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A Scapegoat for All Seasons: The Unity and the Shape of *The Tales of Belkin*

Pushkin's *Tales of the Late Ivan Petrovich Belkin* are five in number, and four of them ("The Shot," "The Blizzard," "The Stationmaster," and "The Lady-Peasant") belong to the same literary species.¹ The narrative features binding this quartet of stories together are, in the main, conventional. Each relates—among other things—the story of a young man who, having won the affections of a beautiful woman, overcomes some obstacle (or series of obstacles) which threatens their union, thereby paving the way to, or consolidating, a *mariage d'amour* at the end of the tale. All of which is to say that embedded in each is one of the oldest of all plots, the "successful courtship."²

But these tales share resemblances that go beyond such broad fictional stereotypes; and it is on the less conventional (and less obvious) points of similarity that I wish to dwell at greater length. From the time that man first became aware of those differences in station, wealth, and natural endowments which separate one individual from another, storytellers—especially tellers of love stories—have preferred to draw their protagonists from the ranks of the fortunate. Thus the typical lover-hero of the older fictional forms (the short story, the romance, the legend, etc.) has through the ages been young, handsome, nobly born, and—at the end of the narrative at least—materially well off. Moreover, until the advent of the picaresque novel it was axiomatic that these "external" attributes were the counterparts of moral qualities without which the hero would be no hero. "Handsome is," after all, "as handsome does."

Now insofar as their outer attributes are concerned, Pushkin's suitors conform perfectly to the familiar mold; for Count *** ("The Shot"), Burmin

1. A selected bibliography of the extensive critical literature on *The Tales of Belkin* may be found in B. O. Unbegaun's excellent edition of the *Tales* (Oxford, 1960), pp. xxvii–xxx. This may in turn be supplemented by references to less important and more recent investigations to be found in the study by Jan van der Eng, A. G. F. van Holk, and Jan M. Meijer, *The Tales of Belkin by A. S. Puškin* (The Hague, 1968). Since the thematic and integrative approach which I use here has little in common with the structural, stylistic, and comparative analyses of earlier scholars, my references to their work—much of it of great interest—will necessarily be limited.

2. I say "embedded" advisedly: in "The Shot," for instance, the Count's courtship, though a part of the *fabula*, occurs offstage. The expression "successful courtship" as used in this article is basically a shorthand term to denote that common narrative core which I have just described.

("The Blizzard"), Minsky ("The Stationmaster"), and Berestov ("The Lady-Peasant") are without exception young, handsome, wealthy, and well-born. Morally speaking, however, they diverge somewhat from the traditional norm. For each is endowed with a touch or more of patrician presumption, which has nothing to do with virtue and is, at times, opposed to it.

In "The Shot" ("Vystrel"), for instance, a tincture of this attitude colors the scene where Count ***, the perfect, hence blasé, gentleman, shows his aristocratic indifference to life itself by munching cherries as Silvio takes deadly aim. In "The Blizzard" ("Metel") this attitude is less pleasantly apparent in Burmin's wild and wanton caprice of marrying an unknown bride without her consent. And in "The Stationmaster" ("Stantsionnyi smotritel'") Minsky's abduction of Dunia is a similar perversion of the young gentleman's "right" to sow his wild oats. Finally, in "The Lady-Peasant" ("Baryshniakrest'ianka"), though young Berestov, like the Count, is essentially likable, it cannot be denied that his aloof manners before the daughters of the local gentry and the not-quite-proper advances he makes to "Akulina" in the woods are examples not of *noblesse oblige* but of its antonym, *noblesse permet*.

In endowing his young lovers with a certain sense of privilege or license Pushkin is not so much breaking with an old-fashioned fictional model as conforming to a more recent one. For, as the examples of Tom Jones, Squire B., and Peregrine Pickle suggest, a streak of frivolity or highhandedness can be found in many an eighteenth-century lover-hero. It is noteworthy, however, that whereas Fielding, Richardson, and Smollett uphold conventional morality by punishing or purging their errant heroes, Pushkin rewards the presumption of his noblemen with outrageous good fortune. Thus it is precisely the Count's lordly indifference to life which prompts Silvio, temporarily at least, to spare it. Had Burmin not indulged in a "criminal" (the word is his) whim at a wayside church he would never have ended up enjoying the affections of the beautiful and wealthy Masha. And if Minsky had not acted with the heartlessness of a Lovelace, he would never have made the charming Dunia his wife.³ Though the comic spirit of "The Lady-Peasant" tends to dissolve such ironies into uncritical laughter, it is a fact that the wooing of Liza—a venture which brings profit or pleasure to all concerned—begins with the liberties which a young nobleman tries to take with a "peasant girl" in the woods. In short, if crime does not quite pay in *The Tales of Belkin*, it is certain that the common

