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## People in Threes Going Up in Smoke and Other Triplcities in Russian Literature and Culture

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“I knew she wasn’t Russian when she said she told her husband to honk the car horn four times as a signal that he had arrived outside the studio. If she were really a Russian, she would have told her husband to honk three times.”

-- Dr. Roy Hanu Hart<sup>1</sup>

“Is there a limited number of ‘letters’ in the language of quantum electrodynamics that can be combined to form ‘words’ and ‘phrases’ that describe nearly every phenomenon of nature? The answer is yes: the number is three.”

-- Richard Feynman<sup>2</sup>

“What is the artist if he is not a triple thinker?”

-- Gustave Flaubert<sup>3</sup>

**I**n the article, “Triplcity and Textual Iconicity: Russian Literature Through a Triangular Prism,” I advance a theory of narrative efficiency based on the capacity of the human mind for processing information to explain the inordinate pervasivity of triplcity in Russian language and culture.<sup>4</sup> I argue that the Russian culture is particularly susceptible to seeing things in threes, to tricategorization, to tertianity of all kinds, and that Russian forms of narration, both spoken and written, are particularly rife with triplcity. This goes well beyond the triplcity inherent in most cultures—the philosophical religious and physiological/psychoanalytic triads (mind, body, spirit; father, son, holy spirit; space, time, change; hell, earth, heaven; id, ego, superego; old brain, mid brain, outer cortex), the physical/electrodynamic/genetic triads (width, depth, height; gravity, time, mass/energy; combinatorial triplets of nucleotides), and semiotic system triads (icon, index, symbol; perception (stimulus), analysis, response)—to more characteristically Slavic/Russian aspects of cultural triplcity. I am trying to demonstrate the special *intensity* of triplcity in Russian culture, the special *density* of it in Russian spoken and written narration. Characteristic Russian aspects include the tripartite Russian personal identification

by name (first name, patronymic, last name). The last name differentiates one's membership in a family (clan, or extended Slavic "zadruga"), distinct from other family units; the patronymic (paternalistically based on the father's first name) gives generational membership within the family and differentiates one and one's siblings from cousins; and the first name (and its gradations) provides a unique identity (and possible characterization) marker within the family unit. Other cultures do not share this tertiary system of personal naming. There is also an impressively rife tertiariness of Russian grammatical categorization, a reflection of the structure of Russian thought:

there are (or were) three numbers (singular, dual, plural), tenses (past, present, future), voices (active, middle, passive), degrees of comparison (simple, comparative, superlative), moods (indicative, subjunctive, injunctive), aspects (durative, iterative, perfective), sentence types (declarative, interrogative, exhortative), genders (feminine, masculine, neuter), persons (first, second, third)...declensional types (masculine/neuter, feminine I, feminine II), conjugational stress patterns (stem, desinence, switching). Surely the dominance of triplicity in grammatical categorization is not merely fortuitous. It is a consequence of the way [Russians] think. (Croft, "Triplicity" 251)<sup>5</sup>

Examples of triplicity in Russian literature, and in the forms of oral narration which preceded literature, are especially easy to find. Vladimir Propp, the Russian formalist literary critic who gave us the extremely structured *Morphology of the Folktale*, devotes an entire section of his seminal work to "trebling" and how it

may occur among individual details of an attributive nature (the three heads of a dragon), as well as among individual functions, pairs of functions (pursuit-rescue), groups of functions, and entire moves. Repetition may appear as a uniform distribution (three tasks, three years' service), as an accumulation (the third task is the most difficult, the third battle the worst), or may twice produce negative results before the third, successful, outcome. (Propp 74)

In *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, psychologist Bruno Bettelheim writes that "the number three in fairy tales often seems to refer to what in psychoanalysis is viewed as the three aspects of the mind: id, ego, and superego" (102). The tales, in Bettelheim's view, are designed to parallel the struggle of these three forces within the developing personality of the young listener. In the tale, the id's unconscious energy seeks release: a primary drive (old-brain or limbic system, physiologically) must be satisfied. Human conflicts result. The tale then introduces elements which represent the ego's (mid-brain, physiologically) attempts to satisfy the id's demands within the requirements of conscious external reality. These attempts, of course, are doomed to failure without the role of the superego (the cerebral cortex, physiologically), which introduces a sense of moral right and

wrong and the uniquely human ability to sacrifice self-interest for the sake of others. The fairytale protagonist, the hero, who eventually succeeds and triumphs in the conflict, is the one who, in contradistinction to others, acts on the level of the superego. This is the very purpose of the fairy tale—to teach the young listener the value of (1) self-sacrificing actions, (2) the value of an over-riding morality, and (3) the appropriate sense of right and wrong.<sup>6</sup>

When Russia developed literacy and then literature, the narrative techniques which had evolved as parts of the oral genres (e.g., the *byliny* and the *skazki*) were carried over into textual structures. Triplicity, accordingly, became an integral part of the written story. In the twelfth-century epic *Lay of Igor's Campaign*, the upstart Prince Igor and his three relative princes—Vsevolod, Oleg, and Sviatoslav—encounter and, unfortunately, disregard a bad omen, an eclipse of the sun which occurs three days into their journey of conquest. Sergei Zenkovsky analyzes this very complex early literary work by pointing out:

