

Stephen Lovell

## Response to Faith Wigzell, 'Reading the Map of Heaven and Hell in Russian Popular Orthodoxy'

Simple dichotomies are perhaps necessary for scholarly discussion to engage the attention of any but a tiny handful of experts in a given sub-sub-specialisation. But they become obstructive when their heuristic and provisional nature is forgotten. A case in point would seem to be the notion that Russian popular belief can be divided into two constituent parts: an ancient substratum of paganism and a topsoil of Orthodox Christianity. This presumed duality, which usually goes under the name of *dvoeverie*, presents the adepts of Russian traditional culture as faith virtuosos who juggled church doctrine and demotic practice. They are made to seem nothing less than premodern precursors of the Soviet citizens who thought one thing and said another (thus engaging in the more morally destructive activity of *dvoemyslie*, 'double-think').

As Faith Wigzell argues, we would be better off dropping this frame of reference. The 'dual faith' model hampers rather than facilitates analysis. It imposes much too absolute a distinction between church and popular religion. It also implies — quite wrongly — that it is some-

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how normal in less benighted places than Russia for Christianity to come along and elbow aside popular forms of belief. It leaves us in the oppressive thrall of a binary: we find ourselves talking about 'form' and 'content', or (as I did above) 'substratum' and 'topsoil', in ways that do not greatly advance our understanding of particular belief systems or of their history. All in all, 'syncretism' is a much more satisfactory term than *dvoeverie*.<sup>1</sup>

But *dvoeverie* is by no means the only binary at which Faith takes aim in her paper. She is concerned largely with what appear to be the foundational either-or questions of any culture: life and death; here-and-now and the other world [*tot svet*]; heaven and hell; and — to some extent — good and evil. These structuring oppositions would appear to be even stronger in Russian culture than in other places. As every first-year student of Russian culture now knows, following Lotman and Uspensky, the Russian world-view found no room for an intermediate space between heaven and hell. This insight can very easily be applied to many phenomena in Russian social and cultural history — from drinking habits to revolutions.

I do not want to belittle the enormous contribution made to the study of Russian culture by scholars who have, to one degree or another, espoused structuralist binaries in order to make sense of their material. But I think a few words of caution are necessary. Firstly, binary analysis of cultures does sometimes run the risk of stating the obvious: of replacing thick description with lists of paired oppositions. Surely it is just not very interesting to observe, for example, that life and death are commonly found head-to-head in all manner of cultural artefacts. Secondly, things are rarely as simple as the binaries would lead us to believe.

Here is where Faith's paper gets especially interesting. By taking a non-standard body of material (the few dozen 'death experiences' [*obmiraniya*] that she has collected), she shows that popular visions of life and death, or of this world and the other world, are rarely as black-and-white, or as stratified, as we might imagine. Sometimes the moral axes seem to be rotated, so that left/right becomes a more significant opposition than up/down. Sometimes the journey from life to afterlife is precisely that — a journey — and offers an open-ended period of transition rather than a clean break. When the subjects do finally arrive at their destination, they may find heaven and hell sideways, not above or below. Equally, the afterlife may represent a slightly sanitised version of their own experience rather than anything transcendental: open Russian fields rather than Paradise or Olympus. Even after going to the trouble of climbing Mount Zion, the seer may find nothing more — but also nothing less — than

<sup>1</sup> Or *mnogoverie* ('multi-faith'), as suggested by Tatiana Bernshtam. [Editor].

a pleasant garden *'just like in our world'*. Even those unfortunate enough to share or observe the fate of the sinners may find hell to be a surprisingly broad and unfettered church.

Faith ends her reflections on the variability of broadly religious feeling by making a suggestive comparison between *obmiraniya* and near-death experiences. Both these phenomena can be regarded as responses to the least satisfying attribute of the 'known world' and of the human being's existence in that world: their finiteness. But, though they spring from a common striving to make sense of the individual's place in the cosmos, the *obmiranie* and the NDE offer different answers. It comes as no surprise, for example, to learn that American after-death visions bespeak a greater commitment, and sense of entitlement, to individual happiness, while *obmiraniya* place more emphasis on reunion with ancestors.

Just as we can recognise differences between American and Russian texts even if we recognise a basic cultural commonality between them, so we can use the *obmiranie* corpus to make more nuanced sense of Russian popular belief — its history, geography, sociology, and anthropology. In what remains of my remarks, I want to hazard a few guesses as to how that might be done.

History, it seems to me, is often the Achilles' heel of folklorists and ethnographers. They have to deal with a small and patchy body of written evidence. They are at the mercy of what and how their predecessors, from the late eighteenth century onwards, chose or were able to record. They are also in the business of studying a culture that is profoundly 'traditional' and hence resistant to incisive historicisation. The continuities are always so much more evident than the breaks.

Yet there are also good reasons to want to analyse historical changes in rural popular culture. In the Russian context, these reasons notably include the violent modernisation and secularisation attempted by the Soviet state. It is clear enough that popular beliefs and practices outlived the Bolsheviks, but these beliefs could themselves hardly have been left unmarked by the Russian twentieth-century experience. The task, then, is to find an intellectually satisfying way of talking about the 'traditional' elements in popular culture of the Soviet era.

From her study of the *obmiraniya*, Faith observes a general trend during the twentieth century towards less Orthodox, less morally stratified, more individualised and more localised after-death visions. She argues that the fading of Orthodox motifs can be ascribed to the weakness of religious teaching in the Soviet era. Deprived of *'taught models'*, Soviet villagers were thrown back on their own resources. While I find this interpretation very plausible, it does seem

to run into the problem of incommensurable sources. Before 1917, we have to rely on written *obmiraniya* taken down by priests; nearer to the present day, we have the benefit of modern oral history techniques. Perhaps it is no wonder, then, that pre-revolutionary texts fit the Orthodox mould, while post-Soviet examples are less elaborate and less saturated with Christian detail (even if the basic mythological structure remains intact).

