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By the Walls of Church and State: Literature's Authority in Russia's Modern Tradition

GREGORY FREIDIN

Thy consolations are not like men's fables, for they are in themselves certain and true.

Deeply inquisitive reasoning does not make a man holy or righteous, but a good life makes him beloved by God.

Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ* (1:1 and 3:52)

Culture has become Church [...] A Christian—and these days, every cultivated man is a Christian—does not know merely physical hunger, merely spiritual food. Word, for him, is flesh, and simple bread is merriment and mystery [...] (By the way, having recalled Baudelaire, I would like to honor his memory as a *podvizhnik*, in the most essential Christian sense of the word *martyre*).

O. Mandelstam, "Word and Culture" (1921)

THE QUESTION OF PERSPECTIVE: RUSSIA OR THE WEST?

It is a commonplace of Russian literary and intellectual history of the past two centuries that state domination of the major social institutions—including the Church and political associations—has led to the transfer of some of their functions to imaginative literature. To recall Herzen, in a country where "the people is deprived of social freedom, literature is the sole pulpit from the height of which the cry of the people's indignation and conscience makes itself heard." In other words, goes the familiar argument, authority that otherwise would have been vested in nonliterary social institutions has accrued to Russian letters.² These and similar assertions are based on an implicit comparison of the Russian case with its Western European

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¹ A. I. Herzen, Sobranie sochinenii, 30 vols. (Moscow, 1956), 8:158.

² See Isaiah Berlin, "A Remarkable Decade," in his Russian Thinkers (New York, 1978).

counterparts and, more important, on the assumption of a normative character—for Russia—of Western historical experience.³

Now, Western historical experience was just that—a unique historical development. However, seen from the perspective of a weaker neighboring nation like Russia, forced to compete with countries that had greatly benefited from the scientific revolution, rationalization of polity and concomitant social development, the historically singular Western way tended to look like a set of normative principles with a claim to universal validity. In the Age of Enlightenment, ideas traveled fast and required little investment for penetrating the borders, mental and otherwise, of what Reinhard Bendix termed a "follower" nation. Under the pressures of military, economic and cultural competition, philosophical speculation in such a "follower nation" readily distilled a hodge-podge of events, ideas and coincidences into an easily consumed nectar of pure essences and rules. What speaks in favor of the usefulness of such a "modernization" perspective is that modern literature as we know it does, in fact, constitute a Western European phenomenon that was imported into Russia at a time when prescriptive, normative poetics—part of the universalist ideology of the Enlightenment—played a key role in the production and dissemination of Russian belles lettres. But beyond that, the conventionally assumed similarity between modern Russian literature and its Western counterparts becomes increasingly less apparent, and one proceeds with the comparison cautiously, mindful of obliterating the differences which do make the Russian case so tantalizingly unique.

GENERAL SCHEMATA: LITERATURE EMERGES AS A MODERN INSTITUTION

Those who have dealt with the arts' transition into modernity in the Western European context have emphasized repeatedly the formative function of the ambiguity involved in the emancipation of writing from its traditional association with the sacred, concentrated in the two great institutions of the old Europe—the sovereign and the Church.⁴ For these thinkers, in one way or another, the emancipation of literature breathed new life into Plato's condemnation of arts as second-order imitations of the Real and provided Hegel with the opportunity to declare art to be a "thing of the past." As long as the arts remained part of the objectifying institutions, especially the Church, as long as they were absorbed into the Christian schemata of truth in the historical plenitude of revelation, Plato's devastating verdict remained

³ For a discussion of an epistemological trap involved in such a comparison see Reinhard Bendix, "Modernization in Comparative Perspective," in his *Nation-Building and Citizenship: Studies of Our Changing Social Order*, rev. ed. (Berkeley, 1977).

⁴ Theodor Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, trans. C. Lenhardt, ed. G. Adorno and R. Tiedeman (London: Rutledge and Keagan Paul, 1983), 320–25; Hans-Georg Gadamer, The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge, 1986), 1–53; Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca, 1979), 141–60; Leo Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing (Glencoe, 1952).

⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, trans. T. M. Knox (London, 1975), 11. See also Dieter Henrich, "Art and Philosophy Today," in *New Perspectives in German Literary Criticism*, ed. R. E. Amacher and V. Lange (Princeton, 1979), 107–33.

suspended.⁶ But emancipation, or autonomy, from such a system of ideological patronage also implied an emancipation from the objectifying power of the great institutions and, with that, a radical uncertainty about the status, function and meaning of a work of art. To recall an expression from Vasilii Rozanov's *By the Church Walls*, the artist could no longer lean against the walls, be they the Church or the Palace, which had provided him with steadying support for centuries. This absence prompted the ever-escalating claims of modern authors for their art, a phenomenon that has been convincingly interpreted as a form of epistemological compensation for the fundamental uncertainty of the artist's modern condition. One such interpretation, with a venerable Hegelian pedigree, belongs to the German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer:

In the nineteenth century every artist lived with the knowledge that he could no longer presuppose the former unproblematic communication between himself and those among whom he lived and for whom he created. The nineteenth-century artist does not live in a community but creates for himself a community as is appropriate to his pluralistic situation. Openly admitted competition combined with the claim that his own particular form of expression and his own particular artistic message is the only true one, necessarily gives rise to heightened expectations. This is in fact the messianic consciousness of the nineteenth-century artist, who feels himself to be a "new savior" with a claim on mankind. He proclaims a new message of reconciliation and as a social outsider pays the price for this claim, since with all his artistry he is only an artist for the sake of art.⁷

The all-too-well-documented story of Nikolai Gogol's struggle to reconcile the opposite poles of his writing—the comical and the redemptive, as first spelled out in his short play, *After the Performance (Teatral'nyi raz"ezd)*—can serve as one of the most telling Russian illustrations of the phenomenon summarized by Gadamer.⁸

Another factor contributing to the emergence of modern literature in the West was the division of writing into two strictly segregated orders: one of scholarship (historiography, philosophy, and so on), the other of imaginative literature. Ultimately, the division served to legitimize scholarship's claim to truth and objectivity, circumscribing poetry and narrative fiction to a cultural space with more flexible conventions of narrative, rhetoric and naturalization. In Russia this process emerged

