Love on the Final Slopes of Life: Fedor Ivanovich Tiutchev and "The Denis'eva Cycle"

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Old age represents a serious social issue. With the current rise in ageing populations, literary approaches to ageing have also emerged, illustrating how literature, as part of the new "humanistic gerontology," can complement other disciplines in the scholarly field of ageing. "Literary gerontology" has grown, over the last few decades, into a burgeoning academic activity, and parallel to the recent wave of novels about old age, ageing is now established among literary scholars as a critical perspective in its own right. This perspective is usually marked by an interdisciplinary stance, as in Helen Small's ground-breaking work on the ethics of longevity, *The Long Life* (2007).

It can easily be claimed that literary studies have much to gain from crossing the border into the field of ageing studies, not least by becoming more conscious about the surrounding world and by recognizing literature's continued relevance in relation to contemporary societal processes. This implies *inter alia* recognition of the important role of literature in the attempt to restore the worth of old age as a universal aspect of human life, and awareness of how reading prose, plays and poetry can contribute to intergenerational identification and intergenerational solidarity.[1] Moreover, literature can inquire in depth into the problem of what Kathleen Woodward refers to as "gerontophobia" (1991, 7), the continu-

1 Especially significant, in light of the heightening conflict now developing between generations as a result of the wave of senior citizens, is the conflict described most provocatively by the British author Martin Amis (2010) as a coming civil war. He even calls for legal drugs for suicide (euthanasia) as a method to stop the "invasion of terrible immigrants […], a population of demented very old people."

Remaining Relevant: Modern Language Studies Today

Bergen Language and Linguistics Studies · vol. 7 · 2017 © Lillian Jorunn Helle.
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15845/bells.v7i0

ing stigmatization and tabooing of old age in our culture. This *phobia* implies, among other things, a tendency not to accept the signs of ageing in oneself, but to relegate these to others.[2] Through this relegation, our own old person becomes an uncanny stranger, as Simone de Beauvoir argued in her essay *The Coming of Age*.[3] And precisely because ageing so often seems to be an alien territory, literature can serve as a crucial means to re-appropriate the repressed. Against the bias of ascribing ageing to others and of othering our own elderly self, literary texts possess a specific potential for rendering the old I present and visible, thereby liberating it from marginalization, shame and silencing. The oppressive negativity of cultural constructions can thus be shaken, forcing us to think beyond clichéd dichotomies and the traditional "discourse of senescence" (Katz 1996).

By the same token, literature can allow access to *individual* ageing, enabling us to grasp the subjectivities and intricacies connected to growing old more clearly than quantitative, statistical sociological studies and medical reports can do. Literature can therefore free the lived realities of ageing from abstract generalizations, by exploring the phenomenologies of the older brain and body. And most notably for our present purposes, literature can investigate the domain of ageing senses and sensations, and widen our understanding of how elderly people experience sensual attractions, love and desire.

To demonstrate these assumptions, I will focus on the so-called "Denis'eva cycle" by the nineteenth-century Russian diplomat and aristocrat, Feodor Ivanovich Tiutchev, one of the greatest poets of the classical Russian tradition.[4] The cycle is generally characterized as being the most sublime body of love poems in the Russian language with a "lyrical intensity and psychological penetration unique in Russian literature"

2 Cf. Woodward (1991, 193): "We repress the subject of aging. […] We do not recognize it in ourselves."

3 For Beauvoir (1972, 289), the ageing self becomes the other within, a frightening and "unheimlich" intruder.

4 The poems have been the subject of numerous genre studies, since they were not originally planned as a cycle, created over a period of 18 years. Usually they are seen as representative of a "not intentional" lyrical cycle (Bukharkin 1977, 118), forming an undisputable unity through their thematic and stylistic coherence. The exact number of poems regarded as belonging to the cycle (from 17–21), is part of an on-going scholarly debate. For the discussions on genre, see Rydel (1995) and Petrova (1988).

