

ROBERT PORTER

JEVGENIJ POPOV AND THE STAGNATION OF SOVIET LITERATURE

The two key words of Michail Gorbačev's rule have, of course, been *perestrojka* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness). These terms have come to stand in clear opposition to the *zastoj* (stagnation) which the Brežnev years have now been widely described as. Yet students of Soviet literature will know that the "stagnation" of the Brežnev years, though restricting and stultifying for creative writers did also see the publication of several very fine works of literature. The "stagnation", which included the persecution of writers, the hounding into emigration of many outstanding talents and the silencing of many others was at the same time complex and contradictory. The anomalies created by the Brežnev years are still very much in evidence under Gorbačev and have engendered yet more anomalies. In the vanguard of the literary revival one sees the very same writers who led the cultural "thaw" of the mid-1950s (Voznesenskij, Jevtušenko, Achmadulina), while the bulk of the literary journals are taken up with publishing a selective backlog of works from the Chruščev years — Anatolij Rybakov's *Children of the Arbat* and Aleksandr Bek's *The New Appointment* being two prominent examples. Thus it is perfectly understandable that one frequently encounters the question both in the West and in Central and Eastern Europe: Where are the *young* writers in the Soviet Union? On a trip to Britain in January 1988 the chief editor of *Novyj mir* Sergej Zalygin was himself well aware of the problem, admitting that his journal was full for the next two years, not least in publishing hitherto unacceptable works such as *Doctor Zhivago*. At the same time he was anxious that *Novyj mir* should not become in his own words „a memorial“ — it should find room for high quality literature of all types and eras, including foreign literature.

Jevgenij Popov is one of several very gifted prose writers who enjoyed a tenuous official existence for part of the "period of stagnation"

and was then effectively silenced at home until the advent of *glasnost*. Born in 1946 he can hardly be representative of the "lost" younger generation, but he does typify that group of writers who were schooled in the Brežnev years, came to the attention of Western readers through *ta-mizat* (publication abroad) and now enjoy official favour and acclaim.

His real debut came with the publication of two short stories in *Novyj mir* in 1976,¹ with an introduction by Vasilij Šukšin. In 1979 he came to the fore once again as one of the editor-contributors to *Metropol*,² the collection of prose and poetry which Soviet writers tried to have published without the encumbrances so characteristic of the time. These writers were roundly defeated and one of the most prominent, Vasilij Aksjonov, joined the third emigration. Jevgenij Popov's contribution to *Metropol* consisted of a "baker's dozen" (*Čertova džužina*) of stories. After that he disappeared from Soviet literary life until 1986, when he published a short story in *Junost* (c. 11 s. 111—112). In 1987 he published collections in *Novyj mir* and *Znamja*.³ In addition to his *Metropol* collection, Western readers were treated to an émigré edition of some of his other stories, entitled *Veselje Rusi*.⁴

It is worth pausing over the connotations of the two titles, "*Čertova džužina*" and "*Veselje Rusi*", neither of which translate very easily into English. "*Čertova Džužina*" does indeed mean "thirteen" or "a baker's dozen", but it is literally "a devil's dozen" and in Popov's case that rendition would certainly be more appropriate. Drunkenness, prostitution, criminality, general irreverence, be it for Russian classical writers or officially sponsored shibboleths, all find their place in the *Metropol* stories. However, what is more in evidence is the *ostensible* incompetence of the narrator. This Gogolian trait becomes the very substance of Popov's art. In jumping from one character to another and back again, introducing seemingly irrelevant details, packing in almost too much incident at the expense of character analysis, philosophy and "necessary" explanations to the reader, Popov in fact displays a rare talent for grasping the essence of life. His world is often comically disgusting. It is always disconcerting and arresting. His quick interplay of juxtapositions call for concentrated reading. Šukšin's warm introduction to his first appearance in *Novyj mir* suggested that Popov should eliminate the "authorial irony" (*etakaja ironičnost avtorskaja*) from his work. Šukšin's stories are themselves noted for their immediacy, but Popov's "rapid fire" techniques clearly are too much for Šukšin.

Veselje Rusi might be translated as *Merry-making in Old Russia*. In

¹ *Novyj mir*, 1976 No 4, p. 164—172.

² *Metropol*. Ed. Aksjonov, V., Bitov, A., Jerofeyev, Vit., Iskander, F., Popov, Jevg., Moskva a Ann Arbor. Ardis 1979.

³ *Novyj mir*, 1987, No 10, p. 97—120 and *Znamja*, 1987, No 5, p. 71—78.

