

## Polemical Remarks about Gorky<sup>1</sup>

During recent years Gorky's name has been linked with the so-called god-building tendency in our literary and social life.

As his talent developed, Gorky gradually shifted from the depiction of down-and-out people to advocates of the new, to fighters for universal human happiness. The first significant work in this realm was the play, "The Enemies." This was followed by: "Mother," "Confession," "Summer," and "[Matvei] Kozhemiakin."

His favorite heroes no longer resemble the rebellious Gordeyevs and Lunevs, consumed with vague and incomprehensible anguish; they have nothing in common with the free and independent bare-foot characters. They harbor no inner feeling of rebellion or discontent. His new heroes have found themselves, determined their place in life, and calmly, confidently are moving towards their goal; they are at peace with life, and filled with feelings of great solidarity with humanity as a whole.

What gives them the strength to renounce their beloved girlfriends, and to endure torment? Why is their gaze fixed on one spot, why do they give their youth and their very lives, and give them matter-of-factly, without much ado, regret or reproach? Gorky finds the answer in the fact that they belong to the great human collective, that they have linked their "I" with the "great populace," and they are able to dissolve this "I" in the ocean of human desires, sorrow and joy.

In Gorky's latest works, there is none of the former individualism, or the deification of the human personality and its rights, none of the individualistic romanticism of golden dreams. On the contrary, happiness, the "meaning of life," and the great lifelong task of man consists of renouncing his personal "I", of merging with the one, all-embracing feeling of love and solidarity with mankind which is tirelessly forging ahead, and of being permeated with this feeling to such a degree as to have no sensation of separation, of being delimited, of one's self. In "Confession," Gorky states directly that unhappiness and evil in life began the moment when the pitiful

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpts from the newspaper, "Iasnaia zaria" [Clear Dawn], # 67 (73), Wednesday, 12 October 1911.

little lump called "I" broke away from the human whole and started to be conscious of its own individuality.

It is not lofty individualism that Gorky advocates, but renunciation of the "self." This is a peculiar kind of pantheism, of life in the collective and through the collective. Mankind, and not man - this is the focus of life. Humanity of the future - this is the god to which man must bow down and pray. To engage in god-building means to create out of the millions of disconnected and isolated "I's" one great, indivisible organism; and no earthly forces will ever be able to destroy it.

In accordance with this outlook, Gorky's new heroes, who have adopted and confirmed their faith, no longer know any doubts; spiritual languor, craving and spiritual yearnings disappear as soon as they have managed to renounce their own pitiful, insignificant "I". They are happy, and have found the highest synthesis of life. On the contrary, the man who is not permeated with this new sensation is pitiful, alone and deprived of living harmony to the extent that he remains outside the purifying flood.

Let us recall the remarkable (from the artistic standpoint) solitary figure of the police constable in "Lethe."

At first glance it might seem that Gorky's pantheism and deification of mankind is indeed the most valuable inclination from the standpoint of social development. Indeed, isn't it by means of developing solidarity that mankind casts off its heavy chains and innumerable fetters? And doesn't the cult of the naked "I" carry with it a stultifying feeling of desolation? And is it not the isolation of human individuals that to a large, if not exceptional, degree explains the fear of death that corrodes the soul like rust corrodes iron? And, on the other hand, don't those who have fully merged with the vanguard of mankind attain the greatest harmony in life?

From the very first days of his literary activity, Gorky developed, grew stronger, and rose ever higher. The years of storm and stress (Sturm und Drang) filled his soul with fresh new currents, and enriched his artistic intuition with new words and feelings. Just see how much warmth and tender love for people there is in his latest, "[Matvei] Kozhemiakin," how divinely written many pages of his "Confession" are, thanks to the anxious love for all living beings that is generously infused into each line and between them as well! With his appeals to humanity and his message of recent years, Gorky has shown what a rich and sensitive soul his talent possesses. But ... here we must insert a significant "but."

There cannot be two opinions about the significance of social impulses, but it is precisely here that not all is well with Gorky.

