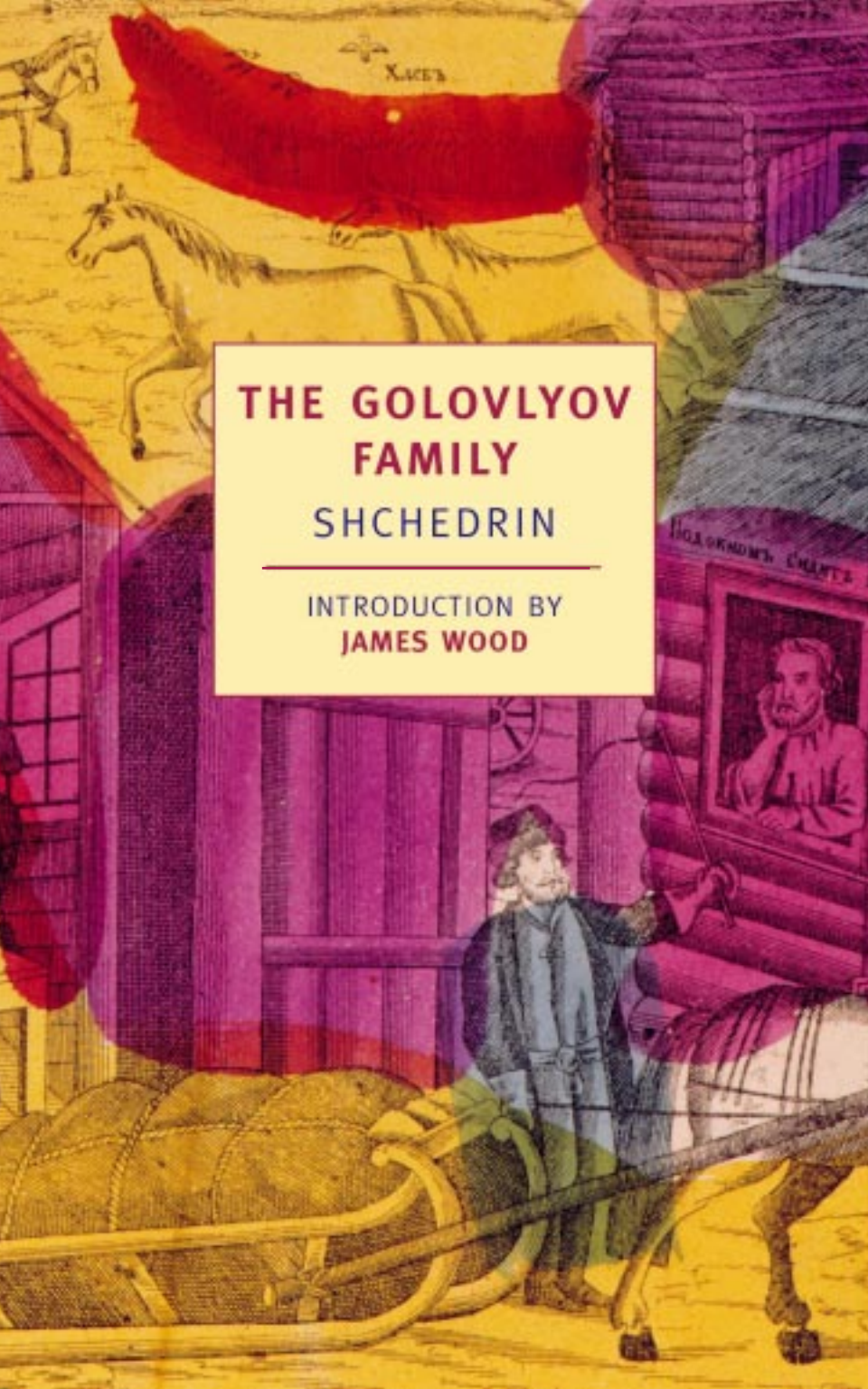

THE GOLOVLYOV FAMILY

SHCHEDRIN

INTRODUCTION BY
JAMES WOOD

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THE GOLOVLYOV FAMILY

MIKHAIL EVGRAFOVICH SALTYKOV (1826–1889), who wrote under the pseudonym Shchedrin, was born into a family of the landed gentry and, as a young man, entered the civil service in St. Petersburg. In 1847 he began to publish satirical stories, which led to a seven-year term of political exile in the provinces. Returning to St. Petersburg, Saltykov worked as a journalist, eventually becoming editor of the radical monthly *Notes of the Fatherland*. His major works are *The History of a Town* (1869–1870), *The Golovlyov Family* (1876), and *Fables* (1885).

