The New Criterion

Features February 2023

A genius at suffering

by *Gary Saul Morson*

On the life & writing of Vsevolod Garshin.

Russia's most underrated writer, Vsevolod Garshin (1855–88), fascinated his contemporaries. A cult figure whose public readings provoked ecstatic responses, the charismatic Garshin struck one young woman as "a perfect model for an icon of our Savior. His large, dark, deep-set eyes looked at me . . . with such melancholy kindness, as though pleading with me, a mere teenager, to have pity on him and on the whole world." The greatest painter of the period, Ilya Repin, pictured him at his writing desk staring at the viewer with deep, soulful eyes that overflow with compassion.

Born into a family of impoverished noblemen, Garshin grew up among people who could hardly have failed to foster his interest in suffering, cruelty, and compassion. His paternal grandfather, Egor Akhipovich, was famously cruel to his serfs and often availed himself of his "right" to displace the groom on a bride's wedding night. Appalled by these horrors, Garshin's father, Mikhail Egorovich, escaped to a military life where, in complete contrast to Egor Akhipovich, he refused to use even routine force to discipline peasant soldiers. Garshin's mother, Ekaterina Stepanovna Akimova, was, in Garshin's words, "an exceptionally well-educated woman." Garshin's father befriended her paternal grandfather, a man so kind that he mortgaged his estate to provide for his hungry peasants. Neighbors regarded him as mad.

When Garshin's mother ran off with her lover, a revolutionary, she left the boy behind for several years. This abandonment apparently fostered the deep melancholy from which Garshin was to suffer for the rest of his life. "The predominantly sad expression on my face," he later explained, "probably began during this period." During his gymnasium (middle and high school) years in

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St. Petersburg, he suffered his first nervous breakdown. The news that his older brother had committed suicide did not help. "Oh, mother," he wrote to Ekaterina, "how miserable I am. I can't even cry anywhere: I don't even have a corner of my own." He enrolled in a mining institute, but he soon recognized that he wanted to be a writer and rejoiced when his first sketch was published: "I feel the same way my favorite, David Copperfield, did when his article was accepted." Dickens's novel was already famous as one of the first masterpieces to describe child abuse.

Garshin's complete works readily fit into a single volume. Like Chekhov and Isaac Babel, he was a master of concision. Raising profound moral and philosophical questions in a few pages, his stories are almost unbearably poignant. One has no difficulty in identifying their voice with Repin's riveting portrait.

This "martyr of the spirit," another contemporary observed of Garshin, "suffered from an illness from which it is morally wrong to recover." Replying to those who doubted that saintly figures like Dostoevsky's Alyosha Karamazov actually existed, some readers cited Garshin as proof they did. Radicals of that time embraced materialism, denied the existence of the soul, and, like Bazarov in Turgenev's *Fathers and Children* (1862), dissected frogs to show that humans and lower animals were essentially the same. Countless frogs lost their lives to young nihilists demonstrating their unsentimental materialist credentials. Legend has it that when Garshin dissected a frog, he was overwhelmed with pity and sewed it back up.

Alyosha Karamazov goes through a spiritual crisis from which he emerges a true "champion" fully equal to life's challenges, but Garshin found the world's evil and misery unbearable, suffered nervous breakdowns, and eventually committed suicide. Chekhov, who adored Garshin's tales, contributed one of his best stories, "A Nervous Breakdown," to a volume commemorating him. Empathy was Chekhov's supreme value, and his stories often depict the needless waste and suffering that result from people's failure to put themselves in another's place, but Garshin's seem to demonstrate the danger of too much compassion.

Like Garshin, Chekhov's hero Vasiliev "had a peculiar talent—a talent for *humanity*. He possessed an extraordinarily fine delicate scent for pain in general." Just as a

> good actor reflects in himself the movements and voice of others, so Vasiliev could reflect in his soul the sufferings of others. When he saw tears, he wept; beside a sick man, he felt sick himself and moaned; if he saw an act of violence, he felt as though he himself were the victim of it, he was frightened as a child, and in his fright ran to help. The pain of others worked on his nerves, excited him, roused him to a state of frenzy, and so on.

Is it possible to live when everyday suffering so overwhelms one? Is it wise to "raise every trifle to the level of a [social] question," as Vasiliev (like his real-life model) is apt to do?

