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Reflective Laughter:  
Aspects of Humour in Russian Culture

EDITED BY LESLEY MILNE



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## TWO FACETS OF COMEDIC SPACE IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE OF THE MODERN PERIOD

*Holy foolishness and buffoonery*

IVAN ESAULOV

IN recent Russian literature there is a name that, as it were, symbolises comedic deviancy: 'V. Erofeev'. At the same time this name also offers a perfect illustration of the theme of this article. In fact it embodies two comedic poles of Russian literature both in its unity, and at the same time also by its splitting into two: the late Venechka Erofeev, noted author of the cult text *Moskva-Petushki*, was drawn towards holy foolishness in his work, while another writer, Viktor Erofeev, still alive, is fully enrolled in the ranks of the buffoons.

A particular interest in these two facets of comedic space in Russian literature can be seen in recent works by Western scholars: the German researcher Hans Günther raises the question of the place of holy foolishness in the works of Andrei Platonov,<sup>1</sup> while the British academic Lesley Milne writes about the tradition of buffoonery in the fiction of Mikhail Bulgakov.<sup>2</sup> In the framework of the current article I will attempt to compare these two types of cultural deviancy which appear in Russian literature. My work makes no claim to be an exhaustive examination of the literary (not to speak of the cultural) material involved; however, I will try to navigate some of the problems of comedic space in Russian culture.

Holy foolishness and buffoonery are close but in no way coinciding spheres of deviant behaviour. It is precisely by virtue of their deviancy that they can be seen as parodies of the dominant norms of one cultural system or another. Moreover, it is incorrect to think of holy foolishness and buffoonery as phenomena that are not systemic. It is rather the case that they are necessary subdominant forms of various types of cultures.

Buffoonery, as is well known, is not only an indispensable attribute of Carnival, but can also be seen as its quintessence (however carnival culture is interpreted – in

the spirit of Mikhail Bakhtin, Aron Gurevich or D.-R. Moser).<sup>3</sup> Comedic culture is the element for buffoonery, whether it is understood broadly in the Bakhtinian sense or narrowly as with Moser.

Holy foolishness is similarly part of comedic culture, although it is only 'comic' from the external point of view. People of course laugh at the holy fool, but only those who are dull-witted and do not understand the innermost meaning of holy foolishness.<sup>4</sup>

Dmitry Likhachev and Aleksandr Panchenko rightly note the distinctive functions of laughter. If the jester-buffoon can cure a vice through laughter, then the main task of the holy fool is the opposite – to provoke weeping for the laughably absurd. The semantics of holy foolishness, as Panchenko shows, consist of ascetic self-annihilation, and faked madness.<sup>5</sup> It is a voluntarily assumed act of Christian heroism.<sup>6</sup> This originates in a literal interpretation of the words of the Apostle Paul, 'We are all fools for Christ's sake' (I Corinthians 4.10). Moreover, it is precisely the life full of voluntary suffering which also gives the holy fool the right to violate hierarchies and parody all the fixed norms of earthly life as untruths. Boris Uspensky characterises the holy fool's way of life as 'anti-behaviour'. We should also note that this research, correctly identifying the didactic nature of the holy fool's 'anti-behaviour', even suggests that the meaning of parody itself is in principle not applicable to the characteristics of the holy fool.<sup>7</sup> It seems to us nevertheless that it is quite correct to look at holy foolishness as an aspect of parody – although, it is true, of a very specific type.

Mikhail Bakhtin, of course, wrote of the carnivalistic character of parody. 'Parodisation is the creation of a dethroning double, it is a 'world turned inside out'.<sup>8</sup> Within its limits parody is the profanation of *everything* sacred and everything serious; 'everything has its own parody, that is, its comedic aspect'.<sup>9</sup> In the abolition of hierarchies, the assumption of free and familiar contact (risqué gesticulations and indecent language), holy foolishness and buffoonery are allied by their eccentricity.

However, there is a clear difference between the two. The holy fool in no way repudiates and profanes everything, but only earthly hierarchies and the earthly world order in general. Hereby he can attain honour in the heavenly kingdom. He often does not make merriment, but is subjected to beatings and deprivations – and secretly prays for his persecutors.

