
Senior Projects Spring 2016

Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects

Spring 2016

Bobok: A Theater Piece Exploring Heresy, the Afterlife, and the Art of Translating Text to the Stage

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Recommended Citation

Goodrich, Eileen Marie, "Bobok: A Theater Piece Exploring Heresy, the Afterlife, and the Art of Translating Text to the Stage" (2016). *Senior Projects Spring 2016*. 264.
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Bobok:

A Theater Piece Exploring Heresy, the Afterlife, and the Art of Translating Text to the Stage

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Arts
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-On Hudson, New York
May 4, 2016

The events described in the paper are textual reenactments of true events, and therefore may be subject to the bias of memory. Take everything with a grain of salt.

To fully describe the way my senior project experience came together, I think it is important to start at the very beginning, which in this case means before the terms and conditions that would be placed upon my class's round of senior project were even laid out. As a first semester junior beginning to think about the logistics of approaching senior project and the scope of the project I would eventually produce, I began by assuming three things. First, I was almost certain that I would work alone, mostly because I assumed that no one in the department would want to work with me, and I wasn't entirely sure I would find someone that I would want to work with either. Second, I knew that whatever project I focused on would find its origins in a found text. Third, I knew that this project would ultimately be an act of translation, specifically, the translation of text through my synesthetic, highly-visual brain. I wanted to create a piece of theater that captured this translation of words and sounds to color, shape, and movement that happens constantly in my own mind, and attempt to allow the audience to experience it too.

I was completely terrified. I had never attempted making such a massive piece on my own, preferring mostly to work on the technical side of projects, working with directors to help them achieve the visual look they wanted for their piece. So when our class was encouraged to work in groups rather than individually, I was excited, thinking that I could find a director to attach my designing brain to. I was even more excited when Kedian Keohan suggested creating a massive festival centered around a single source text, thinking that I could potentially attach myself as a designer to the festival rather than just one.

At this point, I should probably talk about how Daniel Krakovski and I became senior project partners. After the first meeting regarding the rules and regulations of the Theater Senior Project, he approached me about partnering with him. He had this idea for a project, where he

would translate this Russian short story and direct a one-man show, and he wanted me to work for him as a designer and technical advisor. He said that he was looking specifically for a sound designer, an area I had absolutely no experience in at that point in time. I told him maybe.

Then, about a week later, Dan approached me again and gave me the book containing the short story he was referring to, so that I could read it and have some sort of understanding what he was referring to when he talked about his ideas. The short story in question, which would become the basis for our project, was *Bobok: Notes of a Certain Individual* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Although I will go into a more in-depth analysis and breakdown of this story later, I will do a short recap here for context. A man named Ivan Ivanovitch (I later found out that this name is a joke, translating into something like Bob Bob), a down-on-his-luck writer, goes to the graveyard one day for a funeral, hangs around, and then starts hearing the dead people talking. Instead of discussing the wonders of the universe or considering their impending oblivion, they talk about the same, petty things they discussed while alive. Its very ironic, in the way only a deeply-paranoid Russian such as Dostoyevsky can be. I was intrigued, and became even more interested when I sat down with Dan to discuss the story and his own ideas surrounding the theater piece he wanted to create from the text.

Around this time, the collective group of seniors had finally decided on a source text for the festival. We chose Dante's *Inferno*, which I still think was an excellent choice for a number of reasons. First, it was one of the only texts that we had all read, meaning we were starting on an even playing field. Second, the way the story is divided into Circles and the text is divided into cantos made for a really easy break-up of the text. The Circle structure of the *Inferno* meant that the entire festival could be episodic, with different groups exploring different topics, while

still being connected and have an internal logic or story if we wanted it to. Third, the basic story of Dante's *Inferno*, as well as the way it has shaped our culture's understanding of the Christian Hell, is something that has permeated society enough for our audience to have some way in.

This choice in text was also good for Dan's idea (I say Dan's because at this point I had not officially committed to this project yet) because it was a setting his text could be worked into. In a festival that takes place in one section of the afterlife, it is very easy to find a place for the odd short story about a man who hears dead people talking. The only thing he had to do was pick a Circle of hell to take over. Initially, he wanted to go for Limbo or The Gate (The first Circle), arguing that the dead people in this short story are in limbo, so it makes sense to take that circle (they aren't, at least in the Christian sense, but more on that later). I was the one who suggested that he go for Heresy. I argued that the central image in both texts, of dead people speaking in their tombs while a single character listens in, was enough of a connection to justify the choice and an interesting image to play with. (Ironically, it is an image that we didn't end up including, but c'est la vie) I also did not want to see this particular circle neglected. It is such a uniquely subtle but disquieting circle that I thought it deserved to be recognized along with the more flashy circles of Lust and Violence and Treachery.

We were of course the only (sort-of) group that was even remotely interested in Heresy, so we got it without contention. Now it was just a matter of solidifying our roles with the Department. At this point I think it is fair to talk about the senior project that could have been. I initially submitted a project proposal to be the set designer for the entire festival, creating a single unifying set, while also loosely partnering with Dan to provide him with the technical support his specific project would require. Obviously, that proposal was rejected, on the grounds

that there were no design faculty that could properly advise and evaluate the work I did. (Fair) At this point, I was offered a choice of how to proceed. I could either act as a producer for the entire festival, or I could work with Dan as a co-devisor. I ultimately decided to work with Dan, because I was invested in his (now our) project and I didn't want to leave him in the lurch with no partner and miss an opportunity to work in LUMA (Conditions for working in LUMA required that you work in a group). Given the eventual breakdown of the cohesive festival feel the seniors were initially going for, this was probably the right decision.

At this point, we had reached the end of the semester, and summer was approaching. Dan and I agreed that for the summer the most productive thing we could both do is start from the opposite sides of the project and work towards each other. This meant that I was going to tackle researching and decoding Dante, Heresy, and whatever came with it while Dan translated the Dostoyevsky text, and any of the research that came with that. And thus began the research portion of this project.

Before I move into talking about Dante and Heresy and all that fun stuff, I should probably start by giving a little bit of background about my own religious views, which provided an internalized wealth of knowledge for my research. I was raised Catholic by my mother, while my father is more of an informed agnostic, who doesn't really care what I believe in as long as I'm well informed on what that means. This means that I had a fairly good understanding of the Catholic Church, it's history and current views, and the Bible in general before starting this project, so I'm probably going to talk a lot about Church politics in this next section (and probably without doing a good job of citing this).

