Ministry of Defense. Vodka manufacturers claim that the drink was as important as Katyusha rocket launchers in the victory over Nazism, because it bolstered the Russian Army's spirits. But Vladimir Nuzhny, a professor of narcology and one of Russia's best-known theoreticians of alcoholism, thinks otherwise. Those hundred grams were a disaster for the entire postwar generation, he told me. Alcohol dependence soared, and the result was a downward spiral of dissolution that continued into the nineteen-sixties. When the monopoly on vodka production was abolished again, in the early nineteen-nineties, the vodka sector was thrown into chaos: the rich New Russians, who kick-started the motor of Russian "bandit" capitalism, were essentially old-fashioned bootleggers.

Mendeleyev not only created the classic standard for Russian vodka; he also gave the concoction its name. For several centuries, official documents had referred to vodka as "grain wine." To this day, there are probably more euphemisms for vodka than for anything other than the male sex organ. Its aliases range from "hot water," "the monopolka," "the bubble," "crankshaft," "the bitter stuff," and "the white stuff" to the classic Soviet "half litre" and "quarter bottle" (also known as a "daughter"). Etymologically, the word "vodka" is derived from *voda*, the Russian word for "water." (The addition of the letter "k" makes it diminutive.)

The word appeared in standard Russian dictionaries in the mid-nineteenth century, but the upper classes and the urban middle class still regarded the drink as uncultured, almost obscene. Vodka was consumed primarily by the lower classes (hence the Russian idiom "drunk as a cobbler"). This was a result both of the quality of the vodka available (most of it was made from wood alcohol and smelled strongly of fuel oil) and of the barbarous "tavern" fashion in which it was consumed (it was illegal in taverns to eat food with liquor). Until the late nineteenth century, vodka was not even bottled—there weren't enough bottles—and it was measured by the *vedro*, or pail (equal to twenty-five pints).

The secret of the word "vodka" lies in its effect on the masses—in the mixture of lust and shame it inspires. The alcoholic views vodka as a woman; he is afraid to reveal his feelings for her, and is at the same time incapable of restraining them. The very mention of her name creates an atmosphere of conspiracy and mystical exaltation that provokes a kind of pagan stupor. In its essence, vodka is a brazen and shameless thing.

Vodka is unlike other forms of alcohol in that there is no justifiable excuse for drinking it. The Frenchman will praise the aroma of cognac, and the Scotsman will laud the flavor of whiskey. Vodka, however, is colorless, odorless, and tasteless. At the same time, it is an acrid and irritating drink. The Russian gulps his vodka down, grimacing and swearing, and immediately reaches for something else to "smooth it out." The result, not the process, is what's important. You might as well inject vodka into your bloodstream as drink it.

But then that's not entirely true, as all Russians, with the exception of the estimated five per cent of the adult population that doesn't drink, can tell you. Vodka is like a song—it may have banal lyrics and a simple melody, but the combination, like that of alcohol and water, is more than the sum of its parts. In respectable society these days, vodka is served at a table set with a range of dishes perfected in minute detail by the old Russian landowners. The vodka ceremony has its own traditions ("No eating after the first glass"), its superstitions and catchphrases ("Vodka is the aunt of wine"), its schedule (ordinary Russian drunks are distinguished from alcoholics by the fact that they wait until five in the afternoon to start drinking), and its accoutrements (fish, salted gherkins, pickled mushrooms, jellied meat, and sauerkraut)—not to mention its toasts, which are the perfect excuse for consuming alcohol while simultaneously focussing on the general conversation. Every Russian knows that drinking vodka with *pelmeni*, a kind of meat dumpling, can induce a high not far short of nirvana.

Vodka has taken control of the will and conscience of a substantial sector of the Russian population. If you add up all the time that Russians have devoted to vodka and gather together all the vodka-fuelled impulses of the soul—the fantasies, the dreams, the weeklong

binges, the family catastrophes, the shamefaced hangovers, the murders, suicides, and fatalities (favorite Russian pastimes include choking on your own vomit and falling out of a window)—it becomes clear that behind the official history of the Russian state there exists another dimension. Despite all the misadventures and tragedies of Russian alcoholism, the spotlight here belongs to the inexplicable, almost universal delight that Russians take in the notion of drunken disorder. That delight has been recorded over the centuries in the accounts of astounded foreign travellers, such as the Dutch diplomat Balthazar Coet, who visited Moscow in 1676 and wrote, "We saw only the scandalous behavior of debauchees, glorified by the thronging crowd for their proficiency in drunkenness." We encounter the same philosophy in the samizdat best-seller from the Brezhnev era, Venedikt Erofeyev's "Moscow to the End of the Line," a manifesto of indiscriminate social dissidence and a frank apologia for the metaphysics of drunkenness. "Everybody in Russia who was ever worth anything, everybody who was ever any use to the country," the book asserts, "every one of them drank like swine."

Drinking vodka is a social activity. When John Steinbeck was in Moscow, the story has it, it took him a while to understand that the three fingers two friendly guys waved at him were an invitation to split a bottle of vodka three ways; he ended up drinking *à trois* with them in a doorway anyway, apparently with no regrets. But the vodka-drinking ritual also involves a harsh questioning of human conventions. It demands freedom from history, from responsibility, from health, even from life itself. This condition of free fall, of moral weightlessness and philosophical incorporeality, represents both an attack on the "rational" West and a haughty assertion of Russian truth.

Gorbachev is of the opinion that "vodka has done more harm than good to the Russian people," but Evgeny Popov, a contemporary Russian writer who comes from hard-drinking Siberia, holds the opposite view. In conversation in the bar of Moscow's Central Writers' House, Popov claimed that vodka has helped the Russian people counter the stress of living in a less than perfect nation. Vodka has provided access to a private life that is closed to the state, a place where it is possible to relax, to forget your troubles, to engage in sex with the illusion of free choice. Nowhere else has the relationship between literature and drink been as intense as it is in Russia. The revolutionary Nikolai Nekrasov, the émigré Aleksandr Kuprin, the leading Stalinist writer Aleksandr Fadeyev, the Nobel Prize winner Mikhail Sholokhov, and the man who is probably the best Russian writer of the twentieth century, Andrei Platonov, have all had love affairs with the bottle. As Popov told me, "Vodka makes it easier to think up literary plots."

The philosophy of vodka has its dark corner of violence. Russian despots with a sadistic streak, like Peter the Great and Stalin, have taken pleasure in forcing their guests to drink more than they could handle. Other hosts force-feed their guests vodka in order to reduce the social distance between them, to humiliate and deride or take advantage. Vodka is capable not only of generating bravado but also of inducing the excruciating feeling of remorse and self-abasement that is one of the essential elements of the ambivalent Russian personality. Hence the question that the Russian alcoholic traditionally asks his drinking companion: "Do you respect me?" The drinking Russian suffers from a marked divergence between his sober impulses and his drunken ones. It is not easy to govern an entire people in this state.