Satans in the Bud: Symbolist Laughter in Fyodor Sologub's *A Petty Demon*

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Abstract:

Fyodor Sologub was the pen-name for the poet and prose writer Fyodor Teternikov (1863-1927), a self-styled "decadent" who became a leading figure in the Russian Symbolist movement. Sologub's second novel *A Petty Demon* created a sensation when it appeared in 1907. It has since defied the best efforts of critics to classify it as either "decadent" or "symbolist." This study of laughter in the novel shows how Sologub draws from both Baudelaire's "symbolist" and Nietzsche's "decadent" theories of laughter to make a highly original contribution to the novel form, arguably the most successful "symbolist novel" in the Russian tradition. It is also a superb expression of its *Zeitgeist*, reflecting an era much like our own, in which laughter attracted a great deal of philosophical attention.

Keywords: decadence, novel, laughter, Russian literature, Sologub, Symbolism

I

Fyodor Sologub was the pen-name of Fyodor Kuz'mich Teternikov (1863-1927), a complex, cipher-like man who went from humble origins to a leading role in the Russian Symbolist movement. Teternikov was born into the Saint Petersburg servant class and spent his entire life as a gymnasium teacher, migrating through the northwestern provinces of Russia before returning to his native city. There he settled down at the Andreevsky Academy for Boys, where he taught mathematics and rose to the level of inspector of schools. Until late in his life he lived on the academy grounds with his mother and sister, and later his wife, the ill-fated translator and prose writer Anastassiya Chebotarevskaya.[1] The two hosted literary Sundays in the salon style of the time. Teternikov meanwhile under his pseudonym produced striking work in numerous genres, including one fixture of the Russian classics shelf, the novel *Melkij bes* (1907) – variously translated into English as *A Petty, A Little*, or *A Shabby Demon*.

As a young writer, Sologub first came to prominence in the Petersburg journal *Severnyi Vestnik* [*Northern Herald*], where he worked among others with the celebrated literary couple Dmitry Merezhkovsky and Zinaida Gippius. The *Vestnik* published his early poetry and prose, and in 1895 his debut novel *Tjazhelie sny* [*Bad Dreams*]. Although not an unqualified success,

the novel was quickly identified with the work of European "decadents" like J.K. Huysmans or Oscar Wilde, whose world-weariness bordering on the pathological was a touchstone of the *fin de siècle*: a fascination with sickness and death; an attraction to the ethereal, the otherworldly, the exotic; a preference for art and culture over nature, and for fantasy over reality. Sologub differed from these writers because he focused on childhood and adolescence, a reflection of his career as a pedagogue.[2] This drew attention to a scandalous feature of his work: his preoccupation with corporal punishment, frequently eroticized. His subsequent reputation as a "Russian Marquis de Sade" was in fact undeserved – as would be obvious to anyone who had actually read de Sade.[3] Yet it stuck with him throughout his career, and Sologub himself insisted on the "decadent" label. As late as 1922, one of his contemporaries called him "the only consistent decadent" in Russian literature.[4] Sologub's second novel *Melkij bes* took ten years to write and another five to publish but created a sensation when it appeared in book form in 1907. The novel ran through multiple editions and made its author, if not exactly rich and famous, then comfortable and rather notorious. It also made a critical splash, drawing the attention of a circle of tastemakers whose opinions about it were conflicting and passionate. Andrey Bely wrote poignantly in a private letter to Sologub of how he had struggled to absorb the novel, praising him for his "enormous talent" and "unanalyzable charm," his ability to penetrate the reader "like contraband," while confessing that he himself served "other gods."[5] Zinaida Gippius, who belonged to the circle around *Voprosy Zhizni* [Questions of Life], a short-lived religious-philosophical journal that had serialized early chapters of the novel, reviewed the book from an Orthodox perspective. She called on readers to shed tears of repentance for its grotesque protagonist, Ardolon Peredonov.[6] The fictional Peredonov meanwhile, a vulgar, sadistic gymnasium teacher with a fixation on becoming an inspector of schools, soon inspired an abstract noun – *peredonovschina* – which is still used in the Russian language to designate a particularly grotesque form of pettiness.[7] The character also inspired a great deal of titillated speculation, with many readers not unreasonably assuming that he must be a self-portrait of the author. The opinion became so quickly entrenched that Sologub felt obliged to refute it as early as his preface to the second edition, insisting in highly defensive terms that the novel was not a self-portrait, but a carefully polished mirror held up to its readers. This did little to endear him to his readers.[8] Later critics puzzled over whether to classify the novel as primarily "decadent" or primarily "symbolist," one of them throwing up her hands in defeat and declaring that "one cannot call *The Petty Demon* either a decadent or a symbolist novel."[9]

The critical bewilderment over *Melkij bes* reflects its place as a literary-historical outlier. The terms "symbolism" and "decadence" were twin-births of mid-19th century European criticism, largely conjoined until Jean Moreas published his 1886 "Symbolist Manifesto" as a defense against accusations of decadence. The dominant narrative of Russian literary history requires another twenty years for the Symbolist movement to express itself in Russia in a fully authentic way. This occurred around the revolutionary year 1905, when the larger trend imported from Europe received an articulation in journals like *Voprosy zhizny* (or its parent *Novyi put'*) that

was conscious of itself as distinctively Russian – influenced not only by the national literature and the Orthodox Church, but by intervening philosophical developments and the political tone of that year.[10] Thus, *Melkij bes*, initially composed from 1892 to 1902, published partially in 1905 and fully in 1907, appeared as a self-styled "decadent" work at just the moment that a high-minded Russian Symbolism – as articulated for example by Gippius – had presumably outgrown decadence.[11]

Aesthetically, the novel is difficult to place because Symbolist theory in Russia was almost exclusively the bailiwick of poets. Sologub was a poet, as were Bely, Gippius, Merezhkovsky, and virtually all the illuminati of the Russian Silver Age: Annensky, Balmont, Blok, Bruisov, and so on. These poets like their European counterparts idealized the manipulation of symbols into something more than the *mere* use of symbolism. They compared themsleves to theurgists or priests, esoteric figures conjuring reified insights or moods, revelations of another world, as William Butler Yeats once put it, "too subtle for the intellect."[12] Moreas – also a poet – expressed it in his "Manifesto" thus:

> ... le caractère essentiel de l'art symbolique consiste à ne jamais aller jusqu'à la concentration de l'Idée en soi. Ainsi, dans cet art, les tableaux de la nature, les actions des humains, tous les phénomènes concrets ne sauraient se manifester eux-mêmes; ce sont là des apparences sensibles destinées à représenter leurs affinités ésotériques avec des Idées primordiales.
>
> ... the essential character of symbolist art consists in never going so far as a concentration on the ideal as such. Hence, in this art, scenes from nature, human activities, all concrete phenomena cannot manifest themselves as themselves; they are sensibly perceptible appearances, intended to represent their esoteric affinities with the primordial ideals.[13]

