Chapter Thirty-Eight

**How to Write About Lenin – and How Not to**¹

_A Review of Leonard Schapiro and Peter Reddaway (eds.), Lenin: The Man, the Theorist, the Leader_

Discussions of historical method rarely illuminate one crucial point: what kind of _rapport_ must the historian have with his subject if he is to write about it successfully? Clearly, it is not just a matter of a certain sympathy to be felt by the historian for his subject. A certain lack of sympathy may indeed be necessary. But it must be a lack of sympathy of the right kind. For those who intend to write about Lenin there are at least two prerequisites. The first is a sense of scale. One dare not approach greatness of a certain dimension (and what holds of Lenin would hold equally of Robespierre or of Napoleon) without a sense of one’s own limitations. A Lilliputian who sets out to write Gulliver’s biography had best take care. Above all, he dare not be patronising. This danger is not entirely avoided by all the contributors to a new set of essays about Lenin.

The second prerequisite is a sense of tragedy which will enable the historian to feel both the greatness

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and the failure of the October Revolution. Those for whom the whole project of the revolutionary liberation of mankind from exploitation and alienation is an absurd fantasy disqualify themselves from writing about communism in the same way that those who find the notion of the supernatural redemption of the world from sin an outmoded superstition disqualify themselves from writing ecclesiastical history? How much can be achieved nonetheless is witnessed to by Gibbon and by Hume, as well as by their successors; and how much is necessarily missed out is witnessed to at the same time. So far as the October Revolution is concerned, a sense of tragedy is as likely to be obliterated as effectively by the spirit of orthodox hagiography as it is by the philistinism so characteristic of much anti-communism. Indeed, orthodox hagiography has had to ignore entirely the truth about Lenin’s last days.

Among Lenin’s likes were cats, hunting, tidiness, and Pushkin; among his dislikes bohemianism, religion, and Mayakovsky. He once found himself unable to shoot a fox because ‘really she was so beautiful’.

He feared the power of great music to distract his energies and emotions from revolutionary ends. These and other opaque facts about his complex and subtle character are brought out in an excellent essay by Peter Reddaway entitled ‘Literature, the Arts and the Personality of Lenin’. Reddaway also notes the traits singled out by commentators as different as Trotsky, Lunacharsky, and Berdyaev, an overriding simplicity and certainty of revolutionary purpose. ‘Purity of heart’, wrote Kierkegaard, ‘is to will one thing’. It was Lenin’s purity of heart that his opponents could not and his critics cannot bear. This trait has been subject of much misunderstanding. It is often treated as a personal characteristic which Lenin simply happened to have, and so it will appear if it is detached from the theoretical judgements which informed it.

Professor Leonard Schapiro, Mr. Reddaway’s co-editor, stresses Lenin’s ‘fear that the revolution might be “missed”’. As he saw it, compromises, reforms, concessions by the government, a rise in living standards, could all easily operate to postpone or even render impossible or very difficult the revolution predicted by Marx. What Schapiro does not discuss is the question of the source of this fear. To this question there may be a surprising answer.

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3 Kierkegaard 1948, pp. 32, 219.