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A HOLY FOOL OR A DELIRIOUS LUNATIC – MADNESS AS A VIRTUE IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE

The focus of this essay lies on Russian fools for Christ's sake (Russ. *jurodstvo*), examined both as an ascetic exploit in the religious context of Eastern Orthodox Christianity and in the context of Russian literature. The enigmatic figure of a holy fool for Christ is perceived as a particularly Russian form of religiosity, the origins of which can be traced back to the first centuries of the Common Era. As a cultural phenomenon it is encountered in Russian literature from the early 19th century up to the present. A variety of meanings embedded in *jurodstvo* and its significance both as a social-political as well as a moral-philosophical cultural model emerge in Russian literature, especially from the second half of the 19th century onwards. Moreover, certain traits of the holy fool have been attributed to national characteristics of the Russian people. The folly for Christ in its various literary manifestations has turned into an embodiment and metaphor of Russian culture at large. It may refer to a certain way of life or behaviour, which is not confined to fictional characters only, but is ascribed to authors as well as philosophers. Such writers as Nikolai Gogol and Lev Tolstoy are often taken as examples of foolish writers. Vsevolod Garshin, a cult-figure of his time, together with some symbolist poets of the late 19th century, is often associated with *jurodstvo*. Such writers as Venedikt Erofeev, the Soviet antihero and "holy drunkard", or Viktor Krivulin and Elena Shvarts, the religiously oriented underground poets of Leningrad in the 1970-80s, serve as examples from the second half of the 20th century.

The three fictional fools to be scrutinized in this essay represent different historical periods. Orest Somov's tale "The Fool" (*Jurodivyi* 1827*)* belongs to short prose with both hagiograpic and realistic overtones, whereas Vsevolod Garshin's short story "The Red Flower" (*Krasnyi tsvetok* 1883) represents the tradition of idealised madness. The treatment of the latter will focus on the social-historical context and reception of the short story in the late 19th century. The poem by Elena Shvarts "Xenia of St. Petersburg" (*Ksenia Peterburgskaja* 2001), in turn, represents a lyric hagiography of a historical fool for Christ.

Do the two forms of insanity, the traditional folly for Christ's sake – the embodiment of ugliness and deformedness, which aims at mortifying the ego –and

the romantic mad genius whose individual originality and aesthetic and ethical superiority are emphasised, have anything in common?

Holy Foolishness in Russian History and Literature

Jurodstvo as a mode of religious asceticism came to Russian Orthodox Christianity through Byzantium. The Egyptian and Syrian desert ascetics from the first decades of the Common Era are perceived as its prototype. In Russia this phenomenon gained ground especially during the period between the 14th and 17th centuries. The tradition never ceased to exist, despite the suppression by the rulers and the Orthodox church. In the 18th century, official attempts to eradicate the phenomenon by depriving it of its sanctity were common. Fools for Christ did not lend themselves to the needs of the worldview based on rational order and utilitarianism advocated by the Enlightenment and, therefore, they had to be extirpated. In the grip of the reforms introduced by Peter the Great, *jurodivye* occurred mostly as an administrative problem. Catherine the Great's solution to the problem was the establishment of the first mental asylums or 'yellow houses' in Russia. Together with other mentally disturbed people, *jurodivye* were now incarcerated in asylums instead of monasteries. Despite this persecution, *jurodstvo* experienced a renaissance in the 19th century. Publications approaching this phenomenon from various points of view started to appear. In addition to the ecclesiastical authorities, journalists, historiographers, ethnographers as well as psychiatrists were attracted by holy foolishness. Fools appeared also in reports by the police and other government authorities. All these documents bear witness to the fact that as historical figures fools for Christ's sake have always been a very heterogeneous group of people ranging from genuine ascetics shamming madness to the mentally disturbed, eccentrics and impostors who took advantage of the veneration of the holy fools among common people.

Tales about fools for Christ have flourished and been handed down in folk memory as oral tradition and apocryphal legends as well as in written hagiographies through centuries. The *jurodivye,* canonised by the Russian Orthodox church, and the non-canonised fools, revered by the people, manifest a similar form of holiness despite the fact that the fools revered by the folk may possess traits that the church does not approve of. As a form of religious exploit, *jurodstvo* is endowed with certain reoccurring characteristics reinforced in hagiographies. Many of these thematic and stylistic conventions of hagiographic writing have remained partially intact over the centuries. Biographies of holy fools are, however, constantly rewritten and some modern authors accentuate different details than their predecessors. The impact of vitae and popular legends on the manifestations of holy foolishness in Russian literature is evident up to the mid 19th century.

The increased interest in *jurodstvo* in 19th century Russia can be discerned in Russian belles-lettres as well. A diversity of literary manifestations of holy foolishness is characteristic to the Russian literature of the second half of the 19th century in particular. It testifies to the fact that the phenomenon had by this time parted from its purely ecclesiastic context. The increased interest, in Jantulova's view (2001, 198), cannot be attributed entirely to the *narodniks*' enthusiasm for the religiosity of the people and its forms of expression, but is also explained by the freedom to depict *jurodstvo* separately from the hagiographic context. The general progress in education and sciences, medical sciences in particular, provided alternative ways of interpreting holy foolishness. It could be scrutinised, for example, in terms of psychiatry or social sciences. The depiction of the *jurodivyi*'s behaviour in 19th century literature is more detailed and less didactic than in vitae of the saints of the 16th and 17th centuries. Moreover, the characters of the fools are gradually invested with more and more psychological features.

During the period of perestroika, the Russian Orthodox church canonised nine saints in 1988 on the occasion of the 1000th anniversary of Christendom in Russia. Among the saints was one fool for Christ, namely St. Xenia of Petersburg. In Soviet times the phenomenon survived among the people, although it was kept in silence together with other practises related to religiosity. According to the official view, fools for Christ were conceived of as either retarded or mentally ill and they were often incarcerated for long periods of time, some of them spending their whole life in mental asylums. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, hundreds of victims of the Bolshevik revolution with its persecutions of believers have been canonised as martyrs and saints. These include a few holy fools for Christ revered in certain bishoprics, as well as those canonised by the Russian church. A growing flow of hagiographies and popularised legends about old and new holy fools has appeared in Russia during the last twenty years.

