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"THE LADY AND THE WENCH": A PRACTICAL THEODICY IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE

Paul Vallière

In the study of religion, it is important to distinguish broadly between two forms of theodicy: theoretical and practical. Both forms address the fundamental concern of all theodicy, "the justice of God," but they do so in different contexts and for different purposes.

Theoretical theodicies form part of natural or rational theology. They are concerned with the relationship between God and the world as qualified by the evil which exists—or appears to exist, temporarily exists, exists for some good reason, etc.—in the world. Theoretical theodicies combine what we know, or think we know, about the way things are in the world with what we know, or think we know, about God in a unified theory of justice. Generalization is the aim. Clarity, consistency and scope are essential criteria, as in any work of theoretical reason. Theoretical theodicies have been a perennial phenomenon in the history of philosophy and philosophical theology ever since Plato and Aristotle, and they continue to be produced in our own time—in "process theology," for example. In the history and practice of religion, however, practical theodicies count for more.

A practical theodicy is not the applied form of a theoretical theodicy any more than religion is applied philosophy. Religion springs from the irrepressible demand for subjective meaning in the here-and-now of experience, meaning vis-à-vis the mass of tensions and contradictions which condition life in the world. To be sure, these tensions and contradictions are subjects which philosophers and theologians think about. But thinking takes time and demands a measure of detachment from its subject. Meanwhile, people have to live. They have to bear the fury of the world of experience as it is, wrestle with its tensions, make decisions, act and suffer the consequences. It is irrepressibly human to want to order experience, to try to tame the fury, to seek models to live by. This is where practical theodicies come into play. Practical theodicies are representations of right action or right response in the face of adversity or contradiction. Concrete enough to find a foothold in everyday life yet stylized—i.e., traditional—enough to be communicated and sustained, these representations provide individuals and communities with models of behavior under stress. By patterning their actions and responses on them, people find it easier to embrace the world as it is and to see themselves as living rightly in it. To put it another way, practical theodicies facilitate the justification or sanctification of everyday life.

The difference between theoretical and practical theodicy can be seen in the way in which each deals with the problem of suffering. One way for a theoretical theodicy to reply to the charge that God is unjust because human beings

suffer in His world is to distinguish between the whole and the parts. The conflicts and contradictions that cause suffering, so the argument might run, demonstrate not the irrationality of God's world but the partiality of human understanding; if we saw the whole, as God does, we would see the order in all things. Thus, rather than dwelling on the parts in isolation and complaining to God on their account, we would do better to seek the whole as far as it is in our power to find it. Clearly, the context of an argument such as this lies in speculative and systematic thought rather than actual struggles to accept suffering. It is difficult to imagine how a group or an individual in the grip of misfortune would be comforted or aided in a practical way by the thought that the "whole" makes sense, for a concrete vision of the whole is precisely what the "parts," the sufferers, lack.

A practical theodicy addresses sufferers in terms appropriate to their limited or broken situation. Take Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, for example, which like all Greek tragedies is a practical theodicy in that it presents models of right action or right response in the face of adversity. Surely, Oedipus suffered the consequences of partial knowledge if ever a man did. Smart as he was, Oedipus did not see the whole of his situation and, as a result, met with disaster. Yet, not once does the play suggest that Oedipus could have avoided or better understood his sufferings if he had been mindful of the larger scheme of things. The scheme, whatever it is, remains completely beyond the ken of the hero and the spectators alike. At the end of the play the spectators know no more about what the gods are driving at in the person of Oedipus than they knew at the beginning. Nevertheless, the play wins their—and our—assent to the way things are. The nobility of the sufferer, the beauty of the plot, the sonority of the language and music and the power of collective liturgical observance—all these features of the play combine to evoke a feeling of solidarity with Oedipus and, at the same time, a sense of reverance for the ways of the gods, blasphemy being as remote from Sophocles' intentions as the withholding of sympathy.

Psalms of travail and trust, martyrological stories and icons, liturgies for the sick, the dying and the dead—these and other vehicles of practical theodicy are not as complex or sophisticated as a Greek tragedy, yet within their various contexts they do much the same work. Setting forth models of right action and right response under pressure, they orient individuals and communities, nurture a sense of human solidarity and win acceptance of the ways of God.

