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REDISCOVERING DEATH AFTER A TIME OF TERROR: SHOSTAKOVICH'S ELEVENTH QUARTET AND THE PROBLEM OF NARRATIVE THANATOLOGY

In a narrative of any kind—be it literature, musical drama, or programmatic music—death of its principal protagonist plays the pivotal role in shaping its overall structure and message. From the very first appearance of the hero or heroine destined to perish in the finale one can sense the shadow of this eventual outcome on everything he or she does or says. The hero's whole life, as it is shown in the narrative—all his feelings and thoughts, struggles and aspirations—appear as incremental steps directed toward and contributing to reaching the grave as his final destination. The imminent fate of Homer's Achilles, Schiller's Maria Stuart and Don Carlos, Tolstoy's Prince Andrei and Anna Karenina, Wagner's Tristan and Isolde, or the subject of Berlioz's Symphonie fantastique serves as a powerful magnet toward which these literary and musical narratives are heading with the exponentially growing speed and intensity. Whatever moments of hope, elation, or gaiety those heroes may experience in the course of the narrative, they appear as digressions that only help to cast their ultimate destiny in a sharper light.

On the other hand, characters not destined to die attain a peculiar characteristic that can be called narrative immortality. Any thought about such heroes' mortality lies entirely outside the bounds of the narrative proper. Whether the narrative implies that such and such characters will continue to live happily (or sometimes, as in Chekhov's dramas, unhappily) "ever after", or invites the reader to muse about how long their bliss will last, the natural limitation imposed by death is not an issue. How many happy returns to the countryside will the lyrical hero of Beethoven's *Symphonie pastorale* experience in the future? All Jane Austen's heroines are happily married in the finale; but some of them are vivacious and strong-willed while some others delicate and rather vulnerable—does this mean that their respective happinesses have different time value? To ask questions like these would mean to abandon the work of art as such and treat its characters as our peers, subject to our gossip and second-guessing.

To be sure, this principle does not apply to marginal characters who remain easily disposable; they come and go opportunely, succumbing to the story's more essential needs. To this effect, twentieth-century car accidents largely took the place of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sudden attacks of a "fever." But for all the principal protagonists there is hardly any other choice apart from being either totally contingent on their eventual death, or totally unaffected by it.

This sharp narrative duality reflects an even broader philosophical dilemma—namely, the tension between experiencing phenomena of life as openended and perpetually evolving, on one hand, and the need to enframe them as closed events, in order to define and interpret them, on the other. The narratively immortal hero of a *Bildungsroman* embodies the immediacy and fluidity of human experience. He is placed inside the stream of life, a position that makes his experience and personal growth continual and incremental; by the same token, however, his life remains forever an ongoing project. The life of a doomed hero, on the contrary, stands for an interpretation in its wholeness; it poses as a sign to which various symbolic values—ethical, metaphysical, or mystical—can be attached. But the price for this is the loss of the immediacy of experience, since every event in such hero's life is related to the whole underscored by his eventual death. Perhaps no author felt this duality as acutely as Tolstoy; his "double stories" of Pierre and Andrei, Lëvin and Anna attest to his efforts to correlate («сопрягать») if not reconcile these narrative and metaphysical polarities.

The pervasiveness of this opposition makes particularly interesting a phenomenon that evolved in Soviet literature and music in about twenty years after Stalin's death, from mid-nineteen-fifties to early nineteen-seventies. The preceding forty years were the epoch of virtually uninterrupted wars and mass terror—the time of "millions slaughtered at a hefty discount," to use Mandelstam's words. It was also the time when the wall between narrative death and narrative immortality grew higher than ever. The heroes doomed to die marched to their heroic or martyred death with the uncompromising sense of inevitability, while those doomed to live arrived at their industrial, military, and ideological triumphs with equal determination.

