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1

The irrational in Russian thought: an approach

I

The aim of this book is to consider certain aspects of the irrational in connection with three Russian writers, Zamyatin, Pil′nyak and Bulgakov, whose major work spans almost exactly the first two decades of Soviet power. To state this aim is to imply a tension between, on the one hand, the establishment of a State founded on the principles of a materialist, rationalist philosophy and, on the other, the activity of writers working within the State yet preoccupied by ideas and themes which official ideology denies. The relationship is rendered all the more uneasy by the co-existence of other Russian writers some of whom are concerned to shape this official ideology and others to serve it and to write in a way which they anticipate will serve its ends. It is not therefore surprising that confrontation occurred between regime and writer in all three cases: Zamyatin lived the last years of his life abroad in voluntary exile; Bulgakov was driven into a corner and effectively silenced; and Pil′nyak who, by a tragic irony common enough in those days, had done most to accommodate himself to the demands made on him, almost certainly perished as a result of the purges of the late 1930s (although the circumstances of his death are not known, this is generally supposed to have occurred in 1941).[1]

These writers, then, are in different ways and in varying degrees dissidents, and one of our themes is the identification of Russian dissidence with an attachment to the irrational in its many forms. This conflict between the rationality of the State and the claims of a different view of man and the world is an antithesis by no means simply political, arising out of the particular nature of Soviet Communism and the opposition it provokes; it is also a philosophical and religious conflict with wider implications, organically related to similar tensions between artist and State, individual and society, irrationalist and rationalist, in tsarist Russia; indeed, it is in the Russia of the 1860s that we seek a criterion of the irrational for the 1920s and 1930s.

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One of the most important and intriguing problems we shall consider is that of the relationship of the artist to his society, and this question is not simply raised by the circumstances of the three writers' lives; the meaning and purpose of art and its connection with other aspects of experience is dealt with quite specifically by both Zamyatin and Bulgakov, especially the latter. For all the individuality of their separate voices, all three writers are Romantics, in the widest sense of that term: they see art recognising man as a creature of breadth, complexity and paradox, tending not towards harmony but disharmony. Art, in their opinion, should reject the narrow view, the known and the finite for the unknown and the infinite; like Tolstoy they seem to regard what we know as unimportant and what we do not know as all-important. Art for them should be a 'clairvoyance of the inexpressible', as Kireevsky puts it.[2] In this it must explore at least as much the inner world of dream and the subconscious, the mind's furthest frontiers, as the phenomena of visible reality.

The Romantic movement arose in opposition to eighteenth-century neo-Classicism, and its view of art is fundamentally religious; however improbable it might seem that the work of, for instance, Zamyatin in any sense opens out on spiritual perspectives, we nevertheless hope to show that this is the direction of his thought: we are concerned here, as in the case of Pil′nyak and Bulgakov, with a consciousness which, like the religious consciousness, tends to deny its confines rather than accept them. The influence of Orthodox thought on the work of the three writers will be a recurring theme; in fact the language of theology and of religious art lends itself to the identification of a characteristic common to them all: the simultaneous accommodation of apparently incompatible opposites which by an alogical process expresses more of the truth than would reasoned argument. The particular paradox we have in mind is the paratactic, and synthetic, association of crucifixion and resurrection as seen in Byzantine and Russian Orthodox iconography, which conveys a whole truth in all its complexity; its opposite is the analytical isolation of an aspect of that truth which distorts its wholeness, a dwelling, in the example we have taken, on the death and denial of the crucifixion at the expense of the renewal and hope of the resurrection.

A discussion of the irrational in a Russian context entails some brief consideration of the nature of the opposing rationality. In pre-revolutionary Russia this was expressed on the one hand by the

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reality of the existing State and on the other by the views of rationalist thinkers who were more opposed to the tsarist State than were the predecessors of the writers considered here. Under the Soviet regime these two rationalities have to a large extent come together in a society which, as we have suggested, is ostensibly at least inspired by and organised on rational principles. Some attempt at a definition of the term 'rationalism' is therefore called for, together with its associated concepts, 'positivism' and 'utilitarianism', but it is emphasised that these terms are not precise and that they overlap; it would be pedantic to insist on narrow categorisations here which are not reflected in common usage. The most comprehensive of the terms is 'rationalism', which may be taken to mean a philosophical position admitting reason as the sole means of acquiring knowledge and testing the truth; it rejects all forms of mysticism. Rationalism is associated particularly with the Encyclopedists and Philosophers of the French Enlightenment. 'Positivism' is the particular kind of rationalism devised by Auguste Comte: it denies that there is any knowledge other than that which relates to phenomena in the visible world; it thus rejects noumenal knowledge. 'Utilitarianism', associated particularly with Jeremy Bentham and J. S. Mill, advocates the 'greatest good of the greatest number'; it is a quantitative assessment of quality: if an action produces an excess of beneficial effects over harmful ones then it is right, the motive being disregarded. Utilitarianism, like other kinds of rationalism, lends itself to application in the fields of politics and economics; the nineteenth-century Russian thinker P. N. Tkachyov was, for instance, an extreme economic materialist whose ideas owed much to utilitarian principles. The uncertain limits of these categories is shown by the fact that N. G. Chernyshevsky, aspects of whose thought are examined in this chapter, expressed views which are now positivist, now utilitarian, and almost always rationalist. Rationalism reveals a consciousness which is concerned primarily with the 'here', unlike the irrational consciousness which strives towards the 'there' ('jamais une course vers quelque chose, mais une fuite vers ailleurs');[3] the rationalists assert that, given sufficient data, through the application of reason all problems are amenable to solution; the irrationalists deny this possibility, claiming that man is ultimately a mystery, directed by indefinable spiritual, rather than worldly imperatives, and all teleological and Utopian theories must founder on the hidden reefs of his unknowable personality.

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The irrational consciousness, in its impatient rejection of that which it has for that which it lacks, in its refutation of all determinisms in the name of philosophical freedom, even those of space, time and causality, and in its profound dissatisfaction with itself, is an unhappy consciousness, yet it seems to answer more fully than rationalism the essential nature of man, like Faust eternally striving and erring as he strives. It is appropriate that Bulgakov chose a quotation from Goethe's work as an epigraph for his *Master and Margarita* (*Master i Margarita*); our three authors seem intent on disproving the great rationalist Mephistopheles's claim in the Prologue in Heaven:

> A little better would he live
> Hadst thou not given him the gleam of heavenly light.

Easier, but not better; it is this eternally disturbing light which draws man on to respond to St Augustine's great injunction *transcende te ipsum*.

II

These opening remarks have attempted to give some idea of the antithetical positions of rationalists and of those who find their view of man and the world inadequate; but is it possible to arrive at a comprehensive definition of the term 'the irrational' within a Russian context? An answer to this question entails some philosophical discussion of the issues which arise; any reluctance to intrude into an area in which the plain man so easily loses his way is partly outweighed by the opinion of an unidentified philosopher correspondent of F. R. Leavis:

> I think you would be wrong to heed the views of technical-minded philosophers who wish to claim that philosophy is a subject only for experts, who in their wisdom deal with problems too sophisticated for the non-expert, and who have, in consequence, nearly succeeded in making professional philosophy an area with nothing to say to the man faced with real philosophical problems.[4]

An educated Russian, whatever his views on man and society, would find it astonishing that as distinguished a critic as Leavis should need justification for moving away from literature into the area of 'pure' thought; he would regard the issues raised in literature and philosophy as so closely identified as to be almost indistinguishable, and

