

## ‘Lappin and Lapinova’: Woolf’s Beleaguered Russian Monarchs

‘Lappin and Lapinova’ is outwardly a modest piece, one of Woolf’s least extended short stories, running to fewer than 4,000 words. The story it tells, of a quintessentially upper-middle-class London couple who anticipate in a number of ways Clarissa and Richard Dalloway in *Mrs Dalloway* of 1925,<sup>1</sup> has most often been interpreted in terms of the troubled relationship between the sexes in a conventional British marriage from this period and in Woolf’s own social class. With the exception of Meredith Wattison’s highly perceptive and imaginative recent article,<sup>2</sup> most critics make little if anything of the fact that a Russian name ‘Lapinova’ is given to the heroine. It will be argued in this chapter that the choice of a Russian frame of reference is very far from accidental or inconsequential. Indeed the tale provides an opportunity to consider and compare the early and later stages of Woolf’s engagement with Russian literature and Russian culture more generally.

The history of the tale’s production in the form in which it was eventually published covers some twenty years. The tale is an example of what Leonard Woolf describes as Woolf’s customary method, when it came to the composition of short fiction:

- 1 Indeed Clarissa, if not Richard Dalloway, had already made an appearance in Woolf’s first published novel, *The Voyage Out* of 1915.
- 2 Meredith Wattison, ‘This Furred Place – the Woolfs anthropomorphism, bunnies in people suits and the zoomorphic other’, *Plumwood Mountain* 2.1 (2015). <<https://plumwoodmountain.com/articles-and-essays/>> [accessed 8 September 2016].

All through her life, Virginia Woolf used at intervals to write short stories. It was her custom, whenever an idea for one occurred to her, to sketch it out in a very rough form and then put it away in a drawer. Later, if an editor asked her for a short story, and she felt in the mood to write one (which was not frequent), she would take a sketch out of her drawer and rewrite it, sometimes many times. Or if she felt, as she often did, while writing a novel that she required to rest her mind by working at something else for a time, she would either write a critical essay or work upon one of her sketches for short stories.<sup>3</sup>

Although this tale may very likely be the earliest example of a character with a Russian name in Woolf's fiction, even when Woolf first drafted the tale she had in fact been engaging intensively with Russian literature as a reader for some six or seven years. Indeed, it could be argued that her engagement with the idea of Russia went still further back, to her adolescence, before the death of her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, in 1904:

It was the Elizabethan prose writers I loved first & most wildly, stirred by Hakluyt, which father lugged home for me ... He must have been 65; I 15 or 16, then ... I became enraptured ... the sight of the large yellow page entranced me. I used to read it & dream of those obscure adventurers & no doubt practised their style in my copy books.<sup>4</sup>

And the interest in Hakluyt, and his accounts of Richard Chancellor, the sixteenth-century English adventurer who visited the court of Ivan the Terrible, was still there when she reached twenty.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, during the 1920s Woolf was to review an edition of Hakluyt which appeared in the period.

Woolf's sustained exposure to Russian literature seems to have begun in 1910 with Tolstoy, then proceeded two years later to take in Dostoevsky. 'Lappin and Lapinova', whose first draft is from six years later, is most commonly seen as inspired in some measure by Woolf's own marriage to Leonard, but even here a Russian component is also involved. For the tale

3 Leonard Woolf, Foreword to Virginia Woolf, *A Haunted House and Other Stories* (New York: Harcourt Inc., 1944), pp. v–vi (p. v).

4 Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, III, p. 271 (8 December 1929), quoted in Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage Books, 1997), p. 142.

5 Woolf, *The Diary*, II, p. 310 (15 August 1924), quoted in Lee, p. 142.

'Lappin and Lapinova' opens with the young newly married couple, Ernest and Rosalind Thorburn, after their London wedding, five days into a honeymoon spent at what sounds like (but is not spelled out as such) the Swiss lakes. If Woolf in this tale is recalling her own honeymoon in 1912, that included an important Russian element, for her reading during her travels with Leonard (to Spain and Italy rather than what seems to be Switzerland in the tale) was dominated by her first experience of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, a love story of a certain kind, it might be said, if not normally regarded as a romantic novel. In Woolf's 'Lappin and Lapinova' the bride: 'sat in the bow window of the hotel looking over the lake to the mountains, and waited for her husband to come down to breakfast'.<sup>6</sup>

Rosalind is still adjusting to her acquisition on marriage of her husband's name as 'Mrs Ernest Thorburn'.<sup>7</sup> 'Perhaps she would never get used to the fact that that she was Mrs Ernest Anybody, she thought'<sup>8</sup> the bride reflects on her dissatisfaction with her husband's forename: 'Ernest was a difficult name to get used to. It was not the name she would have chosen. She would have preferred Timothy, Antony, or Peter. He did not look like Ernest either.'<sup>9</sup> And, prompted by the sight of her husband eating, and perhaps by French (the lingua franca of a Swiss hotel?), Rosalind, the wife, comes up with a soubriquet for him:

But here he was. Thank goodness he did not look like Ernest – no. But what did he look like? She glanced at him sideways. Well, when he was eating toast he looked like a rabbit. Not that anyone else would have seen a likeness to a creature so timid

6 Virginia Woolf, *A Haunted House and Other Stories* (New York: Harcourt Inc., 1944), p. 68.

7 Wattison points out that a pictorial volume by an artist called Archibald Thorburn, and including a prominent illustration of a white female hare, was published three years after the first drafting of 'Lappin and Lapinova' in 1921. Wattison mentions that the volume observes that 'the Hare and Rabbit have never been known to interbreed'. There is no record of Woolf having actually possessed or read any of Thorburn's work, but he was already a widely published author in 1918, having exhibited work since the 1880s.

8 Woolf, *Haunted House*, p. 68.

9 Ibid. p. 68.

and diminutive in this spruce, muscular young man with the straight nose, the blue eyes, and the very firm mouth.<sup>10</sup>

The young wife's mind makes a number of imaginative leaps:

His nose twitched very slightly when he ate. So did her pet rabbit's. She kept watching his nose twitch; and when she had to explain, when he caught her looking at, why she laughed.

'It's because you're like a rabbit, Ernest', she said. 'Like a wild rabbit', she added, looking at him. 'A hunting rabbit; a King Rabbit; a rabbit that makes laws for all the other rabbits.'<sup>11</sup>

Initially the husband plays along with the fantasy of being 'that kind of rabbit',<sup>12</sup> though he has not noticed any such characteristic hitherto:

since it amused her to see him twitch his nose – he had never known that his nose twitched – he twitched it on purpose. And she laughed and laughed; and he laughed too, so that the maiden ladies and the fishing man and the waiter in his greasy black jacket all guessed right; they were happy.<sup>13</sup>

When they are taking a picnic, 'seated on a clump of heather beside the lake', the wife develops the fantasy:

'Lettuce, rabbit?' said Rosalind, holding out the lettuce that had been provided to eat with the hard-boiled eggs. 'Come and take it out of my hand', she added, and he stretched out and nibbled the lettuce and twitched his nose.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps most readers, and just briefly the heroine herself, whose consciousness is at the heart of the tale, perceive Ernest as a domesticated rabbit. However the heroine then makes another sudden imaginative leap:

10 Ibid. pp. 68–9.

11 Ibid. p. 69.

12 Ibid. p. 69.

13 Ibid. p. 69.

14 Ibid. p. 69.

'Good rabbit, nice rabbit,' she said, patting him, as she used to pat her tame rabbit at home. But that was absurd. He was not a tame rabbit, whatever he was. She turned it into French. 'Lappin,' she called him. But whatever he was, he was not a French rabbit.<sup>15</sup>

And this leads to a further train of thought:

He was simply and solely English-born at Porchester Terrace, educated at Rugby; now a clerk in His Majesty's Civil Service. So she tried 'Bunny' next; but that was worse. 'Bunny' was someone plump and soft and comic; he was thin and hard and serious.<sup>16</sup>

Prompted by this sense of hardness and seriousness, Rosalind triumphantly dubs him: "'Lappin, Lappin, King Lappin,'" she repeated. It seemed to suit him exactly; he was not Ernest, he was King Lappin. Why? She did not know.<sup>17</sup> Woolf at this point allows the wife, Rosalind's fantasy to expand from the individual to the collective: 'When there was nothing new to talk about on their long solitary walks ... she let her fancy play with the story of the Lappin tribe.'<sup>18</sup>

The animal identities for the couple are developed further when Ernest reciprocates and enters into the imaginative game: 'Ernest put down the paper and helped her. There were the black rabbits and the red; there were the enemy rabbits and the friendly.'<sup>19</sup> Ernest (Lappin), by now identified by Rosalind as 'a great hunter'<sup>20</sup> also hits upon a cognate identity for his wife:

'And what,' said Rosalind, on the last day of the honeymoon, 'did the King do today?' In fact they had been climbing all day; and she had worn a blister on her heel; but she did not mean that.

