

## On Literature

*M. Gorky*

February 12-19, 2021

In the early seventies I read a book belonging to my girlfriend. It was called 'Reminiscences of Chekhov, Tolstoy and Andreyev' and like so much you encounter in your youth it made a deep impression on me. Gossip has that effect, as it allows you (or at least gives you the impression) of becoming privy to what really goes on in the world; and like most gossip, it tends to be shared privately and in whispers, enhancing it by the feeling it is exclusive and only known to a privileged few to which you will be added. My girlfriend became a wife and then an ex-wife, and the book disappeared with her. I have often wished to regain a copy of it, and recently I even searched for it on the internet, but with no success. Then I discovered that I had a book by Gorky titled 'On Literature' and perusing its table of contents I discovered to my excitement that it listed three accounts by Gorky on Chekhov, Tolstoy and Yesenin, but none on Andreyev. The omission of the latter I did not consider a serious one, and I felt I had no choice but to read them, and that it would be cheating not to read the entire book, and so I did.

The book is strange, both as to contents, but also as a physical object. It is published by Washington Paperbacks under the auspices of the University of Washington Press in 1973 in cooperation with a Soviet organization and actually printed in the Soviet union. The paper is of poor quality, (but has nevertheless not yellowed during the past half-century), as is the print. Also the editor's remarks are clearly Soviet editing, many authors are stuck with the label of reactionary or merely conservative. It is clearly a recent anthology of Gorky's writing and draws from a variety of published sources, most of them from his old age, but one as early as 1909. There are also at the end attached a few letters ranging from 1900 to the year before he died. The collection is dominated by two longer essays, one on the disintegration of the personality and the other on literary craftsmanship. The first written in 1909 the other in 1931. They are both a bit tedious to read in their political correctness. This can be understood by the second piece, but somewhat puzzling as to the first. There is also a formal address to the first All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, on Soviet Literature from 1933, and which you expect to follow the party line. Gorky is never interesting when he lays it out in a serious abstract way, his background as an autodidact shows too much; thus the most read-worthy pieces are his conversations with and reflections on Chekhov and Tolstoy. So let us take the tiger by the tail and start on the tedious stuff.

The disintegration of personality was written in 1909, after the failed revolution of 1906 and during his exile on the island of Capri. In it he claims that the individual is nothing, the collective is all. The richness of the collective imagination, with its repertoire of stock characters, supplies the material for the individual author to embellish and formulate. The ideas do of course make you think about Jung and the collective unconsciousness, but there is no reference to Jung. The Bolshevik movement held Freud in regard, but it is doubtful that they would have appreciated Jung due to their commitment to materialism. The

essay goes on and on, constantly disparaging the individual, and its lack of imagination and dearth of spirit, repeatedly seen as a philistine and petty bourgeois, thus filled with clichés associated with Marxist propaganda. The second essay, is written much later, and carries the ideas of the first further, at least as to political correctness, while the last, given as an official address is, to be expected, unabashedly correct in the prevalent political context.

