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EAST OR WEST - THE CRUCIAL QUESTION OF RUSSIAN CULTURE

[Introduction to the theme "Own and Alien in Russian Culture"]

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East or West?

Russia is between the East and the West. Is it part of the East or of the West? Is it an Eastern threat to the West, or could it be the West's vanguard in the East? Is its geographical position an embarrassment or an advantage in the culture's development? Questions can be put in many ways, and there are no unambiguous answers, even though answers have been given from innumerable perspectives over the centuries, quite often fanatically and one-sidedly, but also fascinatingly.

Christianity came to Russia from the east, from Byzantium, a thousand years ago (988 A.D.). For a long time, the direction from which it came determined the direction of Russian cultural development, and that direction steers it even now. The eastern faith became the true, the orthodox, faith ("pravoslavie") [1]. It was also official, approved, and later felt to be Russia's own. It had to be defended against foreign, false faith. The relationship to the true faith became normative. The orthodox faith's perspective on the world was dichotomous.

Overall, an exceptionally pronounced dichotomization, or dualism, is a characteristic of the whole Russian culture and its development. The entire cultural history can be followed as the development, interaction, and dialectics of dualistic models. Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspenskij, two renowned semioticians who have studied Russian culture, have explained this dualism in Old Russian culture and have created a concept of the dualistic model in connection with it [2]. But, interpreting this model loosely, one can see this model alive throughout Russia's cultural history up to the current time, and in an exceptionally pronounced manner near the end of the millennium.

What are the basic tensions of Russian culture? Between which poles would cultural development be squeezed? See Table of Russian Culture's Opposite Pairs. One could list still more opposite pairs, but this list already generates a variety of associations for everyone interested in Russian culture. A direct line runs from the infidels to the revolutionaries, and from them to the dissidents, of which every time has its own. From revolutionaries to dissidents? Could there be a direct line of development?

For the development of Russian culture there is a characteristic struggle between opposite forces and tendencies. When one side wins, the other never loses entirely, but stays alive, forgotten, pushed to the side, on the culture's periphery, from which, in new historical circumstances, it rises up with a new meaning, for a new use. What was radical becomes conservative; doctrines declared false are true again. The leaders of the one true revolution become traitors to their people and deflectors from the moral path, while the convicted dissident becomes the moral path's official indicator. The examples are endless. One could provocatively say that the fascination of Russian cultural history is precisely in this eventful and kaleidoscopic development. In order to know new phenomena, one has to know history. The new acquires its general impression only in relation to its historical development.

Christianity came to Russia in its Eastern form and has controlled the direction of Russian culture for a millennium, up to the current time. Eastern faith became the true faith, and Western became the false faith. At first, the true faith was actually threatened from the east; however, the Mongols (ca. 1240-1400) [3] did not succeed in destroying Orthodox Russia, which, having overcome the eastern threat, rose to prosperity.

The nature and direction of this prosperity changed completely in the 1700s. Peter the Great changed course to the west and reformed everything, both society and culture, following Western models. The culture condemned as false and old was left on the sidelines, but it did not die; instead, it started to live and smoulder as an underground counterculture, believing in its rightness, holiness, and authenticity, that is, in its Russianness. Peter and his successors were great reformers guided by the spirit of the Enlightenment, and, at the same time, they became autocratic tyrants and their radicalism became the worst sort of conservatism.

This was noticed and brought out by the young noblemen who were favoured by the rulers; these young men were sent to the West to be

educated to become faithful government officials. But, instead, the West provided new revolutionary doctrines that began to threaten Russia. The Russia of the rulers of the 1800s no longer depended on doctrines from the Western Enlightenment, but instead on the old Eastern Russophile holy unity of ruler, church, and people. The threats to it were revolutionary Western doctrines [4] and radicals who, inspired and blinded by these doctrines, wanted to change Russia completely. The doctrines and means of change were various, but their Western origin was fundamental. Those who demanded change were subversives, whose ambitions were smothered by means of exile and execution. The Western path was false and condemned in 19th-century Russia, and those who followed it were dissidents, just as were the Old Believers of the 18th century.

