

2/21/01 Wednesday's Rock, Grace Maryanka
Closing time: 11:58 p.m., C.S.T.

Do you see this egg? With this egg you can overthrow all the schools of theology, all the churches of the earth.

Dennis Diderot

An Assignment for the Auto-Icon

Mr. Blackman, the black cat progressively addressed by his former pupil, the famous English Utilitarian, Jeremy Bentham (1748 –1832), as Dr. Blackman, Reverend Doctor Blackman, and finally, as the Right Reverend Doctor Blackman was dispatched, or more properly, directed himself to be dispatched, to cross the abyss that separates the abodes of bliss from the enclaves of the everlasting dead. The assignment was a tricky one, with only a marginal hope of timely success, *viz.*, to rehabilitate Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. Blackman was astute enough — foresightful enough, actually — to surmise that the Lenin case required an envoy with Bentham's unique qualifications, that is to say, those of a mummy with some background in materialist philosophy, a degree of kindness and a mind sharpened in the dialectical swordplay of logical disputation. Blackman also realized the potential usefulness of Bentham's eccentric sense of humor, something that Lenin, alive or everlastingly dead, is in sore need of. Lenin was not dead yet, nor even in Russia, but the tumblers for revolution and other weirdnesses were falling into place, and Blackman knew that it was time to set the wheels — if the reader will excuse the mixed metaphors — of cosmogenesis in motion.

The Right Reverend Doctor Blackman found his creature exactly where he expected to find him: behind a plate glass shield in a mahogany display cabinet at the end of the South Cloisters of the main building, University College London. The "Auto-Icon" as it was cleverly self-christened by the jesting philosopher, is the preserved skeleton of the erstwhile DNA-activated Bentham, and was being dusted by one of the College's medical students at the time of Mr. Blackman's approach. Said student, chosen by the Council for some important work regarding a tangential project, was already well versed in the importance and grandeur of the body feline. He did not say "Shoo kitty!" or any such other impudent balderdash, but merely withdrew respectfully so that the Right Reverend Doctor Blackman and the philosopher's relic could conduct their conference in private. The cat addressed the student with his eyes: "Thank you, Mr. Bernole, that will be all for now."

Bentham's relic is dressed in the Mobile Incarnate's habitual attire — ankle-length yellow trousers, gloves, ruffled shirt-front, jacket and undervest. It sits in his deceased progenitor's chair, behind a little table spread with his sect's Board of Green Cloth. The Auto-Icon even sports its former walking stick, the beloved 'Dapple,' the ferule crossed under the tow-padded right leg, its crook hooked over the left knee. But alas, the philosopher's mummified head rests not under his wide-brimmed, high-crowned hat. The preserved sconce, prepared by Bentham's friend, Dr. Southwood Smith, lacked

expression and, as the doctor himself confessed in his letter to William Munk of 14 June 1857, “would not do for exhibition.” Although the head was “rendered as hard as the skulls of New Zealanders”, Dr. Smith’s immortalization methods — “drawing away the fluids by placing it under an air pump over sulfuric acid” — proved inadequate. Even fitted with glass eyes, it could not serve the Dr.’s intention to correct the ignorant “misconception” that “the human body when dissected instead of being an object of disgust is as much more beautiful than any other piece of mechanism as it is more curious and wonderful.” (The tale of the noggin, which became an object of ridicule and merriment, even serving as some undergraduate wags’ football on the quadrangle, is yet another sad addition to the annals of the everlasting dead, whose mummies have always suffered scorn and veneration in more or less equal doses.) To mitigate, if not altogether correct, the head fiasco, the Auto-Icon was surmounted by a wax semblable fashioned by the distinguished French medico turned anatomical artist, Dr. Jacque Talrich. It would not be the first nor the last time in Earth-Vector history that the loss of a human head or brain would prove to be an unexpected boon to the entity in question. And so it was in the case of Jeremy Bentham. The paraffin substitution turned out to be a happy one, insofar as the likeness was held to be so perfect that the Auto-Icon’s bosom friend, the imminent Lord Brougham, exclaimed upon viewing it: “it seems as if alive!” Well, it is alive, as the Right Reverend Doctor Blackman, the cat, is well aware of, but not in any way that Lord Brougham might have imagined.