Three distinct structural planes may be discerned in the *Lay*. The first concerns the destiny of Prince Igor, his campaign, defeat, and escape from the Kumans. This plane, the narrative core of the work, is somewhat clouded by invocations to the late bard, Boyan, reminiscences of past glory, and the allusive atmosphere of foreboding. The second plane consists of portents and lamentations over the outcome of the campaign and Russia's fate, such as the dream of Prince Sviatoslav of Kiev and the lament of Yaroslavna, the wife of Igor. The final plane consists of the author's admonition to the princes to unite, and his censure of their fighting. (168)

We can see here also that Russian critic Zenkovsky's literary analysis is as fraught with triplicity as the literary subject itself: his perception of "[1] three [2] distinct [3] structural planes"; Prince Igor's "[1] campaign, [2] defeat, and [3] escape"; the "invocations to [1] the late bard, Boyan, [2] reminiscences of past glory, and [3] the allusive atmosphere of foreboding." Indeed this kind of meta-triplicity, the product of a subliminal eisegesis or mimesis (if not overtly deliberate as abiding by a widespread "rhetorical convention" of supporting every theme of a thesis with three examples or points of support), is not rare in Russian literary criticism. Consider Roman Osipovich Jakobson's excursus on an ancient Russian treatise titled *The Colloquy on Teaching Letters*. This work is thoroughly infused with triplicity by an unknown author, likely a monk, trying to make a correlation between the word's relationship with the human soul and human reason and the Son's relationship with God the Father and the Holy Spirit—"a polemic," Jakobson explains, "against the anti-trinitarian sects of the fifteenth century." But Jakobson begins his "Acknowledgements and Dedication" of this section with the following sentence, composed

of three triads of differing (one successive, one elaborative, one specificative, including, like a fairy tale, two negative rejections before the final positive acceptance) tri-elemental increments:

The Moscow Linguistic School [a tripartite name], [1] faithful to the [2] precepts of its [3] founder, Filipp Fedorovich Fortunatov [a tripartite name], has been destined to [1] elucidate, [2] substantiate, and [3] develop his view that language is [1] not a mere “external cover in regard to the phenomena of thought” and [2] not only a “means for the expression of ready-made ideas,” but [3] first and foremost it is “an implement for thinking.” (*Selected Writings II* 365)<sup>7</sup>

Was Jakobson influenced to express this triplicity by simple rhetorical convention? Was it because of the influence of the textually proximate triplistic work he was analyzing? Or was it because he, a supreme Russian scholar with the narrative goal of edification, was subject to the same forces governing the narrative techniques of the author he studied? The answer is probably all *three*.

In his preface to the second edition of his verse translation into English of Alexander Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*, Walter Arndt writes that the great “novel-in-verse” is

concerned, as [Vladimir] Nabokov has put it, with the “afflictions, affections, and fortunes of three young men—Onegin, the bitter lean fop; Lensky, the temperamental minor poet; and Pushkin, their friend—and of three young ladies—Tatyana, Olga, and Pushkin’s muse”.... There are three settings (the country estates, Moscow, St. Petersburg)...and the author plays a triple role—that of narrator, or an acquaintance of the hero, and of a character in the poem.<sup>8</sup>

One might well point out here also that Vladimir Nabokov’s characterization of the “afflictions, affections, and fortunes” of a “bitter lean fop” and a “temperamental minor poet” is concomitantly rife with the same triplicity it describes. Surely it is more than merely curious that criticism often mirrors its object. It’s simply that the narrative goal of literature and the narrative goal of criticism of literature is the same: maximal message impact on the reader. So it is not surprising that both should share triplicity as a structural aspect.<sup>9</sup>

There is a saying in the Russian culture that some stories are good enough “to tell three times” (“skazka/istoriia...dostoina tri raza skazyvat”). But it’s three times and three times only—twice is not enough and four times exhausts the story and makes it trite, reflecting poorly on the story-teller. This may be a superstition, like “spitting three times” (“T’fu-T’fu-T’fu”) over the left shoulder to remove the hex or jinx of the evil eye (“durnoi glaz”). But it’s evident in Russian literature as well as in oral story telling. If one surveys the collected works of the great poet, Mikhail Lermontov, for example, one finds that he decided to give the title “Molitva” (“Prayer”) to precisely three of his poems: “Do not blame me, Almighty” (1829), “I, Mother of God, am

now in prayer" (1837), and "In difficult times of life" (1839).<sup>10</sup> Three times, and three times only, did Lermontov give this very title to his poems on religious aspects of his life. There are also three poems titled "Zvezda" ("Star"), three poems with "Smert'" ("Death") in the title, and three poems with "Poet" in the title. This could be considered coincidental, but I don't think so. I think that titling is an important aspect of narration and, as such, is also subject to the triadic doctrine of narrative efficiency. Indeed I would suggest a new line of bibliometrics wherein the oeuvre of other great Russian literati is scanned for such titular triples.