So, apart from religious or psychopathological approaches to *jurodstvo,* divine folly can be conceived as a cultural model or metaphor that may in different historical periods and under different social or cultural contexts be invested with varied meanings and functions. This approach is particularly appropriate for the examination of *jurodstvo* in literature, where the phenomenon manifests itself in most cases in the very character of the *jurodivyi* that adheres to a greater or lesser extent to the religious or historical prototype. It may also be expressed in other distinctive characteristics ascribed to the tradition. *Jurodstvo* may emerge on the thematic level of the literary work. The title, language or style of the fictional work may reveal its connection to the literary tradition, which dates to the first decades of the 19th century when biographies of popular fools were for the first time moulded to meet the aesthetic requirements of belles-lettres.[1] Russian literature of the second half of the century produced an increasing amount

[1] Ivan Bunin's story *Ioann Rydalets* exemplifies a belletristic form of a biography of a saint.

amount of fictional fools who no longer had an immediate historical or hagiographical prototype.[2]

Jantshevskaja (2004) discerned among the late 19th century literary types of *jurodstvo* a function that differs from the previous religious function: the transformed character types aim at paving the way for a new kind of archetypal hero with his own national specificities. Some characters related to *jurodstvo*, for example in Dostoevsky's works, represent in various ways a 'positive hero', even a kind of a moral-spiritual ideal. The insanity of the holy fool, in turn, is used as a means to bring to light the absurd and paradoxical sides of existence. In this way the tradition that started as a monastic exploit has gradually been adopted as a vehicle for the expression of psychological, often unconscious, personal and national self-identification, which offers a regenerating and unpredictable viewpoint not only of the self but also of the Russian way of life at large.

The meanings embedded in manifestations of *jurodstvo* in contemporary literature are manifold and tinged with novel nuances. They vary from character portrayals of mad protagonists to ambiguous references to the tradition. The purpose of the use by contemporary writers of *jurodstvo* as an extended metaphor is to illustrate the specificity of Russian culture or the present state of society and its need for spiritual renewal.[3] No matter how far the 21st century literary manifestations of *jurodstvo* may have travelled from its origins, connections to the ancient tradition are still discernible.

Romantic Madness

Madness as such is an ancient and universal theme in literature, but during the Romantic period its popularity, as is well known, reached a peak, and writers were preoccupied with the relationship between madness and creative inspiration. Romanticism idealised insanity. For the romantics, madness was not a disease but a particular state of consciousness, a holistic experience that reached beyond rationality. 'Sublime' madness was perceived as an inner reality, which, apart from providing a creative person with a chance to overcome the restrictions of the rational mind, meant liberation from both inner and outer norms. The union between genius and madness could at its best serve as a precondition for attaining such aims and ideals that were not confined to the norms of everyday life or to the 'normal' state of mind.

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2 Fyodor Dostoevsky's ambiguous fictional fools fall into the category without historical prototypes.

3 Examples of modern fools are to be found, among others, in Boris Evseev's "*Jurod*" (1998) and Jurii Buida's "*Shchina*" (2000). The main protagonist of Svetlana Vasilenko's novel-hagiography "*Durochka*" is a child, a deaf-mute idiot who saves not only her own country, ravaged by atheism and materialism, but also the whole universe by providing it with a new life and a new spirit.

Romantic influences reached Russia mainly through German literature and philosophy. The story about a 'mad genius' was a popular theme also in Russian 19th century literature where this role was usually given to a poet or an artist. Despite the fact that Russian romantic writers adopted to a large extent the idea of a mad poet or artist as a person with extraordinary powers, they acknowledged the pathological, tragic aspects of insanity. The ironic treatment of the theme often implies this dualistic attitude towards 'genius madness'. (Selezneva 2003, 152-153).

Like the life of a holy fool, that of a mad genius is portrayed in writing. The lives of both types of madmen become an object of description and, subsequently, part of the cultural memory, due to the very fact that they don't in their lives take the middle course, but choose a difficult and exceptional path, strange and dangerous from the point of view of the majority. As the cultural semiotician Jurii Lotman (1992a, 356-366) aptly stated: only those border crossers whose mode of life requires great effort become literary heroes.

Fool for Christ's Sake as a Religious Phenomenon

The Biblical reference to the ascetic exploit of the fool for Christ is to be found in the Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 4:10-13), where apostles are described as weak, despised, naked, homeless, beaten, thirsty and hungry fools for Christ's sake. The Gospel's word about the crucified Christ is weakness and folly in the eyes of the world, while for Christians it signifies strength and wisdom. According to St. Paul, man must lose his mind in order to participate in the divine wisdom, which is to be approached spiritually, not with the intellect:

> For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. (1 Cor. 1: 25-29)

Jurodivyi –the Russian word for a fool for Christ – is usually provided with two different meanings in dictionaries: first, it stands for a mentally disturbed or deficient person. He/she can be disturbed either from birth or his/her distortion may have occurred as a consequence of an illness or an accident. Behavioural deviations may also refer to stupidity, either intentional or unintentional. Secondly, *jurodivyi* in a religious context refers to the form of religious exploit characterised by the deliberately chosen role of a madman for hidden spiritual

purposes. In the latter case, the expression *jurodivyi Khrista radi* ('a fool for Christ's sake') is common. The pretended madness of a fool serves as a disguise that hides his/her secret feat. The Orthodox Encyclopaedia gives the following description of a fool for Christ, which is in accordance with the canonical features of holy foolishness:

> Юродивый Христа ради – святой, избравший особенный, очень редкий и очень сложный путь спасения. Большинство юродивых отличались полным пренебрежением ко всем благам жизни – круглый год ходили босыми и почти без одежды, некоторые носили вериги. Эти подвижники не боялись говорить правду в глаза сильным мира сего даже царям, обличали людей несправедливых и забывающих правду Божию, радовали и утешали людей благочестивых и богобоязненных. За подвиги самоотречения Бог награждал их дарами мудрости и прозорливости.[4]

The quoted definition accentuates the pious, 'decent' aspects of folly for Christ's sake. The fool renounces all worldly goods including his home and family. He pursues the ascetic way alone in the midst of the world in order to reveal the incompatibility between divine and earthly values. *Jurodstvo* thus indicates a fundamental division between the worldly and the divine. By his extreme way of life, a holy fool proves that he is not from this world, although he lives in this world.

The appearance and clothing of a fool for Christ are not without theological significance. The nakedness refers to the paradisiacal state of innocence that prevailed prior to the Fall. It points also to the conflict between the divine order and moral code of God's realm and that of the world. Nakedness or half-nakedness is a visible sign of the fool's preposterous way of life that ridicules and challenges the common sense and morality of the fallen world. He mocks the world and turns the worldly values upside down. By his very appearance the fool calls into question every attempt to reduce Christian life to conforming to the conventional morality and decency. (Ware 2008, 275). By the stripping of his clothes, the fool symbolically removes the mask of 'good behaviour' and hypocrisy. He tears apart the veils of conventional decency and value judgements dictated by the outside world. The hypostatic identity of man as an image of God underlies the ethical view of the Eastern Orthodox church. The Greek theologian and religious thinker Christos Yannaras (1984, 22-23) distinguishes the hypostatic 'person' from the 'individual'. 'Person' (*prosopon*) and 'individual' (*atomon*) are from one point of view opposite in meaning: the 'individual' incarcerated in his self embraces intellectual consciousness – psychological ego with expressions of its will and needs. The 'individual' rejects the 'person's' di-

[4] See http://akaka.al.ru/slovar

distinctiveness and freedom as it aims at determining human existence in terms of so-called objective traits typical of the human species as a whole. According to Yannaras, it is personal distinctiveness that forms the image of God in man and has access to immediate experience of the divine.

