Chapter 3

The Other Within Us

Homosexual Panic and the Post-Soviet Detektiv

Once sexuality may be read and interpreted in light of homosexuality, all sexuality is subject to a hermeneutics of suspicion.

—Mark Edelman

Beginning in 1988 at the height of glasnost, the prison memoirs of Lev Samuilovich Klein, an academic imprisoned under article 121 of the Soviet Criminal Code outlawing homosexual activity, were published in the journal Neva. While neither confessing nor denying a homosexual orientation, Klein, using the pseudonym Lev Samoilov, suggested that, as in the case of the philologist Konstantin Azamovskii, there was a political motivation behind his incarceration: “The authorities were always bothered by how I did [my professional work]—too independently, that is, on my own, as I see it, with a pull toward innovation.” Moreover, none of the twenty-seven letters from readers that were published in the 1993 book version questioned Klein’s sexuality or made any mention of homosexuals, focusing instead on the vagaries and violence of a thoroughly politicized criminal justice system. All this would appear to support Kevin Moss’s claim that “in East European culture of the Soviet period the major axis of definition that structures thought is not sexual, but political: dissident/pro-Soviet.” Unlike in the West, where sexual orientation has long been seen as a key to unlocking the secrets of an individual’s behavior and psyche, in the USSR “the kinds of knowledge that it is felt needful to cover in secrecy,” to quote D. A. Miller, were not, Moss argues, primarily sexual. There was not, therefore, the same degree of suspicion surrounding an individual’s “sexual” identity, nor the same imperative to dissimulate, which explains why some Russian homosexuals today
express a certain nostalgia for a time when homosexuality, though criminalized, was largely invisible.

This would all change with the fall of the Soviet regime, and in 1999, six years after the repeal of article 121, Klein was “outed” by the journalist Viktor Toporov in his autobiography, False Bottom: Confessions of a Provocateur [Dvoinoe dno. Priznaniia skandalista]. Klein, Toporov insisted, was not imprisoned for political reasons: he was a homosexual disguising himself as a political liberal. The political closet, it seemed, had been dismantled and a sexual closet erected in its place. When Klein published his monumental study of homosexuality, The Other Love [Drugaia liub’], in 2000, he included in the introduction a very public plea for privacy regarding “the issue of my sexual predilections, [which] even from the point of view of the Soviet authorities, is my own profoundly personal affair. Intimate. . . .”

The visibility of homosexuality as a topic in post-Soviet media, literature, and film, coupled with the continued reticence of Russian homosexuals to “come out,” has constructed homosexuality as one of the great open secrets of post-Soviet society. The open secret, as Alan Sinfeld writes, “keeps a topic like homosexuality in the private sphere, but under surveillance, allowing it to hover on the edge of public visibility.” Like the dissident in Soviet culture who expresses himself in Aesopian language, the homosexuality in post-Soviet culture is only partially concealed and always vulnerable to exposure. The dubious ontological status of homosexuality is reflected in, among other things, the use of double entendre and euphemism. Consider, for example, the use of the Russian word goluboi, which can denote either the color light blue or homosexual—or both—in the titles of works that feature gay characters and themes, such as the novels Goluboe salo (1999) by Vladimir Sorokin, Golubaia krov’ (1999) by Marusia Klimova, Golubye shineli (1994) by Natalia Brande, and Pesn’ golubogo marlina (2001) by Andrei Buklin; the short story “Goluchik” (2001) by Liudmila Ulitskaia; and the song “Golubaia luna” by Boris Moiseev.

Enabled by what Eliot Borenstein describes as a “shared belief in the capacity of sex to signify, a belief that sex can speak of more than just itself,” the post-Soviet sexual closet differs in a number of fundamental ways from the “political closet” of the Soviet era. Most obviously, perhaps, is that while political ideas are for the most part a product of the intellect and as such consciously chosen, sexual orientation is in general no longer regarded as a matter of choice. And so, particularly under conditions of homophobia, it may be repressed or sublimated by the desiring subject, making the homosexual not only