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Three on Courtship, Corpses, and Culture:

Tolstoj, "Posle bala" - Zoščenko, "Dama s cvetami" -
E. Ginzburg, "Raj pod mikroskopom"

The three texts juxtaposed in what follows share the age-old topos of love, death, and culture. Over the centuries the themes of 'love' and 'death' have been treated and evaluated in various ways, finding themselves on different sides of the 'nature/culture' opposition.

The heroine of Petronius' "The Ephesus widow" starts out 'over-cultural' in her sanctified loyalty to her deceased husband, lying in state; she then desecralizes every convention by giving her own passionate body and even her husband's dead one in exchange for sex with a stranger. Medieval courtly love to the point of death was self-sacrificially platonic, i.e. pointedly 'cultural.' Classicism sharply contraposed love to cultural 'duty,' and, short of a mediating compromise, the conflict led to tragic death. "Natural" sentimental love in the graveyard challenged existing cultural conventions, and the Romantics developed a clearly anti-social cult of love and death.¹ Realism brought a sobering reappraisal of Romantic stereotypes, but they died hard, lingering in the works of a Turgenev and even a Dostoevskij. It took a late Tolstoj to demythologize 'cultured love' by opposing it – in a radical reversal of the Romantic *argumentum ad mortuum* – to what can be called 'death's body.'

To be sure, Tolstoj's stance should not be viewed as "realistic" in some privileged sense, nor the previous treatments of the common theme dismissed as mere "stereotypes." In fact, the cliché in question, 'love as culture's way of overcoming death,' is archetypally implicit in all such plots, but here we confine ourselves to the discussion of those specific cultural issues *overtly thematized* by the text (relegating some "archetypal" remarks to footnotes).² Also, the intertextual links we are establishing among the three texts are purely *structural* and *historical*. It is, therefore, all the more interesting to see how, in the absence of direct influence, the openly anti-cultural posture of the earlier fiction is developed and then reversed in the two later stories.

I. "После бала" (1903)

Although the story derives its title from what happened "after the ball," it consists of two symmetrical episodes, with the first and longer one, "at the ball,"

being essentially a foil to the second ("Вся жизнь переменялась от одной ночи, или скорее утра"). This compositional formula for correlating the states *before* and *after* the exposure to the body³ will also appear in Zoščenko and Ginzburg.

1. Before

At the ball, the narrator-protagonist Ivan Vasil'evič dances and falls more and more in love with Varen'ka. The 'laws' of the ball are repeatedly stressed: the hero fails to 'legitimately' secure the mazurka with his beloved ("По закону, так сказать, мазурку я танцевал не с нею"), because a rival beats him to her while he is busy outfitting himself with gloves ("[он] пригласил ее, только что она вошла, а я заезжал... за перчатками и опоздал"). Another rule is to choose the partner by guessing the "motto," "*kačestvo*". Such appurtenances of ballroom etiquette as the girl's glove and fan (or rather, a feather from it) become the souvenir symbols of the heroes' highly 'cultural' love. The 'glove' motif and its 'legalistic' connotations⁴ are further reinforced as Varen'ka's father prepares to dance with her: "[он] вынул шпагу из португези, отдал ее... и, натянув замшевую перчатку на правую руку, – 'надо все по закону', – улыбаясь, сказал он".

The cultural symbolism of the provincial ball goes even further and higher up: from 'legal' to 'regal.' The hostess, the wife of the *gubernskij predvoditel'*, resembles the pictures of Empress Elizaveta Petrovna; the girl's father is a Nicholas I look-alike; and his tallness and military bearing are echoed by his daughter's "majestic," "*veličestvennaja*", stature and "regal look:" "царственный вид, который отпугивал бы от нее, *если бы не* [my italics - A. Zh.] ласковая... улыбка и рта, и прелестных блестящих глаз..."

This "were it not for" is very characteristic. The cultural atmosphere of the ball is pronouncedly *benign*. Everybody admires Varen'ka and her father, while the father and others approve of the heroes's mutual attraction. Everybody keeps smiling. The 'imperial' hostess is emblemized by the breast of a fun-loving czarīna. The heroes mostly dance together, and when dancing with others, Varen'ka smiles to him all the same. Moreover, the 'rules' themselves are sometimes bent for the hero's benefit ("Она, не смущаясь, через всю залу шла прямо ко мне, и я вскакивал, не дожидаясь приглашения...") and downright violated: after dancing with his daughter, the colonel leads her up to the narrator, although "I am not her partner."

The heroes' love in the cultural lap of a benevolent society expands to encompass the whole world. First, the protagonist's love and "*umilenie*" for Varen'ka envelop the father, who is linked to her both by similarity, in looks, especially the smile ("та же ласковая, радостная улыбка, как и у дочери, была в его блестящих глазах и губах"), and by contiguity, as they dance together.⁵ The good feeling then embraces other guests, including the "Elizabethan" hostess and even the protagonist's rival, and continues to grow: "Я любил и хозяйку... с ее елизаветинским бюстом, и ее мужа, и ее гостей, и ее лакеев, и даже дувшегося на меня инженера Анисимова". "Я обнимал в то время весь мир моей любовью... и, несмотря на то, что был, казалось, бесконечно счастлив, счастье мое все росло и росло".⁶