The conception of man in terms of 'an individual' results in ethical norms that are based on established social conventions that tell us what we ought to be and how we ought to behave. Orthodox ethics, on the contrary, neither draws on ethics dictated by social convention, nor does it evaluate people by their conformity to the given social ethics. The decorum given from without separates the ethos or morality of man from his existential truth, from what he really is as a 'person'. Yannaras (1984, 14-15) compares the 'individual's' ethics – determined by conformity to an authoritative or conventional code of law – to a mask of behaviour behind which one hides the tragedy of his mortal, biological existence. One borrows the mask from different ideologues and authorities in order to be safe from one's own self and the questions that the self poses. Consequently, human morality does not denote any objective measure which could be used to weigh man's nature or behaviour. It refers rather to the existential truth and authenticity of man and his personal freedom. The very same freedom includes a risk that we may use our free will wrongly and reject the divine origin of our being, alienating our existence and being from God. Conceived in this way, morality is an existential event: It is either a dynamic realization of the fullness of existence as a 'person', such as God created him to be in pursuit of his likeness, or failure and distortion of his true hypostasis. (Ibid.).

The fool for Christ's sake takes off the mask of social decorum by deliberately 'stepping out from his ego' (cf. the Russian *'soiti/shodit s uma'* = 'fall into madness', which means literally 'step down from one's mind'). He dons, instead, a mask of foolishness that mocks the conventional morality of this world. Thus, losing one's individual ego is a prerequisite for finding oneself anew as a person. Yannaras (1984, 66-67) points out that fools for Christ often emerge during periods of 'secularization' among Christians, when the Christian identity seems to depend on the conventional standards and ideas of the world. The fool knows that 'virtues' measured with yardsticks of social decorum lead to self-satisfaction and separate man both from God and his fellow men. By his provocative acts he brings people out of their state of spiritual lethargy.

With his nakedness or ragged clothing the fool does not only mock the values and practices of this world, but he himself becomes a target for the scorn of the world. The main purpose of his ascetic exploit is to grow in humility to ultimate self-denial. Through self-humiliation and degradation along with inner prayer the fool aims at suppressing the sin of pride and at finding and maintaining the

virtue of *apatheia*,[5] i.e. pureness of mind. *Apatheia* refers to liberation from all vices, also from negative thoughts and sentiments through a continuous process of purification. (Kavarnos 1986, 43).

The despised stigma of madness guards him from surrendering to the sin of pride. He is deprived of every form of worldly learnedness, including intellectual powers. Unlike their Byzantine prototypes, Russian hagiographies do not emphasise the madness of the fools. It gets mentioned, but as a rule, the rude words, obscene acts or scruffy appearance of the fool is not described in detail (Kobets 2000, 378, 383). The tendency is discerned also in the definition of a fool for Christ cited above where the madness of the holy fool is omitted. This could perhaps be explained by the view according to which the fool's voluntary leap to insanity does not mean a total rejection of reason but that the rational thoughts are renounced only insofar as they concern worldly issues and hierarchies. In his inner reality the holy fool resorts to his rational mind when it comes to fulfilling his divine mission. According to Hieromonk Aleksii (Jurodstvo 2000, 96-97), the rejection of the intellect in matters of this world leads inevitably to disorder in the outer life of a fool for Christ. The purpose of the ostensible renunciation of the intellect is to expand the mind, to make room for God with "thoughts that cannot be expressed in words". Although living in the world, in his inner reality the fool aims at withdrawing from the world by focusing his mental activity towards God. The seeming irrationality is targeted to the surrounding reality. In his inner reality he is far from being mad or mindless.

A political function is often associated with the Russian ascetic exploit, which in Byzantine hagiographies of the holy fools would have been unprecedented (Kobets 2000, 383-384). In their relationship with the surrounding world Russian fools for Christ are often represented as courageous outspoken rebels fearlessly confronting those in power. They often act as a mouthpiece for social evils. On the other hand, the authorities have made use of the revered status of the fool to advance their political and ecclesiastical aspirations. Since none of the worldly authorities deserves the respect of the fool and since he does not thirst for status, power or honour, he remains unconcerned about the consequences of his words and deeds.

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[5] In Orthodox theology, man is perceived as the image of God and his ultimate purpose is to fulfil his divine nature in theosis, likeness of God. In theosis, man returns to his divine origins, to his natural state, from which he has turned away, but which can be attained through exploit and by leading a virtuous life. Virtues are conceived as God's energy and it is God who places virtues in the human heart. God and man fight together against sin and evil. Faith is a precondition for Christian virtues. Only through faith, hope, love and humbleness, as well as by exercising inner attentiveness and by praying, can man reach a state of *apatheia*, i.e. a condition of inner purity in which one may enter into communion and relationship with God. (see Kavarnos 1986, 39-40). Ascetic exploit is a way of practicing virtues, the ultimate purpose of which is spiritual integrity.

His trustworthiness is linked to his utmost sincerity – a fool never lies. His words may appear enigmatic; he may use incomprehensible metaphors and biblical citations, proverbs, puns and rhyming. His speech may consist of inconceivable laconic outbursts, the prophetic significance of which is revealed only after his death. The mumble and awkward speech of the fool, along with his seeming insanity have been interpreted within the apophatic tradition of Orthodox theology: he speaks with his gestures and acts rather than through his words because he speaks about a truth that cannot be rendered in common speech. However, the mysterious words of the fool may become comprehensible if conceived as words that are not to be translated into a rational language, but words that provide an entire new perspective on life and reality.

In his social role the Russian *jurodivyi* is the spokesman of common people. The people honour him as the elect of God, as the representative of divine justice on earth. This is possible because of the fact that in the Russian tradition – unlike in Byzantium – the sanctity of the fool did not remain a secret until his death but was revealed during his lifetime (Kobets 2000, 384). In the eyes of the common folk he often appeared as a living saint who was both feared because of his weirdness and loved for his feats. But then again, people could also deem the madman as possessed by the devil and treat him cruelly. The attitude towards historical fools for Christ has always been contradictory. The church fathers have emphasised the conscious voluntary nature of the insanity of the fools for Christ's sake, but in actual life it has not always been possible to draw a line between the mentally sane fools that have pretended to be mad and those who have been mentally deranged. A mental disorder, however, does not exclude the possibility that one could be spiritually sane in spite of it (Ware 2008, 290).