By the mid-fifties, however, neither a heroic nor a martyred death was in order anymore. On the contrary—millions of those disposed of at a hefty discount began either returning to life or at least being acknowledged as individual human beings who died at a particular time and under particular circumstances. A peculiar effect of this situation in the wake of terror was a rediscovery of death in its human dimensions. Death appeared not as a catastrophe of cosmic proportions or a mystical tragedy but as a fact of an individual person's life—a quotidian fact, one among many others. Instead of posing grandiloquent rhetorical questions, like Adorno's "Can one live after Auschwitz?", one inquires about quotidian circumstances of NN's death—the nature of his illness, the medical

treatment he received, whether anything could be done had his ailment been discovered earlier, and so forth. Instead of launching a feast in the midst of infested streets in the time of plague, or abandoning oneself in the adoration of an angelic adolescent, one finds oneself busy pulling one's connections in hope to obtain a better strain of the vaccine. The collapse of an epic, larger-than-life podium on which death stood triumphantly through the age of high modernism, was precipitous; it left a profound mark on the fundamental function of death in the narrative.

In Lydia Ginzburg's Notes of a blockade man (wrote in the late 1960s or early 1970s, and published only in the time of the perestroika), the anonymous hero and his peers, upon hearing on the radio the announcement of the beginning of the war, react to the news with a dramatic but formulaic statement: "We are doomed" (Мы погибли). It was only much later, the narrator comments, that they realized that to die is in fact not easy at all-that it is a hard labor, so to say, involving much exertion and pain. The story evolves as a succession of minuscule actions and dilemmas with which the hero is confronted at every moment of his blockade existence: in what order to put on one's clothes in the morning as to minimize the exposure to the icy coldness of the room; at what time to join the line to pick the daily bread ration as to come neither too early (when the line is the longest) nor too late, and so forth. The cardinal issue of the death dissolves, as it were, in all these pedestrian thoughts and efforts. It becomes irrelevant to the reader whether the hero will eventually die or survive the blockade; whatever the outcome, it does not affect the narrative. Death becomes literally lost in the trivialities.

The domestication and trivialization of death did not take away its metaphysical and/or mystical significance. On the contrary—by adopting death as their companion, the daily trivia themselves become elevated onto the plane of the transcendental. Having lived for so long in a vortex of total destruction, people found themselves, after the grinding wheel suddenly came to a halt, in a strange world of small-scale joys and frustrations, domestic and occupational routines and hazards. The effect of the "estrangement," in Shklovsky's sense, was complete. Cutting death to human-size proportions exposed the thinness of the line that divides it from the continuum of the existential experience. The ultimate mystery of death reasserted its presence by lurking behind most inconspicuous everyday situations. The more anodyne the daily routine looked, the more acutely it made one feel its mistrial aura.

Pasternak's poem "In a hospital" (В больнице) (1955) that reflected the poets personal experience of a massive heart attack, can be seen as a case in point. The poem is replete with most pedestrian details of its lyrical hero's illness and his experience in the hospital. A crowd of passers-by gaping at the man who fell in the street, a brisk arrival of the ambulance and the militia, a long and tedious

procedure of being accepted to the hospital, curt remarks and body language of the personnel from which the hero strives to deduce his chances for survival, and finally, the appalling physical condition of a district hospital in which he finds himself—nothing is forgotten. The reader may even realize that the shocking impression the hospital made on the hero was due to the fact that he was used to a more genteel treatment at privileged medical institutions of the Writers' Union. (In real life, Pasternak, on his wife's insistence, was transferred, as soon as his condition allowed, to a "special ward", headed by the—by then "rehabilitated"—Academician Miron Vovsi).

And yet it is in this hectic and miserable surrounding that the poem's hero, feeling himself on the brink of death, experiences the mystical encounter with God.

О Господи, как совершенны Дела твои, — думал больной, — Постели, и люди, и стены, Ночь смерти и город ночной.

Я принял снотворного дозу И плачу, платок теребя. О Боже, волнения слезы Мешают мне видеть тебя.