Auto-Icon (excitedly): Mr. Blackman, how very good of you to come!

R.R.D.B (huffily): That’s the ‘*Right Reverend Doctor* Blackman’ to you, Sir.

Auto-Icon (shamefacedly): Yes, yes, quite right. But how are you, Reverend, it’s been ages!

R.R.D.B. (business-like): This isn’t a social call, Jeremy. We have a job for you.

Auto-Icon (stuttering): Well, hmmm, I mean, uh, I don’t know, my, eh, hedonic calculus is a tad rusty and I’m awfully busy here, what with the . . .

R.R.D.B. (sarcastically): College Council meetings? Pleeeze! ‘Jeremy Bethan, present, but not voting.’ I’ve read the minutes. They’re humoring the cabinet. This is real work.

Auto-Icon (with mock-humility); Well really, I’m flattered. I didn’t know that you so valued my competence.

R.R.D.B. (with raised eye-whiskers, and tired voice): “I don’t. But you have some special qualifications. I know, because I put them there.”

Auto-Icon (in a crisp mock-military manner): “I am at your service, Reverend.”

R.R.D.B (resignedly, then with focus): Let’s hope. The deal is this. We need you to try to rehabilitate Lenin. He’s going to be mummified and stuck in the interstice.

Long pause, then the Auto-Icon (cluelessly): Who's Lenin?

R.R.D.B.(efficiently) An apostate that the Council needs to put in check. It's all in the dossier.

Auto-Icon (hesitantly): What's a dossier?

R.R.D.B (tersely): The memoranda, the written notes. (He materializes the file on the Auto-Icon's knee, slipped under Dapple's crook.)

The Auto-Icon thumbs through the file, and looks disconcerted.

R.R.D.B. (exasperated): Now what?

Auto-Icon (eyes downcast, left toe sweeping back and forth before the right one, cutting an arc through the dust on the cabinet floor): Uhhhh . . .what's an interstice?

The Right Reverend Doctor Blackman cocks his whiskers forward in that cat-gesture for which a clumsy human equivalent might be a shrug and a sigh, then says to himself, 'these humans, dumber than dogs or mice.'

Eggs-actly

There are eggs and there are eggs. There are words of the moon and there is the word that is the moon. With the hermit's revelation, Grace gathered her personal self and moved into the selfless realm. The war, Russia, her former career as a dancer, all those fragments of the personal, both large and small, were folded unobtrusively back into the private reality which had emanated them. The impersonal had dawned. A large whiteness tinged with sapphire spun in the center of her vision. This was the "carrying power." Whatever had happened in the heart, whatever was happening or was going to happen, however sweet or bitter to the senses and to the creaking apparatus of the physical body, these were things that could touch and be touched, things that could wed the inner and outer breaths. But this new place — which obliterated the very idea of placeness — was a realm beyond breath, where in and out were superfluous diffusions at the forever-blurred circumference of a perfectly centralized sphere of energy. Here, neither discipline nor nature mattered. Here, nothing mattered. Not because nothing existed, but because matter — this forest of feathered and unfeathered inhuman and human disguises — was exposed as an effusive delusion. It was nothing more than the lingering pink dawn moon that kept changing in response to external forces, the magnet of tides which were themselves entrained by the magnets of celestial bodies. But here, for Grace, in this moment, was a moon, not in the sky, but of it, a moon of psychical reality from whose lambent throne Grace could witness the speculum in which the whole of physical reality was reflected. This was the hermit's realm — this being who collected the diaspora of chickens, whose wild domain was littered with eggs, each one of which gestated in its yoke a new and hitherto unfathomable dimension of being. The chickens all stopped for a moment from their scratching and preening, clucking and squabbling,

and together, in unison, knowingly looked at her. Their eyes, alert, sentient with the sentience of forests and fields and passing nights and days, said: “To pick up an egg is to pick up a world. To pick up an egg is to speak the word. It is to live in the womb of the space which gestates stars.” In an instant the spell was dissolved, or was it? The chickens resumed their endless cachinnations of survival, as if to add as postscript, “Ah, but why quibble, where we are, where you are now, the universe and its stars do not exist. Only the maker of stars exists, the egg of space, awake in its infinite shell.”

