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Literary Rank and File

Everyone wrote poetry, mostly about
the universe.

—Ilya Erenburg¹

I

Moscow is preparing for the New Year celebration. Christmas is not celebrated here, either officially or, broadly speaking, unofficially. Members of the Russian Orthodox Church celebrate the Christmas holiday not on December 25th, but on January 7th, according to the Old Style, or Julian calendar. Asked repeatedly in the past weeks when our Christmas is by Russians who clearly had no notion of what it involved (one taxi driver insisted that American Christmas was January 7th and that New Year's was not celebrated at all), I am struck by the contradiction of a society simultaneously so close to European culture and so ignorant of its most common holiday. In fact, many of the Christmas rituals were simply taken over as New Year rituals, including the New Year's tree and the tradition of gift-giving.

The New Year's trees are not easy to come by. One friend of mine, the father of a five-year-old girl, was up at five to wait in line in the open-air market. Once a tree is acquired, bringing it home is another challenge in a society with relatively few automobiles. Trees turn up in the oddest places. They can be seen riding the metro, going up and down the escalator, coming in from the suburbs on the train. Two days ago, coming back to the dormitory, I passed one riding in a Zil, the long, black car reserved for the highest Soviet officials. It was sitting in the front seat next to the chauffeur. The back seat was empty.

¹ Ilya Erenburg (1891-1967) was a Soviet novelist and correspondent in Western Europe for Soviet newspapers. His novel The Thaw (Ottepel', 1954), which anticipated the de-Stalinization measures after the Twentieth Party Congress (1956), gave its name to that period of liberalization. His memoirs, People, Years, Life (Liudi, gody, zhizn', 1961-66), had a tremendous impact on young members of the technical intelligentsia, educating them about aspects of twentieth-century Russian culture that had been suppressed during the Stalin era. This quotation comes from the biography Ilya Erenburg: Writing, Politics, and the Art of Survival, written by the BBC commentator Anatol Goldberg (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984), p. 107.

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II

With all the scarcities that exist here--meat, men's boots, file folders, toilet paper, boric acid (thought to be an effective roach poison)--one item that is never in short supply is creative writing. No statistics exist on the subject; nevertheless, to suggest that every fourth Russian is actively engaged in writing a short story, verses, or a one-act play is undoubtedly to err on the conservative side. In terms of official writers alone, that is to say, members of the Soviet Writers' Union, the number has grown to well over 8,000.² At a recent reading given in honor of his sixtieth birthday, the writer Vladimir Soloukhin³ estimated current membership at 9,000, with 2,000 of those writers in Moscow alone. And so the gigantomachy carried on between the literary bureaucrats of the Union and a handful of errant writers, some of whom are Union members, the literary process for better or worse goes on. Given the plethora of manuscripts and the certainty with which Russian writers pronounce each other and themselves to be the modern-day Bulgakov, Tsvetaeva, or Chekhov,⁴ the literary scholar and critic finds the task of reading only a fraction of the manuscripts that pass hand-to-hand overwhelming, and quickly turns to a different approach entirely, namely consulting acquaintances in publishing houses, editorial offices, and those writers whose opinions, though mutually contradictory, can transcend the immediate goal of oral self-aggrandisement.

At the lowest level, every medium-sized enterprise, factory, school, publishing house, institute, library, and rural newspaper office has a literary circle (kruzhok), open to anyone who wishes to write, to read manuscripts,

² This estimation is cited by N.N. Schneidman in Soviet Literature in the 1970's: Artistic Diversity and Ideological Conformity (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), p. xi.

³ Vladimir Soloukhin (1924-), Soviet poet and prose writer, is a representative of the rural school of writers. His two best-known works are The Back Roads of the Vladimir District (Vladimirskie proselki, 1957) and Letters from the Russian Museum (Pis'ma iz russkogo muzeia, 1966).