Christ serves as a paragon for the physical and spiritual exploit, for the self-denial and self-degradation of the holy fool. For bearing the cross of madness, the chosen ones are recompensed by God with such gifts as wisdom and clear-sightedness. A fool for Christ shows incomprehensible universal sympathy in taking upon himself the sins of fellow men. He exposes to light their hidden vices while he himself hides his virtues under his seeming vices and defects. In his utmost humility and shamelessness, a fool for Christ is a contradictory figure to whom the church has taken a reserved attitude. As was mentioned, in vitae of the Russian holy fools for Christ's sake, madness is often overlooked. His weird outfit, unconventional behaviour, gestures and speech are often overshadowed by his good deeds, predictions and miracles.

How does madness figure in Russian fiction? Is literature a domain liberated from the restraints of hagiographic conventions in representations of holy or otherwise idealised foolishness? What kind of wisdom may be associated with 'mundane' insanity with its psychological or social models of explanation outside the traditional religious paradigm?

"A Genuine" Popular Fool for Christ

"*Jurodivyi*", the very title of Orest M. Somov's "Little Russian True Story", written in 1827, defines the nature of its main protagonist, Vasil, as a fool. The other hero, a young noble officer named Melskii, in contrast to Vasil, represents the modern rationalistic worldview of the early 19th century Russia without religious prejudices. The author implies the different social status of the protagonists by the revealing detail that Vasil has no family name – he is depicted as a traditional holy fool without home, family and property – whereas Melskii's forename is not mentioned. Vasil's divine mission, which is revealed only in the end of the story, is to lead the prodigal Melskii to repentance and back to the Christian virtues practised by his family, especially by his late aunt. The dying Vasil fulfils his mission with his last ounce of strength after saving the life of the young officer in a duel by throwing himself between Melskii and the bullet.

Vasil's appearance, nature and behaviour are in keeping with a traditional fool for Christ. The naturalistic depiction conforms to a stereotypical biography of a saint or to a popular legend:

> Это был человек высокого роста, с щетинистою бородою и всклокоченными на голове волосами. Лицо его было бледно и сухо и при лунном свете казалось как бы мертвым; мутные, бродящие глаза его показывали, что голова его не в самом здоровом состоянии. [...] который стоял без шляпы, в черном, длинном платье толстого сукна, сшитом наподобие монашеского подрясника; подпоясан он был узким ремнем с железною ржавою пряжкою; обуви на нем вовсе не было; в руке держал он длинную палку с вырезанными на коре ее узорами. (Somov 1984, 2)

His garb resembles that of a monk, referring thus to religious asceticism. The clothing also brings to mind the history of Russian holy foolishness: the first fools for Christ pursued their ascetic way in monasteries until the 15th century, when *jurodstvo* gradually became an urban phenomenon. The black cloak of a monk also stands as a symbol for death and victory over death. It is a lamentation openly declaring that the person in question has taken upon himself the fall and sins of the mankind (Yannaras 1984, 74). Vasil is a wanderer with hollow cheeks living on the charity of people. He sleeps on the bare ground under the open sky. He is constantly on the move and his gesticulations and way of walking are described in detail. Actually, he speaks more through his gestures than through words. The repeated vertical movement when raising his arms to the sky as if addressing God indicates the hidden purpose of his actions and is reminiscent of the gesture language of early Christians. The supernatural powers attributed to Vasil are typical characteristics of a fool for Christ. He is able to

see through people, he reads their minds and is aware of their evil deeds. He can predict future events, even his own destiny, which was "written at birth".

The virtue of humility is personified in the figure of Vasil and it is manifested in his relationship with Melskii. However, Vasil's humbleness is not unambiguous – he accepts his destiny without resistance, but in his treatment of other people's defects he shows utmost rudeness and recklessness. Moreover, he does not try to hide his own virtues but shamelessly boasts about them. Melskii, in his turn, represents the virtue of honour, which is more precious to the young officer than his own life. His 'mundane virtues', such as his extraordinary courage and determination, appear to arise from the vice of pride. As a result of Vasil's selfless sacrifice, the duellers are forced to confront the insignificance of their ultimate motivations as well as the fundamental dishonour of their action, the primary purpose of which was to defend their personal honour. Through the mindless and unforeseeable action of the fool, oppositions are reconciled: the dishonour inherent in conventional honour is revealed and the Christ-like humility that wipes away all blame and shame is manifested in the very shamelessness of the fool.

Melskii's mocking manner of speaking about his brethren kindles the duel. His imprudent remarks seal the fate of Vasil. The fateful role of words is not accidental, but it implies the 'correct' attitude towards speech. Vasil's mode of speaking is typical of a fool for Christ. Vasil is short-spoken and unkind in his responses and uses simple language. His coarse voice sounds rude in Melskii's ears. The fool is convinced that social amusements bewilder our mind and tongue: "Закружишься – забудешься; на сердце одно, а на языке другое. Язык наш – враг наш: прежде ума рыщет"[6] (Somov 1984, 5). And indeed, Melskii's sharp tongue will betray him, and Vasil's prophecy will come true. The fool himself prefers to keep silent, pray or sing[7] rather than succumb to verbosity.

Restraint from speech and avoidance of company are traits that link Somov's fool to Orthodox asceticism, more precisely to the hesychastic tradition of inner silence. A hesychast is a person who aims at emptying himself by depriving his mind of the concepts of human reasoning, of words, thoughts and impressions. His objective is to be filled with the experience of the divine presence of God with the help of the silent prayer of the heart. (Ware 2008, 162-163). In making the voluntary leap to madness, Vasil deprives himself of intellectual powers and ceases to use speech as a vehicle for intellectual, analytical pondering. In his

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6 "In the whirl of a dance one loses control of oneself; the heart says one thing, but the tongue utters another. Our tongue is our enemy: it gallops ahead in front of our sense."

7 In an article dating from Soviet times the relation of Vasil to *jurodstvo* is not mentioned at all. Instead, he is paralleled to the *kalik*is, blind wanderers who used to perform traditional spiritual hymns (Petrunina 1984, 11). These performers of the so-called *stihi*, songs connected to popular religious legends, could be called by various names. Vasil sings, among others, hymns sang at the memorial service for the deceased.

view, the mouth lies and the mind, with its thoughts, impressions and emotions, leads one astray from the path to the truth that resides in the heart. According to orthodox theology, the heart (*kardia*) signifies the human person as a spiritual subject, that very person who is created in God's image and whose purpose is the pursuit of His likeness. Thus, heart represents the most profound self, the innermost core of the 'person' where moral choices take place (Ibid. 104-105).

If we are to believe his own words, Vasil does not lie, steal, betray or possess the vice of avarice. Virtues, identified with him are utmost honesty, moderation, clean conscience and childish carefreeness – characteristics of a stereotypical fool for Christ. Owing to his divine mission, Vasil seems to be free from all shame and guilt, from emotions that such provocative behavior and impudent revelation of other people's weaknesses might arouse in an ordinary person.

