

SOLZHENITSYN AND THE NEW REALISM

Georg Lukács

I

IN artistic terms the relationship of the *novella*¹ to the novel has been often explored, by the present writer among others. Much less has been said of their historical relationship and their reciprocal influence as literature has developed. Yet here we come upon an extremely interesting and instructive problem, and one that throws an especially revealing light on the contemporary situation. I refer to the recurrent fact that the *novella* makes its appearance either as the harbinger of some new conquest of reality by large-scale forms, narrative or dramatic, or else at the close of a period, by way of *rearguard* or postlude. It appears, that is to say, either at the moment of *not yet* in the subduing by the creative imagination of some particular social epoch in its entirety, or at the moment of *no longer*.

In this light Boccaccio and the Italian *novella* stand out as forerunners of the modern bourgeois novel. They give poetic shape to the world in an age when bourgeois ways of living are triumphantly on the march, and are beginning in the most varied spheres to undermine the old *mediæval* ways and to take their place; an age, however, when there can as yet be no homogeneous pattern of things or of human relationships and standards of conduct, proper to a bourgeois society. On the other hand, with Maupassant the short story figures as a kind of *envoi* to the world whose rise was chronicled by Balzac and Stendhal, and whose highly questionable fulfilment was written by Flaubert and Zola.

A historical relationship of this sort can arise only on the basis of the specific features of the two *genres*. As already suggested, the distinguishing feature of the novel is its homogeneous pattern, its all-inclusive scope. Drama attains the same wholeness in spite of its different content and structure. Both aim at comprehensiveness, completeness, in their depiction of life; in both of them the many-sided play of action and reaction round the most pressing questions of the age produces a gallery of human types, contrasting with and complementing each other and taking their rightful places on the stage of events. The *novella*, on the contrary, starts with an isolated case and does not go beyond it; anything more far-reaching in its treatment emerges only by implication. It makes no pretence of bringing social reality as a whole under its shaping power, not even from the viewpoint of a single big contemporary issue. Its authenticity resides in the fact that such

exceptional cases as it treats, usually running to extremes, are possible in a given society at a given stage in its evolution, and that their possibility is by itself a noteworthy feature of this stage. As a result it can dispense with the details of people's origins and connections and the situations in which they act. It can set these in motion without need of preliminaries, and it can omit any precise, full-scale settings. This essential quality of the *novella*, which certainly does not preclude an inexhaustible variety of inspiration, all the way from **Boccaccio** to Chekhov, allows it to come on the historical scene either as pioneer or as rearguard of the larger literary forms, as artistic reflection of what is embryonic or what is obsolescent amid the subject-matter on which art as a whole has to work.

Needless to say, no attempt will be made here at even the most sketchy survey of this historical process. To forestall any misunderstanding that might arise, let it be said that the alternating rôles of pioneer or rearguard which I have spoken of, and which are of primary importance for the following discussion, by no means exhaust the historical connection between novel and *novella*. This has a great many other aspects, which I cannot discuss here. As one example of the manifold links that can occur, some brief mention may be made of Gottfried Keller.⁹ In his youthful novel *Der Grüne Heinrich* he had to turn his back on his native Switzerland, in order to study life in the round as a novelist should. In *Die Leute von Seldwyla*, a cycle of contrasting and complementary stories, he offers us a glimpse of an all-round view of life such as he could not fashion into full novel-form. His Switzerland, so newly introduced to capitalism, could not furnish a complex, smoothly integrated society congruent with his vision of man. The narratives in *Das Simgedicht*, on the other hand, considered as stories within a story, each standing in contradiction to the next, are well suited to trace the ups and downs, the advances and backslidings, in the emotional development of a couple towards genuine love; life as then directly experienced in the world accessible to Keller could not have allowed him to accomplish this in the unitary form of the novel. In his case, in short, we find a unique interweaving of embryonic and obsolescent, which does not indeed seriously invalidate the historical connections just outlined between novel and *novella*, but cannot be accommodated to them without some adjustment. And the literary record displays many other modes of interaction between the two forms which cannot be investigated here.

With these provisos, it may be said that narrative fiction at the present day and in the recent past has frequently receded from the novel to the *novella* when it has attempted to portray sturdy human fortitude. I would instance such masterpieces as Conrad's *Typhoon* or *The Shadow-Line*, or Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. The recession shows itself at once in the fact that the social foundation, the social environment drawn by the novel, vanishes, and it is against a purely natural

phenomenon that the main figures have to defend themselves. The duel of the lonely hero, thrown entirely on his own resources, with **Nature**—a storm, a ship becalmed—may no doubt end in victory for the man, as it does in Conrad; but even when final defeat awaits him, as in Hemingway, man undergoing his ordeal remains part of the essential content of the *novella*. The novels of these same writers, and not their alone, are in sharp contrast to their stories: in them man is engulfed, crushed, broken, warped, by the complex of social forces. There seems to be no effective counter-force, not even the force that leads to tragedy; and since no writer of stature can be reconciled to the disappearance of all human integrity and spiritual grandeur, this type of *novella* stands out in their works as a rearguard action in the fight for man's salvation.

In Soviet literature itself today, progressive energies are **focused**—leaving aside lyric poetry—on the short story. **Solzhenitsyn** certainly does not stand alone, but it is he, so far as my knowledge goes, who has effected the decisive breach in the ideological ramparts of Stalinist tradition. The object of the following essay is to show that with him and his comrades in arms we encounter a fresh start, a first exploration of new realities, and not, as with the leading bourgeois story-writers who have been cited, the end of an epoch.

