"The poet and the man are two different natures, though they exist together they may be unconscious of each other, and incapable of deciding upon each other's powers and efforts by any reflex act."

Shelley: "A Defence of Poetry."

In a recent article I tried to follow Belinskii's terminological ramifications in order to establish the basic philosophical and aesthetic unity of his critical thought as a whole. The results indicated that Belinskii's ontology was essentially idealist, and the transformational powers of poetic genius pivotal in his system of idealization. Hence if Belinskii as a literary critic could reduce empirical reality to its significant typical and general forms of being, it was due only to a knowledge and a creative competency he shared with the ontologically and morally inspired poet. To be functioning critically was synonymous with sharing in the poet's powers of ideal poetic perception.

This in itself establishes the romantic nature of Belinskii's conception of the world. For idealism as a spiritual or creative process is by its very definition romantic. An objection by Northrop Frye comes to mind, however: "Poets work with images rather than concepts; hence an historical literary term, such as Romanticism, really belongs to the history of imagery rather than to the history of ideas in the sense of concepts or theses." This would presumably disqualify Belinskii from even being considered within the proper context of romanticism. But Frye contradicted his own notion when he wrote in his Anatomy of Criticism: "For the form of cosmology is clearly much closer to that of poetry, and the thought suggests itself that symmetrical cosmology may be a branch of myth. If so, then it would be, like myth, a structural principal of poetry, whereas in science itself, symmetrical cosmology is exactly what Bacon said it was, an idol of the theatre."

Another objection which might be raised is that Belinskii certainly looked upon himself in his critical writings as an arbiter of the morally right individual or social action. This would make him guilty of a kind of prescriptive utilitarianism whose pragmatism might at first sight suggest that much of the poetic vision had been sacrificed. But Wellek and Warren's comments on the element of propaganda in literature would certainly have been subscribed to by Belinskii himself:

From views that art is discovery or insight into the truth we should distinguish the view that art—specifically literature—is propaganda, the view, that is, that the writer is not the discoverer but the persuasive purveyor of the truth. The term “propaganda” is loose and needs scrutiny. In popular speech, it is applied only to doctrines viewed as pernicious and spread by men whom we distrust. The word implies calculation, intention, and is usually applied to specific, rather restricted doctrines or programs. So limiting the sense of the term, one might say that some art (the lowest kind) is propaganda, but that no great art, or good art, or Art, can possibly be. If, however, we stretch the term to mean “effort, whether conscious or not, to influence readers to share one’s attitude toward life,” then there is plausibility in the contention that all artists are propagandists or should be, or (in complete reversal of the position outlined in the preceding sentence) that all sincere responsible artists are morally obligated to be propagandists.4

Not only would Belinskii have subscribed to this view, but his conviction of the truth of such a statement would have been further complemented in his own critical work where, given his poetic vision, one might add the corollary that not only were all artists propagandists, but that all inspired propagandists were artists or should be—something that Belinskii also believed.

What I am trying to suggest by way of introduction is that a poetic perception characteristic of the lyrical poet need not be confined to metric or rhythmic modes of expression, but might very well spill over into another mode of expression, while retaining its poetic angle of vision. This is of course not to suggest that Tolstoi or Dostoevskii as writers of prose and artists in their own right were strangers to the creative transformation of reality which characterizes the poet, but their prosaic manifestation of it was by necessity different from the poet’s modality of expression. One can also think of writers such as Belyi, Bruisov and Fedor Solugub, who were primarily poets but could on occasion stray into the world of the novel or short story. But a psychologically intriguing group are the writers who express and yet conceal themselves at the same time far more effectively than most, a fact which makes any analysis of their work far more complex. This group of subtle spirits (Gogol’, Babel, Nabokov come to mind) has written in prose, yet with an affinity to the poet’s metaphorical imagination than can be strongly felt by the perceptive reader. I suspect that Belinskii belonged to this last category, infusing his literary criticism with poetic energy and unconsciously or semi-consciously camouflaging his poetic sight with the garb of literary criticism. Or it could possibly be a matter of the critic functioning as a poet manqué.

We know for instance that in 1830 Belinskii was invited by Ivan Lazhechnikov and Mikhail Popov to participate in the creation of a poetry almanac. Belinskii wrote back: