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Less Than One

SELECTED ESSAYS

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As failures go, attempting to recall the past is like trying to grasp the meaning of existence. Both make one feel like a baby clutching at a basketball: one's palms keep sliding off.

I remember rather little of my life and what I do remember is of small consequence. Most of the thoughts I now recall as having been interesting to me owe their significance to the time when they occurred. If any do not, they have no doubt been expressed much better by someone else. A writer's biography is in his twists of language. I remember, for instance, that when I was about ten or eleven it occurred to me that Marx's dictum that "existence conditions consciousness" was true only for as long as it takes consciousness to acquire the art of estrangement; thereafter, consciousness is on its own and can both condition and ignore existence. At that age, this was surely a discovery—but one hardly worth recording, and surely it had been better stated by others. And does it really matter who first cracked the mental cuneiform of which "existence conditions consciousness" is a perfect example?

So I am writing all this not in order to set the record

straight (there is no such record, and even if there is, it is an insignificant one and thus not yet distorted), but mostly for the usual reason why a writer writes—to give or to get a boost from the language, this time from a foreign one. The little I remember becomes even more diminished by being recollected in English.

For the beginning I had better trust my birth certificate, which states that I was born on May 24, 1940, in Leningrad, Russia, much as I abhor this name for the city which long ago the ordinary people nicknamed simply "Peter"—from Petersburg. There is an old two-liner:

The sides of people
Are rubbed by Old Peter.

In the national experience, the city is definitely Leningrad; in the growing vulgarity of its content, it becomes Leningrad more and more. Besides, as a word, "Leningrad" to a Russian ear already sounds as neutral as the word "construction" or "sausage." And yet I'd rather call it "Peter," for I remember this city at a time when it didn't look like "Leningrad"—right after the war. Gray, pale-green façades with bullet and shrapnel cavities; endless, empty streets, with few passersby and light traffic; almost a starved look with, as a result, more definite and, if you wish, nobler features. A lean, hard face with the abstract glitter of its river reflected in the eyes of its hollow windows. A survivor cannot be named after Lenin.

Those magnificent pockmarked façades behind which—among old pianos, worn-out rugs, dusty paintings in heavy bronze frames, leftovers of furniture (chairs least of all)

consumed by the iron stoves during the siege—a faint life was beginning to glimmer. And I remember, as I passed these façades on my way to school, being completely absorbed in imagining what was going on in those rooms with the old, billowy wallpaper. I must say that from these façades and porticoes—classical, modern, eclectic, with their columns, pilasters, and plastered heads of mythic animals or people—from their ornaments and caryatids holding up the balconies, from the torsos in the niches of their entrances, I have learned more about the history of our world than I subsequently have from any book. Greece, Rome, Egypt—all of them were there, and all were chipped by artillery shells during the bombardments. And from the gray, reflecting river flowing down to the Baltic, with an occasional tugboat in the midst of it struggling against the current, I have learned more about infinity and stoicism than from mathematics and Zeno.

All that had very little to do with Lenin, whom, I suppose, I began to despise even when I was in the first grade—not so much because of his political philosophy or practice, about which at the age of seven I knew very little, but because of his omnipresent images which plagued almost every textbook, every class wall, postage stamps, money, and what not, depicting the man at various ages and stages of his life. There was baby Lenin, looking like a cherub in his blond curls. Then Lenin in his twenties and thirties, bald and uptight, with that meaningless expression on his face which could be mistaken for anything, preferably a sense of purpose. This face in some way haunts every Russian and suggests some sort of standard for human appearance because it is utterly lacking in character. (Perhaps

because there is nothing specific in that face it suggests many possibilities.) Then there was an oldish Lenin, balder, with his wedge-like beard, in his three-piece dark suit, sometimes smiling, but most often addressing the "masses" from the top of an armored car or from the podium of some party congress, with a hand outstretched in the air.

There were also variants: Lenin in his worker's cap, with a carnation pinned to his lapel; in a vest, sitting in his study, writing or reading; on a lakeside stump, scribbling his April Theses, or some other nonsense, al fresco. Ultimately, Lenin in a paramilitary jacket on a garden bench next to Stalin, who was the only one to surpass Lenin in the ubiquitousness of his printed images. But Stalin was then alive, while Lenin was dead and, if only because of that, "good" because he belonged to the past—i.e., was sponsored by both history and nature. Whereas Stalin was sponsored only by nature, or the other way around.

I think that coming to ignore those pictures was my first lesson in switching off, my first attempt at estrangement. There were more to follow; in fact, the rest of my life can be viewed as a nonstop avoidance of its most importunate aspects. I must say, I went quite far in that direction; perhaps too far. Anything that bore a suggestion of repetitiveness became compromised and subject to removal. That included phrases, trees, certain types of people, sometimes even physical pain; it affected many of my relationships. In a way, I am grateful to Lenin. Whatever there was in plenitude I immediately regarded as some sort of propaganda. This attitude, I think, made for an awful acceleration through the thicket of events, with an accompanying superficiality.