Pay attention, reader, to the fact that the spirit of great rage, the spirit of war and challenge, with which Gorky was so richly endowed earlier, is almost completely absent in his latest works. What predominates are soft, tender and even tones. Sometimes a slight feeling of exhaustion begins to creep through. His heroes love humanity, but with a passionless, non-rebellious love. Great love fosters great hatred even for the objects of one's love, if it is active, grows boundlessly and develops; where there is development, there will also be contradictions; they must be overcome; this is the key to the eternal movement of life.

The love displayed by Gorky's heroes is devoid of this struggle, it is motionless and doesn't pass through any stages of turbulent change. But how many obstacles are there in actual fact? How difficult it is to love even the best people! How much scum there is in man, what a burden of banality, pettiness, ignorance and arrogance, both in ourselves and in those we must associate with! We must overcome all this. We must tirelessly remake ourselves and others in order to love and be loved.

With Gorky's heroes, however, love is always ready-made, it is fully developed as if it suddenly descended from above, from the lofty summits, instead of being born amidst pain and suffering.

That's the way it is. On the way to a higher synthesis of life, grey clouds always appear, ghosts of the past wander about, strangers from the other world invoke fear, and luxurious gardens beckon with their coolness, languor and sweet tranquility. And the majority of travelers are often ready to throw down their staffs and stop their dangerous ascent; but they recover and, often after an inexpressibly difficult struggle, move forward and upward. This is the struggle that is lacking in Gorky. Three or four years ago, people declared that Gorky was finished. This was dreamt up by a few of our overly venerable critics. But it is true that the absence of the element I have just noted in Gorky's latest works has deprived these writings of the vital, gripping and real sense of truth which is needed by every great artist. The birth pangs of a new world outlook are missing in his novellas and short stories. And, in the final analysis, this is happening, it seems to me, because Gorky needed precisely that ready-made and cloudless love; he needed it in order to achieve the dispersal and dissolution of the "I" which Gorky advocates. At bottom, in the very depths of this dissolution you will find his concern about the "pitiful" lump of clay, about the individual.

In the desire to renounce oneself and to be submerged in a universal pantheistic sensation, one always detects a yearning to cast off the burden of one's "I", the burden of having to worry about it; there is a yearning to find refuge from one's own homelessness, to find support, to walk away from agonizing problems.

All of this can be found in Gorky and in other god-builders, such as Lunacharsky. For doesn't Iona, the wanderer-hero in "Confession," always set out in his searching for a new religion to escape from intimate needs and the torments of his personality, his own "I"? Moreover, why is it that the god-builders point to liberation from solitude and from the fear of death as an argument in favor of new religious consciousness? The very existence of such questions already indicates that something is wrong, and reveals the inner discord of the individual. Only when loneliness arises does one sense the fact of individual annihilation, only then is the question posed. For a well-integrated man, such a question doesn't exist.

In evaluating Gorky's "god-building" from the theoretical and practical standpoints we must say the following.

The problem of the individual and society is resolved by Gorky in the wrong way, by removing one of the opposed elements.

Both ways are equally wrong: to dismiss the individual for the sake of society, or society for the sake of the individual. Our "I" should grow and develop, and its task with regard to society must be to insert the self into social life. Only in such a way can society itself develop; otherwise what lies in store for society is stagnation and immobility. The more richly society is endowed with sharp and clearly defined individuals, the more richly endowed it is with life, and the more rapid will be its development. And on the other hand: the individual, the "I" only grows when it is engaged, when it has vital ties with the social whole. Milieu creates and nourishes the individual. The desire to renounce one's "I", which is found among some of our intelligentsia, appeared as a result of inner discord, a decline in energy and steadfastness in battle, and, - no matter how strange this sounds in assessing god-building, - because the individual renounced society after the period of storm and stress.

Man felt his loneliness, his impending isolation, and tried to create a fetish of society, to deify human relations, in order to therefore keep from losing his links with other people. In conclusion, I repeat. Gorky has made a tremendous step forward from romantic individualism toward solidarity and the growing brotherhood of man. Here he shows the effects of the years of tempestuous struggle. But his god-building, his preaching of a peculiar kind of pantheism, has

been inundated by the squall of inner reaction which we have been living through in recent years.

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