

CHAPTER IV

LIVE AND REMEMBER

Zhivi i pomni at first glance stands somewhat apart from Rasputin's other writings in that it is his only major work not set in the contemporary period. Also, the author's attention here is on the Russian peasant woman not as a custodian of past values dying out in the modern world, but as an embodiment of sublime spiritual beauty and goodness. Such a figure has antecedents in his work; for example, the lonely schoolteacher Lidiya Mikhaylovna in 'Uroki frantsuzskogo'. She acts as a substitute mother for the young boy Vitya, but is eventually dismissed when discovered gambling with him by the school's headmaster. She is thus very close to the mother-figure so dominant in Rasputin's fiction as a whole, and shares the same fate as Anna in 'Vstrecha' and Aleksandra in 'Vasily i Vasilisa'.

The heroine of *Zhivi i pomni* is Nastyona, innocent herself of any crime, but, like Mariya, guilty in the eyes of the law and, unlike her, ultimately tragic. The story is set in the last months of the War, when Andrey Gus'kov, Nastyona's husband, deserts from the army and returns surreptitiously to his native village Atamanovka in Siberia. He announces himself only to his wife, and together they resume some semblance of their relationship before it was cut short by the War. Within the broad canvas of war, Rasputin thus concentrates on a tiny, seemingly inconsequential pocket of human drama, but creates in it a situation of profound and universal significance.

The author is also true to his fundamental concern: he explores the human response to a drastic change in circumstances, and the individual's relationship to the community within these events. However, it is useful to look at this work in the context of the usual Soviet socialist realist treatment of the deserter theme, an example of which is Chingiz Aytmatov's short story 'Litsom k litsu' ('Face to Face', 1958).

In this work Seyde, a Kirghiz peasant woman, hides and protects her husband Ismail, who has deserted from the Red Army on his way to the front in the first days of the War. Ismail feels no spiritual bond with 'the people', and feels no commitment to the common cause: his act of desertion is born of cowardice and a desire to save his own skin at any cost. He is an individualist, in socialist realist typology, and hence his defiance of the collective is ultimately doomed. Seyde's civic conscience is aroused when she discovers that he has

killed a neighbour's cow. The neighbour is a widow with three young children, who had been dependent on the cow for its milk. Seyde is appalled at Ismail's unthinking brutality, and leads the authorities to his place of hiding, denouncing him as they stand face to face. Thus she asserts her unity with the people and the common cause, and she subordinates her own happiness to the interests of the State.

Andrey Gus'kov, however, is no coward, nor does he desert in the early stages of the War. He has fought for three years, has been wounded, suffered shell-shock, and has received medals for bravery. In one battle with enemy tanks he was the sole survivor from his detachment. He has fought on all the major Soviet fronts: Smolensk, Moscow, and Stalingrad, and, before his desertion, had been with the Red Army on the offensive. In the summer of 1944 he is seriously wounded and spends three months in hospital, undergoing two major operations. Not unreasonably, he expects to be given at least a few days' convalescent leave to visit his family, and these hopes are encouraged by his fellow soldiers in the hospital, and by the doctors. Indeed, with this in mind he dissuades Nastyona from visiting him. His hopes are dashed, though, when he is told to rejoin his unit immediately. Andrey decides to go home for a few days, thinking that in the confusion of war-torn Russia no-one will notice his absence, and he boards a train for Siberia.

The further and longer he travels, however, the clearer the light becomes in which he sees the consequences of his action, and the less likely becomes the possibility of rejoining his unit. After travelling more than a month, he arrives in the vicinity of Atamanovka, and sets himself up in a deserted hut on the other side of the Angara. Andrey's action of desertion is substantially different from Ismail's: he is no coward; indeed, in other circumstances he would be hailed as a war hero. He is, rather, driven to this reckless step by the demands of an uncaring State, which requires unflinching obedience and relentless effort. Andrey has simply had enough.

