

## Review:

### Balzac, Gogol, Blok through the eyes of the physician

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"Never before have I experienced such a tender compassion towards Turgenev", wrote the poet and literary critic Kornei Chukovskii to Prof. Efrem Liechtenstein upon reading his essay about Turgenev's illness and death. Efrem Liechtenstein, a pensive physician and a talented man of letters, developed a genre of the history of illnesses through the lives of his characters. His essays, which are very accurate and very touching, were published after the author's death. But the book's title that has been changed into *Remember the Patient* in the second edition is still very relevant, although more than thirty years have passed from the date of its publication. The medical doctor and writer Prof. Iurii Shcherbak who, as a young man, had been Prof. Liechtenstein's student, wrote some fascinating concluding comments to this book. This is how Shcherbak recollects his first impressions from Prof. Liechtenstein's lectures:

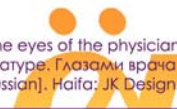
"It was a strange thing, we didn't know the lecturer, but all of a sudden all conversations and the typical students' noise stopped somehow (...) Efrem Isaakovich

taught us an important and complicated principle, namely perceive the patient as a living and suffering person with all his/her complexity and uniqueness".

The book *Literary Etudes through the Doctor's Eyes* by Isanna Liechtenstein, Efrem Liechtenstein's daughter, has been published in Haifa (Israel) lately. It brings back Efrem Liechtenstein's approach, topics, and philosophy. As an example, here are some of the titles of the chapters: "A.P. Chekhov, a patient, a physician and a writer", "Vladimir Dal as we know and do not know him", "The pages of life of Honor  de Balzac", "Physicians in the Human Comedy", " N.V. Gogol's illness and death", "Emil Zola, "The Rougon-Macquart. Doctor's essays", "Romain Gary: "My own self suffocates me", "Antoine de-Saint Exup ry: "Look for me in my writings". Picking up the title of the last essay, I would like to note that Isanna Liechtenstein, who lives in Israel now, is an empathic person. This can be seen in her essays, which are filled with sympathy, and even love, to her characters.

Let us refer to the daughter's memoirs of her father, which follow the introductory chapter "Reflections on deontology" – "I haven't asked to make a speech". The importance of this essay is crucial, as it clearly influenced the whole book. It is a recollection of an eye witness about the Doctors' Plot that was insinuated against the Jewish doctors in Stalin's times. As we learn from this essay, Efrem Liechtenstein had been entrapped by the "Doctors' Plot" before its formal announcement in January 1953. He used to be called to the KGB, where the investigators required that he would tell on his colleagues, but he did not give in. It is evident that had Stalin not died in March 1953, Efrem Isaakovich's future would have been gloomy. An anti-Jewish meeting took place in Kiev's opera and ballet house. Nobody knew at that time that Stalin's death would soon end the persecution. All Jewish lecturers of the Kiev Medical Institute had to go into this meeting one after the other and give speeches, accusing their arrested colleagues of alleged crimes against the Soviet leaders. Liechtenstein was the only lecturer who refused to support the insinuations.

And now let's continue the journey through Isanna Liechtenstein's book. One of its parts is devoted to the life story and creative activities of such physicians and writers as Dal, Chekhov, Veresaev, and Bulgakov. Another part presents the history of the illnesses of the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol and the Russian poet Alexander Blok, which are reconstructed through their letters, diaries, memoirs of their contemporaries and, of course, medical evidence. It provides the reader with the possibility of evaluating the diagnostics and the treatments that were given and compare them both with alternative ways of treatment available then and with contemporary medical possibilities. Another part of the book deals with the medical topics in Balzac's and Zola's writings. Both writers were good psychologists who were interested in the achievements of biology. Their understanding of medical-biological problems is fascinating.



