

Is There Hope For Pushkin's Children?

Russian writers are now free to write anything. Why then do so many feel hesitant and confused? Their dilemma, as Tatyana Tolstaya explains, is one that has vexed Russia's finest artists for centuries.

by Tatyana Tolstaya

Certain tricky questions arise from time to time in literary circles. No one knows who first asked them, and they often seem a pointless game. For instance: Would you, as a writer, continue to write if you ended up on an uninhabited island and it seemed that no one would ever read your work? Many writers answer: Yes, of course I would, I don't need a reader, I'm my own reader, I'm incapable of *not* writing, I am my own source of inspiration, no one should come between me and God, and so forth. It's impossible to judge the sincerity of such feelings. After all, there aren't any uninhabited islands left, are there?

In fact, more and more Russian writers seem to have found themselves on just such islands.

To understand how they arrived there, we might consider a few well-known points. Throughout the entire history of Russian literature, the Russian writer has never been seen by the reading public as "simply" a poet, journalist, philosopher, or scribbler—that is, as a person freely expressing his or her own thoughts and feelings or merely entertaining the reader. The Russian writer has always been seen as a prophet or preacher, a dangerous free-

thinker, or a revolutionary. The very ability to manipulate words and to articulate one's thoughts placed the individual in a suspect position. The word was seen as a weapon far more fearsome than poison or a dagger. A murderer might be sentenced "only" to long-term hard labor, but a person could



Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837)

receive the death penalty for reading forbidden poems. Even one's unproven presence in a place where a song insulting to the government had allegedly been sung could lead to exile. This is precisely what happened at the beginning of the 19th century to the writer and dissident Alexander Herzen, who was forced to emigrate and spend the rest of his life in exile. Such has always been the situation in Russia, but it acquired a particularly threatening aspect with the birth of a genuine, full-blooded literature in the early 19th century. And this threat has persisted right up to this day.

This is a wonderful point of view. It proclaims the primacy of literature over life, of dreams over reality, of imagination over facts. It says: Life is nothing—a fog, a mirage, *fata morgana*. But the word, whether spoken or printed, represents a power greater than that of the atom. This is an entirely Russian view of literature, without parallel in the West. And everyone in Russia, it seems, shares it: the tsars and their slaves, censors and dissidents, writers and critics, liberals and conservatives. He who has articulated a Word has accomplished a Deed. He has taken all the power and responsibility on himself. He is dangerous. He is free. He is destructive. He is God's rival. And for this reason, all of these daring, bold, outspoken, powerful magicians, from Alexander Radishchev in the late 18th century to Andrei Sinyavsky in the 20th century, have been playing with life and death.

Naturally, when such power is attributed to the Word, the writer begins to feel a particular responsibility. Not surprisingly, most great Russian writers and poets have not only accepted this responsibility but have used the power of their words to address the most important social and political problems of their day: freedom (or, more accurately in Russia, the lack of it), the individual, human rights, and so on. A line from the 19th-century poet Nikolai Nekrasov is often quoted: "You're not required to be a poet, but a citizen you're obliged to be." This formulation harked

back to the executed Decembrist Ryleev, who said: "I am not a poet, I am a citizen." But, in essence, it was part of Nekrasov's polemic with Alexander Pushkin, the father of all our contemporary literature.

Pushkin was a poet who is remarkable for, among other things, the fact that from the outset he stood above this flat, pragmatic point of view, which is so seductive in Russia. Pushkin's point of departure was that the writer should teach no one and make no appeals but be free to sing as best he could, whatever came his way, and to listen to his inner voice—in short, to create on an uninhabited island. Pushkin himself lived on a sort of uninhabited island, but his manuscripts, sealed in the bottle of time, floated on the waves into the future and are still out there. His small circle of admirers and contemporary readers didn't appreciate him as he deserved. People read much into his works but did not see everything that was there. They didn't see the most important thing—his inner freedom. (In order to understand this idea fully, one must, it seems, possess one's own inner freedom, and that is one of the most difficult things to acquire on this earth.) Pushkin's contemporary readers appreciated the harmonious beauty of the poet's verse and the dry precision of his transparent prose, they understood his hatred of slavery and his defense of simple, oppressed people, and they saw his profound comprehension of Russian history, his delight in female beauty, his encyclopedic knowledge and astonishing ability to describe Russian life. They praised his humor, his alternately lighthearted and melancholy frame of mind, the tragic nature of his worldview—and quite rightly, for all this was in his verse. But the motif of inner freedom remained in the shadows, as if obscured behind opaque glass.

