
THE BLOOD OF CHILDREN: PETRUSHEVSKAIA'S "OUR CROWD" AND THE RUSSIAN
EASTER TALE

Author(s): Amy Singleton Adams

Source: *The Slavic and East European Journal*, WINTER 2012, Vol. 56, No. 4, FORUM:
SIGIZMUND KRZHIZHANOVSKY, 1887—1950 (WINTER 2012), pp. 612-628

Published by: American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24392617>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Slavic and East European Journal*

JSTOR

ARTICLE

THE BLOOD OF CHILDREN: PETRUSHEVSKAIA'S "OUR CROWD" AND THE RUSSIAN EASTER TALE

Amy Singleton Adams, College of the Holy Cross

"Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred."

René Girard (1977, 31)

Although Liudmila Petrushevskaja is most often associated with the "vitriol and conflict" of *perestroika*, one of her most forceful prose works hails from the late Brezhnev era. "Our Crowd" ("Svoi krug," written 1979, published 1988) is an early example of the Postmodernist spirit in late Soviet-era literature and captures brilliantly the cultural crisis at the heart of the Stagnation.¹ The story introduces key elements that characterize Petrushevskaja's later work—the murderous mother, a storyteller obsessed with narrative authority, and the loss of meaning in the rituals of public and private life. It also establishes Petrushevskaja's signature fascination with the exploration and manipulation of genre, which she continues to pursue and develop.² Like many of her other stories, "Our Crowd" happens at the boundary between a genre and its ironic inversion. Petrushevskaja maintains this boundary by the constant use of contradiction, as Sally Dalton-Brown demonstrates in her extensive study of genre in the works of Petrushevskaja, *Voices from the Void*: "Petrushevskaja, following her concern with the isolated individual whose voice is heard, and yet not heard, creates texts which deliberately fail to become communal oral genres, while at the same time leaning upon the conventions and expectations created by the *attempt* to become so" (viii; italics in original). Closely related to the image of the isolated individual in Petrushevskaja's work is the ubiquitous theme of violence and death.³ Yet, while her ambiguous treatment of any genre seems to fracture or even destroy generic conventions, it also resuscitates honored, albeit sometimes moribund forms with an affirmation that runs counter to the hopelessness that colors her characters' lives.

Of particular importance to "Our Crowd" is its previously unexplored

1. Benjamin Sutcliffe uses the phrase "vitriol and conflict" to describe women's prose of *perestroika* (59). The history and meaning of the story's delayed publication is described by Georgii Viren (203–5) and also by Niusia Milman (21).

2. In addition to writer, novelist, and playwright, Petrushevskaja is also a song writer and visual artist.

3. On the theme of death in Petrushevskaja's work, see Novikov.

generic subtext of the Russian Easter tale [*paskhal'nyi rasskaz*], one of Russia's oldest and most potent "communal" genres.⁴ A reading of "Our Crowd" through the lens of the Russian Easter tale proves to be a productive method of exploring this complex narrative and accomplishes the threefold goal of the present study. First, it establishes links to celebrated Russian authors such as Dostoevsky and Gogol, in whose work the Easter tale and its themes play a vital role, as a way to explore issues of narrative and cultural authority. Second, it helps explain the meaning of the violence—especially violence against children—that forms the core dynamic of "Our Crowd." Finally, it attempts to understand why, on the brink of the Postmodernist era in the Soviet Union, the perversion of the Easter tale's promise of salvation and spiritual communality [*sobornost'*] seems to herald a search for "new forms of cultural wholeness" that shun the syncretic myths of the Modernist Soviet era.⁵ Admittedly, the structural similarities between Christ's Passion and the events described in "Our Crowd" must be regarded as paradoxical. And readers need to ask whether this paradox generates the kind of meaning that the Easter tale promises or simply represents an irony that emphasizes the lack of meaning altogether. In this case, it is important to consider the *generative* paradox that structures the Easter tale, whereby violence actually creates meaning and restores community. The present study attempts to show how Petrushevskaiia negotiates the boundaries of this paradox and the Easter tale genre itself as she expresses both hope in and the failure of its true function—to effect a kind of resurrection of meaning in the atomized society of the period of Stagnation, when even the ritualized violence of the Stalin era fails to generate communality.

The Mother Stands Alone: The Easter Tale and Russian Literature

The Easter tale traces its roots to western Slavic manuscripts dating to the fifteenth century and appears in Russia toward the end of the seventeenth century.⁶ The Easter tales of the late Middle Ages were rich with scenes drawn from apocryphal Gospels and, as a result, are often associated with folk tradition. But they also display some literary characteristics of other genres in Old Russian literature. Most importantly, the Easter tale represents the first attempt to aesthetically understand the life and death of Christ, to "transform the Son of God from a sacred figure into an artistic image" (Savel'eva 1994, 76). Modern Russian literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries clearly approaches the Easter tale as a literary genre, using it to produce land-

4. There are various ways to refer to the Easter tale: *paskhal'nyi rasskaz*, *strasti Khristovy*, and *passiinaia povest'*. For the sake of clarity, I will use only the term "Easter tale" [*paskhal'nyi rasskaz*].

5. On the search for "new forms of cultural wholeness," see Timchenko. Alexandra Smith (2009) examines strategies in Petrushevskaiia's work that "call into question modernism's faith in the grand narratives of historical meaning" (9).

