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Poetic coming-out, (un)masking or 'autofictional poetry'? Valerii Pereleshin's *Ariel* and *Poem without a Subject*

Recent critical interest in queer life writing places much emphasis on prose, instead of poetry, as a medium to express one's sexual nonconformity. This is no less the case in the Russian context, as poetic life writing by queer writers remains on the margins of literary criticism. While Olga Bakich begins her biography of Valerii Pereleshin (1913-1992) by referring to the poet as a 'Russian émigré gay poet', there has been meagre attention on his queer life writing, despite growing scholarly interest in his works as a Russian émigré writer in China and Brazil.

This article explores two poetic works which are considered the poet's first self-referential expression of same-sex love in his poetry: *Ariel* (composed 1971-1975; published 1976), a collection of sonnets, which is Pereleshin's 'lyrical diary' of his fantasized love for a Soviet translator, editor, and writer in Moscow, and *Poem without a Subject* (composed 1972-1976; published 1989), an autobiographical account of the poet's life as an émigré writer, as well as his struggles as one whose sexuality is considered 'deviant' in a heteronormative society. I explore the poetics of masking and unmasking in the representation of same-sex love in *Ariel* through an examination of Pereleshin's appropriation of Shakespeare's sonnets, with which he develops his own 'autofictional' poetry, a genre that enables him to express his passions through the intertwining of factual and fictional elements. My analysis of *Poem without a Subject* focuses on Pereleshin's attempt to present his multifaceted literary and sexual life in the classical Russian tradition through the use of Pushkin's Onegin stanza. Ultimately, I call attention to the limitations of reading Pereleshin's poetic life writing as a coming-out text, and examine strategies employed by the poet, mindful of the challenges in expressing sexual otherness in Russian literature and the threat of literary censorship, to develop his own version of queer life writing.

As more and more life writing genres or subgenres challenge Philippe Lejeune's 'autobiographical pact', which assumes the unproblematic identity of the author, narrator, and protagonist in autobiography, increasing attention has been given to the way writers sought to express queerness in experimental forms of life writing. Max Saunders argues that 'auto/biografiction's masquerades include gender masquerades, making it a mode

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attractive to writers wanting to queer their picture' (Saunders 2010: 23). This 'queering' of the self-referential 'I' resonates with the call for a rereading of poetry through the lens of life writing studies (Gill et al. 2009: 5).

The delayed inclusion of poetry as a form of life writing can be attributed to the nature of lyrical poetry, which privileges and problematizes the association of the lyrical 'I' with its author: 'the lyric "I" [...] asks us to accept the *possibility* that the "I" is autobiographically referential while simultaneously insisting that it need not be. It sets a trap that we, as readers, seem to enjoy falling into' (Gill et al. 2009: 3).

Paul Hetherington compares the tactic of autobiographical and confessional poets to a ruse, first citing the definition of 'ruse' in the Oxford English Dictionary: 'a ruse is a "detour; a doubling or turning" (Little, Fowler and Coulson 1973: 1866) and if a hunted animal employs such strategies in trying to escape dogs, poets arguably employ similar strategies in order to resist or escape "the pressure of reality"' (Hetherington 2013: 20). The ambivalence of the poet/speaker/protagonist relationship in poetry allows it to be perceived as a ruse, offering space for play and masking/unmasking that straddles fiction and reality, which has particular implications for queer expression.

This article examines two poetic works by Russian émigré translator and writer Valerii Pereleshin (Valerii Frantsevich Salatko-Petrishche, 1913-1992). Born in Irkutsk, Pereleshin migrated to the Russified city of Harbin at the age of seven. He studied at the YMCA Gymnasium in Harbin, where he learned English and other subjects following a pre-revolutionary Russian curriculum, and undertook formal study of Chinese in the Oriental Department of the Faculty of Law. Pereleshin was an active member of Russian literary groups in Harbin and Shanghai and is considered one of the most prominent Russian émigré writers in China. Having lived in China for over thirty years, he settled in Brazil in 1953 after a failed attempt to migrate to America. Following a ten-year poetic silence (1958-1967), he became especially productive in the 1970s. Pereleshin translated profusely into Russian from Chinese, English, and Portuguese. His translation of English poetry includes works by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Donne, and six sonnets from *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1609). He also published

translations of classical Chinese poetry and Portuguese poetry, as well as a collection of original poetry written in Portuguese *In Old Wineskins* [Nos odres velhos, 1983].

In his early lyrical works, often perceived as autobiographical, Pereleshin maintains a cryptic and euphemistic tone on the theme of same-sex love. However, his poetic breakthrough took place with the writing of *Ariel* [Ariel', composed 1971-1975; published 1976] and *Poem without a Subject* [Poema bez predmeta, composed 1972-1976; published in full in 1989]. These are the first two works in which he openly discusses same-sex love and makes explicit references to himself as well as his 'beloved' or lovers. *Ariel* is a collection of sonnets about Pereleshin's fantasized love, which he repeatedly referred to as his 'lyrical diary' (Bakich 2015: 210; Vitkovskii 2013: 26). *Poem without a Subject* is a poetic memoir written in Onegin stanzas, which documents Pereleshin's émigré life and which is interspersed with episodes from his romantic encounters and personal thoughts on politics, literature, and sexuality.

In 1977, writing within the context of the post-Stonewall civil rights movement, Simon Karlinsky reads *Ariel* and *Poem without a Subject* as Pereleshin's 'full-fledged literary coming out' (Karlinsky 2013: 303). Characterizing Pereleshin's poetry as an act of 'coming out' associates his works with late twentieth-century coming-out novels and gay autobiography in the Western world, such as *Under the Rainbow: Growing Up Gay* (1977) by Arnie Kantrowitz and *A Boy's Own Story* (1982) by Edmund White, which often take the form of *Bildungsromane* that 'have their roots firmly in identity politics' (Saxey 2008: 6). However, a close study of Pereleshin's poetry reveals that his poetics is far removed from the developmental and teleological mode of coming-out narratives, many of which focus on the protagonist or autobiographer's discovery of sexual identity, painful experiences, and the decision to come out of the closet. Imposing a Western notion of homosexuality and American gay politics onto a Russian text, Karlinsky's comment coincides with the prevalence of 'universalizing pretensions of the US gay rights model' (Baer 2021: 14), as seen in anthologies of gay literature, including *Out of the Blue* (Pereleshin 1997), where the

English translation of Pereleshin's poems appears.[1]

Taking Lee Edelman's understanding of 'queer' as those 'stigmatized for failing to comply with heteronormative mandates' (Edelman 2004: 17), this study analyses *Ariel* and *Poem without a Subject* as Pereleshin's queer life writing with respect to his rejection and questioning of heteronormativity as well as the obligation to procreate. The following discusses *Ariel* with reference to the tradition of the sonnet form and its relationship with life writing, reading Pereleshin's work as a form of 'autofictional' poetic ruse, and examines how Aleksandr Pushkin's digressive form allows Pereleshin to include episodes of same-sex encounters in his poetic memoir. The poetic dialogue with Shakespeare and Pushkin, as well as the use of autofictional style and authorial digressions, enable Pereleshin to develop his queer poetic life writing, a personal response to heteronormativity which is vastly different from Western coming-out narratives.