I don't believe for a moment that all the clues to character are to be found in childhood. For about three generations Russians have been living in communal apartments and cramped rooms, and our parents made love while we pretended to be asleep. Then there was a war, starvation, absent or mutilated fathers, horny mothers, official lies at school and unofficial ones at home. Hard winters, ugly clothes, public exposé of our wet sheets in summer camps, and citations of such matters in front of others. Then the red flag would flutter on the mast of the camp. So what? All this militarization of childhood, all the menacing idiocy, erotic tension (at ten we all lusted for our female teachers) had not affected our ethics much, or our aesthetics—or our ability to love and suffer. I recall these things not because I think that they are the keys to the subconscious, or certainly not out of nostalgia for my childhood. I recall them because I have never done so before, because I want some of those things to stay—at least on paper. Also, because looking backward is more rewarding than its opposite. Tomorrow is just less attractive than yesterday. For some reason, the past doesn't radiate such immense monotony as the future does. Because of its plenitude, the future is propaganda. So is grass.

The real history of consciousness starts with one's first lie. I happen to remember mine. It was in a school library when I had to fill out an application for membership. The fifth blank was of course "nationality." I was seven years old and knew very well that I was a Jew, but I told the attendant that I didn't know. With dubious glee she suggested that I go home and ask my parents. I never returned to that

library, although I did become a member of many others which had the same application forms. I wasn't ashamed of being a Jew, nor was I scared of admitting it. In the class ledger our names, the names of our parents, home addresses, and nationalities were registered in full detail, and from time to time a teacher would "forget" the ledger on the desk in the classroom during breaks. Then, like vultures, we would fall upon those pages; everyone in my class knew that I was a Jew. But seven-year-old boys don't make good anti-Semites. Besides, I was fairly strong for my age, and the fists were what mattered most then. I was ashamed of the word "Jew" itself—in Russian, "*yevrei*"—regardless of its connotations.

A word's fate depends on the variety of its contexts, on the frequency of its usage. In printed Russian "*yevrei*" appears nearly as seldom as, say, "mediastinum" or "gennel" in American English. In fact, it also has something like the status of a four-letter word or like a name for VD. When one is seven one's vocabulary proves sufficient to acknowledge this word's rarity, and it is utterly unpleasant to identify oneself with it; somehow it goes against one's sense of prosody. I remember that I always felt a lot easier with a Russian equivalent of "kike"—"*zhyd*" (pronounced like André Gide): it was clearly offensive and thereby meaningless, not loaded with allusions. A one-syllable word can't do much in Russian. But when suffixes are applied, or endings, or prefixes, then feathers fly. All this is not to say that I suffered as a Jew at that tender age; it's simply to say that my first lie had to do with my identity.

Not a bad start. As for anti-Semitism as such, I didn't care much about it because it came mostly from teachers: it

seemed innate to their negative part in our lives; it had to be coped with like low marks. If I had been a Roman Catholic, I would have wished most of them in Hell. True, some teachers were better than others; but since all were masters of our immediate lives, we didn't bother to distinguish. Nor did they try to distinguish among their little slaves, and even the most ardent anti-Semitic remarks bore an air of impersonal inertia. Somehow, I never was capable of taking seriously any verbal assault on me, especially from people of such a disparate age group. I guess the diatribes my parents used to deliver against me tempered me very well. Besides, some teachers were Jews themselves, and I dreaded them no less than I did the pure-blooded Russians.

This is just one example of the trimming of the self that —along with the language itself, where verbs and nouns change places as freely as one dares to have them do so— bred in us such an overpowering sense of ambivalence that in ten years we ended up with a willpower in no way superior to a seaweed's. Four years in the army (into which men were drafted at the age of nineteen) completed the process of total surrender to the state. Obedience would become both first and second nature.

If one had brains, one would certainly try to outsmart the system by devising all kinds of detours, arranging shady deals with one's superiors, piling up lies and pulling the strings of one's semi-nepotic connections. This would become a full-time job. Yet one was constantly aware that the web one had woven was a web of lies, and in spite of the degree of success or your sense of humor, you'd de-

spise yourself. That is the ultimate triumph of the system: whether you beat it or join it, you feel equally guilty. The national belief is—as the proverb has it—that there is no Evil without a grain of Good in it and presumably vice versa.

Ambivalence, I think, is the chief characteristic of my nation. There isn't a Russian executioner who isn't scared of turning victim one day, nor is there the sorriest victim who would not acknowledge (if only to himself) a mental ability to become an executioner. Our immediate history has provided well for both. There is some wisdom in this. One might even think that this ambivalence *is* wisdom, that life itself is neither good nor bad, but arbitrary. Perhaps our literature stresses the good cause so remarkably because this cause is challenged so well. If this emphasis were simply doublethink, that would be fine; but it grates on the instincts. This kind of ambivalence, I think, is precisely that "blessed news" which the East, having little else to offer, is about to impose on the rest of the world. And the world looks ripe for it.

