

[E S S A Y]

LANGUAGE OF THE HEART

DUNCAN REID WITNESSES THE CHANGES IN RUSSIAN WORSHIP AND THE
CHURCH SINCE THE END OF THE SOVIET ERA

RECENTLY I revisited my adolescence. I borrowed the DVD of *Doctor Zhivago*, and watched all four hours of it. Of course I've read the book, but it was the David Lean film that had changed my world back then. Now, forty years later, Omar Sharif's brooding, ponderous silences in the lead role are somehow embarrassingly romantic—I'm watching this with my matter-of-fact, tell-it-like-it-is Gen-Y children. And Julie Christie's pale lips, ash-blond hair and bluer-than-blue eyes are somehow very sixties. The English-language dialogue in a film set in Russia seems quaint. Yet I surprise myself remembering scenes and bits of dialogue with the same immediacy as it seemed to have then.

In 1965 I was in fourth form, as we called it then, and enjoying the rare good fortune to be learning Russian. I say enjoying, because it was my favourite subject, and taught by my favourite teacher. Russia was exotic and powerful and dangerous, and this, as Robert Dossaix has eloquently noted in his book (*and so forth*),

carried a certain erotic charge: '... there was a kind of erotic fascination at the heart of our attachment to our subject'. Four years earlier the Soviet Union had shown her scientific superiority by putting Yuri Gagarin into orbit, and the year after that had scared all our parents witless during the Cuban missile crisis. Which makes all the more remarkable the appearance of Lean's classic Anglo romanticisation of exotic, powerful, dangerous Russia. I went to see it twice.

The film perpetuated exactly the myth of exotic Russia that Orlando Figes explores and cautions against in his recent monumental cultural history of the country, *Natasha's Dance* (2003). Fifteen years after the *Zhivago* movie, with the benefit of the hippy era behind them, the Americans came up with a similar romanticisation of the same period in the film *Reds*. *Reds* was to *Doctor Zhivago* as Fairport Convention was to the Beatles. In the 1960s, *Zhivago* was orientalism before we knew there was such a thing. It had love and betrayal, purity and violence, idealism, melodrama and genuine tragedy. And it had Julie Christie. I took to jumping onto the running boards of moving trams, until told off by a conductor (remember when Melbourne trams had running boards? And conductors?)

IN his urbane and compassionate advocacy of understanding between human cultures to be found in his book *On Identity* (2000), Amin Maalouf proposes that everyone learn to speak three languages: first their mother tongue; then English—as a useful language; and then a third, a language of choice, their very own 'language of the heart'. This presents a problem to the native-born speaker of English: what is the useful, second language? For me it's German, an undoubtedly *useful* language, as one of my linguist friends assures me. It's a language in which I can hold a tolerable conversation and read a book. So this substitutes for English as the 'useful' second language. And the language of the heart? For me it's Russian.

Perhaps it would have been hard for me not to notice things Russian. I'd grown up in a part of Melbourne settled during the other great Russian scare, that of a hundred years earlier. Getting to primary school each day involved walking along streets with names such as Balaclava, Inkerman, Alma and Sebastapol. But David Lean had brought out the erotic fascination latent in all things Russian. My problem is that I can read this language only with the most laborious and constant recourse to dictionary and grammar book, and in conversation, even when I make out what's being said to me, the words for an answer just refuse to make their appearance. But the heart is not to be denied by such trivialities.

I'VE been to Russia twice. The first time was when I was twenty-one. Along with a group of fellow Oz students, I left the dry white heat of a late-December Melbourne and was deposited into the sub-zero darkness of the Sheremyetyevo Airport—named, even then, after the noble family whose estate had once covered these broad acres on the outskirts of Moscow. Our group, before leaving, had been asked what we wanted to see. My response had been to ask about places of worship. By then I'd been to my first Orthodox liturgy, in the Oxford Street Russian church in Collingwood—an experience that made immediate sense to me of the story about the Grand Duke Vladimir's ambassadors' visit to Constantinople.

Places of worship in the Soviet Union of 1972 meant empty shells of Central Asian madrassas, underground tombs of long-departed monastics in their glass-topped sepulchres, locked churches, museums of 'scientific atheism', and a few churches still open with a few feeble candles burning in the half-light and the occasional elderly visitor standing in hopeless intercession before the iconostasis. Relics of a past era for the curious or the recalcitrant. The public iconography was of the variety to be found in the old International Bookshop in Elizabeth Street, Melbourne: Marx and Lenin, but here in confident civic marble and bronze instead of the romantic-defiant posters on student share-house walls.