JAMES WOOD was born in Durham, England, in 1965 and attended Cambridge University. He has contributed literary criticism to *The Guardian*, *The New Republic*, and *The New Yorker* and is the author of *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief*.

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Shchedrin

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Translated by

NATALIE DUDDINGTON

Introduction by

JAMES WOOD

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INTRODUCTION

THE HYPOCRITE MAY serve, among other things, as a deformed ambassador of the truth. By so obviously misrepresenting the truth, he enables us to trace its smothered outlines. In fiction and drama, this traditional hypocrite acts rather like an unreliable narrator. The unreliable narrator is rarely truly unreliable, because his unreliability is manipulated by an author, without whose reliable manipulation we would not be able to take the narrator's measure. As the unreliable narrator is really only a reliably unreliable narrator, so the traditional hypocrite is always reliably hypocritical, which is why we are so unthreatened by—indeed so enjoy the prospect of—Polonius, Tartuffe, Parson Adams, Pecksniff, and others. Such characters are comic and certify our rectitude, giving us pleasure that, whatever we have become, we have not become that kind of person. Though in a curious, unintended way, if we are not careful, such characters may turn us into hypocrites: the content and well-fed audiences watching Molière suggest that this has already happened.

We can see through the traditional hypocrite because his

zeal tends to be a perversion, almost a parody, of a visible moral code. He is nourished by the same food we consume; but, as it were, he eats far too much of it, and has become bullyingly large. Yet what would the hypocrite represent in a world starved of moral nutrition? A world in which the moral code has already been perverted, long before the hypocrite gets to it? Such a character becomes much more menacing than the traditional hypocrite, for there is no longer any truth for him reliably to misrepresent, and our reading of his motives becomes more difficult. He becomes opaque to us precisely because he ceases to be "a hypocrite," and he ceases to be a hypocrite because he is not a liar: there is nothing for him to lie about. Accordingly, he would be more likely to be a tragic than a comic figure, and more likely to be a solipsist or fantasist than a liar. He has merged with his own horrid world; he has no audience.

In his extraordinary novel *The Golovlyov Family*, the Russian writer Shchedrin (the nom de plume of M. E. Saltykov, sometimes known as Saltykov-Shchedrin) depicts just such a character and just such a world. The hypocrite is Porphyry Golovlyov, one of the sons of Arina Petrovna and Vladimir Mikhaylovich Golovlyov, and the novel, called by D. S. Mirsky "certainly the gloomiest in all Russian literature," is set on the Golovlyovs' dismal estate, known as Golovlyovo. The Golovlyovs are minor landowners (a class Shchedrin satirized in many stories and sketches, and from which he himself came), who, supported by the labor of their serfs, squander a privilege of which they are unaware.

Vladimir, the father, spends most of his time in his study, drinking, imitating the songs of starlings, and writing bawdy verse, while the estate is run by his wife, the ferociously continent and cruel Arina Petrovna. She has little but contempt for her three sons, especially the eldest and youngest, Stepan and Pavel. But for her middle son, Porphyry, known from early days to his family as Little Judas or Bloodsucker, she

also feels something like fear. Even when the child was a baby, "he liked to behave affectionately to his 'dear friend mamma,' to kiss her unobtrusively on the shoulder and sometimes to tell tales. . . . But even in those early days Arina Petrovna felt as it were suspicious of her son's ingratiating ways. Even at that time the gaze that he fixed at her seemed to her enigmatic, and she could not decide what precisely was in it —venom or filial respect."

