The Slave Soul of Russia

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Masochism in Russian Literature

Dmitrii Merezhkovskii once observed that the best Russian writers, however rebellious they may have been in their youth, repented. They ended up preaching smirenie to their readers. Pushkin turned away from his Decembrist friends to write an ode to Nicholas I, Gogol blessed Russian serfdom, Dostoevsky declared, “Humble thyself, proud man! [Smiris’, gordyi chelovek!]” in his famous Pushkin speech, Tolstoy advocated “nonresistance to evil,” and so on. The only exception, according to Merezhkovskii, was Lermontov.¹ Perhaps that was because Lermontov died so young.

Selected Masochistic Characters

Whether or not Russian writers themselves were advocates of moral masochism, it may truly be said that Russian literature is filled with characters who welcome their unhappy fate—suffering, punishment, humiliation, even death. But literary scholars have not paid much attention to masochistic literary characters as a category. One has to go to the chapter on Russian fiction in Nadejda Gorodetzky’s opinionated theological treatise The Humiliated Christ in Modern Russian Thought (1973 [1938]) to find something like a survey.² Gorodetzky’s book is not psychoanalytic at all. But her theme—the humiliated Christ—draws her precisely to characters who are interesting for the psychoanalytic scholar of masochism. Not all masochists in Russian literature are Christian, of course, but all truly Christian characters are moral masochists.

Also very helpful is Margaret Ziolkowski’s Hagiography and Mod-
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**ern Russian Literature**, a literarily more sophisticated study which pays particular attention to “kenotic characters” in nineteenth-century Russian fiction. In her insightful discussions of characters in the fiction of Dostoevsky, Leskov, Uspenskii, and others Ziolkowski often uses the term “kenoticism” in a way that psychoanalysts would immediately recognize as meaning moral masochism.

Here I wish merely to point to some of the more obviously masochistic characters in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian fiction, without repeating too much of what the theologically oriented scholars have said already.

Turgenev’s peasants, for example, are often very humble and accepting of their sad fate, and they usually explain their situation in Christian terms. “The beginning of faith is self-abasement, humiliation,” says the heroine of “A Strange Story.” Beautiful Lukeria in “The Living Relic,” paralyzed by a fall from a porch, accepts her lot wholeheartedly and asks no favors from God: “Why should I worry the Lord God? What can I ask of Him? He knows better than I do what I need. He has sent me a cross which signifies that He loves me.” Gorodetzky cites numerous other instances of this kind of thinking from Turgenev. Each of Turgenev’s masochistic characters is unique, however, and many of them constitute complex and fascinating subjects for potential psychoanalytic case histories.

Tolstoy too depicted many Christian sufferers. One thinks of the rich merchant in “God Sees the Truth but Waits” who is falsely accused of murder and is sent to Siberia, where he learns to accept his sad fate with Christian humility and gratitude, even after the true murderer has been found. Or there is the monk Sergii who, when sexually aroused by the presence of a seductive woman in his cell, chops off one of his own fingers with an axe (later he becomes a wandering beggar with no name other than “slave of God”). Platon Karataev, the famous peasant in *War and Peace*, sits beneath a birch tree with a look of joyful solemnity on his face as he waits for a French soldier to shoot him (cf. Vasilii Shukshin’s character Egor in *Snowball Berry Red*, who obligingly permits a gang leader to shoot him in a grove of his beloved birches).

There are some not particularly Christian masochists in Tolstoy as well, such as Prince Andrei, who seems determined to die before his time, or Anna Karenina, whose behavior becomes increasingly self-destructive as the novel named after her progresses. Of course all these
characters, even the ones in the stories written for peasants, are more interesting and complex than the simplifying label “masochist” would suggest. Each of them deserves in-depth psychological study. Indeed one of them, Pierre Bezukhov of War and Peace, who occasionally behaves in self-destructive fashion, struck me as deserving an entire book.  

