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RUSSIAN WOLVES IN FOLKTALES AND LITERATURE OF THE PLAINS

A QUESTION OF ORIGINS

PAUL SCHACH

For the past several years, my research associate, Robert Buchheit, and I have collected recordings of German dialects spoken by people advanced in years who immigrated to the United States and settled in the Great Plains region decades ago. Our purpose has been to acquire aural records of folk languages, to study the linguistic transformations that have occurred in them, and to preserve permanently languages that will soon disappear. In the course of our research, we have encouraged our informants to speak freely of their personal experiences, family histories, customs, and culture. The numerous recordings that we have made also include many folktales from Europe.¹

A large proportion of our informants, most of whom reside on farms or in small towns in Nebraska, Kansas, and the Dakotas, are Germans from Russia. The ancestors of these

people emigrated originally from Germany to Russia beginning in 1764 during the reign of Catherine the Great, who was herself a princess of German birth. Thousands of Germans were encouraged by the Russian government to form virtually autonomous colonies in the then sparsely populated districts north of the Black Sea and in the region of the Volga River. The migration to Russia continued into the nineteenth century until approximately 1860. Meanwhile the German colonies in Russia grew and prospered until the 1870s, when the government undertook a program of Russianization aimed at breaking down the cultural exclusiveness of the German colonies and integrating the people into Russian society. Objecting strongly to this cultural imperialism, more than one hundred thousand Russian Germans chose to emigrate to the United States, where they settled chiefly in the Great Plains region.²

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RUSSIAN-GERMAN FOLKTALES

Among the folktales that these Germans brought to the Great Plains are wolf stories, dozens of which Buchheit and I have recorded in recent years. They fall into two distinct groups: folktales with happy, often humorous,

endings and those that end tragically as packs of famished wolves ferociously attack and devour human beings.

A typical example of the first type is the story of Fritz and the wolf, told to me in German dialect by an informant in Henderson, Nebraska:

On the way home Fritz encountered a wolf. What to do? He had been told that wolves do not attack dead people. And so he lay down absolutely still. The wolf stood over him, and its saliva dropped down on his head. He grabbed the wolf's front paws and held them so that the wolf could not bite him, and so he walked home, carrying the wolf on his back. When he came home, he banged the wolf against the door and called out: "Father, open up, I've got a live wolf on my back!" Then they turned the wolf and the dogs loose, and they chased the wolf away.

A Mennonite Russian-German from Marion, South Dakota, provided two examples of the tragic variety, both of which he heard from his immigrant grandparents. The first is as follows:

After a wedding the bride and groom set out for the next village in a sleigh with two drivers. Two other sleighs followed them. There were about twelve persons in all. Soon they were attacked by several packs of wolves that came out of the woods. The wolves killed the horses pulling two of the sleds and leaped into the sleighs and killed and devoured the people. The two drivers threw the bride and groom to the wolves in hope of escaping, but none of them made it to the next village. The wolves killed and devoured all the people and all the horses.

The second tale is similar. In this variation a child is thrown to the wolves; it survives while its evil, selfish parents are consumed:

There was a couple driving in a sleigh, and they had a child, and wolves attacked them. So they said, "To save ourselves, we'll throw out our child." They threw out the child, but the wolves kept attacking. When the villagers went to check on those people,

they found the baby, which the wolves never touched. But they killed and ate the man and woman. See, that child was wrapped in a blanket, and the wolves didn't get the scent of it right away. The child was alive.

In most versions of this story, however, a parent or parents sacrifice a child or several children in the vain hope of saving themselves. In one variant, recorded in Sutton, Nebraska, five children are sacrificed.

The most detailed and sophisticated story of all was recorded by Buchheit near Henderson. The narrator, a young Mennonite, told this tale in West-Prussian Low German:

In a village in Russia there was a wedding. That was not one of our Mennonite villages, but it may have been a German village in the vicinity. They had all had a bit too much to drink. After the wedding, the wedding party set out in sleds. They wanted to go to the next village. The other people all said they shouldn't do this because they were being plagued by wolves. Because it was winter and there were too many wolves, they should not leave the village. But they set out nonetheless. There were, I believe, seven sleds. The bride and groom were on one sled, and they had two drivers. There were three horses hitched to their sled, and they were always in the lead. The other sleds were each drawn by two horses, and there were too many people in all of them.

