"If a Cutie, Then Always Misha": Evgenii Kharitonov's Queer Masculinities

Tatiana Klepikova

Abstract: In the history of queer Russian literature of the late Soviet era, Evgenii Kharitonov's name (1941–1981) stands out most vividly for his openly homoerotic poetry and prose. This paper analyzes one of Kharitonov's works, "Vil'boa i drugie veshchi, stikhi" [Vilboa and Other Things, Poems], as a text where he explores the concept of masculinity through the idea of imperfection. It discusses various dimensions of imperfection that his masculine characters demonstrate and argues that for Kharitonov, a "perfect" object of homoerotic desire is defined through minor failings that make him more real and enhance the narrator's attraction to him.

Keywords: literature, Kharitonov, imperfection, masculinity, Vilboa

An iconic representative of late Soviet gay literature, Evgenii Kharitonov (1941–1981) is known for the play "Ocharovannyi Ostrov" [Enchanted Island] that he staged at the Theater of Mimicry and Gesture in Moscow and for his collection of works *Pod domashnim arestom* [Under House Arrest] that he compiled shortly before his untimely death in 1981 and that was officially published in 1993 by the Glagol publishing house in Moscow. Despite the fascinating aesthetics of Kharitonov's literary works and their open and proud homoeroticism unheard of in Russia since Mikhail Kuzmin (1872–1936), only a few researchers have so far focused on his oeuvre, with some of them emphasising the role of binary models in the analysis of his literary legacy.[1] Many of Kharitonov's short stories and poems have also been interpreted through the dynamics between dominant

1 On dichotomous models in Kharitonov's texts, see, e.g., Beliaeva-Konegen; Witte. For studies on Kharitonov in general, see essays that accompany his texts in the 1993 collection (reprinted by Glagol in 2005); Beliaeva; Dark ("Tri lika russkoi erotiki"; "V odnom iz mirov"); Gol'dshtein; Rogov ("'nevozmozhnoe slovo'"; "Ekzistentsial'nyi geroi"); Shatalov; Moss ("The Underground Closet"; "Voploshchenie gomoseksual'nosti"); Leupold; Bernshtein; Kayiatos.

and submissive gay masculinities; and his most famous work, "Dukhovka" [The Oven] has sometimes been read in terms of the relationship between hegemonic heteronormativity and marginalized homosexuality, in which the latter is "frightened" to manifest itself to the hostile environment and is, therefore "doomed to a tragic existence" (Schmid 45; Witte 146-147).

In my paper, I will focus on one of Kharitonov's works that has been rarely discussed— "Vil'boa i drugie veshchi, stikhi" [Vilboa and Other Things, Poems]—and will offer a different approach to the queer imaginary that Kharitonov creates in his works that can and will be discussed here independently of the heteronormative world. My interpretation places Kharitonov's universe into a "parallel reality" that is neither submissive to heteronormativity, not overcoming it—it simply is, and its only purpose is to be a laboratory where Kharitonov can explore male corporeal beauty. As Oleg Dark writes, "[t]he existence of Kharitonov's character is an infinite chain of halted moments of beauty" ("Tri lika russkoi erotiki" 226).[2] In doing so, I argue that by focusing on the perfections of the imperfect and the imperfections of the ideal (alongside other themes), Kharitonov turns sublime imperfection into one of central aspects of male beauty in his universe.