Dostoevsky is of course the master when it comes to depicting masochism in literature—Russian or otherwise. His novels are filled with characters who wallow in guilt, crave punishment, or seek injury or humiliation of one kind or another. For example, in Crime and Punishment Raskolnikov, after protracted agonizing over his murder of the pawnbroker woman, confesses to his crime, is exiled to a Siberian prison, and eventually welcomes his prison sufferings as the road to spiritual regeneration. Aleksei Ivanovich, hero of The Gambler, likes to humiliate himself for the sake of women, and repeatedlypunishes himself by losing at roulette. The underground man in Notes from Underground manages to be insulted and humiliated by practically anything anyone around him does. Nastasia Filippovna of The Idiot runs off with Rogozhin, a man she knows will abuse her (and who in fact eventually murders her). The Christlike Prince Myshkin of the same novel invites all sorts of aggression and cruelty from those around him. In The Possessed Stavrogin withstands a physical blow from Shatov without responding. And so on.

Welcomed injury or humiliation in Dostoevsky’s works is augmented by body language which seems to prime the characters for outright masochistic acts. For example, Dostoevsky’s characters have a strong tendency to bow down before others. Psychoanalytic critic Steven Rosen counts seventy-five bows, kneelings, earth-kissings, and other gestural abasements in The Brothers Karamazov.

To be sure, there is more to Dostoevsky’s characters than their masochism. Stavrogin, for example, is a highly intelligent and complex sado-masochist. There are also major psychological differences in what these characters do, even within the masochistic sphere. Both Stavrogin and Myshkin are capable of accepting a physical blow, for example, but the motivation is quite different in each case. Yet the self-destructiveness is also there as a common feature. There is an underlying psychological similarity to many of Dostoevsky’s characters, which may be characterized as a need to be injured in some way. As critic Edward WasiOLEK says: “The Dostoevskian hero not only pays back for the hurt he suffers,
but he looks for hurt to suffer. He likes being hurt. When he cannot find it, he imagines it, so that it will sting in his blood with the pungency of real hurt. He has a stake in being hurt: he seeks it, pursues it, and needs it.” The hurt very often takes the form of narcissistic wounding (“obida” is a key Dostoevskian word, as in the case of the underground man). But it can manifest itself in various other ways as well, such as gross physical punishment, guilt feelings, humiliation, and of course the most self-destructive act possible, that is, suicide (Dostoevsky’s novels are littered with suicides).

Dostoevsky is thus remarkably inventive at finding ways for his characters to attract punishment or to get into humiliating situations. Both conventional and psychoanalytic critics have observed this. Moreover, Dostoevsky himself was perfectly aware of what he was doing. Of Stavrogin’s decision to publicize in writing the fact that he had sexually abused a little girl, the narrator says: “The fundamental idea of the document is a grim, naked need for punishment, for a cross, for public execution.” Father Tikhon, to whom Stavrogin confesses, also detects Stavrogin’s masochistic motive: “Yes, it is a penance and your natural need for it has overcome you. The suffering of the creature you wronged has so shattered you that it has brought home to you the problem of life and death, so there is still a hope that you are now on the great, still-untrodden path of calling disgrace and universal scorn down upon yourself.”

Tikhon, who is a perceptive (but intrusive) psychoanalyst, sees that Stavrogin’s is not a straightforward Christian masochism, but a masochism that is heavily laced with narcissistic and exhibitionistic elements: “your intention to do this great penance is ridiculous in itself.” Stavrogin must not only make a spectacle of himself, he must also be sincerely humble in consequence. “You will triumph,” says Tikhon, “as long as you sincerely accept their spitting at you and trampling upon you—if you can endure it!” As it turns out, he cannot endure such humiliation, and opts for suicide, a different sort of masochistic act.

Less religious in orientation than the writers I have mentioned thus far is the bitter satirist Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin, whose novels are strewn with masochists. The inhabitants of Glupov (“stupidville”), for example, are moved by an “ardent love of authority [siloiu nachal’stvoli-ubia].” They invent all kinds of ways to harm themselves. For example, they refrain from fighting a fire which is burning down their town,
and instead rant and rave at their governor for what is happening. A later governor of the town is confronted with a crowd of protesters, all of whom are on their knees however. The ancestors of the Glupovites are characterized as follows:

There was in olden times a people called the Headbeaters [golovotiapami], and they lived in the far north, in that region where the Greek and Roman historians thought the Hyperborean Sea to be. These people were called Headbeaters, because it was their habit to beat their heads against anything that came in their way. If they came to a wall, they beat their heads against it; if they wished to pray, they beat their heads against the floor.¹³

*The History of a Town* (1869-70), from which these passages are quoted, is also full of sadistic fantasies to match the masochistic ones (e.g., under a certain governor Borodavkin "there was not a single Glupovite who could point to any part of his body which had not been flogged"; the governor Ugrium-Burcheev "beat himself not feigning," although he is otherwise the arch-sadist of the novel).¹⁴ The laughter which Saltykov-Shchedrin elicits from his reader is itself sadistic in nature, being a form of aggression against the Glupovites. But to the extent that Russians recognize themselves in the Glupovites (just as they recognize themselves in the figure of Ivan the Fool—see below, chap. 6) they are laughing at themselves, that is, they are engaging in a mildly masochistic fantasy of their own.