'Today,' said Ernest, twitching his nose as he bit the end off his cigar, 'he chased a hare'. He paused; struck a match, and twitched again.

'A woman hare,' he added.

'A white hare!' Rosalind exclaimed, as if she had been expecting this. 'Rather a small hare; silver grey with bright eyes?'

15 Ibid. p. 69.

16 Ibid. p. 70.

17 Ibid. p. 70.

18 Ibid. p 70.

19 Ibid. p 70.

20 Ibid. p 70.

'Yes', said Ernest, looking at her as she had looked at him, 'a smallish animal; with eyes popping out of her head and two little front paws dangling'. It was exactly how she sat, with her sewing dangling in her hands; and her eyes, that were so big and bright, were certainly a little prominent.

'Ah, Lapinova,' Rosalind murmured.

'Is that what she's called?' said Ernest – 'the real Rosalind?' He looked at her. He felt very much in love with her.

'Yes; that's what she's called,' said Rosalind. 'Lapinova.' And before they went to bed it was all settled. He was King Lappin; she was Queen Lapinova.<sup>21</sup>

Four pages into the tale the Russian associations become explicit. However, there are many curious anomalies in the nomenclature which Woolf chooses. It might well be argued that giving an animal identity to one's lover is not associated with any particular national culture. Indeed, as if to prove this point, Rebecca West was actively referring to her lover H. G. Wells as 'panther' in their correspondence from much the same period. In real life Leonard Woolf was the marmoset and Virginia the mandrill.<sup>22</sup> However there is also evidence of a specifically Russian dimension to the adoption of animal nicknames within the Bloomsbury group in the years when 'Lappin and Lapinova' was being drafted. David Garnett (who had independently been dubbed 'bunny' ever since infancy) makes the following remarks in his memoirs:

Adrian [Bell] had nicknamed Duncan the Bear and I and some other friends of his called him by the name. Adrian himself was the Corbie and Virginia was the Goat. Vanessa was called the Dolphin because of her undulating walk, but the name was rarely used. Later on I called Duncan [Grant] Misha, which is the Russian peasant name for all bears.<sup>23</sup>

Although both animal rather than human, the alternative identities assumed by the pair in Woolf's story actually call into question their status as a viable, authentic couple. There is a strong sense of mismatch or even misalliance about Lappin and Lapinova, for this is a union not between two

21 Ibid. p 71.

22 Lee, p. 309.

23 David Garnett, *Flowers of the Forest* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1955), p. 130.

fellow rabbits, but between two separate species, a rabbit and a hare.<sup>24</sup> Paradoxically the feminine form which Rosalind chooses is spelled with a single 'p' whereas her husband's name has two, to distinguish it from the French name for rabbit. The choice of 'Lapinova' clearly suggests the Russian language, but if it is intended to indicate 'wife of Lappin' it should surely have two 'p's, and more importantly Rosalind should strictly take the name 'Lapina', making the title, to be strictly logical 'Lappin and Lappina', just as Tolstoy's novel about a couple (where the wife, like Rosalind Thorburn, is marginalised within marriage) is called 'Anna Karenina', not 'Anna Kareninova'. The form 'Lappin and Lapinova' may indicate Woolf's relative ignorance of the Russian language, at this comparatively early date, and therefore argue for the choice of Russian name being exercised when the initial draft was made in 1918, rather than this exotic name being added in 1938.<sup>25</sup> Woolf does make a point about Western readers' virtual ignorance of the Russian language in her essay 'The Russian Point of View', where she first says that an American lately turned Briton, Henry James must nevertheless remain in some key degree culturally alienated from those who have been born and brought up in Britain, for all his near forty years' residence in England. But this, says Woolf, is nothing compared to the degree of alienation non-Russians must experience when reading Tolstoy, or any of the other famous Russian writers – Dostoevsky and Chekhov are the names she gives – and this is on account of their virtually total ignorance of the Russian language. Anglophone enthusiasts of and experts on Tolstoy are always kept at some distance by the language barrier:

- 24 Wattison points out that the hare and the rabbit cannot be successfully cross-bred. This is common knowledge among those who farm livestock, but it is not clear whether Woolf would have been aware of this.
- 25 There are, however, instances where Woolf changed the name of a major character in her fiction only a long way into the drafting process – the names of characters in her first novel *The Voyage Out* were certainly revised, and at the other end of her career, in *The Years* the character of Nicholas was initially Russian before being subsequently made Polish in the published version. The name of Richard for the husband in *Mrs Dalloway* is a case in point, and it cannot be ruled out that the names 'Lappin' and 'Lapinova' might have been added at the later date, when the tale was being revised for *Harper's Magazine*.

Not only have we all this to separate us from Russian literature, but a much more serious barrier – the difference of language. Of all those who feasted upon Tolstoi, Dostoevsky, and Tchekov during the past twenty years, not more than one or two perhaps have been able to read them in Russian. Our estimate of their qualities has been formed by critics who have never read a word of Russian, or seen Russia, or even heard the language spoken by natives; who have had to depend, blindly and implicitly, upon the work of translators.

What we are saying amounts to this, then, that we have judged a whole literature stripped of its style. When you have changed every word in a sentence from Russian to English, have thereby altered the sense a little, the sound, weight, and accent of the words in relation to each other completely, nothing remains except a crude and coarsened version of the sense. Thus treated, the great Russian writers are like men deprived by an earthquake or a railway accident not only of all their clothes, but also of something subtler and more important – their manners, the idiosyncrasies of their characters. What remains is, as the English have proved by the fanaticism of their admiration, something very powerful and very impressive, but it is difficult to feel sure, in view of these mutilations, how far we can trust ourselves not to impute, to distort, to read into them an emphasis which is false.<sup>26</sup>

Woolf's own curious, strictly illogical system of nomenclature which leads to 'Lapinova', if the name was chosen in 1918, appears to bear out her own point concerning the language barrier, and would probably reflect her own relative lack of knowledge of the Russian language at this point. That could have been expected to change, at least to some degree, once Woolf started studying the Russian language with Samuel Koteliensky, the Russian-speaking émigré, who had come to Britain before World War I, fleeing the pogroms in the Ukraine. Woolf had in fact met Koteliensky, together with another of Russian-Jewish extraction, the artist Mark Gertler, in 1918, shortly before the drafting of 'Lappin and Lapinova', but it was only in 1921 that she and Leonard started their extended series of Russian language lessons with Koteliensky.