Ariel – a poetic coming out?

Ariel was inspired by the correspondence between Pereleshin and Evgenii Vitkovskii, a literary editor, translator, and writer living in Moscow. The correspondence sparked the exiled poet's full-blown infatuation with the Moscow writer, resulting in the diary-like collection of sonnets, in which Pereleshin pours out his longing, passion, frustration, and jealousy, despite the fact that the two never met in person. Karlinsky contextualizes *Ariel* thus within the history of Soviet repression of homosexuality: 'Like most gay men in the Soviet Union, Vitkovsky was married [...] His family, consisting of himself, his mother, his wife, and his small son, is typical [...] of the living arrangements of gay men in the Soviet Union' (Karlinsky 2013: 304).

[1] Karlinsky played a major role in the publication of Pereleshin's homoerotic poetry in America from the seventies onwards. Pereleshin's poetry (translated into English by Karlinksy) appears in *Gay Sunshine* and other publications of Gay Sunshine Press as a result of Karlinsky's introduction of Pereleshin to the editor Winston Leyland. In 1989, at his own expense, Karlinsky published the entire *Poem without a Subject* with his detailed introduction and analysis. *Out of the Blue*, which was published by Gay Sunshine Press in 1997, contains Karlinksy's introductory essay 'Russia's Gay Literature and History' and several of Pereleshin's poetry (including selections from *Ariel*) translated into English by Karlinsky and Vitaly Chernetsky.

This positioning of *Ariel* is problematic for two reasons. First, Karlinsky's comment distorts Vitkovskii's sexual identity by conflating his real life and his role as a character in *Ariel*. Vitkovskii repeatedly stressed that he was the 'object of this almost frantic passion' (Vitkovskii 2013: 4), and the poet-persona in *Ariel* is equally aware that his infatuation is a self-deception [samoobman] (Pereleshin 1976: 10).[2]

Second, this interpellation of Pereleshin as a gay writer also requires clarification. Having spent most of his formative years among Russian émigrés in China and being acquainted with the founder of the American *Gay Sunshine Press* Winston Leyland only in 1977, Pereleshin does not refer to same-sex love in his writing with Russian slang such as light blue [goluboi] or English terminology, like 'gay' and 'queer', terms that were borrowed and popularized in Russia only from the 1990s (Baer 2018: 43, 47; Kon 2003: 14).[3] Instead, Pereleshin refers to his sexuality as 'left-handedness' [levshizna] – 'My left-handedness, of course, were understood by many in China' (letter to Vitkovskii, 21 July 1978, cited by Vitkovskii 2018: 560). In his letters to Gleb Struve, he mentions that 'left-handedness' expresses 'the essence better than all kinds of pejorative terms like the English *queer* and *gay*' (5 September 1981, cited by Bakich 2015: 215). He 'would not have objected to *homosexual* if it was equivalent to *heterosexual* [Eng.]' (3 March 1978, cited by Bakich 2015: 215). Even in the poem 'To the One Who Confessed' [Priznavshemusia, 1977], which serves as a dedication to Winston Leyland, Pereleshin refers to *Gay Sunshine* as 'Left-handed light' [Levshinskii svet], implying his preference for the term 'left-handedness' in his Russian writing. Although this figuration of his sexuality might be deemed 'essentialist', his understanding is based on one's deviation from the 'norm', which is not dissimilar to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's understanding of 'queer' as an 'open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically' (Sedgwick 1993: 8).

[2] Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

[3] According to Igor' Kon, the etymology of the use of 'blues' [golubye] to refer to homosexuals has not been fully studied, though one of the popular theories traces its usage to prison slang in the 1950s. (Kon 2003: 11).

Pereleshin's use of 'left-handedness' as an image in his poetry reveals his positioning in a heteronormative society where the 'right-handed' regulate and persecute those who are considered 'deviant'.

The representation of Pereleshin's poetry as his literary coming-out ignores the poetic ruse that he employs in *Ariel*. The title of the collection refers to Shakespeare's dainty, tricksy spirit in *The Tempest* (1623) and represents the opposition between the world of flesh and spirit. Rather than seeing *Ariel* as Pereleshin's coming-out text, I analyse his modelling of the collection after Shakespeare's sonnets, as he reformulates concepts of love, marriage, sexuality, and writing put forward in Shakespeare's 'procreation sonnets'.

The sonnet and the writing of self

To understand Pereleshin's interplay of the autobiographical and fictional in *Ariel*, one must first examine its relationship with Dante, Petrarch, and Shakespeare's sonnets. Dante's *New Life* [Vita Nuova, 1294] and Petrarch's *Song Book (Fragments in the Vernacular)* [Il Canzoniere (Rerum vulgarium fragmenta), 1470] were 'conceived in the shadow of St. Augustine's *Confessions*, as well as in the aftermath of the vast phenomenon of medieval autobiographism' (Mazzotta 1998: 183). In *New Life*, 25 sonnets and six other poems are framed within an autobiographical prose narrative of Dante's encounters and obsession with Beatrice. Similarly, the sonnets in Petrarch's *Song Book* are marked by the author's 'autoreflexive poetics' (Freccero 1975: 38). The lyrical 'I' of the sonnets – the poet-persona – builds the impression of an almost indistinguishable identity between persona and author, resulting in an inclination to perceive the sonnets as the poet's personal expression.

Shakespeare's sonnets transpose and complicate the traditional sonnet form by replacing the idealized female muse with an 'aristocratic, transgendered male version of the *donna angelica*' and a dark lady who differs significantly from the image of Beatrice and Laura (Cousins 2018: 256).[4] Moreover, in the sonnets, the

[4] By 'transgendered' Cousins refers to the reconfiguration of the 'donna angelica' motif in the *fin'amor* [courtly love] tradition by sonnet writers such as Michelangelo and Shakespeare, whose speakers express homoerotic desire.

enigma that revolves around the identities of the speaker and addressees are made complex through the dedication to 'Mr. W.H.' and Shakespeare's playful treatment of the word/name 'Will'. Peter Hühn talks about the work's 'factual-fictional ambivalence', making critics 'grapple with possible factual references in the *Sonnets* but refrain from identifying them because they are impossible to verify' (Hühn 2014: 163). I interpret this ambivalence between the autobiographical and fictional as a ruse, a game employed by the author, which provides the model for Pereleshin's queer expression in *Ariel*.

Structurally, *Ariel* evokes Shakespeare's sonnets. The collection consists of 153 sonnets plus a crown sonnet 'Link' [Zveno], which consists of 14 sonnets and a master sonnet. The number of sonnets almost reaches Shakespeare's 154, though most sonnets are written in Petrarchan form.