In psychoanalytic terms, to all appearances, the buffoon can be understood through the prism of *sadism*. The *malicious*, often physically inferior fool is a typical figure, and it is no accident that by municipal law the fool was on the same footing as the executioner. This, of course, in no way excludes also the figure at the opposite end of the spectrum, the wise and noble buffoon.<sup>10</sup> The model of cultural behaviour of holy fool meanwhile gravitates more towards *masochism*, although

the holy fool suffers not for himself, but 'for the sake of Christ'. In other words, he relates his model of behaviour to another model, to another, sacred text, which he imitates, for all his *external insanity*. Again this does not exclude another type of holy fool, who in Russia has been given the name the 'pseudo-holy fool'. In both cases, looking at holy foolishness and buffoonery, we will see henceforth speak of *invariant* types and moreover how they in this way appear specifically in *Russian* comedic space and mass consciousness.<sup>11</sup> So if in relation to the earthly, sinful world we may speak of parodisation on the part of the holy fool, then in relation to the behaviour of Christ we may speak of a kind of sacred plagiarism, or mimesis.

It should also be noted that there are elements of *mystification* in the social conduct of the holy fool. As is well known, they often went about naked. For the majority of spectators this nakedness was a sign of sinful folly, base carnality and in general temptation.<sup>12</sup> This is the reason why holy fools were so often beaten and mocked. Demons are, for example, often depicted unclothed on icons. But behind this 'disguising', so to speak, as the devil, lies the very mystification. For the holy fool nakedness is not a mask (as it is in carnival activity for the buffoon), but a disdain for the flesh and for adornments; nakedness is a symbol of an open soul.<sup>13</sup> The holy fool and the buffoon's relations to the body are diametrically opposed.

However, the main difference consists in the *functionality* of the figure of the buffoon and the *substantiality* of the holy fool. If carnival, according to Bakhtin, 'celebrates the change itself, the very process of change, and not what is being changed',<sup>14</sup> and the buffoon therefore easily plays with different masks, then the holy fool in all his conduct confirms a higher substantiality – God's will. One could say that the buffoon plays (or is forced to play) according to quite regular *rules* fixed by one cultural paradigm or another. Therefore he is to a much greater extent dependent on the cultural systems he parodies than the holy fool, and is more specifically a participant in the system.<sup>15</sup> But the holy fool, being privy to the substantiality of a 'higher law' has the opportunity just to ignore the rules of the earthly world order; his is a life 'without rules'. To put it another way, the buffoon in all events is determined by the sphere of the *Law* – even when he parodies it – and cannot exceed the degree of deviancy defined by the Law. The holy fool on the other hand strives towards another value – *Grace*. In Russian culture the correlation between holy foolishness and buffoonery is inscribed in the invariant opposition of the Law and Grace.<sup>16</sup>

In Russia holy foolishness and buffoonery correspond to different periods in different ways. The emergence of holy foolishness took place from the fifteenth century to the first half of the seventeenth century. The Orthodox East had little experience of holy fools before this stage. In general it should be emphasised that in Byzantium the spread of holy foolishness was limited. The phenomenon was

likewise alien to the Roman Catholic world. It has been noted that Western travellers would write with great astonishment about the institution of holy foolishness in Russia.<sup>17</sup> Some of these holy fools, such as Mikhail Klopsko, Nikolai Kochanov, Vasily Blazhennyi and others, were subsequently canonised and accepted into the sainthood.

However, when all the holy fools allied themselves to the Old Believers at the time of the Russian Schism, the reforming patriarch Nikon attempted to eradicate holy foolishness as such, as a social institution, anticipating in this way future persecution by Peter the Great. Meanwhile buffoonery, as is well known, actively took root in the Russian cultural milieu in the Petrine period.

As a result of this process that began in Russian culture in the seventeenth century of encouraging one type of deviancy and restricting the other, two poles which differ in their cultural origins coexist: holy foolishness and buffoonery. We may thus speak of two types of parody and two variants of unofficial cultural behaviour, permeating every layer of Russian culture of the modern period. Of course, we have in mind not buffoonery and holy foolishness in their original sense, but precisely the different cultural traditions that actualise the 'memory' of these archetypes.