6. For detailed information on these manuscripts, see Savel'eva 1989, 1994, and 2003.

mark works that seek to evoke a sense of spiritual unity [*sobornost'*] by modeling acts of forgiveness and redemption (see Zakharov). As one of the most self-conscious examples, Nikolai Gogol's essay "Easter Sunday" ["Svetloe voskresen'e"] shows how paschal rituals of forgiveness should produce this sense of spiritual unity nationwide.⁷ At Easter, Gogol writes, "not a single soul stands apart from another, and in these moments all arguments, hatreds and enmities are forgotten, brother embraces brother, and all Russia is as one [не одна душа не отстанет от другой, и в такие минуты всякие ссоры, ненависти, вражды—все бывает позабыто, брат повиснет на груди у брата, а вся Россия—один человек]" (418). Some readers suggest that this dynamic defines a special "paschal archetype," a path along which literary characters and readers alike follow an "artistically organized pilgrimage toward [...] a new life" (Esaulov 2006, 72). Indeed, one need only name the authors who, in addition to Gogol, invoke structural and thematic elements of the Easter tale in their work—Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Bulgakov, Pasternak, and even Gorky make up a partial but impressive list—to recognize an essential relationship between the Easter tale and the development of a distinctly Russian literature. It is significant that one of the first examples of the Easter tale in modern Russian literature is a "translation" of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* with its themes transposed from the selflessness of the Christmas season to the redemption of Easter time.⁸ The Easter feast, which Sergei Bulgakov famously describes as the "heart of [Russian] Orthodoxy" (133), may, in a way, be the heart of Russian literature as well.⁹

Structurally, the ancient Easter tale is usually made up of 32 chapters that describe the events of Holy Week from Lazarus Saturday (the day before Palm Sunday) to the Resurrection, which is often portrayed as Christ leading the righteous out of hell (Savel'eva 1994, 76).¹⁰ Chapters include interpretations of canonical Gospel events, such as Judas's betrayal, the Last Supper, the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ's arrest, the path to Golgotha, and the Cru-

7. This essay is part of Gogol's *Selected Passages from Correspondences with Friends* [*Vybrannye mesta iz perepiski s druž'iami*, 1847].

8. Zakharov considers Khomiakov's translation to be the beginning of the Russian Easter tale genre (254). However, given the long history of the Passion story in Russia (see, for example, Savel'eva 1994 and Esaulov 2006), it is more likely that Khomiakov's cultural translation hearkened back to preexisting forms. Zakharov notes the difference between the Western Christmas tale and its Russian counterpart [*sviatochnyi rasskaz*]. Although both are timed for the Christmas season, Russian Christmas tales—Gogol's *Dikanka* tales (1952a) provide prime literary examples—feature the victory of the individual over evil spirits, witches, devils, etc. (249). In addition, it is not uncommon for Russian tales set at Christmas time to include references to Easter. Maxim Shrayer also discusses this kind of commingling of genres in Chekhov.

9. If, for Bulgakov, the "heart" of Russian Orthodoxy is Easter, then the "soul" is *sobornost'* (145). Esaulov (1997) explores the theme of *sobornost'* and its connection with paschal imagery.

10. As Zakharov points out (256), modern rewritings of the Easter tale may depict or refer to events and holidays from the entire Easter cycle, from the beginning of Lent [*Velikii post*] to Whitsunday.

cifixion. They may also include non-canonical events, such as Christ's farewell to his mother, and biographical episodes about various people connected to Christ. The main chapters of the tale end with the anguish of the Mother of God [*bogomater'*] at the foot of the cross and her "adoption" of John as her son (Savel'eva 1989, 44). Finally, there are chapters describing the fate of each character—from the disciples to Pontius Pilate—after the death of Christ (Savel'eva 1994, 76–79). While modern literary Easter tales rarely fulfill such intricate structural expectations, they may echo them in various ways, usually emphasizing the Easter season and rituals, and featuring themes of moral rebirth and spiritual resurrection accomplished through tenderness and forgiveness (Zakharov 256).

The inclusion of apocryphal scenes in the Easter tale and its subsequent re-workings can create a Bakhtinian "hidden polemic" with the Gospels (Bakhtin 193–95) and underscores the openness of the genre to subversion and manipulation.¹¹ At the heart of the Easter tale, the promise of spiritual rebirth may be realized, but it may also be subverted and even mocked. To the delight of Anton Chekhov, for instance, Nikolai Leikin's "The Bird" ["Ptitsa"] and "After Morning Prayer" ["Posle Svetloi zautreni"] humorously noted the gap between Christian humility and contemporary social mores in 1879, when Easter Sunday fell on April Fool's Day.¹² Likewise, the effectiveness of Gorky's own social critique, his 1895 "On the Rafts. An Easter Tale" ["Na plotakh. Paskhal'nyi rasskaz"], depends on the readers' expectations of the genre. The most frequent and obvious departure from evangelistic texts, however, is the central and potentially subversive role of the *bogomater'*, the mother of Christ. As a character in the Easter tale, she becomes her son's equal, reminding readers that, in the folk consciousness, the suffering of the Mother of God often becomes the true focus of the Passion.¹³ In Saveleva's analysis, the Mother of God episodes function as the tale's "psychological center of gravity" (2006, 79). As the emotional focus of the Easter tale, the "sweet horror" [*sladkii uzhas*] of the *mater dolorosa* expresses the basic contradiction of her character; although she foresees her son's unique fate, she cannot, as a mother, accept its inexorability.¹⁴ As with Russian icons, the suf-

11. This kind of polemic dovetails nicely with Petrushevskaiia's multi-voiced "monologues." For other Bakhtinian elements of Petrushevskaiia's work, see Alexandra Smith 1999.

12. This episode is noted in Zakharov 257.

13. G. P. Fedotov (1991) notes that "in the folk consciousness Golgotha is presented through the suffering of the Mother of God, who becomes, in a way, the main character in the Passion [и собственно Голгофа в народном сознании дана сквозь страдания Богоматери, которая является, таким образом, главным действующим лицом Господних Страстей]" (41). For Sergius Bulgakov, the *bogomater'* is the focus of the church, "the soul of Orthodox piety, its heart, that which warms and animates its entire body" (137).

