

# MODERN RUSSIAN LITERATURE

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NOTHING is more difficult than to sum up the present state of Russian literature, or to give a satisfactory estimate of it as a whole. It has undergone a double crisis of incalculable importance during the few years since the declaration of war. From that moment there appeared a departure, which grew more and more obvious, from the traditions that had previously seemed fundamental. Later the Bolshevik domination — either by wiping out the intellectuals or by sending them into voluntary exile — set up a new and highly complex movement which was definitely to change the direction of the current. The attitude that gave the Russian literature of the days before the war its 'heroic character' — according to the famous formulas enunciated by Professor Venguéroff — was that of a continuous and formidable protest against the existing state of things.

This mental attitude took, on the one side, the form of direct criticism of the old régime; a criticism which directed itself as much against the methods of repression practised by Tsarism as against its thirst for conquest — as for example in Leonid Andreyev's *The Seven Who Were Hanged*, and *The Red Laugh*. In its other aspect it suffered 'the torment of the beyond,' a romantic refusal to accept creation as it is, an attitude exemplified in Dostoyevsky. The last act of Tolstoy, his flight from his home and family, was such a protest; the picturesque insolence of Gorky's 'lost ones' was such a defiance. The saddened lyricism of a Chekhov

found its consolation in the fact that 'life will be beautiful in two or three hundred years.' And what do the deliriums of an Artzybashev or the mystic frenzy of Merejkovsky's group represent, if not the need to escape from the brutal realities of the reactionary powers triumphant over the revolutionists of 1905.

The very idea of the fatherland — identified with an official Russia and overwhelmed by the bureaucracy — scarcely figures among the familiar conceptions of the Russian writers. Their inspiration was the 'muse of vengeance and of sorrow' invoked by Nekrassov, and their characteristic attitude was indignant denial and fervent hope for Utopia. Literature was either an unparalleled weapon, or else a powerful narcotic, a source of forgetfulness, an 'artificial paradise.'

Ten years later the duel with Japan called forth no literature except a flood of pamphlets and revelations. It was a general *j'accuse*. The writers constituted themselves the idealists of liberating defeat. Such works as Kuprin's *The Encounter*, which made his name illustrious, exemplify the intellectual party's condemnation of the military state.

But, before the great conflict which brought the great empire to blows with Germany, a subtle and almost complete change was produced. The best literature ranged itself by the side of the government, which proclaimed that the cause of liberty was its own — just as, a century before, the future

Decembrists had attacked the Napoleonic tyranny. It was the lyric poets who put themselves at the head of this spontaneous movement, and others followed with enthusiasm. To find a precedent for this patriotic fever one must go back to the days of the burning of Moscow, or seek for the demonstrations of the slavophiles Khomiakov and Pioutchev, celebrating the defeat of the Polish insurrection. If the 'sacred union' was nothing but a generous illusion for Russia, which could not last, it at least seized the imagination of the great symbolist poets, Solohoub, and Alexander Block. One of the chiefs of the younger generation, Serge Gorodetzky, the interpreter of the primitive mythology of the Slavs, had just proclaimed the 'communion of the Tsar with the people,' though it is true that to-day we see him celebrating in dithyrambic verse the sickle and the hammer, emblems of the Soviet and the energy of the Bolshevik.

The martyrdom of Belgium was an inexhaustible source of inspiration. In the theatre, productions of the day multiplied. But only Leonid Andreyev's drama, *King, Law, and Liberty* kept its place on the boards. The action of this piece is built around the noble figure of the poet, modeled upon Maurice Maeterlinck, who inspires the king to the supreme sacrifice — the opening of the dikes. Since that time a fragment of a dialogue between William II and a Russian scientist, a volunteer in the Belgium army, has been found among the papers of Andreyev, who died in Finland. This imaginary dialogue proves the constant preoccupation of the moralist haunted by the problem of his responsibility.

