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THE UNDERGROUND CLOSET:  
POLITICAL AND SEXUAL DISSIDENCE IN EAST EUROPEAN CULTURE

In *The Epistemology of the Closet* Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues for the centrality of homo/heterosexual definition in Western culture: "an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition."<sup>1</sup> While any hermeneutic analysis of literature foregrounds secrets the text may hold, secrets are approached differently by different critics. In *The Genesis of Secrecy* Frank Kermode treats secrecy as a kind of will to be interpreted in all narrative.<sup>2</sup> Feminist critics like Adrienne Rich, Gayle Greene, and Coppélia Kahn, among others, are interested in the silences and gaps in the text that indicate women's experience.<sup>3</sup> Sedgwick claims that secrecy in Western culture invariably points to the homosexual secret, and it was this claim that drew the most flak from critics.<sup>4</sup> In East European culture in the Soviet period the major axis of definition that structures thought is not sexual, but political: dissident/pro-Soviet. While there may be reason to consider how other minority/majority definitions (along racial, ethnic, or gender lines, for example<sup>5</sup>) function similarly or differently or intersect in complex ways, there is at least one similarity between sexual and political dissidence that distinguishes them from the others: in most cases they are not immediately apparent, are not--as race, ethnicity, and gender usually are--publicly and unalterably assigned from birth.<sup>6</sup> This situation foregrounds the issue of knowledge/ignorance for these categories (sexual orientation, political dissidence) in ways that it does not for the others. Compulsory heterosexism and compulsory political orthodoxy cause sexual and political dissidents to conceal their dissidence. I will argue that the devices used in the

West to conceal sexual dissidence, to construct the closet, are often identical to those used in Eastern Europe to conceal political dissidence. To this end I will first look at representations of political dissidence in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, then compare Sedgwick's theory of the representation of sexual dissidence in the West; finally I will examine works from Eastern Europe which present both sexual and political dissidence.

Every Russian seems to grow up with two personae, public and private, which are diametrically opposed in many ways. Such double consciousness characterizes minority/majority relations in general. At least one scholar has extended the concept of double consciousness, which presumably originates in discourse on race, to sexual orientation.<sup>7</sup> The minority population must understand the majority consciousness, while the majority does not necessarily understand the minority. In the case of Russia, however, one might wonder whether the pro-Soviet "majority" consciousness could ever be found in isolation. The double consciousness was particularly marked as regards ideology. Before glasnost' all but a minuscule percentage of dissidents supported the regime in public; meanwhile the same majority could voice reservations around the kitchen table. Czes-aw Mi-osz describes this role-playing, this passing as ideologically correct, in The Captive Mind:

It is hard to define the type of relationship that prevails between people in the East otherwise than as acting, with the exception that one does not perform on a theater stage but in the street, office, factory, meeting hall, or even in the room one lives in. Such acting is a highly developed craft that places a premium on mental alertness. Before it leaves the lips, every word must be evaluated as to its consequences. A smile that appears at the wrong moment, a glance that is not all it should be can occasion dangerous suspicions and accusations. Even one's gestures, tone of voice, or preference for certain kinds of neckties are interpreted as signs of one's political tendencies.<sup>8</sup>

This attention to every potential sign system is one of the things that made Russia such an exciting place: anything and everything was charged with meaning. The "mental alertness" and

attention to detail Miłosz talks about cuts two ways: on the one hand the authorities paid close attention to every word, which led to censorship; but on the other hand this attention may have made literature and art more interesting for the people, who were themselves always trying to decode the underlying meaning. There was thus a kind of symbiotic relationship between censorship and literature. This has become particularly clear since glasnost': with the removal of censorship, many authors are lost--they can no longer figure out what to write or how.

Censorship intersected public and private in a way that produced a kind of public code. Sometimes the difference between public and private coincided with written/spoken. An example from the days before glasnost': one day I went to the Moscow Conservatory to buy tickets to a concert of Russian liturgical music. The posters said "Ancient Russian Music," which was the standard euphemism. The cashier said there were no tickets left, but suggested buying tickets for the next day, because "that's also church music." In other words, a woman in a relatively official public position could call it "church music," but it still couldn't be written on the poster.

Euphemisms surrounding Stalin's purges were particularly charged. For years those executed or who died in the camps were listed with no further explanation as "illegally repressed." One of the first glasnost' films, Abuladze's Repentance (1984, released in 1986), decodes some of these. Relatives of prisoners who heard the phrase "exiled without the right to correspondence" knew that it meant their loved ones were dead. While the public euphemism itself may have appeared before glasnost', it would never have been translated into the private language of harsh reality, as it is in the film, where the woman responds, "Why don't you just say he's dead?"<sup>9</sup>

But before glasnost' exploded this system by decoding it in public, Soviets learned to decode it themselves. Unfortunately, little serious theoretical work has been done on the devices used to circumvent the censors. Lev Loseff's On the Beneficence of Censorship defines some of these:<sup>10</sup> devices which function to conceal the referent Loseff calls screens; those which function to draw

attention to the referent he calls markers.<sup>11</sup> Screens and markers are really functions which many devices and elements of the text can perform.

In work on Mark Zakharov's film The Very Same Munchhausen and on Bulgakov's Master and Margarita, I used the term "masking device" to describe what Loseff means by screens.<sup>12</sup> What is fascinating about Master and Margarita is how it deals with two different kinds of language taboos: the religious/superstitious taboo against mentioning the Devil and the political taboo against mentioning the KGB, or the NKVD, as it was called at the time of the novel. Bulgakov takes full advantage of the grammatical, syntactic, and lexical devices at his disposal to mask reference to the secret police, though it is a primary agent in the novel:

Indefinite pronouns and pronominal adjectives:

вошел какой-то гражданин, что-то пошептал  
some citizen came in and whispered something<sup>13</sup>

Pronouns without established referents:

На вопрос о том откуда спрашивают Аркадия  
 Аполлоновича, голос в телефоне очень коротко ответил  
откуда.

To the question of where they were asking for Arkadii  
 Apollonovich from, the voice on the phone briefly answered  
where from. (748)

Надо отдать справедливость тому, кто возглавлял  
 следствие.

