

Thomas Molnar

EASTERN EUROPEAN AND SOVIET LITERATURE OF THE PRESENT AGE*

I am not an expert on the literature of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union but coming from that part of the world and reading some of the relevant languages I feel that I can comment with some degree of authority on the current state of the literature in the countries behind the Iron Curtain.

You have to understand that in Eastern Europe, in spite of Communism, or to a very large extent because of Communism, there is an extraordinarily active intellectual and cultural life. I would even add that at times I have felt intellectual life to be more intense and freer than anywhere in the West. In the West we are so completely spoilt and live in very comfortable societies, so that we have lost moral objectives and even serious intellectual objectives. In Eastern Europe anything that has to do with the word, written or spoken, has tremendous value. It is not only literature as such that counts, for the act of writing constitutes an act of revolt against the Communist occupant. If I were to choose from my knowledge of Eastern and Western contemporary literature, I would say that Eastern literature is far more alive, healthier, more artistic and concerned with real mankind, including man's moral dimension, than is the case in the West.

1. RUSSIAN LITERATURE

Let me start with Russia. We have to make a clear distinction between Russia and Eastern Europe. Russia does not belong and has never belonged to Europe. Russians even today are considered by Eastern Europeans to be Asiatic barbarians, and as such the line of division should be clearly drawn between Russia and the Eastern European nations.

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However, it is a fact that Russia has had a beautiful and significant literature, first of all in the nineteenth century when it was as great and important a literature as anything the West has produced, as well as during the past century.

This literature did not die in 1917 when the Communists took over. It simply went underground and flourished. While there is no such thing as Soviet *literature* (what is written consists largely of a kind of bureaucratic set of rules composed by those who want to get into or remain in the good graces of the Party. Even though these writings appear in millions of copies, they are not read, as they constitute purely ideological propaganda), what the people do read is the literature that since the twenties and until this decade has been underground, in the sense that the state publishing houses have never published any of this, neither have the literary magazines. These novels and poems were simply retyped hundreds of times by people who spent their leisure hours typing — while always keeping a sharp lookout for the secret police. In this way works like Solzhenitsyn's novels would be retyped and distributed and then again retyped — until in the end tens of thousands of copies would be circulating among Russians who are passionately interested in literature — as which Russian is not interested in literature?

What is now true of the sixties and the seventies is that the Russians have a Samizdat literature (which means self-publishing), or in other words, underground publishing. The State authorities know about these ventures, because very often the sons and the daughters of the highest officials participate in them. When they do manage to arrest the “offenders” and block the publication of this underground literature, they do so, but very often they do not bother but allow this mushrooming literature to spread.

So we do have a brilliant Russian literature of the twentieth century, which has nothing to do with the Soviet State, but instead everything with the Russian tradition which goes back to the nineteenth and the eighteenth centuries.

One novel that I should mention was written in the early nineteen thirties by the writer Bulgakov, who, while he was not persecuted, was not published either. The book that I wish to refer to, *Master and Margarita*, was not published then — it had to wait for the nineteen sixties to be published abroad. To my knowledge it has not been published in Russia yet.

Bulgakov died peacefully (not in a concentration camp, which is a relatively rare situation for a Russian artist or writer). His works could not become known as they were simply repressed by the State. *Master and Margarita* is a brilliant satire of Soviet society of the early nineteen twenties, that is, the time when the Communist régime took over. The theme is a take-off of

Goethe's *Faust*, that is, Margharita has the same part as in the *Faust* — the part of an innocent young girl, and the master is Lucifer, who is descending upon Moscow one summer night. For a number of months he creates havoc with the Soviet authorities. One has to recognize that in an atheistic régime which does not accord a place to either God or the Devil, the mere fact that the principal figure in the novel is the Devil is an act of revolt on the part of the author. This explains why the book was never published. The interesting point is that from the point of view of the Devil the whole of Soviet society is seen to be grotesque. Bulgakov does not even bother to show the injustices, the horror or the abuses — he merely shows things up as they are, as a caricature of that society, which, however, is enough to endanger, at least in the eyes of the authorities, the loyalties of the members of that society.