- ⁶ "What we call the Christian art of the West represents the impressive way in which this legitimation was accomplished over the centuries by the Church and fused with the classical tradition by the humanists" (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Bernasconi [Cambridge, 1986], 6). See also Erich Auerbach, "Historical Introduction: The Idea of Man in Literature," in his *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (Chicago, 1961), 1–23. An analogous conceptualization is offered by Northrop Frye. See his notion of the master narrative in the Christian civilization and the historical rhythm of the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Apocalypse, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1973).
 - ⁷ Gadamer, The Relevance of the Beautiful, 7.
- ⁸ For a discussion of Gogol's dilemma see Vasilii Gippius, "Missiia komicheskogo pisatelia," in his *Gogol'* (1924) (Vasilii Gippius, *Gogol*, Introduction by Donald Fanger [Providence, 1963], 87–109). See also Donald Fanger, *The Creation of Nikolai Gogol* (Cambridge, MA, 1980).
- ⁹ Hayden White writes: "[At the turn of the nineteenth century] the disciplining of historical thinking that had to be undertaken if history considered as a kind of knowledge was to be established as arbitrator of the realism of contending political programs, each attended by its own philosophy of history,

as a source of powerful creative tension for literature, opening up a philosophically and, singularly important, politically ambiguous space in which a writer could blur the generic distinctions, taking advantage of the authority associated both with systematically documented narratives—that is, historiography—and the belles lettres. Russian writers who thrived on this tension include Gogol, with his well-known romance with historiography; Tolstoy, with his thundering put-down of academic historiography in War and Peace, so brilliantly analyzed by Victor Shklovsky;10 and Dostoevsky, with his memorable insistence on the reality of a writer's fictional insight. 11 Solzhenitsyn's Essay in Literary Investigation, Gulag Archipelago and even his continuing historical epic of the Russian Revolution show that the conflict between the systematically documented narrative and narrative fiction has provided Russian literature in the past decade or two with a powerful creative impulse and a large and captivated audience. More recently, Evgenii Popov's parodic novel, The Beauteousness of Life, subtitled tellingly Chapters from a "Novel with Newspapers" [roman s gazetoi] Which Will Never Be Begun or Finished, shows that even under perestroika, considerable vitality can still be displayed in this blurred genre, an offspring of the repressive tradition of Russia's polity.¹²

Just as the fragmentation of writing into distinct orders of truth and fiction tended to dissociate Western authors of imaginative literature from important traditional sources of legitimacy and thereby weaken the customary veneration of the written word, so the artists' entry into the market place as individual purveyors of a particular product raised the specter of commodification of literature, intensifying as never before the need for the justification of art. A curious economy of writing was emerging at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. "Once a system of ownership for texts came into being," wrote Michel Foucault in his now famous essay, "What Is an Author,"

the possibility of transgression attached to the act of writing took on, more and more, the form of an imperative peculiar to literature. It is as if the author, beginning with the moment at which he was placed in the system of property that characterizes our society, compensated for the status that he thus acquired by rediscovering the old [medieval] bipolar field of discourses, systematically practicing transgression and thereby restoring danger to a writing which was now guaranteed the benefits of ownership.¹³

had first of all to consist of a rigorous de-rhetoricization. The de-rhetoricization of historical thinking was an effort to distinguish history from fiction, especially from the kind of prose fiction represented by the romance and the novel. The effort was, of course, a rhetorical move in its own right, the kind of rhetorical move that Paolo Valesio calls 'the rhetoric of anti-rhetoric' " (Hayden White, "The Politics of Historical Interpretation," in his *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* [Baltimore, 1987], 48). See also James Clifford's Introduction to Writing Cultures: Poetics and Politics of Ethnography, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley, 1986), 6ff.

¹⁰ Viktor Shklovskii, Material i stil' v romane L. N. Tolstogo "Voina i mir" (Moscow, 1928).

¹¹ A useful and original discussion of this problem for Russian may be found in Michael Holquist, *Dostoevsky and the Novel* (Princeton, 1977), especially chap. 1. See also Gary Saul Morson, "Introduction," in *Literature and History: Theoretical Problems and Russian Case Studies* (Stanford, 1986).

¹² Evgenii Popov, Prekrasnost' zhizni (Glavy iz "romana s gazetoi," kotoryi nikogda ne budet nachat i zakonchen) (Moscow, 1990).

¹³ Foucault, "What Is an Author?" 148ff.

In the broader European context, then, the "modernization" of art and letters involved their emancipation from the spiritual and institutional patronage systems of the sovereign and the Church and their subsequent entry into the "disenchanted" world of competing ideologies, multiple and segregated systems of knowledge, commodity relations, and rapid social change.

SPECIAL PLEADING

This general schemata, however, may be applied to Russia only with strong reservations. First of all, literature as a modern institution emerged in Russia under the tutelage, nurture and surveillance of the all-powerful secularized state and—very much unlike its Western counterpart—was radically discontinuous with its own native medieval tradition, both written and oral. Historiography did not become exclusively "systematic" until the mid-nineteenth century, long after Karamzin and Pushkin—both lyric poets and authors of fiction—had produced what for their times were exemplary historiographic writings. Gogol's forays into academic history, including a serious attempt at a university career, also points to the limitation of the Western model in which fiction was segregated from historiography. "My history of the Little Russia is extraordinarily outrageous," wrote Gogol in 1834 to the historian Pogodin,

but then, it just cannot be otherwise. I have been reproached for its style, which some have found too fervent, too fiery and vibrant for a book of history; but if it were boring, what kind of history would that make!?!¹⁵

The lasting power of Tolstoy's challenge to contemporary historiography in *War and Peace* is another illustration of Russia's resistance to the modern segregation of the orders of writing. Likewise, one is ill-advised to put too much emphasis on the "commodification" of literature in Russia, at least until the middle of the 1840s. 16

Given all of these reservations, it would seem that Russian literature should have been immune to the trauma of separation from the sacred and exposure to the cold rationality and commercial calculus of a disenchanted world. After all, modern Western literature arrived in Russia in its secularized, universalist and apparently victorious version. Yet as the history of Russian letters since Pushkin (and, perhaps, since Novikov, Radishchev and Derzhavin) indicates, Russian literature, too, aspired to the status of an institution of authority, laboring under pressures similar to those experienced by its Western counterparts, even if these pressures were applied almost simultaneously and continuously rather than sequentially and over a long period of

¹⁴ See, for example, D. S. Likhachev's discussion of the Russian "pre-Renaissance" in his *Razvitie russkoi literatury X-XVII vekov: Epokhi i stili* (Leningrad, 1973), 75–126. For emergence of Russian literature as a modern, secular institution see Todd, *Fiction and Society.* See also Holquist, *Dostoevsky and the Novel*, 3–20.

