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From Aleshkovsky to Galkovsky:
The Praise of Folly in Russian Prose since the 1960s



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NOTE ON CONVENTIONS

I have followed the Library of Congress transliteration conventions, with the following two important exceptions: ‘ю’ is rendered throughout as ‘yu’ (not ‘iu’), and ‘я’ as ‘ya’ (not ‘ia’). Furthermore, the endings of proper names in ‘ий’ are transcribed throughout as ‘y’, not ‘ii’ (Dmitry, Aleshkovsky, etc.).

For references, I have been guided by the handbook of the Modern Humanities Research Association (2002). I provide full references to each work at its first mention in each chapter; in subsequent references, I generally cite author and page number only. In cases where more than one work by an author has been referred to, both author and title are given.

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Short Abstract

This thesis illustrates and analyses the appeal of folly to writers of, principally, the late-Soviet era (1960s-1980s). This appeal expressed itself not only in numerous portrayals of evidently foolish characters, but also in the widespread use of first-person narrative in which various masks of folly are worn by narrators to assert their detachment from societal norms and from the scholarly and 'objective' discourse which Soviet culture sought to promote. These tendencies towards folly and subjectivity are examined in their various historical, religious and philosophical implications. Parallels are sought both in the Russian literary-cultural heritage, which has accorded exceptional importance to various models of folly, and in West-European literary traditions, especially that established by Erasmus. It is argued that, while the Russian paradigm of holy foolery (*yurodstvo*) has undoubtedly retained its importance as a literary theme and code, loose analogies with *yurodstvo* may lead to misleading or simplistic interpretations.

In the Introduction I outline further my aims and methodology, while also providing an account of the cultural and literary background to the topic, before and after 1917. In Chapter One I discuss fiction by Vladimir Voinovich, Vasily Shukshin and Venedikt Erofeev, in order to indicate aspects of the general shape of my topic in the given period: how the 'praise of folly' developed and gained in complexity at the end of the 1960s.

The bulk of the thesis (Chapters Two to Five) is devoted to more detailed case-studies of the work of three significant, but critically neglected, writers: Yuz Aleshkovsky, Yury Mamleev and the philosopher, Dmitry Galkovsky. The varied 'fool narratives' of each of these writers manifests, in contrasting ways, a profound and paradoxical engagement with the mind, wisdom and learning. If Aleshkovskian folly develops in a sharply drawn historical context (Stalinism and its aftermath) and bears a markedly Christian flavour, Mamleev seeks to exclude Soviet and Christian thematics entirely, seeking deliverance from thought and reason. Dmitry Galkovsky, meanwhile, assesses the entire history of the Russian intelligentsia's love affair with folly from his own radically subjective and unreliable perspective in his 'philosophical novel' *Beskonechnyi tupik*.

The Epilogue is devoted to Viktor Erofeev's highly cynical interpretation of Russia's 'praise of folly', before concluding with examples of the renewal of its traditions in post-Soviet prose.

Long Abstract

The achievements of Russian prose of the last forty-odd years have remained in many respects uncertain. Very few writers of the period are readily accorded the status given to numerous authors of the early Soviet period, while critical studies have often been marked by a reluctance to address specific works or authors in the detail that would be expected in a study of, say, Bulgakov, Zoshchenko, or Olesha. One reason for this diffidence may be that non-conformist (or *nepodtsenzurnyi*) late-Soviet prose – which is the principal focus of this thesis – presents an array of ‘difficult’, unapproachable and in many respects unappealing authors who belonged to a hermetic intellectual context. Yuz Aleshkovsky, Yury Mamleev, Viktor Erofeev and many others have experimented with language, humour, genre and unsavoury topics in ways that have easily lent themselves to categorization as examples of cruel or carnivalesque tendencies in Russian writing, but less well to patient treatment of their poetics and themes.

I have, therefore, sought to subject individual texts to the kind of extended analysis that might bring to the surface their hidden concerns and make sense of their stylistic experimentation. I have treated the writers under study less as provocateurs than as Silenus figures (who, in A.H.T. Levi’s words, ‘appeared foolish and ugly while being wise and admirable’). I argue that their chosen methods have appealed above all to metaphor, and that beneath an often grotesque exterior they have continued a philosophical, spiritual and aesthetic inquiry that develops the preoccupations of previous Russian writers and thinkers. Whilst transgressing previous boundaries and taboos, they have remained bound to their native literary and intellectual tradition in a manner that might be contrasted with the more diffuse Anglo-American literature of recent decades.

The Silenus image also suggests the unifying theme of this thesis – namely, the foolish appearance which late-Soviet prose has so often assumed. No reader of Sinyavsky-Terts, Evgeny Popov, Aleshkovsky or Venedikt Erofeev (to name but a few) could fail to be struck by these writers' radical commitment to eschewing the rational, sane or 'objective' narrative point of view, or by the manner in which they have populated their novels with eccentrics, fools and madmen and, moreover, cast themselves as such. I began my research from an acknowledgment of this common tendency, which risks embarrassing the sober-minded interpreter (folly, after all, is universal); and from the belief that confronting this tendency directly would shed light on other concerns of recent Russian writing.

Needless to say, many critics and scholars have noted various aspects of the recent 'praise of folly' in Russian literature. Bakhtinian carnival, 'aberrant discourse' (Cynthia Simmons), and holy foolery (*yurodstvo*) are just some of the prisms through which Russian writers of recent decades have been viewed. Of these, the analogy with the medieval tradition of *yurodstvo* (promoted by Mikhail Epstein, Mark Lipovetsky and numerous others) is perhaps the most attractive, capturing as it does the paradoxicality, hidden didacticism and self-abasement characteristic of several writers and their authorial personae, notably Venedikt Erofeev's 'Venichka' in *Moskva-Petushki* (see Chapter One). Undoubtedly, holy foolery is an important subtext in recent writing, as a necessary vehicle for the expression of persistent Christian impulses and imagery and a means of reconnecting with the pre-Revolutionary cultural past. Yet the analogy remains insufficiently theorized and in certain respects inadequate, in part because it rests on a comparison with a code of behaviour (*yurodstvo*) that is characterized by inarticulate communication and gesture rather than the written word; and in part, because the meaning of *yurodstvo*, as applied to literature and the arts, has in certain influential cases become too loose to be illuminating (the case, for example, of Vasily Rozanov).

In this thesis, therefore, *yurodstvo* takes its place within an inclusive critical approach which is informed by other traditions both within and beyond the Russian cultural heritage. I treat the ‘praise of folly’ manifested by recent writers as evidence of a continued critical engagement in Russian literature with the nature of the mind and of reason; with the value of learning and science (*nauka*); and with the opposition of a reason-centred worldview to notions of freedom and integrity that putatively escape the prison of the intellect. These concerns are underwritten both by an ongoing polemic with Marxist-Leninist theory and the Soviet ethos; and by religious (New Testament) values of weakness and humility. They continue the treatment of similar themes both in nineteenth-century literature (Dostoevsky, in particular, is a major influence on nearly all the writers discussed below) and in the early-Soviet period, where Andrei Platonov represents an especially interesting precursor.

A further specific feature of my approach is the attempt to situate the writers discussed within international traditions of literary folly. In particular, I have looked to Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly* as a valuable model of ‘fool narrative’ – by which I mean a text narrated in the first-person singular by an apparent fool. I argue that Erasmian folly illuminates key philosophical and rhetorical features of comic works by Venedikt Erofeev (*Moskva-Petushki*) and Yuz Aleshkovsky (*Nikolai Nikolaevich*). Other West-European writers are also referred to, notably Cervantes and Chesterton.

*

The structure of the thesis reflects a movement towards fool narrative in non-conformist prose at the end of the 1960s. From being a protagonist in third-person narratives, the fool himself becomes the narrator in the more complex fictions of Erofeev, Aleshkovsky and others. Chapter One suggests this development by tracing the move to first-person narrative from Voinovich to Shukshin to Venedikt Erofeev. These three authors have already been the subject of considerable critical attention, and my discussion of them is relatively brief. In the

longer section on Erofeev, however, I suggest fresh approaches to the latter's work, both through the comparison with Erasmus (a possible direct influence) and through a discussion of his lesser-known juvenilia, *Zapiski psikhopata*.

In subsequent chapters, I discuss at greater length three authors (Yuz Aleshkovsky, Yury Mamleev and Dmitry Galkovsky) who, though well-known, have tended not to attract detailed critical attention and whose work manifests markedly different facets of the problem of folly. Aleshkovsky's *Nikolai Nikolaevich* (Chapter Two) is a hilarious instance of fool narrative that wraps its conservative-minded wisdom (praising 'natural man' and religious values of humility) in paradox, low humour and the non-standard lexicon for which the author is famous. Taking as its backdrop the world of Soviet biology, it opposes scientism with the unpredictable logic of its foolish, ignorant and sometimes outright stupid narrator.

A further, longer chapter is devoted to Aleshkovsky in order to show the persistence of the thematics and poetics of folly in his longest and most ambitious novel, *Ruka*, which confronts the full horror of Soviet history through the monologue of one of Stalin's henchmen, a self-appointed 'Monte-Cristo' figure who has worked his way through the system in order to take his revenge upon it. At the centre of the novel's concerns, I argue, is its appeal to contrasting notions of stupidity and folly. On the one hand, the narrator delivers a furious critique of an excessive faith in Reason (*Razum*), which is represented as a stupefying, self-defeating force that is held responsible both for the narrator's personal unhappiness and, through a study of Stalin's psychology, for the wider historical catastrophe. The novel baldly opposes Reason with Soul (*Dusha*), developing as it does so an argument for the value (and, indeed, intelligence) of non-rational and instinctive existence. This argument is conducted through a 'praise of folly' that continues the motifs of Aleshkovsky's earlier work, while also introducing more explicitly Christian themes, which are underwritten by the pervasive influence of Dostoevsky. The divided personality of the

narrator proves the ideal vehicle for this philosophical conflict, which is above all a conflict in his own mind and which involves the 'doubling' with authority (Stalin) which I introduce as a characteristic feature of Aleshkovskian fool narrative in Chapter Two. A further theme of the chapter is the increasing significance in Aleshkovsky's fiction, at a mainly sub-textual level, of the code of *yurodstvo*. Indeed, I suggest that *Ruka* illustrates a tension between *yurodstvo* and a more Erasmian, less tragic paradigm of folly.

Chapter Four is devoted to the mystical writer and philosopher Yury Mamleev, whose 'praise of folly' is conducted outside the Christian framework. In Mamleev's short stories, which supply the focus of this chapter, the imagery of foolishness, idiocy and madness serves the author's need to convince the reader of the illusory nature of the phenomenal world and the certainty of the metaphysical. Inhabiting an 'inside-out' fictional world that favours death and solipsism, Mamleev's characters seek to fulfil their spiritual potential outside the constraints of logic and reason. The uncompromising rejection of rationalism that informs all Mamleev's writing is reinforced by a narrative style that seeks to lure the reader into a view of reality that dissolves conventional categories. I pay particular attention to the prominent role of the imagery of water in his fiction in achieving this end.

In the final chapter I analyse the *magnum opus* of a much younger writer, Dmitry Galkovsky. His *Beskonechnyi tupik*, first published in full in 1997, is a mosaic of philosophical, literary-critical, historical and autobiographical fragments that, in their totality, seek to recapitulate and exemplify fundamental tendencies of Russian thought. At the centre of Galkovsky's exploration of Russia's intellectual tradition is a fascination with, on the one hand, the alleged inflexibility of the Russian mind and its lack of self-awareness; and, on the other, with its tendency to holy foolery (*yurodstvo*), which Galkovsky celebrates, or appears to celebrate, as its redeeming feature. A contentious but often electrifying work, *Beskonechnyi tupik* is at once a prime example of unreliable 'fool narrative' and a treatise on

the history of the Russian intelligentsia's attraction towards folly in the twentieth century. If the villain of the work is Lenin, its hero is the philosopher Vasily Rozanov, and a section of my chapter treats the wider appeal that Rozanov has exerted on late-Soviet non-conformist writers and their efforts to present Rozanov (against considerable evidence to the contrary) as a literary *yurodivyi*.

*

The emphasis on close reading throughout this thesis comes at the expense of a more comprehensive survey both of the period and of the entire opus of each individual author. Incomplete though it is, however, my account does allow for common patterns and themes in my chosen topic to emerge, and I seek to illustrate and interpret these in the course of the thesis. These patterns and themes include the overwhelmingly male character of the tradition I am describing; its intensely subjective focus, often bordering on derangement; its continuous critique of intellectual culture; its appeal to *yurodstvo* on the one hand, and to a more playful, lighter ideal of wise folly on the other; its refusal to seek coherent explanations for historical events; its dissatisfaction with literary or conventional language; and, most essentially perhaps, the role of various discourses of folly in articulating either the persistence or absence of religious faith. My epilogue, which contrasts the nihilism of Viktor Erofeev's story 'Zhizn' s idiotom' with various examples of post-Soviet prose, serves to draw together many of these themes.

Introduction

If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise.
William Blake, 'Proverbs of Hell'

For centuries, Russian writers have persisted in folly, with or without the hope of becoming wise. From Avvakum to Venedikt Erofeev, Russian prose abounds in authors of profound cultural influence who have placed the idiotic and the foolish at the centre of their art and philosophy. The narrator's prefatory remark in *Brat'ya Karamazovy* that the eccentric (*chudak*) may bear within himself the 'heart of the whole' (*serdtsevinu tselogo*) is yet more applicable to the *chudak*'s various cousins in folly – the *durak* (fool), *idiot*, and *yurodivyi* (holy fool) – in Dostoevsky's novels and in Russian fiction more generally.¹ Reflecting the unusually direct impact of the New Testament on modern Russian culture, this tradition has tended to revere the outcast, the feeble, and the intellectually humble. A notion of personal integrity, rather than wisdom, has often been its tacit promise.

Concurrently, Russian writers have cultivated a tradition of first-person narration which has flaunted its aversion to intellectual pretension and learning, engaging the reader in the paradoxes of wisdom and folly once set in play by Socrates. This genre ('fool narrative', as it will be called here) flourished above all in the Soviet period and encourages one to speak of the poetics as well as thematics of folly. These features are by no means unique to Russian literature; but what is perhaps unrivalled is the persistence with which Russian writers have been drawn to them. Like a psychic complex, folly has

¹ F. M. Dostoevsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 30 vols (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972-90), XIV, p.5; compare with similar comments on the role of the *yurodivyi*, pp.275-76. The referent of this comment is the novel's hero, Alesha Karamazov, described in the novel on numerous occasions as a fool or *yurodivyi*.

served as a 'nodal point' of literary development in Russia, at once a creative stimulus and a hindrance that has prompted agonies of self-reflection and self-execration.²

In the period of late socialism (1960s-1980s) which is the primary focus of this thesis, a host of social and cultural factors served to accentuate the appeal of folly, especially to writers who found themselves unpublished and socially marginalized in Soviet Russia. Responding, in part, to the normalizing requirements of Socialist Realism and its presumption of exclusively 'positive' heroes, the fool came to reassume his role as – in Vasily Shukshin's phrase – the eternal hero, and truth-teller, of the times.³ The tendency towards outsider protagonists which gathered steam in the 1950s and 1960s was seized on in subsequent years by writers who – unlike Shukshin or, before him, Yury Kazakov – could hold little hope of publication. In the work of Venedikt Erofeev, Yuz Aleshkovsky and many others, narrator and fool came together in a wilful embrace of the subjectivity and apparent anti-rationalism which Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy had always deemed anathema and had already outlawed in the work of early-Soviet writers. These writers looked back to the type of fool narratives produced at the boundary of acceptability in the 1920s by Platonov, Zoshchenko and others, but they developed the genre in quite new directions. Making a complete break with the political and literary establishment, they explored radically divergent aesthetic and philosophical paths, betraying, in part, the miscellany of intellectual influences, non-Russian as well as Russian, to which the culture of *samizdat* was so receptive.

At the same time, and occasionally within the same texts, Russian intellectuals' attraction to folly, both in the present and in the past, was subjected to unprecedented

² See Carl Gustav Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, trans. by W. S. Dell and Cary F. Baynes (1933; London: Routledge, 2001; repr. 2005), p.82.

³ See John Givens, *Prodigal Son: Vasilii Shukshin in Soviet Russian Culture* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000), p.66; see *ibid*, pp.59-60, on the tendencies towards eccentric and unattractive heroes in prose of the 1950s and early 1960s. For an excellent discussion of the 'Socialist Realist Tradition', see Geoffrey Hosking, *Beyond Socialist Realism: Soviet Fiction since Ivan Denisovich* (London: Granada, 1980), pp.1-28.

scrutiny. In this way, the imposing influence of such figureheads as Dostoevsky and Berdyaev could be offset to some extent by attempts to re-examine the role of folly in Russian thought and self-perception.

This often cynical inquiry did not mark the end of Russia's love-affair with folly. Indeed, the literary myths which late-Soviet fool narrative helped produce – most famously, the 'Venichka' of *Moskva-Petushki* – have only added to its charms. In post-Soviet, post-censorship prose, the concerns described above have survived and remained prominent.⁴

*

These patterns suggest that much stands to be gained by examining recent Russian writing through the prism of folly. The topic, however, is not without its inherent difficulties. On the one hand, it risks generalization and imprecision in its scope and terminology ('folly', as I discuss below, is resistant to exact definition). On the other, the topic tempts excessive specificity, since the tidiest way of addressing it would match types of fools and folly to specific cultural paradigms. Yet a typological approach is not always adequate to the complexity of the material under study.

The approach I am taking is general in the sense that I employ a flexible and inclusive concept of folly which draws on a variety of cultural paradigms and literary models. It is specific in that it involves the detailed and extensive examination of individual texts, seeking out their particular qualities and differences before making broader comparison with other writers and the period as a whole.

The thesis addresses two fundamental tasks. One is to introduce and interpret the prose of three significant and innovative authors – Yuz Aleshkovsky, Yury Mamleev, and Dmitry Galkovsky – who have received little extended critical attention, despite (or as a

⁴ See my Epilogue.

result of) their established reputations.⁵ The prism of folly, broadly conceived, illuminates many of their central preoccupations. This is not to claim, however, that the three writers belong to a shared literary school or family. Aleshkovsky and Mamleev could hardly differ more in many fundamental respects of style and substance, one (Aleshkovsky) a satirist, moral conservative and defender of vitality, the other (Mamleev) a mystic bent on exploring death and philosophies of radical solipsism outside a Christian intellectual framework. And neither's work is likely to be confused with the Rozanov-inspired philosophizing of Dmitry Galkovsky, thirty years their younger. Yet, disparate though they are, these writers are all visibly concerned with the nature of the mind and reason, of wisdom and learning, and all explore these concerns through various 'praises of folly'. These similarities are underpinned both by a shared literary and cultural heritage rich in folly and by an immediate socio-political context which helped reinforce this tendency.

The broad topic of folly thus allows writers who appear in many respects incompatible to be housed together. This serves the parallel aim of the thesis, which is to trace the shape of the late-Soviet 'praise of folly' as a more widespread literary tendency. Through case-studies of Aleshkovsky, Mamleev and Galkovsky, many of its common themes and concerns will emerge, as will aspects of its development in form and genre. This second aim is supported by briefer discussion of other significant and better-known writers of the period in Chapter One, in which I will trace the shape of the topic in the 1960s – namely, the manner in which, from being a character in third-person narrative (Voinovich, Shukshin), the fool became the narrator and sole protagonist (Venedikt Erofeev).

It should be emphasized, nevertheless, that my coverage of the period under study is far from comprehensive. Practical considerations of space and time have excluded

⁵ If Yuz Aleshkovsky is famous for his bad language, Yury Mamleev is notorious for the darkness and perversity of his subject matter. While both reputations are merited, they reflect only the surface of the two authors' fiction, and have arguably inhibited their critical reception.

numerous interesting authors (notably, Sasha Sokolov) who praised folly in still further ways and to whose work the patterns that will emerge here might be found relevant.⁶

Methodology

My readings of individual texts will focus on the different means through which the late-Soviet praise of folly has been conducted. Chief among these are the portrayal of fool characters; the assumption of a foolish persona by first-person narrators; and the discussion of aspects of folly within these narratives.

These three threads often run together and may, moreover, be interwoven with others. In the stories of Vasily Shukshin, for example, eccentricity will be seen to merge with foolishness; in those of Yury Mamleev, eccentricity and foolishness share a single continuum with madness. Bearing such examples in mind, I have taken an inclusive approach that is intended to reflect the fact that writers of fiction are often less inhibited by typological and even lexicographic distinctions than scholars, and that this is especially true of those who trade in the frequently metaphorical discourse of folly. In fiction, as in everyday speech, a ‘fool’ does not have to be stupid, nor a ‘madman’ certifiably insane. Rhetorical literary tropes which invert or re-evaluate these terms – a practice established most influentially in Plato and the New Testament – have added considerably to this semantic instability. In contrast to most manifestations of stupidity in reality, folly in literature is often deliberately ill-definable, a quality which scholars have found

⁶ On folly in Sasha Sokolov’s *Shkola dlya durakov* (1976), see, *inter alia*, Vladimir Tumanov, ‘A Tale Told by Two Idiots: Krik idiota v “Shklole dlya durakov” S. Sokolova i v “Shume i yarosti” U. Folknera’, *Russian Language Journal*, 48 (1994), 137-54. Also relevant to the topic is Sokolov’s third novel, *Palisandriya* (1985). Other notable ‘fool’ authors short-changed in this thesis include Mark Kharitonov, Eduard Limonov, Vyacheslav P’etsukh, Evgeny Popov, and Zinovy Zinik.

themselves acknowledging and implicitly repudiating at one and the same time. in their attempts at categorization.⁷

This is not to deny that such attempts have proved highly illuminating, especially in surveys of a wide spectrum of texts. Thus, Bakhtin successfully identified the *plut* (rogue), *shut* (clown) and *durak* (fool) as key types in the birth of the European novel, as it internalized figures from medieval public life. In doing so, he argued convincingly for the centrality of folly in the novel's eternal polemic with convention and false intellectual authority. The subtle observations he made about the various 'languages' used by these types, about the particular licence of the fool, and about the way in which the fool and clown responded to the author's own need for a mask, are of lasting value.⁸

But can such an approach prove as fruitful when applied to modern (and post-modern) literature which manifests a complex contamination of influences and paradigms, and which, as James Wood notes, 'exchanges typology for the examination of the individual, and the religious dream of complete or stable knowledge for the uncertainty of incomplete knowledge'?⁹

A recent article by Lesley Milne on twentieth-century Russian fiction shows that there is still life in the typological approach, while also illustrating its limitations. Milne makes cogent comparisons between 'types of comic hero and author' from both ends of the Soviet era, presenting Zoshchenko and Voinovich as 'innocents', Ilf, Petrov and Iskander as 'rogues', and Bulgakov and Pelevin as 'jokers' who, like the playing cards of the same name, were able to alter 'the previously determined structures of play' and to

⁷ In her thoughtful introduction to the topic Vicki Janik notes that, 'Defining foolishness is notoriously difficult, almost an illustration of itself', before proceeding with a list of general features by which literary fools might be recognized; *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*, ed. by Vicki K. Janik (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998), p.2.

⁸ See M.M. Bakhtin, 'Slovo v romane' and 'Formy vremeni i khronotopa v romane', in *Voprosy literatury i estetiki: Issledovaniya raznykh let* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1975), pp.72-233 (pp.212-21), pp.234-407 (pp.308-16).

⁹ Wood is referring to comedy in European fiction since the late nineteenth century. See James Wood, *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004), p.14.

create alternative worlds where they held temporary control.¹⁰ This ingenious typology (an explicit successor to Bakhtin's triad) succeeds in indicating some of the masks available, in literature and life, to writers of the Soviet era. However, as Milne herself acknowledges in the case of Venedikt Erofeev,¹¹ many important comic writers will fall outside or between these categories.

As these examples suggest, the typological approach tends to be aimed at mapping a literary landscape rather than at promoting extensive interpretations of specific texts.¹² Here, by contrast, I will be attending to as many different facets of folly in individual texts as are apparent, and to a variety of cultural and literary traditions.

In so doing, I will be exploring chiefly metaphorical forms of literary expression, in which the figure of the fool, and the rhetoric of 'fool narrative', allow for the unpredictable transfer and disclosure of diverse meanings and concerns, often engaging the author in a complex relationship with his double (the fool or foolish narrator) that both hides and reveals. Folly, in this sense, resists interpretation at the literal level, being informed in particular by religious notions of the madman and fool as intermediaries between the worlds of the visible and invisible.

At the same time, the texts under study will demonstrate the continuing tendency in Russian literature to portray folly in strikingly direct and often distressing forms. Nourished by acute cultural and especially religious suspicion of intellectual pride, Russian writers have often sought to depict an escape from the potential prison of the intellect. Sheer idiocy and mental illness have exerted an unusually strong, if highly ambivalent appeal, while the figure of the *yurodivyi* (holy fool), a fixture of pre-Soviet

¹⁰ Lesley Milne, 'Jokers, Rogues and Innocents: Types of comic hero and author from Bulgakov to Pelevin', in *Reflective Laughter: Aspects of Humour in Russian Culture*, ed. by Lesley Milne (London: Anthem, 2004), pp.85-96 (p.86). Ivan Esaulov contributes another article on typological lines in the same volume: 'Two Facets of Comedic Space in Russian Literature of the Modern Period: Holy Foolishness and Buffoonery', pp.73-84.

¹¹ Milne (ed.), p.94.

¹² Bakhtin's discussions are typical in this respect: novels and authors are often listed without consideration of their distinctive qualities.

Russian fiction, has often been seized on for this purpose as a native type, being deemed all the more truthful for his ragged ugliness and inarticulate speech.¹³

‘Folly’

This word, which has no direct equivalent in Russian and bears a rather antique ring in modern English, best suits the inclusive approach I have described. In its density of meanings, folly spans an entire spectrum of lexical, literary and religious associations. In addition to its primary and most obvious meanings (foolishness, a lack of understanding, ‘unwise conduct’), it preserves traces of its former suggestions of evil, sin and madness.¹⁴ The varied evaluations of folly in the Bible (discussed below) have helped prevent these meanings from becoming wholly obsolete.

Literary works written in English or translated into English have greatly expanded the remit of ‘folly’. A history of literary folly would connect major writers as close and as distant as Rabelais, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Pope, Swift, Joyce, and Bellow. At the base of this tradition stands Erasmus’ *Moriae Encomium* (1511; Praise of Folly), which continues to inspire authors, critics and philosophers.¹⁵ Overturning the straightforward moral didacticism of Sebastian Brandt’s catalogue of human vices in his popular *Narrenschiff* (1497; The Ship of Fools), *Praise of Folly* explored the slippery and often contradictory purposes to which the rhetoric of folly could be applied. As modern readings

¹³ What ought to be clear by now, however, is that this is not a thesis about the evaluation of madness or mental pathology on the basis of literary texts. Nor am I focusing on Soviet psychiatry and its institutions. These have been extensively described (and vilified) in much late-Soviet and post-Soviet prose, but they provide only a backdrop, albeit a significant one, to my topic.

¹⁴ These meanings lapsed in the middle and late seventeenth century. Notable also is the still-current use of folly to denote a building erected for purely ornamental purposes. This meaning is appropriate to the perception of Soviet reality proposed in the fiction of Yuz Aleshkovsky and others.

¹⁵ See, for example, Wood, pp.9-11. For an outstanding account of Erasmian irony and its more immediate descendants in European literature, see Walter Kaiser, *Praisers of Folly: Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1964).

have emphasized, it is a philosophical work as much as it is an audaciously satirical one.¹⁶ It is largely thanks to Erasmus that ‘folly’, bearing wisdom in its train, has come to evoke in literary discourse a familiar bundle of quandaries and paradoxes. Furthermore, as Carlos Fuentes recently observed on the occasion of the fourth centennial of *Don Quixote*, it is thanks to the direct (if necessarily tacit) influence of *Praise of Folly* on Cervantes that the modern novel acquired its ‘birthright’, providing ‘a privileged space [...] of incertitude’.¹⁷

Praise of Folly has long been known to Russian readers as *Pokhvala gluposti*.¹⁸ The title illustrates the lack of a satisfactory equivalent in Russian for ‘folly’, which communicates the complexity and allusions of Erasmus’ title in a way that *glupost’* (‘stupidity’) does not.¹⁹ One could also argue for a more general failure of transmission: the tradition of playful irony represented by Erasmus has not translated into the mainstream tradition of Russian prose as directly as it has into that of Western Europe and Latin America. If in Erasmus and Shakespeare, ‘wise fools’ tend to be more wise than foolish, in Russian literature the balance has often been more indeterminate. However, it is one contention of this thesis that some recent Russian writers (especially Venedikt Erofeev and Yuz Aleshkovsky) have rediscovered many of the key features and philosophical concerns of Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly*.

This is not to say, however, that Erasmian folly provides the dominant paradigm for this thesis. Rather, I have taken ‘folly’ as a term capable of embracing a variety of traditions. The most visible of these, to which I will now turn, belong to Russian culture and literature, and to their antecedents in the Classical and Christian traditions. The

¹⁶ See, for example, Ernesto Grassi and Maristella Lorch, *Folly and Insanity in Renaissance Literature* (Binghamton, NY: MRTS, 1986).

¹⁷ Carlos Fuentes, ‘In Praise of the Novel’, *Open Democracy*, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-literature/praise_novel_3182.jsp> [accessed 1 June 2006] (p.2 of 6). See also Kaiser, pp.277-96.

¹⁸ James H. Billington notes that it has been widely read in Russian since the eighteenth century. See Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretative History of Russian Culture* (1966; New York: Vintage Books, 1970), p.60.

¹⁹ In particular, *glupost’* does not capture the important allusion to St Paul’s ‘folly for Christ’s sake’ which is rendered in the standard Biblical translation as ‘юродство Христа ради’.

following survey is intended to provide a basis for the analogies and speculations made in the body of the thesis and to indicate salient features that continue to shape the discourse of folly in Russian literature.

Folly in the Platonic and Biblical Traditions

The enduring prominence of folly in European literature and thought rests in part on the perennial novelty of paradoxes established by ancient authorities who, from highly visible positions within intellectual culture, warned of the acute limitations of the human intellect. One thinks, above all, of Plato's Socrates, and, in the New Testament, St Paul.

The attainments of human wisdom, Socrates believed, were negligible, and he repeatedly drew attention to his own ignorance. He may have been wiser than the reputedly wisest men of Athens, but only 'to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know'.²⁰ Such paradoxical formulations established a strategy that was at once aggressive and defensive towards complacent authority; they also discouraged accusations of arrogance. Their potential appeal to the marginalized author or protagonist in the Soviet era – who has to define his position vis-à-vis 'scientific' Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy – is readily understandable. So, too, is the appeal of other aspects of the myth of Socrates: his courage and poverty; and his incongruous appearance and behaviour, for which he was satirized by Aristophanes and correspondingly exalted by Plato.²¹ In Plato's *Symposium* Alcibiades compares Socrates to statues of Silenus, which concealed god-like beauty beneath their ugly facade; thus, in his 'game of irony', Socrates concealed his

²⁰ See 'Apology', trans. by G.M.A Grube, in Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), pp.17-36 (pp.21-22).

²¹ See David Luljak, 'Socrates as Fool in Aristophanes and Plato', in Janik (ed.), pp.400-5.

wisdom beneath his claims of ignorance.²² Noteworthy also is Socrates' self-appointed function as civic gadfly, tireless in his efforts 'to rouse each and every one of you', and his self-definition as a private man, or *idiotes*.²³ All these features set an important precedent for the personae adopted by some of the philosophically-minded writers discussed in subsequent chapters, who cast themselves as 'idiots' in senses both ancient and modern.

It is the New Testament, however, whose enduring significance has shaped most fundamentally Russia's 'praise of folly', even under atheist Soviet rule. The association of the new Christian faith with folly was articulated most explicitly by St Paul, who set himself and the apostles against their puffed-up 'brethren' in Corinth, claiming: 'We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honour, but we in disrepute' (1 Cor 4:10). Paul responds to the eloquence and complacency of the Corinthians with divinely sanctioned inarticulacy, preaching to them 'not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power' (1 Cor 1:17). Folly serves him – as it did Socrates and as it would Erasmus, Avvakum and many others subsequently – as a rhetorical defence and an unstable mode of irony that often leads to paradox and even opacity.²⁴ Paul wishes to boast 'only of the things that show my weakness' (2 Cor 11:30), yet asserts his unique access to 'the mind of Christ' (1 Cor 2:16).

Such passages cannot be explained merely as exercises in inversion, after which wisdom and folly could reassume the places traditionally accorded to them in the Old Testament.²⁵ Rather, they elaborate on the revolutionary and ostensibly unappealing features of the new faith. Christ himself had appeared mad to his contemporaries, befriending outcasts and prostitutes, violating rituals and laws, and manifesting the self-

²² 'Symposium', trans. by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in Plato, pp.457-505 (p.498). Silenus was the foster-father of Bacchus; images named after him were 'ugly on the outside, being covered with strange carvings; but they were hollow and could be opened up. Inside, was the figure of a God'; M.A.Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (London: Penguin, 1997), p.91.

²³ Plato, pp.28-32 (p.28).

²⁴ See, especially, 2 Cor 11:16-19.

²⁵ As S.A. Ivanov appears to argue in Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, trans. by Simon Franklin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.19.

abasement, kenosis and weakness praised by St Paul and later followed by the holy fools.²⁶ The fact of the crucifixion – ‘a stumbling block [*skandalon*] to Jews, and folly to Gentiles’ (1 Cor 1:23) – had grounded the faith in what would appear to human eyes as madness and scandal. Its meaning could be revealed only to an inspired fool on the boundary between worlds, such as St Paul – and, even then, only ‘in a mirror dimly’ (1 Cor 13:12). The Old Testament notion of wisdom – based on prudence, obedience and fear of God – was no longer tenable. There, the reward of wisdom was, in one theologian’s words, ‘a life of success and respect, not a miserable, shameful death on a cross’.²⁷ Christ, by contrast, had indicated the victory of grace over law, pride and self-reliance, and of the inner life over the external. The deepest truths, he had said, were now more accessible to ‘babes’ than to the ‘wise’, indicating the kinship between infancy and saintly folly.²⁸

The persistence of these themes in modern literature is not hard to understand. The New Testament’s re-evaluation of folly and wisdom bears obvious appeal to the writer of fiction, emphasizing as it does interiority, secrecy, madness, and the breaking of taboos. Where the Old Testament equates folly with sin and blasphemy,²⁹ St Paul accords ‘hidden and secret wisdom’ (1 Cor 2:7) to the fool, endowing him with immense charisma, rather as the fool has been associated in many pagan and primitive cultures with realities and forces beyond the reach of reason.³⁰ Yet the Christian fool is also, in imitation of Christ’s example, the object of society’s scorn and a potential scapegoat.

²⁶ On Christ’s self-emptying (*kenosis*), see Philippians 2:6-11. On his madness: Mark 3:21, John 10:20.

²⁷ Kim Paffenroth, *In Praise of Wisdom: Literary and Theological Reflections on Faith and Reason* (New York: Continuum, 2004), p.54.

²⁸ See Matthew 11:25; Luke 11:21; and John Saward, *Perfect Fools* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp.7-11.

²⁹ See, for example, Psalms 14:1. The Old Testament fool is typically a man without restraint in both actions and words (Prov 14:16, 12:23, 15:2; Eccles 5:3). He is incapable of instruction (Prov 1:7); his folly is infectious (Prov 26:5), and his laughter vain (Eccles 7:5-6).

³⁰ On the ritual role of the fool in primitive culture, see Janik (ed.), p.11; and William Willeford, *The Fool and His Sceptre: A Study in Clowns and Jesters and their Audience* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), pp.73-98.

These patterns reinforce the possibility of folly being viewed as a force in itself, a magnet for both good and evil. St Paul's *moria* (folly), which itself echoed the use of the term in Greek tragedy to suggest a controlling power or fate, would become in *Praise of Folly* a beneficial force that brings happiness and sweet illusion.³¹ In Russian works such as Dostoevsky's *Idiot* (or, as we will see, Yuz Aleshkovsky's *Nikolai Nikolaevich*) a mysterious force comparable to *moria* similarly appears to dictate the course of events.

Yurodstvo

The sanctification of folly and madness has had extraordinary resonance in Russian culture through the tradition of *yurodstvo*, or holy foolery. Its most faithful adherents have enacted in a strikingly literal manner the vocation described by St Paul and his identification of fools for Christ's sake (*yurodivye Khrista radi*) with self-abasement, 'filth' and ridicule as a 'spectacle to the world' (1 Cor 4:9-11). Filtered over centuries through many layers of secular and especially literary culture, *yurodstvo* retained its significance in the Soviet period as a hidden code influencing intellectuals' writings and lives, and, just as importantly, influencing their reception among readers and critics. Indeed, the analogy between *yurodstvo* and non-conformist literature has at times been pressed too far, leading to inaccurate or shallow interpretations. This thesis is intended, in part, to help correct the balance: the recent 'praise of folly' manifests other paradigms of folly that may prompt more illuminating readings than *yurodstvo*. Nevertheless, the ongoing relevance of *yurodstvo* to Russian literature and culture is beyond doubt, deriving from its singular significance over centuries to the Russian people, and to her rulers, writers and artists. It

³¹ *Moria* is largely alien to the Old Testament discourse of folly in Greek translation (where *aphrōn* is the typical designation of a fool). See *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel, 10 vols (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1964-1976), IV, pp.832-47. For Sophocles, who applied the word to the madness of Antigone, *moria* denoted a darkening of the mind; see Seward, p.5.

seems necessary, therefore, to provide an account, however brief, of this elusive and mutable phenomenon both in its theoretical and hagiographic foundations, and in its manifestations in reality and legend, the variety and abundance of which have made *yurodstvo* a specific, ‘national’ phenomenon in the history of holy foolery.³²

Born of a pious frustration with monastic and hermetic seclusion, holy foolery emerged in Byzantium as a paradoxical mode of engagement with the world. The holy fool perceives the world to be lying in the grip of sin, and confronts it by performing (or affecting to perform) sinful acts, thus showing the world’s true face to itself. On the one hand, the Byzantine holy fool (*salos*) aggressively imposed his eschatological fervour on ordinary and apparently virtuous people, shocking them through enigmatic gestures and performances rich in scatological, sexual and alcoholic motifs; on the other, he sought to detach himself from secular temptations through his impassiveness (*apatheia*) and to protect his incognito, thereby avoiding the praise that would follow were his saintly purpose to be revealed. These two dynamics were equally important, and both involved the simulation of madness. Leontius’ *vita* of Symeon of Emessa, who lived in the first half of the sixth century, provides the richest account of fully-fledged urban holy foolery, describing the outrages committed by the saint in order to ‘show a weakness in the virtuous life to the slothful and pretentious’. Symeon ties a dead dog to his waist and defecates in public, eats meat on days of fasting, throws nuts at women in church, spends time with prostitutes and pretends to rape the wife of a tavern-keeper. ‘Some of his deeds the righteous one did out of compassion for the salvation of humans,’ Leontius writes, ‘and others he did to hide his way of life’.³³

³² My summary is particularly indebted to Ivanov, *op.cit.*, and his earlier work, *Vizantiiskoe yurodstvo* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya, 1994); and to the stimulating interpretations of Likhachev and Panchenko in D.S. Likhachev, A.M. Panchenko, and N.V. Ponyrko, *Smekh v Drevnei Rusi* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1984).

³³ See the translation of this Life given in Derek Krueger, *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius’ Life and the Late Antique City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 131-71 (pp.152-53).

Symeon's acts of sacrilege may be explained as a challenge to routine worship and complacency (favoured targets of the holy fools), while the mock rape is explicitly attributed by Leontius to Symeon's need to disgrace himself in front of the tavern-keeper, who was on the point of exposing his saintliness.³⁴ However, such explanations rarely seem adequate to the extremity of the holy fool's behaviour. Indeed, the essence of holy foolery as a historical phenomenon is not the specific (and often strained) exegesis, but the riddling gesture itself, the shocking nature of which survives any explanation. Moreover, as Simon Franklin has remarked, it proscribes explanation, since, 'if the fool's sanctity is authentic, it must be concealed; to be acknowledged is to fail (or to fall victim to pride); how, therefore, could anybody known to be a Holy Fool actually be one?'³⁵ It is only in the historically unreliable forms of hagiography or fiction that holy foolery can be made sense of – hence, in part, its particular appeal to the writer.

Encountering increasing scepticism and disapproval, holy foolery ebbed away in Byzantine culture by the eleventh and twelfth century, but in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Muscovy it flourished again in unprecedented fashion, albeit in a manner that diluted many aspects of the Byzantine paradigm. The Russian *vitae* are pale imitations of the Byzantine models, alluding to the scandalous features of holy foolery with formulaic phrases rather than detailed description, and placing greater stress on less specific saintly achievements, notably prophecy and asceticism.³⁶ In actuality, *yurodstvo* merged to some degree with other paradigms, such as religious wandering, and even shamanism – hence, Ewa M. Thompson has argued, the *yurodivyi*'s customary apparel of chains and metal

³⁴ Krueger, pp.152-53.

³⁵ See Simon Franklin, [Review of *The Holy Fool in Byzantium and Russia*, ed. by Inge Lunde], *SEER*, 3 (1997), 534.

³⁶ See Svitlana Kobets, 'The Russian Paradigm of *Jurodstvo* and its Genesis in Novgorod', *Russian Literature*, 48 (2000), 367-88.

objects.³⁷ Above all, *yurodstvo* blurred the distinction between feigned and actual madness. Many people perceived as *yurodivye* were clearly of unsound mind (or, as Challis and Dewey suggested, autistic).³⁸ Significant also is the etymology of the word *yurodstvo*, its cognate *urod* denoting a congenital deficiency.³⁹ The link between holy foolishness and ugliness or monstrosity (*urodstvo*) would remain pronounced in literary representation.

This pattern of adaptation (or corruption) undoubtedly facilitated the spread of *yurodstvo* as a popular phenomenon among the uncounted thousands of madmen, simpletons, beggars, wild men and ascetics who were perceived as *yurodivye* or *blazhennye* and revered for their assumed clairvoyancy, well beyond Peter the Great's attempts to suppress them.⁴⁰ Diaries suggest that even in the Soviet period wandering *yurodivye* remained an unexceptional occurrence.⁴¹ At the same time, aspects of the original, Byzantine paradigm were kept alive in popular legend. The folklore of *yurodstvo* continued to emphasize its aggressive and paradoxical qualities, while explaining these in a neat, didactic form. Thus, the apocryphal vita of Basil the Blessed describes this most popular of the *yurodivye* smashing an icon beneath which lies a portrait of the devil.⁴² In all his actions, the *yurodivyi* reveals the underside (*iznanka*) of appearances. This feature would, for obvious reasons, accentuate the appeal of the *yurodivyi* to critics of Soviet civilization.⁴³

A final important aspect of *yurodstvo* is the history and mythology of its relationship with power. While the Byzantine holy fool was 'conspicuous in lacking even

³⁷ Ewa M. Thompson, *Understanding Russia: The Holy Fool in Russian Culture* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1987), pp.112-13.

³⁸ Ivanov, *Holy Fools*, p.312. Natalia Challis and Horace W. Dewey, 'The Blessed Fools of Old Russia', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 22 (1974), 1-11 (pp.1-5).

³⁹ Ivanov, *Holy Fools*, p.246.

⁴⁰ On Peter's disapproval, see *ibid*, pp.345-47.

⁴¹ See, for example, Galina Vishnevskaya, *Istoriya zhizni* (Paris: La Presse Libre/Kontinent, 1985), p.25.

⁴² Ivanov, *Holy Fools*, pp.318-22.

⁴³ For an illustration of this, see Chapter Three, below, pp.141-42.

the slightest interest in political engagement' (Ivanov),⁴⁴ Russian culture granted to the *yurodivyi* a freedom to criticize that linked medieval tsar and *yurodivyi* in a bond exceeding, through its spiritual dimension, that between Shakespearean fool and king. This culminated in Ivan Grozny's 'love-hatred' for *yurodivye*, who alone were, like he as *tsar*, beyond good and evil.⁴⁵ Ivan imitated holy foolery in his treatment of his subjects and in his letters, which he occasionally signed 'Parfeny Urodivyi'.⁴⁶ This unique relationship between tsar and fool provided a seductive paradigm by which writers and artists could define their relationship to power and tyranny, and, in particular, towards Stalin.⁴⁷ It also suggested the implication of the *yurodivyi* in the political system and its catastrophes.

Traditions of Folly in Folklore

Yurodstvo, as many scholars have remarked, flourished in a context deprived of cultural outlets that might be compared in scale and significance to the carnivals of the medieval West.⁴⁸ The prominent theatrical and spectacular elements of *yurodstvo* were licensed not by the need for entertainment and temporary liberation from piety and hierarchy, but by the assumed spiritual perfection of the holy fool, which allowed him to enter, unharmed, the spheres of laughter and play which Orthodox culture traditionally identified with the pagan and the satanic. Those who understood the antics of the *yurodivyi* would perceive them as tragic, not ludic. Indeed, those who revered *yurodstvo* were often most critical of

⁴⁴ Ivanov, *Holy Fools*, p.216

⁴⁵ See *ibid*, pp.285-310 (p.286).

⁴⁶ See Likhachev's chapter on Ivan in *Smekh v drevnei Rusi*, pp.25-35 (p.27).

⁴⁷ The case of Shostakovich is the best-known (and most controversial) instance: see Solomon Volkov (ed.), *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich*, trans. by Antonina W. Bouis (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1979), and Ian MacDonald, *The New Shostakovich* (London: Fourth Estate, 1990), pp.1-10. On Stalin's self-identification with Ivan Grozny, see R. Tucker, *The Soviet Political Mind* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1963), pp.37-38, 43-45.

⁴⁸ On the implications of this, see Yu.M. Lotman and B.A. Uspensky, 'Novye aspekty izucheniya kul'tury Drevnei Rusi', *Voprosy Literatury*, 3 (1977), 148-66.

entertainment and folly for its own sake. Avvakum, for example, was severe in his criticism of the *skomorokhi*.⁴⁹

One consequence of these processes was the absence of a tradition of joyful and pious levity in Russian Orthodox culture such as had been represented at the fringes of Catholicism by St Francis, who called on his followers to be *joculatores Domini*, or, a century before him, by St Bernard of Clairvaux, who enjoined Christians to see themselves as the Lord's jesters or tumblers, playing a 'chaste and religious game' by which they might themselves be 'made game of'.⁵⁰ Nor, in the post-medieval period, did Western secular traditions of courtly folly succeed in thoroughly implanting themselves in Russia, despite the efforts of Peter the Great in particular.

Russian folk culture, however, did provide a fertile source of humour, legend, and proverbs based on folly. A great number of folk-tales depend on the mechanism of *odurachivanie*, by which a peasant or worker gets the better of his social superior. It is a striking characteristic of many of these that the Everyman figure who outwits his master is himself designated or perceived as a fool, usually bearing the name Ivan-Durak.⁵¹ It is as though cunning is permissible only in the guise of folly, a pattern that seems to reflect popular Russian suspicion towards ostentatious cleverness and *khitrost'*, often perceived as alien, unpatriotic qualities.⁵² With their aggressive satirical character, directed against the *barin* or the *pop*, these tales were published in great quantity during the years of Collectivization and the violent overthrow of the former rural authorities.⁵³

⁴⁹ Priscilla Hunt, 'Avvakum's "Fifth Petition" to the Tsar and the Ritual Process', *SEEJ*, 46 (2002), 483-510 (p.491).

⁵⁰ Cited in Saward, pp.58, 84-89.

⁵¹ See *Russian Tales of Clever Fools*, ed. and trans. by Jack V. Haney (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2006).

⁵² On *khitrost'*, and its associations with bureaucracy and foreign expertise, see Billington, pp.121-24.

Billington notes that, 'In his famous troika passage Gogol insists that Russia "be not guileful" (*ne khitry*) but like a "straightforward *muzhik* from Yaroslavl"' (p.122).

⁵³ Haney, p.xiii. On *odurachivanie* generally in Russian humour, see V.Ya. Propp, *Problemy komizma i smekha* (Moscow: Labirint, 2002), pp.76-83.

There are, however, many other tales in which Ivan-Durak (or similarly-named fools, such as Emelya-Durak) plays a quite different role, representing qualities which the Soviet establishment used as examples of how not to behave.⁵⁴ The folk fool often epitomizes genuine stupidity and slowness. His inability to say the right thing at the right time and to recognize the rules of social comportment elicits merciless punishment. Together with the many proverbs that emphasize violence towards the fool, and the danger of associating with fools, tales such as ‘Nabityi durak’ suggest, as Daniel Rancour-Laferriere has argued, a sadomasochistic attitude on the part of listeners and storytellers, their temptation ‘to beat the fool (sadism)’ being matched by the ‘urge to get the foolishness beaten out of oneself (masochism)’. In both processes there seems to be a fear of actually *being* a fool, that is, of crossing some dangerous boundary separating the self from the fool’.⁵⁵ In their first-person narratives, the authors I will be examining tend to cross this boundary, rendering the ridicule of the fool identical with the ridicule of the self.

There is a further aspect of the folkloric tradition which mitigates this ridicule. Some important *skazki* in the magical genre make virtues out of the passivity and stupidity of the fool, which somehow facilitate his good fortune. In ‘Durak i bereza’, for example, Ivan sells his possessions to a birch tree: when the tree fails to pay him, he chops it down and finds in its hollow interior a cauldron of gold hidden by robbers.⁵⁶ Persisting in his folly, Ivan becomes lucky, stumbling on his treasure or beautiful princess.⁵⁷ Recent writers have often been drawn to precisely this model of the folk fool, the antithesis of the Soviet ideal of the active hero.⁵⁸ Thus, in his well-known essay ‘Ivan-Durak’, Andrei Sinyavsky

⁵⁴ See Propp, p.89.

⁵⁵ ‘Durak nabityi’ in A.N. Afanas'ev, *Narodnye russkie skazki*, ed. by L.G. Barag and N.V. Novikov, 3 vols (Moscow: Nauka, 1984-85), III, pp.130-31. Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, *The Slave Soul of Russia: Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), p.125.

⁵⁶ Afanas'ev, III, pp.128-29.

⁵⁷ This, too, is a pattern underwritten by proverbial wisdom: ‘Дурак спит, а счастье у него в головах стоит’, ‘Бог дурака, поваля, кормит’.

⁵⁸ Zara Abdullaeva elaborates this opposition in her article ‘Popular Culture’, in *Russian Culture at the Crossroads*, ed. by Dmitry N. Shalin (Colorado: Westview Press, 1996), pp.209-38 (p.224).

ignores almost entirely the motifs of cruelty, murder and duplicity which characterize the fool in many tales, in order to stress the affection inspired by Ivan-Durak, as an 'апоеоз незнания, неумения, неделания и полнейшей бесхитростности'. This description allows Sinyavsky to link Ivan-Durak to the Socratic tradition of wise ignorance, and to make the following claim, fully in the tradition of the 'praise of folly' I will be describing:

Назначение Дурака – и всем своим поведением, и обликом доказать [...] что от человеческого ума, учености, стараний, воли – ничего не зависит. Все это вторично и не самое главное в жизни.⁵⁹

Aspects of Folly in Pre-Revolutionary Russian Literature

It is beyond the scope of this Introduction to give an adequate survey of this large field, but a few of its features should be indicated, if only to illustrate a general pattern: that Russian literature has supplied a continuous rebuke to intellectual pride, drawing on the themes and types described above to do so.⁶⁰

The figure of the *yurodivyi* has played an important part in this process. Already in Avvakum's *Life* (1672-75), holy foolery came to the fore, both in the form of the *yurodivyi*, Fedor, through whom Avvakum dispatches his message to the tsar, and in Avvakum's own remonstrations at the Council of Patriarchs, to whom he cites the words of St Paul ('We are fools for Christ's sake') and to whose intellectual snobbery he opposes his unschooled rhetoric and ignorance.⁶¹ The *Life* is also striking as an early example of first-person narrative in which the narrator consistently mocks himself as a stupid person

⁵⁹ Andrei Sinyavsky, *Ivan-Durak* (Paris: Sintaksis, 1991), pp.38-39.

⁶⁰ On the religious basis of this topic in fiction and philosophy, see Nadejda Gorodetzky, *The Humiliated Christ in Russian Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1938).

⁶¹ See *Archpriest Avvakum: The Life Written by Himself*, ed. and trans. by Kenneth N. Brostrom (Michigan: Ann Arbor, 1979), pp.35-114 (pp.92-94). *Yurodstvo* is also present in Avvakum's sympathy for the tsar, for whom he weeps and prays.

and, worse, berates himself as ‘the scum of the earth’ for his sinful past and evil deeds.⁶² The masochistic tendencies of Russian folly merge with the ridicule of the self shared by other religious texts of Avvakum’s time (notably, the tradition of ‘democratic satire’).⁶³

The political and dissident dimensions of holy foolery re-emerged to dramatic effect a century and a half later in Pushkin’s *Boris Godunov*, which drew on Karamzin’s descriptions of sixteenth-century *yurodivye* to create a short but telling scene in which the *yurodivyi* Nikolka accuses the tsar of the murder of the tsarevich, and refuses to pray for him.⁶⁴ The scene would preserve its emphatic status in Mussorgsky’s opera, based on Pushkin’s play.

Many other nineteenth-century writers included a *yurodivyi* vignette in one or more of their works, whether with admiration or scepticism.⁶⁵ Less schematic and more realistic than the awe-filled depiction of Grisha in Tolstoy’s *Detstvo* is Gleb Uspensky’s portrait in ‘Paramon Yurodivyi’. Paramon is clearly incapable of wearing any mask or feigning madness (he is simply ‘крайне недалекий’), but the authenticity of his ascetic piety, and the wounds caused by his fetters, overwhelm all observers, and especially the narrator. Though a saintly figure, the impression Paramon makes is one of heaviness, slowness and inarticulacy – features that stand in direct contrast to the Western tradition of religious folly represented by St Francis and others.⁶⁶

Yurodstvo was only one of the ways in which Russian writers emphasized the need, if not desirability, of intellectual humility. Certainly, they sympathized with the fate of genuinely intelligent individuals made out to be eccentrics or madmen by the forces of

⁶² Ibid, p.111.

⁶³ On Avvakum’s self-portrait and folly, see Likhachev and others, *Smekh v Drevnei Rusi*, pp.59-71. On ‘democratic satire’, see below, pp.67-69.

⁶⁴ A.S. Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 10 vols (Moscow: Nauka, 1962-66), v, pp.217-328 (pp.298-30). On Pushkin’s sources for Nikolka, see N. Granovskaya, ‘Yurodivyi v tragedii Pushkina’, *Russkaya literatura*, 2 (1964), 92-94.

⁶⁵ See Thompson, pp.125-58.

⁶⁶ ‘Paramon Yurodivyi (Iz detskikh let odnogo “propashchego”)’ in G.I. Uspensky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 14 vols (Moscow: Akademiya Nauk SSSR, 1940-54), vi, pp.94-120 (p.100).

social conformism (the fate of the philosopher Petr Chaadaev). Yet nineteenth-century writers would insist that we meditate on the reasons for the failure of these exceptional individuals, and their unfulfilled intellectual promise. From Griboedov's brilliant and amusing Chatsky in *Gore ot uma*, Russian drama would arrive eighty years later at Chekhov's enfeebled Uncle Vanya: both protagonists may be said to be made fools of (*odurachennye*) by their intelligence.⁶⁷ Such texts ask whether folly, even stupidity, is the enduring basis of Russian society. Gogol's dramatic masterpiece, *Revizor*, makes this point in the most uncompromising manner, not only in its culmination, in which the mayor and his townsfolk realize the sordid truth of their self-centred illusions, but in the pivotal role granted to the simpleton double-act, Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky, as intermediaries and eventual scapegoats. In his later correspondence, Gogol expounded on the impossibility of the development of higher intelligence (*razum* and *mudrost'*) unless one sets out on the path of self-purification and prayer.⁶⁸

In nineteenth-century prose, the themes of folly and intelligence preoccupied Tolstoy and Dostoevsky more than most. Both writers' work shares the preference of Slavophile and post-Slavophile thinkers for feeling over reason as a guide to truth and to the integrity of the personality. But both were also inclined to take these arguments much further, especially Tolstoy, whose flight from his own rationalizing instincts issued in extraordinary invectives against reason and learning, unambiguously favouring the 'supra-rational' knowledge of ordinary people over the rational constructs of the intellectual.⁶⁹ In his 'Skazka ob Ivane-Durake i ego dvukh brat'yakh' (1886), he reworked folklore, and its characterization of Ivan-Durak as a lazybones, to envisage a peaceful kingdom of hard-

⁶⁷ See, for example, Vanya's speech about how he has wasted his life on *skholastika*, ignoring 'real life'; Chekhov, A.P., *Sochineniya*, 18 vols (Moscow: Nauka, 1974-82), pp.61-116 (p.70) Chatsky's *odurachivanie* is noted by Propp, p.78.

⁶⁸ See 'Khristianin idet vpered' (1846), in N.V. Gogol', *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 14 vols (Moscow: Akademiya Nauk SSSR, 1937-52), VIII, pp.264-66. On *Revizor* see below, p.80.

⁶⁹ See especially 'Ispoved'" (1879), in L.N. Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 90 vols (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1928-58), XXIII, pp.1-59.

working fools. Only fools, Tolstoy's *skazka* teaches, can live without sin, money, force and the other consequences of human cunning.⁷⁰ But Tolstoy found it impossible to write himself into this questionable paradise of selfless humility. His diaries of the early 1890s show that *yurodstvo* offered one possible escape from the bind in which he found himself, as a means (albeit artificial) of suppressing egoism and cultivating the low esteem of others; but he remained wary of its temptations.⁷¹

It is Dostoevsky, however, who has exerted most influence over recent Russian fiction. In some ways, his anti-rationalist sympathies were expressed in a more nuanced form than Tolstoy, his intense scepticism about the damage that can be caused by the alienated intellect (as reflected in the Underground Man or Raskolnikov) being balanced by an acknowledgement of the important role of a less limiting and calculating faculty of the mind, *razum* rather than *rassudok*.⁷² Nevertheless, in the struggles between reason and faith, *um* and *serdtse*, *nauka* and *zhivaya zhizn'* which occupy so many of his protagonists, the author's sympathies are invariably on the side of the latter categories. Dostoevsky appeared to view atheism and the rejection of Christ as an expression of obtuseness (*tupost'*) masquerading as intellectual sophistication; against it he set the Christian values of simplicity and inarticulacy, arguing through his characters that learning divides and humility makes whole. Even the 'scholarly atheist' (*uchenyi ateist*) Ivan Karamazov is made to concede that, 'Глупость коротка и нехитра, а ум виляет и прячется'.⁷³ Under the strong influence of the New Testament, and St Paul in particular, Dostoevsky gave to his most luminous characters – Sonia (*Prestuplenie i nakazanie*), Prince Myshkin (*Idiot*), and Alesha Karamazov – intellectual humility and other traits which could render them most open to grace (weakness, infirmity, or social exclusion). At the same time,

⁷⁰ 'И ушли из Иванова царства все умные, остались одни дураки. Денег ни у кого не было. Жили-работали, сами кормились и людей добрых кормили'. Tolstoy, XXV, pp.115-138 (p.129).

⁷¹ Tolstoy, LII, pp.75, 81-82, 113.

⁷² See James P. Scanlan, *Dostoevsky the Thinker* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp.5-6.

⁷³ Dostoevsky, XIV, pp.30, 215. On the dangers of *nauka*, *ibid*, pp.155-56.

Dostoevsky took a critical view of the entrenched codification of folly among the prosperous classes: we are not meant to sympathize, for example, with Fedor Karamazov's attempts to pass off his tyrannical egoism and buffoonery as *yurodstvo*,⁷⁴ while the portrait in *Besy* of Semen Yakovlevich (based on Ivan Koreisha, the 'yurodivyi' most admired by contemporary high society) is sharply sceptical.⁷⁵

These considerations, however, have not discouraged commentators from perceiving in Dostoevsky's own artistic method elements of holy foolery, in its authorial self-effacement and its efforts to confound and provoke the reader.⁷⁶ The argument is not to be dismissed, given Dostoevsky's repeated recourse to the *yurodivyi* in his fiction (in however ambivalent a fashion), and his commitment to the figure of Christ and to the teachings of St Paul. Far harder to substantiate, however, is the widespread use of this analogy when applied to twentieth-century writers whose work rejects both Christ and the code of holy foolery. A significant example here is one of Dostoevsky's outstanding pupils, Vasily Rozanov, whose philosophical provocations have encouraged some to cast him as the 'юродивый русской литературы' (Ivanov-Razumnik),⁷⁷ a characterization that is echoed by at least two of the authors I will be discussing (Venedikt Erofeev and Galkovsky). Yet Rozanov polemicized all his life with the de-vitalizing influence of Christianity and with the abandonment of hearth and home in the ascetic quest for truth.⁷⁸ Like the actual historical phenomenon, holy foolery may thus be said to have mutated and diluted in literature also; its truthfulness and usefulness as a literary category will be a recurring theme in subsequent chapters.

⁷⁴ Ibid, pp.38-39.

⁷⁵ Dostoevsky, X, pp.254-60. On the cynical appeal of *yurodstvo* to the upper classes in the nineteenth century see Thompson, p.44.

⁷⁶ See especially Harriet Murav, *Holy Foolishness: Dostoevskii's Novels and the Poetics of Cultural Critique* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

⁷⁷ Ivanov-Razumnik, *Tvorchestvo i kritika 1908-1922* (Petersburg, 1922), pp.145-170 (p.145).

⁷⁸ On Rozanov, *yurodstvo*, and his reception in non-conformist prose, see below, pp.297-307.

The advent of Soviet power refocused the thematics of folly in Russian literature, adding new satirical and philosophical dimensions. In the works of Gogol, Dostoevsky, and others, true intelligence proved inseparable from faith; but in the post-Revolutionary order, the hegemony of Bolshevik 'rationalism' allied religious belief with delusion, if not madness, and viewed the old intelligentsia – especially its spiritually-inclined philosophers and professors – with profound suspicion. Hence the exceptional determination with which an ailing Lenin saw through the expulsions of 1922, when seventy-odd intellectuals were sent away on ships to Germany, to be shot if seen again in their own country.⁷⁹

Leninist materialism was opposed not only to religion, but to the very notion of subjective mental and spiritual experience. Supported by early twentieth-century psychology, Lenin's monistic doctrines heaped scorn on inwardness and all notions of selfhood; the illusory inner life had to give way to public endeavour, in which those who failed to make themselves useful in the project of scientific Communism could simply be labelled fools. The mind was merely a mirror of reality, where what was real was rational, as Hegel had stipulated, and what was rational had to be scientifically verifiable.⁸⁰ The cult of reason espoused by the Bolsheviks would leave an indelible imprint on political propaganda throughout the Soviet era, hammering home the putatively synonymous relationship between Communism, reason and science. Yet this was rationalism only in the narrowest sense, betraying the Positivist origins of Marxist-Leninism.⁸¹ To dissenting minds who failed to accept an exclusively materialist worldview (and who might have

⁷⁹ See Lesley Chamberlain, *The Philosophy Steamer: Lenin and the Exile of the Intelligentsia* (London: Atlantic, 2006).

⁸⁰ On Hegel and rationalism in the Russian literary context, see T.R.N. Edwards, *Three Russian Writers and the Irrational: Zamyatin, Pil'nyak, and Bulgakov* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp.1-35. On Lenin's assault on interiority, see Lesley Chamberlain, *Motherland: A Philosophical History of Russia* (London: Atlantic, 2004), pp.185-99. On Russian psychology and its political uses, see David Joravsky, *Russian Psychology: A Critical History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1999).

⁸¹ Chamberlain, *The Philosophy Steamer*, pp.280-81.

agreed, with Chesterton, that only faith can keep humans sane), Bolshevik rationalism might itself seem to be a fanatical form of idiocy or madness. The sheer boorishness of the new authorities confirmed this impression in the eyes of many intellectuals.

Individuals' responses to these new paradigms naturally varied according to their personal situation and their level of sympathy with the new regime. An antithesis to the Leninist creed can be found in the writings of Berdyaev, the most famous of the 1922 expellees. His radically subjective Christian philosophy, with its emphasis on creativity, foreshadowed the type of highly personal religion sought by many writers and artists in *samizdat* culture, among whom Berdyaev's works became widely admired.⁸² It stressed the need to sacrifice the 'reason of the world' (*razum mira sego*) and the phenomenal world in order to gain authentic faith and the folly in Christ described by St Paul. Berdyaev also appealed to the traditions of Renaissance folly, which allowed him to blend tenets of Orthodox apophatic theology with the paradoxical theories of *docta ignorantia* (learned ignorance) and *coincidentia oppositorum* developed by Nicholas of Cusa (and later reflected in the writings of Erasmus and Rabelais).⁸³ This acceptance of the limitations of human knowledge could not have been further removed from the premises of Marxist-Leninism.

Many of the most interesting writers of fiction who remained in Soviet Russia in the 1920s and 1930s found themselves articulating much more ambivalent responses to the new order, often by portraying characters with markedly foolish features, towards whom the degree of authorial sympathy was indeterminate. Zoshchenko, for example, presented Soviet reality through the impersonation of the language and character of individuals

⁸² See, for example, Tatiana Goricheva, *Talking About God is Dangerous*, trans. by John Bowden (London: SCM, 1986).

⁸³ See especially Nikolai Berdyaev, *Filosofiya svobodnago dukha: problematika i apologiya khristianstva* (Paris: YMCA, 1927), p.159 (on St Paul), pp.115-18 (on Nicholas of Cusa). On Nicholas of Cusa, see also Kaiser, pp.9-10; and Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), pp.46-47.

described by Nabokov as ‘Soviet-bred Philistine simpletons’.⁸⁴ These narrators feigned incredulity or incomprehension in the face of the manifold imperfections of Soviet institutions, to whose failings they, as fools, proved especially vulnerable. Through his narrators’ *skaz*, full of malapropisms and garbled Sovietese, Zoshchenko implicitly questioned the ability of the *narod* to be reformed and re-educated along the lines demanded by the state.

A contrasting set of problems was posed by Yury Olesha. In *Zavist'* (1927), comedy and foolishness were discovered not in the *narod*, but in intellectuals of the ‘dying era’. The self-assertion and prosaic triumphalism of the new age evoked as their response wounded vanity and jealousy on the part of Nikolai Kavalerov, a drunk who refuses to accept the strength and superiority of Andrei Babichev, who has taken him in out of pity. Kavalerov feels ‘crushed’ by Babichev, and obsessively casts himself as the latter’s fool (*durak*) and jester (*shut*), while nursing the private conviction that Andrei is ‘НЕВЕЖЕСТВЕННЫЙ И ТУПОЙ, КАК ВСЕ САНОВНИКИ’.⁸⁵ The first half of the novel thus presents two contrasting categories of folly: the ineffectual and masochistic Kavalerov, part Underground Man, part impotent drunken clown, who is thrown out of the pub;⁸⁶ and factory director Babichev, whom Kavalerov fancies as a *samodur*, a small-minded domestic tyrant who wishes to mould those in his charge into fools, and even, Kavalerov thinks, to ‘possess’ his own niece.⁸⁷ Both categories responded to important anxieties of the time, felt by the Bolshevik leadership above all: about the old intelligentsia on the one hand, with its aestheticism, self-absorption and Quixoticism;⁸⁸ and, on the other, the ability

⁸⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift*, trans. by Michael Scammell in collaboration with the author (1963; Penguin: London, 1981), p.203.

⁸⁵ Yury Olesha, *Zavist'* (Moscow and Leningrad: Zemlya i Fabrika, 1930), pp.16-17, 48.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p.18. A similar fate would befall the narrator of Venedikt Erofeev’s *Moskva-Petushki* in the buffet at the Kursk railway station; see Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2004), pp.12-14.

⁸⁷ Ibid, p.48. On *samodurstvo* and its literary uses, see V. V. Vinogradov, *Istoriya slov* (Moscow: Tolk, 1994), pp. 615-18.

⁸⁸ Quixotic motifs are numerous in *Zavist'*; see, for example, Olesha, p.97.

of the new class of brash new bosses to escape typical Russian patterns of power: relations of tyranny, stultification and slavery.⁸⁹

A yet richer seam in literary folly was explored by Andrei Platonov, whose experiences and observations of early-Soviet life put his early Revolutionary fervour to the severest test. In his shorter, more comic works of the late 1920s, these doubts were put in the mouths of likeable provincial characters, who identify deeply with their country while remaining politically unaffiliated. They exploit various masks of folly to outwit high-ups and to criticize aspects of the new order, such as bureaucratic waste or technical inefficiency. They combine features of the clown, the folk fool (more Till Eulenspiegel than Ivan-Durak), and the native genius in the mould of Leskov's Levsha, while disavowing their own intelligence. *Sokrovennyi chelovek* (1929), which acquired great popularity among readers of the 1960s, ends with its protagonist Foma Pukhov fending off Comrade Sharikov's interrogation in mock-Socratic fashion:

‘Пухов, хочешь коммунистом сделаться?’

‘А что такое коммунист?’

‘Сволочь ты! Коммунист – это умный, научный человек, а буржуй – исторический дурак!’

‘Тогда не хочу.’

‘Почему не хочешь?’

‘Я – природный дурак!’ объявил Пухов.⁹⁰

Pukhov's commitment to the natural state is absolute. When it is suggested to him that he join a study group (*kruzhok*), he replies, ‘Учение мозги пачкает, а я хочу свежим жить!’⁹¹ His ‘freshness’, inquisitiveness and instinctive activity is opposed both to *nauka* and to the native vices of laziness and stupefaction. In his notebooks, Platonov criticized

⁸⁹ On Lenin's fears about the continuation of these patterns, see Joravsky, p.205. The themes of stupidity and folly persist into the second half of *Zavist'*, where they are ironically identified by Ivan Babichev with feelings; Olesha, pp.88-89.

⁹⁰ A.P. Platonov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 2 vols (Moscow: Informpechat', 1998), I, pp. 457-512 (pp.511-12); on the tale's popularity, see Petr Vail' and Aleksandr Genis, *60-e: Mir sovetskogo cheloveka* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2001), p.271.

⁹¹ Ibid, p.484. Contrast with the Soviet slogan ‘Учение свет, неучение – тьма’.

ordinary Russians' 'self-perception' (*samosoznanie*) as so many Ivan-Duraks, hiding their natural cunning.⁹²

While Platonov may have held a negative view of the popular affection for Ivan-Durak, the *yurodivyi* clearly represented a far more congenial native type.⁹³ With the exception of Yushka, a saintly figure in the late story of the same name, whose goodness is recognized only after his death, his protagonists are not directly named as holy fools;⁹⁴ but the heroes of his major works of the late 1920s, *Chevengur* and *Kotlovan*, insistently prompt this connection in the reader's mind, through their combination of poverty, wandering, asceticism, sorrow, and unpredictable behaviour.⁹⁵ Moreover, the very fabric of Platonovian narration presents the reader with an aesthetic riddle comparable to that posed by the behaviour of the *yurodivyi*. Platonovian language, deliberately twisted out of shape, shares the *urodstvo* both of the new Soviet language and, in physical terms, of many of Platonov's characters.⁹⁶ The emphasis is placed on the reader to find and interpret hidden truth and beauty.

The holy foolery of Platonov's prose was immediately obvious to Soviet critics, Fadeev drew the comparison thirteen times in his four-page review of Platonov's tale, *Vprok*. His hostility testified to the continued vitality of the paradigm of *yurodstvo*, albeit as a taboo. Like Peter the Great's assaults on the charlatanry of holy foolery (*lzhe-yurodstvo*), or Lenin's description of Tolstoy as a 'помещик, юродствующий во

⁹² Andrei Platonov, *Zapisnye knizhki*, ed. by N.V. Kornienko (Moscow: Nasledie, 2000), p.78

⁹³ On this topic, see also Hans Günther, 'Yurodstvo i um kak protivopolozhnye točki zreniya u Andreyā Platonova', in *Sprache und Erzählhaltung bei Andrej Platonov*, ed. by Robert Hodel and Jan Peter Locher (Bern: Peter Lang, 1998), pp.116-31.

⁹⁴ See 'Yushka' (written 1937-38), in Andrei Platonov, *Vzyskanie pogibshikh* (Moscow: Shkola-Press, 1995), pp.475-81. Yushka is described as a 'юрод негодный' (p.479).

⁹⁵ Craig Brandist rightly notes the shift from Pukhov and Makar 'to the more tragic variant of the holy fool' in *Kotlovan*. See Brandist, 'Carnivalization and Populism in the Soviet Modernist Novel: Andrei Platonov and Mikhail Bakhtin', *Essays in Poetics*, 22 (1997), 1-29 (p.19).

⁹⁶ Cf. Platonov, *Zapisnye knizhki*: 'Красота есть обратное понятие... но через некрасоту можно достигнуть высшей красоты' (p.99)

Христе',⁹⁷ Fadeev blamed Platonov for affecting to be a holy fool – implicitly acknowledging his readers' continued reverence for true *yurodstvo*.⁹⁸ A few years later, A. Gurvich continued the theme, attacking Platonov's 'христианская юродивая скрость'.⁹⁹ Itself obsessed with truth-telling and the unmasking of class enemies, Soviet discourse recognized its proximity to this deep-rooted precursor, which had retained its divisive power.¹⁰⁰

Yurodstvo, however, is only one aspect of folly in Platonov's fiction, which is sustained by an intense philosophical interest in the mind itself. Platonov's characters typically struggle with the ungovernable nature of thought, which prevents them from merging fully with their Utopian aspirations, and with the labour needed to realize them. Desiring to 'forget their mind' (*zabyt' svoi um*)¹⁰¹ and to avoid rational, deductive thought, they seek a mystical state of being comparable to that sought, a few decades later, by the characters of Yury Mamleev (Chapter Four). Likhtenberg, in 'Musornyi veter', inverts the Cartesian formula 'Cogito, ergo sum' to make a point both political and philosophical: 'Декарт дурак! [...] что мыслит, то существовать не может, моя мысль – это запрещенная жизнь, и я скоро умру... Гитлер не мыслит, он арестовывает'.¹⁰² Both Mamleev and Dmitry Galkovsky also play with the formula to argue similarly: 'Я не мыслю, следовательно, я существую' (Mamleev); 'Мыслю, значит не существую' (Galkovsky).¹⁰³

⁹⁷ V.I. Lenin, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 20 vols (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1920-27), xv, p.180.

⁹⁸ A. Fadeev, 'Ob odnoi kulatskoi khronike,' *Krasnia nov'*, 5-6 (1931), 206-9. Fadeev wrote of Platonov and other 'kulak agents': 'Они норовят прикинуться безобидными чудачками, юродивыми, которые режут правду-матку (p.206).

⁹⁹ See *Tvorchestvo Platonova*, ed. by V.P. Skobelev and others (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1986), p.185.

¹⁰⁰ The poet Nikolai Zabolotsky came in for similar criticism at about this time; see E. Usievich, 'Pod maskoi yurodstva', *Literaturnyi Kritik*, 4 (1933), 78-91.

¹⁰¹ A theme of *Kotlovan* in particular. See Andrei Platonov, *Vzyskanie pogibshikh* (Moscow: Shkola-Press, 1995), pp.170-281 (especially pp.277-79).

¹⁰² Platonov, *Vzyskanie pogibshikh*, pp.375-91 (p.383).

¹⁰³ Galkovsky calls this the credo of a Russian; see Galkovsky, *Beskonechnyi tupik* (Samizdat: Moscow, 1998), p.101; I discuss Mamleev's inversion further in Chapter Four.

Yet escape from the prison of thought, a motif of the Russian 'praise of folly', usually proves impossible to achieve, and the reader is drawn into the trapped, isolated consciousness of Platonov's characters, which is described in the third person but which projects itself onto all aspects of the fictional world (even nature) as a kind of collective indirect *skaz*.¹⁰⁴ Platonov's fiction thus anticipated the radical subjectivity of the first-person narratives of later writers such as Venedikt Erofeev, Galkovsky, and Yuz Aleshkovsky. It also anticipated (especially in *Chevengur*) the overwhelmingly male character of this tradition, in which the ascetic spiritual and Utopian quest is characterized in part by its exclusion of the feminine principle, and, frequently, by orphanhood.¹⁰⁵ This echoes both the predominantly male tradition of *yurodstvo*, and related expressions of the Christian renunciation of the family and of the secular world. More distantly, it echoes St Paul's rewriting of the Old Testament concept of feminine wisdom as masculine folly, identified entirely with the cross.¹⁰⁶

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This survey of a few writers of the 1920s gives an indication of the variety of forms folly took in the post-Revolutionary era. Later writers would look back to these examples, and to numerous others. At the same time, the late-Soviet period brought with it specific contextual features of its own.

In the broadest terms, the cultural situation in the 1960s was ripe for an intellectual counter-reaction towards folly which would exceed that of the 1920s. Of particular significance were the renewed antireligious campaigns after Stalin's death, peaking in the

¹⁰⁴ See, for example, the opening of *Kotlovan*.

¹⁰⁵ Eliot Borenstein cites Platonov's statement in 1920 about Communist society: 'He who desires the truth cannot desire a woman'; Borenstein, *Men Without Women: Masculinity and Revolution in Russian Fiction, 1917-1929* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), p.xv.

¹⁰⁶ See Mary A. Maleski, 'Paul the Apostle', in Janik (ed.), pp.316-28 (pp.324-25).

early 1960s;¹⁰⁷ the cult status of science throughout this decade;¹⁰⁸ and the rapidly increasing role of psychiatric hospitals (widely referred to as *psikhushki*) as the new form of terror by the threat of which dissenting intellectuals could be brought into line. We will see that Aleshkovsky, Mamleev and Galkovsky all inveigh, in different ways, against Soviet atheism, often mocking it for its obtuseness (*tupost'*), in an inversion of the Marxist-Leninist loathing of religion, inculcated at school, as a stupefying drug (*durman*). All three also reject science, whether simply by ignoring it or by deriding it directly.¹⁰⁹

The *psikhushka*, meanwhile, played a crucial part in forming the favoured discourse of non-conformist intellectuals, with its characteristic inversion of norms of sanity and insanity, folly and intelligence. The readiness of the psychiatric profession in the 1960s to diagnose and forcibly treat as mentally ill any inconvenient individual has been described at length in novels and memoirs.¹¹⁰ One of its consequences was a perverse pride in being certified insane.¹¹¹ The 'filthy madhouse' (*zaplevannyi sumassheshii dom*) is the only place for an honest writer, writes the narrator of Valery Tarsis' *Palata no. 7* (1966), a novel based on the author's own internment in Moscow's Kashchenko Hospital. The narrator's ward contains only one patient deemed genuinely ill by the narrator, and hosts a symposium-like atmosphere of intellectual discussion.¹¹² As the very title of the work suggests, with its allusion to Chekhov's 'Palata no. 6', the *psikhushka* inscribed itself into

¹⁰⁷ See Miriam Dobson, 'Antireligious Campaigns in the Russian Press, 1953-1965', *Slovo* [SSEES], 13 (2001), 139-52.

¹⁰⁸ See Vail' and Genis, pp.100-6.

¹⁰⁹ On the latter, see Chapter Two, below.

¹¹⁰ Zhores A. Medvedev, who was committed in 1970 for his book on Lysenko, attributes this readiness to the school of A.V. Snezhnevsky, with his very broad classification of mental illness (founded on a new 'Pavlovian theory of schizophrenia'), and to the new criminal code of 1961, which omitted articles that stressed psychiatrists' criminal responsibility for placing patients in mental hospitals without adequate grounds. See Zhores A. Medvedev and Roy A. Medvedev, *A Question of Madness*, trans. by Ellen de Kadt (London: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 68-69, 105.

¹¹¹ On this subject see also Tat'yana Goricheva, *Pravoslavie i postmodernizm* (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Leningradskogo Universiteta, 1991), pp.38-48.

¹¹² Valery Tarsis, *Palata no. 7* (Frankfurt: Possev, 1966), pp.46, 18-19.

a rich literary tradition. One of its most famous inmates, Vladimir Bukovsky, who was interned in Leningrad in the early 1960s, recalled in his memoirs that,

[W]e weren't in the least afraid of being called lunatics – on the contrary, we were delighted: let these idiots think we're loonies if they like, or rather, let these loonies think we're idiots. We recalled all the stories about madmen by Chekhov, Gogol, Akutagawa, and of course *The Good Soldier Shweik*. We laughed our heads off at our doctors and ourselves.¹¹³

The consequences of being sectioned in Soviet Russia were, of course, frequently appalling, yet the *psikhushka* remained a focus of humour and satire. It also had its uses, whether for criminals faking madness or ordinary youths desperate to avoid the draft.

In many respects, the fate of the psychiatric inmate could stand as a metaphor for the fate of the non-conformist intellectual in general: in the Soviet context, intelligence and soulfulness had to be hidden. Writers such as Yury Mamleev would hold down an ordinary job by day, and devote their evenings to reading and discussing poetry and philosophy on themes, such as death, about which Soviet literature was largely silent. Outside the walls of the mental hospital, Russian intellectuals had found other ways of insulating themselves against a socio-political context that was widely perceived as immutable, especially after the suppression of the Prague Spring in August, 1968, and the standardization of society and discourse under Brezhnev. The keynote of urban intellectual life post-1968 was escapism, with many writers and scholars deliberately (or by force of circumstance) seeking out menial professional employment – whether as lift-operators, boiler men, or loaders – which left them with more time to pursue often esoteric interests, and to drink.¹¹⁴

As Alexei Yurchak has discussed, this widespread escape into *samizdat*, ancient cultures, *anekdoty*, alcoholic conviviality (*vesel'e*) and intensely-felt subjectivity

¹¹³ Vladimir Bukovsky, *To Build a Castle: My Life as a Dissenter*, trans. by Michael Scammell (London: A. Deutsch, 1978), p.159. See *ibid* pp.155-76 for a description of the role of psychiatric abuse under Khrushchev and Brezhnev. See also Victor Nekipelov, *Institute of Fools: Notes from the Serbsky*, ed. and trans. by Marco Carynnyk and Marta Horban (London: Victor Gollancz, 1980).

¹¹⁴ See Alexei Yurchak, *Everything was Forever, Until it was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). See also the important collection of articles 'Semidesyatye kak predmet russkoi kul'tury', ed. by K.Yu. Rogov, *Rossiya/Russia* 1 (1998), 7-302.

represented a break not only with official culture, but also with the dissident tendencies established in the 1960s. If the dissidents and *shestidesyatniki* engaged in dialogue with the state, taking ‘authoritative discourse at face value’, a younger generation of intellectuals – and some of their most significant precursors, such as Venedikt Erofeev, Mamleev and Brodsky – often detached themselves entirely from political discourse in their lives and writings.¹¹⁵ By thus implicitly accepting the status quo, they espoused attitudes alien to the dissident movement, with its philosophy of living ‘не по лжи’ (Solzhenitsyn).¹¹⁶ But it was precisely this intellectual detachment within a socio-political context of stability, peace, and relative material comfort (in contrast to the Russia of the 1920s and 1930s) that facilitated the turn towards the types of philosophical inquiry that are the subjects of the following chapters.

¹¹⁵ See Yurchak, pp.106, 127.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p.106.

Chapter One

Fools in Search of an Author: Chonkin, *Chudiki*, Venichka

1. Vladimir Voinovich and Private Chonkin

Vladimir Voinovich's most popular novel, *Zhizn' i neobychnyye priklyucheniya soldata Ivana Chonkina* (written 1963-69; henceforth, *Chonkin*), reflects, in relatively straightforward fashion, important reasons that pushed writers of the time towards a 'praise of folly'.¹

Voinovich's fiction of the 1970s and 1980s has entrenched his reputation as a leading satirist and critic of the Soviet civilization. At the time he set about writing *Chonkin*, however, this is not a description the author, or his readers, would have recognized. His work, published and dramatized on a regular basis in the early 1960s, expressed critical tendencies that were quite in keeping with the spirit of the Khrushchev era, and in particular of *Novyi Mir* under the editorship of Aleksandr Tvardovsky.² Voinovich's attentiveness to the gulf between appearance and reality, ideals and actuality (as socio-political rather than philosophical dilemmas) were combined with other general

¹ Part One first appeared in the emigré journal *Grani*, 72 (1969), without Voinovich's permission. Its publication, together with Voinovich's support of Sinyavsky, Daniel' and other dissidents of the late 1960s, lay at the root of the author's tribulations with the authorities over the next decade. Following his expulsion from the Writers' Union in 1974, harassment from the KGB, and threats of punishment, Voinovich emigrated to Munich in 1980. *Chonkin* was published in full by YMCA in Paris in 1975; it also circulated widely in *samizdat*. Its sequel, *Pretendent na prestol*, was published by YMCA in 1979. See Rachel S. Farmer's well-informed survey of Voinovich's life and work in *A Reference Guide to Russian Literature*, ed. by Neil Cornwell (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998), pp.881-82.

² His story of 1963, 'Khochu byt' chestnym', has been described as a 'programmatic' example of the 'художественная логика новомирского реализма'; see Petr Vail' and Aleksandr Genis, *60-e: mir sovetskogo cheloveka* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 1996), pp.161-62. A good discussion of Voinovich's pre-*Chonkin* fiction is given in Geoffrey Hosking, *Beyond Socialist Realism: Soviet Fiction since Ivan Denisovich* (London: Granada, 1980), pp.136-45.

features of post-Thaw realism, such as an emphasis on the emotional life of the individual and the assertion of honesty and sincerity as general principles.

Many of these characteristics carried over to the novel for which Voinovich remains best known. Set in June, 1941, in a village in the back of beyond, *Chonkin* offers an amusing send-up of the Soviet military, the 'intelligence' services, and the cult of Stalin. The irreverence of the novel is a large part of its charm, but its satirical reach should not be overstated. *Chonkin* is set in a place and time that have as much in common with fairy-tales and Gogolian comedy as with concrete (and very recent) history, the most brutal aspects of which remain beyond the novel's scope.³ In line with the historical concerns of the Khrushchev era, its satirical humour is directed, above all, at the cult of Stalin and its legacy of fear, and aims at an effect of catharsis rather than shock. There is no mistaking the universal, galvanizing basis of fear in Krasnoe, but its irruption at moments of crisis, or in dreams, is slapstick rather than chilling.⁴ In other respects, village life is a teeming canvas of eternally pregnant women, drunken men and the odd anecdotally reported death or suicide (p.7). Far from being a comprehensive exposé of high Stalinism, the novel is marked by a mood of profound somnolence and a tone of benevolent indulgence towards such widespread misdemeanours as thieving from the *kolkhoz*.⁵ Indeed, in certain respects, the picture of the Soviet Union suggested by *Chonkin* is generous to a fault. The paranoid *kolkhoz* chairman, for example, is relieved to learn from a recent convict that prison life is 'not so scary' (*ne takaya uzh strashnaya*; pp.62-

³ The novel's opening sentence states that its events happened in a past so distant that their truth can no longer be established; Vladimir Voinovich, *Zhizn' i neobychnyye priklyucheniya soldata Ivana Chonkina* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2002), p.5. Subsequent page references to this edition will follow quotations in the main text. On fairy-tale motifs in the novel, see Helimur Khan, 'Folklore and Fairy-Tale Elements in Vladimir Voinovich's Novel *The Life and the Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin*', *SEEJ*, 40 (1996), 494-518. In *Chonkin*, as Khan rightly points out, 'Voinovich reclaims folklore, which for decades, particularly during the Stalin years, had been used as propaganda among the masses' (p.499).

