


Abram Tertz ★ On Socialist Realism



A BRILLIANT AND REVEALING EXAMINATION OF SOVIET
LITERARY DOCTRINE BY A YOUNG RUSSIAN WRITER

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

Czesław Miłosz

In 1959 two manuscripts by an anonymous young Soviet writer were secretly taken to Paris and published there for the first time. Recently, the first of these, the precedent-shattering short novel, The Trial Begins, appeared in America. On its publication, Time referred to it as "perhaps the most remarkable novel to have come out of Russia since the Revolution. . . ." Now the second manuscript, also a work of major importance, is published with an introduction by the eminent Polish author, Czeslaw Milosz.

Formulated by Maxim Gorky during the height of the Stalin dictatorship, the doctrine of Socialist realism has survived all the recent vicissitudes of Soviet politics. Indeed, this aesthetic theory is no mere matter of taste for the Russian citizen in general and the Russian artist in particular. With its glorification of the state, its optimism-by-decree, and its fundamental aim to educate the workers in the spirit of socialism, this is the philosophy which dictates the whole tone and temper of Russian life. To attack the flood of novels, poems, and plays produced under this theory's aegis—as Abram Tertz does here—is therefore no mere exercise in literary criticism, but a remarkable examination.

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of the very foundation of present-day Russian ideology. Set within the panorama of Russian literary history, Abram Tertz's essay is at once an intellectual and historical document of great moment and an encouraging revelation of new critical tendencies within supposedly monolithic Russia.

To keep his identity a secret, Abram Tertz borrowed his pseudonym from a character in a now banned Moscow University student song. His work indicates that he is a young man, and it is conceivable that he was one of the young writers whose work appeared briefly in Russia in 1956 during the first year of the "thaw." Most important to the Western reader, his writing shows his education by the Soviets and a loving and thorough knowledge of Russian literature. It is obviously his concern for the future of his country's literature that induced him to arrange for the dangerous transport from Russia of his important message to the outside world.

Jacket design by Janet Halverson

ON SOCIALIST REALISM

BY THE SAME AUTHOR: *The Trial Begins*

ON
SOCIALIST
REALISM

by Abram Tertz

INTRODUCTION BY CZESLAW MILOSZ

Pantheon Books

***The text of On Socialist Realism
is translated by George Dennis.***

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

On Socialist Realism is regarded as the theoretical companion and justification of the imaginative world presented in Abram Tertz's novel, *The Trial Begins*. It arrived simultaneously with the novel in the West and was first published by the French review *L'Esprit*. Two leading intellectual magazines in Europe, *Kultura* in Paris and *Il Tempo Presente* in Rome, subsequently published them together as complementary works. The work originally appeared in this country in the pages of *Dissent* magazine.



The essay which follows was written in the Soviet Union and sent by its author through friends to Paris, asking that it be published. It came out first in 1959, in a French translation, in the Paris monthly *Esprit*. We need have no doubt as to its authenticity. We do not know the writer's name, nor would there be any point in trying to discover it. All the evidence goes to show, however, that he belongs to the younger generation of Russian writers, educated entirely under the postrevolutionary system. The fact that he has decided to have his work published abroad shows his belief in the importance of what he has to say. Let us consider this step: here we have a man with ample talent for attaining popularity in his own country, but who secretly writes something intended at best for reading by a small group of intimates. He then goes to a great deal of trouble to place his manuscript

in reliable keeping, and in this way it is brought across the frontiers. He knows full well the risk he runs should the authorities identify him as the author, while at the same time the preservation of his anonymity means that he can acquire neither fame nor money, even if his work is translated into many languages. At the same time he must also face the thorny problem of his loyalty as a citizen, for he lives in a state which forbids writers to publish without permission, and which regards violation of this rule as tantamount to violation of a citizen's duties, i.e., treason. This man has chosen to do what is condemned by the existing institutions and by the community formed by these institutions, for he sees no other way to voice his beliefs.

But American readers would be mistaken if they attributed their own values and perspectives to this anonymous Russian writer, and regarded him as a supporter of the Western way of life, for instance. Were this so, the situation would be relatively simple (an internal enemy of the system would have found means to reveal himself). If we are to understand him, we must abandon the division of people into Communists and anti-Communists. If this anonymous Russian were asked whether he is a Communist or an anti-Communist, he would almost certainly shrug and answer: "What does that

mean?" Only one kind of reality exists for him: it is that in which he has grown up and which forms his daily environment. The world outside the Soviet Union might just as well not exist, as far as he is concerned. He lives with the problems of his own community, and it is significant that he uses the form "we"—"we did this and that," "we believed," "we ought to" . . . This essay should be taken as a voice participating in an internal discussion among Soviet writers; in conditions of greater freedom, his voice would be regarded as a manifestation of the normal right to criticize.

To what extent does this anonymous Russian express the trends prevailing in the society he belongs to? There is a good deal of evidence to show that his views are shared by a large proportion of the intellectuals, particularly among the younger generation. The Russian press has published attempts to reach conclusions in a vein similar to this essay, though they are cautious and half-hearted. Where this anonymous Russian differs from his fellow writers is in the boldness with which he goes to the heart of the matter. Outside the Soviet Union proper, in the countries of Eastern Europe now ruled by the Communists, his ideas would cause no surprise. In some of these countries, where matters of the same kind are openly

discussed, such arguments as we find in this essay are, at least unofficially, as plain as daylight to everyone.

Some Americans may believe that socialist realism, or “sorealism,” as it is called, is nothing more than a style applied in the literature and art of the Soviet Union and in those areas to which its influence extends, a style which bears witness to the nineteenth-century tastes of bureaucrats for wedding-cake architecture, for flat colors in painting, and for plush luxury. That anyone who opposes this system of aesthetics is committing a political offense might appear fantastic. But unfortunately, sorealism is not merely a question of taste. It is a philosophy, too, and the cornerstone of official doctrine worked out in Stalin’s days. Sorealism is directly responsible for the deaths of millions of men and women, for it is based on the glorification of the state by the writer and artist, whose task it is to portray the power of the state as the greatest good, and to scorn the sufferings of the individual. It is thus an effective anaesthetic. The inferiority of poetry, novels, plays, and pictures produced in accordance with this formula cannot be avoided, since reality, which is quite disagreeable, has to be passed over in silence in the name of an ideal, in the name of what ought to be. However, such an inferiority does not prevent, and indeed facilitates,

the extension of the influence of this kind of mass culture. The battle against social realism is, therefore, a battle in defense of truth and consequently in defense of man himself.

Literature in Western Europe and America has never had the social character it possesses in Eastern Europe, except perhaps during the Reformation, when the writer spoke on behalf of a specific religious community. Although the political part played by certain writers has sometimes been great (Rousseau and Voltaire are obvious instances), the collective imagination has never had its archetype of bard, leader, and teacher. Historians of literature can refer only to the isolated example of Ireland in this respect. The violence of national and social conflicts in the eastern territories of Europe has made specific demands on writers. The origins of the Hungarian revolt in 1956 may well have been the Petöfi Club, so named after the nineteenth-century poet, and if so this has symbolic meaning and is simply the repetition of an older pattern. The history of Polish-Russian relations can largely be reduced to the collision of two different concepts of freedom, concepts maintained by writers and closely bound up with their pedagogic functions, different though these functions were in the two countries. After the 1917 Revolu-

tion in Russia, writers were given the honorary title of "Engineers of Souls." This was not particularly novel. It would never occur to the President of the United States to consider poems and plays, and to wonder whether their authors should be rewarded or exiled to Northern Alaska. But the authorities of America have never regarded literature as dangerous to themselves or as an important instrument for maintaining power. In Russia, on the other hand, Tsar Nicholas I personally censured Pushkin's verses. Revolutionary movements in Russia were created by the intelligentsia, who let off steam by writing and used words as a substitute for, or introduction to, action. When the Communist Party established its dictatorship, it retained the custom of allotting a high social rank to writers. And the theory of so-called surrealism itself, which the Party adopted, took shape long before the Revolution, as this anonymous Russian shows. For these reasons the present work is not merely the reflection of arguments about aesthetics, of no interest to the public at large. The game is being played for much higher stakes.

Faced with statements such as those made by the anonymous Russian writer, issuing from the mysterious East, many Western readers may well tend to be incredulous. This irony, this kind of lyrical rage, strikes them as the privilege of mod-

ern writing, which could not have developed in a country deprived for decades of any kind of contact with the outside. Hence the suspicion may arise that here we have a case of the "internal émigré," imitating forbidden but longed-for foreign models. But to claim this would be to disregard the fact that Russian literature is vast enough to provide models to satisfy anyone. Even before 1917, Russia was one of the biggest consumers of books, and although most of the enormous number of books published in Russia since the Revolution are official and mediocre, there also have been a good many Russian or foreign "classics"—the last in excellent translations. This saturation by the printed word constantly creates, as it were, a surplus of demand, which cannot be satisfied by the current monotonous production. Even during the worst periods, a second current has always existed alongside the official one: the unpublished Boris Pasternak, for instance, had a few thousand admirers who knew his verses by heart. When "coexistence" started, tourists who visited Moscow brought back poems circulating in manuscript mainly among young people. These were examples of a large body of totally unknown works by prisoners in concentration camps and by students. Some are remarkable for their high quality, and all are imbued with various shades of sarcasm and irony. The anony-

mous Russian is therefore not alone in his stylistic leanings.

The problem of socrealism is much less simple than it might appear at first sight. Despite many attempts, the elements which constitute its theory have never been combined into a harmonious whole. In fiction, the division of characters into "good guys" and "bad guys" is required just as it is in any Western. The hero is allowed to have some doubts and make some mistakes, but good must finally triumph. Yet this good does not mean morality based on the Ten Commandments, but simply the individual's conformity with the communal aim. And this aim is the victory of the Revolution throughout the world. But since victory can be obtained only through a state led by the Party, the aim is everything which assists the Party to increase the state's industrial, military, and other strength. So the norms of individual behavior are to be found not within an individual, but are determined from without: the "subjective honesty" of a man who, motivated by moral impulses, might condemn the use of tanks in Budapest does not lessen his "objective guilt," for the independence of Hungary would be at variance with the interests of the Soviet Union and hence with the interests of the Revolution, i.e., of all mankind. Although this rea-

soning is crude, it is not difficult to perceive its origins in the German philosophy of history of the first half of the nineteenth century, which introduced the concept of historical development taking place independent of our wishes and desires. This philosophy fell on remarkably fertile soil in Tsarist Russia, because its solidified social structure faced the individual with obstacles whenever he tried to exert his own will; he therefore learned to make the system itself responsible, even for his own incompetence. In this way powerful habits of mind were formed, encouraging dreams of revolution to solve all the personal problems of men and women faced with the world; moral norms were transferred from the inner forum of the conscience to a providential historical process. This transfer was characteristic of the Russian progressive intelligentsia, and was noticed by Dostoevski, who wrote in his *Diary of a Writer* in 1873: "By making man dependent on every error in the social system, the science of environment reduces man to total loss of personality, to total release from all individual obligations and any kind of independence, it reduces him to the worst slavery imaginable." This shows that the apparently naïve formulas for novels and plays, laid down by the Party for writers to follow, were preceded in Russia by many decades of argument as to the relations between the individual and society.