Examination of literary texts of the modern period from this angle can sometimes lead to unexpected results. For example, in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, we can note the concealed authorial linkages between the most repellent and most sublime characters, between Smerdiakov and the spiritual adviser Zosima, if only through the common thread of *stinking*. The corpse of Zosima unexpectedly begins to stink after his death, as Smerdiakov's soul does in his life. However, the fact that Smerdiakov was born to a holy fool is also significant. The image of the almost saintly Zosima and the stinking holy fool correspond within the limits of the same cultural system. Meanwhile Fedor Pavlovich Karamazov as a buffoon, but not a holy fool, intrudes into the system and becomes a cause of its fluctuation. Another, very interesting interpretation of this interrelation is suggested in the work of Lena Szilard.<sup>18</sup> Some of Dostoevsky's works (for example, *The Idiot*, *The Devils*) present a field of *battle* for holy fools and buffoons, and what is more, holy foolishness *always* has positive authorial connotations, while buffoonery has negative ones. We can say that, in *The Devils*, devilry simultaneously turns out also to be buffoonery, while in *The Idiot* in the very opening chapter the central character is defined as a holy fool.

The features of holy foolishness are revealed in Gogol's repudiation of his own literary activity and by his move to 'spiritual prose'. The limited receptivity to this prose is also significant: Gogol's book *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends* was accepted neither by the orthodox clergy nor by worldly critics. Characteristic *rejection* in print of Gogol's ideas was accompanied by equally

characteristic rumours of his *madness*. Precisely these features are frequently connected to holy fools.

We should also recall the similar repudiation of his artistic texts as 'lies' on the part of Lev Tolstoi. His reproaches to the evil into which the world had plunged, his appeals to non-resistance, his attempts to escape property and refusal of all royalties, his violation of church hierarchies (as he stated, 'for the sake of Christ'), and, finally, his flight from home: this is practically the canonical path of the holy fool.

In Soviet culture two variants of cultural tradition can also be traced. So-called 'Soviet satire' (for example the works of Ilia Ilf and Evgeny Petrov) is located almost entirely within the bounds of the buffoonish side of this tradition. *The Twelve Chairs* is constructed around the adventure-buffoonish 'disguising' of the hero, while each of his 'masks' has a purely functional purpose.

When Viktor Shklovsky at the end of the story 'Zoo, or Not-love Letters' wrote an 'application to the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the USSR' with a request to allow him to return from Berlin to Soviet Russia, this appeal had a purely buffoonish character. The letter concluded with the following request: 'Allow me into Russia with all my artless baggage: six shirts (three on me, three in the laundry), a pair of brown boots that have been cleaned with black polish by mistake, and old blue trousers which I have tried in vain to press into a crease'.<sup>19</sup> The 'artless' baggage, as the author called it, is the baggage of the clown-buffoon, whose 'art' lies precisely in the fact that in this letter the buffoonish enumeration of his luggage negotiates the terms of the agreement between the victorious government power and the defeated individual ('I raise my hands in surrender').<sup>20</sup> The main point is to establish a free and familiar contact with the lord and master. This is exactly the freedom of the buffoon.

At the same time, by no means all writers can comply in full, or to any extent, with buffoonish liberty of this sort. In my view, Mikhail Bulgakov is one such example. I consider Lesley Milne's analysis of the work of Mikhail Bulgakov in the context of the European tradition of buffoonery to be very competent and interesting. However, I would like, at the same time, to draw attention to the fact that the supreme 'jester' in *The Master and Margarita* is, of course, not Behemoth the cat, but precisely the 'great mocker' Woland, the devil, that is. In the enigmatic denouement of Bulgakov's novel the Master is not granted 'light', for the further possible reason that this denouement may derive from the Orthodox apocrypha 'The Descent of the Virgin Mary into Hell', where God the Son does not grant forgiveness to sinners – even after the tears and prayers of the Virgin herself, but grants them peace (*pokoï*) from Maundy Thursday to Pentecost.<sup>21</sup> It is characteristic that this is precisely an apocryphal text, that is to say a deviant work in relation to the fundamental corpus of Christian texts; but this is precisely the kind

of deviancy that, like holy foolishness, is indissolubly linked to the vector of Orthodox culture and – for all its deviancy – is defined by it.

