

## Having it both ways

### *Rozanov, modernity and the Skopcy*

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VASILIJ ROZANOV liked to have it both ways. On the one hand, he bemoaned the age of mass culture, cursing 'that damned Gutenberg', for 'lick[ing] writers with his bronze tongue, so they all hardened "in print", effaced and subdued. My "self" exists only in manuscript,' he insisted, 'like every writer s "self".' (Rozanov 1911, 5.) On the other hand, he wrote for the commercial press and boasted of reading Nat Pinkerton to put himself to sleep. Working with and against the modern medium, he tried to make the published text an artifact. Cultivating the illusion of idiosyncrasy, he inserted family photographs (another technological innovation—but one that fixed an unrepeatably moment in time) into his prose, played with italics, uneven paragraphs, incomplete sentences, collages of quotations, juxtapositions, the clash of styles, the intrusion of profanity, the exposure of intimacy (what Viktor Sklovskij calls 'domesticity as literary technique' (1921, 21)). He thus offended the hierarchy of taste, while preserving the conceptual coordinates that structured the thinking of his age. This series included a linked chain of contrasting pairs: old and new, native and foreign (East and West), spiritual and rational, folk and elite. Following this logic, Rozanov added categories of his own: sensual and self-denying, manuscript and print, personal and impersonal.

In this grand scheme, derived from Slavophile thinking, Russia appeared as the antithesis of the modernizing, increasingly rationalist (Protestant or secular) West. Latin Christianity had produced the authoritarian structures of the Catholic Church and the puritanical intellectualism of the Reformation. Russia, too, had its clerical regime and established dogmas, but in seeking to trace Russia's

spiritual profile, intellectuals like Rozanov looked not to the state-supported Orthodox Church but to the Old Believers and homegrown religious sects, persecuted as harmful deviations from the authorized creed (Etrind 1998a, 179-90). For Rozanov, folk eccentrics presented a welcome opportunity to indulge his love of contradiction. And no group raised the issues so dear to his heart with greater drama than the *Skopcy*. The community of self-castrators seemed to display the classic features of folk piety as imagined by the educated elite: spontaneous, naive, earthy. Yet they were also self-disciplined, self-denying, and unprocreative, demonstrating the features of mature Christianity that Rozanov deplored. What was right about Russia and what was wrong were both magnified in their strange and disturbing ways.

This paper will first explore what Rozanov had to say about the *Skopcy* in relation to the major themes of Russia, the West, religion, and the concept of modernity. My discussion will focus on two of Rozanov's essays. One, called "The Dream of the "Spiritual Christians"" (Мечта «духовных христиан»), was first published in 1896, then reprinted in *An Apocalyptic Sect (Апокалипсическая секта, 1914)*, but also appeared, with an added introduction, under the title "The Psychology of Russian Religious Dissent" (Психология русского раскола), in Rozanov's 1899 collection *Religion and Culture (Религия и культура)*<sup>1</sup> The second, "The Fatal Philological Error" (Роковая филологическая ошибка), written in 1905, was also reprinted in the 1914 volume. I will then turn the tables and listen to what the *Skopcy* themselves had to say on these very same issues. I will inquire how the folks who were the object of Rozanov's imagination exercised their own imaginations in the course of everyday life, that very everydayness (обыденщина (Sklovskij 1921, 27)) which Rozanov so valued as a counterweight to the sterile dryness of the abstract mind and the rules of institutionalized religion.

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<sup>1</sup> I cite the longer, 1899, version.

For all his iconoclasm, Rozanov thinks with—and not always against— clichés. 'There are two Russias', he declared, in a Slavophile vein. One was

the *visible* Russia of colossal external forms, whose correct outlines please the eye, whose events begin and end at fixed moments. This is the 'Empire' whose history was codified by Speranskiy And there is the other Russia—'Holy Russia', 'Mother Russia', whose laws no one knows, with indistinct forms and indefinite currents of unpredictable outcomes and origins unknown. This is the Russia of *essences*, of living blood, untouched faith, where facts are not supported by an artificial sequence of other facts but each by the force of existence lodged in itself. (1899,23.)<sup>2</sup>

Just as predictable as the two-Russia scheme was Rozanov's identification of Peter the Great as the villain of the piece. The tsar and his bureaucrats created the empire of outward show and inward regulation by performing

some kind of castration on Russia. Since then, or, more precisely, under the influence of their new *method*, life disappeared from Russia... [which] took cover in bureaucratic forms, (ibid., 50f.)