Golovlyovo is a house of death. One by one the members of the family try to escape, and one by one they return and die. Of course, they only come home because they are in desperate straits. Thus, having run through a family allowance, Stepan arrives from Moscow, only forty but looking a decade older, "inflamed by drink and rough weather," his eyes bulging and bloodshot: "He looked about him morosely from under his brows; this was due not to any inward discontent, but rather to a vague fear that at any minute he might suddenly drop dead with hunger." Stepan hopes to squeeze a little more life out of the family estate, but the punitive Arina, who has her own survival to think of, rations her indulgence.

Stepan is already dying, in a sense. On the Golovlyov estate, where everyone is barely hanging on to existence, the best means of survival is a kind of shutting down of the moral system, as the body sleeps in very cold weather. Thus, the commonest emotion at Golovlyovo is the moral equivalent of boredom: an empty blindness. Stepan, for instance, is described thus: "He had not a single thought, not a single desire. . . . He wanted nothing, nothing at all." His mother is no less sealed off. She allows Stepan a diet that is just sufficient to keep him from starving, and when she is told that he is ailing, the words do "not reach her ears or make any impression upon her mind." For Arina has the Golovlyov disease: "She had lost all sight of the fact that next door to her, in the office, lived a man related to her by blood."

Likewise, Pavel, who locks himself away and drinks himself

to death, is described as "an apathetic, mutely sullen man whose character was purely negative and never expressed itself in action," and as "the most perfect instance of a man devoid of any characteristics at all." And near the end of the book, when Porphyry's niece, Anninka, also returns to die, she spends the time pacing up and down, "singing in an undertone and trying to tire herself out and, above all, not to think."

Golovlyovo is a place of evil in the sense that Augustine and Calvin understood evil: as nothingness, the absence of goodness. The religious emphasis is proper, for in this vacated world, the man who briefly prospers, Little Judas, is above all a brilliant manipulator of religious hypocrisy. He fills the abyss with a diabolic version of traditional religion. Once Stepan, Vladimir, and Pavel have died (the latter is "comforted" by the unctuous Porphyry, but has enough life in him to shout from his deathbed, "Go away, you bloodsucker!"), Porphyry comes alive, and takes control of the estate.

Porphyry is Shchedrin's great creation. His vivacity as a character proceeds, in part, from a paradox, which is that he is interesting in proportion to his banality. Traditionally, the great fictional hypocrites are generally interesting as liars are interesting. But Porphyry does not really lie to himself, for the truth is nowhere to be found in his world. He speaks the "truths" (as he sees them) that are all around him, and they are the most dismal, banal, lying platitudes. Shchedrin is explicit about this at one point. The hypocrites of French drama, he writes, are "conscious hypocrites, that is, they know it themselves and are aware that other people know it too." Porphyry, he writes, "was a hypocrite of a purely Russian sort, that is, simply a man devoid of all moral standards, knowing no truth other than the copy-book precepts. He was pettifogging, deceitful, loquacious, boundlessly ignorant, and afraid of the devil. All these qualities are merely negative and can supply no stable material for real hypocrisy."

Porphyry grinds down his mother and his servants with end-

less banalities. His usual technique is to invoke God: "What would God say?" His sure idea of God's providence is used to justify his cruelty, his swindling, his meanness, and his theft. There is a vivid and comic scene as his brother Pavel is dying. Porphyry arrives in a coach-and-four; immediately his mother thinks to herself, "The Fox must have scented a carcass." Porphyry enters the house with his two sons, Volodenka and Petenka (Volodenka mimicking his father's pieties, "folding his hands, rolling his eyes and moving his lips"). Seeing his mother unhappy, Porphyry says to her: "You are despondent, I see! It's wrong, dear! Oh, it's very wrong! You should ask yourself, 'And what would God say to that?' Why, He would say, 'Here I arrange everything for the best in My wisdom, and she repines!' " He continues:

> As a brother—I am grieved. More than once, in fact, I may have wept. I am grieving over my brother, grieving deeply. . . . I shed tears, but then I think: "And what about God? Doesn't God know better than we do?" One considers this and feels cheered. That's what everyone ought to do. . . . Look at me. See how well I'm bearing up!

