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“Poët v Rossii — Bol’še čem Poët” or the Poet as Superman

A colleague in the noble art of librarianship once struck my attention by his excessive – so it seemed to me – interest in what he called “the moral responsibility of the writer”. It was a condition *sine qua non* that in his universe of cataloguing and indexation it was absolutely necessary that such a term was in existence, and prominently at that. I somehow failed to see why a writer should have a stronger moral responsibility than other people – a journalist, a pedagogue, a politician, or even simply a parent or a child. Since the literary interests of my esteemed colleague to the best of my knowledge limited themselves to the reading of whodunits and other literary works of a more frivolous kind, I tended for a long time to give his arguments rather scant attention, until another colleague pointed out to me that this seemingly philistine concern with other people’s morals actually might be a somewhat clumsy attempt to describe what commonly is known as socially engaged literature or “samfunnsengasjert skjønnlitteratur”, to use the Norwegian term.

For this notion is well known in the literatures of Scandinavia as well: Georg Brandes, the great guru of Scandinavian realism, stated that belles lettres had to occupy itself with problems of society, if not, it simply should be put aside as moribund. But even romanticism, so despised by Brandes, envisaged the writer as endowed by special god-inspired gifts which obliged him towards deities and people as well. This notion is easy to detect in e.g. Aleksandr Puškin, who extolled the poet as a prophet to his people (“Pro-rok”) and saw himself as a bard of the Russian Empire (“Pamjatnik”), at the same time (taking his words directly from Horace) underpinning the idea that Russia was the third Rome, and thus the only genuine inheritor of the Roman Empire. Here we meet the poet as superman, as reigning sovereign in the wonderful edifice of what can be styled as “poetocracy”. But not only eulogies like “Pamjatnik” were engendered by the social or national engagement of writers. From his exile on the channel isles, Victor Hugo hurled his

anathemas against Napoleon III and his regime; some decades later the naturalist writer Emil Zola published his famous article “J’accuse”, thus taking sides in the Dreyfus controversy, and probably constituting the most decisive single factor in disclosing what turned out to be perhaps the most spectacular miscarriage of justice in recent history. In Puškin the poet appears as prophet, in Zola as supreme legislator, both being larger-than-life figures - in other words: Supermen. Zola’s professed aim, to uphold justice and human rights, brings to mind the probably most relevant Russian rendering of the notion discussed here, namely *graždanstvennost’*¹, which while not fitting all too well to the – in this connection – conformative Puškin, fits all the more to Zola and to compatriots of Puškin like Černyševskij and Saltykov-Ščedrin.²

The social engagement of the writer was most welcome in countries with a communist system of society, and social realism coined the doctrine of

¹ *Graždanstvennost’* is a notion which does not give itself too easily to rendering in other languages. Maybe for that reason, quite a lot of dictionaries choose to omit it. (Among them are V.P. Berkov’s *Russko-norvežskij slovar’*, 1. & 2. edition, as well as Krymova & Emzina’s *Russko-datskij slovar’* and Karin Davidson’s *Russko-švedskij slovar’*). The Oxford Russian-English Dictionary (edition of 1972) translates the word 1) civilization, civil society, 2) civic spirit. I.Ja. Pavlovskij’s *Russisch-deutsches Wörterbuch* (3rd. edition, Riga 1900) renders the notion as “Bürgersinn”, “Civilization”, “Bildungsgrad der Staatsbürgerlichen Gesellschaft. Mirowicz et al.: *Bol’šoj russko-pol’skij slovar’* (3rd improved edition, 1986) translates *graždanstvennost’* as “*uspolecznienie*, cf. *postawa obywatelska*”, “*świadomość społeczna*”, giving as synonymous “*graždanskaja soznatel’nost’*” and as example, “*graždanstvennost’*” *stichov Nekrasova = poczucie odpowiedzialności społecznej w wierszach Niekrasowa*). It also lists: *organizacja społeczna* synonymously: *graždanskoe ustrojstvo*). “Borgersinn”, “*samfunnsånd*” may be acceptable Norwegian replacements.

² Nevertheless Puškin liked to draw attention to his humanitarian disposition. Cf. “*Pamjatnik*”, 4th stanza:

I dolgo budu tem ljubezen ja narodu,
 Čto čuvstva dobre ja liroj probuždal,
 Čto v moj žestokij vek vosslavil ja Svobodu
 I milost’ k padšim prizyval.

social'nyj zakaz, thus making the thematic and aesthetic integrity of the writer dependent on what the rulers required him to write. The position of the writer in Soviet society clearly shows the ambiguity in this position of the writer. He is fêted by the rulers, and given the position of an oracle second to God only. But at the same time he will not be allowed to go a step further than what the wielders of power decide. Nobody, neither Nicholas I nor Benckendorff, objected against "Prorok" and "Pamjatnik", but publication of Puškin's blasphemous "Gavriliada" was not permitted before tsardom had descended in its grave. This is an age-old truth. Petronius' words carried enormous weight, he was the great *arbiter elegantiae*, but only as long Nero let him. The writer is god and slave at the same time.

