

RUSSIAN LITERATURE THE GREAT CENTURY

RUSSIAN LITERATURE rose swiftly, lived for a century and a half, and then died. This dictum is patently false as it stands, or at least greatly exaggerated. There were Russian writers before Derzhavin and Pushkin; the statement that Russian literature came to an end after the death of Tolstoy or Blok – or even Mayakovsky – would be denied with indignant violence in many quarters. Boris Pasternak is a living poet of magnificent genius; Alexis Tolstoy, Anna Akhmatova, Ivan Bunin are a legitimate source of pride to patriotic Russians; nevertheless, the paradox enunciated above is not wholly absurd.

When Vladimir Korolenko, one of the most gifted and pure-hearted liberal writes in pre-revolutionary Russia, declared that his native country was not the Russian Empire but Russian literature, the intelligentsia in whose name this was said had no doubt that the literature of which Korolenko spoke belonged to the nineteenth century. It was not, of course, born in a vacuum; much genuine literary scholarship has been devoted to tracing its roots in the folk song and monastic writing of the medieval Slavs, not to speak of the Westernised literature of the eighteenth and even seventeenth centuries; and its epigoni lived well into the twentieth century and added to its renown. But its habitat is the nineteenth century. The great twentieth-century masters, for all their emotional and artistic boldness, were bound up with and spoke about and against the world of the nineteenth century in a sense in which that world itself was not, for example, consciously preoccupied with its own predecessor. The century began with 'Russlan and Lyudmila', which Pushkin wrote in 1820, and ended in 1921 with the death of Alexander Blok.

There is, of course, a literature – and there are works of genius – to be found before and after these dates. Only the blind and deaf would deny this title to the 'Lay of Igor's Host' or to the *bylinas* and the other masterpieces of folk song and popular poetry, or to

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the 'Autobiography' of Avvakum; or deny the importance of the Western influences introduced by Peter, of the noble Johnsonian Odes of Michael Lomonosov, of the comedies of Fonvizin; or minimise the historical deserts of the playwrights and poets influenced by French classicism of the German *Aufklärung*. Nevertheless, Russia at the time of the French Revolution was, compared to Western Europe, almost a literary wilderness. A quarter of a century later it was still no more than a promising cultural dependency of the West. Krylov, Karamzin, and the young Zhukovsky were writers of remarkable gifts, but they did not make a literary summer. Yet by 1850 Russia was in possession of a literature which, comparatively little known in Europe, could vie with that of any culture and period and rose to a level of artistic achievement which was to continue unbroken until almost the end of the century.

Without going into the fascinating, even now too little explored question of the social, political, and economic conditions of the rise of this, perhaps the richest, flowering of artistic genius in a great and fertile era, let us consider the standard facts, for they are remarkable enough. As every Russian schoolboy knows, Karamzin initiated but Pushkin created the modern Russian language. Pushkin has been to the literature of his country and its modes of feeling and imagination more than Dante to the Italians or Goethe to the Germans, and far more than Shakespeare to the English. And this in its turn may perhaps, to some degree, be due to the interplay of French and native influences in Russia at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

One must conceive of a people with rich and unexpended moral and emotional resources, sharp and fanatically rationalistic intellects, and a gigantic appetite for life in all its forms, bursting upon the stage of European history as one of the three great powers – in some respects the strongest of them – after the defeat of Napoleon. In Europe they were thought and spoken of as a mob of barbarians, and no doubt the Cossacks who rode in triumph through Paris in 1815 were barbarous; but French civilisation had left a deeper mark upon their masters than their Western neighbors were ready to acknowledge. 'Grattez un Russe' was a gibe less true of the leaders of Russian opinion in the nineteenth century than either before or after. If not French but German literary influence, then dominant in Europe, had seized upon these infinitely impressionable, untutored, and unformed

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minds, boiling over with a desire to enter the life and culture of Europe and armed with an unlimited capacity for imitation and assimilation, the consequence of undisciplined, romantic chaos imposed upon such raw material might well have proved disastrous – as to a minor degree it did when this very phenomenon began to occur at a later date. Fortunately for the history of human civilisation, French influence, then at its most rigorous, pedantic, and intolerant, had played a decisive part in shaping the style and thought of the ruling, that is, the only literate, class in Russia.

