ARTICLE

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THE CASE OF CHUBAROV ALLEY: COLLECTIVE RAPE, UTOPIAN DESIRE AND THE MENTALITY OF NEP*

Societies can be described by the most flagrant infractions of their behavioral codes. Conduct that offends and shocks is conduct to be studied, for it tells us much about the essential core of the collective entity that has identified it as a threat. In 1926 a crime in Leningrad outraged Soviet politicians, pedagogues and factory workers and unleashed a flood of articles on the problems of youth in the transitional period known as the New Economic Policy (NEP). The attacks on this incident, a sordid but seemingly apolitical gang rape, were unprecedented in their bitterness and lack of restraint. It is the very frenzy of the reaction to this event, a frenzy mirroring that of the assault itself, which hints that the crime may provide an instructive opening into the social mentality that constituted NEP.

To many, NEP essentially meant Utopia Postponed. From its very start, NEP was regarded as a necessary compromise with reality, a period of gestation which would eventually lead to the evolution of the ideal society; the shining goal of Socialism was to be reached via a decidedly dimmer, if temporary, market-based detour. There was a fundamental problem with NEP's self-definition, however. In his tragi-comic novel The Sugar German (1925), Sergei Klychkov tells of a powerful king, Akhlamon, the lord of a fantastically rich fool's paradise.

No one has been to the World's end,
No one has seen Akhlamon's land,
And whoever has seen it, though he set out alive,
dead did he return.1

These three playful lines, beginning to describe even as they seek to destroy the possibility of description, wisely point to a paradox that plagues all

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utopian mentalities, including that which tried to reconcile itself to the wisdom of NEP. A constant feature in the description of would-be perfect worlds is the isolation of the ideal kingdom; the authors of utopian projects frequently seek to frame their descriptions with protective narratives. In the very fact of description, however, lies the seed of the utopia's disintegration. The hermetic seal between the ideal, sacred land and the contagious imperfection of the reality known to and constituting the reader is necessarily broken by the mere fact of the text's existence and transmission. In the act of textual intercourse between the dreamer/author and his audience, both parties are fatally infected: the utopian's ideal by contact with an unsatisfactory and intrusive 'real world', the reader by the desire for a state of purity which he cannot help contaminating.\footnote{One might read Dostoevskii's "Dream of a Ridiculous Man," in which contamination arises—inexplicably and apparently as a matter of course—from an outsider's mere presence, as a parable of this process.} Indeed, the utopian enterprise is doomed by the very necessity of being expressed and limited through the non-utopian, historically determined communicative instrument of language. The perfect utopia—a utopia immune to linguistically transmitted diseases—would be like the perfect crime: we would never know about it.\footnote{V. V. Maiakovskii, Sochinenia 3 vols. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1965), 3:522.}

Utopias are infected not only by linguistic but also by historical transmission. The question of how one gets from here to there requires the establishment of a link between the flawed present and the unflawed future (or past). If the utopian, or utopian-inclined, mentality producing a text does not opt for the solution of an unexplored planet or continent but seeks to ground the utopia's genesis in the present, it must deal with the problem of transition. Here two concerns clash: on one hand the future must be ideal, but on the other it must not be utopian in the second sense\footnote{Throughout this paper, the word utopian is used in its primary definition: "an ideal society." The secondary meaning, "a society which cannot exist", should not be imputed unless otherwise stated.} of the word—on some level the consciousness creating the utopia believes that it can be attained.\footnote{Raymond Ruyer argues that a distinctive feature in utopian thought is the combination of fantasy with belief. "L'utopiste doit croire à demi à ses constructions, de même d'ailleurs qu'un joueur doit croir à son jeu . . . Sinon, l'utopie devient pur exercice de la fantaisie poetique." L'utopie et les utopies (Saint-Pierre-de-Salerne: Gérard Monfort, 1988), 25.} Since the present is so imperfect, however, that it must be rejected for "another" reality, the process of transition is fraught with danger and necessarily becomes a period of purging, in which all imperfections of the here-and-now must be destroyed. This persecution of the present is in part a campaign

2. Nor it of us. A "comic" literary parable of this "tragic" meta-literary truth is provided by Maiakovskii's The Bedbug, where the future attempts to protect itself from the past by confining a "resurrected" man in a very special cage: "Don't worry! Four lateral filters keep expressions on the inside of the cage, and only a few words, all perfectly decent, reach the outside." Above the cage, the filters of which are cleaned everyday by special workers in gas masks, hangs a sign: "Watch out for your ears—the creature curses" [\textit{vyražaetsia}, literally meaning "expresses itself"]; V. V. Maiakovskii, Sochinenia 3 vols. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1965), 3:522. Unfortunately, all verbal prophylactics are in vain; the future has already been linguistically infected. There is no such thing as "safe speech."

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