

THINKING OF FALLING IN LOVE WITH NENETS STORIES: QUESTIONS OF READERLY RECIPROCITY IN LEDKOV'S "SINEVA V ARKANE"

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Russia was one of the world's longest surviving empires when it granted independence to the fourteen satellite Soviet republics in 1991. Modern Russia is still a country of considerable ethnic diversity, and its constitution declares it to be a multinational state. While the conflicts in its Southern belt have since been in the spotlight of the media, the situation of the peoples of its Arctic regions have attracted considerably less attention. Not long after their outset in the eighteenth century, wars in the Caucasus became the subject of numerous news bulletins and were addressed by writers of fiction ranging from enthusiastic colonialists, such as Bestuzhev-Marlinsky, to peace-seekers, such as Leo Tolstoy (Layton 1994). The colonisation of the North, by contrast, began much earlier than this, arguably with the re-establishment of the city-state of Novgorod in 1136. It may well have been because of these early beginnings, which took place long before the spread of the printing press, that so firmly established a popular narrative about colonization and its resistance was never to appear in the North as it was subsequently in the South.

The Soviet époque, in turn, bore witness to a flourishing of narratives about the North, pregnant with the ethos of its revolutionary 're-discovery' or, rather, re-claiming of its natural resources. Many of these narratives are contained in McCannon's *Red Arctic* (1998), which is preoccupied above all with the essays and books written by the Russian explorers, settlers and journalists. As Slezkine (1994) highlighted in an earlier publication, the Soviet authorities also took special pride in having brought literacy to the nomad peoples of the North. That these peoples in turn began to produce, for the first time, their very own writers of fiction was promoted as one of the civilizing benefits of the Soviet rule. This article addresses one example of a work of literature written by the Nenets—the population of the northernmost regions West and East of the Ural mountains—during that period. The process by which a 'reading', or a successful or unsuccessful 'decoding', is produced in a cross-cultural Russian-

Nenets encounter seems to play a significant role in a novella by Vaslilij Ledkov, "Sineva v arkane". The discrepancy between the response desired by the narrator and the actual responses of a 'reader' – a discrepancy which is not entirely bridged at the end of the narrative – is the main focus of this article.

The reader is examined here as she or he emerges from the text ("the implied reader" in literary studies). Is it possible to deduce from a text itself the response it is seeking either to achieve or prevent? What audience might it be addressing? Does literature have any effect at all that is not overridden by the values of each new readership? With the aid of the kind of literary scholarship preoccupied with readerly responses and, in particular, of Wolfgang Iser's *Act of Reading* (1978), I will assume the possibility of answering these questions positively. The reading of "Sineva v arkane" I propose is a historicising one—the text is examined as a part of the history of Nenets literature and Soviet literature, as well as of the history of the Russian and Soviet empires. Iser's approach is of interest to this project as it places an equal emphasis on an attentive reading of a literary text as well as on its historical background. At the same time, it opens up spaces in the text that encourage or even provoke new readers to creative participation.

A literary text interacts with its historical context, but it is not reducible to what we already know about the past according to Iser. It is always a supplement and as such itself requires a careful reading. Nor would a text engage one's interest if it entirely confirmed one's present values. Iser's notion is that a literary text does something to its readers, affects them, primarily by making them assume a diversity of perspectives other than their own. The main perspectives are those of the narrator, the characters, the plot and the reader, if this reader is addressed in the text. The point at which they would converge outside the text, their totality, is precisely the position of the implied reader according to Iser (1980: 36). The text, then, engages its reader in two types of activity. One is a passive synthesis of the textual elements, when connections between the perspectives are easily made. This process may be helped along by a knowledge of the context or literary conventions. Another is of a more creative nature. When a 'blank' in the information cannot easily be filled in, it poses a problem, and requires a problematising venture into the text, context, literary conventions and the values of the actual reader. As in modernist

literature, 'blanks' can also have a power of negation and refuse to be filled in.

In comparison with Barthes' method in *S/Z* (1974), which uses connotation to transport contemporary issues into the text at every stage of reading, Iser's method does not entirely obliterate denotation—first, inside the text and, then, between the text and its historical context. Iser's method is therefore more suitable for our attempt at a historicising reading. It can be argued that my own acquaintance with the context (the concepts of history and literature in general, the histories of Soviet literature and of the Russian and Soviet empires, all interconnected but not overlapping), comes prior to my first encounter with the text. To enable my reader—who might be undertaking her or his very first venture in time behind the Iron curtain—to encounter the perspective of the narrator of this article, I have explicated, and in the next section will continue to explicate, some preliminary contexts. I expect the novella in question to relate to these contexts, but not to overlap with them. It is not least for this reason that I expect to encounter 'blanks' on my way to a converging of the four main perspectives in the novella, at which point my own investment will become obvious.

