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## Popular Culture: Russian Folklore and Mores

### Zara Abdullaeva

The heroine of Thomas Mann's "The Magic Mountain," a Russian woman named Shosha, explains to Hans Kastorz, a German, what Russians mean by morals: "Morality? Do you want to know about morality? Well, we believe that morality is not to be found in virtue, that is, not in reason, discipline, good manners, or honesty; quite to the contrary, we find it in sinfulness, in danger to which one exposes oneself and evil which could devour us. We believe it is morally loftier to perish, to drive oneself into the ground, than to save one's soul. . . ."

Well known is Tiutchev's maxim that "Russia is baffling to the mind." Indeed, any knowledge adequate to this mysterious subject is bound to be indirect and marred with contradictions. Perhaps the most promising approach to the Russian-Soviet reality is through its folklore. In its fairy tales, songs, customs, and jokes, Russian culture discloses its generative code, its secrete meaning, which has remained unperturbed through all the revolutions and perestroikas. The fabled realm inhabited by this nation is indeed enchanted: the most common things are going astray here, while extraordinary ones come to pass. The cause-effect connections are severed for good, common sense is casually defied, and things are ruled by some impenetrable magic which fools smart people and gives the fool a break.

Neither logic, nor psychology, nor positivist science can do justice to the bizarre laws governing life in this wondrous domain. Artistic intuition alone, I feel, can catch the elusive meaning of the ambivalent Russian psyche. Characteristically, writers and artists have been Russia's best interpreters, its true phenomenologists and sociologists. And folklore has furnished us a superindividual narrative in which the peculiarly Russian reality found its conscious expression. So, let us set aside methodological prejudices and take another look at what we have seen so many times before and try to fathom what has been so "baffling to the mind." Like pain in the solar plexus points to something beyond the organ itself, our intuitive knowledge reveals a region of pain undeniably real to those who feel it, even if the region itself is phantom.

*Alas, a fairy tale's a lie, but there's a clue in it,  
a lesson to be learned by all you valiant lads.*

Each fairy tale is, strictly speaking, a lie, but a truth is to be extracted

from this lie. What we find here is a subtext for the text, a clue that beacons us somewhere. The fairy tale is beyond the truth/falsehood dichotomy; rather, it wrenches the two from their habitual context and places them in a new one, say, the context of Soviet civilization.

"A fairy tale," wrote the renown folklorist B. Propp, "reflects not only prehistoric times but also medieval mores and customs, feudal social relations, as well as the relationships found under capitalism." [1] And, we should add, socialism, which built a feudal society according to the mythological blueprints deeply rooted in the past and fully realized in Soviet folklore.

The folk spawned its fairy tales, tried to bring them to life in a magnificent experiment, got a hernia in the process but did not break down completely, harnessed life's destructive forces in the creative power of anecdote, and sublimated into songs its heroic dreams and romantic temperament, perennial loneliness and desire for intimacy, public-mindedness and individualistic urges.

In a mass culture, popular songs play the role once reserved for folk songs. For Soviet folklore is not exhausted by its subterranean anecdote culture -- this unofficial realm that serves the nation as a testing ground for its history and geography; folklore also includes the songs -- the tried and true, as the Russian woman, hero of this surreal history and geography. The song is the barest necessity for us, an almost physical need, a ritual of everyday culture and a symbol of faith. And since singing and fibbing has always been our favorite pastime in which we engage with ardor and passion and without any prompting from the outside, we, as a nation, could reach happiness, or rather dissipate our grief, not in some distant future but in the present, in the here and now of the moment. As the saying goes,

*Dear is the spoon just as the dinner's ready.*

Our fairy tales nourished the arrogant conviction that any fool could master the world in an instant. The fools and heroes might have been robbed of any hopes, for in the end, cadres did determine everything -- "*cadres are everything*" (Stalin); but anecdote sarcastically elevated the slaves in their own eyes, turned them into kamikaze-like heroes, and simultaneously mocked and deflated the sinister jesters lording over them. And the song was always generous and giving. Somebody had to cater to the folk while it was being decimated.

Of course, it was not the lyrics alone that made the popular Soviet songs so vitally important -- the brilliant music by Dunaevsky, the Pakrass brothers, Soloviev-Sedoy, and others had much to do with their success, but this should be the subject of a separate musicological study. By the same token, I leave unexplored the songs by Galich, Okudzhava, Vysotsky and other Soviet bards who wrote authorial songs distinguished by their creators' inimitable individuality. Although their songs were quite popular at a certain time, they should not be dealt with within the framework of the popular Soviet culture.

\* \* \* \*

A well-known avantgarde painter, Mironenko, coined the term "alcoholic consciousness" to describe the state of mind peculiar to "Homo Sovieticus." I think the artist gave us a scientific definition of Soviet mentality. Soviet lore has its direct equivalent:

*To make heads or tails of this, it takes a quart of vodka.*

Such ambivalence has its roots in Russian fairy tales where the anonymous narrator invariably lapses into alcoholic consciousness, as he recounts the incredible feast he chanced to attend:

*And I was there, drank wine and beer,  
it all poured down my whiskers, none landed in my mouth.*

This line familiar to every Russian child blurs the distinction not only between truth and falsehood but also between the sane and the insane, victors and victims, the drunk and the sober. Which is why it is said,

*What is on a sober man's mind, is on the drunkard's tongue.*

Actually, the two are one person. And the reality such a person confronts is the same. What is different is the amount of alcohol consumed, which could radically alter one's state of mind and attitude toward reality.

"In a sense, reality was separated from the state, evolving by itself according to the fairy-tale logic. Thus, the Soviet artist, insofar as he exemplified Homo Sovieticus, developed a peculiar double-mindedness. Truth and lie were mere conventions to him, and good and evil traded places all the time." [2]

Alexander Zinoviev made a similar observation: ". . . In regard to the

Russian mentality, the fundamental dilemma, 'To be or not to be,' amounts to this: 'To drink or not to drink.' The answer is self-evident: 'Of course, to drink!'" [3]

To drink is to be alive. No wonder that in the early perestroika years vodka was rationed and citizens were given coupons for this most basic of all staples. The "alcoholic consciousness," blending together the fairy-tale and everyday reality, is also a utopian consciousness, the state of mind that tends to erase the fine line between the real and the unreal. Hence, every Soviet man is, by necessity, an artist and an alcoholic, a hero and a villain, a left-handed and a right-handed person at the same time. And until very recently, a romantic.