This quantitative excess is, of course, a hubristic flaw of the protagonist. Another is the *quality* of his love – perfectly ideal and "unearthly": "Я был не только весел и доволен, я был счастлив, блажен, я был добр, я был не я, а какое-то нежное неземное существо, не знающее зла и способное на одно добро". His passion is pointedly incorporeal, he feels neither his body, nor his beloved's, which he thinks away, mentally covering it with "bronze garments": "Я вальсировал еще и еще и не чувствовал своего тела. – Ну, как же..., я думаю, очень чувствовали, когда обнимали ее за талию, не только свое, но и ее тело, – сказал один из гостей... – Чем сильнее я был влюблен, тем бестелеснее становилась для меня она... Вы раздеваете женщин...; для меня же... на предмете моей любви были всегда бронзовые одежды. Мы не то что раздевали, а старались прикрыть наготу."

The "bronze garments" do not only symbolize the hero's 'platonism,' they also reflect his willing and total acceptance of conventions – in a metaphoric epitome of all the kid and suede gloves, Varen'ka's satin shoes, the father's touchingly cheap calfskin boots, etc. The function of these and other items of clothing (of which so much is made by the narrator) is precisely to "cover up the nudity," blinding Man to the starkly naked unconventional Truth.

2. After

With all this hubris stacked against him, the hero is rightly afraid for his happiness. The mechanism of excess prevents him from sleep, drives him outdoors and to his beloved's house, and makes him witness the ugly gauntlet-running presided over by the colonel. The scene, which makes the hero fall out of love and change spiritually (abandoning any socially meaningful career), forms a negative replica of the ball episode.

It, too, is a conventional social gathering, a highly legalistic, in fact, law-enforcing procedure, which also takes the form of a specially arranged sequence of movements to musical accompaniment, – a counterpoint deliberately played up by Tolstoj: as the hero approached Varen'ka's house, he "услыхал... звуки флейты и барабана. В душе у меня все время пело и изредка слышался мотив мазурки. Но это была какая-то другая, жесткая, нехорошая музыка". The similarity is enhanced by the presence of the hero (with his 1st-person account) and the colonel. The narrative dwells upon the colonel's familiar face, stature, gait, feet, and the "suede-gloved hand," with which he now hits a weakling soldier on the face for failing to flog properly. Yet another plot rhyme links Varen'ka and the flogged Tartar, who are the respective centers of attention in the two scenes; like Varen'ka, the Tartar, too, is led up to the hero by the colonel as the *danse macabre* approaches.

The common features of the two scenes now display their ominous negative underside: the music is "evil;" deviations from 'law' are no longer tolerated but severely punished (both in the case of the Tartar himself, who had tried to escape from military service, and the weak flogger); the colonel's uprightness and gloves express arrogant cruelty; the smile is gone from his ruddy face; on seeing the hero, he pretends not to know him; etc. The most striking reversal involves the motif of '(in)corporeality.' While beautiful Varen'ka's body remained covered and ignored, the Tartar's frightful body is half-naked from the start ("... что-то страшное, приближающееся ко мне, ... оголенный по пояс человек"). The "jerking body" rivets the narrator's attention, and an epiphany takes place (characteristically, despite the hero's reluctance to see and believe – and, therefore, defamiliarized): "Когда шествие миновало то место, где я стоял, я... увидел... спину наказываемого. Это было что-то такое пестрое, мокрое, красное, неестественное, что я не поверил, чтобы это было тело человека". To make the reversal complete, the hero now gets to "feel" not only the other's body, but his own as well, getting nauseous to the point of vomiting: "на сердце была почти физическая, доходившая до тошноты, тоска,... казалось, что вот-вот меня вырвет всем тем ужасом..."

Thus, exposure to crude reality laid bare undoes the disembodied, conventional, societal love, which fails to deliver on its promise to embrace the whole world, including its dark side. The story is a soft-sell: the narrator suspends general judgement about good and evil, making only a personal choice and somewhat naively conceding that the colonel might know something that would justify the cruelty.⁷

The hero's spiritual conversion, although downplayed, has characteristic Tolstojan overtones, relevant to the problematic of the 'body.' The ball is given "v poslednij den' maslenicy"; consequently, the flogging occurs on the first day of Lent. The Shrove-tide ball connotes, for Tolstoj, false merriment, and – quite *uncarnival-like* (in the Baxtinian sense) – a denial of corporeal reality. As for the revelation of 'carnal knowledge,' coinciding with Lent, it, too, is of distinctly uncarnavalesque, rather piously Christian, kind.

The flogged man kept uttering some words, which the hero made out only when the gauntlet party came closer: "Bratcy, pomiloserdujte", "Have mercy, brothers." At that moment a bystander said: "O, gospodi," "Oh, Lord." And it was for 'merciful hitting', be it deliberate or accidental, that the colonel brutally attacked a soldier. Thus, in a replay of the Calvary, the colonel reconfirmed his 'imperial' - Caesar's and Nicholas I's - stance, as opposed to the godliness of the tortured Christ-like body and the others' compassion. Moreover, since in this configuration the Tartar functions as Varen'ka's counterpart, the scene emblemizes the replacement of societal love with love for a suffering Christ.⁸

