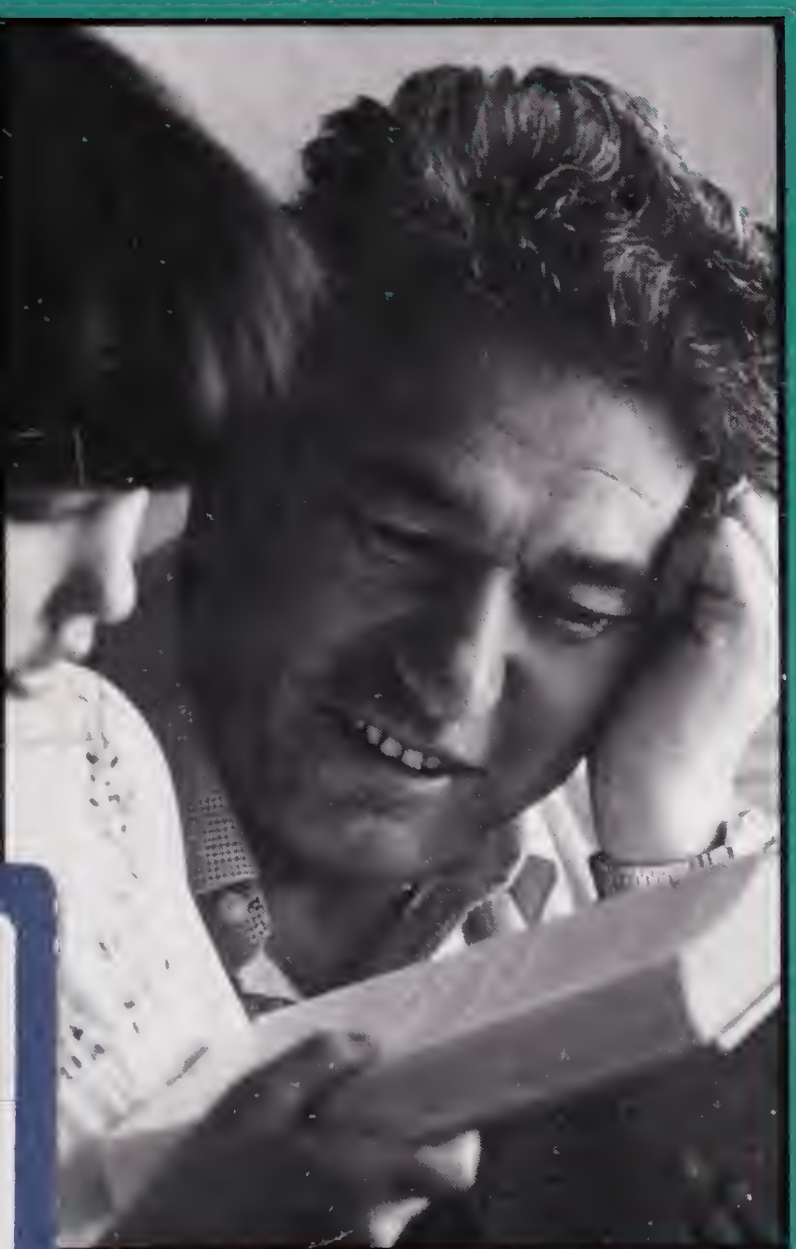
# TIME TO SPEAK



by

Chinghiz

Aitmatov

# TIME TO SPEAK

# TIME TO SPEAK

by Chinghiz Aitmatov

*INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHERS*

*New York*

*Frontispiece*

**Lake Sary-Chelek is part of the Sary-Chelek Wildlife Preserve of 23,868 hectares in Osh Region, Soviet Kirghizia**



By arrangement with Novosti Publishing House (APN), Moscow
Printed in the United States of America

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Aĭtmatov, Chingiz.
[Selections. English]
Time to speak / Chinghiz Aitmatov.
p. cm.

ISBN 0-7178-0669-3 : $7.95
I. Title.
PL65.K59A373 1988 88-28451
894′.3—dc19 CIP

# CONTENTS

"I often visit Sheker—at least two or three times a year. I go there for various reasons; for instance, to attend a wedding or a funeral... I want my children to maintain close links with their native land and fellow countrymen."

# 1

## NOTES ABOUT MYSELF

Writing one's biography for publication is a difficult proposition. Which is best: to write in detail or concisely? People may say it's unnecessarily long, or (if you write little) that there was no need to write at all. The best thing, of course, would be not to begin. Nevertheless, I will make the effort. I am past forty; maybe there is something worth mentioning.

In our village it was one's duty to know one's ancestors down to the seventh generation. Our old men would rigorously question little boys: "Now come here, strong man, what clan are you from, who is your father's father? And his father? And his? And what kind of man was he, what did he do, what do people say about him?" And if a boy did not know his genealogy, his parents were rebuked. What kind of father is it, they would say, without kith or kin? Why is he so careless, how can a person grow without knowing his ancestors? The purpose is to maintain the continuity of generations and mutual moral responsibility within a clan.

I might also begin my biography with what is now known as a "feudal survival." I would say that I am from the Sheker clan. Sheker was the head of our clan. My father is Torekul, his father Aitmat, his father Kimbildi, and his father Konchudzhok. But that is enough. To go further would mean simply to enumerate names about which I know nothing at all. And there are no people who could tell me something about them. Konchudzhok was in fact a nickname of my great great grandfather. All his life he wore *charyki* (shoes made of raw leather) and was therefore called Konchudzhok—one without boot tops, that is, without high

*Soviet Writers, Autobiographies,* v.4, Moscow, *Khudozhestvennaya Literatura Publishers,* 1972

boots. So we derive from "bootless" folk, which is nothing to brag about; but that's how it is.

All this and much of what follows I learned, incidentally, not from my father, who did not live to tell me and who did not have time for such things anyway when he was alive.

I owe all this knowledge primarily to my paternal grandmother, Ayimkan Satan-kyzy, and her daughter, my aunt Karagyz Aitmatova. It is remarkable how much alike mother and daughter can be in their appearance, character and spiritual makeup. They were inseparable for me, like one and the same grandmother in two persons, the old and the young. I thank my stars that I saw and knew these wonderful women, so wise and so beautiful. They were my instructors as regards old times and the family chronicle.

I did not see my grandfather Aitmat, who died somewhere between 1918 and 1920, while I was born in 1928, on December 12th.

An ancient millstone sunk in the ground can still be found in the floodland of the river Kurkureu near our village of Sheker (in the Talas valley, Kirov District). Each year the stone disintegrates further and sinks deeper into the soil. This is where my grandfather's mill was.

They say he was handy with various tools; he could sew and was the first to bring a sewing machine from town, for which he was nicknamed "mashinechi Aitmat" (Aitmat the tailor). He could also make saddles, and could solder and tin dishes; and he played the *komuz* (a stringed musical instrument played by plucking) well and could even read and write the Arabic alphabet. But he was poor all his life despite his enterprising inclinations, was always in debt, and from time to time remained a *jatak*—a non-nomad—for lack of cattle.

Once, Grandfather made a desperate attempt to break away from poverty. He decided to build a water mill in the hope of getting rich on its income. All that he and his brother Birimkul had, the entire property of two families, was invested in the mill. The whole summer of that year the two families spent digging a ditch (it can barely be traced now) to bring water from the Kurkureu to the mill, and building the walls and roof. After a year's work the mill began to operate. But then Aitmat's hard luck struck. There was a fire and the mill was burned down to the ground. All that was left was the millstone. Reduced to utter poverty, Grandfather left the village, together with his twelve-year-old son Torekul, my father, for the construction of a railway tunnel near the Maimak station. From there my father, helped by the

local Russian administration, went to study at a Russian native school in the town of Ailiye-Ata, which is now Jambul.

