

Catastrophes in the Air ¹

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Il y a des remèdes à la sauvagerie primitive; li n'y en a point à la manie de paraître ce qu'on n'est pas.

Marquis de Custrine, *Lettres de Russie*

1

Because of the volume and quality of Russian fiction in the nineteenth century, it's been widely held that the great Russian prose of that century has automatically, by pure inertia, wandered into our own. From time to time, in the course of our century, here and there one could hear voices nominating this or that writer for the status of the Great Russian Writer, purveyor of the tradition. These voices were coming from the critical establishment and from Soviet officialdom, as well as from the intelligentsia itself, with a frequency of roughly two great writers per decade.

During the postwar years alone – which have lasted, blissfully, so far – a minimum of half a dozen names have filled the air. The forties ended with Mikhail Zoshchenko and the fifties started with the rediscovery of Babel. Then came the thaw, and the crown was temporarily bestowed upon Vladimir Dudintsev for his *Not by Bread Alone*. The sixties were almost equally shared by Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* and by Mikhail Bulgakov's revival. The better part of the seventies obviously belong to Solzhenitsyn; at present what is in vogue is so-called peasant prose, and the name most frequently uttered is that of Valentin Rasputin.

Officialdom, though, it should be noted in all fairness, happens to be far less mercurial in its preferences: for nearly fifty years now it has stuck to its guns, pushing Mikhail Sholokhov. Steadiness paid off – or rather a huge shipbuilding order placed in Sweden did – and in 1965 Sholokhov got his Nobel Prize. Still, for all this expense, for all muscle of the state on the one hand and agitated fluctuation of the intelligentsia on the other, the vacuum projected by the great Russian prose of the last century into this one doesn't seem to get filled. With every passing year, it grows in size, and now that the century is drawing to its close, there is a growing suspicion that Russia may exit the twentieth century without leaving great prose behind.

It is a tragic prospect, and a Russian native doesn't have to look feverishly around for where to put the blame: the fault is everywhere, since it belongs to the state. Its ubiquitous hand felled the best, and strangled the remaining second-rate into pure mediocrity. Of more far-reaching and disastrous consequence, however, was the state-sponsored emergence of a social order whose

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depiction or even criticism automatically reduces literature to the level of social anthropology. Even that presumably would be bearable had the state allowed writers to use in their palette either the individual or collective memory of the preceding, i.e., abandoned, civilization: if not as the direct reference, then at least in the guise of the stylistic experimentation. With that tabooed, Russian prose quickly deteriorated into the debilitated being's flattering self-portrayal. A caveman began to depict his cave; the only indication that this still was art was that, on the wall, it looked more spacious and better lit than in reality. Also, it housed more animals, as well as tractors.

This sort of thing was called "socialist realism" and nowadays it is universally mocked. But as is often the case with irony, mockery here considerably subtracts from one's ability to grasp how it was possible for a literature to plummet, in less than fifty years, from Dostoevsky to the likes of Bubennov or Pavlenko. Was this a direct consequence of a new social order, of a national upheaval that overnight reduced people's mental operation to the level where the consumption of garbage became instinctive? (Enter and exeunt Western observers salivating over the Russians' proclivity to read books while riding public transportation.) Or wasn't there perhaps some flaw in the very literature of the nineteenth century that precipitated that dive? Or was it simply a matter of ups and downs, of a vertical pendulum pertinent to the spiritual climate of any nation? And is it legitimate to ask such questions anyway?

It *is* legitimate, and especially in a country with an authoritarian past and totalitarian present. For unlike the subconscious, the superego is expected to be vocal. To be sure, the national upheaval that took place in Russia in this century has no parallel in the history of Christendom. Similarly, its reductive effect on the human psyche was unique enough to enable the rulers to take about a "new society" and a "new type of a man." But then it was precisely the goal of the whole enterprise: to uproot the species spiritually to the point of no return; for how else can you build a genuinely new society? You start neither with the foundation nor with the roof: you start by making new bricks.

What took place, in other words, was an unprecedented anthropological tragedy, a genetic backslide whose net result is a drastic reduction of human potential. To quibble about it, to use political-science mumbo-jumbo here is misleading and unnecessary. Tragedy is history's chosen genre. Had it not been for literature's own resilience, we wouldn't have known any other. In fact, it is an act of self-preservation on the part of prose to produce a comedy or a *roman à clef*. Yet such was the magnitude of what happened in Russia in this century that all the genres available to prose were, and still are, in one way or another, shot through with this tragedy's mesmerizing presence. No matter which way one turns, one catches the Gordon-like stare of history.

For literature, unlike its audience, this is both good and bad. The good part comes from the fact that tragedy provides a work of literature with a greater than usual substance and expands its readership by appealing to morbid curiosity. The bad part is that tragedy confines the writer's imagination very much to itself. For tragedy is essentially a didactic enterprise and as such it's stylistically limiting. Personal, let alone national, drama reduces, indeed

negates, a writer's ability to achieve the aesthetic detachment imperative for a lasting work of art. The gravity of the matter simply cancels the desire for stylistic endeavor. Narrating a tale of mass extermination, one's not terribly keen to unleash the stream of consciousness; and rightly so. However attractive such discretion is, one's soul profits from it more than does one's paper.

On paper, such display of scruples pushes a work of fiction toward the genre of biography, this last bastion of realism (which explains this genre's popularity far more than the uniqueness of its subjects). In the end, every tragedy is a biographical event, one way or another. As such, it tends to exacerbate the Aristotelian art-to-life proximity, to the point of reducing it to a synonym. The common view of prose as being made in the likeness of speech doesn't help matters much either. The sad truth about this equating art to life is that it's always done at the expense of art. Had a tragic experience been a guarantee of a masterpiece, readers would be a dismal minority vis-à-vis illustrious multitudes inhabiting ruined and freshly erected pantheons. Were ethics and aesthetics synonymous, literature would be the province of cherubs, not of mortals. Luckily, though, it's the other way around: cherubs, in all likelihood, wouldn't bother inventing the stream of consciousness, being more interested in the *steam* of it.

