ISAIAH BERLIN ONLINE

The Russian Conception of the Artist

This PDF is one of a series designed to assist scholars in their research on Isaiah Berlin, and the subjects in which he was interested.

The series will make digitally available both selected published items and edited transcripts of unpublished material.

Transcripts of extempore talks (such as this one) have been edited by Henry Hardy to eliminate their most obvious linguistic and stylistic flaws, and some references are provided, but no systematic attempt has been made to bring these texts fully up to the standard required for conventional publication. The aim is only to make them available in a reader-friendly form.

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DAL GRAUER MEMORIAL LECTURES

SIR ISAIAH BERLIN

Sir Isaiah Berlin, president of Wolfson College at Oxford University and one of the world's leading political and historical philosophers, will give two Dal Grauer Memorial Lectures at UBC on Monday and Tuesday, March 1 and 2. Sir Isaiah will speak in the Frederic Wood Theatre on March 1 at 12:30 p.m. on "The Russian Conception of the Writer's Calling." His second lecture, in the Totem Park Residences at 8:15 p.m. on March 2, is entitled "Russian Obsession with History and Historicism." There is no admission charge for either lecture.

The Ubyssey *50 No. 35, 26 February 1971, 5*

MONDAY

GRAUER LECTURER

Sir Isaiah Berlin speaks on "The Russian Conception of the Writer's Calling", Fredy Wood Theatre, 12:30.

ibid., 18

ISAIAH BERLIN TO LECTURE TWICE AT UBC

Sir Isaiah Berlin, one of the world's leading political and historical philosophers, will give two Dal Grauer Memorial Lectures at the University of B.C. March 1 and 2.

Described as having "one of the liveliest and most stimulating minds among contemporary philosophers," Sir Isaiah is president of Wolfson College at Oxford University in England and formerly held one of the academic world's most prestigious posts — Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory at Oxford.

Sir Isaiah is particularly well-known for his studies of Russian political and intellectual history and both his lectures at UBC will deal with topics in this field.

On March 1 he will speak in the Frederic Wood Theatre at 12:30 p.m. on "The Russian Conception of the Writer's Calling." His March 2 lecture at the Totem Park Residences at 8:15 p.m. is entitled "Russian Obsession with History and Historicism."

Born in 1909 in Riga, Latvia, then a part of the Russian Empire, Sir Isaiah emigrated with his parents to England in 1920. In 1932, the year after he graduated from Oxford with a brilliant degree, he began lecturing at Oxford and has been associated with that institution ever since, except for service during the Second World War in New York and Washington, D.C.

Sir Isaiah is perhaps best known to the public for a number of outstanding books, including *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment; The Hedgehog and the Fox*, which examined the character of Leo Tolstoy, the famed Russian writer and philosopher; *Historical Inevitability*, a major contribution to the philosophy of history; and *Two Concepts of Liberty*, a plea for independence and human variety which has been compared to John Stuart Mill's famed essay *On Liberty*.

He has lectured widely in North America and made several appearances on American television. His radio talks in England have been described as "rapid, vivid, torrential cascades of rich, spontaneous, tumbling ideas and images."

UBC Reports *17 No. 5, 25 February 1971, 11*

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The family emigrated to England in 1921, not 1920 as stated in this announcement; in 1920 they had returned from Petrograd (modern St Petersburg) to Riga, capital since 1918 of an independent Latvia

The Russian Conception of the Artist

A Dal Grauer[1] *Memorial Lecture*

(Frederic Wood Theatre, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada, Monday 1 March 1971, 12:30 p.m.)

The Frederic Wood Theatre, UBC, built in 1963

NB This transcript is incomplete and imperfect. The recording is of very poor quality (see the contemporary memo at the end of this file), and any input from readers who are adept at audio editing would be welcomed by Henry Hardy. The lecturer's words become increasing unintelligible as the quality of the recording declines. It has been transcribed here as far as the recording and the editor's hearing allows. Some readings are only conjectural. Thanks, for help already given, to Candice Bjur and her colleagues at UBC, to John Romein of Lifetime Heritage Films, to Adrian Kreuzspiegl and Phil Nixon.

CHAIRMAN [*the recording misses the beginning of the chairman's remarks*] Sir Isaiah is presently continuing his long and distinguished career at Oxford,

[1] A. E. 'Dal' Grauer (1906–61), President and Chairman, British Columbia Power Corporation and BC Electric Company, Chancellor and Chairman of the Board of Governors of the University of British Columbia. On his death his widow and friends endowed a memorial lectureship at UBC.

where he's President of one of the newer colleges, Wolfson; and he is also professor of the City University of New York, where he conducts a graduate seminar. Ever since the appearance of his book on Karl Marx, which was published a few months only before the outbreak of the last war, Sir Isaiah has impressed readers, and those who have heard him, with the powers of his mind and his unique literary gifts. These are instantly recognisable, whether the subjects dealt with are Tolstoy, John Stuart Mill, Alexander Herzen or Herder.

He is, as one quickly discerns from his books, unafraid to state his preferences, which, I should interpret, are those of a liberal humanist, suspicious of metaphysical systems, openly accepting the difficulties which men in society must face in making choices. At the same time that he's attracted to the liberal thinkers of the last century, he feels drawn to the great system-makers of the past, [?] only to deny the notion of final harmony.

This afternoon, Sir Isaiah will be lecturing on the subject of the Russian conception of the writer's calling. Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to present to you Sir Isaiah Berlin.

[*Applause*]

ISAIAH BERLIN Ladies and gentlemen, first I would thank the chairman for his very kind introduction of me, and then proceed to say what I am always getting [?], which is namely this: that I tend to talk very fast in a low voice, and people at the back, and sometimes people at the front, aren't able to hear what I say. May I ask people at the back, if they can't hear, and on the assumption that they wish to hear [*laughter*], to signify this by some mild eccentricity of behaviour, by either raising their hands or shuffling their feet, or doing something which will attract my attention. If they succeed in doing this, I'll do my best to go more slowly and talk more loudly, though I can't promise that this will be a success, but I'll do my best. I assume, perhaps mistakenly, that what I am saying now *can* be heard at the back, otherwise my remarks are somewhat self-stultifying. [*laughter*] Can you hear me? Is it all right? Oh no, thank you very much. Now, let me come to the subject of this talk.

