

Russian Philosophy in the Twenty-First Century

An Anthology

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With a Foreword by

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The Problem of Posthumous Existence from Plato to Dostoyevsky: “Bobok,” a Short Story by Dostoyevsky

Vladimir Kantor

“Bobok” Dostoyevsky’s short story—with an almost surrealistic title—gives us in a concentrated form an idea of how the author understood death and life in Russia, in a religious-philosophical sense, not the ordinary one. His analysis, however, must be placed in a distinct literary-philosophical context.

Death is a constant in all of history and a constant source of human fear. As a rule, religion has calmed people, promising life in the other world. Indeed, life was promised, but the shadows Odysseus encountered in Hades understood that they would be there forever, and that genuine life was left behind somewhere far away. Even the suffering people in Dante’s hell understood that they were on the other side of life. Dante, because of his dislike for the Pope, put him in that other world, that is, sent him to hell. European culture reflected on the theme of death, relying upon the tenets of Christian faith. But it firmly drew the line between life and death. Life is what a person desires. Death pushes a person into the unknown. Christ, of course, promised eternal life in the next world to those who believed in him. Yet those who have risen to the level of reflection have been tormented by terrible suspense.

It seems that Dante depicted everything; he was viewed as a person who had seen hell. And it is no coincidence that Prince Hamlet dreaded these dreams that await every person on the other side of being. He was afraid of what was there. Actually, he followed Plato, the only difference being that he had a Christian (Dante’s) understanding of the other world.

To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks

That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
 Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
 To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
 Must give us pause: there's the respect
 That makes calamity of so long life.

In *Phaedo*, Plato said that a true philosopher seeks death, since it frees the mind of bodily gravity:

True philosophers make dying their profession, and that to them of all men death is least alarming. Look at it in this way. If they are thoroughly dissatisfied with the body, and long to have their souls independent of it, when this happens would it not be entirely unreasonable to be frightened and distressed? Would they not naturally be glad to set out for the place where there is a prospect of attaining the object of their lifelong desire—which is wisdom—and of escaping from an unwelcome association? (19)

Shakespeare passed by this statement, and so did Tolstoy, who lived through his “Arzamas horror” as if it were the horror of bodily death. He said he “was actually seeing, feeling the approach of death, and along with it” “felt that death ought not to exist”: “My entire being was conscious of the necessity of the right to live, and at the same time of the inevitability of dying” (Tolstoy 47). But Tolstoy’s animal-mystical fear of death was probably peculiar among the Russian classics. His passion for carnal life was so strong that he did not even have time to think of the afterlife, in particular, of what the reckoning would be. Although he called his favorite character *Platon Karataev*, he was not going to dispense with the flesh for the sake of thought.

Apparently, while still quite young in 1823, solely Pushkin, an absolute genius of Russian culture, examined fully Plato’s thought. Indeed, that is not surprising given that he was a student at the Lyceum:

Hope sweet breathing baby,
 When I believed that once a soul
 Having escaped from decay, he carries away thoughts forever,
 And memory, and love in the depths are endless,—
 I swear I would have left this world long ago:
 I would have crushed life, an ugly idol,

And flew into the country of freedom, delight,
 To a country where there is no death, where there is no prejudice,
 Where thought alone floats in heavenly purity ...
 But in vain indulge in a deceptive dream;
 My mind persists, despises hope ...
 Nothingness awaits me beyond the grave ...
 Like, nothing! Neither thought nor first love!
 I'm scared!...

This is a very serious confrontation. Unlike Plato, Pushkin does not believe that thought will survive after death “in heavenly purity.” He makes an alarming and, in general, not only anti-Platonist but also anti-Christian note: “Nothing awaits me beyond the coffin....” Strictly speaking, Hamlet’s monologue is a reflection on Dante’s Hell. Pushkin is in doubt. He seemed to convey this doubt to the great writer, Dostoyevsky, who endlessly repeated that Pushkin was the highest and best that Russian culture had created.