After Pushkin's death, this motif became downright unpopular. What inner freedom could there be when despots ruled, when there were no laws and human beings were traded like cattle, and when whole peoples

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and classes were doomed to a brutal life? The only freedom that could be discussed was social—and a number of writers took it upon themselves to call for revolutionary changes or peaceful reforms (in accordance with their individual temperaments and political views), while others turned their attention to the moral reeducation of man, seeing salvation in the process of self-perfection, in religion, in the search for national roots, or in a special mission for Russia and the Russian people. These were marvelous writers, great writers, writers of international renown: Nikolay Gogol, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Leo Tolstoy. . . . But not one of them possessed that inner freedom, and none was able, or dared, to allow himself that inner freedom. Instead, they voluntarily donned the fetters of moral duty: service to the tsar, to God, or to the People. It was only Pushkin, who described himself humorously as “that homely descendant of Negroes” (one of his ancestors was from the royal family of Ethiopia, kidnapped as a child and brought as an exotic entertainment to Russia, where he subsequently was made a nobleman), who was able to formulate the sole ordinance of inner freedom that an artist can accept. It was only Pushkin, whom his contemporaries thought an empty, worldly, frivolous man, a philanderer and naughty child, who had dared to ask the question: “Whether it depends on the tsar or depends on the People—isn’t it all the same to you?” The irony is that after his death admiration for Pushkin grew and grew, until he himself became, for many Russians, God, tsar, and the People, an idol, an icon, holy writ. Mindlessly repeating Pushkin’s idea about freedom as a magic formula, an incantation, no one bothered to delve into its essence. Not one of Pushkin’s admirers would allow you to be free of Pushkin himself.

This, by the way, was what happened in our own time with one of the few genuinely free Russian writers, Andrei Sinyavsky. Desiring to be dependent neither on the tsar nor the People, Sinyavsky, a descendant of the Russian nobility, hid under a Jewish pen name, Abram Tertz, and sent his manuscripts out of Russia to the West, until his identity was uncovered and he was sent to the camps by an enraged government. To many people, this made him a hero, the

mouthpiece of freedom. But in the camp, Sinyavsky decided to write a book about Pushkin, which he also published in the West after he emigrated. And suddenly the defenders of freedom ostracized Sinyavsky, simply because he had dared to address Pushkin as a mere mortal. (The most amusing mistake was made, as always, by Solzhenitsyn, who unleashed the full weight of his *malleus maleficarum* on his fellow prisoner but landed right on the icon. He accused Sinyavsky of printing an “obscene street poem” about Pushkin, not suspecting that the mildly ribald little ditty was composed by Pushkin, who was writing ironically about himself in the third person.) And so it is: God is free, but that’s his own business, and all of you, who love God, are obliged to be his slaves.

Submitting to a moral but not to a creative imperative, Russian writers condemned themselves to all manner of suffering and torment. It was not only that the authorities and society cruelly punished the love of freedom—that goes without saying. The problem was also that the struggle of the poet and the citizen within any given writer usually resulted in the death of the poet. The brilliant Gogol, seeing his vocation as pointing people toward the true path to moral salvation, wrote the second volume of *Dead Souls*, in which, apparently, he tried to create a morally uplifting image of the positive hero. We aren’t certain what he wrote, since, unhappy with the results, Gogol burned the manuscript and then went mad, falling into a state of religious gloom. But the sparkle of Gogol’s early works dims and dies out toward the end of his life. In the last years of his life Leo Tolstoy also ceased to be a brilliant artist, having driven himself into the narrow, cramped cage of forced morality. He didn’t stop being a brilliant personality, but his preaching, the primitive pieces for children, and the moralizing tracts for peasants are no more than a curiosity against the background of his great novels. Fortunately, Dostoyevsky avoided such an inglorious end—perhaps he was saved by the indomitable passions that raged in his soul. Nevertheless, the ideological slant of all his works is obvious. Writers of a lesser stature surrendered more quickly. And the very few who did not wish to sacrifice art on the