What the anonymous Russian writer does for us is to let us for a time enter the skin of a Russian, into a circle inaccessible to anyone without the same background of experiences and rooted in another tradition. His wide knowledge of Russian literature both old and new shows we are dealing with a professional, whose answers to the fundamental questions are not merely academic, for his own progress and realization of himself as a writer depend on them. The most important point in his argument seems to me to be this: the Great Aim—the glory of Russia as sung in the eighteenth century by Derzhavin—was found again at the moment when Lenin seized power, when Russia was torn asunder by the revolutionary movement, after the doubts and searches of the nineteenth century. From this time on, Russia has been the chosen nation, a Welthistorische nation, since it has chosen to be the instrument of a providential historical process leading “out of iron necessity” to Communism throughout the world. The hymns of praise that were sung in the past to the Russian state, assurances of the high vocation of the Russians and their superiority to other nations, were justified ex post. The light of the universal task (the salvation of man) has dawned upon Russia. Therefore, singing the praises of that future happiness which is to be the lot of all men, and this ceaseless ode in

praise of themselves (which is what Soviet literature is), amounts at the same time to an ode in praise of tomorrow. Socrealism emerged from the fusion of two creeds: belief in the mission of the Russian nation and belief in the mission of the (Russian) proletariat. The anonymous Russian writer has had the courage to reject both these creeds, for he believes that an aim attained by methods such as have been used changes into its very opposite: "So that prisons should vanish forever, we built new prisons. So that all frontiers should fall, we surrounded ourselves with a Chinese Wall. So that work should become a rest and a pleasure, we introduced forced labor. So that not one drop of blood be shed any more, we killed and killed and killed."

The Communists of several countries west of the Soviet Union—first the Yugoslavs, then the Hungarians and the Poles—adopted the phrase "the humanizing of Marxism," and many of them paid a high price to oppose what they regarded as a parody of Karl Marx's thought. Literature and art played a leading part in these attempts to do away with dogmas that were crushing man, and it is no exaggeration to say that the breakdown of socrealism has opened the prison gates. Nevertheless the "humanizing of Marxism" depends in the first

instance on changes in the Soviet Union, for until they come about, attempts undertaken in other countries ruled by the Communists will continue to fail. That is why the voice of this anonymous Russian is so important, and it is interesting to consider how far it bears witness to a ripening of new tendencies directed against the heritage of the Stalinist era, and also what prospects these new tendencies have of emerging triumphant. Moderate optimism seems called for, since the number of factors working for or against are about equal.

Technical progress requiring a whole army of highly educated specialists, and the development of education both in high schools and in universities, are bringing conditions into being in which social sciences, literature, and art shackled by dogma clearly do not fit. The main argument used by Soviet "liberals" is the fact that readers and audiences are more intelligent than the product served up to them by the highly paid practitioners of socialist realism. A simplified picture of the world is not enough; the demands of these readers and audiences cannot be satisfied until the presentation of life in the Soviet Union is cleared of its numerous taboos. The falsity of novels, poems, and plays which sterilize reality is too self-evident. These readers and audiences want the truth, at least as savage as that of Khrushchev's 1956 report. And

this public, capable of thinking for itself, is going to increase. Thus the very fact that the Soviet Union is changing into a highly industrialized country supports the campaign carried on by those who share the views of our anonymous writer, even though they have to be more circumspect in the way they set about uttering them.

Still, we must not forget that the writer is a Russian, and is guilty of lèse-majesté in criticizing his own civilization. His fellow countrymen obtain plenty of nourishment every day for their national pride, and the government makes sure that this nourishment never runs short. Though they cannot eat the moon, it bears the emblem of the hammer and sickle. Collective glory is not something fictitious; it is very real, and has been acquired by ruthless indifference to human life. Socrealism has served for several decades as a drug exciting activity, and the effectiveness of hymns of praise has been proved. Should this tried and tested creed be jettisoned, and, instead of rejoicing at measurable results, should one turn to what is immeasurable—the happiness and unhappiness of man?

Attempts at drawing analogies between the Russia of the past and present-day Russia may well lead to errors. Nonetheless, it is likely that the Russians who want freedom and justice find themselves in conflict with most of their fellow countrymen,

just as their predecessors did. This is what happens when criticism of things as they are seems to go against patriotism. Admittedly, Russia is no exception in this respect, and there are other societies in which the cult of raison d'état was and is highly developed. Yet, the case of Peter Chaadaev, author of The Philosophical Letters, gives some indication of the strength of this cult inside Russia. When Chaadaev, in 1836, published one of these Letters, public opinion was so incensed that the Tsar did not even think it necessary to jail the unfortunate philosopher: obedient doctors diagnosed the originator of the uproar as a lunatic. But as we now know, Chaadaev's severe judgments regarding his own country were little short of prophetic. Thus he said: ". . . we are one of those nations which do not seem to be an integral part of the human race, but which exist only to give some great lesson to the world. The instruction which we are destined to give will certainly not be lost: but who knows the day when we will find ourselves a part of humanity, and how much misery we shall experience before the fulfillment of our destiny?"

Alexander Herzen, too, was to find that even the most progressive circles supported him only as long as he did not question the frontiers of the Tsarist Empire, and Russia's right to dominate the territories she had conquered. Each one of us should

beat his breast and ask himself whether he does not tend to modify attacks on his own native institutions, if these attacks are likely to expose him to the charge of subversion and assisting enemies from without. Russia has given the world many evangelically pure men and women, fearless in condemning evil, and fully aware that that which is to be rendered unto God is not the same as that which is to be rendered unto Caesar. The writer of this essay is one of their number. Yet a government has effective means at its disposal to prevent independence of mind; for no matter what may be the feelings of those it governs, they will be united whenever national pride is to be upheld. We can only cling to the hope that the day is nevertheless approaching when the Russians "will find themselves a part of humanity."

Czeslaw Milosz



What is socialist realism? What is the meaning of this strange and jarring phrase? Can there be a socialist, capitalist, Christian, or Moham-medan realism? Does this irrational concept have a natural existence? Perhaps it does not exist at all; perhaps it is only the nightmare of a terrified intellectual during the dark and magical night of Stalin's dictatorship? Perhaps a crude propaganda trick of Zhdanov's or a senile fancy of Gorki's? Is it fiction, myth, or propaganda?

Such questions, we are told, are often asked in the West. They are hotly debated in Poland. They are also current among us, where they arouse eager minds, tempting them into the heresies of doubt and criticism.

Meanwhile, the productions of socialist realism are measured in billions of printed sheets, kilometers of canvas and film, centuries of hours. A thou-

sand critics, theoreticians, art experts, pedagogues are beating their heads and straining their voices to justify, explain, and interpret its material existence and dialectical character. The head of the state himself, the First Secretary of the Central Committee, tears himself away from pressing economic tasks to pronounce some weighty words on the country's aesthetic problems.¹

The most exact definition of socialist realism is given in a statute of the Union of Soviet Writers: "Socialist realism is the basic method of Soviet literature and literary criticism. It demands of the artist the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development. Moreover, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic representation of reality must be linked with the task of ideological transformation and education of workers in the spirit of socialism." (First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, 1934, p. 716.)

This innocent formula is the foundation on which the entire edifice of socialist realism was erected. It includes the link between socialist realism and the realism of the past, as well as its new

¹ This refers to Khrushchev's speeches to Soviet intellectuals, collected and published in 1957 under the title *For a Close Link Between Literature and Art and the Life of the People*.

and distinguishing quality. The link lies in the *truthfulness* of the representation; the difference, in the ability to seize the *revolutionary development* and to educate readers in accordance with that development, *in the spirit of socialism*. The old realists, or, as they are sometimes called, critical realists (because they criticized bourgeois society), men like Balzac, Tolstoi, and Chekhov, truthfully represented life as it is. But not having been instructed in the genius and teachings of Marx, they could not foresee the future victories of socialism, and they certainly did not know the real and concrete roads to these victories.

The socialist realist, armed with the doctrine of Marx and enriched by the experience of struggles and victories, is inspired by the vigilant attention of his friend and teacher, the Communist Party. While representing the present, he listens to the march of history and looks toward the future. He sees the "visible traits of Communism," invisible to the ordinary eye. His creative work is a step forward from the art of the past, the highest peak of the artistic development of mankind and the most realistic of realisms.

Such, in a few words, is the general scheme of our art. It is amazingly simple, yet sufficiently elastic to comprehend Gorki, Mayakovski, Fadeev, Aragon, Ehrenburg, and hundreds of others. But we

cannot understand this concept at all as long as we skim the surface of the dry formula and do not penetrate into its deep and hidden meaning.

The gist of this formula—"the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development"—is founded on the concept of Purpose with a capital P. The Purpose is an all-embracing ideal, toward which truthfully represented reality ascends in an undeviating revolutionary movement. To direct this movement toward its end and to help the reader approach it more closely by transforming his consciousness—this is the Purpose of socialist realism, the most purposeful art of our time.

The Purpose is Communism, known in its early stage as socialism. A poet not only writes poems but helps, in his own way, to build Communism; so, too, do sculptors, musicians, agronomists, engineers, laborers, policemen, and lawyers, as well as theaters, machines, newspapers, and guns.

Our art, like our culture and our society, is teleological through and through. It is subject to a higher destiny, from which it gains its title of nobility. In the final reckoning we live only to speed the coming of Communism.

A tendency toward purpose is part of human nature. I extend my hand to receive the coins. I go

to a movie to spend some time with a pretty girl. I write a novel to earn glory and the gratitude of posterity. Each of my conscious moves is purposeful.

Animals do not have such long-range intentions. They are moved by instincts. They bite to bite, and not for the purpose of biting. They don't think about tomorrow, wealth, God. They live without facing any complex problems. But man invariably wants what he has not got. This quality of our nature finds its outlet in a feverish activity. We transform nature into our own image and turn nature into an object. Aimless rivers become arteries of communication. Aimless trees become paper filled with destiny.

Our abstract thought is no less teleological. Man explores the world by attributing to it his own purposefulness. He asks: "What is the use of the sun?" and answers: "To give light and heat." The animism of primitive peoples is the first attempt to conquer senseless chaos by endowing it with many aims, and to animate the indifferent universe with a life useful to man.

Science has not freed us from the childish questions of "Why?" Behind the causal relations that it establishes we find the hidden and distorted purposefulness of natural phenomena. Science says:

“Man descends from the monkey” instead of saying: “The destiny of the monkey is to become man.”

However man may have originated, his appearance and purpose are inseparable from God—that is, from the highest idea of purpose which is accessible to us, if not through our understanding, then through our wish that there should be such a purpose. This is the final purpose of all that is and of all that isn't, and is the infinite—and probably purposeless—Purpose in itself. For how could Purpose have purposes?