For prose is, apart from anything, an artifice, a bag of tricks. As artifice, it has its own pedigree, its own dynamics, its own laws, and its own logic. Perhaps more than ever, this sort of thing has been made apparent by the endeavors of modernism, whose standards play a great role in today's assessment of the work of the writer. For modernism is but a logical consequence – compression and concision – of things classical. (And this is why one is hesitant to add to the list of modernism's properties its own ethics. This is also why it's not altogether futile to ask history those questions. For, contrary to popular belief, history answers: by means of today, of the present; and that's what perhaps is the present's main charm, if not its sole justification.) At any rate, if these standards of modernism have any psychological significance, it is that the degree of their mastery indicates the degree of a writer's independence from his material or, more broadly, the degree of primacy of an individual over his own or his nation's predicament.

It can be argued, in other words, that stylistically at least, art has outlived tragedy, and, with it, so has the artist. That the issue to an artist is to tell the story not on its own but on his own terms. Because the artist stands for an individual, a hero of his own time: not of time past. His sensibility owes more to the aforesaid dynamics, logic, and laws of his artifice than to his actual historical experience, which is nearly always redundant. The artist's job vis-à-vis his society is to project, to offer this sensibility to the audience as perhaps the only available route of departure from the known, captive self. If art teaches men anything, it is to become like art: not like other men. Indeed, if there is a chance for men to become anything but victims of villains of their time, it lies in their prompt response to those last two lines from Rilke's "Torso of Apollo" that say:

...this torso shouts at you with its every muscle:

“Do change your life!”

And this is precisely where the Russian prose of this century fails. Hypnotized by the scope of the tragedy that befell the nation, it keeps scratching its wounds, unable to transcend the experience either philosophically or stylistically. No matter how devastating one’s indictment of the political system may be, its delivery always comes wrapped in the sprawling cadences of *fin de siècle* religious humanist rhetoric. No matter how poisonously sarcastic one gets, the target of such sarcasm is always external: the system and the powers-that-be. The human being is always extolled, his innate goodness is always regarded as the guarantee of the ultimate defeat of evil. Resignation is always a virtue and a welcome subject, if only because of the infinity of its examples.

In the age that read Proust, Kafka, Joyce, Musil, Svevo, Faulkner, Becket, etc., it’s precisely these characteristics that make a yawning and disdainful Russian grab a detective novel or a book by a foreign author: a Czech, a Pole, a Hungarian, an Englishman, an Indian. Yet these same characteristics gratify many a Western literary pundit bemoaning the sorry state of the novel in his own language and darkly or transparently hinting at the aspects of suffering beneficial to the art of letters. It may sound like a paradox, but, for a variety of reasons – chief of which is the low cultural diet on which the nation has been kept for more than half a century – the reading tastes of the Russian public are far less conservative than those of the spokesmen of their Western counterparts. For the latter, oversaturated presumably with modernist detachment, experimentation, absurdity, and so forth, the Russian prose of this century, especially that of the postwar period, is a respite, a breather, and they rave about and expand on the subject of the Russian soul, of the traditional values of Russian fiction, of the surviving legacy of the nineteenth century’s religious humanism and all the good that it brought to Russian letters, of – should I quote – the severe spirit of Russian Orthodoxy. (As opposed, no doubt, to the laxness of Roman Catholicism.)

Whatever ax, and whomsoever with, people of this sort want to grind, the real point is that religious humanism is indeed a legacy. But it is a legacy not so much of the nineteenth century in particular as of the general spirit of consolation, of justifying the existential order on the highest, preferably ecclesiastical, plane, pertinent to the Russian sensibility and to the Russian cultural endeavor as such. To say the least, no writer in Russian history is exempt from this attitude, ascribing to Divine Providence the most dismal occurrences and making them automatically subject to human forgiveness. The trouble with this otherwise appealing attitude is that it’s fully shared by the secret police as well, and could be cited by its employees on Judgment Day as a sound excuse for their practices.

Practical aspects aside, one thing is clear: this sort of ecclesiastical relativism (which is what the grounded flight of religious humanism boils down to on paper) naturally results in a heightened attention to detail, elsewhere called realism. Guided by this world view, a writer and a policeman rival each other in precision, and, depending on who is gaining the upper hand in a society, supply this realism

with its eventual epithet. Which does to show that the transition of Russian fiction from Dostoevsky to its present state hasn't occurred overnight, and that it wasn't exactly a transition either, because, even for his own time, Dostoevsky was an isolated, autonomous phenomenon. The sad truth about the whole matter is that Russian prose has been in a metaphysical slump for quite some time, ever since it produced Tolstoy, who took the idea of art reflecting reality a bit too literally and in whose shadow the subordinate clauses of Russian prose are writhing indolently till this day.

This may sound like a gross simplification, for indeed, by itself, Tolstoy's mimetic avalanche would be of a limited stylistic significance were it not for its timing: it hit the Russian readership almost simultaneously with Dostoevsky. Surely for an average Western reader, this sort of distinction between Dostoevsky and Tolstoy is of limited or exotic consequence, if any. Reading both of them in translation, he regards them as one great Russian writer, and the fact that they both were translated by the same hand, Constance Garnett's, is of no help. (Even today, it must be noted, the same translator can be assigned to do *Notes from the House of the Dead* and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* – presumably because the Dead and Death are perceived as enough of a common denominator.) Hence, the pundits' speculation about the traditional values of Russian literature; hence, too, the popular belief in the coherent unity of Russian prose in the nineteenth century and the subsequent expectations of its similar show in the twentieth century. All that is quite far from reality; and, frankly, the proximity of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy in time was the unhappiest coincidence in the history of Russian literature. The consequences of it were such that perhaps the only way Providence can defend itself against charges of playing trick with the spiritual makeup of a great nation is by saying that this way it prevented the Russians from getting too close to its secrets. Because who knows better than Providence that whoever follows a great writer is bound to pick things up precisely where the great may left them. And Dostoevsky went perhaps too high for Providence's liking. So it sends in a Tolstoy as if to ensure that Dostoevsky in Russia gets no continuum.