One of the things that people always seem to get confused about with the Catholic Church is that there is no “official” structure of hell. In fact, the Bible makes no explicit mention of Hell, so what a lot of people in the Church and outside of it think about Hell comes from other sources¹. So when Dante was writing his *Inferno*, he was essentially inventing his own version of hell that aligned with his moral and political views. However, his version of Hell is so widespread and popular at this point that it has become the default, even though there are parts of it that do not align with the current views of the Church. For example, Limbo was actually abolished during the Second Vatican Council.² The Church held that the idea of punishing unbaptized babies, who had died before they had a chance to really sin, was cruel and unnecessary.³

Dante’s idea of Heresy is also uniquely his own, and can hold no relationship to the Church’s idea of heresy. Traditionally, the Church has viewed heretics as people who spoke out against the sanctity of the Church, God, and Jesus. This can include anyone from people of different religions, such as Jews and Muslims (See the Spanish Inquisition), to scientists, like Galileo. An important thing to note though is that typically those condemned as heretics were likely those that also posed some sort of political threat to the Church, meaning that the sin of heresy was a far more public sin than others, such as adultery or greed. The heretics in Dante’s world however are not people who do not believe in the sanctity of the Church or God, but rather

¹ Although the Catholic Church tends to focus less on Hell and punishment than some Protestant sects, and chooses to focus on how to live a holy life.

² The Second Vatican Council happened in the early 1960’s, and addressed the relationship between the Catholic Church and the modern world. Major changes that occurred because of this were that Masses were no longer held exclusively in Latin, more Scripture was read during Mass, and there was an increased focus on the mercy of God, rather than the wrath.

³ There was also the issue of Catholic nurses secretly baptizing babies to save them from Limbo and pissing off a lot of non-Catholic parents.

people who do not believe in an afterlife, and therefore do not believe in the sanctity of the soul⁴. It is also worth noting that the people who end up in the Heresy circle are those whose only sin is not believing in the afterlife. The two individuals Dante speaks two are two people he holds in high regard. One is Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti, the father of his best friend, and the other is Farinata, the general responsible for the salvation of Florence, his native city. These are not perfect individuals, but they are overall more blameless than most others Dante encounters in Hell. They are also not people who historically spoke out against or were condemned by the Church, making their sin of heresy a much more internal and personal one.

This discovery led me to a a wealth of questions, but the most important one to me was whether the belief in the afterlife was a widespread belief among all religions and peoples. The idea of punishing someone for not believing in an afterlife (especially nowadays) seems ridiculous, until you consider that it is possible that it is in fact the cultural norm to believe in the continued existence of the soul after death. I delved into books on mummification practices in the ancient world, Victorian obsessions with ghosts and the occult, out of body and near death experiences, and spiritual practices in Japan, among other things. I accumulated a wealth of knowledge on shamanism, different accounts of the afterlife, ghost hunting, and the way people in general have viewed their mortality over the years. I made meticulous notes and sent everything to Dan. We spoke on a regular basis, often over Skype, about my research, his translation process, and the shows he was seeing in Berlin. We both had a ton of ideas about how we wanted to proceed with this piece, and were generally excited about coming together in the fall to get started.

⁴ “Here Epicurus and his followers, who hold the soul dies with the body, have their burial place.” Dante, *The Inferno*, X.13-15, 185)

Before I proceed to talk about the process of creating this piece, I should provide a thorough breakdown of the story Dan translated, which became our primary text. *Bobok: Notes of a Certain Individual* can be divided into four main sections. First, there is what Dan and I called the opening monologue, where Ivan tells his audience about his experience as an unsuccessful writer and the problems with Russian society. The second part is his account of attending the funeral of a distant relative, and his experience sitting in the graveyard before the voices come in. The third part is the part where Ivan listens to the dead people talking, which we call “the voices” because the narrative voice of Ivan is almost entirely gone at this point, conceded to the conversations held by the dead people. The fourth and final part of the text is another shorter monologue, where Ivan condemns the dead and resolves to his audience to explore the phenomenon further. Importantly, the event separating the third and fourth section and what causes the voices to disappear is when Ivan sneezes (or when he reports to have sneezed).

During the process of figuring out what this piece was, one of the main issues we had to address was the way the text shifted back and forth between first person stream-of-consciousness and narration of events. While this technique felt natural on the page, it introduced an interesting issue with how we were going to present this onstage. The structure we ended up with was “reality-imagination-nightmare-reality(?)”, with the conceit being that Ivan is telling the audience his story, and that the recreation of events (which then spiral out of control and turn into their own event) is heightened because of his imagination. The theater then becomes his own personal Holodeck⁵ that he slowly loses control over.

⁵ The Holodeck is a room in the USS Enterprise that uses holographic technology to create virtual realities.

We started the official rehearsal process on Saturday, September 5th. Before I begin to talk about the process, I should properly acknowledge our actor, Fergus Bauman, without whom our project would never have been successful. We began with a complete read-through of the Dostoyevsky text, which at this point looked a mess. It was twenty-four pages and completely unformatted, meaning that it looked like a very dense block of prose instead of a script. There was also an interesting oddity that there were words and phrases that were doubled, where Dan had not completely decided on the translation that he wanted and had left both in. The read-through was slow, and for the most part we just came away with questions, especially ones regarding very specifically Russian things in the text. One example is was the Table of Ranks⁶, which is not referenced directly, but is vastly important for understanding the very present social dynamics in the text. It was at this point that we made our first big decision about the direction of this piece. In retrospect, it was probably a good thing that I had done no research into the specificities of Russian life in the late 19th century, because I acted as a sort of stand-in “dumb” audience member who needed context. And during our read-through I would fairly regularly point out things in the text that were confusing to me, usually that had to do with very specific details of Russian life. From these conversations, we decided that we did not want to do a sort of “period piece”, where we would try and mimic 19th century Russian life of the stage (complete with period costumes), nor would we do a stereotypical modern update of the piece, replacing terms like “rubles” with “dollars.” Instead we decided that the focus should be on making the foreign parts of the text feel relatable and understood without trying to explicitly translate it into modern terms. Anything that could not be made relatable would be cut.

⁶ The Russian Table of Ranks was a formal list of the positions in the military and government, introduced by Peter the Great in 1722. It formed the basis for societal structure in Dostoyevsky’s time.