14. The phrase "sweet horror" [*sladkii uzhas*] belongs to Averintsev (37). Akhmatova introduces the same idea in "Requiem," when the *bogomater'* figure says, "You are my son and my horror [Ты сын и ужас мой]." As Smith (1997, 108–11) shows, Petrushevskaiia, in her 1994 novel *Time: Night* [*Vremia noch'*], later appropriates and subverts Akhmatova's lament.

fering of the *bogomater'* is manifested primarily in her tearful gaze, which becomes an essential motif through which readers experience the sympathy and tenderness [*umilenie*] that precipitate spiritual rebirth.¹⁵

While Petrushevskaja's use of the Easter tale lets her assume the narrative authority of Russian literature's founding fathers, she directs this power toward the story's many mothers. Doing so, she exploits the subversive potential of the genre as well as motherhood itself, which Julia Kristeva regards as "one of the most powerful imaginary constructs known in the history of civilization" (1986, 163). In addition to her role as psychological center of the tale, the Mother of God also becomes the primary focus of the narrator's attention (Savel'eva 2006, 79). In "Our Crowd," Petrushevskaja intensifies this narratorial fascination, conflating narrative authority and motherhood by taking the most unusual step of creating a maternal narrator for the Easter tale. Replacing the silent and submissive *mater dolorosa* with the crude and assertive narrator of "Our Crowd," Petrushevskaja disrupts the expected tone of the Easter tale—and the paradigm of sacred motherhood—at its very core.¹⁶ Neither silent, submissive, doleful nor chaste, Petrushevskaja's mother is more inclined toward Dostoevsky's belligerent underground man than the Mother of God.¹⁷

Petrushevskaja further underscores the sense of generic disruption with unlikely references to the Passion and the life of Mary scattered throughout "Our Crowd." As Lena Marchukaite's mother-in-law, for example, Mary Lazarevna [Мэри Лазаревна] is associated with failed marriages and still-born children rather than resurrection, as her name would suggest. Also, when the presumably barren Aniuta "suddenly" gives birth to child named for the idolized Marisha, the comparison between them and their namesakes (Anna and Maria) and the allusion to the Immaculate Conception is highly ironic. Finally, the implicit suggestion that the narrator's son, Alesha, and later the narrator herself resemble Orthodox icons is both offered and weakened by

15. On the power and effectiveness of the mutual gaze of the icon and the viewer, see Vera Shevzov.

16. In "Inscribing the Female Body" (1993b) Helena Goscilo shows how the use of the edgy female narrator-*cum*-Madonna results in a generic paradigm shift that refocuses the tale on the consciousness of the female narrator and the physiology of the maternal body, supplanting the male voice of the Gospels and the body of Christ. Goscilo's essay "Paradigm Lost? Contemporary Women's Fiction" (1994) demonstrates the relationship among gender, authorship, and cultural authority.

17. Petrushevskaja, Goscilo says, locates her mothers "along a continuum of deviation" as she describes the "pathology of mothers' 'underground' selves" (1995, 105). Of course, in "Our Crowd," the reference to the underground man is explicit. On the influence of Dostoevsky in Petrushevskaja's work, see Tigountsova. Other readers note Dostoevskian themes in Petrushevskaja's work. For example, Goscilo sees how Petrushevskaja's very conscious use of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* as a subtext in "Our Crowd" echoes the anxious concern with narrative authority that characterizes the "underground man" (1995, 105–6). For Dalton-Brown, Petrushevskaja's concern with the "Dostoevskian notion of the perversity of man" and the question of what it means to be human lies at the heart of Petrushevskaja's use of genre (vii).

mundane and grotesque references to bodily fluids and violence. The overall tone of irony also colors the more extended references to the Easter tale as well. Framed between two Eastertide visits to family graves—the first one real and the second imagined—these scenes echo in a rapid, condensed form some of the Passion chapters of the traditional Russian Easter tale: the Last Supper (the Easter dinner at the narrator’s apartment); the Crucifixion (little Alesha’s beating); the Resurrection/Leading the Faithful out of Hell (the exodus of Alesha and the crowd; his “adoption” by that “group family”); and the biographies of those connected to the Passion (the narrator’s predictions about the lives of her friends and family eight years in the future).

On one hand, Petrushevskaya’s disruption of the generic expectations of the Easter tale indicates the moral shortcomings of a group of young Brezhnev-era scientific elites, as the sexual tensions, marital infidelities, and professional jealousies illustrate. Indeed, it is possible to read “Our Crowd” as social critique akin to Leikin’s and Gorky’s earlier tales, where the paradoxical comparison with the Easter tale is complete both in structure and meaning. But the violence at the heart of Petrushevskaya’s story complicates such a reading. The bodies of women (and their children) in “Our Crowd” and many of Petrushevskaya’s works make up not only the “site” or victims of violence, as Goscilo notes (1993a, 140), but also become the locus—that is, the *source*—of violence. In “Our Crowd,” the narrator presents her beating of her son as an act of self-sacrifice—she will ensure his future even if she has to give up parental rights.¹⁸ However, this characterization—if not expanded—runs the risk of casting Petrushevskaya’s women in the rather confining mold of the self-sacrificing mother.¹⁹ Petrushevskaya’s broader picture of the post-Stalinist Soviet Union describes a society in which even the often violent rituals of public and private life—what Lipovetskii and Spieker view as the “sacred center of Soviet modernist society”—fail to generate any kind of communal significance (6–7). (The Stalinist knock at the door, for example, produces only the policeman Valera, whose nostalgic references to Stalin are diminished by the narrator’s insistent focus on flatulence.) “[W]ithout this relation to the sacred,” Lipovetskii and Spieker write, “violence can no longer signify the incorporation of the individual into some collective body [...] in fact, it cannot structure any community at all” (28–29). With characteristic ambiguity, Petrushevskaya suggests that the Easter tale, with its core relation-

18. Lipovetsky and Spieker observe that “[i]n Petrushevskaya, self-destruction constitutes the core of any family relationship: ‘violent’ love inflicted on children and grandchildren is inseparable from self-inflicted traumas, and thus such violence appears as a paradoxical form of self-sacrifice” (31).

19. Theorists such as Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray suggest that such an approach is itself a form of cultural violence against women (Lisberger 17, 28). On the violent power struggle between patriarchal social dynamics and the maternal construct, see especially Irigaray’s “Body Against Body.” On the relationship between the power of the maternal beyond self-sacrifice and the resulting violence that that notion of the feminine may produce, see Kristeva 1982.

ship between violence and the sacred, *may* restore meaning in a world where ritual has become habit and life a series of empty gestures. But her approach presents challenges, not the least of which is the absence of any examples of the Easter tale by which her contemporaries might recognize its conventions.²⁰ And as hard as it is to consider the crass, self-serving narrator as a figurative *bogomater'*, it is even more difficult to accept that the “sacrificial lamb” will be the narrator’s own seven-year-old son.

