

The Arts in Russia Under Stalin

Isaiah Berlin

In the autumn of 1945 Isaiah Berlin, then an official of the British Foreign Office, visited Russia for the first time since he had left it in 1920, aged eleven. It was during this visit that his famous meetings with Anna Akhmatova and Boris Pasternak took place.¹ At the end of his period of duty Berlin wrote a remarkable long memorandum, to which he gave the characteristically unassuming title "A Note on Literature and the Arts in the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic in the Closing Months of 1945."²

He was modest, too, about the content of his report. He enclosed a copy of it with a letter dated March 23, 1946, to Averell Harriman, US ambassador to the USSR. In the letter, written from the British embassy in Washington, he told Harriman: "I enclose a long and badly written report on Russian literature etc. which I am instructed to forward to you by Frank Roberts [British Minister in Moscow]. I doubt whether there is anything in it that is either new or arresting—here only Jock Balfour [British Minister in Washington] has read it, in the Foreign Office I doubt if anyone will. It is confidential only because of the well-known consequences to the possible sources of the information contained in it, should its existence ever become known to 'them.'"

Berlin's self-effacing account of his dispatch is of course quite misleading. As Michael Ignatieff writes in his biography of Berlin: "Its modest title belied its ambitions: it was nothing less than a history of Russian culture in the first half of the twentieth century, a chronicle of Akhmatova's fateful generation. It was probably the first Western account of Stalin's war against Russian

¹See Isaiah Berlin, "Conversations with Akhmatova and Pasternak," *The New York Review*, November 20, 1980, pp. 23–35, reprinted in an anthology of Berlin's work, *The Proper Study of Mankind* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).

²The original text is to be found in the British Public Record Office file FO 371/56725. The version published here incorporates two sets of revisions made by the author—one probably not many years later (including a few references to post-1945 developments), apparently in preparation for a talk; the other in 1992, in response to a request that the memorandum should be published in Russian. A partial Russian translation appeared as "Literatura i iskusstvo v RSFSR" ("Literature and Art in the RSFSR"), *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, December 16, 1997, in the supplement *Kulisa NG*, No. 2, December 1997, pp. 4–5. Until now no version of this document has been published in English. The present title and the notes (which incorporate information supplied by Helen Rappaport, to whom I am duly grateful) are mine. An ellipsis on page 60 shows where one passage—on the performing arts—has been cut by the editors of *The New York Review* for reasons of space. The full text is available at www.nybooks.com.

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The Kremlin, Moscow, 1947

culture. On every page there are traces of what she—Chukovsky and Pasternak as well—told him about their experiences in the years of persecution."³

—Henry Hardy

The Soviet literary scene is a peculiar one, and in order to understand it few analogies from the West are of use. For a variety of causes Russia has in historical times led a life to some degree isolated from the rest of the world, and never formed a genuine part of the Western tradition; indeed her literature has at all times provided evidence of a peculiarly ambivalent attitude to the uneasy relationship between herself and the West, taking the form now of a violent and unsatisfied longing to enter and become part of the mainstream of European life, now of a resentful ("Scythian") contempt for Western values, not by any means confined to professing Slavophiles; but most often of an unresolved, self-conscious combination of these mutually opposed currents of feeling. This mingled emotion of love and of hate permeates the writing of virtually every well-known Russian author, sometimes rising to great vehemence in the protest against foreign influence which, in one form or another, colors the masterpieces of Griboedov, Pushkin, Gogol, Nekrasov, Dostoevsky, Herzen, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Blok.

The October Revolution insulated Russia even more completely, and her development became perforce still more self-regarding, self-conscious, and incommensurable with that of its neighbors. It is not my purpose to trace the situation historically, but the present [autumn 1945] is particularly unintelligible without at least a glance at previous events, and it would perhaps be

³Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (Metropolitan Books, 1998), p. 161.

convenient, and not too misleading, to divide its recent growth into three main stages—(a) 1900–1928; (b) 1928–1937; (c) 1937 to the present—artificial and oversimple though this can easily be shown to be.

First Period: 1900–1928

The first quarter of the present century was a time of storm and stress during which Russian literature, particularly poetry (as well as the theater and the ballet), principally (although one is not allowed to say so today) under French and, to some degree, German influence, attained its greatest height since its classical age of Pushkin, Lermontov, and Gogol. Upon this the October Revolution made a violent impact, but it did not dam the swelling tide. Absorbed and inexhaustible preoccupation with social and moral questions is perhaps the most arresting single characteristic of Russian art and thought as a whole; and this largely shaped the great Revolution, and after its triumph led to a long, fierce battle between, on one side, those primarily artistic rebels who looked to the Revolution to realize their own most violent "anti-bourgeois" attitudes (and attitudinizing) and, on the other, those primarily political men of action who wished to bend all artistic and intellectual activity directly to the social and economic ends of the Revolution.

The rigid censorship which shut out all but carefully selected authors and ideas, and the prohibition or discouragement of many nonpolitical forms of art (particularly trivial genres such as popular love, mystery, and detective stories, as well as all varieties of novellettes and general trash), automatically focused the attention of the reading public on new and experimental work, filled, as often before in Russian literary history, with strongly felt and

often quaint and fanciful social notions. Perhaps because conflicts in the more obviously dangerous waters of politics and economics might easily be thought too alarming, literary and artistic wars became (as they did in German countries a century earlier under Metternich's police) the only genuine battlefield of ideas; even now the literary periodicals, tame as they necessarily are, for this very reason make livelier reading than the monotonously conformist daily, and purely political, press.

The main engagement of the early and middle 1920s was fought between the free and somewhat anarchist literary experimenters and the Bolshevik zealots, with unsuccessful attempts at a truce by such figures as Lunacharsky and Bubnov.⁴ This culminated, by 1927–1928, first in the victory, and then, when it seemed to the authorities too revolutionary and even Trotskyist, in the collapse and purge (during the 1930s), of the notorious RAPP (the Revolutionary Association of Proletarian Writers), led by the most uncompromising fanatic of a strictly collectivist proletarian culture, the critic Averbakh. There followed, during the period of "pacification" and stabilization organized by Stalin and his practical-minded collaborators, a new orthodoxy, directed principally against the emergence of any ideas likely to disturb and so divert attention from the economic tasks ahead. This led to a universal dead level, to which the only surviving classical author of the great days, Maxim Gorky, finally and, according to some of his friends, with reluctant despair, gave his blessing.

Second Period: 1928–1937

The new orthodoxy, which became finally established after Trotsky's fall in 1928, put a firm end to the period of incubation during which the best Soviet poets, novelists, and dramatists, and, indeed, composers and film producers too, produced their most original and memorable works. It marked the end of the turbulent middle and late 1920s, when Western visitors were astonished and sometimes outraged by Vakhtangov's stage⁵; when Eisenstein, not yet a film producer, directed his amusing futuristic experiments on stages discovered in the disused palaces of Moscow merchants, and the great producer Meyerhold, whose artistic life is a kind of microcosm of the

⁴The first two holders of the post of People's Commissar for Education. Anatoly Vasilevich Lunacharsky (1875–1933), dramatist and literary critic, notable for educational reforms under Lenin's New Economic Policy, was commissar from 1917 until 1929, when Stalin removed him from office. Andrey Sergeevich Bubnov (1883–1938), a left-wing Bolshevik (Trotskyist), later changed sides to support Stalin, and succeeded to the post, which he held until 1937.

⁵Evgeny Bagrationovich Vakhtangov (1883–1923), actor, director, and drama teacher, pupil of Stanislavsky, was famous for his innovative work in the Moscow Arts Theater in the early 1920s.

GALLERIES *and* MUSEUMS

a CURRENT LISTING

ACA Galleries 529 West 20th Street, 5th Floor, NYC, 644-8300. <www.acagalleries.com>. Tuesday through Saturday, 10–5:30. *68 Years/68 Masters: Inaugural Exhibition*. October. *Benny Andrews: Human Spirit Series*. November. *Faith Ringgold: Coming to Jones Road and Other Stories*. December.

The Atlantic Gallery 40 Wooster Street, 4th Floor, NYC, 219-3183 or 861-8781. Tuesday through Saturday, 12–6. *Richard Lincoln: Paintings* and *Evelyn Lincoln: Paintings and Monotypes*. October 17 through November 4. Reception: Saturday, October 21, 3–6 pm.

Aperture Foundation 505-5555. Exhibition at the United Nations, Visitor's Entrance, 1st Avenue and 46th Street. Daily, 9–5. Photographer Sebastião Salgado's newest project, *The Children*, with a selection of projected images from his *Migrations*, will be shown at the United Nations General Assembly Visitor's Lobby. The show, organized by the Aperture Foundation and sponsored by Petrobras, showcases 90 children's portraits from around the world, as well as mural-sized images and a DVD presentation. Free and open to the public. Through October 30.

Center for Creative Photography The University of Arizona, 1030 North Olive Road, Tucson, AZ, (520) 621-7968. Monday through Friday, 9–5, weekends, 12–5. *Louise Dahl-Wolfe: The American Image* celebrates one of the great fashion and portrait photographers of her era. Her elegant, skillfully composed photographs helped define a new American style in the post-war era and made the spirited, independent American woman and icon. With prints and unique objects from the CCP's archives and The Museum at FIT's collection. *Couples: Photographs by Mariana Cook*. Cook's intimate yet formal portraits with couples' own narratives about their relationships. Includes portraits of Elaine and Willem de Kooning, Alan Greenspan and Andrea Mitchell, and Maya Lin and Daniel Wolf. Both through November 26.

Columbia University Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery Jermerhorn Hall, 116th Street and Broadway, 8th Floor, 854-7288. Tuesday through Saturday, 1–5. *Architect of Dreams: The Theatrical Barrage of Joseph Urban*. The first major exhibition to focus on architect Joseph Urban's designs for theater and opera, particularly those for the Metropolitan Opera and the Ziegfeld Follies created between 1915 and 1931. Arnold Aronson, curator. October 10 through December, 2000.

Dahesh Museum 601 Fifth Avenue, NYC, 759-0606. Tuesday through Saturday, 11–6, <www.daheshmuseum.org>. *A Distant Muse: Orientalist Works from the Dahesh Museum of Art*. Of the many ethnographic movements associated with the history of art, Orientalism is perhaps the most famous and controversial. It reached its height in the 18th and 19th centuries and is linked to Europe's interest in the declining world of the Ottoman Empire which ruled the area we now call the Middle East. This fall the Dahesh Museum of Art enlivens the discussion with a nuanced review of the major Orientalist works in its extensive collection. Curator Stephen Edidin explores the art produced by Europe's Orientalist painters and the role that art played in shaping and reflecting the complex relationship between the Occident and the Orient. Over 50 works—paintings, sculpture, prints, drawings, photographs, books, and decorative arts—by Jean-Léon Gérôme, Charles-Théodore Frère, Ernst Koerner, Edwin Long, Frederick Arthur Bridgman, George Clairin, and Gustav Bauernfeind, among others. Through December 30.

Forum Gallery 745 Fifth Avenue at 57th Street, NYC, 355-4545. Tuesday through Saturday, 10–5:30. *Frederick Brosen: Points of View*. Beautiful series of cityscapes depicting New York, Paris, Venice, and London. With precise and masterful use of watercolor, Brosen pays tribute to the spectacular architecture of each city, providing careful details of light and color and conveying not only the likeness, but also the respective character of each place. Works exhibited include: *Broome and Bowery, Watts Street, Campo Santo Stefano, and New Row, London*. Through November 4.