There are periods of history when the presence of Purpose is evident, when minor passions are absorbed in the striving for God and He openly calls mankind to Himself. Thus arose the culture of Christianity which seized the Purpose in what is, perhaps, its most inaccessible meaning. Then came the era of individualism which proclaimed the freedom of the individual as the Purpose and set about worshipping this purpose with the aid of the Renaissance, humanism, superman, democracy, Robespierre, service, and other forms of worship. And now we have entered the era of a new world-wide system—that of socialist purposefulness.

A blinding light pours from this summit of thought. “A world that we can imagine, more material and better suited to human needs than Chris-

tian paradise”—thus was Communism defined by the Soviet writer Leonid Leonov.

Words fail us when we try to talk about it. We choke with enthusiasm and we use mostly negative comparisons to describe the splendor that is waiting for us. Then, under Communism, there will be no rich and no poor, no money, wars, jails, frontiers, diseases—and maybe no death. Everybody will eat and work as much as he likes, and labor will bring joy instead of sorrow. As Lenin promised, we will make toilets of pure gold . . . But what am I talking about?

*What words and what colors are needed
To describe these grandiose heights
Where whores are as modest as virgins
And hangmen as tender as mothers?*

The modern mind cannot imagine anything more beautiful and splendid than the Communist ideal. The best that it can do is to restore to circulation old ideals of Christian love and the liberty of the individual. But it has been unable so far to set up a new Purpose.

Where socialism is concerned, the Western liberal individualist or Russian skeptical intellectual is about in the same position as the cultured and intelligent Roman with regard to victorious Christianity. He called the new faith of the crucified God

barbarous and naïve, laughed over the lunatics who worshipped the cross—that Roman guillotine—and believed that the doctrines of the Trinity, the Immaculate Conception, the Resurrection, etc., made no sense whatsoever. But it was quite above his powers to advance any serious arguments against the *ideal* of Christ as such. True, he could say that the best parts of the moral code of Christianity were borrowed from Plato, just as contemporary Christians assert here and there that Communism took its noble aims from the Gospel. But could he say that God conceived as Love or Goodness was evil or monstrous? And can we say that the universal happiness, promised for the Communist future, is evil?

*For don't I know that blindfold thrusts
Will not make darkness yield to light?
Am I a monster? Is not the happiness of millions
Closer to me than empty luck for a few?*

PASTERNAK

We are helpless before the enchanting beauty of Communism. We have not lived long enough to invent a new Purpose and to go beyond ourselves—into the distance that is beyond Communism.

It was the genius of Marx that he proved the earthly paradise, of which others had dreamed before him, was actually the Purpose which Fate des-

tined for man. With the aid of Marx, Communism passed from moral efforts of isolated individuals—“Oh, where are you, golden age?”—into the sphere of universal history, which became purposeful as never before and turned into mankind’s march toward Communism.

At once, everything fell into place. An iron necessity and a strict hierarchical order harnessed the flow of centuries. The ape stood up on its hind legs and began its triumphant procession toward Communism. The system of primitive Communism arose because it was fated to grow into slavery; slavery, to give birth to feudalism; feudalism, to capitalism; and finally capitalism, so that it could give way to Communism. That is all! The magnificent aim is achieved, the pyramid is crowned, history at an end.

A truly religious person relates all the splendid variety of life to his divinity. He cannot understand another faith. He believes in the Purpose so that he can despise other purposes. He shows the same fanaticism—or, if you prefer, *printsipialnost*—with regard to history.¹ A consistent Christian views the entire history previous to the birth of

¹ *Printsipialnost* is a Russian word with no English equivalent. It describes the mental habit of referring every matter, however small, concrete, or trivial, to lofty and abstract principles.

Christ as the prehistory of Christ. From the point of view of the monotheist, the pagans existed only to call upon themselves the will of the only God and, after a suitable preparation, to become monotheists.

It can therefore hardly surprise us that, in another religious system, ancient Rome has become an indispensable stage on the road to Communism. Or that the Crusades are explained not by their internal dynamics, by the ardent efforts of Christians, but by the action of the omnipresent forces of production that are now ensuring the collapse of capitalism and the triumph of socialism. True faith is not compatible with tolerance. Neither is it compatible with historicism, i.e., with tolerance applied to the past. And though the Marxists call themselves historical materialists, their historicism is actually reduced to a desire to regard life as a march toward Communism. Other movements are of little interest to them. Whether they are right or wrong is a matter of dispute. What is beyond dispute is that they are consistent.

If we ask a Westerner why the French Revolution was necessary, we will receive a great many different answers. One will reply that it happened to save France; another, that it took place to lead the nation into an abyss of moral experiments; a third, that it came to give to the world the great

principles of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity; a fourth, that the French Revolution was not necessary at all. But if you ask any Soviet schoolboy—to say nothing of the beneficiaries of our higher education—you will invariably receive the correct and exhaustive reply: the French Revolution was needed to clear the way to Communism.

The man who received a Marxist education knows the meaning of both past and future. He knows why this or that idea, event, emperor, or military leader was needed. It is a long time since men had such an exact knowledge of the meaning of the world's destiny—not since the Middle Ages, most likely. It is our great privilege to possess this knowledge once more.

The teleological nature of Marxism is most obvious in the works of its latest theorists. They brought to Marxism the clarity, strength, and rigor of military orders and economic decrees. A good example is Stalin's judgment on the role of ideas, taken from the fourth chapter of the *Short Course of History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*:

“There exist different ideas and theories. There are old ideas and theories which have outlived their time and ~~serve~~ the interests of outdated forces of society. Their significance lies in their hampering the growth of the society and its forward march.

There are also new, advanced ideas and theories which serve the interests of the advanced forces of society. Their significance lies in facilitating the growth of the society and its forward march.”

As long as its famous author lived, the *Short Course* was the bedside book of every Soviet citizen. The entire literate population was constantly urged to study it and in particular its fourth chapter, containing the quintessence of the Marxist creed and written by Stalin himself. A quotation from V. Il'enkov's novel *The Great Highway* illustrates the universal validity that was attached to the *Short Course*:

“Father Degtyarev brought in a small volume and said: ‘Everything is said here, in the fourth chapter.’ Vinkentii Ivanovich took the book and thought: ‘There is no book on this earth that contains everything that a man needs . . .’ But Vinkentii Ivanovich [a typical skeptical intellectual] soon realized that he was wrong and accepted Degtyarev's view which was that of all advanced people: This book ‘contains everything that a man needs.’”

Every word of this quotation is pervaded by the spirit of purposefulness. Even the ideas that do not favor the movement toward the Purpose have their destiny: to hamper the movement toward the Purpose (once, no doubt, the destiny of Satan). “Idea,”

“superstructure,” “base,” “law of nature,” “economics,” “forces of production”—all these abstract and impersonal concepts suddenly come to life, are covered with flesh and blood and become like gods and heroes, angels and devils. They create purposes and suddenly, from the pages of philosophical treatises and scientific investigations, there resounds the voice of the great religious Mystery: “The base produces the superstructure so that it can serve the base.” (J. Stalin: *Marxism and Linguistic Questions*.)

This is not the only happy turn of phrase of Stalin’s which the author of the Bible might envy. The specific teleology of Marxist thought consists in leading *all* concepts and objects to the Purpose, referring them all to the Purpose, and defining them all through the Purpose. The history of all epochs and nations is but the history of humanity’s march toward Communism, and the history of the world’s thought happened, so to say, in order to bring forth “scientific materialism,” i.e. Marxism, i.e. the Philosophy of Communism. The history of philosophy, proclaimed Zhdanov, “is the history of the birth, rise and development of the scientific world view and its laws. As materialism grew and developed in the struggle against idealism, so the history of philosophy is the history of the struggle between materialism and idealism.” (A. A. Zhdanov, “Con-

tribution to the Discussion of G. F. Aleksandrov's *History of Western European Philosophy*," June 24, 1947.) These proud words seem like the voice of God Himself exclaiming: "The whole of history is My history, and since I assert myself in the struggle with Satan, world history is also the history of My struggle with Satan."

And so it rises before us, the sole Purpose of all Creation, as splendid as eternal life and as compulsory as death. And we fling ourselves toward it, breaking all barriers and rejecting anything that might hamper our frantic course. We free ourselves without regret from belief in an afterlife, from love of our neighbor, from freedom of the individual and other prejudices, by now rather shopworn and looking all the sorer by comparison with the great Ideal before us. Thousands of martyrs of the Revolution gave up their lives for the new religion and surpassed the first Christians in their sufferings, their steadfastness, and their holiness:

Polish commanders

Branded our backs with

Five-pointed stars.

Mamontov's bands

Buried us alive

Up to our necks.

The Japanese

*Burned us in the fireboxes
of locomotives
And poured lead and tin
Into our mouths.*

They all roared:

“Abjure!”

But from our burning throats

Only three words came:

“Long

Live

Communism!”

MAYAKOVSKI

To our new God we sacrificed not only our lives, our blood, and our bodies. We also sacrificed our snow-white soul, after staining it with all the filth of the world.

It is fine to be gentle, to drink tea with preserves, to plant flowers and cultivate love, nonresistance to evil, and other philanthropies. But whom did they save and what did they change in this world, these ancient virgins of both sexes, these egoists of humanism who bought themselves an easy conscience penny by penny and rented themselves a cozy corner in the heavenly almshouses?

We did not want salvation for ourselves but for all of humanity. Instead of sentimental sighs, individual perfection, and amateur dramatics for the

benefit of the hungry, we set about to correct the universe according to the best of models, the shining model of the Purpose which we approached ever more closely.

So that prisons should vanish forever, we built new prisons. So that all frontiers should fall, we surrounded ourselves with a Chinese Wall. So that work should become a rest and a pleasure, we introduced forced labor. So that not one drop of blood be shed any more, we killed and killed and killed.

In the name of the Purpose we turned to the means that our enemies used: we glorified Imperial Russia, we wrote lies in *Pravda* [Truth], we set a new Tsar on the now empty throne, we introduced officers' epaulettes and tortures. . . . Sometimes we felt that only one final sacrifice was needed for the triumph of Communism—the renunciation of Communism.

O Lord, O Lord—pardon us our sins!

Finally, it was created, our world, in the image and likeness of God. It is not yet Communism, but it is already quite close to Communism. And so we rise, stagger with weariness, encircle the earth with bloodshot eyes, and do not find around us what we hoped to find.

Why do you laugh, scum? Why do you claw with your well-cared-for nails the spots of blood and dirt that have stuck to our jackets and uniforms? You

say that this is not Communism, that we took the wrong turning and that we are further from Communism now than when we started. Well then, where is *your* Kingdom of God? Show it! Where is the free personality of the superman that you promised?

Achievements are never identical with the original aim. The means used to reach the aim change its original appearance into something unrecognizable. The stakes of the Inquisition helped to establish the Gospel; but what is left of the Gospel after the stakes have done their work? Yet all of them—the stakes of the Inquisition and the Gospel, the Massacre of St. Bartholomew and St. Bartholomew himself—add up to one great Christian culture.

Yes, we live in Communism. It resembles our aspirations about as much as the Middle Ages resembled Christ, modern Western man resembles the free superman, and man resembles God. But all the same, there is *some resemblance*, isn't there?