Still, Porphyry is afraid. He spends much of his time crossing himself, or praying before his icons. In true Golovlyov fashion, he prays not for anything positive, but negatively, to be saved from the devil. (It is a nice implicit joke that Porphyry is afraid of the devil but is in fact the devil.) "He could go on praying and performing all the necessary movements, and at the same time be looking out of the window to see if anyone went to the cellar without permission." Porphyry uses religious platitudes to protect himself from anything that would threaten his survival; religious hypocrisy is his moral camouflage.

One of the most horrifying events in the novel occurs when Porphyry's son Petenka comes home to beg for money. He

has gambled away three thousand rubles belonging to his regiment, and if he cannot pay them back, he will be sent off to Siberia. Petenka enters his father's study; Porphyry is kneeling, with uplifted arms. He keeps his son waiting for half an hour on purpose, and when Petenka finally explains that he has lost money, Porphyry replies, "amiably": "Well, return it!" When Petenka tells him that he doesn't have that kind of money, Porphyry warns him not to "mix me up in your dirty affairs. Let us go and have breakfast instead. We'll drink tea and sit quietly and perhaps talk of something, only, for Christ's sake, not this." Bitterly, Petenka says to his father, "I am the only son you have left," and his father replies: "God took from Job all he had, my dear, and yet he did not repine, but only said, 'God has given, God has taken away—God's will be done.' So that's the way, my boy."

Hypocrisy is a familiar subject in Russian literature—Gogol's landowners, Dostoevsky's governors, Chekhov's doctor in "Ward 6"—and within it, religious hypocrisy has a special place. The traditional hypocrite may, in his extremism, unwittingly strengthen the visible moral code. But religion, which is itself an extremism, must be weakened by the hypocrite's misuse of it. Religion, after all, unlike ordinary morality, is a devotion—one professes it—so the Christian hypocrite commits an enhanced crime: hypocrisy about which one should certainly not be hypocritical. Thus he may awaken in people the conclusion that religion is itself a hypocrisy: since religion is itself already a profession of morality, it may seem that religion is the source of its hypocritical profession.

Morality is misused by the traditional hypocrite; but religion is only used by the religious hypocrite. Heresy lurks in the distinction. Outside Russian literature, Fielding's Parson Adams, though a benign creature, tends to discredit the Christianity which enables his hypocrisy. And Stendhal, depicting the hypocritical priests of *The Red and the Black*, means to provoke heresy. So too, in a gentler way, does

Chekhov, the son of a terrible religious hypocrite, when, in his story "In the Ravine," he makes fun of a priest who pompously comforts a woman who has just lost her baby while pointing at her with "a fork with a pickled mushroom at the end."

When he began to write *The Golovlyov Family*, in the latter half of the 1870s, Shchedrin, who was known as Russia's greatest satirist, had already mocked religious hypocrisy in his *Fables*, a collection of Aesopian tales about feeble governors, greedy landowners, imbecilic bureaucrats, and cruel priests. In "A Village Fire," a widow loses her only son to the flames, and the priest, like Porphyry, accuses her of grieving too much. "Why this plaint?" he asks her, "with kindly reproach." The priest tells her the story of Job and reminds her that Job did not complain, "but still more loved the Lord who had created him." Later in the story, when the daughter of the village's landowner tells her mother of the widow's suffering, the landowner, like Porphyry, invokes destiny: "It's dreadful for her; but how worked up you are, Vera! . . . That will never do, my love. There's a Purpose in all things—we must always remember!"

At times *The Golovlyov Family* seems less a novel than a satirical onslaught. Its relentlessness has the exhaustiveness not of a search for the truth so much as the prosecution of a case. Its characters are vivid blots of essence, carriers of the same single vice. Indeed, Shchedrin would seem to enjoy shocking the reader by annulling the novel's traditional task, that of the patient exploration, and elucidation, of private motives and reasons as they are played out in relation to a common condition. Instead, he gives us his sealed monsters, people whom we cannot explore since they are shut off from the moral world. Shchedrin knows how terrible, how—given the conventions of the novel—shocking it is to witness Stepan's homecoming, which is a cruel inversion of the parable of the Prodigal Son: "All understood that the man before

them was an unloved son who had come to the place he hated, that he had come for good and that his only escape from it would be to be carried, feet foremost, to the churchyard. And all felt both sorry for him and uneasy." All except Stepan's mother, of course.