I WANT TO TALK about the Russian conception of the artist, which seems to me to have had a very powerful effect upon the

West, not only Russia itself, but the West – upon us all, even at this moment, because it's a highly relevant subject in many ways, as you'll see.

There is something paradoxical about Russia and ideas. After all, nobody will deny that the largest single event or phenomenon of the twentieth century is the great Russian Revolution, which, in one way or another, has affected everyone for good. At the same time, it's difficult to say that, however much or however little you believed in the role of ideas in history, or the interrelationship of ideas and facts, it's difficult to see which particular ideas born on Russian soil precipitated this effect. And indeed further reflection leads one to think – and I'm about to utter a fairly sweeping generalisation, and if it is untrue, I hope someone will point this out to me afterwards – that outside the realm of the sciences, where the Russians have, of course, produced men of genius as much as any other great nation, in the realm of humanities or general ideas, no powerful idea which affected mankind was born on Russian soil. Not any.

What *has* happened is this. There was a great impact of the West upon Russia. These ideas came filtering in, in a manner which I shall try to describe. But something does happen to them on Russian soil. Namely, the Russians do tend, or have tended in the past, to take these ideas extremely seriously. To take an idea seriously makes a very great deal of difference to ideas. In the course of this they become transformed. And in their transformed condition, they come hitting back at the countries where they were conceived, and other countries as well. It's what I should like to call a kind of boomerang effect. When the boomerang comes winging back, it sometimes carries an appearance very different from that with which it began. In this sense, they do transform ideas, and transform them very powerfully.

This, for example, happened to Russia with, say, the ideas of Darwin, which were simply scientific ideas of the West, but became an object of almost religious worship in Russia. It's what happened to the idea of the Party, the Communist Party. The conception outlined by Marx and even by Engels, because it was taken with

utter seriousness and literalness by Lenin and by his colleagues, transformed itself, in practice at any rate, into an institution which its founders could scarcely have [envisaged], and in this form came back to Europe and to the rest of the world, and has made a very great deal of difference to our lives, for better or for worse.

The idea of which I intend to speak, which is the idea of commitment in literature, [?] engagement or commitment, seems to me to be the product of the raining in of such ideas from the West, and their transformation upon Russian soil, and their re-emergence as a kind of Russian idea sometime in the nineteenth century. This idea came back to the West, and the impact of it has made a very great deal of difference both to criticism and to writing, and to the general outlook on life [?].

If you ask why there is this poverty of ideas on Russian soil, there are a good many reasons. Not of course that these are the kind of reasons which the scientist would give. It seems to me that in this kind of historical explanation, even if you do give reasons, it's idle to maintain that, if you had known these reasons beforehand, you could have predicted the consequences. History is not a science, at any rate yet. The history of ideas still less. Nevertheless, I think it says something illuminating about this.

To begin with, you must remember that the great Church schism divided Russia as a section of South-Eastern Europe from the West, with the result that the great intellectual tradition in Europe, which was connected with the Roman Church and the Romantic movement, never really touched Russia. The Russian Church produced its quota of holy living, of martyrs, of saintly lives, but it has no serious intellectual tradition. The Poles who lived next door had it, and so far as Russians had it at all, they caught it from the Poles fairly late in their history. But the fundamental tradition of the Russian Church is non-intellectual in character. It doesn't breed ideas.

More than this, you could say that, as a result of this, you have a comparatively uneducated population with a small upper class, a tiny ruling class, totally incapable of coping with the enormous problems which began to occur when Russia first made its contacts

both with East and West and began to expand, particularly during the reign of Ivan the Terrible. Everyone knows that what occurred was the great forward step made by Peter the Great, who was the greatest, in some ways the most brutal moderniser in the whole of history, who decided to transform Russia and make her capable of withstanding the impact of the West, [?]. He sent his young men into foreign countries, he sent his young men to Germany, to Holland, to England, to France. They came back with skills, with art, with new languages. They became a nucleus of bureaucrats. The more they learnt, the more Europeanised they became, the greater grew the chasm between them and the vast mass of Russian peasantry below, which remained in its old, dark and evil, superstitious, poverty-ridden squalor. This chasm, if anything, eventually widened as a result of Peter, and widened still further in the eighteenth century.

These Russian bureaucrats, who were sent to be educated in the West, and who spoke French in the middle and at the end of the eighteenth century – some of them really went through a traumatic and [?] experience. They read Voltaire. They read Rousseau. They read Montesquieu. They read these people. They came into contact with the ideas of the Enlightenment, the ideas of liberty, the ideas of light, science, which would put an end to superstition and prejudice, suspicion, the dark heritage of the Middle Ages weighing upon them. At the same time, the notion of trying to transform this vast and ill-governed empire in accordance with the new sciences, the new moral and political principles gained in the West, was too heavy a task. The thing was too much. The average Russian landowner of the 1770s with one hand read Voltaire and believed in all kinds of enlightened ideas, and with the other hand still whipped his serfs just as merrily as before. It was a kind of divided life – and not very good, perhaps, for their children.

Some of them attempted to reform, but the weight was so heavy – even the Empress Catherine was not entirely clear, perhaps, when she tried to – at least be a [?] but – to adapt the constitution to some kind of principle enunciated by Montesquieu, when she invited Diderot to Petersburg, and various German and Swiss

scientists as well. Nevertheless, when it came to the point that the danger was too great – winds of change began to blow in Western Europe, the French Revolution was beginning to ripen, the probability of destruction of law and order was too high – and as soon as this began to happen, a straitjacket was immediately clamped on the great Empire. The bureaucrats tightened their control, if anything, and you have a picture of a small number of rather desperate men trying to govern a huge, unruly empire with a vast, ignorant, barbarous or semi-barbarous population of peasants and ignorant serfs, without very much aid from outside – the kind of situation about which the French reactionary de Maistre in the beginning of the nineteenth century said that the worst thing which could happen was the liberation of the serfs.

