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ALEXANDER PUSHKIN'S
Little Tragedies
~ *The Poetics of Brevity*

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57. Ibid.

58. Ibid.

59. See, for example, Shervinskii, *Rim i smysl*, 219–21; Rassadin, *Dramaturg Pushkin*, 178–89; Kazakova, “*Malen’kie tragedii* A. S. Pushkina,” 15–16.

60. Solov’ev, “Opyt dramaticheskikh izuchenii.”

“Strange and Savage Joy”

The Erotic as a Unifying Element in *The Little Tragedies*

~ SERGEI DAVYDOV

Je suis l'Athée du bonheur.

—Pushkin's letter from Boldino, 1830

The famous autumn of 1830, which Pushkin spent at his ancestral estate in Boldino, was the most inspired and fruitful season of Pushkin's life; had he written nothing else but what he wrote during that season, he would still be Russia's greatest poet. In Boldino, Pushkin found himself at a crossroads. The thirty-one-year-old poet was about to end his bachelor life by marrying an eighteen-year-old paragon of beauty, Natalie, who probably did not love him. In his Boldino elegies Pushkin bade farewell to his bachelor past, to women, living or dead, whom he once loved—his “Don Juan list” consisted of thirty-four names at this point. The impecunious bridegroom came to Boldino in order to take possession of two villages, which he received before the wedding from his “miserly father,” and, by mortgaging two hundred “souls,” to collect a dowry for his bride, for such was the condition of his future mother-in-law. In addition, severe epidemics of cholera morbus broke out that fall, casting an ominous shadow over the blithe prospect of marriage. Thus, financial worries, courtship of a young beauty, parting with his promiscuous past, an unprecedented eruption of creativity, and ever-present death reverberate throughout the Boldino writings with a strong biographical note. The “mystery of happiness and grave” [tainy schast’ia i groba] can be seen as the leitmotif of the Boldino season, which opened with this eerie question: “Are they burying a house-goblin? Marrying off a witch?” [Domovogo li khoro-niat, / Ved’ mu l’ zamuzh vydaiut?] from the poem “Besy” (The demons).

Separated from his fiancée by seven quarantines, the poet pondered in life and art the unpredictability and limits of happiness in the face of a destructive force. A brief sampling of his letters shows how this quest monopolized Pushkin's mind: "Ha la maudite chose que le bonheur!" "The devil pushed me to hallucinate about happiness, as if I was meant for it"; Baratynskii says that only fools are blissful as bridegrooms; "Notre mariage semble toujours fuir devant moi, et cette peste avec ses quarantaines n'est-elle pas la plus mauvaise plaisanterie que le sort ait pu imaginer"; "Mais le bonheur... c'est un grand *peut-être*, comme le disait Rabelais du paradis ou de l'éternité. Je suis l'athée du bonheur."¹

Doubling the possibility of happiness in real life, Pushkin tests such a prospect on paper in prose and verse. The Boldino season opens with the upbeat cycle of *The Tales of Belkin*, Pushkin's debut in prose, and concludes with the verse cycle of *The Little Tragedies*. In four out of the five *Tales* ("The Shot," "The Blizzard," "The Stationmaster," and "The Lady Peasant") an ominous force threatens the happiness of the "true hearts," but in the epic space of the *Tales* all situations fraught with doom are happily resolved. In "The Shot," "The Blizzard," and "The Stationmaster," Pushkin unites the true hearts (the Count with the Countess, Maria with Burmin, and Dunia with Minsky) literally over the grave of the adversary who threatened their happiness (Silvio, Vladimir, and Vyrrin, respectively). In "The Lady Peasant," the happy epilogue to the *Tales*, Pushkin marries Vladimir and Liza offstage over the "grave," as it were, of the ancient family feud, thus dodging the Romeo and Juliet scenario.² In Anna Akhmatova's words, these "toy denouements" were a "bizarre conjury of destiny" [svoeobraznoe zaklinanie sud'by] through which Pushkin "prompted fate how to save him, showing it that there are no hopeless situations and that happiness, in spite of all odds, is attainable."³

Having finished *The Tales of Belkin* by 20 October, Pushkin writes in one breath the four *Little Tragedies* from 23 October to 6 November; they conclude the Boldino season. In these experimental verse dramas Pushkin continues to explore in a new generic key the same theme of happiness, sometimes referred to as the "eudaemonic theme."⁴ However, in the tragic space of these "dramatic experiments," as Pushkin called his *Little Tragedies*, the poet comes to diametrically opposed results. In each play the heroes doggedly pursue happiness, but when they are on the very brink of attaining the object of their

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desire, a fatal calamity invariably strikes. Mozart's musical idea captures the crux of this situation:

Now picture . . . let me see! . . .

