

Underground Letters

S. K. OBERBECK

WARD 7, by Valeriy Tarsis. Translated by Katya Brown. Dutton. \$3.50.

THE MAKEPEACE EXPERIMENT, by Abram Tertz. Translated by Manya Harari. Pantheon. \$3.95.

These two books by Russian "underground" writers are as different as fire and ice. They mark opposite ends in the spectrum of dissent in Soviet literature, and represent two extremes in solving problems faced by authors in the Soviet Union.

Valeriy Tarsis may not even qualify as an "underground" writer. If any Russian author ever leapt up from the herd and bellowed conspicuously, it is Tarsis. Incarcerated in an asylum in 1962 for sending *The Bluebottle*, a dissection of life under Khrushchev, abroad for publication, Tarsis seems to have been hardly able to wait to send out another damaging manuscript. This one is *Ward 7*, an account of his "experiences" in the Moscow asylum. There, until the western press took up his case (aiding in his release), Tarsis found "all the most interesting people in the country," other political prisoners like himself—authors, artists, musicians, teachers, students, and professional men. Only one man in the section of 150 was a genuine patient, Tarsis writes, and no one else "was the victim of anything except his lot as a Soviet citizen."

Tarsis is a mature, fluid writer whose thought and style reach backward rather than forward. Pasternak, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Lermontov, Blok—those other "doomed seekers" are his idols. His title refers to Chekhov's famous novella "Ward 6" describing the miserable Russian asylums of eighty years ago. Tarsis's use of the title suggests that today's euphemism for political prison is only a slight improvement. But his almost one-dimensional invective puts him in the curious position of the enlightened reactionary urging counter-revolution to end all revolutions: "God! the number of useless victims

there are! The crowds of Isaacs climbing on to altars of their own free will—not even on their fathers' initiative—and lying down like lambs under the sacrificial knife—instead of snatching it up and sticking it into the fat priests!"

As a Russian writer who lived through the sadly real "publish and perish" years of Zamyatin, Babel, Naritsa, and Pasternak, Tarsis was for decades critical of the Communist régime. He finally broke with the party and the Union of Soviet Writers in 1960—when for him "the time came to remind the world that there existed Russians, not just Soviet citizens, and that there existed honest Russian writers." His version of honesty, then, is this lightly fictionalized journal (told by "Valentine Almazov," or Tarsis). In describing his "walled-in concentration camp" he recalls a kindly psychiatrist who, too old to buck the system, nevertheless "thought it absurd to call 'persecution mania' the state of mind of people who had been persecuted for forty years and whose fathers had been shot or died in concentration camps. . . . You could safely diagnose every Russian as suffering from persecution mania."

In spirited but stacked conversations that Almazov has with his fellow inmates, Tarsis finds his vehicle for displaying his political persuasions. This is perhaps the weakest aspect of what he, or his publisher, chooses to call a novel. It is a personal political tract and should be considered as such. "What the West and the whole free world is trying to prevent is *man* being turned back into a communised anthropomorphic ape," Tarsis writes. His real object is to debunk the boast that there are no Soviet political prisoners. *Ward 7* is really political melodrama.

WHERE Tarsis writes melodrama, Abram Tertz writes a sly political fable. Tertz—presumably Russian, presumably young—is the pseudonym of a clever, deceptively intense author whose previous works (*On Socialist Realism*, *The Trial Begins*, and *Fantastic Stories*) were also smuggled out of Russia. *On Socialist Realism* was a deeply reasoned tract attacking the official artistic style as a "monstrous salad" but reflecting Tertz's subtle and sub-

stantial grasp of the Soviet writer's historical ordeal. *Trial* was a sketchy but moving paranoid fantasy of life under Stalin, and Tertz's short stories were full of brilliant experimental grotesqueries and slag piles of historical reference and metaphysical imagery.

The weight of history and symbol, undiminished in *Lyubimov* (Tertz's real title for *The Makepeace Experiment*), rests lightly in this fanciful story of an outback bicycle mechanic's one-man revolution, rise, and fall. Lenya Tikhomirov (unaptly Anglicized to "Lenny Makepeace") is part Count Cagliostro and part Tom Swift. A magical book containing an Indian mystic's secret of personal magnetism falls mysteriously from a ceiling and Lenya uses it to bewitch and befuddle. His ultimate aim is to seize world power and establish universal peace, but his efforts go hilariously awry.

