

Polemical Remarks about Gorky (1911)¹

Maksim Gorky burst upon the literary scene in Russia in the 1890s with a series of deeply romantic short stories and poems ("Makar Chudra," "Chelkash," "Old Woman Izergil," "Song of the Falcon"). His prolific career spanned more than four decades, during which he produced over thirty volumes of writings. His wide international acclaim was matched by a large following in Russia.

Prior to the October Revolution, Gorky was generally supportive of the Bolshevik Party. In 1917, he became increasingly critical of Bolshevik policy and ended up leaving Russia to live in Italy in 1921. Gorky visited Russia in 1928 and 1929, and finally returned for good in 1931.

The two following articles from 1922 are among Voronsky's earliest works. He would follow closely Gorky's evolution until the writer's death in 1936. Although Gorky would later be turned into a rather bland, socialist-realist icon by official Stalinist literary criticism, his life and works are far more complex than the stereotypes usually offered. Voronsky's articles provide insight into the reception of Gorky's works by young revolutionaries at the turn of the century, and to the development of Voronsky's own critical powers.

Before us stands the old and yet ever new question about the harmonious coexistence of the individual and society - these two hostile elements which have remained at odds, stubbornly and relentlessly, for centuries. And every serious attempt to resolve the debate between the individual and society inevitably attracts one's attention and forces one to listen carefully. Gorky has long been debating and trying to solve the problem of "I" and society, - from the very beginning of his literary activity. This does not mean that he has always defended the same position. Between the Gorky who wrote "Chelkash" and the Gorky who was the author of "Confession" lies a truly enormous distance; Gorky-Chelkash, therefore, is in many ways the opposite of Gorky-Iona. I think that such a change in position is not simply the result of the purely individual peculiarities

¹ Excerpts from the newspaper, "Iasnaia zaria" [Clear Dawn], # 66(72), Tuesday, 11 October 1911.

of his talent, but points to some kind of profound shift in our social life, to an important change in our moods and feelings.

Do you remember, reader, how many deep, fresh feelings and hopes his first works awakened in us? We were captivated in Gorky by the recklessness of courage, by the yearning to shine like a brilliant star or meteor, by the song of a confident young man, proud to be conscious of his own power and strength; we were engrossed by his tales, we believed them without noticing their fantastic nature. Together with Danko we wanted to rip out our seething hearts and illuminate the darkness of the thick forest of our reality; together with the falcon we wanted to soar into the air, if only for an instant; with the stormy petrel we yearned for the tempest.

- Man, - how proudly it sounds!

- Man contains everything, everything for man!

Man and the human personality stood at the center of Gorky's attention. He affirmed human rights, he fought for freedom and for the originality of the individual.

Why was it that we hated his philistines?

For their inability to raise their eyes from the earth to the heavens; for the fact that they sacrificed a yearning to plunge into the thick of things for satiety and mediocre well-being; for their refusal to fight for the right to stand tall, and to recognize themselves as the creators, builders and masters of the earth.

What attracted us to his barefoot and downtrodden people? The fact that they were engaged in elemental protest, that they had cast off the chains which fettered the philistine, that they sang "tragic hymns" of human individuality when they had reached life's lowest depths, that they loved the steppes, the mighty rhythm of surf, and loved to gaze into the skies. We understood Foma Gordeyev and Lunev: we felt close to their mute anguish and discontent, their unconscious yearning to forge a personality out of themselves and find their place in life; we sympathized with their hatred of drab existence and the small change of life.

It is not surprising that Gorky solved the problem of the relationship between the individual and society in favor of the unrestricted rights of man.

A society which places certain demands on each separate member, forcing him to submit and to renounce to one degree or another his inclinations and needs, held little interest for Gorky. His Danko, Falcon and Stormy Petrel gave of themselves, sacrificed their lives, yearned for the storm from the fullness of their being, from the abundance of their energy; - they kept giving, yet asked

nothing, made no claims, and never refused anything. There could be no other question here at all.

A problem emerges only when disagreement begins between man and society, when friction, discord, rivalry or conflicts arise. Danko is too immediate for there to be any question about contradictions between the individual and society. To a certain degree Gorky himself was just as immediate.

But only to a certain degree. With Gorky the question nevertheless came up. Without even recognizing its intricacy and complexity, Gorky cut the Gordian knot both simply and decisively: man first and foremost is a sacred individual and should not be constrained by anything.

It is enough to consider his Chelkash, Satin, and other down-and-out people. In essence they were society's parasites. Yet Gorky reconciled himself with their parasitism, because in his eyes this was neither important nor essential: he didn't measure them by society's standards. The only thing that was important and essential was that his Chelkash characters were original, bold, and as free as the wind in the steppes. It is true that Gorky said: "Create, for you are a man," - but there was nothing definite in these resounding words. So that a man's individuality found it easier to live, or felt freer, Gorky was ready to immerse life in a romantic daydream or reverie, in a golden dream. From the standpoint of social truth and well-being, every golden dream, - which is created in order to take the edge off the horrors and bestial cruelties of life, - is a negative phenomenon, much like hashish or opium.

It is better to have the truth, even if it is cruel. But Gorky approached this problem exclusively with the human individual in mind, and therefore welcomed golden dreams in the name of those who needed them.

If we recall the times before the storm and the moods before the storm, when Gorky began to sing his songs, it becomes clear why he solved the problem, - to the extent that he solved it, - in favor of the individual. After the twilights of the grey Chekhovian days, man began to stand up, began to feel the strength which had accumulated for the struggle for human happiness; he began to feel more confident, became bolder and firmer, raised his head, started to define his place in multi-layered Russian life, - and Gorky reflected this period in his tales and stories. He was the Stormy Petrel of our vague yearnings, of our desire to extract the human personality from oblivion, from the remote areas where it had been cast out.

We were growing up, we were finding ourselves, yet we were still children; like all children we were filled with energy, we were direct and naive, we were proud and conceited. We engaged in sweet reveries, and dreamt enchanted dreams. We wanted to give up our lives joyfully and boldly, to squander them without asking anything for ourselves from those we were helping; we sought no support.

Questions and doubts had not yet arisen, and we were incapable of weighing things carefully. When we were compelled to do so, we considered and calculated while remaining under the influence of the immediate sensation of our fresh and as yet undissipated strength.

Gorky's individualism came from an abundance of energy, from a great yearning to live more freely; he was alone, he had poorly solved the problems of "I" and society, but he contained within him a great deal of young and fresh passion.

Nurmin²

² Nurmin was one of the pseudonyms used by Voronsky.