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Translator's Note

This translation was a challenge, both because of the importance of conveying Mikhail Epstein's literary talent and expressiveness and due to the great number and variety of works of Russian literature he cites.

I used existing translations whenever possible (in a very few instances adjusting perhaps a single word; these minor adjustments are always indicated with square brackets).

But even when I did use an existing translation for some text from a given work, it sometimes occurred that another part of that same translation did not suit this book's purpose. (This is not a criticism, of course; so much of translation is a matter of choice, and the original translator had simply made a perfectly warranted choice that does not match the point Prof. Epstein is making, or in some cases the specific word he is emphasizing.) In such instances, I have cited the original Russian text and provided my own translations.

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Introduction

It would be difficult to find a culture more internally self-contradictory, more given to self-negation, than Russian culture. Reflecting its dual, its (conventionally speaking) East/Western identity, this is a culture of paradoxes. On the one hand, it gravitates toward the positive values of the West, toward social and technical progress and all the materially expressed forms of civilization. On the other, even as it adopts these forms, it casts doubt on and at times destroys them, falling into a radical nihilism directed against the values of reason, beauty, freedom, utility, and order. Hence the tendency to erect idols and mercilessly tear them down, "to incinerate everything one has worshipped" and "worship everything one has incinerated."

"Paradox" refers to a situation or statement that, following its own logic, suddenly enters into contradiction with itself, refutes its own premises, lays waste to its own foundations. Aside from this international term, the Russian language also has more colloquial ways to express the lability of existence: the words *vyvert* ("quirk," "eccentricity"), *vykrutasy* ("antics," "twists and turns"), *prevratnost'* (vicissitude), *nadryv* ("rupture," "laceration"), and *nadlom* ("breakdown") … The same situation of unforeseen reversal is expressed in popular idioms: "to keep stepping on the same rake" and to "strive for something only to be flogged by it." This mode of transition from thesis to antithesis through ironic twist is very characteristic of the Russian mentality. This dialectic has little in common with the Hegelian or Marxist variety, wherein thesis and antithesis are sublated in synthesis, and unity emerges from the struggle of opposites. The Russian version is more like an aggravation, an intensification of the thesis, its being taken to excess, when it turns into its own antithesis and begins to negate itself. Such a dialectic may be called ironic, insofar as it returns to its initial thesis, now with a minus sign. As aptly put by Andrei Bely, the triumph of materialism in the USSR resulted in the abolition of matter. In the same way, the affirmation of socialism led to the annihilation of entire

classes, the destruction of social, professional, and family ties. Aspirations toward the very highest ideals—freedom, unity, productivity, greatness, reason, harmony—all reveal their dark underside, turning into suffering, poverty, slavery, and the absurd. Russian literature, like Russian history, is full of such unexpected twists, and of the pathos of tragic irony.

The tendency toward paradox is inherent also in the major representatives of Russian culture. When I teach courses in Russian literature and intellectual history at universities in the United States and England, what strikes students most of all are not the particular directions of thought but authors' attitudes toward their own ideas and aspirations. They find it surprising that:

Petr Chaadaev was simultaneously the father of both Westernism and Slavophilism: in his "Apology of a Madman," he inverts the meaning of the first of his *Philosophical Letters*, so that now the insignificance of Russia's past and present is put forth as a pledge to her future greatness;

Nikolai Gogol tries to extirpate his own artistic gift and "blasphemous" laughter, and consigns his own cherished work, the second volume of *Dead Souls* (*Mertvye dushi*), to the flames;

Vissarion Belinsky abjures his Hegelian reconciliation with reality, and is ready, "à la Marat," to exterminate, with fire and sword, one portion of humanity for the sake of the happiness of another;[1]

Fedor Dostoevsky's own ideals are derided, in the most sophisticated manner, by some of his characters, and championed by others, the author oscillating emphatically between voices pro and contra;

Lev Tolstoy renounces his own greatest artistic achievements for the sake of peasantly simplicity and truthfulness;

In Vladimir Solov'ev's "A Brief Tale of the Antichrist" ("Kratkaia povest' ob Antikhriste"), completed not long before his death, the author expounds the cherished ideas to which he had devoted his life of prophetic thought—oneness, universalism, ecumenicism, theocracy, and the

1 As Belinsky confesses in a letter (1 March 1841) to V. P. Botkin: "A year ago my thinking was diametrically opposed to what it is now. … My present self is full of a painful hatred for my past self, and if it were in my power, then woe would be unto those who are now what I was a year ago." http://az.lib.ru/b/belinskij_w_g/text_3900.shtml.