18th-century Russian art was made according to Western moulds. In the 19th century there was a struggle to get free of them. The dissociation was impressive: it gave birth to the world-famous Russian realism [5], which was programmatically Russian and, as such, in opposition to Western phenomena and influences, but which, at the same time, drew its energy from them.

The great rise of Russianness and Russian art (exemplified by A.A Ivanov's Appearance of the Christ to the People, 1837-57) is a very multicultural phenomenon. The borrowings, influences and references cross each other in many directions. This development reached its peak in modernism [6], which developed as a reaction to realism. It was born in order to overthrow realism as outdated and to lead art to a restructuring and a new stage. At the same time it brought forward various Western connections in even the most "Russian" of Russian art.

At the turn of the 20th century, "East or West?" was an especially timely question. The East was a threat: the Mongols were again sweeping towards Russia. The East had to be rejected as un-Russian. On the other hand, the East represented hope: a counterforce to dead Western culture. In order to revive, Western culture needed Russian culture and its strength, the "spiritual revolution". [7] This was realised in Russian modernism with a Western stimulus, but still creating thereby a distinctively Russian avant-garde that travelled at the forefront of European cultural development until the end of the 1920s (see Kandinsky's *Composition VI* and Malevich's *Black Square*).

The 20th-century Russian avant-garde blended European and Russian

influences skilfully. Russian distinctiveness was preserved, even though the proportion of Western influences was large. Russian art made an impression in Western Europe precisely because of its Russianness. It represented new and revolutionary art. It was expected to spring up also in the new Soviet society created by revolution. The 1920s were indeed the great age of the new revolutionary art. A rich interplay of Russian and Western European influences is characteristic of the time. In every field of art, the new Russian art was lively and innovative. An echo of the revolution in form quickly spread to the West, where it can still be heard. In Russia itself, that echo is now being listened to afresh.

Starting in the late 1920s, Russianness was canonized as a stagnant kind of realism and a dogmatic definition of the revolutionary (see Laktionov's Letter from the Front). In the struggle between Russia's moving and stagnant cultures, the stationary side won. It was proclaimed to be genuinely Russian and everything pernicious was proclaimed to be Western. This interpretation reached its most extreme manifestation in the 1940s. Artists were condemned for cosmopolitanism, [8] foreign influences were seen as the antichrist, that is, as the ruin caused by Western capitalism. Whereas Russianness had meant, in 18th- and early 19th-century culture, a lively curiosity and a search for new means, it came to mean, in socialist realism, [9] a sacred dogma as strictly demarcated as the extreme nationalism of the 19th century.

The making of a stagnant and simplistic dogmatic culture was hallowed with the concept of the holy Russian people. Its needs and tastes were proclaimed as the criteria for good art. The rulers and national experts defined these needs and tastes from above, just as had always been done in Russia. The False Dmitris, Boris Godunov, Peter the Great, and Catherine the Great, as well as all the 19th-century tsars, believed they knew the people's needs and will. Both radicals and conservatives embraced the people in the last century. The realists portrayed the people as part of their program and aimed to change their conditions through art.

Russian socialism and Soviet ideology adopted this task and outlook as a guiding principle.

The people became an abstract dogma and an absolute value, which often had very little in common with the people's life and values (see Deinaka's Collective Farm Worker on a Bicycle). Indicating the conflict between values and practise later became a task for art, as well as for history. Socialist

realism pointed to values and practise as an ideal unity, which was Russia's own, sacred and unchangeable. The parallel with strict religious dogmas was clear.

Every Russian monarch swore by the people. Today's political leaders also see themselves as having pursued the people's rights. They are, in fact, all as far removed from the people's needs and situation as the monarchs of any age have been. Socialist dogma and slogans no longer exist, and the phrase, "Honour to the (Soviet) people," is no longer proclaimed by a single neon sign or board of honour. The people are nevertheless appealed to, as earnestly and solemnly as before.

"The best for the people" [10] has led not only monarchs, but also rebels and dissidents. Stenka Razin, Yemilyan Pugachev, Decembrists, narodniks, socialists in tsarist times, Solzhenitsyn, Sakharov, the rural men ("derevenchiki") of the 1970s and -80s, and today's extreme nationalists have been on the people's business, believing they know what the people need and what is best for the people.