The world's destiny aside, the only way for a boy to fight his imminent lot would be to go off the track. This was hard to do because of your parents, and because you yourself were quite frightened of the unknown. Most of all, because it made you different from the majority, and you got it with your mother's milk that the majority is right. A certain lack of concern is required, and unconcerned I was. As I remember my quitting school at the age of fifteen, it wasn't so much a conscious choice as a gut reaction. I simply couldn't stand certain faces in my class—of some of my classmates, but mostly of teachers. And so one winter morning, for no apparent reason, I rose up in the middle of the session and made my melodramatic exit through the school gate, knowing clearly that I'd never be back. Of the emotions overpowering me at that moment, I remember only a general disgust with myself for being too young and letting so many things boss me around. Also, there was that vague but happy sensation of escape, of a sunny street without end.

The main thing, I suppose, was the change of exterior. In a centralized state all rooms look alike: the office of my school's principal was an exact replica of the interrogation chambers I began to frequent some five years later. The same wooden panels, desks, chairs—a paradise for carpenters. The same portraits of our founders, Lenin, Stalin, members of the Politburo, and Maxim Gorky (the founder of Soviet literature) if it was a school, or Felix Dzerzhinsky (the founder of the Soviet Secret Police) if it was an interrogation chamber.

Often, though, Dzerzhinsky—"Iron Felix" or "Knight of the Revolution," as propaganda has it—would decorate the principal's wall as well, because the man had glided into the system of education from the heights of the KGB. And those stuccoed walls of my classrooms, with their blue horizontal stripe at eye level, running unfailingly across the whole country, like the line of an infinite common denominator: in halls, hospitals, factories, prisons, corridors of communal apartments. The only place I didn't encounter it was in wooden peasant huts.

This decor was as maddening as it was omnipresent, and how many times in my life would I catch myself peering mindlessly at this blue two-inch-wide stripe, taking it some-

times for a sea horizon, sometimes for an embodiment of nothingness itself. It was too abstract to mean anything. From the floor up to the level of your eyes a wall covered with rat-gray or greenish paint, and this blue stripe topping it off; above it would be the virginally white stucco. Nobody ever asked why it was there. Nobody could have answered. It was just there, a border line, a divider between gray and white, below and above. They were not colors themselves but hints of colors, which might be interrupted only by alternating patches of brown: doors. Closed, half open. And through the half-open door you could see another room with the same distribution of gray and white marked by the blue stripe. Plus a portrait of Lenin and a world map.

It was nice to leave that Kafkaesque cosmos, although even then—or so it seems—I sort of knew that I was trading six for half a dozen. I knew that any other building I was going to enter would look the same, for buildings are where we are doomed to carry on anyhow. Still, I felt that I had to go. The financial situation in our family was grim: we existed mostly on my mother's salary, because my father, after being discharged from the navy in accordance with some seraphic ruling that Jews should not hold substantial military ranks, had a hard time finding a job. Of course, my parents would have managed without my contribution; they would have preferred that I finish school. I knew that, and yet I told myself that I had to help my family. It was almost a lie, but this way it looked better, and by that time I had already learned to like lies for precisely this "almost-ness" which sharpens the outline of truth: after all, truth ends where lies start. That's what a boy learned in school and it proved to be more useful than algebra.

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Whatever it was—a lie, the truth, or, most likely, their mixture—that caused me to make such a decision, I am immensely grateful to it for what appears to have been my first free act. It was an instinctive act, a walkout. Reason had very little to do with it. I know that, because I've been walking out ever since, with increasing frequency. And not necessarily on account of boredom or of feeling a trap gaping; I've been walking out of perfect setups no less often than out of dreadful ones. However modest the place you happen to occupy, if it has the slightest mark of decency, you can be sure that someday somebody will walk in and claim it for himself or, what is worse, suggest that you share it. Then you either have to fight for that place or leave it. I happened to prefer the latter. Not at all because I couldn't fight, but rather out of sheer disgust with myself: managing to pick something that attracts others denotes a certain vulgarity in your choice. It doesn't matter at all that you came across the place first. It is even worse to get somewhere first, for those who follow will always have a stronger appetite than your partially satisfied one.

Afterward I often regretted that move, especially when I saw my former classmates getting on so well inside the system. And yet I knew something that they didn't. In fact, I was getting on too, but in the opposite direction, going somewhat further. One thing I am especially pleased with is that I managed to catch the "working class" in its truly proletarian stage, before it began to undergo a middle-class conversion in the late fifties. It was a real "proletariat" that I dealt with at the factory where, at the age of fifteen, I began to work as a milling machine operator. Marx would

recognize them instantly. They—or rather "we"—all lived in communal apartments, four or more people in one room, often with three generations all together, sleeping in shifts, drinking like sharks, brawling with each other or with neighbors in the communal kitchen or in a morning line before the communal john, beating their women with a moribund determination, crying openly when Stalin dropped dead, or at the movies, and cursing with such frequency that a normal word, like "airplane," would strike a passerby as something elaborately obscene—becoming a gray, indifferent ocean of heads or a forest of raised hands at public meetings on behalf of some Egypt or other.

The factory was all brick, huge, straight out of the industrial revolution. It had been built at the end of the nineteenth century, and the population of "Peter" referred to it as "the Arsenal": the factory produced cannons. At the time I began to work there, it was also producing agricultural machinery and air compressors. Still, according to the seven veils of secrecy which blanket almost everything in Russia that has to do with heavy industry, the factory had its code name, "Post Office Box 671." I think, though, that secrecy was imposed not so much to fool some foreign intelligence service as to maintain a kind of paramilitary discipline, which was the only device for guaranteeing any stability in production. In either case, failure was evident.

