

THE ARTS IN RUSSIA UNDER STALIN

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THE SOVIET literary scene is a peculiar one, and in order to understand it few analogies from the West are of use. For a variety of causes Russia has in historical times led a life to some degree isolated from the rest of the world, and never formed a genuine part of the Western tradition; indeed her literature has at all times provided evidence of a peculiarly ambivalent attitude with regard to the uneasy relationship between herself and the West, taking the form now of a violent and unsatisfied longing to enter and become part of the main stream of European life, now of a resentful ('Scythian') contempt for Western values, not by any means confined to professing Slavophils; but most often of an unresolved, self-conscious combination of these mutually opposed currents of feeling. This mingled emotion of love and of hate permeates the writing of virtually every well-known Russian author, sometimes rising to great vehemence in the protest against foreign influence which, in one form or another, colours the masterpieces of Griboedov, Pushkin, Gogol, Nekrasov, Dostoevsky, Herzen, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Blok.

The October Revolution insulated Russia even more completely, and her development became perforce still more self-regarding, self-conscious and incommensurable with that of its neighbours. It is not my purpose to trace the situation historically, but the present is particularly unintelligible without at least a glance at previous events, and it would perhaps be convenient, and not too misleading, to divide its recent growth into three main stages – 1900–1928; 1928–1937; 1937 to the present – artificial and over-simple though this can easily be shown to be.

The first quarter of the present century was a time of storm and stress during which Russian literature, particularly poetry (as well as the theatre and the ballet), principally (although one is not allowed to say so today) under French and, to some degree, German influence, attained its greatest height since its classical age of Pushkin, Lermontov and Gogol. Upon this the October Revolution made a violent impact, but it did not dam the swelling tide. Absorbed and inexhaustible preoccupation with social and moral questions is perhaps the most arresting single characteristic of Russian art and thought as a whole; and this largely shaped the great Revolution, and after its triumph led to a long, fierce battle between, on one side, those primarily artistic rebels who looked to the Revolution to realise their own most violent 'anti-bourgeois' attitudes (and attitudinising) and, on the other, those primarily political men of action who wished to bend all artistic and intellectual activity directly to the social and economic ends of the Revolution.

The rigid censorship which shut out all but carefully selected authors and ideas, and the prohibition or discouragement of many non-political forms of art (particularly trivial genres such as popular love, mystery and detective stories, as well as all varieties of novelettes and general trash), automatically focused the attention of the reading public on new and experimental work, filled, as often before in Russian literary history, with strongly felt and often quaint and fanciful social notions. Perhaps because conflicts in the more obviously dangerous waters of politics and economics might easily be thought too alarming, literary and artistic wars became (as they did in German countries a century earlier under Metternich's police) the only genuine battlefield of ideas; even now the literary periodicals, tame as they necessarily are, for this very reason make livelier reading than the monotonously conformist daily, and purely political, press.

The main engagement of the early and middle 1920s was fought between the free and somewhat anarchist literary experimenters and the Bolshevik zealots, with unsuccessful attempts at

a truce by such figures as Lunacharsky and Bubnov.¹ This culminated, by 1927–8, first in the victory, and then, when it seemed to the authorities too revolutionary and even Trotskyist, in the collapse and purge (during the 1930s), of the notorious RAPP (Revolutionary Association of Proletarian Writers), led by the most uncompromising fanatic of a strictly collectivist proletarian culture, the critic Averbakh. There followed, during the period of ‘pacification’ and stabilisation organised by Stalin and his practically-minded collaborators, a new orthodoxy, directed principally against the emergence of any ideas likely to disturb and so divert attention from the economic tasks ahead. This led to a universal dead level, to which the only surviving classical author of the great days, Maxim Gorky, finally and, according to some of his friends, with reluctant despair, gave his blessing.

1928–1937

The new orthodoxy, which became finally established after Trotsky’s fall in 1928, put a firm end to the period of incubation during which the best Soviet poets, novelists and dramatists, and, indeed, composers and film producers too, produced their most original and memorable works. It marked the end of the turbulent middle and late 1920s, when Western visitors were astonished and sometimes outraged by Vakhtangov’s stage;² when Eisenstein, not yet a film producer, directed his amusing futuristic experiments on stages discovered in the disused palaces of Moscow merchants, and the great producer Meyerhold, whose artistic life is a kind of microcosm of the artistic life of his country, and whose genius is still only secretly acknowledged, conducted his most audacious and memorable theatrical experiments.

¹ The first two holders of the post of People’s Commissar for [Culture and] Education (the translation of the Russian word ‘prosveshchenie’, whose meaning includes culture and education, is problematic): for their details see Glossary.

² Evgeny Bagrationovich Vakhtangov (1883–1923), actor, director and drama teacher, pupil of Stanislavsky, was famous for his innovative work in the Moscow Arts Theatre in the early 1920s.

There occurred, before 1928, a vast ferment in Soviet thought, which during those early years was genuinely animated by the spirit of revolt against, and challenge to, the arts of the West, conceived as the last desperate struggle of capitalism, presently to be overthrown on the artistic as well as every other front by the strong, young, materialist, earthbound, proletarian culture, proud of its brutal simplicity and its crude and violent new vision of the world, which the Soviet Union, agonised but triumphant, was bringing to birth.

The herald and chief inspiring force of this new Jacobinism was the poet Mayakovsky, who, with his disciples, formed the famous LEF¹ association. While there may have been a great deal that was pretentious, counterfeit, coarse, exhibitionist, childish and merely silly during this period, there was also much that was brimming with life. It was not, as a rule, didactically Communist so much as anti-liberal, and had in that respect points of resemblance with pre-1914 Italian futurism. This was the period of the best work of such poets as the popular 'tribune' Mayakovsky, who, if he was not a great poet, was a radical literary innovator and emancipator of prodigious energy, force and, above all, influence; the age of Pasternak, Akhmatova (until her silence in 1923), Sel'vinsky, Aseev, Bagritsky, Mandel'shtam; of such novelists as Aleksey Tolstoy (who returned from Paris in the 1920s), Prishvin, Kataev, Zoshchenko, Pil'nyak, Babel', Il'f and Petrov; of the dramatist Bulgakov, of established literary critics and scholars like Tynyanov, Eichenbaum, Tomashevsky, Shklovsky, Lerner, Chukovsky, Zhirmunsky, Leonid Grossman. The voices of such émigré writers as Bunin, Tsvetaeva, Khodasevich, Nabokov were heard only faintly. The emigration and return of Gorky is another story.