Describing history in biological terms, we can say that the very essence of that 'beautiful clay', the physical mass that forms the nation's body, has not been animated by true artists. The new Russia was conceived and born without any truly creative, artistic or ethical impulse, (ibid., 49.)

The original, vital Russia emasculated by Peter's organizing thrust derived, so Rozanov declared, from the ancient legacy of Kievan Rus', which persisted only in the seemingly naive and unreflective faith of the sectarians and Old Belief (ibid., 23). Rozanov located the true spirit of the Russian faith not in the church, which was compromised by its association with the state, but in some free-floating, allegedly venerable piety vested in the folk. The church and the Old Belief (раскол), said Rozanov, differed in their fundamental '*ways of thinking*' (методы умствования).

While the church looks for the *rules* of salvation, the raskol looks for the *type* of salvation. The one analyzes, saying 'this is what saves' ... offering] fasts, prayers, canonically correct books in the best editions, critically approved. The raskol, that 'crude' raskol, which often seems the last degree of 'ignorance', follows the law of artistic judgment.

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<sup>2</sup> Here and in what follows Rozanov is quoted in my translation.

Embodied, particular, specific,

the raskolniki do not distinguish holiness from the holy person. ... The *typikon* of salvation—that is the secret of the raskol, the nerve center of its life, its tormenting desire, in contrast to the *summa regulatorum* that governs our, and indeed every, church. The raskol is full of life, personal and artistic, (ibid., 27.)

The *typikon* shaped the minutia of holy practices in cenobitic communities. This type of piety, Rozanov believed, was the true historic legacy:

The raskol experiences the ancient tradition in all its multifarious detail, its petty detail, as fully alive, as existing even today, indeed as the only true reality to which we can unerringly attach our hearts, fix our attention, (ibid., 29.)

Elsewhere, Rozanov draws the distinction not between church and folk, but rather between a 'Russian faith' (русская вера) shared by church and people and 'official dogma' (официальные догматики), which is no more than a 'compilation of Protestant or Catholic learning' (1909,12).<sup>3</sup> In either rendition, it is the rationalistic, Western-oriented character of the Petrine state and the Western-influenced training of the ecclesiastical elite that Rozanov contrasts to an authentic native spirit.

The native spirit had difficulty, however, maintaining its integrity in a de-spiritualized age. The Chlysty and Skopcy, both originating in the eighteenth century, adopted forms of worship that involved frenetic gyrations, during which the faithful spun to the point of exaltation and collapse, an ecstasy they attributed to the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Skopcy in addition resorted to self-mutilation. These distortions Rozanov explained as a result of Peter's reforms, which had deprived the common folk of 'worthy forms of expression' (1899, 50). Turned from the healthy path, these simple believers sought in 'spinning' the same creative outlet that writers and artists found in their art. All alike pursued the

unaccountable ecstasy for the sake of which a person says 'I live and I *want* to live.' Here, in this aesthetic and ethical idea are the seeds of life; and since all of life is divine, the most life-creating ideas are the ones God loves most of all. (ibid., 48-50.)

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<sup>3</sup> Phrase also quoted in Étkind 1998a, 180.

However rooted in the spiritual impulses of the common folk, self-castration was clearly not a 'life-creating idea'. Rozanov has trouble, therefore, deciding where the Skopcy belong in the catalogue of spiritual types. On the one hand, they represent the same link with pre-Petrine cultural spontaneity that is embodied in the Old Belief. Rozanov calls their spiritual verses 'purely folk, thus entirely uncontrived' (ibid., 43). But, on the other hand, they have been misled by an erroneous translation of the famous passage from Matt. 19:12 about the 'eunuchs for the sake of the Heavenly Kingdom', which they transpose from the symbolic or 'physiological' into the literal and 'anatomical' domain (1914 [1905], i32f). More to be pitied than punished, Rozanov explains, they have only followed the logic of church-sanctioned monasticism. Like the Old Believers, whom he praises for their 'artistic judgment' (1899, 27), the Skopcy also exhibit an archaic mode of literal, embodied faith, but they nevertheless dramatize what is wrong with rule-bound religion. This combination offers Rozanov a chance to indulge his favorite pastime: making the most of a cultural contradiction.