He explained to Alexander I that in Europe, at least in the West, there were two great principles. One was the Church, the other was slavery. When the Church acquired enough authority, they could, in their Christian charity, abolish slavery; but in Russia the Church was ignorant, in Russia the Church was not respected, it was despised by everyone, it was chaotic, it was drunken, in the villages no one owned profound respect for the [?] local priests, and therefore the liberation of the serfs would simply be the end. The whole empire would collapse, and they would leave a period of barbarism only in order to enter a period of violent and new barbarism, omitting[?] civilisation altogether. This was the kind of impression which intelligent foreigners obtained about Russia towards the end of the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century. [?].

Nevertheless, what happened, of course, we all know: Russia kept out of the West as long as it possibly could, at least. [?]ically young men were allowed to go, but in small quantities. They weren't allowed to go to France much, because it was regarded as rather too advanced in liberal ideas. They went to Germany, which was regarded as safer. But even there they obtained a certain number of ideas which fermented inside them and didn't really, to the more sensitive and the most morally conscious ones – didn't allow their consciences very much moral rest.

Then there was the great Napoleonic invasion, and the great Russian Army marched through Europe in a big way, for the first time in 1814, from Russia to Paris. This was an event of the first order. Of the first order because the children of the troubled landowners for the first time [?] direct contact with the masses in the form of the concept of – no doubt they knew about their own peasants and their own estates, but the contact wasn't very wide there. In an army, particularly fighting great [?].

[*recording drops out for 65 seconds*]

[?] well soon after, is of course the fact that the Russians emerged from Europe[?] [*another short dropout*] achieved contact with European culture at the very moment of the rise of the Romantic movement.

Don't let me try to summarise the Romantic movement in three-and-a-half minutes, which is presumably what I ought to be doing now. Let me just say this, so far as it's relevant to this particular theme, that one of the central themes of the Romantic movement was the notion of vocation, vocation or purpose or function: that every group of human beings – nations, Churches, cultures, indeed every individual human being – was not born [?]. They each had some part to play in the great world drama. Various countries of course interpreted their various roles differently, but part of the Romantic doctrine was that there was a built-in purpose, the realisation of which would expand the potential of a human group, say the Germans, say the French; or of some organised entity, say the Enlightenment; or of some Church, say the new Protestant Churches – which developed them in some sort of way in which they would release all the potential forces in an appropriate and harmonious manner.

This is the kind of doctrine which is liable to be born, not among advanced, but rather more among backward, nations. These backward nations feel a certain shame and embarrassment about their [?]. They are despised, they are bullied, and they are dominated by the advanced. This is what happened with the

Germans vis-à-vis the French. Here were the French, who were both materially and militarily, artistically and in every other respect the great dominant civilised nation of the world. The English, perhaps, only came [?]. Here were the Germans [?] late sixteenth century, and certainly – [?] for whatever reason – had been looked upon by these Westerners as a simple-hearted collection of half peasant populations, peasants, schoolmasters, grammarians, persons who hadn't done very much for human civilisation, amiable but poor, and certainly not participants in the great Renaissance, in which the Italians, the French, the Dutch, even the Swedes, had taken a much more prominent part, if for example, you take the late sixteenth or the seventeenth century. This kind of humiliation always produces a reaction by which people say, can we build[?] that? Surely we have something which these others have not got. And the Germans came to the conclusion that the French were superficial, that the French didn't understand the inner part of life, that the French were not dutiful, and many things of that sort. [?]

Exactly this dominated the Russians. Surely we must play some part in this world. They look upon us as great clodhopping barbarians, mere brutal repressors of European liberty, a mere army which we [?] coming crashing across Germany in order to restore [?] France. But surely there must be something more to us than what these persons suppose us to be.

The first person who really articulated these doubts and these thoughts was a Russian guards officer called Chaadaev, between 1829 and 1835, and he came to very dismissive conclusions. He said: If other nations have a glorious past, what have we? We have nothing – wandering tribes; after that, Byzantium, decayed Byzantium; after that, debacle[?], after that, the Poles[?]; after that disorder, nothing, darkness, ignorance, brutality, the knout, that's our past. Why are we here at all? What part are we called upon to play in this great world? Perhaps God created us simply as a caution to other nations [*laughter*], to show them how not to be, to show them what not to do.

Well, you can imagine this kind of writing, this kind of breast-beating, which then becomes an absolutely leading[?] thing among Russian intellectuals, this kind of almost exultant self-depreciation, and this painful enquiry about 'Why are we here?', 'Where are we going?', 'What is to be our future?', 'Whither is this enormous country, with its vast wealth, its enormous strength, its huge geographical extent – what is it, what is to become of it?' This kind of problem then becomes, of course, a regular thing with your friends[?]; almost every competent[?] Russian intellectual. Chaadaev, having uttered these sentiments, was promptly declared mad, and a doctor was attached[?] when he was not allowed to leave his house: a regular act on the part of governments of this type when faced with this kind of declaration. [?] now, no. But he did start all the scenes[?] which go to people in Germany. And as a result of this, the young, it seems, to some extent already brought into contact with the West, filled with shame and agony about both the intellectual and above all the moral and social condition of their poor brothers, [?] 95 per cent of the population, began to look for some way of remedying the situation, some way [?]. You must realise that [?] the dangerous ideas of the West were not really allowed to get in, and this also created its own [?].

Take, for example, Paris, where many ideas [?]. Paris [?] the 1830s and 1840s was filled with ideas largely born of the failure, or the relative failure, of the French Revolution; an explanation of why it failed and what you should do in order to obtain those ends for which it was thought the Revolution was fought. Or, on the other hand, of those who thought the French Revolution was a disaster, and how must we stop its dreadful radical effects.

There were a great many conservative, liberal, socialist ideas steaming in Paris at that moment: a great many ideas by Saint-Simon, by [?], by the young Proudhon, this kind of atmosphere to which Marx came comparatively early in his life, in the early 1840s. Where you have an atmosphere where a great many ideas struggle for expression, no one of them, usually, acquires an absolutely blinding domination. They form a kind of field of thought in which

they knock against each other, and inoculate each other. So you have a general field of thought, but no domination.