⁴ Popov, Jevg.: *Veselje Rusi*. Ardis 1981.

itself the title is provocative enough in an era that persistently boasts its newness and providence. The thirty-four stories in the collection focus on the seamy side of life in the Soviet Union, as do the *Metropol* and *Novyj mir* 1976 stories. Frequently, the reader is witness to unhappy marriages that somehow survive, or other domestic conflicts. Cohabitation rather than legal conjugality seems to be the order of the day. "Veselje" is, or was, a word used specifically for intoxication at a wedding. "Rus" the pre-Petrine name for Russia, has survived into the twentieth century not least through the poetry of Jesenin and other champions of the rural way of life. The ethos of "Rus" has enjoyed a new lease of life since the late 1950s with the rise of "*village prose*". Yet in Popov the implication is not nostalgia for a pre-technological era, of the kind expressed by that other outstanding Siberian Valentin Rasputin, but rather a defiant assertion that rival attitudes and mores, particularly in Siberia, have for better or worse remained untouched by the blandishments of the technological age.

The title story, not atypically for Popov, has a married couple, advanced in years, in conflict. The opening paragraphs give us a good example of the artistic method the author employs and of the "irony" which, no doubt, Šukšin found at times unsatisfactory:

"It was a bad ending involving suicide that this very strange story came to. He'd read in the morning that alcoholism in our country was more or less finishing, and the whole task now just consisted of making available quarter and half-bottles instead of half-litres, he read this, was reduced to tears by the heartfelt quality of the article, and by evening had upped and got pissed again.

This aggrieved his wife, old Maria Jegipetovna, who received a pension of 32 roubles and took in washing from the neighbouring tenants — young thin-lipped fellows doing their first year as civil aviation pilots.

The pilots enjoyed a very active love life, went out to restaurants and concerts and took taxis everywhere — that was why they required shirts from their laundry woman, snow-white shirts, with stiff starched collars, so that the black tie set against the whiteness gave all around an understanding of the young man's dashing appearance, neatness and strength."⁵

The old man and his wife fall out because of his drinking, he feigns suicide, by suspending himself round the neck with a washing line. The policeman who is called to the scene is so shocked when the "corpse" comes alive that he has to be taken to hospital, and the old man gets fifteen days in prison — the standard punishment for hooliganism, and more appropriate to juvenile than elderly delinquents.

Thus we are fed some faulty information at the outset. The story does not end in suicide. We are told as much if not more about the pilots than

⁵ Ibidem, p. 87.

we are about the two protagonists in the story, though the pilots never re-appear. The implication of the first paragraph that we are to be treated to a moral lesson on alcohol abuse and death is turned inside out. In prison the hero is defiantly self-confident and feels his resentment is justified: „It ain't right. I understand [...] I understand everything [...] I understand everything.“⁶ The inversion of a projected moralising tale is hardly better achieved in Puškin's *The Stationmaster*. There is a compound irony in the title. Not only is the story very amusing and light-hearted (*vesyolyj*); in its way, it depicts the age-old Russian scourge of drunkenness, wife-beating, foul language which one might more readily associate with an era prior to social enlightenment. Yet the story is set in the 1970s (there is a reference to the Luna satellite). The thrust of the story resides in the contrast between petty human disaffection and the peripheral allusions to a grander existence, one of high technology, social graces, sobriety and self-confidence — as displayed by that ostensibly irrelevant paragraph concerning the pilots.

Little has been known of Popov's approach to the creative process. After the *Metropol* affair he did not join the ranks of the dissidents and emigres, so there are no lengthy interviews in the foreign press, and at home in the Soviet Union his silence as far as the Soviet press was concerned was complete. Thus the two lengthy interviews which appeared in *Literaturnaja gazeta* in 1988 gave especially welcome insights into Popov the man, as well as some indication of other items in his *oeuvre*:

“If the aim of a work is to explain that a new machine-tool is better than an old one, then that work is for half-wits and if it's about how it's bad to steal, murder and fornicate then it's plagiarism from the Bible. From here we have the collapse of traditional forms and the search for new ones, which I am sure are closer to the realism of people's life (*narodnaja žizn*) than 'instructive' forms [...] Take the Russian *častuška*, or the 'sacred fairy-tale' of Afanasjev, or the contemporary joke — there is more 'sur' and absurdism in them than in Ionesco, Beckett and Robbe-Grillet' . . . Gone are the days when Lev Tolstoj 'proposed for the people'. A writer can only carry his reader with him by his talent. It is time to abandon the moralistic tone which comes about through 'instructive compositions’.”⁷

In a broader interview later in the year Popov spoke not so much of himself, as of his contemporaries and colleagues. His interlocutor, Sergej Čuprinin, echoed the point about a lost generation of writers: — “People say everything in Russian prose came to an end, either with the “village writers” or with ‘those who are forty years old’, from Makanin and Prochanov to Kurčatkin and Kirejev.”⁸

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 89.