The Skopcy reversed the creative impulse expressed by Old Belief, while at the same time, Rozanov contends, capturing the very essence of Russian piety. 'The strange spirit of castration, negation of the flesh, hatred for anything substantial or material', Rozanov writes, 'has constrained the Russian spirit with a force the West cannot imagine.' (1909, 10.) This spirit, at the heart of Russian culture, is obsessed not with life but with death, not with movement but stasis. Since adopting Christianity from the moribund Byzantine empire, the 'Russian religion' has been a religion of the grave. 'Life is nighttime, death is dawn, and in the end the eternal day is "over there" (in heaven with the heavenly Father).' (ibid., 5 f)

The contrast with western Christianity, and hence with western civilization, could not be greater:

The difference between stillness and action, contemplativeness and work, patient suffering and active struggle with evil is what separates Orthodoxy, in both psychological and metaphysical terms, from Catholicism and Protestantism. Since religion is the soul of the nation, this difference separates Russia from the western nationalities, whose opposite Russia is. (ibid., If.)

The anti-Byzantine principles of 'life, action, and initiative' (жизнь, акция, деятельность) appear in Russia only with the advent of Peter the Great (ibid., 3). In this role, Peter figures positively as a source of energy, a life force, which he borrows from the spirit of the West. But he also figures negatively as the force that extinguishes the creative spark of Russian culture, substituting rules and regulations for the messiness of life: he is himself a castrator. If the western temperament (derived from Latin Christianity) is healthy and dynamic, its influence on the Russian church, says Rozanov, has been to alienate Orthodoxy from the living spirit of the native faith (ibid., 12). A logical contradiction ? How can the 'people's religious mood and world view', which have 'nothing to do' with church teachings permeated by Catholic and Protestant influences, offer a creative alternative to Petrine rationalism, if that same rationalism is a source of life and the native mood a morbid preoccupation with death and the beyond ? What if Peter and the folk conspire in the act of emasculating Russia ?

The sects, as Rozanov presents them, seem to embody this contradiction. On the one hand, they pursue their faith with intensely passionate devotion. On the other hand, they add nothing to the teachings they purport to reject:

None but the sects are lively and energetic these days. For them movement is a goal in itself. But what they are moving towards is already contained in the core of an already lifeless organism. No sect... adds anything new or original to the Church it opposes and from which it is no more separate than a branch from the trunk of a tree, (ibid., 28.)

What the Skopcy perpetuate is the equation of holiness with death and dying at the heart of the Russian monastic tradition (ibid., 3). The self-professed modernizers Peter the Great and Catherine the Great targeted monasteries as parasitical weights on the social organism. Attempting to rationalize and westernize the church, these monarchs changed its internal organization and encouraged the intellectual development of the clerical elite. By the late eighteenth century, however, educated prelates turned precisely to monasticism as a neglected tradition alleged to derive from Orthodoxy's specifically eastern roots. Rozanov found both alternatives distressing: the energetic

imposition of bureaucratic forms, rendering clergymen no different from state servants (*ibid.*, 21) and strangling the culture's creative force; or the retreat to other-worldly self-deprivation.

It is thus the case that Rozanov lacked a coherent view of Russian religion in general and of the Skopcy in particular. In relation to the Skopcy incoherence is entirely appropriate, however. They were self-contradictory in the extreme. One might say that the tension between opposites was at the center of their religious concept. Believing that castration catapulted believers out of their contingent, embodied, time-bound earthly existence into a realm of disembodied, timeless purity which prepared them for salvation at the Last Judgment, when time itself would come to an end, the Skopcy repudiated worldliness but actively cultivated their worldly affairs. They thought of their two-dimensional existence as replicating the miracle of Christ, in which Godhood was simultaneously concealed in human flesh and revealed to human company. The carnal and transcendent were sharply opposed but also closely interconnected. Because of the literalness with which the Skopcy engineered the translation between the two domains, marking their own bodies with the sign of salvation, modernist intellectuals relegated them to a rudimentary stage of symbolic development. Yet the origins of the castration cult were not in fact remote, and though its members repudiated the outside world and feared its intrusion, they did not live completely isolated from it.<sup>4</sup>