3. It may be argued that there is no unequivocal proof that Dunia eventually becomes Minsky's wife. Her appearance at the end of the story in the company of her three children and their nurse has, however, nothing of the courtesan about it. Moreover to assume that she is still Minsky's mistress blunts one of the basic points of the story: the ironic tension between Vyrin's pessimistic expectations for Dunia and her improbably happy fate. If, as the story ends, Minsky has yet to make an "honest woman" of her, her father's belief that she would end her days as a streetwalker might still come true!

peccadillo of its four gentlemen suitors, a touch or more of aristocratic fecklessness, is nobly rewarded by the author.

But the most unusual feature shared by these stories remains to be mentioned—namely, the presence, alongside the gentleman “hero,” of a second “hero.” In the first three tales the identity of this person is obvious. In the last it is, for reasons that will be discussed in due time, less so. But in all four his self-fulfillment and that of the gentleman suitor are mutually exclusive goals. For this reason I shall, provisionally, call him the “counterhero.”

In contradistinction to Pushkin’s broadly stereotyped gentlemen suitors his counterheroes are a very mixed lot. The first (Silvio) is an ex-officer of mature years; the second (Vladimir) is a young subaltern and petty landowner; the third (Vyrin) is a middle-aged widower and *chinovnik* of the lowest grade. Yet despite these differences they share certain attributes which bring them together and oppose them to their more fortunate adversaries. In the first place, whereas the latter possess both wealth and status, the former have little of either. Thus, despite his bravado and barracks-room popularity, the shabby and obscurely foreign Silvio is no social match for the Count. Similarly, Vladimir, unlike Burmin, is too poor and obscure to sue openly for Masha’s hand. As for Vyrin, his plebeian birth places him wholly beyond the social pale.

The unusual and sometimes unmerited good luck of Pushkin’s gentlemen suitors has been noted. The opposite is true of his counterheroes. Silvio, who is early eclipsed by the brilliant Count and is later forced to swallow public insult without requital, and ultimately perishes in a futile campaign abroad, is not, to say the least, the darling of fortune. Before Vladimir is killed in 1812 he is the victim of an almost unbelievably calamitous convergence of circumstances—the wedding, a blizzard, the caprice of a chance intruder. Vyrin’s downfall, too, is largely precipitated by bad luck—the unpredictable machinations of a young libertine.

It was further noted that, viewed as a product of literary history, Pushkin’s gentlemen suitors are an amalgam of traditional stereotypes—the story-book hero plus a tincture of the eighteenth-century rake. In direct contrast, the counterheroes are distinctly contemporary (i.e., Sentimental or Romantic) in conception. Thus the brooding, mysterious, and vengeful Silvio derives from the satanic hero popularized by “Monk” Lewis, Maturin, and Byron. Vladimir, the poor, persevering young suitor who is accepted by Masha, but rejected by her parents, recalls the hero of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. (Saint Preux is, in fact, named in the story.) And Vyrin, the patriarch whose white hairs are mocked by cruel youth, steps out of a Diderot *comédie larmoyante* or a sentimental painting by Greuze.

To sum up then: each of the four stories portrays a rich, handsome, happy-

go-lucky nobleman, based on traditional fictional models, and a beautiful woman whose love he is trying to secure; in each story this union is threatened by the existence of an impecunious and socially inferior man, based on a Sentimental or Romantic stereotype; and in each the "scapegrace" suitor triumphs, while his "scapegoat"⁴ adversary is defeated and dies. In each, that is, except "The Lady-Peasant," which contains a happy hero and a beautiful heroine, but no hard-luck adversary. And it is the implications of this apparent exception which in a roundabout way I now want to tackle.

Evidence that a number of items are similar is not *ipso facto* proof that they are *unified*. Unity inheres only when the group as a whole is seen to possess a definable "shape." When perceived in the context of this shape, the items, though similar and coordinate, will be seen to play different—that is, functionally diversified—roles. The basic structural similarities binding these four tales have been shown. We must now ask whether, taken together, they make an organic whole.

A clue to the answer is provided by the number of stories we are dealing with. Among the great quaternary patterns present in nature (e.g., the lunar phases, the points of the compass, the times of day) none is more fundamental to our experience than that of the four seasons. Whether, as some have argued, Western literature itself is an outgrowth of seasonal rites celebrated by primitive man need not be debated here. Proof that the seasonal cycle is deeply rooted in the creative "mind of Europe" is supplied by the great number of artists, literary and other, who have through the ages drawn on it for inspiration.⁵ In *The Tales of Belkin* Pushkin joins their number.