Lenin's formula that "art belongs to the people" is quite literally true in a nation where people, like genuine artists, live the imaginary life. And this people's art is rightfully tagged "socialist realism" -- a fabled reality (skazkobyi), a truthful lie.

Being determines consciousness, alcoholic consciousness determines an other-worldly being -- aesthetic reality which blends metaphoric life with realistic art.

The Russian fairy tale culminates in the popular festival with an obligatory feast where the new king generously treats his people to food and drinks. With the goods given away, the hero ends his path as the fairy tale character and begins his happy life in . . . the song, in our Song of Songs.

*"It's hard to live by song alone,"* sang a popular bard, Vertinsky. But then, it is harder to survive without it. Drinking and singing are the two constants firmly embedded in our national character and fully independent from the changing political climate.

You can lose yourself in a song just as well as in wine. The song heals your wounds like a proven folk medicine; you pour your heart into it, you struggle and rejoice, you live and you die and you come back to life with every song you sing.

*For only song, and song alone, will always stay with you!*

Such is the sum of wisdom one gleans from Russia 's long and troubled history. As a popular song goes,

*This song is faster than a bird,*

*It makes our oppressors tremble,  
The ricksha and the coolie sing this song,  
And so does the Chinese rifleman.*

Again, this is hardly a metaphor. In 1940, a Chinese composer implored Dunaevsky, an immensely popular Russian composer, to send him the music sheets, which would enable the Chinese "to make their own weapons that would seal the enemy's defeat." [4] In 1955, the Tokyo Orchestra musicians rehearsing with David Oistrakh, a Russian violinist, greeted the maestro with a patriotic Soviet tune "Wide Is My Native Land," surprising him with such a "very unusual way to express their feelings and sympathies." [5] Paul Robson confessed that, among his favorite tunes, was the Soviet Song of the Motherland: "I know some people will say this is not a genuine 'folk' tune," explained Robson. "But . . . the people took this song close to heart, made it their own, and so, it is as much a folk song as the American song about the Mississippi." [6]

The song is the ultimate proof of the Russian-Soviet people's boundless generosity. The song will never betray you, it is "*your friend forever and ever*," it is always on your side, whether you are a winner or a loser, an executioner or a victim.

Sometimes, when the responsibility weighed too heavily on the General Secretary and President of the USSR, M. S. [Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev] poured his soul and all his emotions bottled inside during the endless political battles into a heartfelt song. Just before his resignation, Gorbachev received Chancellor Helmut Kohl in the luxuriant mansion that once belonged to the former First Secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party. By then, the two were on quite friendly terms, calling each other "Helmut" and "Misha." And so, they were chatting about things. Deep down they both knew that Gorbachev's days were numbered, that the man could not stay much longer as his country's President. . . . Then, all of a sudden, M. S. burst into a song. At first, he sang Ukrainian songs, then switched to those of his native South Russia, the songs from the Kuban river region. Good-natured Kohl, who mellowed quite a bit, tried to sing along, though he did not know the words. They sat there, arms around each other, for quite a while, as I was listening for the last time to Gorbachev's soft, pleasant baritone. [7]

*You don't bid farewell to the song,  
The song won't say good by to you!*

\* \* \* \*

Without a song, the image of the Russian/Soviet man would remain incomplete. Not only did it accompany him wherever he went,

*The song is marching down the street, it bids you to follow suit.*

Like a shadow in a fairy tale, the song is capable of miraculous feats. In one of Evgenii Schwarz's plays, titled "The Shadow," a simple country girl tells a short-sighted scholar: "Can't you see -- we live in a very special country. What is but a fairy tale in other places, what other folks would see as just a fable, happens around here every day." [8]

Our people's fondness for songs signals the triumph of fairy tale over reality, poetry over truth. Consider the following historical fact: "Towards the end of the national congress of Stakhanov workers [laborers routinely exceeding their daily production quotas] who gathered at the Kremlin in November of 1935, the audience unanimously broke out into singing the march from a popular movie "The Merry Boys." [9] It is no accident that the best workers who were "*born to make a fairy tale come true*" and who learned from their own experience that the harder the work, the merrier the life, found it most natural to sing, as though enchanted by the miracle of their daily labor and their magic helper -- the song.

"Your songs," a girl scout from Voronezh once told Dunaevsky, "cheerful and combative, tender and lyrical, show us how beautiful our young lives are and help us live." [10] Like a wise teacher, the song conveys the boundless beauty of our life, "*where every man can breathe so freely.*" Truly, one could have suffocated without it.

Take a closer look at the confession with which the narrator typically ends the fairy tale, "*And I was there, drank wine and beer, it all poured down my whiskers, none landed in my mouth.*" Such awkwardness! It surely sounds peculiar. The narrator assures us he was there at the feast, he claims to have partaken in it, yet his stomach is empty. The phantom reality we encounter in this story perfectly fits the familiar stereotype about "the mysterious Russian soul" -- and "body," for it presages famines in a country with fabulous riches.

A saying hints at the mystery not only of the Russian "soul" and "body," but also of their locus operandi ("in every fairy tale one finds a germ of truth," said Lenin). So, let us keep scanning our fairy tale for further clues about the Russian soul and body and the country they inhabit. There must

be a blinking light in this archetypical paradox of drinking without imbibing, a fateful insight into the Russian curse -- the other side of this blissful life, where we (the collective, the folk) are born to make the dream come true, where I (the individual) was at this feast, drank wine and beer, but went to bed on an empty stomach.

A modern paraphrase translates this sacramental insight from Russian into Russian: "*We are born to make Kafka come true.*" This saying resonates with another archetypical task-setting derived from the ancient Russian lore:

*Hurry I know not where, bring me I know not what.*

Here is a variation on the same theme gleaned from a Soviet song:

*'How will I find you? Where shall I write you?'*  
*'Doesn't matter,' he quietly said. 'Just send your letter somewhere.'*

The fairy tale hero has no idea where he is going and what he is expected to do, but in real life, he has managed "to make Kafka come true." The hero is doomed for an unhappy ending. Some earthly powers might be singled out for the blame, but in fact there is an anonymous curse hovering over the land like a dark cloud, condemning its people to lawlessness and chaos.

A contemporary joke:

*Two men are walking out on the streets:*

- *The weather is terrible -- rain with snow!*
- *Those big-shot bastards, they do whatever they want to us!*

Though the nation didn't read Kafka, it turned into a collective Kafka and transformed its world into an exquisitely absurd place. The nation bowed not so much to the natural or social forces as to the magic existential powers. There may be no place for common sense or reasoned action in this spell-bound world, but plenty of room for imagination and creative narrative.