What does it mean, staying within the boundaries of the Orthodox binary opposition of heaven and hell, to *forgive* sinners? To lead them out of hell into heaven, avoiding the Purgatory that does not exist in Orthodox theology. Woland's question, 'Why don't you take him [the Master – I.E.] with you into the light?'<sup>22</sup> bears witness precisely to the hypothetical possibility of full forgiveness, analogous to the light, which also in Bulgakov has ontological status. 'With you into the light' has the same meaning, of course, as heavenly bliss, if we recall the final return of Woland to the diametrically opposite spiritual space: 'the black Woland dived into the abyss'.<sup>23</sup> In general it is worth mentioning that the conception of the correlation of light and darkness not only for the author, but for Woland too, reveals a kinship with the Orthodox tradition: the dark does not have ontological status; it appears only as an absence of light; it is, in the literal sense, shadow.<sup>24</sup> Of course, 'the spirit of evil and sovereign of shadows' defends the shadows in his dispute with Matthew Levi ('What would the earth look like, if shadows disappeared from it?'),<sup>25</sup> but the main point is that he too appears to agree with his 'shadow' status.

The peace that Bulgakov's Master receives can of course be interpreted as the result of Western influence, as a kind of variety of Catholic Purgatory. But another interpretation is also possible, originating in the ancient Russian apocryphal tradition, to which I drew attention above. At least, the phrase that Bulgakov's Matthew Levi uses about the Master – 'He does not deserve light. He deserves peace' – can be interpreted not in a ternary system (as something halfway between light and dark), but as an artistic assimilation and working out in detail of that *peace* granted to the sinners in the Orthodox apocryphal tradition. The sinners who find themselves not in a 'halfway' position between Heaven and Hell, but still continuing to remain in Hell, outside the light, are granted peace as a deliverance from unbearable torment.

Therefore the request 'to take the Master with you and reward him with peace' is carried out precisely by the 'evil spirit' Woland. Deliverance from torment is something quite different from heavenly bliss. It would seem that in this projection the Master's lack of memory (as freedom from torment, but not as an ideal condition) becomes a little more understandable than in any other cultural tradition: 'The Master's anxious, needled memory began to fade.'<sup>26</sup> It differs from the Apocrypha in that it is not the Virgin Mary who intercedes for the sinners, but Matthew Levi, acting as a messenger of God. And he addresses his request to the 'evil spirit' precisely because the 'eternal home' of the Master and Margarita is completely within the confines of hell, in Woland's jurisdiction, so to speak. I do not wish to cast doubt on the connection of Bulgakov's work to the Western tradition of buffoonery; on the contrary, Lesley Milne has already convincingly

proved this. I merely wish to emphasise that by using this tradition, Bulgakov at the same time transforms it most powerfully. In any case, the way that buffoonery is so firmly attached to the infernal forces, the powers of evil, in Bulgakov's novel is very significant (whatever sympathies many readers may feel for 'Woland's retinue'). The buffoon Koroviev-Fagot is compelled to wear a buffoonish mask because 'he once made an unfortunate joke' about light and darkness.<sup>27</sup> Buffoonery thus enters the sphere of unfreedom, and the comic behaviour of the former knight 'with the gloomy and never smiling face' is prescribed by his infernal master and is in no way chosen by himself: 'And after that the knight *had to go on* joking a bit longer and more than he supposed.' [My italics. – I.E.] Woland's other jester, Behemoth, once outside the bounds of the earth, turns out to be 'a slim youth, a demon-page, the best jester the world has ever seen.' But this 'best jester' is none the less a demon. Furthermore in the narrative structure of the text he stands alongside the other demon, Azazello, who is directly defined as 'a killer-demon'. Thus the leitmotif of buffoonery in Bulgakov's novel becomes increasingly complex.

