

MIRROR OF THE SOUL, by John Dewey: an extract

By the summer of 1850 Ernestine had grown increasingly concerned about her husband. For some time there had been a certain chill in their relations. The Hortense Lapp affair had not helped and is unlikely to have been the last of his infidelities. On reaching her fortieth birthday in April 1850 Ernestine may well have wondered how much longer she could retain the affections of her notoriously wayward spouse. Tyutchev for his part will have noted how the previous summer she had proposed spending several months apart from him at Ovstug. This year he had been promised a courier mission, but she had declined to accompany him abroad.⁵⁸

At the end of June he told her that Nesselrode had unexpectedly withdrawn the offer of foreign travel.⁵⁹ On 2 July she wrote to Vyazemsky that the constant state of expectation had had 'an agitating effect' on him, and that in order to 'relieve his need for a change of place' he had for two weeks been commuting back and forth on what was then Russia's only working railway, twenty miles of track connecting St Petersburg with the imperial palaces of Tsarskoye Selo and Pavlovsk. The second of these belonged to the Tsar's recently deceased younger brother Grand Duke Michael and his wife Yelena Pavlovna, a Princess of the Württemberg royal family; it also boasted a pleasure garden or so-called 'Vauxhall' and was a popular destination for trippers from the capital. Ernestine told Vyazemsky that Tyutchev had even rented a room near the station at Pavlovsk and had stayed there overnight on several occasions.⁶⁰ Any suspicions she may have had on this score are discreetly passed over in her letter. That suspicions there were is clear from Georgievsky's account, which reveals that at about this time Ernestine was concerned at her husband's amatory pursuit of certain unnamed society beauties. According to Georgievsky, she even made an effort to divert him from such worldly-wise rivals by encouraging what she saw as a fairly harmless flirtation with the young and innocent Yelena Denisyeva.⁶¹ In her letter to Vyazemsky she expressed her confident expectation that a trip to Lake Ladoga with Anna and Yelena planned by Tyutchev for the near future, followed in all probability by a visit to Moscow to see his mother, would put an end to the 'entertainment' on offer at Pavlovsk; after this 'autumn will be upon us and everything will fall back into place'.⁶²

It was a vain hope. Just two weeks later, on 15 July, Tyutchev and Yelena became lovers. We know this from a poem entitled '15 July 1865'. Never intended for publication, it commemorates the fifteenth anniversary of that 'fateful day of bliss divine/ When first into my soul she poured her being/ And breathed her very spirit into mine'.⁶³ A more immediate account of these first intimate encounters is given by a poem written at the time:

Though the sultry heat of midday
Breathes in at the open pane,
Here in this calm sanctuary,
Where deep shade and silence reign,

And aromas quick and fragrant
Roam throughout the darkened space,
Let sweet somnolence enfold you
In its gentle, dark embrace...

In one corner, never tiring,
Sings a fountain night and day,
Moistening the enchanted shadows
With unseen reviving spray...

And a love-struck poet's daydream
Seems to haunt the unlit room:
Hovering, fraught with secret passion,
Lightly in the shifting gloom...⁶⁴

Composed already in July 1850, this is now generally accepted as one of the earliest items in the remarkable 'Denisyeva cycle'. As a compellingly candid poetic diary of the affair with Yelena this 'cycle' (a convenient scholarly designation: there is no evidence that Tyutchev ever conceived of the poems as such) remains unsurpassed. Critics have variously described it as 'a novel in verse'; 'a human document, shattering in the force of its emotion'; and 'a few songs without comparison in Russian, perhaps even in world poetry'.⁶⁵ Unfortunately there is no overall agreement as to the exact contents of the cycle, even if its core components are beyond dispute. Certainly a case could be made for including — if only as a kind of prologue — 'Twins' and 'Lord, grant to him Thy consolation...'. Indeed, 'Though the sultry heat of midday...' can be read as a sequel to the second of these. The mendicant poet, his prayers apparently answered, has now been granted refuge from the midday sun in the soothing shade of the 'sanctuary'; there is even a cooling fountain nearby to mirror that glimpsed from afar in the earlier poem.

