The Slave Soul of Russia
Rancour-Laferriere, Daniel

Published by NYU Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/15748

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=548748
The fool (masculine “durak,” feminine “dura”) is a species of masochist. He or she deliberately does things which do not seem to make good sense, at least from the viewpoint of an outside observer. In particular, the “stupid” things a fool does are harmful to the fool. Observers laugh—sometimes even the fool laughs—because the fool’s acts are self-destructive, self-defeating, and humiliating. What the fool does thus fits the clinical definition of masochism given at the beginning of this book.

A Surplus of Fools

Foolishness is a universal phenomenon. Many Russians claim, however, that Russia has more than her share of fools. Russia has so many fools, according to an old proverb, that the supply should last for the next one hundred years (“Na Rusi, slava Bogu, durakov let na sto pripaseno”). Although this proverb is itself more than a hundred years old, there is no indication that the attitude reflected in it has changed. In the late Soviet press, for example, the phrase “country of fools” (“strana durakov”) was very often encountered, and no one but extreme right-wingers (e.g., Igor’ Shafarevich) seemed to mind it. Consider the following item from a 1991 issue of Moscow News:

An organizing committee for the formation of the Russian Foolish Party [Orgkomitet po formirovaniu Duratskoi partii Rossii] has been created in Tiumen. Its chair, Iu. Alekseev, declared that only his party can count on success in this “country of fools.” In the upcoming mayoral election he is challenging the current head of the city soviet.
There was some hope that things would change after the coup of August 1991 was foiled by democratically minded forces. On the front page of an issue of Literaturnaia gazeta published on 21 August of that year, poet Evgenii Evtushenko declared:

Мы сегодня — народ,
а не кем-то обманутые дуракки.⁴

Today we are a people,
and not fools deceived by someone.

Finally, it seemed, Russians were not being submissive, self-destructive fools, but were resisting harmful orders handed down from above.

One year later, however, in an issue of Moskovskie novosti, we find Russian journalist-playwright Aleksandr Gel’man asserting that foolishness is alive and well in Russia. Engaging in a playful masochism of his own, Gel’man calls himself a “fool” and declares: “Stupidity [glupost’] is a large social force which has been neglected for a long time. We stupid ones, after all, are in the majority.” Gel’man goes on to say:

Oh, that stupidity of ours! It is not huge or measureless, but it is inescapable. Once in a while it seems like we might just be saved from it, we might just shake it out of our heads after all—but then we wake up the next day (next year, next century) and there it is, the little mother is right there in her place [matushka na svoem meste].⁵

There is no escape, for “we are in love with our stupidity, and love is blind,” says Gel’man. Stupidity is thus personified, she is a beloved “matushka,” and no other “dama” can possibly substitute for her. This “matushka,” to judge from our earlier discussion of the important role of the mother in the ontogeny of masochism, is an utterly appropriate personification.

Foolishness has historical roots deep in medieval Russia.⁶ Synchronically speaking, the Russian idea of the fool is a peasant idea. In every village there was supposed to be a “derevenskii durachok”⁷ (cf. English “village idiot”). Russian peasant lore is rich with the imagery of stupidity. To select just a few items from the folktale motif-index compiled by Barag et al. in 1979:

They attempt to milk chickens.

He cuts the branch out from underneath himself and falls.
They pull on a log in order to make it longer.

A simpleton kills his own horse.

A fool is afraid of his own shadow, throws things at it.

A fool traps and accidentally kills his mother.

Foma and Erema do everything wrong—they ruin a house they are building, fail to plow a field, catch no fish, and eventually both drown.8

These ideas, however gruesome some of them may seem, elicit laughter in the appreciative Russian listener. The Russian peasant laughs at the fool, that is, permits a momentary and merely symbolic outburst of violence directed against him. The fool may do something actually violent against himself (or sometimes against someone else as well), but the listener remains in effective control while the fool does his thing. The listener’s laughter is violence contained. In psychoanalytic terms, the laughing listener expresses sadistic feelings when confronted with the fool’s masochistic behavior. The interaction of fool and listener is thus sadomasochistic in essence.

