

## Exploring the Body Shameful: Solov'ev, Sologub, and Original Sin

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In the author's foreword to the second, 1908, edition of *Melkii bes* [The Petty Demon, 1907] Sologub describes his novel as a mirror. He offers it to his "dear contemporaries" as a true, undistorted depiction impelling his readers to see themselves and their own world in its pages. Sologub ends the foreword by reasserting the verity of his creation in the following terms: "The deformed and the beautiful are reflected in it with equal precision" (28).<sup>1</sup> Unquestionably a novel that thrusts both the hideous and the beautiful upon the readers, the work boasts a protagonist, Ardal'on Peredonov, portrayed as not merely unheroic or unpleasant, but outright evil. As Zinaida Gippius recollects, readers perceived him as a "model of evil" or, more drastically, as the "embodiment of evil."<sup>2</sup> Thus, it is Peredonov's moral flaws, together with his growing madness, that immediately struck Sologub's "dear contemporaries." Sologub explicitly did not separate ethical from aesthetic, and the novel's hideous and beautiful mark not only the characters' minds and actions, but also their bodies. By moralizing aesthetics, by intimately binding his characters' bodies to their sins, Sologub follows a tradition whose roots reach back to those of the fruit tree planted in the very center of the Garden of Eden.

The third chapter of the Book of Genesis describes Adam and Eve's fall into sin and consequent expulsion from paradise. In the preceding chapter, which offers a picture of the natural, uncorrupted condition of humankind, "[T]he man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed" (Gen. 2:25).<sup>3</sup> The price paid for the knowledge of good and evil was humans' awareness of their nakedness and the accompanying shame that prompted cover and concealment. With the fruit tasted and the Fall complete, "the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves" (Gen. 3:7). Thus, one of the earliest and most influential accounts of sin and morality establishes a close interconnection between the physical and the spiritual. By acquiring an awareness of evil, humans for the first time became self-conscious of their bodies, now sinful and subject to death and de-

cay.

The original sin of Adam and Eve brought forth shame and mortality. On these points, the Eastern and Western Churches fully agree, and the question of the Fall and original sin was and remains a crucial one in Christian discourse. The Old Testament story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is critical to the Christian tradition because it marks the moment that necessitates a savior. Christ as the second Adam must lift mankind out of evil and restore it to its Edenic state – sinless and immortal.<sup>4</sup>

Christian theologians have struggled tirelessly to formulate a coherent account of the Fall and its consequences for the whole of humankind. In the Western tradition, the most prominent and influential among these accounts has been St. Augustine's. His confrontation and polemics with the dualism of Manicheism made the role of evil in creation a primary issue in his thinking, and the story of original sin and Satan's successful temptation of the first human beings the foundation of his meditations on evil. Augustine concluded that the guilt incurred in the Garden of Eden is passed on to all mankind through the sexual act. We thus inherit the corruption and taint of mortality in our very conception and birth. The shame we feel about the body and our desire for another's body must serve as a reminder of our fallen state. "Human nature then is, without any doubt, ashamed about lust, and rightly ashamed. For in its disobedience, which subjected the sexual organs solely to its own impulses and snatched them from the will's authority, we see a proof of the retribution imposed on man for that first disobedience" (St. Augustine 582). In contrast, every one of Edenic, prelapsarian Adam's erections entails an act of will and he experiences no embarrassment in displaying his body or contemplating Eve's.

Augustine's writings, which were to shape Church doctrine in the West for centuries, had almost no influence on the Eastern Church. Russia inherited a Greek/Byzantine tradition that remained quite distinct from the Latin/Roman Church and its dogma. Therefore the Orthodox perception of original sin diverges significantly from the notions of Augustine. John Meyendorff writes:

From these basic ideas about the personal character of sin [in Orthodoxy, JS], it is evident that the rebellion of Adam and Eve against God could be conceived only as their personal sin; there would be no place, then, in such an anthropology for the concept

of inherited guilt, or for a “sin of nature,” although it admits that human nature incurs the consequences of Adam’s sin. (143)<sup>5</sup>

The consequence to which Meyendorff alludes here is mortality. Adam and Eve’s transgression did not indelibly stain the human race with an evil that cannot be overcome in this world. Death entered the world through the Fall, but humans can, and must, make it their goal to realize their divine nature and retrieve their immortal, pre-fallen state. Such is the basis of the concept of deification central to Orthodox theology. Created in the image and likeness of God, humankind is able to rediscover this untarnished vestige of divinity within itself. As S ergei [Sergius] Bulgakov maintains:

For God so loved the world that He spared not His Son to save and deify it. The Incarnation, first decreed to ransom fallen humanity and reconcile it with God, is understood by Orthodoxy as, above all, the deification of man, as the communication of the divine life to him. To fallen man the Incarnation became the supreme way for his reconciliation with God, the way of redemption. This produces the concept of salvation as deification. (108)

For the Orthodox, the body is not so overburdened with shame and sin that it serves as nothing more than a reminder of the transgressions forever haunting humankind. Humans can still return to some semblance of their Edenic condition, and, furthermore, can do so in their bodies, in their flesh, and in this lifetime. Accordingly, the goal of deification should be the purpose of all faithful Orthodox practitioners.<sup>6</sup>

At the Russian *fin de si cle* the naked body once again emerged as the subject of discussion and the center of attention for a re-evaluation of certain prohibitions and taboos. The Symbolist movement in literature refocused intellectuals’ thoughts and debates on erotically charged mystical, often religious, poetry. In the visual arts, too, the Symbolists’ interest in eroticism is apparent (see Konstantin Iuon’s 1910 painting *Adam i Eva*, for example [Fig. 1]).