In Norway, we should be able to judge this special aspect of poetocracy particularly well, although it seems we have still not noticed it. Who I have in mind is Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. To most foreign connoisseurs of Scandinavian literature, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson is a mediocre writer equipped with a political ambition which by far outgrew his literary talent. Few of his works are read, still fewer of his plays performed; notwithstanding, he is celebrated annually with a large literary festival. Bjørnstjerne was a literary superman of his time, honoured even with the Nobel prize of literature (which Ibsen was never given). The existence of an annual literary festival devoted to his name, indicates that in this case superman status has even attained immortality.

The quote introducing this article, "Poët v Rossii – bol'she čem poët", is taken from Evgenij Evtušenko's large-scale poem "Bratskaja GËS", where it introduces the poem "Molitva pered poëmoj". I should like to devote the final part of this little article more specifically to this bard of the Soviet thaw.

Evtušenko's professed programme as a writer, his spiritual message, is that of *graždanstvennost'*. A lofty goal, but hard to attain as he admits in a poem with just the title "Graždanstvennost'". Without doubt inspired by that notion, he launched several poetical enterprises having as their goal to function politically.³ And Nikita Sergeevič Chruščev let him – for a time.

³ The critic V.A.Vozčikov maintains that Evtušenko gave Soviet literary criticism a more emotional twist, when crossing over from poetry: "Javljas' borcom v poëzii, Evgenij

Daj Majakovskij, mne
 glybastost'
 bujstvo,
 bas,
 neprimirimost' groznuju k podonkam,
 čtob smog i ja,
 skvoz' vremja prorubjas',
 skazat' o nem
 tovariščam-potomkam...

What we witness here is a transmigration of souls or spirits, who like the Holy Spirit take residence in people, or rather a chosen few, those belonging to the upper echelons of the literary guild, the literary supermen. Then there is the Russian Spirit or Russkij Duch, who at this stage soars up and above, but who at a later stage may unite with their civic-minded brothers in the mind of the canonized Russian writers. This would result in a striking counterpoint to Dostoevskij's *Besy*, where, as we know, things are the other way round.

For those having read the Holy Bible and *Wergeland*, this of course is nothing new, but nevertheless somewhat unexpected in a poet fed on diamat from infancy. In Evtušenko's notion of the poet turned politician (or the politician turned poet) there is something of the superman, at least when observed against the background of contemporary Soviet reality. In the political system of Marxism-Leninism, resolutions were passed and decisions adopted by way of what was called democratic centralism; Evtušenko follows his heart (and sometimes his opportunism), he acts by force of the emotions of his poetical ego. Something is right because his heart tells him so. Having in mind the transmigration of souls or spirits mentioned above, it is interesting to note that one of his favourite poetical techniques (also beloved by the way, by the young Andrej Voznesenskij), is the identification of the author with any given object. Thus Evtušenko identifies himself with many objects, many of which are not animate at all. On the other hand, many of the inanimate objects he describes undergo animation or prosopopeia, like for instance

the great pyramid in “Bratskaja GĚS”. The keyword here probably is subjectivization, as Evtušenko’s chief poetical vehicle is the Ego (Ja).

Evtušenko’s poetical hero wants to be a superman. But he also wants to be a politician. That may turn out to be even harder. The social’nyj zakaz in Evtušenko’s version may turn out to be a burden too heavy to carry: *Moja poezija/kak Zoluška/zabyv pro samoe svoe/stiraet každyj den’/čut’ zorjuška/epochi grjaznoe bel’e.* (“Zoluška”, 1964). Still, being an undaunted optimist, he seems to reject the assumption that in mixing with politicians and also otherwise taking part in the political process, you also risk taking over the cardinal sins of any political environment: Unreliability, empty phrases, hypocrisy and disdain towards the people the politicians pretend to serve.

Already as a very young man Evtušenko seems convinced that he has enough force to withstand any pressure:

Ja raznyj,
ja cele-
I ne-celesoobraznyj.
Ja ves’ nesovmestimyj,
Neudobnyj,
Zastenčivyj i naglyj,
Zloj i dobryj.
Ja tak ljublju, čtob vse peremežalos’ –
ot zapada
i do vostoka
ot zavisti
do vostorga!
(“Prolog”, 1953).

But his ambition carries with it much stress and nerve-racking conflicts:

Ja, kak poezd, cto mečetsja stol’ko už let
meždu gorodom Da
i gorodom Net.
moi nervy natjanuty
kak provoda,

meždu gorodom Net
i gorodom Da.

(“Dva goroda”, 1964)

It is probably impossible to separate Evtušenko’s literary ambition from his political ambition. The present writer is not convinced that his meddling in politics has always been of benefit to his literary work, but it is difficult to analyze the one without taking into account the other. Evtušenko’s dream probably is to be a people’s tribune, acting closely with the public, as he does when reading his verse in public.

It is difficult to imagine a phenomenon like him in contemporary Norwegian literature. His emotionality and pathos are rather frowned at today. The literary superman seems outdated. The existence of poets like Evtušenko, Roždestvenskij and others goes to show that the tradition of the poetocrats from the great period of nation-building is still a living force in Russian literature.

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