I am writing all this not just for entertainment, for nothing in this world is without its reason. Had the unfortunate mill not burned down, my Grandfather would not have gone to the railway and my father would likely not have begun studying in town. The fact that in the first revolutionary years my father was already a literate person (later he went to Moscow twice to continue his studies), that he was one of the first Kirghiz Communists, held responsible posts, was keenly interested in politics and literature, and that my mother, Nagima Khamzeyevna Aitmatova, was also a literate and quite modern woman, enabled them to acquaint me from an early age with Russian culture, the Russian language and consequently Russian literature—children's literature to begin with.

On the other hand my grandmother constantly took me to the summer pastures in the mountains. She was an exceptionally charming and intelligent woman, respected by everybody in the village, and to me a real treasure house of fairy tales, old songs and all kinds of true and invented stories. I saw real nomad camping, which disappeared when life became settled. Camping was not simply migration from place to place together with herds and flocks but a major economic and ritual process. It served as an exhibition of the best harness, finest adornments, best riding horses and the perfect stowing on camels of packs and the carpets that covered the load; the showing of the most beautiful girls and the performances of improvising women singers who sang mournful dirges (if a place was being abandoned where a relative had died) or travel songs. I witnessed these impressive spectacles just before they disappeared.

My grandmother probably did not even suspect that she had fostered in me a love for the mother tongue. A great deal has been said about it, but the miracle of native speech is inexplicable. Only native words, learned and cherished since childhood, can fill one's soul with poetry born of the experience of the people, awaken the first stirrings of national pride and bring aesthetic pleasure from the multiple dimensions and meanings of the language of one's ancestors. Childhood is not only a wonderful period of one's life, it is also the kernel of the future human personality. It is in childhood that the genuine knowledge of the mother tongue starts and the child begins to feel his or her connection with and belonging to the surrounding people, the natural environment and a particular culture.

I must say, at least on the strength of my personal experience, that in childhood a person can organically and deeply imbibe two languages, and maybe more, if these languages are used equally from the very first years. To me the Russian language is just as dear as Kirghiz, as it was in childhood, and will always be.

I was five years old when I first had to play the role of interpreter, my first "pay" being a hunk of boiled meat. This happened during summer pasturing in the mountains, where I was, as usual, with my grandmother.

That was a time when the newly formed collective farms were just beginning to operate. That summer a great misfortune befell our camp. A stud horse, which the collective farm had only recently bought, suddenly died. In broad daylight he dropped to the ground with a distended belly. There was panic among the herdsmen, for the horse was a valuable stallion of the Don breed, brought from faraway Russia. A messenger was sent to the collective farm and from there to the district center. A day later a Russian man came up to our mountain pasture. He was tall, with ginger beard and blue eyes, dressed in a black leather coat, with a map case at his side. I remember him very well. He did not know a single word of Kirghiz nor did my countrymen know Russian. But he had to examine the animal's body, decide the causes of its death and write a document. The herdsmen promptly decided that I would be the interpreter.

"Let us go," a herdsman said and took me by the hand. "This man does not speak our language, so you translate what he says to us and tell him what we'll say."

Embarrassed and frightened, I tore my hand away and ran to my grandmother in her yurt (a round tent made of skins and felt). I was followed by a gang of my pals, who were consumed by curiosity. After a while the man came in and complained to my grandmother. She was always very kind, but this time she frowned sternly. "Why don't you want to talk with the newcomer? Big men are asking you, or don't you know the Russian language?"

I was silent. Outside the yurt the children waited for the outcome with bated breath.

"Are you ashamed of speaking Russian or of your own language? All languages are from God, so stop stalling, let us go." Grandmother took me by the hand and led the way. The children followed.

The yurt where fresh mutton was being boiled in honor of the guest was filled with people. They were drinking *koumiss* (fermented mare's milk). The Russian veterinarian sat down with the

elderly wise men. He beckoned me, smiled and said, "Come on in, boy, come here. What is your name?"

I faintly mumbled my name. He stroked my head. "Ask them why the stallion died," he said and produced some paper to write upon.

Everyone waited in silence, but my lips were locked and I could not utter a word. My grandmother sat there in great embarrassment. Then an old man, a relative of ours, put me on his knees. He embraced me closely and whispered into my ear confidentially and very seriously, "This man knows your father. What will he tell him? He will say, 'What a bad boy your son is growing up to be with the Kirghiz!' " Then he loudly declared, "Now he will talk. Tell our guest that this place is called Uu-Saz . . ."

"Uncle," I started timidly, "this place is called Uu-Saz, or poisonous meadow," and then I grew bolder as I saw how happy my grandmother and the newcomer and all who were in the yurt looked now. All my life I will remember that simultaneous translation, word for word in both languages. It was established that the stallion perished from the poisonous grass. Questioned as to why other horses did not eat the grass, our herdsmen explained that the local horses did not touch the grass, knowing that it could not be eaten. All this I translated.

The guest praised me, the elderly men gave me a big hunk of fragrant, steaming boiled meat and I ran from the yurt with a triumphant air. The children surrounded me.

"Well done!" they exclaimed. "You speak Russian as fluently as the river flows, without a stop!" In actual fact I had spoken haltingly, but the children preferred to have it their own way. We ate the meat and ran off to play.

Should such things be mentioned in literary biographies? I think they should. One should begin with the first things one remembers, telling when and how they happened. Some people remember themselves from the age of three while others can hardly remember themselves at ten. I am convinced that all this is very important.

So, my grandmother was very pleased with me and for a long time afterwards proudly told people about the incident.

She adorned my childhood with fairy tales, songs and meetings with folk-tale narrators and bards, and she always took me along whenever she went visiting or attended weddings and funerals. She often told me her dreams, which were so interesting that if she happened to doze for a while I would wake her up, demanding that she tell me what she saw in her dream. I would not be

satisfied with small, short dreams, so she would go to the neighbors "to borrow" a dream. Later I realized that she simply thought them up for me.

Soon my grandmother died and I lived all the time at our home in town. Then I went to school. But two years later I had to return to my native village, this time for a long stay and under difficult circumstances.

In 1937 my father, a Party worker, who at that time attended the Red Professorship Institute in Moscow, was purged. Our family moved to the village. That is when the real school of life, with all its complexities, began for me.

We found shelter with father's sister Karagzy-apa. How happy we were to have her! She replaced grandmother for me. Like her mother, she was handy with the needle and knew many fairy tales and ancient songs and was also highly respected in the village. My mother was seriously ill when we came to the village and remained ill for many years. I was the eldest of four children.

The situation was very difficult, but Karagyz-apa showed us that no matter what calamities may befall a person, he will never be lost so long as he lives among his own people. Not only our clansmen, the Shekers (at that time this "feudal survival" rendered us an invaluable service), but also neighbors and even people who had not known us before did not leave us in the lurch, did not turn away from us. They shared with us everything they had—bread, fuel, potatoes and even warm clothes.

Once, my brother Ilgiz (now a scientist, director of the Institute of Physics and Mechanics of Mining of the Academy of Sciences of the Kirghiz Republic) and I were collecting firewood in the field. A horseman turned towards us from the road. He rode in a fine horse and was well dressed.

"Whose sons are you?" he asked.

