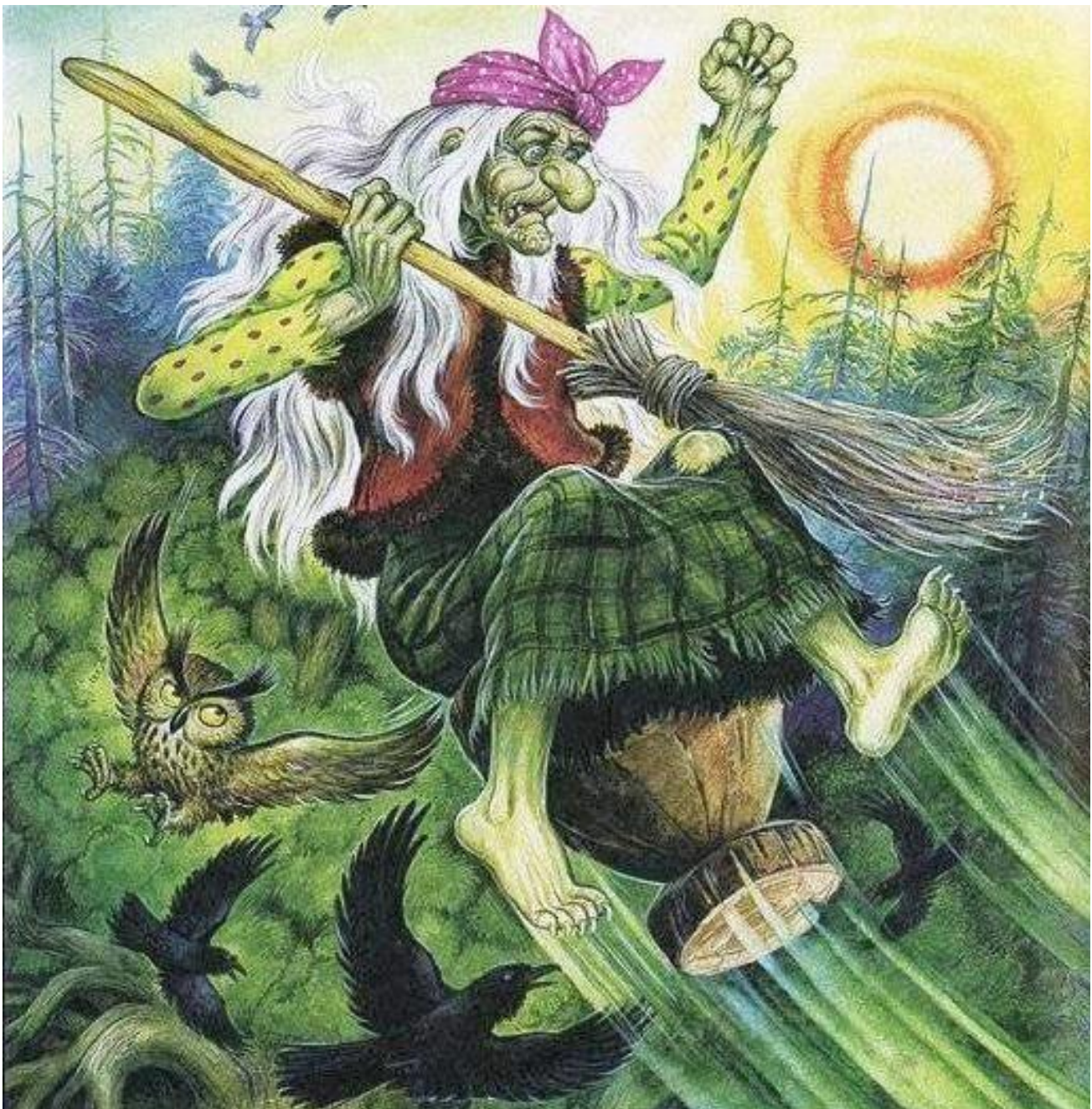


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Learning to philosophize with Russian folk tales



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ABOUT THE BOOK

A common view is that folktales are for children. In general, this is not the case, let alone for Russian folktales. This becomes more obvious when we take a closer look at the rather violent content of these stories. Thus the challenge of this work is an attempt to reestablish the reality of these stories, intended primarily for the adult reader, by offering them accompanied by a philosophical analysis, as well as with questions inviting the amateur of tales to meditate further on the content of these narrations. Since one of the consequences of the infantilization of these stories is precisely that they tend to lose their function, which consists in making the listener reflect on the world, on humanity, on psychology, on himself etc. The allegories or metaphors they contain constitute in fact a kind of narrative philosophy, taking the form of fables or parables, all of which are meant to feed our thoughts. Of course, without excluding children.

Translated from French By Karl-Stéphan Bouthillette

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Conceptual Summary

Structure

Each tale has the following structure:

Story

Questions (comprehension and reflection)

Analysis

1/ Kolobok, the little round bun

Do children belong to their parents?

Concepts: Stability and survival – Possession and control – Danger and self-confidence – Seduction – Mistrust

2/ The Golden Fish

Can we be satisfied with what we have?

Concepts: Origin and paradise – Fracture and tragedy – Irresponsibility – Ambition – Accomplishment – Consciousness

3/ Baba Yaga

Is it a struggle to become oneself?

Concepts: Motherhood – Clean and dirty – Anxiety – Generosity – The necessity of conflict – Rationality

4/ The Vixen Confessor

Is hypocrisy a social obligation?

Concepts: Freedom and ambiguity – Transgression – Preaching and duplicity – Rhetoric and reality – Morality and corruption

5/ Ruffy, son of Bristly

Do we have to struggle in order to survive?

Concepts: Instinct of survival – Bad faith – Reality principle – Individual and society – Justice and arbitrary

6/ Old bread and salt

Are human beings ungrateful?

Concepts: Moral dilemma – Moral universality – Potent and impotent – The limits of omnipotence

7/ The Flying Ship

Is it be good to be an « idiot »?

Concepts: Success and mistake – Hierarchy and reversal – Reciprocity – Trust and love – Being and power – Complacency and weakness

8/ The Dragon and the Tzigane

Are we masters of our own destiny?

Concepts: Dragon – Victim – Surpassing oneself – The game – Reality and subjectivity

9/ The pope with greedy eyes

Why do we pretend to be what we are not?

Concepts: Hypocrisy – Greed – Stubbornness – Conversion

10/ The swan-geese

Is it difficult to grow up?

Concepts: Minority and majority – Trust – Responsibility – Internal authority – Growing up

11/ Truth and Lying

Is the bad more profitable than the good?

Concepts: Survival and civilization – Lying and truth – Bad conscience – Cruelty and sadism – Purification – Providence

12/ The Wise Girl

Why do we want to look smarter than others?

Concepts: Contempt – Intelligence and competition – Revenge and protection – Intelligence and reason

Introduction

A common and widespread assumption is that fairy tales or folk tales are for children. However, it is generally not the case, and even less so when it comes to Russian folk tales. It is probable that, in our modern times, the idea of fairies, magic, spirits, enchanted beings, and speaking animals, has come to be perceived as so primitive, superstitious or archaic that those stories seemed fit mainly, if not only, for children. Thus, the practice of telling those stories has become some kind of a “bedtime” activity, a narrative recited to the child in order to have him fall asleep; a rather strange custom in fact, considering the rather violent content of many such stories. Thus, such tales are now more or less confused with lullabies...

Hence, the wager of this book is to try to reestablish the adulthood or maturity of those stories, by presenting them to the adult reader, accompanied with some philosophical analysis, and a few questions, which will invite the tale-lover to meditate further on the content of the stories. Through this work, we try to remedy some major consequence of the infantilization of those stories: they tend to lose their function, which is to make the listener reflect on the world, on humanity, on society, on psychology, on himself, etc. The allegories or metaphors they contain constitute some kind of narrative philosophy, in the form of fables or parables, intended to provide food for thought to everyone. And this, of course, without excluding the children.

The authors of the present book do not pretend to be specialists in folk tales or in Russian traditional literature. We are simply enthusiastic readers of such texts, and we use our knowledge and experience in the domain of philosophical practice to analyze their content and see what important issues come out of it. Especially since we have discovered, over the years, that they constitute a formidable source of pedagogy, both for the depth of their teachings and for the efficiency of their form, which strongly impregnate the mind of the auditor, old or young. Obviously, we should not be surprised by the originality and wisdom of their content. It is no accident. These stories were born out of an oral tradition polished through the ages, until they were discovered, copied and written down, primarily during the 18th and 19th centuries. Here, we should primarily mention the famous Alexander Afanassiev, who has collected more than 600 traditional Russian tales, transcribed them into a readable way, and catalogued them. But, as well, there are lesser known writers such as Tchoulkov, Popov, Levchine, Khoudiakov, Erlennein, Chudinsky, Rudchenko, Joukovski, Vladimir Dal, Avdéliéva, etc. Other specialists on this matter worked more on the analysis of the folk tales, such as Meletinski, or the world-famous Vladimir Propp, author of *Morphology of tales*.

As well, in wanting to preserve the spirit of the oral tradition, which gives poetic license to the narrator, we have taken some liberties with the original texts: either by combining varied versions that seem to provide different details that enhance the story, or by slightly modifying a version in order to render the plot, the characters or the spirit of a given story more vividly. We hope that the reader will not formalize himself with the freedom we granted ourselves. He should remind himself that even though these stories were once laid down in writing, their genesis is a long process, going through the ages, where, from mouth to ear, many aspects are forgotten, added or transformed. The art of the tale is a living practice.

Russian folktales are largely based on traditional Slavic myths, on ancient rituals or beliefs which are still part of daily life in some remote areas of Russia. Although those narrations are deeply embedded in the Christian belief and culture, we often encounter under the Christian varnish a shamanistic or pagan tradition. As well, because of the immense geography of Russia,

and its constant interactions with many different cultures, there are various inspirations, found already between some more Nordic stories, some more Western or Oriental ones.

We can definitely identify a certain idealism or utopian aspirations in many such stories, a sort of dream for a better world, and, of course, a criticism of the here and now. Often, the hero has to accomplish great deeds, find some precious object, go to far away wonderful places, and combat some beast, a mean or horrible being. The idea of accomplishment is therefore very important: one has to go beyond himself, grow out of fear or pettiness, and thus educate himself in the process. And, in many stories, there are “winners” and “losers”, which will win or lose mainly because of their own specificity, sometimes because of circumstances. We should here make a special remark for the “idiot” or the “fool”, which against all odds and appearances is often the “winner”, warning us against strong prejudices and obvious expectations.

The idea of morality is generally present, but never so clear-cut: the opposition between the good and the bad is not so well defined. We can oppose this perspective to Greek fables of Aesop, or even more to La Fontaine the French fabulist, who explicitly articulates the “official” moral at the end of his fables.

The best example of this ambiguity is the vixen, probably the shrewdest of all animals, portrayed sometimes in a “good” way, sometimes in a “bad” way. Baba Yaga is another such example, whom, although rather horrible and frightening, for she sometimes accomplishes good deeds, but he generally represents the condition for accomplishing something important. Sometimes the “bad” are punished, sometimes they “win”. Still, though the issue of ethics and behavior judgment is duly treated, and even while social values are indeed described, it is not done in any categorical way, as would be expected in Western stories, where crime is generally well established and rightfully punished.

Another characteristic of Russian folk tales is the diversity of characters and the numerous aspects of reality they encompass. They are quite realistic, in the sense that we encounter descriptions of many walks of life, as in a sociological description. We are provided with many details about daily events and habits, instead of the mere archetypal prince and princesses, witches and peasants of which nothing is known beside their main deeds. A good example of this is the vivid description of the house, artifacts and activities of Baba Yaga, a precision that we never encounter in the Western stories of ogres or witches. We therein dwell in the present, and not in the “once upon a time”. And the narrations take place within the context of the present, even when they depict some magical epic or some trip into another world. Those tales are loyal to nature. They witness poverty and suffering, patience or impatience, resignation or revolt, the importance of domestic virtues, family affection, filial reverence, parental love, or their opposites, just as the importance of social life. They account for base behavior as well as for strong aspirations to some nobler way of life. One will notice how those different traits are in many ways still very speaking about contemporary Russian society.

In general, the idea is to allow a better life for the heroes, and often we are told in the end that “they lived well and gathered goods”, a sort of peasant sober well-being where necessities are provided for, instead of the Western, more romantic “they got married, had children and lived happily ever after”. This can be counter posed to the violence of many stories, where one has to survive, sometimes against all odds, against injustice or cruelty; Ruffy the fish is a good example of this struggling situation. The cold-bloodedness and savagery of some stories, such as “Truth and lying”, makes a strong case to defend the idea that those stories were not particularly told to children, but were initially composed to capture the minds and imaginations of grown-ups. As well, we should mention the fact that, contrary to other cultures, such as the Greek, Indian or

Nordic ones, Russians do not possess any elaborated body of myths on ancient gods, nor great epic dramas. Therefore, the popular antique wisdom is transmitted through those short stories describing the most fundamental levels of life: the world, nature, family, basic needs, common desire and hopes, etc.

One should here add a few words about the work of Afanassiev, who was not simply compiling stories. His enormous endeavor, enriching and popularizing folk culture, contributed in an important manner to the propagation and legitimation of Russian civilization. Through this renewal of traditional tales, he was hoping to strengthen the presence of the Russian language, against the predominance of French, promoted by the aristocracy. Very progressive, he had for his accomplishments many problems with censorship and the political authorities of his time. He did not want those stories to be a mere distraction, since he viewed them as an educational tool, on existential and moral matters, to make the reader conscious of important life issues. He established the basis for the later analytical work of Vladimir Propp, who studied different features of the tales, such as the characters, their functions and their metamorphosis, identified the logical structures and established a system of classification of the stories. As an example, we can mention some types of characters he defined: the aggressor who creates problems, the donator who establishes conditions, the auxiliary who helps, the real hero who performs great deeds, the false hero who pretends and fails, etc.

Furthermore, we should highlight the “revolutionary” dimension of Afanassiev’s work, by reminding the reader about the prohibition of many tales in Russia, since the origin. In a way, this situation still takes place now: many stories are not welcome. For example, Afanassiev, who collected and analyzed a great number of Russian tales, was also working on the collection of erotic tales. He has been traveling through Moscow and Vologda regions, gathering stories, songs and proverbs of local people, capturing a reality that was part of the everyday life of peasants. Stories that contained obscene language or indecent descriptions, such as the ridiculing of popes or sexual scenes, were banned from publishing for a long period of time. Apparently, the book that was first called “Russian tales not made for printing”, and later renamed “Russian secret tales”, was printed for the first time in Geneva, in 1872, and only decades later returned to the place of its origin. Funnily, these stories are called “zavetnye”, which means “sacramental” or “cherished”. So, it becomes very hard to guess the content of the book, as if the name of the book itself was trying to hide its reality as much as possible, until the unprepared reader discovers the content by himself. At the same time, these “erotic stories” were popular in the villages: the storytellers, with their inappropriate language, were considered witty and funny. One can thus come to observe the contradiction between reality and the “party line”, a truth which is officially denied.

In an apparent attempt to defend the tales against so many critics, Afanassiev wrote the following lines: “they are the living fountain of authentic folk life, sparkling with the brilliant and witty sides of peasants.” “People still don’t understand that there is much more morality in these tales than in those sermons, filled with school rhetoric.” He understood the fear to face reality, the desire to forget “evil” through an attempt to present everything in the “good light”, pretending that “everything is fine.” It becomes quite ironical when one carefully looks at the content of some Russian tales. Many are filled with a violence that falls into contradiction with all those idealistic intentions. But Dostoyevsky already wrote about the paradoxical nature of the Russian people, where chastity, or pretense for chastity, is intertwined with great obscenity.

Slowly, with time, the forbidden tales were coming back to their motherland. First, through criticism of religion, by allowing the narrative mockery of the popes. Then, by letting the inappropriate content “leak” into everyday life, where, ironically enough, it was originally taken from. After all, folk tales represent a popular wisdom that has the double function of criticizing society and of proposing profound insights as some kind of a therapeutic prescription.

Another observation worth mentioning would be the relation to the tales that many people had in their childhood, at least in Russia: evil traits of some of the characters were hidden or not emphasized in order to protect a child from too harsh a reality, from violence, fear and disappointment. This was done either through the continuous institutional or cultural censorship, that made sure that “bad tales” or “bad features” were not told or mentioned. Or, it was done by the parents themselves, who wanted to shield their offspring from unpleasant or traumatizing experiences. This led to an obscuration of the genuine reality of the characters: for example, Baba Yaga became a nice “grandmother”, and her child eating tendencies were forgotten as something superfluous or even unreal. One would believe only what one wanted to believe, falling into a sort of pleasant illusion. The actual brutality or cruelty of some characters were considered secondary or superficial details and were deprived of any real bearing. In that way, tales were unfortunately deprived of their spiritual substance or symbolic function. Tales were supposed to teach only good lessons, have only “good” and “kind” magic and positive messages. And, if it appeared to be evil or dark, this was by principle understood as a non-essential part of a tale, but rather as some imaginary addition of wicked imagination. Russian folktales had to be pure just like the Russian soul, the soul of an innocent child of God.

This moral situation was so stubbornly imposed that, in order not to take any risks, some school and families were totally prohibiting the books of Afanasiev. And today still, the public authorities are still debating about what measures to take in order to protect the children from such “pernicious” stories. For right or for wrong...

One last point which we would like to bring up to the attention of the adult or parent concerns the usage of those stories, or one’s relation to them, what is called their interpretation. There exists a certain tendency to deny the dark side of those stories, which consists in quartering the content to the mere anecdotal aspect of the narration, denying the symbolic or psychological side of it. This is especially true when it comes to communicating the tales to children, who are supposed to be naïve and pure. The consequence might even go as far as to not tell some stories to younger readers. Of course, this rests upon parental responsibility. But since the work of the psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim, as found in his major work “The Uses of Enchantment, », who constitutes a sort of psychoanalysis of fairy tales, it has been established that children already live in drama and anxiety, and that those stories echo what already takes place in the children’s mind, putting words on it, making it discussable, and therefore dedramatizing internal worries. Therefore, there are many advantages stemming out of using those stories as a cathartic moment, where the child can unload his mind of internal tensions through some symbolic representations. The classical example is the story of the child that is not loved, or the child who is not really the child of his mother or father, as in Baba Yaga for example, and all children psychologists know that this is a basic fear or anxiety present in any “normal” child. Parents should stop telling themselves “fairy tales” on those matters.

Let’s also mention the case of those “speaking animals”, so popular among children. In an innocuous way, they provide a “third” person which allows the child to ask himself great existential questions about birth, parental love, disease, death, life, relation to others, sexual differences, violence, ethics, etc. They have a mediation function that allows for dealing with the

unspeakable. Consciously or not, children will recognize themselves, their hidden thoughts and feelings, even when they are frightening or unacceptable impulses. The different behavior traits of each animal play this function: ferocity or cruelty of the wolf, brutality of the bear, deceitfulness of the vixen, submission of the mare, pride of the rooster, fear of the hare, faithfulness of the dog, etc. All are examples of this psychological diversity.

Another aspect of the problem is that, for many parents, because they feel inadequate, they don't want to take the required time, and they recoil from dialogue with their child. They do not reflectively discuss the stories with them. Either they don't invite the child to speak, or they don't take the time to discuss the questions he raises. Or, again, they impose readily made answers that quickly close the discussion. Some claim that their children are too young, or that they only like listening to the story, thus indicating their own mental state more than the one of their children. Let's just tell those parents that they could discover interesting intuitions about themselves and their children by taking up this opportunity to reflect on the stories, and that is the reason we wrote a whole number of questions after each narration. So, in the end, we hope that they will be useful to every parent and children as an interesting prolongation, an invitation to live through the tales themselves.

1/ Kolobok, the little round bun

Do children belong to their parents?

There once was an old man and an old woman. The old man said:

- Why don't you cook a kolobok, old lady?
- With what? There is no more flour!
- But of course, old lady! Scrape the box, sweep the bag, maybe something will come!

The old woman picked up a scraper, she scraped the box, she swept the bag, and gathered two small handfuls of flour. She mixed it with cream, fried it all in hot oil and placed the kolobok to cool down on the window.

The kolobok stayed there for a long, long time, without moving, when suddenly it began to roll. Rolling and rolling, first on the bench, then on the floor, and soon near the door; it then crossed the threshold in one leap, arrived on the steps, and crossed the courtyard to the gate. There he is, passing the gate and escaping, further and further.

The kolobok rolls, and crosses a hare:

- Kolobok, Kolobok, I will eat you!
- Do not eat me, squinting little hare, I will sing you a song!

And the kolobok began to sing,

- I come from the box that was scraped. I come from the sack that was swept. I was mixed with cream. I was fried in hot oil and chilled on the window. I escaped from grandfather. I escaped from grandmother. And from you, the hare, it's not hard to escape!

The kolobok disappeared before the hare even blinked.

- The kolobok rolls, and crosses a wolf:
- Kolobok, Kolobok, I will eat you!
- Do not eat me, gray wolf, I will sing you a song! I come from the box that was scraped. I come from the bag that was swept. I was mixed with cream. I was fried in hot oil and chilled on the window. I escaped from grandfather. I escaped from grandmother. I escaped from the hare. And from you, the wolf, it's not hard to escape!

The kolobok disappeared before the wolf even blinked.

The kolobok rolls, and crosses a bear:

- Kolobok, Kolobok, I will eat you!
- How could you eat me, crooked paws! I come from the box that was scraped. I come from the bag that was swept I was mixed with cream. I was fried in hot oil and chilled on the window. I escaped from grandfather. I escaped from grandmother. I escaped from the hare. I escaped from the wolf. And from you, the bear, it's not hard to escape!

The kolobok disappeared before the bear even blinked.

The kolobok rolls and rolls, when it crosses the vixen:

- Hello, Kolobok, how pretty you are!

The kolobok sings its song:

- I come from the box that was scraped. I come from the sack that was swept. I was mixed with cream. I was fried in hot oil and chilled on the window. I escaped from grandfather. I escaped from grandmother. I escaped from the hare. I escaped from the wolf. I escaped from the bear. From you, vixen, it will be even easier.
- What a lovely little song! exclaimed the vixen. But I became old, Kolobok, I don't hear well. Please sit on my muzzle and sing your song again, more loudly.

The kolobok jumped on the muzzle of the vixen and again sang his song.

- Thank you, Kolobok! What a beautiful little song! How I would like to hear it again! Come on my tongue and sing it to me one last time, said the vixen, pulling her tongue out.

Stupidly, the kolobok jumped on it, and yum! The vixen swallowed the poor kolobok at once.

QUESTIONS

Some questions to go further and to prolong the reflection

Comprehension

- Is the “birth” of Kolobok difficult?
- Why does Kolobok leave home?
- Why does Kolobok wait before he leaves home?
- What is the main theme of the Kolobok song?
- Why does Kolobok sing his song every time he meets someone?
- Which animal is the most dangerous for Kolobok?
- What does Kolobok think of himself?
- Why is it a vixen and not a fox that eats Kolobok?
- What strategy does the vixen use?
- Why does Kolobok trust the vixen?
- What does Kolobok represent?
- What does this story tell us about life?

Reflection

- Is Kolobok right to leave home?
- Is the vixen a positive or negative character?
- Does the story end well?
- Is the world a dangerous place? `
- Should we do what we want?
- Are strangers more dangerous than family and friends?
- Why do in general children end up leaving home?
- Is it a good thing that children leave home?
- Why do parents make children?
- How do we recognize if parents are too possessive?
- Do children owe anything to their parents?
- Do children belong to their parents?
- Do you see any relation between you and Kolobok?

ANALYSIS

Stability and survival

Life is hard, we struggle in order to survive. And death, disappearance or the end of life are always threatening. One has to wrestle in order to stay alive and satisfy one's needs, even though this wrestling might sometimes appear, from the outside, like a game, albeit a dangerous one. Hence, we reproduce ourselves, in order to prolong our own existence. But, engendering life is difficult as well. That is the essence of the story of Kolobok, the canvas of the drama. Perpetuation through crisis.

The first striking feature of the hero of this story, Kolobok, is its banality, its ordinary nature. Kolobok is just a small round bread, a simple bun, the basic flour product that can accompany any meal, the staple that feeds many peasants who cannot afford anything else, like meat or vegetables. Its shape is round and simple, nothing fancy, something easy to make and bake. It has a rather bland taste. Therefore, in this sense, we are all Kolobok, we can all identify to this common and banal character. The story is very simple. This banality is as well what makes it such a popular story or theme in different European regions, even though the narrations encountered in different languages vary slightly. It thus constitutes a funny and attractive tale already for very young children.

The narration begins in the house of a couple of old people, known as "old man" and "old woman". As it is always the case in folk tales, narrative choices, even details, are never an accident, they have meaning: they symbolize some reality or value. Therefore, there must be a reason why it is an old couple, rather than a young couple, or even a single person. Furthermore, we must add that this "old couple" is a typical scenario for Russian folk stories, much more than in many other cultures, as we see for example in "Sister vixen and the grey wolf", "The healing fox", "The animals in the ditch", etc. And the context, the description of the situation, is one of the three fundamental elements of storytelling, along with the event or drama, and the conclusion or resolution. So, let's advance some interpretation of the situation. Why staging an old couple in their house?

First of all, it indicates some permanence and stability, the duration of time, indicated by the lasting combination of the man, the woman and the house, a constancy of persons, of relation, and of place. Because of this, it represents a certain stable anchoring into reality, if not reality itself, through its repetitive, lasting and invariant nature. What has always been and always will be.

Then, it indicates the hearth, the home, the place of safety and isolation, where life can go on because it is protected from the outside world. And it must function quite well since those two old people have managed to survive for so long. However, we will soon discover another "not so safe" facet of this "safety". Furthermore, old age represents wisdom, the time of "knowing better", because of experience. One has to be smart and think a lot in order to survive, and through life, one acquires experience. Paradoxically, old people represent a certain form of weakness, since time has worn them out, but at the same time a certain form of strength, since wisdom allows them to know and act in a smarter and more efficient way. Old age indicates simultaneously the wealth of antiquity and the poverty of decrepitude, the force of experience and the weakness of body, in a sort of relative equilibrium. And, of course, as we will see, this equilibrium and metastable order will be disturbed by the forthcoming event, by the unfolding drama.

In the case of Kolobok, the triggering element is the sudden desire of the old man, his hunger, which reminds us that time is not so constant, that life has its own imperatives, disturbing the eternity and constancy of existence. So, he suddenly has a craving for a bun. Hunger represents necessity, contingency, the rupture with the permanence, the crisis that punctuates and rhythms the illusory tranquility of life. And, of course, since old age is weak, the couple is poor, and flour is insufficient to satisfy such a desire. So, the poor woman protests, suddenly conscious of the sad state of things, of her own decrepitude and impotence. But, since life always encounters expedients - we can call this the "principle of survival" - flour will be found even though there is no flour: by scraping the barrel and sweeping the bag. We can think here of the concept of the Dutch philosopher Benedict Spinoza, the "conatus", which means that beings always try to persevere throughout their continuing existence, as a driving force of being and of life. A theme that will be pursued in the story, as we will see. This concept is reinforced as well by the other significance of Kolobok: he is the child, the perpetuation of life, that would allow the old couple to exist after their death, another form of struggle against time and finitude.

Possession and control

The round bread is finally made and baked, and left to rest, to cool down, so it can finally be eaten. It indicates that life takes time, organic processes are slow, growing up as well, and we have to be patient, in particular when it comes to child rearing and education. And, of course, more than anything else, life is unpredictable, in particular when we observe what happens to our offspring, which too often do not fulfill our expectations, an outcome which surprises us a lot, be it in the positive or negative sense. So does it go with our cake, which instead of patiently cooling down, in order to be consummated later on, as was foreseen, will decide to get up and go, to leave home, according to its own desire of fulfillment and thirst for adventure. Of course, one cannot help here but to make a comparison with the behavior of children, who leave home at some moment, cut the umbilical cord, sometimes deeply or even brutally disappointing their parents. Be it because they physically leave the family home, or because they abandon the expected track, giving up the "right path", the "good" behavior established by their parents.

Of course, one probable objection which might be raised to us on this matter is that it is very strange that a cake comes to symbolize the "child", the offspring, since it is conceived only in order to be eaten. After all, normal parents are not cannibals! Well, we can remind our readers here about the mythological idea of Kronos, eating his own children, so vividly painted by Goya. Kronos feared his children would take over his own power. And we can also remind the reader that the relation between parents and children, and more and more as children grow up, becoming ever more visible around adolescence, has a lot to do with a power struggle, often around the concept of autonomy. It is common for parents to "devour" their children because they don't want to let go on control. As for the "sweet" side of "eating" the children, how often such expressions are used by parents, such as "You are so sweet I will eat you up", "I could devour you", etc. And in a more general way, beside the eating as such, let's not forget that parents conceive children primarily in order to satisfy their own needs, because of some kind of craving for prolonging their own self. Because they want to fulfill their own desires, fulfill their own life, to accomplish through their children what they could not accomplish themselves, or to satisfy in one way or another their own narcissistic drives. Or to obey some instinct of reproduction, just the way animals do, mating and reproducing automatically out of their own needs. Therefore, in reality, when parents pretend to do things for their children, when they want

to attend them or to please them, they are in reality primarily preoccupied about themselves. Children allow a sort of indirect self-gratification, and when parents speak about their children, they often project their own desires and preoccupations and speak about themselves. The children are a mere surrogate self from which it is hard to separate themselves, even though many parents want to deny this terrible reality.

That is why it is so hard for many parents to let their children go, from any standpoint, or to accept the fact their children are the way they are and not the way the parents wanted. Thus the “eating” desire is herein a mere symbol for some instinctive drive that can easily deny the child’s individuality or its autonomy. And one should know that in some versions of the story, the symbol is explicit, since it is said: “They wanted to have children but they couldn’t, so they decided to bake one”.

To summarize, the two concepts which seem crucial to capture what we just described here, are possession and control. Possession, for the simple reason that the parents have the impression that they own their children, even though they won’t admit it easily, and are probably unconscious of this reality or of its intensity. The possessive pronoun “my children” although hard to avoid in order to speak about those children, is a good indicator of it. And control, because parents want to determine the behavior and the course of life of their children, not necessarily in details but in its major orientations, its values for example. Since parents view the child as an extension of their own being, they easily practice a form of intense projection, forbidding the necessary distance for their child to become himself.

Danger and self-confidence

Let’s now move on to the next step, which could well be called “life is a jungle”. Initially, Kolobok stays put, he does not move: “Kolobok stayed there for a long time, a long time without moving” says the story. Again the slowness of time, the time of maturation, growth and development. An interesting principle, since humans are so impatient! We can even imagine that Kolobok got bored: parental home can indeed represent quite a boring place for the adolescent. But, finally, maturity dawns, the time for autonomy, and, unexpectedly, Kolobok the bun starts moving on its own, and leaves the house, supposedly abandoning the place of safety and protection. But we shall discover later, through his singsong, that it is not the way he perceives his escape: home is not for him a safe place. After all, the “old couple” made him in order to consummate him. “I escaped grandpa, I escaped grandma”, sings he, as a rebel teenager. In his words he puts his parents on the same level as the other hungry animals that he tries to escape from: they are as much of a threat for his own life. After all, they want to consume him as well. The world is a dangerous place altogether; safe heavens are mere illusions, they are just as many invisible traps. But, anyhow, Kolobok has to go, like any child does! This is well described by the rolling down of this round cake-being: the process takes place by itself, and Kolobok rolls along, further and further away from home. He does not know where he is going, but he is happy to fulfill his destiny, trustfully, freely. So he sings along!

Of course, it won’t be long before the “outside” danger shows up, in a very explicit way, since, at the very outset, he meets a hare which tells him right away “I will eat you”. Kolobok is little, the hare is bigger. But, our doughy-hero is “strong”, so he calls the hare “little”, using in the Russian language a diminutive, a prefix indicating familiarity. He has learned much about

life, through “making, baking and waiting”, a sort of skillful metaphor for education. He is now smart, and he can therefore defend himself, in this case with a little song, the composition of which is interesting. It recapitulates the life-story of Kolobok. First the difficulty of finding flour: “I come from the barrel that was scraped. I come from the bag that was swept.” All metaphors that symbolize the difficulty of conceiving life. Then, “I was mixed with cream. I was fried with hot oil”, which symbolizes the work involved in child rearing. “I was cooled down by the window,” recalling the patience to be developed while getting to know the world. Then “I escaped grandfather. I escaped grandmother,” which implies that parental home is a sort of prison where one is deprived of freedom, where one cannot accomplish one’s life and destiny, where one will be consumed. Therefore, it is better to take distance from one’s origins, to cut oneself loose from the entangled roots. This song changes, growing throughout the narration. Every time Kolobok recapitulates his life story, which constitutes his experience, and therefore the totality of his knowledge. And as all humans manage to do, this knowledge and experience allows him to face reality and to escape unharmed from danger. The struggles of life constitute one’s best lessons in order to survive. And the repetition of this song becomes a sort of incantation, a protective mantra, and, at the same time, the fabrication of a myth, the myth of Kolobok, like we all do with our own life narratives. It becomes a sort of exorcism against perilous events, and the elaboration of an identity.

Thus, Kolobok has learned the nature of danger and acquired the capacity to escape it. He thinks that he is smart. Like a cheeky teenager, by escaping home, he has gained self-confidence, as we can observe when he teases the hare about his funny eyes “Do not eat me, squinting little hare.” His humor indicates his spiritual freedom, or his unconsciousness, when he laughs at the strange appearance of “danger”. He decides what will happen, he sets the agenda: he will sing his song. Then comes the wolf, where basically the same situation repeats itself, except that Kolobok has a little more experience “I have escaped the squinting hare” he adds. But, at the same time, he becomes conscious, he can experience more fear with this bigger and more dangerous animal. So this time, he does not tease the animal. Then he meets an even bigger animal, more dangerous still: the bear. If the hare represents fear, the wolf represents cruelty, and the bear represents brutal force, all of them being rather stupid and primitive.

One senses, through the narration, the increase of danger, it is visible for the reader, especially for the child, but at the same time Kolobok has gained in self-confidence, through experience. “I have escaped the squinting hare. I have escaped the grey wolf”. He teases and taunts the bear and becomes bolder: “How could you eat me, crooked paws!” says he. He laughs at the bear for his appearance and challenges him, sure of his own fate. Then he swiftly disappears, without any time for the bear to react. His experience has made him smarter, faster, and more daring than ever, but he tends to overestimate himself, in spite of the growing danger. One of the reasons that probably explains his future demise.

Seduction

Of course, when comes the vixen, which seems much less dangerous than the wolf or the bear, from which he successfully escaped, Kolobok does not perceive the danger so well. He knew even the danger of his native home, but he does not recognize the nature of this new menace, or he will overlook it. Plus, he is now more and more sure of himself. He is cockier than ever. Visibly, he does not know the secret of all fairy tales: the smallest is the being, the more innocent

looking is the figure, most likely the smartest is the character. In other words: beware of appearances! If Kolobok was truly wise and experimented, and not so self-satisfied, he should have suspected from the very beginning of this ultimate encounter that there was a danger, since the danger was not apparent anymore! The behavior was too strange to be true. But our hero is naive. Indeed, the vixen does not threaten him at all, quite the contrary, when she nicely says: “Hello Kolobok, how pretty you are!” And, as usual by now, Kolobok, who more and more thinks he knows how the world functions, proud of his own power, intones his famous little singsong to the newcomer, bragging about all his escapes and victories, challenging his new “opponent”, defying her on the fact that he will not be eaten, once again. But the vixen is a different kind of animal, known in many cultures as the symbol of guile and artifice: it knows how to profile and manipulate, and therefore it understands how people’s minds function. Although seductive, it is quite rational, as it proves in its psychological insights of our hero. And it incarnates the reality principle that will brutally sober up Kolobok, totally imbued with himself.

Of course, in the whole list of characters Kolobok met, the vixen is the first female animal: unlike these blunt males that use brute force and are not so smart, the female uses seduction and flattery, a deceitful strategy for which visibly Kolobok, who knows only how to defend himself against the brutality and directness of the harsh world, is not ready yet. In a way, this indicates that a stronger and more sophisticated will inhabits this animal, since she calculates, she is patient, and she can hide her strategy and intentions. In a way she is more human than the other animals, since more shrewd. “What a wonderful little song!” exclaimed the vixen, which then claims to be old and deaf, therefore harmless. Once again, we have the ambiguity of the weakness and strength of old age. And she insists again on the beauty of the song, until Kolobok, tamed and confident, is where she wants him to be: in her mouth, ready to be eaten. Of course, the strategy is here very simple: by telling Kolobok how strong he is compared to her, he lowers his defenses, and by telling him how beautiful his singsong is, he becomes bewitched, flattered, he is under the spell and helpless. His vanity and self-conceit make him very weak. He cannot think any further. He wants more of this sweet rapturous narcotic. And he will therefore not hesitate to throw himself in the very mouth that will devour him. One ironical aspect of the vixen strategy is how she qualifies as “cute” the song of the “brave” Kolobok, even though this is the story of his life and adventures, as we should remember. Thus she is mothering him, just like adults who find it so charming when children tell some very serious preoccupation or idea, that they consider naive and innocent. And, of course, just like most of us, Kolobok enjoys being mothered and found so cute! Men love this dimension of the female character. Who can resist such comforting words and a feminine seductive smile? Of course, at this moment, the interpretation of the story can lead us to conclude that the inevitable “ravishing” and “consuming” of the child will take place through seduction, not through force.

Seduction – at least one important form of it - operates by telling the other one how he is strong, and how we are weak compared to him, as a sort of direct or indirect flattery. And, we can observe in our daily life how some women play “weak and stupid” in order to seduce the “strong” men who feel empowered by this attitude, and how some men play as well a “weak and suffering” role, and complain, in order to seduce those women who are then happy to play the role of the “strong nurse”, and enjoy consoling the poor victim. Thus, when the child grows, through seduction, playing a new social role, he will be charmed and fall in love, and because of this, or through this, he will abandon the family shelter. We then know the classical singsong of parents to think their child has been abused, cheated, robbed, tricked or else, by some man or

woman of little scruple, some crafty person that has managed to manipulate “our poor child”. Of course, “our wonderful child” was most likely seduced by some person who is far from being worthy of his wonderful nature. The hidden thought is “Indeed! We have not made this child of ours for someone else. We have not raised him the best we could, just to be “consumed” by some suspicious and unhealthy person!” But alas! Our children are made to be “stolen”, physically or psychologically, or “perverted” as some parents see it, although some societies and families are strongly organized to prevent such a “tragedy”, by a sort of endogamy - and thus goes the world. Life is a permanent countering and frustration of basic Freudian impulses, incestuous or else... And the poor parents can forever lament that their “appetizing” Kolobok has been stolen from them by this wretched vixen because of his own stupidity.

Mistrust

How many persons find in the Kolobok story only a naive and innocent tale! Yet, it deals with so many important issues of life. Desiring, conceiving, fostering, learning, struggling, surviving, patience, seducing, risking, all different forms of power and surviving strategies. No wonder this very simple story has met so much success through the ages and throughout the world. Of course, some parents will use the story to teach some homegrown and self-serving wisdom or moral principle that fits them. Among the most common ones are: “Don’t leave the house: it is dangerous out there!” and “Don’t believe the strangers, they cannot be trusted!” The story is then used to teach fear and mistrust. Without knowing it, they espouse the reduced and selfish standpoint of the parents inside the story, who want to keep their child under their wing, like the mother hen, and “consume” it themselves. But it is not the point of view of the narration, which is above this perspective, and critical of such xenophobic temptations, as we try to explain in our analysis. Neither is it the standpoint of Kolobok, who sets the parents in the same category as the other dangerous animals. In this sense, the story is a teaching for the parents as well - or especially for them - in order to render them conscious of the sometimes abusive and possessive parent-child relation, a common and pernicious phenomenon that is difficult to realize, accept and modify, for cognitive, existential and psychological reasons.

Probably one of the reason why this story was born and had so much success, especially in the traditional and agricultural mode of existence, is the wide spread conception in Russian culture that children are made to serve the parents, since the parents gave birth to the children and raised them. It is a sort of moral obligation: paying the debt back. The parents tell themselves: in order to survive, bear a child, and at least someone will hand you a glass of water when you get old. A commonplace in Russian culture. Thus, the child will serve the ones who made him “fresh and appetizing”, by a mixture of sensuous or emotional desire and utility. No wonder Kolobok tried to escape! He wanted to become himself, an escape this existential prison. And we cannot be sorry for the ending. It looks like he accomplished his destiny. Anything is better anyhow than being “eaten up” by the parents, an idea that heavily criticizes the myth of “we want the best for our children, for themselves, and not for us”, so common in parents’ mouth. The same “familial cannibalism” that we find in the “Little red riding hood”, where the grand-mother/wolf eats her granddaughter.

Even if the child, or the parent, doesn’t analyze and grasp the fundamental issues in the story, it echoes profoundly in their soul. As the poet Schiller said: “What the child intuitively perceives as the beauty of the starry sky, will later become perception of truth.” So, what is the truth of this story: does it end well, like in many fairy tales, or badly? Is there accomplishment or

drama? Well, it is up to the reader to decide and construct his own version of truth. Some will see in the story an apology of love as powerful and romantic: the parents wanted fusion, but Kolobok escaped and had fusion with the vixen. In this case, the story has a sort of paradoxical happy ending, since the fusion actually took place. This, of course, opposes the parents who think this story has a bad ending, where Kolobok is punished for having left in a thoughtless way the protective shelter of the family home, a more widespread interpretation. They seriously consider as dramatic and frightening the ending of the story. Or we can take as well the whole story as a comedy, as a satire, where different types of psychological functioning or existential postures are being mocked: the possessive parent, the cocky young man, the seductive woman, control, possession, love, etc. The story is then a scene where we are depicted in our most ridiculous tendencies. The story is told in order to make us become conscious of ourselves and of our established schemes, giving us the possibility to grow beyond our own psychological and existential limits. And to learn the fundamental principle that contrary to common belief and strong gut thinking, our children are not our children.

2/ The golden fish

Can we be satisfied with what we have?

