

Close Encounters

Essays on Russian Literature

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Close Encounters

Essays on Russian Literature

ROBERT LOUIS JACKSON

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To Leslie
Painter and Poet
Companion of My Life

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Willst du ins Unendliche schreiten,
Geh nur im Endlichen nach allen Seiten.

Willst du dich am Ganzen erquicken,
So musst du das Ganze im Kleinsten erblicken.

(If you would advance into the infinite,
Go then and explore the finite in all directions.

If you would renew yourself in the Whole,
Then you must discern the Whole in the smallest of things.)

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

This collection of essays is neither a history of Russian literature in disguise nor is it a collection of separate interpretations of great Russian books. *Close Encounters* is an answer, a new answer to the old question of what to look for in Russian literature. Years ago we had Aaron Copland's *What to Listen for in Music*; and, with quite similar intentions, our author now presents his approaches to "Russian fiction" which, as William Lyon Phelps of Yale University once put it, "is like German music—the best in the world."

The categories are "Freedom and Responsibility" (eight essays covering Pushkin, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov); "Two Kinds of Beauty" (five essays dealing with Dostoevsky, and one on Solzhenitsyn); "Critical Perspectives" (four essays about the purposes of art, with special reference to Dostoevsky's concept of reality, Gorky's polemic with Dostoevsky, Bakhtin's *Poetics of Dostoevsky*, and 'Dostoevsky's Christian declaration of Faith,' and Vyacheslav I. Ivanov's poem "Nudus Salta!"); and last but not least, "Poems of Parting" (four essays on poems by Tyutchev, Igor Severyanin, the two final stanzas of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, and Nabokov's translation of a poem by Goethe).

Erudite and clear, these twenty-two essays comprise political implications and esthetic theory as well as intimations of mortality and immortality. *Close Encounters* means that the reader feels provoked to react and respond to all these writers of prose and poetry as if they were our contemporaries. And they really are our contemporaries, because tradition is brought to life by Robert Louis Jackson's art of interpretation, turning the scholar of Russian literature into a teller of tales of text, subtext and context. The principle of his hermeneutics

comes to the fore in the motto of his collection of essays, taken from Goethe: “Willst du ins Unendliche schreiten,/Geh nur im Endlichen nach allen Seiten,/Willst du dich am Ganzen erquicken,/So musst du das Ganze im Kleinsten erblicken” (If you would advance into the infinite,/Go then and explore the finite in all directions./If you would renew yourself in the Whole,/Then you must discern the Whole in the smallest of things).

This, and only this, is the real definition of “close reading.” It was the renowned German publisher, Ernst Rowohlt, who really knew how to test a manuscript offered for publication. He would throw it down on the carpet, it is said, and just read the page which opened by chance. If the page was of interest to him he published the manuscript. He was convinced that the reader in a bookstore tested a book the same way; open a chance page: to buy or not to buy. We can test whether Ernst Rowohlt was right here, today, by opening at random any page of *Close Encounters*.

Take, for instance, page 100. We are in the middle of the essay on Anna Karenina’s night train to St. Petersburg. “Anna’s deliriums, her hallucinations, or what we might for convenience’s sake call her nightmare, follow on her recognition and her joyful acceptance of her sexuality, her shame, her passion for Vronsky. Her passion is the focal point of her nightmare, but the nightmare itself centers on the conflict this passion arouses in her, and her inner awareness of the consequences of her passion for Vronsky. We are witness to the convulsions of conscience. The emotional climax of these convulsions is both a vicarious experience of sexuality and a premonition of death—a premonition linked with her encounter with Vronsky at the railroad station and her troubled reaction to the death of the guard.”

The interpretation draws the reader into the whirlpool of emotion going on in Anna Karenina, but at the same time the reader becomes aware of Tolstoy the artist who connects the outer world of an accident at a railway station (death of a guard) with Anna Karenina’s forbidden passion for Vronsky as a premonition of death. The chance passage quoted here arouses the reader’s interest; he does not want to stop reading and will not because the rhetoric of interpretation yields completely to Tolstoy’s rhetoric of fiction. The craft of fiction is fused with the art of interpretation. And this is exactly the governing principle of *Close Encounters*. We are seeing the fictional world with the novelist’s eye guided by the interweaving commentary of the essayist. As a result we turn again, or perhaps for the first time, to Tolstoy’s

novel. The effect is that we learn to criticize the critic by going back to the work in question, since literary essays belong by definition to the liberal imagination.

The range of literary matter offered in *Close Encounters* is extraordinary. Not only are we introduced in several essays to the “big” novels *War and Peace* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, but also to most rewarding miniatures such as Dostoevsky’s “The Peasant Marey” or “Anecdote from a Child’s Life,” both taken from his *Diary of a Writer*. And we pay a visit to Dostoevsky’s *The Gambler* to see Polina and Lady Luck. We get an analysis of Chekhov’s most famous play, *The Cherry Orchard*, placed in the context of his use of verbs of motion, as well as an interpretation of Pushkin’s “little tragedy,” *The Stone Guest*. A microcosmic poem by Tyutchev, “In Parting there is a Lofty Meaning,” is shown to be a universe of its own, while Nabokov’s drama of exile in Berlin is highlighted in his Russian translation in 1923 of a poem by Goethe: See the concluding essay, “From the Other Shore. Nabokov’s Translation into Russian of Goethe’s “Dedication” to *Faust*”—one that combines the worlds of Goethe, Pushkin and Nabokov, and demonstrates again the three leading qualities of our author: erudition, “Einfühlung,” or empathy, and what is called “hermeneutic humility,” meaning patience and attention to every detail. The ever present horizon of Western philosophy, including Plato and Aristotle as well as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Nietzsche, guarantees a rare equilibrium of judgment.

For sheer power of convincing argument and didactic know-how, *Close Encounters*, I think, can only be compared to the essays of T. S. Eliot. They need no introduction. Try reading any single one of them and you will find yourself reading all of them.

Horst-Jürgen Gerigk
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A GLANCE AT THE ESSAYS

Close Encounters: Essays on Russian Literature, a selection of writings on Russian prose, poetry, and criticism in four parts, covers the period from my second book, *Dostoevsky's Quest for Form: A Study of his Philosophy of Art* (1966), to the present. For reasons of space, I have omitted selections from my earliest period of writing, notably, from *The Underground Man in Russian Literature* (1958). Yet that study, with its core focus on Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (1864)—a work that both defends free will and criticizes self-will, while pointing to a spiritual path out of the underground—laid the groundwork for one of my most sustained interests in Russian literature: the theme of fate, freedom and responsibility. The first group of essays, centering on works of major Russian writers, consists largely of discussions on this theme, while the second, under the heading "Two Kinds of Beauty," focuses mainly on Dostoevsky's higher esthetic and its centrality in his worldview. The third group of essays, "Critical Perspectives," consists of a discussion of Dostoevsky's views on reality and realism, individual essays on two radically different responses, Gorky's and Bakhtin's, to Dostoevsky's work, and the the consideration of a Russian poet's view of the purpose of art. The final group of essays, "The Poetry of Parting," centers on themes of loss and separation in Russian verse and in translations of Goethe's verse into Russian.

The essays in this book are diverse in theme and content, but all give expression to my binding interest in esthetic and moral-philosophical questions.

Fate, Freedom, and Responsibility

"All's for the best; having accidentally killed Don Carlos. . ."—these are Don Juan's first words in his opening monologue in scene iii of

Pushkin's play, *The Stone Guest*, the last of the Russian poet's "little tragedies." Don Juan is expressing his satisfaction that the way is now open to a conquest of Dona Anna. "All's for the best!" is an allusion to Dr. Pangloss's optimism in Voltaire's *Candide* ("all's for the best in the best of all possible worlds"). The words offer a clue to Pushkin's critique of a rationalism that frees man from moral responsibility. As one of Don Juan's lovers, Laura, remarks: "It's really most vexing. Your eternal tricks—And yet you're never to blame." And yet there is something endearing and affirming about this happy libertine, this boyish lover, this "improviser of the love song": a man whose very existence challenges a rigid and stifling moralistic order. "Moral-Philosophical Subtext in Pushkin's *The Stone Guest*" explores the tension between opposing views of Don Juan. It is with some reluctance, we feel, that Pushkin condemns his liberated and liberating Don Juan. Yet actions have consequences.