The impression of naiveté and simplicity is enhanced by the fact that Vasil addresses himself in the third person singular, as if he was talking about someone else:

> Василь пьет воду; Василь спит на голой земле [...] Василь не леший! – сказал поспешно юродивый. – Он бродит по ночам, а не шатается. А пуще в лавках ничего не забирает в долг на чужой счет. (Somov 1984, 3).

This mode of 'being outside of oneself' could be conceived as a reference to the indifference of the holy fool to his physical body. Kovalevsky (1992, 4) maintains that the fools for Christ's sake perceived themselves as being incorporeal or as residing in a foreign body.

It is worth noting how Vasil's rude and enigmatic manner of speech suddenly changes at the moment when he realises that his life is drawing to its end. His voice is softened and his farewell with Melskii is filled with deep emotion. Now that the mission received from God is fulfilled, he removes the mask of a fool. In Somov's story Vasil is addressed by various names, which reveal his true nature. In the beginning of the story he is called a drunkard, a madman, a simpleton, a tramp, a fool and a lunatic, whereas in the end he is 'an incomprehensible human being', 'an earthly martyr' and 'a deceased neighbour'. The poor people have recognised his dignity already during his lifetime and they come to accompany him to the grave. Even in this detail, Somov's fool follows its holy models. Vasil's character and the salvation story of Melskii tell more about the conventions of the tradition of the folly for Christ's sake as it is rendered in popular tales than about a distinctive individual or personal characteristics of his insanity. The story bears a didactic message. Vasil saves his own soul by sacrificing his life for the life of his fellow man, and consequently his feat shows the young man the way back to the traditional way of life with such Christian virtues as *agapé* and modesty as his guiding principles.

A Madman Tormented by Ideals

Unlike Vasil, the simple traditional fool of Somov's story, the nameless protagonist of Vsevolod Garshin's short story *Krasnyj tsvetok* ("The Red Flower" 1883) is clearly mentally disturbed. The psychiatrists of the time were fascinated with Garshin's accurate description of symptoms of a mental disease, ranging from maniac exaltation and raving fervour with its hallucinations to the strange associations and obsessions of the hero. They paid special attention to the depiction of the coexistence of the so-called normal state and the pathological state of the main protagonist and praised Garshin's ability to describe the transitional stages between these two. (Ellis, see Sirotkina 2002, 130). The main protagonist's insanity was without exception endowed with nobility and dignity; it did not diminish his value as a human being, quite the contrary.

What could explain such an exaltation of madness? It can be attributed, at least partly, to the extraordinary mission of the hero of the story. He was obsessed with saving the whole of humankind from evil, which in his delirious mind was materialised in the three scarlet red flowers that grew in the garden of the mental asylum. The hero sacrifices his life for the whole world by grasping the flowers one by one and by squeezing them in his hand against his chest until the lethal poison of the flowers contaminates him. In his imagination, mankind, including his fellow incarcerated patients, will be liberated as a result of his heroic exploit.[8] As evil will thus be defeated, "The earth would tremble, would be despoiled of her ancient garment to be re-clothed resplendently in new and youthful beauty." (Garshine 1887, 8). The identification of the main protagonist with Christ is obvious, despite the fact that the themes of "The Red Flower" are to be construed metaphorically rather than religiously. Good and evil remain abstractions that don't find realisation in the relation of the hero to the surrounding world. He enters into dialogue with other patients, but each interlocutor seems to talk to himself instead of communicating with others. The hero of Garshin's short story perceives himself as an exceptional individual who, due to his great idea, possesses sufficient strength to carry out his fateful duty. He is credited with similar superhuman powers to a fool for Christ: he is able to read other people's thoughts and see the whole history of objects with one glance. He lives in a reality where the past, present and future are simultaneously present and where the dead mingle with the living. Contrary to the holy paragons, such as Great Martyr Saint George the Victorious, to whom he pleads for help, the martyrdom of the hero – symbolised by the red colour of '*les fleurs du mal*' and the red cross decorating the bonnet of the patients – does not imply his humbleness

[8] The Russian word '*podvig*' has a double meaning: in addition to a courageous deed it refers to an ascetic feat.

or innocent simplicity, but indicates his superiority. He seems to possess a megalomaniac omnipotence parallel to divine perfection.

> Что вы так пристально смотрите на меня? Вы не прочтете того, что у меня в душе, – продолжал больной, – а я ясно читаю в вашей! Зачем вы делаете зло? [...] Человеку, который достиг того, что в душе его есть великая мысль, общая мысль, ему все равно, где жить, что чувствовать. Даже жить и не жить... Ведь так? [...] И у меня она есть! [...] И когда я нашел ее, я почувствовал себя переродившимся. Чувства стали острее, мозг работает, как никогда. Что прежде достигалось длинным путем умозаключений и догадок, теперь я познаю интуитивно. Я достиг реально того, что выработано философией. Я переживаю самим собою великие идеи о том, что пространство и время – суть фикции. Я живу во всех веках. Я живу без пространства, везде или нигде, как хотите. И поэтому мне все равно, держите ли вы меня здесь или отпустите на волю, свободен я или связан [...] Мне все равно, где ни быть и когда ни жить. Если мне все равно, не значит ли это, что я везде и всегда? (Garshin 1883, 3)

The second reason for exalting madness to a status of an ideal can be traced to the personality of the author Vsevolod Garshin (1855-1888), as well as to the time when the short story emerged. After the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, Russia lapsed into a deep political decline. Critics and readers were inclined to perceive a social message in "The Red Flower". It has been read as an invitation to adopt a more human attitude towards the mentally disturbed and as an encouragement to improve the conditions in mental asylums. Moreover, the mental asylum of the story was conceived as an allegory of society at large already in the late 19th century and later in Soviet literary criticism in particular.

The association of social criticism or political dissidence with alleged insanity began in Russia long before Soviet times and Nikita Khrushchev's declaration in 1959 in which he condemns any kind of dissident thinking and action that deviates from the established social norms as mental illness or crime (Brintlinger 2007, 4). In this regard, fools for Christ can be conceived of as pious pioneers of Russian dissident tradition. Quite a few of them ended up in asylums despite the fact that their public action did not always include political criticism.

With his own deep spiritual conflicts and megalomaniac ideals, Vsevolod Garshin represented the generation of writers of the 1870s. Together with his fictional protagonists, the author of the story was commonly called 'a Hamlet of our time'. The story of the red flower has been interpreted as a symbolic portrayal of a perfect upheaval, the dream of the *narodniks*, an upheaval that would in an instant turn the prevailing social order upside down. The idea of self-sacrifice for the sake of others was embedded in this dream. Garshin was a sensitive romantic whose literary production was based on human experience. He had a gift of conveying extreme emotions and individual suffering. In his case,

the personality of the author is inseparably intertwined with his fiction. Garshin's talent in depicting from inside the process of a splitting mind derives from his own experience of manic-depressive psychosis, which was treated in various asylums in the 1880s. He could bring to mind the previous treatments, his own psychotic states and the anxiety brought about by this illness as well as the fear of new attacks. In the grip of mania, Garshin wanted to make the whole of mankind happy, while in depression he felt guilty for all and wanted to carry the sins of the whole world. Writing did not bring any relief to his situation; he himself perceived it rather as a cross that gnawed his spiritual resources and made him mad. The writer with a Christ-like face became a symbol of suffering and an entire mythological cult was developed around his personality. The myth consisted of elements of the tradition of romantic androgyny together with aspects of the hagiographic tradition according to which physical suffering leads to spiritualisation (Wessling 2007, 80). Garshin committed suicide in March 1888.