Once lived an old man and his wife. They were lodged in a dirt-covered hovel that even the poorest would have refused to occupy, but they did not complain. For thirty-three years, the old man and his wife were happy together. Sometimes they bickered, but it never mattered much.

The old man was a fisherman. While he was fishing, his wife was spinning thread, sitting at her wheel. In life, bad times alternate with good ones. Now, at that moment, when this story began, nothing was going on as before anymore. It was as if all the fishes from the sea had gone to other oceans. The old man stubbornly persisted, but he no longer caught anything.

One morning he casted his net into the water, but only mud came up to the surface.

- What does that mean!? He mumbled furiously, throwing his net again.
- Oh, oh, how heavy it is now!

He was suddenly filled with hope. But, alas, there was only a bunch of green algae caught in the net.

- I'll try a third time, he said to himself, thinking of his wife, who had nothing to eat.

The net was so heavy to pull out that the old man nearly fell into the water trying to bring it up. He mobilized all his strength, pulled, and pulled... How disappointed he finally became when he saw, wriggling in the middle of the meshes, only a tiny little she-fish, no bigger than a little finger, yet shining as if made of pure gold.

- Cursed she-fish! lamented the fisherman. My wife will swallow you in a single bite and I won't even have the slightest scale to put under my teeth!
- Let me go back into the sea, said the she-fish. I will reward you by granting each of your wishes.

The old man jumped. Since he had been a fisherman, he had never heard a fish talk!

- Well, then, go! Swim wherever you like, he said, throwing the little she-fish back into the blue waves. Anyway, we would have strangled ourselves with your tiny bones!

It was already late. The old man picked up his net and went home. There, his wife was waiting for him. The empty pans were placed by the fire. The old man did not know what to do to console his wife. He told her of the encounter with the golden she-fish which spoke in such a sweet voice.

- He promised to grant each of my wishes, he said. But nothing came to my mind!
- What an idiot you are, she cried out. Nothing came to your mind! You could at least have asked for a new tub, ours has more holes in it than your old shoes! Go back to the water's edge and ask your little golden she-fish for this favor!

There was nothing one could reply. The old man returned to the shore. Along the way, he kept repeating his wife's wish, so as not to forget it.

- Fish, pretty little golden she-fish, he called to the waves. Come, please, I must talk to you.

The sea waved and the little golden she-fish came out of the depths.

- You make such a noise, she said. I am not deaf. Would you have a wish to make? Do not be afraid, express your most secret wish. I have given you my word and I will hold it.

- Do not be angry, the old man sighed. My wife is not happy. She says we need a tub and that I should have asked you. If you do not find a new one, it does not matter really, as long as there is no hole in it.
- Be easy, gently replied the she-fish. A tub is easily found. Go home now.

The fisherman returned home, skipping like a young man. His wife was finally going to be happy.

As he approached his hovel, he saw her washing the linen in a magnificent new shiny tub. But, instead of looking cheerful, she was furious.

- What an idiot! What an ass! What a good for nothing! She yelled, plunging her arm into the water to look for a rag to throw in his face.

- What's wrong now? asked the stupefied old man. For thirty-three years we have lived together, and you have never been like that!
- Shut up, you triple fool! You could at least have asked for a new house? Look at the state of ours. What's the use of having a new tub? We're surely not going to live in it!

The old man sighed and slowly returned to the seashore.

- She-fish, pretty little golden she-fish, he murmured.
- What do you want from me? Replied the little she-fish in a soft voice.
- Do not be angry, sweet she-fish, the old man muttered. But, my wife desires a new house. She complains a lot and calls me an idiot.
- A house is not too high a price for saving my life, replied the she-fish. Go home, I hope your wife will be satisfied.

The old fisherman hurried back home. What was not his astonishment to see, in place of their old clay house, a beautiful wooden house with a solid roof, a cellar and an attic. His wife was waiting for him at the entrance, sitting on a bench.

- Have you no brain really? She shouted.

Her anger was so great that it made sparks and it is a miracle if the old fisherman did not catch fire.

- What have I done? He amazed himself. Do you not have what you wanted?
- You're just a fool! Asking the she-fish for a mere house, when she told you she would fulfill any of your wishes! Let her keep this house, I prefer a castle!

The poor fisherman now trembled with fear before his wife. She who was so calm and gentle had turned into a fury.

Plunged into these thoughts, the old man returned to the sea. What would the she-fish think? he asked himself anxiously. To restore his courage, he told himself that the she-fish would not eat him anyway and that it would be much worse if he returned home without having satisfied his wife.

- She-fish, pretty she-fish, he called with a timid voice.
- What do you want? asked the golden she-fish, a few moments later. Have I not fulfilled your wishes?
- Yes, the poor fisherman stammered, but my wife is not happy. She no longer wants a house, she wants a castle. She wants to wear clothes of velvet and silk, have gold dishes and crystal glasses, she wants to be surrounded by servants. She deserves a correction, but I do not dare.
- You are a good man, said the little fish. Go back home, your wife will be satisfied.

And, on this, she disappeared into the blue waves of the sea.

The old man returned home, and shrieked. From a distance he had seen the palace. It was all of marble and alabaster. His wife, proud as a peacock, gave orders to a multitude of servants and, never satisfied, slapped them or pulled their hair to make them obey.

The old man would not believe his eyes. The show was too distressing.

- Here I am, said he in a trembling voice, clasping his hat in his hands. Are you satisfied now?

The old woman looked at him with contempt.

- What do you want, wretched? Go back to the stable! Change the manure, bring water and food to the horses. When you have finished, you can sleep with them on the straw.

The poor fisherman's eyes filled with tears. What had become of his sweet loving wife? A heartless harpy! But, already, obeying the orders of the wicked woman, a valet struck him with a whip, and he had to go to the stable.

A week passed. Then another. This new life infinitely pleased the wife of the fisherman. She changed clothes all day long and spent her time admiring herself in the mirrors. The servants were inexhaustible in compliments, but all spoke ill of her in her back. One day she had had enough of constantly changing her ornaments and had the old fisherman taken from the stable.

- By your fault, she said in a disagreeable voice, I am but an insignificant countess. If you had a head on your shoulders, you would have asked the she-fish to make me a tsarina. It is not too late to do well. Return to the seashore!
- Did you go crazy? shouted the old man angrily.
- Shut up, bum! sharply replied the wicked woman. How dare you speak this way to your mistress? Scoot! Or, you will be whipped!

The poor fisherman had only to obey.

- She-fish, pretty golden she-fish, he murmured. I am so confused... But, listen, my wife would like even more...
- What does she want? asked the she-fish immediately.
- My wife wants to become a tsarina, he said, blushing with shame.
- I will help you, replied the she-fish, pitying the good man. Your wife wants to become a tsarina, so will she be, but this is the last time. I never want to hear about her again.

The poor fisherman had not even time to thank her, the little golden she-fish had disappeared in the waves.

- How amazing it would be if my wife called me an idiot by now! he thought to himself as he returned home happily.

When arriving, he suddenly remained as petrified. In front of him stood a marvelous palace, full of gilding, shining with a thousand lights. The old man climbed the monumental staircase and entered a vast reception hall. Seated at the end of a long table in the midst of counts and countesses, his wife held an enormous scepter in her hand, shaped like a duck leg. A servant filled her glass with some wine of refined color, then bowed to the ground. The old woman ate loudly, clattering her tongue, then wiped her fat-stained mouth directly with her skirt. The old man was so happy that he wanted to laugh.

- Tsarina, he said with respect, I expect that you are satisfied with your old and stupid husband now. I hope that you will be able to reward my efforts and that you will grant me a place at your table.

Poor naive old man! He was not at the end of his troubles.

- Disappear from my sight, wretched! the old woman shouted at his address. Do you not see that I govern alone now?

She clapped her fingers and guards grabbed the old man by the collar and threw him out.

A week passed ... then another ... and the old woman grew tired of being a tsarina. She ordered the guards to go and fetch her husband once more.

- Go back to your golden she-fish, she yelled at him, as soon as he had crossed the door, and tell her that I wish to become the queen of all seas and oceans! The golden she-fish will be my servant from now on.

The old man dared not reply. He bowed and went out. He walked very slowly to the seashore and sat down on the beach.

What to do? He was ashamed, but had no alternative but to obey his wife. In a low voice, he called upon the she-fish.

The horizon became black as ink, the wind howled and the sea broke.

- What do you want with me? asked the angry she-fish.
- My wife is a little strange, but no one is perfect, stammered the old fisherman. Could you, once more, grant her wish? She wants to become the queen of the sea and you should be her servant from now on.

The fish did not answer, she flicked the water and disappeared. A flash of lightning then illuminated the sky and a violent thunder struck.

- My wife is finally going to be happy, thought the old fisherman, on his way back. The pretty little golden she-fish will surely fulfill her wishes.

He had to rub his eyes in order to believe it: where the magnificent cupolas stood beforehand, there was nothing but a poor hut of clay. His old wife, dressed in rags, was washing some torn linen in a holey tub. She did not lament, she did not sob. But on her wrinkled face, bitter tears were running.

QUESTIONS

Some questions to go further and to prolong the reflection

Comprehension

- Why did the couple live happier before the story started?
- Why does the woman get angry with her husband?
- Why does the man always accomplish whatever his wife wants?
- Why are those two persons married together?
- What does the man want in life?
- Why does the she-fish not answer anything on the last encounter?
- What does the she-fish represent in this story?
- Did the woman learn anything by the end of the story?
- Should the man have reacted differently to his wife?
- Is the man responsible for the conclusion of the story?
- Is the she-fish fair in her punishment of the couple?
- Does this story end well?

Reflection

- Do you behave more like the fisherman or like his wife?
- Is ambition a good thing?
- Is it important to be wealthy?
- Should we control our desires?
- Does love mean to accept everything from the other?
- Why would someone become mean?
- Can someone be too nice?
- Is it possible to be satisfied with what we have?
- Do we freely determine our own existence?
- Why do people accept to be dominated by others?
- Why do people try to dominate others?
- Why do we think that the world is unfair to us?

ANALYSIS

Origin and paradise

« Many years ago lived an old man and his wife ». The antiquity of the story indicates some archetypal significance to the story: like in the story of Adam and Eve, we will be told some fundamental reality of human existence, in this case also related to the idea of a “couple”. Here as well, the issue between man and woman is not only biological, related to reproduction, but anthropological, related to the nature of the human being itself, the gender division representing some anthropological invariant. Therefore, the human animal cannot be thought of outside of this relation, constitutive of its self, of its identity. In this way of thinking, as we will see in this story, the couple, in its antinomic functioning, incarnates in a vivid manner the fracture of being: this internal division and dissension of the self is characteristic of our species, it establishes our mere existence as an eternal problem. Thus, the later drama unfolding within the couple, as depicted in this story, has been countlessly reenacted ever since and will always and forever reside, in each and every one of us. The whole cycle of this psychological epic captures the cycles, long or short, the dynamic tensions, that structures and rhythms our existence.

Initially, we are still in paradise: man and wife are together, leading a peaceful life. The initial setting of the situation, the primitive and naïve scenery presented to the auditor, as with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, seems to offer a sort of primordial human nature, a type of “goodness” before the “original sin”: the infancy of man. First of all, the state of bareness and destitution of the primitive conditions: “a house of scorched earth that even poor people would not want to inhabit”. Second, the state of acceptance, simple, trusting and ingenuous: “they were not complaining”. Third, the sort of childish constant happiness that nothing troubles: “since 33 years they were happy together”. Here, 33 is not accidental, since it is the alleged age of Christ, when he died on the cross? Thus, most likely, something will now happen, a drama is about to take place. We are about to pass from the golden age, pre-historical, where timelessness and peace reign, to the age of iron, the age of struggling, of hardship and conflict. Before this moment, there might have been some occasional squabbling, but, so the story tells us, “it never had much importance”. Just like children that live in the moment and totally ignore bitterness and resentment. Fourth, this man is a fisherman, which implies that the couple lives out of the generosity of nature, in a pre-agricultural, pre-industrial age, where all one has to do is ask in order to get, like children do. We are not yet arrived what the French philosopher Bergson calls *homo faber*: the man who transforms the world he inhabits, the one who fabricates. Fishing is an activity practiced by many animals. This way of feeding oneself is still very close to nature. The same with the house made of earth, the most primitive material imaginable: all one has to do is bend over and pick it up. Even a log house implies more skills and work. Animals also live in a sort of mud houses, like beavers or ants. In opposition to him, the wife, who is described as “spinning on her wheel”, is already indicated as craftier than her simple husband, as the story will prove. The spinning activity often symbolizes, like with the spider weaving its web, a calculating and scheming activity and character.

Fracture and tragedy

Then, the story announces the incoming drama by introducing the idea of time through the concept of crisis, the idea of change: “bad periods alternate with good ones...”. And now comes the beginning, the inaugural moment where everything is initiated: “at the moment where this story starts, nothing went well anymore...” When the story unfolds, History begins, humanity gets out from its primitive nature, away from the cycles and myths, into a linear process of events that can be recorded and dated.

Everything starts with a singular and dramatic situation, introducing the concept of time. “It was like if all the fishes of the sea were gone toward other oceans”. Man has therefore been abandoned by providence, he is now left on his own, like a grown up child, who suddenly faces the loneliness of personal responsibility, an initial strong feeling of impotence. So, the poor man keeps trying to catch fishes, but “he gets nothing”. Disappointed, bitter, he even gets angry, because “he only catches mud... or green algae...”. But he never loses hope, never despairs, by faith or by a mere sense of survival. And, of course, as the proverb says: “Third is the charm!” As in the symbolical, superstitious, magical and primitive way, things always work out if you persevere until the third time, a number that is often found in Russian stories, with many different explanations, Christian or others, that we won’t discuss for now.

So, the third time, the net becomes very heavy, which means something important is about to happen. But paradoxically, in the net, the fisherman sees only a very small fish, pinkie sized, but shining like gold, and so heavy that the old man almost fell in the water. We know now that we are not in the usual reality, but within a magical one. We know now that logic is not the usual logic, that the obvious is not anymore the obvious, therefore we have to start thinking differently. Of course, following common sense, the fisherman at first is not happy, he does not realize what is happening, unconscious of the gift which he is receiving from providence: there is nothing to eat on this puny fish! Until the she-fish starts speaking, promising to accomplish any wish from the fisherman if he lets her go. The man is so surprised by the turn of events that he lets the fish go, he is so stunned that he makes no request, he is still so skeptical about the promise that he rather rationalizes about the fact with the idea that there is nothing to eat in his catch and it was fine to let it go.

Of course, his wife does not function the same way as he does. She is not so concerned with her husband’s wonderment about the sweet voiced she-fish: she is responsible, she has to take care of the house, and feed the household. She has no energy and time to waste, so she right away gets angry at her husband who did not have the wit to ask for something concrete, a wash-tub for example, since theirs was falling to pieces. Here the opposition between the idealist vision of the world and the realist one, between the contemplative self and the active self, becomes very clear. We should here remind the reader that this tension exists within each one of us, with varying proportions and degrees.

On one side, we look at the world in wonderment, which Aristotle claims is the beginning of knowledge, on the other side we look at the world as a source of necessities, the practical perspective. And, as is often the case, the realist scorns the idealist, for being useless and impotent. Although the reverse is possible too, when the idealist scorns the realist for being too much down to earth, reductionist or ignorant. For example when Jesus, in the parable, takes side for Mary, who has made the “better choice”, against Martha: she prefers to listen to the good word and meditate, rather than being busy, rather than fulfilling practical obligations. One can remember here, as another echo of this antinomy, the famous story of Thales, the Greek philosopher who fell in the well because he was watching the sky, and the servant that saw the scene who started laughing at the pathetic scene. But, in the present case, pressed by the

household needs, the wife gets very angry. The way the story went, it does not seem that she usually gets angry, but now, stuck on one side by the poverty and the lack, and on the other side impressed by the amazing possibilities of the magical fish, she blows up, and even insults her husband, calling him an “imbecile”, ordering him to go back right away to the magical she-fish in order to satisfy her many wants. And, in a way, even though her behavior is becoming quite aggressive, we can understand her disappointment with her “careless and foolish” husband.

The three characters

We all have met someone – or we have been this person – who suddenly, because of practical or economic reasons, stranded between harsh necessity and the possibility to obtain some useful goods, radically change their behavior, just like if they were suddenly taken over by some demon. Possession, or desire of possession, makes one become possessed. This will happen to the wife in this story.

The husband, on the contrary, is rather disconnected from domestic necessity, so far from house matters, that he is scared to forget the request to the fish. Thus, all the way down to the ocean, he repeats aloud the request. This implies that, for him, it is a very formal request, which has no grounding in his soul, the content is foreign to him. He does not really care! Once arrived on the shore, he calls in a very loud fashion the she-fish, just like if she would hear him with “physical” ears. This shows how naive he is. He also is very polite and shy when speaking to the fish. But the she-fish gently reassures him, confirming she has only one word: she encourages him to peacefully go back home. The latter is very happy and obeys, not doubting any moment that his wish will be fulfilled.

From this point on, let us analyze separately the development of the characters: the husband, the wife and the she-fish.

Impotence – The fisherman

As we saw, the fisherman is initially surprised, before being happy with his new discovery. His first good feeling is not even about all the possible gifts, but about the “sweet” voice of the fish. He is visibly a sentimental and contemplative person, a character that fits very well a lack of will, a lack of decisiveness, quite the opposite of his wife. Thus, he doesn’t understand why she gets disappointed and angry. This will be the case repetitively: he has very little time to be satisfied with the different gifts of the she-fish, since his wife, always unhappy, ends up scolding him. Her behavior as well is a surprise to him, since before this turn of events, she never had behaved in this fashion, as he reminds her.

One could hypothesize that this dramatic situation was only an occasion, a mere pretext for the woman to express her resentment and irritation with the impotence of her husband. The story tells us that not much had changed during all these years of common life, a story of poverty, desolation and humility. So, it would make sense to assume that, behind the apparent patience and resignation of the woman, she had built up frustration and anger – merely repressed – against the impotence of the husband. Those negative feelings were just waiting for an opportunity to express themselves.

Even though the wife is getting what she wants from the she-fish through her husband, her irritation and scorn are stronger than any possible gratitude. She brutalizes him. But she

never fears his refusal or his anger: during all these years together she visibly had never witnessed any potent actions on his part. And she is right not to fear. The man suffers from this sudden behavior change, the abusive posture, the violence and the humiliation, but always obeys her, going back to the fish to ask for more wishes. As time goes on, he is more and more embarrassed, since he is conscious of the absurdity of the situation, but he justifies his participation to the process by invoking his wife's reaction toward him. "She only complains and calls me an idiot". He is a victim. His initial naiveté seems to have turned into a strong weakness, a real impotence, an acute form of cowardice. Every time, he is surprised at the fish's accomplishment, at his wife horrendous reaction, but very fatalist, he keeps doing what he is told, passively undergoing events of the world. As the story unfolds and excess prevails, he is more and more scared, and trembles, foreseeing the consequences of all this, but unable to do anything.

He is incapable of changing the turn of events, even though the fish proposes him to fulfill his desires every time: he could have asked for an improvement in the character of his wife or for her to be happy, but it didn't cross his mind. All he can do is to obediently repeat his wife's orders, not granting himself any power. He can neither take the initiative, nor be creative. At this point one can even affirm his stupidity. His only dilemma is to wonder who is scarier: the she-fish or his wife. He seems to be stuck between those two powerful female figures, he is a mere impotent male figure going back and forth with "messages", the courier boy, undergoing consequences: he will receive the wrath of both of them. He act as pitifully with one as with the other.

He is very sad, he pleads his guilt to the she-fish, he blushes of shame, he is embarrassed, he suffers, but does not change his meek behavior. He even knows despair. "She deserves a correction but I do not dare." says he, meekly. What has happened to his sweet wife, that she has suddenly become a heartless hag? She even asks the servants to brutalize him. He finally gets angry with her, for a slight moment, realizing there is a real problem here, but still, he cannot help but obey her, to the extent he humiliates himself and begs, to no avail. "He had no choice", seems to suggest the story, espousing his vision of things. And of course, as usual, at the catastrophic end of the story, he is surprised when he sees everything had disappeared, not even understanding the terrible anger of the fish. We can conclude that he was naive and irresponsible until the end, but there is a moment where to be part of a problematic process, no matter how passively, is to be part of the misdeed.

Greed - The wife.

As we have seen, the wife was "usual", a "good" or "normal" wife, until she discovered all her wishes could be fulfilled. And this discovery had a catastrophic effect on her: she became possessed by desire, obsessed with clinging, taken over by excess and disproportion, ignoring either love or respect. She was possessed by the devil of possession, by lust for ambition. As soon as she saw her husband not as a husband anymore, but as a provider, as a tool, as an instrument for her own greed, she started insulting him, throwing names at him, like "idiot", "stupid" or "donkey", to mistreat him, even worse than a servant. Probably she reminds her of her wretched initial condition. From then on, she is eternally unsatisfied, angry and resentful, since she only sees what she does not own, what she is deprived of, no matter what she already has obtained. The typical scheme of greed. She becomes vain, "parading like a peacock", nobody finds grace to her eyes. Vanity and anger grow of course together, so she brutalizes and

humiliates everyone: in her eyes, all the people around her are nothing but her servants, including her husband, and soon, even the goldfish, and their service is of course never good enough.

This describes the functioning of the egocentric person, for whom everyone represents a mere instrument for her whims and desires. She becomes more and more obsessed with power; in her frantic drive, even tsarina is not good enough. In this worldview, any person is a mere tool for the exaltation and glorification of her petty self. And vileness engenders vileness. The servants, rogue, know this, and tell her what she wants to hear, they flatter her to obtain some favor, while laughing at her in her back. Her greed and ambition are infinite, she wants everything: clothes, money, castle, and even a kingly title, in order to look good, to be rich, to be powerful and famous: all the typical objects that pursue the superficial and ambitious person. Of course, all this is never good enough. But, at the moment when even being a tsarina is not sufficient to her eyes, when she wants to become queen of the seas and explicitly wants the goldfish to become her servant, she definitely has crossed the border toward insanity; she has lost all her senses, she is even committing a form of blasphemy, an extreme form of arrogance. Her baseness and vulgarity have taken a most violent and gross form. She has committed the sin of hubris: she has reached excessive pride or extravagant self-confidence. By some immanent justice, she can now only be punished and will fall lower than ever. So, after having had everything, she will no longer have anything, but this time being conscious of what she has not, since she now knows what she could have, since she already had it! A painful punishment.

In a way, through this epic, she has grown, she has left the earthly paradise where everything was obvious and given. Through this drama she has discovered the reality of the world and the reality of herself, her own abyss. She has experienced the extent of her own being: the whole situation merely revealed the potential within her own soul, her thirst for the infinite, for the absolute, in a material form. In a sense, probably, she has learned more than her husband, or at least in a different way, a more dramatic one. The last sentence, describing how “she did not lament, she did not shout”, even though she had “bitter tears”, tell us how, through this painful experience, she has discovered what we can call “the reality principle”. She has unveiled for us the true price of greed.

Accomplishment – The fish

If we must attribute a concept to the she-goldfish, we would call it “providence”, but also “accomplishment”, since she was the catalyst of the unfolding drama, a sort of immanent justice. She represents some process of reality, a mixture of lawfulness and arbitrariness: she can be generous, but can be pitiless as well. She can modulate her functioning according to the behavior of persons: more to the deserving ones, less to the rogues. At the beginning of the story, she offers a lot to the needy and humble fisherman, at the condition of a simple gesture of generosity: “Let me go back to the sea, and I will fulfill every one of your wishes”. Since the fisherman has very little to lose in this “deal”. A promise that she will confirm at different occasions, which is normal for such a supernatural being: such entities are not whimsical, they represent the invariant, the permanency of the forces of nature. At the same time, she can act in a very personal way, and as we will see, change her mind, but always in a legitimate way. For example, she scolds the fisherman for the naivety he displays by his shouting to him, like if the fish was a “real fish”. As well, initially, she encourages him, reassures him, telling him he has nothing to fear. She reminds him of his generous act action, and hopes his wife will be satisfied, a hope

which might be taken here as a form of irony, since she must know that is an impossibility. Then, the she-fish starts getting irritated with these repetitive demands, showing her “humane” character: “What do you want again? Didn’t I already fulfill your wish?” Just like if she could not predict the consequences of bestowing such a spell as allowing someone to get everything he or she wishes. Unless she presupposed innocently that the human soul is rational, which would be strange for such a powerful being!

She starts indicating that there are limits to everything, but has pity on the poor man. Naively again, when she promises the castle, she assures the man that his wife will be satisfied. Although, this can be thought of as a hint that if she is not satisfied, there is really something wrong with her, and this will definitely spell troubles. The following time, he makes the concept of limit even more explicit: “This is the last time, he says, then I never want to hear of her again.” But the greed of the woman and the impotence of the man are too strong to heed this formal warning of providence. They ask again, and by doing so, they challenge the order of the world, they defy forces of nature, they refuse reality, and they shall be severely punished for it.

This unacceptable hubris is especially manifested by the desire to make the fish, this godly creature, a servant. When the she-fish hears this, she has no words to say, she just strikes his tails and disappears, a sudden action that provokes thunder and lightning in the skies. We now know that the inadmissible has been accomplished, and a grave sanction must be the punishment. What has been done can be undone. Initially, nothing is granted, nothing is given, everything is merely temporarily and conditionally lent; it has therefore to be continually deserved, and all that was granted can be lost if undeserved. At the same time, the dice are thrown. So, good or bad, the drama is accomplished, the story is told, and consequences are fulfilled: we are not in paradise anymore, history has done its deed, irreversibly.

Consciousness

This story is a rich and meaningful one. Many questions and observations can be drawn from it. About the fear the man has from his wife, of her strong will and irrationality. About the childish quality of the man, which makes him a necessary mediator to the goldfish. About the dilemma of life, which makes us wonder if we decide of our life or if life decides for us. But, we think that more than anything else, this story is the story of man, the battle between his desires and his understanding, between himself and the others, between his needs and their satisfaction, between reality and wishes, between instinct and reason, between foolishness and wisdom, etc. It describes the internal tension of the human soul: the debate between the husband, the wife and the she-fish is permanently reenacted, periodically, in each one of us.

The psychologist Karl Jung would claim that the wife in the story is just the dark side of the husband – or vice versa – the shadow of the gutless, meek, childlike self, that passively contemplates the world, unable to act upon it, suppressing its desires and instincts. At certain moments the shadow takes over, like a hungry wild animal asking for the food it was so long deprived of, as children express their power with anger. The powerless self cannot be an obstacle for this drive; it can only contemplate the devastation, although the whole process must bring certain pleasure from liberation of oppression. The wife represents the bitter revenge of the husband upon the world. The she-fish plays the role of the regulator or provider that comes to rescue the torn down personality, either replacing one irrational streak by another, as well powerful, excessive and irrational, but generous, as a form of equilibrium, or putting a definite end to the whole circus.

The meeting with the “shadow” is a crucial point for one’s growth; it allows the process of individuation to happen, as it shows the unpleasant sides that one wants to deny and forget: in this case greed, frustration, bitterness and resentment. Once faced with the reality of the self, some peace can be installed, catharsis has happened and now the soul can set off for a new journey, having reconciled with truth. That is exactly the situation depicted at the end of the story: we are back at the origin but the situation is totally different, since consciousness has emerged. A process has fulfilled its course. Things are ready for a new life. The reader is now conscious. Beyond the simple anthropological aspects of things, and the gender difference, we can find in this tale a metaphysical dimension, the description of the fracture of being. We all know inside of us the separate voices of the three characters represented in this vivid narration. We all have experienced the ingenuousness, passivity and cowardice of the man, the ambition, dissatisfaction and anxiety of the woman, the power, generosity and moral indignation of the fish, and the conflict between those very human qualities or defects. The idea behind such a story is not to offer us a solution to these problems, but simply to make us more aware of them and, in a way, because of that, a bit freer.

3/ Baba-Yaga the witch

Is it a struggle to become oneself?

There once was an old man and an old woman who had a daughter. When he became a widower, the old man married again. The wicked stepmother took the girl in aversion, beating her ceaselessly, and only dreaming of finally getting rid of her. One day, when the father was absent, she said to her daughter-in-law:

- Go to my sister, your aunt, and ask her for a needle to make a shirt for you!

But, this aunt was none other than Baba Yaga herself. The little girl, who was no fool, at first ran to her real aunt:

- Hello, auntie!
- Hello darling! What is going on?
- Mother sends me to her sister, to ask for a needle and thread, to sew me a shirt!

Her aunt warned her:

- Down there, my niece, when the birch tree will try to prick your eyes, tie it with a ribbon. Down there, when the doors of the portal will squeak and will bang, pour oil on the hinges. Down there, when the dogs will throw themselves at you to rip you apart, throw them bread. Down there, when the cat will want to jump in your face to tear your eyes away, give him ham!

The little girl set out on her journey and soon arrived.

Suddenly, in front of her, a smoky cabin appeared, in which was seated the Baba Yaga, with her bone leg, occupied to weave:

- Hello, aunt!
- Hello, my dear child!
- Mother sends me to ask you for a needle and thread to sew me a shirt!
- Very good. Sit down and weave while waiting for me.

As the little girl sets the loom in motion, the Baba Yaga went out and told her maidservant:

- Go and warm up the tub of water to wash my niece. Above all, rub her well, for I want to make of her my breakfast!

The little girl had heard it all, and she stayed there, more dead than alive. When the maid came to fetch her, the poor little girl presented her with a scarf and prayed to her:

- When you will prepare the firewood, dear maid, water it without counting. Do not pity the fire nor save the water that you will pour over it!

Baba Yaga began to wait and wait. Then she approached the window and asked:

- Are you still weaving my niece?
- Yes, yes, aunt, I weave!

When the Baba Yaga had gone away, the little girl took advantage of it to give ham to the cat and to ask:

- Tell me how I can escape from here?
- Here's a comb and a towel, replied the cat. Take them and run away. For the Baba Yaga will chase you. And when you run away, stick your ear to the ground, from time to time, to know where she is. As soon as you will hear her come, you will throw the towel behind you. Then, an immense river will appear. If Baba Yaga ever succeeds in crossing it and pursues you further, stick your ear to the ground once more. If she is comes close

to you, throw the comb. Then, an impenetrable forest will arise which she will not be able to cross!

The girl went away with the comb and towel. When the dogs wanted to rush on her, she threw them bread and they let her go. When the wings of the portal squeaked and banged, she poured oil on the hinges and they let her go. When the birch wanted to poke her eyes out, she tied its branches with a ribbon and it let her go. Besides this, the cat, replacing her, sat in front of the weaving loom. It actually entangled the thread more than anything else, though he wanted to disentangle it. The Baba Yaga approached the window and asked:

- Are you still weaving, my niece?
- Yes, yes, aunt, I weave! purred the cat.

Then the Baba Yaga got tired of waiting. She came out and saw. Angry at the trick she had been played, she began to scold and beat up the cat, for not having scratched the eyes out of the young girl.

- Since the time I have been serving you, protested the cat, you never gave me the smallest bone. But, her, she gave me ham!

When she understood what happened afterwards, the Baba Yaga rushed to the dogs, to the gate, to the birch, to yell at them and to brutalize them in turn.

The dogs said:

- Since the time we have been serving you, you have never thrown us at us the smallest loaf, even carbonized. But, her, she has given us a whole bread!

The portal continued:

- Since the time I have been serving you, you have not poured a even drop of water on my hinges. But, her, she has poured oil there!

The birch added:

- Since the time I have been serving you, you have never tied my branches with the littlest thread. But, her, she has tied them with ribbon!

And the maid added:

- Since the time I have been serving you, you have never given me the least rag. But, her, she has offered me a scarf!

Then the Baba Yaga, the bony legged, climbed up as quickly as she could into her mortar, and, steering with her pestle, clearing her own traces with her broom, she took off pursuing the young girl.

As she was told, the young girl pressed her ear to the ground and, upon hearing of the pursuit, she grabbed the towel, threw it behind her, and immediately an immense river began to flow. Out of fury, the Baba Yaga grinded her teeth. She went to fetch her bulls and they drank all the water. And again, the Baba Yaga started the pursuit.

The girl sticks her ear to the ground once more and hears the pursuit. She throws her comb, and a dark and terrifying forest suddenly stands out. Baba Yaga wanted to gnaw it down, but her efforts were in vain, she could not see the end of it. So she turned back.

Back home, the old man worried:

- Where is my daughter?
- She went to her aunt's house, answered the aunt.

Shortly after, the girl came in, running.

- Where were you? asked the father.
- Ah, father, if you knew! she says. Mother sent me to her sister, to ask for a needle and thread, to sew a shirt. But, her sister is the Baba Yaga, and she wanted to devour me!

- And how did you escape?

The girl told the whole story.

When the old man learned what had happened, he became angry with his wife and shot her. And, thereupon, he began to live alone with his daughter, amassing many goods.

I was there; mead and beer, I wanted to taste it all. On my mustaches they have flowed, in my mouth nothing fell.

QUESTIONS

Some questions to go further and to extend the reflection

Comprehension

- Why does the stepmother despise the little girl?
- Why does the little girl first go to her "real" aunt?
- Why is Baba Yaga so concerned about cleanliness?
- What distinguishes the two types of women from this story?
- What does sewing and weaving symbolize?
- Why does not the cat know how to weave?
- What does it mean to throw the comb and the towel?
- What kind of power teaches the cat to the girl?
- Why do the Baba Yaga "servants" help the little girl?
- Does the girl need Baba Yaga to grow up?
- Is the father aware of what is going on?
- Is the Baba Yaga powerful?

Reflection

- Should we go through painful trials in order to grow?
- Do we need others to grow up?
- Does generosity always end up being rewarded?
- Why do some people like to harm others?
- Does labor contribute to the development of the individual?
- Is the domestic condition of the woman alienating?
- Does the human being have to master the forces of nature?
- Can generosity be learned?
- Is conflict between generations inevitable?
- Is gratitude an important motivation for existence?
- Is coquetry a defect that needs to be corrected?
- Must we love in order to live happily?

ANALYSIS

Presentation of Baba-Yaga

The present story is probably one of the best ones in terms of exposing the character of the famous – or infamous – Baba Yaga. But before entering into the narration, let us provide some background on this Slavic mythical figure, one of the most well known throughout the world. It is not easy to define her exactly, since her functioning somewhat varies throughout different tales. She sometimes is thought of as a mythological figure, representing savage nature, storms, wild forest, or hell, in any case some somber, wild and powerful force. Or she represents a psychological archetype of motherhood perversity, to the extent that she eats children and young people, even her own offspring. As well, she can be thought of as the gatekeeper of the world of death, taking young people, men and women, through symbolic death and rebirth.

Baba means mother, grandmother, old woman, but also “woman”, in a familiar way. In all cases, her name indicates a general conception of mature femininity. Yaga has a rather unclear meaning. Depending on the different archaic languages that might have carried it into Russian, it can mean pain, grievance, quarrel, or different other words that all indicate a form of problem. It means “snake” claims Afanassiev. One can also observe that, in different languages of the Slavic area, her name changes. She is called Baba Roga in Bosnian, Macedonian and Serbian, which translates as "horned old woman/grandmother", and in Romanian, she is called Baba Cloanța, which means "old hag with broken teeth", both referring to her ugly aspect rather than to her problematic self.

Baba Yaga is always old and ugly, clearly showing woman attributes. Some of her features are quite horrible: she has a “bone leg”, only bones and no flesh, iron teeth, which can devour anything and anyone, white and long scraggly hair. Her caricatured breasts are so big that they hang far down, and when she rushes, she throws them over her shoulder. She does not wear the traditional scarf on her head, worn by all decent peasant women, thus displaying her scandalous and wild personality: an excessive and caricatural representation of femininity.

She is a witch, with special powers. She has a smell so developed, like animals, that she can detect human beings or foreign persons. She can fly, in a mortar, guiding herself with a pestle, erasing her own traces with a magic broom. These different instruments are typical of rural life and feminine chores. The mortar and pestle can represent the grinding of cereals, a nourishing activity, but as well it can symbolize obvious sexual activity – a perspective that in the traditional Russian Christian context shocks puritan minds, for who such a reality is dirty. Anyhow, these symbols indicate the initiating rite to adulthood: the confrontation to the Baba Yaga, the arising power of reproduction. The “erasing” broom can in this case symbolize the cleansing, after the act.

The arrival of Baba Yaga is often announced as a tempest. Trees groan and leaves whirl, showing her strong connection to powerful natural elements, while many squealing spirits accompany her, revealing the spiritual dimension of herself. She can make a path through the deep forest by using her sharp nails and teeth. She can ride the wind. She can wage war for a very long time, with untiring efforts: thirty years in one case, with her whole army. Of course, she has many magical objects, like her shield projecting flames on the enemies. If she generally looks like a witch, she can transform herself in a beautiful young woman when she needs to. Thus, any “nice” seductive woman can turn suddenly back into a Baba Yaga!

She has a prodigious appetite. She can eat anyone coming by. She even pursues her enemies with her tongue and, of course, like any good housekeeper, her house is full of food. She is as hungry as the insatiable death, she is always searching, always eating, but she is always reduced to skin and bones. Naturally, her favorite food is fresh children flesh: she is an ogress. So, she won't hesitate to trick the poor naive children, by offering nice gifts or imitating their mother's voice. Although, one will observe that she never eats her prey right away, but always leaves a preparation time, often for the cleaning activity, as a chance for her victims to prove their worthiness and escape their fate.

We have to mention here that the powers of Baba Yaga are not limitless. In fact, in many stories, she is tricked or beaten by some person, even by children. This narrative fact tends to prove that Baba Yaga does not so much represent a figure of fatalism, where the hero is doomed, but more of a challenge, where one has to be good, moral or smart, in order to defeat the dark or evil power. One could say that the hero has to be moral, or civilized enough, in order to overcome the wild power of nature. This is a typical theme of any initiatory rite: overcome instincts through education, sublimate emotions through reason. The hero can get Baba Yaga to self-destroy, for example by tricking her into devouring her own progeny, which happens in some stories.

Her environment is rather feminine. She has no husband; men can sometimes be her servants or assistants, but are not really human, like the bodiless spirits of the three riders - Day, Sun and Night - or Koshchey the immortal. She can have daughters, rarely a son, and three sisters, whose name are sometimes also Baba Yaga, in order to confuse everyone. She generally has an evil behavior, although she sometimes can turn around and help young people to grow up and fulfill their task. But even when she acts in a mean and cruel way, her function is to provide a test for the youth, in order for each one to develop and mature. The good ones will succeed, the bad ones will fail: she will be pitiless, in the same way life is pitiless. In this fashion, she always has a necessary role within society: as a revelator of inner self. For example, when a visitor enters her house, the Baba Yaga can test them by asking whether they came of their own free will or they were sent. And only one answer is the right one! Thankfully, she appears to have no power over the pure of heart, such as Vasilisa and those of us who are 'anointed', protected by the power of love, virtue, or a mother's blessing.

Her house is a typical peasant house, where the traditional oven is an important element. One strange feature is the fact that her house rests on chicken legs and can move or turn around, showing the weirdness and instability of her nature. Sometimes, the house has neither doors nor windows, although they can appear suddenly, reflecting the closed and protective universe of the home, almost fetal. Or, it can be small, then it reminds us of a coffin, especially since the house itself can be surrounded by bones. Like the bone palisade in Vasilisa the beautiful, where cranes are used as lanterns. Of course, this house is far away from any other human home, in a somber forest, beyond a fire river or in a profound ditch, in a swamp, or by the deep ocean. All these places represent mystery, magical beliefs, and life-threatening experiences. Or the pit, the most somber part of the human soul.

Formally, most times, she acts as an enemy of human beings, especially when some foreign person enters her territory. Once more, we can observe the xenophobic dimension of the housekeeper, this animal instinct that views any presence from the outside as a threat. Entering her house in her absence is an unforgivable crime! Sometimes, her home is the underground

world, a holy space forbidden to all other living beings: the “sacredness of home”, the “sacrosanct hearth”, a myth or taboo known under many latitudes, which can be considered a very animal like behavior.

But, as well, she can help the person who needs help in order to solve a problem, avoid a danger, find a special object or has lost a loved one, or one in need of a shelter. She can then provide some magical object or show the way to the far away magical lands inhabited by the spirits. This help will occur most likely with men, especially young and handsome, not so much with women, who are always competitors and must defeat her. But, in any case, the hero must prove to Baba Yaga that he or she is not scared by her, that he or she is therefore capable of dealing with her, implying he or she has what it takes to overcome his own fears. In this case, the hero will always find some element, character, or situation to be used.

As a summary, we can say that Baba Yaga represents the universal mother, with all its dimensions: the powerful, the protective, the emotional, the wild and the arbitrary. Although she is mostly portrayed as a terrifying old crone, Baba Yaga can also play the role of a helper and wise woman. The Earth Mother, like all forces of nature, though often wild and untamed, can also be kind. Some features of her gender are quite exacerbated, which express femininity as a strong power. This excess is partially grounded on an important cultural issue: a strong matriarchal Slavic society. Furthermore, Baba Yaga represents the challenges of growing up, since she incarnates the fearful and angry side of the human soul, the dark forces that have to be surmounted. But, independently of her antagonistic or disruptive function, she acts as a “donor”, claims Vladimir Propp, a famous specialist of folk stories: she supplies the hero – willingly or unwillingly – with something necessary for his development or for his further quest. We can call this a sort of “wicked wisdom”. For, she knows many “secrets” of good and evil: she is the interface between the human world and the spiritual world, or archaic world. There is lot of truth in her, which is why she is so powerful, in herself and in her impact on the collective spirit.

The story

Motherhood

An old man and his wife had a daughter. The mother died, the father remarried. But the stepmother, a mean woman, hated the girl, beating her up, and badly wanted to get rid of her. This scheme is very typical of folk tales, like in Cinderella. The reason it is so frequent in tales is that it symbolizes the classical situation of the girl growing up and entering into competition with her mother. The “nice and loving” mother of the childhood is “dead”, and has emerged the “new” “overwhelming and controlling” mother who is “hindering” the life of the growing girl, not letting her access to her own maturity. Is this situation due to the child entering adolescence and having new requirements, or to the mother not accepting the growing up of the child? The answer does not matter: there is a visible conflict, an eternal one, a drama which implies one has to “die”, which means that each protagonist or antagonist has to give up something of her expectations. In this story, the immediate solution envisaged by the mother is to send the child to Baba Yaga, who is her “sister”, or one might say, her alter ego, a violent, excessive or outrageous one. And the child must ask for “needle and thread to sow a shirt”: an activity which symbolizes motherhood well, because sewing is a mother’s task.