Such a closure, not unexpected in late Tolstoj,⁹ neatly, if somewhat ironically, reintegrates the narrator's naive idealism, platonism, body-covering, unearthly kindness, and universal love (including love of his enemy), which seem to have been undermined by the plot. They are, Tolstoj implies, misused and exploited by the pagan/pharisaical conventional 'culture-love-and-family,' but do have a place in true Christianity.¹⁰

II. "Дама с цветами" (1929)¹¹

Zoščenko liked borrowing famous titles for his comic stories with a different – opposite or unrelated – content. He consistently, if ambivalently, subverted the values and conventions of high literature, arguing that one could not go on writing as if "nothing had happened in our country."¹² The title, topos, and some details of "Dama s cvetami" point to *La dame aux camelias* (*Dama s kamelijami* in Russian), "Dama s sobačkoj," "Bednaja Liza,"¹³ Turgenev's "Zatiš'e,"¹⁴ and, in a widening circle, to "Taman'," *Anna Karenina*, Blok's beautiful ladies (in particular, "Neznakomka"), "Hamlet," etc. In fact, the entire romantic love-and-death myth is targeted, as the narrator states bluntly that the story is about how mystical unearthly love is nonsense and only material things matter: "... как однажды через несчастный случай окончательно выяснилось, что всякая мистика, всякая идеалистика, разная неземная любовь, и так далее, и тому подобное есть форменная брехня и ерундистика. И что в жизни действителен только настоящий материальный подход и ничего, к

сожалению, больше". Several common motifs make "Posle bala" a relevant typological reference: it is, so to speak, in the direction of Tolstoj's story (and beyond) that Zoščenko reworks his "Poor Liza" hypogram.

1. Before

"Dama s cvetami" tells, with numerous good-naturedly cynical "philosophical" digressions, the story of an old-time intelligentsia couple, living out, in deliberate isolation from the Soviet environment, the dream of ideal romantic love. They rent a dacha in Otradnoe,¹⁵ where the wife spends all the time sitting on the bank, holding flowers, gazing into romantic distance, or bathing: "Одним словом, это была поэтическая особа, способная целый день нюхать цветки и настуриции или сидеть на берегу и глядеть вдаль, как будто там что-нибудь имеется определенное – фрукты или ливерная колбаса".¹⁶ The husband, an engineer, lives only for the moments he spends with his wife. Leaving for work in Leningrad, he blows her kisses from the steamboat; returning, he brings presents, embraces her, and talks about his love. The narrator finds this "disgusting": "Одним словом, противно и тяжело смотреть".

The hero complains about "crude reality," performs no social work, and is nostalgic for the idealistic values of the past: "Ему, одним словом, нравилась прошлая буржуазная жизнь с ее разными подушечками, консоме и так далее"; "Я, говорит, человек глубоко интеллигентный, мне, говорит, доступно понимание многих мистических и отвлеченных картин моего детства ... Я, говорит, воспитан на многих красивых вещах и безделушках, понимаю тонкую любовь и не вижу ничего приличного в грубых объятиях... Я, говорит, ... только считаюсь с духовной жизнью и с запросами сердца..."

The reactionary-idealistic complex includes also ignoring the physical aspect of life. The husband despises "crude embraces," the wife walks "on thin intelligentsia legs," "does not ask for food," and never smiles; even when given presents, she will only "frown her little nose." As for her "habit of bathing," it is an idle and effete, rather than athletic, pastime.¹⁷ Characteristic appurtenances of the *ancien* way of life are the useless expensive objects: "*bezdeluški, poduščki, konsome, milen'kij pen'juar, odeta prekrasno*", etc. (cf. the 'glove' motif in Tolstoj).

In a word, the couple represents the 'dead culture' of the past, and, sure enough, death is what happens next. The lady wanted to go bathing, slipped, and drowned, "without resisting Nature:" "... пошла после дождя на своих французских

каблучках – и свалилась". "Конечно, занимайся она в свое время... гимнастикой, она... выплыла бы. А тут со своими цветами окунулась - и враз пошла ко дну, не сопротивляясь природе". The narrator considers and dismisses the probability of suicide, but, in typological terms, the woman is as suicidal as any mermaid-aux-camelias heroine, of which she is a caricature. The absence of a specific cause of death (unlike Ophelia or poor Liza, she is loved, not abandoned) – mockingly underscores the point.

Her death shifts the focus to the hero, whose love now attains its graveyard maximum: "Я любил ее совершенно неземной любовью, и мне, говорит, только и делов сейчас, что найти ее [i.e. her body], приложиться к ее праху и захоронить ее в приличной могилке и на ту могилку каждую субботу ходить, чтобы с ней духовно общаться и иметь потусторонние разговоры". Zoščenko spoofs the 'unearthly' topos (the word "*nezemnaja*" is the same as in "*Posle bala*"), lumping together poor Liza's or Klara Milič's posthumous haunting of the hero, poetic (e.g. Pushkinian) conversations across the grave, dragging of the river (e.g. in Turgenev's "*Zatiš'e*"), piously sentimental grave-tending, here planned in advance, etc.