2

It worked; there was none. Save for Lev Shestov, a literary critic and philosopher, Russian prose went with Tolstoy, only too glad to spare itself climbing the heights of Dostoevsky's spiritual pitch. It went down the winding, well-trodden path of mimetic writing, and at several removes – via Chekhov, Korolenko, Kuprin, Bunin, Gorky, Leonid Andreev, Gladkov – has reached the pits of socialist realism. The Tolstoy mountain cast a long shadow, to emerge from which one had to either outdo Tolstoy in precision or offer a qualitatively new linguistic content. Even those who took the second route and fought that engulfing shadow of descriptive fiction most valiantly – authors like Pilnyak, Zamyatin, Babel, and a few others – were paralyzed by it into a telegraph-style tongue-twitching that, for a while, would pass for an avant-garde art. Still, however generously these men were endowed with talent, spiritually they were

but products of the aforementioned ecclesiastical relativism; the pressures of the new social order easily reduced them to outright cynicism, and their works to tantalizing hors d'oeuvres on the empty table of a lean nation.

The reason Russian prose went with Tolstoy lies of course in his stylistic idiom, with its open invitation to imitate it. Hence, an impression that one can beat him; hence, too, a promise of security, since even by losing to him one winds up with a substantial – recognizable! – product. Nothing of the sort emanated from Dostoevsky. Quite apart from the nonexistent chances of beating him in the game, the pure aping of his style was out of the question. In a sense, Tolstoy was inevitable because Dostoevsky was unique. Neither his spiritual quest nor his “means of transportation” offered any possibility of repetition. The latter especially, with its plots evolving according to the immanent logic of scandal, with its feverishly accelerating sentences conglomerating in their rapid progress, bureaucratese, ecclesiastical terminology, *lumpen* argot, French utopists’ mumbo-jumbo, the classical cadences of gentry prose – anything! all the layers of contemporary diction – the latter especially constituted an unthinkable act to follow.

In many ways, he was our first writer to trust the intuition of language more than his own – and more than intimations of his system of belief or those of his personal philosophy. And language repaid him a hundredfold. Its subordinate clauses often carried him much farther than his original intentions or insights would have allowed him to travel. In other words, he treated the language not so much as a novelist but as a poet – or as a biblical prophet demanding from his audience not imitation but conversion. A born metaphysician, he instinctively realized that for probing infinity, whether an ecclesiastical one or that of the human psyche, there was no tool more far-reaching than his highly inflected mother tongue, with its convoluted syntax. His art was anything but mimetic: it wasn’t imitating reality; it was creating, or better still, reaching for one. In this vector of his he was effectively straying from Orthodoxy (or for that matter from any creed). He simply felt that art is not about life, if only because life is not about life. For Dostoevsky, art, like life, is about what man exists for. Like biblical parables, his novels are vehicles to obtain the answer and not goals unto themselves.

There are, roughly, two kinds of men and, correspondingly, two kinds of writers. The first kind, undoubtedly, a majority, regards life as the one and only available reality in its minutest detail; he’ll give you a conversation in the bedroom, a battlefield scene, the texture of upholstery, scents and tangs, with a precision rivaling your senses and the lenses of your camera; rivaling perhaps reality itself. Closing his book is like the end of a movie: the lights go up and you walk out into the street admiring Technicolor and the performance of this or that star whom you may even try to imitate subsequently in accent or deportment. The second kind, a minority, perceives his, and anyone else’s, life as a test tube for certain human qualities, the retention of which under extreme duress is crucial for either an ecclesiastical or an anthropological version of the species’ arrival. As a writer, such a man won’t give you much in the way of detail; instead, he’ll describe his characters’ states and twists of psyche with such

thoroughness that you feel grateful for not having met him in person. Closing his book is like waking up with a changed face.

One certainly should decide for oneself with whom to go, and Russian fiction obviously flocked to the former, prodded in that direction, we shouldn't forget, by history and her ironclad agent: the *Polizeistaat*. And normally it would be unjustifiable to pass judgment on such a choice, made under such circumstances, were it not for several exceptions, the main one being the career of Andrei Platonov. But before getting to him, it would be only prudent to emphasize once more that at the turn of the century, Russian prose was indeed at a crossroads, at a fork, and that one of those two roads wasn't taken. Presumably too many things were happening on the outside to waste that famous mirror of Stendhal's on scrutinizing the contortions of one's psyche. The vast, corpse-strewn, treachery-ridden historical vistas, whose very air turned solid with howls of ubiquitous grief, called for an epic touch, not for insidious questioning – never mind that that questioning could have prevented this epic sight.

If anything, this idea of a fork, of a road not taken, can be somewhat helpful to an average reader in his distinguishing between two great Russian writers, in putting him on alert whenever he hears about the “traditional values” of the Russian literature of the nineteenth century. The main point, though, is that the road not taken was the road that led to modernism, as is evidenced by the influence of Dostoevsky on every major writer in this century, from Kafka on. The road taken led to the literature of socialist realism. To put it differently, in terms of guarding its secrets, Providence suffered some setbacks in the West but it won in Russia. However, even knowing as little as we do about Providence's ways, we have a reason to assume that it may be not entirely happy with its victory. That is at least one explanation for its gift to Russian literature of Andrei Platonov.

3

If I refrain from stating here that Platonov is a greater writer than Joyce or Musil or Kafka, it's not because such ratings are in poor taste or because of his essential unavailability through existing translations. The trouble with such ratings is not poor taste (when was that ever a deterrent to an admirer?) but the vagueness of hierarchy that such a notion of superiority implies. As for the inadequacy of available translations, they are that way through no fault of the translators, the guilty party here is Platonov himself, or rather, the stylistic extremism of his language. It's the latter, along with the extreme character of the human predicament that Platonov is concerned with, that makes one refrain from this sort of hierarchical judgment, for the above-mentioned writers were not exposed to either extreme. He definitely belongs to this echelon of literature; yet, on those heights there is no hierarchy.

