

STANDING BOTTLES, WASHING DEALS, AND DRINKING "FOR THE SOUL" IN A SIBERIAN CITY

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Introduction: Bottles are a Path

The practice of setting bottles down in front of people either to gain access to goods or services or to ride up on those bottles into some desired position is a well-known feature of Soviet and post-Soviet culture, but treatment of this issue as an economic exchange-related one's tears it from its wider context, a wider sense of exchange and a wider sense of value.¹ A bottle presented is not only an economically meaningful gesture but is supremely meaningful in other ways. The calculated bribery of bottles "stood" others often results in hours of drinking together and a shifty transformation of exchange into an intimacy felt to be central to the *depth* of Russianness. Even when a bottle is not emptied together, what is given may index and invoke a ritual that first and foremost claims to deny the ontological ascendancy of calculated exchange. This paper explores the upward direction of bottles, ways in which it can also be bottles all the way down, and ways in which this sort of slide, which is, I argue, tremendously revealing about Russian culture, occurs. Rituals including alcohol have economic, socio-cultural, philosophical and psychological relations to a master trope in Russian culture, *dusha*, soul,² and recent history has brought many of these aspects to the surface.

One evening in April 1994 in Omsk, Siberia, Andrei came home drunk from putting his car away. When his garage neighbors would beg him to "sit" he couldn't leave, there would be nothing he could do. I understood. In Omsk I learned that even if you don't want to drink you can still find it in your heart to "keep your friends company for half an hour," by which time, more time and more bottles have appeared. Drinking tea, a related ritual and often a euphemism for drinking something stronger, also creates (or defies, or claims to negate) time. Besides drinking tea and drinking alcohol, "drinking tea" can refer to eating, having dessert, sitting and chatting, or having an intimate conversation. If I left my friend Grisha's house without drinking tea he was more offended than if I hadn't come at all; it was how he measured our time together. Even my shortest encounters in Omsk were marked by some liquid and a rushed communion or confidence. Conspicuous

consumption or theft of time ritually isolates a private world of "us." If the proletariat cannot dissipate the world of false consciousness, *sitting* can create another world.

The Ritual

The first two shots often come in quick succession, with only a short pause for discussion; a rhyme may be quoted to justify how soon the second drink appears: *Mezhdū pervoj i vtoroi / Promezhutok ne bol'shoi*; [Between the first and second the interval is not great]. Subsequent drinks are usually administered by a man at whatever rate he senses necessary for the company and the conversation. Some men are renowned as excellent at this as well as at proposing toasts, and are sought out to perform this ritual function at childhood friends' and former army buddies' weddings. The word for the role of toastmaster is *tamoda*, a Georgian word, which is significant. Russians may be somewhat in awe of Georgian drinking ritual.

A bottle opened must be finished *do dna*, to the bottom; as in emptying one's glass to the first and all significant subsequent toasts, performing "completely" corresponds to the openness desired, is proof of earnestness and adds to the efficacy of prayerlike toasts. The first toast may be to the birthday man or woman, then perhaps another to him or her again, then without fail to his or her parents, for which people may stand, and the parent toasted, if he or she is present, especially a father, may object to the fact that some glasses were not full: "it's not acceptable to drink to parents with half-full glasses." And so on, with increasing creativity.

Conversation may be interrupted by the announcement that a toast had "ripened," but often, then, fueled by resistance to drinking, the toast equally organically grows, stretches, becoming conversation, glasses droop tiredly and awkwardly above the table, as once a toast is proposed under no circumstances may glasses be set down again before drinking. If a toast changes or evolves as a result of this talk, someone reformulates it; if conversation after clinking glasses and before drinking up

gets long, a second clink, even without restating the toast, usually occurs before drinking. This is all governed by the freshness of the shared image of the toast and by the sense of our unity. A toast to acquaintance was often first in my presence; then to the hosts, to health ("everything else we can buy), joking toasts to politicians, the very formal toast to the women present, when the men all stand (*za zhenshchin*, even more smilingly official and gallant, raised elbow, to lovely ladies, *prekrasnikh dam*, or, rowdily and rudely, to *bab* - broads). A toast may be to this "not being our last meeting, I hope."

Sitting is an elaborate but malleable language. In January 1991, on the first officially recognized Christmas, at exactly midnight my friends rose haltingly, crossed themselves and each other with raised glasses, toasted Jesus' birth which they had pinpointed, on the model of New Year, at that second, and then aimlessly stood, bricolage having run dry. The next year I drank to toasts such as "At'a boy, Christ!" and "are there tigers in America?" "In zoos." "Here's to tigers!" Once, in the village, at a chicken dinner, my host, smiling, proposed a toast "to the rooster -- rest in peace; you sang well and were a sexual giant." This last was in response to me having taken photos of him chopping off the rooster's head that afternoon, immediately after the bird had mounted a hen and wiped his filthy feet on her white feathers.