Many people, including myself, wrote about Chekhov's struggle with consumption. It is difficult to reconcile with the fact that in Aksenovo he missed the chance of the probable last remission. The koumiss treatment suddenly helped him gain some weight together with some signs of clinical improvement. But the inclination to journeys and nostalgia for *urbi et orbi* (here and everywhere) prevailed over all these arguments. The essay is based on well-known documents, and is extremely touching and full of love to Chekhov. And this fabric of facts is organically combined with Chekhov's own voice: "Is it possible to send me Vilson or any other good masseur? Don't tell anybody about the content of this letter" (from a note to the actor A. A. Vishnevsky). "There is no pain in my legs any more, I sleep well and only short-breath is still... Health comes not as zolotniks, but as poods<sup>1</sup>, but in three days I'll probably start thinking how to run away from boredom" (from the letter to the physician P.I. Kurkin).

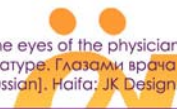
A special part of the book deals with the essay "Physician, writer, philosopher", which was devoted to V.V. Veresaev. "Vikentii Vikentievich has entered my life since my childhood, - writes Isanna Liechtenstein, - as I am obliged to him through my name". The name Isanna was coined from the name of one of Veresaev's characters, Isanka, after Efrem Isaakovich's meetings with Veresaev. I should say that I also appreciate Veresaev and while working on my book *Doctor Bulgakov* I used to meet with some of his relatives. Here is a moral sketch of Veresaev reconstructed in the essay.

"I can remember an episode when Lev Tolstoy asked the physician Vikentii Ignatievich Veresaev, the writer's father, to attend his ill son in Iasnaia Poliana. Being busy with urgent work in the city, the physician who had a deep feeling of duty could not leave his patients even for the sake of Tolstoy and refused to come. Many years later, in 1902, Tatiana Lvovna Tolstaia addressed Vikentii Vikentievich and invited him to become Tolstoi's personal physician. He was afraid to accept the invitation and yet their personal relations were not affected by the refusal".

Such remarks are very important in describing the professional portrait of V. Veresaev. Naturally, Isanna Liechtenstein addresses Veresaev's *The Memoir of a Physician*, which are not only one of the first examples of a physician's confession in the world of literature, but also a literary text, in which the truth is more important than the ideals. I would like to quote several lines from Veresaev's *The Memoir of a Physician* about everyday life of the physician in Russian zemstvo:

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<sup>1</sup> Old Russian measures of weight. Pood is approximately 16 kg while zolotnik is 1/96 of pood.



"My area occupies fifty versts, there are two points of doctor's assistants in different places, and only devil knows how one can eat and sleep in such conditions. And such is my daily life with no intervals. My son lies with scarlet fever at home, and I must go. It's a very difficult service..."

We have forgotten about our predecessors in the vanity of the century, and here we are reminded of them and of Veresaev himself, who had barely escaped death during the cholera riot.

"It is hard to imagine such versatile personality like Honorè de Balzac", - thus begins the essay about the creator of "The Human Comedy". "In this talented person with the irrepressible temperament and love of life, high intentions were combined with risky adventures and petty ambitions. Reading replaced real life for him". Isanna Liechtenstein sympathizes with Balzac, describing how the humiliating punishment he experienced in the college triggered a psychological frustration and possibly his later psychological problems as well. It is an interesting phenomenon that Balzac perceived his own literary characters almost as real people. Thus, during his last illness he used to call for doctor Bianchon, the kind-hearted physician whom he himself had created. "After finishing each novel - continues Isanna Liechtenstein - Balzac used to go out to the *beau monde*, trying to revive his weakened connections; he was looking for communication, support and love". Looking for love was Balzac's dominant feature.

"Nearly twenty years he has experienced a devastating psychological dependence on the Polish countess Ewelina Hanska (nee Rzewuski), whom he used to visit in Ukraine. Unlike other journeys, he practically wrote nothing there. In Verkhovne he suffered from Moldavian fever, which was typical for that region. The same illness killed the famous Russian general Potiemkin and caused sufferings to Pushkin during his Kishenev exile. Balzac felt better and returned to Paris without settling his personal affairs. Two physicians, father and son Knotte treated and seemingly cured him, but the effect was short-lasting. In 1849 he came again to Verkhovne and felt bad, suffering from a heart weakness, short breath, bronchitis and sight problems. May be this was the beginning of the retina's exfoliation. Having barely recovered, he went to provincial Berdichev where a long-awaited wedding took place. But it was clear to everyone that Balzac was incurable".