Much of the theological background of Russian Symbolism came from one of its earliest practitioners – the philosopher and poet Vladimir Solov’ev. His 1892-94 essay “Smysl liubvi” [The Meaning of Love] directly addresses the topic of sexuality in a religious and moral context and, in so doing, speaks about the role of the physical body in

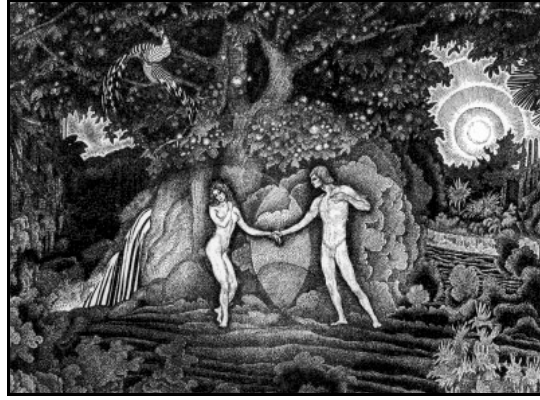


Figure 1. Konstantin Iuon. *Adam i Eva*. 1910. *Simvolizm v Rossii*. Slide 60

the (theoret-ical) Symbolist world-view. This essay, which engages polemically with Lev Tolstói's novella *Kreutzerova sonata* [The Kreutzer Sonata, 1890], is Solov'ev's effort to rescue the sex act from the monastic asceticism with which Tol-

stói ends his tale of illicit sex and murder. Solov'ev posits physical love as the cornerstone of his cosmology. By physically joining the flesh, humans can surmount the differentiation of the sexes, and, by reclaiming divine unity and wholeness, proceed along the path of deification.

The cosmic transfiguration, originated in the Church through the sacraments, must be realized by all men in the world community through love. As Soloviev argued... the starting point for this salvific love is the relationship of the sexes, because the division of the human being into male and female is itself "a state of disintegration and the beginning of death." (Gustafson 44)

My analysis of "Smysl liubvi" concentrates on the place Solov'ev affords the physical human body in his representation of humanity's religious and moral obligations.<sup>7</sup> The centrality of flesh to Solov'ev's doctrine of salvatory deification strips it of the stigma (shame and disobedience) that has plagued it since the Fall.

In his essay, Solov'ev's first gesture is an expressly anti-procreative one. He immediately dismisses reproduction and the multiplication of the species as motivating factors for sexual love. He points to the animal and natural worlds, where reproduction can occur asexually or without physical contact. Since, in comparison to humans, in whom the sexual desire is greatest, these lower organisms are far more fruitful, Solov'ev concludes that "sexual love and the multiplica-

tion of the race are in an *inverse relationship* with one another: the stronger the one, the weaker the other” (494).<sup>8</sup> In his discussion of human sexuality, Solov'ev proceeds to reject any teleological models for the sexual drive. Neither the “world goal,” nor the production of a great genius, nor the betterment of humankind figures in sexual attraction:

If this theory were correct, if the individualization and the exaltation of the emotion of love had all of their meaning, their sole purpose and goal outside of this emotion, and specifically in the requisite (for the world goal) attributes of progeny, then from this it would logically follow that the degree of this loving individualization and exaltation or the strength of love are in a direct relationship with the degree of typicality and importance of the progeny that it produces: the more important the progeny, the stronger the love of the parents.... (Solov'ev 496)<sup>9</sup>

Such is not the case, however, particularly since the strongest loves may be either unrequited (Goethe's *Werther*) or fruitless (*Romeo and Juliet*). Solov'ev ends his discussion with a foray into Biblical history, replacing the distinctly philosophical term “world goal” [*mirovaia tsel'* or *mirovaia volia*] with the theological “Divine Providence” [*Promysl Bozhiu*]. Here he raises the same objections to the religious justification of love as the production of the Messiah as those to the notion that the philosophical and biological purpose of love is the generation of a genius. He finds no indication of passion or desire in the lists of Christ's coupled ancestors. “The Bible does not say whether or not Abraham married Sarah out of ardent love”<sup>10</sup> (Solov'ev 500) and their offspring was not designated a child of love, but, rather, a child of faith. Solov'ev thus denies sexual love a place in any historical processes: “In sacred history, as in general history, sexual love is not a means or a tool of historical goals; it does not serve the human race” (501).<sup>11</sup> Its meaning therefore cannot be found in the future or even outside of the act itself. The rest of the essay is devoted to an explication and justification of the sexual act that make sexual love central to Solov'ev's notion of humankind's participation in God and the unity of the world.