This resemblance lies in the subordination of all our actions, thoughts, and longings to that sole Purpose which may have long ago become a meaningless word but still has a hypnotic effect on us and pushes us onward and onward—we don't know where. And, obviously, art and literature could not but get caught in the meshes of that system and

become, as Lenin predicted, “a small wheel and a small screw” of the gigantic state machine. “Our magazines, both scientific and artistic, cannot be apolitical . . . The strength of Soviet literature, the most advanced in the world, is that it is a literature for which there can be no other interests than those of the people and of the state. (Decree of the Central Committee of the CPSU [b], August 14, 1946.)

It must be remembered, when reading this decree of the Central Committee, that the interests of the people and of the state—which, incidentally, are exactly the same from the point of view of the state—have but a single aim: the all-pervading and all-absorbing Communism. “Literature and art are part of the whole people’s struggle for Communism. . . . The highest social destiny of art and literature is to mobilize the people to the struggle for new advances in the building of Communism.” (N. S. Khrushchev, “For a Close Link Between Literature and Art and the Life of the People,” *Kommunist* magazine, number 12, 1957.)

When Western writers deplore our lack of freedom of speech, their starting point is their belief in the freedom of the individual. This is the foundation of their culture, but it is organically alien to Communism. A true Soviet writer, a true Marxist, will not accept these reproaches, and will not even

know what they are all about. What freedom—if the comparison be permitted—does the religious person require from God? The freedom to praise God still more ardently?

Contemporary Christians, who have broken their spiritual fast and accepted the spirit of individualism, with its free elections, free enterprise, and free press, occasionally abuse the phrase “freedom of choice” that Christ is supposed to have bequeathed us. This sounds like a dubious borrowing from the parliamentary system to which they are accustomed, for it bears no resemblance to the Kingdom of God, if only because no president or prime minister is ever elected in paradise. Even the most liberal God offers only one freedom of choice: to believe or not to believe, to be for Him or for Satan, to go to paradise or to hell. Communism offers just about the same right. If you don’t want to believe, you can go to jail—which is by no means worse than hell. And for the man who believes, for the Soviet writer to whom Communism is the purpose of his own and humanity’s existence (and otherwise there is no place for him either in our literature or in our society), there can be no such dilemma. For the man who believes in Communism, as Khrushchev correctly noted in one of his latest cultural pronouncements, “for the artist who truly wants to serve his people, the question does not

arise of whether he is free or not in his creative work. For him, the question of which approach to the phenomena of reality to choose is clear. He need not conform or force himself; the true representation of life from the point of view of Communist *partiinnost'*¹ is a necessity of his soul. He holds firmly to these positions, and affirms and defends them in his work.”

It is with the same joyous facility that this artist accepts the directives of the Party and the government, from the Central Committee and its First Secretary. For who, if not the Party and its leader, knows best what kind of art we need? It is, after all, the Party that leads us to the Purpose in accordance with all the rules of Marxism-Leninism, the Party that lives and works in constant contact with God. And so we have in it and in its leader the wisest and most experienced guide, who is competent in all questions of industry, linguistics, music, philosophy, painting, biology, etc. He is our Commander, our Ruler, our High Priest. To doubt his word is as sinful as to doubt the will of God.

These are the aesthetic and psychological concepts the knowledge of which is indispensable to anyone who would penetrate the secret of socialist realism.

¹ *Partiinost'* is the point of view that considers everything in terms of the correct Party line.



Works produced by socialist realists vary in style and content. But in all of them the Purpose is present, whether directly or indirectly, open or veiled. They are panegyrics on Communism, satires on some of its many enemies, or descriptions of life “in its revolutionary development,” i.e., life moving toward Communism.

Having chosen his subject, the Soviet writer views it from a definite angle. He wants to discover what potentialities it contains that point to the splendid Purpose. Most subjects of Soviet literature have in common a remarkable purposefulness. They all develop in one direction, and a direction well known in advance. This direction may exhibit variations in accordance with time, place, conditions, etc., but it is invariable in its course and its destiny: to remind the reader once more of the triumph of Communism.

Each work of socialist realism, even before it appears, is thus assured of a happy ending. The ending may be sad for the hero, who runs every possible risk in his fight for Communism; but it is happy from the point of view of the superior Purpose; and the author never neglects to proclaim his firm belief in our final victory, either directly or through a speech of his dying hero. Lost illusions, broken hopes, unfulfilled dreams, so characteristic of literature of other eras and systems, are contrary to socialist realism. Even when it produces a tragedy, it is an *Optimistic Tragedy*, the title of Vishnevski's play in which the heroine dies at the end but Communism triumphs.

A comparison between some representative titles of Soviet and Western literature is revealing. *Journey to the End of the Night* (Céline); *Death in the Afternoon* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (Hemingway); *Everyone Dies Alone* (Fallada); *A Time to Live and a Time to Die* (Remarque); *Death of a Hero* (Aldington) are all in minor key. *Happiness* (Pavlenko); *First Joys* (Fedin); *It is Well!* (Mayakovski); *Fulfilled Wishes* (Kaverin); *Light over the Earth* (Babaevski); *The Victors* (Bagritski); *The Victor* (Simonov); *The Victor* (Chirikov); *Spring in the Victory Collective Farm* (Gribachev), and so on, are all in a major key.

The splendid aim toward which the action de-

velops is sometimes presented directly at the end of the work. This method was brilliantly used by Mayakovski. All his major works after the Revolution end with passages about Communism or with fantastic scenes describing life in the future Communist state (*Mystery Bouffe; 150,000,000; About This; Vladimir Il'ich Lenin; It is Well!; With a Full Voice*). Gorki, who during the Soviet era wrote mainly about the days before the Revolution, ended most of his novels and plays—*The Artamonov Affair; The Life of Klim Samgin; Egor Bulichev; Dostigaev*—with a vision of the victorious Revolution, which was a stage on the way to Communism, and the concluding gesture of the old world.

Even when the book does not end with such a grandiose denouement, it still exists implicitly and symbolically, commanding the development of characters and events. For example, many of our novels and stories deal with the work of a factory, the building of a power plant, the application of an agricultural decree, and so on. An economic task is carried out in the course of the action (e.g., the start of building introduces the plot; the end of building, the denouement). But the task is presented as an indispensable stage on the way toward a higher purpose. In such a purposeful view, even technical processes acquire dramatic tension and can be followed with great interest. The reader finds

out step by step how, against all kinds of obstacles, the plant was put to work, the "Victory" collective farm gathered a good crop of corn, and so on. He closes the book with a sigh of relief and realizes that we have made yet another step toward Communism.

Since Communism is for us the inescapable outcome of the historical process, many of our novels have made the impetuous course of time the mainspring of their action. The course of time, working its way toward the Purpose, works for us. The Soviet writer does not think in Proustian terms. He does not search for lost time; his motto is rather: "Time, march on!" He hastens the course of life and affirms that each day lived is not a loss but a gain for man—because it brings him closer to the desired ideal, even if only by one millimeter.

This purposefulness of the historic processes is linked with the great interest our writers show in history, both recent and remote. Recent historical events like the Civil War and collectivization are landmarks on the road we chose. In more remote eras it is, alas, harder to find the movement toward Communism. But if the writer concentrates hard enough he will uncover, even in the most remote of times, some phenomenon that might be called progressive because, in the final account, it aided in some way our victories of today. The writers

merely anticipate somewhat and give these events the Purpose that they did not yet have. And so the leaders of the past like Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, or the peasant rebel Stenka Razin, though they did not know the word "Communism," still know quite well that our future will be brilliant. They never cease to celebrate this future from the pages of our historical novels, and they constantly gladden the heart of their readers by their astounding perspicacity.

Another subject is offered to our literature by the internal world of man's psychological life. This internal world moves toward the Purpose by dynamics of its own, fights against "the traces of the bourgeois past in its conscience," and re-educates itself under the influence of the Party and of surrounding life. A large part of Soviet literature is an "educational novel" which shows the Communist metamorphosis of individuals and entire communities. Many of our books turn around the representation of these moral and psychological processes, which aim at producing the ideal man of the future. One such is Gorki's *Mother*, where an ignorant woman, defeated by life, is transformed into a conscious revolutionary. Written in 1906, this book is generally considered the first example of socialist realism. Or there is Makarenko's *Pedagogical Poem* about the young criminals who take the road to

honest work, or Ostrovski's novel *How the Steel Was Tempered*, i.e., how the steel of our youth was tempered in the fire of the Civil War and the cold of early Communist construction.

As soon as the literary character becomes fully purposeful and conscious of his purposefulness, he can enter that privileged caste which is universally respected and called "positive heroes." This is the Holy of Holies of socialist realism, its cornerstone and main achievement.

The positive hero is not simply a good man. He is a hero illuminated by the light of the most ideal of all ideals. Leonid Leonov called his positive hero "a peak of humanity from whose height the future can be seen." He has either no faults at all or else but a few of them—for example, he sometimes loses his temper a little. These faults have a two-fold function. They help the hero to preserve a certain likeness to real men, and they provide something to overcome as he raises himself ever higher and higher on the ladder of political morality. However, these faults must be slight or else they would run counter to his basic qualities. It is not easy to enumerate these basic qualities of the positive hero: ideological conviction, courage, intelligence, will power, patriotism, respect for women, self-sacrifice, etc., etc. The most important, of course, are the clarity and directness with which he sees the Pur-

pose and strives toward it. Hence the amazing precision of all his actions, thoughts, tastes, feelings, and judgments. He firmly knows what is right and what is wrong; he says plainly “yes” or “no” and does not confuse black with white. For him there are no inner doubts and hesitations, no unanswerable questions, and no impenetrable secrets. Faced with the most complex of tasks, he easily finds the solution—by taking the shortest and most direct route to the Purpose.

The positive hero first appeared in some books of Gorki's written in the first decade of the twentieth century. He started by proclaiming to the world: “One must say firmly yes or no!” Many were shocked by the self-assurance and straightforwardness of his formulations, by his tendency to preach at everyone around him, and by his pompous monologues celebrating his own virtues. Chekhov, when he managed to read through *The Petty Bourgeois*, frowned with embarrassment and advised Gorki to soften the loud proclamations of his hero. Chekhov feared pretentiousness worse than fire: he viewed such purple passages as a boastfulness foreign to the Russian character.

But Gorki was deaf to such advice. He did not fear the reproaches and sneers of the shocked intelligentsia and its repeated assertions that the new hero was dull-witted and narrow-minded. He

knew that his hero was the man of the future and that “only men who are as pitiless, straight, and hard as swords will cut their way through.” (*The Petty Bourgeois*, 1901.)

Since then the positive hero has gone through many changes and presented himself in many guises. He unrolled his positive qualities in many ways, grew big and sturdy, and finally drew himself up to his full stature. This happened as early as the 1930s, when the Soviet writers dropped their little cliques and their literary tendencies, and accepted, almost unanimously, the best and most advanced trend of all: socialist realism.