At some gatherings everyone *must* drink up at all toasts; at others women just do their best; in lenient company each paces himself. Out of everyone's deep respect for a certain professor and politician, I was exempted the last few shots of strong drink at a gathering the evening before I was to meet him. When I first came to Omsk everyone who drank vodka or *samogon*,³ occasionally Armenian "cognac," but by 1994 many wines and sweet liqueurs were widely available and many women preferred "Sangria" from large bottles or "German" white wine, from smaller ones. One group of drinkers may invoke breaking rules as *dushevno*; another holds to the rigid rules of drinking, which are after all designed to create and facilitate *dushevnost'*; in other groups, even dimly remembered or newly invented traditions are treated as "the right way." At Grisha's party for himself and his daughters, mild relative anarchy reigned, partially because Grisha, a nondrinker, has a very inaccurate sense of when to toast and how to tend to his guests, and partially because he and Nadia find their style of *dushevnost'* in

looseness rather than strictness of the rules of *sitting* as well as other life situations. Grisha had even to be reminded to toast the mother who gave birth to him. But everyone drank simultaneously, whatever they were drinking. And an important toast (which someone figured out and tried to make sound significant) was that the total of the ages of the three guests of honor was 50.

In the 1990's, clinking glasses in some groups was attenuated by a belief that this "primitive" Russian thing is not done in the West, though after a few restrained drinks someone often says "*Let's do it Russian style*" (*davajte po-russki*) and leads a hearty, relieved toast. At a power banquet for powerful regional government figures there was a sense that *we* the powerful have transcended common human relations, though later that day I did see a drunk *partocrat*, brutally crushed against workers in a crowd, get a blissful smile on his face. The few toasts at the banquet to which glasses *were* raised were scarily vague: to the success of implied financial or political projects, but no hint was made as to their nature: something elliptical was said, received a chain of truncated reactions, the topic was dropped. The mysterious spirit of the words *dogovorilis'*, "agreed, and *sozvonimsja*," we'll talk, we'll call each other, reigned; any claim on the future entails the full indeterminacy and complexity of "this post-Soviet life of ours" and often has a nuance of challenge or gamble. Saying "agreed," making contact, has *immediate* value, whether we realize or forget our actual plans. Despite minimized toasting, during the meal someone would catch another's attention across the table or room, meet his or her eyes in the equivalent of a hand clasp, pause, nod, gesture with their glasses "to" each other, and then drink simultaneously. A third or fourth person may gently "break in" on these intimate drinks, which joining in is sometimes acceded to generously and sometimes grudgingly. It seems that many ritual necessities may fall away or be manipulated, but *simultaneity* is more hardy; some "cultured" friends who gather to discuss literature, do not clink glasses and rarely even propose toasts but would never, *never* drink at any moment during a meal except simultaneously, with everyone else. Drinking sips when one wants, as in America, or even "leveling" as in England, is inconceivable here. Drinking is inherently *with others*: I was repeatedly told how offensive it would be to enter a room, pour oneself a drink and not offer one to others present. "Even the worst alcoholics don't drink alone," I was told, which is an exaggeration, but not ridiculous.

The usual Russian drinking technique is to exhale, drink, then eat a snack or drink another liquid before you can smell the alcohol. *The snacks - zakuski* - may be mushrooms, pickles, tomatoes, a sip of the vinegary juice from pickle or pickled tomato jars, juice, a drink made from jam and water, sandwiches, "whatever God sent" that season or year, or as simple as sniffing a dry piece of bread or one's own forearm. At their dacha once, Andrei and I found the ideal *zakuska*: a fresh strawberry, which, Andrei enthused, "immediately takes away all taste of *that*." After-drinking grimaces and remarks may include "foooo - disgusting!" or, as a friend in the village said of her husband Sasha's moonshine, "stinky dog!" I told Andrei and his wife Zina how Sasha bellowed over the telephone for me to bring a *spirtometer* to measure the alcohol in the "stinky dog"; they laughed, commenting on how much villagers drink.

At his wife's birthday party, after many drinks of the "stinky dog," Sasha played his *bajan* and everyone sang. The same group of people gathers regularly to sit, drink, and sing. Often what is sung is *chastushki*, folk limericks, which are improvised as well as remembered by the hundred and sung in turn. Sasha suddenly turned to me and, grinning, announced that after I finish my dissertation I have to start on a truly profound mystery which itself merits a whole dissertation: why, whenever they get together, is the first song that is sung always the same one? The secret connection between drink and song is mediated by the multifaceted links between drink and dusha, the soul.

Drinking for the Russian Soul

People may express derision for a drunk or they may pity him. He may be out of control because of some inexpressible, crushing trouble with his dusha. Oleg told me:

Russians' dusha goes through so much [or suffers -- *perezhivaet*] about everything, gets too overheated, leads to depression and drinking.