Oh, yes, we have all heard them from childhood, their truths constituting a kind of foundation of fantasy, which makes the cultural fantasy bearable. “Mommy, Daddy, tell me a story,” and so the tale begins in which animals speak, in which wisdom is no longer hidden in the professor’s or the priest’s or scientist’s book, in which a certain kind of story, like a mirror in a peculiar egg, stands in the child’s mind, reflecting magical creatures — ballerinas in costume, humans disguised in a forest that cannot be strictly confined to Russia or Poland or Lithuania. See how the child’s eyes grow wide at the critical nexus of the story where the mountain slopes off into sleep and dream, where the adult’s voice, itself unbelieving, still inculcates belief with the strong medicine of parental power. “Here” says the voice that we once trusted or longed to trust, just before sleep pulled us beneath its cozy undulations, “here is the mystery waiting to unfold. Here is Grace at the center with the hermit. And here is the motley wisdom of hundreds of birds.”

The child is asleep now, and the adult closes the book and places it on the nightstand. “But wait,” says the parent, the mother or the father, the one so damaged by the experts’ explications, “what are Old Believers and Orthodox archimandrites doing tramping around in this neck of the woods — Roman Catholics maybe, perhaps Lutherans, maybe a wayward Bogomil or Calvinist, maybe a Bolshevik or two, but chickens and hermits and Orthodox schismatics? Isn’t this arrangement of words beginning to seem like the cheapest stage craft, played out, not for its historical veracity, but only to wring the reader’s heart with shameless dramatic effects?”

Sit down, then, in the chair where you often doze after the children are asleep, and listen to what this authority has to say. He will be standing in his vestments or in his academic gowns or in his labcoat with his miter or his mortarboard on his head. He will appear on a dais, behind a lectern, in a lab, or in an office paneled with old wood and lined with shelves of law books. Perhaps a flag that you revere will be standing near him, limp on its golden pole, a golden eagle surmounting its imperious staff. He will read with a deep and certain voice from a text that is reeking with authority. As you begin to drift off to sleep, you will hear him clearing his throat, his venerable face, bearded or smooth according to the customs of the times, blurring behind its thick and frosted spectacles, and you will hear, as your breath becomes deeper, more regular, the treacherous honey of his speech.

“We must understand that the world is a stranger place than we can suppose, and that its history is the history of bizarre juxtapositions of space and time. Like the Tsar in 1916, the Reason is a verbose, but an ineffectual autocrat, fluent in many languages, truthful in

none. When His word goes forth on timelines and on maps, the mind inside the egg will see these things as facts. ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK!
”

Herr Professor, Herr Doktor, Paterfamilias will cover the blackboard behind him with hoards of symbols, glyphs, letters — the resistant chalk striking hard against the board, clicking, squeaking, sometimes snapping off in the fury of the onslaught. Landscapes made ragged by fire, explosions, drought, flood, exploitation, neglect will pour out of your head and then, then, then across these wounds and bones of earth, you will see the refugees. Ah, how pitiful they are, and how numerous! These dispossessed, these stragglers, these stranniki! The wobbling wheels of their old wooden carts will be drawn by cattle too bony to ever consider eating, bovine sinews that will be straining to pull the wanderers through the glutinous mud of ever-weeping roads. The children will be holding the chickens in their arms or driving sheep which plod knee deep in sorrow and the women will be giving dry suck to children whose large eyes are staring into the vast pale light of the sky as if they already saw starvation there. They will be moving, this hoard of families, like figures in a silent film played on a projector not quite designed for the speed of their departure, jerking from too fast to too slow in a black-shadowed light that always flickers and threatens to flicker out. The music will play some old Jewish dirge, perhaps spun out with a single violin, and after its strings have sufficiently exposed your ears to grief, voices will enter that sing in wordless moans. These harmonies will be dripping with the injustices of ages. And half asleep, you will fitfully half rise half turn in your chair, and look to the lecturer for the balm of an official explanation. Your eyes will be pleading now for that story which will allow you to settle back into the comfort of your life — you will be listening for words that will permit you to drift back to sleep. The official spokesman will be agitated and the words that you had hoped would bring you peace will be curiously ominous, yet paralyzing. You will want to awaken, but will you be able to?