In the twentieth century Russian writers continued to invent masochistic characters. The hero of Vladimir Mayakovsky's long poem "Cloud in Trousers" mocks himself, nails himself to a cross, and compares himself to a dog which licks the hand that beats it. D-503, the hero-number of Evgenii Zamiatin's futuristic novel *We*, explicitly welcomes the pain and punishment doled out by the dominatrix-number I-330. Boris Pasternak's Doktor Zhivago never fails to infuriate my American students with his willing abandonment of his beloved Lara, and his subsequent self-willed going to seed at the end of the novel. Andrei Platonov's works are full of mildly depressed, slightly childish characters who seem to welcome their abasement, for example, Nikita Firs of "Potudan River," who descends to begging and cleaning latrines. Los Angeles Slavist Thomas Seifrid has written a fascinating analysis of Platonov's later works, which he terms "literature for the masochist."¹⁵

Igor Smirnov explicitly deals with the "masochistic culture," "masochistic ideals," and "kenosis" promoted by Soviet socialist realist fic-
tion. Many heroes in this genre efface themselves totally in order to carry out instructions from on high or to fulfill "the plan" dictated by revolutionary authority. For example, the fanatic Pavel Korchagin (in Nikolai Ostrovsky's *How the Steel Was Tempered*, 1935) repeatedly puts himself in great danger, or subjects himself to great deprivation for the sake of the Party. He emerges from the Civil War disabled and incapable of normal physical activity, but doggedly searches for new ways to serve the Bolshevik cause.\textsuperscript{16}

Slavist Katerina Clark has also written on masochism in the Stalinist novel, although she prefers to use anthropological imagery rather than psychoanalytic terminology. Many socialist realist heroes go through what Clark calls a "traditional rite of passage" involving some sort of mutilation, ordeal, or sacrifice. Literal or metaphorical death may occur in the rite, and the result is fusion with some higher collective: "when the hero sheds his individualistic self at the moment of passage, he dies as an individual and is reborn as a function of the collective."\textsuperscript{17}

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn has created some masochistic characters in his fiction. Many of Solzhenitsyn's women are slavishly devoted to their husbands, for instance, Alina Vorotyntseva, Irina Tomchak, and Nadezhda Krupskaya in *August 1914*. Gleb Nerzhin of *The First Circle* is no slave, but he does something which, although perhaps noble, is very dangerous and potentially self-destructive: he spurns a cushy job in a special camp for mathematicians and scientists, and decides to plunge instead into the horrible depths of the gulag. Another of Solzhenitsyn's characters, the quintessentially Russian General Samsonov of *August 1914*, marches submissively toward death when he realizes his army has been defeated:

The commander's voice was kindly, and equally friendly were the looks that followed him as he rode on after thanking the men and wishing them well. There was not a hostile glare to be seen. The bared head and the solemn grief, the unmistakable Russianness, the unalloyed Russianess of his face [opoznavaemo-russkoe, nesmeshanno-russkoe volosatoe litso], with its bushy black beard and its homely features—big ears, big nose—the heroic shoulders bowed by an invisible burden, the slow, majestic progress, like that of some old Muscovite Tsar, disarmed those who might have cursed him.

Only now did Vorotyntsev notice . . . the doomed look imprinted on Samsonov's face from birth [otrodnuuu obrechennost']: this was a seven-pud sacrificial lamb led to the slaughter. He kept raising his eyes to something slightly, just slightly above his head as though he were expecting a great club to descend on
his meekly upturned bulging brow. All his life, perhaps, he had been expecting this, without knowing it. Now he was resigned to it.  