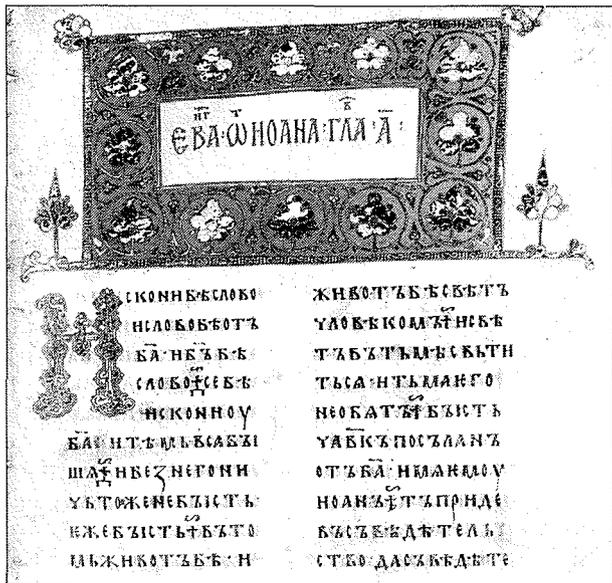
altar of service to the Fatherland, Truth, or the People were subjected to such ferocious criticism by the "progressive thinking" sectors of society that they were literally terrorized, as though they had committed the most heinous of crimes against humanity. Dostoyevsky's indignation at Afanasy Fet's innocent lyrics, "Whispers, timid breath, the nightingales trilled," is well known. This is simply disgraceful, wrote Dostoyevsky indignantly, and he speculated what an insulting impression such empty verses would have made if they'd been given to someone to read during the Lisbon earthquake!

Some people protested: Yes, of course, Dostoyevsky is right, but we aren't having an earthquake, and we aren't in Lisbon, and, after all, are we not allowed to love, to listen to nightingales, to admire the beauty of a beloved woman? But Dostoyevsky's argument held sway for a long time. It did so because of the way Russians perceive Russian life: as a constant, unending Lisbon earthquake . . .

And then these civic passions started to wane, and there began to appear here and there poets and artists for whom freedom and beauty had more meaning than truth and morality. The break began at the end of

the last century, just when the great literature of ideas seemed to have degenerated into banal journalism and liberalistic concoctions on politically correct themes—the women's question, the improvement of mores, popular education, health care, etc. Suddenly all this began to dim. In the Chekhovian, unpoetic *fin de siècle*, when, as many thought, the giants had all died and only the dwarfs were left, the shoots of a new, unfamiliar art, which at first irritated many people, began to sprout. Despite the pressing "needs of the people," modernism was born in Russia, and it was all the more striking for its utter lack of practical application.

Many people considered it a form of madness and delinquency. Leo Tolstoy himself, who at the time sought his moral peace by covering the roofs of neighboring peasant huts with straw thatch and plowing the peasants' poor land, tore himself away from his unproductive, voluntary labor to condemn the "decadents" with what he thought were venomous reproaches. And, of course, the "new art" was at first ridiculed by the entire previous generation of liberally inclined professors, teachers, political figures, lawyers, and other respectable people. This was a generation that read literature only to find "artistic" confirmation of what it already knew: that the peasants feed us, and we must therefore love them; that women are also human beings; that poverty is bad; that we must help the poor and somehow re-organize society. But there were also readers bewitched by the unusual qualities in the new writing. The Russian Europeans, who believed in the formula "Light comes from the West," could not help but eventually respond to the new appeals and new voices. And just as 18th-century Russians experienced the influence of the French Enlightenment and 19th-century Russians were affected by the French Revolution, so early 20th-century Russians imbibed and transformed the new French art—impressionism in painting, symbolism in poetry. (Isn't this why writers and artists flocked to Paris after the catastrophe of 1917—to the prom-



"In the beginning was the word" opens the Gospel of St. John, from an 11th-century Cyrillic Bible. In Russia, words even today have the sanctified status of an icon.

ised land of art and freedom—only to discover that no one needed them there?)