My second visit was more than thirty years later. This time I arrive alone at Domedovo, but with a phone number from my friend the Russian priest from Parkville. It's been an all-night flight from London during which the sun has not set. The weather is humid and sultry, with the same heavy, solder-grey sky you find anywhere in the northern European summer. Passport control takes an age to negotiate, as at Heathrow in the 'other passports' queue. And what's that sign above the gate? I struggle to make sense of a very un-Russian looking word, despite its cyrillic lettering. Ah, '*bee-layn*'! The new Russia, where English has also become a useful language! Well, I wanted to see how things had changed. Moscow appears to be the centre of a totally deregulated society. Anything goes, and people live by their wits from day to day. It's Restoration London perhaps, or Chicago of the gangster era—or Berlin of the Weimar republic? There are old people with cupped hands, and teenage girls with babies, begging at entrance to the metro. This was unthinkable 'earlier', that is, in the Soviet times. My contacts, Inessa and Andrei, are teachers of English, Spanish and Romanian. Andrei lives by his wits, by choice, he assures me, teaching on an hourly basis.

As on my first trip to Russia, I ask about places of worship, and this time about reopened churches and monasteries. One Saturday evening, with Inessa, I visit three small churches, all within ten minutes' walk of one another. There are forty

people in the Church of Maxim the Blessed in the Ulitsa Varvarka. At St Nicholas's Church in Ulitsa Moroseika there's a congregation of seventy or eighty at vespers. This is also the resting place of the relics of Staretz Aleksei, who during the early Soviet period had taught people to use their time while standing in queues or on the underground by praying the mantra-like Jesus prayer. The relics of this twentieth-century martyr, a spiritual guide in difficult times, are the reason for the popularity of this particular shrine. St Nicholas's Church had been a storehouse for much of the last century. Its long-neglected frescoes have now been freshly repainted throughout. The third church we visit, dedicated like the Greek church in Oakleigh to the Holy Anargyroi, is custodian to an ancient icon of St Nicholas. By popular demand, and in the face of clerical opposition, St Nicholas has recently been moved into the body of the church, accessible to the people, rather than in the altar. There are fifteen or twenty people at vespers.

During the Soviet era, all these churches had been closed, and they have been reopened only in the last ten or twelve years. One has gained a relic of a twentieth-century martyr. Even so, Inessa ventures the opinion that they all lack something because they've been closed for so long, some atmosphere you find in the few churches that remained open.

SUNDAY afternoon. At the newly rebuilt Cathedral of Christ the Saviour the queue extends around almost three sides, each the length of a Melbourne city block. There's a dignified mood of patience. But it would be unwise to mistake this for passivity or apathy. I have less patience and head back towards the Kremlin wall. Marshal Zhukov is still there on horseback, as he was in January 1972, but now looking out not to the west but towards a huge billboard advertising one of the dozen or so new mobile-phone providers, and incongruously flanked now by the two-headed eagle the Russians took over from the Byzantines. You can see it on the black-and-gold flags outside Greek churches in Melbourne. But I do wonder how Marshal Zhukov might feel about this new-found old symbolism. To say nothing of a mobile phone advert.

THROUGH a gate in one of the red-brick towers. The Kremlin, I'm told, didn't have a clock till the time of Peter the Great, who caused a riot by erecting one. Holy space was not to be invaded by secular accounting, even of hours and minutes. The walls of the Kremlin, along with other public and private buildings, are acquiring icons. St George, once again the symbol and patron of Moscow, can be found over a Kremlin gate, as well as on the side of every Moscow police car.

A street-corner brass sign informs passers-by that here in the early sixteenth century lived Ilya, hermit of the forest and prophet of God.

The Kremlin has four magnificent cathedrals. They're not really used as churches any more, so they count as museums, except in time of need. Stalin allowed the divine liturgy to be celebrated here in the dark days of 1941 and 1942. But even when not in use they were *here*, and I ask myself: did the officially, scientifically atheist Soviet Union have, in the silent presence of these four holy places clustered round a tiny enclosed square, a Trojan horse within its walls? Presumably this is the mistake the Taliban tried to avoid when they destroyed the Buddhas of Bamian—not that it helped them.