It was Herzen who first noticed that Dostoyevsky was the Russian Dante, saying that the portrayal of the bath in *The House of the Dead* is utterly Dantesque. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Dante’s popularity in Russian culture was rather high. I wrote about this as well as about Stepan Chevyrev, Pavel Miliukov, and others in my book, *The Conflict of Ideas in Russian Literature, 1840 to 1870 (Bor’ba idei v russkoi literature 40–70 godov XIX veka)*, published in 1988. In my view, Gogol constructed his *Dead Souls* as a tripartite poem—following the paradigmatic exemplar of the *Divine Comedy*; yet, only the first part—“Hell”—was a success. “The second volume, the supposed ‘Purgatory,’ already showed the author that, staying within the real material provided by actuality, it is impossible to realize his plan” (Kantor 217). In *A Writer’s Diary*, Dostoyevsky solved eternal problems drawing upon plots that were very relevant at the time, placing them in the context of “final questions.” However, like Dostoyevsky’s *Writer’s Diary*, the *Divine Comedy*, especially, “Hell” and “Purgatory,” was also concerned with pressing issues. In the *Comedy*, images of contemporaries, evildoers, corrupt priests, unfortunate lovers, and the like are immersed in eternity. But let’s not forget that according to Dante, it is not just eternity; it is the afterlife. In *Crime and Punishment*, Svidrigailov, when talking to Raskolnikov, reveals his view on the other world, on what awaits a person there: a bath with spiders. In *Brothers Karamazov*, this topic is endless; it appears most vividly in the talk with the devil: the axe—which, in some sense, is a Russian weapon of revenge—turns out to be a satellite of Earth. There is no doubt that this is already on the level of Dante’s view of the kind of punishment that awaits every Russian person in the other world. Dostoyevsky was

also compared with Dante by Oswald Spengler and other Western thinkers. But, as is generally agreed, a comparison is never perfect: it gives a reference point, but it never gives an understanding of a new entity in its entirety.

The problem of what will be there constantly perplexed Dostoyevsky. That is the topic of one of the most unusual short stories in world literature—"Bobok" (1873). In his most recent book, Igor Evlampiev wrote: "'Bobok' can be viewed as speculation about one possible form of a person's existence in that respect which is opened up to us by the 'highest idea' of immortality, one that astounds with its hopelessness and that looks even more horrible than Svidrigailov's frightening representation of eternity as a bath with spiders" (449). In my view, however, the situation is more complicated than the metaphysical problem of the other-worldly being of a person.

The plot of the short story is introduced by the author in *A Writer's Diary*, which may be viewed as a set of unpretentious notes by a journalist who has not been very successful in literature but does not blame himself for his literary misfortunes. Rather, he blames the moral situation in Russia, where people have lost the criterion necessary to distinguish between the elevated and the dirt in words: "Nowadays humor and a fine style have disappeared, and abuse is accepted as wit" ("Bobok" 507). "I am thinking of making a collection of the *bons mots* of Voltaire but am afraid it may seem a little flat to our people. Voltaire's no good now; nowadays we want a cudgel, not Voltaire. We knock each other's last teeth out nowadays" ("Bobok" 508).

Correspondingly, God has been lost as well—but I will address this subject later. The character understands that it is not his world: "Something strange is happening to me. My character is changing and my head aches. I am beginning to see and hear strange things, not voices exactly, but as though someone beside me were muttering, 'bobok, bobok, bobok!'" (509). And with a strange, almost sacrilegious play on the concepts of "spirit" and "spirituality," the storyteller pronounces in a rather casual way a phrase that is almost impossible for an orthodox person. Thus, almost in a journalistic way Dostoyevsky decisively introduces the main word, which, at the end of the story, will turn into a symbol: "What's the meaning of this bobok? I must divert my mind" (509).