As the story begins, two of Vasiliev's friends, a painter and a medical student, persuade him to join them in an innocent (for that epoch) amusement, a sort of pub crawl through the city's bordellos.

Having derived his knowledge of prostitutes from books, Vasiliev pictures them as delicate beings constantly enduring insult and contemplating their own degradation. What he encounters is utterly different. He is immediately shocked by the interior of the bordellos decorated in a style

> intentional in its ugliness, not accidental, but elaborated in the course of years . . . he saw that it all had to be like this and that if a single one of the women had been dressed like a human being, or even if there had been one decent engraving on the wall, the general tone of the whole street would have suffered.

Still worse, the women "had nothing in common" with what Vasiliev had expected. They displayed not only the absence of human dignity but a sort of negative dignity, a parody of humanness matching the bordello's aesthetics of ugliness:

> "There is vice," he thought, "but neither consciousness of sin nor hope of salvation. They are bought and sold, steeped in wine and abominations, while they, like sheep, are stupid, indifferent, and don't understand." . . . It was clear to him, too, that everything that is called human dignity, personal rights, the Divine image and semblance, were defiled to their very foundations.

These reflections and his condemnation of the prostitutes' outlook strike him as cruel, even criminal, and he suffers immense guilt.

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Worst of all, Vasiliev thinks, is the fact that most people, including his two friends, can go about their lives indifferent to such horrors. "Either we only fancy prostitution is an evil . . . or if prostitution really is as great an evil as is generally assumed, these dear friends of mine are as much slave-owners, violators, and murderers" as are to be found: "What is the use of their humanity, their medicine, their painting?" It was a question that obsessed thinkers of the day: is all high culture an immoral indulgence when others are suffering? Many concluded that it was and should be entirely abolished until evil was eradicated. As Peter Lavrov, the day's most influential philosopher, observed, "Mankind has paid dearly so that a few intellectuals sitting in their studies could discuss its progress." In Western Europe, intellectuals fought to replace one approach to culture with another, but only in Russia did they seriously consider eliminating literature, art, and science entirely.

The idea that the educated should sacrifice themselves for "the people" shaped Russian populism—the term itself was first coined in Russia—during the 1870s. Painters depicted suffering laborers. Such paintings were not beautiful. Instead, they riveted attention and appealed to conscience, as did Repin's famous *Barge Haulers* (1870–73), a topic chosen because, as Dostoevsky explained, "we have accepted somehow that barge-haulers are the best means of representing the well-known notion of the unpaid debt of the upper classes to the People." Hearing of this painting, Dostoevsky had expected a tendentious portrayal of symbols rather than real people, stick figures

with “the usual labels stuck on their foreheads.” To his pleasant surprise, he found a portrait of believable individuals, not one of whom “shouts to the viewer, ‘Look how unfortunate I am and how indebted you are to the People!’” For that very reason, Dostoevsky explains, the painting touches the conscience all the more. Dostoevsky shared that goal with Repin and Garshin, and it obsesses Vasiliev as well.

On Vasiliev’s return home, “his soul was possessed by an unaccountable faint-hearted terror . . . . ‘It’s beginning,’ he thought. ‘I am going to have a breakdown.’” Chekhov, a physician, describes it acutely. Anyone who reads Garshin’s stories will recognize that Chekhov has captured the exceptional sensitivity that shaped them.

Though opposed to all violence, Garshin responded to the outbreak of war with Turkey by enlisting as a private. He went to war, he explained, thinking not even of killing but only of sharing the common soldiers’ suffering. “Is it more moral,” he asked those who objected to serving in the imperial army, “to stay behind, with one’s arms folded, while that soldier is going to die for us?” The hero of his story “The Coward”—who is not a coward, but a pacifist—asks the same question, enlists, and is pointlessly killed.

Some remarkable stories came out of Garshin’s military experience. The hero of “Reminiscences of Private Ivanov” has enlisted, as Garshin and some others did, to study the people. “Yes, it has become the latest fashion these days,” remarks the officer Wenzel with irony. “Even literature elevates the peasant and makes a sort of pearl of creation of him.” Ivanov deplores Wenzel’s sternness, verging on brutality, toward the soldiers under his command, but he eventually discovers that Wenzel had once been an idealist like himself, had shared his view of the people, and even “closely followed Russian literature.” But experience of actual peasant soldiers had shattered his naive idealism. “All that remained of the so-called good books on contact with reality,” he remarks, “proved to be sentimental nonsense.” Though he may cry about using his fists, Wenzel has learned by hard experience that the soldiers respond to nothing else and that the discipline he instills may save their lives in battle. His soldiers perform the best. Is Wenzel Ivanov’s—and all idealists’—future?

