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EHRENBURG, STENDHAL AND NEO-ZHDANOVISM

Among the dissident writers in the Soviet Union the case of Ilya Ehrenburg seems to be giving the Kremlin almost as many headaches as that of Dudintsev. The latter was a young, unknown writer when his book started its chain reaction last year and it is becoming a common experience throughout the bloc that the younger an author, the more unorthodox are his views, and the more the Party leans over backwards to remould them. But Ehrenburg is a hardened, tested Communist who used to be regarded as the bell-wether of the Party line. Moreover he has had an international reputation for decades, unlike the younger dissident writers such as Yev-tushenko and Dudintsev. It is therefore not surprising that when Ehrenburg's views moved sharply in the horrendous direction of freedom for the artist in the summer (see J.C., Radio Liberation, 30/8/57, Background Information 31/8/57), the Party's official countermeasures were at first gentle and almost hesitant (Literary Gazette, 22/8/57). Ehrenburg has often been in trouble before, partly because of his liking for the poetry of Marina Tsvetayeva* (who committed suicide in 1941) and Boris Slutzky. Similarly he has been criticized for arguing that the US has produced an American culture (Literary Gazette, 23 June 1957) and for his running battle in defence of modern art. But by far his most serious error yet was the publication of an article, "The Lessons of Stendhal" in an obscure Moscow monthly (Foreign Literature) in June 1957. This was one of the most outspoken attacks on dictatorship yet made in the USSR, but it was cleverly disguised as the pure distilled wisdom of Stendhal. The latter's most pointed statement, selected by Ehrenburg, reads:

"What counts is not the personality of the tyrant, but the essence of tyranny. A tyrant may be intelligent or stupid, good or evil - but whatever the case he is frightened by conspiracies, he is flattered, he is deceived. The prisons fill, the cowardly hypocrites whisper, and the silence becomes so complete that the heart almost stops."

Such a strong statement, appearing in the middle of the present slow reversion to neo-Zhdanovism, required a strong reply, but at first, for the reasons explained above, it had to be handled with a restraint unusual for the Party. Now the gloves are slowly coming off, with a new article (Znamya, No. 10, 1957) which implies that "foreign reaction," using its "favorite method" of "figuratively poisoning the wells in our rear", is behind Ehrenburg's article.

*See Zvezda, June 1951.

The Znamya article is written by E. Knipovich, a literary critic notable only for the fact that in 1947 (Znamya, No. 2) she made the remarkable claim that there are no "forbidden subjects" in Soviet literature (G. Struve, Soviet Russian Literature, 1917-1950, University of Oklahoma Press, p. 323). Ten years later she is now arguing that "Marxists know of the existence of objective truth"; "that they alone know the truth about Stendhal, and that Ehrenburg's ideas on the subject are distinctly anti-Marxist."

Knipovich blames Ehrenburg for interpreting Stendhal and Julien Sorel, the hero of Le Rouge et le Noir, as "supporters of cosmic pessimism". In point of fact Ehrenburg's interpretation of Stendhal was that he "wished to reconcile justice with that freedom which seemed to him inseparable from human happiness," which is scarcely the standpoint of a pessimist.

But Knipovich is principally disturbed by the fact that, in her interpretation, Ehrenburg contrasts "ideas" with "artistic truth". This is based on a quotation from Ehrenburg which reads:

"Being tendentious in art does not at all mean arbitrarily changing proportions, nor subordinating the actions of the heroes to the idea of the novel; only bad books are written in this way...In changing proportions, altering the perspective, a writer obeys the strict law of artistic truth: only if he observes these laws will the reader accept his interpretation as an image, his painting for a mirror."

At this point in the quotation, Knipovich inserts a note, explaining that Ehrenburg is referring to Stendhal's statement that "a novel is a mirror on the highway." But she deliberately omits the rest of Stendhal's simile, which Ehrenburg quoted:

"The novel is a mirror on the highway. It reflects at times the blue sky, at times the mud, the puddles and the bumps. And you accuse the man who holds the mirror of lacking taste. The mirror reflects mud, and you blame the mirror. You would do better to blame the road with its bumps, or the highway department."