Sadistic attitudes toward the fool are very common in Russia. In general, it is assumed that a fool is someone who is beaten often, or who ought to be beaten or otherwise abused: “Beat a fool, do not spare the fist!”; “You can’t save up enough fists for all the fools”; “They’ll beat a fool even in church.”9 Although the fool cannot be taught anything by beatings (“Teaching a fool is like curing the dead”);10 there is nonetheless a powerful contradictory assumption as well, that is, that the fool (or anyone else, for that matter) needs to be “taught” by violent means:

In order to teach fools, do not spare fists (Uchit' durakov—ne zhalet' kulakov).

He’s grown to the size of the devil, but he hasn’t been beaten with a knout (i.e., he is stupid) (S cherta vyros, a knutom ne bit [t. e., glup]).

I’ll smarten you up. Let’s be humbly thankful for brains (said after punishment) (La tebe dam uma. Blagodarim pokorno za um [govo- riat posle nakazania]).11
Violence is thus an essential "pedagogical" technique in the peasant imagination (and in social reality as well, to judge from the abundant evidence for corporal punishment in traditional Russia). There is a strong temptation to beat the fool (sadism), while at the same time there is an urge to get the foolishness beaten out of oneself (masochism). In both processes there seems to be a fear of actually being a fool, that is, of crossing some dangerous boundary separating the self from the fool. The fact that there are so many proverbs advising one not to get involved with fools suggests that there was a real possibility that one might regard oneself as a fool (I quote just a few here from the many in the Dahl collection):

God forbid that you get mixed up with a fool (Ne dai Bog s durakom sviazat’sia).

Get mixed up with a fool, and may your soul rest in peace (S durakom sviazat’sia—vechnaia pamiat’).

You can ward off the devil with a cross and a bear with a pestle, but there is no way to get rid of a fool (Ot cherta krestom, ot medvedia pestom, a ot duraka—nichem).

The fool is such a threat that one is in danger of becoming one just by having some relationship with one. To observe two fools fighting, for example, means that you are a fool. To accuse someone of being a fool is to risk being called a fool in return ("Ty durak" can provoke "Ot duraka slyshu"). The danger is general: “He who gets mixed up with a fool is a fool” ("Durak, kto s durakom sviazhetsia").

Among Soviet intellectuals the issue of whether one was a "smart" person or a fool was still important. Bulat Okudzhava wrote a famous song on this subject, titled "Song about Fools." It seems that one day the fools (read: stupid bureaucrats, plodding hacks, neanderthal police agents, etc.) began to get embarrassed about being fools, so they had special tags attached to them which read "smart." The song ends with the following quatrain:
One hesitates here, because for a moment it is not clear what Okudzhava now means by "smart" and by "fool." But that is precisely the message. It is easy to confuse a "smart" person with a "fool." The boundary is not clear. As with the nineteenth-century peasant, the twentieth-century intellectual is very concerned about how to distinguish the two. There is always a danger that the "smart" person will be mistaken for a fool, or vice versa.

For the "smart" person a fool is someone who endangers the boundary between self and other. A fool is a self who threatens fusion with other selves. The ridiculed object just might be a subject, especially if the subject is (as most Russians are) in the habit of fighting off masochistic impulses. There, but for resistance to masochism, go I.

It is easier to live with the idea that fools exist if one thinks they do not really mind their situation in life. The fool is a masochist, after all. One should not feel guilty about mistreating the fool because he likes or enjoys abuse:

Spit/piss in the eyes of a fool, and he'll think it's heavenly dew (Duraku khor' pliiu/stsy v glaza, a on: bozh'ia rosa).

A fool is pleased at the hole in his side (Liubo duraku, chto chiri [dyra] na boku).18

Were it not for the fool's apparent "stupidity," these latter proverbs would be a straightforward characterization of the fool's masochism. As for those who are inclined to beat on fools, they have no need for a "stupidity" to conceal their sadism. Apparently concealment is not necessary in the case of sadism. This suggests that masochism is psychologically more disturbing to Russians than is sadism.
Ivan the Fool

All Russians know about the folktale ("skazka") character Ivan the fool ("Ivan durak" or "Ivanushka durachok," sometimes just "Ivan" or just "durak" or "duren'"). As Andrei Siniavskii has recently pointed out, Ivan the fool is the favorite of all Russian folktale heroes. He is a "low" hero who is always getting into scrapes for doing something that appears foolish or stupid. Folklorist Eleazar Meletinskii asserted that Ivan the fool is remarkably deep, psychologically, and that the humor of this fool's actions is much more developed than in corresponding Western tales (e.g., German, Norwegian) or Eastern tales (e.g., Turkic).