Galerie St. Etienne 24 West 57th Street, NYC, 245-6734, <stetienne@mindspring.com>, <www.artnet.com/etienne.html>. Tuesday through Saturday, 11–5. *The Expressionist City*. At the beginning of the 20th century, artists throughout Europe were reacting to a rapidly urbanizing landscape. In Germany and Austria in particular, the urban scene was a locus of both desire and dread, exciting and potentially threatening at the same time. The Galerie St. Etienne's exploration of this topic includes works by Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, George Grosz, Lea Grundig, Erich Heckel, E.L. Kirchner, Käthe Kollwitz, Jeanne Mammen, Egon Schiele, and others. A detailed checklist is available on request. Through November 4.

Janos Gat Gallery 1100 Madison Avenue at 82nd Street, NYC, 327-441. Tuesday through Saturday, 11–6. *Directions*. The Janos Gat gallery moved to its present location in 1995. Summing up five years in its current location, this exhibition—the last in a series of four focusing on directions explored by the gallery since its inception—shows a selection of powerful canvases by the action painter Julian Beck, the Concrete Expressionist Knox Martin, and the NO! artist Herbert Brown, historical rebels of American culture. In the works of Istvan Farkas, Lajos Gulacsy, Gyorgy Roman, and Ilka Gedo, the gallery's interest in Hungarian modernism is represented through some of its best-known examples. "Janos Gat Gallery is filling a knowledge gap, in Central European painters underexposed in America and American artists little known in their own country (the latter forming a missing link between rebellious expression in the mid-20th century and the posed insubordination of much art in America today)." —Jonathan Goodman. October 10 through November 17.

Marian Goodman Gallery 24 West 57th Street, 4th floor, NYC, 977-7160, <Goodman@mariangoodman.com>. Monday through Saturday, 10–6. *Rineke Dijkstra: The Buzzclub, Liverpool, UK/Mysteryworld, Zaandam, NL*. Part one, September 12 through 30. *Rineke Dijkstra: Tiergarten, Berlin*. Part two, October 3–28. *Giuseppe Penone: New York*. Through October 28.

The Grolier Club 47 East 60th Street, NYC, 838-6690. Monday through Saturday, 10–5. On the occasion of Fritz Kredel's centennial, the Grolier Club will mount a retrospective exhibition of the eminent illustrator's work. *Fritz Kredel Centennial Exhibition* will showcase the prolific and versatile artist of the book, presenting his rich legacy of pen-and-ink drawings, watercolors, and woodcuts that were produced on two continents and spanned a period of more than 50 years. Through November 18, except October 9, when the Club is closed. Free to the public.

Japan Society Gallery 333 East 47th Street, NYC, 832-1155. Tuesday through Friday, 11–6, Saturday and Sunday, 11–5. Yes: *Yoko Ono*. The first American retrospective of the work of pioneering avant-garde artist Yoko Ono. In her prolific 40-year career, Ono has embraced a wide range of media, defying traditional boundaries and creating new forms of artistic expression. The exhibition features approximately 150 works from 1960 to the present, with a focus on her early period, and includes objects and installations; language works, such as instruction pieces and scores; film and video; music; and performance art. October 18, 2000, through January 14, 2001. After its premiere in New York, Yes travels to several venues in the United States, including the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (March 10–June 17, 2001); The Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston (July 13–September 16, 2001); the MIT-List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge (October 18, 2001–January 6, 2002); the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (February 22–May 20, 2002); the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (June 22–September 8, 2002); Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami (Fall 2002); and elsewhere in North America and Asia.

Kennedy Galleries 730 Fifth Avenue, NYC, 541-9600, <www.kgny.com>. Tuesday through Saturday, 9:30–5:30. *Intimate Sojourns: Oil Sketches by Anna Richards Brewster (1870–1952)*. Anna Richards Brewster, daughter of William Trost Richards, traveled widely, and many of the works in the exhibition were inspired by her trips to England, Scotland, Ireland, Italy, France, Holland, Norway, Sicily, and North Africa. She settled in the United States near New York City and often visited Newport and Lake Placid, where she spent many childhood summers. *Selected American Master Paintings, Drawings, and Prints*. An exhibition of American paintings, drawings, watercolors, and prints, including works by James Peale, John F. Peto, John F. Kensett, John Sargent, Marsden Hartley, Charles Burchfield, Edward Hopper, John Marin, Rockwell Kent, Lyonel Feininger, and Harry Bertoia. Late 19th- and early 20th-century drawings and watercolors by American Modernists, Impressionists, and Social Realists, and a selection of New York City subjects.

Knoedler & Company 19 East 70th Street, NYC, 794-0550. Tuesday through Friday, 9:30–5:30. Saturday, 10–5:30. *Richard Pousette-Dart: Painting to Paper Black to White*. Through November 11. Catalogue with essay by Carter Ratcliff. *James Castle: Drawings, Constructions, and Books*. Opens November 15.

Leica Gallery 670 Broadway, Suite 500, NYC, 777-3051, <leica.photo@aol.com>. Tuesday through Friday, 11–6; Saturday, 12–6. In the Main Gallery—*Magic Moments II: Leica Black and White Photography*. Forty images from such master photographers as Cartier-Bresson, Bruce Davidson, Elliot Erwitt, Inge Morath, and Sebastião Salgado. In the Oskar Barnack Room—*Legends: People Who Contribute to Life in Greenwich Village*. Images of such Greenwich Village notables as Peter Yarrow. These photographs have been incorporated into a beautiful 2001 calendar. All proceeds support Village Care of New York. All images in the shows will also be available for sale. Both shows October 5 through November 4. Reception: October 5, 5–8 pm.

Karen McCready Fine Art 425 West 13th Street, 5th Floor, 243-0503, <www.karenmccready.com> Tuesday through Saturday, 11–5. *Suzanne Caporael: Studies for Melt*. Exquisitely nuanced gouache on paper studies for this painter's new series on the subject of ice. October 12 through December 2.

Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum 32-37 Vernon Boulevard, Long Island City, Queens, (718) 721-1932. Wednesday through Friday, 10–5, Saturday and Sunday, 11–6. *The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum* was created by the renowned Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988) at the site of his studio in Long Island City. New this season are two special loans to the museum; a model of a home in Carmel, California; the only residence that Noguchi designed; and a model of a mural proposed for a wall in a medical building. Also new are some rarely seen Greek marbles by Noguchi from 1957, which show the influence of Constantin Brancusi. On permanent exhibition are more than 250 works, including stone, bronze, and wood sculptures, models for public projects and gardens, elements of dance sets designed for choreographer Martha Graham, and Noguchi's well-known Akari light sculptures. Housed in thirteen galleries within a converted factory building, encircling a garden containing major granite and basalt sculptures, the museum presents one of the most dramatic installations of art in New York City. Shuttle bus pick-up at West 53rd Street in Manhattan between 5th and 6th Avenues (outside MOMA bookstore). Departs every hour on the half hour, starting 11:30 am. Returns on the hour, starting at 12 noon. \$5 round trip. Open through October.

Noho Gallery 168 Mercer Street, NYC, 219-2210. Tuesday through Sunday, 11–6. *Lan Nguyen: Homeland Moments*. Lan Nguyen shows paintings of her Vietnamese homeland as reflected in the mirror of absence and exile in England and America. Through November 5.

PaceWildenstein (various locations) <www.pacewildenstein.com>. At 32 East 57th Street, 421-3292. *Donald Judd*. A two-part exhibition of the artist's late work. October 27 through November 25. At 142 Greene Street, 431-9224. *Donald Judd*. A two-part exhibition of the artist's late work. October 13 through November 11. *Robert Rauschenberg: Apogamy Pods*. New Paintings. November 16 through December 30.

Prince Street Gallery 121 Wooster Street, NYC, 226-9402. Tuesday through Sunday, 12–6. *John Schmidtberger: Recent Work*. October 13 through November 1. Reception: October 13, 5–8 pm. *Fred McCarthy: Recent Paintings*. November 3–22. Reception: November 3, 5–8 pm.

Rosenberg + Kaufman Fine Art <www.artnet.com/rosenberg-kaufman.html>. Tuesday through Saturday, 11–6, and by appointment. At 115 Wooster Street, NYC, 431-4838. *Garner Tullis and Vadim Katznelson*. New paintings by renowned master printer Garner Tullis and young Russian painter Vadim Katznelson. Through October 14. *Gurdun Mertes-Frady*. New paintings by this noted German-born artist. October 18 through November 18. At 30 West 57th Street, 6th floor. *Frank Dituri*. New black and white photographs by this noted photographer, who splits his time between New York and Italy. Many images were created to accompany a forthcoming book of poetry by Pasolini; others are new, small, square-format images that are poetic, haunting, and elegant. October 12 through November 18.

Luise Ross Gallery 568 Broadway, NYC, 343-2161, <www.luiserossgallery.com>. Tuesday through Saturday, 10–5:30. *Geneviève Seillé: Calligraphical Landscapes*. Working in ink, crayon, and pastel on rough, brown paper, Seillé combines large built-up panels of mysterious writing and numbers with repetitive architectural imagery and figurative, biomorphic shapes. Obsessively detailed, intensely physical, these mixed-media drawings possess an immediacy and lyricism that energize them. They are the artist's own restructured universe, metaphysical landscapes for survival, in which she invites the viewer to live. Through October 21.

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries 20 East 79th Street, NYC, 879-6606. <www.salander.com>. Monday through Saturday, 9:30–5:30. *Rembrandt and the Venetian Influence*. A major exhibit of Rembrandt's works on canvas illustrating his response to the masters of 16th-century Venetian painting. Consists of works loaned from private and public sources including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Nelson-Atkins Museum, the Philadelphia Museum, and the M.H. De Young Memorial Museum. Among the highlights will be Rembrandt's *Flora*. The Venetian paintings on view include works by Titian, Tintoretto, and Veronese. Catalogue available with essays by David Rosand, Frederik Ilchman, and Kenneth Clark. *John Dubrow: Recent Paintings*. Recently, John Dubrow traveled to Israel and became enamored of its unique light and landscape. He created a series of canvases dedicated to the shifting contrasts he encountered there; exceptional paintings of the infinitely subtle point and counterpoint of the Jerusalem deserts and the thriving abstract complexities of the Tel Aviv cityscape. Catalogue available, with essays by Roger Kimball and Martin Peretz. Both shows through November 18.

Anita Shapolsky Gallery 152 East 65th Street (patio entrance), NYC, 452-1094. Tuesday through Saturday, 11–6. *Younger Artists 2000* is an exhibition that brings together a varied mix of contemporary abstract artists from different parts of the world. While the gallery has traditionally exhibited the works of second-generation masters of the Abstract Expressionist tradition, we recognize the young artists who are forging new and stimulating directions in abstract art, while remaining true to the tradition. This exhibition will illustrate the talent of these artists, who, in their pursuit of continuing the dialogue of Abstract Expressionism, warrant recognition equal to that of their predecessors. The exhibit will feature the work of Diane Bogaerts, Thomas Beckman, Una Dora Copley, Amy Ernst, Margaret Evangeline, Leya Evelyn, Mark Gibian, Morfy Gikas, David Hayes, Carol Hunt, Jenny Lee, Martee Levi, Sam Perry, Tina Spiro, Nancy Steinson, and Alison Weld. Through October 28.

Shepherd & Derom Galleries 58 East 79th Street, NYC, 861-4050. Tuesday through Saturday, 10–6. *The Album of Carl Agricola 1799–1852: Neo-Classical Figures and Early Romantic Landscapes*. A selection from the album of the Austrian painter Carl Agricola, which contained elegant figure drawings in a neo-classical style, next to fully developed landscape drawings of 1810. The innovative composition and decisive rendering of the landscapes represent a moment of high Romanticism, predating many hitherto documented German Romantic landscape drawings. In addition, the Album preserved a number of personal works which Agricola seems to have treasured: his first portrait, drawn at age ten, a self-portrait, a family group, and drawings of women close to him. Several free and self-assured sketches for larger compositions document the range of this artist, who was mainly known as a miniature painter and engraver of reproductive prints. October 10 through November 25. Catalogue available.