To read the books of the last twenty or thirty years is to feel the great power of the positive hero. First he spread in every direction, until he filled all our literature. There are books in which *all* the heroes are positive. This is but natural, since we are coming ever closer to the Purpose. So that if a book about the present deals not with the fight against the enemies but with, say, a model collective farm, then all its characters can and must be positive. To put negative characters in such a situation would, to say the least, be strange. And so we get dramas and novels where all moves smoothly and peacefully. If there is a conflict between the heroes, it is a conflict between good and better, model and supermodel. When these books ap-

peared, their authors—men like Babaevski, Surkov, Sofronov, Virta, Gribachev, etc.—were highly praised and set up as examples for others. True, since the Twentieth Congress—one hardly knows why—our attitude toward them has changed somewhat and we apply to them the contemptuous adjective “conflictless.” Once Khrushchev came out in defense of these writers, such reproaches were stilled somewhat, but they are still voiced here and there by intellectuals. They are unjust.

Since we don't want to lose face before the West, we occasionally cease to be consistent and declare that our society is rich in individualities and embraces many interests; and that it has differences of opinion, conflicts, and contradictions, and that literature is supposed to reflect all that.

True, we differ from each other in age, sex, nationality, and even intelligence. But whoever follows the Party line knows that these are heterogeneities within a homogeneity, differences of opinion within a single opinion, conflicts within a basic absence of conflict. We have one aim—Communism; one philosophy—Marxism; one art—socialist realism. This was well put by a Soviet writer of no great literary gifts but politically irreproachable: “Russia took its own road—that of unanimity. . . . For thousands of years men suffered from differences of opinion. But now we, Soviet men and

women, for the first time agree with each other, talk one language that we all understand, and think identically about the main things in life. It is this unanimity that makes us strong and superior to all other people in the world, who are internally torn and socially isolated through their differences of opinion.” (V. Il’enkov, *The Great Highway*, a novel which appeared in 1949 and was awarded the Stalin Prize.)¹

Beautifully put! Yes, we really are all alike and we are not ashamed of it. Those of us who suffer from superfluous differences of thought we punish severely by excluding them from life and literature. There can be no substantial differences of opinion in a country where even the anti-Party elements confess their errors and wish to rectify them as soon as possible, and incorrigible enemies of the people ask to be shot. Still less can there be such differences among honest Soviet people and least of all among positive heroes who think only of spreading their virtues all over the world and of re-educating the few remaining dissidents into unanimity.

¹ One cannot but recall in this connection Khrushchev’s *cri de coeur* against the Jews: “They are all individualists and all intellectuals. They want to talk about everything, they want to discuss everything, they want to debate everything—and they come to totally different conclusions!”

True, there are still disagreements between the vanguard and the backward, and there is still the sharp conflict with the capitalist world that does not let us sleep in peace. But we do not doubt for a single moment that all these contradictions will be resolved, that the world will become unified and Communist, and that the last, by competing with each other, shall become the first. This great harmony is the final Purpose of Creation, this beautiful absence of conflict is the future of socialist realism. And so we can hardly reproach those overharmonious writers who have indeed withdrawn from contemporary conflicts but only to glance at the future, i.e., to find out how they can best pay the debt which, as writers, they owe to socialist realism. Babaevski and Surkov have not deviated from the sacred principles of our art, but have rather developed it logically and organically. They embody the higher stage of socialist realism and the embryo of the coming Communist realism.

The growing strength of the positive hero is shown not only in his incredible multiplication—he has far surpassed other kinds of literary character in quantity, put them into the shade, and sometimes replaced them altogether. His qualitative growth has also been remarkable. As he approaches the Purpose, he becomes ever more positive, great, and splendid. He also becomes more and more per-

suaded of his own dignity, especially when he compares himself to contemporary Western man and realizes his immeasurable superiority. "But our Soviet man has left *them* far behind. He is now close to the peak while they are still wandering in the foothills"—this is the way simple peasants talk in our novels. And the poet runs out of words when he tries to describe this superiority, this incomparable positiveness of our positive hero:

*Nobody rose so high
For centuries and centuries.
You are above all glory,
You are beyond all praise.*

M. ISAKOVSKI

The novel *Russian Forest* by Leonid Leonov, the first writer to be awarded a Lenin Prize—which replaced the Stalin Prize—is the best work of socialist realism for the last five years or so. It contains a remarkable scene. The brave girl Polyá, entrusted with a dangerous mission, makes her way to the rear of the enemy—the action takes place during the Patriotic War. As a camouflage she is supposed to collaborate with the Germans. She plays this part for a while in talking to a Nazi officer, but with great difficulty: it is morally painful to her to talk the enemy's language. Finally she cannot stand it

any more and reveals her true self and her superiority to the German officer: "I am a girl of my time . . . maybe just an ordinary girl, but I am the world's tomorrow . . . and you should stand up, yes, stand up when you talk to me, if you have a trace of self-respect left! But there you sit, only because you are nothing but a horse that the Chief Hangman puts through its paces . . . Well, don't just sit there, do something! . . . Get up and show me the place where Soviet girls are shot!"

The fact that by this pompous tirade Polyá betrays herself and moreover harms the mission with which she has been entrusted does not disturb the author in the least. He finds an easy way out of the resulting situation. The noble purity of Polyá's heart converts a *starosta*¹ who happened to listen to the conversation. His conscience suddenly awakens, he shoots at the German, loses his life, and saves Polyá's.

But this is not what matters. It does not matter so much that the *starosta* moved, within the batting of an eyelid, from the rearguard to the vanguard. What matters very much more is that we have here the straight and immutable determination of the positive hero raised, we might say, to the second

¹ A peasant official put in charge of the village by the Germans.

power. Polya's behavior may seem stupid from the point of view of common sense. But it is filled with an immense religious and aesthetic significance. Under no circumstances, even to further his task, does the positive hero dare so much as to look negative. Even in the face of the enemy who must be outwitted and cheated, he must demonstrate his positive qualities. They cannot be hidden or camouflaged: they are written on his brow and they sound in his every word. And so he defeats the enemy not by cleverness, wits, or physical strength but by his proud attitude alone.

Polya's deed is the key to much that to the non-believer appears grossly exaggerated, stupid, and false—especially the positive hero's propensity to pontificate on elevated themes. He makes Communist assertions at home and at work, in friends' homes and on lonely walks, on the love couch and on the deathbed. But this is not a contradiction; positive heroes were created to present to the world, on every suitable and unsuitable occasion, models of purposefulness:

Measure

Each detail

By the great

Purpose

MAYAKOVSKI

Only men who are as pitiless, straight, and hard as swords will cut their way through.

GORKI

Never before have there been heroes like this. Though Soviet writers are proud of the great traditions of nineteenth-century Russian literature, which they want to follow in every possible way and sometimes actually do follow (even though they constantly upbraid Western writers for slavishly imitating outworn literary canons), the positive hero of socialist realism is a break with the tradition, not its continuation.

A very different type of hero prevailed in the last century, and Russian culture lived and thought differently then. Compared with the fanatical religiosity of our time, the nineteenth century seems atheist, tolerant, disoriented. It was soft and shrivelled, feminine and melancholy, full of doubts, inner contradictions, and pangs of conscience. Chernyshevski and Pobedonostsev, the great radical and the great reactionary, were perhaps the only two men of the century who really believed in God. Of course, an incalculable number of peasants and old women also believed in God; but they were not the makers of history and culture. Culture was made by a handful of mournful skeptics who thirsted for God simply because they had no God.

But you might object: How about Tolstoi and Dostoevski, how about the thousands of other "seekers after God," from the Populists to Merezhkovski, whose search for God has lasted well into the middle of *our* century? I assume that to search means not to have. He who has, who really believes, does not search. And what should he search for, if everything is clear and all that he has to do is to *follow* God? God is not found; He finds us and comes upon us. When He has found us, we cease to search and start to act, doing His will.

The nineteenth century was a century of searching, of ardent or calm aspirations, unwilling or unable to find a solid place under the sun, torn by uncertainties and dualism. Dostoevski regretted that the Russian was so broad—he should be narrowed, he felt. But Dostoevski was so broad himself that he could embrace within himself both Orthodoxy and nihilism. He could find room in his soul for all the Karamazovs—Alyosha, Mitya, Ivan, Fedor (some would add Smerdyakov). We don't know to this day which of them predominated. For breadth excludes faith: no wonder we narrowed ourselves down to Marxism, thus fulfilling Dostoevski's wish. Dostoevski fully understood the temptations of breadth, eternally disputed with himself, and passionately wished to end these disputes, offensive to the one God.

This thirst for God, this wish to believe, arose—as did the search—in a spiritual desert. It was not yet faith, and if the wish preceded faith—Blessed are they who thirst!—it is like hunger preceding a meal. Though a hungry man is ready to eat, there is not always a meal waiting for him. The great hunger of the nineteenth century perhaps conditioned us Russians to throw ourselves so greedily upon the food prepared by Marx and to devour it even before we had time to analyze its taste, smell, and consequences. But this hundred years' hunger was itself caused by the catastrophic absence of food: it was a hunger of godlessness. That is why it proved so exhausting and felt so unbearable, making us “go among the people,” turn radical and renegade, and suddenly remember that we are, after all, Christians. . . . But there was no relief anywhere:

*I want to make peace with heaven,
I want to love, I want to pray,
I want to believe in the good.*

But who is it that cries so anxiously for faith? None other than the Demon of Lermontov's poem.¹ It is the very “spirit” of doubt that has torn us so

¹ Lermontov, the great romantic poet, wrote *The Demon* in 1842.—Tr.

long and so painfully. He confirms that it is not the saints who thirst for God but those who have no God and have left Him.

It is a very Russian Demon. He is too inconsistent in his passion for evil to figure as a full Devil and too inconsistent in his repentance to make his peace with God and rejoin the obedient angels. His tone is not straightforward but ambiguous—"not day and not night, not light and not dark." There are only semi-tones, the secret glitter of twilight that was later glimpsed by the symbolist poet Blok and the symbolist painter Vrubel.

A consistent atheism, an extreme and inflexible denial of God, resembles religion more than this vague incertitude. For this is the crux of the Demon's problem: he has no faith and he suffers from lack of faith. His is the eternal motion upward and downward, backward and forward, between heaven and hell.

Remember what happened to the Demon? He fell in love with Tamara, that divine beauty incarnated in a ravishing woman, and decided to believe in God. But as soon as he kissed Tamara she died, killed by his touch. She was taken from him, and he was once more alone in his anguished unbelief.

For a century this was also the story of Russian culture, which had been possessed by the Demon even before Lermontov. Russia went into a fren-

zied search for an ideal; and no sooner did she touch heaven than she fell. The slightest contact with God led to denying Him, and with the denial came the anguish of unrealized faith.

The universal genius of Pushkin took note of this collision in *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* and other early poems; but it was only in *Eugene Onegin* that he unfolded the theme in its full amplitude. The plot of *Onegin* is a simple anecdote: as long as Tatiana loves Onegin and is willing to belong to him, he is indifferent to her; but when she marries another, he falls in love with her passionately and hopelessly. Embedded in this banal story are contradictions on which Russian literature has dwelled to the days of Chekhov and Blok: contradictions of a spirit without God and of a Purpose irrevocably lost.

