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The Uses of Stalinist Literary Debris

As to the main use (or the masochistic insanity) of returning to Stalinist establishmentarian literature, one might say that if you look for social change, you find it. On the other hand, if you look for constants, you find them too. In the current doldrums of the Brezhnev era, things have not changed all that much. Censors are at work; dissidents are persecuted ruthlessly; the same old directives to propagate fictions are doled out to the willing and publishable graphomaniacs. There seems to be no urgent need to relegate the forties and the fifties to oblivion as irrelevant. And that's the main use of Stalinist debris. Its "negative capability" serves.

Suppose you are obsessed, for inexplicable reasons, with the embourgeoisement of Soviet society. Suppose you are a Soviet *meshchanstvo* buff, and you know that Stalinism is synonymous with Soviet *meshchanstvo* inasmuch as Stalin's hydrocephalic bureaucracy had enacted it fully already in the thirties. Then, the literary output between the war and Stalin's several funerals offers a rich opportunity for the study of this *sov-meshchanstvo*—richer than now. That's another use of that debris.

Dreary ballads, stories, and novels played an important role in that dark period. They stood between the regime and the people. Neither before nor after did literature—no matter how banal, dry, and tendentious—manage to mean so much to the reader. Such a claim could not be made if the system did not permit some insight—at least some conjecturing—into the nature of its mass readership.¹ Because of systemic checks and balances, the regime not only listens secretly to the mass reader's reactions but lets his voice on occasion be heard. Obviously, the response of the readers—and the response to the response—helps the regime assess the effectiveness of the literature it sponsors. Thus it is possible to gain a sense of the postwar reader's needs in regard to what he was made to read. Mass readership seems to have held together despite its wide social diversity. The topical novel of the moment turned out to be just about the only source available for the people's need to understand their society's major workaday problems. And the regime put popular fiction to just

1. At the end of the war, Alexander Tvardovsky publicly bade farewell to his soldier-hero, Vasilii Tiorkin, whose peregrinations he had shared through the years of hardship. Readers implored the author in open letters not to abandon their hero and to stand by him in his postwar adventures. That, indeed, is what the readers were interested in.

this instrumental use.² Not a few novels were read by the top leaders of the party, by cultural luminaries, and their wives. At the same time they were read by high school students and housewives in small towns. They were read, too, by factory workers and milkmaids, throughout the land, from Moldavia to Vladivostok.

Fiction, taken as if it were life, turned into a strange town hall. It became a platform from which the system re-argued itself. And the significance of such *da capo* increased, because the culling of meaning was not always uniform. What the high school student captured from a story was likely to be different from the prime minister's fancy. The diversity of the reader's reaction—as well as its frequent compliant sameness, for that matter—makes establishmentarian literature a clue to the study of *meshchanstvo* or of any other penumbral yet palpable theme. In a way, such fiction was called upon at the time to play the role of effective substitution. This role can be explained in terms of one consequence of Stalin's dictatorship. Ubiquitous controls from above over all manifestations of social life permitted only one kind of relationship: that of each citizen directly to the person of the dictator himself. This taxing bondage led to the undercutting and eventual choking of all viable connecting tissues *between* the citizens. Having crushed the sense of group solidarity, Stalin effected atomization among his subjects:

. . . From his eyes, clear and pure,
 We took courage and strength
 Like radiant water from a deep well
 On our fighting road.
 Let us, comrades, sing a song
 About the greatest general,
 The most fearless and strong,
 About Stalin let's sing a song . . .

He gave us forever and ever
 Youth, glory, and power.
 He has lit the clear dawn of spring
 Over our homes.
 Let us sing, comrades, a song
 About the dearest person,
 About our sun, about the truth of nations,
 About Stalin let's sing a song.³

2. Amitai Etzioni distinguishes three forms of compliance which the regime secures from its subjects: coercive (through fear), instrumental (through appeals to self-interest), and normative (neither through fear nor self-interest but through appeals to emotions); *A Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations* (New York, 1961), p. 5.