Studio Gallery 88 205 West 88th Street, Studio 1D, 579-4654. Friday through Sunday, 1–5, or by appointment. *Barbara Beck: Drawing Constructions and Watercolors*. Beck brings the concept of paper and clay together in her Drawing Constructions, an inventive combination of sculpted porcelain and hand-made papers. October 22 through November 19. Reception: October 22, 1–5 pm. Studio Gallery 88 is a unique neighborhood gallery located in artists' studio space on Manhattan's Upper West Side. The Gallery shows paintings, prints, and drawings, photography, and fine crafts.

Swann Galleries 104 East 25th Street, NYC, 254-4710, <www.swanngalleries.com>. Weekdays, 10–6, Saturday prior to sales, 10–4. October 11: *Important 19th and 20th Century Photographs*. October 12: *The Irish Sale*. October 19: *Science, Medicine and Natural History*, featuring duplicates from the University of Chicago Library and the Adler Planetarium. October 23: *Autographs*. October 26: *Magic*. November 2: *Greece and the Levant and Miscellaneous Travel Literature*. November 9: *Works of Art on Paper*. November 13: *100 Rare and Important Travel Posters*. November 16: *The Virgil C. Lutes Collection of 20th Century Literature*. Please write or call for information, preview hours, quarterly newsletter with full auction schedule, and to purchase catalogues.

The New York Review of Books Gallery & Museum Listings for information, write to lfeeney@nybooks.com.

artistic life of his country, and whose genius is still only secretly acknowledged, conducted his most audacious and memorable theatrical experiments. There occurred, before 1928, a vast ferment in Soviet thought, which during those early years was genuinely animated by the spirit of revolt against, and challenge to, the arts of the West, conceived as the last desperate struggle of capitalism, presently to be overthrown on the artistic as well as every other front by the strong, young, materialist, earthbound, proletarian culture, proud of its brutal simplicity and its crude and violent new vision of the world, which the Soviet Union, agonized but triumphant, was bringing to birth.

The herald and chief inspiring force of this new Jacobinism was the poet Mayakovsky, who, with his disciples, formed the famous LEF⁶ association. While there may have been a great deal that was pretentious, counterfeit, coarse, exhibitionist, childish, and merely silly during this period, there was also much that was brimming with life. It was not, as a rule, didactically Communist so much as anti-liberal, and had in that respect points of resemblance with pre-1914 Italian futurism. This was the period of the best work of such poets as the popular "tribune" Mayakovsky, who, if he was not a great poet, was a radical literary innovator and emancipator of prodigious energy, force, and, above all, influence; the age of Pasternak, Akhmatova (until her silence in 1923), Selvinsky, Aseev, Bagritsky, Mandelstam; of such novelists as Aleksey Tolstoy (who returned from Paris in the 1920s), Prishvin, Kataev, Zoshchenko, Pilnyak, Babel, Ilf and Petrov; of the dramatist Bulgakov; of established literary critics and scholars like Tynyanov, Eichenbaum, Tomashevsky, Shklovsky, Lerner, Chukovsky, Zhirmunsky, Leonid Grossman. The voices of such émigré writers as Bunin, Tsvetaeva, Khodasevich, Nabokov were heard only faintly. The emigration and return of Gorky is another story.

State control was absolute throughout. The only period of freedom during which no censorship existed in modern Russian history was from February to October 1917. In 1934 the Bolshevik regime tightened old methods by imposing several stages of supervision—first by the Writers' Union, then by the appropriate state-appointed commissar, finally by the Central Committee of the Communist Party. A literary "line" was laid down by the Party: at first the notorious Proletkult, which demanded collective work on Soviet themes by squads of proletarian writers; then the worship of Soviet or pre-Soviet heroes. Nevertheless, arresting and original artists were not, until 1937, always brought to heel by the omnipotent state; sometimes, if they were prepared to take sufficient risks, they might manage to convert the authorities to the value of an unorthodox approach (as the dramatist Bulgakov did); sometimes unorthodoxy, provided that it was not positively directed against the Soviet faith, was given some latitude of expression, as a not unwelcome seasoning, at times exceedingly sharp, of the flat daily fare of normal Soviet life (for

⁶Left Front of Art.

example, the early, gay, malicious satires of Tynyanov, Kataev, and, above all, Zoshchenko). This was not, of course, permitted to go far or occur too often, but the possibility of it was always present, and the genius of writers was to a certain extent stimulated by the very degree of ingenuity which they had to exercise in order to express unconventional ideas without breaking the framework of orthodoxy or incurring outright condemnation and punishment.

This continued for some time after Stalin's rise to power and the imposition of the new orthodoxy. Gorky died only in 1935; and as long as he was alive, some distinguished and interesting writers were to a certain degree shielded from excessive regimentation and persecution by his immense personal authority and prestige; he consciously played the role of "the conscience of the Russian people" and continued the tradition of Lunacharsky (and even Trotsky) in protecting promising artists from the dead hand of official bureaucracy. In the field of official Marxism an intolerant and narrow "dialectical materialism" did indeed hold sway, but it was a doctrine concerning which internal disputes were permitted, between, for example, the followers of Bukharin and the followers of the more pedantic Ryazanov or Deborin; between various brands of philosophical materialism; between those "Menshevizers" who saw Lenin as a direct disciple of Plekhanov, and those who stressed their differences.

Witch hunts occurred; heresy, both on the right and the left, was continually being "unmasked" with grisly consequences to the convicted heretics; but the very ferocity of such ideological disputes, the uncertainty as to which side would be condemned to liquidation, communicated a certain grim life to the intellectual atmosphere, with the result that both creative and critical work during this period, while suffering from one-sidedness and exaggeration, was seldom dull, and indicated a state of continuing ferment in all spheres of thought and art. Well might the sympathetic observer of the Soviet scene compare such activity favorably with the slow decline of such of the older generation of émigré Russian writers in France as Vyacheslav Ivanov, Balmont, Merezhkovsky, Zinaida Gippius, Kuprin, and others, though their literary technique was, at times, admitted, even in Moscow, to be often superior to that of a good many of the Soviet pioneers.

Third Period: 1937 to the Present Day

Then came the great debacle which to every Soviet writer and artist is a kind of St. Bartholomew's Eve—a dark night which few of them seem ever completely to forget, and which is scarcely ever today spoken of otherwise than in a nervous whisper. The government, which evidently felt its foundations insecure, or feared a major war in, and possibly with, the West, struck at all supposedly "doubtful" elements, and innumerable innocent and harmless persons besides, with a violence and a thoroughness to which the Spanish Inquisition and the Counter-Reformation alone offer remote parallels.

The great purges and trials of the years 1937 and 1938 altered the literary

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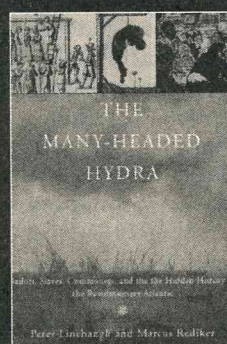
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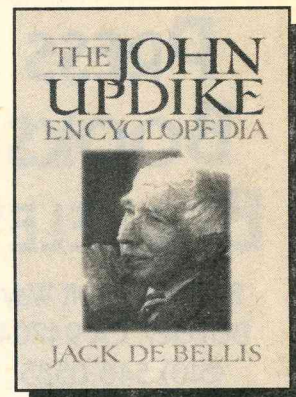
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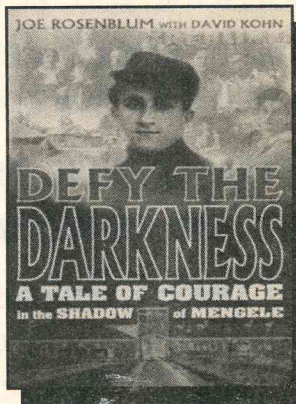
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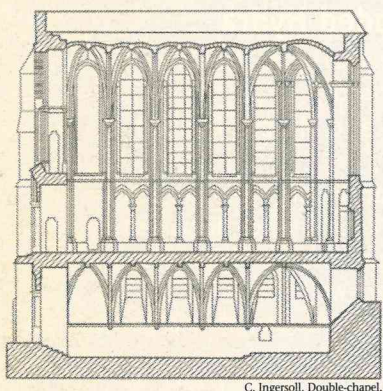
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and artistic scene beyond all recognition. The number of writers and artists exiled or exterminated during this time—particularly during the Ezhov terror⁷—was such that Russian literature and thought emerged in 1939 like an area devastated by war, with some splendid buildings still relatively intact, but standing solitary amid stretches of ruined and deserted country. Men of genius like Meyerhold the producer and Mandelshtam the poet, and of talent like Babel, Pilnyak, Yashvili, Tabidze, the then recently returned London émigré Prince D.S. Mirsky, the critic Averbakh (to take the best-known names alone) were "repressed," that is, killed or done away with in one way or another. What occurred after that no one today seems to know. Not a trace of any of these writers and artists has been sighted by the outside world. There are rumors that some of them are still alive, like Dora Kaplan, who shot and wounded Lenin in 1918, or Meyerhold, who is said to be producing plays in the Kazakhstan capital Alma-Ata; but these seem to be circulated by the Soviet government and are, almost certainly, quite false.⁸ One of the British correspondents, whose sympathies were all too clear, tried to persuade me that Mirsky was alive and writing in Moscow incognito. It was obvious that he did not really believe this. Nor did I.

The poetess Marina Tsvetaeva, who returned from Paris in 1939 and fell into official disfavor, committed suicide, probably early in 1942.⁹ The rising young composer Shostakovich was criticized in 1937 so harshly, from a quarter so high, for "formalism" and "bourgeois decadence," that for two years he was neither performed nor mentioned, and then, having slowly and painfully repented, adopted a new style in closer accord with present-day official Soviet demands. He has on two occasions since then had to be called to order and to repent; so has Prokofiev. A handful of young writers unknown in the West, who are said to have showed promise during this period, have, so one was told, not been heard of since; they are unlikely to have survived, although one cannot always tell. Before this the poets Esenin and Mayakovsky had committed suicide. Their disillusionment with the regime is still officially denied. So it goes on.

The death of Gorky had removed the intellectuals' only powerful protector, and the last link with the earlier tradition of the relative freedom of revolutionary art. The most eminent survivors of this period today sit silent and nervous for fear of committing some fatal sin against the Party line, which anyhow was none too clear during the critical years before the war, nor thereafter. Those to fare worst were the writers and authors in closest contact with Western Europe, that is, France and England, since the turning

⁷The Ezhov Terror, the most frenzied phase of the purges here described, refers to the arbitrary repression orchestrated by Nikolay Ivanovich Ezhov, head of the NKVD (the precursor of the KGB) 1936–1938.

⁸Dora (her given name was Fanya) Kaplan was indeed shot four days after her arrest, on September 4, 1918. Meyerhold was shot on February 2, 1940.

⁹In fact on August 31, 1941.

of Soviet foreign policy away from Litvinov's policy of collective security, and toward the isolationism symbolized by the Russo-German Pact, involved individuals regarded as links with Western countries in the general discredit of pro-Western policy.

Bending before authority exceeded all previously known bounds. Sometimes it came too late to save the heretic marked for destruction; in any case it left behind it painful and humiliating memories from which the survivors of this terror are never likely completely to recover. Ezhov's proscriptions, which sent many tens of thousands of intellectuals to their doom, had clearly, by 1938, gone too far even for internal security. A halt

dox Soviet writers, but evidently had gone through too much to be capable of making their art the vehicle of direct expression of the national emotion. The best war poems of Pasternak and Akhmatova sprang from the most profound feeling, but were too pure artistically to be considered as possessing adequate direct propaganda value, and were consequently mildly frowned upon by the literary mandarins of the Communist Party, who guide the fortunes of the official Writers' Union.

