INTRODUCTION

Venedikt Erofeev's reputation is largely based on a single work, the brilliant prose poem Moscow to the End of the Line (Moskva-Petushki; 1969–1970). Nevertheless, his collected writings—including several imaginative essays, notes and marginalia, and a few unfinished works—do fill a slender volume. Walpurgis Night, or the Steps of the Commander (Val'purgieva noch', ili shagi Komandora) is the only complete play in Erofeev's oeuvre. It was intended, he said, to be the second and central play in a trilogy to be called *Three Nights*. Fragments of the first play in the trilogy, called Dissidents, or Fanni Kaplan (Dissidenty, ili Fanni Kaplan), are extant; the third play was never written. First published abroad in the émigré journal Kontinent in 1985, Walpurgis Night appeared for the first time in the Soviet Union in the April 1989 issue of Teatr; the play was subsequently published in several collections during the glasnost period. It is included in its entirety in the 1995 compendium of Erofeev's work, Leave My Soul in Peace (Ostav'te moiu dushu v pokoe). Staged at the Student Theater of Moscow State University, at the Theater on Malaia Bronnaia, and at several other theaters in Moscow and Saint Petersburg in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the play met mostly lukewarm reviews. Walpurgis Night was previously translated into English by Alexander Burry and Tatiana Tulchinsky (Toronto Slavic Quarterly, no. 9 [Summer 2004]: online); this volume is thus the second English translation of a complex and linguistically challenging work and the first print publication of the play in English.

Walpurgis Night has moments of humor and, perhaps more important, moments of transcendent faith in something beyond the dreariness and brutality of life in the late Soviet Union. These moments are rare, however, and the play is generally darker in tone than Moscow to the End of the Line. Whereas Venichka's death at the end of the poema is ambiguous (after all, Venichka wrote it after his murder), Walpurgis Night has a horrifyingly tragic end devoid of any hope of redemption. Insofar as Gurevich is an authorial character, Erofeev the playwright kills himself at the end of the fifth act. Comparing the literary suicides in Moscow to the End of the Line and Walpurgis Night, we could conclude that Erofeev had reached a point of exhaustion and perhaps despair by the time he wrote this play.

The plot of Walpurgis Night is rudimentary. Lev Isakovich Gurevich, an alcoholic member of the intelligentsia, is brought into a psychiatric hospital on the evening of April 30. He is involuntarily committed and installed in Ward 3. There he meets the other patients, a group of men with diverse delusions and obsessions, whose debates and monologues constitute the substance of the play. As they converse and proclaim, they are subjected to brutal psychiatric "treatments" at the hands of the nurses Tamarochka and Borenka "the Goon." By tricking Natalie, a kinder nurse and his former lover, Gurevich is able to obtain the keys to the medical supply cabinet and secure alcohol for a Walpurgis Night celebration. After all the patients have drunk the spirits, they fall ill and lose their sight; we realize that they have drunk methyl alcohol as one by one they die in agony. Gurevich, the last to die, is beaten ferociously in his last minutes by an enraged Borenka. The play closes with bodies strewn about the ward as the morning dawns.

More than thirty years after Erofeev's untimely death, this play will inevitably be read against the legend of the author. Even before Erofeev died of throat cancer in 1990, the legend had been created by his friends and his readers; in the years since, it has flourished. According to this legend, Erofeev managed to live freely as a limi-

nal figure outside the boundaries of Soviet social and political convention. His drinking, his joblessness, and his peripatetic lifestyle all contributed to his being cast as a talented eccentric. It is ironic but not unusual in the context of twentieth-century Russian culture that the author, homeless and nearly destitute for much of his life, is now regarded as a genius of postmodern narrative. A sculpture has been installed on Ploshchad' Bor'by (the Square of Struggle) in Moscow, immortalizing Venichka's early-morning search for the hair of the dog at the opening of Moscow to the End of the Line. Reading the poema while riding the commuter train out to Petushki is a sort of pilgrimage made by Erofeev devotees. Erofeev's biography, though still rather murky, has been the subject of dozens of memoirs; it has nearly become hagiography, the writer cast as a martyr to the repressive Soviet state. The enduring fascination with Erofeev's life may derive from the need to believe that it was possible to live beyond the strictures of Soviet society. Like Vladimir Vysotsky, the celebrity bard poet of the Brezhnev era, Erofeev resisted the pressure to conform and to pursue conventional success. The relationship between Erofeev and society was symbiotic, however, insofar as Erofeev's peculiar genius seems to have required the absurdity of Soviet reality as the source of his satire and parody.

