NPC-2

Moscow State University
Moscow, U.S.S.R.
1 November 1984

I

The first real snow has fallen and melted. Russian belief has it that three snows must fall before winter is here to stay. In anticipation of winter, the season when the city comes alive, Muscovites are beginning to wear their fur hats. They expect the winter to be a severe one. The mountain ash trees are unusually laden with bright orange-red berries (riabina), a sure sign, they say, of a hard winter. In the parks which encircle the city and in the woods which surround the University territory, Russians are clipping whole branches of the berries to make mountain ash vodka (riabinovka), cognac, or simply to steep the berries in glasses of tea, the same way they steep spoonfuls of jam, chunks of apple, or hard candies.

Meanwhile, the Americans here in the University dormitory are beginning to go stir-crazy. Long hours in the library, difficult access to archives, frustrations in getting by in day-to-day living, and the isolation of life up on Lenin Hills are taking a toll. The lines in the cafeteria have grown longer now that the second-year students are back from the potato harvest (kartoshka). Intense friendships formed quickly in the first month and a half of dormitory living are breaking down and arguments are beginning. It is hardest of all for Westerners who have not yet met people to get them outside the "Emerald City" back into downtown Moscow in the evenings or out into the countryside during the weekends.

I have just returned to Moscow from ten days in the G.D.R.,[1] where I was invited to take part in a discussion on twentieth-century poetry by about sixty scholars and writers primarily from socialist countries. The meeting was held in Ahrenshoop, a tiny resort town in Mecklenburg on the Baltic Sea, about an hour's drive from Rostock. Five or six Britishers were there, some of whom are permanent residents of the G.D.R., and one other American. The meeting was to have included two Moscow scholars as well, but they apparently did not receive Soviet exit-reentry visas. I gave a talk on several analogous developments in contemporary Soviet and U.S. poetry and a reading of my poetry from the volume Explosion in the Puzzle Factory.[2] A second reading was given by Michael Harper, the other American present, who also gave a talk on Black literature in the United States.

It was a meeting of mixed alliances: G.D.R. and foreign, academics and writers, East and West, Party and non-Party. This mixture produced a continuing set of misplaced confidences, inadvertent tippings of the hand as the speaker at any given moment forgot who "we" were, with all our contradictions and fragile truces, and would look up to find the dreaded American among members of the

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socialist fraternity, or the G.D.R. citizen in a group of scholars from capitalist countries. However much we verbally stressed our common goals and assumptions, these unintentional slips made for an entertaining and revelatory exchange. One focus of bemused discussion was the fact that the only member of the "Moscow delegation" who had been permitted by the Soviet visa office to come was the American woman, yours truly. A good many wry comments were made on that subject by participants who had had their own difficulties in inviting their Soviet colleagues in the past.

I will not write here about my paper or the poems, though these may appear in a future report. The poetry reading itself went well: I was surprised that an audience primarily of non-native speakers were able to follow the work of a writer whom they did not know. One of the poems I read included several lines which parody the English song "Green Grow the Rushes-O!" ("I'll sing you one-o..."). As I was sitting around after the reading with two Britishers, both members of the Party, one in his early eighties, the other perhaps in his mid-forties, they both mentioned that they had in their respective youths sung a Party version of the same song, one of the many unofficial Party songs along the lines of "Harry Was a Bolshie," etc. Together the two men tried to reconstruct the Party version they had learned. The older of the two remembered the words best:

> Five for the years of the Five Year Plan,
> And four for the four great teachers,
> Three, three the Comintern,
> Two, two the two good hands
> Of the working man-o.
> One for the workers' unity
> And ever more shall be so!

The younger Britisher, disturbed at what he had heard, insisted that this was not yet quite right. He remembered a slightly different version. It went:

> Five for the years of the Five Year Plan,
> And four for the four well taken...

Gradually it became clear to the three of us that we were dealing here not merely with the traditional whims of the oral tradition, but with different generations of the Party, the first of which had lost track of the song somewhere long before 1956, whereas the second was unaware until this moment that an earlier version had existed.

The four-day meeting included heated discussions on the relationship between the politics and the poetry of both W.H. Auden and Ezra Pound. I will not attempt here to summarize them, the arguments being on the one hand familiar reiterations of late Engels (correspondence with Margaret Harkness among others) and early Lenin (Party Organization and Party Literature), and on the other hand too dependent on a specific understanding of specific texts to be discussed briefly here. Instead, I will turn to the other aspects of my stay in the G.D.R.