¹⁵ Letter to M. P. Pogodin, 11 January 1834, in N. V. Gogol, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 10 (Moscow, 1940), 294.

¹⁶ See T. Grits, V. Trenin, and M. Nikitin, *Slovesnost' i kommertsiia: Knizhnaia lavka A. F. Smirdina*, ed. V. B. Shlovskii and B. M. Eikhenbaum (Moscow, 1929).

time, as was the case in the West.¹⁷ How, then, did the question of the autonomous authority of a literary work begin to arise in Russia—in the virtual absence of wholesale commodification and rationalization of cultural production? The answer lies in the role played by two of Russia's central objectifying social institutions—the autocracy and, to a lesser extent, the Russian Orthodox Church.

In the medieval period, the power of the Prince was intimately intertwined with and dominated the Church; with Peter, the autocrats went as far as they could to transform the Church into a virtual bureaucracy. (This is not to say that the Church ceased to play a vital role in other important areas, maintaining, among other things, a strong monastic tradition and "sacramental leadership." Their charismatic roots notwithstanding, the autocracy and the Church (as two dominant bureaucratic institutions) were becoming increasingly vulnerable to modern rational scrutiny beyond their control, their symbolic power steadily diminishing in the increasingly secular and disenchanted Russia. Indeed, as Richard Wortman pointed out in his recent well-documented study, it was not until the tercentenary celebration of the Romanov dynasty in 1913 that the autocracy attempted practically to disavow its essentially *modernizing* Petrine genealogy and project its roots into the more *organically* Russian soil of the seventeenth-century Muscovite state.¹⁹

Consider the paradox of the supreme power in Russia, which in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century was the chief patron of verbal art. On one hand, the Russian Emperor was the highest *servant* of the state in a manner befitting the leader of a radically modern rationalized polity.²⁰ On the other, as Michael Cherniavsky argued, temporal rulers in Russia, including the Imperial period, have consistently and with support of the Church laid claim to sainthood.²¹ In their recent highly suggestive and richly documented study, Victor Zhivov and Boris Uspenskii show

- ¹⁷ Cf. Leon Trotsky's "law of combined development," which backward countries are bound to follow: "a drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms" (Leon Trotsky, *The Russian Revolution*, ed. F. W. Dupee [New York, 1959], 4). In a way, Trotsky's formula echoes Herzen's belief in Russia's ability to compress Western historical experience and become ripe for the revolution even before the West. For Russian literature in particular see William Mills Todd III, *Fiction and Society in the Age of Pushkin* (Cambridge, MA, 1986), 2ff.
- Is John Meyendorff recently wrote: "One of the most peculiar—but quite important—legacies of Eastern Christianity, which Byzantium had passed on to the Russians, was the paradox of a simultaneous existence in the Church of both a sacramental and a spiritual leadership and experience. The liturgy, the sacraments and, also, the spiritual tradition of monasticism, rather than political influence, were seen as the authentic content of the Christian faith. The reality which they offered was somewhat independent from the official stand of patriarchs, or metropolitans often dependent on the State." See John Meyendorff, "From Byzantium to Russia: Religious and Cultural Legacy," in Tausend Jahre: Christentum in Russland (Zum Millenium der Taufe der Kiever Rus'), ed. Karl Christian Felmy, Georg Kretschmar, Fairy von Lilienfeld, and Claus-Jurgen Ropke (Gottingen, 1988).
- ¹⁹ Richard Wortman, "Invisible Threads': The Historical Imagery of the Romanov Tercentenary," Festschrift for Leopold Haimson, Richard Wortman, ed., Russian History 16, nos. 2–4 (1989): 390.
- ²⁰ G. Hosking, *The First Socialist Society: A History of the Soviet Union from Within* (Cambridge, MA, 1985), 19ff.
- ²¹ Michael Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People: Studies in Russian Myths* (New Haven, 1961). See also A. Poppe, "Le prince et l'Eglise en Russie de Kiev depuis la fin du Xe siecle jusqu'au debut du XIIe siecle," *Acta Poloniae Historica* 20 (1963); and D. Obolensky, "Russia's Byzantine Heritage," in *The Structure of Russian History*, ed. M. Cherniavsky, (New York, 1970).

that a powerful, subterranean trend toward a deification of the Russian monarch—the two authors mean more than just the conventional divine right of kings—could be traced throughout the eighteenth century. Furthermore, they maintain, this trend lasted well into the reign of Nicholas I, exerting a powerful influence on the vocabulary of contemporary poetry.²² Indeed, even as late as 1832 the Holy Synod was compelled to issue the following decree: "Apart from the holy icons, churches should have no images (*izobrazheniia*), and it is prohibited to exhibit in the churches the portraits of His Majesty." Such a prohibition was as indicative of the particular popular sources of legitimacy that the autocracy could tap as of its decision not to tap them. By the beginning of the twentieth century the tables, it appears, had been turned: while the popular sentiment grew increasingly anti-autocratic, the Tsar was anxious to surround himself with the old-time aura of undifferentiated secular-religious authority. "The image of the Tsar as a Christlike figure was presented in the many commemorative histories" during the Romanov tercentenary, with its new emphasis on the dynasty's origins in medieval Muscovy.²⁴