The Blood of Children: Making Sense of Violence in “Our Crowd”

Two things help to focus a reading of “Our Crowd” through the Easter tale, whose ability to create community relies on the genre’s essential link between violence and the sacred. The first is Petrushevskaiia’s original title for the story—“The Blood of Children” [“Detskaia krov'”]—which highlights the central role played by Alesha’s beating and the sacred qualities of his bloodshed.²¹ Second, within the story, the narrator’s own characterization of the beating (in one instance she describes the incident as “The Massacre of the Innocents”) strengthens the link between violence and the sacred.²² Petrushevskaiia’s narrator ends “Our Crowd” with a monstrous but allegedly selfless act of violence, beating her seven-year old son to the point that the child bleeds (“так что у ребёнка полилась кровь” (65)). Despite her seemingly ironic attitude toward her actions, the narrator claims that the blows and the sight of a child’s blood have a unifying effect on her group of friends, her *second* target:

Мой расчёт был верным. Они все, как один, не могли видеть детской крови, они могли спокойно разрезать друг друга, но ребёнок, дети для них святое дело. (66)

My aim was true. As a group, they could not stand the sight of a child’s blood. They could peacefully tear each other to pieces, but a child, children for them are a sacred thing.

In “Our Crowd,” references to the Easter tale provide a way to understand this violent act and its purported effect on the adults who witness it. Considered in light of René Girard’s theories on sacred violence, the Easter ritual is a prime example of the generative properties of blood sacrifice. At the heart of what Girard calls “good” violence is the paradoxical mechanism of the surrogate-victim, the “scapegoat,” or, in the case of Christ, the “sacrificial lamb” (1986, 117). The death of the surrogate victim—who acts as a substitute for

20. By 1994, more than five years after the publication of “Our Crowd,” Zakharov could detect no contemporary examples of the Easter tale (“Сегодня у него почти нет настоящего”) (261).

21. In a personal note to the author of the present study in November 2009, Petrushevskaiia confirms this working title. Another, she writes, was “Nashi” [Ours], which suggests the theme of communality.

22. Doing so, she introduces the idea of the scapegoat into Alesha’s portrayal and associates him with Christ’s sacrifice—for the death of the innocents in Bethlehem in Jesus’s stead is mirrored by his own death on behalf of mankind.

all members of a population—unites a conflict-ridden community through its common hatred of the victim. “All the rancors scattered at random among the divergent individuals, all the differing antagonisms, now converge on an isolated and unique figure, *the surrogate victim*” (Girard 1977, 79, italics in original). At the same time, the uniquely pure blood of the victim is regarded as a “miraculous substance” that can save the community from the “mechanism of reciprocal violence,” which Girard describes as a “vicious circle” of vengeance and reprisals (1977, 81):

[W]e have good reason to believe that the violence directed against the surrogate victim might well be radically generative in that, by putting an end to the vicious and destructive cycle of violence, it simultaneously initiates another and constructive cycle, that of the sacrificial rite—which protects the community from that same violence and allows culture to flourish. (1977, 93)

A regenerative sacrifice—one whose cathartic qualities pinpoint both the climax and the end of ritual festivities (119)—needs the blood of an appropriate victim. For Girard, the ritual victim is both despised and revered:

On the one hand he is a woebegone figure, an object of scorn who is also weighed down with guilt; a butt for all sorts of gibes, insults, and of course, outbursts of violence. On the other hand, we find him surrounded by a quasi-religious aura of veneration; he has become a sort of cult object. This duality reflects the metamorphosis the ritual victim is designed to effect; the victim draws to itself all the violence infecting the original victim and through its own death transforms this baneful violence into beneficial violence, into harmony and abundance. (1977, 95)

In “Our Crowd,” the narrator’s son Alesha plays the role of ritual victim of an Easter ritual whose regenerative power is uncertain. Earlier in the story, the narrator describes how the talentless, unappealing child with bad teeth and a bedwetting habit inspires such scorn that his own father, Kolia, slaps him across the face in disgust. However, Alesha is accepting—even comfortable—with his status as ritual victim.

[Коля] саданул Алёшу прямо по щеке ладонью, и Алёша легко покотился обратно на свою мокрую, кислую постель, но он не очень плакал, поскольку чувствовал даже облегчение, что вот его наказали. (61)

[Kolia] smacked Alesha right across the cheek with his hand and Alesha gently fell backwards into his wet, sour bed. But he didn’t cry much, and to a certain extent even felt a sense of relief that he had been punished.

Trembling in wet undershorts, Alesha’s thin legs suggest the delicacy of the Christ child, an image that is developed further when the bleeding boy is carried out of his mother’s building in a “triumphant communal procession [*triumfal’noe vseobshchee shestvie*],” like an icon—the object of veneration—at Easter.²³ However, Petrushevskaja’s retelling of the Easter tale in the

23. In her study, Behrendt emphasizes how in traditional Orthodox icons the vulnerability of Christ and the humanity he receives from his mother are often expressed through his pale, thin legs (137). The intimacy of the mother-son relationship, emphasized by the encircling pose of “tenderness” [*umilenie*] icons is, of course, completely undermined in “Our Crowd.”

poetics of *chernukha*—the naturalistic and pessimistic mode of the early post-Soviet era—casts doubt on the shift in Alesha’s status from despised to revered ritual victim—and even his role of symbolic victim itself—as the “miraculous substance” representing the victim’s blood is, in this case, urine. In a similar fashion, the narrator’s fixation on bodily fluids eventually questions the link between herself and sacred motherhood. The doleful tears of the Madonna, for example, are only the prescription eye drops that treat her oncoming blindness.²⁴ And, at the end of the story, the narrator demeans the ritual significance of the Easter tale by associating regenerative blood with a much lesser substance. Assuming an iconic pose in an upper story window frame, the narrator-mother mulls over the paschal significance of her son’s bloody beating while noting the beet-colored vomit (for this crowd the real “miraculous substance” is alcohol) on the exterior wall below.