Rasputin's hero, therefore, at first elicits not scorn, but sympathy. In the context of war, though, and especially the State's view of it as a struggle of the two ideologies, Andrew, like Ismail, goes over to the enemy. His act of individualism is a strike against the collective struggle. The theme of Aytmatov's story applies equally to Andrey: 'He who forsakes his people in their hour of need becomes their enemy whether he wills it or not.'¹

The *narod* in *Zhivi i pomni* is represented by the various peasants of Atamanovka, including Andrey's parents Mikheich and Semyonovna. Others include Nestor, the collective farm chairman, Innokenty Ivanovich, the old men Yefim and Stepan, and the women whose menfolk are at the front or have been killed: Nad'ka, Liza Vologzhina, Vera, Agaf'ya, Vasilisa, Katerina, and Kapitolina.

Nastyona's reaction to her husband's desertion differs from that of Seyde. She stands by him to the last, cutting herself off from the State, the community,

and her family. Nastyona is thus not a social or political functionary, but a human being with weaknesses and ordinary human needs. She is a wife first and a citizen second. Rasputin has stated that in this story he was striving above all for psychological authenticity:

The reader was prepared for a situation where she would either turn in her husband herself or make him give himself up. But Nastyona does neither of these things. And I had to demonstrate it so that the reader would not doubt that what she does is both necessary and plausible.²

Nastyona, in short, represents Rasputin's ideal of womanhood. She is a person 'who, by her understanding of life, cannot say: you are guilty and I am not, and who will always accept the guilt of another as her own'.³ Given the hopelessness of the situation, Nastyona, like Andrey, is doomed.

Andrey and Nastyona see each other only rarely. After their first meeting, when he appears to her at night in the Gus'kovs' bath-house, Andrey, obviously, cannot make his presence known in the village. Nastyona has to travel to see him, and she makes the hazardous journey across the frozen Angara and through the snow-bound forest to reach his refuge. As a result of one of these clandestine meetings she becomes pregnant.

As their relationship develops Andrey descends into inhumanity and Nastyona rises to saintly martyrdom. Andrey is consistently associated with demonic and grotesque concepts. When he first arrives and reaches his hut, he is 'like a dead man'.⁴ Pursued and overwhelmed by a 'feeling of bewilderment and emptiness' (II, 111), he learns to live by night and sleep by day, hunting for food and himself feeling hunted in return:

In these hours of darkness he lived by scent alone and thought of nothing, and as morning approached it was scent that led him back to his hut and plunged him into sleep. . . . In such moments it was as if his memory went blank, he refused to believe that he had been in a war and had lived among people, it seemed that he had always roamed alone like this, with nothing to do and no debt to pay, and that such a fate had been prepared for him from the very outset. (II, 141-42)

It is significant that here, too, loss of humanity is linked with loss of memory.

When he looks into the eyes of a she-goat he has mortally wounded, he sees reflected his own head with the horns of a devil. Furthermore, he is at one stage seized with a desire to burn down the old village mill; his association with fire increases the satanic aspect.

Nastyona sees him in terms conditioned by peasant superstition and folklore, in her own highly impressionable frame of reference. When he first approaches her, in the gloom of the bath-house at night, he is as 'something large and unkempt' looming darkly before her (II, 17) and 'a gnarled, barely distinguishable figure' (II, 19). In those first moments together after three-and-a-half years apart, his shaggy appearance reminds her of a

'werewolf' (*oboroten'*) (II, 21). When she visits him on the other side of the river for the first time, she is struck by his resemblance to images from peasant demonology: '*leshii*' and '*nechistaya sila*' (II, 41). She sees reflected in his dingy surroundings the desolation of his soul:

Everything here troubled and at the same time frightened Nastyona — the deserted winter hut, devoid of any spirit of life, its makeshift floor merely boards thrown on the ground any old how, with part of its ceiling sagging and its walls blackened, unevenly hewn and covered in withered cobwebs; and the snow outside, brilliant in the sunshine and undisturbed by tracks, billowing down from the mountain in thick flakes; and Andrey here beside her, now that she recognised him in the light of day . . . and, finally, she herself, not understanding how or why she was here in this distant, neglected spot. (II, 42)

Other Russian literary illustrations of the proverb 'A house is the same as the person who lives in it' (*Kakov dom, takov i khozyain*) include Yevgeny Onegin's house in Tat'yana's dream, inhabited by demons and grotesque creatures, and the homes of the various landowners visited by Chichikov in Gogol's *Myortvyye dushi* ('Dead Souls'). Rasputin is obviously well aware of this folkloric heritage in classical Russian literature.