Apparently, the Russian autocracy and the official church throughout the nine-teenth century were conflicted about the use of such a powerful source of popular symbolic legitimation as deification of the autocrat, however; one can detect little hesitation on the part of Russian authors of belles lettres as they arrogated to themselves this unclaimed "cultural capital" of the holy.²⁵ The mutual alienation of the nobility and the Tsar, brought to the fore by the Decembrist rebellion, only intensified the crisis of authority in Russia.²⁶ Under these circumstances Russian writers, many of whom belonged to the ranks of the nobility, exhibited an ever-diminishing reluctance to appropriate the sacred vocabulary of Church and state and put it to use in constructing a Russia of their imagination. It was during this post-Decembrist period that different historiosophical models for Russia's past and future began to define the intellectual horizons of Russia's educated elite. The nineteenth-century imperative of the "nationalization" of Russia's culture was inextricably bound up with belles lettres and the historical, by implication future-oriented imagination.²⁷

- ²² V. M. Zhivov and B. A. Uspenskii, "Tsar' i Bog: Semioticheskie aspekty sakralizatsii monarkha v Rossii," in *Iazyki kul'tury i problemy perevodimosti*, ed. B. A. Uspenskii (Moscow, 1987). See also Zhivov's earlier pioneering study, "Koshchunstvennaia poeziia v sisteme russkoi kul'tury kontsa XVIIInachala XIX v.," in *Uchenye zapiski Tartuskogo universiteta* 546 (1981). For a similar discussion, but based on more recent material, see G. Freidin, "Mandelstam's 'Ode to Stalin': History and Myth," *Russian Review* 41 (October 1982): 400–426; and idem, *A Coat of Many Colors: Osip Mandelstam and His Mythologies of Self-Presentation* (Berkeley, 1987), especially chap. 1.
- ²³ Ukaz of the Holy Synod of 20 November 1832, and "Ustav o predstavlenii i presechenii," Article 99, cited in Konstantin Nikol'skii, *Posobie k izucheniiu Ustava Bogosluzheniia Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi*, 6th ed. (St. Petersburg, 1900), 23n.
 - ²⁴ Wortman, "'Invisible Threads,' " 398.
- ²⁵ The concept as well as the term "cultural capital" have been developed in the work of a French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu. See especially his *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA, 1984).
- ²⁶ Martin Malia, Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism (1812–1855), (Cambridge, MA, 1961), 43ff.; Nicholas Riasanovsky, A Parting of Ways: Government and the Educated Public in Russia, 1801–1855 (Oxford, 1976).
- ²⁷ I am modifying the famous term which George L. Mosse introduced into scholarship (it was coined by Hitler) in his classic study, *Nationalization of the Masses (Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (New York, 1975).

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Alexander Herzen played a crucial role in this process of "inventing Russia," and one hardly needs to be reminded that students of Russian literature, history and political thought have to share Herzen as a common object of study. The same may be said about other major literary figures in Russia since Herzen; certainly it is true for Dostoevsky, Chernyshevsky, Tolstoy, and, closer to our own time, Boris Pasternak, Vasily Grossman and Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Lenin, it may be recalled, listed himself in the Party poll as a littérateur—*literator*—not a politician. Given the fact that Russian intelligenstia tended to rely on the sources of rhetorical authority it shared with the autocratic state and the Orthodox Church, the question begs to be asked: By what means did the symbolic order of the intelligentsia gain enough power to be able to challenge the autocratic state and its ally, the Church?

SYMBOLIC ORDER

As the major objectifying institutions, the Russian Orthodox Church and the autocracy, headed by one who was anointed by God (*pomazannik bozhii*), both influenced the sources of socially significant meaning and were, in turn, shaped by them.²⁸ And while their actual power and authority in Russian culture was on the wane since the early nineteenth century, their symbolic order, including its supernatural component, was not so easily discredited. Ultimately this symbolic order began to develop a dynamic of its own, separating itself from the institutions in which it had been lodged. Or to put it another way, as a signifying complex this symbolic order gradually separated itself from the signified, and in the years following the Decembrist rebellion became available for other, heterodox, hitherto unthinkable uses, while retaining its intimate association with the idea of the Church and State.

This process did not remain unnoticed among modern Russian thinkers. Along with other important cultural trends, it received a keen critique in the stock-taking volume, Vekhi. In his essay, "Creative Self-Consciousness," the volume's editor and contributor, Mikhail Gershenzon, expressed a mixture of disapproval and admiration when he wrote that in Russia "active participation in the revolutionary movement constituted martyrdom" (podvizhnichestvo).29 More important, another contributor, Mikhail Bulgakov, in his essay, aptly titled "Heroism and Martyrdom," solemnly condemned as obsessive narcissism (samooboznanie) the secular appropriation by the left intelligentsia of the kenotic order of Orthodox Christianity. 30 What these two authors seem to have overlooked is that the holy thus appropriated was intimately bound up with the power of the Russian state and therefore carried with it much of the traditional sacredness of Russian kings-martyrs. As a result of this ostensible secular transposition, the venerable signifying complex of Orthodoxy-Autocracy-Nationality spawned its symmetrical double in the ideology of the intelligentsia. The sanctity of the religious tradition ("Orthodoxy") was mirrored in the fresh tradition of individual revolutionary martyrdom; the power of the revolution and those who

²⁸ Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York, 1915). See also Edward Shils, *Center and Periphery: Essays in Macrosociology* (Chicago, 1975).

²⁹ M. Gershenzon, "Tvorcheskoe samosoznanie," in *Vekhi: sbornik statei o russkoi intelligenstii*, ed. M. O. Gershenzon, 2d ed. (Moscow, 1909), 84.

³⁰ Vekhi, 37.

could act in its name replaced the divine right of the autocracy; and, finally, the autocracy's concession to the modern notion of popular sovereignty ("Nationality") found its counterpart in the intelligentsia's populist messianic nationalism.