2. After

As in Tolstoj's story, the most important things happen after – and in the presence of the body. At first it is looked for in vain, then the engineer offers a reward, grieves on at the dacha, and a month later fishermen find the disfigured corpse. The hero hurries to the side of his beloved: "подошел к своей бывшей подруге и остановился подле нее". The poetic description of the body as a live person "revives" it, setting it up for the ensuing desacralization. The hero turns the dead face with his boot ("Инженер... наклонился.. и тут полная гримаса отвращения и брезгливости передернула его интеллигентские губы. Носком своего сапожка он перевернул лицо утопленницы...") and leaves in revulsion, paying the fishermen an extra five rubles to somehow bury her at the local cemetery ("чтобы они как-нибудь сами захоронили эту даму на эдешнем кладбище").

Thus, confronted with the 'body' (the word recurs several times), the hero reverses himself completely, renouncing his love and interest in the grave and beyond. Also, contrary to generic expectations but in accordance with the narrator's deflation of mysticism, the dead beloved absolutely fails to haunt the hero. In fact, it is now that he finally betrays her with another woman: "А недавно его видели – он шел по улице с какой-то дамочкой. Он вел ее под локоток и что-то такое интересное вкручивал".¹⁸ Like Tolstoj,

Zoščenko plays up the hero's dread of the disfigured body. Here, too, 'unearthly spirituality' means a reluctance to face down-to-earth facts of life. This shunning of the body was foreshadowed by the engineer's escapist ignoring of "crude reality" and "crude embraces": "А в настоящей текущей жизни он ничего, кроме грубого, не видел и свою личность от всего отворачивал"; "... и не вижу ничего приличного в грубых объятиях".

The plot's macabre transition from "idealism" to "materialism" is echoed by a parallel shift in the representation of the social environment. In the beginning, the hero's 'wrong spirituality' is contrasted with the down-to-earth and even crude, but 'rightly idealistic' Soviet values (social work, gymnastics, writing articles, etc.). In the end, the Soviet 'materialism' that provides the background to the ugly content of the main story is downright crass. The fishermen, in a variation of graveside humor, mistake the hero's departure for avoidance of payment: "... мол, а деньги, деньги, мол, посулил, а сам тигалья дает, а еще бывший интеллигент и в фуражке!".¹⁹ This leaves the hero looking less negative: although he shows no compassion, he does betray some emotion: "Он наклонил голову и тихо прошептал про себя: - Да, это она".

What is then the balance of Zoščenko's message? Writing after the Revolution and, so to speak, from behind its looking-glass (that Tolstoj was, in Lenin's words), Zoščenko takes to an ambiguous extreme Tolstoj's anti-cultural stance.²⁰ His heroes belong to a gone culture, not the dominant one, but the open debunking of the former is supplemented with a skaz-type subversion of the latter. No positive characters – except laughter itself – appear in the story, and the picture gets even grimmer towards the end.

On a deeper level Zoščenko endows his heroes with his own traumas (incidentally, the husband, *"let soroka,"* is approximately the writer's age): preoccupation with childhood memories; fear of / attraction to water; problems with eating; anxiety about / overcompensatory interest in sex, femininity, and ostentatious clothing. The fear of excessive pretensions, possessions, and culture seems to have haunted Zoščenko ever since his infancy. In his psycho-autobiography *Pered vosходом solnca*²¹ there is an episode entitled *"Groza,"* where the little Miša and his sister flee from a storm. When his elder sister reproaches him for losing his bunch of flowers (!), he replies: "Раз такая гроза, зачем нам букеты?"²² These words, anticipating similar pronouncements in *"Dama s svetami"* ("пушай увидят, сколько всего они накрутили на себя лишнего"; "в жизни действителен только настоящий материальный подход и ничего, к сожалению, большего"), are emblematic of the writer's bleak view of culture at the time of Revolution.²³

III. "Рай под микроскопом" (1977)²⁴

Ginzburg's memoirs tell an enthralling story of an idealistic Communist's survival in the Gulag thanks to her exceptional life force, good luck, and spiritual integrity. In a sense, the book is an uplifting idyll, portraying the triumph of the human spirit and culture over tremendous odds, a harmony of all positive elements against the backdrop of horror and suffering. The chapter in question, although (semi-)documentary, exhibits such a high degree of literary sensibility and organization that it can be analyzed as a short story in its own right alongside those of Tolstoj and Zoščenko.

1. Before

The paradise placed under the microscope is a relatively tolerable part of Gulag, where the narrator-heroine is a nurse, a member of a nice circle of the camp's medics; the circle is headed by Dr. Val'ter – German, Catholic, "cheerful saint", and Ginzburg's second husband-to-be.

Death is an everyday experience here. The prisoners are "almost otherworldly figures" ("почти потусторонние фигуры"), and the medics must prevent them from dying on the job ("предотвращение смертей во время работы"). Food is a matter of life and death: "В отличие от настоящего рая, небесного, на Таскане ни на минуту не отвлекаются от мысли о хлебе насущном". Deaths are concealed from the officials to continue getting "*rajka*," "the ration;" sometimes a corpse is even brought to the roll-call: "Иногда даже поднимали мертвеца на проверку, ставили его в задний ряд, подпирая с двух сторон плечами и отвечая за него 'установочные данные'".

Yet, this life on the brink of death is governed by 'laws.' The doctors save the slave-laborers so they could die where they are supposed to: "Умирать положено [Ginzburg's italics] на больничной койке,... а то свалится где-нибудь в сугроб, ищи его потом, объявляя о побеге, отчитывайся..." As for the dead man's ration, it can be bequeathed to a friend, and this unwritten rule is solemnly upheld and enforced by the prisoner community: "[Пайку] завещают перед смертью друзьям... Много раз [я] присутствовала при этих завещаниях и даже являлась, вроде, нотариусом при выражении последней воли умирающего ... Завещания соблюдались строго. Шакалов, норовивших цапнуть пайку умершего, подвергали общему презрению, а иногда и кулачной расправе".