But the entertainment of the former resident of the House of the Dead is also special. "There were fifteen hearses, with palls varying in expensiveness; there were actually two catafalques. One was a general's and one some lady's. There were many mourners, a great deal of feigned mourning and a great deal of open gaiety. *The clergy have nothing to complain of; it brings them a good income. But the smell, the smell. I should not like to be one of the clergymen here*" (509–10; The italics are mine.). The storyteller finishes with an anticlerical

attack almost worthy of Voltaire. The reader must understand that the author is a person who is intellectually free.

It is cold. "I looked into the graves—and it was horrible: water and such water! Absolutely green, and ... but there, why talk of it! The gravedigger was bailing it out every minute" (510). Because of that, it feels really chilly; it's October. But there is a perfectly human way out, and a very Russian one, too. Accompanied by the seers-off, he goes to the restaurant to get warm: "Close by was an almshouse, and a little further off there was a restaurant. It was not a bad little restaurant: there was lunch and everything. There were lots of the mourners here. I noticed a great deal of gaiety and genuine heartiness. I had something to eat and drink" (510). Dostoyevsky is ambiguous, as usual: It is unclear whether it was the alcohol that inspired the following or it actually happened. "The only thing I don't understand is why I stayed at the cemetery; I sat on a tombstone and sank into appropriate reflections" (511). Then miracles begin to happen:

I suppose I sat there a long time—too long a time, in fact; I must have lain down on a long stone which was of the shape of a marble coffin. And how it happened I don't know, but I began to hear things of all sorts being said. At first, I did not pay attention to it, but treated it with contempt. But the conversation went on. I heard muffled sounds as though the speakers' mouths were covered with a pillow, and at the same time they were distinct and very near. I came to myself, sat up and began listening attentively.

"Your Excellency, it's utterly impossible. You led hearts, I return your lead, and here you play the seven of diamonds. You ought to have given me a hint about diamonds." (511–12)

And then a scary situation suddenly becomes apparent. The dead, while still being the dead, continue to live some strange life, which is indeed as sinful as the life they lived on earth: There are still ranks, there is still servility to rank, and, depending on one's rank, one still gets respect and a chance to obtain sexual favors. The storyteller is astonished as to how there can be talk of voluptuousness in graves. But there is indeed this talk:

What conceited words! And it was queer and unexpected. One was such a ponderous, dignified voice, the other softly suave; I should not have believed it if I had not heard it myself. I had not been to the requiem dinner, I believe. And yet how could they be playing preference here

and what general was this? That the sounds came from under the tombstones of that there could be no doubt. I bent down and read on the tomb:

“Here lies the body of Major-General Pervoyedov ... a cavalier of such and such orders.” Hm! “Passed away in August of this year ... fifty-seven. ... Rest, beloved ashes, till the joyful dawn!”

Hm, dash it, it really is a general! There was no monument on the grave from which the obsequious voice came, there was only a tombstone. He must have been a fresh arrival. (512)

But all earthly passions are with them:

But what happened next was such a Bedlam that I could not keep it all in my memory. For a great many woke up at once; an official—a civil counselor—woke up and began discussing at once the project of a new sub-committee in a government department and of the probable transfer of various functionaries in connection with the sub-committee—which very greatly interested the general. I must confess I learnt a great deal that was new myself, so much so that I marveled at the channels by which one may sometimes in the metropolis learn government news. Then an engineer half woke up, but for a long time muttered absolute nonsense, so that our friends left off worrying him and let him lie till he was ready. At last the distinguished lady who had been buried in the morning under the catafalque showed symptoms of the reanimation of the tomb. Lebeziatnikov (for the obsequious lower court counselor whom I detested and who lay beside General Pervoyedov was called, it appears, Lebeziatnikov) became much excited, and surprised that they were all waking up so soon this time. I must own I was surprised too; though some of those who woke had been buried for three days, as, for instance, a very young girl of sixteen who kept giggling ... giggling in a horrible and predatory way. (517)