Preliminary Contexts

The novella "Sineva v arkane" is included in the most comprehensive volume of Ledkov's prose writings, *Meteli ločatsja u nog*, published in 1982.¹ Only one of the five novellas in it is marked as an "authorised translation from Nenets". "Sineva v arkane" belongs to the four written in Russian. It shares a first person narrator, called "Vasilij Ledkov", with the novella "Rozovoe utro", which is devoted to the same narrator's childhood. The other novellas are all written in the third person.

Even though the volume appeared in the last decade of the Soviet Union's existence, most of its content conforms with earlier stylistic conventions. The 'socialist realism' of the Soviet epoqe is sometimes confused with 'social realism' by readers who have no special interest in the literatures of the countries which comprised the former Eastern Block. The constraints placed upon writers by the Soviet authorities,

¹ I would like to thank Hans Ove Tverfjell for sharing with me his collection of Nenets literature.

however, resulted in a marked difference from social realism, which in the course of its existence from the second half of the 19th century amassed a variety of plots. The defining feature of socialist realism was a compulsory reproduction of the same plot—the disciplining of the protagonist through the gaining of an insight into the progressive course of history—with a small degree of variation (Clark 1981). Two of the novellas in the volume employ this pattern to represent the life of the Nenets during the Soviet period: a Nenets woman decides to join a collective farm, and a girl is sent off by her Russian schoolteachers to get a higher education against the desire of her parents. The third novella is an epic stylisation, a variety in which the epic heroes of the past were depicted as the forerunners of the revolutionary heroes (see Kolarz 1967 on the minority epics in Soviet culture). In comparison, the two novellas that contain the narration in the first person strike the reader with their loftier, more associative style, recognisable already in the first, incomplete and truncated sentence of "Sineva v arkane": "... And they set off" (1982: 307)².

The stylistic pattern of the novella conforms with a specific deviation from the socialist realist prose that was permissible in particular in the writings for, or about, young adults and adolescents. Its loftiness recalls the 'romanticism' of early Soviet literature and was conventionalised as a display of the youthful enthusiasm about revolutionary change. In the post-Stalinist late fifties and sixties, romanticism enjoyed a revitalisation and encompassed a wider range of topics in order to accommodate some of the concerns of the new generation within the official culture. This stylistic pattern could be applied to treat unhappy love plots and to represent the protagonist's very first confrontation with the breach between imperfect 'reality' and the ideal (or utopian) world yet to be built. There often was another girl or boy out there to bring the hero or the heroine the fusion between the private and the public expected of this literature. An increase in the number of texts in which such fusion became unattainable was to become the first sign of a weakening of the ideological function of Soviet literature.

² All of the quotations from the novella appear in my translation.

The Perspective of the Plot

The plot of "Sineva v arkane" promises to conform with convention and tell of a romantic relationship, in this instance between a Nenets guide and a young, blue-eyed, female Russian folklorist, Lida. The love interest of "Vasilij Ledkov" the guide is indicated from the very beginning of the text, and the implied reader would therefore be directed by an interest in its resolution. The second defining element of the plot is Lida's travels and encounters with the Nenets surrounding, which is new to her. It can be seen as a variety of an education plot, as the implied reader would be interested in her ability to learn to decode, or 'read', what she sees. Remarkably, this is the word Vasilij uses about the ancestors of the Nenets: "They read the tundra... Knew it well, understood it." (1982: 313).

The course of Lida's travels encompasses her first journey in a reindeer sledge (chapt. 1), her first visit to a tepee—of Vasilij's Nenets friend Ivan (chapt. 2-3), her travels around to record Nenets tales (chapt. 4), visits to a sacred Nenets mountain (chapt. 5), encounters with illegal Russian fur traders (chapt. 6) and Russian oil-miners (chapt. 8) and finally her departure (chapt. 9).

The narrative is told from the point of view of Vasilij and it contains a number of 'narratives within a narrative'. These form the third defining element of the plot. He applies his eloquence both to help Lida with the process of decoding and to win over the Russian girl. "I'll still catch your eyes in a lasso as the horizon does the tundra" (1982: 337), he thinks when she questions the contents of one of his tales. (This episode also sheds light on the title of the novella which translates as "Blue in a lasso".)

