Whirlwind

Full of dark thoughts, I was walking through the field,
And suddenly, amid exhaustion and alarm,
I was caught by a frenzied whirlwind.
Among the cloud of dust raised from the road,
Tree leaves were whirling,
Sheaves flew, scattered haystacks,
Tree branches, whole bushes.
Herds, bleating and with heads bowed,
Rushed on; such a roar and howl arose in the darkness
That, squeezing my eyes shut,
I ran and thought the storm meant to smash
Or sweep the earth away.
Instantly the thread of my thoughts was broken.
Caught in the vortex and trying in vain
To open my dust-covered eyes,
I remembered Dante's terrible hellish whirlwind,
Which drove, spinning, like a leaf in a meadow—
The eternal host of perished shadows.
And what then? Suddenly I hear while running
That I am not alone caught in the hellish eddy
And dragged in an inescapable circle.
Opening my eyes for a moment through the burning whirlwind,
I saw a multitude of heads and faces.
Clothes fluttering like sails,
Maddened horses, charioteers in dust,
Children and women raising their hands
From under the wheels of broken chariots.
Only by their lips, open in terrible torment,
I understood that they were all screaming,
But the whirlwind tore the sounds from their mouths
And bore them off like chips on a waterfall...
I suddenly found myself in a lull behind a rock,
And my gaze could follow those fleeing.
And I saw: with heavy tread
Bulls rushing in fear across the field,
And between them calves in a line tail to tail,

Young men and old men running.
Above them the whirlwind circled sheets of paper
And tore gray wigs from their heads...
I immediately recognized pedants in this throng:
Their miserable circle once guarded
The shrine of learning and, in blind daring,
Blocked the road to it for the people...
After them ran the offspring of offices,
A sad host of merchants and swindlers...
Here were the muzzles of pugs, wolfish faces,
And the heads of long-eared horses,
And the Zeus of the scribes' world, and pariahs.
An invisible swarm of demons seemed to drive them.
One fat man fell, exhausted,
But the whirlwind, among dusty clouds,
Tossed him now down, now up, as if throwing a ball;
On another's shoulders a harlot hung,
Like a vampire, biting him:
He beat her, gnashing his teeth...
After them crowds of ladies in ball gowns,
In wreaths of roses, in garlands of ivy,
As if floating in a musical waltz,
Like flying swans
Over the blue steppe toward mirror lakes,
And a crowd of dandies ran after them,
Jostling and stretching out their hands
After the fleeing throng of ladies,
Like a flock of frightened domestic ducks
Runs across the pond, flapping wings
And straining to rise into the air...
But then the whirlwind grew stronger still,
Again the crowds rushed in the hurricane,
Like armies in gunpowder smoke.
Like a multicolored, fiery fountain,
The colors of blue and scarlet ribbons
Flashed before me as in a fog.
I felt: terrible is that height
From which the whirlwind hurled these unfortunates...
But suddenly, I look, the darkness clears,

And the pillar of dust, and with it the voiceless crowd
And pitiable victims in the swirling sand,
All shone in red gleams of light,
And in white robes, holding a cross in his hand,
A venerable old man stood before the crowds,
Like a stone cliff facing a river.
He cried out: Repent! and with his fingers
Pointed at the city... I looked
And was struck dumb... Fire, billowing in waves,
Enveloped the whole sky over the city.
From the smoke sparks fell like seed
From a winnowing fan, and suddenly, through the crackling and roar,
A voice from heaven rang out: The time has come!
Behold him whom you have forgotten! Down,
O lewd and fickle tribe!
I fell half-dead in horror.