Platonov was born in 1899 and died in 1951 of tuberculosis, which he contracted from his son, whose release from prison he had eventually won, only to have his child die in his arms. From a photograph, a lean face with features

as simple as a rural landscape looks at you patiently and as though prepared to take in anything. By education a civil engineer (he worked for several years on various irrigation projects), he began to write rather early, in his twenties, which coincided with the twenties of this century. He fought in the civil war, worked for various newspapers, and, although reluctantly published, achieved a great reputation in the thirties. Then came the arrest of his son on charges of anti-Soviet conspiracy, then came the first signs of official ostracism, then came World War II, during which he was in the army working for the army newspaper. After the war he was silenced; a short story of his published in 1946 invited a full-page pogrom by the top critic of *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, and that was it. After that he was allowed only occasional freelance ghost-writing jobs, such as editing some fairy tales for children; beyond that, nothing. But then his tuberculosis worsened and he couldn't do much anyway. He and his wife and their daughter lived on his wife's salary as an editor; he'd moonlight as a street sweeper or a stagehand in a theater nearby.

He wasn't arrested, although that review in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* was a clear sign that his days as a writer were numbered. But they were numbered anyway; the top honcho in the Writers' Union administration even refused to endorse the secret police's case against Platonov, both because of his grudging admiration for the man and because he knew that the man was ill. Regaining consciousness after a bout with his illness, Platonov would often see by his bedside a couple of men gazing at him very keenly: the state security was monitoring the progress of his illness to determine whether they should bother with this character, and whether the Writers' Union official's stubbornness was justified. So Platonov died of natural causes.

All of this, or most of it, you'll no doubt find in various encyclopedias, forewords, afterwords, in dissertations about his work. By the standards of the time and the place, it was a normal life, if not an idyllic one. However, by the standards of the work Platonov did, his life was a miracle. That the author of *The Foundation Pit* and *Chevangur* was allowed to die in his own bed can be attributed only to divine intervention, if only in the guise of a fraction of scruples surviving in the men from the administration of the Writers' Union. Another explanation could be that neither novel had ever been in circulation, since both were presumably, in Platonov's view, works in progress, temporarily abandoned, much in the same way as Musil's *The Man without Qualities*. Still, the reasons for which they were temporarily abandoned also should be regarded as divine intervention.

Chevangur is some six hundred pages long; *The Foundation Pit* is one hundred and sixty. The first is about a man who, in the middle of the civil war, gets it into his head that there is a possibility that socialism has already emerged somewhere in a natural, elemental way; so he mounts his horse, which is named Rosa Luxemburg, and sets off to discover whether or not that is the case. *The Foundation Pit* takes place during collectivization, in some provincial landscape where for quite some time the entire population has been engaged in digging a vast foundation pit for the subsequent erection of a many-storied brightly lit building called "socialism." If from this idiotically simpleminded description

one concludes that we are talking about yet another anti-Soviet satirical writer, with perhaps a surrealist bend, one should blame the description's author, as well as the necessity for making the description; the main thing one should know is that one is wrong.

For these books are indescribably. The power of devastation they inflict upon their subject matter exceeds by far any demands of social criticism and should be measured in units that have very little to do with literature as such. These books never were published in Soviet Russia and they never will be published there, for they come closest to doing to the system what it has done to its subjects. One wonders whether they will ever be published in Russia, for apart from concrete social evil, their real target is the sensibility of language that has brought that evil about. The whole point about Andrei Platonov is that he is a millenarian writer if only because he attacks the very carrier of millenarian sensibility in Russian society: the language itself – or, to put it in a more graspable fashion, the revolutionary eschatology embedded in the language.

The roots of Russian millenarianism are essentially not very different from those of other nations. This sort of thing always has to do with this or that religious community's anticipation of its oncoming peril (less frequently, but as well, with the presence of a real one) and with that community's limited literacy. The few who read, and the still fewer who write, normally get to run the show, suggesting as a rule an alternative interpretation of Holy Writ. On the mental horizon of every millenarian movement there is always a version of a New Jerusalem, the proximity to which is determined by the intensity of sentiment. The idea of God's City being within reach is in direct proportion to the religious fervor in which the entire journey originates. The variations on this theme include also a version of an apocalypse, ideas of a change of the entire world order, and a vague, but all the more appealing because of that, notion of a new time, in terms of both chronology and quality. (Naturally, transgressions committed in the name of getting to a New Jerusalem fast are justified by the beauty of the destination.) When such a movement succeeds, it results in a new creed. If it fails, then, with the passage of time and the spread of literacy, it degenerates into utopias, to peter out completely in the dry sands of political science and the pages of science fiction. However, there are several things that may somewhat rekindle soot-covered embers. It's either severe oppression of the population, a real, most likely military peril, a sweeping epidemic, or some substantial chronological event, like the end of a millennium or the beginning of a new century.

If only because the species' eschatological capacity is always one and the same, there is not much point in going on about the roots of Russian millenarianism in great detail. Its fruits, too, were not of such great variety, except for their volume and for the influence their volume exerted on the language of the epoch in which Platonov happened to live. Still, talking about Platonov and that epoch, we should bear in mind certain peculiarities of the period that directly preceded the arrival of this epoch in Russia, as well as elsewhere.

The period – the turn of the century – was indeed a peculiar one because of its climate of mass agitation fueled by the incoherent symbolism with which

this chronological non-event – the turn of the century – was invested by a variety of technological and scientific breakthroughs, by the spread of means of communication, causing a qualitative leap in the masses’ self-awareness. It was the period of great political activation: in Russia alone by the time of the Revolution there were more political parties than in today’s America or Great Britain. Along with that, it was the period of a great upsurge in philosophical writing and in science fiction with strong utopian or social-engineering overtones. The air was filled with expectations and prophecies of a big change, of a new order of things coming, of restructuring the world. On the horizon there was Halley’s comet, threatening to hit the globe; in the news, military defeat at the hands of the yellow race; and in an undemocratic society it’s usually one step from a czar to a messiah or, for that matter, to the Antichrist. The period, to say the least, was a bit on the hysterical side. So it’s indeed small wonder that when revolution came, many took it for what they had been looking for.