"Vilboa and Other Things, Poems" is a multigenre literary work that is built up by pieces of prosaic and poetic text that experiment with form, contents, and language. Other than the title "Vil'boa" at the beginning and intervals between pieces of the text, nothing separates "Vilboa" from "Other Things" and "Poems"; they are a single whole – Vilboa, Other Things, and Poems – as announced in the title, which is why I will further refer to all these pieces as simply "Vilboa." It is, however, clear that each piece separated by an interval is a text that stands alone, has a different narrator, a different dynamic, and a distinctive aim that it pursues. Within "Vilboa," Kharitonov seems to be changing masks and testing new ground in each of the pieces – a typical device of his that Svetlana Beliaeva connects to his general interest in and engagement with theater performance (149). The texts that "Vilboa" comprises are all relatively short; they range from four lines to a couple of pages. The title refers to the Russian nineteenth-century composer and conductor Konstantin Vil'boa, whose duo *Moriaki* (The Sailors, 1872) is one of the popular music pieces that is being played at a public concert where the narrator of the first piece of Kharitonov's text finds himself. The homoerotic reference implied in the title of this song—the sailor[3]—starts to develop in the following lines, where the homoerotic vein of the text is confirmed by the hero's interest in a young boy who performs a dance on stage together with a girl:

2 "Существование харитоновского героя – бесконечная цепь остановленных мгновений красоты […]."

3 On the figure of the sailor in homoerotic art, see, e.g., Goldman.

И ближе к делу, номер:
мальчик и девочка лет по тринадцати, пляска.
Все одинаково смотрят,
мальчик пляшет, девочка пропускается.
Глаза в большинстве на него.
Хрупкий зародыш мужества трогает.
А он просто, должен плясать и пляшу, как положено
Не закоренел, складный на редкость.
Не зря отцы хотят сыновей. (39)

The narrator's gaze falls onto the boy and singles him out of the duo, just as, according to him, everyone's gaze in the crowd does, too. He thus directs the readers' attention to the boy, in a cinema-like move of the camera that zooms onto him and leaves the girl out of its sight, which is no wonder, considering the boy's unique physique ("складный на редкость"). At the same time, while the sailor (whose figure looms over this piece) is often viewed as a paragon of masculinity, this boy represents a *promise* of masculinity *to come*, still fragile and touching ("Хрупкий зародыш мужества трогает"; "Не закоренел"). For the narrator, the boy's beauty, therefore, lies in his imperfection that resides in the lack of wholeness that characterises many of Kharitonov's heroes who strive to complete it.[4] The boy is like a piece of clay, out of which anything can be shaped—a platform for infinite possibilities for development, which leaves enough room for imagination. Yet, the material that lies in front of the sculptor is already above average and, therefore, promises to deliver a great product in the end. Kharitonov thus plays with the ambiguity of the situation, in which it is unclear whether the narrator is fascinated by the boy, or by the idealised image of the boy in his later years that he envisions to himself, by the result of the boy's maturing that is now only sketched.

The sailors' (and, therefore, masculinity) theme continues in the sailors' dance performed later by three "brothers" (the narrator will find out later that only the twins are brothers, and the third, older boy who captures his attention, is unrelated to them). "[E]veryone in the audience is excited about" this dance ("все предвкушают, я не один"):

третий на них не похож,
все хороши, третий особенно,
он их постарше, на переломе,
братики, все одной крови, все хороши,
но третий –
бедра ремнями затянуты, сердцевина программы. (39)

Again, just as it was with the first boy, the dancer who captivates the narrator is in the process of maturing—a boy who is turning into a man ("он их постарше, на переломе").

4 Aleksandr Zhitenev asserts that Kharitonov's version of homosexuality is about chasing one's own completeness, see Zhitenev 193.

Even without describing his appearance, only by referring to the tight position of the belts on the boy's hips Kharitonov visualizes his muscular body that impresses the narrator so much that he follows the dancers to another venue, where a different concert with their participation should take place and is quite disappointed when it is cancelled. The narrator is doomed to go back home, where some girl who is staying at his place (a visitor of his flatmates) serves as a reminder of this unattainable beauty. At the same time, she provides yet another hint at the narrator's sexuality, as he voices his lack of interest in women that has already become clear from his account of the boy and the girl's dance: "О, Вильбоа, только домой, / где спит незнакомая девушка. / Подари, девушка, сына, а сама уходи гулять" (Kharitonov, "Vilboa i drugie veshchi, stikhi" 40).