Sometimes the ritual and communication of *sitting* is so important (and non-drinkers in Russian culture insist that they can do the same without alcohol) that it is linked to being human. Two friends were drinking, and at a certain point, when no one made a toast, they sat with raised glasses and one friend joked with a serious expression: "what, now we're drinking silently, like animals?" But

then sometimes drinking can indicate an *absence* of soul and thus of essential humanity; as a ten-year-old boy told me, "If a person was born in a part of town where they drink it means he *had* a bad soul to start with." And Anya once said: "Drunks are dead already. Corpses. But wait," she added, getting confused, "Mussorgsky was a drunk and then went insane, but that dusha of his, it stayed as it was." Drinking always means *something* about the state of a person's soul, though what it means can run from one extreme to the other. Several people mentioned as examples of soulless people those they see in lines for beer. Govorukhin in his 1991 film *The Russia That We Lost* showed these same lines as evidence of the "spiritual death of the Russian people." On the other hand, a 19-year old student told me that "When a Russian has a good drink, you won't find anyone more soulful than he. At any period in our history, both before and after the Revolution."

Once Grisha said:

We need to rest our souls and we are not developed enough anymore, not cultured enough, to use museums for that. But with vodka or tea we can sit with a friend and talk about anything. Fear has trained us to only value conversations we have in the kitchen or the *kurilka*, where we smoke. Only away from *any* time and place can we talk openly.

Culture may be mentioned as an alternative or cure for drinking, as if they somewhere occupy the same place. On television I once watched a show about alcoholism, where a project was described to prophylactically "foster cultural needs in the children of alcoholics" to keep them from going the same way as their parents.

Oleg said:

Spiritual [*dukhovny*] -- that's a richer concept; the person is more cultured, maybe, maybe more educated, tolerant... but soulful, a person can be a drunk and a bum, but still a soulful [*dushevny*] person -- that means he's just good to sit with, you can talk without any of that -- meanness.

The confusion of the link between drink, soul, culture, and the absence of soul and culture can be made clearer only if we notice a connection, not clear in the above quote but explicit in many others in my data, between *kul'tura* and some *simple, fundamental kindness*. This kindness is often given as a much more necessary

component of *kul'tura* than any education. So my friend might call drunks *bezduzhnye*, but when she tells of how a drunk once bought her a train ticket, she has to admit that "in that state they're all kind."

Spirit-based products such as cologne and furniture polish are imbibed by the desperate. Erofeev's (1990) novel *Moscow-Petushki* is an exhaustive tragicomic train ride through drinking lore and practice among such desperate. An Omsk friend described a train ride with friends when they were students and, desperate for a drink, got a hold of a tube of a *spirit*-based toothpaste and, having diluted it, tried to wait for the unpalatable part to settle, but because of the jolting of the train, it never did, and they had to drink it as it was. Drinking and trains go together: on long train trips across Russia, one man told me, you keep company with the same person for several days at a time, and many *dushevny* conversations happen, there is time to drink, tell jokes, complain...

In a hospital I sat with doctors, respectfully toasting our acquaintance (*znakomstvo*) and playfully toasting friendship between nations with shots of medical *spirit*, some of us drinking from ornamented, lacquered wooden cups, others from chipped enameled coffee mugs; medical alcohol which for my sake they called vodka until I called their bluff; then, relaxing, they playfully added drops from some brown medicine bottle. My familiarity with the state of alcohol and alcohol lore in Russia earned me trust in other domains.

With almost completely false severity Zina scolded Andrei for "making" me *sit* and drink with him when he came in drunk from the garages; other wives *really* yell, in big voices like those in which grandmothers sing, in disdain at their men's drinking; in return the women are accused of hindering the unfolding of souls. Sasha, 13 years old, wanted beer yesterday evening when his father and I were drinking. His disgusted mother scornfully allowed his father to give him "20 grams" while we were eating. Later, she went to put her daughter to bed and when they were both sure Tamara was out of sight, his father gave Sasha a large glassful, which he downed, leaping, wide-eyed and innocent, onto a couch when his mother returned. But women do drink together often, not so differently than men. When I returned to Omsk after an absence, Anya in a hushed voice announced to her daughter-in-law Nadia and me, when Grisha had left the room, that we would have a drink together. We did, and a

second, and then Anya corked the bottle of vodka and put it in the refrigerator, saying that would be "our bottle." Grisha's was a virtually non-drinking home, but after Anya's death the next year her wardrobe floor was found to be lined with bottles of vodka, old and new, secretly hoarded against future need as an older woman in some other country might have stashed away money or other valuables, yet when I arrived after her death and Nadia suggested *pomjanim Anju Viktorevnu*, that we drink to her memory, we drank not that hoarded vodka from the wardrobe floor but a *nastoika*⁴ that the family made themselves "so as not to poison anyone at the wake" (*pominki*).