A list of subnarratives within the novella would contain: an explanation for Vasilij's russianised family-name (chapt. 1); the story of the introduction of the aeroplanes and motorised vehicles into the Arctic (chapt. 2); the story of a tabu on female visitors to Nenets sacred places, which Vasilij and Lida successfully break (chapt. 5); and the story of the unfulfilled promises of shamanism (chapt. 7). Other narratives are told when Lida is absent and address the extradiegetic reader directly. The narrator shares his memories of the first time he became aware that he lives in Russia, of his learning Russian and, finally, of being helped on his journey to a big city, Leningrad, by another Russian called Lida (chapt. 4). Additionally, the

recitation of an epic performed by Vassilij's friend specifically for Lida's collection, acts as a narrative within the narrative of the novella (chapt. 3).

These narratives have a guiding function, yet at the same time they interrupt the course of events and postpone the awaited resolution of the plot—will Lida learn to 'read' the Nenets life and reciprocate Vasilij's feelings? How would, then, Iser's other perspectives combine with the perspective of the plot and affect its resolution?

The Perspective of the Narrator

- [...] Are you afraid?

- No. But... it's dark in the tepee! I don't understand anything...

I had a clear memory of my own helplessness when, from the world of snow and silence, I had as if flown over the centuries in one jump and had been drowned in the noise of the most modern of the cities. (1982: 318)

One of the striking traits of the narrator's perspective is the recognition of his own experiences outside the tundra in Lida's often "clumsy" (1982: 347) attempts to fit into the Nenets lifestyle. Parallels between the Nenets narrator, or the first person subject of the narrative, and the Russian object of his observation and desire, Lida, run throughout the narrative. The narrator's perspective is thus sympathetic, as opposed to, for example, satirical or ironic.

The parallels are established, sometimes (as in the quotation above) in the form of the narrator's immediate flashbacks; sometimes they are conjoined by theme rather than temporally—by the Nenets eating of raw meat, for example. Lida is clearly agitated over the preparations made by her Nenets hosts for a meal of raw reindeer meat, but acts as if unaffected. She even accepts a piece, but later spits it out. Her silence upon then having some grilled meat is noted by the narrator (1982: 322). In another episode Vasilij remembers his very first trip to Russia. On a train station he kept hearing the words "Eskimo" and "frozens" (the Russian word for "ice-cream"). Having misunderstood the significance of the episode, Vasilij was offended at being called an "Eskimo", and reminds himself that it is not "appropriate" to eat frozen fish or meat in a city (1982: 331).

There is an entertaining, comical aspect to the descriptions of both the Russian and the Nenets acquiring a code to their new surroundings which compensates for the awkwardness of the situations. The text may thus appeal both to the Russian and to the Nenets and encourage both identities to participate in the constitution of its composite implied reader, giving both groups an introduction to what might be called a "cross-cultural encounter" and encouraging them to experience a sympathetic mutual recognition. The perspective of the narrator promotes this view by establishing a net (or lasso) of metaphorical correspondences between the situations.

The Perspective of the Reader

Lida... I did not know that I was born in Russia. For a long time I did not know that Russia exists. I looked upon this almost always pale land with a child's naive eyes and did not think that there exist people other than us—father, mother, grandmother and me—somewhere else. (1982: 328)

The quotation above stems from chapter 4, in which the narrator is alone, lost in thought. Even though Lida occasionally enters his mind, we must conclude that the extradiegetic reader is the main addressee of this chapter. The intimacy of this address is evident from the way in which the narrator makes his mind accessible to being read. On the level of content, a line of parallels is established between Lida the folklorist and Russia as a whole, another Lida who was Vasilij's helpful guide on his journey to Leningrad and his teacher of Russian:

Father wanted his son to become a hunter, as himself. He taught me to herd the reindeer. But I did not follow in my father's footsteps. In a little, crowded classroom at the edge of the world a blue-eyed Russian woman, sometimes strict, sometimes kind, opened up thousands of new roads for me. (1982: 330)

The quotation above is representative of the metaphoric-metonymical makeup of this chapter. If the traditional Nenets lifestyle is associated with the figure of a father, Russia emerges in a female, motherly form. The narrator uses phrases like "its warmth and care" and a "second birth" (1982: 329) to characterise his own discovery of Russia. The metaphor of rebirth helps it to become a part of the family picture.

Some of the previous narratives in the text also allow themselves to be incorporated into the metaphorical axis of the Nenets-Russian family relationship, established here. Thus, the very first tale Vasilij tells Lida to explain his own russianised surname, is the story of a Nenets clan in which the occurrence of deformed children is recurrent. An elder suggests that they put an end to intermarriage: "Best of all, if the wife is of a different tribe and language" (1982: 310). Vasilij's surname in Nenets denotes the place of their resettlement, and after the arrival of the Russians it has been altered to fit the Russian language. An appearance in "the family" of a Russian motherly woman, and, with her, of the Russian language, is thus already predetermined by the tradition: "In the guise of a blue-eyed woman, it [Russia] patiently taught me near the blackboard to put together melodious words" (1982: 329).