State control was absolute throughout. The only period of freedom during which no censorship existed in modern Russian history was from February to October 1917. In 1934 the Bolshevik regime tightened old methods by imposing several stages of supervision – first by the Writers' Union, then by the appropriate State-appointed commissar, finally by the Central Com-

¹ Short for 'Levyi front isskustva' (Left Front of Art).

mittee of the Communist Party. A literary 'line' was laid down by the Party: at first the notorious Proletkul't, which demanded collective work on Soviet themes by squads of proletarian writers; then the worship of Soviet or pre-Soviet heroes. Nevertheless, arresting and original artists were not, until 1937, always brought to heel by the omnipotent State; sometimes, if they were prepared to take sufficient risks, they might manage to convert the authorities to the value of an unorthodox approach (as the dramatist Bulgakov did); sometimes unorthodoxy, provided that it was not positively directed against the Soviet faith, was given some latitude of expression, as a not unwelcome seasoning, at times exceedingly sharp, of the flat daily fare of normal Soviet life (for example, the early, gay, malicious satires of Tynyanov, Kataev and, above all, Zoshchenko). This was not, of course, permitted to go far or occur too often, but the possibility of it was always present, and the genius of writers was to a certain extent stimulated by the very degree of ingenuity which they had to exercise in order to express unconventional ideas without breaking the framework of orthodoxy or incurring outright condemnation and punishment.

This continued for some time after Stalin's rise to power and the imposition of the new orthodoxy. Gorky died only in 1935; and as long as he was alive, some distinguished and interesting writers were to a certain degree shielded from excessive regimentation and persecution by his immense personal authority and prestige; he consciously played the role of 'the conscience of the Russian people' and continued the tradition of Lunacharsky (and even Trotsky) in protecting promising artists from the dead hand of official bureaucracy. In the field of official Marxism an intolerant and narrow 'dialectical materialism' did indeed hold sway, but it was a doctrine concerning which internal disputes were permitted, between, for example, the followers of Bukharin and the followers of the more pedantic Ryazanov or Deborin; between various brands of philosophical materialism; between those 'mensheviks' who saw Lenin as a direct disciple of Plekhanov, and those who stressed their differences.

Witch-hunts occurred; heresy, both on the right and the left, was continually being 'unmasked' with grisly consequences to

the convicted heretics; but the very ferocity of such ideological disputes, the uncertainty as to which side would be condemned to liquidation, communicated a certain grim life to the intellectual atmosphere, with the result that both creative and critical work during this period, while suffering from one-sidedness and exaggeration, was seldom dull, and indicated a state of continuing ferment in all spheres of thought and art. Well might the sympathetic observer of the Soviet scene compare such activity favourably with the slow decline of such of the older generation of émigré Russian writers in France as Vyacheslav Ivanov, Bal'mont, Merezhkovsky, Zinaida Gippius, Kuprin and others, though their literary technique was, at times, admitted, even in Moscow, to be often superior to that of a good many of the Soviet pioneers.

1937 TO THE PRESENT DAY

Then came the great débâcle which to every Soviet writer and artist is a kind of St Bartholomew's Eve – a dark night which few of them seem ever completely to forget, and which is scarcely ever today spoken of otherwise than in a nervous whisper. The Government, which evidently felt its foundations insecure, or feared a major war in, and possibly with, the West, struck at all supposedly 'doubtful' elements, and innumerable innocent and harmless persons besides, with a violence and a thoroughness to which the Spanish Inquisition and the Counter-Reformation alone offer remote parallels.

The great purges and trials of the years 1937 and 1938 altered the literary and artistic scene beyond all recognition. The number of writers and artists exiled or exterminated during this time – particularly during the Ezhov terror – was such that Russian literature and thought emerged in 1939 like an area devastated by war, with some splendid buildings still relatively intact, but standing solitary amid stretches of ruined and deserted country. Men of genius like Meyerhold the producer and Mandel'shtam the poet, and of talent like Babel', Pi'nyak, Yashvili, Tabidze, the then recently returned London émigré Prince D. S. Mirsky, the critic Averbakh (to take the best-known names alone) were

'repressed', that is, killed or done away with in one way or another. What occurred after that no one today seems to know. Not a trace of any of these writers and artists has been sighted by the outside world. There are rumours that some of them are still alive, like Dora Kaplan, who shot and wounded Lenin in 1918, or Meyerhold, who is said to be producing plays in the Kazakhstan capital Alma-Ata; but these seem to be circulated by the Soviet Government and are, almost certainly, quite false.¹ One of the British correspondents, whose sympathies were all too clear, tried to persuade me that Mirsky was alive and writing in Moscow incognito. It was obvious that he did not really believe this. Nor did I. The poetess Marina Tsvetaeva, who returned from Paris in 1939 and fell into official disfavour, committed suicide, probably early in 1942.² The rising young composer Shostakovich was criticised in 1937 so harshly, from a quarter so high, for 'formalism' and 'bourgeois decadence', that for two years he was neither performed nor mentioned, and then, having slowly and painfully repented, adopted a new style in closer accord with present-day official Soviet demands. He has on two occasions since then had to be called to order and to repent; so has Prokofiev. A handful of young writers unknown in the West, who are said to have showed promise during this period, have, so one was told, not been heard of since; they are unlikely to have survived, although one cannot always tell. Before this the poets Esenin and Mayakovsky had committed suicide. Their disillusionment with the regime is still officially denied. So it goes on.

