

Diagnosing Literary Genius: A Cultural History of Psychiatry in Russia, 1880-1930, and: Posmertnaia diagnostika genialnosti: Eduard Bagritskii, Andrei Belyi, Vladimir Maiakovskii v kolleksiit Instituta mozga: Materialy iz arkhiva G. I. Poliakova (review)

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Article:

Specialists in the new sciences of the mind focused much of their attention in the late 19th and early 20th centuries on classifying mental abnormalities. This was an international endeavor, everywhere tinged by politics and culture, and, as a growing body of fascinating literature demonstrates, Russians were energetic participants. In some respects the efforts of Russian psychiatrists, neuropathologists, and psychologists paralleled those of their counterparts in other societies; in Russia during that era of revolutionary ferment, however, literary culture, medical science, and politics interacted in particularly interesting and distinctive ways.

Among recent works analyzing the volatile mix are monographs by Irina Sirotkina and Monika Spivak, each of whom examines efforts by Russian mental scientists to "diagnose genius." That both authors use these same words in their titles suggests the nature and the presumed importance of the project. Medical scientists and practitioners disagreed as to whether "genius" was a beneficial or a worrisome attribute, but there was near universal agreement that it represented a deviation from normality requiring investigation using the tools of medical science. The methodologies applied to the task varied over time and in accordance with the professional training of the specialists involved. So did the extra-scientific goals of the endeavor. Despite the commonalities suggested by the similar titles of these two books, they are quite different. They utilize different kinds of data and focus their gaze on very different dimensions of the larger project. Sirotkina has written a cultural history of Russian psychiatry, focusing in particular upon psychiatric analyses of literary geniuses. Spivak provides us with an account of the establishment of the Soviet Institute of the Brain, examining in detail its largely covert efforts to study deceased geniuses. The books complement each other nicely, and together offer readers a penetrating glance at some of the intersections between science, culture, and politics in late imperial and early Soviet Russia.

The late-19th-century obsession with medical classifications of "genius," as well as other "abnormal" mental states, was part and parcel of developments that transformed the international discourse concerning deviance in general. An earlier generation of reform-minded experts had insisted that most of society's misfits could be rehabilitated or cured, and had enthusiastically urged their societies to support new approaches they promised would enable deviants to become productive members of society. Governments and private philanthropic groups responded by pouring large sums of money into the construction of asylums, penitentiaries, and reformatories, within which miraculous transformations were supposed to occur. Among the most optimistic of the specialists were mid-19th-century psychiatrists, who boasted that, given proper conditions, they could achieve cure rates of nearly 100 percent.

Russia's earliest psychiatrists shared this belief in the curability of insanity. Initially they took the position that people from all social backgrounds were susceptible to mental disorders; however, they argued that individuals exposed to abstract and complicated ideas were at particular risk. Excessive intellectual stimulation was said to

produce mental exhaustion (even for "geniuses"). It could even lead to insanity, particularly when the exposure was intense and began at an early age.¹

That generation of psychiatrists located most of the causes of insanity in the social environment. Although their theories contained the seeds of a radical critique of modernization and of the Russian social order, their goal was not to change society. Their asylums fit comfortably within the existing order. Indeed, the most marked differences in treatment were evident not between categories of pathology, but across social strata.²

Confidence that deviants could be returned to normalcy eroded steadily in the waning years of the 19th century. As happened elsewhere, total institutions in Russia filled to overflowing and their long-term residents came disproportionately from the lower social orders. Faced with a persistent population of indigent deviants, the discourse of rehabilitation and cure was superseded by a pessimism expressed in concepts like "degeneration," "feeble-mindedness," and "inborn criminality." While environmental causes were never totally dismissed (particularly in Russia), newer theories explained most abnormalities in terms of biological inheritance.³ They also assumed that experts could diagnose faulty heredity by examining the physical, psychological, and social characteristics of deviant individuals.