You have to be fair to the one who was in charge of the case.  
 (750)

Bulgakov uses metonymy to substitute something else for the real agents involved. A car came to pick them up, but it never returned. (492) Another metonymic reference is used throughout the end of

the book: an entire floor of a certain Moscow building was lit up; an entire floor wasn't sleeping. The entire floor was on the case. (747)

Bulgakov uses passive, indefinite personal, and subjectless constructions to avoid mentioning the logical subject:

Passive:

Николай Иванович был доставлен в клинику  
Nikolai Ivanovich was taken to the clinic (577)

Были приняты меры к тому, чтобы их разыскать  
Measures were taken to find them (757)

Прибавились данные  
Evidence was added (754)

были обнаружены Никанор Иванович Босой и несчастный  
конферансье  
Nikanor Ivanovich Bosoi and the unfortunate MC were  
discovered (751)

Indefinite personal:<sup>14</sup>

На Садовую съездили и в квартире № 50 побывали  
(They) had dropped by Sadovaya St. and visited apartment 50  
(577)

Василия Степановича арестовали  
(They) arrested Vasilii Stepanovich (611)

за столом уже повысили голос, намекнули  
behind the desk (they) raised their voice, dropped hints (577)

Subjectless:<sup>15</sup>

легко было установить  
(It) was simple to determine (751)

было известно уже кого и где ловить

(It) was already known for whom to look and where (753)

пришлось возиться. . . разъяснить необыкновенный случай

(It) was necessary to work, to clear up the unusual incident

(751)

The purpose of all of these constructions is to empty the logical subject node either by passivization, which moves the logical object into the grammatical subject node, or some other construction which avoids mentioning the active subject. That these empty agent nodes can be filled by one who knows the code is laid bare when Poplavskii comes to visit from Kiev. All the housing committee officials have been arrested by you know who. When he asks where he can find the president, he gets no answer and only succeeds in upsetting his interlocutor. "Aha!" said the clever Poplavskii and asked about the secretary. Again no response. "Aha!" Poplavskii said to himself. When the man he is talking to is himself led off, Poplavskii draws the right conclusion, but can't even think the words to himself: "Ekh, what complications! And wouldn't you know that all of them at once..." (614) The ellipsis at the end is telling: not only the subject, but even the operative verb is elided, leaving only an accusative object "all of them." Yet any savvy Soviet reader can fill in the rest: the NKVD took them away.

This process of emptying logical subject nodes is mirrored in the resurrection of dead metaphors involving the word "Devil" in the novel. Such expressions as "the devil take them" and "the devil knows" occur repeatedly. In standard Russian they are merely dead metaphors unmarked for reference to a real Devil. But from the very first scene, when Berlioz's "it's time to throw everything to the Devil and set off for Kislovodsk" (424) leads to the immediate appearance of what we learn is the Devil himself, the reader is prepared to see the metaphor realized every time the devil is mentioned. Breaking the taboo against calling the Devil by name brings him to life in Master and Margarita. The taboo against naming the NKVD, though the NKVD is equally active in the novel, is not broken once by Bulgakov or his characters.

Emptiness or elision in the Soviet system has one meaning: the KGB. This was apparent in everyday discourse as well. At best many Soviets could bring themselves to mention the KGB only in a whisper. This habit remained even among those who had lived in the States for a number of years. Somewhere in a cab or at a restaurant an émigré might say, "Remember Misha? I always suspected he was working [for the KGB]." Since the word for informing also means "to knock," the phrase "for the KGB" was often replaced by a gesture of knocking. "I think he works [knock]" or merely "I think he [knock]."

Some significantly shortened phrases have even made it into the dictionary. Since in Russia one "sits" in prison, "he is sitting" out of context (without mentioning a chair or a room) usually means "he's in prison." Characteristically, this is particularly true of the transitive verb "to seat," which without a location and with the empty "they" (indefinite personal) almost invariably means "to put in prison." Since the same verb is used for planting seeds, there was an early joke about Gorbachev's ideal qualifications for Soviet leader as a former agriculture specialist. He knows why to plant and when = He knows what to put people in jail for and when. Fortunately he didn't live up to the expectations of the humorists.

The map of public and private in this system of coded language differs from that drawn by Western feminists, in which women are relegated to the private (family/domestic/personal) realm, while restricted from the public. For one thing, at the peak of Stalinist power the public for our purposes extended well into the family. Soviet children asked, "Whom do you love more, papa or mama?" could answer, "Stalin!" and Pavlik Morozov, the boy who turned in his parents for hoarding grain, became a Soviet hero. The map of disclosure and trust would be different in different periods and circumstances (like the map of who gay men and lesbians are "out" to). Furthermore, the dichotomy between public and private in Soviet coded language is also not so much between proper spheres of activity as between two linguistic systems or registers in which all native speakers--male and female--must become fluent: everyone must become adept at functioning in both public and private modes<sup>16</sup>. What is at stake is knowledge and information. Knowledge

of the code allows one to reinterpret the public message as private information. If one knows that an author is potentially dissident, then one will scrutinize his published works for encoded information. If one knows the code, one can recategorize an author as dissident. It is in part because every text has the potential to contain such information that literature has always been so exciting in Russia. But while the means to encode the information may be rich, the information itself is poor: it can usually be reduced to a binary opposition--Soviet/Anti-Soviet.

The open secret in the Soviet Union was the KGB and its role. In European culture, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick claims, the open secret is homosexuality. Ever since Adam and Eve knowledge and sexuality have been linked. The birth of the binary opposition was engendered by the first couple eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Knowledge of a woman. To know in the Biblical sense. Sedgwick remarks that it was obvious to Queen Victoria and Freud that knowledge meant sexual knowledge and secrets sexual secrets, but that by the end of the 19th century there had developed one particular sexuality that was distinctively constituted as secrecy.<sup>17</sup> Sodomy, as the crime whose name is not to be uttered, can be mentioned only by not mentioning it. This phenomenon is captured in Lord Alfred Douglas's confession, in 1894, "I am the Love that dare not speak its name." The thematics of knowledge and ignorance, of secrecy and disclosure, were from then on connected to one topic alone: the homosexual topic. Yet while this information is very poor (homosexual/heterosexual), the devices for encoding it may be rich, and the consequences of disclosure may be as damaging as for the dissident in the Soviet Union (i. e. violence, prison, or death).