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Garshin’s great theme was the disappointment that inevitably arises when naive ideals encounter reality. In his stories the result is often disgust, and when Chekhov depicts Vasiliev’s disgust at real-life prostitutes, he presumably had in mind Garshin’s rare ability to depict the nauseating. “Four Days,” the story that made Garshin famous, describes another Russian soldier who has joined the army without considering that he might hurt someone. “I meant no harm to anyone when I went to fight,” the hero explains. “The idea that I too would kill people somehow escaped me. I only saw myself as exposing my breast to the bullets.” In the confusion of battle, the hero bayonets a Turk and then, severely wounded, is left for dead beside the Turk’s corpse. He spends four days witnessing and smelling the decomposition of the Turk’s body, a process he describes in

excruciating detail:

> His skin . . . had gone pale and yellowish; his face had swollen, drawing the skin so tight it had burst behind the ear. Maggots were squirming around there. His feet, wedged into his boots, had swollen and enormous bubbles oozed out between the hooks.

So nauseating is the smell that the soldier tries to drag his inert, injured body away from it and, despite the intense pain, at last moves a few feet into fresher air. But then "the wind changes and wafts toward me a stink so strong that it makes me want to vomit. My empty stomach goes into sharp, painful spasms . . . . And the stinking, tainted air washes over me." Then it gets worse. "That day my neighbor became so hideous as to beggar description. . . . His face was gone. It had slid off the bones." Until his lucky rescue, the hero can only imagine he is looking at himself in a few days. Has he seen what life, shorn of prettifying disguises, really is?

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The hero of "The Coward" wonders at the indifference of those who read of hundreds of casualties in battle but are shocked by news of a single murder. The story dwells on the agonies of his friend Kuzma, who suffers from a toothache that becomes badly infected and spreads gangrene through his body. Garshin describes this gradual putrefaction of living flesh in gruesome detail; the hero, observing the process, "thought of other wounds, far more frightful both in quality and appalling quantity, inflicted not by blind senseless chance, but by the deliberate actions of men" in war. Stalin is supposed to have said that a single death is a tragedy but a million is a statistic; the story's hero tries to make us imagine how each battlefield casualty resembles Kuzma's nauseating illness and death, only worse. "Death is always death," he observes, "but it is one thing to die among near and loving ones, and another to lie in the mud and your own blood, waiting for them to come and finish you off, or for the guns to come rolling down and crush you like a worm."

What sort of art is this that evokes nausea? In Dostoevsky's novel The Idiot, Ippolit asks whether it is possible "to perceive as an image that which has no image." Since the Russian word for image also means icon, and the word for ugliness literally means imagelessness, Ippolit is asking whether one can discover beauty in the formless and the sacred in the ugly. Dostoevsky thought one could, and Ippolit mentions Holbein's Christ in the Tomb—the savior's body, pictured entirely naturalistically, has evidently suffered hours of agony—as an example.

Garshin explores this peculiar aesthetic in "Artists," a story in which the diaries of two painters alternate. Dedov, a landscape painter, believes in beauty and excels at rendering it. Real art, he explains, "attunes man's soul to a mood of gentle wistfulness, it softens the heart." His friend Ryabinin, a populist, chooses to paint a laborer whose horrible job is to press his chest against a

rivet on the inside of a boiler while another man hammers on it. Such workers, who do not live long, represent all the suffering that people inflict on each other.

For Dedov, such a subject defeats the very purpose of art: "Looking for the poetic in the mud! . . . all this peasant trend in art, in my opinion, is sheer ugliness. . . . Where is the beauty, harmony, refinement?" Ryabinin, he correctly observes, aims at the very reverse of beauty, "the positively ugly."