In art, this embrace of the people and pursuit of its cause was a concern of socialist realism. In socialist realist theory, non-realistic art was defined as anti-national, alien, and heretical - in short, as unholy. But national elements and their multifaceted use have provided material and a driving force for non-realistic art, too. The power of the early 20th-century avant-garde was its Russianness, even though it did not proclaim this as part of its program. Many of the great trends in early 20th-century art, for instance, symbolism (Vrubel's Demon), futurism (Stepanova's Design for Football Clothes), as well as constructivism (see Tatlin's Model of the Monument to the Third (Communist) International), came to Russia from the West, but they attained a Russian form of expression and reshaped Western European art with the power of that form of expression. Russian theatre and film were, from the beginning of the 20th century, at the forefront of European development as a Russian phenomenon that united its own and the alien in a fresh way.

Conservatives have at various times condemned Western modernism and popular culture as alien. From the 1950s to the 1980s they were often united in a comic fashion. From among the forms of popular culture, perhaps the most typically Western - rock music [11] - quite quickly attained its best Russian manifestation. Lyrics welling out from Russian reality are its best-known trademark - even in the West. Russianness has

attained extreme manifestations in rock, too: rock lyrics sometimes proclaim nationalist-fascist values.

Western elements have come into Russian culture, from the turn of the 18th-century to contemporary rock, by three paths: 1) unoriginal imitation, 2) original Russification, or 3) rigid rejection. The first and third paths have emphasized a strict dualism, while the second path's characteristic has been a multifaceted multilingualism and intertextuality.

The relation to dualistic models and intertextuality has always been emphasized in relation to the culture's own and the alien. Even when working in the West, Solzhenitsyn was Russia's own, although, until the collapse of the Soviet regime, he remained alien to official Russian culture. As "our own alien" he was considered a more important target for attack by the Soviet regime, and heavier weapons had to be aimed at him than at the underground avant-gardists, who had adopted their aesthetic dissidence and rebellion from alien elements, and who started to be a nuisance for socialist realism in the 1950s. These rebels derived their strength from the early 20th-century avant-garde and the currents in Western art.

Aesthetic rebellions and revolutions occur in Russian cultural history in parallel with social ones. In the history of art, "how" is just as essential a question as "what". About both there has been a bitter dispute, to which the question of Russia's own and alien has belonged as an essential part.

The form of 18th-century Russian art was created according to the norms of Western European classicism [12]. Romanticism's [13] formal ideals broke with that set of norms, and realist theory once again demanded a renewal of form. Realism's doctrines were attacked by 20th-century modernism, each of its trends with its own ideals. Although there were large differences in emphasis among the various trends when it came to the relationship between form and content, both were stressed in all trends. Russian formalism [14] in the 1910s and 1920s stressed the centrality of the means of expression. A flourishing in different fields of art - not only visual art, music, and literature, but also theatre and film - came about through the creation of new and revolutionary means of expression. The view was that only with the help of these could revolutionary art's substantive ideals be realised. In the struggle over formal ideals, Russia's own and alien merged with one another. The stimulus for the new means and norms came from the West, but they quickly acquired Russian dress. In 19th-century realism and early 20th-century modernism, Russian art was a

marker of new means of expression.

From the 1930s on, aesthetic ideals counter to socialist realism survived underground. The tradition of modernism was not cut off, though it was officially condemned as corrupting. Art representing different aesthetic ideals appeared in public as soon as the opportunity arose, during the thaw of the 1950s and continually thereafter, even though official cultural politics tried to suppress everything that deviated from the right path. From the late 1950s to the end of the Soviet era, aesthetically rebellious art had an essential place in Russian culture. It emphasized its "underground" aesthetic ideals, which derived their power from Russian modernist tradition, as well as from influences adopted from the West. The tradition and line of the aesthetically rebellious underground [15] is not the same as that of the art based on ideologically active dissidence, though their enemy was a common one, and though the difficulties were similar. The proof of the great importance that art possessed is the fact that travellers on the wrong aesthetic path were subject to continual observation and censorship. During extreme phases the avant-garde of visual art was destroyed by tractors and water pumps [16]. One could still be sentenced to prison camp in the 1970s for engaging in and distributing ideologically unorthodox formalism. House searches were an everyday experience for makers of "incomprehensible" art.