Aunt Karagyz-apa always taught us that in such cases we should tell people our father's name without lowering our heads, looking straight into people's eyes. We boys felt very keenly about everything that was written then about our father, and Karagyz-apa had great compassion for us. Though illiterate, this woman somehow understood that it was all a lie, that what was alleged was impossible. But she could not explain her conviction. By this time I had already read books about Soviet counterintelligence men and dreamed about being sent to catch some spy and catching him and dying in order to prove my father's innocence.

Well, the man who had turned from the road asked us whose children we were. And although it was a torture to me I did not lower my eyes and pronounced our family name.

"What is that book?" he asked.

It was a geography textbook, as I remember, which I carried tucked under my belt. He had a look at the book and said, "Do you want to go to school?"

What a question! We nodded our heads while biting our lips to keep from crying.

"Good, you will study!" And he rode away.

In a week's time we were already going to school. The man who had talked to us was Usubaly Tynaliev, one of our schoolmasters. I was in the class of woman teacher Inkamal Joloyeva, who was very sympathetic to me in those days.

I began to work early: I tilled land from the age of ten. A year later we moved to the district center, the Russian village of Kirovskoye. Mother began to work there as an accountant. Once again I went to a Russian school.

Life had begun to settle somehow when the war broke out.

In 1942 I had to quit school for Mother was unable to support us all.

Once again I was in my village of Sheker, which was burdened and impoverished by war hardships. I was appointed secretary of the village Soviet as the most literate of the teenagers—no one else could be found for the job. I was fourteen years old.

In my childhood I had known life from its bright, poetic side, but now it stood before me as grim, undisguised, sorrowful and heroic. I saw my people in different conditions, at the moment of gravest danger for our homeland, of greatest strain on all our spiritual and physical forces. I was compelled and in duty bound to see all that, for I knew every family on the territory of the village Soviet, every member of each family, and I knew by heart the scant possessions of every house. I learned life from various sides, watched its different manifestations.

Then I became a tax agent of the district financial department, collecting taxes from the population. I wished I had known beforehand how difficult it would be in those hungry war years. It was such a torture to me that after one year, in August 1944, I quit the job without permission—for which I barely escaped being tried by court—and started working as accounting clerk of a tractor team harvesting grain.

As the war continued, more and more pages of the people's life opened before me, a very young man. Having finished eight years of general school in 1946, I entered the zoo-veterinary secondary school in Jambul. I spent the whole of my field practice in 1947 and 1948 in my own village, where I could observe from outside,

as it were, the postwar changes in the life of people near and dear to me.

Upon graduating from secondary school with excellent marks I was enrolled at the Kirghiz Agricultural Institute, from which I also graduated with distinction.

I loved literature from childhood. In school I willingly wrote compositions on freely chosen topics and at the institute I realized that imaginative literature attracted me most of all. I sought answers to my questions in the best works of literature of that time.

It was my great wish that impressive and powerful books should be written about the war, about people's exploits during the war years. The subject had not yet been properly covered by Kirghiz literature, and I wanted Kirghiz readers to be able to read the best books about the war. So, at my own risk, I began to translate *The Regiment's Son* by Valentin Kataev and *The White Birch* by Semyon Babaevsky, without having the slightest idea what literary translation is and how books are published.

When I brought my translations to a publishing house, I was told that those books had long since been translated and would soon be published. That was a very bitter experience, but it was exactly how I began my literary work.

As a student I wrote short notes, articles and essays for newspapers. After the institute I worked as a zoo technician. At that time I had already begun to write short stories. In 1956, I left for Moscow to study literature. I benefited greatly from the Higher Literary Courses in my two years there, and not only in the general educational and theoretical fields; our seminars and discussions were a good school for polishing our creative skills. I also sought to benefit from what was best in the cultural life of Moscow, both in literature and the theater. Having finished the courses, I edited the magazine *Literary Kirghizstan,* then worked for five years as *Pravda*'s correspondent in Kirghizia. This broadened the scope of my observations and helped me to learn more about life as well.

A writer certainly must have a natural gift to think in an artistic manner. However, the shaping of one's talent and personality is affected by the social environment and by the spiritual riches and cultural traditions of that environment, as well as by its world outlook and the political structure inherent in it. For us, this environment is Soviet society, the socialist system, the communist world outlook, and these are what determine the content the Soviet writers' works.

Needless to say, the awarding of the Lenin Prize to me in 1963

for the book *Tales of Mountains and Steppes* was a great event in my life. I am thankful to the Soviet people for this supreme honor.

No one becomes a writer just by himself; the experiences of predecessors enter an artist's creative world long before he becomes aware of his literary inclinations. It is true that far from all of us are destined to make real discoveries along the difficult road of art. This will depend on one's talent and breadth of vision. Often we will be marking time or sliding back in terms of mastery, depth of thought and strength of images. This seems to be the development of the literary process—complex, protracted, uneven and at times hard to explain.

Literature should selflessly bear its cross, describing the complexities of life so that people can know, love and care for things that are kind, good and worthy in each of us, and in people and society at large. This is the true purpose of art. And I strongly believe that so it will always be, since people seek in art confirmation of their best strivings and negation of everything that is evil and unjust, what contradicts their social and moral ideals. This is inevitably accompanied by struggle, doubts and hopes. And this, it seems, will last forever. Therefore, art is destined over and over again to tell us about the complexity and beauty of life.

I do not know what my creative future will be, whether I will be able to produce something interesting. We shall see what we shall see.

"If they would ask me which of the great Kirghizes I know, I would name first the MANAS narrator Sayakbai Karalayev."

# 2

## HE KNEW A MILLION LINES

Several years ago I had an article entitled "He knows a million lines from the ocean-like *Manas*" in the magazine *Soviet Union*. It was about Sayakbai Karalayev, the outstanding narrator of the *Manas* epic. Life has made a sad correction in the title: "He knew a million lines. . . ." Yes, unfortunately we now speak of him in the past tense.

Sayakbai Karalayev was buried the day before yesterday. This is an immense and irreparable loss for Kirghiz culture, for he was an artist of national importance.

The *Manas* epic has not always been what it is today. The creative genius of the Kirghiz people has been developing it for centuries, drawing on their history, their vision of the world, and their poetic talent. In some epoch long ago the tale of *Manas* appeared like a little spring. The spring became a mighty river whose banks grew broader until a turbulent sea of folk poetry was formed in Kirghizia. It was during this period of the flowering of that poetry and its greatest might that Sayakbai Karalayev learned and assimilated the epic.

To be able to embrace the entire depth and breadth of this tale of ancient times, a bard had to possess a keen intellect, phenomenal memory, colossal fantasy and artistic talent. Such was our Sayakbai Karalayev, who devoted his whole life to the art of *Manas*.

And now he is no more. He flared up and died away like a comet. Will a star equal to Sayakbai Karalayev ever kindle again in the firmament of *Manas?* One looks with hope among the people,

*Sovetskaya Kirghizia,* May 12, 1971

for they alone can produce a creative person like our genius Karalayev; perhaps a new Sayakbai Karalayev is still in the cradle or perhaps he is yet to be born!

As we say farewell to the great bard, I would like to include the following article from *Sovetskaya Kirghizia,* written about Sayakbai Karalayev during his lifetime.

* * *

For more than three decades Kirghiz scholars have been recording and systematizing the ancient heroic epic *Manas.* As one leafs through the abridged four-volume version today, one wonders how a people who had no written language could manage to preserve such a mammoth poetic epic through the centuries.