II

The problem with writing about the G.D.R. is that only two topics matter: the Wall and the War. One is of overwhelming importance to Western notions of that country, the other of at least equal importance to the East. Any other topic appears marginal and superficial whenever those two topics are not being addressed: no amount of writing about them is adequate and not writing about them is also inadequate. A Soviet taxi driver who drove me from Moscow's Sheremet'evo Airport into the city several years ago put it most succinctly. Learning I had flown in from the G.D.R., he shook his head disapprovingly: "Ne khorosho" ("Bad"). Asked what was bad, he didn't answer for about ten minutes. Eventually he pointed to a Trabant, the most inexpensive G.D.R. car, sometimes seen on the streets of Moscow. "See that car?" he said, "Twenty million of us died so that car could drive on our Moscow streets."

It must be said here, however, that the Soviet focus on the War and the U.S. focus on the Wall as the exclusively significant emblems of the G.D.R. are profoundly different in nature. However much we in the U.S. rage against the Wall's existence, however much we empathize with the lives of the seventeen million inhabitants who live within its confines, the Wall's presence since 1961 is not our tragedy: it exists in the American consciousness as a symbol of imprisonment, not the reminder of the experience of imprisonment. In this sense, our 1961 and the Soviet 1945 are two radically different failures to deal with the present-day complexity of that culture. It strikes me that ours is by far the more primitive of the two: as the airplane circles Berlin and the Western tourists, trying to spot the dividing line, lurch back and forth across the aisles, one cannot help but wonder what they have learned once they have located the material object itself. Thus, the Wall is not only significant in the West as the most convincing proof of the failure of Socialism. It is in a broader sense proof of the victory of matter over mind: we talk and it continues to exist.[4]

While I was living in the G.D.R. in 1979-80, I visited a friend in the Pankow section of Berlin, one block from the Wall. It was Christmas time and on the other side of the city, in Berlin West, you could see the tall buildings decorated with Christmas lights. As I stood looking at the lights, a group of tourists, presumably West German, appeared on a wooden platform, built on the other side just above the Wall, so that Westerners could climb up and look down at life inside. They stood there and watched, some with small binoculars that they had been wise enough to bring with them. One man waved at me standing in the street below. I waved back. Several more waved in response. Another man began beckoning me with his arm: "Come on over ! It's better!" I couldn't really think of anything to say. After a while they all climbed down, presumably back to their bus. I had become their experience of the Wall, their resident captive. Given this and other such experiences, it gradually no longer surprised me to hear my G.D.R. friends speak among themselves with real hostility and contempt for their Western acquaintances and even--or especially--their own relatives from the Federal Republic.

What did surprise me this time, however, was the extent to which this dislike of West Germans, more specifically of the West German perceptions of the G.D.R., can unite G.D.R. citizens otherwise of diametrically opposed political views. The clearest example of this is the extraordinary popularity among my G.D.R. acquaintances, friends, and close friends, both within academia and outside it, of Honecker's decision to cancel his plans for a September visit to West Germany. Like virtually all G.D.R. citizens who live west of the Erzgebirge, they listen to Western radio and can usually receive Western television. They are not ignorant of the kinds of economic, military, and cultural pressure which the Soviets exercise on the leaders of their country, any more than they are unaware of pressures from the West. They accept without argument the likelihood that the Soviets played a decisive role in the cancellation. The impact of that cancellation, however, the way in which it is talked about in the kitchens, taverns, and coffee houses is as a successful assertion of independence from West Germany.

It is easy and, I think, specious to dismiss this opinion as the indoctrinated view of a captive people. Whatever their lived reality, their access to daily news from east and west is in fact greater than our own. And as for their lived reality, it is, paradoxically, not the occupying forces but the neighboring ones which have had the greater cultural impact. Of the 400,000 Soviet troops stationed there, no one below the officer level is permitted or seen on the streets. Social contact with other Soviets is minimal. Cultural exchange is formal and institutionalized (the House of German-Soviet Friendship, Soviet Film Week, and so forth). Soviet goods other than tourist gifts are not present in G.D.R. stores. The Russian language, though taught from the fifth grade on, is spoken intelligibly by virtually no one. What I am describing here is not anti-Soviet sentiment per se, as in the Soviet Baltic republics, but rather the virtual irrelevance on a day-to-day level of the issue of Soviet cultural imperialism when compared to West German influence. The greater sense of personal threat, as well as personal desire, comes from the constant presence of West German consumer wealth, witnessed by the G.D.R. citizen when the Western relatives come to visit, when they themselves enter the hard-currency Intershops, and when they watch the advertisements in between Western news broadcasts. In this sense, the very medium which informs the G.D.R. viewer—quite correctly—that the Soviets influence the G.D.R. leaderships's decisions is the same medium which contributes to that viewer's sense of victory when the trip is cancelled.