⁴ In *Chonkin*'s first dream, Stalin appears to him as a *baba* (pp.42-43); see also pp.46-47.

⁵ Life in Krasnoe seems almost quaint when set against historical accounts of provincial Russia at the time; see, for example, Lewis Siegelbaum and Andrei Sokolov, *Stalinism as a Way of Life: A Narrative in Documents* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

63). Notably lacking in *Chonkin* are the anger and rawness that characterize fictional representations of the same period in later works by, among others, Mikhail Kononov and Yuz Aleshkovsky.⁶

Arguably, what marks *Chonkin* most profoundly as an unacceptable work in the Soviet literary context is the decision to take for its protagonist a perfect fool. Even amidst the cartoonishly incompetent inhabitants of Krasnoe, Private Chonkin stands out for being distinctively obtuse. In his appearance he is the very image of the literary fool: jug-eared, short, unkempt and generally unformed. In his behaviour, he is wholly resistant to instruction.⁷ Intellectually, Chonkin's most striking qualities are his credulity and literal-mindedness. He believes the village wags that his girlfriend had a sexual relationship with her pet boar, and a fellow soldier that Stalin had two wives (pp.66-70, 23-25). He mistakes a mosquito for an aeroplane (p.97). Though incapable of thinking for himself, he does nevertheless think, and the narrator mocks him for his vapid ruminations: 'Чонкин предавался своим мыслям. Внимательно наблюдая жизнь, постигая ее законы, он понял, что летом обычно бывает тепло, а зимой – холодно' (pp.22-23).

Resorting to the type of mock-apology that became traditional in nineteenth-century Russian literature to introduce unseemly and apparently unedifying protagonists, Voinovich explains his choice of hero thus: 'Всех отличников расхватили, и мне вот достался Чонкин' (p.18).⁸ The comment is tongue-in-cheek, but in a crucial sense

⁶ See, for example, Aleshkovsky's *Ruka* (discussed in Chapter Three) and Kononov's novel, *Golaya pionerka* (Limbus: St Petersburg, 2001), both of which abound in the historical atrocities of the period. The latter treats similar concerns (such as the criminal stupidity of the army and the penetration of Stalinist culture into ordinary dreams), but does so in a considerably more unsettling comic manner. In his 1976 survey of *samizdat* writers, Yury Mal'tsev even went so far as to argue that a lack of 'злость' invalidated the rapidly established categorization of *Chonkin* as satire. See Mal'tsev, *Vol'naya russkaya literatura, 1955-1975* (Frankfurt: Posev, 1976) p.346.

⁷ His sergeant-major comments: 'Службу уже кончает, а приветствовать не научился [...] А вид какой! Весь в пыли, лицо грязное, не боец, а одно недоразумение' (p.14).

⁸ Compare also with Ivan Babichev's difficulty in finding 'heroes'; Yury Olesha, *Zavist'* (Moscow and Leningrad: Zemlya i Fabrika, 1930), p.89.

Chonkin really is the only kind of hero left for Voinovich; only a figure so foolish can serve him, for reasons I will discuss, as a moral touchstone.

In certain respects, Chonkin continues established literary traditions of foolish truth-telling. His deafness to the figurative level of language, for example, is used to expose the manifest dishonesty of one of Stalin's radio speeches at the beginning of the war:

Чонкин слушал слова, произносимые с заметным грузинским акцентом, глубоко верил в них, но не все мог понять. Если лучшие дивизии врага и лучшие части его авиации разбиты и нашли себе могилу, то стоит ли так беспокоиться? Худшие части и дивизии разбить еще легче. Кроме того, непонятно было выражение «нашли себе могилу на полях сражений». Почему они не искали ее в другом месте? И кто эту могилу для них вырыл? (pp.138-39)

The passage exemplifies what Bakhtin takes to be the widespread and crucial function of the *durak* in the novel, whereby the fool's stupidity (*glupost'*) serves as a 'justified failure to comprehend falsity' (*opravdannoe neponimanie lzhi*) and a prosaic response to lofty rhetoric and cliché.⁹ Within the specific context of Soviet satire, Chonkin's comic non-comprehension of figurative political speech may be compared to the similar bemusement of Platonov's 'doubting Makar': a bumpkin who, on arriving in Moscow, seeks out the *proletariat* and *promyshlennaya liniya* as physical entities.¹⁰

However, both in Bakhtin's theorizing and Platonov's fiction, the stupidity of the fool is to a significant degree metaphorical: the moment of non-comprehension generally occurs within an individual episode and context; outside it, the fool (whether Tolstoy's Pierre Bezukhov, an example cited by Bakhtin, or Platonov's Makar) may be sentient or clever on his own terms. Makar's non-comprehension is allied to the native resourcefulness characteristic of several of Platonov's 'fools', making his critique of

⁹ M.M. Bakhtin, 'Slovo v romane', in *Voprosy literatury i estetiki: Issledovaniya raznykh let* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1975), pp.72-233 (p.216).

¹⁰ 'Usomnivshiisya Makar', in A.P. Platonov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 2 vols (Moscow: Informpechat', 1998), I, pp. 521-36 (pp.528-30).

Soviet reality potentially constructive, even if it eventually lands him in the madhouse. He partakes in the 'взаимное непонимание говорящих на разных языках'.¹¹

Chonkin's foolishness, however, is total and abject, at least in the novel's opening section. When we first meet him, he is performing press-ups for the sergeant major, dishevelled, frightened and silent; others (the sergeant major and the orderly) act, think and speak for him. Mainly, they punish him. Chonkin is a character without a language, in Bakhtin's terms, and a kind of comic scapegoat. Yet it is precisely these qualities which render him a truth-bearer in the social context in which he finds himself. In the novel's implicit dialogue of contrasting forms of stupidity, Chonkin's inarticulacy and impotence will provide a fixed commentary on the idiotic and paranoid cunning of his counterparts in authority, who persuade themselves that Chonkin is a spy (p.58). Their logic is determined by a contagious fearfulness that has obvious sources both in Stalinist propaganda (the need to flush out camouflaged internal enemies) and in Gogolian grotesque (the stupid paranoia of the local authorities in *Revizor*). Perhaps the most biting satirical implication of *Chonkin* to Voinovich's own day is that, in a society in which the measure and language of truth have been so comprehensively disordered, *any* viewpoint from within its parameters and discourse will be contaminated. Nobody is left to speak the truth and be believed.

Voinovich returned to this dilemma many years later in his short story, 'Novaya skazka o golom korole', a transparent allegory of society under totalitarian rule, and specifically, perhaps, of the intelligentsia of the 1960s. In this revision of Andersen's fairy tale a 'silly boy' (*glupyi mal'chik*), believing that he will be thanked for his perspicacity and intelligence, announces that the emperor has no clothes: 'Мальчик не знал, что королевство живет по сказкам не Андерсена, а дедушки Карлы Марлы, а в этих

¹¹ Bakhtin, p.216.

сказках всякие глупые возгласы насчет голости короля приравниваются... как бы это сказать... к террору'. The boy is dragged off and punished. Other children are successfully trained not to be so stupid:

Одних родители загодя пороли, другие сами без порки умнели. И, поумнев, начинали понимать, что выражать свои мысли можно по-разному. Можно опасным, а можно совсем безопасным образом. Можно кричать, что король гол, имея в виду, что он гол. А можно, имея в виду то же самое, кричать, что король распрекрасно одет.¹²

Coded, inverted discourse becomes the townsfolk's means of expression and thought, and the source of their humour; nothing they say may be taken at face value, and no truth uttered directly. Aesopian speech of this type has been described by Vail' and Genis as the intelligentsia's principal mode of expression in the 1960s; it was, they write, 'частью более широкой культурной системы – иронии'.¹³ But irony can have a corrosive effect on those who employ it, while leaving its target unaffected. In Voinovich's *skazka*, it functions merely as a new conformity, thanks to which 'в конце концов все перепуталось до невозможности'. The king's subjects eventually tire of double-speak, and decide to tell the truth; but their tongues stick to the roofs of their mouth, and all that even the most critical dissenters can manage is an almost-truth: 'Король наш одет недостаточно, он, можно даже сказать, почти совсем не одет'.¹⁴

Frustration with the impotence of both irony and officially-sanctioned criticism may be proposed as an underlying cause of Voinovich's strategy in *Chonkin*. If, as the 'Novaya skazka' suggests, insincere conformism is equated by society with intelligence, then truthfulness must take the form of genuine foolishness and ignorance of the rules of double-think.¹⁵ Chonkin's single most important quality, in literary and cultural terms, was

¹² 'Novaya skazka o golom korole', in Vladimir Voinovich, *Skazki dlya vzroslykh* (Moscow: Vagrius, 1996), pp.413-19 (p.414).

¹³ Vail' and Genis, p.167.

¹⁴ Voinovich, 'Novaya skazka', p.418.

¹⁵ It should be noted, however, that the voice of 'intelligent' irony and criticism is not entirely suppressed in *Chonkin*. The narrator's brief and highly sarcastic biography of General Drynov, in charge of the operation to

suggested by Voinovich in an interview of 1975: 'Пожалуй, он ни во что не играет'.¹⁶ This, as Arnold McMillin has noted, is also the feature that distinguishes him most fundamentally from Hašek's Švejk.¹⁷ A rogue rather than an innocent, with a 'great deal' on his conscience, Švejk exploits his diagnosis by military doctors as a 'patent idiot' to play the system.¹⁸ Chonkin, by contrast, is incorrigibly (and unthinkingly) serious, patriotic and dutiful; his soldierly uselessness (*bespoleznost'*) depresses him (p.99). As a public citizen Chonkin does not play or laugh, even when he finds himself in a situation where he has to offer a bribe (p.191). His transparency serves to reflect the complex, implicitly sinful game played by everyone else, expressing traditional Russian condemnation of *igra* and *smekh* in inappropriate contexts and bringing it to bear on what Yuz Aleshkovsky would later call the *maskirovka* of Soviet life.

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The need to preserve Chonkin as a 'лицо неприкосновенный' (as the novel's first part is entitled) presents Voinovich with the problem of how to develop any sort of narrative in which his hero can interact with the world. How can plot movement be created around a 'fixed fool', as Laura Beraha has described Chonkin?¹⁹

Voinovich does so by educating his hero à la Rousseau, and thereby rendering him somewhat less foolish. Beraha reads *Chonkin* and its sequel as an example of what she calls 'inverted picaresque'.²⁰ But it is also, in its inverted way, a *Bildungsroman* that brings Chonkin out of inertia and silence and makes of him an example of the 'natural

'liquidate' Chonkin's non-existent criminal gang, demonstrates its sharp but limited possibilities (pp.209-10). Irony is used more humorously in a description of Stalin given by Lyushka, a secondary character who met Stalin in the Kremlin: 'Очень простой человек [...] и очень скромный' (p.125).

¹⁶ Voinovich, 'O sovremennosti i istorii', *Rossiia/Russia*, 2 (1975), 228-35 (p.233).

¹⁷ Arnold McMillin, 'The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin', in Cornwell (ed.), p.892.

¹⁸ Jaroslav Hašek, *The Good Soldier Švejk*, trans. by Cecil Parrott (London: Penguin, 2000), pp.25, 35.

¹⁹ Laura Beraha, 'The Fixed Fool: Raising and Resisting Picaresque Mobility in Vladimir Voinovich's *Čonkin* Novels', *SEEJ*, 40 (1996), 475-93 (p.489).

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.477. The Chonkin saga, Beraha proposes, 'suggests its decade's longing for picaresque mobility'; while the hero's foolishness may 'be said to derive from a blocked picaresque career' (pp.477, 478).

man' whom Voinovich has stated to be his preferred type of hero.²¹ Having established Chonkin's inability to adapt to his society, and to be educated by it, Voinovich isolates his hero from his social context and prepares for him a different type of education in 'natural' living. Left on his own to guard the plane, Chonkin is placed in a situation where he is forced to break the rules, simply in order to eat, smoke or relieve himself (p.33). His first acts of transgression prove to be a powerful catalyst. He smokes, sings, then calls out to a cartful of girls riding past; though they laugh at him, they affect him most agreeably (p.34), providing the overture to the artless courtship of Nyura that immediately follows. Henceforth Chonkin will show the erotic appetite characteristic of the literary fool.²² Sexual awakening is accompanied by the sudden flowering of other hidden talents: gardening, domesticity, even the odd flash of wit.²³ When Nyura's house is besieged by the soldiers who have come to liquidate him, Chonkin will show resourcefulness and literacy (pp.186-89). Whilst remaining recognizably foolish, Chonkin has now acquired a voice in the novel to be set against others – most obviously, perhaps, the delusions of the local Lysenko-esque *uchenyi*, Gladyshev. And in his drunken conversation with the kolkhoz chairman, Golubev, Chonkin will seem the more sober of the two. Indeed, Golubev tells him: 'Ты, Ваня, человек очень умный [...] С виду дурак дураком, а приглядеться – ум государственный' (p.196).

Through the example of Chonkin, then, Voinovich shows that natural man and Soviet man are separate species. It is not a subtle argument, and the limitations of the novel's praise of the noble fool are implicitly acknowledged in the drunken Golubev's travesty of the philosophy of the return to nature: 'Жан-Жак Руссо говорил, что человек

²¹ Voinovich, 'О современности и истории', p.231.

²² See, for example, p.64; and compare with Aleshkovsky's Nikolai Nikolaevich (Chapter Two).

²³ 'Интересно, чему их там в городах учат?' Nyura asks. "Известно чему," сообразил Чонкин. "Сало деревенское жрать"; p.35.

должен стать на четверинки и идти назад к природе` (p.197).²⁴ The choice of a foolish protagonist allows Voinovich to portray a figure of uncorrupted appetites and instincts, but it does not lead to a meaningful questioning of the nature of intelligence or to a broader exploration of the issues raised by a writer's choice of an apparently anti-intellectual agenda. One reason for this is that, in contrast to most of the other texts to be studied here, Voinovich preserves the greatest possible distance between narrator and fool. The self-reflexive complexity of the first-person fool narratives of Venedikt Erofeev, Aleshkovsky and others, is therefore absent.

What *Chonkin*'s praise of folly may lose in profundity, it compensates for with its comedy, its plot and the cultural resonances suggested by its hero. Voinovich's comments of 1975 clearly express his desire to create a national hero, and one in a specific mould:

Мне хотелось показать простого русского человека. Меня с давних пор привлекает народный характер. Это не Швейк и не Тёркин. Швейк и Тёркин – герои активные, Чонкин пассивен. [...] Это образ, идущий от сказки. Это Иванушка-дурачок, который все делает невпопад.²⁵

The parallel with Ivan-Durak stands in need of qualifications ignored by both Voinovich and his interpreters.²⁶ Chonkin's goodness, if derived from Ivan-Durak, has more in common with the somewhat sentimentalized and stylized Ivanushka celebrated by modern-day readers of the folk-tales (such as Andrei Sinyavsky) than with the actual prototype of the *skazki*, who may be amoral, if not cruel, and is sly as often as he is artless. Most importantly, Voinovich (like Tolstoy in his *skazka*)²⁷ endows his Ivan with a work ethic alien to the fool of folklore, who needs to be cajoled into leaving his stove and carrying out the simplest task. Nevertheless, the fecklessness and intransigence of Chonkin; the good

²⁴ Rousseau enters Chonkin's dream a few pages later (p.202), while the motif of crawling gains in prominence (p.206).

²⁵ Voinovich, 'O sovremennosti i istorii', p.233.

²⁶ See Hosking, *Beyond Socialist Realism*, p.16; McMillin, p.882; Mal'tsev, p.348; Khan, p.495.

²⁷ See above, pp.22-23.

fortune that sustains him through his adventures; and the magic reversals of conventional values that he makes possible all serve to identify him with the fools of the *vol'shebnyye skazki* in particular. Especially effective in ensuring the association is the chain of imagery familiar from the *vol'shebnyye skazki*: among them, Chonkin's conversations with animals (pp.28-32); his profound attachment to his mother and to the world of dreams (p.203);²⁸ his immersion in country life as the background of magical occurrences; the motif of standing guard (whether over a treasure or a grave);²⁹ and his resistance to being taught or 'improved', thus drawing the fears of those around him that they will be infected by the fool's incorrigible idiocy.³⁰ In these and other ways, Voinovich created a stylized folk hero capable of lodging himself deep in the Russian reader's mind and of displacing the very different folksy heroes previously thrown up by Soviet literature, notably Tvardovsky's Vasily Terkin (1946).³¹

2. Vasily Shukshin

In sharp contrast to Voinovich's *Chonkin*, with its homely depiction of *derevenskii byt*, are the short stories of Vasily Shukshin (1929-1974). In these vignettes of Siberian village life – written in the 1960s and early 1970s, and, in the main, published contemporaneously – folly, folk culture and modernity intersect in a far more dynamic manner.

The salience of the fool in Shukshin's fiction was recognized by the author himself. Shukshin appeared to conceive his own characters within the varied traditions of Russian folly, including *yurodstvo*, folk tales, and *skomoroshestvo*, as John Givens notes in his

²⁸ On this, see Khan, p.511.

²⁹ See, for example, A.N. Afanas'ev, *Narodnye russkie skazki*, ed. by L.G. Barag and N.V. Novikov, 3 vols (Moscow: Nauka, 1984-85), II, pp.5-7 (no.179) and III, p.185 (no.396).

³⁰ See, for example, the despair of Gladyshev; *Chonkin*, pp.129-33, 142. On the contagious threat of folly in folklore and proverbs, see Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, *The Slave Soul of Russia: Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), p.125.

³¹ See A.T. Tvardovsky, *Vasily Terkin. Terkin na tom svete* (Moscow: Raritet, 2000).

comprehensive monograph. Givens, however, is most inclined to see Shukshin's fools and oddballs (*chudiki*) in the context of carnival. 'The point is that Shukshin's *chudiki* speak to the spiritual freedom embodied by the fool, to the liberating qualities of laughter and the joyful relativity of carnivalized celebration, precious qualities indeed during a time of political reaction in the second half of the 1960s'.³² But it is debatable how much laughter or joy Shukshin's signature characters actually bring.³³ In a brief survey of stories written towards the end of Shukshin's career (the late 1960s and early 1970s), I wish to draw greater attention to the fact that folly pervades Shukshin's stories in a manner which is often far from celebratory.³⁴ The attraction to folly which the stories demonstrate is itself being questioned. In some stories, the authority of the fool as truth-teller is undermined, even ridiculed, while in many others Shukshin appears to be counting the cost of a cultural mentality marooned in folly: secondary characters demonstrate an obsessive need to expose others as fools, while the protagonists are often prone to wallowing in their own folly and failure, in a masochistic and theatrical manner which hardly presumes the reader's admiration. Shukshin thus anticipated the increasingly self-reflexive and sceptical discourse of folly in late-Soviet non-conformist prose, which would reach its culmination in the work of later writers such as Dmitry Galkovsky and Viktor Erofeev.

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Fools often come to the fore in Shukshin's fiction in the context of the stories' direct confrontation of evil and cruelty (which is itself another feature that makes Shukshin an important bridge to the concerns of later, more radical and unpublishable writers).

Shukshin's fools are scapegoats, as well as entertainers and truth-tellers, and serve as

³² See John Givens, *Prodigal Son: Vasilii Shukshin in Soviet Russian Culture* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2000), pp.18-19, 65-67 (pp.65-66).

³³ Givens' extensive discussion often suggests this, but consistently veers towards a more positive evaluation of Shukshin's fools and eccentrics against a sociopolitical backdrop of conformity; see especially, pp.57-86.

³⁴ A text, written at the very end of Shukshin's career which fully confirms this point is the satiric fairy tale *Do tret'ikh petukhov*, which places Ivan-Durak in a Sovietized and bureaucratized neverland, rendering him an entirely unlikeable parody of the folkloric archetype; he sells his soul to gain a 'certificate of wisdom'. I have not discussed this lengthy tale here for reasons of space; it is well summarized by Givens, pp.102-5.

magnets for evil forces. This is especially clear in stories devoted to what might be called ‘naturals’, such as ‘Chudik’, whose eponymous hero has become critical shorthand for the Shukshinian hero,³⁵ and who, we are told in the second sentence, ‘обладал одной особенностью: с ним постоянно что-нибудь случалось’.³⁶ Chudik’s dimness and trusting simple-mindedness draw the intense irritation, cruelty and hatred of others. The story describes his visit over the Urals to his brother, cut short by his sister-in-law, who is driven to apoplexy by the two brothers’ reminiscences about early infancy. Chudik feels himself to be jinxed, repeatedly asking himself, ‘Да почему же я такой есть-то?’, while wondering: ‘Не понимаю: почему они стали злые?’.³⁷

Similarly, in “‘Raskas’”, a cuckolded husband returns home to find the note: ‘Иван, извини, но больше с таким пеньком я жить не могу. Не ищи меня. Людмила’. The husband responds by writing a long and, he believes, edifying account of his wife’s behaviour, highlighting the waste of government resources on her education. The newspaper editor to whom he brings his ‘Raskas’ guffaws as he reads; laughter turns to embarrassment when he discovers that the story is not fiction. Here, as elsewhere in Shukshin’s work, the fool’s traditional role as truth-teller is subjected to cruel irony; such genuine fools, it seems, are of no use to anyone. In characteristically ambivalent fashion, however, Shukshin still appeals in the final lines to the reader’s sympathy for his unfortunate *penek*: ‘А он шел и молча плакал. И ему было не стыдно. Он устал’.³⁸

A less transparent example of similar patterns is given in one of Shukshin’s most celebrated stories, ‘Tantsuyushchii Shiva’. Seven carpenters are drinking in a bar and loudly complaining about the terms of their new employment. They are interrupted by Arkashka Kebin (nicknamed ‘Tantsuyushchii Shiva’) who mocks them, reminding them

³⁵ See Givens, p.58.

³⁶ V.M. Shukshin, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 6 vols (Moscow: Nadezhda-1, 1998), I, pp.428-37 (p.428).

³⁷ Ibid, pp.431, 437, 436. These patterns would be replayed in Abram Terts, *Kroshka Tsores* (Paris: Sintaksis, 1980).

³⁸ Shukshin, I, pp.423-38 (pp.423, 428).

that it was in fact they who first set out to deceive their employers. They listen in silence to his reproaches, with surprise but also, it seems, resignation. Only Van'ka Seleznev reacts aggressively, and, grabbing Arkashka by the throat, demands that he dance for them. Shiva eventually agrees, but uses his dance to do a hilarious imitation: 'Как Ванька Селезнев дергает задом гвозди!'. Van'ka becomes furious, but is told to lighten up by his colleagues; when he fails to do so, the foreman, who is the only worker from outside the village, knocks out his teeth. Ironically, it is Arkashka who steps in for Van'ka, appalled by the foreman's 'base' way of fighting. In the final lines, the bar-girl blames Arkashka for bringing storms in his wake: 'А все ты разжег!... Шива чертов. Вечно из-за тебя одни скандалы'.³⁹

Arkashka castigates sloth and vice, recalling the Hindu god Shiva, whose powers to destroy evil are conveyed through a ferocious, flailing dance.⁴⁰ But his role may also be interpreted according to Russian paradigms of folly. Arkashka may be seen as part *skomorokh*, part *yurodivyi*. A good deal of irony, even parody, colours the expression of these paradigms, while never wholly undermining them. Like the *yurodivyi*, Arkashka presents himself as a fearless truth-teller, telling the carpenters: 'имейте мужество выслушать горькую правду'. The intervention of the narrator, however, is sarcastic: 'Великая сила – правда: зная ее, можно быть спокойным. Аркаша был спокоен. Он судил прохиндеев'.⁴¹ The 'bitter truth' seems to be of no great interest to the carpenters, whose indulgence towards Arkashka appears to be motivated more by the *skomorokh*-like entertainment provided by his dancing. Theatrical performance seems to be more important than moral stricture, and, like many of Shukshin's protagonists who are more

³⁹ Shukshin, II, pp.195-202 (p.202).

⁴⁰ The four-armed 'Dancing Shiva', with a cobra on his head and a demon under his feet, is a common devotional image in Hindu households.

⁴¹ Shukshin, II, p.197.

obviously foolish,⁴² Arkashka is forced to entertain against his will, before being rewarded with a drink.⁴³ Nevertheless, the performance of this ‘артист’, though almost beaten out of him, is described by the unpredictable narrator as a unique expression of freedom: ‘это свободная форма свободного существования в нашем деловом веке’. Arkashka thus elicits both scepticism on the part of the narrator (for his claims to know the truth) and admiration. Against the bar-girl’s desire to cast Arkashka as scapegoat, the narrator suggests that the true villain of the piece is the foreman, with his ‘мерзкое искусство’ of fighting. Without the meddling of this outsider, the villagers might have sorted out their own differences.⁴⁴

Odurachivanie

It is not Arkashka, however, but Van'ka who reflects the prime concern of many of Shukshin's stories: namely, the unpredictable expression of injured *amour propre*. While the language and behaviour of the Shukshinian protagonist is often robust, he proves comically vulnerable to the merest slights. His ideal self-image proves to be drastically at odds with his situation in life and with his perception by others (especially, women) – a perception which, in turn, painfully affects his view of himself. His lofty ideas, which he has difficulty articulating, about his soul, inner freedom and *toska*, are all too easily mocked. Psychologically, he invites the fate that inevitably befalls him: that of being played for a fool. *Odurachivanie* proves as fundamental to Shukshin's stories as to folklore.

Very often, Shukshin's men are made fools of by women, who find their men's spiritual needs and pains merely ridiculous. In ‘Veruyu!’, Maksim is driven to distraction

⁴² Among them, Ivan-Durak in *Do tret'ikh petukhov* and Bron'ka in ‘Mil' pardon, madam!’

⁴³ His role in this sense is comparable to that of the *skomorokh* in Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev* (Mosfilm, 1966).

⁴⁴ Shukshin, II, pp.199, 201.

by the inability of his wife to understand, or even acknowledge, the melancholy (*toska*) which afflicts him on Sundays, and makes a despairing attempt to prove to her that, 'у человека есть также – душа! Вот она, здесь, – болит!'.⁴⁵ Most directly, women make fools of men by cuckolding them ('Raskas'), deceiving and robbing them ('Materinskoe serdtse'), or simply being the direct cause of their eventual humiliation ('Suraz', 'Khmyr'). There is the sense that men are fools because women keep them in that role. Indeed, in a carnival reversal of the norm, they define them as such, saddling them with a name that becomes an identity. 'Chudik' begins: 'Жена называла его – Чудик. Иногда ласково'. It becomes clear that Chudik's wife takes him for a complete fool and non-entity ('ничтожество'), though it will be another woman, his sister-in-law, who first specifically calls him a *durak*.⁴⁶ Throughout the story, he is bullied and stifled by women, even by the lady telegraphist, who rewrites his childish telegram to his wife. It's left to the narrator to dignify him with a name and a biography, keeping alive the possibility that there may be more generous ways of considering this unfortunate character. The story ends:

Звали его – Василий Егорыч Князев. Было ему тридцать девять лет от роду. Он работал киномехаником в селе. Обожал сыщиков и собак. В детстве мечтал быть шпионом.⁴⁷

A similar pattern recurs in 'Mil' pardon, Madam!', dedicated to Bron'ka Pupkov, an expert hunter who tells city folk tall stories around the fire about his failed attempt to kill Hitler during the war. It is hard to know what to make of Pupkov, who appears to believe his own fantasies, but his wife is in no doubt, calling him a 'fingerless fool' (*durak bespalyi*), and citing a proverb that emphasizes the abasement and masochism of the fool:

⁴⁵ Shukshin, II, pp.215-24 (p.216).

⁴⁶ Shukshin, I, pp.428, 431, 436.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p.437.

‘Смеются, в глаза смеются, а ему... все божья роса. Харя ты неумытая, скот лесной’.⁴⁸

Female mockery is only the most obvious form of *odurachivanie* in Shukshin's stories. On closer inspection, it becomes clear that *odurachivanie* is a way of life and a way of thinking for all Shukshin's villagers (hence the carpenters' fear of being deceived and made fools of by their bosses in 'Tantsuyushchii Shiva').

A popular, satirical vein of *odurachivanie* which Shukshin taps with particular frequency is dethroning and role-reversal, a tradition recalling folk-tales in which the peasant fools the *barin*. Here, however, the emphasis is on the discrediting of intellectual, rather than class, superiority. In 'Debil', an electrician teaches a teacher some good manners in revenge for a previous incident when the teacher had flaunted his wiring skills to the electrician.⁴⁹ In 'Srezal' a couple of academics arrive to visit a relative and are subjected to ritual *odurachivanie* by a villager renowned for his skill at cutting visitors down to size. The attempted humiliation is far from convincing, though it is certainly nasty.⁵⁰ Indeed, the mockery of intellectual pretension is *de rigueur* among Shukshin's villagers, just as the affectation of learning and *intelligentnost'* is a temptation to which locals constantly succumb, only to be instantly ridiculed.⁵¹ It is not just the women but the context of the *derevnya* itself (both as the village, and as country life generally) which appears to hold its men in the role of fools. The impression is created that the very notion of having a truly intelligent person in their midst is to the villagers themselves an impossibility; they expect only affectation, while their compulsive appeal to the terminology of folly and (in ironic tones) intelligence suggests a shared complex of

⁴⁸ Ibid, pp.437-445 (p.444). On this and similar proverbs, see Rancour-Laferriere, p.126.

⁴⁹ Shukshin, II, pp.312-17.

⁵⁰ Ibid, pp.225-32. This cruelty is emphasized and criticized by the narrator in the concluding paragraphs. It may be compared to the cruelty prevalent in the *skazki o shutakh*; see V.Ya. Propp, *Russkaya skazka* (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Leningradskogo Universiteta, 1984), pp.282-83.

⁵¹ See, among other stories, 'Debil', 'Mikroskop'.

inadequacy and a conviction that life will spit in their face. It also recalls the abusive discourse of folly established by Lenin at the beginning of the Soviet period and targeted, above all, at the intelligentsia.⁵²

In some stories, the curse of inevitable *odurachivanie* takes more subtle and moving forms. In 'Master' the renowned carpenter Semka Rys' discovers a stone church in a neighbouring village and, inspired by its beauty, asks permission from the local priest to renovate it. Rys', we are given to understand, has never experienced such enthusiasm before, and never been so keen to apply his gifts. Ordinarily, he is a heavy drinker, to the displeasure of his fellow villagers, who despair of his wasted talents. The priest sends Rys' to the metropolitan, who sends him on to the *oblispolkom*. There, an employee shows him an official description of the church, stating its lack of any architectural value: it is a 'Более или менее точная копия владимирских храмов'. The employee himself had been deceived (*obmanulsya*) when he first saw it. For Semka Rys', though, this is a disillusionment equivalent to a kind of death. Returning home, he realizes that he hasn't had any vodka for a whole five days, and drinks himself blind.⁵³

In view of such tales of disillusionment, it is not hard to see why Shukshin is often viewed as a short-story writer in the tradition of Chekhov.⁵⁴ Like much of Chekhov's fiction, Shukshin's stories are tragicomic chronicles of wasted talents, drunkenness and vanity; and of failed epiphanies and failed intentions (be they of seduction or murder).⁵⁵ His characters experience life as something inauthentic and unutterably wearisome. It is through comparison with Chekhov's plays rather than stories, however, that the theatre of folly concealed in Shukshin's fiction may best be illuminated. Like many of Chekhov's

⁵² This discourse is a theme of Galkovsky's *Beskonechnyi tupik*; see below, Chapter Five.

⁵³ Shukshin, II, pp.82-93 (p.91)

⁵⁴ See, for example, *Russkie pisateli 20 veka: Biograficheskii slovar'*, ed. by P.A. Nikolaev (Moscow: Bol'shaya Rossiiskaya Entsiklopediya, 2000), p.786.

⁵⁵ See, for example, 'Suraz', in Shukshin, II, pp.42-63.

stage characters, Shukshin's fools behave in a self-consciously performative manner.⁵⁶ This is true even of the 'naturals': Chudik and Bron'ka Pupkov, for example, are artists and actors, however unappreciated their entertainment may be. They relish the chance to create an impression with a grand gesture or carefully constructed joke, and derive great satisfaction from their performances.⁵⁷ Their attraction to stagey scenarios is shared by Shukshin's characters in general and is a part of village life: performances are a means of social survival for some characters (Arkashka's dancing and that of the child Van'ka in 'Dalekie zimnie vechera'; Bron'ka's story-telling). The ritual humiliation conducted in 'Srezal' is compared to a show ('Прямо как на спектакль ходили').⁵⁸

It is the more complex and tormented fool-protagonists, however, who have most in common with Chekhovian types: here, theatricality is a mode of both behaviour and thought. Like Uncle Vanya, such characters are given to melodramatic confessions, to self-pity and self-castigation, and to a profound sense of emptiness. They expose themselves to ridicule and perceive themselves as the protagonists of a farce. They swear revenge on their foes, but in fact harbour little genuine hostility.⁵⁹ Bakhtin rightly noted that one function of the fool in literature is to render the inner life public, but the authenticity of the intense emotions which Shukshin's fools like to publicize is itself open to question.

The protagonist of 'Biletik na vtoroi seans' is one such character. The story begins with the statement that, 'Последнее время что-то совсем не ладно было на душе у Тимофея Худякова – опостылело все на свете',⁶⁰ and consists of Timofei's half-

⁵⁶ Though one should also note the strictly un-selfconscious manner, more reminiscent of the puppet theatre, in which characters like Chudik are hit by their wives with straining ladles and oven forks; Shukshin, I, p.431.

⁵⁷ Thus, Chudik is delighted with the witticism he makes in the shop at the railway station when he hands over a fifty-ruble note he finds on the floor. When he later realizes that the note was his, he is too embarrassed to go back.

⁵⁸ Shukshin, II, p.225.

⁵⁹ The protagonist of 'Suraz' is typical in this regard. He concocts elaborate fantasies of revenge against the man who has humiliated him, but realizes he could never carry them out: 'он понял, что не находит в себе зла к учителю [...] вообще никогда никому не желал зла'. In the end, he takes his own life. Shukshin, II, p.61.

⁶⁰ Ibid, pp.304-11 (p.304).

drunken laments about his wasted life to three different acquaintances: a drinking-partner at work, a former lover, and his father-in-law. His colleague fakes sympathy, while the others laugh at him to his face. The motif of *odurachivanie* is again central. Seeing his former mistress reminds Timofei of the humiliation of the aftermath of their relationship, when his wife and mistress became friends: ‘Самое дурацкое положение настало потом: обе женщины, Поля и Гутя, вдруг подружились. И вместе смеялись над Тимохой’.⁶¹ After seeing his mistress he returns home drunk to find a saintly-looking man whom he calls *Nikolai-ugodnichek* and to whom he portentously confides his sins, his unhappiness and the grievances occasioned by his father-in-law; he even begs Nikolai for a second life. But ‘Nikolai’, it turns out, *is* his father-in-law, a revelation that leads to farce rather than the dramatic revenge of which Timofei had just boasted. Timofei makes an absurd attempt to set fire to his father-in-law, but quickly becomes conciliatory, admitting, ‘Я бы все честно сказал, только не знаю, чего такое со мной делается. Пристал, видно, так жить’. It even seems that Timofei is grateful to his father-in-law for having allowed him to play out the fantasy of confession to a holy man; after the mistake becomes clear, Timofei is twice described as ‘satisfied’ (*udovletvorenniy*). In the last words of the story he asks his father-in-law to forgive him the ‘farce’ (‘Прости за комедию-то. Прости великодушно’), echoing the theatrical metaphor inherent in the story’s title, and also Astrov’s cry towards the end of *Dyadya Vanya*: ‘Finita la comedia!’.⁶²

Unlike Uncle Vanya, however, Timofei is a man of the people. And unlike Chekhov’s fiction and drama, Shukshin’s stories suggest a close association (if not identification) between the narrator and his protagonists, however foolish or unfortunate. The question posed by the narrator at the end of one of Shukshin’s last stories (‘Klyauza’) – ‘Что с нами происходит?’ – is the question posed by many of his foolish characters,

⁶¹ Ibid, p.306

⁶² Ibid, p.311. Chekhov, A.P., *Sochineniya*, 18 vols (Moscow: Nauka, 1974-82), pp.61-116 (p.110).

such as Chudik.⁶³ This association extends to the author himself, being reinforced by the powerful legend of Shukshin as a *chelovek iz naroda*, an outsider in high culture ‘plagued’, according to Givens, by his ‘provincial complex’.⁶⁴ Playing off this legend, the stories will the reader to trace their dramas back to Shukshin himself, to see them as the staging and questioning of his own persona and attitudes. Though still mainly written in the third person, Shukshin’s stories suggest a far lesser distance between author/narrator and protagonist than was seen to be the case in *Chonkin*. The humiliation and mockery which his foolish protagonists often court thus attach at some level to their author also. Indeed, these features have even led to Shukshin’s art being viewed as a ‘подвиг юродивого’, who wills ridicule on himself.⁶⁵ The parallel is somewhat loose, however, and points ultimately to more general traditions in Russian culture and literature whereby the performer or writer draws laughter upon himself. I discuss this literary tradition further, in its roots and manifestations, in the following section.

3. Venedikt Erofeev

In the work of Venedikt Erofeev (1938-1990), the cultural processes traced above culminated in the creation of a highly sophisticated poetics which was at once more autobiographical and more elusive than that of his contemporaries. In Erofeev’s extended first-person narratives the narrator no longer mediates between authorial wisdom and the foolishness of the protagonist: he *is* the fool and the only important character. Moreover, the narrator is given the same name as the author. Erofeev’s self-presentation as narrator, protagonist and fool produced, in *Moskva-Petushki* (written 1970), the most influential

⁶³ Shukshin, III, pp.94-101 (p.101).

⁶⁴ Givens, p.17.

⁶⁵ Anatoly Durov, ‘Tantusuyushchii Shiva. Ispodlob'ya’, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 17 April 2003; see <http://exlibris.ng.ru/tendenc/2003-04-17/6_shiva.html> [accessed 10 July 2006]

literary persona of non-conformist prose, a cultural myth, as Mikhail Epshtein has suggested, to rival those of Esenin or Vysotsky.⁶⁶ An account of the alcoholic life and death of 'Venichka' as told by himself, *Moskva-Petushki* radically transformed previous models of Russian literary folly.

The role of the fool, I will argue, suited Erofeev as a means of self-effacement and self-deprecation, while the rhetoric of folly (alcoholic 'fool narrative') provides *Moskva-Petushki* with much of its stylistic complexity and ambivalence. Other readings of the *poema* have sought more specific criteria by which to explain Erofeev's paradoxical self-mythologizing, with its brazen allusions to literary and especially Biblical sources, and the interpretation of Venichka as a *yurodivyi* has become particularly dominant in recent criticism.⁶⁷ Yet such a parallel is both illuminating and limiting. Erofeev may indeed have consciously drawn on aspects of the code of *yurdostvo*, whether in the Pauline attacks on complacency and strength that characterize his writings,⁶⁸ or in his own nomadic and impecunious lifestyle, and threadbare attire.⁶⁹ Moreover, in his essay on Rozanov (1973), he identified himself (and implicitly Rozanov) as a *durak* and *otshchepenets*, drawing ironic contrasts with his fellow countrymen that strongly echo St Paul's rhetoric of holy folly ('We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ'...) and its association with filth and death:

Говна нет, и не пахнет им, остались только брильянты и изумруды. Я один только – пахну... Ну, еще несколько отщепенцев – пахнут...
Мы живем скоротечно и глупо, они живут долго и умно. Не успев родиться, мы уже подыхаем.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ See Epshtein's introductory essay on the myth of Erofeev, 'Posle karnavala, ili vechnyi Venichka', in V.V. Erofeev, *Ostav'te moyu dushu v pokoe: Pochti vse* (Moscow: Kh.G.S., 1997), pp.3-30.

⁶⁷ A list is provided in S.A. Ivanov, *Blazhennye pokhaby: Kul'turnaya istoriya yurodstva* (Moscow: Yazyki Slavyanskikh Kul'tur, 2005), p.380. Here Ivanov rejects very strongly the analogy between Rozanov, Kharms, Erofeev and others with *yurodstvo*.

⁶⁸ On *samodovol'stvo*, see Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2004), p.87.

⁶⁹ See Anindita Banerjee, 'Venedikt Vasil'evich Erofeev', in *Dictionary of Literary Biography Vol 285: Russian Writers since 1980*, ed. by Marina Balina and Mark Lipovetsky (Detroit: Gale Group, 2003), pp.69-81.

⁷⁰ 'Vasily Rozanov glazami ekstsentrika', in Erofeev, *Ostav'te moyu dushu v pokoe*, pp.149-64 (p.158). Merezhkovsky and Rozanov himself used similar rhetoric in passages cited by Dmitry Galkovsky; see

Yet, as I will argue further in Chapter Five, this newly-minted literary tradition of ‘holy foolery’ is deprived of many of the original paradigm’s key attributes. Above all, the mood of the Rozanovian/Erofeevan literary persona – exemplified by the plea, ‘Оставьте мою душу в покою’ (a citation from Rozanov taken as the title for a posthumous edition of Erofeev’s own works) – is irreconcilable with the basis of holy foolery. The desire to be left in peace might be seen as a monastic urge, but the holy fool breaks out of the monastic paradigm and takes as his guiding principles the right to scandalize and play the aggressor, to eschew tranquillity at all costs.⁷¹ Such an attitude can hardly be tallied with the myth of Erofeev.

The literary subtlety of Venichka and his *poema* may better be captured by an approach based on folly within a broader tradition. This will help to show how *Moskva-Petushki* answered its author’s need, expressed over a decade earlier in *Zapiski psikhopata*, for a ‘произведение, которое выражало бы самые сложные чувства – и одновременно не выражало бы ничего’.⁷²

In the following pages I will first trace the genesis of Erofeev’s persona in the recently published *Zapiski psikhopata* (2000), which show Erofeev’s precocious self-casting as an erudite fool who mocks others but ultimately draws ridicule on himself. This pattern carries over to Venichka, whose detachment from the world is all but complete and whose self-perception as a fool has become thoroughly internalized. My discussion of folly in *Moskva-Petushki* leads to parallels with two distant literary traditions: the motif of

Galkovsky, *Beskonechnyi tupik* (Samizdat: Moscow, 1998), pp.211, 518. Another important aspect of Erofeev’s self-casting as a *yurodivyi* is his tearful love of his country and its rulers, despite their sinfulness. Venichka repeatedly speaks of *moya zemlya*, *moi narod*, while Erofeev himself had this to say in an interview shortly before his death: ‘Это вам вольно рассуждать о моей власти, ебена мать. Это вам вольно валять дурака, а я дурака не валяю, я очень люблю свою власть, ни один гаденыш не любит так мою власть’. Interview with Leonid Prudovsky (1990), in Venedikt Erofeev, *Sobranie sochinenii*, ed. by V. Murav'ev, 2 vols (Moscow: Vagrius, 2001), II, pp. 239-66 (pp.263-64).

⁷¹ See S.A. Ivanov, *Vizantiiskoe yurodstvo* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya, 1994), pp.53-54

⁷² Erofeev, *Sobranie sochinenii*, II, pp.5-174 (p.121).

self-directed mockery which the *poema* shares with the ‘democratic satire’ of seventeenth-century Russia; and the rhetorical and symbolic features which it shares with Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly*. This latter comparison is intended to suggest that Erofeev’s *poema*, consciously or otherwise, draws in certain basic respects on a rhetorical strategy first perfected by Erasmus, and shares similar premises. At the same time, the comparison with *Praise of Folly* highlights the very different outcomes to which the two authors were led by a common perception of existence as a ‘sport of folly’. In its spirit, *Moskva-Petushki* proves less Erasmian than another masterpiece of non-conformist prose, written in the same year: Aleshkovsky’s *Nikolai Nikolaevich*, the subject of Chapter Two.

Zapiski psikhopata

Written in late adolescence (1956-58), the diary entries that constitute *Zapiski psikhopata* describe conversations, impressions and anecdotes that putatively took place during the author’s first two years in Moscow. Erofeev received his schooling in the Arctic city of Kirovsk and grew up, from the age of eight, in an orphanage.⁷³ He arrived in Moscow in 1956, aged seventeen, on a scholarship to study at MGU. After only six months’ study, however, he was expelled (for reasons which remain debated), and he was also expelled soon after from the Vladimir Pedagogical Institute. He began an unsettled life marked by profound hardship and constant migration around the Soviet Union on low-paid labour.⁷⁴

The portrait of the author supplied by the *Zapiski* attests to the raw and often coarse material from which Erofeev refined his eventual self-mythology in *Moskva-Petushki* a dozen years later. This rawness, however, is not to be confused with artlessness. Much

⁷³ His father had been imprisoned in 1946, on the charge of disseminating anti-Soviet propaganda, leaving his mother without the resources to feed her children

⁷⁴ See Banerjee, p.72. See also ‘Kratkaya avtobiografiya’ in Erofeev, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1, pp.16-18. Banerjee’s account is considerably fuller, and includes a substantial bibliography.

concerned with education, especially education in the humanities, the diary entries betray Erofeev's recent exposure to a wealth of new intellectual influences. In particular they reflect the influence, in both stylistic and thematic terms, of Dostoevsky.⁷⁵ Also manifest is Erofeev's desire to stage himself in his writing; to make his own persona its principal subject.

The *Zapiski* demonstrate the failed engagement with the outside world from which would follow the radical disengagement described in *Moskva-Petushki*. Their exploration of the relationship between Erofeev and his environment helps illuminate the background to the later work, with the absurdities of Soviet society being more directly addressed.⁷⁶ The narrator's psychological ostracism is discussed at great length with, for example, a secretary of the Komsomol, who is not the only character to accuse the narrator of propagating *chelovekonenavistnichestvo*.⁷⁷ The latter presents himself as a cynic, a scourge of stupidity and self-delusion. In precociously Socratic fashion, he questions and provokes his interlocutors, exposing the inconsistencies of their position. In discussion with nineteen-year-old Anechka, for example, he shows how her displeasure at being penniless makes of her a potential saboteur of the society which she claims to believe in so wholeheartedly, and quotes Lenin to prove his point. The dialogue is also characteristic of the work in its crudely expressed misogyny, typified by the narrator's hysterical encouragement to Anechka to prostitute herself.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Banerjee notes the resemblance to *Zapiski iz podpol'ya* and to Gogol's story 'Zapiski sumasshedshego'; Banerjee, p.73. The narrator of Dostoevsky's story 'Bobok' also comes to mind, with his indignation at society's topsy-turvy evaluations of intelligence and sanity.

⁷⁶ 'Zapiski psikhopata' in Erofeev, *Sobranie sochinenii*, II, pp. 5-174 (pp.81-86, 148-49, 160).

⁷⁷ Ibid, pp.72-5; see also the comments of the librarian, pp.95-96. In his disgust at the cult of mandatory optimism and Soviet-style *chelovekolyubie*, the narrator demonstrates precisely the attitude which Viktor Erofeev would later describe as fundamental to the line of *drugaya literatura* in which he places his namesake, Limonov, Mamleev and others (see my Epilogue). On this topic, see also Zinovy Zinik's excellent article, 'Dvuyazikoe [sic] men'shinstvo: Doklad na mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii po literature, Lisbon, Mai 1988', *Sintaksis*, 22 (1988), 185-98.

⁷⁸ Erofeev, *Sobranie sochinenii*, II, pp.81-86.

What is most striking about such dialogues, however, is the manner in which it tends to be the narrator, rather than his interlocutor, who ultimately supplies the focus of attention and bemusement. Anechka's comments at the end of the conversation are typical: 'Ха-ха-ха-ха! Нет, Венька, ты просто гений! Только я не понимаю, почему тебе все – смешно! [...] Не понимаю, что ты за человек!' Others are similarly baffled: 'Черт его знает, что у него на уме. Темный человек... Непонятный'; 'Знаешь что – я сам чудак, много чудаков видел, но такого чудака первый раз встречаю'.⁷⁹ Indeed, the narrator's identity, and the impossibility of determining it, is the central concern both of the narrator and those who know him. The work is a collage of opinions about Erofeev, in the form of other people's reports, letters, diary entries and contradictory advice.⁸⁰ The narrator gives his own extremely lengthy lists of possible, self-contradictory definitions, making comic but pathetic attempts to match himself either to conventional categories ('Бездарь. Гений. Оригинал [...] Идиот. Философ') or to historical figures from Berkeley to Zarathustra.⁸¹

On one level, this obsession may reflect Erofeev's sense of personal hurt and his unrequited need for approval.⁸² On another, it suggests the problem explored at far greater length by Dmitry Galkovsky: the fate of the independent thinker in Soviet Russia (and in Russia generally). Erofeev's narrator lives in an environment where to be a true thinker is to become an outcast rather than a Socratic gadfly; to seem not just ridiculous, but contemptible. He shows by his own example the unacceptability to the Soviet public of any critical attitude that was not tethered to a 'positive' programme demonstrating love of the collective and expressed in the language of *kul'turnost'*. To assume such an attitude

⁷⁹ Ibid, p.80.

⁸⁰ Ibid, *inter alia*, pp.60-62, 79-81, 99-100, 167-68.

⁸¹ Ibid, pp.139, 101. Erofeev habitually signed his name 'V. Er.', suggesting the German *Wer* (Who); see Banerjee, p.74.

⁸² This is a theme of the posthumous reminiscences published in 1991; Nina Frolova and others, 'Neskol'ko monologov o Venedikte Erofeevе', *Teatr*, 9 (1991), 74-122.

towards the state was to be seen as its enemy, and later, in the 1960s, as an *otshchepenets*, the term which perhaps best captures the social identity of Erofeev's literary persona.⁸³

Like the fools of Shukshin, the narrator draws the public's hostility (*zloba*).⁸⁴ In his originality he is defined as 'глупый', and his criticisms, even when they hit the mark, render him a laughing-stock: 'Молодой человек! Ведь это все над вами смеются! Над вашей дуростью! Вас, наверное, не научили культуре в университете?!'⁸⁵ Although his ironic wit is widely acknowledged, he is perceived as a *durak*. One diagnosis, of obvious relevance to *Moskva-Petushki*, is that he must be either a *durak* or a drunk (or a man from the moon).⁸⁶ His place in society can be expressed only in negative terms: "А! Это тот самый!" "Исключили из комсомола!" "Выгнали из университета!"⁸⁷

Far from seeking to overturn society's low opinion of him, the narrator shows how he has internalized its mockery. In one entry, he records the humiliation and ridicule he experiences in a dream.⁸⁸ In another, he avows his own idiocy, recalling Socrates and, still more strongly, Platonov's *sokrovennyi chelovek*:

'Ккаккой ты все-таки умный, Ерофеев!'
'Нет, товарищ секретарь, я от рождения идиот.'⁸⁹

In a manner that distantly recalls the behaviour of the holy fool, and its interpretation by modern writers such as Tolstoy, the narrator often appears to use his *Zapiski* to show himself in the worst possible light. The narrator makes the *yurodivyi*'s choice, as defined

⁸³ Describing the suffocating 'standardized' worldview that held sway in the 1960s, Erofeev's close friend, Vladimir Murav'ev, wrote: 'Самым страшным и убийственным было забытое сейчас громовое слово-обвинение "отщепенец", действительное на всех уровнях жизни. Собственно говоря, это было то же самое, что прежде "враг народа", и недаром прозорливый администратор сообщает герою ерофеевских "Записок психопата", что он – "врах" и что его надо без лишних слов расстрелять'; Murav'ev, "Vysokikh zrelishch zritel", in Erofeev, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1, pp.5-15 (p.7).

⁸⁴ Erofeev, *Zapiski psikhopata*, pp.104-8.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p.95. And see p.60, where the narrator is warned: 'Ты узнаешь, какой ты был глупый, когда оригинальничал...'

⁸⁶ Ibid, p.109.

⁸⁷ Ibid, p.93.

⁸⁸ Ibid, pp.66-67.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p.106. On Platonov, see above, pp.28-31.

by Tolstoy, to preserve a low reputation.⁹⁰ His immaturity is constantly on display, while his incessant witticisms are made to appear annoying rather than intelligent. Among the indictments of himself which he publicizes are lengthy speeches of advice by his elders presenting him as a posturing misanthrope of no experience in love or life, warped by excessive reading (especially of gloomy Dostoevsky) and incapable of seeing the good in anything.⁹¹ The narrator makes no comment or rejoinder, leaving the reader with little reason to doubt the charges.

The repeated criticism of the narrator's bookishness and ignorance of 'настоящая жизнь'⁹² is of particular significance in view of the 'praise of folly' undertaken in *Moskva-Petushki*. Erudition emerges from *Zapiski psikhopata* (as from Dostoevsky's *Zapiski iz podpol'ya*) as no less questionable a virtue than wit, while the university illustrates the inadequacy of conventional evaluations of intelligence. The opinion of a drunken family friend about Erofeev's fellow students is cited to make clear the classic distinction in Slavophile philosophy between intellectual abstraction and the truth of feeling: 'Умных мало – а все умничают... Чувствовать надо умно, чувствовать не головой, но умно... А ваши эти все – холодные умники... Тебе с ними не по пути...'.⁹³ The narrator himself describes the university as the 'колыбель своей дегенерации'⁹⁴ and rejoices at his expulsion. In his new life of hard labour, books and high culture are as of little interest to him as lofty ideas or 'higher aims' (*vysshie tseli*). Indeed he records that, 'Да вообще-то мне и ничего не надо'.⁹⁵

It is a sentiment fully in the spirit of the jottings (or 'fallen leaves') of Erofeev's beloved Rozanov, as is Erofeev's stated ambivalence towards the printed word (even

⁹⁰ L.N. Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 90 vols (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1928-58), LII, pp.81-82.

⁹¹ Erofeev, *Zapiski psikhopata*, pp.60-62.

⁹² Ibid, pp.72-73.

⁹³ Ibid, p.39.

⁹⁴ Ibid, p.16.

⁹⁵ Ibid, p.121.

though it is clear that he continued to read voraciously). In the little that he did write he followed Rozanov in eschewing cold *umnichanie* for an impression of living, inconsistent thought – nowhere more so than in his anti-scholastic ‘essay’ on Rozanov. And, like Rozanov, Erofeev develops, from as early as the *Zapiski*, an irresponsible persona, opposed to sober, conventional opinions.⁹⁶ He avails himself of the fool’s licence to mock seriousness and to overturn norms and hierarchies.⁹⁷

He also demonstrates a deep suspicion towards language: to its false distinctions, as between intelligence and folly; its imprecision; and its at best approximate imitation of feeling. He tells one interlocutor:

Ты никогда точно не определишь слова, которое выражает какую-нибудь ‘отрасль’ твоего душевного. Каждое определение потребует у тебя слов, которые тоже нуждаются в определении... И в конце концов, все окажется неопределенным и невыразимым...⁹⁸

Anticipating signature techniques of *Moskva-Petushki*, Erofeev experiments with Rozanov’s habit of placing words in quotation-marks to highlight their inadequacy and delights in showing how cheaply expressions can be turned inside-out, and how little this matters.⁹⁹ The only response to the frivolity of language is an accentuated, knowing frivolity of expression, a juggling of words and meanings. Levity of expression extends also to the spheres of gesture and theatre. In a memorable image, the narrator of the *Zapiski* describes himself juggling vodka bottles as he slides out of university and respectable society.¹⁰⁰

Mocking the sterile possibilities of irony and wit as responses to a loathsome and banal reality, the *Zapiski* suggest that a solution and defence is to be found in outward jest

⁹⁶ See, for example, *ibid*, pp.66-67, 72-73.

⁹⁷ In his own words: ‘Я восторженно приветствую любое отклонение от нормального человеческого! Но я не могу понять, почему отдается предпочтение “возвышению”, если “верх” и “низ” – однородные отклонения от общечеловеческого уровня!’ *Ibid*, p.68.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, p.111.

⁹⁹ See, for example, the phrase, ‘В состоянии не то грустной неопределенности, не то неопределенной грусти’. *Ibid*, p.77.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p.15.

and inner silence, through a pose which appears to reveal only to conceal. The one piece of advice that he does take on board, both here and in his later work, is that given by the family friend regarding the attitude he should take to ‘them’ (students and ‘civilized people’ in general): ‘Главное – избегай искренности с ними, – немного искренности – и ты прослывешь бездушным, грязным, сумасшедшим...’¹⁰¹ This will be echoed in *Moskva-Petushki*, where ‘they’ become ‘you’, the reader to whom the narrator refuses to disclose his true thoughts:

Все, о чем вы говорите, все, что повседневно вас занимает, – мне бесконечно посторонне. Да. А о том, что меня занимает, – об этом никогда и никому не скажу ни слова. Может, из боязни прослыть стебанутым, может, еще отчего, но все-таки – ни слова.¹⁰²

Erofeev’s narrators wear the masks pinned on to them by others in order *not* to tell the truth about themselves. To use a phrase that Erofeev once applied to the few contemporary poets who met with his approval, they remain ‘себе на уме’.¹⁰³

Moskva-Petushki

Among *samizdat* and *tamizdat* texts of the 1970s, *Mosvka-Petuski* owed much of its singular influence and popularity to the manner in which it captured the shift towards intellectual introspection and escapism that had gathered steam during the 1960s and that was entrenched by the events of 1968. Here, as in the fiction of Yuz Aleshkovsky, Yury Mamleev, Sasha Sokolov and others, the world is subsumed to a single distorting consciousness within the frame of unreliable ‘fool narrative’.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p.40.

¹⁰² Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2004), p.37. This edition is described by its publisher, Igor Zakharov, as the first *avtorskii tekst* to be published in Russia: it follows the first publication in the Jerusalem periodical *AMI* in 1973 (subsequently reprinted by YMCA in Paris, 1977), but takes into account the author’s corrections on the copy held by the Erofeev family.

¹⁰³ Interview with Igor’ Bolychev, ‘Umru, no nikogda ne poimu...’, in Erofeev, *Sobranie sochinenii*, II, pp.275-82 (p.278). The phrase suggests that they keep their thoughts to themselves. Slyness is implied, and the phrase is applied by Daniel Rancour-Laferriere to the clever fools of the *skazki*; see Rancour-Laferriere, p.128.

Notions of space and time are first to be affected by these distortions. Whereas *Zapiski psikhopata* offered what appeared to be a chronicle of the author's experiences in the present, *Moskva-Petushki* is set in a past which is both immediate ('yesterday') and impossibly distant: the narrator, we learn in the final line, died before he began telling his story.¹⁰⁴ The consciousness of the narrator evoked by the opening pages of the *poema* barely interacts with the world, which is reduced to the variously surreal memories of a single, somewhat 'otherworldly' mind – memories, moreover, that are separated by chasms of alcoholic amnesia. As we first meet him, in the dawn-light of the opening pages, the narrator appears to be veiled from the world by a kind of blindness that renders him comically incapable of finding his way around Moscow or ever 'seeing' the Kremlin. Other people, notably those who throw him out of the restaurant, are perceived only as blanched, monochrome presences ('Надо мной – две женщины и один мужнина, все трое в белом').¹⁰⁵ Over the course of the entire *poema*, the 'real' world of other people will be rendered distinct only in the drinking-party in the train, a scene I will return to. Back in Moscow, after the failed journey, the imagery of darkness and veiling returns with particular force, leading us beyond its originally comic associations towards the narrator's murder. In his alcoholic delirium, the narrator feels he is shrouded by fog and darkness.¹⁰⁶

An important sign of the narrator's detachment from the world is his retreat from dialogue with others. In the course of his final day, Venichka talks primarily to himself; secondarily, to the reader and to the angels whom he believes to be guiding him; and least of all, to other people whom he encounters (the important exception to this is again the drinking-party). Actual dialogues from the past are often absorbed into the ceaseless

¹⁰⁴ The book ends with the phrase: 'и с тех пор я не приходил в сознание, и никогда не приду'. Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki*, p.141.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p.14.

¹⁰⁶ 'Вокруг – ничего, кроме ветра, тьмы и собачьего холода'; ibid, pp.130-1. See also the narrator's thoughts about the *t'ma* beyond the window of the train (p.113).

chatter that he addresses to himself. Thus, while the narrator of the *Zapiski* is told by others not to get above himself, Venichka reprimands himself to this effect.¹⁰⁷

A prominent motif of this internal dialogue is the narrator's self-characterization as a fool and his mockery of his occasional shows of intelligence or erudition.¹⁰⁸ This is said to develop from his definition as such by others:

– А когда ты в первый раз заметил, Веничка, что ты дурак?

– А вот когда. Когда я услышал одновременно сразу два полярных упрека: и в скучности, и в легкомыслии. Потому что если человек умен и скучен, он не опустится до легкомыслия. А если он легкомыслен да умен – он скучным быть себе не позволит. А вот я, рохля, как-то сумел сочетать.¹⁰⁹

Declaring the narrator's foolishness, such passages also illustrate his wit and linguistic agility, drawing the categories of intelligence and stupidity into the play of paradox and inversion which propels the narrator's speech. The narrator's self-casting as a *durak* cannot be explained as false self-deprecation, since a condition of Venichka's self-portrait is that he should be a fool even in his intelligence, hence his ridiculous displays of erudition.¹¹⁰ At the other end of the rhetorical scale, he is given to Chonkin-like statements of the obvious, as if to confirm the futility of *umnichanie* and of opinions in general: “‘Человек смертен’ – таково мое мнение’; ‘Тьма сменяется светом, а свет сменяется тьмой – таково мое мнение’.¹¹¹

The root of such attitudes in the Orthodox promotion of *smirenje* (and condemnation of *gordynya*) is apparent, as is the privileging in Russian religious thought of spiritual intuition over intellectual abstraction. Venichka hectors himself: ‘И вообще,

¹⁰⁷ ‘Если ты выпил, Веня, – так будь поскромнее, не думай, что ты умнее и лучше других!’; *ibid*, p.113.

¹⁰⁸ ‘Вот-вот! Ты хорошо это, Веничка, сказал. Наше завтра и так далее. Очень складно и умно ты это сказал, ты редко говоришь так складно и умно’; *ibid*, p.36.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p.36. See also p.17, where the angels call him a *durak*, and p.29, where the narrator calls himself a ‘круглый дурак’. The motif becomes most intense towards the end of the *poema*: see, for example, pp.113, 114.

¹¹⁰ He recalls, for example, how he once tried to explain to a lady of good society that he only ever breaks wind in a noumenal rather than phenomenal fashion; *ibid*, pp.25-26. See also the narrator's absurd displays of erudition in the preceding passage (pp.23-25), in which he recalls trying to justify himself to his former colleagues for the fact that they never see him going off to the toilet.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, pp.49, 113.

мозгов в тебе не очень много. Тебе ли, опять же, этого не знать? Смирись, Веничка, хотя бы на том, что твоя душа вместительнее ума твоего'.¹¹² At such moments, the narrator's self-castigation borders on the parodic, perhaps mocking the prevalence of the motifs of intellectual self-abnegation and kenosis in Russian literature. This mockery may be reflected in broader structural features of the work, especially in its treatment of the relationship between *intelligent* and *narod*. Venichka's failed journey and his immersion in the *narod* suggests a parody of the male, kenotic quest for spiritual integrity and intellectual self-humbling played out in the novels and lives of Tolstoy, Platonov, Pasternak, and others. Indeed, Venichka's last day carries faint echoes of the last days of Tolstoy when, in flight from Yasnaya Polyana to the monastery of Optina Pustyn, he travelled by train in third-class, throwing himself into discussions (and, eventually, lectures) with fellow passengers.¹¹³ In their different ways, both men sought to dissipate the intellectual's burden through contact with the *narod*; such, in one of its aspects at least, is the *utrennaya nosha* ('которую еще никто не назвал по имени') which Venichka carries with him on to the train along with his heavy briefcase stuffed with spirits and which is relieved in the course of his journey, as the prevalent motif of heaviness in the opening pages dissipates in the expectation of reaching Petushki, where 'первородный грех [...] никого не тяготит'.¹¹⁴

Nevertheless the main object of laughter and mockery remains the narrator himself. Venichka portrays himself as a fool not just through his words but also through his behaviour and appearance. Amidst all his confusion about his identity ('Отчего я и дурак, и демон, и пустомеля разом?'),¹¹⁵ he consistently casts himself as a figure of ridicule,

¹¹² Ibid, p.36.

¹¹³ See the account of Tolstoy's last journey in A.N. Wilson, *Tolstoy* (London: Penguin, 1990), pp.508-12.

¹¹⁴ Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki*, pp.8, 34. Such an interpretation of Venichka's burden is supported by the disquisition of the *chernousyi* on the intelligentsia's guilt before the people, a guilt which drove them to drink: 'пили оттого, что честны, оттого, что не в силах были облегчить участь народа!' Ibid, p.70.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p.38.

making of himself the instrument of his humour and staging his comic misfortune. Describing his unsuccessful quest for sherry in the restaurant of the Kursk railway station, he makes us laugh simply by suggesting he might have been taken for an ordinary traveller rather than a pathetic drunk.¹¹⁶

The scholarly investigation into old Russian humour that was carried out in the 1970s helps clarify some of the cultural roots of this humour.¹¹⁷ Specifically, *Moskva-Petushki* may be compared to the ‘democratic satire’ of the seventeenth century, to such works as ‘Azбука o golom cheloveke’, in which a narrator describes his foolishness and his essential deprivation – not just of material goods but of life’s blessings more generally. Venichka echoes quite closely what Likhachev calls the *avtorskii obraz* cultivated in old Russian parodies and satires, in which ‘Авторы [...] чаще всего смешат непосредственно собой [...] Авторы притворяются дураками, “валяют дурака”, делают нелепости и прикидываются непонимающими’.¹¹⁸

In Likhachev’s analysis, the anti-world inhabited in such works represents the inversion of an ‘ideal’ world from which the narrator is estranged and of whose bliss he is deprived, and not of the ordinary world of prosperity, which by the seventeenth century was understood to be as cruel and sinful as it is in *Moskva-Petushki* (indeed, Likhachev notes, mass impoverishment had rendered the anti-world similar to the real world of most

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p.12.

¹¹⁷ See Likhachev, ‘Smekh kak mirovozzrenie’, in D.S. Likhachev, A.M. Panchenko and N.V. Ponyrko, *Smekh v drevnei rusi* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1984), pp.7-71 (pp.7-24, 35-58). The similarity between *Moskva-Petushki* and parodic works of the second half of the seventeenth century was noted by Živa Benčić, though she discusses the comparison only in relation to two texts about drunkards, *Sluzhba kabaku* and *Povest’ o brazhnike*; see ‘Obraz Venichki Erofeeva’, *Russian Literature*, 51 (2002), 243-60 (pp.254-57). As to the nature of the influence of these texts on Erofeev, I would agree with Benčić that, ‘Речь идет о сходствах, которые, судя по всему, не будучи осознанными или намеренными, также могут находить свое объяснение в памяти жанра’ (p.254). See also V.P. Adrianova-Perets, *Russkaya demokraticeskaya satira XVII veka*, rev. edn. (Moscow: Nauka, 1977).

¹¹⁸ Likhachev and others, p.7.

people).¹¹⁹ Thus, while both the narrator and the 'мир благополучия' are being mocked, only the former can win our sympathy.¹²⁰

Venichka belongs to a similar type of 'anti-world' as the narrators of democratic satire, being a figure of impoverishment and deprivation to whom everything happens 'наоборот', as he emphasizes from the opening paragraphs of his *poema*. Moreover, his martyr-like dedication to the bottle links him, as Živa Benčić has also discussed, to the tradition of seventeenth-century liturgical parodies (*parodia sacra*), such as 'Sluzhba kabaku', whose purpose was to make of the drunken narrator a laughing stock, a salutary example of how not to live.¹²¹ *Moskva-Petushki* is quite explicitly not a didactic work, yet the phantom of an ideal existence remains, occasionally breaking through Venichka's drunken haze and prompting him to curse his dependence on alcohol and to mourn the lack of some higher spiritual nourishment:

Я вынул из чемоданчика все, что имею, и все ощупал: от бутерброда до розового крепкого за рупь тридцать семь. Ощупал – и вдруг затомился и поблек... Господь, вот Ты видишь, чем я обладаю? Но разве это мне нужно? Разве по этому тоскует моя душа?¹²²

Considering *Moskva-Petushki* within the tradition of old-Russian *smekh* thus helps us to understand the ambivalence of its humour and lyricism. (This also helps explain how it was at all possible that the book could be presented as a tract against alcohol, achieving its first publication in Russia in the journal *Trezvost' i kul'tura*.)¹²³

Comparison with old Russian parodies suggests one final point of convergence. 'В этом антимире', Likhachev, writes, 'нарочито подчеркивается его нереальность,

¹¹⁹ Ibid, pp.17-18, 51-52.

¹²⁰ Commenting on 'Azбука gologo cheloveka', Likhachev writes: 'Ясно, что для автора в равной степени, хотя и по-разному, неприемлемы оба мира: мир благополучия и мир неблагополучия. Благополучный мир неблагополучен своей несправедливостью. Неблагополучный мир, хоть и смешон, все-таки вызывает сочувствие, он свой, и герой его – жертва первого мира'. Ibid, p.50.

¹²¹ Benčić, p.254.

¹²² Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki*, p.18.

¹²³ The *poema* was published there a in shortened and corrupted form in 12 (1988), 1-3 (1989).

непредставимость, нелогичность'. The world of *Moskva-Petushki* may be similarly characterized, organized as it is according to the laws of inversion (on the Moscow-Petushki line, for example, anyone who buys a ticket is disrespected by the conductor and considered a *zayats* by the general public).¹²⁴ The foolishness of the narrator serves to refashion the world in the light of his folly and absurdity, 'чтобы "дурить" и "воздурять" все существующее' (Likhachev).¹²⁵ This unreal world becomes a projection of aspects of the narrator's subjective experience. Looking at others the narrator sees himself and feels his own feelings: 'Я поднял глаза на них – о, сколько, должно быть, в моих глазах сейчас всякого безобразия и смутности – я это понял по ним, по их глазам, потому что и в их глазах отразилась эта смутность и это безобразие'.¹²⁶ The very intonation and humour of the narrator's speech carries over to other speakers at the drinking-party,¹²⁷ while its idiotic participants (*tupoi-tupoi* and *umnyi-umnyi*, as well as the 'feeble-minded' grandfather and grandson) reflect both the schizophrenic division of voices in the narrator's own mind and the comic doubling characteristic of the *smekhovoi mir* and of folk culture generally in its portrayal of folly.¹²⁸

Indeed, the entire world of *Moskva-Petushki* spreads in concentric circles around the narrator's folly. At the nearest remove is the narrator's kin: his infant son, whom he describes as a miniature fool in the image of his father, a 'крошечный дурак'.¹²⁹ At its broadest, the circle encompasses all Russia, whose *narod* is proudly appropriated by the narrator. Walking down the train, he perceives the folly of the 'народ моей страны' to lie

¹²⁴ Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki*, p.93.

¹²⁵ Likhachev and others, p.7.

¹²⁶ Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki*, p.14.

¹²⁷ They share the narrator's love of humorous linguistic inversion (see, *inter alia*, pp.75-76). Notable also is the Venichka-like self-deprecation of the *dama slozhnoi sud'by*. Describing her abandonment by her husband, she says: 'Зачем уехал? К кому уехал? Мое недоумение разделяла вся Европа' (p.85).

¹²⁸ The *slaboumie* and physical idiocy of the Mitrich relatives is described with great relish by the narrator, who calls the grandson a 'совершенный кретин' ('И дышит он как-то идиотически'...); *ibid*, pp.63-64. Benčić rightly links this 'прием парных образов' to the *Povest' o Fome i Ereme*; Benčić, p.256. Likhachev names this *Povest'* as the origin of the theme of doubling in Russian literature; see Likhachev and others, pp.40-41.

¹²⁹ Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki*, p.41. The same pattern is explored at much greater length by Dmitry Galkovsky; see Chapter Five.

in their eyes, contrasting them with the rapacious, sly gaze of other (presumably, capitalist) countries.¹³⁰ His lengthy description of the eyes of his people ends with an allusion to the now-familiar proverb that one can spit (or piss) into a fool's eyes and he will think it 'heavenly dew' (*bozh'ya rosa*).¹³¹ Identifying with his foolish people, Venichka views them as we are invited to view Venichka: as both ridiculous and pitiable. Russia and Russians are thus drawn deeply into the thematics of folly in *Moskva-Petushki*, as they are in the work of other authors studied in this thesis, notably Yury Mamleev and Dmitry Galkovsky.¹³²

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The representation of Venichka as a fool in *Moskva-Petushki* undoubtedly draws on a wide array of sources, Russian and foreign, ancient and modern.¹³³ A full exploration of these is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, one fundamental aspect of Venichka's self-representation, which is both supported and contradicted by the features discussed above, does need to be mentioned here, and provides a link to the final part of my discussion.

¹³⁰ On the deep-rooted associations in Russia of slyness with foreign countries, see James H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretative History of Russian Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), pp.121-22.

¹³¹ 'Мне нравится, что у народа моей страны глаза такие пустые и выпуклые. Это вселяет в меня чувство законной гордости...[...] Им все божья роса...'; Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki*, p.21.

¹³² Indeed, the opening page of *Shatuny* (written 1966-68), which describes an *elektrichka* travelling through *Podmoskov'e*, offers an obvious parallel with Erofeev's *Moskva-Petushki*. As in Erofeev's train, the passengers of the *elektrichka* serve as representatives of the Russian *narod* and as mirrors of the protagonist's other-worldly, self-absorbed state of mind. They also share with the protagonist a kind of mystical idiocy: 'Люди сидели неподвижно, как замороженные, словно они отключились от всех своих дел и точно такой же жизни. И не знали, куда их несет этот поезд'; *Shatuny*, in Yury Mamleev, *Izbrannoe* (Moscow: Terra, 1993), pp.5-136 (p.7).

¹³³ In particular, I would suggest the importance of G.K. Chesterton and Heinrich Böll. Böll's novel *Ansichten eines Clowns* (1963; familiar to English readers as *The Clown*) is narrated by a drunken professional clown who shares many qualities with Venichka (such as his tearfulness, sentimentality, vulnerability and failure in life). The use of a fool narrator allowed both authors to explore private lives in a comparable fashion. *The Clown* was probably known to Erofeev, given Böll's great popularity among the intelligentsia at the time; see Klaus Mehnert, *The Russians and Their Favourite Books* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1983). The Chesterton wave in Moscow must also have been of some significance to Erofeev, as a close friend of Chesterton's principal translator (in *samizdat*), Natal'ya Trauberg; and indeed the qualities of jocular and levity sought by Chesterton are fully recovered in his work. Chestertonian resonances will be discussed in greater detail in relation to Yuz Aleshkovsky in Chapters Two and Three.

Throughout *Moskva-Petushki*, Erofeev toys with age-old perceptions of the fool, rooted in folk culture, literature and art, as one who is content and complete in his folly; whole despite his separation from others and his isolation from the world. With his lack of critical self-reflection, such a fool, as I.P. Smirnov has discussed, fails to recognize the boundary between himself and the world, merging with it. Unable to recognize the existence and truth of that which lies outside himself, he renders himself blissfully oblivious to his own failings.¹³⁴

Venichka evokes this image of the fool, even while he is manifestly incompatible with it. On the one hand, Venichka is clearly not content in his folly, feeling the painful absences of God and love, above all, and showing endless capacity for self-reflection. Yet at the same time, he affects on occasion the complete idiocy of the fool, as if aspiring, in his own isolation from the world, to the wholeness of the fool. This is further reflected in the imagery of the circle (suggested already above) which attends Venichka's misadventures, just as it has attended the imagery of folly down the ages. It is present in Venichka's self-description as a *kruglyi durak*,¹³⁵ in the pervasive motif of eyes, noted above; in the description of intellectual Russia's addiction to the bottle as the 'кыр, порочный круг бытия';¹³⁶ and in the circular nature of Venichka's journey which returns him to Moscow, and specifically – to the Garden Ring.

This imagery provided one means by which Erofeev could communicate the paradoxical integrity of his narrator, a quality which would attach in legend to the author himself, as a triumph against a society that made of him an outcast and *otshchepenets*. It is also one feature that renders relevant the analogy with Erasmian folly to which I will devote the remainder of this chapter.

¹³⁴ I.P. Smirnov, *Psikhodiakhronologika: Psikhoistoriya russkoi literatury ot romantizma do nashikh dnei* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 1994), pp.297-98.

¹³⁵ Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki*, p.29.

¹³⁶ Ibid, p.71.

Artists and writers of the late-medieval and early-Renaissance West frequently conceived of folly in circular terms.¹³⁷ As Foucault has argued, such imagery rendered folly ambivalent and potentially pregnant with wisdom. Citing paintings by Brueghel and Bosch, Foucault compares the merely fragmentary images of wisdom granted to the man of reason with the innate knowledge of the fool: ‘the Fool bears it [wisdom] intact as an unbroken sphere: that crystal ball which for all others is empty is in *his* eyes filled with the density of an invisible knowledge’.¹³⁸ In the philosophy of learned ignorance (*docta ignorantia*) cultivated by Nicholas of Cusa, similar imagery applies. For Cusa, Peter C. Phan has written, ‘the relationship of our intellect to Truth is like that of a polygon to a circle. The resemblance increases as we multiply the angles of the polygon, but no multiplication, even if it were infinite, will ever make the polygon equal to the circle’.¹³⁹

It is in the work of one of Cusa’s followers, Erasmus, that the analogy between *Moskva-Petushki* and the early-Renaissance praise of folly may be traced in greatest detail. The fertility of the comparison can be explained by the two authors’ shared quest for a rhetorical form that would best be suited to a light, jocoserious treatment of the human condition.

Moskva-Petushki and *The Praise of Folly*

Venichka’s lightness, in speech and behaviour, accords with a perception of human life as absurd and ridiculous in its duration and all but unspeakable in its end. It finds expression

¹³⁷ Cf the round dances of the fools captured in paintings and in soties; the white disc that the fool holds to his face in illustrations to the psalms; and the motifs in art of the wheels, bladders, stones, baubles and bells of folly. Many of these may be found in the copious illustrations in Sander L. Gilman, *Seeing the Insane* (New York: J.Wiley, 1982), pp.7-10, 36-41. Discussing the poetry of John Lydgate, Clifford Davidson notes that, in medieval tradition, ‘the number for a fool is nought’; *Fools and Folly*, ed. Clifford Davidson (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996), p.2.

¹³⁸ Michel Foucault, *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1961), abridged and translated by Richard Howard as *Madness and Civilization* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.19.

¹³⁹ Peter C. Phan, ‘The Wisdom of Holy Fools in Postmodernity’, *Theological Studies (Baltimore)*, 62 (2001), 730-52 (p.740).

in a plot that is purely digressive and anecdotal (the circular journey of a drunk) and in a prose that is supremely conscious of the inadequacy and essential frivolity of language. In a more than trivial sense, Venichka has nothing to say, explicitly refusing to commit his secrets to the page.¹⁴⁰ Sincerity in writing, *Moskva-Petushki* suggests, would be 'heavy', pompous and risible. Equally unappealing is the sanctimonious irony which Venichka suspects in his readers;¹⁴¹ his own irony is of a different timbre. Literature, *Moskva-Petushki* seeks to illustrate, is expressive only when it equivocates, evades, and practises silence through words; when it is 'себе на уме'.

To fill out this silence, and to suggest this equivocation, Erofeev turned to a rhetorical strategy that has a striking amount in common with that invented by Erasmus in *Praise of Folly*. Erofeev, who quotes two of Erasmus' aphorisms in his notebooks,¹⁴² may well have read *Praise of Folly* in the available translation by P.K. Guber.¹⁴³ He may also have absorbed Erasmian irony through Rabelais, Chesterton and other writers; its influence on subsequent European literature, as Walter Kaiser observes, has been as all-pervasive as it has been incalculable.¹⁴⁴

Transferred to the Russian cultural and literary context, the ludic and jocular qualities of an Erasmian *jeu d'esprit* offered the perfect foil to the Gogolian sense of horror which is never far beneath the surface of Erofeev's *poema* and which breaks through in the final pages.¹⁴⁵ Comparing *Praise of Folly* and *Moskva-Petushki* yields close similarities in terms of both content and rhetoric. Both works present themselves as the impromptu speech of a self-declared fool who exploits to comic and disconcerting effect

¹⁴⁰ Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki*, p.37.

¹⁴¹ 'Я даже вижу – отсюда, с мокрого перрона, - как все вы, рассеянные по моей земле, качаете головами и беретесь иронизировать'. Ibid, p.16.

¹⁴² Erofeev, *Ostav'te moyu dushu v pokoe*, pp.308, 311.

¹⁴³ Published in Moscow by Khudozhestvennaya Literatura in 1958, 1960, and throughout the late-Soviet era.

¹⁴⁴ Walter Kaiser, *Praisers of Folly: Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1964), p.20.

¹⁴⁵ Erasmus describes it as such (originally, as an *ingenii nostri lusum*) in his prefatory letter to Thomas More; Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, ed. by A.H.T. Levi, trans. by Betty Radice (London: Penguin, 1993), p.4.

the paradox of foolish wit; both might be seen an extended joke, or *anekdot*; and both refuse to be tied to rhetorical and structural convention.¹⁴⁶

Venichka, however, is not just a 'foolish' narrator, of which there had been plenty in the *skaz* tradition before him. What is unique to him in this role is his drunkenness. If Stultitia is a fool who sings a double-voiced praise of folly, then Venichka is an alcoholic who sings a double-voiced praise of alcohol. The two models borrow from one another closely, in a symbolic interdependence arguably closer than that between *Praise of Folly* and Panurge's encomium 'In Praise of Debtors' in the third book of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.¹⁴⁷ Stultitia praises drinking, and Venichka – folly.

Most importantly, perhaps, folly and intoxication are inseparable at the level of Christian symbolism, both providing a common metaphor in the New Testament for the believer's passionate dedication to Christ. Indeed, as M.A. Screech has discussed, it was Erasmus who revived 'the Greek patristic theme of "sober drunkenness"' as a metaphor for good Christian folly. Indeed, 'For Erasmus, there is a very close analogy between being drunk and being inspired by the Holy Ghost'.¹⁴⁸ *Praise of Folly* ends both with a hymn to foolishness in the service of Christ as taught by St Paul, and, in its final line, a summons to the reader to drink. As Stultitia notes, true piety is both madness (folly in Christ) and intoxication: 'And so we should not be surprised if the apostles were thought to be drunk on new wine, and Festus judged Paul to be mad'.¹⁴⁹

The processes of getting drunk and of becoming foolish also run together in *Moskva-Petushki* and are even expressed through the same verb (*oduret'*). As the narrator says, with characteristically evasive paradox, of the drinking-party in the train: 'Все как-то настолько одурели, и столько было тумана в каждой голове, что ни для какого

¹⁴⁶ Reflecting her status as a self-contented and all-embracing fool, Stultita announces her reluctance to separate her declamation into the rhetorical fragments demanded by the genre; see Erasmus, p.12.

¹⁴⁷ François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. by J.M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1955), pp.295-301.

¹⁴⁸ See Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross*, pp.111-15 (pp.112, 111).

¹⁴⁹ Erasmus, p.128.

недоумения уже не хватало места.¹⁵⁰ Moreover, as the historical meanderings of the *chernousyi* emphasize, foolishness (ignorance) and alcoholism have always been inseparable vices for the impoverished Russian *narod*, while the intelligentsia has drunk itself to early graves in sympathy. Communism's attempts to re-educate both parties have achieved little; the 'vicious circle' continues unbroken to the present day.¹⁵¹

Given these similarities, it comes as little surprise that the rhetorical paradox at the heart of *Moskva-Petushki* may be expressed as a translation into alcoholic categories of Stultitia's 'wise folly'. Stultitia's repeated claims that her foolish talk may in fact hide wisdom (in turn, a translation of the Cretan paradox),¹⁵² are echoed in Venichka's claim to be sober in his inebriation. It is uttered at a pivotal moment, directly preceding the *poema*'s gruesome conclusion and unraveling its shaping metaphor. Notable also in the same paragraph is a distant echo – again, in alcoholic jargon – of Stultitia's description of human life as 'nothing but a sport of folly';¹⁵³ life, for Venichka, is nothing but a 'fleeting inebriation (*okosenie*) of the soul':

Ибо жизнь человеческая не есть ли минутное окосение души? и затмение души тоже. Мы все как бы пьяны, только каждый по-своему, один выпил больше, другой меньше. [...] А я – что я? [...] Я, вкусивший в этом мире столько, что теряю счет и последовательность, – я трезвее всех в этом мире; на меня просто туго действует...¹⁵⁴

This basis of 'sober drunkenness' and wise folly lends to the narrator's speech many of the qualities of unreliability and irresponsibility exploited by Stultitia. Indeed, from the opening paragraphs the alcoholic stupefaction of the narrator only intensifies his

¹⁵⁰ Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki*, p.86.

¹⁵¹ Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki*, pp.70-1. Soviet propaganda enthusiastically reinforced the identification of alcohol and idiocy. As a poster of 1926 declared: 'Кто умен, а кто дурак! Один за книгу, другой в кабак'. The poster shows a peasant having a lesson while an empty vodka bottle lies at his feet. See <<http://www.plakat.ru/Catalog/cat10.htm>> [accessed 8 August 2006]. Note also the common collocation: 'пьяный дурак'.

¹⁵² Erasmus wrote to More: 'The world will pass its own judgement on me, but unless my "self-love" entirely deceives me, my praise of folly has not been altogether foolish'. And Stultitia will echo him: 'Perhaps what I'm saying seems foolish and absurd at first sight, but really it's a profound truth'. Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, pp.7, 55.

¹⁵³ Ibid, p.42.