If, as seems likely, religious scruples had for some time held Yelena back from adultery, what persuaded her eventually to ignore them? A possible explanation is given by Georgievsky, to whom she later more than once expressed her firm belief that the union she and Tyutchev had embarked on was a true marriage in the eyes of God if not of man, and that this outweighed any legalistic objections. One particularly emotional affirmation of this was recorded verbatim by Georgievsky:

I am more of a wife to him than his previous wives, and no-one in the world has ever loved and valued him as I do — every sound and intonation of his voice, every expression, every line of his face, every glance and smile; I live in him completely, I am completely his, and he is mine: 'and two shall become one flesh', but he and I are one spirit. [...] Isn't that then the essence of a marriage blessed by God Himself: to love one another as I love him and he loves me, and to be as one instead of two separate individuals? Am I not then married to him, is ours not a true marriage?⁶⁶

Faced with such unshakeable conviction, neither Georgievsky nor the various priests she consulted on the subject had the heart to contradict her. Nor, apparently, did Tyutchev. Aware that a fourth marriage was forbidden by the Orthodox Church, he seems to have deliberately left her with the impression that Ernestine was his third wife. 'His previous marriage is already dissolved as a result of his having entered into a new marriage with me,' Yelena later told Georgievsky, 'and that he doesn't ask for the Church's blessing on this marriage is purely because he has already been married three times [...]. But such is the will of God, and I humbly submit to His holy volition, although not without at times bitterly lamenting my fate.'⁶⁷

Tyutchev was both flattered and alarmed by the sheer power of Yelena's love. His own initial reaction to their intimacy had been — as he guiltily recalled in a poem the following year — little more than 'pride' in his 'conquest'.⁶⁸ But if he imagined this would be just another 'fleeting passion' he had reckoned without Yelena. In her he encountered 'so deep and self-denying, so passionate and powerful a love that it engulfed his whole being too'.⁶⁹ These are the words of Georgievsky, who believed it was only by virtue of this unconditional love that she was able for so many years to retain the affections of such an 'easily enamoured and inconstant poet'.⁷⁰

In July 1850 such considerations still lay in the future. For the moment there was only the euphoria of new-found love, not to mention the excitement of clandestine assignations. On the evidence of a poem written that month, these included nocturnal boat trips on the Neva:

On the Neva

Once again a star-glow quivers,
On the rippling tide afloat;
Once more to the waves delivers
Love its enigmatic boat.

And as in a dream the vessel
Glides on between tide and star,
And two spectral forms that nestle
In the craft are borne afar.

Is it idle youth partaking
Of the night's enchantments here?
Or two blessed shades forsaking
This world for a higher sphere?

White-fledged waves so fleet and nimble,
Trackless as unbounded seas,
Shelter in your void this humble
Craft and all its mysteries!⁷¹

The journey by steamer to Lake Ladoga and the Konevets and Valaam monasteries went ahead as planned from 4 to 9 August. Anna shared a cabin and a monastery cell

with her friend Yelena, evidently unaware of what had transpired between her travelling companions.⁷² Stormy weather encountered at one point during the voyage inspired a poem ('Whipped up by a gusting sullen/ Squall, the waves grew dark and swollen./ Glinting with a leaden sheen').⁷³ The circumstances of its composition might make this seem an obvious candidate for inclusion in the 'Denisyeva cycle', but in fact it is a purely descriptive piece containing no reference to Yelena.

By September Yelena realised that she was pregnant. Despite this they managed to keep the affair secret until the following March, when the Smolny bursar came across evidence of their illicit meetings at a flat rented for the purpose near the Institute and reported this to his superiors. For Yelena's aunt Anna Dmitrievna in particular the resulting scandal could not have come at a more awkward time. It was shortly before the annual leavers' ceremony, a grand occasion customarily attended by members of the imperial family at which '*chiffres*' (diamond brooches in the shape of the Empress's monogram) were awarded to girls who had graduated with distinction. Anna Dmitrievna had been in charge of the current leavers' class for several years, in recognition of which she had been expected to receive an honour and to see her niece Yelena appointed a Maid of Honour at court. Among the leavers that year were Tyutchev's daughters Darya and Kitty and Yelena's half-sister Marie. Denisyev *père* had come up specially for the ceremony from the provinces with his second wife, and his public outburst of rage on learning of the affair only helped to give it wider currency. Anna Dmitrievna was obliged to accept retirement on a fairly generous pension and vacate her official quarters at the Institute. Yelena's fate was much harsher. Disowned by her father, who forbade her sisters any contact with her, and shunned by most of her former friends and acquaintances, she became totally dependent on Anna Dmitrievna, with whom she continued to live and who supported her financially.⁷⁴

The events of March 1851, and their devastating effect on Yelena, are recalled in one of the poems of the 'Denisyeva cycle':

That which you gave your adoration
And prayers, and cherished as divine,
Fate yielded up to desecration
By idle tongues quick to malign.