If this point seems to confirm that Woolf was still essentially a beginner in the Russian language yet in another sense the very choice of the rabbit as the animal emblem for Ernest proves uncannily authentic in a Russian context, and suggests considerably greater familiarity with the Russian

26 Woolf, 'The Russian Point of View', pp. 173–4.

language and Russian culture. For the word 'krolik' ('rabbit') is used by Russian wives as a standard term of endearment for their husbands. And the etymology of the word 'krolik' can be traced back through Polish to Old High German, where 'kunig', is related to 'koenig', the word for 'king'. The word is also related to the Italian 'conegliano', the archaic English 'coney' and the Latin 'cuniculus'. And Woolf's Lappin is not merely a rabbit, a tame, domesticated rabbit, but 'King Lappin', a king rabbit roaming in the wild. Incidentally the Latin word for hare is 'lepus', which is certainly heading in the direction of 'Lapinova'. The 'ova' ending (which misleadingly suggests 'daughter of') tends to imply that the Russian names were given by Woolf to the characters in the story as early as 1918 or 1919, when her knowledge of the Russian language was still embryonic, whereas the very fact of hitting upon 'rabbit' as a term of endearment for a husband seems perhaps to indicate the greater knowledge of Russian she probably did not have in 1918 and which she and Leonard should however have acquired by the late 1930s. That said, by November 1920 Woolf was able to translate Chekhov,<sup>27</sup> so she might certainly be expected to have acquired this degree of knowledge of idiomatic Russian by the 1930s and the revising of 'Lappin and Lapinova'.

The English names chosen by Woolf in this story are themselves also far from innocent or devoid of intertextual significance. Ernest, as Semino has suggested,<sup>28</sup> brings in the question of assumed names, when Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* is recalled, but of greater interest as regards Woolf's output as novelist, though also relating to drama, is the heroine's name. 'Rosalind' brings to mind Shakespeare's comedy *As You Like It*. This play involves two marriages (Celia's with Oliver and Rosalind's with Orlando.) Again, depending on the names given to the characters in the original draft, there is considerable significance as regards the name Rosalind. For this would make 'Lappin and Lapinova' the first instance of an association between Russia and Shakespeare in Woolf's fiction. Woolf

27 Edward Bishop, *A Virginia Woolf Chronology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), p. 59.

28 Elena Semino, 'Blending and characters' mental functioning in Virginia Woolf's Lappin and Lapinova', *Language and Literature* 15 (2006), pp. 55–72 (p. 71).

says of Dostoevsky in ‘The Russian Point of View’ ‘out of Shakespeare there is no more exciting reading’,<sup>29</sup> and later in the 1920s Woolf was to go on to produce a novel named after the hero of *As You Like It*, *Orlando* (1928). This novel involves an encounter between an English and a Russian lover, which ultimately ends in betrayal and separation. Moreover the Shakespeare comedy entails cross-dressing between genders, just as Woolf’s novel’s hero returns from Turkey as a woman. More specifically, the motif of the tree is shared by *As You Like It* and *Orlando*. And, as Guiguet remarks, a woodland setting is common to both Shakespeare’s play and this short story ‘Lappin and Lapinova’:

The protagonists of ‘Lappin and Lapinova’ triumph for a while, thanks to the artifice of a personal and secret world in which they take refuge. Their escapades into the new Forest of Arden into which Rosalind has led her solemn sensible Ernest, where he becomes King Lappin and she, the little silver-grey hare with big protruberant eyes, a little crazy but none the less a Queen, bring them together while separating and protecting them from everyday life – their own and that of others.<sup>30</sup>

In both play and short story the woodland represents an area where fiction can prevail over unimaginative quotidian reality, and where everyday roles are transformed. As her husband Ernest, at least initially, remarks ‘Is that what she’s called – the real Rosalind?’ At this early stage, fresh from honeymoon, not yet backsliding into the imaginative death which it is suggested or implied that marriage is prone to become, the husband is the spouse who refers to the exotic, outlandish Russian Lapinova identity as ‘the real Rosalind’, presumably to distinguish her from the quiet and retiring urban human ensconced in middle-class marriage in London. The admittedly fragile fictional fantasy world shared by the eponymous couple in ‘Lappin and Lapinova’ is also Russian by distinction from the very English world either of Porchester Terrace and Bayswater, or ‘a saddler’s shop in South Kensington, not far from the Tube station.’<sup>31</sup> where the young couple

29 Woolf, ‘The Russian Point of View’, p. 178.

30 Jean Guiguet, *Virginia Woolf and her Works* (London: Hogarth Press, 1965), p. 339.

31 Woolf, *Haunted House*, p. 75.

take up residence after marriage. Yet Woolf (through Lapinova's eyes) subverts Rosalind's in-laws' superficial English respectability:

Rosalind (Lapinova) 'looked at her father-in-law, a furtive little man with dyed moustaches. His foible was collecting things – seals, enamel boxes, trifles from eighteenth-century dressing tables which he hid in the drawers of his study from his wife. Now she saw him as he was – a poacher.'<sup>32</sup>

And Woolf, besides giving animal identities to the newlywed couple also extends the principle to cover the bride's superficially very conventional in-laws, the Thorburns:

And Celia, the unmarried daughter, who always nosed out other people's secrets, the little things they worked to hide – she was a white ferret with pink eyes, and a nose clotted with earth from her horrid underground nosings and pokings. Slung round men's shoulders, in a net, and thrust down a hole – it was a pitiable life – Celia's; it was none of her fault. So she saw Celia.<sup>33</sup>

The Celia in the Woolf short story shares some of the retiring and passive qualities of Duke Frederick's daughter in the Shakespeare comedy, as well as the same name, though she is also given a more sinister dimension thanks to the animal imagery. The rural aspects (bear in mind that the action of Woolf's story takes place in Bayswater and South Kensington) are also nurtured by the characterisation of Ernest's mother (with a bit of gender transposition to add to the sense of disorientation and challenge to convention) as a squire:

And then she looked at her mother-in-law – whom they dubbed The Squire. Flushed, coarse, a bully – she was all that, as she stood returning thanks, but now that Rosalind – that is Lapinova – saw her, she saw behind her the decayed family mansion.<sup>34</sup>

And Lapinova perceives herself as saved from being overwhelmed by her in-laws only by her new husband's twitching nose, and his animal and

32 Ibid. p. 74.

33 Ibid. p. 74.

34 Ibid. p. 74.

regal identity as Lappin: “Oh, King Lappin!” she cried as they went home together in the fog, “if your nose hadn’t twitched just at that moment, I should have been trapped!”<sup>35</sup>

Much depends upon when exactly the heroine in the short story was given her Russian forename, and Ernest described as ‘King Lappin’. The absence of any 1918 manuscript makes it ultimately impossible to say whether these were in the tale from the outset or only added when the tale was revised for publication in *Harper’s Magazine* in the late 1930s. If the earlier date is assumed this would make the short story a reflection of the great wave of Russophilia which inundated British cultural life in the first three decades of the twentieth century. In 1918 Woolf may have been giving a character a Russian name for the first time, but this was by no means the beginning of Woolf’s obsession with Russia and Russian literature. After reading *Crime and Punishment* on her own honeymoon in 1912, Woolf proceeded to read Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* in January 1915 and *The Insulted and the Injured* in October of the same year, while in February 1917 she read and reviewed for the TLS *The Eternal Husband and Other Stories*, followed by *The Gambler* in October 1917. Dostoevsky at this date was rated very favourably by Woolf and his qualities were identified as those which were most sorely missing in canonical Western novelists. Reviewing *The Idiot* in January 1915, Woolf said: ‘Scott merely makes superb ordinary people, & Dostoevsky creates wonders, with very subtle brains, & fearful sufferings,’<sup>36</sup> and Woolf prefaced her enthusiastic description of Dostoevsky’s *The Insulted and the Injured* to Lytton Strachey, on 22 October 1915, by censuring Henry James, an old and close friend of her father’s, and at this date still alive:

I should think I had read 600 books since we met. Please tell me what merit you find in Henry James. I have disabused Leonard of him; but we have his works here, and I read, and can’t find anything but faintly tinged rose water, urbane and sleek, but vulgar, and pale as Walter Lamb. Is there really any sense in it? I admit I can’t be

35 Ibid. p. 75.

36 Woolf, *The Diary*, I, p. 22 (19 January 1915).

bothered to snuff out his meaning when it's very obscure. I am beginning the *Insulted and Injured*; which sweeps me away.<sup>37</sup>

Woolf's immersion in Russian literature was by no means narrowly confined to Dostoevsky. As far back as 1910 she had read Tolstoy in the summer of that year 'in bed at Twickenham', and pronounced the experience 'a revelation', and in February 1917 Woolf reviewed for the TLS Louise and Aylmer Maude's translation of *The Cossacks and Other Tales of the Caucasus*, by Tolstoy, followed in November 1917 by the Slavophile Sergei Aksakov's autobiographical *A Russian Schoolboy*, and in May 1918 Chekhov's collections *The Good Wife and Other Stories* and *The Witch and other Stories*, both translated by Constance Garnett. In October 1918 she reviewed the Silver Age Symbolist Valerii Briusov's *The Republic of the Southern Cross and Other Stories*.