The central hero of this literature—Onegin, Pechorin of Lermontov's *Hero of Our Time*, Belto of Herzen's *Whose Fault?*, Lavretski of Turgenev's *Nest of Gentlefolk* and Rudin of his novel of that name—is usually called "the superfluous man." For all his generous impulses he is unable to find a destiny and he presents a lamentable example of a purposelessness that is of no use to anybody. He is, as a rule, a reflective character, with tendencies to self-analysis and self-flagellation. His life is full of unrealized projects, and his fate is sad and

slightly ridiculous. A woman usually plays a fatal part in it.

Russian literature is full of love stories in which an inadequate man and a beautiful woman meet and part without achieving anything. The fault, of course, lies with the man, who does not know how to love his lady as she deserves, actively and with a purpose. Instead, he yawns with boredom, like Onegin and Rudin, or else he kills his beloved, like Aleko in Pushkin's *Gypsies* or Arbenin in Lermontov's *Masquerade*.

If only the hero were at least a low fellow, incapable of higher feelings! But no, he is a noble creature and the most attractive woman boldly offers him her heart and hand. But instead of rejoicing and taking life with a song, he commits some irresponsible acts and, against his own desires, does everything he can to ensure that his beloved shall not become his.

Judging by the literature of the time, all hearts were broken in nineteenth-century Russia and no children were born for a while. But the writers were not describing the actual life and customs of the Russian nobility; they were engaged in depth metaphysics of an aimlessly agitated spirit. In this literature, woman is the touchstone of man. His relations with her bare his weakness and, compromised by her strength and beauty, he descends

from the stage on which a heroic action was to be played, bows to fate, and sneaks out into nothingness with the shameful cry of a base, useless, superfluous man.

The women, those innumerable Tatianas, Lisas, Natalias, Bellas, and Ninas [Tatiana is the heroine of *Eugene Onegin*; Lisa of *A Nest of Gentlefolk*; Bella of *A Hero of Our Time*], shine like an ideal, chaste and beyond the reach of Onegin and Pechorins, who love them so clumsily and unsuccessfully. For Russian literature they served as a synonym of the ideal, as symbol of a higher Purpose.

For woman is generally considered a beautiful, pure, and nebulous creature. Not too much is asked of her: she need not be concrete and definite to save man; it is enough that she be pure and beautiful. And since she occupies, like every Purpose, a passive and waiting position, her beautiful, magical, mysterious, and not too concrete nature permits her to represent a higher stage of the ideal and to serve as a substitute for the absent and desired Purpose.

This was the woman that the nineteenth century found most to its liking. She impressed it by her vagueness, her mysteriousness, and her tenderness. Pushkin's dreamy Tatiana opened up an age; the "Beautiful Lady" to whom Blok dedicated his first

collected poems closed it. Tatiana was indispensable for Onegin to suffer *through the absence of somebody*. And, concluding a love story that lasted for a century, Blok took the Beautiful Lady as his Bride, only to betray Her and to lose Her and to torment himself all his life by the purposelessness of his existence.

Blok's poem *The Twelve*—a work at the boundary between two hostile and mutually exclusive cultures—contains an episode that puts a full stop to the love theme of the nineteenth century. The Red Guard Petka kills, against his will and in a fit of anger, his sweetheart, the prostitute Katka. The tragic murder and the sorrows of lost love resuscitate the old drama, known to us from the days of Lermontov's *Masquerade* and *Demon*. Blok himself used it in many variations—did not the fool Petka and big-mouthed Katka, with her new boy friend Harlequin-Vanka, issue from Blok's own Pierrot and Columbine? But if the old heroes, the Demons and Arbenins, just turn their emptied souls inside out and freeze into a hopeless sorrow, Petka, who followed in their footsteps, is not allowed to do it. His more politically conscious comrades rouse him and re-educate him:

*You sure go on and on, you bastard,
What are you? A little girl?*

*Sure, you want to turn your soul
Inside out for us to see? O.K.
Come on, snap out of it, look smart,
Get yourself under control!*

.

*And Petrukha soon slowed down
His hurried steps*

.

*He threw back his head
And became gay once more.*

Thus was born a new hero, never seen before. In bloody battles against the enemy—"I will drink blood for my black-browed beauty!"—and in the works and pains of the new era—"This is no time for babying!"—he cures himself of sterile reflections and useless pangs of conscience. He lifts his head proudly, cheers himself up, and enters Soviet literature under the flag of the new God whom Blok, from old habit, calls Jesus Christ:

*Forward, forward,
Working people!*

The superfluous man of the nineteenth century became even more superfluous in the twentieth. To the positive hero of the new era he was strange and incomprehensible. The superfluous man seemed to him much more dangerous than the openly nega-

tive enemy. After all, the enemy was like the positive hero—clear, straightforward, and, in his own way, purposeful. Only his significance was negative—to hinder the movement to the Purpose. But the superfluous man was a creature of different psychological dimensions, inaccessible to computation and regimentation. He is neither for the Purpose nor against the Purpose—he is outside the Purpose. Now this simply cannot be; it is a fiction, a blasphemy. While the whole world, having defined itself with regard to the Purpose, is divided into two antagonistic camps, he feigns not to understand this and keeps mingling his colors in vague and ambiguous schemes. He proclaims that there are no Reds and no Whites but simply people, poor, unfortunate, superfluous people:

*They all lie in a row—
No line between them.
Look: soldiers!
Who's ours? Who's theirs?
He was white and now he's red—
The blood reddened him.
He was red and now he's white—
Death whitened him.*

M. TSVETAeva¹

¹ Marina Tsvetaeva returned to Russia in 1940 after a long exile and committed suicide two years later. She has

In the religious struggle, the superfluous man proclaimed his neutrality and expressed his sympathy with both parties, as in these verses of the symbolist poet Voloshin:

*Both here and there, among the ranks
One voice alone can be heard:
"Who is not for us is against us.
There are no neutrals. Truth is with us."
And I stand alone among them
In the roaring flame and smoke
And with all the strength that I have
Say a prayer for them both.*

Such words, as blasphemous as a simultaneous prayer to God and Satan, could not possibly be permitted. It was more correct to proclaim them to be a prayer to the Devil: "Who is not for us is against us." And this is what the new culture did. If it turned again toward the superfluous man, it was only to prove that he was not at all superfluous but rather harmful, dangerous, and negative.

Naturally, the leader of the new crusade was Gorki. In 1901 he sketched the first model of the positive hero and attacked those "who were born without faith in the heart," who "never felt that

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been posthumously "rehabilitated" recently and her work republished.—TR.

anything was true,” who “forever wandered between yes and no.”

Gorki roared “No!” at these superfluous men, who roused his ire by their indefiniteness, and called them “petty bourgeois.” Later he extended the concept of “petty bourgeois” far and wide and cast into it all who did not belong to the new religion: property owners large and small, liberals, conservatives, hooligans, humanists, decadents, Christians, Dostoevski, Tolstoi. Gorki was a man of *printsipialnost*; G. Chulkov called him the only truly believing writer of his time. He knew that all that is not God is Devil.

The literary revaluation of the superfluous man and his rapid transformation into a negative figure was intensified in the 1920s, the formative years of the positive hero. When they were placed side by side, it became obvious to everybody that there were no heroes without Purpose, but only heroes who were for or against the Purpose and that the superfluous man was, when all is said and done, a camouflaged enemy, a base traitor who should be unmasked and punished as quickly as possible.

Thus wrote Gorki in *The Life of Klim Samgin*, Fadeev in *The Debacle*, and many others. In *The Towns and the Years* Fedin purged his heart of the last drop of pity for the superfluous hero, formerly so enchanting. The only dissonant note was per-

haps struck by Sholokhov in his *And Quiet Flows the Don*. Having shown the tragic fate of that superfluous man, Grigori Melekhov, he bade him an affectionate farewell. Since his hero belonged to the simple people and not the intelligentsia, it was possible to close an eye to Sholokhov's behavior. Today his novel is considered a model of socialist realism. But it is a model that, for obvious reasons, has found no imitators.

Meanwhile, other superfluous men, wishing to save their lives, renounced their past and duly transformed themselves into positive heroes. One of them recently said: "There is nothing in the world more disgusting than fence-sitters. . . . Yes, yes, I am a Red. A Red, the Devil take you." (Fedin's *An Extraordinary Year*, 1949.) The curse was addressed, of course, to the Whites.

Thus did the hero of nineteenth-century Russian literature perish ingloriously.



In its content and spirit, as in its central figure, socialist realism is much closer to the eighteenth century than to the nineteenth. Without realizing it, we jump over the heads of our fathers and revive the tradition of our grandfathers. Like ourselves, the eighteenth century had the idea of political purposefulness, the feeling of its own superiority, and a clear consciousness that “God is with us”:

*Hark, hark, O Universe,
To vict'ries beyond human power;
Listen, O astounded Europe,
To the exploits of these Russians.
Peoples, know and understand,
Believe ye that with us is God;
Believe that, aided by His hand,
A single Russian can defeat*

All your abysmal evil forces.

Peoples, know this dread Colossus:

God is with us, so honor ye the Russian.

These verses of the eighteenth-century poet Derzhavin have a very contemporary ring, though the language would, of course, need modernizing. Like the socialist system, so eighteenth-century Russia conceived of itself as the center of Creation. Inspired by the plenitude of its virtues—"self-created and self-fortified"—it proclaimed itself as an example to all peoples and all eras. Its religious self-conceit was so strong that it did not even admit the possibility of the existence of other norms and ideals. In his *Portrait of Felitsa*, Derzhavin, praising the ideal reign of Catherine II, expressed the desire that

*Peoples savage and remote,
Covered still with wool and scales,
Dressed only with leaf and bark,
And adorned with wings of birds,
Should all gather at Her throne,
Hear the gentle voice of Law,
So that tears should run in torrents
Down their swarthy, sunburned faces.
They should cry and understand
The bliss of living in our time,*

*Should abandon their equality,
And all subject be to Her.*

Derzhavin simply cannot imagine that these “savages,” the Huns, Finns and other peoples that surrounded the Russian throne somewhat in the manner of the International, should reject this flattering offer and not wish to submit at once to Catherine, who is, after all, “celestial grace incarnate.” For him, as for our writers, anyone who does not wish to become like the model proposed to him and does not hasten to forget his barbarous “equality” and accept the proffered gift of “bliss” falls into one of two categories. He either is so stupid that he does not understand his own interests, in which case he must be re-educated; or he lacks virtue and is, to use one of our words, a “reactionary,” in which case he must be liquidated. For in our world there is nothing finer than this state, this faith, this life, and this Empress. So Derzhavin believed, just as a contemporary poet who celebrates the new reign in Derzhavin’s language:

*There is no country like vast Russia,
No flowers grow as bright as ours,
Great is our people, free and deathless,
Our proud, eternal Russian people.
It stemmed attacking hordes of Batu*

*And broke all chains that held it down,
It made Russia and it raised her
To heights of stars and crests of time.*

A. PROKOFIEV

Eighteenth-century literature produced its own positive hero. He is “the friend of common good”; he “strives to surpass all in courage,” etc.; i.e., he constantly raises the level of his political morality, possesses all the virtues, and tells everybody just what to do. This literature knew nothing of the superfluous man. Neither did it know the destructive laughter that was the chronic disease of Russian culture from Pushkin to Blok and reached its climax among the decadents. “All the most lively and sensitive children of our century are stricken by a disease unknown to doctors and psychiatrists. It is related to the disorders of the soul and might be called ‘irony.’ Its symptoms are fits of an exhausting laughter which starts with a diabolic mockery and a provocative smile and ends as rebellion and sacrilege.” (A. Blok, *Irony*, 1908.)