Here is what the sagacious Marquis de Custine had to say about Russians: "They have more finesse than tact, more plasticity than sensitivity, more flexibility than spontaneity, more grace than tenderness, more insightfulness than ingenuity, more quick-wittedness than imagination,

more perceptiveness than wit, but the quality that distinguishes the Russian the most is shrewdness." [11] The last point sounds odd: the ability to figure out one's best interest must be the last trait this patient folk possesses. Yet Marquis de Custine guessed the secret deeply buried in the Russian psyche: in order to survive, this nation had to exercise its uncommon rationality -- irrational rationality. And it is this peculiar brand of rationality that bred some supernatural mutations.

*Rabinovitz looks into the mirror:  
- One of us has got to be a snitch!*

Dualism has become an inalienable property of the Soviet monolith, it is present in the larger-than-life heroes and ordinary people alike.

\* \* \* \*

While the fairy tale helped one creatively transform life, the song did the same thing to fairy tale. If anecdote was a manifestation of collective neurosis and a form of individual protest, then song served both as a powerful collective tonic and as a means for personal relaxation.

For many years we stumbled "*wherever my eyes would lead me.*" You cannot reach such a murky destination while travelling a common road. Nor can you rely on consciousness or conscience favored by a socialist society. Rather, you must entrust yourself to the "collective unconscious" which replaces social imperatives ("you ought to do this") with the notion of predestination. In other words, you need to follow the creative path charted in folk art.

*He who doesn't know the joy of singing and hasn't learned to sing,  
Will never know happiness in this world.*

This line from a Soviet song comes across like an official directive, a lesson taught "to all you valiant lads," a warning as well as a promise of salvation.

"The state aesthetics," explains Vladimir Paperny, "sanction the production of life according to the epic laws. The epic in Culture-2 [official Soviet art] is the composition of folk songs as prescribed by the orders of state power." [12]

The nation that sang at home and at work, by the camp-fire and on a train, in a mud-hut and in the streets, was performing a magic rite that

fulfilled the soul's innermost needs and marked important milestones in national history. The result was a fairy tale that displaced real life, a ritual behavior that charmed and ultimately conquered space and time. After all, "we are only a geological product of vast spaces into which we were thrown by some enigmatic force, nothing more than a curious wrinkle in the physical geography." [13]

*Vast and boundless is the Russian land . . . ,  
You are rich in your fairy tales, you live by your songs.*

Fairy tales are our gold reserve, a vital mineral resource. But we ourselves are also like the fossils that come to life while singing. In our songs, we transcend the mundane reality and build a fabled one.

*Life is fine, living is fine.  
For some it's fine, for others it's shit.*

Like the living corpse from Tolstoy's play, Fedia Protasov, used to forget his troubles while listening to the Gypsy songs, the Soviet man drew his strength from and realized his dreams in songs.

The right to sing is the only inalienable right guaranteed to the Russian people. It is also their duty. In the 1920's, the right to fairy tales (as the right to tell jokes in the 1930's) was suppressed. "'Fairy tales have had their day,' charged the anti-fairy-tale campaign, 'Down with the fairy tale. The future literature must be freed from this anachronism. 'The magic tablecloth will never feed us, and Cinderella won't drop her shoe around here again,' lamented a poet, Ilia Selvinsky. "Along with fairy tales, removed from children's libraries were all the books where the element of fantasy exceeded the officially approved dosage." [14] Then, in 1933, a sudden about-face: the Communist Party Central Committee passed the resolution, declaring fairy tales to be "an important genre of literature for children." [15] But it was the song, this powerful pedagogical tool, that transformed the fairy tale and turned it into a tale for adults who were to retain their childish fantasies, playfulness, and vulnerability.

*We will sing and laugh like children,  
As we struggle and labor through the day.  
For we were born in such a way,  
That we shall never and nowhere quit.*

Notice the song's dominant spacio-temporal pattern: "never and

nowhere," which has its logical counterpart in "always and everywhere."

The revolutionary songs traced the unhappy history of the hero. But from the 1930's on, Soviet songs marked a new page in the hero's biography -- his bright and cloudless "life after death."

Those born to make a fairy tale come true were actually destined to bring the Kafka world alive, which is why the Soviet hero gradually evolved into a deadman, an inanimate object -- a "sovok," literally, "dust-pan," the term designating "Soviet man" in the contemporary Russian slang. This wordplay is emblematic of Soviet realities, and it is widely reflected in common parlance.

*Reagan, riding the streets of Moscow, turns to Brezhnev:*

- *'What are these people lining up for?*
- *'You see, shoes just have been thrown out in the shoe-store.'*
- *'Good for you. In America such shoes are also thrown out.'*

In Russian parlance the verb "to throw out" means "to be on sale," "taking" is the synonym of "buying." The product thrown out is taken by "sovok" (dust-pan).

- *What is a joke reduced in price?*
- *It is the joke for which you once got ten and now only three years in jail.*

When the Soviet power came tumbling down, all it left behind was "bare facts" that could not explain anything. By contrast, jokes reflected the nonexistent being or the being of the nonexistent. Recorded and published in the post-perestroika period, jokes have become a collection of corpses, akin to the collapsible sculptures in the conceptualist art. They are the most stunning, though unseen, monuments on our common grave.

The genre that gave the everyday Soviet culture its most eloquent expression was doomed from the outset. This culture's nonbeing was faithfully preserved in its jokes, but the joke itself fell by the wayside, as its time has run out. The anecdote vanishes along with its raconteur who has recognized the curse of his (non)existence sublimated into a fairy tale and a song. When folklore merged with the culture of letters, the joke lost its meaning. The joke is being relegated to the past, permeated with the romantic nostalgia for the brave and gifted Soviet man, who never parted with the song. The Soviet song, with which he "*lived, toiled and loved*" and which helped him "*make fairy tale come true*," fulfilled the American

dream -- the Russian fairy tale.

*Remember, there once lived Alonushka?  
She led me to the fairyland.  
Trust me, you'll find there happiness,  
Enchanting is the fairy tale's magic.*

Songs made up for whatever the sloppy narrator failed to eat and imbibe at the fabulous feast. When you sang, you embraced the world as a feast, a non-stop holiday amidst arduous labors. If there is nothing to eat, there is still a song to get us through the day.

*People will be happy forever and ever.  
Our dream has no limits and nothing can stop it.*

The boundless hope for happiness turned into unhappiness without bounds. Where workdays are holidays, you learn to revel in misery.