Pereleshin probably reads Shakespeare's *Sonnets* as the Bard's autobiographical writing, interpreting 'Mr. W.H.' to be the actor Willie Hughes, a claim popularized by Oscar Wilde's fictional text *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* (1889). In *Ariel*, Pereleshin characterizes himself as the poet-persona (Dante/Petrarch/Shakespeare) and portrays Evgenii Vitkovskii as a Beatrice/Laura/Willie Hughes figure in panegyric mode:

> The girl next door Portinari
> Dante housed in a grand paradise,
> But his insipid wife
> He left alone in the bazaar of life.
> […]
> And here I am without a home, without a wife
> I converted persistent dreams into flesh,
> And you came into being as stellar Beatrice ('Sonet obidy', Pereleshin 1976: 141)
>
> Соседскую девчурку Портинари
> Дант поселил в торжественном раю,
> Зато жену бесцветную свою
> Забыл одну на жизненном базаре.
> […]
> Вот так и я без дома, без жены
> В плоть претворил настойчивые сны,
> И ты возник надзвездным Беатричем,
>
> Here I am – Shakespeare of the second Elizabeth,

> And you – a different Willie Hughes who has seen the light. ('Parallely', Pereleshin 1976: 15)
>
> Вот я — Шекспир второй Елизаветы,
> А ты — другой, прозревший Вилли Хьюз.

The 'enlightened' Willie Hughes implies the role of the poet-speaker as an older 'mentor', educating the youth in literature as well as matters of love, which may also suggest a sexual awakening.

Pereleshin pays tribute to Petrarch and Shakespeare in the twentieth sonnet in *Ariel*. Though the sonnets in *Ariel* are not numbered, thematically the sonnet echoes Shakespeare's Sonnet 20, in which the poet-persona openly expresses his admiration of the feminine beauty of the male addressee, whom Nature by 'adding one thing to my purpose nothing' (Shakespeare 2014: 151) assigns to be a man. Shakespeare's 'master mistress of my passion' (Shakespeare 2014: 151) anticipates Pereleshin's Evgenii in *Ariel* – a womanly [zhenstvennym], compound male-female figure: Pereleshin's neologisms *zhenomuzh* and *muzhedeva*, which Vitaly Chernetsky translates as 'wife's husband' and 'maiden-man' (Pereleshin 1997: 191), have further translation possibilities as Pereleshin plays on the words *muzh* [husband], *deva* [maiden], *zhena* [wife], and *Zhenia* [the diminutive form of Evgenii]. The poem also plays on the contrasts between masculine and feminine forms; thus, 'Zhenia' (with a feminine ending) is preferable to the masculine 'Evgenii':

> By Evgenii of the legends and Januaries?
> No, I am bewitched by the womanly Zhenia:
> I am sick by him to the point of dizziness,
> And fits are more often and acute.
>
> I think: won't it be smarter to run from jealousy and humiliations?
> But from spasms and burning sensations will
> seven hundred lakes and seven seas hide?
>
> After all even there, excited and disturbed,
> In spite of the vultures of the customs offices,
> You will appear with strings, loving,
>
> both a wife's husband and secretly a man-maiden:

Let us be loved and let them listen to you
The Ghent of geniuses and snowy Geneva! ('Zhenia', Pereleshin 1976: 28)

Ев*ген*ием легенд и *ген*варей?
Нет, *жен*ственным я околдован *Жене*й:
Я болен им до головокру*жени*й,
И приступы все чаще и острей.

Я думаю: не будет ли хитрей
От ревности бежать и уни*жени*й?
Но спрячут ли от судорог и ж*жени*й
Семьсот озер и семьдесят морей?

Ведь даже там, взволнован и встревожен,
Наперекор стервятникам таможен,
Со струнами предстанешь ты, любя,

И *жено*муж, и втайне мужедева:
Пусть любят нас и слушают тебя
*Гент ген*иев и с*нежн*ая Женева! [emphases – K.L.]

The play on words that contains the syllables *gen* from 'Evgenii' and *zhen*, from Zhenia, or wife [zhena] resembles Shakespeare's punning on 'Will', as in Sonnet 135. It also recalls the fifth poem in Petrarch's *Song Book*, as the poet-persona spells out Laura's name with the repetition of LAU, RE, TA, which suggests the name Lauretta (Petrarch 1996: 6).
Petrarch's veiling of the identity of Laura and Shakespeare's playful treatment of names both depart from Dante's autobiographical *New Life*, but Pereleshin's use of personal names and dates in *Ariel* renders it an example of poetic life writing. The collection opens with an acrostic that spells out a close variant of the name 'V-I-T-K-O-V-S-K-I-I' (the last letter of the name 'й' [ĭ] is changed to 'и' [i]). The name of Evgenii's son, his first wife and a future younger son who would be named after him (Valerii the second) are also mentioned in the sonnets. Pereleshin himself imagines Evgenii as his twin brother ('Evgenii was brother to Valerii' [A bratom byl Valeriiu Evgenii], Pereleshin 1976: 12), thereby inserting his own name into the collection. Notably, the sonnets are all dated from 20 April 1971 to 29 October 1975, giving the impression that *Ariel* documents the poet's infatuation and emotional turmoil as a result of his correspondence with Evgenii Vitkovskii. These episodes of

vacillating emotions present a loose narrative that begins with the poet's desire to guide Evgenii to be his literary successor, which quickly transforms into passionate love, punctuated by scenes of longing and outbursts, as well as ruminations on literature. In the final part (sonnets 137-153), the poet-persona records his near emotional breakdown and eventual sobering up after discovering Evgenii's 'betrayal' – that he left his wife for another woman.

'Autofictional' poetry as a ruse

What is the relationship between the autobiographical and the fictional in *Ariel*? In what sense does Pereleshin's appropriation of the sonnet form demonstrate the interplay between censorship and poetic licence?

To answer these questions, it is useful to examine discussions over autofiction, a subgenre of life writing. The term autofiction, believed to be coined by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977, refers to life writing that contradicts Lejeune's 'autobiographical pact'. Jacques Lecarme defines autofiction as a narrative whose 'author, narrator and protagonist share the same nominal identity and whose generic title indicates that it is a novel' (Lecarme 1993: 227) which blurs the line between the factual and fictional. Doubrovsky and Lecarme's arguments reveal problems with the linear, confession-based autobiographical narratives, which do not apply to 'ex-centric' writers 'who either cannot or choose not to produce a coherent, teleological narrative' (Bloom 2019: 11). For these 'ex-centric' writers, including queer writers, the fictionalization of self offers a way out of the double conundrum that faces gay autobiography: the author's responsibility, which poses ethical questions over the revelation of identities of those related to the author, and a predictable, teleological reading, which follows 'a clear pattern of change: from a secretive world to a public one; from a private world to a participatory one: from a shameful world to a proud one' (Plummer 1995: 108).