(Gregg 1957, 158).[5] It is possible to view the strong emotional resonance of these poems in the light of their highly dramatic autobiographical subtext: the cycle retells, in lyrical verse, how the married (for the second time, as it were) Tiutchev, at 50, an advanced age at that time, fell in love with Elena Aleksandrovna Denis'eva, a noblewoman of 22 and a school-friend of his daughters. While not divorcing, the poet kept her as his "mistress" and over the course of 15 years she bore him three children. The liaison was considered scandalous and was condemned by polite society in St Petersburg. The female partner in the illicit union was particularly ostracized. Elena Denis'eva became *persona non grata*, and after being thrown into disgrace by both family and former friends, she became increasingly desolated, a victim of nervous breakdowns and bouts of depression.[6] The affair ended in utmost tragedy in 1865, when Elena Denis'eva, after a long period of deteriorating health, died from tuberculosis, closely followed by the death of two of their children. These events threw the aging lover into a spiral of endless despair and, although he was reconciled with his wife, the long-suffering German baroness Ernestine Pfeffer, this family reunion did little to lighten the despondency of his closing years.[7]

Based on this personal drama, Tiutchev has written a lyrical collection which questions, in an innovative manner, the prevailing stereotypes regarding love in the winter of a man's life. The poems display, in their rare psychological depth and passionate strength, the exceptional power of literature to present the human experience in all its contradictory and confusing complexity. In this sense, they allow unique access to emotional, sensitive and moral dimensions, thereby generating a type of insight into the human condition that could hardly have been obtained, for example, through philosophical analyses, ethical treatises or religious teaching. This insight, however, seems to have less to do with, for instance, finding solutions to problems, than with literature's capacity

5 This echoes the Russian Symbolist Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, who regarded the Denis'eva cycle as the greatest love poems not only in Russian, but in world poetry as well (1915, 110).

6 Society's condemnation, however, was typically one sided, revealing the double standard of the period's sexual morals. While Elena Denis'eva was blatantly rejected by *the beau monde*, Tiutchev continued to be a well-received guest both at the court and in the salons of the nobility (cf. Pigarev 1962, 148).

7 For more on Tiutchev (both life and works), see Gregg (1957) and Dewey (2010); for a standard Russian study, see Pigarev (1962).

to produce meaning and reduce suffering (cf. Cole 2014, 520).[8] Hannah Arendt has expressed this, with a citation from Karen Blixen: "All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story" (Arendt 1998, 175).[9]

Indeed, putting sorrows into a story is exactly what Tiutchev is doing in the Denis'eva-poems, since this lyrical cycle also takes the form of a narrative. As such, it has more than once been compared to a lyrical diary, a lyrical novella or a novel in verse, with a discernible threefold structure: a prologue, a climax and an ending (Petrova 1988, 48).[10] The poems register (or rather poetically refract), in chronological order, the different phases of an often turbulent relationship, mapping with excruciating intensity the inner and outer world of the lovers. We follow them—in glimpses—from the glorious first meetings and moments of ecstasy, through bitter-sweet depictions of the birth of their illegitimate children, to the harsh attacks from the lyrical I, Tiutchev's alter ego, upon society for its sexual hypocrisy and for the way it degrades the feelings of his beloved and declares them a sin. Further, we are shown the heroine's compromized reputation, her faded appearance and growing desperation, her grave illnesses and death, and finally, the traumatized contemplations of the grieving male, a frail old man left with troubling guilt and ruthless self-accusations.[11]

When Tiutchev narrativizes his life in these poems, it could be argued that the inherent transformational potential of narrative contributes to a transcending of the chaos of reality and a rendering the meaningless meaningful.[12] Transfigured through the poet's lyrical tale, the pains and losses of the Denis'eva affair become part of a process of new cognition, as well as a testimony to the senescent subject in love. These lyrical texts, therefore, demonstrate the intimate interconnectedness of transformation, self-knowledge and narrative. Moreover, the narrative strains of the cycle, its clearly pronounced novelistic character, could pertain to it, in a certain sense, as an "education sentimentale." As Antoine Compagnon (2006) has asserted, this "education," with its implications for values and

8 For further discussions on this point, see Baars (2012, 197).

9 The citation stands as an epigraph to the chapter on action in the second edition of Arendt's book *The Human Condition* (1998).