This omitted passage has been interpreted by Western observers (Manchester Guardian, September 4, 1957) as Ehrenburg's defence of Dudintsev, and of other Soviet writers who are alleged to have erred by "distorting socialist reality".

Knipovich complains that she finds it difficult to deal with Ehrenburg's type of literary criticism, "all the theses of which are masked." But after laying them bare to her own satisfaction, and stating that Ehrenburg now sees "artistic truth as the wings of Pegasus, uplifting the artist, but ideas as the yoke bearing him to the ground," Knipovich revives the argument, already used

by the neo-Zhdanovites against K. Simonov, that Ehrenburg's own war stories (The Fall of Paris, The Storm, The 9th Wave) show the fallaciousness of this attitude to ideology.

The technique of resuscitating the Stalin-epoch war novels as an argument against dissident writers is partly an appeal to their patriotism. But Ehrenburg has already declared his attitude to this last resort of all chauvinists:

"Stendhal loved his motherland, but he did not approach it with lying praise or pseudo-patriotic fuss; he was too chaste to beat his breast and cry at the crossroads of Europe about the superiority of France...The argument about Stendhal's cosmopolitanism is the old argument about the true character of love for the motherland: is such love connected with neglect of other peoples, with exaltation of the weaknesses and faults of one's own countrymen, with anathemas and toasts....One must learn to flatter no one, not even one's own people."

Knipovich succeeds in pinning on Ehrenburg the new charge that he is a supporter of humanism. This is achieved by use of a quotation from the Foreign Language article:-

"Stendhal created a world which, being realist, is in no way a copy of the world of 1830 or 1840. If this is critical realism, to my dying day I shall never understand how it differs from ~~the~~ artistic methods of that revolutionary or humanist realism, towards which the progressive writers of the world are now striving."

Knipovich finds it difficult to understand what methods of humanist and revolutionary realism, and what progressive writers Ehrenburg is discussing?

"If Soviet writers are meant, then the method of socialist realism...should have been mentioned...Ehrenburg is an experienced warrior on the ideological front. Why is he now, at a time when a fierce debate on socialist realism is in progress, suddenly so 'bashful in the fight' that he does not even want to pronounce the name 'socialist realism'?"

In fact there is little evidence that Ehrenburg was thinking of Soviet writers. The phrase 'humanist realism' is strongly suggestive of the Polish 'revisionists', such as E. Szacki and many others who have been the bane of the Kremlin for many months (see Background Information, 9 October 1957). Yet Knipovich herself is 'so bashful in the fight', despite her Zhdanovite training, that she does not dare to apply the label of 'revisionism' to Ehrenburg - she only hints that it is lurking in the offing, ready for use if the obstinate Ilya refuses to come to heel.

In a similarly roundabout way Knipovich suggests a charge of nihilism against Ehrenburg without actually using the word. She accuses him of having no place in his "lamentable set-up" for the great writers of the 20th century, whom she identifies as Gorky, Rolland, Barbusse, Fadeyev,

Sholokhov, Heinrich Mann, Thomas Mann, Shaughan O'Casey, and Laxness. Negation of the achievements of regime-approved writers has long been part of the standard indictment against "nihilist" authors and critics.

The final gambit used by Knipovich against Ehrenburg is to imply that he is an exponent of personality cult because "he wishes to be a monopolist, both in his love for Stendhal and in interpreting the latter's work." Yet she admits that Ehrenburg's "Lessons" made use of both Tolstoi and Balzac, so that her real charge should be that he did not rely on orthodox Communist analysis. "His thoughts", she says, "are not very new, but they are very wrong." Whether they are wrong is a matter of opinion, but this statement on thought control, taken from Stendhal but used by Ehrenburg, is sufficiently new in a Soviet magazine to be worth quoting:

"Even if a king is an angel, his government destroys art, not because it bans the subject of a painting, but because it crushes the soul of the artist. People wish to please a Minister or Vice-Minister, their immediate superior. Even though these ministers be the most honorable men in the world, toadyism, flattery and obsequiousness will still develop."

And these are the very vices, that according to Khrushchev, developed around Stalin. The conclusion that it is the system at fault, not so much the individuals, will be reached by many of Ehrenburg's readers, and that is what he must be presumed to have intended.

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