The Kirghiz are one of the most ancient peoples of Central Asia, who have reached an exceptionally high level of epic culture over the many centuries of their history. The prolonged existence of a nomad people in very specific historical conditions (an absence of a written language and pictorial art, and a constant struggle with strong feudal states for freedom and independence) coupled with great poetic talent led to the emergence and development of the oral epic genre. The Kirghiz put into their epics what many other peoples depicted in historical narrations, in literature, theater, painting and sculpture.

Today ten out of the fifteen so-called smaller Kirghiz epics that have reached us in oral form have been published. Each numbers hundreds of thousands of lines of verse and each is original in its content, describing various aspects of life and the destinies of people and nations. *Kodjojash,* for instance, is an ancient dramatic poem about a hunter, his veneration of nature and his struggle with the elements. *Oljobai and Kishimjan* is a lyrical tale, a kind of Romeo and Juliet drama of the steppes. *Kedey-kan* ("Khan From Among the Poor") tells of a social utopia.

But the greatest of all Kirghiz epics is certainly *Manas.* It is a striking work of art.

The epic *Manas* is like an ocean. In length, it exceeds all other epics known to the world. There are eleven versions of *Manas,* some of which number over 700,000 rhymed lines. In terms of the wide range of phenomena in life that *Manas* embraces, it holds a leading place among the world's epics. Its chief theme is the struggle of the Kirghiz people against foreign invaders, and it glorifies the legendary strong man, *Manas,* who rallied together the disjointed Kirghiz tribes. But along with the heroic battle scenes, much attention in the epic is devoted to various everyday aspects of human life. The artistic and informative ranges of

*Manas* are amazingly broad and varied. It includes lyrical, social and moral themes as well as the knowledge the ancient Kirghiz possessed in geography, medicine, architecture, astronomy and warfare. The epic has a rich gamut of artistic forms and genres, ranging from the simplest satire and humor to tragic heights that astound one with the great suffering of human beings. Primordial realism is intertwined with fairy-tale fantasy, and symbolism and didactics with profound psychological analysis; philosophy coexists with belief in magic and miracles; intimate sentiments take the form of great passions of the heart, while love is subordinated to the clan and the patriarchal interests of the feudal community. *Manas* is the immense world of the past of the Kirghiz people, a grand artistic canvas painted by the people onto the panorama of world culture.

The epic was handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. It is rare for a Kirghiz to be unfamiliar with the story of the strong man Manas. The people have preserved the memory of the best narrators—*manaschi*—for centuries. This explains the appearance in our day of such a phenomenal artist as the bard Sayakbai Karalayev. This 70-year-old wise man lived a glorious life. During the civil war he fought in the ranks of the Red partisans against Admiral Kolchak's White troops in Siberia. He would recite excerpts from *Manas* as he rode in the saddle or sat near a bonfire during rest stops. He recalled that people who had not the slightest knowledge of the Kirghiz language could listen to *Manas* for hours. This proves that Karalayev was an exceptionally talented actor. On his return home he became the best known *Manas* narrator in all Kirghizia.

The Kazakh writer Mukhtar Auezov, an authority on the world's epics, called Karalayev a "legendary epic poet," a "modern Homer," a "rhapsodist of the 20th century." This expression of admiration is by no means excessive. It would be hard to find another person who knows by heart nearly a million lines of verse. It took years, even decades, to write down Karalayev's recital of one version of *Manas* and of other "smaller" epics.

As one looks at Karalayev, at his changing face and gestures and the expression of his eyes, as one listens to this man who possesses an exceptional gift of artistic transformation, it seems as if he himself personifies the epic. It is as though the winds of the past have blown across his entire figure. The events of days gone by, the human emotions, ancient wisdom, sorrow, the good and evil of distant times, are gathered and act in one person. Karalayev's performance is full of spiritual tension: rhythms, passion and inspiration are mixed together with anguish and sorrow,

while pain and tears are interwoven with determination and courage. And then once again reflection, laughter and tears.

Once I went with Karalayev to visit a collective farm in the Chu Valley. The news of Karalayev's arrival quickly spread to neighboring villages, and people hurried to go to the collective farm from the fields and livestock farms in trucks, cars and tractors. There were far too many people to fit them all in the collective farm's club, so Karalayev performed right in the street. A chair was put on a knoll for him, while his listeners accommodated themselves as best they could—right on the ground, in trucks or in the saddle. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a thunder cloud appeared and it began to rain ferociously. Karalayev did not stop his performance, nor did a single person run for shelter. The people listened to *Manas* in the pouring rain, entranced by the bard's singing. This is something I will never forget.

If I were asked to name the great men of my people, I think I would begin with Karalayev.

Of course everyone is proud of the history and creative achievements of his own people. But when I think of the *Manas* epic, I am especially proud that it has now become a treasure of Soviet culture shared by all the peoples of our country. The *Manas* epic has a history of over a thousand years, but only in Soviet times was it first written down and published. Large sections of it have been translated into Russian, which has made it possible to add *Manas* to the treasure-house of world culture.

In our time *Manas* is living a second life in the form of books, operas and other stage performances, and Kirghiz filmmakers are preparing to make a film based on the epic.

# 3

## THE SNOWS OF THE MANAS-ATA

I often visit Sheker, two or three times a year, for there is always an occasion—a wedding or a funeral. And I try to teach my sons, who are inveterate town dwellers, to be as close to my countrymen and relatives. I do not know how successful I will be in this, for times seem to be changing.

Our Sheker is a big, well-established Kirghiz village with more than 300 households. Whenever I come there, I see new houses and homesteads; the village is growing. It stands in a prominent place, "at the head of the water," in the local saying, in the foothills of the Talas Ridge, opposite a great double-top mountain, facing the Manas peak. Manas rode on horseback up that tall mountain to have a look around and to make sure that enemies did not threaten. (It is easy to imagine how vast a space Manas could view from that height. The scale is truly epic. This is how the people of ancient times wanted to see their son and hero Manas.) Be that as it may, it is from there, from the perpetual snow of the Manas, that the turbulent and ice-cold Kurkureu runs into the valley, bringing water and hence life to everything that lives on this land . . . .

I am always excited when, approaching Sheker, I see the blue-white snows of the Manas sparkling with patches of sunlight at that inaccessible height. If you cut yourself off from everything and gaze for a time at this mountaintop, into the sky, then time loses its meaning. The past vanishes. Nothing has happened, nothing has changed, everything in the world is the way it was ten, twenty, maybe a hundred or a thousand years ago. The Manas stands on Earth the way it has always stood. And the clouds are

*Ogonyok,* 1975, No. 19

floating above it as before, the same clouds. And you yourself are that same little boy who, running out of the house in the morning, enjoyed the sight of the mountain high above the village. Alas, one can revel in dreams only for a minute or two . . .

This time I am more than usually agitated by my trip to Sheker and for good reasons, too. The editorial board of *Ogonyok* magazine asked me to write an article about my fellow villagers of the war years. At first I was not sure I had something to write about, for the rear is after all only the rear. War means the front and fighting, the rest being of less importance. These doubts persisted on my way to Sheker, but as I came closer to it and saw the perpetual snows of the Manas, I recalled a lot of things.

There was much to remember. My childhood, the war and postwar years, were spent in this area, then known as the Sheker village Soviet. I recalled people of that time. They—toilers, peasants and activists—were much like any other people in any collective or state farm. When I think about war today I see every one of them as if spotlighted by the events of the war years. I remember the rallies in the first years of war. Common responsibility for the destiny of the country became personal. Straight from the rallies, columns of volunteers started from the district center for the front. This was essential. Everybody, important or not, found his or her historical place at the front or in the rear in the great struggle. Yes, historical. No other word fits.

