

Vissarion Belinski 1811-1848

*A Study in the Origins of
Social Criticism in Russia*

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NEW YORK / RUSSELL & RUSSELL

Harvard Studies
in Comparative Literature
Founded by William Henry Schofield

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L. C. CATALOG CARD NO: 68-27052
PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Preface

For all but the specialist in the literary and intellectual history of Russia this book will serve, if it serves in any way, as an introduction to Belinski. So far only one other volume in English has been published about this major Russian critic: the Soviet translation of a Soviet anthology, entitled *V. G. Belinsky: Selected Philosophical Works*.^{*} Unfortunately, the selection that is there made from Belinski's writings is only partly representative of his whole development. In any case such a book, even if it were without faults, is no rival of mine, since it has been my interest to do something quite different: namely, to present a critical analysis of Belinski's intellectual career. To this end I have concentrated upon the main lines of his evolution, trying to make sense of it and to discover whatever unity it may possess. Belinski's published articles, written on a wide diversity of authors and works, fill a dozen sizeable volumes. It is obvious that a book like mine could not be expected to present the total Belinski in this sense. Instead, I have aimed to present the total Belinski in another sense: to give here all that one needs to know in order to understand him. Necessary to this design is, of course, a discussion of all his major articles, as well as of his most important personal correspondence (which alone fills three volumes). All translations, of numerous prose passages and occasional lines of verse, are my own.

In pursuit of my subject I have undertaken to give the non-specialist reader some introduction to the intellectual and cultural situation in which Belinski lived and wrote. That situation is of interest not only because it helps to explain Belinski himself, but also because those times constitute, as it were, the adolescence of

^{*} Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1948. 552 pages.

PREFACE

the Russia with which we coexist today. Certain dominant attitudes, certain ways of conceiving the problems of Russian culture, were shaped in those years. I do not mean to contend that Russian history began in 1811, with the birth of Belinski. But it is a distinctive feature of modern Russian history that the early decades of the last century were extremely decisive for the subsequent direction of the national life.

Among the fundamental problems of cultural life which were formulated during the first half of the nineteenth century in Russia is the problem of literature. Nowhere else at this time is it possible to find such anxiety in the asking of questions about literature: What direction should it take? What is its function? What relation does it bear to the national life? Since, among the many Russian intellectuals who concerned themselves with such questions, it is Belinski who first tried to arrive at a comprehensive and systematic statement, any study of Belinski is obliged to become a study in the relation between literature and society. This is what the following essay was originally designed to be.

Just as my interests in this essay have included both the study of literature and the study of Russian intellectual history, so I have a main obligation appropriate to each interest to acknowledge: to the Department of Comparative Literature and to the Russian Research Center of Harvard University. The basic pattern of the present book was first worked out in the form of a doctoral dissertation for the Department of Comparative Literature. Professors Harry Levin and Renato Poggioli of that department have both given me support of many kinds. Although the Russian Research Center did not sponsor the present study, I have it to thank for a research fellowship which allowed me to continue my study of the Russian intelligentsia. Professor Michael Karpovich of Harvard University and Professor René Wellek of Yale University have given me valuable advice and even more valuable encouragement. Finally, I wish to thank the Committee for the Promotion of Advanced Slavic Cultural Studies for its financial help in the publication of this book. Since such acknowledgment as this is my only way of repaying these debts, I am glad of this chance to make it.

HERBERT E. BOWMAN

VISSARION BELINSKI

(1811-1848)

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CHAPTER ONE

Introductory: Literature and Society

The Problem

An interest in the interrelation between literature and society leads not into one study but into a field of study. The history of the subject follows not so much the evolution of an answer to a single question as the unrolling of a series of episodes. The intellectual curiosity or moral concern of the time must decide into what momentary form the continuing theme is to be arranged. The poet's membership in the republic; the fitness of vernacular language for poetry; the claims of inspiration against established canons of taste; the artist's revelation of the spirit of his age — each formulation of the larger problem may suggest a wholly new and independent range of speculation.