The personal traits of the author were mixed with the traits of the protagonist in "The Red Flower". They merged into a type characteristic to that particular historical period when many disappointed members of the intelligentsia with progressive aspirations thought that manifestations of idealism could occur only in the irrational mind. The reactionary hopeless atmosphere of that time prompted thoughts according to which only a madman with 'abnormally' developed willpower and faith in the ideal could imagine himself to be capable of improving life (Sirotkina 2002, 130). Both Garshin as a person and his story were received quite enthusiastically among psychiatrists. Owing to the sympathy towards the writer, doctors tended to overlook the negative aspects of his disease. Psychiatrist N.N Bazhenov's account on Garshin's mental disorder attests to this tendency: he describes the disease as 'a spiritual drama', stressing the fact that a psychic disease does not totally eliminate the higher characteristics of a human being – his dignity and intelligence: "even during his fits of madness he [Garshin – MK] remains the same hater of evil, full of active love for people, ready to sacrifice himself for their sake, just as in his state of normal spiritual balance" (Sirotkina 1998, 7). The main protagonist of "The Red Flower" was perceived in the same vain. He was regarded as a noble self-sacrificing hero who died for his high megalomaniac ideals (Sirotkina 2002, 130). Garshin's case illustrates well the state of Russian psychiatry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Psychiatrists were keen on composing 'case histories' for famous writers where the role played by the literary works was not without significance. In this way psychiatry tried to seize the 'discourse of madness' which in Russia had been dominated to a certain extent by literature.

The maximalist medieval notion of norm could be taken as a starting point for deciphering both Garshin's life and his short story. According to Jurii Lotman (1992b, 81) the norm expresses a pursuit towards an unattainable ideal. Or,

if the ideal is attainable it can be reached only with the help of madness. The purpose of the behaviour of the 'madman' in this case does not lie in violating the norms, but the madman acts according to norms that deviate from the norms of everyday life. He is guided by norms that can be followed only by an exceptional hero under exceptional circumstances. It takes self-sacrifice, suffering and exaltation of suffering to attain such high ideals. From the point of view of the medieval norm, insanity as presented in "The Red Flower" could be understood as a kind of sacred folly, as evidence of a link between superiority and insanity that manifests itself in the passion of the hero for his mission impossible at the risk of his own life. Neither Garshin nor his nameless hero are the only characters in Russian literature with superhuman powers in situations that require superhuman effort. Notwithstanding the fact that some Russian writers have tried to attain the high ideals in real life, often with tragic consequences, as Garshin's case testifies, the realisation of such ideals has remained a dream.

The Russian psychiatrist Lakhtin (quoted from Sirotkina 2002, 132) classified Garshin along with the protagonist of his story as belonging to the category of 'pathological altruists' that comprises both historical and fictitious characters (Socrates, Don Quixote and Jeanne D'Arc, among others). 'Pathological altruism', in his view, is characteristic of a society in turmoil where revolutionary aspirations have been violently suppressed (e.g. Russia in the 1880s or after the 1905 revolution). In the oppressive atmosphere of such a society, 'pathological altruists' cannot find an outlet for their active altruism and, as a consequence, it may take pathological shape in the form of distorted heroic visions of self-sacrifice. Psychiatrists, the 'specialists on the soul' of that time, were interested in the actions of 'pathological altruists', which were examined with the help of the material provided by the literary representations and biographical accounts of the writers. Due to the phenomenon, many psychiatrists reconsidered the meaning of mental illness and, on a more general level, the notion of 'normality' vs. 'abnormality' (Ibid. 2002, 133). Experts on mental disorders in 'prisonlike' Russia appreciated highly extreme idealism. What is even more striking in their accounts is the fact that the extreme idealistic exploit balancing on the verge of insanity and the unshakeable faith in the ideal may sometimes be conceived as psychotherapeutic methods, as ways to remain sane in that very reality. (Jarotsky, see Sirotkina 2002, 7).

The dark side of the 'pathological altruism' of Garshin's hero manifests itself as megalomania with hallucinations and pathological narcissism, egocentricity and 'individuality' in Yannaras's sense of the word:

> Он видел себя в каком-то волшебном, заколдованном круге, собравшем в себя всю силу земли, и в горделивом исступлении считал себя за центр этого круга. Все они, его товарищи по больнице, собрались сюда затем, чтобы исполнить дело, смутно представлявшееся ему

> гигантским предприятием, направленным к уничтожению зла на земле. Он не знал, в чем оно будет состоять, но чувствовал в себе достаточно сил для его исполнения. [...] Он надеялся, что к утру цветок потеряет всю свою силу. Его зло перейдет в его грудь, его душу, и там будет побеждено или победит – тогда сам он погибнет, умрет, но умрет как честный боец и как первый боец человечества, потому что до сих пор никто не осмеливался бороться разом со всем злом мира. (Garshin 1883, 4)

The hero's image of himself brings to mind a state that in orthodox theology is called spiritual pride (Gr. *hyperthania*, Russ. *duhovnaja prelest'*). It is an opposition to the state of humility and is considered as one of the seven deadly sins. The notion signifies an egocentric psychic state endowed with unhealthy illusions and hallucinations about oneself and one's spiritual gifts. During such a state, one may have pseudo-spiritual hallucinations and imagine that one communicates with Christ or the angels. (Challis & Dewey 1978, 260). In Patristic writing, such a false experience of reaching spiritual heights is associated with being possessed, i.e. with a state of insanity ruled by evil forces instead of the divine.[9]

A Lyrical Hagiography of a Female Fool

Elena Shvarts (1948-2010), the renowned St. Petersburg poet, has dedicated a poem to the Blessed St. Xenia of St. Petersburg, who is the first officially-recognized female fool for Christ in Russia and one of Russia's most highly esteemed saints. It is believed that she started her exploit as a *jurodivaja* in the mid 18th century. Her life has not only attracted the attention of hagiographers, but it has also been kept alive in oral tradition, popular legends and in literature. After her canonisation in 1988 a whole hymnography – akathists, prayers and services – was dedicated to the Blessed St. Xenia.[10] The abundant literature published on St. Xenia concentrates on particular themes and incidents of her life. One of the musts to be mentioned is the reason she turned to *jurodstvo* and its consequences to the mode of her feat. Both the cause and its consequences are implicitly present in Shvarts's poem, although the poet takes it for granted that the reader is acquainted with the hagiographic mainstream about the beloved fool.