There is a great variety of practical theodicies in the history of religion. The variety has two obvious sources: first, the complexity of the tensions and contradictions of everyday experience; second, the multiplicity of religious traditions which cope with these tensions, but not always in the same way. Comparative religion tries to organize this bewildering variety by identifying, analyzing, classifying and studying the interaction between practical theodicies, while at the same time respecting their concreteness and contextuality in the traditions in which they arise. The source materials are as disparate and varied as the subject. For the study of practical theodicies in the Russian Orthodox tradition, for example, classical sources such as the dogmatics of the Ecumenical Councils, the theology of the Greek fathers and the Eastern liturgies are worth looking at, but one must not stop with them. It is just as important to examine saints' lives, icons,

prayer books, folklore, popular piety, Russian social organization and vernacular Russian literature. These materials may be homelier than the classical sources in many cases, but they have the great advantage of speaking already in the idiom of practical theodicy, an idiom close to that of everyday life, while classical sources tend to demand greater efforts of translation.

Works of imaginative literature are a particularly rich source for the study of practical theodicies. Like religion, literature confronts the tensions and contradictions of everyday life with models of right action or right response which it embodies in the formal yet concrete structure of the text, oral or written. One sees literary works functioning as practical theodicies most clearly in genres which presuppose a liturgical context, such as Greek tragedy. Yet even when the formal links between literature and liturgy have been severed, as is the case in most modern literature, the concern with theodicy is not excluded. It simply finds more secularized or sophisticated forms of expression. One of the many uses of comparative religion is that it helps us appreciate how modern literature (and other forms of expression) functions to perpetuate traditional approaches and responses to the world, including traditional types of theodicy.

"The Lady and the Wench," a story by Nikolai Leskov (1831-1895) published in 1894, is an excellent example of a practical theodicy of Russian Orthodox tradition in a work of modern Russian literature.[1]

The story begins by introducing us to a Russian writer and his wife, the latter being "the Lady" of the title. The Lady is a woman of noble birth who has studied in Switzerland, seasons her Russian with French, follows social, political and intellectual affairs and holds liberal views. But she hates sex in general and the male sex in particular. Informing her husband early in their marriage that she "'wished to take vengeance in his person on all men for the oppression of women,'" she proceeds to make his life miserable.[2] When her husband writes an essay criticizing a lecture on Garibaldi delivered in St. Petersburg by Mme. A.N. Yakobi, the Lady throws him out of the house.[3] Their servant, a simple, uneducated country girl named Prasha, takes pity on the writer, goes to live with him and eventually bears him a son. Shortly thereafter the writer dies, and Prasha, without legal protection, is left on her own. She survives by starting a laundry business along with a relative of hers, another young woman at loose ends named Zinaida. A victim of poverty and sexual exploitation and already the mother of four children, Zinaida is looking for a female companion to live with, ostensibly because at her dying husband's request she had vowed before an icon of the Virgin of Kursk never to remarry; also, by implication, because she wants to escape the tyranny of men.

For a while, the two women are content. Prasha raises her son, and Zinaida enjoys hard work in Prasha's company. Unfortunately, things do not remain this way. Prasha remarries, and Zinaida, corrupted by her sexually precocious youth, cannot govern her impulses. The presence of a man in the household makes her itchy and jealous. She makes overtures to Prasha's husband and begins having sex with some of the neighbors until Prasha finds out what is going on. Humiliated, Zinaida leaves the household and embarks on an aimless life interrupted by occasional pregnancies. Eventually she settles down to keep house and perform other

services for a couple of monks of the Caves Monastery in Kiev and later marries one of them. After the ex-monk's death, she enters a convent where, of all people, the Lady is the director. Prasha, on the other hand, survives her second husband's death long enough to raise her three children and then retires to live alone in a little cottage in Finland where, from time to time, she keeps the company of a local eccentric:

> Among the Finns Prasha even found a friend, a very poor old man named Abel. He lived like a gnome in a sort of burrow in the earth, and Prasha was at first even a bit afraid of him. Little, bandy-legged, shaggy and very old, but with a head of black hair ungreyed, he wore a black sheepskin jacket and trousers of hide. In the daytime he sat by his hole in the ground weaving purses and singing. In fact he was always singing something, and in the nighttime again he would creep out and spend hours wandering among the rocks until finally he would climb up on one of them and doze. Prasha soon realized that old Abel was not threatening and stopped being afraid of him. Later she asked him what it was he sang.
>
> "Psalms," he answered.
>
> "Why do you sit outside at night?"
>
> "I'm listening."
>
> "What are you listening to?"
>
> "Something you can't hear from lips."
>
> "He must be mad," thought Prasha. Yet she, too, enjoyed coming out of her cottage and sitting in the open air. "You sit in the quietness and pretty soon you get so quiet yourself that you suddenly start to hear something," [she pondered].[4]

So Prasha has Abel teach her how to sit and listen, how to gaze, as he put it, "upon the other side," i.e., the heavenly side.

> She loved to watch the shaggy Finn Abel trying to hear the inaudible and catch a glimpse of the unseen side, and she began to go out at night and sit for hours with Abel among the rocks. In her soul as in the open air all was brisk, strict and fresh.[5]

"The Lady and the Wench" can easily be read as a schematization of sexual tensions. What makes it also a practical theodicy is the nature of the subject matter along with the author's purpose in treating it. Sexual tensions, not to say contradictions, are a natural subject for practical theodicies because of the suffering which they cause and the threat which they pose to a sense of the coherence of human nature. Furthermore, in "The Lady and the Wench," Leskov goes beyond the mere analysis of sexual tensions to propose a model in which they are brought to a fitting resolution, at least to his mind. Both points require elaboration.

"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27, R.S.V.). No theory will ever be able to cushion the effect of the shift from the singular to the plural pronoun in this verse. Whether we choose to say that the God in whose image we are made exists beyond maleness and femaleness or incorporates both in the same being, the

fact remains that human being reflects divine being in a broken way. So obvious is this to us that we accept Gen. 1:27 as it stands. Stretching syntax, the verse bars us from a world of make-believe and forces us to reckon with the actual world of experience, a world where basic questions about sexuality force their way into our lives, if not always our consciousness. Why are human beings sexually divided? What is sexual passion for? How can it be controlled? Is sexuality the same thing in men and women, or is it different? The forms which such questions take are not always admirable or promising. The question posed at the beginning of "The Lady and the Wench" is, "Which kind of women make better 'life-companions' for a literary man: educated or uneducated women?"[6] Judged on its merits, the question is vulgar and sexist. Yet to inquire why such a question arises in the first place is not vulgar or sexist—or uninteresting.

The purpose of "The Lady and the Wench" is to assert a model of right response to the pressures of sexual being, a fitting sexual ideal. Prasha represents the successful negotiation of sexual tensions while the Lady and Zinaida are both failures. The latter fail for diametrically opposed reasons, the Lady because she hates sexuality and Zinaida because she cannot control it. Significantly, both end up in the same place: a convent. For neither one does this terminus represent a peaceful resolution of tensions. It shows instead their spiritual isolation and inability to cope with themselves. Throughout the story Leskov depicts the women running to religion to vent frustration. The Lady, who makes a practice of maligning her husband to his publishers, at one point importunes the editor Kraevsky on a public street. Rebuffed, "she raced through the open doors of Semionov Church, crying out from the porch that she would 'curse him before the icon.'"[7] Zinaida, shamed by the exposure of her dalliances with the neighbors, appears before Prasha with a cup of holy water and asks her to sprinkle her with it. (Prasha refuses.) We have already mentioned the vow before the Virgin of Kursk by which a dying sensualist, Zinaida's second husband, attempts to extend the tyranny over his wife which his impending death is threatening. All of these appeals to religion have something unjust or unclean about them. At the same time, it is worth observing—in fairness to the suppliants and with respect for Leskov's realism—that the appeals also contain a measure of truth. The world which God has made is indeed a place of sexual division, sexual confusion and sexual exploitation. Many people are overwhelmed by it. Even the church is sometimes overwhelmed by it and becomes the place where sexual false consciousness finds its securest home.