Dealing with the "biologically deviant" was a matter of great concern. The menace represented by feeble-minded prostitutes, born criminals, and even gifted degenerates was deemed to extend far beyond any harm they might cause by their own inappropriate behavior. "Degeneration" was said to threaten the entire future of civilization. Consider the alarming analysis of Pavel Ivanovich Kovalevskii, Professor of Psychiatry at Khar'kov University, who warned that "the majority of cases of mental illness are transmitted from parents to children. Furthermore, with each passing generation these disorders become more severe, finally culminating in the degeneration of the family line."⁴ Writing for the general public, Kovalevskii described the process of degeneration in detail. In the first generation one finds individuals with "nervous temperaments," i.e., a tendency to irritability and passionate or violent outbursts. Members of the second generation suffer from "neuroses," such as epilepsy and hysteria. Their offspring are prone to even more dangerous and unpredictable behavior, often exhibiting well-known forms of insanity. Should such individuals be permitted to reproduce, society is then confronted with a fourth and final generation of idiots, the feeble-minded, and deaf-mutes — most if not all of whom are certain to be sterile.⁵

Russia rejected the most extreme of the social policies (e.g., compulsory sterilization) that some eugenicists derived from these organic theories of deviance.⁶ Nonetheless, the discourse of degeneration was reflected in late imperial social policy as well as in scientific and literary culture. As we learn from Spivak, some of the methodologies derived from these theories lasted well into the Soviet era.

Implicit in such theories was the idea that individuals and even entire "races" of people "could be ranked in a linear scale of mental worth."⁷ A corollary notion was that manifestations of deviance could be classified in order of increasing remoteness from an assumed, albeit rarely articulated, norm. In order to identify and assess deviations, the experts utilized a wide array of indicators. They weighed brains and counted their convolutions. They measured the thickness of skulls. They examined jaw size, arm length, ear size, visual acuity, sensitivity to pain, and a host of other physical traits. They also looked beyond the physical body, compiling detailed family, medical, and psychological histories to prove that degeneration was present or would occur in succeeding generations.

That feeble-mindedness posed a grave threat to society was taken for granted by those caught up in this obsession with measurement and classification, as was the conviction that it was most common among people in the lowest social strata. But what of individuals at the other end of that linear scale, those who evidenced special gifts of creativity or intellect? Debate about the nature of "genius" was not new; however, inspired by notions of degeneration, fin-de-siècle theorists took the discussion in new directions.⁸ Some considered "genius" to be evidence of degeneration, albeit of a "higher" sort that emerged when "old, highly-bred families begin to show symptoms" (cited in Sirotkina, 167). Other scientists were more optimistic, regarding special

talents as a sign of "progeneration," which was "a highly progressive phenomenon ... [and] a step towards man's ideal evolution" (Sirotkina, 40).

Of the many possible manifestations of "genius" in 19th-century Russia, literary creativity was of greatest interest to Russia's mental scientists. While this is an indication of the importance of literary culture in late imperial society, it is also a reflection of the prevalence of psychiatric themes in the fiction of the time. Pushkin wrote of the horrors of the madhouse. Gogol' chronicled the descent into insanity. Chekhov, Dostoevskii, Tolstoi, Garshin, and Andreev also explored the psyche of the madman and the social milieu of the asylum. That representatives of the new "scientific" approaches to mental disorders would decide to address that body of literature is hardly unexpected, yet Sirotkina is the first scholar to examine the evolution of this discussion over an extended period of time.⁹

One psychiatric response to these literary works was to assess the validity of individual authors' descriptions of mentally disturbed individuals and their treatment in the empire's madhouses. It is unlikely that the doctors regarded writers of fiction as direct competitors. Nonetheless, engaged as they were in a determined effort to establish the uniqueness and superiority of their own expertise, psychiatrists could hardly be expected to leave unchallenged descriptions of psychiatric symptomatology by extremely popular and influential lay writers. After all, if being able to portray complicated forms of mental illness with accuracy was a sign of literary "genius," what might that suggest about the capabilities of the experts who were able to "diagnose" the geniuses?¹⁰