In a list of delicacies on a table, liquor is called "something for the soul," *dlja dushi*. On the one hand, drinking is said to "calm" the soul; on the other, it facilitates the experience of what is conceived of as the soul's restless, passionate nature. Andrei told me that in one village a shop girl took home vodka so that if at night someone's *dusha bolit*, soul was in pain, he could get a bottle. "Drunkenness is so well developed in Russia because we think about the meaning of life too much," One friend rhapsodized:

Our nation daily poses a question about the sense of its existence on earth, from three alcoholics gathered under a fence to get drunk to a university auditorium. It's like Gorky's character; the unneeded man drinks the money he was given to buy pants with. When reproached, he answers "why do I need pants when my dusha wants vodka?" We get drunk differently -- it's all only in order to open up and feel yourself brothers. But if you want to know about that we'll have to *sit* down sometime...

When we did *sit* he explained, anxiously gesturing, that *the bottle is only a path*, that the goal is not to get drunk but to communicate, to commune. When Andrei told Zina in a persecuted but loving tone to either keep us company or leave us in peace, he invoked the popular association of drink to Russia herself: "Dasha is an anthropologist; she should know *everything*, the most important things, *everything*, about Russia," he said. When he mentioned that vodka with beer gives you a headache, I agreed. He laughed: "and they say there's a difference between Americans and Russians!"⁵ This *everything about Russia*, in which alcohol lore figures prominently, is a doorway to much more (and much less) than communion.⁶ Another friend, who was always very pleased when I would drink

with him, and who would always announce, while persuading me to drink yet another shot, that it was only "50 grams -- for company," at a party one night made similar gestures at a bottle and a roast chicken, saying to me in a drunk undertone: "understand -- *everything* comes from and depends on these trifles; *everything* comes from *this*." *Everything*, including what is hidden: Bottles and the power to make things appear and disappear

Alienating oneself socially is tantamount to endangering one's property; Andrei described how *friends protect friends*. He described his dependence on the other scientists, professors and administrators at the garages while mixing the last of his Amaretto with his homemade cedarnut alcohol. A shortage of places to meet has transformed a cluster of sheds at the edge of the city into a second set of kitchens; one man, who owns a neighboring garage, had separated from his wife and was actually living in his garage. The men drink a shot of *samogon* in one shed, of vodka or some *nastoiika* in another. I very often heard it said that the perestroika-related alcohol shortage, among shortages of other foods necessary for hospitality, as well as the increasing influence of formerly weak cash were killing traditional relations; perestroika reportedly did to soul exactly "what Gorbachev did to vodka" (for which he was often roundly cursed as part of toasts). A *chastushka* I heard one evening in a village went: At dawn the cock crows / at noon, Pugacheva [a popular singer] / The liquor store is closed / Gorbachev has the keys.

Bottles are jokingly called hard currency, they work so much better than rubles. Money's arms were just never long enough, and Gorbachev's anti-alcohol campaign increased the previously high value of the bottle. Grisha and I and a bottle of vodka which Anya had given him once rode 100km into the steppes on a bus on New Year's eve to get a good deal on beef. During my stay every adult received a monthly coupon with which he or she could buy two bottles of vodka at very low state prices. Some actors I knew, who did not have permanent residence rights to their apartments (*propiski*) did not get coupons, which are distributed by apartment, and, due to their inability to obtain cheap vodka, were immeasurably poorer. Urban households hoarded this alcohol; a living room or bedroom cabinet would sometimes open, revealing rows of bottles. Non-drinkers also often brewed their own alcohol to avoid toxic technical spirit sold as vodka in urban kiosks,⁷ and to exchange for access to

goods or services, especially in the village where many families have garden plots, often with small dachas. People would joke about how all their vodka goes off to the village to pay for the care and feeding of their fowl there. In the city as well, though, if you know a man in charge, you make time, drink a bottle together and convince him to give you uninflated prices. If the mechanic doesn't get a bottle, the elevator stays broken. And "If someone wants to become a boss," Zina told me, "and can set bottles in front of people, bottles, bottles, and up he rides into management on bottles. And there he sits -- utterly incompetent."