This disapproval, with undertones of doubt about his fundamental loyalty, did finally get under Pasternak's skin to so effective a degree that this most incorruptible of artists did pro-



Detail of Isaiah Berlin's diplomatic pass, issued in Moscow on September 15, 1945

was finally called when Stalin made a speech in which he declared that the process of purification had been overdone. A breathing space followed. The old national tradition reacquired respectability; the classics were once again treated with respect, and some old street names replaced the revolutionary nomenclature. The final formulation of faith, beginning with the constitution of 1936, was completed by the *Short History of the Communist Party* of 1938. The years 1938 to 1940, during which the Communist Party made even greater strides in the strengthening and centralization of its power and authority—tight enough before this—remained, during the slow convalescence from the wounds of 1938, blank so far as the creative and critical arts were concerned.

The Patriotic War

Then war broke out and the picture altered again. Everything was mobilized for war. Such authors of distinction as survived the Great Purge, and managed to preserve their liberty without bowing too low before the state, seemed to react to the great wave of genuine patriotic feeling if anything even more profoundly than the ortho-

duce a handful of pieces, close to direct war propaganda, which had been too obviously wrung out of him, sounded lame and unconvincing, and were criticized as weak and inadequate by the Party reviewers. Such *pièces d'occasion* as the *Pulkov Meridian* by Vera Inber, and her war diary of the Leningrad blockade, and the more gifted work by Olga Bergholz, were better received.

But what did emerge, possibly somewhat to the surprise of both the authorities and the authors, was an uncommon rise in popularity with the soldiers at the fighting fronts of the least political and most purely personal lyrical verse by Pasternak (whose poetic genius no one has yet ventured to deny); of such wonderful poets as Akhmatova among the living, and Blok, Bely, and even Bryusov, Sologub, Tsvetaeva, and Mayakovsky among the (post-revolutionary) dead. Unpublished works by the best of the living poets, circulated privately in manuscript to a few friends, and copied by hand, were passed to one another by soldiers at the front with the same touching zeal and deep feeling as Ehrenburg's eloquent leading articles in the Soviet daily press, or the favorite conformist patriotic novels of

this period. Distinguished but hitherto somewhat suspect and lonely writers, especially Pasternak and Akhmatova, began to receive a flood of letters from the front quoting their published and unpublished works, and begging for autographs and confirmation of the authenticity of texts, some of which existed only in manuscript, and for the expression of their authors' attitudes to this or that problem.

This eventually could not fail to impress itself upon responsible Party leaders, and the official attitude toward such writers grew somewhat softer. It was as if their value as institutions of which the state might one day be proud began to be realized by the bureaucrats of literature, and their status and personal security became improved in consequence. This is not likely to last, however: Akhmatova and Pasternak are not loved by the Party and its literary commissars. To be nonpropagandist and survive you must be inconspicuous: Akhmatova and Pasternak are too obviously popular to escape suspicion.

The Present

The more benevolent, if no less watchful, attitude of the official state censors has enabled the better thought of among the established writers to adjust themselves in what they plainly hope is a series of relatively secure niches; some have avowedly harnessed themselves, with varying degrees of conviction, into the service of the state, and declare that they conform as faithfully as they do, not because they must, but because they are true believers (as Aleksey Tolstoy did with his radical revision of his famous early novel *The Road to Golgotha*, which originally contained an English hero, and his play about Ivan the Terrible, which, in effect, is a justification of the purges). Others apply themselves to nice calculation of how much they can afford to give up to the demands of state propaganda, how much being left to personal integrity; yet others attempt to develop a friendly neutrality toward the state, not impinging, and hoping not to be impinged upon, careful to do nothing to offend, satisfied if they are suffered to live and work without reward or recognition.

The Party line has suffered a good many changes since its inception, and the writers and artists learn of its latest exigencies from the Central Committee of the Communist Party, which is ultimately responsible for its formulation, through various channels. The final directive is today officially produced by a member of the Politburo, Mikhail Suslov, who for this purpose replaced Georgy Aleksandrov. Aleksandrov was removed, so one is told, for writing a book in which Karl Marx was represented only as the greatest of philosophers, instead of someone different from and greater in kind than any philosopher—an insult, I suppose, rather similar to describing Galileo as the greatest of astrologers. Suslov is responsible to the Party for propaganda and publicity; the members of the Writers' Union who adapt this to the needs of their colleagues are the Chairman and in particular the secretary, a direct nominee of the Central Executive Committee of the Party, and often not a writer at all (thus the late Shcherbakov, a purely political

figure, a powerful member of the Politburo at the time of his death in 1945, was at one time secretary of the Writers' Union).

When, as occasionally happens, reviewers of books or plays or other "cultural phenomena" make mistakes, that is, stray from the Party's path in some particular, this is put right not merely by bringing the possible consequences of his errors home to the individual reviewer, but by publishing a kind of counter-review of the original review, pointing out its errors and laying down the authoritative "line" about the original work under review. In some cases stronger action occurs. The last chairman was the old-fashioned but none too enterprising poet Nikolay Tikhonov. He was ousted for permitting so-called pure literature to appear: and the politically totally committed Fadeev succeeded him.

Writers are generally considered as persons who need a good deal of watching, since they deal in the dangerous commodity of ideas, and are therefore fended off from private, individual contact with foreigners with greater care than the less intellectual professionals, such as actors, dancers, and musicians, who are regarded as less susceptible to the power of ideas, and to that extent better insulated against disturbing influences from abroad. This distinction drawn by the security authorities seems fundamentally correct, since it is only by talking with writers and their friends that foreign visitors (for example, the author of this memorandum) have been able to obtain any degree of coherent insight, as opposed to brief and fitful glimpses, into the working of the Soviet system in the spheres of private and artistic life—other artists have largely been conditioned into automatic avoidance of interest in, let alone discussion of, such perilous topics. Known contact with foreigners does not in all cases lead to disgrace or persecution (although it is usually followed by sharp interrogation by the NKVD), but the more timorous among the writers, and particularly those who have not thoroughly secured their position and become mouthpieces of the Party line, avoid discoverable individual meetings with foreigners—even with the Communists and fellow travelers of proven loyalty who arrive on official Soviet-sponsored visits.

Having protected himself adequately against suspicion of any desire to follow after alien gods, the Soviet writer, whether imaginative or critical, must also make certain of the correct literary targets at any given moment. The Soviet government cannot be accused of leaving him in any uncertainty in this matter. Western "values," which, unless avowedly anti-Soviet or considered reactionary, used at one time not to be thought too disreputable and were left alone, largely glossed over in silence, are once again under attack. The classical authors alone seem to be beyond political criticism. The heyday of earlier Marxist criticism, when Shakespeare or Dante—as well as Pushkin and Gogol and, of course, Dostoevsky—were condemned as enemies of popular culture or of the fight for freedom, is today regarded with distaste as a childish aberration. The great Russian writers, including such political reactionaries as

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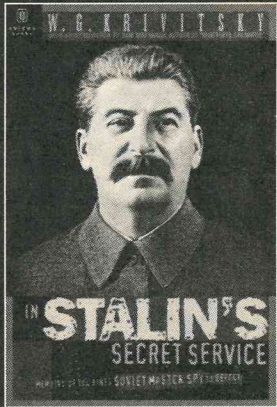
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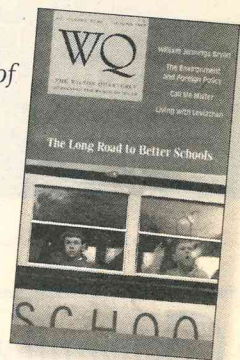
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Dostoevsky and Leskov, were, at any rate by 1945, back on their pedestals and once more objects of admiration and study. This applies to a large degree to foreign classics, even though such authors as Jack London, Upton Sinclair, and J.B. Priestley (as well as such, to me, little-known figures as James Aldridge and Walter Greenwood¹⁰) enter the pantheon on political rather than literary merit.

The main burden of Russian critical writing is at present directed to the rehabilitation of everything Russian, particularly in the region of abstract thought, which is represented as owing as little as possible to the West; and to the glorification of Russian (and occasionally non-Russian) scientific and artistic pioneers active within the historic limits of the Russian empire. This is modified by the fact that lately there have occurred signs of awareness that the Marxist approach was in danger of being abandoned too far in favor of excessive wartime Russian nationalism, which, if it spread, as it showed signs of doing, into regional nationalism, would act as a disruptive force. Consequently historians like Tarlé and others—and particularly Tartar, Bashkir, Kazakh, and other ethnic minority historians—have been officially re-proved for a non-Marxist deviation toward nationalism and regionalism.

The greatest binding force of the Union, apart from historic association, is still Marxist, or rather "Leninist-Stalinist," orthodoxy, but above all the Communist Party—the healer of the wounds inflicted by Russia on her non-Russian subjects in Tsarist days. Hence the paramount need for re-emphasizing the central egalitarian Marxist doctrine, and the fight against any tendency to fall into easy nationalism. The greatest attack of all was launched on everything German; the origins of Marx and Engels could hardly be denied, but Hegel, whom earlier Marxists, including Lenin, naturally enough regarded with the piety due to a direct ancestor, is today, with other German thinkers and historians of the Romantic period, subjected to violent assaults as a Fascist in embryo and pan-German, from whom little if anything is to be learned, and whose influence in Russian thought, which can scarcely be altogether concealed, has been either superfluous or deleterious.

By comparison, French and English thinkers get off more favorably, and the Soviet author, both historian and littérateur, may still continue to permit himself to offer a little cautious homage to the anticlerical and "anti-mystical" empiricists, materialists, and rationalists of the Anglo-French philosophical and scientific tradition.

After every care has been exercised, every step taken to avert official disapproval, the most distinguished among the older authors still find themselves in a peculiar condition of being at once objects of adulation to their readers, and half-admiring, half-suspicious toleration to the authorities; looked up to, but imperfectly understood by, the younger generation of writers; a small

¹⁰Aldridge, an Australian Communist novelist, had published *Signed with their Honour* (1942) and *The Sea Eagle* (1944). The first and best-known novel by the working-class writer Greenwood was *Love on the Dole* (1933).

and decimated but still distinguished Parnassus, oddly insulated, living on memories of Europe, particularly of France and Germany, proud of the defeat of Fascism by the victorious armies of their country, and comforted by the growing admiration and absorbed attention of the young. Thus the poet Boris Pasternak told me that when he reads his poetry in public, and occasionally halts for a word, there are always at least a dozen listeners present who prompt him at once and from memory, and could clearly carry on for as long as may be required.

Indeed there is no doubt that, for whatever reason—whether from innate purity of taste, or from the absence of cheap or trivial writing to corrupt it—there probably exists no country today where poetry, old and new, good and indifferent, is sold in such quantities and read so avidly as it is in the Soviet Union. This naturally

Anna Akhmatova



cannot fail to act as a powerful stimulus to critics and poets alike. In Russia alone does poetry literally pay; a successful poet is endowed by the state, and is relatively better off than, for example, an average Soviet civil servant. Playwrights are often exceedingly prosperous. If a rise in quantity, as Hegel taught, leads to a change in quality, the literary future of the Soviet Union ought to be brighter than that of any other country; and indeed there is perhaps evidence for this proposition better and more solid than a priori reasoning by a German metaphysician, discredited even in the Russia whose thought he affected for so long and so disastrously.