¹⁵⁴ Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki*, p.133.

untrustworthiness as he grapples with memory loss and uncertainty. Like Stultitia, Venichka has full license to contradict himself, to exaggerate, digress, equivocate and confuse; his words can never be safely taken at face value and the tone of his voice can rarely be fully grasped since his speech itself is founded on paradox and instability. The feminine fickleness of Stultitia finds its physiological equivalent in the continuous alterations of an alcoholic's mood. Such inconsistencies become the riddle of Venichka himself, and the impossibility for the reader to determine with any confidence such central questions as his attitude to alcohol and to God, his depravity and sanctity, his cynicism and sincerity. The reader's dilemma in distinguishing sincerity from dissembling is exacerbated by the narrator's praise of his own virtues, such as *tselomudrie* and *delikatnost'* (like Stultitia, Venichka exploits the fool's license to boast, though he presents his virtues as flaws); and by his highly theatrical staging of his own predicament.¹⁵⁵

Moskva-Petushki might be found to differ fundamentally from *Praise of Folly* in having a basis in narrative rather than argument and rhetoric. Yet the narrative arc is itself part of Erofeev's *jeu d'esprit*; it, too, is circular and foolish. From the opening lines, the reader is alerted to the anecdotal character of the story and to the likelihood that the narrator's journey ended in failure. Our interest is largely sustained not by the expectation of narrative development but by digression and argument. Much of *Moskva-Petushki* is, like *Praise of Folly*, an exercise in rhetoric, propelled by the need to justify a comic and apparently absurd premise. Stultitia seeks to prove, at great length, that all humans are fools at heart and, moreover, that they are better and closer to the well-springs of life when they embrace their folly; and further from life when they adopt the masks of seriousness

¹⁵⁵ On the narrator's *delikatnost'*, see *Moskva-Petushki* pp.22-23. The narrator's riddling combination of self-deprecation and boasting is on show in the chapter, 'Nikol'skoe-Saltykovskaya', where he concludes: 'Кому же, как не нам самим, знать, до какой степени мы хороши?' (p.37). Citing the common conviction that it is 'the height of folly' to praise oneself, Stultitia had asked at the beginning of her speech: 'What could be more fitting than for Folly to trumpet her own merits abroad and "sing her own praises"''. Erasmus, p.11.

or, insult of insults, stoicism.¹⁵⁶ *Moskva-Petushki* contains at its core a similar attack on sobriety of temperament, self-reliance, complacency and gravity. ‘Мы все как бы пьяны, только каждый по-своему,’ Venichka maintains. The drunk who is miserable in the morning and dreamy in the evening is less repellent to him than the (presumably sober) man who is chirpy in the morning and exhausted by dusk.¹⁵⁷ His praise of alcohol, however frivolous it may often be, is conducted through argument and draws on the same rhetorical devices as Stultitia’s praise of folly: the endless citing of examples, hidden quotations, parody, qualifications, and contradictions. Entire paragraphs are held together by rhetorical questions and answers,¹⁵⁸ while sentences are typically connected by particles and phrases signalling agreement and dissent, provocation and justification (‘Но ведь’; ‘Зато’, ‘Да знаете ли вы’; ‘Например’; ‘Почему?’; ‘Ну вот’; ‘Ну, конечно,’).¹⁵⁹ Like Stultitia, he parodies the methods and terminology of scholasticism, philosophical discourse and science; in his analysis of the regularity of a drunk’s hiccups, he draws a direct analogy with Marx and Engels’ ‘схема общественных формаций’.¹⁶⁰

These incoherent arguments are crowned by the demonstration at the heart of the book – as erudite and absurd as Stultitia’s proof of universal folly – that all men are drunkards, even ‘ваш хваленый Иоганн фон Гете’. Established over five pages by the *chernousyi*, the argument enraptures everyone, until the *dekabrist* brings up the name of Goethe. Venichka, however, is able to prove that Goethe too was an alcoholic; ‘Стройная система была восстановлена, и вместе с ней восстановилось веселье’.¹⁶¹ In both *Moskva-Petushki* and *Praise of Folly*, alcohol and folly bring ‘веселье’ and laughter; through their force the ‘play’ of life is set in motion and illuminated, and its best virtues

¹⁵⁶ See, *inter alia*, Erasmus, pp.45-46.

¹⁵⁷ Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki*, pp.133, 18, 49.

¹⁵⁸ See, for example, *ibid*, p.48.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 52, 49, 50, 48-49, 50, 18.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p.54.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, pp.72, 73.

revealed.¹⁶² It is only at the drinking-party, at the height of inebriation, that the curtain rises over the stage of *Moskva-Petushki*; the passengers become themselves, or, more accurately, assume with relish the masks and ‘клички’ (*chernousyi, dekabrist, dama slozhnoi sud'by*) appointed to them. All are welcome to the drinking-party, even women.¹⁶³ Like folly for Stultitia, drinking for Venichka reveals the common elements of humanity, and the common elements of its shared illusions. He becomes spokesman for the principles of the bottle – inclusivity, reconciliation, compassion, even Christian love – and its refutation of superciliousness and irony.¹⁶⁴

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The similarities I have noted between *Moskva-Petushki* and *Praise of Folly* derive from a closely comparable authorial stance against self-reliance and calculation; and from a similar humility, which is opposed to the scholastic pretensions of theologians or political thinkers, towards the workings of the universe and of God. Intellectual humility is Stultitia’s central (and most serious) contention, just as it was of Erasmus and of the spiritual movement, the *devotio moderna*, to which he was most indebted.¹⁶⁵ Venichka’s persona derives in its essence from a similar (Pauline) attitude: man is ignorant and weak, and should not succumb to the temptation to think otherwise and puff himself up (*zagordit'sya*);¹⁶⁶ he should accept, in Erasmus’ words to Dorp (in justification of *Praise of*

¹⁶² On the imagery of life as a play and ‘sport of folly’ in *Praise of Folly*, see Erasmus, p.44. In *Moskva-Petushki*, the imagery of light and dark run parallel with that of drunkenness and sobriety, levity and gravity. See, for example, p.122: ‘И вот – я запрокинулся, допивая свой остаток. И – сразу – рассеялась тьма, в которую я был погружен’.

¹⁶³ Ibid, p.83.

¹⁶⁴ It is in this spirit, for example, that he responds to Mitrich’s absurd attempt to tell a love-story in the manner of Turgenev: ‘А я сидел и понимал старого Митрича, понимал его слезы: ему просто все и всех было жалко [...] Первая любовь или последняя жалость – какая разница? Бог, умирая на кресте, заповедовал нам жалость, а зубоскальства Он нам не заповедовал. Жалость и любовь к миру – едины’ (p.82).

¹⁶⁵ On the *devotio moderna*, see Erasmus, pp.ix-x, and Kaiser, pp.8-10. Venichka explicitly attacks a calculating, self-reliant approach to life (*raschet, umysel*); *Moskva-Petushki*, p.135.

¹⁶⁶ The theme is broached in the very first paragraphs, as Venichka struggles with his amnesia and ignorance: ‘Что это за подъезд, я до сих пор не имею понятия; но так и надо. Все так. Все на свете должно происходить медленно и неправильно, чтобы не сумел загордиться человек, чтобы человек был грустен и растерян’; ibid, p.8. Compare with 1 Cor 1:27-29: ‘God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise,

Folly), the Socratic claim that, ‘part of our knowledge lies in our accepting that there are some things we cannot know’.¹⁶⁷ In a passage that aptly demonstrates the capacity of Erasmian rhetoric to leap from the frivolous to the cosmic, Venichka infers from the impossibility of measuring hiccups the inaccessibility of God to the mind.¹⁶⁸ ‘Foolishness’ in this sense is the human condition, since, ‘С извечными законами бытия нам, дуракам, не совладать’.¹⁶⁹ *Duraki* are entirely dependent on grace, hence the very frequent recurrence in *Moskva-Petushki* of Christ’s command to Lazarus: ‘Встань и иди’. In both works, the proper response to the human condition is a profound passivity to higher workings, expressed in the final pages of *Praise of Folly* in Christian madness, and in *Moskva-Petushki* in ‘sober drunkenness’ and the recognition, even at the *poema*’s tragic end, that ‘“Неисповедимы Твои пути”’.¹⁷⁰

For all these common features, however, major distinctions obviously need to be drawn, since my comparison leaves untouched many aspects of Erofeev’s *poema*. Above all, *Moskva-Petushki* rests on a tragic apprehension of life alien to Erasmus’ ever-cheerful Stultitia and on a rawer sense of anger: when, towards the end of his monologue, Venichka ‘dons the lion’s skin’, to use Stultitia’s phrase, he does so to deliver an impassioned invective against the state of his country and those responsible for turning ‘мою землю в самый дерьмовый ад’.¹⁷¹ And, whilst Erasmus was reprimanded for a lack of piety in his cheerful *Praise of Folly*, Erofeev describes a situation far bleaker in its assessment of the relationship between man and God. Venichka’s abandonment by God makes for an entirely grim *finale*. The only consoling interpretation that might be found for it is that it

God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God’.

¹⁶⁷ Erasmus, p.154.

¹⁶⁸ Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki*, p.55.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, p.113.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, p.138.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, p.123. Stultitia uses the phrase ‘to don the lion’s skin’ at roughly the same point in her speech. Erasmus, p.128.

retraces in fiction the condition of God-forsakenness (*bogoostavlennost'*) which Berdyaev, at least, had held to be only a temporary stage in man's spiritual evolution.¹⁷²

Venichka's praise of folly, moreover, is a precarious edifice that can be sustained no longer than his inebriation; when the latter subsides, and Venichka finds himself back in Moscow, the stage is removed to leave the blind 'дерьмовый ад' in which he perishes. It is a pattern familiar above all from Gogol, the writer Erofeev considered most essential to his art.¹⁷³ *Revizor* ends in similar fashion: the illusion (or 'fog') which has intoxicated the townsfolk evaporates to leave the blind rage of the town mayor, who invites the ridicule of the entire world upon himself ('Вот смотрите, смотрите, весь мир, всё христианство, все смотрите, как одурачен городничий! Дурака ему, дурака, старому подлецу!').¹⁷⁴

Whatever its possible borrowings from Renaissance folly, *Moskva-Petushki* thus also remains tied to native literary traditions of *odurachivanie* and *osmeyanie* canonized by Gogol, among others. Motifs familiar from the expression of this tradition in Shukshin's stories, such as the laughter and mockery of women, persist in *Moskva-Petushki* and are eventually transfigured in Venichka's ugly murder, which is carried out to the laughter of angels.¹⁷⁵ Donning the cap and bells, and staging the mockery of the fool on a cosmic scale, Erofeev invites his readers to laugh, and weep, at their own helplessness and folly.

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¹⁷² See Nikolai Berdyaev, *Ekzistentsial'naya dialektika bozhestvennogo i chelovecheskogo* (Paris: YMCA, 1952). The connection between Venichka's grief and Berdyaev's notion of *bogoostavlennost'* has been noted by Konstantin Kustanovich in 'Venichka Erofeev's Grief and Solitude: Existentialist Motifs in the *Poema*', in *Venedikt Erofeev's Moscow-Petushki: Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Karen L. Ryan-Hayes (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), pp.123-152 (p.135). Venichka repeats Christ's cry on the cross, 'My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (Luke 15:34) at the end of the *poema*, in Russian and Hebrew. Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki*, p.140.

¹⁷³ See his interview with Irinia Tosunyan, in Erofeev, *Sobranie sochinenii*, II, 267-82 (p.271).

¹⁷⁴ N.V. Gogol', *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 14 vols (Moscow: Akademiya Nauk SSSR, 1937-52), IV, pp.5-95 (p.93).

¹⁷⁵ 'Они смеялись, а Бог молчал'; Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki*, p.141. Earlier, Venichka had described how his girlfriend in *Petushki* also laughed at him when they first met; *ibid*, p.43.

In this chapter, I have traced certain processes in non-conformist prose which show how the late-Soviet praise of folly moved towards its characteristic expression in the first-person fool narratives of, among others, Venedikt Erofeev, Yuz Aleshkovsky (see Chapters Two and Three), and, later, Dmitry Galkovsky (Chapter Five) and Viktor Erofeev (Epilogue). They express, as I have suggested, a movement away from representations of the fool in third-person narrative, where the fool articulates a traditional moral and socio-political agenda, towards a poetics of radical subjectivity, in which aspects of the author's self-perception are clearly at stake, and in which the privileges of literary folly (to tell the truth and claim a unique form of wisdom) are subjected to uncompromising scrutiny. This process is accompanied by other features, notably mockery of the self and a distrust of the formal discourse of intellectuals – in particular, of complacent irony.

I have also placed emphasis on the movement towards levity in this tradition, as a property of fool narrative in both style and imagery. From the oafishness and slowness of Chonkin (and the heaviness of Russian literary fools and *yurodivye* in general) we arrive at the quick-witted, light-footed foolishness of Venichka. In *Moskva-Petushki*, as in *Praise of Folly*, the author's interest in folly may be taken as a sign of heightened intelligence, an attempt to pierce through the illusions and false hierarchies of social existence (the aim also of Russian 'democratic satire'). At the same time, however, Venichka is questioning the value of intelligence itself. If the stupidity of the fool traditionally renders him devoid of self-criticism, Erofeev may be asking whether an excess of self-awareness, such as Venichka exhibits, might not also amount to a form of total folly (of being a *kruglyi durak*), but without the happiness granted to the 'natural' fool. Such a 'coincidence of opposites' is fully in the spirit of the Erasmian tradition which, I have sought to argue, *Moskva-Petushki* continues in a Russian key.

Chapter Two

‘Я – человек!’:

Yuz Aleshkovsky and the Triumph of Nikolai Nikolaevich

The patterns I have traced in the work of Voinovich, Shukshin and Venedikt Erofeev are reconfigured and further developed in the exuberant fiction of Yuz Aleshkovsky (b.1929), whose narrators draw science, history and politics into their orbit of folly, and continue the tendency (described in Chapter One) towards a prose of heightened subjectivity.¹ Nearly all Aleshkovsky's fiction is in monologue form, typically spoken by narrators who are manifestly foolish and/or deranged. Like Voinovich and Shukshin, Aleshkovsky appeals to the fool and to the rogue as vehicles of truth and moral regeneration within the context of a general orientation towards the *narod*. Like Venedikt Erofeev, he explores folly through a manifestly Christian lens, tempting analogies with *yurodstvo*. Yet, as in the case of *Moskva-Petushki*, it is comparison with Western European exponents of literary folly, and especially Erasmus, that proves unexpectedly pertinent.

After an introductory section, which will refer to the central events of Aleshkovsky's life, to the broader relevance of my topic to an understanding of his writing and to the specific features of Aleshkovsky's satirical approach, I will discuss in turn his first work of adult fiction, *Nikolai Nikolaevich* (written 1970), and, in Chapter Three, his longest novel, *Ruka* (written 1977-78). Both have received little detailed critical attention, as may be said of Aleshkovsky's opus in general, despite a steady drip of brief articles and

¹ This feature, common to nearly all Aleshkovsky's writing, is an explicit theme of *Ruka* (see Chapter Three), whose narrator contrasts the radical subjectivity of his own, often obscene, speech with the false discourse of Marxist-Leninist objectivity, and harangues his interlocutor: ‘А я ебал “объективную” правду. Я выписываю и получаю “субъективную”! И ты мне ее выдавай!’ *Ruka. Povestvovanie palacha*, in Yuz Aleshkovsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 3 vols (Moscow: Ripol Klassik, 2001), I, pp.229-538 (p.289): see also *ibid*, p.233.

surveys.² If *Nikolai Nikolaevich* is a ‘scientific fantasy’ that showcases the author’s flamboyant comic and linguistic gifts,³ *Ruka* asks to be seen as Aleshkovsky’s major philosophical statement and as his definitive reckoning-up with the ‘System’, and its figurehead – Stalin. Soon after writing this work, in 1979, Aleshkovsky emigrated to the United States, where he has remained ever since. Though Aleshkovsky continued producing fresh fiction into the 1990s, the principal frame of reference for my discussion is his most fruitful decade, stretching from *Nikolai Nikolaevich* to *Sinen’kii skromnyi platochek* (written 1980).⁴

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Aleshkovsky’s life and career in the Soviet Union were characteristic, in their unstructured variety, of many non-conformist writers and artists of his time.⁵ Following a sporadic education interrupted by war, military service and a prison sentence, he made a living in Moscow first as a builder and a driver, and then, more profitably, as a writer of film scripts and popular children’s stories.⁶ His greatest contribution to the unofficial culture of the 1950s and 1960s was his songs about life and love in prison camps, about Stalin and other Soviet leaders; they were sung not to a guitar, but to a rhythm beaten out on the table. His ‘Pesnya o Staline’, in particular, became immensely popular throughout the Soviet Union, although few knew its author. Introducing it to the readers of *Novyi Mir* in 1988, Sergei

² See for example the brisk and rather dismissive survey in Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos*, ed. by Eliot Borenstein (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), pp.117-122. Lipovetsky concludes that ‘the artistic philosophy that guides Aleshkovsky cannot grasp the complexity of the world’ (p.122). A more balanced overview can be found in Robert Porter, *Russia’s Alternative Prose* (Oxford: Berg, 1994), pp.31-38. Further secondary material will be cited in the course of my discussion.

³ *Nikolai Nikolaevich* is described as a ‘научно-фантастическая повесть’ on the title-page of the first published edition (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1980).

⁴ Dates of composition as given in Aleshkovsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*. 1992 saw the publication of the novel *Persten’ v futlyare*, collected in *Sobranie sochinenii*, III, pp.3-168.

⁵ On Aleshkovsky’s life, see his witty but hardly comprehensive ‘Avtobiograficheskaya spravka’ (1994), in *Sobranie sochinenii*, III, pp.535-38; and his interview with John Glad, in Glad, *Besedy v izgnanii* (Moscow: Knizhnaya Palata, 1991), pp.114-22. Other interviews, available only on the web, will be cited in the course of the chapter. See also the useful encyclopedia entries by Arnold McMillin in *A Reference Guide to Russian Literature*, ed. by Neil Cornwell (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998), pp.109-10; and T.A. Sotnikova in *Russkie pisateli 20 veka: Biograficheskii slovar’*, ed. by P.A. Nikolaev (Moscow: Bol’shaya Rossiiskaya entsiklopediya, 2000), pp.22-23.

⁶ See Glad, p.114.

Bocharov described it as 'подлинным фольклором нашего времени'.⁷ Among acquaintances, Aleshkovsky was known and loved precisely for his mastery of the oral genres – 'жанр песни, шутки, каламбура, застольной импровизации', according to one of his closest friends, Andrei Bitov.⁸ Only in 1970, aged forty, did he make his explosive debut in *samizdat* with *Nikolai Nikolaevich*, an entirely unpublishable tale which (like all Aleshkovsky's fiction) bears a manifest debt to oral and performative genres.

One biographical milestone seems especially significant for Aleshkovsky's literary development. Like Dostoevsky, whom he has described as his spiritual teacher, Aleshkovsky was shaped in his youth by the experience of four years' imprisonment in Siberia (1950-53), his release enabled by the mass amnesties that followed Stalin's death.⁹ And like Dostoevsky, who faced a mock execution before his imprisonment, Aleshkovsky felt himself fortunate to have survived his ordeal.¹⁰ In the most general terms his existential trajectory may be compared to that of his teacher: early experiences of punishment, despair and near-death yielded, in the fiction of later adulthood, to passionate affirmations of life as a gift, however great its attendant suffering. This parallel, however, remains hidden in Aleshkovsky's songs and fiction. Here, punishment in Siberia is associated with the fate of millions of Aleshkovsky's countrymen under Stalin; and also, as we will see, with Stalin himself.

The actual cause of Aleshkovsky's sentence, which brought him to camps in Birobidzhan and the Far East, was an act of drunken hooliganism while on military service in the Navy. He was not, he has emphasized, a political prisoner, a category associated

⁷ See Bocharov's preface to Yuz Aleshkovsky, 'Ne unyvai, zimoi dadut svidanie...', *Novyi Mir*, 12 (1988), 121-24 (p.121).

⁸ Andrei Bitov, 'Povtorenie neproidennogo', *Znamya*, 6 (1991), 192-206 (p.192).

⁹ Indeed, the years of Aleshkovsky's confinement mirror those of Dostoevsky in Omsk in the previous century (1850-54); on Dostoevsky, see Kenneth Lantz, *The Dostoevsky Encyclopaedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004), pp.297-99. On Dostoevsky's status for Aleshkovsky, see Glad, p.121.

¹⁰ As he comments in his 'Avtobiograficheskaya spravka': 'Слава Богу, я успел дожить до дня когда Сталин врезал дуба, а то я обогнал бы его с нажитой в неволе язвой желудка'; *Sobranie sochinenii*, III, p.537.

primarily with the intelligentsia:¹¹ '[Я] был обыкновенным уголовником, матросом, подсевшим за угон в пьяном виде легковой машины секретаря райкома партии для того, чтобы не опоздать на поезд, везший меня на корейскую войну'.¹² It was precisely an 'обыкновенный уголовник' (the pickpocket Nikolai Nikolaevich) whom Aleshkovsky took for his first narrator twenty years later. Such a choice ensured that Aleshkovsky's debut would share the true, unofficial *narodnost'* of his songs; and it set the pattern for his subsequent fiction, typically narrated by poorly educated outsiders of peasant stock.¹³

Aleshkovskian *skaz*, a far stronger brew than the *skaz* of Zoshchenko or of other comparable comic writers, is grounded in the rich soil of urban slang, *mat*, and criminal jargon. These features have enabled Aleshkovsky to indicate, with his every paragraph, the contrasting deadness of Soviet officialese and linguistic *kul'turnost'*, and the extent to which these have infected and prostituted conventional literary discourse. Language, he suggests, is to be purified with the muck of its by-products.¹⁴ A similarly paradoxical effect is yielded by the use of peasant or low-life narrators who, despite their own frequent need of correction (as thieves or alcoholics), serve as a corrective antithesis to the ruling establishment. The distance that separates them from socio-political process (as great as that separating their jargon from the language of *Pravda* or Socialist Realism) allows them, and us, to see its iniquities more clearly when they come up against the satanic System – as happens, to more or less destructive effect, in all Aleshkovsky's fiction. The comments of the narrator, Baikin, in *Sinen'kii skromnyi platochek* are characteristic:

¹¹ In contrast to Dostoevsky, who was sentenced in 1849 for his involvement with the Petrashevsky circle.

¹² Vladimir Nuzov, 'Prorochestvuyushchie gibel' Ameriki oshibayutsya', *Zhurnal Vestnik Online*, 6 November 2001 <<http://www.vestnik.com/issues/2001/1106/win/nuzov.htm>> [accessed 31 July 2006]

¹³ As Mikhail Roshchin wrote in perhaps the first (and last) article on Aleshkovsky's fiction to appear in the Soviet press: 'Он [Юз] весь вышел из народа'; Roshchin, 'Yuz i Sovetskii Soyuz', *Ogonek*, 41 (1990), 9-10.

¹⁴ See the defence of *mat* given by the narrator of *Ruka* at the beginning of his 300-page monologue: *Sobranie sochinenii*, I, p.235. On Aleshkovsky's language, see Priscilla Meyer, 'Skaz in Juz Aleskovskij', *The Slavonic and East European Journal*, 28 (1984), 455-61; and, most insightfully, Bitov, 'Povtorenie neproidennogo'.

Я своим крестьянским умом мало чего в социальной жизни понимаю. Но я вижу простым незамутненным оком, что колхоз – говно и хуже крепостного строя в тыщу раз, а рабочий – раб, малооплачиваемый и пьющий всуемерть. Что, вы сами, что ли, не видите? А верить в Бога почему людям не велите?¹⁵

Like Voinovich, but within the frame of first-person narration, Aleshkovsky has eschewed the perspective and language of the intelligentsia, from which his narrators are maximally estranged. His method is in important ways more paradoxical and daring than those found by previous humorous writers of the Soviet era who had appealed to the fool and outsider for satirical effect. The Aleshkovskian narrator introduced with Nikolai Nikolaevich, and foreshadowed in 'Pesnya o Staline', is neither a blank slate of stupidity (like Chonkin) nor a naif (like many characters in Zoshchenko or Platonov) but a quick-witted (if foolish-seeming) social reject who nevertheless recognizes his complex role within the System, and his implication in its operations. He is less a 'простой рабочий' than a 'простой советский заключенный' ('Pesnya o Staline'), who experiences different types of confinement and punishment – prison and unemployment (*Nikolai Nikolaevich*), mental hospital (*Sinen'kii skromnyi platochek*), enforced alcoholism (*Maskirovka*) – yet remains in some sense needed by the state. Thus, as we will see, Nikolai Nikolaevich proves irreplaceable to biologists for the quality of his sperm, while Baikin proves indispensable to the asylum's doctor as the subject of the latter's dissertation. The scientific context of both these examples emphasizes the dependence of the wise on the (putatively) foolish and mad. Against the dictum that 'незаменимых нет', Aleshkovsky plays out a paradox of foolish wisdom, namely that society depends for its survival and prosperity on what it scorns,¹⁶ a paradox felt particularly strongly perhaps in the land of the GULAG, whose prisoners were the engine of the country's economic progress.¹⁷

¹⁵ Aleshkovsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1, pp.539-630 (p.543).

¹⁶ Matthijs van Boxxel explores such paradoxes at length in his book, *The Encyclopædia of Stupidity*, trans. by Arnold and Erica Pomerans (London: Reaktion, 2003).

¹⁷ See Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History of the Soviet Camps* (London: Allen Lane, 2003).

Aleshkovsky's fictions suggest complex relations between the protagonists and the authorities at whose hands they suffer: not just attitudes of fury and remonstrance (though these are present to excess), but also suggestions of comparison, doubling and even shared culpability. In particular these parallels relate to the figure of Stalin, and may be explained by the extent to which Aleshkovsky has viewed his own life as enmeshed with that of Stalin. The connection is both superficial (Yuz: Iosif), and profound, beginning with the two men's shared experience of punishment (Stalin was arrested and exiled in Siberia four times before the Revolution), and the fact that Aleshkovsky indirectly owed his release to Stalin's death. Furthermore, as Aleshkovsky highlights in his 'Avtobiograficheskaya spravka', his birth coincided with the great turn in Stalinist policy, the 'великий перелом' of 1929. As Anne Applebaum points out in her history of the Gulag, this was also the year when the camps, in which Aleshkovsky would find himself twenty years later, first assumed the critical role that would constitute their main function and explain their mass expansion: namely, as sites of unpaid, forced labour in the service of rapid industrialization.¹⁸

Aleshkovsky appears to have seen himself as the very product of Stalinist rule. Certainly, his writing is deeply involved in the contradictions of Stalin's policies and, above all, personality. At the heart of these contradictions are the intellectual credentials of both Stalin and the Aleshkovskian narrator. These themes are suggested as early as the masterly 'Pesnya o Staline' (1959), which begins:

Товарищ Сталин, вы большой ученый,
в языкознание знаете вы толк,
а я простой советский заключенный,
и мне товарищ — серый брянский волк.

За что сижу, воистину не знаю,
но прокуроры, видимо, правы,
сiju я нынче в Туруханском крае,

¹⁸ Applebaum, p.2 and *passim*.

где при царе бывали в ссылке вы.¹⁹

A similar parallel with Stalin's pre-Revolutionary criminal past will be made by the thief Fan Fanych, narrator of *Kenguru* (written 1974-75), who remembers Stalin as a crook (*urka*) in Tiflis and Baku.²⁰

The song sets the tone of Aleshkovsky's later fiction in the audacious, highly familiar and direct tone with which it addresses authority. As in *Sinen'kii skromnyi platochek*, which takes the form of an epistle to Brezhnev from a patient in a mental asylum, Aleshkovsky draws here on the ancient traditions by which the Russian *narod* has appealed to its leader. These traditions were continued and actively encouraged in the Stalinist era, when many citizens, from the countryside in particular, wrote to Stalin and other Party leaders about 'the experiences of ordinary people'.²¹ Whatever their criticisms, and the incongruities they observed between official policy and reality, such letters were typically marked by a sense of faithful devotion to the leader and the Party.

This devotion is present in 'Pesnya o Staline', but already as a memory: 'Но [мы] верили вам так, товарищ Сталин, / Как, может быть, не верили себе'. Although the narrator is addressing the living Stalin, he speaks of him here as if he were already in the past (indeed the song, composed six years after Stalin's death, benefited from hindsight). The ironies are multiple and profound. The title echoes that of the 1930s song in the *bol'shoi stil'* by A. Surkov and M. Blanter, while the text is replete with parodic repetitions of Stalinist aphorisms.²² Thus, through the words of a 'простой советский заключенный', Aleshkovsky is able to sustain a double-voiced commentary on Stalinism:

¹⁹ 'Pesnya o Staline', in Aleshkovsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, II, pp.555-56 (p.555).

²⁰ 'Он банки курочил. Почтовые дилижансы брал с партнерами. Неплохой был урка, но ссучился. Генсеком стал'; Aleshkovsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I, pp.49-186 (p.132)

²¹ For a wide selection of these see Lewis Siegelbaum and Andrei Sokolov, *Stalinism as a Way of Life* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2000). I have quoted from a letter from Party member K. Pol' to Stalin in 1939 (p.247).

²² Especially obvious in the following couplet: 'Мы рубим лес по-сталински, а щепки,/ А щепки во все стороны летят'.

from the perspective of a loyal prisoner, who dreams of Stalin and may still revere him, while being baffled by his own fate; and from an ironical, critical perspective that has grasped the cruelty and futility of the suffering imposed by Stalin ('мы нелегкий крест несем задаром'). On the one hand there is a sense of distance and awe ('Вы снитесь нам, когда в партийной кепке / И в кителе идете на парад'); on the other, there is an attempt to enter Stalin's mind and to speculate about subtle aspects of his psychology ('Как, может быть, не верили себе'), as if from the standpoint of an intimate acquaintance and licensed critic (or fool). This close footing would be claimed in different ways by the narrators of both *Ruka* and *Sinen'kii skromnyi platochek*.

The narrowing of the distance between narrator and authority draws on a further related parallel suggested by the heavily ironic opening stanza of the song, with its implicit mockery of Stalin's pretence of 'ученость'. Indeed, the re-evaluation of this stanza's false antithesis – 'simple' citizen versus 'learned', scholastic authority – becomes an overarching trope of Aleshkovsky's fiction.

In its most obvious aspects, this re-evaluation involves dismantling what Craig Brandist has described as the mock 'Latin scholasticism' of Stalinist rule,²³ and suggesting that the Soviet leaders are no more erudite or wise than the narrator, who takes himself to be neither and who frequently draws attention to his lack of formal education, at times regretfully.²⁴ The Party leaders, by contrast, take every effort to conceal their intellectual limitations. Thus, Stalin dons the cap of a 'большой ученый' and makes a dramatic foray in the field of 'языкознание' (a reference to Stalin's notorious series of Pravda articles on linguistics in 1950),²⁵ while Brezhnev is derided in *Sinen'kii skromnyi platochek* for the fawning tributes paid to *Malaya zemlya*, and to what the head of the Academy of Sciences

²³ Craig Brandist, 'Carnivalization and Populism in the Soviet Modernist Novel: Andrei Platonov and Mikhail Bakhtin', *Essays in Poetics* 22 (1997), 1-29 (pp.3-4).

²⁴ See, for example, *Sinen'kii skromnyi platochek*, in Aleshkovsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I, pp.539-630 (pp.560-61). Aleshkovsky's own education, it should be remembered, was uncompleted.

²⁵ See Robert Service, *Stalin: A Biography* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2004), pp.564-65.

calls ‘ваш исключительно большой вклад в развитие теории и практики марксизма-ленинизма в условиях современности’. Here, as elsewhere, we are encouraged to see ‘Gensek Prezhnev’ (*sic*) as a latter-day Stalin, with the narrator benefiting from his fool’s license to comment: ‘Ты же лучше их знаешь, что ты за теоретик и грамотей’.²⁶

For satirists of the late-Soviet era such targets were perhaps unmissable. Aleshkovsky, however, is not simply playing them for laughs, but to explore a fault-line of Bolshevik history: namely, that a regime which presided over mass literacy campaigns and saw itself as reason incarnate could be so ridden with complexes and contradictions in its estimation of the value and role of intellectual enterprise, and should have had, as its longest-serving General Secretaries (Stalin and Brezhnev) leaders of questionable intellectual credentials, with Stalin being worshipped as the ‘highest genius of mankind’ and ‘coryphaeus of all the sciences’.²⁷ These paradoxes have been studied in depth by David Joravsky, whose *Russian Psychology* charts the zigzagging path taken by the Party leadership towards isolation, ‘anti-intellectualism in an intellectual guise’ and eventual thought control, a path determined by the Party’s highly distrustful attitude towards the intelligentsia, and its fear of the ‘backwardness’ of the masses in whose name it ruled. The pattern was set by Lenin, an *intelligent* who famously execrated the intelligentsia as the ‘shit’ (*der'mo*) of the nation, and demonstrated the difficulty, if not impossibility, of reconciling reason with faith in the Party. But, for Joravsky (as for Aleshkovsky), it was in Stalin, both in his policies and personality, that these contradictions were most graphically etched, leading to ‘wild pretensions of intellectuality’ and the insistence ‘with guns in hand

²⁶ Aleshkovsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I, p.629. The projection of Stalin onto Brezhnev – a leader otherwise too faceless and feeble to be satisfactorily demonized – accords with a general pattern in non-conformist literature described by Andrei Zorin: ‘К семидесятым годам задним числом подверстывались тридцатые, а брежневские брови воспринимались как хитроумная маскировка усов отца народов’; A.L. Zorin, ‘От Galicha k Prigovu’, *Rossiya/Russia* 1 (1998), 153-66 (p.155).

²⁷ Gregory Freeze, *Russia: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.345; see also David Joravsky, *Russian Psychology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989) p.325.

that the intelligentsia hear and obey'.²⁸ This process of intellectual narrowing and rigidification will be found to be a central subject of *Ruka*.

As the ironic opening of 'Pesnya o Staline' suggests, together with the later comment about Stalin's lack of self-belief, it is the intellectual vulnerability of Stalin that interests Aleshkovsky, and that helps explain why, as Aleshkovsky has said in interview, 'как предмет исследования – литературного, психологического – он [Stalin] мне гораздо интереснее, чем Ленин'.²⁹ Behind the mask of Stalin the coryphaeus we are encouraged to see Stalin the arriviste from the provinces, the careerist Bolshevik *praktik* who rose to the top of the Party on the back of the least impressive intellectual CV; a man famously found 'rude' by Lenin, and described by Trotsky as the Party's 'most outstanding mediocrity'.³⁰

These insecurities are reflected and mocked in the distorting mirror of the Aleshkovskian narrator, a grotesque double of the *Vozhd'*, manifesting the ignorance and *nekul'turnost'* which the Bolsheviks feared to be the true face of the people on whose behalf they ruled, and which some feared to lurk in Stalin himself. Nikolai Nikolaevich, in particular, mocks through his own person the efforts to reform the *narod*, as if declaring to authority that it was justified in its suspicions: the people are indeed incorrigible. In the most graphic illustration of his *nekul'turnost'* Nikolai Nikolaevich inspects his bruised genitals in the mirror of a hotel foyer in Moscow. 'Деревня хуева!', a hotel porter shouts at him, adding that, 'Франция, евова, на тебя смотрит!'.³¹ Like a *yurodivyi*, Nikolai Nikolaevich reveals the wounds of his country, whether on his body or in his language.

Above all, Aleshkovsky's narrators are not constrained by the hypocritical double-bind pointed out by Joravsky when he comments that, whatever their anti-intellectual

²⁸ Joravsky, pp.332, 193, 332-33.

²⁹ See Nuzov <<http://www.vestnik.com/issues/2001/1106/win/nuzov.htm>>.

³⁰ Joravsky, pp.324, 320.

³¹ Aleshkovsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1, p.32.

leanings, Stalinists must wear 'a badge of fealty' to rational and scientific discourse.³² Indeed, the narrators of *Nikolai Nikolaevich* and *Ruka* make the derision of reason and the intellect a key theme of their monologues. At the same time, their monologues reveal an obsession with authentic wisdom and education. The narrators reveal themselves as amateur tutors, though the lessons they seek to impart, or which their experiences impart for them, are generally of a religious and eschatological, rather than scientific or theoretical, nature. Aleshkovsky himself appears to have nurtured a lifelong fixation with the question of what can and should be taught – a consequence, perhaps, of his interrupted education (about which he has expressed contradictory views).³³ In 1998, for example, he published a moving obituary of the scholar Yury Glazov under the title 'Poslednii urok', describing his wish to learn by heart the lesson of his friend's fortitude, even joy, in the face of illness and certain death.³⁴

As these two chapters will further illustrate, the mockery of false *uchenost'* ultimately serves rhetorical and didactic purposes that have much in common with Erasmian folly. The satire of affectation, vice and stupidity at a local level is linked (and arguably subordinate) to a philosophical apprehension of the world organized by the discourse of folly and a perception of society as a ship of fools. Within this schema, the 'praise of folly' ultimately issues in a new form of wisdom, through the 'transvaluation of values' that Walter Kaiser rightly views as the key to Erasmian irony.³⁵

³² Ibid, p.323.

³³ Contrast his comments in his 'Avtobiograficheskaya spravka', where he claims not to have the slightest regrets about his aborted education (*Sobranie sochinenii*, III, p.536) with those in his interview with Nuzov: 'После лагеря я не захотел учиться, пробавлялся самообразованием, о чем сейчас жалею.'

³⁴ Aleshkovsky, 'Nekrolog: Poslednii urok', *Novyi Mir*, 7 (1998), 241-42.

³⁵ See Walter Kaiser, *Praisers of Folly: Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1964), pp.19-100. Kaiser illustrates this pattern in the case of Stultitia's treatment of prudence: 'A value (prudence) is transvaluated by means of praising its opposite (rashness and self-deception); the fool's gold of both is refined by the alchemy of the fool into the pure gold of a new value (true prudence based on understanding)' (p.61).

1. 'Nikolai Nikolaevich'

Nikolai Nikolaevich is not only among the funniest texts in Russian literature, as Andrei Bitov, one of its first readers in *samizdat*, has rightly observed.³⁶ It is also among the coarsest and most pervasively foolish. Extravagantly vulgar in both topic and expression, this *povest'* comprises the unbroken monologue of a self-confessed *durak*, Nikolai Nikolaevich (NN), a criminal recidivist turned sperm provider who tells of his unlikely adventures in Soviet biology (more precisely: 'в мрачном гадюшнике советской биологии') and speaks in a linguistic farrago unprecedented in Russian prose: a mixture of prison slang, obscenity and cod scientific jargon.³⁷ His addressee is referred to simply as 'кирюха' ('drinking buddy') and is deemed far more stupid than the narrator.³⁸

NN's own foolishness is confirmed by the opinions, which he dutifully reports, of a policeman (p.18), a complete stranger (pp.41-42), and a deputy director who goes so far as to call NN 'недоразвитый' (p.32). It is also suggested by prominent features of the narrator's speech, be they his frequent malapropisms or his ludicrous displays of ignorance and faulty reasoning. He refers, for example, to his 'компас [rather than 'комплекс'] неполноценности' (p.30); and calls his interlocutor a 'денатурат' (p.40), when he presumably means 'дегенерат'. He believes that *La Dolce Vita* is a film by Mussolini (p.20), and that a frozen carp will come back to life if it is thrown in the bath (p.15).

Following Erasmus, Aleshkovsky might have prefaced NN's monologue with the words: 'Stultitia loquitur'. But he might also have asked his reader, again with Erasmus, to

³⁶ Bitov, p.193.

³⁷ The subtitle to the text in the *Sobranie sochinenii* (2001) reads in full, 'Светлое путешествие в мрачном гадюшнике советской биологии'; Aleshkovsky, *Nikolai Nikolaevich* in *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1, pp.3-48 (p.3). Subsequent references will be to this edition and volume, and will follow quotations in the text.

³⁸ NN comments, for example, that 'У меня изжога от твоей тупости' (p.21). In general, NN's asides to his *kiryukha* are at the lowest level of comic abuse and invariably focus on the latter's alleged stupidity (see, *inter alia*, pp.37-38, 40, 42). In this respect, the pair recall countless duos of comic fools, most relevantly, perhaps, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Of his own folly, NN freely admits: 'Я и есть дурак. И Бог, надеюсь, меня простит' (p.42). See also p.13, where he describes himself and his *kiryukha* as 'дураки'.

attend to the hidden wisdom in the speech of a fool accurately described by a reviewer of the first edition in Russia (1990) as ‘простоват, но не прост’.³⁹ Like *Moskva-Petushki*, *Nikolai Nikolaevich* shares with *Praise of Folly* key rhetorical features. It develops an argument about folly and the role of the intellect from apparently ludicrous premises; and it presents itself as an impromptu speech for a private audience that develops like an extended joke until, in Walter Kaiser’s expression, it jokes its way into seriousness.⁴⁰ In stark contrast to Erofeev’s *Moskva-Petushki*, these features are wedded to an Erasmian celebration of vitality that expresses itself in joy, frivolity and gratitude. Yury Aikhenval’d has already suggested the debt owed by Aleshkovsky to two of Erasmus’s greatest students, Cervantes and Rabelais;⁴¹ later in this chapter (pp.111-17) I will illustrate how (consciously or unconsciously) Aleshkovsky recovers essential features of Erasmian folly itself.

Such a reading should by no means exclude the many other literary and cultural traditions, not least on native soil, with which Aleshkovsky engages in this tale (and in some cases, seeks to vanquish). It is important, then, to discuss the text first by itself, in terms of its plot, language and form, and of its more immediate historical and cultural setting.

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NN devotes his monologue to his thirty-year career as a sperm provider in scientific institutes in Moscow. The account is interspersed with the story of his affair with a beautiful laboratory assistant, Vlada Yur’evna, and episodes in his friendship with an old partner-in-crime (the ‘международный урка’).

NN’s life-story runs as follows. Released from prison after the Second World War, he falls into old habits, pick-pocketing on the Moscow tram-routes, until his aunt finds him

³⁹ Aleksei Mokrousov, ‘Yuzom – v istoriyu’, *Ogonek*, 6 (1992), 23.

⁴⁰ Kaiser, pp.50-51.

⁴¹ Yury Aikhenval’d, *Don Kikhot na russkoi pochve*, 2 vols (New York: Chalidze, 1982-84), II, p.376.

work in a laboratory. When NN discovers the kind of work involved, he is initially reluctant and even ashamed to take it on, until he grasps its profitable terms (half an hour's 'work' for a full day's pay). Such are the exceptional qualities of his sperm that NN quickly negotiates a massive salary rise and a ration of two litres of pure alcohol a month, allegedly for hygienic purposes (pp.11-13). As his bargaining skills would suggest, NN is not just a fool, but also a rogue, a trait that links him both to criminal protagonists of Aleshkovsky's subsequent works (especially Fan Fanych, narrator of *Kenguru*), and to a well-established tradition in comic prose (exemplified most famously by Ilf and Petrov's *Ostap Bender*).⁴²

The laboratory is run by a maverick biologist and geneticist, Anatoly Kimza, who was rendered impotent during the war, having suffered a heavy dose of radiation during his secret employment in armaments production (p.28). His research interests in the genetic consequences of radiation, and in other fields, place the laboratory at the very fringe of political acceptability at a time when Lysenkoism – with its denial of the existence of genes – is in full swing.⁴³ As one of Kimza's colleagues, known simply as the *akademik*, points out: 'Мы – генетики – без пяти минут враги народа' (p.15). These fears prove justified when the laboratory is closed down, although NN escapes punishment by playing the fool to his interrogators (pp.25-26), as Platonov's Pukhov did in *Sokrovennyi chelovek* and Erofeev in *Zapiski psikhopata*. He is employed for a while as a porter at the Sklifosovsky hospital, where he is joined by Vlada Yur'evna, the lab assistant who came to NN's rescue at moments of professional incapacity, and whom he has

⁴² Drawing on this tradition, Lesley Milne usefully defines the rogue as one who 'accepts the situation as it is and tries to turn it to his own advantage'; Milne, 'Jokers, Rogues and Innocents: Types of Comic Hero and Author from Bulgakov to Pelevin', in *Reflective Laughter: Aspects of Humour in Russian Culture*, ed. by Lesley Milne, (London: Anthem, 2004), pp.85-96 (p.86). NN's use of political (Marxist-Leninist) terminology to his own advantage provides good examples of such roguery; see, for example, his conversation with Kimza, p.44 ('Я – человек! Советский причем. У меня нервы исторически издерганы').

⁴³ See below, pp.97-99.

rescued from lifelong frigidity. Working in the hospital teaches NN compassion, and he gives up thieving for good (pp.35-37).

Following Stalin's death, the laboratory is rehabilitated under Khrushchev, with a new speciality in sexology, for which NN continues to be of inestimable value. In mock-Pavlovian fashion he is rigged up with wires and electrodes to examine his phenomenal sexual energy in the hope that it may ultimately be harnessed (pp.39-41); and he impregnates, via artificial insemination, the wife of a foreign dignitary sent over by the Central Committee (p.43). The resulting offspring is said to be twenty years of age, from which we can conclude that NN is speaking in the mid-to-late 1970s and that he has been in the same profession for the best part of three decades. NN ends his monologue, however, by announcing his intention to hand in his notice the next day and become a cobbler, following an enlightening conversation with the *akademik* about the futility of science, Marxist-Leninism, and Soviet history, for all of which NN's profession is pronounced the exact metaphor. In the *akademik*'s words,

Вся советская, Коля, и мировая наука – сплошная суходрочка на девяносто процентов! А марксизм-ленинизм? Это же очевидный онанизм. Твоя хоть безобидна, Коля, суходрочка, а сколько крови пролито марксизмом-ленинизмом в одной только его лаборатории, в России? Море! [...] Подрочили. Время за живое и достойное дело приниматься. (pp.47-48)

This envoi sounds very much like a message from the author, casting the tale as a satire of science and of the Soviet Union, in which the consummation of the 'светлое будущее' (p.47) has failed to arrive. The onanistic metaphor, with its associated call to proper employment ('достойное дело'), represents the Soviet project as a kind of futile and damaging exercise in graduate study; and indeed, writers of dissertations are repeatedly invoked in Aleshkovsky's fiction as the very symbol of (fraudulent) Soviet authority, with

normal citizens cast as the victims of this extended intellectual whimsy.⁴⁴ We are also encouraged to note the pernicious equivalence, instituted by Bolshevik rhetoric, between political ideology and ‘objective’ science, whereby proper scientific practice could be sacrificed to ‘the great social experiment’ of Soviet history.⁴⁵

The *akademik*’s speech, however, is simplistic and reductionist, posing as many questions as it answers, notably in the equivalence it asserts between world science and Marxist Leninism. Is it Soviet history and science that represent Aleshkovsky’s chief target, or intellectual endeavour *per se*? Indeed, the emphatic satirical conclusions are out of tune with the tale as a whole, and with its dominant comic method, which is considerably more ambiguous (and more interesting), and prompts one to ask whether *Nikolai Nikolaevich* is a satire at all. It seems highly possible, in this light, that the speech was among the ‘philosophizing’ sections which, according to the testimony of one *samizdat* reader, Evgeny Kozlovsky, were added later (presumably, for the first publication of the text in 1980).⁴⁶

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Aleshkovsky himself has described *Nikolai Nikolaevich* as an apolitical work (‘там никакой политики нет’),⁴⁷ calling it ‘antiscientistic’ rather than anti-Soviet.⁴⁸ Certainly, the attack on science goes well beyond Soviet practice, and it is significant that NN’s adventures occur outside the context of orthodox Soviet biology. Nevertheless, this context has a highly visible role in the background of the tale, and should be briefly summarized.

⁴⁴ See especially *Sinen’kii skromnyi platochek*, where the asylum doctor (called Vtupyakin, like every other figure of authority in the tale) uses the narrator as the basis for his doctoral dissertation.

⁴⁵ Cf Joravsky, p.250.

⁴⁶ See Kozlovsky, <<http://www.lebedev.com/MusicPhone/Review/kozl/e21.htm>> [accessed 16/02/2006]. The *akademik*’s speech may be compared closely with the views of a childhood friend of the narrator of *Ruka*, who expounds on his conviction that ‘все революции – пустопорожняя дрочка’; *Sobranie sochinenii*, III, p.351.

⁴⁷ Interview with Ekaterina Varkan for *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* in May 2001; <http://exlibris.ng.ru/lit/2001-05-24/2_uz.html> [accessed 16/02/2006]

⁴⁸ Glad, p.116

In Soviet science, the post-War years (when NN's career began) were dominated – like many before and after – by the biologist Trofim Lysenko, who held that external and controllable factors alone determined evolution. In their reductive environmentalism, Lysenko's theories had generally commanded the approval of Stalin, and in 1948 the session of the Lenin All-Union Academy of Agricultural Sciences (VASKhNIL) ended in a ringing endorsement of Lysenkoism and the comprehensive routing of the geneticists. Zhdanov renounced his earlier support for 'Mendel-Morganist genetics', scientists recanted in great numbers, the possibility of a 'non-Party' science was officially outlawed and campaigns were launched to destroy collections of fruit-flies, the traditional objects of genetic experiments. The campaign following the alleged Doctors' Plot of 1953 tightened the screws of scientific conformism ever further and breathed new life into the eccentric, but politically orthodox, ideas of Olga Lepeshinskaya and others. Meanwhile, the discovery of DNA by Watson and Crick in 1953 seemed to confirm Russia's waning prominence in the field of biology.⁴⁹

Aleshkovsky evokes the memory of this period through numerous scornful references and allusions to Lysenko, Lepeshinskaya and the unmasking of the 'Morganists'.⁵⁰ Lysenko becomes a by-word for unspeakable state-sponsored stupidity and elicits the particular fury of the *akademik* (pp.16, 39), who is informed by the deputy head of the institute (when the lab is being closed down): 'У нас не гены, а клетки!' (p.25). The portrait of Soviet science given in the novella is also coloured by the lapse between the period described and the time of composition. Despite the criticisms of his doctrine in the wake of Stalin's death, Lysenko returned to favour under Khrushchev for his agricultural theories, and Lysenkoism, with all its deleterious consequences, was to live on as an influential school of thought far into the Brezhnev era, and even, according to Valery

⁴⁹ See Valery N. Soyfer, *Lysenko and the Tragedy of Soviet Science*, trans. by Leo and Rebecca Gruliow (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

⁵⁰ Aleshkovsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I, pp.24, 16, 35.

Soyfer, beyond.⁵¹ One of these consequences, which only came into focus in the late 1950s and 1960s, was insufficient knowledge of the menace to heredity posed by nuclear radiation. The research carried out by Kimza's laboratory in the post-War years reflects, somewhat anachronistically, the panicky awareness among Soviet scientists and nuclear physicists, from the 1950s onwards, about the danger posed by even small amounts of radiation.⁵²

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Whilst raising these issues, however, Aleshkovsky treats them in a fairly light-hearted manner. Such an approach – to anticipate my comparison with *Praise of Folly* – is redolent of the tale's Erasmian credentials, whereby the fool's speech is propelled by banter and the omission of the darker aspects of any given topic (there is no mention, for example, of the many scientists who perished in the camps for their non-Soviet views); and whereby specific satirical elements are subordinated to broader, 'foolosophical' enquiry. Thus, the manifest follies of Lysenko, Lepeshinskaya and others contribute to the sociopolitical backdrop of intellectual fraudulence, but they are secondary to the tale's more general concerns, which include a polemic with the claims of scientific progress *per se*.

One is inclined to see this polemic as a reaction, at least in part, to the infatuation with science that swept Soviet society in the 1960s. Certainly, it is founded on a conservative (and, as I will later discuss, religious) view of the menace to 'natural' and sane standards of human life posed by the elaborate complexities of innovation and artifice. The novella is designed to bear out this position, as is suggested by the symbolic outcome of the artificial insemination of Vlada with NN's sperm: she miscarries (pp.30-

⁵¹ Soyfer, pp.182, 242, 275-302.

⁵² Ibid, pp.265-68. This issue was taken up most prominently by the central figure in the creation of the hydrogen bomb, and supervisor of several tests, Andrei Sakharov, who used his high standing in the Academy of Sciences to lobby against the Lysenkoists for immediate and wide-scale research into the subject. Sakharov's own research and calculations, as well as his first-hand knowledge of deaths as a result of testing, led him to what he would describe as a 'moral dilemma' and to a subsequent position advocating a ban on nuclear testing. See Richard Lourie, *Sakharov: A Biography* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2002), pp.156-58.

31). Against these outrageous medical advances, which NN perceives as threats to his soundness of mind, Aleshkovsky sets the example of NN as 'natural man,' ultimately uncorrupted by the scientific milieu which has used him for its own purposes. Where Dostoevsky's Underground Man once tormented himself with visions and theories of science's subjugation of humanity, NN actually undergoes the experience of being experimented on and controlled. Yet he emerges intact from his ordeals, to repeat victoriously: 'Я – человек!' (pp.12, 44).

Moreover, NN is 'natural man' endowed with the sexual voracity and generosity that have long been the blessings of the literary fool. Hence the parallel and contrast with Kimza, who likes to call NN his 'alter ego' (p.34). NN's sexual triumph is a crude reminder of the happiness denied to Kimza, whose romance with Vlada Yur'evna ended with the impotence incurred as the price of his scientific expertise. And it is Kimza (or more precisely, 'какой-нибудь искалеченный Кимза') who is invoked in the closing pages by the *akademik* as the symbol of Communism's failure to deliver (p.47).

NN's own attitude to science fluctuates in the course of this mock-*Bildungsroman*. He reports his bursts of enthusiasm for scientific research, whether his initial hope, on being employed, that his sperm would be of service to humanity (p.9); or his excitement at the prospect of his seed being multiplied in outer space (pp.15-16); or the unhelpful hypotheses he offered to the researchers when they experimented on his brain (p.40). He also describes how he once put his newly acquired knowledge into practice to change the sexual proclivities of an annoying neighbour with a course of injections (pp.36-7).

These instances, however, largely belong to the realms of the fantastic and comic. Whether in the present tense or the past, the principal, didactic tendency of NN's views on the virtues and ills of progress is emphatically negative. He recalls how he felt on seeing the experiments carried out on his sperm:

Господи, думаю, куда же мы забрели, если к таким сложностям прибегаем. Кто это выдумал науку? Пойду я лучше по карманам лазить в троллейбусе “Букашка” и в трамвае “Аннушка”. Особенно зло меня разобрало на эту матку искусственную. (p.22)

The shift to standard colloquial speech and exclusion of *mat* underline the significance of the passage, though it is not NN’s final word on science. This is spoken towards the end of the tale when, after explaining his excitement at the next experiment planned for him (Kimza hopes to discover quarks through the energy released by NN during orgasm), the narrator suggests a toast to science (*nauka*), an echo perhaps of Stalin’s well-publicized toast to *nauka* at a reception in the Kremlin in 1938.⁵³ In mid-speech, however, NN changes his mind (‘Впрочем, стоп! Не хочу я за науку пить. У меня на нее большая душевная обида’), and delivers his well-considered verdict in an outburst of indignation:

Ну а если рубануть правду, нужна она лично мне, эта наука ебучая? Тебе она нужна? Вон по улице бабка полунищая идет, ногу за собой отсохшую волокет. Ей наука нужна? Да! Нужна! Ногооживляющая только наука, а не в жопу электроды вставляющая. (p.41)

NN’s argument is clear: applied medicine is good; blue skies scientific research is bad, a sign of the warped modernity whose degrading characteristics NN has experienced on his own body in the laboratory. Such conclusions are hardly subtle, but they are as intelligent as we may expect from the narrator, through whom Aleshkovsky draws on the tendency of fool narrative (exemplified by Erasmus’ *Stultitia*) towards forceful simplification and its ability to ignore any inherent confusions or contradictions – the fact, for example, that the ‘unnatural’ type of science which NN caricatures might be necessary for the utilitarian benefits he applauds.

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To describe *Nikolai Nikolaevich* as ‘anitscientific’, however, does not go far enough, since the critique of *nauka* is itself overshadowed by NN’s crude assault on the culture of

⁵³ Joravsky, p.325.

literacy and on the supremacy of the mind itself within that culture. In its design, in the character of its narrator, and in the narrator's language and arguments, *Nikolai Nikolaevich* is a thoroughly anti-intellectual work. As such, it is not only (or even primarily) a reaction to its immediate historical and cultural context, but a jocoserious *ne plus ultra* among literary praises of folly.

The form and language of the tale, with their maximal dissociation from the discourse of the learned, play an important role in facilitating and shaping this polemic. They also place the work firmly in its contemporary context of non-conformist literature and reflect some of the defining values of that underground *milieu*, notably its rejection of the printed word and its search for literary vitality in the resources of oral genres. This is the thrust of Andrei Bitov's essay on *Nikolai Nikolaevich*, which Bitov considers to have been written 'не столько против власти, сколько против печати', and which he interprets less as a piece of prose than as an extension of the improvisatory skills of its author: 'произведение выпадает из литературы, как из прохуdivшегося мешка'.⁵⁴

Bitov's interpretation does not account for the fact that the spoken quality of *Nikolai Nikolaevich* has, after all, innumerable precursors in *skaz* narration.⁵⁵ What is true is that Aleshkovsky successfully sustains the paradox of the narrative's anti-textual prejudice, suggested by NN's very first words: 'Вот послушай. Я уж знаю: скучно не будет' (p.5). This opening, promising an entertaining yarn, also suggests an atmosphere of confidentiality, in which revelations are to be made 'между нами' (p.5). Indeed the whole novella, which is dedicated to three friends (one of whom, 'A.B.', is presumably Bitov), may well have been primarily intended as an entertainment *mezhdumami*, to the exclusion of a wider audience, or readership. If the tale emerged, as Bitov reports, from a series of

⁵⁴ Bitov, pp.192-93.

⁵⁵ See Priscilla Meyer, pp.455-61.

private letters, then we, as readers outside this context of close acquaintance, may well not be privy to every level of its humour and reference.

We can, however, trace the genre of this humour to the *anekdot*, an observation that applies to much non-conformist prose (including, in their different ways, *Moskva-Petushki* and *Chonkin*), and to nearly all Aleshkovsky's fiction. The tale's anecdotal character further reinforces its 'unpublishable' and performative quality, as well as drawing attention to its folkloric roots. As a scurrilous tall story which merges the everyday and the fantastic, *Nikolai Nikolaevich* embodies many of the features listed by Sinyavsky-Terts, in an article of 1978, as characteristic of the *anekdot*. Terts saw the *anekdot* as definitive of the world of the late-Soviet intellectual, while Aleshkovsky, together with his narrators, appears to have viewed it as definitive of the Soviet world *tout court*.⁵⁶ Especially pertinent is Terts' characterization of the hero of the *anekdot* as a combination of 'dimness, bravery, ignorance, ingenuousness and common sense' and, as such, a type who bears a relation to Ivan-Durak.⁵⁷ All this is true also of NN, whose resemblance to Ivan-Durak is in certain respects very strong: his congenital laziness, his dirtiness, and, above all, the extraordinary good fortune which his folly bestows on him.⁵⁸ Like the Ivan-Durak of some of the best-known *skazki* he manages to avoid hard work while making his fortune and obtaining (at least temporarily) his 'царевна' (p.33), Vlada Yur'evna.⁵⁹ As Sinyavsky wrote in another essay on Ivan-Durak, it is precisely the folly of the fool which turns out to be the 'необходимым условием счастья [...] условием пришествия божественных или

⁵⁶ Shibanov, the narrator of *Ruka*, speaks early in the novel of 'наше анекдотическое время'; *Sobranie sochinenii*, I, p.234.

⁵⁷ Abram Terts, 'Anekdot v anekdote', *Sintaksis*, 1 (1978), 77-95 (pp.77, 87).

⁵⁸ NN's laziness is emphasized early on: 'работать я не любил. Не могу – и всё' (p.6). Like Ivan-Durak, who prefers to remain on the stove, NN prefers to lie on his bed and read than go to work: 'Назавтра говорю Кимзе, что работать не буду. Принципиально я не рабочий, а артист своего дела. Я, говорю, на тахте люблю лежать и хавать книжки' (p.7). NN's hygiene, or lack of it, is a recurrent motif: see pp.11, 27-28.

⁵⁹ NN's success in avoiding labour – indeed, even his so-called 'work' at the laboratory is sometimes done for him (when Vlada Yur'evna lends a helping hand) – may be compared with that of Emelya-Durak, for whom the logs cut themselves; see A.N. Afanas'ev, *Narodnye russkie skazki*, ed. by L.G. Barag and N.V. Novikov, 3 vols (Moscow: Nauka, 1984-85), I, pp.326-27.

магических сил';⁶⁰ even if this happiness comes at the price of beatings and punishments (symbolized in *Nikolai Nikolaevich* by NN's treatment as a kind of Pavlovian dog).⁶¹

It is the case, however, that *anekdoty*, folklore and oral narrative have been widely prevalent in late-Soviet non-conformist prose. Stylistically, what most distinguishes *Nikolai Nikolaevich* against this backdrop is a different quality – namely, its extraordinary language, which also establishes the specific tenor of the tale's idiocy. It seems appropriate to introduce the word 'idiocy' here for its suggestion of a private, self-enclosed world of reference and meaning (*idios*: 'a private person', or, as an adjective, 'one's own', 'private', 'distinct'). NN speaks in an idiolect which draws heavily on prison-camp lingo and low slang, but which is thoroughly individual in its combination of registers and, consequently, its improvisations. It develops in the specific context of NN's past, at the confluence of misunderstood scientific jargon and the coarse idiom of the poorly educated recidivist. It is only if the scientific can be translated, at least partially, into this idiolect that it holds any meaning for NN, though it may thus confuse the reader (and be outright meaningless for those who command the original scientific language). These patterns are exacerbated by NN's tendencies as a fool narrator towards exaggeration and digression, wild hypothesis and eccentric syllogism. A case in point is his attempt to prove how one can drink beer without urinating, which leads to observations about life in India and fantasies about the molecular and atomic properties of excrement. The discussion ends with one of NN's neologisms: 'synchrofrazotron' for 'synchrocyclotron' (p.11).

Moreover, NN's adventures in science plunge him into philosophical waters which his language is only capable of muddying further. His anger at the artificial insemination (with his sperm) of his beloved Vlada, for example, prompts the following outburst about man and machine:

⁶⁰ Andrei Sinyavsky, *Ivan-Durak: Ocherk russkoi narodnoi very* (Moscow: Agraf, 2001), pp.39-40.

⁶¹ See p.40. Pavlov is mentioned explicitly by a laboratory assistant two pages later.

Зачем они так выдумали, бляди, разве не смог бы я просто так палку кинуть? [...] Я, сучий мир, еще, слава Богу, не машина, и муде у меня сварное, а не на гайках. (p.30)

Trying to state his 'natural' credentials, the narrator ends up using an adjective from the vocabulary of machinery ('сварное') to describe his reproductive organs. And when he takes on the mind-body dichotomy, by elaborating his premise that 'член [...] главней мозгов' and prophesying the grim future of a civilization that runs against this truth, the effect is both ludicrous and obscure:

В общем, хули говорить. Помни мое слово, вот увидишь! Когда мозге [*sic*] больше некуда будет развиваться, настанет общий пиздец. Стоять не будет по тем временам даже у самых дураков, вроде нас с тобой. (p.13)

A further, very particular linguistic feature of *Nikolai Nikolaevich* is the prevalence of various forms of translation as a means of negotiating between the different registers of speech. Most obviously, this occurs in the opening paragraph, in which synonyms are provided in footnotes for three examples of criminal slang.⁶² But on an internal level the entire text is saturated with paraphrase and translation between various 'languages': criminal slang; street slang and common speech; scientific terminology; and the unique formulations of NN's idiolect. Thus, the narrator paraphrases what he has understood of his colleagues' scientific activity in the low speech that he believes will be understood by his interlocutor: he even needs to explain, in the passage quoted earlier, that 'excrement' is 'shit' ('кал, то есть говно'). In the other direction, the narrator needs to explain his native prison jargon in common speech, for the benefit of the reader as well as his *kiryukha*: 'Одни ксивы. То есть доносы.' (p.7); 'Я дрочу и трухаю, что одно и то же' (p.8).⁶³ All these exercises in translation elaborate, albeit in topsy-turvy fashion, Aleshkovsky's

⁶² Eg. 'воровал' for 'куропчил' (p.5).

⁶³ When it comes to his own malapropisms, however, NN is less willing to compromise, as we see after he coins the phrase 'не видать, как своих мозгов'. Responding to his interlocutor's objection, NN continues: 'Молчи! Это раньше говорили "как своих ушей". Теперь открыто, что уши можно рассмотреть в зеркало. Попробуй же рассмотри мозги' (p.42).

favoured theme of education. They present the comic spectacle of the narrator as a blundering, hectoring teacher, an absurd ‘coryphaeus’ of the unofficial discourses of the Stalinist and post-Stalinist era.

Serving the necessary function of helping to render NN’s speech more or less comprehensible to the reader, such translation also pulls in the opposite direction, towards the triumph of the narrator’s folly. As in folklore, *durachestvo* proves contagious, and one manifestation of its dominance is at the level of language. NN’s idiolect even seeps into the speech and thought of his colleagues at the laboratory, a process suggested by this early victory over Kimza, who had initially berated NN for his coarse language (p.6), but then falls into it himself:

‘Сперма нам нужна, Николай. Сперма!!!’

‘Что за сперма?’

‘То, из чего дети получаются.’

‘Какая же это сперма. Это – малофейка. Малофья, по-научному.’

‘Ну, пусть малофья. Согласен сдавать для науки?’ (p.8)

NN’s lingo is taken up with particular zest by the *akademik*, who is grateful to NN for his ‘доброе, живое слово’, and learns to echo the narrator’s expressions.⁶⁴ This newly acquired slang supplements his habitual parodying of Marxist-Leninist discourse and sloganeering,⁶⁵ showing once again how folly provides an alternative to the intelligentsia’s primary mode of critique – irony. Moreover, there is a natural empathy between NN and the *akademik*, as may be suggested by the latter’s nickname, which in criminal jargon may denote an ‘experienced recidivist’.⁶⁶ This empathy comes to the fore in the pair’s final conversation, discussed earlier, in which the *akademik* elicits from NN the word

⁶⁴ See p.16 (‘не буду бздеть, не буду’); p.39: ‘Тогда и подрошим, ха-ха, как вы изволили подпустить термина’; and p.47: ‘Придет, надеюсь, пора, и он [человек] завяжет, как ты выражаешься, завяжет и займется настоящим делом’.

⁶⁵ See, for example, the *akademik*’s Stalinist incantations over his scientific experiments: ‘... А вместо сердца пламенный мотор’ (p.15); and his mimicking of Leninist discourse (p.39).

⁶⁶ See *Dictionary of Russian Slang*, ed. by Vladimir Shlyakhov and Eve Adler, 2nd edn (New York: Barron’s, 1999), p.2.

‘суходрочка’ as a definition of their occupation as scientists, of Marxist-Leninism, and of Soviet government. This radical simplification of the issues in question is made possible by the ascendant authority of the narrator’s idiolect.

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This pattern emerges still more clearly at the level of narrative development, where the spread and triumph of NN’s folly is expressed by his triumph as a Priapic figure. The increasing deference to the paradoxical authority of NN’s language is matched by the general subservience of all NN’s colleagues at the laboratory to his sexual authority. This becomes apparent from the very beginning of NN’s employment, and is recognized by Kimza:

А у Кимзы опыты пошли успешно, он иногда шутил даже поставить памятник моему члену заводной. Чтобы он вставал с первыми лучами солнца. В старину такие были памятники. Но их снесли. Застеснялись. А кого застеснялись? Ведь член, кирюха, если разобраться, самое главное. Главней мозгов. Мы же лет мильён назад не мозгами ворочали, а хуями. (p.13)

Subsequent developments serve to corroborate NN’s premise that ‘член [...] главней мозгов’; and that, as he argues a few pages later, sperm is essential, ‘а интеллект – дело наживное, если он вообще нужен, потому что хули от него, кирюха ты мой, толку, от интеллекта этого?’ (p.16). The nature of NN’s profession allows his arguments to be demonstrated with comic force, since the laboratory becomes entirely dependent for its research on his sperm, permitting NN to blackmail his learned colleagues: ‘Нечего на мне экономию разводить! [...] Мандавошки! Если бы не я, вы бы не диссертации защищали, а свои жопы на летучке у директора. На моем хую держитесь!’ (p.12).⁶⁷ Even the Soviet government becomes dependent on NN’s continued productivity when it demands his sperm for the artificial insemination of a foreign delegate’s wife. Nor is NN’s

⁶⁷ This pattern, whereby the experts are dependent on the fool, also forms the basis of *Sinen’kii skromnyi platochek*.

power restricted to the laboratory. His conquest of Vlada, who had described herself to him as frigid, is clearly intended as a further graphic illustration of the triumph of matter over mind, and of the fool over the professor (Kimza), who cries on hearing of Vlada's pregnancy (p.23).

A similar lesson is suggested by the tale's surprising conclusion. NN may have acquired some 'intellect' through his experience ('интеллект – дело наживное'), but his pledge on the final page to leave the world of science and learning, and become a cobbler, would suggest that he has resolved his dilemma over whether the intellect is 'вообще нужен' to his private satisfaction. NN's choice also suggests a rejection of the path of idealism, which he had momentarily embraced after reading *Don Quixote* – 'Чем я, думаю, занимаюсь, когда надо продолжать войну с ветряными мельницами?' (p.47) – and a confirmation of his pledge to utilitarianism, already familiar to the reader through his views on science.⁶⁸ These views link NN's thought to Stalinist orthodoxy, and certainly it is hard to escape the piquancy of NN's specific choice of utilitarian employment. Stalin's father, as is well known, was a cobbler;⁶⁹ while the radical left-wing thinkers of the 1860s are forever associated with the comment (coined by Dostoevsky in a satirical lampoon, but ever since attributed to Pisarev, or sometimes Chernyshevsky) that boots are worth more than Shakespeare.⁷⁰ NN's escape from the metaphorical laboratory of Soviet history, then, may also serve to retrace its past, both anecdotally and intellectually.

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Other readers have found echoes in this conclusion of *Pygmalion*; and also of Voltaire's *Candide*, whose ending Flaubert found to be an inspired expression of pure

⁶⁸ See, *inter alia*, pp.9, 41.

⁶⁹ As is noted in *Chonkin*: see Vladimir Voinovich, *Zhizn' i neobychnie priklucheniya soldata Ivana Chonkina* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2002), p.154.

⁷⁰ See Henry Hardy's clarification of this on the Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library:

<http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/quotations/quotations_by_ib.html> [accessed 11 February 2006].

stupidity ('stupid like life itself').⁷¹ However we choose to read it, we may agree that *Nikolai Nikolaevich* describes, in its overall structure, a movement out of ignorance and into ignorance. This circle of folly contains not just the narrator but, by synecdoche, an entire society in which ignoramus and expert differ in title only.⁷² The sense that the other main male characters (Kimza, the *akademik*, and the *mezhdunarodnyi urka*) are either doubles or alter egos for the narrator reinforces the comic pattern of NN's self-identification and self-projection (while also suggesting a psyche at the very fringes of sanity). So too does the identification between NN and Soviet power, which is suggested in various ways. The foreign delegate's wife, for example, has NN to thank for being 'осеменяемая Советским Союзом' (p.43). More broadly, NN's life has been almost entirely defined by the state, albeit negatively (through punishment). The history of the Soviet Union has been the history of his own life, and its key events – such as the death of Stalin, or the liberalizing measures of 'Nikita' (which made possible the reopening of the laboratory) – punctuate and structure his monologue.⁷³ In short, NN has every right to declare: 'Я – человек! Советский причем' (p.44).

In some of these respects, *Nikolai Nikolaevich* continues comic traditions of fool literature of the early Soviet era. In the stories of Zoshchenko or the shorter fiction of Platonov, the foolish protagonist or narrator is similarly an outsider who is nevertheless deeply implicated in the society he describes and often ridicules; indeed, he invests his own self-respect in the Soviet state. Arriving in Moscow, the protagonist of Platonov's story 'Usomnivshiisya Makar' (1929) looks for the very heart of the capital, 'чтобы постоять в самом центре и проникнуться уважением к самому себе и к своему

⁷¹ For the first suggestion, thanks to Catriona Kelly. On the echo of *Candide*, see Porter, p.35. On Flaubert and *Candide*, see Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p.11.

⁷² '[Ч]его мучиться мне – темному лесу над рекой,' thinks NN, contemplating his ignorance and confusion, 'когда наш академик, уж у него-то звезда во лбу горит, сам ни хуя толком не понимает' (p.42).

⁷³ See, for example, the openings of Chapters 13 and 14, pp.35, 37. Like the singer of 'Pesnya o Staline', NN often refers to the Soviet leaders (Lenin, Stalin and Khrushchev) in a familiar or anecdotal fashion: see pp.33, 37, 38, 45-46.

государству'.⁷⁴ As in *Nikolai Nikolaevich*, folly is socially marginal but symbolically central, exerting a centripetal force over fictional reality.⁷⁵

But the apotheosis of folly in *Nikolai Nikolaevich* exceeds its precursors. Platonov and others had often used the foolish protagonist or narrator for sociopolitical critique, even if, as authors, they refused to see themselves as satirists. One can extract from 'Usomnivshiisya Makar', or *Sokrovennyi chelovek*, the essential function of satire to compare 'a real and an ideal [society], or a noble dream with a debased reality' (Gilbert Highet);⁷⁶ and this is how such fiction was read, earning Platonov critical opprobrium. But NN, as we have seen, is unable to offer an intelligent critique of the status quo; and nor does he wish to. Despite clearly satirical moments, his tale does not lend itself in its entirety to accurate description as satire; and it certainly does not seek to tell the truth to power.⁷⁷ In these respects, it is not hard to understand Aleshkovsky's comment that 'там никакой политики нет'; or why, as he reports, *samizdat*-reading Central Committee members found the tale hilarious, and not in the slightest respect threatening.⁷⁸

The genre rediscovered by Aleshkovsky in his flight from plain satire, has, I propose, profound resemblances to that invented by Erasmus in *Praise of Folly*. It is an escape into humour and whimsy, on the one hand, and into the philosophical and religious speculations of 'foolish wisdom' on the other. It shares these similarities with *Moskva-Petushki*; but in *Nikolai Nikolaevich* the recovery of Erasmus's strategies is yet more comprehensive.

⁷⁴ Andrei Platonov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 2 vols (Moscow: Informpechat', 1998), I, p.526.

⁷⁵ This pattern can be observed in *Revizor* in the roles of Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky.

⁷⁶ Gilbert Highet, *The Anatomy of Satire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp.159-60.

⁷⁷ This role is assumed, in very limited fashion, by the *urka*; see pp.23, 37.

⁷⁸ 'Мне известно, что многие работники ЦК партии читали эту книгу и смеялись – смеялись потому, что она действительно смешна и как-то еще не затрагивала их как партийных бонз'; Glad, p.116.

NN's celebration of the phallus is of a piece with his praise of folly.⁷⁹ Aleshkovsky thus recovers the twin key aspects of Stultitia's self-representation (sex and stupidity), and the two principal objects of her mock-encomium. Where Venichka's hymn to the bottle proved unable to stave off the Gogolian terror of the *poema*'s final pages, NN's eulogy of sexual satisfaction is fully in tune with the vitality and spirit of Erasmian folly.

NN's sheer shamelessness on sexual matters should not discourage comparison with *Praise of Folly*, for Stultitia is similarly vulgar, in her own circumlocutory way, when she speaks 'more frankly', at the very opening of her encomium, about her kinship with the 'sacred fount', namely 'that part which is so foolish and absurd that it can't be named without raising a laugh'.⁸⁰ Stultitia thus associates herself with origins, with the gift of life, and with her place at the foundation of human society. From here follow the paradoxical arguments by which she 'proves' her importance, beginning with the claim that even the 'sober philosopher' must stoop to the use of his ridiculous fount, for 'if the philosopher ever wants to be a father it's me he has to call on – yes, me'.⁸¹

Stultitia's claims to her own indispensability and primacy are mirrored in NN's argument that, 'член [...] главней мозгов'; and we have already seen how Aleshkovsky makes a similar case to demonstrate the putative dependence of learning on the phallus. Certainly, Aleshkovsky goes about corroborating his narrator's thesis in a rather different manner from Erasmus, through plot rather than complex rhetoric, while the bluntness of NN's expression contrasts starkly with the agility of Stultitia's tongue. Nevertheless

⁷⁹ An association well captured by the Russian slang for a John Thomas: *durak*. A comic biographical anecdote that precisely captures this celebration can be read in Lev Losev's splendid essay, 'Yuz! *Apologia*', in Losev, *Sobrannoe* (Ekaterinburg: U-Faktoriya, 2000), pp.603-14 (pp.604-5).

⁸⁰ Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, ed. by A.H.T. Levi, trans. by Betty Radice (London: Penguin, 1993), p.20.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, p.19.

Nikolai Nikolaevich also deals in equivocation and paradox, in its essence and structure, if not in its every sentence.

NN is undeniably more stupid than Stultitia, yet not so stupid that he is unable to maintain the tension between wisdom and folly, leaving the reader uncertain as to the exact balance in his speech and actions of idiocy and cunning, affected simple-mindedness and true ignorance. Even his misuse of language may be construed by the reader as deliberate.⁸² Moreover, in his encounters with authority, and in his exploitation of his own authority in the laboratory, he shows how, in praises of folly, ‘foolishness and roguery go hand in hand’ (Kaiser).⁸³ NN himself expresses his awareness of this complexity:

Я и есть дурак. И Бог, надеюсь, меня простит. Может, я и впрямь не ведаю, что я творю? Не могу понять: ведаю я или не ведаю. А понять надо бы до Страшного суда. Он тебе не нарсуд. Там не прикинешься дурачком и не уйдешь в глухую несознанку. (p.40)

As both rogue and fool, NN demonstrates how, in life (and especially during interrogations by the Soviet authorities), the ‘fool’ must be aware of his folly in order to get by. In literature, too, this self-awareness is essential in order to effect a ‘transvaluation of values’. Like *Praise of Folly*, *Nikolai Nikolaevich* is a double-voiced monologue in which the wisdom of the author speaks through the narrator’s omissions, idiocies and occasional flashes of insight. This slipperiness must also be reflected to some extent in the narrator’s own speech and his self-awareness: for were NN truly an absolute fool, or a clinical idiot (like, say, Faulkner’s Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*), providing us only with the stenogram of a closed consciousness, he would be an unfit agent for the very deliberate inversions of foolish wisdom. Thus, Stultitia warns us that she is not in fact ignorant;⁸⁴ and NN – alluding to Christ’s prayer on the cross – tells us that he thinks he knows not what he does; unless he does know.

⁸² Consider, for example, his use of the idiom, ‘не видеть, как своих мозгов’; see above, n63.

⁸³ Kaiser, p.48.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p.40.

What, then, is the foolish wisdom that carries over to *Nikolai Nikolaevich*? On the one hand, it is an amused perception of society as a ship of fools. *Praise of Folly* showed how satirical elements, though prevalent, could be subordinated to a philosophical, rather than didactically ethical imperative, to demonstrate that folly was inescapable; and that society was always, of itself, a masquerade, ‘a large pretence’, and that true wisdom consisted in accepting this, rather than setting out to ‘spoil the whole play’.⁸⁵ Neither speaker nor author could be exempt from universal folly. As Kaiser has written of *Praise of Folly*: ‘[O]f all Erasmus’ gestures, none is more human or beguiling than that he places himself in the Ship of Fools as one of the passengers’.⁸⁶ The Ship of Fools that Erasmus had in mind was a riposte to that made so famous at the time by Sebastian Brandt: that is, a cargo of sinners *en route* to damnation. Erasmus was (to the horror of some of his readers) far less explicitly concerned with sin, and this is a key to the new ambiguities he was able to explore. Indeed, *Stultitia* mocks those who are excessively pedantic in their religious observance or theology.

Nikolai Nikolaevich retains this essential frivolity. NN is a contented passenger on the Soviet ship of fools, boasting in the first paragraph of his speech about the benefits his ridiculous career has brought him: a flat, a ‘Moskvich’, and a good wife. His decision to leave the arena of science to become a cobbler need not be read as an act of subversion. Perhaps he is merely fed up with his job, as he says (p.47); and as Vlada’s final comments (which end the tale) make clear, the circus of scientific progress will continue without him (p.48). In this light, the *akademik*’s final speech, which introduces sin and suffering as the wages of Soviet rule, seems particularly out of place, and anticipates rather the tone of Aleshkovsky’s subsequent, far more indignant fiction, in which the perception of life as a *maskirovka* becomes explicitly linked to the malevolent designs of authority.

⁸⁵ Erasmus, p.40.

⁸⁶ Kaiser, p.45.

The reverse side of the secular frivolity of *Nikolai Nikolaevich* reveals the didactic agenda of Erasmian folly: namely, the celebration of divine wisdom and mystery, and the assertion of the limitations of the human intellect.

The Christian bias of *Nikolai Nikolaevich* may be understated, certainly as compared to Aleshkovsky's later fiction, but it surfaces unmistakably towards the end, as the quotation given above would suggest. Anticipating Aleshkovsky's later works, the final pages also witness the introduction of a religious voice amid the secular babble. In *Ruka* and *Sinen'kii skromnyi platochek* such a voice belongs to actual priests or holy men. In *NN* it is the old *akademik* who suddenly assumes the role, identifying NN on the penultimate page as the unconscious and flawed, but authentic vessel of the threatened yet unvanquished divine spirit: “А ты, Коля,” говорит старик, “порадовал меня. Не так прост и низок человек, как порою кажется. И в вас, шалопает, есть искра Божья! Есть!” (p.47). He concludes their final conversation with an eccentric statement of wise folly:

‘Я скажу тебе по секрету, Коля,’ академик зашептал мне в ухо свой жуткий секрет: ‘Я считаю, что не зря жил и трудился в науке. Мне, слава Богу, стала окончательно непонятна тайна жизни, и я уверен, никто ее не поймет. Да-с! Никто! Ради понимания этого стоило жить все эти страшные годы.’ (p.48)

Echoing Erasmus's scepticism about the claims of science,⁸⁷ the *akademik*'s speech also affirms the broader paradox of *Praise of Folly*, which has its roots in Socrates' affirmations of his ignorance and which was captured in Erasmus's comment to Maarten van Dorp: that ‘part of our knowledge lies in accepting that there are some things we cannot know’.⁸⁸

The *akademik* is also reaffirming (in perhaps excessively demonstrative fashion) the trajectory of NN's ‘education’. The accumulation of negatives in his sermon

⁸⁷ See Kaiser, p.88.

⁸⁸ Erasmus, p.154.

(‘окончательно непонятна’; ‘никто ее не поймет’; ‘Никто!’) underlines the motifs of ignorance and non-comprehension which have pervaded NN’s encounter with science, whatever his own occasional, boastful assertions to the contrary.⁸⁹ Likewise the emphasis on the ‘тайна жизни’: for even when NN grasps a scientific formula, and proudly vaunts his knowledge of it, the reader can see that what is being praised is not science, but God. The accessible facts of human knowledge are signs of the unfathomable. Here, NN is describing his feelings on being given a mug of water by a woman to cure a hangover: ‘не знаешь, что лучше – вода или баба. И она загадка, и вода – тоже. Ведь ее Господь Бог по молекуле собирал да по атому – два водорода, один кислород. А если лишний какой, то пиздец – уже не опохмелишься. Чудо!’ (p.31). The formula does not explain water, which remains an enigma (*zagadka*).

A more obviously identifiable modern descendant of Erasmus, G.K. Chesterton, articulated this assault on scientific materialism and ‘fatalism’ more fully in *Orthodoxy* (1908), where he argues against the capacity of science to render the world comprehensible: it only renders the world more miraculous. The so-called ‘laws of nature’ are matters of mystery or ‘magic’, not necessity. It is not a necessity, and far from logical, that the apple should always fall from the tree, or the chicken emerge from the egg.⁹⁰ The patterns and repeated transformations we note in the natural world are the unstinting labour of the Creator, who ‘is strong enough to exult in monotony’:

It is possible that God says every morning, ‘Do it again’ to the sun; and every evening, ‘Do it again’ to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them.⁹¹

⁸⁹ See for example p.15 (‘я в этом деле не секу’); and p.22 (‘ничего не понимаю’).

⁹⁰ See G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (NY: Doubleday, 2001), pp.49-58. The scientist is mistaken, Chesterton argues, when he concludes that, ‘because one incomprehensible thing constantly follows another incomprehensible thing the two together somehow make up a comprehensible thing’ (p.49).

⁹¹ Ibid, p.58.

NN has similar thoughts about divine labour: it is a *chudo*, not a necessity, that in every atom of water two molecules of hydrogen should be combined with one of oxygen. His intuitions suggest what Chesterton precisely articulates: that science is ‘only a set of marvellous facts’, not ‘a truth connecting those facts’.⁹²

Like both Chesterton and Erasmus, Aleshkovsky suggests that the proper response to God’s work and our own fundamental ignorance should be ‘elementary wonder’, joy and gratitude.⁹³ The quoted passage continues with NN considering the properties of air:

Или воздух возьми. Ты об нем когда думаешь? Вот и главное. ‘Хули думать, если его не видно’. А в нем каких газов только нет! [...] Не видно! Вот и нужно, чтобы нам, людям, думать побольше о том, чего не видно. О воздухе, о воде, о любви и о смерти. Тогда и жить будем радостно и благодарно. (p.31).

NN’s scolding of his *kiryukha* is a thinly disguised hymn to creation; and we will see how the common roots that Aleshkovsky shares with Chesterton in Franciscan praises of creation become more clearly visible in *Ruka*. Like St Francis, Erasmus, Chesterton, and other ‘*jongleurs de Dieu*’, Aleshkovsky draws on the New Testament virtues of Christian childishness and simplicity, embodied in NN.

At the same time, the sense of primary wonder that comes to the fore in such passages betrays the origins of fool literature in philosophy as much as religion.⁹⁴ NN’s bullying of his *kiryukha* to think about the invisible echoes Stultitia’s appeal, at the very climax of her speech, to ‘the contemplation of invisible things’. Such contemplation is the occupation of the ecstatic fool in Christ, but its value, as she shows, was first articulated most significantly by Plato, who ‘defines philosophy as a preparation for death, because it

⁹² Ibid, pp.48-9.

⁹³ Ibid, p.51.

⁹⁴ Socrates says of ‘wondering’: ‘this is where philosophy begins and nowhere else’; ‘Theaetetus’, in Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. by John M. Cooper (Hackett: Indianapolis/Cambridge, 1997), pp.157-234 (p.173).

leads the mind from visible and bodily things, just as death does'; and who enshrined this lesson in his parable of the cave.⁹⁵

Like many of the protagonists of fool literature, NN is also an ambassador of the unseen: as a pickpocket he is known as the 'карманник-невидимка' (p.35); and as a reader, he weeps in sympathy over the delusions of literature's most famous exponent of the arts of the invisible, Don Quixote (p.47). Through such tropes, and though the exaggerated folly of his narrator, which he develops along Erasmian lines, Aleshkovsky is able to recover the sense of religious and philosophical wonder that may be proposed as the reply to all secular certainties, whether scientific, materialist or otherwise.

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I have argued, on the basis of *Nikolai Nikolaevich*, that a grammar for Aleshkovskian folly may be sought in the Western Christian tradition of literary foolery, and most specifically in the influential tradition of Erasmus, whose descendants in the fool tradition of European fiction and thought include Cervantes, Chesterton and numberless others. My reading, however, is not an attempt to assert certain direct influence, or concealed imitation; nor should it exclude the manifest debts owed by Aleshkovsky to native literary and cultural tradition. Precedents for the passages quoted above may rightly be sought also in the work of writers more culturally and historically proximate to Aleshkovsky. NN's expressions of wonder and sense of the miraculous may, for example, be set alongside those of Alesha Karamazov. His willed naivety in the teeth of materialist explanation connects him more broadly to a flourishing Dostoevskian tradition of pre and post-Revolutionary intellectuals, from Rozanov and Aleksei Losev to Yury Mamleev. Whether in Dostoevsky or Losev, the religiously-informed questioning of the explanatory primacy of science involves the

⁹⁵ Erasmus, pp.128-29.

appropriation of a tone and an authorial position that interpreters have been quick to link to *yurodstvo*.⁹⁶

To what extent, then, may *Nikolai Nikolaevich* be said to be informed by holy foolery? Certainly, as in the fiction of Aleshkovsky's 'teacher' Dostoevsky, such a parallel is reinforced by a range of motifs and characteristics prevalent both in the reported historical practice of *yurodivye Khrista radi* and in their cultural reception. The variety of registers and jargons in NN's speech, where foul language is interspersed with childish-sounding flights of the spirit, and the apparent coexistence in his personality of the coarse and the exalted are redolent of the polarities of the code of *yurodstvo*. More specifically, the shocking traits of NN's character and language – his penchant for self-exposure, sexual license and scatology – all have significant precedents in the scandalous antics of Orthodox holy fools, especially the *saloi*.⁹⁷

Yet, however persuasive some of these connections may be, it is equally clear – indeed, it is a distinguishing feature of the work – that *NN* invokes tropes of Russian spirituality only to turn them on their head. As with Erofeev's Venichka, alien elements of levity alter the traditional native patterns of holy foolery.