Direct proclamation did not belong in the new avant-garde's means of expression. A proclamation meant a performance for everyone in everyone's name, and the avant-garde cherished their subjective rights and their own territory. Many of today's conservatives in art-life demand a return to the artist's role, lost over the last decade, as an omniscient promulgator and teacher. In the eyes of many, if art does not address the masses or is not the focus of conversation, it is not significant art. Being the focus is a long tradition in Russian art. Is it now a lost tradition?

In addition to the proclamatory function, the Russian artist has always had a function as the questioner of values, norms, and unchanging ways of life. These questions have often been asked with humorous means. This vein runs through Russian cultural history side-by-side with that of serious proclamation. The questioner is a subjective fool listening to his own voice, the "yurodivy" [17], a person considered mad, for whom truth means turning fundamental truths upside down and making fun of them.

The tradition of laughter culture [18] already begins in Old Russian art and

strongly flourishes among today's avant-garde. The Russian artist has expressed himself through grotesque laughter, cutting irony, and riotous parody whenever serious and proclamatory art has been imposed as his one and only proper function. Uninhibited borrowing of different elements and themes and the parodic and ambiguous use of them have always been among humour's means. Making fun of sacred texts and figures was a familiar phenomenon in medieval times in Russia and elsewhere throughout Europe. Parodic quotation, one of the means used by the classic 19th-century humorists, was important in visual art, literature, and music. In early 20th-century modernism, and especially in the art of the 1920s, borrowing and its means stimulated various branches of art. Icons' language of form inspired many modernists in the visual arts (a good example of modernism's way of exploiting the conventions of icon painting is David Burlyuk's *Portrait of the Poet V. Kamenskij*, from 1917)[19]; Russian folk music and canonised classics inspired musical innovators; theatre artists called into question the whole 19th-century performance tradition through parodic quotation; and the film technique of photomontage, developed in Russia, reshaped all of cinema.

For aesthetically directed, underground art of the last few decades, socialist realism has offered an inexhaustible treasure trove of borrowings, and it has been exploited without scruple. Without socialist realism, there would be no Russian conceptualism or "sotsart". Conceptualism (in literature) and "sots-art" (in visual art) are Russian postmodernism's purest manifestations. Both in literature and in the visual arts, conceptualism takes Soviet realism's language and clichés as its subject and seeks, by recycling these clichés, to empty them. This art trend has been topical from the 1970s right up to the end of the 1990s. In literature its most important representatives are Dmitri Prigov and Lev Rubinstein (see more on their texts; in the visual arts, Ilya Kabakov and the team of Vitali Komar & Aleksandr Melamid.[20]

It is only from the clichés of socialist realism that the tradition of grotesque contemporary Russian theatre could grow; rock music scoops up material from Soviet music, both in earnest and in parody; and for recent literature, the normative, hollow, and colourful vocabulary of socialist realism and of the whole socialist way of speaking has been vital.

Art's form and language has been reshaped by means of laughter. Aesthetic creation of the new in Russia, however, also has an ideological content. Creative mockery is naturally also taking an attitude. Does it have any

significance anymore, when the material for, and target of, that mockery have lost their meaning, when the Soviet Union and socialist realism no longer exist? This question has often been posed in recent discussions of art in Russia. The question has been put forward mostly by those who support the traditional concept of art; for them, the duty of art is to depict and to proclaim. Many expect a message and a proclamation from Russian art for the current vacuum of values. Religion, in the form of the official Orthodox church and of all sorts of colourful cults, of secret doctrines and also of mass entertainment of various kinds, has acquired the function of vacuum-filler. Is the time of art, then, over?

Russian postmodernism, which grew out of 1970s and 1980s underground art, does not proclaim values, but rather the bankruptcy of values. It is, however, bound up with values. In this, Russian postmodernism can be seen as differing from Western postmodernism. The skeleton of socialist realism and socialist society, laughed-out and fished-out, symbolises, for many artists, a zero point, from which a new Russian art can emerge. In a situation in which Russia is full of apocalyptic signs of chaos, destruction and the last days - which are important materials for art, as they have been in the past - all blasphemy and questioning is "proclaimed" to be an indication of new possibilities and hope. This is a special feature of the development of Russian art. By alluding, borrowing, or blaspheming, and by scooping its store of elements empty, it emphasises the creation of something its own, something new, something Russian. This Russianness can have extreme nationalistic and conservative features, as well as the appearance of universal relativism indifferent to values. It is, however, emphatically Russian.