Even subjects that were ostensibly distant from the issue of power struggle tended to find expression in the vocabulary of the autocratic state. To offer an example, Pushkin's affirmation of the autonomy of a modern poet, "For a Poet" ("Poetu," 1830), shows just how radically this involved signifier of the Russian imperial state and church could be dislodged from its original pedestal. The thought of the poem is plain enough and hardly rises above the stock romantic notion of a self-sufficient genius. But the rhetorical tension that informs the piece—a potent mixture of revolutionary, autocratic and ecclesiastical vocabularies—is quite striking and demands a special attention. Examined in terms of its rhetoric, the poem begins to tell a singular story, one about the appropriation by poetry of the sacred language of the Revolution, the Church and, perhaps most intriguing, the autocratic state.

The opening line, for all intents and purposes, inverts the democratic political slogan:

Поэт! Не дорожи любовию народной.

Poet! Thou shalt not cherish the people's admiration.

The paradox persists into the next stanza where the value of the autocratic order is affirmed before the affirmation is subverted by being elaborated as a symbol of an individual's freedom:

Ты царь: живи один. Дорогою свободной

Или, куда влечет тебя свободный vм.

Усовершенствуя плоды любимых дум,

Не требуя наград за подвиг благородный.

Thou art Tsar: live by thyself. Along a free path,

Thou shalt walk wherever thine free intellect moves thee,

Perfecting the fruit of thine cherished meditations,

Asking for no reward for thine noble suffering.

Such allegorical figures as the "free path," "free intellect" and the "perfecting the fruits of cherished meditations" (viz., Ryleev's *Dumy*) all point to the Decembrist vocabulary of enlightenment and emancipation. The "noble feat" (*podvig blagorodnyi*) is an ambiguous expression in Russian, pointing to two traditions simultaneously: the chivalric one, implying charismatic military exploits, and the Christian one, implying imitation of Christ in suffering (*podvig*, "martyrdom" or "bearing witness by imitation"). ³¹ Both claim for the poet the central, charismatic function in the culture of Westernized nobility and the Orthodox Christian faith while treating with marked disdain the bureaucratic order with its rational calculus of promotions and awards ("Asking for no reward"). Proclaiming the Poet's right to be the supreme judge of his own poetry regardless of popular opinion, Pushkin chooses to draw an

³¹ See Peter Henry, "Imagery of *podvig* and *podvizhnichestvo* in the Works of Garshin and the Early Gor'ky," *Slavonic and East European Journal* 61 (January 1983): 139–59.

implicit analogy between the profane rejection of the genius by the reading public and the infantile callousness with which the French revolutionary mob had once destroyed what was their country's sacred ancestral legacy (emphasis added):

. . .Ты сам свой высший суд! Всех строже оценить умеешь ты свой труд.

Ты им доволен ли, взыскательный художник.

Доволен? Так пускай толпа его бранит

И плюет на *алтарь*, где твой огонь горит,

И в детской резвости колеблет твой *треножник*.

... Thou art alone the supreme judge; Thine own judgment of thine labor is severest of all.

Art thou pleased with it, demanding artist?

Pleased? If so, may the mob castigate it And spit on the *altar where thine fire is burning*,

And in their childish sprightliness rock the holy tripod.

This concluding appeal to the sacred, filtered through the reference to classical antiquity, characteristic of the Decembrist era (poet as Apollo: his fire is burning on the altar, poet as Pythia, his holy tripod), sums up Pushkin's study in assimilating the discourses of the Church and state (the Tsar, the supreme judgment, or vysshii sud) to the vocabulary of the poet's self-presentation. The fact that the poem was published in 1831 should give us some idea of the ease with which the "sacred" vocabulary could be put to "profane" uses, with the poet usurping, if only rhetorically, the sacred authority of the autocrat and the Church.

Even if one is to consider Pushkin's laconic characterization of the poet as tsar to be a mere rhetorical flourish, it would be hard to deny this metaphor an enviable staying power and a curious capacity for being elaborated into a full-blown myth. Recall Tiutchev's poem on the death of Pushkin:

Из чьей руки свинец смертельный? Поэту сердце растерзал? Кто сей божественный фиал Разрушил как сосуд скудельный? Будь прав или виновен он, Пред нашей правдою земною Навек он высшею рукою В "цареубийцы" заклеймен. [...] И сею кровью благородной Ты жажду мести утолил—И осененный опочил Хоругвью горести народной. Вражду твою пусть тот рассудит,

Whose hand released the deadly lead
That tore the Poet's heart?
Who dared shatter this divine vial
As if it were a profane vessel?
Be he innocent or guilty
In the eyes of our worldly justice,
By the supreme hand,
He shall be forever
Branded a "regicide."
[...]
With thine noble blood
Thou quenched the thirst for revenge—
And fell asleep, enshrouded
in the shroud of the people's mourning.
Let Him pass judgment over thine

quarrel

Кто слышит пролитую кровь . . . Тебя ж, как первую любовь, России сердце не забудет!³² Who watches over spilled blood . . . But, like first love, thou Shalt never be forgotten by Russia's heart!

The poem sanctifies Pushkin in accordance with the Russian tradition that can be traced to the saints Boris and Gleb: the death of a prince or, later, the Tsar is absorbed into a narrative of martyrdom—imitation of Christ's passion. In this way, the Pushkin of Tiutchev's poem becomes the carrier of the ultimate authority referents—that of the Russian autocracy and the Russian Church. Even more significant, only the poet's violent death qualified him as *martyr* and victim of *regicide*. Whether Pushkin's opponent had just cause—"Be he innocent or guilty"—is brushed aside as an altogether irrelevant concern in matters relating to the death of a *national* poet. Oblivious to his heterodoxy, Tiutchev continues to fill the poem with signs of aristocratic honor, romantic eros ("first love") and romantic nationalism. Such *bricolage*, if anything, places a greater emphasis on the mimetic, theatrical usage of the reference to martyrdom, which for contemporaries must have functioned as the other symbolic coin of the realm—honor, love and loyalty to one's country.