The machinery was obsolete; 90 percent of it had been taken from Germany as reparations after World War II. I remember that whole cast-iron zoo full of exotic creatures bearing the names Cincinnati, Karlton, Fritz Werner, Siemens & Schuckert. Planning was hideous; every once in a while a rush order to produce some item would mess up your

flickering attempt to establish some kind of working rhythm, a procedure. By the end of a quarter (i.e., every third month), when the plan was going up in smoke, the administration would issue the war cry mobilizing all hands on one job, and the plan would be subjected to a storm attack. Whenever something broke down, there were no spare parts, and a bunch of usually semi-drunk tinkers would be called in to exercise their sorcery. The metal would arrive full of craters. Virtually everyone would have a hangover on Mondays, not to mention the mornings after paydays.

Production would decline sharply the day after a loss by the city or national soccer team. Nobody would work, and everybody discussed the details and the players, for along with all the complexes of a superior nation, Russia has the great inferiority complex of a small country. This is mostly the consequence of the centralization of national life. Hence the positive, "life-affirming" drivel of the official newspapers and radio even when describing an earthquake; they never give you any information about victims but only sing of other cities' and republics' brotherly care in supplying the stricken area with tents and sleeping bags. Or if there is a cholera epidemic, you may happen to learn of it only while reading about the latest success of our wondrous medicine as manifested in the invention of a new vaccine.

The whole thing would have looked absurd if it were not for those very early mornings when, having washed my breakfast down with pale tea, I would run to catch the streetcar and, adding my berry to the dark-gray bunch of human grapes hanging on the footboard, would sail through the pinkish-blue, watercolor-like city to the wooden doghouse of my factory's entrance. It had two guards checking our badges and its façade was decorated with classical

veneered pilasters. I've noticed that the entrances of prisons, mental hospitals, and concentration camps are done in the same style: they all bear a hint of classicistic or baroque porticoes. Quite an echo. Inside my shop, nuances of gray were interwoven under the ceiling, and the pneumatic hoses hissed quietly on the floor among the mazout puddles glittering with all the colors of the rainbow. By ten o'clock this metal jungle was in full swing, screeching and roaring, and the steel barrel of a would-be antiaircraft gun soared in the air like the disjointed neck of a giraffe.

I have always envied those nineteenth-century characters who were able to look back and distinguish the landmarks of their lives, of their development. Some event would mark a point of transition, a different stage. I am talking about writers; but what I really have in mind is the capacity of certain types of people to rationalize their lives, to see things separately, if not clearly. And I understand that this phenomenon shouldn't be limited to the nineteenth century. Yet in my life it has been represented mostly by literature. Either because of some basic flaw of my mind or because of the fluid, amorphous nature of life itself, I have never been capable of distinguishing any landmark, let alone a buoy. If there is anything like a landmark, it is that which I won't be able to acknowledge myself—i.e., death. In a sense, there never was such a thing as childhood. These categories—childhood, adulthood, maturity—seem to me very odd, and if I use them occasionally in conversation I always regard them mutely, for myself, as borrowed.

I guess there was always some "me" inside that small and, later, somewhat bigger shell around which "everything" was happening. Inside that shell the entity which one calls

"I" never changed and never stopped watching what was going on outside. I am not trying to hint at pearls inside. What I am saying is that the passage of time does not much affect that entity. To get a low grade, to operate a milling machine, to be beaten up at an interrogation, or to lecture on Callimachus in a classroom is essentially the same. This is what makes one feel a bit astonished when one grows up and finds oneself tackling the tasks that are supposed to be handled by grownups. The dissatisfaction of a child with his parents' control over him and the panic of an adult confronting a responsibility are of the same nature. One is neither of these figures; one is perhaps less than "one."

Certainly this is partly an outgrowth of your profession. If you are in banking or if you fly an aircraft, you know that after you gain a substantial amount of expertise you are more or less guaranteed a profit or a safe landing. Whereas in the business of writing what one accumulates is not expertise but uncertainties. Which is but another name for craft. In this field, where expertise invites doom, the notions of adolescence and maturity get mixed up, and panic is the most frequent state of mind. So I would be lying if I resorted to chronology or to anything that suggests a linear process. A school is a factory is a poem is a prison is academia is boredom, with flashes of panic.

Except that the factory was next to a hospital, and the hospital was next to the most famous prison in all of Russia, called the Crosses.* And the morgue of that hospital was where I went to work after quitting the Arsenal, for I had the idea of becoming a doctor. The Crosses opened its cell doors to me soon after I changed my mind and started to

* The Crosses has 999 cells.

write poems. When I worked at the factory, I could see the hospital over the wall. When I cut and sewed up corpses at the hospital, I would see prisoners walking in the courtyard of the Crosses; sometimes they managed to throw their letters over the wall, and I'd pick them up and mail them. Because of this tight topography and because of the shell's enclosure, all these places, jobs, convicts, workers, guards, and doctors have merged into one another, and I don't know any longer whether I recall somebody walking back and forth in the flatiron-shaped courtyard of the Crosses or whether it is me walking there. Besides, both the factory and the prison were built at approximately the same time, and on the surface they were indistinguishable; one looked like a wing of the other.

