A Little Muzhik, Muttering to Himself: The Novel and the Poor

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As Anna Karenina is in the act of throwing herself under the train, we get the following words, the last ones of the chapter: "'Lord, forgive me for everything!' she said, feeling the impossibility of any struggle. A little muzhik, muttering to himself, was working over some iron. And the candle by the light of which she had been reading that book filled with anxieties, deceptions, grief and evil, flared up brighter than ever, lit up for her all that had once been in darkness, sputtered, grew dim, and went out for ever" (Tolstoy 2000: 768).

Those whose memory of the novel is relatively fresh will recall that in thinking at this very dramatic moment of "a little muzhik," or former serf, muttering to himself and working over some iron, Anna is recalling a dream she has had repeatedly, and has again the night before her suicide, a dream described more precisely as "a dreadful nightmare." In the Pevear/Volokhonsky translation, it goes like this: "A little old muzhik with a dishevelled beard was doing something, bent over some iron, muttering meaningless French words, and as always in this nightmare (here lay its terror) she

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felt that this little muzhik paid no attention to her, but was doing this dreadful thing with iron over her, was doing something dreadful over her. And she awoke in a cold sweat" (752).

I am not the first to notice how interesting this dream is. One book of criticism I consulted, which focused on other matters, included the sentence, "All critics of course discuss trains, railway stations and recurrent dreams of peasants beating something with a piece of iron" (Armstrong 1988: 86). Peasants beating something with a piece of iron is not quite right, at least according to this translation, but the casual reference is a sign of comfortable familiarity. The article that is most cited on this topic, Gary Browning's "Peasant Dreams in *Anna Karenina*," notes that the dream "supports a great number of explanations" (Browning 2000: 525). That is the least you can say. Of course, it does not support all explanations equally. Browning cites Vladimir Nabokov's reading: "'what the horrible little man in her dream was doing over the iron is what her sinful life has done to her soul—battering and destroying it'" (525). This is strangely moralistic, from the author of *Lolita*, and (not so strangely) oblivious to the "horrible little man" being not just little and horrible but a former serf, and in that sense, conceivably, both little and horrible by definition, at least as seen from a superior social position. Browning cites another reading, which notices that the muzhik is a peasant but takes his speaking French as evidence of "'a hideous abomination imposed on the old natural, simple life of Russia'"—a symbol of adulteration as well as adultery, you might say, or of what it means to be "'a married woman who is willing to abandon her family'" (525). Browning's own reading is somewhat more sympathetic to Anna and also more plausible. It takes the peasant to represent "a debased Karenin and Vronsky": "Since over time [Karenin and Vronsky] prove incapable of fulfilling her high expectations," Browning writes, "Anna subconsciously transforms them in her mind into ignoble creatures: French-speaking noblemen whose appearance and conduct are those of a *muzhik*. Anna's loss of her unobtainable ideal and an accompanying despair at perceived coarse and even violent sexual relations with her men finally impel her to self-destruction" (526).

There is plenty of evidence linking the dream with punishment for sin, with omens and the plausibility of belief in them, and/or (following Browning) with the supposed coarseness or violence of sex as Anna supposedly perceives it. Thomas Barran, in the MLA's *Approaches to Teaching* volume on *Anna Karenina*, writes rather too confidently that the sack in which the muzhik is rummaging "belongs in Freud's category of female genital symbols" (2003: 163). From there it is the shortest of steps to sexual

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violation. A student will perhaps conclude, therefore, Barran says, "that Anna's dream predicts her destruction at the hands of a hypocritical and demanding social class that has no more rectitude than a filthy old peasant" (164). He does not positively endorse this interpretation, but he does seem to take for granted, on the "fish swim" principle, that a "filthy old peasant" is indeed a plausible stand-in for the lack of rectitude of Anna's own class—that uncleanliness and age, in a peasant, are reliable markers of moral degradation. This seems true of a great many readings, from Nabokov's on down. It strikes me as odd, given the whole Levin side of the plot, with its epiphanic scene of landowner and peasants mowing together and all the political and existential baggage carried, especially in the ending, by the landowner's awkward attempt to identify himself with the peasants who work for him, that more does not seem to have been made of the literal fact that the peasant in the dream, or dreams, *is* a peasant, which is to say a representative of a collectivity about whose place in Russian society the novel is actively troubled, as its author and his society were. The least one can say is that the dream is a bridge between the Levin plot and the Anna plot. A somewhat larger point would be that, as one of the novel's most memorable moments, it reorients how Anna's love story should be read, anchoring it in a social background that does not otherwise seem very important to that story, if it even seems worth noticing at all: the relations between rich and poor.