Seen in this way, irony is the laughter of the superfluous man who derides both himself and everything sacred in this world. “I know men who are ready to choke with laughter when they learn that their mother is dying, that they are starving to death, that their fiancée has betrayed them.

Through this accursed irony, everything is the same to them: good and evil, the blue sky and the stinking pit, Dante's Beatrice and Sologub's Untouchable Lady. [Fedor Sologub, a poet of the turn of the twentieth century, with decadent tendencies.] Everything is confused, as in a tavern or a fog." (Blok, *ibid.*)

Irony is the faithful companion of unbelief and doubt; it vanishes as soon as there appears a faith that does not tolerate sacrilege. There was no irony in Derzhavin, nor in Gorki—except for a few early tales. In Mayakovski there are a few examples, mostly from prerevolutionary times. Mayakovski soon found out what he could and what he could not laugh about. He could not permit himself to laugh at Lenin, whom he praised to the skies, any more than Derzhavin would laugh at his Empress. Pushkin, by contrast, addressed indecent verses even to the chaste and modest Tatiana. Pushkin was the first to taste the bitter joys of self-negation, even though he was gay and had a balanced character. As for Lermontov, he almost seems to have imbibed the poison in his childhood. In Blok himself and in his contemporaries Sologub and Leonid Andreev, destructive laughter became an elemental force sweeping everything before it.

As in the eighteenth century, we became severe and serious. This does not mean that we forgot

how to laugh; but laughter ceased to be indecent and disrespectful; it acquired a Purpose. It eliminates faults, corrects manners, keeps up the brave spirits of youth. It is laughter with a serious face and with a pointing finger: "This is not the way to do things!" It is a laughter free from the acidity of irony.

Irony was replaced by pathos, the emotional element of the positive hero. We ceased to fear high-sounding words and bombastic phrases; we were no longer ashamed to be virtuous. The solemn eloquence of the ode suited us. We became classicists.

When Derzhavin, in his old age, wrote the ode "To the Great Boyar and Military Commander Reshemysl," he gave it a subtitle: "or the image of what a great lord should be." The art of socialist realism might be given the same subtitle: it represents the world and man as they should be.

✎ Socialist realism starts from an ideal image to which it adapts the living reality. Our demand "to represent life truthfully in its revolutionary development" is really nothing but a summons to view truth in the light of the ideal, to give an ideal interpretation of reality, to present what should be as what is. For we interpret "revolutionary development" as the inevitable movement toward Communism, toward our ideal, in the light of which we see reality. We represent life as we would like it to

be and as it is bound to become, when it bows to the logic of Marxism. This is why socialist realism should really be called “socialist classicism.”

Some theoretical books and articles by Soviet writers and critics use the terms “romanticism” and “revolutionary romanticism.” Gorki wrote much about the links between romanticism and socialist realism. He longed for “the illusion that exalts” and defended the artist’s right to embellish life and to present it as better than it is. These calls did not remain unheeded, though many of Gorki’s formulas are now veiled by an embarrassed silence or interpreted pharisaically: it is obviously not easy to admit that what we really need are some pretty lies. No, no, God forbid! We are against illusions and against idealization; we write only the truth and at the same time present life in its revolutionary development. Why should we embellish life? It is quite beautiful as it is, we are not out to embellish it, we just want to show the seeds of the future it contains. Romanticism is legitimate provided it does not conflict with realism. Revolutionary romanticism, like “revolutionary development” and “seeds of the future,” is inherent in life, which, as inveterate romantics, we depict truthfully.

All this talk is merely our usual literary politics. In reality—as Gorki knew—romanticism suited our tastes only too well. It gravitates toward the ideal,

makes our wishes pass for the truth, likes pretty knickknacks, is not afraid of bombast. This is why it had its well-known success among us. Yet romanticism has played a less important part in our art than might have been expected. It made its presence felt mostly in the prehistory and initial period of socialist realism. In its mature period—the last twenty, thirty years—socialist realism has had a comparatively slight romantic tinge.

Romanticism is intimately connected with the *Sturm und Drang* period of Soviet literature, the first five years after 1917, when life and art were flooded with sentiment, when the blazing élan toward a happy future and the world-wide significance of the Revolution were not yet regimented by a strict political order. Romanticism is our past, our youth for which we long. It is the ecstasy of swollen banners, the explosions of passion and rage, the rattling of sabers and the neighing of horses, the shootings without judgment and without consequences, the “On to Warsaw!,” the life, sleep, and death under the naked sky lit by the fires of regiments as nomadic as the Tartars of old:

*Youth that led us
To the march of sabers,
Youth that threw us
On the ice of Kronstadt.*

*Battle horses
Carried us off,
On city squares
They massacred us.*

E. BAGRITSKI

These are not just the sentiments of revolutionists who have survived and grown fat. The memory of the Revolution is as sacred, both to those who took part in it and to those who were born after it, as the image of a dead mother. It is easier for us to grant that everything that happened after the Revolution was its betrayal than to insult its memory by reproaches and suspicions. Unlike the party, the state, the Ministry of State Security, collectivization, Stalin, etc., the Revolution needs no justification by the Communist paradise that awaits us. It is self-justified and justified emotionally, like love or inspiration. And even though the Revolution was carried out in the name of Communism, its name does not sound less sweet to us for that. Maybe even sweeter. . . .

We live between past and future, between the Revolution and Communism. And if Communism, promising us golden mountains and representing the inevitable logical outcome of all human history, imperiously pulls us forward, the past too pushes us in the back. For it is we who accomplished the

Revolution. How then can we blame it or blaspheme against it? We are caught in this psychological squeeze. In itself, we may like it or not. But both before us and behind us stand temples so splendid that we could not bear to attack them. And when we remember that, should our enemies win, they would make us return to the prerevolutionary mode of life (or incorporate us in Western democracy, it hardly matters), then, I am sure, we will start once more from where we began. We will start from the Revolution.

While working on this article I have caught myself more than once dropping into irony—that unworthy device! I caught myself trying to avoid the phrase “Soviet power.” I preferred to use its synonyms, like “our state,” “the socialist system” and so on. No doubt this was due to the fact that when I was young, the words of one of our Civil War songs went straight to my soul:

*All of us into the fight
For Soviet power
And as one man we'll die
Fighting for it.*

It is enough for me to pronounce the words “Soviet power” to make me see the Revolution with my mind’s eye. I see the taking of the Winter Pal-

ace, the rattling motion of machine-gun belts, the bread cards for one-eighth of a pound, the defense of Red Petersburg. In a strictly logical judgment, "Soviet power" and "the socialist state" are the same thing. But if I have a few things against the socialist state—trifles, all of them—I have absolutely nothing against the Soviet power. Ridiculous? Maybe. But this is also romanticism.

Yes, we are all romantic with regard to our past. But the further away we are from our past and the closer we come to Communism, the weaker becomes the romantic halo that art has bestowed upon the Revolution. This is understandable: romanticism is, indeed, part of our nature; but it is not all of it. Sometimes it even violates our nature.

Romanticism is too anarchic and too emotional, while we are becoming ever more disciplined rationalists. It is at the mercy of turbulent feelings and diffuse moods, forgetting logic, common sense, and law. "The folly of the brave is the wisdom of life," the young Gorki assured us. This advice was timely when the Revolution was made: fools were necessary then. But can we call the Five-Year Plan "folly of the brave"? Or the guidance of the Party? Or, indeed, Communism itself, inevitably prepared by the logical course of history? Here every point is thought through, rationally foreseen, and sub-

divided into corresponding paragraphs. What folly is this? Hm, Comrade Gorki, you obviously haven't read your Marx!

Romanticism is powerless to express our clarity and precision. Composed gestures and even moderately solemn speech are foreign to it. It waves its arms, gets excited, and dreams distant dreams of the time when Communism is all but built and will be seen any moment.

In affirming an ideal, romanticism is not binding enough. It takes the wish for the reality. This is not bad in itself, but it smells of subjectivism and lack of self-restraint. The wish is the reality, because it must be. Our life is beautiful not only because we want it to be beautiful but also because it must be so: it has no choice.

All these arguments, mostly voiceless and unconscious, gradually dried up the hot current of romanticism. The river of art was covered with the ice of classicism. As art become more precise, rational, and teleological, it squeezed out romanticism.

The cold breath and ponderous heaviness of classicism were felt by us long ago, but few men dared to be outspoken on this subject. "The spirit of classicism blows upon us from all directions. All breathe it; but they either cannot distinguish it or don't know its name or simply are afraid to speak

about it.” (A. Efros, *The Messenger on the Doorstep*, 1922.)

The most daring of all was N. Punin, a fine art critic. At that time he was connected with futurism; he is completely forgotten now. As early as 1918 he noted “the marked classicism of Mayakovski’s verses.” He declared that in his *Mystery Bouffe*—his first major postrevolutionary work—Mayakovski “ceased to be a romanticist and became a classicist.” He forecast that “much as he would like to, Mayakovski will never again rebel as impetuously as he did in the past.”

Although his forecast proved remarkably correct—and not only as regards Mayakovski—the term “classicism” did not take hold in a Soviet literature that kept becoming more clearly classicist. It was, perhaps, too embarrassingly frank. Also, it recalled certain undesirable associations that seemed to lower our dignity. We preferred to call ourselves modestly “socialist realists” and hide our name under this pseudonym. Yet the great majority of our works, both good and bad, have the stamp of classicism, whether clear or obscure. It is apparent in the positive hero and in the strictly hierarchical distribution of the other roles, in plot and in language.

Beginning with the 1930s, the passion for solemnity finally imposes itself, and a pompous simplic-

ity of style, the hallmark of classicism, becomes fashionable. We call our state "the Power"; the mujik, "cultivator of the bread"; the soldier, "the warrior"; the sword, "saber." We capitalize a great number of words. Allegorical figures and personified abstractions invade our literature, and we speak with slow solemnity and grandiose gestures.

*Yes, we believe, we must believe
That truth exists—this is our stand;
And that the good is not defenseless
And conquers evil in the end.*

A. TVARDOVSKI

*The time has come! In vain with cruel fate
The Fascist Lord has Moscow threatened long.
But to victorious Moscow fell Berlin.*

M. ISAKOVSKI

The first heroes of Soviet literature stormed the fortresses of capitalism with torn bast shoes on their feet and sexual oaths on their lips. They were coarse and unrestrained: "Vanka! Put some paper rubles in your shoes! You can't scoot barefoot to the meeting!" (Mayakovski.) But now they have acquired good looks, elegant clothes, and refined manners. If they are sometimes lacking in taste, this is the national and social trait of our classicism, born as it was of Russian democracy. But

neither the heroes nor their authors ever suspect that they are in bad taste. They try with all their power to be beautiful, polite, and cultured. They present every detail “correctly” and “in the best of taste.”