But it remains a brilliant novel, a marvellous take-off on the theme of the medieval Faust. By putting Lucifer down in the middle of Moscow and by making him a resident of the Soviet Writers' Union, Bulgakov creates all sorts of caricatural situations highly appreciated by the underground audiences.

One could, if time permitted, speak of dozens of Russian writers, from the nineteen thirties onwards when persecution landed many of them in concentration camps (and in fortunate cases in exile). Up to the time known as the *thaw*, the Khrushchev years, when Khrushchev for incalculable reasons decided that it was now time to rehabilitate some writers that had been suppressed up to that time, the situation was invidious. The Russians had, during the thaw, a brief period of freedom when the novels and poems of a man like Pasternak could be published. He was awarded the Nobel Prize, but he was not allowed to go to Stockholm to collect it.

An even greater writer than Pasternak emerged at just that time. He had the good fortune of calling Khrushchev's attention to himself, and Khrushchev, again for unknown reasons, decided that this was not only the time for the rehabilitation of the writers, but also the time to allow things to be said about Stalin's concentration camps.

That is how Solzhenitsyn as a writer was born, and his first long short story (not really a novel), *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch*, was published by the *Novymir*, a Soviet literary magazine, which was extremely cautiously trying to publish some things — which the Party at all times still had to approve. Even where the Party was not in complete agreement, however, Khrushchev allowed the publication of the story in the *Novymir*. It was then eventually published in book form, the only thing to appear in Russia by this author.

This story is strongly recommended to all readers. It is a short story, but a kind of revolution in Soviet literature — that is, in the sense of the under-

ground literature for one short moment coming to the surface and becoming a transient official literature too.

The novelty of that book is that instead of deploring, and writing horror stories about the conditions of the camps in which Solzhenitsyn himself had spent ten years, instead of writing about that which he would write about later in the *Gulag Archipelago*, in this book he describes the life (in the course of 24 hours) of an old convict, Ivan Denisovitch, who got into the camp originally as most Russians do, not knowing quite why — probably because some bureaucrat decided that a certain segment of the population would now be deported and die and rot there in the camp. He is an old and devoutly Christian man, who in a way takes things in his stride, and sees this also as God's will, and he is satisfied, in the midst of his sufferings, that he is alive, that little things happen to him, such as that at dinner time when they pour hot water into his plate he receives a larger amount than he normally does, and so he can now make more tea than he usually does. That is a joyful occasion to him. There are various such incidents in the book, and they have symbolic value in the sense that the Russian people survive even the most horrible decades by a kind of inner glow, an inner health. They suffer because they call themselves Christians, and therefore they have to suffer. But they find in the nooks and crannies of their horrible little lives small pleasures and little joys, and when he finally goes to sleep Ivan feels quite happy and falls asleep smiling.

If one were to regard this simple story as a children's story one would be greatly mistaken, for it is life as it is lived within us when we are really and utterly alone, when we come face to face with the fundamental concepts of happiness or unhappiness. But in the Soviet Union this theme is an act of revolt, because nobody is supposed to be in a camp unless he is a real and monstrous enemy of the state. One such man, who shows that he can find little joys and pleasures in the midst of the difficulties, will show to the world that they cannot destroy the minds and the souls of the Russian people. It is really a miracle that Khrushchev allowed that book to be published.

But Solzhenitsyn has ultimately become known for far greater and more significant books than this one. One is his autobiographical book — perhaps the autobiography of the entire Soviet régime from the time of its inception to the time when the book was written in the late nineteen sixties. It is a tremendous book, and in it Solzhenitsyn deals with his own coming to terms with his anti-Communism, a decision which grew into inner resistance, a resolve that he alone would if necessary fight the Soviet régime, by not accepting the lies spread by the Party, by living the life of an inwardly free man.