Nor could the experts fail to comment upon powerfully written and widely read depictions of the empire's mental institutions. At minimum they could hope to exempt medical professionals from direct responsibility for the deplorable conditions and repeated therapeutic failures. Furthermore, the elevated status of literary "geniuses" could be used to advance professional agendas. Sirotkina focuses at some length, for example, on Nikolai E. Osipov's use of Tolstoy's writings to articulate and Russify Freudian notions, arguing that, "there could hardly have been a better way to facilitate the reception of psychoanalysis in Russia" (Sirotkina, 107).¹¹ Psychiatrists also took for granted that creative works could help to diagnose individual mental pathology. A writer's ability to produce "accurate" fictional portrayals of insanity was sometimes interpreted as evidence of personal experience with the problem. The doctors wrote numerous medical biographies for which they relied heavily on analysis of the "patient's" fictional writings. These "pathographies" are central to Sirotkina's analysis. She contends that they were far more than simple, straightforward exercises in medical diagnosis. They "provided a stage for physicians who wanted to express a world-view, make moral as well as professional claims, and thereby integrate their special interests with a wider culture" (Sirotkina, 4).

A variety of literary figures were subjected to this kind of scrutiny. Debate raged, for example, as to whether Gogol', whom most agreed had been mentally disturbed, possessed a "degenerate constitution" or was a "progenerating" genius. Evaluations of later writers (prominent among them Dostoevskii) were similarly contradictory, and, as Sirotkina points out, over time pathography, cultural criticism, and politics in Russia became elaborately intertwined: physician played literary critic and literary criticism took the form of medical diagnosis.

After the turn of the century, psychiatric analysis, like other forms of cultural criticism, became more overtly political. Psychiatrists never abandoned the effort to identify and explain individual pathology, but they also turned their attention to larger and more complex collective phenomena. In the final years before the revolution, entire creative movements came under psychiatric scrutiny. As before, the primary focus was literature. Decadent and Symbolist writings, in particular, were closely examined, filled as they ostensibly were with "degenerates, neurasthenics, psychopaths" (Sirotkina, 120). Psychiatrists cast their nets ever wider, commenting upon modern styles of painting, sculpture, theater, and even participation in radical politics.

Some of these analyses focused on the presumed risks to mental health posed by the activity in question: "modern art reinforced nervousness in society." Others found pathology in the collective psyche, evidenced, for

example, in "the rising rate of hysteria and neurasthenia and the decreasing resistance to authority" (Sirotkina, 123, 127). Leftist psychiatrists regarded social and political change as a necessary precondition for improving the collective mental health. Those farther to the right advocated individual level solutions such as mental health education. As Sirotkina points out, by the end of the imperial era, there was little that the members of this highly polarized profession agreed upon except that "literature was an index of mental health ... [and that it] should provide guidance for society, especially during critical periods" (Sirotkina, 144).

The point at which the works of Sirotkina and Spivak intersect is in the examination of efforts to "diagnose genius" in the years immediately following the Bolshevik Revolution. Although war and revolution left psychiatry in disarray, members of the profession quickly regrouped. Many were optimistic that the new order would afford them new opportunities to put their expertise to work — helping to shape the new Soviet man and woman. Sirotkina describes an array of psychiatric projects in the 1920s. Some endured (e.g., the mental health dispensary system); others remained on paper. Among the latter was a proposal to create Departments of Social Welfare for Mad Geniuses.

Debate about the relationship between genius and pathology continued long after 1917, and for a while psychiatrists continued to treat literature as a diagnostic tool. Inspired by ideological and creative fervor, authors of early Soviet pathographies reevaluated classic writers. No one was exempt, not even such exalted figures as Pushkin and Tolstoi. At the decade's end, however, this activity ceased, silenced by the same forces that eliminated or sent underground virtually every field of study that "linked the biological and the social."¹² The classics were restored to the literary pantheon, and the genre of pathography disappeared.