But “the girl is not stupid”, says the story: she is not a child anymore. So, she first goes to her aunt, her “real” mother’s alter ego, a “good” mother, a true “aunt”, the equivalent of

Cinderella's godmother, the fairy. And, like in Cinderella, a few magical tricks will be offered to help the poor girl in distress that she can use to protect herself in her "adventure" with her "bad" aunt.

When she arrives at the Baba Yaga's house, the crone is weaving. The weaving represents domestic activity, but also the spider weaving its web. It symbolizes conniving and plotting. The encounter is very polite: good behavior, civil manners are very important in a girl's education: she has to look good and polite. The girl asks for needle and thread on her stepmother's behalf, a request through which the hag responds by putting the girl to work: she has to start weaving herself. Funnily enough, the "bad" mother, just like the "good" mother, invites the girl to grow up and become a woman: she has to learn weaving and scheming, in order to grow.

Clean and dirty

While the girl learns to be a woman, Baba Yaga tells her servant to prepare a hot bath for her, and insist that she should clean her well, in order to eat her. The cleansing is important: it represents a purification rite. It takes place before the eating, which represents the consumption of the other, the union between beings, the possession. The "bad" mother wants to eat her child: it is hers! But as well, she wants the child to be clean, two desires that fit well together.

Let's examine, for a moment, this desire for "cleansing". What is its function? We clean to get rid of dirt, of dirtiness, of earth. What does "dirt" represent? It is unpleasant: bad smell, bad taste, ugly. It is unhealthy: it brings disease. It is immoral: it means bad manners, disrespect for self and for others. It is an esthetical problem, a hygienic problem and a moral problem. Now, as all mothers know, cleaning is not natural: one has to teach such a skill, such an attitude, and there is a lot of resistance; it implies education and willpower. First, the baby is not capable of doing it by itself, then the growing child might not see the necessity of it, or even might not like the whole idea. One has therefore to fight in order to maintain a "clean order". This goes for the persons as for the house. And, in general, "clean person" and "clean house" go together.

Where does physical "dirt" come from? As a general concept, it comes from "life". First, organic life, or inner life: all these processes that our body is involved in, which can produce trash, dejections, in particular what is connected to nourishment. Second, social life: the interaction of individual and society, where we are contaminated by other: by definition the other is dirty. Third, world life: the contact with many different objects and substances that can stain the person. Therefore, cleaning implies to remove all traces of life, since there is something fundamentally impure in it. We can easily connect this, on a more spiritual level, to the Christian vision, in particular the concept of "original sin": man is born sinner, and has to act in order to "cleanse" himself through his thoughts and actions. And most religions have some kind of similar cleansing concept, and even cleansing rituals.

Baba Yaga is very concerned with "dirt". She does not like strangers: the ones who bring the dirt from outside into her home. She gets very angry when they penetrate her house. One of her signature instrument is a broom, which symbolizes "dirt chasing". Witches even ride those brooms! She washes people, like in this story. As well, she is an angry and violent woman. This implies that she does not like life, does not like the world, does not like the outside, etc. That is why she lives far from anyone else, in remote places like deep forests. Her house is almost like a womb. Or, as sometimes depicted, closed on itself like an egg, on top of those two chicken legs. She does not love and cannot be loved, which explains her bitterness and resentment. She can

only possess, and devour: typical behavior of “bad motherhood”, except Baba Yaga does not pretend to call this “love”! Her obsession with cleanliness and protection reveals her own terrible conception of herself, of others, of the world. Being is impure. She does not want people for what they are, but for what they can be for her: she is afflicted by a high degree of intolerance. Baba Yaga doesn't accept dirt; she protects herself from outside “impure” life and cleans with her magic broom, a powerful instrument that erases everything, even her own traces. The present paradox is that she is dirty: with her ghastly appearance and her mean soul, which is why the broom has for main function to erase the very traces of the crone. She even has a "whorish" quality, a strong sensuality deprived of any soul, even though she rejects relation to any man. Strangely enough, her corruption is not the one that attracts and is seductive, but the one that repels, frightens, creates aversion, the anger and resentment, the rejection of love, provoking disgust and fear in the reader.

Anxiety

Another aspect of this Baba Yaga behavior is its anxious dimension. Because there is possession, there is protection, expectation and anxiety. Because there is fear of others, there is fear for life, there is fear of life, there is anxiety. Often, this fear of life expresses itself as a fascination with death, a mixture of repulsion and desire. As we saw it, a common example of this fear expresses itself in the desire for cleaning, which is supposed to protect from dirt, disease and mortality, a preoccupation quite obsessive in some persons. There is a refusal of the reality that life and death are two sides of the same coin. It is not an accident if the main companion of Baba Yaga is Koshchey “the deathless”, an evil sorcerer of terrifying appearance, who ravishes beautiful women, who cannot die because his soul is hidden away.

The fear of death is a fear of life, because it is a fear of reality. This can explain, among other reasons, why Baba Yaga lives far away from anyone else, why she is so xenophobic: she is always worried someone would penetrate uninvited in her house. Paradoxically, for many parents, anxiety is a sign of love, they take it and express it as a proof of love, when it is only a fear of life, a strong instinct of possession, and a lack of generosity. And, this same anxiety will be transmitted to the children, instead of an attitude of trust that would constitute a true manifestation of love, because it means an acceptance of life, an acceptance of the other as he is. Baba Yaga cannot love, so she is anxious.

The child that must not get dirty, the requirement of cleaning that takes precedence over any other consideration is a refusal of both life and the child, since the latter has to make experiences that imply “dirtiness”, physical and moral. One will remark that, in Russia, as in many cultural contexts, this dirtiness is more acceptable from boys than from girls. No wonder the “pure little princess” cultivates this side of herself, and can become later on, often or occasionally, an overt sort of Baba Yaga. In this context, one can remember the obsession in the Russian culture with leaving the coats out in the cloakroom, and taking the shoes off before coming inside the house, in school or other public places, in particular where there are children. A behavior that, funnily enough, mixes hygienic considerations and moral obligations. Probably, the idea is to make those little beings - body and soul - more “desirable” by freeing them from the impurities of the world. Baba Yaga wants to purify the child, not for the sake of the child, not for the “good”, as a gratuitous action, but for herself, for the consumption, possession and fusion, as the only approximation of love that she can have access to. We are far from the “agape”, the generous love that lets go, that accepts the other one as he is. This is the home of “eros”, the love

that clings and possesses. Thus, the Baba Yaga is always anxious of “not possessing”, anxious of “loosing”, anxious of not getting what she wants, feeling permanently threatened.

Baba Yaga is emotional, irrational and powerful: she only knows her own desire. She is unpredictable and arbitrary: who knows when she will help or not the poor girl or the lost young man. Although desire is a fundamental and constitutive part of the human soul, one has to learn to not be overdetermined by it. The main consequence of this overdetermination is the frustration, the deception, the fear, and the resentment that derives from it. She is anxious and generates anxiety, like those parents who expect a lot from their children. This is the painful “spine” which Baba Yaga carries in her soul, which makes her so angry, and fearful, and anxious. So, she fights and wages war with everyone. In the absolute, one can suppose that Baba Yaga wants to be loved. But it is so unthinkable that it is hardly ever mentioned in any story. And, all the young girls that come to her house are given difficult tasks that make them anxious, since they are threatened to be eaten if they don’t fulfill them. They learn the anxiety of getting older, like any young girl that learns to be responsible, living for others instead of being careless, egocentric and depending on their parents. There is a sort of agony: accepting to challenge oneself and becoming a woman in order to be loved, which allows to go beyond the irrationality and pain of Baba Yaga. The woman which cannot take up this challenge will become like Baba Yaga, and wage war for ever: she will not know peace because she will always see others as a menace, not like a blessing.

Generosity

The girl heard the plans of Baba Yaga, and she is very frightened. Now is the time to put into action the “tricks” of the “good mother”, who had foreseen all the terrible threats. What are those threats? The servant must prepare the cooking fire to eat her. The cat must pull her eyes out. The dog must tear her apart. The barrier must hit her. The birch tree must prick her eyes. Life is definitely dangerous! What are those protecting tricks? To the servant: a scarf, in order to be pretty. To the cat: a piece of ham, for food. To the dog: some bread, for food. To the barrier: some oil, in order to function better. To the birch: a ribbon, in order to look pretty or some other practical reasons. In each case, the girl is threatened by those different characters that are supposed to be in the service of Baba Yaga, but instead of merely defending herself, she offers them a gift which pleases them. Thus, they will side with the girl instead of siding with Baba Yaga, who precisely is not generous, since she cannot love.

So, each time, when the hag will reproach them their betrayal, they will answer her, one after the other, that the girl gave them what their mistress never gave them at all until now, all this time they spent with her, even though this gift was in some cases satisfying a very basic need, like hunger. This confirms the fact that the old woman lacks any generosity whatsoever. Everyone around is there only to satisfy her needs, or they become her enemy. For her, no one exists as a legitimate subject, but only as a mere object. Like a little child, she only knows her wants. Anyone who stands as an obstacle to her self-gratification becomes someone to destroy. In opposition to this infantile behavior, the young girl has learned to pay attention to everyone, and know what everyone else needs, as a condition for satisfying her own needs. This way, she will also prevent the violence: burning, blinding, whipping, squealing, biting, etc. She is growing up, and in order to do this, she has to confront herself to her “negative alter ego”: Baba Yaga, which in a certain way lives in her. In other words: if she does not grow up, she will become like Baba Yaga, the unloved woman, and she will be eaten up by her, swallowed in her ugly anger.

Growing up means to become generous, to think of the other one and of his needs. In order to be loved, one has to learn to love, one has to become lovable, one has to learn to decenter himself. It is in this sense that we can consider that Baba Yaga is the dark side of any “cute little princess” which considers that she is the center of the world, capricious and whimsical. The old crone symbolizes the fate of such a behavior. And we all know how the disappointed cute little princess turns into an angry witch when she does not get what she wants or expects.

The necessity of conflict

Baba Yaga asks her niece if she is still weaving, and the girl answers positively. Meaning she is becoming a woman: she is still scheming and organizing things. In fact, when the cat takes her place in order to protect her, the story explains that he tangles the thread rather than unravel it: he does not have any woman “weaving” power, but only a “wild” power. So, the girl is getting stronger, for example she orders the servant not to save the water she will pour on the wood, nor have pity over the fire. One has to be master of the elements and accept to have this power, without “apologizing” or “feeling sorry”, without some weak “sentimentalism”. This control of the elements is confirmed by the help the cat will give her in order to escape: she will make a wide river appear, then a dense forest. This “magical” action will be accomplished by throwing away a comb and a towel, which represents some domestic elements: beauty and utility. Thus, by abandoning the domestic considerations and possessions, she will gain access to the “outside” world, and obtain power and maturity through this change of attitude and new behavior. From another standpoint, the river may symbolize emotions, like anger, pity or jealousy, which the girl learns to control and put at bay. It also indicates the separation between two irreconcilable worlds. Just like the deep forest can represent the darkness of the womb, or a strange, mysterious, dangerous and even impenetrable place, where we get lost or enter at our own expenses. These are the boundaries she has to establish between her “Baba Yaga” identity and her “mature identity”.

To detect that the Baba Yaga is coming, as the cat taught her, the girl must stick her ear on the earth: this image is very speaking. It means “listening to the whole of the world”, opening up to “reality”. Thereby, the Baba Yaga, using all her powers, like the bulls who drink the water of the river, or her powerful teeth to gnaw at the forest, cannot get through, and, at the end of this terrible battle, the crone, disappointed, has to go back home. The girl has vanquished, she has won over herself, she has become a real woman.

As an epilogue of the epic, the girl arrives home, she tells her father the whole endeavor caused by the stepmother, and how the Baba Yaga tried to devour her. Hearing this, the father got angry and shot his wife. Then, they lived together, father and daughter, gathering wealth. The daughter has won: she killed the mother and even has taken over the masculine element the father represents, following the psychoanalytic pattern. This action represents the psychological “murder of the parent” which, according to Freud, is a mixture – a “complex” – of feelings and souvenirs, generally unconscious, which partially conditions the behavior of a person. It reflects an ambivalent process of identification, jealousy and competition between the son and father, daughter and mother, such as encountered in the Oedipus complex. This “hate” impulse drives the child to eliminate a rival for which he or she experiences at the same time a certain admiration or tenderness. We want to take the place of this “rival”, because we want to be like him, and we have to eliminate him or her. One has to obtain the power of his “parent”, and replace this parent as an object of love, to be worthy of love and love oneself.

Nevertheless, these “women affairs” are an internal matter: they refer to internal life and struggle of a young – or not so young – girl, and have to proceed as such. One can say that all these women: Baba Yaga, the mother, the aunt, the stepmother, all incarnate different archetypal facets of a woman, or the internal struggle of a young girl with femininity and motherhood: dealing with her own mother and with herself as a future mother. A lifelong quest that deals with identity, relation to oneself and relation to the others. Despite all appearance, there is something loveable in Baba Yaga, some desperate quality that makes her so human. Man or woman, she belongs to us and we will want to defend her. And let’s not forget that in different ways, she is the warped instrument, veiled and obscure, of immanent justice.

Rationality

The father, this masculine element, which finally intervenes in this emotional feminine world, also represents the idea of justice, harsh and irrevocable. One can be surprised by this very new and sudden awareness of the situation on his part, a strange contrast with his blindness and absence in the first part of the story. A form of initial impotence which oscillates between absence of justice and rash justice, in a world of emotions governed by powerful women figures, such as Baba Yaga and others. The girl has to grow up before rationality can play a true role in her life. Now it is possible, before it was not. One should also note that the father kills his wife, but does not go after the Baba Yaga: just like if the latter was not a real person, a mere representation of “potent irrationality”, and therefore it makes no sense to kill her, she is a mere allegory.

Rationality, here, indicates a type of behavior and the ideas accompanying it, which are based on reason rather than on emotions. It is based on the power of the mind to think in a coherent way, to understand reality in an ordered fashion, to develop and maintain motivated opinions. In correlation to this, justice means there is a fair treatment of people, which implies a reasonable behavior, which means that good actions or persons are rewarded, bad actions or persons are punished. In such a perspective, one can trust the other, everyone is animated by the perspective of a common good, which implies that we appreciate our fellow men, and we behave well toward them in the hope that they will behave well toward us. If love is not an imperative for such a perspective, mutual respect and appreciation are necessary conditions. In this fashion, human beings can engage in a life that implies peace of the soul and happiness, they can focus on satisfying their needs in a process of collaboration: the world becomes a livable place. Understanding takes the place of fear and superstition.

We can then understand the end of this story: “they gathered goods”, which is the classical ending in numerous Russian folk tales. A very peasant sort of wisdom, where “goods” mean wealth and security, and indicate happiness. One can ponder about such an idea, but if one has to defend it, it could be said as a main argument that the pursuit of wealth has an objective dimension; it takes us out of the irrationality and excessive subjectivity. Work is rational, it is connected to reality, it puts us to the test and it allows for the development of the self. Of course, we can notice the fact that “goods” and “good” are related, rightly or not, which indicates a very materialist way of thinking the good. An instinct of possession that would fit Baba Yaga very well. But, it also reminds us the end of the Chekhov play “Uncle Vania”: when the emotional turmoil produced by mundane people cease because they leave, Vania and his niece can finally go back to work and rest. Happiness is connected to rationality, reality, accomplishment, and justice.

Before terminating our analysis of this story, one word has to be said about the end motif, a mysterious sentence that is often used as an epilogue to many skaski, Russian folk tales. "I was there; mead and beer, I wanted to taste it all. On my mustaches they have flowed, in my mouth nothing fell." An observer was there, just like we the reader, who guarantees us the truth of this story, since he was there, and talks to us about it. Just like we as well, he wanted to enjoy all of it, to drink the various and delicious brew of the story. But the story merely grazed his mind, like the liquid his moustache. Nothing really penetrated, like often is the case with the reader of the skaski, who does not really understand it, who does not think so much about it, who does not so much use it in his life. Like with the parables of the Bible, the text remains far for us, the message is too powerful to be really heard and internalized. Unless we prefer a more Slavic and romantic interpretation of the idea: the order of the universe, this world and even more the other world, is far too mysterious to be grasped by a weak and frail human mind. But whatever is the explanation, we still heard and felt the story: our moustaches got a whiff of it...

4/ The Vixen confessor

Is hypocrisy a social obligation?

A vixen came back from a long retreat. Seeing a rooster on a raised tree, she preached him in this fashion:

- Cockerel, my son! You are perched high, but you turn your mind toward evil thoughts, impious thoughts. You, roosters, have too many women: some have ten, others twenty, others still thirty and some even forty! When you get together, you quarrel with each other, about your many concubines! Come down to the ground, my son, and repent! I return from a distant desert where I endured thirst, hunger and deprivation. I am ready to hear your confession, my child!
- Vixen, dear mother! I am in no state of grace. I have neither fasted nor prayed. Come back at another time!
- Oh, my child, you may have neither fasted nor prayed, but come down anyhow to repent, so as not to die in sin!
- Vixen, dear mother, with honey lips, with pleasing voice, with words full of anointing! Do not judge your neighbor and you shall not be judged, for those who sow the wind harvest the storm! You want to compel me to repent, but it is not my soul that you want to save, it is my body that you want to devour!
- Rooster, my son! Why should we hear these sacrilegious remarks? Why should I commit such a sin? Do you know the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican? Do you know that the Publican was saved and that the Pharisee was lost by pride? Well, you, my child, on this tree, perched so high, you will perish without confession! Get down to the ground, you will be closer to repentance. You will be forgiven and absolved, and admitted to the heavenly kingdom!

Acknowledging the gravity of his sins in the depths of his soul, the rooster wept with contrition. He began to descend from branch to branch. He sank down to the ground and landed in front of the vixen.

As quick as lightning, the vixen seized the rooster in her sharp claws. She looked at him, rolling her ferocious eyes, revealing her sharp teeth, ready to devour him alive, as the heretic he was. But the rooster said to the vixen:

- Vixen, mother, with honey-lips, pleasing voice, with words full of anointing! Is it my soul which you want to save or is it my body which you want to devour?
- Your body and your motley feathers are nothing to me, but what worth I find here is to make you pay for an old story. Remember the day I went into the farm to eat a chicken? And you, idiot, idle, from the top of your perch, you began to shout, to scream, to shake your legs, to wiggle your wings? The chicken then cackled, the geese gaggled, the dogs barked, the horses neighed and the cows mooed. Peasants and wives quickly ran, with axes, with brooms. And I had a hard time escaping them! And all this for what? For an unfortunate chicken! All of this while the owls, on their part, have been feeding themselves forever on these birds without ever being worried! So, fool, good for nothing, you can say goodbye to life!

The rooster then said to the vixen:

- Vixen, mother, with honey-lips, with pleasing words full of anointing! Yesterday, I was summoned to the metropolitan, to become a deacon. The whole synod and chorus praised

me, saying that I was a good fellow, with pleasant manners, a scholar, and, above all, a good singer. If you wish, my mother, I can recommend you for the function of clergyman-baker. The profit would be great: tender bread, Easter loaves, butter, eggs and cakes filled with cottage cheese...

The vixen then loosened her claws. The rooster escaped, returned to his tree, and began to trumpet:

- Dear lady, respectable baker of the clergy, how are you? Is the income hefty, are the communion breads sweet? Carrying the Easter loaves, did you get blisters on your back? And the hazelnuts, devil, do you love them? And by the way, do you still have teeth?

Sad, the vixen went back to the forest, bitterly sobbing:

- Since I have been born, I have never witnessed such a scandal! Since when have the roosters been deacons and vixens the bakers of the clergy?

Glory to him and his power, from now on until eternity. And this is the end of the tale.

QUESTIONS

Some questions to go further and to extend the reflection

Comprehension

- Why is the rooster highly perched?
- Why does the rooster not believe the vixen?
- Why did the rooster end up being convinced?
- Why is the rooster crying?
- How does the rooster return the situation to his advantage?
- Is the vixen clear on her own motives?
- Why does the vixen compare her fate to the one of the owls?
- Did the vixen get caught in her own trap?
- Why is the vixen scandalized?
- Are these animals true believers?
- In what way are the vixen and the rooster similar?
- Who is the most cunning in the story, the rooster or the vixen?

Reflection

- How do we decide if what we hear is true or false?
- What function does religion fulfill?
- Can we laugh at everything?
- Why do we become indignant?
- Does the end justify the means?
- Does morality sometimes serve to justify more prosaic concerns?
- Is society a jungle?
- Is hypocrisy an indispensable attitude of life in society?
- Is it possible to be truly moral?
- Should we instrumentalize others in order to satisfy our needs?
- Are we always aware of our own motivations?
- Do we end up believing our own inventions?

ANALYSIS

The Vixen

Freedom and ambiguity

The fox is an ambiguous animal in its relation to man: he is both considered useful and harmful. He is useful for his role in chasing small rodents who are carrier of diseases, as well for his fur, very popular in some periods. But, he is considered harmful as a predator of small domestic animals and as a carrier of diseases, such as rabies. Let's add to this perspective the idea that he is smart and cunning, for example by the way he digs holes with many exits, which makes him hard to catch. He is inventive, as shown by his agility to escape hunters, the fact he uses and remembers many hiding places for his food, that he is capable of entering the most well protected animal shelters in order to feed himself and that elaborates and varies hunting strategies, which very much surprise his prey, such as pretending to play or lay "dead". He does not hesitate to live close to men, even next to cities, and has a tremendous capacity of adaptation. Another important feature is his appearance: his oblique eyes and his sharp muzzle, his "whining" like face that smiles at the same time, which makes him look so hypocritical, but at the same time so cute and charming.

The fox is one of the main animals in which man can recognize himself, or at least some specific human characteristics. What we can see in this fox is a streak of immorality, our own immorality, which accounts for a certain anxiety this animal induces in our soul, since he cheats and lies to obtain what he wants, a feature that in a certain way we would like to have and fear to have. He is a champion of metamorphosis, a plastic quality that normally is primarily reserved to our species. He is both weak and strong, sometimes he wins, sometimes he loses, when his tricks turn against him. He is ironical and creative, he makes us laugh. His behavior reflects true freedom and independence. Thus, he is a very human animal. So, we should not be surprised to find him very present in many folk literature, generally as a symbol of cunning and shrewdness, intelligence and corruption. He can be cruel or generous. The ambiguity of the character makes us wonder if these stories denounce the corruption of society, or if they cynically make the apology of such behavior. In Russia, the fox has a very predominant role among other animals.

Let's analyze his function in Russian folk tales, where he is primarily female, a vixen, which in this context means an increase in the tenacity and shrewdness of the animal, in order to get what she wants. Of course, her main characteristic is to be guileful and conniving, in this sense very human. In the skaski, she is mainly solitary, although she sometimes has offspring. This solitary statute fits the fact that she does not abide by usual social rules. For her, the end justifies the means, her desire is her law, and nothing will stand as an obstacle. She instrumentalizes any other being she meets. She is ruthless, has no pity, to the extent of being sometimes atrociously cruel. We can bring as an example of this, in a skaska, the way she convinces a bear to eat his own brain. A cruelty that becomes sadism when it is just for the pleasure of making the other one suffer, for example with the wolf caught in the ice, where after tricking the wolf she calls the peasants to tear him apart. She is a real sweet talker: very often, she tricks other animals or human with crazy schemes she invents. But, sometimes, it is with mere seduction, like in Kolobok, or when she invites the rooster to visit her house, telling him how much she loves him and wants to teach him life. She is a good actress. She can feign disease, stupidity and even death, as a trapping or escaping strategy. She is very perspicacious,

has good profiles on other beings, especially their stupidity and greed, so she can manipulate everyone, convince them of anything, make them feel guilty, etc. Of course, the drawback of this smartness is that she can get caught in her own traps, probably because of her excessive self-confidence and strong desires, which makes her underestimate her interlocutors: once in a while she finds someone who uses her own trick against her, like the peasant that puts a dog in her bag while she sleeps, or the bird that gets her chased by the dogs. She can even get killed, a rare occurrence, what we find for example in the story “Old bread and salt are easily forgotten”.

Our vixen corresponds to an archetype in mythology: an anthropomorphic being, called the trickster, which can be found in many cultures: for example, the shameless male fox of the “Roman de Renard”, the odd and crazy Till Eulenspiegel, the goblins, small ambiguous creatures, the Nordic Trolls, or the “Domovoy”, the classical Russian homey imp. It usually takes the form of an animal, a human or a humanlike being. Such creatures are famous for their trickiness, wickedness and for breaking the established order. In principle, the trickster violates accepted laws and rules in order to re-establish the new order, although the consequences are not always so clear. Even though it can be cruel, one can claim its indispensability, since it introduces renewal by bringing in chaos and re-organizing the usual. The Greek heroes, savior, transgressive and punished, such as Prometheus or Orpheus, or like Odysseus, the man with the thousand tricks, are a variant of it, which have broken the established order, although they are hardly comical. One can claim that the trickster is the soul of society. It adds a lively dimension to it and creates a flow: after its intervention, the world is “unstuck”, a deeper reality is revealed. Its status is paradoxical: it is both beneficial and malefic, useful and useless. In some sense, the trickster is as well a shadow, the dark or ambiguous side of every human being, as was proposed by the psychologist Carl Jung: the divine trickster lives in each one of us, in a mixture of light and dark, divine and fallen, primitive and witty. One way to look at this trickster archetype is as the child in our soul: he likes to play, without consideration for responsibility or morals, but he is free. Freedom is at the cost of abandoning usual calculations and social habits. Just like the trickster plays an important role in a society by shaking it up, it is valuable for the self – it is a guarantee for the process of growth, as our little internal shadow can become a trigger for the light to shine out.

Transgression

The smartness of the vixen has some more profound consequences on the meaning of this character, other than representing simple tricking. First, she is an iconoclast. She has no respect for the established order, she disturbs any natural hierarchy: for example she takes on species that are much stronger than her, creatures that she should fear, like men and bears. There is an important dimension of freedom and courage in her behavior, which can be observed as well in the moral domain. For example, she does not hesitate to put excrement in the bread, in order to trick the wolf, a behavior so gross that Afanassiev, or his censors, preferred to avoid mentioning the name of the unsavory “object”. Or, she eats a sick woman, sucking all her bones, while pretending to be a healer. In this sense, she takes important risks with herself. As well, she plays dead, like in “Sister vixen and the grey wolf”, leaving herself at the mercy of the merchants, or she plays trick for mere pleasure, with the wolf, which is much stronger than her.

Second, she reverses values, she produces a sort of transvaluation: the good can become the bad, and the bad can become the good. For example, the “bad” she does to the wolf can be thought of as “good”, since it is a justified punishment, but it can as well be thought of as “bad”

because of its cruelty. This whole problematic of the vixen is articulated around a behavior which reaches – or transgresses – the limits, of accepted social codes. Is she doing the good, or doing the bad? In many story, we feel split about how to judge what is going on, depending on whom she is fighting with. In this sense, the present story is quite puzzling. We don't know whom to back: the proud rooster or the cunning vixen?

Third, the vixen is often speaking in a double language, and like her interlocutors, we don't know if she is serious or not, if she is being ironical or straightforward, if she is saying the truth or pulling our leg, just like her interlocutors in the stories. She says true things, but with a crooked intention, just like she does wrong things, that are well deserved. Therefore, we never know if she illustrates vice or virtue, if she justifies moral corruption and cynicism, or if she denounces it, like in the present story. She makes the reader wonder and think.

Fourth, because of these different considerations, she can be considered a spiritual – or intellectual – animal. Meaning that she does not have merely pragmatic considerations. Periodically, she will in fact be portrayed for example as a member of clergy or as a doctor. Other case, she will use logic: even again maybe in a warped way, she has access to abstract reasoning, just to render justice or play a trick like in “Old bread and salt”. She acts like a shaman, in “The bear and the wolf”, speaking to animal spirits and dancing to bewitch and manipulate the bear, she has special powers and takes on a mystical dimension. Or, becoming old and weak, she shows true wisdom. In this very story, she incarnates the mistrust and fear that femininity provokes, the same danger that we see in Kolobok. We realize that her shrewdness and cunning is not always an end in itself, but the means for deeper mental processes. In a way, within the stories, she educates her interlocutors, even though they periodically die from this harsh “lesson”. That is probably, like with Baba Yaga, what Propp calls the “donor” dimension of the character: the vixen plays an initiating role, she makes her interlocutor grow, or die. Clearly she is an ambiguous model for the reader: she does not correspond to a clear category of behavior, unlike many other characters.

Analysis of the story

Preaching and duplicity

Indeed, we have here a surprising animal. What did she do in the desert? Maybe she went there to escape revenge from some victims of her horrible tricks. Or, maybe, just like Jesus, went to retreat and meditate, she felt guilty about all her mischiefs. In the latter case she would be pictured as a thoughtful and pious person, very respectable, and that is the image she tries to promote in the present story. Thus, as soon as she saw the rooster, highly perched, she started preaching. Before we enter the content of the speech, let's examine the character of the rooster. It is not an accident if he is “highly perched”: not only does it indicate a rather natural stand of this animal, but it reflects as well on his symbolized character. In many cultures, because of his behavior and appearance, he represents virility, under all its features: courage, feistiness, arrogance, lustfulness and leadership. In English, the cock also designates the male organ, and is the root word for the terms cocky and coquettish, that confirms the commonality of the cock as a symbol of vanity and posture, as a poseur. He is as well associated with victory, eloquence, vigilance, fecundity and lubricity. For Christians, this animal is the emblem of Christ: light and resurrection, or intelligence, coming from God. As the Lord, he announces the arrival of the day

after the night, meaning the good after evil. So, we can see from those different features why the proud rooster represents a good challenger for the cunning vixen.

“Cockerel, my son” she says. Right away, she speaks to him from a superior position, reducing his stature, humbling him down, like if she was her mother, playing on the ambiguity between in the maternal and religious sense. The fight has already started, in a very low key, clerical and diplomatic way. We will observe in this whole story the importance of the hypocritical rhetoric, imitating church like sanctimonious behavior and smug moralizing, manipulatory, where the real meaning or intention of the criticism is often not so clear. “You are highly perched”, meaning you are proud, but “you spin in your head impious thoughts”, meaning “I am better than you, vile sinner, I am purer, so you should be humble, listen to me and obey me”. Especially since, unlike him, she is in a state of grace, after her sojourn in the desert. She insists on the lasciviousness of the animal, the defect of his kind, criticizing the blatant polygamy, up to “forty women”. Then she attacks him again through his species, for their quarreling habit about females. And, as a conclusion, she invites him to humility: to come down on earth and repent. As she claims her own holiness, since she endured a harsh askesis: thirst, hunger deprivation, which makes her ready to hear the confession of the rooster.

But the rooster, who is not exactly stupid, unlike many other animals falling for the tricks of the vixen, redoubles the irony and enters the same “holy” game. He calls the vixen “mother”, and refuses her invitation by telling her that he is not in “a state of grace, having not fasted nor prayed”, inviting her to come back another time. In real non-clerical language, to get lost! But, the acting goes on: the vixen is tenacious. She acknowledges the answer of the rooster, but adds as an argument that anyhow, he should “come down and repent in order not to die in sin”.

The rooster starts losing ground, he cannot go on acting, he compulsively says what he really thinks. He accuses the vixen of being hypocritical, with her “honey lips, soft voice and holy words”, and quotes the gospel by telling her that she “should not judge and she will not be judged”, and a biblical proverb: “Who sows the wind reaps the tempest”. He then denounces directly her blatant lying: “It is not my soul you want to save, but my body you want to devour”. But the vixen shows here her strength: she does not let herself be demounted by those strong words, she sticks to her initial strategy. “Rooster, my son, why hold those sacrilegious words? Why would I commit such a sin?” Then she quotes the parable about the Pharisaic and the Publican. The former representing a pretentious, holier than thou type of behavior, when the latter, with no pious pretension, is actually more ready to accept the true faith. The vixen tells the rooster the ulterior opposite fate of both. She scolds him for his vile behavior, warning him he will die without confession, concluding again that he should come down, repent, be forgiven, be absolved and be admitted in the celestial kingdom.

During this whole passage, the story shows us how such sacred and moral discussion or preaching can take place as pure theater, quite a cynical one, where no one believes what he says, but tries to convince the other as a way of trickery. Behind the “holier than thou” attitude, is a reality of power struggle, greediness and desire. A denunciation that tries, through laughter, to make us become more realistic about human speech and moral claims.

Rhetoric and reality

The tenacity of the vixen finally pays off. The rooster "recognizes the gravity of his sin deep in his heart, and begins to cry with contrition". This is a typical moment where the paradoxical and spiritual nature of the vixen comes to the surface. Because we know who she is, just like the

rooster. We are aware of her true nature and intentions, but at the same time her words speak with so much force and truth - not just rhetorical or specious argumentation - that it touches our hearts and we are ready to believe her. She teaches wisdom to the rooster, inviting him to recognize his own faults and bad actions, even if, as the end of history proves, it is a total manipulation. Perhaps we can see here a critique of the church, which uses people's imperfections and feelings of guilt to manipulate and control them. This can be called the revolutionary aspect of the fox: how he reverses the established order.

Thus, the vanquished rooster descends, "branch by branch", slowly, like in a religious procession or a process of atonement, supposing redemption. Of course, in his "humble" state of mind, he does not expect the vixen to seize him sharply with his sharp nails. And at that moment, the narration is very striking, where the fox reveals its true intention, its true self: "she watches him, rolling her fierce eyes, showing her sharp teeth". She is "ready to devour him, the heretic he is." This last proposition is very caustic, hypocritical or paradoxical: the narrative mixes the two contradictory levels of the fox, the formal and uplifting religious discourse on the one hand, the lecherous and wild intention of the other. Just as the legal punishment of a heretic was to be consumed with pleasure!

The poor rooster is lost, confused by the strange turn of events and the mixture of speeches. In his desperation, he still wants to understand, unless he also prepares an ultimate counter-strategy. He speaks softly, calls her "mother", as he had always believed her, but he asks as well for confirmation of the situation: "Is it my soul that you want to save or my body that you want to eat?". In her words, the vixen claims both at the same time. This desire for "both" at once is the typical strategy of the deceiving spirit or the refuge of the confused mind. The rooster asks her to choose unequivocally, to clarify the state of things. And at this stage, having nothing to lose, without even trying to justify her own actions, the vixen admits both the reality of her initiative and the reality of her true self. She admits the strong anger and deep resentment she has harbored in her gut since an incident she experienced with the rooster, where she was almost killed, when in fact the rooster had only acted according to his responsibility: to watch the farm and protect the animals against predators like the fox. Through the expression of this strong and lasting desire for vengeance, "you are going to pay an old story", not only does the vixen show the anger that dwells in her soul, but she expresses exactly the opposite of a decent Christian behavior: theoretically the ability to love and forgive. She insults and humiliates the rooster, she ridicules him: "Your body and your motley feathers are nothing to me... idiot, idle", and she describes the rooster with strong terms, quite caricatural. She admits that she came to steal and eat a chicken, an action she tries to justify and minimize. In reality, she cannot bear the fact that she was stopped by farm animals: how do these stupid animals dare to oppose her desire? Who do they think they are? She feels frustrated and humiliated. She is full of feeling and revenge. To justify her previous action, she uses the totally worthless argument that "owls do this without any problem". So the rooster has to die for his "crime". We do not even know if she really wants to eat the cock: one emotion exceeds the other. Resentment is stronger than hunger. This reminds us of the attitude of the victim that Nietzsche criticizes in his vision of the Christian, an attitude that breeds resentment: the morality of the weak, where behind the oppression is hidden a crushed pride that feeds a desire or revenge, mere anger. We can hardly imagine the vixen in the desert, fasting and praying, as she carries that painful bitterness deep in her heart, which erupts at the first opportunity.

Morality and corruption

It is the turn of the rooster to go back to the “hypocritical tone and speech”: he understands what seems to function in life, and perceives the only strategy that makes sense in this situation. He calls the vixen “mother” again, like if she had not revealed her real mind. He describes his religious promotion, explaining how he is “a good boy, has pleasant manners, is an erudite and especially sings well”. He assures he can provide her with a good job as baker of the clergy, a good job because of many good things to eat! This description of the “religious” function becomes another criticism of the church, the statute as a form of corruption: if you get a good job in the church for moral or religious reasons, you can feed yourself well. Again, the confusion between the body and the soul, the juxtaposition of morality and immorality. The language of deprecation is the best argumentation.

The vixen is visibly tempted, this proposal engenders sufficient doubt in her, so that her claws release a bit the pressure and the rooster escapes, going back up on the tree where he can now have his revenge by teasing the vixen about her new career phantasms. Basically, joking about her gluttony and her gullibility. It is probably hard for the vixen to know which is worse: the frustration of losing this fruitful and juicy perspective, or the irritation of being caught in her own kind of trap. The seduction of the words and the sense of omnipotence that comes from this rhetorical ability has turned against her; she is the victim of the craft she overuses.

“Sheepish, the vixen went back to the forest, bitterly weeping”, complaining about “the scandal of roosters who are deacons, and vixen who are baker of the clergy”. The funny punch line of this story is the way the vixen is described: she gets engulfed in her own fabrication, she ends up believing the role she gave herself, she got engrossed in the situation that was invented during her Punch and Judy show with the rooster.

And that is indeed the punishment of the sweet talker: he ends up believing his own lies. Unless this believing actually helps him deal with the harshness of reality. After all, the vixen, by complaining about the “scandalous” order of the world, does not have to confront her own behavior and shortcomings.

One way to characterize the immorality of the vixen is with the expression: “The end justifies the means”. She wants to eat the rooster, or have revenge over him, and everything can be used for that purpose. She can lie, cheat, be blasphemous, she will stop at nothing to satisfy her desire. Neither respect for truth, nor for religion, nor for the other, nor for life, will stand in her way. Her desires rule, she does not question them or analyze them: there is no other criteria to which she checks, compare or evaluate those impulses of hers. Whatever stands in her way is an obstacle she has to surmount, destroy or skirt. There are no universal principles to respect: just her own wishes. Kant defines morality through the categorical imperative: “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law”. In other words, act in the way that you want everyone to follow. And, of course, the vixen does not follow this principle: she certainly hopes others do not do to her what she does to them. She is totally self-centered, a behavior that can be called egocentric, infantile or immoral.

She instrumentalizes everyone: other beings are all mere objects to gratify her wants. They are not real subjects in the sense that they would have their own end, they would have their own freewill or finality, and would be respected as autonomous beings. In the eyes of the vixen, everyone exists only “for her”, not “for themselves”, which would be the basic conception of respect. The world and everyone is at her service, only at her service. Of course, this exaggerated behavior is presented to the reader as a caricature of what all of us do, at varying degrees, and in different situations, when we deny to the other his own individual and independent statute,

annihilated because there is a need or a desire which we want to fulfill through him, in spite of him. Reason or moral principles thus don't apply, we are a creature of whims and desire, an attitude which defines the basis for immoral behavior. From a psychological standpoint, we could add to this a certain conception of cruelty, since any empathy or pity, feelings that makes one humane or human, are banned by the same process.

Glory to him

The reader will probably be surprised by this concluding sentence of the narrator. This common excerpt from the scriptures appears rather out of tune with the narration. The whole scene was more like a comedy, where nothing is to be taken seriously, where words are never to be taken at face value, where each character tries to hypocritically manipulate the other. And suddenly we have a church like statement, sounding like a prayer, a glorification of God, a laudatory expression of his nature and his power. "Glory to him and his power, from now on until eternity." Of course, the sentence can go through unnoticed, since the game is over and the meaning of those words is far from obvious. But the narration finishes only after this cryptic sentence, as we are told: "And this is the end of the tale". So let us try to give so meaning to this provocative statement.

One way to analyze it would be on the serious mode. After all, the vixen, hero of the story, committed blasphemy, pretending to be a member of the clergy, using religious language, quotes rituals and ideas merely in order to accomplish her revenge and fulfill her earthly desires. She is a vicious sinner, she represents the worse in clerical duplicity. So she deserves to be punished. The narrator therefore invites us to rejoice at the idea that the malicious plot of the shrewd vixen was foiled. Especially because of her hypocritical and sanctimonious pretensions.

Paradoxically, the instrument of her demise is a rooster, an animal who is far from being a just or a saint. He is pretentious, fornicator, manipulatory, and vain. But the ways of God are impenetrable. Thus, in spite of the blatant imperfection of the animal, he becomes the vehicle for divine justice. In this lawful and surprising process, we can see the might of God, the predominance of his inescapable will, his hegemony on earthly creatures, the application of an immanent and transcendent justice. Therefore, all is well that ends well.

Another way to analyze it would be in the humoristic mode, as irony. In this case, the author continues to speak about sacred matters in a "false" way, meaning the opposite of what the word truly indicates. Thus we oppose the greatness and idealism contained in religious words to the lowly ways and manners of earthly creatures, even though the latter refer periodically to holy principles to justify their sinful behavior. This would be a continuation of the satire this story represents, a sarcastic pamphlet against the clergy and holier-than-thou behavior. A hint for this interpretation is given when citing the Pharisee, not accidentally mentioned by the vixen, which can be taken as an unconscious avowal of this precise fraudulent behavior. With this tongue-in-cheek final subtle remark, the narrator tries to reinforce in the reader a distance with "holy speeches", inviting us to more acute practice of critical thinking.

5/ Ruffy, son of Bristly

Do we have to struggle in order to survive?

First Version

Ruffy, the good-for-nothing, Ruffy the brawler, went up the river with his whole family. He went up the Kama river, then the Tross river, he crossed the Koubenskoye lake, and finally arrived to lake Rostov, where he asked for permission to stay one night, but where he stayed for two nights, and then two weeks, two months, and finally he stayed there for over thirty years. He traveled all over the lake, battling and dislodging large and small fishes.

The great and small fishes gathered in a circle, and chose a fair judge, the mustached catfish.

- We are asking you for justice!