3. Mikhail Isakovsky, "Pesnina o Staline" (1936), *Sbornik stikhov* (Moscow, 1943), pp. 444–45.

Horrendous Stalinist debris should not so much induce tut-tutting over idolatry as serve as a reminder of how uncomfortable the upward and onward march of the collective had become—à *genoux*, one by one, gratefully acknowledging gifts from the Persona. Even a somewhat unruly writer brings out the absolutistic strategy of atomization. The next fragment takes us to a swank Moscow roof-top restaurant where a driving Stalinesque amazon chats amorously with her victim, the positive hero so-called whom she is about to ensnare:

[She]: Tell me, do you have a sacrosanct [*zavetnaia*] dream? You know what I mean? A fantastic dream, an almost impossible one, but such that you do not wish to part with. Do you have one?

[He]: I do. (*He meditates.*) I would like to have a talk with comrade Stalin.⁴

The thrust of intimate dreams, let alone the more prosaic aspirations, was to be enshafed in the only permissible vertical direction, straight to the enthroned dictator. Just such emotional mythmaking was the task that subservient literature was alleged to perform better than *Pravda* editorials. And did.⁵

The hagiography of feudalism, which broke all human lateral, vertical ties asunder, reaches a *sui generis* peak when the dictator takes the hand of one of his deserving serfs and leads him personally across the threshold of . . . death. It is one of the rare instances when crude *lubok* allows the presence of death at all.⁶

Alexander Tvardovsky spoke of the impact of the bondage in his well-known confession:

... Just try and find the man who
Did not praise and glorify him.
Just try and find him!
Probably not in vain
The son of the East
To the very end
Fulfilled the traits
Of his hard,
Of his cruel
Wrongness
And rightness.

4. Alexander Kron, *Kandidat partii*, published in *Novyi mir*, 1950, no. 10, p. 19.

5. Among the descriptions of socialist realism, Leonid Rzhevsky's seems especially apt, if, alas, not easily translatable: "metod 'pravdopodobnovo' izobrazheniia nepravdopodobnykh iavlenii, v ob'ektivnoi deistvitel'nosti otsutstvuiushchikh"; *Materialy Konferentsii Nauchnykh Rabotnikov (emigrantov), sostoiavsheisia v Miunkhene 11-14 ianvaria 1951 g.*, 6 vols. (Munich, 1951), 6:45.

6. The death scene of the party organizer Zernov in A. Gribachev's *Vesna v "Pobede"*, published in *Znamia*, 1948, no. 12, p. 49.

But who of us is fit to be a judge,
 To decide who is right, who is wrong?
 We speak of people. And people
 Do they not create gods themselves?⁷

Digging in the Stalinist debris might be helpful in sharpening the focus of the questions whether the citizen has regained some of his faculties to distinguish right from wrong and whether some twenty years later Soviet society has had a chance to recover. The fretting about *chuzhoi* and *rodnoi*, the corrosive uncertainty about the thou, the distrust of eros, the fear of the breakdown of personal loyalties—an important and persistent cluster of themes in the lyrics of the late fifties and sixties—spoke against such recovery. The fear of treason seemed to prevail. It was frequently expressed by Evtushenko, the postwar heir to Simonov's wartime lyric muse. All three—the wartime lover, his postwar disciple, and their muse—remain adroitly public:

She who comes to me is not at all the one.
 She puts her hands on my shoulders
 And steals me from the other.
 And she who is the one—
 tell me for the sake of god—
 whom will she embrace?
 She from whom I am stolen
 Will also steal in revenge
 and will not find the answer
 and will struggle with herself,
 unknowingly clinging
 to a stranger.
 O, how many nervous, evil,
 unnecessary encounters
 and empty friendships!
 O, thoughtful light,
 come help to break
 the togetherness of strangers
 and the disunion of the close!⁸

Such a lament could well have been entitled blindman's buff in pitch darkness.⁹

In the first years after the war, any and all public discussion was closed. Even the private forum shrank. The very arena of the family became perilous

7. "Za daliu dal'," in Alexander Tvardovsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3 (Moscow, 1952), p. 341.

8. "Utrennie stikhi," *Novyi mir*, 1957, no. 4, p. 75.