The Symbolist Manifesto contained an implicit challenge to prose writers as well as to poets, taken up not in Russia not long after Sologub by other poets-turned-novelists, chief among them Andrei Bely. Yet the list of "Symbolist novels" never grew particularly long. The ghostly apparitions of the Symbolists could more readily haunt a novella like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, or a lyrical short-form like the Baudelarian prose-poem or Joycean epiphany. The prevailing winds within Modernist theory gave the very term "Symbolist novel" the ring of an oxymoron. The sheer scope of the novel, its episodic structure, its multiplicity of characters and situations, its polyphony and heteroglossia – above all its parodic and satirical tone, its "carnivalization" of human life, in Mikhail Bakhtin's formulation – all seemed in direct opposition to the Symbolists' hermetic ideal. The novel wears a comic mask. It affirms the domestic and quotidian, the democratic and the down-to-earth, and thus derives its aesthetic power, not from a "high" culture of esoteric ideals, but on the contrary from a "low" culture that either ignores these ideals or if anything makes a travesty of them. The novel celebrates "human activities ... as themselves." It has evolved from – and thus reflects and participates in – what Bakhtin called "the common people's creative culture of laughter."[14]

Among the Russian Symbolists, it may have been Aleksandr Blok who most clearly intuited how Sologub produced "high" Symbolist effects within a presumably "low" comic genre – and precisely through laughter. A great admirer of Sologub the poet, with whom he was often compared, Blok praised the novel in a review published in 1907. There he pointed out a powerful Symbolist aesthetic in the way the novel uses certain scenes to prepare for moments of symbolic disclosure. Periodically, as though a curtain has been raised, the text offers horrifying glimpses of reality, a reality that Blok called, using emphatic italics, *chudovischnoe zhizni* [the monstrosity of life]:

> Задача показать читателю нечто чудовищно-нелепое, так, однако, чтобы его можно было рассматривать беспрепятственно, как животное в клетке. Животное это – человеческая пошлость, а клетка – прием стилизации, симметрии. В симметричных и стилизованных формах мы наблюдаем нечто безóбразное и бесформенное само по себе. Оттого оно веет на нас чем-то потусторонним, ирреальным – и за ним мы видим небытие, дьявольский лик, хаос преисподней.
>
> The task is to show the reader something monstrously absurd, but in such a way that it can be examined without interference, like an animal in a cage. This animal is human vulgarity [*poshlost'*], while the cage is the device of stylization and symmetry. In symmetrical and stylized forms, we observe something that is imageless and formless in itself. That is why it howls at us in an otherworldly and unreal way – and beyond it we see non-existence, a diabolic countenance, the chaos of hell.

Such moments impressed Blok so strongly that he associated them not only with the "low" realm of hell, but in the very next sentence with "the highest reality disclosed, a moment that flares up and imprints itself more clearly than anything else on the memory, just as in life we remember best those wild, ardent minutes, whether good or evil, from which the head spun and ached."[15]

It is rather astonishing that there are no high-profile studies of laughter in *A Petty Demon* – in the first place because the novel is held in such esteem by such sophisticated critics. It is the more surprising because the representation of laughter is ubiquitous in the text – and not only the *representation*. The novel itself is uproariously funny. It is also the product of an era in which laughter commanded a great deal of philosophical attention. The French philosopher Henri Bergson published his influential series of essays on laughter in 1900 – later collecting them into book-form as *Le Rire*. Freud came out with *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* in 1905, the same year that *Melkij bes* was originally serialized.[16] Although Sologub was notoriously reticent on his creative process and influences, there can be no doubt that these and other thinkers were being read and discussed in his Petersburg milieu.[17] This essay however will limit itself to showing his affinities with two 19th century theorists of laughter: Charles Baudelaire and Friedrich Nietzsche. The demonstration is worth carrying out if only to rescue Sologub's novel from the Russian-studies ghetto to which it is usually consigned. It is important to emphasize that *A Petty Demon* could not be more thoroughly Russian. At the same time, the "petty" can be shown to originate in Nietzsche, the "demon" in Baudelaire. Sologub's attempt at a "Symbolist

novel" is in fact among the most sophisticated comic novels of its time, vastly underappreciated, although in the best traditions of both Russian and European literature. It is difficult to name another work that has more to say about the status and function of laughter in our own time.

II

Perhaps scholarship has neglected laughter in *Melkij bes* precisely because the topic is dauntingly large. Laughter is represented so frequently and prominently from the first page to the last that it becomes something more than just a theme. It achieves a saturation effect. This occurs on the macro-level of the text within two separate but related plot-lines that converge on an apocalyptic revelation. The main plot-line follows Peredonov's misadventures as he strives for his coveted inspectorship – a satire of provincial careerism familiar to readers of Russian literature from Gogol's *Dead Souls*, or to take a more contemporary example, from Chekhov's short story "The Man in the Case." This main plot-line is set up not only as satire, but specifically as farce. Peredonov's manipulative girlfriend Varvara, with whom he is cohabiting, falsely claims to be the "protégé" of a local princess with the power to promote him to inspector. Varvara forges letters from the princess pressuring him to get married. Once Peredonov has been duped into marrying Varvara, he waits in vain for his inspectorship, while frustration and paranoia take hold, personified in the form of a supernatural dust-demon called the *Nedotykomka* – its name derived from the Russian roots *nedo* and *tykhii*, meaning something like "unquietable" or "not to be quieted." As Peredonov descends into madness, the narrative style departs increasingly from the conventions of satirical realism, moving the main plot toward convergence with a subplot at the novel's crisis.

The subplot begins in Chapter 14 – not long after the introduction of the *Nedotykomka* – and follows the love affair between two young people: Ludmila Rutilova and Sasha Pylnikov. The former is a hedonistic young woman in her twenties, a prospective bride for Peredonov and thus rival to Varvara. The latter is one of Peredonov's gymnasium students, a shy, gentle, pubescent boy around whom mean-spirited rumors are swirling: that he is not a boy at all, but a girl in disguise. The petty Peredonov becomes aware of these rumors and obsessively pursues them. This subplot also has earmarks of farce, with the difference that the two young lovers – in contrast to virtually every other character in the novel – are at least initially *not* grotesque. Rather than caricatures, Lumila and Sasha come across as fully rounded and conflicted human beings, and their budding relationship, though shot through with laughter, is treated with a poignant sincerity. The increasingly intense and unstable conflict between innocence and experience is a typically Sologubian conceit, and the source of the novel's emotional suspense.