The oldest of the Kremlin churches is the Uspenskii Sobor, the Cathedral of the Dormition. Faded frescoes cover every square inch of every wall. Here the story of Jonah is told, sequentially, in gesso, and the depiction of Mary that the Greeks call the *Hodegetria*—the one who points the way—gazes so deeply into the eyes of the observer that it seems rude to turn away. The well-known icon writer's device of deliberately reversing perspective draws you out of yourself—but here you are first confronted before the invitation.

The Archangelskii Sobor is the resting place of the tsars, each in a casket above the stone floor. The script is in the elaborate seventeenth-century Cyrillic style. Suddenly there's a hush and people stop where they're standing. You can hear a low drone of three male voices, joined then by a single alto soft, gentle and low harmonising with them before suddenly breaking loose and soaring off into the vast hollow roof-spaces. *This* is the perfect piece of song, and it perfectly fits the architecture. The crowd has stopped for a group of young musicians spruiking their CD? But it's more than that—the music of heaven itself or, as the group's Jungian-sounding name, Anima, suggests, the music of the depths of the soul.

As I leave I overhear a middle-aged woman explaining in English to her Indian guest how the town of Chernobyl had been saved by the prayers of the Mother of God. It was she who had ensured the wind had blown the other way that April day in 1986. Pity about Estonia—and anywhere else *downwind*.

SUNDAY has been sunny-hot, and the scene in the Aleksandrovskii Garden outside the west wall of the Kremlin is one you'd see in any European city on a Sunday afternoon in summer. People eating ice-creams, throwing water at each other from the fountains, sitting at outdoor beer-stalls listening to the buskers. Monday, it's pouring, and we're going to the Donskoy monastery, dedicated to the Donskaya Mother of God icon that in 1380 accompanied Prince Dmitri in

his victory at Kulikovo against the Central Asian suzerains. This was the beginning of Russia's salvation from the 'Tartar yoke'. The significance of this liberation becomes clearer to me later that afternoon when we visit the Novodevichii Women's Monastery. The name—'new girls'—refers not to the inhabitants of the convent, but to the fact that, as my guide book puts it with appalling matter-of-factness, this was the site of a market where children were once sold into Eastern harems. No wonder Kulikovo is seen as a historic liberation, and the hero of Kulikovo a saint:

The most holy Mother of God enquired: 'And where is Prince Dmitri?' The Apostle Peter answered her: 'Prince Dmitri is in the city of Moscow, in the holy cathedral of the Dormition; he is attending the liturgy ...' The most holy Mother of God said: 'Prince Dmitri is not in his place: he shall lead the throngs of martyrs ...'

The military theme is not far away as we walk towards the monastery entrance, flanked with tanks of the Donskoy regiment. The tanks, though, are white-painted, as if to point to some different and more worthy purpose than that of patrolling Prague streets or shelling Afghan villages. As we walk through the cavernous entrance several nuns are at work on a new fresco. The subject is the much revered Patriarch Tikhon, the first leader of the Russian Church after the Revolution, arriving at these gates in 1918. Tikhon was kept here, effectively under house arrest, for the rest of his life, and his remains are buried here. Looking at the older, but newly restored frescoes, I learn something of the pedagogical use of pictures. 'Look at this scene: what is going on here? It must be the feeding of the five thousand. How do you understand this story—what do you make of it?' So I find myself wondering how to explicate a text, how to configure a sermon, on the spot. 'And this must be the woman at the well. See how she stands, with what dignity. How can you possibly pray without pictures?' Inessa asks me.

On the way out, the air of unhurried dignity continues. People walking down the long pathway stop and turn back three or four times, even in the heavy rain, to bow low and cross themselves, on their way back into the territory of the everyday. By now I have started to understand something of the importance of constant worship in these places. Church is not something you may or may not do for an hour on Sunday morning. If you go into a church, you *expect* to find worship going on. There is no time-bound meeting for worship. Worship reflects eternity. The monasteries offer a sense of calm amid a busy, overcrowded life. On the metro we're pushed along with the crowd through the gates and up the escalator. It's like being on the Swanston Street bridge at midnight, New Year's Eve,

except you're a hundred metres underground. Earlier in the year a bomb had gone off in the Madrid underground. If the congestion was anything like this, the injuries would be horrific and the panic almost unimaginable. Three minutes later we're walking the length of the whitewashed walls of the Danilovskii Monastery. There's no-one else around. The sense of calm and openness is the Hegelian antithesis of the metro crowd.