Out of the many possible directions into which a study of the relation between literature and society can lead, modern criticism often takes a special interest in devising a sociology of literature. And it is true that of all artistic creation literature may seem the most easily accessible to the social philosopher, since it is expressed in the social medium of language and is always to some extent engaged in the portrayal of social relationships. Yet the chance is also great that social theory will be often frustrated in the effort to account for the work of art, which by its nature displays all the ambiguities of an incorrigible individuality. To admit, as at least one Marxist critic is willing to do, that art is the Achilles' heel of historical materialism ¹ is only to admit that all spontaneous self-expression bristles with problems for generalized social theory.

Confidence in a social interpretation of literary creation may

take support from a readiness in the contemporary artist himself to abandon claim to special authority as prophet or as legislator, acknowledged or unacknowledged. A disorderly modern world tempts the artist to make an aesthetic or pious or sophisticated or scholarly withdrawal from the traffic of an acquisitive society and to assert his private claim of independent vision in estrangement or aloofness from the world of affairs. Retired as lawmaker for his society, the artist comes to be defined as its creature.

Meanwhile the isolation of the artist becomes one of the targets against which a social interpretation is aimed. To the solitary artist is refused the privilege of seeing in his works no more than a creation of private fancy. Such a refusal may tend to violate the nonchalant spontaneity of the creative passion, but at least it works to dignify the activity of the artist. Too deliberate an effort to see how "from literature it is possible to reconstruct the entire social, political, and economic life of a people" ² may bring on temporary blindness to the permanent condition of art, but at least the fault of such a view consists in the exaggeration of the virtue of taking the artist seriously.

Recognition of a relationship between literature and society may find its basis either in the proposition that literature is the unconscious expression of social institutions or in the quite different contention that the literary artist should consciously dedicate his work to the elaboration of social themes. These two positions are not only different, but they may appear to be mutually exclusive. Yet historically — and psychologically — the first proposition has had a way of bringing the second into being: from seeing literature as an expression of social life, the theorist goes on to argue that the best art is that which most clearly and fully reflects social conditions.

The effort to interpret the work of literary art as an expression of social institutions may begin far from any attempt to make art tendentious. The long history of systematic speculation upon the sociology of art, distinguished by such names as Vico, Montesquieu, Herder, Hegel, Taine, takes its origin from an interest in a philosophy of culture more or less free from the formulation of dogma. But even the objective recognition of an interdependence between art and society always provides a basis from which orders

may sooner or later go forth, that the artist consciously portray his social milieu. J.-M. Guyau's study, *L'Art au point de vue sociologique*, provides one eminent example of how the disinterested consideration of "art from the sociological point of view" is quickly transformed into an eagerness to rule that "le but le plus haut de l'art est de produire une émotion esthétique d'un caractère social."³ The ease with which Madame de Staël could move from a study of literature in its relations with social institutions (*De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*, 1800) to the formulation of a program for French literature (*De l'Allemagne*, 1810) is only one historic illustration of the proximity of literary theory to literary policy. Every systematic statement of what art is offers the materials for a systematic statement of what art should be.

The requirement that art become conscious social criticism need not in itself, however, endanger the artist's spontaneity by requiring that art be held to a propaganda service. Precisely in the interest of making literature into valid social criticism, the author, it may be argued, must remain free, in an unhampered and undirected judgment upon actual life. In other words, the exponent of the artist's dependence upon his society may still argue for the freedom of art. Thus G. V. Plekhanov's insistence upon the artist's obligation to his society still allows him to hold that if a writer works merely to illustrate an accepted argument, he is then no longer an artist but a publicist, regardless of the form in which he works.⁴ Even a revolutionary as active as Trotski can disparage the attempt to crystallize a "proletarian literature," recognizing that so long as literature remains creative it will transcend a given historical stage of social development.⁵

The peril for the artist which hides in his employment as a public servant must inevitably appear, however, whenever the struggles over social policy become intensified. Only temporary safety can then be found in the compromises which may be offered: as in Trotski's readiness to allow art to "make its own way by its own means" — since "the domain of art" is not one "in which the Party is called upon to command" — and at the same time to impose a sentence of death upon whatever in the free domain of art appears harmful or inexpedient for the social pro-

gram, since "the artists who are created by the Revolution cannot but want to speak of the Revolution."⁶