On the micro-level, we can illustrate how laughter saturates the text by opening the book at random to any chapter – and almost to any page. The first chapter is most efficient however insofar as it introduces the main characters and themes. In keeping with what Blok called "the device of stylization and symmetry," this chapter is divided into two scenes in which Peredonov

interacts first with men and then with women. The masculine scene is set in a churchyard after a holiday mass, with a tone of foreboding struck at the end of the opening paragraph. The sentence fragment is worth noticing:

> … казалось, что в этом городе живут мирно и дружно. И даже весело. Но все это только казалось (I, 9).
>
> … it appeared that in this town they lived peacefully and amiably. *And even merrily*. But all of this was only an appearance.[18]

The narrative wastes no time in introducing the "merrily." As Peredonov mingles with his male co-parishioners outside the church, he boasts that he is sure to win his inspectorship as soon as he marries Varvara. One of the company shows mock surprise that he could legally marry his "sister" (*sestra)*, a word-choice that sparks an explosion of laughter in the other men (I, 9). Peredonov hotly defends himself by insisting that Varvara is not his "sister" but his "second cousin." The translation is inadequate however, because the exact term in Russian is *troiurodnaia sestra*, which literally means "threefold-related sister." On a realistic level, this is the moment of diegetic laughter that launches the farcical plot. On a symbolic level, however, it acquires an extra meaning from the religious setting. The joke evokes Old Testament sister-wife motifs, as in the story of Abraham and Sarah. Peredonov's defense suggests the Trinity – *Troitsa* in Russian. These are the verbal hints or traces that Moreas meant by *apparences sensibles*, impossible to detect on first reading, but increasingly observable on subsequent readings. Their symbolic implication is that Peredonov and Varvara are mythic doubles, like twin brother and sister, two sides of the same petty coin. They are also, as the narrative will later reveal, "threefold related."

Laughter floods the text from this moment on. Peredonov recounts a visit he has made to Varvara's all-powerful princess, which inspires a skeptical guffaw from his friend Rutilov (I, 10). When Rutilov offers to set him up one of his own three sisters instead – that is, Ludmila – Peredonov's response is to burst into laughter. He then abruptly stops, convinced that Varvara would denounce him to the princess. Here we have the first indication of his paranoia, which becomes increasingly reflected in an inability to laugh (I, 11). The masculine scene ends as Peredonov indulges an immodest thought at the expense of the three Rutilov sisters – a trio of Fates, as the narrative increasingly hints, characterized by the tag *veselye, nasmeshlivye* [merry and mocking] (I, 12).

The chapter then segues into a second, symmetrically constructed scene in which Peredonov is lured into his neighbor Vershina's garden. Here the farcical marriage plot is developed from a feminine perspective. Like Rutilov, the Circe-like Vershina is attempting to marry Peredonov off – in this case to her lodger Marta. Religion is once again significant: the first moment of diegetic laughter occurs when Vershina mocks the Polish Catholic Marta for attending an Orthodox mass, implying that she only goes to there on the look-out for a husband (I, 13). Vershina then laughingly recounts the story of one of her own hapless suitors, while the brow-beaten Marta laughs along, "like well-mannered children laugh." Peredonov, after some consideration, joins in, while the narrator explains, in a

nice piece of character drawing, that this lack of spontaneity is typical of him (I, 15). Peredonov responds with a story about his battle-ax landlady, whom he intends to bilk out of a month's rent, guffawing at the prospect (I 16). Marta's adolescent brother Vladya enters – one of the novel's ever-present gymnasium boys – and whispers and laughs with his sister. Peredonov takes offence and demands an explanation. The narrator remarks: "Whenever someone laughed in front of him, and he did not know what they were laughing about, he always assumed that they were laughing about him" (I, 18). Peredonov is mollified by the other characters, but takes revenge by making jokes at the gymnasium pupil's expense. The chapter ends as it began: Vershina bursts into laughter at Peredonov's insistence that his girlfriend Varvara – who is clearly pushing fifty – is not yet thirty years old (I, 20).

This analysis of even a single chapter supports an observation from the critical tradition that *Melkij bes* is a "pattern novel." Like other works of Symbolist prose, it develops a symphonic structure of variations on a theme, holding the reader's attention not so much through character development as through hypnotically-repeated patterns of images and events. The novel's epigraph, for example, taken from one of Sologub's lyric poems ("I wished to burn her, the wicked witch"), is continually broken down and reassembled on variations of ego, desire, fire, femininity, wickedness, and sorcery – patterns that reach a manic crescendo at the end.[19]

The patterning of laughter is just as relentlessly complex. It echoes through the text in multiple contexts in various qualities and quantities. A parade of secondary characters is represented as tittering, giggling, or laughing almost constantly – their hilarity abstracted and personified in the form of the supernatural *Nedotykomka*. Peredonov's classroom *riots* with laughter, a constant source of complaint for his headmaster. And as we have noted, Peredonov's descent into madness is measured by his growing inability to laugh and his paranoid obsession with the laughter around him – laughter that becomes increasingly intense and meaningful as the plot-lines converge toward a crisis.[20]

III

The farcical elements of *Melikij bes* remind us that the novel's appeal went far beyond sophisticates like Bely or Blok. It was also a popular success. We need to keep an eye on this fact precisely because the laughter we're concerned with is symbolic: that is, it exists both on the diegetic, systemic level of the text and on the non-diegetic, extra-systemic level of the reader, and the interplay between these levels, their momentary unity and/or disunity, is significant aesthetically.[21]

One can state this more plainly. Every parent of an infant knows that laughter comes spontaneously to the human species – and moreover is thoroughly contagious. Few aspects of human existence bind us together so deeply. We experience a kind of *communion* in laughter, as something above, below, or beyond communication, that is, *mere* communication. Yet how often does the grotesque laughter in *Melkij bes* invite us to commune with its characters? Is there any point in the chapter summarized above at which a reasonably dignified reader would partake in

the mirth? Or is it not more likely that this merry riot of vulgarity – as it mutates through drunken orgies, the torture of animals, the belittling of pupils and servants, and so on – will provoke an indecisive, then a fascinated horror, something like what Blok called *chudovischnoe zhizni*?