The catfish sent for Ruffy, the brave man, and said to him:

- Ruffy, brave man, why did you take possession of our lake?
- If I seized it, replied the latter, it is because your lake of Rostov burned up and down, from St. Peter to St. Elias. And, once burned, it was completely emptied!
- Never in life, said the catfish, never did our lake burn! Do you have any witnesses, documents certified by Moscow, supporting evidences?
- I have witnesses, proofs certified by Moscow, many evidences! The perch was there, she burned her eyes and they are still red!

Then the catfish sent for the perch. The crucian carp, bailiff and executioner, accompanied by two handfuls of little minnows, serving as witnesses, went to fetch her.

- Perch! His Highness the mustached catfish summons you to appear before him!

The perch came and saluted the catfish. The catfish said to her:

- Hail to you, perch, honored widow! Did our lake of Rostov burn from Saint-Peter to Saint- Elias?
- Not in a century, said the perch, our lake has never burned down!

The catfish said:

- Do you hear, Ruffy, brave man? Perch speaks against you!

And the perch added:

- The one who knows Ruffy and knows him well dines without bread!

But Ruffy does not despair. He has faith in God:

- I have on this subject, witnesses, proofs certified by Moscow, justifying documents! The roach was there. He carried burning brands and his fins are still red!

The crucian carp, bailiff and executioner, accompanied by two handfuls of little minnows, serving as witnesses, arrived at the roach.

- Roach! His Highness the mustached catfish summons you to appear before him!

The roach greets the catfish, who asks him:

- Tell us, roach, has our lake been burned from Saint-Peter to Saint- Elias?
- Not in a century, he said. Our lake has never burned! The one who knows Ruffy and knows him well dines without bread!

- Ruffy does not despair, he has faith in God, he says to the catfish:

- I have witnesses, proofs certified by Moscow, evidences! The monkfish, an honored widow, who is not wasteful, will tell the whole truth! She was there, she carried firebrands, and now she is all black!

The crucian carp, bailiff and executioner, accompanied by two handfuls of little minnows, serving as witnesses, went and said:

- Monkfish! His Highness the mustached catfish summons you to appear before him!

The monkfish greets.

- Good morning, His Highness!

- Hello, monkfish, respected widow, you who are not wasteful, said the catfish. Did our lake burn from Saint-Peter to Saint- Elias?

- Never has our lake of Rostov burned! The one who knows Ruffy and knows him well dines without bread!

Ruffy does not panic, he has faith in God.

- I still have witnesses, proofs certified by Moscow, justifying documents! The sculpin was there, he carried coal and was all black!

The crucian carp, bailiff and executioner, accompanied by two handfuls of little minnows, serving as witnesses, went to fetch the sculpin.

- Sculpin! His Highness the mustached catfish summons you to appear before him!
- Ah, my good men, take a piece of gold for your inconvenience! I have thick lips, a wide stomach. I have never been to the city. I have never appeared in court. I cannot speak, I cannot salute!

The envoys of the court returned. They seized Ruffy and put the rope round his neck. Then, Ruffy implored the good God, who sent rain and humidity, so that Ruffy could slip out of the knot.

He reached the lake Koubenskoye, then the Tross and the Kama. In the Kama, were the pike and the sturgeon were swimming.

- Where the hell are you going, cried Ruffy.

Hearing the sharp voice of Ruffy, the fishermen threw their net. They succeeded in catching Ruffy the restless, Ruffy the pernicious. Brodka threw Ruffy into the boat, Petrushka threw him into the basket.

- What a good fish soup it will make, she said.

Such was the end of Ruffy.

Second Version

In a rich house lived Ruffy the glutton, Ruffy the slanderous. But life became hard, and came poverty. Riding on a shabby sledge made of three stakes, Ruffy left for the lake of Rostov.

There, he began to shout at the top of his sharp voice:

- Ho! You, sevruga, kaluga, perch, chub, and you, roach, the little orphan! Let me, Ruffy, sport in your lake. I will not spend a year there, but just an hour, feasting, eating bread and salt, and listen to the news!

All of them, sevruga, kaluga, perch, chub, up to the roach, the little orphan, gave Ruffy an hour to bathe in the lake. In an hour Ruffy dislodged all of the fishes and began to drive them towards the muddy dyke. The fish were offended, and they went to complain to the sturgeon, Peter the Just:

- Sturgeon, Peter the Just! Ruffy is doing us the greatest harm! He asked for the permission to stay one hour in our lake and he used that time to dislodge all of us. Figure it out and judge, sturgeon Peter the Just, faithfully and truthfully.

Peter the Just sent the little chub to fetch Ruffy. The fish sought in vain. Then, Peter the Just sent dame-pike. Waving her tail, lady-pike dived deep into the water! There, she uncovered Ruffy, under a pebble:

- Hello, Ruffy!
- Good morning, lady-pike! What are you doing here?
- I came to summon you to appear before the sturgeon, Peter the Just, to decide of your imprisonment. Petitions have been filed against you.
- By who?
- By the sevruga, the kaluga, the perch, the chub, and even by the roach, the little orphan. And, also, by the sculpin, a simpleton with large lips, who does not know how to speak. Let's go, Ruffy, let's go to the tribunal to judge in all justice the crime that you committed.
- No, lady-pike! I have another idea, come with me, we will have fun!

Dame-pike would not hear anything. She wanted to take Ruffy to court to try him as soon as possible.

- Come, lady-pike, as sharp as your teeth might be, you know well that one cannot catch me by the tail! Today is Saturday. There is, at my father's place, an evening where we will stuff and amuse ourselves. Let's be merry! And, tomorrow, although it is Sunday, I promise, we will go to court. This way, at least we will not go hungry! Dame-pike agreed and went to enjoy herself with Ruffy.

There, Ruffy made her drunk and locked her up in the sheepfold, of which he blocked the door with a stake.

For a long time, the court waited for the return of lady-pike. Finally, the sturgeon, Peter the Just, sent the catfish. The catfish flicked its tail, plunged into the deep waters, and found Ruffy under a pebble, at the bottom of the water.

- Hello, my son-in-law!
- Hello, father-in-law!
- You're required in court, Ruffy. Plaintiffs have come forward against you.
- And who is that?
- The sevruga, the kaluga, the perch, the chub, and even the roach, the little orphan.

And, since Ruffy was his son-in-law, without any hesitation, the catfish took him by the arm, and led him straight to the tribunal.

- Sturgeon, Peter the Just, why are you so pressed to make me appear in court?
- There are accusations against you! You asked for permission to amuse yourself during an hour in the lake of Rostov and you took this as an opportunity to dislodge all the fishes that were present. The sevruga, the kaluga, the perch, the chub, and even the roach, this little orphan, have taken the matter badly, and have come together to file a petition against you, and ask for justice.
- In this case, replied Ruffy, I too have a request to file, because they are the ones who have done me wrong. Listen to me and to my petition: they are themselves the offenders. I followed the banks late at night. They were covered with water and the edges were blurry. I hurried and I pressed myself, when I slipped and fell to the water, covering myself with dirt! Peter the Just, give the order to gather all the sworn fishermen so that they launch their fine nets. And, order all the fishes to gather in front of the nets. Then, you will know who is wrong and who is right, for he who is right will not be caught in the nets, he will be able to escape!

The sturgeon, Peter the Just, heard his request, gathered all the sworn fishermen and ordered all the fishes to come together in front of the nets. Ruffy was first caught in the net. He stirred, moved in all directions, and with his eyes wide open, leapt out of the net.

- Well, you see, Peter the Just, who is right and who is wrong?
- I see that you are right, Ruffy. You are free to sport in the lake. Henceforth no one will harm you, unless, of course, the lake dries out and the raven takes you out of the mud!

Ruffy plunged into the lake, boasting to all:

- Very well, sevruga and kaluga! Count on me, perch and chub! I will not forgive anything, even to the roach, the little orphan! And not even to the bellied sculpin. He does not know how to speak. He has thick lips. But, he nevertheless presented his petition! To all, I will pay back their due!

At that moment passed Lyubim, who did not like the boasting of Ruffy. He was followed by Sergei, carrying a long stick. Then, came Persha, who threw the net on Ruffy. Then Bogdan, who caught him in the net. Finally came Oustin, who pulled out the net, and let Ruffy escape.

QUESTIONS

Some questions to go further and to prolong the reflection

Comprehension

- Why do fishes choose the legal way to solve their problems with Ruffy?
- Is the catfish a fair judge?
- Why does the catfish call Ruffy "good man"?
- What characterizes Ruffy's argumentation?
- What do the other fish think of Ruffy?
- Is Ruffy in good faith when he speaks?
- Is Ruffy rather intelligent or stupid?
- Does Ruffy think himself above the law?
- What is the difference between Ruffy and other characters in the story?
- Why does the catfish continue to call upon witnesses?
- Does Ruffy rather trust God?

Reflection

- Is bad faith part of the human condition?
- Do societies always generate ostracism?
- Are the poor condemned to fight against the wealthy?
- Does the judicial institution tend to be on the side of the wealthiest?
- Are testimonies always subjective?
- Why can we disgust those who differ from us?
- Is money the most powerful of powers?
- Is it better to avoid getting noticed?
- Is there any natural justice?
- Are men really equal before the law?
- Does faith in God serve to give oneself courage?
- Is faith in God above the law?

ANALYSIS

Instinct of survival

From the outset, the two stories presently given depicts Ruffy, hero of 32 different tales in the corpus, as an evil being: he is "good for nothing" and brawler" in the first story, "glutton" and "slanderous" in the second one. In Russian, his full name is "Ersh Ershovich, son of Shetnik". "Ersh" is the Russian name of the ruffe, an aggressive and invasive river fish, but it is also the name of the hard brush used to scrub pots or toilets. This is the same for his father, since "Ershovich" means "son of Ersh". And further more, "Shetnik", the father's apparent nickname, indicates heavy hairs, silks. Chitin is the hard material that constitutes the carapace of crustaceans. His sharp needles are mentioned in many stories: "He is going around, piercing our sides with his sharp bristle". In another tale, the pike is complaining about the impossibility to eat or bite him because of his prickly nature. Thus, we are assured that Ruffy is a tough guy, that he has a harsh, coriaceous, rough and wounding personality. In addition, it is a Russian word from the same family: "oshetinitjsya", which means being angry or irritated, or reacting aggressively to what is being said.

But one can also interpret this character in a more sympathetic way: as someone who seeks above all to survive in a harsh social environment. Many narrative elements go in this direction. For example, historically, this story finds its origin at the end of the 16th century, in the Rostov region. It clearly refers to territorial disputes, common in this troubled time, when Ivan the Terrible, founder of the Russian empire, first ruler to be crowned as a tsar of all Russias, was fighting to establish his authority, against foreign enemies and against the nobility, the boyars. Through the creation of his Oprichnina, he established an administration only answerable to him. Tsarist autocracy and despotism, political centralization, would lie at the heart of the Russian state, as we see in the reference Ruffy makes of « papers from Moscow ». But as well, was installed a solid juridical system, where an autonomous local administration was combined with centrally appointed officials, sent from the capital, which became the backbone of power. This formalism is described by the different procedures the fishes utilize in the stories, including the arbitrary dimension of the procedures, which are being ridiculed, showing a parody of justice, mocking the administration.

Ruffy is an outlaw, excluded and "forgotten" by others: he is not accepted by society and he must fight for his own place within it. In the story, like in nature, he is not attractive. He is bony, unpleasant to touch. He quickly pollutes his surroundings, since he procreates a lot and quickly. His flesh is uneatable as well. He can merely produce a "tasty broth", probably a reflection of his strong character. To describe this fish, we could bring in the concept of "derelict", proposed by Martin Heidegger: a state of being thrown out into the world that characterizes the existence of each one of us, the situation of being abandoned to oneself that creates anxiety and a quest for some "place" or "belonging". Ruffy is definitely a derelict: someone without any status, function or home, an unwanted parasite merely trying to adapt and to survive. He is poor and repulsive. He represents what other fishes don't want to be: the so-called opposite of a good or normal social life. That is why he is always struggling: driven by necessity and despair, he is a sort of bandit, a desperado. He is alone, everyone is his enemy, while the "good", established and moral society pretends to be fair to him, but God, apparently, is on his side.

Despite the problematic qualities of being an outlaw, such status has some advantages. One does not belong to a particular place nor obey particular laws; therefore, one can act more freely, not being bounded by any rule. And, our witted hero is even proud of his position: he is tricky, does what he wants and laughs at other fishes that seem to be naive and stupid. Having no status gives a special status. It is hard to determine Ruffy's social position: we don't know if he is a fallen aristocrat on the loose or a revolted peasant who decided to take a grip on his own destiny. He fits neither profiles. He is too impudent and brazen for a peasant and too uncouth and gross for an aristocrat. But, precisely because he doesn't belong to a given class, he can mock others. The ambiguity of the position creates a safe opportunity for criticism or complaint. Some might even point out the jester-like nature of Ruffy: witty people gifted with words were even called "Yersh" at that time. Historically, the jester was the character that could "tell the truth" to anyone including the king, because of his comic and outrageous style. His choice of language is quite particular, harsh and even gross, always surprising. He is arrogant, a buffoon who is laughing at others, although in the present story his desire for survival does not allow him to always play freely: he is permanently trying to satisfy his needs, seeking possession, cheating in order to obtain what he wants. In a way, he desires too much in order to be a "real" jester. Despite his apparent lightness, there is bitterness in his soul. His playing is too calculating to be pure amusement. He doesn't want merely to teach, but to survive. He criticizes society, but almost by accident: his criticism is not a goal but merely an aftermath of his calculations.

On the other hand, the various fishes which are mentioned, somewhat ridiculous, seem to be the wealthiest, those who are already well in place, while Ruffy is the poor but combative character who seeks, instead, to make a place for himself, which cannot be done without frustrating some other members, well established, although often pathetic. The catfish that acts as a judge, the "mustached" one, appears ridiculous in his pompous formalism. The rich sculpin practices the corruption of official. The very official crucian carp and the witnessing small minnows are easily bought. In the second story, the governor "Peter the Just" seems very impotent and foolish, and not really "just". The lady-pike is corrupted by debauchery, alcohol and party. All these characters show the moral baseness of society in which Ruffy tries to survive. Perhaps this explains his behavior: he must adapt to survive. Therefore, he is aggressive and argumentative, while the other fishes are cowardly and stupid. He looks a bit like the vixen, but more violent and less subtle, he fights, unlike the vixen, which uses seductive strategies. Like her, sometimes he gets caught, sometimes he wins: thanks to his thorns and his tenacity, he is resistant and hurtful. While the reader is not sure whether he should like Ruffy or despise him. Survival is an ambiguous concept: it is a kind of necessity, but it also reduces the human to a simple, uncivilized animal, where reigns the "Everyone for himself and God for all".

Bad Faith

To survive, Ruffy does not play fair game. His strategy is one of disappointment, lies and hypocrisy, nevertheless barely veiled. Thus, he asks permission to remain in the lake of Rostov for one hour, and once permission is granted, he gradually prolongs his stay until he remains there thirty years. The list is long of such tactics on his part, more and more crude. When he is summoned before the tribunal of his peers, ulcerated by his brutal practices, he goes so far as to claim that the lake has burned, and that it has completely emptied himself. All of these false or absurd claims are made in order to justify his misdeeds. Thereupon, the tribunal, formal to the point of being ridiculous, asked him whether he had "proofs, documents certified by Moscow,

witnesses", and of course, as one would expect, he pretends to have many. He convokes in turn various fishes, attesting that their very natural characteristics are the proof of what he is advancing: the red eyes of the perch, the red fins of the roach, the black color of monkfish and the sculpin, all prove the fire of the lake.

Is the rogue fish sincere? Does he believe what he says when he states these "truths" which go against common sense? A sentence strangely reasoned in this sense: "Ruffy does not despair, he has faith in God," which is repeated in different way: "Ruffy does not panic, he has faith in God." When we listen to him, we are tempted to believe him, even though reason prevents us to accept such a hypothesis. We must add that the presence of God is ironical in this seemingly a rather "godless" world. Ruffy claims to have an "objective" proof of his claims, a very administrative and juridical one, but at the same time he calls upon God. He is playing on both registers: the one of the evidence and the one of faith, both objective and subjective. If the first one does not work, then God will provide.

In the functioning of Ruffy, we can observe the paradox or ambiguity of bad faith. Theoretically, bad faith is the attitude or conduct of the one who speaks or acts against his own conscience, in spite of common sense or reason, with falsehood, with a bad intention, without really believing what he himself states. This term, which comes from jurisprudence, implies that the person concerned speaks on the basis of formal claims he knows well to be fraudulent and bad. It is therefore an attempt at invoking and manipulating pseudo arguments, of making false pretenses, of summoning even the improbable, while hoping that our words will be taken for granted. Involved in such an effort, engrossed in his will to deceive, to fraud or to harm by articulating his quibbles or incongruities, the person of bad faith may end up believing in his own inventions. So much so that, if he never confesses to anyone that he lies in the grossest of ways, he does not confess it to himself any more. He cannot and does not want to admit that what he says has no meaning. He persists in affirming his counter-truths without even blinking. To such an extent, and with such insistence that those who hear him will even end up doubting their own mental faculties, their critical abilities.

In the different stories depicting Ruffy, he often persists in the "sincerity" of his behavior. Is he a natural unconscious trickster, or is he conscious of those strategies that imply deception and cheating? He seems to strongly believe in the necessities of survival that motivate his actions. Visibly and explicitly, the means justify the end. He has a strong claim for independence. For example, in one story he states: "I live by the means of my own strength. I eat from my own land." He declares, at the same time, to be autonomous and to be at home everywhere: he is a self-made man in a world that belongs to him. In another story, he repeats periodically in an "enchanted" singsong: "I am not a robber. I am not a bandit." It seems that he strongly believes in his innocence or desperately wants to believe in it. One can easily say that he is trying to convince himself of it. He also can be proud of his actions when he brags: "I am known in Moscow and other big cities, by nobles, popes and deacons" or when he claims he has "official papers" from Moscow, as it happened in the present story. Thus, he claims to be universally recognized and legitimized. Social critics can quickly become egomaniacs, and our hero is not an exception.

It even seems that there is a special providence for beings of bad faith, doubtlessly when they succeed in believing without faltering in their own good fortune. Thus, Ruffy, condemned by the justice of his fellow men, manages all the same to escape from the sentence to which they condemned him: "The good god sends him rain and humidity so that he slips out of the knot." All the more improbable, being in the middle of a lake! But the fact of "slipping out of the knot",

a very symbolic expression, is undoubtedly a very characteristic of Ruffy, an indefatigable rhetor who escapes all constraints or consequences of his actions through his viscous words. Is he sincere? How can he convince anyone? Here, we can think of the paradox of the actor, according to Diderot, who challenges the common opinion: according to him, the convincing actor expresses an emotion that in reality he does not feel. According to the philosopher, "the less one feels, the more one makes one feel." In this, he opposes two ways of playing. The "playing soul", where the actor sincerely feels the emotions, and the "playing intelligence" where the actor plays without feeling. The latter, freer, detached from emotions, can then stage himself, build his character, with the help of his words, voice and body movements. In this domain, Ruffy seems to have a gift.

However, Ruffy is not the only one in this story who could be accused of duplicity. Other fishes also seem to fall into what Sartre calls "bad faith". This concept designates the denial of one's freedom, when we are caught into social games: fame, function, status, identity, occupation, etc. In this situation of alienation, we are not ourselves, we just comply, in order not to face our own real self. Lie and appearance become the rule, authenticity has vanished, whatever is the role that we have opted for, in order to fill our own void and be recognized by others. Thus, we can observe how, one after the other, all fishes play a certain role, putting on a given mask, opting for a given "persona": they are not subjects anymore, they become the object of their own desire and of their own fear. They lack a fundamental freedom and therefore are not responsible anymore for what is happening to them and their surroundings. They are determined by mere circumstances. They act out a social role, they are conditioned, oblivious to their own freedom or in denial of it. In this "theatrical" distribution, each fish has certain qualities or a certain reputation which forces him to act in a particular way. The prudent monkfish, which doesn't waste money or goods, an honest widow, sincere and unfairly treated by life. The coward and passive sculpin with fat lips, who has never seen the city and is scared to testify. The formal and legalist catfish, acting as a judge and pretending to be just. The vapid and laconic roach, which has nothing to add and merely repeats what other fishes say, a good example of "non-existence" engendered by bad faith. But all these "good people" have in common to despise the "bad person", so repulsive and frightening, which make one "dine without bread", a perspective that visibly seems quite repulsive.

All these characters, condemned to themselves, speak in the way they are expected to speak, they simply pay lip service to their role. In spite of their "differences", their speech is exactly the same, a feature that adds a grotesque touch to the whole court scene. One could claim that they are not conscious of the absurd side of the situation, although Sartre would claim the impossibility of such unconsciousness, attesting that we cannot escape our freedom and are condemned to the awareness of it: the painful bad conscience.

Reality principle

What is most detrimental to the bad faith of the rhetorician is the principle of reality. Something resists, albeit feebly, his indefatigable discourse, which pretends to determine or engender reality. The narrative offers us various avenues that could allow the reader to escape the impact of the various quibbles and dirty tricks of the brawling fish.

First, if Ruffy can "fight and dislodge large and small fish," he ends up alienating the "community" of the fishes of the lake, who, tired of these aggressions, come together to act. Thus, the "group" is the first reality that attempts to overcome this indefatigable fighter. If he can

defeat each of the fish individually, it may not be the same when the fishes come together. So it is with those aggressive beings attacking everybody. One of the most immediate consequences is their de facto exclusion, implicit or explicit, from the community of their fellows. They are rejected, actively or passively, one of the main consequences of their asocial behavior, because they do not respect the basic rules of life in society. Rightly or wrongly, the latter is regulated by a certain number of principles whose main concern is to restrict the freedom of individuals in order to protect everyone, according to the famous rule: "The freedom of one stops where begins that of others." Thus, since Ruffy continues to do only what he likes, society turns against him.

Next, the narrative invokes the concept of justice, in two different ways. First of all, there is a "natural" justice, expressed by the fact that "large and small fish gathered in a circle", a gesture indicating the equality of everyone, irrespective of individual status or strength. This collective action, highly symbolic, is quite opposite to the law of the jungle, of every man for himself, represented by Ruffy, devoid of any principle, for whom the end justifies the means. In this perspective, the person is respected as a person, and is not considered an object for others. In this circle, everyone has the right to speak, everyone has a full right to exist. The second concept of justice is that of the institution, a formal structure erected within the state in order to regulate the activities of society. In opposition to the savagery of Ruffy, the other fishes do not wish to "settle accounts" according to their own individual means, according to the principle that "one does not render justice by oneself." By fear or for the sake of fairness, they decide to appeal to justice, an institution supposed to incarnate objectivity, in order to settle their differences with the outlaw. Therefore, as in any judicial proceedings, the accused will be asked whether he has any witnesses or evidences to provide. Of course, Ruffy's assertions are meaningless, and the judicial procedure is absurd, but it is nonetheless true that through this caricature the story cites what could be a check on the abusive statements of the defendant.

After justice, objectivity is summoned. In response to Ruffy's "factual" evidence of the lake fire, various fishes are convoked, all of which categorically denying the arguments of the boastful fish. What is "objective" is not so much the content, for Ruffy also advances "objective" justifications, theoretically observable, such as the color of the eyes of the perch or the fins of the roach, ascribing to them a fanciful causality. But what is objective is the fact that there is a certain unanimity to refuse the validity of his statements.

Every time the refutation is definite. The fishes repeat one after another: "The one who knows Ruffy and knows him well will dine without bread". The reader must wonder about the meaning of such a mysterious sentence. Different interpretations can be given to this suggestive phrase, which divides readers in what concerns its meaning. It can be considered a criticism of the crookedness of Ruffy, as a warning against him: if you know him or befriend him, he will quickly squeeze you out, leaving you with nothing, not even bread. Bread here represents an important if not necessary part of the basic Russian meal. After all, since he is ready to lie and cheat in order to survive, just like he does in court, one can suspect him of being deprived of moral preoccupations, of being pitiless and disrespectful of his neighbor. Another meaning can refer to the Russian proverb: "You will become like the ones you talk to": you are defined by your surroundings. So, if you get to spend some time with Ruffy and befriend him too much, you will start to act and speak in the same way and belong to the same class of poor people with no status: you will be deprived of bread. Thus, it is better to keep out and not to get involved with him. A different understanding could be: if you have to eat bread in order to get full, it means you don't have much to eat. Bread, in this case, becomes some unrefined staple intended to fill the stomach, in opposition to some more refined dish, like meat or fish. In this case, by

befriending Ruffy, by becoming like him, you will eat well, just like him, instead of being a “bread eater”. But, of course, you will then become an immoral person. A different version of the said proverb mentioned in other stories also goes in the direction of “eating well”: “The one who will know and understand Ruffy will not dine without bread”, so he will be satiated.

Still, a different idea encountered is that, if you know Ruffy and are familiar with his habitat, you can catch him and make a tasty soup out of him, in which case no bread is needed, the fish will be sufficient. It is interesting to note that, in some other stories, Ruffy is depicted as a big fish, so heavy that he has to be carried around in a sledge. Therefore, it is no wonder that bread would indeed be superfluous. A last interpretation, rather funny, refers to the fact that Yersh is the name of a strong drink, a mixture of beer and vodka. Thus, of course, no dining is necessary at all, or one can claim that Yersh makes anyone “drunk” with all these tricks and phony arguments, depriving his “friends” of any food. We will let the reader play with those different interpretations, an exercise which is probably more fun than deciding which one is the “right” one.

Finally, reality is implacable: even providence seems to resist Ruffy. Although he testified of his faith in God, and the latter seems to have saved him from hanging, sending "rain and humidity" into the lake, he as well gets caught by the fishermen and ends up in the fish soup. Sure of himself, he speaks loudly, calls out to the other fishes in his "loud voice," and, as a result, is spotted. Doubtless he was not cautious enough. In this case one can also say that he betrayed himself: his excess of self-confidence, his impression of omnipotence, his feeling of impunity, made him forget that there was, after all, a whole reality which did not depend upon him, which he could not indefinitely ignore nor deny.

The individual and society

Faced with the aggressiveness and the trickery of Ruffy, society seems somewhat impotent. As we have seen, from individual to individual, he always gets away, even with big fishes. His talents as a brawler and his audacity give him a definite victory. One may be surprised at such hegemony, nevertheless the power of such an abusive character is not without a certain reality. In general, the human being seeks and prefers certain tranquility. Moreover, he is fearful. Also when a person acts truly aggressive, more than one will prefer to abandon the terrain. This is why terrible situations occur, where various people are witnessing an aggression without acting, for fear of retaliation. Of course, when it comes to protecting our own well-being or person, we will probably be more motivated, but the retreat reaction remains one of the most classic in the case of aggression. So, we will not be surprised if Ruffy succeeds in doing whatever he wants in the lake, confronting its inhabitants one by one. One can even criticize the recourse to justice, which can be considered as another form of cowardice. Indeed, why do not all these fish, "big and small," regulate the matter by their own means? This would take little time. One wonders why all these fishes need to come together in order to make a formal solemn collective decision to act, a form of impotence.

Another point on which society seems caught unprepared: the enormity of Ruffy's lies. "The lake burnt down," he says, and there is a court process that takes into account such nonsense. Simple common sense, basic reason, logic, experience, all seem to be totally defeated. An explanation is needed, which refers us to the principle that the more a lie is enormous and

blatant, the more credible it is. Various explanations can be found for such an observation. The first is that we prefer not to believe that one of ours invents and supports such incredible enormities. This would call into question our confidence in our fellow men. The consequences for our psychic equilibrium would be terrible. Especially if this person is close to us. Hence, we prefer to "naively" believe what is told to us, through a "forced" credulity which one might even call bad faith. The other reason for this acceptance is that it might be costly for us to contradict a word given with such assurance. One often encounters a timorous side in the human being, oscillating between fear and shyness. He is afraid of provoking or confronting others, without really knowing what the consequences might be, out of insecurity. Often, he is too careful when comes the time to confront someone. He lacks boldness, energy and self-assurance, he prefers not to say anything. He must feel truly threatened to act. Which is quite understandable, insofar as personal tranquility and social peace are favored. It is for this reason that audacity and gall are rather beneficial attitudes. It is for this reason that he who perseveres in his aberrations and maintains his outrageous pretensions will have a good chance of victory, to the extent that he maintains some coherence, of course. This behavior simply makes the resistance or opposition psychologically costly. Thus, the sculpin, who refuses to come to the court. While his testimony could help the community. He is even ready to pay the "ushers" for not coming, he invokes his speech difficulties, his lack of habit of the city, his uncouth manners. He feels inferior and dreads to make himself ridiculous, like all timid persons. Like them, he privileges his feelings - his sad passions, as Spinoza would say - rather than any moral obligation or rationality. And thus, one sees how a being without faith or law can hold the high end to a whole community, relying on their weakness and impotence.

Justice and Arbitrary

Despite the humorous tone of the story, criticism is hard on the functioning of society. Not one character seems to catch up for the other, on the pathetic side. The tone of this story may therefore seem sarcastic to the reader, even cynical. Is it realistic? To each his own judgment. But let us examine some aspects of the social functioning that are evoked throughout the narrative.

Ruffy, whom we have long referred to, is a character fearing neither God nor man, for whom the end justifies the means. He is aggressive, brawler and braggart. His dishonesty lies both in his words and his actions; he is manipulative and brutal. He plays along the rules of society, when it suits him or when he feels stuck. For example, his attitude during the judicial protocol, being stubborn in order to outlast the others, while flouting truth and honesty through his gross lying. One could ask whether he does so for some practical reasons, to gain something, or in order to better flout the social codes and show his omnipotence. Anyway he is a dangerous being, as all other fish know and say. And one might lose appetite just by knowing him!

The mustached catfish, which acts as a judge, represents the hollow and pompous formalism of the institutions, in this case the judiciary one. He is called "His Highness", to make it even more ridiculous. He treats Ruffy as a "good man," a "kindness" which shows his stupidity, or his duplicity. And when Ruffy states his incredible argument of the "burnt lake," he asks him quite calmly if he has proofs, authenticated documents. However, he too lives in the lake, a priori he should know what happened or not. And, a minimum of common sense should also indicate to him the absurdity of the argument. But, he continued the discussion as if nothing strange was happening, in a very serious way, as if in Moscow they were going to certify that the

lake had burnt down and that it would serve as proof. This senseless legal formalism must be taken, must be imagined, as a criticism of justice, far from common sense, subjected to arbitrariness. It contains all sorts of grandiloquent formulations, especially to characterize individuals or their functioning. "His Highness the mustached catfish", "perch, honored widow", "monkfish, respected widow", the repeated formal salutations, as many terms indicating a pompous side, too careful of forms and honors to be honest or fair. Justice remains as theatre.

After justice, it is religion that gets its share. If Ruffy "has faith in God," when he behaves in a manner so devoid of morals, it is because religion is in this case perfectly accommodates to immorality, to every man for himself, and to the ends justifying the means. Worse still, when he implores God, he receives what he requests, which would tend to prove that God protects the wicked, as well as others or better yet, thus showing his totally arbitrary side. The institutions seem to pose no threat to the one who does as he pleases and respects nothing.

As to the various fishes presented to us, they seem rather devoid of any personality. They appear bland and helpless, rather anxious about forms, fond of flattering words, but scarcely existing, they are victims and weaklings, as is shown in particular by the example of the helpless sculpin, which we have examined above, who does not hesitate to corrupt the "officials" to protect his own weakness, or with those poor widows, who indicate to the reader the harshness of life "in the lake". But only Ersh Ershovich seems to have a real and adequate personality.

6/ Old bread and salt are easily forgotten

Are human beings ungrateful?

A wolf found himself caught in a trap, but he managed to escape, and resumed his way through the thickets. Hunters saw him and began to hunt him down. The wolf came to cross a road where a peasant walked with a sack and a flail. The wolf approached him and implored:

- I beg you, peasant, let me get inside your bag, the hunters are at my heels!

The peasant accepts, he hides the wolf in his bag and throws it over his shoulder. He continues his route and crosses the hunters.

- Did you not see the wolf? they ask.
- No! replies the peasant.

The hunters resumed their galloping and disappeared very quickly.

- Well, have they gone, my torturers? the wolf asked.
- Yes.
- So, let me out!

The peasant untied the bags and the wolf got out. He then said:

- Now, peasant, I will eat you!
- Hey, wolf! Are you not ashamed! Don't you remember from which tribulation I have just saved you?
- Old bread and salt are easily forgotten! answered the wolf.

Seeing that things were turning sour, the peasant replied:

- Listen, let us walk a little while and ask people we meet. If the first person we encounter speaks like you, then it's fine, eat me if you want!

They set out on their way. A mare was advancing towards them. The peasant stopped her.

- Please, mare, dear mare! I freed the wolf from a certain death and he wants to eat me!

And he told the mare what had happened. The mare thought for a moment, then said:

- I lived with my master for twelve years. I gave him twelve foals. I worked for him with all my strength and, now that I am old and that I can no longer work, he threw me into a ravine. I managed to get out of it, and here I am, walking aimlessly, just wandering around. Yes, old bread and salt are easily forgotten!
- You see, I'm right! said the wolf.

The peasant grieved and begged the wolf to wait for a second meeting. The wolf agreed. They saw an old bitch coming to them. The peasant asked her the same question. The bitch reflected and said:

- For twenty years I have served my master. I have kept his house and his cattle. But as soon as I began to age and stopped barking, he chased me away and I am now left wandering without a goal, aimlessly walking. Yes, old bread and salt are easily forgotten!
- Well, you see, I'm right! said the wolf.

The peasant grieved even more, and begged the wolf to wait for a third meeting.

- Then you will do as you please, if you do not remember the service I have rendered you.

The third time, they saw a female fox. The peasant repeated his question to her. But the vixen began quibbling:

- But how is it possible for such a large wolf to fit in such a small bag?

The wolf and the peasant swore that they said nothing but the pure truth. The vixen did not want to believe them. She insisted:

- Come on, peasant, show me how you managed to put the wolf in the bag!

The peasant wide opened the bag, the wolf introduced his head in it. The vixen insisted:

- Can't you see that you can only put your head in this bag!

The wolf moves in entirely and sits still.

- Come on, peasant, continues the vixen, show me how you tied it.

The peasant attaches the bag.

- Come, peasant, show me now how the wheat is beaten!

The peasant starts hitting the sack with the flail.

- Now, show how we really scourge with this flail!

The peasant violently lashes its tool and accidentally strikes the head of the vixen. She falls dead.

Stunned, the peasant concluded:

- Indeed, old bread and salt are easily forgotten!

QUESTIONS

Some questions to go further and to extend the reflection

Comprehension

- Why does the peasant agree to help the wolf?
- What vision of the world does the wolf entertain?
- What do the stories of the mare and the bitch tell us?
- Why does the vixen question the two protagonists?
- Why does the peasant finally pick up the motto of the wolf?
- What caused the loss of the vixen?
- Is the vixen cunning or stupid?
- Was the vixen justly rewarded?
- Why did the peasant kill the vixen?
- Has the peasant changed in the course of the story?
- Is there a victim in this story?
- Does this story intend to justify or to criticize ingratitude?

Reflection

- Is man corrupted by nature or does he become corrupted?
- Are human beings sometimes inhuman?
- Is man a threat to animals?
- Why do we want to help others?
- Is survival our priority?
- Should we accept reality or believe in a better world?
- Why do we need others to confirm what we say?
- Is the good and evil of an action in the intention or in the result?
- Is ingratitude a "normal" behavior?
- Is it right to demand gratitude for a service rendered?
- Is it morally acceptable to instrumentalize others?
- Can selfishness be considered a legitimate attitude?

ANALYSIS

Moral dilemma

The world is a very unsafe place. Man is a wolf for man, wrote Hobbes, the British philosopher, inspired by Plautus, the Roman playwright. And, as the story starts, the wolf, which is supposed to symbolize a ferocious and dangerous being, is trapped and hunted. He is first caught, then escapes, but right away hunters pursue him again. There are two ways to look at the relation between man and wolf. By hunting the wolf, man shows he wants peace and safety in the world, and therefore he tries to get rid of any animal or being which threatens this peace and safety. Peace even though war, one could say. Or, by hunting the wolf, man shows that he is actually the most dangerous of all animals, since he puts in danger the life of even the most dangerous animals. Thus, should we have pity or not on the wolf? That is the moral dilemma posed to the peasant, which the desperate wolf meets on the road, while fleeing. "Please save me from the hunters!" prays the wild beast. The peasant is not a hunter, not even a shepherd, he is a cultivator. He deals only with vegetal, as shown by the fact that he carries a bag and flail. He is therefore a peaceful man, like the Abel of the Bible, killed by his brother Cain. He is trusting and empathic, so he cannot help but have pity when he meets the poor stalked animal, no matter how dangerous the beast is. He can be called naïve and stupid, or trusting and generous, depending on the rather realist or rather moral perspective one wants to opt for.

We can be surprised by his choice, but at least someone decides to act humanely in this place so far described as a world of brutes and blood thirsty creatures. Maybe there is hope in humanity! The man stretches his generosity to the point of carrying the wolf on his shoulder, and lying to the hunters when they ask him if he has seen the wolf. Maybe the corruption of our genuine hero starts here, when he decides to cheat in order to save a life: violence and evil starts right now, with a simple lie, when one decides to hide the truth from his fellowmen, no matter how good the reason is. This is the idea behind the categorical imperative of Kant: no context can justify an action that is bad in itself. To advocate justification through circumstances is to open the door for immorality. The shepherd has now entered into the domain of conflict, even if it is to save a life. Worse, he has made a pact with the enemy of humanity, with bestiality, even though he has done it out of his own humanity. The problem is a classical moral dilemma: the opposition between the pragmatic vision and the moral vision. The pragmatic perspective, primarily preoccupied with satisfying our material needs or our instincts, incite us to view as a major goal to protect our own – and relatives – lives and well-being. The moral perspective, primarily preoccupied with accomplishing the good, incites us to respect and protect every one's life and well-being. In this case, should one choose between saving a particular life, considered dangerous to one's own life, and therefore act morally, or should one refuse to save such a life, for security reasons, and therefore act pragmatically? As always, morality comes in the form of a tension, a dilemma, where different and opposed considerations contradict each other, with diverse consequences and implications.

Moral universality

Our peasant has chosen the ethical perspective, and he will pay the price. For, as soon as the wolf feels that danger has vanished, he recovers his true self, gives up his fearful and pleading attitude, and threatens to devour the peasant. The latter, confident in the power of his moral

perspective, calls upon the wolf to be grateful for what was given to him: his life was saved. But to no avail: the wolf is a wolf, he has no consideration for moral preoccupations. He is a pragmatic being, a beast concerned only with survival. He flatly answers that “Old bread and salt are easily forgotten!” Which can be translated in a more explicit way as “Services rendered are easily forgotten”. We cannot help but to think that the wolf is right in terms of his argumentation, even though we might regret his flagrant ingratitude. For, the wolf is a harsh realist, and the peasant a naive utopist. But, that is generally the problem with morality: since it is founded on theoretical universal principles, it might forget harsh daily reality, which is composed of singular events, or particular cases, of immediate necessities. Thus the peasant will pay dearly for his moral choice, the price of his life, since the wolf threatens to eat him up.

But the peasant is not about to give up his moral vision so easily, so he offers the wolf to check out what “common opinion” has to say about the issue: they will ask the first creature they meet to judge who is right and who is wrong. The problem is here interesting: it is a sort of public polling to see which one of the two visions is the most well established. And, the way it is presented by the peasant, we can imagine that for him the opinion that will be confirmed by common sense will be the one that is right. “Common sense”, “Good sense”, “Reason”, or “Healthy sense”, as it is called in Russia. Probably, it is the most universal and therefore the most appropriate, since morality has universal pretensions, or pretends to ground itself in universality: it is supposed to provide common rules of behavior to structure and guide social behavior. In the same way, it is the probable reason why the wolf accepts the challenge: he is practically sure that anyone in his right mind will confirm his saying. Thus, he is only slightly postponing his meal, a mere concession to moral gratitude, one might comment.

Many philosophers, such as Rousseau, claim that morality is an inner sentiment that is present in all humans, even going as far as to state that this quality constitutes the human specificity. Even if we accept such a postulate, the question then remains to define the precise nature of this moral sentiment. For example, we can oppose the idea of David Hume, for whom “morality” means “utility”, to Adam Smith for whom it is a form of natural empathy. Thus, the peasant and the wolf both claim the universality of their posture, and therefore its righteousness.

Of course, one might suppose that, at this time, the peasant is only trying to gain time, that he is being shrewd, and that his problem is not to know who is right or not. This would confirm the initial idea that the peasant is continuing his process of corruption: in order to survive, he is shifting from a moral perspective to a pragmatic one. And, even though this idea is not deprived of interest, let us pursue the debate between morality and realism.

The first creature encountered is a mare, which is requested to give her opinion on the matter. Naturally, she tells the most horrible story about the way she was ungratefully treated by her former master. She worked hard for him. She reproduced for him, and the worse of it is that she was cruelly thrown in a ditch and almost died when she was considered too old to work. Thus, we can conclude that creatures, especially man, are totally ungrateful, and the wolf is right. So the peasant is sad, and either because he cannot believe this is common thought, or again to gain extra time, he begs the wolf to ask someone else. The latter accepts, they meet a bitch, and once more they hear a horror story about man. The peasant is more and more saddened by the testimonies they receive, so goes the story. We don’t know why. Is it because he will be eaten? Is it because he is proven wrong? Is it because those stories are painful to hear? Is it because the idea that man is immoral is a terrible perspective? Moral and practical considerations are here undistinguishable. But, anyhow, the peasant asks the wolf to check with someone for a third

time, claiming that this time, if the wolf is confirmed, he can do as he wish, if he persists on not remembering the service rendered.