In “Our Crowd,” a clear pattern of degrading the Easter tale with such banal and crude disruptions of its expectations repeatedly threatens to disassociate such acts of violence from the ritual renewal the genre promises. Petrushevskaiia strengthens the effect of this disruption by preceding the climactic beating—which in Girard’s reading should create a sense of community within the narrator’s “circle”—with a non-ironic invocation of the Easter tale. In “Our Crowd,” descriptions of the time of year, the Easter foods, and, most importantly, the meaning and intention of the holiday establish and heighten the generic expectations of traditional Easter tales (60–63). They also provide literary and cultural ideals, with which the story’s culminating Easter scene engages. Echoing the language of nineteenth-century commentaries on the meaning of the Easter season, Petrushevskaiia’s narrator affirms the possibility of spiritual unity, forgiveness, and remembrance. At first, the narrator is subtle, linking the traditional Easter graveyard picnic with a new life for her son [*On dolzhen byl nachinat' s etikh por novuiu zhizn'*] (60). Later, her long description of the scene at the cemetery expands to include a consideration of the broader meaning of the holiday:

Помню, что кругом в оградах стояли люди, возбужденно разговаривали, пили на воздухе, закусывали, у нас ещё сохранились эти традиции пасхальных пикников на кладбищах, когда кажется, что всё обошлось в конце концов хорошо, покойники лежат хорошо, за них пьют, убраны могилки, воздух свежий, птицы, никто не забыт и ничто не забыто, и у всех так же будет, все пройдёт и закончится так же мирно и благополучно, с бумажными цветами, фотографиями на керамике, птичками в воздухе и крашеными яйцами прямо в земле. (62)

I remember people were standing around inside the fences, talking excitedly, drinking in the fresh air, and having a bite. We’ve kept these traditions of Easter picnics in cemeteries, when it seems that everything in the end will turn out right. The dead lie there happily and we drink to

24. The narrator’s oncoming blindness (a theme doubled by her own mother’s blindness) plays with the idea of spiritual insight and the premonitory gaze of the *bogomater'*, discussed in Shevzov.

them, tidy up the graves, the air is fresh, there are birds, no one is forgotten and nothing is forgotten, and it will be that way with everyone. Everything will end up so happily and peacefully, with paper flowers, photographs on ceramic, little birds in the air and colored eggs right on the ground.

In clear contrast with the claustrophobic world of crowded apartments and incestuous relationships, this graveyard scene in “Our Crowd” is, in a real sense, a breath of fresh air (with *vozdukh* appearing three times). The positive descriptions of the Easter picnic all point to an inevitably happy ending (“everything in the end will turn out right,” “everything will end up so happily and peacefully”), wherein everything and everyone will be fondly remembered (“*nikto ne zabyt i ничто не забыто*”).²⁵ After the narrator and her son carry out the rituals—neatening her parents’ graves, eating the eggs, bread, and spring apples and leaving a bit as an offering for the dead and the birds—she thinks about the meaning of the holiday again, noting on the bus ride homeward that the passengers were “somehow *friendly* and pleasant, as if they had caught a glimpse of the world beyond the grave and saw there fresh air and plastic flowers and they drank to that in a *friendly* way [какие-то *дружные*, благодные, словно заглянули в загробный мир и увидели там свежий воздух и пластмассовые цветы и *дружно* выпили за это дело]” (62, italics added).

The Easter picnic traditions revitalize a sense of hope and community—here among strangers on the bus. The repeated root “*drug-/druzh-*” [friendly] underscores the Easter themes of forgiveness and reconciliation and also refers back to a nineteenth-century literary predecessor. In his previously mentioned reworking of Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, Khomiakov empha-

25. While also echoing Gogol’s phrasing in “Easter Sunday,” Petrushevskaiia’s use of the phrase “no one is forgotten, nothing is forgotten [*nikto ne zabyt, ничто не забыто*]” calls up an entirely different era of Russian history. Visitors to St. Petersburg Piskarevskoe Cemetery will encounter it in Olga Berggolts’s poem on the memorial wall as well as on countless World War II memorials throughout Russia.

Здесь лежат ленинградцы.
Здесь горожане — мужчины, женщины, дети.
Рядом с ними солдаты-красноармейцы.
Всею жизнью своею
Они защищали тебя, Ленинград,
Колыбель революции.
Их имен благородных мы здесь перечислить не сможем,
Так их много под вечной охраной гранита.
Но знай, внимающий этим камням:
Никто не забыт и ничто не забыто.

Such layering of historic references indicates Petrushevskaiia’s approach to Postmodernism, which often includes the kind of “play” that both Ihab Hassan and Fredric Jameson describe in their work. On the theme of play in Postmodernism see Hassan 1987; on the theme of pastiche or the notion of the intentional jumble see Jameson (1991).

sizes the same root morpheme “*drug-*” to associate paschal rituals with lofty and sacred meaning. Easter, Khomiakov writes, is

связано со всем, что есть святого в нашей вере. Это одно время в круглом году, когда каждый готов открыть *другому* всю свою душу, когда не *друзи* готовы снов подать *друг другу* руку и забыть все прошедшее и когда все люди, высшие и низшие, равно чувствуют себя братьями. (85, italics added)

[Easter is] connected to everything that is sacred to our faith. It is the one time of year when everyone is prepared to open their souls to each other, when enemies [non-friends] are willing to once again offer each other their hands and forget everything that came before, and when all people, high and low, feel like brothers to one another.

But ritual imitation needs authenticity to create meaning. The invocation of the imagery and conventions of the Easter tale will not transcend the simple irony of the comparison if it fails to generate a sense of community. In “Our Crowd” the reader is challenged to evaluate the success of this, the Easter tale’s essential function. Amid the petty arguments that ensue during the narrator’s annual Easter party, the repetition of familiar phrasing (“friendly,” “all,” “all as one”) rings hollow; it makes the narrator’s earlier belief that “everything in the end will turn out right” seem illusory. Tense discussions about divorce, apartment swaps, and the custody of children are punctuated by the narrator’s observance of a “friendly” atmosphere. However, the group’s attitude toward their hostess is clearly characterized by an animosity in which she seems to revel nonetheless. As they seat themselves, she notes, the guests “all began to laugh in a friendly, satisfied way [*vse oni zasmeialis’ družnym, dovol’nym smekhom*]”; later they “all yell and sing in a friendly way [*vse družno orali, peli*]” until, when it is time to go, they “put their coats on in a friendly way [*družno odevalis’*]” (63–65). The dichotomy between the group’s treatment of the narrator and her perception of their mood borders on self-delusion and her narrative authority is suspect.