"A land primed for fatality, already cursed with it," William Faulkner wrote about the South in his novel *Absalom, Absalom*. The same might be said about Russia's tormented history, yet a deep spiritual legacy in Russian literature and culture argues against such pessimism. The colossal undertow of fatality in Russian national consciousness, nonetheless, is at the center of Ivan Turgenev's early historical-philosophical story, "The Inn" ("Postoiialyi dvor," 1855), the melancholy tale of a diligent Russian Job in a land of binding serfdom. Turgenev empathizes not with the resignation or "wise humility" (smirennomudrie) that wells up in his defeated peasant hero at the end of the story, but with the latter's earlier vigorous efforts to forge his own destiny in the face of what appears, at first, to be a hail of accidents and arbitrary blows of fate.¹

Turgenev's almost hypnotic fascination with fate surfaces again, years later, in his subtle philosophical tale, "Knock... Knock... Knock!.." ("Turgenev's 'Knock... Knock... Knock!..' The Riddle of the Story"). Chance plays an outsized role in the destiny of Turgenev's strange protagonist, Teglev. Yet Teglev, as his creator underscores, stubbornly wills his own fate; he continually turns chance into fate. Ridel, however, the morally ambiguous and rational-minded narrator of Turgenev's tale, plays a subversive role in the drama of his friend,

¹ For a discussion of Turgenev's "The Inn," see my article "Turgenev's 'The Inn': A Philosophical Novella," in *Russian Literature* 16 (1984): 411-419.

Teglev: he gambles with Teglev's credulous nature, thereby facilitating his ultimate suicide.

Man's position is a precarious one in Turgenev's bleak and incalculable universe. No one, or "Nobody," responds to our knocking. We must look inwards rather than outwards for an answer, respond to the heart rather than the head, Turgenev believes. We are our brother's keeper.

Through gambling, smuggling, attempts at escape, and other forms of risk, Dostoevsky affirms in *Notes from the House of the Dead* (1861-1862), the convict in his fate-bound prison world seeks to act "according to his own free will." That freedom, however, is "so utterly without foundation as to border almost on delirium." Dostoevsky's convict is a psychological prototype for the Underground Man (Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, 1864), a disillusioned idealist who knocks his head against the walls of rationalist utopia and of a fate-ruled universe of his own making.

Dostoevsky's gambler, Aleksey ("Polina and Lady Luck in Dostoevsky's *The Gambler*"), an educated person who has lost his faith and national roots, is ultimately caught up in roulette's perpetual mobile of challenges to fate; it is a game, however, in which Polina, the woman who is attracted him, albeit very cautiously, becomes a surrogate for the "lady luck" he seeks to conquer at the gambling tables. The results are predictably tragic for the relationship. On discovering his real love in "lady luck," Aleksey continues to seek "salvation" at the gambling tables. Salvation in roulette, however, is a metaphor for spiritual bankruptcy. Man, Dostoevsky insists, will find neither God nor freedom in play with fate.

"If Napoleon is France, if Napoleon is Europe, it is because the people whom he sways are little Napoleons," Ralph Waldo Emerson famously wrote in "Napoleon; Or, the Man of the World." The Napoleon of *War and Peace* is a satirical figure, while the officer Fyodor Ivanovich Dolokhov might be described as a little Napoleon in everyday life, the quintessential gambler in life. He does not lend himself to caricature. A person of keen intelligence and energy, a duelist and calculating killer, he embodies the spirit of the times, what Napoleon, writing about himself to his brother Joseph Bonaparte, August 12, 1795, describes as the "moral state" of France, "the habit of running risks." The duel between Pierre and Dolokhov, a dramatic and philosophical centerpiece in *War and Peace*, juxtaposes an unpretentious, unaggressive, and bumbling amateur, stumbling into trouble with a professional who has an

overweening confidence in himself and in the powers of the mind. The duel, in many respects contrasting eastern and western philosophies of life, echoes in *War and Peace* the larger confrontation between Russia and Napoleon; it underscores, on the one hand, the limits of rational calculation and, on the other, the ultimately unpredictable character of human events.

"A man's character is his fate." Tolstoy dramatizes this ancient truth early in *Anna Karenina* in the chapter treating of Anna's meeting with Vronsky at the railroad station. Vronsky, glancing at Anna as she steps off the train, notes a "restrained animation" on Anna's face, the abundance of something that expressed itself "against her will." Vronsky's appearance upsets the delicate balance between animation and restraint in Anna. She signals her troubled awareness of the impact Vronsky has made on her when, some moments later, she observes to her brother with regard to the accidental crushing of a guard at the railroad station: "It's a bad omen." She immediately follows this remark with the question: "And have you known Vronsky for a long time?" Anna's conflation of the horrendous accident with the agitation aroused in her by Vronsky's appearance underscores a predisposition in Anna herself to a tragic view of life. Her remark casts a long shadow ahead to her suicide at a railroad station. Ever-present chance plays a role in this episode, but Anna unconsciously weaves it into the basic design of her nature.

"Breaking the Moral Barrier: Anna Karenina's Night Train to St. Petersburg" details the triumph of animation over will, even as Anna's violent emotional upheaval attests to her moral resistance to that happening. Nothing is fated in this scene, Tolstoy insists. Anna is free to resist or to yield to temptation. Chance and circumstance play a role in this dramatic episode, but it is Anna who determines the outcome, not as one who wills it, but as one who is caught up in nature's powers of creation and destruction.

Oscar Wilde once wrote that the "dreadful thing about modernity was that it put tragedy into the raiment of comedy, so that the great realities seemed commonplace or grotesque or lacking in style."² Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, a story of the commonplace and grotesque which moves from satire to tragedy and then to

² Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis and Other Writings*, With an Introduction by Hesketh Pearson (London: 1986), p. 183.

eleventh-hour redemption; a story that conflates Joban, Aristotelian, and Christian drama in a parable of everyday life, demonstrates that the great realities never take holiday. These realities are at work even in everyday language.

Nobody among Judge Ivan Ilych's middle class entourage is capable of facing the fact of death, the reality of his own death, in particular; nobody is capable of reflecting on the meaning of life that the fact of death poses. The thought of death is repressed. Yet the very language Tolstoy's characters use to cover up their fear and anxiety betrays their inner turmoil.

The language of evasion is at the center of "*Uzhas in the Subtext: The Death of Ivan Ilych*." Concentrating on the opening and closing scenes of the story, "*Uzhas in the Subtext: The Death of Ivan Ilych*" focuses on the way horror (*uzhas*), penetrates everyday language and manifests itself in veiled and euphemistic forms of speech. The essay begins with an analysis of the way Ivan Ilych's colleagues gingerly process the "news" of his death and concludes with a discussion of the end of the story, where horror is replaced by pity.

"What Time is it?" asks Lopakhin, former serf and now merchant, in *The Cherry Orchard*. "Time is marching on" (*Vremia idet*—literally, *time is coming*), he warns the Ranevsky family with reference to the impending sale of the estate. Nobody in the Ranevsky entourage, however, nobody except Lopakhin, is moving to meet time and the exigencies of the situation. In Act I of the play, everybody is going to sleep.

Yet there is constant movement throughout the play. The Russian verbs of motion *idti* (to go on foot) and *ekhat'* (to go in a vehicle) in all their variant forms, uses, and meanings, literal and figurative, are on everybody's lips. The play is bracketed by the grand actions of coming and going. Remarkably, one can structure the literal and dramatic action of the play almost entirely around verbs of motion.

The verbs of motion become the means of transportation, so to speak, for the motifs of coming and going, arrival and departure, farewell and reunion, sleep and awakening, death and resurrection. Arriving very early in the morning at the estate, Anya wants to go to sleep quickly so as to awaken and run about the cherry orchard—her Garden of Eden. The need for sleep is real, but sleep, the long sleep, dream, death, and awakening form a subtext to the topics of the play. What time is it? It's later than you think. In fact, the Ranevsky family does not so much live in time, in the present, as out of time. Time is apocalyptic in *The Cherry Orchard*. There is no more time ...