Another parallel is established to Vasilij's tale of his first flight on an aeroplane in chapter 2. The boy had been dreaming of becoming "a good hunter and reindeer herd" (1982: 314). As a model pupil he was compelled to get a higher education in Leningrad by the authorities:

He gave father a paper with a round seal to sign, and I was taken to the village.

Father sat on the ground and cried. I cried too. [...] It sometimes seems to me that he is sitting there still. (1982: 315)

A sense of trauma penetrates this story, but it is compensated for by the "thousands of new roads" (1982: 330) in its re-telling in chapter 4. Yet another gain to compensate for loss is that, at present, the aeroplanes, helicopters and other things "unusual have become usual" (1982: 313) and indispensable in the tundra. The father is being left behind not only by his son, but also by the technological progress. A first encounter may thus be a misreading, and what may at first appear to be a trauma might later lead to the acquisition of knowledge. The Russian teacher, both strict and kind, embodies this idea of gain through loss.

Keeping in mind the meditative nature of this chapter, in which nothing actually happens (the narrator is lost in thought), its function seems to be purely to entwine the previous information onto the metaphorical axes that I have discussed. It represents a movement from the particular to the generalised. Random episodes, retold,

become characteristic of the Nenets relationship to Russia, Lida becomes Russia and thus bears witness to a desire of the narrator to establish a general context for the extradiegetic reader. The perspective of the reader is overdetermined by the text, as the narrator himself tries to establish a point at which all textual perspectives meet; to pre-empt the readerly questioning and, thus, active participation. The text is either restating the conditions of their mutual relationship for the Russian and Nenets readers, or educating new readers into it. It is asserting the possibility of being Nenets yet Russian. What does it say about being Russian yet Nenets?

The Perspective of the Characters

- [...] But I cannot imagine tundra today without aeroplanes and cars.

Lida is smiling strangely. She is silent.

[...]

Lida's indifference is surprising, touching a raw nerve in me. (1982: 313-314)

The perspective of Lida will be my main focus here, as the narrator leaves mere episodic roles to the other characters. With the eye of a lover, Vasilij carefully notes Lida's verbal and non-verbal responses. In comparison with his own lengthy narratives within the main narrative, Lida's words are relatively sparse. Unlike Vasilij's, the reader has no access to her internal world, her thoughts in response to her experiences in her new surroundings.

Several of her responses are therefore non-verbal ones. One of the first such reactions is her laughter when Vasilij tells her he is thinking of her on their way from the airport to the tundra. As the quotation above (from chapt. 2) indicates, she is only moderately interested in the introduction of the aeroplanes to the Nenets, while Vasilij is agitated and reminded of the trauma of his first journey to Leningrad. She is also silent after a meal of raw and then grilled meat (chapt. 3). The truncated "and ... said nothing" (1980: 229) yet again gives an impression of an expectation that she does not deliver. She looks "startled" when their host Ivan addresses the question "habene?" ("Russian woman?") (1982: 317) to Vasilij upon her arrival, thus asserting her difference.

Having told him that a two-part film based on Shakespeare's "Richard III" is showing in Leningrad cinemas, Lida in turn calls Vasilij "strange" when he responds with "difficult"³ (1982: 321). Vasilij's pursuit is thus not made easy. Either the lack or the sparsity of Lida's responses constitute those very "blanks" that keep up the interest of the reader in the love plot, leaving its resolution open. A certain melancholic undercurrent in the novella—if Lida's perspective is a facet of the implied reader—is also an anxiety of the readerly non-reciprocation despite all overdetermination.

On other occasions, Lida is able to produce the right response. She wants to be "a hostess of a tepee" (1980: 321) and participates in the making of a meal. She mostly observes "the norms of the tundra etiquette" (1980: 334) required of women, though Vasilij takes her to a sacred Nenets place against these rules. Being able to recognise the difference between modern and ancient Nenets epics—in translation—she nevertheless displays neither knowledge nor interest in their religion when taken there. The turning point comes after her confrontation with the Russian private, or "illegal" in Soviet terms, fur traders, who mock Vasilij's friend Ivan. Lida asks whether they already have a fur hat of the kind used by the Soviet officials, since the "hat of Monomakh"—one of the symbols of the Russian empire—is "not for everyone" (1982: 339). Having remained silent for a while, she tells Vasilij that the cold tundra is "made warm by its people" (1982: 341). Vasilij notes the focus of her eyes entirely upon himself for the first time.