This opening section of the essay is strictly apophatic in nature. It consists of a systematic refutation of various theories of love until all that remains is the act of sexual intercourse. Solov'ev denies it

the context of the marital bed or the acceptable purpose of God's commandment to be fruitful and multiply: "The coincidence of strong loving passion with successful procreation is only an accident, and a rare one at that" (512).<sup>12</sup> This move unmistakably distinguishes him from the Augustinian tradition. For Augustine, the production of children constitutes the sole remotely redeeming aspect of lust and sexual intercourse.<sup>13</sup> As much is made concisely clear in a chapter heading from the *City of God*: "The blessing of fertility not forfeited by sin, but associated with morbid lust" (St. Augustine 583). Augustine argues that while fornication and conjugal intercourse are natural and necessary, they nonetheless are accompanied by the inescapable shame that is humankind's earthly punishment for original sin. Sex and lust are evil and forever tainted. In contrast, even before Solov'ev's "Meaning of Love" begins in earnest (the opening chapter discussed above comprises "Predvaritel'nye zamechaniia" [Preliminary Remarks]), it limits the author's theological discourse on salvation to physical love. Solov'ev's essay on love rests on the elimination of what, for Catholic theology, qualifies as the only justification of love. His text requires a radically different reading of original sin from that proposed by Augustine, for Solov'ev bases his treatment of sexual love on an expressly Orthodox view of the body as capable of recapturing its prelapsarian, God-like state.

In order to enact such a return and to realize their ever-present inner divine nature, humans must overcome the divisions and isolation that plague this world. Solov'ev sees harmony with God in wholeness, and salvation in the comprehensive unity of all things [*vseedinstvo*]. The specific unity that concerns him in "Smysl liubvi" is that of humankind. An elimination of the barriers that prevent humans from granting one another their inherent individuality constitutes the ultimate goal of *vseedinstvo*, the end of the historical process Solov'ev is advocating. The enemy of this endeavor, according to Solov'ev, is egoism, which excludes all others and must be overcome by our wholly giving ourselves over to another, by the "union of two lives in one" (511).<sup>14</sup> This act requires a sacrifice of our own egoism that will enable the realization and affirmation of the other's individuality (as well as of our own). Love must be a "complete and permanent exchange" and yet also a "complete and permanent affirmation of oneself in another" (Solov'ev 508).<sup>15</sup> Whereas in the ideal, divine sphere such a surrender is perfectly attainable, our world permits only a distant approximation of such a unity.<sup>16</sup> The physical union of sex-

ual love on earth mirrors the divine union possible only by a complete merging with God. In good Symbolist fashion, Solov'ev views physical love as the *realia* through which we can glimpse the *realiora* that is the ultimate goal of experiencing the divine. The path to that crucial, salvatory “all-unity” requires the elimination of differences between male and female. The sexual act unites the flesh and thus brings humans closer to God.

Only in that, so to speak chemical, union of two beings, homogeneous and equivalent, but *wholly* different in form, is it possible (as in the natural order, so in the spiritual order) to create a new person, the actual realization of true human individuality. We find such a union, or at least the very near possibility of it, in sexual love, and thus we grant it the exclusive meaning of the necessary and indispensable foundation of all further perfection, and of the inevitable and constant condition under which a person can really live in the truth. (Solov'ev 508)<sup>17</sup>

The Orthodox mission of deification is here recast into a call for a new unity and the creation of a new person, the first step of which is the union of male and female: “This new man was to be an androgyne, representing the free union of the masculine and feminine principles, whose androgynous wholeness will reestablish him in the image and likeness of God” (Matich 30).

Solov'ev was intent on effecting a real and palpable theurgical transformation in humankind. His work helped usher in the Symbolist project of life creation [*жизнотворчество*], which entailed the realization of another, ideal world, of which we can only catch fleeting glimpses from (and in) this world. According to “Smysl liubvi,” love can reveal the “outer limits of this other, better reality” (536).<sup>18</sup> For Solov'ev this reality is not a new and untraversed realm, but, rather, a primordial and familiar locus. He describes man’s learning of it as “good news from a lost paradise – news about the possibility of its return” (536).<sup>19</sup> The new, transformed human being belongs in Eden, for he has recouped the flesh, once again made it holy, and earned for humankind forgiveness for original sin. Sexual love, rather than a stigma to be borne in eternal memory of human transgression, is a crucial element in our redemption and the recovery of humankind’s rightful place with God.

For Augustine, shame invariably accompanies the naked body

and particularly the sexual act. Man knows that he is no longer in paradise since he, like his original parents, experiences shame at his nakedness and must always cover it. Sexual love has no such stigma for Solov'ev, who, in a position more permissible in the Eastern Church than for its Western counterpart, regards that love not as a reminder of humankind's distance from God, but as a positive attribute that must serve to help him regain his own divinity. Shame of the body does not fulfill the negative and debasing role assigned by Augustine. Caryl Emerson reformulates Solov'ev's idea on this score:

Sexual shame, a universal attribute of human beings, separates us from the lower nature of animals and from our own animal nature. But it is not the bodily principle, nor the sexual act per se, nor the instinct driving it that is shameful. The natural fact of sexuality itself causes shame, and our awareness of this shame signifies our intuitive knowledge that we "must not as a passive instrument serve the vital purposes of nature." (Emerson 668)<sup>20</sup>

Sexual love, in short, is fundamental in Solov'ev's philosophy of salvation and he must therefore dispel the negative consequences of shame and disdain for nakedness that figure so prominently in Augustine's thought.