The veneration of a young body resurfaces in the second piece of "Vilboa" set in a venue that connects to the sailors' theme of the first piece by breathing homoeroticism and homosociality—a public bath. A visitor of the bath, the narrator recounts his observations of the male genitals that he witnesses in abundance at this place, while he is particularly impressed with the ones of younger boys:

> Событие: показали феномена,
> такая длина впервые.
> При том, что обладатель почти ребенок,
> только что вытянулся, в пропорциях не установился.
> Но размера такого не видел.
> Тоже сначала мылись дети, моложе его, двое,
> тоже у них по-взрослому развито:
> у одного такой крепенький темного цвета,
> как будто бы повидал виды, с прикрытой головой,
> у другого потоньше, но по длине хорошо […] (40)

The piece exploits the already familiar types of characters: a young man on the verge of becoming a paragon of masculinity, who is, however, not quite there yet ("почти ребенок, только что вытянулся, в пропорциях не установился") and the narrator who is desperately chasing the dream that seems really close in this case (he would clarify at the end of the piece that his chances to invite this young man over were quite high, yet he missed the opportunity).[5] Unlike the previous texts, this piece demonstrates the traditional Kharitonovian openness about discussing physical details of the genitals and of sexual acts: Evgenii Popov would recollect that Kharitonov's narrative could "scare off many readers" by its "deliberately shameless" style [*narochito besstyzhii*; 104]. Kharitonov's haptic aesthetic resides in his visually and linguistically touching and caressing the object of desire: Igor' Iarkevich notes in this regard that

5 "Сам не из Москвы, здесь в ремесленном, / какой билет в лотерее: / здесь в общежитии, смело позвать / деревенский и ничего не знает, / выигрыш раз в десять лет – / упустил." (41).

> Стилистика Харитонова бесконечно, запредельно чувственна. Его персонажи агрессивно демонстрируют свою чувственность в отношении не только самих себя и субъектов своей любви, но буквально всего, что их окружает. Познание мира для них абсолютно сенсорно, ни о какой рациональности в принципе не может быть и речи. Их душа словно бы спрятана в кончиках пальцев, которыми они пробуют и щупают мир. (Iarkevich 169)

The bath scene is a perfect example of the author's approach, for the penis that he witnesses is the only part of the boy's body that raises no doubts in the narrator about the boy's perfection (it is quite clear that the "phenomenon" about which the author speaks is the penis, not the boy) and he gladly shares all the details about it with the reader:

> какой-то коленчатый, как бамбук,
> как будто дорос до хорошей длины,
> и дальше решил, на второе колено,
> и зарубка видна, до которой вначале.
> А на пределе –
> если даже в два раза, непостижимо,
> как распрямляется – собственная тяжесть не даст,
> закон рычага. (41)

Naturalistic descriptions that abound in tiniest detail are softened by the irony that Kharitonov weaves into his text that also hints at the only imperfection that this part of the male physique bears, in narrator's view—the wrinkles:

> если смотреть в отдельности, возраст не определим.
> Единственная деталь по которой годы не опознаются.
> По любой другой можно, а эта и так в морщинах. (40)

Just as the dancer, this bath boy slips away from the narrator (the former—due to inopportune circumstances, the latter—due to a lack of decisiveness on the narrator's part). The motif of chasing a beautiful young man without a happy end is central to Kharitonov's texts. It is often the reason of the suffering, a tragedy of life, and bitter disappointment of his narrators, and has been addressed in research on several occasions (Dark, "Tri lika russkoi erotiki" 225-26; Shatalov 56; Moss, "Voploshchenie gomoseksual'nosti" 192-194). This motif of escape falls in line with Kharitonov's fascination with the imperfect: the unattainability of the objects of desire is part and parcel of their sublime imperfection. While the narrator would find it perfect to be together with an object of his veneration in many different ways—from observing him to having a love relationship with him; he is consistently deprived of this pleasure, and it may be for the better, as this failure leaves him with an illusion that he has constructed for himself, it preserves the perfection that he imagined by leaving the imperfection in place.