I do not minimize the importance of Western coverage of the cancellation, nor am I presenting the concensus I encountered as—mutatis mutandi—the "real" truth, nor am I in fact denying that the citizens' reactions themselves are manipulated, however well-informed they are from both sides. What I am arguing is that the impact of this foreign policy decision on domestic policy was very much to Honecker's advantage, quite the contrary from what Western press coverage I have been able to read (Time, Newsweek, The Herald Tribune). The people I spoke with were not ashamed that their leader "bowed to Moscow" (to expect that they would be ashamed is to graft Poland onto the G.D.R.), but rather were amused and pleased that he would stand up to the West Germans, regardless of whether the decision came from Moscow. We do not need to agree with this perception to recognise the impor-

tance of including it in Western analysis. In fact, I suppose, the very support for Honecker's cancellation is a statement of the extent to which G.D.R. citizens feel that relations between the two Germanies have stabilized to the point where Honecker can afford such a move.

If we in the West have tended to treat the G.D.R. as a kind of aquarium into which we peer, foreign visitors to that country have been built their own aquarium, a culture within a culture. The separation within the G.D.R. between citizens of East and West was previously maintained by a sense of threat; increasingly it is now maintained by the construction of luxury ghettos for foreigners in all major cities of the G.D.R. Within these hotels, only hard currency--dollars, D-marks, francs--are accepted, whether for a meal, a Western newspaper, or for G.D.R. stamps. Since all services are provided, including those unobtainable outside, there is no "real" reason to go beyond the revolving door. And so one can speak not only of two German cultures in the international arena, but also of two German cultures within the G.D.R. itself. One subsists on G.D.R. marks, and, when possible, on D-marks; the other on D-marks and, when necessary, G.D.R. marks. One speaks German and fractured Russian; the other, German and fractured English. One lives in apartments unless assigned to hotel rooms; the other in hotels where, to rewrite Marx, there are simulated bird songs in the morning, classical snippets in the afternoon, and "The Girl from Ipanema" in the evening, where every unaccompanied woman is a hard-currency woman, where the clothing is made of leather, where the service sector is melancholy at its failure to do enough for you, where everything you drink is poured from one vessel to another before being given to you, where everything Western--liquor, cigarettes, newspapers--is provided except women and television. For Western television, a special aerial would have to be erected on top of the hotel and that, for some reason, is unacceptable. About the other, I am not qualified to speak.

I stayed at various times in two such hotels, in the apartments of friends, and once in a vacation hostel for G.D.R. citizens. There, needless to say, things were a lot sparser, though not so different from provincial hotels in Scotland or northern F.R.G. As tourists from capitalist countries, we are normally assigned only to the first-class hotels, and therefore have little access to the way the G.D.R. vacationer lives.

III

One of my intentions in going to the G.D.R. this time was to visit the Johannes R. Becher Literary Institute in Leipzig. The Literary Institute, established in 1955, six years after the founding of the G.D.R., followed the model of the A.M. Gor'kii Literary Institute, established in 1934. It is a university-level institution for the education and, of course, ideological training of young writers. At various points in their respective histories, these two Institutes have had a variety of other goals as well: the fight against illiteracy, the development of a workers' literature, the encouragement of literature by non-Russian ethnic minorities. The present-day Director, Prof. Rudolf Gehrke, with whom I met during my stay in Leipzig, sees the Becher Institute as providing one way for young writers to develope their skills, to get a university

education, and to prepare for a job involving literary production, whether as an editor, journalist, poet, or translator. The job might involve part-time work, for example, writing informational brochures for a particular enterprise and the remaining time left free for writing fiction.

Twenty writers are chosen from about sixty to a hundred applications to pursue a three-year education that includes creative writing seminars, lectures on classical and contemporary German literature, Soviet literature, Marxism-Leninism, aesthetics, music history, art history, world literature, literary criticism, and that untranslatable German topic Kulturwissenschaft (cultural studies, I suppose). From conversations with students, former students, lecturers, and with the Director, I gather that the creative writing seminars are conducted for the most part in the same manner as our own: students bring in work in progress and read it to their seminar group, who in turn provide comments and discussion of the text. Occasionally, specific written pieces are assigned. Students are expected to work in all three forms--prose, poetry, and drama--as well as literary criticism and essays. Each incoming class studies for three years and graduates before the next class is admitted.

Their period of study includes not only lectures and seminars, but also physical work. The students spend part of their first year in a local brown coal enterprise, the second in an agricultural collective, and the third in a publishing or printing firm. Prof. Gehrke stressed repeatedly that the purpose of this physical work was not the production of proletarian novels, that the students' scant experience was not sufficient for any complex understanding of the factory as a whole. Its purpose, he maintained, was to provide the opportunity for some kind of work experience radically different from the cloistered atmosphere of the Literary Institute, in part a recognition that the Institute model is as confining to the writer as it is supportive.