In contrast to the frustrated Lady and Zinaida, Prasha represents integrity, fulfillment and peace. Unlike the Lady, she has the capacity for passion and warmth. She also has the ability to control it, which Zinaida lacks. To this extent, Prasha represents a mean between the extremes of coldness and licentiousness. It is significant, however, that the picture of Prasha fails to feature that which a contemporary American audience might expect to find as the embodiment of the mean: a balanced, integrated relationship between a man and a woman establishing mutual identity and fulfilling sexual being. Two characteristics of Prasha's sexuality prevent this ideal from emerging in the pattern of rightness which she is

made to represent: the precedence of maternal over heterosexual eros in Prasha's relationships with men, and her renunciation of sexuality at the ripe age of forty.

Prasha starts out as a "wench" who, with a kind of innocence-cum-passion, gives herself to her dejected master in a way which suggests a nurse and mother more than a lover. When she hears that her master lies sick and despairing, "she immediately handed over [the master's and Lady's] child to its mother and went to serve the sick man. Like a peasant woman she began 'straightening him up'—that is, she changed his sheets, rubbed him down with water and vinegar, spoke kindly and comfortingly to him and cooked him broth."[8] Soon Prasha becomes a mother in her own right, and this identity channels her energies until her children are raised. The power and centrality of Prasha's maternal passion are underscored by the fact that she, not her mates, provides continuity in the family. The males die long before the children are grown and provided for. In the end, however, Prasha renounces domestic life and chooses a life of quietude, contemplation and considerable isolation from human companionship. Abel becomes her tutor. His name signifies a paradigm of innocence, purity and defenselessness. Keeping "Abel's" company means passing beyond the passion and aggression of sexuality as such.

Both of the characteristics which give Prasha's sexuality its specificity are deeply ingrained in the culture of Russian Orthodoxy and as such represent not just Leskov's preferences or idiosyncracies but his connection with tradition. Western scholarship on Leskov has generally failed to see this basic connection because of a tendency to overstress Leskov's alienation from the Orthodoxy of his day. Leskov's relations with the Russian Church were prickly: some of the most biting satire of Orthodoxy in Russian literature can be found in his works, his interest in other branches of Christianity—especially Protestantism—is documented, and his religious preference late in life was Tolstoyanism, not official Orthodoxy. Yet to a comparative religionist, whose job it is to distinguish religious realities from confessional appearances, Leskov will continue to appear profoundly traditional. The brief demonstration which follows concentrates on the theme of renunciation of sexuality in "The Lady and the Wench." The emphasis on maternal eros in the portrait of Prasha is equally traditional, but compared with the theme of the renunciation of sexuality the linkage to a traditional model of maternal eros is not as explicit textually and would require us to go beyond the story.

The leading American scholar of Leskov, Hugh McLean, reads "The Lady and the Wench" as "a plea for a broader, more tolerant view of sexual relations than was characteristic of many Christian moralists, including Tolstoy."[9] McLean is talking about Leskov's portrayal of sexuality in Prasha as something natural and good in contrast to "the extreme antisexual position Tolstoy articulates in 'The Kreutzer Sonata' and its famous 'Afterword.'" McLean is not altogether comfortable with the specific content of Prasha's sexuality as celebrated by Leskov. He calls Prasha "the male chauvinist's (insecure male's) ideal of the perfect woman: affectionate, devoted, modest, unassertive, undemanding, but at the same time competent, practical, and self-reliant."[10] But this flaw does not ruin the value of "The Lady and the Wench" for McLean, for at least the story is not a "Kreutzer

Sonata." True, one might wonder why the story ends by depicting the renunciation of sexuality, but McLean has a different reading of the end of the tale.