The line of holy foolishness in the comedic space of Soviet literature can be traced, for example, in Nikolai Kliuev's lyric poetry or in Andrei Platonov's work (a theme investigated in the article by Hans Günther mentioned above).

Lena Szilard in her work focuses the analysis on Dostoevsky's *The Devils* and Andrei Belyi's *Petersburg*. At the same time she also points to more general cultural idea-clusters. In particular she emphasises that 'the problem of retreat into holy foolishness as a problem of life appears again in new and acute forms at the very beginning of the twentieth century.'<sup>28</sup> Thus, for Andrei Bely, according to Szilard, 'the true path lay not in the enactment of holy foolishness in the space of real life, and not in its deployment as an artistic theme; the natural and necessary realisation of this form of behaviour lay in the area of *grammatical space*'.<sup>29</sup> [Lena Szilard's italics – I.E.] In my view, however, the question of holy foolishness (and not buffoonery) as the 'mental foundation of the narrative'<sup>30</sup> as concerns the prose of Andrei Belyi is not fully proven by Szilard. None the less, the attempt itself to delimit holy foolishness and buffoonery as cultural codes in concrete examples of artistic texts (sketched out only briefly in Szilard's work) does deserve every attention.

Even scholarly discourse can sometimes yield to this sort of systematisation. Thus not only Aleksei Losev's artistic prose but also some passages of his academic writings are distinctly 'holy foolish' in character. Let us take, for example, *The Dialectic of Myth* (*Dialektika mifa*, 1930).

Not only schoolchildren but all the respected scholars do not notice that their world of physics and astronomy is a pretty boring, sometimes repulsive and sometimes simply mad mirage, that same hole at the back of beyond that we can still find love and respect for all the same. But I, for my sins, can never get my mind round the idea that the earth rotates and orbits. How can that be happening? I've read the textbooks, at one point I

wanted to be an astronomer, I even married one. But I still can't convince myself that the earth is in motion and there is no sky. You read about pendulums of some sort or another and displacements from somewhere, parallaxes or whatever... I'm not convinced. It's downright thin as an explanation. We're talking here about the whole earth, and you're rocking some pendulums or other at me. But the main thing is, it's all so uncomfortable, so alien, nasty, cruel. There I was on the earth, under my native sky, hearing about a world 'that also is stablished, that it cannot be moved'<sup>31</sup> And suddenly none of it exists: not the earth, or the sky, or the 'cannot be moved'. You've been thrown out on your ear into some empty abyss, and sent on your way with a curse. 'That's your native land – spit on it and smear it out!' Reading astronomy textbooks I feel that someone has taken a stick to drive me out of my own home and is spitting in my face. And what have I done to deserve it?<sup>32</sup>

For the full picture, let it be noted that in this same passage of Losev's text, with its talk of holes, sticks, marrying astronomers, being spat at and, of course, the immobile and definitely not rotating planet Earth, there is a completely neutral academic statement: 'Newton's mechanics are built on the hypothesis of a homogeneous and infinite space.' I shall cite three other examples of Losev's holy foolishness, which have a particularly shocking ring against the background of his argument, which otherwise on the whole observes the academic conventions:

As tobacco is incense to Satan, so kerosene is sauce for the demons. Eau-de-cologne in general exists only for hairdressers and salesmen, and maybe for fashionable archdeacons. Only someone who has abandoned the true faith can pray with a stearin candle in his hands and smelling of eau-de-cologne. This is heresy in the full sense of the word, and such impostors should be anathematised.<sup>33</sup>

You will probably also say that the heart cannot sink into the boots. As far as I am concerned, then – alas – I have to say that my heart has sunk into my boots too many times for me to be able to treat this as a metaphor or a lie. I really do sometimes feel my heart in my boots. I even know what paths through the organism it takes to get there. If you don't understand this, there's nothing I can do about it. Not everyone is equally able to understand everything.<sup>34</sup>