Sedgwick cites an example from Beverley Nichols' Father Figure in which a father can bring himself to name homosexuality to his son only by leaving him a piece of paper on which he has written, "illum crimen horribile quod non nominandum est."<sup>18</sup> Characteristically the topic is avoided by being mentioned only as unmentionable, and even the language is distanced, as if somehow locking the secret inside the closet of a dead language makes it safer. Such translation



was a common Victorian strategy for compartmentalizing sexuality, and homosexuality in particular.<sup>19</sup> In a recent article precisely on the problem of translating sexually explicit passages--especially those referring to homosexuality--from classical Greek and Latin into Russian, M. L. Gasparov curiously resorts to a similar tactic himself. Discussing the inadequacy of published translations of Catullus 16, "Pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo," he presents first the published elliptical and bowdlerized versions, then the best translation ("I will fuck you in the mouth and in the ass") in Russian, but in Latin letters instead of Cyrillic!<sup>20</sup> In the *Merchant/Ivory* adaptation of Forster's *Maurice* the schoolteacher manages to draw a sexually explicit diagram, but he can label it only in Latin: "membrum virile, vulva..." Later in the same film, this time following the novel, the translation of Plato's dialogue is censored: "Omit: a reference to the unspeakable vice of the Greeks."<sup>21</sup> Everyone knows what that means.

Sedgwick discusses the textual strategies authors use to mention and at the same time not mention the homosexual topic. Among these she discusses periphrasis and preterition. Periphrasis, or talking around the topic, comes very close to the kind of metonymic mention found in Bulgakov. Preterition is the term Sedgwick uses for mentioning something by not mentioning it, elision with attention called to the elision itself. Again this is the same device Bulgakov uses to point to the unmentionable KGB: passives and indefinite personal forms (they took him away) are used in contexts in which they are strange, in which they call attention to themselves. When the inhabitants of the unlucky apartment vanish one by one, one character says "she knows perfectly well who took away their neighbor and the policeman, but she doesn't want to say it at night." (492) Sedgwick analyzes the strategies Melville uses in *Billy Budd* to mask and at the same time point to Claggart's "hidden nature." The adjectives applied to him include "mysterious, exceptional, peculiar, obscure, notable, phenomenal, and secretive." The phenomenon in question is referred to satisfactorily only as "it."<sup>22</sup>

Sedgwick points out that since homosocial bonds are essential to society and since every man is potentially homosexual,

homophobia is a required strategy to regulate relationships between all men. Homophobic violence is terroristic and synecdochic: since it is impractical to do away with all homosexuals, we will isolate them by attacking some. But homosexuals can't tell if they will be the objects of violence; hence they are controlled. And at the same time the larger heterosexual population is regulated, since no man can tell for sure that he is not homosexual. Sedgwick refers to this terrorist potential as the blackmailability of Western maleness through homophobia.<sup>23</sup> On the one hand this blackmailability is literal: the overwhelming majority of actual blackmail cases in the last century have involved homosexuality. This is why, supposedly, the CIA and the Foreign Service banned homosexuals for so long. But because the blackmailability is potentially universal, non-homosexuals may have a paranoid reaction: homophobia and homosexual panic.

The same kind of universal blackmailability applied to Anti-Soviet sentiment in the Soviet Union. The worst bogey of the Stalinist era was the "hidden enemy." And paranoid reactions of the majority of the population meant that anyone would be glad to revile an innocent victim just to prove that he himself was loyal. Ignorance of the facts was no obstacle: "I have not read the works of Solzhenitsyn," people wrote, "but he should be deprived of his citizenship for his Anti-Soviet views." In Master and Margarita Nikanor Ivanovich's wife reacts typically: she presumably knows her husband is innocent, yet she still urges him to come clean so they reduce his sentence. (518) This is also another example of how the official public sphere intruded on the private domestic sphere in the Stalinist Soviet Union.

Such devices for concealing and revealing political dissidence are restricted neither to the Soviet Union nor to the novel. In fact it was a trilogy of plays by Václav Havel that first brought home to me the parallels between the devices for concealing political and sexual dissidence.<sup>24</sup> The three plays are linked by the character of Vaneĕk, a dissident writer, and by his refusal to conform to various groups. This very nonconformity is viewed in the East European context as highly negative and tantamount to dissidence. Vaneĕk differentiates himself in the first play from the working class, in the second from

his petty-bourgeois peers, and in the third from a fellow writer who is officially approved. The circle thus narrows from socio-economic class, to professional values, to political-ideological bent. But there is more involved in Vaneĭ's nonconformity than politics: sexuality is also an issue in the first two plays.

In the first play, Audience, Vaneĭ works at a brewery loading barrels: as a known dissident writer, he cannot be trusted with any work for which he is qualified. The audience of the title is a meeting with his boss, the working-class brewmaster, who wants to help Vaneĭ out, but not to get into trouble with the authorities for doing it. The main badge of acceptance for the working class in Audience is the Czech national sport, beer drinking. The brewmaster says, "We all drink it here, everybody" (6) and won't even admit the possibility of Vaneĭ's not liking beer: "Everybody's a beer drinker." (14) At the same time he pressures Vaneĭ to traffic in women. He keeps insisting he bring the actress Bohdalová to the brewery. This is in fact his last demand, when it seems they can agree on nothing else: "Are you gonna do that much for me? You are gonna do it for me, right? For one damn evening--I'll be okay after that--everything's gonna be different after that--I'm gonna know I didn't waste my life after that--that fucked-up life I got ain't been all the way fucked up--you gonna bring her?" (25)

In the epilog the audience starts over again, and this time Vaneĭ chooses a strategy of passing: instead of sipping the beer or pouring it out as he has heretofore, he guzzles it just like the brewmaster. He even takes on the brewmaster's obscene language: "Everything's all fucked up!" (26) Obviously this playwright is also a good actor.