“Fact: The persecutions of the Old Believers has scattered their hives and created a diaspora of monks. Fact: the murderous stalemate on the Eastern Front and the breakdown of discipline of the Russian armies has created a diaspora of soldiers. Fact: The chaos of the war and the disintegration of the Tsar’s regime has created a diaspora of revolutionaries. Fact: Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, Social Democrats, Bundists, Conspirators, Agent Provocateurs, Anarchists all swarm the cities and infect the hinterlands. Fact: the Jews have escaped the Settlement of the Pale. Do you not see how these animals, these sheep, these pigs, these goats these asses, these horse’s asses, these geese, these farmyard cluckers, these chickens subvert the Autocracy and the Holy Mission of Holy Mother Russia. ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK!

The vestments will have disappeared, the academic robes will have been transformed, the white labcoat will have turned black. The one upon the dais, behind the lectern will be in the streets now with many of his ilk, they will be bearing truncheons, they will be dragging shop keepers out of their shops, they will have nooses and placards and slogans
... .

Fact: The Russian Assembly, the Union of the Russian People, the Union of Russian Men, the Russian Monarchist Union, The Society for the Active Struggle Against Revolution and Anarchy, the Union of the Archangel Michael have banded together hundreds upon hundreds who have raised the black hand of retribution against the Jews, against the Revolutionists, against the ritual butchers of Christian Children, against the German influence infiltrating the Court, against the blackboard where the holy white chalk slashes fact after fact after fact. ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK!

You will be trapped in your chair when they come for you, these agents of officialdom, the Okhura, the KGB, the FBI, the questioners with their questions: "Isn't it a fact that you slept fitfully on night of September 10th? When did you check this book out of the library? We can prove that your fingerprints are on this torn lottery ticket. Why didn't you eat meat at the patriotic festivals? You have been reported looking at the moon and admiring cats. You admit, then, that you opened your hand to catch the falling rain, and that once as a child you failed to venerate the flag. We know that you whispered clandestine imprecations against the logic of war, and questioned the sanctity of compound interest. Don't try to deny it, Sir. Madam, your obloquy has militated against retrogression. You failed to buy brand names. You once spoke the word "proletariat" aloud to your mirror. You accused our icons of being petrified relics. Do you see this egg? Isn't it the truth, Sir, Madam, that you once marveled at the mysteries of the cosmos? Are you going to sit there and deny that you remain unimpressed by the nightly appearance of stars? Admit it: you have been betrayed by the facts. ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK!

The face of Herr Professor, Herr Doktor, Paterfamilias, the Scientist, the Accuser, the representative of the Union of the Archangel Michael will come close to your face. His eyes will be like bits of rotten wood. His cheeks will be like old cheese glowing with bacterial iridescence. His ears will grow pointed and long in the half-light, his breath will exude the sugar of eaten children. You will try to fix his face in your memory: this must be someone you know, the father that turned his back on you as you reached out to take his hand, the mother that turned cold in the heat of your need. But the features will start to melt, their identity on the run. And won't the river look odd then, the Neimen, as it runs brown and darkening in the cold, like something told in fairy tails of horses and the blood jumping on the rump of the mare see how it runs the old man's toes in the cold naked not running through the woods now as fast as you can run run run came the Cossacks loud horses running through the leaves and wisps of crinkley beardhair like wiry fairy threads cut with the hack hack hack of a sword in the trees burning run the tides of the North Sea run the villages in the fairy light like households with legs on the run and Jews on the run and the faun in the afternoon it was with the music of Debussy that would not stop flic-flac flic flac flic flac flic ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! and the sheep on the sheeppath unlocked by chanting depart ye monsters from this servant of God go out of his bones out of his strength out of his veins and arteries Oh the blood was on the run out of his joints and cartilages out of his willful head out of his sharp eyes riverrun past Eve and Adam's out of his ruddy face run out of

his toiling hands Oh don't touch me father run run out of his swift feet on the run out of all the inner parts on the run go over to the mosses run to the marshes run to the stagnant swamps run let the key and lock be on my run words run from swerve of shore to bend of bay I must tell you Our little Grace Fydorovna had a small part as the "Bread Crumb Fairy" and she quite outshone the much fawned-over Carlotta Brianza's "Aurora" the dawn was pink and it made the other colors run brings us by a commodius recirculation back to think that our liaison created such an angel! run but I digress run during the entr'acte who should present himself at Our box but the Tsar's illustrious uncle himself Grand Duke Nicholas Nicoloeivitch and with him the venerable author our own Count ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! That face is forever large forever pressing nearer forever runing runing runing its mouth with fact: Fact: you feel cold. Fact: a great calamity is rapidly approaching. Fact: the Russian winter's ensuing frigid chaos is pursuing a great diaspora of leaves. Fact: the displacement of focus in a ballerina has created a diaspora of reason. Fact: the insanity of reality makes the unreal real, creating a diaspora of facts. ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK! ACK!