That's enough of your lecherous language. You go on and on about 'subjectivism'... Such a refutation carries no weight at all. ... So what in nature is *objective* [Losev's italics. – I.E.]? Matter, movement, force, atoms and so forth? But why? Concepts of matter, movement, force and atoms change too, like all our subjective constructs. In different epochs they are completely different. So why do you not talk of subjectivism here, but when I start saying that nature is merry, mournful, sad, majestic etc., you suddenly accuse me of subjectivism? What happens here is that under all such 'objectivism' there lies your own doctrine, more precisely your metaphysical whims and all sorts of sympathies and antipathies. When someone is in love, they exalt the objectivity of the corresponding loved one. You are in love with an empty black hole, calling it 'the

universe', studying it in your universities and worshipping it in your heathen temples. You live off the cold lechery of an ossified universal space and maim yourselves in your self-built black prison of nihilistic natural sciences. But I love the sky, its blue blueness, deep deepness, my very own native sky. And wisdom itself, Sophia, the Divine Wisdom has the same blue blueness, deep deepness, very own nativeness. But what's the point of my talking to you?<sup>35</sup>

It is particularly interesting that immediately after this holy-foolish tirade against the 'cold lechery' of university 'objectivists' who are in love with the 'black empty hole', Losev argues his case by referring to the (in this case similar) position of Vasily Rosanov. Thus it would appear that we can talk of a purely scholarly 'support by reference to predecessors in the field'. However, from the very first words of this citation it becomes clear that the support is primarily by reference to the tradition of holy foolishness in Russian literature. For what lines from Rozanov does Losev find so congenial? They are these:

Does the sun care about the earth? Not from anything that we can see: it 'attracts it in direct proportion to the mass and in inverse proportion to the square of the distance'. Thus Copernicus's first answer about the sun and the earth was stupid. Simply stupid. He 'calculated'. But the 'count' when applied to a moral phenomenon is in my view simply stupid. It was this stupid answer by Copernicus to the moral question of the sun and the earth that began the vulgarisation of the planet and the voiding of the Heavens. 'Of course the earth does not have the sun's concern for it, but is only attracted according to the cube of the distance.' Makes you want to spit.<sup>36</sup>

It is significant that this purely holy-foolish 'Makes you want to spit' of Rozanov's is likewise quoted by Losev, and further more as a kind of last and decisive argument, in so far as what follows the 'spit' is a fully rational and logical philosophical disquisition beginning as a numbered section 2, and couched in completely neutral academic language: 'Secondly, in so far as history is a coming-into-being of facts that *are understood* [Losev's italics. – I.E.]...'<sup>37</sup>

It has to be emphasised that Aleksei Losev in all his works (especially those of the 1920s) was trying to lay the basis of a completely new and deeply serious model of the world, built on a Christian foundation and with links of inheritance to the Russian religious-philosophical thought of the twentieth century. However the form in which Losev's model of the world is affirmed, like the form of his polemic with the imposed 'materialist' ideology, follows precisely the holy-foolish tradition in Russian culture – if only because (although not only because!) another variant of opposition was not available to Losev. An open and 'serious', not comic, that is a purely academic form of polemic with Marxist-Leninist materialism was impossible in the USSR; the line of buffoonery was, however, unacceptable to Losev, who secretly became a monk in 1928. Losev's attitude to the carnival culture of the Renaissance (and likewise to Bakhtin's book on Rabelais) was unequivocally

negative. In order to appreciate this one only has to leaf through his monograph, *Renaissance Aesthetics (Estetika Vozrozhdeniia)*.

It is possible to single out a special 'third' line, in which one can see the combination (contamination) of holy foolishness and buffoonery. An interesting example of such a combination is Maksimilian Voloshin's collection of poems *The Deaf-mute Demons*, published in 1919.<sup>38</sup>

Three parts of the collection ('The Angel of Retribution', 'The Torches of Paris' and 'The Paths of Russia') are deliberately arranged by the author in that precise sequence. The author's position can be discerned in this construction: by moving away from the contemporary Russian catastrophe back to the time of the French Revolution, Voloshin demonstrates typological features of revolutionary violence that have clear demonic attributes, and the 'return' to Russia in the third part, creating the effect of an artistic cycle, is accompanied by a clear historical retrospection.