Nikolai Gogol is an author whose work is rife with triplicity. In his *Dead Souls* he likens Russia to a "Troika, winged troika...that none can overtake" (Nabokov 112-113).<sup>11</sup> He declares that "Lo, the troika has [1] wings, [2] wings, [3] wings" and later "[1] steeds, [2] steeds, [3] and more steeds." Gleb Zhekulin in his article "Rereading Gogol's 'Viy'" describes Gogol's "favourite...the fundamental device of triplication":

Three students set out on their journey: Tiberii Gorobets, Khoma Brut, and Khaliava; for three nights Khoma reads in the church—these are the visible, obvious instances of triplication, but there are other, less noticeable instances: on his return to Kiev after his witch-ride, Khoma passed...some three times through the market; the church in which the body of the *pannochka-ved'ma* was lying had three conical cupolas; the old witch approaches Khoma in the shed three times before she catches him; when Mikita's experiences with the witch are mentioned, three men want to tell the story; only three of the sotnik's servants are known to us by their names, Evtukh, Dorosh, and Spirid; and, at the very end of the story, Khaliava, drinking his third tankard, pronounces a eulogy of Khoma: "He was a splendid man, was Khoma! A magnificent man! And he was ruined for nothing." (302)<sup>12</sup>

Zhekulin also points out that Gogol's syntax too "often falls into patterns of three. Thus the young widow who gives shelter to Khoma on his return to Kiev used to sell 'ribbons, rifle-shot and wheels'; the little church was 'wooden, blackened, and carpeted with green moss.'" Further, Zhekulin points out three successive permutations of the same sentence, paragraphs consisting of "three sentences of similar syntactical construction," and sentences composed of "three subordinate clauses." He clearly demonstrates that the thematic triplicity, evident in the plot and in the opposition of the characters, is rendered through triads of sentences, many of tertiary syntactical structure, and with triple strings of adjectives. Structure in support of content is nowhere more emphatic than with triplicity (Zhekulin 303).

By the 1830s Nikolai Gogol had become aware of a particular "story worth telling three times": the story of spontaneous human combustion. Stories of spontaneous human combustion had entered the literature of the romantic period from sources in France and Italy. The concept exists in many cultures. Even in Hawaiian lore,

we learn that the early 19th-century King Kamehameha's fear of Kaua'i's tributary King Kaumuali'i was based on Kaumuali'i's knowledge of an incantation called the "Aneekapuahi" which, if uttered in an adversary's presence, would cause that adversary's spontaneous incineration (Joesting 58). Early American literature includes an episode of it. Charles Brockden Brown's popular Gothic romance, *Wieland; or the Transformation* (1798) includes an episode of spontaneous human combustion, and later descriptions appear in Herman Melville's *Redburn* and Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* (Croft, "Spontaneous" 335-347). In Gogol's particular view, spontaneous human combustion was part of the malicious workings of the Devil. He decided to include an episode of it in his story "St. John's Eve" from the collection *Village Evenings Near Dikanka* (1831-32). The character "Petro the orphan" marries the beautiful Pidorka after complying with a demand by the Demon Basavriuk and a witch helper to kill Pidorka's younger brother Ivas in order to acquire a fortune in gold coins. But Ivas reappears when the witch is summoned by Pidorka to cure Petro's dejection of forgetfulness about his heinous act. When Petro sees the witch, he

let out a shriek of laughter that struck fear into Pidorka's heart. "I've remembered! I've remembered!" he shouted with uncanny glee, and seizing hold of an axe, swung it with all his might at the old woman. The axe sank two inches into the oak door. The old woman disappeared into thin air and a child of about seven, clad in a white shirt, with his head covered by a sheet, suddenly appeared in the middle of the room ...the sheet dropped from his head.

"Ivas!" cried Pidorka and rushed across to the boy; but the vision was enveloped from head to foot in blood and flooded the hut with a red light.... In terror she ran out of the hut; but then, recovering her senses somewhat, she turned back to help the boy; in vain! The door had slammed shut so hard behind her that she couldn't open it. People came running up; they pounded on the door, and then broke it down, but there wasn't a soul inside. The entire hut was full of smoke, and in the middle, where Petro had stood, lay a heap of ashes, still giving off wisps of smoke. They rushed to the bags of gold—but instead of coins they only contained broken shards of pottery. Their eyes popping from their heads and their mouths agape, the Cossacks stood rooted to the spot, afraid even to twitch their moustaches. (48-49)

A paragraph later, Gogol's narrator explains, "that wasn't the end of the matter. The very same day that the Devil took Petro to himself, Basavriuk reappeared in the village...he was none other than Satan himself, and had taken human form in order to get his hands on hidden treasure" (49).

"St. John's Eve" is a powerfully scary story, and it garnered for Gogol his early reputation as a teller of supernatural tales. The episode of spontaneous human combustion was an important aspect of his narration, infusing the story with a terrifying manifestation of the "Devil's will." But Gogol was not done with the

story of spontaneous human combustion. He included another episode of it into the story “Vii” from the *Mirgorod* collection (1835, rewritten in 1842). This is the same story treated above for its triplicity. In “Vii,” the seminarian Khoma Brut is asked to pray over the body of the deceased daughter of a local Cossack commander. But this daughter was, according to the three Cossacks—Evtukh, Dorosh, and Spirid—a witch (actually a “gentleman’s daughter-witch” or “pannochka-ved’ma”), as evidenced by their story of what happened to Mikita the Dog-keeper when he dallied with her.

Once her ladyship came to the stables where he was grooming a horse. Come here, Mikita, she says, let me put my foot on your shoulder. And—fool that he is—he obliges: don’t stop at that, he says, get right up on my back. The mistress raised her foot and the moment he saw her naked, white leg he was completely bamboozled. The silly dolt bent down and, grabbing hold of her naked legs with his two hands, galloped away like a horse across the field, and he hadn’t a notion afterwards where they went; only he came home more dead than alive, and from that day on he was withered as a dead stick; then one fine day they went to the stables and what do they find?—a heap of ashes and an empty bucket: he’d burst into flames, and burnt to a cinder. But you ask anyone, there wasn’t a better dog-keeper anywhere in the world. (391)<sup>13</sup>

Later it is the gentleman’s daughter-witch (“pannochka-ved’ma”) who, while Khoma is praying for her soul, rises up from her coffin to summon “Vii,” the demonic monster with eyelids drooping to the ground who steals Khoma’s soul through eye contact when his gnome minions lift his eyelids to expose his eyes. Again, the episode of spontaneous human combustion is associated with the work of the Devil.