The eagerness of the social reformer to use the artist to his own purposes is only one expression of inherent competition between artist and reformer. Art engages energies which any program of social reform seeks to monopolize. Such alienation of affections may turn vigorous art of any school into the enemy of the political operator who divines in the activity of the artist a pole of attraction lying outside his own field of influence. Not only does the perspective of the artist tend to overlay that of the social and political activist, but the very objectivity of art threatens to disintegrate the purposiveness of social reform. However willing the reformer may initially show himself toward the artist's demand for independence, he is continuously liable to see in that demand a counterclaim to which he cannot allow completely free assertion. The defense of a free literature which was so passionately made by nineteenth-century Russian liberals came to its collapse after the Revolution at the hands of their descendants.

The inclination of the political reformer to bend art to his plan parallels in the world of practical affairs the systematic effort of "totalitarian" social theory to exclude whatever it cannot interpret in its terms. Here perhaps the most conspicuous illustration is Marxist literary criticism.

Marxist philosophies of art claim to reestablish the dignity of the work of art against its prostitution within an economy of private profit. For although, by the tenets of historical materialism, artistic activity is assigned to an ideological superstructure, yet, one Marxist argues, "it does not follow that art plays merely a secondary role (as Pisarev would have it, putting a shoemaker above Raphael); on the contrary, it is the idealistic exaltation of art over material reality which results in the ascetic debasement of art to the level of its more sensuous relationship to life."⁷ Capitalist economy, in Marx's own view, by its dominant concern for exchange value and corresponding disregard for the intrinsic value of the objects of exchange, provides no effective motivation for appreciating the work of art as an end in itself; "capitalist production is hostile to certain branches of spiritual production, such

as art and poetry.”⁸ “Viewed from the standpoint of the objective relations of capitalist society, the greatest work of art is equal to a certain quantity of manure.”⁹

But the theoretical requirement of Marxist theory to place artistic creation in a dependent position contradicts whatever claim it can make to having dignified the work of art. Historical materialism must ultimately attack the authority of the work of art by reducing it to a reflection of a “material” reality which is alone autonomous. The theoretical difficulties created by such relativism appear nowhere more dramatically than in the province of art. For if art is the creation of a psychology determined by a specific context of socioeconomic relationships, how can the art of a particular time and place continue to make its appeal to other times and places? A fully consistent materialism would seem to destroy the validity of any such continuing appeal. Marx himself could not be taken as a model of consistency in this detail. He was willing to announce a private admiration for the art of Greece despite his own cultural distance from Greek society. He even ventured to suggest that Greek art can provide a norm for all succeeding generations, who can hardly hope to surpass the artistic excellence of the ancient Greeks.¹⁰

Can this inconsistency be resolved within the Marxist system? Apparently not by Marx himself, who escaped into an *ad hoc* explanation of the continuing attraction in Greek art as the appeal of “normal children” to a modern world in its complex maturity.¹¹ Such an interpretation, however respectable, remains a digression from the main theory out of which an aesthetic was to be fashioned. It suggests the unsystematic and unsatisfactory conclusion that a separate account must be made for each work of the past which the critic happens to admire. Such a requirement ceases to be a test of an aesthetic theory and becomes instead a test of critical ingenuity.

It may be noted in defense of Marx that he did not proceed to deny his private preference when it appeared to erect a stumbling block for his theory. The obvious alternative is to deny value, except documentary, to all works of the past — of yesterday, almost literally. Such thorough denial of the past in art can force the creative impulse into only one possible avenue of expression:

a fanatical utopianism which leads directly away from the present concrete reality which all true art portrays. In conformity with a theoretical refusal to validate any experience which is felt to transcend time and place, the critic with a completely relativistic aesthetic must deny the experience in order to preserve the theory. In such an extremity the aesthetic is emptied of all content by becoming a system of generalization about experiences which no longer take place.