After this initial reading, we dived into what I call Phase One of the rehearsal process. This is where we worked exclusively with Fergus, trying to wrap our heads around what was happening in this text. Because *Bobok* is told in first person, everything we know about Ivan is filtered through his bias, so we had to spend the better half of a day profiling him to get a sense of who he is, especially who he is when he is not presenting himself to his audience. We were also trying to get a sense of how this text was going to get on the stage. Dan was insistent that we put the majority of the text on the stage, preserving the story, characters, and style of the text. (As I mentioned before, I was much more open to the idea of only using parts of the text) This of course led to the problem of how to logically put a text that is mostly dense narration of a character's inner thoughts onto the stage. We experimented with different ways of Fergus monologuing the first part of the text: like he was in an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, like he was making a webcam video, like he was inviting the audience into his home. We also did a lot of extensive physical work and work with object play. (This is where the idea of using the script as a prop came in) This style of working through the text, improvising sections using very specific prompts, ended up forming the basis for the way we would work in the future.

During this time, I was also trying to convince Dan that we should consider working with supers⁷. For me, reading the text and using the research I had accrued in the summer, I kept having a wide assortment of images going through my head that I wanted to work with: A burial scene, corpses crawling out of graves, veiled figures sitting in chairs set up to look like tombstones, removing their veils to reveal half-rotten faces (I was on a bit of a morbid streak). I

⁷ Super is an opera term for a performer who is onstage who does not have a specific vocal or dance part in the original opera. They are usually added into the show towards the end of the process. They're kind of like the opera equivalent of movie extras.

wanted there to be an element of horror (something that is vastly underused in theater in my opinion), and I wanted the idea of death to be really present, as well as a physical loss of control for Ivan. Eventually, Dan opened up to this idea, and we organized a rehearsal where we worked with some people on the section with the voices. To be honest, if it wasn't for Brynn Gilchrist and Gideon Berger, this rehearsal would have been a complete wash. Nothing really good happened until everyone else left and the three remaining performers (Brynn, Gideon, and Fergus) did an improvised movement piece exploring power dynamics. After this rehearsal, Dan and I decided that we wanted Gideon and Brynn involved in this project. We were not entirely sure what their roles would be (in retrospect, this was a terrible idea), we just knew that there was a really good working relationship between the three, and we wanted to see where they could take it and what that would add to the piece.

It is around this time that I would say Phase Two of rehearsal really started. At this point, we had a fair solid grasp on who we thought Ivan was, we had a more worked through text (we had not cut any of it at this point, but it was formatted to look more like a script), and we had a very vague sense of where we were going (a major accomplishment). Our goal now was to begin to really structure the theater piece we were creating. We started "staging" the text, starting with our pre-show/pre-text beat, and working through the different sections of the text. I put the word staging in quotation marks, because it was more like improvising through the text with specific prompts, the way we had worked with Fergus.

We also began working on cutting down the text. It was at this point that Jonathan Rosenberg, our project advisor, asked us some very important questions regarding how we were going to cut this down. Right before this phase in the rehearsal, we had done a full "run" of the

text, putting it on its feet, and timing it to get a sense of how long the text was in its entirety. In totally it was 54:09, which is more than double the time we were allotted (about 25 minutes). This meant that we were going to have to make some fairly major cuts in the text. Jonathan asked us how we were planning on doing this, if it was going to be a shortened version of the piece in its entirety, if we were going to only do one complete section of the text, or if we were going to only take the parts of the text we liked. I'm not sure if we ever gave him a satisfactory answer at that time. We didn't want it to simply be a section of the piece, nor did we want it to just be a redux. We mostly wanted to keep whatever we thought was pertinent to the story of Ivan we were trying to tell (which was also still up in the air at that time). We did this by first identifying the different "threads" of conciseness in Ivan's opening monologue section. This ended up being not only important for cutting the text, but also for identifying the underlying psychological impulses that would propel Ivan from one topic to the next, and then back again⁸. We then started cutting any trains of thought that were either hard to follow or ultimately unimportant to the overall story. Identifying the strains of thoughts were helpful because it helped make sure there were not blips or jumps in the thought process of Ivan.

Despite the work we were doing to cut down the opening monologue, the most difficult part was cutting down the length of the voices. During our first timed run, the section with the voices accounted for thirty minutes of the overall length, and was also the section that felt the most bogged down energy-wise. However, unlike Ivan's monologue sections, where certain thoughts and sections can be internalized by the character and therefore cut, the section with the

⁸ "A word does not start as a word- it is an end product which begins as an impulse, stimulated by attitude and behavior which dictate the need for expression." - Brook, *The Empty Space*, 12

voices fits together more intricately, where certain earlier sections that are uninteresting and unimportant at the time will reveal important bits of information that only become relevant later.

One of the major ways we addressed this problem was through the work we were doing with the soundscape. As I mentioned previously, Dan's initial idea for the voices section was to use a soundscape to amplify and displace the voices, all voiced by Fergus/Ivan, through the theater. During Phase One of the rehearsal process, the creation and conception of the soundscape had been put on hold so that we could focus our attention on the important character work that we were doing for Ivan and the voices. Once we moved into Phase Two, we began to play with the idea of the soundscape and how it would manifest itself. This required a weekend where we all went down to New York City and played around in Fergus's recording shed (it is quite literally a shed in the back of his yard). While there, we worked on creating several shorter soundscapes, including one that would later be the inspiration for how we looked at the voices section in general. In this one, we took snippets of recordings from each individual voice and layered them on top of each other, along with other effects such as a drone, to create a crescendoing cacophony of voices that did more to impart the feeling of the chaos of the voices rather than simply letting their dialogue slowly amp up. Because of this breakthrough, we stopped looking at the voices section as something that needed to be done in its logical entirety, but rather as the crescendoing of the madness that surrounds Ivan.

But while that was going well, the other parts of the project (in my opinion) were not. This is the point in the story where Dan and I will probably tell vastly different tales. From what I was seeing, I felt like our project had hit a brick wall. Working with Brynn and Gideon proved to be challenging, as there was a noticeable lack of communication and direction on our part. We

loved the work that they were doing with Fergus physically, but we were having a very hard time defining their characters and their relationship to Ivan. This is probably because somewhere down the line, the project had changed from a dramatization of the events in the text onstage (where the idea of the voices manifesting themselves as corpses might have actually worked) to Ivan telling the calculated story of events that had already happened to him. This left Brynn and Gideon in a bit of a predicament, as their characters had to become some extension of Ivan's storytelling, while still having psychological impulses of their own.