Andrey is isolated not only from the human community, but also from the natural world. He learns to howl like a wolf and frightens away all the wildlife living nearby. As the months pass and winter comes to an end, the snow and ice melt and nature revives. Although the air becomes increasingly fresh and the forest becomes brighter and freer, Andrey desperately seeks out the last traces of snow in the dark reaches of the forest where the sun does not penetrate. Nastyona, when she sets out on her increasingly arduous journeys to visit him, is invariably accompanied by darkness, rain, wind, or storm. Andrey turns from the sunlight and the life-giving force — the sunlight that sustains Anna in *Posledniy srok* — and sinks deeper into his own purgatory.

The Angara, as has been seen in 'Vniz i vverkh po techeniyu' and *Proshchaniye s Matyoroy*, represents the flow of time and historical progress. In this story it acts also as the natural boundary, separating Andrey from the human community, and it is this boundary Nastyona has to cross as she moves from one world to the other. As Andrey points out to her:

'Before only one side of the river existed for you: the side where people were. On the right-hand bank of the Angara. But now there are two: where there are people and where there is me. You can't ever bring the two together — The Angara would have to dry up for that.' (II, 87)

The Angara symbolizes a psychological barrier for Nastyona. In winter, at the beginning of the narrative and when she was still excited by her husband's return, the river is frozen and easy to cross on foot. But when the ice thaws, and when her conscience begins to trouble her, it becomes increasingly difficult. It is also a metaphysical boundary between Andrey's world of oblivion and

degradation, and normal human society. Nastyona is ultimately unable to cross this boundary, and she perishes in it.

Whereas Andrey comes from a hard-working and conscientious rural community, which he rejects, Nastyona has no such stability to which she can turn. Her father was killed during collectivization and her mother died in the famine that followed. As a young girl during the famine she kept herself and her younger sister alive until they made their way to the home of a relative who took them in. Even when she was married she had to endure the petty domestic tyranny of her mother-in-law and physical beatings from her husband. (One particularly brutal attack occurred when she suggested that their childlessness might be a result not of any defect on her part, but on his.) All in all, she has known in the course of her life little happiness, but much deprivation, fear, and cruelty. Nevertheless, her sense of loyalty and devotion is strong, stronger than Andrey's, even if it clashes eventually with her innate sense of good.

In her suffering and ultimate tragedy she is associated with images suggesting spiritual beauty and religious absolution. When she realizes that she is pregnant, for example, she stands naked before the window of her room one night and the moon casts the shadow of the window-frame over her breast in the shape of a cross. When Andrey learns that she is carrying his child, he is overjoyed: it is the expiation of his sin, the extension of his being into the future. Nastyona becomes for him his 'Holy Mother' (*Bogoroditsa*) (II, 82); 'Save my soul', he implores her (II, 86).⁵

Similarly, when she first visits Andrey, she brings him some candles obtained from a church to light up 'the darkness of his isolation and despair'. It is Russian Orthodox practice to light candles and pray for the souls of departed or loved ones. Also, as G. E. Mikkelson points out, Andrey and Nastyona, when they are apart, pray for each other.⁶

Such religious symbolism is heightened by the resemblance of the relationship between Andrey and Nastyona to that of Raskol'nikov and Sonya Marmeladova in Dostoyevsky's *Prestupleniye i nakazaniye* ('Crime and Punishment'). Towards the end of the story Nastyona calls Andrey to repentance in terms strikingly similar to those used by Sonya with Raskol'nikov:

'Andrey, maybe all this isn't necessary? Maybe we shouldn't go on like this, maybe we can stop? I'd follow you anywhere, to hard labour even. Wherever they sent you I'd go, too. I just can't go on like this, and neither can you — just look at yourself, at what you've become, what you've done to yourself.' (II, 182)

Sonya says to Raskol'nikov: "'What — what have you done to yourself? . . . I'll go with you, I'll go anywhere with you . . . I'll join you in hard labour'"⁷. With the current interest in Dostoyevsky in the Soviet Union after decades of suppression, Soviet critics have attempted to establish parallels between the malevolent and individualistic Andrey and Raskol'nikov and the Underground Man.⁸ Andrey, however, is not acting according to any abstract theory; he is

simply losing his humanity. Moreover, Raskol'nikov is redeemed through his religious impulse; Soviet socialist realist ethics would not allow the traitor Andrey to re-enter the human community: he is by necessity damned.

