8 Fedor Sologub’s *The Petty Demon*: Eroticism, Decadence and Time

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Though *The Petty Demon* is one of the most important novels to come out of Russian modernism (its only rival is Belyi’s *Petersburg*), it has received less attention than it merits.¹ It won enormous popularity with the reading public upon its appearance in 1907, but the watchdogs of Russian culture have been less indulgent. Until recently Sologub’s uncompromising pessimism and his peculiar erotic interests made him unwelcome for the reigning puritanical orthodoxies. His contemporaries deplored the perversity and sadism that appears in his works; later critics have tended to pass over his peculiar eroticism or to ascribe it to the vogues of the *fin de siècle*. However, eroticism, especially in its perverse forms, was more than mere fashion. It was at the very heart of the literary phenomenon we call decadence and central to Sologub’s concerns.²

In *The Petty Demon*, the world divides according to quality of feeling, especially erotic feeling. On the one hand, there is the provincial school teacher, the depraved Peredonov; on the other, the child, Sasha, and the young woman, Liudmila, who is attracted to Sasha and becomes his beloved. For all its ‘decadent’ perversities, *The Petty Demon* recapitulates the romantic opposition of corrupt adulthood and innocent childhood, identifying corruption and innocence with distinct varieties of sexual life. If in Sologub’s other work eroticism sometimes seems like incidental self-indulgence, the author titillating us (or himself), here it is incorporated into the overall structure of meaning.

Peredonov is a grotesque figure whose name has entered the language as a term for blatant and thoroughgoing vulgarity (*poshlost*). The Russian comic tradition, from Fonvizin through Gogol, Saltykov-Shchedrin, Dostoevsky and Bulgakov, has tended to extravagant monstrosities of the comic imagination rather than polite parlour wit.³ The grotesque exaggerates a feature of appearance or character to the point of caricature and deprives the world of a reasonable standard of normality, so that the human descends into the beastly and demonic.

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¹ J. Elsworth (ed.), *The Silver Age in Russian Literature* © International Council for Soviet and East European Studies, and John Elsworth 1992
For Sologub, as for Gogol before him, the devil is in the saddle. Without Mephistophelean grandeur, their diabolical inventions are mere 'petty demons', mindless and banal nonentities existing in limbo, 'dead souls' in breathing bodies. Evil has become habitual, comedy's 'way of the world'. Though Gogol is his closest predecessor, Sologub's interests are more psychological and philosophical. Like his fellow Symbolists (and Dostoevsky before them) he proceeds from or works towards a theory of life. His view is unrelentingly Manichean – the created world is hopelessly fallen; goodness lies somewhere beyond. His characters acquire comic force from their relation to caricature, but in the case of Peredonov he probes inward to ferret out a determining principle of his nature and, through him, of the nature of evil.

Evil for Sologub lies in the absence or perversion of human feeling. Peredonov is nasty, mean, brutish, duplicitous, sadistic, but above all he is emotionally dead. Black melancholy is his 'humour'. Like other writers of the Symbolist movement, Sologub shifted his focus from action to nuances of mood and tone, which in grammar meant an increased importance for adjective and adverb. The modifiers associated with Peredonov all describe profound depression: 'gloomy', 'indifferent', 'dull', 'despondent', 'dreary', 'cold', 'lonely'. An adjective meaning 'sullen', 'gloomy', 'morose' (ugriumyi) turns into a fixed epithet, appearing, as it does, on almost every other page.4 Peredonov is 'always' gloomy, his gloom is 'imperturbable', his mood is 'hopelessly dreary'. His face expresses 'nothing', his eyes are 'vacant', his perceptions are 'slow and dull', his movements 'mechanical'; 'nothing in the external world interests him'; 'he has no friends, no one will come to save him'.... The metaphors that describe him belong to the dead, the mechanical, the diabolical or beastly: 'walking corpse', 'dead apparatus', 'frozen mask', 'puppet', 'pig' (the latter is a disguise for the devil in Russian folklore).5 His gloom follows him everywhere, polluting the natural and human world about him, as he becomes a figurative representation of universal alienation.

The weather was bleak again. Gusts of wind blew along the streets raising whirlwinds of dust.... a mournful light that did not seem to come from the sun sifted through the cloudy mist. A depressing silence hung over the streets.... Among these torpid streets and houses, on an earth alienated from the heavens, an unclean and impotent earth, walked Peredonov, wearied by vague fears.... As always he looked at the world with dead eyes, like a demon, tormented in his dreary solitude by terror and anguish. (140–1)