During the years before the revolution, the arts flourished in an extraordinary manner; and Pushkin's weighty words suddenly sounded with renewed force and acquired fresh significance. The "new art" discovered that the word is magical in and of itself and not only because people are willing to kill for it. This art discovered, or rediscovered, that man is not only a member of society but a strange animal with five senses, with a variety of often untamed sexual needs, a capricious, whimsical being with unruly moods, hysterics, and perversions; that the world is large and unfathomable; and that there is such a thing as the delight of exotic, unseen countries and islands—Africa, Egypt, Ceylon, India, Japan—which are interesting not only for their statistical profiles, their undeveloped industries, and oppressed working people but for their religion, history, philosophy, mysticism, aromas, fiery sunsets over the water, snakes, lotuses, kimonos, tea ceremonies, hashish, and the unusual beauty of their women and men.

The new art fell in love with camellias and tuberose, the colors lilac and green, sea shells, bracelets, sails, the smoke of bonfires and the dust of the road, dreams and ravings, mystical illuminations and divination by cards and palmistry; it fell in love with the carnival, the theater, ancient Greece, and the ascetics; it was enchanted by languor, anguish, and tears, and it cried not because it had no money to buy a cow or to pay the money-lender but because the Ideal was unattainable, because dream and reality were divided by an insurmountable wall, and because the soul strives to reach something somewhere out there, far away, in the clouds: It strives for death, the past and the future, and the loquacious numbers and weighty objects have already foretold the approaching destruction of the world, foretold plague, death and affliction, revolution and apocalypse.

Now, when we look back with a feeling of sorrow and loss at that legendary time, which seems separated from us by a transparent but impassable barrier, when we hear the dim, underwater voices of those people—their debates and quarrels, their

amorous admissions, their unrealized and realized prophecies—we have a vision of the *Titanic* floating in the night and gloom on its way to destruction, a vision of a huge ship brightly illuminated, full of music, wine, and elegant people, a bit afraid of the long ocean voyage, of course, but hoping that the journey will end well. After all, the ship is so large, strong, and reliable!

Russia perished just as quickly as the *Titanic*. And, likewise, only a handful of people survived.

Alexander Blok, a brilliant poet who possessed truly prophetic gifts, whom Anna Akhmatova called "the tragic tenor of the era," had a premonition of the fall of the former Russia. He foresaw the revolutionary squall ("the unheard of changes, unseen storms") and even predicted the coming destruction and catastrophe ("O, if you knew, children,/The cold and gloom of the coming days! . . ."), but he didn't know and could not imagine that instead of the cleansing though perhaps deadly wind for which he was prepared, a thick, malodorous mist would descend over the land. Blok says he wrote poetry by listening to an inner music, which he would then transform into verse. When the revolution came, Blok at first listened greedily to the new sounds: "Listen to the revolution with your whole heart!" He wrote a poem in which, he thought, this new music sounded, and then suddenly he went "deaf." According to his contemporaries, he complained of this "deafness" as a physical rather than metaphysical calamity: "I've gone deaf, I've gone deaf, I don't hear anything any more!" he told his friends and his diary. He—a productive, marvelous poet—wrote no poetry in the last three, postrevolutionary years of his life. To be more exact, he did write one poem. In it he said farewell to the world as he departed "into the darkness of night," as he called it. And it was none other than Pushkin whom he remembered and mentioned precisely in connection with that inner freedom, which, it seems, was his own "music" and which had left him during those fearful months.

Pushkin! We sang the *secret* freedom
Following in your footsteps.
Give us your hand in foul weather,
Help us in the mute struggle!

After this came silence. Blok, who was by and large a mystical poet, died mysteriously in 1921: He had an unknown illness that resembles AIDS. He began to dry up, to go deaf; he became emaciated and weak, and, once dead, he lay unrecognizable in his coffin, frightening those who had known him.

But not all of Russian literature had been killed. The government was distracted by more important forms of destruction, and Russian artists managed to shine for a short, frightful moment before going down in the abyss of the Soviet night.

Russian literature of the early Soviet period (as well as Russian émigré literature, which is thematically distinct from Soviet, but stylistically close) continued to dramatize the theme of the Poet and the Citizen. Those who decisively chose the Citizen drowned in oblivion, and those who chose the path of the Poet surfaced alive. Of course, this theme, which is latent throughout the entire history of Russian literature, has never manifested itself in pure form. Feelings of civic duty were not alien to the great Russian poets of the frightful Soviet period; likewise, stylistic beauty and creative discovery were not entirely unknown to the writers who sold out to the regime and tried to be model Soviet citizens.