Walpurgis Night, like Moscow to the End of the Line, is soaked in alcohol on the levels of plot and narration. Here, too, drunkenness (or, more precisely, alcoholism) fuels the characters' speeches and motivates their actions. At times, Gurevich's rhetorical flights are inspired by inebriation, as are Venichka's. Venichka, however, strives toward the garden where the jasmine is always blooming and the nightingales never cease singing. He depends on alcohol for transcendence, for escape from quotidian Soviet life. Gurevich's quest, in contrast, is for oblivion, realized in blindness, the loss of his voice, and death. By the time Erofeev is writing Walpurgis Night, alcohol is no longer a magic potion or a liquor subject to transubstantiation: it is poison. In Moscow to the End of the Line love and alcohol are intricately interwoven in the image of the red-haired woman waiting in Petushki; in Walpurgis Night love—sullied at the outset by Gurevich's suspicion that Natalie has been unfaithful to him — is merely a pretense, a means of obtaining the keys to the supply cabinet. The absence of love (however fanciful) in the plot contributes significantly to the bleakness of the play.

It is curious that Erofeev turned to writing plays in the last years of his life, for he rarely attended the theater. On the evidence of this single play, it seems that the form allowed him to create pure verbal constructs, speeches linked or unlinked by logic (because the characters are madmen or alcoholics). The setting is minimal; the stage directions for the most part refer to characters' appearance or provide authorial commentary on the action. In some cases, Erofeev uses stage directions to give the reader (and presumably the director) insight into the emotions and thoughts of the characters. In respect to form, however, Erofeev is remarkably traditional. Walpurgis Night in the Russian version is subtitled "A Tragedy in Five Acts," and the play adheres closely to the classical structure of the tragedy. We have in the first act the exposition, with Gurevich's arrival and incarceration in the psychiatric hospital. The second act is the complication, with the mock trial of Rear Admiral Mikhalych and the cruel beatings of several patients at the hands of the medical staff. In the third act we have development of the action, as Gurevich symbolically seduces Natalie with his poetry and obtains the key to the supply cabinet. The culmination or catastrophe occurs in the fourth act when the patients drink the methyl alcohol Gurevich has stolen. The fifth act gives us the tragic denouement, as the inmates of Ward 3 die one by one, ending with Gurevich.

The setting of the play in a Soviet psychiatric hospital has both political and aesthetic significance. When Erofeev was writing, psychiatry in the Soviet Union was largely an instrument of state repression and punishment. Political dissidents were frequently confined to psychiatric hospitals in the 1970s; they were diagnosed with schizophrenia, subjected to brutal treatment, and forced to take mind-numbing drugs. The psychiatric hospital—or less euphemistically, the madhouse-functions as a microcosm of Soviet society. Ironically but entirely in keeping with the tradition of the trope in Russian literature, the patient-inmates are freer than those outside the walls of the hospital. Written off as madmen, they are free to express their ideas and opinions openly. Just as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn populated his cancer ward with patients whose illnesses reflected the ways they had lived their lives, Erofeev creates a cast of characters who embody various ideologies. Prokhorov is a mouthpiece for Soviet jargon; his lines are largely propaganda slogans, and he has dictatorial tendencies. Seryozha Kleinmikhel is a utopian dreamer, unstained by the pragmatic cynicism of Soviet culture. Vova, an old man from the country, voices the neo-romanticism of Village Prose, a movement far from Erofeev's own literary inclinations. Stasik invents a fantastical garden with words, some of which he coins in his mad perorations. Gurevich stands at the center of this cacophony, a holy fool stubbornly insisting on the power of beauty. Indeed, he is a sort of encyclopedia of world culture; his lines are variously quotations from, references to, or catalogues of works of art, literature, and music.

A striking feature of this play is that Gurevich sometimes speaks in verse. His switching to verse seems spontaneous, a tic that he cannot control even when threatened with punishment. Though often banal and humorous, his "Shakespearean iambs" (as one of the doctor's assistants calls his unrhymed iambic pentameter) distinguish him from the other patients in the psychiatric ward and from the staff. Then the other patients take to speaking in verse, following Gurevich's example, and even stage a poetic performance at the beginning of the last act. Early in the play Gurevich tells the doctor that he is quite content in the Soviet Union except that he dislikes the "disrespect for the Word" that he senses around him. His identity as a poet puts him in an antagonistic relationship with the state, represented in Walpurgis Night by the staff of the psychiatric ward. Erofeev's adaptation of this Pushkinian theme resonates profoundly in the late Soviet period, for questions of accommodation, self-censorship, and coexistence with authority were highly relevant to the literary culture of those years.

Gurevich is half Jewish, which is obvious to other characters in the play and to Russian readers from his first name and his patronymic.