Although none of our four stories encloses a single season, a specific time of year may be said to dominate each. Thus, of the five temporally discrete episodes in "The Shot" the first two make no seasonal references; but each of the last three allude to one and the same month. In the third episode certain details in Silvio's account of his first duel with the Count (the *spring* sun, the *ripe* cherries, the *heat* of day) make it clear that the summer solstice is near. In the fourth episode, which describes the arrival of the Count and Countess at their country estate, the month of June is explicitly mentioned. And in the final episode (the Count's relation of his second duel with Silvio) the same month can again be clearly inferred: the honeymooning couple have just arrived at their summer residence after the wedding, and the weather is

4. I use the term here and elsewhere in the loose sense of a person who seems to be dogged by chronic bad luck, or whose happiness has been sacrificed for a person less deserving than he.

5. As examples of literary works which use the seasonal cycle one could cite—to go no further than the field of English poetry—Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*, Thomson's *Seasons*, Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, and Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

clement. In short, although nature does not play a major role in "The Shot," the season which prevails is obviously early summer.⁶

Unlike "The Shot," "The Blizzard" establishes its key season through a long (a third of the narrative) and detailed account of a single central event. This is of course the eponymous blizzard, which decides the fate of all three characters and suggests the theme. Obviously winter is our dominant season here.

As for "The Stationmaster," although the narrator makes several seasonal references in the course of the tale, only once is an outdoor scene fully evoked. Near the end of the story, having learned that Vyrin's old station has recently been shut down, he goes to the nearby village to make inquiries: "This occurred in autumn. Grayish clouds covered the sky; a cold wind blew from the reaped fields, carrying off the red and yellow leaves from the trees which we met on the way." A moment later, apprised of his friend's death, he has a small boy lead him to Vyrin's grave: "We arrived at the cemetery, a bare unenclosed place sown with wooden crosses and not shaded by a single small tree. Never had I seen such a sad cemetery." It is while the narrator is taking in this desolate scene that his small guide tells how a "beautiful lady" (Dunia) had recently visited the same sad spot and had prostrated herself at the stationmaster's grave for some time before leaving. In this autumnal mood and autumnal setting the story ends.

The first seasonal reference in the last of the *Tales*, "The Lady-Peasant," occurs when Liza, disguised as a peasant, goes off to the woods in hopes of glimpsing the mysterious young Berestov. The narrative importance of this episode, which starts a train of events that will culminate in marriage, is patent. And the quasi-parodic description which it contains ("Dawn glowed in the east . . .") is the longest in all the *Tales*. Predictably, perhaps, the season described, the season which lends its coloration to the story as a whole, is spring.

Each of the four stories is, then, colored—or at least "tinted"—by one of the four seasons: "The Shot" by early summer, "The Blizzard" by winter, "The Stationmaster" by autumn, and "The Lady-Peasant" by spring. And we need only join the seasonal epithet to the narrative moment which it frames to see that the former harmonizes with the latter. We may thus speak of the

6. Technically, of course, early or middle June (the time indicated in the third and fourth episodes) belongs to spring, not summer. In the popular mind, however, June is a summer month, just as September is an autumn month and December a winter month. In English, for instance, the old expression "midsummer day" was used to denote June 21, the *first* day of summer. That Pushkin thought in similar terms is suggested by the fact that although the Count and Countess arrive in the countryside in the first week of June—that is to say, well before the beginning of summer in the technical sense—he says they came to the country "for the summer."

summer fullness of the Count's happily preserved marriage, the wintry despair of Vladimir, hopelessly lost in the blizzard, the autumnal melancholy that suffuses Vyrin's burial place, and the spring freshness of Liza's early morning escapade. But beyond this rather obvious consonance of narrative moment with seasonal milieu, one can recognize two larger patterns—one defined by the relation of the season in question to the total narrative structure of its particular story, the other defined by the relation of the sum of all the seasons to the quartet of tales taken as a whole.