But if it was bottles all the way up, it was bottles all the way down: vodka, like the hours spent drinking, creating intimacy or pseudo-intimacy necessary to do business, has great, even "magic" transformational power. On a popular game show, *Polje Chudes* (Field of Miracles), based on the American "Wheel of Fortune" but named after a mythical setting in the Pinocchio story *Buratino*, a question referred to a magic word; the answer was not the predictable "thank you," but "bottle." A bottle *is* such fine currency because of its magic role in ritual *sitting*. "When the head of the dorm came to tell me to move," I was told, "I had a bottle ready. We drank and he forgot why he'd come; *Land of Miracles*." The image of miracles in Russian culture is, I believe, tremendously rich. Washing machines, boots, apartments, cars, and other disparate goods swapped in exchanges unmediated by money and sometimes "greased" by alcohol seem absurd, miraculous, but when refrigerators become sheepskin coats, the mediating element, half hidden behind shifting consciousness, luck, opportunistic behavior, ritual delicacy and an opaque veil around power, is what is called *sistema*, the "system," in which bottles are one of many players.

Having to invent ways to get things done rather than relying on an official, so-called "civilized" division of labor is part of what is involved when Russians call themselves or their society "primitive." What was called a hostess' "sorcery" made possible the "magic" of a generous meal when stores were empty; thus, while complimenting her, "uncultured" mention of the exhausting practical process of acquiring commodities was avoided. A meal condensed time, work, creativity, opportunism, debt and power. All *vozmozhnosti*, possibilities, are vital to hospitality. These sorcerers work the *sistema*, pulling goods out of some other world like

rabbits out of hats. If bottles are one part of this magic, they are also *many kinds* of magic. As money's influence in exchange grows, the role of human interaction is said to be attenuated: the bribery of standing someone a bottle used to result in *sitting*. If you wanted to go to a restaurant, you *knew* someone there; to the baths, you *knew* someone; the landscape was alive with acquaintances. Increasingly, you have to pay. "It *feels* different, less *human*," I was told by one young businessman; under the old system people *had* to deal with each other, had to communicate. An American for whom I was interpreting was furious at her Russian counterpart for his reluctance to say how much her delegation owed for their transportation. The Russian got desperate and with a martyred air said that he would have to find time to get together with the director of a certain factory, drink a bottle with him and come to some agreement. A grossly simplified, seemingly illogical and perhaps false account, but a candid enough representative revelation about "our system" to calm down and confuse an angry *Amerikanka*.

Money spoils something the "corrupt" *sistema* often preserved: in an intense voice, a very drunk Cossack once tried to explain to me the secret heart of the situation: "Everyone wants to have something, but *only through someone*." The moral context of this statement is an ancient Russian stigma on the fallen present world which constantly threatens to, in Bakhtin's (1984) words, "reify the soul." The current present is seen as an ultimate challenge to that particular soul. Money's purity can be experienced as dirty and inhuman, and if money liberates, it is a liberation about which some post-Soviets are ambivalent. An editor once told me that "for all its problems, that *sistema* had more *dusha*."

Although ambition or the desire for some concrete personal profit or return from exchange are, superficially, anathema to the project of soulful openness, if an individual values these things highly enough, the need becomes deep, and thus begins to partake of the contexts and treatment of deep things, insinuating itself into arenas like the kitchen table, where deep human issues are opened, closed, and negotiated. As this depth is emphatically and proverbially unfathomable, the depths are also often invoked by a *gesture*, as if to say: "transcendently, infinitely further *there*, further than I can express..." And as anyone who has experienced Russian culture knows, drinking itself is too packed and profound

a ritual activity for mere words to describe; the knowledge that a person was drinking or drunk arrives simultaneously with what is said in words, but *is not a word itself*. A friend sat and, as we talked, he played with a clownishly large orange plastic comb, the edge of which, at one point, he ever so briefly and exquisitely pointed at his throat in a universally known gesture. It is usually a flick of the fingers tapping the throat, and is understood to replace the verb "drinking" or the adjective "under the influence" even when performed in the most ephemeral and stylized ways.

Exchange can be made into help and vice versa by the use of certain highly valued words. The word "friendship" can be used to exploit someone who takes it at face value, but if both parties have concrete goals, "friendship" softens the image. Saying "he's *one of us*" labels both transient business partners and lifelong acquaintances as belonging in a profound emotional community. Both contexts may involve sitting, drinking, talking. Drinking together both "washes," purifies, a deal between friends of its defiling practical nature, and also often labels as friendship a deal between near strangers. On Omsk streets it is common to see men physically supporting each other in the middle of the day. Once I came upon a couple of them at a central intersection, arms embracing each other around the waist, nose touching nose, having a conversation over their wrinkled suits.

In the village, an acquaintance had furs he was trying to sell; someone mentioned that he might be interested in them. Then the topic was mysteriously, abruptly dropped. We eventually started making our way to his house; ostensibly for a drink, but then his pregnant wife, in a sleeveless house dress, cooked and served a full meal. We drank, ate, drank, and only then was it decent to revive the subject of exchange of these furs. Work is transformed into rest, business into community and vice versa through formal similarities between economic and emotional solidarities such as drinking and terms like "he's one of us." This category of "us" assumed, established or referred to while *sitting* can be exclusive: no one not in *our* position can understand; or, on the other hand, "we" can be a unity as fleeting as the high from one shot of vodka with a chance acquaintance.