In contrast with her previous short questions and sparse responses, Lida's speech now becomes more extensive:

- [...] I think I have fallen in love with this land after all. I'll get to the museum of the Arctic and see everything in a new light. And will tell everything to my friends.
I walked by her side, disturbed by the words about the museum.
(1982: 350)

³ The reference to this film from 1954 dates the events of the novella back to the time of the post-Stalinist liberalisation, also the prime time of popularity of the stylistic pattern of the novella.

She subsequently confesses to Vasilij that at first she was afraid of sleeping near him. She then asks him to write: "May be... I'll come back". (1982: 351)

The 'blanks' the text has opened for its implied reader are now close to being bridged. The plot with its elements of love and education is not given a negative resolution through its characters. The characterisation by the narrator of the relationship between the Russians and the Nenets as a family relationship is almost confirmed for the implied reader in a plot that suggests the formation of a new couple. Upon making all of these connections, the implied reader still encounters a slight remaining gap within the voice of the narrator, despite the political correctness of the relationship of his text to modernity and technology. He is anxious that the only thinkable place for the Nenets in Russia is a museum.

A Recontextualisation

The key rhetorical strategy of the text, as in much Soviet print material, seems to be the dialectical principle that easily reverses (gain through loss) or blurs potential antitheses (the Russian-Nenets family). There was, however, one major antithesis that disallowed relativisation, the opposition between the past and the future, guaranteed by the Marxian progressive course of history. As long as one of the members of an opposition could be rhetorically attached to a notion of future progress, the narrator's home could be exchanged for a big city, his choice of occupation for compulsory studies. According to this logic, the Soviet state also bore no resemblance to the Russian empire, since, within the Soviet state, every possible loss suffered by the Nenets was compensated for by a future gain. We could stop here and say that the text overlaps entirely with its historical context, a strategy encouraged by the metaphorical correspondences in the narrator's thoughts addressed to the extradiegetic reader. According to Iser, though, it would raise little real interest in this reader.

Still, in the figure of Lida the text assumes the possibility of a reader who knows little about the context of the relationship between the Nenets and the Russian. This constitutes one of the paradoxes of the text, if it should be seen as just a restatement of a context that is already known. Vasilij is much more of a Russian in the context of the hybrid Nenets-Russian family relationship than Lida is, or becomes, of

a Nenets. Lida falls in love with the Nenets during the course of the narrative, but the only plausible place for them in Russia which this particular reader can think of is a museum.

Even though this text certainly relates to socialist realism in the way it makes a private love story embody the Nenets-Russian relationship in the Soviet state, it does not entirely overlap with the conventions of a standard socialist realist plot. Lida is indeed being educated, but an insight into the progressive course of history is for her not easily attainable. The Nenets are not easily located along the line of history and are therefore relegated to a museum. Slezkine (1994) has viewed examples of Soviet literature written by the writers from Northern peoples in the light of the early Russian communists' interpretation of these peoples' pre-feudal way of life as a primitive communism. This allows for a line of history to be drawn, but little reminds us of the same outlook on the Nenets in the novella. Rather, the life of the Nenets as 'read' by a Russian visitor lacks a proper place in history, it is a 'blank' in it, which disturbs the first-person narrator.

Another instance of an asymmetrical relationship inside the Russian-Nenets family is that, having been written in Russian, the novella excludes or 'blanks out' all Nenets readers with no knowledge of (written) Russian. The price of education, or the possibility of being written into literature—if not history—is the loss of language.

If there is no place for the Nenets in the linear model of history, their literature opens itself up to several possible futures. Firstly, it can choose another cultural context for reproduction (different from the Soviet literature) and make it entirely reducible to a different cultural norm. Another possibility is a Nenets literature that is able actively to engage its reader in the process of reading and that allows for a less passive synthesis, for numerous 'blanks' that pose its readers with the problem of participation. It should most certainly appear in Nenets, but this will 'blank out' Nenets readers who have lost their language. I will therefore not exclude the possibility of a literature written by the Nenets still appearing in Russian, as long as the effect of the education in Russian persists. For this literature to attract an audience other than the Russian-speaking Nenets, a Russian audience, could be a challenge, as such an audience, like Lida, may know little of the Nenets and be relatively disinterested. It, too, could either reproduce

earlier patterns or choose not to tell this reader what she or he already knows, but, by means of 'blanks', provoke her or him into participation.

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