⁷ *Literaturnaja gazeta*, 1988 No. 16, p. 6.

⁸ *Literaturnaja gazeta*, 1988 No 31, p. 5.

The "forty-year-olds" would clearly include Popov though he was more a victim of the period of stagnation than Makanin and the others. The discussion also touched on the practicalities of publishing in the new climate. Now publication at one's own expense was permitted, but again this involved inordinate delays. As Popov put it: "The state publishing houses are choked with manuscripts, and publication at one's own expense is a fiction."

What emerges from these interviews is a portrait of a man who has a strong inclination to absurdist writing, whether of the foreign variety (Becket, Robbe-Grillet) or specifically Russian (Charms, Platonov); moreover, here is a man who is at the same time commonsensical and down-to-earth. In his art these two aspects fuse. A closer discussion of some of his stories will bear this out and demonstrate that in Popov, the era of stagnation and the consequent stagnation of publishing have meant in fact a revitalisation of literary creativity, the fruits of which are now being seen.

Though the term "zastoj" does not figure prominently in his work, it is not difficult to trace elements of stagnation in Popov's stories. Characters are frequently concerned with trivial matters. Their circumstances may change slightly but their attitudes do not. Their joys and anger are short-lived and the Russian spirit does not seem to undergo any great changes. Despite all their violence, eccentricities and the rapid if banal incidents that they encounter, Popov's characters are at bottom complacent, possibly resentful, but ultimately resigned to their fate.

For example the story 'Concerning Katovič the Cat' ends with a pair of drunks, together with the wife and son of one of them, dancing around in the kitchen. Son and mother have persuaded the drinkers not to beat the pet cat. The intended misdemeanour is all the more unsettling for its paltriness. Yet while the situation is defused, the pettiness of all the characters rises to the surface. There is an insistent repetition of epithets such as "quiet" (ticho), "empty" (pusto): — "[...] these quiet people of a huge country. They felt empty they felt stifled, they felt good, they felt jolly" (im bylo pusto, im bylo dušno, im bylo chorošo; im bylo veselo).⁹

The notions here of emptiness and confinement are taken up in a story whose title might be translated as "Nothing at home" (Doma pusto).¹⁰ The hero-narrator qualifies as an engineer, goes off to Aldan in north-east Siberia to build canals, earn high wages and send most of his money home to his mother. On impulse he takes out subscriptions to literary journals for her to save for him. But then he receives a telegram that she is dying. The story is a good deal more complex than this plot summary

⁹ *Metropol*, p. 121.

¹⁰ *Novyj mir*, 1987 No 10, p. 102—105.

suggests. His mother was fed on orthodox literature of an earlier era and is anxious that he should make something of his life, not just become a Soviet petty-bourgeois (Sovetskij meščanin). Yet that is just what the narrator is becoming, while consciously (and apparently successfully) striving against such an outcome. "Nothing at home" is not so much an indictment of the petty-bourgeois values in the individual, nor even merely a challenge to the Soviet petty-bourgeois values so thoroughly examined in Vera Dunham's work in *Stalin's Time*.¹¹ It is more expressly the view that man, even in his most noble moments, is in fact pathetic. Though the story has almost none of the comedy that one usually finds in Popov, it does point to the essential absurdity of life. The deceptive simplicity of the work is something we often encounter in Šukšin's stories.

Popov's absurdist view does not make for a bleak view of mankind: "From an optimistic pessimist I have turned into a pessimistic optimist, who understands very clearly that if we are all going to sit twiddling our thumbs, listening close to 'what's doing on at the top' then the world is going to collapse."¹² At the same time, as we noted earlier, Popov is utterly opposed to the moralistic, didactic method. Indeed, *inversion* of such an approach is one of his hallmarks.