The story-tellers followed the poets closely. We see remarkable writings gathered up in *Loukomorie*, a collection edited by one of the members of the Souvorin family, the son of the great

reactionary journalist. Kouzmin, Solohoub, even the Socialist Oliger, contributed mediocre and inferior productions to these collections.

Those works dealing with the war are characterized by almost the same stereotyped ideas. There is always a German, the hypocritical fiancé of the heroine who, once war is declared, reveals himself as the worst sort of a brute, and a spy besides. Battle-scenes are described with equal artificiality — reproductions of the sound of the detonations, or the enthusiastic shouts of the assault. The writers far behind the line are less concerned with the bloody reality of war than with its glorious trappings. One can imagine Merejkovsky's indignation as he protested against 'these nightingales singing in blood.' Having broken with the great pacifist traditions set up by Tolstoy, and being deprived of immediate impressions, these writers experimented with — or else, less conscientious, actually produced — 'pretty writings'; and so to-day not a line survives of their hasty sketches.

Another literary *genus* established itself, however, that of the war-correspondent. Many eminent authors attached to the auxiliary service of the army sent their stories of the war to the great periodicals. The novelist, Alexis Tolstoy, the poet Valleri Bryusov, and many others were in the number of the correspondents. A philosopher, Fedor Steppoune, published, under a pseudonym, *The Letters of a Second Lieutenant of Artillery* — a work which will live. Goumilev, a young schoolmaster, twice decorated and then wounded, wrote verses *On the Holiest of Wars*, as he advanced through East Prussia at the head of his hussars. It is to him also that we owe the chronicles of the campaign. But these anguished, or merely picturesque, descriptions of the war, seen at first-hand, do not by any means

constitute works of art. We possess in them only the scattered elements of a great epic that is yet to be written.

The war was accepted by all the literary groups as a necessity imposed by the German menace, or as a renewal of the national life. Only one man stood out against the current — Maxim Gorky. He had left Italy in order to establish at Petrograd the review *Liétopis* (*Annals*) an organ of internationalist propaganda. Except for this he abstained from any political activity. In a leading article which was violently discussed, he set side by side the two souls of Russia — the soul of Europe, bent on action, contrasted with the soul of Asia, dreamy and inactive. There followed two works that reestablished Gorky's artistic prestige, which had been weakened by his novels, highly artificial in conception, on Socialist themes. In *Childhood* and *Among Men* he described the early years of his life. There is nothing more moving than to follow the formation of this soul, developing amid the most poignant scenes, picturesque or burlesque, of popular life on the Volga. This animated biography takes its place among the classics, the memories of childhood of an Aksakoff or a Tolstoy.

However great the temptation to go on with a general picture of Russian literature to-day, I must give some attention to individual work. During the years of the war, although no new literary form was developed, the art of the novel was enriched by three remarkable productions. *Alexander I*, by Merejkovsky, is a chronicle of the reign which fixed the destiny of Russia for a century. Merejkovsky proceeds by antithesis. In the *Trilogy*, to which he owes his distinction, he opposed Christianity to Paganism. In his mystic philosophical works he tried to establish a synthesis, the religion of the Holy Spirit.

In *Alexander I* we see the forces of reaction in conflict with the youthful nobility stirred by revolutionary fervor. The soul of the Emperor is sadly divided, and he fails to meet the dilemma. The throng of historical personages who play a part in this drama of a whole country present themselves to us in two aspects: real so far as precise documentation and the painting of historical settings are concerned; fictitious so far as these characters are intended to be twisted to the preconceived ideas of the author, although the book itself was conceived in the years which preceded the war.

*That Which Was Not*, a novel by Boris Savinkov, the famous political adventurer, is equally representative of a page of more recent history. It is a picture of the revolution of 1905 and its defeat — a work based on the sensations and personal memories of the author, who was a very active terrorist organizer. The literary qualities of this novel were not solid enough to allow of its survival after a sensational but ephemeral success.