The death of Gorky had removed the intellectuals' only powerful protector, and the last link with the earlier tradition of the relative freedom of Revolutionary art. The most eminent survivors of this period today sit silent and nervous for fear of committing some fatal sin against the Party line, which anyhow was none too clear during the critical years before the war, nor thereafter. Those to fare worst were the writers and authors in closest

¹ Dora (her given name was Fanya) Kaplan was indeed shot four days after her arrest, on 4 September 1918. Meyerhold was shot on 2 February 1940.

² In fact on 31 August 1941.

contact with Western Europe, that is, France and England, since the turning of Soviet foreign policy away from Litvinov's policy of collective security, and towards the isolationism symbolised by the Russo-German Pact, involved individuals regarded as links with Western countries in the general discredit of pro-Western policy.

Bending before authority exceeded all previously known bounds. Sometimes it came too late to save the heretic marked for destruction; in any case it left behind it painful and humiliating memories from which the survivors of this terror are never likely completely to recover. Ezhov's proscriptions, which sent many tens of thousands of intellectuals to their doom, had clearly, by 1938, gone too far even for internal security. A halt was finally called when Stalin made a speech in which he declared that the process of purification had been overdone. A breathing-space followed. The old national tradition re-acquired respectability; the classics were once again treated with respect, and some old street names replaced the Revolutionary nomenclature. The final formulation of faith, beginning with the constitution of 1936, was completed by the *Short History of the Communist Party* of 1938. The years 1938 to 1940, during which the Communist Party made even greater strides in the strengthening and centralisation of its power and authority – tight enough before this – remained, during the slow convalescence from the wounds of 1938, blank so far as the creative and critical arts were concerned.

The Patriotic War

Then war broke out and the picture altered again. Everything was mobilised for war. Such authors of distinction as survived the Great Purge, and managed to preserve their liberty without bowing too low before the State, seemed to react to the great wave of genuine patriotic feeling if anything even more profoundly than the orthodox Soviet writers, but evidently had gone through too much to be capable of making their art the vehicle of direct expression of the national emotion. The best war poems of Pasternak and Akhmatova sprang from the most profound feel-

ing, but were too pure artistically to be considered as possessing adequate direct propaganda value, and were consequently mildly frowned upon by the literary mandarins of the Communist Party, who guide the fortunes of the official Writers' Union.

This disapproval, with undertones of doubt about his fundamental loyalty, did finally get under Pasternak's skin to so effective a degree that this most incorruptible of artists did produce a handful of pieces close to direct war propaganda which had been too obviously wrung out of him, sounded lame and unconvincing, and were criticised as weak and inadequate by the Party reviewers. Such *pièces d'occasion* as the *Pulkovo Meridian* by Vera Inber, and her war diary of the Leningrad blockade, and the more gifted work by Olga Berggolts, were better received.

But what did emerge, possibly somewhat to the surprise of both the authorities and the authors, was an uncommon rise in popularity with the soldiers at the fighting fronts of the least political and most purely personal lyrical verse by Pasternak (whose poetic genius no one has yet ventured to deny); of such wonderful poets as Akhmatova among the living, and Blok, Bely and even Bryusov, Sologub, Tsvetaeva and Mayakovsky among the (post-Revolutionary) dead. Unpublished works by the best of the living poets, circulated privately in manuscript to a few friends, and copied by hand, were passed to one another by soldiers at the front with the same touching zeal and deep feeling as Ehrenburg's eloquent leading articles in the Soviet daily press, or the favourite conformist patriotic novels of this period. Distinguished but hitherto somewhat suspect and lonely writers, especially Pasternak and Akhmatova, began to receive a flood of letters from the front quoting their published and unpublished works, and begging for autographs and confirmation of the authenticity of texts, some of which existed only in manuscript, and for the expression of their authors' attitudes to this or that problem.

This eventually could not fail to impress itself upon responsible Party leaders, and the official attitude towards such writers grew somewhat softer. It was as if their value as institutions of which the State might one day be proud began to be realised by

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the bureaucrats of literature, and their status and personal security became improved in consequence. This is not likely to last, however: Akhmatova and Pasternak are not loved by the Party and its literary commissars. To be non-propagandist and survive you must be inconspicuous: Akhmatova and Pasternak are too obviously popular to escape suspicion.

THE PRESENT

The more benevolent, if no less watchful, attitude of the official State censors has enabled the better thought of among the established writers to adjust themselves in what they plainly hope is a series of relatively secure niches; some have avowedly harnessed themselves, with varying degrees of conviction, into the service of the State, and declare that they conform as faithfully as they do, not because they must, but because they are true believers (as Aleksey Tolstoy did with his radical revision of his famous early novel *The Road to Golgotha*, which originally contained an English hero, and his play about Ivan the Terrible, which, in effect, is a justification of the purges). Others apply themselves to nice calculation of how much they can afford to give up to the demands of State propaganda, how much being left to personal integrity; yet others attempt to develop a friendly neutrality towards the State, not impinging, and hoping not to be impinged upon, careful to do nothing to offend, satisfied if they are suffered to live and work without reward or recognition.

The Party line has suffered a good many changes since its inception, and the writers and artists learn of its latest exigencies from the Central Committee of the Communist Party, which is ultimately responsible for its formulation, through various channels. The final directive is today officially produced by a member of the Politburo, Mikhail Suslov, who for this purpose replaced Georgy Aleksandrov. Aleksandrov was removed, so one is told, for writing a book in which Karl Marx was represented only as the greatest of philosophers, instead of someone different from and greater in kind than any philosopher – an insult, I suppose, rather similar to describing Galileo as the greatest of astrologers.

Suslov is responsible to the Party for propaganda and publicity; the members of the Writers' Union who adapt this to the needs of their colleagues are the Chairman and in particular the Secretary, a direct nominee of the Central Executive Committee of the Party, and often not a writer at all (thus the late Shcherbakov, a purely political figure, a powerful member of the Politburo at the time of his death in 1945, was at one time secretary of the Writers' Union).