The mob broke in and violated
The shrine within your heart concealed,
And you must see, humiliated,
Its sacred mysteries revealed.

Could but the soul, serenely flying
Above the mob on wings so free,
Escape from all this world's undying
Vulgarity and bigotry!⁷⁵

Georgievsky maintains that Tyutchev had to flee abroad to escape the wrath of Yelena's father.⁷⁶ This is clearly a distortion of actual events: Tyutchev may well have

found it advisable to go into hiding for a while, but is known to have stayed in Russia throughout 1851. More credible is a related claim made by Georgievsky: that at the time 'poor Lyolya was abandoned by everyone, the first to do so being Tyutchev himself'.⁷⁷ That this indeed happened is suggested by a poem which has long puzzled scholars:

Those eyes... I loved them to distraction —
God knows, they held me in their sway!
From their dark night of wondrous passion
I could not tear my soul away.

Their gaze, impossible to fathom,
Laid bare the life within entire,
Revealing an unending chasm
Of grief and smouldering desire.

Beneath her lashes' silken glory
They brimmed with pensive, mournful life,
Like pleasure, languorously weary,
Like suffering, fraught with tragic strife.

And at such moments of rare wonder
Not once was it vouchsafed to me
To gaze unmoved upon their splendour
Or stem the tears that flowed so free.⁷⁸

Line 9 leaves us in no doubt that Tyutchev has one particular woman in mind. Editors from Chulkov on agree that in view of the poem's intense emotional charge and date of composition (before the beginning of 1852) that woman can only be Yelena; yet all are troubled by the fact that she should be referred to throughout in the past tense.⁷⁹ If Georgievsky is right and Tyutchev felt obliged or was persuaded to break off relations with Yelena after the *débâcle* of March 1851, the apparent inconsistency is resolved. Convinced that he and Yelena had parted for ever, he would quite naturally write of their passionate encounters in the past tense. In the event it would prove to be just another of his 'final farewells', no more enduring than its predecessors. They would stay together for fourteen years, during which time she would bear him two more children.

One of these, Fyodor, later claimed that Tyutchev too found himself shunned by society and the court, and that his career was blighted as a result of the affair.⁸⁰ Pigaryov has shown this to be completely untrue. There was no change in the pattern of his promotions, and he continued to be received at court and in polite circles as before.⁸¹ Although there was no doubt individual disapproval of what he had done, the unthinking double morality of the time ensured that it was the woman who had to bear the full weight of social disgrace. It was Yelena who suffered, not Tyutchev. This despite the fact — apparent even to such a sympathetic observer as Georgievsky — that if blame had to be apportioned between them, he clearly deserved the major share for

his seduction of an impressionable young woman half his age, and for making her pregnant. According to Georgievsky, he accepted as much himself.⁸² His feelings of guilt and self-reproach first came to a head in the immediate aftermath of March 1851, as is clear from a poem written at that time. This is also of interest for providing further apparent evidence of an abortive 'final farewell' (see in particular verse 5, and the phrase 'ask, and discover' in line 7):

O, how our love breeds ruination:
How we unerringly destroy
In passion's blind intoxication
Our heart's desire, our deepest joy!

When you first claimed her as your lover,
What pride that conquest roused in you!
A year's not passed... Ask, and discover
What now survives of her you knew.

The roses in her cheeks have vanished,
Her carefree smile, her gaze so clear...
All these by withering dews were banished —
By tears, hot tears that scorch and sear.

Do you recall that fateful hour
When you two first met — you and she:
Her words, her glance of magic power,
Her laughter like a child's so free?

And now? Has all been dissipated?
For how long did the vision last?
Like northern summer, a belated
And transient guest, it swiftly passed.

For her your love was retribution
Wrought by a vengeful destiny;
It stained, as with a vile pollution,
Her blameless life with infamy...

A life of bleak renunciation,
Of suffering... And when she turned
To memories for consolation,
Here too her faith and hope were spurned.

Now she has felt life's charms expire
And views the world as one apart...
The mob burst in and through the mire
Trode all the flowers of her heart.

And what is left for the retrieving,
Like ashes, from her long ordeal?
Pain, bitter pain of rage and grieving —
Pain without hope or tears to heal!

O, how our love breeds ruination!
How we unerringly destroy
In passion's blind intoxication
Our heart's desire, our deepest joy!⁸³