And yet – the book is funny. It is undeniably funny. Stubbornly so. Its sense of humor comes from a fully recognizable comic tradition. Favorably-minded early reviewers made flattering comparisons to Gogol, Goncharov, and Saltykov-Schedrin, even as Sologub's Symbolist ambitions went completely over their heads.[22] A showcase example is the homage to Gogol that begins in Chapter 8. Here Peredonov, feeling persecuted by real and imaginary rumors, decides to make the rounds of various provincial officials – each of whom makes a tip of the hat to *Dead Soul*s. At the top of the list is the mayor of Peredonov's particular provincial hell, whose Gogolian surname Skuchaev evokes a Dickensian "Mr. Dull" or "Mr. Borus." The term used for "mayor" is *gorodskoi golova*, which – with a switch of grammatical gender – means literally "city head." The reception room of the "city head" is filled with rock-hard couches and chairs, wryly compared by the narrator to "toys magnified many times," and extremely uncomfortable to sit on, although for that very reason praised by the local archbishop as *dushespasitel'nyi* [soul-saving]. The innuendo that saving one's soul means punishing one's behind rings all the more absurd in the universe of "the Russian Marquis de Sade" (VIII, 78).

Peredonov's ignorance and contempt for learning, and his desire to conform at all costs, are by this point well-established in the narrative. The scene thus implies that the city head's judgment stands in for the block-headed judgment of the town. As a born politician, eager to please a constituent, Skuchaev tries so valiantly to make sense of his visitor's paranoid rambling that he ends up mistaking it for bookish abstraction:

> Беда с этими учеными, – думал он – не поймешь, чего он хочет. В книгах-то эму все ясно, ученому человеку, а вот из книги нос вытащит, так и завязнет и других завязит (VIII, 81).
>
> The problem with these scholars – he thought – is that you can't catch what the guy wants. In those books of his everything's clear to him, this scholarly guy, but *viola* he pulls his nose out of a book, and gets all tangled up, and gets others all tangled up too.

This theme of the idiot mistaken for a scholar is picked up and run with through the next few chapters. On Peredonov's visit to the bellowing public prosecutor Avinovitsky, for example, the aspiring school inspector thoroughly confuses Alexander Herzen with Adam Mickiewicz, only to arrive at the prudent conclusion: Мне нельзя запрещенные книги читать. Я и не читаю никогда. Я – патриот. (IX, 90). [I'm not allowed to read forbidden books. I never even read at all. I'm a patriot]. In the next chapter he confesses to the Marshal of Nobility that in his youth he supported a Constitution for Russia – as did we all! – but that it was a Constitution without a Parliament. The Marshal, true to his progressive leanings, considers this an intriguing possibility, until Peredonov clarifies: а теперь я ничего [but now I'm for nothing] (X, 93). The satire is

thoroughly Russian, yet translates delightfully into any culture of self-censoring conformity.

It is worth pointing out that Peredonov and the other grotesques are funniest when they take themselves seriously. This is epitomized in the farcical episode in Chapter 15 that functions as a cap-stone to the series of visits. Here Peredonov accompanies his masculine side-kick Volodin to the home of the well-read Nadezhda Adamenko. The sheep-like Volodin makes another example of "stylization and symmetry": along with Varvara and the *Nedotykomka*, he is one of three characters in Peredonov's intimate circle. The extreme seriousness with which he bleats out a marriage proposal to Nadezhda sets off convulsions of laughter in the lady and her younger brother – another of the novel's ubiquitous boys – made all the more unbearable by their attempts to suppress it (XV, 141-145). This scene can take even the wariest reader off guard: it is virtually impossible to read *without* laughing. As Nadezhda and her brother vainly struggle to suppress their laughter, readers can find themselves in almost painful communion. Meanwhile, *Russian* readers can hardly miss the fact that Nadezhda's first name "Hope" and last name "Adamenko" gesture symbolically toward "the hope of mankind." Coming on the heels of the homage to Gogol, this is as close as Sologub ever comes to a whole-hearted affirmation of "the common people's creative culture of laughter."

The main thing to emphasize here is that we read about laughter in the novel, and we laugh ourselves, but not always at the same time – in fact, very *rarely* at the same time – and the tension this creates between text and reader generates a pattern of symbolic effects. The pattern moreover is fluid, not fixed. It depends not only on the reader's subjective sense of humor, but also on a deepening aesthetic engagement with the text. In this sense, the treatment of laughter is fully consistent with Moreas' injunction on "the essential character of symbolist art." The novel offers no fixed ideal of laughter or the laughable *as such* – only constantly shifting traces or hints of some "primordial ideal" that the laughter invokes.

IV

We can now turn to the philosophies of laughter that were current in Sologub's milieu. The definitive statement on laughter among the French Symbolists was not surprisingly an essay on *Satanic* laughter: Charles Baudelaire's *De l'essence du rire et généralement du comique dans les arts plastiques* [On the Essence of Laughter and More Especially of the Comic in the Plastic Arts]. Published in 1855, some thirty years prior to the Manifesto, but only two years before its author's seminal verse collection *Les Fleurs du Mal*, the essay looks at Romantic themes through the eyes of a free-thinking Catholic. Although its emphasis is on the "plastic," or visual, rather than on the verbal arts, it is clear from even a cursory reading that it profoundly influenced Sologub's novel.

The title in French is rather misleading, because the topic is not so much laughter *per se* as caricature – or more specifically, the relationship between laughter and the grotesque. Baudelaire begins by distinguishing two types of caricature, the first of which is journalistic and ephemeral, but the second of which "contains an element of the mysterious, the durable, the

eternal which commends it to the attention of artists." The applicability of this claim to *Melkij bes* is impossible to overlook:

> That beauty – a word which it is difficult to define – should find a place in works designed to display to human beings their own moral and physical ugliness, is something curious and worthy of careful study. Nor is it less curious that the lamentable spectacle thus offered to mortals should excite in them the deathless and incorrigible spirit of mirth. This it is that forms the real subject of the present article.[23]

Baudelaire's argument rests on the premise that "the wise man never laughs but he trembles," meaning that the true Christian "in whom the spirit of The Lord is active" is acutely aware of the common origin of both laughter and tears in the Fall of Man (112). From this premise, he derives the following propositions:

> Laughter is satanic, and, therefore, profoundly human. It is born of man's conception of his own superiority. Since it is essentially human, it is also essentially contradictory, that is to say it is at once a sign of infinite grandeur and of infinite wretchedness: of infinite wretchedness by comparison with the absolute Being who exists as an idea in Man's mind; of an infinite grandeur by comparison with the animals. It is from the perpetual shock produced by these two infinites that laughter proceeds (117).

As a theorist of laughter, Baudelaire can be placed among those who privilege a psychological over a social perspective. He believes like Freud for example – but not like Bergson – that "the sense of the comic, the ability to laugh, is in him who laughs, and not at all in the object which excites laughter." It is therefore impossible to laugh at our own folly, unless – like a philosopher – we develop a detachment that allows us "rapidly to become two persons at one and the same time." By contrast, "the most comic of animals are also the most serious, as, for example, monkeys and parrots" (117-18). Or sheep – like Peredonov's Volodin.