Yurodstvo, whether in literature or hagiography, bears a vital nexus of concerns that are notable by their absence in *Nikolai Nikolaevich*, among them: asceticism, particularly of the flesh; radical spiritual didacticism within an eschatological framework; and extravagant anti-aestheticism, even, as the etymology of the word suggests, monstrosity. Above all, the principles of abasement and self-sacrifice which weigh so heavily on the *yurodivye* (heaviness being one of the crucial aesthetic features of *yurodstvo*) receive

⁹⁶ NN's paeans to air and water, cited above, have much in common, in their tone of childish naivety and religious awe, with the outbursts of the philosopher (and secret monk) Aleksei Losev against the 'objectivist' claims of physics and astronomy, in his *Dialektika mifa* (1930). Ivan Esaulov argues for the 'holy foolishness' of these outbursts in his article, 'Two Facets of Comedic Space in Russian Literature of the Modern Period: Holy Foolishness and Buffoonery', in *Reflective Laughter: Aspects of Humour in Russian Culture*, ed. by Lesley Milne (London: Anthem, 2004), pp.73-84.

⁹⁷ See my Introduction, pp.14-15.

predominantly comic treatment in the personality of NN, of whom it could be said, as it was said of Erasmus in the light of *Praise of Folly*, that his attitude to sin is all but frivolous. Like Stultitia, NN is able to claim the satisfaction of both body and soul; sex and love. His ‘triumph’, like hers, is truly universal, though its connotations may echo most strongly in the Russian literary context: the rogue’s choice of life over death (as he tells Kimza: ‘я, блядь, не мертвые души государства забиваю, как Чичиков, а свежую свою родную сперму! [...] Я – человек!’);⁹⁸ the victory, in the face of scientific materialism, of free will and self-realization over the neuroses, defeatism and inaction of the type heralded by the Underground Man; and the refusal to embrace seriously the role of victim, whether as masochistic *durak*, or ‘humiliated Christ’.

NN is thus also one of the most affirmative works in Russian literature, outside the traditions of Chernyshevsky and Socialist Realism.⁹⁹ The somewhat dismissive remarks often made by critics about Aleshkovsky – to the effect that his work is simplistic in its optimism – rather miss the point. Aleshkovsky’s originality and bravery lie precisely in the exuberance and vitality with which he marked his debut in *Nikolai Nikolaevich*. In later works, where Aleshkovsky confronts more directly the catastrophe of Stalinism and its legacy, these qualities endure, though the context in which they survive loses the frivolity of *Nikolai Nikolaevich*. Sin and conscience come very much to the fore. This leads to accompanying transformations in the thematics of folly, whose place in Aleshkovsky’s fiction nevertheless remains central.

⁹⁸ See p.12; the affirmation is repeated on p.44. Aleshkovskian vitality is in contrast to the dominant trends of non-conformist prose generally, as reflected in the prose of Venedikt Erofeev, Yury Mamleev and others.

⁹⁹ On which, see Rufus W. Mathewson, Jr., *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958).

Chapter Three

The Curse of Reason and the Gifts of Folly in Aleshkovsky's novel *Ruka*

The 1970s witnessed a surge in Aleshkovsky's literary ambition and confidence. Having further explored the narrative possibilities of the monologue in the picaresque *Kenguru* (written 1974-75) and the deliriously satirical *Maskirovka* (written 1977), Aleshkovsky drove his chosen form to its rhetorical limits in his longest novel, *Ruka* (written 1977-78),¹ which was accurately described by Brodsky as a 'монолог всей кошмарной русской истории этого столетия'.² If *Nikolai Nikolaevich* may be viewed as an Erasmian *jeu d'esprit* recast in convict slang, in *Ruka* playfulness and jocosity bear more sinister forms, belonging to the realm of the Satanic Soviet 'System' (*Sistema*), described as 'совершенно организованная преступность' (p.413).³ High moral seriousness is accompanied by a determination to avoid any accommodation with evil and any veiling of the full monstrosity of Soviet (and especially Stalinist) history. Indeed, *Ruka* stands apart from dominant trends in non-conformist intellectual life of 1970s Moscow, when a culture of *anekdoty*, parody and ironic familiarity with Soviet discourse enabled, as Andrei Zorin has written, an 'игра в одомашнивание чудовищной системы'. *Ruka* contains irony and *anekdoty* in abundance, but these express authorial indignation, rather than serving as testimony of the widespread feeling that (in Zorin's words) 'мир советского официоза ощущался нами как "дом родной", как некогда сказал о терновом кусте Братец

¹ References, to be given after quotations in the text, are to *Ruka. Povestvovanie palacha*, in Yuz Aleshkovsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 3 vols (Moscow: Rpol Klassik, 2001), 1, pp.229-538. I am calling *Ruka* a novel following its definition as such in the first published edition (New York: Russica, 1980).

² Brodsky went on to affirm that *Ruka* is 'прежде всего монолог самого языка, того языка, который, как и породившая его карательная система, не знает себе равных'; cited by T.A. Sotnikova in her entry on Aleshkovsky in *Russkie pisateli 20 veka: Biograficheskii slovar'*, ed. by P.A. Nikolaev (Moscow: Bol'shaya Rossiiskaya Entsiklopediya, 2000), p.23.

³ On the (prevalent) identification of Communism with the Devil in *Ruka*, see especially pp.514-19.

Кролик'.⁴ Though grotesque and often deranged, *Ruka* is a book of sober fury, and this sobriety – reflected in the need for a clear-sighted view of the past, and, more literally, in the narrator's highly cautious consumption of vodka – itself strikes a new note both in Aleshkovsky's corpus and in late-Soviet non-conformist prose generally, which was marked by its highly alcoholic tendencies (as typified, among the authors studied here, by the fiction of Venedikt Erofeev and Yury Mamleev).⁵

Generically, also, *Ruka* is a work with few, if any, precedents outside the corpus of Aleshkovsky's own fiction. The epigraph, according to Edward J. Brown, reports a comment by Conrad on *Heart of Darkness*,⁶ but Marlow's monologue is far shorter and more controlled than that of KGB colonel Vasily Shibanov. A 300-page outburst of bile, confession, traumatic recollection and historical speculation, *Ruka* has succeeded in deterring extensive critical engagement, while Aleshkovsky's achievement in sustaining a compelling and intricate narrative over such a stretch has gone largely unacknowledged.⁷

With its sporadic lapses into madness, *Ruka* echoes the tragicomic insanity of *Maskirovka*. In its interweaving of fantasy, anecdote and history, it recalls *Kenguru*. But where, in *Kenguru*, Aleshkovsky took as his comic narrator the international thief Fan Fanych, who never saw any more of the Leader than his foot, *Ruka* is narrated by a KGB

⁴ A.L. Zorin, 'Ot Galicha k Prigovu', *Rossiia/Russia* 1 (1998), 153-66 (p.162).

⁵ The scourge of alcoholism in the Soviet Union is discussed in *Ruka* on pp.239-40, while the notebooks of Venedikt Erofeev contain the following intriguing entry: 'Юз Алешковский: Нельзя облегчать отчаяние алкоголем. Страдания должны быть чисты'; Venedikt Erofeev, *Sobranie sochinenii*, ed. by V. Murav'ev, 2 vols (Moscow: Vagrius, 2001), II, p.351. Indeed, *Maskirovka* and *Ruka* appear to be informed (unlike *Nikolai Nikolaevich*) by a critical view of Russian drinking habits as an instrument of state oppression.

⁶ See Edward J. Brown. 'Zinoviev, Aleshkovsky, Rabelais, Sorrentino, Possibly Pynchon, Maybe James Joyce, and Certainly Tristram Shandy: a Comparative Study of a Satirical Mode', *Stanford Slavic Studies*, 1 (1987), 307-25 (p.320).

⁷ A partial exception is Brown, who praises Shibanov's 'remarkable' performance and 'heteroglossia'; Brown, pp.319-20. Robert Porter omits the work in a chapter on Aleshkovsky and Vladimir Sorokin in Porter, *Russia's Alternative Prose* (Oxford: Berg, 1994), pp.31-42. *Ruka* is also effectively ignored in the survey of Aleshkovsky in Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos*, ed. by Eliot Borenstein (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), pp.117-22. For a discussion of the novel in a Bakhtinian key, based on a reading of the abbreviated English translation by Susan Brownsberger (1989), see M. Keith Booker and Dubravka Juraga, *Bakhtin, Stalin, and Modern Russian Fiction: Carnival, Dialogism and History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1995), pp.103-22. See also K. Sapgir's perceptive review, 'Volk i zvezdy', *Kontinent*, 28 (1981), 422-26.

colonel who, as Stalin's henchman, is able to explore his employer's psychology in depth. Stalinism – arguably Aleshkovsky's key thematic concern throughout his career – finally takes centre stage. Brutal and historically credible descriptions of Collectivization, the Purges, and the Gulag overshadow the work's purely fictional elements, rendering *Ruka* a powerfully realistic indictment of Soviet rule.⁸

The gravity of the book's topic is offset by its highly unpredictable plot and its humour. The latter serves the purposes both of satirical irony and of the novel's paradoxical exploration of intelligence and folly. Whilst reason, often personified as *Razum*, is held responsible in *Ruka* for the dulling of the mind (*tupost'*) and even derangement displayed by Stalin and others, various manifestations of innocuous folly (often represented by Soul or *Dusha*) are proposed as the means of psychological and spiritual regeneration. This dichotomy of Reason and Soul runs through the entire novel, and represents one conflict in the split psychology of the narrator, who reports towards the end: 'Каша у меня какая-то в голове. Я в душе чище гораздо и проще...' (p.510). *Ruka* thus presents itself as a psychomachia, fought in the narrator's mind and projected by him onto Stalin and humanity at large, with the battle between Reason and Soul proving inseparable from the struggles of vice and virtue, God and the Devil, madness and sanity. The 'praise of folly' that emerges is fundamental, I will argue, to the novel's philosophical, religious and historical concerns, and to its attempts to wrest hope from despair. It is also fundamental to the novel's complexities and ambivalences, setting, for example, 'bad' stupidity (*tupost'*) against types of folly (among them ignorance, foolishness, childishness) that, in certain contexts, are deemed positive.

The following, detailed analysis is aimed at rendering these complexities clearer, and at providing the necessary framework to do so. Thus, I first summarize Shibakov's

⁸ The most gruesome episode is the cannibalization by fellow convicts of the father of Shibakov's interlocutor (pp.498-506). On historical precedents for this, see Zhak Rossi, *Spravochnik po GULagu* (London: Overseas Publications Interchange, 1987).

elaborate, non-linear narrative (Part One, below) and demonstrate its significant debt to illustrious predecessors, including Dumas and, above all, Dostoevsky, with whose final novel, *Brat'ya Karamazovy*, *Ruka* is in constant sub-textual dialogue (Part Two). Part Three is devoted to the narrator Shibarov, to his complex credentials as a 'fool narrator' and to the relevance both to him and to his monologue of the paradigm of *yurodstvo Khrista radi*. After discussing the critique of Reason in *Ruka*, and its relevance to the portrait of Stalin (Part 4), I then turn to the novel's celebration of folly (Part Five), illustrating the influence of Dostoevsky but also extending the comparison with the Erasmian and Chestertonian traditions of folly made on the basis of *Nikolai Nikolaevich* in Chapter Two. The values and philosophical ideas that are at stake in these processes are addressed in Part Six.

In conclusion, I argue that *Ruka* is caught between a 'praise of folly' whose values and levity are held as desirable, even ideal; and the reality of a cultural and historical context in which, without freedom, the only escape into folly available is supplied by the tragic masks of *yurodstvo*.

1. A 'Hangman's Narrative'

The determining event in Shibarov's life was his orphanhood at the age of twelve during the campaigns of forced Collectivization. In the winter of 1929 his native village of Odinka was stormed by children of his own age. Behind these 'sons of the Revolution' came the Chekists, led by Ponyat'ev, the father of the man to whom Shibarov is now addressing his monologue almost fifty years later. Opposed to Collectivization, Shibarov's father asserted the villagers' constitutional right to remain independent in a letter to Stalin. The upshot of his efforts was a reply claiming to come from Stalin but faked by Ponyat'ev,

and the Chekists' disarming, deception and execution of every adult in the village. As the massacre took place Shibarov was sat on an iced-over log by Ponyat'ev's son, tied to it and made to sing the Internationale. For Shibarov the consequences of this sadism were impotence and a life-long hatred of the socialist anthem, and in particular of its hero, Indignant Reason (*Razum vozmushchennyi*).⁹

The course of Shibarov's biography since then has been rather improbable. After spending his adolescence in the 'Anti-Fascist Children's Home', where he was put in a position of authority over his fellow orphans, he escaped with two friends, Sashka and Pashka, thanks to the efforts of Pashka's highly-placed uncle and the direct intervention of Stalin (pp.352-57). At his new school for the privileged, Shibarov developed his ambitions to rise through the System in order to take his vengeance upon it, and specifically on those who killed his parents and their fellow-villagers.¹⁰ This self-appointed destiny became plausible when, one fine day, he came across Stalin picking mushrooms in the woods and saved him from a rabid dog, felling it with a single blow of his fist (pp.361-63). He was rewarded with a career as one of Stalin's top henchmen, a nickname (*Ruka*) to describe his favoured weapon,¹¹ and a licence to weed out and execute whomsoever he wished, provided he could, through the total fabrication of evidence, convince his paranoid boss of the suspect's potential threat. Sharing a rapport founded on mutual cynicism, Stalin and Shibarov are, we will see, portrayed as virulent antagonists of an ideology whose survival they ensured.

At the time of speaking, almost a half-century after the events at Odinka, Shibarov is close to fulfilling his programme of revenge. The year is 1977, as may be inferred by

⁹ For the raid on Odinka, see pp.242-51. Shibarov says he was in his thirteenth year ('на тринадцатом году'); p.255.

¹⁰ Shibarov told Pashka's uncle: 'Чекистом хочу быть [...] врагов народа давить хочу! Пока не подохну, давить буду!' (p.357).

¹¹ As one of his many physiological quirks, Shibarov has a gigantic hand, whose palm is thirty centimetres long (p.256).

Shibanov's 'celebration' in the course of his week-long monologue of the sixtieth anniversary of the October Revolution, which is also his sixtieth birthday (pp.496, 517). The addressee is the final villain of Odinka to be brought before Shibanov's private court. After denouncing his father (Ponyat'ev) in order to advance his career, he took the name Vasily Gurov. Now a corrupt and successful player in the sausage industry, Gurov has been ambushed by security men in his dacha and is the audience for Shibanov's crowning performance, the 'hangman's narrative' that we are reading. At its end, Shibanov promises, Gurov will face certain death. As with his previous victims, Shibanov draws out the pleasure of retribution by demonstrating to Gurov the absolute fallaciousness of the System, and of his own allegiance to it: hence, in part, the monologue's length, and the artistic justification of its extended socio-political polemic. He also brings before Gurov his ancient father, who was cannibalized by fellow convicts following an escape from Kolyma (p.501). Ponyat'ev is still alive but has neither arms nor legs, and has lost the ability to speak.

Shibanov's monologue does not conclude, however, as he initially intended, and he ends by requesting and receiving his own death at Gurov's hand. While Shibanov's effective suicide reflects his gathering mental confusion and distress, his sparing of Gurov's life suggests the influence upon him of a string of religiously-inclined, mainly Christian individuals whom he has interrogated in the course of his career and who are grouped together in the narrative as the *Brat'ya* (Brothers) or *edinomyshlenniki*. At certain points Shibanov breaks off to report directly the views of the Brothers, most prominently those of Frol Vlasych Gusev, whose two 'depositions', written in Shibanov's office, are cited by the narrator in their entirety (pp.413-23, 467-83). The first provides a serio-comic history of the separation of the former lovers, Reason and Soul, during the October Revolution, leading to the stubborn and catastrophic isolation of (Indignant) Reason,

which, deprived of Soul and therefore of God, is nothing less than the Devil.¹² In the second deposition, Frol, who clearly identifies himself with Soul, continues his dialogue with Reason, now portrayed as a useless drunkard still reeling from a fifty-year binge which began with the Revolution.¹³

The final thirty pages of *Ruka*, describing Shibarov's metanoia, provide the work's most novelistic section. Flashbacks to different points in the past continue to divide the reader's attention, but there is for the first time an unambiguous and significant development in the present tense and a bringing together of the book's various strands. Having first arranged for Gurov himself to be humiliated and killed, following his own death, Shibarov renounces this plan also. God, he tells his subordinate Ryabov, 'спас меня с помощью Фрола Власыча и памяти об отце от последнего непростительного шага в пропасть' (p.530). The theme of compassion (associated with Soul) finally surfaces, not just in Shibarov's decision to spare Gurov, but also in his recollection of a sharp feeling of selfless love and pity ('страстное сострадание') when observing the sexual encounters which Gulag convicts were forced to negotiate through a fence (p.507); and in the softening of his attitude to one of those convicts, Ponyat'ev, who, Shibarov accepts, has suffered enough and for whom he wishes a 'human death' (p.516).¹⁴

¹² 'Дьявол есть человеческий разум, лишившийся Бога' (p.414); similarly, p.415.

¹³ This portrait of Soul's former partner suggests a mocking view of the elevated tropes of Russophiles such as Berdyaev, who wrote that the *narod* (bearer of the Russian soul) desires and awaits its husband; Nikolai Berdyaev, *Dusha Rossii* (Moscow, 1915), p.10. The opposition of 'Russian Soul' and 'Enlightened Reason' was 'nationalized', as Svetlana Boym has written, in the second half of the 19th century; see Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp.84-85. Aleshkovsky, however, pointedly avoids 'national' mythologization, whether in *Ruka* or elsewhere; see his send-up of Tyutchev: 'Пора, мой друг, едрёна мать,/ Умом Россию понимать./ А предписание "только верить"/ На время следует похерить'; *Sintaksis*, 9 (1981), p.41.

¹⁴ 'Я тебе желаю, Понятев, человеческой кончины...' On compassion, see Part Six, below.

2. Intertextuality in *Ruka*

Dialogue with literary predecessors abounds as a prevalent feature and, at times, theme of *Ruka*, and has significant consequences for my topic. It derives in realistic fashion from Shibarov's self-confessed bookishness, which was nurtured at the orphanage; and from his penchant for complex improvisations, which he was able to indulge in a thoroughly cynical manner as a criminal investigator under Stalin. In the 1930s and 1940s, Shibarov comments, the Lubyanka and every other such establishment on Soviet soil might well have been renamed 'Домами литераторов' (p.259). Concocting far-fetched crimes to pin on Enemies of the People was an ideal employment for a 'неудавшийся беллетрист' (p.434) like Shibarov. Fiction, in this debased sense, forms part of the association throughout *Ruka* of the demonic (Soviet) with the artful, the ludic and the cruel.

The most explicit instance of intertextuality in *Ruka* is of a more noble variety, namely, Shibarov's identification with the self-styled Count of Monte Cristo (Dantes). Shibarov found in Dumas' epic (1844-45), which he read at the orphanage, a model for his own dedication to a life of revenge. It became his favourite book (p.340), and the Count his 'бессмертный приятель' (p.509).¹⁵ The parallels between the fates of the Count and Shibarov are too extensive to describe in detail here, but it is clear that they reflect both a common point of departure (flagrant injustice, the murder of the father, and escape from confinement), and a comparable process of revenge, some episodes of which mirror one

¹⁵ Aleshkovsky himself claims to have found in the works of Dumas (along with those of Pushkin, Jules Verne and Mayne Reid) a moral touchstone that has served him since childhood; see his 'Avtobiograficheskaya spravka', in *Sobranie sochinenii*, III, pp.535-38 (p.536). Stephen Dedalus also shares Shibarov's childhood enthusiasm for *The Count of Monte Cristo*, though Joyce's hero broods more on the romantic heroine Mercedes than on 'the figure of that dark avenger'; see James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916; London: Everyman, 1991), pp.64-67 (p.64).

another closely. Thus, like Shibanov with Gurov, the Count decides, in his duel with Albert, that Albert will live, and he (the count) will die.¹⁶

Here, too, one can note the manner in which, through intertextuality, *Ruka* both invites postmodernist play and actively resists it. For Shibanov frequently rebels against his self-identification with the Count, either because he does not consider himself worthy ('Я – говно, а не граф Монте-Кристо'),¹⁷ or because he blames (or wishes to blame) his 'Monte-Cristo complex' for his mental confusion and excesses of cruelty (pp.293, 509). These latter complaints suggest that truth and morality must be found by each individual in himself; and that they must be sought through life, not literature, whose examples can mislead.

In general, the visible intertextual links in *Ruka* tend to appeal to popular cultural reference points. Few authors were more widely-loved than Dumas in the latter decades of the Soviet Union.¹⁸ Jack London also receives a mention, for his story 'Love of Life', which, as Shibanov mentions, was admired by Lenin (p.502). Among Russian writers, Pushkin features prominently.¹⁹ *Skazki* provide another significant backdrop to events in a country which Shibanov calls the 'kingdom of chance' (*tsarstvo sluchainosti*). His recollection of his descent one night with Stalin into the Lenin mausoleum, for example, is spliced with a fantasy about Ivan-Tsarevich making the same journey in order to provide Lenin with a proper (Orthodox) burial. The fairy-tale context, imbued with Christian significance, is used to re-humanize monumental figures who are otherwise more likely to draw the cold censure of both narrator and reader:

¹⁶ Alexandre Dumas, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, trans. by Robin Buss (London: Penguin, 2003), pp.983-86. I am grateful to Jennifer Baines for indicating the extent of the connection.

¹⁷ *Ruka*, p.286; similarly, p.304.

¹⁸ Klaus Mehnert, *The Russians and Their Favourite Books* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1983), p.96.

¹⁹ In Frol's first deposition, he appears in the flesh, gazing out from the balcony of his St Petersburg house at the October Revolution; p.415.

И возьмет Иван-царевич желтого человечка на руки, как деток берут, заснувших в гостях от сладкого измора, и перенесет его на руках туда, где всем положено покоем от века, и помолится на коленях, чтобы приняла Мать Сыра-Земля хоть что-нибудь, хоть клеточку одну, оставшуюся от человека несчастного, от раба Божьего – Ульянова Владимира. (p.437)

The frequent appeal to *skazki* is part of a general pattern by which the fictional world of *Ruka* appears to organize itself around common denominators, enabling, as I will discuss, the disclosure of universal aspects of humanity even in such men as Stalin or Lenin. This disclosure is central both to the novel's moral enquiry and to its 'praise of folly'.

Beneath these largely popular cultural reference points in *Ruka* lies a sub-textual web too vast to be encompassed in a brief summary.²⁰ Here, I wish to indicate above all the dialogue with Dostoevsky's *Brat'ya Karamazovy*, a hidden influence that pervades the philosophical concerns of *Ruka*.²¹

Both *Ruka* and *Brat'ya Karamazovy* explore, and seek to undermine, a worldview which rejects God and founds itself on self-sufficient human reason. Unsurprisingly, therefore, *Ruka* engages deeply with the anguish of Ivan Karamazov and his famous 'Legend'.

The philosophical dilemmas that torment Ivan Karamazov resonate in the most important dialogues between Shibarov and the Brothers. Thus, Ivan's refusal to accept that there can be any forgiveness or justification for the torture of a single little child, and his subsequent rejection of all Christian theodicy, is echoed in the conversation between Shibarov and a priest. The evil referred to by Ivan has materialized in the events at Odinka, and Shibarov asks the priest how it is possible for him to react to the monstrosity

²⁰ *Hamlet* suggests itself as a particularly fertile source for comparison, whether to explore Shibarov's possible madness; the apparitions of the ghost of his father, imploring him to seek his own salvation rather than revenge (p.357); his staging of plays and films for Stalin; or his eventual 'suicide' at Gurov's hands. Within Russian prose, the influence of Gogol and Bulgakov on Shibarov's perception of the Devil is especially tangible (Gogol's 'Shinel' is in fact cited at several points in the narrative: see, for example, pp.378-79). Other important precursors, from Avvakum to Chekhov, will be discussed in the course of the chapter.

²¹ Booker and Juraga argue by contrast that 'the Dostoevsky work that provides the best illumination of *Ruka* is probably *Notes from Underground*'. However, they also observe that, 'Structurally, the entire novel is highly reminiscent of the "Grand Inquisitor" section of *The Brothers Karamazov*'. See Booker and Juraga, pp.110-11.

of his own childhood suffering and to find sense in a universe that allows it (pp.315-18).²² In Frol's two depositions, the shadow of Ivan's thought again looms large. The unacceptability of random evil and injustice, and of impregnable divine mysteries, has led Reason to declare to Soul: 'Если твой Бог не снимает трагизма существования, то я сам его сниму! Я сам по себе!' (p.419) As he goes about destroying the old world and building the new, Reason warns Soul, 'не мешай нам, не мешай!' (p.196), rather as the Grand Inquisitor reproaches Christ for returning merely to get in the Inquisitor's way.²³

Ivan's legend, though never mentioned, also elicits many correspondences in Shibbanov's interpretation of the October Revolution and its consequences. Ivan's cynical certainty, articulated by the Grand Inquisitor, that the masses would happily sacrifice freedom for material security ('bread') has become historical reality. Satan's first temptation of Christ – to turn stones into bread – is central to both texts. In 1917, according to Shibbanov, the Devil, 'который не смог в свое время искусить Христа хлебом' (p.266), finally succeeded, with the help of the Bolsheviks and the 'insane' intelligentsia, in landing his prize catch – the Russian proletariat. The country turned into a 'labour camp' run by authorities who themselves do not believe in the manifestly unattainable ideals they propagate, such as the world commune, and which continues to function only thanks to the sophisticated punitive mechanisms of the state and the enslavement of the peasantry. The authority of the Soviet leadership is presented as being founded on deliberate deception, like the authority of the Grand Inquisitor, who says he will lie to the masses that he is feeding them in Christ's name.²⁴

But the legend is travestied by Aleshkovsky, as well as imitated. While the Inquisitor's vision of his own authority was predicated on a notion of social justice, which

²² Shibbanov calls the priest by a vast number of different names, from 'Lev Nikolaevich' (Tolstoy) to 'Fedor Mikhailych' (Dostoevsky).

²³ 'Зачем же ты пришел нам мешать?'; F. M. Dostoevsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 30 vols (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972-90), XIV, p.229.

²⁴ Ibid, p.231.

should embrace all humanity and not just 'the chosen few' (*izbrannye*) capable of following Christ's arduous example,²⁵ in the Soviet Union described by Shibarov the Devil has reneged even on his promise of feeding the people. Bread has to be bought abroad, while the workers starve (p.267). In the Inquisitor's utopia, all would be happy bar the authorities, who would take on themselves the sins of the infantilised masses and the sin of their own deception; in *Ruka*, the authorities – executioners like Shibarov and Stalin – are miserable and paranoid, while the masses (and especially the crushed peasantry) are embittered and hungry.

This image of Soviet society is in some respects more like the chaos that the Grand Inquisitor prophesied would reign in a post-Christian atheist society before men such as he took over; it does not borrow from the Inquisitor's fantasy of total control and regimentation in the way that Zamyatin's *My* or Orwell's *1984* might be said to do. On the other hand, Shibarov certainly does emphasize the condition of the people's enslavement which is the premise of the Inquisitor's vision.²⁶ The common man (*muzhik*), Shibarov explains, works for a ruling caste which plunders his salary, siphoning it off to finance its own privileges or the national defence budget. But the *muzhik* can't complain too loudly, or he'll be told: 'раз отдал ты власть в наши руки, то сиди и не пукай. Обратно мы ее тебе, миленький, не отдадим' (p.236). The 'duped crowd' (*okhmurennaya tolpa*) has been punished for its instinctive urge 'to seek someone to bow down before' ('кому бы поклониться', p.391). This very question, 'пред кем предклониться?', had been described by the Inquisitor as humanity's eternal anguish.²⁷

In both novels the new deal between the elite and the masses presupposes a corresponding gulf in intelligence and knowledge. The Grand Inquisitor has joined 'the clever people' (*umnye*), who alone can distinguish good and evil, while the masses are to

²⁵ Ibid, p.234.

²⁶ Ibid, pp.230-31; on the enslavement of the masses in *Ruka*, see pp.266-67.

²⁷ Dostoevsky, XIV, p.231.

be sentenced to ignorance and ‘sweet’ childish happiness – the price for the loss of their freedom, but one which they will readily accept.²⁸ An analogous situation has obtained in Shibanov’s Soviet Union. The *narod* has been ‘criminally stupefied’ (*prestupno oglyuplyaemyi*) over decades, a process made worse by television (p.434). However, in contrast to Ivan’s legend, the asceticism and ‘cleverness’ of the authorities in Shibanov’s Soviet Union are a mere façade, propped up in the latter case by their friends in the ‘Всероссийское общество лжеученых’ (p.275). Habitually, the authorities are described as colourless and obtuse (*tupye*).²⁹ Marx, writing in 1844, saw stupidity and ‘cretinism’ as the product of alienated labour in capitalist societies; in a sharp historical irony, this is the fate in *Ruka* of every level of Soviet society, and one can apply Avital Ronell’s summary of the capitalist Germany of Marx’s time to Shibanov’s Soviet Union: that it ‘resembles a ship of fools [...] offering stupor in lieu of responsiveness’.³⁰

As will be further illustrated in the course of this chapter, Ivan’s Legend is not the only aspect of *Brat’ya Karamazovy* to be echoed in *Ruka*. Just as Dostoevsky perceived his whole novel as a response to the Legend,³¹ so too is *Ruka* plotted as a rebuke to Indignant Reason, with both writers drawing on various manifestations of folly in order to recover an image of humanity, linked to the image of Christ, with which to oppose the dehumanizing hegemony of reason.³²

²⁸ Ibid, pp.236-38.

²⁹ See, for example, p.434; in *Sinen’kii skromnyi platochek* all figures of authority are called by the same name: ‘Втупякин’.

³⁰ See Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002; paperback, 2003), pp.56-59.

³¹ Joseph Frank cites Dostoevsky’s remark that “‘the whole novel is an answer’ to Ivan and his Legend’; Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Mantle of the Prophet, 1871-1881* (London: Robson, 2002), pp.604-18.

³² As one of Shibanov’s religious interlocutors tells him: ‘Я ничего, кстати, нового вам не сказал. Я только обрел личный опыт постижения Образа Жизни. Образ Жизни и есть Христос’; p.318. Restoring Christ’s *obraz* in man was of central importance to the late Dostoevsky. As Harriet Murav has written of Dostoevsky’s *Diary of a Writer*: ‘the author’s project was to *obrazit*’ Russia: to restore its people to the image (*obraz*) of God in which they had been created’; see Harriet Murav, *Holy Foolishness: Dostoevskii’s Novels and the Poetics of Cultural Critique* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p.130. On the verb ‘образить’, learnt by the author in prison, see Dostoevsky, XII, p.26.

3. The Narrator

In a dramatic exaggeration of patterns already described in relation to Aleshkovsky's previous works, the narrator of *Ruka* presents himself as both a split personality and a cracked mirror of Soviet history, ideology and power. Not only does Shibarov share his birthday with the Revolution (7 November 1917), but his entire life has proved an ironic echo of its promises and ideals as expressed by the most famous lines of the Internationale (cited by Shibarov without line breaks): 'Весь мир насилья мы разрушим до основанья, а затем мы наш, мы новый мир построим, кто был никем, тот станет всем' (p.255). The anthem's echoing of the New Testament is surely one reason why Shibarov perceives it as 'diabolic' (p.276). But it is precisely Shibarov who – through his orphanhood, his absolute dependence on Soviet welfare, and his rise through the System – was a nobody who became all-powerful, was destroyed and then rebuilt. And it is arguably Shibarov who, in the calculated enactment of his revenge, has assumed the role of 'пазым возмущенный', even as he execrates reason throughout his monologue.³³

Such a fate may be viewed as a parody of the aspirations of Bolshevik ideology. But Shibarov also represents this ideology's livid scar, marking its profound perversity, whether in its devastation of family ties, sanity of mind, or healthy sexuality. In this latter respect, as in his intellectual abilities (to which I will shortly turn), Shibarov represents the mirror image of Nikolai Nikolaevich, recalling in his impotence NN's 'alter ego', Kimza.³⁴

³³ See, for example, p.290, where Shibarov curses 'самовлюбленный, хамоватый человеческий разум'.

³⁴ Shibarov's distress at being unable to have sexual relations with women is described on pp.256-57. His sublimated sexual urges are occasionally gestured at in bursts of cod psychoanalysis which further serve to underline his internal divisions and ambiguities. Following a delirious digression about sausages, Shibarov admits that these may be the 'фаллические образы моего ущербного подсознания' (p.282) – and also, perhaps, signs of an ambivalent attraction to sausage-entrepreneur Gurov, whom he calls at one point his 'sleeping monster' ('спящая вы моя уродина') (p.396). The criticism of Aleshkovsky's fiction that, 'always and invariably, it is flesh that wins the argument' (Lipovetsky, p.120), is of only limited relevance to *Ruka*; but it is the case that Shibarov's absence of a sexual life is offered as an important reason for his tormented adulthood and as a comment on the corruption of human appetites under Soviet rule.

Shibanov's freakishness is expressed garishly enough in his self-portrait as a hermaphroditic grotesque (pp.255-56).³⁵ Of still greater significance to his narrative than his physical appearance are the monstrous conflicts which he sustains in his mind, consciously or otherwise. The abrupt scission in his biography marked by the events of 1929 has, the reader comes to understand, generated internal fissures beyond Shibanov's comprehension that occasionally plunge him into delirium and virtual insanity.³⁶ Just as his acts of retribution demonstrate both calculation and incontinent rage, so his monologue treads a fine balance between clarity of mind and madness. Memory, he suggests, is his only insurance against insanity ('Вот сумасшествие – от невозможности вспомнить'). Indeed, his entire life has been an act of remembrance for the dead (his family) as against the Soviet ethos, typified by the father-denouncing Gurov, of amnesia (*vsezabvenie*) masquerading as a 'безумная жажда жизни' (p.290).³⁷ Yet the amnesia with which Shibanov reproaches Gurov and the Communists generally is also a feature of his own monologue, which is constantly arrested by failures or confusions of memory. Moreover he appears to forget how much he does remember, as a consequence of which his narrative constantly escapes his control. He describes, for example, how the thoughts of his former suspects (*podsledstvennye*) 'всплывают вдруг, оживают, раскрываются, как водяные лилии, помимо моей воли и шевелят мой язык, и снова тонут в гадостном омуте моего существования' (p.291). Frequently, we are not told until afterwards that the narrator, making a particular argument, has been speaking in the 'voice' of another.³⁸

If Shibanov's narrative seems to belong at times to other people, it is equally the case that the thoughts of others, whom we can mostly assume to have been executed, have

³⁵ 'Талии вообще у меня нету. Перехожу из спины прямо в жопу и через подпухлые, тоже, конечно же, бабы ляжки в ножищи сорок шестого размера' (p.256).

³⁶ See, for example, pp.278-78, 528-29.

³⁷ See also p.518: 'вы, коммунисты, умеете забывать все, мешающее продвигаться вперед сквозь бурелом времени'.

³⁸ See, for example, the end of Ch 29, p.342.

been preserved thanks only to his own capacious (if faulty) memory, and are further developed by him. This process has the ghoulish effect of creating an endless gallery of (dead) doubles for the narrator, an effect reinforced by the obvious doubling between Shibarov and the apparently soon-to-be-dead Gurov, who shares the speaker's age, first name and patronymic (Vasily Vasil'evich), and who, like Shibarov, is described as a monster.³⁹ The reality depicted by the monologue comes to seem at times like the projection of a disordered and distorted interior universe; and in this respect, comparison with Dostoevsky's *Dvoynik* is apt.⁴⁰ Shibarov is himself prone to questioning the reality of the world outside his mind, most strikingly when, describing his collaboration with Stalin, he remembers wondering whether the terrible things that he witnessed were not his own 'personal madness' ('моим собственным сумасшествием', p.380). *Ruka* is thus one of the most graphic examples of the trend towards isolated, self-enclosed first-person narrative, bordering on madness, that has been so typical of non-conformist late-Soviet prose.⁴¹

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As we have seen, this trend towards psychological isolation has been represented in non-conformist prose not only by the madness of the narrator but also by his identification with other forms of folly – literary, religious and otherwise. Shibarov, too, may be described as a 'fool narrator', although, as such, he presents a singular and complex type.

Clearly, Shibarov is not a fool through any lack of intelligence or worldliness, a feature which immediately distinguishes him from most of the protagonists and narrators discussed in this thesis so far. The contrast with the ignoramus Nikolai Nikolaevich is

³⁹ Shibarov calls Gurov an 'уродина' (p.396), and himself an 'урод' (p.286).

⁴⁰ See Booker and Juraga, p.113.

⁴¹ On this trend, see Oleg Dark, 'Novaya russkaya proza i zapadnoe srednevekov'e' in *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie*, 8 (1994), 287-301. Within Aleshkovsky's opus, *Maskirovka* and *Sinen'kii skromnyi platochek* provide further illustrations of this pattern.

particularly striking.⁴² Shibarov's education has been systematic; NN's came as an accidental result of his employment. And where NN was made to read through Western literature to measure its efficacy as a sexual stimulant, Shibarov read heavily in his adolescence – to compensate, he implies, for his sexual impotence.⁴³ The experience of devouring utopian and revolutionary literature at the orphanage proved formative: 'Все варилось и запекалось в сердце, но и мой слабый умишко не мог уж тогда не соотнести наличной очевидности советского ада или ада французской революции с его идейными и нравственными истоками' (p.350). Yet the erudition of Shibarov simultaneously suggests an aspect of his folly. These 'sources' are barely ever referred to again, and the sentence quoted is more revealing for the phrase 'мой слабый умишко', with its suggestion of the term *slaboumie*. The counterpoint to Shibarov's cunning, insight and education is indeed a psychic hinterland of fragility and imbalance – a Dostoevskian combination of extremes which is reminiscent of, among others, the 'слабоумный идиот' (and cynical murderer) of *Brat'ya Karamazovy*, Smerdyakov.⁴⁴

Another feature that sets Shibarov apart from the tradition studied hitherto is his political centrality. From Platonov and Zoshchenko to Venedikt Erofeev and Aleshkovsky himself in his earlier works, the fool has typically been a social and political outsider (even though he may wish, as in the case of Platonov's 'Doubting Makar', to identify with the centre).⁴⁵ Estranged from power, the fool in this tradition is also deprived of the knowledge that power brings. Shibarov, on the other hand, describes the days he spent gazing through the peep-hole into Stalin's study, learning, through an agreed code, which

⁴² It is also, of course, a function of the novel's ambition: a similar chronicle and critique of Stalinism could not have been delivered by a narrator as ignorant as Nikolai Nikolaevich.

⁴³ 'Мне хотелось читать страстно и непрерывно, как Сашке и другим пацанам онанировать'; p.349.

⁴⁴ Smerdyakov is described as such by the Prosecutor at Dmitry's trial; see Dostoevsky, XV, p.174. Further resemblances between Shibarov and Smerdyakov – notably, their shared resentment, physical repulsiveness, and inert sexuality – suggest that this is a comparison which could be pursued further.

⁴⁵ See above, pp.109-10. The famous opening of *Moskva-Petushki* affirms, by contrast, Venichka's political acentrality: 'Все говорят: Кремль, Кремль. Ото всех я слышал про него, а сам ни разу не видел'. Venedikt Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2004), p.7.

of the colleagues who passed through he should execute. This privileged and intimate vantage-point may be compared more to that of the Shakespearean fool, or even a tsar's *yurodivyi*, though Shibarov commands no obviously spiritual authority in his relationship with Stalin, and is content, it seems, to be seen by him as his 'silly fool' ('дурак я глупый', p.437).

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Shibarov's professional omniscience does not, however, guarantee his wisdom, as the trajectory of his monologue will show. His hubristic declarations in the opening paragraphs, in which he tells Gurov that he knows everything about him, even how he will react to interrogation, prove mistaken. It is not Gurov who will 'crack', as Shibarov prophesies in his second sentence (p.251), but Shibarov himself. This is, in part, the folly of pride and self-reliance, castigated in both Testaments, for which Shibarov will pay the full price. In a dream reported towards the end of the monologue, his father (bearer of the biblical name, Ivan Abramych) will call him a fool (*durak*) for the failure of his life to bear any sort of fruit, and he is berated (possibly by his father) for his pride (*gordynya*).⁴⁶

Indeed, it is the prism of Christian values which proves most significant in illuminating Shibarov's failings and folly. Shibarov is obsessed by the language of salvation and damnation, appealing, like Nikolai Nikolaevich, to the Last Judgement as the final court of truth (p.285), while seeing himself as a figure so inhuman as to be beyond redemption, telling Gurov: 'Перестали... перестали быть людьми... нет у нас христианской жизни, не будет у нас ни христианской кончины' (p.462). He communicates his sense of perdition through tirades of self-loathing: 'Я – палач. Я – урод. Я – шестерка проклятой мной власти. Я – говно... Прости меня, отец, Иван Абрамыч!' (p.286); 'Но я грязен, бесконечно грязен, я сознаю напрасность

⁴⁶ '[С]лышал голос то ли отца, то ли одного из подследственных: "Ты возомнил в своей гордыне, что есть на свете мертвые души. Нет мертвых душ!"' (p.495).

греховных мстительных усилий' (p.509). He is revolted by the hypocrisy of the professional role he has forced himself to play: 'Я помогаю органам делать всю жизнь как раз то, с чем мне надобно было бы активно бороться, и поэтому я дохлое говно, которому нет теперь ни спасенья, ни прощенья' (p.304). He isn't fighting the devil, he acknowledges: he's serving him (p.462).

These frequent masochistic outbursts, expressing both a secret desire for salvation and the certainty of its impossibility, echo the scatological language of more saintly Russian 'sinners' than Shibarov, especially the Archpriest Avvakum, who describes himself in his *Zhitie* as the 'scum of the earth', and exclaims: 'Seeming to be something, I am excrement and pus, an accursed man – just plain shit! I stink all over, in body and soul!... Though I stink here for myself, working my evil deeds, at least I won't seduce others! So help me, it's good this way!'⁴⁷

Avvakum's self-execration suggests the hope of eventual self-improvement along the Christian path of growth through repeated failure. Shibarov, by contrast, considers himself unfit to take even the first step on this path. His sadomasochistic complex appears to hold him in a vice, and he is only too aware that his desire for purification is compromised not only by the sheer burden of his past sins, but also by his ongoing desire for revenge. As he acknowledges in an early passage, he considers himself a 'complete shit' (*polnoe govno*) precisely because this desire can never fully be quenched (p.252). Yet, despite this realistic self-appraisal, Shibarov returns compulsively to Christian ideals. Self-abnegation, martyrdom, and, above all, asceticism are key motifs, illuminating biographical, polemical and religious themes.

⁴⁷ See *Archpriest Avvakum: The Life Written by Himself*, ed. and trans. by Kenneth N. Brostrom (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1979), p.104. Avvakum describes himself as the 'scum of the earth' (p.111). On Russian religious masochism see also Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, *The Slave Soul of Russia: Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp.18-27.

Asceticism of the flesh was a part of Shibarov's self-invention in his adolescence, when, making a virtue out of necessity, he convinced himself that sexual abstinence was incumbent on Monte-Cristo types like himself (p.351). But Shibarov came to reject his identification with Monte Cristo; and so too, implicitly, with its exalted ideals.

This false claim to asceticism is magnified hundredfold in the distorting mirror of Soviet power. The target of some of Shibarov's greatest indignation is the show of 'romantic' self-denial put on by the Bolshevik ruling class, which served to lull the masses into a belief in genuine equality and to conceal the rapid formation of a corrupt caste (p.352). This particular façade of Revolutionary virtue represents a critical instance in Shibarov's broader argument that the advent of Soviet rule should be explained as the victory of the Antichrist: the camouflaging of evil as good, so as to deceive society.⁴⁸

There is, however, a genuine type of askesis that is described in *Ruka* and that is linked to holy foolery. It is mooted in the monologue's dramatic denouement, when Shibarov considers how he would live his life, were it to be given to him again, not from birth, but from his time at the orphanage:

Я связал бы дежурного, оглушив его кулачиной, и это было бы мое последнее касательство до плоти человека. Я пробрался бы, закосив юродство, в уцелевший монастырь и молился бы ежедневно и еженощно за мой взбесившийся, изнасилованный, замордованный, страдающий, ослепленный и любимый народ. Я молился бы страстно за его исцеление и вознесение над обидой за насилие, сохранение достоинства и понимание смысла страдания, я молился бы, постясь, чтобы чище была моя молитва, за его душевные прозрения и сопротивление ожесточению... Я и теперь молюсь за все это. (p.509)

The mention of *yurodstvo* is somewhat smudged by Shibarov's use of *fenya*: he appears to be suggesting that he would fake *yurodstvo* as one would fake madness or illness

⁴⁸ 'Зло непременно должно выдавать себя за Добро, иначе существование Зла, противное основанию человеческой природы, возмущает Дух общества, и оно травит силы зла, как бешеных собак...' (p.251). Comparable notions of the Antichrist were, of course, developed by Dostoevsky, Solov'ev and other pre-Revolutionary thinkers.

(‘закосить под сумасшедшего/инвалида’).⁴⁹ Nevertheless, an authentic notion of *yurodstvo* appears to underlie the fantasy of the holy life which is proposed here as a meritorious response to suffering and evil. In his intimate connection to the *narod*, and his role as its living conscience and supporter (through prayer) against injustice, this image of Shibarov-*yurodivyi* recalls the socially-minded holy fools both of Russian hagiography and canonical literary representation. His masochism finds religious expression in his desire to take the suffering of the world on himself.

However, he considers himself too sinful to assume such a role, being a figure of death more than life (pp.509-10). He compares himself unfavourably to a *zek* at Kolyma, who had prayed in the presence of Shibarov, promising to take upon himself all the wounds of his fellow men.⁵⁰ Perhaps, then, it is this *zek* who should be viewed as the true *yurodivyi*.

However we interpret this specific passage, it serves as a further hint to suggest the potential relevance of the paradigm of *yurodstvo* to Shibarov’s narrative. This possibility is reinforced by much broader structural and thematic features of the novel, as I will now indicate.

In Chapter Two it was argued that the thematics of *yurodstvo* are only partially developed in *Nikolai Nikolaevich*, a work whose dominant tone is light-hearted. The concerns and tone of *Ruka*, by contrast, are serious and eschatological, being founded on a binary schema of good and evil, God and the Devil, which strongly recalls the context that facilitated the flourishing of *yurodstvo* as a form of sanctity and protest in medieval Russia.⁵¹ In striking contrast to *Nikolai Nikolaevich* and *Kenguru*, and also to the Western, Erasmian tradition of folly, the concepts of play (*igra*) and even art have become the

⁴⁹ See *Dictionary of Russian Slang*, ed. by Vladimir Shlyakhov and Eve Adler, 2nd edn (New York: Barron’s, 1999), p.115.

⁵⁰ The prayer has been cited just a few pages earlier, and is referred to through the motif of a piece of coal which the *zek* promised to take with him out of the zone so as to warm his fellow men; see pp.504, 510.

⁵¹ See my Introduction, p.17.

province of the devil. In the symbolic schema of the novel, *igra* is strongly identified with *Razum* and *Ideya* (pp.480, 380), and Frol mocks Reason for its participation ‘в игре “коммунизм – светлое будущее всего человечества”’ (p.480), while Shibarov moralistically contrasts *igra* with the values of life and work (pp.496, 236). And where the pickpocket Nikolai Nikolaevich could boast that he was an ‘артист своего дела’,⁵² in *Ruka* art, as represented by the elaborate literary inventions and theatre required by Stalinist repression, has been annexed by politics.

In medieval Russia, the licence of the *yurodivyi* in this context was to exploit the spheres of play and theatre usually deemed Satanic for his paradoxical purposes. Shibarov, having established a similar context through the binary moral and religious framework described above, acts within it in a manner that, in numerous respects, brooks comparison with the behaviour of the medieval *yurodivye*.

Like the *yurodivye*, or prominent religious figures close to *yurodstvo* (most influentially, Avvakum), Shibarov perceives himself to be living in the midst of evil, where evil is dissembled as good. His monologue constantly seeks out the under-side (*iznanka*) of false appearances. As Basil the Blessed revealed the Devil hiding on the other side of an icon of the Virgin Mary, Shibarov reveals to Gurov the Satanic truth of Communism’s seeming virtue, professed on its own iconic banners:

Ваше дело – тупо нести над собой самый лукавый в истории человечества лозунг “Да здравствует коммунизм – светлое будущее всего человечества!” и не видеть его изнаночного содержания, сформулированного для самого себя отцом советской партийной фразеологии – Дьяволом: “Коммунизм – это каннибализм сегодня! Каннибализм – это коммунизм завтра!” (p.518)

In such passages, Shibarov’s narrative provides a lucid example of the transfer of the medieval code of *yurodstvo*, based on gesture and theatre (and inarticulate speech), to the necessarily logocentric code of literary *yurodstvo*. Words for Shibarov, at such moments,

⁵² Nikolai Nikolaevich, in Aleshkovsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1, pp.3-48 (p.7).

assume the role of images and gestures for the *yurodivyi*, and possess the same ambivalence out of which the paradoxes of *yurodstvo* are shaped. It is not the apparent (external) meaning of words that defines their quality – good or evil – but their hidden intention, just as the *yurodivyi* exposes the hidden intentions of apparently virtuous sinners, and masks his own (holy) intentions in displays of apparent sinfulness. The paradoxes and inversions inherent in this mode of evaluating religious truth and goodness are further aggravated in *Ruka* by the manner in which the Soviet ethos is shown to have inherited, and corrupted, culturally prominent forms of asceticism and Christian virtue. Defending his actions during Collectivization, Ponyat'ev tells Shibarov: 'Тот, кто верит мне, тот, кто хочет верить мне, тот увидит мои действия в правильном свете!' (pp.430-31). As in *yurodstvo*, virtue here is hidden. Only a similarly virtuous person of the Communist faith, Ponyat'ev believes, will perceive the righteousness of the inner content of his actions.

It is quite counter to the code of *yurodstvo*, however, to make such explicit claims for one's hidden righteousness: the *yurodivyi* typically defaces his own good deeds in order to ward off pride and the esteem of others. In these respects Shibarov fits the pattern of *yurodstvo* more closely. While making no claims for his virtue, and every claim for his sins, he allows the reader to see that, at whatever terrible a price, there is arguably some good in his life of revenge. In his profession he has sought (albeit for his own vindictive purposes) to awaken the conscience of those he interrogates, disclosing their sins and falsity through his unpredictable and highly theatrical acts of provocation and aggression – calculated performances that might well be compared to the ambivalent, spectacular and scandalizing performances of the *yurodivye*, who took on the appearance of sin to shame indifferent sinners.⁵³ More specifically, Shibarov's performances mimic the intricate

⁵³ See his treatment of Vlachkov, described below, p.145.

complexity of the Show Trials, placing the burden of interpretation on us as readers, while reintroducing moral and religious values into the absolutely amoral worlds of many of his *podsledstvennye*.

The symbolism of Shibarov's appearance and self-presentation also recalls that of the *yurodivye*. Like them, he manifests the inner deformations of his people and time through his own external monstrosity (*urodstvo*).⁵⁴ 'Любуйтесь, любуйтесь! Ваших же рук дело!' he tells Gurov as he shows him his physical deformity (p.256). Shibarov's self-identification with filth and death is also in line with the symbolism of holy folly since St Paul.⁵⁵

It would be absurd to suggest that Shibarov is a worthy descendant of St Paul or the *yurodivye* of hagiography; and a *yurodivyi* could hardly be a vindictive hangman, as Shibarov is well aware.⁵⁶ But through his narrator, Aleshkovsky is able to revisit the paradoxes of their extraordinary behaviour. Moreover, like Avvakum, Shibarov draws companionship from various holy-foolish characters, whether the *zek* described above, or the Brothers, described as 'разные юродивые' (p.465).⁵⁷

In the conclusion to this chapter, I will seek to summarize the fraught role of *yurodstvo Khrista radi* in Aleshkovsky's fiction in general. It is, however, only one aspect of folly explored in *Ruka*.

⁵⁴ 'Я – урод' (p.286); see also p.255, where he compares himself to a 'монстр'; and p.352, where he counts himself among the 'лишенцы, уроды и голубая кровь' who opposed the Revolution.

⁵⁵ Shibarov describes his sense of filth on p.509; and his self-perception as a living corpse ('трупешник, Господин Крематорий, Товарищ Полковник Морг') on p.244.

⁵⁶ Indeed, the cruelty, mockery and unpredictability of his monologues has something in common with that of the *yurodstvovanie* (or 'playing at holy foolery') found by Likhachev in the letters of Ivan the Terrible; see 'Litsedeistvo Groznogo: K voprosu o smekhovom stile ego proizvedenii', in D.S. Likhachev, A.M. Panchenko and N.V. Ponyrko, *Smekh v Drevnei Rusi* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1984), pp.25-35. For a still closer resemblance to Ivan's epistolary manner, see Viktor Erofeev's story-monologue, 'Popugaichik' (1981).

⁵⁷ In Part Five, however, I will argue that the holy foolery of the most prominent of these, Frol, is of a Franciscan rather than Orthodox nature.

Part Four: The Narrow Circle of Reason

The thorough dividedness and ambivalence of Shibanov enable Aleshkovsky to make of him not only a figure of spiritual torment, but also a villain who, in his futile pursuit of revenge, acts almost mechanically, as though he were beyond religious and moral constraints. In this guise, Shibanov offers a psychological model that is replayed in the analysis of Stalin placed at the very centre of the monologue. Above all, the ‘doubled’ characters of Shibanov and Stalin illustrate the consequences of their imprisonment in what one of Shibanov’s religious interlocutors calls the ‘проклятый заколдованный круг, возведенный Разумом’ (p.317). Reason (*razum*), having sacrificed its harmonious relationship with Soul to serve the ‘devilish idea’ of Communism (p.515), bears an extraordinarily pejorative burden of meaning in *Ruka*, swallowing up any finer distinctions (such as that, drawn by Dostoevsky and others, between *rassudok* and *razum*).⁵⁸ It is associated primarily with the destructive mechanisms of revenge and, more broadly, with Soviet ideology, which is depicted as a hardened, isolated and dead realm which stupefies, deranges and dehumanizes all who work within its parameters, even its internal antagonists such as Shibanov.

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It is in Shibanov that the consequences of an excessive dependence on reason, and its connections to cruelty, insanity and masochistic stupidity, are studied at greatest length and played out in the treatment of his suspects. His interminable mock-interrogations assume prominent elements of theatre, in which, as in the ‘грандиозные спектакли’ of the Show Trials (p.259), fabrication is heaped upon fabrication.

⁵⁸ See my Introduction, p.23.

Shibanov's lengthy account of his interrogation and execution of Vlachkov, one of the main villains at Odinka, provides the best example of his method. After bringing Vlachkov a fabricated denunciation claiming that he had emptied his Mauser on Stalin's portrait, Shibanov then pretended to take Vlachkov's side, while mercilessly probing his conscience. After two weeks of terror, Vlachkov 'cracked', confessing that once on a picnic he had compared his pipe to Felix Dzerzhinsky's face. Shibanov responded by shifting from approval to vicious condemnation of Vlachkov for making the comparison, confusing Vlachkov and breaking his will to such an extent that Vlachkov was prepared to follow his every order, even to shoot at portraits of the Party leaders, thereby committing the crime for which he had been prophetically charged in the denunciation. Still Shibanov had not finished with him, launching into an invention, passed off as fact, about the restoration of democracy currently underway in Russia, and the dismantling of the Communist Party. Vlachkov believed the fable, swearing that he had long sensed 'the depraved nature of Bolshevism' (p.272), and begging Shibanov to spare his life for service in the new Utopia. Having proven once more the falseness of the System and the wretched pusillanimity of one of its servants, Shibanov finally carries out the execution (pp.262-77).

As this episode shows, Shibanov's treatment of his suspects is sadistic, but, in its way, methodical, even 'rational'. As Shibanov likes to repeat, 'Месть всегда разумна...' (p.466). Moreover, it is not just revenge which is 'always rational' in *Ruka*, but also cruelty. As Shibanov observes, considering the cannibalization of Ponyat'ev, such 'нечеловеческие муки' are not to be blamed on God: 'Они дело рук и разума самих людей' (p.501). The comment echoes the Dostoevskian insight, articulated by Ivan Karamazov among others, that it is precisely clever or sophisticated people who stoop to inhuman levels of cruelty.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ See Dostoevsky, XIV, p.219.

However, as Shibarov acknowledges in a heavily ironic passage (pp.465-66), the identification of reason and revenge is deeply paradoxical. Revenge may be the product of reason, but it can never be 'reasonable', as those would wish who call for 'разумное мщение'; it is by its nature immoderate and linked to passion (*strast'*). Thus, Shibarov's carefully staged spectacles merge into anarchic improvisation in which he becomes carried away by his own invention. He remembers, for example, succumbing to his own fantasy about the restoration of democracy in the Soviet Union, and feeling that he was losing his mind as a result (p.273).

In broad terms, this pattern reflects that of the *Zapiski iz podpol'ya*, in which the narrator, desperate to avenge his spite on the world, also enmeshes himself in the interminable fabrications of his intellect at the risk of his sanity; he, too, is unable to break out of his monologue. But Aleshkovsky is considerably more explicit than Dostoevsky in demonstrating the self-defeating mechanisms of this psychological *cul de sac*. In the process of retribution, which Shibarov illustrates through the allegory of the conflict between Reason and Soul, the avenger harms himself:

Не согласившись и презрев веру Души в то, что не избежать виновным в злодействе наказания, если оно тотчас же не постигло их, он [*Razum*] сам бросается творить суд, но не утоляет жажды, прильнув к черной воде мести, которая солена от века, и только распаляет себя, когда не обезумеет от ненависти... (p.466)

The logic of this self-appointed justice is not only self-defeating, but even obtuse. There is a proud and self-reliant way of thinking, Aleshkovsky is suggesting, that seems intelligent but is ultimately stupid and determinist, as can be plainly judged by its consequences: namely, the failure to attain one's aim (which proves illusory), and the complete lack of freedom that ensues. The 'vicious circle of reason' follows laws independent of the self-deluding actors, and Shibarov's narrative is shot through with a tragic awareness of his own mechanistic destiny. He doesn't even exist, he says, but merely 'functions

physiologically' (p.244); he considers himself devoid of independent thought.⁶⁰ At one point, he calls Gurov a 'homunculus' (*gomunkulus*, p.304), but Shibbanov too may be viewed as *homunculus Sovieticus*, cast loose, Golem-like, on the System that created him in its image.

Also implicit here is criticism of the Old Testament precept quoted by Shibbanov: 'око за око и зуб за зуб' (p.466). We will see that this law, revoked in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:38) and mourned by the Grand Inquisitor,⁶¹ is opposed in *Ruka* by the evangelic themes of universal weakness, ignorance and compassion.⁶²

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Shibbanov's unorthodox portrait of Stalin contains many of the narrator's own psychological traits.⁶³ Stalin, Shibbanov asserts, loathed himself and the ideology which he represented. Nevertheless, he served it out of fear (a motivation which may cast a cynical light on Shibbanov's own self-fashioning as an avenging Monte Cristo). As for Stalin's political ambition, the narrator explains: 'попав в заколдованный круг, Сталин злобно и инфантильно решил, что лучше уж он будет олицетворять ненавистную идею, чем кто-нибудь другой. Молотов, например' (p.382).

Shibbanov's deliberately perverse interpretation of Stalin explicitly challenges the assumption that Stalin nurtured his 'cult of personality' out of self-love: 'Из ненависти к себе он его лелеял'. It also serves to recapitulate, at the centre of his narrative,

⁶⁰ 'Да, гражданин Гуров, я снова пользуюсь чужими мыслями. Да! Я ими напачкан! Да! У меня нет самостоятельного мышления!' (p.457)

⁶¹ See Murav, p.148.

⁶² Not all voices in the Old Testament, however, supported the philosophy of 'An eye for an eye'. In his famous essay, 'On Revenge', Francis Bacon quotes both Solomon, who, 'I am sure, saith, "It is the glory of a man to pass by an offence"' (Prov. 19:11) and, with great approval, Job, who asks, 'Shall we take good at God's hands, and not be content to take evil also?' (Job, 2:10); see Bacon, 'On Revenge', in *The Oxford Book of Essays*, ed. by John Gross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp.3-4. Job's rhetorical question is the quintessence of the position taken in *Ruka* by the Brothers: see especially pp.317-18. The influence of the Book of Job on Dostoevsky was profound, and reflected in *Brat'ya Karamazovy* in its over-riding significance for Zosima: see Dostoevsky, XIV, pp.264-65.

⁶³ Shibbanov resists the comparisons between himself and Stalin which Gurov apparently suggests. The narrator argues that: 'Я угрожал десятки лет в отличие от Сталина на личную идею...' (p.382). But, as I will now discuss, Shibbanov's claims to a uniquely 'personal' idea are questionable; his indignant disavowal of the parallel with Stalin serves ultimately to gesture towards it.

Shibanov's fate in the 'vicious circle of reason'. Stalin is said to have fallen into this circle through his own 'thick-headedness' ('по собственной тупости'), rather than by force of necessity or destiny (p.382). But, though his fall was not preordained, once within the circle he could only cling to an illusion of free will, as Shibanov strongly suggests in this account of Stalin's behaviour (observed by him through the key-hole):

Сталин выходил из-за стола, прохаживался по кабинету, передергивая плечами, резко вскидывая подбородок и вертя головой. Он, безусловно, проверял, свободен ли он лично в своих движениях, поступках и в образе мыслей или тоже, как эти трупы,⁶⁴ опутан веревочками и целиком подвластен игровым прихотям ненавистной идеи. (p.380)

Like that of Shibanov, Stalin's whimsical and vain exercise of power resembles, in its malice and capriciousness, the pig-headedness of the *samodur* (though the term is never used), and of such Dostoevskian *shuty* as Fedor Karamazov. Stalin inhabits the realm of folly defined by false freedom, his petty tyranny reflecting the extent to which he is himself tyrannized by fear and the 'ненавистная идея'. His love of the theatrical and the spectacular allows him to conceal these truths from himself.⁶⁵

Above all, the interpretation of Stalin elucidates the role of revenge within the moral and religious agenda of *Ruka*. As often, we have to see beyond Shibanov's opinions to the connections which Aleshkovsky is suggesting through the narrator's words and, at best, partial understanding. For while Shibanov believes (most of the time) that his life has been dedicated to a personal and justified pursuit of vengeance, his narrative suggests that a feeling of resentment is the universal fate of all who are tainted by ideology, whether Stalin, Shibanov or their victims. In perpetrating revenge, he and others are merely paying the System back in its own currency, since the Soviet Union is itself described as an act of revenge: the revenge of Satan (and godless Reason). It is impossible for Shibanov, Stalin and others to gain any satisfaction for their grievances, since their quarry is illusory and

⁶⁴ Namely, the colleagues whom Stalin has called to his study and will shortly have executed.

⁶⁵ As Avital Ronell argues: 'A condition that requires covering up, stupidity calls forth spectacle'; Ronell, p.50.

purely conceptual.⁶⁶ Theirs is a form of malign Quixoticism based on self-hatred, whose source is their separation from God, their isolation and self-imprisonment. Without God, *Ruka* suggests, nothing good is possible; and especially not true freedom and intelligence. Shibanov and Stalin remain within the sphere of the *tupost'*, determinism and isolation which are, implicitly, the salient features of atheist Soviet ideology itself.⁶⁷

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The assault on *razum* in *Ruka*, and its identification with the absence of freedom, clearly owes much, as I have suggested, to Dostoevsky, and also, undoubtedly, to his 20th-century religious interpreters, especially Berdyaev, who continued Dostoevsky's exploration of the nature of freedom.⁶⁸

At the same time, this assault may also be profitably viewed within an international tradition of Christian 'fool literature'. Like Stoicism, Stultitia's main philosophical target in *Praise of Folly*, reason is associated in *Ruka* with wilful self-reliance, calculation, destructive pride and the denial of transcendence. Another example of this tradition, and one much closer in time and theme, is Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* (introduced earlier in relation to *Nikolai Nikolaevich*).⁶⁹ Its identification of reason with madness parallels that of reason with stupidity and insanity in *Ruka*.

In *Orthodoxy*, the Christian writer's knowingly childish and even foolish apprehension of the world is contrasted with the philosophy of modern materialists, whom Chesterton compares to the madmen of the Hanwell asylum in London. Early in his

⁶⁶ As is suggested by its designations: 'Mr Ponyat'ev', for Shibanov; 'Idea', for Stalin.

⁶⁷ The self-isolation of the Soviet leaders and Central Committee as a cause of the Great Terror is a theme that emerges strongly from historical studies, notably J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). Aleshkovsky's critique is of course also a critique of an intellectual movement, Marxist-Leninism, whose combination of close-mindedness ('идейная замкнутость') and arrogant dogmatism was apparent to its critics from as early as 1910; see David Joravsky, *Russian Psychology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p.195.

⁶⁸ See, especially, Nikolai Berdyaev, *Mirosozertsanie Dostoevskago* (Prague: YMCA, 1923). On Dostoevsky, the absence of freedom and Old Testament folly, see Kim Paffenroth, *In Praise of Wisdom: Literary and Theological Reflections on Faith and Reason* (New York: Continuum, 2004), pp.7-26.

⁶⁹ See above, pp.115-16.

discussion Chesterton allies materialism and madness in order to undermine the putatively unquestionable authority of scientific materialism, on the one hand, and conventional notions of madness on the other. The materialist is ‘mad’ because he has a dangerously limited worldview, having stunted his faculties by relying exclusively on that of reason; a sense of the miraculous and of genuine freedom are denied to him. Chesterton may compare this to madness because, contrary to conventional wisdom, ‘The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason’. Such a man is ‘wrong’ to view the world solely through the light of his rational faculties, but there is no point arguing with him, since he can defend his delusions with impregnable logic: ‘his mind moves in a perfect but narrow circle’. This narrowness lends to the philosophy of materialism an ‘insane simplicity’. But the madman’s defence of his simplistic, solipsistic dominion also requires resources of cunning and argument, unless, that is, he is to break out (as Chesterton advises he should) from the ‘tiny and tawdry theatre in which your own little plot is constantly being played’. As in *Ruka*, isolated reason, madness and folly in the negative sense understood by the Old Testament are further allied with an eventual dulling of the mind: ‘Thinking in isolation and with pride ends in being an idiot’.⁷⁰

Chesterton’s materialists may well be compared to the atheist authorities of *Ruka*. But if Chesterton was writing before the astonishing triumphs of the deterministic materialism which he execrates, Aleshkovsky shows the cruelty that results when such ‘madmen’ are afforded the power to have their ‘tawdry theatre’ performed for them. Comparison of the two works may also be made at the level of rhetoric. In both, key terms of intelligence and sanity – above all, ‘reason’ and ‘madness’ – are employed in a manner that is either loose or questionable. The reader of both texts, and especially *Ruka*, is left

⁷⁰ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), pp.13-17, 39. For an example of Chesterton’s awareness of his potential foolishness in the eyes of the reader, see p.62.

with a fairly loose sense of what intellectual processes are covered by 'reason' (often interchangeable in Aleshkovsky's writing with *intellekt*, *mozg* and *um*); while the notion of madness proposed is both vague and limited: not all 'madmen' have minds that move in perfect 'narrow circles'.⁷¹ But if the literal meaning of such language is imprecise, its figurative purpose is clear and powerful, pointing, as Chesterton explains, to unfashionable notions of sin and evil: 'though moderns deny the existence of sin, I do not think that they have yet denied the existence of a lunatic asylum [...] Men deny hell, but not, as yet, Hanwell. For the purpose of our primary argument the one may very well stand where the other stood'.⁷² Chesterton's articulation of this metaphorical basis illuminates also a rhetorical premise of *Ruka*, by which madness and *tupost'* similarly serve as metaphors for the misuse of the divine gift of the mind and, above all, of freedom, a value held sacred by both writers.⁷³

5. The Gifts of Folly

Like Chesterton, Aleshkovsky examines the mind in the light of faith. The approach of both writers is a universalizing one. Just as Chesterton concedes that we all bear the potential to condemn ourselves to the madness of excessive reason that he describes, so Aleshkovsky, through the infinite series of 'doubling' allowed for by his narrator's monologue, seeks to illustrate universal mechanisms of the mind. Thus, the parallel between Shibanov and Stalin helps undermine the notion that the latter possessed a qualitatively unique form of evil.

⁷¹ As Part Six, below, will illustrate, such terms are defined more by what they exclude (for example, compassion).

⁷² Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p.9.

⁷³ On freedom as the greatest divine gift in *Ruka*, see, *inter alia*, pp.413, 510, 526; see also *Sinen'kii skromnyi platochek*, in Aleshkovsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I, pp.539-630 (p.624).

In both *Ruka* and *Orthodoxy*, the purpose of this religiously informed psychology is not only to explore the misuse of the mind, but also to illustrate the gifts of life available to those who do not confine themselves to the 'narrow circle'. Following his discussion of 'reason used without root, reason in the void', Chesterton sets himself the question: 'If this be what drives men mad, what is it that keeps them sane?'⁷⁴ Aleshkovsky may be said to pose a similar question, but one marked by the passage of history since 1908 (when *Orthodoxy* was written): namely, what can return man to sanity, and to his rightful image (*obraz*)?

In reply to this, *Ruka* asserts, in true Dostoevskian spirit, that the mind cannot reason its way back to sanity, since it cannot even explain the evil for which it is principally responsible. When the mind tries to confront evil (its own deeds), it buckles. Shibarov occasionally recognizes this pattern as the cause of his own bouts of insanity:

Просто поражает иногда мозг полная невозможность просечь в один миг абсурдную чудовищность происходящего, если к тому же непонимание момента не может быть компенсировано поступком. Все клапаны закрыты. От вонючего пара помрачается разум. (p.279)

He recognizes it even more readily in others, as when he describes to Gurov the reaction of his father (Ponyat'ev) to his imminent political disgrace:

Запор возник в мозгах у вашего папеньки. Очень трудно бывает осознать происходящее бедному человеческому мозгу, несущему прямую и косвенную вину за все непостижимые обороты жизни, которые превращают бывших палачей в казнимых своими жертвами. (p.431)

Such instances of intellectual collapse, often described in crudely physiological language, echo through the novel. Thus, Vlachkov's appeal to Shibarov, shortly before his death – 'что происходит, что? Человеческий мозг понять этого не в силах!' (p.270) – is

⁷⁴ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p.22. Chesterton will begin his argument by asserting that Christian sanity depends on permitting free will to remain a 'sacred mystery' (p.23).

repeated a few pages later, where it is said to have been made not only by Vlachkov but by numerous suspects, both 'pure' and vile (p.276). The impotence of the mind is accompanied by a sense of implication, whereby, echoing Dostoevsky, every man (and mind) is responsible for all others.⁷⁵

In their accumulated effect, these yells of incomprehension, articulated at moments of greatest weakness, amount to a collective 'Why?' that expects and receives no rational answer. They may be compared to a speech given by Aleshkovsky in 1983, when he discussed the need, in confronting his country's past, to eschew 'a convenient sociological system of explanation' in order to pose 'that extremely simple and even seemingly idiotic question: But why then the Soviet regime? Why does it exist, Lord, if three hundred million people have been deprived of the possibility of eating normally for decades'. After a series of such rhetorical questions, he concluded by quoting Gogol: 'There is no answer'.⁷⁶ Similarly, in *Ruka*, no rational answers are found for the major historical questions that arise. Despite the historical background that the narrator claims to have acquired at the orphanage, and despite the novel's saturation in historical realia, only one substantial explanation emerges for the Revolution itself and its consequences: namely, that it was the triumph of the Devil (see especially pp.266, 452). In terms of historical or sociological argument, we are offered only the simplifications and illusions of counter-factual fantasy: 'если бы Керенский, блядь такая [...] не предал Корнилова, то большевистская проституция сразу была бы взята к ногтю, а Россия бы стала нормальной буржуазной демократией, где и народ, свободно дыша, пил и ел от пуза'

⁷⁵ This emerges particularly clearly in *Sinen'kii skromnyi platochek*, in the likeable narrator's recollections of his war-time experiences: 'Смотрю из окопчика на небо, на поле – и краснею, маршал, перед Всевидящим, как пацан перед батькой, нашкодивши чего-то. Краснею, взгляда Его не выдерживаю и чую, что наделали мы, люди, опять такого зла ужасного, опять наделали такого зла, непонятно, ради чего наделали и как это вообще могло произойти'; Aleshkovsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I, p.560.

⁷⁶ 'Writers in Exile', ed. by William Phillips, *Partisan Review*, 50 (1983), 487-525 (p.508). Compare with Fan Fanych's rhetorical questions in *Kenguru*; Aleshkovsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I, pp.49-186 (p.53).

(p.344).⁷⁷ As for the Terror, Shibarov concludes: 'Постигнуть логику развития террора было абсолютно невозможно: она отсутствовала' (p.452).⁷⁸ Evil, in *Ruka*, must retain its mystery, and, thereby, its ineradicable reality. The philosophical insight is similar to that expressed by Lev Shestov: 'One can ask, "Whence comes evil?" But one cannot answer this question. There are questions whose significance lies precisely in the fact that they do not admit of answers because answers kill them'.⁷⁹

By pointing beyond the resources of reason, the naïve question, 'Why?', gains approval in the value-system of *Ruka*. It begins to mark the path of a return to sanity, since here it is (to use the novel's governing dichotomy) Soul rather than Reason who is speaking and who simplifies history to recognize the evil that Reason, caught in its own complex cycle, fails to apprehend.

The question also returns us to Dostoevsky, for whom an apparently simple-minded question, phrased in the simplest terms, may mark the beginning of the possibility of moral and spiritual regeneration. It recalls, for example, the dream of Dmitry Karamazov, who, on seeing a burned-out village and a crying baby, asks repeatedly: 'Да почему это так? Почему?' In the dream Dmitry's coachman gives him obvious answers to these questions, but he continues to ask: 'почему это стоят погорелые матери, почему бедны люди, почему бедно дитё, почему голая степь, почему они не обнимаются, не целуются'. He recognizes that his questioning is mad and senseless (*bezumno, bez tolku*), but believes that 'именно так и надо спросить'.⁸⁰ He thus exhibits a persistent naiveté, even stupidity (Dmitry is described here twice as *glupyi*), which has the inverse value for both

⁷⁷ These are comments made by Sasha Grinberg at the orphanage; see, similarly, Shibarov's observations about the Civil War, famines and dekulakization: they could have all been avoided, he hectors Gurov, if a dozen or so leaders had been sent into quarantine by the healthy forces of society (p.273).

⁷⁸ This would appear to be contradicted by the Brothers, about whom Shibarov says: 'Ничего необъяснимого, на их взгляд, в терроре не было' (p.454). But they too offer no rational, logical or 'sociological' explanation, pointing only to the influence of the Devil (*ibid*), and often preferring to remain silent rather than answer Shibarov's specific questions about guilt and evil (see, for example, the behaviour of the priest, p.315).

⁷⁹ See Lev Shestov, *A Shestov Anthology*, ed. by Bernard Martin (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1970), p.88.

⁸⁰ Dostoevsky, XIV, pp.456-57.

Aleshkovsky and Dostoevsky of the stupidity that is born of reason and the devil (who, in *Brat'ya Karamazovy*, is described as ‘ужасно глуп’ and ‘животно хитер’).⁸¹ This almost sacred stupidity signifies the surrender of the intellect to God. It is thanks to such *glupost'* that Alesha ‘joined the angels’; while in *Ruka* we are told that *glupost'* may at times reflect the ‘неосознанное согласие с тем, что должно быть по воле Бога и судьбы’ (p.424).⁸²

The distinction between the ratiocinating stupidity (marked as *tupost'*) that enslaves and the naïve stupidity that saves informs the entire novel, and especially its treatment of history.

There are, on the one hand, types of blindness to the past that are roundly condemned in *Ruka*, such as the betrayal of one’s parents (the sin that appals Shibarov above all others). Stubborn, falsifying efforts to make history conform to intellectual (rational) constructs also draw Shibarov’s venom. This is the tendency of Ponyat'ev and other unreformed idealists who hold to their Marxist-Leninist faith whatever their own personal sacrifices, and even imprisonment:

Эти, дождавшись через двадцать лет свободы, до сих пор оправдывают любую страшную, допущенную по тупости или произволу ошибку исторической необходимостью, а желание осмыслить природу ‘ошибок’ для того, чтобы предотвратить их и искоренить, – преступным ревизионизмом. (p.504)

Yet, on the other hand, there is a willed naiveté towards history and personal injustice that the novel actively encourages and demonstrates. The path back to sanity proposed by *Ruka* relies on history *not* being made sense of, a process that mirrors the refusal of Ponyat'ev and others to ‘make sense’ (*osmyslit'*). But if Ponyat'ev’s historical amnesia is aimed at saving Reason, then ‘good’ historical naiveté (also a form of amnesia) enables Aleshkovsky to suggest the survival of a kind of perennial innocence (associated with Soul); here, *naivnost'*, *nevinnost'* and *nevezhestvo* form a sacred lexical trinity. The

⁸¹ Dostoevsky, XV, p.87.

⁸² Compare with Sinyavsky’s interpretation of the stupidity of Ivan-Durak; see my Introduction, pp.19-20.

implication is that the monstrosities of history, interpreted as the work of the devil and human reason, occurred without true knowledge, that is to say without the knowledge of the soul. Shibarov and others were thus both guilty and innocent. Hence Shibarov's assertion on the final page that his soul remains 'неповинна' (p.538). And hence also the persistent refrain throughout *Ruka* (and *Sinen'kii skromnyi platochek*) of Christ's prayer on the cross: 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do' (Luke 23: 34). These are the last words with which Shibarov's father addressed his killers (p.249); and the words with which the 'Brother' Frol Vlasych describes Shibarov (p.467). This is also how Frol describes the events of 1917: 'о революции первый раз слышу. Восставших масс не заметил. Видел толпу безумцев, не ведающих, что творят. Отнесся к ним сочувственно, предвидя злобные последствия бунта' (p.422). Such a response to evil – proposed throughout *Ruka* as the Christian alternative to revenge – asserts the ignorance that, at some level, exculpates the perpetrator. It also asserts the ability of the observer or victim, in the face of historical trauma or personal tragedy, to render himself ignorant of the precise manifestation of evil, thus protecting his spiritual integrity. Moreover, as Shibarov suggests in his description of the raid on Odinka, such a reaction may, at times of greatest distress, be automatic and salvific:

Не видел я, кто стрелял в батю моего, Ивана Абрамыча, и выстрелов не слышал, потому что в шоке находился. Не устояла на ногах ребячья душонка. Я даже думаю, что работает временами у нашей психики механизм спасительной отключки от безумных мгновений жизни... (pp.249-50)

Arguably, *Ruka* projects this reaction over the entire span of Soviet history. Its naïve, even foolish overview of history appears to be governed by this same 'механизм спасительной отключки', whereby the Revolution and its consequences must be simplified as the work of the devil or of pure contingency to enable the survival of a faith in humanity's capacity to be saved (and also to preserve an uncritical view of the pre-Revolutionary past when

Russia was on its way to becoming a bourgeois democracy, 'где и народ, свободно дыша, пил и ел от пуза').

Of course, the reader is free to object to the implications of these claims of ignorance, and question whether Shibarov and other murderers described in *Ruka* really do 'know not what they do'. They are, after all, not living before the message of Christ was revealed; and, despite their living in an atheist state, Christian language and modes of thought are not buried too deeply in their minds, as Shibarov's language of sin and damnation amply testifies. Nor are the evil-doers notable for their ingenuousness (*prostodushie*), the quality for which Dmitry Karamazov was told by his coachman that his sins would be forgiven by God.⁸³ Perhaps the acerbic observation of Stultitia is appropriate here: '[W]hen men pray for forgiveness, though they may have sinned in full awareness, they make folly their excuse and defence'.⁸⁴

This objection, however, may be countered by the fact that in *Ruka* each character addresses Christ's words not to himself, but to others.⁸⁵ It is perhaps more accurate to say that here Aleshkovsky is taking to its conclusion the doctrine of his 'teacher', Dostoevsky, that all must be guilty for all, in order to be saved.

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The praise of folly in *Ruka* does not only occur at this exalted level, and the drama between Reason and the rather nebulous notion of Soul is just one of the ways in which Aleshkovsky seeks to restore sanity and human likeness. In other respects, the thematics of folly are considerably earthier, even if, for obvious reasons, the Priapic exuberance of *Nikolai Nikolaevich* is absent.

⁸³ Dostoevsky, XIV, p.372.

⁸⁴ Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, ed. by A.H.T. Levi, trans. by Betty Radice (London: Penguin, 1993), p.126.

⁸⁵ In addition to the examples given earlier, see Shibarov's comments on p.510: 'Я молюсь сейчас коротко и ясно за прозрение слепых и сильных, злых, но не ведающих, что творят, восхищенных искусственной звездочкой'. The theme is established in Aleshkovsky's work from as early as the 'Pesnya o Staline': 'В чужих грехах мы сходу сознавались,/ этапом шли навстречу злой судьбе'; on this song, see above, pp.87-89.

The word 'folly' is appropriate here in the broad sense familiar from Erasmus, whose Stultitia recruits to her cause a vast range of activity, from drunkenness and childishness to sexual love and piety. The capaciousness of folly is essential to Stultitia's purpose: it stands, in her speech, for the universality of human nature once affectations have been discarded. She sees herself as the very source of life, and her notion of folly is entirely democratic: 'I don't leave a single mortal without a share in my bounty, though the gifts of the other deities are unevenly bestowed'.⁸⁶

A comparable levelling strategy is pursued by Aleshkovsky against the pretensions of human reason. Enid Welsford's comment that in *Praise of Folly*, 'Erasmus defends the creative vital instincts of humanity against the encroachment of the analytical reason', is equally appropriate to *Ruka*.⁸⁷ Importance is ascribed to three groups of instincts in particular: laughter; animal life; and childhood. A background to these themes is supplied by the strong presence in Shibakov's narrative of the ordinary folk. These can be associated with both faces of folly. Generally, the *tolpa* is reminiscent of the infantilised masses of Ivan's Legend – such is the 'охмуренная толпа, инстинктивно ищущая кому бы поклониться' (p.391), or the 'одураченная толпа' observed by Shibakov on Red Square (p.370). By contrast, the mind of the *narod* and the peasantry is more susceptible to positive evaluation. The *narod* may in Shibakov's estimation be frequently foolish and gullible, but it is also a testing-ground for the conceits of the powerful, and a refuge of basic truths and common sense, in a trope canonized by Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and others.⁸⁸ Particular emphasis is attached to the values of the peasantry which Shibakov was born into, and to the tragedy of its destruction. Seeking to convince Gurov of the sincerity of his

⁸⁶ Erasmus, p.73.

⁸⁷ Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1935), p.238.

⁸⁸ In *Ruka* the people's common sense is exhibited clearly in Shibakov's 'little fable' about a dressing-down given to Khrushchev by a metallurgist, Fedor Boronkov. After supplying Khrushchev with a comprehensive critique of his domestic and foreign policy, Boronkov tells him: 'Мне остоебенило видеть на заводе и на улицах одно, а читать другое [...] Мы не идиоты, мы видим все это, понимаем' (p.337).

diatribe against the degeneration of Russia, he affirms: 'во мне орет не советский прирученный либерал, поглощающий за сытным завтраком самиздат, а крестьянин во мне орет, гены орут крестьянские' (p.280). Once again, as in the fiction of Voinovich and Venedikt Erofeev, the 'praise of folly' is tied to an antipathy to the complacent intelligentsia.

Laughter

Ruka is not a comic work in the manner of *Nikolai Nikolaevich* or *Kenguru*, but laughter is nevertheless essential to its development, while the novel would be all but unreadable without its abundant word-play, low humour and varied use of irony. Comedy thus helps involve the reader in the grotesque and tragic material of Shibanov's narrative. In addition, it serves its time-honoured role, within the plot itself, of dissolving hierarchy and enmity.⁸⁹

In Frol Vlasych's second deposition (pp.467-82), it is word-play which temporarily eases Soul's stand-off with Reason. Her punning on Reason's name ('Разовый ты ум', p.472) and that of the State Planning System ('Уж не Господен ли план?', p.475) enables her, for the first time, to criticize Reason without giving offence and to make the latter see himself 'со стороны' (p.472). Laughter thus provides a short-cut to self-knowledge: 'к Разуму вместе со смехом возвращалось понимание заблуждения' (p.475). Soul's humorous accusations of Reason's foolishness ('Разум, ты глуп') prove self-fulfilling, reducing Reason to fits of giggling and making him all but fall out of the train on which they are travelling (p.472). Laughter also discloses 'что-то несомненно детское' in Reason's expression (p.472), and returns him to childhood memories (p.476). In the case

⁸⁹ As the narrator of *Sinen'kii skromnyi platochek* tells Brezhnev at the end of his epistle: 'Смеху трудно сопротивляться, маршал'; Aleshkovsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I, p.629.

of Shibarov, as we will see, the return of such memories serves as a sign of his transformation.

A different, more ambivalent source of laughter is Stalin, whose salient comic characteristic in *Ruka* is his asinine speech, comprising proverbial sayings that are alternately credible and ludicrous ('Тише едешь, приедешь на масленицу'; 'Не тяни кобеля за яйца: он укусить может!'); nuggets of faux-Confucian wisdom ('собака лает – ветер носит'); and similes recalling his Georgian stock ('Нам кадры нужны, как шампура для шашлыков').⁹⁰ His sense of irony and the level of his self-awareness are hard to judge. We first see him trying and failing to collect mushrooms. When it is explained to him that this is because he is unaccustomed to bowing down, he replies: 'Хорошее, научное объяснение, даже лести не вижу в нем' (p.362).