On occasion Popov favours the traditional fairy-tale opening ("Once upon a time"), all the better to destroy the simplistic moral categories that the fairy-story creates, and all the better to dispel any moral that the fairy-story so frequently thrusts upon the reader. "The Drummer and his Drummer-Wife" utilises precisely such inversion, as does "Ruin" (variously in Russian Razzor or Razor): — "Once upon a time there lived a quiet little girl near the Ujar Station on the East-Siberian railway. Her dad turned out to be a right son of a bitch [. . .]"¹³

Father runs off, mother dies, the heroine tries to enter further education, but there are no places, she gets pregnant, a shot-gun wedding ensues and many people at the wedding weep: "From joy, of course. What else?"¹⁴ In this story the girl has married into the class above her, but one can well imagine that the conjugal life to come will bring her little joy, and her marriage will come to resemble those of the older generation that Popov depicts with such mischievous glee. In "Ruin" it is as if Little Red Riding Hood elopes with the Big Bad Wolf. The story is all the more pithy for its realism: Money, career, exams, abortion, domestic altercation all blend to produce a tears-through-laughter effect. The ending to the story might well be seen as an inversion of Gogol's famous phrase.

¹¹ Dunham, V. S.: *In Stalin's Time. Middle Class Values in Soviet Fiction*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1976.

¹² *Literaturnaja gazeta*, 1988, No 16, p. 6.

¹³ 'Razzor' in *Veselye Rust*. 'Razor' in *Literaturnaja gazeta* note 13, which mentions a collection published in a periodical. *Veselye Rust*, p. 7.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

Popov clearly has a lot in common with Zoščenko. His stories are brief yet make liberal use of repetition either to emphasise a character's limited powers of expression or to reinforce the notion of man trapped in a routine. He often addresses his reader directly and colloquially (skaz). He, like Zoščenko, is able to blend the official language of the age with ageless everyday speech and even obscenities, to highlight the gap between ideals and realities. Yet the grotesque element in Zoščenko is something which Popov has developed in his own special way, so that it is difficult if not impossible to classify Popov as a satirist. (Let it be said that do describe Zoščenko as such and no more is to do him also a disservice). However, Zoščenko wrote his poignant stories in the immediate wake of the Russian Revolution and when a new society was under construction. Though there were formidable social problems, they were perfectly tangible, and there was a widespread conviction that life could be improved. In the 1980s the Soviet Union (and the rest of the world) faces problems just as daunting, but if anything more difficult to define. The society that Zoščenko and his contemporaries constructed eventually abolished hunger and illiteracy, but the simplistic policies adopted were colossally expensive in terms of human life and freedom. A society under reconstruction needs the complex talents of writers like Jevgenij Popov if it is to succeed, and if the game is to be worth the candle.

JEVGENIJ POPOV A STAGNACE SOVĚTSKÉ LITERATURY

Jevgenij Popov je jedním z těch sovětských autorů, kteří se vynořili za Brežněvovy vlády a poté se stali obětmi oné doby. Popov byl jedním z redaktorů-příspěvatelů almanachu *Metropol* (1979), jehož vydávání bylo v Sovětském svazu zakázáno, který však vycházel v emigraci. R. 1981 Popov vydal na Západě sbírku povídek. Jeho oficiální odmlčení skončilo r. 1987 zveřejněním jeho díla v časopisech *Novyj mir* a *Znamja*.

Jeho příběhy jsou stručné, ale zároveň složité. Popov v nich používá několika zajímavých tvořivých pomůcek („neschopný vypravěč“, „skaz“ a na povrch bezvýznamný detail) k vytvoření svého osobitého absurdistického stylu psaní.

Jeho díla, často, ale ne vždy komická — líčí banalitu všedního života jako past či léčku, ubíhající po vyježděných kolejkách. Je zde zřejmý rozpor mezi vysokými ideály a všední realitou.

Častým námětem jeho příběhů bývají stinné stránky sovětského života: zločinnost, prostituce, alkoholismus a rodinné rozpory. V rozhovorech s Popovem odhalujeme jeho náklonnost k absurdní literatuře, ale zároveň se nám Popov ukazuje jako praktický a angažovaný člověk. Je proti moralizování v literatuře; často uvádí své příběhy pohádkovým „Byl jednou jeden...“, a poté vyvrací zjednodušená ponaučení a morální kategorie pohádkového žánru.

Nebylo by obtížné porovnat Popova se Zoščenkem. Oba jsou mistři dialogu a „skazu“, oba používají nespolehlivého vypravěče a mísí oficiální žargon s vulgární mluvou. Bylo by však chybě vydávat Popova zjednodušeně za satirika. Jeho komplexní tvorba náleží dokonale společnosti, která provádí komplexní úkoly přestavby.