The second play, Unveiling, contrasts Vaneĭ to his friends Michael and Vera. They are perfect representatives of petty-bourgeois materialist values traditionally deplored by the Soviet intelligentsia: МЕЩАНСТВО [petty-bourgeois ideology] and ВЕЩИЗМ [thingism]. But they also criticize Vaneĭ for his sex life--they think he does it too infrequently--and they offer to demonstrate how they keep their sex life interesting. They also urge him to have children. This is the only one of the plays from which politics in the narrow

sense are wholly absent.<sup>25</sup> But then it concerns only the private sphere (the apartment, family relations), and the point is that Michael and Vera care about nothing but things.

The third play, Protest, shows Vanek's meeting with Stanek, an officially sanctioned writer who enjoys the personal and material security his official standing guarantees. Stanek wants to support the dissidents without endangering his comfortable position, i. e., without revealing he has done it. Vanek suggests he join a protest by signing a petition. In Eastern Europe, where the sign, the document takes priority over physical reality, signing a petition (against the trial of Siniavsky and Daniil, against the invasion of Czechoslovakia) was the quintessential dissident act. Protest is maximally political, and here sex plays almost no role (though it is interesting that Stanek considers aiding the dissidents because of his daughter's relationship with the arrested Javurek).

Of course in a play about coming out / being out as a dissident, control over information is most important. Absence, silence, interference with communication are all clues to the significance of the message. Before beginning the important talk, Stanek switches on a tape recorder to play music. This is a characteristic attempt to jam the bugging devices, a trick familiar to anyone who spent time in Eastern Europe in the good old days. It could be replaced, for example, by taking the phone into another room or putting it under a pillow, or by repeatedly flushing the toilet. When Stanek reads Vanek's play,<sup>26</sup> he complains that "unfortunately we were given a rather bad copy. Very hard to read." (61) The visual equivalent of silence is invisibility, and it has the same meaning: political significance, dissidence. Samizdat manuscripts were produced in many carbon copies (later nth generation xeroxes); the last carbons were necessarily pale--but that made the process of deciphering them all the more rewarding.

The whole play hinges on Stanek's signature: the presence or absence of a name in a series. Stanek first gives Vanek money, but anonymously, of course. Later, after admitting that his name would acquire value from its previous absence, Stanek decides against signing. Instead he will restrict himself to "backstage diplomacy" (as

opposed to coming out on stage, 72) and "private intervention" (as opposed to public disclosure, 63).

The paranoid mechanism kicks in here as well. Stanek criticizes Vanek for his "moral superiority." (74) He is conscious of these thoughts too: he says people hate dissidents who are a living reproach to them. But in the end he attacks Vanek in a particularly devastating way: he accuses him of talking in prison. In effect he accuses Vanek of outing others (which, given that he has outed the brewmaster, seems plausible).

The parallels between strategies for simultaneously concealing and revealing sexual and political secrets are no accident. Loseff, on the one hand, speaks of the reader's cathartic pleasure in decoding Aesopian language and compares it to decoding erotic motifs in literature. He draws an analogy between the function of literary erotica and of Aesopian literature as opposed to the function of their unencoded, more direct correlates, pornography and political journalism. The aesthetic work leads to a psychological effect, while pornography and political journalism lead to a physical effect: an erection or an insurrection.<sup>27</sup> Daniel Rancour-Lafférière points out that this juxtaposition was not, in fact, discovered by Loseff, since Freud consciously borrowed terminology from the political sphere--repression, censorship, distortion--to refer to control of sexual information in the psychology of dreaming.<sup>28</sup> It is perhaps significant that the example of Aesopian erotic language Loseff cites is a homoerotic poem by the gay poet Kuzmin.

What happens when these two kinds of censorship, political and sexual, intersect? What devices are used in the literature of the former Soviet Union and its allies to refer to the homosexual secret? Until very recently there was almost complete silence on anything relating to the subject of homosexuality in Russian literature. There are, however, some recent Russian works in which gay love is a central theme: Evgenii Popov's "Reservoir"<sup>29</sup> (1979), Evgenii Kharitonov's "Oven"<sup>30</sup> (1982), and Nikolai Koliada's "Slingshot"<sup>31</sup> (1990). The first two are short stories and were circulated first in samizdat, then published abroad. The last, a play, was published in the Soviet Union after glasnost'. The only word for "gay" or

"homosexual" in any of the three texts occurs in Popov's story, where a colonel of working-class origin calls the gay men "pidari," (156) the Russian equivalent of "faggots." Characteristically, the gay men in Popov's story and the more out of the pair in Koliada's play are dead by the end. Kharitonov's narrator lusts after a boy all through the story, but certainly never comes out to him, and by the end he will never see him again. All three depict the extreme negative evaluation (imagined and real) of Russian society. In fact, homophobia is a major plot factor in all three works. The big secret--for the audience, the reader, the narrator, or the other characters--is homosexuality.

Popov's story tells of a scandal in a dacha community in a small Siberian town. The scandal involves two visiting men who are revealed to be lovers (though they are not, of course, explicitly designated as such in the text). Not only did they "obviously avoid our girls," but they "even walked hand in hand." (155) Eventually the girls dress one of the men in drag, the other flies into a rage, and the two fall off a raft and drown, returning as skeletal ghosts to haunt the villagers. It also transpires that the theater director who invited them in the first place has emigrated to America, where such behavior is the norm: "apparently it will be easy for them to indulge there in the vice that here is met by a strict barrier." (157) Anthony Vanchu has pointed out that the primitive view of the narrator, who represents the official moral values of Brezhnevian bourgeois culture, divides the world into "svoi" and "chuzhoi"--"ours" and "the outsiders'." In this scheme it is appropriate that homosexuals be lumped together with people who would even think of emigration: all deserve to be sent to some "other world."<sup>32</sup>

There are several patterns here worth pointing out. First, the death of the gay characters. In The Celluloid Closet Vito Russo has documented the frequency of death--usually violent death, murder, or suicide--of gay and lesbian characters in American film. In Popov's story homosexuality is conflated both with emigration (a version of dissidence, the connection to which should not now be surprising) and with the supernatural. Again, after Bulgakov, this should be no surprise. Shifting homosexuality into the sphere of the

fantastic is nothing new: science fiction / horror characters, particularly vampires, are often portrayed as gay or lesbian to make them even more strange. This is, as Russo points out, the stereotype parodied in Rocky Horror Picture Show.<sup>33</sup> Sedgwick discusses the importance of the homosocial in the paranoid Gothic.<sup>34</sup> Popov's ironic twist thus combines two standard plots about gay characters--one in which they are killed off, another in which they are demonized: in Popov's story the gay couple first are drowned, then return as ghosts to scare the good citizens of the dacha settlement away.