To sum up, I can say that Isanna Liechtenstein, if we compare her essay with other publications about Balzac, created her own medical water-color.

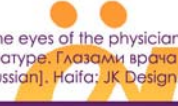
Another fascinating essay full of sympathy tells about Gogol's illness:

"During the last two-three weeks of Gogol's life, the physicians made various diagnoses. At first, F.I. Inozemtsev suggested typhoid, a violent epidemic, which was at that time in Moscow. But there were no precise symptoms and he himself doubted it. The idea of meningitis was raised up during a consultation. The consultation was led by Dr. Over, who replaced the ill Inozemtsev. He used to see Gogol as an 'hypochondriac and a difficult patient'. No personal contact has developed between the two of them, which made treatment more difficult... Having agreed that it was meningitis as Tarasenkov had diagnosed, Over insisted that they prescribed Gogol the treatment which was typical to this ailment at that time, namely phlebotomy and pouring cold water on the patient as he was lying in a hot bathtub. He was also given broth to drink from a wine-glass. Gogol used to ask not to disturb him".

It is difficult to explain such coincidences, but in writing about fictional characters writers sometimes foresee their own future, as Gogol did in the *Notes of a Madman*: "No, I can't bear it any longer. My God, what do they do to me! They pour cold water on my head! Why do they torture me..." (*Notes of a Madman*). To say the least, it was a chain of medical mistakes in the treatment of the genius, who was inclined to stress and depression and I can agree with this conclusion of the author.

And here are a number of excerpts from the essay about Zola in the context of the whole book. While planning *The Rougon-Macquart*, Zola decided to end the series with the novel *Doctor Pascal*. "He used to study his mother and the features of her character with the curiosity of a naturalist observing a metamorphosis of an insect", - quotes Isanna Liechtenstein this novel. "For a moment, as if in a flash of a lightning, he saw the future of this family, of this brace being let free". "I believe that the future of mankind is in the achievements of the mind. I believe that man will acquire at least the clarity of the spirit, if not happiness in his incessant learning...". Isanna Liechtenstein stresses that it is difficult to find such good examples of deep reflection on scientific problems as one finds in Zola's novels. In his intuition he foresaw Weisman's theory about the thin and complicated substance – the embryo's plasma that part of it always remains in every new creature in its primary and unchanged form in order to pass it on from one generation to the other. A whole world of similarity is transferred by the spermatozoid, although the human eye cannot see it even with the best microscope. Zola was, to some extent, the prophet of science, but the world did not follow Pascal.

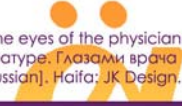
Let us follow Isanna Liechtenstein and address Zola's *Lourdes*, where hysterical symptoms are cured. According to Zola, "the development of science enlarges the proven part of knowledge, and reduces the ideal part of it. And the novelist has to deal with the twilight zone between them". Another important idea is about strengthening the belief in miracles in



moments of crises, when life is left with no much hope and there is a need of strong decisions and hard efforts. These are basic pictures of existence.

The main target of the essay *The Tragedy of the Life and Death of A.A. Blok* is to clarify the picture of his illness, the missed possibilities of its treatments and, of course, avoiding the tragic finale in light of the state of medical science in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Isanna Lichtenstein strives to purify the last months of the poet's life from speculations and fabrications. Unfortunately, physicians were among those who contributed to their origin. Thus seven years after Blok's death I. V. Mints, in his paper which was published in the professional journal *Klinicheskii arkhiv genial'nosti i odarennosti* [Clinical Archives of Genius and Talents], referred to the neural-psychological status of the poet. According to Mints, Blok had a dysplasia of the hypo genital type. Yet this definition does not withstand criticism. The pictures show a tall and harmoniously built man with developed muscles, inclined to physical work. Although he had serious sexual problems in his marriage, they did not reflect his sexual life as a whole. His problem was that he perceived his wife as the embodiment of Eternal Femininity, who should not be disgraced by sexual intercourse. Yet he had full sexual relationships with other women and he became a father shortly before his death.