In addition to this program of direct study, the Institute provides two other programs, the first a correspondence program, whereby about sixty participants, chosen from an average of 150 applicants, may regularly send their work in to the Institute faculty for comment. At six week intervals the correspondence course students spend two to four days at the Institute for an intensive series of consultations and lectures.

A third program exists for older writers, including many graduates of the Institute. They are released from their normal work several days a month to participate in a Sonderkurs of seminars, lectures, and discussions. They receive an honorarium which covers the costs of their participation, often a welcome sum for the freelance writers among them. This program does not lead to a degree: it is intended to bring writers, particularly those who do not live in big cities or within a literary community, back into intensive contact with their fellow writers. During my visit, one such meeting was going on, attended, among others, by the Sorbian writer Angela Stachowa, whose feminist prose pieces ("In diesem Winter," for example) have attracted considerable interest, and the poet Heinz Czechowski (Was mich betrifft, 1981), a G.D.R. writer who went West and then returned to live in the G.D.R.

As might be expected, there is considerable disagreement in the literary community at large about the value of such an Institute. While a number of well-respected G.D.R. writers have studied there, including Adolf Endler, Rainer and Sarah Kirsch (now in the West), Max Walter Schulz, and Hans Weber,[5] no one, not even the Institute staff itself, would argue that their talent was the result of an Institute education. Like the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, it is a place where young writers can come into direct contact and discussion with their readers as well as with older writers, scholars, and critics. I plan in a future report to discuss its Moscow counterpart, the Gor'kii Literary Institute, which recently has celebrated its fiftieth anniversary.

Back in Moscow now, the second snow of the winter has been falling all morning and the ground is covered. By the time this report is distributed the U.S. elections will be over. I will include some discussion of their impact here next month, although I must say that there is virtually no interest on the part of most Russians. Reagan's victory is a foregone conclusion and the mood is very glum about the future of Soviet-American relations. The greatest tension is in fact among the Americans here on Lenin Hills. The "second-month malaise," which in my experience reproduces itself in every American group over here, is exacerbated by political splits over the upcoming elections. Those Americans who would approach their Soviet experiences with a willingness to accept at face value stated Soviet norms and values are conscience-striken at being from the same country as Reagan. Those who would maintain a consistently critical view of life here are repulsed by the "genteel radicalism" of their compatriots. The coincidence of the November 7th celebration of the October Revolution, in which some of the Americans here would like to participate, and the November 6th U.S. elections, in which others of the Americans would like to participate, is almost more than civil intercourse can stand.

Nancy Condee

Notes

[1]The German Democratic Republic, or G.D.R., is usually referred to by Americans as East Germany. Even that country's more pro-Western citizens bristle at this latter name, which, to their minds, is only slightly less insulting than the older term, "Soviet occupied zone." The name G.D.R. is for them not an acceptance of official rhetoric, as it sounds to our ears, but rather an acknowledgement of that country's existence as a valid social and cultural entity, distinct from, if dependent on both West Germany and the Soviet Union.

[2]Nancy Condee, Explosion in the Puzzle Factory (Providence: Burning Deck Press, 1983). The paper on contemporary U.S. and Soviet poetry will appear in the forthcoming volume Anspruch des Jahrhunderts (Rostock: Wilhelm Pieck Universität, 1985).

[3]I leave the identities of the teachers to the imagination of the reader.

[4]Rather than giving an introduction to the entire country here, I would refer interested readers to several books which have appeared in English. I do not have full bibliographical information at hand, but will list what I have: Henry Krisch, The German Democratic Republic: A Profile (Westview, 1982); Peter C. Ludz, The German Democratic Republic from the Sixties to the Seventies: A Sociopolitical Analysis (Harvard University Center for International Affairs. Occasional Papers in International Affairs: No. 26), reprint of 1970 ed. (AMS); Eberhard Schneider, The German Democratic Republic: The History, Politics, Economy, and Society of East Germany (St. Martin, 1978); Johnathan Steele, Inside East Germany: The State That Came In From the Cold (Urizen, 1977); Gerhard Wettig, Community and Conflict in the Socialist Camp, 1965-1972: The Soviet Union, the German Democratic Republic, and the Soviet Problem (St. Martin, 1975); Lawrence L. Whetten, Germany East and West: Conflicts, Collaboration and Confrontation (New York University Press, 1981).

[5]Hans Weber was recently a guest of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. While no Soviet writer has yet attended, three G.D.R. writers have been able to come, including John Erpenbeck and Wolfgang Kohlhaase.

Received in Hanover 11/13/84