The work of the older writers, with roots in the past, is naturally affected by the political uncertainties by which they are surrounded. Some break a total silence very occasionally to write a late lyric, or a critical article, and otherwise subsist in timid silence on pensions, in houses in town or country with which the state, in cases of real eminence, provides them. Some have taken to a politically inoffensive medium, such as children's or nonsense verse; Chukovsky's children's rhymes, for example, are nonsense verse of genius, and bear comparison with Edward Lear. Prishvin continues to write what seem to me excellent animal stories. Another avenue of escape is the art of translation, into which much splendid Russian talent at present flows, as, indeed, it always has. It is a slightly odd thought that in no country are these innocent and unpolitical arts practiced with greater perfection. Lately there has been a

drive against them too.

The high standard of translation is, of course, due not merely to its attraction as a distinguished vehicle of escape from politically dangerous views, but also to the tradition of highly artistic rendering from foreign tongues, which Russia, a country intellectually long dependent on foreign literature in the past, developed in the nineteenth century. The result is that persons of exceptional sensibility and literary merit have translated the great classical works of the West, and hack translations (which the majority of English versions of Russian literature still are) are virtually unknown in Russia. In part, such concentration on translation is due also to the emphasis at present laid on the life of outlying regions of the Soviet Union, and the consequent political premium put upon translations from such fashionable languages as Ukrainian, Georgian, Armenian, Uzbek, Tadjik, at which some of the most gifted Russian authors have tried their hand with brilliant effect and much resultant interregional good will. Indeed, this will probably turn out to be the most valuable single contribution which Stalin's personal influence will have made to the development of Russian letters.

As for fiction, the commonest path is that taken by such steady, irretrievably second-rate novelists as Fedin, Kataev, Gladkov, Leonov, Sergeev-Tsensky, Fadeev, and such playwrights as Pogodin and (the recently deceased) Trenev, some of whom look back on variegated personal revolutionary pasts.¹¹ All of them today make their bow in the manner prescribed by their political directors, and in general produce work of high mediocrity modeled on late-nineteenth-century archetypes, written with professional craftsmanship, long, competent, politically *bien pensant*, earnest, at times readable, but on the whole undistinguished. The purges of 1937 and 1938 appear to have stamped out that blazing fire of modern Russian art to which the revolution of 1918 had added fuel and which the recent war could scarcely have extinguished so swiftly if political causes had not begun to do so earlier.

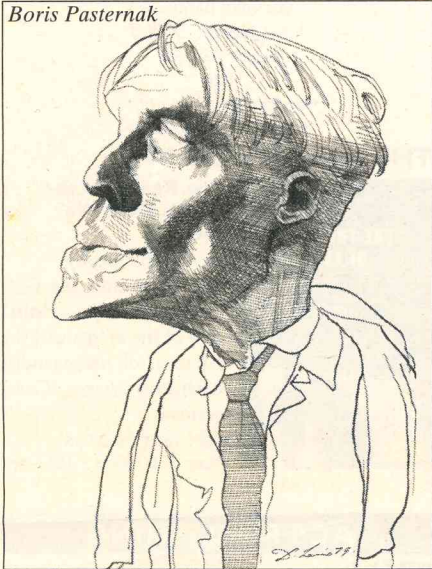
Over the entire scene of Russian literature there broods a curious air of total stillness, with not a breath of wind to ruffle the waters. It may be that this is the calm before the next great tidal wave, but there are few visible signs as yet of anything new or original about to be born in the Soviet Union. There is no satiety with the old and no demand for new experience to stimulate a jaded palate. The Russian public is less blasé than any other in Europe, and the cognoscenti, so far as there are any, are only too well

¹¹These writers, now largely forgotten and unread, were among the most successful and widely read exponents of socialist realism. Their then best-known works include Kataev's *Five-Year Plan novel Time, Forward!* (1932), Gladkov's *Cement* (1925), Leonov's *The Badgers* (1924), Sergeev-Tsensky's *The Ordeal of Sevastopol* (1937-1939), Fadeev's *The Rout* (1925-1926), and Trenev's *Lyubov Yarovaya* (1926). The ruthless *apparatchik* Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Fadeev (1901-1956) was general secretary and chairman of the Soviet Writers' Union 1946-1954.

pleased if there are no worrying political clouds on the horizon, and they are left in peace. The climate is not propitious to intellectual or artistic enterprise; and the authorities, who would eagerly welcome invention and discovery in the technological field, do not seem aware of the indivisibility of the freedom of inquiry, which cannot be kept within prescribed frontiers. Invention seems for the present to have been sacrificed to security; unless and until this changes, Russia is scarcely likely to make a crucial contribution, at any rate in the field of humane arts and studies.

And, it may be asked, the younger writers? No foreign observer of the Russian literary scene can fail to be struck by the gap between the older writers, loyal but melancholy figures of no possible danger to the stability of this, to all appearance, thoroughly stable regime, and the immensely prolific younger writers, who appear to write

Boris Pasternak



faster than thought itself (perhaps because so many of them are free from it), and rehearse the same patterns and formulae so tirelessly and with such apparent sincerity and vigor that it is scarcely thinkable that they can ever have been assailed by any real doubts, either as artists or as human beings.

Perhaps the immediate past explains this. The purges cleared the literary ground, and the war provided the new subject and the mood; there sprang into being a brood of writers, facile, naive, and copious, varying from crude and wooden orthodoxy to considerable technical skill, capable at times of moving, at others of genuinely gay, and often vivid, journalistic reportage. This applies to prose and verse, novels and plays. The most successful and most representative figure of this type is the journalist, playwright, and poet Konstantin Simonov, who has poured out a flood of work of inferior quality but impeccably orthodox sentiment, acclaiming the right type of Soviet hero, brave, puritanical, simple, noble, altruistic, entirely devoted to the service of his country.

Behind Simonov there are other authors of the same genre; authors of novels dealing with exploits in kolkhozes, factories, or at the front; writers of patriotic doggerel or of plays which guy the capitalist world or the old and discredited liberal culture of Russia itself, in contrast with the simple, now wholly standardized, type of tough, hearty, capable, resolute, single-minded young engineers or political commissars ("engineers of human souls"), or army commanders, shy and manly lovers, sparing of

words, doers of mighty deeds, "Stalin's eagles," flanked by passionately patriotic, utterly fearless, morally pure, heroic young women, upon whom the success of all five-year plans ultimately depends.

The older authors do not conceal their opinion of the value of this kind of conscientious but commonplace literary mass production, related to literature much as posters are to serious art. Nor would they be as critical as they are if, side by side with the inevitable mushroom growth of such work, inspired by, and directly ancillary to, the needs of the state, there were also something profounder and more original to be found among the younger writers—among those, let us say, who are under forty. They point out that there is intrinsically no reason why contemporary Soviet life should not generate genuine and serious "socialist realism"—after all, Sholokhov's *Quiet Don*, dealing as it did with Cossacks and peasants during the civil war, was on all sides recognized as a genuine, if sometimes dull, lumbering, and overweighted, work of imagination.

The obvious criticism which these older writers urge—and such "self-criticism" is allowed to appear in print—is that out of shallow facility and the easy orthodoxy of standardized hero worship no genuine work of art can ever be born; that the war heroes themselves have won the right to subtler and less hackneyed analysis; that the experience of the war is a profound national experience which only a more intense, sensitive, and scrupulous art can adequately express, and that the majority of the war novels now published are crude travesties and a hideous insult to the soldiers and civilians whose ordeal they purport to describe; finally (this is never said in print) that the inner conflict which alone makes an artist has been too easily resolved by the oversimple rules of an artificially flattened political schema, which allows no doubts about ultimate purpose, and not much disagreement about means, and which has, perhaps as a result of the purges and their physical and moral consequences, so far failed to create its own artistic canons, standards in the light of which something no less strictly conformist but also no less devout and profound than the religious art of the Middle Ages could evolve in Russia today. Nor do I see much hope of that at the present time. The cry by the poet Selvinsky for socialist Romanticism¹²—if socialist realism, then why not socialist Romanticism?—was ruthlessly suppressed.

Meanwhile the financial rewards of these fashionable younger authors, unaffected as they are by the strictures of the critics, entitle them to be considered the equivalent of best sellers in Western countries; no literal equivalent exists since fiction and poetry, good or bad, is sold and distributed immediately on publication—such is the hunger of the public and the inadequacy of the supply. The subjects of historical novels, since *romans de mœurs* are scarcely safe, tend, apart

¹²More accurately "socialist symbolism," which would have allowed writers to treat a wider range of subject matter—beyond tractors and blast furnaces—without compromising their political loyalty.

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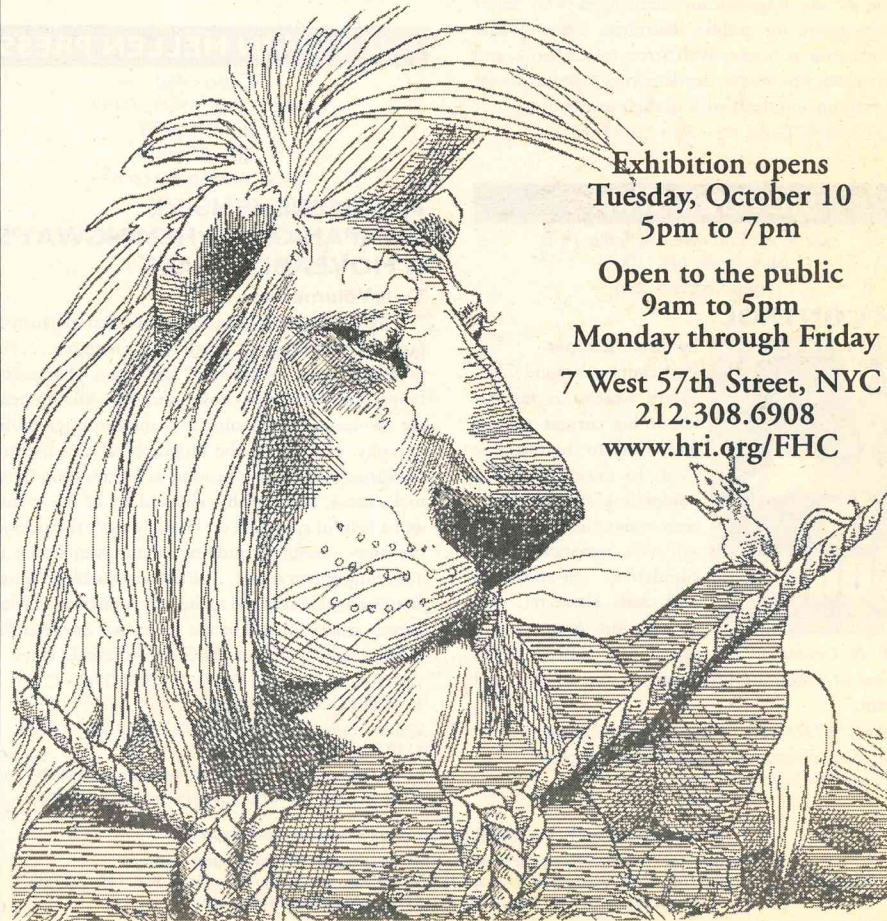
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This fashion was not indeed begun, but was given its strongest fillip, by the late Aleksey Tolstoy (he died this year), who alone, perhaps, had the makings of, and the ambition to be, the Virgil of the new empire which had excited his rich imagination and brought his remarkable literary gift into play....

The vast increase in literacy under the stimulus provided by the earlier period when Marxism was in ferment, as well as the immense circulation of Russian and to some degree of foreign classics, particularly in translation into the

various languages of the "nationalities" of the USSR, has created a public the responsiveness of which should be the envy of Western writers and dramatists. The crowded bookshops with their understocked shelves, the eager interest displayed by the government employees who run them, the fact that even such newspapers as *Pravda* and *Izvestia* are sold out within a few minutes of their rare appearance in the kiosks, is further evidence of this hunger.