And when they were a certain distance from the village—perhaps halfway between the two villages—the wolves suddenly appeared. The snow was black with wolves. And the people drove the horses as hard as the harness and traces could bear. The hindmost sled tipped over, and the wolves devoured the people and the horses. And so it went with one sled after the other. Each time the wolves were delayed somewhat, but soon they caught up with the next sled. Then the horses and people screamed, and this happened again and again until there was only one sled left, the one with the bride and groom and the two drivers in it.

One of the drivers looked back, and the other one asked, "How many?"

"Oh," he said, "plenty." He said, "Enough for all of us—maybe forty, maybe fifty wolves."

And then the bride turned around. As soon as she looked backward, the driver seized her feet and threw her out. She screamed. The groom reached out to pull her back in, and the driver pushed him out too. The wolves devoured them.

By now they could see the lights of the village. They drove the horses as fast as they could go. They saved their own lives, but I don't think it was worth it. After that they had no place to stay and nobody would tolerate them. They had to move from village to village. Nobody would employ them. Grandmother said she did not know what became of them.

The narrator heard the story from his grandmother, who came to Nebraska from South Russia in 1880. She believed the story to be true, but thought it had occurred among Volga Germans farther north, where wolves were more numerous. The narrator's parents, however, felt certain that the story dealt with Russians rather than with Germans. He found verification for this in the fact that Willa Cather, as he had just discovered, told exactly the same story and even knew the names and the fates of the two villains.

CATHER'S "MY ANTONIA"

Cather's version of the folktale, which is incorporated into her novel *My Antonia*, remains one of the most memorable passages in all of her works.³ As the narrator from Henderson indicated, the principals of the story in the Cather version were ethnically Russian, not German. Pavel and Peter, as she named them, were immigrants who had homesteaded in Nebraska, near Black Hawk (the fictional equivalent of Red Cloud, Cather's home town). Because they speak only Russian, they communicate with and through Antonia's father, Mr. Shimerda, a Czech musician who has brought his family to America at the insistence of his wife.⁴ Peter and Pavel, who left their distant homeland because of a "great trouble"

(p. 37), are hounded by misfortune. Despite their diligence, Peter has to mortgage all their property to the local moneylender. A gaunt, sinister-looking giant, Pavel suffers a severe injury that leaves him bedridden. "Misfortune seemed to settle like an evil bird on the roof of the log house, and to flap its wings there warning human beings away. The Russians had such bad luck that people were afraid of them and liked to put them out of mind" (p. 51).

Shortly before Pavel died, he disclosed to Mr. Shimerda the "great trouble" that had driven them from Russia. Antonia and Jim Burden, the narrator of the novel, were present. Pavel lay in bed, moaning and gasping for breath. Outside the wind howled in gusts. "Each gust, as it bore down, rattled the panes, and swelled off like the others. . . . Presently, in one of those sobbing intervals between the blasts, the coyotes tuned up with their whining howl: one, two, three, then all together. . . . This sound brought an answer from the bed—a long complaining cry—as if Pavel were having bad dreams or were waking to some old misery" (p. 53). Antonia explained to Jim that Pavel was afraid of wolves and that they ate men and women in Russia. After making his confession, Pavel was seized with a violent fit coughing, which left him completely exhausted. Antonia later told Jim the terrible tale:

Pavel and Peter served as groomsmen for a friend who married a young woman from a different village. Following the wedding celebration the party set out in six troika sleighs for the village of the groom, with his sleigh in the lead. Soon they were overtaken by an enormous pack of wolves. The driver of the last sleigh lost control of his horses, the sleigh overturned, and horses and humans alike were devoured by the voracious beasts. As the pursuit continued, one sleigh after the other was overtaken by the wolves until only the groom's sleigh was left. Pavel ordered the groom to sacrifice his bride in order to lighten the sleigh, and when he tried to protect her, Pavel pushed the groom out and threw his bride after him. At that moment the two groomsmen heard the bell of their village monastery.