At dawn, light needled through the trees, slipped through the wide chinks of the hut's logs, and faintly crimsoned the stretched bull bladder. She opened her eyes, and went out blinking into the light. It was pink. Pink dew jeweled the ground and jeweled too the pink chickens, feathers and eggs, which were everywhere. Grace could feel her heart beating as if newly awakened.

Individuation

If there is, in the slovenly arrangements
Of nature, and in the yet more slovenly
Arrangements of culture, an imposition
Of beauty, a style imposed by discipline,
As say, a choreographer of birds,
A designer for the sounds of human motion,
Must she be hidden in the roiling seasons,
Never on stage, but a force that sets the stage,
As the stage of actions is set by the cause of love?

Out of the dreaming chaos of night's wings,
The dancers stream into the streaming light.
One dancer dances free from this bright mass.
She is the one arranging, the one deciding,
Her beauty forces order on the rest.

2/28/01 Wednesday's Rock, Grace Maryanka
Closing time: 9:43 p.m., C.S.T.

The rift between dreams and reality causes no harm if only the person dreaming believes seriously in his dream, if he attentively observes life, compares his

observations with his castles in the air, and if, generally speaking, he works conscientiously for the achievement of his fantasies. If there is some connection between dreams and life then all is well.

Dmitry Ivanovich Pisarev
Blunders of Immature Thinking

Of this kind of dreaming, there is unfortunately too little in our movement.

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin
What Is To Be Done?

Materialist Controversies

Although walking with a stick, Lenin could see at a glance that the old man accompanying him was more than spry enough, and relied upon the article for something besides physical support. He used it to move twigs or other obstacles from their path, to reach overhead and bend aside the lower hanging branches, or to stab at the air in order to tendentiously skewer some philosophical point. The woods they were moving through were rather dense, the pre-dawn light dim, misty, and gray, and try as he might, Lenin could not remember how he had arrived here, or who this garrulous old geezer was who seemed to have some opinion, and a very revisionist opinion at that, on everything under the not yet risen sun. The Commissar was growing angrier and angrier, and was about to blurt out some remonstrance when a sharp branch sprang up and ripped a gapping tear in the old man's yellow pants. Lenin winced at the sound and the overt physicality of the sudden wounding. He expected to see a gush of hot blood pour out, and was feeling a bit giddy in anticipation of it, when, to his utter astonishment, nothing much happened at all. Or rather, what happened seemed so strange that his mind could not quite register the product of his senses. Some kind of towing or stuffing began to crumble out of the tear, and the old man, seemingly oblivious as to what had happened or what was happening to him, unfazed, continued with his tiresome dialectics.

“Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. In words a man may pretend to abjure their empire, but in reality he will remain subject to it all the while. The principle of utility recognizes this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and of law. Systems which attempt to question it deal in sounds instead of sense, in caprice instead of reason, in darkness instead of light . . .”

“What the devil are you blathering on about man! Your leg is torn open and you're coming apart at the seams!

“Oh, yes, quite right. But ‘tis no matter,” and with that the old man took the tip of the walking stick, and worked the towing back into the tear, hardly missing a step in his pace, or a beat in his tedious exposition.

“Circumstances to be taken into the account in estimating the value of a pleasure or pain considered with reference to a single person, and by itself. To a person considered by himself, the value of a pleasure or pain considered by itself, will be greater or less, according to the six following circumstances, viz, 1) its intensity, 2) its duration, 3) its certainty or uncertainty, 4) its propinquity or remoteness, 5) its fecundity, and 6) its purity. Considered in reference to a number of persons, to these six, we may add one other, to wit, 7) its extent; that is, the number of persons to whom it extends, or (in other words) who are affected by it . . .”