9. "In-depth" visitors to the Soviet Union today and those close to the recent émigrés do not seem to agree on whether the cultural intelligentsia forms anything like a homogeneous group or whether it is bitterly and abrasively splintered, especially from left of center to the extremists. Nor does there seem to be an accord on the matter among the dissidents. *Quod erat*, alas, *demonstrandum*.

as the family itself stood embattled under fear and suspicion. Under the circumstances, the topical novel turned into an ersatz social forum. It offered very much. For atomization among citizens was not the only form of stupor. All social organizations, the famous "societal forces," had also become atrophied because of mandatory bureaucratization. Despite the official cant regarding healthy and inspiring communication throughout the social structure, social organizations had defaulted in their function as transmission belts of values and preferences from the regime to the people, let alone from the bottom to the top. In this petrification, a novel substituted for a sense of the reader's participation in the social process on a local as well as on a national scale.

Nor should one forget another kind of function that literature was permitted and, in fact, entrusted to perform. It was no less important than the others. No matter what the arguments among Western observers about the nature and dynamics of Soviet social stratification,¹⁰ there can be little doubt that Stalinism engendered class cleavage, a precipice between those drawn into the power structure and those left below and behind. To those in the lower regions of that society, popular fiction offered just about the only slit window, the only chance at insight into the life of those above them, of the powerful and the privileged. To the populace even a run-of-the-mill district party secretary seemed a potentate, a VIP. The description of such a VIP's daily travails and especially that of his love and family pleasures or vicissitudes, with details of top-drawer *kul'turnost'*, kept the mass reader spellbound. It was exotic reading matter. And it was that in a unique way, not readily understood, perhaps, in another society. Such reading matter was interesting—compellingly, grippingly so. For it was relevant. (Special relevance resulted from the disconnecting, fragmenting, isolating impact of the Stalinist regime described above.) Establishmentarian fiction impinged on and involved the real, vital interests and aspirations of the mass reader. And if he identified with fictional characters, whether positively or negatively—if, in other words, that fiction evoked either personal dreams or frustrations—it had become more than a reflective force. It had already turned into an active one.

It was a time of unrest, of fear, of fervent expectations and, not least, a time of drastic economic hardship. In a very serious way there was neither *panem* nor *circenses*. Shops, restaurants, cafés for bohemian youth, beaches, spas, and travel did not exist for the overwhelming majority. Soviet society emerged after the war somewhat altered—not always dramatically but still

10. Robert Feldmesser's provocative "Equality and Inequality Under Khrushchev" and Seweryn Bialer's ". . . But Some Are More Equal than Others" complement each other in a pertinent manner regarding problems of today. Both articles are reprinted side by side in *Problems of Communism Anthology: Russia Under Khrushchev*, ed. Abraham Brumberg (New York, 1962).

significantly enough. Class cleavages as such may have narrowed because of the leveling effect of war and the sporadically and spottily increased social mobility. The army alone pulled an enormous number of people up. But because the ordeal of war had pressed the total population down to a drearily impoverished way of life, the very class stratification with its privileges and intrinsic injustices turned more tangible, more provocative, and more painful. Bridging it all, that life was gray and hard. Abrasive toward each other, people groped desperately for betterment, and to assert themselves.

In this setting, then, reading became a major leisure activity for those who cared to read. It maintained its importance partly *faute de mieux*. It offered the reader a chance to project his own urgent problems against the paradigms of current social issues he found in pedestrian, time-bound genre fiction. Such projections directed his groping, and perhaps helped him to clarify his own quite varied aspirations. They helped him to understand what the system wanted of him and what he wanted of the system.

One more aspect of popular fiction of that time might well be mentioned. Of the rules of socialist realism, the surrealistic and futuristic beautification of reality—the unequivocal command that the writer should lie—seemed useful for everybody concerned. Happy endings abounded; tractors got repaired; job and family conflicts got resolved; boys got girls. It may have been an oversimplification to assume that the mass reader hated these lies. Some did, no doubt. Others did not. The Horatio Alger thrust of that fiction brought solace. It helped people to kid themselves. The mass reader—one would think—craved hope more than he craved truth.