Kharitonov's "Oven" is about a 28 year old who falls in love with a 16 year old boy, also at a dacha settlement. The story centers on the narrator's attempt to develop a relationship with the handsome Misha without the latter or any of his friends ever suspecting the narrator is gay. Of course he never says he is gay, but the language tells us he's male, and he certainly falls head over heels for Misha. In stream of consciousness / diary form, the narrator reveals his plans and triumphs, always with strategies to interest Misha, to get close to him, without seeming either to be interested in him or to want to get close to him. The stream of consciousness narration does not, however, ever show the narrator contemplating the nature of his dilemma or the possibility of coming out: he seems comfortable in his closet. There is no discussion of why his interest must be hidden or what it means--it's just taken for granted. The age difference, while a factor, is not the major barrier: in fact it only calls attention to the fact that the friendship will be suspect to the observant eye: why should the narrator be so friendly with Misha? What do they have in common? In the end, nothing, and they part when the narrator fails to give Misha his address in a sufficiently casual and offhand way to avoid suspicion of ulterior motives.

While the narrator never comes out, another character does. At a dance in the dacha community the narrator meets Ol'ga, Misha's sister, with a young man who is described as "her husband a handsome Jew<sup>35</sup>." (244) That same day it transpires that his name is Slava and he is not her husband, so he is designated as her "lover." On Saturday the narrator again meets this "lover Slava" in line for beer. Now he is described as "fashionable and unshaven on purpose"

(246), and the narrator recognizes that "he looks about my age and from his mannerisms I could see he was from a circle closer to mine than Sergei, relatively." (246) Later he again comments on this "familiar circle of people" (247) and concludes that "maybe he's not even her lover." (248) The attentive reader's suspicion is confirmed that same day, when Slava the Jew and Shurik are escorted to their two-man tent: "And this Shurik, the friend, says lying in Ol'ga's lap -- Ol'ga, when did such and such a girl find out I was like that? My god, I get it. And even his voice is like that. But Slava the Jew doesn't look it." (249) The discovery both intrigues the narrator, who returns alone to chat (though they have already gone to sleep), and raises the expectations of the reader for the results of the narrator's quest. The only identification of someone as "gay" substitutes the empty relative/demonstrative adjective "takoi"--"such, like that, that way."<sup>36</sup> Kharitonov has another story entitled "One Boy's Story-- 'How I Got Like That.'"<sup>37</sup> Even in the elaboration that "Slava the Jew doesn't look it," the Russian elides the "it:" "Slava evrei ne pokhozh."

The thematics of the closet are certainly central to Kharitonov's story, where the narrator is in a double bind: he wants to prevent knowledge of his homosexual intentions while, at the same time, he wants to act them out. Such duality is characteristic of the language of the closet, which often employs ellipsis and preterition to point to the homosexual secret without naming it. In "The Oven," it is not so much the language per se that is double-edged, as the narrator's actions: his every move is explicitly designed to conceal his designs on Misha. In our terms the narrator is out to himself and to the reader. He is even out to some friends: when his friend Vanya comes he points out Misha and asks him what he thinks-- "Vanya, a man of passions different from my own, confirmed everything about Misha." (240) It is only to Misha and to society at large that the narrator is not out. The reader gets a view from inside the closet while it is being constructed.

For the reader this inside knowledge is more than just knowing what "takoi" means. The narrator compares Misha to Antinous, the emperor Hadrian's beautiful boy lover, knowledge of whom is something of a shibboleth of homosexual identity. The reference is



particularly noticeable in a context which contains no other allusions to any person outside the story: Misha's father speaks to him as father to son, "after all for the father there is no Antinous, one boy out of a hundred thousand, but just his sixteen year old son." (251) Earlier, when showing Misha off to Vanya, he makes a similar comment: "I was wondering if he could understand when he had before him a boy who was one in ten thousand." (240)

Koliada's "Slingshot" is the only work of the three in which some kind of sexual interlude actually occurs in the course of the play, but of course it doesn't happen on stage, and it is only referred to as "what happened between us." (24) Upon reading this line the confused reader will flip back through the play to find out what the characters are talking about. It's not there. There is, it's true, a dream interlude in which two unidentified voices say, more or less, "How good... how good it is... is it good for you?" "It's never, never been so good for me before..." (18) This cliché could be staged in a revealing way, though nothing in the stage directions points toward such a solution.

Again there is an age difference between the characters. The handsome Anton is 18, while Ilia, a handicapped beggar in a wheelchair, is 33. At first the two flirt, with Anton apparently more interested in seducing Ilia than vice versa. But in the fifth scene (after the dream episode) Anton comes in drunk to blackmail Ilia: he wants fifty percent of his alms or he'll "go and tell all about him." (22) The apparent cause of Anton's sudden homophobia is that he has been cured of his feared impotence with women. Ilia's verbal gestures of love are met with hysterical cries of "shut up!" Anton has decided to "forget," "tear out," and "erase" what happened between them. (24-25) Only in the last scene does a remorseful Anton return to find that Ilia has died.