God appears amidst the oppressive chaos of the hospital. The meditation about God and death does not soar over this lowly reality but mixes into and dissolves in it. The mystical "night of death" appears adjacent to the night commotion of the city; the mystery of God's appearance takes place as the result of a "dose" of a sedative that was given to the patient; his tears of mourning and joy can be described in strictly medical terms, as an effect of the drug. True to this everyday frame of the mystical situation, the hero begs God's pardon for his poor vision.

There were few composers whose oeuvre was dominated with the idea of death with such persistence and intensity as that of Shostakovich (Tchaikovsky and Mahler, the two composers to which Shostakovich felt particular affinity, come to mind as a possible parallel in this regard). Numerous works by Shostakovich from Stalin's time are dominated by the total presence of death. For instance, in the Trio E minor, one of the composer's foremost achievements, written in 1944 on the occasion of death of his closest friend and mentor, Ivan Sollertinsky, death of a single person acquires cosmic dimensions, representing the total devastation at the end of the war, with a poignant hint at the particular predicament of the Jews. It makes the more remarkable the evolution of the theme of death that one can spot in some of Shostakovich's works of a later time.

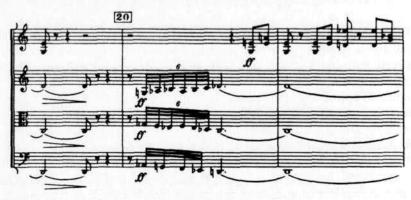
In 1966, Shostakovich wrote the Eleventh Quartet F minor, dedicated to the memory of another deceased friend — Vasily Shirinsky, the second violin of the Beethoven Quartet, with which Shostakovich closely collaborated over decades. In contradistinction to the intense pathos of the Sollertinsky Trio, the musical texture of the Quartet turned out to be extremely light and sparse. Instead of passionate expressions of grief, it offered a suite-like succession of seven brief movements representing standard, one can even say routine, genres of the violin repertory: Scherzo, Recitative, Etude, Humoresque, and Elegy, framed by the Introduction and the Finale. The memorial to a deceased musician is narrated through a chain of musical numbers exemplifying his daily professional life. The memory of his death appears dissolved in a stream of small events of music-making, teaching, and amusement. Even the dramatic moment of death's arrival is signified by a quotidian detail: the wailing of the ambulance's siren. Showing all his mastery in employing mass musical genres, Shostakovich conveys the close conjunction between the routine pace of life and the arrival of death.

The "Introduction" begins with elementary intervals of the fifth and octaves played by the violin solo, as if in a stylized imitation of the process of tuning. The next movement, "Scherzo," is written in an easy-going, mildly jocular mood; the light pace of the principal theme is punctuated by playful glissandos sounding like animated gestures in an informal conversation. The unostentatious idyll of the Scherzo is interrupted by the "Recitative". With a stark naturalism, it recreates the sound of a passing ambulance, up to the "Doppler's effect"—the pitch sinking on a half-tone after the ambulance has "passed."

The movement that follows is far from a mourning one might expect after the arrival of death. It is marked as the "Etude"— a virtuoso piece recalling innumerable examples of the musical perpetuum mobile. These demonstrations of musical virtuosity sometimes receive a programmatic justification as imitations of the sound of a flying insect—most famously, in Rimsky-Korsakov's "Bumble-bee's Flight" for a cello solo. The cellist Gregory Piatigorsky once testified how, in preparation for his first American tour, he added an impressive collection of musical insects to his repertoire, to be used as encores. In conjunction with the naturalistic recreation of the arrival of death in the previous movement, the familiar sounds of musical insectology in the "Etude" acquire an unmistakable association with the flight of the soul, as it leaves the body immediately after death. A mystical image of a soul carried away from the body on its dragonfly wings is superimposed on a routine situation of music-making, reminiscent of a concert hall or a Conservatory classroom.