It is unclear whether to accept the narrator’s interpretation of the group’s reaction to her son’s beating as an event that restores community and—by way of ritualized violence—builds meaning. With its reference to the sacred and echoes of Gogol’s vision of Russia united as “one” [*“kak odin chelovek”*], the narrator’s description insinuates that her brutal attack constitutes a Passion of sorts, an idea that intensifies with the subtly iconographical treatment of Alesha’s character. The group’s dramatic exit from the hellish scene inside the building with Alesha held high and the catalog of the future lives of each member of the group hint again at the story’s reliance on the Easter story archetypes (Christ leading the faithful out of hell, the “adoption” of Alesha by the group). But the narrator’s fantasy that the group will “surround” (literally “encircle”) her son “with attention [*Ego okružaiut vnimaniem*]” (66) is self-serving. Her “friends,” who, throughout the course of the story, cheat on their spouses, rape women, consort with prostitutes and KGB officers, commit incest, and leave their children untended all night while they drink themselves

into oblivion, are no more apt to care for the boy than she is. Like the beating itself, the imagery that the narrator attaches to her son—the Christ child to her Madonna, a victim of the Massacre of Innocents—may be meaningless. Rather than strengthening the link between violence and the sacred, Petrushevskaja's story leaves open for question the essential relationship between Passion and compassion. The climactic Easter beating allows her to invoke the conventions and expectations of the Easter tale while holding out the possibility of their ironic use. If the tale's climactic beating fails to fulfill the function of generative violence, it becomes instead another episode in the "vicious and destructive cycle of violence" typical of the conflict-ridden "circle." On the other hand, it may be difficult to refer to the Easter tale at all without suggesting the possibilities of spiritual and cultural renewal.

Petrushevskaja ends her story as she begins, with a reference to Dostoevsky's "underground" man. In doing so, she obliges readers to confront issues of narrative authority in her polemic with paradigms of motherhood, sacred or otherwise. While her shockingly ironic treatment of the Easter tale genre seems to subvert its cultural authority, the double irony of the story's two endings—one doubtful and one hopeful—may nonetheless demonstrate its authenticity. In "Our Crowd," the narrator's second (and imagined) description of Alesha's Easter visits to her grave—especially with its repetition of the imagery from their actual trip to the cemetery—promise that he will forgive her for hitting him and understand the meaning of their shared "sacrifice."

Алеша, я думаю, приедет ко мне в первый день Пасхи, я с ним так мысленно договорилась, показала ему дорожку и день, я думаю, он догадается, он очень сообразительный мальчик, и там, среди крашенных яиц, среди пластмассовых венков и помятой, пьяной и доброй толпы, он меня простит, что я не дала ему попрощаться, а ударила его по лицу вместо благословения. (67)

Alesha, I think, will come to me on the first day of Easter, we mentally agreed on that and I showed him how to get there and the day. I think he'll guess, he's a very perceptive boy. And there, among the painted eggs, among the little plastic wreaths and the rumped, drunken, and kindly crowd, he'll forgive me for not letting him say good-bye, and hitting him in the face instead of giving him my blessing.

The vision of a lonely grave with which Dostoevsky's hero threatens the prostitute Liza serves as both a subtext and counterpoint for this scene. It also allows Petrushevskaja's narrator to express her own anxiety about how or even if she will be remembered by her son.

Засыплют поскорей мокрой глиной и уйдут в кабак...Тут и конец твоей памяти на земле; к другим дети на могилу ходят, отцы, мужья, а у тебя—ни слезы, ни вздоха, ни поминания, и никто-то, никто-то, никогда в целом мире не придёт к тебе; имя твоё исчезнет с лица земли—так, как бы совсем тебя никогда не бывало и не рождалось! (Dostoevsky 161)

They'll cover you up quickly with wet blue clay and go to the tavern...That's the end of your memory on earth; other people's graves are visited by children, fathers, husbands, but at

yours—not a tear, not a sigh, not a prayer, and no one, no one in the whole world will ever come to you; your name will disappear from the face of the earth—as if you’d never existed, as if you’d never been born!

The irony of the implicit comparison between Petrushevskaja’s narrator and Liza is complex. As Patricia Behrendt shows in her study of the iconography of Liza’s portrayal, it is this threat of an unvisited grave that inspires a selfless and liberating love in Liza and allows her to assume the role of symbolic Madonna (141). But, despite the apparent confidence of Petrushevskaja’s narrator, her imagined grave is unlikely to inspire either forgiveness or understanding. Indeed, her son—who, throughout the story, is portrayed as anything but “perceptive”—would have to intuit several unspoken messages to fulfill his mother’s fantasy. For Alesha, a paschal epiphany and rebirth into a new life seem unlikely. And, skeptical of the narrator’s assertions about her insight and intelligence (“*Ia umnaia, ia ponimaiu*”), the reader—whose own faith guarantees the effectiveness of the Easter tale—knows better the hopelessness of her conversion. In the end, as Ivan Esaulov observes, “[a] disbelief in the hero’s awakening of conscience indicates a disbelief in the salvation of everyone else, a disbelief in God’s mercy, which in turn renders the suffering of Christ ultimately meaningless” (1997, 40). However, in a final twist, Petrushevskaja’s reference to Dostoevsky keeps open the possibility that the promise of the Easter tale will be fulfilled and that the “crowd”—in this case, possibly her readers—will discern some kind of meaning in her actions.