Notwithstanding Doubrovsky and Lecarme's focus on prose, their discussion sheds light on a similar approach in poetry. Hetherington discusses how poets use the strategy of poetic ruse to create an 'imposture or masquerade', giving the example of Anne Sexton: 'Instead of revealing herself, Sexton speaks from behind the mask of "confessional poet", and uses this mask as a way of saying many apparently "true" things about language and reality

while distorting the literal truth of what she says in whatever ways suit her purposes' (Hetherington 2013: 27). In a similar vein, Pereleshin's poetic representation and invention of self in *Ariel* is arguably his 'autofictional poetry', which can be read as a ruse: a 'necessary artifice; as a way out of difficulties' (Hetherington 2013: 20). In 'Judgment' [Sud] the poet-persona imagines being judged by Girolamo Savonarola, the fifteenth-century Dominican friar of Florence, whose controversial laws against sodomy and 'bonfire of the vanities' made him a symbol of hostility towards same-sex relationships:

> History will end with judgment:
> From the dusky Sheol will rise
> The merciless monk Savonarola
> To judge Paris, Pompeii and Sodom.
>
> Then we, also humbled by shame,
> Will pay our debts to the last obol,
> Cluttering up the foot of the throne
> With our longing, love and labour.
>
> Then will burn, in order to smoulder forever,
> Basilicas, palaces, libraries –
> Food for the grumbling fire.
>
> How shall we answer then
> For the music, for impassioned sonnets?
> Even I won't be able to preserve your poems. ('Sud', Pereleshin 1976: 30)

> История закончится судом:
> Поднимется из тусклого шеола
> Безжалостный монах Савонарола
> Судить Париж, Помпеи и Содом.
>
> Тогда и мы, принижены стыдом,
> Свои долги заплатим до обола,
> Загромоздив подножие престола
> Своей тоской, любовью и трудом.
>
> Тогда сгорят, чтоб дотлевать вовеки,
> Базилики, дворцы, библиотеки –
> Подачками ворчливому огню.
>
> Какие мы дадим тогда ответы

За музыку, за страстные сонеты?
Твоих стихов и я не сохраню.

Though the scene depicted is purely imaginary, the fear that one's writing could possibly become the cause for persecution is clearly presented.

The poet-persona of *Ariel* oscillates between 'confession' and the rejection of such 'truth'. On the one hand, he imitates Hellenic artists who add a personal signature on *stamnos*, ancient Greek wine jars which sometimes have inscriptions on them, making it a secret (but public) love confession:

...I like to hide among sad iambs
the confession: EUGENĒS – THE BEAUTIFUL BOY. ('Priznan'e', Pereleshin 1976: 19)[5]

...Мне прятать нравится среди печальных ямбов
Признанье: EUGENES – O EPHEBOS KALOS.

On the other hand, Pereleshin warns against biographical scrutiny, especially on the part of the critic. In 'Enquiry' [Spravka], which starts with an epigraph from Fedor Tiutchev's poem 'Don't believe, don't believe the poet, maiden...' ['Ne ver', ne ver' poetu, deva...', 1839], the poet mocks the future literary critic who tries to find out the truth of the poet:

The future literary critic
Should suffer because of me:
After all I am a sly person,
a little crafty rogue,
I'm putting him on the wrong track
[...]
And by poems I bought myself a wig,
Forged a cheque, married on dowry,

Tormented a wife and squandered money...
Will he understand, in spite of deceptions,

[5] The Greek phrase 'ὅ παῖς καλός' [the beautiful boy], usually carrying erotic connotation, is a common inscription on Greek vases (Clark et al. 2002: 100). Instead of *pais* [boy] Pereleshin uses the term *ephebos*, which refers to young men from eighteen to twenty years old. The connection between 'EUGENĒS' and Evgenii Vitkovskii is apparent as the name Evgenii is derived from the Greek word *εὐγενής* [eugenēs].

That the poet was slandering his very self? ('Spravka', Pereleshin 1976: 140)[6]

Грядущему литературоведу
Помучиться придется надо мной:
Ведь я – хитрец, плутишка продувной,
По ложному его пускаю следу.
[…]
А по стихам – купил себе парик,
Подделал чек, женился на приданом,

Извел жену и деньги промотал…
Поймет ли он, наперекор обманам,
Что сам себя поэт оклеветал?

This simultaneous masking and unmasking complicate the self-referentiality of the text, resisting a simplistic, (auto)biographical interpretation despite the use of real names. It also allows a creative space for Pereleshin to express his attitudes towards same-sex love and, more importantly, to represent such love from the raw material of the Russian language.

Love and sexuality in *Ariel*

The model of love presented in *Ariel* is that of Ancient Greece, with Ariel depicted as Alcibiades, Ganymede, Charmides, and Antinous. The poet-persona takes on the role of an aged mentor, and upon receiving the poem of his literary 'apprentice', compares the correspondence with a Socratic dialogue:

Crowned with threadbare garland,
I will join the dialogue with the student [who is]
Trusting, courteous and long-awaited,

And the conversation will rumble all over the world:
Come in, in one desired face,
My Menexenus, my Lysias, my Charmides! ('Pri poluchenii "Okeana"', Pereleshin 1976: 10)

Увенчанный поношенным венком,
Я в диалог вступлю с учеником

[6] The last word in Tiutchev's original line *deva* [maiden] is removed, changing the addressee from a girl to the general audience, enabling a non-heterosexual reading.

Доверчивым, любезным, долгожданным,

И разговор по свету прогремит:
Входите же, в одном лице желанном,
Мой Менексен, мой Лисий, мой Хармид!

The mentor desires to nurture the youth into a literary successor:

Oh, I want such an heir
To find in you, so that you the sparkle of word
Serve, like me, with the highest level of strength. ('Akrostikh', Pereleshin 1976: 9)

О, я хочу преемника такого
В тебе найти, чтоб ты сверканью слова
Служил, как я – по высшей мере сил.

Although there are fantasized erotic episodes in *Ariel*, the Platonic ideal is upheld. The contrast of flesh and spirit not only reflects the poet-persona's internal struggle, but also contributes to the depiction of a chaste love that is superior to the carnal relationship between men and women. Confronting a youth who is surrounded by 'maidenly warmth', the poet-persona directs him to Diotima's teaching about love, recounted by Socrates in *The Symposium* (c. 385–370 BC):

[…] And again talk about 'The Feast'
We will have: about triplicities in the world,
About the happiness to become a cool stream

And [to] quench the desire of a sworn brother [which is]
Primal, the most understandable – in what
Diotima instructed Socrates! ('Ne pervii raz', Pereleshin 1976: 157)

[…] И снова речь о «Пире»
Пойдет у нас: о тройственности в міре,
О родости прохладным стать ручьем

И утолить желанье побратима
Первичное, понятнейшее – в чем
Наставила Сократа Диотима!