The Danilovskii, newly reopened, has been the official residence of the patriarch since the 1988 celebrations of the millennium of Christianity in Russia. Its spiritual and psychological centre is the relics of St Daniil, the first prince of Moscow in the thirteenth century, and later a monk. Daniil is, as Inessa tells me, our prince, the protector of Moscow: 'he is in the ground here and he is also with God, and he prays for us'.

Where have I heard these words, *our* prince, before? I wonder vaguely. Of course, this is how the soldiers in *War and Peace* speak of Andrei. I remember it again when reading James Forsyth's *Peoples of Siberia* (1992). In the 1930s a group of indigenous people in the far East met publicly during the day to elect a soviet (because that's what the Russians had required) and secretly at night to elect a *knyaz*, a prince (because that's what *they* needed).

NEXT to the Novodevichii there's a sports stadium, and in the sports stadium the local equivalent of Triple J's Big Day Out is in full blast. The rock music in no way diminishes the calm purposefulness of the nuns or the meditations of their visitors. The Novodevichii is custodian to the cemetery in which notable Muscovites are buried. We pay our respects at the grave of the late nineteenth-century philosopher Vladimir Soloviev. In Russia, all philosophy is religious. As Nicholas Berdyaev first suggested in his book *The Russian Revolution* (1931), Marxism itself was something of a Judeo-Christian heresy. It was a rerun of Byzantine iconoclasm, and there are still old black and white films of people 'with ugly smiles', as Inessa puts it, burning piles of icons. These are Dostoyevsky's devils, she assures me, coming out, out of ordinary, otherwise good people. I also understand now why Russians aren't overly given to smiling. It's ugly, undignified.

TUESDAY it's still raining, and we're off to Zagorsk, which has now resumed its former name of Sergiev Posad. I'm travelling with Simeon, a 19-year-old politics student, as well as Inessa and Andrei, and we're to meet up with another of their students, Masha. The placename honours the local saint of this part of the

country, the hermit Sergei, spiritual and no doubt political adviser to Dmitri, hero of Kulikovo. Sergei discovered a spring in the forest here and lived as a solitary until, as always happens with solitaries, disciples and tourists started to gather. For a while Sergei limited the number of companions to twelve, but the community soon grew into a monastery, and the monastery grew into a centre of pilgrimage. The spring is now covered by a log-shelter for people to collect water and bathe. And there's a queue.

Sergiev Posad is sixty or so kilometres from Moscow, a bit more than an hour by bus, and various stopping points on the road through the forest developed over the centuries. It was customary, for example, before approaching the shrine of St Sergei to visit the relics of his holy parents a few kilometres away. The central church is another Uspenskii Sobor, and the monastery compound is also the home of the Moscow Theological Academy. Andrei, who is about my age, had grown up in Zagorsk, and tells me how he had gone to school within sight of the monastery walls, but had never been told what it was, or anything of its significance. There was never a school excursion into the monastery grounds.

The monastery, reopened since 1944, is the visible centre of the town, and the golden cupola of the Uspenskii Sobor dominates the surrounding countryside. I have a letter of introduction to the Theological Academy, but have failed the protocol that dictates I should have sent it in advance. We're told we shouldn't have strayed into the academy buildings. 'Don't worry,' says Inessa. 'It's very Russian to get into places where you shouldn't be, without papers.' A few minutes later we repeat this performance. 'It is far too expensive to buy a ticket to the academy's icon exhibition, so we'll just join this party of tourists and go through with them.' Which we do!

I join the line (the *bee-layn*?) of pilgrims shuffling towards the glass-topped tomb of the saint. Light a candle before the shrine, bend and kiss the glass, then kneel among the crowd at prayer on the stone floor. I am 'not here ... to carry report' (in T.S. Eliot's phrase), but to kneel where prayer has been valid. My Protestant brain turns to slurry, the last vestiges of Enlightenment self-consciousness sliding beneath the surface, and a primitive *Urkatholizismus* wells up from some unplumbed depth within me. This is not Vatican II Catholicism, not even Tridentine Catholicism, but something older and more elemental, something far beyond rationalising.