That is why whenever we say "before the war," "after the war," "during the war," these are not simply conventional phrases. More than merely chronicling life, these words denote to me a time of stark comprehension of life, a time when our society acquired experience that became a value of world significance. Because war was not only a global historical landmark that divided the 20th century into two parts—the prewar and postwar periods of mankind's development—but also each person's destiny, the lot of anyone who lived at that time, the measure of one's actions and moral values. The war faced literally everyone; I don't know anybody who evaded it and those who tried to do so inevitably faced the people themselves, for this concerned their common destiny and there could be no exceptions. The war demanded total commitment.

I was thirteen years old when the war started and the discovery of the big world began for my generation. I can hardly believe today that at the age of fourteen I was already working as secretary of the village Soviet. I had to decide, with a war going on, quite complicated social and administrative questions. At the time

this seemed nothing out of the ordinary. Lads who finished the seventh grade in 1941 worked as teachers of junior grades. They would receive their higher education after the war. My brother Ilghiz is three years my junior. Throughout the war, he studied at school and was also the village mailman. I am proud of him. He was a fine boy and a conscientious postman in that hard time. The barefoot, thin eleven-year-old—today such a one would probably not be allowed to go to the next street—ran for many kilometers, crossing a river on his way, to the neighboring village, where the post office was, to get the soldiers' letters and the newspapers that he would read aloud for people working in the fields. At the age of fifteen, at the request of a general meeting of the Dzhiyde collective farm, he was awarded the medal "For Valorous Work During the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945," which he certainly deserved.

But this is not the point. The fact is that he and I, like many adolescents of the war years, owe all the best of what we did and what we are to adults who educated us by word and deed, by their own example.

I remember once being called out of my home in the winter of 1942. Kenesh, the village Soviet's messenger, had come for me on horseback.

"Climb onto the horse, sonny," he said. "The top people want you. Must be something important." He pulled one leg out of the stirrup and lifted me to the saddle. Thus we started on our way, with me sitting behind him.

Kenesh was also an interesting person. Though his real name was Ibrahim everybody in our area called him Kenesh. The word "kenesh," which derives from the word "Soviet" in Kirghiz, in this case meant Soviet power. The poorest of the poor, he had been the first in the village to raise his voice for the power of the downtrodden, for Soviet power, and was the first member of the Land Laborers' Committee in the early years after the Revolution. This illiterate farmhand became famous for his fiery speeches in favor of Soviet power at all big and small meetings. He always added that he wanted nothing special for himself personally. "A piece of bread for me and a wisp of hay for my horse. I need nothing more. And I will work for Soviet power day and night until I drop dead from the saddle." He gave up his last goat when the subscription for war bonds was conducted. So he worked till the end of his days as a messenger and voluntary propagandist and one can say that he died practically in the saddle. To this day people living on the Manas slopes remember him with gratitude, admiration and wonder. During the war Kenesh was already an

old man but his active and passionate nature was not subdued, and several times I witnessed his vigorous speeches at meetings. One could feel his old Laborers' Committee spirit; his words flowed from his heart, from his soul, and ignited other hearts . . .

So such was the man who brought me to the village Soviet. Three men sat in the cold, unheated room that had a mud floor and little windows with broken glass. The one in a huge sheepskin coat, a grey-bearded, towering, middle-aged shepherd from Archagul, a neighboring village across the river, was Kabylbek Turdubaev, the new chairman of the village Soviet, who replaced a man who had gone to the front. The other two in soldier's greatcoats were men wounded at the front: collective farm chairman Alisher Aidarov, who had recently returned from the front, one hand still bandaged, and secretary of the village Soviet, Kalyi Nukeev, his crutches propped against the wall.

"You will have to leave school for a while," Turdubaev told me. "You'll catch up later, after the war. Because Kalyi here will become a team leader"—he nodded towards Nukeev. "Although with his crutches he would be more in place as a secretary. But you understand yourself that the collective farm cannot do without a team leader. And there is no one besides him. I myself am semi-literate. All my life I have only tended cattle. I need an able assistant. So we have decided you are suitable for the job."

Thus I became secretary of the village Soviet. Archagul, the village across the river, was also under our administration. For two big villages in the perils of war times, we had a chairman who had come right from a sheep flock, and as secretary—a schoolboy; such was the situation. But life was going on and various matters demanded attention and solution. There was much work to do.

My scholarly knowledge was scanty. For instance, one paper from the district Soviet prescribed "malenization" to be effected on the territory of our village Soviet. The veterinary term meant a medical treatment for horses. But I told Turdubaev that "mobilization" of all horses had been ordered. At that, he went black in the face: "How shall we manage in the collective farm without draft animals?"

So he and I hastened to the district center, which was at the village of Kirovskoye forty kilometers away. We started out at midnight and arrived there in great agitation. They explained to us what was meant and confusion was great. I was mortified still further when I had to mount my horse on leaving the district Soviet. The horse was quite tall while I was quite short, dressed in a heavy sheepskin coat with a belt, and a fur hat, for it was winter.

Garbed in this way, I just could not reach the stirrup with my foot. Time was short, for we had to call at the bank. While I was dancing about trying to reach for the stirrup, Turdubaev, a strong man, lifted me and put me into the saddle. My humiliation was great. What kind of secretary of a village Soviet is it who has to be lifted to the saddle like a baby?

"I'm not going to work this way," I stated angrily.

"No one has noticed," Turdubaev assured me. "But work you will have to. You should also study further. As soon as the war ends, off you go to school. And now let us move on."

Now that many years have passed, I thank my stars that almost from childhood I was lucky enough to meet interesting, worthy people. One of them was my chairman of the rural Soviet, wise *aksakal* Turdubaev, a former shepherd. About a year and a half later, when educated men—wounded officers—came to the village, Turdubaev returned to his accustomed occupation. We met once, much later, at the funeral feast for a person near to both of us, got to talking and recalled, of course, our joint work at the village Soviet. I thought the old man would start joking about that period, saying that it is better a small fish than an empty dish, or something to that effect. But no, our talk was quite serious. "I often ask myself," he said, "whether we did everything properly at that time."

To do everything properly during those hard times meant to do a lot. Mobilizations followed one another—to the front, to the labor army, to the mines, to timber-felling sites and even to the Chu Canal, the construction of which was continued even in those years. We did not limit ourselves to handing summonses to people and noting them in our books. Turdubaev deemed it his duty to talk to every person and his family, to persuade and comfort them, to help them in every way; he always addressed the people who were leaving with parting wishes and often accompanied them to the district center and the military commissariat, staying with them till the moment of send-off. Several times he entrusted this mission to me, though I could hardly cope with it. No matter how serious the situation, I tried to comport myself properly, but I was only a boy after all.

I remember one particular case. A shepherd who was called up to the labor army failed to appear in time at the village Soviet to go from there to the district center. He told the messenger that he would not go. So I had to go to him. The man met me at his threshold, angry and irritated. Honestly speaking, he was right. For a whole year he tended the flock, moving from place to place with his family. He and his wife did the job of four shepherds. He

got nothing for his work at the collective farm, and now he was being mobilized. When he came down from the mountains to his deserted house in the village, he had neither fuel nor clothing, nor fodder for his cow.

"How can I go, how can I leave them!" he said, pointing to the little children and his sick wife, who lay in a corner covered with a sheepskin coat.

Though I did not know what to do, I realized that the law was the law and had to be obeyed.

"You go and we shall look after them," I assured him sincerely, though I had no idea what I could do for the family.