When, as occasionally happens, reviewers of books or plays or other 'cultural phenomena' make mistakes, that is, stray from the Party's path in some particular, this is put right not merely by bringing the possible consequences of his errors home to the individual reviewer, but by publishing a kind of counter-review of the original review, pointing out its errors and laying down the authoritative 'line' about the original work under review. In some cases stronger action occurs. The last chairman was the old-fashioned but none too enterprising poet, Nikolay Tikhonov. He was ousted for permitting so-called pure literature to appear: and the politically totally committed Fadeev succeeded him.

Writers are generally considered as persons who need a good deal of watching, since they deal in the dangerous commodity of ideas, and are therefore fended off from private, individual contact with foreigners with greater care than the less intellectual professionals, such as actors, dancers and musicians, who are regarded as less susceptible to the power of ideas, and to that extent better insulated against disturbing influences from abroad. This distinction drawn by the security authorities seems fundamentally correct, since it is only by talking with writers and their friends that foreign visitors (for example, the author of this memorandum) have been able to obtain any degree of coherent insight, as opposed to brief and fitful glimpses, into the working of the Soviet system in the spheres of private and artistic life – other artists have largely been conditioned into automatic avoidance of interest in, let alone discussion of, such perilous topics. Known contact with foreigners does not in all cases lead to disgrace or persecution (although it is usually followed by sharp interrogation by the NKVD), but the more timorous among the writers, and particularly those who have

not thoroughly secured their position and become mouthpieces of the Party line, avoid discoverable individual meetings with foreigners – even with the Communists and fellow-travellers of proven loyalty who arrive on official Soviet-sponsored visits.

Having protected himself adequately against suspicion of any desire to follow after alien gods, the Soviet writer, whether imaginative or critical, must also make certain of the correct literary targets at any given moment. The Soviet Government cannot be accused of leaving him in any uncertainty in this matter. Western ‘values’, which unless avowedly anti-Soviet or considered reactionary, used at one time not to be thought too disreputable and were left alone, largely glossed over in silence, are once again under attack. The classical authors alone seem to be beyond political criticism. The heyday of earlier Marxist criticism, when Shakespeare or Dante – as well as Pushkin and Gogol and, of course, Dostoevsky – were condemned as enemies of popular culture or of the fight for freedom, is today regarded with distaste as a childish aberration. The great Russian writers, including such political reactionaries as Dostoevsky and Leskov, were, at any rate by 1945, back on their pedestals and once more objects of admiration and study. This applies to a large degree to foreign classics, even though such authors as Jack London, Upton Sinclair and J. B. Priestley (as well as such, to me, little-known figures as James Aldridge and Walter Greenwood) enter the pantheon on political rather than literary merit.

The main burden of Russian critical writing is at present directed to the rehabilitation of everything Russian, particularly in the region of abstract thought, which is represented as owing as little as possible to the West; and to the glorification of Russian (and occasionally non-Russian) scientific and artistic pioneers active within the historic limits of the Russian empire. This is modified by the fact that lately there have occurred signs of awareness that the Marxist approach was in danger of being abandoned too far in favour of excessive wartime Russian nationalism, which, if it spread, as it showed signs of doing, into regional nationalism, would act as a disruptive force. Consequently historians like Tarlé and others – and particularly Tatar,

Bashkir, Kazakh and other ethnic minority historians – have been officially reproved for a non-Marxist deviation towards nationalism and regionalism.

The greatest binding force of the Union, apart from historic association, is still Marxist, or rather ‘Leninist-Stalinist’, orthodoxy, but above all the Communist Party – the healer of the wounds inflicted by Russia on her non-Russian subjects in Tsarist days. Hence the paramount need for re-emphasising the central egalitarian Marxist doctrine, and the fight against any tendency to fall into easy nationalism. The greatest attack of all was launched on everything German; the origins of Marx and Engels could hardly be denied, but Hegel, whom earlier Marxists, including Lenin, naturally enough regarded with the piety due to a direct ancestor, is today, with other German thinkers and historians of the Romantic period, subjected to violent assaults as a Fascist in embryo and pan-German, from whom little if anything is to be learnt, and whose influence in Russian thought, which can scarcely be altogether concealed, has been either superfluous or deleterious.

By comparison, French and English thinkers get off more favourably, and the careful Soviet author, both historian and littérateur, may still continue to permit himself to offer a little cautious homage to the anti-clerical and ‘anti-mystical’ empiricists, materialists and rationalists of the Anglo-French philosophical and scientific tradition.

After every care has been exercised, every step taken to avert official disapproval, the most distinguished among the older authors still find themselves in a peculiar condition of being at once objects of adulation to their readers, and half-admiring, half-suspicious toleration to the authorities; looked up to, but imperfectly understood by, the younger generation of writers; a small and decimated but still distinguished Parnassus, oddly insulated, living on memories of Europe, particularly of France and Germany, proud of the defeat of Fascism by the victorious armies of their country, and comforted by the growing admiration and absorbed attention of the young. Thus the poet Boris Pasternak told me that when he reads his poetry in public, and occasionally

halts for a word, there are always at least a dozen listeners present who prompt him at once and from memory, and could clearly carry on for as long as may be required.

Indeed there is no doubt that, for whatever reason – whether from innate purity of taste, or from the absence of cheap or trivial writing to corrupt it – there probably exists no country today where poetry, old and new, good and indifferent, is sold in such quantities and read so avidly as it is in the Soviet Union. This naturally cannot fail to act as a powerful stimulus to critics and poets alike. In Russia alone does poetry literally pay; a successful poet is endowed by the State, and is relatively better off than, for example, an average Soviet civil servant. Playwrights are often exceedingly prosperous. If a rise in quantity, as Hegel taught, leads to a change in quality, the literary future of the Soviet Union ought to be brighter than that of any other country; and indeed there is perhaps evidence for this proposition better and more solid than a priori reasoning by a German metaphysician, discredited even in the Russia whose thought he affected for so long and so disastrously.