One such writer, Andrei Platonov, who passionately believed in communism, wrote a series of novels that he thought glorified the new era and new ideas. But his creativity, his unusual train of thought, and his unprecedented style constituted a devastating attack against the regime. There is no more anticommunist literature than Platonov's: Paradoxically, his rejection of communism is achieved not by way of open accusations but through his linguistic visions.

But most of them—the young and the old, the smart and the stupid, those who tried to fit in and didn't know how, those who tried to protest, not knowing that it was useless—were sent to different prisons and camps, or shot, or frightened nearly to death, or exiled from the country, or brought to suicide, or forced to exalt their tormentors. Their manuscripts were confiscated and burned, their libraries were destroyed, their archives were taken away and lost, and for a quarter-century the country was submerged in communist gloom.

The end of the 1950s—Khrushchev's "Thaw"—brought a new wave of "civic" literature. Writers, especially poets, "spoke the truth," and hundreds of thousands gathered to hear that truth. It was then that the poets Andrei Voznesensky and Yevgeny Yevtushenko became well known. The latter, paraphrasing Nekrasov, coined the famous saying "In Russia the Poet is more than a poet." Cynics, noting how swiftly civic passions in the literary arena were replaced by mercantile passions, repeated these words, adding: "That's why the poet needs more money and privileges." This short-lived dawn of civic literature was replaced, as ever, by a new twilight; the hopes for social reform were extinguished, and from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, we lived through the period that it is now fashionable to call "the era of stagnation," a period that one must condemn at all costs.

Oh, yes, things were very bad for the citizen during these years. But artists, poets, and writers—miracle of miracles!—flourished in this stifling era, and never has so much been written or read as during these dismal, static, prevaricating years. Literature was valued above everything. Books became a common form of currency. In order to acquire certain rare books, people would spend huge sums or laboriously retype the books themselves on old typewriters. Soviet censorship—the most refined in the world—placed the stamp of interdiction not only on meaning but on style as well, and state presses, instead of cashing in on the huge demand for books and journals, artificially limited the print runs. People stole journals from their neighbors' mailboxes. Thieves broke into apartments in order to carry away books. It was a surprising, paradoxical time—and who could have foreseen that it would be this way? Who would have thought, after the lobotomy Russian culture underwent in the 1930s–1950s, that living, functioning cells still existed? The external pressure grew stronger, and, as before, words could land you in jail, hard labor, or the madhouse: They could even cause your death. But the writers and readers became more and more cultivated and enlightened; they protected their treasure—the word—from the outside world with ever greater agility and inventiveness. They placed ever greater

hopes on this bright, fragile, frightened, self-willed butterfly. Both writers and readers dreamed of external freedom, for, it seemed to them, they had had their fill of Pushkin's and Blok's secret freedom. They could not guess that external freedom might prove disastrous and their inner freedom imaginary.

The wide world which had once been open to the Russian had long since contracted to the dimensions of his apartment. Distant and not very distant lands—Paris and China, London and Ceylon, the seas, islands, nighttime streets of far-off capitals, bright with lights and cars—seemed to be pretty, fabricated fairy tales, in whose existence it was difficult to believe. The Russian tendency to indulge in dreams and fantasy mingled the foreign and unreal in a whimsical cocktail, in which it was difficult to distinguish what had already been, what was invented, and what had happened (but not to us). At this time, the literature of the fantastic thrived, as did "village" literature, which was more and more inclined to idealize the lost world of the Russian village, attributing to "the soul of the people" rare virtues that had never existed in reality.

The painful rupture in culture—the artificial, forced darkness that divided the literature of the 19th-century Golden Age and the early 20th-century Silver Age from our barbaric iron period—was traumatic for literature and all the other arts. The *Titanic* seemed to have sunk along with its baggage, and if from time to time corpses floated up to the surface, their facial features were distorted and unrecognizable.

When an epoch is buried
 No psalms sound at graveside.
 It will have to be garnished
 With nettle and thistle.
 And only the gravediggers labor
 Nimbly. For this cannot wait!
 It's so very, very still, Lord,
 You can hear time passing.
 And later the epoch will surface
 Like a corpse in a spring-swollen river,
 But by then the son won't know his
 own mother,
 And the grandson will turn back in sorrow.

This is what Anna Akhmatova wrote about occupied Paris in 1940, but it was not truly Paris that she had in mind.