By this time, Lenin was both confused and incensed, and was about to grab the annoying, cavorting stick and knock the rest of the stuffings out of this mysterious and tedious reactionary when the old man stopped suddenly, looked down to his antique shod feet and pointed the tip of his cane to an extraordinary sight, to wit, an egg. Lenin then realized that this egg, although it was the first one he had noticed, was one of thousands of others that were lying all over the leaves as if some rain had gently deposited them unbroken from the cloudy feathers of a vast celestial chicken. The old man brought the tip of the cane up to his pursed lips and raised his eyebrows, indicating that they should be silent. Now a strange sound began slowly to rise around them, the sound of a multitude of chickens, muffled by the baffles of the thickset trees, but definitely growing as they tiptoed towards the source. With the eggs and the clucking and such came also the sight of chickens, hundreds, if not thousands of them, on the ground, and even perched in the lower branches of the goldenleaved trees. Lenin, for an instant, forgot about his annoyance and confusion, and was silenced by the wonder of his surroundings. He started to speak, but the old bourgeois flunkey shushed him, and so the Commissar continued in a whisper . . . “where are we?” To which the old man replied. “I believe in Russia, or in a place very like Russia . . .” Then Lenin asked, “What are we doing here?” But the old man, raising his stick in the direction of a dark wooden hovel, merely said, “sshhh!” and “Watch!”

The gray mists began brightening, imperceptibly at first, then the luminance accelerated with a subtle vigor, until the forest and all its denizens, suddenly, without Lenin or his companion realizing exactly how, were saturated in the most elegant diaphanes of light, a light, in fact, that was somehow more than itself, a sentience, if one could call it that, a sagacious entity that whispered *beauty*, that whispered *exaltation*, that whispered *peace*. One might refer to it as red, the blood of dawn, for it was that intense, but its intensity admitted to no harshness. It was pink, a pink light, then, and it needled through the trees, and soaked the little black wooden hovel, and made it magical. This magical hue jeweled the dewy ground and jeweled too the chickens, the feathers among the fallen leaves, the eggs — the snow of eggs — which were ubiquitous and perfect, pink-perfect in perfect pink light. Vladimir Ilyich could feel his heart beating as if newly awakened. Perhaps now he was free. Everything was sweetened by the pink light. But as the sun climbed, not everything was as it seemed to be. The chickens rose from their roosts and began a hullabaloo of searching, scratching and calling. They turned over leaves, found grubs,

tugged at unwilling worms. A slightly built Russian cavalry officer came out of the low, black hut and into the splendid light. And then, stooping, there followed a tall hermit, roughclad in monk's garb. These two stood for awhile, silent among the chickens, and Lenin and his companion withdrew, crouching behind the muscular bole of a tree. The old man turned to Lenin and said "be careful that our shadows do not give us away." Then Lenin queried, "Why are we hiding?" To which the old man responded, "sshhh. Watch. Listen." Listener, watcher, these were the roles of a lowly attendant, and ones that Vladimir Ilyich richly despised, but he turned his attention to the two figures who had just immersed from the hovel. In the midst of these hundreds of obstreperous chickens, the hermit, not exactly speaking to the officer, but speaking near him, addressing, instead, or in addition to him, the strange pink light, the cacophony of fowl, the solemn columns of the ancient trees. Lenin was growing excited, for although he could not quite place the identity of the speaker, he felt a revulsion that made him want to attack. But the old man tapped him into silence with the walking stick, and together they heard, distinctly, the lone, low human voice, amidst all of these inhuman ones. It said, "You are not a Russian cavalry officer." The slightly built officer froze. "You are Grace Maryanka, the *prima ballerina assoluta* of the *Ballets Russes*."

Lenin was on the verge of rushing out from behind the tree, but he was restrained by the crook of Dapple, as the old man had hooked it under the tail of the Commissar's topcoat and into the waist band of his pinstriped trousers. Lenin slipped in the wet leaves, and was dragged back into hiding by the surprisingly strong grip of the old man, who placed his hand over the revolutionary's mouth with enough force to command silence. Then, the old man unhooked the stick and deftly flicked Lenin's fallen bowler out of sight behind the tree. If the two figures who had immersed from the hut had heard the scuffling, they showed no awareness of it, and the hermit, taking a few steps forward, beyond the stupefied and betrayed cavalry officer, began, like an actor approaching the footlights for his soliloquy, to assume a thespian's attitude for a thespian's speech. This speech was not so much addressed to "Grace," but to the spirit of the place and time, that unseen, but enveloping presence to whom he seemed to need to explain himself.