“Under the white ceiling sparkled an elegant chandelier, fringed with transparent glass pendants, as with icicles . . . Tall silvery columns supported a blindingly white cupola, decorated with necklaces of electric bulbs.”

What is this? A Tsar’s palace? No, an ordinary club in a provincial town.

“On the stage, by the polished wing of the grand piano, stood Rakitin, dressed in sober gray. Like a blue river, a necktie flowed down his breast.”

A singer? A fashionable tenor? No, a simple Party worker.

And now let’s look at the people. They do not curse, they do not fight, they do not drink themselves senseless the way the Russian people used to do. And if they take a drink at a wedding table covered with exquisite foods, it is only as an accompaniment of toasts:

Terentii raised his eyes, looked around at the guests, rumblingly coughed into his fist, caressed the silver flow of his beard with a trembling hand, and said:

“First of all, let us congratulate the young couple. May they be happy and embellish the earth by their presence.”

The guests followed him with their toasts, among the melodious clinking of the wine glasses:

“May they honor their parents!”

“May they have healthy children!”

“And not injure the glory of the kolkhoz!”

The quotation is taken from the novel *From the Whole Heart* by E. Maltsev, published in 1949. It is like dozens and hundreds of other novels. It is a sample of classicist prose of average literary quality. The style has long been a commonplace of our literature, and passes from author to author without undergoing any substantial change.

Every style has its distinctive quality. But classicism is more prone than other styles to impose its mark, to observe pedantically definite canons and norms, to be conservative as to form. It is among the most stable of styles. It brings and accepts new elements mostly in its formative period, but later tries to follow established models faithfully and is hostile to researches in form, experimentalism, and originality. This is why it rejected the talents of many poets who wanted to embrace it but retain their personalities: V. Khlebnikov, O. Mandelshtam,

and N. Zabolotski among them.¹ Even Mayakovski, whom Stalin called “the most talented poet of our Soviet era,” remained a tragically solitary figure within it.

Mayakovski was too much of a revolutionary to become a traditionalist. To this day he is accepted politically rather than poetically. For all the paeans written to his glory, his rhythms, images, and language seem overbold to most of our poets. Those who want to follow in his footsteps copy his mannerisms but are unable to grasp what is essential in him—his boldness, inventiveness, and passion. They imitate his verses but don’t follow his example. Whether it is because Mayakovski was the first budding classicist who, having no predecessors, broke new ground, whether it is because he caught the spirit of the times—both in Russia and in the world at large—and, being a romantic, wrote like an expressionist while combining his classicism with the constructivist style, or whether it is simply because he was a genius, his poetry is alive with the spirit of innovation, and this spirit left us when he died.

Geniuses, of course, are not born every day, and

¹ Khlebnikov, who died in 1922, was one of the founders of Russian futurism. Mandelshtam, who rebelled against the symbolists, died after deportation. Zabolotski is among the most talented Soviet poets today.—Tr.

the state of art rarely seems satisfactory to contemporaries. Still I must sadly confess, with others of my contemporaries, that our literature has become progressively impoverished in the last two or three decades. Fedin, Fadeev, Ehrenburg, Ivanov, and many others have written worse and worse with the years. The twenties, of which Mayakovski wrote: "Only poets, alas, we have none," now seem to be the years in which poetry flourished. Since the writers accepted socialist realism en masse—the beginning of the thirties—literature has gone down and down. Some few glimmers of light during the Patriotic War did not save it.

In this contradiction between the victory of socialist realism and the low quality of literary production, many are inclined to blame socialist realism. They say that great art cannot be written under it and even that it is the death of all art. But Mayakovski provides a refutation, to start with. For all the originality of his talents he remained an orthodox Soviet writer, perhaps the most orthodox Soviet writer—and this did not stop him from writing good poetry. He was an exception to general rules, but mostly because he observed these rules more strictly than others. In his poetic practice he carried out the demands of socialist realism more radically and more consistently. For the contradiction between socialist realism and literary quality,

the blame must fall on literature, i.e., on the writers who accepted the rules of socialist realism but did not have sufficient artistic consistency to embody them in deathless images. Mayakovski had that consistency.

Art is not afraid of dictatorship, severity, repressions, or even conservatism and clichés. When necessary, art can be narrowly religious, dumbly governmental, devoid of individuality—and yet good. We go into aesthetic raptures over the stereotypes of Egyptian art, Russian icons and folklore. Art is elastic enough to fit into any bed of Procrustes that history presents to it. But there is one thing it cannot stand: eclecticism.

Our misfortune is that we are convinced socialist realists but not convinced enough. Submitting to its cruel rules, we are yet afraid to follow to the end the road that we ourselves have chosen. No doubt, if we were less educated, it would be easier for us to attain the integrity that is indispensable to a writer. But we went to school, read all kinds of books, and learned only too well that there were great writers before us—Balzac, Maupassant, Tolstoi, and, yes, what's his name?—Chekhov. This is what has undone us. We wanted to become famous and to write like Chekhov. This unnatural liaison produced monsters.

It is impossible, without falling into parody, to

produce a positive hero in the style of full socialist realism and yet make him into a psychological portrait. In this way, we will get neither psychology nor hero. Mayakovski knew this and, hating psychological analysis and details, wrote in proportions that were larger than life. He wrote coarsely, poster-style, Homerically. He avoided like a plague descriptions of common life and rural nature. He broke with "the great traditions of great Russian literature" and, though he loved Pushkin and Chekhov, he did not try to imitate them. All this helped Mayakovski to lift himself to the level of his epoch and to express its spirit fully and clearly, without alien admixtures.

But the writing of so many other writers is in a critical state right now precisely because, in spite of the classicist nature of our art, they still consider it realism. They do it because they base their judgments on the literary criticism of the nineteenth century, which is furthest away from us and most foreign to us. Instead of following the road of conventional forms, pure fantasy, and imagination which the great religious cultures always took, they try to compromise. They lie, they maneuver, and they try to combine the uncombinable: the positive hero (who logically tends toward the pattern, the allegory) and the psychological analysis of character; elevated style and declamation with and pro-

saic descriptions of ordinary life; a high ideal with truthful representation of life.

The result is a loathsome literary salad. The characters torment themselves though not quite as Dostoevski's do, are mournful but not quite like Chekhov's, found their happy families which are not quite like Tolstoi's, and, suddenly becoming aware of the time they are living in, scream at the reader the copybook slogans which they read in Soviet newspapers, like "Long live world peace!" or "Down with the warmongers!" This is neither classicism nor realism. It is a half-classicist half-art, which is none too socialist and not at all realist.

It seems that the very term "socialist realism" contains an insoluble contradiction. A socialist, i.e., a purposeful, a religious, art cannot be produced with the literary method of the nineteenth century called "realism." And a really faithful representation of life cannot be achieved in a language based on teleological concepts; If socialist realism really wants to rise to the level of the great world cultures and produce its *Communiad*, there is only one way to do it. It must give up the "realism," renounce the sorry and fruitless attempts to write a socialist *Anna Karenina* or a socialist *Cherry Orchard*. When it abandons its effort to achieve verisimilitude, it will be able to express the grand and implausible sense of our era.

Unfortunately, this is not likely to happen.' The events of the last few years have dragged our art on a road of half-measures and half-truths. The death of Stalin inflicted an irreparable loss upon our religiously aesthetic system; it cannot be resuscitated through the now revived cult of Lenin. Lenin is too much like an ordinary man and his image is too realistic: small, bald, dressed in civilian clothes. Stalin seemed to be specially made for the hyperbole that awaited him: mysterious, omniscient, all-powerful, he was the living monument of our era and needed only one quality to become God—immortality.

Ah, if only we had been intelligent enough to surround his death with miracles! We could have announced on the radio that he did not die but had risen to Heaven, from which he continued to watch us, in silence, no words emerging from beneath the mystic mustache. His relics would have cured men struck by paralysis or possessed by demons. And children, before going to bed, would have kneeled by the window and addressed their prayers to the cold and shining stars of the Celestial Kremlin.

But we did not listen to the voice of our conscience. Instead of intoning devout prayers, we set about dethroning the “cult of personality” that we ourselves had created. We thus blew up the foun-

dations of that classicist colossus which, if we had waited but a little, would have joined the Pyramid of Cheops and the Apollo Belvedere in the treasury of world art.

The strength of a theological system resides in its constancy, harmony, and order. Once we admit that God carelessly sinned with Eve and, becoming jealous of Adam, sent him off to labor at land reclamation, the whole concept of the Creation falls apart, and it is impossible to restore the faith.

After the death of Stalin we entered upon a period of destruction and re-evaluation. It is a slow and inconsistent process, it lacks perspective, and the inertia of both past and future lie heavy on it. Today's children will scarcely be able to produce a new God, capable of inspiring humanity into the next historical cycle. Maybe He will have to be supplemented by other stakes of the Inquisition, by further "personality cults," and by new terrestrial labors, so that after many centuries a new Purpose will rise above the world. But today no one yet knows its name.

And meanwhile our art is marking time between an insufficient realism and an insufficient classicism. Since the loss it suffered, it is no longer able to fly toward the ideal and to sing the praises of our life in a sincere and elevated style, presenting what should be as what is. In our works of glorifi-

cation resound ever more openly the notes of baseness and hypocrisy. The most successful writers are those who can present our achievements as truthfully as possible and our failings as tactfully, delicately, and untruthfully as possible. Any works that lean too far toward an “excessive verisimilitude”—meaning realism—fail. This is what happened with Dudintsev’s novel *Not by Bread Alone*, which stirred up a lot of noise and was publicly anathematized for blackening our bright socialist reality.

But is the dream of the old, good, and honest “realism” the only heresy to which Russian literature is susceptible? Is it possible that all the lessons that we received were taught in vain and that, in the best of cases, all we wish is to return to the naturalist school and the critical tendency? Let us hope that this is not so and that our need for truth will not interfere with the work of thought and imagination.

Right now I put my hope in a phantasmagoric art, with hypotheses instead of a Purpose, an art in which the grotesque will replace realistic descriptions of ordinary life. Such an art would correspond best to the spirit of our time. May the fantastic imagery of Hoffmann and Dostoevski, of Goya, Chagall, and Mayakovski (the most socialist realist of all), and of many other realists and nonrealists

teach us how to be truthful with the aid of the absurd and the fantastic.

Having lost our faith, we have not lost our enthusiasm about the metamorphoses of God that take place before our very eyes, the miraculous transformations of His entrails and His cerebral convolutions. We don't know where to go; but, realizing that there is nothing to be done about it, we start to think, to set riddles, to make assumptions. May we thus invent something marvelous? Perhaps; but it will no longer be socialist realism.