This might be as good a spot as any to suggest that sponsored literature does not mirror anything through the glass darkly or otherwise. It is what it is—and it is that in grim earnestness: the embodiment of the regime's desired values, a repository of its myths. There are other ways of putting it. One of them is to say that such literature blends peeping-Tomism with instant distortion.

The catastrophically inflated importance that Stalin's dictatorship attached to literature might be described as the *Iskra* complex. Next to ignition, Lenin's periodical had embodied the Bolshevik instrumental approach to writings, to literature, to the printed word in general. It enacted for the first time effectively the belief—one that only became stronger with Bolshevik victories—that the main function of the printed word is organizational. To compress and paraphrase a long arch of events, the press organizes before the Revolution and controls after the Revolution. The worship of organization, in turn, grows out of the belief—quite fantastic—that political, social, and psychological problems can be solved best of all, and solely, in fact, by organization. When the *Iskra* complex fully matures, that is when the stress on the organizational potential

of the printed word—and the parallel fear of its potential—reaches *Pravda* proportions, it underpins the bureaucratic aspect of the ruling elite's culture. One of its essential traits is the obsession with documents, with documentation, with the dread and magic power of the printed word. Such an obsession mistakes the word for reality and actually attempts to transform the word into action.

Barrington Moore calls this complex “the charter myth of Bolshevism” and suggests that such charter myths “do not necessarily become milder and more tolerant as they become incorporated into a working institutional system.”¹¹ The dark and inalienable side of the charter myth is, of course, the regime's obsession with repressive, terminal censorship. To protect the citizenry from the corollary and ever-present dangers of the printed word, the charter myth's organizational and paranoid intent extends to the belief that that other, even more crucial, word—the word not yet written—can and must be prefigured and controlled.

For the paradox hunter, the interaction of literature and society in the early postwar period offers its own special paradox. Despite the frenzy with which the regime extinguished whatever spark and veracity that sponsored literature may have possessed, it managed to engage the mass reader.¹² From then on, however, on both scores—from the vantage point of the regime and of the people—comparable literary materials have undergone some change in regard to their mediating function. Even if one might assume that the regime's instrumental view of the printed word remains the same, some oscillation in the use of controls has taken place. Most important, Soviet society in the meantime has turned from an impoverished to a semi-affluent one. Today more people enjoy more *panem* and more *circenses*. Leisure has taken, therefore, other forms—more satisfactory, no doubt, for the average literate person. On the other hand, new divisions have sprung up between various groups of writers. The readers have splintered as well. And in some quarters the need for truth now seems to outbid the craving for hope. So much for the justification of returning to *les neiges d'antan*.

As to some adjacent notes on the use of the use of postwar Stalinist literature, it should be repeated that insight accrues in regard to mythology and only there. Therefore, the study of Soviet *meshchanstvo*—or of anything else—is not predicated on the search for realism (in any of its senses) in its depiction. Through the maze of flat didacticism, of encoded messages, of the mentioned mix of peeping-Tomism and blatant distortion or phoney *vsamde-*

11. Barrington Moore, *Political Power and Social Theory* (New York, 1965), pp. 10 and 27.

12. Unbelievable as it may seem in retrospect, Azhaev's, Polevoy's, and Bubennov's overpopulated “epics” were read and responded to.

lishnost', one tries to look for some clues. In this case it is the growth of postwar *meshchanstvo*. How?

Linear, straight, total reading is a waste of time. In retrospect, in fact, it is unendurable. One looks for detail instead and for short cuts. As is well known, the smaller genres held more information for our crude extraliterary purposes than the clunky overpopulated ones; women among writers managed to signal more than their male colleagues; a neophyte more than an old, experienced hack; negative characters consistently stole the show from the models; anything whatsoever happening at night was more interesting than *vsamdelishnost'* flooded by daylight. And a nocturnal dialogue was really it. Words came out of the mouths of two embattled characters that could not possibly have been intended by their creators.¹³ A pink lampshade, scalloped and fringed, veritably radiated eloquence.¹⁴

