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FORUM: THE LEGACY OF ANDREI SINYAVSKY

ANDREI DONATOVICH SINYAVSKY (1925–1997)*

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I remember clearly the first time I saw Andrei Sinyavsky. It was on the occasion of a lecture he delivered at Columbia University in 1978. Before the main gates of the university at 116 Street and Broadway, a lone emigre woman, well along in years, paced stalwartly back and forth, brandishing a handmade poster which read, “*Styd i sram, Tovarishch Abram,*” apparently expressing her outrage at *Strolls with Pushkin*. On the other side of Amsterdam Avenue, Lehman Auditorium in the School of International Affairs was filled to capacity, primarily with emigres expecting, or hoping to provoke, a scandal. Then Sinyavsky himself appeared on stage—already gnome-like, but his hair and beard still ginger-colored—and proceeded to deliver a sober, scholarly lecture on the *Life of Archpriest Avvakum by Himself*. If the audience came expecting Abram Tertz, they found Andrei Sinyavsky.

Tertz was from the very beginning something more than just a pseudonym. Sinyavsky himself gave the most vivid description of his “dark” alter ego in his novel *Goodnight*:

I see him as if it were now, a robber, gambler, son of a bitch, hands in his trousers, moustache like a thread, in a cap flattened to his eyebrows, propelled by a light, rather shuffling gait, with tender interjections of an indecent character on his withered lips, his emaciated body honed in many years of polemics and stylistic contradictions. Intense, irrefutable. He'd slit your throat at the drop of a hat. He'll steal. He'll croak, but he won't betray you. A businesslike man. Capable of writing with a pen (on paper)—with a pen [*perom*], which in thieves' language is a knife, dear children. In a word—a knife. (345)

Sometimes, after a glass of wine or two, Andrei Donatovich would do an imitation of Tertz. The transformation was as striking and comical as it was

* The tributes to Sinyavsky published here originated in a panel entitled “Andrei Sinyavsky: *In Memoriam*,” which was held at the AATSEEL National Conference in Toronto in December 1997 and in which all of the contributors participated.

instantaneous. Slouching his shoulders, letting his perennial cigarette droop from his lips at a rakish angle, shoving his hands into his pockets, and scuffing his feet, Tertz—a wickedly mischievous glint in his eyes—would appear where only a moment before had stood the dignified, kindly, in later years white-bearded figure of Professor Sinyavsky. Andrei Donatovich clearly enjoyed these performances, the role playing—or, to use one of his favorite words for art, the spectacle. And they were certainly memorable illustrations of the liberating power of art—the transformation of the self into text, of Sinyavsky into Tertz—art, which, as Sinyavsky reiterated again and again, is more vivid, brasher, more extravagant than real life, and, most important, unconstrained by the rules and moral imperatives that should and must regulate the flesh-and-blood world outside the text.

Tertz was ever Sinyavsky's greatest, riskiest, and most frequently maligned performance. As Sinyavsky observed in *Goodnight*: "For some reason people, even among my close acquaintances, like Andrei Sinyavsky and don't like Abram Tertz. And I'm used to it; let me hold onto Sinyavsky as an accomplice, as a cover for Tertz, as a playbill. We all need a modest and noble appearance in life" (345). He was right: a lot of people, a lot of Russians, like the woman with the sign at Columbia, did not like Abram Tertz, that literary outlaw, "Jew," and "in your face" outsider, who wrote "with a knife," cutting through the niceties of polite literature.

Yet, whatever their differences, both Sinyavsky and Tertz were very much products of their time, even, perhaps, in their joint ability—to my mind unparalleled by any other Russian cultural figure of the post-Stalin years—to transcend their immediate cultural context. The point of contact between the two was art. Andrei Sinyavsky thus made it clear that his quarrels with his age were aesthetic rather than political, just as he would maintain to the end of his life that his differences with the Soviet authorities and his other ideological opponents were "stylistic."

I was therefore greatly saddened especially by the Western obituaries of Sinyavsky in which he was remembered first and foremost as a political dissident and martyr, his career as a writer mentioned as little more than an afterthought. I was saddened because throughout his life Sinyavsky refused to allow himself to be pigeonholed as a "dissident," at least in a narrow political sense. On the other hand, in a characteristic move to depoliticize and destabilize meaning, he announced in the 1978 essay "Art and Reality" that all artists are dissidents (2) and in the 1986 article "Dissidence as Personal Experience" averred: "In conclusion it remains for me only to reaffirm my 'dissidence.' That's not hard under the avalanche of abuse. In emigration I began to understand that I am not only an enemy of Soviet power, but an enemy in general. An enemy per se. Metaphysically, from the beginning. I'm no one's friend at all, but just an enemy. . ." (146).