This engagement with Russian literature was complemented by an abiding interest in Russian current affairs. The Shakespeare play *As You Like It* is ultimately a comedy of love, but this comedy takes place in its mysterious woodland setting only because Frederick has organised a political uprising and forced his older brother Duke Senior into exile. It is worth observing that the notion of the hero and heroine as a Russian king and queen in exile may not have been entirely an act of imaginative fantasy on Woolf's part. Since the early years of the twentieth century the Russian Grand Duke Michael Mihailovich, a cousin of Tsar Nicholas II, had been resident in London. In an act worthy of any Shakespeare comedy, he had been banished by the Tsar for contracting a morganatic marriage with a bride who, though descended from Pushkin, no less, was considered of too low aristocratic rank to serve as consort for one so close to the imperial succession as Grand Duke Michael. The couple took up residence at Kenwood in 1909. Their movements were announced in the Court Circular and the couple played a prominent role in fashionable London society, hosting a grand ball at Kenwood in the summer of 1914, just months before the declaration of war. They also performed charitable functions and attended

37 Woolf, letter to Lytton Strachey, 22 October 1915, in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, II, p. 67.

theatrical events, such as the premiere of what became a very successful run of an adaptation of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* at the Ambassadors Theatre, starring the Russian émigrée actress Lydia Javorska, herself married to Prince Baryatinsky until her divorce. That production closed only owing to the outbreak of war in 1914. Thus there were manifold examples of political parallels with the Shakespeare play, with a Russian and regal dimension in the London society in which Woolf and the Bloomsbury group were active. Moreover, by the time Woolf came to write 'Lappin and Lapinova' the Grand Duke had found his circumstances seriously reduced, following the abdication of the tsar who had formerly banished him, and been forced to move out of Kenwood House. Furthermore, 'Lappin and Lapinova' ends with the death of one who has formerly been styled 'Queen Lapinova', and in precisely the same time Woolf would have been aware of the fate of the Russian imperial family at Ekaterinburg, their titles removed by the Bolsheviks prior to the mass execution. The degree to which Woolf and the rest of the Bloomsbury group were following political events in Russia is demonstrated nowhere more clearly than in the founding of the 1917 Club. Woolf's husband Leonard was instrumental in setting this institution up together with the Labour MP and future prime minister Ramsay MacDonald. The 1917 Club was not just an association of like-minded people united by a wish to celebrate the end of absolute monarchy in Russia and the setting up of a provisional government which was supposed to blossom as a Western-style democracy, but was a real social club with permanent premises in Gerrard Street (in the part of Soho which is today London's Chinatown).<sup>38</sup> Virginia Woolf found the club very much to her liking and called in frequently, while other members included E. M. Forster, Middleton Murry, and H. G. Wells. Some of the membership were communists and Bolshevik-supporters, but the club was set up to support the idea of democratic socialism, although ironically by the time it opened its doors towards the end of 1917 Kerensky was already being outflanked and forced into exile by the Bolsheviks under Lenin and Trotsky.

38 Interestingly, the eighteenth-century prostitute's lodgings in *Orlando* are also located in Gerrard Street (Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 1995), p. 106).

The drafting of Woolf's first novel *The Voyage Out*, eventually published in 1915, began as early as the first months of 1908, and in the novel Russia crops up periodically in the speculative conversation of the well-to-do English with whom its plot is concerned. In Chapter XV Russians are singled out together with the Chinese, as the true hope for the survival of the human race. The idea that out-and-out Orientals (the Chinese) are to be bracketed along with the liminal, questionable fellow Europeans (the Russians), as the true hope for the future of the human race, is striking indeed, albeit also satirised here:

'And the future?' she reflected, vaguely envisaging a race of men becoming more and more like Hirst, and a race of women becoming more and more like Rachel. 'Oh no', she concluded, glancing at him, 'one wouldn't marry you. Well, then, the future of the race is in the hands of Susan and Arthur; no – that's dreadful. Of farm labourers; no – not of the English at all, but of Russians and Chinese.' This train of thought did not satisfy her, and was interrupted by St. John, who began again: 'I wish you knew Bennett. He's the greatest man in the world.'<sup>39</sup>

Later in the novel a subsidiary character, the gauche and outspoken Evelyn Murgatroyd, voices views which reflect the atmosphere surrounding the failed uprising against the Tsarist government in 1905, prompted by Russia's ignominious defeat at the hands of the Japanese the previous year:

'The bother is', she went on, 'that I mayn't be able to start work seriously till October. I've just had a letter from a friend of mine whose brother is in business in Moscow. They want me to stay with them, and as they're in the thick of all the conspiracies and anarchists, I've a good mind to stop on my way home. It sounds too thrilling.' She wanted to make Rachel see how thrilling it was. 'My friend knows a girl of fifteen who's been sent to Siberia for life merely because they caught her addressing a letter to an anarchist. And the letter wasn't from her, either. I'd give all I have in the world to help on a revolution against the Russian government, and it's bound to come.'<sup>40</sup>

In this extended extract evidence emerges of the view of Tsarist Russia, widely espoused among liberal and left-leaning artistic circles in London

39 Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 213.

40 Ibid. p. 213.

since the pogroms in the last decades of the nineteenth century, as a paranoid police state where the innocent and dissidents are sent off to prison camps in Siberia on the flimsiest of pretexts. The character who delivers these lines, Evelyn Murgatroyd, has been introduced as resembling a ‘gallant lady of the time of Charles the First leading royalist troops into action’<sup>41</sup> but later shows herself to be fixated with the idea of revolution, albeit the romance of Garibaldi and the Risorgimento is what first and foremost appeals to her, when she makes her entrance, rather than the Russia of 1905. Evelyn instils an initial attitude of panic and fear in the thoroughly English, and thoroughly repressed, St John Hirst:

‘Do you think Garibaldi was ever up here?’ she asked Mr Hirst. Oh, if she had been his bride! If, instead of a picnic party, this was a party of patriots, and she, red-shirted like the rest, had lain among grim men, flat on the turf, aiming her gun at the white turrets beneath them, screening her eyes to pierce through the smoke! So thinking, her foot stirred restlessly, and she exclaimed:

‘I don’t call this life, do you?’

‘What do you call life?’ said St. John.

‘Fighting – revolution,’ she said, still gazing at the doomed city. ‘You only care for books, I know.’

‘You’re quite wrong,’ said St. John.

‘Explain,’ she urged, for there were no guns to be aimed at bodies, and she turned to another kind of warfare.

‘What do I care for? People,’ she said.

‘Well, I am surprised!’ she exclaimed. ‘You look so awfully serious. Do let’s be friends and tell each other what we’re like. I hate being cautious, don’t you?’

