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Moscow as city and metaphor

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Alexander Martin

Penelope Fitzgerald?s historical novel *The Beginning of Spring*, set in Moscow in 1913 but written at the height of *perestroika*, conveys an ambivalence familiar to those of us who spent time there during the Gorbachev years. Much in the Moscow she describes is grimy and discouraging: the oppressive bureaucracy;

the ugly, derelict buildings; and, for much of the year, the gray, wet, depressing weather. But the book also gives an idea of the light that shone through the cracks in Russia?s shell: the Chekhovian charm of the ramshackle wooden houses and overgrown gardens; the churches with their golden onion domes, exuding a majestic sense of history and enduring, timeless faith; and the people themselves, approaching life with a humor and an almost mystical intensity of feeling that seemed to prevent the everyday from becoming banal. In the late 1980s as in 1913, the country was on the verge of epochal changes, and to be there meant to be a witness to history.

The Beginning of Spring expresses the *Zeitgeist* of the Gorbachev years, but it also incorporates much older images and stereotypes. It could hardly be otherwise. Penelope Fitzgerald (1916?2000) was a distinguished and talented novelist ? her fiction was awarded both the Booker Prize and the American National Book Critics fiction prize ? but she was evidently no Russia hand; at least, *The Beginning of Spring* is her only work set in that country. Much of the novel is about the Russians? sheer cultural otherness. Like many thoughtful, well-meaning Westerners trying to understand the Russians, Fitzgerald represents them as people who are exceptionally soulful, passionate, and melancholy. This is a stereotype that first appeared in Russian literature in the 19th century, and it has since become a fixture both in Russia and in the West.

How the stereotype used by Fitzgerald originated becomes clearer if one reads Laurie Manchester?s *Holy Fathers, Secular Sons*, a study of the role of secularized *popovichi* (sons of Orthodox clergymen?from *pop*, ?priest?) in the formation of the Russian intelligentsia. Russia?s high culture was long dominated by nobles who looked down on their lower-born compatriots because they lacked European culture. When commoners became more educated in the mid-19th century, and more resentful of the nobility?s snobbery and arrogance, they asserted their own moral superiority over the nobles by treating lack of cosmopolitanism as a badge of national authenticity. Manchester?s book argues that no one did more than the *popovichi* ? many of whom acquired great influence as writers, educators, scientists, journalists, or political activists ? to promote the idea that ?real? Russians should aspire to a pattern of thought and behavior rooted in the mystical spirituality of Russian Orthodoxy, not in supposedly universal notions of rationality and enlightenment modeled by West Europeans.

The ?Russian? traits espoused by Manchester?s popovichi are pervasive in *The Beginning of Spring*, and they appear all the more exotic because Fitzgerald shows us Russia through the eyes of a semi-outsider, a Russified Englishman. The central character in *The Beginning of Spring*, Frank Reid, is a husband, father of three young children, and owner of a modest printing business in Moscow. The business was founded by his parents, Britons who settled in Moscow, and Reid himself is at home in both cultures. When the story begins, his English wife Nellie has just unaccountably walked out on him and gone home to Britain, and Reid is left trying to sort through the implications ? where she has gone, whether she will come back, and what it all means for him, their children, and his own relationship with Russia. This is the novel?s central plot line, which reaches a surprising dénouement at the end that I won?t give away.

As Reid attends to his affairs, we meet a variety of other characters. This is where Fitzgerald beings the Russian stereotypes to life: there is the eccentric Anglo-Russian businessman Selwyn Crane, who writes Russian poetry about birch trees, wears a Russian peasant blouse, and tries to live by the utopian Christian precepts of Tolstoy; there is Kuriatin, the moody, theatrical merchant; Tvyordov, Reid?s employee, a compositor and erstwhile labor organizer, who approaches his craft with almost religious reverence; Lisa, the enigmatic peasant housemaid, whose sexual allure derives from her preternatural calm and serenity; Volodya, the pistol-wielding student who is either a revolutionary, a jealous lover, or both; and assorted drunken coachmen, bribe-taking police officers, and officious station masters. Restless seekers all, they resemble Russia itself, that ?magnificent and ramshackle country? (p. 177).

The novel?s characters are a study in contradiction and opacity: rebellious yet submissive, lecherous yet ascetic, corrupt but also profoundly moral. Moscow itself shares these traits. Fitzgerald was ill served by whoever advised her on language matters, because she keeps mangling the Russian words that are supposed to provide local color, but judging from my own research on tsarist Moscow, her sense of the city is spot-on. The city?s sights, sounds, and smells are described in such pungent detail that Moscow must count as a

quasi-character. Fitzgerald does a beautiful job of evoking the city in passages like this one:

?Dear, slovenly, mother Moscow, bemused with the bells of its four times forty churches, indifferently sheltering factories, whore-houses and golden domes, impeded by Greeks and Persians and bewildered villagers and seminarists straying on to the tramlines, centred on its holy citadel, but reaching outwards with a frowsty leap across the boulevards to the circle of workers? dormitories and railheads, where the monasteries still prayed, and at last to a circle of pig-sties, cabbage-patches, earth roads, earth closets, where Moscow sank back, seemingly with relief, into a village? (pp. 35-36).