Already at the beginning of our century A. M. Smirnov argued that the great appeal of Ivan the fool throughout Russia over many generations indicates that a profound psychological truth is tapped by this figure.

The psychology of Ivan the fool is revealed by the variety of ways in which he manages to get punished. In one tale, for example, he is supposed to deliver dumplings to his brothers. But on the way he notices his shadow following him and, thinking the shadow is hungry, throws the dumplings at it. As a result, his brothers beat the living daylights out of him. In another tale he takes the creaking sounds made by a birch tree for spoken words, and is later ridiculed by his "smart" brothers. Sometimes his foolish act brings punishment without even the intervention of another person, as when he cuts the tree limb he is perched on. In some of the tales the fool gains no reward for his troubles, and merely moves from one punishing situation to another. In other stories he does attain a worthy goal, such as gold or a beautiful wife. Ivan the fool sometimes turns out to be Ivan the prince. In the meantime, whatever the outcome, the fool is always punished in some direct or indirect fashion for his manifestly stupid actions. The descriptions of the punishments are remarkably detailed, they tend to be repetitious, and they are clearly intended to elicit sadistic outbursts of laughter from the listener.

Russians laugh at their folkloric fool. He seems to deliberately provoke punishment (even though, logically speaking, he is not responsible, for he is retarded, i.e., too "stupid" to understand what he is doing). His apparent masochism cannot but gratify the addressee's sadistic impulses. But the laughter also reveals a kind of recognition. Some previously repressed information about the self is released by the fool. In laughing
at their folkloric fool, Russians are laughing at themselves. He is, after all, often named Ivan—a favorite name among Russians, a name that may even be considered metonymic for Russians. When Ol’ga Semenova-Tian-Shanskaia titled her ethnographic monograph “The Life of ‘Ivan,’ ” she was counting on this metonymy. As Maksim Gor’kii argued, Ivan the fool represents the Russian peasant’s own willingness to take a beating, to be passively resigned in the face of whatever sud’ba has to offer.

The listener’s laughter is thus a doubly masochistic phenomenon. Ivan the fool does things which provoke ridicule upon himself, and laughing Russians are in effect ridiculing themselves. Ivan’s provocative style of masochism finds resonance in the Russians’ habit of laughing at themselves.

The folkloric fool either does not know his acts will get him into trouble because he is too retarded to understand what is going on, or he does know but is slyly biding his time (“sebe na ume,” as the Russians say). Scholars have tended to focus on the latter. The masochism is easier to ignore that way, and emphasis can be put on the tales in which Ivan is covertly clever, and in which there is a happy ending (although sometimes the happy ending is just a matter of luck, with the fool remaining truly naive). It is in any case important to keep in mind that tales about the fool do not always have a happy ending (in such instances the fool is likely to be nameless). In these tales the listener is treated to nothing but a series of masochistic incidents. Even when the ending is happy (e.g., the fool gets the princess and the gold), what comes before the ending is in any case overtly self-destructive for the fool.

The apparent masochism of the Russian folkloric fool sometimes shades over into altruism. As Smirnov observes, Ivan is “ready for any self-sacrifice.” Dmitrii Likhachev considers the fool specifically in the context of his discussion of Russian kindness (“dobrota”). The fool can be very kind—to animals, to the poor, to his family. For example, he permits a swarm of mosquitoes to suck his blood. Or he gives alms to beggars. In such behavior, as Meletinskii observes, the fool is “the embodiment of the great potentialities inherent in the simple man of the people.”

In his altruistic function Ivan the fool seems almost holy. Likhachev uses the terms “durak” and “iurodivyi” almost interchangeably.
fool is capable of loving his enemies in a curiously Christ-like fashion. He can be, as the Russians say, stupid to the point of saintliness ("glup do sviatosti").

The Fool and His Mother

Joanna Hubbs prefers to view the fool’s altruistic behavior as “motherly.” A quite explicit example is the foolish general who sits naked on some eggs in order to hatch out the chicks—a hen is a mother, after all. In an early Soviet literary variant titled “Van’ka Dobroi” ("Van’ka the Good) the fool lives happily ever after with his mother and two of the animals he has saved.