The shepherd smiled sadly: "Is it you who is going to look after them?"

"Yes, I, our village Soviet . . ."

"All right, boy," he said with a sigh. "You go now, and I'll manage somehow. Go, there's nowhere I can go. I will arrange things for them somehow, then I'll be ready to go even to the end of the earth."

I was greatly depressed by all this. When I returned to the village Soviet and told Turdubaev what I had seen, he frowned darkly. He kept squeezing his beard in his hand, as was his custom.

"What do you suggest?" he inquired in a rather anguished tone.

"Help them," I said. "They need fuel, hay, and they hardly have any flour. The children are cold and look hungry."

"I know myself that they need all this. But you have promised in the name of the village Soviet, so you must make your promise good. Otherwise people won't believe us. Go to the chairman of the collective farm and make sure that they provide a buggy and supply the family with hay, and straw for fuel. Make them weigh out some flour and potatoes. The man has to go to the labor army tomorrow, and he must know that there is Soviet power here. Even if one of us is too old and the other too small, still it is power."

It was no simple matter to squeeze out of the collective-farm chairman what was needed. He was in the wrong mood to begin with. He had more than enough troubles of his own. He was responsible for everything, beginning with the provision of the planned output. He heard from all sides: give this, give that! And there was no one telling the collective farm: take this! The only demand was to give! But to be able to give, one has to work, and there was almost nobody who could do the work. So we had neither time nor people to deliver hay or straw to the needy! A man is leaving for the labor army? Let him, he is not the only one.

The whole country is fighting. All families are needy, everybody is hard up . . .

I had certainly chosen a bad moment to approach the chairman. He was seething with chagrin and resentment. But I insisted, arguing and begging as best I could. In my despair I was ready to grab a pitchfork, for the argument was taking place in the stable yard. Then I was told: Here are the horses, there is the harness; straw is in the field near the threshing floor, hay is in ricks, but there is nobody to carry it, so you manage yourself, the best you can." I dashed to the horses, harnessed them, threw a couple of pitchforks into a cart and rumbled out into the street. I had to make haste, for the winter days were short.

In the street I stopped near the house of my cousin Paizbek Mombekov, who lived with his relatives. His father was in the army, his mother had died, and Paizbek himself, about fifteen years old, was a teacher at our school. I was lucky to find him at home. Together we drove into the fields for straw. We piled up a huge stack, but the cart fell on its side soon after we began to move. So we changed the harness, then put the cart right with great difficulty. Then we stacked the hay back. We drove into the shepherd's yard close to evening when it was still light. I could see that many trees in his kitchen garden were cut at the root. He was felling one tree after another. He went on with his job as we threw the straw down.

When he came up to us he was all sweaty and his back was steaming. We kept silent. Then he said: "Thank you, boys. I have cut my poplars for firewood. They will dry a little and can be used later, when I am gone. It's a pity, for the trees were very young. Never mind. After the war, God willing, we shall plant and grow new ones."

I gave him a paper with the chairman's order to issue flour and potatoes to his family. I remember exactly—eight kilograms of flour and twenty kilograms of potatoes. And I said that we would bring hay the next morning.

"Excuse me, sonny, for my outburst when you first came," the abashed shepherd said. "I was frightened: my children are quite small and my wife has recently been ill very often. She caught cold in the mountains. Otherwise I wouldn't have spoken the way I did . . ."

Paizbek and I brought a saw in the evening and spent much time sawing the felled poplars into logs to be split into firewood later. I came home very late, fighting off dogs in the streets. I slept badly that night for I was afraid of oversleeping. Early in the morning I had to check the mustering of the mobilized men and their send-

off to the district center. But there was more than that to keep me awake. All kinds of thoughts crowded in my head.

I thought of the war. Formerly I had visualized it as incessant machine-gunning and endless exploits, enemies falling in bundles and all our men left unscathed . . . The naive childish illusion was now ruthlessly collapsing. Almost every other day the village Soviet received "black papers" (killed-in-battle notices) from the front. One man, then another, then one more died the death of a hero . . . The most dreadful thing was to carry the horrible news to the families of the killed men. And although the terrible fact had already been announced with due dignity by white-bearded *aksakals,* and the whole village had wept for the fallen men, it was I who had to bring the black paper to the home of each stricken family. This was not done immediately but after the initial explosions of sorrow and despair. Still, it was a torture to take out of the official map case inherited from the previous secretary a small, printed paper, the size of one's palm, with a military stamp and the signatures of majors, captains and other staff members. There were only a few lines of text. I would read them in a low voice, translate them into Kirghiz, and then fall silent. Then I would hear a hard, hollow sigh, as if a mound of small rocks had started with a rustle to slide and roll down a mountain slope. I could not raise my eyes, though I was guilty of nothing. I would hand over the paper and say: "Hide it away." Here the stifled, feeble crying of the mother would burst into spasmodic sobbing, followed by weeping. Had the piece of paper come in place of the live son?

I could neither stand up nor go away, nor could I console them. What words of consolation could I find? At such moments I wanted to dash out of the house, grab a machine gun—yes, a machine gun, nothing less—and run directly to the front from which the paper had come. And there, shrieking with furious wrath, I would shoot the fascists with long bursts from the inexhaustible and constantly clattering machine gun. But I knew it was only a dream. Who would give a machine gun to a boy, especially so short a one? I ought at least to be a little taller . . .

Finally I would go away, crushed by the sorrow of people dear to me. Go away with the village Soviet's map case, containing still more killed-in-action notices, slung on my shoulder. The map case, the kind that traveling officials carried before the war, had belonged to the older brother, Aitaaly, of my fellow countryman, now the well-known Kirghiz writer Ashim Dzhakypbekov, chief editor of the *Kirghizfilm* study. Aitaaly, a sociable fellow, who did not shun junior-grade Ashim and us children, had organized military games and gone hiking with us. Then he grew up, matured

into an adult, and shortly before the war he began to work as secretary of the village Soviet.

When the former secretary was handing the files over to me he asked, "Have you got a case to carry papers in?" Of course I had no case; we went to school with our books tucked under our belts. Then he produced the map case filled with old papers, from the bottom of a drawer. "Here, take this. Aitaaly's case has been lying here since he left it when he went into the army. Come on, take it. You can't carry papers in your hands."

That's how I got the map case. I discovered in it various business notes, old receipts, undelivered tickets for various taxes, and also a letter in verse, a declaration of love, *Ashyktyk kat,* as the title said. Aitaaly must have failed to hand it to the girl to whom it was written. I did not know what to do with it, for there was no name, just the initials of the girl. I thought it improper to show the letter to anyone and in my naiveté and inexperience I tore it up. Afterwards I regretted this bitterly. I realized how rashly I had acted when I had to carry in the map case the notice of Aitaaly's death at the front . . .

My duties included the distribution among the soldiers' families, in keeping with a special list, of tiny bundles of crude matches made by an artisans' cooperative, soap manufactured in the same way and cut into microscopic fragments, thread, and kerosene—a "quarter" of a liter per family.

Privations, hardships, sufferings. Was there no limit to all that? Weren't these trials enough? But people displayed boundless courage, which cannot be expressed in words, not bowing in the face of war. No matter how hard it was, when it seemed there was no more strength to bear the mounting troubles and the burden of hardships, when human patience seemed at an end, people still fought back, still did over and over again everything that depended on them.

Much has been said about our women in the war years. They have been justly and worthily praised as toilers and mothers. Still, were I a sculptor or an artist I would devote my whole life to fashioning the image of the great figure of the 20th century, the woman of the war years, in which I would seek to embody my gratitude, admiration, pride and compassion.