Two Kinds of Beauty

The opening essay of the second group of essays, "Two Kinds of Beauty," focuses on Dostoevsky's higher esthetic, the classical and Christian foundation of his view of beauty, and the way in which it is reflected in Dostoevsky's concept of "obraz" (image, form, shape, but also icon) and "bezobrazie" (ugliness, shapelessness, moral disfiguration), its opposite. Dostoevsky's higher esthetic is the organizing element of his worldview: it constitutes a philosophical credo, at once a view of beauty and a statement about the human condition. Dostoevsky's interest in Christian esthetics goes back to his earliest years, when he became familiar with the writings of Schiller and with Chateaubriand's *Genius of Christianity* (*Le génie du christianisme*, 1802). In 1856 he wrote an essay on the "significance of Christianity in art," the "fruit of decades of thought," he noted in one of his letters. The essay was not published or preserved, but elements from it resonate in his critical writings of the early 1860s, in particular his critique of the utilitarian esthetics of the radical critic N. A. Dobrolyubov, and above all in his letters and notebooks, where the religious foundation of his esthetic finds direct and explicit expression. The deeply personal character of Dostoevsky's higher esthetic may be felt in his moving letter to N. D. Fonvizina in 1854 where he speaks of moments, in prison, where he conceived of Christ as the ideal of beauty and perfection. He emerges in this letter as one whose faith is inconstant, but whose striving for it is permanent and passionate. Echoing his own personal outlook, his higher esthetic posits a tragic view of mankind eternally striving, in spite of all setbacks and failures, for the highest ideal. "Mankind on earth strives for an ideal that is contrary to his nature," he wrote in his notebook in 1864.

Dostoevsky dramatizes the concept of "obraz" and "bezobrazie" as moral and esthetic polarities in "Over the Brandy," the chapter Dostoevsky devotes to Fyodor Karamazov's fatal moral and ideological encounter with his sons. The theme of "Over the Brandy" is "bezobrazie"—desecration, the defilement of everything sacred (Russia, the Russian peasant, woman, the mother of Alyosha and Ivan, and, finally, the icon of the Madonna.). "An eclipse as never before," Fyodor himself babbles at the end of this scene in recognition of moral and spiritual catastrophe. "Why is such a man alive!" shouts his son Dmitry Karamazov in an early scene in the novel. In "Over the Brandy," one may say that Fyodor has passed sentence on himself.

A more human image of Fyodor emerges in the course of the novel, but at this point Fyodor's behavior would seem to be evidence in favor of Ivan's deep skepticism over human nature.

The issue of Fyodor's basic nature, and his sons' response to it, is taken up in "The Defiled and Defiling 'Physiognomy' of Fyodor Karamazov." The essay begins with a consideration of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's anthropological concept of the "indissoluble complicity between defilement and sexuality"—a complicity that is dramatized in Fyodor's unbridled sensuality. The discussion then turns to the narrator's provocative sketch of Fyodor's face, or "physiognomy," as he puts it. The sketch raises a question that was at the center of the so-called art or science of physiognomy in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: do a person's physical features offer the key to his character? Dostoevsky denies a direct correlation of face and character. One must "look into" the face of a person, he insists, to find his spiritual center. Here Dostoevsky's poetics of insight concord with his religious worldview: "Man is created in the image and likeness of God." Man's "obraz," man's image, his likeness to God, may be marred, as in an old icon, but the sacred image retains its essential link with divinity.

The narrator's sketch of Fyodor (a purposeful provocation on the part of Dostoevsky) suggests otherwise; it effectively sets into motion the esthetic and moral-philosophical dialectic of the novel, the issues of good and evil, of the nature of man, of "obraz" and "bezobrazie," that are dramatized in the novel's action and, in one form or another, debated by its main characters.

"Anecdote from a Child's Life," the account of a twelve-year-old girl who unexpectedly leaves her home, goes through harrowing experiences on the dark streets of St. Petersburg, then returns home to tell the tale to her mother, who tells it to Dostoevsky, who tells it with embellishments to his reader, is one of the most important yet least examined sketches in Dostoevsky's *Diary of a Writer*. Here is fact, but here is fiction (three stories rolled into one). Here, too, we are witness to the process of creation, to threshold art—a mode of writing that marks many of the pages of *Diary of a Writer*. A high-minded excursus on the nature and dangers of preadolescence in a predatory world, a sketch with a focus on child-molestation (a frequent theme in Dostoevsky's work), "Anecdote" on every level—genre, form, content, style, language, imagery, view and presentation of character—is marked by the phenomenon of *duality*.

"Life is a whole art," Dostoevsky writes in "Petersburg Chronicle" in 1847, "and to live means to make an artistic work of oneself." This can be done, he writes, only in accord with "communal interests," in sympathy with the "mass" of people, "with its direct, immediate requirements, and not in drowsiness, not in indifference . . . not in solitude."³ These remarks are foundational for any consideration of Dostoevsky's life, work, and artistic muse, especially for Dostoevsky's post-prison and exile writings when his personal, and defining, social contract with the Russian people merges with an explicit Christian ethic and faith.⁴

Artistic self-creation in Dostoevsky's early credo finds its apotheosis in social engagement and creation.⁵ Dostoevsky's ideal finds explicit expression in the narrator of the semi-fictional *Notes from the House of the Dead* (1861-1862). Here the subjective element of autobiography is subordinated to the objective task of the national biography of the Russian people. The esthetic and spiritual accomplishment of this biography consists in the restoration of the image of the martyred Russian people. The narrator of the main text himself emerges by the end of his memoirs as a man of the upper classes who, through his social and personal testament, through suffering shared with the people, himself has attained spiritual liberation. This result punctuates, as it were, the concluding lines of the memoir devoted to the narrator's release from prison, lines laden with spiritual-religious content and allusion (Dante): "Yes, with God! [a response to the convicts' "God be

³ F. M. Dostoevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh*, 30 vols. (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972-1990), 18:13-14.

⁴ For a critique of a *negative* interpretation of Dostoevsky's "muse," see my discussion, "A View from the Underground: On Nikolai Nikolaevich Strakhov's Letter about His Good Friend Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky and on Leo Nikolaevich Tolstoy's Cautious Response to It" in Robert Louis Jackson, *Dialogues with Dostoevsky. The Overwhelming Questions* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press: 1993), 104-120.

⁵ Dostoevsky's notion of self-creation through social creation or engagement would seem to come under the rubric of the Romantic notion of "zhiznetvorchestvo"—"life" (*zhizn'*) and "[creative] work" (*tvorchestvo*)—a belief later adopted or adapted by the Russian Symbolists. For a discussion of this concept and its various nuances and applications, see Michael Wachtel, *Russian Symbolism and Literary Tradition. Goethe, Novalis, and the Poetics of Vyacheslav Ivanov* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 37, 143-156.

with you!"] Freedom, a new life, resurrection from the dead... What a glorious moment!"

In this work, however, there is little direct discussion by the narrator of his spiritual life or how he arrived at his populist outlook. "The Peasant Marey" (1876), with its account of a daydream recollection in prison of a childhood encounter with the kindly and earthy peasant Marey, seeks to fill in that gap. That daydream "miraculously" banished all hatred from his heart, Dostoevsky writes; it enabled him to see the Russian convict in a new light. This peasant with shaven head and branded face, "may be the very same Marey: after all, I really can't look into his heart."

In reading "The Peasant Marey," one feels that Dostoevsky's esthetic dream of artistic self-creation through social creation, through merging with the mass, had been realized and, remarkably, in a single moment of the second week of Easter, most likely in April 1851, a year and a half into his terrible prison ordeal. Did this happening, however, take place in historical time or artistic time? Is this a single, or a triple vision? What is the mix, here, of truth and poetry? Such are some of the questions posed in "The Triple Vision: Dostoevsky's 'The Peasant Marey'."

Dostoevsky's concepts of "obraz" (image, form, but also sacred form, the icon) and "bezobrazie" (the ugly, deformed, disfigured, the scandalous) are rooted in the Russian language and spirituality. In "Matryona's Home," one of Solzhenitsyn's finest works, ethical and spiritual truths are expressed more through imagery than in direct authorial statement. Here, the concepts of "obraz" and "bezobrazie" find embodiment respectively in the peasant woman Matryona and in the disfiguring juggernaut of Soviet power. Matryona is destroyed, but her redeeming iconic image survives. Solzhenitsyn's Matryona is not a doll, not a smiling Soviet advertisement, but the Russian peasant woman upon whom Russian life has depended from time immemorial.

