CHAPTER TWO

UTOPIAN SEX: THE METAMORPHOSIS OF ANDROGYNOUS IMAGERY IN RUSSIAN ART OF THE PRE- AND POST-REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD

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In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Russian visions of a utopian future inevitably included an improved or new human being, conceived as a necessary prerequisite and natural outcome of a just and happy society. Although the term, novyi chelovek (new human being) is masculine in Russian, it can be applied to people of either sex, introducing the notion of an inter-gendered identity, i.e. androgyny.

In this respect, Russia was like many other European cultures where preoccupations with androgyny emerged at this time. Value crises and the process of reviewing major economic, social and cultural concepts generated wide-ranging debates about gender relationships and identities. The androgynous ideal offered an attractive alternative to the polarisation of male and female roles in patriarchal society. Subsequently, a complex concept of androgyny emerged as a progressive model in Russian culture during the first three decades of the twentieth century. It was hoped that by promoting a harmonious fusion of male and female, such a model would

1 Starting from the 1860s the idea of gender equality and women’s emancipation became an important part of the reformist campaign for radical renewal of all major aspects of Russian social and political life. Consequently, the role of women in Russian history and culture—both past and present—attracted the special attention from Russian historians, ethnographers, journalists and early feminist campaigners, including D.L. Mordovtzev, V.I. Mikhnevich, A.V. Amfiteatov, N.A. Kotliarevskii, N.A. Belozerskaia, E.N. Shchepkina, A.M. Kollontai and many others. Various aspects of gender relationships and identities inspired several important literary works including Nikolai Chernishevskii’s hugely influential novel Chto Delat’? [What is to be Done?] (1863), Nikolai Nekrasov’s poems Sasha (1855), Moroz—Krasnyi Nos [Father Frost—Red Nose] (1863) and Russkie Zhenschchiny [Russian Women] (1872–1873), Ivan Turgenev’s novels Rudin (1856), Nakanune [On the Eve] (1860) and Ottsy i deti [Fathers and Sons] (1862), as well as the highly controversial Kreutzerova Sonata [The Kreutzer Sonata] (1889) by Leo Tolstoy. For more information see, Catriona Kelly, Refining Russia: Advice Literature, Polite Culture, and Gender from Catherine to Yeltsin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Linda Edmondson, Women and Society in Russia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Linda Edmondson, ed., Gender in Russian History and Culture (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); and Helena Goscilo and Beth Holm gren, eds., Russia—Women—Culture (Bloomington, IN.: Indiana University Press, 1996).
enable humanity to overcome centuries of antagonism between the sexes. This ideal survived the Revolution before being gradually eradicated from Soviet ideology in the late 1930s.

This article addresses some aspects of this intense fascination with the motif of androgyny in Russia’s visual arts before 1917, and maps out the metamorphosis of this utopian vision within the new cultural idiom of Socialist Realism.

1. The Pre-Revolutionary Period: Searching for the Ideal Human Being

During the Silver Age of Russian culture, the concept of androgyny was explicitly connected with dreams of a better, more just and unspoiled world. Russian philosophers and writers of an idealistic orientation regarded androgyny as a source of harmony, love, and creativity. The transcendental union of male and female was a major theme in Vladimir Soloviev’s writings, while Nikolai Berdiaev advocated androgyny as an essential pre-requisite for the flowering of human creativity. Symbolist writers were equally interested in the concept. Zinaida Gippius adopted a masculine persona in her poems, and Dmitrii Merezhkovskii’s novel Leonardo Da Vinci is substantially based on the subject of androgyny. Androgynous innuendoes also feature in the novels of Fedor Sologub and Andrei Bely.

The first Russian artist to explore the motif of androgyny in painting was Mikhail Vrubel. His Demon Seated (1890, State Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow) was partly inspired by Mikhail Lermontov’s poem The Demon (1829–1839), but it also expressed ideas that had haunted the artist for a long time. According to Nikolai Prakhov, Vrubel’s first biographer, the artist’s demon was not the devil or an evil spirit, but it actually ‘means the soul and it incarnates the eternal struggle of the mutinous human spirit seeking the reconciliation of its stormy passions with knowledge of life;