His Jewishness is significant for understanding the meaning of his life and death. Entrenched anti-Semitism was a given for Erofeev, an unalterable feature of Soviet culture. The other characters—especially Prokhorov, who speaks in official Soviet cant—casually cast anti-Semitic slurs and voice crude stereotypes. And while Gurevich resembles the author in many ways, his Jewishness is an additional, non-autobiographical feature that is clearly symbolic. It underscores his otherness and his status as a victim of irrational hatred.

Walburgis Night is saturated with violence, both physical violence and violence done to the spirit. Erofeev's play is reminiscent in this respect of both Chekhov's short story "Ward No. 6" and Ken Kesey's 1962 book, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. Brutality is more graphic and more constant here than in Moscow to the End of the Line, making it a challenging work to experience. Borenka the Goon and Tamarochka embody cruelty toward the vulnerable and the weak. They enjoy administering various sadistic "treatments" to the patients and thus personify the immorality of Soviet power. Language is frequently an instrument of violence in the play as well. The speech of the hospital staff often consists of strings of profanities, ugly insults, and threats that accompany physical blows.

The title of the play is an amalgam of several cultural and literary references; the density of these within the title reflects Erofeev's use of quotation or echoing throughout the play. "Walpurgis Night" refers to the spring holiday marked traditionally by revelry, carousing, and excess. The holiday is best known to us through the Faust legend and the literary and musical works that developed it, most notably Goethe's Faust, Mendelssohn's oratorio, and Balanchine's ballet. Walpurgis Night ends at dawn on May 1. Thus the revelry in Erofeev's psychiatric ward takes on overtones of a witches' sabbath and ends with the dawn of May Day, in time for the Soviet celebration of Communist solidarity, with all of the patients lying dead. Walpurgis Night is exactly six months from All Souls' Day and is the pagan antipode to the ecclesiastical holiday. Erofeev, as we know, converted to Catholicism in 1987, near the end of his life. However, little in this play suggests faith or comfort in religious conviction; Erofeev portrays the lives of his characters as hellish and their deaths as pointless.

The second part of the play's title, The Steps of the Commander, refers to the Don Juan legend and its literary manifestations. The most direct reference is to Aleksandr Blok's 1912 poem "The Steps of the Commander" ("Shagi komandora") from his Retribution cycle. Inevitably, the subtitle calls to mind Aleksandr Pushkin's play "The Stone Guest" ("Kammenyi gost'"), which is also based on the Don Juan legend and is a source for Blok's poem. As in these two seminal reference texts, the steps of the commander in Erofeev's play suggest impending destiny. The approaching steps are retributive, promising punishment for betrayal. In Pushkin's play, Don Juan has whimsically seduced Doña Anna and taunted fate; Blok's poetic persona has betrayed the ideal of the Beautiful Lady and squandered his talent. One suspects that both variants inform Erofeev's Gurevich, for he manipulates others—first and foremost Natalie, but the other patients as well—for his own purposes. And he has abused his poetic talent, veering from the sublime to the vulgar in his verses, unoriginally patching together lines from myriad sources.

Walpurgis Night is densely packed with cultural, literary, and historical references beyond the Faust and Don Juan legends. In fact, the play includes even more concentrated clusters of allusions than does Moscow to the End of the Line. Erofeev's references are often thematically significant; place-names, literary echoes, and musical motifs enhance or contrast parodically with the characters or plot of the play. In other cases, these references seem intended to create sound patterns, sonic associations quite free of connotative connection. Gurevich transforms Francisco Goya to General Franco and Gaius Julius Caesar to César Cui to Tsezar Solodar, weaving a cultural pastiche. It remains for Erofeev scholars to tease out the significance of the many references included in Walpurgis Night, as they have done for Moscow to the End of the Line. Some references will be best appreciated aurally, however, as Erofeev follows Marina Tsvetaeva in privileging sound over sense in poetically linking images.

The levels of language used by the characters in the play vary

widely, although this contrast is felt more strongly in the original Russian than in English translation. Bureaucratic jargon jostles with colloquialisms, poetic flights are interrupted by profane interjections. Linguistic mélange—a striking aspect of Moscow to the End of the Line—is a structural feature of this play, for most of the characters are associated with a level or type of language. The stylistic complexity of Walpurgis Night presents a challenge to the translator. The many puns and idioms that Erofeev embeds in the text also pose difficulties for translation. Marian Schwartz's translation renders both the sense and the spirit of the play. The English-language reader experiences the temporary escape that poetic language offers the patients in the psychiatric ward (or the Soviet Union). The brutality that pervades the world of the hospital is conveyed in equally ugly English profanity. And Gurevich's senseless roaring (ryk) at the end of the play is a tragic descent into voicelessness that signifies the destruction of poetry in all languages.

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