Anton's ranting homophobic blackmail threats resonate with echoes of Stalinist informers denouncing the "hidden enemy:" "I'll go and tell the neighbors, the whole building, the whole street who they've warmed in their midst, who lives here, I'll tell... " (22) The phrase for "warmed in their midst" (кто у них под боком пригрелся) was most often used of political deviants. Anton continues to

threaten Ilia with the psychiatric clinic, the place both homosexuals and political dissidents were isolated. In Popov's story, as Vanchu points out, it was the ironic revenge of the dead gay men to threaten the "normal" villagers with the same fate: "the vice of the corpses, gleaming with skeletal lust in the light of the moon, beckons, approaches, frightens, and leads people straight into psychiatric hospitals..."<sup>38</sup>

When Roman Viktiuk directed "Slingshot" in San Diego, he turned the internalized homophobia around at the end of the play. When Ilia calls Anton an angel, the latter compares them to rats swimming in shit who see a bat above. The baby rat says, "look mama, an angel." (23) Viktiuk's production was originally to have both actors wear wings, but the wings made did not look right. The director did not want to give up the wings altogether, so they were placed prominently so the audience could see them, then one set flew over the stage at the end.<sup>39</sup> Viktiuk used a similar device in his adaptation of Sologub's Petty Demon at the Sovremennik theater in Moscow. The highly idealized boy, Sasha, appeared above the stage at the end of the play winged like an angel. Both versions of this gay deus ex machina may in fact be coded references to Kuzmin's 1907 gay-positive novel Wings, in which growing wings becomes a metaphor for acknowledging that one is gay--coming out to oneself.

Thus far all of my examples of sexual dissidence in Eastern Europe have centered on prose and drama, on Slavic, and on gay males. Lest the reader assume that the parallels are limited by medium, nationality, or gender, I would like to end with a brief discussion of a Hungarian film about lesbians. Egymásra nézve, distributed here as "Another Way," was released in 1982 by Károly Makk, with a screenplay by Makk and Erszébet Galgóczi based on Galgóczi's 1980 Törvényen belül<sup>40</sup>, "Within the Law." The film centers on the love between two lesbian journalists in 1958. In his article on Hungarian film in Post New Wave Cinema in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, David Paul writes that "at first glance the issues of lesbianism and censorship may strike one as unlikely twins."<sup>41</sup> Surely not so unlikely!

Both the film and the story begin with the death of Éva and progress through flashbacks. It is telling both that one lesbian is killed while trying to cross the border (a quasi-suicide) and that the other is shot by her husband, perhaps paralyzed for life. It is Éva, the more out and outspoken of the pair, who is killed. Yet while Éva is politically outspoken, she becomes inarticulate when it comes to explaining her love to Lívía. Confronted by Lívía, whose panties she has stolen earlier, she can only say: "It's very hard and you won't understand... you see, there are such feelings... now it's hard for me... I..." The elisions and the visual here say it all: Lívía looks away whenever Éva looks at her and vice versa: they can't look each other in the eye. The absence of communication points to the homosexual secret.

While there is no discussion in the film of the closet per se, there are parallels in the world of political censorship. Éva talks about the corridor. In the corridors of the newspaper office people say one thing, but they say another in editorial meetings and in print: "we always speak sincerely only in the corridors." Éva's editor Erdos responds that "when you've tried to speak the truth for 30 years, as he has, you learn to value those corridor conversations." At least there is some space, though it is clearly delimited, where the truth can be spoken. Erdos also refers to "writing for the drawer"--another metaphor familiar from Russian--Bulgakov's Master and Margarita, for example, was written for the drawer--put away until such time as it could be taken out and published. Éva says she's tired of "putting things in drawers and sweeping them under rugs," to which Erdos responds that there is a limit to the truths that can be published. Éva, unlike her editor, recognizes no limits. The word used for limit, "határ," also means border. And it is no accident that the title of the novel in Hungarian also points up the inside / outside opposition: "Törvényen belül"--"Within the Law."

Lesbianism in the film is referred to with the usual empty pronouns and pronominal adjectives: "something like this (ilyesmi)" or just "this (ez)": I've never done "something like this." I don't know anything about "this." You have more experience in "that" than I do, but I don't want any of "this." When the police confront the pair

kissing on a park bench they threaten to tell Lívía's husband and her boss if they ever catch her again doing "something like this."

Makk even takes advantage of the absence of grammatical gender in Hungarian to draw attention to the lesbian affair at one point. Just before Dönci shoots Lívía, he asks, "Does he/she have someone? children? a parrot? Tell me about him/her." When he asks, derisively, if the "champion of truth" has anything to do with the affair, Lívía responds that he knows perfectly well who they are talking about. Éva is indeed the "champion of truth," and she struggles to express the truth about her sexuality, as she struggles to express the truth about the 1956 revolution in the newspaper, appropriately named "Truth."

The curiosity which results from the obligatory suppression of knowledge about lesbianism and about sex between women in particular is played out in an interview between Éva and a detective after Lívía's husband shoots her:

Detective: hmm... what do you feel when you look at me? I can't understand... how... how do you do it?

Éva: Do what? Tell me what you're curious about.

Detective: That... well, ... that something...

Of course "that something" (a *valami*) is never named with a noun.

Instead, she shows him with her gesture:

We do it with our fingers... with one, or two, or three.

Éva breaks a social taboo by describing crossing the border of her partner's body with her fingers. It is immediately after this transgression of her prescribed limits that we see Éva on a train on the way to her attempted political border crossing, which we know results in her death. As in Popov's story, the connection is made between sexual dissidence and defection or emigration. Éva is arrested, and when she protests, the police answer that "we are not in America." The connection is again made when she is killed trying to cross the border, to defect. That defection and dissidence are equivalent is clear in the Hungarian verb "defects:" *disszidál*. Near various physical embodiments of the border--barbed wire fences, a river--she is told to stop by the guards, who shout at her and fire warning shots. Éva keeps walking in defiance. The film ends as it

begins, with a slow-motion sequence of a bird flying over the barbed-wire and watchtowers of the border.

In *Another Way*, then, Makk takes advantage of the similarities between political and sexual dissidence and constructs his film around the intersections of the two. Éva is both politically and sexually dissident, and the film shows just how similar the devices used to conceal and reveal such dissidence are.