There is a decided shift in mood from *Trial* to *Lyubimov*, a relaxation and departure from the "phantasmagoric" style to a playful, less haunted storytelling. Tertz is more detached in irony and ire, shaping the flamboyant satire to his own whims rather than conforming it to the mood and history of the Stalinist nightmare. But *Lyubimov* definitely *is* history, from Mother Russia's nineteenth-century peasants and the New Jerusalem of the Revolution to the foundering agricultural period of Khrushchev. It is history cast in ridicule, history that goes begging for heroic figures. There is Lenin, sure enough, but only peering out waggishly from the hundred-ruble notes with which Lenya papers the walls of his headquarters. Lenin bay-ing wolfishly at the moon: "He howled . . . and he howled again until he began to feel chilly and turned and ran as fast as his legs would carry him, his green eyes flashing in the dark, back to his writing and his calculating. . . ."

What is Lenya's major problem in sustaining his revolution? Too grand a dream and not enough bread. He substitutes toothpaste for caviar and convinces the thirsty peasants that the river runs champagne, and makes fiery red peppers taste like succulent steaks. But his subtle powers of propaganda wane when a reprisal force from the capital presses in on

Lyubimov. Spies arrive, then a squadron of bombers, and finally remote-controlled tanks impervious to Lenya's magnetic powers that crush the city's curious revolt. "They have everything—planes, press, radio, telephones, lunatic asylums—and what have we got? Nothing!" laments Lenya. "Nothing except our naked imagination."

BUT TERTZ knows the powerful force of the "imagination," and in one teasing paragraph he seems to address the oppressive bureaucracy: "A fire in a bog can be surprisingly difficult to cope with. You put it out in one place, it comes up in another. . . . No one knows how the fire spreads. . . . You never see it spread—only the smoke steals along the ground and after a few days of standing in it the trees have turned into ready-made firebrands." Tertz's time as a "firebrand" has not arrived. He is content to tease, to spin stories of witty and malicious portent. Has he merely shuffled the deck of history, or stacked it according to his own purposes? It is hard to catch the true answer. In a way, his entire book can be read as an extended anecdote—the kind of jokes Russians tell each other to vent their humor without treading on official toes.

Lenya's tale, visited by ghosts of the past, tricked up with mocking, scholarly footnotes, is a question of mood over matter. Like an onion, it has a strong taste, a strong smell, layer upon layer of literary and historical allusions, but no apparent center. Its pith is in its peels. Some critics, taking note of the ultrapolitical slant publishers use in promoting Russian "underground" books, have suggested that Tertz be read primarily as a novelist. Surely that is just. But asking us to read Tertz as an apolitical fiction writer is about like asking Roger Blough to write an apolitical account of Big Steel in the 1960's. Tertz is a natural-born dissenter, not an anti-Communist, and one shudders humorously to think what he could do with the foibles of our own Great Society.

But this is not the end of problems with Tertz. In part, his real meaning and real words have been rather distorted by his London translator, Manya Harari, who at times renders Russian dialect into marbled

mouthed Cockney and who has apparently deleted whole paragraphs from Tertz's original. As a curious footnote, her name was mentioned in the Gerald Brooke espionage trial, in connection with the Russian anti-Communist émigré organization NTS. Whatever Mrs. Harari's politics, a writer of political persuasions as delicate as Tertz's deserves an entirely unbiased translator. It does not appear that he has got one.

A Compelling Summons

ROBERT COLES

DARK GHETTO: DILEMMAS OF SOCIAL POWER, by Kenneth B. Clark. *Harper & Row*. \$4.95.

There is, in the social sciences, an uncommon tradition of research based on the investigator's personal involvement and even suffering. In this sense, *Dark Ghetto* is much more than what it claims to be: a strict, unsentimental social and psychological portrayal of ghetto life, with continuing comment on its political and economic underpinnings.

One thinks of Bruno Bettelheim and Viktor Frankl, so putting to use their experiences in the concentration camps that psychologists and psychiatrists who read them ought never again have quite the license to disregard both the diabolic and the spiritual in favor of this or that clinical abstraction. One thinks of Anna Freud, taking up her moving effort in behalf of the English children rendered homeless by the Nazi blitz: psychoanalytic knowledge could be tested and found helpful to ordinary, everyday children facing a world run terribly amok. Now it is Kenneth Clark, who shows social scientists that their tasks need not be futile, boring, comically pretentious, and, worst of all, hopelessly removed from reality.

Recently Roy Wilkins remarked that "Even Franklin Roosevelt, in 1940, wasn't ready to denounce lynching in so many words." It was then that Kenneth Clark received his Ph.D. in psychology from Columbia. Shortly thereafter, he worked in

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