II

The capital problem of socialist-realism at the present time is a critical appraisal of the Stalin era; this is, of course, the most urgent task for socialist thinking altogether. I confine myself here to the sphere of literature. If socialist-realism, which in consequence of the Stalin era has sometimes come to be a term of scorn and abuse even in socialist countries, wishes to rediscover those heights that it scaled in the 1920s, it must find its way back towards a genuine image of contemporary man. But its way thither must lie through a faithful record of the Stalin decades, with all their brutalities. Sectarian bureaucrats raise the objection that one ought not to go raking into the past, one should be content to portray the present. The past is past, they say, already completely routed and, for men today, lost to sight. This kind of assertion is not only untrue, for its very utterance proves how influential the Stalinist cultural bureaucracy still remains: it is also destitute of sense. When **Balzac** or **Stendhal** depicted the Restoration period they were well aware that the majority of the men they were delineating had been moulded by the Revolution, by Thermidor and its aftermath, the Empire. **Julien Sorel** or **Père Goriot** would be nothing more than ghostly shades if they were described for us solely as they existed during the Restoration period, without references to their destinies, their growth, their past. The same applies to the literature of the palmy days of socialist-realism. In **Sholokhov**, **Alexei Tolstoy**, the young **Fadeyev**, and so on, the main characters are all offspring of

tsarist Russia; their actions in the civil war would be inexplicable to anyone ignorant of how they have come to be where they are, since pre-war days, as a result of their experiences of the imperialist war and the months of revolution—and, above all, of what all this has meant to them.

Among those who are playing an active part in the socialist world today there are few even now who did not in some degree experience the Stalin era, and whose present intellectual, moral and political make-up was not fashioned by the events of that time. The notion of the people at large developing towards socialism and building its foundations, undisturbed by the excesses of the dictatorship, is not even a daydreamer's honest delusion: those who hawk it about and turn it to their own use are the very men who know better than anyone, from their private recollections, that the Stalinist method of ruling penetrated everyday life through and through, and that except possibly in the remotest villages its effects were strongly felt everywhere. So expressed, this has the sound of a mere generalization, but it is one that applies to different people in very different ways; individual reactions to the dictatorship reveal a seemingly endless variety of attitudes. To detect only a single pair of alternatives, as many Western commentators do, the pair represented as it were by Molotov and Koestler, is, if only by a few shades, more unrealistic and stupid than the bureaucratic version quoted above.

If that version were really to usurp a controlling influence over writers, we should be faced with a straightforward continuation of the so-called "illustrative literature" of the Stalin era. It was a crude falsification of contemporary life: it had no basis in the interplay of previous conditions, nor in the matter-of-fact ambitions and doings of ordinary people, but was determined in every case, in form and content alike, by the appropriate directives of the Party apparatus. Since this "illustrative literature" did not grow out of life, but out of glosses on official directives, the puppets contrived for the purpose could not have—could not be allowed to have—any past, like human beings. Instead they had only official dossiers, which were filled in accordance with how they were intended to be viewed, either as "positive heroes" or as "vermin."

Crude falsification of the past is only one part of a similar, all-round distortion of characters, situations, destinies, vistas, in the productions of "illustrative literature." Thus the senseless doctrine I have quoted is no more than a consistent reproduction, brought up to date, of the Stalin-Zhdanov line on literature; no more than a newfangled hindrance to the regeneration of socialist-realism, to its recapturing the ability to portray the really typical figures of an age, whose attitudes to the problems, large and small, of their own time are fixed by the dictates of each individual personality and of the path that each life has followed. That each individuality is ultimately conditioned by the forces of social

history will be demonstrated more forcibly than in any other way by this linking up of past, present, and vista of the future. It is precisely when a fiction-character of today is allowed to grow naturally out of the past he has lived through that the ties between man and society within his own personality are brought to the surface and rendered unmistakably clear. For the past, which looked at historically is the same for all, takes on a separate shape in terms of each human life; the same events are differently experienced by people of different descent, different position, culture, age. Even a single event is exceedingly heterogeneous in its repercussions on human beings, depending on whether they are far away from it or near at hand, close to its centre or at its periphery; in fact the sheer randomness of the circumstances linking them with it widens the range of permutations. And spiritually, in face of such events, no one is really passive. Everyone is confronted with a choice, whose outcome may vary from **firm** tenacity to compromise, prudent or foolish, right or wrong, and so on all the way to collapse, or to surrender.

But it is never a question merely of unique happenings and reactions to events; rather of chains of events, and an earlier response always has a notable bearing on a later one. It follows that without an uncovering of the past there can be no discovery of the present. It is on this account that Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* represents a significant overture to a reawakening of literature in the present epoch of socialism.