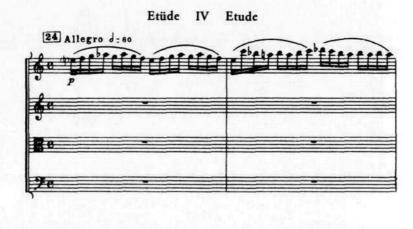




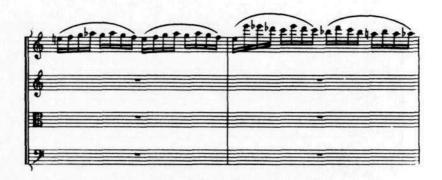










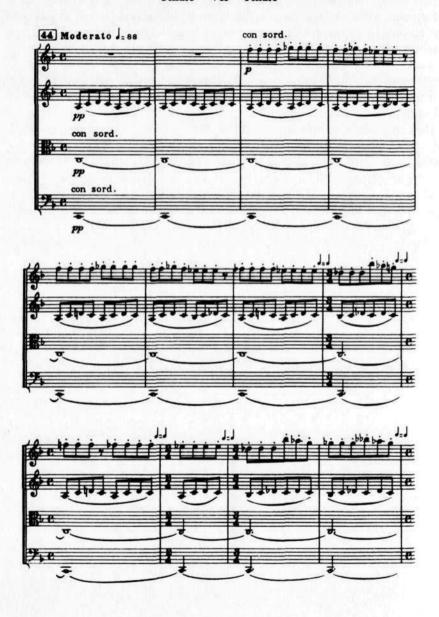


Example 1: Shostakovich, Eleventh Quartet, $3^{\rm rd}$ movement: Recitative and beginning of $4^{\rm th}$ m. Etude

The duality of the mystical and the quotidian continues in the next piece, "Humoresque." Again, it recreates the situation of routine music-making, with its formulaic virtuosity and pedestrian brilliance. At the same time, the "humorous" cacophony of voices racing against each other evokes an image of a throng of souls rushing forward or being chased—an image whose musical antecedents go back to such famous examples as Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* or Tchaikovsky's *Francesca da Rimini*. The chorus eventually fades away, leaving a single voice (played, tellingly, by the second violin)—a lone soul left behind and rushing to catch up with the rest.

The composition is crowned with a cloudless "Finale," whose infantile mood and lullaby waving rhythms are vividly reminiscent of Musorgsky's and Mahler's musical images of a dead child. Once again, as in the Scherzo, the monologue of the violin is being interrupted by playful glissandos, whose weightless ascendances now reveal their mystical meaning. The violin's monologue, telling, with a childish lightness, its story of calm and joy, ends on a protracted note in the extremely high register that eventually fades away.

Finale VII Finale



Example 2: Shostakovich, Eleventh Quartet, beginning of the "Finale"

The peculiar narrative phenomenon outlined in this paper was short-lived. By the mid-seventies, the tides of conceptualism and fantastical realism swept away the delicate balance between the banal and the mistrial which was its essence. This balance could occur only in a world dumbfounded with its own normalcy—with the possibility of finding oneself firmly settled in one's habitual ambiance, doing one's routine work, getting ill, receiving a treatment, dying. In works of Ginzburg, Pasternak, Shalamov, Shostakovich and, if one thinks of their Western counterparts, Camus, this unique sensibility led to overcoming the duality of the existential and the symbolic, exemplified in the dilemma of a narrative dominated by either the hero's life or his death. In a major breakthrough in the narrative tradition, the new narrative strategy allowed the quotidian routine and the metaphysical meaning to merge with and to dissolve in each other. The spirit of innovation is palpable in Pasternak's words with which he described his experience in the hospital in a letter to Olga Freidenberg (20.01.1953):

Я радовался, что при помещении в больницу попал в общую смертную кашу переполненного тяжелыми больными больничного коридора, ночью, и благодарил Бога за то, что у него так подобрано соседство города за окном и света, и тени, и жизни, и смерти.

I rejoiced that they placed me in that death grindery of the hospital's hall, full of the gravely ill, in the middle of the night, and thanked God for how he made them all neighbors—the city out there, the light and the shadows, life and death.