I may also mention another work of distinction: *Petersburg*, by André Byely, one of the most remarkable men of the symbolist generation: poet, novelist, critic, and anthroposophist. As a thinker Byely leans upon German philosophy and ultimately on that of Steiner; and in his quest after a new form of expression, he presents himself as a rival of the great French initiators, as a Mallarmé or a Rhimbaud. For the overwhelming task of making over the novel, he prepared himself by a series of 'symphonies in prose.' *Petersburg*, based on a fantastic conception of the capital, — 'the most artificial in the world' as Dostoyevsky would say, — has special value because of the word-study of the author. This clever rhythmic prose, surcharged with assonances and other phonetic tricks,

enriched with grotesque or pathetic metaphors and suggestive epithets, forms a whole that is as complicated as a labyrinth, yet lightened by gleams of genius. To read *Petersburg* is a labor; and yet this book, so full of suggestions, seems to mark an important change in the evolution of the Russian language.

But the moment was approaching when all literary aspirations were to grow sombre in the torment of the revolution.

When, after a year of convulsions, the Communist dictatorship was established, it had an important effect upon literary production. In view of the situation that was forced upon the intellectuals by triumphant Bolshevism, literature could adopt only one attitude without perishing: silence. Authors resolutely refrained from writing, for had they dared to speak, measures would have been taken to deal with them.

Once all publications outside the official press had been eliminated, printing material declared state property, distribution of paper subject to control, nothing remained for men of letters who refused to rally to the support of the new régime. Misery was their lot so far as material things were concerned.

One man alone accepted the task of maintaining if not literature, at least the existence of literary men. This was Maxim Gorky. Some hundreds of literary men owe to him liberty, the food that saved them from famishing, very often life itself. I do not regard myself as qualified to discuss the political conduct of this man, who is so generally attacked. Some day a resurrected fatherland will judge him. To combat the bad faith of a hypocritical and brutal government, he had to struggle without truce in the cause of the intellectuals. I cannot speak here of

his purely humanitarian undertakings, but his enterprise of *World Literature* ought to be mentioned. It is a series of translations of all the distinguished literary work that appeared on the two continents from the dawn of the French Revolution to our own day. The plan of these publications was worked out independently by a chosen body of literary men and scientists; and all the competent men were gathered together in this design of unification and civilization.

By the making of translations, the writing of notes and prefaces, they endured the worst times somehow, although the situation of all these authors, condemned to translating the works of others and forbidden to produce anything themselves, was somewhat paradoxical.

There is no need to say that *World Literature* was nothing but a generous illusion. By a clever manoeuvre, the men at the head let the writers go on with their work, but did not give them the paper necessary for publication. In this way *World Literature* won resounding acclaim, even dazzled credulous people, in other countries; but, as a matter of fact, it was reduced to nothing.

Gorky, wearied by the burden of irreconcilable responsibilities, and a struggle without glory and without effect, himself produced very little. A play for the popular theatre, *The Workman Who Talks Well*, designed to cure the victorious proletariat of his distaste for work and his love of talk, was hissed, and then forbidden, on the ground that it was an attack on the majesty of the people. Some *Memories of Leo Tolstoy* were much admired; but in playing the rôle of the devil's advocate in a panegyric of Lenin, he had definitely alienated the people's minds.

In view, however, of the silent but obstinate protest of the literary men,

the need for an official art was brought home to the despots. There were the futurist poets, who had just come to the front with their new master, Mayakowski, at their head. They saw in the distress of the national soul 'the means to arrive.' Their leader — a man of talent but wholly devoid of scruples, and athirst for notoriety — put at the service of the most debased demagogues his poetry, with its powerful rhythm and its marked sonority, abundant in images of deliberate and unexampled brutality. His *Mystery-Play*, a kind of comedy in the manner of Aristophanes, in which he makes a chorus of workmen pass through hell and heaven so that they may come out at last in the promised land of Communism, crowned with the greatest pomp, fell flat. People were stupefied to see the shade of Tolstoy scoffed at in the open theatre by a Russian poet. A new poem, *The One Hundred and Fifty Millions* proclaimed the so-called Bolshevist faith of the Russian masses.