The 'voices' of the rebellious False Dmitri ('Dmitri the Emperor'), Stepan Razin ('Stenka's Judgement'), and the archpriest Avvakum (in the poem of the same name in the third part) do not appear and disappear episodically, but are the compositional elements of the whole cycle's lyric plot. These are the 'voices' of the executed sufferers, each of whom has his own *truth*, and their fates, according to Voloshin, are mysteriously linked with the fate of Russia.

Therefore the significance of the heroes' 'voices' cannot be reduced simply to one or other compositional function isolated within the framework of each separate poem. Thus the words of the archpriest Avvakum 'Satan asked God to give him bright Russia' (52) sound not only in the 'Avvakum' text of the collection's third part but also appear as an epigraph to the first part of *The Deaf-mute Demons*. One should note also the final identification by Voloshin's Avvakum of his true native land as the heavenly Jerusalem and not the earthly Russia. The hero experiences execution as return: 'I am to return home. . . Oh my dearest Christ! Back to you in heavenly Jerusalem!' (54)

All three parts are united by a bloody carnival ambivalence, very consonant with Aleksandr Blok's image of the universal conflagration in blood, demanding in addition God's blessing on this. The artistic world of the collection is saturated with phantasmagorical proximities of the demonic and divine, the profane and the sacral. Here not only are the demons the servants of God, without knowing it, and Satan in his turn can ask God to give him 'bright Russia', but also the martyr archpriest Avvakum, wishing to 'cast off' in his fiery boat for the heavenly Jerusalem, does not wait for the execution. He himself uses a candle to light the wattle of the hut in which he has been placed by his persecutors and thus, strictly speaking, commits suicide.

The severed head of Madame de Lamballe? whose perspective sets the dom-

inant point of view in the text that opens the middle part of the collection, calls herself 'the people's herald' when it is impaled by that same 'people' on a pike. Raised above the crowd on the pike, her head seems to dance 'at a ball in Versailles', while the 'bacchanalia' of the mob has a defiant sacral subtext: the bloody 'madness' of the people is called 'holy' (20) – and by their victim herself, as if satisfied with this, her last, 'dance'.

However the artistic logic of this particular type of ambivalence is explained also by another, holy-foolish, subtext which is immanent in Russian culture. According to this, sinful Russia, in order to be resurrected in the status of Holy Rus', has necessarily to pass through sufferings and – in the extreme case – through complete destruction, which is understood by no means metaphorically. Resurrection is, alas, impossible without previous death. This is perhaps the source of Voloshin's typically holy-foolish desire for sufferings and humiliations: 'I love you [Russia – I.E.] defeated, / Desecrated and in the dust' (10); 'Send down fire, plague and scourge upon us, / From the Germans of the west and the Mongols of the east'; 'You will become a barren and trampled cornfield' (36). There is also the thirst for martyrdom, which for Voloshin has not only an ambivalent but also a clearly Christ-centric character. Avvakum is grateful to the Devil for 'martyr's blood' – 'You have thought well, Devil, / And we gladly consent: / To suffer sufferings for the sake of Christ' (53). Here of course it is possible to see only a formulaic and abstract mythopoetic ambivalence of Good and Evil. However I would like to stress that this desire for 'sufferings for the sake of Christ' and this at first sight insane gratitude to the Devil for humiliation and spilt blood reflects Voloshin's own holy-foolish vision of the world.

Resurrection is by no means a second Birth; it is not being born again. It is, on the contrary, salvation through passage into another (spiritual) dimension, into a qualitatively different realm. Therefore in Orthodox Russia the festival of Christ's Resurrection, Easter, was always experienced as the main church festival, not only in religious but also in cultural terms. Christmas, by contrast, was always celebrated much more modestly, in comparison with the West. Different concepts of humankind show through here. In one case the main event of human life is Birth. In the other, it is its future Resurrection.<sup>39</sup> In the example from Voloshin cited above, the move into another dimension (carrying with it an extremity of tension) is presented in holy-foolish terms: 'we are, you see, monsters for the sake of Christ' (51). It is precisely holy foolishness that Voloshin's Avvakum can use to justify the suicidal (self-willed) accelerated departure of his fiery 'boat', in the hope of a swift Resurrection.