Nakedness and the body are similarly central to another vital work of the Russian *fin de siècle* – Sologub's novel *Melkii bes*, which he began writing in 1892, the year Solov'ev turned to "Smysl liubvi." Sologub's scathing depiction of Russian provincial life, however, is so mired in a world of sin and depravity that it makes an escape from the realization of humankind's fallen state extremely difficult.

Roman Struc's discussion of Sologub's novel in the context of Gogol's and Dostoevskii's artistic statements on beauty draws upon an important and prominent characteristic of Russian culture – the conflation of the aesthetic and the ethical (Struc 71). Physical repulsiveness invariably heralds moral ugliness. *Melkii bes*, set in a town populated with singularly hellish and wicked characters whose moral and spiritual baseness finds a clear correspondence in Sologub's powerful and evocative descriptions of their bodily hideousness, adheres to this schema.<sup>21</sup> The remainder of my essay examines Sologub's portrayal of the body within the dichotomies of shameful/shameless nakedness and tainted/untainted flesh—dichotomies enabled by the distinction between a pre- and post-lapsarian notion of the body.

Above all, the novel's protagonist, Peredonov, repeatedly is implicated in physical repulsiveness and degradation. As Struc observes, "Nothing Peredonov touches remains unsoiled, often in a physical sense, just as often by his obscene imagination" (Struc 78).<sup>22</sup> My discussion focuses on one of the vilest aspects of his life – his cousin/fiancée, Varvara. Sologub presents a counter-aesthetic, in the form of Sasha Pyl'nikov's body, as revealed to Liudmila Rutilova, which contrasts to the novel's generally negative depictions of physicality. Liudmila's undressing or "revelation" of Sasha is an attempt to forge a sphere distinct from the world that surrounds them. They provide the only hint of redemption in the work, and it is through Sasha's body alone that the reader glimpses the possibility of a return to humankind's original, paradisiacal condition. These two worlds collide in a confrontation during the masquerade toward the end of the novel, which displays both the ugliness and the beauty of bodies and souls in an orgiastic mingling of disguised and exposed flesh.

Varvara Maloshina, Peredonov's cousin, fiancée, and mistress, could not be further from the Symbolist ideal of an earthly representation of Sophia, the Divine Feminine. If, as Diana Greene contends, "Inevitably, [... the Russian Symbolists'] feverish exaltation of the Divine Feminine rebounded into its opposite... The Divine Feminine came to be seen as either virgin or whore" (Greene 90).<sup>23</sup> Varvara unquestionably represents the whore, who has retained no vestige of her creation in the image and likeness of the Divine. Her body neither elicits respect nor retains intimations of sanctity. Sologub makes this shockingly clear in the very first scene of the novel in which she appears.

"I want to spit on you," Peredonov said calmly.

"No, you won't!" Varvara screamed.

"I'm going to spit on you right now," Peredonov said. He stood up and with a dull and indifferent expression he spat in her face.

"Swine!" Varvara said rather calmly as though the spit had refreshed her. She started to wipe herself off with a napkin. Peredonov was silent. Lately he had become even cruder than usual with Varvara. Even before he had always treated her poorly. Reassured by his silence, she said more loudly:

"It's true, you're a swine. It landed right in my mug." (44)<sup>24</sup>

This moment instantly familiarizes the reader with the novel's pervasive ugliness. Just as striking as the act itself is the total calmness with which both characters behave in this exchange (the adverb "calmly" [*spokoino*] is attached to both in this short dialogue). Spitting in another human being's face violates that person's humanity, and constitutes an affront to that which separates us from animals. When Peredonov spits on Varvara, it is not a beast (such as his much abused cat) he is assaulting, but a being created in the image and likeness of God. For a Russian reader, the connection between divinity and humanity is heightened by the archaic Russian word for face, *lik* (still detectable in the modern *litsa*), which refers to the depiction of the Savior's face on an icon. Thus the act carries connotations of profanity, of an assault upon the potentially sacred in humans' innermost identity. The reactions of both Varvara and Peredonov indicate imperviousness to this significance: she simply wipes her face (or "mug" [*morda*], an animal snout rather than anything human, and a far cry from *lik*) and dismisses the insult. Sologub echoes this early scene in Peredonov and Varvara's senseless custom of spitting on and befouling their wallpaper.