⁴ Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940), prose writer and dramatist, is best known for his novel Master and Margarita (Master i Margarita, written 1928-40, published 1966-67). Marina Tsvetaeva (1892-1941), poet, emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1922 and returned in 1939. Her works include Evening Album (Vechernyi al'bom, 1910), Craft (Remeslo, 1923), After Russia (Posle Rossii, 1928). Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), dramatist and prose writer, wrote The Gull (Chaika, 1895), Three Sisters (Tri sestry, 1901), and The Cherry Orchard (Vishnevyy sad, 1904).

and to exchange opinions.⁵ The literary circle, conducted by a member of the Writers' Union, a teacher of literature, a university graduate who had majored in philology, or simply a fellow worker, is one of several such groups (chess, sewing, et cetera) intended to give employees the opportunity for harmless leisure-time activities, individual self-expression, and social contact with colleagues. Although talented writers do emerge from such circles—I am reminded of the example of the poet Bella Akhmadulina (born 1937), who, before her admission to the Gor'kii Literary Institute for young writers, participated in a writing circle at an automobile factory—these circles are usually described with bemused condescension by more established writers, both official and unofficial.

The benefit of such artistic expression, as well as the regenerative function of writing, however, is by and large reserved for that sector of Soviet society viewed by the state as demonstrably adjusted, healthy, and normal. And herein lies a major difference between Soviet and U.S. notions of who, besides established writers, should be encouraged to write. In the U.S. we writers are not invited to conduct writing courses in local factories, offices, or research institutes. For many reasons, among them the exigencies of private enterprise and the function of literature in American society, the idea verges on the absurd. We do occasionally have the opportunity to earn honoraria outside the university community by conducting such courses in prisons, psychiatric hospitals, or for other groups that have become socially marginalized. The assumption presumably is that the act of writing itself as a form of expression is in some sense rehabilitative and could, in individual instances, return the amateur writer to a more normal way of life, that is, to the company of those who do not write, who have had no encouragement, interest in, or need for writing, and who would just as soon have the funding for such writing workshops reallocated to more sensible uses. Unless such chance rehabilitation occurs, however, the writer-teacher may safely earn several weeks honorarium payments, quietly hoping that the theory of art therapy, both dubious and sustaining, will continue to be an unresolved issue.

⁵ In addition to the literary circle, an enterprise might arrange other direct or indirect ties with the Writers' Union. I recently attended at the Central House of Litterateurs an evening of poetry and discussion between the editorial board of the journal Moscow (Moskva) and workers and management from the Lenin Komsomol Automobile Factory. The official writers present were, to put it mildly, a mixed lot: among others, the conservative poet Egor Isaev, the young parodist Aleksandr Ivanov, and a gifted, but unknown poet from the provinces, Tat'iana Smertina. The factory's circle, known by the Russian initials for the factory, AZLK, has published work in the journals Moscow, Youth (Iunost'), and in the almanach for young poets Sources (Istoki). I will not comment on the quality of the writing; I am concerned here simply with the fact that the phenomenon exists, different from the structures of literature we know in the U.S.

In the Soviet Union, on the other hand, the prisons and psychiatric hospitals (along with the Gor'kii Literary Institute) are among the few places where one does not find a literary circle. The idea of a writing circle in a Soviet prison is at least as absurd as the idea of one in the IBM executive offices, for very different reasons, of course. Imagination and individual self-expression are a risky business here, in a sense, part of the problem. Part of the rehabilitative solution is the reestablishment of social and collective norms. It is one thing for the average Soviet citizen to write a short story about lived reality; it is, to put it gently, quite another for the incarcerated citizen. An acquaintance of mine, a writer who among other tasks serves on the editorial board of the prisoners' journal For a New Life (Za novuiu zhizn'), reacted with astonishment as I described the collections of stories, poems, and illustrations put together by the inmates of a Massachusetts penitentiary. When I asked him, admittedly with feigned naiveté, what function his journal served if not as an outlet for prisoners' writings, he explained that it contained stories by former prisoners, intended to serve by example to rehabilitate their readers. When I suggested that part of the rehabilitative process might include the act of describing the experience of incarceration, he spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness: "They are, after all, deprived of their rights." To each society its own contradictions.

At a somewhat more advanced level of writing skills than the literary circle are seminars conducted for young writers at branches of the Writers' Union. Admission to these seminars is based on submitted manuscripts and autobiographical materials. The writer who is to conduct the seminar may construct the "profile" of such a seminar, based on applicants' geographical background, age, profession, and so forth. Recently my American friend Volodya Padunov and I were invited to attend a meeting of such a seminar, held once a week for several hours at a branch of the Moscow Writers' Organization, part of the Russian division of the Soviet Writers' Union. We arrived late, together with the writing teacher, a friend of ours. The participants were already assembled, some fourteen people—four women, ten men—between the ages of twenty-five and forty. The seminar meetings are sometimes devoted to discussions of literature, sometimes to discussions of participants' short prose manuscripts, submitted in several copies and distributed among members of the seminar.