FIG. 1. *The painting by Paul Powis, dated 1887, cited by Bernice Slotte as a possible inspiration for the Russian wolves tale in Willa Cather's My Ántonia (1918). Courtesy Willa Cather Memorial Collection, Red Cloud, Nebraska. Nebraska State Historical Society.*

Willa Cather concludes the episode as follows:

Pavel and Peter drove into the village alone, and they had been alone ever since. They were driven out of their own village. Pavel's own mother would not look at him. They went away to strange towns, but when people learned where they came from, they were always asked if they knew the two men who had fed the bride to the wolves. Wherever they went, the story followed them. It took them five years to save money enough to come to America. They worked in Chicago, Des Moines, Fort Wayne, but they were always unfortunate. When Pavel's health grew so bad, they decided to try farming.

Pavel died a few days after he unburdened his mind to Mr. Shimerda, and was buried in the Norwegian graveyard. Peter sold off everything, and left the country—went to be a cook in the railway construction camp where gangs of Russians were employed. [P. 60]

The death of Pavel and the departure of

Peter deeply depressed Mr. Shimerda. He became more and more melancholy and withdrawn and finally committed suicide. But Willa Cather was still not quite ready to part with the story of Russian wolves.

For Ántonia and me, the story of the wedding party was never at an end. We did not tell Pavel's secret to anyone, but guarded it jealously—as if the wolves of the Ukraine had gathered that night long ago, and the wedding party been sacrificed, to give us a painful and peculiar pleasure. At night, before I went to sleep, I often found myself in a sled, drawn by three horses, dashing through a country that looked something like Nebraska and something like Virginia. [P. 61]

The episode is skillfully incorporated into the novel. Through various forms of foreshadowing, Willa Cather arouses and maintains her readers' curiosity about the "great trouble" that brought the unlucky Russians to Nebraska. She spins out the source by adding vivid details

and suggestive observations. She brings the distant story close to us by identifying the two groomsmen as "Pavel and Peter (our Pavel and Peter!)" (p. 53). Through her narrator she shares with her readers experiences that she must have cherished for a long time. The first passing reference in her writings to Russian wolves howling and following sleighs occurs in "The Clemency of the Court" (1893); the suicide of Mr. Shimerda was first treated in "Peter Sadelack, Father of Anton."⁵

Strangely enough, few critics have commented on the meaning and function of this "remarkable little inset story," as the Cather biographer David Daiches labeled it. Daiches thought that "its relation to the novel as a whole is somewhat uncertain." He seemed to contradict himself, however, when he associated it with the "fascinating mystery" of the European background of the story, "a background which includes the horror of the Russian scene whose famished wolves pursue a bridal party returning home during the night."⁶ This suggests that the "inset story" was intended as a sort of modern equivalent of the medieval *excursus ad aliud extra materiam*, that is, a digression to something outside the story proper for the purpose of illuminating characters or situations from a unique point of view and thereby endowing the narrative with greater depth and wider dimensions. The "European background" of *My Ántonia* is broad and diversified. It includes many hardy immigrants who persevere and conquer where Anglo-Americans fail and flee, but it also includes the hapless Russian pariahs and the gentle musician who is destroyed by the harsh realities of the Great Plains.

BROWNING'S "IVÀN IVÀNOVITCH"

When I first read *My Ántonia*, I assumed that Willa Cather had been inspired to create the haunting tale about Pavel and Peter by Robert Browning's dramatic idyll "Ivàn Ivànovitch." The details, to be sure, are quite different, but the setting and the basic motifs are the same: an attack by a huge pack of ravenous wolves in a

Russian forest in the dead of winter, the sacrifice of human beings for whose safety one is responsible in order to escape death oneself, and divine retribution for the heinous crime. Inspiration from Browning is probable, or at least possible, since Willa Cather was well acquainted with his poetry.

Browning's poem begins with a brief discussion between the poet and his "friend the Russ."⁷ The subject of the discussion is the skill and versatility of Russian carpenters in the use of the axe. This method of foreshadowing is reminiscent of nineteenth-century German fate tragedies, in which the lethal weapon was prominently displayed at the beginning of the play. There follows an ominous description of the scene, a vast forest

Of pine and all that breeds and broods there,
leaving loth
Man's inch of masterdom,—spot of life,
spirt of fire,—
To star the dark and dread, lest right and
rule expire
Throughout the monstrous wild, a-hungered
to resume
Its ancient sway, . . .