10 On the cycle as a "kind of novel," see Bukhshtab (1970, 49).

11 For an English translation of the poems, see Tyutchev (2000).

12 Most notably Paul Ricœur has insisted upon the capacity of narrative to transform life and refigure the identity, see Verner (2000, 116 ff.).

moral matters, is an essential dimension in literary narratives. Hence, we have a linking of literature to the (contemporary) ethical turn, to the narrative's potential for triggering inner change and growth, and to the capacity for staging moral predicaments and existential problems. A similar capacity can be observed in Tiutchev. His "novel in verse" is permeated with guilt-ridden ethical dilemmas, questioning the integrity of the elderly poet's actions, the morality of his involvement with Elena Denis'eva and his right to ruin a young woman's life. His (or the lyrical I's) reflections on his own, often far from heroic figure and the recognition of his own inadequacy and selfishness are conveyed as agonized steps of self-discovery, in which Tiutchev (or his poetical alter ego) strives, with brutal candor, to understand or *explain* the entangled feelings of his final love. As Dmitrii Merezhkovskii once asserted, in these prose poems Tiutchev manifests a "passionate and pathetic" truth about himself with an unprecedented and merciless openness, exposing "the highest levels of truth," which can be expressed only through poetry (2015, 109).

Thus, the Denis'eva-story is an eminent illustration of the *explanatory* power of narrative, a topic Paul Ricœur has repeatedly insisted upon, once writing: "A narrative that fails to explain, is less than a narrative" (1992, 1, 148). This implies, amongst other things, that by simultaneously presenting and structuring time, narratives are able to organize the human experience in an irreplaceable manner. Knowledge of one's life, therefore, presupposes the hermeneutical circularity of narrative and time, situating the narrative form in a particularly valuable relationship to aging, making it intrinsically, if not constitutively, bound to the self-reflections of late life (cf. DeFalco 2010, 13). This is a connection that is revealingly exemplified in the cycle, not least in the poems written after Elena Denis'eva's death, which are usually considered the most profound of the whole collection.[13] In addition, they constitute a recollection and a confession, both genres commonly associated with ageing individuals' attempts to resurrect the past and restore some kind of coherence to their lives. In this respect, the latest poems in the cycle are senescent endeavours to come to terms with what has been, although in Tiutchev's lyrical reminiscences there are no traces of a naïve, soothing or sentimentalizing

13 See f. ex. the poems "All the day she lay oblivious," "The breeze has dropped," "Oh, this south, oh, this Nice," "In the sufferings of my stagnation," "On the eve of the Anniversary of August 4th 1864."

nostalgia. Instead, these poems are subtle investigations into the phases of mourning and represent a writing of loss that is also an expression of creativity, showing how crippling grief can generate the most moving (love) stories.[14] At the same time, the poems depict an old man who is navigating between different versions of himself, among them an elderly husband sedately ensconced (once again) within the family circle, while simultaneously living as a bereaved lover, possessed by haunting and harrowing memories. This is especially evident in the poem "The breeze has dropped," written some months after his mistress's death, when Tiutchev was travelling with his eldest daughters to Lake Geneva. The contrast between the poem's description of the idyllic Swiss landscape and the tormenting memories of a grave "back home" poignantly renders this conflict. Such splitting typically threatens the sense of a unified personhood, disturbing the stability of (an ageing) subject's existence. The cycle may also provide further insights on ageing, therefore, described as a process "of increasing multiple identities" (Skenazi 2013, 57).[15]

While the scope of this article does not allow for an extensive textual close-reading of the Denis'eva-verses, in what follows I will concretize some of my previous general remarks by referring to and commenting upon some of the poems, particularly the one entitled "Last Love" (1854), which is often seen as emblematic of the cycle and to incorporate, in a condensed way, its main themes:

Oh, how, in the ending years
Is love more tender and obsessive—
O shine! O shine, the parting rays
Of my last love, the evening sun!

14 Cf. also Woodward (1993, 97) on the connection between loss and renewal through reminiscing writing. She has elsewhere suggested that all reminiscing activity has the potential of revitalizing the future of an elderly individual, not only of reviving the past (1997, 13). In Tiutchev's case one could hardly argue that his poetical reminiscing restored a bright and forward-looking perspective to his ageing existence, but at least it led to a deeper recognition. The poetical retelling of the break, crisis and catastrophe in relation to the Denis'eva affair—circumstances threatening any harmonious completion of the old poet's biographical narrative—may thus have contributed to a certain reintegration in his life, however frail and fragile, and also have made his sufferings more endurable.