*Russia , my mother. Who shall I compare you with?  
I can't live without you, I can't sing without you.*

To sing is to live, to live is to drink, from which it follows that to drink is to live and sing. This is the tragic but dignified choice of the centaur -- the heroic sovok.

While the fairy-tale nagged one to "*go I know not where*," the path charted by the song always led either up or down, straight to the heavens or all the way to hell. Meanwhile, here on earth, the purges were going on.

\* \* \* \*

The scientific experiment designed to make fairy tale abide in this world was unfolding under the watchful eye of the helper from beyond the grave who volunteered to aid the simple folks in their appointed task. The Russian fairy tale spelled in some significant details the road leading to the magic kingdom. We also learn from it about the kingdom's topography, its distinguishing traits, as well as its location, be this on the top of the hill, in the netherworld, or underwater.

The hero's adventures usually began in the woods. "In fairy tales, the wood symbolizes an obstacle." [16] The labor camp to which Soviet prisoners were sent to cut wood can be seen as a stopover on the way to

the other world. The wood was the entrance to the kingdom of Hades in which caveated magic objects were stored and the languishing princesses waited to be freed. Hence, the prominence that cutting wood was accorded in Soviet mythology (the film "Communist") and the ominous reference to "*the wood chips that fly when the wood is cut.*" That is to say, the innocent will suffer when the grand battle is waged, or as the English proverb has it, "You cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs."

Meanwhile, the fairy-tale hero enters the wood and meets the old Yaga-the-witch. The success or failure of his mission is in her hands. From this point on, the hero need not to worry about anything and can rest. Once you secured the helper, the battle is practically won. This fairy tale's prerequisite was dutifully observed in building the new socialist society. Beautiful palaces are filled with eternal lights in the fairyland, wherever it might be located -- even in the netherworld. Gardens are in full bloom here, inspiring the poet's imagination:

*I know there will be a city,  
I know our garden will bloom,  
When our Soviet homeland  
Is teeming with such people.*

The subway of Hades, the Garden of Eden -- this is the netherworld of the Stalinist mythology that uncannily blends the symbols of life and death.

The decision to blow up the Church of Christ the Savior and erect in its place the Palace of Soviets was a logical step towards the glorious future. Having failed to build up the Palace, the authorities settled on a compromise: a swimming pool -- a kind of underwater palace in the invisible city. The subway and the swimming pool symbolize the invisible yet real kingdom. To build both some real effort were required, though. Alas,

*Nothing can stop us on land or at sea.*

The Exhibition of the People's Economic Achievements (EPEA) was the third metaphor of this fairyland topography, symbolizing the nation's countless victories and fabulous riches. The EPEA is the architectural ensemble embodying the "other-worldly kingdom," as well as a frontier between the world at hand and the world to come. The sky-scrappers, the subway, the EPEA, the place where the wood is cut -- these are the fairy tale palaces, gardens, and the magic grounds where the Soviet heroes

could prove their metal. The visible and the invisible worlds merge when the Palace of Congresses rises in the old Kremlin, when the Kalinin Avenue displaces the Old Arbat, when the rivers are forced to reverse their flow -- wherever a perestroika of one kind or another is unleashed on the country and its people.

In the long run, the fairy-tale hero "proves that either he has reached the other world (fulfilled all assignments, descended to hell, etc.) or that his own nature is akin to that of a dead man. . . ." [17] That's why we have turned our world into a fairy tale. We are heroes. Dead man's nature is our nature. Some of us have been to "the other world" and saw hell with our own eyes, while others have labored to make "the other world" into our own. But just as our dreams have come true, we have stopped revelling in myths and fairy tales and plunged into reality. We may yet pay dearly for our inability to remember that at the core of our "historical reality" is the myth.

"Disavowing the myth," wrote Propp, "would strip the myth of its sacred nature, its magic, or as Levy-Bruhl liked to say, its mystic power. Without its myths, the tribe could not possibly continue to exist." [18]

It was indeed glasnost that began to tear off the masks from the cherished social and cultural myths, depriving the folk of its stable worldview and plunging the nation into chaos. This demythologization from above was aided by the Soviet man's unusual genealogy:

*Where am I from? From the anecdote.  
Where are you from? From the anecdote.  
Where are we all from? Just the same,  
We are all from the anecdote, from the anecdote*

(N. Gorbanevskaja)

What is this strange place they all have descended from, like Venus from the sea foam?

According to Dostoyevsky's classical and somewhat worn out formula, Russian literature came out from Gogol's story, "The Overcoat," from the anecdote about the man who lost his most valuable possession, i.e., from "laughter through tears." Like the man stepping out from his overcoat, Russian literature emerged from the anecdote. Then, as if shedding the police surveillance and leaving behind one's underground existence, the

Soviet man came into being, again owing his birth to a joke.

To come out of the anecdote was to acquire freedom, to sever the umbilical cord with the Motherland, to demythologize one's existence. The joke derives its roots from the collective anti-mythology, or if you wish, to the anecdote about "the father of all nations" begetting all sorts of bastards and "children of the underground." To come out of the joke also means to stop being an anti-Soviet man and become "just another man."

Paradoxically, getting a jail sentence for telling a joke, is a joke in itself, although a sad one. Laughter (liberation) is punished by tears (imprisonment).

This, it seems, is possible only in the Soviet land. As a modern proverb has it, "Soviet means excellent," i.e., something really beautiful and inimitable. Thus, the anecdote became a parol for entering the culture of the taboos, the culture open to every Soviet man, regardless of his social, class or intellectual background. The Soviet civilization's hieroglyphics are penned in the invisible ink of anecdote that is deeply rooted in the nation's subconsciousness. Once deciphered and interpreted, however, the anecdote -- this basic staple of urban folklore, vanishes without a trace. The jokester's Muse is spewed out in the air, you can not catch her in a net like a butterfly.

- *What is the theory of relativity?*

- *I am not sure, but if I were you, I would have emigrated long ago.*

The joke is not just the uniquely Soviet comic strip but also a ubiquitous oral journal in which real characters acquire the status of mythological heroes.

Anecdote situated itself in the underground of the official mass culture, but it also served as its avantgarde. Unlike works produced by Soviet underground artists, anecdote could not be smuggled abroad, for it was alien to Western civilization's semeiotics. Unable to make profit from its jokes, the people repeated the experience of the "lost generation" -- "the victors received no spoils from their victory." The folk's heroic efforts were appreciated and properly assessed only by the KGB that kept a watchful eye on the vanguard folklorists.