This characterization of Samsonov as an “unmistakably Russian” masochist is quite appropriate, historically. The real Samsonov led a Russian army to sure defeat at the hands of the Germans in East Prussia during the opening weeks of the First World War. Nearly a quarter of a million Russian soldiers were lost. Supposedly the idea was to help the French by forcing the Germans to withdraw troops from the Western front. Historian Richard Pipes quotes a statement made by the Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich to a French military representative at Russian Headquarters: “We are happy to make such sacrifices for our allies.”

A list of masochistic characters in Russian literature would be long indeed. I have only begun to scratch the surface. Rather than continue with a list, however, I would like to look closely at some specific (but diverse) literary passages which offer interesting hints about the deep structure of Russian masochism.

Dmitrii Karamazov

Readers of Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov* assume that old man Karamazov was killed by his illegitimate son Smerdiakov. But Dmitrii (Mitya) Karamazov is unjustly accused of the crime instead. There is a long investigation, and the authorities decide to try Dmitrii. At first he is rebellious, but then, as he is about to be led away to prison, he makes an abject speech in which he welcomes his sad *sud’ba*:

I understand now that such men as I need a blow, a blow of destiny [udar sud’by] to catch them as with a noose, and bind them by a force from without. Never, never should I have risen of myself! But the thunderbolt has fallen. *I accept the torture of accusation, and my public shame, I want to suffer and by suffering I shall be purified.*

In order to understand this clearly masochistic declaration, a psychoanalyst would want to know something about the events leading up to it. As it turns out, Dmitrii had taken a nap before his speech because he was so exhausted by the long interrogation of the investigators into his alleged crime. While asleep he had a vivid dream, and this dream tells us much about Dmitrii’s motivation.

In the dream Dmitrii sees depressing sights—a cold, November steppe, a village in which half of the huts are gutted by fire, poor peasant
women standing about, cold, thin and wan. Particularly striking is the image of a mother with her extremely unhappy child:

In her arms was a little baby crying. And her breasts seemed so dried up that there was not a drop of milk in them. And the child cried and cried, and held out its little bare arms, with its little fists blue from cold.

"Why are they crying? Why are they crying?" Mitya asked, as they [Mitya and his driver] dashed gaily by.

"It's the babe [dite]," answered the driver, "the babe weeping."

And Mitya was struck by his saying, in his peasant way, "the babe," and he liked the peasant's calling it a "babe." There seemed more pity in it [zhalosti budro bol'she].

"But why is it weeping," Mitya persisted stupidly, "why are its little arms bare? Why don't they wrap it up?"

"The babe's cold, its little clothes are frozen and don't warm it"

"But why is it? Why?" foolish Mitya still persisted.

"Why don't they feed the babe?" Dmitrii asks desperately. Feeling "a passion of pity [umilenie], such as he had never known before" Dmitrii wants to cry, he wants to do something "so that the babe should weep no more, so that the dark-faced, dried-up mother should not weep, so that no one should shed tears again from that moment." Then he hears the reassuring voice of his beloved Grushenka, who promises to remain with him for the rest of his life (implicitly, even in Siberia). He wakes up, a radiant smile on his face.

Given that Dmitrii has just had such a dream, it is not surprising that he immediately begins his speech with the following words: "Gentlemen, we're all cruel [vse my zhestoki], we're all monsters, we all make people weep, including mothers, and babes at the breast." But what has this persisting image of an unhappy babe at the breast got to do with Dmitrii's own current unhappiness? He continues: "but of all, let it be settled here, now, of all I am the lowest reptile! Every day of my life, beating my breast, I've sworn to amend, and every day I've done the same filthy things. I understand now that such men as I need a blow of destiny." —that is, a blow of sud'ba, and so on, as we saw above.

The breast imagery thus carries over into Dmitrii's castigation of himself. He beats his own breast ("biia sebia v grud' ") right after saying that he is guilty of making women and babes at the breast ("grudnykh detei") cry, which in turn is right after his dream about an extremely unhappy baby crying at its mother's inadequate breast ("grudi-to . . . takie issokhshie").
All of this business about breasts constitutes extraordinarily primal psychical material. Dmitrii's dream seems to have carried him very far back in time. Dmitrii is miserable in his present situation, just as a child at the breast is miserable when the breast/mother does not feed it. Previous psychoanalytic readers of the dream agree that the mother and child in the dream represent Dmitrii's dead, abandoning mother and Dmitrii himself as a child. Whether or not one agrees with such an interpretation, it has to be admitted that some kind of connection exists between Dmitrii's masochistic welcoming of a blow of sud'ba and the mother/breast imagery of the immediately preceding dream. This connection will be explored below, after the relevant clinical considerations have been raised.