Shibarov's portrait of Stalin presents a folksy caricature at which it is impossible not to laugh, and which successfully ridicules his public image as a wise and responsible figure of authority.⁹¹ Such satirical horseplay may seem at odds with the brutal depiction of Stalinism in *Ruka*, and with Shibarov's attempt, at the very centre of his monologue, to present a serious psychological analysis of Stalin as a self-loathing paranoiac. Yet the censure which Stalin's frivolity might invite is outweighed by the novel's imperative to disclose a levelling basis of folly, and thereby humanity, to which all, even Stalin, can be reduced (or raised). Far from alienating him, his foolishness renders him familiar within the text. His flagrant ignorance of history – he speaks, for example, of the 'восемнадцатый помидор Луи Бонапарта' (p.355) – merely exaggerates the more general tendencies discussed above, while his proverbial banalities are echoed throughout *Ruka*, whether by Shibarov ('Борьба со старым – не флирт со шлюхой'), or the common-sensical metallurgist, and truth-teller to Khrushchev, Fedya Boronkov ('Талант,

⁹⁰ See pp.362, 438, 406, 375. On Confucius, see p.378.

⁹¹ On this image, see pp.381-82.

полагаю, не чугун: его по одинаковым формам не надо разливать').⁹² And while Stalin is himself in many ways a figure of ridicule (like Khrushchev, who is derided for his 'anecdotal' passion for maize), he too finds life's circus ridiculous; 'human obtuseness' ('тупость людская') has him in stitches.⁹³ In this way he participates fully in a carnival atmosphere as both subject and object of laughter.

The World of Animals and the Model of St Francis

The teeming underworld of animal life in Aleshkovsky's fiction suggests, like comedy, an underlying and universal context to which all life bears a relation. It also supplies a moral commentary on human behaviour. Following a lengthy literary tradition stretching from the Renaissance to Vladimir Voinovich, Georgy Vladimov and others in recent Russian prose, Aleshkovsky indicates through animals natural instincts and knowledge which humans have forgotten.⁹⁴ His fiction, especially *Sinen'kii skromnyi platochek*, echoes Stultitia's view that 'the least unhappy [men] are those who come nearest to the instinctive folly of dumb animals', who, 'the theologians assure us [...] can't even sin'.⁹⁵ In the *Partisan Review* round-table, he warned of the consequences for entire civilizations that ignoring such 'instinctive folly' can incur: 'We humans are so full of the arrogance of superiority over the whole animal kingdom that, in a certain sense, we have dulled in ourselves a number of powerful instincts. I dare say that none of us has ever seen a wild animal [...] run headlong into the arms of its predator'.⁹⁶

⁹² See pp.430, 338. Stalin's proverbs are just one of his folksy characteristics. His coarse language and his constant derision of sycophantic intellectuals and political careerists also strike a popular chord, and have much in common with the populist prejudices of the *soi-disant* peasant, Shibarov.

⁹³ See pp.337, 485.

⁹⁴ See, especially, Vladimov's influential novel *Vernyi Ruslan* (Frankfurt: Posev, 1975).

⁹⁵ Erasmus, pp.53-55.

⁹⁶ 'Writers in Exile', p.512.

In *Ruka*, as in Aleshkovsky's *Sinen'kii skromnyi platochek* and Vladimov's *Vernyi Ruslan*, dogs play an especially prominent role. It is the assault of an Alsatian which enables Shibanov to save Stalin's life and win his favour, and the 'canine theme' persists in their professional relationship as a code whereby Shibanov, watching through the peephole, learns which of Stalin's colleagues are to be executed by the Leader's deliberate digressions on dog-related matters. This 'собачья тематика' (p.375) recalls not only the event which brought Stalin and Shibanov together, but also the contemporary discourse of political opprobrium.⁹⁷

Characteristically, this political discourse is revived only to be turned inside out. If in the Show Trials the equation of humans with animals connoted humiliation of the person, in *Ruka* animals serve as a touchstone of vitality and basic values. Hence the disappearance of Gurov's two pets halfway through Shibanov's monologue, when the scale of their master's crimes have become clear. On their return they scratch and bite Gurov (p.395). Gurov richly deserves this mutiny in the view of the narrator, who is still livid at the massacre not just of the humans at Odinka, but also of the cats and dogs, an abomination for which he holds Gurov personally responsible (pp.292-93).

The native intelligence of animals is also to the fore in *Sinen'kii skromnyi platochek* in the war memories of the narrator, Baikin, who was saved by a stray dog as he lay on the battlefield with his leg torn off. The dog, whom Baikin nicknamed Mashka and called a 'four-pawed Burdenko' (after the famous surgeon), licked clean his wound 'без долгих рассуждений'.⁹⁸ Animal instinct is thus identified with vitality and the soul in the broader

⁹⁷ See Dermot Fitzsimons, "'Shoot the Mad Dogs!': Appellation and Distortion during the Moscow Show Trials, 1936-1938', *Slovo* [UCL], 13 (2001), 172-187.

⁹⁸ Aleshkovsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I, p.562.

polemic against reason, whose operations are described in *Ruka* as being infinitely slower than that of the soul (p.299).⁹⁹

In contrast to Stalinist discourse, then, and in common with Renaissance rhetoric, Aleshkovsky shames humans not for resembling animals, but for being unlike them and sinking below their level.¹⁰⁰ To the examples given should be added Mashka's refusal in *Sinen'kii skromnyi platochek* to eat human flesh from the battlefield,¹⁰¹ in stark contrast to the escaped convicts in *Ruka* who take Ponyat'ev along as a source of nourishment (a *korova*, in the jargon of the Gulag). In these ironic parallels between the world of animals and the zoo of educated humanity there are further echoes of the denizens of Skotoprigon'evsk, whether of Ivan Karamazov's objection to the phrase 'bestial' cruelty when applied to humans ('зверь не может быть так жесток, как человек, так артистически, так художественно жесток'), or of Kolya's affirmation that there are more idiocies (*gluposti*) to be found among men than among animals.¹⁰²

Perhaps it is also partly to Dostoevsky that we should trace the exuberant love of animals and the natural world which characterizes the most obviously luminous character in *Ruka*, Frol Gusev. In the extract from the Life of Zosima which supplies the structural riposte to Ivan's Legend, this theme dominates, particularly in the description of Zosima's elder brother, Markel, who, in the very course of his fatal illness, discovered a joy in nature and God. Previously an atheist, Markel experiences an epiphany that inspires him, despite his imminent demise, to declare to his grieving mother both that 'жизнь есть рай' and that 'всякий из нас пред всеми во всем виноват, а я более всех'. These two realizations are brought together in his plea to the birds outside his window for

⁹⁹ When the studiously irrational Frol Gusev enters Shibonov's office, his appearance is described as the arrival of 'сама жизнь, реальная жизнь, не нуждающаяся в трудном, медленном осознании' (p.464).

¹⁰⁰ This trope is to be found in Erasmus and, most commonly, writers of the later Renaissance such as Montaigne. See the commentary of A.H.T. Levi: Erasmus, p.70.

¹⁰¹ Aleshkovsky comments with double irony that Mashka 'войну по-человечески переживала'; Aleshkovsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I, p.563.

¹⁰² Dostoevsky, XIV, pp.217, 473.

forgiveness.¹⁰³ Markel's acceptance of his death dramatically influenced Zosima's own philosophy, in which wonder and humility before creation, allied with the doctrine of universal guilt, do not so much answer Ivan's specific arguments and doubts as implicitly reject the very right of humans to construct and then question theodicies. A similar religious outlook emerges in *Ruka*.

However, there is another, more distant precursor to be considered here – namely, St Francis, whose likely influence on the portraits of Markel and Zosima has been indicated by Joseph Frank.¹⁰⁴ Francis, patron saint of animals, breezes into *Ruka* in fairly recognisable form as the veterinarian Frol, who refers to himself in his depositions as a 'покровитель животных' (p.423),¹⁰⁵ and who conducted a burial ceremony in the Summer Garden, during the October Revolution, of assorted creatures (p.422).¹⁰⁶

The specific parallels between Frol and Francis are numerous, including textual allusion ('Стой, сестра моя – лошадь!'; p.468)¹⁰⁷ and a quasi-pantheistic urge towards pathetic fallacy.¹⁰⁸ Like Francis, Frol is a bare-footed wanderer, whose 'nocturnal Odyssey' on the night of the October Revolution ends in his abandoning the city for the country (pp.422-23). He is, furthermore, head of a (notional) brotherhood;¹⁰⁹ displays a courteous, playful and joyful disposition, turning his childish smile to God in what

¹⁰³ Dostoevsky, XIV, pp.262-63.

¹⁰⁴ Frank, pp.624, 625, 633.

¹⁰⁵ Frol also refers to himself twice as a 'покровитель людей и животных'; pp.418, 482.

¹⁰⁶ There is also a distant hint of St Francis in Shibarov, with his nostalgic love of 'grubby Vaskas' and other animals from his Odinka boyhood (p.293); in this, as in many other respects, Frol serves as yet another alter ego for the narrator.

¹⁰⁷ The allusion to Francis's *Canticle of the Sun* also contains a further echo of Pasternak's poem (and collection title), 'Sestra moyá – zhizn'; Boris Pasternak, *Izbrannoe*, 2 vols (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1985), 1, pp.74-75. Pasternak, sharing a similar exuberance and vitality, is a poet of manifest importance to Aleshkovsky; see especially *Persten' v futlyare* (1992), collected in Aleshkovsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 3, pp.3-168.

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, p.467: 'Трамвай похотливо, но добродушно звал к себе баб'. On these themes in Francis's life and writing, see James Cowan, *Francis: A Saint's Way* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2001), p.145; and G.K. Chesterton, *St Francis of Assisi* (London: Continuum, 2001), pp.98-99.

¹⁰⁹ Frol's seniority among the Brothers (or *edinomyshlenniki*) is asserted by Shibarov on p.465. They seem to him to be 'members of a single order' (p.453).

Chesterton calls Francis's 'great gratitude' and 'sublime dependence'; and embraces, prays for and pursues self-sacrifice.¹¹⁰

In Frol's despairing appeal to humanity, made on the streets of Petersburg during the October Revolution, these motifs combine with the humility of a Markel or Zosima, for whom life is a gift and a paradise; and with the ecstatic acceptance of what Aleshkovsky has called elsewhere the 'счастливые беды жизненной судьбы'.¹¹¹ It's 'stupid' (*glupo*) to curse God, Frol says:

‘То не Бог, то Дьявол творит Зло! И Дьявол – есть наш Разум, утративший Бога. Он – в нас! [...]

Именно в этот момент к моим ногам упала убитая шальной пулей ворона.

‘Господи,’ сказал я. ‘Спасибо тебе за ужас и радость жизни, за свет и мрак, за песню и смерть птицы, за жар и озноб. Спасибо за то, что в теле моем пребывают в невозмущенном упреками мире, согласии и детском удивлении Разум и Душа. Господи! Пошли мне, как птице, случайную смерть на лету!’ (p.423)

The notes of self-parody and even kitsch in passages such as this, however, render Frol a barely credible presence. Indeed, his unreality underscores the sense in which he may be understood as a dream of Shibarov himself. Yet it is also clear that he is the favoured 'voice' in Shibarov's mind, and the one to whose views most pages are given. At the end of the narrative Shibarov will thank Frol for having indirectly saved him and deterred him from his final act of revenge (pp.529-30).¹¹² Furthermore, Frol sets the tone for the outlook and characterization of the other Brothers,¹¹³ who are grouped together as 'святые люди' and 'разные юродивые' (p.465). These descriptions are attributed by the narrator to Gurov, who wonders how Shibarov's respect for such folk can coexist with the sadism demanded by his profession.

¹¹⁰ Chesterton, *St. Francis*, pp.87-88. On Francis's courtesy, *ibid*, pp.43, 111; on his 'Search for Martyrdom', *ibid*, p.141.

¹¹¹ From Aleshkovsky's obituary of Yury Glazov: 'Nekrolog: Poslednii urok', *Novyi Mir*, 7 (1998), 241-42 (p.242).

¹¹² Shibarov spent three months in Frol's company; on his affection for Frol and his writings, see pp.464-65.

¹¹³ See, for example, pp.308-18.

The comparison of the Brothers to *yurodivye* (not repeated elsewhere) is perhaps intended to suggest little more than eccentricity. But it gives cause to ask whether, if we accept that Frol is modelled to a considerable extent on St Francis, he can also be viewed as a *yurodivyi*. This question is relevant also to the parallel with *Brat'ya Karamazovy*, where both holy-foolish and Franciscan motifs are present.

Harriet Murav begins her study of holy foolishness in Dostoevsky with an incident from St Francis's life that, she argues quite convincingly, corresponds 'in many ways' to *yurodstvo*.¹¹⁴ Yet, on the whole, Ewa Thompson is surely right to say that St Francis may be viewed as a God's fool but not a *yurodivyi Khrista radi*.¹¹⁵ Certainly there are important similarities: among others, the topsy-turvy view of the world; the following of the gospels to the letter; and the quality of *apatheia*, or of being 'dead to the world'.¹¹⁶ Yet there is no parallel in tearful Russian *yurodstvo* for the demonstrative joy and mirth, both in life and in the prospect of death, which was epitomized by St Francis. Conversely, there is little in St Francis of the deliberately provocative aggression and scandal-mongering of the *yurodivye*; their anti-aesthetics; and their extreme, and often puzzling didacticism. Hagiographic *yurodstvo* is a primarily urban phenomenon, while St Francis is associated with the open skies. For the *yurodivyi* the world lies in sin, and must be saved; for Francis, life is a paradise for which he never deems himself sufficiently worthy, rushing to commit ever-greater sacrifices. Both, of course, are moved by the imitation and love of Christ, and both show the wounds of this love to the world; yet the legends associated with them fascinate in quite different ways.

¹¹⁴ The incident in question is Francis's public rejection of his father, which Murav reads as an act of provocation reminiscent of *yurodstvo*. See Murav, p.1.

¹¹⁵ Ewa M. Thompson, 'The Archetype of the Fool in Russian Literature', *Canadian Slavic Papers*, 15 (1973), 245-273 (p.245).

¹¹⁶ This was noted in St Francis by his contemporary, Thomas of Celano. See Cowan, pp.122, 130; Chesterton, *St. Francis*, p.79.

In the character of Frol Gusev, the Franciscan model of religious folly is brought out much more emphatically than in *Brat'ya Karamazovy*, where the dominant prism for understanding religious folly remains *yurodstvo*, as a key topos in the personalities of Alesha ('По отцу сладострастник, по матери юродивый'),¹¹⁷ Zosima, Ferapont, Smerdyakov, and others. The greater prominence of the Franciscan model in *Ruka* accords with a general tendency, which I will discuss further in the conclusion, towards an expression of the vitality and paradoxical sanity which is more easily found in the medieval and Renaissance examples of Francis and Erasmus than in the dark ambivalences of *yurodstvo*. These examples accord, moreover, with the widespread pursuit in non-conformist prose of levity of mind and of style, discussed in relation to *Moskva-Petushki* (see Chapter One), and clearly manifested by Frol in the passage quoted above.¹¹⁸

Childhood

'What is childhood but silliness and foolishness?' asks Stultitia; but in the final, less frivolous section of her speech, she emphasizes 'the mystery of salvation' that, in Christ's words, 'had been hidden from the wise but revealed to little children, that is, to fools'.¹¹⁹ The 'childishness' of religious folly is regularly noted by biographers and scholars.¹²⁰

In *Ruka*, infancy bears all these associations, most plainly in the frequently emphasized childishness of Frol.¹²¹ This quality communicates itself in some form to the narrator, through whom the theme is treated in a more dramatic and complex manner, developing both from the dialogue with Dostoevsky, and the narrator's own orphanhood.

¹¹⁷ Alesha is thus described by Rakitin; Dostoevsky, XIV, p.73

¹¹⁸ Notably, in his request: 'Господи! Пошли мне, как птице, случайную смерть на лету!' (p.423).

¹¹⁹ Erasmus, pp.23, 124-25.

¹²⁰ John Saward argues that holy foolishness 'is always childlike and Christocentric'; Saward, *Perfect Fools* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p.10. See also S.A. Ivanov, *Vizantiiskoe yurodstvo* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya, 1994), p.19. On Francis's 'inspired infancy', see Chesterton, *St. Francis*, pp.103-4.

¹²¹ 'Младенчеством, счастливым и ничем не замутненным, веяло на меня от Фрола Власыча' (p.464).

It is in the final section of *Ruka*, as Shibarov approaches and celebrates his sixtieth birthday, that the theme comes to occupy his thoughts most persistently.¹²² In his rush of joy after deciding to renounce revenge entirely, he tells Ryabov: ‘я мальчиком себя чувствую за час до прихода Понятьева в мою деревню’ (p.530). This recollection ties in with a dream-parable forty pages earlier which marked the beginning of Shibarov’s transformation and which was set in his family’s allotment, imagined in the dream as the only barren allotment in the village. The ghost of his father appears to him, making a final plea for Shibarov to abandon his pursuit of revenge, and asking him to consider, ‘как так произошло, что ты семечко и клубешки посеял, а ничего не возшло’ (p.494). The plea is successful: Shibarov is left in the allotment, where, embracing and kissing the earth, he recognizes that he must foster life. Explaining his change of heart to Gurov, he says he has taken his last chance to see his father again (p.495).

The correspondences with *Brat'ya Karamazovy* remain prevalent and significant. In Dostoevsky’s ‘mystical ethics’, as understood by Zenkovsky, ‘super-reasonable’ love rises ‘to a sense of inner connection with the whole world, even with the dead’; and W.W. Rowe illustrates how the connection with the dead is negotiated by dreams, which ‘are not infrequently the special medium whereby a dead child can communicate with the living’. In *Ruka* dreams play a similar role, although here it is not a dead infant communicating with the living, but the former infant in Shibarov communicating with his dead father; through dreams, Shibarov keeps alive the memory of Odinka, and also the child within himself.¹²³

The content of Shibarov’s dream, and the death of the dreamer shortly afterwards, suggest a playing out of Dostoevsky’s chosen epigraph: that a corn of wheat brings forth

¹²² See, for example, pp.512-13: ‘В конце жизни теряешься, как пацан, не знаешь, за что взяться, глаза разбегаются, словно времени впереди вагон’.

¹²³ William Woodin Rowe, *Dostoevsky: Child and Man in His Works* (New York: New York University Press, 1968), pp.121, 123.

fruit only when it dies (John 12: 24).¹²⁴ In its consequences, Shibarov's dream proves as transformative as Dmitry's nightmare of the burned-out village and crying baby, which also rendered the dreamer childlike in its aftermath.¹²⁵ Dmitry's second childhood, as André Gide emphasized, is that of the Christian who renounces his adult self and follows the Gospel injunction: 'Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven' (Matthew 18:3).¹²⁶

This verse is also cited by one of the Brothers as a response to Shibarov's doubts about the balance of good and evil. Not for the first time in *Ruka*, discussion of a philosophical dilemma is curtailed by an appeal to the non-rational:

‘Сказано – будьте как дети!’ ответил мне, не помню уж кто, и добавил: ‘Жизнь бесконечно старше Разума [...] да, жизнь старше Разума, но в тот самый миг, когда он, завидуя взрослости, отпадает от ее бесконечной наивности и до-верия, а до-верие это и есть детская неосознанная вера, в тот же самый миг он становится маленьким старичком, в котором осталось от жизни, если не выродилось, одно умение и одна страсть – логически мыслить. Будьте как дети, граждане следователи!’ (p.454)

The child is thus enlisted with Soul against Reason, entering *Ruka*'s virtuous circle of naivety, innocence, ignorance, instinct and vitality. The passage also echoes the advice given by Alesha Karamazov to his brother Ivan to love life more than its meaning.¹²⁷

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It should also be noted that the theme of childhood in *Ruka* is marked (and rendered powerful) by an ambivalence characteristic of the novel and its narrator. On the one hand the truncation of Shibarov's childhood in Odinka was a trauma which kept him trapped in a loathsome and formless pre-pubescent physical state. It condemned Shibarov to unremitting rancour, and to the fate of Dostoevsky's child victims, whose memories become 'permanent mirrors of the experience, hauntingly prolonging both the cruelty of

¹²⁴ Dostoevsky, XIV, p.5.

¹²⁵ The dream led Dmitry to the conclusion that 'each is guilty for all – for all "babes"'. There are only little children and big children. All are "babes"; cited by Rowe, pp.124-25.

¹²⁶ Cited by Rowe, p.120.

¹²⁷ Dostoevsky, XIV, p.210.

the deed and its crippling consequences' (Rowe).¹²⁸ Yet the curse of Shibarov's childhood trauma, both physical and psychological, also proves to be the thing that saves him; it is to his residual, unvanquished immaturity that he is returned in the final pages. This reflects a broader pattern in the author's treatment of folly and idiocy, which acts as a curse in preventing the Aleshkovskian hero from rising to the intellectual challenges posed by the world, but which also saves him from intellectual pride – the path influentially condemned by Dostoevsky in the person of Ivan Karamazov.

6. Rousseau, Compassion, and Common Sense

Moving closer to his biological father, Shibarov is implicitly also moving closer to his Maker, even though he accepts that he is damned.¹²⁹ Rowe's words on divine parenthood in Dostoevsky are equally relevant to *Ruka*:

God's parenthood, then, is essential for meaningful relationships between men [...] But the denizens of Dostoevsky's world generally fail to recognize this parenthood. And when they do not, in the words of Vyacheslav Ivanov, "men, those children of God" embrace a "solipsistic nihilism" and "must inevitably destroy themselves and one another."¹³⁰

The response to the threat of 'solipsistic nihilism' offered by *Ruka* involves not only acceptance of God, but also, as discussed in the previous section, a return to sources of vitality and common humanity. As Shibarov's narrative speeds towards death, its thematic argument pulls backwards towards a celebration of origins and instincts, not least in its eulogy of childhood and filiation. In Frol's second 'deposition', which better resembles a

¹²⁸ Rowe, p.12.

¹²⁹ The patronymic of Shibarov's father, Abramych, underlines this connection.

¹³⁰ Rowe, p.120. See also Shibarov's apparently frivolous words about the Devil earlier in the narrative, which adumbrate this theme and provide a ready interpretation for Shibarov's adult life: 'Странно, что, поминая ежеминутно чертову мать, мы никогда не обмолвимся ни словечком о его папеньке. Странно... Может быть, он их бросил, и травмированный мальчишка стал изощренным бандитом, мстящим людям за отлучение от отцовства?' (p.310).

parable, this movement is given literal expression. Here, Indignant Reason has become the exhausted stoker of a train headed backwards, stopping at each station to allow Frol to buy cherries or baked milk (pp.467-69). The arrow of Soviet history has been reversed.

This desired return to man's better nature and truth – accompanied, as we have seen, by the dismantling of intellectual pretension – strongly suggests the enduring influence of Rousseau.¹³¹ In broad terms, echoes of Rousseau may be heard throughout Aleshkovsky's work, and to the comparisons that follow may be added in particular a shared hostility towards the intellectual class and urban prejudice.¹³²

The thought of Rousseau, especially as expressed in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (the 'second' discourse; 1755), leaves a manifest impression on the assumptions that underpin the more optimistic arguments internalized, or cited, by the narrator of *Ruka*. These arguments, which supply a counter-current to the suicidal drift of Shibanov's 'hangman's narrative', draw above all on the need for man to be reconnected to his putatively pre-rational feelings and original nature, and thus to be restored.

Shibanov is, however, no 'natural man' like Nikolai Nikolaevich or Voinovich's Chonkin. Rather, he may be said to represent (at least until the final pages) the very epitome of the modern man estranged from himself, in Rousseau's terms, and condemned thereby to a life determined by fear and false values, the absence of freedom, the spiteful need to dominate others and 'the frightful contrast of passion mistaking itself for reason and understanding grown delirious'.¹³³ Yet, being acutely aware of his own deformation, Shibanov remains a fitting vehicle for some of Rousseau's fundamental principles. He

¹³¹ Rousseau begins the first part of his second discourse with the intention to 'strip' man 'of all the supernatural gifts he may have received, and all the artificial faculties he can have acquired only by a long process'. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality', in Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, trans. by G.D.H. Cole (London: Everyman's Library, 1993), pp.31-125 (p.52).

¹³² On these well-known themes in Rousseau, and in particular his loathing of the intelligentsia, see 'Rousseau' in Isaiah Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty*, ed. by Henry Hardy (London: Chatto and Windus, 2002), pp.27-49.

¹³³ Rousseau, p.43. In the portrait of Stalin given in *Ruka*, the Rousseauian vices of *amour propre* and caprice are especially exaggerated.

knows, for example, that evil is not inherent in man, being ‘противное основанию человеческой природы’ (p.251). Hence in good part his susceptibility to the views of his religious interlocutors. Frol’s parables about reason and soul recapitulate many of Rousseau’s themes, such as the potential tyranny of reason and the need to locate fundamental principles, the ‘most simple operations of the human soul’ that exist ‘prior to reason’, according to Rousseau, and that should serve as our true moral compass.¹³⁴

These resemblances are reinforced by a comparably mythic, and deliberately unintellectualized, representation of history. In the second *Discourse*, Susan Neiman has written, Rousseau provides ‘an alternative to the story of the Fall’, in which ‘the problem of evil and its solution depend on the idea that evil has developed over time’.¹³⁵ For Aleshkovsky, also, human nature appears mutable. This theme emerges particularly strongly in Shibarov’s conversations with the Brothers, serving Shibarov’s cynical dystopian fantasies on the one hand (‘Мы выведем в конце концов поколение людей, которых будет тошнить от оргазма, материнства, сыновнего почтения’); and, on the other, the Brothers’ faith in the ability of mankind to reassert its predisposition towards good.¹³⁶ In the Gulag diary of a Christian cited by Shibarov, the *zek* discusses the trace (*sled*) of our actions, whether good or bad, that will be inherited by the generation that follows (pp.322-23). Such arguments suggest the possibility that future generations can be oblivious to the original ‘trace’, and no longer know or even care where their nature was corrupted. As in Rousseau, evil in *Ruka* perpetrates itself collectively, as an obtuse, even involuntary process. At the same time, this mythical and highly subjective interpretation of

¹³⁴ Rousseau, pp.46-47. At the same time, Rousseau, like Frol, does seek to establish the rightful role of reason, and its potentially harmonious interaction with the soul; but for both reason must know its place. See N.J.H. Dent, *A Rousseau Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp.201-3.

¹³⁵ ‘This assumes, in turn, that human beings develop over time, both as species and individual beings. *Human nature has been altered*. Thus begins the second *Discourse*, and its force becomes clear only when we recall how earlier thinkers saw human nature as much the same through time and space.’ Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp.44-46 (p.44).

¹³⁶ See especially Chapter 25, pp.308-18 (p.312).

the past, with its deliberately naïve assumptions about the progress of history and its absence of detailed explanation, retains the implicit memory of a moment, represented in *Ruka* by 1917 (and, in Frol's parables, by the divorce of Reason and Soul), to which this degradation can be traced, and therefore of a time preceding this moment of comparable innocence (and healthier society). For Aleshkovsky, as for Rousseau,¹³⁷ man's moral history could have been otherwise; and its vector could yet be altered again.

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It is Shibarov who, through his obsessive interest in the emotional rather than rational responses of his interlocutor, Gurov, locates most effectively the innate principles mentioned above. In doing so, he indicates (though he cannot exemplify) the alternative ethical framework that *Ruka* proposes in response to the Soviet ethos – one which elides Rousseauian values with the re-evaluation of notions of intelligence and wisdom.

In Shibarov's narrative the opposition of Reason and Soul favoured by Frol is elucidated as the contrast between a worldview which tries to suppress the guiding role of instinctual feelings (specifically, that fostered by Marxist-Leninist 'objectivity') and one which accepts it. Emotions, Shibarov realizes, are the indicators of the God-given values (*tsennosti*) which, he feels certain, persist in some form even in the most depraved Communists as evidence of the survival of their souls.¹³⁸ Hence his protracted attempts to flush out of Gurov a confession of remorse for his cruelty towards his own mother, for whose death from illness and hunger he was partly responsible. Incensed by Gurov's attempts to give him 'objective', rationalistic answers, Shibarov inveighs:

Ты мне скажи: жалко тебе маменьку или не жалко? Было тебе невыносимо жить или не было (p.289)

¹³⁷ See Neiman, pp.43, 45-46.

¹³⁸ He describes Bolshevik class morality as 'антимораль, оружие Сатана Чертилыча в борьбе с ценностями, данными человеку Богом' (p.305).

Интересуют меня не мысли, а исключительно чувства, ну а если формулировать точнее, то душевные реакции 'человека нового типа' на разрушение нормальных отношений к ценностям. Разве маменька с папенькой не ценности? (p. 298)

As these passages suggest, and many others confirm, the deepest 'feeling' that interests Shibarov, and Aleshkovsky, is compassion, the emotion which clearly connects the narrator to his own childhood before the massacre of Odinka and to the value (sacred, in his eyes) of the family.¹³⁹

The disposition to compassion is one of Rousseau's two innate principles by which we should take our moral bearings (the other being *amour de soi*).¹⁴⁰ It is also the disposition in reference to which the paradoxical re-evaluation of intelligence in *Ruka* is finally resolved. The hyperbolic attempts to prove that reason is 'obtuse' (*tup*) and that the instincts are wise point ultimately to the contrast between minds that are blunted to pity by slavery to the constructs of ideology and reason (p.515), and those which are still open to the promptings of compassion. The former are defined by the 'серая тупость' which Shibarov perceives in himself as his habitual frame of mind, and which is shared by the Devil, who is 'туп' and 'слеп' (pp.379, 515). It is the same 'greyness' mentioned by Frol when he speaks to Shibarov 'о нечувствительном к боли сером веществе мозга, как материальном субстрате человеческого Разума' (p.436).

This re-evaluation through compassion of the nature of intelligence accords closely with recent work by the philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, who, drawing heavily on Rousseau, argues that emotions can and should be viewed as 'essential elements of human intelligence, rather than just supports or props for intelligence'.¹⁴¹ Like Shibarov,

¹³⁹ Shibarov specifically discusses compassion (*sostradanie*) on pp.507, 515.

¹⁴⁰ '[C]ontemplating the first and most simple operations of the human soul, I think I can perceive in it two principles prior to reason, one of them deeply interesting us in our own welfare and preservation, and the other exciting a natural repugnance at seeing any other sensible being, and particularly any of our own species, suffer pain or death'; Rousseau, pp.46-47. Rousseau discusses compassion (*pitié*) at length in *Émile*; see also the useful entry on compassion in Dent, pp.51-55.

¹⁴¹ The re-evaluation also accords with the theories of Jung, who similarly argues for the 'rationality' of feelings and their intrinsic link to values. In his 'Psychological Theory of Types', Jung makes the important

Nussbaum finds compassion to be the emotion which best exemplifies ‘intelligent responses to the perception of value’. Indeed: ‘Compassion itself is the eye through which people see the good and ill of others, and its full meaning. Without it, the abstract sight of the calculating intellect is value-blind’. Where Shibanov explores Soviet ideology, Nussbaum provides examples from Nazi Germany of how compassion, with its ‘intimate connection to a true “core theory” of values’, could subvert ‘ambitious false theories of value’ and ‘Nazi rationalizations’. Finding a contingent but ‘deeply rooted’ link between the ‘obtuseness’ of such rationalizations and the absence of compassion, she cites for support Auden’s description of Europe in the late 1930s: ‘Intellectual disgrace/ Stares from every human face,/ And the seas of pity lie/ Locked and frozen in each eye’.¹⁴²

Most specifically, Nussbaum helps clarify the very literal identification suggested in *Ruka* of intelligence and compassion. For her, as for Aleshkovsky and Rousseau, compassion is not a purely altruistic emotional response. Indeed, its ‘intelligence’ as an emotion rests on its acknowledgment of the correlation between the good of another person and one’s own. Referring to Aristotle, Nussbaum calls this the ‘eudaimonistic judgement’, namely, an awareness that, ‘this person, or creature, is a significant element in my scheme of goals and projects, an end whose good is to be promoted’.¹⁴³

In *Ruka* this essential point underwrites a key image summoned by Shibanov to describe humanity’s natural vocation, which has been destroyed by the Bolshevik ethos:

point, borne out by *Ruka*, that it is precisely the ‘thinking type’ (in the terms of *Ruka*, the type most beholden to *Razum*) who is most reluctant to accept the fact that ‘feeling values and feeling judgements – that is to say, our feelings – are not only reasonable, but are also as discriminating, logical and consistent as thinking’. The reason for this reluctance, Jung posits, is that in the thinking type ‘the feeling function is always less developed, more primitive, and therefore contaminated with other functions – these being precisely the functions which are not rational, not logical, and not evaluating, namely, sensation and intuition’. See Carl Gustav Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, trans. by W. S. Dell and Cary F. Baynes (1933; London: Routledge, 2001; repr. 2005), pp.93-94.

¹⁴² Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp.1-3, 392, 375.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, p.321.

Классовая мораль разрушает поле человеческого существования, совместно возделываемое людьми с начала времен. Поле связывает, обязывает, воспитывает способность к сопереживанию, удерживающему почти всегда от причинения ближнему боли и обиды, мы рождаемся в этом поле, в нем нас хоронят, и если становимся сорной травой, то с поля нас – вон! (p.368)

Compassion, or fellow-feeling (*soperezhevanie*), plays a crucial role in the economy of this virtuous cycle. The passage implies that the person who lacks compassion betrays both his duty and his self-interest, risking summary eviction from the ‘field’, and closely resembles Rousseau’s description of the ‘internal impulse of compassion’ and the manner in which this impulse dictates man’s duties to others.¹⁴⁴ It is also notable, and typical of Shibanov’s narrative, that the metaphor of the weed (*sornaya trava*) should echo the rhetoric of Stalin at the height of the Terror, while giving to it an entirely different meaning. If Stalin spoke, from the late 1930s, of Enemies of the People as ‘poisonous weeds’,¹⁴⁵ in Shibanov’s treatment the metaphor forms part of an appeal to compassion as the emotion that should serve as the foundation of any philosophy of true communality. As throughout *Ruka*, the apparently virtuous but deceitful labels and rhetoric of Soviet Communism are being subtly refilled with their rightful content.

The above passage, and its emphasis on mutual interest and dependency, is also consistent with the Erasmian tradition of fool literature in which I placed Aleshkovsky in Chapter Two. A key concern of this tradition has been to deride philosophies that fail to account for shared human experience and entrap their followers in isolating intellectual constructions founded on false promises of rationality and control. For Chesterton, the target was materialism; for Erasmus, in *Praise of Folly*, it was Stoicism, the philosophy that, as Nussbaum demonstrates at length, influentially rejected compassion, insisting

¹⁴⁴ Rousseau, p.47.

¹⁴⁵ See Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History of the Soviet Camps* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), p.21.

instead on the self-sufficiency of each individual.¹⁴⁶ Aleshkovsky similarly seeks to strip away intellectual pretension to search for common bonds (what Stultitia calls the ‘binding force’ of society), and finds their greatest expression in compassion.¹⁴⁷ His ‘praise of folly’ results, like those of Chesterton and Erasmus, in an appeal not to the irrational but to universal values that rest on something comparable to the ‘sound common sense’ of which Stultitia boasts.¹⁴⁸ The worldview of Reason is exposed as damaging and even insane; while the apparently non-rational, or foolish, perspective – based on feelings and Soul – ultimately provides a reasonable basis for co-existence.

Within this paradoxical process, whereby the apparently non-rational elicits the genuinely reasonable or rational, can be traced the ‘transvaluation of values’ found by Walter Kaiser in Erasmian rhetoric and discernable also in Chesterton’s *Orthodoxy*. Just as Chesterton ends up describing himself (rightly) as a rationalist, after lambasting those who are limited by their misdirected reason,¹⁴⁹ so *razum* in *Ruka* is reinvested, in the speeches of the Brothers and other religious figures, with positive connotations, regaining its place as one of the important, but not exclusively dominant, faculties.¹⁵⁰ This process is part of a pattern that can be traced throughout Aleshkovsky’s literary career, being linked to his socio-political critique, whereby original (and often religious) meanings are returned to value-laden words that have been abducted and corrupted by Soviet discourse. This involves the re-evaluation of further terms within the discourse of folly and wisdom, such

¹⁴⁶ To feel compassion for a person, according to the Stoics, was to insinuate humiliatingly that person’s attachment to ‘external goods’ over which one has no control. See Nussbaum, pp.368-86. Whereas Stoics believed that the compassionate person, by paying too much heed to his emotions, would be susceptible to revenge, *Ruka* compellingly illustrates how the opposite can be true – blindness to another’s pain and the terror of swapping places with the victim (see pp.457-58) entrenches the will to cruelty and the dominance of that incontinent single emotion.

¹⁴⁷ Erasmus, p.34.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, pp.32-33. Chesterton also appeals to ‘common sense’ in *Orthodoxy* (pp.17, 46) as he does to ‘common morality’ (p.39) and the ‘consensus of common human voices’ (p.44). Like Aleshkovsky, Chesterton associates himself with the wisdom of the village over that of the intellectual (p.44).

¹⁴⁹ ‘I am a rationalist. I like to have some intellectual justification for my intuitions.’ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p.150.

¹⁵⁰ See, for example, the diary of the Gulag prisoner, cited pp.321-24. Here the value of *razum* and of what is rational (*razumno*) is implicitly upheld in his argument against suicide: ‘отречение от жизни неразумно, ибо неразумение тоже след, и наследует его следующий за тобой’ (p.322).

as *uchenie*, but also others only contingently related, such as freedom (*svoboda*), suffering (*stradanie*) and martyrdom (*muchenichestvo*).¹⁵¹

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These two chapters would remain incomplete without considering where they leave two important strands of Aleshkovskian folly – namely, the influence of Dostoevsky, and the relevance of *yurodstvo*.

The discussion above ultimately highlights the distance that, that, despite the many close echoes, separates Aleshkovsky from his ‘teacher’. The philosophy promoted by *Ruka* – whether in the speeches of the Brothers, or Shibarov’s metaphor of the field – combines pity with the characteristics of the typical Aleshkovskian hero of other works, such as *Nikolai Nikolaevich*: among them, vitality, good sense, decency, and dutifulness. It is at odds with the most striking features of the positive hero of the mature Dostoevsky, who, as in the cases of Alesha Karamazov or Zosima, tends to be characterized primarily by extraordinary humility and selflessness. Compassion is certainly as important a value for Dostoevsky as for Aleshkovsky, but in the work of the former it bears an essentially altruistic form (the case of Prince Myshkin). Moreover, the faith in the potentially redemptive value of suffering and distress suggested by so many of Dostoevsky’s characters is alien to Aleshkovsky’s fiction, where, as in the case of Shibarov (or Baikin in *Sinen’kii skromnyi platochek*), the effects of trauma and cruelty are demonstrated in a disillusioned manner. Within the Russian canon, it is Chekhov, not Dostoevsky, who

¹⁵¹ On martyrdom, see pp.518-19, where Shibarov explains the difference between bogus Bolshevik self-sacrifice and the genuinely spiritual experiences of the early Christian martyrs. On *uchenie* in *Ruka*, see the narrator’s ‘correction’ of Lenin: ‘Учение Маркса всеильно, потому что оно неверно’ (p.267); Shibarov believes that his own life has provided a different and more valuable lesson, telling Gurov: ‘Моя жизнь вас кое-чему научила’ (p.510).

anticipated most closely Aleshkovsky's treatment of suffering and compassion, notably in Gromov's indignant response to Andrei's 'parody' of the Stoics in 'Palata No. 6'.¹⁵²

These considerations also highlight the distance separating Aleshkovsky's narrators from the ideals of *yurodstvo*. Martyrdom and self-abasement are not sought by Aleshkovsky's narrators, but are rather imposed upon them. If the narrators of *Maskirovka*, *Ruka*, and *Sinen'kii skromnyi platochek* come to resemble *yurodivye*, then it is at the cost of the simple values they hold most dear, while the Brothers, especially in the person of Frol, bear Franciscan rather than Russian Orthodox trappings of holy foolery.

Yet, despite this, the sub-textual code of *yurodstvo* remains critical to an understanding of the writer's work, since the values asserted by the Brothers – of freedom and humanity – belong only to an ideal space (like the Brothers themselves, who never seem wholly real). The Russian reality that is actually inhabited by the protagonists of Aleshkovsky's central period (*Maskirovka*, *Ruka*, and *Sinen'kii skromnyi platochek*) is determined by the total absence of freedom, and by agents, directly named as Evil, that enforce the deformation of the personality. In this context, *yurodstvo* becomes perhaps the only available response by which the individual can protect himself from evil, albeit at a great and tragic price. This is suggested by Shibanov in his fantasy to 'put on' (*zakosit'*) *yurodstvo* and, at greater length, in *Sinen'kii skromnyi platochek*, an epistle to Brezhnev that casts its tearful narrator, Baikin, very much in the mould of a holy-foolish truth-teller, wallowing in the metaphorical dirt in order to save his soul (while losing his mind in the mental hospital to which he has been unfairly assigned) and hoping to prick Brezhnev's conscience.¹⁵³

¹⁵² Calling himself 'neither a sage (*mudrets*) nor a philosopher', Gromov rails at Andrei's 'sleepy stupefaction' (*sonnaya odur'*) and his contempt for suffering, declaring, 'На боль я отвечаю криком и слезами, на подлость – негодованием, на мерзость – отвращением. По-моему, это собственно и называется жизнью [...] Доктор, а не знать таких пустяков'; Chekhov, VIII, pp.103, 101.

¹⁵³ 'Я ведь пишу тебе и для того еще, чтобы совесть в тебе проснулась от прочитанного, пока не поздно'; Aleshkovsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I, p.615.

Sinen'kii skromnyi platochek also reveals the mounting difficulty in Aleshkovsky's work for the narrator to claim the distance required for the humorous philosophical speculations typical of fool literature in the tradition of Erasmus or Chesterton. Baikin is well aware of the absurdity and evil of the psychiatric system to which he has fallen prey, but his ability to intellectualize the ridiculous aspects of this situation will, the reader suspects, become ever more fragile, given the course of aggressive psychotropic medication to which he is being forcibly subjected by Vtupyakin, and the regular signs of his mental deterioration. The governing metaphor of *Maskirovka*, in which the narrator imagines he has been literally raped by the state, is realized here at the psychological level. In this social context, to claim the outsider status typical of the literary fool has become impossible, and the thematics of folly have been overtaken by those of literal idiocy and madness. The loneliness of the Aleshkovskian narrator has become purely malign and devoid of any consolation. Forcibly appropriated by the state, on the one hand, he is drastically isolated on the other, with the chosen form of Aleshkovsky's fiction – the monologue – becoming a tragic expression of the narrator's fate. Like Shibanov's father who, in a motif of *Ruka*, sent a letter to Stalin and received a reply from Ponyat'ev (Mr Concept), Baikin's narrative evokes the absence of dialogue with any human (or divine) other.

Chapter Four

Yury Mamleev and the Dissolution of Thought

Widely translated, widely known in his own country since the belated first publication of his fiction there in 1990, and the recipient of distinguished awards,¹ Yury Mamleev remains nevertheless a figure of uncertain status in Russian literature, both at home and in the West. He seems to have few admirers on the editorial boards of the *tolstye zhurnaly*, where his works are rarely published, and where they are discussed in highly derogatory terms, if at all.² Not one article devoted primarily to Mamleev's work has appeared in a major English-language academic journal;³ while book-length studies of recent Russian fiction simply ignore him.⁴

Yet Mamleev (b. 1931) has been a significant figure in Russian intellectual life for almost half a century: as a shaping spirit of a notorious artistic and literary circle of

¹ Mamleev was awarded the Andrei Bely Prize for prose in 1991 and the Pushkin Prize (Alfred Toepfer Foundation) in 2000. The first of his many publications in Russia was the collection of short stories *Utopi moyu golovu* (Moscow: Vsesoyuznyi Molodezhnyi Knizhnyi Tsentr, 1990).

² See, for example, Leonid Kostyukov, 'Forma pustoty' [review article], *Znamya*, 2 (2003), 214-15; and Oleg Dark, 'Maska Mamleeva', *Znamya*, 4 (2000), 185-87.

³ Interesting critical writing on Mamleev exists elsewhere, in longer and shorter fragments, and includes: Aleksandr Gol'dshtein, *Rasstavanie s Nartsissom: opyty pominal'noi ritoriki* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 1997), pp.277-301; Ulrich Schmid's exposition of Mamleev's philosophy in 'Flowers of Evil: The Poetics of Monstrosity in Contemporary Russian Literature (Erofeev, Mamleev, Sokolov, Sorokin)', *Russian Literature*, 48 (2000), 205-22 (pp.208-13); Eugene Gorny, 'The Negative World of Yuri Mamleev', <<http://www.zhurnal.ru/staff/gorny/english/mamleev.htm>> [accessed 14 October 2005]; Tatyana Goricheva, 'Krugi ada', *Kontinent*, 36 (1983), 382-85, and 'Pronzennye pustoty', *Sintaksis*, 20 (1987), 196-99; Natal'ya Mazur, 'Kobob', *Literaturnoe Obozrenie*, 7-9 (1992), 76-80; I.P.Smironov, 'Evolyutsiya chudovishchnosti (Mamleev i drugie)', *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie*, 3 (1993), 303-7; Mikhail Ryklin's analysis of the visual and symbolic aspects of Mamleev's world as a response to Stalinist terror, 'Tela terrora (tezisy k logike nasiliya)', in *Bakhtinskii sbornik*, ed. by D. Kuyundzhich and V.L. Makhlin, 2 vols (Moscow: Prometei, 1990), I, pp.60-76 (pp.71-76). There is also a good entry on Mamleev by E.Yu. Zubareva in *Russkie pisateli 20 veka: Biograficheskii slovar'*, ed. by P.A. Nikolaev (Moscow: Bol'shaya Rossiiskaya Entsiklopediya, 2000), pp.446-47. Of the above, only Gorny discusses a specific text (*Shatuny*) in any detail.

⁴ He is barely mentioned, for example, in M.N. Lipovetsky and N.L. Leiderman, *Sovremennaya russkaya literatura*, 3 vols (Moscow: URSS, 2001) and I.S. Skoropanova, *Russkaya postmodernistskaya literatura: Uchebnoe posobie*, 4th rev. edn (Moscow: Flint, 2002); and is entirely omitted in Robert Porter, *Russia's Alternative Prose* (Oxford: Berg, 1994); and Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos*, ed. by Eliot Borenstein (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 1999). All these books cover the years of Mamleev's literary activity, and many writers who, like Mamleev, are not obvious 'postmodernists'.

Moscow underground culture that met at his flat on Yuzhinskii pereulok in the 1960s and early 1970s; as a representative of the ‘third-wave’ literary emigration in the 1970s and 1980s, gaining widespread recognition for his fiction in America and in France, and through the émigré journals, where his stories were frequently published and discussed; as a philosopher with a specialist interest in Indian thought; and, following his return to Moscow in 1994, as a magnet of post-Soviet literary culture. The notion of a ‘школа Мамлеева’ is occasionally invoked to describe the author’s literary influence in Russia at both ends of his career: on the underground writers to whom he read his stories before his emigration (or who knew them through *samizdat* and *magnitizdat*);⁵ and on young Russian authors today, especially those who participate in Mamleev’s current circle, the ‘Club of Metaphysical Realism’. ‘Metaphysical realism’, with its implicit genealogical link to Dostoevsky’s ‘fantastical realism’, has long been Mamleev’s preferred definition for the literary genre in which he works.⁶

The reluctance of critics and scholars to engage with Mamleev may suggest that ethical scruples have obscured a full consideration of the author’s aesthetic and philosophical originality.⁷ As Eugene Gorny has written: ‘His name is surrounded with an aura of the most extreme spiritual perversity which keeps his writings beyond the scope of “normal” literature [...] It sometimes seems as if critics avoid his writings merely out of a sense of self-preservation’.⁸ On a purely literary basis, I would suggest that two essential features of Mamleev’s fiction (which has changed little over time) serve to discourage critical attention – the very same features, moreover, which, in their combination, render

⁵ See Yury Mal'tsev, *Vol'naya russkaya literatura, 1955-1975* (Frankfurt: Posev, 1976), pp.116-20 (p.116).

⁶ See Mamleev’s aesthetic statement, ‘Metafizika i iskusstvo’, written in the 1960s and appended to the author’s philosophical work *Sud'ba bytiya*: <<http://www.rvb.ru/mamleev/03philos/01sb/sb.htm>> [accessed 19 July 2006], pp.48-53 (page references to this long web document correspond to the print-out). See also Mamleev, *Rossiia vech'naya* (Moscow: AiF-Print, 2002), p.283, and the author’s preface to Mamleev, *Vechnyi dom: povest' i rasskazy* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1991), p.3.

⁷ According to John Glad, ‘Mamleev’s fetishism inspires sheer revulsion. His tales combine pathological violence with incredibly sordid sexual topics whose language and images would be inappropriate anywhere’; Glad, *Russia Abroad: Writers, History, Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Birchback /Hermitage, 1999), p.464.

⁸ Gorny, <<http://www.zhurnal.ru/staff/gorny/english/mamleev.htm>>

Mamleev's art among the most original in recent Russian prose. The first is its monochromatic emphasis on the most infernal human urges; the second, its use of language.

In Gorny's apt description, Mamleev 'made the realm of negative, destructive drives the only object of both metaphysical reflection and artistic representation'.⁹ Certainly, this makes for a very limited account of human experience, in which virtue, compassion and love directed beyond the self (all key concerns of the Russian literary tradition) are virtually proscribed; and in which the author appears actively to require the extremes of evil and suffering manifested by his characters. At the same time, the disturbing receptiveness of Mamleev's world to pathology, cruelty, egoism and moral obscenity (notably, cannibalism), permits catharsis and a paradoxical type of narrative and philosophical freedom – the freedom to look beyond the vicissitudes of human suffering on to the plane of the 'metaphysical'.

A concise illustration of this pattern is the story 'Kover-samolet', in which a mother abuses her three-year-old child for damaging her new rug (to the extent that the boy's hands need to be amputated), and then hangs herself.¹⁰ The 'metaphysical' perspective is supplied by an apparently feeble-minded relative, Maria, one of Mamleev's many infantile adults. Her unpredictable response to events appears to make of her the interpretive key for the story, a suspicion which is confirmed by the closing passage, with its ascent to a qualitatively different apprehension of reality:

‘Ничего, ничего в этом нету страшного,’ твердила она.

Но в ее глазах явственно отражался какой-то иной, высший страх, который, однако, не имел никакого отношения ни к этому миру, ни к происшедшему. Но для земного этот мрак, этот страх, возможно, был светом. И, выделяясь от бездонного ужаса в ее глазах, этот свет очищал окружающее. (p.514)

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ References after quotations in the text are to the largest published edition of Mamleev's fiction: *Izbrannoe* (Moscow: Terra, 1993). A useful on-line resource, containing most of Mamleev's writing in fiction and philosophy, is *Russkaya virtual'naya biblioteka*: <<http://www.rvb.ru/mamleev>> [accessed 19 July 2006].

The language and imagery of Mamleev's fiction are as bold as his subject-matter. Early in his career, Mamleev developed an impoverished and radical aesthetic which has changed little ever since. His style is deliberately unrefined in its syntax, collocations and descriptions; functional in its construction of narrative; and bathetic in its strong echoes of Dostoevsky, Zoshchenko and others. It lends itself to being dismissed by guardians of good taste as 'sub-literary', or plain bad.¹¹ Yet, in his most effective fiction, Mamleev turns this eschewal of stylistic sophistication to powerful advantage. Emerging from an underground culture in which stories were generally read aloud, Mamleev cloaks his philosophical and psychological enquiry in narratives that are direct and often folkloric. They are also very strange. Through his style as much as his themes, Mamleev aims to bring the non-material world closer, to implicate the reader in a murky, otherworldly reality.¹² Hence the pervasive vagueness of description and the abundant use of idiotic-sounding similes; of hyphens and prefixes that suggest uncertainty and smudged boundaries; and of other, often outlandish mannerisms.¹³

Just as Mamleev's language may be said to aim beyond language, so the sense of his words aims beyond reason, and beyond the conventional categories imposed by the mind. Mamleev often describes his characters as 'ошалелые', and this is clearly the fate that he also plans for his readers (as, in his view, Dostoevsky and Esenin had done before him).¹⁴ By shaking his readers strongly enough he wishes to render accessible to them the

¹¹ See, for example, Kostyukov, pp.214-15. The philosopher Mikhail Ryklin, while arguing eloquently for Mamleev's importance, concludes his discussion with a provocative comparison: 'Мамлеев и Бродский – это, может быть, два полюса нынешней русской словесности: абсолютно состоявшаяся литература, лишенная символической эффективности [Brodsky, one assumes], и литература, позорно провалившаяся в силу своей огромной символической эффективности [Mamleev]'; Ryklin, pp.75-76.

¹² Vail' and Genis perceptively describe Mamleev's fiction as a 'настойчивая попытка убедить нас в реальности ирреального'; Petr Vail' and Aleksandr Genis, *Sovremennaya russkaya proza* (Ann Arbor: Ermitazh, 1982), p.167.

¹³ In the first sentence of 'Kover-samolet', for example, the mother's eyes are described as 'сырово-замороженные'; while the boy, being beaten, 'орал, как орала бы ожившая печка' (pp.510-11). In Mamleev's recent novel, *Mir i khokhot* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2003), this style approaches self-parody. I discuss Mamleev's language further below, pp.235-38.

¹⁴ See *Rossiia vechneya*, p.23.

‘metaphysical’ level of his realism. The antitheses of traditional Western categorial (and dualistic) thought – such as good and evil, love and selfishness, God and man – are swallowed up in the pursuit of this over-riding ambition.

Philosophically, such a strategy is rooted in Mamleev’s vituperous polemic with rationalism and its limitations. Mamleev says in justification of his crazy and monstrous characters that, ‘Мои герои задаются вопросами, на которые разум не в состоянии ответить’.¹⁵ Such a distinction, between those aspects of existence amenable to rational explanation and those that lie beyond reason, echoes Kant’s separation of the phenomenal and the noumenal, the knowable and unknowable.¹⁶ Whilst making this distinction, however, Mamleev refuses (both in his fiction and philosophy) to respect the inviolability of the boundary between these realms.

As I will discuss, anti-rationalism is an ideological and philosophical contention of all Mamleev’s writing. It is also present in his fiction as an imaginative imperative, for, as Mamleev has repeatedly emphasized, ‘Образ глубже идеи’.¹⁷ Alongside the pervasive imagery of monstrosity, representations of folly, idiocy and madness enable Mamleev to suggest realities beyond the world of phenomena. It will become apparent that very different manifestations of ‘folly’ form a continuum in Mamleev’s fiction, from idiocy and madness to *durachestvo* and *yurodstvo*. Mamleev’s ‘praise of folly’ is a praise of threshold states of mind.¹⁸ Moreover, these states are described in a manner that is itself on the edge of reason, lacquering the narrative in shades of idiocy, or even schizophrenia.

¹⁵ Ibid, pp.285-94.

¹⁶ Kant plays an unexpectedly prominent role in Mamleev’s story, ‘Upyr’-psikhopat’. The vampire in question finds Kant a congenial thinker in his awareness of the strict limitations of reason in grappling with the divine and immaterial, and the illusoriness of the world: ‘насчет теории он [Kant] молодец: действительно, ну как из разума можно вывести существование Бога? Какого, например, Бога можно вывести из нашего вурдалакского ума? Ничего, кроме тьмы, не выведешь [...] Как здорово он определил, что весь наш мир – явление, кажимость в конечном счете!’; *Izbrannoe*, pp.486-90 (p.487).

¹⁷ *Sud’ba bytiya*, p.3; *Rossiia vechnaya*, pp.7, 48-49.

¹⁸ As Zubareva comments: ‘Его цель не в том, чтобы изобразить сумасшествие, а в том, чтобы показать психологический “порог”, переход от “здорового”, “нормального” состояния к безумию’ (p.447).

The second part of this chapter (pp.204-44) will be devoted to discussion of the imagery of folly in Mamleev's fiction and to a close analysis of a selection of short stories. Prior to this, in Part One, I will discuss the intellectual premises of his anti-rationalism, after first setting in greater context Mamleev's biography and intellectual formation, and introducing the fundamental themes of his fiction. The digressions from the principal concerns of my thesis that this will entail may be justified firstly, by the absence of a satisfactory critical apparatus on Mamleev and secondly, by the need to place the elusive thematics of folly within a framework that is meaningful for the author in question (by taking into account, for example, a family background in psychiatry), and that pays due attention to other equally prominent, and mutually related, aspects of Mamleev's fiction.

Throughout the chapter, I will be concerned primarily with Mamleev's writings before his emigration in 1974, including his main philosophical work, *Sud'ba bytiya* (written 1960s-1970s). In Part Two I will focus in particular on stories from the so-called Yuzhinskii (or Central) Cycle. I will, however, make occasional reference to some of his later fiction (Mamleev has continued to produce novels into his seventies), and will conclude with a discussion of two stories written in emigration in the folkloric style, which serve to recapitulate the themes of this chapter.

Part One

The many substantial interviews conducted with Mamleev since the early 1990s pay greater attention to philosophical and literary concerns than to the varied circumstances of the author's life (about which Mamleev is not especially forthcoming). Nevertheless, one can extract from them the bones of a biography, in both its official and unofficial guises.¹⁹

Mamleev was born in Moscow in 1931. His father was a professor of psychiatry and a follower of Freud,²⁰ who was arrested in the 1940s and died in the Gulag, events which Mamleev's mother concealed from him until he was older.²¹ Warned off the study of literature and philosophy at university (because, in his words, 'мои склонности были явно немарксистского характера'), Mamleev entered the Institute of Forestry. After graduating he became a teacher of mathematics at evening school, a job he held until his emigration with his wife in 1974, which brought him to America the following year, where he taught at Cornell, and then, in 1983, to Paris. Mamleev claims to have resorted to emigration as the only means of ensuring the physical survival of his writing, none of which had yet been published in the West.²²

Experiences associated with his childhood and family appear to have left a particularly deep imprint on Mamleev; and also perhaps on what we will see to be the infantile aspects of his fictional world. One of Mamleev's strongest memories of childhood is of his father's ability to cure him of phobias through hypnosis.²³ Another important influence was his aunt, a psychopathologist at the Kashchenko Hospital. He thus

¹⁹ The best of these was carried out by Sergey Shapoval: 'Izobrazhenie zla ne est' zlo...', *Ural'skaya nov'*, 1 (1998). This interview is available online at < http://www.mutabor.land.ru/faselist/Mamleev/mamleev_int.htm > [accessed 25 July 2006]; see also the other interviews on this site, and the useful biographical information provided.

²⁰ Author's interview with Mamleev in Moscow, April 2000.

²¹ '[К]ак это часто бывало в репрессированных семьях, она сказала, что отец уехал в командировку'; Shapoval, < http://www.mutabor.land.ru/faselist/Mamleev/mamleev_int.htm >

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

had ideal sources at hand to provide the real-life case studies on which, by his own account, many of his stories are based.²⁴

In general, Mamleev remains reticent about aspects of his own psychological and spiritual development, such as his reaction to the knowledge of his father's death; or the sources, in terms of actual (or mystical) experience, of his 'metaphysical' outlook (though he has suggested that these, too, were located in childhood).²⁵ His fiction is similarly self-effacing, encouraging critics to speak of Mamleev's 'mask'.²⁶ What is undeniably apparent is a stark non-correspondence between certain biographical data and the intellectual convictions expressed in Mamleev's writing, where mathematics and psychiatry are, as we will see, frequently derided.

Further light is shed on Mamleev's intellectual development by his and others' accounts of the cultural context of his life in the 1960s and early 1970s. Mamleev describes himself as one of the 'centres of gravity' for a group of artists, writers and 'wandering mystics' that often met at his flat on Yuzhinskii pereulok and that included the poets and writers Leonid Gubanov, Eduard Limonov, Vladimir Bukovsky, and (in the years immediately prior to Mamleev's emigration) Venedikt Erofeev; and many artists, among them Sasha Kharitonov and Anatoly Zverev.²⁷ By the standards of the burgeoning non-conformist culture of the time, this circle has achieved a remarkable notoriety. The *kvartira na Yuzhinskom* has been portrayed by the journalist Aleksei Chelnokov as the

²⁴ Mamleev's aunt is also said to have tried to curb the young author's alcoholic excesses, finding Mamleev a bed in the hospital, 'чтобы прервать его длительные запои'; Vyacheslav Ogryzko, *Iz pokoleniya shestidesyatnikov: materialy k slovaryu russkikh pisatelei XX veka* (Moscow: Literaturnaya Rossiya, 2004), pp.158-59.

²⁵ Mamleev limited himself to the following comments in an interview with Aleksandr Voznesensky, 'Metod "skrytogo cheloveka"': 'определенные вещи глубинные со мной случались. Но говорить об этом я не могу – это очень личное. И это может происходить с каждым. Особенно часто это в детстве бывает. А потом забывается'. See <http://exlibris.ng.ru/printed/fakty/2003-12-11/1_mamleev.html> [accessed 25 July 2006]. See also *Sud'ba bytiya*, pp.4, 9.

²⁶ See, for example, Dark, 'Maska Mamleeva', pp.185-87.

²⁷ See *Rossiia vech'naya*, p.192; Shapoval, <http://www.mutabor.land.ru/faselist/Mamleev/mamleev_int.htm>; and Igor Shevelev, 'Dukhovnyi otets russkogo post-upyriзма' (interview with Mamleev, 2000), <http://www.mutabor.land.ru/faselist/Mamleev/mam_ot.htm>.

home of Moscow's 'чернушно-подпольная богема'; the site of extreme alcoholic, narcotic and sexual excess, and of a fascination with the occult. Notably, Chelnokov emphasizes the self-conscious craziness of the Yuzhinskii boheme: "'Человек, не побывавший в психушке, – неполноценный человек", – один из ее девизов'.²⁸ At the same time, psychiatry itself appears to have been a frequent topic of discussion in the circle.²⁹ Indeed, Mamleev, according to Chelnokov, was known as its 'Главный Психиатр': 'Он со знанием дела расставлял ловушки душам своих приятелей, провоцировал их на безумные поступки, внимательно, как под микроскопом, разглядывал и затем садился писать рассказы'.³⁰ Mamleev himself has acknowledged his debt to modern psychiatry and compares his use of psychiatric cases to Dostoevsky's professional interest in *krimanilistika*. Where the latter served Dostoevsky's purposes of moral investigation, 'знания из психиатрии' served Mamleev 'для показа парадоксальных, "запретных" сторон человеческой души'.³¹ Instances from the history of psychiatry aided him, he comments, in his task of showing exceptional people in exceptional circumstances.³² They are rare recorded examples of the type of non-repeatable phenomena of human existence which, Mamleev argued in an article of 1979, science has generally chosen to ignore.³³

Mamleev rejects the more lurid rumours associated with the Yuzhinskii crowd, admitting only to widespread excesses of drinking, a symposium-like atmosphere of creative discussions and readings, and the 'unclothing of souls' (*obnazhenie dush*) in a Dostoevskian manner.³⁴ Myths aside, two connected features of this sub-culture bear particular significance for an appreciation of Mamleev's thought and fiction: firstly, the

²⁸ Aleksei Chelnokov, 'Melkie i krupnye besy iz shizoidnogo podpol'ya', *Litsa*, 7 August 1999.

²⁹ Ogryzko, p.158.

³⁰ See Chelnokov.

³¹ *Rossiia vechnaya*, p.281.

³² Preface to *Vechnyi dom*, pp.3-4.

³³ See 'Skazka kak realnost' in *Rossiia vechnaya*, pp.262-65.

³⁴ See *Rossiia vechnaya*, pp.191-92; and Maria Efimova, 'O chudesnom i real'nom', *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 13 October 2005, <http://exlibris.ng.ru/fakty/2005-10-13/2_mamleev.html> [accessed 15 July 2006].

putative detachment of this circle, whose members Mamleev describes as ‘представители чистого искусства’, both from political life (whether Soviet or dissident) and from socio-political debates;³⁵ secondly, its immersion in mystic and esoteric literature, from the canonical writings of Eckhardt and Boehme to the twentieth-century Traditionalist movement associated primarily with the esotericist René Guénon (1886-1950), a Roman Catholic turned Sufi whose ideas I will discuss shortly.³⁶ Both these features merit consideration in their relation to Mamleev’s intellectual and artistic principles.

With regard to the first, Mamleev’s writing reflects a desire to transcend socio-political and ideological considerations. Its location, however, remains the Soviet Union, and aspects of the Soviet context are everywhere to be found (such as the *kommunalka*, the scene of many of his stories),³⁷ while Soviet values appear to have had a deep-rooted influence as an ideological antithesis. As will be seen, the alienated Mamleevan protagonist subscribes in many respects to a counterimage of Soviet culture: against an optimistic propaganda of health and vitality, death; against collectivism and civic endeavour, solipsism; against atheism and materialism, an obsession with the metaphysical; against urbanization, a yearning for the forest and country.³⁸ Indeed, Natal'ya Mazur has read Mamleev’s stories not just as an inversion of Soviet values (and of Socialist Realist norms), but as their parasitic dependents, resulting in art as limited in its emotional range as the ideological system which (in her view) is being satirized. The

³⁵ Shapoval, <http://www.mutabor.land.ru/faselist/Mamleev/mamleev_int.htm>.

³⁶ Mystic literature was available in copies made from the *spetskhrany* of the Lenin library, or in translations from English and Polish; see Shevelev, <http://www.mutabor.land.ru/faselist/Mamleev/mam_ot.htm>.

³⁷ A stimulating analysis of the oppressive effects of the *kommunalka* on the psychology of Mamleev’s characters is provided by Ryklin, pp.73-76. Among Mamleev’s many stories in which the *kommunalka* plays an important role are ‘Vanya Kirpichikov v vanne’ and ‘Khozyain svoego gorla’, both discussed below.

³⁸ In his article of 1979, ‘Skazka kak realnost’, Mamleev criticizes the mentality ‘нашей урбанистической цивилизации XIX-XX веков’: see *Rossiia vechnaya*, pp.262-5 (p.262). The Marxist-Leninist mentality was profoundly city-orientated. For Marx, as Lionel Trilling has written, ‘the city offered escape from what he called “the idiocy of village life”’; Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p.20.

tone of his stories ('угнетающе безысходный') is, she argues, 'так же неизменен, как и радостно-приподнятый, жизнеутверждающий тон соцреализма'.³⁹

This interpretation, however, is itself limited, since Mamleev's principle of inversion also needs to be situated in its relation to the broader denunciation of modern civilization and spirituality that informs all Mamleev's work. His implicit critique of the materialistic, rationalistic and anti-transcendental premises of Soviet ideology forms only a part of a wider rejection of a centuries-long process of spiritual and intellectual involution (*involyutsiya*) in the Western world. To Mamleev's mind, the West is currently in a state of 'spiritual death' (*dukhovnaya smert'*), in which rationalism, scientism, widespread agnosticism and pseudo-religions have blunted the awareness of metaphysical reality that has underpinned all healthy spiritual traditions (such as that which survives in India).⁴⁰ The 'inverted' behaviour of many of Mamleev's protagonists – their escape into unreason, solipsism and an obsession with death – reflects the author's artistic response to a contemporary world that is itself upside down.

The primary model for this narrative of Western decline appears to have been provided not by Dostoevsky or Spengler, but by Guénon, whose works made a profound impact on the Yuzhinskii circle. Guénon is cited as an authority in a number of Mamleev's most substantial interviews, and his singular influence on intellectuals of Mamleev's acquaintance is explicitly attested in *Sud'ba bytiya*.⁴¹ It would be mistaken to suggest that Mamleev's own worldview originates or fully coincides with that of Guénon; but it is clear that the discovery of Guénon led to an extremely fertile meeting of minds. Guénonian

³⁹ Mazur, p.79. A different analysis of Mamleev's departure from Soviet ideology is provided by I.P.Smironov, who perceives a deliberate process of de-politicization in Mamleev's recourse to the grotesque and the monstrous. Mamleev's texts 'разрушают сталинскую конструкцию общества, возвращая чудовищному собственный смысл, отнятый у него в тоталитарную эпоху'; Smironov, pp.304-5.

⁴⁰ *Rossiia vech'naya*, p.240. For a caricature of pseudo-religiosity, see, *inter alia*, the key story of Mamleev's American cycle, 'Charli'; *Izbrannoe*, pp.602-20.

⁴¹ See, *inter alia*, *Sud'ba bytiya*, p.5; *Rossiia vech'naya*, pp.203-7; and the continuing references to Guénon in Mamleev's most recent novel, *Mir i khokhot*, pp.72, 104.

Traditionalism was a key concern of Mamleev's circle, having been discovered by the poet Evgeny Golovin in the Lenin Library in the early 1960s.⁴²

In such works as *The Crisis of the Modern World* (1927) and *The Reign of Quantity* (1945) Guénon elaborated to powerful effect the 'principle of inversion' mentioned above. The modern Western world was, in his view, monstrous, 'abnormal', ignorant and 'mentally disturbed' in its very progressiveness, rationalism and apparent sanity; its privileging of physics over metaphysics; and its self-satisfied agnosticism ('men glorying in their ignorance').⁴³ It was experiencing the Kali-Yuga, the 6,000-year period of decline that represents the fourth and final age of the Hindu cycle and that is itself characterized by inversion. The end of the Middle Ages marked the end of authentic Christianity and the point when the 'tradition' had been broken.⁴⁴ The Renaissance and Reformation had, Guénon writes, 'completed the rupture with the traditional spirit, the former in the domain of the arts and sciences, the latter in the sphere of religion itself'. The legacy of this rupture would be individualism and rationalism; and, instead of 'intellectual intuition', the fragmentation of knowledge and the victory of the 'profane' point of view, with its advances in 'practical applications of the kind which constitute the sole real superiority of modern civilization – hardly an enviable superiority, moreover, which by its development to the point of shifting every other preoccupation has only succeeded in endowing this civilization with the purely material character that makes of it a sheer monstrosity'.⁴⁵ For Guénon, in Mamleev's own approving précis, contemporary Western civilization 'оказалась препятствием для духовной реализации человека, ибо она подчинена

⁴² Discussed in Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp.221-40. Golovin and the philosopher Geidar Dzhemal', with whom Mamleev collaborated on *Sud'ba bytiya*, have since brought Traditionalism into post-Soviet Russia's political mainstream, through the Neo-Eurasian movement.

⁴³ René Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, trans. by Marco Pallis and Richard Nicholson (London: Luzac, 1962), p.41.

⁴⁴ Sedgwick, pp.28, 21.

⁴⁵ Guénon, p.10.

контртрадиции, в которой все ценности перевернуты и обратны нормальной духовной традиции'.⁴⁶

In all these arguments, Mamleev's writing echoes that of Guénon. In particular, I would suggest, Guénon ghosts the thematics of folly and anti-rationalism in Mamleev's fiction and philosophy. The notion of an inverted spiritual norm translates for both writers into paradoxical evaluations of the intelligence of modern (Western) humanity. Its dominant species – atheist/agnostic, materialist, and rationalist – is simply stupid, party to a process in which, Mamleev has said in an interview, 'Кульť денег, кульť обыденной жизни и массовой культуры неизбежно ведут к идиотизации жизни'.⁴⁷ Thus, the ordinary citizens to whom Mamleev's protagonists react may be described – as in the story 'Tetrad' individualista' – as 'pathologically stupid' in the emptiness of their spiritual lives; it is the apparently crazy protagonist who is, at least in his own eyes, intelligent and spiritual (if not normal: no 'norm' actually exists in the disharmonic Mamleevan universe).⁴⁸

For Guénon, modernity had mistaken reason, 'a purely human and relative faculty', with 'the highest part of intelligence', and had condemned itself to the rationalism 'of which Descartes was the real originator', thus obscuring higher, divine forms of knowledge ('intellectual intuition').⁴⁹ Mamleev's hostility to rationalistic interpretations of being is similarly acute, leading him to posit, in *Sud'ba bytiya*: 'Я не мыслю, следовательно, я существую'; and to argue in interview that, 'философия – это всего лишь рационалистическая попытка понять то, что рационалистически понять

⁴⁶ *Rossiia vech'naya*, p.207.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.208.

⁴⁸ On this disharmony, see Schmid, 208-9. I discuss 'Tetrad' individualista' below, pp.228-38.

⁴⁹ Guénon, *Crisis*, p.53.

невозможно'.⁵⁰ In his fiction, the critique of reason (*razum*) expands into a frustration with the mind (*um*) per se. His characters are either in flight from thought – 'от ума одна только скука' (p.636); 'Что в нас вечно? Не ум'(p.168) - or are caricatured for their absurd obsessions with rationalistic, problem-solving pursuits, which are presented as deliberate attempts to avoid the essential questions. 'Iznanka Gogena' (pp.418-32), for example, begins with the mathematician Vadim Lyubimov being informed by telegram that his father is dying: 'Любимов, потускнев от тоски, решился поехать, взяв с собой жену – Ирину. В поезде он много курил и обдумывал геометрическое решение одной запутанной проблемы' (pp.418-19). Lyubimov's father returns to the living as a vampire to haunt (and bite) his children. Unable to find a satisfactory 'scientific explanation' for the occurrence, the son begins to recite mathematical formulae (p.422); but even these incantations (recalling Gogol's 'Vii') fail to ward off his father's reappearances, and the son never recovers from this intrusion of the supernatural onto a rationalistic worldview.⁵¹

The allergy to Cartesian rationalism shared by Guénon and Mamleev is linked, in the latter's fiction, to a rejection of a dualist view of the mind and body, and of any dualist philosophy. Those of Mamleev's characters who are not obsessed by mathematics and other putatively secondary and illusory forms of knowledge tend to resist any form of activity which exerts the mind more than the body.⁵² Typically they escape from such activity into contemplation of the body itself, a process exemplified by the protagonist of the story 'Khozyain svoego gorla' (pp.506-509), who finds himself unbearably frustrated by his accountancy work, and even by the act of reading the Bible. All such mental

⁵⁰ *Rossiia vechnaya*, p.211. As Schmid observes: 'Since the true meaning of human existence lies in self-realization as God, Mamleev has to invert Descartes' famous sentence "I think, therefore I am". Thinking belongs to the human sphere of existence and hinders the realization of God'. Schmid, p.209.

⁵¹ 'В дальнейшем Вадим совсем скис; врачи ставили шизофрению, но он просто вдруг отупел математически' (p.426).

⁵² We frequently see them eating and thinking at the same time. As one character says in *Mir i khokhot*: 'Когда я ем, я люблю думать – для контрасту, для противоречия' (p.91).

exertion strikes him as a waste of his spiritual energies: ‘Точно он испытывает свой дух не по назначению’ (p.507). It threatens to lure him away from the purpose of his life, which he locates in his throat (pp.508-9). The Marxist conviction of the unity of mind and body (requiring therefore a unified science)⁵³ is thus ironically mirrored in the monistic worldview of Mamleev’s fiction. But if the Chernyshevskian tradition eliminated dualism by accepting only the material as real, Mamleev does so by accepting only metaphysical reality.⁵⁴

Mamleev’s anti-rationalism echoes Russian thinkers as well as Guénon. Dostoevsky, whom Mamleev avows as his primary literary influence (in particular, for his *Zapiski iz podpol'ya*), is a tangible presence. As Tatyana Goricheva has suggested, both authors examine and criticize, in their different ways, a perceived excess of human consciousness.⁵⁵ An author who invites equally close comparison in his treatment of *um* and *soznanie*, and his mockery of Cartesian rationalism, is Andrei Platonov, to whom Mamleev acknowledges a ‘strange kinship’ (*strannuyu blizost'*), albeit not as a direct influence (he first read Platonov in emigration).⁵⁶ In their highly literal exploration of mind, matter and death through seemingly ordinary and foolish characters, Mamleev and Platonov appear to share deep cultural roots; certainly, Mamleev’s observations about Platonov’s writing are often equally applicable to his own.⁵⁷

⁵³ See David Joravsky, *Russian Psychology: A Critical History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p.264.

⁵⁴ On Chernyshevsky, see T.R.N. Edwards, *Three Russian Writers and the Irrational: Zamyatin, Pil'nyak and Bulgakov* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982), pp.23-24. Terry Eagleton notes the broader philosophical interdependence and mirroring of ‘the atheist and the metaphysician’, taking for his examples Ivan and Alesha Karamazov. See Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp.47-48.

⁵⁵ Goricheva, ‘Krugy ada’, p.198.

⁵⁶ *Rossiia vechnaya*, p.284.

⁵⁷ See *Rossiia vechnaya*, pp.228-29, 253-56, and the comment that, ‘Произведения Платонова – это мир выпадения из рациональной вселенной, достигнутый как результат высшей “отключенности” его героев и их связи с первобытным, но великим хаосом’ (ibid, p.43).

Unlike Platonov, however, Mamleev's exploration of what is beyond reason is undertaken on elitist principles.⁵⁸ His doctrinal philosophy affirms a hierarchy of spiritual experience, and this vertical structure informs his fiction also, eschewing the values of humility and weakness promoted by Dostoevsky, Platonov and many other major Russian writers.⁵⁹

Although Mamleev's short stories generally trade in unusual imagery rather than doctrine (unlike such novels as *Shatuny* and *Mir i khokhot*), they also bear the imprint of doctrinal certainties in their assumptions about the nature of reality. The confusion which defines the Platonovian hero in his struggles to evaluate the claims of the physical world is strikingly absent. In *Sud'ba bytiya* the body is not rejected, but is described as one of the lowest levels of the self, whose claims are valid in so far as it can assist the disclosure of the higher levels.⁶⁰ Some of Mamleev's characters illustrate this principle in a quite literal way, finding in a part of their anatomy a foretaste of their divinity, and even an object of worship.⁶¹ Many others fail to recognize the body's role as an instrument of transcendence and remain trapped by it; hence, in part, the grotesque sensuality of Mamleev's world. In both cases, what is at stake is not a conflict between body and spirit (both belong to the sacred self), but a degree of enlightenment. His characters act 'rightly' or 'wrongly' to the extent that they achieve spiritual self-realization; and this achievement is made possible by knowledge of their potential, a knowledge which brings with it an inversion of conventional evaluations of wisdom and folly. If there is any compassion to be found in

⁵⁸ In Guénon's view, the interpretation of the Tradition should be the task of the elite. The Reformation elicits his particular scorn, since by establishing freedom of enquiry Protestantism left interpretation 'to the private judgement of individuals, even of the ignorant and incompetent'. Guénon, pp.56-57.

⁵⁹ Merezhkovsky argued that, 'All Russian literature teaches humility'; though he made an exception for Lermontov; Edwards, p.12. Perhaps only the literature of the Silver Age supplies a meaningful precedent in Russian literature for the spiritual elitism of Mamleev. On this link, see Gol'dshtein, pp.277-301, and Mamleev's autobiographical essay, 'Opyt vosstanovleniya', in *Antologiya gnozisa*, ed. by A. Rovner, 2 vols (St Petersburg: Medusa, 1994), I, pp.25-27.

⁶⁰ *Sud'ba bytiya*, p.10.

⁶¹ See, for example, the story 'Noga', in *Chernoe zerkalo*, pp.201-7.

Mamleev's writing, it is pity for humans' widespread ignorance about their own spiritual potential, their 'страшный сон о себе как о смертном (тварном) существе'.⁶²

In general, however, one is always aware of the pull towards a mystic plane of consciousness from which suffering and conflict appear as secondary, even negligible. This 'higher level' was described by Guénon as one where the antimonies of ordinary life cease to exist;⁶³ it represents the permanent (and generally unfulfilled) aspiration of Mamleev's characters, who inhabit a fictional world that is disharmonic yet seeks to point beyond paradox and conflict.

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So far I have been concerned primarily with the intellectual premises of Mamleev's anti-rationalism. In Part Two I will be concerned more with its imagery in his fictional characterization of the foolish, the idiotic and the mad. Before addressing this, however, I will introduce two themes vital to an understanding of Mamleev's fiction – namely, death and solipsism – and indicate some of the points at which they intersect with my topic.

The isolated existence of non-conformist intellectuals in the late Soviet period was experienced by Mamleev, as has been suggested, at the spiritual level above all. Beyond the enclosure of his social and intellectual circle lay a world marked by the 'spiritual vacuum' (*dukhovnyi vakuum*) into which members of his generation were born in the 1930s and 1940s. In his interviews and his brief essay, 'Opyt vosstanovleniya', Mamleev returns repeatedly to the profound consequences of an initial experience of total atheism in fostering a sense of existential terror and a heightened consciousness of death: 'Черный атеизм, который нам предлагался, рождает ощущение, что смерть доминирует над

⁶² Ibid, p.4. Mamleev continues: 'Нет ничего более кошмарного, чем то представление, которое имеет сам о себе человек'.

⁶³ Guénon, *Crisis*, p.29.

всем'.⁶⁴ Many within the intellectual elite of his generation 'прошли через тайный опыт "смерти", т.е. через опыт восприятия смерти как абсолютного конца'. The process, he writes, had the positive effect of forcing him and others in his circle into a lucid and self-reliant spiritual quest: 'Такой путь труднее, но вернее, поскольку среда не подсовывает готовых штампов, пустой буквы вместо духа'.⁶⁵ At the same time, this acute awareness of death appears to have been responsible for supplying the obsessions of his fiction, whose essential elements include graveyards, corpses, vampires, cannibalism and necrophilia, and whose overall atmosphere remains knowingly infantile, as if locked in that childhood past.⁶⁶ Mamleev's stories describe what one character calls his 'странный, инфантильно-инфернальный мир' (p.405).

Death determines the entire landscape of Mamleev's inverted world. As one character remarks in *Bluzhdayushchee vremya* (2001): 'весь мир – огромный труп'.⁶⁷ In confronting death in this way, Mamleev was confronting a taboo felt especially strongly in Soviet culture and Socialist Realism. As Viktor Erofeev, one of Mamleev's epigones, has rightly observed: 'Это всепоглощающая обсессия, восторг открытия табуированного сюжета (для марксизма проблемы смерти не существовало), черная дыра, куда всасываются любые мысли'.⁶⁸

This fearlessness in the face of taboo was one consequence of the author's underground environment, which liberated its participants from internal as well as external

⁶⁴ Dmitry Ol'shansky, 'Tri metafizicheskie Moskvy' [Interview with Mamleev], *Vremya MN*, 26 April 2002, p.11.

⁶⁵ 'Опыт vosstanovleniya', p.26.

⁶⁶ Several of his stories describe children being overwhelmed by death; see, for example, 'Yama', in *Izbrannoe*, pp.462-68 (p.462).

⁶⁷ Mamleev, *Bluzhdayushchee vremya* (St. Petersburg: Limbus, 2001), p.36. The narrator of 'Yama' meditates on the consequences of his inverted perspective: how he lives as if dead, and how he sees others in their hidden relation and attraction to death; *Izbrannoe*, pp.462-63.

⁶⁸ *Russkie tsvety zla*, ed. by Viktor Erofeev (Moscow: Zebra-E Eksmo, 2002), p.16. In Marc Slonim's words, 'Socialist Realism negated human limitations and avoided the problem of death and the human condition in the universe'; cited in Geoffrey Hosking, *Beyond Socialist Realism: Soviet Fiction since Ivan Denisovich* (London: Granada, 1980), p.2.

censorship.⁶⁹ Yet, in a paradox described by Mamleev himself, such freedom to face metaphysical reality was equally a form of constraint.⁷⁰ As a writer Mamleev is bound to death, and so are his characters, in whom this bond both embraces and exceeds the pervasive imagery of erotic yearning.⁷¹ 'Прикованность' – a word more familiar in the literary context of romantic or sexual attachment⁷² – is one description given to this bond, not least in the very short, powerful story of the same name, in which the young narrator becomes obsessed by a paralysed female doctor, as an image of living death and non-being. He gives up his career and family to spend all day by her side:

Я ушел от всех миров в эту прикованность, точно душа моя прицепилась к этому застывшему жирному телу [...]
 Неподвижность, одна неподвижность преследует нас. [...]
 Но постепенно у меня становится все меньше и меньше мыслей. Они исчезают. Одна неподвижность сковывает мое сознание, и все существование концентрируется в одну точку. (p.492)⁷³

The imagery of immobility, with its rejection of growth and thoughts, shares much in common, as will be seen, with the imagery of idiocy in other stories.

Living in a world which they generally perceive in its phenomenal appearance to be a joke, a mistake, an illusion, or a game, many of Mamleev's characters treat death as the only important reality. It should be noted, however, that this does not guarantee the seriousness of death in their eyes. Indeed, the potentially comic aspect of death – especially when caused by some entirely banal accident or trivial impulse – is a well-

⁶⁹ See Ol'shansky, p.11; and I.S., p.130.

⁷⁰ 'Это, таким образом, ситуация абсолютной свободы, которая в то же время тождественна абсолютной несвободе;' 'Опыт vosstanovleniya', p.25.

⁷¹ The narrator of 'Yama' comments: 'надо жить во смерти, каждую минуту сознавая ее, копошась в ней, как в любимой женщине. Человек, быть может, и есть всего-навсего мысль о смерти' (p.462); it is a play, perhaps, on Spinoza's proposition (LXVII) in his *Ethics* (1673) that, 'A free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a meditation not of death, but of life'.

⁷² Cf the opening lines of Akhmatova's poem of 1911: 'Сердце к сердцу не приковано,/ Если хочешь – уходи'.

⁷³ See also the opening paragraph of the story 'Udovletvoryus!': 'жить в смерти – это значит жить в отказе от всего, что наполняет сознание. Смерть – не шутка природы, а, напротив, необычайно глубокое явление, требующее серьезной и всепоглощающей прикованности'; *Chernoe zerkalo*, pp.183-88 (p.183).

spring of Mamleev's idiosyncratic humour.⁷⁴ He frequently subverts lofty notions of death as the surest gateway to the mysteries of the unknown, notably in his bathetic treatment of the motif of the vampire.⁷⁵ In general, those of Mamleev's characters who are most advanced in perceiving the absurdity and fundamental irreality of the material world study death only to be returned to an awareness that metaphysical knowledge (or the 'истинно потустороннее') must be sought 'не по ту сторону жизни, а по ту сторону человеческого сознания' ('Yama', p.468). For such characters, death, like the world in general, can become an object of play and childish folly.⁷⁶

For less enlightened characters, however, death is the reality by which a conventional and philistine view of the world can be purified and altered. In much of Mamleev's fiction the 'discovery' of death as an urgent fact exposes false assumptions and releases the repressed self. A lurid instance of this pattern occurs in *Shatuny* (written 1966-68), when the ailing Andrei Khristoforov – a seeming paragon of holiness and *smirenie*, and preacher of optimism and love – fails to come to terms with his mortality:

[Е]го вдруг охватил ужас [...] он почувствовал, что внутри его растет какое-то чудовище, которое сметает все его прежние доводы разума о смерти и оголяет его перед самим собой. [...] Это чудовище было его второе существо, которое иногда виделось в нем раньше, в глубине его ласковых, христианских глаз – существо, которое упрямо хотело жить и жить.⁷⁷ (p.43)

In the wake of this experience (a parody, perhaps, of the saintly death of Dostoevsky's Zosima),⁷⁸ Khristoforov sheds his rationalistic arguments about universal love and starts impersonating a chicken, which earns him the nickname *kurotrup*.

⁷⁴ 'Udovletvoryus!'' begins: 'Что может быть непонятнее и вместе с тем комичнее смерти?!'; *ibid*.

⁷⁵ See especially 'Iznanka Gogena' (pp.418-32) and 'Упырь'-psikhopat' (pp.486-90), in which the vampire cuts a banal figure, bored and nauseated by his existence in the *zagrobnyi mir*.