An invaluable tool for clarifying these relationships is supplied by the eminent literary theorist, Northrop Frye. In the third part of his seminal *Anatomy of Criticism*, entitled "Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths," Frye argues that all narratives are reducible to the four archetypal *mythoi* of romance, tragedy, irony (or satire), and comedy.⁷ Concerning the specific narrative features assigned to each of these *mythoi* more will be said later. Of immediate relevance is Frye's association of each *mythos* with a particular season of the year: romance with summer, tragedy with autumn, irony with winter, and comedy with spring. Moreover, articulated in their "calendar" order, starting with summer and ending with spring, they are seen to describe a single overall plot with a beginning, middle, and end of its own.⁸

The interest which Frye's theory of seasonal *mythoi* has for a student of the *Tales* is obvious, and the line of speculation which it opens is intriguing. In what way (one wonders) might Pushkin's four "seasonal" stories be related to the four seasonal *mythoi* posited by Frye? To discover a correlation between the two would not only help define the overall shape of the *Tales*, it would, by way of unearned increment, provide interesting evidence in support of Frye's hypotheses.⁹

To begin at the beginning, the first *mythos* in the seasonal cycle is romance, whose time of year is summer, the central and distinguishing narrative theme of which is, in the critic's words, an "agon or conflict"¹⁰ between two persons. Since romance is, historically speaking, the earliest, hence the most

7. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (New York, 1968), pp. 131–239.

8. Frye: "The four *mythoi* that we are dealing with . . . may now be seen as four aspects of a central unifying myth," which he then briefly describes (p. 192). Later he hypothesizes that "romance, tragedy, irony, and comedy are all episodes in a total quest-myth" (p. 215). In both cases the order is the same: romance (summer) first, comedy (spring) last.

9. Frye's elaborately documented theory of the *mythoi* is probably in no need of additional evidence. On the other hand, his hypotheses that each *mythos* is associated with a particular season and that joined together all four *mythoi* form an overall plot are suggested rather than demonstrated. This being the case, evidence that a great writer had more than a century earlier worked in accordance with these formulae cannot but be of interest.

10. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 192.

primitive, of the *mythoi*, it leans toward black-and-white characterization: the protagonists are virtuous, their opponents wicked.¹¹ Moreover, in addition to these "primary" moral qualities, a pattern of secondary attributes is recognizable. Typically, for instance, the hero is associated with such values or qualities as vigor, order, fertility, and youth, while his adversary is often identified with darkness, old age, sterility, Satan, and death.¹² Finally, a feature common to many romances is the inclusion of a beautiful maiden whom the evil antagonist, often in the form of a dragon or monster, is holding in thrall. Such versions of romance end with the defeat of the monster by the hero, the deliverance of the maiden, and her marriage to her rescuer.¹³

Turning now to Pushkin, we note that the first tale in the collection is "The Shot," the season of which is indeed summer. The affinities which the narrative has with the *mythos* of romance are, moreover, unmistakable. The action described is obviously an *agon*: the prolonged "duel" between Count *** and Silvio. Also, more than any other tale in the collection, "The Shot" projects a moral world which is black and white: the Count is plainly a good person, while the character and activities of Silvio are repeatedly described by variations on the word for "evil" (*zlo*).¹⁴ One finds in both characters, moreover, those secondary attributes noted by the critic: the Count is young, vigorous, fertile (in the sense that his happy marriage to a beautiful young woman suggests the likelihood of a family), and identified with order (he is completely *comme il faut*, an exemplary member of the "establishment"); while Silvio is, explicitly or otherwise, associated with advanced age, darkness, Satan, sterility, and death.¹⁵ Finally, although the dénouement of "The Shot" has no literal dragons, captive maidens, or heroic rescues to offer, figuratively these are suggestive terms. For Silvio in his monomaniacal thirst for vengeance is a moral monster. Until this thirst is satisfied the Count and Countess are in a sense his prisoners (as the Countess's prostrate position at her "captor's" feet suggests). And however one may interpret the ambiguities of this climac-

11. Frye: "The mode of romance presents an idealized world: in romance heroes are brave, heroines beautiful, villains villainous" (p. 151).

12. See Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 187–89.

13. See Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 189.

14. The following words or expressions are used in connection with Silvio: *zloi iazyk*, *ot slosti*, *zlorechie*, *neobkhodimoe zlo*, *volnenie zloby*, *zlobstvoval*, and *zlobnaia mysl'*.

15. The narrator's remark that "we considered him an old man" connects Silvio with the notion of advanced age. Silvio's association with darkness is implicit in the fact that he is never seen in broad daylight. His satanic overtones are explicit in the narrator's remark that his "somber pallor, blazing eyes, and the thick smoke issuing from his mouth lent him the aspect of a true devil." His solitary bachelor's life, lack of vocation, and destructive and vacuous pastime (firing at the blank walls of his room) all indicate a sterile mode of existence. His association with death is self-evident.

tic scene,¹⁶ it “works,” both affectively and practically, like a deliverance: the death sentence is lifted, the marriage preserved, and the “monster” leaves to die in foreign parts. “The Shot” is, of course, by no means a perfect embodiment of romance.¹⁷ Few “modern” short stories are. But it is closer to that *mythos* than it is to the other *mythoi* described by Frye; and it is closer to that *mythos* than is any other member of the *Tales*.