The work is not, or not primarily, concerned with unveiling the horrors of the Stalin era, the concentration camps, and the rest. Works with such a purpose have **long** since been current in Western literature, but from the time when the 20th Party Congress initiated criticism of the Stalin period their original power to shock has, especially in the socialist countries, worn off. Solzhenitsyn's achievement is to have turned an uneventful day in an anonymous camp into a literary symbol of the still undigested past, the past that is still waiting to be ordered by the writer's art. Although the concentration camps themselves represent only the worst excess of Stalinism, he has made his chosen sector of the period, rendered with great artistry in tones of grey upon grey, a microcosm of everyday life as a whole under Stalin. He has achieved this by grappling imaginatively with the question of what demands that age made on human beings; who succeeded in remaining human and preserving his dignity and integrity as a man; who was able to stand firm, and how was this achieved; in what characters the substance of humanity was left intact, or was twisted, shattered, destroyed. Restricting himself rigorously to the facts of life in a camp, Solzhenitsyn is able to raise this question both comprehensively and definitely. The **ever**-shifting possibilities that political and social life offers to those who have remained free are of course eliminated; but the choice between holding out or giving in imposes on living creatures so inescapable a

to-be-or-not-to-be that every single decision is raised to a level where it typifies a vital and universal truth.

The whole composition, whose details will be reviewed later on, serves this purpose. As the main character emphasizes at the close, the commonplace bit of concentration camp life that is described is one of its "good" days. Nothing out of the ordinary takes place in fact on this day, nothing remarkably atrocious. What we see is simply the way life is normally conducted in the camp, and the typical behaviour of its inmates. This allows the specific problems to be thrown into a clearly defined shape, while it is left to the reader's imagination to visualize the effects on these characters of still heavier burdens. The utmost economy of literary treatment matches this basic tendency of a work almost ascetic in its absorption in the essential. Of the world outside nothing is alluded to except what is indispensable because of its influence on men's inner lives; of their spiritual world nothing except such impulses as are directly and prominently related to their human core, and even of these only a very sparing selection. Hence the work, though not planned on symbolist lines, can make its powerful impact as a symbol, and everyday problems of Stalin's world, even when they have no direct connection with concentration camps, are also illuminated by it.

This very abstract summary of Solzhenitsyn's work will be enough to show that in spite of its striving by dint of factual delineation towards the fullest possible completeness, towards a counterpoint of human types and destinies, it belongs thematically to the category of the short story or *novella*, and not to that of the novel, however short. Solzhenitsyn deliberately leaves out any distant view of things. Life in the camp is exhibited as a permanent condition, scattered references to particular prisoners finishing their terms are left extremely vague, and it never occurs to anyone even in a daydream to imagine the camp itself ever coming to an end. In the case of the central figure what is stressed is that the country he knows has been altering very greatly, there is no chance of his ever returning to the old world he once lived in; this too intensifies the isolation of the camp. In every direction a thick veil hangs over the future. All that is foreseeable is a series of days much alike; some better, some worse, but none different at bottom. Reference to the bygone is equally sparing. Occasional hints about how individuals came to be in the camp reveal by their laconic, matter-of-fact brevity just how arbitrary are the sentences of the judicial and administrative, military and civilian courts. Not a word is said about grand political topics such as the great trials: they are submerged in an inky past. Nor is the personal injustice of transportation, which is only touched on in odd cases, overtly censured; it appears simply as hard fact, as the ordained precondition of this camp existence. Thus everything that may, or rather must, form the task of the great novels or dramas that will one day be written, is with thorough-going, conscious artistry

excised and banished. Here may be seen a resemblance in point of literary form, but of form alone, to other outstanding *novellas* earlier mentioned. There is no question, however, as in those cases, of a retreat from larger forms, but rather of a first coming to grips with reality in the search for the larger forms corresponding to it.

The socialist world today is on the eve of a renaissance of Marxism which is not called upon merely to restore its original system, so grievously distorted by Stalin, but which will be directed first and foremost towards a full comprehension of the new data of reality by the light of the concepts, at once old and new, of genuine Marxism. In the literary field an identical duty faces socialist-realism. Any continuation of what was praised and honoured in the Stalin era as socialist-realism would be futile. But I am convinced that they are equally mistaken who prophesy an early grave for socialist-realism, and who want to re-christen as "realism" everything from western Europe since Expressionism and Futurism and abolish all use of the term "socialist." When socialism recaptures its true nature, and feels once again its artistic responsibility in face of the great problems of its age, mighty forces may be set moving towards the creation of a new socialist literature of actuality. In this process of transformation and renewal, which implies for socialist-realism an abrupt change of direction from that of the Stalin era, Solzhenitsyn's story constitutes in my opinion a milestone on the road to the future.

Such first swallows of a literary spring may, of course, be of importance historically, as heralds of a new age, without necessarily possessing any special artistic talent. This might be said of Lillo, and after him Diderot, as the inventors of middle-class drama. I have no doubt however that Solzhenitsyn occupies a different historical niche. Diderot's theory of social conditions as the focal point of dramatic interest brought within the range of tragedy a valuable new province; the part he played as pioneer is not nullified by our recognition of the mediocrity of his own dramas, though it amounts only to a theorizer's discovery of something in the abstract. Solzhenitsyn's achievement has not been to win a new province for literature, that of life in the concentration camp. On the contrary his mode of presentation, concerned with the normal life of the Stalin era and the alternatives it put before humanity, displays its real originality in its way of dealing with the problems of human beings holding out, or succumbing. When the concentration camp is perceived as a symbol of life in general as it then was, the depiction of details of life in the camp becomes, from the point of view of the future, only an item in the all-embracing sweep of the new literature now announcing itself. In this literature everything that is of significance for individual or social conduct now, everything that goes to make up the vital prehistory of our present, requires to be given artistic shape.