But St. John was decidedly cautious, as she could see by the sudden constriction of his lips, and had no intention of revealing his soul to a young lady.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover St John snubs Evelyn’s too forward advances in favour of bestowing his attentions on an inanimate object and a dumb animal: “‘The ass is eating my hat,’” he remarked, and stretched out for it instead of answering her.<sup>43</sup>

41 Ibid. p. 131.

42 Ibid. p. 133.

43 Ibid. p. 133.

The discourse here, with the references to St John's 'soul' and Evelyn's exclamation 'I don't call this life, do you?' fits very much within the terms of the discourse among British readers during the era of Russophilia, with the frequent references to 'soul' remarked upon by Woolf in relation to Dostoevsky's work.<sup>44</sup> In Woolf's other early novel *Night And Day*, reflecting the intensity of the Russophilia of the second decade of the twentieth century, further references to Russia are also to be found, although these are relatively 'ornamental' rather than being central or conveying deeply held views about Russia. Mary Datchet, the feminist suffragist is described as having 'a ruffled appearance, as if she had been running her fingers through her hair in the course of her conversation; she was dressed more or less like a Russian peasant girl.'<sup>45</sup> Earlier in the same chapter, William Rodney, a poet of sorts, and Cassandra Otway, a cousin of the heroine Katharine Hilbery, spar in terms of their knowledge of Russian literature:

Cassandra's voice rose high in its excitement.  
'You've not read "The Idiot"!' she exclaimed.  
'I've read "War and Peace"', William replied, a little testily.  
'"WAR AND PEACE"!' she echoed, in a tone of derision.  
'I confess I don't understand the Russians.'  
'Shake hands! Shake hands!' boomed Uncle Aubrey from across the table. 'Neither do I. And I hazard the opinion that they don't themselves.'  
The old gentleman had ruled a large part of the Indian Empire, but he was in the habit of saying that he had rather have written the works of Dickens.<sup>46</sup>

The exchange, though only in passing, the prelude to a discussion of Shakespeare, is nonetheless telling. It is the young woman who seems to have great enthusiasm for Dostoevsky, and to defend his own cultural capital the scion of the English upper classes, educated at Winchester and Cambridge, asserts that while he may not have read Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* he can still claim to have read *War and Peace*. At this date (published in 1919, *Night And Day* was composed between November 1917 and the Armistice in

44 Woolf, 'The Russian Point of View', p 173.

45 Woolf, *Night And Day*, p. 302.

46 Ibid. p. 295

November 1918) Dostoevsky, translated into English by Constance Garnett in the past two decades, may also have enjoyed primacy with Virginia Woolf. However William Rodney's claims to be taken seriously on the strength of having read *War and Peace* are then humorously qualified by his admission 'I confess I don't understand the Russians'; and the irony is completed when Uncle Aubrey, retired stalwart of the British Raj, says that he would rather have been Charles Dickens – perhaps perceived by him as the quintessentially English polar opposite of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky – than enjoy the status he attained as ruler in India. Uncle Aubrey seems to be venerating English literature, even to the detriment of British geopolitical prowess, and he continues in this superficially self-deprecating manner by saying that he, like William Rodney, fails to understand the Russians as a race. Finally, he ventures the opinion that the Russians are doomed to act irrationally, not even able to understand themselves. This seems to perpetuate the stereotype of the Russians as an impulsive, irrational, even mystical people.

While these exchanges in *The Voyage Out* and *Night And Day* are of interest as indicators of the views of Russia held among the British metropolitan intelligentsia in the first two decades of the twentieth century, it should be stressed that neither novel resembles the works for which Woolf went on to become celebrated in the 1920s, which represent radical and self-conscious departures in the craft of the novel. In her work in these first two decades and on into the 1920s as critic, reviewing Russian literature, and the work of Dostoevsky especially, Woolf repeatedly admires the quality of 'soul' which is to be found in this author's novels, and their sheer power and emotional force. She says in 'The Russian Point of View', where she describes his novels as 'seething whirlpools' and readers are 'filled with a giddy rapture' that 'They are composed purely and wholly of the stuff of the soul.'<sup>47</sup> She welcomes the way in which their power of feeling makes formal concerns secondary and on occasion capable of being put aside altogether. By contrast she expresses frustration with the form of the traditional Victorian and Edwardian English novel, with its predictable

47 Woolf, 'The Russian Point of View', p. 178.

and measured formula of thirty-two chapters.<sup>48</sup> Here 'Lappin and Lapinova', first drafted in 1918, may be seen, for all its brevity, as presaging the experiments with narrative method which were to come with *Jacob's Room*, on which she began the next year, *Mrs Dalloway* of 1925, *To The Lighthouse* of 1927, *Orlando* of 1928 and *The Waves* of 1931, arguably her most avant-garde and experimental novel. 'Lappin and Lapinova' includes parallel narratives (the couple's lives as humans and their lives as hare and rabbit, indoors and outdoors, by day and by night). Moreover the border between the two modes of existence is subtle and permeable. The kind of rapid, audacious shifts found in this story are to become central to her next, and first experimental novel.

The Russian contribution to *Jacob's Room* should not be overstated, but again there are some remarks of consequence in terms of the discourse presenting Russia as non-European and non-civilised. Part of the scheme of the novel is to show the importance for patriarchy at this date of the idea of classical Greek as part of the educated Englishman's upbringing and Woolf presents Jacob Flanders and his fellow public school and Cambridge educated contemporary Timmy Durrant as products of this system:

The Greeks – yes, that was what they talked about – how when all's said and done, when one's rinsed one's mouth with every literature in the world, including Chinese and Russian (but these Slavs aren't civilized), it's the flavour of Greek that remains. Durrant quoted Aeschylus – Jacob Sophocles. It is true that no Greek could have understood or professor refrained from pointing out – Never mind; what is Greek for if not to be shouted on Haverstock Hill in the dawn? Moreover, Durrant never listened to Sophocles, nor Jacob to Aeschylus. They were boastful, triumphant; it seemed to both that they had read every book in the world; known every sin, passion, and joy. Civilizations stood round them like flowers ready for picking. Ages lapped at their feet like waves fit for sailing. And surveying all this, looming through the fog, the lamplight, the shades of London, the two young men decided in favour of Greece.<sup>49</sup>

And the novel's hero gives the opinion: "Probably," said Jacob "We are the only people in the world who know what the Greeks meant."<sup>50</sup>

48 Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', p. 149.

49 Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room* (London: Hogarth Press, 1990), p. 70.

50 Ibid. p. 70.

Before the novel is over Woolf alludes both positively and negatively to Russia. Overall she is determined to suggest that the veneration of classical culture has played a malign and disastrous role in the British war machine leading to the slaughter of World War I – while in this instance the Russians may be dismissed as once again able to be bracketed with out-and-out Orientals such as the Chinese. The statement is indeed made by Jacob that ‘these Slavs aren’t civilized’, and elsewhere reference is made to the widespread enthusiasm then sweeping Britain for the Ballets Russes ‘have you heard the news? life in the capital is gay; the Russian dancers ...’<sup>51</sup>

In another exchange Woolf satirises the British intelligentsia’s fixation with literature in other languages (which, as she points out in the ‘The Russian Point of View’ essay, remains largely unknown to them in terms of any nuance, owing to the language barrier):

But at dinner that night Mr. Williams asked him whether he would like to see the paper; then Mrs. Williams asked him (as they strolled on the terrace smoking – and how could he refuse that man’s cigar?) whether he’d seen the theatre by moonlight; whether he knew Everard Sherborn; whether he read Greek and whether (Evan rose silently and went in) if he had to sacrifice one it would be the French literature or the Russian?<sup>52</sup>

And finally Woolf suggests the tyranny of taste wrought by the Russophilia of the age: “And now,” wrote Jacob in his letter to Bonamy, “I shall have to read her cursed book” – her Tchekov, he meant, for she had lent it him.<sup>53</sup>

Woolf’s character Jacob Flanders may rail against having to read and come up with an opinion on Chekhov’s short stories, purely as a matter of social form, but for Jacob’s creator, Woolf herself, Chekhov was arguably a key Russian author in the development of the aesthetics which dominate her characteristic style in the fiction of the 1920s. Woolf rebelled against the formulaic nature of the English novel at this date, still very much under the influence of the Victorians, and it was Dostoevsky with his immediacy who perhaps first represented an alternative set of creative and expressive

51 Ibid. p. 87.

52 Ibid. p. 139.

53 Ibid. p. 139.

aesthetics. Dostoevsky's work is characterised for Woolf by intensity of passionate feeling, and by spiritual drama. She associates Dostoevsky most of all the Russians with 'soul'. From Chekhov she took a greater emphasis upon wistfulness – the doomed sense of a passing social order, highly articulate, but to little practical purpose, great talkers, but powerless to withstand social change following the emancipation of the serfs and the social unrest which was eventually to manifest in the 1905 attempted revolution, just a year after Chekhov's death. And Chekhov also influenced Woolf's approach to form. No writer could be further than Chekhov from the idealistic zeal and certainty of Dostoevsky, with his Slavophile rejection of modern liberalising Russia, and Tolstoy, with his anarchistic challenge to the state. The others court didacticism, while Chekhov eschews easy messages or even conclusions, whether as short story writer (Woolf focuses on 'Gusev' in 'Modern Fiction') or as playwright. The eschewal of messages or conclusions has technical implications.