As has often been noted, the novel throws off any number of tendrils that get entangled in the dream. Some are obvious but relatively trivial: connections to Vronsky, for example, with whom Anna has just quarreled, whom she first met at the train station when a worker had just been run over by a train, and who has himself had a remarkably similar dream. What is done to the iron (rather than with it) does suggest sex. But the iron is also a reference to the railroad, the Russian word for which has iron in it and which is associated for Tolstoy with a threatening modernity. The disorderly beard could certainly be taken as tradition (the beard) seen from the viewpoint of a clean-shaven modernity for which beards *as such* are disorderly.[1] I want to hold on to all those connections while trying to make what sense I can, in the amateur way of a non-Russian speaker, of some of the dream's other elements: the word *over*, as in both "bent over" the iron and "over

1. Thanks to Inna Kapilevich for reminding me that the beard has deep significance in pre-nineteenth-century Russia as a traditional Orthodox sign of godliness. Peter the Great, in his attempt to Westernize, not only did not grow a beard but forced the nobility to shave theirs.

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her," the meaningless French words, and above all the special source of the terror: the fact that the muzhik is paying no attention to Anna.

Why, as a nonspecialist, take so much trouble over this dream? Because it stands out as part of the answer to a question that is much larger than the question of how *Anna Karenina* is to be best or properly read. My impression is that we novel lovers have come to think, not happily but with a sense of resigning ourselves to the inevitable, that as a genre, the novel has never really been written by, for, or about the poor. Like literature in general but unlike many other art forms, the novel presupposes literacy, and literacy has never been democratically distributed. It seems likely that novelists on the whole have not been poor, at least relative to the population at large, and it seems likely that the same holds for the majority of the genre's readers. Given the requirements of leisure, literacy, and privacy, among others, it seems reasonable to suppose that the novel has been by and large a middle-class genre, talking about the lives of those who are most likely to be reading it and largely ignoring the lives of those who probably won't read it. If this isn't wrong, as I'm afraid it isn't, what is the best case that can be made about the novel's concern for economic inequality, for those who care? My first book, on the representation of servants in canonical fiction, suggested in a no doubt overblown, first-book sort of way that the poor, whose lives were almost never represented directly in the novel, nevertheless intruded into its form by means of stage conventions about servants, and in so doing also had significant and surprising effects on its sociohistorical meaning. I resist the idea that academics only have one idea in their lives, but I do seem inclined to revisit my earlier project now, unfashionably late, focusing not on servants in particular but more generally on figures, including servants, who are both marginal and poor. Perhaps I have unfinished business.

When Anna first mentions the dream, sometime into her affair with Vronsky, she takes it as a premonition that she will die. Since the dream comes up again in her death scene, it has been easy for critics to feel they are acknowledging it merely by linking it to her fateful descent toward suicide, whether as tragedy or self-punishment. But the details, as she divulges them to Vronsky, clearly exceed the function of, say, atmospheric foreshadowing: "there was something standing in the bedroom, in the corner. . . . And this something turned, and I saw it was a muzhik with a dishevelled beard, small and frightening. I wanted to run away, but he bent over a sack and rummaged in it with his hands. . . . He rummages and mutters in French, very quickly, and rolling the *r*s in his throat, you know: '*Il faut le*

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battre le fer, le broyer, le pétrir . . .' And I was so frightened that I wanted to wake up, and I woke up . . . but I woke up in a dream. And I wondered what it meant. And Kornei [the servant] says to me: 'You'll die in childbirth, dear, in childbirth . . .' And I woke up" (Tolstoy 2000: 361–62).

As you know, Anna does not die in childbirth. It is not that kind of novel. So what kind of novel is it?

In spite of its devastating satire of the mysticism to which some of its idle aristocrats are attracted, the novel is not totally allergic to a sort of magical realism *avant la lettre*, even if (like *Jane Eyre*) it indulges in magical realism very sparingly (doing the hunting scene from inside a dog's point of view would have to count). The most important instance is when Vronsky has almost the exact dream. Which we get *before* we get Anna's, and about which Vronsky says nothing, so that Anna cannot mull it over as a supernatural coincidence or message from the beyond: "'What was that terrible thing I saw in my dream? Yes, yes. The muzhik tracker, I think, small, dirty, with a dishevelled beard, was bending down and doing something, and he suddenly said some strange words in French. Yes, that's all there was to the dream,' he said to himself. 'But why was it so horrible?' He vividly recalled the peasant again and the incomprehensible French words the peasant had uttered, and horror sent a chill down his spine" (355–56).

Thinking like a man, Vronsky associates the figure in his dream with the masculine activity of hunting: his muzhik is a tracker. Anna, as a woman, naturally associates the figure in the dream with the female space of her bedroom. In other words, the suggestion is that though this is something each experiences in a gendered way, it need not be taken as *about* gender, and it is certainly not first and foremost an exclusive account of female sexual subjectivity. It seems more plausible to take it as representing an experience of class that Anna and Vronsky have in common.