Platonov writes in the language of the “qualitative change,” in the language of a greater proximity to New Jerusalem. More precisely, in the language of paradise’s builders – or, as in the case with *The Foundation Pit*, of paradise’s diggers. Now, the idea of paradise is the logical end of human thought in the sense that it, that thought, goes no further; for beyond paradise there is nothing else, nothing else happens. It can safely be said, therefore, that paradise is a dead end; it’s the last vision of space, the end of things, the summit of the mountain, the peak from which there is nowhere to step – except into pure Chronos; hence the introduction of the concept of eternal life. The same actually applies to hell; structurally at least, these two things have a lot in common. Existence in the dead end is not limited by anything, and if one can conceive that even there “circumstances condition consciousness” and engender their own psychology, then it is above all in language that this psychology is expressed. In general, it should be noted that the first casualty of any discourse about utopia – desired or already attained – is grammar; for language, unable to keep up with this sort of thought, begins to grasp in the subjunctive mood and starts to gravitate toward categories and constructions of a rather timeless denomination. As a consequence of this, the ground starts to slip out from under even the simplest nouns, and they gradually get enveloped in an aura of arbitrariness.

This is the sort of thing that is happening nonstop in Platonov’s prose. It can safely be said about this writer that his every sentence drives the Russian language into a semantic dead end or, more precisely, reveals a proclivity for dead ends, a blind-alley mentality in the language itself. What he does on the page is approximately as follows: he starts a sentence in a way familiar enough that you almost anticipate the tenor of the rest. However, each word that he uses is qualified either by epithet or intonation, or by its incorrect position within the context, to the extent that the rest of the sentence gives you not so much a sense of surprise as the sense that you have compromised yourself by knowing anything about the tenor of speech in general and about how to place these words in particular. You find yourself locked in, marooned in blinding proximity to the meaninglessness of the phenomenon this or that

word denotes, and you realize that you have got yourself into this predicament through your own verbal carelessness, through trusting too much your own ear and the words themselves. Reading Platonov, one gets a sense of the relentless, implacable absurdity built into the language and that with each new – anyone’s – utterance, that absurdity deepens. And that there is no way out of that blind alley but to retreat back into the very language that brought one in.

This is perhaps a too laborious – and not terribly accurate or exhaustive (far from that!) – attempt to describe Platonov’s writing technique. Perhaps, too, effects of this sort can be created in the Russian language only, although the presence of the absurd in grammar says something not just about a particular linguistic drama but about the human race as a whole. All I have tried to do is to highlight one of Platonov’s stylistic aspects that happens to be not so much even a stylistic one. He simply had a tendency to see his words to their logical – that is absurd, that is totally paralyzing – end. In other words, like no other Russian writer before or after him, Platonov was able to reveal a self-destructive, eschatological element within the language itself, and that, in turn, was of extremely revealing consequence to the revolutionary eschatology with which history supplied him as his subject matter.

In casting a sort of myopic, estranged glance at any page of this writer, one gets a feeling of looking at a cuneiform tablet: so densely is it packed with those semantic blind alleys. Or else his pages look like a great department store with its apparel items turned inside out. This by no means suggests that Platonov was the enemy of this utopia, of this socialism, of the regime, collectivization, etc.; not at all. It’s just that what he was doing with the language went far beyond the framework of that specific utopia. But then this is what every language inevitably does: it goes beyond history. However, what’s interesting about Platonov’s style is that he appears to have deliberately and completely subordinated himself to the vocabulary of his utopia – with all its cumbersome neologisms, abbreviations, acronyms, bureaucratese, sloganeering, militarized imperatives, and the like. Apart from the writer’s instinct, this willingness, not to say abandon, with which he went for newspeak, indicates, it would seem, his sharing of some beliefs in the promises the new society was so generous with.

It would be false as well as unnecessary to try to divorce Platonov from his epoch; the language was to do this anyway, if only because epochs are finite. In a sense, one can see this writer as an embodiment of language temporarily occupying a piece of time and reporting from within. The essence of his message is LANGUAGE IS A MILLENARIAN DEVICE, HISTORY ISN’T, and coming from him that would be appropriate. Of course, to get into excavating the genealogy of Platonov’s style, one has inevitably to mention the “plaiting of words” of centuries of Russian hagiography, Nikolai Leskov with his tendency to highly individualized narrative (so-called “*skaz*” – sort of “yarn-ing”), Gogol’s satirical epic sway, Dostoevsky with his snowballing, feverishly choking conglomeration of dictions. But with Platonov the issue is not lines of succession or tradition in Russian literature but the writer’s dependence on the synthesizing (or, more precisely, supra-analytical) essence of the Russian language itself, conditioning – at times by means of purely phonetic allusions – the emergence

of concepts totally devoid of any real content. His main tool was inversion; and as he wrote in a totally inverted, highly inflected language, he was able to put an equals sign between “language” and “inversion.” “Version” – the normal word order – came more and more to play a service role.

Again, very much after Dostoevsky’s fashion, this treatment of language was more befitting a poet than a novelist. And, indeed, Platonov, like Dostoevsky, wrote some poetry. But if Dostoevsky, for his Captain Lebyadkin poem about the cockroach in *The Possessed*, can be considered the first writer of the absurd, Platonov’s verses earn him a niche in no pantheon. But then scenes such as the one in *The Foundation Pit* where the bear-apprentice at some village’s smithy is enforcing collectivization and is more politically orthodox than his master put Platonov somewhat beyond the status of a novelist as well. Of course, it could be said that he was our first properly surrealist writer, except that his surrealism wasn’t a literary category tied in our mind with an individualistic world view but a product of philosophical madness, a product of blind-alley psychology on a mass scale. Platonov wasn’t an individualist; quite the contrary: his consciousness was determined precisely by the mass scale and both the impersonal and the depersonalizing character of what was happening. His novels depict not a hero against a background but rather that background itself devouring a hero. And that’s why his surrealism, in its turn, is impersonal, folkloric, and, to a certain degree, akin to ancient – or for that matter any – mythology, which, in all fairness, should be regarded as the classical form of surrealism.

It’s not egocentric individualists whom both the Almighty and literary tradition automatically endow with a crisis-prone sensibility but traditionally inanimate masses that express in Platonov’s works the philosophy of the absurd; and it is due to the numerical vastness of its carriers that this philosophy becomes far more convincing and utterly unbearable in its magnitude. Unlike Kafka, Joyce, and, let’s say, Beckett, who narrate quite natural tragedies of their “alter egos,” Platonov speaks of a nation which in a sense has become the victim of its own language; or, to put it more accurately, he tells a story about this very language, which turns out to be capable of generating a fictitious world, and then falls into grammatical dependence on it.