Potent and impotent

The third time is the charm, says the proverb. And indeed, this time, we have a very different animal, when we encounter the vixen. The first two animals can be characterized as victims. All they do is tell their horrendous life story, complain, and conclude to the villainy of their master, and from this single example they conclude to the universality of ungratefulness. The way they function is a very common one, of banal nature, in the following three main characteristics. First, the powerless and predetermined vision of one's life, where one undergoes uncontrollable external processes, a world vision which can be thought of as "impotent fatalism". Second, a suffering perspective about one's life, where we mainly focus on the events that prevent us from being happy: unhappy conscience, Hegel calls it. Third, a strange and excessive kind of induction, where we derive the reality of the world from the standpoint of our own reduced and very singular personal experience. This illegitimate type of induction can be called abusive generalization, in the sense that the induction process, in order to be logical, scientific or legitimate, must be based on a certain minimal number of occurrences of a phenomenon before we conclude to the establishment of some universal principle. But, too often, subjectivity rules, with its passive connotation, where emotions and feelings prevail over an active reason, capable of critical thinking, an operation which would necessitate some distance from one's own mental states and opinions in order to function, a sort of unconscious projection.

Thus, the vixen distinguishes herself: she is not some weak and suffering victim. Right away, she questions, she objects, she expresses astonishment: "How can such a big wolf be held in such a small bag?", she asks. We can as well presuppose she has a strategy. One can recognize a totally different style of life, a different mode of thinking. On this specific point, we should remind the readers that the first two animals are domesticated animals. They totally rely on man for their food, for their activity, for their whole life: they are totally taken care of and dependent, for the better and for the worse. Whereas, on the contrary, the vixen is a wild animal: she lives on her own. She has to survive day after day, for herself and for her offspring. Thus, she has to be active, to foresee, to be quick, to calculate. She cannot allow herself to think and act like a victim. She cannot mourn her fate, or she will be dead, caught by surprise. As we know from the history of philosophy, Aristotle for example, astonishment is the beginning of knowledge: astonishment is the reason to reason!

To her remarks, the peasant and the wolf answer with total sincerity: they want to defend themselves, they swear they say only the pure truth. This reaction, as described in the story, is quite interesting: it somewhat reveals the strategy of the vixen. It is very common for people, when their words are put in doubt, to react emotionally. They get irritated, or anxious, or insulted, and since their emotions are provoked, they react with their emotions. Swearing that one is right is a very emotional reaction. It has nothing to do with reason. Reason implies the use of argumentation: some proof which would rationally, objectively and universally sustain the initial statement. But, the famous "I swear to you it is true" is nothing but rhetoric. It is purely an appeal to emotions, to interpersonal relations, just like "believe me", or "trust me", or other arguments of the same ilk. It either reflects a general difficulty to think, or a momentary mental disorder, generally of an emotional nature.

By acting in this fashion, the vixen has taken the offensive, she has destabilized her two interlocutors. She has short-circuited their mental function by doubting their words. She visibly knows that one of the biggest fears of human beings - even the wolf is a human in such a fable - is the fear to be misunderstood, or the fear of not being believed. The reason is that we are often insecure, about ourselves, about our identity, about our thinking, so that we permanently look in the eyes and mouth of others for some kind of confirmation, some kind of reassurance, some kind of approbation. Thus, doubt from others, doubts about our clarity or about our credibility, engenders an immediate protest or denegation. Thinking is not present anymore. We do not try to understand what is happening: feeling threatened, we rather want to defend ourselves. We only react, instinctively, losing distance and autonomy.

The limits of omnipotence

The vixen is a smart animal. She does not believe the two other characters, says the story, or at least she pretends not to believe them, we would rather add. The narration in those types of stories often takes on an ingenuous tone. In the present case, it genuinely supports the two amazed, dumbed and subdued characters. Unless, cunning like the vixen, the narrator wants to trick us. Unless again he wants to surprise us. The vixen insists, pursuing her strategy of “suspicion”, she wants some proofs, not mere words, since she “cannot” really believe the story she was told. She wants facts, actions that can be observed with the eyes, beyond any doubt. She asks the peasant to show her how he can put the wolf in the bag. The latter then introduces only his head in it. But, the vixen insists, so the wolf enters totally inside the bag. It is funny to see how the lead of the situation, the control of the occurrence of events, has been totally abandoned to the vixen. She was only supposed to give her opinion, but by now this crafty character has everyone accomplishing just what she wants. She is a very potent figure, as we see. She completely controls the situation.

Following her instructions furthermore, the peasant completes the work by tying up the bag with the wolf inside. Is he blindly following the orders of the vixen? Does he think that he is being helped? We don't know, and the story does not say. But when the vixen orders “Show how the wheat is beaten”, continuing therefore to obey, or pretending to do so, as in a comical or absurd theater scene – reminding us of a typical commedia dell'arte action – the peasant starts beating the wolf to death without any difficulty. There are numerous stories of this type in Russian folklore and others as well, showing how a smart character saves another one – not so smart – from real danger. But, one of the main reasons we picked up this story is its particularly interesting punch line, its ending. A punch line is always a key element in those types of short stories, like in a joke. It gives the conclusion, the perspective, the vanishing point of the narration, from which the whole meaning and significance is derived. Plus, the laughter or surprise it will provoke will enhance the interest of the tale and enrich its pedagogical effect.

So, the vixen tells the peasant: “Now, show how we really scourge with this flail!” And when he obeys, the peasant inadvertently hits the vixen with his end of the instrument: the part which is a big wooden staff, normally used to hold the flail in order to beat the cereals by swinging the short stick attached to it. And, by doing so, he kills the poor animal that just saved his life. Here, we could expect the peasant to be surprised, or to be sorry for having killed the animal who so generously helped him. But, instead of this, he flatly concludes with the proverb of the wolf, merely repeating: “Bread and salt are quickly forgotten”. The irony of this ending is that the peasant does not fear anything anymore, his life is saved, he is not under duress. So, he

does not have to lie nor to protect himself. Thus he freely concludes that gratitude is not a “normal” behavior.

Does the peasant believe and think what he says, or is he merely repeating those words because he is stunned by the epilogue of his adventure? Does he want to justify the killing of the wolf and the killing of the fox, both committed by him? We don’t really know, we cannot answer precisely those questions. We can only wonder and speculate, since the story does not tell us. It does not enter in those details, it is our reader’s task. What we know “for sure” is that this peasant, who initially, at the beginning of the story, represented the “good person”, the one that saves the life of even the “big bad wolf”, the naive and generous soul, now perverted by the contact of society, has become rather cynical. Can this be called “growing up” or becoming “realist”? Is this an educational process or a corruption process? Did our hero lose his moral principles, or did he learn the principle of reality? Is the story advocating a type of blunt realism, or is it warning us about the fragility of our moral feelings? Well, it probably wants us to meditate on all of this...

In fables, the vixen is generally a strange or surprising character. Very human like, with its unpredictable and cunning characteristics. Often, in stories, the vixen wants to obtain something and she gets it, like in “The vixen and the grouse”, “Kolobok”, “The cat, the rooster and the vixen”, or she tricks for fun like in “The vixen and the heron”, or she does some good for a reward like in “Sniegourouchka and the vixen”. Sometimes, she wins like in “Kolobok”, “The cat, the rooster and the vixen”, sometimes she loses, like in “The vixen and the grouse”, or she is even fooled by times, outsmarted, like in “The vixen and the crayfish”. But, in the present story, the character seems even stranger, for different reasons. For example, we don’t know why she questions the wolf and traps him, instead of merely answering the question asked to her. She answers the question with other questions, apparently disconnected to what is asked from her, in a very Socratic fashion. She questions the phenomenon that is presented to her as facts, doubting the objective knowledge that everyone agrees with, even by opponents like the wolf and the man. She manages to punish the wolf for his ingratitude, and acts as the sword of justice. But, then, she is killed inadvertently for doing so. She is killed by accident. And the person that kills her is the most stupid and gullible person of the story, whom she helped, and after killing her he has no regrets at all. It is a very absurd death! And it is probably to remind us that no matter how smart we are, we cannot control and determine the totality of events. Our intelligence will never exhaust or control reality, which will therefore always surprise us. No matter how smart we are, we should remember that there are limits to our own power. The vixen is the smartest animal in Russian folklore, and in the present story she has apparently good intentions, but it will not stop her from being killed in the most absurd and inglorious manner. Maybe she just gave too much trust to her own powers. She thought that she was omnipotent. She fell for the classical sin of hubris: overlooking her own limits.

7/ The flying ship

Can it be good to be an « idiot »?

There once lived an old man and an old woman. They had three sons. The first two were said to be very smart, the third one was supposed to be stupid. The elder brothers were loved by the old woman. She was giving them clean clothes, and fed them tasty dishes. While the youngest son was dirty, wearing a holey shirt and eating stale bread. The old woman used to say:

- He is a fool, he doesn't understand, so what, he doesn't care anyhow!

One day, a rumor reached the village. The tsar will marry his daughter and give half his kingdom to the person who would build such a ship that would both cruise the sea and fly in the sky. The two eldest brothers decided to try their luck and build such a ship.

- Mother, father, let us go. Who knows, maybe one of us will become son-in-law to the tsar!

Their mother baked them tarts, roasted chicken and goose and gave them a flask of vodka to have on their journey. She packed their clothes, accompanied them to the gate and gave them her blessing. The brothers went to the forest, started to cut and saw the trees. They brought down a lot of them. But what to do next? They had no idea. So, the two brothers started to argue and fight, almost pulling out each other's hair. Suddenly a little old man came up to them and asked

- What are you fighting about? Maybe I can be useful to you?

The two brothers didn't listen to the old man, they threw curse words at him and told him to get lost.

- We have no need of you, and we have nothing for you, stupid beggar, they yelled.

The little old man left. The brothers fought for a bit, ate all their food, and had to go home empty-handed. Once they were back, the youngest brother started to ask his parents to let him go too, in order to try his luck. Father and mother tried to prevent him, arguing.

- How can you go on such a journey! Wolves will certainly eat a fool like you alive!

But the stupid son insisted:

- If you let me go. I will go. If you won't, I will go anyhow.

So, the parents told him:

- You can go now, but you are not a son to us anymore.

They just gave him a piece of stale bread and a gourd of water, and let him go. The idiot took an axe with him and went off to the forest. As he was wandering through the woods he saw a pine, so thick that only three people could embrace it. He cut this pine and started to clean it from the branches. Suddenly the little old man came up to him.

- Hello, son!
- Hello, grandfather!
- What are you doing? Why did you cut such a big tree for?
- The Tsar promised to give his daughter to the one who will build a flying ship. So, I am building it!
- But are you capable of building such a ship? It is not an easy task, you might not manage.
- Hard or easy, I should try. Who knows, maybe I will manage! And you came by. Old people are wise, knowledgeable. Maybe you can give me some advice.

And the old man said:

- Well, if you're asking for an advice, take your axe and cut this pine from the sides like this!

And he showed how it should be done. The idiot listened to him and cut the pine as was said. When he started to cut he got surprised: the axe was moving all by itself!

The old man continued:

- And now do the same but from the other end.

The idiot didn't miss a single word. He did everything as the old man showed to him. When he finished the job, the old man complimented him.

- So, now it is time to take a rest and eat a bit.

The idiot said, sighing:

- All I have is this piece of hard stale bread. How can I give this to you? You probably won't be able to eat it...
- Give me your stale bread

The old man took the bread and gave it back. The fool couldn't believe his eyes: the bread had become soft and white!

- You see, said he old man, unlike your mother, God loves simple-minded people! Let's start with some vodka, he added, because, of course, the water had now turned into the best vodka.

After eating, the old man said:

- So, now it is time to put up the sails.

The man shows what to do. The fool is working as hard as he can. And the sails are ready.

After eating, the old man said:

- Now, take your ship and go! But, don't forget: you must invite on the boat everybody you'll meet on the way.

The fool thanked the old man profusely. And, no sooner did he sit down in the ship that it rose up into the air, soaring high above the treetops, the rivers and the wide fields.

While he was flying, he saw a man on the road beneath him, his ear stuck against the ground.

- Hello, good man!
- Good morning!
- What are you doing here?
- Listening to what is happening in the other world!
- Would you like to get on my ship?

The other did not refuse. He went up onboard the ship, and they both resumed their flight. While they were flying, they met a man advancing on one leg, the other leg being attached to his ear.

- Hello, my brave, why are you walking on one leg?
- Because, if I used my second leg, in one step I would go over the world!
- Come with us!

He went up and, again, they flew away. Suddenly, a man was seen aiming with a rifle, but what exactly he was aiming at could not have been said.

- Hello, my brave! What are you aiming for? There is no bird around!
- But I'm not aiming so close! I shoot beasts and birds, dwelling a thousand leagues from here. It's my way of hunting!
- Come up with us!

The other went up and they left. Suddenly, they saw a man carrying a bag of bread on his back.

- Good morning, good man! Where are you going?
- I'm looking for bread for my meal!
- But you have a full bag of it on your back!
- That? For me? It does not even make a mouthful!
- Come on, come with us! Eat-without-hunger joined them and they flew.

Soon, they flew over a lake. On the shore, a man walked about.

- Hello, my brave! What are you looking for?
- I'm thirsty and I cannot find water!
- In front of you there is a whole lake. What are you waiting for to drink?
- That? For me? But it does not even make a throatful!
- Come! Come with us!

He went upstairs and, again, they flew away. Suddenly a man was seen approaching the forest, a wooden bundle on his shoulder.

- Hello my friend! Why are you going to the forest carrying these logs?
- Because these logs are not simple wood logs!
- Ah! What are they then?
- They are such logs that, if they are scattered, a whole army suddenly arises, in a moment!
- Come with us!

He goes up. They fly, and fly. Suddenly, appears a man who carries a big bundle of straw.

- Hello, my good one! Where do you carry this straw?
- At the village!
- So, there is no straw in the village?
- There is, but this straw is not an ordinary straw. It is such that, even in the summer, it is enough to spread a little so that, immediately, the cold falls and that everything is covered with snow and frost!
- Come with us too!
- Why not!

This was the last encounter, and soon they reached the palace of the Tsar.

Now, at that moment, the tsar was at the table, having food. He caught sight of the flying ship, was surprised and sent a servant to know who was the crew of such a ship. The servant approached, did not enter the ship but, upon seeing only peasants, without even asking them questions, returned to announce to the Tsar that, in the ship, there was not a single person of quality, but only muzhiks. The Tsar told himself that it was not proper to give his daughter to some villein, and he began to seek how to get rid of such a would-be son-in-law. An idea came to his mind:

- I will ask him to perform difficult tasks!

Immediately, he sent order to the idiot to bring back to him, before the end of the meal, the water of healing and life.

At that very moment, when the Tsar gave this order to his servant, the first companion - he who could hear what was happening in the other world - heard his words and reported them back to the idiot.

- What to do now? It will take me at least a year to find this water, and still!
- Do not be afraid, said the rider, I will do it for you!

The servant arrived and transmitted the royal order.

- Tell him that it will be done! replied the idiot.

The companion detached his leg from his ear, jumped, and instantly reached the water of healing and life. Then he told himself, "I have plenty of time to get back!", he stretched and went to take a nap next to a mill.

Meanwhile, the Tsar's meal was coming to an end, and the water of healing and life was still not there. On the ship, all were agitated. The first companion clutched his ear against the damp earth, listened and said, as he got up:

- Bah, he sleeps quietly in the shade of a mill!

The gunman took his rifle and fired at the mill. The shot woke the rider, who got up and brought the water in less time than it takes to say it. The Tsar had not yet risen from the table that his orders were executed, point-by-point.

There was nothing left for the Tsar to do but to imagine another task. He sent word to the idiot:

- Very well, since you are so clever, show me your courage by eating at once, with your companions, twelve bulls and twelve bags filled with baked bread!

The first companion heard these words, and at once repainted them to the idiot, who became frightened.

- But, all at once, I am not even able to eat one whole bread!
- Do not be afraid, replied Eat-without-hunger, I will take care of it and I will not even have enough!

The servant arrived, reported the royal order:

- Well, replied the idiot, send the meal, we will eat it!

The twelve grilled bulls and the twelve bags filled with baked bread were brought. Eat-without-hunger soon liquidated it all:

- Bah, he said, it is very little! I would still need more!

The Tsar then ordered the idiot to drink forty barrels of vodka. Hearing his words, the first companion repeated them to the idiot. He took for fright:

- But, even a bucket alone, I am not able to empty!
- Do not be afraid, said Drink-without-thirst. I'll do it, and it will not even be enough!

Forty barrels were filled with vodka. Drink-without-thirst threw himself on it and, in one stroke he emptied it all. When he had finished, he said:

- It is little, I would still have some!

Then, the tsar ordered the idiot to go and take a steam bath before marrying. He specified that the bathhouse, made of cast iron, be heated till red, in such a manner that the idiot would perish on the spot once in it. Soon, the place sparked like fire. The idiot goes therein, followed by the peasant carrying the straw. They are both enclosed in the cabin. The peasant spreads the straw and it begins to be so cold that the water started freezing once the idiot had barely finished washing. He had to climb on the stove to finish the night. In the morning, when the servants came to look for him, he was safe and sound and he was singing.

The facts were reported to the Tsar. He got upset, not knowing what to do in order to get rid of the idiot. By dint of thinking about it, he came to the idea of ordering him to raise a whole regiment. In himself, he thought:

- How could a simple peasant raise a regiment? He will never succeed!

When the idiot learned about this, he panicked:

- I am lost now, friends! You got me out of trouble quite often. But this time, I think nothing will do!

- Hey! replied the peasant with the wooden bundle, have you forgotten me? Remember that I am a master in this art. Fear-nothing!

Then, the servant arrived:

- If you want to marry the princess, raise a whole regiment by tomorrow!
- Well, I will! But if, after this, the Tsar still finds excuses, I shall fight him and take the princess by force!

During the night, the companion went off in the plains, carrying with him his wooden bundle, and began to throw branches and logs here and there. At once appeared innumerable troops, composed of cavalry and infantrymen, equipped with cannons.

In the morning, the Tsar caught sight of the army and, in turn, became frightened. As soon as possible, he sent the idiot rich clothes and beautiful ornaments, and begged him to come to the palace to marry the princess. The idiot arrived in clothes and ornaments. He had become so beautiful that it was impossible to describe him. He presented himself to the Tsar, married the Princess, received a rich inheritance, and became reasonable and quick-witted. The Tsar and the Tsarina began to love him, whereas the Princess, she became completely besotted with him.

QUESTIONS

Some questions to go further and to extend the reflection

Comprehension

- Why does the mother prefer her first two children to the third?
- Why do the two brothers refuse the old man's help?
- Why do the parents oppose the departure of the third son?
- Why does the idiot son accept the old man's help?
- Why does the old man ask the idiot to take on board all those he meets?
- What does it mean: "Unlike your mother, God loves the simple-minded!"?
- What does the encounter with the old man represent?
- Why does the idiot obey the old man?
- Has the tsar changed in the course of the story?
- What are the common characteristics of the ship's passengers?
- Why did the Tsar want a flying ship?
- Why does the idiot succeed?

Reflection

- Should we sometimes be idiotic?
- Do we always have to think before we act?
- Is there a hierarchy between men?
- What is the difference between maternal love and divine love?
- Can parents love equally their children?
- Does excess inhabit the human heart?
- Why do we refuse help from others?
- Is it possible to be without prejudice?
- What is the relationship between existence and power?
- Does knowledge prevent us from thinking and acting?
- Is it good to want the impossible?
- Can a society exist without hierarchy?

ANALYSIS

Success and mistake

The old couple had three sons. In tradition, the number three is that of accomplishment. The third time is the right one, as an English proverb says: "The third time is the charm." But, if the third time is a success, the first two are not: they represent mistake or failure. From the outset, the story revolves around this problematic of the essay, that is to say, the necessary relation between error and success. Things are not given a priori, from the beginning, since the world is imperfect. Which means that it is capable of perfection, and that we are responsible for its improvement. A perfect world would be a world where man would be impotent, irresponsible, reduced to a childish and dependent state, as in earthly paradise. The Garden of Eden symbolizes this state of childhood where things are what they are, nothing changes, everything is already ordered. We have only to let ourselves live in a state of bliss and total confidence.

Thus, it is necessary to dare to act and to transgress the rules, i.e. to be deceived, in order to be able to achieve something. This is contrary to the idea of success as a perfection, which would deny all possibility of error, a state of arrogance to which all finitude and all humanity would be repugnant. To succeed is to miss. We understand our mistake when something does not work. We pay attention to the world when it fails. To miss is not the opposite of success, it is the condition of success.

The story begins, moreover, with the order of the Tsar, who invites everyone to "succeed" an almost impossible task: a ship capable of flying, a "perfect accomplishment", one might say. With, as a reward, the hand of the princess and half the kingdom, meaning, the ultimate recognition: to become a king. The stakes are high. Of course, the hero of the story is totally incongruous. He is clumsy, a mistake of "nature", the shame of his parents, a real failure, since he is idiotic, dirty and badly dressed. The mother prefers to trust her two eldest sons, apparently well endowed, closer to perfection. How could she suspect, the poor lady, that one should not trust appearances, that all that shines is not gold, that sensible solutions are not always the best? She could not guess that only the one who knows to be mistaken is capable of accomplishing the marvelous. The others are too immersed in the immediacy of evidence and certainty. The younger is accustomed to the strangeness of things, the elders believe they know, and pretend to master the order of the world. Only this strange, unconventional and unloved son is likely to generously accept as a gift from providence the unpredictable chain of causes and effects. Good boys, good pupils, are accustomed to know, too accustomed to be astonished and to discover the unexpected. They are too confident to be confident.

It should also be noted that the hero of this story is found in many skaskas, such as "Ivan Durak", "Sivka-Bourka", "How Ivan Durak kept the door", etc. He is generally known as "Ivan the fool", and the stories always contain the same theme of the clever, naive and "protected" idiot.

Hierarchy and reversal

This story is marked by a hierarchical vision of the world. As we have seen, the intelligent brothers above, the idiot brother below. Beautiful appearance and cleanliness prevail over ugliness and dirt. Cleanliness is a form of perfection, where things are already realized: nothing is dirty, nothing is in the process, everything is given. Dirt implies imperfection, what is being

done, that is, the lack. Here, the dirty one who will display real power, toppling cleanliness and perfection. Then comes the hierarchy between the nobles and the peasants. Normally, the former are better endowed and more powerful. Here, the peasants are the ones who realize the accomplishment. It is they who embody the power of being and who will eventually overcome the senseless challenges of the king, which no noble had been able to accomplish so far. The different characters involved in the impossible project, those with "special" powers, are all described as humble peasants, including one character always in want of food and another always in want of water. And, ultimate in reversal, the princess will fall in love with such a peasant, whom she will marry, and adore. We are told that even her parents, the king and queen, began to love him. And it is precisely on this problematic of love that the third unseated hierarchy articulates itself: between the loved and the unloved. The third son is not loved by his mother, unlike his two brothers. The mother accompanies the first two sons and equips them generously, but she abandons the third one with almost nothing, right on the doorstep, going as far as disowning him. The old man warned us about this by saying to the boy: "The Good Lord loves the simple-minded." Your mother does not love you, and yet you are loved, by a more powerful and just being. This is undoubtedly the key to the hierarchical reversal. To be loved by God is not anecdotal. It is to be blessed. It implies to be within the order of being, to correspond to the order of the world, to have true value. Heavens are granted to the simple-minded, as the Gospels foretell. But, in general simple people are not appreciated, they are rather despised because they do not know how to play the games of society, they are too disconnected from the social pacts. They are always fooled; they are the excluded, the fringe, the eternal losers. In the present case, even his mother does not like the simpleton, she prefers by far those who seem groomed for success. Those can leave home, they are strong and autonomous, while the other, incapable, should remain under maternal domination. Of course, our unloved hero will prove the opposite of this evidence: this is the teaching that we deserve.

Reciprocity

There is another reversal than the one of hierarchy in the course of the narration, a different upheaval in terms of personal functions and relational dynamics. Contrary to the previous reversals, the latter does not imply a hierarchy, or the reversal of a hierarchy, for it serves rather to establish a new principle, based on reciprocity, on equality, that is a reversal of all hierarchy, abandoning the very concept hierarchy. In this sense, this other reversal establishes a new, healthier, more balanced order. It does not imply the crushing or disappearance of one of the partners, who then would become a subordinate subject, or mere object. The reversal takes place not between beings but between relations: the shift takes place between subordination and equality, between competition and collaboration. At first, the "vertical" order prevails. The mother prefers her intelligent sons, the other is an idiot, not worthy to be loved. The brothers think themselves strong and cunning, they despise the old man, who looks like a beggar, who pretends to help them, a claim which is unbearable to them. The king and his court despise the muzhiks, even though they are the ones who succeed in building the flying ship, to his great surprise and indignation. He even envisaged the idea that he would go so far as to make war on these peasants, rather than grant his daughter to one of them. In opposition to this, the idiot agrees to be helped, and he will accept to feed the old man, while thinking that the food offered is not good enough for this old man. And, it is because he accepts collaboration and exchange that he will be helped. It is also because he will accept to host each of the strange characters he

takes on his ship that these will help him, even if he did not expect anything from them. The counter-gift accompanies the gift, granting each partner of the deal status and legitimacy. It is this collaborative alliance that will defeat the royal forces, themselves based on hierarchical relations and contempt. Thus, the horizontal replaces the vertical. The issue is therefore to show us that companionship and mutual support are stronger connections than power relations. This new order, more peaceful and humane, is at once more generous and more effective.

The mother gives, but she calculates: she aspires, she prefers, she is unjust. The "idiot" son gives, but he is ashamed to not give enough. The other deserves better than "that." It is the intention that counts. The reality of generosity is found in the relation of the subject to himself and to the world around him, not in the objective reality of the given thing. The idiot values others. It is for this reason that he is rewarded and finds many goods in his bag. This is explained to him by: "The good God loves the simple-minded." The idiot does not calculate. He does not try to possess. He wants the good of others. It is in this very attitude that he is idiotic. The "intelligent" person seeks to get as much as possible for himself. These are the "shrewd" we meet in other stories, such as Ruffly, for example, who cleverly acts, only when being moved by selfish concerns. Through generosity, one reaches the transcendence, thus the distinction that the old man makes between maternal love and divine love. The former is conditioned by formal or apparent qualities, the latter by the greatness of the soul. The gift, its nature and its form, its intention and its finality, are the measure of it. Thus the "idiot" will be rewarded: he will find satiety and contentment. The replacement of water by vodka is a strong symbol of this, since the latter arouses joy. A joy that alone can engender true love. Of course, the down-to-earth reader, concerned about the harmful effects of alcohol, must understand that this is not vodka as such, but a drunkenness which connotes love among beings, including in its apparent irrationality.

Trust and love

The issue of trust is very present in this story. The reader notices it from the start, through the behavior of the mother character. She trusts her two eldest sons, whom she thinks are more competent, more beautiful, more intelligent, etc. As a result, she loves them more, and the reader concludes that a sort of equivalence or community operates between love and confidence. So this "loving" mother encourages her two well-endowed sons to leave and seize the challenge. We can even add that her ambition is expressed through them, since they represent the extension of her being, her power to act and to exist. She encourages them to take their autonomy.

It is very different for the third son: she would like to keep him under her thumb. She does not trust him. She orders him to stay home. In her relation to her youngest, she expresses worry: "the wolves are going to eat you", while insulting him, since she calls him "fool". Displeased, furious at seeing him leave, she gave him very little provisions. He has no right to her blessing. The most interesting, however, is her threat of denial. Indeed, if he leaves, he is no longer "their son". One can be surprised at such a threat, given the lack of enthusiasm – not to say the lack of love – which she expresses towards her son. Why should she be worried about the departure of this being whom she considers ridiculous? Why does she wish to retain this son, toward whom she is so unconcerned? It seems that we find here a recurring theme in the Russian tales. Kolobok for example, where parents are implicitly invited to accept the departure of their children, to grant them autonomy rather than to be possessive parents who prefer to keep their children under their wing in order to "protect them". To love is to trust. It is to grant a power to be, while "to protect" is to be possessive, it is to refuse to grant the child the right to grow and to

exist. We find here an explicit criticism of the parents for whom to love is synonymous with worrying or protecting. Fear weakens love, if it does not annihilate it. Love is synonymous with trust and generosity. Thus, for these abusive parents, when the "weak" child is no longer protected, he is no longer "our" child, since he is no longer a child. Henceforth, parents are no longer parents: they are dispossessed of their being. Unconsciously, like Saturn or Kolobok's parents, they want to devour their own children. In reality, it is the mother who is the real danger to her son. She prevents him from growing up. That is why she lets the children she loves leave and retains the one she does not really love. A paradoxical situation which should invite many parents to reflect.

In another way, her relationship with her various sons shows the mother's ambiguity towards children, a mixture of ambition and possessive fear. One can criticize her in two ways: for her ambition on the one hand, for her anxiety on the other. If she seems to love her first two sons better, we can also say that she expects something from them. But, finally, what parent is not expecting some "gratification" from his or her children! It is easy to forget that if we breed, if we have children, it is above all for ourselves, to satisfy our own desires, our own needs, to calm our own anxieties ...

The hero does not know how to make the flying ship, but he fulfills the task by trusting God, men, the world. The dialogue with the "old man" is a kind of unraveling of the idiot's trust capacity, proportional to his "poverty". He ignores, he knows he does not know. He nevertheless wants to take up the challenge, and as he knows that he does not master the internal processes and paths of reality, he trusts "everything" and therefore himself. He does not live in paradise, but in the best of possible worlds, as Leibniz describes it. His approach is apparently absurd. It puts reason into question, in its limitations. In this sense, the idiot has access to an intellect beyond reason. He grasps meaning beyond absurdity, while "others" grasp only meaning in its evidence, that of customary reason. His ignorance and the acceptance of his ignorance go hand in hand with his love of the world; so naive is this love devoid of reason and reasons. This naivety can also be called trust, and it is what allows him to act, which pushes him to act. The old man trusts the youth, in return the latter trusts him and therefore trusts himself. The action seems strange to the young man, but he does it anyway. It is an act of faith, and moreover he signs himself three times, a sign of faith and blessing. Faith and trust are of same nature. They both come from giving, from generosity: one offers one's confidence or one's faith, one gives it without waiting for any return, it is not conditional, otherwise it would not be trust or faith.

In some versions of the story, the boy meets the old man, who tells him to strike a single blow of his axe on a tree and then go to rest. While sleeping, the work is done by itself, and on waking up, the boat is fully built. This "sleep" is symbolic, it shows the tranquility of his soul, because he is supported by Providence. In other versions, a "voice calls him", showing the attention he deserves from the divine. And the text often insists on this point of confidence, telling us for example "that he set to work without any hesitation," an attitude of excessive ingenuity, one might think. But, it undoubtedly goes that way with trust: like love, it does not know how to calculate, it does not worry or look back.

Being and power

Plato suggests the idea that the first expression of being is power, that is, an ability to act in a given way, corresponding to a particular being, to a specific form of existence. This intuition

seems to correspond fairly well to the functioning of this story, where several characters exist and are defined solely in relation to their specific power, their power of action. Besides, the main theme of this story is none other than the one of power and impotence. Let us first examine these archetypal characters, the various passengers of the flying ship. Each of them represents the potentialities of actions, the modalities or attributes of the subject, of a subject, whatever it may be. What are they?

- *To listen.* The man who can hear far

To listen to the earth, what happens elsewhere, to hear what is going on in the whole world. This represents a strong link between the subject and the totality of the universe. If we know how to hear, we are completely present in the world.

- *To move.* The man who walks on one leg

Moving is another form of contact with the universe. For this man, it is possible to move everywhere, instantly, almost to be everywhere at once. He must even make an effort not to go too far!

- *To hunt.* The man with the rifle

This is a remote action. No place is foreign to this man, he can immediately reach any place or any being without even moving. Thus he is not interested in proximity, but only by distance. He has the power to take life from very far away.

- *To swallow.* Eat-without-hunger

To ingest the world is what we do through knowledge. It is about our ability to have the world in oneself, to absorb it, to digest it. Especially since Eating-without-hunger swallows quite naturally, without having any need of desire. He even carries bread, in his superabundance of goods.

- *To drink.* Drink-without-thirst

To have an infinite thirst, like the ocean, which receives without end all the rivers, as if he attracted them to itself. A moving and fluid reality, symbolizing the union of the whole and the parts, since each drop is lost in the totality of the ocean. The man who is thirsty is reluctant to drink a lake that is not even a sip for him.

- *To conquer.* The man with the pack of wood

What is like a log for everyone is a fighter for the conqueror. He turns everything to good account, branches and logs all become soldiers, and nothing can stop him, since an entire army can arise at his simple command. He represents force, battling, and the might of the victor.

- *The cold.* The man with the bundle of straw

Straw is normally a symbol of heat. It is used to warm up and to protect one from the cold, but this "unusual" straw does the exact opposite. The cold represents cessation of life, since nothing grows when snow and frost do their work, before nature resumes its course. It is the power of winter, when everything stops.

These various powers of being can be considered as primordial forces, faculties of existence or archaic forces. They represent, for example, the shrinking or disappearance of space and time, which are the limiting factors of action. Thus, one can act without the constraints of limited power, of temporality, of distance. We leave the "outer" world in which things are separate and distinct, where reality is scattered, to return to the transcendent unity of inner reality. The instantaneity and power of these various actions refer to the indivisibility of being, the indivisibility of the world.

The flying boat is probably the most striking symbol of this supernatural force. It is endowed with an enormous power, a fantastic instrument, which places the individual owning it above others. He flies above, he has height, he escapes gravitation. It is understandable that the Tsar, an ambitious man, wished for such a contraption. But, he could not build it himself. His power was too mediocre and limited. So much so that he could not recognize the power of the man who built the boat.

The construction of such a ship is a somewhat disproportionate ambition. Nevertheless, the excess is as well considered positive, for it represents infinite power. The yardstick with which one can examine finitude, sent back to its reduced and reductive reality. Proximity, limitedness are not considered admissible anymore; only the infinite is worthy of interest.

The different powers that are summoned here can all be taken in a negative form: the one who listens to everything is too curious or dizzy, the one who walks fast is impatient, the hunter is a destructor, the hungry is a glutton who is never satisfied, the one who drinks does not know how to stop, the combatant represents the violence, the cold incarnates death. Nevertheless, these different negative forces here seem to be summoned as positive forces since they can act in a productive way. As we shall see later, this is a paradoxical vision, which can be accounted for by saying that all that is can only be good, that all power can only be the affirmation of being. These powers are as many archaic forces, as one would observe in a primitive mythology, represented by gods or demons.

Complacency and weakness

We are introduced to the Tsar when at the table, restoring himself, installed in complacency and satisfaction. He notices a ship flying in accordance with the instructions he has given to the whole kingdom. One might think he would be astonished or glad to see his challenge taken up, and that he would rush to congratulate those who achieved such a feat. He had even promised to grant his daughter to the one who would meet this challenge, showing his high interest in this project. But instead he sends forth a servant who, faithful to his master's vision of the world, does not notice anything interesting in the situation: only a few muzhiks, uneducated, rude, rough people. Instead of rejoicing in the exploit, the Tsar seeks to rid himself of the hero, whose identity does not fit his prejudices. To do so, he raises impossible challenges that are more miraculous than actual exploits. The "healing water of life", which is to protect against sickness and death, is indeed what can expectedly be asked of the "powers of being", the mighty passengers of the flying boat. The various challenges issued in a row will all be of that sort, but none of them will pose problem to this "exceptional" crew. The muzhiks even get annoyed, and the idiot threatens to wage war against the Tsar if he does not keep his promises. This superficial and contemptuous man ends up understanding the situation when he suddenly becomes frightened, when he realizes he is dealing with stronger than he. He then resigns himself to keep

his promise, to hold his engagements, in spite of himself. But, as always in this kind of story, in which the frog becomes a prince, " The idiot had become so beautiful that it was impossible to describe him." We must believe that its true nature is at last becoming evident. Only an idiot can be sufficiently intelligent, that is, sufficiently generous and confident, to accomplish what he has accomplished. But to realize this, the Tsar, who represents the established order, superficiality, and complacency, must undergo a shock and realize the inanity of his position, the superficiality of his way of thinking and being.

We must imagine that, like the mother or the tsar, we are caught up in our own prejudices, embedded in a hierarchical matrix where success and bankruptcy are obvious concepts. We must learn, at our own expense, in spite of ourselves, that it is not so. We must understand that value is not determined according to the evidences of society, but by other realities that may seem rather surprising. Already, it is a matter of knowing how to give rather than to calculate and to possess. It is also a question of not relying on our immediate impressions, but of knowing how to look beyond or under appearances, by being suspicious of what attracts us, of what repulses us. We too often trust our own subjectivity, no doubt without being aware of it, a subjectivity that tends to identify to common opinion.

Foolishness often criticizes the established power, such as government or authority, directly or not. Thus in this story even though the hero pretends to fulfill the will of the tsar, he accomplishes his destiny by confronting what the tsar represents. Because of the actions of the "idiot", the sovereign was forced to confront an undesirable situation and face a reality that does not befit him. We can observe in different stories of the tradition that the king and the fool are often linked, even though in antagonistic fashion, in what can be described as a dialectical relation, often consisting of confrontation and reconciliation. This implies a transformation of the different characters, the "partners" in this relation. For example, the conversion of the idiot once he has won over the tsar, who becomes "beautiful, reasonable and quick-witted". Or the conversion of the tsar, who now "loves" the idiot, overcoming his own prejudices, accepting to share his power with a muzhik.

The established and formal power collapses, forced to bow down in front of the natural, more primordial power. This archetype has to be interpreted as a tension within each one of us, between some conventional and established mode of existence, confronted to a more rational or archaic impulse, considered more legitimate. Thus, legality is confronted to legitimacy. Legality refers to the laws as they are established, with their arbitrary dimension, whereas legitimacy refers to some higher order principles, such as morality or natural law.

Idiocy and foolishness

The "idiot" or the "fool" is a recurrent character in Russian literature. It was depicted in the famous "Idiot" of Dostoyevsky, met in novels of Gogol, but we already encounter it in numerous traditional Russian tales, for example with the character of "Ivan Durak", the equivalent of the unnamed hero in the present story. He is found in many skaskas, such as "Ivan Durak", "Sivka-Bourka", "How Ivan Durak kept the door", etc. His name means "John the fool", and these stories always contain the same theme of the clever, naive and "blessed" idiot. Originally, the word "durak" signifies crazy, berserk, outrageous, bearing a rather negative and violent connotation, described as well as an impetuous force. In other words, it is an irrationality that is powerful and hard to master, while being at the same time a very natural expression of the self, this dimension of the psyche where reason plays little importance. The magic plays here an

important role, which operates both in the character and in his surroundings. Even though in many narratives the “idiot” is usually one who turns out to be smarter than other characters, his “victory” does not depend on him, but generally comes from the higher forces: God’s will, help from the passers-by, fortuitous circumstances, intervention of providence or of animals that represent some archaic forces.

It seems like things happen by themselves, once the “idiot” just decides to act. He relies on some kind of fatality, called “avosj” – in Russia a very common way of acting, a motivation or explanation – which indicates a mixture of hope, fatalism, impotence and wishful thinking, relying on some kind of good luck with, of course, the possibility of bad luck. It is often expressed by the “maybe”, carrying a connotation of trust, fear and incertitude. Here lie both the strength and the weakness of the “idiot”. Because he trusts the world, he is capable of accomplishing things others cannot realize. He doesn’t calculate, he cannot calculate, thus he does not worry about the outcome and does not deem anything impossible. His soul is tranquil. Feeling no need to control, he can fall asleep and let the world take care of his quandaries.

As we can observe in many tales, “the powerful forces” are usually on the idiot’s side. “Idiots are lucky”, says the proverb. One can wonder whether it is the generosity and openness of the idiot which gives him such credit, or rather a lawful compensation of immanent justice to counterbalance his poverty and his needs. As well, we can think of the famous sentence of the gospel that claims: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” And one can think about this issue both from the standpoint of a redress or a reward.

The “easiness” with which the “idiot” achieves incredible things can be quite irritable for the others, probably because of their own obsessive calculations. They are resentful: they don’t receive what they think they deserve. They are overwhelmed by a strong desire for possession, moved by ambition, their failure is unbearable, thus the envy they feel. On the other side, the idiot is neither driven by strong passion, nor by calculation. Things come to him through intuition, his reasoning is primitive, his actions are free and not costly. One meets this very situation in the case of prince Mishkin, the famous “idiot” of Dostoyevsky: his naivety and generosity provokes anger and violence in his surroundings. In the “paranoid” world he lives in, the aristocracy; his absence of calculations is considered a proof of even bigger calculations: he is constantly suspected of contriving a plot, since such “ingenuity” and “unpretentiousness” is considered totally abnormal, or impossible. At the same time, in a contradictory way, he is depicted as “unsophisticated”, as “a fool without ambitions”. His openness and straightforwardness are the “obvious” reasons to doubt his good intentions: in a society filled with conspiracy and intrigue, someone without such pretensions can either be a hopeless idiot or an insidious plotter, an ironical paradox. And, since he often easily obtains what others desperately want – recognition, love, money or respect – people are inclined to think that they overlooked the machiavellian evil behind the innocent mask.

The idiot has in general the function of showing the “other way” of being, by breaking the common scheme and going against the established laws, even against reason itself. In different tales, Ivan the fool feeds his own shadow, puts hats on the pots so they would not be cold, pulls out eyes of sheep so they would not run away, expects a table to run, etc. He applies his strange knowledge to the situations where, according to common sense, it cannot work or it looks ridiculous. But, of course, by means of some magical principle, it starts functioning. He can act outrageously and, through his excesses, he makes others doubt. For example, he cries at weddings and laughs at funerals. He can be thought of as a jester, the character that thinks the unthinkable, speaks the unspeakable, thus ridiculing common habits, limits and fears. Although

he doesn't have a pretension to teach any wisdom, his free, purposeless actions are filled with depth, even though, like a child, he is unconscious and doesn't know what will come out of his deeds. Others, prisoners of their usual customs and schemes, can only mock the idiot, be astonished or angry at his accomplishments. Violation of common sense or the rules of logic is not a problem for the idiot, and it is precisely what allows him to realize things the others would not even imagine.