Equally important, the poem demonstrates that the religious background of the Russian nobility during the reign of Nicholas I, however impious its members claimed to have been, should be neither overlooked nor underestimated.³⁵ Even if their appeal to religious symbolism was merely formal and did not stem from devotion, the symbolic vocabulary and grammar they were using resonated audibly with the Russian Orthodox Christianity of their day. This alone could not but affect how their system of beliefs and practices was then and would subsequently be perceived. The ease with which death, regardless of the patent profanity of its cause, could prompt a gestural mimesis evocative of Christian sanctity is nothing short of remarkable.

With only limited attention paid to theological speculation and, especially, in the absence of jealous controls over the holy (both had been decisive for Western Christianity),³⁶ the Orthodox Church's emphasis on the devotional and liturgical aspects of worship amplified the theatrical and mimetic aspects of religious practice. The tendency received further reinforcement from the strong theatricalization of

³² First published in *Grazhdanin* 2 (13 January 1875): 38, signed "Munich." Most likely, the poem was composed under the immediate influence of society discussions of the poet's duel and death during Tiutchev's stay in Russia in May-July 1837. Clearly "audible" in the poem are the specifically contemporary controversies between those who put the blame on the poet himself and those who castigated his duelling opponent ("Будь прав или виновен он" would otherwise be incomprehensible). See K. Pigarev, *Zhizn' i tvorchestvo Tiutcheva* (Moscow, 1962), 92ff.

³³ A. Poppe, "La naissance du culte de Boris et Gleb," *Cahiers de civilisation medieval* 24, no. 1 (1981): 29–53.

³⁴ Rene Girard's theories of the mimetic nature of desire and the fundamental cultural function of the sacrificial victim may shed additional light on the role of the "poet's death" in constructing Russian national consciousness. See, in particular, Girard's *La violence et le sacré* (Paris, 1972).

³⁵ Even if we assume that the proverbial irreligiousness of the Russian nobleman corresponded to the actual state of affairs, the religious feelings of the Russian *noblewoman*, who played a decisive role in the upbringing and education of their offspring, needs to be accounted for (as do the Orthodox calendar, sacraments and so on).

³⁶ Peter Brown, "Parting of the Ways," Society and the Holy In Late Antiquity (Berkeley, 1982).

Russian educated society in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.³⁷ Nowhere is this mimetic element more apparent than in the proverbial "kenotic" strand in Russian Orthodox culture, with its stress on meekness, suffering and humility. Martyrdom (*podvizhnichestvo* and/or *muchenichestvo*) is an institution that is by no means unique to Orthodox Christianity.³⁸ Nor is it synonymous with the "kenotic" set of practices, for the latter occupy only a limited space on the continuum of Christian saintliness, with one extreme dominated by purposive, result-oriented action, and the other focused on mimesis, as it were, for its own sake—namely, imitation of Christ. For obvious reasons, this latter, most theatrical, exemplary form of imitation (I use both "theatrical" and "imitation" in a value-neutral sense) tends to be limited to the specifically human, humble aspect of Christ, be it the lowering of his divine self (*condescending*) in the merriment of Cana of Galilee or the pain, death and the debasement of the Crucifixion.

Barely a decade after Tiutchev, Alexander Herzen applied the principle of what I would like to call kenotic mimesis to the history of modern Russian literature in a book written in French and curiously entitled *Du dévelopment des idées revolutionaires en Russie*, implying, first, that "revolutionary ideas" had universal validity and applicability and, second, that certain events and processes in Russia—first and foremost, the development of the belles lettres—must be seen as a continuing elaboration of these ideas. By citing the example of Russian literature, Herzen was hoping to convince his French interlocutors that Russian society was not only sufficiently mature as such but that it had long ago discovered the new religion of socialism and was now well into its Apostolic age:

The history of our literature is either a martyrologue or a registry of penal servitude. Even those for whom the government has shown mercy die; having barely blossomed, they hasten to part with life.

La sotto giorni brevi i nebulosi Nasce una gente a cui il morir non duole.

Ryleev was hanged by Nicholas. Pushkin was killed in a duel at the age of thirty-eight. Griboedov was treacherously killed in Teheran. Lermontov was killed in a duel at the age of thirty [sic] in the Caucasus. Venevitinov was killed by the [aristocratic] society at the age of twenty. Kol'tsov was killed by his family at the age of thirty. Belinskii was killed at the age of thirty-five by hunger and want.

³⁷ Iurii Lotman, "Theater and Theatricality in the Order of Early Nineteenth-Century Culture," *Soviet Studies in Literature* (Spring-Summer 1975). See also Mandelstam's "theatrical" treatment of the French Revolution in his essay "Deviatnadtsatyi vek"—an important intellectual testimony of one who had lived through the revolution of 1917 and who used the vocabulary of gestural mimesis to present the participants in the Decembrist rebellion ("Dekabrist," 1918).

³⁸ Polnyi Pravoslavnyi bogoslovskii slovar' (St. Petersburg, 1913), vol. 2. See also Peter Brown, The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity (Chicago, 1981), 72; idem, "The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity," Representations, 1983, no. 2; and idem, "Holy Man in Late Antiquity," in Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity (Berkeley, 1982). For a powerful intellectual trend (whatever its merits as historiography) emphasizing the particularly kenotic essence of the Russian Orthodox tradition see G. P. Fedotov, "Introduction," The Russian Religious Mind (Cambridge, MA, 1946), i–vii; N. Gorodetzky, The Humiliated Christ in Modern Russian Thought (London, 1938); and Stephen Graham, The Way of Martha and the Way of Mary (New York, 1916).

Baratynskii died after his twelve-year long exile. . . . "Woe is to the people who stone their prophets," declares the Scripture. But the Russian people has nothing to fear, for there is nothing worse than its own fate.³⁹

Naively rhetorical as this passage may sound today, with its staccato of incantations, it shows the enormous effectiveness of the mimetic, performative strategy for the legitimation of literary authorship, for it is not the work of the author that is emphasized here but the ostensibly theatrical "gesture" of the poet being martyred before the public's very eyes. Moreover, this gesture, which originally had functioned as a means of framing literary authorship as a socially prestigious occupation, was now being used by the society itself as proof of its own maturity and virtue. Herzen's somewhat padded martyrologue was displayed as the bona fides of Russia's revolutionary nationalism.