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[9] Literary characters who possess traits both of a holy fool and that of a possessed figure occur in Dostoevsky's novel "*Brat'ja Karamazovy*" (the monk Ferapont) and in "*Besy*" (Stavrogin), among others. Among historical figures, Rasputin and Ivan IV are often considered to belong to the category of the possessed.

[10] For the evolution of Xenia's hagiography and hymnography, see Sergei Shtyrkov's insightful account (Shtyrkov 2011) passim.

Xenia Grigorevna Petrova was married to Andrei Fedorovitch Petrov, a colonel and court chorister. The marriage had an abrupt end when Andrei unexpectedly passed away and the 26-year-old Xenia was suddenly left alone in the Russian capital. After the funeral the young widow gave away all her possessions and dressed in the clothes of her late husband. Her relatives, alerted by her strange behaviour, assumed that she had lost her mind out of grief, but she was proven sane. Elena Shvarts renders the incident in the first part of her poem *Ksenija Peterburgskaja* ("Xenia of Petersburg" 2001) in the following way:

Ксения петербургская[11]

Ксения Ксению в жертву принесла,
"Умер мой любимый. Стану им сама".
Со своего ума сошла
И, как на льдину круглую,
Прыгнула в чужой.
В чужую память,
В чужие сны,
В шелковый камзольчик,
В красные штаны.
Бежит она и басом
Кричит в сырую тьму:
Живи – я исчезаю,
Живи – кричит ему.
Выбегает из Ксении,
– Ату ее, быстрей.
И вот она уже –
Опять живой Андрей.

Unlike the standard hagiographic texts, the poem does not depict the details of Xenia's earthly life. Shvarts does not occupy herself with Xenia's feats, predictions and miracles. The jump into madness as a deliberate, conscious choice serves as a starting point for the poem, followed by the laying aside of her former identity and the "change" of sex. For Shvarts, the significance of these events lies in their spiritual nature. Xenia ceases to identify herself with her feminine self, her ego – i.e. with everything that has constituted the crux of her self in this life, including her name. She sacrifices her self for the sake of her husband in a manner that seems totally insane. Her identification with Andrei has been perceived as an attempt to save her late husband's soul, because he did not manage to confess his sins or receive communion before his sudden death[12].

[11] Shvarts 2001, 28.

[12] According to Shtyrkov, the interpretation according to which her motivation for assuming a double identity and embracing holy foolery lies in her ultimate, self-sacrificing love for her husband is characteristic of post-Soviet hagiographic narratives. It undermines the traditional

Most of the numerous accounts about St. Xenia render the impression that her sudden devotion and the 45 year-long exploit that followed were not results of her insanity but that they testify to her special wisdom and knowledge about the minuteness of earthly good compared to divine happiness.

The insanity of the fool is conceptualised in the poem through the woman/man dichotomy and the reconciliation of the opposites is realised through cross-dressing. In cultural semiotics, dressing up in the clothes as well as speaking in the voice of the other sex is conceived as a form of anti-behaviour or preposterous behaviour (Uspenskii 1994, 320). Its main aim is to break down the generally accepted hierarchies and modes of thought. Folly for Christ's sake pertains to forms of anti-behaviour but differs from it in the sense that the fools conduct is motivated by a higher purpose that contradicts the beliefs and opinions of this world. By his/her provocative behaviour, the holy fool aims at exposing the apparent and false nature of the surrounding reality in its entirety (ibid. 326-7). In this respect the cultural and religious foundations for the behaviour of the fool coincide.

Could there be other reasons for Xenia's renouncement of her femininity besides saving the soul of Andrei by atoning for his sins? Is the role of the holy fool taken on by a man in a more natural way than by a woman? The fact that many female ascetics, including Xenia,[13] are compared to a male ascetic as their model in the hagiographic narratives seems to corroborate this impression. Xenia's abandonment of her womanhood is not unique among female saints. The following passage from an akathist to St. Xenia could be read as a reference to a particular group of saints who covered their femininity under men's clothes: "Rejoice, for you renounced your own name, referring to yourself as dead! Rejoice, for you assumed foolishness and took the name of your husband, Andrei! Rejoice, for you called yourself by a man's name, renouncing woman's weakness!" They were often wives/daughters whose husbands/fathers did not approve of their choice of a monastic life. So Xenia is not the only woman who gave up her femininity when stepping on the path of *imitatio Christi*.

Or perhaps she did it for practical reasons? Life as a homeless wanderer in the Petersburg of the late 18th century was presumably safer as a man. It was al-

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portrait of Xenia as an urban holy fool by offering an understandable, demystifying explanation for her behavior and thus turns her to a typical holy person instead of a fool. In his view, Shvarts, alongside almost all contemporary lay authors, conveys a similar interpretation of St. Xenia's holy mission. (Shtyrkov 2011, 297-304).

13 See Akathist to St. Xenia: "Rejoice, for you were the peer of Andrei, the fool for the sake of Christ!...." The text refers to Andrei of Constantinople whose vita is particularly popular among Russian Orthodox believers. Xenia is associated with a male paragon, and not with, say, Maria of Egypt who, according to some legends, revealed herself to Xenia after her husband's death in a dream and guided her to ascetic life. Maria of Egypt, in turn, is said to have lost her female appearance during her ascetic exploit in the desert and some sources point out that she, too, wore men's clothes in order to hide her true sex (Ziolkowsky 1988, 74-6).

so true that men had no obligations concerning the household. The stories about St. Xenia's miracles and predictions often start with her sudden emergence in a house where she catches the mistress or the daughter in their daily toil, preparing coffee or mending socks. Moreover, Xenia's special gift is related to the domestic sphere: she arranged and gave her blessing to marriages, but warned about false suitors, she healed the sick, especially children, and helped alcoholics to quit drinking (see, e.g. Trofimov 1993, 151-3).