While public debate about the nature of genius ceased with the "Great Break," efforts to study it did not. Sirotkina ends her account in 1930. This is the point at which Spivak begins, just as Maiakovskii's recently "harvested" brain is carried off for scientific analysis. As she notes, the earliest analyses of famous brains occurred prior to 1917, but it was in the 1920s that proposals emerged to institutionalize the practice. In the heady days of the NEP, faith in the potential of science to solve social problems and advance human potential was exceptionally high. Examining the brains of "degenerate" or otherwise diseased individuals to look for physical evidence of pathology was already standard practice. It was but a short logical leap to the conclusion that anatomical analysis of the brains of talented individuals would further the understanding of "genius." One of the most visible of the "quests for the material foundations of genius" began with the death of Lenin, after which his brain was retrieved and preserved for analysis.¹³ Scientists had been weighing and measuring human brains for decades. Despite the flawed assumptions and methodologies characteristic of this work, many of its basic premises had yet to be discredited. Among these was the assumption that brain size was a direct indicator of mental worth. Since Lenin had been deemed a genius (clearly of the progenerative sort) prior to the postmortem examination, it was incumbent upon those who performed it to find confirming evidence. Lenin's brain turned out to be rather smaller than expected, a potentially troubling problem, but one that scientists managed to solve by some subtle refining of the normal range.

Spivak credits Vladimir Mikhailovich Bekhterev, one of Russia's most famous neuropathologists, with the idea of preserving the brains of gifted individuals in a "Soviet Pantheon," where they would remain accessible for future study. She examines the governmental response to this proposal, noting that it came to fruition only after Bekhterev's death in 1927 and in a different form and location from the ones he had originally proposed.¹⁴ The brain collection was housed at the Institute of the Brain, an outgrowth of the laboratory that studied the brain of Lenin. After the 1920s much of its work was carried out in secret, and little information was released about either the collection or the types of analysis in which its staff were engaged. The impetus for Spivak's book was her discovery of a privately held collection of documents about some of the institute's famous subjects. She describes a chance meeting with the daughter of Grigorii Izrailovich Poliakov, a scientific worker at the institute in the 1930s. Poliakov's daughter, herself a former institute scientist, bequeathed the documents to the Andrei Belyi Museum, which recently received authorization to publish them.

Among the "geniuses" deemed worthy of study by the Institute of the Brain were individuals from many walks of life. Joining the collection in the 1930s were such august personages as Vygotskii and Pavlov from the world of science. There were also important political figures from the USSR and abroad. In addition to Kalinin, Kirov, Krupskaiia, Lunacharskii, and Kuibyshev, the collection housed the brains of communist party leaders from France, Japan, and Germany. Leading literary figures, including Gorkii, Belyi, and Maiakovskii were included, as were Stanislavskii, the composer Ippolitov, and even a circus animal trainer. The collection was still making acquisitions as recently as 1989, at which time it acquired the brain of Andrei Sakharov.

One of Spivak's fascinating discoveries was that the institute devoted to the study of the brains of Soviet geniuses also collected extensive biographical and psychological information about its subjects. In other words, the effort to understand the "material foundations" of genius focused on psyches and social relationships as well as on brain tissue. Institute staff conducted extensive interviews with family members and friends. Much of the book consists of unedited material about three early Soviet literary figures: Vladimir Maiakovskii, Eduard Bagritskii, and Andrei Belyi. The material is presented as she found it in the Poliakov family archive. These are not typical biographical documents. In addition to accounts of events in each subject's life, they include assessments of hereditary endowment, physique, psychomotor and sensory skills, emotional states, habits, willpower, intellect, and imagination.