To start from the beginning. In the initial essay we learn that Gorky took a serious interest in literature only when he was fourteen; before that he had been content to follow intricacies of plots, but after that he started to take an interest in form and the ulterior purpose of a book. He claims that science and literature have much in common, both rest on observation, comparison and study, and both the writer and the scientist need to have imagination and intuition. For the latter, imagination and intuition are necessary to fill in the gaps in a chain of facts (one suspects he really means gaps in chains of deductions.) Somewhat surprisingly he takes a rather narrow and specific view on 'imagination' by taking it literally, namely by thinking in images, and more peculiarly, attributing to natural phenomena human qualities, feelings and even intentions. He also, more interestingly, explains that great writers are neither realists nor romantics, but artfully blend the two approaches together. As to himself he admits two factors making him a writer. The first was the drabness of the life around him, and I guess he is now referring to the romantic side; and the second that he was so full of impressions that he could not help himself writing, which was the realistic streak. Maybe he failed to combine them? As examples of the former he lists *The legend of the Burning Heart* as romantic and *Twenty-six Men and a Girl* as realistic. He deplores the fact that the writers of the Russian nobility failed to depict simple Russians of will and action, and thus the romantics among them never produced a Schiller. In particular he takes exception to the idealistic accounts of the peasants among such writers and brings up Gleb Uspensky as a laudable example of realistic portrayals. The writers which influenced Gorky the most was the French ones, and especially Stendhal, Flaubert and Balzac. Through them he discovered that books could reveal to him things he had not seen or known in man. In particular how the old Grandet in Balzac made him understand his own grandfather. Balzac painted in oils and when he first saw paintings by Rubens, he immediately thought of Balzac. Thus his advice to young would be writers would be to learn French so as to be able to read those masters in the original. A book, he writes, is just as much a phenomenon of life as Man is, and much less of a 'thing' than all the other things Man has created. As a beginning writer Gorky did not dare to attempt prose, it seemed much too difficult, instead he tried his hand at poetry at first, but he changed his mind, yet the rhythm of poetry plagued his prose for a long time. Also prose demands precision, and he was once taken to task by Tolstoy that the position of an oven fire, in a scene in one of his stories, could not light up the bakers faces in the way it was described. Similarly Chekhov remarked that a woman, in one of his other stories, seemed to have three ears, of which one was on her chin.

Art may lie within the reach of the individual but creativity does not. It is the people (the collective unconsciousness?) which created Zeus, Phidias merely fashioned him in marble. Gorky is hard on *Weltschmerz* as he dismisses as the pathetic attempt of the 'I' i.e. the individual to cover its nakedness and to find shelter from its trembling fear of death.

Poetry inspired by it may be forceful, he concedes, but only in the way a cry of anguish is. He inveighs against the individualist, and warns him that the Proletariat has no desire to bring him to their attention. He starts calling the individualists 'hooligans' as creatures with no social sentiments and hence doomed to wither and lose even their instincts of self-preservation and their sense of value of their personal lives. Indeed the individual who only lives for himself is doomed, reduced to an idiot who is incapable of coherent thinking and can associate ideas only with the greatest difficulty, his thoughts being just flashes in the pan. Ultimately it leads to an attitude that after an individual destruction there should be a general one. The attitude of 'If there is no personal immortality then everything will die with me'. Gorky takes them to task. There is no private and individual immortality, he reminds the reader, we shall all inevitably vanish and yield place on this earth to people who will be stronger, more handsome and honest than we are. And who will create a new, splendid and vivid life, maybe even by collective effort overcome death through the marvelous force of many united wills. Ending with a joyous greeting to the people of the future. Such naive hope in the blessings of the future, which were so common at that time, and which lends to that very time such a happy, idyllic glow in retrospect, may to readers of today (people of the glorious future?) bring to mind the specter of exponential growth of technology, including artificial intelligence, which are now presented with a mixture of exultation and horror. So what is the remedy to those ills obsessively castigated by the author? To become fused with mankind and he alludes to people from Walt Whitman to Anatole France who have all turned to a more active life by becoming socialists. Even such a worshiper of the 'I' as Strindberg, he notes, cannot but acknowledge the wholesome influence of humanity at large as a huge storage battery. From then on he emphasizes the crucial rôle of the intelligentsia as the purveyor of the wisdom of the masses and their duty to tap into their strength. To acquire knowledge, should not be done out of petty personal interest, but serve knowledge itself to extend its boundaries, further and further, a process he sees as infinite. He has only contempt for those who try to lead a spiritual life, this is only yet another manifestation of individualism, of shying away from an active fruitful life, something which became tragically manifest when such lost souls went out among the peasants, earning nothing but contempt through their weaknesses, their ineptness at manual work, and their total inability to communicate with them.

Gorky warns that a new kind of writer has emerged on the Russian scene. He describes him as a public jester, a buffoon who is out to tickle the tastes of a public of philistines eager for mere amusement. Such a man, he judges, does not serve his country, only the public. Individualist, philistine, petty bourgeois not to mention hooligans, this kind of name calling, to which Gorky is not above happily indulging in, only goes to show that a child who is loved is loved through many names. Mediocrities and madmen, such are the two types of present-day writers, he adds, and thus adding to the repertoire of endearments. The literary fields, plowed by our great masters, yielding an abundance of bright flowers, are now overgrown with the weeds of ignorance and littered with the scraps of colored papers, the jackets of Western books. Those petty and paltry ideas of Western philistines, which are so alien to us, he continues in his diatribes He ends his essay on Cultural Disintegration on a call to organize the huge reserve of collective energy found among the people, into an active force and to create class, group and party collectives.