Russia was exactly the opposite. It was a young nation, fresh, eager, a new generation of young men being educated at the now expanded universities – even the Russians realised that for the problem of coping, even technologically, with the West a higher level of education was needed. And so the universities expanded. Persons not of noble birth began to be admitted. These persons, both these young noblemen and others, lived in an atmosphere of comparative intellectual vacuum.

When you have this situation of a fresh nation, with immense agonised eagerness after knowledge, hunger after knowledge [?], nostalgic yearning after truth, which somehow or other the Churches had failed to provide, certainly their traditions had failed to provide – if you have that, *any* idea which comes wafting across, God knows how, in the false bottom of somebody's suitcase which the censors haven't been able to find, through the oral repetition by some young Russian who'd been to Paris or been to Brussels or been to some centre of Western culture, who then reported what he had read and what he had heard – these ideas acquire an enormous vitality and grow out of all recognition, because they haven't very much to compete with. And if you have a censorship as well, which represses these ideas, they acquire the force of forbidden fruit, which, of course, makes them seem more attractive; with the result that these ideas, in wafting across from the West, grew to enormous size and power among the Russians. Moreover, because political and social thought was in effect forbidden under the repressive government of Nicholas I, they found their way into what were regarded as the safer channels of literature and art; with the result that literature became automatically [?]. That is to say, people who would normally have become social or political pamphleteers wrote novels or poems. And people who would normally write novels or poems became social or political pamphleteers. [?] things became huge, because it was the only outlet for this huge pent-up indignity, exasperated

desire to find some solution to a problem, to discover what to do, how one should live, and so forth.

The voice which really articulated all this was that of the critic Belinsky in the 1840s – or late 1830s, early 1840s. He was a man of humble birth, and therefore [?] experience [?] which [?] were a public matter of social and political discussion [?] of the more advanced persons. He was a man of such sincerity and passion, such immense integrity and purity of life, that he had a very dominant effect upon [?]. And it was really he who created this particular movement. Now, let me explain what he believed and what people [?].

As I say, the natural field for this was art and literature. Now, if you take the West, the normal view, I'll call it the French view, but of course it's a wild simplification [?] – the ordinary Western or French view was that art was simply a product which you possessed. You were an artist. The public expected you to produce something. You were like a carpenter: a table was ordered, you made the best table you could. You were a composer: you produced the most beautiful work of music you could produce. You were a writer: you wrote in the most beautiful words, placed in the best order, about the most, to you, interesting subject. And you hoped [?] talented [?] gifted [?] your composition [?].

This is not, of course, the view of the Romantics, who saw the artist as a kind of sacred instrument for the purpose of spreading the inner soul of the world, some kind of inner reality, which the gross eye of the ordinary critical observer could hardly express. But in Russia, simply because the number of the enlightened [?], these people felt that they were the only people who could talk to each other freely. Whenever you have a situation where you have political repression, and there's [?], you always have a certain solidarity among the liberated, a solidarity among the enlightened, a solidarity among those who *can* read and write, a solidarity among those[?] who [?]. These people began to feel that they had a certain responsibility to their weaker brethren, the responsibility of any man in public to tell the truth.

On the French view, you simply purveyed the object and you made it as attractive to the people, to the audience, to the public as you could. But in Russia the idea that art is an object would be regarded as [?] because that meant that in some way you were compartmentalising [?]. You said: As a writer, I write; as a composer, I compose; and as a man – what do I do as a man? [?] As a writer – if I am Goethe, for example – I may pity poor Gretchen in *Faust* and represent her as an innocent victim of Faust, wrongly condemned to death. But as the advisor to the Grand Duke of Weimar I may sign a great many death warrants of girls who performed exactly the same crimes as Gretchen, without any qualms. It won't do. Man is one, and what he says, he says with the whole of his personality. You cannot divide human beings inside and say: As a father I feel this, and as a writer I feel that. As a citizen I feel this, and as a painter or as a composer I feel that.

This is a view which is genuinely different from that of the average Western writer. If you said to Stendhal that you had discovered that he was a spy for the German government, you wouldn't have regarded that as relevant to the excellence or otherwise of his novels. Even if you had discovered, I think, that Dickens took rack rent from the poor at the time of writing his most moving novels, perhaps it would have done something to weaken his reputation. But the merit of his novels would still have been regarded as undiminished by this. This wasn't so in Russia.

When Herzen said, 'The Russian [?]' – the famous Russian revolutions [?] nineteenth and twenteth century – 'Russian literature is one enormous indictment of Russian life';[2] when the writer Korolenko in the [?], a perfectly decent second- or third-rate novelist and short-story teller, said, 'My home is not Russia, my home is Russian literature',[3] this meant something quite clear [?]. It

[2] More literally, Herzen writes of 'The great indictment drawn up by Russian literature against Russian life': 'Du développement des ideés révolutionnaires en Russie' (1851), A. I. Gertsen, *Sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh* (Moscow, 1954–66), vol. 7, 117.

[3] His exact remark is 'I found my homeland, and this homeland became, first of all, Russian literature.' V. G. Korolenko, *Istoriya moego sovremennika* (1910–22),

meant that Russian literature, which is the literature ultimately of [?] – a literature which tries to defend human rights, a literature which in some way expressed those ideals which were largely not [?] – that was the true home of a writer who thought that to speak the truth without censorship [?] humanity.

It wouldn't have made any sense – you can't imagine Jane Austen saying, 'England is not my country, English literature is my country.' It wouldn't have made any sense even for Henry James to say, 'America is not my country, American literature is.' Nobody would have known what he meant and indeed he wouldn't have said it. But, in the case of Russia, it's very plain what this means. Because literature did become the only escape route[?], the only fence through which the exasperated wound could be [?]. And for this Belinsky is largely responsible, even if it breached unity of theory and practice [?]. He didn't plead for propagandist [?]. He merely said that it was the business of a man whose public wished him to have the temerity, the courage to speak in public on a subject [?]. [?] largely shaped by certain social forces, and lived in a certain kind of society, inevitably, if you told the truth, and told it at a profound enough level, the social implications [?]. There was no need to do this deliberately. All his life [?] the social obligations of the writer. He kept on emphasising the fact that it was no good merely reading ideas in books [?]. That didn't make you live. The argument was that if you lived in a society and didn't want to run away from its realities, then what you said inevitably reflected those realities, whether you meant them to do so or not. And that is what all great writers in some sense did. Shakespeare did [?] civilised Germans inspired all these writers, and even the cold-hearted Goethe, try as he might, nevertheless conveyed the whole texture of contemporary German life, which is why philosophers and other writers had so many quotations from him in their works [?] because he was a kind of encyclopedia of German [?]. [?]. Above all, [?] on the one hand non-detachment [?] those who ran away [?].

part 1 (1910), chapter 27: *Sobranie sochinenii v pyati tomakh* (Leningrad, 1989–91), vol. 4, 270.