Diotima's speech highlights the importance of procreation in Plato's conceptualization of love, which both Shakespeare and

Pereleshin draw upon: 'the object of love is not beauty [...] It is birth and procreation in a beautiful medium' (Plato 1998: 49).

Suggesting that procreation in the form of childbirth reflects the human desire for immortality, Diotima argues that there are relationships that lead to other forms of procreation and immortality:

> the offspring of this relationship are particularly attractive and are closer to immortality than ordinary children [...] and we cast envious glances at good poets like Homer and Hesiod because the kind of children they leave behind are those which earn their parents renown and 'fame immortal', since the children themselves are immortal (Plato 1998: 52-53).

The first 17 sonnets in *Shakespeare's Sonnets* – commonly referred to as 'procreation sonnets' – can be read as a transposition of this Platonic ideal. The poet-persona repeatedly urges a fair youth to be married, so that he can leave behind his imprint for eternity:

> She [Nature] carved thee for her seal, and meant thereby
> Thou shouldst print more, not let that copy die ('Sonnet 11', Shakespeare 2014: 133).
>
> And nothing 'gainst time's scythe can make defence
> Save breed to brave him, when he takes thee hence ('Sonnet 12', Shakespeare 2014: 135).

The turning point of the sequence is when the poet realizes an alternative way to immortalize the youth's beauty – through his sonnets:

> And all in war with time for love of you
> As he takes from you, I engraft you new ('Sonnet 15', Shakespeare 2014: 141).

The word 'engraft' combines horticultural imagery, which symbolizes a medieval understanding of marriage and procreation, with the imagery of writing ('engraft' recalls the Greek word *graphein*, to write). The theme of writing as an alternative method of procreation continues, despite doubts over his 'pupil pen' and 'barren rhyme' ('Sonnet 16', 143), and transforms into a confidence

in the poet's ability to conquer Time:

> Yet do thy worst, old Time, despite thy wrong,
> My love shall in my verse ever live young ('Sonnet 19', Shakespeare 2014: 149).

While *Ariel* is in many aspects a response to Shakespeare's appropriation of Plato's imagery of procreation, Pereleshin places a greater emphasis on Diotima's figuration of beauty as a medium for birth. The first sonnet in Pereleshin's *Ariel* concludes with a similar idea of procreation:

> Who will reproach my spirit for treachery?
> Have I not previously asked the chosen one –
> With him and *in him* I produce progeny! [italics – K.L.] ('Akrostikh', Pereleshin 1976: 9)
>
> Кто упрекнет мой дух за вероломство?
> Избранника и прежде я просил —
> с ним, и *в нем* произвожу потомство! [italics – K.L.]

This resonates with Plato's conceptualization of non-physical birth:

> his giving birth to beautiful discourses and virtue and his gaining of immortality, can logically be accomplished only in partnership with another person: one gives birth, in effect, to an enlightened way of life *in* the person of the (younger) partner, and it is through him that the lover gains a kind of vicarious immortality (Leitao 2014: 37).

In Pereleshin's version the beloved – whom he is mentoring to be a poet – becomes a medium (*with him, in him*) in a more spiritual form of procreation, which materializes in Pereleshin's poetry. The figure of *Ariel* thus represents a higher realm of existence and creativity:

> Two windy, amorous Ariels
> Are given to create in innocent height,
> And below – we: we burn and with them share
> The magical gift of conception in beauty. ('My', Pereleshin 1976: 11)
>
> Двум ветровым, влюбленным Ариэлям
>
> Дано творить в безгрешной высоте,
> А ниже – мы: горим и с ними делим

Чудесный дар зачатья в красоте.

Pereleshin also makes use of this conflicting understanding of procreation to formulate his view towards the sexual politics that opposes the 'procreators' and 'degenerates':

And is it necessary for fertilization,
That a couple writhes from lust? ('My', Pereleshin 1976: 11)

А нужно ли для оплодотворенья,
Чтоб корчилась от похоти чета?

Pereleshin directs his frustration towards the institution of marriage, particularly in its modern, Soviet form. In 'The Speech of Aristophanes' [Slovo Aristofana] he appropriates Aristophanes' myth of the three sexes in *The Symposium* to mock those who fill up the civil registration offices (ZAGS)[7]. Apart from the double 'he' and double 'she', the third sex was the 'lascivious "he-she"' [bludlivyi 'on-ona']:

That breed was quite strong:
Round and somewhat funny,
It lived, not remembering gods,
And for that was cut into two!

Since that time Ajax weeps about Ajax,
Sappho sings about the Mytilene maids,
And the third sex throngs every ZAGS,

Anticipating the lure of infidelity:
It takes sex partners by force,
Rears children and boasts of themselves. ('Slovo Aristofana', Pereleshin 1976: 20)

Порода та была весьма сильна:
Округлая и несколько смешная,
Она жила, богов не вспоминая,
И надвое за то рассечена!

С тех пор Аякс рыдает об Аяксе,
Поет Сафо о девах Митилен,
А третий пол толпится в каждом ЗАГСе,

[7] ZAGS, the Soviet equivalent of a registry office, stands for *Organy zapisi aktov grazhdanskogo sostoianiia*, the body for 'the registration of acts of civic status'.

Предведая заманчивость измен:
Сожителей захватывает с бою,
Детей растит и хвалится собою.

The depiction of the third sex as lascivious, unfaithful couples crowding up at civil registration offices offers a critique of how society legitimizes heterosexual unions and procreation, highlighting the problem of heteronormativity, where heterosexuality prevails over all other (outlawed) forms of relationships, union and sexualities.

For Pereleshin, the symbolic opposition between procreators and degenerates not only represents different perspectives over sexuality, but also one's attitude to life and art. Throughout the sonnet collection, the procreators are portrayed as Soviet workers toiling for material sustenance, incomparable to the poet-persona, who creates poetry and reaches immortality and fame. This is a reversal of the Soviet conceptualisation of poet as a worker, as illustrated by Maiakovskii's 'Poet worker' [Poet rabochii, 1918]:

We grind minds with the rasp of language.
Who is greater – a poet
or a foreman,
who
leads people towards material gain?
Both.
Hearts are the same as motors.
The soul is the same as the cunning engine. ('Poet rabochii', Maiakovskii 1956: 19)

Мозги шлифуем рашпилем языка.
Кто выше — поэт
или техник,
который
ведет людей к вещественной выгоде?
Оба.
Сердца — такие ж моторы.
Душа — такой же хитрый двигатель.

In Pereleshin's formulation, the prosaic (authority, monotonous life) stands opposite to poetry (art, immortality), mapping the distinction between *byt* (everyday life) and *bytie* (being) onto the procreators-degenerates polemic:

Prosaists in heaven had my life
Conceived: career of a lawyer,

Dignitary (and, perhaps, a diplomat,
Though I do not recognize such ranks).