An indigenous Russian ideology attributes a kind of "antistructure" and "communitas"-generating power to drinking ritual. In practice, this is part of a tremendously

complex system involving economic, power, and other relations, but this must not be allowed to obscure for us the phenomena of experiences of solidarity associated often, though of course not predictably or always, with drinking together. As a 30-year old friend of mine said: "Dusha isn't in individuals but in their union."

Communion and Dashing Expansiveness, as Opposed to Practicality

Perhaps one "pain" from which drinking distracts attention is exactly one's practical motivation. Jokes about Russians as notorious drinkers feature *razmakh*, unpredictable, unchecked gestures, the proverbial "maximalizm" popularly attributed to a modeling of the Russian psyche on a landscape so transcendently vast that the social authority of practical and impractical is supposed to be made to wither by contrast.

In Tara, 300 km north of Omsk city, on the edge of the taiga, my hostess told me about the mushroom harvest, about Siberian hospitality and how vodka counteracts the effects of radiation. She selected and gave me strings of dried mushrooms. Then we sat down, toasts were offered to acquaintance and "to the open Russian soul in the closed city of Tara!" In Omsk, if a person leaves a party early or refuses to drink, he may be asked if he is Russian or not. *Sitting* is a priority and all else must fade in the face of it. A person who allows real time or practical matters to affect this may be (and often is) accused of soullessness. Returning to the association of Russia herself to drinking ritual, often *the first question* I was asked about America was "what do they do when they sit at table?" Different ways of creating communion are *truly* foreign. Once a Russian friend told me about a chance encounter between himself and some friends and several Ethiopians in a train:

The Ethiopians mixed vodka with cola and sipped it slowly and separately. And you know how *we* drink -- you down half a glass together, your soul warms up (*dusha sogrela*), and then you start to talk...

A joke has it that Soviet business is when you steal a wagonload of vodka, sell it, and blow the money on vodka. A real practice, of going fishing all night, drinking rather than fishing, and stopping by the market in the morning to buy fish so the wife won't be angry, is also repeated. Jokes about Russians as moronically generous drunks illustrate how by *sitting* they challenge the

hegemony of a world which coerces people into living by mundane laws: A Frenchman, an Englishman and a Russian are stranded on an island. An angel appears, offering each a wish. The Frenchman wants to be in a Paris cafe; the Englishman to be in his garden. They vanish. The Russian thinks and finally says "we were *sitting* so well; bring the guys back!"

A character in the film *Autumn Marathon* cruelly coerces two others, including a foreign professor "with work to do," into drinking with him, which they do in miserable silence. Then he comments "*Khorosho sidim*," we're sitting well. To *sit* includes doing, in a certain culturally specific sense, *nothing*; if doing nothing *well* is paradoxical, that increases its value. This comic attempt to breathe life into what is sewn together is only a slightly exaggerated version of what I often experienced. The damned thing is that after a few drinks, that community *can* come to life. In Tara, after a drink, my hostess jumped up and gave me more mushrooms, laughingly remarking on her culture of drinking: "I knew when I'd had a drink," she said, "I'd think of more things to give! I admit it, I was being stingy!" After another drink she leapt up and gave me a carved cup; and later, "because God loves threes," a jar of jam. She said: "*sitting at table is a process*; when you offer hospitality and another accepts it, you watch this process."

The Power of Drink

That process rarely extends to the fellowship of boss and worker. During a period when Grisha was tremendously pained and angry over a break with a best friend with whom for years he had spent hours a day at work drinking tea, he lied extravagantly and significantly to me that this friend, recently promoted to head of the workshop where Grisha worked, had refused to drink with him, citing the proverbial "bosses don't drink tea with subordinates." In drinking as in other domains of post-Soviet life, as I have suggested in many contexts, power and dusha abhor each other yet "underground" need each other. Zina told me "we drop our duplicitous Soviet masks in the kitchen." With nothing to hide, there would be nothing to drop.

Later the same evening in Tara we went to another home. My first host said that as he is older than the rest and their boss he could propose a toast though we were no longer at his table. He at first used his power as toastmaster as a supervisor, to give subtle messages intonally charged with implicit context and meaning, that we must "be kind, not

let circumstances separate us. . . ." He knew that by the obligatory simultaneous drink he was exacting consensus in the very moment of "dusha" on whatever implied agenda he had. Then, shifting from "work" to "rest," he broadly, comically concluded, now in the genre of candid "kitchen talk": "and here's to the absence of communists!" This rare instance of superiors drinking with subordinates was due to my presence in Tara. My suggestion in the Omsk workshop where Grisha worked that a manager who had found us celebrating something should be invited to join in was rejected. "It's not done." Part of *sitting* and *resting* is feeling that you are together against a greater power, the boss, the System, Fate. *Sitting* must simultaneously be outside and in defiance of contexts of power relations. Most (not all) boss' presences would infect the gathering with the quotidian order of things: bad for the subordinates trying to rest and bad for the boss, for, as I was told, if a boss sees the other side, shows *interest*, does not maintain his *indifference*, he won't be able to play his own part. Zina said:

Sitting together occurs according to the principle of spirituality (*dukhovnosti*). It's unpleasant for me to drink tea with my director. I am assistant director, he is director. It's unpleasant. Because his methods of doing things, his views, they are perfectly foreign to me. I am comfortable drinking tea with those under me, we can talk on any topic at all, openly.