Suppose we find in a novel that a party secretary busies himself a lot with the private affairs of his parishioners. He is not likely to be cast as the central character. He will, however, act deftly as a key figure—the key figure.¹⁵ The smallest detail attaching to his person carries significance. He summons a quarreling couple or an adulterer to his *office*. During *working hours*. He chastises and *threatens* the *adulterer*. He renders judgment over the dispute and expects his *order* to be executed. All this happens toward the *beginning* of the tale. This party secretary enjoys *good health* and shows no signs whatsoever, either in the first or last chapter, of suffering from a heart ailment. In another novel, similar in main theme and didactic effort, the party secretary happens to be *afflicted* with an incurable *heart ailment*. Nor does he summon the clawing couple to his office. He drops in on them in *their own dwelling*. He knocks at their door late in the evening and stays *after midnight*. He not only does not shout at them and does not render summarily any judgment, but drinks tea meekly, sighing all the while, and ends up by *siding* with the more obviously *guilty* partner. All this happens, what's more, toward the

13. Kondrashov versus Bassargin in Konstantin Simonov's *Dym otechestva* (1947), Uzdechkin versus Listopad in Vera Panova's *Kruchilikha* (1947), and so on, and so on.

14. Once the fearsome notion of pattern is hinted at, the problems of the size of the sample, of intervening variables, and the like come up. This makes the reader who banks on his intuition uneasy. Since Stalinist literature is *entirely* subservient, it is hard to see where intervening variables could come from. In answer to "How many times?," one might say that the ghastly uniformity of that literature was underpinned by its mandatory redundancy: *davai* kolkhoz novels, *davai* anticommopolitanism plays. In such tightly prefigured straits for central themes and characters, details were derived, obviously, from the same pre-patterned matrix. Details do form patterns, I daresay, if they shape up more than once. And one example is as good as twenty.

15. The very nature and function of postwar partsecs was to stand in the wings. See my ancient "The Party Secretary in Post-War Soviet Literature," mimeographed (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1953).

closing chapters. Thus two sets of details are related to each other: heart trouble over enviable health; the domestic samovar over the office setting; the more imaginative compassion for hidden motivations and frustrations over the soulless bureaucratic assault on the culprit.

The handling of the grievous strains in the war-torn family had turned difficult, and the need arose to alter the image of the party official from a self-righteous bully, who originated in the vestiges of the Bolshevik-proletarian heroics, to an understanding father confessor.¹⁶ His ailing heart, and the (generally speaking) yellow complexion, was now to stand for kindness, strained from compassion. The good party secretary now commenced the soothing and the healing—the making of *uiut* and the sponsoring of domestic bliss.¹⁷ The attribute of the ailing heart denoted not only compassion but prevented the party secretary from indulging too vigorously himself in the pleasures of *meshchanstvo*. He, for one, had to uphold some minimum decorum of abstinence. Nevertheless, he had to be ready and willing to eat profusely at the table of his parishioners. This is one more reason, perhaps, why *ulcers* were reserved at the time for *psikhovannye intelligenty* and the somewhat old-fashioned representatives of the proletariat. Emaciated in their combat against *meshchanstvo*, both species were deemed, untranslatably, *upadochnye*¹⁸ and, therefore, negative. Bad party secretaries were welcome to ulcers,¹⁹ of course, but good managers (*khoziaistvenniki, stroiteli*) shared cardiac deficiency with the best pure party folk.

One story, the *pièce de résistance* of this paper, expresses the essence of the postwar *meshchanstvo* spirit as it was deftly converted into the regime's desired public values. It involves a deserving industrial district boss, fully entitled to his ennobling cardiac trouble. The syndrome of details around his person even spells out the cause of his disturbance. The title of the ballad—the godawful thing is in verse—does not seem too promising: “Nachal'nik raiona proshchaetsia s nami.”²⁰ But never mind. It is only three pages long

16. The spirit of party officialdom in, for example, the nasty Skorobogatov in Antonina Koptiaeva's *Ivan Ivanovich* (1949), and in the party secretary comrade Sukhov (dry, indeed) in Sergei Antonov's “Novyi sotrudnik” (1954), on the one hand, is here juxtaposed with that of humble repentant and neopopulist Pashkov in Iurii Kapusto's *V srednem raione* (1950) and the disarmingly last-name-less *raikomsek* Ivan Il'ich with his telling “yellow sickly face and penetrating spark in his eyes” in Grigorii Medynsky's monumental *Maria* (1949).