Online study guides, which advise that the muzhik dream is a good topic for an A paper, interpret it as an omen or foreshadowing of Anna's fate. That seems worth at best a B. Gary Saul Morson (2003) reads it in terms of Anna's fatalism, a psychologizing of fate that maybe gets the grade up to a B+. Politicized rather than psychologized, the dream might as well be taken to signify the premonition of an actual collective fate, with or without fatalism. Dreamers, like those who are about to die, are credited with the ability to perceive what is otherwise obscured by distance, whether temporal or social. It is after his dying brother says that the serfs are no better off after emancipation that we are told Levin "had always felt the injustice of his abundance as compared with the poverty of the people" (Tolstoy 2000: 93).

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It seems plausible that one form of rule breaking—breaking the unwritten rule that the realist novel will not admit mystical or supernatural causes, or the mystical or supernatural at all—should be associated with another form of rule breaking: breaking the rule that anything of real significance to the novel will be said or done by characters who are neither too high above nor too far below the average class position of the novel's readers. I can imagine exceptions and objections to this rule and will welcome examples—as all lovers of the novel should—but for now I will plow ahead rather than stop to qualify.

The idea of a violation of fundamental rules helps make sense of a "something" that suddenly turns into a some*one*, a thing that reveals itself to be a person. (More might be made, and probably has been somewhere in the criticism, of Tolstoy's frequent use of the word *something*, which often signals an evasion which is at least provisionally irredeemable, the lack of a word that Tolstoy himself both wants and is unable to fill in.) The sense of a fundamental violation also applies, more obviously, to the "horror" (Vronsky) and "terror" (Anna) that accompany the dream for both of them. Fear is the political emotion that more than any other keeps the majority in its place. Here fear is relocated from the majority to the minority that rules them. The idea of a fundamental violation of unwritten rules is also there, in the fact that a muzhik is speaking French. French is used in the novel exclusively by the Russian aristocracy and is used in particular in the presence of the servants, where its purpose is self-evidently to ensure that the servants will not understand. Here, it is the representative of the servant class who speaks French, and it is the masters—though they do speak French—who nevertheless do not understand it when it is spoken by others in their presence. That is too neat a reversal to be accidental or merely an index of social disorder.

There is also an obvious and even larger reversal in the fact that the muzhik is *not paying attention* to Anna. Recall that for her, his not paying attention to her is the biggest source of her terror. The assumption that, as a woman, Anna wants attention from a man, hence that this is a simple reference to her fear that Vronsky is now turning away from her, does something less than justice to the detail. Readers who take it in this gendered way are domesticating her story and missing, I think, an almost revolutionary gesture of disrespect. What is normal in Anna's society is for the landowners to pay no attention to their servants and peasants. That's the silent norm that is being loudly reversed here. And this reversal of an ordinary, structural, unnoticed inattention is heightened, I would say, by the "mutter-

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ing," which occurs in both dreams. Muttering (to restate the obvious) means speaking in a low or indistinct voice, as if not having decided whether one is merely speaking to oneself or also to the other. It would already be an affront to the socially superior other even if it did not also signify murmuring or grumbling, as in complaint. In both senses, there is a violation of unwritten rules: the disrespect of not speaking up to make oneself heard in the presence of one's masters, and the disrespect of complaint about work one is (in general) being forced by the masters to do.

Having underlined the repeated and glaringly unconcealed element of social reversal, I can go on, perhaps too predictably, to redescribe the word *over* so as to emphasize not its sexuality but more social reversal. The muzhik is not just "over the iron," but "over" *her*. That is, he is noticed to be higher than he is supposed or assumed to be. (Browning sees sexual violence in an earlier moment when the shadow of a muzhik on a train platform "slips *under* [Anna's] legs" [2000: 527] as the sound of a hammer is heard—clearly linked by the hammer to the later dream, but not so clearly linked to sexuality.) The text raises the muzhik up, making him higher than he would or should be. It is at least as plausible here to think of a violation of social hierarchy as of sexual positions.