⁷⁶ See 'Pryzhok v grob', in *Chernoe zerkalo*, pp.22-36; or 'Yama', whose narrator tells us: 'Я еще в детстве [...] очень любил играть вокруг своей будущей могилки. Я строил её из песка или глины, ставил жалкий детский крестик из палок и играл около неё в прятки. Мама порола меня за это...' (p.462).

⁷⁷ 'Shatuny', *Izbrannoe*, pp.5-136.

⁷⁸ Kissing the ground and praying, Zosima 'тихо и радостно отдал душу Богу'; F.M. Dostoevsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 30 vols (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972-90), XIV, p.294.

Showing characters to themselves, the prospect of imminent death thus also discloses a desperate attachment to life. This new-found vitality is accompanied by an egotistic rejection of previous constraints imposed by rational or moral scruples. Beyond these constraints lies what would conventionally be designated as the monstrous (Khristoforov's 'чудовище'), as madness and violence. From the point of view of the subject, however, existence has undergone an extraordinary simplification, since nothing now matters other than the self.⁷⁹ Realization of this turns the subject against the world, and towards himself. If for Zosima, hell meant not being able to love others, for Mamleev's characters hell means not being able to love oneself.

In Mamleev's writing, then, the theme of death is thoroughly enmeshed with that of solipsism. The term, which surfaces explicitly in several stories, is central also to *Sud'ba bytiya* and its exposition of a 'Religiya "Ya"'. In the introduction to this text Mamleev argues that the term 'solipsism' serves merely to underscore 'тот фундаментальный факт, что – по крайней мере, в пределах индивидуального существования – бытие дано человеку только как его собственное личное бытие'.⁸⁰ This fact, however, is transformed by Mamleev into the absolute conviction that the self is the only available reality and the only available source of truth. His own notion of solipsism is distinguished, he writes, by a perception of the world beyond the self as the 'существование несуществования': 'мир не-я есть небытие, ставшее существованием, призрак, который может впиться, мираж, который причиняет боль'. Solipsism reveals the truth about this world, eliminating pseudo-reality and drawing its sting.⁸¹

⁷⁹ A typical illustration of this pattern is given in 'Smert' ryadom s nami (zapiski nekhorošego cheloveka)', where the narrator describes his feelings after a close shave with death: 'Теперь [...] я чувствовал только непробиваемый холод к чужим страданиям' (p.389).

⁸⁰ *Sud'ba bytiya*, p.4.

⁸¹ See, for example, *ibid*, p.12: 'жизнь для себя (и любовь к Себе) есть постоянное разрушение мнимой реальности мира'.

From such premises, it is not far to the contention of Mamleev's 'Religiya "Ya"', which he developed in Moscow in the 1960s: namely, that the higher self should be an object not merely of knowledge, but of worship (*poklonenie*). Man's obligation, according to this 'religion', is the disclosure of his divine status. This doctrine, as Mamleev discusses at length in *Sud'ba bytiya*, has much in common with the metaphysics of the Vedanta even though it arose, he claims, before his fuller acquaintance with Indian philosophy.⁸² It also represents an antithesis to the Soviet imperative of enforced collectivism, itself a corruption, in Mamleev's understanding, of traditional spiritual and religious practice.⁸³ Above all, Mamleev's system rejects the dualism central to Western spirituality, and its corresponding themes of growth, revelation, and dependence on others.⁸⁴ To Mamleev, the 'abyss' lies between man and the world, not between man and God. He makes about Indian philosophy an observation equally applicable to his own: 'тайна человека состоит в том, что он не есть человек'.⁸⁵

In developing a philosophy of solipsism, and even 'ecstatic narcissism' (which he ties, as in the myth of Narcissus, to the trope of death),⁸⁶ Mamleev plays with a variety of more specific cultural traditions in the West and in Russia. One is stated in passing in *Sud'ba bytiya*, when Mamleev compares this desired, absolute narcissism to God's infinite love of himself as described by medieval mystics.⁸⁷ Another is suggested by his emphasis on the aspects of Orthodox thought that celebrate the divine nature of man,⁸⁸ and on the practice of various sects, such as the *khlysty*, to whom he attributes the belief that,

⁸² Ibid, pp.17, 15.

⁸³ 'Излишний коллективизм советского мышления того времени, по моему мнению, нарушал правильный баланс между традиционной "соборностью" и интересом к внутренней стороне души в русской духовной истории'; *ibid*, p.3.

⁸⁴ Within the Russian intellectual context, an influential antithesis of Mamleev's solipsism may be found in the thought of Berdyaev, with its emphasis on the creative relationship between man and God as separate beings, each inadequate and unfulfilled without the other; see Nikolai Berdyaev, *Ekzistentsial'naya dialektika bozhestvennogo i chelovecheskogo* (Paris: YMCA, 1952).

⁸⁵ *Sud'ba bytiya*, 'Primechaniya', n22.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p.11

⁸⁷ Ibid, p.16.

⁸⁸ *Rossiia vech'naya*, p.241.

‘каждый человек – это потенциальный Христос, необходимо только открыть его в себе, в чем и состоит высшая цель секты’.⁸⁹ Thirdly, Mamleev suggests in *Sud'ba bytiya* that his themes of solipsism (and, by extension, narcissism) follow from a central concern of the Russian literary tradition, namely the description of the inner self ‘как бессмертного, независимого, свободного начала’.⁹⁰ Mamleev cites Tolstoy as the prime exponent of this tradition, yet it seems certain that Tolstoy would not have approved the absolute narcissism advocated in *Sud'ba bytiya*, even if he appears at times to have experienced it. Tolstoy’s diary records an arduous and vigilant struggle with self-love: ‘Смотрелся часто в зеркало. Это глупое, физическое себялюбие, из которого кроме дурного и смешного ничего выйти не может’ (8 March 1851).⁹¹ For Mamleev, in contrast to Tolstoy and to a venerable tradition in European thought (enshrined in Holbein the Younger’s illustration for *Praise of Folly* of the fool looking into his bauble), narcissism is no longer ‘stupid’.

This is one example of how Mamleev exposes, consciously or otherwise, the underside (*iznanka*) of his native literary tradition. The self-absorption and self-love of the Russian intellectual, moreover, is a theme not only of Mamleev’s work but of many of the authors studied in this thesis. While in Mamleev’s writing it may be welcomed, in the work of Viktor Erofeev, Dmitry Galkovsky and others it is subjected to mockery and the charge of idiocy in an entirely pejorative sense.⁹²

⁸⁹ Ibid, p.71.

⁹⁰ *Sud'ba bytiya*, p.3. See also Mamleev’s comments on Gorky in *Rossiia vechnaya*, p.45

⁹¹ L.N. Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 90 vols (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1928-58), XLVI, p.48 (I have modernized the orthography); quoted in translation in Galina Galagan, ‘The Young Lev Tolstoi and Laurence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey*’, in *Reflective Laughter: Aspects of Humour in Russian Culture*, ed. by Lesley Milne (London: Anthem, 2004), pp.57-62 (p.60).

⁹² See below, Chapter Five and Conclusion.

Part Two

Mamleev's short stories, which will be the focus of the remainder of this chapter, are better suited than his longer fiction to a critical approach that explores the tensions between the relative claims of folly and wisdom, madness and sanity. The numerous protagonists of *Shatuny*, to take Mamleev's most important novel, go far beyond the stage at which such dichotomies (which they would perceive as false) retain much meaning or usefulness. They all, multifariously, embrace the ecstatic madness (*bezumie*) commended in Mamleev's 'Religiya "Ya"' (a text which clearly underpins their solipsistic spiritual quests).⁹³ Occasionally the narrator does step back to remark, for example, that the characters' 'манеры [...] все больше напоминали манеры обитателей сумасшедшего дома' (p.101). On the whole, however, the novel feigns ignorance of its own outlandishness, describing an enclosed environment that becomes ever more delirious and esoteric, with narrative development giving way to extended exposition of philosophies akin to that of the author. Close acquaintances of Mamleev in the 1960s, such as Aleksandr Dugin, are perhaps justified in claiming *Shatuny* (despite its cult success) as 'нечто закрытое, не подлежащее профанации, предназначенное для немногих'.⁹⁴

The metaphysical concerns of Mamleev's stories, by contrast, are developed in more familiar contexts and lend themselves more readily to exoteric interpretation. Seeking to shock the reader into a spiritual awakening, they encourage a radical re-evaluation – if not outright collapse – of conventional intellectual categories. I will begin with a survey of general features of Mamleev's representation and imagery of folly, before discussing a selection of specific texts.

⁹³ See *Sud'ba Bytiya*, p.12.

⁹⁴ See his essay on Mamleev, 'Temna voda', <<http://imperium.lenin.ru/Lenin/27/russ-veshch.html>> [accessed 25 July 2006]. Dugin discusses the novel almost as a *roman-à-clef* about members of Mamleev's circle.

The imagery and language of folly and mental derangement in Mamleev's stories borrow from both archaic and modern models of discourse and representation. The contemporary vocabulary of mental pathology is situated in a fictional landscape which often recalls imagery associated with folly and damnation in the pre-modern West.

In Russian studies, this context is now associated most famously with Bakhtin's interpretation of Rabelais. 'Mamleevian grotesquerie', however, is not to be confused (as Caryl Emerson may have done) with Bakhtinian 'carnival grotesque'.⁹⁵ There is nothing of the cyclical vitality of Bakhtinian carnival in Mamleev's fiction, where all flesh is dead flesh ('весь мир – огромный труп'). Closer to Mamleev's thought and imagination are the apocalyptic visions of late-medieval artists, notably Hieronymus Bosch. Like Bosch, Mamleev presents teeming and highly variegated canvases of grotesque human activity, in which natural appetites appear to have been wholly distorted.⁹⁶ And like Bosch, Mamleev depicts hell; or, in James McConkey's more accurate observation, he depicts a world in which it is 'as if Earth has become Hell without human awareness that such a transformation has taken place'.⁹⁷ Mamleev describes the spirit trapped in flesh and illusion, and in the anonymity of urban spaces: 'Формально это место называлось общежитием, а на самом деле было скоплением мертвых, без всякого потустороннего выхода, точно застывших душ' ('Khozyain svoego gorla', p.506).⁹⁸ On

⁹⁵ 'Mamleevian grotesquerie does indeed recall the Rabelaisian world that so disgusted Losev and Isupov with its incipient "Satanism". What can be said of these various successive readers of carnival grotesque? Bakhtin, by all accounts, was delighted by its products. Isupov was repelled. Ryklin and Mamleev coolly observe'; Caryl Emerson, *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p.192.

⁹⁶ Whether in 'natural' surroundings (see *Shatuny*, in *Izbrannoe*, pp.90-92), or in the urban context of *kommunalki*. In interview Mamleev has himself drawn attention to the comparison between his art and that of Bosch (*Rossiia vechnaya*), p.269.

⁹⁷ James McConkey, [Review of Yuri Mamleyev, *The Sky Above Hell*], *Epoch*, 30 (1980), 93-94 (p.94). Occasionally, Mamleev lays bare this vision of the world as hell. The narrator of 'Upr'-psikhopat' exclaims: 'О это небо, небо над адом!' (*Izbrannoe*, p.489).

⁹⁸ Hans Belting finds similar imagery in Bosch's Hell, commenting that 'the window reflected in the cauldron [worn by the Prince of Hell] must surely be a metaphor for a room with no way out'; Belting, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (Munich: Prestel, 2002), p.35.

other occasions, Mamleev's scenes recall the Ship of Fools, medieval paintings of which (by Bosch and others) provided metaphors of damnation, illustrating, in Foucault's words, a 'false happiness [that] is the diabolical triumph of the Antichrist; it is the End, already at hand'.⁹⁹ A similar 'triumph' informs many of Mamleev's mass portraits of urban life. In 'Serye dni', for example, the drunken, gluttonous, cacophonous and lustful bestiary of the Ship of Fools appears to have sailed into the 'сумасшедшее чрево' (p.394) of Soviet communal life:

Там обитает разнообразный полупьяный житель. Очень много жирных, с отвисающим животом и задом дядек, лысых, матерщиников и сладострастников. Женщина живет всякая (p.393)¹⁰⁰

When it comes to the specific terminology of folly, however, Mamleev is more likely to borrow from modern discourses of mental pathology than from the language and imagery of sin, ironically resorting to the clinical language of materialist modernity to describe its psychic disorder. (Terms with pre-modern connotations, such as *yurodstvo*, appear far less often.)

The liberal and apparently careless scattering of terminology from psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis helps define the absurdist outlines of the Mamleevan world, where human experience is so saturated in varieties of mental derangement and inadequacy that pathologies leak out onto furniture, windows and stairwells (emphasis mine):

Домишко, о котором идет речь, расположен по Пищезадумчивому переулку, во дворе. Его давно пора снести, ан нет – он держится. На второй этаж ведет лестница с **шизофреническими** углами и провалами. В квартирке под седьмым номером двадцатый год живут четыре семейства. У каждого из них свои привычки, **психопатии**, выкрики; если бы описать все их многолетние отношения, то получился бы длинный роман наподобие 'Войны и мира', но с **психоанализом**, чертовщиной, мордобитием и

⁹⁹ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, trans. by Richard Howard (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp.19-20.

¹⁰⁰ The story ends with the image of a 'кружащийся в легком сумасшедшем танце мир' (p.401).

одиноким заглядыванием в самого себя. Но мы опишем лишь один день. ('Tol'ko by vyzhit', p.372)

Федор жил в угрюмой, до странности идиотской дыре где-то в гуще Москвы. **Идиотизм** главным образом выражался в окнах, которые смотрели на наблюдателя как выбитые глаза деревянного существа. ('Lyubovnaya istoriya', p.584)

Such urban settings are characteristic of nearly all Mamleev's short fiction and suggest that mental pathologies are, at least in part, the corollary of a process of cultural and geographical dislocation, identified by Mikhail Ryklin as the 'зависание' of Mamleev's characters between town and village. As Ryklin notes, the imaginations of Mamleev's 'urban bodies' are cramped by their communal surroundings; they now belong neither to the city nor to the country.¹⁰¹ In 'Tol'ko by vyzhit' this *zavisanie* can be felt in the very survival of the ancient 'домишко', now divided into communal flats.

The modern urban mentality has produced, according to Mamleev, an unprecedented plague of psychic disorder,¹⁰² and his fiction has been influenced, as was noted earlier, by the science of psychiatry. However, while it can be interesting to identify the psychological syndromes that are described, if not always named, in Mamleev's fiction, it is also the case that psychiatry and clinical evaluations of insanity – what Foucault has called the 'monologue of reason about madness' – are frequently the objects of the author's deepest antipathy.¹⁰³ Indeed, Mamleev's fiction may profitably be read alongside, and illuminated by, the work of Foucault, Laing and other critics of modern Western psychiatric practice writing in the 1960s and 1970s, even though he evidently arrived at his own views on these matters quite independently.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ 'Они истощаются в слишком тесных для их земледельческих фантазий городских пространствах, но и от крестьянской ментальности они бесконечно далеки'; Ryklin, p.74.

¹⁰² *Rossiia vechnaya*, pp.262, 206.

¹⁰³ Foucault, p.xii. Among Mamleev's stories that particularly lend themselves to interpretation as psychiatric or psychoanalytic case-studies, see 'Ne te otnosheniya' (*Izbrannoe*, pp.447-50) and 'Noga' (*Chernoe zerkalo*, pp.201-7).

¹⁰⁴ I develop these comparisons below.

Mamleev's stories continually emphasize the culpability and absurdity of the psychiatric profession, often to ironic effect. In 'Dushevnobol'nye budushchego' (pp.370-72) Soviet psychiatric norms are inverted in an allegory set five hundred years in the future. The patient Gorrilov is diagnosed with a 'больно интересный психоз' and 'хроническое состояние невменяемости' because he never experiences delirious states of mind, delusions or suicidal impulses: 'И вы подумаете,' says one doctor, 'ни одного бредового нюанса... Никаких стремлений на тот свет... Какое тяжелое помешательство...' (p.371). He is promptly isolated. Several other stories, among them 'Nepriyatnaya istoriya' and 'Iznanka Gogena', contain more direct stabs at the ignorance of the contemporary psychiatric and psychological professions.¹⁰⁵ This satirical vein is prominent also in Mamleev's 'American' cycle. In 'Otrazhenie' (pp.596-600), seventy-year-old Mary, about to die from cancer, is told by her psychoanalyst: 'у вас еще много впереди: целые три недели. Живите активно. Гоните негативные мысли и не думайте о смерти' (pp.598-99).

Evidently, Mamleev's quarrel is not just with repressive Soviet psychiatry, but with the modern science of the mind *per se*, which, he suggests, derives from a limited view of human experience and spiritual potential; from what Guénon perceived as the 'spiritual ignorance' of modernity.¹⁰⁶ In 'Lyubovnaya istoriya', modern psychiatry is presented as a debased science, infinitely inferior to esoteric mysticism (p.586); while psychoanalysis, Mamleev has said in interview, appeals only to man's basest nature.¹⁰⁷

The sciences of the mind enable Mamleev to focus his universal polemic against the pretensions of *nauka* generally and its 'mechanical', 'naive' efforts at rational

¹⁰⁵ See *Izbrannoe*, pp.374-78 (p.375), pp.418-32 (p.426).

¹⁰⁶ *Rossiia vechnaya*, p.55.

¹⁰⁷ Author's interview.

explanations of super-rational` phenomena.¹⁰⁸ These features inform the three stories from the Central (Yuzhinskii) cycle to which I will now turn. The first two, ‘Poslednii znak Spinozy’ and ‘Vanya Kirpichikov v vanne’, form a diptych of richly (if disturbingly) comic stories. If the former emphasizes the depersonalizing and despiritualizing aspects of institutionalized medicine, opposing these with the figure of an inspired ‘idiot’-figure, the latter shows a fool reclaiming, in the most graphic manner, his rights to his own body.

‘Poslednii znak Spinozy’ (pp.451-57)

This story – whose title refers to a schizophrenic who believes he was once Spinoza – begins by describing a medical anti-world set not in the future (as in ‘Dushevnobol'nye budushchego’), but in the malodorous Soviet present. The opening paragraph sets the tone:

Районная поликлиника № 121 грязна, неуютна и точно пропитана трупными выделениями. Обслуживают больных в ней странные, толстозадые люди с тяжелым, бессмысленным взглядом. Иногда только попадаются визгливые сексуальные сестры, словно готовые слизнуть пот с больного. Но у всех – и сестер и врачей – нередко возникают в голове столь нелепые, неадекватные мысли, что они побаиваются себя больше, чем своих самых смрадных клиентов. Один здоровый, откормленный врач – отоларинголог – плюнул в рот больному, когда увидел там мясистую опухоль. (p.451)

The grotesque evocation of the *poliklinika* is both fantastic (the doctor spitting into the patient’s mouth) and realistic. The dirt and discomfort are perfectly credible, as is the terse account of the brutal experience of the patients that follows, reflecting Mamleev’s concerns with the spiritual impoverishment of contemporary society: ‘Больной здесь – как и везде – загнан, забит и на мир смотрит зверем. В Бога почти никто ни верит. А о бессмертии души вовсе позабыли’ (p.451).

¹⁰⁸ The limitations of *nauka* are the topic of Mamleev’s article, ‘Skazka kak realnost’’, and science is often deprecated in his fiction. Investigating the link between ‘zhivotnost’ and ‘soznanie’, the animal-loving protagonist of ‘Kogda zagovoryat?’ tries to grasp this connection ‘в целом, а не объяснить механически, наивно, как ученые’: *Izbrannoe*, pp.495-499 (496).

If hospital life is conventionally thought of as clinical, beneficent and correct, Mamleev asks us to see it from its psychological interior – as sexualized, selfish and pregnant with taboo. The ironizing principles of his fiction are able to wreak particular havoc on the medical context: death and pain elicit not pity and good works, but despair on the part of the patients and erotic solipsism on the part of the well-fed, complacently healthy and psychologically estranged doctors. Another example of this pattern of psychological estrangement from the task in hand occurs in the early story, ‘Urok’ (pp.378-80). Such contexts allow Mamleev to bring his favoured themes to the fore, by juxtaposing the apparently practical demands of a hospital or school with the very abstracted, ‘metaphysical’ behaviour of his characters. They express a sense of the irreality (or ‘folly’) of public life in the late-Soviet era, a feeling hardly confined to Mamleev and his circle.¹⁰⁹

Nelya Semenovna, the doctor who supplies the initial focus of ‘Poslednii znak Spinozy’, is a woman of voracious appetites who scares her patients with medical terminology and rejoices in their fatal diseases. Her absence of compassion is shocking in the conviction of its common-sensical egoism.¹¹⁰ Reflecting the twin Mamleevan tendencies towards solipsism and an obsession with death, Nelya views external reality as a threat, a hallucination (p.452), or a trap (*lovushka*, p.452), whose very existence is to be denied or ‘eaten up’ (‘точно хотела съесть окружающий её город’, p.451) – hence her pleasure at the death of her patients, especially the young (p.452).¹¹¹ The only realities she

¹⁰⁹ It is reflected even in the fiction of a writer as far removed from Mamleev as Solzhenitsyn. In *Rakovyi korpus*, Solzhenitsyn makes great play of how Zoya enjoys her sensation of good health amidst her very sickly patients. And in a brief cameo towards the end of the same novel, we meet a shop-girl described in a sentence more than worthy of Mamleev: ‘Она вообще смотрела как-то метафизически, углубленная во что-то дальнее, будто здесь перед ней не реальные покупатели слонялись, а скользили их безразличные тени’; Solzhenitsyn, *Rakovyi korpus* (written 1963-67; St Petersburg: Azbuka-Klassika, 2003), pp.149, 443.

¹¹⁰ At a consultation she tells the mother of a sick child: ‘Если вы, мамаша, будете так переживать из-за того, что ваше дите все равно помрет, вы еще раньше его загнетесь’ (p.453).

¹¹¹ ‘Вообще почти всю свою жизнь Нэля Семеновна думала только о смерти.’ (p.452) The similes of the opening pages emphasize the self-containment of her world: she relaxes in her armchair, ‘как в мире’, and walks ‘как думающая булка’ (p.451).

accepts are her own bodily existence and death, of which life is just a 'frame' (*obramlenie*). A lifelong meditation on death and the world beyond has, as with many of Mamleev's protagonists, forever 'shaken' (*rasshatalo*) her consciousness, leading her to conclude that whatever follows death must be inexpressible in human language and categories of thought; all human notions of the afterlife must be false, being 'высосанными из земной жизни, из теперешнего сознания'. Death for her is the beginning of sense (the only thing 'о чем она еще могла думать "логично"'); yet it calls for a response that is beyond known sense: 'Ей даже казалось, что чем бессмысленнее – и вне обычных рамок – она видит мир и себя, тем ближе она к Богу и к истине послесмертного бытия' (pp.452-53).

In her thoughts and behaviour, and her frustration with the limits of ordinary thought and consciousness, Nelya is entirely in the mould of Mamleev's philosophy and typical protagonists. The story departs from this monologic pattern with the aggressive introduction of Petr Nikitych (Petya), who demands immediate medical attention and informs Nelya that he was once Spinoza, 'а теперь – идиот' (pp.454-55). He even has a huge tattoo of the philosopher ('причем в парике') emblazoned on his chest. Petya's behaviour is alternately manic and subdued, and he appears to have come to the clinic in search of a cure both for his malfunctioning bowels and for the schizophrenia which he is scared of taking with him to the other side (pp.453-54). Such a conflation of physical and mental ailments is in line with Mamleev's rejection of dualism and categorization; so too is the implied continuum between madness and idiocy.

Nelya is disinclined to believe Petya's claims, but she is nevertheless fascinated by this 'idiot' and invites him to sleep with her. As their relationship develops, we see Petya in two contrasting aspects: firstly, as a figure of idiocy and abjection (from Nelya's monopolizing perspective); and secondly, as Nelya's philosophical antagonist, offering an

alternative, optimistic metaphysics to the dark visions shared by most of Mamleev's characters.

The initial, visual impression made by Petya is that of literary and artistic cliché, an 'idiot' whose mental impairments are clearly stated by his physiognomy, which is repeatedly described as 'degenerate' (pp.453, 455). They are also symbolized by his incontinent drooling (pp.454, 456). This motif is significant, since the imagery of fluids in Mamleev's stories is a pervasive one, and, in its variety of implications, will be a theme of the remainder of this chapter. As we will see, the history, treatment and literature of folly – and in particular madness – has ancient associations with water; in Mamleev's writing idiocy, folly and madness persistently draw the imagery of liquids and spit. Thus, Petya declares his identity to Nelya 'брызжа слюной' (p.454), and the association of Petya's idiocy (even madness) with liquid emanations returns emphatically after their philosophical dispute: 'он начал хихикать, пускать слюни'; 'Обрызганный своими эмоциями, как мочой, он скакал по комнате' (p.456).

Such imagery is highly redolent of the symbolism of abjection described by Julia Kristeva in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (1980) and discussed, with reference to Mamleev's *Shatuny*, by Jan Peters. For Kristeva, in Peters' accurate summary,

the abject refers to the human reaction to a human breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other. An abject reaction is primarily triggered by the sight of corpse, or more commonly, by our bodily fluids and waste products, as these phenomena traumatically remind us of our own materiality, mortality and potential non-being.¹¹²

Mamleev's fiction is flooded in such signs of the abject, which serve as countless *memento mori*. In 'Tetrad' individualista', the cemetery where the narrator spends his time

¹¹² Jan Peters, 'Mamleev's *Shatuny* as a Negotiation of the Absolute and the Abject', (unpublished paper given at 2004 AATSEEL conference, Philadelphia), p.1. See also Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

is described as 'грязненькое, забрызганное' (p.535). In 'Poslednii znak Spinozy' the imagery of liquid bodily excrescence is especially abundant, from the 'трупные выделения' of the first paragraph to Nelya's 'жидкое от себялюбия тело' (p.452). At the same time, the 'abject' retains its essential link with its antithesis, in accordance with the Kristevan paradigm. Petya, as we will see, is an idiotic emissary of the absolute, while in the story 'Dnevnik sobaki-filosofa' (pp.458-61), the narrating dog relates the conviction of his acquaintance, Laika, 'что божественная эманация проявляется главным образом в виде слюны, или, более обще, сладости. Эта эманация исходит из рта Собаки № 1' (p.461). Indeed, throughout Mamleev's fiction, the imagery of liquids and waste appears to be reinvested with a sacred significance, suggesting an attempt to reconnect with the roots of the religious imagination and the first myths of creation. In the *Enuma Elish* of Babylonian myth, as Karen Armstrong has written, 'the gods emerged two by two from a formless, watery waste – a substance which was itself divine'.¹¹³

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According to Martin Halliwell, who draws on Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* to suggest the link between idiocy and abjection, the characteristic ambivalence of the literary idiot generates both 'intense fascination' and 'revulsion', and 'draws the inquirer near to the point beyond which meaning and social identity collapse'.¹¹⁴ Such an ambivalent reaction is provoked, for example, by the 'idiot' of Victor Erofeev's story 'Zhizn' s idiotom' (1980).¹¹⁵ In Mamleev's stories the association of the abject and the idiotic is also pronounced, but a modification of Halliwell's (and Kristeva's) model is necessary in order for its role to be properly understood.

¹¹³ Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (1993; London: Vintage, 1999), p.14.

¹¹⁴ Martin Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy: The Idiot Figure in Modern Fiction and Film* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp.51-52.

¹¹⁵ Discussed in my Epilogue.

Most importantly, the fear and disgust which Kristeva posits as our instinctual reaction to the abject (as a token of death)¹¹⁶ are not shared by Mamleev's characters. The abject for them is a source of pleasure, whether emanating from their own bodies, or from other people, who are acceptable, and can be engaged with, only at the point of their extinction.¹¹⁷ What is unacceptable and repulsive, by contrast, is the healthy, non-abject 'other' who, in accordance with Mamleev's philosophy of radical solipsism, partakes of a reality that is understood to be false but that can nevertheless cause the solipsist pain, threatening to divide his self-contained world.

Only one type of living being escapes this pattern, by being both a living 'other' and acceptable, indeed attractive: namely, the physically and mentally infirm. Like the paralysed doctor in the story 'Prikovannost', Petya in 'Poslednii znak Spinozy' is attractive to Nelya as an absent presence; he does not repel, despite the imagery of abjection by which he is identified. As we are told emphatically in a single paragraph, 'Нэле он нравился именно как идиот' (p.457); and the appeal is of a primal, sexual nature.

As throughout *Shatuny*, sexual desire is indistinguishable from desire for non-being, and Nelya's attraction to Petya is of a piece with her attraction to the dead, her 'увлечение умирающими' (p.457). It is also of a comparable nature to the 'влечение к небытию' noted by one critic as characteristic of the protagonist of 'Lyubovnaya istoriya', Fedor, who falls in love only once the object of his affections, male or female, has died, and whose only other human attachment is to his idiot sister, Nata.¹¹⁸ Nata is 'дурна' (p.584), a 'ненужная вещь' (p.587); her look, like that of Petya, is 'тупой'.¹¹⁹ Yet Nata is the one living creature whom Fyodor is unable to do without, even though he can't explain

¹¹⁶ Kristeva, pp.3-5.

¹¹⁷ See, for example, Fedor Sonnov's conversations with his murdered victims in the first part of *Shatuny*.

¹¹⁸ I.S., p.130. On the 'sexual attraction of non-being' in *Shatuny*, see Gorny,

<<http://www.zhurnal.ru/staff/gorny/english/mamleev.htm>>

¹¹⁹ Petr stares at Nelya 'тупо' (p.454); Nata's eyes are 'тупые' (p.585).

to himself why (p.586). In both these stories, the protagonist perceives the idiot as a kindred spirit: Petya's *tupost'* is matched by that of Nelya, while both Nata and Fyodor are characterized by their *idiotizm*, and even the idiocy of their physical surroundings.¹²⁰

The protagonist's attitude to the idiot (or infirm) is thus one of self-identification and appropriation. Alien to growth and conflict, the idiot supplies a desired image of passivity and stasis. Appropriating him, the protagonist populates his or her solipsistic world with similar, but subordinate beings.¹²¹ H. William Tjalsma's translation of an alternative (and still more scabrous) version of 'Poslednii znak Spinozy' contains the following elaboration:

Nelya liked him primarily as an idiot. And the knowledge that she was being screwed by a true imbecile was a pleasure to her, as if his sperm therefore would be blacker and her enjoyment more intense. It seemed to Nelya that she was now surrounded by unseen little idiot boys to whom she had somehow given birth.¹²²

Nelya's fantasy might well strike a psychoanalyst as a symptom of imminent psychosis.¹²³ In the context of Mamleev's fiction, with its inverted evaluation of the abject, it asks to be read as a fantasy of power, self-propagation and personal immortality, where possession of the idiot (sexual and otherwise) becomes equivalent to the possession of death. Implicitly linking the idiot to the otherworldly knowledge of the mystic, Mamleev makes of him a shortcut to the absolute, symbolized here by Petya's 'black' sperm.¹²⁴ The idiot thus refers to what is beyond language and representation.¹²⁵

¹²⁰ See the opening lines of the story, quoted above, p.207. Fedor is also perceived as an 'идиот' by the father whose dead children Fedor falls in love with (p.585).

¹²¹ Similar fantasies will be observed in Galkovsky's *Beskonechnyi tupik*; see below, pp.269-70.

¹²² Yuri Mamleyev, *The Sky above Hell and Other Stories*, trans. by H. William Tjalsma (New York: Taplinger, 1980).

¹²³ Jung came to such a conclusion about a dream of a comparable nature; see Halliwell, p.52.

¹²⁴ Nelya wonders about Petya's self-assurance: 'то ли это было просто внутреннее убеждение, то ли он знал какие-то тайны'. A similar contact with higher forces is manifested by the protagonist of *Mir i khokhot*, Stasik, whose name and role as an absent presence suggest close comparison with idiot figures in Mamleev's fiction. He says of himself: 'Чеpez меня проходит то, чего нет в этом мире'; *Mir i khokhot*, p.224.

¹²⁵ Halliwell discusses the idiot of post-Romantic and modernist writing 'as an enigmatic symbol for that which cannot be understood or fixed in a stable frame of reference'; Halliwell, p.51.

All this, however, accounts only for Nelya's perception of Petya. The story's key conflict stems from the revelation that Petya is able to challenge Nelya's solipsistic subjugation of him, and to articulate, albeit briefly, a contrasting philosophy. Such an open conflict is unusual in Mamleev's fiction, which generally avoids the tension of competing ideas;¹²⁶ in Petya, Mamleev creates a character against the grain of his own thought.

Petya and Nelya's philosophical differences are clarified in the bedroom, after Petya takes offence at Nelya's continued scepticism about his true identity. In his brief speeches Petya invokes moral harmony and the law of justice to explain his reincarnation as an idiot (p.455). He does indeed appear to echo Spinoza in his belief that the world is driven by a logical, if inscrutable design, from the perspective of which apparent evil is negated. In Spinoza's interpretation of sin and evil, elaborated in his *Ethics* (1673) and summarized by Bertrand Russell, 'negation exists only from the point of view of finite creatures. In God, who alone is completely real, there is no negation, and therefore the evil in what to us seem sins does not exist when they are viewed as parts of the whole'.¹²⁷ Petya makes a similar argument, drawing on the same distinction between the part and the whole, and the gulf in cognition by which the two are separated:

[Н]е думай, что я, как все эти верующие, понимаю только нравственность, забывая о познании. Наоборот, я убежден, что именно в познании ключ к нравственности. Когда мы действительно познаем потустороннее, когда спадет пелена и мы увидим, в каком конкретном отношении находится наша земная жизнь — эта малая часть великого — ко всему остальному, то, естественно, все наши представления изменятся, и мы увидим, что зло — это иллюзия, и на самом деле мир по-настоящему справедлив... Да, да... И этот самый кролик, которого ты так сладко пережевываешь... Да, да... Не смейся... И его существование будет оправдано... (p.456)

Characteristically for recent Russian fiction, Mamleev introduces philosophy through comedy and bathos, via the foolishness and low social status of the speaker (the tattoos

¹²⁶ The story 'Krysa' is typical in this regard, describing the overwhelming impact of an aggressive philosopher on an accidental interlocutor in a pub; *Izbrannoe*, pp.547-52.

¹²⁷ Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p.548.

covering Petya's body mark him out as 'приблатненный', pp.454, 455). Nelya laughs at the incongruity of such fine words 'в устах такого идиота, как Петя' (p.456). Nevertheless, she answers his arguments, challenging him: 'почему ты уверен, что, когда спадет пелена, все окажется таким уж благополучным?'. She dismisses what she perceives to be his narrowly ethical concerns as secondary to a cosmic process whose aim is 'связана с расширением самобытия, самосознания' (p.456).

Nelya's metaphysical intuitions about a cosmic mystery that is potentially both terrible and mind-transforming are, once again, reminiscent of Mamleev's own in *Sud'ba bytiya* and his stories; so too is her rejection of the primary significance of ethics. Petya's reaction after Nelya's speech might suggest that she has won the argument: 'В конце этой тирады Нэля вдруг заметила, что Петя опять подурел. Его взгляд потух, лицо приняло придурковатое, выдуманное выражение; он начал хихикать, пускать слюни... и наконец запел популярные песни' (p.456).

But the story does not quite end here. The affair continues and Nelya even starts taking Petya on her rounds. He exerts a surprising influence on her patients: 'Петя всем своим видом и нелепыми высказываниями вселял в больных уверенность в устойчивость загробного мира'. Inexplicably, however, the public in the area serviced by Nelya's hospital begins to die off in vast numbers. Nelya's joy at this development is unconfined: 'она позабыла обо всем на свете, даже о своем экзистенциальном чревоугодии' (p.457). She forgets about Petr Nikitych, too, who disappears. The story ends on an ambiguous note, suggesting perhaps, as at the conclusion of Mamleev's *skazka* 'Erema-Durak i smert' (p.630), that the enigmatic wisdom of the fool has not been heeded:

[О]дна страшная история напугала ее. Петр Никитич исчез.

На столе лежала записка: 'Уехал в Голландию'.

'Прозевала, прозевала, – мучительно подумала Нэля Семеновна. – Из-за моего увлечения умирающими... Он не вынес равнодушия к себе. Ушел.'

И она осталась одна – наедине со смертью. (p.457)

This coda emphasizes the serious concerns veiled by the story's vigorous comedy. The intensity of Nelya's distress at Petya's disappearance ('страшная история'; 'мучительно подумала') suggests that Petya, uniquely, has succeeded in undermining her philosophical, self-centered outlook. What, then, is the essence of this conflict?

On the one hand, Nelya and Petya are mirror-image antagonists, linked by their language and even by their assonant nicknames.¹²⁸ Their 'philosophical' speeches echo one another closely, as in their shared conviction that the mysteries will be revealed 'когда спадет пелена' (p.456) – a reference, it seems, to the Buddhist and Hindu notion of *maya*, which is connected in *Sud'ba bytiya* to the assertion that those who exist under the power of its illusion, and fail in the mission of divine self-realization (*Bogorealizatsiya*), are obliged to play a 'шутовскую и страшную роль'.¹²⁹

Nelya's intuition of what will be revealed once the veil is lifted ('может открыться новое зло, более глубокое и страшное...', p.456) directly opposes Petya's optimism. Mamleevan anti-rationalism, in the thoughts and words of Nelya, is set against its apparent opposite: the Spinozan rationalism that was advocated as an important predecessor by Hegel and, subsequently, the Russian materialists of the nineteenth century.¹³⁰ The story proposes antithetical systems that also share similarities in their inherent mysticism, and in their hierarchical and teleological tendencies. Both appear to brook no argument.

Yet, beyond his skeletal philosophy, Petya does bring something qualitatively new to the established concerns of Mamleev's fiction, challenging its tyranny of solipsism. He

¹²⁸ Petya's use of the phrase 'эта малая часть великого' (p.456), for example, echoes Nelya's awareness, expressed before Petya comes on the scene, that 'то, что мы видим; только жалкая часть всего мира' (p.452).

¹²⁹ *Sud'ba bytiya*, pp.33-36 (p.36).

¹³⁰ T.R.N. Edwards notes that 'Chernyshevsky finds Spinoza, together with Aristotle, an early advocate of his "anthropological theory", which denies unknowable areas in the field of human conduct and thought'; Edwards, pp.8-9, n10.

serves, however unconsciously, as an agent of division and change, not just for Nelya, but also her patients, who respond to Petya as a new god or father, and even wish to enter his skin ('как бы влезть в его существование', p.457). In his frequent absurdity, apparent naivety and idiocy, he tempts comparison with various celebrated manifestations of Christian folly in Russian literature, such as Bulgakov's Yeshua, who like Petya appears to deny the reality of evil;¹³¹ and, above all, Dostoevsky's Myshkin. Like Myshkin he arrives out of nowhere, as if from the other world, to present a naïve idea of optimism to a cynical audience that is more inclined to find him absurd.¹³² His unpredictable and transient mental states recall those of Myshkin, and the relapse into total *odurenje* that follows his argument with Nelya recalls the black-out of consciousness that marks the final stages of Myshkin's epileptic fits. Both Petya and Myshkin challenge the borders between madness and sanity, sickness and health; and both are mystified by society's definition of them as idiots and eccentrics.¹³³ Finally, like Myshkin, Petya vanishes at the end of the story, unable, the narrator explains, to endure Nelya's indifference.¹³⁴

Yet there are key revisions, too, in Mamleev's idiot. While remaining a figure of extremes, opposed to indifference, Petya brings the message not of love but of near-mystical cognition, as Nelya recognizes (p.456). Like Viktor Erofeev in 'Zhizn' s idiotom',¹³⁵ Mamleev responds to the capacity of the Dostoevskian idiot to attract others by revising the nature of this attraction in a coarsely sexual key. He transforms Myshkin's

¹³¹ Edwards cites Yeshua's 'simple-minded assertion that "there are no evil people on earth"' and finds in him 'something of the Holy Fool'; Edwards, pp.166-67.

¹³² "Вы мне не верите," с ненавистью выдавил он, глядя на Нэлю. "Все вы такие здесь, на земле, скептики"(p.454).

¹³³ See Martin Halliwell's excellent discussion of 'epilepsy and idiocy' in *Idiot*; Halliwell, pp.79-86. Halliwell cites Myshkin's question, applicable also to Petya: 'But what sort of an idiot am I now when I know myself that people take me for an idiot?' (p.83).

¹³⁴ Though not even an avowed Christian, Petya is interpreted by society (Nelya's patients) as a saviour figure. In this sense, he plays the role of the 'missing person' perceptively identified by James McConkey. Mamleev's concern, according to McConkey, 'is with a world which, having lost any shared religious or metaphysical values, has become meaningless. In a sense, the missing person in these stories is Christ: deprived of His example, Mamleyev's characters turn wholly inward'; McConkey, p.93.

¹³⁵ See my Epilogue.

Christian folly of love, however, not into the aggressive madness of Erofeev's idiot, but into what Nelya perceives as the folly of philosophical optimism.

'Vanya Kirpichikov v vanne' (pp.503-6)

One of Mamleev's many eccentrics of the *kommunalka*, Vanya Kirpichikov is given to spending inordinate amounts of time in the bath, taking with him a guitar and a bundle of filthy clothes. Once in the tub, Vanya likes to look at his body and sing, in a manner described in the very brief preface to Vanya's 'записи' as 'лихо-полоумное' (p.503). Generic words for 'half-witted' or 'crazy' are dotted throughout the story. Vanya describes how, in the bath, 'Я на собственное тело как кот на сумасшедшее масло смотрю... Вроде вкусно, но чудно больно' (p.503). Bathing brings him to ecstasy, 'полоумие' and the complete absence of thought (p.505). Vanya's actions are also 'crazy', including a minor act of auto-cannibalism and attempts to run away from his own body.

Vanya's behaviour is a source of some anxiety to his neighbours, who lock their doors and at one stage call the police (p.505). But there appears to be affection as well as caution in their attitude towards him: the neighbours try to help Vanya after he injures himself (p.504), while old Nastas'ya Vasil'evna calls him 'наш-то' (p.503). The neighbours, one feels, are prepared to put up with Vanya: he is, at least, *their* 'madman', to whom they can afford some indulgence and pity – rather as the Russian village once treated its fools.

Idiocy in Mamleev's writing invites associations with immobility, infirmity and the sudden illumination and darkening of consciousness; stories such as 'Vanya Kirpichikov', by contrast, suggest foolishness or *durachestvo*. Needless to say, both paradigms are hardly fixed, and bear a certain relation to madness: to schizophrenia and apparent mental

damage in the case of Petya; and to a less readily definable quality of blessed craziness in Vanya.

Although Vanya does not identify himself as a *durak*, he recalls other characters who do, both in Mamleev's fiction and in the work of other writers studied in this thesis – most notably, Yuz Aleshkovsky's Nikolai Nikolaevich. And although the story is set largely in one room (the bathroom), Vanya Kirpichikov is characterized by a radical unpredictability of movement and thought, similar to that of the protagonist of the comparable story 'Chelovek s loshadinym begom' (pp.468-71), who readily defines himself as a *durak* (p.468). In both these stories, the narrator-protagonist is a compulsive runner who expresses and enacts his desire to escape from himself ('из тюрьмы своей вырваться', p.471) in accesses of spiritual yearning.¹³⁶ This emphasis in both stories on running suggests a possible comparison with the *beguny*, who, in Mamleev's brief survey of Russian sects in *Rossiia vechnaya*, are mentioned alongside the *netovtsy* as examples of religious anarchy. Certainly, Kirpichikov's religious practices are highly unconventional and, as we will see, explicitly opposed to state authority; they are also as anti-rationalist as any of the sectarian practices Mamleev describes.¹³⁷

The setting and style of 'Vanya Kirpichikov' also call for broader literary comparisons. Describing the bliss of bathing, Vanya compares himself to Dostoevsky's idiot: 'улыбка-то на мне тогда Божья, как все равно у князя Мышкина' (p.505). This throwaway reference – which is better understood as an example of Mamleev's affectionate parodying of Dostoevsky than as a meaningful parallel¹³⁸ – serves to remind us of the observation made in the preface: that Kirpichikov is something of a bookworm

¹³⁶ See the last page of 'Chelovek s loshadinym begom' (p.471): 'Я побежал. Я от мыслей часто бегу'. In the final sentence he asks, 'Господи, когда же я к тебе улечу?!'

¹³⁷ *Rossiia vechnaya*, p.73. At the start of his survey, Mamleev contrasts native Russian 'самобытные секты' with the Protestant 'rationalist' sects that arrived from the West; *ibid*, p.70.

¹³⁸ Cf Gol'dshtein, p.278: 'С Достоевским [...] у Мамлеева разговор непростой: он Федором Михайловичем, при всем к нему колоссальном респекте, большей частью манипулирует в стиле поп-артного писчебумажного Диснейланда только-для-взрослых'.

(p.503). Certainly, Kirpichikov's account is not without literary pedigree. The upheaval in hygienic practice demanded by urban, Soviet life was observed with amusement and good-humoured irony by several writers before Mamleev. Zoshchenko, himself an aquaphobe, set two of his most celebrated stories, 'Banya' and 'Krizis' (1925), in watery contexts.¹³⁹ In 'Krizis' the narrator relates how, during the 'crisis' of living space, he was fixed up with a bathroom as his home. The story might well be compared at length to 'Vanya Kirpichikov', whether for its setting, its *skaz*, or its none-too-clever, innocent-sounding protagonist, who is, however, not quite as eccentric as Vanya (rather, it is the situation in which he finds himself that is abnormal).¹⁴⁰ Another significant precedent from the 1920s has been suggested by Natal'ya Mazur, who cites Mayakovsky's poem, 'Rasskaz liteishchika Ivana Kozyreva o vselenii v novuyu kvartiru', as an 'апология тела' in which the act of bathing becomes almost equivalent to the cleansing of one's spirit in church.¹⁴¹ In Mamleev's story, I would add, bathing ceremonies are similarly presented as a surrogate religion ('Наш-то уже в церкву свою безбожную побёг, – говорит обычно старушка Настасья Васильевна'), though Vanya likes to stand the Soviet ideal of good hygiene on its head: 'люблю, из ванны вылезая, во все грязное одеться, так противоречия больше' (p.503).¹⁴²

The contradiction between dirt and cleanliness is just one of many sustained by Vanya Kirpichikov. In their totality, these contradictions serve to emphasize the self-sufficiency and self-containment of Vanya's existence, the encompassing of the binary

¹³⁹ On Zoshchenko's fear of water, see Zinovy Zinik, 'Fish in a Nice Dry Box', *Times Literary Supplement*, 4 January 2002, p.11.

¹⁴⁰ See Mikhail Zoshchenko, 'Banya' and 'Krizis', in *Sobranie sochinenii*, 4 vols (Moscow: Imperium, 2002), pp.288-90, 331-33. The influence of Zoshchenko on Mamleev, both stylistically and generically, seems undeniable, whether in the construction of the comic vignette or in the colloquial register used.

¹⁴¹ Mazur, p.79.

¹⁴² A parallel can be found in Sasha Sokolov's *Palisandriya*. As the critic 'I.S.' has written about Sokolov's hero: 'Одна из маней героя – грязевые ванны. Очищение равно загрязнению. Воля субъекта быть телесно самотождественным (чистым) не отделима от желания быть чужим себе (грязным)'. I.S., p.139.

patterns of being within the experience of a single individual. Like Petya ('Spinoza'), Vanya provides an image of wholeness unavailable to the non-foolish.

The development of the thematics of folly in 'Vanya Kirpichikov v vanne' revolves around two central elements, which I will discuss in turn: Vanya's body and the water into which it is immersed.

Vanya regards his body as miraculous and sacred; but also as an obstacle to full spiritual self-realization.¹⁴³ This ambivalence relates to a broader ambivalence prevalent in literary representations of the fool, whereby the fool is marked by a pronounced physicality and sexuality on the one hand, and, on the other, by a porous sense of self and a tendency to imitate and identify with others.¹⁴⁴ Mamleev's fools regard their physical reality, and especially their brain matter, with quizzical fascination, as something incommensurable with their perceived selves. In 'Chelovek s loshadinym begom', for example, the narrator interrogates his anatomy ('Интересно, мозги у меня серые, а как можно серостью думать?!' p.470), and is himself interrogated by it: 'каждый кончик свой вопрос имеет. Нога спрашивает – зачем?!' (p.471). His wish to query the importance and relevance of his body has the ironic effect of foregrounding the physiological, thus underlining its undeniable claims.¹⁴⁵ At the same time the narrator is able to be transfigured, albeit fleetingly, through his ready identification with external phenomena, such as a song, which plants itself in his brain like a nail: 'Я сам себя песней-гвоздем чувствую... Только кто меня в стенку забивать будет? А я, когда пою, сам в небеса гвоздем забиваюсь' (p.470).

¹⁴³ See *Sud'ba bytiya*, p.10.

¹⁴⁴ Italo Calvino provided a brilliant example of this pattern in his novella, *Il Cavaliere Inesistente* (1959), in the character of Gurdulú.

¹⁴⁵ According to Avital Ronell, 'idiocy has something to do with the nearly existential fact of being stuck with a body or, to put it differently, with the fact that the body has claims upon us [...] the body exists as if to mark the dumb impassiveness of our being'; Ronell, *Stupidity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), p.180.

Similar concerns are elaborated with still greater persistence by Vanya Kirpichikov, who even examines his body through a microscope. In the opening paragraph of his notes the word ‘тело’ appears five times, and recurs with comparable frequency throughout the story. In its positive manifestations, the narrator’s obsession with his body is marked by a sense of the miraculous,¹⁴⁶ and is contrasted with the medical and professional perspective. Calling himself a doctor, and comparing the bathroom to an operating theatre (p.503), Vanya invokes medical imagery for purely satirical purposes, mocking the ‘professors’ (p.504). The kind of surgery which he carries out on himself – cutting open his leg to drink the blood – is of a strictly non-scientific nature. Vanya rejects medical practice and discourse in favour of a wholly subjective experience in which the dualist understanding of mind and body is overcome; both brain and body, Vanya tries to suggest, are made of the same stuff.¹⁴⁷

Vanya’s wonder at his body resembles the amazement of Nikolai Nikolaevich at the construction of the universe. Like Aleshkovsky’s hero, Vanya expresses his sense of the miraculous in the least pretentious manner possible. His prevalent use of *prostorechie* marks him out as every bit a man of the people.¹⁴⁸ Comparing himself at one point to a monkey in his movements (p.504), Vanya is anything but an *intelligent*; his delusions are of a different order: ‘боевой ты, Ваня Пантелеич, – думаю, – Бонапарте, и почти поэт’ (p.504). The imprecise articulation of his feelings and the idiosyncrasies of his logic further set him apart from what he takes to be conventional wisdom: ‘А чудес на мне видимо-невидимо... Ежели взять, например, волосье, так что ж я, по Божьему пониманию, всего-навсего лес дремучий?! Ха-ха... Меня не обманешь...’ (p.503). His

¹⁴⁶ The word *chudo* and its cognates recur throughout the story.

¹⁴⁷ ‘Иногда лупу возьму и через нее в ногу всматриваюсь – извилин-то сколько, извилин, а еще профессора говорят, что они только в мозгу... Я те дам в мозгу... Я сам себе доктор’ (p.504).

¹⁴⁸ *Prostorechie* comes through in almost every sentence. To take a few examples from the opening paragraphs: ‘И верноить, ванна наша грязная, никудышная’; ‘через каждый дѣн, заграбастав одежонку погрязней, я, – читатель, люблю, из ванны вылезая, во все грязное одеться’ (p.503).

language veers, quite naturally, from the low to the elevated, especially when he talks about his body, which he occasionally names by the Old Church Slavonic form 'телеса' (p.505).¹⁴⁹ In a holy-foolish manner comparable to the discourse of Nikolai Nikolaevich, a religious sense of wonder and reverence commingles with coarse interjections:

Мозга почти не работает, только удивление так шевелится, постепенно, часами: ух, — думаю, — тело какое белое, с закорючками, загадочное, ух и чудеса, чертова мать, и почему нога впрямь растет, а не вкось... Ишь... (p.504)

Also redolent of the *yurodivyi*, and other religious ascetics, is Vanya's craving to be rid of his body. Vanya claims to love his body (p.503), but his attitude towards it is highly ambivalent. He describes how he likes to look at his tongue in the mirror, but feels repelled by its meatiness: 'Больно большой и страшный, как сырое мясо... А какое я, Иван, имею отношение к сырому мясу. Во мне душа во внутренних — а не сырое мясо' (pp.503-4). Then he remembers the occasion when, feeling 'religious', he tried to eat himself in the bath, drinking his own blood from a wound in his leg (p.504). Finally, we learn how, having been pursued by his body, he succeeded in liberating himself from it for good: he simply denied its existence, and now washes a coat-hand instead (pp.505-6). Self-possession has been spiritualized to such an extent that it has turned into a kind of dispossession, as Kirpichikov sheds (in his imagination, at least) both body and thought, gaining the mystical tranquility described in the final paragraph: '...О Господи, какое во мне спокойствие. Таперича Ване Пантелеичу большие дела предстоять' (p.506).

In 'Chelovek s loshadinym begom', the agent of change is song, which brings the narrator to the desired state of *tupost'* (a key word to which I will return later in the chapter).¹⁵⁰ In 'Vanya Kirpichikov' the agent of the protagonist's transformation is bathwater, which

¹⁴⁹ Furthermore, instead of talking of 'my body', he generally says 'this body of mine': 'со смешком в единственном моем глазу люблюсь чудесам тела своего...' (p.503).; and p.506: 'тело своё'; 'тело моё'.

¹⁵⁰ 'Мне что, мне хорошо... Пустоты нет, одна тупость...' (p.470).

similarly dissolves his physical selfhood and processes of thought ('Мыслишек никаких', p.505). In both cases, we can observe the characteristic association of literary folly with insubstantial or changeable phenomena.¹⁵¹

Water defines Vanya's privileged position between worlds (the typical location of Mamleev's fools and madmen), and reflects a mystery of explicitly divine provenance:

Вода для меня, что слезы Божьи, ласкают, а все равно непонятные. (p.503)

Я ведь побаловаться люблю. Но только не в сухой ванне. Я уже говорил, что вода – как Божьи слезы. Когда я гнусность свою – тела – окунаю в эдакое теплое пространство, то я совсем сам не свой делаюсь. Точно меня Душа расслюнявила. И весь я от мира – водицей этой – огороженный. Мыслишек никаких, но зато слух – на радость и на полоумие обращен. (p.505)

In this striking image Vanya, an uncomprehending fool, is bathed in the tears of a sorrowing god, tears which are also, a few sentences later, described as the 'слезками мира сего' (p.505). Mamleev's fiction may be alien to compassion, but folly does allow for limited intuitions of cosmic grief; as it does more copiously in the foolish or idiotic creations of so many other writers, among them Faulkner and Venedikt Erofeev.¹⁵² Also notable here, alongside tears, is the recurrent motif of spit. A characteristically imprecise expression articulates the sensation that Vanya experiences in the water: 'точно меня Душа расслюнявила'.¹⁵³

A cultural precedent for this association of watery imagery and folly is suggested by Foucault's exploration of the ancient link 'in the dreams of European man' between water and *folie* (translatable as both 'madness' and 'folly').¹⁵⁴ Like Mamleev, Foucault

¹⁵¹ Water and music, it should be added, also have long histories as therapies for madness; see Foucault, pp.158-64; 169-70.

¹⁵² In *Shatuny*, Anna wakes from a dream and sees the flickering stars, and it seems to her, 'что это – ожившие, разбросанные по миру голоса всех идиотов, тоскующих на земле...' (p.100). Compare with Faulkner's Benjy: 'But he bellowed slowly, abjectly, without tears; the grave hopeless sound of all voiceless misery under the sun'; William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929; New York: Norton, 1994), p.199.

¹⁵³ The central meaning here may be that Vanya's soul 'softens' or 'melts' (perhaps 'Душа расслюнявилась' is what Vanya is actually trying to say). Thanks to Eugene Gorny for suggesting this.

¹⁵⁴ Foucault, p.9.

attempts to recover sacred, otherworldly significance in the pre-modern, pre-clinical experience of *folie*, arguing that the symbolic role of the madman on the cusp of the Renaissance replaced that of the leper, whose punishment was evidence that he had been chosen by God.¹⁵⁵ In ‘Stultifera Navis’, the opening chapter of *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault discusses the historical precedents for the literary and artistic topos of the *Narrenschiff* (Ship of Fools). Asserting that in the Rhineland of 15th-century Germany the mad really were expelled from towns and handed over to boatmen as a regular occurrence, he speculates about the obscure paradoxical symbolism of this practice, which ‘haunted the imagination of the entire early Renaissance’.¹⁵⁶ The sea to which the mad were consigned was a symbol of turbulence and unreason, from which the soul could be ‘brought to port’ only by the grace of God: such was the language of the fifteen-century mystics who saw the soul, in Foucault’s phrase, as a ‘skiff, abandoned on the infinite sea of desires’.¹⁵⁷ Yet at the same time – and here Foucault looks more to the creative imagination for corroboration (citing *Tristan et Iseut*) – the sea is also the place of an otherworldly, esoteric wisdom.¹⁵⁸ The manner of the madman’s expulsion is a symbol of both confinement and liberation, punishment and opportunity:

On the one hand, we must not minimize its incontestable practical effectiveness: to hand a madman over to sailors was to be permanently sure he would not be prowling beneath the city walls; it made sure that he would go far away; it made him the prisoner of his own departure. But water adds to this the dark mass of its own values; it carries off, but it does more: it purifies [...] It is for the other world that the madman sets sail in his fools’ boat; it is from the other world that he comes when he disembarks. The madman’s voyage is at once a rigorous voyage and an absolute Passage.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p.4: ‘his existence was yet a constant manifestation of God, since it was a sign both of His anger and His grace’. In the Classical Age, Foucault will go on to argue, madness will no longer be considered ‘in its tragic reality, in the absolute laceration that gives it access to the other world; but only in the irony of its illusions’ (Ibid, p.29).

¹⁵⁶ Foucault, pp.6-7. Foucault’s factual claims about this practice have since been questioned by historians; see Erik Midelfort, ‘Madness and Civilisation in Early Modern Europe’, in *After the Reformation: Essays in Honor of J.H. Hexter*, ed. by B.C. Malament (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980), p.254.

¹⁵⁷ Foucault, p.10

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, p.9: ‘those unknown highways which conceal so much strange knowledge’.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, p.8.

The sea-voyage ‘develops, across a half-real, half-imaginary geography, the madman’s *liminal* position on the horizon of medieval concern’; ‘He has his truth and his homeland only in that fruitless expanse between two countries that cannot belong to him’.¹⁶⁰

In however bathetic a manner, Kirpichikov’s tub is a similar ‘point of passage’, and a similar type of ‘home’ and locus of truth. The story recovers the the same paradox between ‘social exclusion’ and ‘spiritual reintegration’ reflected, for Foucault, by the experience of the lepers and, subsequently, wandering madmen of Western Europe.¹⁶¹ Only by being cut off from his neighbours and society can Kirpichikov recover a sense of wholeness. For him, as in Foucault’s reading, water is an escape from the ordinary world, from secular values and authority: ‘И весь я от мира – водицей этой – огороженный’; ‘Милицию вызывали, но я от всех диаволов водицей этой завсегда огороженный’ (p.505). His cleansing rituals take him ever further ‘beyond the grave’.¹⁶²

‘Tetrad’ individualista’ (pp.524-37)

For Mamleev, as for Foucault, *la folie* may be said to represent ‘the *déjà-là* of death’.¹⁶³ this is apparent in ‘Vanya Kirpichikov v vanne’, and, even more emphatically, in ‘Tetrad’ individualista’. Here, the ‘madness’ of the death-obsessed narrator is once again the means and symbol of the otherworldly, having been returned to the ‘ultimate regions’, or the mystical space of ‘the Great Secret’, deserted by European culture, according to Foucault, after Shakespeare and Cervantes.¹⁶⁴ At the same time, the narrator’s detailed description of his descent into a state resembling derangement is cast in terms borrowed from modern

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, pp.8-9.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, p.5.

¹⁶² ‘И словно я теперь становлюсь загробней’, p.506. Vanya is obsessed with spiritual cleansing, telling his neighbours to scrub their souls (p.503), and is clearly plagued by a violent sense of his own filth (‘гнусность свою’, p.505) which he temporarily overcomes in the bath.

¹⁶³ Ibid, p.13.

¹⁶⁴ Foucault, pp.28, 18.

psychiatric and literary discourse. Indeed, the narrator's experience accords quite closely with clinical accounts of schizophrenia, as I will show.

'Tetrad' individualista' belongs to the more exoteric of Mamleev's fictions. The narrator's febrile account of his inability to accommodate himself to society, his separation from his wife and his withdrawal into solipsism, mysticism and apparent madness, is contextualised in an unusually explicit manner. The rejection of empty modernity and the embrace of death and the metaphysical are emphatically spelled out:

Жизнь была настолько мрачна своей безысходностью и материализмом, своей животной тупостью и ясностью, что Смерть – единственная, видимая и ощущаемая всеми, Великая Тайна, причем тайна, бьющая по зубам – являлась настоящим оазисом среди этого потока декретов, овсяной крупы, телевизоров и непробиваемой 'логики'. (p.535)

These comments are made towards the end of the story, by which time the narrator has devoted himself almost exclusively to the ecstatic contemplation of death, watching funeral ceremonies and sometimes pushing through to kiss the corpses (p.537). His behaviour is, in the figurative sense, schizophrenic: sometimes he accompanies the ceremonies with great solemnity, at others with fits of idiotic giggling – and occasionally he experiences both reactions at the same time (p.536). When he giggles, it is at the realization that, 'я вот-де живой, а он мертвый' (p.535). By contrast, his flights of spiritual, even religious ecstasy are caused by his perception of the corpse as being, at least partly, his own. Like Vanya Kirpichikov, he stands on the threshold between worlds:

Слегка подпрыгивая, я трусил за гробом, и мне всегда казалось, что хоронят какую-нибудь мою частицу: полноги, каплю моей души или просто палец. Поэтому неподражаемо таинственный гробовой путь до ямы я ощущал как собственный болезненно-родной путь где-то в пространстве между нашим и загробным миром, когда душа уже отходит, но еще не отошла. (p.536)

In these final pages, the key term by which the narrator describes his mental state appears to be *slaboumie*,¹⁶⁵ but by this stage the reader is unlikely to be paying too much attention to terminology since the narrator's entire account has been drenched in imprecise descriptions of derangement and disease. These apply both to himself – his 'сумасшедше-проникновенный взгляд' (p.524); the 'неврастенично-гнойные ранки' of his soul (p.529); his 'потаенно-безумные мыслишки,' (p.530) – and to his surroundings, be they the 'шизофранные комнаты' of his flat (p.528) or his wife, who is described as exceptionally schizoid.¹⁶⁶

The terms recruited to describe the narrator's shaken consciousness are no more than vague approximations. Scholarly, 'expert' explanations are derided. Death, the narrator emphasizes, is inaccessible to the language of 'теорий, книг, диссертаций' (p.534). Only an experience of mental ecstasy at its threshold makes understanding possible:

Я упивался холодно-застывшими чертами мертвеца; мне казалось что если я буду долго, долго до безумия вглядываться в его лицо, то я сорву эту неподвижно-кошмарную, мертвую маску и увижу за ней разгадку жизни, разгадку самого себя. (p.536)

The dense vocabulary of madness and pathology gathered around the narrator contrasts with the language used to describe the narrator's in-laws, a family of 'солидные инженеры' (p.526) who in their 'idiocy' are said to typify nine-tenths of the world's population (p.525). Simply by finding himself in the company of his in-laws, the narrator feels 'приравненным к чему-то идиотскому' (p.526). Idiocy here denotes respectability and conventionality: it enforces on the narrator an 'идиотическая свадьба с

¹⁶⁵ 'На вершине экстаза я так погружался в чистоту этой мысли, что чувствовал себя – и это было самое приятное – совсем слабоумным' (p.536); he describes kissing the corpses 'в слабоумненьком отупении' (p.537).

¹⁶⁶ See p.525: 'по-своему шизоидна она была необыкновенно'. As the story progresses, and the narrator pushes her away, her behaviour becomes increasingly hysterical; she exhibits 'слабоумную решительность' (p.531) and creates 'изломанно-шизофранные сцены' (p.532).

идиотическими родителями' (p.525). From the perspective of the family, the narrator's spiritual strivings represent mere insanity.

If one reads 'Tetrad' individualista' alongside the work of a psychiatrist deeply sympathetic to the schizophrenic mind, such as R.D. Laing, one can see how closely Mamleev's protagonist follows established clinical patterns of schizophrenia. It is also interesting to compare the common motives of Mamleev and Laing's fascination with schizophrenia, with how 'the cracked mind of the schizophrenic may *let in* light which does not enter the intact minds of many sane people whose minds are closed'.¹⁶⁷ Writing in the same period, both Mamleev and Laing looked to the experience of the 'mad' for the survival of the urge to transcendence which is otherwise self-censored in a society of 'one-dimensional men', a society that encourages the adaptation of, in Laing's expression, false selves to false realities. Mamleev would surely subscribe to the sentiments expressed in Laing's 1964 preface to *The Divided Self* (1959):

Our civilization represses not only 'the instincts', not only sexuality, but any form of transcendence. Among one-dimensional men, it is not surprising that someone with an insistent experience of other dimensions, that he cannot entirely deny or forget, will run the risk either of being destroyed by the others, or of betraying what he knows.

In the context of our present pervasive madness that we call normality, sanity, freedom, all our frames of reference are ambiguous and equivocal.¹⁶⁸

The availability of the schizophrenic to other dimensions issues in what Laing calls 'ontological insecurity': a weak sense of the reality and identity of oneself and others.¹⁶⁹ Such a state is fundamental to Mamleev's prose, as the critic 'I.S.' has argued in his discussion of 'schizoid' postmodernism.¹⁷⁰ In 'Tetrad' individualista', the narrator's 'ontological insecurity' is clear to see.

¹⁶⁷ R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (1959; London: Penguin, 1990), p.27.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, p.11.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, p.39.

¹⁷⁰ 'Быть может, наиболее радикально идея субъекта, не данного самому себе, была выражена в прозе Мамлеева. Субъект, которого описывает Мамлеев, либо мертв, либо субститутирует мертвое, либо заполняет интересом к смерти все свое бытие'; I.S., p.129.

Unlike Laing, in whose interpretation the schizophrenic seeks to cling on to his selfhood – efforts which render him ‘desperate, simply without hope’ – Mamleev depicts schizoid protagonists who often desire the loss of selfhood, embracing the ‘non-being’ which the schizophrenic, in Laing’s account, perceives as a threat.¹⁷¹ In this sense, Mamleev goes beyond Laing, who views the schizophrenic situation as unambiguously tragic. However, Mamleev’s characters are as unwilling as Laing’s to surrender themselves to the hateful, ‘ordinary’ other. Both authors are interested in how the schizophrenic mind defends its own perception of ‘reality’ against that held by others. So radically different are these perceptions that they are mutually exclusive, hence the loneliness of the schizophrenic and the improbability of his experiencing love. ‘I have never known a schizophrenic who could say he was loved,’ writes Laing.¹⁷²

The ‘individualist’ did once love his wife, but now professes amazement at the fact: ‘Как это удивительно – любить другого человека’ (p.524). After his rejection of Zina, his expulsion of her from his mind and life accords with the schizophrenic ‘technique’ described by Laing as ‘petrification’. The schizophrenic, Laing writes, often tries to deal with his dread of losing his fragile subjectivity, of becoming ‘no more than a thing in the world of the other’, by petrifying the other in his mind and thus destroying him.¹⁷³ Correspondingly, the ‘individualist’ turns Zina into a tree, a wall, or a thing:

Она стала казаться мне совсем обычной, простой и понятной, я ловил себя на том, что не видел различия между ней и деревом, глядящим на нас в окно.

[Я], похлопывая по ее оголенной, прозрачно-белой спине, часто вдруг недоумевал: не по стенке ли я хлопаю.

Я уже чувствовал, что отношусь к ней как к вещи, как к чашке, которую можно разбить и не пошевелинется в сердце. (p.531)

¹⁷¹ Laing, pp.38, 42-43.

¹⁷² Ibid, p.38.

¹⁷³ Ibid, pp.46-52.

The clinical pattern observed by Laing is completed in Mamleev's story by the narrator's redirection of his affection towards himself: 'Но чем более я был груб по отношению к ней, тем более нежен по отношению к себе... Нежность эта доходила до такой степени, что я стремился порвать со всем, что меня окружало, и непередаваемо жалел себя' (pp.531-32). In Laing's words, 'To consume oneself by one's own love prevents the possibility of being consumed by another'.¹⁷⁴

Equally significant are the parallels between the two authors' representation of the schizophrenic in society. In 1967 Laing wrote of schizophrenia as being 'a special strategy that the patient invents in order to live an unlivable situation'.¹⁷⁵ For Laing, society was maximally culpable in the distress of the 'patient'. Lionel Trilling summarized the plight of Laing's patient as follows:

The malignant influence which he fails to withstand commonly masks itself in benevolence, yet its true nature is easily detected, for it is always the same thing, a pressure exerted by society through the agency of the family. It is the family which is directly responsible for the ontological break, the 'divided self' of schizophrenia [...] We may put it that Laing construes schizophrenia as the patient's response to the parental imposition of inauthenticity.¹⁷⁶

The parallels to this analysis in 'Tetrad' individualista' are remarkably close. The 'family' is that of the narrator's wife, with whom the couple lived for a brief period after their marriage (pp.524-27). The situation was indeed 'unliveable': 'я органически не мог с ними не только спорить, но и разговаривать' (p.526). The narrator perceives the family's outward shows of 'benevolence' and *kul'turnost'* as an affront to his personal dignity, and their idiocy and materialism as a threat. Simply by communicating with them, he feels that he is descending to their level ('когда я им отвечаю, я становлюсь

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, p.51. See also the story 'Nezhnost' (*Izbrannoe*, pp.403-7), which replicates the pattern of Tetrad' individualista' in pitting a similar narrator against a similar wife (who also suffers from lunatism). The narrator finds that his self-love, his 'tenderness' to himself, overpowers his love for his wife. The imagery of petrification is also present here, to describe the narrator's soul and thoughts: 'Какими тяжелыми камнями наполнена моя душа... И мир такой же: из камней... Мне холодно...' (p.405)

¹⁷⁵ Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p.115.

¹⁷⁶ Trilling, pp.159-61.

обычным'; p.527). The ways by which he tries to protect himself from their contaminating, 'malignant influence' and inauthenticity are identified as deliberate strategies (his 'политика'; p.527): first he tries to say nothing but to conform in his actions, then, when this fails, he decides to defend himself from his in-laws 'кольцом инакоречия' answering their questions in a nonsensical manner (p.527).

The maneuvers of the schizophrenic described by Laing are reflected in countless stories: the turn to self-love, the fear/desire for petrification or 'engulfment' (consider 'Vanya Kirpichikov v vanne' with his mania for water and fire), and the destruction of the other in one's mind.¹⁷⁷ This is not to say that the psychiatric prism should be employed to the exclusion of others (religious, philosophical), but it does confirm the familiarity of Mamleev, a psychiatrist's son, with clinical practice, and an empathy with the existential situation of the 'mad'. This empathy points up another common thread between Mamleev and Laing: the radical rejection of society as it is. As Trilling argues in his critical summary, Laing was hardly original in his 'inculcation of society'; what was new was the degree of this inculcation, and the maximalist position to which it led him, a position from which 'it follows that we must not give our assent to any form of rearing, education, or socialization in which prescriptive influence has a part'.¹⁷⁸

If Laing's ideas now seem exaggerated and impractical, it is to a large extent because of their reluctance to deal with modern society as it was (and indeed with the reality of mental illness) in favour of an impossible ideal of authentic being and of a society without prescriptions. For Laing and Foucault mental illness became the focus of a broad-brush critique of modern society. A similar pattern, and a similar reluctance to countenance modernity, may be traced, not just in Mamleev's writing but more broadly in the cult of folly in recent Russian prose. For psychiatrists, the division between the

¹⁷⁷ On engulfment, see Laing, *Divided Self*, pp.43-45.

¹⁷⁸ Trilling, p.161.

individual and society must be interpreted as tragic; for the writer it is an artistic opportunity, one that has been eagerly taken up by Aleshkovsky, Mamleev, Sokolov, both Erofeevs and many others, all of whom have situated fictions in the minds of schizophrenic or otherwise unbalanced narrators.

‘Нежность, от которой мутнеет ум’

The last aspect of ‘Tetrad’ individualista’ that I wish to discuss is its illumination of the relationship between the mental state of the typical Mamleevan protagonist and the unconventional stylistic features of the author’s prose. In the case of ‘Tetrad’ individualista’, this relationship is linked to the narrator’s self-conscious literary posturing.

‘Tetrad’ individualista’ demonstrates many of the concerns of nonconformist prose that recur frequently in this thesis, among them: the satirical references to *nauka* (‘теорий, книг, диссертаций’), to what the narrator calls *umstvennye gluposti* (p.525), and to *intelligenty* in general; the related loathing of the written word (‘Я ненавижу бумагу, читателей, перо, буквы’; p.532);¹⁷⁹ and the protagonist’s recourse first to silence and then to his own nonsensical language.¹⁸⁰

The narrator’s attack on intellectual pretension, however, does not prevent him from indulging in literary reference and self-fashioning. Art and poetry are identified by the narrator with higher yearnings and, by extension in the context of the story, with madness; they are rejected by his wife’s family (p.527). The narrator is both artist – he composes stories in his head which he will never write down or relate (p.532) – and himself a literary cliché. As the latter, his key features are his rebelliousness and sense of

¹⁷⁹ It is a paradoxical assertion, of course, given that we are reading his story, although the fact that it takes the form of a *tetrad* (which breaks off suddenly) underlines the unfinished, unofficial nature of the text.

¹⁸⁰ On the importance of these features in non-conformist prose, with specific reference to the fiction of Nikolai Baitov, see Oleg Dark, ‘Novaya russkaya proza i zapadnoe srednevekov’e’ in *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie*, 8 (1994), pp 287-301 (pp.288-99).

unrecognized greatness, poses which are struck in a variety of manners, whether absurdly high-flown and romantic ('И бегал я, и скулил, и в небесах парил, и грозился – но тяжело мне все-таки было') or Dostoevskian (the narrator's opening salvo, 'Поганенький я все-таки человечешко', reworks, not for the only time in Mamleev's fiction, the opening line of *Zapiski iz podpol'ya*).¹⁸¹ Like Baudelaire, he praises the criminal, the debauched and the alcoholic (pp.524-25); and like Sartre, he appears to believe that hell is other people.

Through such frequently crass allusions and echoes, the narrator cultivates the provocative but familiar persona of the contrary, anti-social hero. More original, and more specific to Mamleev's prose, is the further provocation implicit in the burlesque treatment of this literary topos and, more broadly, in the type of language used by the narrator. To begin an account with the declaration, 'Поганенький я все-таки человечешко' – with its two superfluous diminutive suffixes, and the highly colloquial particle *vse-taki* – is to begin in an almost offensively sub-Dostoevskian and sub-literary fashion. It reflects the tone not just of this story, but of Mamleev's writing in general, whose texture is defined most strikingly by the obsessive abundance of absurd diminutives, such as 'наслажденьице', 'актики', 'состояньице', to take a few examples from a random passage (p.528).

Such features are surely an important reason why, as Ryklin claims, Mamleev's prose falls 'ниже любой литературной ватерлинии'.¹⁸² However, they have the purpose of seducing, as well as provoking, the reader. Mamleev's diminutives, opaque hyphenated nouns and pervasive use of aposiopesis are not only deliberately ugly and vague, but also affectionate and 'tender' (*nezhnost'* being a key Mamleevan word). Used to describe death and other horrors, the language also seeks to engage the reader in a kind of complicity. The

¹⁸¹ See pp.534, 524. *Zapiski iz podpol'ya* begins: 'Я человек больной... я злой человек. Непривлекательный я человек'; Dostoevsky, V, p.99. See also 'Утопи мою голову', in *Izbrannoe*, pp.439-47 (p.439).

¹⁸² Ryklin, p.75.

more conventionally unattractive the protagonist, the more unnervingly lyrical his rhetoric: see, for example, the diary of the vampire in 'Upyr'-psikhopat' (pp.486-90).

It is a pattern that is reflected very explicitly at the level of action as well as language in 'Tetrad' individualista', where the narrator manages to seduce and keep his wife (at least for a while) by offering her *nezhnost'* as well as morbid obsession. Explaining why his wife continued to visit him, the narrator remarks, 'она знала, что найдет там нежность. Нежность, от которой мутнеет ум' (p.529). This clouded state of mind suggests once again the imagery of fluids (as in the collocation 'мутная вода'), and is linked here – as in some other stories, such as 'Krysa' – to the effects of alcohol. The narrator adores the beer-joint (*pivnushechka*), where he feels enveloped by 'теплыми своими спонтанными мыслями' and experiences the first phase of a spiritual revelation (p.535). In this and other respects, Mamleev's stories have much in common with *Moskva-Petushki*, whose narrator describes at length his tearful *zanutnennost'*.¹⁸³

In contrast to Erofeev's quick-witted Venichka, however, Mamleev's characters are literally in flight from thought. Also alien to Venichka is the imprecise way in which this escape is described. Mamleev's frequent and contradictory use of the word 'тупой' can serve as a good example. The common type of spiritual philistine criticized in 'Tetrad' individualista' is described as 'патологически туп'; his *tupost'* is 'звериная' (p.525). But *tupost'* also colours the narrator's flights of madness: 'Я вдруг начинал тупо хихикать' (p.535); 'Несколько раз бывали экстазы, когда я в слабоумненьком отупении [...]' (p.537). Thus, the apparently clear-cut opposition between the narrator and his 'idiotic' in-laws is to a certain extent blurred. Similarly, in 'Poslednii znak Spinozy' Nelya looks out of her window 'с тупым выражением,

¹⁸³ See Venedikt Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2004), pp.74-77.

точно хотела съесть окружающий ее город` (p.451), while Spinoza stares at her with a similarly dull expression: `больной тупо уставился на нее` (p.454). Arguably, one effect of this deliberate imprecision of expression is to dissolve the reader's own rational thought-processes; to bring the reader, too, into the sphere of *tupost'*.

Mamleev's folk tales: The 'Narodno-mifologicheskii tsikl'

A postscript to this chapter is suggested by a fairly minor branch of the author's oeuvre: his 'Narodno-mifologicheskii tsikl', written in emigration.¹⁸⁴ Two of the four stories which comprise this cycle – 'Blazhenstvo i okayanstvo' and 'Erema-Durak i smert' – offer insights into the themes of this chapter. While the cultural archetypes of the *yurodivyi* and the folk *durak* are absent from Mamleev's main story-cycles (a fact which reflects, among other reasons, the author's refusal to be tied to established cultural models), in these two stories they serve as examples of liminal figures whose customary cultural and religious associations are revised by Mamleev in line with his own metaphysics. Taken together, the stories suggest that the universal sway of folly and idiocy in Mamleev's fiction derives not only from the author's scepticism about the human intellect, but also from his low estimation of any form of constructive action, and a lack of interest in ethical questions. Finally, I will speculate that the figure of the fool also serves Mamleev as a metaphor for the writer, and for his own authorial position.

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'Blazhenstvo i okayanstvo (*poema-legenda*)' (pp.635-47) is set at the time of Peter the Great and evokes obvious associations with the prologue to Pushkin's *Mednyi vsadnik*. Indeed, the main character in the story, the holy fool Ivashko, recites, or rather prophesies,

¹⁸⁴ It is numbered as the fourth cycle by the editors of *Russkaya Virtual'naya Biblioteka*, the third being the 'American Cycle'; see <<http://www.rvb.ru/mamleev/contents.htm>> [accessed 25 July 2006]

a famous couplet from Pushkin's poem as he sits on the bank of the Neva: 'И здесь нам Богом суждено/ В Европу прорубить окно' (p.644). As in *Mednyi vsadnik* the construction of Petersburg inspires an ambivalent reaction. The narrator recognizes the majesty of the new city (pp.644-45), but the predominant tone is negative and apocalyptic. Furthermore, the building of Petersburg is associated not with the tragedy of a humble family, as in Pushkin's poem, but with turmoil at a cosmic level. The dying Ivashko prophesies that, 'Темные времена будут [...] Велико безумство любое будет... Где свет, где тьма – все спутается...' (p.647). As elsewhere in Mamleev's writing, however, this vision of impending 'тьма' is potentially both a catastrophe and an opportunity: 'ежели в грядущем выдержат все наши – такое им откроется, такое' (p.647). With the death of Ivashko, his follower Aleksei is left to wonder: 'Бытие, бытие, чем подпереть?' The story emphatically connects Russia's breakthrough into Europe and modernity with a crisis in its spiritual life and native traditions; the provincial world of *yurodivye* and *kolduny* have been deemed alien to Peter's new city (p.645).

However, while suggesting nostalgia for pre-modern Rus and an implicitly negative attitude towards modernity, 'Blazhenstvo i okayanstvo' also presents, in Ivashko, a deliberately problematic example of a *yurodivyi* (or *blazhennyi*: Ivashko is referred to as both, most often the latter). Although Ivashko exhibits some typical features of the *yurodivyi*, including his bizarre behaviour (p.636), prophesying and 'чудные слова' (p.643), other *yurodivye* shy away from him.¹⁸⁵ A vision in a prison-pit at the beginning of the story, whose contents Ivashko will never disclose, has transformed him into an unrecognizable figure: 'Ивашко совсем одурел: раньше был юродивый как юродивый: слюну пускал, чесался, события будущего рассказывал, глаз был светлый. А опосля

¹⁸⁵ See p.639: 'Местные юродивые боялись блаженного: "Ты уже не токмо наш, Ивашко, – робко говорили они, – ты вонна какой стал, без всякого подобия... Ангелов не спугни"...' Even by the standards of holy foolery, Ivashko appears to go too far in his behaviour, befriending demons and feeding them with his own flesh in his sleep, pp.641-42.

этого глаз стал дурной и какой-то неподвижный (p.636).’ In Mamleev’s treatment, the *yurodivyi* has become a figure of inertia (*nepodvizhnost’*) and idiocy (*odurenje*). The sense of heaviness which has accompanied literary portraits of the *yurodivyi* is here annexed to aspects of Mamleev’s non-Christian mysticism. Behind Ivashko’s actions lies not the promise of Christian salvation, but, implicitly, the ambivalent prospect of the abyss (familiar from *Sud’ba bytiya*), which is directly named in this story as the ‘главная тьма’ (p.647).¹⁸⁶ The Orthodox rationale for holy foolishness is absent. Ivashko’s *yurodstvo* does not manifest itself in provocative public behaviour that carries some sort of implicit rebuke. Rather, his holy-foolish desire for self-abasement (‘больше всего из мирского его тянуло на дно: там, среди людей спокойных, пьяниц и ошалевших’; p.637) reflects the drift towards the void which is the mystical goal of many of Mamleev’s characters.¹⁸⁷

Elsewhere in Mamleev’s fiction, the figure of the *yurodivyi* or *blazhennyi* makes only fleeting appearances. The provocative essence of *yurodstvo Khrista radi*, with its implicit faith in human choice and agency, is, it seems, alien to Mamleev. In the novel *Bluzhdayushchee vremya* (2001), a character is introduced under the nickname ‘Юродивый Бездны’, but his desire to ‘provoke the abyss’ through his absurd behaviour is immediately rejected by Klin, one of the protagonists: ‘ибо Клим полагал, что даже такое, и даже еще более изощренное провоцирование бесполезно: Бездна придет сама и только когда захочет. Глупо ее торопить. Воля человеческая тут не играет никакой роли’.¹⁸⁸

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¹⁸⁶ After Ivashko dies Aleksei experiences ‘тяжелые сны’: ‘Будто уходит из Руси в просторы Неизвестно-Божие блаженный Ивашко, и такие те просторы, такие, что лучше и не зреть ничего такого (p.647).’

¹⁸⁷ It may be compared in particular with the physical and intellectual degradation towards nothingness described in ‘Golos iz nichto’ (pp.552-567).

¹⁸⁸ *Bluzhdayushchee vremya*, p.90.

In his article 'Skazka kak realnost' (1979), Mamleev wrote of the danger for the modern writer of being too faithful to the *skazka* genre; instead, a writer should create his own myths.¹⁸⁹ In general, Mamleev follows his own advice in his modern, urban stories, while at the same time building in numerous echoes of *skazki* formulae, which often serve to suggest the residual folk mentality of his characters.¹⁹⁰ 'Erema-Durak i smert' (*skazka*)' (pp.625-30) marks an exception from this approach, since it is written in the *skazka* style and derives its power from the effectiveness of this imitation.

Mamleev's Erema shares the complete incompetence of Emelya-Durak and other folk fools.¹⁹¹ The description of his attempts to hunt – 'Ерема ружье на сук повесил, свечку в руки взял, зажег и со свечкой на зайца пошел' (p.626) – recalls the *anekdoty o gluptsakh* collected by Afanas'ev; so does his ability to mistake a bear for a tree (p.626). Erema, we are told, 'спит на печке, как дурак набитый (626)', an allusion both to a pervasive motif of fools' behaviour in folktales (lying on the stove) and to the two dark tales entitled precisely 'Durak nabityi'.¹⁹²

The development of broader, formulaic themes suggests further important similarities. As in the *skazki*, the villagers try to instruct the fool (pp.625, 627), whose idiocy proves contagious:¹⁹³ "Мысли от него только мешаются," жаловались бабоньки' (p.626). Erema's stupidity even has an effect on the village animals. When he leaves, the dogs lose their appetite: 'От глупости, конечно. Словно их Ерема онелепил

¹⁸⁹ *Rossiia vechnaya*, pp.262-64.

¹⁹⁰ These include the abundance of *skazki* formulations such as 'лес дремучий' ('Vanya Kirpichikov v vanne', which I discussed above, is especially rich in such examples); the frequent personification of death (see the comparison drawn below between the last sentences of 'Erema-Durak' and 'Poslednii znak Spinozy'); the use of *skazka*-type titles, for example 'Smert' ryadom s nami' (pp.388-93), or 'Kogda zagovoryat?' (pp.495-99), recalling 'Kto zagovorit pervyi?', collected in *Russkaya bytovaya skazka*, ed. by V.Ya. Bakhtin (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1987), no.158.

¹⁹¹ 'Emelya-Durak', in A.N. Afanas'ev, *Narodnye russkie skazki*, 3 vols (Moscow: Nauka, 1984), I, pp.320-26.

¹⁹² Afanas'ev, III, pp.130-31; quoted and discussed in V.Ya. Propp, *Russkaya skazka* (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo leninskogo universiteta, 1984), p.278.

¹⁹³ Daniel Rancour-Laferriere cites various proverbs that describe this contagious idiocy, such as, 'Дурак, кто с дураком свяжется'; Rancour-Laferriere, *The Slave Soul of Russia: Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp.124-25.