15 The topic of selfhood and the multiple senescent self is highly in focus in literary (and other) ageing studies (see for example deFalco, 2010), illustrating how the story of a person's old age may dissolve into multiple narratives or even anti-narratives.

The darkness cuts half of the sky;
And only the West has the roving glow,
Oh, time of evening, do not fly!
Enchantment, be prolonged and slow!

The blood may thin within our veins,
Yet more the heart preserves a tender passion—
O you, my final love,
You are my bliss and desperation.

At first glance, this poem (like all the Denis'eva poems) appears to be a quintessential product of Romanticism, reenacting the classical motif of the ephemeral and illusive character of the joys of love. And since the above text conveys the reflections of an elderly man, this illusiveness becomes especially precarious, and the fleeting aspect of the moment takes on a new significance, spurring the ageing lover to beg for it to last: "Enchantment, be prolonged and slow!"[16] His exclamation underscores the desperate quality of his last love, which is both "bliss and desperation," lending a more destructive dimension to his sensual pleasures. The oxymoronic nature of his feelings, the contradictory conjoining of pleasure and destruction, emhasizes the tragic dialectics or dualism of love and death which underlies the whole cycle. This dualism is a highly recurrent topos in Russian literature and culture, and can be regarded as a poetic convention, or as an exploration of a traditional Russian thought pattern—the concept that pleasure and pain are one and the same thing. Erotic passion becomes ambiguous, therefore, since it not only leads to sexual gratification, but also to human loss and annihilation.[17]

16 Reminding one of the famous, but fateful words uttered by Faust regarding the moment: "Oh stay a while, you are so lovely" (*Faust,* Part 1, Scene 4), lending as it were a fatal tone also to Tiutchev's evocation. Tiutchev was very familiar with Goethe's drama, having translated it into Russian (cf. Pratt 1984, 233).

17 On this topic, see Helle (1998) and (2011). A most radical version of the dark side of sex evolved in the Russian sects of castrates ("skoptsy"), in the 17th and 18th centuries. For the sectarians, the fear of the death present in the sexual embrace became so precarious that only self-mutilation, the surgical removal of sexual organs, could save the human soul from the dangers of the flesh. The novelist Lev Tolstoi, in his second period from 1880, came close to these conceptions, although he argued that man, to reach a pure condition, should be mentally castrated, by his power of will, and not by the knife (see Helle 1998). On the sects, see also Etkind (1998).

Typically, Tiutchev presents love as a form of enslavement or a battle, inevitably leading to the death of (one of) the parties involved, as expressed in "Predestination," a poem from 1854. This text uncannily anticipates the tragic fate of the female lover, inquiring into the notion of love as a fatal duel, with the weaker of the two, the woman, being killed, like "an animal" (Bukhshtab 1970, 49).[18] The catastrophic, even "grotesque" (Aikhenvald 1994, 388) core of sensual attractions is no less disturbingly present in yet another poem (1851) with the famous opening stanza:

Oh how murderously we love,
How in a tempestuous blindness of passion
We destroy most surely
That which is dearest to our heart.

Lines such as these provokingly illustrate the "Russian" idea of the fateful coupling of Eros and Thanatos.[19] From one point of view, the Denis'eva cycle elaborates upon such well-known poetical and rhetorical approaches, endorsing in its own brilliant manner, preconceived perceptions regarding the mortal ravages of love. On the other hand, the cycle transcends

18 On this topic and its element of sadomasochism, see also Tabachnikova (2015, 130ff) and Gatchev (1994, 21ff). Certainly, the motive of the fatal linking of love and death has played a role also in a European, not least in the Romantic literary and cultural tradition. But the dread of the death hiding in erotic love seems to have been particularly strongly felt in the Russian setting. Vasilii Rozanov (1856–1919), a Russian philosopher and writer who wanted to create an alternative to what he called the hysterical and hyperbolic asceticism of Russian culture, claimed that: "The terrible Skoptsian spirit, the rejection of the flesh, has suppressed the Russian people with a force that the West can have no understanding of" (1906, 8).