Once an artist appeared at our village Soviet. The middle-aged man was paid with flour for portraits of our best women team leaders (Stakhanovites). Beautiful Asia Dubanaeva, the best of them, who was talkative and always happy, looked quite different in the portrait, both like and unlike herself. We stood next to the artist watching him paint a young and beautiful face with eyes full

of alarm and sorrow. Someone told him that Asia did not look like herself.

"She looks like all women who are waiting for their husbands," he replied.

"Unfortunately, our Asia was not destined to meet her husband again. Years rolled by while she worked and waited, waited and worked.

Adolescents stood side by side with the women to carry on their puny shoulders the man-sized burden of growing grain for our daily bread. The twelve- or thirteen-year-olds of that time became plowmen and grain growers. In 1942, our collective farm at Sheker decided to plow an additional 200 hectares* for spring grain. "Bread for the front!" was the commanding slogan of that time. Plowing a couple of hundred hectares is not much of a problem today, for it can easily be done with the help of tractors. At that time, when plows were drawn by horses and the collective farm was even short of plows, the tilling of so much land over and above the plan was an exploit. For during one day a double-furrow plow drawn by a team of four horses could at best till just over half a hectare of a fallow or virgin field. So you can figure it out for yourself . . .

The boys who acted as plowmen had to abandon school for the highly important reason that the horses had to be prepared beforehand, during the winter. A draft horse requires daily care and grooming, otherwise it will fail during the first days of the sowing season. As every peasant knows, plowing is the hardest agricultural job.

That year we started out into the fields very early in spring in order to complete plowing and sowing in time. The soil had just begun to breathe. Winter had not quite gone yet. I remember, as clearly as if it were today, that it was the end of February.

In the very first days I went to see my comrades in the fields of the Kok-Sai steppe. The weather was gloomy when I started out in the morning, and when I arrived at the place it started to snow heavily. Snow was swirling in the air and covering the ground. Since then my memory has kept the picture of the small plowmen amid the fleeting snow that fell noiselessly in large flakes, thick and melting quickly. It was falling over a vast deserted area, screening off the world. But the plowmen wouldn't stop, kept driving on the horses. Along the black border of the plot running across a hillock, plows were moving one after another like ships sailing through mist across a heaving sea. They disappeared be-

*A hectare is 2.47 acres.

hind the hillock as if plunging into the waves. Then only the boys' voices could be heard. I rode along the edge of the plow field to meet them.

They sailed out of the swirling snow. The teams of four stertorous horses were bent under the strain. The snow melted immediately on their backs into white vapor. They were moving with difficulty, the clay underfoot wet and sticky and the harness heavy and damp. The boys driving the teams were also having a hard time. These "knee-high" plowmen wore sodden empty sacks on their heads. They should have been indoors, but they were children of the war and knew their duty.

I can still see the scene, the black teams crawling through the blinding snow, the plow moving relentlessly on . . . I recognize the boys by their voices: Baitik, Taiyrbek, Satar, Anatai, Sultanmurat . . . They are my classmates. I didn't approach them for a long time so that they would not see me crying . . .

During that winter a terrible thing happened. One night I was wakened by loud knocking at the window. Someone was bending down from the saddle and crying: "Get up! Hurry to the stable! Horses have been stolen!"

I promptly dressed myself and ran out of the house. People were spilling out of the other houses, pulling on their clothes. As I came near the stable I heard loud, excited voices. We were told that at midnight, when the stableman was asleep, someone had led away two of the best horses from a stall near the gate. The stableman thought at first that the horses had got loose by themselves and only realized what had happened when he saw that the saddles also were gone. He ran out of the stable, but it was too late . . .

The thieves had to be caught. We mounted at random whatever horses were available, without saddles, and dashed in different directions in pursuit of them. No one knows what would have happened if we had found them. What thieves would be afraid of us boys? Till dawn we searched all the ravines, gullies and wintering sites but could not find a trace anywhere. The thieves proved far too experienced. We felt the loss very keenly, for we had been preparing those horses for spring plowing, had left school for that purpose, but there were people who did not care a rap for anything . . .

I could tell you much that is interesting and noteworthy about my peers in the village because ours was a generation of teenagers who suddenly, in the first days of the war, had to go from the world

of childhood into the abyss of military life, who were plunged into the hardships and sufferings of that life in the rear which demanded of us the maturity and courage of adults.

I think my generation proved so staunch and of so purposeful a character because of those difficult conditions. This does not mean, however, that today's material well-being is less conducive to developing staunchness in our young people. On the contrary, it would show a lack of common sense were they to use today's benefits against their own good. Each era makes its own demands of people, has its own problems and requirements; therefore life is never easy if taken seriously, if one meets life's challenges. Truly we never dreamed of the opportunities for personality development that we now have. But that's not the point I want to make here. I simply want to say that there is not a single one of my peers of the war years of whom I would now be ashamed. Not a single one. They have long been family men and women, most of them have grown-up children, each is doing his or her job and I am pleased to say that their paths in life are of great human dignity. I can vouch for every one of them. The brothers Taisariev, the "plowmen" Baitik and Taiyrbek, have been toiling ceaselessly to this day. They are communists and are highly respected in the village. Baitik, a field section leader, is a well-known tobacco-grower in our republic. Taiyrbek is a top specialist both in crop-raising and livestock-breeding. Paizbek Mombekov, who worked as teacher for 33 years, died two years ago. Toktogul Usubaliev has risen from accounting clerk to chairman of the collective farm in the neighboring village of Bakair. Abdaly Nuraliev, a former Komsomol worker, is one of the collective farm's activists. Toktogul Mambetkulov and Batima Orozmatova have been teaching Sheker children for many years. Nuriya Dzholoeva and Orozgul Usubalieva also work as teachers in remote districts. Alymseiit Doolbekov has been working as a junior veterinary surgeon for many years. Zhaparbek Dosaliev is a forest ranger. Turgunbai Kazakbaev is the chairman of one of Kirghizia's largest collective farms, the Rossiya, which owns, among other things, 60,000 sheep. Mirzabai Dzholdosheva is the chief accountant of another very big collective farm in our Kirov District. Gapar Medetbekov is a leading actor at the Naryn Drama Theatre.

Such have been our destinies, difficult, very difficult, but not pointless.

The great Kazakh poet Abai said that life is like the movement of the sea where one row of waves is followed by another; the wave of the "preceding generation" is followed by a new genera-

tion, then another, and so on without end . . . And the sea lives . . .

Reflecting on the war years, I come to the conclusion that the decisive role in our moral education was certainly played by the "preceding wave," the older generation, the generation of the men who went to the front. Much could be said about this. No doubt all generations are always interconnected. In peacetime, this process follows its natural course in the continuity of experience and traditions. During the war, everything changed sharply. Our quiet Sheker, standing at the foot of the eternal Manas and, surrounded by other mountains, suddenly found itself amid the stream of events that shook the world. Our men, called up to protect their Homeland, went to the front, while waves of evacuated people reached our parts. Beyond the mountains, trains were rolling round the clock both ways—west and east—through the Maimak railway station that linked us with the outside world and Dzhambul, the nearest town. The trains marked the pulse beat of the fighting country.

One of the first to describe the war from his own experiences—telling about the front lines, tank battles, bomb blasts, and forest fires, about people's conduct during the fighting, about hospitals, military surgeons and about death and courage, was the poet Myrzabai Ukuev, our village's famous bard. He died long ago, but his songs are still remembered and sung in the areas around the Manas.