Well . . . *me*, let's say—a somewhat younger version,

In love—not overmuch, but lightly so;

I'm with a lady . . . or a friend . . . *say, you*;

I'm cheerful . . . then . . . some vision from the grave . . . [viden'e grobovoe]

A darkness comes . . . or something of the kind.⁵

In each of the four tragedies Pushkin stages this conflict as a contest between Eros and Thanatos.⁶ I will use these two terms as a convenient shorthand for the complex forces involved in each conflict.

The main protagonists of *The Little Tragedies* pursue happiness through the gratification of some Eros-inspired desire. In each case, the essence of their passion is dualistic: "The heroes give themselves to the chaotic and orgasmic force of passion and simultaneously suffer as they try to absolve themselves from it. Thus the tragic hero becomes both a criminal and an expiatory victim."⁷ The four objects of their passion form a well-marked crescendo in the four dramas: gold, music, love, and life. Each becomes an idol, is worshiped in a quasi-religious, shamanistic manner, and acquires highly erotic attributes.

The old Baron in *The Covetous Knight* now ranks gold above love, yet we know that there was a time when the knight cherished his lady's love. Unfortunately, the gift of her heart, their profligate son, Albert, only poisons his father's late years by threatening to squander his inheritance once his father dies. The Baron's love was displaced by a craving for gold, into which the widower invests what remains of his flaccid libido. The Baron awaits his rendezvous with his treasures "[t]he way a youthful rake awaits a tryst / With some licentious harlot." The Baron's "trusty chests" [vernye sunduki] are his underground harem; each time he is about to unlock a chest, he "fall[s] into a fever and [. . .] shudder[s]" [vpadaiu v zhar i trepel], an ardor worthy of Don Juan (or of Fedor Karamazov). However, the Baron's "lust for wealth,"⁸ underscored by Pushkin's sexual pun, takes a sudden morbid turn:

Physicians claim that there are certain men
Who find a pleasure in the act of murder.

When I *insert* my key inside the lock,
 I feel what murderers themselves must feel
 As they plunge dagger into flesh: excitement . . .
 And horror all at once.⁹

In his cellar the Baron tests the compatibility of pleasure and crime, the two things that, like "villainy and genius," should not go together in the moral universe of *The Little Tragedies*. Like a high priest performing sorcery, the Baron lights candles before each coffinlike trunk and conducts a Black Mass. His underground requiem includes a Litany and an Eternal Memory in commemoration of the victims from whom the various gold pieces were extracted. At the same time, the Baron keeps his own son on the verge of poverty, driving him into dealings with money lenders and into contemplation of patricide. The father's lust for gold has an emasculating effect on the son; the young knight, admired for his prowess at the tournaments by both rivals and ladies, shies away from other courtly meriments because of his lack of seemingly attire. By denying his son his inheritance, the father foils, in a proto-Karamazovian manner, the son's romantic prospects with the lady of his heart, Clotilda.

The Baron's castrating touch also affects the object of his own passion. By burying the gold in his cellar, the miser has withdrawn it not only from his wastrel heir but also from its natural economic circulation.

Go home—you've roamed the world quite long enough
 In service to the needs and lusts of men.
 Sleep well in here—the sleep of peace and power;
 The sleep the gods in deepest Heaven sleep. . . .

The Baron's Eros breeds death. Arrested in its procreative flow, the gold has become emasculated, sterile, and barren; Thanatos has won over Eros.

Salieri, in the next "little tragedy," too once loved a woman, but instead of an offspring, Isora has bequeathed to him a ringful of poison. For eighteen years Salieri carries with him Isora's "prophetic gift [of love]" [*zavetnyi dar ljubvi*], waiting for a worthy occasion on which to employ it. By now music has displaced love in Salieri's life, but his ardor is once again unrequited.