For the moment, I am stymied by the rolling of the *r*'s in the throat (perhaps a regional or flawed French?) and by the sack in which the muzhik is rummaging in Anna's version of the dream (assuming we should not immediately take the Freudian route and identify the sack with the female genitalia). But there is a peasant carrying a sack who gets off the train in the scene where Anna meets Vronsky, and that might induce us to entertain a literal-minded alternative. The sack is the timeless if not especially elegant carry-on preferred by people without much choice in their luggage. Maybe the sack is just a sack. And perhaps the sack's everyday humbleness goes with a certain humbleness in the rummaging. To rummage is to search, but to search for something that is felt to be there, available, within a pocket or drawer or box or sack; it is not to go on a quest for something far away and possibly nonexistent, but to feel for something imagined with some confidence that it exists and is readily accessible, close at hand. This close-at-handness, which is not what most readers remember from the dream, makes rummaging quite a different activity from pounding iron with a hammer or from the indistinctness of merely doing *something*—though the indistinctness that is a characteristic note here may simply reflect the fact that Anna and people like Anna do not really know what is done every day around them by those who make their lives possible. This is a point that

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Levin raises, in the other half of the novel, about the Muscovite aristocrats who cheerfully sell off their woods (as Tolstoy himself repeatedly did when young) in order to finance their expensive existence in the city and who know nothing about the value in rural labor of what they pay for their exquisite Moscow meals and other evening recreations.

On the face of it, Anna's tragic love affair does not seem to have much to do with Levin's assertion of the labor theory of value. But in one structural and very powerful sense it does. Anna's is the story of a fallen woman. It questions how one should feel about a woman's fall. But the novel is filled with references to *other* fallen women, most of them prostitutes, and to what might be thought of as their sexual labor—the labor on which the men at the top of Russian society, including Levin himself, depend. Since this theme is most ostentatious in the case of Vronsky, a sexual predator, it is important to remember that recourse to prostitutes is indeed presented as a universal, true for the entire class, including Levin himself, who is not presented as a sexual predator, at least during the period covered by the novel. It is his desire to confess that truth about his past that obscurely blocks his early married relations with Kitty. Tolstoy himself almost wrecked his marriage by showing his diaries to his very young wife right after their wedding, thereby offering her too much information about the many peasant women she now saw around her every day with whom he had had sex.

The crossover from the Levin plot to the Anna plot through sex work—the fallen woman and her alignment with the many working women who service wealthy men, a collective biographical fact of their class—reinforces the idea that the dream shared by Anna and Vronsky is in fact much more widely shared. You can call it a collective dream, but why not go all the way and call it a class dream? This is only a hypothesis, but there is further evidence for it. If the insistence on iron in the dream is a reminder that Levin has wanted his muzhiks to use iron plows, which are more efficient, rather than the traditional wooden plows they prefer, then this element of the dream can be assimilated to modernity, to Levin's guilt at forcing the peasants to modernize, or indeed—pushing the point a little further—to work for the profit of the landowners at all. That might still leave us wondering why the dream shows up in Anna and Vronsky, whose story has little to do (though not nothing) with agricultural methods. But in Tolstoy's world, *everything* has to do, ultimately, with agricultural labor. In Vronsky's dream, the muzhik's words are "strange" and "incomprehensible." In Anna's dream, the words are also described as "meaningless," but we do at least get the words, which are perfectly comprehensible *as* words, if not in their further

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associations or reasons for being pronounced. They describe operations that "must" be done, with some mystery surrounding where the imperative comes from. Is it the imperative to modernize, or merely the imperative to work? Or is it the imperative to work *for the benefit of others who do not work*? There is no mystery about the appropriateness of these operations to iron: *battre* means "strike," *broyer* means "grind, crush, or pulverize," *pétrir* means "knead, shape, or mold." In each case, this is an act of industrial or artisanal labor that transforms a raw and resistant material so as to render it more useful, but with an additional hint of aggression or violence, perhaps only because iron in its ordinary state is not very malleable. Critics tend to see these technical operations as destructive. But they are also creative. Perhaps this one-sidedness, seeing only the destructive and not the creative, is a sort of normal myopia, to be expected among those for whom transformative work itself is alien. The assumption that manual labor as such embodies aggression or violence suits what would have to be called the class position of the mental laborers, or the literate.

Tolstoy, as we know, asked his readers to stop thinking of manual labor, on which their survival depended, as something alien to their lives. And from that viewpoint, one notes that the French terms are *not* alien to their lives. Nor indeed are they distinctively modern. *Battre* also means "churn" or "thresh." *Broyer* also means "pound," as in the treatment of flax or hemp—or in the making of the ink that once upon a time was essential to the act of writing. And *pétrir* also means "knead" or "mold." Kneading, molding, pounding, churning, and threshing are all operations that would also be carried out routinely on an ordinary farm and would be applied to materials other than iron. The suggestion is that treating iron on the railway may not be different, finally, from how one would ordinarily treat milk or hay or flax or bread on a farm. It is not violent or aggressive, not offensively or threateningly modern in itself. It may be perceived as violent or aggressive only because of the unbearable dependence of those who do not work on those who do and of the violence that would have to be involved in tearing society away from that dependence.