The bankruptcy to which a closed system of relativistic aesthetics is ultimately brought threatens every effort to explain the work of art by an analysis of social institutions. Perhaps the temporary salvation of every sociological aesthetic lies precisely in its failure to achieve a closed system of interpretation. The intellectual kinship between the explanation of art as the expression of national and social institutions and "the identification of the artist's individuality with a definite political principle," as the Marxist recommends,¹² may not be immediate, but it remains potential.

The Bias of the Russian Intelligentsia

The hazards of a conscious insistence upon the interdependence of art and society are perhaps nowhere more available to observation than in the literary history of modern Russia. Main currents in Russian cultural life during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have constantly worked to direct Russian critical thought toward a sharp awareness of the social role of literature. In the first place, the intellectual elite in modern Russia has traditionally performed the combined tasks of social philosopher and literary critic. In important cases the two spheres of activity become identical. This feature of Russian intellectual life expresses a peculiar cultural situation, which crystallized with the emergence of a well-defined and publicly active "intelligentsia" in the first half of the nineteenth century.

It became the function of the Russian intelligentsia to maintain constant surveillance over national affairs generally by passing critical judgment — artistic, philosophical, political — upon the whole state of Russian social and cultural life. Collaboration in

this critical function constituted the major criterion of membership in the intelligentsia, for in every other respect its members remained free to assume differing or antagonistic positions. The common cause remained the cause of Russia: her enlightenment, her general welfare. All workers in that cause belonged to a single spiritual community, in which the accidental differences of social origin and private life became irrelevant: whether their class alignments were aristocratic, plebeian, or mixed; whether they lived together as friends or enemies or in merely casual awareness of one another; whatever the differences in their formal education, intellectual competence, or moral character; indeed, whether or not they agreed in any important principle in the philosophies by which they passed judgment upon Russian national life or in their conceptions of the best methods to be employed in giving any social or political philosophy a practical expression.

The degree to which the attitudes of the intelligentsia tended to be radical is partly a measure of official oppression and social isolation. Precisely because they set themselves up as critics of the existing order, these self-appointed tribunes, whatever the character of their thought, were certain to embarrass the authorities, by whose lights the very attitude of criticism or freethinking was condemnation enough. The government's stupidity and ruthlessness in suppressing free thought naturally became in its turn an object of critical censure to its victims. By such a tragic or ridiculous evolution even the most harmless opinion could give a start to a career of radicalism. But even more important than official censure in making for radicalism among the intelligentsia is the fact that its members constituted an exceedingly small contingent within a multitude of inert or hostile humanity — a few bright candles in a dark night of popular ignorance or indifference. A sense of being few against desperately great odds helped in itself to cultivate the spirit of a militant minority predisposed toward extreme positions and extreme measures. Looking up to see an insensitive, arbitrary officialdom; looking down to see a vast herd of characterless subjects of the realm aimlessly at large; looking across at each other to see disagreement and disunity among a handful of potential collaborators — the members of the intelligentsia were from any point of view certain to be impressed by

the hopelessness of their isolation and, as an inevitable consequence, to develop the moral and intellectual belligerence that inspired radical philosophic and political attitudes.

Inspired or irritated by his assignment to an almost single-handed critical attack against the total structure of Russian national life, the member of the intelligentsia was stimulated to direct his criticism against the entire foundation of Russian cultural existence. He thus inclined toward "radicalism" in the sense that he busied himself not merely with pruning the dead leaves of national culture but with a deliberate probing at its roots; not merely with specialization upon a selected pathological detail but with an examination of the total organism. Consciousness of an unresolvable social problem in national dimensions has constantly weighed upon the spirit of the Russian intellectual. Hardly elsewhere in the modern world has so much intellectual energy been expended in efforts to define the role, the mission, the needs, the destiny, of the national life. With whatever justification, this preoccupation with crisis in Russia has given continuing stimulation to the mentality of radicalism.