Running through the whole book is the theme of ?the beginning of spring?. Perhaps Fitzgerald was thinking of Ilya Ehrenburg?s 1954 novel *The Thaw*, which provided an entire generation of Soviet readers with a metaphor for the return of freedom and hope after Stalin?s death. In Fitzgerald?s novel, the season is late March, when the snow and ice begin to melt. It is not a pretty time of year, but winter?s grip loosens at last and life comes into its own again. Fitzgerald describes how the double panes are removed from the windows, and once more the sounds of the street penetrate the interior of people?s homes. A nervous anticipation and uncertainty takes hold. Nellie has abandoned her family, but we don?t know why. Reid loves Moscow yet considers moving to England; he is attached to his business but has doubts about its long-term viability, and he understands neither Nellie?s sudden urge to leave nor his own unexpected feelings for Lisa. Selwyn Crane is spiritually torn between two conflicting sexual impulses ? free love and chastity ? and is about to pour out his heart to the world in his first book of poetry; the approach of summer also means another restless season of wandering the Russian countryside in peasant birch-bark sandals. In the wider world, meanwhile, it is 1913, and we all know what lies in store.

When Fitzgerald anthropomorphizes the city and uses human characters to embody the mood of a fateful historical moment, she is making use of time-honored literary devices. What makes these devices believable to the reader is the appeal to well-established images of Russians as soulful, brooding, oblivious to external order, and uncompromising in their quest for deeper spiritual experience. But this was no timeless Russian national stereotype; rather, it was invented in the mid 19th century.

Until the early 19th century, Westerners as well as upper-class Russians viewed the Russian Empire primarily as a quasi-colonial civilizing project that aimed to bring an amorphous mass of backward peoples and lands into the ambit of European enlightenment. The issue on which debates about Russian society turned was whether the empire?s multiethnic population was becoming enlightened, not whether there was a single, identifiable Russian ethnicity and what its essential national character might be.

All of this shifted in the second quarter of the 19th century. Educated Russians ? writers, painters, journalists, historians, musicians ? began exploring what they thought were the unique features of the Russian nation. It is at this moment in time that the cliché on which Fitzgerald relies came into being: that Russia?s exterior is harsher and more forbidding than that of Western countries because its inner core is warmer and more spiritual. Like all national stereotypes, these claims were based on observations of reality, but they were above all a protest by dissenting intellectuals against the imperial regime. The regime wanted its subjects to be obedient and rational; instead, they were now exalted as rebels and dreamers. Russia?s flat, monotonous landscapes, criticized earlier as oppressive and dreary, were found to contain a mystical beauty, and the filth and poverty of peasant villages was recast as a sign of spiritual greatness. The West ? and, by association, the tsarist regime ? was nothing but pretty appearances; ?Russia?, by contrast, was spiritual truth.

Laurie Manchester?s *Holy Fathers, Secular Sons* helps us understand how this conception of Russianness arose. It has long been known that the rise of 19th?century Russian nationalism had roots both cultural (German Romanticism, Slavophilism, liberalism) and sociological (the disillusionment of noble intellectuals, and the growth of a non-noble educated class). Manchester draws our attention to a social group whose role has traditionally not received adequate attention ? the clergy, or rather, their sons.

The fact that scholars studying the sociology of Russian intellectual history have focused so much more on nobles than on the clergy is, come to think about it, surprising, because clergy and *popovichi* formed a

crucial reservoir from which educated laypeople ? including many who were technically noble ? were recruited. The government needed more officials than the nobility could supply, while the clergy had more educated sons than could be placed in Orthodox parishes, so there was a steady flow of *popovichi* out of the clergy and into the state service (where many were ennobled) and other literate professions. Much of Russia?s educated population therefore had roots in the clerical milieu.

Laurie Manchester shows, based on a study of a hundreds of *popovich* memoirs, that *popovichi* all through the 19th century shared a similar outlook on life. This outlook sharply differentiated them from the group they viewed as their chief rival and with whom they were locked in a relationship of profound mutual dislike and disdain ? the nobility. Both considered themselves the natural leaders and moral enlighteners of the nation. The *popovichi*, born among the common people and raised to serve in local parishes, prided themselves on being ?real? Russians, unlike the Europeanized nobility. Nobles were torn between a European and a Russian self, and some felt like foreigners among the Russian people or harbored guilt feelings toward the peasantry; *popovichi* considered themselves part of the Russian populace and hence experienced none of these tensions. Nobles aspired to a lifestyle of politeness and refinement; *popovichi* took pride in having grown up in poverty and living an ascetic life.

One source of the *popovichi*?s powerful sense of corporate identity, Manchester argues, was their clerical upbringing. Orthodox parish clergy were almost always sons of clergymen and married to daughters of clergymen, so they were a caste-like group, isolated from other classes and imbued with a sense of their own saintly mission in a society whose elites were corrupted by sin and estranged from Russia?s sacred traditions. The nobles, they felt, were haughty, spoiled by material luxury, and estranged from Russia by their cultural cosmopolitanism. The merchants were alienated from their nation by the greed that inhered in their occupation. Only the clergy, they felt, aspired to a life of godliness, service to the people, and devotion to Russia?s true national essence.