O Heaven! Where is justice to be found?
 When genius, that immortal sacred gift,
 Is granted not to love and self-denial,
 To labor and to striving and to prayer—
 But casts its light upon a madman's head,
 A foolish idler's brow? . . . O Mozart, Mozart!

A similar pathology that once defiled Salieri's love now afflicts his passion for music, an infatuation with a dash of necrophilia: "[Killing] potent sounds, / I disassembled music like a corpse" [*Zvuki umertviy, / Muzyku ia raz'ial, kak trup*]. The autopsy of his beloved object climaxes in an actual murder, the thrill of which the Baron had only dreamed about. The melomaniac kills his beloved musician and something else:

I feel both pain and joy,
 As if I'd just fulfilled some heavy debt,
 As if a healing knife had just cut off
 An aching limb!

The word *chlen* (limb or penis) that Pushkin uses here suggests that Salieri has performed a metaphoric castration.¹⁰ The progression from autopsy to murder to self-mutilation allows for the conjecture that Salieri might have contemplated both murder and suicide. His words to Mozart—"No, wait! / You've drunk it down! . . . and could not wait for me?" [*Postoi, / Postoi, postoi!.. Ty vypil.. bez menia?*]—suggest that Mozart, having drunk the poisoned wine alone, preempted Salieri's doubly morbid scheme.¹¹ Salieri's Eros, misplaced and disfigured by pathology (necrophilia, masochism, homicide, self-castration, suicide), breeds death.

Both the Baron and Salieri are proud and lonely misers, willing to endure privations in order to attain their goals. However, if the Baron has buried his treasure too deep in his underground vault, Salieri has placed his too high on a pedestal. Salieri considers it a sacrilege when a street fiddler plays one of Mozart's tunes: "I cannot laugh—when some benighted hack / Bismirches Raphael and his Madonna" or "[w]ith parody dishonors Allegrieri." Salieri would like to withdraw music (just like the Baron would withdraw the gold) from the public domain. Mozart, on the other hand, is wasteful and promiscuous, sharing his

gift and wine with the initiated and the commoner alike. Just as Albert sends his last bottle of wine to the sick blacksmith, Mozart gives the blind musician money for a drink. However, in his reluctance to part with his Requiem, commissioned by the "visitor in black," Mozart unexpectedly shares with the Baron and Salieri a touch of miserliness.¹²

Salieri is the true incarnation of Thanatos. His condemnation of Mozart—"And no successor will be leave behind. / What profit then his life?"—lays bare his own creative and procreative impotence as a childless composer of stillborn music. By contrast, Mozart, the true incarnation of Eros, "is not a slave of music [...]" but its lover, unfettered by his own attachment to it.¹³ He is also happily married and has sired a son with whom he plays and romps. Although death ultimately triumphs, the offspring of Mozart's biological and creative Eros live on, and his music resounds throughout the theaters and taverns of Salzburg and crosses the borders to Spain—the next "little tragedy" opens with an epigraph from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*.¹⁴

In *The Stone Guest* both gold and music make way for a higher value: "Of all the happy pleasures life supplies, / To love alone does music yield in sweetness." Bacchantes and pious women, wives and widows, husbands and bachelors, the ascetic friar, and even the marble tomb slab—each has been allotted its own share of Eros. Nevertheless, all is not well under the passionate Castilian sun. The Commander is dead, his lovesick widow pines away, while the paragon of Eros idles in exile in frigid France. Dona Anna was given in marriage to the rich Commander: "The lucky man!" grumbles the covetous Don Juan.

He brought but worthless wealth
To lay before an angel—and for this
He tasted all the joys of paradise!

However, as we are led to believe, Dona Anna has found true love in marriage, and her passion eventually extends beyond the grave:

How happy he, I think, whose frigid grave
Is warmed by such an angel's airy sighs
And watered by her sweet and loving tears.

The Commander, who "tasted all the joys of paradise" in Dona Anna's

arms, knew how to cherish it. He was as miserly with his treasure as the Baron and Salieri were with gold and music, cloistering Dona Anna within the walls of his home, guarding her chastity, and barring access to others. In this one-woman "harem," the couple produced no offspring, implying perhaps impotence, barrenness, or both. When Dona Anna becomes a widow, the dead Commander confines her within the cemetery walls, and when even this "chastity belt" loosens its grip, his stone ghost rises from the dead—awesome and castrating—and claims his own.