Critical Perspectives

"Critical Perspectives," the third grouping of essays, opens with "Dostoevsky's Concept of Reality and Its Representation in Art." The Russian author's omnibus conception of reality lies at the root of his realism. Reality embraces everything from the familiar to the fantastic. It encompasses psychological, social, economic, cultural, scientific,

historical, metaphysical and religious realms. Reality is everywhere, if we only have the eyes to see it.

Dostoevsky depicts life and death fearlessly—"nothing human is alien to me." "Mere realistic truth, however," is alien to him. The artist must "look into" reality and seek out its "main idea," an idea that at its root is inseparable from the ideal. Man "thirsts" for beauty and the ideal; there is no contradiction, he says, between realism and idealism: both have the same ultimate goals. "There is no reason to be ashamed of one's idealism."

Few if any Russian writers carried on a more intense and at the same time self-lacerating polemic with Dostoevsky than did the Russian writer, Maxim Gorky ("In the Interests of Social Pedagogy: Maxim Gorky's Polemic with Dostoevsky"). Here is a tale of attraction to, and repulsion from, one's psychological double. Dostoevsky's artistic genius was never a question for Gorky: he ranked him with Shakespeare. The trouble was Dostoevsky's allegedly gloomy assessment of man and the human condition, the "sadistic" and "masochistic" elements that Dostoevsky allegedly "discovered" in Russian history and human nature. Yet his sense of the cruelty and chaos of Russian man and, it seems, of human nature, runs like a red thread through Gorky's own writings, including his brilliant three-part creative autobiography "Childhood" ("Detstvo," 1913), "In the World" ("V liudiakh," 1916), and "My University Years" ("Moi universitet," 1922).

"As a 'judge of the world and of people,'" Gorky declared to an audience of Soviet writers and critics in 1934, "Dostoevsky is easy to imagine in the role of a medieval inquisitor." Yet Gorky at the end of his life naively gave the luster of his name to a modern Soviet inquisition. "In the Interests of Social Pedagogy: Maxim Gorky's Polemic with Dostoevsky" explores the social, esthetic, and philosophical dimensions of Gorky's polemic with Dostoevsky in the first quarter of the twentieth century, a period when a whole section of Dostoevsky criticism confused Dostoevsky the writer with his heroes and anti-heroes. Gorky nonetheless remains one of the most interesting figures of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, one who has not yet emerged from the critical clichés of eastern and western criticism.

M. M. Bakhtin was not among the critics who identified Dostoevsky with one or another of the characters in his novels. His Dostoevsky study in 1929 struck a sharp blow at much of earlier Dostoevsky criticism and scholarship. "The present book," Bakhtin wrote in the

opening line of his preface to the 1929 edition of his study, "is devoted to problems of Dostoevsky's *poetics* and surveys his work from that viewpoint *only*." (Bakhtin's italics). In spite of the limitations he placed on his inquiry, one that excluded "ideology that found its direct expression in the pronouncements of Dostoevsky" (or more precisely of his characters), Bakhtin will give real thought to how Dostoevsky's "radically new authorial position" in the novel accommodates 'Dostoevsky's Christian declaration of faith.' Whether he succeeds in integrating this line of thought with his core polyphonic view of Dostoevsky's novels is another question. This topic is at the center of our discussion, "Bakhtin's *Poetics of Dostoevsky* and 'Dostoevsky's Christian Declaration of Faith.'"

"Nudus Salta!", one of the late poems of Vyacheslav I. Ivanov (1866-1949), contrasts an orgiastic-Dionysian view of the "purpose of art" with a lofty, spiritualized Dionysian and Christian view of art. Ivanov certainly embraces the view of art set forth in the second stanza of his poem. On the other hand, though in earlier years he had taken a deep interest in the orgiastic elements of Dionysianism he had never embraced the "all is permissible" program for art trumpeted in the first stanza of his poem. Significantly he distances himself from this stanza by putting it in quotation marks, thus suggesting an alien voice. "Vyacheslav I. Ivanov's Poem 'Nudus Salta!' and the Purpose of Art" brings to the foreground one of Russia's great poets and thinkers.

Poetry of Parting

The final group of essays in this book, "Poetry of Parting," brings together poems of widely differing interests and directions. All, however, share a focus on the themes of parting and loss.

Brevity and compression of artistic thought characterize many of the poems of Fyodor Tyutchev (1803-1873). Such is the case with his microcosmic philosophical poem, "In Parting there is a Lofty Meaning." In five lines, with a working vocabulary of 26 words, Tyutchev offers a poem of astounding complexity on the themes of mortality and immortality. What starts out as an affirmation of the "lofty meaning" of parting ends with an abrupt "awakening." "Here are some bad verses expressing something even worse," Tyutchev wrote his wife in a letter. Yet Tyutchev's poem has its own understanding of what it wants to say. As André Gide observed in his preface to *The Immoralist*: "Really, there are no problems in art for which the work itself does not provide an

adequate solution" (A vrai dire, en art, il n'y a pas de problèmes dont l'oeuvre d'art ne soit la suffisante solution).

Igor Severyanin's poignant and prophetic poem, "No More Than a Dream," about the loss and recovery of the legacy of the great Russian poet Alexander Blok, has an outward simplicity that belies its inner complexity. This dazzling poet of pre-revolutionary Futurism has lost none of his mastery of poetic technique in this post-revolutionary poem of exile and loss. Poetry in Severyanin's poem, however, turns away from provocative "innovation" for its own sake and returns to the roots and role of poetry as inspiration and prophecy. Not without reason does the dream occupy the center of Severyanin's poem, and not surprisingly does it return on its deepest level to the poetry of Alexander Pushkin, Russia's greatest poet.

In the final two stanzas of his great "novel in verse," *Eugene Onegin*, Pushkin bids farewell not only to Onegin and to his, Pushkin's, "faithful ideal," Tatyana, but also to "those to whom at friendly meetings/the first strophes I read . . . /Some are no more, others are distant, /as erstwhile Saadi said." (The translation here is by Vladimir Nabokov). On the historical plane, scholars have seen in these lines a veiled reference to the Decembrists, participants in an abortive insurrection in St. Petersburg in 1825, people with whom Pushkin was intimate. In his Commentary on Pushkin's final two stanzas of *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov gives a good deal of time to searching out the source of the so-called Saadi line. My essay, "Supremum Vale: The Last Stanzas of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*: Goethe, Zhukovsky, and the Decembrists," directs attention to works whose impact on the last two stanzas of *Eugene Onegin* is indubitable, namely, Goethe's "Dedication" (*Zueignung*) to *Faust* and Vasily Zhukovsky's free adaptation of Goethe's "Dedication," entitled "A Dream: An Imitation of Goethe" (1817). The essay focuses on how Pushkin integrated fragmentary literary reminiscences with his own creative design.

The inspiration for the final essay in this book, "From the Other Shore: Nabokov's Translation into Russian of Goethe's 'Dedication' to *Faust*," is quite simply the question: why did Nabokov in his discussion of the final two verses of Pushkin's "novel in verse" ignore Goethe and Zhukovsky, two writers who figure prominently elsewhere in his Commentary on *Eugene Onegin*?

The genius of Nabokov is "strong," not only in "opinions," but in the wizardry of his art and artistic persona; it is famously strong, too, in the art of play, of hide and seek, of mystery and disclosure. One

takes note not only of what Nabokov says, but of what he does not say, as one does of empty space on a chess board. "From the Other Shore" is an effort to fill in this space. My discussion involves Nabokov the man, writer, scholar, critic, and translator of *Eugene Onegin*. It focuses on his tragic loss of family, home and hearth, land and homeland, and, in this connection, on his translation of Goethe's "Dedication"—a poem also dealing with the theme of grief and loss.

In an extraordinary way, the problem content of Nabokov's life and poem-translation merges with the works of Pushkin, Goethe, and Zhukovsky. One becomes aware, again, of the fraternity of great artists and of the way in which images and motifs, through shared concerns, bound and rebound across the centuries.

A Note on the Text

The twenty two essays brought together in *Close Encounters*, with the exception of the final one on Nabokov written for this book, were taken from my books, from journals, or from collections published over a period of fifty years. In editing this book, I have systematized different styles of footnotes and transliteration. Where citations from Dostoevsky's works were concerned, I have shifted from the use of earlier collections of his works, letters, and notebooks to the most recent Russian edition of his collected works published in the Soviet Union—*Polnoe sobranie sochinenii Dostoevskogo v tridtsati tomakh*, 30 vols. (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972-1990).