They introduced a wife and family into the programme,
So that I follow the way of my father and grandfather,
But from a young age, being an eccentric and restless person,
I am not attracted to everyday life, but to existence. ('Nedosmotr', Pereleshin 1976: 87)

Прозаики на небе жизнь мою
Задумали: карьеру правоведа,
Сановника (и, может-быть, полпреда,
Хоть я таких чинов не признаю).

Внесли жену в программу и семью,
Чтоб я пошел путем отца и деда,
Но с юных лет, чудак и непоседа,
Не к быту я тянусь, а к бытию.

The fate of male – a fertile wife
And sons, and daughters, and grandsons,
To cram As and Bs in their face,
To snort, puff, and to be confused about tenses.

But will start seeding
A man of prayer, an ascetic, a man of science
Or a poet, whose secret pain is converted
By a poem into pauses and sounds? ('Bessmertie', Pereleshin 1976: 42)

Удел самца — плодливая жена
И сыновья, и дочери, и внуки,
Чтоб в их лице зубрить азы и буки,
Сопеть, пыхтеть и путать времена.

Но станет ли пускаться в семена
Молитвенник, подвижник, муж науки
Или поэт, чья в паузы и звуки
Боль тайная стихом обращена?

Relieved from sexual procreation are those who reach immortality – Mikhail Lermontov, Christopher Marlowe, and Paul Verlaine – a far cry from the Soviet translator, a factory worker whose 'rhyming' amounts to drudgery or 'hard labour':

[…] For dull translation,

Grumbling, you proceed –
for tedious hassle.
And the factory will produce until the night,
Rhyming backbreakingly:
have to catch that deadline! (‘Krapivnitsa’, Pereleshin 1976: 35)

[…] За тусклый перевод,

Ворча, ты примешься —
за нудную мороку.
И будет до́ ночи производить завод,
Рифмуя каторжно: поспеть-то надо к сроку!

In the face of his beloved’s family life, where the production of translation evokes the sexual act of procreation, even the phallic symbol of the poet-persona – the proboscis of small tortoiseshell (*krapivnitsa*, a kind of butterfly) which represents his letter – becomes impotent:

The letter will flop: my proboscis is powerless.
It doesn’t sway, not ‘brazilized’ at all (‘Krapivnitsa’, Pereleshin 1976: 35)

Письмо завалится: мой хоботок бессилен.
Не поколеблется, ничуть не побразилен

‘Brazilized’ [pobrazilen] is a neologism with a root that resembles the word ‘Brazil’ [Braziliia]. Although Pereleshin never discussed his use of the term, in his letter to Iurii Ivask he mentions ‘the Brazilian psychology’ (19 July 1974, cited by Li et al. 2005), which is associated with the free expression of same-sex love in poetry.

When Vitkovskii leaves his first wife for another woman, not only does Pereleshin condemn him for succumbing to physical desire, calling him a womaniser [babnik] with another acrostic which spells ‘ARIELILIBABNIK’, meaning ‘Ariel or womaniser’ (Pereleshin 1976: 154), but he also belittles him as a conformist:

After all Menexenus, Bosie, and Charmides are
Outside the tribe, and every one of them is famous.
But you are a father: the sedition is overcome! (‘Zhenatomu drugu’, Pereleshin 1976: 136)

Ведь Менексен, и Вози, и Хармид —
Вне племени, и каждый знаменит.

Но ты — отец: осилена крамола!

In a sense, Pereleshin's writing could be understood as a literary compensation for his unattainable desire, as the dejected lover fantasizes an alternative form of union with his beloved:

Now you have become a monogamous male
[…]
But, loving vindictively and sacrificially,
I sucked a drop of blood from you ––
Just one, but the liveliest one.

It is in me, and you, half monk,
In it are frivolous. Now I'm rejoicing,
And together we fornicate in my poems. ('Krovinka', Pereleshin 1976: 104)

Теперь ты стал самцом единобрачным,
[…]
Но, мстительно и жертвенно любя,
Я высосал кровинку из тебя –
Всего одну, но самую живую.

Она во мне, и ты, полумонах,
В ней – ветрогон. Теперь я торжествую,
И вместе мы блудим в моих стихах.

Even in this poem, the concept of love for Pereleshin presented throughout *Ariel* is inseparable from his overarching concern with literary creation. Pereleshin's fantasized love with a phantom symbolically represents his desire for a literary connection with his native country and his wish to have his poetry published in Russia. For Pereleshin, Vitkovskii is the *medium* – not only as a muse, but also as the chosen one who introduces his poetry to his homeland.

By exploring *Ariel* within the context of the sonnet tradition and its formation of a poet-persona, which establishes the voice of the poet through poetic encomium, it is possible to read the fantasized love in *Ariel* as Pereleshin's expression of his emotional truth and an act of self-creation. Pereleshin's infatuation with a ghost serves as a medium for art – the ultimate goal being 'the avalanche of sonnets' [sonetnaia lavina] (Pereleshin 1976: 43). By a playful manipulation of fact and fiction, Pereleshin manages to create in Russian poetry a queer poetic voice, countering the Soviet regulation

of sexuality and sexual relationships.

Poem without a Subject – a queer voice embedded in narrative digression

Compared with *Ariel*, Pereleshin's *Poem without a Subject* appears a drastically different example of life writing. Written in Onegin stanzas, the poetic memoir traces the émigré poet's life from his birth to his first few years in Brazil, with a narrative that is frequently interrupted by the humorous, and at times self-deprecating, ruminations of the poet-narrator. While the memoir has been read as a document that gives a factual account of émigré life (Zabiiako 2016: 150), the autobiographical pact is problematized with fictional elements such as the fictional character Bogdan Strel'tsov, who serves as the poet-narrator's alter-ego or a mask for him to voice his political or literary criticism.

Poem without a Subject demonstrates a historical and literary responsibility to record the names, anecdotes, caricatures, and tragic fates of Pereleshin's acquaintances and historical figures: the staff and students of the Law Faculty in Harbin, the literary groups Churaevka (Harbin) and Friday (Shanghai), those persecuted during the Japanese occupation and repatriation to the USSR, etc. As such, episodes of romantic encounters only take up a small part of the memoir.

However, it is worth examining how *Poem without a Subject* treats the question of sexuality, as it is now expressed in an 'unmasked' autobiographical format. I will focus on the narration of two love relationships and Pereleshin's thoughts on 'left-handedness', which is enabled to a large extent by the digressive style of the narrative.[8]

Pereleshin narrates what is understood to be his first experience of love in Song 3, when he met a young patient named Vasilii Nesterenko in Kazem-bek Memorial Monastery Hospital, upon contracting dysentery in 1937. The narration of his tender attachment begins in Song 3.21:

[8] For a discussion of the digressive nature of the Onegin stanza and the various ways it was appropriated by Lermontov, Voloshin, Viacheslav Ivanov and Pereleshin, see Michael Wachtel's *The Development of Russian Verse*. A comparison of the form and style in *Poem without a Subject* and Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* can be found in the article by E. Kapinos (Kapinos 2020) and Vadim Wittkowsky (Wittkowsky 2020).