Is it even possible to be voluptuous when being dead? But I want to remind that, among great thinkers and writers, only Dostoyevsky visited the House of the Dead—a place similar to the other world but where people continued to live animal lives, pursuing all the vices of the real world. Although long, this quote from *Notes from the House of the Dead* is absolutely necessary:

Then begins an orgy of drinking, eating, and music. With such means at his disposal he even softens the hearts of the inferior prison officials. The debauch sometime lasts several days. All the vodka he has prepared is

soon drunk, of course; then the prodigal resorts to other publicans who are on the look-out for him, and he drinks until he has spent every farthing. However carefully the convicts guard their drunken fellow, he is sometimes seen by a higher official, by the major or the officer on duty. He is taken to the guard-house, stripped of his money if he has it on him and finally flogged. He shakes himself, goes back into the prison, and a few days later takes up his trade in vodka again. Some of the festive characters—the rich ones, of course—have dreams of the fair sex, too; for a big bribe to the guard escorting them, they sometimes can be taken in secret to someplace in the town instead of to work. There in some out-of-the-way little house at the farthest end of town, there is a feast on a huge scale and really large sums of money are squandered. Even a convict is not despised if he has money. A guard is picked out beforehand who knows his way about. Such guards are usually future candidates for prison themselves. But anything can be done for money, and such expeditions almost always remain a secret. (Dostoevsky 73)

That is this strange *life in death*—temporary death that was not experienced in Russia solely by Dostoyevsky; yet he was the only one to make it an object of artistic reflection.

But Russian folklore speaks of it as well. In the Russian fairy tale, Propp identifies “the phenomenon of temporary death”—and notes: “the forms of this death vary considerably, but what is important for us now is the very fact of that, not the forms.” He refuses to explain this fact, noting that at this stage, it is sufficient to identify it: “We can only establish the fact without trying to explain it. The fact is that to this dying and resurrection, people attributed the acquisition of magical properties” (185). Yet, what Dostoyevsky describes in the novella “Bobok” is also life in death that will sometime turn into genuine death. But it should be underlined that we are not talking of the folkloric living dead or ghouls; rather, we are talking about the dead that, while staying in graves, continue their existence. The author could see something like this only in the House of the Dead.

It seems that Andrei Bely was the only one to compare these two katorga- and cemetery-related observations by Dostoyevsky:

What is the reason to publish all this filth that does not have a jot of the artistic? The only point is to frighten, offend, disrupt everything that is sacred. For Dostoyevsky, “Bobok” is, in a sense, the shooting at the communion service, and the play with the words “spirit” and “spirituality” is the vilification of the Holy Spirit. If it is possible to punish an author for

what he reveals to the public, then “Bobok,” just one “Bobok,” could match Dostoyevsky’s *katorga*: Yes, Dostoyevsky is a *katorga* prisoner because he wrote “Bobok.” (Bely 154)

But it should be understood that Dostoyevsky’s personal experience, his brilliant personal discovery was made in the context of Russia’s worldview between 1830 and 1870. It should not be forgotten that in 1836, Piotr Chaadaev’s “First Philosophical Letter” was published. It specifies the place where it was written—Necropolis. In 1842 *Dead Souls* was published by Dostoyevsky’s favorite Russian prose writer—Gogol. In “Bobok,” there is a hint at a connection with Gogol; Vladimir Tumanin and other commentators believe that it can be found in the first lines of the short story, where it is said that some artist portrayed him as “someone who was close to being insane” and added a few warts: “I believe that the artist who painted me did so not for the sake of literature, but for the sake of two symmetrical warts on my forehead, a natural phenomenon, he would say. They have no ideas, so now they are out for phenomena. And didn’t he succeed in getting my warts in his portrait—to the life. That is what they call realism” (“Bobok” 508). Tumanin believes there is resonance here with the last phrase from “Diary of a Madman”: “And do you know that the Bey of Algiers has a bump under his nose?” The warts resonate with this strange bump. The ugliness of the face and bumps reminds, of course, of Socrates, the ugliest of philosophers; moreover, the novella features the philosopher Platon Nikolaevich, speculating on Plato’s and Socrates’s topics—those of life and death:

Platon Nikolaevich is our home-grown philosopher. <...> He explains all this by the simplest fact, namely, that when we were living on the surface, we mistakenly thought that death there was death. The body revives, as it were, here, the remains of life are concentrated, but only in consciousness. I don’t know how to express it, but life goes on, as it were, by inertia. In his opinion everything is concentrated somewhere in consciousness and goes on for two or three months ... sometimes even for half a year ... There is one here, for instance, who is almost completely decomposed, but once every six weeks he suddenly utters one word, quite senseless of course, about some bobok, “Bobok bobok,” but you see that an imperceptible speck of life is still warm within him. (521)

Russia wanted to feel itself in the context of world culture, gaining self-awareness during the centuries starting with Peter the Great. And now having gained it, Russia perceives itself as submerged in the gloom of death. “Here,

one can move or breathe only if a tsar's permission or order has been given. Because of that, it is so murky and depressed here, and dead silence kills all life. It seems that a shadow of death hangs all over this part of the globe" (Custine 74). In Dante's case, the dead live in hell. The geography and topography of hell is described in Dante's *Comedy* rather thoroughly. On earth, thought Dante, there were the living, the worst might already be suffering in hell, undergoing punishment, but in Russia, Dostoyevsky saw, at a cemetery, a new kind of being: those who were alive and dead at the same time. For them, it was not a punishment. It is terrifying to say it—for them, it was a way of life.

"That ... he-he ... Well, on that point our philosopher is a bit foggy. It's apropos of smell, he said, that the stench one perceives here is, so to speak, moral—he-he! It's the stench of the soul, he says, that in these two or three months it may have time to recover itself ... and this is, so to speak, the last mercy... Only, I think, baron, that these are mystic ravings very excusable in his position..."

"Enough; all the rest of it, I am sure, is nonsense. The great thing is that we have two or three months more of life and then—bobok! I propose to spend these two months as agreeably as possible, and so to arrange everything on a new basis. Gentlemen! I propose to cast aside all shame."

"Ah, let us cast aside all shame, let us!" many voices could be heard saying; and strange to say, several new voices were audible, which must have belonged to others newly awakened. The engineer, now fully awake, boomed out his agreement with peculiar delight. The girl Katiche giggled gleefully." ("Bobok" 522)

And where life lost its highest meaning, a human specimen plunges into debauchery and casts aside the notion of shame. The topic of the shame of Dostoyevsky's characters and their losing it is splendidly developed in Deborah Martinsen's book, *Surprised by Shame*. Given the context of this concept, the "Bobok" characters' shouting that one should not feel ashamed reveals a terrifying moment. People cannot shout out such things, and neither can animals, for animals know no shame. And Dostoyevsky's characters know it but want to get rid of it. The words "ashamed," "shameless," "let's not be ashamed of anything," and so on literally pervade the author's texts.

Vladimir Soloviev, a thinker who influenced Dostoyevsky, believed that it was shame that distinguished humans from animals. In *The Justification of the Good: An Essay on Moral Philosophy* about the connection between shame and the problem of the sexual, he wrote:

There exists one feeling which serves no social purpose, is utterly absent in the highest animals, but is clearly manifested in the lowest of the human races. In virtue of this feeling the most savage and undeveloped man is ashamed of, that is recognizes as *wrong* and conceals a physiological act which not only satisfies his own desire and need, but is, moreover, useful and necessary for the preservation of the species. Directly connected with this is the reluctance to remain in primitive nakedness; it induces savages to invent *clothes* even when the climate and the simplicity of life make them quite unnecessary. (50–51)

What is in this short story? What did the great author want to tell? Whereas according to Plato, “Those who really apply themselves in the right way to philosophy are directly and of their own accord preparing themselves for dying and death” (11), Platon Nikolaevich distinguished between the notion of death that exists “there” and the one that exists here, and that seems posthumous but is, in fact, life that continues in this death. There is virtually no transition from life to death. The sepulchral, verbal debauchery accentuates this situation.