Along with such fundamentals of culture as 'laws,' the circle has also access to spiritual nourishment in the form of 'books' (which the doctor obtains from the free citizens he treats) and 'intellectual dialogues' (in the course of which "Конфуций [the nickname of a paramedic] оправдывает свое прозвище, поигрывая разными аргументами для доказательства недоказуемого"). A redeeming role is also played by 'memory,' developed in the tragi-comic episode with the Kazakh prisoner: he keeps forgetting the name of *his* penal code article (i.e. the one according to which has been convicted) and is happy when the roll-calling guard supplies the number.

The hero and heroine's trips into the woods for flowers, *alias*, medicinal herbs produce a perfect synthesis of their nascent love, humanistic culture, and union with nature: "Цветение тайги... пробуждает потерянную было нежность к миру,... к стройным цветам иван-чая, похожим на липовые бокалы [!]... Доктор... называет [растения] на трех языках: по-русски, по-немецки, по-латыни".²⁵ The doctor also possesses extraordinary spiritual powers; he becomes not only the heroine's husband but also her priestly guide, who converts her to Christianity.²⁶ He mediates between this world and the other (this was ironically prefigured by the convicts' "otherworldliness"), gains the heroine's love by listening about her dead son, and teaches her how to care for a young patient "for Aleša's sake": "Он единственный, с кем я могу говорить об Алеше. Он как-то так поворачивает руль разговора, точно нет разницы между ушедшими и нами, оставшимися пока на земле... Это смягчает неотступность боли. Иногда доктор... связывает с этой моей болью самые повседневные наши дела. – Вы должны... подходить к Сереже Кондратьеву ... Ради Алеши..."

It is, therefore, in a highly 'cultured' way that the relationship develops, with old-fashioned courtship, sharing of poems and ideas, and declaration of love in letters: "Доктор идет на сближение обстоятельно и нежно, как в доброе старое время. Рассказывает о детстве.²⁷ Излагает свои научные гипотезы. Терпеливо переносит поток стихов... И в любви признается... не устно, а в письме". The arrival of the love letter forms a major plot event: it is motivated by the doctor's *komandirovka* to another camp and takes place at the moment the heroine is treating her son's miraculously convalescing double Sereža. And – for conspiratorial reasons – the letter is in Latin.

The heroine can barely understand Latin (she knows French), but is anyway moved by the romantic discourse ("приподнятые, почти патетические слова: Амор меа... Меа вита... Меа спес..."). This perfect fusion of love and culture is all the more striking as it reshapes the famous Levin-Kitty declaration of love by

initials, which is pointedly anti-conventional and anti-symbolic.²⁸ At night she composes her answer – alas, in Russian, but at least in verse (foreshadowed by the immaculate trochees of the Latin quotes from the doctor's letter) and in Roman terms: "... Как прекрасен Капитолий, сколько в небе глубины! День прекрасный, день веселый, мы свободны, мы – одни. Все тяжелое забыто в свете голубых небес, вы шепнули: меа вита, amor меа, меа спес... Я в восторге. И отныне я прошу вас вновь и вновь только, только по-латыни говорить мне про любовь..."

The letter, which insists on using a special, ultra-cultured foreign language for amatory discourse, connotes culture not only by its literariness – by being written in verse, but also by its intertextual strategy. The heroine's poem is a reworking of a specific source: "Сердце бьется ровно, мерно...." a vintage Akmatova self-healing by stoical recourse to memory and culture.²⁹ But even borrowing from such a kindred 'cultural' spirit, Ginzburg has to make a significant change – for the idyllic. In Akmatova, the declaration of freedom ("Ты свободен, я свободна") means putting a good, 'cultured' (e.g. Peter the Great's) face on broken love. In Ginzburg's poem, it means release from the camps, whereas love is not questioned: love and culture are in league, not in conflict.

2. After

At this high point the idyll is brutally shattered. In the middle of the night the heroine is summoned to the hospital ward and ordered to save the life of a convict and identify the meat in his bowl. She feels like vomiting: the meat is human, the prisoner, a cannibal. He has murdered a fellow *zek* (to be sure, one earlier saved by the doctor) and has been secretly cooking parts of his body – in a macabre counterpoint to the 'lawful' and friendly use of corpses to get extra rations in the beginning of the chapter. The prisoner's name, Kuleš, which in Russian means simple grub with meat, adds an unwitting, but powerful irony to the story. The author (or rather, History) ups the ante: in Tolstoj we had a tortured live body, in Zoščenko, a desecrated corpse, here the epiphany takes the form of looking into a pot of human flesh. (The camp commandant even kids the murderer about making meatloaves of the heroine: "Из нее, браток, котлетки-то, поди, вкуснее были бы...".)