If, therefore, political control were to alter at the top, and greater freedom

of artistic expression were permitted, there is no reason why, in a society so hungry for productive activity, and in a nation still so eager for experience, still so young and so enchanted by everything that seems to be new or even true, and above all endowed with a prodigious vitality which can carry off absurdities fatal to a thinner culture, a magnificent creative art should not one day once again spring into life.

To Western observers the reaction of Soviet audiences to classical plays may seem curiously naive; when, for example, a play by Shakespeare or by

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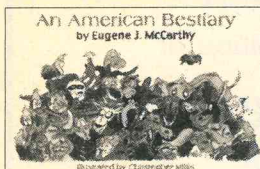
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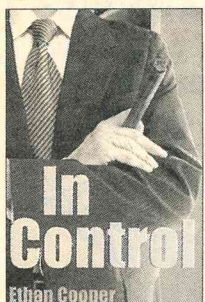
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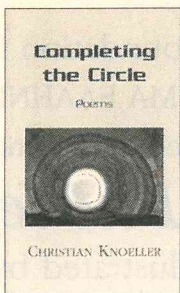
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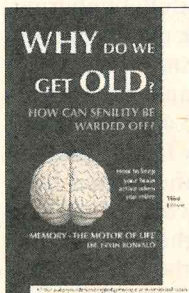
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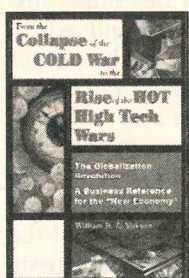
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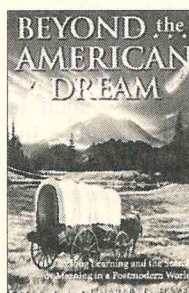
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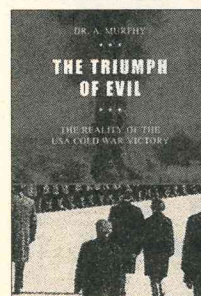
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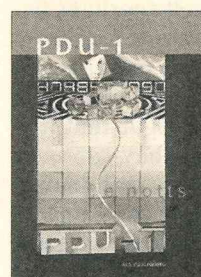
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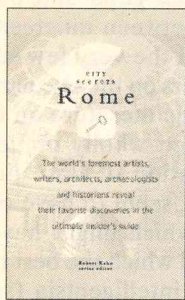
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difficult conditions and in dwindling numbers, of a real nucleus of aging but articulate intellectuals, deeply civilized, sensitive, fastidious, and not to be deceived, who have preserved unimpaired the high critical standards, in certain respects the purest and most exacting in the world, of the pre-revolutionary Russian intelligentsia. These people, now to be found in politically unimportant government posts, universities, publishing houses, if not positively catered for by the state, are not vastly harried either; they tend to be gloomy or sardonic because they see few successors to themselves in the succeeding generation, and this is said to be mainly due to the fact that such young men or women as show any signs of independence and originality are ruthlessly uprooted and dispersed in the north or central Asiatic regions, as an element disturbing to society.

A good many of the young who showed signs of talent as independent artists and critics are said to have been swept away in 1937-1938 ("as with a broom," as a young Russian said to me at a railway station, where he felt unobserved). Nevertheless, a few such are still to be found in universities or among translators from foreign languages or ballet librettists (for whom there is great demand), but it is difficult to estimate whether by themselves they are sufficient to carry on the vigorous intellectual life upon which, for example, Trotsky and Lunacharsky used to lay such stress, and for which their successors seem to care so little. The older intellectuals, when they speak with candor, make no bones about the atmosphere in which they live; most of them still belong to the class of what are known as "the scared," that is, those who have not fully recovered from the nightmare of the great purges—but a few are showing signs of emerging once again into the light of day. They point out that official control, while no longer as fiercely devoted to heresy hunts as before, is so complete in all spheres of art and life, and the caution exercised by the timid and largely ignorant bureaucrats in control of art and literature so extreme, that whatever is new and original among the ambitious young naturally tends to flow into non-artistic channels—the natural sciences or the technological disciplines—where more encouragement to progress and less fear of the unusual obtains.

As for other arts, there was never much to be said for or about Russian painting—today that which is exhibited seems to have fallen below the lowest standards of nineteenth-century Russian naturalism or impressionism, which did at least possess the merit of illustrating, with a great deal of life, social and political conflicts and the general ideals of the time. As for pre- and post-revolutionary modernism, which continued and flowered during the early Soviet period—of that not a whisper, so far as I could tell.

The condition of music is not very different. Apart from the complicated cases of Prokofiev and Shostakovich (political pressure upon the latter seems scarcely to have improved the style of his work, although there may well be vigorous disagreement about this—and he is still young), either it is again largely a dull academic re-

production of the traditional "Slav" or "sweet" Tchaikovsky-Rachmaninov pattern, now worn very thin (as in the case of the endlessly fertile Miskovsky and the academic Glière), or it has taken to lively, shallow, and occasionally skillful, at times even brilliantly entertaining, exploitation of the folk song of the constituent republics of the USSR, along the simplest possible lines—perhaps, to put it at its lowest, with an ultimate view to possible performances by balalaika orchestras. Even such moderately competent composers as Shebalin and Kabalevsky have taken this line of least resistance, and have, with their imitators, become monotonous and tirelessly productive purveyors of routine music of remorseless mediocrity.

Architecture in its turn is engaged either in the admirably done restoration of old buildings and occasional supplementation of these by competently executed pastiche, or in the erection of vast, dark, bleak buildings, repulsive



Isaiah Berlin in New York, 1988

even by the worst Western standards. The cinema alone shows signs of genuine life, although the golden age of the Soviet film, when it was genuinely revolutionary in inspiration and encouraged experiment, seems, with some notable exceptions (for example Eisenstein and his disciples, still active), to have yielded to something cruder and more commonplace.

In general, intellectuals still seem haunted by too many fresh memories of the period of purges succeeded by rumors of war, succeeded by war and famine and devastation; regret as they might the flatness of the scene, the prospect of a new "revolutionary situation," however stimulating to art, could scarcely be welcome to human beings who have lived through more than even the normal Russian share of moral and physical suffering. Consequently there is a kind of placid and somewhat defeatist acceptance of the present situation among most of the intellectuals. There is little fight left even in the most rebellious and individualistic; Soviet reality is too recalcitrant, political obligation too oppressive, moral issues too uncertain, and the compensations, material and moral, for conformity too irresistible.

The intellectual of recognized merit is materially secure; he or she enjoys the admiration and fidelity of a vast public; his or her status is dignified; and if the majority long, with an intensity not to be described, to visit Western countries (of whose mental and spiritual life they often entertain the most exaggerated notions), and com-

plain that "things are screwed up too tight in this country," some, and by no means the least distinguished, tend to say that state control has its positive aspects as well. While it hems in creative artists to an extent unparalleled even in Russian history, it does, a distinguished children's writer said to me, give the artist the feeling that the state and the community in general are, at any rate, greatly interested in his work, that the artist is regarded as an important person whose behavior matters a very great deal, that his development on the right lines is a crucial responsibility both of himself and of his ideological directors, and that this is, despite all the terror and slavery and humiliation, a far greater stimulus to him than the relative neglect of his brother artists in bourgeois countries.

Doubtless there is something in that, and certainly art has, historically, flourished under despotism. It may be a particularly unrealistic moral fallacy, so long as glory and high position are the rewards of success, that no form of intellectual or artistic genius can flourish in confinement. But facts, in this case, speak more loudly than theory. Contemporary Soviet culture is not marching with its old firm, confident, or even hopeful step; there is a sense of emptiness, a total absence of winds or currents, and one of the symptoms of this is the fact that creative talent is so easily diverted into such media as the popularization and the study, sometimes both scholarly and imaginative, of the "national" cultures of the constituent republics, particularly those in Central Asia. It may be that this is merely a trough between high crests, a temporary period of weariness and mechanical behavior after too much effort spent on crushing the internal and external enemies of the regime. Perhaps. Certainly there is today not a ripple on the ideological surface. There are appeals to cease reading the Germans, to cultivate national Soviet (and not local or regional) pride, above all to cease to uncover non-Russian origins of Russian institutions or alien sources of Russian thought; to return to orthodox Leninism-Stalinism, and to abstain from the vagaries of non-Marxist patriotism, which luxuriated during the war; but there is nothing remotely resembling the fierce, often crude, but still sometimes profoundly and passionately felt ideological Marxist controversies of, say, Bukharin's lifetime.

Yet this account would be misleading if it did not include the fact that, despite the difficult and even desperate situation in which persons of independent temper and education at times find themselves in Russia, they are capable of a degree of gaiety, intellectual as well as social, and of enthusiastic interest in their internal and external affairs, combined with an extravagant and often delicate sense of the ridiculous, which makes life not merely bearable to them but worthwhile; and makes their bearing and their conversation both dignified and delightful to the foreign visitor.

Certainly the present aspect of the Soviet artistic and intellectual scene suggests that the initial great impulse is over, and that it may be a considerable time before anything new or arresting in the realm of ideas, as op-

Dominique Nabokov

Griboedov is performed, the audience is apt to react to the action on the stage as if the play was drawn from contemporary life; lines spoken by the actors meet with murmurs of approval or disapproval, and the excitement generated is wonderfully direct and spontaneous. These are perhaps not far removed from the kind of popular audiences for which Euripides and Shakespeare wrote, and the fact that soldiers at the front have so often compared their leaders with the stock heroes of patriotic Soviet novels, that fiction is to them, as often as not, part

of the general pattern of daily life, seems to show that they still look on the world with the shrewd imagination and unspoiled eye of intelligent children, the ideal public of the novelist, the dramatist, and the poet. This fertile soil, still so little plowed, in which even the poorest seed seems to sprout so quickly and so generously, can scarcely fail to inspire the artist, and it is probable that it is the absence of precisely this popular response that has made the art of England and France often seem mannered, anemic, and artificial.

As things are, the contrast between the extraordinary freshness and receptivity, critical and uncritical, of the Soviet appetite, and the inferiority of the pabulum provided, is the most striking phenomenon of Soviet culture today.

Soviet writers in articles and *feuilletons* love to emphasize the extraordinary enthusiasm with which the public has received this or that book, this or that film or play, and, indeed, what they say is largely true; but two aspects of the case are, not unnaturally, never mentioned. The first is that, despite all official propaganda, strongly felt and

perhaps almost instinctive discrimination between good and bad art—for example, between nineteenth-century classics and the very few surviving literary masters on the one hand, and routine patriotic literature on the other—has not been wholly obliterated, and standardization of taste does not, so far at least, seem to have occurred on the scale which might have been expected, and which the best members of the Soviet intelligentsia (such as survive) still fear.