However narrowing and indeed fatal the severity and aridity of the French classical tradition might have proved in less robust cultures, in this case they performed the task of providing a clear and firm framework for an imagination already astonishingly rich and malleable, infinitely impressionable but only half articulate, spurred on by a passion for self-improvement and a great and touching hunger for intellectual and moral authority – for truths in the light of which to conduct inner and outer life. The result was that this fertile and generous current which might otherwise have become dissipated or formed stagnant pools – as perhaps happened in other Slav countries – was organised and acquired form, direction, and discipline, and culminated in a combination of spontaneity, elegance, and depth not known since the Greeks. By the time the flood of German romanticism was let loose and overflowed into Russia as well as France, the basic forms of the Russian style of thought and writing were sufficiently firm and mature not to be dissolved by the great onrush. Indeed, the effect of the flood was, in the beginning at any rate, beneficial, and combined with their social situation to protect Russian writers against a premature growth of professionalism, particularly in the realm of criticism. It played its part in creating the peculiar mixture of self-dedicating devotion to the arts and a horror of any division between the arts and private life which is perhaps the most arresting single characteristic of Russian literary culture in the nineteenth century. And literature was everything: as the critic Chernyshevsky said of it, it embraced nine-tenths of everything that was said at all in the Russia of his day; it was not a criticism of life but for both writers and readers was inextricably woven into the texture of daily life.

No greater contrast can be found in Europe than between what one may call – albeit with grave over-simplification – the Russian

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and the French conceptions of the artist and his function. The characteristic French artist of the nineteenth century traditionally seeks to attain to the highest level of skilled perfection to which the medium is susceptible he still carries something of his pre-romantic function as in the first place a purveyor of objects of beauty or interest before a particular audience – general or particular, a coterie or an individual. His purpose is, in the first place, to produce the object; the consequence may be to transform the outlook of a generation; but if this happens, the object, not its maker, is the cause. The artist's claim, like that of any other professional, rests upon the intrinsic properties of the object, which, as soon as it is produced and handed over to the public, stands or falls by its own qualities and not by any relationship which it is conceived as continuing to have with its author or to set up within and among the individuals at whom it is directed. The author offers only his craft, and his private life is consequently no concern of the public; his morality as man or citizen, his attitude to personal or social questions, his personality in general are not thrust forward. The work of art is not primarily a self-conscious public avowal of something for which he professes to stand.

Even if a work of art has a 'message' in the most directly moral or political sense, this 'message' is that of the work itself. The artistic function is, in theory at least, no more closely connected with the artist's behaviour as a son or a lover or a voter than those of the man who sells him his canvas or prints his books. The amateur is not admired as such; the concept of the artist as a faltering, fallible, disarmingly wayward, uncontrollable being expressing himself out of a sudden gust of feeling or whim or for reasons too private or complex to be easily explained, with no responsibility to anyone, no committal act of staking out some public, professional claim – that has always been rightly despised and rejected in France. And the art and literature of France owe a very great deal to this refusal to identify incompetence and confused self-indulgence with artistic freedom, and inner confusion, lack of discipline, and immaturity with a special kind of spiritual beauty and a sensibility which recoils before the vulgarities of professionalism.

Nevertheless, to the Russians this French conception of art has always, even in its wildest moment of exoticism, seemed false and repulsive. Whatever their differences, Russians were agreed upon the public duty of the artist as a dedicated figure. No doubt Ryleev

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or Nekrasov or the later Mayakovsky believed in the social function of art, whereas the romantics, or the *fin de siècle* symbolists, believed in it as a kind of clairvoyance and in the poet as a priest giving words to 'earth's holy dreams'. But vessels of sacred inspiration are not more *dégagé* than those of morality; impurity of life corrupts vision and turns the poet into an impostor and a traitor; he leads not two lives but one. Consequently the distinction between the artistic and the private personality seems to them specious, and attempts to practice it cold and even vicious. The task of art – as of life, with which this view almost identifies it – is to open the windows of the soul: whoever has something to say must say it in every situation, in every available medium.

The great Russian writers of the century assumed that if one spoke at all it was to testify to the truth. Distinctions between artistic and personal truth, political and private truth, what one did as a craftsman and how one lived as a man, were at best vague and artificial, at worst a deliberate attempt to conceal the truth from oneself or others, a dishonest or misguided attempt to get the best of morally incompatible worlds, to buy an indulgence to preach one thing while practicing another; in effect to prostitute oneself, to sell the truth or one's capacity to discover it for a mere facility in elaborating techniques and producing objects which, because they did not necessarily, and as such, express what one knew to be true, came close to being a lie and a betrayal. The greater the skill the deeper the treachery, the more cold-hearted the sin against society and one's own self. Such very different writers as, let us say, Stendhal and Daudet would have been equally outraged by an examination of their private lives to determine whether they could morally have 'lived' through that which was expressed in their works of art. But if Pushkin, the 'purest', least moralistic, and best of all Russian writers, had been discovered to be secretly in the pay of a foreign government, if Tolstoy had been found to have been, even before his conversion, on intimate terms with the chief of the secret police, the shock would have been severe. Not only the public but these authors themselves would hardly have tried to dismiss the charges as in some sense irrelevant to the value of their works.

¹ French, at any rate, more than it is English or German, although of course to build a generalisation upon it – with Hugo, Zola, and Péguy, to choose three great names at random, to testify against it – would be very unwise.