[…] to a sick youth
I became attached – it was all the more gentle,
that my tortured Vasenka
was meeker than a child
and accepted [his] tuberculosis
without lamentations or tears,
but, only as I got up to say goodbye,
to cornflower blue eyes
tears ran up, and the teardrop –
there was nowhere for it to roll down –
called me to love, to not forget (Pereleshin 1989: 131)

[…] к юноше больному
я привязался – тем нежней,
что мой замученный Васёнка
был безответнее ребенка
и принимал туберкулез
без сетований или слез,
но, только я вставал проститься,
на васильковые глаза
взбегали слезы, и слеза –
ей было некуда скатиться –
звала любить, не забывать

In the preface of *Poem without a Subject*, Karlinsky identifies a similar sentiment to that presented in Gogol''s 'Nights at the Villa' [Nochi na ville, 1839], in which Gogol' recalls how the brief episode in his youth with Iosif Viel'gorskii, who was dying of consumption, brought about a return to his youth:

> when a youthful soul seeks fraternal friendship, full of sweet, almost infantile trifles and mutual show of tokens of *tender attachment*; the time when it is sweet to gaze into each other's eyes, when your entire being is ready to offer sacrifices [italics – K.L.] (Gogol' 1997: 41)

In Pereleshin's account, the youth's attachment creates a complex feeling in the poet: 'Love? Entreaty? Lash??' [Liubov'? Mol'ba? Uprekremen'??] (Pereleshin 1989: 132). The episode was devastating to Pereleshin, as the poet himself fell sick and was unable to accompany Vasilii during his last hours. The narration, however, breaks off and only returns to the time before Vasilii's death as the poet made a 'a business proposition' [delovoe predlozhen'e] (Pereleshin 1989: 136) with God that he will sacrifice his own life for Vasilii's, ending with Pereleshin's decision to become a monk. This ambivalent

experience of love is not presented as an awakening to one's sexual orientation, nor narrated in a linear manner, but serves as the narrative transition towards the poet-narrator's life as a monk.

The poet-narrator's emphasis on his guilt becomes the narrative focus in the second account of love, which includes the most explicit line suggesting his physical intimacy with a man in the memoir:

> Liu Xin, but for me – Lucien.
> We fell in love easily and immediately:
> the heated stove invited [us] to strip naked and lie down,
> and he lay down without refusal,
> and in the morning, having repeated the rite,
> hurried back to the bookshelves. (Pereleshin 1989: 279)
>
> Лю Син, а для меня – Люсьен.
> Слюбились мы легко и сразу:
> звала натопленная печь
> раздеться догола и лечь,
> и он ложился без отказу,
> а утром, повторив обряд,
> спешил вернуться в книжный ряд.

This account of love affair with the Chinese bookseller Liu Tiansheng departs from the lyrical style in *Ariel* through the inclusion of multiple voices. For instance, immediately after the depiction of the couple's happiness follows an imagined speech from God:

> You're drunk with happiness, Valerii,
> but you'd better not joke with God:
> with an equal loss
> you'll pay for intoxication!
> (Pereleshin 1989: 279)
>
> Ты счастьем опьянен, Валерий,
> но лучше с Богом не шути:
> равновеликою потерей
> за упоенье заплати!

The projected admonition is followed by the poet's internal conflict, in particular between passion and religious devotion. After a long digression, the tale returns to an extended and dramatic narration of Liu Tiansheng's arrest and release by the Nationalists in 1947, followed by a dialogue in Song 7 between Pereleshin and Liu Xin about his experience in the re-education camp. More

factual than sentimental, this account contributes to Pereleshin's depiction of individual suffering during political turmoil, which is discussed repeatedly in the memoir, rather than simply being an account of a love relationship.

These romantic encounters and internal struggles are presented as episodes in Pereleshin's life, but they are not placed at the centre of the narrative. Unlike *Ariel*, in which the poet-persona's fantasy and passion take a central role, *Poem* comprises a series of digressions, where no single subject is identified as the major theme. The inclusion of homoerotic episodes in the memoir suggests an acceptance of his sexuality, without turning the narrative into one of sexual awakening and 'coming out'. Instead, the digressive form allows Pereleshin to express a worldview based on the opposition of procreators and 'degenerates', revealing Pereleshin's ultimate concern to be one of censorship and the writing of 'left-handedness':

> almost half a century we
> have not got along:
> the breeders – and I.
> Those who do not make babies
> eke out under the name of degenerates
> their vain life. (Pereleshin 1989: 226)

> почти полвека мы не ладим:
> производители – и я.
> Те, кто не делает младенцев,
> влачит под кличкой вырожденцев
> жизнь бесполезную свою.

Depicting the homophobic writer Grigorii Klimov (pseudonym of the Russian émigré writer Igor' Kalmykov) as a representative of procreators who persecutes degenerates (vyrozhdentsy), Pereleshin returns to Aristophanes' myth:

> though wise Klimov had Ajax
> harassed – and persecuted to the Registry Office:
> so as not to become degenerates,
> [that] he chooses a 'good part',
> and, so that now his babies do not conceive the idea to roll down,
> he carries some money to Uchpedgiz
> for edifying books,

where the homeland and party membership card are,
and about Ajax there is no word.[9] (Pereleshin 1989: 227)

хоть мудрый Климов и Аякса
травил – и дотравил до ЗАГСа:
чтоб в вырожденцы не попасть,
избрал и он “благую часть”,
и, чтоб теперь его детишки
не вздумали скатиться вниз,
деньжонки носит в Учпедгиз
за назидательные книжки,
где родина и партбилет,
и об Аяксах речи нет.

The emphasis here is on publishing: ‘Ajax’s babies’ refers to literary works, the offspring of love, which have no chance of being published. Instead, edifying books [nazidatel'nye knizhki] are commissioned. A more direct discussion of ‘norms’ and ‘left-handedness’ can be found in the last song (8.47-52). Questioning the validity of ‘the norm’, Pereleshin expresses the inherent injustice of this division:

A lefthander understandably is a transgressor,
but is a daltonic better than him?
A normal youth is *different*:[10] (Pereleshin 1989: 388)

Левша, понятно, беззаконник,
но лучше ли его дальтоник?
Нормальный юноша *другой*:

then – with a normal right hand –
he writes page after page:
forehead and nose in ink stains,
but such a denunciation is ready,
that coxcomb McGowan himself
will take his word for it,
and will put someone in jail,
accused of being not right-handed:
the left-handed, lame people and hunchbacks

[9] ‘Uchpedgiz’ stands for *Gosudarstvennoe uchebno-pedagogicheskoe izdatel'stvo*, the State Publishing House of Scholastic and Pedagogical Literature.