What other evidence can be provided in order to make the best possible stab at interpreting the *obmiraniya*? It seems important, first of all, to establish how much we can know about the people who had these visions and told these stories. What kind of people were they? Did they occupy any particular position in the community? Did they have a reputation otherwise for special insight? Did they acquire such a reputation after recounting their *obmiranie*?

These are difficult and perhaps unanswerable questions. But a quick pronoun count in Faith's piece suggests that one thing can be said with reasonable certainty: most of the seers and tellers were women. What is it about Russian peasant culture that makes it acceptable (or even expected) for women to have such experiences? As the source base for a study of *obmiraniya* is not enormous, we must assume that only a tiny proportion even of women have had such experiences. What, then, qualified a peasant woman as an *obmiravshaya*? Could anyone claim to have had such a vision? Might you have more than one? Did you have to be nearing death yourself to have such a vision? Presumably a coma was a one-off occurrence for most people, but could dreams and unnatural sleep have an iterative character?

The *obmiraniya* were not only experienced and retold but also listened to. It thus seems necessary to establish how soon after the experience these visions were made known to others, and how widely they were then relayed. Did they enter the stock repertoire of the community's oral culture, or did they remain in some sense the discursive property of the *obmiravshaya*? From Faith's account it seems that these visions have come down to us as quite elaborate and moralised narratives. It is easy to see how they might have entered the common storehouse of folk wisdom. On the one hand, they uphold the norms of the community. These are clearly morality tales, or at least moral visions, with human beings commonly assigned to different levels — or compartments — of the afterlife. On the other hand, the *obmiraniya* may also present a materially comfortable, danger-free version of the here-and-now. To this extent they seem designed to soften the predicament of mortality. In other words, they seem to combine a normative role (of showing people how to behave better, and warning them not to behave badly) and a pragmatic role (of helping people to feel better).

Another important issue concerns the wider diffusion of these

stories. Do they spread beyond the village where they are told and other neighbouring villages? Are there distinct regional differences to be observed? By describing the *obmiranie* as a 'genre', Faith implies that it was widely understood in rural popular culture as a likely discursive outcome of a coma. Would a person emerging from such a state feel moral pressure, or incentive, to deliver an appropriate vision? Did not the existence of a set of genre expectations place definite limits on what an *obmiravshaya* could tell of her experiences (never mind what she had actually seen)? It would seem, at the very least, that there is an interesting tension between these expectations and the special status of the *obmiranie* as an individual, subject-centred story based on authentic first-hand experience.

Perhaps the significance of the *obmiranie* becomes clearer if we compare it with the treatment of death in popular cultural forms that are less individual and subjectivised. The strongest single message of *bytovye skazki* and *legendy* seems to be that life is short and unfair, while death is external and random. As the saying went, '*Zhizn daet odin tolko Bog, a otnimaet vsyakaya gadina*' [Only God can give you life, but any bastard can take it away again]. In tales of the deathbed such as 'The Death of the Righteous Man and the Sinner', Death is shown as a sudden and unexpected visitor. The duty of a good man is not to be caught unawares. If you are not suitably prepared when Death comes upon you, you have to be exceptionally quick-witted or lucky to find a way out. In demotic retellings of stories such as 'The Old Man and Death' and 'The Soldier and Death', the human protagonist is sometimes able to outsmart a personified Death. Or, if he yields to his fate, he is allowed to reach heaven (where, however, he does not necessarily feel at home).

But the dominant theme in rural popular culture seems to be the need to envelop death tightly in ritual. As folk legends made clear, the death of a righteous man was serene and proceeded by the appropriate stages; it was only sinners who died suddenly. The elderly would go through various stages in preparation for death: getting their final clothes together, choosing a place in the burial ground, praying for their soul and for an 'easy' death. In some communities (for example in Vladimir province), old people might be taken out into the fields to say farewell to the soil on their own plot of land. The dying were commonly washed, dressed appropriately and placed in the holy corner of the *izba*, under the icons; to wash them after death was considered a great sin. All the adults from the village would come to say farewell to their dying neighbour, if necessary seeking to forget past grievances. Old women would gather round a deathbed, one of them lighting incense as soon as the person passed away, the others bursting into convulsive tears. A whole cycle of laments might be required: to confirm the death, to announce the death, to greet the arrival into the house of the coffin, to mark its

departure, to accompany it to the burial ground, to mark the lowering of the coffin into the grave, to accompany the procession back to the village, and to mark remembrance at the wake. Finally, bodies were prepared for burial by specially designated *umyvalniki* (or *naryazhalniki*), [washing-women, dressing-women], who were old or widowed, and 'had no sin' on them (that is to say, no longer engaged in sexual relations).

Death's dense ritual overlay in the Russian village makes me wonder again about the cultural meaning of the *obmiranie*. Were these after-death visions in fact rather marginal, did they encroach on the authority of ritual? Did they not compromise the prerogative of death to be mysterious and random? Are they a sign that peasants had a subjectivity like the rest of us? To return to an earlier question, I wonder whether the heavily gendered character of the *obmiranie* offers a key to its meaning. Might it not be that in the Russian village, as in many other places, women are left to shed light on the things that fascinate everyone but are awkward to talk about outside the protective context of ritual?