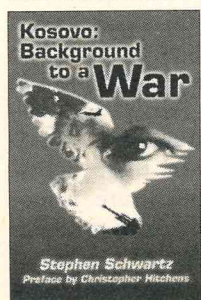
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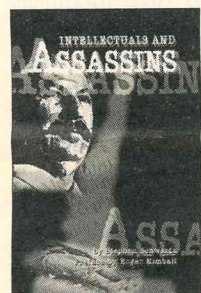


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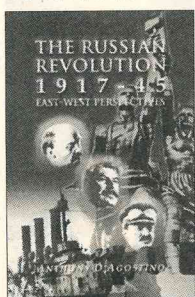


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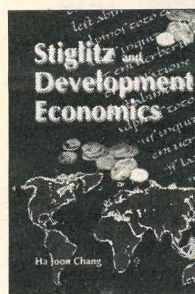
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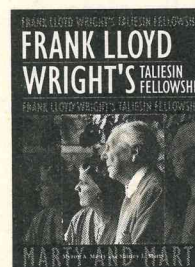
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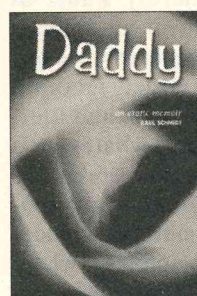
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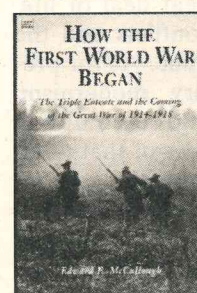
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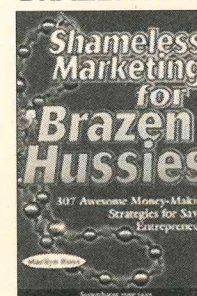
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On 'The Invention of Love': Another Exchange

To the Editors:

Catullus XI ends:

*nec meum respectet, ut ante, amorem,
qui illius culpa cecidit velut prati
ultimi flos, praetereunte postquam
tactus aratrost.*

In G. P. Goold's translation:

*and let her not count on my love, as in
the past,
for through her fault it has fallen like a
flower
at the meadow's edge, after being
lopped by the passing plough.*

In *The Invention of Love*, the elderly Housman ("AEH") in conversation with his young self ("Housman") remarks that poetical feelings are a peril to scholarship: "There are always poetical people ready to protest that a corrupt line is exquisite. Exquisite to whom? The Romans were foreigners writing for foreigners two millennia ago; and for people whose gods we find quaint, whose savagery we abominate, whose private habits we don't like to talk about, but whose idea of what is exquisite is, we flatter ourselves, mysteriously identical with ours."

Whereupon—

HOUSMAN: "But it *is*, isn't it? We catch our breath at the places where the breath was always caught. The poet writes to his mistress how she's killed his love—'fallen like a flower at the field's edge where the plough touched it and passed on by.' ... Two thousand years in the tick of a clock—oh, forgive me..."

AEH: "No, we're never too old to learn."

In his letter [*NYR*, September 21], Daniel Mendelsohn asserts that the real Housman would have reviled this kind of "sentimental thinking" which "subverts his superb philological insight" about cultural bias.

If he means (and what else can he mean?) that the real Housman would have reviled the idea that Catullus XI or any other classical poem was capable of having an identical appeal to the Romans as it has to us, that would not have been a superb philological insight but a lapse into idiocy. Housman was not an idiot, and we don't need his famous tears over "Diffugere nives" ("the most beautiful poem in ancient literature") to know it.

The point which Housman was making in his Cambridge Inaugural Lecture, and which Mr. Mendelsohn has misunderstood, was the very different one that an "exquisite" effect is not an argument for defending a verse against an emendation made on philological grounds. That is the context in which Housman reminded us ("exquisite to whom?") that the Romans were very different from you and me, and adjured us to "acquire, if we can, by humility and self-repression, the tastes of the classics [i.e., classical authors]."¹

Building on his mistake, Mr. Mendelsohn objects that when the fictitious Hous-

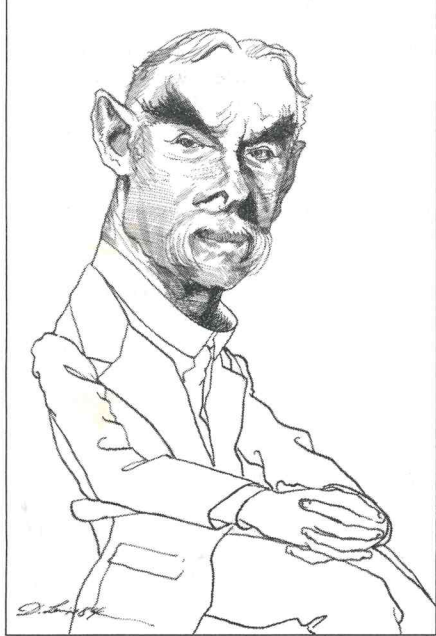
¹The example Housman used in the Cambridge Inaugural Lecture is Horace, Odes I, 23, v. 5, where the manuscripts have the arrival of spring (*veris*) fluttering the leaves, and where Richard Bentley in his famous 1711 edition read *vepris* (bramble) for *veris*, and *ad ventum* (in the wind) for *adventus* (arrival), because—Bentley said, and Housman concurred—in Latin, arrivals can't flutter anything. Bentley wrote (in Latin), "Absolutely nothing can be more certain than this conjecture and it proves itself by its own light as surely as though it were produced from a hundred manuscripts." Here is Housman in 1911: "... When pedants like Bentley and Munro object that the phrase is unsuitable to its context, of what avail is it to be assured by persons of taste—that is to say persons of British taste, Victorian taste, sub-Tennysonian taste—that these are exquisite lines? Exquisite to whom? [Etc.]" None-

man refers to the necessity for "the repression of self-will," he does so in a different context, albeit in the same scene. Unwisely, he writes that I "certainly ... sunder [Housman's] call for 'self-repression' from its proper context as the logical conclusion of the 'exquisite to whom?' speech..."

But I certainly do not. He is unaware that the context for the phrase as I made use of it is not the Cambridge lecture but Housman's Preface to his *Manilius*, where, putting the general case for rigorous scholarship (as he is doing in the scene), he writes that what is required is to "read attentively, think correctly, omit no relevant consideration, and repress self-will ... [and more besides]."

From this collapsing platform, Mr. Mendelsohn speculates that my inability to appreciate his understanding of Housman's "methodological and intellectual insights" might be explained by a public conversation recorded on stage at the Wilma Theater, Philadelphia, and my belated "dis-

A. E. Housman



covery"—("as he referred to it")—that Housman was a classicist.

(It's worth pausing a moment to consider the quote marks around "discovery" and the parentheses. Mr. Mendelsohn wishes us to think something—but what? My words in the published transcript are: "The first thing I knew about Housman was that he was a poet. I wanted to write a play about him almost instantly when I discovered the second thing about him, that he was a [classicist]." Now, presumably there was a moment when Mr. Mendelsohn discovered the same thing, but it would not occur to me to try to make him look—what? foolish? callow? boastful?—by affecting to discern some kind of posture in the verb.)

My next words were: "I didn't know he was homosexual. I knew nothing about him." All of which, writes Mr. Mendelsohn, "makes one wonder whether he understands Housman's poetry any better than he does Housman's scholarship." If he wants to patronize me, let me help him. I don't understand a hundredth part of Housman's scholarship; and I read *A Shropshire Lad* when I was young without knowing whether Housman was homosexual, heterosexual, or a hermaphrodite.

But Mr. Mendelsohn has more uses for the transcript, which he would like to think supports him in his insistence, which I find obtuse, that Wilde is supposed to represent the "successful" personality which Housman "failed" to live for himself: inside the scholar, the poet Wildely signaling, one could say. Not many people would call Housman's emotional life a successful one,

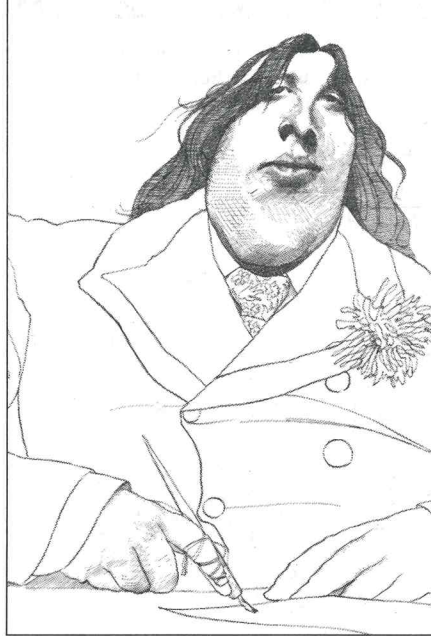
theless, the Loeb has not promoted *vepris* to the text, and of the modern editors I have to hand only David West (Oxford University Press, 1995) accepts Bentley; which he does with an extra finesse on the symmetry of the images in vv. 5–8.

but he had his own personality to make the best or the worst of.

In Philadelphia, I said (or, as the inimitable Mr. Mendelsohn has it, "boasted") that the appeal was to write the play about two people who inhabited the same person. I was not the first or the hundredth to see the poet and the scholar as a divided man. Mr. Mendelsohn believes I failed to illuminate that divide, and I think that is at least an intelligible criticism. (His own dovetailing of the two, in his article, remains a suggestive contribution to our view of Housman, in my opinion.) My excuse if I need one is that I was more struck by a different division.

Housman was simultaneously a gratified man and a disappointed one. As a private person he was driven in on himself, not only in my view, by a hopeless passion which contracted his personality (epithets like "arrogant," "bitter," "anti-social" are much what one expects to find, and does find, in the index to the Richard Graves biography,

Oscar Wilde



along with "companionable," "witty," etc.), and that in some ways, amazingly, he remained an adolescent (there is an unpublished 1922 letter to Jackson which in its archness reads like a schoolboy's).

"Stoppard has remarked," writes Mr. Mendelsohn, changing tense to distance the upcoming remark from the transcript which he himself has called as witness (*Where do they teach this?*), "that 'personally' he finds Housman heroic, but..." and so back to his spavined hobbyhorse that I disdain Housman's intellectualism. The sentence is: "I called Housman earlier some sort of failure. I personally find him heroic." This might have alerted him to what in the context is obvious, that the "failure" is seen by me as the complement to an intellectual and poetical self-fulfillment which is Housman's triumph and which for me makes Housman, differently from Wilde, a hero, just as he was, differently from Wilde, "some sort of failure." I added: "It was this tension between different sorts of success and failure which interested me." If Mr. Mendelsohn could have brought himself to notice it, that sentence alone would have undone half his thesis.

The other half, he undoes merely by deploying it. Out of modesty, lack of competence, and general disinclination, I cannot follow him into what he calls his "larger point" and what I would call his snobbish squaring of my regrettable "popularity" with my "ambivalence about people who pursue knowledge for its own sake" (he quotes me as saying it's what makes us human, which doesn't sound all that ambivalent to me, and he might have quoted Housman from the play: "Scholarship... [is] where we're nearest to our humanness. Useless knowledge for its own sake. Useful knowledge is good, too, but it's for the fainthearted..."; yet one can see why he didn't). But his thesis, that Housman's in-

tellectual passions constituted "a whole and satisfactory life," is more romantic than anything I could have come up with, and how Mr. Mendelsohn can think it after reading the poems is a question I cannot answer.

But there is one poem Mr. Mendelsohn has evidently not read. He says (the shrink is in) that if I didn't have it in for intellectuals, I wouldn't find it "necessary" to present Housman "as a man who, despite his stunning literary and scholarly accomplishments, continually [i.e., twice] cries out that he wishes he had died for his beloved [but never had the luck]." Since he obviously thinks this is something I made from the whole cloth, let him turn to Additional Poems XX.

*I shall not die for you.
Another fellow may;
Good lads are left and true
Though one departs away,
But he departs to day
And leaves his work to do,
For I was luckless aye
And shall not die for you.²*

Finally, but it has to be done, there's my poor old American publisher again. Mr. Mendelsohn allowed himself a casual and ill-founded kick at Grove Press. I made a rebuttal which I would have thought unanswerable, and indeed he doesn't answer it. To get in another kick, he panics sideways into a ludicrous and irrelevant riff that ends up equating Oscar Wilde with Ethel Merman. Here as elsewhere, Mr. Mendelsohn commands a kind of admiration, but it's the kind one might have for a skater who, finding the ice has given way beneath him, makes out he was really going for a swim.

Tom Stoppard

London, England

Daniel Mendelsohn replies:

Tom Stoppard in his defensive mode reminds me of the mythic monster: for every head you chop off, ten grow back. In this case, however, each batch of ten makes more noise, and yet has less bite, than the single head it replaces. I can understand Mr. Stoppard's annoyance following the last exchange which he initiated; the sting of having his own words (that he'd found Wilde "heroic" and Housman "a failure") used against him must have been sharper than the sting of my original criticisms of his play—which were, it is worth remembering, hardly characterized by the shrill, protesting-too-much tone that has found its way once again into Mr. Stoppard's defenses. (I said I found him "pop" and "romantic"; he countered with calling me "obtuse," "fatuous," and, if I now read him aright, "idiotic.")