The work of the older writers, with roots in the past, is naturally affected by the political uncertainties by which they are surrounded. Some break a total silence very occasionally to write a late lyric, or a critical article, and otherwise subsist in timid silence on pensions, in houses in town or country with which the State, in cases of real eminence, provides them. Some have taken to a politically inoffensive medium, such as children's or nonsense verse; Chukovsky's children's rhymes, for example, are nonsense verse of genius, and bear comparison with Edward Lear. Prishvin continues to write what seem to me excellent animal stories. Another avenue of escape is the art of translation, into which much splendid Russian talent at present flows, as, indeed, it always has. It is a slightly odd thought that in no country are these innocent and unpolitical arts practised with greater perfection. Lately there has been a drive against them too.

The high standard of translation is, of course, due not merely to its attraction as a distinguished vehicle of escape from politically dangerous views, but also to the tradition of highly artistic rendering from foreign tongues, which Russia, a country intellec-

tually long dependent on foreign literature in the past, developed in the nineteenth century. The result is that persons of exceptional sensibility and literary merit have translated the great classical works of the West, and hack translations (which the majority of English versions of Russian still are) are virtually unknown in Russia. In part, such concentration on translation is due also to the emphasis at present laid on the life of outlying regions of the Soviet Union, and the consequent political premium put upon translations from such fashionable languages as Ukrainian, Georgian, Armenian, Uzbek, Tadjik, at which some of the most gifted Russian authors have tried their hand with brilliant effect and much resultant inter-regional good will. Indeed, this will probably turn out to be the most valuable single contribution which Stalin's personal influence will have made to the development of Russian letters.

As for fiction, the commonest path is that taken by such steady, irretrievably second-rate novelists as Fedin, Kataev, Gladkov, Leonov, Sergeev-Tsensky, Fadeev and such playwrights as Pogodin and (the recently deceased) Trenev, some of whom look back on variegated personal Revolutionary pasts.¹ All of them today make their bow in the manner prescribed by their political directors, and in general produce work of high mediocrity modelled on late nineteenth-century archetypes, written with professional craftsmanship, long, competent, politically *bien pensant*; earnest, at times readable, but on the whole undistinguished. The purges of 1937 and 1938 appear to have stamped out that blazing fire of modern Russian art to which the Revolution of 1917 had added fuel and which the recent war could scarcely have extinguished so swiftly if political causes had not begun to do so earlier.

Over the entire scene of Russian literature there broods a curious air of total stillness, with not a breath of wind to ruffle the waters. It may be that this is the calm before the next great tidal wave, but there are few visible signs as yet of anything new or original about to be born in the Soviet Union. There is no satiety

¹ These writers, now largely forgotten and unread, were among the most successful and widely read exponents of socialist realism (for details see Glossary).

with the old and no demand for new experience to stimulate a jaded palate. The Russian public is less blasé than any other in Europe, and the cognoscenti, so far as there are any, are only too well pleased if there are no worrying political clouds on the horizon, and they are left in peace. The climate is not propitious to intellectual or artistic enterprise; and the authorities, who would eagerly welcome invention and discovery in the technological field, do not seem aware of the indivisibility of the freedom of enquiry, which cannot be kept within prescribed frontiers. Invention seems for the present to have been sacrificed to security; unless and until this changes, Russia is scarcely likely to make a crucial contribution, at any rate in the field of humane arts and studies.

And, it may be asked, the younger writers? No foreign observer of the Russian literary scene can fail to be struck by the gap between the older writers, loyal but melancholy figures of no possible danger to the stability of this, to all appearance, thoroughly stable regime, and the immensely prolific younger writers, who appear to write faster than thought itself (perhaps because so many of them are free from it), and rehearse the same patterns and formulae so tirelessly and with such apparent sincerity and vigour that it is scarcely thinkable that they can ever have been assailed by any real doubts, either as artists or as human beings.

Perhaps the immediate past explains this. The purges cleared the literary ground, and the war provided the new subject and the mood; there sprang into being a brood of writers, facile, naïve and copious, varying from crude and wooden orthodoxy to considerable technical skill, capable at times of moving, at others of genuinely gay, and often vivid, journalistic reportage. This applies to prose and verse, novels and plays. The most successful and most representative figure of this type is the journalist, playwright and poet Konstantin Simonov, who has poured out a flood of work of inferior quality but impeccably orthodox sentiment, acclaiming the right type of Soviet hero, brave, puritanical, simple, noble, altruistic, entirely devoted to the service of his country. Behind Simonov there are other authors of the same genre; authors of novels dealing with exploits in kolkhozes, fac-

tories or at the front; writers of patriotic doggerel or of plays which guy the capitalist world or the old and discredited liberal culture of Russia itself, in contrast with the simple, now wholly standardised, type of tough, hearty, capable, resolute, single-minded young engineers or political commissars ('engineers of human souls'), or army commanders, shy and manly lovers, sparing of words, doers of mighty deeds, 'Stalin's eagles', flanked by passionately patriotic, utterly fearless, morally pure, heroic young women, upon whom the success of all five-year plans ultimately depends.

The older authors do not conceal their opinion of the value of this kind of conscientious but commonplace literary mass-production, related to literature much as posters are to serious art. Nor would they be as critical as they are if, side by side with the inevitable mushroom growth of such work, inspired by, and directly ancillary to, the needs of the State, there were also something profounder and more original to be found among the younger writers – among those, let us say, who are under forty. They point out that there is intrinsically no reason why contemporary Soviet life should not generate genuine and serious 'socialist realism' – after all, Sholokhov's *Quiet Don*, dealing as it did with Cossacks and peasants during the civil war, was on all sides recognised as a genuine, if sometimes dull, lumbering and overweighted, work of imagination.