These are clearly demonstrated in what is possibly the shortest of all Woolf's short stories, if it can be regarded as such rather than as a sketch. 'Uncle Vanya' is a piece of prose by Woolf which, like 'Lappin and Lapinova', has no certain date of composition, though it most likely comes from the late 1930s. It amounts to less than a page in length and is the interior monologue of an English woman who has just attended a performance of *Uncle Vanya*. For all that, its method is nonetheless complex and polyphonic. Within twenty-five lines we are presented with the woman's thoughts, the words being delivered as text on stage, the gunshot near the end of the play, and then the non-theatrical reality of the early twentieth century in a British theatre intrudes, with the playing of the National Anthem, a practice at that date still *de rigueur*, and neatly reminding the audience that the Russian spell, and suspension of disbelief are over. The woman in the audience describes the stage sound effects: 'Now we hear the bells of the horses tinkling away in the distance.'<sup>54</sup> The woman remarks to herself silently and continues,

54 Woolf, *A Haunted House*, p. 241.

'And is that also true of us?' she said, leaning her chin on her hand and looking at the girl on stage. 'Do we hear bells tinkling away down the road?' she asked, and thought of the taxis and omnibuses in Sloane Street, for they lived in one of the big houses in Cadogan Square.<sup>55</sup>

The piece, for all its extreme brevity, is formally and technically remarkable. There is a fluidity of movement from words which are actually heard but are a text (Chekhov's from *Uncle Vanya*, albeit in an English translation) to unuttered words, which are the woman in the audience's thoughts, at times unsignposted as such. The play ends anti-climatically, and the woman reflects whether the truth of the play extends to the reality of that particular moment, and, perhaps, of the British rather than Russian setting. Then the woman in the audience reveals that she has completely misunderstood the religious connotations of Sonya's line in the play 'we shall rest', which in a Russian context would immediately be understood as a statement about death and the afterlife. By contrast the woman in the audience seems to feel that she and her husband have been insufficiently stretched by their evening in the theatre 'we're not even tired'. Most irrationally of all the woman announces 'As for us', as her husband helped her on with her cloak, 'we've not even loaded the pistol. We're not even tired.'<sup>56</sup>

Having begun thinking 'Don't they see through everything – the Russians?' by the end of the sketch the woman in the audience at least, if not her husband, and, conceivably the majority of the English audience also, have failed completely to see the point of the piece. It as if British obtusity is the other side of Russian disillusioned pessimism.

The exact date of this short story has not been established, although Woolf saw a performance of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* on 16 February 1937 and wrote it up in her Diary. It represents a stage where Chekhov has become part of the Russian theatrical repertory in Britain but his plays are deprived of their true impact. But that is also Woolf's ironic point. The significance of Chekhov for her career as novelist could not have been more far-reaching. Chekhov's inconclusiveness, his refusal to end with an

55 Ibid. p. 241.

56 Ibid. p. 241.

obvious or melodramatic conclusion is seminal for Woolf. In May 1922 Woolf wrote to Janet Case, 'There's not a single living writer (English) I respect: so you see, I have to read the Russians' and in August 1923 she wrote to Gerald Brenan 'do not start with a snap like the stories of Maupassant and Mérimée' and in precisely this period, to which 'Lappin and Lapinova' may be seen as a prelude on a modest scale, Woolf starts work on *Jacob's Room*, with its elided confusions of narrative voice, its celebrated initial allusion to the opening of one of the most canonical of Victorian novels, George Eliot's *Adam Bede*:

With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen, I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr. Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder, in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799. The afternoon sun was warm on the five workmen there, busy upon doors and window-frames and wainscoting.<sup>57</sup>

becomes in Woolf's hands in 1922, the momentous year of modernism for writers in English, when Joyce published *Ulysses* (the Woolfs' Hogarth Press declined the honour) and Eliot published *The Waste Land* (which the Hogarth Press did publish), a sly exercise in subversion of nineteenth-century intrusive narration:

'So of course', wrote Betty Flanders, pressing her heels rather deeper in the sand, 'there was nothing for it but to leave.'  
Slowly welling from the point of her gold nib, pale blue ink dissolved the full stop; for there her pen stuck; her eyes fixed, and tears slowly filled them. The entire bay quivered; the lighthouse wobbled; and she had the illusion that the mast of Mr. Connor's little yacht was like a wax candle in the sun. She winked quickly. Accidents were awful things. She winked again. The mast was straight; the waves were regular; the lighthouse was upright; but the blot had spread. '... nothing for it but to leave', she read. 'Well, if Jacob doesn't want to play' (the shadow of Archer, her eldest son, fell across the notepaper and looked blue on the sand, and she felt chilly – it was the third of

57 George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 5.

September already), ‘if Jacob doesn’t want to play’ – what a horrid blot! It must be getting late.<sup>58</sup>

Chekhov’s inconclusiveness as regards form – the end of the scene may precede it and then prove not in fact to be the end at all – a whimper usually follows a bang – was a vital ingredient in allowing Woolf to move on from the essentially late Victorian and Edwardian version of the novel which she had been confined to in *The Voyage Out* and *Night And Day*. While discussion of Russia and ideas of Russian culture had permeated those novels to some considerable degree it was only in the works of the 1920s that a Russian approach to form may be said to have predominated in her fiction. In *Jacob’s Room*, Woolf, also operating under the influence of cubism (a major factor since Fry’s post-impressionist exhibitions just before World War I), exploited the kind of freedom of structure she found in Chekhov to provide a template for her own experiments:

I have been reading Tchekov this afternoon, and feeling Good Lord, why does he mention this? There is a perpetual unexpectedness in his mind which is, I think, the interest of him. Perhaps all the Russians have it. It is only in France and England that events seem threaded like beads on a string – for which our best stories are so dull. How dull Mérimée is!<sup>59</sup>

(Woolf does not seem to have remembered that Mérimée was fluent in the Russian language and a key figure in the translation of Russian literature into French.)

The simile ‘like beads on a string’ echoes the famous formula decrying the formulaic in ‘Modern Fiction’:

Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and

58 Woolf, *Jacob’s Room*, p. 1.

59 Woolf, Letter to Gerald Brenan, 10 August 1923, in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, III, p. 63.

uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?<sup>60</sup>

And further on in the same essay Woolf sets up Chekhov as the model of what modern literary style should aspire to:

It is the saint in them which confounds us with a feeling of our own irreligious triviality, and turns so many of our famous novels to tinsel and trickery. The conclusions of the Russian mind, thus comprehensive and compassionate, are inevitably, perhaps, of the utmost sadness. More accurately indeed we might speak of the inconclusiveness of the Russian mind. It is the sense that there is no answer, that if honestly examined life presents question after question which must be left to sound on and on after the story is over in hopeless interrogation that fills us with a deep, and finally it may be with a resentful, despair. They are right perhaps; unquestionably they see further than we do and without our gross impediments of vision.<sup>61</sup>

The last sentence above is very close to that allocated to the woman in the audience in the short story 'Uncle Vanya':

Don't they see through everything – the Russians? All the little disguises we've put up? Flowers against decay; gold and velvet against poverty; the cherry trees, the apple trees – they see through them too', she was thinking at the play. Then a shot rang out.<sup>62</sup>

But ultimately in the 'Modern Fiction' essay Woolf shies away from embracing the Russian approach completely. She perceives an element of the comic to be a fundamental strength of English literature and to be signally missing from Russian writers:

But perhaps we see something that escapes them, or why should this voice of protest mix itself with our gloom? The voice of protest is the voice of another and an ancient civilisation which seems to have bred in us the instinct to enjoy and fight rather than to suffer and understand. English fiction from Sterne to Meredith bears witness to our natural delight in humour and comedy, in the beauty of earth, in the activities of the intellect, and in the splendour of the body. But any deductions that we may

60 Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', p. 150.