In editing *Close Encounters* I have made stylistic changes and adjustments in the text, very occasionally deleting passages or quotations that were redundant in the context of the entire work. However, it was not possible to eliminate all repetitions without damaging the content of the essay. For reasons of space, I had to make significant cuts from "Two Kinds of Beauty" and "Dostoevsky's Concept of Reality and Its Representation in Art," two long essays taken from my second book *Dostoevsky's Quest for Form: A Study of his Philosophy of Art* (1966). In the case of the first essay, I have added a small amount of material from an adjacent essay in *Dostoevsky's Quest for Form* so as to provide a more complete view of my thought.

My special thanks go to David M. Bethea, Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Series Editor of *Ars Rossica*, and also to Deva Jasheway, Kira Nemirovsky, Sharona Vedol, Lauren Taylor, and other staff of the Academic Studies Press, for their assistance in the preparation and launching of *Close Encounters. Essays on Russian Literature*.

Robert Louis Jackson

Truro, Massachusetts , August 27, 2012

*FATE, FREEDOM,
AND RESPONSIBILITY*

MORAL-PHILOSOPHICAL SUBTEXT IN PUSHKIN'S
*THE STONE GUEST*¹

Who is it that can tell me who I am?

—King Lear

A Question of Identity

"The beginning is always decisive," German novelist Theodor Fontane observed well over a hundred years ago. "If one hits it off right, then what follows succeeds through a kind of inner necessity."² One may add that that necessity sometimes carries with it a hint of the inner content of the work. That is eminently the case with the beginning of *The Stone Guest* (*Kamennyi gost'*, 1830) where Pushkin projects a major concern of his play: the question of Don Juan's identity.

The four opening lines of *The Stone Guest*, in contrast to the opening lines of Pushkin's *Mozart and Salieri*, seem disappointingly plain. But plainness in Pushkin always masks complexity. Nothing in Pushkin ever disappoints. He had the uncanny art of making everyday words, speeches, gestures, and actions laden with meanings and

¹ From Alexander Pushkin's *Little Tragedies: The Poetics of Brevity*, ed. Svetlana Evdokimova (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 191–208. Part one of the present essay was first published as part of a larger essay, "Beginnings: The Opening Lines of *Skupoi rytsar'*, *Motsart i Sal'eri* and *Kamennyi gost'*" in *Transactions of the Association of Russian-American Scholars in the USA* 30 (1999–2000): 85–96. Part two of the essay originally appeared under the title of "Moral-Philosophical Subtext in *Kamennyi gost'*" in *Scando-Slavica* 35 (1989): 17–24.

² *Der Anfang ist immer das Entscheidende. Hat man's darin gut getroffen, so muss der Rest mit einer Art von innerer Notwendigkeit gelingen.* Letter of March 6, 1879, to Mathilde von Rohr. See Th. Fontane, *Briefe* 4 v., ed. K. Schreinert and Ch. Jolles, vol. 3 (Berlin: Propyläen Verlag, 1971), 190.

resonances inside and outside the text. The opening lines of *The Stone Guest* are remarkable in the way they intimate in their camouflaged way the tragic direction of the action and a basic issue of the play. On the surface, the lines introduce a tale and hero as familiar to the audience as was the story of Oedipus to the ancient Greeks.

Let's wait for night here. Ah, finally
 We've reached the gates of Madrid! Soon
 I'll fly through familiar streets,
 My moustache covered with a cloak, my brows with a hat.
 What do you think? Could I ever be recognized?³

[Dozhdemsia nochi zdes'. Akh, nakonets
 Dostigli my vorot Madrida! Skoro
 Ia polechu po ulitsam znakomym,
 Usy plashchom zakryv, a brovi shliapoi.
 Kak dumaesh'? Uznat' menia nel'zia?]

The fate of Don Juan, the fatality of the play's action, is prefigured in the words "night," "finally," "gates," "soon" (*noch', nakonets, vorot, skoro*). The first two lines subtly foreshadow the fate of Don Juan at the gates of hell, suggesting, too, that he is "flying" toward that fate, that is, freely accepting and motivating his own fatality; this fact is made explicit in his last words at the end of the play, "I called you, and I am glad to see you" (*Ia zval tebia i rad, chto vizhu*). The last two phrases of the opening lines signal with equal subtlety Pushkin's conscious and unconventional quest in his Don Juan play: the deconstruction of the standard or popular image of Don Juan and its replacement with a morally and psychologically complex figure.

Don Juan, attired in cape and hat that half-masks his face yet at the same time flaunts his conventional signature identity; this familiar Don Juan, ready to fly along "familiar streets," asks lightheartedly, "What do you think? Could I ever be recognized?" Don Juan here puts the question of the entire play: Who is Don Juan? Will the reader "recognize" Pushkin's Don Juan? What is the nature of his identity? Not accidentally do the words "know" and "recognize" (*znat', uznat', priznat'*) recur in the text.

To the popular audience, the dashing cavalier that appears at the beginning of *The Stone Guest* is as recognizable as the "familiar streets"

³ All translations of *The Stone Guest* are mine.

through which he flies. But the question of Don Juan's identity is put, almost mockingly, to the audience: "What do you think? Could I ever be recognized?" The answer will come, slowly but surely, in the course of the play. The audience will ultimately be confronted with a Don Juan who defies conventional romantic or pre-romantic monological labeling; they will find a man, like Odysseus, of many turns, a man of complex and elusive identity, a polyphonic and ultimately tragic Don Juan. The image that Pushkin creates for his reader is that of a man who specializes in masks but who, at the last moment, is unable or unwilling to put on a new disguise, unless it be his own face.

This man of many faces is not apparent to the good-hearted but limited Leporello, a person who, in fact, stands closest to the audience in his monological perception of Don Juan. Leporello takes the mask or myth for the man; loyal to the traditional two-dimensional image of Don Juan, he is certain that his master will be easily recognized. With irony, Leporello replies to Don Juan's question, "Could I ever be recognized?"

Oh yes! It's hard to recognize Don Juan!
There's a mass of people like him!

[Da! Don Guana mudreno priznat'!
Takikh, kak on, takaia bezdna!]

Don Juan, carefree but reluctant to be tagged, retorts:

You're joking?
Now who will recognize me?

[Shutish'?
Da kto zh menia uznaet?]

Leporello proceeds to name the people who will recognize him:

The first watchman,
Gypsy, or drunken musician,
Or one of your own kind, some insolent knight
In a cape with sword under arm.

[Pervyi storozh,
Gitana ili p'ianyi muzykant,
Il' svoi zhe brat, nakhal'nyi kavaler
So shpagoiu pod myshkoi i v plashche.]

Leporello's Don Juan is the cliché, the familiar Don Juan, the stock image that will be recognized by people of his class or by people who share similar traits with him. Yielding to a fatalism that will characterize him throughout the play, Don Juan gives up the argument with the remark: "Well, what matter, what if I'm recognized" (*Chto za beda, khot' i uznaiut*). Pushkin, however, does not give up the matter. He has just begun his play, one in which a complex Don Juan will defy the expectations of the audience and, indeed, if we are to believe Don Juan's final revelations to Dona Anna, perhaps Don Juan's own image of himself.

Don Juan's encounters with Dona Anna in scenes 3 and 4 witness a dramatic process of unmasking. Confronted by her persistent questioning, he declares at last, "I am Don Juan [and] I killed your husband"; "I am Don Juan and I love you" [*Ia Don Guan . . . Ia ubil supruga tvoego; Ia Don Guan, i ia tebia liubliu*]. Don Juan's strange, seemingly reluctant, yet inwardly driven unmasking of himself leads Dona Anna to respond with amazement, "So this is Don Juan . . ." (*Tak eto Don Guan . . .*) Yet even *this* "Don Juan," the supposedly rock-bottom one, does not strike the reader as the ultimate Don Juan. The removal of one mask after another leaves a gallery of masks. The reader is left to wonder, is the Don Juan who declares, "I am Don Juan," just one more mask, or is he the sum of all the masks that he has worn?