Eventually, the joke was objectified, turned into a personified object that could be stolen or thrown out as useless.

*From Brezhnev's interview:*

- *Do you have a hobby?*
- *Yes, I am collecting jokes about myself.*
- *Really? How many have you gotten so far?*
- *Enough to fill a couple of labor camps.*

Man's fate measured by his right to tell jokes -- the Soviet civilization must be credited with this fundamental discovery, which transcends the boundaries of the merely political and enters the domain of the purely existential.

- *Why is life so expensive these days?*
- *Because it has become a luxury.*

The joke faithfully mirrored the ongoing transubstantiation of life into commodity, word into action, literature into life, human being into an object. The Soviet jokester cultivated the astounding detachment from the actual happenings, and it is his Olympic aloofness (divine omniscience?) that secured his triumph over reality. Disengagement and passivity that the Soviet man honed into a fine art are largely responsible for his exceptional perceptiveness embedded in the anecdote narrative which evolved into a unique language that distinguished a caste and reflected the modernist principle of "missing links" ("I write in missing links," Osip Mandelstam).

- *The Sun has set.*
- *Don't you think it's a bit too much?*

The joke is that "to set" (sest) also means in Russian "to be imprisoned."

\* \* \* \*

Unusual characters, weird circumstances and screwed up actions so typical of Russian fairy tales and songs have been absorbed into the Kafkaesque Soviet reality as a norm, even an ideal. But then the tale is recounted "as if all that happens in it had once taken place in real life, although neither the teller nor the listener believes the tale. This discrepancy highlights the fairy tale's humor." [19] Place, time and circumstances narrated in the fairy tale are supposed to be a convention, a belief in reality temporarily suspended. The fairy tale's humor stems from the tension between its truthful form and its improbable content. The reader laughs whenever the tale begins to resemble the truth. But when

the fairy tale was transformed into an official ideology, literature and art, i.e., when it was entrusted with a serious mission, humor branched off into anecdote, saved itself in a joke. Humor, i.e., the refusal to believe the official fairy tales about happy life, could incur serious consequences for the humorist: he might end up in jail. The formal opposition (and not merely a literary one) between good and evil, laughter and tears, was being overcome.

The joke disrupts the reality, forces the destiny to stumble at the very point where fairy tale and reality were supposed to merge seamlessly into each other. Through the anecdote, the individual mocks the familiar stereotypes buried in the collective unconscious, shakes them loose and turns them around. The humorist violates the conventions about the typical reality, whittles away at its foundations through the unsanctioned word. Like Yaga-the-witch could smell a human being miles away, the authorities sniffed the unsanctioned word. The innocent jokester sentenced to correctional labor is Ivan-the-Fool who has worked his way up through endless ordeals to become a hero, even if only posthumously.

The genealogy of the Soviet man brings us back to the fairy tale, to its time dimension, and specifically to the fact that the most complicated tasks are accomplished by its heroes at night. It was at night that the "free slaves" undertook their honest labors and managed to carry out the impossible tasks that the king-despot set forth to them. In 1936, a well-known architect, M. Ginsburg, had already known that the dead of night was the time most suited for serious labor: "Hundreds of leading architects are now living through the most extraordinary time, working the nights through, giving all their thoughts, all their strength, to their work." [20]

Nocturnal labors are carried out in the fairy tales with the help of the magical powers and are accompanied by a distinctly sexual pleasure. No wonder Stalin was called "the father of all nations." This strong metaphor proved its continued fecundity by yielding "Stalin's children," then "Stalin's grandchildren" -- "children of the 20th CPSU Congress," and so on and so forth. The greatest progenitor, Stalin, preferred to work at night. And by the morning, one is either the hero (*either I am a master, or else, I have perished*) or a dead man (*"here's my sword and off with your head"*).

Nocturnal labors are propelled by the seminal powers that brought into being generations of Soviet workers who died with the name of "the great father" on their lips or endeavored to start a new life by denouncing their

paternity.

The vanguard workers and farmers who toiled hard to make a fairy tale into reality owe their life not only to "the father of all nations" but also to other fairy tale heroes: Maria the Queen, Vasilisa the Beautiful, and their numerous descendants from the supernatural world: sorcerers, witches, and dragons. Propp calls all these characters "grantors." Thus, Yaga-the-witch functions in the fairy tale as the hero's mother, mother-in-law, aunt, or wife's sister. Whoever came in contact with the inhabitants of the netherworld -- fabled or communist -- was infused with remarkable spirit and stamina: the labors of the dead were vast, unceasing and invariably successful. The farther away was the fairyland, "the land of the dead," the more woods were cut down and wood chips wasted, the quicker was the natural selection of the "passive hero" endowed with magical powers.

Thus were spawned the myths -- the fairy tale's vital ingredient, a constituent part of Marxism.

It is noteworthy, also, that during perestroika, people watched the televised parliamentary proceedings and endless political debates deep into the night. Having rested during the working hours, the folk was ready by the night time to get on with its most riveting and emotionally charged labors.

Five-year economic plans accomplished in four years, the obsessive desire to catch up with and overtake America -- these are but instances of the accelerated mythological time, when magical stallions and charmed wolves covered thousand miles in split seconds, while children grew up into epic heroes in a matter of hours. Hence, the proverb: "*Children of others grow faster.*" These must be children fathered by "the father of all nations," by Yaga-the-witch, by assorted fairy monsters and their ideological offsprings. The uncertain time frame combined with the preference for exact dates (one day, three months, or twenty years allotted to accomplish the task, be this erecting a castle or building communism) signaled the intention to deceive. The magical, surreal sense of time infused the leaders with enthusiasm and made them sing:

*The centuries' tasks are accomplished in years.*

In just one night the fabulous hero was expected to weave a carpet, bake bread, plough the land, sow and harvest the wheat, grow the garden, erect the palace, put up a bridge. And why not,

*We have no fear of icebergs and storm-clouds.*

Which only proves that

*In our darings we are always right.*

The fairy tale rewards the hero for being passive. "*By will of the pike do as I like,*" intones the fool and, without lifting his finger, he gets his wish instantly granted. The song, on the other hand, praises the will, the endeavor:

*And if we have to, we shall move the mountains . . .*

*Jacks of all trades, we'll make our dreams come true. . . .*

*Surely, you and I are worth something,*

*If the mountains bow to us.*

In real life, though, being active or passive would make no difference to us. The fabled fool was worthless, yet he got whatever he wished, because from the start he eschewed effort. The hero extolled by the song, the one who "moved the mountains," sooner or later lost everything he had.

