DOUGLAS R. WEINER (Tucson, AZ, USA)

MAN OF PLASTIC: GOR’KIĬ’S
VISIONS OF HUMANS IN NATURE

Introduction: The Meaning of Gor’kii’s “Godbuilding”

On the face of it, it seems strange that Maksim Gor’kii, who chose exile as a protest against what he termed Bolshevik “vulgarity,” elected to return to the Soviet Union for good during the ravages of forced collectivization and man-made famine. Perhaps the degree of his real enthusiasm for “socialist construction” has been underestimated in our efforts to arrive at a “balanced” view that emphasizes his self-appointed role of intercessor for the cultural and scientific intelligentsia or in the nakedly cynical assessment that Gor’kii returned to Russia blandished by the prospect of becoming a “people’s commissar for literature.” Gor’kii’s commitment to a total transformation of human and nonhuman nature—by human reason—was at the core of his intellectual life and opus. By studying what socialism represented to Gor’kii we may perhaps begin to gain a


2. According to Dan Levin’s Stormy Petrel: The Life and Work of Maxim Gorky (New York: Appleton-Century, 1965), pp. 263-73, the crucial moment marking Gor’kii’s decision to return to the USSR came in 1925. Khodasevich, who lived with Gor’kii until moving to Paris that spring, felt that Gor’kii’s need for “the Beautiful Lie” became stronger. Gor’kii was plagued by demoralization and an urge to drink. After the first letter arrived for Gor’kii from Anton Makarenko, founder of the Gor’kii Labor Colony in Poltava, Gor’kii became intrigued with using internment as a means to “remold” those with anti-socialist views. Already in 1926, he eulogized Feliks Edmundovich Dzerzhinskii, founder of the secret police, thus burning bridges with others in emigration (p. 263). After Gor’kii’s final return to Russia, his friend Khodasevich pronounced a sorrowful and weighty judgment: “He finally sold out—not for money, but to preserve the powerful illusion of his life. . . . It was the only thing that could guarantee his reputation during his lifetime as the great proletarian writer and leader and after his death assure him a niche for his ashes in the Kremlin wall. In exchange for that, the Revolution required of him, as it requires of everyone, not honest service, but slavishness and sycophancy. . . . He was transformed into a superintendent of writers.” Ibid., p. 273. It should be emphasized, however, that Levin’s biography overall is the most insightful and subtle examination of Gor’kii’s life. Many of the points of this article were contained in less adumbrated form in Stormy Petrel, although I read that work only after independently developing my own argument.
better understanding of the ways in which Bolshevism resonated in the hearts and minds of its other, less coherent, adepts.

Although Gor'kii trumpeted his belief in rationality, his disaffection with irrational, backward Russian life was, paradoxically, rooted in an emotional reaction to it. In his autobiography *Childhood* he recalls the "abominations of that barbarous Russian life" marked by "repulsiveness" and "the vigorous scum of bestiality with which it is overgrown."3 His attitude towards death ("How ugly and disgusting death is! How hateful!"4) was also strongly colored by emotional revulsion, first of all. As late as 1926, in a letter to Konstantin Fedin, Gor'kii could admit that his commitment to socialism was above all emotional: "I am an old detester of suffering, physical or moral. Both... arouse in me indignation, disgust and even fury. Suffering must be hated, only in this way can one destroy it. It degrades Man, who is a great and tragic being.... Please understand me, I look on this muddle not from the aspect of social chaos, but with the eyes of instinct, the biological power which inspires me with hostility to all suffering."5

There were other, non-rational sources of Gor'kii’s "god building" as well. His impulse to attend university had its source in adolescent fantasies of becoming a scientific miracle-worker. He had pictured himself "as a gray-bearded wizard, creator of means for growing wheat and rye with kernels the size of apples, and potatoes that would weigh a pood apiece — not to speak of numerous other benefactions for this earth, on which life was so confoundedly difficult...."6 in other words, a future Ivan Michurin or Trofim Lysenko. In one of his first essays, which appeared in the *Samarskaia gazeta* on 14 July 1895, Gor'kii commented on an article he had read two years earlier about the encroachment of the Gobi Desert on Russian agricultural lands. Complaining that the authorities had still not taken any measures, he warned that soon the country would be "up to its ears" in sand. "And there, where a country called Russia used to exist, there will be a limitless sandy waste — yellow, empty, and stifling. And steppe wolves will roam about, gaunt with tails tucked under and faces like Samarkand mustard plasters."7

In Gor'kii's youth these strong emotional fears of the wasteland still coexisted with the capacity to be moved by the beauty of wild nature.

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4. Ibid., p. 244.
7. Quoted from M. Gor'kii, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 23 (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1953), p. 16.