Don Juan, the happy-go-lucky bachelor, may have been denied love beyond the grave, but he enjoyed a lion's share of earthly love. If the Baron's and Salieri's libidos were misplaced, Don Juan has dispersed his among too many targets. He "collects women the way the Baron collects gold."¹⁵ Incapable of leaving the objects of his desire unserved and unmated, he keeps his seraglio happy. In his northern exile among Gallic "waxen dolls," he pines away for his Iberian sweethearts, remembering every fleeting shade of their charms, from the "lowest peasant girl in Andalusia" to the beautiful Inéz. To his darlings, Don Juan is always an uninvited, though welcome, guest. In contrast to the Commander, he is generous and supremely lacking in jealous feelings, sharing his sweethearts with other men. He is as generous with his love as Albert would be with gold or as Mozart is with music. A true master in verbalizing Eros, Don Juan is an inspired improviser of love songs, which Laura performs with such artistry. He falls in love very much to the tune of Mozart: "not overmuch, but lightly so" [*ne slishkom, a slegka*]. Laura, the high priestess of love and song, prefers him to all other men. Even the coy widow, whose husband and brother-in-law he has killed, gladly receives him, heedless of the ruin he has brought many a fine lady.

One question, however, remains. Shall we believe that this "devoted slave of lust" [*pokornyĭ uchenik razvrata*], as he calls himself, is capable of stepping out of his time-honored role to discover true love for the first time?

But ever since the day I saw your face
I've been reborn, returned once more to life.
In loving you, I've learned to love true goodness,
And now for once I bend my trembling knees
And kneel in awe before almighty virtue.

Should we believe him if in the same breath he forswears all his former attachments: "But not a one till now / Have I in truth adored"? Dmitri Blagoi and Friedeberg Seeley do not, and Barbara Monter declares Don Juan's theatrical gestures "a travesty of the romantic concept of redemption through love."¹⁶ However, accepted wisdom has it that Don Juan, "far from being an unreconstructed lecher, is [...] in the process of falling sincerely, even virtuously, in love." Without this, the argument goes, there would be no tragedy.¹⁷

Regardless of Don Juan's ardor, his Eros, like that of his predecessors, is contaminated by pathology. His serial penetration of women has its morbid counterpart in his intercourse with men; Don Juan stabs the Commander in a duel and pierces his rival in love, Don Carlos, just when the latter is on the verge of possessing Laura—Don Juan will be paid back in kind. The description of the duel and of Don Carlos's wound are rife with sexual innuendoes: "Get up, my dear; it's finished now" [Vstavai, Laura. Koncheno]—*konchit'* (to finish) also means to climax. These words are followed by Laura's implicit comment about Don Carlos's naked torso: "You didn't miss... you pierced him through the heart. / There's not a drop of blood [from this three-cornered wound]." The presence of the cadaver in Laura's bedchamber has an aphrodisiac effect on Don Juan: "(He kisses her.) Laura: 'My sweet!... / Oh, stop... before the dead!'" [Postoi!.. pri mertvom!]. The corpse ends up being a witness to their tryst and will be disposed of "before the break of day."

Consistent with Don Juan's morbid erotic slant, it should come as no surprise that his romance with the late Inéz (murdered by her jealous husband) took place at a cemetery. Recalling Inéz's charms, Don Juan invokes her pale, lifeless, nymphlike allure in terms that border on necrophilia:

I always found
A strange attraction in her mournful eyes
And pallid [dying] lips. How strange it is, how strange.
You never thought her beautiful, I know,
And yes, it's true—she wasn't what you'd call
A dazzling beauty. But those eyes of hers,
Those eyes... her searching look. I've never known
So beautiful a gaze. And then her voice—
As soft and weak as some poor invalid's...

The proximity of death seems to be a catalyst for Don Juan's Eros.¹⁸ He courts Dona Anna at the very cemetery where he used to meet with Inéz and experiences an erotic thrill as he observes the widow prosecute herself and "drape with raven locks the pallid stone" of her husband's sepulcher. Inviting the dead husband to attend the seduction of his widow—to his postmortem cuckolding—heightens this "strange and savage joy" [neiz' iasinnoe naslazhdenie] to a new degree. Apparently, Don Juan would like to relive the thrill of lovemaking in the presence of a dead man. Small wonder that the climax of his courtship with Dona Anna—their first frigid kiss ("kholodnyi, mirnyi potselui")—is interrupted by the entrance of the stone ghost with its castrating handshake: "How cold and hard his mighty fist of stone! / Away from me.... Let go.... Let go my hand...." [O, tiazhe! / Pozhat'e kamennoi ego desnit'syl / Ostav' menia, pusti, pusti mne ruku...].