An imperfect connection between the narrator and the object of his desire often comes from an emotional distance that grows between lovers, where the narrator is substituted by a new lover; sometimes due to his own fault:

Не верь, милый друг, как я тебе не верю.
Просто целуем, перебираем друг друга.
Какая сухая осень. Цветы у метро с рук.
Ты охладел, потому что я охладел.
Я разжился на Толю и нового Мишу.
Как красавец, так обязательно Миша.
Почему ты не взял у меня его место?
Почему я тебе не запал весну назад?
Лучше ты слева он справа на обе руки,
чтобы никто не пропал.
Там еще Слава из ЦСКА без звонка. (58)

On other occasions, the distance grows in connection to an untimely death, often brought about by the war, about which Kharitonov ponders in a digression in the first piece on the sailor dancers:

Война с вами точно обходится, не дает переспеть,
запечатлевает в канун расцвета,
чтобы у всех разрывались сердца.
Гибнет мальчик в тельняшке, спадает со щек румянец,
не распустившись в окоп,
губ никто ему не раскрыл. (39)

Death at a young age locks young beauty forever, preserves its perfect imperfection that will now never achieve perfection and, therefore, will never become imperfect.

One more dimension of imperfection that goes beyond the ones that I described above in that it acquires shape through multiple levels on which the imperfection is not only represented, but also performed, is the language. "Vilboa" contains a piece that is constructed as recollections of a (young) man about his boyhood. In this piece, Kharitonov's narrator does not dwell on young boys but assumes a role of a young boy upon himself in striving to reach the sublime imperfection that, in his view, resides in them. Yet, in doing so, the narrator does not only reinvent himself as a young boy who recollects his youth, but he also starts to act like one, at least on the level of the language that with each line disintegrates further under the pressure of the immature orthography and punctuation:

Они мне дом, они мне деньги,
разбаловали, дарагии,
адивают абувают, а я про это напишу,
маленькими буковками хорошо писать,
ломать буду язык как бутта савсем маленький […]. (44)

The letters grow small (although only acoustically, not on paper), and so does the narrator who visually transforms into a young boy in front of the reader together with the language of the text. However, even in this role that may be the closest approximation that the narrator can experience to the objects of his desire he fails to feel perfection: he places himself into circumstances where, instead of celebrating the beauty of his young body, he is torn by remorse that his family will forever see him as incomplete, as imperfect:

> Мамачка, бумаги прочла, будит типерь пра миня думать
> никакой надежды на симью на внукав
> […]
> Уеду за то что прочла, мамачка будит плакать
> ни спать зачем уличила
> дело тонкае разви можна […] (44)

The discovery of the narrator's homosexuality by the family is never presented through the eyes of the family in this piece, we only learn about the narrator's idea of their idea of him—a line of logic that is flawed from the beginning, imperfect just as the narrator thinks he is to his relatives. He self-deprecates himself to the extent of imagining himself in their minds as "nothingness," a failure: "из миня ничиво ни будит" (45). He achieves imperfection, but it is of a kind that does not elevate him to the same level to which he raises the objects of his own desire: on the contrary, he falls even lower than he initially was due to the intricate games of his own mind, while the text, on the other hand, rises to perfection through the imperfection that creates it.

We can, therefore, look at Kharitonov's texts not as a compendium of binaries of young and old, strong and weak (which may be emphasized in some of his texts, such as "Odin takoi, drugoi drugoi" [One is Like This, the Other is Different], where one is necessarily perfect and the other flawed), but as a palette of forms and shapes that reveals different degrees of imperfection combined with perfection that are hidden within each of his characters and narrators.

Works Cited

Beliaeva, Svetlana. "O tvorchestve Evgeniia Kharitonova." *Strelets, no.* 66, 1991, pp. 148-62.