Or those on the contrary who submitted to it and said: Life is terrible, but we haven't made it that way [?] you might as well accommodate us. [?] never produce work [?].

The people he admired were those who he said were sons of their time, sons of their country, knew where they were, understood the social situation in which they lived, suffered it in their instincts, in their feelings, in the innermost intestines of their heart and mind [?] works of art because they have a talent for imagery, because they have a talent for writing: without talent, without images nothing would happen. To say of literature [?] interesting, true, important [?].

This is the sermon of this preacher, whose own tormented life bore evidence to his sincerity and depth. He started off by preaching the philosophy of Fichte, which in his case [?] implied the attempt to rise above the darkness of everyday life [?]. He then abandoned this for the philosophy of Schiller, which preached the necessity of resisting tyranny, resisting oppression, and in some way making [?] a vehicle of [?]. He left that. His life is one long series of zigzags, painfully borne, because every time he changed his view he did it in a most agonised way and tried to live it [?] Hegel, who in some way, for him at any rate, preached reconciliation with reality, because once you understood why there was [?], once you understood why Philip II was [?], once you understood why Peter the Great was shaping the people with his own hands, once you understood why Nicholas I had to keep Russia in its straitjacket, because the common people, if they were allowed anywhere near ideas, would become intoxicated by them and go and smash everything up; once you understood this, you were reconciled to it; to understand reality is to understand the great pattern of the universe, to kick against which is a form of childishness and immaturity.

This is a reactionary [?] Belinsky didn't linger in it very long, because, being a morally very sensitive individual, in the [?], in the end, he said, whatever Hegel might say, he was not prepared to put up with every cruelty and abomination of history, simply because some higher harmony demanded it. It's all very well for the higher

harmony, he said. But for us who live below, this is less convenient. [*laughter*] It may be that discords are necessary for some higher harmony, but those who are doomed to instantiating discord in their personal lives cannot be expected to appreciate this point of view. And so he ended up, it doesn't quite matter how he ended up, he ended up as a fairly bourgeois liberal, in fact. But this, I think, is relatively unimportant. The point is, each time he tried to live his philosophy in the most active way, however many friends or enemies it might have made him. But this created a moral image for other Russian writers of what criticism is to do. Let me try to explain. It's really the birth of the theory of criticism.

There were social criticisms in earlier [?]. For someone like Sainte-Beuve, for example, in the eighteenth century, social criticism means knowing about the milieu of the writer, who his parents were, where he went to school, what the social situation was in which he was brought up, what the religious and social or political views were of his time [?].

For someone like Schlegel, social criticism means the perception, in great works of art, of the most typical figures of their time. You looked in Shakespeare for the most rich and full-blooded representatives of the sixteenth century. You looked in Cervantes for the richest and most developed kind of humanity in the Spain of his time. You looked in Dante for something similar. And therefore social criticism is simply the ability to pick out a kind of idealised image of the most typical, the most characteristic, the most important, the most interesting being – artificially compounded – of any age and any time [?] in what way it has expressed itself culturally, in what way it expressed itself socially, in what way it expressed itself morally, and of course [?]? [?] Belinsky is the father of criticism [?]. The sense in which [?]. He really believed in the identity [?], with all that followed.

When, for example, he reviewed *The Vicar of Wakefield* by Goldsmith,[4] which he must have read in the seventeen[?] French

[4] When this lecture was given it was generally assumed by Belinsky scholars that the (unsigned) review of Goldsmith's novel published in *Sovremennik* in

translations, seventeen of the miserable French translations. He certainly read no English, and not much French [?]. He says, 'All very well about the Vicar of Wakefield, but he's represented by Goldsmith as a kind of saintly character on the edges of life, who takes no part in the action at all. The wicked people are people who act. The virtuous people are people who don't do anything, are simply buffeted about by life: victims, innocent, unworldly, rather sweet, but essentially rather impractical victims of the morality of [?]. We can't accept this. This is anti-activist philosophy. The morality of this implies non-action. In some way it is only a reaction. It implies that confrontation, or some kind of Christian resignation, is more important than active interference [?] the full exfoliation of all my talents in the service of whatever I regard as an ideal of my life. I'd rather condemn the poor Vicar of Wakefield. And this was a tremendous piece of moral propaganda of the wrong kind.

This, of course, is an exaggerated attitude, and doesn't tell us much about the Vicar of Wakefield. But it indicates the kind of criticism. When he reviews fifteenth-rate novels, he takes them utterly seriously. He says, 'Maria Nikolaevna in Chapter 1 says this and this and this, but in Chapter 14 she no longer says that [?]. The kind of character that Maria Nikolaevna is, as we all know, must be such and such, therefore the author is doing something immoral here. He's trying to attract the reader's sympathy. He's trying to play with the reader. He's trying to affect the reader's nervous system. He's trying to simply excite the reader. He's trying to sell something to the reader. He's not interested in the truth. He's not [?] deeply into the subject. This is a form of using art simply as a form of amusement, or using art, worse still [?]. This is [?]. This is the worst form of [?] betrayal, which a man attempting to tell the truth [?]. This was roughly speaking the kind of [?] which he [?].

November 1847 (1847 vi no. 1, part 3 ['Russkaya literatura'], 77–86) was by Belinsky. It has since emerged, however, that it was in fact written by A. D. Galakhov, who mentions it in 'Moe sotrudnichestvo v zhurnalakh', *Istoricheskii vestnik* 26 (1886), 312–35, at 323. But Galakhov's attitude echoes Belinsky's closely, and may indeed have been influenced by it.