In the poem that opens the third part of the collection and bears the characteristic title 'Holy Rus'', holy foolishness is, in the first place, directly equated to sainthood and, secondly, as represented by Voloshin, determines not just



individual representatives (the holy fools themselves), but also the whole country in its entirety:

Who am I to dare to cast a stone at you?  
 Shall I cool the tempestuous flame of Holy Week?  
 Shall I not bow my face down to you in the mud,  
 Blessing the track of your bare foot,  
 You, homeless, carousing, inebriated  
 Rus', holy-foolish in Christ! (26)

The other side of the moral 'rebellion' of Voloshin's Avvakum and the artistic 'mutiny' of the author is the awareness of the metaphysical gap between the given features of the earthly here-and-now (changing 'masks' so easily that it is almost impossible to discern the true 'face') and the Divine providence that guides it. For Voloshin, in brief, the relationship between Holy Rus' and the real Russia is conceived not as a relationship of the ideal and its imperfect embodiment, but as something of a binary opposition.<sup>40</sup> For ideal, or Holy, Rus', to triumph and *reveal herself* (be resurrected), the logic of this position necessitates the destruction of the real Russia. But not only is there is no Resurrection without death, there is also no Resurrection without firm faith in the real possibility of this miracle. Faith in its turn is inconceivable without a strict and ontologically serious division between the saintly and the sinful. In the opposite case, the 'will to death' – 'Russia is finished' (13), 'Smoulder to ashes, Russia' (29) – becomes a carnival-buffoonish delusion, as Voloshin seems to understand when he writes 'the devilish round dance holds sway' (12).

Of course in the period when totalitarianism was coming into being, the deviancy of buffoonery and holy foolishness took on particular connotations. Both carnival buffoonery and serious-comic holy foolishness parodied the nature of the official Soviet world-order. (Of course, as is 'customary' for buffoons and holy fools, they often employed the clichés and stereotypes of the dominant culture, for example the use of Marxist terminology not only by writers but also by the Formalist critics, and by Losev, and Bakhtin.) But in the present chapter I wanted to emphasise that in some cases the parody has buffoonish attributes in its relationship to the authorities, in others it bears characteristics of holy-foolishness, and in yet others we are dealing with contamination of these two categories.

The present article only outlines the theoretical possibilities of such a demarcation, which are illustrated by almost arbitrarily chosen literary material. A systematic description of the interrelationships between holy foolishness and buffoonery in Russian literature of the last three centuries is the task of a separate large study.

*Translated by Sarah Young and Lesley Milne*

## JOKERS, ROGUES AND INNOCENTS

*Types of comic hero and author from Bulgakov to Pelevin*

LESLEY MILNE

THE three lead words in the title of this essay are not so easy to translate directly into words of Russian origin. They present a variant on Bakhtin's triad of 'the worldwide images of the rogue, the clown and fool' (*plut, shut, durak* in the Russian original).<sup>1</sup> The variant of joker, rogue and innocent is, however, filtered through the medium of English language and culture. In his contribution to the present volume Ivan Esaulov, while accepting a general European context within which Russian literature can be analysed, stresses that there are also concepts that are specifically Russian, such as the tradition of the 'holy fool'. In turn, while fully accepting the need for sensitivity to what is 'native', we could argue that it is often illuminating to approach the literature of another culture 'from outside', which raises the whole question of the role of the 'foreign specialist' in literary scholarship. As foreigners we must concede that we do inevitably import experience from our own native cultural traditions into our examination of the literatures of other countries. Furthermore, our own native languages act as a kind of grid through which we perceive the world and categorise and conceptualise different phenomena. Often, however, this conceptual grid can successfully be translated into the foreign culture that is the object of study.<sup>2</sup>

In the triad of 'joker', 'rogue' and 'innocent', only 'the rogue' has a full equivalent in native Russian: *plut*. The rogue is indeed a universal character in both Eastern and Western European culture, with a literary genealogy that reaches back to antiquity and marked its first modern European flowering in the sixteenth century with the Spanish picaresque novel. In subsequent centuries the picaresque genre, based on the adventures of the rogue (*picaro*) was disseminated throughout European literatures, establishing itself firmly in each tradition. In Russian there is a