Peredonov is not the only character who desecrates Varvara's body. Out of spite for Varvara's insulting words about her cousin, Prepolovenskaia tricks Varvara into rubbing herself with stinging nettles. While Peredonov's attack is limited to her face, the next violation entails her whole body. Moreover, if readers are to properly imagine Varvara applying the maliciously prescribed treatment, they must envision her naked—and Sologub ensures that they do so by enclosing in references to Prepolovenskaia's trick a lengthy description of Varvara's naked body in the bedroom:

Although Varvara was stumbling about from drunkenness and her face would have provoked disgust in any healthy person with its flaccidly lewd expression, nevertheless her body was beautiful, like the body of some tender nymph to which the head of a jaded whore had been affixed by force of some despicable spell. And for those two miserable, drunken and filthy people [*liudishke*] that exquisite body represented nothing more than the source of vulgar temptation. Such is often the case – and verily in our age it is appropriate for beauty to be scorned and desecrated.

Peredonov roared with laughter as he gazed at his naked girlfriend.

All that night he dreamt of women of all shapes and sizes, naked and vile. (74)<sup>25</sup>

Whereas the narrator (and, consequently, the reader) is aware of the beauty and exquisite nature of her body, for Peredonov and Varvara her flesh merely represents temptation and debasement. The vestiges of otherworldly splendor in Varvara's body only serve to remind one how far she has fallen. When associated with Peredonov and Varvara, nakedness can be only vile [*gnusnyi*] and low [*nizkii*]. Standing disrobed in front of Peredonov (and us), Varvara symbolizes not the glory of humankind's inherent divinity, but rather the desecration to which our sinfulness has subjected it.

The novel's other prominent scenes of undressing and observing a naked body all center on Sasha Pyl'nikov, an "effeminate," androgynous schoolboy posited as Peredonov's nemesis.<sup>26</sup> After hearing the rumor that the ambiguous Sasha, whose very name can signify either sex, is really a girl, Peredonov makes it his mission to expose Sasha, quite literally. He succeeds in this goal when the director of the gymnasium has Sasha undress for the school doctor, thus eliminating suspicions of the rumor's veracity. Nevertheless, Sologub's introduction of Sasha into the novel in this aura of sexual (am)bivalence tempts the reader to "undress" him – a desire satisfied numerous times throughout the text, first by the director, then by Liudmila, and finally by the mob at the masquerade. The novel repeatedly exposes his body, without any hint at depravity, for Sasha's innocent beauty militates against shame and disgust at contemplation of his flesh. Struc contends, "[...] Beauty appears as a visible opponent to the world's 'petty demons'... [Sologub's] ugly anti-utopia, inhabited exclusively by sadistic Peredonovs, is unredeemed by beauty; yet, again the only island of escape is beauty" (Struc 81-82).<sup>27</sup> Though beauty cannot redeem this world, Sasha unquestionably functions as evidence that not all physical beauty is tainted and that the body itself may be lifted out of the mire into which sin and depravity have cast it.

Liudmila, who looks at Sasha's body and most fully appreciates its loveliness, gradually teaches him to overcome his initial shame and to enjoy fully, and revel in, his nakedness.

From that time on, Lyudmila more than once would start to unbutton his jacket when she took him off to her room. At first he was embarrassed to tears,

but he soon grew used to it. And then he would gaze clearly and calmly as Lyudmila pulled down his undershirt, bared his shoulders, fondled and patted his back. And finally, he himself started to undress himself. (236)<sup>28</sup>

She draws him out, and in his discovery of his own body the reader witnesses a reawakening of the divine beauty covered up as the aftermath of Adam and Eve's Fall. Just as their transgression caused them to immediately conceal themselves under the first semblance of clothing, Sasha's recovery of his inherent divinity expresses itself in repeated ritualistic undressing and shedding of clothes. Evgenii Anichkov comments on the otherworldly implications of this unabashed physical beauty:

Man is beautiful and his body is beautiful. And it is everywhere beautiful; under the modest jacket of the schoolboy Sasha in a small provincial city, in the musty school, is concealed the divine beauty of the human body... One need only to expose it, to show it openly and to love it with such an exalted and even mad feeling with which Liudmila is overcome, as if inspired. (Anichkov 218)<sup>29</sup>

When Sasha bares himself for Liudmila, their innocence distinguishes the couple from Peredonov and Varvara. Free from lust and depravity, they enjoy a playful relationship that ultimately erases the taint that has blighted interaction between men and women since their forebears' expulsion from paradise.

Liudmila's adoration of Sasha's body has a particular resonance in *fin de siècle* culture in general. As indicated in Nikolai Evreinov's collection titled *Nagota na stsene* [Nudity on the Stage, 1911], the cult of the body was such an important part of early-twentieth-century dance and theater that Evreinov dubbed the entire century the "age of

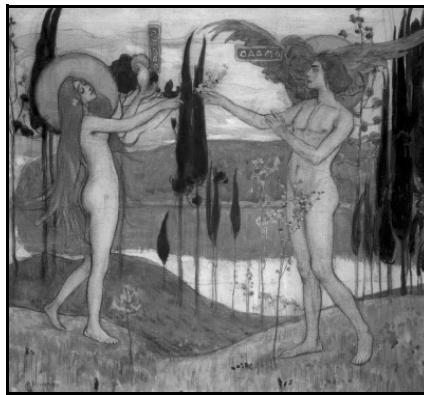


Figure 2. M.V. Nesterov. *Adam i Eva*. 1898. *Simvolizm v Rossii*. Slide 92.