And it enters very deeply into the heart of even the most [?], and even the most [?].

Let me tell you [?] that this is a real case of boomerang. The problem of what is the subject of art, if you [?] the social function or on the contrary art for art's sake, was something which was raging in Paris in the [?]. Various persons, Saint-Simonians for example, [?], maintained that the purpose of art was [?]. Art for art's sake as a movement was born as a protest against pressure on the artist by outside forces, by the Church, by the state, by the bourgeoisie, by the market. Saint-Simon [?] maintained that whatever you said already conveyed your personality, and was, whether you knew it or not, [?]. Therefore artists might as well realise that their work [?]. They might as well become conscious that everything that has a certain effect on others, is in a certain sense propaganda. And if it is propaganda, you might as well be aware of what it is, and direct it towards [?] namely, the realisation of Saint-Simonian ideals.

Against this there arose someone like Théophile Gauthier, a well-known Romantic poet, [?], who said that it is [?] to try to make of art something useful [?].

> A poem is not a syringe. An epic is not a railway station. A novel is not a pair of shoes. A metonymy will not keep the rain off when you walk: it's not an umbrella. No, no, a thousand times no [he says], by the bowels of all the Popes, dead, living, in the future, let me tell you that what you are saying is absolute nonsense and rubbish. Cretins, fools, ten thousand times no. [5]

This was a very famous instruction by Mademoiselle de Maupin, and it was seen as the greatest manifesto of pure art. This argument between people who believed in art as a social tendency, people like the writer George Sand, and people of that circle, and the art

[5] *Mademoiselle de Maupin: double amour* (Paris, 1835), 41–2 (the preface is dated May 1834). IB plays fast and loose with the text here: for a more accurate version see SR2 254–5; cf. RR2 15.

for art's sake Romantics, like Gautier and his friends, this rage, in the 1830s and the early 1840s, had ultimately fizzled out. By the 1860s, not very much was heard of it [?].

But in Russia it took tremendous root, and [?] it has become the origin of the entire school of Russian fiction. [?] Take someone like Turgenev, who is regarded in the West as the most artistic, the most pure, the most lyrical and the least political of all the great Russian novelists. Turgenev was in love with art as art, and he adored the [?], and he was always saying how little he wished to be involved in the painful and tragic problems of the day, but he [?]. When he wrote *On the Eve*, for example, about the Bulgarian Revolution; still later, when he wrote his famous novel *Fathers and Sons*, the central character of which is the sinister nihilist Bazarov, who despises the whole of accumulated aesthetic civilisation, who believes that only science matters, who dislikes genteel living as such, who shocks and horrifies both his friend, the student, and the student's father, and above all, the student's aesthetic uncle, [?] the violence, and the brute, and the undisguised hostility of his radical sentiments, which says that, more or less, detecting bombs is more useful than reading about the [?] the Russian people, because he wanted the truth, he wanted science, and not all this self-indulgent pretty poetry, and the aesthetic embellishment of life, and so forth. When he wrote this, a storm broke over his head. It broke over his head because the young thought he had caricatured them, and the old thought he had idealised them too much. This is what invariably happens on the part of anyone who seeks to tell the truth in careful terms with a certain degree of unbending integrity, which Turgenev certainly had.

He might have answered all these criticisms. The old criticised him for putting Bazarov on a pedestal, for suddenly producing this crude, violent, nihilistic revolutionary figure whose hatred of the tsarist regime, hatred of liberal life itself, of glorifying him, of making him sinister but at the same time wildly attractive, the large, gigantic figure much bigger than anyone else. The novel puts everybody else to shame. The young, of course, said that he was much too horrified [?] part of their intention to [?]. In a way [?] of

the government, those who fix a new label on the students they didn't like, call them nihilists and punish them for every fire that broke out in Petersburg, for every accident that occurred in Moscow, by saying these were deliberate pieces of revolutionary activity. Turgenev didn't retire by saying, I am a novelist. I simply describe what I find. I am not tempted here. I am not preaching a sermon here. Why are you all against me? I am trying to tell the truth. I am not [?]. I am an honest man, describing the life of others. He did not do this, and couldn't [?] with Belinsky's eye upon him. Belinsky was dead by 1848, before the novel was published, but he was a great friend of Turgenev, and the moral influence which his image had was something indelible [?]. There was this severe stare which hauled them back to some sense of indignity[?] and truth. And above all conveyed[?] all forms of evasion. Evasion above all before coming [?] social danger.

Turgenev tried [?]. He said to the young, [?]. You may go a little too far. But in every other respect, of course, I am on his side. And he wrote endlessly, [?] large number of people [?]. How could they [?]? How could they? [?] Of course, I am on the side of liberty against serfdom. [?] One understood why they were doing it because, of course, [?] Russia was in a terrible condition. Nevertheless, it was clear that our goals were utopian and our methods abominable.

I am not for a moment trying to defend Turgenev, who is a somewhat typical [?] trying to defend himself both ways. The only point I wish to make is he didn't wish to escape into saying: Art is art. What is it to do with politics? Why do you …? I am describing …. How dare you suggest that I am influencing [?] by taking sides? Of course one takes sides. One can't help it. In every sense [?] as I said before, is not possible to neutralise oneself to such an extent which is so far above and therefore has merely produced a so-called objective description which doesn't for one single moment betray the writer's [?]. Yes, I have an attitude, and, if you want to know what it is, I am against revolution, I am against the reactionaries. But I hate the reactionaries, I fear the radicals. I [?] mine.

[?] This is roughly what [?]. I believe in gradualism. I believe in [?]. I believe that if you hurry things, you produce chaos, you produce violence [?]. On the other hand, if this [?] system goes on, then, of course, the revolutions will multiply, the danger of a collapse becomes imminent, and this country, which is supposed to be the most reactionary and [?] and most abominable state in Europe, will deservedly collapse under its own weight. Well [?]. And that was the least, the least [?], as the purest, purest example of an [?], the man about whom [?] the man more [?] than anyone who has ever lived. The man who is looked on by, and is even [?] France by Flaubert, by Maupassant, by Zola as the most perfect artist [?]. Certainly the view of Turgenev as a writer of harmless idylls, of [?] dreamy accounts, [?] descriptions of the Russian countryside, of the Russian peasants, of the Russian squires, is the normal view of Turgenev propagated in the West.