The image Don Juan seeks to present to Dona Anna at the final moment of their encounter before the appearance of the knight-commander is that of a man reborn to virtue and humility. Yet even in confession, Don Juan has difficulty (one might say a constitutional one) in expressing, indeed, in feeling, a direct sense of guilt or remorse for his actions. At first, he flatly and defiantly declares to Dona Anna that he has killed her husband, that he "doesn't regret it," and that "there's no repentance" in him (*"Ia ubil / Supruga tvoego i ne zhaleiu / O tom — i net raskaian'ia vo mne"*). Yet in response to Dona Anna's "So this is Don Juan . . ." he is driven to a strange, even hobbled confession, one in which he speaks of himself, as it were, at a remove:

True, is it not, *he's been described to you*
A villain, a monster. — O Dona Anna,
Rumor, *perhaps*, is not quite mistaken,
On my tired conscience much evil
Weighs, perhaps. Thus for long I have been
An earnest student of debauchery (my italics—RLJ).

[Ne pravda li, on byl opisan vam
 Zlodeem, izvergom. — O Dona Anna,
 Molva, byt' mozhet, ne sovsem neprava,
 Na sovesti ustaloi mnogo zla,
 Byt' mozhet, tiagoteet. Tak, razvrata
 Ia dolgo byl pokornyi uchenik.]

Don Juan is certain only of his earnest attention to “debauchery.” Not without reason does the reader (to say nothing of Dona Anna) react with a certain suspicion to the affirmation of rebirth that follows Don Juan’s reference to his “tired conscience”:

But from the time I first saw you,
It seems to me that I have been completely reborn.
 Loving you, I love virtue
 And for the first time humbly
 Bend my trembling knees before it (*my italics—RLJ*).

[No s toi pory, kak vas uvidel ia
 Mne kazhetsia, ia ves' pererodilsia.
 Vas poliubia, liubliu ia dobrodetel'
 I v pervyi raz smirenno pered nei
 Drozhashchie kolena prekloniaiu.]

Don Juan is at least consistent in indicating, most surely naïvely, the fact that he relates to issues of good and evil in a very vague way. His conscience, it would seem, is “tired” not so much through stress as inactivity.

Does Don Juan really have knowledge of himself when he speaks of being reborn? Is there a perceptive shift toward “virtue” in him? Or does it just seem so to him? Is not the supposedly unmasked face he turns to Dona Anna in these last moments even more of a mask than his other disguises? Everything in Don Juan’s moral nature at this last moment is in the realm of “perhaps,” a realm of flux. What is certain is that his sensitivity to moral problems at this point is not above that of the child-adult (in this Don Juan is emblematic, like Dostoevsky’s Dmitry Karamazov, of the broad human condition) struggling with the names or notions of “good” and “evil,” awkwardly trying to relate them to the confused reality of his own inner feelings and strivings. The concept of a “tired conscience” best describes the deepest stratum of his moral personality at this fatal turning point in his life.

The near-final image we have of Don Juan as he confronts the “stone guest,” the statue of the knight-commander, whom he has

summoned, is that of an untrembling and unrepentant figure boldly and gladly accepting his fate. Yet even this picture of a defiant Don Juan is not the final picture of Don Juan that Pushkin leaves us.

"Who knows you?" (*Kto znaet vas?*), that is, who can make you out, Dona Anna wonders. Her "Who knows you?" is the obverse side of Don Juan's "It seems to me." Don Juan does not fully know himself, and Dona Anna, like the reader, is baffled by appearances. In any case, the figurative meaning of "Who knows you?" masks the practical question of recognition, for Dona Anna accompanies her words, "Who knows you?" with an obvious concern that Don Juan, in coming to her, risks being recognized:

But how could you come here.
You could be recognized,
And your death would be inevitable.

[No kak mogli priiti
Siuda vy; zdes' uznat' mogli by vas,
I vasha smert' byla by neizbezhna.]

With this practical question we have come full circle to the beginning of the play, where the literal question of Don Juan's recognition, and of his safety in Madrid, masks the figurative question of his identity: will anybody recognize the real, complex, enigmatic Don Juan? The implications of being recognized are spelled out in Dona Anna's concern that recognition of Don Juan would lead ineluctably to his death.

Death, however, will come not from the king of Spain but from the statue of the knight-commander, from the implacable stone guest, an embodiment of a fate that Don Juan has been inviting from the opening lines of the play: "I have come at your call," says the commander. "I called you, and I am glad to see you," replies Don Juan.

Don Juan's question at the opening of the play, "Could I ever be recognized?" has now become moot. He has long discarded the familiar cape and disguise that popularly define him and that are the signs of carefree erotic triumphs. He has made himself vulnerable and disclosed his complexity. He recognizes both his fatality and his free choice of that fatality. All that remains, it would seem, is a proud confrontation with death. Yet here, too, Don Juan defies expectations.

Don Juan's behavior in the last act and in his last moments casts his fate in a tragic light. To the knight-commander's peremptory

"Give me your hand" (*Dai ruku*), Juan answers, "Here it is . . ." (*Vot ona . . .*). Pushkin's suspension points suggest hesitation on the part of Don Juan. *Ona* ("it" when the Russian noun is of the feminine gender but also "she") refers to Don Juan's hand, but it might also refer to the commander's hand, the death-bearing "right hand" (*desnitsa*) of retribution: "Here it is . . . oh, it's heavy / The grip of his stony hand!" (*Vot ona . . . o, tiazhelo / Pozhat'e kamennoi ego desnitsy!*) That is the hand of death.

The same kind of ambiguity a few moments earlier in the text characterizes Dona Anna's "Here it is" (*Vot on*) when Don Juan begs a kiss. *On* ("it" when the Russian noun is of masculine gender but also "he") refers to the kiss—a masculine noun in Russian—Dona Anna gives Don Juan. "Vot on" may also refer, however, to the arrival of the knight-commander, the "stone guest" whose knocking is heard simultaneously with Don Juan's kiss; thus, "Here he is."

In remarkable play with the simplest elements of the Russian language and with the simplest gestures, Pushkin accents at the end of his play the complex and dramatic linkages of love and death in the relationship of Don Juan and Dona Anna.

The phrase "Vot ona" (that is, "Here it is," here is my hand) might also refer in the subtext to the presence of Dona Anna, who, at the appearance of the commander, "falls" (*padaet*). Thus, along with "Here it is" (Don Juan's hand or the right hand of the knight-commander), the same Russian phrase might also read "Here she is" (*Vot ona*), that is, here is Anna lying on the ground. Such an association between *ona* (she, it) and "Anna" is strengthened by the fact that *ona* and "Anna" are similar-sounding words in Russian, differentiated orally only by differences in stress.

Don Juan's "Vot ona" at the end of the play echoes his use of this phrase at the *beginning* of scene 3. Immediately after his evasive but still hubristic description of how he killed Dona Anna's husband, Don Juan sees Dona Anna and remarks, "Ah! Here she is." (*A! vot ona.*) At this point, Pushkin notes, "Dona Anna enters." When one considers the intimate associations in the play between Dona Anna and death, one may say that Don Juan, seeing Dona Anna for the first time immediately after having described his murder of Dona Anna's husband, sees not merely the woman who will arouse a storm of passion in him but his nemesis, that is, "death"—but without recognizing it.

The allusion to Anna at the end of the play (*Vot ona*) suggests Don Juan's human concern for Dona Anna. Thus, "Vot ona"—"Here it is"

or "Here she is"—preludes both approaching death (the death-bearing hand of the knight-commander) and Don Juan's despairing invocation of Anna's name at the end of the play: "O Dona Anna!"—last words that now, poignantly and unambiguously, attest to his attachment not so much to himself as to Dona Anna.

The movement, then, in the development or disclosure of Don Juan's character is bracketed by two signposts—one at the beginning of scene 3 and the other at the end of scene 4: "Vot ona," "Vot ona." Though identical, each pair of words testifies to very different attitudes toward Dona Anna: in the first instance, Don Juan sees Anna as an object; in the second case, as a subject, a shift that hints at a change of consciousness in Don Juan, at least "momentarily." But the moment of change is the moment of death. Death puts an end to the individual's ever-present freedom, a freedom that in Don Juan's case has been systematically abused. It is death, and only death, that makes it possible to invoke the ancient Heraclitian law that "a man's character is his fate."

