



The Furious Vissarion

Review of Herbert E. Bowman, *Vissarion Belinski*

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The Furious Vissarion

Review of Herbert E. Bowman, *Vissarion Belinski, 1811–1848: A Study in the Origins of Social Criticism in Russia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1954: Harvard University Press), *New Statesman and Nation* 50 (July–December 1955), 8 October, 447–8



Vissarion Belinsky by Kirill Antonovich Gorbunov, 1843

VISSARION BELINSKY, ‘the father of the Russian intelligentsia,’ has suffered a peculiar fate. For a decade after his death his name could not be mentioned within the confines of the Russian Empire without fear of reprisals. At the end of this period, and until the Revolution of 1917, his literary views could be – and were – freely discussed, but his social and political opinions could be referred to

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only in a cautious and circumspect manner. After the Revolution he was declared to be a precursor of Marxism, and all criticism of him became heretical and politically unwise. Since the 1930s his figure has been all but buried in his native country beneath a mountain of unreadable and semi-literate official Communist patter. Yet he deserves a better fate. For he is, by any standards, a great European critic.

He was born and brought up in penury in a remote provincial town, expelled from the University of Moscow for political radicalism and perhaps for lack of systematic knowledge, self-taught and tormented all his life by an acute sense of social and intellectual inferiority in the company of the gay, well-born, rich, self-confident and strikingly gifted young intellectuals who befriended him, condemned to earn his livelihood by endless hours of literary drudgery. Ugly, asthmatic, shy, quick to take offence, giving himself too easily to people and causes only to suffer inevitable shame and humiliation, Belinsky dominated the Russian literary world of his time, and, more than any other single person, transformed Russian critical and creative writing in the second half of the nineteenth century.

He wrote no major works; all that he did he did in haste, at the last moment, to meet the demands of editors and publishers, some of whom exploited him mercilessly. He wrote awkwardly, in difficult and shapeless sentences, without correcting, in a perpetual battle with the censorship. He sometimes talked nonsense, made blunders, and infuriated contemporary (and many later) Russian critics by the dogmatism, blindness and occasional ignorance and extravagance of his views. But what was plain for all to see, both in his lifetime and after, was that his attitude was in some way novel; that he had something to say; that he spoke with a degree of seriousness and a depth of feeling and moral force unique in any period.

Books, and the personalities and ideas of writers, were to him crucially important. All writing – whether creative or critical – was for him the most dedicated and responsible task a human being could undertake, for the sole purpose of it was to tell the truth to

others, which only those who were demonstrably incorruptible, both morally and intellectually, could be expected to attain; with the, for him, clear corollary that there exists no definable region of experience, called art, in which those who in other departments of their lives may be engaged in falsehood or moral compromise can, nevertheless (because art is not life), create masterpieces beyond the range of ethical judgement.

Belinsky's deepest concern, like that of most Russian writers of his own and later times, was personal and moral. He wished to discover how to live, what to do and what to believe, and he sought in literature the revelation that others had found in metaphysics or religion. His passion for literary quality was overwhelming, but it was not primarily aesthetic. With appalling absorption and directness he asked of every work and every writer what it was exactly that was being said; with what purpose; out of what inner impulse. What kind of world did it – or its creator – inhabit or bring into existence?

Every work (and every writer) for him possesses a nodal point – a centre of moral gravity – whence alone all its other properties can be determined. Only after this (as he believed) act of objective analysis has been accomplished can one ask whether what has been said is genuine or counterfeit, and why, and in what degree. Is the story, the situation, are the characters of the novel, the tragedy, the biography, so constructed as to present the play of life – with which alone creative art is concerned – in its fullest complexity and depth? Or has the writer deliberately left something out, evaded the central problem, betrayed his vision to serve some external, didactic or mercenary purpose, forced it into some preconceived metaphysical or aesthetic or, worse still, political pattern, prostituted his gifts and his feelings, inflated his words, and failed out of cowardice or stupidity, or out of sentimentality, or lack of patience or of integrity, or simply from lack of talent? And has this led him to sin against his sacred calling – the creation of the most beautiful objects, the discovery and incarnation of the truth as fully and vividly as possible?

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Belinsky applied these canons to Shakespeare, whom he worshipped; to Pushkin, whose unique domination over Russian national life he did more than any man to establish in eleven celebrated essays, written in haste, and at times badly, but as moving and original today as on their first appearance more than a century ago; to Gogol, whose genius he celebrated and alternately illuminated and misrepresented; to Lermontov, whom he understood and supported during the darkest period of his short and turbulent life; to Dostoevsky, whom he discovered, recognised at once as a writer of the first magnitude, and then derided and abandoned (but then Belinsky died in 1848); to Turgenev and Goncharov, whom he encouraged in their earliest beginnings. And in the course of this day-to-day journalism he invented the particular type of social criticism which played a vital role not merely in Russian literary history but in the unique development of Russian political ideas. Indeed the principles and ideals with which Belinsky's life and being – his habits, his physical appearance – were identified, became central in the conception of the liberal intellectual in Russia until his liquidation by the revolution.

Mr Bowman, in the course of his carefully written, lucid, modest and well-documented thesis, rightly stresses this, the ideological aspect of Belinsky's literary activity. The type of social criticism which Belinsky created, influenced though it was by German Romantic writers, consisted not in the search for ideal types of human character or situation, distilled quintessences against which actual persons and events in history can be measured, and in terms of which they can be classified; nor yet in didactic exercises, although both these elements are to be found in his work, and the latter has been exaggerated and travestied in Soviet accounts of his aims and influence.