Gogol’s third and last telling of the story of spontaneous human combustion is found in his great novel, *Dead Souls* (Part I, 1842). His con-man Chichikov is trying to purchase from a host of greedy and incompetent landowners (the real “Dead Souls”) the legal titles to the landowners’ serfs or “souls” who have died since the last census. He intends to use these titles as collateral to obtain a large bank loan and then default on the loan and abscond with the money. But the landowners he encounters are reluctant to sell him the titles to their dead serfs, even though the sale would lessen their tax burden. Chichikov asks one of these landowners, Mrs. Korobochka, “Have any of your serfs died?” Her answer shows her to be more concerned with her serfs’ services than with their lives:

Oh, my good friend, eighteen of them! . . . And they were all such nice people, such good workers. True, since then some new ones have been born, but what’s the good of that; they’re all so young and yet the tax assessor came and demanded that I pay so much per soul. So the people are dead and I have to pay for them as

if they were alive. Last week my blacksmith was burned to death. He was such a good blacksmith and a quite skilled locksmith as well.

Chichikov asks, “Why, did you have a fire?” And Mrs. Korobochka continues:

God has spared me that calamity—a fire would have been even worse. No, he burned all by himself, the blacksmith. Something caught fire inside him. He had too much to drink, and there was a blue flame escaping from him, and he kept smoldering and smoldering and then went all black like charcoal—and yet what a good blacksmith he used to be! And now I can’t go driving—no one to shoe the horses. (59-60)

So, Nikolai Gogol thrice and only thrice tells the tale of spontaneous human combustion in his works. Likely, he considered it a most intense story to tell once, still powerful to tell twice, and even thrice: but, after that, no more. The story’s narrative utility was, in his mind, exhausted.

Fyodor Dostoevsky’s works are replete with triplicity. In line with the titular triples in the works by Lermontov given above, I note that Dostoevsky has three works with titles including the word “zapiski” (“notes”): *Zapiski iz mertvogo doma* (*Notes from the House of the Dead*, 1862); *Zimnie zapiski o letnikh vpechatleniyakh* (*Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, 1863); and *Zapiski iz podpol’ia* (*Notes from the Underground*, 1864), published in three successive years.<sup>14</sup> His *Notes from the Underground* begins with these three famous sentences: “Ia chelovek bol’ noi. Ia zloi chelovek. Neprivlekatel’nyi ia chelovek.” Each of these three sentences is composed of three words and each sentence presents these words in three different orders: 1) subject, predicate noun, adjective; 2) subject, adjective, predicate noun; and 3) adjective, subject, predicate noun. In his “A Brief Note on the Translation,” translator Michael Katz, who states right off that “of all the works of nineteenth-century Russian literature I have translated, without doubt Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* remains the most challenging,” most adeptly relates the peculiar ordering of the words in these first three sentences to the characterization of the work’s fictional narrator and to the work’s dominant themes: individuality, humanity, and the effects of personal character. After presenting ten previous translations of these three sentences into English, Katz translates them as “I am a sick man. I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man.”

Triplicity in Dostoevsky’s works is well shown in William Woodin Rowe’s article, “*Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*: Some Comparative Observations.” This article details for five pages the amazing “scope of triplicity” in both these Dostoevsky novels. Here is a sample of Rowe’s description of the plots:

Perhaps most fatefully of all, triplicity informs the descriptions of murder in both novels. At his “third meeting” with Ivan, Smerdyakov describes the murder in



*The Brothers Karamazov*. He hit Fyodor Pavlovich three times, he claims, with a paperweight weighing about three pounds. The third blow broke the latter's skull and he collapsed, whereupon Smerdyakov took the 3000 rubles from an envelope closed by "three large red wax seals."

Raskolnikov [in *Crime and Punishment*], who has pawned with Alyona a ring "with three red stones," gains entrance in response to his "third" ring at his third visit to Alyona's, after which he hits her three times (hoping to steal 3000 rubles). As with Smerdyakov, his third and last blow breaks the skull. Dostoevsky seems intrigued by this "third-of-three death patterning": in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Father Ferapont claims to have killed a devil by making the sign of the cross three times; in *Crime and Punishment*... Svidrigailov kills himself with the third shot of a three-shot pistol. (Rowe, "Crime" 338-339)<sup>15</sup>

In his earlier article, "Dostoevskian Patterned Antimony and Its Function in *Crime and Punishment*," Rowe states that Dostoevsky "creates antimonic effects by means of a three-stage formulation which may be likened to the swinging of a pendulum from one side to the other and then at least partially back" (287). He cites Leonid Grossman's work, "Dostoevskii-Khudozhnik" ("Dostoevsky the Artist"), to establish the triplistic nature of this patterning in other works of Dostoevsky.