This evening's meeting was devoted to a discussion of a short story entitled "The Sender" ("Adressant") by Oleg B., a pale, blond man in his early thirties. The story, which I had managed to read quickly just before the seminar, was a verbal portrait, written in a subdued, understated style reminiscent of Chekhov's stories, of a smug, pedantic office worker named Eduard Matveevich. Having read in a major literary journal a story that displeased him, Eduard Matveevich sets about writing a letter to the editors, pointing out to them the artistic shortcomings of the story. The letter, which Eduard Matveevich writes covertly in the office while he is supposed to be working, is couched in the most worn-out clichés of Socialist Realism, the official aesthetic theory of Soviet literature: the need for a positive hero, the social obligation of the writer to express a firm, clear position, et cetera. By shifting the reader's attention from this letter to the office in which Eduard Matveevich works, and back to

the letter, Oleg sets up a parallel between Eduard Matveevich's own work and the "flawed" work of the fictional author. Fearful of taking a position on issues at work, yet quick to criticize the author for the absence of a critical stance in his writing, Eduard Matveevich is a man whose high ideals exist as a nomenclature for the failures of others. The story ends with the conclusion of Eduard Matveevich's letter. Filled with a sense of victory for having demolished the ill-fated writer, whose work we in fact never read, Eduard Matveevich hopes that his own letter will be published in the journal. Then, he daydreams, his co-workers, whom he disdains, but whose admiration he nevertheless seeks, will notice his name, and, more important, the bosses will think highly of him.

As a descriptive piece, the story was both carefully and cleverly done. It was a typical "writing seminar" story: writing about writing, with a field of landmines for his most immediate audience, other members of the seminar. We as the readers and critics of his piece that evening were presented with a portrait of an arrogant, petty reader-critic and invited to express our views--the perfect writer's revenge.

The seminar began with introductions. Volodya Padunov and I were presented to the group as Americans interested in contemporary literature and literary theory; I was introduced as a poet. To my surprise and panic, the teacher then announced that Volodya and I would serve tonight as "opponents" (oppon-enty), one of several carefully defined tasks in Soviet academic role-playing. Its value is specifically the tearing apart of a written piece, as part of a lengthier discussion of its merits and demerits. I was, to say the least, caught off guard, and judging by the pallor of Volodya's face, he was also not delighted at the prospect. We had been invited merely to attend and were told, when handed the manuscript only hours before, that we might make a few comments if we wished.

In response, a whoop of glee went up from the crowd, eager to have an otherwise staid discussion turn into a fray, especially one in which they could remain safely on the sidelines: "Congratulations !" they cried, clapping Oleg on the back, as if he had been announced the father of triplets, "the Americans are going to give it to you ! How nice !" Pale and grim, we three exchanged glances, condemned prisoners of the teacher's mischief. To be fair, I must acknowledge that it was not malice on the teacher's part, but delight in the opportunity of putting his friends on the spot.

Oleg began to read his story. It was about thirteen double-spaced pages. I had hoped to use that time to organize my comments, but he read at a speed faster than human thought, and within ten minutes he was finished. The teacher turned to the crowd and asked, "Questions ?" The crowd was gleefully silent, except for the nervous shuffling of feet and paper. I was on.

Given the scathing portrait of the reader-critic, who gave no thought to anything by the imposition of external, "eternal" standards of art, I began my comments by describing what I saw as the tasks Oleg had set himself in the story, essentially, how the story was made. I talked about the development of the parallels between the hero-technocrat's work and the

fictional writer's work, as well as the implications of that comparison; the double narrative, which shifts from the hero's letter to the hero's workplace. I criticized what I saw as inconsistencies in Eduard Matveevich's speech patterns, specifically ways in which he addresses colleagues for whom he has no respect. I discussed at some length the development in the hero's internal speech from initial distrust and fear of the fictional author to a sense of victory and contempt that mirrored the hero's disdain for his fellow workers. In short, I said, I liked the story.