And, as Anya once pronounced, "Indifference is the greatest sin and drinking talk is not indifferent," that is, it creates community rather than emphasizing self-interest. At home, at their respective tables, managers and workers may complain about each other, but the ritual and the result at both kinds of table are similar. At the banquet for regional government figures, as a woman talked to me, describing how Russians have forgotten how to work, her eyes were fixed on mine as if furiously sending messages in an eye tradition related to kitchen talk; the feeling is "we're in direct contact, I'm sending you waves of meaning which supplement, validate or contradict my words."

I had originally thought that drinking situations showed something about power relations and about *dusha*, but I realized after a time that the link is stronger; there are many positive connection between drinking and power. One, as I have mentioned, is the use of drink to establish the solidarity and trust that can help one attain powerful

positions and connections. Another relates more to the authority which a drunk's soulful honesty commands. At a play at the *Sovremennik* [Contemporary] Theater in Moscow, a character was drunk enough to say to a bureaucrat that he and his like should be "exterminated as a class." This new application of an old slogan was suddenly wildly cheered by an otherwise quiet audience, who found their own feelings blurted out by someone more in touch with those feelings and less in control. But a stronger example still came from Masha, who mentioned that if you refuse to drink with someone, they may throw a sarcastic challenge at you: "*Ty brezguesh so mnoi vypit'?*" "What, you too squeamish to drink with me?" This implies that the reluctant one considers himself *higher*, disgusted to drink with a normal person. It is an accusation of elitism and thus of lack of *respect*.

Respect and Openness

Masha was once joking about drunks and respect: "The way to answer," she said, "when they ask if you respect them is 'I respect you but I won't drink.'" But I pushed her to take my question more seriously and she startled me with the Dostoevskian Christianity of her answer:

He wants to hear that you respect him and he wants proof of it, because -- look, he's drunk, but nevertheless he is respected, that means that, even in *that* state he is still *a human being!*

"Those jokes about drunks always talking about respect -- I can translate that," Aleksandr Ivanovich told me: "When they talk about respect they are really saying 'Do you feel that I am an absolutely related, dear person to you?'" A thirty-year old woman said: "Respect is awareness of others. *Dushevny* contact is focusing on others."

When a man "stands" another vodka it is called a sign of respect to drink. At a theatrical tribute to a set designer I saw a distilled version of one aspect of drinking ritual. The scenario was a trial; "witnesses" came on stage to pay tribute to the guest of honor's career and character. As a witness finished he or she "had" to drink up (*do dna*, to the bottom) a shot of vodka, validating the good wishes, earning the right to wish them, proving his or her *respect*. Respect may be mentioned more often by drunks, but it's said that what a sober man has on his mind a drunk has on his tongue. Drinking talk, again, as Anya said, is not indifferent. Displaying *interest* in another or in his or her point of view, even in the form of passionate

disagreement, is acknowledging and thus in some profound sense *realizing*, drawing out and giving reality to, both souls involved. Respect is empowered in a way similar to interest.

Much of what is expressed explicitly and implicitly during open talk is the value of *openness* itself. This interpersonal state of "openness" is one of the most focal moments of *dusha*. Drink increases candidness, but I am convinced that the wider cultural and psychological effects of alcohol are implied by hospitality *even when alcohol itself is absent*, and that hospitality in general is informed by the experience of *sitting*, even drinking together. I once had a long wait on an airstrip in Omsk with a man I hardly knew. I offered him food. He immediately "opened up," making me return prestations of technical details about a plane we were idly watching, notes on the deleterious effects of the plane's radar on pilots' sexual organs, and observations about the corrupt dance of bottles of just landed Armenian cognac going on in and around the plane. Particularly in a formerly closed city (Omsk was officially opened in January 1991) an individual's capital of "secrets" to "open" during "open communication" is great, and a formerly classified security or defense-industry-related detail may be proffered alongside a family secret, gossip, a valuable or hysterical rumor, or confession of some hidden emotion with no particular distinction made between them. Which brings me to the shiftiness of it all and the eclecticism of it all.⁸