It is easy to understand, of course, why nineteenth-century Russians should have viewed the ritual of self-castration (excising the genitals for purity's sake) as a form of blood sacrifice recalling primitive religious cults. Yet castration was introduced no earlier than the 1750s or 1760s by the group's prophetic leader, later known as Kondratij Selivanov, who decided to apply the techniques of animal husbandry to the purification of his human flock. The Skopcy understanding of castration as an act accompanied by the visitation of the Holy Spirit, which sanctified the human spirit as it cleansed the flesh, parallels the hesychast focus on the reception of the Holy Spirit through constant prayer and self-forgetting. Repetitious prayer and the chanting of sacred verses were part of

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<sup>4</sup> For full discussion of Skopcy beliefs and social organization, see Engelstein 1999.

Skopcy worship. The decades in which castration was first enacted coincided with the period of monastic revival in which some leading churchmen turned back to a lapsed mystical tradition as a way of revitalizing the monasteries that had been weakened by the state's assault. In reviving the hesychast approach to spiritual life, these churchmen did not, however, see themselves as turning back the clock, but as adapting time-worn modes of spiritual devotion to current conditions. There seems to be no direct connection between the emergence of the Skopcy as a distinct group and the monastic revival, but some sort of influence cannot be excluded, since the monasteries were an important source of inspiration for the common folk at large.

The Skopcy need not therefore be seen as a uniquely folk manifestation of Orthodoxy deeply rooted in time but can be construed as a local variation on broader contemporary themes.<sup>5</sup> Because they arose on Russian soil—in the very heartland—and clearly derived the elements of their cult from the Orthodox mode, the mystical eccentrics appealed to intellectuals such as Rozanov as embodiments of a native style<sup>6</sup>. Their practices, however, have much in common with other religious movements of the time. Indeed, when they first appeared they were denounced as variations on a noxious foreign theme. A visiting Silesian mystic, Quirinus Kuhlman, had been executed as a Quaker heretic by Princess Sofija in 1689. In denouncing the Chlysty fifty years later as a 'Quaker heresy', Orthodox clergymen condemned the 'enthusiastic' style as a product of Protestant sectarian influence. In so doing they betrayed their own debt to foreign sources, borrowing a turn from English polemics that linked religious fanaticism to radical politics (Tsapina 1997).

The mystical fervor and convulsive enthusiasm of Skopcy worship indeed share the general character of Christian mysticism that flourished in late eighteenth-century England and Germany, although no direct contacts explain the outbreak of 'enthusiasm' in central Russian villages. Not just the timing of their appearance but also the persistence of these beliefs and practices conform to a

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<sup>5</sup> For the argument against the antiquity of Skopcy practices, see Zivov 1996.

<sup>6</sup> On Russian intellectuals seeing Skopcy as native, see Étkind 1996; 1998a



European pattern. The nineteenth century did not exhibit a simple decline in what an increasingly secular public considered old styles of worship. Ireland experienced a revival of formal and popular Catholicism after 1850, the same decade in which Bernadette saw the vision of Mary that inaugurated the miracle cult at Lourdes. Improvised veneration of the Virgin flourished in Germany, as well.<sup>7</sup>

Russian sectarians were, moreover, a curious amalgam of pious anachronism and worldly savoir-faire. Old Believers clung to their beards and succeeded at commerce. Eventually they abandoned some of the cultural features which had set them apart, building urban communities and participating in civic affairs. Smaller, more resistant groups, such as the *Duchobors*, who got into trouble for refusing to bear arms or cooperate with state authorities, were also capable agriculturalists (see Breyfogle 1995). No less stubborn in defense of their core beliefs, the Skopcy were also adept at coping with their material and cultural surroundings. At home, in their guarded inner spaces, protected by closed courtyards and drawn curtains, they enacted their dramatic ceremonial life. Garbed in white robes signifying purity and salvation, they participated in rituals of worship under the guidance of prophetic leaders. Repudiating ties of family and kin, they claimed to have negated sexual difference. On the street and during business transactions, by contrast, they wore conventional clothing, observed social proprieties, and organized their communities in family groups, in which men and women fulfilled traditional social roles. Nor were their practices entirely unchanging. The forms of expression they used to consolidate their membership, communicate with the outside, and understand their relationship to the host culture shifted with the times.