Describing what he deems the main characteristic of Dostoevsky's "structural system," Leonid Grossman notes a tendency in the novels to reveal a tragic situation gradually "in three meetings or three conversations of the heroes." This conduces, he observes, to a careful thematic development "in a little trilogy," a "concise three-act drama" with increasing (1) suspense, (2) horror, and (3) revelations. (Rowe, "Crime" 341)

An example of this tripartite Dostoevskian antimony (i.e. the "pendulum swinging from one side to the other and then at least partially back") is to be found in *Crime and Punishment* where the detective Porfirii Petrovich looks at the murderer Raskol'nikov and "with a kind of obvious mockery" screws up his eyes "as if winking at him." Here, "both reader and Raskol'nikov are led to believe that Porfirii (1) seemed to wink, (2) may not have, and (3) probably did" wink, engendering in Raskol'nikov the conclusion that Porfirii is "(1) wrong, (2) right, [or] (3) slightly wrong" (Rowe, "Dostoevskian" 290).

This tripartite antimony is thematically evident in Dostoevsky's novel, *Besy* (*Demons*, 1871-72), a "novel in three parts." In her article, "The Absence of Historical Time in Dostoevsky's *Besy*," Dawn Seckler mentions parallel triplistic themes in Dostoevsky's work: life, death, and resurrection (Christ-like behavior of his characters); crime, confession, redemption; paradise, being cast out of paradise, return to a partial paradise. In *Besy*, Seckler writes, Dostoevsky's main character Stavrogin "becomes involved with three of the novel's female characters—Liza Nikolaevna,

Daria Pavlovna, and Maria Timofeevna.” In the chapters “Night” and “Night (continued),” Dostoevsky describes Stavrogin’s “trek from his home [1] to Kirillov’s, then [2] to Shatov’s, along Bogoiavlenskaia Street, and [3] to the Lebiadkins” and she comments:

That there are three, and not two or four, references to the dark and rainy weather is significant. Dostoevsky trebles elements of both description and action: just as references to the conditions outside are made three times in these two chapters, Stavrogin comes into contact with Fed’ka the convict three times. The first, figurative, “meeting” occurs when Petr Verkhovenskiï mentions Fed’ka’s presence in the town to Stavrogin. The second and third meetings are literal: Stavrogin meets Fed’ka along Bogoiavlenskaia Street on his way to and from the Lebiadkins’, meets Fed’ka in exactly the same spot where they had previously parted. Like the rain and the darkness, Fed’ka’s presence is sustained in timelessness while Stavrogin engages in other business. When, after each of the three visits, Stavrogin re-enters the darkness outside, he also enters a world where nothing has changed. (Seckler 62)<sup>16</sup>

When Leo Tolstoy was a young man serving in the Russian army during the Crimean War, he wrote his depiction of military life in his *Sevastopol Sketches* (a trilogy, 1855). At the end of “Sevastopol in May,” he wrote a description of his life’s hero, truth, which has been mentioned by his biographers and critics as the best single synopsis of his life’s work:

The hero of my tale, [1] whom I love with all the powers of my soul, [2] whom I have tried to depict in all of its beauty, [3] and who always [1] was, [2] is, [3] and will be beautiful—is truth. (116)<sup>17</sup>

This characterization of his “hero” is dense with triplicity, as are many of Tolstoy’s works. The most obvious of these are the version of “The Three Bears” he wrote in order to help in his project to educate his peasants and his didactic tale, “The Three Old Men” (1886), meant to edify a society subject to a church hierarchy he found distasteful. In this story, Tolstoy’s Archbishop, a passenger on a ship in the cold White Sea, encounters three old men whom he hears described by three different sources as being “holy men.” One of these sources is referred to in three different ways (“little muzhik,” “peasant,” and “fisherman”). The Archbishop inconveniences the ship’s company by demanding that he be taken to the island where these old men live. There, he meets the simple old men and asks them how they pray. They answer naïvely that they pray to God by saying: “Three are Ye. Three are we. Have Ye mercy upon us.” The Archbishop then spends all day teaching the old men the Lord’s Prayer, and leaves their remote island satisfied that he has well carried out God’s will. But soon a light on the horizon appears, causing the Archbishop to ask the helmsman in triplistic fashion what it might be “a boat, or not a boat; a bird, or not a bird; a fish, or not a fish?” The light, in course, materializes as the

three old men, who have levitated themselves into the air and soared out over the sea in pursuit of the ship so as to ask the Archbishop for further repetitions of his instruction on how properly to pray. Thus Tolstoy's lesson to society about the superfluity of the church hierarchy is rife with triplicity for mnemonic effect. After his excommunication from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1901, he is reputed to have synopsised his stance toward organized religion with a rhyme, treating the triune relationship of himself, God, and the Russian Orthodox Church in precisely nine (3x3) words: "Bog i ia—my druž'ia / Mne ne nuzhna religija" ("God and I are friends / I don't need religion"; see Croft, "Tolstoy's").

Daniel Rancour-Laferriere is a leading psychoanalytic interpreter of literature, often including Freudian insights (e.g., the triplistic "id, ego, superego") into his work. His recent work on Tolstoy, titled "Tolstoy on the Couch," includes discussion of Tolstoy's "psychopathology" and its effects on his literary works. The title (after a colon) continues, "[1] Misogyny, [2] Masochism, and [3] the Absent Mother." In his review of this work, Martin Bidney mentions Rancour-Laferriere's discussion of how the narrator of Tolstoy's "never-finished 'Notes of a Madman'" witnesses "three episodes of punishment," crying at two of them "and, in the third, beats his head on the wall in identification with the tale of Christ's crucifixion" (305). Consideration of this discussion leads to the conclusion that triplistic aspects of Tolstoy's "psychopathology" finds its reflection in the structure of his literary works and, perhaps derivatively, in the works interpreting them. Again we see another triplicity: the triplicity of Tolstoy's psychological neuroses, the triplicity of Tolstoy's literary works, and the triplicity in Rancour-Laferriere's interpretation of both—hence the author, the work, the criticism: the main "stuff" of our literary lives.