unification of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches—as a worldview inspired by the devil;

Vasilii Rozanov combines in himself Judeophilia and Judeophobia; vigorously advocates both left- and right-wing causes; wages war on Christianity, and dies as a communicant of the Christian sacraments;

Aleksandr Blok, a knight of the Beautiful Lady and the Eternal Feminine, in a carnivalesque move casts this ideal persona as a harlot in *The Fairground Booth* (*Balaganchik*) and *The Stranger* (*Neznakomka*);

Vladimir Maiakovsky, a poet of cosmic tragedy, after the revolution gives himself over to the service of state propaganda, "trampl[ing]," as he put it, "on the very throat of my verse";[2]

Andrei Platonov, a utopian, a communist and technophile, creates the most profound anti-utopia of socialist society as a kingdom of emptiness and death;

Daniil Andreev preaches, as a religious ideal, the universal church-state of the Rose of the World, which paves the way for the Antichrist;[3]

Anna Akhmatova comments on one of Osip Mandel'shtam's works: "The essay is superb in its nobility, but Mandel'shtam revolts first and foremost against himself, against what he has done, and done the most, just as when he revolted against himself by defending the purity of Russian against encroachment by other words, revolted against his own theory, his idea about Italian sounds and words in Russian. … It would be hard for a biographer to sort this all out without knowing this characteristic of his, this tendency to revolt, with the purest nobility, against what he himself had been doing, or what had been his idea."[4]

Conscious or unconscious irony or even self-derision has been a highly characteristic gesture of Russian writers and thinkers, an irony that overturns that which took decades of concentrated effort to create, a resolute self-negation.

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2 Cited from Rottenberg, *Vladimir Mayakovsky: Innovator*, 87.

3 I describe the ironic self-refutation of D. Andreev's mystical utopia in detail in my discussion of paradoxes of Russian eschatology in *Religiia posle ateizma: Novye vozmozhnosti teologii* (*Religion after Atheism: New Possibilities for Theology*), 106–58; for a partial translation, see "Daniil Andreev and the Mysticism of Femininity."

4 *Dnevnik Pavla Luknitskogo*, 8 July 1926. http://www.litmir.net/ br/?b=62792&p=89

This book is devoted to the paradoxes of Russian literature, but many of its general conclusions apply to Russian culture as a whole, insofar as in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it remained for the most part a literary, a verbal one. Russian culture is famously marked by the duality of its values, as has been discussed by early twentieth-century thinkers (N. Berdiaev, D. Merezhkovsky, S. Askol'dov) as well as by cultural scholars in the latter part of the century (Iu. Lotman, B. Uspensky, S. Averintsev). In the well-known formulation of Iurii Lotman and Boris Uspensky, "a specific feature of Russian culture is … its fundamental polarity, expressed in the dual nature of its structure. The primary cultural values (ideological, political, religious) in the system of medieval Russia are arranged in a bipolar field of values separated by a sharp boundary and bereft of any neutral axiological zone."[5] Thus in Orthodox Christianity, the world beyond the grave is divided into heaven and hell, whereas Catholic conceptions include a third space as well—purgatory, to which the souls of the not-entirely-righteous and not-entirely-sinful are consigned, those who have conducted themselves according to ordinary human standards and therefore, once they have undergone a purifying ordeal, may be found worthy of salvation. "In the real life of the medieval West, a broad range of neutral behaviors and neutral social institutions were thus enabled, things that were neither 'holy' nor 'sinful,' neither 'of the state' nor 'anti-state,' neither good nor bad."[6]

If a neutral zone is not fortified in a culture, then it begins to swing from one extreme to the other, from piety to godlessness, from asceticism to debauchery. This duality gives rise to upheaval, to a "rotational" model of development, where opposites rush headlong to change places, and there is no gradual evolution. All extremes are sharpened: God and the devil, saintliness and sin, the spiritual and the corporeal, religion and atheism, Christianity and paganism, the God-Man and the Man-God, state and individual, power and anarchy… Even when Russian culture undertakes to attempt a joining of two poles, it does so not via their evolutionary mediation but rather through their direct coupling, as

5 Lotman and Uspenskii, "Rol' dual'nykh modelei v dinamike russkoi kul'tury (do kontsa XVIII veka)," 220.

6 Ibid.

in Dostoevsky's characters, who are "too capacious" and simultaneously stare into the abysses above and below, at once encompassing the ideals of the Madonna and of Sodom.