It's inaccurate, because of course every single one of his novels, his bigger novels, has a central political view. It's always concerned with Russia and [?]. One of the characteristics of Russian literature, simply because Russia is [?], because they're so aware of their backward position, because they're so aware of how undeveloped they are [?] Europe, and it fills them with embarrassment, shame and a certain [?] desire to assert themselves, as always happens [?] whether the people are Russians or Asians or Africans, or whoever may be [?] now.

For this reason, the whole of Russian literature is deeply narcissistic. The only literature which is at all comparable [?] the United States of America, [?] not quite so much. All Russian novelists are about Russia, and about Russia [?]. The question of 'Whither Russia?', [?], what do we do about the serf system, what do we do about the tsarist system, what do we do about corruption, what do we do about arbitrary punishment, what do we do about the whole horror of this reactionary regime? This preoccupies us more in one way or another, [?] for it or against it [?]. It would be very odd if Dickens said, 'Whither England?' Balzac didn't say, 'Whither France?' Jane Austen didn't say, 'Whither Hampshire?' or 'Whither Wiltshire?' [?]

This is typical of the Russians, and typical of Turgenev, and typical of these major novelists. The same thing is true of Tolstoy, in a very different way. If you take Tolstoy, for example, he is a man who is not [?]. He is a man who, on the whole, despises [?], ephemeral problems were important is fundamentally wrong. But even Tolstoy is deeply offended by the notion that the novelist has to be responsible. And he [?] that the man, that there is no division between the man and the novelist. You can't say that the novelist may be one thing, but the man another. How dare you ask me what I do as a man? None of your business. [?] I produce novels, you read them. I produce poems, you read them. What I do at home is my relationship to my [?], my wife, my money, is my own affair. This is not a political thing, it's a [?] thing.

Tolstoy has four criteria for what makes a good novel. [?] The first criterion is that you must write well. [?] for Tolstoy this includes writing fairly and truthfully. If you do that, what you write is going to be good. If you are not, [?].

The second criterion is that the problems about which you must write must be of general human importance and not peripheral. They mustn't be trivial. They must concern themselves with what men in general are making [?].

The third criterion is that you mustn't write about what you yourself haven't lived through in some capacity[?] yourself, either [?] or [?]. You mustn't say [?]. Because [?]. You must say what his left eyebrow was doing. You must say what the [?] up against. You must say how he wore his hair. You must say exactly what kind of [?] position [?]. And if you are an artist, people will be scared [?]. You mustn't say [?]. You mustn't ask the reader to play with the [?]. In other words, you mustn't [?]. It must all be done in pure gold. You must be quite clear that everything which you are writing is something for which you have some corresponding theory, either because you've lived through it, or because you've imagined it, in full concrete [?]. You'll find that – for example, the variants of one of his later stories give you an example: *Hadji Murat*, where the images are always being made more and more [?] of horses' feet. At first they seem to remove their feet from the water with a

slight hidden sound. Then comes another image [?] – the final image is, 'They move their feet from within the mud at the bottom of the stream with the sound of the popping of corks.'[6] [*laughter*] [?].

The fourth criterion is that you must understand where the moral centre of inspiration lies. If you don't understand that, you are behaving immorally. Now, in a sense, of course, Tolstoy [?]. And one of the reasons for choosing these criteria was to do down the three most important writers in Russia of his own day. I say this because he did in fact do them down. I don't think it's his motive, but it's awfully plausible to say that he did it. Take, for example, the first criterion, [?] about importance. [?] loathed all these writers, more or less. He says, because [?] an excellent writer. Nobody could deny that he wrote beautiful prose. Moreover, there's no doubt that he experienced everything he writes about. All this life in country houses [?]. And all this love of pretty women [?]. And all these melancholy and sweet thoughts are [?]. But they are of no importance, they are trivial and peripheral. Who wants to know what decaying Russian noblemen think in decaying Russian country houses? What honest workman, what honest peasant [?] of this decayed, melancholy, self-destroying, neurotic – although he didn't call them that – collections of peripheral [?]. The next person asks the question of the fact that you must have suffered it yourself [?]. Of course, these problems are terrible. He's quite right. He's writing about the dark [?] wounds of our society. [?] are marvellous, lucid and effective. Unfortunately, [?]. He's a serf-owner. He won't liberate his own serfs. [?] from an outside point of view. He himself suffers anything when he does it. And this is true of other writers as well. [?] suffers nothing when he writes about [?].

Flaubert is a marvellous writer, you will say. But take, for example, *Saint Julien l'Hospitalier*, the story of St Julian, who [?] the

[6] In the last chapter of the novella (XXV) Tolstoy writes (as translated by Aylmer Maude): 'The horses drew their feet out of the sticky mud into which they sank, with a pop like that of a cork drawn from a bottle.'

leper, and is then – the leper is Jesus Christ, and St Julian [?]. This is the most moving and important religious story [?], and nobody can say it's extremely trivial in any way. The only point is, if it wasn't for Flaubert, supposing that Flaubert [?] supposing that Flaubert would have behaved quite in that way. And this, he says, undermines confidence.

This is precisely what he said about Bernard Shaw, who tried to suck up to him in every possible way, but who refused, and said he was a superficial man. [?] He feels nothing, suffers nothing. There is nothing to lose. This knocks out [?] and quite a large number of other persons.

The final [?] is writing well, which [?], and agonised over everything, unfortunately can't write. [*laughter*] After the first two hundred pages, all the characters are on the stage, the whole thing is then gone through [?].