The intersection of culture, politics, and sexuality will everywhere and always be a locus of hotly contested power struggles. Now that political and sexual dissent have come out of the closet into the public arena there as well, Russia is no exception. Two cases worthy of comment involve the writers Eduard Limonov and Valentin Rasputin. Limonov, who earned a certain *succès de scandale* with his semi-autobiographical novel about an émigré disillusioned with America who discovers gay sex, now writes jingoistic articles for Zhirinovskiy, the extreme right-wing nationalist, and assiduously avoids the gay activists. At a talk at the Writers' Union in Moscow he was warned by concerned conservative ladies, "Edik, be careful: there are homosexuals in the room!"<sup>42</sup> Surely the man who wrote in a quasi-autobiographical novel about being raped on the streets of New York was terrified!

Rasputin, the Siberian writer who spearheaded a campaign to oppose the Brezhnev government efforts to divert Siberian Rivers, now wants to exclude homosexuality from Russia: "When it comes to homosexuals, let's keep Russia clean. We have our own traditions. That kind of contact between men is a foreign import. If they feel their rights are infringed they can always go and live in another country."<sup>43</sup> Homosexuality, claims Rasputin, is "chuzhoi" [other/outside/alien], not "svoi" [ours]. This is the same gesture we have seen in Popov's "it will be easy for them to indulge [in America] in the vice that here is met by a strict barrier" and in the policeman's comment to Éva, "we are not in America." The same claim was made in 1934, when the Soviet Union criminalized homosexuality (it was decriminalized in 1993)<sup>44</sup>. Ironically, the Soviets criminalized homosexuality as proper to Nazism at the same time the Nazis criminalized it as indicative of Communism. Simon

Karlinsky has demonstrated the absurdity of Rasputin's claim<sup>45</sup>, but it is one more example of the kind of reaction that results from the conflation of political and sexual dissidence.

These observations are only a starting point. In a sense the observation that the thematics of knowledge and ignorance are connected in East European culture to political dissidence argues against Sedgwick's claim that they are connected to one topic alone: homosexuality. On the other hand, she need not be read in such a maximalizing way (though her critics will continue to do so); furthermore, East European culture in the Soviet period is arguably not Western culture, to which Sedgwick restricts her claim. If the experience of Western feminists is any indication, we should be very careful about applying a readymade queer theory to East European culture. Only in the last decade have significant strides been made by Western feminist critics in addressing Russian literature.<sup>46</sup> The major contemporary Russian women writers Tatiana Tolstaia and Liudmila Petrushevskaja are outspoken in their claim that feminism has nothing to do with their projects.<sup>47</sup> Only in the last few years have Russian critics themselves begun to dabble in gender theory.<sup>48</sup> Still many contemporary writers sympathetic to the specificity of Eastern European culture are skeptical of the applicability of Western models.<sup>49</sup> In part this may be because feminism historically addresses gender inequalities specific to Western industrialized capitalism; much feminist theory is also grounded in Marxism, with which East European writers have problematic relations. Some of the same problems must be encountered by any effort to apply queer theory as well.

The possibilities for cross-fertilization between gay studies and Russian and East European studies hardly end here. Many Western scholars share with Sedgwick a certain theoretical anxiety about our projects. Sedgwick fears she risks "glamorizing the closet itself" and admits that her own discourse "echoes mostly with the pre-Stonewall gay self definition."<sup>50</sup> Western scholars of East European culture similarly risk glamorizing censorship and longing for the pre-'glasnost' days. We have only begun to map out some of the virgin territory in Slavic which remains to be explored by more adept

analysts better trained in gay studies. Still I hope the comparison of the devices used to conceal political and sexual dissidence, the devices of Aesopian language and the closet, proves fruitful for further study.

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1. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet (Berkeley: Univ. of California Pr., 1990), 73.
  2. Frank Kermode, The Genesis of Secrecy (Harvard: Harvard U. Pr., 1979).
  3. Adrienne Rich, "Taking Women Students Seriously," On Lies, Secrets, and Silence (New York: Norton, 1979), 237-46; Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, "Feminist Scholarship and the Social Construction of Woman," Making a Difference (New York: Routledge, 1985), 1-36.
  4. Christopher Benfey, "Telling it Slant" New Republic, Mar. 18, 1991, 35.
  5. Toni Morrison makes a similar universalizing claim for the centrality of race, even in texts by white authors about white characters: see Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).
  6. Sedgwick, 34.
  7. W. E. B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk, in Three Negro Classics (New York: Avon Books, 1965), 215; John J. Winkler, "Double Consciousness in Sappho's Lyrics," in The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader (New York: Routledge, 1993), 577-94.
  8. Czesław Miłosz, The Captive Mind, trans. Jane Zielonko (New York: Vintage, 1981), 54-5.
  9. Nancy Condee and Vladimir Padunov provide a wealth of information on such semiotic shifts and the resultant "postmodernization" of Soviet Culture in "Perestroika Suicide: Not by Bread Alone," New Left Review, 189 (Sept./Oct. 1991), 67-89. The effects of these radical changes in the culture on the aesthetic system are discussed in their "Makulakul'tura: Reprocessing Culture," October, 57 (Summer, 1991), 79-103, and in Michael Epstein, "After the Future: On the New Consciousness in Literature," South Atlantic Quarterly, 90:2 (Spring, 1991), 409-44.
  10. Lev Loseff, On the Beneficence of Censorship (München: Verlag Otto Sagner, 1984), 29.
  11. Loseff, 51.