According to Temira Pachmuss, the symbolist poet Zinaida Gippius "saw various manifestations of the number 'three' in the composition of the world—the Holy Trinity, the unity of human personality-love-society, or of the spiritual world-man-material world, and so forth." Gippius explained that the essence of her *weltanschauung* "can be presented as an all-embracing triangle in the structure of the world and as an uninterrupted merging of the three principles, indivisible and yet separate from one another." Pachmuss has translated Gippius' poetic expression of this idea from the poem, "Troinoe" ("Threefold," 1910).

The world abounds in a three-fold depth.

A threefold depth is given to poets.

And really don't poets speak

Only of this?

Only of this?

A threefold truth—and a threefold beginning.

Poets trust in this truth.  
God thinks only about this:  
  
About Man.  
Love.  
And Death.  
(Pachmuss 105)

Zinaida Gippius found commonality in the religio-philosophico-psychological work of russophone (1) philosopher, (2) mystic, and (3) teacher George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866-1949) and his disciple Peter Demianovich Ouspensky (1878-1947), with their “Law of Three,” the “Three Paths to Awakening,” and the derivative nine-point “enneagram of personality types.”<sup>18</sup>

John Garrard has elucidated the apocalyptic elements in Alexander Blok’s innovative narrative poem, *Dvenadtsat’* (*The Twelve*, 1918). He points out that “the ‘simple plot’ of *The Twelve* [involves] the triangle of Petrukha, his prostitute girlfriend Katia, who has abandoned him for a wealthier turncoat, Van’ka” (50). Garrard, having studied Alexander Blok’s personal copy of the Bible’s book of Revelation, elaborates that this “simple plot” “replicates in miniature the narrative of Revelation in which John of Patmos predicts the fall of Rome and Domitian by way of the coded imagery of the Whore of Babylon and the Beast” (50). Garrard mentions Blok’s consciousness that St. John, whom he considered the author of three books of the Bible (The Gospel, the First Epistle, and Revelation), three times uses the image of a bride preparing for her wedding to describe aspects of the “three effects upon the world” which will result from Christ’s reappearance: “First, the exact moment (‘hour’) of his coming will be a surprise, no matter how urgently people have been expecting and hoping for it. Second, his coming will cause massive change and destruction. Third, he will be virtually unrecognizable at the hour of his actual appearance” (58). Garrard continues that “Blok’s most explicit clue that the subtext for his Christ figure in Revelation lies in the three iterations of the statement that the Twelve Red Guards follow a banner ‘with no cross.’ *The Twelve* uses the same line on three occasions quite early in the poem: ‘Hey, Hey, with no cross!’” (58). And, Blok made marginalia in the text of his copy of Revelation, drawing lines to connect the jotted names of his characters to characters in the text: for example, drawing a line between Revelation’s mention of the “Whore of Babylon” to the jotted name “Katia,” an important character in *The Twelve*. When St. John uses the image of a wedding and a bride three times, Blok “underlines precisely these [three] passages,” and “as if the underlining and the parallel lines were not enough, he added three X’s in the margin” (Garrard 63-64).<sup>19</sup>

Edmund Wilson, the eminent literary critic, had a very high opinion of Nobel Prize belated laureate Boris Pasternak's novel, *Dr. Zhivago*. In November of 1958, he wrote:

*Dr. Zhivago* will, I believe, come to stand as one of the great events in man's literary and moral history. Nobody could have written it in a totalitarian state and turned it loose on the world who did not have the courage of genius. May his guardian angel be with him! His book is a great act of faith in art and in the human spirit. As for his enemies in his fatherland, I predict that their children, over their vodka and tea, will be talking about the relations between Larisa Fyodorovna and Pasha and Yury Andreevich [3] as their parents, and I don't doubt they themselves, have talked about Tatyana and Lensky and Evgenii Onegin [3] and Natasha and Prince Andrei and Pierre [3]. (Wilson, *The Bit* 446)<sup>20</sup>

Wilson discusses the symbolism of the name "Zhivago," associating it with "life" (the meaning of the Russian root "zhiv-") in the life, death, and resurrection triad. He compares the plot structure to an elaborate "skazka" or "fairy tale" in which a "miraculous figure" in the person of Zhivago's half-brother Evgraf three times comes to Yury Zhivago's rescue:

first when, before Zhivago has taken his family away, he collapses in Moscow with typhus; again, when he is marooned with his family in the Urals, before he has been kidnapped by the partisans; and finally, when, returned to Moscow, unwanted and unassimilable, he is on the point of petering out. On this last occasion, Evgraf induces him to leave for a time his devoted lower-class wife and provides him with lodgings in which to write. We never know what Evgraf is or how he accomplishes his miracles; he is always an important person whose authority is felt at once, never questioned; he can always produce food, secure for his half-brother conditions of leisure. Yet we do not know [1] what office he holds, [2] why he is always so sure of himself, and [3] how he has managed to escape the purges. On his third intervention, he brings death in the flesh. The Doctor, now hidden from his family, does not survive his last creative liberation, but Evgraf preserves his manuscripts, the poems in which Yury lives again. (Wilson, *The Bit* 442)<sup>21</sup>