Thus reinforced by historical events, the tendency to take a critical attitude toward the national culture in its entirety led, among other consequences, to an inclusion of all cultural activities under a single judgment: to a sharpening of the sense that no single organ of the national life would function regularly until the total organism was regulated. Particularly in its origins in the nineteenth century, modern Russian literary criticism, carried forward at first by an intelligentsia of such "radical" or "totalitarian" mentality, moved toward a social criticism which judged any particular literary work or current at least partly by its contribution to Russian cultural identity and enlightenment, as the expression of the national society and also as the vehicle of cultural advance. To be sure, major currents in modern Russian literature run counter to this utilitarianism. Indeed, part of the inspiration of such important movements as Russian Decadence, Symbolism, Acmeism, Formalism, can be found in their reaction against the confinements and distortions of the social interpretation of literature, and in their exuberant desire to restore to literary art its full freedom. But even such major attacks as these upon the

"civic" conception of art did not work toward an absolution of the Russian artist from the responsibility of performing a civic function. Rather the broadening of the confines of art made for a broadening of the artist's responsibility. An eminent example is Alexander Blok (1880-1921), probably the foremost Russian poet of the twentieth century, whose sense of vocation as a voice of national prophecy was acute and tragic.

The tendency to take literature "seriously" finds its most deliberate expression, of course, among the critics. The gravity of his assumed obligations to his public so weighed upon the Russian critic that he typically adopted not only a grim but often also a grandiose sense of mission. A Russian literary historian has defined this moral duty of the critic in explicit terms: "The critic who is without a leading principle which has been rigorously thought out and which is religiously adhered to, is a negative quantity rather than a positive asset to any . . . literature. Over against the world of external reality, he should represent a rich inner world of personal morality, a soul of unbounded receptivity, and a mind occupied by serious reflection. Every fact should find in him an answering echo; both the trivial and the important phenomena of life should stimulate in him the activity of disinterested thought, concerned only with truth and justice."¹³ Such a heavy pressure of obligation was bound to shape the very definition of literary criticism — which, in its more extreme "utilitarian" or "civic" forms, came to be primarily concerned with the public to which it was addressed and which it proposed to "enlighten" by means of the interpretation of literary works. This insistence that literary art perform a work of national enlightenment is by no means confined in Russia to the critic. The names of Gogol, Dostoevski, and Tolstoi alone may serve as dramatic reminders of the Russian artist's preoccupation with his moral mission within Russian society. Only in rare cases, however, did the Russian literary artist show himself ready to impose upon art the moral and ideological demands which leading Russian critics of the nineteenth century commonly made.

The conception of literature as an expression and guide of the national cultural life made a particularly effective appeal to the intelligentsia of the second quarter of the nineteenth century —

a period marked by the conscious effort of a great nation to come of age. The dominant problem of the period is nothing less than to determine and to articulate a cultural identity. "All men the least bit wakened to thought set out around this time to seek, with the fervor and greediness of hungry minds, the foundations of a conscious rational existence in Russia."¹⁴ It would not be easy to find another example in similar dimensions of an entire national community turning in upon itself to resolve the riddle of its existence. The student of the period is sure to be impressed or amused by the gravity and extent of its deliberations. But the age is by no means a time of merely dilettante philosophizing about grandiose theoretical propositions. Not less notable than the extensiveness of the philosophic effort is the "fervor and greediness" with which it is made. Questions which strike us today as almost hopeless in their sweep stand at this time as the urgent problems of a vigorous national life. It is this uncommon combination of largeness and urgency in the philosophic quest which gives the period its tremendous adolescent overflow of intellectual intensity.

This age, which might be called "the Age of Belinski," is conspicuous and perhaps unique in its preference for phrasing the contemporary cultural problem in the form of a question about the relation between literature and society. Such a formulation has, of course, a genuine appropriateness. The relationship between the literary artist and his milieu does indeed incorporate the whole relationship between the individual and society. And it is characteristic of Belinski and his contemporaries to have insisted that a conception of aesthetics requires first of all a conception of culture. "What should our literature be like? What should it express?" was a specific way of asking, "How shall we feel about our world? What kind of reproduction shall we make of it?"

The intellectual concern of the period might thus be called "aesthetic" in the largest sense; it is so at the same time in a more restricted sense. For the period of Belinski's lifetime it is difficult to exaggerate the seriousness of the attention paid to literary creation, at least by an enlightened minority. Belinski himself remarked frequently upon this characteristic of his age, as when he wrote: "It might still be said without exaggeration that only in art and