Actions have consequences, Tolstoy observed in connection with his novel *Anna Karenina*. Pushkin's *Stone Guest* is about many things, but it is also about consequences. Don Juan invites the knight-commander to his tryst with Dona Anna. However, his resoluteness, his almost buoyant defiance of a moment earlier—"I called you, and I am glad to see you"—deserts him. His final appeal to the "stone guest"—"Leave me alone, let go, let go my hand . . ." (*Ostav' menia, pusti—pusti mne ruku . . .*)—and his last words—"I'm perishing—it's the end—O, Dona Anna!" (*Ja gibnu—koncheno—O, Dona Anna!*)—no longer reflect a resolute acceptance of fate.

Don Juan's last words, however, reflect not repentance but regret and concern for Dona Anna. As such, they also undercut any last attempt on the part of the reader to reset the portrait of Don Juan in any of the old conventional moral-didactic frames. Pushkin is never the prescriptive moralist; he is a writer, in this case, a tragedian. The final image we have of the doomed Don Juan is that of a man liberated from literary convention; though a transgressor of higher law (on this point, Pushkin remains firm) this Don Juan is far from being a conventional deceiver or villain.⁴ He is psychologically complex, multidimensional;

4

Relevant here is Pushkin's remark in a letter to Prince P. A. Vyazemsky about the crowd's attitude toward Byron: "It is delighted at the discovery of any kind of nastiness. *He is petty, as we are, he is nasty, as we are!* You lie,

he is strangely appealing; at the same time, he is enigmatic and disturbing in the way anarchy combines in him with a beguiling aspect of innocence. Don Juan is, ultimately, a tragic figure.

The play's conclusion, one that presents Don Juan disappearing or descending (*provalivaiutsia*) into some netherworld, brings the reader back to the opening lines of the play: "Let's wait for night here. Ah, finally / We've reached the gates." These lines, as we have suggested, signify the fact of Don Juan's arrival, "finally," at the gates of Madrid; they also anticipate his arrival at the gates of hell.

A Question of Higher Law

Alas! My God! he said, I have killed my old master, my friend, my brother-in-law. I am the best man in the world, and behold, I have just killed three men; and of these three, two were priests.

[Hélas! Mon Dieu! dit-il, j'ai tué mon ancien maître, mon ami, mon beau frère; je suis le meilleur homme du monde, et voilà, déjà trois hommes que je tue; et dans des trois il y a deux prêtres.]

—Voltaire, *Candide, or Optimism*

Scene 3 of *The Stone Guest* opens with a brief monologue by Don Juan. As the Russian scholar Dmitrii D. Blagoi observed, the monologues in Pushkin's *Little Tragedies* serve the function of psychological self-disclosure. With respect to Don Juan's monologue, however, Blagoi maintains that it has "not so much a psychological as an informational character, leading [us] on into the subsequent course of action."⁵ On the contrary, whatever its informational function this monologue, indeed, its opening phrase, goes to the heart of Don Juan's complicated psychology and raises fundamental moral-philosophical issues that underlie Pushkin's whole play. These issues engage Pushkin's complex response to the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.

"All's for the best; having accidentally killed Don Carlos" (*Vse k luchshemu: nechaianno ubiv Don Karlosa*) are Don Juan's opening words in

scoundrels. He is both petty and nasty—not like you,—but in a different way!" See *Pushkin o literature*, ed. I. V. Bogoslovskii (Leningrad: Academia, 1934), 85.

⁵ D. D. Blagoi, *Tvorcheskii put' Pushkina* (Moscow: Akademiia Nauk SSSR, 1967), 648.

his brief monologue. This accidental, unintentional, unexpected killing of Don Carlos (this is Don Juan's view of the matter) has annoying consequences: Don Juan is obliged to mask himself as a hermit in a monastery. However, there are compensations: he is now in a position to cast his eyes on the charming Dona Anna. In short, "All's for the best."

The phrase "All's for the best" resonates with meaning. It recalls the social-philosophical, indeed, cosmological, euphoria of the early-eighteenth-century Enlightenment, Voltaire's lethal counterattack in *Candide, or Optimism* (*Candide, ou l'Optimisme*, 1759), and the unforgettable Dr. Pangloss, who in the face of every misfortune insists that "all's for the best" (*tout est au mieux*) "in this best of all possible worlds" (*dans le meilleurs des mondes possibles*).

Voltaire is satirizing the philosophy of Gottfried Leibnitz (1646–1716) as distilled in the writings of Christian Wolff (1679–1754) and others, one that posits a divinely preestablished harmony in which everything has its place and purpose, and everything is directed toward a beneficent end. Moral evil and suffering ultimately dissolve in the universal harmony. "But Pangloss consoled them by the assurance that things could not be otherwise than they are; for, said he, all this must necessarily be for the best. As this volcano is at Lisbon, it could not be elsewhere; as it is impossible that things should not be what they are; as all is good."⁶ Optimism here is but the obverse side of fatalism: "All Chance, Direction which thou canst not see," as Alexander Pope put it in his *Essay on Man* (1734).

With fatalism, of course, goes the rejection of the notion of responsibility or accountability. Such a fantastic and shallow outlook is quite congenial to Pushkin's Don Juan, this buoyant and blithe gallant, this happy libertine, this childlike lover who appears to live beyond good and evil. But is this outlook Pushkin's? Pushkin's approach to the question of responsibility lies at the center of his "little tragedies."

"All's for the best; having accidentally killed": Don Juan's evasion of the question of responsibility is implied in the juxtaposition of these two phrases. The problem of responsibility dissipates in the realm of

⁶ "[M]ais Pangloss les consola, en les assurant que les choses ne pouvaient être autrement; car, dit-il, tout ceci est ce qu'il y a de mieux; car, s'il y a un volcan à Lisbonne, il ne pouvait être ailleurs; car il est impossible que les choses ne soient pas où elles sont; car tout est bien" (chapter five).

a larger beneficent purpose. Juan's monologue closes as it opens: with a characteristic evasion of the question of responsibility.

When hard by the Escorial we met,
He stumbled upon my sword and expired.
Just like a dragonfly upon a pin.

[Kogda za Eskur'ialom my soshlis',
Natknulsia mne na shpagu on i zamer,
Kak na bulavke strekoza.]

Don Juan does not consider himself responsible for killing Dona Anna's husband; rather, he views his opponent as at fault for stumbling upon his, Juan's, sword. Juan, further, distances himself from the moral significance of his act by comparing his opponent to an insect.

The theme of self-will (*samovolie*) is raised obliquely at the play's beginning in Leporello's reference to Don Juan's decision to return to Madrid. "The exiled Don Juan has willfully turned up in Madrid." (*Don Guan iz ssylki samovol'no v Madrid iavilsia.*)

Don Juan's hubris, his moral and social declaration of independence, echoes again in the subtext of Leporello's answer to the monk's question, "Who are you? The servants of Dona Anna?" (*Kto zdes'? ne liudi l' Dony Anny?*) "No, we are our very own masters, / We are out for a stroll." (*Net, sami po sebe my gospoda, / My zdes' guliaem.*) Yet as Pushkin demonstrates in his play, no man is master in this world, and life is not a stroll.

Scene 2 is decisive in establishing the moral-philosophical context of Don Juan's singular psychology. The theme of guilt and responsibility is introduced at first, indirectly, by Laura, a character who in large measure shares the optimistic and carefree nature of Juan, but who nonetheless is not oblivious to moral questions. When Don Carlos objects to Laura's uttering the name of Don Juan, she retorts, "Am I to blame if every moment / That man's name is on my tongue?" (*A vinovata l' ia, chto pominutno / Mne na iazyk prikhodit eto imia?*) What is spontaneous, happenstance, unpremeditated, Laura seems to suggest, is not subject to moral accountability or censure. This outlook is implicit in Don Juan's behavior and actions. The theme of the accidental, the unintentional, the unexpected is a major one in scene 2. When Don Juan arrives in Laura's apartment, he finds Don Carlos there and exclaims, "What an unexpected meeting! / Tomorrow I'm at your service" (*Vot nechaiannaia vstrecha! / Ia zavtra ves' k tvoim uslugam.*)

But the encounter and its consequences can be viewed only partly as unexpected or accidental. Don Juan, on setting forth to Laura's house unannounced, remarks, "I'll go straight in the door—and if somebody's with her, / I'll suggest that he jump out the window" (*K nei priamo v dver'—a esli kto-nibud' / Uzh u nee—proshu v okno prygnut'*). Don Juan comes looking for trouble. Characteristically, after killing Don Carlos, he puts all the blame for the event on the Spanish grandee: "What's to be done? / He asked for it himself" (*Chto delat'? / On sam togo khotel*). "And it is difficult to come up with any rebuttal to this [fact]," Blagoi remarks at this point in his analysis of *The Stone Guest*.⁷ The matter is not at all that simple, however. There is much to object to in Don Juan's remark, "He asked for it himself." We have here a typical attempt on his part to sidestep personal responsibility for killing Don Carlos.⁸

Laura grasps the issue more subtly than does Blagoi. To Don Juan's "he asked for it himself," she replies ironically:

Ah, Don Juan,
It's really most vexing. Your eternal tricks—
And yet you're never to blame . . . Where have you come from now?
Have you been here for long?