Eventually, Dan and I would make the decision to cut their characters from the piece, but during this phase neither of us would admit or realize that making that decision was what needed to happen for the project to move forward. On my end, I was very insistent that they stay, mostly because their involvement was initially my idea and I was worried that if I let that go there would be nothing of note in the piece that I could specifically call my artistic decision. This was probably my lowest and most depressed point in the process for me. Despite the fact that I really like Dan as a person and I generally enjoyed working with him, I felt as though there were major problems in our working relationship. One of the issues we had was that we had never properly defined our roles in the rehearsal room and in the process. Although I had completely a lot of research during the summer, it was for the most part not being used, and I felt as though I was still considered the technical advisor and designer. (Which would have been fine, except we kept cutting all of our technical elements) I felt as though every time I wanted to try or do something, it was like pulling teeth to get him to agree to it, and that every time we would talk conceptually about the piece, he would decide that we needed to approach it in a new way, which would undo the work that we had already did, and the artistic decisions that I had already fought to make. I

became genuinely scared that this project was not something that I had a full artistic role in and that I was there mostly to do housekeeping. So I continued to insist, mostly to myself, that keeping Brynn and Gideon on the project was the right decision and we just needed to work harder to establish their characters.

By the time the end of December came and the fall semester came to an end, we had what we were calling a first draft of our piece done. It was still longer than twenty-five minutes, and I thought that it was completely awful, but we had at least something on its feet. Dan and I agreed to take time off from thinking about the project from the end of the semester until the new year, and that I would come down for a week of work at some point in January. Thus ended Phase two. Honestly, I think that this time off was the best thing for both of us and for the project. I was getting pretty depressed about the entire project at this point, which was not helping my ability to focus and make informed creative decisions.

When we came together in January, I found that Dan and I were better able to work together and made some real progress conceptually. The thing that really helped this from my perspective is that we finally settled onto a solid conceptual base for our project. We discovered that the breakdown of Ivan and his control is a disintegration, specifically a disintegration through fractalization. This helped us reach a mutual understanding about how to move forward, as this description was based in imagery which helped me, while still being conceptual enough for Dan. We finally made the decision to cut Brynn and Gideon's characters and focus on Ivan. We took Jonathan's notes from seeing one of our runs and worked more intensely with Fergus on making the tricky psychology of Ivan really present. We also worked more on making real cuts to the text, particularly in the voices section where we finally decided to do a combination of

straight text and chaotic text to help shorten that section while keeping the correct motion. I call this part Phase 3.

Phase 4 really encompasses the final month of the project, from when we returned to Bard for the spring semester all the way through the final performance. At this point there were relatively few decisions we were making in regards to the structure of the piece itself, and our focus lied entirely on making sure that what we were presenting was coherent, precise, and ready for the stage. We added a last minute technical feature with the falling paper (lovingly shredded by yours truly), which I think ultimately could have been executed a bit better, but the effect was worth it. The performances themselves were completely terrifying. There were multiple technical glitches with the sound system, which I was terrified would ruin the piece, as it was one that relied a great deal on the soundscape being audible. However, in retrospect I am thrilled with how well the performances went and I will forever be grateful to Fergus for the sheer amount of energy he put into it.

And here ends my chronological account of the process of creating this piece. From here, I would like to delve more deeply into some of the concepts and ideas that were being thrown around in the rehearsal room surrounding the piece. My goal here is not to explain or even analyze the piece itself (that is something that should be left to the audience), but rather to witness the conceptual ideas that were present in the room.

Despite the volume of research that I produced over the summer, almost none if it made it into the final piece. The two things that I think are still applicable are the way *Bobok* and *Heresy* relate to each other, and ghost stories. I came across ghost stories very quickly in my research, due to the fact that it was another cultural example of the dead being dead but present

simultaneously. When deciding on which circle of hell we would occupy, Dan was really insistent that we go for Limbo, because he said the dead in *Bobok* were hovering in the space between death and what lies beyond. While I do agree with him that our dead people do exist in this odd space in reality, that does not in fact represent what Dante's Limbo is or what the limbo of the Church is, which is a specific designation for the morally good, but unbaptized.

While I didn't agree that the dead were actually in Limbo as Dan argued, I was curious about the space they occupied and I wanted to explore this more. I am not suggesting that the dead in *Bobok* are ghosts, as they are still dependent on their physical bodies, however I was interested in exploring people's simultaneous beliefs in the Christian afterlife and the phenomenon of ghosts. My research led me of course to books on the Victorian fascination with the supernatural, but it also led me to traditional ghost stories, which ended up being far more useful to the final project.

All types of horror stories have their own unique structures, and ghost stories in particular have a highly developed formula. Generally in ghost stories, the protagonist has some sort of odd encounter with an unusual person, or something will happen that they can't explain. They will ponder why this is, and usually the unexplained phenomenon will either happen continuously or two more times (good old use of threes). The story ends with the protagonist discovering that what was happening all along was actually the work of ghosts.⁹ The ghost can be friendly or malignant, the story might be scary or comforting, and the ghost can even be the protagonist themselves, but the one thing all true ghost stories have in common are that they build tension before one final reveal. There's even an old Japanese game where people at a party

⁹ "The best ghost stories don't have ghosts in them. At least you don't see the ghost. Instead you see only the result of his actions." (Dhal, 18)

sit in a circle telling ghost stories, and after each story is told, another light goes out, until the room is in total darkness and spirits supposedly emerge from the walls. (Kind of like a more elaborate Bloody Mary¹⁰)

This basic structure, of the build and then the reveal, was important for me to include in our piece, and I think it is something that we achieved for the most part. However, in our piece, the reveal isn't the presence of the dead but rather the powerless of the narrator. One of our major decisions was to adapt the pivotal moment in the text. In the original *Bobok*, the voices stop when Ivan "suddenly sneezed."¹¹ However, this fact is only reported to the audience by a fairly unreliable narrator. In our version, we struggled with what to do with this moment for a while. Dan wanted to keep the original sneeze, however it was completely ridiculous with the angry cacophony that we were creating with the soundscape. After trying a bunch of things, we finally decided on Ivan having a complete breakdown, which eventually leads to his fit of swearing. It is worth noting that Ivan does not swear throughout the rest of the piece, trying to keep his vocabulary as lofty as his ideals. So it seemed appropriate that when he finally lost control he would devolve into swearing, and then attempt to cover it up by calling it a "sneeze." His powerlessness is once again revealed when he is forced to start his story over at the very end, repeating the phrase "will you ever be sober?" over and over again, reinforcing his flaws to the audience and stuck in an endless loop.