The Old Church Slavonic word *desnitsa* (right hand) has the connotation of God's righteous hand, and Vladimir Goldstein is right on the mark when he writes: "The cemetery rendezvous, the Commander as a guard for [Don Juan's] lovemaking, or the corpse of Don Carlos as a silent witness of it—these are not exotic paraphernalia used to spice up a sexual act but consistent attempts to debase the mystery of death, to mock its power, to dismiss its inevitability. By mocking death Don Juan strives to overcome it, to ignore the power of time over his life, to conquer his way to heaven."¹⁹

Don Juan dies with Dona Anna's name on his lips, but in the moral universe of *The Little Tragedies* the fornicator and atheist, who mocks both love and death and debases their mystery, is not admitted into the paradise of true love, the realm where Eros is able to transcend the grave and attain immortality. Because Don Juan has squandered his gift of love in transient, nonprocreative, and morbid pursuits, Eros again loses to Thanatos. Don Juan's music, his love songs, may live on, but their creator perishes. The vagabond lover and his paramours remain childless and will pass their barrenness, along with their Eros-inspired art, to the revelers of the last "little tragedy."

Pushkin ends *The Stone Guest* just when the widow's vow of fidelity is on the verge of being broken. In the last tragedy, *A Feast in Time of Plague*, the widower Walsingham and the orphaned revelers have already broken all their vows. Seated around the banquet table on the town street are the English clones of Inéz, Laura, Dona Anna, and Don Juan, but the object of desire has been raised a notch higher. Facing

death point-blank, the revelers crave the ultimate substance: life—or what's left of it. The feast among the corpses releases in the revelers an unprecedented eruption of creative Eros. The singers, dancers, poets, and lovers perform, under the baton of the Master of Revels, a highly artistic rite. Walsingham is himself a newborn poet, his "hymn to plagues" being his first poetic attempt. In their celebration at the edge of the grave of song, dance, poetry, wine, love, and life, the revelers abandon all time-honored pieties and cross over into that uncanny realm beyond good and evil, where "strange and savage joy" [neiz"nashimiy nashazhdeniye] can be had. It seems that no guest—invited or uninvited, made of flesh or stone—can stop the Dionysian feast, the revelers' last bastion against the onslaught of Thanatos.

As their ranks grow thinner, the revelers pretend that death does not exist, proposing a "tinging toast" to the empty chair of the jolly Jack-son, "as if he lived." Walsingham rebukes their hackneyed trick—one does not clink when honoring the dead—and proposes a more devious scheme by which to tame fear and fool death: not by mocking it, like Don Juan, but by actually embracing it. In his "hymn to plagues" the Master of Revels bids his moribund congregation to taste the savage delight and merge with the elemental forces of destruction:

There's bliss in battle and there's bliss
on the dark edge of an abyss
and in the fury of the main
amid foam-crested death;
in the Arabian hurricane
and in the Plague's light breath.

All, all such mortal dangers fill
a mortal's heart with a *deep thrill*
of wordless rapture that bespeaks
maybe, immortal life,
—and happy is the man who seeks
and tastes them in his strife.

(Vladimir Nabokov's translation; emphasis mine)²⁰

There's rapture on the battleground,
And where the black abyss is found,

And on the raging ocean main,
Amid the stormy waves of death,
And in the desert hurricane,
And in the Plague's pernicious breath.

For all that threatens to destroy
Conceals a *strange and savage joy*—
Perhaps for mortal man a glow
That promises *eternal life*.
And happy he who comes to know
This rapture found in storm and strife.
(J. Falen's translation; emphasis mine)

Есть упоение в бою,
И бездны мрачной на краю,
И в разъяренном океане,
Средь грозных волн и бурной тьмы,
И в аравийском урагане,
И в дуневении Чумы.