61 Ibid. p. 153.

62 Virginia Woolf, 'Uncle Vanya', in *A Haunted House*, ed. Susan Dick (London: Vintage, 1985), p. 241.

draw from the comparison of two fictions so immeasurably far apart are futile save indeed as they flood us with a view of the infinite possibilities of the art and remind us that there is no limit to the horizon, and that nothing – no ‘method’, no experiment, even of the wildest – is forbidden, but only falsity and pretence.<sup>63</sup>

This too is of interest. The woman in the audience in the ‘Uncle Vanya’ short story may show an ignorance of Russian literature which Woolf portrays in satirical comedy, entirely mistaking the religious implications of ‘we shall rest’, but Woolf herself seems here to be regarding Chekhov in the same breath as Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, neither of whom is known primarily for comedy. Yet Chekhov himself declared that another of his plays *The Cherry Orchard* was a comedy in four acts and an English contemporary of Woolf’s, Dorothy Sayers, said of *The Cherry Orchard* ‘in its blackest moments it is inevitably doomed to the comic gesture’.<sup>64</sup>

That we are more advanced, less advanced, or have advanced in an entirely different direction. At any rate, the English person who finds himself at dawn in the nursery of Madame Ranevskaja feels out of place, like a foreigner brought up with entirely different traditions. But these traditions are not (this, of course, is a transcript of individual experience) so ingrained in one as to prevent one from shedding them only without pain but with actual relief and abandonment.<sup>65</sup>

In fact the Russian cultural influence may also in some respects have peaked before the end of the 1920s. Arguably, it was the inconclusiveness of Chekhov, and his refusal to share either Dostoevsky’s slavophile and religious engagement or Tolstoy’s fundamental anarchistic challenge to the state, which most enabled Woolf to pursue a radical openness of literary form which is above all seen in *Jacob’s Room*, *Mrs Dalloway* and *To The Lighthouse*, as well as *The Waves* from the first year of the following decade. *Mrs Dalloway*, with its twenty-four hour compression of time and confinement to a single geographical setting, and its interior monologue (thought by many critics to owe more to Proust than to James Joyce),

63 Woolf, ‘Modern Fiction’, p. 154.

64 Dorothy Sayers, letter to *New Statesman*, February 17 1937, *Letters of Dorothy Sayers*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1997), II, p. 11.

65 Virginia Woolf, review of *The Cherry Orchard* (1920), quoted in Rubenstein, p 77.

certainly represents a departure from *The Voyage Out* and *Night And Day*. In reality, however, the Russian influence upon it is, as Rubenstein and Liza Knapp have shown, considerably indebted to Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Mrs Dalloway's party is modelled in some ways on the dinner hosted in *Anna Karenina*; and Clarissa's unfulfilling marriage to Richard Dalloway follows in the tradition of Anna and Karenin, and with the device of the double plot borrowed in the English novel. Moreover both novels involve suicide, albeit it is only contemplated by the heroine in Woolf's novel, whereas it is actually carried out by Anna.

Formally *To The Lighthouse* is yet further from the conventional novel, with its distinct approaches to the passage of time in each of its three sections. Although not extending to matters of form, nevertheless the predominant Russian influence here is surely that of Tolstoy rather than Dostoevsky or Chekhov. The parallels between the dinner which Stepan Obolonsky very much takes over from his wife Dolly in Tolstoy's novel, with its potage Marie Louise, and in Woolf's novel, the dinner offered by Mrs Ramsay, reaching its climax with 'boeuf en daube' are notable. Moreover the young lovers Dolly and Levin are paralleled in *To The Lighthouse* by Paul Rayley and Minta. Woolf makes the link to *Anna Karenina* explicit (in comic vein) when she has Paul Rayley name the novel:

Anyhow, she was free now to listen to what Paul Rayley was trying to say about books one had read as a boy. They lasted, he said. He had read some of Tolstoi at school. There was one he always remembered, but he had forgotten the name. Russian names were impossible, said Mrs. Ramsay. 'Vronsky', said Paul. He remembered that because he always thought it such a good name for a villain. 'Vronsky', said Mrs. Ramsay; 'Oh, ANNA KARENINA!' but that did not take them very far; books were not in their line. No, Charles Tansley would put them both right in a second about books, but it was all so mixed up with, Am I saying the right thing? Am I making a good impression? that, after all, one knew more about him than about Tolstoi, whereas, what Paul said was about the thing, simply, not himself, nothing else. Like all stupid people, he had a kind of modesty too, a consideration for what you were feeling, which, once in a way at least, she found attractive. Now he was thinking, not about

himself, or about Tolstoi, but whether she was cold, whether she felt a draught, whether she would like a pear.<sup>66</sup>

In isolation this might be no more remarkable than the name-checking of *War and Peace* and Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* the previous decade in *The Voyage Out*, but here, at least for the reader with a more retentive memory than Paul Rayley's, the proliferation of other parallels points to a far more in-depth relationship between the English and Russian novels. Even so, it is hard to argue that it is the Tolstoy influence which produces the radically experimental narrative form and techniques of *To The Lighthouse*.

On the face of it, at least in one regard, Woolf's last novel of the 1920s, *Orlando* can be seen as, on a much grander scale, following the example set by 'Lappin and Lapinova', when that story was first drafted at the end of the previous decade. 'Lappin and Lapinova' might perhaps today be described as an example of magic realism, a literary genre which has chiefly flourished since the 1960s, its most famous exponents being Vargas Llosa and Salman Rushdie, although Franz Kafka can also be seen as an important precursor. There is no record of whether Virginia Woolf knew of any of the work of the Czech writer, let alone had read it. If she did it would certainly have occurred after the initial 1918 drafting of 'Lappin and Lapinova' and around the time of its publication in revised form for *Harper's Magazine* at the end of the 1930s. English language translations by Edwin and Willa Muir of 'The Burrow' and 'Investigations of a Dog', both of which involve an element of anthropomorphism appeared in 1933 and onwards, continuing after Woolf's death. A. L. Lloyd produced an English language version of 'The Metamorphosis' in 1937, which Woolf could conceivably have read. If she was among the relatively small numbers of English readers of Kafka at that point there is no record. Any parallel between Kafka's anthropomorphism in the short stories 'The Burrow' or 'A Report To Academy', where the animal comes close to the human, and 'Lappin and Lapinova' is therefore more likely coincidental rather than conscious. It is also of interest that the animal identities assumed by Ernest and Rosalind in 'Lappin and Lapinova' are put on through the exercise of imaginative willpower,

66 Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 117.

and the shared fantasy ends when the husband refuses to continue playing along with the game. Of course Kafka's single most celebrated short story, 'The Metamorphosis' involves transformation from the human to the animal, in fact to the insect form. Unlike the hero and heroine in 'Lappin and Lapinova' Gregor Samsa undergoes a strictly one way process. He is released from his ordeal as a giant bug only through death. The nearest equivalent to this notion of metamorphosis in Woolf's fiction comes not in a short story, but in a novel, indeed the novel whose plot has by far the longest and least realistic timespan among all of Woolf's works. *Orlando*, of 1928, involves a central eponymous character who lives to an age of over 300 years. Perhaps closer to home, David Garnett's 1922 novella *Lady Into Fox*, which was admired by Woolf, might be cited as a possible influence upon both the finished 1938 version of 'Lappin and Lapinova' and, on account of its unbridled fantasy, *Orlando* in 1928. Like Gregor Samsa, and like the wife in Garnett's tale, Orlando undergoes a transformation from which he never reverts. Orlando wakes up one morning (from a trance slumber of several days' duration while on a diplomatic mission to Turkey) and discovers that a profound, irreversible change has taken place involving him, although in Woolf's novel, unlike Kafka's short story, this moment occurs mid way through rather than at the outset of the narrative. It must be added, of course, that in Woolf's novel the profound transformation is not of species but of sex, from male to female. Yet there are also important references to the animal in *Orlando*, and at least one of these turns out to be linked to questions of national stereotypes involving Russia.