Aside from the nightmare of the muzhik who ignores her, Anna's most famous dream is the dream in which she has two husbands. In that dream, having two husbands is miraculously not a problem. The dream carries an obvious utopian impulse, a reference outside the world of the novel to the possibility of a transformed society in which Anna's falling in love with Vronsky would not lead to inevitable tragedy. I mention this because I think there is another utopian impulse, if a less marked one, in

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the way the muzhik dream fuses industrial with agricultural work, making it part of an already existing Russian way of life. It is a more dramatic version of the dream logic that combines, in its description of the muzhik, "small and frightening": small would seem to go with reassuring, or *not* frightening. If one logic tells us that the muzhik is frightening even though he is small, another logic would allow that perhaps that which seems frightening perhaps need not after all be so frightening.[2] That possibility in itself might be frightening, in that it makes the prospect of an enormous social reversal seem less unlikely—less like the object of a utopian quest, and more like the result of rummaging in a sack.

In a more fully developed and satisfactory version of this reading—one that focused entirely on *Anna Karenina* and not on the larger question of the novel and the poor—I would want to determine how far my interpretation of the muzhik dream does or does not affect how one answers the question that everyone reading *Anna Karenina* has to confront: What goes wrong between Anna and Vronsky? I do not offer, as a potential answer, the claim that the novel is a simple allegory of the exploitation of sexual labor. Anna is not just a woman, she is also, among other things, a member of a particular class. (The almost unearthly physical vitality Anna shares with her brother, and which Tolstoy is tempted to place beyond good and evil, is the other characteristic I would most want to pursue.) I would claim, however, that the protomodernist nihilism or cynicism that Anna arrives at just before her suicide, which invites various psychological labelings, also makes sense as an achievement—more precisely, as the achievement of a perspective substantively free from the conventions of her society, a society that was doomed and sometimes felt itself to be doomed. Her dream belongs to that vision, a vision that is simultaneously painful and liberated. My assumption is that *only* a dream, and a dream that is uncannily dreamed by two characters, could be the bearer of a perspective so far beyond that society's everyday horizon. It is something like what Franco Moretti says about the magical realism of Gabriel García Márquez: it is there to indicate a social causality that comes from beyond the subjective horizon of the characters. A geopolitical horizon in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and here a class horizon.

In the book-length project to which this essay belongs, I will come back to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which (so I will argue) balances its geopolitical attention to American imperialism with a concern for domestic

2. On fear as a political affect, see Robin 2004.

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poverty as a fact that is not fully or even predominantly attributable to United Fruit. This concern is easy to miss but, as in *Anna Karenina*, impossible to ignore once it is pointed out and given its proper emphasis. But before saying more about this or others of the middle-class classics that are my chosen topic, let me pause over the obvious thing that Tolstoy does not do: present the poor not merely as muttering to themselves (and in a foreign language) but speaking out, at length and without obvious hindrance, in their own voice. Consider, for contrast, John James Bezer's *Autobiography of One of the Chartist Rebels of 1848* (1977), which was published serially in twelve issues of the *Christian Socialist* in 1851. Bezer's narrative begins as follows:

> ["A Chartist Rebel permitted to write in the *Christian Socialist*! I'll not take in another num"—"Hold, 'Tory Bill,' say nothing rashly." "What *do* poor people want? Isn't there a prison for those who *do* grumble, and a workhouse for those who *don't*, with a Bible and a Prayer-book in both places; and a Protestant (we'll have no Popery there)—a Protestant Chaplain to explain the texts properly, in order that they may know their duty to their superiors, and learn meekly to bow to all those placed in authority over them. *Can* the rich do more?" "Yes. They can 'do unto others as they would be done unto.'" (151)[3]

Bezer seizes the opportunity to speak about "what poor people want" and to speak in his own poor person's voice, an opportunity that the genre of the novel would rarely if ever accord the members of his class, even those who had distinguished themselves as he did by their courageous involvement in the history of their time. (Even in 1848, best sellers tended to be aristocratic historical romances; doubts remained as to whether the middle class was interesting enough for fiction.) But when he does speak, in fact even before he can speak, he imagines himself interrupted. The interruptions continue. The idea that one never does speak entirely or purely in one's own language, uninterrupted, might pass as a theoretical truism. Here it is staged with a certain dramatic immediacy.

This working-class autobiography begins enclosed by a square bracket. The square bracket introduces the voice of a reader who objects to the title and therefore does not want to read the text that in a sense has not yet begun. The bracket is not closed, allowing the autobiography proper

3. On Chartist fiction, see also Vargo 2017. I am grateful to Greg Vargo for teaching me more than I can say here about the special rewards of Chartist writing.