Mayakowski was supported by other adepts no less observant of the official ideals — Kliouev, a peasant of the government of Olonetz, drawing his inspiration from the primitive direct speech, chief of a mystic sect in his own country, the panegyrist of Bolshevism, in his poem, *A Copper Whale*; Ezenine; Valleri Bryusov, 'the faultless master' of the symbolist group, who is to-day the administrator of Communist letters; and the Imaginists who, with Cherchenevitch and Marienhof, 'the syndicate of poets,' knew how to win the good-will of Lunacharsky, and to secure many a subsidy from him.

At the same time, efforts were made to replace what was called bourgeois poetry by proletarian art. Everywhere the 'Proletcults' were found — associations destined to support this movement, hothouses in which these artificial flowers were cultivated. The workman

poets, or those who so styled themselves, a Guerassimov, a Gastev, are the relentless imitators of Verhaeren, of Walt Whitman, the great American, and of their bourgeois colleagues. Their works are nothing but *pastiches*, of merely relative importance.

But the great Bolshevist cataclysm, the frenzied outbreak of the masses, the moral overthrow, the destructive madness of a few crazy people destroying themselves, would still have had to wait for literary expression if one inspired and remarkable poem had not appeared. This is *The Twelve*, by Alexander Blok, the poet of *The Fair Lady*, the well-beloved mystic, whose previous work had been the last flowering of an exhausted but still captivating romance. This poem — the song of songs of the October Revolution — describes the lugubrious night march of the Red Guards with a phantom Petrograd for a setting. At the end of the poem you see — a blasphemous conclusion — Christ appearing through the whirling snow and pointing out the way to the ghastly squad. By a kind of Messianic mysticism, the poet attributes to these sinister figures an unconscious mission, which is almost divine.

No work has stirred up such vehement discussion, for the Bolsheviki themselves feared a trick hidden in this apotheosis of their own ideas; but the skill and intuition of the artist are marvelous. He employs a composite style, in which the *argot* of the pavement and the prison mingles with the jargon of public meetings, popular refrains, orthodox prayers, and the seraphic, winged sweetness of the words describing the appearance of the Christ.

Were we to confine ourselves to printed works, we should now have given a fair summary of the state of literature during the Soviet régime. But the authors, forbidden other ways

of securing a public, bethought themselves of communicating their writings orally to readers equally exasperated by the requirements of the official press. Little by little lectures, then the 'almanacs,' and then the 'spoken reviews' increased in number. We may see Remisoff reciting his learned and delightful paraphrases of the old popular dramas; we may see Zamiatin reciting striking short stories — vivid in style and grotesque as silhouettes; and we may see the critics analyzing these unpublished authors by word of mouth. No repression could wipe out completely the whole force of a literary generation. Though her hands were bound, the muse sang during her time of torture.

In his celebrated work on the literary movement of the nineteenth century, the Danish critic, Georg Brandes, entitled one of the two volumes devoted to France: *The Literature of the Exiles*. Some day, perhaps, the literature of the Russian exiles will form a collection no less imposing; but to-day there is little to presage such an event. Russian literature abroad, though it is rich in names already illustrious, is lacking in new writers, and struggles in vain to raise itself; for it is an uprooted literature, the work of men fascinated by the spectacle of their agonized fatherland, overwhelmed with an irremediable nostalgia, left alone in a world which is making itself anew, and separated from their land and from their dead.