For one man, let alone a writer, to fight the NKVD, the secret police, which is everywhere, and which controls everything, is an extraordinary act of defiance. The man who did this, who succeeded in his act of defiance by refusing for example to appear at secret police hearings when summonsed, ran a terrible risk, as normally any act of this kind would mean instant deportation to Siberia. Yet the régime, stunned that this could be done, because nobody has done it before, did nothing — and the defiance worked. He kept publishing books abroad, and he, the little Soviet citizen, threatened that if anything were to happen to him or his family his books would all be published in the West (and by now we know what books they were). These books were published as *The Gulag Archipelago*, and through them Solzhenitsyn intended the régime to be embarrassed at the very least. With tricks then but mostly through honest standup, he fought the régime through what he wrote and eventually published.

Even more important than that book and the many novels he has published is a relatively short book called *Lenin in Zürich*. It is interesting and to some extent symbolic, that Lenin spent the years of the First World War in Zürich, where he was plotting the overthrow of the Czarist régime — and that he should be associated through his exile with Solzhenitsyn, who was also, in 1974, dropped as it were from the sky from the plane transporting him to West Germany. Solzhenitsyn too decided to spend some years of his exile in Zürich. He thus followed, in a certain sense, in the footsteps of Lenin. There can be no more different men than Lenin and Solzhenitsyn. If the Russian soul can be seen to have two extremes, the utmost barbaric brutality would be manifest in Lenin, and the Christian Russian would be manifest in Solzhenitsyn. For the one then to write the history of the other is curiously apposite. It is not merely the history of Lenin, but the history of the Russian soul. By following Lenin's footsteps through Zürich, by going to the same library where Lenin spent most of the time reading on political and social matters, Solzhenitsyn, in repeating the process, would achieve a biography of extraordinary power. Once again it is not merely a biography but an autobiography of a great Russian author and thus a sort of hybrid.

It so happens that a great French anti-Communist who is now in his late eighties and who has been fighting Communism since Lenin and Stalin, and who is an expert on Soviet matters, recently wrote a sixty-page article showing that what Solzhenitsyn wrote was not actually based on Lenin's documented actions, that his work was thus not based on incontrovertible fact, that his documentations was shoddy, that very often he takes liberties with the facts of Lenin's life, and that therefore the book has no historical value. I think that one could safely say that if this is not the real life of Lenin that

Solzhenitsyn wrote, it *ought to be* the real life of Lenin. Solzhenitsyn is a great writer, and he has gone through hell, the sort of hell created by Lenin and his Party. He understands Lenin better than anybody else could hope to. I am not here taking the side of falsifying biographies, but I am definitely taking the side of literature. To write with the capacity for feeling into the soul of Lenin is not given to any biographer of Lenin, or any political scientist, so therefore Solzhenitsyn's Lenin would survive much longer than Lenin's memory otherwise would.

One is dealing therefore, in the cases of Bulgakov and Solzhenitsyn, with giants of literature, and not the little dwarfs with which the literatures of the West are studded and who publish freely and endlessly all sorts of novels in which there is no limit on what they could write: they might write about sex and then sex again, with leftist propaganda thrown in for good measure. Ultimately this kind of writing becomes in itself a boring kind of propaganda. Where one would, therefore, expect propaganda, the greatest literature of the twentieth century issues forth, and the greatness of this literature is not that it is excellent only in terms of literary canons, but it is that, in this totally corrupt Western society, there are now Russian writers (and mind you, they come from the East, so that a light is brought to this darkening world of the West, ironically, from the East) who write again, as the greatest literature has been written, from Homer to Dante to Shakespeare to Goethe and also to the nineteenth century Russians, about moral man.

In using the term *moral man* I do not mean good man, because man is not good, but certainly also not evil, being not merely a mechanism as the so-called Russian Soviet realism would like to paint him. Men are once more presented in the fulness of their moral dimension — and in this dimension men appear as they are — moral, immoral, but men with extraordinary spiritual richness and complexity, which the Soviet ideologues would like to reduce to a robotlike uniformity of existence. The enormous importance of the Russian writers today resides in their clarity and directness of moral vision — and this is a fresh breeze in the moral muddle of the West.