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any attempt to isolate one sphere from another as irrelevant and even harmful. The shaping of Russia's history has tended to channel ideas into the only area in which at times they could find expression, however obliquely: that of literature. A case could certainly be argued for the proposition that the most important and original modern Russian religious and philosophical thought is found in literature and literary criticism rather than in works of a purely theological or philosophical character, and such thinkers as Solov′yov and Khomyakov chose to express many of their ideas in poetry. A lack of philosophical training, in some cases an inadequate or distorted understanding of philosophical thought, has never inhibited the Russian writer from vigorously discussing ideas; the autodidact V. G. Belinsky is a case in point. Indeed, a fresh and unacademic approach has often permitted valuable insights. The reader of Belinsky is not presented with a set of considered philosophical conclusions: he shares his excitement as he rejects one system to discover another. Russian literature and literary criticism have been a bridge between the abstract world of ideas and the concrete world of everyday life; the writer has taken the idea, embodied it, and conveyed it with a sense of directness and urgency in the form of the question which the Russians, like Socrates, have traditionally regarded as primary: how is one to live? In Russian thought ethics has almost always taken precedence over logic, epistemology and even metaphysics. In this it is Kant, with a similar regard for the primacy of morality, expressed in the categorical imperative and in much else, who is suggested as the major German philosopher most congenial to the kind of consciousness which we discuss here. One of the great preoccupations of the 'irrationalists' is freedom, and H. G. Wells's comment on Kant shows the extent to which he anticipates the rebellion against the ultimate determinants: 'Since the period when all the great theologies that prevail today were developed, there have been great changes in the ideas of men towards the dimensions of time and space. We owe to Kant the release from the rule of these ideas as essential ideas.'[5] While it is Hegel, particularly in his influence on rationalist thought, who has had a more direct connection with Russia during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Kant's indirect influence has been greater than some critics allow; certainly he is important to the Russian religious philosophers of the early part of this century. And Dostoevsky's interest in both philosophers is shown by his request to his brother in a letter of

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22 February 1854, in which he asks for copies of *The Critique of Pure Reason* as well as Hegel's *History of Philosophy*.[6]

The Russian cultural tradition, therefore, unequivocally endorses a literary discussion of a philosophical theme, and requires that this shall bear directly on the problems of everyday life. An immediate reaction might be that the irrational stands apart from this everyday reality; deeper consideration suggests that this is not so, and further calls into question the nature of reality itself. We have just referred to Hegel's influence on Russian thought, which was immense, and his famous dictum 'what is real is rational and what is rational is real' played a fundamental role in many Russians' appreciation of the nature of the problems we are concerned with here. The dictum seems to support a rationalist view of reality, but as Hegel's interpreters and popularisers soon discovered, it is possible to read him in so many ways that quite different conclusions can be reached as to what he means. The difficulty centres on the definition of the term 'real', first of all in a temporal sense: is this the everyday arrested reality of the present moment (*byt*) or the becoming reality of what is to be (*bytie*), the question at issue in the attempt to define a Marxist theory of art in the inaugural issue of *Lef* (March 1923)? Hegel himself held that reality was the process by which infinite reason actualises itself, but he met with difficulties in reconciling this idea of process – and progress – with his justification of the 'perfect' Prussian State, which seemed to the independent observer scarcely the ultimate realisation, the 'arrested reality', of the Absolute Idea. Perhaps the Russians, notably Belinsky, were close to grasping the true implications of Hegel's dictum when, in a vulgarisation of his ideas, they too took 'the real is rational' to mean 'might is right': Hegelianism can be construed as supporting the most oppressive regime by the argument that what is has to be, as it is part of the historical process. Yet for individual, suffering man, history, as Arthur Koestler says and Belinsky realised, has too often been 'an inhuman, unscrupulous builder, mixing its mortar of lies, blood and mud',[7] and this process has too often been justified in terms of a 'becoming reality'.