Tat'iana Larina

If Dmitrii Karamazov's sud'ba is to suffer in prison for a parricide he desired to commit but in fact did not commit, the sud'ba of Tat'iana Larina, heroine of Aleksandr Pushkin's verse novel Eugene Onegin, is simpler. It is to suffer rejection by the man she loves. But she welcomes his rejection of her and her subsequent suffering quite as much as Dmitrii welcomes the opportunity to purify himself in prison. Vasilii Rozanov classifies her as a "passion sufferer" ("Strastoterpitsa").

True, Tat'iana does not initially wish to be rejected, to be punished. That was not the enterprise she originally had in mind. Rather, she had wished to be sexually united with the man who has swept her off her feet. But so profound is the attraction to Onegin, so totally does she commit herself to him, that she is prepared to accept anything he deems appropriate as a response, including rejection. She hands over control of her sud'ba to Onegin, as we saw earlier in a passage quoted from her love letter to him. Other passages as well in the letter depict the extent of her surrender:

Другой!.. Нет, никому на свете
Не отдала бы сердца я!
То в высшем суджено совете...
То воля неба: я твоя;
Вся жизнь моя была залогом
Свиданья верного с тобой;
Я знаю, ты мне послан богом,
До гроба ты хранитель мой...


Another! . . . No, to nobody on earth
would I have given my heart away!
That has been destined in a higher council,
that is the will of heaven: I am thine;
my entire life has been the gage
of a sure tryst with you;
I know, you’re sent to me by God,
You are my guardian to the tomb.27

The sympathetic narrator tells us that poor Tat’iana’s sud’ba is in the
hands of a “fashionable tyrant.” But after a while we begin to get the
impression that Tat’iana, whom Dostoevsky called “the apotheosis of
the Russian woman,”28 likes to be tyrannized. She feels that she will
“perish” because of Onegin, but also that “perishing from him is lovely.”29
Her soul, “avid of sadness” (“pechali zhadnoi”) after being
rejected by Onegin, continues to ache for him.30 She suffers much, and
her suffering is very Russian.31 Hers is the same soul, the same “dusha,”
that the narrator had previously characterized as Russian: “Tat’iana
(being Russian, in her soul [russkaia dushoiu].”32 The critics agree that
Tat’iana’s folksy Russianness is one of her essential features.33

In Tat’iana’s dream, one of the most famous in Russian literature,
Onegin takes the form of a bear, chases her across a snowy landscape,
then appears as the “master” (“khoziain”) of a gang of grotesque wild
animals which terrify her. Onegin is at this moment both dear and
frightful to Tat’iana (“mil i strashen ei”)—an indication of her ambiva-
lence. She desires him, but fears terrible consequences. She is laboring
under what psychoanalysts would recognize as the infantile conception
of sex as a terrible act of violence.34 Yet she then permits the “master”
to take her to a bench, deposit her there, and start to make love to her,
and would without objection have allowed him to take away her virgin-
ity were it not for the fact that two other characters suddenly enter upon
the scene.35

From the dream it is clear that Tat’iana wants Onegin to master her
sexually. But in reality he is the master of her fate. By means of the love
letter she throws herself at him, and it is then up to him to decide what
will become of her. Because he rejects her, her sud’ba is to marry another
man, an honorable man, yet a man she does not love, a man by whom
(as Rozanov observes) she apparently has no children. It is as if Onegin
were her father who, in the venerable Russian tradition, marries off his
daughter to some stranger.
Indeed, Onegin is more of a parental figure than his Byronic, worldly-wise image would suggest. Tat’iana *makes* him a parent by her insistently childlike stance.  

Her love is not that of a sophisticated coquette, it is no game. Rather, it is innocent, trusting. In love Tat’iana is as dependent as a child: “Tatiana . . . unconditionally yields/ to love like a dear child [kak miloe ditia].”  