However, Baudelaire's theory is most relevant to Sologub's artistic universe at the moment it makes a distinction between the convulsive, self-contradictory laughter of adults and the unified, intuitive laughter of children. His thoughts on this head could be cut-and-pasted into any introduction to *A Petty Demon*:

> The laughter of a child is like a flower's expanding bud. It is the joy of receiving, the joy of breathing, the joy of gazing, of living, of growing. It is a vegetable joy. For this reason, there is more in it of the smile than of the laugh; it is analogous to the wagging of a dog's tail, or to the purring of a cat. Be it noticed, however, that, if the laughter of children differs from these purely animal expressions of contentment, the reason is that it is not wholly devoid of ambition, a form of ambition suited to young creatures in the process of growing up, in other words, to Satans in the bud (120).

Baudelaire's claim about "Satans in the bud" leads directly to his aesthetic conclusion: "From the point of view of art, the comic is an imitation, whereas the grotesque is a creation."

What he means by this is that laughter inspired by the comic (or as he later defines it, by the garden-variety "significantly comic") arises from our feeling of superiority over other human beings – a natural feeling that art merely imitates. By contrast, the laughter inspired by the grotesque (or as he later defines it, by the "absolutely comic") arises from our feeling of superiority over nature itself – a feeling that art (re-)creates. Both types of laughter are Satanic, but the one is merely natural, while the other is, in a primordial sense, *super*-natural:

> ... laughter provoked by the grotesque has in it something profound, axiomatic and primitive, which more closely relates it to innocence and to absolute joy than does the laughter occasioned by the comedy of manners. There is between these two forms of laughter [...] the same difference that is to be found between literature with a social purpose and Art for Art's sake; and this gives to the grotesque a proportionate superiority to the merely comic (121).

It helps to remember at this point that the Greek roots *sym* + *bolein* mean literally "to hold or join together." The "absolutely comic" is in Baudelaire's words "much closer to nature" – more primordial, more child-like, more innocent – and thus "has a *unity* which must be grasped by intuition." Symbolist laughter is correspondingly immediate. There is something esoteric, something reified about it, which makes it "the perquisite only of superior artists, they alone being capable of absorbing and digesting any absolute idea" (122).

V

It is clear then that Sologub's sensibility in this novel can be traced to Baudelaire and his epigones – no surprise for a Symbolist poet. But Baudelaire's thought on laughter fails to account for that fluid pattern of symbolic effects described above: the tension between text and reader that occurs when laughter itself becomes grotesque. In other words, while Baudelaire explains the difference in quality between "significant" and "absolute" laughter – and suggests that a "superior artist" can exploit this difference symbolically – he stops short of examining the *culture* of laughter as such. Here it is useful to consider Nietzsche, the foremost European philosopher of "decadence," whose work was at the peak of its popularity and influence in Russia at the time that *Melkij bes* was being written.[24]

A self-styled "immoralist" and "psychologist," Nietzsche developed a rigorous course in skepticism directed at the philosophical conditions of modernity – above all at Christian idealism. Sologub was an admirer. We know from an essay by his wife that he was enamored of *Also Sprach Zarathustra*.[25] He must have also been aware of the philosopher Lev Shestov, some of whose writings on Nietzsche and Russian literature appeared in the same journal *Voprosy zhizni* that published early chapters of *Melkij bes*.[26] In this, Sologub exemplifies a fundamental difference between the French and Russian generations of Symbolists: the latter came strongly under the influence of Nietzsche's radical pessimism. Nietzsche's pessimism was not however stereotypically Teutonic, that is, humorless. On the contrary, Nietzsche assigns an extremely high

value to human laughter – so high, as one commentator put it, "that with certain qualifications Nietzsche's thought may be said to comprise not a tragic but a 'comic' philosophy."[27]

Nietzsche's thought on laughter begins from his distinction in *The Birth of Tragedy* between the "healthy" Apollonian and Dionysian laughter of early Greek tragedy and the "decadent" laughter of later Greek comedy under the influence of Socratic rationalism.[28] The extension of this claim through Platonism into Christianity leads to the contrast in his mature thought between two kinds of laughter in the modern world: "the laughter of the height" and "the laughter of the herd" – or to put it more politely, of the multitude. The distinction receives its most extended treatment in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1882) – known in Russian as *Veselaia nauka* – where Nietzsche imagines a "joyful wisdom" that will someday unify laughter and knowledge. Although Sologub was almost certainly acquainted with this book, we can stick to illustrative passages from *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, given that Nietzsche as a non-systematic philosopher made the same distinction in multiple contexts.

In the preface to this book "for everyone and no one," Nietzsche's spokesman Zarathustra descends from a mountaintop to preach his doctrine of the *Übermensch* – the man "Over Man" – only to be greeted by the derisive laughter of the townspeople in a marketplace. They ask him to make them into the Last or Ultimate Man instead – the nihilistic end-point of decadence – one standard unit in an immense, indistinguishable "herd." Struck into silence, Zarathustra abandons the marketplace to deliver a series of discourses to the solitary individual, asking in one of them: "Who among you can at the same time laugh and be exalted?" The symbolic answer: "He who climbs upon the highest mountain laughs at all tragedies, real or imaginary."[29]

Probably Nietzsche's best-known treatment of laughter, in *Zarathustra* or in any other book, is the parable of the shepherd locked in combat with a serpent that has crawled into his mouth and down his throat. Unable to dislodge the serpent, Zarathustra calls out for the shepherd to bite off its head:

> The shepherd [...] bit as my cry had advised him; he bit with a good bite! He spat far away the snake's head – and sprang up.
> No longer a shepherd, no longer a man – a transformed being, surrounded with light, laughing! Never yet on earth had a man laughed as he laughed (180).

This laughter according to Zarathustra is "no human laughter," for it makes life and death both equally endurable. As the symbolism rather heavy-handedly suggests, the shepherd merits this exalted laughter by finding the courage to cut through conventional morality and to speak and act freely on his own terms. His laughter is not *a*-moral however. It rather expresses a higher moral truth that opposite values, like good and evil, pleasure and pain, life and death, are not mutually exclusive, but bound together in the human condition. Nietzche contrasts it throughout his work to the laughter of the Ultimate Man, the social conformist, for whom life is a labyrinth of thwarted desires. The difference between this "laughter of height" and the "laughter of the herd," to paraphrase one commentator, is the difference between the playful laughter of

lovers in bed and the prurient laughter of a dirty joke, or between the innocent laughter of a child with a toy and the bullying laughter of one child taunting another who does not fit in.[30]

We do not read far in *Melkij bes* before encountering just such a moral distinction. Sologub's most intimate prose is devoted to the relationship between Sasha and Ludmila that begins in Chapter 14. This chapter ends with a Symbolist prose-poem of the highest order: Ludmila's sequence of "African dreams." The adult Ludmila dreams that she is lying in an overheated chamber and that her legs are a tree trunk scaled by a serpent with Sasha's face. Her dream then changes to the shore of a lake on a sultry evening, where she is lying naked with a golden crown on her head, while a regal white swan – also with Sasha's face – approaches and overpowers her.