One of the most emblematic stars of current Russian literature is Victor Olegovich Pelevin. In her *Russian Life* article, "Victor Pelevin: Genius Temporis," Galina Yuzefovich writes that: "You cannot understand Russian literature of the past fifteen years without reading Victor Pelevin" (40). And in the works of Pelevin, triplicity is often evident in his relations of time, place, and character. In the tale "Zatvornik i shestipalyi" ("Hermit and Six-toes," 1995), there are two main characters and a "socium" of others—all gradually revealed through the flow of details to be chickens in a mechanized Russian food factory. As these two, the "Hermit" and "Six-toes," consider their place in their particular "cosmos," three lights are immediately visible in the universe above them. The Hermit states that he has come to this world

from the third of five previous worlds where he has been. He and Six-toes are then approached by a giant rat named One-eye. They ask the rat why “if both eyes are in order he is called ‘One-eye.’” The rat answers that the “One-eye” refers to his third, inner, eye: an eye that is always open. As their eventual fate becomes clear to them by the ninth (3x3) and last chapter, Hermit and Six-toes escape from three of the “Gods” who attempt to process them into food by pecking them and resorting to their forgotten power of flight. Even the syllabic structure of the work is rife with triplicity: the trisyllabic names (e.g., “Zatvornik,” “Shesti [2x3]-palyi,” “Odnoglazyi”—these last two with adjectival endings—and the “Socium”) and most powerful sentences: e.g., “Smert’ prishla” (“Death arrived”).

In all of Russian Culture, but especially in its preliterate narrative forms through most of its most sophisticated modern literature, we find a pervasive and intense triplicity—in plot, characterization, and even the wording itself; in source, theme, and method; in authors’ lives, their relationships, and their resultant treatment by scholars, critics, and literophiles. Telling things three times in a triplistic way is a veritable hallmark of Russian literature which opens diverse aspects of the culture as a whole to further elucidation. ✱

### Notes

Many people have contributed to my study of the “threes” in Russian literature and in literature and culture generally. For their comments, suggested sources, sending of related articles, letters, and other aid, some of it dating back to 1985, I would like to thank: Pat Barrett, Chuck Winkler, Tatyana Dhaliwal, John Garrard, George Gutsche, Tatiana Keeling, Jeanette Owen, Delbert Phillips, Rolfs Ekmanis, and Daniel Rancour-Laferriere. I have also received inspiration from other sources, including the internet’s *Threesology Research Journal* (<<http://cenocracy.topcities.com>> notably starting at page </cro1> titled “Examples of Three: beginning”), an absolutely mind-boggling analysis, apparently by triophile extraordinaire Herb O. Buckland, of “pattern-of-threes” in our lives; the “Digital Project” of Red Planet Software; and from Prof. John A. McNulty of Loyola University of Chicago’s School of Medicine for his amazing “List of Threes in Anatomy” (cf. <[www.meddean.luc.edu/lumen/MedEd/GroassAnatomy/Threes.html](http://www.meddean.luc.edu/lumen/MedEd/GroassAnatomy/Threes.html)>). A Russian website by Alexander I. Stepanov titled “The Number and Culture. The Rational Unconscious in Language, Fiction, Science, Present Politics, Philosophy, History,” including a good list of “Triple Structures” is to be found at <[www.alestep.narod.ru/eng\\_bl/](http://www.alestep.narod.ru/eng_bl/)>. An interesting late find was Brian Stross’ article, “Maya Bloodletting and the Number Three,” in which a “sonic resemblance” of Mixe-Zoquean words for “three” and the Maya (and earlier Olmec) words for ritual bloodletting is considered the etiology of homonymous iconographs.

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Roy Hanu Hart, author of *Bitter Grass*, *The Numbers of Heaven*, and *Journey of*

*Faith*, responded this way (in a personal telephone conversation with the author in 1999) when asked to comment on the genuineness of a television-interviewed “Anastasia” pretender subsequently debunked by a DNA test (cf. Hart 198-200).

<sup>2</sup> Nobel laureate Feynman uses this statement in the course of explaining what he calls *The Strange Theory of Light and Matter* (84; italics mine).

<sup>3</sup> Edmund Wilson uses Flaubert’s question “to Louise Colet” as the epigraph to his collection, *The Triple Thinkers: Twelve Essays on Literary Subjects*.

<sup>4</sup> The key works here are those of Roman O. Jakobson (“Beitrag” and “Morfo-logicheskije”), wherein Jakobson describes the semantic structure of the Russian substantival case system as a hierarchy of three semantic features binarily applied. His description uses a two-dimensional graphic representation called a “Prague School Markedness Diagram” (cf. the works of Catherine V. Chvany for discussion of the model’s adaptation into a three-dimensional figure, the cube). In my “model of narrative efficiency” this diagram represents the structure of the encoding capacity of the human mind. The decoding capacity is described surprisingly analogously by George Miller who mathematically defines limits on the information processing ability of the human mind within diverse sensory parameters of short-term memory (through which narrative communication flows) as a binary decision raised to the third power: i.e., 8, or “Seven plus or minus two.” Miller’s description is well amenable to graphic representation by a Prague School Markedness Diagram like Jakobson’s, forming a kind of iconicity between the encoding and the decoding structures of the mind, an iconicity essential to successful communication and narration.