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The artist's duty, whatever the disagreements about the direct utilitarian content of his work, derives, according to this view, not from the fact that he is an artist but from the fact that he speaks publicly at all; if one ventures to speak one must be very sure to tell the truth; the truth is one and indivisible; one lives one life and not many, and what is right or true for the artist cannot be wrong or false for the same individual in some other capacity. One must say what one believes, or 'be what one is', as fully, scrupulously, and profoundly as one is able, not necessarily as a citizen – one may hate or despise the state or society or any other institution. The advocates of social literature such as that preached by Nekrasov and the Radicals, can without any inconsistency be regarded as the enemy. But because fidelity to artistic principles is ethically imperative, because it is an end in itself, justifying everything and not itself in need of justification, this doctrine was believed as faithfully by the 'decadents' who denounced the moral and social function of art as by the most fanatical anti-aesthetic materialists and utilitarians.

Whatever the sources of this attitude, whether it is connected with the Orthodox doctrine of the various duties of man; or with the fact that Russian art, and more particularly literature, was created by aristocratic dilettanti and continued by individuals whose education divided them from their own social class and artificially, and often uneasily, united them with this world of well-born amateurs; or with the influence, during the impressionable years of Russian literature, of those German religious mystics and romantic writers who preached the identity of the occult source of art and life; or with the social and political conditions of life in Russia which made the intelligentsia the automatic enemy of the government and the State, and so inevitably turned it into an opposition, a torch-bearer, and a preacher from the very beginning: whatever the genetic explanation, the result was to make the characteristic Russian writer a representative of a humane culture in a wider sense than art alone; to make him, in this sense of the word, an amateur, an undivided personality, quite consciously opposed to that very professionalism of the West whose techniques he was destined so profoundly to influence, whose standards he transformed, and to which he remains to this day the ideal of freedom, completeness, precision, and truth.

The Russian intelligentsia was, of course, only one particular product of this general attitude. Not all Russian writers, not even

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those idolised by the intelligentsia, were members of it. Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, did not belong to it, whereas Turgenev, Belinsky, Herzen, and after a fashion Chekhov, Blok, and even Gorky did. Whether one belonged depended on the degree to which the writer or artist was conscious of himself as a standard bearer of an enlightened liberal, and above all secular – not necessarily democratic – attitude in political and social issues and not primarily on the genre of his art, intimately though this was bound up with his general views and temper.

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What was common to the writers who created the Russian literary tradition was their acceptance of the theory and practice of art as a vehicle for the expression of a vision of reality in the widest sense – by whatever means conveyed it most faithfully. The emphasis was therefore on the content, and inadequacy of form was condemned because it falsified or weakened the content and not because it transgressed against a rule or lacked some intrinsic quality as such. This is so, from the deliberate exaggerations of Tolstoy's 'naive' theories of art to the most fiercely remote and hermetic among the pre-revolutionary symbolists or acmeists or 'ego-futurists'.

Hence the frontier between the educated private individual and the professional writer and critic was in fact narrower than in the West, nor was it guarded with so jealous a sense of the importance of *métier*. The tradition of the learned dilettante persisted side by side with the development of academic and technical writings; learning was valued, but, more than learning, the power of conveying a first-hand experience – the sense of being face to face with the object, with no mediating theories or modes of interpretation.

The freshness, directness, and authenticity of the best Russian criticism is as unique as that of the poets and novelists. Belinsky and Pisarev speak about literature, Ulybyshev and Stasov about music, with a degree of spontaneity, relevance, seriousness, and life not found in far more clever, better-informed, and indeed profounder critics; their gusto is not solemn, or abstract, or philosophically inflated, or trivial, or tedious: they possess a natural sense of what is important and central, and a remarkable combination of responsiveness and a boundless inner vitality and power of expression beside which other traditions of critical

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writing, however original or illuminating or wise, at times seem a little stuffy and *voulu*.

Of this great and civilised tradition Prince D. S. Mirsky was, a quarter of a century ago, the most brilliant and fascinating representative in exile. He was in so sense a careful academic writer. His two celebrated books on Russian literature, which between them covered the entire range of the subject, were, like his essays on Dante and Western literature in general, anything but impersonal, 'Scientific criticism', the attempt to apply to literature a system of principles, drawn from some other field, whether aesthetic, psychological, moral, or derived from some particular sociological or political doctrine, was alien to his sharply perceptive, undisciplined, imaginative, exuberantly overflowing nature. In the late twenties he went through a spiritual crisis and became a fervent and even fanatical Marxist; he abandoned literary criticism, wrote a panegyric to Lenin – as being, among other things, a great prose writer – wrote the history of Russia conceived on the pattern of what was at the time of his conversion still the orthodox anti-individualist doctrine, returned to Russia to find that he had misjudged his moment, and found himself condemned for the heresy of being a follower of the then recently discredited Marxist historian, Pokrovsky.