17. This keeps Zalkind, one of the last of the positive party Jews, especially busy in Vasilii Azhaev's *Daleko ot Moskvy* (1948).

18. A good example of the first is Dr. Levin in Iurii German's *Podpolkovnik meditsinskoi sluzhby* (1949), and of the second, the long-suffering bitter trade union representative Uzdechkin in Panova's *Kruzhilikhha* (1947).

19. The hysterical Korytov in Peter Pavlenko's *Schast'e* (1947).

20. Lev Oshanin (1953), in *Antologija russkoi sovetskoi poezii v dvukh tomakh* (Moscow, 1957), 2:273–76.

and does the job better than a long-winded, crowded novel. "Somewhat stooped, somewhat tired," the boss still rushes about, as is his habit, with large, decisive steps. The awareness of two things does not abandon him. First, he knows that he must give up his job, for he is "stricken with severe and deep illness." Second, he knows just as clearly that nothing in his future life "will help him to forget . . . the cement and iron ore" to which he had dedicated all his life. Stooped shoulders harmonize with his heart ailment. The latter helps his case. For it demonstrates that he had sacrificed himself to public duty and hard—very hard—work. So far, so good. But what's new? What is the story's timely (i.e., postwar Stalinist) component?

The intent of the story happens to be more than to pat this worthy man on the back. He feels remorse, and sympathy is called for. And that's where *sobaka zaryta*. That's where by twist and inference deheroization takes place and in its wake the transfiguration of a value or two. Although, if need be, he would repeat from the very beginning his "swift, hard, nomadic life," a curious discomfort stirs in his—yes, in his soul:

There is only one thing that fills his soul with anguish,
There is only one thing that he cannot correct.
Beloved hands he recalls
As they cared for him, hurrying, full of sorrow over parting.
Did they not bid him farewell too often?
Were the separations not too long?

When home, he worked from dawn to dawn. And over a cup of tea, he buried himself in a newspaper:

Concerned with the people, concerned with the Don and the Volga,
It did not occur to him to think about Olga.
How many were the nights she waited.
How she blossomed under sparse tenderness.
It had seemed to him that this was a private matter.
It did not fit into projects and plans.
But meanwhile Olga Andreevna turned gray.
Perhaps, too gray. Perhaps, too early.

He also felt remorse in his love for his children. He had neglected them. Meanwhile, though, the telling line is buried furtively in the text: "It had seemed to him that this was a private matter." It was not. He was wrong. Former prescriptions for former heroes, calling for the shortchanging of the family and of domestic bliss, have been slowly abrogated. A desired new balance between the public and the private was in the making. Private matters were no longer private at all. They were now subject to inspection. Heart ailment here means retribution. The boss has learned the new lesson so well that he passes it on to the new generation. Bidding farewell to all his subordinates, he confronts a young trade union representative. The young man

is also entirely positive. Of course, he is nervous and anxious. He expects to receive advice and orders from the powerful superior on the proper placement of engineers over whom the young man now has power. Instead, the boss astonishes him by insisting on the crumbling of the wall between the private and the public:

Quite unexpectedly for such a moment
 The boss asked:
 "You are married, are you not?"
 And the young man stands amazed.
 He stares at the boss's faded tunic.
 He hears the old stern chief of the district
 Say to him:
 "Take care of your love."