When she tries, naively, to explain her feelings for Onegin to her old nurse, she fails. The nurse thinks that she is ill. Repeatedly referring to Tat’iana as “my child” (“ditia moe”), the nurse tries to take care of her, as a solicitous mother would (the office of nurse or “niania” was the typical means of parent-surrogation among the nineteenth-century Russian nobility).

In frustration Tat’iana sharply orders the nurse out of the room, and commences to write the love letter already quoted above. If the nurse does not understand, perhaps Onegin will. One parental figure is replaced by another.

But, although Tat’iana is willing to play the child, Onegin plays at best a very distant and inadequate parent. After receiving the letter he comes to her in the family garden and commences to deliver a cold, standoffish sermon. Tat’iana, a “humble little girl” (“smirennoi devochki”) “humbly” (“smirenno”) hears out the lesson of Pushkin’s pseudomature, narcissistic hero. She is in tears as he escorts her back to her mother. She will be unhappy for the rest of the novel, indeed she will cherish her secret unhappiness for the rest of her life. That is her *sud’ba*, and it is Onegin—she believes—who has determined that *sud’ba*.

Even when Onegin comes crawling back to Tat’iana in the end there is no change in her attitude. She admits that she still loves him, but she is now properly married (to a man she does not love) and will not be unfaithful. More important, her *sud’ba* had been decided by his response to her initial, abject declaration of love to him. She now is even grateful to him for the way he behaved:

> в тот страшный час
> Вы поступили благородно,
> Вы были правы предо мной.
> Я благодарна всей душой...⁴

> at that terrible hour
> you acted nobly,
> you in regard to me were right,
> to you with all my soul I’m grateful.⁴⁰
Again, it is her soul, her Russian "dusha" which accepts the abjection. What is more, she would still prefer that he be the strict disciplinarian with her:

колкость вашей браи,
Холодный, строгий разговор,
Когда б в моей лишь было власти,
Я предпочла б обидной страсти
И этим письмам и слезам.⁵

the sharpness of your scolding,
cold, stern discourse,
if it were only in my power
I'd have preferred to an offensive passion,
and to these letters and tears.⁴²

How can he be the slave ("Byt' chuvstva melkogo rabom") when sud'ba has already determined that she be the slave? No, she will remain severed from him, as he had originally decided ("You must, / I pray you, leave me"). She would rather be enslaved by the memory of a lost, inadequate object than gain a present object. She would prefer that Onegin be dead for her, as is her poor nurse ("niania"), the mother-surrogate whom he had replaced, and who now sleeps in the "humble churchyard" near her childhood home.

Vasilii Grossman’s Thousand-Year-Old Slave

Vasilii Grossman (1905—64) was a writer very much preoccupied with the notion of fate (sud'ba, rok). His novel Life and Fate (Zhizn' i sud'ba, 1980) offers a panoramic view of the sometimes intersecting, sometimes parallel fates of its countless characters—Russians and Germans, Jews and Gentiles, soldiers and civilians, the living and the dead. Grossman has been called the Soviet Tolstoy, and Life and Fate is regarded by some as the War and Peace of the twentieth century.

But it is Grossman’s incomparably pessimistic novella Forever Flowing (Vse techet, first published abroad in 1970) that is relevant here. In this work Grossman explicitly connects the idea of fate to Russian masochism.

In several chapters toward the end of the work the reader encounters Grossman’s somewhat loose but fascinating theses concerning “the myth of Russian national character” and “the fate [rok] and character of
Russian history." According to Grossman’s narrator, “inexorable repression of the individual personality” and “slavish subjugation [kholopskoe podchinenie] of the individual personality to the sovereign and to the state” accompanied the “thousand-year history of the Russians.” This external force produced a Christian strength and purity of national character that was unlike anything in the West. Russian observers, such as Chaadaev, Gogol, and Dostoevsky, had understood this, and had honestly believed that Russia would eventually have something very special to offer to the West. But they had not understood something else, namely, that “the characteristics of the Russian soul were born not of freedom, that the Russian soul is a thousand-year-old slave. And what could a thousand-year-old slave give to the world . . . ?”

Grossman’s ideas of “Russian soul” and “thousand-year-old slave” are personifications of the Russian people. They are not persons, properly speaking, but they resemble persons. They are metaphors for the many submissive persons in Russia, or for the submissive characters in Grossman’s novel. For example, the “thousand-year-old slave” is like the character Nikolai Andreevich, a Soviet scientist whose “entire life consisted of one long act of obedience, with no trace of disobedience.”