The Russian folkloric fool tends to be strongly attached to his family, especially his mother. Altruism in Russia, as everywhere else, is learned on mother’s knee. But the foolishness as well as the altruism should be characterized as “motherly,” or at least as having to do with the mother. In many variants the problem is that the fool cannot seem to make a break with his mother. He is often the youngest child, which means he is the last one to have emerged from his mother’s body, and no one else has since occupied his position as mother’s little boy. He is very passive and dependent on his mother. His closeness to her is part of what makes him laughable. He is an adult, but is developmentally retarded. Sometimes he is speechless, like an infant. He is a lazybones, a stay-at-home, usually remaining in his mother’s hut and lying on (or behind) the stove. Sometimes even his name suggests the stove to which he is so attached: “Ivan Zapechnik” ("Ivan Behind-the-Stove") or “Kniaz’ Pechurinskii” ("Prince Stovish"). The image of the stove (“pech”, a feminine noun) is decidedly maternal, and reinforces the idea of the fool’s continuing dependence on his mother ("The stove is our dear mother," says a peasant proverb). Like a little child, the fool is often without britches, he is dirty, does not clean himself, has a runny nose, and so forth. His mother is more or less forced to take care of him. When he does get up the energy to go out and do some daring, stupid deed, he often follows this with a return home to his mother and a reversion to his former passivity and nearly symbiotic union with his mother. The behavior of the Russian folkloric fool thus exemplifies that grade of masochism in which the individual, when behaving masochistically, is attempting to move away from the mother (see clinical discus-
sion, above, 109). In any case, the boundary of the foolish self with the mother is at issue.

Russian proverbs often implicate the mother (but not the father) in the fool’s foolishness. There are many ways, for example, to excuse a fool by saying he was born that way (e.g., “Ne durak, a rodom tak,” or “Kak rozheny, tak i zamorozheny”). These are hints that the mother somehow gave birth badly, or made some kind of mistake in giving birth to the fool. She compensates for this by taking pity, by devoting special attention to her defective child (in the tales he is often the favored third child). But sometimes she will neglect or abuse the child. Sometimes she will admit that her child is a fool. One proverb has her formerly speechless son call her a fool (“Tri goda ne bail parnishko, da: ‘dura mat’”).

Here we should note the traditional sexist attitude which portrays women as not too bright: “Long on hair, but short on brains” (“Volos dolog, da um korotok”). There are quite a few such proverbs, and Russia is indeed a male chauvinist nation in the extreme (as will become clear in the discussion below on the slave soul of Russia as a gendered object). But the quintessential Russian fool is nonetheless a man, not a woman, a “durak,” not a “dura.” There is many an “Ivan durak,” but no “Tatiana dura.” If in the folkloric imagination there is some foolishness in women (including mothers), nonetheless it is men who go to extremes in this matter.

Laughter is essential to the fool’s appeal, but this laughter can become rather gruesome by Western standards. The grown-up fool’s closeness to his mother is mildly funny, but non-Russians are likely to be shocked when the fool insists on keeping his mother’s corpse nearby because he cannot part with it. Russians laugh when the fool mistakenly takes his mother for a thief and kills her with a club. They laugh when the fool (in several variants) uses his mother’s corpse to force various people to pay him for allegedly murdering her. They are delighted when the fool throws the mother-figure of Iaga-Baba into an oven and cooks her.

It is difficult to avoid the impression that the fool feels hostile toward his mother in many of the tales (despite, or perhaps because of his dependence on her), and that sympathetic (laughing) Russians are finding an outlet for archaic, childish hostility they once felt toward their
own mothers. Their laughter at the fool implies approval of what the fool is doing to his mother.53

Consider an example of the very abundant motif-type known as the “arrant fool,”54 who tests his mother’s patience rather severely:

In a certain family there was an arrant fool. Not a day passed on which people did not complain about him; every day he would either insult someone or injure someone. The fool’s mother pitied him and looked after him as if he were a little child; whenever the fool made ready to go somewhere, she would explain to him for half an hour what he should do and how he should do it. One day the fool went by the threshing barn and saw the peasants threshing peas, and cried to them: “May you thresh peas for three days and get three peas threshed!” Because he said this the peasants belabored him with their flails. The fool came back to his mother and cried out: “Mother, mother, they have beaten up a fellow!” “Was it you, my child?” “Yes.” “What for?” “Because I went by Dormidoshkin’s barn and his people were threshing peas there.” “And then, my child?” “And I said to them: ‘May you thresh peas for three days and get three peas threshed.’ That’s why they beat me up.” “Oh, my child, you should have said: ‘May you have such an abundance that you have to be hauling it for ever and ever.’”