Thereupon Ivàn Ivànovitch, the blond, blue-eyed giant is introduced, surrounded by neighbors watching him carve a shipmast from a tree trunk. Suddenly a horse and sled appear. The exhausted horse collapses, and the unconscious form of a woman is lifted from the sled. It is Loùscha, the wife of Dmitri, a carpenter. After she has been revived, Loùscha kneels, placing her head on her friend Ivàn's knee.

His broad hands smoothed her head, as fain
to brush it free
From fancies, swarms that stung
like bees unhived.

Finally Loùscha is able to relate her agonizing tale:

Dmitri had finished his work on a church in a neighboring village and was about to return home with his wife and their three children. At the last moment a fire broke out, and he remained to help save the village. Loùscha and the three children set out in their sled drawn

by their horse, Droug. The road led through a dense pine forest, "lamped" by "moonlight and snow." Suddenly the horse snorted and plunged. Loùscha first heard, then caught sight of, the pursuing wolf pack, led by a "fiend" she called "Satan-face."

The eldest son, Stepàn, shrieked, and Satan-face snatched him from the sled. The mother comforted herself with the thought that his death would assure the survival of the other two children. She sought to reassure her second son, Terentiù:

Yes, I'll lie down upon you, tight-tie you
with the strings
Here—of my heart! No fear, this time,
your mother flings . . .
Flings? I flung? Never! But think!—
a woman, after all,
Contending with a wolf!

Satan-face and part of the pack again overtook the sled, and Terentiù was pulled out and devoured. With the break of day Loùscha was confident that she and the baby were safe. But Satan-face was relentless in his pursuit. He tore the child from the mother's arms.

That slew me: yes, in brief,
I died then, dead I lay doubtlessly till
Droug stopped
Here, I suppose. I come to life, I find
me propped
Thus,—how or when or why—I know not.
Tell me, friends,
All was a dream: laugh quick and say the
nightmare ends!

In words of haunting ambiguity Loùscha begs Ivàn Ivànovitch to free her from the print of Satan—apparently an allusion to a popular belief that wolves were embodiments of the witches of Satan.

Down she sank. Solemnly
Ivàn rose, raised his axe,—for fitly,
as she knelt,
Her head lay: well-parted, each side, her
arms hung,—dealt
Lightning-swift thunder-strong one blow—
no need of more!

.

The man was scant of words as strokes. "It had to be:

I could no other: God it was, bade 'Act for me!'"

The remainder of the poem need not concern us here. Suffice it to say that Ivàn, although condemned by the people and the judge, is exonerated by the wise old "Pope" (that is, priest) of the village: "I proclaim Ivàn Ivànovitch God's servant!" Loùscha's attempt to fabricate a story of heroic but futile defense against Satan-face failed when she inadvertently revealed that she threw her first child—"flings? I flung? Never!"—to the wolves.

"THE ENGLISHWOMAN IN RUSSIA"

How did Browning learn of the tale? Although he spent several weeks in Russia in 1834, Browning did not compose "Ivàn Ivànovitch" until 1878 while vacationing in Splügen, Switzerland, located near the Italian border. It has been suggested that the winter landscape there reminded him of the Russian forests, but it is more likely that the inspiration for his poem about the Russian peasant woman and the village carpenter was a tale found in an anonymous book entitled *The Englishwoman in Russia*, published in England in 1855.⁸ The story is recorded there as follows:

A dreadful anecdote was told me of a peasant woman and her children, who were crossing the forest that stretched for many miles between her isba [log cabin] and the neighboring village. They were in one of those small country sledges, in shape something like a boat, drawn by a single horse. Suddenly they heard a rustling sound among the trees; it was but faint at first, but it rapidly approached; the instinct of the affrighted steed told him that danger was near at hand; he rushed on with redoubled speed. Presently the short yelp of a wolf aroused the mother; she started up and gazed around; to her horror she beheld a mighty pack of wolves sweeping across the frozen snow, in full cry upon their traces. She seized the whip, and endeavored by repeated blows to urge on the fear-stricken