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12. Kevin Moss, "A Russian Munchausen: Aesopian Translation," Inside Soviet Film Satire: Laughter with a Lash, ed. Andrew Horton (Cambridge: 1993), 20-35, and "Bulgakov's Master and Margarita: Masking the Supernatural and the Secret Police," Russian Language Journal Vol. 38, Nos. 129-30 (1984), 115-31.
13. Mikhail Bulgakov, Belaia gvardiia, Teatral'nyi roman, Master i Margarita (Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1978), 674; further references are to this edition, and all translations are the author's.
14. This form, which consists of the third person plural of the verb with an elided subject, has the force of our constructions such as "they say...": the subject is human, though unidentified.
15. Transformational grammar interprets these constructions, which are very common in Russian, as having the infinitive in the grammatical subject position. The logical subject, which would be in the dative, is optional.
16. Given the gender imbalance of traditional patriarchal Soviet society, it may well be that men have to be more adept at producing the public register than women. Yet, since decoding, translation from one code to the other, can occur only in the private sphere (around the kitchen table), both genders must be competent in interpreting the code. Perhaps more men than women master the parole in this system, while women and men equally internalize the langue.
17. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet (Berkeley: Univ. of California Pr., 1990), 73.
18. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Between Men (New York: Columbia Univ. Pr., 1985), 95.
19. John Boswell comments on this practice with some amusing examples. John Boswell, Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1980), 19-20.
20. M. L. Gasparov, "Klassicheskaia filologiia i tsenzura nravov," Erotika v russkoi literature, Literaturnoe obozrenie (spets. vypusk, 1992), 4.
21. E. M. Forster, Maurice (New York: Norton, 1971), 51.
22. Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet, 95.
23. Sedgwick, Between Men, 89.
24. Václav Havel, Audience and Unveiling, trans. by Jan Novak; Protest, trans. by Vera Blackwell; in Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz, ed., The Vanek Plays (Vancouver, U. of British Columbia Pr., 1987).
25. Anthony Vanchu has pointed out that, of course, compulsory heterosexuality and reproduction were political inasmuch as they

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were enforced by the state to varying degrees in Eastern Europe (private conversation).

26. The audience may remember that in the first play the brewmaster had asked Vanek to promise not to write about his political views. In the third we learn that he has broken that promise: the play Stanek has read is about the brewmaster. The brewmaster has been outed!

27. Loseff, 227; One is reminded, though Loseff does not comment on it, of Barthes's *jouissance*.

28. Daniel Rancour-Laferrière, Review of Loseff, On the Beneficence of Censorship, in Russian Language Journal, Vol. XLI, Nos. 138-139 (Winter-Spring, 1987), 368.

29. Evgenii Popov, "Chertova diuzhina rasskazov," Metropol' (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979).

30. Evgenii Kharitonov, "Dukhovka," Katalog (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1982), 238-256. A two volume collection of Kharitonov's works has recently appeared: Slezy na tsvetakh, Glagol 10(1&2), 93.

31. Nikolai Koliada, "Rogatka," Sovremennaia dramaturgiia, No. 6, 1990, 4-28.

32. Anthony Vanchu, "Cross(-Dress)ing One's Way to Crisis: Yevgeny Popov and Lyudmila Petrushevskaya and the Crisis of Category in Contemporary Russian Culture," World Literature Today, Winter 1992, 107-18; the "other world" of emigration was in informal Soviet parlance regularly compared with the spiritual "other world," since no one ever returned from either.

33. Vito Russo, The Celluloid Closet (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 52.

34. Sedgwick, Between Men, Ch. 5 and 6.

35. Slava's appositive epithet seems less obtrusive to the Russian reader. In Russian culture the definition Jew/non-Jew (i.e., Russian) seems as obligatory and as transparently descriptive (in the view of the majority) as racial and gender designations seem for the majority discourse in English. In Russian the question "Is he Russian?" usually means "Is he Jewish?" and the nationality "Jew" or "Russian" is inscribed as the 5th entry in the Soviet passport. Elsewhere Kharitonov has been accused of antisemitism, yet he also explicitly compares the situation of the homosexual minority in the Soviet Union to that of the Jews. In "The Oven" Slava's nationality does not seem to play a significant role.

36. Forster describes Risley in Maurice as "that way" in quotation marks: Forster, 71.

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37. Evgenii Kharitonov, "Rasskaz odnogo mal'chika--'Kak ia stal takim,'" Strelets, No. 2, 1991, 163-67; a translation of this story is forthcoming in the International Anthology of Gay Fiction, ed. Mark Mitchell and David Leavitt (New York: Penguin, 1994).
38. Popov, 158.
39. I am grateful for this information to Susan Larsen, who helped Viktiuk in his production.
40. Erzsébet Galgóczi, Törvényen kívül és belül (Budapest: Szépirodalmi könyvkiadó, 1983), now available in English as Another Love, trans. by Ines Rieder and Felice Newmann (Pittsburgh: Cleis Pr., 1991).
41. David Paul, "The Magyar on the Bridge," in Daniel J. Goulding, ed., Post New Wave Cinema in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (Bloomington: Indiana U. Pr., 1989), 192.
42. Related by Zhenia Debrianskaia, one of the activists present.
43. quoted in Lionel Joyce, letter to the editor of the New York Review of Books, April 11, 1991, p. 61.
44. See Igor Kon, "Sexual Minorities," Sex and Russian Society (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1993), 92, and Simon Karlinsky, "Russia's Gay Literature and Culture: The Impact of the October Revolution," Martin Duberman, ed., Hidden from History (New York: NAL, 1989), 347-64.
45. Simon Karlinsky, "Russia's Gay Literature and History (11th-20th Centuries)," Gay Sunshine, No. 29/30 (Summer/Fall, 1976); "'Vvezen iz-za granitsy...!' Gomoseksualizm v russkoi kul'ture i literature," Erotika v russkoi literature, Literaturnoe obozrenie (spets. vypusk, 1992), 104-7.
46. Barbara Heldt, Terrible Perfection: Women in Russian Literature (Bloomington: Indiana U. Pr., 1987); Sexuality and the Body in Russian Culture, ed. Stephanie Sandler, Jane Costlow, Judith Vowles (Stanford: Stanford U. Pr., 1993); Fruits of Her Plume, ed. Helen Goscilo (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1993).
47. Catherine Portuges notes that the Hungarian director Márta Mészáros also distances herself from feminism; Screen Memories (Bloomington: Indiana U. Pr., 1993), 151 n. 21.
48. Natal'ia Rimashevskaja, "The New Women's Studies," Perestroika and Soviet Women, ed. Mary Buckley (New York: Cambridge U. Pr., 1992), 118-122; Tatiana Mamonova, Russian Women's Studies (New York: Pergamon, 1989) and Women and Russia (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

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49. Francine du Plessix Gray, Soviet Women: Walking the Tightrope (New York: Doubleday, 1989); Slavenka Drakulic; How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed (New York: Harper, 1993).
50. Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet, 68, 63.