Solzhenitsyn has had a great impact on the West. He appeared on television, so that even while people have not seen him in the flesh, they have seen and heard him on television, and the impact of the man, the moral seriousness that he exudes (I don't want to use the word saintliness, but I would stop just short of using it) has impressed generations of Westerners. I would like to refer to the Harvard speech of June 1978, which is ample evidence of the impact a man who speaks the truth can have on the people of the West, who are in an altogether different situation.

But Solzhenitsyn has almost passed from the literary scene, and while he

will maintain, for decades to come, this moral authority, there are now other writers, Soviet Russians, whom the régime cannot digest and therefore, instead of killing them, as was the case under Stalin, they are now expelling them. Every new writer who rejects the régime is now expelled, and of course he might consider himself fortunate. The one who springs to mind is Alexancer Zinoviev, who was a Professor of Mathematics and Logic at the University of Moscow, and who began to write novels, secretly, because not only would they not be published, but if the secret police in one of their periodic searches of his drawers found a manuscript, not only would he lose his job, but his children would lose their educational opportunities, he would lose his apartment and he would be forbidden to travel abroad to mathematical congresses.

In spite of all the difficulties besetting him he kept writing, and it is a curious but not altogether unexpected phenomenon that great literary artists in a way write better when there is not, all around them, a permissive society in which everything can be written (and unfortunately the more disgusting the better). People do write better when there is a certain degree of threat over their heads. They discover more acutely the beauty of the word, and they take extreme care to write beautifully, for they know that if they do that at least posterity will see them in print.

This has been the case with Zinoviev. His style is not really comparable with the richness of style of Solzhenitsyn, but one has to accept that the repressive Soviet régime has wilfully and knowingly destroyed the extraordinary richness and beauty of the Russian language. In so far as the language is the soul of the nation, the Russian language was a kind of platform of resistance of the Russian people against the Communist oppressors. So the Communists are guilty essentially not only of destroying the people but they have exterminated the Russian language, which they made into a kind of bureaucratese, heavy with constant clichés being repeated, about the kind of leadership of Lenin and Stalin.

So the language itself is prostituted. One of Solzhenitsyn's great aspirations is precisely to renew the Russian language, in other words to go back to the real language and so also to fight the Soviet régime and its constant lies.

Now Zinoviev, belonging to a younger generation, did not escape the new impoverished language, so that his language is not a very beautiful one. But what he says is just as explosive as what Solzhenitsyn says, because in the book called *The radiant future* (which is a sarcastic take-off of the constant Soviet promises that although one may be living in difficult circumstances now, the future will be better — which is of course not true, but in the

meantime the slogan of the radiant future is obediently repeated) he describes Soviet society, that is, the layer of Soviet society that he knows best: the academicians, the professors, the writers and those corresponding hierarchical figures in the Party system who deal with matters of literature, science, mathematics and art. These are the privileged members of society. They are not materially deprived, they are not in camps, in fact they are the rich layers of society, having special shops where they can buy good merchandise, they have cars, they have summer residences, they can travel because they are trusted by the régime – up to a point, because spies abound all round them. Each is called upon to spy upon the other, to betray the other – otherwise their privileges will be taken away. So the constant blackmail is a fact of their lives – but nevertheless material goods are available to them.

What Zinoviev writes is really that this is the most natural society, that the *Soviet* society is the most natural one. What does he mean by natural? If animals are natural, then the society is also natural, because he wants us to imagine human beings who have no religious dimension, who have no family law, who cannot imagine a man loving a woman and a woman loving a man, a society in which there is no decency, in which there are no moral considerations. If this sort of mechanistic society is the perfect model of society, then of course the Soviet society is the most perfect and natural one.

But it is precisely for these reasons that it is the most inhuman society. It is a machine which works, and if anything comes within the wheels of the machine, then the Party ruthlessly grinds it to pieces: whether it is a person or a group or a work of literature or of the plastic arts. This is therefore an immense satire of Soviet society, a theme which Zinoviev also pursued strikingly in another book, called *The yawning heights* (which is an eight-hundred page book, for when the repressed Russians get started on their writing, the flood cannot be stopped. This is a natural phenomenon, for when everybody is constantly muzzled, the tension builds up until it explodes in an irrepressible flood). In this book no human beings are mentioned by name. There are abstractions instead, such as the envious men, the ambitious man, the betrayer – types in which Soviet society abounds. These types are allowed to express themselves, showing Soviet society in an ever uglier light.