I once wrote that only in the other world is there no shame—neither in heaven, where there is nothing to feel ashamed of, nor in hell, where shame is forgotten and cast aside, like it is forgotten and cast aside in Dostoyevsky’s “Bobok.” While a human is alive, it is impossible for him not to feel ashamed of himself or somebody else; that is what sharpens his perception of the world and makes him a human. But, in the process of analyzing “Bobok,” I understood that either it was not hell or it was hell according to Swedenborg, where sinners were rejoicing. But it is not the other world here yet. Then what is it? Or, alternatively, it should be acknowledged that hell is possible wherever there is a human being. *The House of the Dead*, however, provided the experience of life outside life, life in death. It is the topic of the living dead that is raised in the first novel of his “Pentology”—in the novel *Crime and Punishment*. There are not few of them there; I do not even speak of those who walk on the verge of life and death, like Katerina Ivanovna, or those who go into death, like the drowned woman who, being right before Raskolnikov’s eyes, threw herself into a dirty Petersburg ditch, and other constantly dying minor characters like Lieutenant Potanchikov.

Worth mentioning is the reaction of Dmitrii Pisarev, a keen admirer of literature when not polemically at war. One of the first readers who was able to see the text, he believed that the character Marmeladov exemplifies the living dead:

And with this clear understanding of his utter worthlessness, with this indelible, bright, and burning memory about the events of the fateful night, he, nevertheless, rushes to a watering hole, having stolen from his wife her hard-earned money, boozes for five days, ruins all of the remaining hopes of his family, and, in addition to all his feats, having squandered in watering holes everything that could be squandered, comes to his daughter, who lives according to the yellow ticket, to beg her—in order to buy the last half of a shtoff of vodka—for a modicum of the money that she gets from seekers of cheap and easy love and that constitute the only stable bit of a help for the consumptive woman and the three of her always hungry kids. *Clearly, Marmeladov is a corpse feeling and understanding his degeneration; he is a corpse watching, with inexpressibly painful attention, all the phases of that horrible process by which any similarity of this corpse with a live person capable of feeling, thinking, and acting is destroyed.* This painful attention constitutes the last remainder of a human image; looking at this last remainder, Raskolnikov can understand that Marmeladov has not always been the kind of corpse that he sees sitting in a watering hole and drinking a half of the shtoff bought with Sonya's money. (330; the italics are mine)

That is the result of the author's understanding of Russian life.

What is the historical context of Dostoyevsky's life? Herzen called the reign of Nicholas I, which created this state of life in death, the "plague stretch." "Human traces will disappear, swept away by the police," he wrote of that time, "and future generations will often stand in perplexity before the smoothly beaten wasteland, searching for the lost ways of thought" (35). At the end of 1847, when thunder burst over literature and art, Professor Aleksandr Nikitenko, feeling depressed because of his surroundings, wrote in his diary: "The vitality of our society manifests itself in a rather weak way: We are now spiritually closer to death than we should be, and, therefore, the prospect of physical death evokes less natural horror in us" (308).

