

Through Russia

M. Gorky

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I first heard about Gorky from my mother. She was praising *My universities* to her father, suggesting that he, a Russo-phobic read it. He was not fond of reading books. Have you read one you have read them all, (at least if you stuck to a certain author) he used to say. And as noted, he was suspicious and fearful of Russians and Russian culture and politics. That was the way many Swedes were brought up as was my mother and also myself. But she had nevertheless discovered the literary treasures of that people, and at that time, (could I have been ten or so ?), it was implanted in my mind to keep the same distinction myself. In fact I remember the occasion very vividly as it was in the nature of a revelation. That matters are not of one piece.

However, I did not read Gorky right away, I was after all but a child and it would have been beyond me. But I did discover the short stories of Chekhov as a teenager, and later on in my early twenties the novels of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy played an important role in my life. I was deeply enamored by those classics of Russian literature and was led to entertain sentimental notions of the Russian soul and soil. In this mood I read a rather marginal work by Gorky - *The Life of a Useless Man*. Twenty years later or so I went through the trilogy of his autobiography, the one my mother had referred to so approvingly. I liked them, and thus I picked up the book under review with great expectations.

But expectations are meant to be disappointed. And I was disappointed. But why? The book consists of ten independent chapters, each a short story on its own. One would like to know whether those are autobiographical or just 'made up'. Does it make a difference? It does, a made-up story has to be really good to capture our attention and to keep it as well; while a story out of real life, may of course be embellished, but as long it has a documentary element, it has a claim on our interest, because it concerns real life and can teach us something. Now most writers are autobiographical. To make things up does not challenge the imagination as much as relating something that actually happened. The biographer Peter Ackroyd confirms this by claiming that a biography involves more imagination than fiction. This might appear paradoxical and frivolous to boot. But in biography you cannot stray, you have to stay with the basic facts; and the imagination only comes into serious play when encountering real obstacles. Thus one may surmise that the stories presented in the collection all have an actual basis in reality, that the narrator in all cases, is the young Gorky tramping through Russia, encountering the vast landscapes and the eccentric personalities who populate it. This is the basic assumption, without which the reading would appear pointless.

All of those stories follow a certain template. First a lengthy description of the external surroundings, which often tends to be rather tedious, and you find your mind wandering, unable to attach itself to the elaborate word-painting. Then some people are introduced, and your attention is pricked. Some inane conversation, which suddenly leads to unexpected revelations. Chekhov manages to paint a scene vividly in a few strokes, while

Gorky adds detail upon detail, as if believing that mere accumulation enhances the illusion of palpable reality. This may be the case in a visual display. A painting showing an abundance of details we may find charming and construed as an invitation to explore; but a verbal description is very different. It does not proceed by giving factual detail, just recall a lengthy description of a character's clothing, or of the minuate of his or her facial comportment; you tend to forget them right away. In a social setting what is said is far more important than looks. Yet of course this is a trap that writers are liable to fall into, not only those who are young and naive, after all Gorky was well into his fifties when he wrote these pieces. Occasionally his style makes me think of someone like Hawthorne with his florid writing. But it is one thing to read something of that order in its original language and quite another to read it translated. Maybe the Russian original has qualities which have been lost in translation? That could very well be the case.

Russia is a vast country with a population of primitive customs and outlooks. Tolstoy may have idealized the Russian peasant, speaking about soul and soil, but Chekhov knew better. Traveling through primitive Russia means an encounter with dirt and poverty, spiritual as well as material. One should not sentimentalize it, and Gorky does not.

Many of the stories involve young women, as the very first in which the narrator happens upon a woman in labor by the wayside abandoned by her party, and helps her give birth, not out of any expertise and competence, but simply because of need. The woman resents him and screams, but that he has to ignore, and the whole thing seems to have a happy ending. The erotic allures of many of the women are emphasized and lend to the stories a certain dramatic tension. Of course, Gorky is not vulgar, the allure is hinted at, not necessarily made graphic. The story 'A Woman' may be the most suggestive in that regard. A young woman who has attached herself to a young man whom she is trying to save and induce him to make himself a good husband to her and supply her with a simple but solid home. But the young man has other plans and resents being a project and rejects her. The narrator has a long nocturnal talk with her, the kind you have with a stranger in he middle of the night. With no one listening in to you, you are set into intimacy. Nothing of what you say will have the slightest consequences being in no way connected to your life as a whole. In fact it being in the nature of a dream. Thus it is magic because it allows you to speak with total honesty with no incentive to lie and thus paradoxically, because lies cannot be found out, there is no need to invent them. It is a true baring of souls. The two come close together, but only in this magic, unreal episode. The woman understands that clearly, but not the young narrator (as one assume that the narrator is young, a young Gorky) who cannot refrain from dreaming wanting to accompany her further on her way, that pilgrimage of hers towards a happier future. Can the magic extend to include his own life. The woman knows that it cannot and eventually they split.

You have only one life to live, but you feel that you would like to live all the lives which are possible for you to live. To experience to the fullest extent all what you are capable of. Like a short temporary fling of romantic adventure, just to remind yourself of all what you could pursue, but cannot, as you are only allowed to pursue one life. One life among many. What is the fear of death? On what is it really based? Not on the wish to live forever, as you can easily persuade yourself that this would be tedious beyond contemplation; but on the bitter realization that death will put the definite end to all of

those unlived lives which were never even begun. That you will have died before you had a real chance to live. Happy are those who feel that they were meant for only one life, and that was the life they lived. For those to show courage in facing extinction is much more natural than for those, whose lives no matter what, would have truly been felt unlived.

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