Shiftiness and the Path of the Bottle

I often thought of the complexities of even "warm, open" *sitting* as "shifty." Shifty in how the craft of dealing out thoughts and stories, the art of reaching communion can flicker, alternating with the skills of teasing out and revealing gossip, of claming up and backing off while maintaining a general sense of what is accepted as gratuitous warmth. It is a dance of, if not controlled, then certainly provoked clinging to each other, governed partially by the mysterious power that candid, open revelations (or revelations disclosed in the style of openness) have of creating a desire in one's companion to reciprocate in kind. Or in *some kind*. A traditional Russian refusal to accept money for goods or services amounted in many people I knew to a virtual avoidance of public contact with cash and avoidance of any appearance of self-interest; but willingness to accept gifts or drink can

be a dizzyingly ambiguous juncture of calculation and hospitality. Refusing a gift is offensive. Refusing money affirms one's commitment to helping *ot dushi*, from the heart, gratuitously, but also... money is simply worth *less* than objects. This shiftiness is apparent in the words of a young woman who told me:

Communal taking of food is sacred. It comes from Christ -- and from our economic conditions. If you're hungry, you go visiting. When they invite you to eat you think "wow, there are still human beings left!" When they come over you remember how they received you.

Boundaries between "gratuitous" help and an economy of favors are blurred by the shiftiness of emotions, fleeting impulses of warmth, by the way one is never fully aware of one's motives. Drink in bottles and in shot glasses embodies and helps create this shift.

And in the morning after such soulful interactions, after sharing critiques of others and stories of degradation at the hands of direct and indirect superiors, after sharing a final drink or two for the road, called *pososhok*, from the word *posoh*, walking-stick,⁹ do the acquaintances wake up as real friends? Sometimes, but not necessarily; shared moments of soul often sink back into a realm opened up by the kitchen, the night and the alcohol. They may or may not color "practical" everyday economic or work relations (often considered of a lower grade reality, that is, spirituality) with a distant knowledge that with this person one can *sit*, that is, that somewhere, he has *dusha*. The art and science of *sitting*, creating *dushevnost'*, depend on the gamble of opening cards, laying things on the table; if it "works" a wall falls, revealing your similarity to each other; if you lose, you have lost power, safety, and made an ass of yourself. In conversations which toy with becoming *dushevnyje* bits of information are whirled around, timidly or brazenly advanced, used as teasing bait and thrown down, under the sign of *supposedly* gratuitous antipractical drinking time, as challenges in dances of power, exchange, friendship, and things, by virtue of their social or cultural biographies, felt to be too "deep" or "complex" to formulate, only to share. How a person dances this cultural dance depends on his character, skill, morals, goals, beliefs, his psychological context for such soul-gambling. *Sitting* implies an infinite range of possible meanings of elements that are on the surface ritually similar, a limited palette

that may reduce a drinking interaction to earning a favor or that may sketch a future friendship or other alliance.

Textnotes

1. Most recently by Myriam Hiron (1994).
2. I choose to use the Russian word *dusha* rather than the English translation of "soul;" for some discussion of differences between these terms cf. Wierzbicka (1992).
3. Home-brew, moonshine, in Omsk and environs was often made from a by-product of sugar beet processing. *Samogon* can be clear and delicious or unfiltered and noxious, depending on the ingredients and the skill of the man or woman producing it. It often sits in large glass jars under a sink or in a kitchen cabinet. Another homemade drink, as rare as *samogon* was ubiquitous, was *medovuho*, mead, which, everyone said, would make your knees fold up under you, though nothing of the sort happened when I tried it.
4. *Nastoiki* are usually made from diluted *spirt* (cf. Hiron 1994) with some berry, herb, nut, and occasionally sugar added. *Nastoiki* are steeped for a number of weeks. Andrei's specialty is *nastoika* steeped with cedarnuts from the taiga.
5. One evening a drinking discussion turned to a cultural comparison of exactly this question. We resolved, after exchanging scores of common and exotic lexical items related to alcohol, that Russian slang was predominantly verbs for the process of drinking or getting drunk, whereas American drinking slang had a greater proliferation of adjectives describing the drunken state.
6. With a certain group of friends I would sit in the kitchen for hours at a time, and because we ate and drank very slowly and constantly, I would feel a sort of measuredness, that the goal was to sit all night, not get drunk but just to keep going, be together.
7. "Armenian" cognac bottles often had Omsk seals on them. Friends explained that it did not necessarily mean that the contents were not

cognac; what was sure, however, was that the drink had been partaken of and diluted at every step of the trip.

8. See Pesmen 1991 for an extensive discussion of eclecticism and the "mixing of metaphors" in any number of human contexts.
9. One man, in the full-blown joy of joking drinking expertise, labeled several drinks beyond the *pososhok*: for example, a drink when one's foot is in the stirrup, when one is riding off, etc.

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