> A more specific polemical intent in "The Lady and the Wench" is to strike one last blow on Leskov's ever-ready anti-Orthodox anvil. The "Orthodox" career of Zinaida, with its silly vows to an icon and its "sacraments" of marriage to men she did not love, ends in an Orthodox convent, full of "temptations," where—of all things—the shrewish "lady" has become the "directress" (*nacal'nica*—Leskov avoids using the correct term, *igumen'ja*, "abbess"). Prasha's life ends ideally in the simple peace taught by a Finnish Protestant who can scarcely speak Russian.[11]

The Finn, in other words, represents a foreign, non-Orthodox witness; indeed, a "Protestant" witness of some kind. What kind? Witness to which Protestant values or ideals? McLean does not say.

In exposing the error of this interpretation we pass over the small but not insignificant point that nowhere in "The Lady and the Wench" does Leskov identify Abel as a Protestant. We pass over it because Abel's confessional identification is not the issue. The issue is the quality of the religiosity depicted in him and the way in which the meaning of "The Lady and the Wench" is affected by it. The fact of the matter is that, as an inspection of Leskov's portrait of Abel will show, there is nothing Protestant about it at all. Protestants, even Finnish Protestants, are not known or celebrated by their co-religionists for living in burrows, weaving purses or perching on boulders to sing psalms at night. Far from being "Protestant," Abel is a kind of Northwoods anchorite. All the details of Leskov's portrait fit the traditional Orthodox picture of the anchorite: wilderness setting, burrow (cave) in the earth, weaving, wandering among rocks and crags, perching in the manner of a *stolpnik* ("pillar-sitter") to sing prayers, quiet contemplation of "the other side," and above all the life of asexual holiness befitting an "Abel." With "Abel" as her teacher Prasha's spiritual goal in retirement is *apatheia* ("impassibility"), the transcendence of the passions. The goal is quite explicit. Receiving a letter from Zinaida announcing the latter's marriage to one of her monks Prasha thinks to herself: "If I could write I would write her that now, seeing I am already forty years old, the time has come for me when all sources of life should be shut off [*zatvorit'sia*]."[12] The language suggests the extinguishing of desire, an inward *zatvornichestvo* ("recluse-asceticism"). That this ideal has a vitality of its own—let us call it the vitality of patience beyond passion—is what Prasha learns in Abel's company.

In other words, Prasha's edification is of a thoroughly traditional sort. The polemics against contemporary Orthodoxy in the portraits of Zinaida and the Lady should not be allowed to obscure the profoundly traditional outlook of Leskov's story. "The Lady and the Wench" may not be Orthodox according to the letter, but it is surely Orthodox in spirit. It is so whether or not Leskov intended it to be, which is a separate issue. Certainly there is nothing Protestant about the story, least of all the portrait of Abel. Prasha is not justified by faith. She is justified by her approximation to a life of primordial innocence represented to her by

a holy eccentric. As for her sexuality, it is justified in the end by her capacity to extinguish it. This final grace, however, is not presented with the intention of undermining Prasha's accomplishments as lover, mother and wife any more than a Hindu father, retiring to a life of wandering asceticism, aims to discredit or betray his achievements as a householder. A practical theodicy rooted in tradition is at work in both instances. Prasha is doing as she ought to do. Seeking the patience beyond passion, she grows lovelier and livelier than ever. Or so Leskov would have thought, with the full weight of Orthodox tradition behind him.

NOTES

1. N. S. Leskov, "Dama i fefela (Iz literaturnykh vospominanii)," *Sobranie sochinenii*, 11 vols. (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo Khudozhestvennoi Literatury, 1958), 9: 456-500. My translations throughout.

2. Ibid., p. 462.

3. Alexandra Nikolaevna Yakobi (1842-1918) was a well-known author of children's literature under the pseudonym A. Toliverova.

4. Leskov, "Dama i fefela," p. 497.

5. Ibid., p. 498.

6. Ibid., p. 456.

7. Ibid., p. 459.

8. Ibid., p. 468.

9. Hugh McLean, *Nikolai Leskov: The Man and His Art* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 491.

10. Ibid., p. 490.

11. Ibid., p. 491. I question whether Leskov's use of the word *načal'nica* bears a negative implication.

12. Leskov, "Dama i fefela," p. 497.