Because of all this, Platonov seems to be quite untranslatable, and, in one sense, that’s a good thing: for the language into which he can not be translated. Still, the body of his work is very substantial and relatively diverse. *Cheven-gur* and *The Foundation Pit* were written, respectively, toward the end of the twenties and in the beginning of the thirties; Platonov remained operational for quite some time after that. In this sense, his case could be regarded as that of Joyce in reverse: he produced his *Portrait of the Artist* and *Dubliners* AFTER *Finnegans Wake* and *Ulysses*. (And, as we are at this moment on this subject of translation, it is worth recalling that sometime in the late thirties one of Platonov’s short stories was published in the United States and that Hemingway was extolling it. So it is not entirely hopeless, although the story was very third-rate Platonov; I think it was his “The Third Son.”)

Like every living creature, a writer is a universe unto himself, only more so. There is always more in him that separates him from his colleagues than vice

versa. To talk about his pedigree, trying to fit him into this or that tradition of literature is, essentially, to move in a direction exactly opposite to the one in which he himself was moving. In general, this temptation of seeing a literature as a coherent whole is always stronger when it's viewed very much from the outside. In this sense, perhaps, literary criticism indeed resembles astronomy; one wonders, though, if this resemblance is really flattering.

If there is any tradition of Russian literature, Platonov represents a radical departure from it. I, for one, don't see either his predecessors, save perhaps some passages in *The Life of Archpriest Avvakum*, or his successors. There is a sense of terrific autonomy to this man, and much though I'd like to link him to Dostoevsky, with whom he perhaps has more in common than with anyone else in Russian literature, I'd rather refrain from doing so: it would illuminate nothing. Of course, what screams to be pointed out is that both *Chevengur* and *The Foundation Pit* thematically, at least, can be regarded as sequels to Dostoevsky's *the Possessed* because they represent the realization of Dostoevsky's prophecy. But then again, this realization was supplied by history, by reality; it wasn't a writer's conjecture. For that matter, one can see in *Chevengur*, which its central character's passage through the lands in his search for the organically emerged socialism, and with his long soliloquies to a horse called Rosa Luxemburg, an echo of *Don Quixote* or *Dead Souls*. But these echoes reveal nothing either – except the size of the wilderness in which one cries.

Platonov was very much on his own, and in a big way. His autonomy is the autonomy of an idiosyncratic metaphysician, a materialist, essentially, who tries to comprehend the universe independently, from his vantage – or disadvantage – point of a small muddy provincial town lost like a comma in the infinite book of a vast, sprawling continent. His pages are studded with people of this sort: provincial teachers, engineers, mechanics, who in their godforsaken places entertain their huge homemade ideas about world order, ideas that are as mind-boggling and fantastic as these men's own isolation.

I have gone on about Platonov at such length partly because he is not very well known in this country, but mainly in order to suggest that the mental plane of regard of contemporary Russian prose is somewhat different from the rustic view of it generally entertained in the West. The uniformity of the social order doesn't guarantee that of mental operation; an individual's aesthetics never completely surrenders to either personal or national tragedy, no more than it surrenders to either version of happiness. If there is any tradition in Russian prose, it is one of searching for a greater thought, for a more exhaustive analysis of the human condition than is at present available, of looking for a better resource to ladle from to endure the siege of reality. But in all that, Russian prose is not that different from the vectors of other Western and Eastern literatures: it's a part of Christian civilization's culture, and neither the best nor most exotic part at that. To regard it otherwise amounts to racism in reverse, to patting the poor relation on the shoulder for his decent conduct, and that should somehow be stopped: of only because this attitude encourages sloppy translations.

Perhaps the most troublesome aspect of Platonov is that the quality of his work makes it hard to sustain an engaged discourse about his contemporaries and those who came after him. This way even be cited by the powers-that-be as a reason for suppressing both *Chevangur* and *The Foundation Pit*. On the other hand, it's precisely the suppression of these two books, resulting in a lack of awareness of their existence, that has allowed a great number of writers – both his and our contemporaries – to go on with their production. There are crimes the forgiving of which is a crime also, and this is one of them. Suppression of Platonov's two novels not only set back the entire literature some fifty years; it also hampered the development of the national psyche as such by the same number of years. Burning books, after all, is just a gesture; not publishing them is a falsification of time. But then again, that is precisely the goal of the system: to issue its own version of the future.

Now this future has arrived, and although it's not exactly what the system bet on, in terms of Russian prose it's far less than it should have been. It's a good prose all right, but both stylistically and philosophically, it's far less enterprising than the prose of the twenties and thirties. It's conservative enough to enable one to talk about "traditions of Russian prose," of course, but it knows in what century it lives. For the latest in that knowledge it has to go, unfortunately, to foreign authors, most of whom still have less to offer than that same Platonov. In the sixties the best of modern Russian writers were taking their cues from Hemingway, Heinrich Böll, Salinger, and, to a lesser extent, from Camus and Sartre. The seventies were the decade of Nabokov, who is to Platonov what a tightrope walker is to a Chomolungma climber. The sixties also saw the first selection in Russian of writings by Kafka, and that mattered a lot. Then Borges came out, and on the horizon looks the Russian translation of Robert Musil's great masterpiece.

There are a great many other foreign authors of lesser stature who, one way or another, today teach Russian writers a lesson in modernism, from Cortázar to Iris Murdoch; but as has already been said, it's only the best of them who are willing to learn this lesson. The ones who really learn this lesson properly are the readers, and today an average Russian reader is much smarter than a promising Russian writer. Also, the trouble with the best is that they are writers of mainly satirical bent, and they face from the outset obstacles of such magnitude that they have to go easy even on that acquired knowledge. Apart from this, in the last decade there has been emerging in the country a largely unpalatable, strong tendency toward nationalistic self-appreciation, and many a writer, consciously or unwittingly, caters to that tendency, which often has the attraction of asserting the national identity in the face of the depersonalizing mass of the state. Natural and commendable as such an aspiration may be, for literature it beats a stylistic and aesthetic retreat and means recoiling without firing a destructive salvo, sequestering oneself in narcissistic self-pity because of having curbed one's own metaphysical ability. I am talking here obviously of the "peasant prose," which, in its Antaeus-like desire to touch the ground, went

a bit too far and took root. Neither in invention nor in overall world view does the Russian prose of today offer anything qualitatively new. Its most profound perception to date is that the world is radically evil, and the state is but that evil's blind, if not necessarily blunt, instrument. Its most avant-garde device is stream of consciousness; its most burning ambition is to admit eroticism and foul language into print: not, alas, for the sake of the print, but to further the cause of realism. Thoroughly fundamentalist in its values, it employs stylistic devices whose chief attraction lies in their familiar solidity. The name of the game is, in short, classical standards. But here is the rub.

