ARTS & LETTERS

The Virtues Of Exile

"The Writer in Exile: The Good Years" by Ewa M. Thompson, in *Slavic and East European Journal* (Winter 1989), Dept. of Russian and East European Studies, Univ. of Minn., Minneapolis, Minn. 55455.

We live in an age that adores victims, and in popular mythology there are few greater victims than the exiled Russian or Eastern European writer.

Save your tears for Ovid, says Thompson, a professor of Slavic studies at Rice University. In 8 A.D., the Roman poet was exiled to a Black Sea backwater whose inhabitants could not read Latin—or any other language. Most of them were illiterate. Exile today is different. Thompson believes that it "has given some writers an audience for which they could not have hoped in the countries of their birth. In some cases, it has converted their national readership into a worldwide one. It made their ideas matter in a way in which they could not have."

A case in point is Alexsandr Solzhenitsyn. Best known as the chronicler of the Gulag, he is also the chief purveyor in the West of the image of gentle Mother Russia as an innocent victim of history. "Instead of trying to change the self-perception of his countrymen," she writes, "he has reinforced abroad an old and paradoxical image of Russia as a society of rural Ivan Denisoviches and Matrënas who somehow have produced the largest military-industrial complex in the world."

Quite the opposite is true of the eminent Eastern European exiles, such as Milan Kundera, Czeslaw Milosz, Josef Škvorecký, and Janusz Glowacki. They "have begun to forge a definition of that part of the world that has become comprehensible to the home audience *and* to the audiences of the host countries. They have helped to create an understanding of the unity of 'the other Europe' which had not existed in the West before." From books such as *Native Realm, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting,* and *The Engineer of Human*

Who Speaks for Whom?

Do exiled Eastern European writers truly speak for (or to) their countrymen? In an interview with Philip Roth in the *New York Review of Books* (April 12, 1990), Czech novelist and playwright Ivan Klíma suggests that one of the most prominent exiles, Milan Kundera, may not.

The reproach that he is writing for foreigners rather than for Czechs is only one of the many reproaches addressed to Kundera and only a part of the more substantial rebuke—that he has lost his ties to his native country . . . .

In my opinion the allergy [to Kundera] is caused, in part, by what people take to be the simplified and spectacular way in which Kundera presents his Czech experience. What's more, the experience he presents is, they would say, at odds with the fact that he himself had been an indulged and rewarded child of the Communist regime until 1968.

The totalitarian system is terribly hard on people, as Kundera recognizes, but the hardness of life has a much more complicated shape than we find in his presentation of it. Kundera's picture, his critics would tell you, is the sort of picture which you would see from a very capable foreign newspaperman who'd spent a few days in our country. Such a picture is acceptable to the Western reader because it confirms his expectations; it reinforces the fairy tale about good and evil, which a good boy likes to hear again and again. But for the Czech readers our reality is no fairy tale . . . .

Last, but not least, is an extraliterary reason, which may, however, be at the very core of the charge against him. At the time when Kundera was achieving his greatest world popularity, Czech culture was in a bitter struggle with the totalitarian system. Intellectuals at home as well as those in exile shared in this struggle . . . . Kundera seems to many people to have stood apart from this kind of effort.

Souls, there has emerged "a new type of East European literary hero: skeptical, yet not unprincipled; aware of the absurdity of the situation in which 'the other Europe' has been forcibly placed, but remarkably free of self-pity; conscious of his nationality but alert to the needs of other 'political losers.'" Thus Eastern Europeans have distanced themselves from both their Russian and Western European counterparts.

Art and the Decline of Nations

"Counterfeiting Nature: Artistic Innovation and Cultural Crisis in Renaissance Venice" by Arthur Steinberg and Jonathan Wylie, in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (Jan. 1990), 102 Rackham Bldg., Univ. of Mich., Ann Arbor, Mich. 48109-1070.

How many times has the story been repeated? A society slowly rises to greatness and then, just as it passes its peak, experiences a spectacular flowering of the arts.

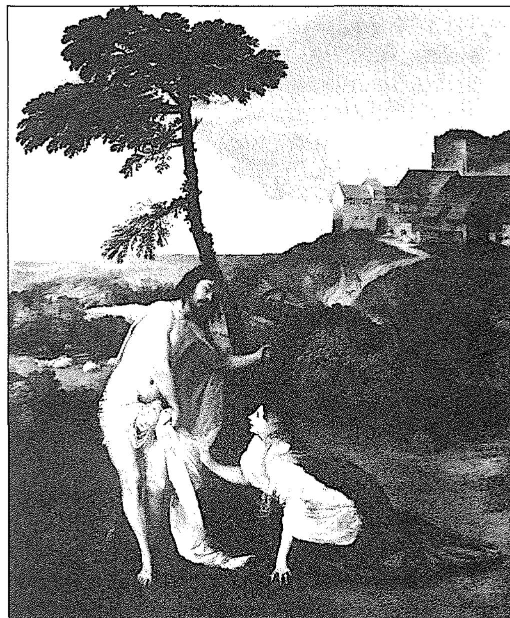
Venice during the early 16th century was such a place. Exhausted by decades of war with the Ottoman Empire, it then confronted the League of Cambrai—including Florence, Spain, and France. The League handed the Venetians a disastrous defeat at Agnadello in 1509.

Out of this turmoil grew one of the great flowers of Venetian art: the "natural painting" of Giovanni Bellini (c. 1430–1516), Giorgione (c. 1478–1510), and Titian (c. 1480–1576). Steinberg and Wylie, both historians at MIT, argue that this flowering was no accident.

The patriarchs of Venice proudly thought of themselves as having a special link to God. Venice was known as *la sancta città* (the holy city), and legend had it that it was founded on Annunciation Day, the same day on which Adam was created, Mary impregnated, and Christ crucified. The city's misfortunes thus cast doubt not only on her favored status but on "the very souls of her political and economic elite."

To continue the illusion of Venetian greatness, the city fathers went on a civic spending spree, creating a huge market for art. Venetian artists soon discovered that the newly developed oil paints allowed the painter to work more quickly and produce more pictures than traditional egg-based tempera paints did. And oil allowed artists to achieve much more vivid colors and life-like effects. Almost too life-like, in fact. The main subjects of Venetian art were sacred figures such as the Virgin Mary, and if they could be depicted as part of profane reality, the authors observe, their "sacredness became ambiguous or even risked disappearing entirely."

Bellini tried to solve the problem by surrounding his sacred figures with cherubs and halos, and by placing them on an entirely different plane. Invariably, the result was really two (or more) pictures: a Madonna in the foreground, for example, and a completely detached landscape in the background. It was left to Giorgione and especially Titian to create the new style of



In Titian's Noli Me Tangere *(Do Not Touch Me) of 1511, the sacred foreground is set apart by Christ's motion away from Mary Magdalene and by the bush, the tree, and other pictoral markers.*