So it doesn't make sense to me to try to be consecutive here. Life never looked to me like a set of clearly marked transitions; rather, it snowballs, and the more it does, the more one place (or one time) looks like another. I remember, for instance, how in 1945 my mother and I were waiting for a train at some railway station near Leningrad. The war was just over, twenty million Russians were decaying in makeshift graves across the continent, and the rest, dispersed by war, were returning to their homes or what was left of their homes. The railway station was a picture of primeval chaos. People were besieging the cattle trains like mad insects; they were climbing on the roofs of cars, squeezing between them, and so on. For some reason, my eye caught sight of an old, bald, crippled man with a wooden leg, who was trying to get into car after car, but each time was pushed away by the people who were already hanging on the footboards. The train started to move and the old

man hopped along. At one point he managed to grab a handle of one of the cars, and then I saw a woman in the doorway lift a kettle and pour boiling water straight on the old man's bald crown. The man fell—the Brownian movement of a thousand legs swallowed him and I lost sight of him.

It was cruel, yes, but this instance of cruelty, in its own turn, merges in my mind with a story that took place twenty years later when a bunch of former collaborators with the German occupation forces, the so-called *Polizei*, were caught. It was in the papers. There were six or seven old men. The name of their leader was naturally Gurewicz or Ginzburg—i.e., he was a Jew, however unthinkable it is to imagine a Jew collaborating with Nazis. They all got various sentences. The Jew, naturally, got capital punishment. I was told that on the morning of the execution he was taken from the cell, and while being led into the courtyard of the prison where the firing squad was waiting, he was asked by the officer in charge of the prison guard: "Ah, by the way, Gurewicz [or Ginzburg], what's your last wish?" "Last wish?" said the man. "I don't know . . . I'd like to take a leak . . ." To which the officer replied: "Well, you'll take a leak later." Now, to me both stories are the same; yet it is even worse if the second story is pure folklore, although I don't think it is. I know hundreds of similar tales, perhaps more than hundreds. Yet they merge.

What made my factory different from my school wasn't what I'd been doing inside each, not what I'd been thinking in the respective periods, but the way their façades looked, what I saw on my way to class or to the shop. In the last analysis, appearances are all there is. The same

idiotic lot befell millions and millions. Existence as such, monotonous in itself, has been reduced to uniform rigidity by the centralized state. What was left to watch were faces, weather, buildings; also, the language people used.

I had an uncle who was a member of the Party and who was, as I realize now, an awfully good engineer. During the war he built bomb shelters for the Party *Genossen*; before and after it he built bridges. Both still stand. My father always ridiculed him while quarreling about money with my mother, who would cite her engineer-brother as an example of solid and steady living, and I disdained him more or less automatically. Still, he had a magnificent library. He didn't read much, I think; but it was—and still is—a mark of chic for the Soviet middle class to subscribe to new editions of encyclopedias, classics, and so on. I envied him madly. I remember once standing behind his chair, peering at the back of his head and thinking that if I killed him all his books would become mine, since he was then unmarried and had no children. I used to take books from his shelves, and even fashioned a key to a tall bookcase behind whose glass sat four huge volumes of a prerevolutionary edition of *Man and Woman*.

This was a copiously illustrated encyclopedia, to which I still consider myself indebted for my basic knowledge of how the forbidden fruit tastes. If, in general, pornography is an inanimate object that causes an erection, it is worth noting that in the puritanical atmosphere of Stalin's Russia, one could get turned on by the one hundred percent innocent Socialist Realist painting called *Admission to the Komsomol*, which was widely reproduced and which decorated almost every classroom. Among the characters depicted in this painting was a young blond woman sitting on a chair

with her legs crossed in such a way that two or three inches of her thigh were visible. It wasn't so much that bit of her thigh as its contrast to the dark brown dress she wore that drove me crazy and pursued me in my dreams.

It was then that I learned to disbelieve all the noise about the subconscious. I think that I never dreamed in symbols —I always saw the real thing: bosom, hips, female underwear. As to the latter, it had an odd significance for us boys at that time. I remember how during a class, somebody would crawl under a row of desks all the way up to the teacher's desk, with a single purpose—to look under her dress to check what color underpants she was wearing that day. Upon completing his expedition, he would announce in a dramatic whisper to the rest of the class, "Lilac."

In short, we were not troubled much by our fantasies —we had too much reality to deal with. I've said somewhere else that Russians—at least my generation—never resort to shrinks. In the first place, there are not so many of them. Besides, psychiatry is the state's property. One knows that to have a psychiatric record isn't such a great thing. It might backfire at any moment. But in any case, we used to handle our problems ourselves, to keep track of what went on inside our heads without help from the outside. A certain advantage of totalitarianism is that it suggests to an individual a kind of vertical hierarchy of his own, with consciousness at the top. So we oversee what's going on inside ourselves; we almost report to our consciousness on our instincts. And then we punish ourselves. When we realize that this punishment is not commensurate with the swine we have discovered inside, we resort to alcohol and drink our wits out.