The plot of the next story, “The Blizzard,” is more complex. The time of year it embodies is winter, the season associated by Frye with irony. And the ironic action is one which ends in frustration or defeat.¹⁸ How then can it simultaneously describe that “successful courtship” which, as earlier noted, characterizes all four tales? Simply by telling *two* stories, one bitterly ironic, the other incredibly (in the exact sense of the word) happy.

The first of these stories, which occupies more than half of the tale as a whole, describes young Vladimir’s wooing of Maria Gavrilovna. Starting with a whole constellation of Sentimental clichés (the young lovers of unequal rank, the inevitable parental opposition, the secret correspondence, the plans for an elopement), Pushkin is careful to maintain a certain ironic distance from his stereotype creations (“Maria Gavrilovna was brought up on French novels *and therefore* was in love,” “*it goes without saying* that the young man burned with an equal passion,” “*of course* this happy idea [of eloping] occurred first to the young man”).¹⁹ As the elopement preparations get under way, however, the author’s gentle irony on the predictability of human conduct yields to the cruel irony of a fate which is bent on making life as unpredictable as possible. Caught in a furious blizzard on his way to the wedding, Vladimir wanders all night, utterly lost, and does not reach his destination until dawn—when it is too late. Standing stunned and bewildered before the locked church, he is the incarnation of that “puzzled defeat” which is the central theme of the ironic *mythos*.²⁰ So intense, indeed, is the despair of this moment that subsequent bitter developments (he rejoins the army and is killed in the campaign of 1812) can scarcely increase the ironic impact.

16. For a recapitulation of the various interpretations of the erid see van der Eng, *Tales of Belkin by A. S. Puškin*, pp. 61–80. My own view is that Silvio’s refusal to shoot at the Count is an acknowledgment of the moral bankruptcy of a life dedicated to vengeance.

17. One misses in “The Shot,” for instance, the motif of the *quest* to which Frye attaches considerable importance (pp. 187 ff.). It is also noteworthy that it is the “monster” Silvio, not the “hero” Count ***, who is the true protagonist of the story. This of course reverses the emphasis found in the traditional romance.

18. See Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 223–39.

19. The italics are mine.

20. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 224. Nerval’s famous line of ironic frustration and futility, “Le Prince d’Aquitaine à la tour abolie” (alluded to by Frye, p. 239), admirably expresses Vladimir’s situation.

The second courtship (which occupies the last third of the tale) describes how Burmin and Masha, already married to each other, meet, fall in love, and discover the astounding truth. This is indeed a happy ending—for those around to enjoy it. But if fate eventually makes full reparations to Masha—and rather more than that to her husband—it cannot make us forget that cruel *quid* (the annihilation of Vladimir) which it has demanded in exchange for Burmin's *quo*.

Autumn, we have seen, is the season of "The Stationmaster," the season of tragedy. Because the tragic *mythos* (like the ironic one) cannot, by definition, coincide with a "successful courtship" a hybrid narrative might, again, be expected. What in fact we find is a tale with two unequal facets: one—which is "happy" and plays a subordinate role—reflects Minsky's love affair with Dunia; the other—which is melancholy and plays a dominant role—describes Vyrin's reaction to these events.

That Vyrin's fate is in the popular sense "tragic" is plain enough: broken-hearted at his daughter's supposed ruin, he takes to drink and dies. That his career imitates the tragic curve in the narrow literary sense needs, perhaps, some amplification. Like the tragic hero of antiquity Vyrin is, as the story opens, at the top of fortune's wheel: a happy bemedaled patriarch, boasting to strangers of his daughter's virtues. Then, briefly but fatally, he reveals the classic symptoms of *hubris*—rashness and arrogance. Flattered by his passing acquaintance with a "gentleman," he imprudently accepts his offer to drive Dunia to Mass unaccompanied, brushes aside her doubts with a rebuke, and watches the two depart—never to return. His downfall thus stems from that peculiar combination of impersonal fate (*moira*) and individual error (*hamartia*) which, typically, lays the tragic hero low.²¹ And while he never attains the ultimate moment of high tragedy, insight into his own error,²² there is in the final pictures of the helpless suppliant in the streets of St. Petersburg and the lachrymose drunk in the dilapidated stationhouse more than enough pathos to confer the tragic title on his destiny.²³

21. See Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 209–10.

22. In discussing this moment of tragedy Frye comments: "The discovery or *anagnorisis* which comes at the end of the tragic plot is not simply the knowledge by the hero of what has happened to him . . . but the recognition of the determined shape of the life he has created for himself, with an implicit comparison with the uncreated potential life he has forsaken. The line of Milton dealing with the fall of devils, 'O how unlike the place from whence they fell!', referring as it does both to Virgil's *quantum mutatus ab illo* and Isaiah's 'How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer son of the morning,' combines the Classical and the Christian archetypes of tragedy" (p. 212). If in Vyrin's fall we do not find the first kind of *anagnorisis*, there is in the besotted old man's maundering about his past happiness a great deal of the *quantum mutatus ab illo*.