Paris is the sheltering place of precious *débris*. There is Bounin, who is the natural chief of this group, an undoubted master. His pessimism, his objective method, the austere character of his style, make one think of a Flaubert, but a Terrorist Flaubert. His work cannot be reduced to brief formulas. He swears an implacable and uncompromising hatred of Bolshevism,

making himself, as it were, a counterpoise to Gorky, whom he attacks with fierce invectives and ferocious irony. There are also the novelist Kuprin; the poet Balmont, the idol of the young men of 1905, who writes a good deal with the fieriness of youth; Grebenchikoff, who paints the life of the Siberian desert in a powerful yet simple way; Madame Tefky, who, though she cultivates writing of the amusing sort, is by no means lacking in agreeable lyric qualities; Aldanov, the historian of Lenin, who recently published a novel on Napoleon 'in the manner of Anatole France.'

Sometimes it happens that it is the books and not the authors who are exiled. Merejkovsky is publishing in Paris his last novel, *December Fourteenth* (the date of the military insurrection against Nicholas I in 1825), although he wrote it in Soviet Russia. This was the subject that haunted Leo Tolstoy, and it will be remembered that the last part of *War and Peace* might have served as a transition to a volume on the Decembrists. Fedor Solohoul, who is now living in Russia was able to publish his novel, *The Snake-Charmer*, abroad — a rather insignificant episode and somewhat tainted by a certain opportunism. The charmer is a young girl of the working class, good, beautiful, and intelligent, who succeeds in completely transforming the character of her bourgeois patrons. One cannot be very much astonished to see the style, even of a celebrated writer, going to pieces under the influence of this factitious piece of work, which is optimistic without conviction. This enfeebling of a powerful talent — is it not a symptom of the incurable disease that is affecting all Russian creative endeavor? These pages — are they not written on the walls of a prison?

But Russia's terrific misfortune has not destroyed all sources of inspiration. Count Alexis Tolstoy has just finished

a book of the greatest scope: *The Road of Torture*, a novel which is now being published in the Russian review, *Contemporary Notebooks*. The action takes us from the beginning of the war to the beginning of the Revolution. Numerous persons, drawn from the most diverse social classes of Russia, move through the action, of which the declaration of war, the offensive in Galicia, the flight of the hero from an Austrian prison-camp, the murder of Rasputin, and the upheaval of 1917, are the principal incidents. The book is a monument erected to the martyred people, an effort to untangle the causes of the catastrophe; and it is also a novel of adventure, full of surprises and striking episodes.

*The Road of Torture* is not a first book, for the third Tolstoy has already published many a novel, captivating alike for the interest of a story well told and for the beauty of its style. His

heroes of everyday life, grotesque and ludicrous as they are, the last wearers of gentlemen's cast-off clothing, eccentrics indulging their manias, win for him a place apart among Russian novelists. It is even possible that *The Road of Torture*, once it is finished, may carry Tolstoy to the head of the literary movement of exiled Russia.

I trust that, in this very summary study, though striving to avoid fastidious classifications, I have asserted the essential facts, whose more extended analysis would serve to give a complete picture of the Russian literature of our day. I have abstained from all prophecy; but who can doubt the inexhaustible resources of the Russian genius? The day, no doubt, is near at hand when the soul of Russia will again burst into flower amid the rubbish; when Lazarus will break from the grave and rise to light and liberty.

## MARK AKENSIDE, POET AND PHYSICIAN

BY EDMUND GOSSE

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SOMETHING very subtle links the practice of literature to the profession of medicine. What it is I cannot tell, but the fact subsists that if you see a surgeon or a physician meditating alone, there are ten chances that he is busy composing a sonnet to one chance that an engineer or a bank manager or a brewer is doing the same. It is no new thing: from early times the doctors have been apt to be men of letters.

Their profession has two faces, as was said of Rabelais, one turned to time, one to eternity, and the author of *Pantagruel* was the type of the literary physician. He abounds in all countries, but with us in England he has been particularly frequent, from Lodge, whose *Rosalynde* inspired the *As You Like It* of Shakespeare, down to the present Poet Laureate, whom I remember forty years ago on the staff