(p.625)'. As in the folk-tales, attempts to educate Erema fail completely, echoing the Russian proverb that, 'Teaching a fool is like curing the dead'.¹⁹⁴

The association of folly and death in this proverb is far from unusual: death is a subject of fairy-tales generally, and many of the best-known *durak* stories feature the macabre to an extreme degree.¹⁹⁵ In 'Erema-Durak' the theme of death is also salient, but it is explored in a way which expresses the specific qualities of Mamleev's fool.

Death, in fact, is demystified in 'Erema-Durak i smert' and deprived of the didactic role it plays in folklore.¹⁹⁶ Folk wisdom suggests that death, if nothing else, will bring the fool to his senses, and the villagers express their confidence that this will be the case with Erema: "“Ничего, как смерть подберется, так заплешет по-человечески,” говорили другие. “Смерть, она кого хошь научит”" (p.627). However, the meeting between Erema and Death proves humbling to the latter, not the former. When the *nezhivoe tsarstvo* sends Marusya to ensure a horrible death for Erema, it is Marusya who finds that, 'она понемножечку от Ереминого взгляда в живую превращается' (p.629). At the end of the story, the *nezhivoe tsarstvo* finally gets its way, but its victory seems insignificant: 'на деле оказалось — Смерть далеко не всезнайка. Не дано ей тоже многое из тайнова знать'. As for the fool, we are told: 'ушел Ерема в свое царство — собственно говоря, он в нем всегда пребывал. Но что это за царство и есть ли оно, не людям знать. Ни на земле, ни на небе, нигде его не найти' (p.630).

Erema's mystery thus remains intact. He seems to be a personification of non-being, a figure beyond death or life, who challenges the categories by which folk culture is structured. Just as Ivashko is in some sense beyond *yurodstvo*, so too Erema is beyond ordinary *durachestvo*: 'Такой дурак, что совсем необыкновенный' (p.625); 'Разные

¹⁹⁴ Rancour-Laferriere, p.124.

¹⁹⁵ In 'Durak nabityi', the fool kills his mother. See also the pair of *skazki*, 'Mertvovoe telo', in Afanas'ev, III, pp.184-85 (nos 395-96).

¹⁹⁶ See, for example, 'Pochemu lyudi ne znayut, kogda umrut?', V.Ya. Bakhtin, p.295.

дураки бывают, разной степени, но этот был абсолютный. Никогда такие не появлялись' (p.626). Worldly and unworldly categories cannot contain his folly: the townsfolk amongst whom he later appears find that he is neither 'светлый', nor 'адский' nor 'земной' – he is simply 'никакой' (p.627).

It is tempting to see Erema, even more emphatically than Ivashko, as a herald of the 'Божественное Ничто' described in *Sud'ba bytiya*. This work culminates in a 'Final Doctrine' (*Poslednyaya doktrina*), which Ulrich Schmid has described as philosophically unique in its claim for 'a non-entity that lies beyond God', a 'Trans-Abyss' or 'Trans-Darkness' which is 'transcendental to God, reality and the higher "I"'.¹⁹⁷ If such a 'non-entity' can be imagined, then Erema might be its mirage-like personification: 'Нет для него ни смерти, ни бессмертия, и жизнь тоже по ту сторону его. Не из того он соткан, из чего мир небесный и мир земной созданы, ангелы да и мы, грешные люди. И есть ли он вообще? (p.630)'

As a figure connected with the unknown, Erema also has much in common with the author's own perception of his role as artist. It seems that Mamleev perceives the writer as a kind of fool from beyond, communicating and spreading the non-rational nature, or folly, of the universe.

Such speculations are suggested by an article of 1987, 'Mezhdu bezumiem i magiei', in which Mamleev compares cultural approaches, Indian and European, towards the definition of the 'человек искусства'. Mamleev puts forward two fundamental and opposed images of the artist: the 'маг' ('тот, кто владеет невидимой реальностью') and the 'безумец' ('тот, кем невидимая реальность владеет'). The argument gravitates towards approval of the second notion:

¹⁹⁷ Schmid, pp.209-10.

Говорят, что поэту ближе ‘черный ветер’ Неизвестного, Черный Ветер Бездны, чем поза победителя над невидимой реальностью. Он, воплощенный на краю Бездны, должен посылать сигналы Богу, которых не существует в Центре.¹⁹⁸

This position of such a *bezumets* is that of an observer, and indeed Mamleev has emphasized his detached perspective as a writer.¹⁹⁹ We may infer that for Mamleev the writer is, like Erema, a ‘cold’ rather than sympathetic figure.²⁰⁰ He shares the qualities of the folk fool noted by Sinyavsky: a ‘passive receptivity’ (*vosprimchivaya passivnost*), and an intrinsic awareness that ‘от человеческого ума, учености, стараний, воли – ничего не зависит’.²⁰¹ Despite his distance, the author, too, seeks the dissolution of thought, as he secretly dreams for his consciousness to be ‘flooded’ by the ‘great waves of the unknown’ (*velikie temnye volny Neizvestnogo*).²⁰²

¹⁹⁸ Mamleev, ‘Mezhdu bezumiem i magiei’, *Beseda*, 6 (1987), 178-84 (p.179). See also the discussion of this article in Schmid, pp.211-12.

¹⁹⁹ Author’s interview.

²⁰⁰ Erema’s coldness and impassivity is repeatedly underlined. See, for example, p.630: ‘Вдруг засветился он изнутри белым пламенем холодным и как бы несуществующим’.

²⁰¹ See above, p.20.

²⁰² ‘Mezhdu bezumiem i magiei’, p.179. The identification of fool and writer was noted also by Aleksandr Genis: ‘Философия “дурака”, отсылающая читателя на Восток, к религиозно-философскому учению о Пути-Дао, объясняет неосознанную, внеличностную, интуитивную, инстинктивную, если угодно, “животную” природу творчества – поэт, погружаясь в искусство, идет вглубь, минуя свое Я’; Genis, *Ivan Petrovich umer: Stat’i i rassledovaniya* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 1999), p.36.

Chapter Five

Dmitry Galkovsky's *Beskonechnyi tupik*:

A Treatise on Russian Folly

Dmitry Galkovsky (b. 1960) completed *Beskonechnyi tupik* (BT) in 1988 but had to wait nine years before seeing it published in full in Moscow (his native city), in a print-run of 500 copies financed by friends and acquaintances. The author introduced the work in his preface as a ‘философский роман, посвященный истории русской культуры XIX-XX вв., а также судьбе “русской личности”, слабой и несчастной но все же СУЩЕСТВУЮЩЕЙ’ (the use of capitalization, here and throughout, is Galkovsky’s). A year later, in 1998, Galkovsky managed to publish 2000 copies of a corrected and supplemented second edition; it is to this edition that I will be referring in this chapter.¹

The extensive text consists of almost 700 densely printed outsize pages subdivided into 949 *primechaniya* (I will call them ‘entries’). It is framed by paraphernalia that give an accurate impression of the author’s literary persona. Two portentous images of the author – a stylised black-and-white photo-portrait at the front, and a photograph of a bust of Galkovsky at the back – are offset by the deflated tone of the short afterword, in which the author claims that, ‘Моя книга оказалась никому не нужна’, despite its merits; that his life, that of a non-entity (*nichtozhestvo*), has been forever ruined; and that, between the completion and eventual publication of BT, ‘я из “автора ненапечатанной книги” превращался в “автора ОДНОЙ ненапечатанной книги”, из “молодого человека” – в “пожилого неудачника”, из “неизвестного литератора” – в “объясняющую себя сволочь”’ (p.689). The two prefaces show the other side of Galkovsky’s reaction to this

¹ Dmitry Galkovsky, *Beskonechnyi tupik* (Samizdat: Moscow, 1998). The foreword from the first edition (1997) is republished here, before the main text.

period of limbo. He describes the rejection of the work by scores of publishers (although fragments were published in many leading literary journals and newspapers), and rails against his persecution by leading representatives of the post-Soviet 'Soviet intelligentsia', who conspired to keep his book from the reader (p.iv). Appropriately, given the anachronistic flavour of Galkovsky's paranoia, the 'publisher' of the second edition carries the name *Samizdat*. Yet *BT* has also proved to be a consummately contemporary work, lending itself ideally to the Internet, where Galkovsky has posted the book as a hypertext.² Largely through his prominent presence on the web, he has maintained the fame which he garnered in the late 1990s for his work as a columnist for *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, and for his rejection, in 1997, of the then-prestigious Anti-Booker Prize.³

BT intertwines extensive literary and philosophical debate with a personal narrative based on the author's biography, in which the putative failure of the national intellectual tradition is found to be reflected. As a 'philosophical novel', *BT* is more a work of philosophy than of fiction. Indeed, it illustrates a failure to turn life into narrative, or into anything more than a succession of fragmentary memories. Furthermore, these recollections trace a life which, in its adult years, has been lived among books and in the absence of 'external events' (*vneshnikh sobytii*), especially love. The narrator mocks its tragic nature: 'Моя жизнь удивительно трагична. А, собственно говоря, трагических событий в ней нет. Смерть отца только. Но ведь это тоже так банально, так естественно мелко' (234, p.153).⁴ The failure of the life, as much as the life itself, becomes the author's preoccupation, and it is in the elaboration of this failure that the book attains its artistic complexity. It also allows Galkovsky to present himself in the light of

² See <<http://www.samisdat.com>> [accessed 19 July 2006]. The structure of *BT* proves more effective on-line than on paper, since each entry, posted on a separate web-page, provides instant links to all the other entries on associated topics.

³ Galkovsky describes his reasons for rejecting this award for *BT* in a later book, *Propaganda*; this essay is posted at <<http://www.samisdat.com/2/214-otk.htm>>.

⁴ Subsequent references to *BT* will follow this model, providing in parenthesis both entry number (italicized) and page number.

folly, casting himself as a comic dropout, an inveterate bookworm and helpless *durachok*. He gives himself a somewhat ridiculous alias, Odinokov, emphasizing both his solitary nature and his literary pretensions (by assonance with Nabokov, an important presence in the book). Not only does Odinokov wear the cap and bells, so too does his book: Odinokov appears to the reader ‘в шутовском колаке “Бесконечного тупика”’ (877, p.622).

The description is merited, since *BT* treats its principal subject – the Russian intellectual tradition – in a polemical and topsy-turvy manner, drawing writers and thinkers into its theatre of failure. The many interpretations it gives of individuals and texts are idiosyncratic in the extreme, corresponding to the philosophy of the ‘wise mistake’ laid out by Galkovsky in an autobiographical essay of 1995 (‘Tragicheskii ratsionalist’), where, writing of himself in the third person, he commented: ‘Жизненная философия Г. – не “истина” и даже не “поиск истины”, а “мудрая ошибка” [...] Взаимное наложение ошибок превращается в истину.’⁵ As I will show, Galkovsky misinterprets others in order to arrive at his own truth, seeking wisdom by persisting in folly.

Availing itself of the fool’s licence to exaggerate, confuse and scandalize, *BT* also explores that strand of literary folly which is particularly salient in Russian writing: namely, the total implication of the narrator-author in the processes which he mocks and criticises. In doing so, and in providing another example of solipsistic ‘fool narrative’, *BT* fits squarely into the tradition of non-conformist prose studied in this thesis, especially as represented by Vasily Shukshin, Venedikt Erofeev (with whom Galkovsky shares a reverence for Vasily Rozanov), and Yuz Aleshkovsky.

The love-deprived, God-forsaken and almost exclusively male world which is the favoured territory of this tradition (from Platonov onwards) also defines the contours of *BT*. Its underlying determinants can be located without particular difficulty. Odinokov’s

⁵ The essay can be read on-line: <http://old.russ.ru/antolog/inoe/galkov_o.htm> [accessed 19 July 2006].

flight into introspection is plainly a response to the Soviet cult of collectivity;⁶ and his painful sense of alienation from Orthodox Christianity is explicitly linked to Soviet atheism, as it influenced his own upbringing:

В конечном счете я могу прийти в церковь, но куда же мне девать мое детство, лишенное светлых образов религиозного опыта, этой основы православия? [...] Вообще, как мне вместить разросшееся мышление под церковный купол, если душа моя искажена, деформирована, просто во многом инфантильна, недоразвита? (830, p.587)

Odinokov, to judge from the authors he cites at great length, has sought to emigrate intellectually into the pre-Soviet past of Russian religious thought, while remaining historically bound to his own past and to the Soviet culture that has deformed him, resulting in a sense of profound isolation. In 'Tragicheskii ratsionalist', Galkovsky wrote of himself:

Ирония в том, что, пока он боролся за уютный мир частной жизни, в психике и в самом составе души произошли такие изменения, что именно этот абсолютно враждебный мир анонимного коллективистского хамства и стал родным или по крайней мере относительно понятным, привычным, сподручным. Г. пережил трагедию одиночества так глубоко, что навсегда остался наедине с самим собой в замкнутом пространстве сюжета.⁷

*

As its very title suggests, *Beskonechnyi tupik* is a work of sustained dichotomies and contradictions. It has been touted as a leading example of a new wave of Russian postmodernism, and certain of its features, such as its structure (which I will shortly discuss) appear to support this view.⁸ Such an interpretation, however, risks promoting a reading of the work as essentially ludic, when Galkovsky's exploration of the structures of Russian thought is anything but light-handed. Rather, he aims to show how, within the

⁶ A pattern comparable to the experience of the much older Mamleev; see Chapter Four.

⁷ See <http://old.russ.ru/antolog/inoe/galkov_o.htm> [accessed 19 July 2006].

⁸ I.S. Skoropanova calls Galkovsky the leading figure among a new generation of postmodernists in a useful chapter dedicated to *Beskonechnyi tupik* and the critical responses it has elicited. See her *Russkaya postmodernistskaya literatura: Uchebnoe posobie*, 4th rev. edn (Moscow: Flint, 2002), pp. 441-65 (p. 441).

Russian intellectual processes which *BT* both explicates and illustrates by its own example, such polarities as faith and reason, speech and silence, the individual and the collective, are experienced as painful and inflexible.

Among these dichotomies, those organized around the taxonomy of intelligence (idiocy and genius, *yurodstvo* and cunning), are of primary importance. Indeed, it is hard to think of another work of Russian literature that treats these concerns with greater comprehensiveness, or that seeks to locate them so insistently in the native context. ‘Увы, мы глупы’, Odinokov says in connection with Russian history of the last two centuries (408, p.289). *BT* attempts an analysis of this specifically Russian stupidity, often identifying it with the flawed quest for rationalism. In doing so, *Beskonechnyi tupik* recapitulates and extends the concerns discussed in previous chapters. Various manifestations of folly prove critical to Odinokov’s complex discussion of Soviet history and Russian thought, and a notion of *yurodstvo Khrista radi* plays a pivotal and ambivalent role.

This chapter is divided into four parts. In the first, I provide an introduction to *BT*, describing its structure, its method of argumentation, and the assumptions about Russian philosophy and Russian thinking upon which it builds. In the second, I describe Odinokov’s identification of Russian folly with mockery; here, as throughout *BT*, the aggressive dynamics of Russian culture hold sway. In this section I discuss the presentation of Odinokov’s father as a fool, and Galkovsky’s attempts to show what may be called a cultural genetics of stupidity. In the third and fourth parts, I treat successively the negative and positive poles of folly in *BT*: Lenin, whom Odinokov presents as Antichrist, and those writers whom he exalts (or appears to exalt) as *yurodivye*, above all Rozanov, the interpretation of whose role in *BT* will involve a broader consideration of Rozanov’s significance in non-conformist prose. Throughout, the chapter is aimed at an

elucidation of *BT* and its arguments, rather than the polemical engagement which, at times, the book all but demands in its forceful claims for Russian exclusivity.

1. A Guide to *Beskonechnyi tupik*

Design and structure

The design of *Beskonechnyi tupik* betrays two of the work's chief inspirations – Rozanov and Dostoevsky. The composition through fragments of varying lengths follows in the tradition developed by Rozanov in *Uedinennoe* and *Opavshie list'ya* (1912-1915). *BT* also begs comparison with Dostoevsky's *Dnevnik pisatelya* (1873-81) in its origins as a diary, in the variety of its entries and in its use of interpolated material (extensive quotation from various writers).⁹ Aside from Odinokov's direct engagement with both Rozanov and Dostoevsky in *BT*, other features further suggest these links, notably the narrator's love of polemic and paradox, his frequent flirtation with anti-Semitism, and his desire to locate the unique features of the Russian psyche.¹⁰

Yet *BT*, in structure at least, is not a work of imitation. Galkovsky informs the reader in the first of two prefaces that the work's true title is *Primechaniya k 'Beskonechnemu tupiku'*, since its 949 numbered entries have their source in an earlier essay (written 1984-85) which, confusingly, also bears the title 'Beskonechnyi tupik', but which Odinokov refers to in *BT* as the *Iskhodnyi tekst (IT)*. Rozanov is as central to the essay as he is to *BT*, though the format and tone of the discussion is more conventional.

⁹ In stark contrast to the *Dnevnik pisatelya*, however, *BT* is resolutely uncontemporary, its polemic being largely directed at thinkers and writers of the past. If the *Dnevnik* provides a scrapbook of current events, and reactions to them, *BT* can be seen as a scrapbook of Russian literature and thought.

¹⁰ Dostoevsky wrote in the *Dnevnik* in 1876 that his aim was to clarify 'the idea of the uniqueness of our national spirit'; cited in Kenneth Lantz, *The Dostoevsky Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004), p.474. The anti-Semitic aspects of this work have been frequently noted. Odinokov's attitude towards Jews is complex; what is clear is that he wishes to separate Jewishness from his model of Russian thought.

When *IT* was published in *Kontinent* in 1994, Odinokov added a short afterword which effectively renounced the essay, claiming that it added nothing to the still unpublished book. Above all, he rejected its ‘incorrect tone’: ‘Тон этой части – тон 50-летнего профессора, вещающего с кафедры. Но мне было не 50, а 24’.¹¹ This hostility to the affectation of professorial authority suggests one reason for the assumption of various masks of folly in *BT*, and for the shift towards a more personal, Rozanovian manner of addressing the reader.

Only individual phrases from *IT* remain in *BT*, but these underpin the work’s elaborate structure, while the essay itself remains a valuable source for understanding the book. In the map provided as an insert for the revised edition, the design of *BT* is presented in an image reminiscent of a Christmas tree: the numbered entries branch off from forty-seven points on the main trunk, with each point referring back to a sentence or phrase in *IT*. The first entry on each branch thus takes its cue from a quotation in *IT*; the second entry refers to the first, and so on. Thus, point 36 on the trunk represents a quotation, cited in *IT*, giving Rozanov’s opinion of Nekrasov. This point leads off along one branch to entry 650 (in which Odinokov asserts Nekrasov’s *yurodstvo* in poetry) which then leads to 901 (again on Nekrasov) and finally along this branch to 944, which picks up on a separate comment in 901. The entries are numbered consecutively, but are often unrelated: 650, for example, is followed by an entry on political revolutionary history (651). Thus, the reader has two ways of working through the book, a choice that reflects the author’s conflicting impulses towards orderliness and chaos and the contradiction between his desire for non-rational freedom (elaborated, as we will see, through his praise of *yurodstvo*) and his own intellectual disposition as a ‘tragic rationalist’ (who, in contrast to other writers studied in this thesis, but in common with Lenin, is entirely sober).¹²

¹¹ Dmitry Galkovsky, ‘Beskonechnyi tupik’, *Kontinent*, 81 (1994), 220-307 (p.307).

¹² On Odinokov’s sobriety, see entries 244, 572; on Lenin’s dream of a sober Russia, see *IT*, p.292.

The very need to provide any sort of structure, however loose, is at odds with the putative tendency of Russian thought that Odinokov claims to epitomize himself. According to this tendency, 'Чем глубже анализ, тем рассыпаннее форма отечественного мышления' (7, p.6). It is also at odds with the ostensible spontaneity and randomness of Rozanov's approach. Indeed, Odinokov stresses that his own essay and book ought to be seen only as, 'Своеобразные прологомены к Розанову, плавный переход от "полного текста" к его полной разрушенности'. The total textual disintegration of *Opavshie list'ya* is a stage beyond Odinokov's Christmas tree: 'После "опавших ветвей" начинается сам Розанов' (7, p.6).

Of arguably greater interest are the patterns that emerge independently of these processes. Repetition and reformulation of key ideas, words and topics occurs in a way that is more subtle and complex than the external design might suggest. It is above all this internal structure that enables Odinokov to enact a 'попытка русского мышления' (7, p.6), and an 'опыт овладения национальной идеей' (144. p.102).

Along *BT*'s verbal stream, to switch metaphors, the reader keeps encountering familiar features. These include the often eccentric tics which Odinokov considers to be characteristic of, and often exclusive to, Russian thinking and language, among them: *spokhvatyvanie*, *glumlenie*, *oborachivaemost'*, *zaglushechnost'*, and *zloradstvo*. Certain Russian historical topics also recur frequently, such as the Decembrist and Slavophile movements, Freemasonry, Christianity and Socialism. Especially prominent is the relatively small group of authors with whose writings and personalities Odinokov engages at length, with hostility or (more rarely) affection. Chief among them are Rozanov, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Nabokov, Solov'ev, Berdyaev and, as the twentieth century's 'central figure' (544, p.391) and the personification of its nihilistic 'idea of evil' (448, p.347), Lenin. All these men, and especially Lenin, serve as doubles and even father-

figures for the narrator;¹³ and all are implicated in the quest for self-knowledge (or *samopoznanie*, as Berdyaev called one of his best-known works). This is at the same time a quest for national self-knowledge: ‘Розанов писал, что ему никто не интересен, кроме русских. А мне никто не интересен, кроме меня. Меня как русского. Осознание себя как русского, принадлежащего к русским, соединяет меня еще с миром’ (508, p.361). Despite this qualification, the narrator encourages us to see the whole book as an exercise in solipsism (‘в этой книге я говорю только о себе’; 664, p.481)¹⁴ and ‘extreme subjectivism’ (*krainii sub"ektivizm*; 625, p.444). Continuing a motif frequently remarked in this thesis, he links the idiotic with the inability to escape the enclosed self:

‘Катастрофа “Бесконечного тупика”. Одинок превращается в бесцельную стилизацию, идиотски обыгрывающую собственную гениальность. А Соловьев, Чернышевский, Ленин, Набоков, Чехов и др. оборачиваются лишь двойниками моего “я”. (912, p.648)

Perhaps as much as half of *BT* consists of quotation, much of it from the works of the authors listed above. A small but significant proportion of this mass recalls Rozanov’s trademark use of quotation marks whereby attention is drawn to individual but generally commonplace locutions without reference to their use by any particular writer.¹⁵ The vast majority of quotations, however, are lifted from specific texts. One effect is of an infinite recess of words in which Odiokov recognizes himself to be lost (a fate he shares, as will be seen, with Lenin and the Bolsheviks). Conscious of his alienation from the faith of his intellectual forbears, he mourns the absence of a single authoritative Book. To quote one entry in its entirety:

Я ... Библию заменил библиотекой.

И пытаюсь теперь из тысяч прочитанных книг сделать себе Книгу. Розанов сказал: ‘Ветхий Завет – нескончаемость. Евангелие – тупик’.

¹³ The book’s dedication, ‘Моему отцу’, is thus quite ambiguous.

¹⁴ 664, p.481.

¹⁵ See, for example, 22, pp.19-20.

‘Бесконечный тупик’. Смешно. Не получится. Жизнь пропала. (783, p.564)

Odinokov's imprisonment in other texts and himself is itself experienced as an infinite cul-de-sac. In this way, as Skoropanova comments, ‘Галковский развивает тезис “сознание как текст”’. Even when he is not quoting others, she argues, he sees life through the prism of Russian literature, aware, like Barthes, of how life imitates the book.¹⁶ His protagonists, as we will see, are interpreted on the basis of literary models.

In *BT*, it should be emphasized, intertextuality serves a quite specific and self-explanatory purpose in the context of the work's unusual ambitions. Extended quotation enables Odinokov to illustrate the putative unity of all expression in Russian writing, its hidden mechanisms and determinants. Disagreeing with Nabokov's reading of Gogol, Odinokov argues that no writer can create a separate world in Russian: ‘Нет, мир совершенно един. История – едина. Язык – един. Различие в интерпретации, взглядах. Но на пределе – единство’ (505, p.360). Odinokov suggests this unity in part by his organization of his material. Other voices are brought in unobtrusively, and the ensuing quotation may last a few lines or a few pages. The highly polemical interpretations that connect the quotations are somewhat camouflaged by the sheer flow of words. Russian thought is thus presented as a single, self-propelling text, a polyphony that is at the same time a monologue, anchored in common themes and mechanisms of thought. If Dostoevsky's writing (like that of Rozanov) invites the reader's ‘полное растворение в авторских мыслях’ (22, p.19), *BT* aspires to the reader's immersion in the totality of all Russian thinkers.

¹⁶ Skoropanova, pp.442-43.

Argumentation

Within this attractive edifice (or ‘folly’), the narrator, Odinokov, is bent on subversion and provocation. He strikes an authoritative air, but his arguments are tendentious and his laconicism of style leaves lacunae of argument, despite his disingenuous comment that his every opinion is well-founded (771, pp.555-56). Paradox and provocation are taken to deliberate excess. Thus, the biologist Trofim Lysenko is said to have been intellectually ‘stronger’ (*posil'nee*) than Kant, given the conditions in which he worked (343, p.229).

To take a more serious example, Odinokov claims the fundamental quality of the Underground Man to be his ‘tender-heartedness’ (*laskovost'*): ‘Основа его внутренней жизни – колоссальный заряд первичного доверия к миру, ласковой открытости. Даже не доброты, а именно ласковости, ласкового женского неприятия зла’ (22, p.19). Such a reading is wilfully contrary, given the Underground Man’s treatment of Liza, in particular, which is defined by an absence of trustfulness (*doverie*) and tenderness of heart. Odinokov provides some support for his assertion of the Underground Man’s ‘неприятие зла’, though the quotation he chooses gives only a partial glimpse into a complex character, and might easily be countered with other passages. One’s suspicions are reinforced by the manner in which the very brief discussion is framed. There is disingenuity, and even fool-playing, in Odinokov’s warning that his assertion about the Underground Man’s character will strike a *foreign* reader as surprising (22, p.19) – as if it would strike the Russian reader as pure common sense; while the merging of this discussion with a much longer section on Odinokov’s character, and the abuse of his trustfulness in childhood, may well suggest that it is only Odinokov who interests Odinokov, not the Underground Man.

Yet Odinokov's speculations about the Underground Man's character prove stimulating as well as eccentric, and not so far-fetched as to be plainly dismissed. They succeed in making important connections with the character of Odinokov, not least in the suggestion of the two men's shared childishness as an aspect of their injured pride. While offering the Underground Man as a further double for Odinokov, Galkovsky also suggests the internal doubling within Dostoevsky's character, seeking out, as he does throughout *BT*, the underside of familiar topics and individuals. In implicit contrast to the Underground Man's stated desire to satisfy his caprice, to do the wrong thing, and to overturn people's expectations, about all of which Galkovsky's narrator says nothing, Odinokov comments on the 'Заискивание героя "Записок из подполья", стремление быть хорошим, то есть как можно точнее отвечать любым представлениям о себе' (22, p.19). The observation suggests that the Underground Man's deep-rooted desire to please, and his ostentatious attempts to displease, are the two sides of one medal; and that the issues of freedom with which he so preoccupies himself are ultimately secondary to his excessive and constricting dependence on the opinions of others.¹⁷

This comment is my own extrapolation of Odinokov's observations, and thus a small demonstration of the way in which *BT* seeks to provoke the reader into subjective response through its exaggerations, unstated connections and silences, whether within the entries or at their interstices. The reader won't agree with all Odinokov's comments on the Underground Man but the insights remain, as a contribution to the jigsaw of the entire work. Exaggerations and distortions may thus be seen as the fool-narrator's 'wise mistakes'.

¹⁷ Odinokov's emphasis on the Underground Man's childish desire to please may be compared with aspects of the fictionalized biography of Chernyshevsky in Nabokov's *Dar*: see Vladimir Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda*, 5 vols (St Petersburg: Symposium, 1999-2000), IV, p.397 and *passim*. I discuss further the relevance of *Dar* to *BT* below, pp.281-83.

As this example suggests, *BT* both analyses the antinomial tendencies of Russian thought, and is itself shaped by them. As a rule, the logic of inversion is directed towards the disclosure of negative polarities or doubles; most typically, towards the exposure of the intellectual limitations of the various *intelligent* Odinokov is discussing, their foolish underbelly. Thus, Odinokov asserts the illogicality of Lenin's triumphant syllogisms (402, pp.206-7); the naivety and even 'stupidity' (*glupost'*) of Berdyaev's meandering eulogies to Russianness (23, p.21); and the 'monologic' and 'monotonous' thinking that produced Bakhtin's paeans to dialogicity (935, pp.657-58). He delights in exposing writers' absence of self-awareness, and the gaps between intention and expression. It is what is not intended in the text – often described as *progovarivanie* – that interests him.¹⁸

Yet Odinokov's self-fashioning as a scourge of folly is a precarious construction, as he never ceases to remind us. He, too, feels that he deserves to have his limitations exposed; indeed, he longs to meet the person who will shove his stupidity (*glupost'*) in his face (24, p.22). His entries goad the reader to do to his arguments what he does to those of Lenin, Berdyaev and others. His polemics are at once aggressive and vulnerable, uninsured by the necessary detail. Thus, he cites Lenin's statement, 'Мы отвергаем вздорную побасенку о свободе воли', and declares: 'Это какое-то неслыханное пренебрежение элементарной логикой. Свобода воли ОТВЕРГАЕТСЯ, то есть происходит чисто ВОЛЕВОЙ акт' (402, pp.276-77). But the conclusion that Lenin's rejection of freedom of will is self-contradictory needs further elaboration: the act of *otverganie* does not have to connote volition, and may often be said of subjects (such as a physical body, or *organizm*) that have no volitional capacity.¹⁹ It is impossible, of course, to assert the extent to which Galkovsky, through Odinokov, deliberately weakens his own arguments, but it is also

¹⁸ See 23, p.21, which develops the following premise: 'Многие страницы произведений Бердяева очень наивны. Чрезвычайно наивны. Но эта-то наивность и даже глупость позволяет ему выбалтывать сокровенное. Именно в "Самопознании" я увидел русскую идею. Ее не увидел сам Бердяев'.

¹⁹ Odinokov's point seems even less convincing in the general context of *BT*, since the many discussions of Lenin frequently focus on his putative lack of free will. See Part 3, below.

impossible to ignore the extent to which Odinokov mirrors the faults he is exposing in others: the ‘*zaglushki*’ of his argument, their ‘*oborachivaemost*’. In the case of Lenin, the mirroring is especially obvious: with his penchant for capital letters, overstatement, sweeping generalization and aggressive *ad hominem* rhetoric, Odinokov is a worthy inheritor of Leninist polemic.

The internal dynamics of *BT* derive in large part from this pattern of ambivalence and reflexivity. The book is both a critique of Russian philosophical writing and the Russian intellectual, and a self-critical demonstration of their characteristic features.²⁰ In this next section, I will identify the governing mechanisms that, according to Odinokov, structure the thought and personality both of himself and of the Russian writers he discusses; and the assumptions that lie behind the interpretive prism through which these mechanisms are discerned.

The premises of Beskonechnyi tupik

The basis of Odinokov’s generalizations about Russian philosophical writing is his view of the Russian language, which, from the opening pages of *IT*, is deemed inadequate for systematic, rationalist argumentation. It is defined by its sham quality (*mnimost*), its ambiguity and formlessness (reflected in its inclination to long sentences), being ‘темным, аморфным и парадоксальным’.²¹ Even the particle ‘не’ is held to be ‘weak’ (349, p.235); while ‘да’ can be used in a non-affirmative manner as a synonym of ‘впрочем’ (352, p.238). Russian is a poetic language (349, p.235) which is ill-suited to proofs and demonstrations, a fact Odinokov sees reflected in Berdyaev’s admission in *Samopoznanie*

²⁰ Cf 657, p.477: ‘Русское мышление слабое, но самокритичное’.

²¹ Galkovsky elaborates: ‘Русская речь похожа на мед в сотах. Она сладко-тягуча и одновременно пронизана пресными восковыми перегородками’ (*IT*, p.222).

that, 'Я ничего не могу толком развить и доказать'.²² He describes the philosophical language of Berdyaev, Dostoevsky and others in agonistic terms, identifying the putative mechanisms of attempted self-correction (such as 'оговорки' or 'спохватывания') by which they try, quixotically, to fight the inherently anti-rational tendencies of Russian speech.²³

This process of verbal oscillation is determined also by the antinomial quality of Russian thought (and culture). Since no polarity reflects the truth, the Russian thinker is constantly 'correcting' or 'justifying' himself by moving towards the other pole. This *perpetuum mobile* is, Odinokov suggests, the 'Russian idea' which Berdyaev sought but failed to see under his very nose:

Бердяев дал определение характера русского народа. Де, страна крайностей... Потом подумал, подумал и дописал: русские крайние и в своей срединности. Таким образом, Бердяев ничего не сказал. И это очень по-русски. Он 'заоправдывался', 'заоправдался'.

Бердяев не понял, что сам факт постановки вопроса о 'русской идее' и является ее осуществлением. Тут гигантская заглушка. Мы подлецы, ничтожества, но святые. Мы не ничтожества и не святые, а посредственности. Мы посредственности, но посредственности исключительные, в которых максимально проявлена подлость и святость [...] Но и т.д., и т.п. (23, p.21)

The result in Russian philosophical writing is the production by these mechanisms of endless verbiage, immoderate 'выговаривание'. Excessive speech and literary self-expression is unambiguously condemned by Odinokov in a book whose length repeats the crime. The explosion of literature in post-Petrine Russia is perceived as a deformation of the country's mission: 'Нации с таким языком нужно было молчать'. Silence, he argues, was Christian Russia's natural idiom, and garrulousness was once seen as sinful:

²² *IT*, p. 223.

²³ See, for example, *IT*, p.240: 'В Достоевском сказался, выразился русский тип мышления: судорожный, прерывистый, и одновременно тягучий, с бесконечными оговорками и спохватываниями'.

‘Русское христианство ночное, дословесное. А в слове чертовщина’ (127, p.91).²⁴ Dostoevsky is described as having emerged from this silent Rus; his ‘Russian Christ’, Alyosha, who replies with silence to the Grand Inquisitor in *Brat'ya Karamazovy*, reflects the ‘высокий дар русского молчания’ (224, p.146). Yet Dostoevsky also showed how a culture of silence had, in literature, given way to its opposite: ‘В русской культуре есть дар молчания, но нет дара умолчания. Русский человек не может вовремя остановиться и начинает выговариваться. Этот процесс выговаривания блестяще изображен в “Записках из подполья”’ (7, p.5). It is through the ambivalences of *yurodstvo* that, as we will see later in this chapter, Odinokov proposes a type of literature in which this polarity of speech and silence may be reconciled.

*

An evaluation of Odinokov’s evaluation of the Russian language as an inadequate philosophical tool is a task for separate study, but the genealogy of his critique seems clear. It includes most obviously Chaadaev, who questioned whether Russia had any thinkers of its own; the Slavophiles, who tended to define themselves in contrast to Western rationalism; and 20th-century religious thinkers who wondered, in the words of Fedotov, whether the Russians, and Slavs in general, had a ‘natural organic incapacity’ for rational thought.²⁵ Odinokov fully shares these thinkers’ exceptionalist interpretation of Russian intellectual culture, appearing to view it, like Fedotov, as an inheritor of Byzantium’s Christianity but not its Hellenism.

The image of Russian civilization given by Odinokov is overwhelmingly and eccentrically Christocentric, as the cover of the revised edition suggests, with its image of a deformed cross. Indeed, Christianity is portrayed as a cultural and intellectual fetter:

²⁴ See also *IT*, pp.227-29. The opening episodes of Tarkovsky’s *Andrei Rublev* illustrate Galkovsky’s point, their mood of virtual silence broken only by the rumbustious and implicitly sinful performances of the *skomorokh*.

²⁵ Quoted in Charles Lock, ‘Bakhtin Among the Poets: Towards a History of Silence’, *Dialogism*, 5-6 (2001), 44-64 (p.50).

witness Odinokov's comments on Belinsky ('И всё же, как ни ругал Белинский Христа, уйти от него он не смог'; 268, p.175), or on Bulgakov's *Master i Margarita*: 'Пилат Булгакова это русский больной ум, разочарованный в мире и фатально связанный с темой Христа. Всё равно. Всегда' (849, p.602). Outside Christianity, a Russian ceases to be a Russian (839, p.596); within it, he identifies himself so strongly with Christ's example that he becomes a diminutive Christ: 'Каждый русский, хочет он этого или не хочет, является маленьким Христом, который пришел в мир всех спасать. Это тайная, интимная мечта любого русского' (411, p.290).

To illustrate the distinctiveness of Russian faith, Odinokov quotes at length the distinction made by Berdyaev, in *Smysl tvorchestva*, between the perception of Christ in the Catholic West as an 'object' to whom the believer aspires as an ideal, and the experience of Christ in Orthodoxy within the believer's soul as 'subject' (429, p.301). Berdyaev's anthropocentric interpretation of Christianity in Dostoevsky's novels,²⁶ and the philosophies of 'Godmanhood' variously developed by Solov'ev and Berdyaev, issues in *BT* in the total identification of man with Christ.

This idiosyncratic development of Christianity reaffirms the exceptional status of Russian culture and the 'Russian logos' (*IT*, p.295). The Christian paradigm, in its unique Russian manifestation, trumps all others, whether rationalist or Romantic. This leads Odinokov to posit uniformity within Russian culture, where it is the fate of all to be '*khristosiki*'.²⁷ There can be no exceptional individuals according to the Western paradigm of (Romantic) genius, whose application to the Russian context is repeatedly castigated by Odinokov as a category error: 'По-русски гениев быть не может. Все русские гении конвенциональны' (803, p.574). Russian 'genius' is always identified with the example of Christ, and, just as emphatically, with folly and intellectual kenosis: 'Русский

²⁶ See Nikolai Berdyaev, *Mirosozertsanie Dostoevskago* (Prague: YMCA, 1923), esp. pp.35-63.

²⁷ On Odinokov's use of this word, see 411, pp.290-91.

романтик это христосик, идиотик, дурачок` (429, p. 301).<sup>28</sup> Here, the words `genius` and `fool` are interchangeable polarities within the fixed vocation of attempted self-realization as Christ. A Russian can be, like Gogol, a `гений-святой` (839, p.595), yet an `idiot`, like Prince Myshkin, is also only ever one step away from sanctity (161, p.114).²⁹ To Odinokov, the highest form of this national genius is, as we will see, *yurodstvo*.

2. Mockery and Durachestvo in Beskonechnyi tupik

These key cultural determinants – the `Russian logos` and the example of Christ – are themselves examined in the light of a third related factor which to a large extent generates the book's thematics of folly, namely, the putatively ubiquitous role of mockery in Russian culture. In different guises, mockery pervades every page of *BT* and represents an important focus of Odinokov's exploration of the Russian mentality, hence the attention given to the meanings, etymology and tonality of the very words that express types of mockery in Russian, especially *glumlenie*: `Такие слова непереводимы, и в них раскрывается национальная сущность'.<sup>30</sup> This entry also brings out the universally performative quality of mockery in *BT*: `Глумиться это значит забавляться издевательством над кем-либо, "тешиться". При этом сам глумящийся тоже втягивается в издевательское действо. Он шут, потешный скоморох` (371, p.249). Mockery is theatrical but not spontaneous; indeed, it is ritualized in a cultural context modelled on the relations between the powerful and the weak or humiliated, where free and equal interaction between individuals is deemed impossible. Even `normal

²⁸ The key example studied in *BT* of the Russian encounter with Romanticism is Pushkin; see below, pp.290-94. Odinokov's approach is paradoxical, since it seems to be indebted to Romantic thought, especially the German Romantic intellectual tradition from which the Slavophiles drew so much inspiration. In particular, Odinokov's conviction about the limits imposed by language on Russian thinking recalls the ideas of von Humboldt, who argued for the dependence of thought on each specific language; see Lock, pp.45-46.

²⁹ Cf the saying, `глуп до святости`.

³⁰ See also the entry on `идиот` and `идиотничать` (161, pp.114-15).

conversation' is proscribed. A Russian conversation is, according to Odinokov, 'либо пьяное застолье, либо допрос, либо вообще их жуткое наложение. А возможен ли вообще нормальный диалог по-русски? Вот для меня? Да, но как очень тонкое глумление над собеседником и самим собой' (205, p.135).

Odinokov's investigation of subtle but malicious forms of mockery (*glumlenie*, *izdevatel'stvo*) reflects the manifest influence, once again, of Dostoevsky, whose less saintly characters, from the Underground Man to Fedor Karamazov, frequently seek to dominate or humiliate others through cruel teasing or buffoonery. Equally Dostoevskian is the premise that such mockery, as an exercise of power, should take place between two people in conversation. The mechanism of doubling which this leads to in Dostoevsky's fiction (as in that of Yuz Aleshkovsky) is fully operational in *BT*, where the object of mockery is always liable to be a reflection or echo of the perceiver. This has already been seen in Odinokov himself, who loves to mock and criticize others, yet seeks with equal ardour his own humiliation and unmasking. He interprets his own book in a similar fashion. It is an example of *glumlenie*: 'Сама ее форма – издевательство над читателем' (205, p.135); but the author is at its mercy, too: 'Книга эта – злорадство, тупик, петля на моей шее' (869, p.618). This double-edged dynamic, deprived of freedom or merriment, might be seen as a malign form of the type of two-way carnival laughter described by Bakhtin. It also recovers the experience of the righteous Christian who, like Paul (or even Jesus), is both scorner and scorned.³¹ Yet it is ultimately singular, having developed within a specific cultural tradition and being tied to Dostoevskian polarities whereby humility threatens to reveal itself as pride, intelligence as stupidity, and love as tyranny. In contrast to the mystical '*coincidentia oppositorum*' perceived by Berdyaev in Dostoevsky's

³¹ On Christ's irony and mocking, in Luther's exegesis, see M.A. Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (London: Penguin, 1997), pp.54-55.

psychology and 'gnosis',³² Odinokov suggests that the extremes of the Russian psyche meet only at one end, where the prosaic truth of illusory ideals is disclosed. Idealist and intellectual (rationalist) aspirations make a fool of the individual, as the example of Odinokov is meant to illustrate.

Central to all these processes of *glumlenie* and their production of folly and idiocy is a perception of the Russian cultural space as inherently malevolent, prone to reversing intentions and exposing their falsity. This reversibility, noted above in Odinokov's discussion of 'не' and 'да', pervades the narrator's entire interpretation of Russian thought and speech, exposing the mechanisms of *glumlenie*, *zloradstvo*, and *oborachivaemost'*. Prophecies, for example, inevitably turn against their speakers, however perspicacious. Thus, Dostoevsky's and Leont'ev's predictions about the advent of socialist tyranny in Europe proved correct, but not in the way they intended. They had foreseen it to be Russia's role to be the potential saviour of the socialist West, not the other way round (280, p.180).³³

The West is an important agent of *glumlenie* in *BT*. The image of the West that has filtered into Russia since Peter the Great has had, Odinokov suggests, a cruel and stupefying effect. The appeal of Western objectivity and rationalism has preyed on the vulnerable aspects of the Russian character that Odinokov repeatedly emphasizes, such as its childishness and trustfulness, its receptivity to authority (especially the printed word),³⁴ and its desire to impress, to be liked and, ultimately, to imitate. Yet the 'Russian logos' is fatally ill-suited to objectivity and rationalism, and transforms them into their opposite, mocking the individual's aspirations. Already in *IT*, Galkovsky argues that, 'Наверное, где-то в подсознании у русского есть варварское стремление к западной научности,

³² See Berdyaev, p.10.

³³ Compare Odinokov's views with the essay on the 'irony of Russian history' that concludes James Billington's work, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretative History of Russian Culture* (1966; New York: Vintage Books, 1970), pp.590-97.

³⁴ Described as the 'русская идеальная восприимчивость к слову' (462, p. 319).

рациональности'. But such efforts are doomed since 'рациональная мысль в устах русского приобретает иррациональную окраску'. Mere stupidity (*glupost'*) is the result (*IT*, p.224). The Russian appropriation of rationalistic, logical thought is fatal, firstly because it is resisted by the Russian language, and secondly because it is naïve, gullible and invariably hitched to the requirements of immediate application, to the realization of objective abstractions in subjective experience. As Odinokov notes in parenthesis, 'им [русским] только бросить два-три силлогизма, они отца родного зарубят' (853, p.608).³⁵ If the result is not stupidity or cruelty, it is intellectual folly, as Odinokov suggests when, alluding to the hopes of Nikolai Fedorov for humanity's resurrection of its ancestors, he imagines what would happen if he too tried to think 'elegantly and rationally' (*stroino i ratsional'no*): 'в результате получилась бы примитивная "фёдоровщина". Полезла бы такая чертовщина, что все бы за голову схватились, – оживление мертвых и тому подобная ахиня' (28, p.23).

These traits can combine with the Messianism described above, generating further nationally specific forms of *glumlenie* and stupidity. One of the best demonstrations of this pattern is, as often in *BT*, a personal one. In a single entry (853, pp. 607-8), Odinokov segues from a description of caricatures in pre-Revolutionary humorous magazines – where Russians' derision of Russians displays 'biological hatred' – to an autobiographical instance of the mockery to which Russians are habitually subjugated and mocked by one another. He describes how his aunt ('которая меня не любила') would order him in his childhood to sleep on his back: lying in other positions, she told him, would give him a twisted spine. Unable to sleep, Odinokov would not even complain: 'кот стал бы орать. А русским доказали. Какой-то совершенно посторонний человек за червонец в

³⁵ Similar thoughts are voiced with more sophisticated rhetoric by Saul Bellow's Mr Sammler, as he muses on 'the meaning of historical stupidity': 'And the Russians also, with their national tenacity. Give them a system, let them grasp some idea, and they would plunge to the depths with it, they would apply it to the end, pave the whole universe with hard idiot material'; Bellow, *Mr Sammler's Planet* (1970; London: Penguin, 1996), p.143.

“Здоровье” заметку написал, тётка прочла и стала меня “спасать”. The episode, and Odinokov’s interpretation of it, brings together many of the themes discussed in this section, including Russians’ credulity towards objectivity and the written word, and the cynical interpretation of the *khristosik* paradigm. The objective, scientific proof of a single comment in a journal is enough to convince his aunt, whose response takes the familiar form of ‘saving’. But this impulse conceals her true pleasure in wielding power, and her indifference as to whether her nagging yields any benefit. The aunt’s aggressive didacticism reveals the ‘способность русских к юродству, глумлению, травле. “Учёбе” других дибиной и дрекольем. [...] Тут еще и страсть к господству, объяснению’. Her behaviour might be seen as a form of *samodurstvo*; it also recalls the Underground Man’s realization that only a false type of love can be compatible with the need to tyrannize and to flaunt one’s moral superiority.³⁶

Another striking, and characteristic, feature of the episode is its suggestion of the complicity which Odinokov felt in his aunt’s behaviour and in its stupidity. The phrase ‘русским доказали’ suggests the credulity of both aunt and nephew, while the roles that the two play in this putatively timeless enactment of Russian *glumlenie* may be seen as representing the two sides of the *khristosik* paradigm: the aunt as the one who, in seeking to ‘save’, persecutes, and the nephew who suffers and is humiliated. Also notable here is the pattern, familiar from the stories of Shukshin (see Chapter One), of male impotence before tyrannical women.

Other similarities might be drawn with the processes of *odurachivanie* in the stories of Shukshin. Shukshin’s fools share with Odinokov, his father and other *duraki* in *BT* an absence of original malice, but a similar complex of inadequacy, inviting the fate of being

³⁶ Remembering Liza, the Underground Man says: ‘Я и полюбить уж не мог, потому что, повторяю, любить у меня – значило тиранствовать и нравственно превосходить’; F.M. Dostoevsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 30 vols (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972-90), v, p.176.

played for a fool, and assuming this role with theatrical gusto. The world of both writers is determined by fears of cultural inauthenticity.³⁷

To a far greater extent than Shukshin, however, Galkovsky wishes to elucidate the malevolent cultural dynamics that produces fools out of unmalicious people, and deprives them of freedom. He is interested in the cultural genetics of stupidity, whereby *duraki* bring others down to their level, foisting on them the same stultification of good qualities. This is brought out with particular clarity in the relationship between Odinokov and Odinokov-otets.

The *durachestvo* of Odinokov's drunkard father is of an eccentric nature, sometimes cruel and hardly straightforward. Most obviously, the father acts foolishly during his binges, lying in the sand-pit in the courtyard or, at home, deliberately crawling on the floor towards an exposed electricity socket. As a young child, Odinokov often had to be called to rescue him (22, p. 20). In a long entry (152) the father is portrayed, in a succession of scenes, as acting in ways that defy easy comprehension. At the Pioneer camp, he joins seven-year-old Odinokov in the canteen: 'Смотрит, как я ем. И вдруг рука отца высовывается с пальцем, сверпутым улиткой, и шелк – улитка стремительно распрямляется. У меня из глаз посыпались искры, а потом – слезы'. On the Moscow metro, returning from a party with Odinokov, he travels two stops in one direction, then two stops in the other – and continues doing this for an hour. On other occasions he roars with laughter (*khokhochet*) and smashes crockery. The entry closes with two scenes of thoughtless cruelty towards adolescents: in the first he finds Odinokov's reproduction of a depiction of a naked woman and shows it to his mother in a fit of hilarity; in the second he reads out his niece's 'intimate diary' (p. 109).

³⁷ See my discussion of Shukshin's stories in Chapter One.

Odinokov chooses not to attribute outright malevolence to his father, commenting in parenthesis: ‘злости не было, только озлобленность’ (p. 109). He portrays a deformed personality, in which good traits appear in a tainted and harmful form: the father’s love is ‘egoistic’, and his intelligence warped. As a result, he epitomizes some of the worst national traits discussed in the work, notably his inability to conduct dialogue, both in a literal sense and in the metaphoric sense of being able to accept another’s reality and understand it (‘Доброта отца сочеталась с какой-то органической способностью проникнуть в чужой мир, понять его’; p.108). The father is unable to understand other people, yet is nevertheless driven by an overpowering need to engage with them. The combination leads to mannered, ‘inside-out’ forms of behaviour, of acting in an ‘artistic’ sense; as throughout *BT*, theatricality and play are interpreted in an exclusively negative sense.³⁸ Quoting Rozanov’s description of Russians, Odinokov comments: ‘Мой отец тоже был типичной “ерундой с художеством”. Даже в постепенном пьяном распаде его личности был какой-то артистизм. (6, p. 4)’.³⁹

It can hardly be coincidental that several of the descriptions of Odinokov’s father are interspersed with discussions of Dostoevsky,⁴⁰ among which is the interpretation of the Underground Man discussed above, suggesting that we should view the father along similar lines, as a childish, non-malicious character. Unlike most observers, Odinokov was aware from childhood that his father was ‘joking’ even in his cruelty. In a canteen the cook shouted at the father when she saw him hurting his son, but Odinokov rushed to defend him: “Мой папочка хороший, вы не понимаете, он шутит!” (p. 108). In some respects the portrait that emerges is more reminiscent of the Dostoevskian buffoon than the Underground Man, with its cocktail of drunkenness, raucous laughter, provocation, sentimentality, childishness, hysteria, violence, and the cruel urge to shame others. But,

³⁸ Compare with Aleshkovsky’s *Ruka*; see above, Chapter Three.

³⁹ It is worth noting that the father actually was an artist, who once worked at a Pioneer camp; 108, p.152.

⁴⁰ See especially entries 22, 152.

whether we see him as the Underground Man or General Ivolgin, it is clear that we are meant to see *Odinokov-otets* as a victim as much as a villain, and as a man deprived of freedom.⁴¹

The mechanisms by which such *durachestvo* is perpetrated are demonstrated in the way in which he inherited the farcical atmosphere of his father's life as a failure and fool. The psychological deterioration of the father coincided with *Odinokov's* childhood, just as his agonizing death coincided with *Odinokov's* own awakening as a personality ('со смертью отца связано мое пробуждение как личности'; 228, p.150). The defining humiliation that marked his 'awakening' occurred shortly before his father died, when he was hung up by his jacket and swayed by his class-mates. The mock-crucifixion, tying him to the fate of his father, is interpreted in the same fashion as the slow death of the father that frames it – as both tragedy and farce:

[С]мерть отца, ее ужас, комизм и нелепость и воплотились навсегда в образе 'вешалки' [...] Здесь произошла идентификация с отцом. Я как бы вобрал в себя его предсмертный опыт. И тем самым выломился, выпал из этого мира. Я понял, что в этом мире я всегда буду никчемным дураком, и все у меня будет из рук валиться, и меня всю жизнь будут раскачивать на вешалке, как раскачивали моего отца. (228, p.150)

In *Odinokov's* recollections of his relations with his father, marked by 'черты дурашливого комизма' (20, p.22), the two appear as a kind of comic duo of dropouts, *durak* and *durachok*, with the son constantly rushing to the latter's defence or rescue. The son acts as protector, the father as both a child and a saviour, who likes to smooth over his displays of aggressive buffoonery towards his son with the phrase, 'Я тебе добра хочу' (899, p.637). This mirroring of roles, suggesting how trapped *Odinokov* is in the example of his father, is particularly striking in *Odinokov's* many fantasies and dreams about himself and his father. He describes, for example, an adolescent dream of life on an

⁴¹ In this sense, the interpretation of Dostoevsky and the Underground Man suggested by *BT* is most definitely non-existentialist: the father's attempts to assert himself through absurd or aggressive actions are taken to be a sign of his lack of free will.

enormous spaceship, which would be unpeopled save for Odinokov's sick father, whom he would cure. It is described as a closed world (*mir zamknutyi*), a 'воссоздаваемая по моему желанию маленькая земля' (588, p.423). His father's inability to engage with others has been passed on to his son.

In another dream, Odinokov replays the scene in the canteen, with the roles reversed:

И вот сейчас я, достойный сын своего отца, протягиваю руку через толщу времени и металлической пружиной расправляю палец в щелчке. И глаза отца вываливаются в борщ, и мозг брызжет из окровавленных глазниц. Отец по-детски прислоняет к черным впадинам тыльные стороны ладоней и слепо плачет. (152, p. 108)

This violent, Karamazovian hatred of the father is nourished also by the memory of the sexual humiliation which he experienced at his father's hands. The moment that enshrined this stunting influence was the father's mocking of his drawing, an incident described with transparent symbolism:

Возьмем маленькую, только что родившую елочку и отрежем ей маникюрными ножницами верхушку. Нормального дерева уже не получится [...] Отец взял ножницы и чик-чик – отрезал сексуальный сектор моего мира. (152, p. 109)

While the overcoming of the 'castration complex' was seen by Freud as a necessary stage in the development towards adulthood, for Odinokov the threat has proved impossible to address and seems to have been enacted in reality: his adult life is marked by a complete lack of sexual relations.⁴²

As he grew older, however, Odinokov's recurring dreams about his dead father changed from nightmare to nostalgic fantasy. In them, the memory of his father ceases to define Odinokov's sense of self: 'Я стал свободен, и в этой свободе он жив'. The two

⁴² 'Я девственник и никогда ни с одной женщиной даже не разговаривал' (793, p. 568)

men come together in a meeting of 'dream-thoughts' (*mysli-sny*) and become the meaning in one another's meaningless lives:

Я обниму его, прижмусь к колючей щеке, и он ласково улыбнется, тоже обнимет. А потом я скажу: Никому мы, пап, не нужны. Мы же эти... 'ничтожества'. И мы пойдем рука об руку по тихому, заснеженному переулку. (741, p. 532)

Failure thus affords its own consolations, and this is part of the Dostoevskian bind through which folly is interpreted in *BT*. Humiliation and mockery bring stultification, but also a lack of responsibility and an escape into the world of childhood and fantasy, where conflicts and complexes can be finally reconciled: 'Я смысл его бессмысленной жизни. И это есть элемент осмысления и моей собственной жизни' (741, p.532). At the same time, it is possible to see *BT* itself as the further perpetration of the father's cruel folly, trapping the reader in its aggression and mockery.

3. Odinokov's Lenin

Odinokov's engagement with intellectual predecessors is, as I have suggested, both promiscuous and profound, involving both provocative misreading and penetrating insight. The narrator is if anything *too* close to Rozanov, Dostoevsky, Nabokov, Berdyaev, Solov'ev and others, whether in sympathy or antipathy, and this excessive proximity may be posited as one reason for Odinokov's avowed failure as a creative artist in his own right. Like the Underground Man, he is arguably too impressionable for his own good, a feature which he masks with cynicism.

Yet, intense as these relationships are, none is as strongly charged as that between Odinokov and Lenin, his evil double.⁴³ This tension derives both from the paramount

⁴³ He recalls intuiting, between the ages of 17 and 20, that Lenin was his 'символический двойник, актуализация зла' (139, p.98).

historical significance which Odinokov attaches to Lenin as the Antichrist through whom the Soviet catastrophe came to pass,⁴⁴ and from the uniquely troubling centrality of Lenin and his writings, all 55 volumes of which the narrator has read (551, p.395), to Odinokov's self-perception and attempted *samopoznanie*. In the study of Lenin, the drama of nation and individual coincide entirely. Odinokov describes as accidentally prophetic the comment of the Old Bolshevik Ol'minsky, 'Познавать В.И.Ленина для нас означает познать самих себя' (544, p.391), and suggests that Lenin is a historical phenomenon on the scale of Jesus Christ, and therefore too recent to be fully comprehended (462, p.320). Stalin presents no such enigma:

Сталин понятен: полугиран-полупадишах (здесь сказалось европейско-азиатское происхождение грузина) – неинтересная личность. Он пришёл на готовое, когда его уже ждали. Ленина тоже ждали, но пришёл он вовсе не на готовенькое. В нём русской истории 'повезло', и без него, конечно, иного бы не было, кончилось бы кризисом, но не крахом. Нужен был такой катализатор, биоключ, который отворил бы ворота в ад сатанизма. А ад бушевал, кипел столетиями. (653, p.475)

Although Lenin is cast as the construction of Russian culture and especially literature, these premises do not make him any more transparent, or lessen the mystery attached to his myth. Rather, Odinokov suggests that the phenomenon of Lenin is not calculable, and is not to be understood primarily in terms of historical cause and effect.⁴⁵ Instead, Lenin is approached through analogies with Russian literary characters;⁴⁶ and also, to a surprising extent, through his style, as expressed in his behaviour, appearance and language. Unlike Berdyaev, who remarked on Lenin's total absence of theatricality (while also noting that his simplicity bordered on cynicism),⁴⁷ Odinokov is determined to cast Lenin as an actor and performer, and above all to draw him into *BT*'s varied thematics of folly. As I will

⁴⁴ The identification of Lenin as Antichrist is implicit throughout *BT*; see, for example, 797, p.571.

⁴⁵ A similar approach is taken to the Revolution – 'Причина революции во многом в её беспричинности, нелепости' (547, p.393) – as by Shibakov in *Ruka*.

⁴⁶ 'Ленин – персонаж. Он возник не из русской истории, а из русской литературы' (462, p.319).

⁴⁷ These comments, from *Russkaya ideya*, are cited by Odinokov in 478, pp.338-39.

discuss below, the motifs of buffoonery (*shutovstvo*), clowning, circus acts, and (malevolent) *yurodstvo* are nearly always at hand in the many entries devoted to Lenin.

Not only does Odinokov's Lenin embody the Russian cultural mechanisms identified by Odinokov (especially its aggressive, mocking didacticism and Messianism), he is a sinister impersonator of them. Crucial here are Odinokov's claims for Lenin's non-Russianness as the descendant of Jews, Germans and Mongols – he was at most, Odinokov argues, a quarter Russian (420, p.296). Paradoxically, it was the foreignness of his blood that enabled him to become maximally 'constructed' by Russian culture (442, p.312; 420, p.297). In himself, Lenin is described as faceless (*bezlik*) and even 'неживой' (488, p.347; 600, p.430); he is compared to a puppet or a Pavlovian dog (442, p.312), and cast as a reanimated Chichikov (488, p.347).

On the one hand, these features reflect the need to present Lenin as a Satanic false personality, and therefore as a wearer of masks. The heavily emphasized 'facelessness' of Lenin accords with the folk image of the devil as described by Florensky, in comments cited with approval by Odinokov (556, p.397). The devil has no *lik*, only *lichiny* (masks), which must be exposed. In discussing Lenin at such length, Odinokov follows his own precept: 'О Боге лучше говорить мало, во сне, туманно. Черт – должен быть разложен по полочкам. Ведь личину, маску нарисовать гораздо проще, чем лик' (556, p. 398). This task is all the more urgent given the incongruity, interpreted as another form of mockery, between Lenin's banal appearance, 'в кепочке', and the scale of his destructive impact, in bringing down a civilization (478, p.338).⁴⁸

This approach to Lenin, however, is complicated by the fact that all the protagonists of *BT* tend to be viewed as performers and one-man theatres (and all are

⁴⁸ Odinokov is clearly reacting not only to the banality of Lenin's appearance, but also to the conclusions that might drawn by the humdrum quality of his total immersion in political life. Thus, G.S. Smith cautions against seeing in Lenin an idea of evil, since he was a man who thought and lived only for politics; see G.S. Smith, 'Proud to Suffer', *London Review of Books*, 19 October 2006, 30-31 (p.31).

implicated in the work's thematics of mockery). Philosophers in general, from Socrates to Odinokov's beloved Rozanov, are specifically said to live 'в театральном пространстве' (141, p.100). The problem which Galkovsky is addressing, therefore, is the difference between good and bad forms of theatre and masquerade. In a culture which places such value on hidden virtue and spirituality, on kenoticism and the appearance of simplicity, the question of how to distinguish the masks of evil and good becomes as crucial as it is vexed, bearing in its train, as *BT* shows, a complex historical, literary and artistic ancestry.⁴⁹ This explains the extraordinary centrality of the paradigm of *yurodstvo* in *BT* as a controversial form of behaviour maximally liable to cynical interpretation and appropriation (hence the primarily pejorative connotations which the word has come to bear in modern Russian). As I will show, this negative sense of *yurodstvo* is applied to Lenin, while, in his portrait of Rozanov, Odinokov seeks to recover *yurodstvo* – or rather, reformulate it – as an ideal for how the intellectual, and specifically, philosopher, should live in the world and in the Russian logos.

I will now look in greater detail at what Lenin represents for Odinokov, and how he is represented, under three categories closely related to one another and to my general topic: rationalism, language, and aspects of theatrical folly.

Pathological Rationalism

Lenin is identified with negative manifestations of folly in *BT* as a paradoxical consequence of his own excessive identification with rationalism. The pattern is similar to that observed in Aleshkovsky's *Ruka* in the portraits of Shibanov and, in particular, Stalin.

⁴⁹ On distinguishing Satanism as a problem specific to Russian culture and history, see 653, pp.473-76. Related to this is the 'problem of recognition' posed by *yurodstvo*; treated at length in Harriet Murav, *Holy Foolishness: Dostoevsky's Novels and the Poetics of Cultural Critique* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

In *BT*, too, the excessive dependence on reason is held to be incompatible with genuine intelligence; and the self-alienation from God that results is linked to the madness of solipsism.⁵⁰ These themes are developed in a more theoretical manner in *BT* than in *Ruka*, being underwritten by the premises which I discussed in Part One. They are treated in relation to Lenin and the Bolsheviks in general.

In *IT* the Bolshevik Revolution is viewed as the culmination of Russia's attempted appropriation of Western rationalist thought and culture – a process whose agents include the 'fools' (*duraki*), Chernyshevsky and Belinsky⁵¹ – and its repudiation of its own social and religious traditions:

Ленин это и есть конкретное воплощение смутной русской мечты о трезвой, рациональной и основательной жизни: русской штунды 'без икон и с метлой'.⁵² С культурным европейским бассейном вместо грязных юродивых, толпящихся под золоченными куполами. 17-й год – это приход к власти 'умных русских', 'русских философов'. С тех пор по количеству профессиональных философов наша страна прочно занимает первое место в мире. Это расцвет. Конечно, ничего не получилось. Вместо Правды получилась 'Правда'. (*IT*, p. 292)

This attempt to transplant Western reason and culture is, as discussed earlier, interpreted in *BT* according to the law of reversibility (*oborachivaemost'*). The search for rational truth, Odinokov indicates through his sarcasm, led in Soviet Russia to the absence of any truth,⁵³ while the accompanying attempt to expel old Russia's religious essence (symbolized above by the hordes of dirty holy fools) would also ultimately rebound on its perpetrators – hence the portrayal of Lenin in *BT* as a kind of malevolent, false *yurodivyi*, and the extended discussion of his obsession, manifested in his rhetoric, with dirt and swamps (653, p.473). In Russia's inescapably Christian culture, Odinokov suggests, the rejection of

⁵⁰ Other motifs familiar from *Ruka* also persist: Odinokov's Lenin, like Shibakov's Stalin, is following a project of revenge (see below, pp.284-85), the working-out of which takes theatrical forms.

⁵¹ The 'дурак Белинский' is described as the 'личинка новой рациональной России'; *IT*, p.248.

⁵² An allusion to Rozanov, who wrote: 'Штунда – это все, что делал Петр Великий'; cited by Galkovsky, *IT*, p.251.

⁵³ On this see also the important entry 714, pp.510-11.

religion is always a religious act and a curse against oneself.⁵⁴ It is an expression of nihilism that ultimately rebounds on, and annihilates, the individual, and not the culture's idiosyncratically Christian past. The individual's didactic fantasies will always be trumped by the didacticism (*nazidatel'nost'*; 6, p.4) of his country.

The attack on Soviet 'professional philosophers' in the quotation above is elaborated further in *BT*, where Odinokov suggests that there were no philosophers in the Soviet Union, only scholars (*uchenye*; 343, p.229),⁵⁵ who are firmly identified with Bolshevik power.⁵⁶ The contrast drawn between these two types of intellectuals is absolute. Socrates is the model philosopher of antiquity, Aristotle its *uchenyi* (593, p.427). *Nauka* studies something (*nechto*), crushing the personality; philosophy studies nothing/everything (*nichto*), thereby developing the personality (848, p.601). It is argued that the Russian personality is affected particularly adversely by *nauka*, since Russian scholarship did not develop out of theology, as it did in the West. As a result, 'существование русского в науке возможно только за счет серьезного обеднения личности' (200, p.133). The result is mere *rassudok* and a putative atheism which, as in Aleshkovsky's *Ruka*, is defined as *tupost'*.⁵⁷ The *uchenye* are thus both clever (in an insidious sense familiar from Dostoevsky) and obtuse.⁵⁸

Soviet scholarship is said to reflect the 'faceless dominion' (*bezlikoe gospodstvo*) of evil and to be marked by the 'seal of non-existence' (*pechat' nebytiya*). Such descriptions echo precisely the characterizations of Lenin throughout *BT*. And it is

⁵⁴ See 6, p.4, where Odinokov is discussing the Show Trials: 'Носители идеи отрицания идей сами себя отрекли (и отреклись перед смертью)'.

⁵⁵ Lenin himself acknowledged in a letter to Gorky that, 'I am not a philosopher. I am badly prepared in this domain'; see Lesley Chamberlain, *Motherland: A Philosophical History of Russia* (London: Atlantic, 2004), p.197.

⁵⁶ See, for example, 573, where the delegates at a Party congress are compared to 'Веселые, молодые ученые, собравшиеся на университетский капустник' (p.411).

⁵⁷ 'А русский [учёный] зуда. И зудит, зудит, зудит. Тупость чудовищная. Утилитарный абстрактный ум. Грубый, славянский. Извилины мало, зато кора толстая' (200, p.133).

⁵⁸ 'От них умом не защитишься, они глубже лезут' (343, p.229). Chernyshevsky is described as 'дурак, дурак, а умный'; 432, p.302.

doubtless in Lenin's writings that Odinokov's anger against Soviet *uchenost'* has its source. The objectivity which Lenin sought as his model of truth, and his swingeing attacks on idealist philosophy, are in direct contrast to Odinokov's principle of 'extreme subjectivity', even if this antithesis is not explicitly stated.⁵⁹

Odinokov finds an exemplary manifestation of the Leninist dependence on reason and scientific objectivity in the authorities' reaction to the resurgence of religion among the millions of peasants caught up in the Volga famine of 1921-22, and their failure to help:

В окрестных деревнях также стали появляться обновлённые иконы, и не только в храмах, но и в домах крестьян. А что оставалось делать? – молиться и умирать. И вот на этом этапе новое правительство наконец помогло. Но не хлебом, ибо не хлебом единым... Воронежский губернский ревтрибунал возбудил уголовное дело против контрреволюционных молитв о дожде и хлебе. В приговоре от 22.10.1921 года отмечалось:

‘Научно-психиатрическая экспертиза установила развитие эпидемии массового религиозного психоза’. (573, p.411)

The Bolshevik cult of reason which could permit such inhumanity was given voice by Martynov-Pikker at the Twelfth Party Congress (April, 1923), whom Odinokov cites in the same entry: ‘Источник силы нашей коммунистической партии и властвующего у нас пролетариата заключается в том, что они, низвергнув все кумиры, продолжают молиться одному Богу, богине разума, исторического разума’ (573, p.411). For Odinokov, however, it is this faith in the ‘неумная сказка’ of rationalism that represents a form of delirium and intoxication (910, p.648), an impoverished religion which moreover bears in an unconscious and therefore irresponsible form traces of the Christianity which it tried to replace. The irony of the Biblical allusion (‘Но не хлебом, ибо не хлебом единым...’) implies that the demanding aspects of the Christian doctrine, once transferred

⁵⁹ On Lenin, see Chamberlain, *Motherland*: ‘Lenin wanted the criterion of truth not to be “how it strikes me”, but “the view from no one” [...] He wanted a downgraded “I” and an upgraded objective world, a balance which would afford something like the certainty and containedness of the medieval world’ (p.196).

onto the rationalist terrain of Marxist-Leninism, led to a hardening against the suffering of others.⁶⁰ Certainly, Odinokov is unambiguous about the pathological and solipsistic insanity caused by socialism and its dependence on reason: ‘Социализм это именно болезненно разросшийся русский мозг, вырванный из организма и агонизирующий в собственном солипсическом безумстве’ (54, p.42). The further irony, implicit in every entry on this topic, is the narrator’s awareness that solipsism and excessive rationalism are features of himself also, as a product of socialism.⁶¹

Another important feature of the depiction of the early Bolsheviks is the emphasis Odinokov places on their external frivolity. Reading through the protocols of the Twelfth Party Congress, which took place in the aftermath of the famine described above, he finds the note ‘смех в зале’ repeated 49 times:

Я читал протоколы и думал: ну хоть кто-то, хоть один ‘чудак’ не выдержит, закричит: ‘Что же мы наделали! Нет нам прощения!’ Ничего подобного. Общая атмосфера – ЛЕГКАЯ, ШУТОЧНАЯ. [...] Веселые, молодые ученые, собравшиеся на университетский капустник. (573, p.411)

The Bolsheviks’ leaden-footed and inflexible thinking thus co-exists with irresponsible joviality. A different, but related type of frivolity is described more fully in 547, where, following the example of Bunin in his diaries, Odinokov draws attention to the ceremonious and grandiloquent burials awarded for propaganda purposes in 1917 to numberless undistinguished individuals, passed off as heroes who died for the noble causes of the Revolution: ‘Шутовские похороны и некрологи это символ “русской революции”, всего “русского освободительного движения”. Потому что серьезно ответить на вопрос: почему? зачем? – невозможно’ (547, p.393).⁶² The Revolution is cast simply as the victory of stupidity (*glupost’*), made possible by the advent of

⁶⁰ Marxist-Leninism is described elsewhere as the ‘новейшая псевдохристианская ересь’; 547, p.394.

⁶¹ As expressed for example in 507, p.361, and 572, p.410.

⁶² Bunin, cited by Odinokov, wrote in similar terms in spring 1917 about the ‘комедия похорон будто бы павших за свободу героев’ and their ‘издевательство над мёртвыми’; 547, p.394.

doctrinaire second-raters and the ascendancy (since Peter the Great) of Potemkin-village politics (see 547, p.393).

In the context of the work as a whole, it seems clear what this stupidity signifies: a lack of awareness of the processes at stake, leading to an unconscious surrender to the negative tendencies of Russian thought already described: dogmatism and mockery, excessive objectified rationalism, and an infatuation with words for their own sake. It also seems clear that Odinokov's polemic is not with reason or intelligence *per se* but with excessive rationalism and its irresponsibility. He comments in another entry that, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, 'Корабль России разваливался на ходу. И разваливался именно в тех местах, где требовалось серьезное, нешуточное напряжение ума' (408, p.289). Against the rationalist, garrulous idiocy of the Bolsheviks (see 335, p.225), Odinokov finds a model of authentic, internalized intelligence in Rozanov, to whom he refers in the *Iskhodnyi tekst* when he argues: 'Сам по себе разум был нужен русской культуре, но разум, играющий не конструктивную, а инструментальную роль' (IT, p.237).

Utko-rech'

Odinokov finds the combination of cleverness and non-reflexive stupidity just described best expressed in the language of Lenin. It is precisely Lenin's absence of qualities, his lack of selfhood or personality, that permits him to become maximally illustrative of the processes of the Russian language, an empty shell echoing the 'орущая пустота нашего языка' (442, p.312). Empty or not, it is the Russian language, as opposed to force of personality, that endows Leninist polemic with its savage energy, rendering it dynamic.⁶³

⁶³ Similarly, Lenin's facelessness, and the 'idea of evil' that it represents, is held to be dynamic; Stalin, by contrast, 'уже статичен, это устоявшееся зло'; 488, p. 347.

Rather as Hannah Arendt found evil to be embodied in banality, where banality is interpreted as the inability to think critically and self-reflexively,⁶⁴ so Odinokov's Lenin, 'в кепочке', is evil through his uncritical surrender to the malign forces of the Russian language and thought when turned to the services of dogmatic rationalism.

The key dynamics of Lenin's language are those I have already discussed in Part One, in which didactic reasoning inevitably takes the form of humiliation, mockery and psychological oppression.⁶⁵ Commenting, for example, on one of Lenin's public letters in *Pravda*, which responds to a university professor's complaints about the treatment of the intelligentsia, Odinokov finds in it the 'ideal of pure mockery' (*ideal chistogo glumleniya*). It is the lack of conscious design on Lenin's part that particularly interests Odinokov, the fact that Lenin was writing in complete earnest: 'если СПЕЦИАЛЬНО поставить себе целью издевательство, то получится гораздо бледнее, чем у Ленина' (462, p.320). As with the Bolsheviks in general, Lenin's language seems to write itself and create its own effects. He doesn't understand the processes at work, nor even necessarily the phrases he uses: 'Конечно, речи Ленина это нечто звериное, нечеловеческое. Какая-то оруелловская "утко-речь". Своего ничего. Обрывки фраз – магические заклинания. Он не понимал их смысла, смысла происходящего' (600, p.430).

The word-flood, unleashed in the nineteenth century, develops under the Bolsheviks, into the recycling of rationalist delirium and the production through speeches, newspapers and books of a new social reality and a complete but artificial spiritual world (343, p.229), sculpted out of a closed and hollow language (652, p.472). Lenin, a 'slave of the book' (*rab knigi*) who epitomizes Russia's susceptibility to the word, provides the model for these processes, which generate an endless chain of abstractions:

⁶⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: The Banality of Evil* (1963); Arendt is not mentioned in *BT*.

⁶⁵ See, for example, 291, pp.194-95. Such rhetoric accompanies Lenin's policies upon taking power, which are described as a 'широчайшая программа издевательства над миллионами людей' (614, p.438).

Излюбленный полемический приём Ленина: употребление вместо фамилий своих противников "эвфемизмов" типа "немецкий Плеханов" или "русский Каутский". Плеханов – русский Каутский, а Каутский – немецкий Плеханов. Германия – немецкая Россия. Россия – русская Германия. Луна – ночное солнце. [...] Связь между вещами понятна, но сами вещи абстрактны и поэтому взаимозаменяемы. (778, p.560)

This critique accords with Galkovsky's cynical account of what is meant by cleverness in Russia: not truth, but knowledge of the relationship between signs (or words):

Так кто же "умный человек" по-русски? Владеющий истиной? Нет – знанием [...] Знание же это знание знаков, знахарство. Понимание соотнесенности смысла. (34, p.28)

Lenin's cleverness, masked as the voice of reason, is the cleverness of proverbial cunning,⁶⁶ in which *znakharstvo* replaces Christian truth (*istina*). It is echoed in Odinokov's comments elsewhere on the 'умничание' and 'хитрость' of Marxist dialectics, whose repeating spirals Odinokov views as an essentially artistic and stylistic construction. As in the case of Lenin, it is the image of Marx, and the style of his writing (the 'magic secret' of his 'scholarly method'), that bewitched Russians, not his actual philosophy (528, p.373).

An important literary source used by Galkovsky must be introduced here, since Odinokov clearly grafts onto Lenin aspects of the portrait of Chernyshevsky given in the fourth chapter of Nabokov's novel, *Dar*, even if Odinokov's Lenin is presented as a considerably more malign character. The theme of the 'dialectical spiral' is one explicit borrowing from *Dar*, but closer inspection reveals that Odinokov's debt to the fourth chapter is even greater than he lets on.⁶⁷ Indeed, Cherdyntsev's mocking but double-edged biography of Chernyshevsky appears to underwrite many of the important themes of *BT*. If

⁶⁶ Expressed in the phrase used to describe his approach to power and its attendant cruelty: 'Стоял сзади и смотрел: "Туда умного не надо"' (412, p.291). Lesley Chamberlain also finds that Lenin 'was simply much too cunning to associate himself directly with killing'; Chamberlain, *The Philosophy Steamer: Lenin and the Exile of the Intelligentsia* (London: Atlantic, 2006), p.95.

⁶⁷ I am grateful to Thomas Karshan for pointing me towards the most relevant passages and strands of imagery in *Dar*. The aspects of the novel which I mention below are treated at fuller length and in much greater depth in his doctoral thesis on play (and work) in Nabokov.

Nabokov exposed the fragility and self-contradictoriness of Chernyshevsky's thinking while also showing, according to Odinokov, 'что в каждом из нас сидит маленький рогатый чернышевский' (402, p.277), so *BT* makes Lenin the devil at the centre of its self-analysis of the Russian mind.⁶⁸

One important and unstated borrowing relates to Cherdyntsev's understanding of the 'fatal error' of materialism generally, in comments anticipating Odinokov's critique of Leninist polemic (quoted above):

Нам вообще кажется, что материалисты его типа впадали в роковую ошибку: пренебрегая свойствами самой вещи, они применяли свой сугубо вещественный метод лишь к отношениям между предметами, а не к предмету самому, т.е. были, по существу, наивнейшими метафизиками как раз тогда, когда более всего хотели стоять на земле.⁶⁹

This ignorance of the 'tangible object' results in 'terrible abstraction' (*strashnaya otvlechnost*),⁷⁰ vitiating Chernyshevskian materialism. Ratiocination is founded on ignorance, a combination which Cherdyntsev discerns in Chernyshevsky's early writings and which he connects to Chernyshevsky's tendency to attain the opposite of his aspirations (foreshadowing Odinokov's obsession with reversibility): 'за все его лягает собственная диалектика, за все мстят ему боги'.⁷¹ All these aspects are recovered in *BT*, along with many others in Cherdyntsev's essay, such as the emphasis on Chernyshevsky's desire in his youth to create a perpetual motion machine.⁷² Odinokov's descriptions of Lenin's mechanical thinking evokes this image, as does Odinokov's own construction, *BT* itself, with its structural potential to continue *ad infinitum*.

⁶⁸ 'Ленин это максимально возможное, "до упора", развитие Чернышевского' (420, p.277). Odinokov considers inadequate Nabokov's estimation of Lenin as a 'conceited failure' (*samolyubivyi neudachnik*), arguing: 'Судьба неудачника очень удачно наложилась на неудачу самой русской цивилизации. И получилась головокружительная удача' (462, p.320).

⁶⁹ Nabokov, IV, pp.420-21.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p.421.

⁷¹ Ibid, p.396. Odinokov alludes to Nabokov on this theme in 6, p.4.

⁷² Nabokov, IV, pp.395-96.

The motif of copying as a form of idiocy also links the two works, being explicitly underwritten in *Dar* by scorn for the materialist ‘copy theory’ of knowledge (that we see all objects as they really exist) beloved by Lenin for its denial of independence of perception.⁷³ While Cherdyntsev mentions Flaubert’s stupid copyists Bouvard and Pécuchet in his discussion of Chernyshevsky,⁷⁴ Odinokov bluntly compares Lenin to Gogol’s Bashmachkin (462, p.320). The anti-creative quality of his thought ties in both with Odinokov’s definition of stupidity as backward-looking (547, p.394); and with his interpretation of Soviet socialism, which suggests a Berdyaevan emphasis on creativity as the highest good:

Сам факт сотворения Богом данного конкретного человека свидетельствует о его исключительности, неповторимости. Творение не может быть копированием. Социализм же, как одна из разновидностей рационализированного сатанизма, считает человека именно копией, подобием, но не образом. Ведь и сам сатана лишь подобие, а не образ: тень, пародия, карикатура. (714, p.510).

But Odinokov, too, is a copyist, as we have seen.

Lenin as Charlie Chaplin

Another feature of Cherdyntsev’s essay which resurfaces, in greatly expanded form, in Odinokov’s characterization of Lenin, is Chernyshevsky’s love of clowning, examples of which Cherdyntsev finds in the ‘joke ceremonies’ with which Chernyshevsky amused himself (if not his biographer) in Saratov. The son of a priest, he also enjoyed playing pranks in church, though Cherdyntsev is quick to reject the Marxist interpretation of this as salutary blasphemy.⁷⁵ In other of Nabokov’s works, the theme of clowning and fool-playing becomes identified with the sadistic use of power (see, for example, the jailer

⁷³ Ibid, p.421.

⁷⁴ Ibid, p.406.

⁷⁵ Nabokov, IV, p.408.

Monsieur Pierre in *Priglasenie na kazn'*). This identification followed directly from the author's view of Lenin and Bolshevism, which foreshadows that of Odinokov. As Nabokov wrote to Edmund Wilson: 'It is this atmosphere of joviality, this pail of milk of human kindness with a dead rat at the bottom, that I have used in my *Invitation to a Beheading*'. In the same letter, he comments on Lenin's mannerisms (his screwing up of the eyes) and 'bluff geniality'.⁷⁶ In *BT* Lenin is extensively associated with such features, whether in his language his appearance or his demeanour. This does not necessarily attest to the particular influence, in this instance, of Nabokov. Lenin's 'bluff geniality' struck Stalin as strongly as it did Nabokov,⁷⁷ while his appearance and gestures have had a perennial appeal to impersonators.

Lenin's writing, as cited in *BT*, is full of clowns and sadistic comics.⁷⁸ His preference for branding his many enemies as idiots and fools and his conviction that they could be taught only through violence is well illustrated. Such diatribes are frequently coloured by elements of the comic, even vaudeville. Odinokov cites an instruction of 1922 concerning the plague of red tape in Moscow:

Прессе поручить высмеять тех и других и ОПЛЕВАТЬ ИХ. Ибо позор тут именно в том, что москвичи не умели бороться с волокитой. За это надо бить палкой ... А идиоты две недели ходят и говорят! За это надо ГНОИТЬ В ТЮРЬМЕ ... Москвичей за глупость на 6 часов клоповника. Внешнеторговцев за глупость – на 36 часов клоповника. Так, и только так УЧИТЬ надо. (614, p.438)

This is the anomalous timbre of Lenin's petty nihilism, assumed, according to Odinokov, ever since his return from exile in 1900, when he set out to revenge himself on the world:

‘Месть носила низменно-животный, мелкий и поэтому зло-комичный, “чарли-

⁷⁶ *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940-1971*, ed. by Simon Karlinsky, rev. edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p.38.

⁷⁷ See 715, p.511.

⁷⁸ Odinokov points out Lenin's 'устойчивое обращение к теме клоунады, шутовства, балаганного скоморошества' (478, p.337). This entry contains several examples.

чаплиновский” характер: пинки, бросание тортов, обрывание фрачных фалд, подножки, плевки, удары палкой по голове` (614, p.437).

Lenin (portrayed in *BT* as an archetypal *intelligent*) liked to call other members of the intelligentsia ‘словесные клоуны’ (291, pp. 194-95). In portraying him as a buffoon and an ‘evil clown’ (*zloi kloun*; p.194), Odinokov pays Lenin back in his own coin. The discourse of clowning and the circus thus become another manifestation of the *oborachivaemost'* which Lenin is held to exemplify, and which the Chekists discovered to their cost when they tried to arrest the circus clown Bim-Bom on stage in 1918, only to be taken for clowns themselves by the audience (it is surprising that Odinokov does not report this incident).⁷⁹ In another entry, 478, it is the very people Lenin insults who return the compliment: his description of the politicians Nabokov and Trepov as ‘acrobats’ who should be tipped into a pit was thrown back at him by the liberals, who deemed it ‘шутовство или непроходимая тупость’ (p.337).

Odinokov also provides evidence of Lenin’s actual association with circuses: his speeches in the Chinizelli circus soon after the Revolution, and his fascination with the ‘эксцентризм’ of circus clowns. As he told Gorky: ‘Тут есть какое-то сатирическое или скептическое отношение к общепринятому, есть стремление вывернуть его наизнанку, немножко исказить, показать алогизм обычного. Замысловато – а интересно!’ (478, p.338). Odinokov follows this quotation with an ironic, ‘Действительно’: in his eyes, Lenin himself distorts reality and turns it inside-out.

Indeed, Lenin’s impersonation is so good that it convinces and implicates others:

Это выламывание из логоса. Молчание Ленина уже не русское. Это молчание клоуна. Клоун, раскрашенный, в жабо и с дурацкой карликовой гармошкой в руках, ломяще упорным волчьим взглядом смотрит на зрителя. И зритель ощущает СЕБЯ клоуном. (412, p.291)

⁷⁹ See Orlando Figes, *A People’s Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924* (London: Pimlico, 1997), pp.631-32.