23. "The Stationmaster" and the tragic *mythos* share other, less important points. Frye observes that "tragedy is much concerned with breaking up the family" (p. 218),

Although even a reader unversed in literary theory would, I think, recognize that "The Lady-Peasant" is comedy, the following quotations from Frye are nonetheless illuminating: "What normally happens [he observes of the archetypal comic plot] is that a young man wants a young woman, that his desire is resisted by some opposition, usually paternal, and that near the end of the play some twist in the plot enables the hero to have his will" (p. 163). In addition Frye calls attention to the typically comic motifs of illusion (often "caused by disguise") and reconciliation (pp. 170, 166), while observing that the archetypal comic plot culminates in a *cognitio* in which "characters find out who" is "available for marriage" (p. 170).

The coincidence of Frye's comedic formulae with Pushkin's story of a young man whose desire to marry a young woman is thwarted on the one hand by *paternal opposition* and on the other by the *illusion* perpetrated by his beloved's *disguise*, and whose happiness is prepared by the *reconciliation* of two families and climaxed by a *cognitio* wherein he recognizes the true identity of his beloved, needs no more demonstration than my italics have just provided. Nor should it come as a surprise that the season associated with the comic *mythos* (spring) is indeed the season which colors Pushkin's tale. It is, rather, the comic *purity* of "The Lady-Peasant" which, seen in the context of the other tales, deserves comment. For unlike "The Blizzard" and "The Stationmaster," which combine a dark *mythos* (irony and tragedy respectively) with the "successful courtship" motif, thus producing a kind of narrative dissonance or chiaroscuro, "The Lady-Peasant"—the comic *mythos* of which harmonizes with and reinforces the courtship motif (the two are in fact nearly identical)—has no dissonance, no shadows. For the first and only time in the *Tales* all is light: as the curtain falls every member of the cast is happy.

This returns us to the point which initiated our discussion of seasonal and mythic patterns—namely, that unlike the other members of the quartet "The Lady-Peasant" has no scapegoat or counterhero. For if, as literary theorists contend, it is in the nature of comedy to reconcile, harmonize, and include,²⁴ then pure comedy (such as we have here) will reconcile, harmonize, and include purely—that is, completely. In such an economy there can of course be no place for a real (i.e., permanent) victim.²⁵

and that "the central female figure of a tragic action will often polarize the tragic conflict" (p. 219). Elsewhere he notes the importance of the figure of the suppliant "who presents a picture of unmitigated helplessness and destitution" (p. 217). The relevance of these remarks to the dissolution of Vyrin's family, the key role that Dunia plays in "polarizing" the conflict between her father and her lover, and Vyrin's role as suppliant in St. Petersburg is obvious.

24. Frye, for instance, notes that "the tendency of comedy is to include as many people as possible in its final society: the blocking characters are more often reconciled or converted than simply repudiated" (p. 165).

25. Frye: "Comedy often includes a scapegoat ritual of expulsion which gets rid of

This does not mean, however, that the story is without a pseudo victim. This is young Berestov himself, who before an impressed audience of provincial maidens plays the star-crossed lover, strikes disillusioned attitudes, and wears a death's-head on his finger as an emblem of his unhappy lot. But the pose (which he assumes only before his social equals) cannot last indefinitely. Caught between his irresistible passion for "Akulina" and his father's immovable ambition that he marry Liza Muromsky, he finally casts affectation aside and runs impetuously to the same young lady before whom he had recently struck aloof attitudes, ready to tell her the truth and implore her aid. And it is precisely when this final veil of affectation falls that he learns that his dilemma is an illusion. By removing the scapegoat's mask he learns that the threat of becoming a real one (disinherited, penniless, the husband of an ex-serf) is a chimera. Such is the double *cognitio* of this comedy.