III

In this single day of Ivan **Denisovich** readers have found a symbol of the Stalin era. Yet no trace of symbolism is to be found in Solzhenitsyn's presentation. He gives a faithful, authentic excerpt from life, with none of its elements brought forward so as to acquire a heightened, or **over-**heightened, meaning, and thus qualify as a symbol. Certainly in this specimen-bit of life the fortunes and the behaviour typical of millions of people are registered in concentrated form. Solzhenitsyn's simple fidelity to nature has nothing in common either with literal naturalism or with any technically more sophisticated modification of it. Contemporary discussion of realism, and socialist-realism first of all, neglects the really fundamental issues, not least because it loses sight of the distinction between realism and naturalism. In the "illustrative literature" of Stalin's day realism was supplanted by an officially prescribed naturalism, combined with a so-called revolutionary-romanticism, officially prescribed likewise. On the level of abstract theory, no doubt, if nowhere else, naturalism was contrasted in the 'thirties with realism. But this abstract idea could be clothed in flesh and blood only by being set in opposition to the "illustrative literature"; for in practice the manipulators of literature denounced all facts not in accord with government regulations — though they denounced no other kind of facts — as "naturalistic." In **harmony** with this system a writer could rise above naturalism only by choosing to describe exclusively such facts as supported directly or indirectly the official policies whose literary "illustration" the piece of writing in question was to undertake. Thus the fixing of standards became a purely governmental matter. Without any regard to the characters' own springs of action, and their own natures, the standard-setting took for granted a positive or negative judgment of their behaviour decided purely by whether this appeared to promote or to obstruct the execution of government policy. Plots and figures were excessively contrived, yet they could not escape a good measure of naturalism. For it can be said to characterize this style that it does not combine detailed facts with one another or with their human agents and the destinies of the latter by any inherent logic. Its details remain colourless and lifeless, or they may be exaggeratedly precise, as the author's own bent may **determine**; but they never enter into the **subject-**matter so as to form an organic unity, since they are, on principle, only stuck on to it from outside. I would remind the reader of the scholastic debates about how far, or how markedly, a positive hero may, or should, have negative qualities as well. Implicit in them is a denial of the fact that in literature the all-important thing, the alpha and omega of the creative process, is the actual, unique human being; and an assumption that men and their destinies can and ought to be treated like marionettes.

If, as many now desire, modern Western techniques are to take the place of an antiquated socialist-realism, the naturalistic basis of the

prevailing trends in modernist literature are being altogether overlooked in both camps. I have pointed out repeatedly in a number of contexts that the various trends which have broken away, each in its turn, from pure naturalism, have all preserved intact its inbred lack of inner cohesion, its chaotic structure, its elimination of any close union between reality and appearance. They have got away from the naturalistic obsession with literal reproduction, but only to replace it by a one-sidedly subjective or one-sidedly objective vision which, from the point of view of first principles, leaves the basic difficulty of naturalism essentially untouched. This applies to these literary tendencies in general, not to the notable exceptions and their special successes. Gerhart Hauptmann in *The Weavers*, or *Beaver-skin*, is not in an artistic sense a naturalist; whereas the great mass of Expressionists, Surrealists, and so forth have never really broken free from naturalism. From this angle it is easy to understand why a large proportion of those who are against the socialist-realism of the Stalin era should seek asylum in modernist literature and fancy they have found it there. But the required transformation cannot possibly be accomplished on this level of purely emotional impulse: there must first be a revolution in the relation between writers and social reality, they must transcend the naturalism that underlies their position, and both experience and think out the grand problems of our age. To take a merely subjective step forward they need not make any break at all with "illustrative literature"; even in the 'thirties there were novels about industrialization that toed the Party line yet made use of all the resources of Expressionism, the "new objectivity," the montage-style, etc., and differed from the average official product of the period in these superficial technicalities alone. There is some evidence that the same state of affairs may return today, and it must in fact be pointed out that a rejection of the old official cult which is confined within merely subjective limits is very far from denoting a full intellectual and cultural victory over it.

Solzhenitsyn's story stands quite aloof from all the tendencies contained in naturalism. I have spoken already of the extreme parsimony of his style of presentation. This explains why his details are always highly significant. As in every work of art worth the name, their special shades of meaning arise from the nature of the subject-matter itself. We are in a concentration camp: every bit of bread, every piece of rag, every scrap of stone or metal that can be turned into a tool may help to prolong life; but along with this goes the risk, if you carry one of them on you when you are marched out of camp to work, or if you hide it anywhere, of discovery, confiscation, even solitary confinement in darkness. Every look or gesture of a superior demands a prompt and correct reaction, and here too the wrong guess may conjure up serious dangers; on the other hand there are situations, at meal-times for instance, where a strong will properly directed can lead to an extra helping; and so on and so forth. **Hegel** stresses as one corner-stone of

the epic greatness of the Homeric poems the striking part played in them by impressive and accurate description of eating, drinking, sleep, physical toil. In ordinary bourgeois life such functions on the whole lose their intrinsic weight, and only the very greatest men have the skill, like Tolstoy, to bring back again these complex sharings of experience. Comparisons of this sort can of course only serve to throw light on the problems of writing that we are considering, and should not be taken as in any way suggesting equivalence of literary stature.