The change of her name and clothing, and even of her voice to a deep bass, testifies to Xenia's rejection of womanhood. However, the alternation between feminine and masculine personal pronouns in Shvarts's poem suggests a struggle between the two sides of her divided personality. The poet focuses on the very process of Xenia's identification with Andrei, which has its painful moments. Judging by outer appearance Xenia seems indeed to be overcome by Andrei. Shvarts's lyric version omits one aspect repeatedly occurring in hagiographic material – namely that after Andrei's uniform was worn to rags, she dressed again in a skirt and a blouse wearing the colours of the Preobrazhenskii regiment where Andrei had served, and that she continued to answer to the name of her late husband only. Bodin (2005, 43-44) explains Xenia's renouncement of femininity – which became a distinctive sign of her exploit – both in Christian and social terms. In the social sense she gives up all sexual categories. She does not pretend to be a man, despite the fact that she adheres to her husband's name even after changing back to woman's clothes. According to the Christian interpretation, her act is in line with the words of St. Paul in the Epistle to the Galatians (Gal. 3: 27-28) concerning the kingdom of God where oppositions and categories cease to exist: "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Thus, the prophesy of St. Paul gives another explanation for the female ascetics' abandonment of femininity – the ultimate asexuality of angelic life.[14]

Notwithstanding the fact that the fool for Christ's sake by his/her very appearance and manners rejects earthly laws, he/she cannot ignore totally all mundane categories. Actually, the values and oppositions the fool aims to reconcile are embedded in his/her conduct that reveals the antinomies he wants to overcome. In cultural terms, many opposite qualities are neutralized in the fool's behaviour because they lose their significance as generally accepted categories, whereas in religious terms the reconciliation of irreconcilable oppositions is a universal token of the highest perfection (Syrkin 1982, 167-8). In Xenia's case, female and

[14] The neutralization of the dichotomy between woman/man is associated with *jurodstvo*. Symeon of Efesa is an example of a holy fool who pays no attention to the difference between man and woman (Syrkin 1982, 164).

male polarities are reconciled. The erasure of biological and social oppositions illustrates the ideal of absolute equality inherent in *jurodstvo*.

In the second part of the poem Shvarts invests Xenia's repudiation of femininity with yet a deeper spiritual significance. The process of self-emptying depicted in the poem corresponds to the spiritual discipline of kenosis. It refers to Christ, who in incarnation gave up his divine features, and emptied and humbled himself for the sake of man. As the holy fool is a follower of Christ, his/her life means constant self-degradation and renunciation of thoughts, words and deeds that separate him/her from God. Shvarts describes kenosis as the passageway toward ultimate spiritual transformation. The total emptiness of the mind is attained by absolute oblivion, by erasing all impressions, thoughts, memories and emotions, i.e. all that constitutes the individual or the ego. Absolute emptiness of the mind serves as a prerequisite for attaining theosis, likeness to God, and St. Xenia exemplifies an authentic kenotic relationship through her holy foolery:

Но жизнь плывет, чуть жжется,
Обоим не живется.
Придется выйти ей,
Да вот куда? – беда!
Пока ты уходила,
В твой дом стучала, била
Подземная вода.
Она размыла ум и сон,
И в эту пустоту
Тебе вселиться нету сил –
А токмо что Христу.

Elena Shvarts deploys concrete elements and things as metaphors of inner life. One of the classical elements pertaining to the mythology and realia of the city of St. Petersburg bears an important symbolic meaning in the poem. The mortification of Xenia's ego is juxtaposed to jumping onto an ice floe. By giving up her own will she surrenders to the current of the divine will. Water is the very element that washes away her ego-consciousness also in the last lines of the poem when her mind in its entirety is swept away by underground waters.[15] The water motif that functions as a vehicle for Xenia's transformation into Andrei could also refer to the sacrament of matrimony and the water symbolism of the Orthodox wedding ceremony. Monastic life or ascetic exploit in the desert is not the only means to perfection. Matrimony can function as a field of earthly ex-

[15] The underground water could be a reference to the swampy soil of St. Petersburg and to the floods that have inundated the city on several occasions in its history. In 1824, for instance, a flood destroyed the library of Smolensk cemetery together with the registers of the deceased who were buried there. It is maintained that as a consequent of the flood, the exact time of Xenia's life and death has remained unknown (Kniga 2000, 111).

ploit; it provides an opportunity to move toward the likeness of God. The shared pursuit that seeks for "virtue of soul and nobility of character" keeps a Christian husband and wife together. According to the church fathers, the spiritual unity is stronger than that of the body (Woodill 1998, 27, 107).

As was mentioned, Xenia's identification with Andrei has also been conceived as a peculiar way of a wife to save the soul of her husband, who died suddenly with neither confession nor having taken communion. Water in the wedding ceremony stands for a symbol of rebirth and new baptism. Matrimony in Christ means making room for one another, in the same way as Xenia makes room first for Andrei and then for Christ by depriving herself of the outer and inner distinctive attributes of her personality. In Shvarts's poem, marital love is spiritualized and transformed through the mystery of holy madness into divine love in the posthumous life.

While hagiographic narratives concerning St. Xenia, no matter if written by clerical or lay authors, tend to concentrate on certain concrete instances of her life, Shvarts uses the elements of this world as bridges to the invisible inner kingdom. The life depicted in the poem has two levels – the levels of both the visible and invisible worlds are simultaneously presented through the concrete elements of the surrounding reality: through the house that serves as a metaphor of an empty mind and the kingdom of Christ, and through clothes, water and ice floes that are instruments of the mystery of the divine transformation. The fool for Christ, as depicted by Elena Shvarts, does not exceed the borders of the established religious paradigm, despite the fact that the metaphors, imagery and lexicon of the poet differ from the traditional, more "naturalistic" mode of representation. Shvarts is able to convey the essence of the fool's exploit by compressing it into a few lines and images. Unlike the majority of the hagiographic texts devoted to the holy fools, Xenia's insanity is not passed over with just a brief remark, but instead it constitutes the crux of the poem. The theme of madness realises itself in the division of Xenia's personality and in the gradual emptying of her mind(s). In order to mortify the individual ego, she has to abandon her reason, to let go of her thoughts and memories. Consequently, madness is invested with deep theological significance. The Christian virtues of faith, love and humility are materialised in the very insanity of the fool for Christ. By using concrete metaphors Shvarts succeeds in providing the mysterious process of kenosis with a visible and comprehensible form. In the final analysis, the poem describes St. Xenia's transformation from the image of God to theosis, to the likeness of God.

Conclusion

Both for a romantic fool and for a fool for Christ's sake, madness signifies first and foremost a special state of consciousness which does not necessarily correspond to a pathological state. It represents an experience of a different state of consciousness that reaches for knowledge and truth beyond the rational mind. Both types of madness question the rationalistic view of man by shedding light on the restraints and limitations of the rational intellect. Both share an intension to transcend social boundaries and conventional norms through acts and thoughts, thus challenging generally accepted truths, beliefs and opinions. Moreover, both types of insanity manifest the paradoxical consequences of free will. The shocking freedom inherent in madness is attained only through suffering and extreme inner struggle where insanity serves both as a source of power and a means towards ideals and virtues.

In madness, a virtuous life cannot be reached by means of rational thinking or action. Sublime or holy forms of insanity avoid conformity to established ethical norms. The virtues of the fool are thus unconventional and invisible. They are masked as their opposites – wisdom hides behind foolishness, beauty behind deformity, perfection behind defection and good behind malice and rudeness. The virtue embedded in madness avoids any predetermined definitions and ready-made truths. Consequently, the meaning and function of the 'virtuous fool' cannot be discovered by judging the appearance or words but by recognizing the ultimate purpose of his/her actions.

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