Putting aside for the moment subsequent interpretations and applications of Hegel, let us return to the dictum in an attempt to arrive at some approximate definition of temporal reality. Time is infinite in its divisibility; it follows that it is difficult, if not impossible, to prove that the present exists, even if we feel this to be time at its

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most real: the 'fleeting moment' becomes the past even as it arrives, yet its reality is not wholly extinguished as it goes from us. The future may in certain areas be forecast with a degree of accuracy on the basis of past experience, but in other areas it is so fraught with imponderables that it is not amenable to rational prediction; yet it is no less real for our inability to grasp it, as we soon experience. We tend in fact to view temporal reality as that which is illuminated by the narrow ray of light which is our predominating consciousness of the present moment; yet what lies in the darkness beyond is perhaps not less real simply because it is not so illuminated, and it is a restricted consciousness that would have it so. If each moment does not open out a temporal perspective on past and future it is to some extent because we fail to think through that moment with sufficient intensity. This intensified awareness of past and future has considerable relevance in the works of our three writers, and points towards a broader view of temporal reality than might be acceptable to a rationalist.

Temporally, then, the real is a shifting sand; can we be more definite as to its nature in terms of space? Apparently not, for what may appear real at first sight because it is visible and perhaps tangible may undergo so complete a metamorphosis that its seeming reality, its permanence, will then be seen as a delusion. Ultimately the quality of permanence may be present rather in the abstract, in ideas, which are seldom if ever wholly extinguished; it is ironical that many of the most 'irrational' and therefore in some opinions the least 'real' ideas are the longest lived, an irony which is explored in depth particularly by Bulgakov.

We are therefore faced with a paradox, a simultaneous accommodation of opposites which has already been put forward as a characteristic of our three writers. We have to admit the expression of a greater reality in the permanent than in the ephemeral, and we have also to admit the reality of change in all things. And if we accept reality as change, it follows that it is very difficult to find a criterion for the rational in any application of Hegel's dictum: assuming that the cognitive faculties are capable of perceiving this 'moving' reality, which in itself is a major philosophical question, it is valid as a criterion of the rational only for the actual moment of discovery; by the time the criterion is applied the process has moved on, and an outmoded reality is being set against the question at issue – although that has never stopped men from trying to apply it; we live (and for

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the most part must live) by a 'convenience logic' based on an approximation of the underlying realities.[8]

Another problem arises in connection with the comprehensiveness of the term 'reality'. The second half of Hegel's dictum cannot be divorced from the first in order simply to assert 'what is rational is real', that is, *only* what is rational is real, hence what is irrational is unreal. The dictum must be read as a whole: according to Hegel if something is real then it is rational; but that can only be true in some special philosophical interpretation; common sense accepts that madness is real but not that it is rational. As we have seen, matter, in spite of appearances, may be ultimately less 'real' than spirit, at least in our final recognition of its impermanence: yet the less real may be the more rational, in the sense that the physical world is governed by natural laws which are to a high degree known and predictable, and it is in the stubborn permanence of ideas that the application of laws is most difficult. We are close to asserting that the unreal is rational and the irrational is real. The difficulty in defining the real may also be expressed historically: what seems unreal or quite simply false now may come to seem a truism in the future; the medieval consciousness would have considered altogether fantastic most of the conclusions of the exact sciences which we now regard as reflecting reality and as rational. The position can be stated in comparatively simple terms: the real, or the 'true', is commonly considered that which lends itself to accommodation within existing conventions of thought; the unreal, or 'untrue', is that which lies outside this area, but which in the future may or may not be so accommodated: Poltorak remarks in Pil'nyak's *The Volga Flows into the Caspian Sea* 'I know many truths which are untruths, and I know very many untruths which have become great, very great truths.'[9] (This 'definition' of the real as that which is generally accepted as real applies not only to a given society at different periods of its history; it also of course applies to the differing standards of separate but co-existing societies.) The fact that we are unable to grasp or accept what seems unreal or untrue now does not mean that it does not exist; to acknowledge this brings us close to Kant's idea of the thing-in-itself, and his conclusion that the existence of God, immortality and freedom cannot be established rationally, and that our inability to do this does not disprove His, or their existences. Such an acknowledgement contrasts with the views of those such as Averroes, Aquinas, and Spinoza who seek to approach God through