I also think the relationship between Heresy and *Bobok* was very strong in the end. To be honest, I think I was the only one on our team that was really concerned with this, but I also did

¹⁰ A game usually played at sleepovers where you stand in a dark room in front of a mirror holding a candle and say "Bloody Mary" three times. After the third time, she is supposed to appear in the mirror and scare the bloody shit out of you.

¹¹ Dostoyevsky, *Bobok*, 22

not feel I had to work that hard to establish that connection, at least in a theatrical way. I am of the opinion that when two things, even completely disparate things, are juxtaposed with each other, any audience that cares enough will begin to draw connections between the two¹². For me, once I had unlocked the “secret” of Dante’s Heresy and what that sin meant to him, disrespecting the sanctity of the soul, the connections to *Bobok* became obvious and significant. Ivan, despite his unreliability, is an earnest narrator, who truly believes in the lofty ideals he spouts. He is truly horrified at the behavior of the dead, who are mostly an amoral group who care more about the pleasure of the moment than genuinely reflecting on their souls and “their final moments of consciousness.”¹³ For Ivan, and for me personally, these dead souls embody Dante’s idea of Heresy.

The final thing then to talk about is how this project, ultimately, ended up being the project that I wanted to do all the way back in the beginning of junior year. Although the text I was using and the way I was thinking about this project were wildly different than what I was initially imagining, my project still ended up being an act of translation of text to the stage. Throughout the whole process, I was approaching the text of *Bobok* the same way an archeologist would approach a sedimentary rock containing a dinosaur skeleton; my job was to cut through the unnecessary material around the heart of the text, in order to present to the audience what I viewed as the most necessary and interesting. The metaphor breaks down a little bit when you consider that what I see as the heart of the text is subjective and can very well be

¹² “Any word he argues, acquires a slightly different meaning each time it appears in a new context. Moreover, the boundary between text and context is not fixed. Infinite contexts invade and permeate the text, regardless of chronology or authorial intention. For example, *Hamlet* influences how we read *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*; but *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* also influences how we read *Hamlet*.” — Hayles, “Chaos as Orderly Disorder”, 314

¹³ Dostoyevsky, *Bobok*, 23

something entirely different for someone else, but so much of theater is about putting your own personal thoughts and questions out to an audience and see what you get back. While the things I was hoping to convey might not have been a perfect translation, the act of translation itself and the feedback I have received have made this project ultimately something that was worthwhile.

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Please Note: The following script is the final draft we used for performance purposes. For reasons of clarity, the voices section (pages 5-22), which was altered in a recorded soundscape during performances, is presented here in its standard dialogue format.

Bobok

IVAN

On the third of the month, Semyon Ardalionovich says to me: “Honestly, *Ivan Ivanych*, will you ever be sober?” A strange demand indeed. I’m not offended, I’m a timid man—but, then again, they’ve made a lunatic of me. It so happened I was getting my portrait done when the portraitist remarks: “So, they say you’re a literary scholar, so to speak”. I gave in, and he—I read to you: “Come on up to witness this sickly, close to insane, individual.”

I mean whatever, but then again, such ad hominem vindictiveness—and in print? The printed word is meant for noble things; one needs ideals—but here...

You could have at least said it indirectly, so I could have the last word. But no, he doesn’t want “indirectly”. These days humor and good style are disappearing, replacing invective for insight. I take no offense: I wrote a novella—they didn’t print it. I wrote a feuilleton—rejected. I wrote many feuilletons for many editorials offices, all rejected. They say, “You lack, shall we say, salt.”

Salt. What salt, I ask with a chuckle. Attic salt? Lately I’ve been translating from French, for booksellers. I even write advertisements for merchants: “A rarity! Red”, so to speak, “tea! From colonial plantations. I compiled “*The Art of Attracting Women*”. I myself

have released six such books in my career. I want to compile Voltaire's *bons mots*, but I'm afraid the public will find it tasteless. Who's Voltaire now? These days it's a bludgeon to the face, not Voltaire! Everyone's knocked each other's teeth out!

And so, that is the extent of my literary activity.

I think that the portraitist painted me not for the sake of literature, but rather for the two symmetrical warts on my forehead: a phenomenon, they say. They're out of ideas, after all, so they depend on phenomena. This they call realism.

As for the insanity, well last year many were written off on account of madness. And with what rhetoric: "Such a distinctive, so to speak, talent...and in the end...well, this should have been foreseen long ago..." Ah, drive you mad they certainly will, but they have yet to make anyone smarter.

I recall a Spanish anecdote in which the French, two and a half centuries ago, built for themselves their very first madhouse: "They locked away all of their idiots in a special building to reassure *themselves* that they are, indeed, smart people." My point exactly: locking someone up in a loony bin does not demonstrate one's intelligence. "So-and-so went crazy, this, in turn, means we are smart". No, it doesn't.

Ah, devil take it ...and why am I obsessing over my own intellect: grumble, grumble. I've even worn out my housekeeper. Yesterday a friend came by: "Your, so to speak, style is changing, it's choppy. You chop, chop—

an inserted sentence, and yet another inserted sentence within the inserted sentence, and then you add a parenthetical about yet another thing, and then again you chop, chop...”

My friend is right. Something strange is happening to me. And my character’s changing, and my head aches. I’m starting to see and hear some very strange things. It’s not so much voices, but rather it’s as if someone were near me: “Bobok, bobok, bobok!”

What is this ‘bobok’? I need to unwind.

I went to unwind and wound up at a funeral. A distant relative. I haven’t been to a cemetery, I don’t think, for twenty-five years; and what a spot it is!

First of all, the smell. About fifteen dead people arrived. Many grieving faces, even falsely grieving faces, and many exhibited unreserved happiness. The clergy can’t complain: income’s income. But the smell, the smell. I would not want to be in their place.