<sup>5</sup> These are categorizations from several definitive grammars of the Russian language, including that of V.V. Vinogradov. But this is not all. Linguists describe Slavic vocalic phonology on a chart of two articulatory tricategorizations: front/central/back and high/mid/low. They divide the consonants into stops, fricatives, and resonants and the prosody into accent, pitch, and quantity/length (Carlton 80, 186).

<sup>6</sup> The numbers in brackets, both here and later are added to point out related triplicities.

<sup>7</sup> This addresses, of course, the question of language/thought determinism (advocating co-determinacy between the nominalist and relativist positions).

<sup>8</sup> Only the 2nd edition Dutton publication of Arndt’s translation has this preface.

<sup>9</sup> Another exemplification of criticism mirroring the triplicity of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* is that of Edmund Wilson, who writes, “Pushkin has put into the relations between the three central characters a number of implications...they may be said to represent three intellectual currents of the time: [1] Evgenii is Byronism turning worldly and dry; [2] Lensky, with his Schiller and Kant, German Romantic idealism; [3] Tatyana, that Rousseauist Nature which [1] was making itself heard in Romantic poetry, [2] speaking a new language and [3] asserting a new kind of rights” (*The Triple Thinkers* 44).

<sup>10</sup> These are the only poems of this title included in the outstandingly comprehensive and definitive *Lermontovskaia Entsiklopediia* (Manuilov 283-284). Translations are available in C.E. L'Ami and Alexander Welikotny, and Anatoly Liberman. There is also a "Iunkerskaya molitva" ("A Soldier's Prayer") in Lermontov's oeuvre, but this is not *his* prayer and the title is not exactly the same.

<sup>11</sup> A "troika" or "trio" in this sense is a Russian harness arrangement, referring to a sleigh or carriage drawn by three animals. These quotations are from the last page of *Dead Souls*, Part I, in any translation, but the wording here is from Vladimir Nabokov's discussion in *Nikolai Gogol* (112-113).

<sup>12</sup> I have preserved Zhekulin's transliteration of "Vii" as "Viy" as part of a quotation of his article's title.

<sup>13</sup> I have altered Richard Peace's translation slightly here, preferring "Dog-keeper" (or even, as used elsewhere, "Dogboy") to render the Russian "psar" where Peace uses "Huntsman."

<sup>14</sup> See Michael Katz' "A Brief Note on the Translation" in his edition of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (xi-xiv). I thank the RMMLA reviewer for the three "zapiski" titles.

<sup>15</sup> Certainly "three-shot pistols" are, and were, rare, though in a market in Turkey in 2001, I found a replica of one manufactured in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

<sup>16</sup> Dostoevsky-philes can often cite examples of triplicity in almost any work of Dostoevsky's, but most frequently do they mention the triplicities of plot and characterization in the novel *Vechnyi muzh* (*Eternal Husband*, 1870). I am not trying to be exhaustive, only illustrative of the different main aspects of the phenomenon.

<sup>17</sup> The translation here is mine from *Russian Through Poems and Songs* (56).

<sup>18</sup> The Gurdjieff/Ouspensky precepts obtained quite a following in Europe and the United States after widespread translation of Ouspensky's *Tertium Organum* in 1912. See P.D. Ouspensky, *The Fourth Way*, and also <[www.gurdjieff-legacy.org/50bookexcerpts/ouspenskyioneer.htm](http://www.gurdjieff-legacy.org/50bookexcerpts/ouspenskyioneer.htm)> or <[www.darkecho.com/JohnShirley/sgur.html](http://www.darkecho.com/JohnShirley/sgur.html)>.

<sup>19</sup> Garrard also elaborates on the Biblical use of the number twelve (61). Garrard's very insightful mention of the symbolic glyphs here (the three X's) brings to mind the fact that Russian uses three dots ("...") to mark ellipses. In that regard, Pushkin titled his famous poem, "Ja pomniu chudnoe mgnovenie..." ("I remember that wondrous instant...," 1825) as "K +++" using three plus marks to signify the ellipsis of his muse's name. And, Lermontov "titles" his poem (later song) "Vykhozhu odin ia na dorogu..." ("Alone along the road I'm walking...," 1841) as "\*\*\*\*" (three asterisks, ostensibly to signal absence of a formal title). The asterisk (Russian "zvezdochka" or "little star") is perhaps the oldest and most universal glyph of all, dating to the ideogram phase of Mesopotamian cuneiform writing: circa 3000 BCE (see <<http://std.dkuug.dk/jtcl/scz/wg2/docs/n2664.pdf>>) and having



in modern computer typography both the original six-(2x3)-point and, because of the Muslim perception that the six points symbolize an Israeli Star of David (itself composed of two triangles), five-point versions. Three asterisks arranged in a triangle are called an "asterism" (see <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asterisk>>). Of course, the discussion here involves Russian literary uses of *three* tripled glyphs (X, +, \*) in addition to ordinary punctuational "three dots."

<sup>20</sup> The references in the quotation are to the triads of main characters in (respectively) Pasternak's *Dr. Zhivago*, Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, and Tolstoy's *War and Peace*: three immortal Russian works.

<sup>21</sup> In this quotation we see described the life, death, and resurrection (by virtue of his preserved poems) mentioned earlier.

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