The idiot is someone who often doesn't have a strong connection to any home or definite roots: he either roams around the world or has relatives that don't love him. He is a nomad, adventurous, he is without house or home. In the present story, his family rejects him. He is ready to leave. Although it is hard to determine what comes as initial cause: an internal freedom leading to rejection from the outside, or an outside rejection that prepares the ground for his own detachment. Anyhow, there is a definite dynamic between the character and his surroundings. Generally, he leaves just as easily and freely as he acts. Easily satisfied, happy with not much, he is always ready to try anything, as he doesn't have much to lose: neither from a material standpoint, nor from a relational or psychological one. Because he is stupid, he is autonomous. Being abandoned by the others diminishes the level of expectations: he does not depend on their gratitude or recognition; strangely enough, he is ready to give and expects nothing in return. Like such characters as Yersh, he can be considered a derelict, but a naive or loving derelict, as he is willing to accept and embrace whatever comes his way. Yersh, on the other side, is a fighting derelict, wanting to find his place, to survive and to be accepted.

Historically, fools were overthrowing usual habits and customs, rejecting reason, and as a result, were considered to have access to more profound layers of reality, being more authentic and having an access to the higher powers. Reason can therefore be considered as a psychological limit, synonym of pragmatism, sordid calculation and absence of spirituality, it triggers pride and reveals our arrogance: once we know, it becomes difficult to give up on the knowledge, on the power, and to become ignorant. Innocence is lost through learning. The Bible tells us about Adam and Eve who were thrown out of the Earthly paradise for their desire to know, instead of remaining God's innocent children. One who is poisoned by knowledge and reason ceases to "see". Rationality thus becomes an obstacle more than a mean for wisdom. In their desire to acquire this "divine wisdom", some characters were trying to reproduce such behavior. In the 15th-16th centuries, there were the "yurodivuy": "God's fool" or "holy fool". They would walk barefoot, begging in the streets, being "crazy for the sake of Christ". They were treated with some awe and reverence, they were believed to be under the protection of God. This reminds us as well of Francis of Assisi, preaching to the birds, which apparently were listening to him. Being an "idiot" seems to allow for the abandon of the usual principles and surrender to the powers that transcend the limits of the immediate.

8/ The dragon and the Tzigane

Are we masters of our destiny?

In ancient times, there was a village over which a dragon frequently flew. He was devouring people. In the end, there remained, all in all, only one peasant.

One day, a Gypsy came to pass by as evening fell. Whichever side he turns, nowhere does he find a soul that lives. At last, entering the last isba, he saw the last peasant who was crying, all alone.

- Hello, good man!
- What are you doing here, Gypsy? You must have had enough of life.
- What is going on here?
- You do not know that a dragon keeps flying here and that he is devouring people one after another? He has already eaten everyone, except me, but tomorrow it is my turn! And, for you, this is not much better because, every time, he eats two!
- Bah! And if he was strangled? Come on, I will spend the night with you and tomorrow we shall see who this dragon is!

The night passed. Suddenly, in the morning, a strong storm broke out, the isba shook and, in the air, appeared the dragon.

- Ah, ah! he jubilated. Here's a supplement to my breakfast! I had only one creature left and upon my return I now find two!
- Because you think you're going to eat me? asked the Gypsy.
- Yes, I will eat you.
- You are lying, devil's worshipper. For you will choke!
- Well, would you be stronger than me?
- For sure! Would you doubt it?
- Very well, let us make a trial and see which of the two has the most strength!
- Let's go!

The dragon took up a millstone:

- This stone, do you see it? Well, with one hand, I shall crush it!
- Perfect, I do not take my eyes off you!

The dragon put the stone in his palm and crushed it so well that sand and sparks came out.

- Pretty! Said the Gypsy. But are you able to squeeze a stone so that water flows from it? No? Well, look at me!

On the table, there was a white cheese pavement. The Gypsy seized it, began to press it, and the whey came out.

- So, you saw it? Which one of us is the stronger, in your opinion?
- One has to admit that you have a harder grip than me. But let's try to see which one of us whistles the best.
- Come on, start!

When the dragon began to whistle, all the leaves fell from the trees.

- You whistle well, friend, but not as much as I do! Said the Gypsy. Only, you're going to have to close your eyes, because when I start, they're going to blow out of your skull!

The dragon believed him and he covered his eyes with a scarf.

- Go, whistle!
- The Gypsy seized a club and began to hit the dragon on the head.

The other shouted:

- Suffice, enough, Gypsy! Do not whistle anymore! That's it! You almost forced my eyes out!
- As you wish. But, I can start again, no problem!
- No, no! I have nothing more to say. Let us rather make peace. Be my elder brother, and I shall be the young one!
- So be it!
- Well, brother, said the dragon, go to the steppe. A group of oxen grazes there. Choose the fattest, take it by the tail and bring it back, so we have our lunch!

What could the Gypsy do!

So he went off in the steppe, where he saw a large group of oxen. Thereupon, he starts catching them, attaching them by the tail, one to the other.

Tired of waiting, the dragon lost patience and went to check.

- It takes you so much time!
- Just wait! I tied together fifty and I will bring them all together, so that we have enough to eat for the whole month!
- What an idea! Let's not spend our life here! Only one will suffice!

And grabbing the fattest beef by the tail, the dragon shredded it with a single gesture, loaded the mass of meat on his shoulders and went home.

- But brother, all these oxen I have tied, do we leave them here?
- Of course!

Upon returning home, they stuffed two cauldrons with meat. However, there was not enough water.

- Here, take this ox-skin, said the dragon to the Gypsy, fill it with water and bring it back, so that we cook the meal.

The Gypsy took the skin. He had the greatest difficulty to drag it along to the well, and yet it was empty. Arriving at the well, he began digging a trench. Tired of waiting, the dragon came running.

- What are you doing, Brother?
- You see, I dig the earth in order to bring water directly to the house.
- What an idea! Do you realize how long it will take!

The dragon let the skin go down into the well, filled it with water, and brought it back to the house.

- Hey brother! said he to the Gypsy, go to the forest, find a dead oak tree and bring it back, so we can light a fire.

The Gypsy went into the forest, where he looked for creepers to make a rope. He braided a long, long one, and began to encircle several oaks. Impatient, the dragon hastened to the forest.

- What's the matter with you?
- I want to tie twelve oaks with this rope and uproot them all together so that we'll have enough wood for a long time!
- Oh, that one is so stubborn! exclaimed the dragon, who tore off the biggest oak and dragged it to the isba.

Pretending, the Gypsy sat silently in the corner of the house, as if sulking. Once the meat was cooked, the dragon called upon him to eat, but he replied:

- No, I don't want to eat, leave me alone!

When the dragon had finished the ox and the water contained in the skin, he questioned the Gypsy:

- Tell me, why are you angry?
- Because, whatever I do, it's never good enough. You are never happy!
- Come on, don't be angry! Let's make peace!
- If you want to make peace, come to my house!
- Sure! Let's go!

Immediately, the dragon found a carriage, harnessed three magnificent horses, and together they went to the Gypsy's encampment. When they saw their father, the little gypsies, half-naked, ran to meet him, shouting at the top of their voice:

- Daddy is coming, and he is bringing a dragon!

At these words, the dragon became frightened:

- Who are they?
- My children! They must be hungry! Make sure they do not attack you!

The dragon immediately jumped off the carriage and ran away without a word.

The gypsy sold the carriage and the horses, and went on to live carefree.

QUESTIONS

Some questions to go further and to prolong the reflection

Comprehension

- Why does the Gypsy decide to stay with the peasant?
- Why does not the peasant flee?
- Is the Gypsy stronger than the dragon?
- Why does the dragon take up the challenge of the Gypsy?
- Why does the dragon want to be the "younger brother" of the Gypsy?
- Is the Gypsy an immoral being?
- What does the Gypsy represent in this story?
- What strategy does the Gypsy use?
- Why does the dragon prefer to reconcile with the Gypsy?
- Why does the Gypsy invite the dragon to his home?
- Is the Gypsy rational?
- What does the dragon represent?

Reflection

- Do we all react equally to misfortune?
- Do we always have to think before we act?
- Are we master of our destiny?
- Does providence exist?
- Is manipulation a good thing?
- Is impatience a weakness?
- What are the main differences between nomad and sedentary?
- Why do we invent allegorical creatures?
- Is bluffing a good strategy?
- Is it more prudent to ally with the powerful?
- Why do we say that the bigger the lie is, the more credible it is?
- Why are adults sometimes afraid of children?

ANALYSIS

Dragon

The dragon is a recurring character in many stories, a mythical creature par excellence. Being gigantic, with extraordinary powers, it always symbolizes great strength. The dragon is a very ancient mythological figure, since its oldest traces date back 6000 years, in China. It is seen as a symbol of life or power, as a protector of places, things or people, or as a magical and evil being, a foe that heroes, saints or gods have to fight in order to reestablish world order or the good. The example of the dragon that Saint George fights is the best-known example. Archaic symbol, it is often linked to natural or chthonic forces, earthly or subterranean. Its name derives from the fact of "seeing", so it often plays the role of a guardian or of a protector. When dragons are not considered dangerous or hostile, they can be powerful and venerated: they sometimes represent the power in place, the king or emperor, as in China. Its very nature is paradoxical, being creeping and flying, symbol of earth and fire, and in different cultures representing good or evil, although in the context of Christian cultures it is connoted rather negatively.

In Russian culture, Zmey Gorynich is the most famous dragon, depicted in tales, a frightening creature with three to twelve heads. He is very brutal and in many occurrences can be fought only with force, but not with tricks. He is cruel and strong. He is only interested in killing his opponent. Being stupid, he has no doubts whatsoever about his own strength. Although, as we see from his patronymic name - son of Goryn - there is a certain respect towards the powers of this beast. His name indicates that he lives in mountains, considered as doors to the "other world". His function is to be the protector of the realm of the dead. Fighting him, therefore, means to accept the ultimate challenge, passing from one stage to the other, as a form of initiation, from innocence to maturity, as is often required by crossing the "Kalinov bridge" where the dragon keeps his watch.

In the present case, as is often the case in western cultures, it is a rather raw, stupid, primitive, archaic and evil force. When it manifests itself, it triggers a storm, walls vacillate, hearts tremble. It is powerful, terrorizing, destructive, and even worse, cannibalistic. It reduces the human being to the state of game or meat.

The present story tells us that the dragon devoured one by one the people of the village, so much so that remained only one peasant, fatalistic and desperate. This dragon, "worshipper of Satan" as the Gypsy calls it, is undisputed master of the place. He is sure of himself. He devours all those who pass by. Of course, the fact that there is practically no one left reveals the brutality and the stupidity of the dragon in question. He can only destroy, to such an extent that nothing will remain. But he is so foolish that he cannot think the sustainability of his functioning. Like a child, he thinks only about the immediate, the desire which animates him, his own desires. He does not reason, as we shall see in the course of the story. Especially since no one has been able to oppose his terrorizing and destructive force until then. He therefore considers all men as mere objects to satisfy his needs. No doubt, it is in this attitude that the dragon symbolizes evil: an inability to put oneself in the place of others. Completely devoid of empathy, totally self-centered, unaware of the consequences of his actions, indifferent to everything which is not himself. These are certainly the main characteristics of an evil being. Ego-centric, he is proud of his powers, which he likes to show. He is very infantile, because of his impulsiveness, his narcissism and his credulity. Like a little boy, he breaks stones, he whistles, he is primarily

preoccupied with drinking and eating. He is very impatient, and with this impatience the gypsy will play, in order to manipulate the dragon. Impulsive, he immediately accepted the challenge put forward by the Gypsy: he had no doubt that he would win. He rushes, and therefore cannot think, as Descartes points out, critical of precipitation. His naivety and his hastiness are the weaknesses of his strength, the reasons for his loss.

One comes to feel that the dragon is rather lonely, and it almost moves us when he proposes to the Gypsy to become his younger brother. He tries to please him and is troubled by the idea that his "big brother" is angry with him. Finally, he is very fearful, since he is seen to run away lest the Gypsy's children should eat it. One can conclude from this simultaneously frightening and ridiculous nature that the dragon frightens those who want to be frightened, like the villager of the story. As is often the case with the forces of evil, their main ally is found in the credit given to them by ordinary mortals in accepting their evil power. Only the heroes, the pure and the brave, put them in check, for they can glimpse their reality and their fragility, beyond these frightening appearances.

We must specify that the dragon of the story is more human and weak than usual: he has human preoccupations, such as desire for recognition, fear of failure and wanting to be loved. He is quite emotional for a creature of pure brutal force, its more usual depiction. But the mood here is humoristic.

Victim

The peasant is above all a victim. His role is necessary to give meaning and significance to both dragon and gypsy. Passive and resigned, he constitutes the stake of the two opposing forces. He appears at the beginning of the story, then disappears, for he no longer has an active function in this fight between the powerful. He is there only for the staging, to underline the drama played by the forces in opposition. Nevertheless, he is important, at least in order to show what evil can accomplish, but also what allows this evil or facilitates its role. First, he is alone, there is no one else in the village, all have been eaten. This solitude symbolizes withdrawal, the feeling of abandonment that characterizes the impotent victim. Correlated with this solitude, the feeling of sadness overcoming his soul, for his fatal destiny is now traced: he weeps over his fate. Will happen to him what happened to the others: no one escapes the malevolent one, the evil, which devours us entirely, especially when we declare forfeit. The peasant internalizes this evil to such an extent, like many victims, that he makes himself its spokesman. So, when he receives the Gypsy, he resorts to sarcasm: "You must have enough of life." Let us recall that sarcasm, heavily loaded, contrary to irony, freer and lighter, is often a sign of bitterness and resentment. If irony is meant to make the listener laugh, sarcasm wants to be unpleasant, it mocks the interlocutor without worrying about him: it is no longer a question of shared gaiety. The sarcasm, rather accentuated, contains a certain dense touch of meanness. It wants to mock. It is acerbic, biting. The tone is heavier than in irony. Sarcasm expresses impotence, irony, on the contrary, invites us to think better. In this unpleasant remark one would almost think that the peasant is angry with the Gypsy. This is the typical syndrome of the victim, angry with everyone, especially with himself, for his inability to change the order of things. He is angry with everyone for his own pain and fatality. A fatalist who hates or fears his own fatality. Neither does he know how to combat it, nor does he know how to accept or to love it. Quite symbolically, he is the last of the inhabitants of the village, so his being contains all the weight and absurdity of the world. He certainly cannot envisage what is going to happen. He cannot even see the possibility that this

Gypsy, a new arrival in the drama, represents his lifeline. Hope is no longer welcome. The man grants full powers and total sovereignty to the dragon. He cannot even leave his house. He hopelessly and helplessly waits for his destiny to accomplish itself. As a consenting victim, he suffers from the Stockholm syndrome, this known pathology where the victim ends up identifying with the executioner, becomes the ally of the executioner, while dreading his executioner. He grants him such a power, by default of his own power, that he thinks and makes him all-powerful.

Overpassing oneself

The irruption of the Gypsy into the narrative makes a notable difference, bringing in a counterpoint to the context, hitherto very dramatic: a deserted village, marked by death and desolation. This new character is out of tune with the present situation: an irreversible, fixed relationship established between an executioner and a victim, forming an inseparable and inevitable couple. His initial remark, when barely arrived at the village, denotes the difference of mentality between him and the peasant: "And if he choked," he said, speaking of the dragon. A funny, macabre and grotesque perspective, proposing that the terrible animal die while eating its victim. He laughs at the situation, described in a derisive way. The Gypsy distinguishes himself by the fact that he refuses drama: although he recognizes the fact the dragon eats men –he might even fear the dragon – he does not accept that the situation undergoes a sort of immutable law: unlike the villager, he is not a victim. It is in this specific quality that he is a stranger. Let us not forget that a gypsy is precisely identified as a being who does not respect established social conventions: he does not live in one place, he does not belong to the community, he follows his own codes. That is what gives him a freedom to which the villager has no access. It is in this that he is not a victim, contrary to those who accept the norms, the established rules. One can think here of the superman of Nietzsche, who opposes the "last man". The latter knows only his immediate desires. He is impulsive and fearful, he hides behind the rules, while the former is free, for he represents life, in its crude and powerful dimension. His task is the transfiguration of existence. He invites man to a metamorphosis, to the extraordinary: to live autonomously, by his own means. For this, we must not be afraid of our own bounds, in order to free ourselves from them. The Gypsy is free by escaping from human life, considered as a routine, as a habit, as an obligation, as a series of codified rules, like a fear of finitude. In a sense, he is not stronger than another, he has no particular powers, but he is stronger because he laughs at the danger, without ignoring it. He knows how to play, so he defies fate. Ironically, his little children will even frighten the dragon. They symbolize precisely the gratuitousness, the ingenuity, the absence of calculations and fear, for ratiocinations enclose the human soul in impotent speculations, in useless worries. It is the very wager of unconsciousness, that of an authentic life. One can also think of the process of man in Nietzsche, through three stages: the camel, the lion and the child. The camel is submerged by responsibilities and obligations. The lion fights against this burden, he gets cross, he is still in the reaction mode. But the child, in its novelty, emerges into life without worrying about an overwhelming "reality" already established. On this subject we must mention the role of children in the conclusion of this story, for it is they, these little beings described as naive, half-naked and shouting at the top of their voices, who will definitely frighten the dragon. An humoristic touch, which shows that this dragon, like often what arouses fear, is a paper tiger, which scares only those who accept it. The spirit of lightness prevails over the spirit of seriousness: the first is free, the second is impotent.

Thus, the Gypsy, this pariah, rejected by good society in general, for his absence of principles, represents the "good" in this history. He is the only one who can fight the dragon, precisely because he is devoid of principles. He is intelligence itself. The dragon also rejects all principles a priori. In this, he is the "brother" of the Gypsy, as the story tells us. But they are false brothers, false twins. One only follows his lowest instincts, the other thinks, all in finesse, precisely because he is the underdog. There is nothing worse than force allied with stupidity!

The game

Like Ulysses in the Iliad and the Odyssey, the Gypsy is endowed with a form of cunning intelligence, which the Greeks called *metis*. It is a wisdom of action, reflective, practical and strategic, tricky, from where comes the nickname of the hero: "Odysseus, the man with a thousand tricks". Speech is an essential ingredient: it is about being eloquent and cunning. This attitude implies to adapt to situations, to exploit them, to take advantage of circumstances. Curiosity, sharpness and duplicity, are the qualities of such characters. They are enduring and ready for all comedies, all stratagems. So much so that they can be attributed a certain weakness in ethics – lying and deceit – while granting them the status of accomplished men, of heroes, for they act rather for the good. They are informed and free. Their faces are multiple, which allows them to face situations that are diverse, strange and surprising, such as the encounter with the dragon for the Gypsy or the Cyclops for Odysseus. These monsters all incarnate the dark facet of the human soul. Their curiosity leads them to travel, thus the wandering, of the Gypsy, of Odysseus, and as a result they do not respect the rules of the place, since they are not attached to it: they relativize them because they notice how the rules change from place to place. They are therefore led to act as they see fit, regardless of formal obligations, and yet they have a certain personal idea of the "good" which motivates them.

This plasticity allows them to cloth themselves in the skin of the other, to adopt temporarily their vision of the world, to imagine what the other can do and not do, think and not think, just as an army general or an experienced chess player would, in order to survive and to defeat the opponent. Such wisdom may appear to be reductive, too pragmatic in the eyes of the lovers of "truth", a truth that is said and demonstrated, but the "metis" nevertheless implies an *askesis*, similar to the one constituting heroes, those who remain an example and an inspiration for all. Let's call it a truth of efficiency. Thus, the Gypsy uses the dragon's impatience and its credulity as so many weapons to fight the beast, just as he uses his children to frighten him. This is what Ulysses does, for example with the Cyclops, telling him he is called "Nobody", in order to escape with his travel mates. To do this is to be able to enter the mind of the enemy and to know how it works. In each case, an intimacy is created between the two protagonists, where it is necessary to play comedy, which requires intelligence, courage, abnegation and distance, in order not to panic and to continue to play against danger. How not to label as intelligence this bold duplicity, just as much even so differently from a formal and erudite intelligence? It is what Schiller calls "play instinct", which seems to him as education par excellence. For him, the play instinct reconciles being and becoming, identity and change. The man fully educated "aesthetically" is the one who plays. The instinct of play, therefore, would be aimed at maintaining the self in time. Diverse and constant, changing, but only to progress, freed, first of all from himself. The "aesthetically educated" man is the prolongation of the child who plays: "Man plays only where, in the full sense of the word, he is a human being, and he is fully human only there where he plays."

Thus, the intelligence of the Gypsy is deceitful and manipulative: he pretends to enter into the play of the dragon, he simulates, he plays comedy, he is a fine strategist, he manipulates other's feelings. He plays placidity and naivety until the end. He captures the weaknesses of the enemy, understands his excess, he is endowed with emotional intelligence. Both because he knows how to control his own fears and because he understands the subjectivity, the weaknesses and the excesses of the dragon. Like a judoka, he uses the opponent's forces to better deceive him. He accepts to look idiotic, in order to make the one who believes him to act exactly as he pleases. But he does not play tricks out of pure personal interest, like Ruffy for example, he does not simply try to earn some personal reward. He plays in order to play, by defiance, to challenge arbitrary power and de facto to help the peasant. He plays with the dragon as one plays music, both for oneself and for others, with certain gratuitousness, and not merely for gaining anything. His craft is intelligent because it is free. The gypsy, unloved of society, singular and nomadic, intelligent because he travels, unpredictable and curious, is a disturbing character. Because he does not respect the usual rules, he does what he wants, he follows his own rules, he manipulates as he pleases. He does not hesitate to say what he wants or needs to say. He understands otherness. He exists on his own right, he derives his authority only from himself. How can we not admire him and be inspired by his singular and particular existence? Beyond laughter and astonishment, this is what the story proposes.

The gypsy is a rhetorician, he juggles with ideas and words, defying the laws of logic and common sense. His usage of causal principles is surrealistic, for example when he links the whistling and the pain in the head, or when he ties the cows by the tail. And we laugh about this, the way he ridicules the stupid dragon. But the interesting aspect of his relation to speech, the essence of rhetorical practice, is about power, how to manipulate others, how to transform reality through words and thoughts, how to engender new perspectives that modify the "data", that transforms the context and the situation. He uses strategy, in oppositions to the peasant, powerless and passively suffering, victim of the status quo.

Reality and subjectivity

As we see, reality is not the same for the peasant and for the gypsy. Is one more real than the other? True, reality is the totality of what exists. But, is what exists obvious from empirical evidence? It can be said that it is not so, if one sticks to science, whose function is to create evidence, which at first is not obvious, or even contrary to common sense. Restricted relativity is not a more obvious phenomenon to common sense than quantum effects. How can we imagine that we do not see what we see with our eyes, although we perceive only the rays of light that are reflected by the things we see? "I see what I see, of course" writes the man of common sense, and yet it is not the case. We could say that we are fabricating evidence, that perception is a construction, insofar as we transform reality, through our actions, through our thought, and even through our subjectivity. The question arises whether there is a reality that is beyond our control. We can nevertheless contrast reality, that of "things", objective, with that of our desires. But what if our desires make us transform "things"? This is often the case. Thus, the peasant presents a reality he has observed, and concludes that he knows what the dragon will do, on the basis of a very rational induction process: what has happened is real, observable, and should happen again. But, the gypsy questions this "obvious" reality. From his point of view, the dragon is not a reality or a being in itself: it is what we make of it. It is an object that changes according to our actions.

In this sense, the realism or fatalism of the peasant is a choice, different from that of the Gypsy. According to very ancient philosophical quarrels, dating back to antiquity and the Middle Ages, different perspectives confront each other to determine what a thing or a being is, its reality. Is an entity determined by its essence, formally and a priori, or is it determined by its history, its circumstances, its becoming, that is, its existence? Is the "thing" a principle or an actuality, a nature or a presence? For Plato, an entity is the representation of an eternal idea, for Aristotle it is the encounter of a form and matter. Kant, among other philosophers, will maintain that only the presence of the thing, to our senses or our mind, the phenomenon, is a reality that can be talked about. We cannot debate about what exists in itself, the noumenon, we only have access to what actually exists, that is through a relation, what appears to us. For Sartre, the reality of a being is the totality of its actions, and not a priori reality.

Is the world any reality outside of our actions, or something in which we participate, which we engender? Does intelligence have for its end the capacity to act or the knowledge of things a priori? For example, for American pragmatic philosophers, thinking one thing amounts to identifying all of its practical implications. While, for Plato, the essence of things, the only accessible one to the reflective mind, is the ultimate reality. Nothing more necessary than the concept of reality, but nothing more slippery. The peasant and the Gypsy each convey their reality. For the former, things are what they are, the dragon is a dragon, for the latter, things are what one does with it, the dragon is manipulable. It is up to us to choose our own vision of the world, or at least to become aware of our own options on the nature of reality. And we can introduce the hypothesis that this story confronts a strong tendency within Russian culture to view the world as a drama, the famous biblical valley of tears, where man suffers, punished for his sins, chained in an ineluctable, unchangeable and painful existential machinery. In a way, the Gypsy represents the radical ontological freedom so dear to Nicolas Berdyaev, for whom man is fundamentally free, for the good or the bad. The creative action is what first of all constitutes the person, against any determinism, against any rigid or formal perspective.

9/ The pope with greedy eyes

Why do we pretend to be what we are not?

In the parish of St. Nicholas there lived a pope. This pope's eyes were thoroughly pope-like. He served Nicholas several years, and went on serving until such time as there remained to him nothing either for board or lodging. Then, our pope collected all the church keys, looked at the picture of Nicholas, thumped him over the shoulders with the keys, out of spite, and left the parish, going forth as his eyes led him. As he walked along the road, he suddenly came upon an unknown old man.

- Hail, good man! said the stranger to the pope. Whence do you come and whither are you going? Take me with you as a companion.

Well, they went on together. They walked and walked for several versts, then they grew tired. It was time to seek some rest. Now, the pope had a few biscuits in his cassock, while his travelling companion had a couple of small loaves

- Let's eat your loaves first, says the pope, and afterwards we'll take to the biscuits as well.
- Agreed! replies the stranger. We'll eat my loaves, and keep your biscuits for afterwards.

Well, they shared the loaves. Each of them ate his fill, but the loaves got no smaller. The pope grew envious:

- Well, thought he, I'll steal them from him!

After the meal, the old man laid down to take a nap, while the pope kept scheming how to steal the loaves from him. The old man went to sleep. The pope deftly drew the loaves out of his pocket and began quietly nibbling them in his corner. The old man awoke and felt for his loaves. They were gone!

- Where are my loaves? he exclaimed. Who has eaten them? Was it you, pope?
- No, not I, on my word! replied the pope.
- Well, so be it, concluded the old man.

They shook hands, and set out again on their journey. They walked and walked. Suddenly, the road branched off in two different directions. Well, they both went the same way, and soon reached a certain country. In that country, the King's daughter was dying, and the King had given notice that to him who should cure his daughter he would give half of his kingdom, and half of his goods and possessions. But, if any one undertook to cure her and failed, he should have his head chopped off and hung up on a stake. Well, they arrived, elbowed their way among the people in front of the King's palace, and announced that they were doctors. The servant came out from the King's palace, and began questioning them:

- Who are you? From what cities? Of what families? What do you want?
- We are doctors, they replied. We can cure the Princess!
- Oh! If you are doctors, come into the palace.

So, they went into the palace, saw the Princess, and asked the King to supply them with a private apartment, a tub of water, a sharp sword, and a big table. The King supplied them with all these things. Then, they shut themselves up in the private apartment, laid the Princess on the big table, cut her into small pieces with the sharp sword, flung them into the tub of water, washed them, and rinsed them. Afterwards, they began putting the pieces together. When the old man breathed on them the different pieces stuck together. When he had put all the pieces together properly, he gave them a final puff. The Princess began to quiver, and then arose alive and well! The King came in person to the door of their room, and cried:

- In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost!
- Amen! they replied.
- Have you cured the Princess? asked the King.
- We have cured her, said the doctors. Here she is!

Out went the Princess to the King, alive and well. The King said to the doctors:

- What sort of valuables will you have? Would you like gold or silver? Take whatever you please.

Well, they began taking gold and silver. The old man used only a thumb and two fingers, but the pope seized whole handfuls, and kept on stowing them away in his haversack, shoveling them into it, and then lifting it a bit to see if he was strong enough to carry it.

At last they took their leave of the King and went their way. The old man said to the pope:

- We'll bury this money in the ground, and go make another cure.

Well, they walked and walked, and at length they reached another country. In that country, also, the King had a daughter at the point of death, and he had given notice that whoever cured his daughter should have half of his kingdom and half of his goods and possessions. But, if he failed to cure her, he should have his head chopped off and hung up on a stake.

Well, the devil tormented the envious pope, suggesting to him:

- Why shouldn't you go and perform the cure by yourself, without saying a word to the old man, and so lay hold of all the gold and silver for yourself?

So, the pope walked about in front of the royal gates, forced himself on the notice of the people there, and gave out that he was a doctor. In the same way as before, he asked the King for a private room, a tub of water, a large table, and a sharp sword. Shutting himself up in the private room, he laid the Princess on the table, and began chopping her up with the sharp sword. And, however much the Princess might scream or squeal, the pope, without paying any attention to either screaming or squealing, went on chopping, and chopping, just as if she had been so much beef. And, when he had chopped her up into tiny little pieces, he threw them into the tub, washed them, rinsed them, and then put them back together bit by bit, exactly as the old man had done, expecting to see all the pieces unite with each other. He breathed on them, and breathed again, but nothing happened! He gave another strong puff, but still nothing happened. Thus, the pope flung the pieces back again into the water, washed and washed, rinsed and rinsed, and put them together bit by bit. Again, he breathed upon them, but still nothing came of it.

- Woe is upon me, thought the pope, frightened. Here is a real mess!

Next morning the King arrives and realizes that this "doctor" is a total failure: he has only messed up the dead body all over with muck! The King immediately ordered the "doctor" off to the gallows. But our pope besought him, crying:

- O King! You are free to do thy will! But spare me for a little time! I will run for the old man, he will cure the Princess.

The pope ran off in search of the old man. He found him, and cried:

- Old man! I am guilty, wretch that I am! The Devil got hold of me. I wanted to cure the King's daughter all by myself, but I couldn't. Now they're going to hang me. Do help me please!

The old man returned with the pope.

The pope was taken to the gallows. The old man asked the pope, once he climbed the first step of the scaffold:

- Pope! Who ate my loaves?

- Not I, on my word! So, help me Heaven, not I!

The pope was hoisted on to the second step. The old man asked again the pope:

- Pope! Who ate my loaves?
- Not I, on my word! So, help me Heaven, not I!

He mounted the third step, and again it was “Not I!” again and again.

Now his head was actually in the noose, but he still said “Not I!” all the same.

Well, there was nothing to be done! Nevertheless, says the old man to the King:

- O King! You are free to do thy will! But permit me to cure the Princess and free this man. And if I do not cure her, order another noose to be readied. A noose for me, and a noose for this pope!

Well, the old man put the pieces of the Princess's body together, bit-by-bit, and breathed on them, and the Princess stood up alive and well. The King recompensed them both with silver and gold.

- Let's go and divide the money, pope, said the old man.

So, they went. The old man divided the money into three heaps. The pope looked at them, and said:

- How is this? There are only two of us. For whom is this third share?
- That, says the old man, is for him who ate my loaves.
- I ate them, old man, cries the pope. I did really, so help me Heaven!
- Then the money is yours, says the old man. In fact, take my share too. And now go and serve in your parish faithfully. Just don't be greedy, and don't go hitting Nicholas over the shoulders with the keys.

Thus spoke the old man, and straightaway disappeared.

QUESTIONS

Some questions to go further and to prolong the reflection

Comprehension

- Why does the pope leave the parish?
- Should a pope to be envious?
- Does the old man trust the pope?
- Is the old man naive or stupid?
- Do the two men lie for the same reason?
- Why does the pope think he can cure the princess by himself?
- Why does the old man continue to help the pope?
- Did the pope understand something at the end?
- Has the old man finished his duty with the pope?
- What is the meaning of the healing procedure used by the old man?
- Why won't the pope admit the theft when he is threatened with death?
- Why does the old man give all the money to the pope?
- Who is this old man?

Reflection

- Why do we pretend to be what we are not?
- Is it good to be naive?
- Can we really change?
- Why are we envious?
- Why are clerics periodically portrayed as immoral persons?
- How can we lie blatantly, when the truth is obvious to everyone?
- Why is it hard to get out of a stubborn mental state?
- Is desire stronger than fear?
- Is it possible to be deprived of any moral impulse?
- Should we be sure of the result in order to act?
- Is it naive to think that the good will always prevail?
- Is greed the most powerful incentive in the heart of man?

ANALYSIS

Hypocrisy

The most striking feature of the hero of our story is his blatant hypocrisy. Officially, he was a pope. Which implies that as a servant of God, he was normally a man of integrity, a moral example for everyone. His purpose was to help members of the parish, spiritually, psychologically, and even practically, to the extent possible. His ambitions and desire were supposed to be moved by elevated and noble considerations. His life examples were, in theory, Jesus and the Saints, who loved their neighbor and God more than themselves. But, in reality, it was something else, totally different, as the story warns us very quickly. “This pope eyes were really pope-like” says the narration. A surprising adjective that is commonly encountered as the symbol of contradiction in the Russian tales tradition, between the expected moral behavior of a character, and a reality quite opposed to it. A very ironical sentence indicating that greed is a prime motivation in this man: the eyes are the organ for covetousness and appetite. What we see and what we want to see is what we desire. “His eyes are bigger than his stomach” says a popular proverb, a phrase the mother tells the child who desires more than he can swallow and digest. We would expect that in a man of the church, the heart would be the principal organ, because of love, and faith, but visibly not here, in a sharp contrasted way.

And beyond this particular person, through the expression used, it seems that priesthood in general are criticized, through the idea of “pope-like eyes” as symbol of greed, therefore a recurrent characteristic of those priests. Why would popes be here criticized in such a harsh fashion? There exist several possible explanations to such a phenomenon. We can think of the difficulty of self-expression that existed in this time of censorship, especially if one decided to criticize the church. While in the West carnival culture was gaining popularity, allowing common people to mock authorities, it was not that habitual in Russia. The only ones who had the luxury of openly laughing at established powers were the jesters. The Russian philosopher Bakhtin, in his study of what he calls carnivalization, speaks of its function: reversal, dethronement and overthrowing of established powers. Low becomes high, poor become rich, stupid become smart. It allows emotional discharging, a sort of catharsis, creating the possibility of changing the fixed order. Tales can as well be considered such an arena for shifting the usual, laughing at something that cannot be laughed at during daily life. In those texts, priests, therefore, become greedy and sinful characters, avid for money and recognition. The pope is the immediate object for mockery as he is the closest and most accessible to people in terms of representing power, political and moral authority.

Another hypothesis sends us to the system of religious education common to all seminaries of that period, an education that was famous for its aridity, lifelessness, cramming of vain knowledge and, funnily enough, lack of spirituality. Pedagogical practice was not the primary preoccupation of the Eastern Church, more so than in the West, where many school teachers of secular subjects were priests. Laughter of course was banned. Taught in a very formal fashion, future priests were coming out of the seminary merely ready for some formal, simplistic and rigid application of their knowledge, with faith reduced approximately to a fear of hell and an intransigent respect of rituals, accompanied with indifference, suspicion or even loathing towards studies and secular knowledge. All this was making them rather petty in their preoccupations and deeds.

Finally, another reason explaining this sordid situation could lie in the poverty of many churches that forced priests to live off what was given by the parish, which was not much. Restriction and deprivation created frustration, a reality being opposed to the sermons that banned the desire for material goods and self-interest. Nonetheless present in the heart of priests, those earthly desires, in spite of the contradiction, were visible to all.

At this point, we could pursue our work into a historical, sociological or ethnological study, in particular of the Russian context, in order to explain the phenomenon, but let us rather broaden the analysis, making it more universal, by examining the concept of dissimulation and pretension, at the heart of the present issue. Hypocrisy qualifies a behavior in which someone pretends to cultivate and display moral standards or opinions that he does not actually have or practice. Of course, it is a very common behavior, a very instinctive psychological dynamic, to the extent that many of us are not even conscious of indulging in this type of double standards. Now, the question is: why do we act in such a fashion? For, there must be something to gain from it, if it is so popular. There seems to be two main answers to this question. A psychological one and a material one. The first one is the image we obtain from such a pretension. We look better in the eyes of other, we acquire a rather favorable judgment from them, since we display features that are more pleasant to common sense or to the criteria of a given group. Since judgment of others is fundamental to us, in order to feed our ego, to satisfy the psychological needs of our persona, our image. This “pretension” generally helps to compensate for the bad self-conception or self-suspicious we nourish toward ourselves in the depth of our bosom, although never sufficiently powerful enough to really quench our anxiety. Contrary to common opinion, it is easier to get a favorable judgment from our neighbor rather than from ourselves, no matter how harsh is the neighbor. Shame, fear, and despair inhabit the heart of man. Thus, we attempt in permanence to create and feed an idolized self, that has more to do with wishful thinking than with reality, and we sacrifice truth and reality in order to believe in it. We are ready to deny anything that will come in the way of what we pretend to be. And, of course, this sand castle is exhausting to maintain, since it is very weak and fragile. It can crumble at any time, so we have to protect it eagerly against “otherness”, which is the reason why, in general, we spend so much energy in justifying and defending ourselves.

The second reason for hypocrisy, more material, is that humans live in society, where we interact with each other. We are interdependent and necessitate our fellow citizens in order to satisfy our needs and desire. We thus depend on their benevolence and goodwill. For this reason, we need to inspire trust in order to get some credit from them, a necessity which implies that our personality arouses some sympathy. Thus, we must display “healthy” or “popular” moral standards. Then, of course, what is more reliable or admirable from a moral standpoint than a priest, at least from a formal standpoint, at least in past times? As well, the Church is an institution rather well endowed, powerful and rich, which in a certain era was considered a good strategy for earthly ambitions. But, the discrepancy between the high moral standards preached and the reality of the actions, as the gap between the speech on poverty or humility and the greed for wealth or power, made the priest a perfect candidate for a good example of hypocrisy. “Do what I say, not what I do” is a common sarcastic criticism of the clergy, as a strong symbol of common human behavior.

Greed and generosity

As already indicated, our pope is greedy, the narration established this quality of our hero. A greed that stands in opposition to his formal status, as a religious man, normally disinterested and selfless. This opposition is well exemplified with the fact that he stayed in church and served Saint Nicholas until there was nothing left for “board and lodging”, which reveals his base preoccupations. Saint Nicholas is famous as a thaumaturgic and intercession figure. Through prayers, he can satisfy the needs of the faithful, he is a “gift provider”. But, as well, he is known for being strict in what concerns faith and piety, harshly punishing the ones who mistreat his icons. In opposition to this reverence, despite the sacredness of icons in the orthodox tradition, one can find traces of a very utilitarian relation of Russian people towards these objects of faith. There is a very speaking saying that one finds in the “Letter to Gogol” (Vissarion Belinski) which depicts this paradoxical relation to the icon: “If it works, one prays in front of it, but if it doesn’t work, one cover pots with it”. The story thus puts in evidence the contradiction between the holy principles and the daily reality of religious practices.

Our pope is thus visibly disappointed with his saint patron. Out of spite, for not getting what he wants, he even strikes the icon, normally a sacred object, which definitely reveals his cynical and unprincipled self. With the old man, his egoistic behavior remains consistent. He “shares” by proposing to eat first what the other one has: “What is yours is ours, what is mine is mine”. He then steals the food of his companion while he sleeps, a theft that, of course, he will deny. His greed is so compulsive that, because of it, he cannot even think properly: he could wonder why, for example, this stranger has magical bread in his possession, and tell himself that he is a special person. But his greed blinds him: what he sees and provokes his lust, he wants to get at any price. When both will be rewarded for saving the princess, the pope will take as much gold and silver as he can, instead of the handful the old man took, even though the old man is the real doctor. And, at the next occasion, he will go by himself in order not to share any reward, forgetting that the other one is the real doctor. Although, as the story goes, the rewards from the kings are so generous that refusing to split them does not make any sense: it is pure pettiness. But, the message of the present story is to tell us that greed, by the power of its emotional ascendancy, stops us from thinking straight and makes us very stupid. Only one thing can compete with greed in the present case: stubbornness, defending one’s image, as we will see later. But, as an ironical touch, only greed will make the pope confess the truth about stealing the bread.

In opposition to the greed of the pope, as a contrasting feature that makes it even more visible, there is the old man, mysterious, powerful and wise, a figure of the “good”. Probably St Nicholas himself. Although, as often within the tradition, the “good” takes on a mysterious and surprising form. As Plato said: “When the gods come to visit men, they generally take the form of a foreigner, of a stranger.” Thus, the “old man” has no name. We don’t know his true identity, although we presuppose that he has a specific one, rather identifiable, in view of his behavior and actions. “Hey good man!”, says the stranger when he meets the pope, showing his good and trusting nature, as naive as it may seem to us. His unbounded generosity is also indicated by his “magical loaf”, a mysterious bread, which endlessly reconstitutes itself. Thus is true generosity, without any limit and always fulfilling its function, infinitely giving and sharing, in opposition to greed, which always calculates and competes, therefore operating within the finite realm. We can relate this idea to the multiplication of the breads of Christ. One fights and clings only when there is finiteness or scarcity, this scarcity being real or imaginary. And, when the pope steals his bread, the old man accepts his denial, when it evidently does not make any sense. And, he will save the pope from death, even when he still refuses to admit the theft. Often, generosity seems

naive and stupid to the calculating person. But, for the former, there is a fundamental trust in immanent justice. So, it is not worth doubting or mistrusting: it takes too much energy and mental space. Trust is healthier, mistrust is painful and it corrupts the soul.

Thus when the pope betrays him again, he gives him a chance to say the truth and save himself, body and soul. All the way until the end, he gives him the opportunity to become a better man, without ever getting resentful, impatient or angry. Peace reigns in his heart, in opposition to the worry that dominates the mind of the pope.

Stubbornness

Another important characteristic of the pope is that he is stubborn. For one, he is obsessive in his quest for material goods, ready to accomplish anything, even when it does not make any sense. Second, he is obsessive in his capacity to deny or ignore reality, as we have seen. The revealing feature is the situation around the stealing of the bread that he refuses to avow. Even when he will be facing death, after being condemned by the king for killing his daughter, he will not be capable to admit the larceny, regardless of the fact that it is his only chance to save his neck. On the opposite, the old man will readily give up his plan to make him avow and save him anyhow.