I think this system is efficient and consumes less cash. It

is not that I think suppression is better than freedom; I just believe that the mechanism of suppression is as innate to the human psyche as the mechanism of release. Besides, to think that you are a swine is humbler and eventually more accurate than to perceive yourself as a fallen angel. I have every reason to think so because in the country where I spent thirty-two years, adultery and moviegoing are the only forms of free enterprise. Plus Art.

All the same, I felt patriotic. This was the normal patriotism of a child, a patriotism with a strong militaristic flavor. I admired planes and warships, and nothing was more beautiful to me than the yellow and blue banner of the air force, which looked like an open parachute canopy with a propeller in the center. I loved planes and until quite recently followed developments in aviation closely. With the arrival of rockets I gave up, and my love became a nostalgia for propjets. (I know I am not the only one: my nine-year-old son once said that when he grew up he would destroy all turbojets and reintroduce biplanes.) As for the navy, I was a true child of my father and at the age of fourteen applied for admission to a submarine academy. I passed all the exams, but because of the fifth paragraph —nationality—didn't get in, and my irrational love for navy overcoats with their double rows of gold buttons, resembling a night street with receding lights, remained unrequited.

Visual aspects of life, I am afraid, always mattered to me more than its content. For instance, I fell in love with a photograph of Samuel Beckett long before I'd read a line of his. As for the military, prisons spared me the draft, so that my affair with the uniform forever remained platonic. In my view, prison is a lot better than the army. In the first

place, in prison nobody teaches you to hate that distant "potential" enemy. Your enemy in prison isn't an abstraction; he is concrete and palpable. That is, you are always palpable to your enemy. Perhaps "enemy" is too strong a word. In prison you are dealing with an extremely domesticated notion of enemy, which makes the whole thing quite earthly, mortal. After all, my guards or neighbors were not any different from my teachers or those workers who humiliated me during my apprenticeship at the factory.

My hatred's center of gravity, in other words, wasn't dispersed into some foreign capitalist nowhere; it wasn't even hatred. The damned trait of understanding and thus forgiving everybody, which started while I was in school, fully blossomed in prison. I don't think I hated even my KGB interrogators: I tended to absolve even them (good-for-nothing, has a family to feed, etc.). The ones I couldn't justify at all were those who ran the country, perhaps because I'd never got close to any of them. As enemies go, in a cell you have a most immediate one: lack of space. The formula for prison is a lack of space counterbalanced by a surplus of time. This is what really bothers you, that you can't win. Prison is a lack of alternatives, and the telescopic predictability of the future is what drives you crazy. Even so, it is a hell of a lot better than the solemnity with which the army sics you on people on the other side of the globe, or nearer.

Service in the Soviet Army takes from three to four years, and I never met a person whose psyche wasn't mutilated by its mental straitjacket of obedience. With the exception, perhaps, of musicians who play in military bands and two distant acquaintances of mine who shot themselves in

1956, in Hungary, where both were tank commanders. It is the army that finally makes a citizen of you; without it you still have a chance, however slim, to remain a human being. If there is any reason for pride in my past, it is that I became a convict, not a soldier. Even for having missed out on the military lingo—the thing that worried me most—I was generously reimbursed with the criminal argot.

Still, warships and planes were beautiful, and every year there were more of them. In 1945, the streets were full of "Studebekker" trucks and jeeps with a white star on their doors and hoods—the American hardware we had got on lend-lease. In 1972, we were selling this kind of thing *urbi et orbi* ourselves. If the standard of living during that period improved 15 to 20 percent, the improvement in weaponry production could be expressed in tens of thousands of percent. It will continue to go up, because it is about the only real thing we have in that country, the only tangible field for advancement. Also because military blackmail, i.e., a constant increase in the production of armaments which is perfectly tolerable in the totalitarian setup, may cripple the economy of any democratic adversary that tries to maintain a balance. Military buildup isn't insanity: it's the best tool available to condition the economy of your opposite number, and in the Kremlin they've realized that full well. Anyone seeking world domination would do the same. The alternatives are either unworkable (economic competition) or too scary (actually using military devices).

Besides, the army is a peasant's idea of order. There is nothing more reassuring for an average man than the sight of his cohorts parading in front of Politburo members standing on top of the Mausoleum. I guess it never occurred to any of them that there is an element of blasphemy in

standing on top of a holy relic's tomb. The idea, I guess, is that of a continuum, and the sad thing about these figures on top of the Mausoleum is that they really join the mummy in defying time. You either see it live on TV or as a poor-quality photograph multiplied in millions of copies of the official newspapers. Like the ancient Romans who related themselves to the center of the Empire by making the main street in their settlements always run north-south, so the Russians check the stability and predictability of their existence by those pictures.