> Потом приснилась Людмиле великолепная палата с низкими, грузными сводами, – и толпились в ней нагие, сильные, прекрасные отроки, – а краше всех был Саша. Она сидела высоко, и нагие отроки перед нею поочередно бичевали друг друга. И когда положили на пол Сашу, головою к Людмиле, и бичевали его, а он звонко смеялся и плакал, – она хохотала, как иногда хохочут во сне, когда вдруг усиленно забьется сердце, – смеются долго, неудержимо, смехом самозабвения и смерти (XIV, 138)

> Then Ludmila dreamed of a magnificent tent with narrow, sturdy arches – and jostling into it were naked, strong, beautiful pubescent boys – and the most beautiful among them was Sasha. She sat on high, and the naked boys in front of her took turns whipping each other. And when they lay Sasha on the ground, with his head toward Ludmila, and lashed him, while he laughed resoundingly and wept – she laughed, as you sometimes laugh in dreams, when the heart suddenly begins to beat intensely – and you laugh long, unbearably, the laughter of self-forgetfulness and death.

Along with the sheer verbal beauty of the passage – its Symbolist imagery of serpent and swan, beloved of Yeats among many others – we can enumerate multiple Nietzschean motifs: Ludmila's laughter is Dionysian; it comes from above; it is mixed with tears; it is ecstatic; it is an erotic confusion of life and death, pleasure and pain; it is an ego-destroying, orgasmic laughter in communion with Sasha himself. On awakening, Ludmila is convinced that she has fallen passionately in love with the boy, and laments the moral conventions that prevent her from beholding his nakedness in waking life:

> Точно стыдно иметь тело, – думала Людмила, – что даже мальчишки прячут его.

> "It's like it's shameful to have a body," thought Ludmila, "that even little boys hide it" (XIV, 138).

Ludmila's sincerity of feeling at this moment contrasts so sharply with the novel's grotesque *peredonovschina* that it is impossible not to assign it a higher moral value. But because Ludmila is a grown woman, a member of the adult community, it is equally impossible to ignore her defiance of moral convention. As she pursues an ever more intimate relationship with the

pubescent Sasha, this *aporia* generates suspense: how can such a higher morality be sustained?

It is worth going back to Baudelaire for a moment and his laughter of "Satans in the bud." Ludmila in her innocent erotic play with Sasha creates a world of sensual pleasure and beauty around him. She draws in her two sisters, swearing them to secrecy. At the same time, the petty Peredonov becomes increasingly aggressive in his efforts to unmask his sensitive and delicate pupil – whom he now senses is a rival. Peredonov represents herd morality at its most grotesque. As he makes a show of piety in church, he feels the laughter of the Fate-like Rutilov sisters bearing down upon him like a supernatural force:

> Смех – тихий смешок, хихиканье да шептанье девиц Рутиловых звучали в ушах у Передонова, разрастаясь порою до пределов необычайных – точно прямо в уши ему смеялись лукавые девы, чтобы рассмешить – и погубить ему.
>
> Laughter – the quiet chuckling, giggling, and whispering of the Rutilov girls rang in Peredonov's ears, increasing at times to uncommon extremes – as if the deceitful maidens laughed directly into his ear, in order to laugh him to pieces – to annihilate him (XXII, 201).

This is the annihilation to which the plot-lines converge. The climax of the novel takes place at a community masquerade ball, where prizes are awarded for best costumes. Spurred on by Ludmila, who wants to make a mockery of Peredonov, the sisters dress Sasha as a Japanese geisha and enter him into the contest. They are acting in this sense like Baudelaire's "superior artists." Their understanding of the laughable, which began in a natural sense of superiority over the likes of Peredonov, has now passed beyond this into a sense of superiority – through art – over nature itself. At the same time, in their contempt for the "herd" at the masquerade ball, they are storming a Nietzschean height, a vantage-point from which it is possible "to laugh at all tragedies, real or imaginary."

Sasha is a pawn in this adult game. What he intuits as the masquerade approaches is that Ludmila and her sisters are *ambitious* – and ambitious for something that nature cannot sustain. At one point, in another of Blok's "devices of stylization and symmetry," he has a vision that complements Ludmila's "African dream." It shows remarkable insight into the psychology of adolescence:

> Хотелось что-то сделать ей, милое или больное, нежное или стыдное, – но что? Целовать ее ноги? Или бить ее, долго, сильно, длинными гибкими ветвями? Чтобы она смеялась от радости или кричала от боли? И то, и другое, может быть, желанно ей, но мало. Что же ей надо? [...] в чем же это таинство плоти? И как принести свою кровь и свое тело в сладостную жертву ее желаниям, своему стыду? (XXVI, 248)
>
> He felt like doing something to her, gentle or painful, tender or shameful – but what? Kiss her feet? Or whip her, long and hard, with long supple switches? So that she laughed with joy or cried out in pain? Both of those things, it may be, were desired by her, but that was not enough. What then did she need? [...] what then *was* this mystery of the flesh? And how was he to bring his own blood and his own body into sweet sacrifice to her desires, and to his own shame?

The answer comes at the climax of the novel. For our purposes here, it is enough to say that the moral *aporia* is turned on its head. This is because, as the sisters mock Peredonov's obsession with Sasha, they also play into the ugly rumors about Sasha that are circulating in the community. They bring him to the masquerade ball as the girl he is rumored to be – literally as their work of art – like a lamb to sacrifice, or like the letter "S" that turns "laughter" into "slaughter." The supernatural laughter to which the sisters aspire, which mocks all tragedies real or imaginary, which simultaneously echoes back to the innocent unity of childhood and forward to "self-forgetfulness and death" – which laughs Peredonov to pieces – also threatens the innocent Sasha with destruction. The novel's emotional suspense is no longer generated by the Nietzschean question: how can a higher morality be sustained? Rather by the question: Who will be sacrificed for it?