"Maybe it is the smells that I remember the most, the impossibly sumptuous sheaves of lilacs and roses, sprays as large as carriages decorating the state rooms at Tsarskoe-Selo — Easter, when the Emperor's entire entourage would gather for the traditional greeting. Splendor such as this is not the creation of one man, or even the creation to honor one man, but is, I think, the expression of an entire nation's character, its aspirations for heaven brought, at least in this one time, in this one place, to nest upon the Earth, to alight in a place where it could be rendered tangible to the senses, where it could conjure a foretaste, if possible, of paradise. What a beautiful parade of Old Russia's dignity in service: the priests and cantors with their gold-braided crimson caftans, the gardeners with baskets heaping with fruits and flowers, the grand Furriers with their white stockings and vermilion uniforms. How splendid the scarlet of the ecclesiastics! How wonderful the couriers in their black hats crowned with ostrich plumes! And the ethnic subjects in their traditional costumes, the Arabs in their turbans and oriental shawls, the butlers, the cooks, the scullions, all in their proper places and all in their appropriate attires!"

Then a strange thing happened in the pink light of the woods, the hermit's words began to actually transform the scene, and Lenin and the old man, could not only hear the descriptive words, but see, smell, taste, feel the very procession being described. There was the Master of the Horse, and all the officers of the equitation, and there the Italian halberdier, adorned in his elk-skin breeches and his gold embroidered white jacket. All these lackeys were strutting in procession, their varnished boots, medals and oiled hair catching the dazzling points of the thousands of crystals in the chandeliers. The coachmen passed in their long wadded greatcoats, the pleated backs crisscrossing in harmony to the solemn music. So many silken scarves, so many luxurious furs, so many round heads bowed in supplication! The huntsmen, the Imperial beaters, the police and all the visitors — all subjects of the divine Autocrat, all come together to proffer their groveling service! There were hundreds and hundreds of them, so many that their procession destroyed in passing the waking hours of two illustrious days!

Now the hermit turned to the disguised dancer for the first time, as if he had suddenly realized that his audience was not only the trees and the birds, but also included this paralyzed human being. She was staring at him, as was Lenin, and perhaps, like Lenin, she too was trying to convince herself that she had not gone totally mad, and that this rustic personage was something, someone, who had once inhabited a world as alien from this bosky hovel as earth is from the halls of paradise. How had he discovered her name? And what was the point of his story? As Lenin watched, restrained by the old man, he did not know what to expect. Was the hermit about to bow and kiss the dancer's hand or was he poised to leap on her and tear her body to pieces, like some blood-crazed lycanthrope?

“And do you know what each one of these hundreds and hundreds of servants had come to offer their Emperor?”

The dancer shook her head, and said, although she knew the answer, every Russian knew it. “No.”

The hermit bent his tall frame to the earth and picked up one of the eggs. Then he straightened, and smiling with his white, even teeth, he held forth, between his thumb and forefinger, his humble prize.

He just stood there. Silent. The birds too went silent, as if cued by this amazing iconic gesture. Time passed. The sun rose higher in the sky and enflamed the gold leaves of the birches, which flickered and fell, more animated in their deaths than the living chickens, who sat stock still, as if in awe of their servant's performance. The hermit at last raised his eyebrows, still smiling, still obviously expecting the dancer to answer. Lenin felt a hoard of contradictory emotions careening with sharpened knives in every direction inside his heart and belly. Here was the Russia that he so despised, so wanted to destroy, but so needed to preserve in the formalin of his hatred.

At last the dancer, questioning, hesitant, proffered: “An egg?”

The hermit burst into laughter, and the chickens burst into life. “Yes! Yes! My child, an egg! Each one gave the Tsar an egg — not a hen’s egg, but an egg of porcelain, or stone, or a polished egg from the Urals. And all that time, in the midst of all that splendor, I could think of only one thing, one thing alone that ate at me with an all-consuming rancor. And do you know what that one thing was, that rancorous serpent squirming in my breast!