FIG. 2. An engraving published in Frédéric Lacroix, *Les mystères de la Russie* (Paris: Pagnerre, 1845) depicting wolves attacking a Russian peasant woman as she is about to throw one of her three children to pursuing wolves. The description in *The Englishwoman in Russia* (1855) corresponds precisely to this visual representation: a single peasant woman, a sledge shaped much like a boat drawn by a single horse instead of the typical Russian troika, and a village in the distance.

horse to even greater swiftness. The poor animal needed no incentive to hasten his steps, but his force was well-nigh spent; his convulsive gasping showed how painfully his utmost energies were exerted. But courage! there is hope! the village is in sight! far off, it is true, but we shall gain it yet! So thought the unhappy mother, as she cast a look of horror on the hungry savage beasts that were following in the rear, and saw that they were rapidly gaining upon her. Now they are near enough for her to see their open mouths and hanging tongues, their fiery eyes and bristling hair, as they rush on with unrelenting speed, turning neither to the right nor to the left, but steadily pursuing their horrible chase. At last they came near enough for their eager breathing to be

heard, and the foremost was within a few yards of the sledge; the overspent horse flagged in his speed; all hope seemed lost, when the wretched woman, frantic with despair, caught up one of her three children and threw him into the midst of the pack, trusting by this means to gain a little time by which the others might be saved. He was devoured in an instant; and the famished wolves, whose appetites it had only served to whet, again rushed after the retreating family. The second and third infant were sacrificed in the same dreadful manner; but now the village was gained. A peasant came out of an *isba*, at sight of whom the wolves fell back. The almost insensible woman threw herself out of the sledge, and, when she could find sufficient strength to speak,

she related the fearful danger in which she had been and the horrible means she had employed to escape from it. "And did you *throw them all* to the wolves, even the little baby you held in your arms?" exclaimed the horror-stricken peasant. "Yes, all!" was the reply. The words had scarcely escaped from the white lips of the miserable mother, when the man laid her head at his feet with a single blow of the axe with which he was cleaving wood when she arrived. He was arrested for murder, and the case was decided by the Emperor, *who pardoned* him, wisely making allowance for his agitation and the sudden impulse with which horror and indignation at the unnatural act had inspired him.⁹

The similarity between this tale and Browning's poem is too close to be accidental. The differences are those of genre. The mother and the peasant of the tale are simple, and the style straightforward. In the poem Ivàn Ivànovitch and Loušcha gradually reveal their complex personalities through their actions and deeds. Whereas the peasant in the tale, overwhelmed with rage and horror, impetuously slays the woman, Ivàn calmly and deliberately beheads Loušcha, more out of pity than in anger.

LINDSAY'S "SHUKAR BALAN"

My conviction that Browning's "Ivàn Ivànovitch" was the primary source for the wolf story in *My Antonia* was shaken when I read *Shukar Balan: The White Lamb*, by Mela Meisner Lindsay.¹⁰ This novel is a fictionalized biography of the author's mother, Evaliz. The setting of the first part of the novel is a German village in Russia where the author was born.

In Lindsay's version of the tragic tale, Evaliz, as a reward for helping her sister-in-law deliver a baby, is permitted to accompany her brother Wilhelm to the city of Nizhi-Novgorod on the annual trip for provisions and supplies not obtainable in the village. Just as they are on the point of leaving, some neighbors, Johann and Minna Mauer, come floundering through the snow with their child, deathly sick with diph-

theria. Wilhelm agrees to take them along so that the child can be treated by a physician. Despite the doctor's efforts, the child dies.

On the morning of the return trip Wilhelm expresses his satisfaction with the weather. But Johann, who as a child has had an encounter with wolves, is apprehensive. "Don't forget," he says, "a hard freeze brings on the marauding wolves." All day long he fidgets, "his fearful eyes searching, searching, as though 'willing' a wolf-pack to come." Nevertheless the first day and most of the second day pass uneventfully.