Questioning Authority: The Easter Tale and Post-Soviet Culture

With her Brezhnev-era return to the Easter tale, Petrushevskaja questions the ability of Soviet Modernism to generate communal meaning while, with extreme foresight, she wonders whether Postmodernist forms can regain the cultural authority of the past. The paschal dynamic of death and rebirth provides a convenient metaphor for Postmodernist culture, which is often envisioned in these terms. It is a rite of passage, Lipovetsky writes, a “temporary death, through which it is necessary to pass, in order to be born again or to attain a new quality [временная смерть, через которую нужно пройти, чтобы родиться заново или обрести новое качество]” (1995, 199). The Russian Postmodern condition could certainly be described as the cultural “death” of Modernism, which, to follow Lipovetsky’s paradigm, should then provide new cultural forms and constructs. In that way, Petrushevskaja’s dismantling of the sacred ideal of compassionate motherhood in “Our Crowd” is one of the ways she takes on Modernism, exposing the role of the maternal metaphor in Russian literary and social patriarchy. In *The Modernist Madonna*, Jane Silverman Van Buren explains how this kind of aesthetic and theoretical treatment of the mother-child relationship constitutes a response to such cultural authority. Van Buren cites Kristeva’s work in particular (1986), along with that of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, when she writes:

Their metaphor of maternity encompasses many themes opposed to cultural codes based on the presence and erection of ultimate authority. The maternal metaphor acts as a semiotic instrument to invoke the unrepresentable and absent aspects excluded from the mainstream of “father-dominated culture.” (14)

If Van Buren’s “modernist Madonna” expresses the ideals of a phallogocentric society, it follows that any challenge to the image of mother and child becomes a “rebellion [...] against a culture manifestly dominated by male personality” (2). In this way, Petrushevskaja’s allusions to the Easter tale in “Our Crowd” become a protest (her efforts to diminish the influence of Soviet male-governed culture is comically reflected, for example, by the reference to the miniature phallus Andrei brings back from Japan). However, the possible failure of ritual violence to generate meaning in Petrushevskaja’s Easter tale indicates the disruption of the death-rebirth cycle and moves the story beyond the confrontation with a “father-dominated culture.” Striking at the heart of Russia’s “Easter tale” genre, the story also questions the very possibility of cultural rebirth via *any* literary construct, modern or postmodern. In today’s Russia, where, according to writer Mikhail Shishkin, the voice of its grand literary traditions has succumbed to the banal and often violent rhetoric of the country’s political and commercial centers of power, Petrushevskaja’s question could not be more relevant.²⁶

REFERENCES

- Akhmatova, Anna. *Requiem*. Munich: Tvorchestvo zarubezhnykh pisatelei, 1963.
- Averintsev, S. S. *Ot beregov Bosfora do beregov Evfrata*. Moscow: Nauka, Glavnaia redaktsiia vostochnoi literatury, 1987.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984.
- Behrendt, Patricia Flanagan. “The Iconic Representation of the Christian Madonna: A Feminine Archetype in *Notes from Underground*.” *Dostoevski and the Human Condition*. New York: Greenwood, 1986. 133–43.
- Berggol'ts, Ol'ga. “Leningradskaia poema.” *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh: Stikhotvoreniia i poemy, 1941–1945. Proza, 1941–1954*. Vol. 2. Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1988. 40.
- Bulgakov, Sergei. *The Orthodox Church*. Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1988.
- Cixous, Hélène. “The Laugh of the Medusa.” *Reading Rhetorical Theory*. Ed. Barry Brummett. New York: Harcourt, 2000. 879–93.
- Dalton-Brown, Sally. *Voices from the Void: The Genres of Liudmila Petrushevskaja*. New York/London: Berghahn, 2000.
- Dostoevskii, Fedor M. *Zapiski iz podpol'ia. Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridtsati tomakh*. Leningrad: Nauka, 1973. 5: 99–180.
- Eliade, Mircea. *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005.

²⁶ Mikhail P. Shishkin, “Battling the Mindset of Totalitarianism.” Public lecture, April 7, 2008. Worcester, MA.

- Esaulov, Ivan A. "Sobornost' in Russian Literature." *Cultural Discontinuity and Reconstruction: The Byzanto-Slav Heritage and the Creation of a Russian National Literature in the Nineteenth Century*. Jostein Børtnes and Ingunn Lunde, eds. Oslo: Solum, 1997. 29–45.
- . "The Paschal Archetype of Russian Literature and the Structure of Boris Pasternak's Novel *Doctor Zhivago*." *Literature & Theology* 20.1 (March 2006): 63–78.
- Fedotov, Georgii P. *Stikhi dukhovnye (Russkaia narodnaia vera po dukhovnym stikham)*. Moscow: Gnozis, 1991.
- Girard, René. *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977.
- . *The Scapegoat*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986.
- Gogol', Nikolai V. *Večer na khutore bliz Dikanki. Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh*. Leningrad: Izd. Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1952a. 1: 11–294.
- . "Svetloe voskresen'e." *Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh*. Leningrad: Izd. Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1952b. 6: 412–21.
- Gorkii, Maksim. "Na plotakh." *Sobranie sochinenii*. Moscow: Gos. izd. khud. lit., 1960. 1: 188–97.
- Goscilo, Helena. "Body Talk in Current Fiction: Speaking Parts and (W)holes." *Russian Culture in Transition: Selected Papers of the Working Group for the Study of Contemporary Russian Culture, 1990–1991*. Stanford Slavic Studies, Vol. 7. Oakland, CA: Stanford UP, 1993a. 145–77.
- . "Inscribing the Female Body in Women's Fiction: Cross-Gendered Passion à la Holbein." *Gender Restructuring in Russian Studies*. Tampere: University of Tampere, 1993b. 73–86.
- . "Paradigm Lost? Contemporary Women's Fiction." *Women Writers in Russian Literature*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994.
- . "Mother as Mothra: Totalizing Narrative and Nurture in Petrushevskiaia." *A Plot of Her Own: The Female Protagonist in Russian Literature*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1995. 102–12.
- Hassan, Ihab. *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1987.
- Irigaray, Luce. "Body Against Body: In Relation to the Mother." *Sexes and Genealogies*. New York: Columbia UP, 1993. 7–22.
- Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1991.
- Khomiakov, Aleksei S. *Svetloe voskresen'e. Povest' zaimstvovannaia u Dikkensa*. Moscow: V. A. Kosheleva, 1991. 81–105.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia UP, 1982.
- . "Stabat Mater." *The Kristeva Reader*. New York: Columbia UP, 1986. 160–86.
- Leikin, Nikolai. "Ptitsa" and "Posle svetloi zautreni." *Savrasy bez uzdy*. Saint Petersburg: Tvorchestvo R. Golike and A. Vil'borg, 1880. 195–97; 198–201.
- Lipovetskii, Mark. "Izzhivanie smerti. Spetsifika russkogo postmodernisma." *Znamia* 8 (1995): 195–205.
- , and Sven Spieker. "Introduction." *The Imprints of Terror: The Rhetoric of Violence and the Violence of Rhetoric in Modern Russian Culture*. Vienna: Wiener Slawistischer Almanach, 2006. Sonderband 64. 5–35.
- Lisberger, Joann Carrie. "Violence and the Lost Maternal: Problems of Sacrifice, Biblical Authority, and Feminine Desire in Narrative." Diss. Boston University, 1991.
- Mil'man, Niusia. *Chitaia Petrushevskuii: Vzgliad iz-za okeana*. Saint Petersburg: Rosprint, 1997.
- Novikov, Tatyana. "Requiems: Liudmila Petrushevskiaia's World of Death." *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 58.1 (2004): 31–47.
- Petrushevskiaia, Liudmila. "Svoi krug." *Sobranie sochinenii*. Moscow: TKO AST, 1996. Vol. 1. 45–67.