This sense of the clergy?s special calling was reinforced by the experience of quasi-martyrdom at the bursa, as the schools of the Orthodox Church were colloquially known. The bursa system resembled secular secondary schools in aiming to provide a sophisticated humanistic education, but otherwise it was like no other school system in Russia. Attendance was compulsory, and unlike most schools, it was for one social estate only: it was staffed by clergymen and designed exclusively for sons of the clergy, so depending on his level of ambition and talent, a young man could go from primary all the way to post-secondary schooling without ever coming into contact with lay teachers, administrators, or classmates. Lay schools, especially those for the nobility, placed great emphasis on neatness, order, and polished manners. By contrast, the bursa was notorious for its filthy and decrepit buildings, the squalid living conditions of its students, and the coarseness with which obedience to authority was enforced; the sadistic violence of corporal punishments at the bursa was legendary even in lay society.

Manchester argues that across generations, the experience of the bursa united *popovichi* entering lay professions with each other and with their peers who remained in the clergy, and isolated them from the other elements of society. The bursa formed memories that no other class shared. Leaving home for the bursa was universally remembered as a traumatic break with the innocence of childhood. Gazing back across that fateful divide, *popovichi* remembered their earlier family life with an intensity of affection that reinforced the bonds of loyalty uniting them with the clergy. They recalled their fathers as bearers of a saintly, quintessentially Russian masculinity, and their families as models of love and harmony. Although there was affection for particular teachers and comrades at the bursa, the bursa itself was recalled as a place of suffering. Other classes, especially the nobles, might pity or despise the *popovichi* as people degraded by an abusive education ? as late as the 1930s, dictionaries still defined *seminarskii* (the adjective derived from ?seminary?) as meaning ?coarse, ill-bred? ? but *popovichi* themselves regarded the horror of the bursa as a trial by fire that made them into saintly martyrs and thus uniquely qualified as moral leaders of the nation.

Manchester argues that the *popovichi* were the principal source of the distinctive, at times paradoxical ethos that educated contemporaries as well as historians have generally attributed to the 19th?century Russian intelligentsia. Both groups hated both the nobility and capitalism. They condemned leisure, privilege, and

wealth, and embraced a life that was demonstratively austere and anti-materialistic. They felt a deep bond with the peasantry but expected to be acknowledged as its leaders. They were unsparing in their social and political criticism, but their sense of embodying the nation?s indivisible essence made them uncomfortable with dissent and disagreement. All of these were attitudes common both to the intelligentsia and to the *popovichi*, and they underlie the outlook of Selwyn Crane and the radical student Volodya in Fitzgerald?s *The Beginning of Spring*, just as the notion of an all-pervading, mystical Russian essence shapes Fitzgerald?s description of Moscow itself.

Holy Fathers, Secular Sons places this transformation of *popovichi* into intelligentsia in a dual explanatory framework. First, Manchester argues ? persuasively, I find ? that much in the *popovich* mentality represented an adaptation of the clergy?s Orthodox religiosity. They carried on, in secularized form, the clergy?s belief that it alone represented both moral integrity and true Russianness, and that the peasantry was not corrupted by sin as the nobles and merchants were. Secularizing the notion of individual salvation and of a future messianic redemption of humanity, they refused to separate the political from the personal, instead insisting that the struggle for change in the sociopolitical order be accompanied by tireless efforts at moral and spiritual self-improvement.

Aside from the secularization of religious sensibilities, the other concept that Manchester uses to frame her analysis is the notion of ?modern selfhood?. Modern selves, she argues, are people who think critically and believe that they can control their own lives and surroundings; variations of this definition are repeated throughout the book (e.g. pp. 5, 115, 135, 153, 214). The argument that the *popovichi* were pioneers in the development of modern selfhood in Russia is plausible and makes intuitive sense, but it does seem a bit conjectural. The *popovichi* made autonomous career choices, but might not their clerical ancestors have done the same had the social order permitted it? Some *popovichi* wrote memoirs and kept diaries in which they constructed a sense of their own selves ? but most did not do these things, and might their ancestors not have done so if their culture had encouraged this particular form of self-expression? A systematic exploration of the older sense of self might have shed light on these questions, but the book does not attempt it, and perhaps the available sources may not allow it.

I argued earlier that Manchester?s book could be read as a study of the origin of the national stereotypes that underlie Fitzgerald?s novel. On one crucial point, however, the two diverge. Fitzgerald?s characters are driven by a spiritual quest, but they are eccentric, naïve, passive people, and in Moscow in March 1913, they drift helplessly into the maelstrom of the 20th century. By contrast, the *popovichi* had a sense of destiny that made them vigorous participants in modern Russian history ? the sorts of people who helped build the new Soviet order after 1917, and whose descendants helped bring it down in Fitzgerald?s own time.

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