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to begin, for another few paragraphs. But in a less literal sense, it never does close. If we consider that the resistance attached to the voice of "Tory Bill" and to the form of dialogic interruption is constitutive of this rather brilliant piece of working-class writing, we may see why, *pace* Mikhail Bakhtin, working-class writing tends not to take the form of the novel. And we may also see why even *outside* the novel the working class, like the subaltern, cannot speak, at least not in its own voice.

The interruption comes from outside, in the sense that it expresses a political position with which the text will disagree: an embrace of religion that, then as now, associates virtue with humble acceptance of one's place in the world and with obedience to authority. But the author is on a first-name basis with "Tory Bill," who also seems to be a regular reader of *Christian Socialist*, an organ of the organized working class, and the suggestion is that the voice comes from within that collectivity. In any case, what is so striking about the opening of the *Autobiography* is how dialogic it is. Bezer stakes his own claim to a religious basis for his socialism—"'the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof'"—and ends the paragraph with a secular translation: "Shake hands with the poor, and 'Brothers be for a' that'" (151). But the next line plunges him back into the dialogic mode—more precisely, into resistance to his story. It is a one-sentence paragraph: "'Is there anything remarkable then in your life?'" (151). The answer to this question is another paragraph:

> "No, not very; except, perhaps, the Newgate affair—it is the life of millions in this "happy land," "the admiration of the world, and the *envy* of surrounding nations"—where glorious Commerce has reached such perfection that everything, even the blood, and sweat, and lives, of white slaves, is bought cheap and sold dear,—so dear that the average lives of the poor in some towns amount to about seventeen years." (151)

This paragraph, which is also dialogic, filled as it is with quotations from others, sarcastically inflected—happy land, admiration of the world, and envy of surrounding nations—is then followed by more of the dialogue format and Tory Bill: "Oh, I see it all now! You had *nought* to *lose* in 1848, and so your motto was, 'Down with everything, and up with nothing but anarchy, confusion, and civil war.' Thank God, however, the Special Constables, the 10th of April showed—" (151). The same insistent dialogism continues in the next paragraph: "Showed what?—that class had arisen against class, where there ought to be no classes; that the lower orders had to wait a

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little longer; that there was a great gulf fixed between the poor and the rich which nothing but a practical—mark! practical Christian Socialism can remove" (152). The attention of each speaker to the words just spoken is so tight that Bezer also interrupts himself—his "mark!" stops his own sentence in its onward flow so as to confront the listener's presumed objection.

Bezer will eventually get to his birth and then to the childhood hardships that resemble in some points those of David Copperfield and other well-known novelistic protagonists. His voice, like that of David or Jane Eyre, should be considered a civilizational accomplishment, and quite a dazzling one. But while he is not exactly muttering, nor is he exactly muttering to himself, his voice cannot be considered a pure working-class antithesis to Anna's muzhik dream.

Like other working-class narrators, Bezer says very little about courtship and marriage; he passes over in a few sentences those matters that the novel and its middle-class readers tended to put at the center. But David Vincent credits Bezer with establishing almost uniquely "a convincing balance between his private and his public life" in his extended and nuanced treatment of his father (Vincent 1977: 149). Like middle-class writers, he uses Standard English, and he goes so far as to mock the Cockney of the policeman, a political enemy but also a member of the working class. It comes as no surprise to learn that Bezer was the publisher of the *Christian Socialist* up to the moment when it folded, cutting short his autobiography, and as such (like many other Chartists) was arguably by this time in his life hanging on to the lower rung of the middle class. He writes as if he had been "called out," in the duelist's sense, responding not because he needs to express himself or because he thinks his life is special but precisely because his life is representative of many other lives, representative of a community that is under attack and to which he feels, strongly, that he belongs. But that community cannot be simply identified as the working class. It is certainly not the "rabble," as in Edmund Burke and G. W. F. Hegel, which is nothing unless and until it is roused, and which neither thought *could* be genuinely roused or properly organized. It is a *political* community—we might also call it a movement—that has rules of belonging that are both more restrictive (the member must demonstrate solidarity) and looser. As Antonio Gramsci said, in order to be successful, a political party or movement does not require and indeed cannot tolerate perfectly and exclusively shared class identity. It cannot do its job without addressing class others, or others whose class positions are not easy to assign with precision.

