# Two Suicides — Text 1 of 2

Not long ago I happened to be talking with one of our writers (a great artist) about the comic in life, about the difficulty of defining a phenomenon, of naming it with its true word. I had just remarked to him beforehand that I, who had known *Woe from Wit* for almost forty years, had only this year properly understood one of the most vivid types in this comedy, Molchalin, and I understood him precisely when he—that is, this very writer I was speaking with—explained Molchalin to me, suddenly bringing him out in one of his satirical sketches. (I will talk about Molchalin some other time; it is a noble theme.)

"And do you know," my interlocutor suddenly said to me, evidently long since and deeply struck by his idea, "do you know that whatever you write, whatever you bring out, whatever you note in a work of art, you will never match reality. Whatever you depict, it will all come out weaker than in reality. You think you have achieved in your work the most comic thing in a given phenomenon of life, caught its most hideous side—not in the least! Reality will immediately present you with a phase of the same kind that you had not even conceived of, surpassing everything that your own observation and imagination could have created!.."

I had known this since '46, when I began to write, and perhaps even earlier, and this fact had struck me more than once and left me in doubt about the usefulness of art in the face of such apparent impotence. Indeed, follow any fact of real life, even one that is not at all so striking at first glance, and if only you have the strength and the eye, you will find in it a depth that Shakespeare does not have. But that is precisely the whole question: whose eye, and who has the strength? After all, not only to create and write works of art, but merely to notice a fact, one also needs, in one's own way, an artist. For one observer, all the phenomena of life pass in the most touching simplicity and are so clear that there is nothing to think about, nothing even worth looking at. Another observer, on the other hand, is sometimes so troubled by those same phenomena that (it happens, and not infrequently) being at last unable to generalize and simplify them, to draw them out into a straight line and rest there, he resorts to another kind of simplification and simply puts a bullet through his brain, to extinguish his tortured mind along with all the questions at once. These are only two opposites, but between them lies the whole of human meaning that exists. But, of course, we can never exhaust an entire phenomenon, never reach its end and its beginning. We know only the urgent, the visibly ongoing, and even that only by appearances; ends and beginnings are still, for the time being, fantastic to man.

By the way, one of my respected correspondents informed me back in the summer about a strange and unsolved suicide, and I have been wanting to talk about it ever since. In this suicide everything, outwardly and inwardly, is a riddle. This riddle I, by the nature of human nature, of course tried to solve somehow, in order to stop at something and find peace. The suicide was a young girl of twenty-three or twenty-four at most, the daughter of a far too well-known Russian émigré and born abroad, Russian by blood, but almost entirely non-Russian in upbringing. The newspapers, I think, vaguely mentioned her at the time, but the details are very curious: She soaked cotton wool with chloroform, bound it over her face, and lay down on the bed... And so she died. Before dying she wrote the following note:

I am going to undertake a long journey. If this does not succeed, let them gather to celebrate my resurrection with Clicquot. If this succeeds, I beg that they not bury me until I am quite dead, since it is very unpleasant to wake up in a coffin underground. It's not chic!

That is:

I am undertaking a long journey. If the suicide does not succeed, then let everyone gather to celebrate my resurrection from the dead with glasses of Clicquot. And if it does succeed, I ask only that they bury me after making quite sure that I am dead, because it is extremely unpleasant to wake up in a coffin underground. It would be very un-chic!

In this vile, coarse chic, to my mind, one hears a challenge, perhaps indignation, malice—but at what? Coarse natures destroy themselves by suicide only from a material, visible, external cause, and from the tone of the note it is clear that she could have had no such cause. At what, then, could the indignation have been?.. At the simplicity of what presents itself, at the emptiness of life? Are these those all-too-famous judges and deniers of life, indignant at the stupidity of man's appearance on earth, at the senseless accident of this appearance, at the tyranny of inert cause, with which one cannot reconcile oneself? Here one hears a soul that had risen up precisely against the straight-line quality of phenomena, that had not endured this straight-line quality communicated to her in her father's house since childhood. And the ugliest thing of all is that she, of course, died without any clear doubt. Conscious doubt, so-called questions, most likely did not exist in her soul; everything she had been taught since childhood she believed straight out, on trust, and that is the most certain thing. That means she simply died of cold darkness and boredom, with suffering, so to speak, animal and unaccountable; it simply became suffocating to live, as though the air had run out. The soul could not endure the straight-line quality unaccountably and unaccountably demanded something more complex...

About a month ago, in all the Petersburg newspapers there appeared a few short lines in small type about a suicide in Petersburg: a poor young girl, a seamstress, threw herself out of a fourth-floor window because she simply could not find any work to sustain herself. It was added that she threw herself out and fell to the ground holding an icon. This icon in her hands is a strange and unheard-of feature in a suicide! This is already some kind of meek, humble suicide. Here, evidently, there was no murmuring or reproach at all: it simply became impossible to live. God did not will it, and she died, having prayed. About certain things, however simple they may appear, one does not stop thinking for a long time; somehow they haunt one, and one even feels as though one were to blame for them. This meek soul, which destroyed itself, involuntarily torments the thought. It was this death that reminded me of the suicide of the émigré's daughter reported to me back in the summer. But what, however, two different creatures, as though both from two different planets! And what two different deaths! And which of these two souls suffered more on earth, if only such an idle question is decent and permissible?