The roots of Russian features and forms are in the history of Russian art. The same phenomena and lines of development repeat and, when they rise to the surface, they acquire new forms and expressions. The new is born from rebellion against the old, but it would not be possible without the old. An uprising is also always adoption and borrowing. From these a new creation begins.

It is difficult to predict just what the new, young generation, whose ties to the Soviet era are weak or nonexistent, are going to create at the turn of this millennium. There are still no clear signs of direction. The conditions for creating art have changed completely. Now, even in Russia, the creation of art is in the control of market forces. But the Russian artist can be proud that his art no longer belongs to "the whole nation", that the print runs of

works are not in the millions, but in the range of a few hundred. Russian art's new trends have always started from the interest of a small group of receivers. There is no doubt that this is happening now. A thousand-year tradition will live irrevocably in the next millennium, both as the coming revolt's oppressive object and as a new substrate. What is fascinating in Russian culture is both its quick and passionate change and its eternal unchangingness.

Notes

[1] For more about Orthodoxy in Russia, see the Pravoslavie.ru web pages (English version).

[2] The article mentioned here is Lotman and Uspenskij's classic *Rol' dual'nykh modelej v dinamike russkoj kultury* (Lotman & Uspenskij 1977), which appeared in English in Lotman & Uspenskij 1985. The article's starting point is an investigation of the development of Old Russian culture as a dialectic of opposites. A culture creates its own models and, simultaneously, actively influences its organisational process, its own structure. It organises itself hierarchically, canonising or excluding different texts. According to Lotman and Uspenskij, a fundamental feature in Old Russian culture is the principle of polarity. It is fundamental that the arrival of a new phenomenon never means the complete replacement of the old one. The new does not wipe out the old, though the new phenomena produce a radical collision with the previous. The old remains latent in the new phenomenon - even the old's polemic, its dialogue with the new. In a new cultural period, the new of that period can even be born out of the now-latent old. Each of them was latent in a previous new.

[3] The Mongols destroyed Russia systematically. The sway of the Golden Horde ("zolotaya orda") was cruel. Cities and their cultures were destroyed; for example, Kiev, the first centre of Old Russian culture, was levelled to the ground. The period of the Mongol yoke slowed down political and cultural development. It has been estimated that 11th-century Russia was politically and culturally on the same level as Western Europe, but by the beginning of the 15th century it had been left far behind.

[4] The first Western revolutionary doctrines that spread to Russia were the French Revolution's principles and ideals at the turn of the 19th century. These can be considered to continue to appear in socialist principles in various forms from the utopian socialism of the 1830s and 1840s to the socialism of the last years of the 19th and first years of the 20th century, a theoretical socialism, but one with various practical manifestations, a socialism that reached its peak in Russia with the revolutions of 1917.

[5] Starting in the 1830s, realism raised all branches of Russian art to world fame. Russian realism is also exceptionally bound to its theory, represented most significantly by Vissarion Belinskij (1811-1848). According to Belinskij, 19th-century Russian reality was a legitimate stage in Russia's organic development. The function of art was to objectively depict that reality. For Belinskij, realism implies a comprehensive worldview. Realism is not just copying reality, but reflecting it through, and letting it be controlled by, this worldview.

[6] Modernism is a general title for those artistic trends of the beginning of the 20th century that started from the denial of reality as the primary subject of depiction and which emphasised, instead, the artist's subjective experience and the mediation of that experience's reality. Modernism sought forms of expression for a modern sense of life. Instead of reality being seen as mechanistic, there was a search for inner experience. What was considered interesting were reality's inexplicable dimensions, other realities, subconscious powers and tensions. There were attempts to give a new form to experiences sought from these sources. The most important trends in modernist circles included symbolism, futurism, acmeism, and constructivism.

[7] Many symbolists particularly, above all Andrej Belyj (1880-1934) and Aleksandr Blok (see also) (1880-1921), believed in the revolution as a revolution of spirit ("revolyutsiya dukha"). The spiritually creative powers, maximally applied by the artist, were expected to explode both the creators' and the receivers' consciousness and, along with that, create the world anew. "The real revolutionaries are not Marx and Engels, but rather Strindberg, Ibsen, and Wagner", proclaimed Andrej Belyj in 1918.