I peeked at the dead people’s faces with caution,. Some expressions are soft, others are unpleasant. Overall, smiles are not so nice, some especially so. I don’t like it; they haunt my dreams.

What makes dead people that much heavier in coffins, I wonder? They say it’s from some sort of inertia, that the body is no longer in control of itself...or some such malarkey; this contradicts mechanics and intelligent thought. I don’t like it when those with mere general educations apply themselves in solving complex quandaries; and this is rampant.

I don't understand, however, why I stayed at the cemetery. I sat down on a tombstone and naturally fell deep into thought.

I began with the Moscow exhibition, and concluded with the concept of astonishment, as a topic. Here is what I concluded on "astonishment": "To be astonished by everything is, of course, stupid, and not being astonished by anything is considered much more beautiful and is, for some reason, accepted as good tone. But this is hardly the case in actuality. I think, not being astonished by anything is much stupider than being astonished by everything. Besides: not being astonished by anything is almost the same as not respecting anything. The stupid person is incapable of respect."

This is where I really lost my way. I don't like reading tombstones; they're always the same.

It is safe to infer that I had been sitting for a long time, even too long; in other words I lay down on a long rock in the shape of a marble coffin. And how did it happen that I started to hear various things? I didn't pay attention to it and dismissed it with disgust. But, as it were, the conversation continued. I listen—muffled sounds, as if mouths were smothered by pillows; and all the while articulate and very close. I came to, sat up, and began to eavesdrop very attentively.

LEBEZYATNIOV

“Your Excellency, this is simply impossible, sir. You called for hearts, I called whist, and suddenly you have seven diamonds. You have to decide before hand about diamonds, good sir.”

GENERAL

“So what, we have to play by memory? Where’s the appeal in that?”

LEBEZYATNIKOV

“It’s not allowed, Your Excellency, without a guarantee it’s not at all allowed. It has to be the dummy, and there must be a blind deal”.

GENERAL

“Well you won’t get a dummy here.”

IVAN

What rude words! Both strange, and unexpected. One is all uncompromising with a solid voice, the other is softly sweeter; I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t heard it myself. I didn’t go to the wake, I don’t think...

SHOPKEEPER

“Oh, ho, ho, ho!” —

IVAN

Suddenly sounded an entirely different voice; about five yards the general’s spot and from a totally fresh little tomb—a voice male and simple, but softly pious and tender in manner.

SHOPKEEPER

“Oh, ho, ho, ho!”

AVDOTYA

“Ack, again he’s hiccupping!”—

IVAN

Suddenly rang a highly squeamish voice of an irritated lady, one holier than thou.

AVDOTYA

“Being near this shopkeeper is a punishment!”

SHOPKEEPER

“I didn’t even hiccup, I haven’t even eaten, it is but my nature. But you, madam, and your-here caprices are in every way preventing you from relaxing.”

AVDOTYA

“Then why did you have to lie here?”

SHOPKEEPER

“They put me here, my wife and my little children put me here, I didn’t up and lie here. This is the sacrament of death! And I would never lay next to you, not for any amount gold—we are equally sinful in God’s judgment.”

AVDOTYA

Equally sinful!

IVAN

Mocked the dead lady with contempt.

AVDOTYA

“And don’t you dare even speak with me!”

SHOPKEEPER

“Oh, ho, ho, ho!”

LEBEZYATNIKOV

“It would seem that the shopkeeper is obeying the lady, Your Excellency.”

GENERAL

“And why wouldn't he obey?”

LEBEZYATNIKOV

“Well it is known, Your Excellency, that there is a new order here.”

GENERAL

“What's this new order?”

LEBEZYATNIKOV

“Well we, so to speak, died, Your Excellency.”

GENERAL

“Ah, yes! Well, order is order”...

NEW VOICE (OLD TIMER)

“No, I'd live some more! No...you know...I'd live more! –Suddenly rang a new voice, somewhere around in between the general and the irritable lady.

LEBEZYATNIKOV

“You hear that, Your Excellency, he's at it again. For three days he's silent and then suddenly: 'I'd live more, no, I'd live more!' And with such an appetite, don't you know, he-he!”

GENERAL

“A bit boring, though”

IVAN

His Excellency remarked.

LEBEZYATNIKOV

A bit boring indeed, Your Excellency. Perhaps we can tease Avdotya Ignatyevna again, he-he?

GENERAL

“Oh no, if you please. I can’t stand that unrelenting pain-in-the-ass.”

AVDOTYA

“And I, on the other hand, can’t stand either of you! You’re both utterly boring and have no ability to speak in ideals”

IVAN

No, this I cannot allow! And this is a contemporary dead person! However, I should listen more and not jump to conclusions. This new twerp, I saw him lying in his coffin the other day. His facial expression was that of a petrified little chicken, utterly repugnant! What next, however.

What followed was such a hullabaloo, that I was unable to retain it all, as many more awoke all at once: an official awoke, a State Councilor, who began to imminently and immediately engage the general on the topic of a new sub-committee in the Ministry of ‘such and such’ Affairs, and about the likely issues arising from the merger, namely the reshuffling of officials, which very much entertained the general. I admit, I myself

learned a lot, I was even surprised by the possible opportunities of learning such administrative news, here in the capital. Then an engineer semi-awoke, but he was still in a state of indiscernible mumbling, so the others didn't bother him, but rather let him sleep it off. And then finally, a notable lady, buried this morning in a catafalque, expressed notions of posthumous inspiration. Lebezyatnikov (the Court Councilor whom I already hate, as he is indeed one to fawn, placed by General Pervoedov, and turned out to bear the name Lebezyatnikov) was fussing and was surprised over how quickly everyone had been waking up. I confess, I myself was surprised; as some of those now awake were buried but three days ago, like, for example, one rather young maiden, roughly sixteen years of age, who was giggling...basely and carnivorously giggling.

YOUNG MAN

“Ah, ah...ah, what's happened to me? -

LEBEZYATNIKOV

“A new one, Your Excellency, a new one, thank god, and how soon! Last time they were quiet for a week.”

AVDOTYA

“Oh, it sounds like a young man!” -

IVAN

Squealed Avdotya Ignatyevna.