Grossman has clearly been influenced by Chaadaev, Custine, Ler-montov, Berdiaev, and other writers on the slave soul of Russia. His contribution is to wield the notion of Russian masochism as a weapon against Bolshevism, and against Lenin in particular.

Grossman repeats and extends his personification of the “thousand-year-old slave.” At one point she is a “great slave” (Velikai a raba”) who, having recently cast off the chains of tsarism, marries Lenin. She follows after him with obedient step. Seeing that she is so pliable, Lenin begins to lord it over her. Gradually he becomes alarmed and frustrated by her “soft Russian submissiveness and suggestibility.”

Lenin could not change Russia’s age-old slavish essence. For this reason, according to Grossman, he was not a true revolutionary: “Only those who encroach on the very foundation of old Russia—her slave soul [ee rabskui u dushu]—are revolutionaries.”

Lenin was victorious, yes, but the Russian soul remained a slave. The narrator says that there is nothing mysterious about the “Russian soul,” for slavishness is no mystery. The real riddle is why Russia seems fated to be slavish:
What is this, really, an exclusively Russian law of development? Can it be that the Russian soul, and only the Russian soul, is fated to develop not in direct proportion to the growth of freedom, but in proportion to the growth of slavery? Do we have here, after all, the destiny [rok] of the Russian soul?  

"Of course not," retorts the narrator to himself. There are other countries which have slave traditions, too. But still, for Russia there is indeed no hope. Russia’s slavishness is predestined. Such is the fate of history ("rok istorii"). Even Lenin, who valiantly attempted to absorb Western ideas of freedom, failed to liberate Russians. Lenin—with his fanatic Marxist faith, his iron will, his intolerance of dissent, his cruelty toward his enemies—was himself a product of the slavish Russian mentality. Lenin only managed to re-enslave the peasants, the proletariat, the intelligentsia. He could not overcome Russian slavishness because he was a part of it. He, like Dostoevsky and the other “prophets of Russia,” "was born of our unfreedom." In Grossman’s view, there simply is no possibility for Russians to escape their enslavement.

It is difficult to imagine a more pessimistic, fatalistic, and, for some, even offensive attitude. Many of Grossman’s readers were disturbed. He was doing something much more radical than criticizing the great Lenin. When it was published in the West, his novella offended Russian chauvinists of both the pro-Soviet and anti-Soviet bent. When more recently it was published in Russia, some writers accused Grossman of “Russophobia.” Anatolii Anan’ev, who was responsible for publishing it in the journal Oktiabr’, defended Grossman: “the phrase about Russian soul being a thousand-year-old slave provoked fury. But if we are not slaves, then why have we been submissively standing in lines for seventy years, why have we been applauding any dogma that happens to be spoken from the rostrum?” 

What the psychoanalyst is likely to notice in Grossman’s text is the association of masochism (“soft Russian submissiveness and suggestibility,” “slave soul”) with the notion of fate (here rok). In Grossman’s formulation, there is a predestined quality to Russian masochism.

The analyst also cannot miss the repeated images of birth in Grossman’s text: “the characteristics of the Russian soul were born [rozhdeny] not of freedom”; “the birth [rozhdenie] of the Russian state system”; Lenin was “born [rozhdan] of our unfreedom”; “anywhere slavery exists, such souls are born [rozhdaiutsia],” etc. This kind of imagery
suggests that the fatedness of Russia's slave soul originates specifically from birth.

The one who gives birth is, of course, the mother. What Grossman seems to be saying in these philosophical passages is that the very earliest relationship with a mother of some kind is what predetermines Russian slavishness.

Three things, then, are connected for Grossman: masochism, fate, and the mother. This triple connection, as we saw earlier, also applies to Dostoevsky's character Dmitrii Karamazov (and to some extent it applies to Tat'iana Larina, with Onegin a mother-surrogate rather than a literal mother).

Why should masochistic inclinations be connected to both fate and the image of the mother? This is a question that cannot be answered without a detailed consideration of the unconscious psychodynamics of masochism.

For that matter, many other aspects of the slave soul of Russia will remain a mystery until—at last—we delve into the psychoanalytic literature on masochism.