An act of sacrificial violence culminates the novel. It is announced by a breath-taking example of "stylization and symmetry," a final moment of diegetic laughter that bookends the entire text. Peredonov, Volodin, and Varvara get dangerously drunk at the masquerade ball. As the *Nedotykomka* swirls through the crowd, the amiably stupid, sheep-like Volodin spars with Varvara over a play on words: whether they are drinking *vtroem* or *vdoem* – as a trio or a pair. Varvara solves the problem with a verbal-mathematical pun. She points out that the three of them together constitute both a trio *and* a pair, because, according to a proverb that she has quoted since snaring Peredonov in marriage:

> Муж да жена – одна сатана, – сказала Варвара и захохотала (XXXII, 287).
>
> Man and wife make a single Satan – said Varvara and burst into laughter.

This final explosion of Satanic laughter makes explicit the symbolism that was merely implicit in the novel's original deployment of diegetic laughter, when Peredonov calls Varvara his "*troiurodnaia sestra*." It is an omega-laugh connecting to this alpha-laugh, closing a full circle of symbolic meaning. It is a moment of disclosure – equal parts ludicrous and terrifying – that "flares up and imprints itself more than anything else on the memory," a head-spinning plunge into utter depravity that is also esoteric, hieratic, high Symbolist art.

VI

Sologub as both pedagogue and artist seems to have been acutely aware of the process through which "Satans in the bud" blossom into adult forms. Here we have only considered his affinities with Baudelaire and Nietzsche. His remarkable parallels with his contemporaries Bergson and Freud could make the topic of another essay. It remains for Russian specialists to look at how his treatment of laughter resonates with other writers in his context – whether humorists like Saltykov-Schedrin or philosphers like Lev Shestov.

One can however draw conclusions. Sologub's technique is undeniably Symbolist in the spirit of the 1886 Manifesto. He deploys symbols like a theurgist or priest – a magician even – fluttering a

veil before us in which sparkling stars of laughter are stitched "in stylized and symmetrical forms." The laughter that the text *re-presents* comes in constant collision with the laughter it *presents* – that is, evokes – sometimes winking on both planes at once. There is a sense of the "accidental" to this, like the clashing of ringlets made by droplets on a pond, such that every reader and every reading is unique.[31] Some moments are more or less "objectively" funny. Yet because the novel offers no fixed ideal of laughter or the laughable, we open ourselves to its most vivid symbolic effects by putting aside both cultural tradition and generic preconceptions – and letting our laughter just *happen*. The novel is Symbolist insofar as it is fiendishly prolific in putting a culture of depraved laughter into the service of "primordial ideals." It is decadent insofar as it enacts the reverse: it forces us to participate in that depravity to point that – like the tangled scholar Peredonov – we are hopelessly implicated in it. The novel shows no contradiction between "symbolism" and "decadence." In effect, it restores their original unity.

The French philosopher Georges Bataille, whose hyperbolic thoughts on laughter owe an obvious debt to both Baudelaire and Nietzsche, conceived of the phenomenon as a spiritual economy of revelation and concealment. Laughter is the sudden consolidation of one's own being at the pinnacle of the pyramid of being, the momentary attainment of absolute sovereignty at the expense of an inferior other – one of those grotesque figures who, like Peredonov and his circle, founder on their finitude. But the laughter of the sovereign being, to be truly sovereign, must participate in the other's fall. Laughter renders sovereignty finite – so that finitude, conversely, is sovereign – and presents us with the nothing and nowhere of being, meaningless, yet laughable, because the presence of an absence, as Bataille concludes with truly Gallic aplomb, is "impossible, and yet there."[32]

This mutual cancellation of the sublime and the pathetic recalls Blok's vision of non-existence behind the novel's otherworldly and unreal howls – "a diabolic countenance" that, impossibly, could only be his own.[33] Sologub's challenge to his most attentive readers comes down to this: that in using laughter to display *chudovischnoe zhizni*, "like an animal in a cage," he puts his readers on display as well. We would be well-advised to check our smiles in his polished mirror, in our media-saturated 21st century, rollicking from pinnacle to base with laughter.

Endnotes:

1. Chebotarevskaya was a feminist activist and literary figure of interest in her own right. She supported the February Revolution in 1917 but strongly opposed the October Revolution and committed suicide in 1921 after a struggle for permission to emigrate with her husband.
2. The most extended discussion of Sologub's children in English is by Rabinowitz (Columbus, 1980).
3. Sologub's reputation for sadism largely came out of his conservative position on corporal punishment in schools, which was raging in Russian educational circles at the time. See Pavlova, M.M. (Moscow, 2007), who reprints an article by Sologbub "O telesnikh nakazaniakh," pp. 468- 475. Flagellation was a well-established theme in 19th century literature, beginning at least with Rousseau, and exemplified among self-styled decadents by Swinburne. But Sologub's treatment of the theme had little in common with either Rousseau or Swinburne – and even less with de Sade.
4. Chulkov (1922), p. 53. Sologub's vast output of lyric poems divided the universe into a sordid here-

and-now called "life," governed by the evil principle of the Sun, and a divine otherworld of "death," the realm of the Devil, the true god of beauty and imagination. An exemplar is the verse cycle "Zvezda Mair" [The Star Mair], in which an imaginary star of truth and beauty is counterposed to our own.

5. Dated 30 April 1908, the letter can be read online at http://www.fsologub.ru/, where there is an interesting footnote on its origin. See also Bely's review of Sologub's story collection *Istlevaiushchie lichiny* [Decaying Masks], which is included in Chebotarevskaya, ed. (St. Petersburg, 2002), 149-152.
6. Gippius, Zinaida. "Slezinka Peredonova." In Chebotarevskaya, ed. (2002), 111-122. The review originally appeared in 1908 in the journal *Rech'* [Speech].
7. We could use a word like this in English. The 2019 "Sharpiegate" scandal is an example of *peredonovschina* that could have been lifted directly from the novel. It is also an excellent illustration of what Baudelaire meant by "the absolutely comic."
8. Some readers, to be sure, were influenced by personal antipathy. Sologub's own Stendahlian metaphor suggests that he identified as a realist. There is however a tendency in Symbolism toward what Diana Greene calls "the perfect understanding between the author-narrator and his creation." Think Joseph Conrad and Charles Marlow, for example, or James Joyce and Gabriel Conroy. But for this Sologub's first novel makes a better illustration.
9. Greene (Columbus, 1985), 112-113. An overview of scholarship on *A Petty Demon* can be found in the excellent critical edition edited by M.M. Pavlova (St. Petersburg, 2004), 720-21. Miroslav Drozda's Russian language analysis was an important source for this article. There are many useful analyses in English, not cited in this essay, including those by Judith Mills (on critical contexts), Harriet Hustis (on language), and Linda J. Ivanits (on the grotesque).
10. See for example Pyman (Cambridge, 1994).
11. Sologub himself wrestled with the historical "telescoping" that often occurs when Western ideas are imported into Russia. In an unpublished essay from 1894, "Ne postydno li byt' dekadentom?" [Is it not shameful to be a decadent?], he attempted to reconcile two views among critics "acquainted with the most recent idealistic endeavors, here with us and in Europe":

    > [...] the first is that all (or many) great poetic works have been symbolic, according to the very nature of art, which is always idealistic; the second is that decadence has only recently appeared, an ugly, temporary phenomenon, already past its bloom, grotesque in all respects, diametrically opposed to symbolism. The Russian literati who adhere to the new tendency do not, apparently, have anything against being recognized as symbolists – while reviewers stubbornly accuse them of decadence as of something artless and, if you will, contemptible.