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It is the incompatibility between class identity and politics that justifies a project of political criticism like mine that evades class identity and focuses instead on the vague concept of poverty. In the novel, as in politics, poverty is not a fixed identity, and its lack of fixity—which is however saturated with the facts of deprivation, and thus very far from being an instance of indeterminacy for its own sake—helps make novels, too, do the work they can do. In middle-class novels, poverty can define a point of origin that the protagonist will eventually leave behind. What Vladimir Propp says of the hero of the folktale—that his initial position in the plot is defined by lack or deprivation—is arguably true much more generally, and if so, poverty too would become, narratively speaking, a general if only a temporary condition. (Note that for Tolstoy, even the muzhik is not a fixed class position: it includes the new, grasping, and acquisitive protobourgeois, buying up the forests of the idle, debt-ridden aristocrats and driving a hard bargain, like the father of Julien Sorel in *The Red and the Black*, an unpleasant "peasant" who, one forgets, owns a sawmill.) Poverty is therefore not external to the middle class.[4]

This is much the same position articulated from below, as it were, by Jacques Rancière, the contemporary philosopher who has thought most seriously about poverty and its place in discourse. As James Swenson explains, for Rancière, the militancy of workers in the nineteenth century "expressed a conscious rejection of an identity as 'worker' and stemmed in no small part from a tenacious desire and effort to appropriate the leisure and culture of the bourgeoisie. But this made them neither fish nor fowl; in many ways they were either pseudobourgeois or lumpen proletarians. Their voices, as they have survived until today, may be true, but they are not 'authentic' expressions of a workers' culture or ethos" (Swenson 2009: 262).

This is not always Rancière's position. In *The Philosopher and His Poor*, his theory of why a discourse like philosophy should be interested

4. It is true that for much of the period of the novel, poverty was moralized: if you were poor, your poverty was thought to be a result of your bad character, and character was thought to be immutable. But this theory was roundly rejected by many of the period's most influential writers, including Adam Smith, Thomas Paine, and Henry Mayhew. "Paine believed that 'the hordes of miserable poor with which old countries abound' were 'the consequence of what in such countries they call government'" (Stedman Jones 2004: 22). And "Smith never employed the notion of 'indolence' in connection with the laboring poor—this he reserved for depictions of the landed classes and the established clergy. . . . Smith made no reference to the 'goad of necessity,' nor did he suggest any essential difference of mentality between rich and poor" (98). See also Stedman Jones 1984.

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in the poor is more cynical about philosophy's motives.[5] The philosopher *needed* the overworked poor, who supposedly had no time to reflect, he argued, because it was by contrast with the supposedly time-deprived necessity of nonphilosophers and especially those who worked with their hands that the philosopher made the case for the superior value and legitimacy of his own freely acquired knowledge: "the freedom—his own—that would be corrupted if it were refracted in the shattered time of worn-down servitudes and saved-up leisures, in the uncertain light of demi-knowledges and demi-cultures, in the disoriented space of pathways and dead ends where people searched not long ago for what rebellious workers and dreamers called 'emancipation'—the self-transformation of the slave into a human being" (Rancière 2003: 147).[6]

The principle of self-constitution by means of exclusion or denigration will be familiar, and examples are not hard to come by where, much as Rancière finds in philosophy and sociology, fiction too allows a prosperous protagonist to realize himself while or even by denying the possibility of emancipation or self-transformation to an impoverished other. Consider Edmund Wilson's 1942 novella, "The Princess with the Golden Hair." In making his personal discovery of poverty, Wilson's highly cultured narrator follows his sensuality, which seems to determine both his desire and his disgust: "when her mother had answered the door and I had followed her down to the basement, I saw that they were extremely poor and I grasped what it meant to be poor. They had only three rooms to themselves, and they had to cook or sleep in all of them. They were submerged in that close smell of poverty—of boiled clothes, unaired bedding and smoke and grease—which seems a permanent half-suffocated state just this side of complete extinction" (Wilson 1980: 226–27). He has been trying to talk class to his new working-class lover, but has given it up:

> To tell her that the fur workers like her mother, the garment workers like her cousins, and the waitresses at Field's like herself were expected to dislodge their employers and the big figures she read

5. Bruno Bosteels finds in Rancière himself a critique of the over-simplified division between haves and have-nots that Rancière sometimes falls into in his discussions of the poor. "The plebs: those excluded from power? But who is ever totally excluded from power?" (2009: 168).

6. According to Swenson, it is Rancière's style, specifically the style of free indirect discourse, that has been taken as the signature technique of the novel, that "allows him to speak about floor layers and university professors in a single discourse" (2009: 258–59).