In his essay on craftsmanship he refers to Laplace, that celebrated mathematician and the Newton of France, as he lauds him, who claimed that an impatient scientist blessed with a vivid imagination often finds the causes before observation has made him discern them, and becomes so attached to the child of his imagination that he will think nothing of making it change the facts, rather than the other way around; and Gorky warns that a man of letters resembles the above impatiently imaginative scientist. The author warns those budding writers about using the aristocratic expression 'creative efforts' and instead substitute the simpler and more accurate word - work. Ideas, he reminds them, cannot be extracted out of thin air the way nitrogen is, instead they are created on earth springing from the soil of hard labor using the material of observation, comparison and study, and in the final analysis on facts and nothing but the facts. This is a piece of advice, especially as to the abuse of the word 'creativity', as pertinent today as it apparently was almost a hundred years ago. Gorky hence dismisses the complaints of young writers that public duty usurp too much time and hence hampers creative thought as being groundless. He cannot feel any sympathy for young people complaining about life being hard, a mere thirteen years ago (obviously referring to the end of the pre-revolutionary period) it was incomparably harder for young people, while forty years ago it was intolerable. He himself has never thought of himself as exclusively a writer, having never lost his zest for public activities. Yet he does resent his autodidacticism, the result of a wealth of impressions overwhelming him and thus preventing him from systematic study and lack of time for a proper self education. What he was looking for in literature was first and foremost a hero, a man of a strong and critical personality, but was disappointed as far as Russian literature was concerned. In what way could figures like Oblomov and Rudin satisfy this need? The three Russian writers who influenced him the most were Pomyalovsky, Gleb Uspensky and Leskov<sup>1</sup>.

Gorky is dismissive of Nietzsche, as a creator of a philosophy intended to serve the masters. Furthermore there was nothing original about it, the foundations for it had already been laid down by Plato, and he also, somewhat puzzlingly, adds Malthus as a predecessor. Nietzsche anyway ended up a madman, and his philosophy is the favorite spiritual feed of the fascists. Incidentally, Gorky rejects Plato, without naming him. Accordingly everything we encounter in civilization is the creation of man and never existed before as unreleased forms. Apart from testifying an incomplete and somewhat literal interpretation of Platonism, his dismissal contrast ironically with the faith Gorky presents in the collective wisdom versus individual. How does this really match with the kind of naive materialism he professes as a Marxist?

His diatribes against philistines and their ilk, so prominent in the previous essay discusses, also take place in the present one. While his outrage in the past has the virtue of sincerity, in this later work, it too often degenerates into a politically correct cliché. In the previous case, the struggle for a socialist revolution was still going on with no

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<sup>1</sup> Pomyalovsky (1835-63) novelist in the realistic tradition known for *Bourgeois Happiness* and *Molotov* ended his life as an alcoholic. Gleb Uspensky (1843-1902) short story writer, prominent in the Narodnik movement, i.e agrarian socialism. Uspensky ended his life in a psychiatric institution. Leskov (1831-1895), novelist, short-story writer and journalist. Known for *Lady Macbeth of Mtsenks*, *The Cathedral Clergy*, *The Enchanted Wanderer* the first turned into an opera by Shostakovitch

guarantees of success, now over twenty years later it had become an established orthodoxy. Now he inveighs against the greed of the philistines and that his purported fight for freedom is nothing else than seeking a freedom to exploit the labors of others. Now he extols the proletariat of the Soviet Union, which by now has developed a true consciousness of the root of all evil and sorrow in life being private property, which must be destroyed along with the shameful shackles of capitalism. Thus he admonishes writers of today not to complain that they are working for strangers, that no one can understand them, this can only happen if they do not understand let alone are not carried away by the revolutionary aims and tasks of the masses. He concludes his essay by claiming that we are living in an epoch in which the proletariat is acquiring a harmonious personality, meaning one which enjoys actual, decisive and complete freedom of thought, and thus the only force capable of subduing the hostile force in the world. Such expressions do date and place the writer.