Isanna Lichtenstein composes the history of Blok's illness from various biographical and medical sources and memoirs. He was a weak child, started walking rather late and got stronger only thanks to the help of the family physician Dr. Karrik. According to his aunt and biographer, M. A. Beketova, the child was very nervous. His first serious illness was exuding pleurisy, from which he suffered at the age of six. Dr. Karrik succeeded in curing the boy. Blok's mother was very strict in everything concerning regime, hygiene and treatment when it was needed, and as a result Blok grew up as a healthy strong youngster. But in a later stage the situation became problematic. In 1909 Blok's wife L. D. Mendeleeva fell in love with the poet and writer Andrei Bely. She remained with her husband, but the problem of their relationship was not solved. Blok, on the other hand, fell in love with the actress N. N. Volokhova. In December 1909 Blok's father died in Warsaw. The inheritance improved Blok's material status, but not his psychological situation. He started complaining of heart problems. In 1911 he was diagnosed as having neurasthenia. In the following years, Blok used to consult various physicians in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg, yet nothing was found except for nervous disorders and scurvy. It is important to emphasize that at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, both scurvy and gout were diagnosed without strict argumentation. The nervous atmosphere at home and the inclination to alcohol were not improved by night walks and did not contribute to the weakening of stress. Some memoirists pay too much attention to the "alcoholism", which may be an exaggeration.



Blok's mother developed epileptic symptoms, and an interesting version of them is proposed by Isanna Liechtenstein. Relying on the epilepsy mitral phenomenon, which was reported in 1956 by Efrem Liechtenstein and N. Man'kovskii, she considers the possibility that it was the case of Blok's mother, who suffered from a heart disease. Taking into account the strong emotional bondage between mother and son, her illness could be a reflection of their crises. Blok used to write her notes like: "Mom, you are sad, and I think about you".

His poem "The Twelve" with its acceptance of the revolution became the apotheosis of Blok's life and creative writing, but the sobering was soon to follow. The poet stopped "hearing the music" and stopped writing poems. From the spring of 1921 he started complaining of pains in his legs and arms. About the arm pain we know from the entries in Blok's diary in 1920-1921. Blok became weak, grew thin, and used a stick for walking. Yet, in May 1921 he travelled to Moscow with two other writers, where he had to give lectures. Everybody hoped for an improvement, but it did not happen. Attempts were made to send the poet to a sanatorium in Finland, and the meeting of the Council of Peoples Commissars discussed this idea. Lenin vetoed it, while Trotsky and Kamenev supported it.

During his last weeks, the poet suffered greatly from suffocation, languor and pain in the whole body. He could not lie down. He died at 10 o'clock on Sunday, August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1921 in the presence of both his mother and wife.

So what has really caused his death? According to Liechtenstein's analysis, Blok has suffered from rheumatism since 1910. The illness had various stages and at some point it seemed to transform into endocarditis. So why did he die so early? Was it the Bolshevik regime that caused his death? Isanna Liechtenstein concludes her interesting essay stating that an illness certainly develops more often in a bad political or psychological climate, yet there were other objective causes as well. It should be right to mention the whole complex of causes in their tragic combination which nobody succeeded to overcome.

Isanna Liechtenstein's talented book is based on a large number of literary and scientific sources. It continues the deontological tradition that was introduced and developed by the physician and writer Efrem Liechtenstein. May be my response is the first presentation of this book to the Western reader. And I would like to quote Mikhail Bulgakov's well-known words: "Let them know, let them know".