[Ekh, Don Guan,
Dosadno, pravo. Vechnye prokazy—
A vse ne vinovat . . . Otkuda ty?
Davno li zdes'?]

Laura's words go to the heart of the problem of the capricious child-adult Don Juan: eternal tricks, pranks, spontaneous actions, gambling with love and death—and yet never guilty! Laura brings to the foreground Don Juan's unexpressed assumptions: chance is supposedly at fault. Yet the childish prank committed by an adult is often a stepping outside of law and limits. One may recall, too, in this connection that "tricks" (*prokazy*) are usually mischievous, even

⁷ Blagoi, op. cit., 647.

⁸ Another typical instance of Don Juan's moral evasiveness is his response toward the end of scene 4 to Dona Anna's question: "How many poor girls did you ruin?" Don Juan replies, "I did not love a single one of them till now"—as though not loving these girls justified his ruining their lives!

malicious. Of significance, in this connection, is that the Russian word for trick (*prokaza*) also means leprosy.

We, too, may ask Don Juan, as Laura does, Where have you come from now? Have you been here for long? That is, from what world or realm comes this man who places himself consciously or unconsciously above all accountability and law? Does Don Juan, variously called “devil,” “a real demon,” arrive with his “eternal tricks” like some fallen angel from exile? “I’ve just arrived, / And on the sly—for I’ve really not been pardoned” (*Ia tol’ko chto priekhal / I to tikhon’ko—ia ved’ ne proshchen*). Precisely, neither king nor God has pardoned this charming but devilish Don Juan.

Laura’s remarks inadvertently bring out the moral dimension of Don Juan’s tricks. She quickly drops the matter but in a manner that recalls Juan’s “All’s for the best.” She goes on:

And you immediately remembered your Laura?
Well and good. But come now,
I don’t believe [it]. You were passing by accidentally
And saw the house.

[I vspomnil totchas o svoei Laure?
Chto khorosho, to khorosho. Da polno,
Ne veriu ia. Ty mimo shel sluchaino
I dom uvidel.]

Chto khorosho, to khorosho, “Well and good,” literally, “What’s good is good.” In other words, whatever happened, the end is good. What is good for us, what brings pleasure, however, is not always ethically good. In the hierarchy of things good, esthetic good does not take precedence over ethical good. “What’s good is good” does not address the issue of the corpse on the floor, of murder, although in Dr. Pangloss’s philosophy, “It is demonstrable that things cannot be otherwise than they are, for all things having been made for some end, everything must necessarily be for the best end.”⁹ Not in Pushkin’s view, however. Indeed, in his play, the notion that “all is good” (*tout est bien*), “all’s for the best” (*tout est au mieux*), or that man is what he is

⁹ “Il est démontré, disait il, que les choses ne peuvent être autrement; car, tout étant fait pour une fin, tout est nécessairement pour la meilleure fin.” Chapter one.

and ought to be is not the end of the matter, but the beginning of the problem.

In Pushkin's active subtext, Laura's "I don't believe [it]" tells us more than the fact that she doesn't believe Don Juan intentionally came to see her. On the moral-religious plane neither Laura nor Don Juan believes firmly in anything except themselves; certainly, they do not "believe" in the religious sense of the word. In any case, they do not strongly believe in a world where is accountable for one's acts.

Scene 2 ends with a mutual confession of infidelity. Don Juan asks Laura how many times she has been unfaithful to him. "What about you?" she asks in return. "Tell me . . . No, we'll talk it over later" (*Skazhi . . . Net, posle peregovorim*), he replies as the scene concludes. What Don Juan wants, feels, desires comes first; other matters come later, if at all. In the presence of the dead Don Carlos, both Don Juan and Laura make love. Significantly, the words "We'll talk it over later" are immediately followed by the phrase that opens scene 3: "All's for the best." That notion is the underpinning of all of Don Juan's actions and behavior.

In fact, Don Juan is not beyond good and evil, either objectively or subjectively, as the play's conclusion demonstrates. Nor is the "improviser of a love song" — one of Don Juan's redeeming disguises — always an improviser. In his monologue at the beginning of scene 3 he wonders how to address Dona Anna, but then decides:

Whatever comes into my head
That's what I'll say without preparation,
Like the improviser of a love song.

[Chto v golovu pridet,
To i skazhu, bez predugotavlén'ia,
Improvizatorom liubovnoi pesni...]

All the ambiguity of Juan's character is present in this remark: he is an improviser by nature, an impromptu musician of love who bends to the winds of chance. Yet the improvisation can also be a calculated one. With Don Juan, sincerity and guile go hand in hand: "I'll strike up a conversation with her; it's time" (*Vpushchusia v razgovory s nei; pora*). Time for what? Time to entangle, time to seduce, time to love.

"All's for the best," then, is pivotal in the play: it defines Don Juan's underlying amoral outlook; it inaugurates the final movement toward catastrophe in scenes 3 and 4 of *The Stone Guest*, episodes in

which Don Juan challenges the statue of the knight-commander and makes his last gamble with love and death, his final and fatal play for unlimited freedom.

It is clear, however, that Pushkin, like E. T. A. Hoffmann in his novella *Don Juan*, breaks decisively with the traditional perception of Don Juan as mere libertine, a cynical and godless bon vivant. Like Hoffmann, Pushkin posits a complex psychology in Don Juan, one in which the sensual and spiritual elements are contiguous with one another. While sharing Hoffmann's perception of Don Juan's nature, however, Pushkin generally dispenses with the romantic idealization of Don Juan as a superior being hoping to "still through love the [higher] longing that tore at his heart."¹⁰ Pushkin replaces the suggestive but still flimsy romantic and melodramatic paraphernalia with a profound and quite realistic consideration of Don Juan as a complex moral-psychological and cultural type.

"What if Dona Anna had been destined by heaven to let Don Juan recognize the divine nature in him?" asks Hoffmann, and he answers, "Too late."¹¹ But does the tragedy of Pushkin's Don Juan consist in the fact that he was snatched away at the very moment he was reborn, that is, when he was on the threshold of a new life? There is no question that Pushkin's Don Juan *feels* reborn in his encounter with Dona Anna, but it is a feeling or value he experiences only momentarily—"the value of momentary life" (*tsenu mgnovennoi zhizni*). His tragedy is not that he meets a potential savior, Dona Anna (his "angel," his "goddess," his "heavenly beatitude") when it is too late;¹² this puts the matter back

¹⁰ "Here on earth there is really nothing that so elevates man in his innermost nature as love . . . Little wonder, then, that Don Juan hoped to still through love the [higher] longing that tore at his heart and that the devil here flung the noose around his neck" (*Es gibt hier auf Erden wohl nichts, was den Menschen in seiner innigsten Natur so hinaufsteigert, als die Liebe . . . Was Wunder also, daß Don Juan in der Liebe die Sehnsucht, die seine Brust zerreißt, zu stillen hoffte, und daß der Teufel hier ihm die Schlinge über den Hals warf?*). E. T. A. Hoffmann, "Don Juan. Eine fabelhafte Begebenheit die sich mit einem Reisenden Enthusiasten zugetragen," in *Fantasie und Nachtstücke* (Munich: Winkler-Verlag, 1960), 75.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹² The Russian poet Anna Akhmatova held this view. She writes: "Don Juan's last exclamation . . . 'I'm perishing—it's the end—Oh, Dona Anna' convinces us that he really has been reborn at the time of his meeting with Dona Anna;