The obvious criticism which these older writers urge – and such 'self-criticism' is allowed to appear in print – is that out of shallow facility and the easy orthodoxy of standardised hero-worship no genuine work of art can ever be born; that the war heroes themselves have won the right to subtler and less hackneyed analysis; that the experience of the war is a profound national experience which only a more intense, sensitive and scrupulous art can adequately express, and that the majority of the war novels now published are crude travesties and a hideous insult to the soldiers and civilians whose ordeal they purport to describe; finally (this is never said in print) that the inner conflict which alone makes an artist has been too easily resolved by the over-simple rules of an artificially flattened political schema, which allows no doubts about ultimate purpose, and not much

disagreement about means, and which has, perhaps as a result of the purges and their physical and moral consequences, so far failed to create its own artistic canons, standards in the light of which something no less strictly conformist but also no less devout and profound than the religious art of the Middle Ages could evolve in Russia today. Nor do I see much hope of that at the present time. The cry by the poet Sel'vinsky for socialist romanticism¹ – if socialist realism, then why not socialist romanticism? – was ruthlessly suppressed.

Meanwhile the financial rewards of these fashionable younger authors, unaffected as they are by the strictures of the critics, entitle them to be considered the equivalent of best-sellers in Western countries; no literal equivalent exists since fiction and poetry, good or bad, is sold and distributed immediately on publication – such is the hunger of the public and the inadequacy of the supply. The subjects of historical novels, since *romans de moeurs* are scarcely safe, tend, apart from war and post-war propaganda themes, to be the lives of such officially approved heroes from the Russian past as Tsars Ivan IV and Peter I, soldiers and sailors like Suvorov, Kutuzov, Nakhimov and Makarov, honest patriots and true Russians, too often plagued and frustrated by the intrigues of sycophantic courtiers and disloyal noblemen. Their character and exploits offer opportunities of combining a pleasantly romantic and patriotic historical background with political or social sermons only too clearly applicable to contemporary needs.

This fashion was not indeed begun, but was given its strongest fillip, by the late Aleksey Tolstoy (he died this year [1945]), who alone, perhaps, had the makings of, and the ambition to be, the Virgil of the new empire which had excited his rich imagination and brought his remarkable literary gift into play.

The same gap between the young and old is perceptible in the other arts, in the theatre, in music, in the ballet. Whatever has

¹More accurately 'socialist symbolism', which would have allowed writers to treat a wider range of subject-matter – beyond tractors and blast furnaces – without compromising their political loyalty.

grown without a definite break from a rich past and leans on a pre-Revolutionary tradition has, by firmly clinging to such old and tried supports, managed to preserve its standards into the present. Thus the Moscow Arts Theatre, while universally acknowledged to have declined from the extraordinary level of its golden age, when Chekhov and Gorky wrote for it, nevertheless preserves a remarkable standard of individual acting and of inspired ensemble playing which rightly continues to make it the envy of the world. Its repertoire, since the post-1937 era, is confined either to old plays or to such tame new, conformist pieces as have relatively little character of their own, and simply act as vehicles in which gifted naturalistic actors can exhibit their superb, old-fashioned skills; what the public remembers is for the most part the acting and not the play. Similarly the Maly (Little) Theatre continues to give admirable performances of Ostrovsky's comedies, which were its mainstay in the nineteenth century; the acting of plays attempted since the Revolution, whether classical or modern, at the Maly tends too often to sink to the level of the repertory companies directed by Ben Greet or Frank Benson. One or two of the smaller Moscow theatres perform classical plays with verve and imagination, for example Ermolova's theatre and the Transport Theatre in Moscow, and one or two of the little theatres in Leningrad. The best performances given even in these theatres are of classical pieces; for example, Goldoni, Sheridan, Scribe; modern plays go less well, not so much because of old-fashioned methods of acting, as because of the inevitable tameness of the material itself.

As for opera and ballet, wherever past tradition exists to guide it, it acquits itself honourably, if dully. When something new is put on, for example the new ballet *Gayaneh* by the Armenian composer Khachaturyan, playing in Leningrad this year, it is capable of displaying exuberance and temperament, which disarm the spectator by the gusto and delight in the art of the dancers. But it is also, particularly in Moscow, capable of sinking to depths of vulgarity of décor and production (and of music too) which can scarcely ever have been surpassed even in Paris under the Second Empire; the inspiration of the scenes of clumsily

heaped-up opulence with which the Bolshoy Theatre in Moscow is so lavish derives at least as much from the tawdry splendours of the early Hollywood of ten and even twenty years ago, as from anything conceived in Offenbach's day; and such crude display is made to seem all the more grotesque and inappropriate by the individual genius of a truly great lyrical and dramatic dancer like Ulanova, or of such impeccable new virtuosi as Dudinskaya, Lepeshinskaya and the ageing Semenova, Preobrazhensky, Sergeev and Ermolaev. In either case it lacks the fusion of undeviatingly precise, inexorable discipline with imaginative originality and wide range, and that combination of intensity, lyricism and elegance which had raised the Russian ballet to its former unattainable height.

There are still fewer signs of new life in the two great opera houses of Moscow and Leningrad, which confine themselves to a highly stereotyped repertory of the best-known Russian and Italian works, varied by occasional performances of, for example, *Carmen*. Minor theatres, in search of politically innocent amusement, offer their clients operettas by Offenbach, Lecocq and Hervé, performed with more gusto than finish, but vastly welcomed as a contrast with the drab monotony of daily Soviet life. The contrast between age and youth is again noticeably present, not so much in the ballet (which could not exist without a perpetual recruitment of young dancers), as on the dramatic stage, where few, if any, outstanding actors or actresses have come forward during the last ten years. The audiences seem clearly aware of this, and whenever I hinted at this to my anonymous neighbours in the Moscow theatres, it was invariably assented to so rapidly that it must be a very obvious commonplace. Such casual neighbours in the theatre almost invariably expand dolefully on the regrettable absence among the younger people of dramatic talent, and even more of the right sensibility – with which the older actors, still on the stage (some whose careers go back to the early years of the century), are so richly endowed – and one or two have wondered whether the theatres of the West do not produce better young actors than the Soviet Union. Perhaps 'the tradition is not so rigid and oppressive there'. Even the Arts Theatre seems to have stopped dead in technique and

feeling – or else has been forced to go back to the days before the First World War.