In a shorter essay, written in 1933, he makes a case for the education of children through books (ostensible to make them into responsible Soviet citizens one gathers), by being rather specific and suggest themes. His thoughts on how a popular book on science should be written are worth quoting. He emphasizes that books on science and technology should not only reveal the ultimate results of human thought and experience but also to acquaint the reader with the process of research work, displaying how the search for the correct method is carried out and obstacles overcome. I would also like to add that only through this method can a reader truly appreciate the ultimate results. One may also compare science to detective work, replete with the finding of facts (clues) and forming hypotheses, most of which turn out to be dead ends. The public enjoys detective stories, not only for the depiction of characters and milieus (although that feature should not be underestimated) but also for the presentation of mystery and its ultimate explanation. Gorky writes

*Science and technology should not be depicted as a storehouse of ready-made discoveries and inventions, but as an arena of struggle, where concrete and living man overcomes the resistance offered by material and tradition.*

Furthermore he insists that such popular books should be written by active and distinguished scientists, not by impersonal and intermediate compilers, who are nothing but hacks ready to concoct any feature story on the prompting of any publisher. Just as the Soviet State has driven the middleman out of industry, it should also expel him from literature. He concludes the essay to another appeal for the organization of a group, in this case of scientists and writers.

In his official address to Union of Soviet writers he attacks Plato and Platonism, dismissing the former as the philosopher *who founded a world-understanding divorced from labor processes and the conditions and phenomena of everyday life* (italicized in the original). Plato is also seen as providing support for the Church, which saw him as a Christian forerunner, and which fought against paganism, i.e. a materialistic worldview rooted in labor. When feudalism started to feel the power of the bourgeois, the idealistic philosophy of Bishop Berkeley emerged, the reactionary significance of which was revealed by Lenin. When the Bourgeois in their turn felt the power of the Proletariat, they quickly returned to the philosophy of idealism and the bosom of the Church. In fact, when Marxists come around to write on the history of Culture, they will show that the rôle of the Bourgeois

has been grossly exaggerated. Gorky goes on to claim that the peasants and the workers were denied access to education, and thus to develop their minds and alleviate conditions of their work. The education open to them only had the goal to train them to become obedient servants of Capitalism. He then goes on to regret the rift between manual and intellectual work. Once again he deplores the lack of exemplary heroes in Russian literature, where instead thousands of swindlers, thieves, murderers and detectives usurp the attention, and not only in Russian literature. In fact Gorky attributes the slow development of the class-consciousness of the working people to the pernicious influence of the detective story. Why concern yourself with crimes merely existing in the imagination, when crimes against the working people are committed every day? No wonder that Sherlock Holmes appeared in England. The greatest criminals are people like Ivar Kreuger, Cecil Rhodes, Pierpont Morgan<sup>2</sup> and others of their ilk, who are more sinister than Ivan the Terrible. Why, he wonders, are only superfluous men depicted with such art, when not bankers and scientists? Two groups of writers of the Western Bourgeois literature can be distinguished, one including Trollope, Collins, Braddon, Marryat, Jerome, de Kock, Feval, Samarow, Stinde<sup>3</sup> and hundreds like them, nowadays, one surmises, even more obscure. All of these, according to Gorky, are 'good bourgeois' but poor talents, yet as adroit and vulgar as their readers. The other group, far more exclusive, consists of apostates, who have escaped from their bourgeois origins, and created outstanding works of critical realism and revolutionary romanticism. From those, whose names he does not divulge, we can both learn from their techniques as well as profit from their documentation of the rise and the decline of the bourgeoisie. Russian literature he likewise divides into the critical realists of Gogol, Chekhov and Bunin as well as Fonvizin and Griboyedov<sup>4</sup> and the purely petite-bourgeois