YOUNG MAN

“I...I...I from complications, and so suddenly! -

GENERAL

“Well, can’t help it now, young man,” –

YOUNG MAN

“Ah no! No, no, there’s no way! I was at Shultz’s; I had, you know, complications, first my chest and a cough—

LEBEZYATNIKOV

“You said your chest first?” –

YOUNG MAN

“Yes, my chest and phlegm, and [then suddenly no phlegm, no chest, and I can’t even breathe...and you know...]”

LEBEZYATNIKOV

“I know, I know. But for the chest, you should rather see Ecke, not Shultz.”

YOUNG MAN

“You know, I was going to see Botkin...and then...”

GENERAL

“Well, Botkin’s a bit much” –

YOUNG MAN

“Ah no, he’s not too much at all; I hear he’s all attentive and can prognosticate everything in advance.”

LEBEZYATNIKOV

“His Excellency was referring to the cost” –

YOUNG MAN

“What do you mean, it’s only [*but*] three rubles, and he looks you over and writes you prescriptions...and I absolutely wanted to, I was told he’s the best...So what, gentlemen, what should I do, go to Ecke or to Botkin?”

GENERAL

“What? Go where?” –

AVDOTYA

Dear boy, dear, lovely boy, how I love you so! If only they put him by me!

LEBEZYATNIKOV

“Your Excellency, Privy Councilor Tarasevich awakens!” –

TARASEVICH

“Ah? What?” –

LEBEZYATNIKOV

“It’s me Your Excellency, sir, just me thus far, sir.”

TARASEVICH

“What do you require from me?”

LEBEZYATNIKOV

“Only to inquire as to His Excellency’s well being; newcomers here always feel themselves claustrophobic, sir...General Pervoedov would like to have the honor of making your acquaintance with Your Excellency and hopes to...”

TARASEVICH

“Never heard of him.”

LEBEZYATNIKOV

“But please, Your Excellency, General Pervoedov, Vassily Vassilyevich...”

TARASEVICH

“You’re General Pervoedov?”

LEBEZYATNIKOV

“No sir, Your Excellency, I am but Court Councilor Lebezyatnikov, at your service, but General Pervoedov...”

TARASEVICH

“Nonsense! And I ask you, leave me be.”

GENERAL

“Leave it”.

LEBEZYATNIKOV

“He’s just not fully awake yet, Your Excellency, it must be taken into account, sir; this they do out of unfamiliarity: once he’s fully up, he’ll receive you kindly, sir...”

GENERAL

“Leave it”

KLINEVICH

“Vassily Vassilyevich! Ey you, Your Excellency! I’ve been observing you all for two hours already, I’ve been here three days, after all; do you remember me, Vassily Vassilyich? Klinevich, we met at the Volkonsky house, where they, I don’t know why, even received you.”

GENERAL

“Well, Count Pyotr Petrovich...even you...and at such a young age...I’m so sorry!”

KLINEVICH

“I’m sorry myself, but I don’t care, I want to make the best out of everything. And it’s Baron, not Count, nothing but a Baron. We’re raggedy little Barons, once lackeys, I don’t know why, I spit on it. Avdotya Ignatyevna, remember when you took me, fifteen years ago, when I was still a fourteen-year-old page, and corrupted me?”

AVDOTYA

“Ah, it’s you, you rascal, well at least God sent you, because here—you wouldn’t believe, Klinevich, wouldn’t believe, the lack of life and wit here.”

KLINEVICH

“Well yes, yes, and I aim to stir-up something quite original here. Your Excellency—not you, Pervoedov—Your Excellency, the other one, sir Tarasevich, the Privy Councilor! Answer me! Klinevich, the one who transported you to Mademoiselle Furie during Lent, remember?”

TARASEVICH

“I hear you, Klinevich, and I’m quite happy to hear from you, believe me...”

KLINEVICH

“I don’t believe you one bit, and I spit on it. I bet he’s already sniffed out Katya Berestova.”

TARASEVICH

“Who? What Katya?” –

KLINEVICH

“Ah, what Katya? Over here to the left, five steps from me, ten from you. This is her fifth day here, and if you only knew, *grand père*, what a little hellcat she is... Katya, make yourself known!”

KATYA

“He-he-he!” –

IVAN

Responded a slightly cracked feminine little voice, sounding something like the prick of a syringe.

KATYA

“He-he-he!”

TARASEVICH

“And she’s blonde?” –

KATYA

“He-he-he!”

TARASEVICH

“I’ve...for a long time...fantasized about a blonde...around fifteen years old...and in these exact circumstances...”

AVDOTYA

“Ah, you sick bastard!” –

KLINEVICH

“Enough!” –

IVAN

Decided Klinevich—

KLINEVICH

“I see the material is excellent. Hey, you, official of some sort, Lebezyatnikov, I think you were called!”

LEBEZYATNIKOV

“Lebezyatnikov, Court Councillor, Semyon Evseych, at your service and with great pleasure.”

KLINEVICH

“I spit on your pleasure, it just would appear that you seem to know everything around here. Tell me, first off (this has been puzzling me since yesterday) how is it that we are able to speak here? We did die, after all, but we can still nonetheless speak; it’s as if we’re moving, and all the while we are neither speaking nor moving, what’s the trick?”

LEBEZYATNIKOV

“This, if you please, Baron, could be better explained by Platon Nikolayevich.”

KLINEVICH

“What is this Platon Nikolaevich? Enough hemming and hawing, get to the point.”

LEBEZYATNIKOV

“Platon Nikolaevich is our locally made philosopher, natural scientist and magister. He released a few philosophical books in his time.”

KLINEVICH

“Get to the point, the point!”

LEBEZYATNIKOV

“He explains it all with the simplest facts, namely, that up there, when we were still living, we mistakenly thought our death there as death. Here the body becomes sort of alive again, the remains of life concentrate, but only in consciousness. This—I don’t know how to express this—continues life, as if by inertia. It’s all concentrated, in his opinion, somewhere in one’s consciousness and goes on for another two or three months...sometimes even for half a year. There is, for example, someone like that here, who’s almost entirely decomposed, but once a week at six in the morning he still mumbles one word, meaningless of course, about some sort of bobok: ‘Bobok, bobok’—but in him too, there is still a glimmer of life, perpetuated by an invisible spark.”

KLINEVICH

“That’s pretty stupid. Then how is it that I don’t have olfactory capacities, but can still smell stench?”