"The elevation of the fool over the great warrior, the substitution of magical help for personal effort, the weakness of heroic elements in general -- such are the most painfully evident features of the Russian fairy tale. In this enchanting poetic dream the Russian man seeks peace and rest; the fairy tale lends wings to the dream and at the same time dissipates its energy." [21]

The Soviet song corrected this shortcoming. Lucky fools gave way to heroes brimming with energy. They no longer counted on heaven-sent miracles; they were demiurges, creating the world with the supernatural help rendered by the songs, with the help of the magical word.

The fool in the Russian tales might not be smart, but he is wise and cunning. Fools are unencumbered by the romanticism besetting the bright ones. Down-to-earth creatures, fools are happy with what they have. It is the smart ones who turn out to be quite ordinary, even naive. Fools defy the norm, and not just because they are lazy. The smart ones lead boring lives, go to work, look for bargains, and are afraid to be taken advantage of. By contrast, fools are idle, carefree, happy-go-lucky, and frequently break the rules. The fool is a contemplative, self-sufficient philosopher --

the most intimate folk hero.

Whereas fairy tale "enlists as its heroes the most unremarkable, unattractive, unenviable characters," [22] the song resolves this enigmatic contradiction by promoting the heroes who are the cream of the crop.

*If I have dreamed you up, then, be just as I see you . . .*

*The brightest, strongest, kindest and most tender of men. . . .*

Clearly, you need a comparative offset to be able to tell who is the best. The best are those who defeat the worst. Which is why the folk singing its popular songs not only savored their aesthetic qualities and enjoyed an erotic relief but also forged weapons against its enemies, enlisting the song for its future struggles. And "struggle" with us has always been a predominantly aesthetic category tinged with erotic pleasure.

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The song praised the epic heroes, those "free slaves" who used to be just slaves, scholars who once were illiterates, generous gift-givers who knew poverty first hand. But most importantly, it elevated active romantics over passive fools. Somewhere along the line, the singer mutated into a magician and an archaic myth was transfused into a contemporary art style glorifying the legendary present.

*Why? That's really simple, my dear.  
I didn't study the textbook to learn about life.  
Magic is my real trade. And if you want me to,  
I can make you as beautiful as Cinderella.*

That is right: the promise is to turn the girl not into a princess but into a beautiful Cinderella, the hard-working heroine for whom "workdays are holidays."

Mark Berness, a Russian star entertainer with a magnetic appeal, especially for women, sang this song about the magician, and his listeners seemed to believe every promise he whispered into their ears. He must have believed his words himself. "Our songs carry our ideas into life," insisted Berness, "and therefore the aesthetic evolution of our song is for us an ideological issue." [23] Significantly, Berness is talking about lyrical songs, songs about love and friendship, and not just about fighting songs. Verily, "the poet in Russia is more than just a poet." The true Soviet man

must, according to this ideology, have an acute aesthetic sensitivity. The only puzzle confronting fairyland heroes is how to "*sing to the end the song we have dreamed up.*" For as long as the song is being sung, the active fools can enjoy life at its fullest. Once you are through, however, you have to start from the beginning, and the very song that turned mundane folks into happy heroes has lost its magic. Suddenly, you are back to square one, returned to the unhappy time before the singing commenced. But "*we have been born in such a way that we shall never and nowhere quit.*" We know from the song that "*everyone becomes a hero when the motherland commands.*" At the same time, we are told that "*we have been born that way.*" From which it follows that the Soviet man is genetically endowed with mythological capabilities directly linked to his mass-messianic origins. Some auxiliary qualities that the song instilled in the "masters of the land" included the ability to see the invisible, hear the unspoken and understand the language of birds:

*Sing us about the wild mountains, you free-wheeling wind,  
About the mysteries hidden in the sea depths,  
About the birds' talk, . . . About the virgin forest,  
About the wild beasts' trails, . . . About iron muscles . . .  
Set our souls on fire, Make everyone desire  
To catch up with and overtake our fathers!*

The song fuels our "*heart's fiery engine,*" tempers our "*iron muscles,*" compels one to confide, "*My heart is racing like an engine. . .*"

Surpassing time, space and one's parents is the implacable necessity. The failure to sever the umbilical cord with the Motherland suggests the unsurpassing infantilism in the little masters, fools-the-trail-blazers whose dreams are as childish as their valor. Here is the predicament: No matter how fervently mothers desired to see their children doing well, how selflessly they nurtured them into maturity, the fathers, whose accomplishments children were called upon to overshadow, would catch up with them and cut short their adventurous offsprings' lives. In the words of G. Gachev,

To become an American one must commit a crime, known as the Orestes complex. One has to commit the matricide. In Western Europe, where the Oedipus complex prevails, the son kills the father and marries mother-nature. In the East, we find the Rustam complex, when the father kills the son, for the father is representing the tradition. The same is in Russia: fathers are stronger than sons. Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great both killed their sons. Literature furnishes similar examples: Taras Bulba in

Gogol's epic story, the hero of Gorky's "The Artamonov Brothers." The Oedipus story is turned on its head: the father kills the son and marries his daughter-in-law. Much like Gorky himself who had an affair with the wife of his son, Maxim. Thus, the Rostam complex prevails in Russia, the Orestes complex -- in America. [24]

*The Young Eagles of the Fleet,  
They come into their own to give relief to the old guard.*

With time, the young eagles will turn into "Stalin's falcons" and follow an imperative "to remain young at heart," to stay young forever, to labor valiantly and then cease to exist. Young masters are eaglets, their airplanes are big eagles, and Father Stalin is the "*wings of the eagle*."

*Seeing off her son, Mother said with pride:  
You're not a coward, You're son of the eagle,  
So go, son, great deeds are awaiting you.  
Son of the eagle must have been fathered by the eagle.  
The eagle power counts eaglets by the millions  
And the nation is proud of them.*

The eaglet is the son of father eagle and mother earth. Remember the girl Katiusha from the popular song who "*came out on the steep river bank*"? She was in love with "*the blue eagle of the steppe*," and that could only mean that she loved both father and son. "*We love our Motherland like the young bride*," sang the young eagles, but they were scared away by the father, who cut short their lives, who took pride in them but also hated them for their excessive attachment to their mother, for the threat they posed to his power, for their immodest desire "*to climb the highest heights*."