It consisted rather in an impassioned anti-aesthetic and anti-theological humanism, in the final rejection of all frontiers between art and life, and in particular of the view that the work of art can – or, worse still, should – be examined as an object in and for itself, an artefact with a life and a value independent of its creator. He remained altogether out of sympathy with the mounting protest (at

any rate in the West) against the confusion of moral, aesthetic and social categories. On the contrary, particularly in his last phase, Belinsky saw in literature not words, nor patterns, nor manifestations of individual skill or intellect or imagination or willpower, but the expression of the life of specific associations of human beings in various stages of material and spiritual development, life in which one came face to face with individuals with directly perceptible temperaments, motives, activities, seeking to be something, to communicate something, and, if they were alive and not dead, struggling and suffering to achieve this.

For Belinsky to understand the quality, the style, of a work of art was to hear a voice – that of an individual or a group or an entire society (this is how he interpreted Schelling and Hegel to himself, both when he accepted and when he repudiated them). Unless one hears this voice one cannot begin to understand an individual or a process of thought or a form of life; neither understand nor assess nor ‘live through’ it. And unless the experience was lived through with the agonised intensity with which Belinsky did himself live through the poetry of Schiller or Goethe or Pushkin, or the philosophical ideas of Fichte or Hegel, one remained deaf and blind, outside the process of creation.

Criticism was to Belinsky unthinkable without an attempt, fraught with the utmost difficulty, calling for the completest possible self-obliteration on the part of the critic, to experience within oneself an alien structure of life, the inner vision, almost the nervous organisation of another – of the creative artist. Criticism was not contemplation, certainly it was not designed merely to give pleasure, least of all was it a formal or technical craft or skill. It was rather an act of painful self-adjustment to unfamiliar ideas, of attempting to inhabit a world created by another imagination. Without this all interpretation remained external and dead.

What the critic sees he must tell. Literature is first and foremost an activity of human beings, and nothing that affects their lives can, in principle, be alien to him. The critic is under no obligation to emphasise the social aspects of works of art or their psychological effect or moral content at the expense of their aesthetic qualities;

nor to concentrate upon ideas which may be embodied in them at the expense of their modes of expression or their form or texture, or the methods by which they are made. The critic's only duty is to tell the truth.

And since these social factors are, in fact, vital to a given work of art, the critic has no choice but to analyse them, and, if need be, judge them, in terms of the society whose voice the artist must of necessity claim to be (this Romantic notion is at the heart of all that Belinsky says). Works of art are not made of words, colours, sounds, but, in some sense, always with ideas and feelings and volitions; and if these are shallow and false, the work of art will not remain unaffected. To pretend that it is independent and 'objective' is self-deception, a perverse denial of the truth for the sake of a false aesthetic theory, false because it denies the light by which human beings in fact live (whether they admit it or not) for the sake of a preconceived distinction between life and thought, life and art. And this seemed to Belinsky false or frivolous, or both.

This preoccupation with moral issues did, of course, at times lead to absurdities. Belinsky's disparagement of medieval literature in general and of the *Divine Comedy* in particular, or his dislike for one of Pushkin's greatest masterpieces – *The Bronze Horseman* – because of its 'amoral' outlook, sprang from a fierce humanist bias which at times made him strike out blindly. But in his case this was almost always, in the end, compensated by his passionate instinctive love of poetry in all its manifestations; his exquisite natural taste; his complete freedom from all philistinism, pedantry, personal vanity, which after his infatuation with a particular system of ideas was over, invariably opened his eyes and induced shame and self-accusation. His depth, his sincerity and his inability to cling to anything which he did not feel, as well as believe, to be true, no matter against what authority, saved him always – but not, alas, his disciples – from moralism or falsification in the name of abstract principles. The intensity and authenticity of his effort to discover the truth breaks through the diffuse and heavy prose, and directly affects his reader, particularly in his letters, the most moving in Russian literature, beside which the great letters of the West –

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Byron's or Flaubert's – seem coldly contrived. This capacity for vivid, painfully truthful, emotionally unexaggerated self-revelation, and not his critical or moral theories, however profoundly believed, however characteristic of his class or age, is what marks him a critic of genius.

Belinsky remains at once the most representative and the most arresting figure in the history of the Russian intelligentsia. Turgenev, who knew and understood him, said that he lived near the heart of the life of his nation, and felt and gave voice to the deepest issues that agitated the Russian society of his time more unforgettably than subtler but more peripheral writers.

Because he committed himself too much and too often, Belinsky (like Rousseau) to this day excites the most violent opposition and the blindest devotion. His life and work remain the strongest single intellectual influence (not excluding Marxism) upon the evolution of ideas which culminated in the overthrow of the tsarist regime. It is a strange irony of fate that this uncouth and undisciplined man, the violent opponent of all orthodoxy and regimentation, tormented by doubts all his life, restlessly moving from one intellectual obsession to another, each time with a passionate hope that he had found the truth at last, and, in the end, painfully liberating himself from it; perpetually stumbling and falling and rising again, caring ultimately only for individual liberty, secular education, truth and free speech; dedicated to an unending battle against the arbitrary use of power and the despotism of the cut-and-dried systems of the Western ideologies; that this spontaneous, independent, morally uncompromising *homme révolté*, who was incapable of cheating either himself or others, and, therefore, quarrelled with both right and left in turn, should today be worshipped as one of the four patron saints of the Soviet state philosophy. Although he died over a century ago, the furious voice is audible still, a menace to every established faith.

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