nudity” [*nek nagoty*] (Evreinov 7).<sup>30</sup> Evreinov’s defense of the naked body assumes markedly religious terms: “And, finally, for man, for all of us this is a creation of the hand of God, the hand of the most refined Artist, Sculptor, Architect, Musician, and Poet” (Evreinov 2).<sup>31</sup>

The articles within the anthology devote considerable space to developing a history of nudity, grounding it in the golden aura of Classical Greece. While it is not my purpose to dwell on this aspect of Sologub’s novel, Greek themes certainly inform *Melkii bes*, especially in sections devoted to Sasha. Liudmila joyously declares to him, “I love beauty. I’m a pagan, a sinner. I ought to have been born in ancient Greece. I love flowers, perfume, brilliant clothes, the naked body... I love the body, strong, dexterous, naked, which is able to take its own pleasure” (235).<sup>32</sup> Sologub signals Liudmila’s affinity for ancient culture through her patronymic, “Platonovna” (literally, “daughter of Plato”), and her attachment to Sasha as an androgynous creature derives from the type described in Aristophanes’s speech in Plato’s *Symposium*. In a passage reportedly intended to appear in *Melkii bes*, but ultimately excised, the writer Sergei Turgenev classifies Sasha as a hermaphrodite, a category he explains as follows:

If you like, it’s a higher being. In him we find a self-fulfillment, a harmonious combination of the active and passive elements in the human spirit and nature. And, actually, not simply a combination, but rather a synthesis of these two elements. Each of us represents a kind of disunited being. But the perfect person is not a man, not a woman, nor even a man and a woman together, and is neither man nor woman. These two elements are united in him chemically, so-to-speak, in a supernatural process, so that the usual physiological path is abolished as being superfluous and leading nowhere. We are all either fertile or procreative, whereas he already represents the self-wrought fruit. (303)<sup>33</sup>

This long digression invokes not only Aristophanes’s androgynes (the “disunited beings”), but also Solov’ev’s. The anti-procreative nature of this creature, as well as its “chemical” union (see Solov’ev 508, as quoted above), directs the reader immediately to “Smysl liubvi.” Thus the novel’s strong Greek undercurrent is predicated on a Christian view of the body as a reflection of its creator’s divine nature. The pagan Liudmila worships a body clearly molded in the image and like-

ness of a Christian God.

By way of concluding my discussion of *Melkii bes*, I wish to dwell briefly on one of the novel's climactic scenes – the masquerade, which brings the entire town together in a voyeuristic mêlée of dressing and undressing. Sasha attends in the guise of a geisha, his costume one of the most concealing at an event that showcases scandalous outfits and minimal coverage. The nakedness displayed during the evening, however, is anything but beautiful. Varvara's friend Grushina, transformed into the goddess Diana, is maximally exposed:

Naked arms and shoulders, a naked back, naked chest, feet in light slippers without any stockings and naked to the knees, and a light dress out of white linen with a red border and her body naked underneath...

It was attractive to see everything left so courageously bare on Grushina – but what contradictions. There were flea bites on her skin, her movements were vulgar, her words unbearably uncouth. Once more physical beauty had been profaned. (250-51)<sup>34</sup>

As in the earlier description of Varvara's nakedness, the narrator appreciates the body as a source of true and pure beauty, exalting it and commending the instinct to reveal it. Yet the "contradictions" of Grushina's revealed form only accentuate her desecration of true and pure physical beauty. And when forced to cover herself, she manifests precisely those revolting traits – "cursing and spitting" (255)<sup>35</sup> – that throughout the novel attach to aesthetic and moral ugliness. Like Varvara's, hers is a body corrupted by the world of sin and mortality that is postlapsarian humanity's lot.

When Sasha finally arrives at the masquerade, the attendees immediately notice and single him out for his attractiveness. Even through his costume the town senses that he is more beautiful than the lurid nude women strutting around the hall and acknowledges as much by handing over to him the tickets that elect the geisha as the best female costume. Sasha, however, does not belong amidst this crowd of barbarians and ruffians (an identity materialized in the "savage" American and ancient German costumes).<sup>36</sup> Not tempting or lewd, but transcending sexuality, lust, and the distinction between male and female, his androgynous bodily beauty exemplifies the union of spirit and flesh in one exquisite being. The townsfolk dimly sense his uniqueness, but cannot appreciate it, and react violently by fighting to tear off his clothes. Their desire to see Sasha's body and to reveal

his identity is the key impulse associated with Sasha throughout his appearance in the novel, beginning with the rumors that introduced him to the town. His entrance into the fallen world cannot but incite and enrage its inhabitants, for he epitomizes all that they have strayed from and lost.