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the exercise of the reason,[10] and the unacceptability to Hegel of a final, irreducible area of doubt; Hegel only concedes that there is a tension between knower and known prior to the realisation of the Absolute Idea. (The frequency with which the ideas of Kant fall in with those of our writers supports the assertion that their orientation is fundamentally Romantic; Kant provided a theoretical basis for much of the thought underlying the Romantic movement.) Thus we are again faced with the conclusion that the 'real' is an uncertain quantity; it may include that which lies within and without the conventional framework of acceptance at a given moment in a given society. The idea arises, suggested by the thought of Dostoevsky and Solov′yov, of an 'all-comprehensive' reality, one which embraces not only those phenomena which submit to logical interpretation but also those which do not, although our experience of them seems just as real nevertheless; this idea is close to Bely's concept of reality as 'the sum total of all possible experience (inward and outward)'.[11] This reality might be complemented by a 'higher' rationality which would acknowledge that because a phenomenon or a thing is, then it may make sense, in terms of itself at least, whether or not a particular intellect is able to grasp the reason (if any) for its being. To take an analogy from the field of prosaic reality and rationality, it would do less than justice to our rational powers, and be dishonest, if a scientific experiment were conducted in which were ignored, for the sake of convenience, phenomena which did not conform to preconceived patterns of thought. Of course, by closing the mind against 'irrational' factors we should probably arrive at a definite answer which would neatly round off the experiment in a way gratifying to the consciousness, rather in the manner of an anecdote; but the result would bear as much relation to the totality of the experience as would the dénouement of the anecdote to the unsatisfactory open-endedness of real life. Most immediate pressures operate towards the production of results; it is difficult to accept that because of unknown, perhaps unknowable, factors there will be no clear-cut answers, and this uncertainty opposes the tenor of rational conditioning, which is almost always teleological. Recognition of the irrational demands an acceptance of uncertainty and a considerable and continuing effort of intellectual honesty. Certainly the three writers with whom we are concerned do not provide clear-cut answers, and their works are to a high degree open-ended; the reader is expected to work hard at them.

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The argument has led so far to the conclusion that 'all is (or may be) rational'. Possibly this is a defensible position in terms of abstract thought, but as a working hypothesis it is of as little practical use as Hegel's dictum has proved to be. We must establish a criterion, and to do this turn from philosophy to society, accepting if need be that we frequently use double standards: whatever our philosophical beliefs as to the ultimate nature of rationality, we continue to make social judgments on an empirical basis as to what is or is not rational, and these judgments are informed and usually supported by a consensus of opinion we are bound to respect. The works of imaginative writers reflect, directly or indirectly, the society in which they are created; we shall seek our criterion of the irrational there.

It would be tempting to isolate and analyse examples in Russian literature of irrationality manifested in terms of insanity, but this would be of greater value from a point of view of pathology than in establishing the extent to which the irrational is rich in universal implications. A study of the irrational should provide most general insights where it concerns those aspects of conduct which, while departing from commonly held standards, can be supported by philosophically justifiable convictions and do not obviously cross the uncertain boundary into the world of madness. Case histories may be interesting in themselves, and give rise to good literature, but they do not have that generality of application which is so characteristic a feature of Russian literature. Poprishchin in Gogol's 'Notes of a Madman' ('Zapiski sumasshedshego') and Peredonov in Sologub's *The Petty Demon* (*Melkiy bes*) end as recognisably insane; they are less significant philosophically than Dostoevsky's Underground Man, whose consciousness accurately prefigures the isolation and anguish of the individual in so much twentieth-century literature. The Underground Man is not insane, yet his conduct, judged by the norms of his society, is beyond doubt irrational. In fact at no time before or since have the conflicting notions of man as a rational and an irrational being been so fully articulated in Russian thought as during the polemic between Chernyshevsky and Dostoevsky in the early 1860s, the debate receiving literary expression in *What Is To Be Done?* (*Chto delat'?*) and *Notes from Underground* (*Zapiski iz podpol'ya*). This dispute will establish a criterion of the irrational which will serve as a point of reference for the 1920s and 1930s.

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