Whether Herzen succeeded in persuading the international revolutionary fraternity that Russia was ripe for socialism is beside the point here. More important in the long run, Herzen's schemata made it possible for literature to function as a convincing index of the society's progress toward the messianic age of socialism, and for the writer's biography to fuse with a narrative of martyrdom. In the course of a decade or so this schemata became adopted by the Russian intelligentsia as one of its most satisfying myths. Indeed, for the period beginning roughly with Herzen's *Du dévelopment* and ending with Siniavskii's "The Literary Process in Russia," Russian literature, it would seem, was assured the pride of place in the Russian pantheon of national, authority-generating treasures. Russian writers and readers, both the intelligentsia and the officials in the high councils of state, could be relied on to continue and reinforce that symbolic order.

Indeed, if we look at Russian literature from the vantage point of Russia's high modernism, the more its history changed, the more it stayed the same. Vladislav Khodasevich entitled his famous meditation on poetry, on the occasion of the eighty-fourth anniversary of Pushkin's death, "Koleblemyi trenozhnik" ("The Tripod Rocked," 1920), emphasizing once again the oracular, cultic and kenotic (*koleblemyi*, under a constant threat of being overturned) essence of the poet's mission. Studying this period, one gets the impression that the sacred vocabulary, as it was codified by Pushkin's "*Poetu*," had been imprinted on the minds of Russian modernists.

Consider a passage from Mandelstam's autobiographical prose where, in a somewhat different key, he used the familiar symbolic idiom to paint a tableau of the Populist intelligentsia of fin de siècle and its poet-idol, Semyon Nadson (emphasis is mine, G.F.):

Все время—литературная *страда*, свечи, рукоплескания, горящие лица; кольцо поколения и в середине—*алтарь*—столик чтеца со стаканом воды. Как летние насекомые под накаленным ламповым стеклом, так все поколение обугливалось и обжигалось на *огне*

³⁹ A. Herzen, O razvitii revoliutsionnykh idei v Rossii, in Herzen, Sobranie sochinenii, 9 vols. (Moscow, 1955), 3:454.

⁴⁰ Abram Tertz (Andrei Siniavskii), "Literary Process in Russia," Kontinent, 1973, no. 1:80.

литературных праздников с гирляндами иносказательных роз; причем сборища носили характер культа и искупителной жертвы за поколение. 41

At all times—literary passions, candles, applause, ardent faces; the ring of the generation, and in its center there stands the altar—a little table for the reciter of poetry with a glass of water on it. As insects in summertime flock to the hot glass of the lamp, so did the entire generation smolder, getting burned on the fire of literary celebrations, with their garlands of allegorical roses. These gatherings, it should be added, had the character of a cult worship and redemptive sacrifice for the sake of the generation.

Mandelstam's passage can just as easily apply to the entire Soviet tradition of commemorations, with the once suppressed or semi-suppressed *podvizhniki* of modern Russian letters, from Pushkin and Lermontov to Akhmatova, Pasternak, Bulgakov, Tsvetaeva, Platonov, and Mandelstam himself, acquiring the stature of *cult objects*, the *redemptive sacrificial victims* for the subsequent generations. No less powerfully, this tradition or, better, ritual has resonated through the study of Russian letters both in the Soviet Union and abroad. The doubters would do well to consider the powerful echo that Herzen's famous martyrologue found in what is perhaps the single most important essay on modern Russian poetry. I have in mind Roman Jakobson's article-obituary of Vladimir Mayakovsky, "On the Generation That Has Squandered Its Poets":

Russian poetry knew two periods of brilliant efflorescence: the beginning of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the current one. Then, too, as more recently the epilogue took the form of an epidemic of early deaths of the major poets. In order to experience tangibly the figures below, we need only to imagine how impoverished would be the legacy of Schiller, Hoffmann, Heine, especially, Goethe, if they had left the stage before turning forty. Ryleev is executed at thirty-one [note the present tense, G. F.]. Batiushkov goes mad at thirty-six. The twenty-two-year-old Venevitinov perishes as does the thirty-two-year-old Delvig. Griboedov is killed at thirty-four, Pushkin at thirty-seven, Lermontov at twenty-six. Their deaths have often been seen as a form of suicide. Mayakovsky used to compare his battle against the quotidian with the duels of Pushkin and Lermontov.⁴²

ICON ENVY

The domination of modern Russian society by the singularly jealous and powerful state may have constituted the single most important *outside* factor in the development of the national Russian literature. The Orthodox Christian culture of the Russian Church, too, has left a powerful imprint on the institution of authorship, and not only in the formation of the myth of the martyred author. Veneration of icons, distinguishing the Russian tradition from its Western counterpart, appears to have played an important role in the strategies for justification of literary authorship adopted by Russian writers. This practice of Russian Orthodox Christianity repre-

⁴¹ Osip Mandelshtam, *Shum vremeni* (1925), in O. Mandelshtam, *Sobranie sochinenii*, ed. G. P. Struve and B. A. Filippov, 2d ed. (Moscow, 1971), 60.

⁴² R. Jakobson, "O pokolenii, rasstrativshem svoikh poetov," in R. Jakobson and D. Sviatopolk-Mirsky, *Smert' Vladimira Maiakovskogo* (The Hague, 1975).

sented, and perhaps still represents, a reminder of the continuing presence of the holy, and not merely the supernatural, in a certain type of artistic representation, a phenomenon that had long been unheard-of in the West. Nikolai Gogol's novella, "The Portrait," provides a most exemplary illustration.

For Gogol the artist, as the novella shows, veneration of icons was an immediate, palpable and urgent proof of the capacity of art—to paraphrase Thomas à Kempis—to be in itself certain and true. In the modern disenchanted world of Gogol's story, where money can be an equivalent of any object, a portrait of a usurer becomes itself a usurer, showering the artist with gold, rendering transparent the spiritual degradation of the artist in a market economy. Only by locking himself up in an Orthodox monastery and immersing himself in the rigorous discipline of the traditional icon painting could Gogol's artist restore his soul and render his art transparent to God's will. However satisfying in a story, such a traditional solution to the problem of the authority of art in the modern world could not have a wide appeal among Russian artists and writers. But the pathos that animated Gogol's story was irresistible, and before long, Gogol's literary descendants began to search for ways to make secular art both holy and true.

