

Eureka! The Mystery of “A Radiant Personality”



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Looking back now, I realize that my research into Russian literature arrived at a crucial crossroads in my mid 40s. For some two decades since I was a graduate student, I had devoted my youthful passion to studying the Russian avant-garde movement of the early 20th century. When, thereafter, I resolved to move on and explore culture in the Stalin era. Even I found the bold change in direction too drastic at first. But fortunately, the fruit of my research, a volume on Stalinist cultural theory titled *Russia Crucified*, won the 29th Osaragi Jiro Prize in 2001. This stroke of luck largely reflects my research in Russia and my work with researchers around the world that were made possible by none other than the Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research. And the story I am about to relate for the first time here, too, is one of my latest accomplishments under the program.

On August 9, 1975, when I was still in my mid 20s, I learned of the death of a certain composer through an old TV set in the lobby of the Intourist Hotel in central Moscow. I was not all that upset by the news. It was my impression, and indeed common knowledge among all music fans at the time, that he had established the image of a favorite of the Soviet state and enjoyed all sorts of special privileges. In fact, I promptly walked away from the television feeling a mild sense of revulsion at his convalescent, bloated face. Little did I know that the composer would become such an important subject of interest to me 25 years later. His name was Dmitri Shostakovich.

For the past decade or so, with funding from the Grants-in-Aid program, I have been conducting research around the theme of friction and symbiosis between politics and culture in the nearly 70-year history of the Soviet Union. In short, it deals with how the creative intellectuals of the era fought and survived political oppression; that is, censorship. In the process of this research, I emphasized the keyword “duplicity.” The term normally carries negative connotations, as it suggests lies and deceit, but I saw it from a slightly different angle. I was amazed by the shrewd wisdom of these intellectuals, at how they exploited their global fame and leveraged duplicity to get on in the world – and, on the other hand, how intellectuals who could not be duplicitous enough were hushed up, and those too proud to be duplicitous, who opted to distract themselves with alcohol, luckily evaded suppression. I admit this stereotyping may sound superficial and be easy prey to criticism. But it is an undeniable fact that alcohol (say, like vodka) was a clever tool to control intellectuals, to pacify them and restrain their will to rebel.

On the side, I am also engaged in another project in my spare time: translating Dostoevsky. For the past two years, I have been working on *Demons*, which I dealt with in my thesis as a university student. Meanwhile, a date was set for the international symposium I had been organizing to be sponsored by a Grants-in-Aid study group. This was in January this year. I titled it “The Trials of Freedom: Resistance and Imagination in the Post-Stalin Era” with the intention of discussing in depth the influence freedom from oppression had on the work of artists. I planned to unveil at the symposium a hypothesis I had been harboring for quite some time: an endeavor to interpret the reception of *Demons* in 20th-century Russia through the central themes of “resistance” and “imagination.” The problem was whether I could come by any evidence to support my hypothesis.

One of the first candidates to come to mind as an overseas speaker was Ludmila Saraskina, who had just completed a biography of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the anti-Soviet novelist known for *Cancer Ward* and *The Gulag Archipelago*, and regarded as the most prominent *Demons* scholar of modern times. I could think of no better person than her. Alas, as the symposium in late January approached, I was faced with a number of difficulties. The unstable global climate, among other factors, caused airports in Moscow to shut down for days on end this winter, and Saraskina began having serious doubts about flying to Tokyo. Eventually, though, my passion as a translator of *Demons* must have moved her, as she assured me she would come whatever it takes. This, in turn, braced me up for my role as one of the keynote presenters.

My chief interest lay in the *Four Verses of Captain Lebyadkin*, a collection of songs that Shostakovich composed in his final years as he ailed from lung cancer and heart disease and eased his suffering with alcohol. In all honesty, it was an odd title to pick for what would likely be one’s swan song. Captain Lebyadkin is a character in Dostoevsky’s *Demons*, a drunken buffoon-poet who ends up being killed brutally in a plot by the revolutionary group. Every Russian researcher I know concludes that Shostakovich infused no autobiographical meaning into the verses. But I wonder. Do they not realize that the name Lebyadkin derives from *lebedi*, the Russian word for “swan”?

Let me continue. Dostoevsky’s *Demons* contains four verses supposedly penned by this buffoon-poet. Shostakovich, for some reason, eyed these verses and composed what in fact did turn out to be his swan song. The title of final verse is “A Radiant Personality” no less – in *Demons*, it is set to be an expression of admiration for some heroic revolutionary in Dostoevsky’s time.

I am not a big fan of mysteries, but I have always made it my mission to unravel the autobiographical mysteries hidden between the lines, whether they be in literature or music. For the sake of argument, let's say that Shostakovich actually did mean for the four verses to be autobiographical. Who, then, is the "radiant personality"? Who did Shostakovich have in mind when he composed this last verse? One Russian researcher declares it is Solzhenitsyn, the Nobel laureate who bravely rose in revolt to Soviet authorities and got deported only months before the song was composed. I was convinced this was wrong and was determined to disprove it.

In the weeks leading up to the symposium, I struggled to track down this mysterious "radiant personality" relying on every document I could get my hands on. The answer was in no document. My draft was due a week before the event, but I pushed back the deadline a day at a time. Three days to go, two days, one day... And a small miracle happened.

On January 22, the Sanjo Conference Hall at the University of Tokyo was soon a full house thanks to the notices posted in newspapers. I was the last to take the podium. I was so excited that my voice grew shrill, I stuttered, and I was totally washed out after the 40-minute lecture. My presentation sounded mad, I know, because a friend in the audience later warned me that I should seek medical attention.

In conclusion, Shostakovich's "radiant personality" was none other than Joseph Stalin. Shostakovich set about composing the last verse of his swan song almost two decades after Stalin's death, yet still fearing the dictator's shadow. Not out of praise for the dictator, of course, which the spirit of the Khrushchev Thaw sought so hard to denounce. Shostakovich rather must have envisioned the drunken buffoon admiring the "radiant personality" as a creative intellectual who survived the Stalin era with a forced duplicity. The fourth verse was his confession from the heart, proof of sincerity from an artist who had overstepped many a carcass, though through self-torment, and pulled through in a period of horrifying dictatorship.

Saraskina approached me after the symposium.

She said, "Let me introduce you to Madame Shostakovich. She lives in Paris!"