The dancer shook her head again, the expression on her face a mixture of amazement and horror. And Lenin, behind the tree, now sure of the speaker’s identity and why he hated him so, had to be restrained once more from launching an attack.

“I was thinking, if only I had been born before my brother, these offerings would have been mine. I — a Grand Duke — may Christ in His infinite mercy forgive me — was envious of all those eggs!” And at that, the man broke into gut-doubling laughter, as wild and as inhuman as the cachinnations of his chickens, so that once again, Lenin, and perhaps the disguised dancer as well, wondered if this lunatic were actually the Grand Duke Nicholas Nikoloievitch or some weird double, the semblable that each member of the royal family was rumored to have possessed as a prophylactic against assassination. But whatever the truth, they had all been deceived, the evangelist of fowls was no more authentic than this bizarre place and time. The Grand Duke or hermit ended his hysteria in the paroxysm of a runny cough. It was ghastly. But at last he looked up with moist eyes at his astonished guest and blurted out: “Don’t you see? For me, here, every day is Easter, and every day I am the Tsar!” Then the madman resumed his laughter, bending his tall frame forward and releasing a stream of blood on to the leaves. Alarmed, the slightly built dancer, rushed to his side, but she could not support him. Finally, the hermit’s long bones buckled and he slumped to the dewy ground, continuing to cough, until his white skin turned as vermilion as the Grand Furriers’ uniforms. Lenin stared in malice, but a malice that had, just at the edge of it, a tinge of wonder, one might almost say, of compassion. The Grand Duke’s face was livid and it seemed that at any moment the veins in his forehead might burst or his whole head explode. At last, he grew quiet, as unmoving as a stone in the gathering leaves, only his eyes glistening, only his hair and beard twitching in the breath of the dancer, as she brought her face close to the fallen aristocrat’s. She looked on him with expectation, but he had finished his dissertation now, and was not only silent, but also the enforcer of silence. For the chickens, too, had ceased all movement and clamor and sat on the ground, on the hut, or in the trees as still as carvings.

The old man and Lenin sat huddled behind their tree, mesmerized. Hours passed. The sun rose in the azure sky. The shadows were driven underground. A slight breeze stirred and combed the canopy, and the great trees creaked out a solemn and peaceful music, its notes fluttering down as the crescents of golden leaves. Then the shadows returned, blue at first, then lavender, then violet. The leaves slowly shrouded the spread-eagled body of the Grand Duke, whose breath was as shallow and raspy as his face was serene. Lenin could see that the lips of this detested oppressor were curved upward in a blissful, benevolent smile, and that his eyes, almost unblinking, were as blue and bright as the lapis of the sky. The shadows grew denser, and finally the rasping stopped. The old man

and Lenin came out from hiding and stealthily sidled up to the dancer. She did not, could not, or would not see them, and the man on the ground was stargazing. Grace knelt down. She drew her face close to the Duke's, listening intently for some whisper of breath. Suddenly the Duke's great hand shot out and grabbed her tunic. She gasped and Lenin and the old man fell back into the leaves in horror, breaking eggs, rolling about in astonishment, the old man's cane tossed into the air, to fall back and stick in the earth, upright and quivering. "Do you know what gave you away!" said the Duke, in a voice filled with thunder and mirth. "It's the uniform. That's the uniform of a Hussar. Hussar's are chosen from the small and dark. But you are small and fair!" With that a rose of blood bloomed through the Duke's white teeth, then sank back in his throat. His eyes turned milky and the chickens suddenly cried.

Surface Truth

How is it then that style came to be
Looked upon as subterfuge, an ornament
Disguising the authentic, an attribute
Hiding the truth, and not the truth itself?

In its externals, every culture makes
Fantastic references to the truth. Icons
Come out of Churches, visit the sick,
Exude miraculous powers. Soldiers march;

Chickens are eaten; dogs are kept as pets;
Sticks are placed at the crossroads of the heart.
The sun comes up and lights this intricate skin.
Everything leaps to sight, nothing is hidden.

Style is not a disguise. It is the
Authentic surface of an inward motion,
The dance of things that swarms into the eye,
Bearing that part of deathlessness that dies.