19 Actually, this "Russian" idea seems to have contributed to the development of psychoanalysis in Europe through the Russian-Jewish psychoanalyst Sabina Spielrein who, in her study *Destruction as the Cause of Coming into Being* (*Die Destruktion als Ursache des Werdens*) from 1912, presents a model in which destruction becomes pregnant with creation; the death instinct is an aspect of the life instinct. Sigmund Freud, for a while Spielrein's advisor, received decisive impulses from her work as can be seen his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (*Jenseits des Lustprinzips*) from 1920, in which he admitted her role in anticipating his ideas regarding the doctrine of Thanatos in a footnote. In Freud though, these ideas are transformed into an instinctual dualism, Thanatos and Eros (or libido) remain two independent forces standing in varying relations to one another. Freud therefore did not follow up on Spielrein's insistence on life and death as two facets of the same phenomenon, an ambiguous way of thinking deeply rooted in Russian religious and intellectual tradition (see Helle 1998, 44ff.).

the conventionalism of such dualistic notions, since this relationship had devastating implications also in real life. Furthermore, by retelling this story, with all its conflicting entanglements, Tiutchev, even when confirming one set of established conventions, subverts others; and above all, he dissolves powerful constructions pertaining to love and ageing. Like a palimpsest, these texts reveal clichés, prejudices and norms that still prevail in our culture, thereby challenging cemented stereotypes concerning love in old age.

Firstly, a common presumption regarding old age is that the weakened senses of senescence lessen sensitivity. However, as is evident in Tiutchev's "Last love" (cited above), the male protagonist indicates that the intensity of his emotions has actually increased in later life.[20] Despite the fact that his physical strength has decreased—the blood thinner and his body frailer—his ability to feel is stronger than ever, as he loves her, the poet asserts, "more tenderly, more obsessively." Thus, we can note an unmasking of the common conception of fixed periods of life with fixed characteristic traits.[21] According to these schemes, sensual love is associated with youth, while ageing is associated with reasoned self-reflection. Such social and cultural constraints that are imposed upon old age are continually resisted in the Denis'eva collection. The lyrical I in his "ending years" acts towards his beloved like a youth in the first haze of infatuation. As the Russian Symbolist Andrei Belyi once wrote: "The calm classic […] Tiutchev in old age falls in love, like a young man, with the passion of a volcano" (1911, 12). His passionate obsession is thus at odds with cultural scripts of elderly asexuality, undermining the polarities of sexual youth and neutered old age.

The way the cycle negates abstract age-related categories is also evident in the way the poems destroy the prevalent dual portrait of the ageing male as either a chaste and wise sage, or a sexually active pleasure seeker. In Tiutchev, this binarity is frequently dissolved since the lyrical I behaves like an ageing wise man sometimes, reflecting on his moral role in the affair; and like an ardent lover sometimes, lost in his emotional yearnings. In this interaction, contemplation is intertwined with

20 Tiutchev is here akin to the elderly Michel de Montaigne, who noted that, although his age had weakened his body, his sensitivity to their sensual qualities had actually increased, cf. Skenazi (2013, 112).

21 For more on the fixed ages of man, see Skenazi (2013, 8ff), see also Sears (1986).

pleasure, elderly wisdom with passion, intriguingly combining what has traditionally been kept apart by culturally construed dichotomies. One could, therefore, contend that "the standard oppositions of old age and youth, wisdom and folly, lust and chastity prove irrelevant when applied to the later life of a particular individual" (Skenazi 2013, 117). These words are totally appropriate when applied to our ageing poet, making the Denis'eva verses into a flexible tool for registering the ambiguities and ambivalences of the senescent self in love.

Moreover, texts about intergenerational love have tended to depict these liaisons in a more or less farcical manner, the greying paramour not seldom subject to laughter, a clichéd personage in an uneven age-related setting. Late-life sensuality is thus often translated into late-life hedonism, emphasizing in a comical fashion the supposedly excessive desire of the lecherous grandpa (cf. DeFalco 2010, 129ff.). Such clichés are clearly denunciated in the Denis'eva cycle, in which elements of ridicule and irony are absent in relation to the sensual and emotional bonds between the younger and the elder lovers. At the same time, the poems seem to problematize, or possibly criticize, another stereotype, that of intergenerational love leading to suffering, both for the young and old. In Tiutchev, grave repercussions follow the trespassing across generational boundaries, features that can be found, to mention a quite different context, in modern works such as Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* and *The Dying Animal*.