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<sup>2</sup> Ivar Kreuger (1880-32) Swedish industrialist, entrepreneur and financial speculator, maintaining a monopoly on matches. Committed suicide in Paris as his financial empire collapsed. Cecil Rhodes (1853-02) British colonialist, politician and mining magnate active in Southern Africa. Nowadays notorious as an advocate of white supremacy. Pierpont Morgan (1837-13) American banker, dominated corporate finance in the States during the so called Gilded age.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Trollope (1815-82) a famous and prolific Victorian novelist needing no further presentation; Wilkie Collins (1824-89) Victorian novelist and playwright, known for *Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* being the first modern English detective novel; Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1835-15) Victorian novelist known for *Lady Audley's Secret* a so called sensational novel; Florence (?) Marryat (1833-99) daughter of Frederick Marryat (naval officer and pioneer of nautical fiction) and Victorian novelist prolific author of sensational novels; Jerome K. Jerome (1859-27) author of *Three Men in a Boat*; Paul de Kock (1793-71) French novelist specializing in equivocal adventures such as *Le Barbier de Paris*; Paul Feval (1816-82) French novelist, known for vampire fiction and a pioneer of modern detective stories, testified by his series *les Habits Noir*, he suffered a financial scandal, lost his fortune and became a born-again Christian and started writing religious tracts; Octave Feuillet (1821-90) French novelist and playwright, also a member of Académie française, known for *Sibylle*; Gregor Samarow, pseudonym for Johann Ferdinand Martin Oskar von Meding, (1829-03) German writer of historical novels and adventure stories; Julius Stinde (1841-05) German writer, using twelve different pseudonyms, penned novels, stories, plays, satires and also texts on popular science, originally working as a chemist.

<sup>4</sup> Denis Fonvizin (1745-92) playwright founder of Russian comedy (*The Minor*); Alexander Griboyedov

literature of Bulgarin, Masalsky, Zotov, Krestovsky, Solovyov, Averkhenko<sup>5</sup>. The ability to imagine has been totally lost in bourgeois society, according to Gorky. The logic of hypothesis has survived only works when grounded in experiments. The bourgeois individualistic romanticism, with its penchant for the fantastic and the mystical does not, in the opinion of Gorky stimulate the imagination nor encourage thought. Divorced from reality it has to rely on the magic of words, as seen in Proust and his followers (who are they?). He then starts to extol the influence of some Russian writers, such as Turgenev's on Scandinavian, Tolstoy's on Thomas Hardy, and Dostoevsky on Nietzsche. He lauds the portrait that Dostoevsky gave of the 'Hero' in the 'Notes from the Underground' of the egocentric social degenerate, whom we will also meet later in Huysmann's 'A Reboirs' and in the writings of Oscar Wilde. Dostoevsky's genius is indisputable, yet his influence was deplorable. Gorky considers the period between 1907 and 1917 the most shameful decade in the history of the Russian Intelligentsia, it was period of complete 'creative freedom' which found its expression in the wholesale import of conservative ideas stemming from Western bourgeoisie. Bergson's philosophy was in ascendancy, and Plato was revered, this the perpetrator of the most pernicious fallacy through modes of thought divorced from reality, a reality that changes continuously through the processes of labor and creativity. He lauds Lenin along with the present leader of the party (i.e. Stalin, but not mentioned by name) for having raised the temperature of labor. Here in the Soviet Union, he claims, there will be no longer any place for superfluous people. The very surface of the land has changed, instead of a disarray of strips of lands, each cultivated on its own presenting a sorry looking expanse of parceled land, now uniformity (and one presumes, rationality) reigns, vast expanses of just one color. Then Gorky becomes more specific. The Party leadership of literature must be strictly purged of all philistine influences.

As noted initially, the most interesting part of the collection, is the inclusion of the literary portraits of Chekhov and Tolstoy, which made such an impression on me, when I first read them in my youth. The three of them lived intermittently in Yalta at the turn of the century enabling them to drop in on each other, and allowing Gorky to jot down notes and relay to posterity glimpses of high level gossip. Chekhov is presented as an almost Christlike figure of infinite wisdom and restraint, always gentle and polite, but not one to be meddled with. His laugh is wonderful, Gorky remarks.