Zinoviev, like Solzhenitsyn, was expelled from Russia two years ago. While one may regard this as a fortunate thing for the Russian author who is now teaching at the University of Munich, one has to remember that it is, in Solzhenitsyn's own words, a horrible thing for a writer, especially a Russian

writer, to be expelled and thus cut off from his country, because it is a well-known fact that there is an almost mystical bond between a Russian and his country. It is thus a tragedy to a Russian writer when he has to leave his country for ever. There is the dilemma always — a Russian cannot write what he wants to inside his country, but outside the country he cannot write in his own language either, because as soon as something is completed, it has to be translated into German, French, English in order to ensure an audience, so that there cannot be that mysterious link which an author must have with his audience around him. The author writing in exile cannot feel that there is an audience who intuitively understands and appreciates his work. Thus he may well be inhibited from working, dry up and stagnate.

However, I do know from various sources that Solzhenitsyn has actually managed to bring out another fifteen manuscripts with him, and hopefully he will be able to complete and then to publish these (and not die, given his tremendous will-power) before they have been published.

Much more could be said of Soviet literature, and not only literature in the sense of *belles-lettres*, but also in the sense of authors writing in explicit criticism of the régime. I could really list here sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, scientists and many others, including writers on religion. All this would not strictly speaking be literature, but would all be part of the Russian writer's arsenal today. These books, which cannot be published within Russia, are published abroad and are then smuggled into the USSR. Practically anywhere where a Soviet ship puts in, the local anti-Communists are approaching the sailors of the ships, most of whom are anti-Communists themselves (many secretly being Christians) to smuggle in literature. Today Solzhenitsyn is in fact a "bestseller" inside Russia — not in the sense to which we are used, but in the sense that there are thousands of illegal copies circulating, being read by the Soviet intellectual élite. The Soviet public thus does have some access to the works of Solzhenitsyn and others.

2. EASTERN EUROPEAN LITERATURE

Let me also deal very briefly with Eastern European literature as against Soviet literature (this includes the works of Poles, Hungarians, Romanians, East Germans, Czechs and Bulgarians).

Once again, literary life has perhaps never been as active as it is now. In spite of the fact that this may seem contradictory, I would like to repeat that there is an enormous amount of freedom in the hearts and in the minds

of these people. No freedom exists outside themselves, and the censors are after them the minute it becomes known that they are even planning to write something, but it is precisely this that sets their minds free — the danger and the problems that they encounter whenever they write for publication either underground or abroad.

Let me mention here for example one book (not a novel) by a Pole called Adam Mischnyk who has been persecuted by the régime for a number of years now. He used to be a leftist intellectual. As is the case with many other leftist intellectuals, he was initially, with the occupation of his country by the Communists, an intellectual and ideological ally of the Communists. He maintained that Poland had suffered for years because the church imposed an impossibly reactionary régime on the country and the people. The Communists were then actively welcomed because it was felt that they upset some of the restraints imposed by the church such as the divorce laws and laws dealing with contraception and abortion.

These leftist intellectuals felt that the Communists would co-operate with them. It took less than ten years for them to discover that in their Soviet allies they had found a force more horribly oppressive than they had ever dreamed of. From that moment on (in the early fifties) the anti-Communist movement became very much alive, even among leftists.

Mischnyk now maintains, in a book published in France, that they were wrong in choosing the Communists as their allies. The church, the Catholic church, had been right all along, for in keeping the nation away from immorality it provided a secure base, and ensured the survival of Poland. It is only because they are now 96% Catholic that they can fight the Communists and never surrender, because they belong elsewhere, to themselves. The Communists can do what they want — the Poles will forever resist and endure.