To continue their clandestine relationship becomes increasingly hazardous for Nastyona. Although she has to lie and steal to keep Andrey hidden and still the suspicions of an increasingly suspicious community, deception goes against her very nature. When, early in the narrative, Maksim Vologzhin returns home from the War to a hero's welcome, with his arm in a sling but otherwise in one piece, Nastyona's sense of guilt prevents her from taking part in the celebration, in which the whole village is involved. She feels ashamed before everyone: Vologzhin, her friend Nad'ka, widowed with three small children, and Andrey's mother and father: 'She was now a stranger, an outsider, not daring to respond to their tears and joys and not bringing herself to join in their conversations and songs' (II, 71).

When the end of the War is announced, she is similarly unable to share the communal rejoicing, realizing that 'this was not her day or her victory, and she could have nothing to do with it' (II, 151). Her pregnancy in the course of time is noticed and commented upon, and, claiming that the father was a casual acquaintance from outside the village and denying all knowledge of Andrey's whereabouts, she is driven from her adopted home by Semyonovna and ostracized by the community. The moment of her discovery is described as 'the threshold of her sacred path' (II, 186) — her path to martyrdom. Nastyona's movements are now watched, as suspicion grows that Andrey, long known to have deserted, is in the vicinity. She sets off in a boat (it is now summer) across the Angara to warn him that the authorities are closing in and the police have arrived in the village. She is followed, and, as her pursuers catch her up, finally broken by the twin burden of guilt and duplicity, she throws herself in the swift-running waters of the river. As she prepares to die, she hears thousands of church-bells, and a large shadow creeps across the water. Nastyona's death is, in the words of G. E. Mikkelson, 'a release from torment, a resolution, and a martyrdom, in the traditional Christian sense'.⁹ She is reunited with the community after her body is washed up, four days later, when the women in the village arrange to have her buried in the village cemetery, and not on the piece of land set aside for suicides. The women, mothers all, realize that she died for love, they understand and are deeply affected by her tragedy.

It is a sign of Rasputin's considerable success in making this story not simply a religious parable but also a compelling psychological drama that, as well as charting the essential opposition of Nastyona and Andrey, he also brings out the links that bind them, just as he stresses the family characteristics of Anna's apparently disparate children in *Posledniy srok*. For example, it is precisely in his isolation that Andrey joins the human community with the prospect of becoming a father. Andrey and Nastyona also experience the same dream

when Andrey is at the front and they are thousands of kilometres apart. Nastyona appears to him as she was before she was married, but surrounded by children — their as yet unborn children — and standing against a background of birch trees, symbols of rural Russia. She upbraids Andrey for leaving her alone for so long and with so many children to look after, and thus provides a subconscious spur for Andrey's decision to desert. Also, on her return home from her first visit to Andrey, the guilt she feels is described in the same frame of reference in which she had first observed Andrey's home:

Nastyona felt her soul to be pained and troubled, and at the same time full of space and width — as in a house from which things have been removed. Now she could do exactly as she pleased. And this emptiness made her shiver, it lured her and drew her in, laying bare all those corners where every thought rang with a resonant and questioning echo. (II, 51)

Andrey soon glimpses the duality of his personality in his changed circumstances; “‘It’s as if it’s not my life, it’s as if someone else has crept under my skin and is ordering me about. Whenever I want to turn to the right — he turns to the left’” (II, 48). Nastyona reciprocates this awareness towards the end, seeing Andrey's descent into darkness and her own double existence: ‘Every person has arms and legs enough for one, but there’s more than one of him inside — there’s several, and all of them pulling in different directions and tearing him to pieces’ (II, 175).

Just as Andrey is isolated from the natural world, so, too, Nastyona sees herself judged by nature after she has denied to Mikheich knowing where Andrey is.