The picture of Tolstoy is more complicated, instead of a gentle Christlike figure, we have a kind of holy saint and pagan God, a source of frustration and endless fascination.

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(1795-29) diplomat, playwright, poet and composer, whose fame rests on one book - *Woe from Wit* verse comedy.

<sup>5</sup> Faddei Venediktovitch Bulgarin (1789-1859) Russian writer of Polish extraction, inspired by Walter Scott he wrote a number of historical novels centered on Iwan Wyshigin which also became popular outside Russia, and even tried his hand on science fiction; Konstantin Petrovich Masalsky (Масальский), (1802-61) writer, poet, playwright, editor and author of historical novels; Vladimir Zotov (1821-96), writer, playwright, journalist and editor, known for *Old House*; Vsevolod Krestovsky (1840-95) writer of city mysteries, known for *The Slums of St-Petersburg*, became a reactionary anti-Semitic; Vsevolod Solovyov (1849-03) historical novelist known for the *Chronicle of Four Generations*; Arkady Averchenko (1881-25), playwright and satirist, editor and story contributor to the journal *Satyricon* (1908-1914). Some more obscure names are added by Gorky.

God and Tolstoy, that means two bears in the same lair. Gorky thinks it is a pity that Tolstoy does not have an Eckermann as Goethe had, one to document his sayings and table talk for the benefit of posterity. One candidate would be Suler<sup>6</sup> who is always hanging around and towards whom Tolstoy entertains a great fondness, but who does not seem to measure up to the task. Gorky takes notes, but loses them, only much later accidentally chancing upon them, allowing the portrait to be written. On the subject of 'freedom' Tolstoy wonders what it means. Would it mean that everything and everyone would agree with me? But then I would no longer exist, for we are only conscious of ourselves in conflict and opposition. On a walk with Chekhov Tolstoy turns to him and asks 'Were you very dissipated in your youth?' Chekhov only smiled sheepishly tugging at his beard. 'I was an indefatigable –' Tolstoy explains. This statement, which I have to admit puzzled me a little at the time, I still remember, proving to me that those portraits are indeed, if doubt ever would arise, the very same that I read back then, except that the translations may have been different. In my first encounter I am sure the dash was not there, the Soviet translation being a bit more prudish. Lots of *obiter dicta* are issued by the great man, so often mischievously playing the fool. The portrait is followed by a letter Gorky wrote on learning about his death. In it he exclaims that as long as Tolstoy walked this earth he (Gorky) was not an orphan. He quotes Tolstoy on Dostoevsky, the former claiming that Dostoevsky knew only how to feel, not how to think. Furthermore Dostoevsky was mistrustful, vain, cantankerous and miserable, concluding that it is funny that so many people read him and he cannot understand why. Why do they not read Leskov instead? He is a real writer. Gorky admits that he never liked the way Tolstoy talked about women, in that respect he talked too much like the 'common man' never afraid of resorting to vulgarities. In fact he was then sometimes insincere, and at the same time intensely personal. Tolstoy brings up poetry and Waltmann [sic] and tells Gorky that there is nothing poetical about him (i.e. Gorky), while Waltmann is a good writer, at times even better than Gogol. Tolstoy could not accept his personal mortality, could not God make a single exception just for him? This is what I remembers most vividly from my first reading, and sure enough it appears again.

The short portrait of Yesenin, the one-time lover of Isadora Duncan<sup>7</sup> is of much less interest, even less so then the extended portrait of Andreyev<sup>8</sup> in my original encounter. The collection ends with a few letters, on which I will not comment.

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<sup>6</sup> Pet-name for Leopold Sulerzhitsky (1872-1916) theater director, painter and pedagogue, and Tolstoy 'groupie'.

<sup>7</sup> Celebrated American dancer, met her death when her long scarf became entangled in the wheels of a car she was traveling with in Nice. The affair with Yesenin was short lived.

<sup>8</sup> Leonid Andreyev (1871-19), playwright, novelist, short-story writer, and considered the father of Expressionism in Russian literature.