Our seasonal cycle is now complete: four stories with a common narrative core, each colored by one of the four seasons, and each modified (or reinforced) by the *mythos* associated with that season. Seen as a whole, moreover, their overall design is clear: starting with the moral simplicities of romance, where noblemen are good and lucky, and their enemies evil and ill-starred, Pushkin has taken us through the darker and more complex seasons of irony and tragedy, where the victors are not always right, nor their victims necessarily wicked, to bring us out into the reconciling brightness of spring, where scapegoats turn out to be chimeras and every mouth is found to have a silver spoon in it. And while it should go without saying that in writing these tales Pushkin was guided not by any preconceived theories of *mythos*, season, and scapegoat,²⁶ but by the intuitive genius of the Muse, one cannot but admire

some irreconcilable character, but exposure and disgrace make for pathos, or even tragedy" (p. 165). Coupled with the remark immediately preceding it (see note 24) this suggests that the "purity" of a comedy is diluted precisely to the extent that its villains and victims remain unreconciled.

26. That Pushkin wrote a quartet of stories in order to illustrate a theory of archetypal plots which he had evolved is, to say the least, most unlikely. On the other hand, Pushkin's familiarity with the seasonal theme is attested in a letter to his friend Delvig: "Write a splendid long poem, only not about the four times of day or the four seasons" (*Pushkin-kritik*, N. V. Bogoslovsky, ed., [Moscow and Leningrad, 1934], p. 13). And, as Richard Gustafson has shown (in his "The Metaphor of the Seasons in *Eugenij Onegin*," *Slavic and East European Journal*, 6 [1962]: 6-20), the poet himself had already made effective use of the device in a major work. Nonetheless it seems doubtful that he composed the *Tales* according to a preconceived seasonal pattern. For one thing, he did not write them in the order in which they later appeared ("The Coffinmaker" was written first, followed by "The Stationmaster," followed by the "Preface," etc.). For another, he did not, as we have just seen, observe the exact calendar order of the seasons, since he put the autumnal story, "The Stationmaster," after the winter story, "The Blizzard." From an artistic standpoint the reason for this is clear: in order to maintain the crescendo of melancholy (the first three stories of the quartet appear in order of increasing sadness), as well as to observe the familiar dramatic principle of

the way his Muse could hit on titles for her stories which point straight to the narrative essence of their *mythoi* as defined a century and a quarter later by Frye. For if the basic action of romance is an *agon* or duel, does not "The Shot" echo this duel? Is not "The Blizzard" a neat hypostasis of the "confusion and anarchy"²⁷ which lie at the center of the ironic plot? Does not the ambivalence of "The Stationmaster," which denotes superiority (a "dictatorial"²⁸ official of the tsar charged with supervising public transportation) while connoting the exact opposite (the lowest of all functionaries, abused and beaten by the travelers he serves), foreshadow the hero's tragic fall from complacent pride to degradation? And, finally, if the crux of the comic *mythos* is indeed a moment of recognition in which the young lovers discover who is "available for marriage," is not this *cognitio* explicit in the compound title, "The Lady-Peasant"? These are striking premonitions.

To the foregoing one obvious objection may be made—namely, that no schema based on a quaternary cycle can possibly account for the shape of a group which numbers *five*. In other words, until a function is found for the middle member of the *Tales*, "The Coffinmaker" ("Grobovshchik"), the case for overall unity will remain unproven.

The best way to understand the role of "The Coffinmaker" in the *Tales* is to appreciate the significance of its most obvious quality: its radical dissimilarity to the seasonal quartet. (It is, incidentally, the only tale which contains no seasonal references at all.) Alone among the *Tales* "The Coffinmaker" has an urban rather than a rural setting. Alone among them it draws its characters from an exclusively proletarian milieu. It is the only tale which depicts no handsome gentleman, no fair maiden, no romantic incident indeed of any kind, as well as being the only one which traffics in the ghoulish and the macabre. Finally, and most important, far from being what one scholar has called a "miniature novel"²⁹ (a term which the narrative density of the other tales fully justifies), "The Coffinmaker" is a mere anecdote: brief, rudimentary in structure, and inconsequential in significance. Flanked, two on either side, by the much longer, more ambitious, and more conventionally

making things darkest just before dawn, he chose to place the gloomiest story of the group, the "tragic" "Stationmaster," immediately before the happiest story, the comic "Lady-Peasant." But had he intended at the outset to observe the strict calendar order, he would, one suspects, have found a way to do it. Common sense, then, suggests that it was only *after* he had completed all five stories that the problem of their ordonnance presented itself. At this point (one conjectures) he recognized the pattern in the materials at his disposal and rearranged the stories in the order in which we are analyzing them.

27. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 192.

28. The "dictatorial" note is sounded in the ironic epigraph from Viazemsky: "Kollezheskii registrator, / Pochtovoi. stañtsii. diktator."

29. Unbegaun, *Tales*, p. xv. Unbegaun applies this term to "The Blizzard" and "The Stationmaster," but "The Shot" and "The Lady-Peasant" deserve it quite as much.

constructed tales, the short, grotesque "Coffinmaker" peeps out of the *Tales* like a dwarf from a group of normal human beings.