Significance of detail in Solzhenitsyn has a quite special function, connected with the nature of his subject: it throws into relief the crushing constriction of camp routine, its monotony perpetually fraught with peril, the minute and ceaseless movements needed for preservation of bare existence. Each small point marks a parting of ways between safety and ruin; each circumstance can give rise to fateful consequences, beneficial or disastrous. In this light the fact of any odd things being just what they are, a fact always in itself fortuitous, is inextricably and visibly bound up with the unfolding fates of odd individuals. And thus the life of the **camp** in its overwhelming entirety emerges from a most economical use of **materials**; the **organized** sum total of a plain, meagre statement of fact constitutes a symbolic whole, with a meaning for all humanity, and shedding light on an important **phase** of man's **evolution**.

On this organic foundation we see arising a new and distinct species of *novella*, and the parallels and points of contrast between it and the great modern *novellas* of the bourgeois world already mentioned help us to interpret the historical location of each. In each case man has to struggle against a potent and hostile environment whose cruelty and inhumanity betray its elemental character. In Conrad or Hemingway this hostile environment is, in fact, Nature: with Conrad it may be storm or calm, but even when a purely human fate is at work, as in *The End of the Tether*, it is the onset of blindness, the cruelty of his own biological nature, that the old captain has to resist. The social side of human relations recedes into the background, and not seldom fades to vanishing-point. Man is set in conflict with Nature herself, and in the **conflict** he must save **himself** by his own strength, or perish. In this duel every detail counts, therefore, whether it be something fateful for the man as he is watched from outside or something that brings before his own mind the alternatives of salvation or catastrophe. Since man and Nature confront each other face to face, **nature-images** can take on a Homeric breadth without any lessening of their fateful intensity: they are the means whereby the interweaving of fate and human agent can be carried to repeated **climaxes** of meaning. But once more, the pre-eminently social quality of men's relations with one another fades and even vanishes; and that is why such *novellas* must be said to stand at the end of a literary epoch.

With Solzhenitsyn too the complex of things portrayed has been endowed with elemental features. It is simply there, as a brute fact,

having no ascertainable origin in the currents of human life, not evolving into any further form of social existence. Yet it is after all, through and through, an "artificial Nature," a mesh of social factors. Elemental as its operations may appear, inexorably cruel, senseless, inhuman, they are all none the less consequences of human deeds, and the human being who has to protect himself against them must stand towards them quite otherwise than towards Nature proper. Hemingway's old fisherman can feel sympathy and admiration for the mighty creature whose stubborn resistance almost destroys him. No such attitude is conceivable towards the myrmidons of Solzhenitsyn's "artificial Nature." A smothered revolt against them, even though he eschews any blatant expression of it, is latent in every fragment of dialogue, every gesture. Life's bare physical reactions, like hunger or shivering with cold, are in the last resort governed by the relation of man to man. Survival or failure are always, unconditionally, social facts; they are connected, even if this is never proclaimed in the story, with the real life that is to come, life in freedom amongst other free men.

Admittedly the elemental fact of simple physical survival or annihilation is also involved; but on a broad view it is the social factor that predominates. For Nature really is independent of beings like us; she can be brought into subjection by our practical knowledge, but her essence remains inevitably unchangeable. However crassly elemental an "artificial Nature" may seem, it is nevertheless built out of human relationships, it is of our own making. Hence the healthy attitude to it, when all is said, is the instinct to alter, improve, humanize. The true quality of all its details, the way they are, their appearance, their interactions and intertwinings, are invariably communal in character, even when their sources in community life are not directly disclosed. Here too Solzhenitsyn restricts himself to an ascetic frugality of comment, but the very objectivity of his presentation, the elemental savagery and inhumanity revealed in an institution of the human family, deliver a more devastating verdict than any emotional rhetoric could have done. In the same manner his austere turning away from any far horizon conceals, so to speak, an unseen horizon. Every resistance or retreat points a silent finger at the more normal human relationships of the future: it is a prologue in dumb-show to a truly human life among other men that is still to come. Thus the segment of life we see here is not a dead end, it is society's prelude to its own future. It is worth adding that within the sphere of individual existence conflict with Nature herself can help to mould human character, as it does in Conrad's *The Shadow-Line*, but her influence goes no further than the individual. The captain in *Typhoon* wins through, but as Conrad himself reminds us, we have seen only an interesting episode, without any wider consequences.

We are brought back to the symbolic effect of Solzhenitsyn's story. Without overtly doing so it supplies a prologue in miniature for **the**

coming challenge by the creative spirit of art to the Stalin régime when fragments of life like this were really representative of everyday life at large. It is a prelude to the reshaping of the present, of the world inhabited by those who passed through that "school," whether they did so in their own persons or at second hand, whether actively or passively, whether strengthened by it or broken, and who were formed by it for the life of today and for active participation in it. That is the paradoxical aspect of Solzhenitsyn's position as a writer. His laconic language, his abstention from any allusion to anything lying beyond the immediacy of life in the camp, nevertheless draw in outline those central ethical problems apart from which the men of today could neither exist nor be understood. It is by its concentration on economy and restraint that this severely limited extract from life becomes an overture to the great literature of the future.