For protection from this horror the narrator resorts to 'culture.' The prisoner must be saved in order to be tried and executed – in an irony of camp medicine mentioned earlier in the chapter. In spite of that, the narrator now finds herself identifying with the jailers, albeit reluctantly and ambivalently: "Я еле удерживаюсь на ногах от физической и душевной тошноты. Спасать,

чтобы потом расстреляли? Да пусть бы он умер вот сейчас же... Ловлю себя на том, что впервые за все эти годы я..., вроде бы, внутренне ближе к начальству, чем к этому заключенному. Меня сейчас что-то связывает с этим начальником режима. Наверно, общее отвращение к двуногому волку, переступившему грань людского".³⁰

Confronted with the 'body,' the heroine at first behaves very much like Tolstoj's and Zoščenko's protagonists, exhibiting first a reluctance to look or recognize, then disgust and physical revulsion: "Я заглядываю в котелок и еле сдерживаю рвотное движение. Волоконца этого мяса очень мелки, ни на что знакомое не похожи". But "next morning" ("*nautro*," cf. "*Posle bala*") the doctor returns. Addressing the heroine for the first time by *ty*, "thou,"³¹ he assures her that one *can* face the facts: the beast living in man is not to win. Love and culture join hands to withstand the impact of the cadaverous antibody. In fact, the doctor, in true Enlightenment spirit, has from the start advocated sober scrutiny of reality, rather than blind praise of "the paradise" or shunning of facts. And it is his words that give the chapter its title: "Вижу, что вам надо взглянуть на наш рай попристальной. Под микроскопом".³²

* * *

The variations on the topos have come almost full circle. Tolstoj shook the foundations of officially sanctioned love, rooted in violence to Nature's and Christ's body. Zoščenko, writing amidst cultural ruins, exaggerated Tolstoj's deadly (and virtually avant-gardist) critique of old values and ambivalently extended it to the new, without offering anything positive in their place. Shocked back into the cultural fold by the wildest avant-garde nightmares come true,³³ Ginzburg sought to reclaim the traditional values of love and culture, reintegrating them with Nature, Christianity, and even official authority, in what can be seen as a blueprint for the current climate in Russia. Of course, such an ideal harmony³⁴ is open to a new round of deconstructions, as well as to post-modernist mock remythologizing.³⁵

Notes

- ¹ Pushkin's works, in particular, offer a wealth of variations on this Romantic theme: love at the price of death, passion on the brink of death, love for a deathly beauty, love at, across or beyond the grave, lovemaking in the aphrodisiacal presence of a corpse (e.g. Don Guan and Laura's lovemaking "*pri mertvom!*" in "The Stone Guest"), etc.

- ² Already "The Ephesus widow" exemplifies the contradiction between overt and covert meanings: on the archetypal level (in contrast to what has been said above about its explicit message) it carnivalistically equates life and death, the deceased husband and his living double, sacrilege and ritualistic renewal (see O. M. Frejdenberg, "Tri sjužeta ili semantika odnogo," in her *Poëtika sjužeta i žanra*, Leningrad: GIXL, 1936, 335-361).
- ³ The symmetry was reflected in a draft title, "рассказ о бале и сквозь строй" (*Polnoe sobranie sočinenij v 90 tomax*, Moscow: GIXL, v. 34, 1952 [notes by B. M. Eixenbaum]), 550.
- ⁴ It appears already in *Detstvo*, Ch. 21.
- ⁵ They are, of course, one of those Tolstojan families sharing physical and psychological features; one of the draft titles was "Doč' i otec," "Daughter and Father" (*Polnoe sobranie...*, v. 34, 550); Ždanov, V.A., *Poslednie knigi L.N. Tolstogo. Zamysli i sveršenija*, Moscow: Kniga, 1971, 96). More specifically, the old Count Rostov and Nataša may be ironically recycled here; cf. Nataša's keen identification with the Count as he dances Daniel Cooper with Mar'ja Dmitrievna and also her Russian dancing in Otradnoe with the "Uncle."
- ⁶ The protagonist's love for the father and the entire high society has parallels in Nikolaj Rostov's feelings at the Emperor Alexander's review of troops (see Gustafson, Richard, *Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger. A Study in Fiction and Theology*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986, 362) and in the feelings of Father Sergius as a young man toward Emperor Nicholas; note in the latter case the emphasis on the cultural integration of the protagonist into the society represented by his fiancée and the imperial father figure.
- ⁷ This acquiescent naturalization of the mysteriously overruling power of conventions is reminiscent of the attitude of Pierre Bezukov in the antechamber of his dying father ("это так нужно").
- ⁸ In the drafts Tolstoj tried to individualize the flogged man, but ended up presenting him as a generic "man stripped to the waist," "*ogolennyj po pojas čelovek*" (Ždanov, 104-105) – in accordance with the universally human and more specifically Christian theme (*Ecce homo!*).
- Tolstoj's emphasis on the 'natural nakedness' of the flogged body should not be taken at face value: although physically bared, semiotically it is clothed in cultural garb – that of the Christian myth. Like Pierre, Tolstoj (and certainly his hero in the story) seems doomed forever to rend the "bronze garments" of convention after convention only to accept each subsequent painted *matreška* - doll as the absolutely natural one.
- ⁹ I.e. writer and man whose conflict with official institutions involved a virtual rejection of marriage, including his own.

