



Khandra

Russian spleen, boredom, melancholia, longing. Khandra is a specifically Russian ailment, a problem of ethnic patho-psychology. It is of the same Greek origin as the English “hypochondria.”

The word *khandra* existed before Aleksandr Pushkin wrote Evgeny Onegin. However, it was Pushkin that lifted it from obscurity. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, boredom was thought to be an aristocratic illness. A bored visage entered the code of social behavior as a sign of refinement and nobility. Only the plebeian, forever in need, would have a visage inflamed by greedy and unconcealed interest. The satiated man, master of everything and acquainted with all, could not help but be bored. Such was the origin of spleen, the illness of English aristocrats, introduced into poetic fashion by Byron in the image of Childe Harold.

Khandra, in distinction to spleen [splin], is not an ailment of satiety. Spleen afflicts aristocrats, while depression penetrates deeply into the soul of the whole Russian people, acquiring there another, more potent name: longing [toska], or woe [kruchina]. The Russian song is mournful [tosklivaia], and this longing [toska] is born not of satiety, but of the opposite: of some cheerless emptiness of the whole world, whose cities and towns have been brushed away like specks of dust in the wind. Onegin’s depression, related on one hand to aristocratic spleen, on the other reveals a proximity to an eternal national longing. What in the novel’s first chapter is called “depression” is the anticipation of another, more all-encompassing feeling. Later, when Onegin leaves Petersburg, the Europeanstyle, languid and refined city of boredom, and sets off for the countryside, and then for his travels around Europe, from time to time this feeling is called by its real name: “Toska!” “I’m young, life is robust in me, / what have I to expect? Ennui [toska], ennui! . . .)

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Bibliography

Pushkin, Eugene Onegin, tr. Vladimir Nabokov (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1975).

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