Unlike medieval Russia, where the icon dominated, if not monopolized, pictorial representation, modern Russia gave free play to both the Eastern and Western order of visual representation, thereby offering a legitimate perspective on the icon as a "work of art." But the reverse was also true, and these holy "art objects" began to serve as the proverbial tall order for the writer. Early on in the history of Russian modernism, after writers had assimilated Nietzsche's famous announcement regarding God, and Tolstoy's regarding art, the intensity of *disenchantment* forced Russian poets in the Symbolist movement to seek justification outside the sphere of modern, autonomous art. Their solution was to model their creation on the duality of the Orthodox icon which to modern eyes served as proof positive for the possibility of a new religion-art.⁴³

Granted, their efforts to ensure, à la Thomas à Kempis, that their fables would be in themselves certain and true failed in the sense that the poets had not produced a new world religion. But they were highly successful in sustaining the tradition of Russian literary authorship as a social practice of charismatically endowed *holy men* (*startsy*).⁴⁴ Literary authors became canonized,⁴⁵ and literature became part of the intelligentsia's national secular religion, replete with the "icons" of the author-saints. This tradition, which Mandelstam so eloquently described in *The Noise of Time*, survived quite easily the disappearance of the old regime, with whom it had been sharing some of its most powerful legitimizing rhetoric.

For just as the gentry society of Herzen's time made use of writers for its own

⁴³ See, for example, Viacheslav Ivanov's "Poet i chern'" (1904), in V. I. Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 3 vols., ed. O. Decharte (Brussels, 1971–79), 1:771.

⁴⁴ For a perceptive discussion of the congruence between the monastic *starets* tradition and the self-image of the writer see Sven Linnér, *Starets Zosima in the Brothers Karamazov*, Stockholm Studies in Russian Literature, 4 (Stockholm, 1975), 93–96, passim.

⁴⁵ See Marcus C. Levitt, Russian Literary Politics and the Pushkin Celebration of 1880 (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1989).

self-justification, so could the new Bolshevik regime ill afford to pass up such an effective tool for generating authority for itself. Unlike their Western counterparts doomed to the eternal insecurity of an artist in a disenchanted world—Russian writers could once again find certainty in the state's patronage and repression, especially repression. As the prescient Lev Shestov sarcastically remarked in 1918, Russian writers were likely to fall for the temptation of martyrdom, for, after all, "up to this time, the best songs were composed in prison and exile."⁴⁶

This *kenotic* scenario for assuring the continued authority of Russian belles lettres (and with them its producers from the ranks of Russian intelligenstia) could, on occasion, find an absurdly overt expression, as it did in 1921 in a piece by a prominent and unusually cultivated Marxist critic, P. S. Kogan. Kogan's words fit marvelously with the demystifying reflections on Russian literature that are common among the younger generation of Russian writers today.⁴⁷ Appealing to prominent Russian writers abroad to return to Russia, Kogan unabashedly argued that Russia alone could provide them with the context most conducive for the development of *serious* literature in the tradition of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Enormous mutual benefits, Kogan wrote, could accrue both to the writers and the state if only they could return to Russia and subject themselves to the oppressive hegemony of the Bolsheviks:

The Tolstoys and the Bunins do not understand that their place is here, that this dictatorship [of Communist ideology] is closer to that martyrdom which is so dear to the history of Russian literature than to that nonideological arbitrary rule which is characteristic for the despotic governments [in the West].⁴⁸

The actual life histories of Ivan Bunin and Aleksei Tolstoy show that some writers declined the attractive proposition and stayed abroad, while others succumbed to the temptation and returned to Soviet Russia. ⁴⁹ These, however, were individual decisions. The subsequent history of Russian literature in the Soviet Union provides a melancholy demonstration that the old nineteenth-century model of the writer as martyr and writing as redemptive sacrifice found powerful reinforcement in the government's cultural policies, intelligentsia's ideology, and—recalling the public mourning of death of Vladimir Vysotsky, the never-ending pilgrimage to Bulgakov's flat—popular religious imagination as well.

That era is now over and, who knows, perhaps a new, truly secular age of Russian belles lettres is about to dawn. Yet Soviet history in general and the history of Soviet Russian literature in particular counsel caution. Whether literature and state

⁴⁶ Lev Shestov, "Zhar-ptitsy (K kharakteru russkoi ideologii)," *Vozrozhdenie*, 16:3 (June 1918); reprinted in *Znamia*, 1991, no. 8:189–92.

⁴⁷ See the much-discussed Viktor Erofeev's "Pominki po sovetskoi literature," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 4 July 1990; and Sergei Chuprynin's exhaustively reasoned "Peremena uchasti: Russkaia literatura na poroge sed'mogo goda perestroiki," *Znamia*, 1991, no. 3:218–35.

⁴⁸ P. S. Kogan, "Russkaia literatura v gody Oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii," Krasnia nov', 1921, no. 3:239.

⁴⁹ See my two recent studies which deal with the subject of returning and/or emigrating: "Vopros vozvrashcheniia I: O pokolenii, sokhranivshem svoikh uchenykh: Viktor Shklovskii i Roman Iakobson v 1928–30 gg.," *Stanford Slavic Studies* 4 (1991): pt. II, 177–89; and "Vopros vozvrashcheniia II: 'Velikii perelom' i Zapad v biografii I. E. Babelia nachala 1930-kh gg.," ibid., 190–240.

of the post-perestroika Russia will be able to resist the temptation of this venerable tradition of bonding together power and beauty, authority and faith, with the cement of martyrdom—only time will tell. But what an outrageous farce it would be if, after having gone through the *tragic* phase in the nineteenth century and the absurd, tragicomic one in this, Russian writers fail to lower the curtain on one of modernity's most enchanting, brutal and, at long last, most predictable dramas.