Все, все, что гибелью грозит,
Для сердца смертного таит
Неизъяснимы наслаждения—
Бессмертия, может быть, залог!
И счастливы те, кто средь волненья
Их обретасть и ведать мог.
(Pushkin 7: 180–81, stanzas 4, 5; emphasis mine)

Like Mozart's Requiem, Walsingham's hymn reveals an uncanny fascination with death, but Mozart's creation is a Christian Mass, whereas Walsingham's hymn is a thoroughly pagan conjury. Moreover, its logic is pure sophistry: if in the realm of the living Death alone is immortal, then by embracing Death and blending with her primal forces we too shall render ourselves immortal. But Death won't be fooled by this ingenious "metaphysical camouflage," and Walsingham is doomed to repeat Don Juan's fatal blunder of inviting Death to his feast. Walsingham outdoes Don Juan in his audacity: the latter was a mere serial seducer of women and killer of men; Walsingham, the self-appointed

high priest, is a mass seducer of an entire death-bound congregation. He ignores the entreaty of the Anglican priest to stop the revelry and to save their souls for the sake of eternal life, and he curses all who would follow the priest, knowing full well, perhaps (just as the Grand Inquisitor once knew), that "beyond the grave they will find nothing but death" [za grobom obretut li sh' smert'].²¹

For the time being, Eros has the upper hand, and the feast goes on. The revelers are all inspired poets and life-artists striving to prolong their earthly joy. But their carousing among the corpses seems to have contaminated their Eros and impaired its ability to transcend death. From the Scottish ballad about some bygone plague that the harlot Mary sings, we learn that their ancestors once possessed this ability. Jenny, the heroine of the ballad, entreats her beloved not to come near her or to kiss her lips if she dies. She begs him to leave the village and, once the plague is gone, to visit her grave. For her part, Jenny pledges to remain true to her sweetheart even in Heaven. ("A Edmonda ne pokinet Dzhenni dazhe v nebesakh!") For the revelers such a paradise has been lost; the ancestral wisdom of the ballad, just like the priest's appeal, falls on deaf ears.

Defiant, devil-may-care brinkmanship has replaced the chastity of the ancients and their reverence before death. Unperturbed by the contagion, the revelers embrace their dead ("Can that be you, good Walsingham? / Who on your knees but three weeks since / Embraced your mother's corpse and sobbed?") and engage in licentious acts in front of their deceased. Walsingham explains to the priest:

I cannot leave

To take your path. What holds me here
Is foul despair and memories dread,
Awareness of my lawless ways,
The horror of the deathly hush
That now prevails within my house—
And yes, these fresh and frenzied revels,
The blessed poison of this cup,
And kisses sweet (forgive me, Lord)
From this depraved but lovely wretch....
My mother's shade will call me back
No more.... Too late.... I hear your plea
And know you struggle for my soul....

Too late.... Depart, old man, in peace;
But cursed be all who follow thee.

Admittedly, Walsingham retains a measure of conscience even in his sacrilege. Unlike Don Juan, who wanted to seduce Dona Anna in front of her dead husband, Walsingham would like to "[c]onceal this scene" from the "deathless eyes" of his dead wife, Mathilda. But in his hymn Walsingham outdoes even Don Juan in metaphorical audacity. In the final and erotically most animated lines of the hymn, the plague becomes a maiden brimming with desire:

And so, Dark Queen, we praise thy reign!
Thou callest us, but we remain
unruffled by the chill of death,
clinking our cups, carefree,
drinking a rose-lipped maiden's breath
full of the Plague, maybe!
(Vladimir Nabokov's translation)

So hail to you, repellent Pest!
You strike no fear within our breast;
We are not crushed by your design.
So fill the foaming glasses high,
We'll sip the rosy maiden [literally, And we drink the breath of the Rose
Maiden] wine
And kiss the lips where plague may lie!
(J. Falen's translation)

И так—хвала тебе, Чума!
Нам не страшна могилы тьма,
Нас не смутит твоё призыванье!
Бокалы пеним дружно мы,
И Девы-Розы пьём дыханье—
Быть может—полное Чумы!
(Pushkin 7: 181, stanza 6)

Paradoxically, in the contest of Eros and Thanatos in *The Little Tragedies* a beloved woman becomes a direct or indirect accomplice of death. Mozart was poisoned by Isora's gift of love, Dona Anna's frigid

kiss triggers the entrance of the stone Commander, and in *A Feast in Time of Plague* the fornication with the miasmatic Rose Maiden portends death. Although the revelers are still alive, dancing and ringing "around a rosie," their circle narrows, and the moment when the next "falls down" is just around the corner. Be that as it may, the revelers are already barren, childless, and their society all but extinct.