This combination of discouragement of all innovation – the name of the purged producer Meyerhold is scarcely spoken aloud – together with a considerable encouragement of the stage as such is bound, unless something occurs to interrupt the process, to lead in the relatively near future to a widening chasm between accomplished but unreal, and contemporary but commonplace and provincial, styles of acting. On the other side it must be said that the childlike eagerness and enthusiasm of Soviet readers and Soviet theatrical audiences is probably without parallel in the world. The existence of State-subsidised theatres and opera, as well as of regional publishing houses, throughout the Soviet Union is not merely a part of a bureaucratic plan, but responds to a very genuine and insufficiently satisfied popular demand. The vast increase in literacy under the stimulus provided by the earlier period when Marxism was in ferment, as well as the immense circulation of Russian and to some degree of foreign classics, particularly in translation into the various languages of the 'nationalities' of the USSR, has created a public the responsiveness of which should be the envy of Western writers and dramatists. The crowded bookshops with their understocked shelves, the eager interest displayed by the Government employees who run them, the fact that even such newspapers as *Pravda* and *Izvestiya* are sold out within a few minutes of their rare appearance in the kiosks, is further evidence of this hunger.

If, therefore, political control were to alter at the top, and greater freedom of artistic expression were permitted, there is no reason why, in a society so hungry for productive activity, and in a nation still so eager for experience, still so young and so enchanted by everything that seems to be new or even true, and above all endowed with a prodigious vitality which can carry off absurdities fatal to a thinner culture, a magnificent creative art should not one day once again spring into life.

To Western observers the reaction of Soviet audiences to classical plays may seem curiously naïve; when, for example, a play by Shakespeare or by Griboedov is performed, the audience is apt to react to the action on the stage as if the play was drawn from

contemporary life; lines spoken by the actors meet with murmurs of approval or disapproval, and the excitement generated is wonderfully direct and spontaneous. These are perhaps not far removed from the kind of popular audiences for which Euripides and Shakespeare wrote, and the fact that soldiers at the front have so often compared their leaders with the stock heroes of patriotic Soviet novels, that fiction is to them, as often as not, part of the general pattern of daily life, seems to show that they still look on the world with the shrewd imagination and unspoilt eye of intelligent children, the ideal public of the novelist, the dramatist and the poet. This fertile soil, still so little ploughed, in which even the poorest seed seems to sprout so quickly and so generously, can scarcely fail to inspire the artist, and it is probable that it is the absence of precisely this popular response that has made the art of England and France often seem mannered, anaemic and artificial.

As things are, the contrast between the extraordinary freshness and receptivity, critical and uncritical, of the Soviet appetite, and the inferiority of the pabulum provided, is the most striking phenomenon of Soviet culture today.

Soviet writers in articles and *feuilletons* love to emphasise the extraordinary enthusiasm with which the public has received this or that book, this or that film or play, and, indeed, what they say is largely true; but two aspects of the case are, not unnaturally, never mentioned. The first is that, despite all official propaganda, strongly felt and perhaps almost instinctive discrimination between good and bad art – for example, between nineteenth-century classics and the very few surviving literary masters on the one hand, and routine patriotic literature on the other – has not been wholly obliterated, and standardisation of taste does not, so far at least, seem to have occurred on the scale which might have been expected, and which the best members of the Soviet intelligentsia (such as survive) still fear.

The second qualification is the continued existence, although under difficult conditions and in dwindling numbers, of a real nucleus of ageing but articulate intellectuals, deeply civilised, sensitive, fastidious and not to be deceived, who have preserved unimpaired the high critical standards, in certain respects the

purest and most exacting in the world, of the pre-Revolutionary Russian intelligentsia. These people, now to be found in politically unimportant Government posts, universities, publishing houses, if not positively catered for by the State, are not vastly harried either; they tend to be gloomy or sardonic because they see few successors to themselves in the succeeding generation, and this is said to be mainly due to the fact that such young men or women as show any signs of independence and originality are ruthlessly uprooted and dispersed in the north or central Asiatic regions, as an element disturbing to society.

A good many of the young who showed signs of talent as independent artists and critics are said to have been swept away in 1937–8 ('as with a broom', as a young Russian said to me at a railway station, where he felt unobserved). Nevertheless, a few such are still to be found in universities or among translators from foreign languages or ballet librettists (for whom there is great demand), but it is difficult to estimate whether by themselves they are sufficient to carry on the vigorous intellectual life upon which, for example, Trotsky and Lunacharsky used to lay such stress, and for which their successors seem to care so little. The older intellectuals, when they speak with candour, make no bones about the atmosphere in which they live; most of them still belong to the class of what are known as 'the scared', that is, those who have not fully recovered from the nightmare of the great purges – but a few are showing signs of emerging once again into the light of day. They point out that official control, while no longer as fiercely devoted to heresy-hunts as before, is so complete in all spheres of art and life, and the caution exercised by the timid and largely ignorant bureaucrats in control of art and literature so extreme, that whatever is new and original among the ambitious young naturally tends to flow into non-artistic channels – the natural sciences or the technological disciplines – where more encouragement to progress and less fear of the unusual obtains.

As for other arts, there was never much to be said for or about Russian painting – today that which is exhibited seems to have fallen below the lowest standards of nineteenth-century Russian naturalism or impressionism, which did at least possess

the merit of illustrating, with a great deal of life, social and political conflicts and the general ideals of the time. As for pre- and post-Revolutionary modernism, which continued and flowered during the early Soviet period – of that not a whisper, so far as I could tell.

The condition of music is not very different. Apart from the complicated cases of Prokofiev and Shostakovich (political pressure upon the latter seems scarcely to have improved the style of his work, although there may well be vigorous disagreement about this – and he is still young), either it is again largely a dull academic reproduction of the traditional ‘Slav’ or ‘sweet’ Tchaikovsky–Rachmaninov pattern, now worn very thin (as in the case of the endlessly fertile Myaskovsky and the academic Glier), or it has taken to lively, shallow and occasionally skilful, at times even brilliantly entertaining, exploitation of the folk song of the constituent republics of the USSR, along the simplest possible lines – perhaps, to put it at its lowest, with an ultimate view to possible performances by balalaika orchestras. Even such moderately competent composers as Shebalin and Kabalevsky have taken this line of least resistance, and have, with their imitators, become monotonous and tirelessly productive purveyors of routine music of remorseless mediocrity.