Alas, Mr. Stoppard's defenses once again consist of nothing more than hair-splitting (he runs rings around Housman's "exquisite to whom?" speech, only to end by acknowledging that its gist is that the Romans had different tastes, which is precisely the sense that I claimed for it and, alas, the one that his character AEH so bizarrely rejects); straw-man arguments (I certainly never claimed that Mr. Stoppard invented Housman's despairing remark to

²"I shall not die for you," first published three years after Housman's death, survived as a "first draft" in pencil and a fair copy in ink in what is now "Notebook D" in the Adelman Collection in the Canaday Library, Bryn Mawr College (see *The Poems of A. E. Housman*, edited by Archie Burnett). Two pages earlier, there is the date "Jan. 1925" in Housman's hand; that is, two years after Moses Jackson's death. I have taken it that the poem evokes Jackson. (There are precedents in the Notebooks for Housman's returning to poems years after putting their origins aside.) If it does not, the sentiment remains the sentiment.

posed to steady competence and solid achievement firmly set by authority within the framework of established tradition, is likely to emerge from the USSR. The old Russia, the condition of which preoccupied and indeed obsessed her writers, was, in a certain obvious sense, an Athenian society in which a small elite, endowed with a combination of remarkable intellectual and moral qualities, rare taste and an unparalleled sweep of imagination, was supported by a dark mass of idle, feckless, semi-barbarous helots, about whom much was said, but, as Marxists and other dissidents justly observed,

exceedingly little was known, least of all by the men of good will who talked most about them and, as they supposed, to them and for their benefit.

If there is one single continuing strain in the Leninist policy it is the desire to make of these dark people full human beings, capable of standing on their own feet, recognized as equals and perhaps even superiors by their still disdainful Western neighbors. No cost is too high for this; organized material progress is still regarded as the foundation on which all else rests; and if intellectual and indeed civil liberty is considered to hamper or retard the

process of transforming the Soviet peoples into the nation best equipped to understand and cope with the technologically new post-liberal world, then these "luxuries" must be sacrificed; or at least temporarily shelved.

Every citizen in the Soviet Union has had this brought home to him with varying degrees of force, and if some perform an inward act of protest, it remains inarticulate and ineffective. Nevertheless it is doubtful whether this remorseless course can be kept up quite so rigorously beyond the life of the fanatical and single-minded generation which knew the Revolution. The

principal hope of a new flowering of the liberated Russian genius lies in the still unexhausted vitality, the omnivorous curiosity, the astonishingly undiminished moral and intellectual appetite of this most imaginative and least narrow of peoples, which in the long—perhaps very long—run, and despite the appalling damage done to it by the chains which bind it at present, still shows greater promise of gigantic achievement in the use of its vast material resources, and, by the same token, *pari passu*, in the arts and sciences, than any other contemporary society. □

Mbeki and AIDS in Africa: A Comment

To the Editors:

Helen Epstein ["The Mystery of AIDS in South Africa," *NYR*, July 20] writes of President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa as a "visionary ruler," albeit one who has "not adequately confronted the most deadly threat facing his country," the AIDS epidemic.

Unfortunately, President Mbeki's "African Renaissance" to the contrary, a visionary he is not. In terms of background, ideological formation, and current mode of thought, his closest contemporary parallel is probably... Vladimir Putin of Russia.

How else does one characterize a former member of the Politburo of the South African Communist Party who, post-Gorbachev and as head of state, has embraced the global market?

I knew Thabo Mbeki briefly when I arrived in London in 1967, a few months after being released from Pretoria Prison where I'd served a sentence for membership of the SACP. Still in his early twenties, Thabo was already a crown prince within the inner sanctum of the CP, which increasingly became the guiding force within the African National Congress in exile. The milieu of exile politics at the top of this highly secretive apparatus constituted the whole of Mbeki's political life, from late teens until his return from exile nearly forty years later.

I got to know more about him when I left the ANC in the company of his younger brother Moeletsi, together with another dissident ANC figure (subsequently minister for telecommunications), Pallo Jordan, during the heady period before *les événements* in Paris and the Tet offensive in Saigon in 1968. In the radical atmosphere of those days, we considered Thabo to be an apparatchik of the classic Soviet type, an organization man through and through, an ideological hit man. Visionary he was not, then; and I cannot see how, now.

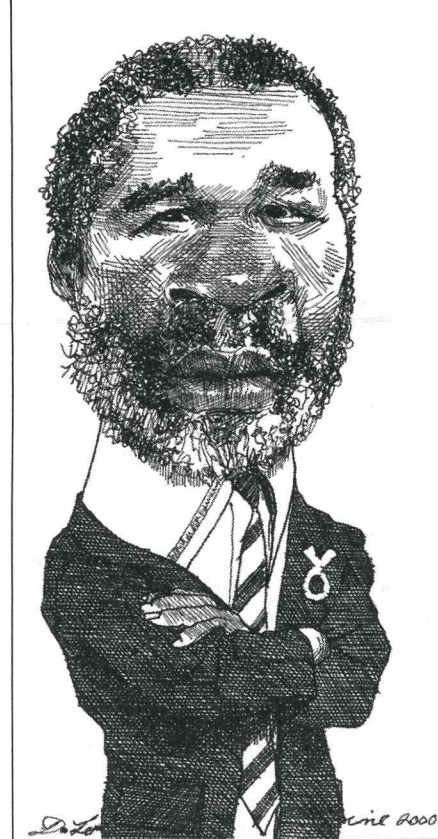
As dauphin and heir apparent within the CP and the ANC, Thabo's political line of descent lay through his father, Govan Mbeki, sentenced to life imprisonment on Robben Island in 1964, alongside Nelson Mandela. While local editor of the CP newspaper, *New Age*, in the motor industry city of Port Elizabeth, Govan Mbeki had built up the best-organized ANC branch in the whole country.

His virtues of strict, unquestioning Stalinism combined with serious attention to organization provided the model for how the CP was to hold the ANC together—and hold on to the ANC—through the decades of the exile. Thabo inherited his father's immense prestige within the ANC, as well as his unquestioning orthodoxy.

Unlike younger "internal" leaders, who learned the skills of democratic leadership in student organizations, trade unions, and

civic associations within South Africa in battle with the apartheid state during the 1970s and 1980s, Thabo Mbeki's skills have been those of the smoke-filled room, behind closed doors, in exile. He is remote, aloof, at home with the cabal rather

Thabo Mbeki



than the people, unlike Mandela. His instinct is to command support rather than to win it.

This was serviceable enough during the exile. Funded by the Soviet Union, its troops trained in Soviet-bloc states and supported across the world by the Anti-Apartheid Movement, the ANC was the only show in town when young militants crossed the border from SA [South Africa] seeking weapons and training, in order to return and fight. By comparison, the ANC's main rival, the Pan Africanist Congress, was in almost permanent disarray, poorly funded and poorly organized, with negligible military facilities.

In this milieu the ANC behaved in exile—especially in Africa—like a one-party state. Dissent of any kind was not tolerated. When Thami Mhlambiso, one of Mbeki's colleagues in the leadership of the ANC youth in the 1960s, became critical of its links with the CP, he was expelled in 1975 in the purge of the so-called "Gang of Eight." Mbeki then tried (unsuccessfully) to get him purged also from his salaried post with the United Nations.

Following a mutiny of about 90 percent of the ANC's trained troops in Angola in 1984, in support of a number of demo-

cratic demands, Mbeki raised no objection when their protest was crushed, first by the Angolan Presidential Guard and later (at Pango camp, in northern Angola) by public executions. Leaders of the mutiny were subjected to torture and imprisonment in the notorious ANC prison camp, Quatro. Prisoners from Quatro were paraded before the media and expected to give a sanitized account of their imprisonment at a press conference held in Zambia in 1985, an event hosted by Mbeki.

More than a decade later, as vice-president of South Africa, and shortly before becoming president, Mbeki tried to prevent publication of the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission because of its recording and condemnation of ANC abuses in Quatro and other camps in exile. It is reasonable to think that his objection was grounded in his own complicity in structures that had at least endorsed and at worst directed these abuses. Mandela, by contrast, was the first ANC leader to acknowledge that abuses had indeed taken place, initially in a public statement in April 1990, then by throwing his weight in favor of two internal ANC inquiries, and finally in his support for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

It was this experience of a practice of suppression of dissent that governed Mbeki's de facto support for fellow president Mugabe in the reign of fear preceding the recent elections in Zimbabwe, unlike his former fellow minister, Pallo Jordan, who criticized the thuggery of Zanu-PF supporters in a speech in the South African parliament.

Jordan, who was never a member of the CP, had himself been imprisoned by the ANC security department in Zambia in the 1980s for having described its members as "amaBhunu" (that is, as "Boers," because they replicated the thuggery of the apartheid state).

Mbeki's strange stance on the issue of the AIDS virus has two sources, one legitimate, the other not. It is fully appropriate that an African political leader should condemn the massive economic disparity between the rich, white West and AIDS-stricken Africa, where mega-deaths are indeed the wages of poverty. The destruction of Africa's economically active population, aggravated by third-world debt and global terms of trade, is equivalent to the Great Hunger in Ireland in the 1840s. Hatred of the West will be the result for generations if this is not remedied quickly. In however strange a manner, Mbeki in part articulates this anger, as does Winnie Madikizela-Mandela.

What confuses their case, however, is Africanist ideology relating to sexuality, most graphically expressed by Mugabe, as president of the country with the highest

proportion of total population with HIV/AIDS. His response to the crisis has been a deeply prejudiced attack on homosexuality both within Zimbabwe and in Britain, most notoriously focusing on Foreign Office Minister Peter Hain.

In a similar manner, Winnie Mandela justified her kidnapping and assault of four youths in Soweto in 1988 (one of whom was murdered) on the grounds of the alleged homosexuality of the priest in whose manse they were staying. Before her conviction, her supporters paraded outside the court with banners stating "Homosex is not in black culture."

It is this implicitly racially governed as well as homophobic mindset that lies behind Mbeki's refusal of the judgment of the overwhelming majority in contemporary science on the nature of the AIDS virus. On the one hand such a view endorses an Africanist myth of a pure and primal Africa contaminated by a sinful West, a reversion to the race theory of the apartheid state. It reflects on the other hand the cloistered, driven mindset that produced the sham biology of Lysenko in the final years of Stalin.

The problem faced by the ANC in the 1990s was that with the end of the cold war, the ideology of the Brezhnev years ceased to be serviceable in the organization, in much the same way as in Russia or Serbia. The Freedom Charter—the social program of the ANC from the 1950s—was effectively scrapped, as a condition of the ANC entering government. The agreement of the new government to relocation out of the country of its central industrial/financial nucleus, the Anglo-American/De Beers complex, was massive proof of the relative weakness of the government. It has not been able to deliver on its social program, in any substantial way. The best way of interpreting Mbeki's "African Renaissance" is as a nationalist alternative to the loss of his previous ideology.

That said, AIDS was always going to work havoc in South Africa, given the systemic disruption to stable, settled sexual relationships brought about over a century by the migrant labor system created by Britain in the early 1900s to serve the gold-mining industry, and policed by the pass laws (also a British creation, in the unified South African state set up after the Anglo-Boer War).

For this reason alone, South Africa and Zimbabwe are owed a special debt of recompense from the West, and especially Britain, as beneficiary over decades in terms of profit over from the migrant labor system. President Mbeki has not made it easier for this to be forthcoming. As Malcolm X used to put it, he is part of the problem, not the solution.

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