Young authors, thinkers, and poets stepping into life felt worse than others. Their life experience did not involve any empathy for the state's trying to promote liberal European development in Russia. Their activity aimed at enlightening the country was banned right away. Recall, for instance, the death penalty given to the Petrashevtsy and the sentence given to Dostoyevsky: "*execution by firing squad*" for reading aloud a letter written by one litterateur (Belinskii) to another one (Gogol). Exile, prison (*katorga*), and military service (*soldatchina*)—that is what was in store for many. Surely, not all of them died; yet their existence

was fragile and precarious. Russia, seen through their eyes, resembles “a poor cemetery” (Herzen) and the inhabitants of this world are all “dead souls” (Gogol). To Chaadaev it was a city of the dead (Necropolis); Nikitenko called it the “Sandwich Islands”—that is, a place people of the nineteenth century thought humans were eaten: individuals who made any attempt to think or had any virtuous intention, however modest, were condemned and sentenced to banishment and death.

In 1854 Timofei Granovskii wrote to Herzen, who was then abroad: “One must bear a lot of faith and love in oneself to retain any hope for the future of the strongest and sturdiest of the Slavic peoples. Our sailors and soldiers die gloriously in the Crimea; but no one knows how to live here” (448). In the same year (1854), the ex-prisoner Dostoyevsky conceived his *Notes from the House of the Dead!* When portraying all the social classes present in the vast Russian land that were behind katorga walls, he exclaimed: “And how much youth lay uselessly buried within those walls, what mighty powers were wasted here in vain!” (351). That is a cemetery indeed! In this “poor cemetery,” it is quite possible that people can remain in a semi-conscious state and only whisper “bobok.” Life has degenerated, but it has not become death. However, this cemetery is not poor; on the contrary, it is rather grand, for it is the whole country.

It is this terrifying degeneration of the human soul that Dostoyevsky described in his most terrifying short story. It is more terrifying than hell. Moreover, the inhabitants of the graves parody Nikolai Chernyshevskii, who formulaically tried to oppose the horror of death with the beauty of life, consisting in “the rational principles.”

“No, no, no, Klinevich, I was ashamed, up there I still felt ashamed, but here I terribly, terribly long to be ashamed of nothing!”

“As I understand, Klinevich,” rumbled the engineer, “you suggest arranging our life here, so to speak, on new and rational principles.” (“Bobok” 522)

The radicals believed that the rational principles would eliminate shame. That is what beauty is. Dostoyevsky is almost in agreement with this, for the ideal of Madonna and the ideal of Sodom are combined in beauty. That is life—or so it seems. But having already seen this life, he answered that beauty was a terrible thing—God and the devil were fighting in it. Chernyshevskii pronounced his formula before experiencing *katorga*.

But Dostoyevsky after the House of the Dead, understood that the image of Russia would be one similar to it: “the Gulag Archipelago.” As Aleksandra Toichkina writes:

It is important to him (Dostoyevsky) that his *Notes* ... be viewed neither as a testimony of an eyewitness concerning his life at *katorga* nor as an essay about the mores and condition of prisons—but rather as a deeply artistic work about people’s fates, about man’s nature and his or her life courses, about Russia and the Russian people (here, the notion of the Russian people covers different ethnicities). It is no coincidence that at the center of the Dead House metaphor, there is the notion of a house, a living place, and the epithet “dead” refers to the quality of life in this house, the state of those who live in this house (The italics are Kantor’s.). The topos of a house turns out to be central for the image of hell in Dostoyevsk’s *Notes*.... (56)

We should not forget, however, that traditionally, in Russian culture, especially in the Slavophile system of symbols, the topos of a house was equivalent to the topos of Russia.