Shchedrin knows that it is both a kind of affront to decency and to the decency of the novel itself to present a family reunion in such inhuman terms, and his narration, at points throughout the book, registers the offense. Usually, Shchedrin breaks in to tell us what we should think about each character, acting as an omniscient satirist. But at other times, he writes as if from one of the character's minds. When Stepan returns, Arina, Pavel, and Porphyry hold a family conference to discuss his fate. Arina tells Porphyry and Pavel that she has decided to allow Stepan the meanest of allowances. Shchedrin writes: "Although Porphyry Vladimiritch had refused to act as a judge, he was so struck by his mother's generosity that he felt it his duty to point out to her the dangerous consequences to which the proposed measure might lead." Since the reader can see that there is nothing "generous" about Arina, the novel's narration, at this point, is ironic, affecting to think of Arina as Porphyry might think of his mother. Yet we know that Porphyry can never be trusted, and that Porphyry never thinks well of anyone. What does it mean, then, to be told that he thought his mother generous? Is it possible that the moral sense has been so polluted in Porphyry that, even though he hates his mother, he credits his own hypocritical lies, his own devious fawning and playacting, and actually believes his mother to be generous at this moment? Or, more simply, is it just that Porphyry truly thinks that Arina's terms are too good for Stepan, that, in effect, Porphyry hates his brother more than his mother? Shchedrin's devilish twist is that he has left us alone: we do not know.

This technique, antinovelistic in its essence, nonetheless grants Shchedrin a peculiar novelistic power of his own. He

uses it to bring us closer to the characters, letting us, if only for a minute, inhabit the wilderness of their souls. The method is especially effective when used with Porphyry, for we are made to share in his self-deceptions. Here Shchedrin's narration is genuinely "unreliable," and unreliable about an already unreliable man. At one devastating moment in the novel, Shchedrin writes of Porphyry: "He had lost all connections with the outside world. He received no books, no newspapers, no letters. One of his sons, Volodenka, had committed suicide; to his other son, Petenka, he wrote very little, and only when he sent him money." The reader starts at this: the last time Volodenka was mentioned by Shchedrin, he was a little boy, mimicking his father. This is the first time we have heard anything about his committing suicide. But again, if we see the sentence as, in effect, issuing from Porphyry's mind, it is just the heartless way that he would think of his dead son—as an unimportant memory, hardly worth mentioning.

The closer Shchedrin brings us to Porphyry, the more unknowable he actually becomes. In this sense, Porphyry is a modernist prototype: the character who lacks an audience, the alienated actor. The hypocrite who does not know he is one, and can never really be told that he is one by anyone around him, is something of a revolutionary fictional character, for he has no "true" knowable self, no "stable ego," to use D. H. Lawrence's phrase. Around the turn of the twentieth century, Knut Hamsun, a novelist strongly influenced by Dostoevsky and the Russian novel, would invent a new kind of character: the lunatic heroes of his novels *Hunger* and *Mysteries* go around telling falsely incriminating stories about themselves and acting badly when they have no obvious reason to. It is difficult to know when they are lying and not lying, and impossible to understand their motives. They too are unknowable, even though they are, in a sense, antihypocrites, so deeply in revolt against the pieties of Lutheranism that they have become parodically impious. They broadcast

their self-invented sinfulness in the streets, though no one is really listening. The line from Dostoevsky, through Shchedrin, and on to Hamsun, is visible. In this regard, *The Golovlyov Family*, this strange, raucous book, whose characters both suffer from and aspire to the condition of nothingness, a book which is at times broad satire, at times Gothic horror, and at times an antinovel, becomes more modern the older it gets.

—James Wood