Sergiev Posad is another part of what Victoria Hammond, describing a similar location in her *Letters from St Petersburg* (2004), identifies as 'Holy Russia.' Russian soil is sacred soil. After returning to Australia I learn from an Australian geolo-

gist who has worked here that there are some mineral deposits in Russia that foreign mining companies won't touch: they are also parts of the national treasure, parts of Holy Russia. We walk past a corner of the monastery compound. 'In this *bashnya*,' Simeon tells me, 'Peter I took refuge during the Streltsy rebellion. It's called the 'duck *bashnya*'—what is the word in English?—because he shot ducks from here.' Quick rummage through the garden shed of memory, and successful for a change: *bashnya*—tower. 'Tower,' I say. 'Yes, of course, the duck tower, because of Peter I.' Peter the Great became Peter I during the Soviet period, because a tsar could never be great. Apparently he's still yet to be restored to greatness, despite the manifest restoration of other, more recent members of the Romanov family. But then again, they are martyrs.

I am to go to Simeon's home for lunch, to meet his grandmother. We're walking past—to an Australian eye—unnaturally green, wildly overgrown kitchen gardens, giant rock roses and unruly grass verges in front of unpainted picket fences and iron-roofed bungalows. Simeon tells me his house has a plaque because his great-uncle had been a Hero of the Soviet Union. We come to the house. It has an unpainted picket fence, an overgrown kitchen garden, a corrugated iron roof, and a small marble notice by the front door. I catch the words '*Geroi Sovetskovo Soyuzo ... 1941g*'. Inside, the house has the clean sparse look I associate, rightly or wrongly, with Scandinavia: all polished blond timber.

Simeon's grandmother is a sprightly 80-year-old, and lunch is a very substantial meal. She had collected vegies from her own garden, and cooked cabbage soup and chicken, as well as fish. Because it's the fast of St Peter, Simeon and Masha are selective in what they eat. Simeon's grandmother, I suspect, finds these religious scruples of the young slightly amusing. She is old, she tells me, so she can eat anything. It is assumed that I, as a non-Orthodox, am also to be able to eat anything—and am expected to. I can understand a certain amount of what she has to say, but feel frustrated at not being able to answer. She can speak German, Simeon tells me. So, maybe that's how we can converse? No, she is old, and has forgotten everything. *Vsyo zabylo*. Besides, her brother, who lived in this house, was a hero ... I understand: there are limits of sensibility to the usefulness of even a potentially useful language.

RUSSIA is different. The issues are different. 'Is it true,' Inessa asks me, 'that women go into Orthodox churches in the West without headscarves? How do you explain this if St Paul explicitly forbids it?' I don't even attempt a discussion of the Pastoral Epistles. But now it's okay, she tells me, for women to wear trousers

in church. Just a few years ago a woman wearing trousers in church would have been asked to leave by some over-enthusiastic neophyte. The biggest objection to the earlier times is that 'we believed things that were not real'. Our Western post-modern scepticism about 'the real' suddenly sounds hollow. As signalled in George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984), contemporary theology recognises a similarity between faith communities and linguistic communities. And as George Steiner says in *Real Presences* (1989), life is more than a language game.

But there are some similar problems. There is no shortage of people flocking into churches, but how to bring up children in the faith, without extremism? Already we are seeing some reactions on the part of the teenage children of those who rediscovered their historic Orthodoxy in the first jubilant years of glasnost and the new Russian Federation after 1991. There are other questions as well: what is the destiny of Russia? The Soviet Union gave Russia empire and purpose, but now? 'To preserve Orthodoxy,' says Inessa. To save the West from barbarism, I wonder to myself. Alexander I's revenge for the burning of Moscow was not to burn Paris, but to have the liturgy of St John Chrysostom celebrated in the—newly renamed—Place de la Concorde. And if the Tartars hadn't been stopped at Kulikovo, I'm not sure there'd be too many Renaissance piazzas now in western Europe, or coffee houses in Lygon Street. 'And what of Russia—how does the West see us? How do *you* see us?'

I RECEIVE a letter from Inessa after my return to Melbourne. She writes astoundingly good English, especially for someone who's never been to an English-speaking country. Two planes have crashed leaving Domedovo just after they'd come home through there from summer holidays. A bomb has gone off in the underground near their flat, and at about the time they would normally be coming home from work. Money is short, and now it's winter. People live by their wits, and life is more than a game. More than walking across a field, to quote the Russian proverb that's also cited at the end of Pasternak's poem 'Hamlet'.