The goal of the institute was to develop a thorough portrait of the physical, psychological, and social functioning of each individual. In that sense its work constitutes a Soviet reinvention of the pathography, a form which Sirotkina contended had been laid to rest by the end of the 1920s. Continuities in method and in assumptions about the abnormality of genius are clearly evident. The scientists who organized and maintained the Institute of the Brain would probably have agreed with earlier psychiatrists that "a mentally balanced man makes neither wars and revolutions nor writes poetry."¹⁵ However, from the early 1930s onward their work was based on the assumption that the imbalance was in a "positive" direction. Pre-revolutionary mental scientists, on the other hand, heatedly debated the issue. While relatively few psychiatrists wrote pathographies, those who did so vigorously and publicly defended their differing diagnoses of genius. The Soviet Institute of the Brain carried its work out behind closed doors. While the public nature of the pre-revolutionary debate facilitated Sirotkina's analysis of the motives and methods of its participants, Spivak's account of the data collection activities of the Institute of the Brain leaves the reader with unanswered questions: were the data ever analyzed? If so, what were the findings? Might they have raised ideologically uncomfortable questions about some of those "progenerative" geniuses? Hopefully, future researchers will be able to answer some of these questions. In the interim, scholars in many fields of study will find reading both of these two works a rewarding endeavor.

Notes

1. A. Dranitsyn, *O pomeshatel'stvo, pri pervonachal'nom ego poiavlenii i lechenii ego vne zavedenii* (St. Petersburg, 1867), 38—39.
2. The notion that the simple folk suffered from different ailments than did the privileged classes was, of course, not unique to psychiatry. Lower expenditures for the peasantry were often justified on the grounds that they suffered from "simpler" illnesses.
3. Laura Engelstein discusses some of the reasons why Russian scientists were reluctant to abandon completely environmental explanations for deviance. See *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 128—64.
4. Pavel Ivanovich Kovalevskii, *Rukovodstvo k pravil'nomu ukhodu za dushevnyimi bol'nymi — dlia rodstvennikov i okruzhaiushchikh* (Kharkov, 1880), 103—4.
5. *Ibid.*, 104—5. Kovalevskii's analysis is based upon that of the French psychiatrist, B. A. Morel.
6. See, for example, Mark B. Adams, "Eugenics as Social Medicine in Revolutionary Russia," in *Health and Society in Revolutionary Russia*, ed. Susan Gross Solomon and John F. Hutchinson (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990).
7. Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 86.
8. For a historical overview of the various perspectives, see George Becker, *The Mad Genius Controversy: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1978).

9. Other researchers have examined some of these themes by focusing on individual authors or examining the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis. See, for example, James L. Rice, *Dostoevsky and the Healing Art: An Essay in Literary and Medical History* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1985); and Alexander Etkind, *Eros of the Impossible: The History of Psychoanalysis in Russia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), trans. Noah and Maria Rubins [originally published as *Eros nevozmozhnogo: Istoriia psikhoanaliza v Rossii* (St. Petersburg: Medusa, 1993)].
10. The psychiatrist Vladimir Fedorovich Chizh, for example, praised Dostoevskii's rich and accurate depictions of mental illness, observing that "only a very gifted psychiatrist would discover [their] real and complete meaning," cited in Sirotkina, *Literary Genius*, 51.
11. Osipov was one of the earliest and most prolific champions of Freudian theory in Russia. For other discussions of this subject, see Martin A. Miller, *Freud and the Bolsheviks: Psychoanalysis in Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); James L. Rice, *Freud's Russia: National Identity in the Evolution of Psychoanalysis* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1993); and Etkind, *Eros*.
12. Field, "Eugenics," 219.
13. Spivak, *Posmertnaia*, 22.
14. Bekhterev proposed housing the collection at his institute in St. Petersburg. After his death the decision was made to locate it in Moscow, one highly symbolic victory in a long-standing struggle between mental scientists in the two cities. See Julie V. Brown, "Heroes and Non-Heroes: Recurring Themes in the Historiography of Russian-Soviet Psychiatry," in *Discovering the History of Psychiatry*, ed. Mark S. Micale and Roy Porter (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).
15. The statement was made by G. V. Segalin, who attributed it to the German psychiatrist Ernst Kretschmer. See Sirotkina, 167.