Like the itinerant English clown who fascinates and troubles the narrator of Gorky's 'Kloun' (1916), a story which Galkovsky does not mention, Odinsonov's non-Russian Lenin is made to seem sinister and fake for his otherness, for his extraneousness to the culture within which he is operating. Both narrators evince suspicion towards the clown-figure's removal from the crowd and his unwillingness to besmirch his hands in the dirt of Russian life.⁸⁰

As a putative non-Russian who is at the same time a product of Russian culture, Lenin is presented in *BT* as an impersonator both of Russia's sacred values (such as silence) and of her fatal flaws (such as the tendency towards impersonation itself). He is thus a figure of absolute death and vacancy: the mask in his case (unlike in that of Rozanov) conceals nothing. This applies also to the references to Lenin as a type of *yurodivyi*, a term whose ambivalence epitomizes the fragile nature of the evaluations on which *BT* is founded. If both Lenin and the hero of the work, Rozanov, are described as *yurodivye*, then what is the difference? The answer, it seems, is that Lenin recalls only the appearance of the *yurodivye*, and not their spiritual essence. This is clarified in a comparison between Lenin (as shown on film during an interview with the American journalist Lincoln Eyre) and the *yurodivyi* portrayed in Surikov's painting *Boyarynya Morozova*. Lenin looks like the holy fool who expresses his sympathy with Morozova ('Эти губы, топырящиеся юродской varezhкой, прыщ на щеке, гротескная мимика и жестикуляция...'), but his malicious nature actually identifies him with the boyar on the

⁸⁰ 'В своей политической деятельности Ленин всегда прятался за спины "товарищей" и почти никогда не спорил, не вступал в полемику живьем, глаза в глаза. Стоял сзади и смотрел: "туда умного не надо"'; 412, p.291. Gorky's narrator contrasts the clown, whom he follows on the town's streets, with the 'serious Russians' (*ser'eznye russkie*) going about their daily business, and comments:

'Но он проходил сквозь потоки людей на панелях, как будто ничего не видя, не понимая, и я сердито думал:

"Притворяешься, не верю я тебе..."

Но я счел себя положительно обиженным, заметив однажды, как этот щеголь помог встать пьяному, которого опрокинула лошадь, поставил его на ноги и тотчас, сняв осторожными движениями пальцев свои желтые перчатки, бросил их в грязь.' 'Kloun' in M. Gorky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 30 vols (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo Khudozhestvennoi Literatury, 1949-56), II, pp.316-21 (p.319)

other side of the canvas who is celebrating Morozova's punishment for her support of the Old Belief (478, p.338).

This assertion of Lenin's false holy foolery, his *yurodstvo* without sanctity or virtue, leads one to posit an implicit cultural association capable of explaining Odinokov's obsessive need to identify Lenin with clowning and 'bad' folly. It sends us back to the examples of previous Russian rulers who experimented with folly (and mockery) as tools of power. It recalls, for example, the conduct of Ivan the Terrible as described by Lotman and Uspensky: 'Поведение Грозного – это юродство без святости, юродство не санкционированное свыше, и тем самым это игра в юродство, пародия на него'.⁸¹ The danger of such parodying – of entering the zone of diabolical play – can certainly be perceived in Odinokov's portrait of Lenin, not least in the latter's tendency to view politics as an 'игра архисложная' (809, p.578). Lenin's frivolity and love of foolery should be linked also to Peter the Great, who brought into Russian culture the European models of folly that would fascinate Lenin and whose reforms of merry-making (*vesel'e*) further entrenched many of the patterns that reappear in *BT*, such as the ruler's personal love of buffoonery and *durachestvo*. The results of Peter's reforms, as Lotman discussed, was the theatricalization of the life of the elite, whom the people came to see as *ryazhenye* – as Lenin is himself described in *BT* (420, p.296).

In opposition to the example of Lenin is that of Rozanov, and, secondarily, others in *BT* who are linked to holy foolery in a manner that draws Odinokov's praise.

⁸¹ Yu.M. Lotman and B.A. Uspensky, 'Novye aspekty izucheniya kul'tury Drevnei Rusi', *Voprosy literatury*, 3 (1977), 148-66 (p.164).

4. Yurodstvo and the Cult of Rozanov

Beskonechnyi tupik provides a vivid illustration of the ongoing relevance of *yurodstvo* to Russian intellectuals late into the twentieth century. Though it is only one among many topics discussed by Odinokov, its role in the work is pivotal. *Yurodstvo* is held to represent possibly the greatest freedom available to the Russian, and the highest expression of his individuality (366, p.246). Moreover, it is posited as the ‘phenomenon’ without which the Russian genius and the sudden flourishing of this genius in the literature of Pushkin, Dostoevsky and others would be inexplicable (366, p.246).

Odinokov predominantly discusses the phenomenon in relation to modern writers of the past two centuries, as a code by which to explain (or to gesture towards an explanation of) their personalities and their writings, for both of which *yurodstvo* serves as a guarantee of integrity. Only the briefest and most superficial summary of the canonized holy fools is given, in comments which emphasize their greater proliferation in medieval Russia than at any previous time in the Orthodox Church, and the symbolic importance in Russian culture of Basil the Blessed (163, p.115). Greater attention is given to the allegedly ‘profound holy foolery’ (*glubokoe yurodstvo*; 349, p.236) of Serafim Sarovsky (1759-1833), a saint renowned more as a miracle-worker rather than as a *yurodivyi*.⁸²

In this section, I will discuss how Odinokov identifies *yurodstvo* in the personality and works of three writers: Pushkin, Chekhov and Rozanov. These creative readings (or ‘wise mistakes’) are questionable in themselves, but serve a greater purpose within the work as a whole. They allow Odinokov to build up, through fragments, an overarching concept of Russian holy foolery which may not be wholly applicable to the individuals cited (Pushkin, Chekhov and Rozanov), but which is, in essential respects, unusually

⁸² See especially entries 349, 364. On Sarovsky, see *Prepodobnyi Serafim Sarovsky: Zhitie, prorochestva, nastavleniya* (Minsk: Luchi Sofii, 1997).

faithful to the original paradigm and which is disabused of the sentimentality which has sometimes coloured the intellectual and literary reception of *yurodstvo*. Above all Odinokov successfully evokes the aggressiveness and sheer anarchy of the holy fool, evoking a type of sanctified hatred (or *contemptus mundi*) rather than compassionate love.⁸³ Another important trait which Odinokov emphasizes is the *yurodivyi*'s negative attitude towards speech. Through his discussion of Rozanov he shows how silence, as Panchenko argued, is the *yurodivyi*'s ideal language,⁸⁴ even if, in literature, this must necessarily be a silence that is conducted through words, where the use of language deflects from the essence of the writer's personality.

This emphasis on the nihilistic aspects of *yurodstvo* means that the evil of Lenin and the freedom of *yurodstvo* – two poles by which Odinokov structures his thought – become ostensibly comparable.⁸⁵ The over-riding importance attached to *yurodstvo* by Odinokov suggests its culpability in the pattern noted in the *Iskhodnyi tekst*: ‘русское христианство, не уравновешенное секулярным сознанием [...] породило революционный нигилизм’ (*IT*, p.257). In this way, *BT*, while explicitly praising *yurodstvo* (and, perhaps, deliberately overdoing this praise) also allows itself to be read as a commentary on its dangers and, just as significantly, on the dangers of the appeal of *yurodstvo* to Russian intellectuals.⁸⁶ It is only through Odinokov's portrait (even cult) of Rozanov-*yurodivyi*, that, as I will argue, a solution is sought to this dilemma.

⁸³ The *yurodivyi*'s ‘русская святая ненависть к миру, издевательство над миром’ is described in 349, p.236. Sergey A. Ivanov asserts early in his definitive study of *yurodstvo* that, ‘Holy foolery always, in our view, involves aggression and provocation’; Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, trans. by Simon Franklin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.9. *BT* captures both these aspects, which have been underplayed by influential apologists of *yurodstvo* (among them Kovalevsky, Fedotov and Sinyavsky). Harriet Murav also smooths over the inherent aggression of the *yurodivyi*, when, discussing *Brat'ya Karamazovy*, she makes the following, highly questionable contrast: ‘The fool mocks the world out of hatred and a desire for revenge; the holy fool mocks the world out of love’; Murav, p.138.

⁸⁴ See D.S. Likhachev, A.M. Panchenko and N.V. Ponyrko, *Smekh v drevnei rusi* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1984), p.95.

⁸⁵ The case of Chekhov, discussed below, epitomizes this ambivalence.

⁸⁶ As such, it poses similar questions to Viktor Erofeev's story, ‘Zhizn' s idiotom’, discussed in my Epilogue.

Odinokov's claims for the cultural significance of *yurodstvo* derive in good part from his desire to clarify what it might mean to be a Russian genius, and to take issue with the (Western) Romantic appropriation of the term.⁸⁷

Odinokov argues that, unlike the West, Russia never established a 'культ гениев и шутов, как людей, максимально выделяющихся из коллективного начала' (366, p.245). It had, by contrast, a 'monoculture', where buffoonery existed only in the 'rudimentary forms' of *skomoroshestvo* and where *yurodivye* replaced the cult of genius (366, p.246). In Pushkin, he seeks to disclose how the principles of *yurodstvo* exerted a hidden but formative influence on the 'first Russian genius' (366, p.246).

Odinokov's interpretation of Pushkin begins with the familiar question of the poet's relationship to Romanticism. Odinokov is adamant: 'Менее всего Пушкин был романтиком' (137, p.97). While acknowledging the enormity of Pushkin's debt to Byronic Romanticism and even accepting that Pushkin succeeded in absorbing this 'alien principle' (*chuzhenarodnoe nachalo*), he emphasizes that this process of borrowing was never more than ironic and playful (176, p.120). Thanks to *Evgeny Onegin*, 'русская литература началась с иронии, полупародии' (137, p.97), while the nature of Pushkin's adaptation to Byron's alien thematics led directly to the 'несерьезность русской литературой, ее "недобротность"' (176, p.120). Later writers, including Lermontov and Gogol, failed to recognize the salience of playfulness in Pushkin, leading ultimately to the vulgar interpretations of the Soviet era (137, 176, 349).

⁸⁷ The recovery of silence as a facet of *yurodstvo* can also be seen as part of Odinokov's obsessive ambition to use *yurodstvo* to trump any claims for the determining influence of Romanticism on Russian culture. The Romantics also made a value of muteness in its association with folly and idiocy; see Lock, p.48, and Avital Ronell's discussion of Wordsworth's *The Idiot Boy*, in Ronell, *Stupidity* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2002; paperback, 2003), pp.246-77.

In an extended entry, 349, Odinokov leads up to the identification of Pushkin with *yurodstvo* through the most aggressive of his assaults on Pushkin's alleged Romanticism. Typically, the assault relies on a radically counter-intuitive reappraisal of the words of the writer in question, in order to reveal their unconscious motivation. He cites Pushkin's famous remarks, in a letter to Vyazemsky, on the shameful of prying into the intimate life of a genius such as Byron: 'Оставь любопытство толпе и будь заодно с гением... Мы знаем Байрона довольно [...] Охота тебе видеть его на судне' (p.235). After quoting the passage at length, Odinokov argues – first by logical analysis, then, more convincingly, by pure insight – that Pushkin does not mean what he is saying. Pushkin may have accepted the myth of the Romantic genius (described as 'мрачные и гордые одиночки-богоборцы') but his language betrays his subconscious, Russian rejection of Romantic self-aggrandisement. Indeed, the passage 'брызжет ненавистью к декларируемому содержанию' (p.236). The 'vulgar' mention of the chamber-pot is interpreted as an instance of *progovarivanie*; as an exaggerated rhetorical trope that discloses Pushkin's desire to destroy (or excrete) this myth. Furthermore, Odinokov interprets Pushkin's recourse to scatological metaphor in his private writing as an instinctive expression of his disdain not just for Romanticism but even for the 'word' and for himself: 'Это любовь и одновременно НЕНАВИСТЬ к слову. К себе' (p.236).⁸⁸ He finds support for such a view in Dostoevsky's comments on Pushkin's shame in his vocation and his share in Russians' characteristic lack of self-respect.

Pushkin's *yurodstvo* is attested, Odinokov argues, by the words he put in the mouth of Nikolka in *Boris Godunov*, and by the author's comments in another letter to Vyazemsky, where he wrote of the play: 'Хоть она и в хорошем духе писана, да никак

⁸⁸ The reference is to Pushkin's comments in his correspondence on completing 'Tsygany': 'Она покаместь мне опротивела, только что кончил и не успел обмыть заповишие <...>' (349, p.236).

не мог упрятать моих ушей под колпак юродивого. Торчат!’ (p. 236).⁸⁹ This comment is less transparent than Odinokov lets on (he does not discuss it), and appears to suggest – if we read it as anything more than a clever quip – that the reason the play was sure to enrage Nicholas I was that he, Pushkin, had failed to limit himself to his role as an author-*yurodivyi*, and had entered more dangerous political territory.

We have, therefore, two incompatible views of *yurodstvo*: Pushkin’s perception of *yurodstvo* as a unique license, accepted by society and the tsar, for upbraiding the powerful, and Odinokov’s nihilistic reading of the phenomenon. Pushkin’s understanding accords more with the specifically Russian features of holy foolery (the *yurodivyi*’s link with power); Odinokov’s is closer to the original paradigm.⁹⁰ Pushkin’s opus is, he writes, a ‘разрушение смысла’; its essence, and Pushkin himself, remains beyond reach (a kind of spiritual silence beyond words is suggested here, which is more fully developed in Odinokov’s comments on Rozanov). The reader who tries to come close to it through the poet’s words perishes, and is transformed into *poshlost*’ and cliché: ‘Все гибнет. Но ведь в этом, в гибели, и смысл’(p.237).⁹¹ Pushkin is compared to the Mozart of *Mozart i Salieri*, who drove Salieri to distraction, earning the rebuke: ‘Ты, Моцарт, недостойн сам себя’. Showing no respect to his own talent or dignity, he is said to have put on the ‘dunce’s cap’ (like Nikolka, and Odinokov himself): ‘Конечно, тут впору разрыдаться, когда автор реквиема наряжается в шутовской колпак. Но ведь это русская черта: икону чудотворную об угол печки. Икону!’ (p.237). To Pushkin, as to the *yurodivye* with their apparent disdain for the external trappings of faith, even for the icon, nothing is sacred. People have been trying for 155 years to make Pushkin respectable by knocking off his cap (as Nikolka’s cap is knocked off in *Boris Godunov*), but to no avail (p.236).

⁸⁹ On *Boris Godunov*, see my Introduction, p.21.

⁹⁰ See my Introduction, pp.13-17.

⁹¹ Similar comments are made by Odinokov about Rozanov throughout *BT*, beginning with the first entry.

Odinokov's portrait of Pushkin has an unacknowledged precedent in *Progulki s Pushkinym* (written 1966-68), in which Abram Terts similarly emphasized the primacy of parody, play and non-didacticism in Pushkin's work, and also sought to de-monumentalize and de-iconicize the poet's genius, drawing attention to his scatological humour, eroticism and folly.⁹² One could also make general comparisons between Galkovsky and Sinyavsky, in their use of unreliable, provocative and often foolish masks (Odinokov and Terts). Both supply examples for loose analogies between literary postmodernist playfulness and *yurodstvo* (or *yurodstvovanie*).⁹³

However, Odinokov strikes out on his own in the description of *yurodstvo* that follows directly from the comparison with the icon-shatterers:

‘Ничего не надо’. Тут свет, сноп света, слезы. Сожжение мира. За Христа на крест – нет, это баловство, это ‘благородно’, это ро-ман-ти-ка. А отказаться от всего, не притвориться ничтожеством, а стать ничтожеством. И чем выше осуществление в духовном мире, тем ценнее отказ, величественней жертва оуродства во Христе. (349, p.237)

Clearly, Odinokov is projecting his own concept of *yurodstvo* back onto Pushkin, and appropriating the poet for his argument that all Russian genius is Christian and holy-foolish. Since Pushkin's religious views have remained hard to establish with any confidence, this is a self-evidently vulnerable position to take, and one sure to irritate those who see Pushkin as an agnostic or even atheist son of the Enlightenment.

Leaving aside its relation to Pushkin, however, the passage makes an important contribution to the clarification of Odinokov's concept of *yurodstvo*. It locates the essence of *yurodstvo* in the absolute rejection of the world and the self, which must be sacrificed not for Christ (*za Khrista* or *Khrista radi*), but ‘in’ Christ (*vo Khriste*). It is not just the

⁹² ‘Но кто еще эдаким дуриком входил в литературу?’ Terts asks. On the ‘semi-parodic’ basis which Pushkin gave to Russian literature, he comments: ‘Нужно ли говорить, что Пушкин по меньшей мере полупародиен?’. See Abram Terts, *Progulki s Pushkinym* (London: Overseas Publications/Collins, 1975), p.41.

⁹³ See Skoropanova, *passim*.

imitation of Christ, or plain martyrdom, which is at stake; rather, Odinokov indicates a process of kenosis (‘не притвориться ничтожеством, а стать ничтожеством’) to achieve a full identification with the humiliated Christ, expunging the world and the self from one’s consciousness. Such *yurodstvo* flies in the face of all sentimental idealism, hence Odinokov’s emphasis on its ugliness (the old spelling ‘оуродство’ recalling the cognate ‘уродство’), and on Pushkin-*yurodivyi*’s lack of dignity. As Odinokov writes elsewhere, ‘Истина по-русски – это потеря достоинства’ (28, p.23).

It is also curious to hear in the passage a distant echo of the rhythm and illogicality of Don Quixote. See, for example, the latter’s statement: ‘A knight errant going mad for a good reason – there is neither pleasure nor merit in that. The thing is to become insane without a cause’.⁹⁴ *BT*, and its interpretation of *yurodstvo*, presents a type of uglified Russian Quixoticism, with the last entry, in particular, recalling Cervantes’ hero: ‘Но все же. Все же предпринята безумная попытка сопротивления. И вдруг она удастся, и произойдет чудо, и реальность изогнется фантастически причудливым образом’ (949, p.686).

Odinokov’s Chekhov

Though Odinokov admires Chekhov for his artistic genius, his view of him is highly ambivalent, paradoxical and complex, and developed over many entries.

Odinokov is primarily interested in Chekhov as a writer who, he believes, distrusted reason and recognized his own intellectual limitations and those of his culture. He transformed these limitations into deliberate stylization and play and into the ‘muffled’ nature (*zaglushechnost*) of his thinking, with its ‘wise rejection of reason’ (*mudryi otkaz*

⁹⁴ Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Don Quixote*, trans. by John Rutherford (London: Penguin, 2000; repr. 2001), p.208

ot razuma; 770, p.554).⁹⁵ Odinokov supports his argument with an artful elision of biographical sources and fiction. The critique of the intellectually deluded intelligentsia, conducted in the story 'Ogon'ki', is mirrored in Chekhov's own self-characterization in his correspondence with Suvorin, at the age of twenty-nine, as a 'круглый невежда' and his awareness that he was not a thinker or a philosopher. Chekhov eventually reconciled himself to his handicap, rather as the narrator of 'Ogon'ki' concludes, 'Ничего не разберешь на этом свете!' (770, p.555).⁹⁶

These premises lead Odinokov to posit, in two lengthy entries (347 and 370), that the key to Chekhov's writings and personality is the *yurodstvo* of a man who has lost his faith in Christ: 'Юродство потерявшего Христа, путь к обретению Христа через бессмысленное и непонятное юродство, самоуничтожение, заглушечный отказ от разума' (370, p.249). He also notes the emergence of religious themes in the late Chekhov, both in his life (he spoke to Bunin about his urge to become a *strannik* and visit holy places) and in his story, 'Arkhieriei' (717, pp.512-13).

In 347 Odinokov attacks Chekhov's many hagiographers, especially those such as Mikhail Men'shikov and Gorky who eulogized his kindness and unassuming manner. Instead, he seeks to show how Chekhov's eschewal of Romantic self-aggrandizement took the form of an insincere pose of modesty (*skromnost'*) which was coldly designed to provoke and to mock. The Chekhov that emerges from this entry is a weak-willed, empty, cowardly and even malicious man, yet in the final paragraph he is triumphantly exculpated:

[Р]ечь идет о том, что в его личности нашли воплощение лучшие качества русского человека, может быть, великие качества. Чехову было в высшей степени свойственно

⁹⁵ See entries 177, 179, 792.

⁹⁶ There is a similarity between Odinokov's perception of Chekhov and that of Viktor Erofeev in his recent novel *Khoroshii Stalin* (2004): 'Чехов – агностик, запретивший, к счастью, себе много думать'. Erofeev, however, does not question Chekhov's agnosticism, as Odinokov does. See Erofeev, *Khoroshii Stalin* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2004), p.136

ЮРОДСТВО. Лишь на достаточно примитивном уровне это проявляется как “издевательство” или “скромность”. Или, на еще более примитивном уровне, как “злоба” и “добродетель”, “мягкость”. На этих уровнях образ Чехова распадается, становится антиномичным, клетчатым. Что неверно. (347, p.234)

Yurodstvo is thus presented as guarantee of the ‘wholeness’ of the individual, and an escape from the curse of binary categories. Yet, in its application to Chekhov, the assertion of this reconciliation of opposites seems, in the light of the preceding paragraphs, unconvincing or even insincere in its enthusiasm.

In 370, Odinokov further elaborates Chekhov’s *yurodstvo*, on the basis of a one-sided interpretation of ‘Palata No6’, identifying Ragin with the author. Odinokov is interested in Ragin’s “‘слабость’ перед реальностью” (p.247), his susceptibility to dialogue with the mad and his allegedly holy-foolish inversions of the norm. Ragin’s generosity to an inmate in the ward and to the gambling postmaster – he gives him all his last savings – confirms to Odinokov the unworldliness and holy foolishness of his character, as does his self-abasement in the ward, when, still a doctor, he puts himself on an equal footing with the inmates (pp.247-48). As is said in 347 of Chekhov himself (p.234), Ragin’s weakness and apparent modesty are interpreted here as a provocation of reality, a reality whose categories neither Ragin nor his creator are held to believe in:

Суть рассказа в авторском неразличении сумасшествия и реальности, добра и зла. Тут юродство в самой авторской позиции Чехова. Юродство всей его жизни. Судьба Рагина это жертва миром, жертва собой. Это отказ от разума, юродство во Христе. Только с этой высшей точки зрения ‘Палата №6’ выстраивается во вполне цельное, гармоничное произведение. Всё высвечивается изнутри.’ (370, p.248)

Be this as it may, Odinokov’s reading entirely ignores inconvenient aspects of the story, such as the fact that Ragin spends most of it defending the values of the intellect, for which he is severely reprimanded by Gromov – who might have been seen, with much greater justification, as Chekhov’s self-projection.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Gromov’s defence of humane values and his hatred of cant were fully shared by Chekhov; see, for example, Chekhov’s letter to A.I. Pleshcheev, quoted by Odinokov himself; 696, p.500.

This unbalanced interpretation of Chekhov – as a subliminal *yurodivyi*, and not the voice of rational, atheist decency – allows Odinokov to arrive at his main conclusion about the symbolic significance of Chekhov for Russia:

Пример Чехова показывает, что вне революции в России ничего не было. Альтернатива революционному активизму - чеховская тоска, чеховский тупик. В Чехове русская культура сказала "нет" безрелигиозному рассудку. Бесы должны были перебеситься и низвергнуться в пропасть. Мечта о либеральной, атеистически-протестантской России - бредовая сказка. Могло произойти всё что угодно, только не это. В России атеизма не было. Русский атеизм это пустота - нигилизм. (370, p.249)

The nihilism of *yurodstvo* and the nihilism of atheism and the Revolution are thus presented as Russia's only two options. Within this schema, Chekhov is made to occupy an ambivalent position, and indeed the imagery with which he is described recalls Odinokov's Lenin more than Odinokov's Rozanov.⁹⁸ This Chekhov is a 'frightened Russian' (*ispugannyi russkii*; 696, p.494), and therefore a frightening Russian, who implicitly did not come to terms with the consequences and ineluctability of Russian nihilism.

Odinokov's Rozanov

The association of Rozanov with *yurodstvo* in *BT* results in a synthesis which involves, in significant respects, creative misreadings of both Rozanov and *yurodstvo*.⁹⁹ The holy-foolish Rozanov who emerges is a man uniquely capable of existing in the Russian logos without perpetrating its malign tendencies. He is also placed in a universal context, being compared persistently to the archetypal philosopher, Socrates, who employed similar

⁹⁸ As with Lenin, the imagery used to describe Chekhov is associated with borderline states between death and life; in 347, for example, he is compared to a vampire in his ability to draw all energy out of those around him (p.232). And as in the case of Lenin, his posture of 'modesty' lends to this a sinister, theatrical air: 'И все так тихо, скромно, с улыбочкой' (p.233).

⁹⁹ The key entries linking Rozanov with *yurodstvo* are 141, 163, and 841.

strategies in confronting the problem: 'как философу жить в миру' (141, p.100). Through his holy foolery, Odinokov argues, Rozanov surpassed his ancestor (841, p.598).

In eulogizing Rozanov with uncritical zeal, and identifying him with *yurodstvo*, *BT* continues a significant tradition in late-Soviet non-conformist literary culture, and it is to this wider context that I will turn first. This section thus has a dual purpose: firstly, to illuminate the reception of Rozanov generally in late-Soviet non-conformist prose, by setting Odinokov's Rozanov alongside the portraits given by Venedikt Erofeev and Andrei Sinyavsky; and secondly (pp.307-14), to identify the strictly idiosyncratic aspects of Odinokov's interpretation, which brings to a conclusion the themes of this chapter.

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The perception of Rozanov as *yurodivyi* has been advocated by enough critics, authors, and scholars to have acquired a life and progeny of its own, regardless of the important arguments that militate against such a view (predominantly, as I will further discuss below, Rozanov's frequently expressed antagonism towards the figure of Christ and his philosophy of domesticity). Odinokov himself quotes one such critic, Yury Ivask (*IT*, p.272).

Late-Soviet writers and intellectuals further entrenched the identification of Rozanov with *yurodstvo*, no one more poetically than Andrei Sinyavsky. His study '*Opavshie list'ya*' *V.V. Rozanova* (1982) covers a far greater spread of Rozanov's works than its title suggests, and serves as both a valuable corrective to Odinokov's portrait of Rozanov (based almost exclusively on *Uedinennoe* and *Opavshie list'ya*) and as an illuminating point of contrast on the question of *yurodstvo*.¹⁰⁰ Another fundamental text in this tradition is Venedikt Erofeev's story, 'Vasily Rozanov glazami ekstsentrika' (written 1973; henceforth 'Vasily Rozanov'), whose echoes of holy foolishness were mentioned in

¹⁰⁰ A. Sinyavsky, '*Opavshie list'ya*' *V.V. Rozanova* (Paris: Sintaksis, 1982). Sinyavsky discusses *yurodstvo* with regard to Rozanov in Chapter 6, pp.168-85.

Chapter One.¹⁰¹ Like *BT*, ‘Vasily Rozanov’ is saturated in quotations, both direct and concealed, from Rozanov’s works. Erofeev is one of the very few contemporary writers identified by Odinokov,¹⁰² and it seems certain that Galkovsky would have known this influential story. In the *Iskhodnyi tekst*, while discussing the dangerous influence of Rozanov’s rhetorical brilliance, he comments: ‘Есть ряд авторов, которые были раздавлены Розановым, темой Розанова (явно из их числа и современный писатель Венедикт Ерофеев)’ (*IT*, p.247).

The tone of this comment is dismissive, but its accusation is equivocal, given the fact that Rozanov himself made a virtue of *razdavlennost'*, having criticized Tolstoy and Solov'ev precisely for lacking it (‘наоборот, сами весьма и весьма “давили”’).¹⁰³ And indeed, Odinokov and the narrator of Erofeev’s story find Rozanov appealing for similar reasons. Erofeev’s narrator describes being saved from suicide by the gift of three volumes of Rozanov,¹⁰⁴ which he immediately sets to reading until he falls asleep with one of the tomes still in his arms. On waking, he finds that the book has become Rozanov himself, with whom he enters into a warm discussion about the degeneration of humanity.¹⁰⁵ A variation on this pattern is described in *BT*, where Odinokov describes how Rozanov saved him from the (possibly suicidal) solitude suggested by his name: ‘Я купил “Второй короб” за огромную, бессмысленную сумму и прочел за две октябрьские ночи. Это был как предсмертный укус пчелы Сократа. Больно и сладко. Целебное жало спасло от ревматизма одиночества’ (97, p.71).¹⁰⁶ For both narrators, who portray themselves as social outcasts, Rozanov offers philosophy’s traditional gift, consolation, but in an unconventional form: through provocative and infectious subjectivity and, above all,

¹⁰¹ See above, p.55.

¹⁰² He also discusses Solzhenitsyn and Zinov'ev.

¹⁰³ As cited in Venedikt Erofeev, ‘Vasily Rozanov glazami ekstsentrika’, in Erofeev, *Ostav'te moyu dushu v pokoe: pocht'i vse* (Moscow: Kh.G.S, 1997), pp.149-64 (p.155).

¹⁰⁴ The quotations within the text suggest that these are *Uedinennoe* and the two ‘baskets’ (*koroba*) of *Opavshie list'ya*.

¹⁰⁵ Erofeev, p.156.

¹⁰⁶ On Rozanov as a source of solace for Odinokov, see also *100*, p.74; *147*, p.105, and *IT*, p.275.

through the emotional tenor of his writing – its tenderness (*nezhnost'*) and sadness (*grust'*), brought together in pity (*zhalost'*).¹⁰⁷

Other convergences of interpretation help establish a backdrop to the theme of *yurodstvo*. The emphasis on Rozanov's rejection of dogma is one such example: he is a philosophical interlocutor rather than a teacher or system-builder to be slavishly followed.¹⁰⁸ Also stressed is Rozanov's polemic against the printed word and mass circulation (a full account of which is supplied in Sinyavsky's study).¹⁰⁹ Galkovsky declares in *IT* that Rozanov 'вообще уничтожил словесное бытие, разрушил перегородку между читателем и писателем' (*IT*, p.264); while, according to Odinokov, Rozanov also managed to overcome the boundary between himself and his writing: 'Книги Розанова и сам Розанов это одно и то же' (625, p.444). Rozanov is thus distinguished in *BT* from his precursors (principally, Dostoevsky) and contemporaries (principally, Lenin), who placed such faith in *slovesnoe bytie*.

The immediacy of Rozanov's appeal to the reader suggests to Odinokov pre-'Guttenbergian' forms of communication: silence, laughter, weeping, facial mimicry. He repeatedly returns to these in his sketches of Rozanov, which evoke images of non-verbal gestures that are directly associated with *yurodstvo*.¹¹⁰ This one-man theatre of paradox is given its most unfettered expression in Erofeev's story in an exhibition of contradictory gestures. The episode describes Rozanov's early-morning trip to church, while the narrator of the story is still asleep:

¹⁰⁷ Odinokov discusses Rozanov's 'удивительная жалость'; 940 (p.660), while Erofeev's narrator cites Rozanov prominently on this theme (Erofeev, p.154). A further relevant quotation from *Uedinennoe* is cited by Sinyavsky: 'Моя душа сплетена из грязи, нежности и грусти'; Sinyavsky, p.185.

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, *BT*, 641, pp.460-61.

¹⁰⁹ See Sinyavsky, pp.108-36.

¹¹⁰ 'Розанов юродски хнычет, размазывает слезы по щекам'; 290, p.193. See also 899, p.637. In the *Iskhodnyi tekst*, Galkovsky comments that Rozanov 'не говорит, но плачет, смеется, поёт'; *IT*, p.263.

Выйдя на паперть, он подал двум нищим, а остальным, всмотревшись в них, почему-то не подал. За что-то поблагодарил Клейнмихеля, походя дал пощечину Желябову, прослезился и сказал квартальному надзирателю, что в мире нет ничего святее полицейских функций.¹¹¹

This scene is unusual for placing Rozanov, albeit briefly, in the context of the public square (generally, as will be discussed at greater length, 'Vasily Rozanov' and *BT* reflect Rozanov's self-casting as a private individual). Like the *yurodivye* described by Panchenko, the Rozanov of Erofeev and Odinokov may be placed in a potentially humorous context but is not himself frivolous or *shutochnyi*: as in medieval Russia, laughter continues to be associated with the demonic. Rozanov knew better than anyone, Erofeev's narrator observes, 'что в мире нет ничего шуточного', and had himself written: 'Смеяться – вообще недостойная вещь, низшая категория человеческой души. Смех – от Калибана, а не от Ариэля'.¹¹² Odinokov's Rozanov also reflects these principles. He is as distant from the buffoonery of Odinokov's father or of the Bolsheviks at their Party Congresses as he is from the self-delusions of excessive seriousness or 'devilish cunning' which Odinokov, like Dostoevsky, criticizes (899, p.637).¹¹³ He maintains the holy fool's equivocation between laughter and tears, and Odinokov imagines him speaking, 'со слезами на глазах (от смеха)' (899, p.637).

The challenge posed by *yurodstvo* to conventional standards of moral and physical perfection may also be traced in these three late-Soviet interpretations of Rozanov. In *Uedinennoe*, Rozanov described himself as unprepossessing from childhood and morally deficient in his maturity.¹¹⁴ Erofeev, Sinyavsky and Odinokov develop these themes,

¹¹¹ Erofeev, p.156.

¹¹² Erofeev, pp.162, 154.

¹¹³ Он 'дьявольская хитрость', see 899, p.637. On Rozanov's non-seriousness: 'Этот человек слишком хорошо чувствовал собственную неподлинность, собственную несерьезность. Вообще неподлинность и несерьезность русского человека. И человека вообще' (940, p.660). Rozanov thus appears to represent for Odinokov the continuation of Pushkin, who established the 'несерьезность русской литературы' (176, p.120).

¹¹⁴ V. Rozanov, *Uedinennoe* (Moscow: Russkii Put', 2002), p.85.

perceiving in Rozanov's self-portrait an inverted aesthetics and a radical honesty (or 'cynicism') which can be invested with moral force.

Sinyavsky argues that Rozanov's *yurodstvo* consists in his deliberate self-abasement as a physical and moral specimen, in the lowering (*snizhenie*) of his persona through literature:

Юродивый всегда поступает так, чтобы как можно хуже выглядеть среди людей – самым грязным, самым последним, даже иногда самым неприличным. И так же – стилистически – относится к себе Розанов. Стилистика Розанова – это стилистика юродивого. Иначе говоря, где-то под спудом прячется – добро, красота, истина, лирика, а внешне все это выражается в крайне вульгарной форме.¹¹⁵

This discussion is framed by and interspersed with assertions of Rozanov's *tsinizm*. In using this word, Sinyavsky appears to be appealing to its original meaning as a philosophy that defied conventional appraisals of the beautiful and the true. Cynicism's place as a precursor of *yurodstvo* has been noted by Panchenko and S.A. Ivanov, among others,¹¹⁶ and, as personified by Rozanov, it suggests to Sinyavsky also the model of the *yurodivyi*, whose neglect of himself and his appearance guarantees his inner sanctity.¹¹⁷ Sinyavsky comments that 'некрасивость [...] становится у Розанова своего рода "эстетическим идеалом", норма его прозы, которые получают глубокое, в том числе нравственное, обоснование'. He goes on: 'Речь, таким образом, идет о скрытой красоте некрасивого. Красота из сферы внешней переходит в сферу душевную'.¹¹⁸ True beauty is hidden by ugliness, as wisdom is by folly. This pattern holds for the presentation of Rozanov by all three writers, and evokes in all cases the elision of Platonic and Christian traditions of folly. Their Rozanov, crude, ugly and foolish from without but precious and wise within, is

¹¹⁵ Sinyavsky, p.175.

¹¹⁶ See Likhachev and others, p.80; Ivanov, pp.16-18. On Rozanov and Cynicism, see D. Khanin, 'Beauty and the Beast: Vasilii Rozanov's Aesthetic and Moral Ideal', *Russian Review* 57 (1995), 72-86.

¹¹⁷ 'Розановский цинизм, таким образом, становится подтверждением правды, которую он хочет сказать. Так же – как в юродивом заведомое пренебрежение к себе и к своей внешности становится способом сохранения внутренней святости.' Sinyavsky, p.176.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, pp.182-83.

readily identifiable as a Silenus figure, the description given to Socrates by Alcibiades, to Christ by Erasmus, and, following these illustrious jocoserious precedents, to *Gargantua and Pantagruel* by Rabelais.¹¹⁹

Odinokov and Erofeev's narrator stress with still greater directness than Sinyavsky Rozanov's unappealing appearance. The latter records the opinion of unnamed women that, 'нос его был мясист, а маленькие глаза постоянно блуждали и дурно пахло изо рта'.¹²⁰ The moral charge of Rozanov's *yurodstvo*, which is made explicit in the interpretation of Sinyavsky, is also implied here. Erofeev's narrator opposes Rozanov, with his 'метафизический цинизм' and his petty sins, to the great falsity (*gigantskaya lozh'*) of his (and, equally, Erofeev's) era.¹²¹ Like the *salos* and *yurodivyi*, Erofeev's Rozanov is defined by his refusal to affect virtue, and his apparent embrace of vice, in the struggle against hypocrisy: 'Да, этот человек ни разу за всю жизнь не прикинулся добродетелем, между тем как прикидывались все'.¹²²

For all three late-Soviet writers, the explicit or implicit analogy with the puzzling behaviour of the *yurodivyi* reinforces the appeal of Rozanov as a kind of anti-teacher, an antidote not just to Soviet didacticism, but also to the didacticism of Russia's literary and philosophical heritage. A by-product of these interpretations is the endorsement, by Erofeev and Odinokov, of Rozanov's hostility towards Solov'ev, whose apparent spiritual

¹¹⁹ On the Silenus, see my Introduction, p.10-11. Rabelais describes a Silenus as containing 'rare drugs [...] and other precious things' and alludes to Alcibiades' comparison in the opening paragraph of his prologue, to provide an analogy for his own book, whose subjects 'are not so foolish as the title on the cover suggested'; see François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. J.M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1955), pp.37-38. On Erasmus' copious rhetorical use of the Silenus figure (notably to describe the Cynic philosopher Diogenes, Socrates and Christ), see the editor's note in Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, ed. A.H.T. Levi, trans. Betty Radice (London: Penguin, 1993), p.13, n.10, and Screech, pp.90-92.

¹²⁰ Erofeev, p.162.

¹²¹ Ibid, pp.157, 162.

¹²² Ibid, p.162.

perfection, teacherly approach to others, and physical and intellectual beauty are cursed at great length throughout *BT*.¹²³

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Yet all these arguments for Rozanov's holy foolishness ultimately founder, as I suggested in the Introduction, on his non-acceptance of Christ and of such evangelic themes as poverty and homelessness. Rozanov's anti-aestheticism, which appears to link him to *yurodstvo*, informed this attitude also. To Rozanov, Christ's beauty and perfection, and the asceticism of the Gospels in general, was an impediment to the task of living well on earth, and of rejoicing in life. Christ, through his very beauty, took the zest out of life (even if Rozanov would turn to him in the face of weakness and death).¹²⁴ As Rozanov wrote in his preface to *Lyudi lunnogo sveta*: 'Великая красота делает нас бесвкусными к обыкновенному. Все "обыкновенно" сравнительно с Иисусом'.¹²⁵

Rozanov in fact introduced a quite new *persona* that manifestly informs both Erofeev's story and *BT* and that revises all established notions of *yurodstvo Khrista radi*. Critical here is the emphasis on *obyknovennost'*, and, more broadly, the Rozanovian affection for *byt*. As Sinyavsky observes: 'основной персонаж прозы Розанова – самый обыкновенный человек, подчеркнуто обыкновенный, нарочито обыкновенный'.¹²⁶ Sinyavsky fails, however, to articulate fully the implications of this for any portrait of Rozanov as *yurodivyi*: the emphasis on the ordinary, on daily life, actually serves to exclude the gaudy identification of the rejected and the sacred, the monstrous and the miraculous that

¹²³ See, for example, 591, pp.425-26. The aesthetic contrast between Solov'ev and Rozanov is supported in *IT* by a quotation from Merezhkovsky: 'Какая в самом деле противоположность этих двух лиц, Вл. Соловьева – с его иконописным лицом Ионна Предтечи, и Розанова – с обыкновенным лицом "рыжеватого господина в очках"' (*IT*, p.272). See also Erofeev, p.155.

¹²⁴ On Rozanov's appeals to Christ in times of despair, see Janet Anne Schonwald Romanoff, 'Vasilij Rozanov: the Jurodivyj of Russian Literature' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Stanford University, 1974), pp.216-17.

¹²⁵ Vasily Rozanov, *Izbrannoe*, ed. by Yury Ivask (New York, 1956), p.106. Rozanov revered Dostoevsky, but implicitly rebelled against the reverence felt by Dostoevsky towards Christ's beauty.

¹²⁶ Sinyavsky, p.176.

underpins *yurodstvo*. His ‘тоска по унижению’, for example, is not a show of Dostoevskian self-abasement; it is not, as Sinyavsky rightly comments,

какой-нибудь мазохизм или “жажда пострадать”, а поиски наиболее соответствующего для себя лица и положения. Потому что в униженности оживает душа и открывается простор интимности. В унижении человек живет не внешней, а именно внутренней жизнью.¹²⁷

The ‘простор интимности’ is, indeed, perhaps the most characteristic feature of Rozanov’s trilogy, especially *Uedinennoe*, which is subtitled ‘на праве рукописи’ (‘restricted circulation’, or ‘printed almost privately’, in Mirsky’s translation).¹²⁸ Extolling private life and the family as the highest values, Rozanov expresses a modesty that seems wise rather than false. He ‘abases’ himself not for the purposes of display or performance, but as an acknowledgement that his literary genius, of which he is in no doubt, is a gift rather than an achievement and does not elevate him above others (especially his family) or above the ordinary in life:

Мне хотелось бы, чтобы меня некоторые помнили, но *отнюдь не хвалили*; и только при условии, чтобы помнили *вместе с моими близкими*.

Без памяти о них, о их *доброте*, о *чести* – я не хочу, чтобы и меня помнили.

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Откуда такое чувство? *От чувства вины*; и еще от глубокого чистосердечного сознания, что я не был хороший человек. Бог дал мне таланты: но это другое. Более страшный вопрос: был ли я *хороший человек* – и решается в отрицательную сторону.¹²⁹

Sinyavsky quotes similar passages, but immediately contrasts them with what he takes to be an example of Rozanov’s *samovoskhvalenie* (from *Uedinennoe*): ‘Каждая моя строка есть священное писание (не в школьном, не в “употребительном” смысле), и каждая моя мысль есть священная мысль, и каждое мое слово есть священное слово’.

Sinyavsky draws his chapter on Rozanov’s ‘self-portrait’ to its conclusion by observing

¹²⁷ Ibid, p.183.

¹²⁸ See Romanoff, p.240. Ibid, pp.244-47 on Rozanov’s glorification of the private life.

¹²⁹ *Uedinennoe*, pp.84-85. The italics are Rozanov’s.

that: 'Розанов и ниже всех людей, и выше. И глупее всех, и умнее всех. И в этом движении вверх-вниз состоит движение розановской прозы, ее внутренняя игра'.¹³⁰

This interpretation is, to my mind, unsatisfactory, reducing the originality of Rozanov's prose to a play of paradox. It is not necessarily the case that when Rozanov describes the 'sacred' quality of his words – or even when he declares his own genius and intelligence – he is necessarily praising *himself*. Indeed, *Uedinennoe* concludes with the lines: 'Никакой человек не достоин похвалы. Всякий человек достоин только жалости'.¹³¹ By praising his own gifts, Rozanov is praising God. It is as if Rozanov needs to identify these talents as given in order to arrive at a sober assessment of his 'лицо и положение' in the world, and to cast into greater relief those other aspects of life for which he and others do bear direct responsibility.

In this sense, Rozanov's apparent bursts of *samovoskhvalenie* may better be read as acts of modesty and also as a way of delimiting (even belittling) the sphere of literature and of literary genius within the wider sphere of life. They allow Rozanov to readdress, in novel fashion, the moral dilemma posed by fame and pride. Tolstoy, in his old age, looked to *yurodstvo* as the model antidote to pride and self-regard;¹³² Rozanov, by contrast, seeks a solution which does not present the author either as the best or (*contra* Sinyavsky) worst of men and which refrains from sweeping moral judgment or from opposing egoism to absolute (Christian) selflessness. Instead, the *samyi obknovennyi chelovek* coexists with the gifted, socially marginalized artist and radical polemicist. It is the human familiarity of this persona, rooted in an ordinary domestic context, which accounts, at least in part, for Rozanov's appeal to Galkovsky, Erofeev and others. Beyond Rozanov's apparent self-contradictions, a genuine paradox emerges, namely that his writings, founded as they are on extreme subjectivity ('я – весь дух, и весь субъект: субъективное действительно

¹³⁰ Sinyavsky, p.184.

¹³¹ *Uedinennoe*, p.310.

¹³² See my Introduction, p.23.

развито во мне бесконечно, как я не знаю ни у кого`), turn out to be neither egoistic nor isolating.¹³³ The narrators of ‘Vasily Rozanov’ and *BT* are both ‘saved’ by the simple fact that they find in Rozanov, uniquely, an interlocutor with whom they feel at home:

Нет, с этим “душегубом” очень даже есть о чем говорить, мне давно не попадалось существо, с которым до такой степени было бы о чем говорить. (‘Vasily Rozanov’) ¹³⁴

С Василием Васильевичем можно жить. Я бы смог с ним жить в одной коммуналке. Он бы пил у меня утром на кухне воду из носика чайника, в семейных трусах, майке и шлепанцах на босу ногу, и все было бы отлично. (141, p.100)

Odinokov’s fantasy is a homage to the ‘прямой русский быт’ which, uniquely in Russian philosophy, created the works of Rozanov: ‘Быт всех других русских философов крив’ (*IT*, p.244). It recalls the family setting of *Uedinennoe* and *Opavshie list'ya* and their fragmentary compilation amid the round of daily chores. This domestication of philosophy has far-reaching implications for Odinokov and for his specific task of redefining *yurodstvo* through Rozanov; and it is with this topic that I will begin the next section, leaving behind the comparison with Erofeev and Sinyavsky.

*

Rozanov, as depicted in *BT*, responds to two linked dilemmas which are explored by the entire work. The first has to do with the isolation of the philosopher as a socially dangerous individual – a problem Odinokov dates back to Socrates, in whom philosophy made its ‘первые попытки создания технологии спасения мира от философов – создания технологии уединения’ (141, p.100). The second, less explicit dilemma, concerns another form of disengagement: the religious tendencies likely to isolate the Russian thinker, in particular, from the world.

¹³³ *Uedinennoe*, p.64. Odinokov says of Rozanov: ‘В чем я никак не могу понять Розанова, так это в том, что он никогда не был эгоистом’ (160, p.114).

¹³⁴ Erofeev, p.154.

Socrates represents for Odinkov the moment when individual intellectual autonomy developed to the extent that it threatened the state with the rival imperium (or ‘microcosm’) of the philosopher’s mind: ‘Философ был опасно близок, тогда как его нужно было определенным образом изолировать от общества как вредного сумасшедшего’.¹³⁵ Of relevance here is the distinction made by Socrates, and discussed at length in Plato’s *Apology*, between the public and private domains (even though Odinkov does not use these terms, preferring the related opposition *gosudarstvennyi-negosudarstvennyi*).¹³⁶ Socrates describes himself in the *Apology* as an *idiotes* (a private man), and believed that, in this capacity, he could be of greater use to the city as a whole than if he held public office.¹³⁷ But his fate showed that, in society’s eyes, this role could not be welcomed or accommodated.

Rozanov, however, succeeded in turning this enforced isolation (*uedinenie*) into a good, in maintaining his integrity (*tselnost’*; *IT*, p.237) while living in the world; in remaining a private man, rather than a martyr, in public life: ‘Значение Розанова в решении этой сократовской проблемы – как философу жить в миру – для русских условий и русской души’ (*141*, p.100). In the Russian context, Odinkov’s Rozanov might be contrasted with Chaadaev, who was described by Mandel’shtam as a rare example, in Russian culture, of a “‘частный” человек’ or ‘*privatier*’,¹³⁸ but who suffered for his independence, being placed under house arrest and declared insane following the publication of his first *Philosophical Letter* in 1836.

Within the logic of the entire work, the question ‘как философу жить в миру’ relates to Odinkov’s provocative assertion that every Russian considers himself to be

¹³⁵ Odinkov describes this process in its various stages: see *141*, p.100. From the surrounding paragraphs it is clear that the model of the philosopher Odinkov has in mind here is Socrates.

¹³⁶ See *141*: ‘Русские, как и греки, как и евреи, – негосударственный народ’ (p.101).

¹³⁷ The question of Socrates’ ill-defined ‘occupation’, and his preferred status as a private man, is a key theme of the *Apology*. Socrates argues that he brings benefit to the city through his private offices, since: ‘A man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time’. Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. by John M. Cooper (Hackett: Indianapolis/Cambridge, 1997), p.29. See also p.32.

¹³⁸ Osip Mandel’shtam, ‘Chaadaev’, in *Slovo i kul’tura* (Moscow: Sovetskii Pisatel’, 1987), pp. 87-91 (p.89).

Christ, and to his ensuing question: ‘Но как же жить “Христом” в миру?’ (429, p.301). Both paradigms, as studied in *BT*, have a destructive potential, mirroring that of Revolutionary nihilism and utopianism. Implicit in the second question is a rejection of the urge to flee the world into asceticism and seclusion (the phrase ‘в миру’ denoting precisely life outside monastery walls). Chekhov’s fantasy of becoming a *strannik* is one example of this urge; other more obvious instances, not cited by Odinokov, would include Tolstoy’s flight to Optina Pustyn in 1910, and the role played by this monastery for pre-Revolutionary intellectuals generally, notably Dostoevsky and Solov'ev.¹³⁹ In late-Soviet texts such as *BT* or Aleshkovsky’s *Ruka*, this fantasy of escape remains, but its object has become unattainable: Odinokov speaks of his own attraction to the harmony of monastic life, but (like Shibarov in *Ruka*) recognizes that he is unfit for this model, having been spiritually corrupted by Soviet socialism (793, p.568).¹⁴⁰

The link between the two questions given above has a firm historical foundation. Philosophy was historically tied in Russia to monasticism, to the ascetic life, and to the example of Christ as a philosopher in word and deed. Such an understanding, inherited from the monks of Alexandria, opposed the notion of philosophy espoused in Hellenic and Judaic culture, which was perceived in Rus as a surrender to intellectual pride.¹⁴¹

Galkovsky clearly wishes to stress in *BT* the persistent intertwining of these paradigms in the modern era, citing, for example, Frank’s assertion in *Vekhi* that an *intelligent* is a monk (416, p.294). Yet equally, through Rozanov, who famously said that he carried the monastery in his soul, Odinokov wishes to show how they can be untied: how the religious-philosophical imperative can be reconciled with life. He wishes to

¹³⁹Dostoevsky and Solov'ev made a pilgrimage to the monastery in 1878, after the death of Dostoevsky’s son.

¹⁴⁰ On Shibarov’s fantasy of becoming a monk in *Ruka*, see Chapter Three, pp.139-40.

¹⁴¹ See M.N.Gromov, ‘O znachenii termina “filosof” na Rusi’, in *Germenevtika drevnerusskoi literatury: XVI – nachalo XVIII vekov* (Moscow: Akademiya Nauk SSSR, 1989), pp.447-80 (pp.460-61).

elaborate how, ‘Страшный потусторонний нигилизм его души (“в душе у меня всегда стоял монастырь”) оборачивался в реальности апофеозом бытия, почвы’ (IT, p.237).

To Odinokov, Rozanov’s *yurodstvo* is the very key to his achievement as a Russian thinker living in society. Historically speaking, the connection is a logical one: holy foolishness came about precisely as a result of the desire of monks to rejoin the world, and bring their faith into society. Odinokov, though, is not particularly interested in Rozanov’s engagement with the world in an active sense. Rather, he wishes to explain how, at a psychological level, the mechanisms of *yurodstvo* allowed Rozanov to maintain his psychic integrity while living in the world (which, according to the Orthodox premise, ‘lies in evil’).

As in the cases of Pushkin and Sarovsky, Odinokov casts Rozanov’s *yurodstvo* as an attitude of absolute hatred towards the world. This is certainly an eccentric reading of Rozanov’s writings, where earthly joys and pleasures are constantly celebrated, and one with which Rozanov’s contemporary readers would hardly have agreed. Berdyaev, for example, thought Rozanov bourgeois in his attachment to *byt*, calling him a ‘philistine’ (*obyvatel’*) of genius.¹⁴² At most, Rozanov shared with Odinokov a certain contempt towards the crowd and a profound skepticism towards humans’ ability to exercise free will.¹⁴³

But Odinokov’s interpretation enables him to make the argument which interests him – namely, to elaborate a model of the psychology of the philosopher-‘*yurodivyi*’. In the passage that follows from a comparison of Rozanov and Socrates, we read:

Спасительное отличие заключается в ЮРОДСТВЕ Розанова. Юродство это открытая, вполне выявленная ненависть к миру. Любое проявление реальности воспринимается при подобном душевном настрое как издевательство. Но зато сама ненависть оказывается отстраненной от лица, и более того, к самой ненависти человек относится с ненавистью.

¹⁴² See Romanoff, pp. 213-4.

¹⁴³ See, for example, Rozanov, *Uedinennoe*, p.102.

Юродство это вообще “ничего не надо”. С миром вообще ничего общего иметь не хочется. (841, p.598)

The world, according to this model, is so alien that it strikes the *yurodivyi*-philosopher as a mockery; *yurodstvo* enabled Rozanov to disdain and distance the emotion (hatred) that it caused in him. It is an attitude of wise resignation, in which the principle of negation is dominant: ‘Тут гениальное русское юродство, то есть ощущение собственной ничтожности и ничтожности мира и глубокая уверенность, что так и должно быть, что так ПРАВИЛЬНО’ (141, p.100). Rozanov views even himself in negative terms, accepting his status as a *nichtozhnost'* who serves no ostensible social need.¹⁴⁴

Rozanov's *yurodstvo*, for Odinokov, is thus above all a manifestation of heightened awareness – of the hostile laws of the world and (we will see) of the word. Rozanov accepts his social marginalization, possessing the paradoxical ability to perceive fully the disharmonic nature of the world and yet to achieve the ideal of a harmonious existence:¹⁴⁵ ‘Розанов – это философ, нашедший в себе силы жить, и жить полнокровной жизнью, зная, что жизни нет’ (IT, p.235). Rozanov's direct antithesis in *BT* is Lenin, whose actions and words are shown to reflect an extraordinary lack of such awareness.

Rozanov's intensified awareness means that, at a certain level, he is removed from his own actions and from his own expression in the world; he is aware of their performative nature, that the philosopher ‘живёт в театральном пространстве’ (141, p.100). Not only does he not do anything (a motif of *Opavshie list'ya*, picked up repeatedly by Galkovsky),¹⁴⁶ he does not say anything either, despite his vast legacy of words: ‘Содержание книг Розанова равно нулю. Он действительно НИЧЕГО НЕ СКАЗАЛ и

¹⁴⁴ Here, Odinokov is following the spirit and letter of *Uedinennoe*, p.143: ‘Я не нужен: ни в чем я так не уверен, как в том, что я не нужен’.

¹⁴⁵ On this latter point, see 841, p.598.

¹⁴⁶ See, for example, *IT*, pp.277-79.

ушел в иной мир великим молчуном' (467, p.323).¹⁴⁷ In his many mutually contradictory opinions, he doesn't seek coherence, and reflects the world's disharmony: 'не хочет согласовывать свои мнения, превращается в несогласуемое наречие' (690, p.493). He is wise, even 'chaste', in not taking language too seriously, in accepting its 'unreality': 'Нет целомудрия у Соловьева и ему подобных. У Розанова есть. Именно из-за его ощущения ирреальности слова, из-за его юродства, деформирующего словесный мир' (163, p.115). And he is wise in not entrusting to words his inner life: 'Розанов никогда не говорит о душе, о внутреннем мире. Не говорит, но плачет, смеется, поет. В результате идеи, холодные идеи, полностью отделяются от сущности человека. Но одновременно и растворяются в ней' (IT, p.263).

These comments are also underpinned by Odinokov's evaluation of silence as Russia's true, ancient language: 'А слово у русских лишь верхушка айсберга, не более. В этом и семейный, домашний характер розановской и вообще русской речи. В семье слово физиологично и иероглифично' (899, p.637). This passage strongly suggests that, through Odinokov's Rozanov, Galkovsky wishes to summon the memory of the radical Orthodox practices, kept alive into the early twentieth century, of Hesychasm and *imiaslavie*, in which silence beyond thought is posited as an end in itself that brings one closer to God and in which letters and words are valued not for their semantic value (the 'знание знаков' mastered by Lenin) but for their 'hieroglyphic' (iconic) and 'physiological' quality; for being embodied in speech, and enfleshed (like Christ). In *imiaslavie*, a movement alive on Mount Athos during Rozanov's life,

The word is exteriorized, and as a mantra, is virtually a parody of a speaker's intention. The reification of a word, as pure exteriority, threatens the inwardness of its speaker. Words, as they attain thickness, reach into a silence that denies the interiority of any who would vocalize them.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Compare with Rozanov's own thoughts on literature, silence and the printed word, in *Uedinennoe*, p.118.

¹⁴⁸ Lock, p.54.

Charles Lock, from whose article on Russia's 'history of silence' I have cited these lines, sees these concerns reflected in the poetry of Mandel'shtam (whose poem *Silentium* begins, 'Она ещё не родилась').¹⁴⁹ They are also reflected in Odinokov's interpretation of Rozanov's use of language, and his interpretation of the Russian language full stop – as 'a parody', consciously or not, 'of a speaker's intention'. They might be traced also in the paradoxical writings of other late-Soviet authors, notably Venedikt Erofeev, with his desire to write a book that would express nothing (see Chapter One); or Vladimir Sorokin, some of whose stories arrange strings of expletives with the monotonous simplicity of the hesychastic 'Jesus Prayer'.¹⁵⁰

Rozanovian 'yurodstvo' and silence-through-words dovetail, in *BT*, with Odinokov's silence about God, his apophatic refusal to describe God in positive terms. Apophatic theology can hardly be attributed to Rozanov's writings (which describe a personal, intimate God), but Odinokov places Rozanov within the apophatic discourse of *BT* as a whole, in which Odinokov's own comments about God suggest that the *via negativa* is the only approach to faith available to him.¹⁵¹ With its close links to both *yurodstvo* and hesychasm,¹⁵² apophasis completes the triangle within which, I would argue, the ideal of the *filosof* is sought in *BT*. As Odinokov says, recalling all three religious paradigms, "Нужно жить как все, не выделяя себя в стенах святости. Верить в Бога – это уже в него не верить. Нужно молчать и не думать об этом" (46, p.37).

Yet the ideal is a dangerous and potentially nihilistic one; and Rozanov's importance as a revised type of *yurodivyi* is to offset its destructive tendencies. Though described by Odinokov as a nihilist, Rozanov actually provides, in his ability to live a

¹⁴⁹ Lock, pp.51, 54-55.

¹⁵⁰ Cf 'Vozhmosnosti', in Vladimir Sorokin, *Sbornik rasskazov* (Moscow: Russlit, 1992), pp.48-49.

¹⁵¹ This feature of Russian postmodernism has been explored at some length by Mikhail Epstein. See especially his articles on 'minimal religion' in Mikhail Epstein, Alexander Genis, and Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*, trans. and ed. by Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover (New York: Bergahn, 1999), pp.163-71, 345-93.

¹⁵² See Lock, p.52, on the development of hesychasm from apophatic theology.

harmonious life ‘в миру’, a buffer against actual nihilism. With his *apofeoz bytiya*, Rozanov defuses the revolutionary impulses that may be traced in Russian Christianity’s heritage, whether in that of apophatic theology, or in *yurodstvo* in its original form.¹⁵³ In Odinokov’s Rozanov, the *yurodivyi*’s essential qualities of aggression and provocation have been sublimated and distanced from reality. Like Erofeev’s Venichka, who aspired to a place ‘где нет места подвигу’, Odinokov’s Rozanov suggests an ideal of life without the potentially destructive heroism of the Christian saint or committed Revolutionary.

As Andrei Sinyavsky acutely observed, Rozanov’s religious views within the context of Christianity, and his antipathy to the demands of ascetic saintliness, amounted to an ultimatum to God: ‘либо я, Розанов, либо Христос’.¹⁵⁴ Odinokov, it seems, responds to this dilemma by developing a cult of Rozanov rather than Christ. Apophaticism, Epstein notes, developed from a religious context which ‘rejected the idea of Christ’s human nature, accepting only his divine nature and hence attributing a certain virtuality, conditionality and illusoriness to his human incarnation’.¹⁵⁵ Odinokov appears to follow in this tradition, denying the status of Christ as a human, historical figure: ‘его в истории нет’ (387, p.262); Christ elected to preserve his sanctity rather than live in this world (*IT*, p.257). Rozanov, however, did exist in history as a warm human being: ‘Вместо Христа он [Rozanov] поставил Розанова. Но Розанова как Розанова, а не как Христа’ (641, p.460). This *yurodivyi vne Khrista*, a conflation of Rozanov and Odinokov’s own notion of holy foolery, is the precarious model of the philosopher and human being which Galkovsky offers to the reader.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ As Mikhail Epstein has argued, ‘the lines of development of the apophatic theological tradition [...] very clearly lead us to the Russian nihilism of the nineteenth century and the Soviet atheism of the twentieth, in which negative theology becomes the negation of theism itself’. Epstein and others, p.351.

¹⁵⁴ Sinyavsky, p.25.

¹⁵⁵ Epstein and others, p.350.

¹⁵⁶ I am grateful to my supervisor, Catriona Kelly, for suggesting this description of Rozanov as a ‘юродивый вне Христа’.

Epilogue

Life after the Idiots: Viktor Erofeev and Post-Soviet Prose

The sense of a dead end or *tupik* informed the work of many non-conformist writers and artists in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Its causes ranged from the apparent immutability of social and political conditions in the late Soviet Union to the growing influence of rediscovered authors (notably, Kharms and Dobychin) whose work could be found to foreshadow the postmodernist vogue, as well as the growing literary taste for the cruel and the absurd. Some authors continued in the fool-playing traditions of Shukshin, or of *Moskva-Petushki* (itself, a model ‘dead-end’ text), combining sorrowfulness with ironic humour directed at the author-narrator as much as at the outside world.¹ In the work of others, folly acquired harder layers of idiocy and madness, reflecting a new cultural aesthetic, or ‘necroaesthetic’, in which provocation and irony were put to chilling, even inhuman effect.² In the stories and novels of the young Vladimir Sorokin, the authorial persona disappeared entirely, to be replaced by cerebral rearrangements of nineteenth-century and Soviet literary codes, played out in a violent but unnervingly apathetic manner.

These processes were accompanied by a tendency towards recapitulation and explanation. *Beskonechnyi tupik* represented one attempt at summarizing an intellectual tradition. Another has been carried out by Viktor Erofeev (b.1947). This is most obviously apparent in Erofeev’s criticism and literary journalism, but it may also be traced in his

¹ See, for example, the stories and novels of Evgeny Popov.

² I take the term ‘necroaesthetic’ from Alexei Yurchak’s interesting discussion of cultural trends in Leningrad in the early 1980s, among them the self-consciously idiotic and hyper-naïve art and prose of the ‘Mit’ki’ group, and the violent, zombie-like public provocations and films of the ‘necrorealists’, who sought ‘dim-witted merriment’ (*tupoe vesel’e*) and ‘energetic idiocy’ (*energichnaya tupost’*) as their goal, epitomizing what Yurchak calls late-Soviet ‘dead irony’. See Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp.238-59 (p.245).

fiction. Of particular interest is Erofeev's story of 1980, 'Zhizn' s idiotom', a highly concentrated distillation of some of the themes and tendencies of late-Soviet non-conformist prose, and a maximally cynical interpretation of its 'praise of folly'. Russian intellectuals had often loved the idea of loving 'idiots'; Erofeev's story asks what it would be like to live with one. The cultural resonance of this highly complex text has been testified not only by the reaction of like-minded writers (Sorokin has apparently called it the greatest Russian short story of the twentieth century),³ but also by its reincarnation as an opera by Alfred Schnittke opera (1991) and as a memorable film, also bearing the same name, directed by Aleksandr Rogozhkin (Troitskii Most, 1993).

'Zhizn' s idiotom' is both the title of the story and the nature of the strange sentence meted out to its protagonist, a second-rate writer (*literator*) like many of Erofeev's narrators. As punishment for an unexplained crime, he was ordered to choose a patient from a mental asylum and take him to live with himself and his wife. In the asylum, he had hoped to find a genuine *yurodivyi*; he was disappointed, but Vova, his chosen 'idiot' seems a good second best: 'я сжился с мыслью, что он профессор [...] Я мечтал проникнуть в его мечты'. He is shaken out of his complacency, however, when he returns home to find Vova in a pool of milk on the kitchen floor, with the contents of the fridge strewn about him. Vova's delinquency accelerates: he tears up volumes of Proust, paints the walls with his excrement and walks around naked, fondling his impressive ornament. He smashes the telephone, symbolically marooning the couple in a claustrophobic environment where they, too, become contaminated by madness and hysteria.

Vova's violence and sexual aggression lead him to rape the narrator's wife, who then becomes infatuated. But she aborts his child and Vova turns against her, beating her and making advances towards the narrator. A homosexual idyll ensues. The wife tries to

³ As quoted by the publishers of Viktor Erofeev, *Pupok: rasskazy krasnogo chervyaka* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2002).

take her revenge, only for Vova to behead her with secateurs as the narrator looks on in a state of incontinent excitement. In the final paragraph, we learn that the narrator ended up in the same ward from which he had taken Vova, before himself being 'chosen' by a certain Craig Benson, under whose care he wrote this story.⁴

Two principal polemics emerge from this unpleasant tale and its orgies of pastiche and parody. The first continues the arguments sustained over decades in Erofeev's criticism and essays, the keynote of which has been an assault on the faith in human nature demonstrated by Russian writers of all schools, be they the nineteenth-century classics, the architects of Socialist Realism, or the 'men of the sixties' (*shestidesyatniki*). All, according to Erofeev, had supported a deluded doctrine of 'humanism' and 'love of fellow men' (*chelovekolyubie*) which concealed the inescapable prevalence of evil, not as a social phenomenon but as a property of every individual. In a classic rebellion of the son against the fathers, Erofeev's polemic has been directed with particular force against dissidents, like Solzhenitsyn, and 'liberals', like Evtushenko and Voinovich, who had reinforced belief in man's essential goodness, despite the lessons of Stalinism. Against them, Erofeev has pitted the less palatable discoveries of what he calls *drugaya proza*, a line that he traces from Shalamov to Venedikt Erofeev, Mamleev, Limonov and numerous other '*fleurs du mal*'.⁵

⁴ Viktor Erofeev, *Zhizn' s idiotom: rasskazy, povest'* (Moscow: Interbuk, 1991), pp.5-26 (p.16). Further references to this story are given after quotation in the text. The premise of the story recalls the opening of Kafka's *Trial* (the motif of the unexplained punishment), while its development (the transformation of a settled family by an alien presence) recalls 'The Metamorphosis', though Vova, unlike Gregor Samsa, is never seen from inside. Some of the many other subtexts are given in a sharp analysis by I.S. Skoropanova; see Skoropanova, *Russkaya postmodernistskaya literatura: uchebnoe posobie*, 4th rev. edn (Moscow: Flint, 2002), pp.249-54.

⁵ See especially Erofeev's introduction to his anthology of *drugaya proza*, in *Russkie tsvety zla*, ed. by Viktor Erofeev (1997; Moscow: Eksmo, 2002), pp.5-30; See also his earlier article, 'Pominki po sovetskoi literature', *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, 4 July 1990, p.8; reprinted in Erofeev, *Sharovaya molniya* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2002), pp.58-79. Erofeev finds in *drugaya proza* support for his call for a return to 'pure' literature and aesthetic freedom. Sinyavsky-Terts had hoped for a similar development three decades earlier in his essay 'Chto takoe sotsialisticheskii realizm?' (1959). But where Sinyavsky's criticism and fiction emphasized the grotesque, the irrational and the cruel vagaries of chance (see, for example, his novella of 1980, *Kroshka Tsores*), Erofeev has based his fiction, often monotonously, on evil and madness. Of the writers discussed in this thesis, he has most in common with Mamleev, while inheriting none of the latter's mysticism.

‘Zhizn' s idiotom’ may be contrasted with the fiction of Voinovich, Aleshkovsky and other ‘men of the sixties’, whose praise of folly served, as has been seen, to reflect on the idiocy and cruelty of the apparently ‘normal’ world, and to indicate the urgent need for a return to fundamental values. In Erofeev’s story, by contrast, the idiot serves to negate value and to expose the illusions inherent in the abstract notion of *chelovekolyubie*. The narrator’s friends had told him that his punishment offered him the chance to develop compassion, a quality he had lacked hitherto (p.6), but the unfolding of the story suggests the truth of an argument which Erofeev had found in Dostoevsky: that *chelovekolyubie*, based on loving humanity from a distance, masks the inability or reluctance to tolerate one’s fellow men at close quarters.⁶ Vova’s transformation into a violent, sexual animal shatters the mask of humanism, by which, as Blok had written (translating Pascal), humans try to escape from themselves.⁷ Pounding on the bedroom door that separates him from the narrator and his wife (p.18), Vova may be said to materialize the idiom, ‘достучаться до человека’.

The second, more surprising polemic is with aspects of *drugaya proza* which Erofeev had celebrated, and with which he has identified himself. A central feature of this tradition has been its rejection of reason, perceived as the handmaiden, ever since the Enlightenment, of ‘humanist’ doctrines. With implicit approval, Erofeev has described Venedikt Erofeev, Vyacheslav P'etsukh and Evgeny Popov as a ‘группа юродствующих писателей’, arguing:

Каждый из них по-своему затемняет свою мировоззренческую позицию. В советские времена затемнение служило политической маскировкой, самозащитой (или трактовалось как таковое), но по сути своей оно отражало отказ от рационалистических ответов на проклятые вопросы бытия, полемически яркое бессилие объяснить мир.⁸

⁶ See his essay ‘Vera i gumanizm Dostoevskogo’ (1972), collected in Viktor Erofeev, *Labirint Dva* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2002), pp.71-109 (pp.86-87).

⁷ ‘Krushenie gumanizma’ (1919) in Aleksandr Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 8 vols (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1960-63), VI, pp.93-115 (p.107).

⁸ Erofeev, *Russkie tsvety zla*, p.20

‘Zhizn’ s idiotom’ also offers no ‘rationalistic answers’; yet nor does it follow the tendencies, accurately described above, of seeking refuge in folly and *zatemnenie*. Indeed, the story may best be seen as a wholesale attack on the heritage of Russian literary folly. It wreaks havoc with the many codes of folly available to the Russian writer, for all of which Erofeev’s idiot can be seen, if the reader chooses, as a parodic signifier.

Thus, Vova is a mock-*yurodivyi*, whether in his sexual aggression and exhibitionism or his speech, limited to the single exclamation ‘Эх!’. Its frequent repetition invites comparison with the speech of the canonized holy fool, Mikhail Klopsky, who was said to echo the words of his interlocutors.⁹ Vova’s holy-foolish form of audible silence might be seen to betoken ulterior knowledge, or an entirely different language. Yet the reader is left in no doubt as to the absence of such knowledge. The desire to discern *yurodstvo* is being ridiculed as the affectation of the intelligentsia, which wishes to find in the *narod* a repository of hidden values. This is what the narrator had dreamt of before choosing his ‘idiot’: ‘Я мечтал о [...] блаженной, юродивой паталогии, народной по форме и содержанию’ (p.6). Equally ironic is the narrator’s repeated description of Vova as his ‘Marei Mareich’, an allusion to Dostoevsky’s reminiscence (‘Muzhik Marei’) of an episode in his childhood when he witnessed at first hand the ‘delicate, almost feminine tenderness’ in the heart of the ploughman Marei, a ‘coarse, bestially ignorant Russian serf’.¹⁰

Vova also invites obvious comparison with Dostoevsky’s ‘idiot’, Myshkin, whom Erofeev had enlisted in an early article in support of his polemic against humanism.

⁹ ‘Эх’ and ‘эхх’ are punned on p.23. Oleg Dark discusses another imitation of Klopsky in Nikolai Baitov’s story, ‘Silentium’; Dark, ‘Novaya russkaya proza i zapadnoe srednevekov’e’, *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie*, 8 (1994), 287-301, p.288

¹⁰ F. M. Dostoevsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 30 vols (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972-1990), xxii, pp.48-49; cited from the useful article on this sketch in Kenneth Lantz, *The Dostoevsky Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004), pp.304-5.

Through the ‘excessiveness’ (*chrezmernost’*) of Myshkin, Dostoevsky had delivered a rebuke to social and bourgeois norms. He had shown that, ‘Прохладной, выдержанной, разумной любовью спастись невозможно. Нужно безумство любви. Именно такой любовью можно увлечь за собой людей’.¹¹ But Myshkin’s successes were few, as Erofeev emphasized, and the failure of his idiocy (*idiotizm*) appears to be caricatured in Vova. He, too, is a figure of excess, but his madness carries no redemptive charge.

In these and other ways, Erofeev plays with many of the metaphors and tropes of folly discussed in this thesis – the asylum, *yurodivyi*, the folk fool, the Priapic fool – in order to suggest that there is only idiocy, signifying nothing. The ‘attraction’ of folly is simply its force, and its potential to destroy. Hence the parodic parallels that implicitly connect Vova with figures of totalitarian authority.¹² His name, his professorial bearing (pp.13-14), his alleged immortality (‘ты никогда не умрешь, Вова’; p.26), and the language with which he is described (p.14) all identify him firmly with Lenin; so too does his status as a father-figure (Я – твой сын, Вова’; p.24).¹³ They are all qualities given to Vova by the narrator, who names and describes him. As such they express the narrator’s culturally programmed fantasies. Seeking meaning in idiocy, the narrator actually yearns for submission – to be taught, guided and dominated. The consequences, when fantasy becomes reality, follow the laws stipulated by folkloric wisdom: that idiocy, or *durachestvo*, will infect everything it touches. An implicitly male force, it appropriates everything to its sadomasochistic ends, not least the body of the narrator’s wife: ‘Тогда мы ее избили, не очень больно, раздели для забавы и избили, хохоча над ее

¹¹ Erofeev, *Labirint Dva*, p.102.

¹² On the parallel with totalitarianism, see Petra Hesse, ‘Pri-otsutstvie sub"ekta: “Zhizn' s idiotom” Viktora Erofeeva’, *Russian Literature*, 51 (2002), 261-72.

¹³ On the image of Lenin as a teacher, father and immortal, see Olga Velikanova, ‘The Function of Lenin’s Image in Soviet Mass Consciousness’, in *Soviet Civilization between Past and Present*, ed. by Mette Bryld and Erik Kulavig (Odense: Odense University Press, 1998), pp.13-38. The identification of father and authority is of considerable biographical significance for Erofeev as the son of a diplomat who gained Stalin’s confidence. The theme is developed in his recent autobiographical novel. *Khoroshii Stalin* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2004), where he describes himself as a ‘сын власти’ (pp.327-28).

дурацкими титьками [...] и титьки стали совсем уж дурацкими, и мы даже всплакнули над их бесповоротной глупостью` (p.24).

Exposing the anarchy and violence inherent in the cultural reverence for the fool, 'Zhizn' s idiotom' also mocks the type of strategy which Erofeev found to be typical of *drugaya proza*, whereby a narrator affects folly (or *zatemnenie*) as a mask and a mode of self-defence, seeking refuge in self-directed laughter. Erofeev's narrator is far from being a charming, Venichka-type fool. Rather, his intellectual attraction towards folly reveals itself as homosexual lust, which may more accurately be interpreted here as lust for the self (*idios*: one's own): *samolyubie*, not *chelovekolyubie*.¹⁴ This suggestion is reinforced both by the way in which the narrator speaks of his complete self-identification with Vova,¹⁵ and, more subtly, by the unreliability of his 'fool narrative'. The narrator frequently confuses his own past, confessing to huge gaps in his memory (*provaly*) and verging on nonsense and delirium (p.9). The reader is tempted to construct a more logical narrative than the one given. Perhaps the narrator himself murdered his wife, was sectioned and only then, in his derangement, invented this retrospective fiction about the 'idiot', thus externalizing his own crime. In any case, the story leaves us in no doubt that, as the narrator is told by his wife, 'Он не идиот! Идиот – это ты, ты! Ты!' (p.21).

In the process, the subjectivism of non-conformist Russian writing has been intensified to such a degree that the human subject has disappeared, consumed from within by an idiot-monster.¹⁶ Self-defence proves impossible, since the devil lies within. The traditions of self-directed laughter and fool narrators are thus grotesquely parodied,

¹⁴ On narcissism and idiocy more generally in non-conformist prose, see Dark, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ See p.15: 'Так Вова стал моим. Теперь, любезный мой читатель, я расскажу о том, как я стал его'.

¹⁶ Compare with Mamleev's depiction of Andrei Khristoforov in *Shatuny*; see above, p.200. Erofeev spoke out against the rampant subjectivism of contemporary culture in an interview of 1999: "'Ya dostatochno skepticheski otnoshus' k prosvetitel'skoi roli literatury'"': *Beseda s Viktorom Erofeevym*, *Strelets*, 1 (1991), 251-57 (p.254).

suggesting that they are far less innocent than they appear: that the coyness of the fool-narrator masks his narcissism, humility – pride, and intellectual delicacy – violence.

It might be argued, nevertheless, that the anarchy unleashed in ‘Zhizn’ s idiotom’ permits a different evaluation. After all, the milieu which Vova destroys is itself mocked: the irony, wordplay and complacency of the narrator and his friends (and the wife’s love of Proust) are derided throughout the story. The intellectual class is clearly the target, as is an image of the decadent, ‘bourgeois’ intelligentsia which recurs in Erofeev’s stories, being mapped onto both late-Soviet and pre-Revolutionary Moscow, often in one and the same story.¹⁷ Hence the many echoes of Silver Age decadence in the Dionysian plot of ‘Zhizn’ s idiotom’, with its motifs of madness, erotomania and the mutilated woman.¹⁸

However, this very diachronicity is a clue that renders suspect any ‘positive’ reading of Vova. The crisis which the story stages, and its deeper ambivalence, is that Russian culture has been in this situation before, and has ended up choosing destruction. In ‘Krushenie gumanizma’ (1919), Blok described a culture stifled by its own surfeit, and rejoiced in the prospect of a cathartic return to elemental existence.¹⁹ This and other precursors cast Erofeev’s concerns in an ironic light (an irony implicit in the very title of one of his essays, ‘Krushenie gumanizma 2’).²⁰

In answer to this dilemma, ‘Zhizn’ s idiotom’ suggests that intellectual reverence for the ‘idiot’ is an integral mechanism in the circular patterns of Russian history. If *gumanizm*, interpreted as an over-estimation of man and of reason, bears destruction in its wake (as Stalinism showed), so too does a cultural mentality in flight from intelligence and oriented towards the nihilistic patterns of *yurodstvo*. Indeed, the story suggests that the two

¹⁷ See, for example, ‘Berdyayev’ and the diatribe of one character against the *sytost’*, *tupost’* and *trusost’* of the ‘буржуазный мир’; Erofeev, *Zhizn’ s idiotom*, pp.63-86 (p.80).

¹⁸ In particular, ‘Zhizn’ s idiotom’ might be compared with Bryusov’s *Ognennyi angel* (1907), whose plot also turns on a debauched love triangle.

¹⁹ Blok, p.114.

²⁰ See *Sharovaya molniya*, pp. 102-9

processes are at some level connected. Seen in this light, 'Zhizn' s idiotom' can be read as a parable that calls, above all, for a purging from the charms of folly.

*

Little would suggest that Russian writers have heeded this call. Folly has endured as a prominent theme in post-Soviet prose, in part because the Soviet period and its literary myths have cast such a long shadow over the 'new' fiction. Thus, in Vladimir Makanin's weighty novel, *Andergraund, ili geroi nashego vremeni* (1998), the reader is returned to the milieu of the late-Soviet literary underground, a world of unacknowledged geniuses and vagrant artists, with its well-known proclivity to excessive drinking, eccentricity and simulated madness. The *psikhushka* occupies a central place in the novel, though the narrator is keen to avoid the conventions of the genre whereby 'психи – это дебилы, рассуждающие, как профессора философии в легком подпитии'.²¹ In place of literary cliché, the historical tragedy of aggressive Soviet psychiatry and its free use of neuroleptics on talented individuals are given full exposure. But the novel is also suffused with the literary mythology of the recent past, most obviously in the figure of the narrator's brother, Venya, a permanent *psikhushka* inmate who shares not only his name with the hero of *Moskva-Petushki* but also the latter's proud, but gentle character, his foolish bearing, and his bitter fate as a 'российский гений' whose place, as Makanin's narrator puts it in the last line of the novel, is 'in the shit' (*v govne*).²²

The earnest concerns of *Andergraund* might be contrasted in every respect with Valery Rokotov's *Korona shuta (Idiotskii roman)*, published the same year and also set in late-Soviet Moscow. The narrator devotes the novel to his fascination with a certain 'eccentric', Ferdyev, who enjoys playing practical jokes on the somnolent public and giving them the benefit of his foolish wisdom, which he dispenses in Rozanovian

²¹ Vladimir Makanin, *Andergraund, ili geroi nashego vremeni* (Moscow: Vagrius, 1999), p.128.

²² See Makanin, p.493. On the correspondences between the novel and Erofeev's work, see Andrei Nemzer, *Zamechatel'noe desyatiletie russkoi literatury* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2003), pp.227-28.

sententiae. Recalling Bulgakov in its narrative style, the novel is also replete with allusions to Renaissance traditions of carnival and literary folly, and to Swiftian satire. It charts a kind of fool's progress in which Ferdyev variously wears the masks of rogue, *yurodivyi*, Don Quixote, madman, prisoner, monk and revolutionary. In the process, he comes to seem more and more absurd; having once mocked Soviet life, Ferdyev finds himself, after 1991, yearning for the past. Observing him, the narrator is drawn into an extended meditation on the role of the eccentric in society and on the latter's mistaken pride in believing himself to be outside or above his milieu. The apparent moral of the tale – that obsessive truth-seeking (*pravdoiskatel'stvo*) is 'stupid' and 'dangerous', and that the wisest attitude is to accept and enjoy the masquerade of human existence, joining its ship of fools – chimes with the views of Erasmus' Stultitia, and, as we have seen, the early Aleshkovsky.²³

Far away from Moscow, different faces of folly emerged in fiction that also described the Soviet past. In Hamid Ismailov's *Zheleznodorozhnaya doroga* (1995), set in the small Uzbek town of Gilas, or in Yury Buida's story-cycle *Prusskaya nevesta* (1998), set in the equally small town of Znamensk, near Kaliningrad, the confused experience of life at the periphery of the Soviet empire is etched both in the Faulknerian frequency of idiocy and madness, and in the chosen narrative voice, given to verbosity and Rabelaisian excess. Both writers' towns serve as collection points for the desperate, the deported and the orphaned. The emptiness of their uprooted lives, which in *Prusskaya nevesta* float ghost-like over the traces of the recent German inhabitants, is masked both by the garrulous style of the narrators and by the fictions and exaggerations invented by the townsfolk themselves to make their lives more tolerable and comprehensible. In both works, it is the 'idiots' and 'madmen' who, escaping into fantasy or memory, manage to

²³ Valery Rokotov, *Korona shuta (Idiotskii roman)* (1998; Moscow: Rosmen, 2004). On *pravdoiskatel'stvo*, see p.171.

cling on to some form of identity and even happiness. In Buida's Znamensk, such characters – foolish, vivid and richly comic – are legion.²⁴

Buida's story-cycle is offered by its publishers as a *roman v novellakh*, but, like Ismailov's novel, it has a greater affinity to the genre of the epic. We know the characters primarily from their outlandish appearance, speech and actions, rather than from their inner motivations and thoughts. In these respects, Buida reflects a more widespread move in post-Soviet prose (exemplified also by *Korona shuta*) away from the intense subjectivity of earlier writers, such as Venedikt Erofeev and Yuz Aleskhovsky. As a consequence the fool comes to assume a more traditional role as a protagonist in third-person narrative.

Another aspect of *Prusskaya nevesta* shared by other 'foolish' works of the 1990s is the resurgence of explicitly Christian imagery – in contrast to the earlier postmodernist wave of the 1970s and 1980s that was characterized, in Mikhail Epstein's phrase, by 'minimal religion'.²⁵ Humanity is preserved in Buida's Znamensk by characters whose manifest deficiencies are interpreted through the imagery of sacrifice, miracle and grace. In the longest and most harrowing story, 'Rita Shmidt kto ugodno', an abandoned German girl is taken in by two 'witches' Martha and Maria.²⁶ A fool (*dura*) and scapegoat, Rita becomes a model of Christian kenosis, capable of absorbing and redeeming evil.²⁷

This feminization of the sacrificial, Christian fool is another development from the tendencies described in previous chapters. Svetlana Vasilenko gives the motif full

²⁴ See, *inter alia*, the protagonists of the stories 'Khitry Mukh', 'Brat'ya moi zhavoronki', 'Vita malen'kaya golovka', and 'Veselaya Gertruda'; Yury Buida, *Prusskaya nevesta* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 1998). Ismailov's novel (Moscow: Voskresen'e, 1997) is more easily available in Robert Chandler's translation as *The Railway* (London: Harvill Secker, 2006).

²⁵ See above, p.313, n150.

²⁶ Their namesakes were once visited by Christ (Luke 10:38-41).

²⁷ Buida, pp.121-48 (p.146). In his essayistic work, *Zheltyi dom* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2001), Buida treats similar themes in the light of broader literary tendencies of the twentieth century, whereby, in Nabokov's words, 'слабоумие стало последним прибежищем человека' (p.468). See also the interesting discussion of *yurodstvo* in this work (pp.10-16), and the narrator's self-appellation Yu.V., an implicit reference both to Buida's name and patronymic (Yury Vasil'evich) and, via assonance, to the figure of the *yurodivyi*.

expression in her novel, *Durochka* (1998), a 'роман-жизне' about a girl, Nad'ka, who was unwanted by her parents for her physical and mental deficiencies. In a complex narrative that shifts fluidly between different periods of the Soviet era and the folkloric past, Nad'ka is depicted as a mute reproach to atheism and cruelty, and invested with miraculous powers of goodness and fertility that are opposed, in the fourth part of the book, to the apocalyptic threat of atomic warfare.²⁸ Combining in Nad'ka features of the *yurodivaya* and the *klikusha*, Vasilenko elaborates established paradigms in a creative spirit absent from some of the more schematic recent representations of *yurodstvo* in fiction.²⁹

Buida and Vasilenko illustrate a pattern that has been traced in different ways in previous chapters: that, at the deepest level, folly endures in Russian literature as a vehicle of religious and metaphysical inquiry. Where the impulse towards transcendence has been denied – in 'Zhizn' s idiotom', for example, or in the compelling existentialist fiction of Dmitry Bakin – the tendencies towards folly have either been criticized (Erofeev) or excluded (Bakin).³⁰ The survival of Russia's praise of folly would seem to depend, therefore, on the extent to which Russian writers retain their ties to the spiritual and literary traditions from which it first developed.

²⁸ Svetlana Vasilenko, *Durochka: Roman, povest', rasskazy* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2000), pp.7-126; and see Helena Goscilo's insightful introduction to the English translation: Vasilenko, *Shamara and Other Stories*, tr. and ed. by Helena Goscilo (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2000), pp.xi-xxii.

²⁹ See, for example, Boris Evseev, *Yurod* (1998).

³⁰ See Dmitry Bakin, *Strana proiskhozhdeniya* (St Petersburg: Limbus, 1996). I have written about this book in a review of its English translation by Andrew Bromfield; see Oliver Ready, 'Bundles of Teeth and Hair', *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 September 2002, p.21.

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