What underlies this concept – classical standards – is the idea of man being the measure of all things. To tie them to a particular historical past, say, to the Victorian era, amounts to the dismissal of the species' psychological development. To say the least, it's like believing that a seventeenth-century man felt hunger more than his modern counterpart. This by harping on the traditional values of Russian fiction, on its "severe spirit of Orthodoxy," and what-not, the critical profession invites us to judge this fiction by standards which are not so much classical as those of yesterday. A work of art is always a product of its time, and it should be judged by this time's standards, by the standards of its century to say the least (especially if that century is about to be over). It is precisely because Russia produced such great prose in the nineteenth century that there is no need for special provisions in evaluation of its contemporary fiction.

As in everything else, in the way of prose this century has seen a lot. What it has come to value, it seems, apart from popular-at-all-times straight storytelling, is a stylistic invention as such, a structural device – montage, hopscotch, whatever. In other words, it has come to like a display of self-awareness, manifested by the narrator's distancing himself from the narrative. That, after all, is time's own posture toward existence. In still other words, in art, this century (alias time) has come to like itself, the reflection of its own features: fragmentation, incoherence, an absence of content, a dimmed or a bird's-eye view of the human predicament, of suffering, of ethics, of art itself. For lack of a better name, the compendium of these features is commonly called today "modernism," and it is of "modernism" that contemporary Russian fiction, both published and underground, falls markedly short.

By and large, it still clings to an extensive, conventional narrative with an emphasis on a central character and his development, along the lines of a *Bildungsroman* technique, hoping – and not without good reason – that, by reproducing reality in its minute detail, it may produce a sufficiently surrealistic or absurdist effect. The grounds for such hope, of course, are solid: the quality of the reality of the country; oddly, though, that turns out to be not enough. What thwarts these hopes is precisely the stylistic conventionality of the means of depiction, which hark back to the psychological atmosphere of these means' noble origins, i.e., to the nineteenth century, i.e., to irreality.

There was one particular moment, for instance, in Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*, when Russian prose, as well as the writer himself, came within a two- or three-paragraph distance of a decisive breakthrough. Solzhenitsyn describes

in one chapter the daily grind of a woman doctor. The description's flatness and monotony definitely matches the list of her tasks, epic in their length and idiocy, yet this list lasts longer than anyone's ability to sustain a dispassionate tone recording it: a reader expects an explosion: it is too unbearable. And this is exactly where the author stops. Had he gone on for two or three paragraphs more with this disproportion – of tone and content – we might have gotten a new literature; we might have gotten a real absurdity, engendered not by the stylistic endeavor of a writer but by the very reality of things.

So why did Solzhenitsyn stop? Why didn't he go on with those two or three paragraphs? Didn't he feel at the moment that he was on the verge of something? Perhaps he did, although I doubt it. The point is that he had no material to stuff those two more paragraphs with, no other tasks to mention. Why, then, one would ask, didn't he invent some? The answer is at the same time noble and sad: because he is a realist and inventing things would be untrue: both to the facts and to his nature as a writer. A realist, he had a different set of instincts from those that nudge you to make things up when you see an opening. It's for this reason that I doubt that he felt he was on the verge of something: he simply couldn't sense the opening, wasn't poised enough to see it. So the chapter ends on a moralizing, see-how-bad-things-are note. I remember reading it with my fingers almost trembling: "Now, now, now it's going to happen." It did not.

This episode in *Cancer Ward* is all the more symptomatic since Solzhenitsyn qualifies as both a published and an underground writer. Among many other things that these two categories have in common are their flaws. Unless he has completely crossed over to the experimental side, an underground writer can be distinguished from his colleagues in the establishment mainly by his subject matter, much less so by his diction. On the other hand, an experimentalist tends to go about his experimentation with a real vengeance: having no prospects of being published, he is usually quick to give up didactic concerns altogether, which eventually costs him even his limited audience of a few cognoscenti. Frequently, his only solace is a bottle, his only hope, to be compared by a scholar in some West German magazine to Uwe Johnson. In part because his work is utterly untranslatable, in part because he is usually employed by an institution doing some classified scientific research with military applications, he doesn't entertain thoughts about emigrating. Eventually, he abandons his artistic pursuits.

This is the way it goes, for the middle ground claimed in countries with a better political system by somebody like Michel Butor, Leonardo Sciascia, Günther Grass, or Walker Percy simply doesn't exist in Russia. It's an either/or situation in which even publishing abroad is not of decisive help, if only because it's invariably detrimental to the author's physical well-being. To produce a work of lasting consequence under these circumstances requires an amount of personal integrity more frequently possessed by tragic heroes than by the authors of those tragedies. Naturally, in this predicament prose fares worse than other forms of art, not only because the process of creating it is of a less mercurial nature, but also because, thanks to prose's didactic nature, it's been watched very closely

indeed. The moment the prose watcher loses the author, it's curtains for the work; yet efforts to keep the work accessible to its watch-dog render it properly sheepish. As for writing "for the drawer," "for the attic," which an established writer sometimes undertakes to clear his conscience, it too fails to bring him a stylistic cure – which became evident during the last decade, which saw almost the entire attic prose swept clean to the West and published there.