- 10 The opposition pagan/Christian, in particular, the way it is implicit in the correlation Varen'ka/the Tartar, may be the story's hidden archetypal theme. The gauntlet scene exhibits similarities with archaic wedding rituals and their folkloric and literary refractions that involved the taming of the bride, i.e. of her social and sexual hostility, by flogging (see Propp, V. Ja., *Istoričeskie korni voľšebnoj skazki*, Leningrad: LGU, 1946, 277, 304; Frejdenberg, op. cit); many other elements in the story are consistent with this hypothesis. To put it briefly, Tolstoj's protagonist refuses to pass the pagan test and renounces the culture contingent on it, reinterpreting the torture as the emblem of his newly discovered Christian faith. For more detail see my paper, "The Historical Roots of Tolstoj's 'After the Ball'," at the international conference on The Role of Christianity in the History of Russian Culture, UC Berkeley, May 21-24, 1988.
- 11 See M. Zoščenko, *Izbrannye proizvedenija. 1923-1945*, Leningrad: GIXL, 46-52. In a slightly different version, as "Rasskaz pro damu s cvetami," the story was included in *Golubaja kniga* (1934), see M. Zoščenko, *Sobranie sočinenij v trex tomax*, Leningrad: Xudožestvennaja literatura, v. 3, 250-255.
- 12 See M. Zoščenko, "O jazyke," in his 1935-1937, Leningrad: GIXL, 1940, 335.
- 13 Incidentally, Zoščenko does have a story of that title as well.
- 14 Zoščenko bore a special grudge against Turgenev, having gotten the lowest grade, "ediniću," with a "Rubbish," "Чепуха!", remark for his high school composition about Liza Kalitina (see Zoščenko, *Sobranie...*, v. 3, 467, 507)
- 15 In addition to Nataša Rostova (see Note 5), Nastas'ja Filippovna, too, has had some idyllic moments on an estate of that name.
- 16 This could be a put-down of Blok's *И вижу берег очарованный / И очарованную даль*. According to K. Čukovskij, Zoščenko created his literary mask (in 1919) by giving a paper about Blok "in the vulgar style of the [fictitious] confirmed sleaze [pošljak] Vovka Čučelov," see Čudakova, M. O., *Poetika Mixaila Zoščenko*, Moscow, Nauka, 1979, 27; on the "uncrowning" of Blok's Beautiful and Unknown Ladies by the young Zoščenko see also Zoščenko, Vera, "Tak načinal Zoščenko," in *Mixail Zoščenko v vospominanijax sovremennikov*, compiled by A. Smoljan, N. Jurgeneva, Moscow: Sovetskij pisatel', 1981, 84.
- 17 The verb is pointedly not *plavat'* "swim," which she is – fatally – no good at.
- 18 This is a complete reversal of, say, "Poor Liza," where betrayal causes suicide, which in turn enables Liza to reclaim, from beyond the grave, Erast's loyalty. The "haunting woman" syndrome in Russian literature began with Liza's sketchily outlined posthumous emotional impact on Erast; in Pushkin's "The Mermaid" it took the form of potential physical aggression; later, Nastas'ja Filippovna succeeded in morally destroying all guilty and innocent males alike

already in this world (see Match, Olga, "What's To Be Done about Poor Nastja: Nastas'ja Filippovna's Literary Prototypes, *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*, 19 [1987], 55); finally, in Blok the *femme fatale* attained the peak of domination over the male persona – to get literally the boot in the denouement of Zoščenko's story.

- 19 Zoščenko's fishermen fill the role of 'epiphanetic witnesses,' analogous to that of the God-fearing bystander in "Posle bala." Their talk of money is clearly not "beyond culture," openly representing the new set of values (as do the narrator's professions of "materialism"). On another level, one may wonder whether their being fishermen, of all trades, and, moreover, literally, fishermen of a human body, but, alas, not the soul, should be correlated with the story's theme and, further, with the Christian ending of "Posle bala;" cf. also Note 23.
- 20 See my article "Lev Tolstoj and Mixail Zoščenko kak zerkalo i zazerkal'e ruskoj revolucii," *Sintaksis*, 16 (1986), 103-128. On Zoščenko's treatment of 'culture' see Ščeglov, Ju. K., "Enciklopedija nekul'turnosti (Zoščenko: rasskazy 20-x godov i *Goľubaja kniga*), in Žolkovskii, A. K. and Ju. K. Ščeglov, *Mir avtora i struktura teksta. Stat'i o ruskoj literature*, Tenafly, NJ: Hermitage, 53-84.
- 21 For attempts to interpret Zoščenko's literary texts in light of his self-psychoanalysis see Hanson, Krista, "Kto vinovat? Guilt and Rebellion in Zoščenko's Accounts of Childhood," in *Russian Literature and Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, Amsterdam: John Benjamins (forthcoming) and my "Vljublennno-blednye narcissy o vremeni i o sebe," *Beseda* (Paris), 6, 149-155, and "Aristokastratka," *Sintaksis*, 23 (1988), 69-81.
- 22 *Sobranie...*, v. 3, 528.
- 23 Both the story's announced theme and its less obvious personal agenda have time-hallowed archetypal counterparts. The heroine is a kind of sleeping beauty or, rather, Eurydice, who has to be reclaimed from the nether world. On the way there her prince has to pay the Charon-like fishermen (their mistrust may be correlated with Orpheus' non-payment). In fact, she is dead from the start (she does not eat or smile) and accordingly divided by water from her husband, who leaves for work by boat (cf. Zoščenko's fear of water). Having found her, he, instead of redeeming her with a kiss or taking her with him, rejects her and blithely returns to the other shore alone, thus reversing the story's mythological hypogram.
- 24 A chapter from Evgenija Ginzburg, *Krutoj maršrut. Kniga vtoraja*, New York: Possev-USA, 1985, 99-106.
- 25 The mention of Latin prepares the role that language will play in the chapter's central episode.