To be stubborn means to stand firm and keep one's idea, to refuse to change one's mind. It is a rather ambiguous concept, since it can take either a positive or a negative connotation. If one is hardheaded or obstinate, it has a rather negative connotation. If one is persistent or tenacious, it has a rather positive connotation. A proverb says that "only fools don't change their mind", but, as well, we can hear that "perseverance is the mother of reward", or even that "only perseverance can lead to success". It is negative in the sense of not being able to progress and think better, as a form of mental closure and blindness. It is positive in the sense of being true to oneself and constant, not being influenced by the surroundings or circumstances, like someone irresolute or erratic. According to the person or to the culture, the appreciation of the word stubborn will vary in shades and in meanings. Some will consider it rather a desirable quality, associated with strength, others not, viewing it as rigidity.

In the case of this story, stubbornness is a bad characteristic, since it is connected with denial of reality: a refusal to admit one's fault, an intellectual and moral flaw. In order to show the absurdity of the gesture, the pope refuses to admit that he stole a loaf of bread at the very moment when it could save his life. What does he have to lose? Nothing, since there is no "danger" and he is already forgiven morally by the old man. Or, there is something more pressuring still, for which he might be ready to risk death: his own image, his persona, as we have seen it earlier. This corrupted man, who seems to be deprived of any scruples, has a problem with himself: probably he has a bad conscience, a terrible self-conception, so he cannot accept to be explicitly called a thief. All the evidence is against him: he knows the old man knows he is the thief, and he knows that the old man knows that he knows that he knows... There is no secret there, or it is an public secret, an open secret: a secret everyone knows, even though it is not said, for no one dares to pronounce it. That is a very familiar situation that many a stubborn person knows: refusing to admit reality, in particular a fault or an error, even when all evidence is blatant. What can as well be called bad faith. Stubborn persons will go out of their way, into sheer absurdity, in order to deny, and excessive ridicule won't scare them. They will attempt all kind of strategies, like anger, or cold and repetitive negation, in order to formally maintain their position. Just like if their words had the capacity to engender or to modify reality. It is partially in this sense that some people defend stubbornness: they want to freely determine,

by themselves, what reality is. Everyone can then decide for himself, according to circumstances, to call this a power or merely self-delusion. But for our pope, we will quote the Latin proverb: “Errare humanum est, perseverare diabolicum est.”

Conversion

One can accuse the present story of having a certain bias: moralizing, promoting humility and other Christian values. After all, the pope could be described as a hard-nosed businessman who is merely trying to survive as he can, and therefore has to be tough and unprincipled, in order to pursue his goal. The old man then represents some naive and sympathetic, but ingenuous and unrealistic character. A generous “idiot”, typical of many tales. Or an “idiot” who is really the wise and potent person, in opposition to the shrewd but limited and actually impotent devious character. The pope represents false pretension: bad faith, superficial knowledge, wicked shrewdness. It seems to us that this is indeed the perspective of the story. The pope is nothing but dissimulation, hypocrisy, deception and pretensions. His lies and trickiness are in fact shallow, and inoperative on the long run. For, fundamentally, only truth pays off, as the story wants to teach us. Another way to look at the issue is to see in this drama the double nature of man: animal like survival behavior and greediness on one side, humanity, generosity, thinking and wisdom on the other side.

If we accept the wager of the story, where “true” values are represented by the old man, what is going on in the process of the narration? Well, let us go till the end of the story and see what the old man says and hopes. “Go and serve in your parish faithfully; don’t be greedy and don’t go hitting Nicholas over the shoulders with your keys.” Then he disappears: visibly his mission was accomplished. So what was his mission? If we trust his last words, he simply wanted the pope to become a real pope, or to become human. First of all, let us remind the reader that lot of these stories are made to address specific problems existing within society, whatever the problem are. And, in Russian folk tales – in other cultures as well – we recurrently encounter the “bad” or “false” pope, an occurrence that we can take as a criticism of the way the clergy lived and behaved. Thus, the story invites those “false” popes to become “real” or “good” popes. Just like they invite in numerous situations the readers to grow up and be wiser. And this change can be called a conversion: just like in a religious conversion, there is a change in the system of values. Through the appeal to conversion, one is invited to experience a transformation of the self, with new behavior, new beliefs, a new vision of the world.

Thus, let us examine in what consists the “new vision” of the world, and the strategy used to reach it. To summarize it: faith, generosity, and respect. What was the path? To show that this vision is “better” for different reasons, that we now enunciate. This perspective is powerful: it procures an “infinite” loaf, it cures incurable people. It is peaceful: there is no competition, no fight, no impatience. It is generous: it gives everything, like in the final sharing of the treasure. We have to underline the fact that in the sharing of the money, one third is for “the thief” himself, which implies forgiveness, respect and love, since the worse sinner has the same “value” as anyone else. Three is also the holy number, referring to the Trinity. It is truthful: it does not play on deception, hypocrisy, and lying. Now, of course, we also have to take into account the presence of the old man, his personality. Because his existence determines the process. Is he a saint? Is he a magician? Is he another avatar of God? Can the pope become like him? Whatever he is, he tells the poor pope and the reader that there is another reality that what

appears to him, and that he has to take it into account. Otherwise, who knows what can happen! Even though the old man did not threaten him in any way, the simple fact he exists and that he is so powerful indicates to the pope that our gestures have consequences, a consideration that can be taken as a friendly warning. If there is another reality which is connected to truth and good, which is furthermore powerful, we are better be careful with our deeds, for we might pay a heavy price for our wrongdoings.

On the other side, why does the “old man” not threaten the pope? Why does he not use a more dramatic strategy? The closest the pope comes to severe warning, is on the verge of his execution, when he still refuses to tell the truth. But even there, the old man helps the terrible sinner, even though he does not repent. The explanation we can give is that the old man plays a double strategy: power and benevolence, but benevolence still remains the most substantial aspect of being. Miracles, knowledge, power, remain external factors, appearance. The true quality, as St Paul wrote it, remains charity, or love for one’s neighbor. And, that is the message the old man wants to imprint in the heart of the pope. Because of this, the message might be considered weak: who knows what the pope will do afterwards? Nothing shows that he is convinced or has changed even a bit, since he apparently told the truth only in order to get more money. He told the truth only out of greed! The reader might think that the old man is naive if he thinks his strategy will work. But, we can imagine that it is precisely on this incertitude, on this paradoxical ending, that the narrator wants to leave us. So, we keep our free will, remain perplexed, and think about our own existence.

10/ The swan-geese

Is it difficult to grow up?

Once, in a village, there was an old man and an old woman who had a little girl. They also had a boy in the cradle.

- Girl, little girl, said the mother, we go to work. We'll bring you back a white bread, sew you a pretty little dress, and buy you a fine head shawl. But, be wise, keep your brother well, and do not leave the house!

The parents did not even have their backs turned that the little girl forgot what they had just told her. She puts her little brother on the tender grass in front of the window and she left the house to frolic and play outside. A flock of swan-geese caught the baby and grabbed him on their back. Upon her return, the little girl looked around, looked for the baby, but nowhere did she see her brother. She uttered a cry, and ran from right to left. He had indeed disappeared! She calls, she sobs and laments.

- And my parents, what are they going to say!

But the baby brother did not answer back. She went out into the open country. In the distance, the swan-geese, who hid themselves beyond the dark forest, flew. These birds had a bad reputation in the country. They were accused, among other misdeeds, of being thieves of children. The little girl guessed that it was they who had taken her little brother and she went after them.

As she was running she saw a bread oven appear before her:

- Bread oven, bread oven, tell me where the swan-geese are gone!
- Taste my rye pierogies and I will tell you!
- Oh! At my papa's, even wheat pierogies are left overs!

The bread oven did not say a word. She runs farther.

On her way stands an apple tree:

- Apple tree, apple tree, tell me where the swan-geese are gone.
- Eat one of my sour apples and I will tell you!
- Oh! At my papa's, even the sweet apples in the garden are left overs!

She runs farther.

Now, her path is barred by a river of milk, with banks of jelly.

- River of milk with banks of jelly, where are the swan-geese?
- Eat my jelly with a little milk, and I will tell you!
- Oh! At my dad's house, even cream is left over!

She could have run for long, through fields and forests! Luckily, she met a hedgehog. She would have given him a good kick, but she was afraid of hurting herself. So, instead, she asked:

- Little hedgehog, little hedgehog, do you know where have the swan-geese gone off to?
- Over there! Said he, pointing towards the path.

She rushed forward and saw a small isba, mounted on chicken legs, hovering over herself. Through the half-opened door, she saw, her jaw dropping, Baga Yaga with her leg of clay, and, on the bench, her little brother, playing with golden apples. Then, moving carefully, she seized him and carried him away.

The swan-geese flew in her pursuit, hovering around her.

Where to run? In front of her, flows the river of milk, with banks of jelly.

- Mother river, hide me!

- Eat a little of my jelly.

It was no longer the time to be capricious. She hurried to eat some, and the river hid her in her bank.

The swan-geese passed without seeing her. As she went out, she thanked the river.

There she is, running again, her little brother in her arms. But the swan-geese turned back and flew around to search for her. What to do? What a misery!

Suddenly stands in front of her the apple tree:

- Mother apple tree, hide me!

- Eat a sour apple!

Quickly, she swallowed it. The apple tree hid her in its branches, covering her with its leaves. The swan-geese went by. She went out, resumed her course. The swan-geese caught sight of her and returned. Here they are, coming down on her. They already were beating her with their wings, trying to seize the baby. At that moment, the bread oven appeared.

- Madam bread oven, hide me!

- Eat one of my little rye pierogies!

Quickly, the young woman swallowed it, then opened the mouth of the oven, and went into it. The swan-geese rotated, roared with shrill cries, and left empty-legged.

As for her, she quickly ran to the house. It was a good idea, because her parents were just arriving.

QUESTIONS

Some questions to go further and to prolong the reflection

Comprehension

- Why does the girl forget the recommendations of her parents?
- What strategy do the parents choose to motivate their daughter?
- Why does the girl forget what she promised her parents?
- Is the girl considered responsible by her parents?
- Why does the girl worry about the reaction of her parents?
- Why does the girl refuse the proposals made to her?
- Why did the girl want to kick the hedgehog?
- What is the relationship between the swan-geese and Baba Yaga?
- Did the girl learn anything in this story?
- What can the apple tree, the river, and the oven represent?

Reflection

- Can we badly love our children?
- Why do we forget your responsibilities?
- Why should we be responsible?
- Is the human being fundamentally self-centered?
- Is morality the foundation of civilization?
- Does morality always come from outside?
- Why are we capricious?
- Should we frustrate our children in order to educate them?
- Why do we hesitate to accept proposals of others?
- Why do our parents remain a figure of authority?
- Is it difficult to grow?
- Can promise of rewards corrupt the education of children?

ANALYSIS

Minority and majority

There was a family: an old man, an old woman, a little girl and a baby boy. Just like in “Kolobok”, we meet a couple of old parents who normally are not supposed to have small children. One could wonder about such discrepancy, considering the biological reality. We propose the perspective that “old parents” represent an initiatory role, often the one of grandparents that transmit their wisdom to small children and guide them in challenges they need to overcome. They are parents with a special function, as we will see in the story. More than anything else, they are meant to create a situation for the discovery of the self and for the development of the consciousness of one’s actions, a process that will take place through encountering different difficulties.

When the parents left for work, they said: “Girl, little girl, we go to work. We’ll bring you back a white bread, sew you a pretty little dress, and buy you a fine head shawl. But, be wise, keep your brother well, do not leave the house!” The scene is set in order to profile the hero of the story: the “little girl”. Visibly, she is old enough to care for her baby brother, but, on the other hand, some stipulations point to her youthfulness. She is not old enough to work outside. She is called “little girl”. She does not do thing out of duty and responsibility, since she has to be motivated by her parents with rewards, an external gratification. They will give her a sweetbread that will satisfy her sweet tooth, showing weakness of gourmandize. They will sew her a dress and buy her a scarf, which will please her coquetry and vanity. As a general psychological pattern, we can say that they appeal to her sense of greed, a common feature of all little children. Then, she is asked to be nice, meaning to have a “pleasant”, “kind” and “satisfactory” behavior, which is not what would be expected and demanded from an adult. Thus, we presuppose that she will not be “nice” unless she is told to. She will be a “good person” only then she will be obedient and listen to adult recommendations, meaning that she will only do what she is told.

In general, to speak like this to someone imply that the behavior of this person poses problem, and we suppose that by admonishing him, he will listen to us and change his behavior. Lastly, she is asked “not to leave the house”, which implies that she cannot be trusted outside. The world is too dangerous for her. Not only she is “little”, but everything her parents say is geared to remind her that she is “young”, too young for many things. Although, as we said, she is old enough to care for her baby brother, to take care of the house, and she can be trusted to obey orders without acting whimsically, at least from the standpoint of the parents. Therefore, we see that this girl is at an intermediate stage: she has already grown up and can be held responsible for herself, for another being, and for important things, but not enough to be totally and naturally trusted. She is therefore in a transitional phase, an ambiguous situation, presupposing the need to still grow further, accompanied by the dilemma and dramas surrounding this need for growth.

But, as soon as the parents left, “the girl forgot what they had just told her”. A natural behavior of a young child, which behaves well when the parents are there, but this “right” behavior is simply caused by the presence of an external authority, and not by an internalized moral imperative. Solitude is therefore a crucial experiment to test out a personality, to experience autonomy, and therefore to learn how to grow up. It is through some form of isolation that one’s personality can emerge and bring about self-consciousness. This is the revealing

moment where one can examine the degree of internalization of moral principles, the strength or weakness of psychological virtues.

This opposition between “external” and “internal” moral authority, is what Kant names heteronomy versus autonomy, the first one being the state of “minority”, the one of a child, depending on external constraints in order to behave “properly”, even though this behavior still characterizes many adults. “The moral law inside of my heart” is the expression of Kant, written on his grave. The internalization of moral law is what distinguishes the adult from the child, majority from minority, the latter knowing moral law only as some principles imposed by authority, the former having established authority within himself.

Trust

The sentences of the parents have no real bearing unless they are still present, their commandments vanish when they are gone. A reality that so many parents complain about, without realizing it is the natural drawback and obvious consequence of accumulating all these recommendations and injunctions they address to the child in permanence. As well, on the parents’ side, we can state that the initial speech where they promised different treats is a form of shirking: a cheap way out of their responsibility. Just as if promising some trinket would guarantee that their child would act responsibly.

The parents know that they are taking a risk with their children and their house, probably forced by the situation, or not. They have some kind of bad conscience about it, a form of guilt, a feeling that most parents experience in those types of situation. In a way, it is not important to know if they have to do it, or if it is only for some kind of comfort that they take those decisions. They undergo some form or another of guilt, hopefully so, in a way. Because, it means that they are aware that there is a danger. They know their child is still young, that she is not fully conscious of the consequences of her own actions, that she does not know how to behave in case of emergency. They know as well that she might not obey their instructions, either willfully or by distraction. There is lot of carelessness in a child. And the girl does not mean any harm when she follows her whims. But the parents decide, right or wrong, to go ahead anyhow, leaving home and letting the child take care of herself, her baby brother and the household. Of course, this is a necessary step at some moment in the life of the child: she has to be trusted, one day or another.

The parents who could never take that decision and trust the child would maintain the latter in a state of forced infantilism, because of their mistrust, fostering insecurity in this child’s soul. But, the problem is in the way this trust is articulated and negotiated. The promise of some kind of reward, in the form of a gift that is bought, is a very typical, cheap, and lowly form of behavior for an educator. In those situations, the child has to grow, and it is not by promising gifts that would please her that we help her do so. We then play on her sense of immediate gratification, not on her reason or sense of responsibility. It is a mistake made by many parents, just because it is the easiest strategy. Trust has to be constructed, and must be fed by reason, by true bonding, not by appealing to easy pleasing, which would accomplish the opposite of its purpose, and would defeat it in a way. In the case of this story, we should therefore not be surprised by what will follow, regardless of the fact that it also belongs to the universal logic of things.

Responsibility

The parents want to “buy” the trust in their daughter with the promise of gifts, instead of working on this trust and developing it. This represents a sort of soft corruption. Candies, gifts of all kinds, promises, rewards, and compliments such as “You are the best”, are typical tricks many parents resort to, in order to motivate children or to make them feel “satisfied”. But they don’t realize that, by acting in this fashion, they give a bad habit to the child: to act in order to get a reward, a habit which has a debilitating effect on the mind and the will of the child. He therefore does not accomplish things anymore for the sake of accomplishment, for the pleasure and the pride of challenging himself, but only in respect to a “salary”. Children thus become addicted to this immediate gratification, which engenders certain fragility, because of the lack of autonomy it fosters in the personality. It deprives them of a sense of gratuity, of effort for its own sake. It also induces an idea of being the “center of the world”, since the child has to be rewarded for everything he does: the world is in debt with him. Because of this, some children do not grow up. For example, they cannot accept any form of criticism. They remain quite egocentric, or have a competitive and jealous mentality. In other words, by spoiling their child, parents don’t teach the young one to become responsible, since he always depends on a reward in order to act.

In the present story, for example, the parents could tell the girl that if she acts responsibly, they would be happy, or she could be proud of herself, or they could take the time to discuss with her, in order to explain the whole situation and make her reason. But, such initiative would need more time than promising a gift. It would imply more patience and psychological involvement, an investment that they, like many parents, are neither ready nor willing to commit themselves to. They don’t want to delve into the question of trust. Maybe they themselves prefer not to investigate the nature of the risk they are taking. If they did so, along with their daughter, they might frighten themselves out of that decision, which would then become impossible to take. They would be rendered impotent.

This is a common reason why parents prefer not to discuss with their children: they would have to confront themselves on some issues which they are not ready to confront, like the question of trust, trust in themselves, in others or in the world. Is it real trust, or is it “comfort” trust, because it suits them well? Is trust conditional or unconditional? As well, it raises issues like the tension between freedom and necessity. Did they really have to go or did they want to go? Could only one parent leave home? Could they have taken the children with them but it was just too bothersome? The story does not say and, for the moment, it is not important. But, very often, necessity is used as an alibi for comfort.

We can easily accuse these parents of being irresponsible. And, in a way, to delegate a responsibility might be a form of shirking from one’s duty. The question is to determine when this becomes legitimate, for whatever reasons: external obligations or internal ones, like challenging the other person, child or else. A judgment often hard to make, between two excesses. Blind trust is an easy way out, just as overprotection, or exclusive belief in oneself. Many parents thus don’t trust anyone else than them to take care of their children, a superstitious and paranoid behavior, since one believes accidents only happens to others. A fearful, anxious and mistrusting worldview that will be communicated to the child, which, for example, won’t be able to stand the absence of the parents, thus fostering even more insecurity. In a way, abandonment and overprotection boil down to the same thing: the incapacity to make a rational and responsible judgment. Funnily, many parents commonly combine these two excesses, going from one to the other with a disconcerting ease.

Internal authority

“She puts her little brother on the tender grass in front of the window and she left the house to frolic and play outside.” She does not do anything really crazy, nor mean. There is nothing scandalous in her behavior. After all, it is pleasant for the baby brother to be in the grass, and she just goes frolicking outside, not very far from the house. The girl is nothing but a nice young girl, just slightly disobedient and unconscious. But, of course, there is always space for destiny to accomplish its fate. This slight overlooking of the danger of the outside world, or slight disobedience towards the parents, is sufficient for the drama to be set in motion. It takes the form of a flock of geese-swans, which seize the baby and fly away with him.

Geese-swans in the story are mythological animals, a combination of antinomic features, a sort of oxymoron, like we encounter in other such imaginary animals, for example in the minotaur: man and bull; or in the centaur: man and horse. One way this duality could be rendered is that geese, a rather domesticated animal, represent the accessible world for human beings, when the swan, mysterious and pure, represent what escapes us, a reality from beyond. In themselves, geese are intelligent animals, they can either be wild or domesticated. Wild, they travel very large distances. Domesticated, they act as protectors of human beings, they are part of the “helpers”, whose function is to keep the danger away. They are attached to home and territory. They can relate personally to humans. But, wild, they are nomads, who have no anchoring and are not attached to any person or any place. In this second sense, they represent the opposite of citizenship and lawful behavior. Nomadism indicates some primitive form of social organization, like the clan. It is opposed to civilization. The latter being connected to the establishment of a fixed dwelling place, to the “city”, as indicated by the etymology of the term “civilization”. The geese are not really aggressive, they are not prey birds – but they don’t respect property and they steal what does not belong to them, in particular children, according to some mythical traditions.

Already in itself, the goose represents a paradox, a contradictory double nature. On the other side, the swan is a gracious and beautiful animal, a symbol of purity, of love and often of transformation, a passage from one stage to the next. We encounter this principle in “The ugly duckling”, famous story of an “unfitting” volatile that has to discover he really is a swan in order to finally exist. The swan can represent an acquirement of wisdom through rebirth, a conversion of the self. In this story, the swan-geese do not present a real life-threat to the boy, even though they have uncanny practices. They are dangerous only in appearance. They represent, before anything, a challenge, an incitation to initiation and maturation, the confrontation to one’s own fears, through the creation of a challenging situation that can of course impress the soul. We should not be surprised to discover, later on, that they are connected to Baba Yaga, who also symbolizes the wild and unpredictable side of things. The idea of “stealing children” fits the “alienation principle” the crone represents, to become a stranger to oneself, as a condition for psychological and existential growth.

When the girl returns, she discovers the disappearance of her baby brother, she looks for him, screams, runs around in a panicky way, but she quickly has to face the terrible reality. She calls, she cries, she laments: “And my parents, what will they say!” Facing the harsh reality, she feels really powerless, but more than anything else, she worries about the parental reaction. That is what is meant by “heteronomy”. The reality principle or moral ideas are not internalized by the child: they are merely an injunction which comes from outside, from an authority with emotional

weight and retaliating powers. Instead of being concerned about the baby brother, she is concerned about herself: the treatment she will receive from the parents. Another reaction confirming her statute as a “little girl” who needs to grow up.

Then, she decides to stop running around the neighborhood, and to go further away, in open country, a decision that indicates a break in her behavioral pattern. By taking the risk of going further away from the house, she starts taking responsibility for her life and actions. For this reason, she becomes conscious: she can now see the geese, even though they are far away, hiding beyond the somber forest. And, we should remind ourselves that the dark forest represents an important psychological boundary between the known and unknown world, the place where normal rules don't operate any more, the somber side of the world and of the human soul, what remains to be discovered and conquered. Of course, Baba Yaga lives there, and the wild geese have a perfect place to hide therein. Knowing the reputation of the wild geese, the girl guessed what happened, and takes the courageous decision to pursue the flock of birds, in spite of all the dangers. She starts to acquire internal authority.

Growing up

Now starts the path of challenge, the initiatory process that will allow the girl to grow up. She will meet different entities that represent various obstacles, or that will refuse themselves to her, but they also incarnate “masters”, or “donors”, since each one of them will invite her to become conscious of herself, to accept reality and to go beyond her limited individuality. The first three characters – oven, apple tree and river of milk - are explicitly “donors”, since they actually propose to feed her. The first entity she meets is a bread oven. She asks him where the geese are gone. But the bread oven sets as a condition that she first eats one of its rye pierogies. The girl exclaims herself at such an “extravagant” demand, arguing that “at her daddy’s house, even the wheat bread, we leave them aside.” Indeed, why would she eat a dark coarse crust pie if she has already too much of refined white crust pie! Her reaction is the one of a spoiled little princess. First of all, she refuses the proposal made to her, when it would not cost her very much to please the oven, in order to get her information. Second, she speaks about her daddy, invoking his “powerful” authority. Third, she is bragging about the “wealth” of her family. Fourth, she is scorning her interlocutor when he proposes to help her, putting down his offer as useless and below her own statute. Fifth, she only sees her own desire: she is incapable of taking into account the expectations of other persons. Sixth, she is still speaking of “her house”, distinguishing what is hers and not hers, which means that she hasn't entered yet the foreign land, she is still at home, like a child, not yet in the world. So, the oven does not tell her anything. The same situation will repeat itself with the next two interlocutors: the apple tree and the milk river, claiming each time that, at her daddy’s house, they have much better goods and that they don't even want them because they have plenty, even though she is proposed some fancy treat. Having more than she needs is precisely the definition of a spoiled person.

So, she runs, but does not know if she is running in the right direction, and “she could run like this for a very long time through fields and forest”, tells the tale. A rather silly and infantile behavior, disoriented and thoughtless. Although, she at least keeps her pursuit in spite of her diverse princess like capricious tendencies. She will then meet a hedgehog that, as a silly and sadistic girl, she would have gladly kicked, but she did not do it only because she was scared or hurting herself with his spines. And she tries anyhow to ask him where the birds went, indicating she does not lose sight of her quest. We see that she has a combination of mature and infantile

behavior, a mixture that describes well the intermediary state of her psyche and existence, and in-between situation.

She is lucky: the hedgehog does not set any condition and tells her directly where to go. An attitude showing the generosity of providence, through all these “donors” that we should learn to recognize. She rushes and arrives at the strange house on chicken legs spinning on itself, where lives Baba Yaga, the ugly witch with a clay leg and a horrible non-human face. And she sees her little brother sitting to next to her, playing with golden apples. At this point, she decides to take full responsibility: she grabs her baby brother and runs away with him. This time, the river that before was “standing” there is now “running”, which shows that some change has happened: the order of the world is not the same anymore. It is not “stuck”, but flowing: it has different protagonists, which she has met before, she will accept their conditions and take their gift. So the river of milk, the apple tree and the bread oven will “of course” help her out. From now on, she addresses them differently: she calls them “mother-river”, “mother-apple tree”: they have become part of “her world”, which shows that she will accept what things are, a reality that is as well hers. Therefore, she will accept to be helped. She will not scorn at otherness, she gratefully recognizes the generosity of reality, so she becomes potent. She won’t be proud and capricious anymore. She will have learned and grown up. She is accomplishing her destiny and becoming a woman. She is not a “little girl” anymore, but a “young woman”, as the story tells us at the end. Her parents can now come back. The initiation has happened. They will realize that they were right to trust her. Not because they bring her some reward, but because they gave her a chance to grow up and to learn the reality of life. This is the most difficult lesson for any parent, because they realize their child is not a child anymore. Because this autonomous being does not “belong” to them anymore. He or she now has his independent existence. The “child” now truly exists as a person. A lesson that can be useful for many adults as well, in relation to their own life and behavior.

11/ Truth and lies

Is the bad more profitable than the good?

You know what happened! I will tell it for your own good. It will not be told to anger Your Highness, it is just to relate a story. One day, just like you and I now, two peasants of greatest and extreme poverty began a discussion. The first one lived out of expedients, lying to everyone, he was, you know, good at cheating, a real trickster. The other, you know, whatever the difficulties, never failed to act according to truth. He wanted to live his life through labor. That is the topic they debated. One said:

- It is better to live in falsehood.

And the other:

- One cannot spend his whole life lying. Better to live as one can. But, in truth.

They did all they could, but neither succeeded in convincing the other. And they argued and argued, but no one, you know, won the argument.

Hence, they resolved to question about this issue the first person to come by. Thus, they hit the road together. They walk, and walk, and finally see a peasant plowing, a serf. They, you know, approach him thus:

- May God help you, good man! Give us thy word on this: how is it better to live in this world: in truth or in lies?

- No, you know, brothers! You cannot live your life in truth, it is more comfortable to live in a lie. Look at us, you know: the masters impose new chores upon us all the time, and time to work for ourselves we have not. So, if you want to go on and get wood, say to the forest, you have to be a sick man, you know. If not during the day, then at night, since it is forbidden.

- You see, I'm right! said the liar.

They continue to walk, wishing to know what another would tell them. They go on, and go on, and finally they see a merchant driving a carriage with two horses. They approach, and ask:

- Stop for a moment, you know, not to anger His Highness, but we will ask you something. Solve our argument, you know. How is it better to live in this world, in truth or in lies?

- Come on, friends, you dream! It is complicated to live in truth! It is better to live in lie, of course! The others deceive us, why not cheat them as well?

- You see, I'm right! said the liar again to the just.

They pursued their course, desiring a third opinion. They go on and go on. They finally see a pope. They approach him, you know, and say:

- Stop for a moment, old man and solve our argument: how is it better to live in this world, in truth or in lies?

- You have time to waste on those questions! In lies, obviously! What truth is there today? And for the truth, you know, you will end up in Siberia. They will say you are a slanderer. You want an example? On this I won't lie: in a parish, we collect the dime according to the number of practitioners. Then, obviously, we don't declare everybody... And how often do we replace mass by a simple prayer.

- Well, you hear this, said the liar, everybody agrees to say that it is better to live in lies.

- No, hear this, it is better to live by the law of God, as God orders. Happens what may, but I will not live in falsehood, you know, said the just.

And, thereupon, they both continued on their way together. They walk, and walk. The liar pleases each and everyone, and everywhere they feed him and even give him little white breads.

As for the just, he drinks a bit of water where he can, and for the food, he must work in return. The liar, you know, never ceases to make fun of the just.

One day the righteous man turned to the liar:

- Give me a piece of bread, you know.
- Yes, sure, and what are you to give me back?
- If you want something, take whatever I have.
- Then I gouge one of your eyes out!
- Well, take it out.

Thus, the liar took out the eye of the just. Then, he gave him some bread.

The other one endured the suffering, you know, and the two of them left again by the roads. Time passed. Again, the righteous man asked the liar for a piece of bread. The liar started taunting him anew:

- Let me, you know, take your other eye out, then I give you a loaf
- Ah! Brother, have pity, I will be blind
- No, you know. But on the other hand, you are the just and I live in falsehood.

So what to do? Well, if that's the way it is, that's the way it is

- Well, do it, if you are not afraid of sin.

So, my brother, the liar took out the other eye and gave the other a piece of bread. Then he abandoned him, you know, in the middle of the road.

- Are you counting on me to lead you, by any chance?

What to do?

The blind man ate his piece of bread, you know. He started testing the floor with his stick. Then he walked and walked, you know, the way he could, ended up losing his way, and stopped, not knowing which way to turn. He began praying to God:

- Lord! Do not abandon your sinful slave!

He prayed and he prayed and then, he heard a voice:

- Go to the right, you will arrive in a wood. Search the path with your stick. When you find the path, you know, follow the path. When you take this path, it will lead you to a rumbling source. When you reach the rumbling source, take water from this source, wash yourself, bathe your eyes. Once you bathe your eyes with it, you will recover sight! Once you regain your sight, you will go up the source, till you come about a large oak tree. When you see the tree, you will climb into it. When you climb into it, you will hide there and wait for the night. When you will have waited for night, demons will come to gather under this oak, which is their meeting place, you know, and you will listen to what they will say!

He went as far as the forest, plodding along the way as he could. He reached the forest, poked around it, on and on, and eventually he discovered the path. He followed it and reached the rumbling source. He washed his face, you know. He washed his face, drank the water and bathed his eyes. He bathed his eyes and saw again the Godly world, regaining his sight. When he regained his sight, he went up the spring. He was walking and walking on it and he caught sight of the great oak. Under this oak, the earth was all trampled. He climbed into the oak. Once he climbed the oak, he hid there, and waited for the night.

Suddenly, you know, on every side, in the air, appeared demons, coming to rest under the oak. They were coming and coming and when all were there, each one began to tell where he had been. One said:

- As for me, I have been at the house of a certain princess. I've been torturing her for ten years. They tried to drive me out by all means, but without success. For, he alone will succeed

who has obtained the icon of Our Lady of Smolensk, you know, possessed by a certain merchant. The icon is in the icon case, hanging on his gates.

In the morning, you know, when all the demons had gone, the righteous man descended from the tree. Once descended from the tree, he went in search of the merchant. He was looking and looking and after much trouble, he managed to find him. Once he had found him, he asked to hire him as a laborer.

- For a year's work, he said, I will not ask for anything other than the icon of Notre Dame from the gates.

The merchant, you know, accepted the deal. The righteous one worked for one year with all his strength. At the end of the year, he asked for his reward, you know. The merchant hesitated:

- Well, brother, I am satisfied with your work, but I hold this icon dearly, rather you take money.

- No, I do not want money, you know. We agreed on this icon.

- No, you know, I won't give it. Or, stay another year at my service and maybe I will give it to you.

Thus, the just man remained one more year to work for the merchant, you know. He knew neither night nor day, working all the time. That's how diligent he was.

At the end of that year he again claimed the icon of Our Lady of Smolensk from the gates, you know. But the merchant again did not want to let him go and give the icon.

- No, listen, I prefer to give you money. If you do not want it, work another year for me and then, it's certain, you'll have it.

Well, if that's the way it is, that's the way it is. The righteous man remained to work one more year with a zeal that won him the admiration of all, you know. The third year passed. Once it was passed, he claimed his due, you know. The merchant could not do anything. He picked up the icon from the gates and gave it to him.

- Take it and go, God be with you!

He fed him generously and, you know, gave him a little bit of money.

So with all this, the righteous man took the icon. He took the icon and hung it on his chest. Once he hung it on his chest, he went to the kingdom, you know, to cure the princess. The princess who was possessed by the demon. He was walking and walking and arrived in that kingdom. Once he arrived, he went to see the Tsar:

- You know, I can cure your princess, he said.

So, he was brought in the apartments of the palace. He was brought in and then conducted to the unhappy princess. Upon seeing her, he asked for water, you know. They brought it to him. He then signs himself. He signs himself and makes three salutations, bending to the ground, you know, praying to God. He prayed to God and then took the icon of Our Lady of Smolensk off his chest. He took off the icon and plunged it three times into the water, reciting prayers. He plunged it and finally, he passed the lace around the neck of the princess and told her to wash her face. So, mother, once she hung it on her chest and washed her face, you know, right away, the disease, the enemy, this dirty force escaped from her in a whirlwind. It escaped from her in a whirlwind and she suddenly finds herself in good health, just as before, you know.

With all this everybody rejoiced, so much, heaven knows how. They rejoiced and they did not know how to reward the peasant. They wanted to give him land, you know, a domain, a strong pension.

- No, I do not want anything, you know! he replied.

Then, the Princess said to the Tsar:

- I will marry him!
- Fine, said the Tsar.

So with all this they got married, you know. They got married and our peasant began to wear royal clothes, to live in the royal apartments, to eat and drink everything and did everything with them. He lived and he lived and he became accustomed to them. Once he got accustomed to them, he said one day:

- Let me go back to my native country where I still have my mother, a poor old woman.
- Very well, said the princess. We will go together.

Thus, they left, together with the princess. The crew, the horses, the coach, the clothes, everything was royal. They rolled on and rolled on, and they reached his motherland. Once they had reached his motherland, they suddenly caught sight of the liar. You know, the liar that argued that it is better to live in falsehood than in truth. He walks towards them, you know, and the righteous royal heir says:

- Good morning, my brother! And he calls him by his name, you know!

The other was astonished, you know, to see himself recognized by such a noble lord in a carriage, whom he did not know anything about.

- You remember how we discussed whether it would be better to live in the truth or in lies, and how you have blinded me? Well, it is me.

Stricken, the other got embarrassed and did not what to do.

- No! Do not be afraid, I'm not angry with you, you know, and I wish the same happiness to you as I got.

And he began to teach him, just as God had done for him:

- Go to such a forest. You will see a path in the forest. Follow that path. You will reach a rumbling source. Drink water from this source, you know, and wash yourself. Once you have washed, go up the source. You will see a big oak. Climb on it. Hide and wait for the night. Under the oak demons will come to gather, you know. Listen to them and you will get your chance.

So, the liar followed, you know, the advices of the righteous, as if they were written. He found the path, came to the rumbling source. He drank and he washed, you know. He washed and he went up the source. He went up and then saw the oak. And under the oak the ground was stomped. So he climbed on that tree. He waited for the night. He waited for the night, when the demons were assembled for their sabbath, coming from everywhere. Once they were assembled, they detected his presence from his smell. They detected his presence, you know, and they shredded him to pieces.

Thus, you know, that was it. The just became the son of the tsar while the liar was gnawed by the devils.

QUESTIONS

Some questions to go further and to prolong the reflection

Comprehension

- Do supporters of falsehood have good reasons to lie?
 - What is more difficult: living in truth or living in lie?
 - Why does the supporter of truth accept to lose his eyes?
 - Why does the merchant finally give the icon to the man?
- Is the partisan of truth right to not hold a grudge against the partisan of lies?
- What are the main differences between the two peasants?
 - Why does the supporter of truth maintain his position despite the difficulties?
 - Is the partisan of falsehood content with himself?
 - Why is the partisan of lies so cruel?
 - Is the partisan of lies as free as he asserts?
 - Why does the supporter of truth recover sight?
 - Why does the supporter of truth refuse any reward from the king?

Reflection

- To which of the two characters in the story do you most resemble?
- Is it necessary to lie to achieve one's ends?
- Is the righteous man right to be righteous?
- Where does human cruelty come from?
- Does justice always triumph?
- Does evil profit more than good?
- Why do we generally want to be right?
- Is to lie easier than to tell the truth?
- Is the human being fundamentally corrupt?
- Is life in essence a tragedy?
- Is there an objective truth?
- Can we escape the feeling of guilt?

ANALYSIS

Survival and Civilization

The story starts with a direct call to the reader: ‘You know what happened!’. Just like if we already were in the confidence, or if we could of course guess what is going on. Thus the matter closely relates to us, it is of great familiarity, it must be touching our humanity. But the narrator is worried, he suspects we might get angry, meaning he will tell us unpleasant news; he will probably remind us of the misery of our own humanity, so we risk to get offended. In order to fend off this danger, we are called “Your Highness”, either to flatter us and sweeten the pill, or to remind us of our own human dignity, our intrinsic nobility, in spite of all. These warnings are important, since the story will speak about us: « Just like you and I now », and the narrator does not in any way pretend to escape this lowly human condition. So we are just like those two peasants, “of greatest and extreme poverty”, and one could not describe more intensively the drama humanity is plunged into. The world is a valley of tears, a very Dostoyevsky like staging of the situation.

We know right away that the issue is “survival”. The peasant identity indicates someone who has a direct contact with nature, one that depends on this harsh reality and has to struggle with it. And the poverty indicates, in the same fashion, pain and struggle, the fact that there is no surplus, no protection, the state of nakedness and destitution. Plus, the way the protagonists are described, with no spouse, no family, indicates a profound feeling of existential loneliness. We are always alone when we try to survive: our poor isolated self versus the brutal reality of the world. As for the discussion, even though it indicates the presence of someone else, it is purely one of formal nature, not a sentimental or empathic dialogue. And, anyhow, like most discussions, it will end up in some kind of confrontation, even in fierce opposition. This case does not fail the rule, since we learn that they both have a very different conception of life and of human relations. For the first one, lying is better. For the second one, truth is better. And, as much as they try to convince each other, they remain inaccessible and irreducible one to the other. They camp on their positions and totally disagree until the end. Even reason, therefore, cannot help us bond and make us feel less lonely. Life is truly a very personal endeavor, an experience in loneliness.

The debate here is a moral issue. The problem is not one of truth as a scientific or epistemological question, but as an ethic, as a mean to function in the world, as a way to relate to other people, as a way to behave. This is indicated more particularly by the comparison between the liar who “lived out of expedients, lying to everyone, he was, you know, good at cheating, a real trickster”, and the honest one “whatever the difficulties, he never failed to act according to truth.” Of course, the fundamental allegiance of each character is radically different. The first one lives in the “jungle”. He primarily has to survive, without caring for any other principle or anyone else than himself, his desires, his needs and his fears, and, of course, in such a system, the end justifies the means. The second one adheres to transcendent and universal principles, which stand beyond and above himself or anyone else for that matter. In a way, the first one represents animal behavior or savagery, the second one represents human existence or civilization. The sensuous instinct relies on the singular, the formal instinct relies on the universal. We can relate those two types of behavior to what Friedrich Schiller distinguishes as the “sensuous instinct” and the “formal instinct”. The first one varies with time, according to circumstances, according to sensations, according to the immediacy of internal and external events. The second one unifies the self, searching for some kind of harmony beyond shifting

circumstances and inner modifications. The first one operates in the finite, mobile and ephemeral, the second one aspires to infinity, searching for absolute and invariant principles that can engender and account for coherency and justice. The first one adapts itself to contingency. The second one proclaims and legislates. Schiller will criticize both these instincts as impeding our true humanity: the first one for its immediacy, the second one for its rigidity. He will set them back to back and put forward a third instinct, one of play and beauty, which reconciles the first two. But, for now, this is not so much our problem.

Lying and truth

Thus the issue is “survival”, and “we”, the reader, are immediately and forcefully involved in it. Since the beginning, the stylistic form of the narration insists on the importance, the proximity and the seriousness of the business thus discussed. Indeed, the matter of truth and lie is a very important moral issue, a morality that, at the same time, is not a purely theoretical issue, but a vital one. The style of the text can be characterized both as formal, emphatic and peasant-like, or coarse, a strange combination. It is formal since we will encounter many such formulations such as “Your highness”, to address the reader, or “God may help you”, to address a passer-by. It is emphatic through the abusive mentioning of “You know”, “Listen”, and in the original Russian text the permanent repetition of parasitic phatic words: or repetitive suffixes such as “to” or “ot” or “ka”, which have no meaning in themselves and sound quite awkward and heavy. This insistence makes the story hard to read, or funny perhaps, as the reader wishes. All these artifacts are deployed to ensure that we enter the narration and feel concerned by the content. They have a pedagogical function, and bear a slightly condescending overtone. The fact the heroes debate the “good and bad” are peasants is significant. And, the narrator wants to make sure that we don’t forget this. His idea, visibly, is that the problem of “good and bad” is fundamental, banal and necessary.