A Feast in Time of Plague was Pushkin's final and most daring experiment with happiness in the face of death. The protagonists of *The Little Tragedies* sought to gratify some *Eros-inspired desire*. The objects of their desire followed a *crecendo* (gold, art, love, and life), and all acquired highly *erotic attributes*. The protagonists *worshiped their idols* with shamanic abandon and aspired to attain *earthly paradise and immortality*. In each "little tragedy" *Eros temporarily triumphed*, and the idol-worshippers celebrated with a *feast*. But because their passion was defiled by *pathology* (misplaced libido, sterility, barrenness, morbid sexuality, masochism, castration, suicide, murder, necrophilia), the victory of Eros was short-lived and the ability to transcend death lost. The triumph of Thanatos is not complete, though; the fate of the four major *survivors* remains open at the fall of the curtain. The poetic justice will be meted out to Albert, Salieri, Dona Anna, and Walsingham offstage in the unwritten elliptical hypothetical "fifth act" that constitutes the true tragic space of each of Pushkin's experimental "little tragedies."

Death has robbed the Baron of his gold, but in the implied fifth act Albert's complicity in the death of his father might despoil his joy over his guilt-ridden inheritance. Until his doomday will Salieri agonize over Mozart's last words about the incompatibility of villainy and genius. Don Juan's punishment is death and damnation, but the final destination of Dona Anna remains moot. Pushkin may have chivalrously spared his Anna the destiny prescribed by the classical scenario; his stage remark, "(They sink into the ground)" [(Provalivaitusia)], may refer just to Don Juan and the Commander. If this is the case, then, after the curtain falls, Dona Anna has to face the same anguish and agony as the rest of the survivors of *The Little Tragedies*. Physical death is the most likely outcome for the revelers, who possibly also forfeited their chance for Christian afterlife. Their prospect for an alternative immortality through the pursuit of strange and savage pleasure remains iffy, to say the least. Their revelry continues, but their master has already distanced himself. As the curtain falls, we find him "lost in [deep] thought" [pogruchennii v glubokuu zadumchivost'], pondering,

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perhaps, his "grand peut-être," as Rabelais used to call paradise or eternity. The content of Walsingham's silent reverie constitutes fifth act of this last "little tragedy."

Walsingham's vision of his late wife, Mathilda, which triggered his reverie and sent a metaphysical shudder through his bones, offers an arcane glimpse into the contents of this rumination:

Where am I now? *My blessed light!*
I see you . . . but my sinful soul
Can reach you there no more. . . . (emphasis mine)

Mathilda, who tasted the earthly paradise in Walsingham's embrace ("znala rai v ob'iatiakh moikh"), is now in Heaven, where Walsingham's arms no longer reach. Walsingham calls her the "blessed [child of] light" [sviatoe chado sveta], while her real name casts an additional glimmer on Walsingham's reverie. Dante used the name Matilda in *The Divine Comedy*. It belonged to the "radiant lady" who at the end of *Purgatory* guided the Poet to the river Lethe, which erased the memories of his evil deeds, and to the river Eunoë, which revived the memory of his virtues. The Poet is now "pure and prone to ascend to the stars" to Paradiso, to Beatrice (Dante, *Purgatory*, canto 33).

Thus the "fifth act" of Pushkin's gloomiest "little tragedy" is not without a ray of hope. Mathilda, privy to both earthly and heavenly paradise, could be signaling to *her poet*—"The Hymn to the Plague" is Walsingham's first poetic creation—that he too is not beyond salvation.

Surrounded by cholera morbus and cherishing hopes of marrying the beautiful eighteen-year-old Natalie, Pushkin tested in Boldino the challenge of happiness in the face of doom. The autumn opened with a prose cycle, *The Tales of Belkin*, of which "The Coffinmaker" was written first (8 September), and concluded with a cycle of verse tragedies, of which *A Feast in Time of Plague* was written last (6 November). These two liminal texts, straddling the Boldino season, emblematically echo its dominant theme—the contest of Eros and Thanatos. The plump Cupid with an inverted torch, painted on the sign over the coffinmaker's shop in "The Coffinmaker," can be seen as the emblem uniting the remaining four *Tales of Belkin*, in which love of the true hearts each time defeated death. As an analogous emblem of unity for *The Little Tragedies*, in which Thanatos invariably triumphs over Eros,

I propose, from *A Feast in Time of Plague*, the "somber cart" laden with corpses, which,

as you well know,
Has right to travel where it will,
And let it pass we must.