Architecture in its turn is engaged either in the admirably done restoration of old buildings and occasional supplementation of these by competently executed pastiche, or in the erection of vast, dark, bleak buildings, repulsive even by the worst Western standards. The cinema alone shows signs of genuine life, although the golden age of the Soviet film, when it was genuinely Revolutionary in inspiration and encouraged experiment, seems, with some notable exceptions (for example Eisenstein and his disciples, still active), to have yielded to something cruder and more commonplace.

In general, intellectuals still seem haunted by too many fresh memories of the period of purges succeeded by rumours of war, succeeded by war and famine and devastation; regret as they might the flatness of the scene, the prospect of a new ‘revolutionary situation’, however stimulating to art, could scarcely be welcome to human beings who have lived through more than even

the normal Russian share of moral and physical suffering. Consequently there is a kind of placid and somewhat defeatist acceptance of the present situation among most of the intellectuals. There is little fight left even in the most rebellious and individualistic; Soviet reality is too recalcitrant, political obligation too oppressive, moral issues too uncertain, and the compensations, material and moral, for conformity too irresistible. The intellectual of recognised merit is materially secure; he or she enjoys the admiration and fidelity of a vast public; his or her status is dignified; and if the majority long, with an intensity not to be described, to visit Western countries (of whose mental and spiritual life they often entertain the most exaggerated notions), and complain that 'things are screwed up too tight in this country', some, and by no means the least distinguished, tend to say that State control has its positive aspects as well. While it hems in creative artists to an extent unparalleled even in Russian history, it does, a distinguished children's writer said to me, give the artist the feeling that the State and the community in general are, at any rate, greatly interested in his work, that the artist is regarded as an important person whose behaviour matters a very great deal, that his development on the right lines is a crucial responsibility both of himself and of his ideological directors, and that this is, despite all the terror and slavery and the humiliation, a far greater stimulus to him than the relative neglect of his brother artists in bourgeois countries.

Doubtless there is something in that, and certainly art has, historically, flourished under despotism. It may be a particularly unrealistic moral fallacy, so long as glory and high position are the rewards of success, that no form of intellectual or artistic genius can flourish in confinement. But facts, in this case, speak more loudly than theory. Contemporary Soviet culture is not marching with its old firm, confident or even hopeful step; there is a sense of emptiness, a total absence of winds or currents, and one of the symptoms of this is the fact that creative talent is so easily diverted into such media as the popularisation and the study, sometimes both scholarly and imaginative, of the 'national' cultures of the constituent republics, particularly those in Central Asia. It may be that this is merely a trough between high crests, a

temporary period of weariness and mechanical behaviour after too much effort spent on crushing the internal and external enemies of the regime. Perhaps. Certainly there is today not a ripple on the ideological surface. There are appeals to cease reading the Germans, to cultivate national Soviet (and not local or regional) pride, above all to cease to uncover non-Russian origins of Russian institutions or alien sources of Russian thought; to return to orthodox Leninism-Stalinism, and to abstain from the vagaries of non-Marxist patriotism, which luxuriated during the war; but there is nothing remotely resembling the fierce, often crude but still sometimes profoundly and passionately felt ideological Marxist controversies of, say, Bukharin's lifetime.

Yet this account would be misleading if it did not include the fact that, despite the difficult and even desperate situation in which persons of independent temper and education at times find themselves in Russia, they are capable of a degree of gaiety, intellectual as well as social, and of enthusiastic interest in their internal and external affairs, combined with an extravagant and often delicate sense of the ridiculous, which makes life not merely bearable to them but worthwhile; and makes their bearing and their conversation both dignified and delightful to the foreign visitor.

Certainly the present aspect of the Soviet artistic and intellectual scene suggests that the initial great impulse is over, and that it may be a considerable time before anything new or arresting in the realm of ideas, as opposed to steady competence and solid achievement firmly set by authority within the framework of established tradition, is likely to emerge from the USSR. The old Russia, the condition of which preoccupied and indeed obsessed her writers, was, in a certain obvious sense, an Athenian society in which a small élite, endowed with a combination of remarkable intellectual and moral qualities, rare taste and an unparalleled sweep of imagination, was supported by a dark mass of idle, feckless, semi-barbarous helots, about whom much was said, but, as Marxists and other dissidents justly observed, exceedingly little was known, least of all by the men of good will who talked most about them and, as they supposed, to them and for their benefit.

If there is one single continuing strain in the Leninist policy it is the desire to make of these dark people full human beings, capable of standing on their own feet, recognised as equals and perhaps even superiors by their still disdainful Western neighbours. No cost is too high for this; organised material progress is still regarded as the foundation on which all else rests; and if intellectual and indeed civil liberty is considered to hamper or retard the process of transforming the Soviet peoples into the nation best equipped to understand and cope with the technologically new post-liberal world, then these 'luxuries' must be sacrificed; or at least temporarily shelved.

Every citizen in the Soviet Union has had this brought home to him with varying degrees of force, and if some perform an inward act of protest, it remains inarticulate and ineffective. Nevertheless it is doubtful whether this remorseless course can be kept up quite so rigorously beyond the life of the fanatical and single-minded generation which knew the Revolution. The principal hope of a new flowering of the liberated Russian genius lies in the still unexhausted vitality, the omnivorous curiosity, the astonishingly undiminished moral and intellectual appetite of this most imaginative and least narrow of peoples, which in the long – perhaps very long – run, and despite the appalling damage done to it by the chains which bind it at present, still shows greater promise of gigantic achievement in the use of its vast material resources, and, by the same token, *pari passu*, in the arts and sciences, than any other contemporary society.