The fool was overjoyed. The next day he went to walk in the village and met some people carrying a coffin with a dead man in it. Remembering yesterday’s advice, he roared in a loud voice: “May you have to haul this for ever and ever!” Again he was soundly thrashed. The fool returned to his mother and told her why he had been beaten up. “Ah, my child,” she said, “you should have said: ‘May he rest in peace eternal!’” These words sank deep into the fool’s mind.

Next day he went wandering again in the village and he met a gay wedding procession. The fool cleared his throat, and as soon as he came up to the procession, he cried: “May you rest in peace eternal!” The drunken peasants jumped down from the cart and beat him up cruelly. The fool went home and cried: “Oh my dear mother.”55

This goes on for two more identically silly episodes. Finally the mother gets fed up and forbids her fool to go to the village any more, and the tale ends. In other variants there is either no resolution (the tale ends in medias res), or the fool eventually dies from his many wounds.

What is the point of such a narrative? What is funny about it, and why does it strike home for Russians?

The two chief players are mother and child. Their back-and-forth interaction is what is important (the ending varies, and is largely irrelevant). The mother seems normal, while the grown-up son is a fool that she looks after “as if he were a little child” (“kak za malym rebenkom”).
Indeed the fool’s behavior is childlike—comparable to that of a two-year-old, to be precise. Mothers in all cultures know about the “terrible twos,” an age when the child is first asserting its independence from her by constantly getting into scrapes, always saying “no,” often ending an adventure in tears. This is an important stage in the formation of the self. Often the child knows perfectly well when something is wrong or harmful, but pretend not to and gets into trouble anyway. Of a child that is behaving in this obstreperous fashion Russians will use the same expression as they use for characterizing a fool: “He is on his mind to himself” (“On sebe na uma”). Mothers do not necessarily love their children any less as a result of such behavior, however. The narrating mother in Natal’ia Baranskaia’s A Week Like Any Other declares of her children: “I love our little fools so much.” This is generally in keeping with the affectionate attitude Russians have toward the fool figure (“Akh ty moi glupen’kii,” or “Akh ty moi durachok”).

What is going on in the Afanas’ev tale is very much like a misbehaving toddler’s interaction with the mother. Just as the rebelling child repeatedly runs off and hurts itself, the fool here keeps going into town and doing something that elicits abuse from others. And just as the little child always runs back to its mommy for comfort, the fool here runs back repeatedly to his “matushka.”

From the viewpoint of the tale’s addressee, as I observed above, the fool appears to be inviting abuse, that is, he appears to be behaving masochistically. This impression is difficult to shake in this particular tale because the fool is thrashed so many times—not just the magical number three, but five times. In another variant, the mistreatment occurs nine times in a row. In a literary variant by Lev Tolstoi the beatings occur seven times, with the fool being beaten to death the last time. Note also the fool’s epithet, “nabity durak,” translated as “arrant fool” by Guterman, but etymologically better rendered as “very beaten fool,” or more colloquially as “stuffed full,” as in “nabity meshok” (“a bag stuffed full”). Another way to convey this fool’s foolishness is to say that, no matter how much he gets beaten, the foolishness does not get beaten out of him.

The repetitiveness of the beatings is suggestive. The fool is being particularly rebellious. He is not only punishing himself, he seems to be punishing his mother as well (she becomes quite frustrated). If he cannot do anything to please her, he will punish her. His willfulness is directed
at her as well as at himself—or would be if he were not so “stupid.” His foolishness is a cover that permits the Russian addressee to indulge in both self-destructive and mother-destructive fantasies. Punishing the self and punishing the mother are not very different when there is a lingering boundary problem between mother and child.

And the attempt may fail. At the deepest level, the Russian folkloric fool invites the addressee to indulge in a disturbing fantasy of remaining merged or fused with the mother. When the fool does try to make the break, his mother usually encourages him. But his efforts are in vain, at least initially, and in many variants the fool never does succeed. He must remain with his mother till the end of his days. Nothing could be more humiliating. The unseparated self is the lowest form of self. It deserves all the punishment it gets from funny storytellers and laughing listeners.