Late afternoon . . . finds us within five versts [3.3 miles] of home. Soon we will be with our people and all will be happy. All, that is, except Minna and Johann, who must somehow find a burial plot under house-deep snow for their baby.

The anxiety of getting back home is in man and beast alike. Our horses run freely, without a hint of the whip. I peek out to see if the other two sleighs are still following us. They are. They look like black shadows skimming over the plains. Each driver chooses his own route, since there are no roads on the wide expanse of windswept snow.

Suddenly there is a faltering in our smooth flight. The steady pace of our horses is broken. They are filled with alarm. The loud shouts of Wilhelm and Johann drown out the silver clamour of the troika bells. I push away the covers and look out over the desolate snow and see nothing. But Wilhelm understands the danger.

"Snow wolves! Flanking our left," he cries, ordering Johann to sit down and keep his head. "We'll outrun them. Hoi! Hoi!" he shouts, getting to his feet also and applying the braided *plotka*, the whip, to the horses' rumps for the first time.

But ordering Johann to do something is like talking to the wind. Half-crazed he struggles with Wilhelm to get hold of the reins, confounding the already frantic horses. . . . Our horses cannot keep their heads, with Wilhelm and Johann fighting over the reins. [Pp. 40-41]

Wilhelm now commands Johann to lighten

the sled by throwing out everything but the quilts, but Johann is completely demented, so that Evaliz has to do so. Eventually the wolves overtake the sled. Johann seizes the dead child from Minna and hurls it toward the wolves. Minna springs after her child, and two wolves snatch Johann out of the sled. The wolves pull down the horses, and as they are devouring them, Wilhelm overturns the sled. Meanwhile the two other sleighs have reached their village, and Wilhelm and Evaliz remain under their sleigh until help arrives.

The two literary versions of the folktale are much alike, not only in content but also in technique. Like Willa Cather, Mela Meisner Lindsay effectively employed the device of foreshadowing in order to arouse apprehension and suspense in the reader. Johann's fearful anticipation of the wolf attack occurs at the beginning of the journey home; the wolves are sighted almost two days later. Both writers also made skillful use of retardation. Willa Cather described in detail the tortured behavior of Pavel as he made his confession in Russian, which only Antonia and her father could understand. From Antonia's whispered comments Jim Burden knew only that Pavel was relating something "awful" about wolves. Not until later did Antonia tell him the entire story. In describing the actual attack, Willa Cather had the narrator repeatedly change the focus of attention from the bride and groom to the fate of the other five sleds, to the wolves, and to the two drivers. Similarly, Lindsay and Evaliz focus alternately on the other two sleds, on Johann and his struggle with Minna for the dead child, and on Wilhelm's efforts to control the horses and to beat off the wolves with his whip. Like Cather, Lindsay also succeeded in investing her wolf story with a feeling of immediacy of time and place by having her mother, the narrator Evaliz, relate it years later, after she had immigrated to Kansas.

QUESTIONS OF ORIGIN

The similarity of the Willa Cather and the Mela Meisner Lindsay versions suggests that

both ultimately were based on the same source. Lindsay told me that she based the wolf episode on a tale she had heard related in Kansas many years ago by German immigrants from Russia. She dramatized the story somewhat in order to make her mother's life in Russia more exciting and adventurous, but she made no substantive changes in it. Since she had not read either Browning's "Ivàn Ivànovitch" or Cather's *My Antonia*, there can have been no direct influence from these two works.

Cather's sources cannot be so readily identified: Cather scholars have not considered the question carefully. According to Virginia Faulkner, Cather claimed that she had heard the wolf story from dancers who were settlers from Russia. Bernice Slote suggested the possibility of secondary sources, but stressed the importance of a painting by Paul Powis that depicts wolves pursuing a sled. It seems more probable, however, that much like Lindsay, Cather first heard the tale, perhaps indirectly, from immigrants who had settled in central Nebraska. There are no settlements of ethnic Russians in Nebraska, but numerous Germans from Russia were to be found in neighboring counties to the north and northeast of her home in Red Cloud. Volga Germans had settled in Adams and Clay counties. The most important colonies of Black Sea Germans in the state (among whom the wolf tales were more common) are located a few miles farther to the northeast: the region around Sutton, Nebraska, was settled in the 1870s and 1880s by Palatine-speaking Germans from three villages in the vicinity of Odessa on the Black Sea; the Henderson area, located a few miles away in York County, was settled at the same time by Low German-speaking Mennonites from the colonies of Chortitza and Molotschna in South Russia.