From under that crumbling wall, there grew a phantasmagoric profusion of objects, somewhat reminiscent of Antonioni's explosion of domestic accouterments in the finale of *Zabriskie Point*. Acquisitiveness was in. It was now mobilized, with discretion, to "take care of your love." A positive hero—nay, superpositive of the then favored rural Builder type—preens himself to court his fiancée.²¹ The main thrust of this folksy ballad—of the lulling rhymed mushrooms and raspberries variety—conveys that an outer-upward-onward directed war veteran has not only no grievances and demands to present to the regime but is humbly grateful for his instant nook in postwar society and stands ready to exert himself to the limit on the job, whatever it may be. Once at it, he is also supposed to show that merriment, opulence, and *prazdnik na nashei ulitse* had already veritably engulfed the bucolic scene—in 1947. Anyway, he departs to go courting—clean-shaven, in uniform, in full bemedaled regalia, with a wrist watch "on his left hand."²²

He secured for her a couple of brooches,
 handmade
 shoes
 and for a dress—
 bright polka dots
 and a seventeen-jewel
 wrist watch.
 For the mother-in-law
 The gifts of kerchiefs
 of Moscow make are
 very stunning.

21. Nothing, perhaps, is quite so shattering in retrospect as the callous falsehood of bliss and opulence perpetrated in kolkhoz fiction about the ravaged and forgotten villages. One good use—the best, in fact—of the Stalinist literary debris is to remind one of just that.

22. Aleksei Nedogonov, "Flag nad selsovetom," *Novyi mir*, 1947, no. 1. The far more capable Mikhail Lukonin might be considered a master of this crucial theme: the retooling of the veteran for postwar chores.

Glaza razbegaiutsia. Not only polka dots but a fancy watch. Not only special-ordered pumps but—in tribute to explicitly unperturbed matriarchal mores—offerings to the mother-in-law which seem remotely analogous to Saks Fifth Avenue purchases. As to the “couple of brooches,” even though or just because they rhyme with polka dots, they are pinned onto the bosom of *makhrovoe meshchanstvo* in their seemingly casual redundancy. Two brooches are better than one.

If taken out of a sufficiently ample context, the twin brooches do not quite manage to say all they can. Pinned and repinned elsewhere, in various variants, including those which are diamond-studded,²³ they cease to be only vulgar or only unlikely and become a desired, if ticklish, value to both the regime and the postwar middle class. They represent not only craved affluence but its transfiguration into *kul'turnost'*, valid and unassailable all the way around.

One might turn to vegetation for a moment, the kind from which *kul'turnost'* issues with organic ease. The fragment to follow gains weight if one considers that it is taken from a love ballad patterned according to boy-gets-girl-but-only-after-overfulfillment-of-norm; that the boy although fully positive is shy, weak, and downright stupid; that the main purpose is to show that public exertion will at some point be rewarded in private currency; that eros is fully negotiable; and that the piece is not a parody, since it appears in the front part and not the tail end of the portentous journal. Here, then, stands the interior decoration of the room of a formidable maiden, another Stalinesque amazon, an overachieving, overharvesting kolkhoz link leader:

A world map on the wall,
A bookshelf in the corner,
The portrait of Lysenko
Leans over the table,
Geraniums bloom on the window sill,
A loudspeaker on the wall.²⁴

It is all put together in proper balance: double-headed *kul'turnost'*, appliances connected with the stern world at large *and* objects making cuddly *uiut*, science *and* beauty, Lysenko *and* geraniums. If one finds the primordial potted ficus in the dwelling of combatively righteous workers,²⁵ one may rest assured that the regime undertook to water it.

Potted plants, pictures, and hangings on the wall gave previews of

23. Anatolii Sofronov, *Kar'era Beketova*, published in *Novyi mir*, 1949, no. 4, pp. 44–89.

24. Alexander Geveling, “Tania,” *Oktiabr'*, 1950, no. 3, p. 72.

25. Vladimir Kochetov, *Zhurbiny* (Moscow, 1952). It took Evtushenko to speak out against this archetypal *meshchanstvo* plant in “Stantsiia zima” in the eloquent year of 1956.