[8] From socialist realism's perspective, cosmopolitanism meant the phenomena of Western "decadent art" and the "imitation" of those phenomena, and, in a broader sense, all connections to the Western world. Meeting a stranger, possessing a book, or having bad family origins could lead to denunciation, arrest, and sentencing. (See the word "kosmopolitizm" in *The Big Soviet Encyclopaedia* or *BSE*.)

[9] In 1932, socialist realism was proclaimed as art's leading trend or, as it was defined, "method". Other trends were no longer officially allowed. The method prevailed till the middle of the 1980s ("sotsiyalisticheskij realizm" in *BSE*; "socialist realism" in Wikipedia).

[10] From the 1830s on, the romanticised picture of Russia's people as being, in every sense, better and holier than others acquired a central place in Russia's political, religious, and aesthetic thinking. The "narodniki" movement was born in the 1860s; its name comes from the Russian word "*narod*", or "people". The "narodniki" tried to get the people to take part in social reform activity. The people received teaching and instruction. The revivalist activity, however, was not very successful. Still, the myth of the omniscient people survived and had many manifestations in the course of the 20th century. ("narodnichestvo" in *BSE*; in *Universal'naya Entsiklopediya* or *UE*)

[11] See Tomi Huttunen's article, *Russian Rock: Boris Grebenschikov, Intertextualist*.

[12] The classicist aesthetic prevalent in 18th-century Russian art was strictly normative. Its background was the Enlightenment and its ideals, the vision of art as a part of social activity. The classicist ideal was the enlightened individual, whose actions would be directed by lofty moral principles, a feeling of responsibility, and a useful citizen's strivings. The harmonious person was the ideal, and art's goal was the creation and attainment of harmony.

[13] Romanticism grew in Russia, as in the rest of Europe, in conjunction with national awakening and an interest in the country's own history and popular tradition. In Russia this development was exceptionally visible. Romanticism dominated Russian art from the 1810s to the 1830s, but its traces can also be noticed much later. Romanticism's starting point is a view of the artist as an exceptional individual that has to have the freedom of subjective, creative work. Of utmost importance is the depiction of the inner world, through which outside reality can be attained. Along with the pathos of freedom, there is also a social dimension connected with Russian Romanticism.

[14] Russian formalism was a school of art research in the 1910s and 1920s. Theories produced in its circles have been epochal both in the creation of art and the study of it. The formalists emphasised the priority of art's formal and expressive language. The formalists especially promoted an artwork's structure and sign language.

[15] See Stanislav Savitski's article *Dadaism and Surrealism in Late Socialist Unofficial Culture*.

[16] In 1974 a huge outdoor contemporary art exhibition was arranged in a Moscow suburb; it brought forward the works of artists, both known and unknown, who had broken the boundaries of what was allowed. The choice of an out-of-the-way exhibition space was a protest against institutions obstructing artistic activity. The institutions responded with the support of the government authorities: with tractors and water-spraying street-cleaning trucks. A large number of the works were ruined. This event received a great deal of attention in the Western media.

[17] The *yurodivy*, "God's madman," was a ragamuffin beggar figure that hung around churches and big events; his crazy speech was honoured as being the truth originating from God. In his poverty and weakness, he was seen as being close to God. He was both mocked and honoured. In Russian culture, "yurodivy" figures occupy an important position. In different eras, dissidents who boldly proclaimed the truth were often seen as continuing the "yurodivy" tradition.

[18] The concept of a laughter culture derives from the philosopher and literary scholar, Mihail Bahtin (1895-1970). Bahtin analysed this idea as a special feature in medieval culture and in the work of Dostoevskij. It has since been applied to various eras and cultures. (See especially Bakhtin1929; Bakhtin 1965.

[19] See more of Burlyuk's work.

[20] View Dmitri Prigov's interview (requires QuicktimePlayer). See Komar and Melamid's *People's Choice* project and Russian, Finnish, and Dutch favourite pictures, as well as Russian, Finnish, and Dutch most-hated pictures.

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