The fact remains, however, that Browning and the anonymous author of *The Englishwoman in Russia* recorded versions of the story that are startlingly similar—so similar that we must ask if there is a source common to both them and the Russian-German immigrants on the Great Plains. Are both versions ultimately

drawn from Russian folklore, or can they be traced to some other source?

The latter seems to have been the case. I pointed out earlier that the many stories about Russian wolves still related by people on the plains are of two basically different kinds—happy and tragic. The happy stories are folktales that employ international themes and motifs. There are analogues in many languages, including Russian. They range from stories like “Little Red Riding Hood” to Sergei Prokofiev’s charming *Peter and the Wolf*. But the tragic wolf tales, to the best of my knowledge, are not part of international folklore. Moreover, they do not, according to the Russian scholar A. Alekseev, have parallels in Russian literature or folktales.¹² If Alekseev is correct, the Germans from Russia on the Great Plains could not possibly have borrowed their tragic wolf stories from ethnic Russian sources. They must have some other origin.

“LES MYSTERES DE LA RUSSIE”

Alekseev again provides the answer. The ultimate source of the tragic wolf tales is not to be found in folk culture but in the following story recounted in *Les mystères de la Russie: Tableau politique et moral de l'Empire russe*, by Frédéric Lacroix:

It is told that a Russian woman, returning home from a neighboring village with her three children in the middle of a bitterly cold winter, was attacked by famished wolves. In order to escape the pursuit of these dreadful creatures, she lashed the horse hitched to the sled and tried, but in vain, to frighten off the wolves with her cries. The sled sped rapidly over the snow, but the blood-thirsty pack ran just as swiftly, and the peasant woman saw that she had no possibility of escape. In this decisive moment she will doubtless, you assume, lay her children down in the sled, lash the horse vigorously in the hope that it will return to the village by itself, and then, courageous and devoted mother that she is, she will sacrifice herself to the voracious wolves. On the contrary. She lets her children perish.

She first throws out one; then, this prey having merely whetted the appetite of the beasts, she tosses the second one out. Finally the third one soon follows his two brothers; and the mother, safe and sound, triumphantly crosses the threshold of the connubial home. Thus one can see what servitude can make of a woman, of a mother. Similar cases are possible wherever powerful forces of perversion incessantly exert their influence on the morale and morality of a people.¹³

The popularity of *Les mystères de la Russie* was phenomenal. First published in 1844 by printers in Paris and Brussels, it appeared in different versions. It was immediately translated into German and Spanish and later into English and Italian.¹⁴ Claiming to set forth both the strengths and weaknesses of Russia, the author clearly also sought the denigration of Russia, as we may assume from its wolf tale.

If, as Alekseev maintains, this attack by a French writer on the repressive political system of Russia is actually the source for the wolf tale in Browning’s poem—and thus also for the versions in *My Antonia* and *Shukar Balan*—the question arises as to how his tale reached the Germans in Russia. The answer rests in circumstantial evidence. The German translation of Lacroix’s book, *Geheimnisse von Russland*, was published in Regensburg on the Danube River.¹⁵ For many German emigrants to Russia, Regensburg was a major stop; for others it was the port of embarkation for the long journey down the Danube to the Black Sea and ultimately to the settlements in southern Russia. It is true that the major migrations to the Ukraine took place between 1789 and 1824, but some immigration to that region continued until after 1860. Certainly at least a few of the German immigrants would have been eager to read a book that purported to reveal “secrets” about the politics and morality of their future homeland. Furthermore, for decades many Lutheran and Reformed ministers who served German colonies in Russia and the Ukraine received their theological training at the universities of Tartu (Dorpat) and Basel, where a

book such as *Geheimnisse von Russland* was certainly known.