I believe that what Sinyavsky meant here by "dissidence," by being an

“enemy per se” is a function of Sinyavsky’s lifelong attempt to wrest art from the sphere of politics, from Gorky’s bloodchilling ultimatum, tacitly inherited by the russophiles who persecuted Sinyavsky in emigration and in the USSR during glasnost, that “any writer who is not with us is against us.” Tertz countered with the plea to be accepted, as he said at his trial, as being not “against,” but simply “different.” If Western postmortems of Sinyavsky’s life tended to err by freezing him in the role of political dissident, of one defined by being “against” the Soviet regime and therefore locked in the very bipolarity Sinyavsky sought to escape, his own fellow countrymen were as likely to condemn him for his refusal to play the conventional role of political dissident, for his “aestheticism,” his impudence, his *différance*.

Those who responded to Tertz’s nonconformity and irreverence over the years with moral indignation sadly missed the point of his “aestheticism,” of Sinyavsky’s insistence that a strict line of demarcation, violated only at dire risk to society, be drawn between art and the world outside it, between the all too vulnerable body and its representation. The essence of Stalinism, for Sinyavsky, lay in the transformation of the world into text, unleashing horrifically destructive forces into everyday life. The antidote he seemed to suggest, through the example of his Tertz works and through his own flagrant self-bifurcation, was to return fantasy and play and violations of decorum to their proper realm of literature, to create, what he called so famously in *On Socialist Realism* “a phantasmagoric art of hypotheses instead of a purpose” (50). What has most frequently been misunderstood about Sinyavsky (as Tertz), even by his admirers, are the ethical implications of his “blasphemous” stance. At the end of *In the Shadow of Gogol* Tertz speaks outright of the sanctity of artistic play, positing yet another paradigm for the artist, the *skomorokhi*: “Only with them will Russian art be saved. . . . This is the artist, become saint, whose sanctity is reckoned in terms of the light and maturity of art. This is the doer whose deeds are exhausted in play and music” (336). In the mindspinning metaphors of his later works, above all *Strolls with Pushkin*, he demonstrates the implications of this stance, which lie in the renunciation of authoritarian discourse, whether it emanate from the Soviet state or from Solzhenitsyn’s writer as “second government.” Perhaps, then, Tertz’s most courageous act was to relinquish control of his own texts, to give them over to the free play of his reader’s imagination, in the process bestowing on his readers that greatest of gifts, giving up that with which Russian writers — with their particular fondness for haranguing, condescending and preaching to a captive audience — have historically been so unwilling to part: sole dominion over the right to legislate meaning. Read “correctly,” Tertz’s texts engage the fantasy and encourage the fanciful, proliferate manifold angles of reading, open the mind, and generously, playfully, even devoutly — in the most luminous sense of that word — invite the

reader to participate as co-author, to break free of the dead weight of totalitarian rote into the liberating realm of redemptive *jouissance*.

The last work Sinyavsky published under the Tertz pseudonym during his lifetime is entitled, "Journey to the Black River" (*Puteshevstvie na chernuiu rechku*). As the invocation of the site of Pushkin's duel in the title indicates, the text is an encounter with the author's death, in both a literal and a figurative sense. For Sinyavsky, unlike for Roland Barthes, the metaphor of the death of the author serves as a trope for the reification of meaning by the scholarly establishment, the transformation of literature into a graveyard:

[T]he 'history of literature' and 'literary criticism' [. . .] does not consist in affixing labels or in promoting or demoting one or another writer in rank. To build and establish a funeral home over a dead literature that has stagnated for so long. With flowers. With orchestras. In crowds of admirers and with wreaths on catafalques. And after cremation to assign the precious ashes to drawers in an enormous, worldwide columbarium? . . . (20)

Tertz conceives his own role as reader-critic-scholar-writer differently:

I imagine myself at night in the cemetery, on the vast Elysian Fields of the history of world literature — as a light shade. What would I do there? Would I weep? They've already been wept for for a hundred years. No, I'd run from monument to monument and would whisper into the ear. Of each one individually: "Wake up! Your time has come! . . ." (20–21)

It is precisely as a "light shade" that I would like us to remember Tertz. This is his legacy to the future — the possibility that his works may serve as a bridge between what has been and readers to come, between the cultural treasures of Russia's tormented past and the uncertain cultural allegiances of the Russia coming into being.

Once a number of years ago while standing with Andrei Donatovich on a back porch as we, exiled from the smoke-free house in Oregon where he and Marya Vasilevna were staying, were puffing away on cigarettes, I screwed up the courage to tell him that I thought he was a great writer. He wordlessly waved my comment aside, perhaps less out of modesty, than out of embarrassment and even superstition. Still, I'm glad I told him. Moreover, at a time when the very notion of "great writer" appears poised on the verge of extinction, I nonetheless believe that there are very rare and very special verbal talents that challenge us constantly to reevaluate the very nature of meaning in ways that can bring us great aesthetic pleasure and deep ethical wisdom. I have no doubt but that Abram Tertz and his alter ego Andrei Sinyavsky were among them.

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