When I was working at the factory, we would go for lunch breaks into the factory yard; some would sit down and unwrap their sandwiches, others would smoke or play volleyball. There was a little flower bed surrounded by the standard wooden fence. This was a row of twenty-inch-high planks with two-inch spaces between them, held together by a transverse lath made of the same material, painted green. It was covered with dust and soot, just like the shrunken, withered flowers inside the square-shaped bed. Wherever you went in that empire, you would always find this fence. It comes prefabricated, but even when people make it with their own hands, they always follow the prescribed design. Once I went to Central Asia, to Samarkand; I was all warmed up for those turquoise cupolas and the inscrutable ornaments of madrasahs and minarets. They were there. And then I saw that fence, with its idiotic rhythm, and my heart sank, the Orient vanished. The small-scale, comb-like repetitiveness of the narrow palings immediately annihilated the space—as well as the time—between the factory yard and Kubla Khan's ancient seat.

There is nothing more remote from these planks than

nature, whose green color their paint idiotically suggests. These planks, the governmental iron of railings, the inevitable khaki of the military uniform in every passing crowd on every street in every city, the eternal photographs of steel foundries in every morning paper and the continuous Tchaikovsky on the radio—these things would drive you crazy unless you learned to switch yourself off. There are no commercials on Soviet TV; there are pictures of Lenin, or so-called photo-études of "spring," "autumn," etc., in the intervals between the programs. Plus "light" bubbling music which never had a composer and is a product of the amplifier itself.

At that time I didn't know yet that all this was a result of the age of reason and progress, of the age of mass production; I ascribed it to the state and partly to the nation itself, which would go for anything that does not require imagination. Still, I think I wasn't completely wrong. Should it not be easier to exercise and distribute enlightenment and culture in a centralized state? A ruler, theoretically, has better access to perfection (which he claims anyhow) than a representative. Rousseau argued this. Too bad it never worked in Russia. This country, with its magnificently inflected language capable of expressing the subtlest nuances of the human psyche, with an incredible ethical sensitivity (a good result of its otherwise tragic history), had all the makings of a cultural, spiritual paradise, a real vessel of civilization. Instead, it became a drab hell, with a shabby materialist dogma and pathetic consumerist gropings.

My generation, however, was somewhat spared. We emerged from under the postwar rubble when the state

was too busy patching its own skin and couldn't look after us very well. We entered schools, and whatever elevated rubbish we were taught there, the suffering and poverty were visible all around. You cannot cover a ruin with a page of *Pravda*. The empty windows gaped at us like skulls' orbits, and as little as we were, we sensed tragedy. True, we couldn't connect ourselves to the ruins, but that wasn't necessary: they emanated enough to interrupt laughter. Then we would resume laughing, quite mindlessly—and yet it would be a resumption. In those postwar years we sensed a strange intensity in the air; something immaterial, almost ghostly. And we were young, we were kids. The amount of goods was very limited, but not having known otherwise, we didn't mind it. Bikes were old, of prewar make, and the owner of a soccer ball was considered a bourgeois. The coats and underwear that we wore were cut out by our mothers from our fathers' uniforms and patched drawers: exit Sigmund Freud. So we didn't develop a taste for possessions. Things that we could possess later were badly made and looked ugly. Somehow, we preferred ideas of things to the things themselves, though when we looked in mirrors we didn't much like what we saw there.

We never had a room of our own to lure our girls into, nor did our girls have rooms. Our love affairs were mostly walking and talking affairs; it would make an astronomical sum if we were charged for mileage. Old warehouses, embankments of the river in industrial quarters, stiff benches in wet public gardens, and cold entrances of public buildings—these were the standard backdrops of our first pneumatic blisses. We never had what are called "material stimuli." Ideological ones were a laughable matter even for

kindergarten kids. If somebody sold himself out, it wasn't for the sake of goods or comfort: there were none. He was selling out because of inner want and he knew that himself. There were no supplies, there was sheer demand.

If we made ethical choices, they were based not so much on immediate reality as on moral standards derived from fiction. We were avid readers and we fell into a dependence on what we read. Books, perhaps because of their formal element of finality, held us in their absolute power. Dickens was more real than Stalin or Beria. More than anything else, novels would affect our modes of behavior and conversations, and 90 percent of our conversations were about novels. It tended to become a vicious circle, but we didn't want to break it.

In its ethics, this generation was among the most bookish in the history of Russia, and thank God for that. A relationship could have been broken for good over a preference for Hemingway over Faulkner; the hierarchy in that pantheon was our real Central Committee. It started as an ordinary accumulation of knowledge but soon became our most important occupation, to which everything could be sacrificed. Books became the first and only reality, whereas reality itself was regarded as either nonsense or nuisance. Compared to others, we were ostensibly flunking or faking our lives. But come to think of it, existence which ignores the standards professed in literature is inferior and unworthy of effort. So we thought, and I think we were right.

The instinctive preference was to read rather than to act. No wonder our actual lives were more or less a shambles. Even those of us who managed to make it through the very thick woods of "higher education," with all its unavoidable

lip—and other members'—service to the system, finally fell victim to literature-imposed scruples and couldn't manage any longer. We ended up doing odd jobs, menial or editorial—or something mindless, like carving tombstone inscriptions, drafting blueprints, translating technical texts, accounting, bookbinding, developing X-rays. From time to time we would pop up on the threshold of one another's apartment, with a bottle in one hand, sweets or flowers or snacks in the other, and spend the evening talking, gossiping, bitching about the idiocy of the officials upstairs, guessing which one of us would be the first to die. And now I must drop the pronoun "we."