According to Dostoyevsky, the strongest, most active, and most capable people of leading Russia—for he had not met anywhere people stronger than them—are Russia’s gold reserve and, strictly speaking, Russia’s energy. For a country is not defined by a depersonalized mass of people incapable of action, but by action takers: Potemkins, Menshikovs, Stolypins, authors, thinkers, and artists and—those buried in jail (*ostrog*). “After all, one must tell the whole truth; those men were exceptional men. Perhaps they were the most gifted, the strongest of our people. But there mighty energies were vainly wasted, wasted abnormally, unjustly, hopelessly” (*House* 351). Surprisingly, in 1918, the images of this scary short story surfaced in Semion Frank’s great article, “De Profundis.” It was a moment of complete disintegration of the country, and Dostoyevsky’s scary images turned out to be very relevant. The article “De Profundis” was written in the same year (1918), after the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly. At the very beginning of the article, Frank pointed out that all the intellectual parties had been brought down by soldiers and sailors, that is, by the armed people; they had been buried, figuratively speaking. It was impossible to hear their voices; only mumbling sobs could be heard. The people were ready to kill the Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) and even the Bolsheviks; the mob (*ochlos*) was triumphant—as if they were at a wake for a relative they disliked. The topic of the dead arises again; but here, the dead seem like ghouls rather than those who demand justice. Frank communicated this idea with amazing accuracy, having recalled the great short story “Bobok” by Dostoyevsky, in which the character hears the vile voices coming from graves. Once again, we encounter the dead, but they are not triumphant and benevolent; rather, they are petty and vile. Frank writes:

One recalls the horrible, perverted fantasy of the greatest of the Russian prophets—Dostoyevsky. Before the dead in their graves fall silent forever, they live yet awhile, as in half sleep with snatches and glimmers of their former feelings, passions, and vices. The dead, who are almost completely decomposed, from time to time mutter a meaningless “bobok”—the only vestige of their former speech and thought. All the present-day, petty, often nightmarish, and absurd events of our life; all the senseless bustle of these “Sovdeps” [Soviets] and “Excoms” [ex-communists] that at times bear fruitless verbiage, and at times bear only the fruit of blood and destruction; all of these chaotic scraps of speeches, thoughts, and actions, these vestiges of a once powerful Russian state and culture, after the furious dance of revolutionary specters, like the last, dying sparks after a witches’ sabbath—are these not all the same kind of “bobok”? And if we, suffocating and dying amidst this gloom in our grave, in our anxieties and hopes continue by inertia of thought to mutter about the “testaments of the revolution,” about “Bolsheviks,” and “Mensheviks,” and about the “Constituent Assembly”; if we convulsively cling to pitiful remnants of old ideas, concepts, and ideals, which are dying away in our consciousness; and in the gloom of death take this fruitless and inactive fluttering of feelings, desires, and words for political life—then this too is the same “bobok” of the decomposing dead. (478–79)

Dostoyevsky did not like and was afraid of brigands, with whom he had to live for several years. But he doubtless recognized their power.

And yet, in this strange pseudo-life, there was something unreal—as if one lived and did not live at the same time. Therefore, for the author, the way out of the situation of half-life and half-death was resurrection: “Freedom, new life, resurrection from the dead....” (*House* 352) But freedom is also understood by the katorga prisoner as life after death: “I may mention here parenthetically that our dreams and our divorce from reality made us think of freedom as somehow freer than real freedom, that is, than it actually is” (*House* 350). And such a notion of freedom reflected involuntarily that of the outlaws of Pugachev’s rebellion, for their notion of freedom was out of historical context. “Bobok” is a continuation of *The House of the Dead*, though told differently.

Is the life of bodies possible after death? The well-known Medieval Dioptra depicts the talk between the body and the soul. But in Dostoyevsky’s short story, the souls are so polluted and dirtied that they cannot separate themselves

from the body, cannot engage in dialogue with it, and must keep living their bodily life even after death.

This is a special kind of immortality that only a great sinner could realize. Dostoyevsky, who considered himself a great sinner, wanted to write a novel about it. Strictly speaking, as mentioned several times, all of his texts are variations on the topic of “the great sinner.” And the short story “Bobok” offers yet another variation. A dead person’s body that does not allow the soul to be free drags it down into its stench. The body cannot separate itself from the soul. That is the overcoming of Plato’s forms by sinners.

БОБОК is a symbol of human existence in Russia. I am not aware of a symbol that is more terrifying than this one.

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