When Orlando first encounters Sasha, the daughter of the Muscovite Ambassador, in 1683 during the Great Frost which renders the Thames a temporary skating rink (and perhaps too by the same token makes normally temperate England seem as close as it can get to Russia), Sasha is presented as figure of gender ambiguity:

Orlando, it is true, was none of those who tread lightly the corantoe and lavolta; he was clumsy and a little absentminded. He much preferred the plain dances of his own country, which he danced as a child to these fantastic foreign measures. He had indeed just brought his feet together about six in the evening of the seventh of January at the finish of some such quadrille or minuet when he beheld, coming from the pavilion of the Muscovite Embassy, a figure, which, whether boy's or woman's,

for the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex, filled him with the highest curiosity.<sup>67</sup>

When Orlando begins the affair with Sasha he gives her this name because it belonged to a specifically Russian fox he had owned as a boy:

Hence, Orlando and Sasha, as he called her for short, and because it was the name of a white Russian fox he had had as a boy – a creature soft as snow, but with teeth of steel, which bit him so savagely that his father had it killed – hence, they had the river to themselves.<sup>68</sup>

Just as the human characters devised alternative names in ‘Lappin and Lapinova’ and associated them with animal identities, as rabbit and hare, so here Orlando chooses the Russian abbreviation of Alexandra partly because it is not gender specific, being used equally for males and females in Russian, and partly because it is in his personal history associated with a pet animal he once owned: a specifically Russian fox. Before Sasha’s arrival in person with the Muscovite delegation, Orlando already had an association with Russia, albeit in the form of a Russian animal, which, despite being ‘soft as snow’ had ‘teeth of steel’ and ‘bit him so savagely that his father had it killed.’

Orlando’s prior experience of the Russian character was something simultaneously ‘soft’ yet savage. The premonition of a tragic end to the relationship here is also charged with ironies. For Sasha is destined to remain female but to die like any ordinary mortal (as the fox has earlier died), whereas Orlando will ‘die’ as a male but live on to a superhuman age only after changing sex to female:

‘All ends in death,’ Orlando would say, sitting upright on the ice. But Sasha who after all had no English blood in her but was from Russia where the sunsets are longer, the dawns less sudden, and sentences often left unfinished from doubt as to how best to end them – Sasha stared at him, perhaps sneered at him, for he must have seemed a child to her, and said nothing. Ransack the language as he might, words failed him. He wanted another landscape, and another tongue. English was too frank, too candid,

67 Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 35.

68 *Ibid.* p. 20.

too honeyed a speech for Sasha. For in all she said, however open she seemed and voluptuous, there was something hidden; in all she did, however daring, there was something concealed. So the green flame seems hidden in the emerald, or the sun prisoned in a hill. The clearness was only outward; within was a wandering flame. It came; it went; she never shone with the steady beam of an Englishwoman – here, however, remembering the Lady Margaret and her petticoats, Orlando ran wild in his transports and swept her over the ice, faster, faster, vowing that he would chase the flame, dive for the gem, and so on and so on, the words coming on the pants of his breath with the passion of a poet whose poetry is half pressed out of him by pain.<sup>69</sup>

Further anecdotes which the lovers Orlando and Sasha tell each other include one of another wild animal questionably domesticated:

And then, wrapped in their sables, they would talk of everything under the sun; of sights and travels; of Moor and Pagan; of this man's beard and that woman's skin; of a rat that fed from her hand at table; of the arras that moved always in the hall at home; of a face; of a feather. Nothing was too small for such converse, nothing was too great.<sup>70</sup>

Arguably the influence of Russian culture for Woolf changed towards the end of the 1920s. Although the events of its plot – a protagonist whose life lasts for over 300 years, and the change of gender from the third chapter onwards qualify the label 'magic realist' – in terms of its narrative technique *Orlando* is far less experimental than *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs Dalloway* or especially its immediate precursor *To The Lighthouse*. In this novel, which is a parody of history and of biography, chronology is rather more straightforward than the limitation to twenty-four hours from which there are Proustian flashbacks, moments of being, in *Mrs Dalloway*. Orlando's memory is uninterrupted by the change of sex. Nor is there the contrapuntal double plot of that novel, nor the second-by-second crawling through time found in the first part of *To The Lighthouse* or the racing through ten years and the biggest conflict in world history represented by the mere eighteen pages of 'Time Passes', the middle section from the same novel. If it is compared with the central 'Oxen of the Sun' section of Joyce's *Ulysses*,

69 Ibid. p. 22.

70 Ibid. p. 21.

where the author shifts in rapid order through one historical form of the English language from the Anglo-Saxon of *Beowulf* by way of Middle English, Elizabethan English and the English of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and nineteenth century Victorianism,<sup>71</sup> it can be seen that, for all its outrageous plot, *Orlando* is not an excessively demanding experience for the reader.

*Orlando* is also written at what may be a key juncture in Woolf's engagement with Russia and Russian culture. This hard to classify novel, part *jeu d'esprit*, part parody of traditional biography and history, turns out to have been started at a time when the friend with whom Woolf had become besotted, Vita Sackville West, had recently visited Russia. While West was in Teheran for the coronation of the Shah, she was informed by Woolf that she and Leonard had an official invitation to travel to Russia:

I am writing at great speed. For the third time I begin a sentence, The truth is I'm so engulfed in *Orlando* I can think of nothing else. It has ousted romance, psychology and the rest of that odious novel completely. Tomorrow I begin the chapter which describes Violet and you meeting on the ice ... It will be a little book, about 30,000 words at most, and at my present rate which is feverish (I think of nothing but you all day long, in different guises, and Violet and me and Elizabeth and George the 3rd) I shall have done it by Christmas. That's to say, if we don't go to Russia; Do you want me to go to Russia? We've been asked to go there, free, by the Government, to celebrate the anniversary of the Revolution for one month. Don't you think one should take the chance, my love, and risk the cold? Tell me what you think. I must settle by Tuesday.<sup>72</sup>

In a fine instance of what was never more than a possibility in real life being turned into fiction, the counterfactual or 'magic realist' novel *Orlando* was called into being in precisely the same period as a very real invitation from the Bolshevik regime in what was now termed the USSR. Neither Leonard Woolf nor Virginia accepted the invitation, and it is not recorded

71 James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 366–407.

72 Woolf, letter to Vita Sackville-West, 19 October 1927, in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, III, p. 439.

whether the invitation was made by the regime to husband or wife primarily, and on the grounds of Leonard's political achievements or Virginia's literary accomplishments. Certainly the Woolfs sit rather oddly among the succession of Fabian figures like H. G. Wells, the Webbs and George Bernard Shaw who were feted by the communist regime. Perhaps some Kremlin apparatchik misinterpreted the revolutionary credentials of the 1917 Club, still in existence at this date. Woolf went on reviewing Russian literature in the next decade, and there are important Russian influences upon, and references to the idea of Russia and Russian culture in *The Years* and *Between the Acts*.

Russia continued to afford Woolf cultural capital into the next decade, but in a rather different form, with the English author drawing upon Turgenev and Chekhov predominantly. Her opinion of Turgenev was fundamentally revised when she reread his novels for the purposes of writing criticism after 1930, and it is perhaps not coincidental that the last novel published in Woolf's lifetime, *The Years* (1937) is widely regarded as an example of more traditional narrative than the majority of the works she had produced in the 1920s, with their strong emphasis upon technical experimentation. In many ways this tantalising declined invitation in the late 1920s serves as an end point for Woolf's most intense and forward-looking involvement with the myth of Russia.



Figure 8. Photo of Angelica Bell, daughter of Vanessa Bell and niece of Virginia Woolf, in costume as the Russian Princess from Woolf's novel *Orlando*. Tate Archive.