character, of level of *ku'lturnost'*, of the ability to provide contentment. The vast and tacit process of deheroization—of deproletarianization, for that matter—signified that, among other balanced chores, the postwar hero was to become concerned with rounded-out, integral, domestic happiness. Objects did even more. They carried social and political meaning. They did so in the sense of providing the reader with guidelines for the interpretation of character in different social settings. In a certain environment, yellow faded photographs of bearded ancestors—with a tiny bouquet of flowers inserted between glass and frame—could signal admirable traits and beliefs. This happened in just about every kolkhoz tale and holds for the rural maiden just mentioned. It also holds for a young struggling tool and die maker.²⁶ Bearded ancestors and folk art, even if mass-produced, blended with patriotism and showed that lower-class *ku'lturnost'* cherished connections with the native past. Even pinups of a couple of foreign movie actresses, preferably Italian, may have signified a certain widening of the horizon, not at all reprehensible in the provinces.²⁷ An eighteenth-century French etching, however, exquisitely framed and hung in the study of a professor, spelled something else.²⁸ (“Ein nervöser Mensch auf einer Wiese wäre besser ohne sie daran . . .”) It spoke of promiscuity and cosmopolitanism. So did a world map or a bottle of foreign five-star cognac or cuff links. They could become counterproductive, and turn into attributes of global presumption and trespassing. It all depended on the setting. In the arctic dwellings of pioneering engineers they were always approved.

A cross-stitched shirt combined with slow speech favoring regional proverbs may have been described in a tone indicating virtue in a party official *qua* harbinger of neopopulism and lack of it in a kolkhoz chairman as signs of recalcitrant one-man bossism. An expensive fur may have confirmed the excellent character of a woman in charge of a factory,²⁹ but it turns into quite an indictment on the back of a provincial potentate's wife, entirely too idle.³⁰ The constellation of detail, combined with the tone in which objects were described, offered clues in regard to checks and balances imposed on private cravings as a public value. A fur coat could stand for dignity or for depravity.

By and large, however, in combination with different weights attached

26. Pavel Shebunin, *Stakhanovtsy*, published in *Novyi mir*, 1950, no. 7, pp. 108–84.

27. The fluffy, contentment-making provincial soprano in Zhanna Gauzer's *Vot my i doma*, published in *Zvezda*, 1947, no. 11, pp. 4–106.

28. Kozelsky in Iurii Trifanov's *Studenty*, published in *Novyi mir*, 1950, no. 10, pp. 56–175.

29. Solntseva in Anatolii Surov's *Rassvet nad Moskvoi*, published in *Oktiabr'*, 1951, no. 1, pp. 112–61.

30. Kondratieva in Anatolii Surov's *Zelenaia ulitsa*, published in *Novyi mir*, 1949, no. 5, pp. 82–120.

to objects according to social setting, what astounds one is their profusion. The material universe of the Soviet citizen—his house, furnishings, personal possessions—acquired a life of its own. A metamorphosis had taken place. Material things were manipulated to express the regime's desired values. Home furnishings glided into heartwarming accounts of family activities. An orange lampshade invited solicitous parents to read to their children.³¹ And this was laudable, for the war-torn family had to be strengthened. An opulent room with heavy drapes and a grand piano kept young people off the street.³² And that was good, too. The regime had granted the permission either to own pleasure-producing objects or, more importantly, to crave them. Within reason, of course. Within *meshchanstvo* reason.

As to the use of all this background information, one should not worry whether strutting affluence, as described in dreadful novels, was real or imaginary, whether electric garbage-disposal units were actually built into the kitchens of renowned engineers before 1950 or whether such advanced domestic appliances were manufactured only out of wishful thinking. Neither appliances nor roof-top restaurants, nor champagne served there, should be compared with statistically reliable indices. The only concern is with the social role these objects began to play and the accommodating tone with which they were treated.

The acquisitive drive is not a postwar phenomenon. It is not new. Nor is the craving for affluence. What was new was the tone. The regime held up the promise of material betterment as a means of consolidating loyalty and support. A vast change in prescribed values began to show in Stalinist fiction. Certain acquisitive cravings on the part of the citizens became not only acceptable for the regime but desirable. The regime reached out to *meshchanstvo* and just about everything it stood for. And the tone of the fiction so signified.

31. Gauzner, *Vot my i doma*.

32. Trifonov, *Studenty*.