If fairy tales capture the nation's collective unconscious, songs continue and expand this mythological cosmogony -- national in its form and socialist in its content -- in the new historical era. The traditional predilection for the folklore-inspired imagery has not lost its primary aesthetic, and not just ideological, significance in our time, although the transformation of the fairy tale into a song called for sacrifices on the part of the singers.

*Oh, my city, . . . I call you "my beloved,"  
Give your soul to it, and it will make you happy.*  
Sounds like a bargain with the devil: give me your soul, I shall make you happy.

*Throughout the land, from the mountain tops,  
Where the eagle is flying so freely,  
The nation is making a beautiful song  
About great and beloved Stalin.*

More about Stalin:

*He is the one who embodies the virtues of great leader  
With the gentle compassion of the father.*

And here is an expert's opinion on the folkloric bond between insemination and death:

Folk songs still glorify the falcon. . . . The favorite and most important incarnations of the Thunderer were eagle and falcon. . . . This identification of God, responsible for thunder and rain, with the eagle is clearly conveyed in this ancient charm: 'The eagle was flying from behind the Khvalyn Sea (sea-sky), throwing stones and flints about the shores. Sent an arrow of lightening into wet earth, striking spark and fire from the flint. And the cloud poured rain.' . . . In more recent times, when arrows were replaced with rifles, the lightening was likened to a gun shot. This is evident from the following riddle: "The eagle flies, exhaling flames, carrying the man's death on his tail. [25]

Or as Taras Bulba, Gogol's immortal hero, yells to his son,

*I begot you, and so, I'll kill you.*

"Pagans often saw their gods as a cross between man and bird." [26] The eagle-father calls on his eaglets to rise above the vast land and then sends them back to their mother's womb, from which the newfangled birds -- and new songs -- will fly out in due course.

\* \* \* \*

"Difficult assignments" are common in fairy tales as well as reality which aspires to become a fairyland. But then, "*We are not looking for easy trails.*" The central and barely articulated task given to the fairy-tale hero is . . . to perish. It is very important that "difficult assignments" appear to be impossible to accomplish (it is impossible to build socialism, for no one knows what it is, nonetheless it has been built).

"The assignment takes a particular form -- putting the fiance to the test.

When 'power' is invoked here, it is anything but physical strength. What is truly tested here is the magical power, embodied in the hero's helper." [27] Magic is baffling to the mind, but then so is the refrain from the popular revolutionary song:

*Fearless, we shall battle for Soviet power,  
And we shall perish one and all in this struggle.*

"The assignments and the requisite perils that the princess sets before her suitor reflect not so much her desire to choose the best groom as the secret hope that there will be no groom at all." [28] This observation by Propp is most perceptive, and it goes to the heart of the matter. The bride is not against the idea of marriage as such. It is the particular groom she is not happy about, and she goes out of her way to put off what seems to be a happy ending, because it would mean the end to "difficult assignments" and the beginning of an easy -- and therefore meaningless -- life. The far away and uncertain future is more precious than the present, and the more effort is spent to bring out the future, the longer the road leading to it. Remember: *"Fearless, we shall battle for Soviet power, and we shall perish one and all in this struggle."* In the end, the power will still be there, but we shall be no more. And so, as long as one lives, the battle continues, as does the song:

*For as long as my feet can walk,  
As long as my eyes can see,  
As long as my lungs can breathe,  
I shall be moving onward . . .*

*Propelled by my heartbeat toward the disquieting future.*

These sentiments trace their roots to the most mysterious of all Russian fairy tales, which nurtured generations of Russian and Soviet people.

*The hen hatched a golden egg. The old man tried to break it, but he couldn't. The old woman tried to break it, but she couldn't. A mouse ran along, wagged her tail, the egg fell off and broke by itself. The old man is crying, the old woman is crying, and the hen says: 'Don't cry, folks, I'll hatch you another egg, not a golden but an ordinary one.'*

Why are the old man and the old woman crying over the broken egg? Was not breaking the egg what they both wanted? Why not rejoice now when they have gotten their way? This family is remarkable precisely because it labors hard to avoid achieving its stated goal. Its members are trying to

break the egg, but they really do not want to have it broken. Getting oneself busy means day-dreaming or singing along. The dream that has come true ruins your life. That is why the old man with the old woman are crying -- there is nothing else to do. That is why the mere thought about the song coming to an end is so terrifying.

Fairy tales teach us that wealth is perilous and poverty is profitable. Thus the dilemma -- "to have or not to have" -- is solved. All one has to do is to pay close attention to . . . words. Both fairy tale and Kafkian reality are permeated with mystic attitudes toward words, which is an analogue of or a substitute for actions. The word could land you in jail, the word could save your life, and the word that was sung guaranteed you the sublime, liberating, nay, sensual pleasure. Our song is ascending to the Sun like the "troika-the-bird," it soothes our burning hearts each time it rises from the ashes like a Phoenix.

The mysterious logic that reverses the natural sequence of cause and effect stems either from the faith in the word or the intuition about its inherent falsehood. But the law of the "identity and struggle of the opposites," or of the antinomic character of "alcoholic consciousness," still holds. In the Russian fairy tale, as in life, the poor is the one who is oppressed, but then it is the poor, the meek and the weak, who defeats the mighty one (like the rooster who fools the fox). Ivan reaches the crossroads where he chooses the road "leading to your doomsday," but manages to survive and defeat his enemies. Then, we are invited to a feast, where one is wined and dined but leaves on an empty stomach. It is good to be wealthy, yet it is only a matter of time before the poor will take over your possessions. "*Who was once in a gutter, now's the knight,*" says the proverb, but the other one warns you about the reverse transformation, "*from the knights and into the gutter.*" "*Who has been nothing, will have become everything.*" By will of the pike, peasant Yemelia turned into a king. By the commandment of the "Gold Fish," the old fisherman's wife became the queen. To be sure, in the end she loses everything the Gold Fish granted her, but that was because she wanted to have more than everything. The cardinal alternative -- "everything" and "nothing" -- appears to harbor the two incompatible things, but beneath this superficial antagonism there is the fundamental unity of the opposites. Thus "alcoholic," i.e., dual, consciousness adapts the law of the "identity and struggle of the opposites."