The other stories by Solzhenitsyn that are known to me are laden with no such symbolic, far-reaching meaning. Yet perhaps for this very reason they are marked just as plainly by the same groping into the past in the search for a means of laying hold on the present; more plainly still, as we shall see, in their final effect. This looking towards the present is least in evidence in the fine story *Matryona's House*, where Solzhenitsyn paints, as some of his contemporaries have done, a village world far from anywhere, whose people and way of life have been little affected by socialism and its Stalinist growth. That situations of this kind can exist is not unimportant in an all-round view of our age, but it is in no degree central to it. We are given a portrait of an old woman who has experienced and suffered much, has often been deceived and always exploited, whose deep goodness of soul and serenity are utterly unshakable; the example of a being whose humanity nothing could destroy or disfigure. It is a portrait in the great Russian realist tradition, though with Solzhenitsyn only the tradition in general is discernible, not any stylistic inheritance from a particular master. This link with the best Russian models of the past can be recognized likewise in his other *novellas*. The fabric of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* is put together similarly from the moral resemblances and contrasts among a number of principal characters. The dominant figure is a shrewd peasant who can play his cards adroitly but never abandons his self-respect. With him is contrasted on the one hand the once choleric naval captain who risks existence itself rather than allow an indignity to pass without protest, and on the other hand the crafty squad-leader who defends the interests of his fellow-workers against the authorities skilfully, but at the same time utilizes them so as to improve his own relatively privileged status.

A more dynamic story, much more closely bound up with the dilemmas of the Stalin era, is *On the Kreshchovka Station*, where the social morality of that time of crisis and its "state of alert" are at the centre of interest. It discloses through the medium of a dualism of

opposites how Stalinist slogans, reduced to clichés, distort all life's real problems. Here, too, and again in keeping with the *novella* form, there is only the detached conflict of individuals and its momentary resolution, without any indication of what after-effects the decision now taken is to have on the participants' lives, on their development up to today. But in this case the collision is so managed that the tensions it sets up produce ripples overflowing the boundaries of the story. The choice imposed by the "state of alert," the campaign for "vigilance," was not merely a burning problem of those vanished days: its consequences, in the shape of those forces that have moulded the moral personality of so many people, are still at work today. Solzhenitsyn's concentration camp story could renounce stoically any glimpse of a distant horizon, any allusion to the present, not simply in the narrative itself but even in the imagination of the reader which often, if he is the right reader, supplies what is left unsaid. Now on the contrary the question is put to us with intentionally painful frankness: how will the enthusiastic young officer get over this experience, what kind of man will it make of him, and of many others like him, to have been the doer of such a deed?

A still more remarkable illustration of this type of *novella*, artistically just as appropriate to the *genre* as the other one, is provided by Solzhenitsyn's latest work, *For the Good of the Cause*, which provoked loud applause and violent condemnation in the Soviet literary world. Here he boldly takes up the challenge hurled by the sectarians at the friends of progressive literature—the demand for writing about the constructive enthusiasm felt by the broad masses even during the reign of the "cult of personality," as something quite separate from Stalinism. The story concerns the rebuilding of a technical school in a provincial city. Its old premises are quite inadequate, there is not sufficient room for the students; the authorities are putting bureaucratic delays in the way of the new buildings that are required. But the teachers and pupils are a genuine collective, united by mutual respect, even affection. They volunteer to undertake the major part of the construction work themselves during their holidays, and they complete it in time for the beginning of the next school year. The tale opens with a brisk, animated account of the work being finished, of the sincere trust and the frank discussions between teachers and pupils, and their expectation of a happier lot in the setting they themselves have created. Then suddenly a committee of officials turns up, makes a very superficial inspection of the old premises, declares them to be in perfect condition, and hands the new building over to another institution. The desperate efforts of the Principal, even though assisted by someone of goodwill in the Party machine, are of course in vain; in the Stalin era it is useless to struggle in however righteous a cause against the bureaucratic caprices of officialdom.

That is all; but it is enough for a crushingly accurate refutation of

the sectarian official myth of genuine, active enthusiasm under Stalin. No rational person has ever disputed that there really was such enthusiasm, now and then. Truth becomes myth with the notion that it was possible for socialist idealism to deploy itself fruitfully side by side with and unhindered, or actually encouraged, by the reigning cult. Solzhenitsyn shows us one burst of popular energy, and at the same time the usual fate that Stalinist bureaucracy has in store for it. The tale ends, like his other writings, at the point where the contradiction stands before us as large as life, but once again without any indication of threads of human destiny leading onward to man as he is today. And once again the external framework is closely restricted, as the spirit of the *novella* requires; only enough detail is supplied, either about the earlier negligence of the officials or about the ultimate arbitrary decision of the higher authorities, to establish a factual report, though an extremely convincing one. Solzhenitsyn succeeds here too, with his frugal, dispassionate style and his abstention from comment, in throwing into relief what is typical in the facts thus presented. This is of course far from being a question purely of method. He can fulfil his ambitious design only through having the gift, with his technique of suggestion, of making all his characters and suggestions come to life and impress us as typical. The origins of this bureaucracy and the groupings within it, the private career-interests at work behind all the high-sounding devotion to the Cause, these remain outside the bounds of the narrative, and are felt only as an all-pervading something to be taken for granted. The bureaucrats themselves certainly are brought before us very vividly, with their inhumanity masquerading as practical sense, but they are not illuminated from within, either as citizens or as men. We have a more individualized picture of the teachers and students in their exultant mood at the outset, though it is confined to what the brevity inseparable from the *novella* permits; the mood is so strong that the memory evoked from time to time of the "Communist Saturdays" of the civil war years has no sound at all of hollow rhetoric.