Volodya talked about the multiple layers within the story and about its multiple texts: the text of the story, of the letter, of the story about which the letter is written, and, finally, of the meaningless excerpted quotations with which the hero buttresses his letter. Volodya commented on the different forms of speech--direct, indirect, and quasi-indirect (the author paraphrasing the hero's speech, using turns of phrase characteristic of the hero himself)--and the moments of transition from one to another. He suggested ways in which some of these transitions could be made more effective, and concluded by stressing that he, too, had enjoyed the work.

The writing teacher, disgruntled that "our opponents have turned out to be apologists," handed the discussion over to the participants of the seminar. They were critical of the piece, more critical than in most writing seminars I have either taught or participated in. Oleg was told that the portrayal of the minor characters was insufficient, that the hero's motivation for writing his letter was unclear, that the story was too long for its modest content, that the story lacked life, that it should be rewritten so as to stress its grotesque elements, that the ending should be more unpredictable. Repeatedly, he was told by his fellow writers that "this is not a real problem," that "we" have outgrown this issue, that no one, not even Eduard Matveevich, could any longer still believe in the necessity of a positive hero.

What I admired about these comments was their forthrightness: his colleagues who did not like the story said so, flat out, and explained why, simply and without malice. Coming from a society that stresses close reading, I did not like the fact that the comments that were made at no point addressed the printed page, specific flaws or strong points, specific changes that could be made. Their comments were rather a set of outspoken impressions, sufficient coming from an average reader, but less helpful than a practicing writer is capable of being, given each of our experiences in putting a work together.

The next stage of this ordeal was the summary of comments. The teacher reviewed the reactions, favorable and unfavorable. He asked the participants about the literary antecedents for the story. Immediately, the response came from several places around the table: Chekhov and the tradition of the insignificant man. The teacher used that response to underscore the validity of the criticism that the story had nothing new to say, but insisted that its contribution lay elsewhere, in its depiction of the modern-day insignificant man's attempt to correct in others' behavior those failures that are first and foremost his very own: the critique of poor writing that is itself poorly

written, the criticism of shoddy work and lack of courage in a letter written by a cowardly technocrat during work hours. In one of those breathtaking leaps that Russians of any political persuasion are able to make from the personal to the political, or from the individual to the state, he alluded to the reforms that Andropov attempted to introduce, reforms intended to ensure workers be paid according to the quality of their work, and that they engage in work during work hours. It seemed to me at that moment that those present became tense, undecided, first, whether the speaker was serious, and, second, whether they wanted to take him seriously; perhaps undecided, too, whether the words were spoken because two Americans were present. Looking around the table, I guessed that the reasons varied.

At last Oleg himself was permitted to speak, and it was only then that I had a glimpse of the kind of pressure he had been under. In a brief, impassioned outburst, he asserted that the story had been misinterpreted by everyone present, that it was not about the insignificant man, that the comments had not been helpful, that the work had yet to receive a decent reading. As Oleg subsided and as the others tried to calm him down, the teacher spoke up in support of Oleg's right to reject the comments, stressing that none of them, either in the seminar or in the future, was under any obligation to give weight to any comments made of a piece they had written. The important question was not whether to rewrite it in response to criticism, but to ask what had given rise to the comments, where they had come from.

The formal part of the evening behind us, we talked informally about writing seminars in the two countries. I briefly described the location of such courses in the English Departments of American universities, about the model of the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, dating back to 1922, and about the Breadloaf Writers' Conference, where more experienced writers can attend seminars, submit manuscripts for comments by well-known writers, and meet with editors, agents, and publishers. One man asked how it was that young American writers tend to break through, what path do they follow? To be honest, I answered, I thought it depended at least as much on professional contacts as it did on good writing. A guffaw broke out from the participants: "Isn't that lovely? Just like here."

Finally, the evening was turned over to the starosta or elected representative of the seminar, a man slightly older than the rest. He had recently attended a meeting of such representatives. He gave us a brief report, including an announcement on how to get published ("We know, we know: 'write better,'" muttered one cynic). An almanach of stories was being put together by the publishing house Moscow Worker, and each writing seminar was invited to submit work by three writers, chosen by the seminar teacher. The publishing house had only one pre-condition: submitted stories must contain a positive hero. A groan went up from around the table. "Now, now," the starosta tried to calm them, "just take him and put him down," a pun on "put down" ("polozhi") and "positive hero" ("polozhitel'nyi geroi"). Only Oleg smiled ironically, held up his manuscript, and said quietly, "You see, folks? It's all here."


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