The method Russian culture has developed to work with these opposites consists in "twisting" and "overturning" them: the sublime and majestic is revealed to have demonic features, while the base and minor are suddenly characterized by spiritual depth and devotion. The cultural dynamic is manifest in its hyper-intense paradoxicality. While the greatest of the Russian tsars, Peter I, and Russia herself, manifest demonic traits in the portrayals of Pushkin and Gogol, the littlest of the little men, the literary type of Bashmachkin, evolves into Prince Myshkin, the loftiest of figures in Russian literature.

This model of the ironic "reversal" or "inversion" of opposites affords us insight into the enduring structural features of Russian culture, which are reproduced in its various historical stages: pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet.[7]

7 See my discussion of these dual and triadic models of Russian culture and the role of mediation between opposites in *Russian Spirituality and the Secularization of Culture*, 31–61 and 121–32.

PART I

The Titanic and the Demonic: Faust's Heirs

1 Faust and Peter on the Seashore: From Goethe to Pushkin

a. Comparativistics and Typology

From its inception in the mid-nineteenth century, the comparative-historical method was directed against romantic aesthetics, the main purpose of which had been to gain insight into the creative spirit of a work, its singularity and the uniqueness of its author. What made the comparative method novel and valuable was that it discovered a work's dependency upon its literary environment and influences. The artist, till recently thought of as a "free genius," was now viewed as an intermediary in the exchange of plots, images, and ideas shifting from one literature to another.

However, the consistent application of this method, which treated literature not as the fruit of organic creativity but as a medium of cultural exchange, ultimately came to hinder the development of literary scholarship.[1] As Dionýz Ďurišin has justly put it, "From the genetic-contact standpoint, writers of the second rank are often far more illustrative than those of the first, because the continuity of interliterary values in their works is more linear."[2]

In search of a new methodology, one capable of analyzing artistically original phenomena, the field of comparative literature was forced to reject the primacy of "influences and borrowings" and return to examining the creative uniqueness of the works being compared. Thus arose and rapidly spread the field of *typological* research, focused on connections between literary phenomena that result not from direct interaction but in

1 On the crisis in comparativistics and the flaws of this method, see Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism*, 282–95; Zhirmunskii, *Sravnitel'noe literaturovedenie: Vostok i Zapad*, 66–67, 101, 137, 185; and others.

2 Diurishin, *Teoriia sravnitel'nogo izucheniia literatury*, 212.

the course of parallel and independent development. Using the concepts of Leibniz, we may state that from the typological standpoint, artistic worlds are closed monads that do not communicate via doors and windows but rest on a common foundation and correspond to one another through a "preordained harmony."

Thus in the latter half of the twentieth century does the comparative-historical method undergo a comprehensive update. One of the ways in which comparative studies develops is to return to themes previously studied in terms of direct contact, and to broaden these subjects in the light of typological juxtapositions. The greater the artistic phenomenon, moreover, the less subject it is to external influences, and the greater the call, consequently, for a typological approach.

Hence the need to reexamine the theme, already sufficiently studied in terms of literary influence, of "Pushkin and Goethe." V. A. Rozov (*Pushkin and Goethe*), V. Zhirmunsky, D. Blagoi, and other Russian scholars have identified in their studies all the however-many major reminiscences of Goethean imagery and motifs to be found in Pushkin's oeuvre. It is unlikely that new facts in this area remain to be discovered, which renders a typological juxtaposition of the two artistic worlds all the more pressing. It is indicative that not a single comparative study—not even Rozov's book, justly criticized for deriving almost the whole of Pushkin from Goethe—has found room to discuss Pushkin's greatest creation, *The Bronze Horseman* (*Mednyi vsadnik*). And indeed, this long narrative poem does not contain any obvious intertextualities or reminiscences that might enable comparison with any work by Goethe. Nevertheless, a typological analysis allows us to uncover what the direct-contact approach has missed. Between *The Bronze Horseman*, written in 1833, and the second part of *Faust*, completed in 1831 and first published in 1833, there exists, even in the total absence of influence, borrowings, polemics, and the like, a profound correlation, and contrast, in terms of *artistic metaphysics*.

b. Toil and the Elements

After all his tireless seeking, and nearing his life's threshold, Goethe's Faust has resolved to expand coastal lands so as to wrest, step by step, the sea bed from the waves. For Faust, the sea embodies an elementality as