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> about in the papers and to make themselves the rulers of society—must seem to her, I could see by her silence, to be thrusting on herself and her people a role for which she knew they were not fitted and for which I must know they were not—so that I soon began to feel silly and insincere; and my Marxist way of talking seemed at the same time to imply that Anna and her family were at present such "underprivileged" beings as to have been practically outlawed from humanity, when the fact was that she and I, in our manners with one another and in the freedom with which we both bound ourselves, as it were, by emotional contact, were meeting on equal terms—so that to force into the situation the conception of the Marxist proletariat was to be guilty of, not merely bad taste, but of violence against everything that was good between us. I found myself embarrassed, too—and dropped the subject and gave her more beer. (220–21)

The last moments of their relation have a beauty of which one would like to think Wilson was conscious. He quotes in its entirety a letter of farewell from Anna: "I have told Stan I would marry him. He don't want me ever to see you again, so I guess this is good-by. I am alright now. They told me at the clinic I can go to work soon. Don't call me but just write and type the address, because I have told Stan I wouldn't see you and somebody might tell him. This is good-by. Thanks for everything. Love, Anna" (308). This passage, set off in the text like a poem, is followed without commentary by the narrator's painterly reflections on a cocktail party he attended that same afternoon. "All the textures and shapes of people's well-kept-up places showed cold-washed and brilliant today in the strong October light and almost made looking at color and form an object in life by itself: the sides of a white garage gave planes of an incontaminable candor" (308). It is as if the narrator were daring the reader to imagine the two styles of "He don't want me to see you again" and "incontaminable candor," juxtaposed here on the same page, as equals in a marriage—or perhaps even as equals in the same society. Flaunting his credentials, he constitutes himself as an aesthetic connoisseur, and his lover, a representative of the poor who was not without aesthetic and emancipatory impulses of her own, pays a price that includes having those impulses blocked.

Wilson does his working-class lover no favors by letting her speak her own language—though he does so repeatedly and at length.[7] On the

7. I say "his" because Wilson was drawing directly on personal experience. See John Updike's "Afterword" to *Memoirs* as well as Friedman 1999. Updike comments: "One's

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contrary, one might say that in this manner he merely masks his cruelty, forcing her to reveal herself as she is and denying her aspiration to be something she is not, or is not yet. If so, this gesture of authoritarian permissiveness might be turned around, becoming a back-handed argument in favor of those novels, both before and since, which make no room for more or less realistic working-class language, or very little, and instead content themselves with obliqueness, perhaps structural or as imagistic as the dream-like muzhik muttering to himself. I am thinking, for example, of the throw-away moment in *Middlemarch* in which an agricultural laborer says, in almost incomprehensible dialect, that infrastructural improvements like the canals have benefitted the rich, not the poor: "it's been all aloike to the poor mon. What's the canells been t' him? They 'n brought him neyther me-at nor be-acon, nor wage to lay by, if he didn't save it wi' clemmin' his own inside. Times ha' got wusser for him sin' I war a young un. An' so it'll be wi' the railroads. They'll on'y leave the poor mon furfer behind" (Eliot 1977: 386). It is impressive that this gets stated. It is more impressive still that although Eliot's spokesmen do not agree with it, the novel leaves this statement unrefuted.

In Orhan Pamuk's *Snow*, to mention another modern classic, no major character speaks on behalf of the poor, and yet poverty is arguably central to the problematic around which the novel turns: whether Ka, the privileged secular metropolitan, can renegotiate a relationship to the homeland he has been away from for so long. When Ka, summoned to the headquarters of the coup, tells Sunay that he "may be starting to believe in God," Sunay responds that he is mistaken, but that in any case "it would make no sense to believe alone. You'd have to believe in him the same way the poor do; you'd have to become one of them" (Pamuk 2004: 219). The title of chapter 31, the crucial (and Dostoevskyan) chapter about the meeting at the Hotel Asia in which all the anticoup factions try to hammer out a common statement to be published in the West, is "We're Not Stupid, We're Just Poor!" (298). No faction claims this message—a message that keeps the focus on Turkey's subordination to the West but rules out political Islam's religious, cultural, identitarian view of it. Poverty does not confer an identity that anyone wants or needs to defend to the death. It exists in the West as well as the East, though not equally. A secular fact, poverty

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breath is snatched to see, in the journals, the patrician, pontifical Wilson led by sex to the edge of the abyss of poverty, its diseases, its tangled familial furies, its hopeless anonymity. He did not fall in" (Wilson 1980: 457).

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is no more central to the platform of the secularists than to the religious party. Predictably, then, it does not figure in the final statement. Yet it hangs heavily over the dynamics of the love triangle that gives the novel its final shape and thus over the politics of the novel as a whole.[8]

As I assemble and elaborate further examples, am I indulging in special pleading? One need not be a true believer in the novel or prepared to go to any lengths to make a political case for literature as such in order to feel that the subject of poor people in rich people's novels is less distinct than one might imagine from the subject of poor people in texts of their own, and secondly that there are discoveries to be made in this unlikely area that bring something of significance to politics as well as to literary criticism. As I argue in *The Beneficiary* (2017a), though with minimal attention to the form of the novel, those who wish for an end to economic inequality, wherever they themselves stand on the scale of deprivation, cannot put all their hopes on the poor.

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8. For a full exposition of this argument, see Robbins 2017b, from which these sentences are taken.

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