In 1939 or 1940 Mirsky disappeared from view and was not heard of again in the West. There were, and are, many rumours about his fate. It is said that he died of disease; and again that he was politically 'liquidated', or that he was destroyed by a combination of both factors. In 1945 a rumour circulated in the foreign colony in Moscow that he was living in obscurity, according to some in Moscow, according to others in Central Asia. All that is certain is that, like Botticelli, he committed artistic suicide before he physically ceased to exist, and like the painter did so as the result of an acute crisis at the height of his creative powers.

His histories of literature were, however, composed while he was living abroad, before his conversion. They lack depth of genius but possess learning, elegance, wit, intellectual gaiety, and an incomparable style and sweep and power of communicating impressions and ideas with which no work on the subject in our own day can begin to compete. His judgments are often highly idiosyncratic: like the anti-materialists who dominated his youth he goes too far in damning the radical critics of the nineteenth

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century for confusing social and artistic criticism, for narrow moral and social priggishness, shapelessness, and verbosity. His tirades against the worthless are magnificent. Thus he attacks Merezhkovsky for being an author possibly not without gifts as a popular novelist but a bad writer and above all, repulsively false; this he does in language with a debased form of which recent Soviet criticism has made us all too familiar. Or again he suddenly praises the letters of Vladimir Solovev as being inferior only to those of Pushkin, for reasons not easy to grasp, and is liable at all moments to enunciate personal judgments with a reckless directness reminiscent of the early Shaw. But with all this his judgments are usually sharp, original, and to the point, and possess a combination of vigour and fastidious taste which may be taken in by the odd, the remote, the non-existent, but not by the second-rate; it may overlook the obvious, and enlarge splendidly upon imaginary virtues and vices, but recoils instinctively and very violently from the commonplace, the insipid, the drab, and the false.

The language in which Mirsky expressed himself in what was to him the foreign medium of English is a highly individual and uncompromising instrument, and succeeds in conveying the wonderful freshness of the still unexhausted Russian language itself, in which he must often have thought while composing the metaphors and similes and analogies are sometimes of a dazzling virtuosity, like the conversation of an inspired talker. Like all Russians he was moved to his greatest heights by Pushkin, on whom he had written a monograph – his English at such moments is wielded with a vitality and an originality as well as an astonishing skill to which only Vladimir Nabokov offers a parallel. In his book on contemporary Russian writers he spoke mainly of writers whom he knew well personally, and his opinions possessed the authenticity derived from personal relationships. His observations about such writers as Ivanov, Bal'mont and Blok, Annensky and Gumilev, Pasternak and Tsvetaeva, Mayakovsky, Akhmatova, and Mandel'shtam, are more interesting than anything else of the kind written in English.

The reader must not misunderstand me: Mirsky's books are exhilarating works of criticism, not textbooks; a great deal is omitted; the account of the Kiev and later medieval periods is sketchy to a degree whatever annoyed or bored the author was left out or dismissed with a string of casual epithets delivered with a typical *beau monde* breeziness. For solid pabulum there exist more

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reliable books in English, easily obtainable in American editions; but Mirsky's book will be read long after these excellent works are safely established on the reference shelves of libraries, for unlike them it comes near to being itself a literary masterpiece.

Despite the omission of such unique examples of Mirsky's 'reportage' as his 'interchapter' on the Russian literary scene in November, 1917, impressionist but brilliant paralipomena – regrettable in spite of the nearly, but only nearly, convincing reasons given by the editor, the new edition is a long overdue memorial to the last critical writer of a golden age. The form of education which made possible the world to which he belonged is dead and gone; the *douceur de vivre* which permeated it, founded though it was on intolerable social injustice, speaks in every line of Mirsky's prose. He lived in one of those critical 'inter-chapters' between two violently conflicting ages, when for a brief instant there occurs a blend of the civilised outlook of a dying aristocratic culture with radical political beliefs; of great refinement of taste and style with the conscience and rebelliousness of a new, more egalitarian age. Like Henri de St Simon and Alexander Herzen, like Prince Kropotkin and Bertrand Russell, like Justice Holmes and Franklin Roosevelt, Mirsky was a unique compound of inner freedom, imagination, charm, and an acute and fearless intelligence, only born at such moments, when the old is not yet dead and the new not yet in being, when there is a *détente* between the generations, *chargé du passé et gros de l'avenir*. Professor Whitfield has rendered a genuine service in reediting this text, even with the excisions which the publishers have exacted. He has revised facts and dates about which Mirsky is liable to be inaccurate; and his own final chapter, in which he attempts to bring up to date the facts about living Soviet writes, admirably tentative and noncommittal in the absence of dependable information, is exceedingly useful.

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