But once more, and quite justifiably from the point of view of literary form, the conclusion is abrupt: the curtain falls as soon as the bare facts have been unfolded, and the underlying questions, the problems of burning concern to us today, are left unanswered. What effect did these and similar experiences and lessons have on those teachers and students?—how deeply were their later lives coloured by them?—what sort of members of the human family of today did they grow into? The conclusion is only sufficiently definite to prompt an intelligent reader to ask these questions, and in his mind they will long continue to reverberate and pulsate. Again, then, the Stalinist past points imperiously towards the fundamental issues of the present day, and this time far more distinctly and unequivocally, with far greater force and urgency, than in all the earlier stories. As a result this *novella* cannot be as complete in itself, as fully rounded off and self-contained, as *Ivan Denisovich*,

and in a narrowly artistic sense therefore it does not reach the same level. All the same, as a groping towards the future it represents a long step forward by comparison with its predecessors.

IV

When this onward march will be completed, and whether by Solzhenitsyn himself or by others, or by some other single writer, is something nobody today can foresee. Solzhenitsyn is by no means the only one who is preoccupied with this consanguinity of yesterday and today, as perhaps a reference to Nekrassov is enough to make clear. Nobody can say now what form will be taken by the final effort to unravel the present by means of an interpretation of the Stalin era, that moral pre-history of almost everyone active today. The decisive factor will be the unfolding of our social existence, the revival and renewal of socialist consciousness in the socialist countries, especially in the Soviet Union; although every Marxist must take account of the inevitable unevenness of ideological development, with regard to art and literature most of all.

Our review cannot go further, therefore, than to state what is irresistibly certain to happen, leaving completely open the question of how it will come about, or through what agencies. One thing we may be sure of is that there are grave hindrances and impediments to the new blossoming of socialist-realism, obstruction above all by those who have remained faithful to Stalinist precept and practice, or at any rate act as if they have. True, open opposition by them to any new flowering has been muffled for the time being by a variety of events, but they acquired skill of manoeuvre in the school of Stalin, and obstacles underhandedly thrown in the way may in some circumstances do more damage to what is new and immature and frequently unsure of itself than brutal measures of coercion of the old-fashioned sort, though even these have not disappeared and can still work great mischief.

On the other hand, progress towards something genuinely new may be hampered and led astray by the sort of intellectually banal squabbles that are to the fore nowadays with us, about modernism in a shallow, merely technical or stylistic sense. As already pointed out, nothing of real importance can be accomplished by such means, since the real artistic problem is that of overcoming, on the broadest front, the view of life from which nearly every style founded on naturalism derives. So long as many of our writers are hypnotized by technical nostrums, and assuming that the faction still loyal to Stalinism cultivates somewhat more flexible tactics, the situation of the 'thirties as described above may easily repeat itself; in other words, what one might call a "Durrell style" may be so employed as to divert attention from the real problems of the age. Admittedly some things are coming out even in this field that have to be taken seriously. In many people, Stalinism destroyed faith in

socialism. On the subjective level the doubts and disillusionments it engendered may well be perfectly honest and sincere; and yet when they seek to express themselves they may very easily produce nothing more than a campfollowing of Western tendencies.

Even when works so inspired are interesting from a purely aesthetic point of view, they seldom avoid some degree of mere imitativeness. **Kafka's** vision was really and truly fixed on the murky nothingness of the epoch that gave birth to **Hitler**, on something disastrously actual, whereas the nihilism of a Becket is no more than a game with imaginary abysses, no longer corresponding to anything vital in historical actuality. I am aware that in intellectual quarters for more than a century now scepticism and pessimism, however questionable their manifestations have been at each turning-point, have come to be considered far more distinguished than faith in the great cause of human progress. Yet Goethe's words at Valmy³ point more meaningfully to the future than Schiller's words about "women turning into **hyaenas**,"⁴ and they point too in Goethe's own work towards Faust's last **speech**.⁵ Shelley is more original and more lasting than Chateaubriand, and Keller learned more lessons from 1848, and more fruitful ones, than Stifter. In the same way today the march of world history and world literature depends primarily on those whom the Stalin era has only spurred on to deepen and bring up to date their socialist conviction. The most honest and gifted among those who have lost this conviction and are turning out "interesting" works in the wake of Western vogues, will be seen, once the energies today hidden or only dawning are fully released, as no more than epigones.

Let me repeat that it is not my purpose here to go into the business of *avant-gardism*. I recognize that writers like Brecht, the later Thomas Wolfe, Elan Morante, Boll and others have created striking, novel, and probably enduring works. What I am concerned with is simply the fact that when disillusionment with socialism foregoeth with the literary modes of the sceptical, alienated Westerner, in the long run the outcome is likely to be a brood of imitators. It may be superfluous to add that the only way for honest people to get the better of a disappointment with some sides of life is through life itself, through living their lives face to face with the truth of history and society. Literary argumentation by itself is futile; while attempts to drive and dragoon the artist can serve merely to lend esoteric fashions a more aristocratic air, and to repel honest seekers after socialism more thoroughly than ever.