The day was already well on the wane and sinking downwards, and the sun and the moon had appeared at different ends of the same sky; the thin, pointed crescent of the moon flickered, evil and assertive, while the sun shone pale. Nastyona always felt afraid when she saw them together, and she could not understand why they did not go their separate, time-ordained ways. And now she also became uneasy. Without screwing up her eyes she looked full at the sun, and she thought that she could feel the cold, stinging rays of the moon reaching her. (II, 133)

These links serve to heighten the tragedy, and increase the sense of Andrey's sin, for Andrey is not so much rebelling against the State in his actions, as striking against the hallowed concept of motherhood. Throughout the story he seeks to destroy this concept. On his journey home to Atamanovka he spends a month with Tanya, a deaf mute, who provides for him without expecting anything from him in return, feeling very happy with even the slightest sign of gratitude or affection. She teaches him to understand her sign language ‘with the same love and patience as when teaching a child to speak’ (II, 29). Tanya is like a mother to him, and Andrey leaves her callously and without warning. As he later sinks into degradation, he remembers Tanya and again yearns to be with her, not, however, for pity and sympathy, but to mock and pity her

alternately, to exercise total power over her, to use her body as he pleases, and to satisfy his ever-increasing egocentricity. She had offered him maternal warmth and understanding, but he responds with cruelty and sadism.

Similarly, Nastyona, when she first visits him, feeds him by hand 'like a child' (II, 42), but he turns away, a symbolic rejection of the maternal instinct which is later to have a tragic culmination. (Nastyona has a presentiment of her death when, towards the end of the narrative, she accidentally wanders into the graveyard of suicides and stumbles into a grave. Furthermore, she cannot swim and has a morbid fear of water. It is two days after this incident that she drowns.)

Andrey's treatment of Mother Nature is similarly cruel. He wounds a she-goat and watches its lingering death in twisted fascination.

He did not kill it as he should have done, but stood and watched, trying not to miss a single movement, the suffering of the dying animal, its intermittent convulsions, and its head lolling to and fro on the snow. (II, 55)

He later kills a four-month-old calf in full view of its mother, standing on the opposite bank of the river. The child in Nastyona's womb is also four months old at the time, and Nastyona and Andrey similarly belong to opposing banks of the Angara. He kills the calf not merely for the meat, but 'to please something that had taken a firm and unrelenting hold of him' (II, 149). Nastyona's fate is implied here, for she at one stage dreams of talking to a cow, an unconscious awareness of her organic oneness with the natural world. Andrey tries to destroy the beauty and the very basis of life.

Zhivi i pomni, therefore, far from marking a thematic departure, reflects Rasputin's consistent anxiety for the relationship of the individual to his or her society, and the bonds that tie him or her to it. This work, moreover, shows the author's confidence to transfer this basic conflict to another period and within it to increase the scope for tragedy. *Zhivi i pomni*, like *Proshchaniye s Matyoroy*, spans several months, whereas his earlier two *povesti* embraced only a few days. Rasputin proves that he can sustain tightness of form and subject-matter in whatever time-scale he chooses.

The links of *Zhivi i pomni* with the mainstream of Rasputin's writings are deeper, however. Like the tree-fellers who try to cut down the *tsarskiy listven'* and the authorities they represent, Andrey's assault is on Mother Nature. Like Anna's children, he forsakes his roots and betrays the spiritual and moral heritage of his native land. Like them, too, he turns his back on the concept of motherhood. Andrey is thus judged in terms of his relationship to the natural world, the unspoilt Eden Rasputin identifies with Russia before the Fall.

Rasputin's collective hero is not an individual woman of any particular generation, but Mother Russia herself, personified, symbolized and deified in the various female characters in his works. His major conflicts can be reduced

to Soviet man's denial of his roots, resulting in an upset in the balance of the feminine and masculine in human society. Consequently, the masculine ethos becomes more assertive, and the feminine is continuously and increasingly under threat.

Andrey escapes retribution, but morally he dies. He hears the commotion on the Angara, guesses rightly that the authorities are on his trail, and escapes to a cave in the taiga he has prepared for just such an eventuality. His degradation is complete: he reverts to a pre-historic state, living like an animal in a material and spiritual wilderness. Andrey has no past, present, or future. The story's title could serve as a central motif for all of Rasputin's writing: it is a warning to society that the past, the community's roots and the sources of its identity, and the lessons the individual learns in childhood, are only to be forsaken at the peril of man losing his humanity, his soul.