    Sologub goes on to argue that "a great illness of the spirit" is necessary for the insights of symbolism: "and since any suffering that is inconceivable to the crowd is despised and ridiculed by it, then this suffering also received the contemptible moniker decadence." It is significant that Gippius in her review gestured at a similar "illness of the spirit." Sologub's essay is reprinted in Pavlova (Moskva, 2007), 494-501.
12. Yeats (London, 1980). Yeats discovered the "symbolical" in these exquisite lines by Robert Burns: "The white moon is setting behind the white wave, / And Time is setting with me, O!" As for prose, he believed that any symbol could evoke the power of surrounding symbols "as a sword-blade may flicker with the light of burning towers."
13. Translation mine. The original text is widely available online.
14. Bakhtin (Austin, 1981), 20. Bakhtin argues that the parodic-travestying literature from which our modern novelistic discourse has evolved

    > introduces the permanent corrective of laughter, of a critique on the one-sided seriousness of the lofty, direct word, the corrective of reality that is always richer, more fundamental and most

> importantly *too contradictory and heteroglot* to be fit into a high and straightforward genre. The high genres are monotonic, while the "fourth drama" and genres akin to it retain the ancient binary tone of the word (55).

15. Blok (Moscow, 2003). There is an untranslatable word-play in the phrase "something that is imageless and formless." The word for "imageless" – *bezóbraznoe* – is only one stressed syllable away from a synonym for "vulgarity" [*poshlost'*] – *bezobráznoe*.
16. Theories of laughter can be divided into social or psychological. Bergson exemplifies the former. For Bergson "any arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement." Laughter thus serves to punish behavior that is dangerously mechanical or automatic:

> The rigid, the ready-made, the mechanical, in contrast with the supple, the ever-changing and the living, absent-mindedness in contrast with attention, in a word, automatism in contrast with free activity, such are the defects that laughter singles out and would fain correct.

Freud by contrast elaborated what is still the best known psychological theory. Freud saw laughter as a sudden discharge of mental energy, a cognitive "short-circuit" that allows us to re-live the euphoria of childhood, "a bygone time in which we were wont to defray our psychic work with scant expenditure." Both theories apply to *A Petty Demon*. Peredonov and his circle are fully aware of the punitive power of laughter – on both the giving and receiving ends. Peredonov himself is repeatedly compared to "a dancing doll," while a minor character named Tishkov, for example, is called "a cleverly-devised annoyance machine."

17. Despite its provincial setting, Sologub's novel is a quintessential product of Petersburg – Russia's sophisticated "window on the West." The author hinted at this in his preface to the 1913 seventh edition, where he imagined a dialogue between his "Russian self" and his "Parisian soul." His contemporaries called him the "Northern Sphinx" in allusion to the famous statuary on Vasilievsky Island, where his Andreevsky Academy was located.
18. Translation and emphasis mine. Chapter and page numbers are taken from Sologub (Moscow, 2007), the most recent popular edition of the novel in Russian.
19. The analysis here is indebted to Greene (1985), 69. Compare also Rosenthal and Foley (1982), 43-55.
20. See Roustang (1987) for a discussion of how paranoia and laughter are inversely related in psychology.
21. My understanding of the systemic and the extra-systemic is indebted to Lotman (Ann Arbor, 1977). See also footnote 31 below.
22. There are abundant examples in Chebotarevskaya, ed. (Petersburg, 2002). Typical among them is an admiring but thoroughly bewildered review by A. Izmailov, pp. 446-461.
23. Baudelaire (New York, 1956), 110. All subsequent quotations and their page numbers are taken from this English translation.
24. The most comprehensive study of Nietzsche in Russian culture is by Clowes (DeKalb, 1988).
25. Chebotarevskaya (1908), 83. Cited among others in Rosenthal and Foley (1982).
26. See Clowes (DeKalb, 1988).
27. Gunter (1968), 493. My choice of examples from *Zarathustra* is also influenced by Lippit (1992), who develops many of the same arguments.28. Gunter (1968), 494.
29. Nietzsche (London, 1969), 68. This is the classic English translation by R.J. Hollingdale. All subsequent quotations and their page numbers are taken from it. Interestingly, this particular passage comes from the discourse entitled "Of Reading and Writing."
30. Gunter (1968), 504.

31. Compare for example Lotman (1977), 59. "Literature imitates reality; it creates a model of the extra-systemic out of its own inherently systemic material. In order to appear 'accidental,' an element in a work of art must belong to at least two systems and must be located at their intersection. That aspect of the system which is systemic from the point of view of one structure will appear 'accidental' when viewed from the vantage of the other."
32. Bataille (Paris, 1970). See also Borch-Jakobsen (1987).
33. Blok's 1910 lecture "On the Present State of Russian Symbolism" is shot through with metaphors borrowed from *Melkij bes* – some of which strikingly support this observation. Describing the discovery of a Baudelarian "magic world filled with correspondences," Blok compared the symbolist poet to a possessor of esoteric knowledge, a theurgist who stands at the threshold of a vast revelation. As purple-violent worlds of imagination open up to him, the poet discovers he is no longer alone, but instead is filled with demon-doubles, "which the caprice of his evil creative will forms into constantly changing groups of conspirators":

    > With the help of these conspirators he conceals at every moment some part of his soul from himself. Thanks to this network of deceit ... he is able to forge a weapon out of each of the demons ...; they plunder the violet worlds and, obedient to his will, fetch him the most precious things ... What has been created in such a way – through the spells cast by the artist and the *petty demons* [my emphasis] who serve every artist – has neither beginning nor end, is neither living nor dead. ... This is the creation of art.

    The lecture was addressed to a Petersburg audience of poetic initiates who could presumably appreciate obscurities like "purple-violet worlds." It nonetheless beautifully formulates the Symbolist's self-conception as a mediator between two halves of a dualistic universe – and in language alluding directly to Sologub. The lecture is translated in Blok (London, 1980), 149-50.

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