The books of the Silver Age of Russian literature—the books of Russian émigré writers and the Soviet literature that never reached its readers—all of this would have been lost if not for the love and enthusiasm of Western publishers, who stubbornly and meticulously gathered and published Russian writers, without hope of any great commercial success. They were subjected in the press to the insults and condemnations of the Soviet government and official Soviet literature specialists. These books made their way into the Soviet Union in the suitcases of diplomats, courageous foreigners, and KGB agents who made money on reprints and the resale of books. It was dangerous to read these books in a public place—in the park or on the bus or subway—because the extremely white paper and dark, well-printed letters that distinguished Western books from the yellow-gray Soviet books could be seen from afar, tempting the alert passerby to raise a fuss and denounce the reader. Many incautious people paid with their freedom—or at least with their jobs.

The Russian books of Nabokov, published by the small press Ardis, infiltrated Russian literature in this way. Nabokov was the most mysterious and beloved writer of our day, and the publishers of Ardis—Carl and Ellendea Proffer—acquired the status of quasi-mythical omnipotent beings. Whether we were able to enjoy this divine prose or were condemned to shiver in the dark of ignorance was up to them. Besides Nabokov, the Proffers published many other authors, as did numerous other Western publishers—but Nabokov had the most magical effect of all on Russian readers of the 1970s. And no word sounded so enchanting to the Russian ear as the mysterious source of books, Ardis.

Then came the time we all know about, when Gorbachev and his like-minded colleagues were obliged by intense public pressure to allow "glasnost." And the word flooded the land.

The circulation of literary journals jumped to a million. Then to two million. Then four million. Instead of controlled doses and cautious judgments, all manner of opinion was suddenly available, from the intelligent to the bizarre; all possible viewpoints appeared in print, from the most

democratic to the most fascistic and misanthropic; all kinds of prose, from heavy, traditional realism to the extreme avant-garde; all kinds of poetry, and religious tracts, astrological charts and calculations, the prophecies of Nostradamus, the mystical texts of Daniil Andreev, pornography, the platforms of dozens of political parties, cooking recipes, rules of good taste from the 1880s, exposés, memoirs, autobiographies—all of it overwhelmed the reader, who was accustomed to hiding, looking cautiously around, pulling the curtains closed, whispering or pretending to be blind, mad, or devoted to the cause of communism (which amounts to the same thing). The word, which had seemed unique and rare, was published in editions of millions and lost its magical qualities. The reader, elated at first, was eventually overwhelmed and then disappointed. A collector of rare coins might feel the same thing if he suddenly realized that the pride of his collection was no more than the most ordinary coin to be found in any department store. Everything was lost, everything was desacralized in one fell swoop. Writers—formerly a caste of priests, connoisseurs of clandestine rituals—were no longer any different from anyone else. If previously a poet could take pride in the deft use of an Aesopian language, employed in order to hint at political views or to express secret civic protest against the authorities, and if the reader could take pleasure in his own acuity in decoding these poetic cryptograms, now people started to wonder: What was the point of all this? Now anyone who wanted to could take a piece of paper, write a lewd ditty in large letters, curse or insult the regime, and go out on the square to all-around approval, holding the poster high above his head.

The regime itself was desacralized. The veil of secrecy was torn from the Kremlin's inhabitants; their saints, their idols, and their beliefs were ridiculed and scorned. And, as is always the case, it turned out that the emperor had no clothes, the temple was empty, and it wasn't even a temple but a third-rate brothel.

The poet no longer had to be a citizen. Citizens took this responsibility upon themselves. The poet could quietly return to poetry. And, lo and behold, it turned out that

there was no place for writers to return to: All their fuel reserves had already been placed on the Altar of the Fatherland, and there was nothing with which to light one's own fireplace. Those who still had a bit of kindling found themselves on an uninhabited island alone, bewildered and flustered.

When literature develops naturally, even sudden changes in the age—such as those that took place when modernism arose within the depths of a tired and oversatiated “realistic” literature—are not damaging. Memory and continuity are retained, and even if the new art completely breaks with the old, it still sees and remembers what it broke with, what exactly it was negating. But when everything that had once been is destroyed and trampled, amnesia sets in. Literature directs its senile gaze toward the mirror in the morning and doesn't recognize itself; it tries to understand who it is, where it came from, and whether yesterday existed or was only a dream. It starts everything anew, gets muddled and repeats itself in viscous, uncompliant words: It invents what was already invented long ago, stares at linguistic designs in amazement, not understanding where they come from and what they mean. Such a literature moves in circles, tries to remember last night's dreams, doesn't understand its neighbor's language, grows irate, and, in its torment, accuses its ancestors. This scenario is now being played out on the ruins of Russian art.