Beliaeva-Konegen, Svetlana. "Po-prezhnemu pod domashnim arestom." *Slezy na tsvetakh,* pp. 173-78.

Bernshtein, Evgenii. "Evgenii Vladimirovich Kharitonov." *Russian Writers since 1980,* edited by Marina Balina and Mark Lipovetskii, Gale, 2004, pp. 122-28.

Dark, Oleg. "Tri lika russkoi erotiki." *Strelets, no.* 67, 1991, pp. 223-29.

Dark, Oleg. "V odnom iz mirov." *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, no.* 3, 1993, pp. 274-84.

Goldman, Jason. "Subjects of the Visual Arts: Sailors and Soldiers." *The Queer Encyclopedia of the Visual Arts,* edited by Claude J. Summers, Cleis Press, 2004, pp. 319-20.

Gol'dshtein, Aleksandr. "O Evgenii Kharitonove." *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, no.* 3, 1993, pp. 259-65.

Iarkevich, Igor'. "Posledniaia priamota." *Slezy na tsvetakh,* pp. 169-72.

Kayiatos, Anastasia. "Silent Plasticity: Reenchanting Soviet Stagnation." *Women's Studies Quarterly,* vol. 40, 3-4, 2013, pp. 105-25.

Kharitonov, Evgenii. *Slezy na tsvetakh: Kniga 2. Dopolneniia i prilozheniia*, Glagol, 1993.

Kharitonov, Evgenii. "Vil'boa i drugie veshchi, stikhi." *Slezy na tsvetakh: Kniga 1. Pod domashnim arestom*, Glagol, 1993, pp. 38-58.

Leupold, Gabriele. "Ein Held der Schwäche." *Unter Hausarrest: Ein Kopfkissenbuch*, Rowohlt Berlin, 1996, pp. 361-80.

Moss, Kevin. "The Underground Closet: Political and Sexual Dissidence in East European Culture." *Postcommunism and the Body Politic,* edited by Ellen E. Berry, New York University Press, 1995, pp. 229-51.

Moss, Kevin. "Voploshchenie gomoseksual'nosti v rabotakh Evgeniia Kharitonova i Gennadiia Trifonova." *Na pereput'e: metodologiia, teoriia i praktika LGBT i kvir-issledovanii: sbornik statei,* edited by Alexander Kondakov, Tsentr nezavisimykh sotsiologicheskikh issledovanii, 2014, pp. 191-201.

Popov, Evgenii. "Kus ne po zubam." *Slezy na tsvetakh,* pp. 102-05.

Rogov, Kirill. "'nevozmozhnoe slovo' i ideia stilia." *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, no.* 3, 1993, pp. 265-73.

Rogov, Kirill. "Ekzistentsial'nyi geroi i 'nevozmozhnoe slovo' Evgeniia Kharitonova." *Pod domashnim arestom: Sobranie proizvedenii,* edited by Gleb Morev, Glagol, 2005, pp. 5-18.

Schmid, Ulrich. "Masken des Begehrens: Homosexualität in der russischen Literatur." *Osteuropa, no.* 10, 2013, pp. 17-48.

Shatalov, Alexander. "The Last Unprintable Writer." *Index on Censorship,* vol. 24, no. 1, 1995, pp. 54-57.

Witte, Georg. "Der beobachtete Erzähler. Literarische Reflexe des Anormalen – am Beispiel Evgenij Charitonovs." *Enttabuisierung: Essays zur russischen und polnischen Gegenwartsliteratur,* edited by Jochen-Ulrich Peters and German Ritz, Peter Lang, 1996, pp. 141-60. Slavica Helvetica.

Zhitenev, Aleksandr A. "Zhizn' s tainoi: o proze Kharitonova." *Emblemata amatoria: Stat'i i etiudy*, Nauka-Junipress, 2015, pp. 192-94.