Nobody knew literature and history better than these people, nobody could write in Russian better than they, nobody despised our times more profoundly. For these characters civilization meant more than daily bread and a nightly hug. This wasn't, as it might seem, another lost generation. This was the only generation of Russians that had found itself, for whom Giotto and Mandelstam were more imperative than their own personal destinies. Poorly dressed but somehow still elegant, shuffled by the dumb hands of their immediate masters, running like rabbits from the ubiquitous state hounds and the even more ubiquitous foxes, broken, growing old, they still retained their love for the nonexistent (or existing only in their balding heads) thing called "civilization." Hopelessly cut off from the rest of the world, they thought that at least that world was like themselves; now they know that it is like others, only better dressed. As I write this, I close my eyes and almost see them standing in their dilapidated kitchens, holding glasses

in their hands, with ironic grimaces across their faces. "There, there . . ." They grin. "*Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* . . . Why does nobody add Culture?"

Memory, I think, is a substitute for the tail that we lost for good in the happy process of evolution. It directs our movements, including migration. Apart from that there is something clearly atavistic in the very process of recollection, if only because such a process never is linear. Also, the more one remembers, the closer perhaps one is to dying.

If this is so, it is a good thing when your memory stumbles. More often, however, it coils, recoils, digresses to all sides, just as a tail does; so should one's narrative, even at the risk of sounding inconsequential and boring. Boredom, after all, is the most frequent feature of existence, and one wonders why it fared so poorly in the nineteenth-century prose that strived so much for realism.

But even if a writer is fully equipped to imitate on paper the subtlest fluctuations of the mind, the effort to reproduce the tail in all its spiral splendor is still doomed, for evolution wasn't for nothing. The perspective of years straightens things to the point of complete obliteration. Nothing brings them back, not even handwritten words with their coiled letters. Such an effort is doomed all the more if this tail happens to lag behind somewhere in Russia.

But if the printed words were only a mark of forgetfulness, that would be fine. The sad truth is that words fail reality as well. At least it's been my impression that any experience coming from the Russian realm, even when depicted with photographic precision, simply bounces off the English language, leaving no visible imprint on its surface. Of course the memory of one civilization cannot, perhaps should not, become a memory of another. But when language fails to reproduce the negative realities of another culture, the worst kind of tautologies result.

History, no doubt, is bound to repeat itself: after all, like men, history doesn't have many choices. But at least one should have the comfort of being aware of what one is falling a victim to when dealing with the peculiar semantics prevailing in a foreign realm such as Russia. One gets done in by one's own conceptual and analytic habits—e.g., using language to dissect experience, and so robbing one's mind of the benefits of intuition. Because, for all its beauty, a distinct concept always means a shrinkage of meaning, cutting off loose ends. While the loose ends are what matter most in the phenomenal world, for they interweave.

These words themselves bear witness that I am far from accusing the English language of insufficiency; nor do I lament the dormant state of its native speakers' psyche. I merely regret the fact that such an advanced notion of Evil as happens to be in the possession of Russians has been denied entry into consciousness on the grounds of having a convoluted syntax. One wonders how many of us can recall a plain-speaking Evil that crosses the threshold, saying: "Hi, I'm Evil. How are you?"

If all this, nonetheless, has an elegiac air, it is owing rather to the genre of the piece than to its content, for which rage would be more appropriate. Neither, of course, yields the meaning of the past; elegy at least doesn't create a new reality. No matter how elaborate a structure anyone may devise for catching his own tail, he'll end up with a net full of fish but without water. Which lulls his boat. And which is enough to cause dizziness or to make him resort to an elegiac tone. Or to throw the fish back.

* * *

Once upon a time there was a little boy. He lived in the most unjust country in the world. Which was ruled by creatures who by all human accounts should be considered degenerates. Which never happened.

And there was a city. The most beautiful city on the face of the earth. With an immense gray river that hung over its distant bottom like the immense gray sky over that river. Along that river there stood magnificent palaces with such beautifully elaborated façades that if the little boy was standing on the right bank, the left bank looked like the imprint of a giant mollusk called civilization. Which ceased to exist.

Early in the morning when the sky was still full of stars the little boy would rise and, after having a cup of tea and an egg, accompanied by a radio announcement of a new record in smelted steel, followed by the army choir singing a hymn to the Leader, whose picture was pinned to the wall over the little boy's still warm bed, he would run along the snow-covered granite embankment to school.

The wide river lay white and frozen like a continent's tongue lapsed into silence, and the big bridge arched against the dark blue sky like an iron palate. If the little boy had two extra minutes, he would slide down on the ice and take twenty or thirty steps to the middle. All this time he would be thinking about what the fish were doing under such heavy ice. Then he would stop, turn 180 degrees, and run back, nonstop, right up to the entrance of the school. He would burst into the hall, throw his hat and coat off onto a hook, and fly up the staircase and into his classroom.

It is a big room with three rows of desks, a portrait of the Leader on the wall behind the teacher's chair, a map with two hemispheres, of which only one is legal. The little boy takes his seat, opens his briefcase, puts his pen and notebook on the desk, lifts his face, and prepares himself to hear drivel.

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