As if to mark the significance of these two texts within their respective cycles, the poet left his cryptic signature on both of them. In the *Tales* Alexander Pushkin endowed his coffinmaker, Adrian Prokhorov, with his own initials (in the drafts even the first letters of their patronymics matched: Simeonovich and Sergeevich). Pushkin also lent to Adrian his own erstwhile profession—all members of the infamous Arzamas society were undertakers.²² In addition, the poet has his coffinmaker begin his profession in 1799, that is, the year Pushkin was born. Adrian's counterpart in *A Feast in Time of Plague* is the undertaker pulling the somber cart. This black man shares with Pushkin an additional biographical detail: both are of African origin. In the English original (John Wilson's *The City of the Plague*, 1816), the undertaker is a Negro because he comes from the colonies, whereas in the Russian context this detail, I believe, begs for an autobiographical interpretation. Thus in both key texts of the two experimental Boldino cycles, the poet himself merrily plays at being the undertaker, and in tragedies, even "little" ones, the last laugh belongs to those who remove the corpses.

Notes

1. From letters 518, 519, 523, 525, 535 (Pushkin 14: 110, 113, 114, 123; see also Pushkin, *The Letters*, 309, 310, 314, 315, 323).
2. For the unity of the *Tales*, see Bethea and Davydov, "Pushkin's Saturnine Cupid."
3. Akhmatova, "Kamennyi gosť Pushkina," 166–68.
4. See Gregg, "The Eudaemonic Theme." The centrality of the concept of pleasure and happiness in *The Little Tragedies* was discussed by Blagoi, *Sotsiologičeskaja tvorčestva Pushkina*, 219–23; Akhmatova, "Kamennyi gosť Pushkina," 89–109; and Beljak and Virolainen, "Malen'kie tragedii' kak kul'turnyi epos," 73–96.
5. All translations are by James E. Folen. I have occasionally inserted in square brackets a literal translation of Pushkin's words.

6. For the "love and death" theme, see Blagoi, *Sotsiologičeskaja tvorčestva Pushkina*, 206–18; Terras, "Introduction," 5–12, 105–10, 12; and Monter, "Love and Death."
7. Beljak and Virolainen, "Malen'kie tragedii' kak kul'turnyi epos," 86.
8. Vladimir Alexandrov's expression in his "Correlations in Pushkin's *Malen'kie tragedii*," 183.
9. Emphasis mine. The pun involves the verb *vlagať* (to insert) and *vlagašče* (vagina).
10. See Smirnov, *Psichodiakhronologika*, 30.
11. Suggested by Aikhenval'd, *Pushkin* (1908), 86, and Vatsuro, "Introduction," 50.
12. Noticed by Ermakov, *Étudy po psichologii tvorčestva A. S. Pushkina*, 174.
13. Aikhenval'd, *Pushkin* (1908), 82.
14. Libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte, 1787.
15. Alexandrov, "Correlations in Pushkin's *Malen'kie tragedii*," 183.
16. Blagoi, *Sotsiologičeskaja tvorčestva Pushkina*, 213; Seeley, "The Problem of *Kamennyi Gosť*"; Monter, "Love and Death," 210.
17. Gregg, "The Eudaemonic Theme," 189; Kotliarevskii, "Kamennyi gosť"; Bem, "Bolskaja osen"; Akhmatova, "Kamennyi gosť Pushkina," 100, 163.
18. Blagoi, *Sotsiologičeskaja tvorčestva Pushkina*, 212–13, 215; Siniavskii, *Progulki s Pushkinym*, 70; Lotman, "Tipologičeskaja kharakteristika realizma pozdnego Pushkina," 140.
19. Golstein, "Pushkin's Mozart and Salieri," 170.
20. Nabokov, *Three Russian Poets*, 15–16.
21. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 240.
22. For the concept of the poet as an undertaker, see my "The Merry Coffinmaker."