"*Working days are holidays for us*" means that there are neither workdays, nor holidays. There is only total -- totalitarian -- uniformity, where all heterogeneity is suppressed and distinctions are obliterated. In

songs, much like in fairy tales, "*vast distances contract*" and "*nights resemble days*." The extremes tend to exaggerate a specific, low-key event, blowing it into something global: revolution is always "*the world revolution*," success means that "*we are ahead of the whole world*," struggle proves that "*nothing can stop us*," empowering the Soviets means that "*all power goes to the Soviets*," and if we are to perish, "*we shall perish one and all*." In the fabled reality, idea serves as metaphor, reality as fairy tale, song as magic:

*In bitter cold the song will warm you up  
In blistering heat it'll refresh you like cool water.  
And of course, the living appear as dead and the dead as living:  
As if alive, speaks Lenin to the living. . .  
Lenin's more alive today than anybody living.*

\* \* \* \*

"*Where does the Motherland begin?*" From a picture in the textbook, from a bench in your backyard, from a song your mother sang to you, but most importantly, "*From the oath you gave to Her in your hearts of heart*." Hence,

*Our concern is a simple one,  
What we care about is this,  
That our Motherland live forever,  
Nothing else matters to us. . .*

Our sole (all or nothing) concern is to assure our Motherland's well-being, even if that means all of us should perish. Motherland's life is always imperilled by her enemies, who never sleep. And so, "*my heart is always nudging me toward a disquieting future*." This maniacal drive "*higher and higher*," turned the wayfarer into a perpetuum mobile with "*a fiery engine for a heart*" for whom freedom and labor are the same thing, workdays are holidays, writers are engineers of human souls. In the end, the wayfarer turns into a vagabond, a refugee, and a freedom fighter.

*Where does the Motherland begin?  
Perhaps, from the rumbling of the train wheels.*

Thus went the famous song. But these train wheels ultimately ran over the people, who convinced themselves that they are a God-chosen people.

*Come with me . . . Let's climb to the very top --*

*Beyond the clouds, . . . Across the seas and forests*

But:

*Across the seas and forests, the sorcerer takes the knight.*

The song's hero is akin to the knight-sorcerer, half-man, half-God. This metamorphosis has been captured in the folk songs.

*To make his work easier, a wise Englishman invents a steam engine,  
Tired by his labor, our Russian muzhik bursts into a song 'Dubinushka.'*

"Dubinushka," the Russian word for "cudgel," is the name of a popular song which warns us that, sooner or later, the muzhik will "*find an even bigger cudgel to do away with the gentry, the czar and the priests.*"

This instrument of retribution, born out of song and often transformed beyond recognition, is handed over from one generation to another. But the song itself is also a tool which aids the Russian laborer, just as the steam engine aids an English worker. This mighty weapon-come-tool left an indelible imprint on man, the Soviet man, who belongs to the anti-machine civilization.

*You are the master, you are the Lord of the universe,  
Oh, mighty working man.  
In the palm of your hand,  
You can hold mountains and forests.  
Or consider this line:*

*We are happier than many  
Perhaps, we are stronger than gods.  
If gods created the earth,  
We are creating cities on it.*

The master of the cities holds in the palm of his hand the god's creation. Isn't it any wonder that "*I, he, you, she -- our whole nation*" are more powerful than all the gods and would think nothing of dispensing with those fabulous gifts:

*Today, I gave her all of the sky,  
Tomorrow, I'll give her the entire earth.*

"Happiness for eternity" has so firmly ensconced itself in our songs that

very little of it was left for mundane life. Heaven and hell have become indistinguishable, a nearly perfect equilibrium has been established between poetry and truth, the warrior and the fool, the long road and the dead ends, superliminal time and time that stands still.

". . . Were underground palaces built to serve as bomb shelters or were bomb shelters originally conceived as palaces? . . . Is graveyard the trap-door to paradise, or is paradise a stopover on the way to the graveyard? Paradise is at the graveyard's side, the graveyard is the foundation for paradise." [29]

The song pulled down the wall that once separated the real and imagined worlds, eliminated the distinction between top and bottom (says the hero of "In the Gutter," the play written by the engineer of human souls, M. Gorky: "Man! That word has a proud ring to it!"), and between victory and defeat, which, it is said, a true poet "shouldn't be too quick to tell apart." Surely, the same applies to our entire creative folk who has spun off those fairy tales, songs and anecdotes.

In the fairy tales we find the clues to the mystery of the lucky fools, of the princesses toiling at night like exemplary workers, of the kings who seek council from the drunkards, of the "lie" that is always "*well-heeled*," of the Russian man who feels everywhere out of place. While the fairy tale goads us to find an answer to this puzzle in the sorrow, the song points out in the opposite direction.

And when the dream has finally come true and paradise is built on the graveyard, there is nothing much left to do, except to die (deathwish or the yearning for "the other life" is stronger in the Russian than the will to live), or keep on chasing the blue bird of happiness in the ever loftier heights. For, the ultimate happiness is in seeing to it that the Motherland lives forever. Craving life is not enough; one ought to strive to make it better. Eternal perfection lures us on, it gives us no respite. "*Oh, my heart, you never let me rest.*" Workdays merging with holidays fill one's heart with frenzied joy.

*The train wheels are repeating . . .  
My addresses and phone numbers  
Which are scattered across many cities. . .  
My address has no street number,  
My address is the Soviet Union!*

And when the Soviet Union has finally collapsed, the Mother Earth

quavered, erasing familiar street names, obliterating the addresses we used to know. The only thing left for the Soviet man was the song.

We live through extraordinary times today, when all the myths are dying. Witness all the sorcerers, astrologists and witch doctors invading our TV screens. They have precise names and addresses, and we don't seem to be perturbed listening to their drivel.

Myths lend stability to the public mind; fairy-tale miracles happen suddenly, "all by themselves."

At first, we rejoiced when the myths began to fall by the wayside. Now that the floodgates of truth are open, we are desperately trying to stave off its tide which threatens to engulf us. Even when we see through its deception, we do not want to see the myth explode and recoil from the sight of the mythological ruins. People still believe that "truth is good, but happiness is dearer." As Gogol sarcastically wrote in his poem in prose, "The Dead Souls":

'Do you really think we are oblivious of our life's inanities? Surely we can see that many things around here are distressing. Why don't you show us something beautiful and exciting, instead, so that we can lose ourselves in a sweet dream!' 'Now, now, my dear fellow, don't bother me with the tales about my wretched estate and its many woes,' a landlord says to his bailiff. 'I know it myself. Don't you have better things to tell me? Help me forget this sad world, and you'll make my day.'" [30]

The total disarray pervading our existence today testifies to the fact that our romantic sensibilities are waning, that the myth has lost its magical poetic power. The only myth that continues to fire imagination is the one about Russia's mysterious, messianic destiny. Alas, even this most seductive of our myths have shown cracks.

*The rest is silence. . .*

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