Most of the Skopcy were unlettered peasants. From the beginning, however, they attracted recruits among the wealthier villagers, some of whom were able to make their way through Scripture on their own. Congregations sometimes formed among lowly townsfolk and merchants who accumulated profits from the trade

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<sup>7</sup> Larkin 1976, chapter two, 'The devotional revolution in Ireland, 1850-75'; Kselman 1983 ; Blackbourn 1993 ; Harris 1999.

in grain. As the nineteenth century unfolded, the community developed a literate minority, which negotiated contacts with the world, kept the information pipeline flowing, and documented the group's fortunes. Anxious to avoid disclosure and persecution, the Skopcy kept to themselves, but they saw no harm in the instruments of secular culture. When photography studios appeared in midcentury, the Skopcy eagerly sat for individual and group portraits. One congregation opened a studio of its own. In the course of business, the Skopcy kept records and accounts, hired lawyers, and sent telegrams. The wealthy organized pensions and charities to sustain the aged and less robust.

But the Skopcy observed a sharp distinction between the 'worldly' and the 'pure'. Though castration rendered them amphibious—still embodied here on earth but already prepared for life eternal, they did not limit their interest in changing cultural forms to the less important, practical aspects of their existence. In the early years, they transmitted their sacred songs and narratives orally, by constant repetition. The story of the community's discovery in 1772 recounted Kondratij Selivanov's persecution and conveyed his message to the flock. Expressed in a voice supposed to be his own, the 'Passion of Kondratij Selivanov' combined the generic features of the saints' lives with the picturesque language of the folktale. The verses that accompanied Skopcy worship belonged to an established folk genre, and the 'Passion' may have been transcribed by the founder's early disciples. It is not clear, however, who actually composed it. A version was first published under the hostile auspices of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which devoted itself in the 1840s to collecting information about the variety of heretical sects in order better to suppress them. The folklorist Vladimir Dal' had a hand in this compilation. It is not impossible that he edited the texts he saw into print. If so, the results were not displeasing to the Skopcy, who recognized the narrative as their own. They encountered the published text in a pirated edition of the official report produced in London. The reprint was the work of populist radicals who viewed religious dissenters as potential recruits to the revolutionary cause (Etkind 1998b, 89-123). The Skopcy deplored the ministry's hostile tone and mis-

representations, but they showed no interest in radical ideas. They were flattered, however, to see their homespun tales presented in a cultured context.

The role of bureaucrats and intellectuals in formalizing and disseminating Skopcy lore underscores the complexity of the sectarians' relationship to the outside world. Though they defined themselves in opposition to it (separating the sheep from the goats), they derived their sense of identity from their encounters with it. Their story of origins reflected the moment of disclosure, when believers were first subject to outside scrutiny and asked to account for themselves. When Selivanov returned from Siberian exile, he lived for almost twenty years in St Petersburg, where he became an object of fascination in court circles. This was the era of religious enthusiasm that affected high society and even the emperor himself. The cultivation of home-grown mystics, such as the Skopcy, appealed to the elites in touch with spiritual trends in Europe. The veneration that Selivanov seems to have elicited in these years only enhanced his prestige among his humble followers. Their convictions were also bolstered by the harassment and punishment they continued to experience at the hands of the secular authorities, who routinely arrested, interrogated, and convicted ordinary believers of what remained a criminal offense.