- Savel'eva, O. A. "Passiinye povesti v vostochno-slavianskikh literaturakh. Voprosy tekstologii." *Khristianstvo i tserkov' v Rossii feodal'nogo perioda (materialy)*. Novosibirsk: Nauka, Sibirskoe otdelenie, 1989. 30–44.
- . "Apokrificheskaia povest' 'Strasti Khristovy': Nekotorye voprosy struktury i poetiki." *Evangel'skii tekst v russkoi literature XVIII–XX vekov*. Ed. V. Zakharov. Petrozavodsk: Izd. Petrozavodskogo Universiteta, 1994. 76–83.
- . "Russkii apokrificheskii Khristos: K postanovke problemy." *Slavia Orientalis* 52.2 (2003): 159–78.
- Shevzov, Vera. "Scripting the Gaze: Liturgy, Homilies, and the Kazan Icon of the Mother of God in Late Imperial Russia." In *Sacred Stories: Religion and Spirituality in Modern Russia*. Eds. Mark D. Steinberg and Heather J. Coleman. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2007. 61–92.
- Shrayer, Maxim D. "Conflation of Christmas and Paschal Motifs in Čechov's 'V Roždestvenskuju noč'." *Russian Literature* 35.2 (1994): 243–59.
- Smith, Alexandra. "In Populist Clothes: Anarchy and Subversion in Petrushevskaya's Latest Fiction." *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* 31 (1997): 107–25.
- . "Carnivalising the Canon: The Grotesque and the Subversive in Contemporary Russian Women's Prose (Petrushevskaja, Sadur, Tolstaia, Narbikova)." *Russian Literature in Transition*. Nottingham: Astra Press, 1999. 35–58.
- . "The Effacement of History, Theatricality and Postmodern Urban Fantasies in the Prose of Petruševskaja and Pelevin." *Die Welt der Slaven* 54.1 (2009): 53–78.
- Sutcliffe, Benjamin. *The Prose of Life: Russian Women Writers from Khrushchev to Putin*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2009.
- Tigoutsova, Inna. *The Ugly in Russian Literature: Dostoevsky's Influence on Iurii Mamleev, Liudmila Petrushevskaja, and Tatiana Tolstaia*. Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Press, 2010.
- Timchenko, Marina. "Transition: The State of Contemporary Artistic Culture." *Re-Entering the Sign: Articulating New Russian Culture*. Ed. Ellen E. Berry and Anessa Miller-Pogacar. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1995. 129–43.
- Van Buren, Jane Silverman. *The Modernist Madonna: Semiotics of the Maternal Metaphor*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989.
- Viren, Georgii. "Takaia liubov'." *Oktiabr'* 3 (1989): 203–5.
- Zakharov, V. N. "Paskhal'nyi rasskaz kak zhanr russkoi literatury." *Evangel'skii tekst v russkoi literature XVIII–XX vekov*. Petrozavodsk: Izd. Petrozavodskogo Universiteta, 1994. 249–61.

Реферат

Эми Сингелтон Адамс

Детская кровь: «Свой круг» Петрушевской и русский пасхальный рассказ

Хотя Людмила Петрушевская чаще всего связана с так называемой «чернухой» Перестройки, одно из самых важных её произведений было написано уже в Брежневском периоде. «Свой круг» (написан в 1979, опубликован в 1988) является ранним экземпляром духа постмодернизма в литературе поздней советской эры и блестяще отражает культурный кризис Застоя. Рассказ также определяет глубокое увлечение Петрушевской эксплорацией и манипуляцией художественных жанров. Прежде несчитаемый жанровый субъект русского пасхального рассказа является особенно важным рассказу. Чтение «Своего круга» через линзу русского пасхального рассказа оказывается продуктивным

подходом к изучению этого сложного рассказа и достигает тройной цели настоящей статьи. Во-первых, он создаёт связи со знаменитыми писателями как Достоевским и Гоголем, у которых пасхальный рассказ и его темы играют важнейшую роль, и таким образом подходит к вопросам художественного и культурного авторитета. Во-вторых, он объясняет значение насилия—особенно насилия против детей—которое формируется центральной динамикой «Своего круга». Наконец, он старается понять почему, на грани постмодернизма в Советском Союзе, извращение обещанных пасхальным рассказом спасения и соборности объявляет искание «новых форм культурной цельности», которые отказываются от синкретических мифов периода Советского модернизма. В настоящей статье обсуждается игра Петрушевской с пределами этого парадокса и жанра пасхального рассказа самого, как она выражает и надежду, и неудачу настоящей функции жанра—возрождения культурного значения во фрагментируемом обществе Застоя.