While Dedov hopes to soothe his audience, Ryabinin refuses to allow viewers to contemplate his paintings as mere works of art, as something pretty to look at. On the contrary, he strives to obliterate aesthetic distance and draw viewers into the subject's world, where they become morally responsible for the suffering they witness. "Bound to canvas by the spell of my power," Ryabinin addresses the workman he has depicted, "come forth, gaze down upon these dress coats and trains, and shout to them: I am a festering sore! Smite their hearts, give them no sleep, rise as a ghost before their eyes! Kill their peace of mind, as thou hast killed mine."

The hero of Garshin's novella about a prostitute, "Nadezhda Nikolaevna," suffers "the humiliating shame of a man who considers himself to blame for the evil he is [only] told about." Likewise, in "Artists," Ryabinin wants his audience to experience such suffering with him. Destroying his peace of mind, the process of painting this picture consumes Ryabinin. Falling ill, he experiences terrifying nightmares, and, when he at last recovers, he gives up painting altogether. We may wonder whether the protest artists typical of today, who readily continue their labor to achieve fame and commercial success, really believe what they preach.

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Drawing on his own experience in an asylum, Garshin's best-known story, "The Scarlet Flower," depicts an idealist who knows he is mad and yet believes his own insane reasoning. Aware that he lives among mental patients, the hero still discerns in each of them "some incognito or secretly disguised person." Some idealists, as Garshin knew by experience, also find a way to believe in what they simultaneously recognize as impossible.

The story's hero thinks he has been called upon "to fulfill a task which he vaguely envisaged as a gigantic enterprise aimed at destroying the evil of the world." All evil, he decides, proceeds from three red flowers growing in the asylum yard. Each flower is red because it has absorbed "all the innocently spilt blood" of humanity. Each "was a mysterious, sinister creature, the opposite of God . . . in a modest innocent guise." One by one, the hero contrives to pick the flowers, each time holding his trophy to his breast all night to defeat its evil by absorbing it into himself. As in "Artists," taking responsibility entails self-destruction. The hero of Garshin's story "The Signal"

stops a train about to be derailed by slashing his arm and making a red flag from cloth soaked in his own blood. As readers recognized, all Garshin's work was such a signal. Despite the ample diet ordered by the doctor, the hero of "The Scarlet Flower" loses weight rapidly. His mission consumes him. For an idealist of this type, a struggle with evil that leaves one healthy would be a sham.

Garshin knew that his own utopianism was futile at best.

"Soon now, soon," this utopian dreamer assures himself, "the iron bars would fall apart and all the people imprisoned here would be set free and rush to all corners of the earth, and the world, with a shudder, would throw off its shabby old covering and appear in all its glorious and shining new beauty." Having picked the third flower, he dies convinced that he has rid the world of evil. By morning "his face was calm and serene; the emaciated features . . . expressed a kind of proud elation . . . . they tried to unclench his hand to take the crimson flower out, but his hand had stiffened in death, and he carried his trophy away to the grave." Garshin knew that his own utopianism was futile at best.

The success of Garshin's stories derives from their ability to register the pathos of the idealist's experience while also conveying its appearance to others. Readers empathize with the inner perspective without forgetting it represents a kind of illness. Dedov's views about Ryabinin, especially concerning the futility of his choices, ring true; Wenzel turns out to be sadly wise; and the narrator of "The Scarlet Flower" makes us sympathize with the utopian madman without forgetting that, whatever sentimentalists might say, he is truly mad. As the madman's reasoning is both sane and nonsensical, Garshin creates a double perspective in which both the ideal and the real claim their due.

This double perspective was Garshin's own. Unlike many populists, he could not wholly commit himself, and so the revolutionary poet Yakubovich regarded him as a "Hamlet of Our Time." In his famous essay "Hamlet and Don Quixote," Turgenev identified two Russian personality types, one an incorrigible idealist impervious to counterevidence and the other a skeptic forever paralyzed by doubt. Garshin was both. Could that be one reason that he dedicated "The Scarlet Flower" to Turgenev's memory?

Russian cultural history offers an array of idealists who wound up causing far more harm than good. The lesson of the Russian experience, perhaps, is that nothing causes more evil than the attempt to abolish it altogether. But learning that lesson does not entail cynicism. The truly wise discover how to alleviate suffering without ever supposing that the mere impulse to do so guarantees actual improvement.

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This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 41 Number 6 , on page 13

https://newcriterion.com/issues/2023/2/a-genius-at-suffering