Sologub and Solov'ev extol the beauty and divinity of the body against a backdrop of corrupted and lustful flesh. Both writers found a vision of redemption concealed in man's seemingly wrecked and sinful physical shell. Solov'ev posited a glimmer of our inner divinity and our affinity with the creator in the union of two bodies accomplished by sexual love. Sologub perceived the beauty of the human body created in the image and likeness of God, but also noted its desecration through wallowing in the ugliness of the world. Lapsed from the divine model farther than most, Peredonov (as his name – “lower than the depths” – implies) continues to degrade and profane physical beauty, quite literally spitting in its face. His counterpart, Sasha, vouchsafes a vision of untainted beauty, of a creature who truly resembles his heavenly maker. Through beauty such as his we realize that paradise is not forever lost and that we can indeed return to the splendor of Eden.

#### *Notes*

1. All quotations from the novel, cited parenthetically in the text, refer to the translation by S.D. Cioran. The original follows in a note with page references to the Intelvak edition. “Уродливое и прекрасное отражается в нем одинаково точно” (8).
2. “образ зла” and “воплощение зла” (Gippius 75).
3. All quotations from the Bible reference the New Revised Standard Version.
4. The place of the cross and Christ's resurrection in Orthodoxy especially centers on his perceived defeat of death. See the Paschal troparion, “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life,” often sung by the chorus during the Easter Matins.
5. The notion of original sin as an individual infraction may also be found in Vladimir Lossky's general work on Orthodoxy: “In fact the fruit was good in itself, but everything hinges on the personal relationship of man and God” (Lossky 82).
6. I should note that the reading of Orthodox Christian doctrine I am proffering here is more indicative of the so-called Russian religious renaissance, which developed in parallel with the Symbolist movement in the last decade of the nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth.

The basic writings of Lossky and Bulgakov (both of whom carried this tradition into emigration) are representative of this movement, which was crucial to the social and philosophical milieu in which Solov'ev was working. The theology of the Russian religious renaissance, while clearly grounded in traditional Greek and Russian beliefs, proved to be far more experimental and radical than the Russian Orthodox Church itself. The Church, which had been incorporated into the massive state bureaucracy under Peter I, was a highly conservative and ascetic institution that smacked of officialdom and state-sponsored censorship. See Zenkovsky 754-57.

7. Irene Masing-Delic expertly outlines Solov'ev's philosophy of salvation and quite rightly shows the importance of the physical body in his erotic utopia. However, as is the case with most commentators on "Smysl ljubvi," she leapfrogs over his discussion of physical human intercourse and concentrates primarily on the end result of the process he is advocating: the aesthetically created divine androgyne (see Masing-Delic 105-22, esp. 117-18). It is my intention to examine physical intercourse as the all-important initial stage of the path that brings about the androgyne. It is the crude, earthly metaphor that Solov'ev employs to explain the all-unity of God and as such deserves a central position in any understanding of Solov'ev's philosophy of salvation.
8. "Итак, половая любовь и размножение рода находятся между собою *в обратном отношении*: чем сильнее одно, тем слабее другая."
9. "Если б эта теория была верна, если б индивидуализация и экзальтация любовного чувства имели весь свой смысл, свою единственную причину и цель вне этого чувства, именно в требуемых (для мировых целей) свойствах потомства, то отсюда логически следовало бы, что степень этой любовной индивидуализации и экзальтации или сила любви находится в прямом отношении со степенью типичности и значительности происходящего от нее потомства: чем важнее потомство, тем сильнее должна была бы быть любовь родителей..."
10. "Священная книга не говорит, женился ли Авраам на Саре в силу пламенной любви."
11. "В священной истории, так же как и в общей, половая любовь не является средством или орудием исторических целей; она не служит человеческому роду."
12. "Совпадение сильной любовной страсти с успешным деторождением есть только случайность, и притом довольно редкая."
13. A similar claim may be made for the rather conservative Russian Orthodox Church, as well. However, Solov'ev's position falls wholly within the realm of Orthodox theology. See note 6 above.
14. "соединение двух жизней в одну."

15. “полный и постоянный обмен”, “полное и постоянное утверждение себя в другом.”
16. Solov'ev sees as representative of divine unity the person of Christ, who consists of a masculine entity (Logos) and a feminine entity (Sophia). However, this question enters into an aspect of Solov'ev's philosophy of religion that lies beyond the purview of this essay.
17. “Только при этом, так сказать химическом, соединении двух существ, однородных и равнозначительных, но *всесторонне* различных по форме, возможно (как в порядке природном, так и в порядке духовном) создание нового человека, действительное осуществление истинной человеческой индивидуальности. Такое соединение или по крайней мере ближайшую возможность к нему мы находим в половой любви, почему и придаем ей исключительное значение как необходимому и незаменимому основанию всего дальнейшего совершенствования, как неизбежному и постоянному условию, при котором только человек может действительно быть в истине.”
18. “край иной, лучшей действительности.”
19. “добрую весть из потерянного рая – весть о возможности его возвращения.”
20. She cites from Solov'ev's *Opravdanie dobra*.
21. “The world of *The Petty Demon* is visually close to that of Bosch's hell and Breugel's proverbs. It is a world in which petty, spiteful evil pervades the atmosphere and swallows up the characters” (Ivanits 322).
22. Peredonov's compulsion to defile the world around him echoes what Lossky describes regarding the presence of evil on earth in the form of the fallen angels: “Remaining dependent on God in his very being, since his being was created by God, the spirit in revolt consequently acquires a hatred of being, a frenzy to destroy, a thirst for an impossible nothingness. As only the earthly world remains open to him, he tries here to destroy the divine plan, and having failed to annihilate creation, to disfigure it” (Lossky 82).
23. In general, her article provides an interesting, biographically motivated reading of Sologub's female characters (in his short stories) as more diverse than those of some of his Symbolist compatriots.
24. “– Плевать я на тебя хочу, – спокойно сказал Передонов.  
– Не проплюнешь! – кричала Варвара.  
– А вот и проплюну, – сказал Передонов.  
Встал и с тупым и равнодушным видом плюнул ей в лицо.  
– Свинья! – сказала Варвара довольно спокойно, словно плевок освежил ее.  
И принялась обтираться салфеткою. Передонов молчал. В последнее время он стал с Варварою грубее обыкновенного. Да и раньше он обходился с нею дурно. Ободренная его молчанием, она заговорила погромче:

- Право, свишня. Прямо в морду попал.” (24)
25. “Хотя Варвара шаталась от опьянения и лицо ее во всяком свежем человеке возбудило бы отвращение своим дрябло-похотливым выражением, но тело у нее было прекрасное, как тело у нежной нимфы, с приставленною к нему, силою каких-то презренных чар, головою увядающей блудницей. И это восхитительное тело для этих двух пьяных и грязных людишек являлось только источником низкого соблазна. Так это и часто бывает, – и воистину в нашем веке надлежит красоте быть попоранной и поруганной. Передонов угрюмо хохотал, глядя на свою голую подругу. Всю эту ночь ему снились дамы всех мастей, голые и гнусные.” (58)
26. A.G. Gornfel'd also identifies the adversarial contrast that Sasha and Liudmila provide to Peredonov's sexual exploits: “The divine beauty of two beautiful young bodies, tenderly and sweetly merging with each other, should here serve as a counterbalance to the monstrous sexual filth of Peredonov's outlook and his world.” [Божественная красота двух прекрасных юношеских тел, нежно и сладостно восполняющих друг друга, должна была здесь послужить противовесом чудовищной половой грязи передоновского мира и мировоззрения.] (Gornfel'd 425). However, I disagree with Gornfel'd's ultimate conclusion that the evil powers of the *nedotykomka* win out and Sasha and Liudmila are, at the end, no better than the rest of the Peredonovs in the world around them. I would stress that Sasha and Liudmila provide, however fleetingly, an important vision of an alternative world free from the filth of *peredonovshchina*.
27. This reading of the novel finds a resonance in Linda Ivanits's argument that Peredonov is an “inversion of attempts in Russian and world literature to depict the totally good man” and specifically of Dostoevskii's Prince Myshkin, who believed that beauty would save the world. Ivanits, 322. On the novel as an inversion of a salvation myth, see also Venclova 145.
28. “С тех пор Людмила не раз, уведя Сашу в свой покой, принималась растегивать его курточку. Сперва он стыдился до слез, но скоро привык. И уже смотрел ясно и спокойно, как Людмила опускала его рубашку, обнажала его плечи, ласкала и хлопала по спине. И уже наконец сам принимался раздеваться” (245).
29. “Человек прекрасен, прекрасно тело его. И оно прекрасно всюду; под скромной курточкой гимназиста Саши в маленьком провинциальном городке, в затихлой гимназии, скрывается божественная красота человеческого тела... Нужно только решиться обнажить его, показать воочию и полюбить его с тем экзальтированным, скажут сумасшедшим чувством, какое охватывает, словно вдохновение, Людмилу.”
30. This collection edited by Evreinov consists mostly of translations of

- French articles. Evreinov's own introductory article, however, addresses the subject from a Russian vantage point.
31. "И, наконец для человека, для всякого из нас, – это творение рук Божьих, рук искуснейшего Живописца, Скульптора, Архитектора, Музыканта и Поэта."
32. "Люблю красоту. Язычница я, грешница. Мне бы в древних Афинах родиться. Люблю цветы, духи, яркие одежды, голое тело... Я тело люблю, сильное, ловкое, голое, которое может наслаждаться" (243).
33. I have been unable to obtain the original of this passage, which was among fragments Sologub published in 1912, collected by Stanley Rabinowitz. They appear in English as an appendix to Cioran's translation of the novel.
34. "голые руки и плечи, голая спина, голая грудь, ноги в легоньких туфельках, без чулок, голые до колен, и легкая одежда из белого полотна с красною обшивкою, прямо на голое тело...  
Все так смело открытое у Грушиной было красиво, – но какие противоречия! На коже – блошки укусы, ухватки грубы, слова нестерпимой пошлости. Снова поруганная телесная красота" (261).
35. "ругаясь и плюясь" (266).
36. Varvara's name, derived from the Russian word for barbarian (варвар), connotes savagery, lack of civilized enlightenment, which are traits she unquestionably possesses.

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