This kind of changeover is not only the case with Mischnyk. It is the case with hundreds and thousands of others, who in Poland especially feel themselves increasingly free to say this type of thing out loud. The recent visit of the Pope to Poland merely confirmed this, because the message of the Pope, independently of the religious message, was that the Poles, in spite of the Eastern occupation, belong to Western civilization and culture through religion, through art and tradition, through inner feelings and history. And this is what the Poles and others behind the Iron Curtain wanted to hear: that someone should say this not only in the safety of Washington or London or Paris, but in Warsaw, under special circumstances. The Pope also asked, and he was the first ever to ask this, that for the duration of his

visit to Poland the Soviet flag should not fly next to the Polish flag. It was an act of revolt and independence brought by the Pope to the Poles and others behind the Iron Curtain — and a gesture understood and appreciated by all of them.

Let me now turn to another episode that is only half literary. A year ago a Catholic monthly magazine in Budapest which is allowed to publish even though it is Catholic (being very careful not to offend the régime) allowed itself to put the question “What is your personal relationship to God?” to the most prominent members of the Hungarian public, writers, artists, physicians, scientists.

I do not feel that such a question could today be put in the corrupt West, because everybody would laugh. “God? There is no God!” When all the atheistic philosophies of existentialism, structuralism and so on are the fashion and the fad in the West, speaking of God in countries where God had been declared dead by the philosophers would be grotesque.

It shows, however, the inner freedom of the countries behind the Iron Curtain that a Catholic paper there can ask the question. The answers that came back and were published declared eloquently that without belief in God, artists would be unable to create anything — and scientists would not be able to understand this meaningless material universe without a guiding spirit which they identify with God.

Even a Communist intellectual, a lady called Agnes Heller, who used to be the preferred disciple of the great Communist philosopher of Hungary, George Lukács (who has since died), contributed to this Catholic magazine. She is a Jewess, a Communist (a card-carrying member of the Party). Even she said that while she was not a religious person, she still regarded all those who believed in God as her brothers and sisters. All those little Party members who live by privilege and arrogance, thinking that they have real status, she has contempt for. For such a person to say this was of course dangerous — it is still not possible in spite of the seeming tolerance. Miss Heller was expelled from Hungary together with her husband, and they are now living in Australia.

What is important is that she took the courage into her hands to write this. The ex-Communist (or she might still be a Communist) had come around completely, as Solzhenitsyn did in Russia, as Mischnyk did in Poland — and these are merely a few random examples drawn from an ocean of conversion in these countries to morality and to religious faith.

The Party of course is still ruling, but one might ask how long a Party could rule when the thinking minds of the nation have become totally disaffected with the ideology of the ruling party — and where they openly

espouse the very ideology (Christianity) which is the direct antithesis of the ideology of the ruling party.

From an embarrassment of riches I would like to draw one more example only. In Czechoslovakia in 1977 hundreds of authors and artists and professionals got together and published the so-called *Charter of '77* (which refers to the year of publication), in which they demanded a greater amount of freedom from the authorities. Needless to say they have ever since been persecuted — and in the crudest manner possible. They are brought to trial on all sorts of trumped-up charges, and when the Party is unable to bring charges against them, perhaps because they are too much in the Western eye, then as they go home at night they might be attacked by so-called hooligans who are of course members of the Secret Police. They are physically injured in this way — thus one can see that the Party resorts to the dirtiest tricks against these courageous people, who are now, in every country, demanding to be heard. They are manifesting their discontent and demanding rights — not merely on the basis of economic well-being, or the basis even of democracy, or the abolishing of the Soviet régime. They are demanding the rights on the basis of the soul's right to express itself and to think freely. (This has nothing to do with that nonsensical human rights business which President Carter invented in a moment when he wanted very much to be elected president.) This is not a sham but an eminently serious business, undertaken by people whose lives are risked in any moment of writing and speaking. It is important for us, and especially I would say for University students, to realize that these ideas are disseminated through the main channel of literature. Only in its language can a nation fully express itself, only through its language can it have reference to its ancestors and its traditions. Only through literature can this be manifest at all — and far more efficiently than it can be done through any other mode of protest.

So, while the real fighters are mostly poets and novelists, this is precisely the reason why they are in the forefront of the battle for real freedom.