The Skopcy were therefore dependent for their sense of self-importance not only on divine anointment but also on the responses they elicited in the course of their earthly lives. They were fascinated by their reflection in the worldly glass. Those who could read followed what was written about them, denouncing the literature as ill-informed. It was not until 1904, however, that the Skopcy published anything on their own behalf. Against the objections of timid brethren who feared the perils of exposure, Gavriil Men'shenin (1862-1930) edited a volume titled *The Poetry and Prose of Siberian Skopcy (Поэзия и проза сибирских скопцов)*, which contained a selection of sacred verses and reprints of the founding tales first published in 1845 (Men'shenin 1904). Castrated in childhood, Men'shenin had learned to read and write as a boy and constituted himself the community spokesman. He claimed to be composing a true history of the sect, based on archival sources, designed to refute the calumnies of the so-called experts, although no

such book ever appeared. The 1904 volume published in Tomsk was not, however, meant exclusively to educate outsiders. The faithful used it as a guide to correct belief and practice, a way of codifying and transmitting Skopcy lore. Compared to the original process of oral transmission which sustained the group's early networks, the turn to print signalled not only the adaptation of secular resources but also the standardization of the creed.

Various self-styled Skopcy writers expressed the desire to see their work in print, but the goal was not easy to achieve. The opposite of Rozanov, who affected distaste for mechanical forms, these humble scribes dreamed of access to the standard format. They were not of course typical of their kind. Most Skopcy, even at the end of the nineteenth century, including almost all the women, could not benefit directly from the use of print, since they were unable to read. But the literate few showed a surprising curiosity about opinions other than their own. In their various searches and investigations, the police confiscated printed material, ranging from popular lives of saints and spiritual pamphlets to more heady encounters with current intellectual debates, such as the controversial works of Ernest Renan and David Friedrich Strauss. What the humble brethren made of these attacks on revealed religion is hard to say. We know they read and admired Tolstoy but were disappointed that he did not go far enough on the path to salvation.

Along with Men'shenin, the most prolific and curious of the handful of Skopcy intellectuals was Nikifor Latysev (1863-? 1939), also castrated as a boy and devoted to explaining the creed. He was an avid reader of the popular journal *The Grainfield* (*Хува*) and newspapers such as *The Russian Word* (*Русское слово*), which introduced a semi-educated public to contemporary issues in literature and science. He knew that nonbelievers considered religious belief 'mythological' and might dismiss him as mentally imbalanced, not for defending the practice of castration, but for taking religion seriously at all—for speaking its language. The forensic experts, as Latysev knew from his own experience, deemed the Skopcy competent to stand trial. Describing the Skopcy as susceptible to mass delusions and the transports of spiritual ecstasy, the experts acknowledged that believers adhered to a set of coherent ideas, which they were able to explain to others, and had no difficulty conducting

their practical affairs. Latysev, for one, made it his ambition to reach beyond the fold. To do so, he realized, he would have to translate the Skopcy idiom into the language of the secular world. He was willing, indeed eager, to do so. Both he and Men'shenin bemoaned their meager learning. Men'shenin, for his part, wished to see the holy texts rewritten to conform to the standards of literary prose, though he himself lacked the skills to do so. Neither thought himself archaic or threatened by change. They believed they had a message for modern times.<sup>8</sup>

The Skopcy thus embody Rozanov's nightmare and his ideal. With the ruthless logic of the simple-minded they translated symbolic meanings into concrete acts. The 'logic' by which the converts arrived at their radical conclusion does not pertain to the realm of abstract thinking that Rozanov found so dry and unproductive. It belongs, rather, to the type represented by the collage of sensuous images and sensations that Rozanov preferred to the cold abstractions of reason. The Skopcy creed belongs to the universe in which 'facts are not supported by an artificial sequence of other facts but each by the force of existence lodged in itself.' The consequences of their style of mind was, however, to reinforce the Christian tendency to reward sexual abstinence and disparage bodily pleasures as sinful. The outcome is thus at odds with the method by which it is obtained. The Skopcy, after all, used a language entirely in Rozanov's favorite register: for what is more embodied, less standardized and abstract, than the amputation of a particular body part? And what more eloquently endorses the importance of the corporeal than such drastic attempts to suppress it? Castration, though directed against the flesh, is enacted upon it. It is a daringly carnal deed, made familiar by the barnyard lore of peasants used to gelding livestock and slaughtering hens. In short, the Skopcy arrive at a destination that Rozanov deplors by a route that he is fond of recommending. The reasons they do so are no more susceptible to rational explanation than any other mystery of the human soul. And for that reason alone, they must have given Rozanov great pleasure.

PRINCETON

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<sup>8</sup> On evolving forms of Skopcy expression, see Engelstein 2000.

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