In my view Solzhenitsyn and those who share his aims are remote from any merely **formal** experimentation. They are trying, in both human and intellectual terms, both as citizens and as artists, to work their way through to those realities that have always been the **starting-point** of genuine innovations in artistic form. All Solzhenitsyn's writings hitherto exemplify this, and the links between them and the complex of difficulties in the way of the regeneration of Marxism today are equally

easy to trace. Any pronouncement on the style of the epoch now at hand, any effort to anticipate what the future will bring, would be reducing speculation to idle scholasticism, *aesthetics* to mere bickering. What is at present discernible may be summed up as follows. The great literature awaited by the socialism now in course of renewal cannot possibly, and least of all in the ultimate, decisive questions of form, prove a straightforward continuation from the first outburst of socialist literature, it cannot mean a return to the 'twenties. For the pattern of social tensions, the quality and character of people and their relations with one another, have altered radically since then. Every genuine style is founded on the ability of writers to seize those particular elements in the pattern and motive forces of the life of their age that characterize it most profoundly, and on their capacity—the acid test of true originality—to discover a corresponding form, fit to mirror these and to give suitable expression to their deepest, most unique and yet most typical identity. Authors in the 'twenties painted the stormy transition from bourgeois to socialist society. From the security of peace-time, unbounded as this of course appeared on the surface, the way forward at that time led through war and civil war to socialism. People were faced with an imposingly dramatic decision, and had to choose for themselves which side they wanted to belong to; often they had to undergo a translation, which might be explosive, from one class-existence to another. It was by conditions like these that the style of *socialist-realism* in the 'twenties was determined.

Today's strains and stresses are of a wholly different sort, with regard both to the structure of society and to its motive forces. Resounding conflict out in the open has become rare and exceptional. Over lengthy periods the surface of social life seems to alter little, and what changes can be detected come about slowly, each in its turn. By contrast, a radical transformation has been going on for decades in men's inner lives, which, it goes without saying, already exerts its influence on the social surface and as time goes on will play a steadily growing part in the shaping of our whole way of life. In the art of today as in that of a more distant past the accent falls on man's inward life and conscience, on his moral decisions, which cannot be expressed, it may be, in any external act. It would be quite wrong however to see in this predominance of the subjective in art any analogy with certain Western movements where the alienation of individual from society seems to hold absolute sway and generates an inner life boundless in appearance, impotent in reality. What is meant here is not any such analogy, but the fact that there may be a long chain of crises of conscience, most of which cannot as things are, or can only in exceptional circumstances, crystallize into outward action; although the ways in which they disclose themselves may be dramatic, often bordering on the tragic. What matters is how rapidly and deeply the people experiencing these things become fully aware of the perils that Stalinism embodied, how they

react to this knowledge, and how their conduct nowadays is influenced by their accumulated experiences of those days: by whether they were able then to hang on, or fell by the wayside—whether they stood firm, or were crushed, or came to terms, or capitulated. And it is clear that the truest way to keep faith is to reject Stalinist distortions and thereby to consolidate and deepen all really Marxist, really socialist convictions, at the same time preparing them to face fresh problems.

It is needless to go further, for this is not the place for any attempt to describe even cursorily the period we are living through as a whole, its historical roots, or the divergent lines of human behaviour most characteristic of it. My object has been to bring to light those living realities which unanswerably prescribe for socialist-realism today a different style from the one that conditions in the 'twenties prescribed for literature then. The foregoing brief commentary will have served, I believe, to substantiate this thesis, and the conclusion thus reached must suffice. I will add only that Solzhenitsyn's *novella* form is an organic growth of the soil of our age. Where the next generation of writers will seek their point of departure must be left to them. "*Jeprends mon bien je le trouve*": this has always been the motto of original and significant writers, who have always gladly but with a due sense of responsibility accepted the risk that every selection involves, the risk of whether their "good" will really turn out well or not. It is a risk that lesser writers sometimes take carelessly or frivolously. However fully theory may be able to predict the larger social contours of the changes to be expected, it is just as fully bound to withhold discussion of all actual works of art until after the event.

Translated by
M. A. L. Brown

NOTES

1. *Novella*: a prose form, intermediate in length between the novel and the short story, very popular with German writers from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century. The action of a *novella* usually concerns one particular situation, conflict, event or aspect of a personality on which the work exclusively concentrates. The *novella* in this specific sense was first used in fourteenth-century Italy, and Boccaccio's mastery of the form inspired Goethe in particular to experiment with it in German. (Trans.)
2. Gottfried Keller, 1819–90. A Swiss novelist and poet whose largely autobiographical novel *Der Grüne Heinrich* tells of a young Swiss who leaves his homeland to study art in Germany. From boyhood he had been isolated from his fellows, but in Munich he gradually resolves to renounce his artistic pretensions and devote himself to the social and moral well-being of his own country and its citizens. *Die Leute von Seldwyla* and *Die Simgedicht* are both *novella* cycles. The former is unified by its setting—an imaginary but typical Swiss village—in which varied incidents involving different characters allow Keller to comment on the virtues and deficiencies of Swiss life. *Das Simgedicht*, by contrast, has a

definite thematic **unity**. **Despite** the varied subject-matter, the problem of marriage and the relations between the sexes is **common** to all six *novellas* in the latter. (Trans.)

3. Goethe's comment on **the** battle of Valmy, the victory of the French revolutionary troops over the **Prussians** and Austrians in 1792. "There begins here and now anew epoch in world history." (*Goethe: Die Campagne in Frankreich*. Trans.)
4. Schiller in *Das Lied von der Glocke* (1799) alludes clearly though not explicitly to the French Revolution in his apocalyptic vision (e.g. the words quoted) of the horrors which come about when a nation is **transformed** by revolution. (Trans.)
5. Immediately before his death Faust has a vision of the future, of a community living free from restraint, in a pastoral Utopia threatened constantly by the **sea**. Provided the members of the community constantly maintain the sea-defences and work their land, their happiness and security are assured. (Trans.)