A great writer is one who elongates the perspective of a human sensibility, who shows a man at the end of his wits an opening, a pattern to follow. After Platonov, the closest that Russian prose came to producing such a writer were Nadezhda Mandelstam with her memoirs and, to a somewhat lesser degree, Alexander Solzhenitsyn with his novels and documentary prose. I permit myself to put this great man second largely because of his apparent inability to discern behind the cruelest political system in the history of Christendom the human failure, if not the failure of the creed itself (so much for the severe spirit of Orthodoxy!). Given the magnitude of the historical nightmare he describes, this inability in itself is spectacular enough to suspect a dependence between aesthetic conservatism and resistance to the notion of man being radically bad. Quite apart from the stylistic consequence for one's writing, the refusal to accept this notion is pregnant with the recurrence of this nightmare in broad daylight – anytime.

Aside from these two names, Russian prose for the moment has very little to offer to a man at the end of his wits. There are a few isolated works which in their heartbreaking honesty or eccentricity approximate masterpieces. All they can supply our man with is either a momentary catharsis or comic relief. Though ultimately furthering one's subordination to the status quo, this is one of prose's better services; and it's better if the reading public in this country knows the names of Yury Dombrovsky, Vasily Grossman, Venedikt Erofeev, Andrei Bitov, Vasily Shukshin, Fazil Iskander, Yury Miloslavsky, Yevgeny Popov. Some of them authored only one or two books, some of them are already dead; but, together with the somewhat better-known Sergei Dovlatov, Vladimir Voinovich, Vladimir Maximov, Andrei Sinyavsky, Vladimir Maramzin, Igor Efimov, Eduard Limonov, Vasily Aksyonov, Sasha Sokolov, they constitute a reality with which everybody for whom Russian literature and things Russian are of any consequence sooner or later will have to reckon.

Each one of these men deserves a discussion of no lesser length than this lecture already is. Some of them happen to be my friends, some are quite the contrary. Squeezing them into one sentence is like listing air-crash victims; but then that's precisely where a catastrophe has occurred: in the air, in the world of ideas. The best works of these authors should be regarded as this catastrophe's survivors. If asked to name one or two books that stand to outlast their authors and the present generation of readers, I for one would name Voinovich's *In Plain Russian* and any selection of short stories by Yury Miloslavsky. However, the work that faces, in my view, a really incalculable future is Yuz Aleshkovsky's *Kangaroo*, soon to come out in English. (God help its translator!)

Kangaroo is a novel of the most devastating, the most terrifying hilarity. It belongs in the genre of satire; however, its net effect is neither revulsion at the

system nor comic relief, but pure metaphysical terror. This effect has a lot less to do with the author's rather apocalyptic world view as such than with the quality of his ear. Aleshkovsky, whose reputation in Russia as a songwriter is extremely high (in fact, some of his songs are a part of national folklore), hears the language like a prodigy. The hero of *Kangaroo* is a professional pickpocket whose career spans the entire history of Soviet Russia, and the novel is an epic yarn spun out in the foulest of language, for which either "slang" or "argot" fails as a definition. Much like a private philosophy or set of beliefs for an intellectual, foul language in the mouths of the masses serves as an antidote to the predominantly positive, obtrusive monologue of authority. In *Kangaroo*, the very much as in everyday Russian discourse, the volume of this antidote overshoots its curative purpose by a margin capable of accommodating yet another universe. While in terms of its plot and structure this book may bear a resemblance to something like *The Good Soldier Schweik* or *Tristram Shandy*, linguistically it is absolutely Rabelaisian. It is a monologue, nasty, morbid, frightful, rampant with a cadence resembling biblical verse. To drop yet another name, this book sounds like Jeremiah: laughing. For a man at the end of his wits that's already something. However, it is not exactly concern for that anonymous yet ubiquitous man that makes one appreciate this particular work, but its overall stylistic thrust in a direction unfamiliar to the Russian prose of today. It goes where the vernacular goes; that is, beyond the finality of a content, idea, or belief: toward the next phrase, the next utterance: into the infinity of speech. To say the least, it strays from the genre of the ideological novel of whatever denomination, absorbing the condemnation of the social order but spilling over it as over a cup too small to contain the flood of language.

Starting with the authors mentioned above, some may find these notes maximalist and biased; most likely they will ascribe these flaws to their author's own métier. Still others may find the view of things expressed here too schematic to be true. True: it's schematic, narrow, superficial. At best, it will be called subjective or elitist. That would be fair enough except that we should bear in mind that art is not a democratic enterprise, even the art of prose, which has an air about it of everybody being able to master it as well as to judge it.

The point, however, is that the democratic principle so welcome in nearly all spheres of human endeavor has no application in at least two of them: in art and in science. In these two spheres, the application of the democratic principle results in equating masterpiece with garbage and discovery with ignorance. The resistance to such an equation is synonymous with recognition of prose as an art; and it's precisely this recognition that forces one to discriminate in the most cruel fashion.

Whether one likes it or not, art is a linear process. To prevent itself from recoiling, art has the concept of cliché. Art's history is that of addition and refinement, of extending the perspective of human sensibility, of enriching, or more often condensing, the means of expression. Every new psychological or aesthetic reality introduced in art becomes instantly old for its next practitioner. An author disregarding this rule, somewhat differently phrased by Hegel, automatically destines his work – no matter what good press it gets in the marketplace

– to assume the status of pulp.

But if it were only the fate of his work, or his own, that wouldn't be too bad. And the fact that supply of pulp creates a demand for pulp isn't too bad either; to art as such it's not dangerous: it always takes care of its own kind, as the poor or those in the animal kingdom do. The bad thing about prose which is not art is that it compromises the life it describes and plays a reductionist role in the development of the individual. This sort of prose offers one finalities where art would have offered infinities, comfort instead of challenge, consolation instead of a verdict. In short, it betrays man to his metaphysical or social enemies, whose name in either case is legion.

Heartless as it may sound in many ways, the condition Russian prose finds itself in today is of its own doing: the sad thing is that it keeps perpetuating this condition by being the way it is. Taking politics into consideration is therefore an oxymoron, or rather a vicious circle, for politics fills the vacuum left in people's minds and hearts precisely by art. There must be some lesson for other literatures in the plight of Russian prose in this century, for it's still a little bit more forgivable for Russian writers to operate the way they do, with Platonov dead, than for their counterparts in this country to court banalities, with Beckett alive.