One idea that is currently quite popular is that literature is to blame for all the woes of Russian society. The accusations vary, but for the most part can be divided into two groups. The first holds that Russian letters was involved in shady deals: It taught people how to light fires, throw bombs, called Russia to take up the axe, confused the peasants and accused the ruling class of parasitism, of sucking the people's blood and gnawing on the people's bones. It gave the revolutionaries a shove—and they lunged. And then you get the Gulag. And then you get 60 million people tortured.

The second version, by contrast, accuses Russian letters of inaction. Instead of looking for the bright side of reality, pointing out the positive and shoring up the healthy elements of society, it listened to the trill of the nightingales, wept in a

drunken ecstasy over gypsy songs, drank itself away in bars, allowed itself to be carried off to sunset distances, promised that everything would perish, grow deaf, grow thick with duckweed, and plunged into a deep melancholy, pessimism, and fatalism. And there is some truth to this. Who, after all, are the heroes of Russian literature? Idiots, epileptics, consumptives, thieves, murderers, drunkards, fallen women, idlers, dreamers, fools, nihilists, three sisters whining away for two hours straight on a stage. They loll about on the sofa in stained robes, cut up frogs, lose millions at cards, corrupt minors. They go off with axes to kill old ladies. They slit people's throats once, and then they do it again. Their heads are shaved and they're sent to distant farms. Their heads are shaved and they're sent to the army. They set dogs on children. They hang themselves. They drown themselves. They shoot themselves. Yes, an impressive panopticon! And then you get the Gulag. And then you get 60 million casualties.

The accusations take opposing tacks but come to the same conclusion. But the most remarkable thing about these bitter nihilistic accusations—sounding from the right and the left, from nationalistically inclined government officials as well as from democrats appealing for the equality of all thinking minorities and the recognition of the sovereignty of virtually every village, if each so desires—is that it represents the very same, antiquated, but nonetheless indestructible belief in the power of the word, in the primacy of the word over life, of the dream over reality, and of imagination over facts. Here is the old belief in the idea, that if you can just compose it correctly, then life will be correct, it will be healthy, wealthy, and wise.

Of course, this is naive—to imagine that Russia's pragmatic merchants cut down their poetic cherry orchards because that's what Chekhov wrote: When the orchard meets the merchant it is the orchard, alas, that perishes. Yet now in Russia some of

the most intelligent, educated, and talented people—whose cultural ambivalence readers of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy will recognize—claim that literature should not exist at all, since it goes against God, that the writer is sinful by nature for he competes with the Absolute, that we dare not know, risk, and desire, but should only make our peace, pray, and read Holy Scriptures. These people are frightening because they know precisely what God needs: He needs control over the Word.

The "People," in whose name these new critics of Russian literature speak, do not, of course, listen to these accusations and are not overly interested in philosophical debates. The "tsar" has lost control over current events and has no time for literature. "Isn't it all the same to you—whether to depend on the tsar or on the People?" The words of the poet come to mind ever more often. And it seems that he's laughing, that he knew all this in advance.

What should we write about? What should we speak about? To whom should we appeal? To whom call out? Whom should we amuse and frighten, and to whom should we complain? And how to find one's own voice? And what should we do? Destroy? But everything has already been destroyed. Build? What kind of dwelling and for whom, if the wind is so strong that it will demolish any structure? And when the wind dies down, who is to say what it will leave in its place: snow drifts, desert sands, forest, swamp, or open seas?

The Russian writer at the end of 1991 feels like a senile old man on an uninhabited island in the company of indifferent goats and mindlessly cawing parrots. He doesn't know what to do. Make paper boats and fashion hooks from ball-point pens? Look for a ship to show up over the horizon with people from the other world? Wait until he's carried away by a wave? Or simply sit still until there arise, perhaps because of an earthquake, bare new islands, worthy of his imagination.

—Translated by Jamey Gambrell