Then, our two heroes take off on a journey, their adventure, searching for some third opinion that could decide who is right and settle the quarrel. The first person they meet is another peasant that seems even poorer than them, since he is a serf, that can be exploited at will by his landlord. They first wish him well by saying “May God help you”. This can be taken as a form of irony, like if no one could help this man beside God himself. It indicates an extreme case of impotence and destitution. Anyhow, our two heroes can do nothing for him, even though their way of speaking to him might sound paternalistic. Of course, when they ask him his advice on lie and truth, he can only take the first option. His life is terrible. He has a hard time surviving. Obviously, how else could life be! He has to lie primarily to his landlord, which ruthlessly exploits him and others with the same serfdom statute, in order to protect and defend himself. The liar is of course happy that his thesis is confirmed, but both continue their path and now meet a merchant. Naturally, the merchant as well chooses the “lying” side of the alternative. With a rather different argument however: “truth is too complicated”, “living in lie is better” he says, like some evident postulate. Then, he adds that “since the others deceive us, why not cheat them as well”. Thus, the “natural” order of the world is lying, the common behavior is “lying”. It is clear! Differently from the serf, who attributes the cause of his behavior to a particular person, the merchant, freer and richer, attributes it to the generality: to some laws of nature or society, which seems very much like a place where you cannot trust anyone.

Of course, the liar is happy, the two fellows pursue their path, and this time, they meet a pope. Worse than the previous characters, this one thinks the two peasants are really wasting the

energy with this idle discussion, for the case is closed! “You have time to waste on those questions!” Even the pope claims that to lie is a better path, although he seems to lament the present-day situation: “What truth is there today?” Indeed, he suspects that truth does not exist anymore, in our epoch of decay and corruption. There are different reasons for this: by lying, you earn more money, you don’t get condemned for being a slanderer and get exiled to Siberia, and you make your life easier by not respecting the rules. The operating logic here is very simple and quite straightforward: everyone lies, everyone knows that everyone lies, therefore you have an obligation to lie in order to survive. With his “nostalgia”, the pope is referring to some “golden age”, when things were better than they are now, indicating the decadence of time, expressing the impotence of man in front of the present order of the world that he willy-nilly has to accept. “Truth is with God, lying is on Earth”, says the Russian proverb, confirming the hopelessness of the situation, the impossibility of change, the irreversibility of the state of things. One can only wail and complain, remembering the good old times, the Garden of Eden, or dreaming of a future paradise.

Hearing this cynical proposal, the partisan of truth replies – surprisingly, in opposition to the clergyman – “I prefer the law of God”. “Whatever happens, I will not live in lie”, he states, presaging his defeat in the debate. The interesting point here is how explicitly the story tells us that opting for truth is mere folly. Folly of men, could we say, wisdom of God. Such an absurd option that even men that normally should live according to the “right path” and set a moral example for everyone do not abide by it and even doubt of its very existence. Truth is therefore an illusion. It is superfluous, and it can only bring you troubles. Sticking to this principle of truth is almost unhealthy! Thus, when the partisan of truth decides to maintain his position in spite of all the evidences against such a stand, he must know that he will face loneliness and difficulties, since he goes against reality and common behavior, refusing the law of the land. But, at least, our “truth hero” is a realist, since he consciously accepts the consequences of such a rebellious and dangerous behavior. Maybe those three persons were there only to test the strength of his conviction and to prepare him for further events.

Bad conscience

Then, the story tells us how the companions keep traveling, and everywhere the liar has much more success than his mate. He is given the best food for nothing, while the other must work for food and not even a glass of water is given to him. Life is very harsh for the honest person. Success belongs to manipulators. This situation gets so bad that the truthful person is ready to give anything for a piece of bread, in order to survive. The liar, totally unprincipled, mean and cruel, asks the other for one of his eyes in exchange. A deal that is accepted. This moment of the story, quite strange for the reader, is very surprising, and very inhuman. The incredible deal of a piece of bread in exchange of an eye pulled out! One might wonder why the narrator goes to such an extreme to make his point, but he alerted us at the beginning. And of course, as now expected, a little while later, the second eye will undergo the same terrible fate. The honest man does warn the other one beforehand: “Well, do it, if you are not afraid of sin. But, this will not stop the liar, although he will pay for it later on. But, let us examine the evolution in the behavior of the liar, since the narration gives us some interesting clues.

Initially, the “liar” is merely expressing his opinion, and trying to argue for it. He wants to be right, just like his counterpart. So, they agree to look together for some external

confirmation. So far nothing really distinguishes the two men in terms of behavior. Then, the three requests confirm that the liar's standpoint is the most popular, and his behavior, very different from the other one, brings him much more success. He can really be reassured in his position. He has won the debate in many ways. At this point, there are different ways in which he could react to his own victory. But he chooses humiliation; he mocks the "man of truth", "taunting him", says the story, being sarcastic. A detail telling us that there is some kind of emotional issue in the affair. After all, why could he not be generous in his victory! An incessant mockery is not a light occasional joking: there is necessarily a form of anger, of revenge, or resentment in such a reaction. And let's not forget the strong reaction of the "man of truth", who claimed a reference to the law of God, and pretended to accept any consequence. The implicit reproach is very strong to the liar. First, he must be in the "law of the devil", since he takes the opposite way to God's one. Second, he does not have the courage of his counterpart, since he goes the easy way: he is therefore weak, a coward. And, since in general we don't like the bearer of bad news, the "man of truth" causes psychological pain to the liar. He holds a sort of moral mirror to him, which sends him back a terrible picture of himself.

In Russian language, the word "krivda" is often used to call people who have only one eye, or eyes which function badly. In some cases, this adjective also refers to limping. One-eyed creatures, in folklore tales, usually belong to the other world, as "Likho", for example, a rather evil creature, bringing misfortune to people it meets. Having a full sight indicates a capacity to see the truth, when lacking eyes or having a bad sight indicates a distortion, both physical and spiritual. Thus, one can understand why our crooked soul peasant is interested in the eyes of the truthful man: he wants to get the power he lacks. A mixture of desire haunts him: to legitimize his own being, to win over his rival, to mock or humiliate the power he is lacking. And, since the crooked soul cannot become straight, as we will notice in this story, he wishes to "bend" or to destroy other souls, out of pure spite. Despite being formally right, being richer and seeming to have a happier life, our crooked man conserves his handicap: his "sight" is blurred. He cannot see right. And he is in deep pain, a state that can explain his extreme cruelty. After all, "The truth prickles the eyes", states the Russian proverb. Thus the symbolism of the eyes, which otherwise would lack any meaning. Making the other one lose sight, getting his eyes, a cruel, illusory and absurd compensation for his terrible self-conception, for his moral pain.

Clearly, the liar suffers from an acute case of bad conscience. He pretends to be free. He claims the "I do what I want, and no one will stop me". But, existence, and the process of socialization making us human, are inseparable from the moral law inscribed in all of us, the inevitable moral sentiment. We cannot escape guilt, and the pain that derives from it. The "other", our mirror, becomes the guarantee and the witness for this guilt. That is why Sartre claims "The other is hell", because we see our true image in it, we observe the "dirty" face we don't want to see. For Emmanuel Lévinas, the moral attitude, the "welcoming of the other" is fundamental in our subjectivity, it constructs our being, makes us go beyond ourselves. We have a basic responsibility to our fellow men inscribed in our intimacy. He calls it "the experience of the face". And the betrayal of this demand can only induce bad conscience and guilt, therefore moral pain. And, it is for this pain that the liar wants revenge, by inflicting physical pain on the person he sees as the cause of this pain, which explains his exacerbated cruelty. An endless process of which the horizon is the destruction of this other who reminds us who we are, what we do, and our own alienation.

Cruelty and sadism

So, we should not be surprised at the further horrendous developments. When the man of truth is reduced to a beggar's statute, because of his hunger, it seems to tremendously increase the cruelty of the liar, who in exchange for a piece of bread asks for pulling out an eye. This is pure sadism, since he there is nothing to gain by this requirement. He can only satisfy some obscure desire of destruction, nourished by a bad conscience, provoked by the continuous presence and the "holier than thou" behavior of the man of truth. This is an acute case of resentment: the other reminds him of his hidden moral anguish, and he hates him for it. This confirms the idea that his previous mocking was not joking, but the expression of a hardly controlled anger. We see it even more when the man of truth begs for mercy, in order not to become blind", "No, you know. But on the other hand, you are the just and I live in falsehood." This argument is quite interesting, because of its paradoxical strangeness and its false coherence. Formally, admitting that one is righteous is certainly not a reason to wound him, especially so cruelly. Unless one indeed admits explicitly of being "bad" – insisting on an opposition to the righteous – therefore expressing resentment, as we have claimed.

The victory of the liar is, in a sense, a pyrrhic victory. It is won at too great a cost: the corruption of the soul and the awful self-image that derives from it. Through the confrontation, by admitting his position and stretching it out, the liar has totally exposed himself to broad daylight, and he cannot stand the view of it, even though he tries to ignore this reality. In a way, he has proven himself wrong, and he knows it. In spite of all the confirmations he was looking for and obtained, he awaits another result: he knows his system does not work, because of his own conscience: it is too costly. Therefore, the anger against the "man of truth". Just like Socrates was laughed at, before being hated and killed by the sophists. And, of course, we could evoke the figure of Christ in the same way, including the cruelty inflicted upon him and the desire of revenge against him. His cruel departing comment to the blinded man is quite interesting as well. "Are you counting on me to lead you, by any chance?" In one way, it can be taken as pure sarcasm, where he tells the other that he can definitely not count on him to guide the blind man, even though he badly needs help because of him. But this sentence can as well be taken as well in a moral sense: of course, he cannot lead the other, since he cannot even lead himself and his life adequately, a statement giving us a sneak preview about the end of the story.

We are here facing explicit cruelty, and even sadism. Cruelty signifies a deliberate behavior to cause pain and suffering unto others. Sadism goes further: it indicates the pleasure that one experiences when he inflicts pain on others, or when he watches someone suffering. It is a form of perversion, in the sense that it changes something that is morally bad into something that is good, since it is seen as pleasurable. There is a psychological deviation from a "healthy norm". Of course, one can always claim pleasure is the only legitimate criteria for action. Hedonism is the philosophy claiming that search for pleasure and avoidance of pain is the main objective of human existence. But, it is bound by certain "moral limits". "Enjoy and give enjoyment, without harming yourself nor anyone else, here is the totality of morality", wrote Chamfort. But, in sadism, there is an impulse of death and destruction, as a kind of condition for pleasure, as Freud established, which can be viewed either as pathological or positively. For example, Georges Bataille claimed that transgression, or sin, was a fundamental component of true pleasure. In a limited way, we all have undergone a form of pleasure connected to the idea of doing something "bad" or "forbidden". Even though the actions of the liar might seem quite inhumane, each one of us can meditate on these moments where we experienced a form of

pleasure connected to power, possession, domination, humiliation or else, which was inflicted by us or someone else to another person, or even to our self. Revenge, impotence and lust for power are probably the most common incentive for this kind of “perversion”.

Purification

Of course, such a “truth loving man” does not despair so easily, since he is convinced that God will not abandon him. A righteous man, who never fails the right path, in spite of suffering and ordeals, is necessarily protected by providence. So, he prays, asking God for help, showing his trust, humbly proclaiming himself his faithful servant, and a mysterious voice answers him and tells him what to do. He does not need guidance: he is guided by Truth itself. Probably, one needs to be blind to the world, its temptations and illusions, in order to be able to hear and see “Truth” in such a clear fashion, to be illuminated. In this sense, the loss of sight indicates that he reaches another state of consciousness. We find in the tradition such an idea of the blind prophet or diviner, like the poet Homer, of the famous Tiresias from Greek mythology, who cannot see visible objects with his eyes but can predict the future. Thus, one has to give up sense perception in order to see the deeper truth hiding behind apparent reality. A sacrifice most are not ready to do, because of their attachment to the world, its games, rituals and obligations. But, the courage of the righteous gives him access to this “other reality”. A state that explains why he can hear voices that no common mortal would hear, and especially the liar. Having lost his eyes, he can hear better, especially the mysterious or divine voices.

The voice tells him to go to the woods: the place where people get lost, a somber and mysterious place. He will err a long time, but finally he will encounter a path. From now on, he will be guided and will know what to do. It will take him to the “roaring source”. This expression indicates simultaneously the originary, the purity, and the power of a natural force. He must clean his eyes with this water. This pure and powerful water will purify his being, so that he can see anew. Then, he can follow the source until the great oak, which symbolizes strength. He will hide in it until the night, when the demons come to meet, at their meeting place, and he will listen. Thus, even in the darkest moment, in the darkest place, where evil resides, not only will he be safe, but he will be able to listen and to take advantage of the situation. The demons will work for him! After the inferno of the initial moment of his adventure, where he met pain and agony, he is now in the purgatory. Through his initiating pilgrimage he is getting purified and learns how to confront directly the demons. He can be around them without fearing anything. He is protected.

So, he learns the secret of one demon: how he has been torturing a princess since ten years. He learns as well the secret of the deliverance of this princess: to obtain a specific icon of the Virgin Mary from a merchant in Smolensk. So, he will go see this merchant and engage in hard manual labor, that he will for him during three years in order to get the icon. At the end of each year, the merchant tried to corrupt him with money, trying to negate his promise of the icon. But our hero held steadfastly, until the merchant, at the end of the third year, impressed by the zeal displayed, not only gave the icon, but added money to it. Once more, our hero had to prove himself, to show his humility, his endurance and his tenacity, always with “three”, the sacred number. We can add as a proof of his virtue the fact that the icon was hanging on the gate, very easy to steal. A very tempting gesture, especially when he was so blatantly hoodwinked by

merchant. But of course, he did not have to resist: the idea never even crossed his mind. This man is pure!

He then goes to realize his task of curing the princess, chasing the demon with the help of purifying water, prayers, and the sacred icon. And when offered many important material and financial rewards for his accomplishment, he refuses all of them. "I want nothing, he said". He does the good for itself, not as a mean for a reward. The princess, of course amazed and seduced, decides she should marry him, and he accepts. The beauty of his actions and of his soul can only engender love in other pure souls! His power is connected to this purity, and the fact that "he wants nothing" shows that no unhealthy desire corrupts his soul. We should remember that lying is caused by the fact we want to hide some shameful thought, action or purpose, badly obtain something, or when we compete with others. Whereas, truth has nothing to fear or hide. But, for this, the soul must cleanse itself from any trace of avidity.

Providence

As an epilogue to this story, our man of truth, now dressed as a prince, together with his wife the princess decides to go back home, to visit his old mother. This return to the origins indicates to us that we come to the closing if the circle, to the conclusion, the ultimate moment of truth and justice. And indeed, they meet the liar, who does not at first recognize his victim, a richly clad man with his equipage that calls him "My brother", to his great surprise. Liars have selective memory. And the righteous ignores how liars function. The prince tells him who he is, reminds him of their discussion and the puncture of the eyes. But, seeing the other stunned, and probably frightened, he quickly adds: "Do not fear anything, I am not angry against you, and I wish you the same luck as with me." His soul ignores anger, hate and resentment, he truly loves his brethren. He even reveals to him the secret of his success, "just like God had done for him", says the story. This last comment warns us that our hero has become "godlike", that he is sanctified, blessed, so that he does not have one ounce of ugly thought in his head, no trace of evil feeling in his heart. No anger, no vengeance, only generosity. Even the bad man is his brother. Love for him is primary. He cares for his fellowmen, independently of their deed. Unlike Cain, who answers with anger to the question of God, after murdering his brother: "Am I my brother's keeper?", the truthful man considers himself a keeper of every soul, righteous or sinful. A situation the liar cannot expect nor understand, since evil inhabits his heart. The function of the truthful man is the one of Jesus: to re-establish justice in a world that was corrupted, to return truth and justice back into human hands, so that it does not exclusively belong to God.

Thus, the liar followed the advice from "his brother", and went to the forest and hid in the oak, where immanent justice awaits him anyhow. But, unluckily, or rightfully, when the demons arrived, "they perceived his presence because of his smell and they shredded him to pieces". Of course, because the liar is impure, soiled, he has a strong smell. The righteous told the liar to wash himself, and he did or not, but the dirt of his soul is too strong and too ingrained to be cleansed properly: he was too corrupted to be purified so easily. Paradoxically, one has to be already pure to become purified. Thus, even though the liar did everything that he was told, his fate could not be the same as the righteous. It would be too easy and unfair! The initiation path is not only a training ground for the heroes, it is as well a dangerous place that reveals the true self of everyone and takes them to their ultimate fate, good or bad. It is the place where the process of truth and justice must duly accomplish itself, a process that cannot take place without many pains and difficulties.

“The just became the son of the tsar while the liar was gnawed by the devils.”, concludes the story. And we have a classical moral tale where the righteous are rewarded and the sinners punished, after an initial moment where it seemed that morality was being taken aback and defeated. Through this unlawful situation, a tension was created, the drama could unfold, until morality reestablished its legitimate rights, thanks to the faith and beauty of a courageous hero, and the help of the divine grace without which nothing significant can be accomplished.

The crucial concept here seems to be the one of providence. The term refers to some force, natural or divine, which would guarantee the lawful order of the world, help or control our lives, determine the path of things which happen to us, usually in a way which protects us, ensuring the good and warding off the bad. It can also be thought as a principle of immanent justice. Naturally, the good will be rewarded and the evil punished. Of course, such ideas imply a sort of faith in the beauty of the world, or the goodness in some transcendent force, this principle being named God or whatever else, the reward being in this life or in another one. In a way, the man of truth in the story has taken this option, consciously or not. He is convinced that “truth” is the right option, even though it seems that, in an immediate way, it brings him more pain and troubles, and that a life of lying seems to pay off much better than a life of truth.

The way he expresses his faith in providence is visible in the sentence: « Lord! Do not abandon your sinful slave!. » This happens at the most tragic moment, when he is blind, lost, and does not know what to do anymore. He could totally despair, but he does not. He appeals to the tutelary force determining reality, God in this occasion. He surrenders to him, giving up his own will, and he is then ready to accomplish his path. He will have to confront the demons, who represent evil, and he will therefore be rewarded because his heart is pure, unlike the “man of lie”, the impure one, who will be punished by the demons, because he is like them, he is demon-like. Demons have no power over the ones who are not like them. Purity of the soul is a powerful protection.

That is the meaning of the “voice” which prescribes the man of truth to put water over his eyes. The path of purification is to follow the river until its source. The source represents the “originary”, the purity before the fall, the “power” from which everything comes, divine like, before corruption takes place. Nevertheless, the main condition for salvation is not to merely accomplish the formal “rituals”, but to have a pure heart, or to purify the heart, its equivalent. Rituals constitute in themselves a mere artificial action, which does not guarantee the quality or “righteousness” of the soul. And, “warped” souls will be punished by providence.

12/ The wise girl

Why do we want to look smarter than others?

A Russian lord who was known for his wisdom in his village had twelve servants, and he thought they were all really stupid. It didn't matter how much he was teaching them, they seemed hopeless to him, all of them. Thus, after trying everything, the lord came to the conclusion that it was impossible to do anything with those twelve workers and he decided to make fun of them.

One day he gave them an order:

- Go flay the boulder lying in the broad field where two roads cross.

The workers obediently took knives, axes and went to fulfill the lord's desire. When they came to the stone, they were puzzled for they did not know how to proceed. A young girl came by. She was wandering around, looking for her goat, which she had lost. She asked the workers what they were doing there. They told her the whole story.

- If I were you, she said, I would come back and tell the lord to first slaughter the stone and only then to send you back to flay it.

The workers, relieved, went back to the lord and repeated what the young girl had said, word for word.

The lord got surprised and asked them:

- Who taught you to speak this way?
- We met a young girl on our way and she counseled us, the twelve workers answered.

The lord felt some irritation:

- If she is so smart, she should make bast shoes for me out of this stone.

The workers went to search for the girl to transmit the wish of the lord. They found her working in the yard of her poor house where she lived with her father, and told her. In return, the young girl gathered a little sand in a bag and told the messengers:

- Bring this to your lord and tell him to braid shoelaces out of this sand for his bast shoes.

The workers came back again to the lord and reported to him the girl's answer. This time the lord got angry and yelled:

- Is this girl a fool? How is it possible to braid a lace out of sand?

The workers had to find the girl again to tell her the lord's words. And she replied:

- If only fools can ask to braid a lace out of sand, people who ask to make bast shoes out of stone are not any smarter.

The lord became green with anger when he heard the young girl's words, and not knowing what to do, he told the workers to get out of his sight. He couldn't sleep for two days trying to figure out how to teach this cheeky girl a lesson. For sure he couldn't leave it at that!

On the third day, he finally decided to call the young girl's father in order to give him a task he would never be able to realize. This way, he thought, he could get his revenge from the girl. So, he sent his twelve workers to convoke the poor man. The lord was very happy about the complicated and impossible task he had prepared for him. When the man came, he told him:

- I have a task that I want you to do. I will give you 10 boiled eggs, then you should put a hen on them, and in one night you are supposed to have chickens. Then you should cook three of them and bring them for my breakfast tomorrow morning before I get up. Otherwise I will punish you!

The poor man came back home very upset, almost crying. His daughter asked what was troubling him, so he told her. The young girl smiled and advised him not to worry:

- I will take care of this task, she said.

She took a pot full of kasha and told her father:

- Give this pot to the lord, tell him he should dig the soil and put the kasha in it so it would become wheat. Then he can harvest the wheat and make buckwheat out of it in order to feed the chicken that are supposed to come out of the boiled eggs.

Her father repeated everything as he was told. The lord got so furious that he couldn't say anything for a while. He then asked the poor man if he himself came up with such an answer.

The father answered with a sad look on his face:

- How could I make up something like that? It is my young daughter who found such an idea.

The lord, realizing that he wouldn't be able to catch the girl with simple tricks, told the father:

- Well, if your daughter is so smart, there is a last task for her. Tell her to come to my house so she would neither walk, nor ride, neither barefoot, nor with shoes, neither with a gift, nor without it.

The father came home and told his daughter everything lord told him. The daughter advised him again not to worry. The next morning she put a ragged shoe on one foot, the other one left barefoot. Then she caught a sparrow, took a sledge, and harnessed a goat. She held a sparrow in one hand, had one foot on the ground, the other one in the sledge pulled by the goat. As she came to the lord, she gave him the sparrow, which flew right away through the open window.

The lord realized then that he found a truly smart girl and came to the conclusion that he should better marry her than get angry. So, they got married and lived peacefully for a while. And because both were smart, many people came to see them for advice.

One day two people who were business partners came in and asked the lord to settle a quarrel they had. A foal had been born and they wanted to decide whom it belonged to. The lord started to ponder, but he couldn't think of anything. His wife who was observing the scene finally asked them:

- What does each one of you own in the business?

They explained that one of them possessed the cart and another one a mare. So, she said:

- It is easy to decide. Take the foal, the cart and the mare to the top of a hill. Then both of you lead the mare and the cart separately as they go down the hill. The foal belongs to the one that he will follow.

The lord was not so pleased. But the twelve workers laughed, enjoying the whole situation.

Then, two brothers came, because they quarreled about a cow that the richer brother had given to his sibling a year before, that he now wanted to get back, once it got fatter. In order to decide, she asked them to answer a riddle.

- What in this world is the most nourishing thing, the fastest thing, and the most pleasant thing?

The rich brother thought this was an easy task.

- Nothing can be more nourishing than the lord's swine, nothing faster than the lord's dog and nothing more pleasant than money, said he.

Then, the poor brother answered.

- Mother earth is the most nourishing: it feeds everybody and devours everybody. The fastest is thought: it can go anywhere in a single instant. The most pleasant is sleep, since a man abandons everything else when he wants to sleep.

Thus, the wise girl gave the cow to the poor brother. But, slowly, a rumor started that the wife of the lord was smarter than her husband. Of course, the lord got very upset. So much so that he decided to get rid of her.

- I wish that you go back to your father, he said. But you can take away whatever you consider belongs to you.
- As you wish, she told him. But we can't separate just like that. We should drink before we leave, in order to say good-bye.

So, they drank. But it seemed like the wife didn't want to leave yet. She kept repeating:

- What a misery, we should drink some more!

Thus, the lord got so drunk that he was driven out of his wits. Seeing this, she told herself that she could not decently leave him in this wretched state, all alone. So she carried him in the cart, by herself, and set off to her father's home. When the lord finally came to his senses, he started asking:

- Who brought me here? Where am I?
- I brought you here, his wife answered. You told me yourself yesterday to take with me whatever belonged to me. So, I took what first of all belongs to me: that is you!

QUESTIONS

Some questions to go further and to prolong the reflection

Comprehension

- Why does the lord give an absurd order to his servants?
- Which strategy generally uses the girl to answer the lord?
- Why does the lord want to take revenge on the girl?
- Why does the girl laugh at the lord?
- Why does the lord decide to marry the girl?
- Is the lord jealous of the girl?
- What motivates the lord more than anything?
- Why does the lord decide to get rid of his wife?
- Do the lord and his wife love each other?
- Are the lord and the girl similar?
- On what does the young girl base herself to render justice?
- Did the girl change in the course of the story?

Reflection

- Why don't we like to lose face?
- Is pride a vice or a virtue?
- Why do we often compare ourselves to others?
- Why do we often think that "others" are idiots?
- Why do we love ridiculing others?
- Why does the idiocy perceived in others irritate us?
- What is the value of absurd ideas?
- Why is it interesting to think of opposites together?
- Can you feel threatened by a loved one?
- Can we love without a feeling of possession?
- What values should justice be based on?
- What makes a person intelligent?

ANALYSIS

Contempt

The lord of this story is contemptuous. He has a reputation in his village for being a wise man, a glorifying title he does not seem to deserve, if one observes the way in which he conceives and treats his servants. "He is intelligent, his servants are idiots," and no doubt that in his vision of the world, which is somewhat reduced, the whole lot of villagers is no better off. We may even laugh at the classical little landowner or nobleman who seems very pretentious in thinking himself above others, but who does not seem very rich or powerful in view of the small number of his servants and whose reputation merely extends to his village alone. One can see in it the idea that the despiser has just a small and petty vision of himself. Perhaps, we must also conclude that the less obvious the difference in status, the more it must be demonstrated or justified, even if only to oneself. Thus, micro-powers, as Foucault calls them, are sometimes the most terrible ones, the most arbitrary and binding. The expectations of recognition are all the greater as the status is small.

Thus, the "potentate" of this story is not only far above the common lot, but, moreover, he wants to be generous and well intentioned, for he is a "great educator". He will have "tried everything" with his people, ironically showing his moral dimension, his capacity for action, his tenacity, and so on. Thus realizing the "impossibility" of the task – to make stupid servants intelligent – he ends up abandoning, an impotent attitude, which is perfectly contemptuous.

Contempt is a strong feeling which makes us think that other people, if not everyone, are good for nothing, useless, uninteresting, stupid, or, in any case, inferior. This feeling is expressed, voluntarily or not, by words, gestures, or a manner of speaking. It can take the form of disdain, expressed through sarcasm and virulent criticism, or else through indifference, haughtily ignorant of others. Nevertheless, it is always a question of depriving the other of any value, of not granting him any respect, of paying no attention to him. Contempt condemns, rejects, ignores others. Despise is arrogant and pretentious. It does not shy away from an action which could insult or hurt someone. It does not take into account the feelings, status or ideas of those who incur its implacable condemnation. Very egocentric, such a person disregards any feelings other than his own. Although, if one looks closer, it will no doubt be discovered that this same contempt, the same scornfulness, one applies to himself, for he cannot protect himself from the unwelcome, wicked, and even cruel view he entertains about the world and therefore about himself, since, in addition, he shares the intimacy of this very view of which he is himself a victim.

Thus, our lord, wishing to amuse himself, to distract his boredom, or simply to express his bilious temperament, sends his servants to perform an absurd, ridiculous, or even humiliating task. One imagines the sarcastic jubilation procured at that time. Is there really nothing better to do with his employees, one wonders! It is also possible to imagine his annoyance when his workmen return with the reply given to them by the young girl. The harshness which then animates him against her is only the expression of the resentment which gnaws at him. If there is one thing that the contemptuous person does not bear, it is to be sent back to himself, to his presuppositions, to his random judgments.

Intelligence and competition

The lord is irritable, angry, becomes violent, solely on the basis of verbal exchanges without real practical issues, an attitude which might surprise the reader. It therefore seems useful to investigate the reason for such an emotional and intellectual impulse, such insistence on combating and making oneself unhappy. Animals compete, especially males, to determine who is the strongest, who is the best and, therefore, the "leader", explicitly or not. In some species, a battle will be carried out until death. And, without going so far, in many animal groups, there must be established a hierarchy governing all social relations shaping everyday life, with in each case dominant and dominated individuals. It seems that the human being has perpetuated this tradition, as is seen, for example, in the concepts of patriarchy or matriarchy, where domination is established according to biological or cultural criteria, of seniority or gender. Nevertheless, physical strength is of course an important criterion for classifying beings: in order to improve the species, Darwin would say. So it is, in human relations, though it has often been transformed. Strength is no longer merely a matter of muscles, a criterion often considered outdated, although still in force in many milieux. Or we should we add this "muscle" more specifically human, that of the brain, or intelligence. For if there is a plan on which our congeners adore confrontation, it is that of the cerebral capacities. This kind of permanent game consists of knowing who is "the smart one" and who is "the idiot." Maybe this exercise, in a way, also contributes to the improvement of the species, through emulation. Nevertheless, there is a difficulty, in comparison with the more conventional competitive games, in determining the winner. For, if physical force imposes a winner and a loser, where the result is obvious, as regards intelligence, the result is clearly less obvious, and each one can withdraw after the fight, convinced that the other is an imbecile, even though appearances do not go in this direction. As Descartes puts it: "Common sense is the thing of the world which is best shared; for, each thinks that he is so well provided, that even those who are the most difficult to content with anything else are not in the habit of desiring more than they already have." One simply forgets, as the philosopher specifies, that: "it is not enough to have a good mind, the principal is to apply it well." Otherwise, in fact, according to him, "common sense or reason is naturally equal in all men."

In order to feel intelligent, since comparison has force of law, we need to think or to believe that the other is an idiot. Any encounter, any discussion, therefore constitutes the stake of a battle, sometimes with Homeric dimensions in view of the efforts deployed in it, which may seem derisory in the eyes of the observer. A rather striking case being the setting of the couple, where a dull fight, more or less violent, can spread over many years. Or, some beings choose or tacitly decide, because they operate on the same territory, to carry on a merciless struggle at all times, which consists in proving that one is more intelligent than the other, even going as far as ridiculing or humiliating the other, according to the degree of acrimony which has taken root. Thus, the intelligence of the neighbor is a threat to oneself. And, the human being is endowed with an exaggerated sensibility. For us, the ridicule kills, in the most pitiless way. For, our image, this idol so important to us, has thus fallen from the pedestal on which we feverishly try to erect it, without even believing too much in it. It is reduced to nothing, a nothing which constitutes a symbolic death, totally unacceptable.

This clarification will help us to understand why, throughout the story, the lord is fascinated by this girl, the only inhabitant of the village to jeopardize his intellectual hegemony, threatening his power to display himself. It goes to the point where he can only marry her, he can only divorce her, he can only stay with her. And, in a more subtle way, it seems to be identical

with the girl, which a certain gift animates and sometimes exceeds, a gift that therefore must be mastered. This struggle represents the oscillation between intelligence and wisdom, which epitomizes the learning of a lifetime.

Revenge and protection

At the beginning of the story, three times over, in order to help the twelve servants, the girl gives the lord a taste of his own medicine. In guise of defense, she proposes retaliation identical to the attack. For example, when he asks to make some shoes with stone, she asks him to make laces with sand. And each one concludes formally that the other is an idiot. This strategy is called "play tit for tat". This type of response is certainly one of the most classic, both in personal quarrels and in diplomatic relations, no doubt because it is both simple and instinctive. "I do to you what you do to me!" The principle of reciprocity, with a rather negative connotation (I hit you back if you attack me), is nevertheless applicable on a more positive level (I help you if you help me), as much in relation to love, to assistance, as in in dispute or in combat. It is found in certain conceptions of justice, illustrated by the biblical phrase: "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." This principle also knows some variants of the same kind, such as "you also do it", "you are not better", or "it is you who started", a strategy highly prized in siblings for example. Such a type of action is, in fact, a revenge taken from someone who hurts us, by reproducing against him his own mode of action, verbal or physical. With a minimum of distance, one notices that this type of answer or argument remains poor, because it is very often compulsive, not creative, predictable, repetitive and enclosing, both for the person who states it and for his interlocutor, and for the whole relational dynamics. Moreover, with some reflection, one may wonder about the *raison d'être* of such immediacy, or about the legitimacy of such a principle of equivalence. Even though, at first, it may seem right, rational or reasonable.

At first glance, the principle of "reciprocity" makes sense, for several reasons. First, it does justice, according to the principle that an evil act cannot go unpunished. Impunity would not render a service to the victim, seeking redress, nor to the culprit, who would be encouraged in his bad habits, or to society, which requires regulatory principles accompanied by punitive sanctions in order to prevent any transgression, as much as possible, and protect itself from harmful acts. Second, the "Eye for an eye principle" seems to render justice fairly. It is a matter of "one for one," therefore there is no excess or abuse in retaliation, but simply a just retribution, capable of making the culprit feel the precise moral pain which he caused by his transgression. Third, in this dangerous world, where our existence and, above all, our identity are permanently threatened, we need to defend ourselves, and our instinct itself urges us to make the most of this simple mechanism. This sense is so exacerbated that we do not hesitate, at times, to produce a "punishment" even before the "attack" is exerted, a rather widespread mechanism of anticipation or preempting, which we consider here as an aberration of the "an eye for an eye".

The main problem of this system is that the person practicing it copies his behavior on others. The action of the subject is modeled on the one of his interlocutor, both cognitively and emotionally. He works in a system of dependence, reaction, revenge, and is not free. Certainly, defending oneself has meaning, and fortunately some mechanisms of "survival" are anchored in us. And, the retribution remains right. But, these processes leave too much room for the unconscious, the conditioned reflex. Our rationality is reduced to the minimum. It is neither generous, nor creative, nor loving. It surpasses or regulates the reign of the irrational, but, in spite of everything, it posits a dangerous world, like that of Hobbes, in which man is a threat to

man, since reprisals, punishments, protection, in short, all the signs of a hidden war, at least of a society where it is "Every man for himself and God for us all", reigns. Thus, the one who practices the "an eye for an eye", without realizing it, is suspicious of others. Certainly, he can trust, momentarily and conditionally. But, in his reductive logic, he is not very charitable, he is even quite petty, and he can only catch himself in his own trap, at the same time as the neighbor, enclosing each in a predetermined role. Moreover, in the first part of this story, it is clear that both the lord and the young girl become prisoners of this system, a closed scheme they both participate in elaborating. This state of mind can only engender a permanent confrontation without a way out and endless. Since there are no loopholes in such a system. For its own reasons, pride or blindness, the lord will have more difficulty in escaping it than the girl. At best, the "an eye for an eye" is a conflictual system, where merely reigns some tolerance for others. The other is simply bearable, never lovable. Everyone is ready to battle at the slightest alert. In this framework, man is vengeful, a characteristic that defines his most immediate nature. He is animated by a vindictive sense of justice: he has to punish.

Intelligence and reason

The lord and the girl are the heroes of the story. They are the ones who are intelligent. They are more "brilliant" than the "average", above the servants and other villagers. For this reason they are in competition, as we have seen. Hence, they entertain a certain anxiety. Intelligence is not wisdom. Nevertheless, over the course of the story, we will observe certain transformations in the diverse forms of this intelligence. But, in order to do this, we shall already advance a distinction that seems useful to us: one between formal intelligence and rational intelligence. Is intelligent one who, having the ability to understand, can grasp ideas and manipulate them logically. And he can learn to perfect his own understanding. Nevertheless, one can distinguish in this an intelligence which will be called formal, which consists in understanding the words and their arrangements, the nature of things and their principles, the significance of the facts by interpreting them, and an intelligence which is to be called rational, capable of conducting a voluntary and deliberate activity, to prioritize values and goals for action, to make critical judgments about oneself and one's own actions, to examine creatively a diversity of opportunities. The latter is accompanied by a sort of wisdom or astuteness.

Rationality makes it possible to take care of oneself and others, to be emotionally more relevant, to take decisions in a detailed way, to have access to a certain flexibility of the mind. For many formally intelligent or even highly intelligent people exhibit a chronic inability to behave rationally. Among the difficulties of formal intelligence are, for example, the inability to evaluate probabilities in an intuitive or reasoned way, the rigidity of mental processes, the overestimation of one's own knowledge, the difficulty to problematize one's own opinions, the difficulty to foresee various possibilities, to be too self-centered, to restrict oneself to a predetermined framework, to lack perspective by favoring the short term, to neglect one's own well-being or more substantial purposes, to refuse arbitrariness or randomness, the ignorance of oneself and one's own subjectivity, etc. Already in Plato, one encounters warning against these various problems, through precepts like "know thyself", a condition of our knowledge of the world, the "nothing too much" which warns against the excesses of all sorts, where the principle of wisdom is the knowledge of what one knows and of what one does not know.

Through the story, we are told that the girl has lost her goat, which indicates a lack of practical sense, a lack of attention to others or to the world. But, when she learns what the lord

ordered, she immediately understands what he is scheming and throws the ball back to him several times. In this sense, thanks to her mental agility, although she helps the servants who can thus protect themselves, and the lord is appropriately and usefully defeated, this exchange nevertheless remains somewhat sterile, each one remaining on his positions. Nevertheless, the lord manifests his own infantilism, his oversized ego, his inability to come out of himself. He always wants to be right, which is irrationality par excellence, a phenomenon quite common among those who "know" or are "intelligent", accustomed that they are to have the last word. He even attacks the father, threatening him, probably not daring to attack the girl directly, which shows the dimension of fear nesting in the heart of such behavior. He again imposes an absurdity, to the dismay of the poor father who does not understand what is happening to him. But, once again, the trick is thwarted by a "tit for tat", now classic. An absurdity responds to another. This, moreover, represents in an exaggerated way the form that many idle and aberrant discussions take, especially when one wants to prove something at all costs.

Finally, the lord brings himself to attack the girl directly, again proposing something absurd. His instructions are full of contradictions: the girl must come barefoot and with shoes, with and without a gift, so on and so forth. He forces her to come, thinking about how best to humiliate her. But, this time, rather than practicing the "tit for tat", she moves on to a higher step: she decides to take up the challenge. To do this, she must rethink the "instructions", through other words, in order to make these ideas possible. This is what is called problematizing, or dialectizing. That is to say, the art of thinking contradictions, or that of identifying and modifying the presuppositions, which is clearly more creative than the "an eye for an eye". She thus comes to see the lord, having solved the "problem". And, it is there that the lord, beyond all anger, falls in love with her. By showing some flexibility, she has transformed the situation. She has been able to open up to others, rather than to practice a systematic retaliation, thus causing an attraction rather than a rejection.

The next step, when she gives justice, is progressing ahead in this process. In the foal case, she asks to follow the natural law: the foal comes with the mother. In the affair of the cow, the deeper, the wiser, the less avid, the most honest and less servile must win. At this point, she shows true wisdom, taking advantage of each situation to emphasize fundamental principles, especially the principle of the "good". She does not merely appear "malignant" or "brilliant". She educates. Moreover, she sometimes makes the sagacious choice not to explain her judgments, inviting everyone to form an idea by himself. She chooses to trust the ability of everyone to think. She is not indulge in any kind of contempt. At this point, the lord is visibly overtaken. His image, as a "smart" man, takes a blow, and he now prefers to get rid of her. In this sense, in the course of the story, if the girl evolves, the lord seems fixed in his functioning and is hardly progressing.

There is one last step, the conclusion of the story where the girl takes her husband back at her parental home. An epilogue the story leaves rather ambiguous. The girl shows her ability to empathize, when her husband is drunk. But, is she able to love, beyond difficulties and rejection? When he tells her that she has to go back to her father, she agrees. By pride or by calculation? She makes him drink. To delay the moment of a departure that saddens her, or by strategy? She takes him with her. By empathy, love, or manipulation? She said, "you belong to me." By possession, or by passion? Nevertheless, as a symbolic gesture of acceptance, she takes her husband home, in her intimacy, as a "poor young girl". She no longer plays. Can she love this husband who remained so primitive in spite of his formal intelligence? This husband, who does not seem to grow up, unlike her, who even rejects his wife out of sheer pride.

Plato introduces us to love as a sort of ideal, evoking the hypothesis that even his master Socrates cannot attain it, as suspected by Diotima of Mantinea. Perhaps, indeed, love represents the greatest challenge to intelligence, formal or reasonable, for it is this power of being which knows how to set the intellect back in its humble role. It is the place where, theoretically, competition no longer has to be, since it is the overcoming of oppositions, the unity of opposites, the abandonment of distinctions. Does the girl succeed in this bet, at the end of the story? The reader may ask the question by himself and for himself. But whatever is the conclusion of the reader about this “wise girl” and the reality of her being, the story shows us different aspects of what is intelligence, its calculating, competing and formal aspects, and its deeper and more generous side, where reason is creative and loving.

List of Concepts

Accomplishment (2)
Ambiguity (4)
Ambition (2)
Anxiety (3)
Arbitrary (5)
Bad conscience (11)
Bad faith (5)
Being (7)
Civilization (11)
Clean (3)
Competition (12)
Complacency (7)
Conflict (3)
Consciousness (2)
Control (1)
Contempt (12)
Conversion (9)
Corruption (4)
Cruelty (11)
Danger (1)
Dirty (3)
Dragon (8)
Duplicity (4)
Fracture (2)
Freedom (4)
Game (8)
Generosity (3)
Greed (9)
Growing up (10)
Hierarchy (7)
Hypocrisy (9)
Irresponsibility (2)
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Individual (5)
Instinct of survival (5)
Intelligence (12)
Internal authority (10)
Justice (5)
Limits of omnipotence (6)
Love (7)
Lying (11)
Majority (10)
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Mistrust (1)
Moral dilemma (6)
Moral universality (6)
Morality (4)
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Necessity (3)
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Preaching (4)
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Rationality (3)
Reality (4) - (8)
Reality principle (5)
Reason (12)
Reciprocity (7)
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Revenge (12)
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Rhetoric (4)
Sadism (11)
Seduction (1)
Self-confidence (1)
Society (5)
Stability (1)
Stubbornness (9)
Subjectivity (12)
Success (7)
Surpassing oneself (8)
Survival (1) – (11)
Tragedy (2)
Transgression (4)
Truth (11)
Trust (7) – (10)
Victim (8)
Weakness (7)