Yet another stereotype questioned in the cycle is the topos of the re-energizing force of a young woman's love, imagined as a magic fountain ensuring the waning man a second youth. These notions are equivocally expressed in Tiutchev. To a certain degree, in the description of the initial phase of their union, one could perhaps claim that "the gaze of the beloved"—also a well-known trope—invigorates the ageing male, as in the poem "I knew a pair of eyes, oh, these eyes."[22] Very soon though, the enchantment of her eyes is extinguished as readers are confronted with the affair's disastrous effects on the lyrical heroine, which also send the ageing lover into despair and unhappiness, dismantling, as it were, the

22 In this poem, the power of the female gaze is described as a metaphysical force tying the lyrical I to cosmic dimensions. On the development of the topos of "the gaze of the beloved," see Drpić (2016, 388 ff.).

idea of rejuvenating love.[23] Likewise, the topos of the young woman as an ideal of bodily and spiritual beauty, functioning as a source of inspiration for the elderly artist, is no less ambiguously refracted in the cycle. Initially, the female figure comes close to this Romantic perception, being depicted as blooming in her maidenly loveliness, an object of both lofty exaltation and lusty longing in the gaze of the ageing man. But this image is dramatically reversed, when the lyrical I describes her, only one year after their first meeting (and after the birth of their first child), as having lost both her exuberant joy in life and her former radiant looks. The roses on her cheeks have disappeared and the glorious smile on her lips has gone.[24] Through the regretful glance of the senescent lover, we see her painfully fade away, her youth taken from her, turning her, so to speak, into the anti-thesis of a traditional muse.[25]

However, by the same token the rendering of the heroine's premature ageing also becomes part of the cycle's dismantling of the boundaries between youth and age. The original differences in their appearances seem to diminish, as the younger woman is presented as increasingly weary and worn out. But the poet's feelings do not diminish, and his initial passion is combined with a growing sense of compassion, tenderness and care. Thus, it is typical that he loves her "more tenderly" (cf. "Last Love"), an interesting expression since it has been claimed that tenderness in Russian love contexts recalls the concept of compassion and pity, which were synonymous with love in the Russian language (Gatchev 1994, 21). Such an understanding of love, one might argue, confers new depth also on the love/death-binary. The pity he harbours for his mistress (despite their tumultuous relationship) shines through in every line, and his conscience-stricken sympathy for her sufferings enables him to understand the situation also from her perspective. Some of the poems are even written as if from her female point of view; in this, the cycle reveals a trespassing across not only intergenerational borders, but also gender borders. An example of this would be the poem "Don't say: he loves me like before" (1852), written in the voice of the woman and showing Tiutchev's ability to identify with his female lover's manner of speaking and inner

23 See especially the poem "How murderously we love" (1851).

24 See *ibid*.

25 The words of Lev Tolstoi are therefore very to the point: "Tiutchev is all too serious, he is not joking with his muse" (Chertkova 1960, 362).

world. This ability was noted already by the novelist Ivan Turgenev, who observed that the language of the female heart was "intimate to Tiutchev and easily rendered by him" (1963, 426). The empathy with which the beloved is described adds a new psychological dimension to the lyrical ego's scrutinizing self-searching. The result is a document, shattering in its emotional force, in which the elderly poet investigates his final love with such unconventional, undisguised honesty that it acquires a universal pertinence and touches the hearts of today's readers as well.

The cycle's original approach to a number of traditional themes, its reinvention of Romantic poetry, is also evident in Tiutchev's (or the lyrical I's) criticism of the Russian *beau monde* for its hypocritical condemnation of the "mistress." His writing reflects an awareness of women's precarious place in society and contains an element of social critique seldom encountered in lyrical love verses. This element lends a new facet to Tiutchev's interpretation of the Denis'eva affair and demonstrates once again his ability to combine and bring together flaming passion with psychological and social analysis, thereby destroying established oppositions between elderly wisdom and youthful infatuation. Furthermore, the manner in which Tiutchev in these poems builds his final love into an utterly gripping narrative, making bearable the tragedy of the experiences it is based on through its sheer literary and poetical magnetism, reminds one once again of the words of Karen Blixen: "All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story." The meaning of this statement could hardly have found a better expression than in "The Denis'eva cycle."

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