I risk the simile in the hope that it will suggest the artistic function of this story. For centuries artists have used comic or grotesque passages (the gargoyle on the cathedral, the scherzo after the slow movement, the buffoon in the tragedy, etc.) as a means of giving "Dionysian" relief (to use the familiar Nietzschean distinction) to more "Apollonian" surroundings. This is how Pushkin utilizes "The Coffinmaker." Halfway through his cycle of tales about dashing young noblemen, foiled adversaries, and fair maidens, he dims the lights (most of the story occurs in the penumbra or at night) and offers us a ghoulish little *entr'acte*, the loutish hero of which he pointedly compares to those notorious buffoons of comic relief, the gravediggers in *Hamlet*. When the anecdote about Adrian's insult, conjuration, and spooky dream has been told, the seasonal cycle resumes.

Contrast is, by definition, the ruling principle of comic or grotesque relief. But this does not mean that in a work of art such a passage can be completely unrelated to the whole; otherwise there would artistically speaking be no whole. "The Coffinmaker" illustrates this truth. Despite the many differences separating it from the seasonal quartet the story shares with them one important feature. For in the proletarian Adrian with his lugubrious manner, his gruesome trade, and his evident penchant for being the butt of others' jokes we have yet another avatar of the scapegoat. But this scapegoat is neither pathetic (his misfortunes are trivial) nor sympathetic (he is too surly and unpleasant), but simply ridiculous—a grotesque effigy of his kind.

One part of the work, the "Preface," remains to be mentioned. Since publishers' prefaces, real or counterfeit, are seldom integral parts of the fictional works which they introduce, this omission may seem legitimate. But the perspective afforded by an integrative approach to the *Tales* throws unexpected light on the relation of its introduction to its body.³⁰

It has already been observed that a scapegoatlike figure, whether sinister (Silvio), pathetic (Vladimir and Vyrin), grotesque (Adrian), or a comic impostor (Berestov), is the leading male character of each story. Viewed from this angle the thematic function of the "Preface" is clear. For it, too, has a "hero" in the person of the author himself, a description of whose life and character is the burden of these pages. Belkin was, we learn, a man of modest

30. An effort to relate the "Preface" to the rest of the stories has recently been made by Jan M. Meijer, "The Sixth Tale of Belkin," in *The Tales of Belkin by A. S. Puškin* (pp. 110–34). Meijer's preoccupation with structural and stylistic problems is, however, unrelated to my own. The same article contains a useful summary of earlier interpretations of the "Preface," the most important of which point out the parodic and mystificatory aspects: the satire on the prefaces of Scott's novels and Pushkin's desire for at least temporary anonymity.

origins (he belonged to the petty provincial gentry) who, after some rudimentary schooling, served in the army until the death of his parents, when he returned home to bungle the administration of his small estate (he was sweet-natured, naïve, and wholly incompetent), failed as a would-be author (the pages of his novel were eventually used to stuff windows in the winter), and died at the age of twenty-nine still a bachelor (he had been painfully shy in the presence of women) of complications arising from a cold. The story of this guileless and unlucky young man is, then, the story of yet another of life's victims, who is not only the inventor of but also the prototype for his hard-luck heroes,³¹ and whose natal village, Goriukhino ("Miseryville"), is a tag for his fate and theirs.

But this is not quite all. For dimly yet unmistakably juxtaposed with Belkin is the author of the preface himself, who—his words allow us to infer—is the living antithesis of his neighbor.³² He is a practical, self-assured, and successful landowner, who has lived the long life denied Belkin, and whose village, Nenaradovo (suggesting joy or delight³³), places it—and him—at the antipodes of Goriukhino. All of which is to say that the "Preface" functions with respect to the *Tales* as an overture to an opera: it states those basic themes (the scapegoat, the natural "winner," the caprice and moral indifference of fate) on which the stories that follow will ring the seasonal changes from summer to spring.

31. According to the "Preface" Belkin did not invent his heroes. The stories were all true and told to him by others. The manner of narration actually employed, however, makes little use of oral narration or the eyewitness report. If Pushkin did not want the reader to accept Belkin as the author—in some meaningful sense—of the *Tales*, he would not, obviously, have chosen the title he did.

32. The author of the "Preface" writes that Belkin resembled him "neither in his habits, in his way of thinking, nor in his mores [*nравом*]."

33. The verb *nenaradovat'sia* means "to rejoice greatly." The juxtaposition of Goriukhino and Nenaradovo has been noted by Unbegaun (p. 8), who also notes that this is the village of Masha in "The Blizzard."