- 26 As a result, she can now write about the "real paradise, the heavenly."
- 27 Cf. the hero's preoccupation with his childhood in "Dama s cvetami."
- 28 In the semiotic sense of the word "symbol": 'sign based on convention'. For a semiotic reading of the episode see Pomorska, Krystyna, "Tolstoy – Contra Semiosis," *International Journal of Slavic Linguistics and Poetics*, 25-26, 389.

29 Сердце бьется ровно, мерно.
Что мне долгие года!
Ведь под аркой на Галерной
Напи тени навсегда.

Сквозь опущенные веки
Вижу, вижу, ты со мной,
И в руке твоей навеки
Нераскрытый всер мой.

Оттого, что стали рядом
Мы в блаженный миг чудес,
В миг, когда над Летним садом
Месяц розовый воскрес, –

Мне не надо ожиданий
У постылого окна
И томительных свиданий.
Вся любовь утолена.

Ты свободен, я свободна,
Завтра лучше, чем вчера, –
Над Невою темноводной,
Под улыбкою холодной
Императора Петра.

(1913)

On this poem see Ščeglov, Ju. K., "Poètika obezbolivaniia (stixotvorenie Akmatovoj 'Serdce b'etsja rovno, memo...')," in our *Mir avtora...*, 175-203.

- 30 But a Tolstoj or a Pil'njak might take the side of the wolf against the humans.
- 31 This *ТЫ*, capitalized and placed at the end of the chapter (as literally its last word), is, of course, a reference to the archetypal Russian arbiter of culture, love, and death – Pushkin ("Ты и вы": "Пустое *вы* сердечным *ты* / Она, обмолвись, заменила...").
- 32 However, it is not the eye-opening doctor who is cast in the role of the 'epiphany witness' (cf. Tolstoj's bystander and Zoščenko's fishermen), but the camp commandant. The doctor comments later on – in accordance with the

narrative's strategy of rewriting the crude reality in 'cultural' terms. Writing is, indeed, crucial to Ginzburg's text, which belongs to the Romantic (and also modernist) tradition of casting the Writer as protagonist. Hence the proliferation of cultural activities: the exchange of letters, recourse to verse, addressing a convict (the messenger and suspected informer) in the style of Dumas-père ("Доложите герцогу: ответа не будет... Доброй ночи, виконт!"), etc. The tenor of this 'writing' is not modernist (e.g. of the Babel kind) but rather Romantic or even romance or fairytale-like: the adventures of a damsel in distress lost in the forest, at the mercy of evil "step-mothers" (in other parts of the memoirs), who finds her prince-charming, *alias* kind sorcerer to whom she is an apprentice; she also gets help from the spirit of her "mother" (Axmatova). More or less overt, these fairy-tale motifs naturally lead us to the hidden archaic underpinnings of the plot.

The core motif of the pot of human flesh combines at least two archetypal readings. On the one hand, it represents the dead body of the bridegroom (hence his absence), which is thus guaranteed magical rebirth (hence his prompt return). Initiation and wedding rituals included various types of blood-letting, cutting, roasting, and dismemberment of young males (and sometimes females, hence the possibility of the heroine-to-meatloaves metamorphosis) as ways of preparing them for adulthood and marriage (endowing them, among other things, with a magic knowledge of animal languages). The performance of these acts of mutilation could be entrusted to other agents (slaves, villains, ogres, animal-helpers; in this connection, the wolf, with whom the cannibal convict is equated, can be seen as the totem of the hero or heroine, cf. the positive image of the "grey wolf" in Russian folklore and also Note 30). On the other hand, by identifying correctly the meat in the pot, the heroine passes a test. Among initiation and pre-wedding tests for the bride were those by eating, handling the oven, and cooking; pots and other crockery were also prominent in wedding rituals and their literary reflections. (See Propp, *op. cit.*, and Frejdenberg, *op. cit.*)

The joint effect of the two motifs is to provide a powerful subliminal accompaniment to the chapter's explicit rehabilitation of marriage, culture, and society, infusing the somewhat idyllic discourse with the blood of archaic rituals.

³³ In fact, according to a recent view, Stalinism was a runaway version of the Russian avant-garde, see Grojs, Boris, "Stalinizm kak éstetičeskij fenomen," *Sintaksis*, 17 (1987), 98-110.

³⁴ Characteristically, the harsher the reality confronted by the text, the more defensive and conventional the discourse chosen for its portrayal. Tolstoj probes the half-dead body with realistic seriousness; Zoščenko takes refuge from the disfigured and abandoned corpse in heartless comism; Ginzburg shields herself from cannibalism with the rose-colored glasses of an idyll (cf., however, Note 32).

- ³⁵ Cf. for instance, Sokolov's *Palisandrija* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985), narrated by the absolute ruler of Russia (the ultimate *načal'nik režima*) in the 'over-cultured' style of the Silver Age, with corpses and necrophiliac loves galore.