Well, this is really by the way. The point I'm making is not this one at all, of course. The point that I wish to make is that Tolstoy also felt deeply that [?] of the story had to have some kind of moral centre, otherwise they were no good. He adored Maupassant. He adored him more than any other great writer ever adored anyone. [?] Take the story by Maupassant where a little girl, the daughter of a prostitute, a lot of men come to see her mother and make merry, and the little girl is pleased by all this laughter [?]. And then when she discovers that her mother is [?], the little girl, who is seduced by one of her mother's lovers, becomes a prostitute herself, and that's the end of the story. And Tolstoy says, it's stupid. Apart from the immorality of the story, [?], apart from all that, he says, what must happen [?] the little girl discovered her mother's true profession, still more [?] herself a real prostitute, was obviously an event of the deepest possible moral significance, [?], and critical. For Maupassant [?], no, it's not at all. Life is not like that. This is what happens. [?] nothing happens. This is a form of cheating the reader. It's like something [?]. And when you miss the mark, that's a trick. It's a trick. It's a typical literary trick. And to trick the reader is to fail at the calling of the writer. It's some form of [?], which a

man, a [?] man, is not allowed to do, because it's a form of lying. And lying is out.

This is Tolstoy's moralistic criticism. Of course, it's partly moralistic criticism, but I wish to say that here is Tolstoy, who fundamentally [?], who loathed publicity, who loathed the Revolution, who loathed the ideas which have [?] country by acts of parliament, or by revolutionary action, or by [?]. Everything lay entirely within the spiritual centre of the individual. [?] when it actually comes to criticism, uses the very criteria of integrity, of truth, of what matters, of [?]. And this applies [?]. It applies to [?]. It even applies to the symbolists. The symbolists know what they are. They know what they are like. But even they, while teaching and preaching, are lying about [?], peering into some unknown, through the mists of the spiritual experience [?], the deep spiritual value behind the symbols that somehow [?] reproduce. But still, they were obliged to tell the truth, whatever it is that they seem to have heard, they have written. There was no question of writing for enjoyment, writing for fun, writing to amuse yourself, writing to excite the reader, writing for the thousand and one reasons for which people have written. This [?] by them, as by every Russian, of importance, was regarded as frivolous and [?].

Finally, this is doctrine which, of course, has gone on [?]. In the Soviet Union it has taken a much more utilitarian and much more [?] form. [?] because they thought that people would tell the truth, of course the truth must be in your blood and in your marrow, and [?]. The idea of writing according to the book, or obeying the instructions of the state, of the Church, the party, was to them a formal form of betrayal of your calling. And that is why, when you do get this [?], let's say *Doctor Zhivago*, which is exactly in the tradition of [?], I don't speak of [?], but even the purely imaginative novels, like *Zhivago*, of course, [?], contain a doctrine, [?] in favour of salvation by art, [?], in favour of obscure individuals, not crushed by [?] against the provincial regions, born in an obscure little country, [?] sell out in the fullest possible way. And that is why, quite correctly, the critics of *Novyi mir* criticised [?] doctrine. And they took [?] from earlier times. [?] revolution. And he was

criticised, for example, by the late Mr Deutscher,[7] even more harshly; he said it, he criticised it, for not bringing in the important things that happened during the Revolution. For example, where was [?]? Where were the – that's the point – the important decisions which were made by the Central Committee? [?] about Dickens [?] novelists. Why is there nothing in Dickens about, I don't know, the Durham Report? Why is there nothing in George Eliot about the First International or Karl Marx? Why is there nothing in Shakespeare about [?]? Why is there nothing in Shakespeare about the Dutch Wars? Why is there nothing in Dickens about [?], I don't care what, what, what you would like to say.

He was very [?]. This is what he was criticised for. Nevertheless, it was certainly a right [?] to criticise because no doubt it stands in the tradition of social criticism in which even the most imaginative works are regarded as the entering through the marrow and the blood, as [?] calls it, of the writer himself, of the deepest experience of the time, concerning which he must be sometimes [?]. And a view which is directly antipodean to his opposite one, that of what I call the French [?], namely the view that the artist is simply a creator of something, of an object, of a silver [?], or let us say of a silver bowl. You want a silver bowl, I create a silver bowl. No business of yours what my motive is. No business of those who I am. As Mr T. S. Eliot said, 'Art illuminates by its own inner radiance.'[8] The writer, the biography of the writer [?]. It is at that point [?] at which the whole of our tradition [?] until the present day. And this kind of criticism, which [?] heard about from Communists and many other kinds of critics, [?] in Russia, in [?], due perhaps to [?], but as we think of other Russian ideas, it is simply an idea from France, not taken seriously. There is in France

[7] Isaac Deutscher, 'Pasternak and the Calendar of the Revolution', *Partisan Review* 26 No. 2 (Spring 1959) 248–65; repr. in *Labour Review* 6 No. 1 (Spring 1961), 11–16, 25–8, and in *Ironies of History: Essays on Contemporary Communism* (London, 1966), 248–66.

[8] Eliot spoke of the self-sufficiency of 'the radiance shed' by 'poems themselves' in *The Frontiers of Criticism* (Minneapolis, 1956), 13.

perhaps an idea which wafts across somehow in the writings of M. Pierre Leroux, who is [?] a friend of George Sand, wafts across [?] of one of his ideas, takes root in Russia, and springs into enormous size [?] the rest of the world from then onwards.

Thank you very much.

[*Applause*]

CHAIRMAN [?] It falls to me to express again our deep gratitude for all that we have heard here this afternoon. I would like to bring to your attention the fact that Sir Isaiah is delivering another lecture tomorrow afternoon – or tomorrow evening, at 8:15 in the Totem Park Residences, when the subject of his talk will be the Russian obsession with history and historicism.

Thank you again, Sir Isaiah.

[*Applause*]

University of British Columbia Archives, ***LE3.B8k U54: 142 Tape*** *(see memo on next page)*

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THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

INTERDEPARTMENTAL
MEMORANDUM

TO Mrs L[aurenda] Daniel[l]s, Special Collections, LIBRARY

FROM Prof. F[rank] Beardow, Slavonic Studies, U.B.C.

30 March 1971

Dear Mrs Daniel[l]s,

Returned with thanks Berlin's lectures on tape. We made a copy of 143, i.e. 2nd lecture.

It is impossible to copy 1st lecture since I'm afraid whoever was responsible for the recording did not understand recording techniques or was using faulty equipment. There is so much background noise that it is completely inaudible, which is a pity since it was the better of the two lectures. Just thought you would like to know

FB

Transcript of UBC memo about the poor quality of the recording
UBC Library