LEBEZYATNIKOV

“This...he-he...well, here our philosopher descended into a fog. It was the olfactory functions exactly that he noticed, that here stench is a smell, so to speak, but is rather moral—he-he! The stench is as if from the soul, so that during these two or three months to recalibrate¹...it is, so to speak, a

¹ Maybe use: “repent”.

final mercy...Only I think, Baron, that all of this is mythical nonsense, something highly forgivable for somebody in his position...”

KLINEVICH

“Enough, the rest, I’m sure, is all nonsense. Above all, it’s two or three months of life and in the end—bobok. I offer you all to spend these two months as pleasantly as possible, and therefore come up with new rules. Gentlemen! I propose to be unashamed!”

ALL (OR MOST)

“Ah, let’s, let’s be unashamed!” –

IVAN

Sounded many voices, and, strangely, many new voices, meaning that all the while, they had reawakened. An awoken engineer declared, with exceptional readiness and in a deep bass, his complacency. The girl Katya giddily giggled.

AVDOTYA

“Ah, how I would like to be unashamed!” –

IVAN

Advodya Ignatyevna cried with delight.

KLINEVICH

“You hear that, if Avodtya Ignatyevna wants to be unashamed...”

AVDOTYA

No-no-no, Klinevich, I was ashamed, in that situation I was inhibited and ashamed, but here I really, really want not feel ashamed!”

ENGINEER

“I understand, Klinevich” –

IVAN

The engineer spoke in his bass—

ENGINEER

“that you are proposing to base our present, so to speak life, on new and already reasonable beginnings.”

KLINEVICH

“Well, this I spit on! Tomorrow, I think, they’ll bring over a, if I’m not mistaken a feuilleton writer along with, I think, his editor. Anyway, to hell with them. But for now, I would like to not lie. This is all I want, for this is most important. Devil take it, doesn’t the grave mean anything! We’re all going to tell, out loud, our stories without inhibition. I’ll talk of myself first. I, as you know, am of the carnivorous vein. Everything up there was tied up in [*with*] rotten ropes. Away with rope, and we shall live these two months in [*with*] *the* most shameless truth! Let us strip and get naked!”

ALL (OR MOST)

“Strip, get naked!” –

IVAN

Shouted all the voices.

AVDOTYA

“I really, really want to get naked!” –

IVAN

Avodtya Ignatyevna squealed.

YOUNG MAN

“Oh...oh... Oh, I see, it will be quite fun down here, I don’t want to go to Ecke!”

OLD TIMER

“No, I’d live some more, no, you know, I’d live some more!”

KATYA

“He-he-he” –

IVAN

Katya chuckled.

KLINEVICH

“Most importantly, no one can prevent us, and although Pervoyedov, I see, is upset, he can’t reach out and touch me. *Grand père*, do you agree?”

TARASEVICH

“I completely, completely agree with upmost pleasure, but especially with Katya going first with her ‘biography’.”

GENERAL

“I protest! Protest with all my might” –

IVAN

Firmly, and with conviction, declared General Pervoyedov.

LEBEZYATNIKOV

“Your Excellency!” –

IVAN

With rushed worry and lowered voice fawned and pleaded the no-good
Lebezyatnikov.

LEBEZYATNIKOV

“Your Excellency, but it’s more profitable for us, if we agree [*comply*].
There’s, you know, this girl...and finally, all these different little things.”

GENERAL

“Yes, this girl, but...”

LEBEZYATNIKOV

“More profitable, Your Excellency, by God [*it’s*] more profitable! Just for
example, let’s at least try...”

GENERAL

“Even beyond the grave they don’t let you be [*relax*]!”

KLINEVICH

“First off, general, you’re playing preferans in your grave, and secondly,
we-spit-on-you” –

IVAN

Articulated Klinevich.

GENERAL

“My dear sir, I ask you, not to forget yourself.”

KLINEVICH

“What? You couldn’t even reach me if you tried, and I can tease you from
here, like Yulka’s little bichon. And, first of all, gentleman, what kind of
general is he here? He was a general there, but here he’s ‘pshick’!”

GENERAL

“No, I’m no ‘pshick’, even here...”

KLINEVICH

“Here you’ll rot in your grave, and all that will be left of you will be six copper buttons.”

ALL (OR MOST)

“Bravo, Klinevich, ha-ha-ha! –

IVAN

Jeered the voices.

GENERAL

“I served my sovereign...I have [*bear, wear*] a sword...”

KLINEVICH

“Go poke mice with your sword, besides, you’ve never even taken out.”

GENERAL

“Nonetheless, sir, I was part of the whole.”

KLINEVICH

“As if there were a shortage of parts of the whole.”

ALL (OR MOST)

“Bravo, Klinevich, bravo, ha-ha-ha!”

ENGINEER

“I don’t even understand, what is this sword?” –

IVAN

Declared the engineer.

GENERAL

“The sword, mister, is an honor!” –

IVAN

Shouted the general, but I alone heard him. A long and amorphous roar erupted, a riot and a racket, and only Avodtya Ignatyevna’s impatient hysterics [*squeals*] could be made out.

AVDOTYA

“Oh quicker, be quicker! Ah, when will we start being unashamed!”

SHOPKEEPER

“Oh-ho-ho! My soul is truly tormented!” –

IVAN

And here I suddenly sneezed. This happened unexpectedly and unintentionally, but the effect was utterly shocking: everything went silent, as it would be at a graveyard, vanished, like a dream. True graveyard silence ensued. I don’t think they were ashamed in front me, they did decide to be uninhibited! I waited five or so minutes and—not a word, not a sound. I conclude, naturally, that they must have some kind of secret, unknown to mortals, which they carefully keep from all things mortal.

“Well,” I thought, “my darlings, I’ll visit you yet”—and with these words, I left the cemetery.

No, this I cannot allow; no, absolutely not! Bobok does not deter me (so this is what Bobok turned out to be!).

Depravity in such a place, depravity of the last hope, depravity of meek and rotting corpses, and—they don't even value their final moments of consciousness! They were given, gifted those moments and...and above all, most important, in such a place! No, this I cannot allow...

I'll visit other classes, and listen everywhere. That's just it, you have to listen everywhere, and not just from the edge, in order to form an understanding. I hope to stumble upon something comforting.

But I will certainly visit them again. They promised their biographies, and various anecdotes. Tfu! But I'll go, absolutely I'll go, it's a matter of conscience!

I'll bring it to "The Citizen"; they also displayed the portrait of one of the editors. Perhaps they'll even print it.