[10] A daltonic is a person with colour-blindness.

are not needed among normal people! (Pereleshin 1989: 389)

потом – нормальною десницей
страницу пишет за страницей:
в чернильных пятнах лоб и нос,
зато готов такой донос,
что сам МакГоуэн хлыщеватый
поверит на́ слово ему,
и сядет кто-нибудь в тюрьму,
в неправоручьи виноватый:
левши, хромцы да горбуны
среди нормальных не нужны!

For Pereleshin, the 'right' is no different from the 'left', yet the right-handed procreators denounced the left-handed, condemned them as diseased, and sent them to prison. Here the tirade relates to the personal reality of the poet, whose fate was caught up in Cold War political polarization and McCarthyist homophobia: McGowan was the US 'interrogator' John H. McGowan, an officer of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, after whose questioning in 1950 Pereleshin was detained and deported. Among the testimonies against him as a Soviet sympathizer was the claim that 'the subject may have been a homosexual' (cited by Bakich 2015: 125).

Pereleshin's interweaving of biographical information and personal views in the authorial digressions of *Poem without a Subject* is not just an imitation of Pushkin's poet-narrator. In the memoir, the playful tone and the polyphonic nature of the text are pivotal in creating the voice of the Other. On one level, Bogdan Strel'tsov – a pseudonym used by Pereleshin as he wrote poems with political themes – serves as the memoirist's alter-ego, to mask his criticism of Soviet politics in the Brezhnev period. However, in the digressions, Pereleshin (as the narrator of the poetic memoir) constantly caricaturises Bogdan and other Soviet writers, with the former resembling Eugene Onegin as a subject of the poet-narrator's ridicule. Like Pushkin's poet-narrator, these digressions allow Pereleshin's narrator to assert himself as a literary connoisseur, and further enable him to establish the identity of a poet struggling for free expression in a homophobic society.

Distinguishing the digressions in *Eugene Onegin* [Evgenii Onegin,

1833] from biographical confessions in Romantic poetry, Sona Hoisington argues that they 'draw attention to the narrator, to make us feel that the story we are reading "emanates" from him' (Hoisington 1975: 147) with the result of fashioning the image of 'Pushkin the poet': 'The narrator is portrayed as poet-creator, whose rich spiritual life is revealed in beautiful lyrical digressions' (Hoisington 1975: 151). Similar views are put forward by Anna Dvigubski: the digressions combine as a jagged, contradictory superstructure to create a multidimensional portrait of another character, Author, who supersedes his heroes' (Dvigubski 2013: 14).Pereleshin's poet-narrator, through his meta-poetic reflections, comments, and diatribes, as well as painstaking demonstration of his poetic virtuosity, fashions himself as a multi-dimensional poet who does not abandon his literary pursuit in the face of war, exile, persecution and censorship.

In the last song, having removed the character (and his alter-ego) Bogdan, Pereleshin, in his own voice as a poet-memoirist, comments on his ultimate struggle against right-handed censors:

> So that this arduous feat
> will make it until Sunday,
> I make the poem latent,
> unreachable for stings,
> unattainable for the watch-dogs
> [...]
> Nobody will be responsible,
> and the stamp for resolution
> a police bailiff will affix
> (Pereleshin 1989: 398)
>
> Чтоб этот подвиг многотрудный
> до воскресенья долежал,
> поэму делаю подспудной,
> недосягаемой для жал,
> недостижимой для барбосов.
> [...]
> Никто не станет отвечать,
> и к резолюции печать
> приложит полицейский пристав

Writing in old age and thinking that his life may end soon, the poet consoles himself towards the end of his memoir:

> To the dead is not dangerous at all
> the curses of the right-handed: (Pereleshin 1989: 399)
>
> Нисколько мертвым не опасны

проклятья праворуких масс:

February 1976, cited by Bakich 2015: 215-216)

According to Vitaly Chernetsky, 'Pereleshin elaborated a paradigm of augmentation and subversion of Russian national form through openly embracing the potential of cultural hybridity and challengingly suffusing his texts with a queer problematic' (Chernetsky 2003: 67). Pereleshin appropriates Pushkin's Onegin stanzas and interposes his memoir with views on sexual 'norm' and deviation, as well as his personal struggle in writing about same-sex desire.

Ariel and *Poem without a Subject* demonstrate Pereleshin's literary manoeuvres to counter the silencing of the 'deviant other' in Russian literature. Reading Pereleshin's poetic life writing simply as his 'literary coming-out' ignores the subtleties and intertextuality of the texts, which are neither an 'exposure' of one's sexual identity, nor a depiction of his romantic life.

Conclusion

> Under the blows of the Judeo-Christian 'morality,' Plato's ideal of loving a young man has become something 'unspoken.' But people *speak*. That same Shakespeare spoke about it with greatness in his sonnets; in Russia, Mikhail Kuzmin spoke brilliantly. Now it is my turn to speak, and the advantage is that at the end of the twentieth century there is no need to hide in the shadows and camouflage it as 'an accidental deviation from the norm.' (Pereleshin, Letter to Vadim Leonard,17

Pereleshin's appeal to literary classics and use of autofictional devices can be interpreted as strategies in view of the threat of censorship:

> in medieval grammar
> the muddle-headed party censor
> not finding obvious prohibitions,
> will rush home – until rain,
> and hastily, in order to be left alone
> and not be late for dinner,
> will write "Accepted for printing" (Pereleshin 1989: 39)
>
> в грамматике средневековой
> партийный цензор бестолковый
> запретов явных не найдя,

домой помчится – до дождя,
и наскоро, чтоб отвязаться
и к ужину не опоздать,
напишет “Принято в печать”

However, they also constitute Pereleshin’s creation of a unique poetic voice, in the same way as Dante, Petrarch, Shakespeare, and Pushkin establish the unique voice of the poet via their poet-personae and poet-narrators. If Petrarch’s *Song Book* is ‘a poetry whose real subject matter is its own act and whose creation is its own author’ (Freccero 1975: 34), Shakespeare’s ‘procreation sonnets’ introduce a poet-persona who awakens to the power of artistic creation, and Pushkin creates the image of the Author in his verse novel, *Ariel* and *Poem without a Subject* constitute Pereleshin’s self-fashioning as a queer poet, as he explores new ways of presenting the self in his poetry.

Looking beyond Pereleshin’s queer life writing as coming-out texts, or as a poetic ruse to voice the ‘unnameable’, one witnesses the author’s play with poetic licence, as he explores the possibilities of self-expression through the intermingling of fact and fiction, as well as the use of authorial digressions. Pereleshin’s self-creation in his poetic life writing contributes to his poetic transformation, as he reaches a new perception of his poetic self and produces increasingly intimate and open depiction of same-sex love in Russian and Portuguese.

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