Vivid and shocking tales like the one related, and possibly concocted, by Lacroix readily come loose from their literary moorings and acquire a certain independent existence. They are easy to remember and easy to relate orally. Oral tales, of course, are subject to rapid, and sometimes radical, mutations, which are influenced both by the individual narrator and by the audience. Once the propagandistic purpose of such a tale has been forgotten, its flippant ending is no longer satisfactory. Justice demands that crime be punished. And thus, fitting punishments are devised by the various tale-tellers, with or without audience participation.

The horror of the wolf story was magnified in some versions by increasing the number of children sacrificed to the wolves; it also could be mitigated in various ways, as we have seen in one of the recordings and in Lindsay's *Shukar Balan*. For various reasons, narrators substituted an adult or adults or even animals for the children of the original tale, and thus a variant developed in which a bride and groom were sacrificed. As the changing tales were passed on by word of mouth among the Germans of southern Russia, they lost their Russian identity and came to be associated with various German villages, usually "farther to the north," where wolves were believed to be larger, more numerous, and more ferocious than in the Ukraine and South Russia. Eventually they reappeared in the Cather and Lindsay novels, much as they were retold to me in the 1980s.

NOTES

1. The author gratefully acknowledges research support for the collection of folktales on the Great Plains from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the University of Nebraska Research Council, and the Center for Great Plains Studies.

2. There is an extensive bibliography of materials treating the migration of Germans to Russia and their subsequent movement to the United States, Canada, Brazil, and elsewhere.

For a brief introduction, see LaVern Rippley, "Germans from Russia," in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. by Stephan Thernstrom et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 425-30.

3. Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (1914; reprint, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Sentry Edition, 1954). All subsequent page references are to this edition.

4. Russian and Czech are not mutually understandable. For the sake of Cather's story we must assume that Pavel and Peter spoke a West Ukrainian dialect that could have been comprehended by the Czech-speaking Shimerda family.

5. *Hesperion*, 26 October 1893; *Mahogany Tree*, 24 November 1892. Both stories are reprinted in *Early Stories of Willa Cather*, ed. by Mildred Bennett (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1957), pp. 1-8 and 33-44.

6. David Daiches, *Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1951), pp. 43 and 47.

7. Robert Browning, *The Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning*, ed. by Horace E. Scudder (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1895), pp. 880-86. The quotations that follow are from this edition.

8. *The Englishwoman in Russia: Impressions of the Society and Manners of the Russians at Home* (London: Murray, 1855).

9. As quoted by William Clyde DeVane in his *Browning Handbook*, 2d ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), pp. 438-39.

10. Mela Meisner Lindsay, *Shukar Balan: The White Lamb* (Lincoln, Nebr.: American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 1976).

11. Personal conversations with Virginia Faulkner and Bernice Slotte. The Powis painting is presently housed in the Willa Cather Museum in Red Cloud, Nebraska.

12. A. Alekseev, "Die Quellen zum Idyll Ivàn Ivànovich von Rob. Browning," *Jahrbücher für Kultur und Geschichte der Slaven*, n.s., 5 (1930): 417-27. A revised and expanded version of this article appeared as "Zur Entstehungsgeschichte der *Dramatic Idyls* von Robert Browning," *Englische Studien* 66 (1931): 54-64.

13. Translated by the author from the French edition: Frédéric Lacroix, *Les mystères de la Russie, tableau politique et moral de*

l'Empire russe . . . d'après des manuscrits d'un diplomate et d'un voyageur (Paris: Pagnerre, 1845), pp. 323–24.

14. An entirely different book with the same title was published in 1844 in Paris and Brussels and was also translated into several languages, including German. See Marc Fournier, *Les mystères de la Russie: Russie, Allemagne et France, révélations sur la politique russe, d'après les notes d'un vieux diplomate* (Brus-

sels: Société Belge, 1844). It does not contain the wolf story.

15. *Geheimnisse von Russland: Ein politisches Sittengemälde des russischen Reichs*, 2 vols. (Regensburg: Georg Joseph Manz, 1844). The folktale appears in 2: 183. The same publisher also issued a German translation of the Marc Fournier version under the title, *Geheimnisse von Russland: Aufschlüsse über die russische Politik nach den Notizen eines alten Diplomaten*.