Myrzabai Ukuev was the first wounded man from the front, whom the whole village welcomed with both joy and embarrassment; when he was taken off the cart they had to put crutches under his arms, for he was without one leg. We had seen nothing like that before. There had been lame or one-eyed people. But a man with a leg cut off above the knee was a totally new sight, at least to us boys. We were scared . . .

Myrzabai used to be a young and handsome teacher who rode a gray pacer known to all as "Myrzabaev's *jorgo.*" He was fond of singing and composed his own songs, strumming the strings of a *chertmek.* Now he stood among us without a leg, very pale after the hospitals and trains, propped on his crutches and surrounded by his fellow villagers, smiling and weeping together with us.

That same evening, before a multitude of people, Myrzabai sang his songs of the front, which he had composed in a hospital. It was a great event for us, a lifelong memory. We were all entranced by Myrzabai's songs, his tales in verse about the war. The people listened with baited breath, drying their tears while recalling their own men who had gone to the front. Although he sang of himself

and his fellow soldiers, they were also songs about each one of us and about the people as a whole.

Improvised oral poetry is very difficult to translate or retell because the essence of the folk bard's art consists in the very act of his narration, his simultaneous composition and performance. And still, I'll try to render what we heard: "Sons of different peoples—Russians, Kazakhs, Uzbeks and Kirghiz—we became closer than brothers in the army. We have one mother, our country, who has nourished all of us with her white milk. We cannot bear, *dzhigits,* to see our mother in trouble! Isn't she our support when we climb a steep mountain, isn't she our hope when we descend? Let us swear as our legendary strong men, *batyrs,* swore, to lie on the same field if we are destined to die and to stand on the same mountain if we are destined to win. Thus we spoke to one another as we walked through the forests towards our clashes with the fascists. And then the earth trembled under our feet as during a great earthquake. And bombs began to fall from above, screeching the soul out of the body and throwing black dust heavenwards. And we joined the battle near Leningrad . . ."

Thus he sang for his fellow villagers. We were particularly stirred by that place in Myrzabai's story where the troop train proceeding from Novosibirsk to the front followed a line passing through our station Maimak. At dawn the train, rolling at full speed, passed the station, the Maimak gorge, went through the tunnel, along the Talas Ridge, past Mount Manas. That is when the words must have been born which shook us when Myrzabai sang them and which have since become a favorite song of our village. Those were the words of a son's farewell address to the Ala-Too mountains:

*"Out of my vision remained Ala-Too,*
*Capped with blue snow, with streams of pure water, Ala-Too.*
*Out of my vision remained our Manas,*
*The snow-capped mount of our fathers, Manas.*
*Good-bye, blue-snowed Ala-Too,*
*Wish your sons victory over the enemy,*
*Good-bye, the mount of our fathers, Manas.*
*I will carry you away in my eyes as in a mirror,*
*Capped with blue snow, with streams of pure water, Ala-Too,*
*And the snow-capped mount of our fathers, Manas . . ."*

How many times afterwards we sang this song at meetings and partings!

In the winter of that year we saw off eighteen-year-old lads who had been called to the ranks. Only recently, it seemed, we younger

ones had hung around with them. They were our regular friends and comrades, even if they were a bit older. Now they were going to the front. One of them was Dzhumabai Orunbekov, my kinsman and friend. He had gone to school, then worked on the collective farm, and that was all he saw in his life, which he laid down at the battlefield. He was the first, I remember, to have sung when the boys climbed into the cart:

*"I will carry you away in my eyes as in a mirror,*
*Capped with blue snow, with streams of pure water, Ala-Too,*
*And the snow-capped mount of our fathers, Manas . . ."*

And they rolled off across the village. Those who were seeing them off ran after them. Myrzabai stood alone, propped on his crutches, listening to the song of parting with the homeland, which could be heard for a long time.

Myrzabai Ukuev was highly esteemed and honored in our village. He took an active part in the life of the collective farm; after his return from the front and to the end of his days he worked as an accountant and was always elected to the Party bureau. He was always welcome everywhere and shared all of the village's troubles and joys. His wise words and his songs instilled hope in people and urged them to believe in and fight for victory.

All in our village, children and adults alike, were proud of him and knew his frontline experiences. We knew by name the people he had served with, who they were and where they came from, and who was in command, for he had told us all this in the poem about war that he sang. We also knew how and under what circumstances he was wounded and who had saved him.

It had happened in a forest near Leningrad sometime in the summer or autumn of 1941. During the fighting a shell exploded near him. All he remembered was that something struck him in the knee. When he came to, the fighting was still going on, amid the deafening roar of shooting and explosions. He lay there bleeding, unable to move and awaiting death, when a girl medical orderly crawled up to him. The name of that Russian girl was Tanya, and we in our village called her Taniya. If only our Taniya knew how she was admired and loved by the fellow villagers of Myrzabai Ukuev! Unfortunately it is now impossible to find out any details about Tanya since Myrzabai Ukuev is no longer living. But we knew that she managed to bandage him before it was too late and carried him away from the battlefield. Myrzabai sang thus about her:

*"What mother gave birth to such a girl*
*Who had all the kindness in the world . . .*

*That woman became to me dearer than my own mother.*
*What father brought up such a girl*
*Who had all the courage in the world . . .*
*That man became to me dearer than my own father . . .*"

The translation of these lines is certainly very approximate. Oral poetry essentially consists of the "live" performance by the author before his audience and probably should not be put down on paper. It dies on paper like a flower dried between the pages of a book.

The postwar boys and girls of Sheker owed a great deal to former frontline soldiers like Myrzabai Ukuev. He was greatly worried by the fact that we had had to stop going to school. In 1944, when the war had already moved west, when men who had been in the labor army and many wounded soldiers began to return home, Myrzabai urged us to resume our studies. Some of us did begin to go to school again at that time. After the war I enrolled at a specialized secondary school in Dzhambul, one that trained zoo technicians and veterinary surgeons. That was a very difficult, hungry time. Once, between lessons, someone shouted to me that a man on crutches was looking for me. I ran out into the yard and there was Myrzabai-aka, smiling and stroking his mustache. I was very glad to see him.

"I came to town on business, to the supply center," he said, "so I thought I should drop in to see how you master the sciences."

He was pleased to hear me tell him how we lived and studied.

"Let us go out into the street," he said, hobbling out of the yard. "There is something in the cart I brought for you."

We went to the gate.

"Listen," he told me then, "I know that things are not easy here, in fact they are very hard. But don't ever think of quitting. We have no such right, now. If you find it too difficult, tell us. We'll think of something in the village. But you must study at all costs . . ."

The first grain-harvester operator of our village, old Communist Toilubai Usubaliev, was Myrzabai Ukuev's peer, his friend and also our mentor at that time. But on the eve of the 30th Anniversary of Victory Day, I wanted especially to remind the younger generation that during the war Toilubai Usubaliev was a rare person, one not sent to the front in spite of his numerous requests, because he was the only combine-harvester operator for several collective farms. And the way he operated harvesters has become a legend. No one would believe that what he did is possible because no one would now attempt to repair such machines, they are simply scrap. But he put all his life into ruined harvesters and

did what was required. I described one of his harvesters in the short novel *Jamilya.* During the harvest season in 1944 I worked as his assistant. When the machine was in operating shape, we worked without respite around the clock. The front could not wait and neither could the grain. That was the most heroic summer in my life. I will never forget those days.

Again a song is heard. The grass is green on the sides of the road and flocks with their young are roaming the hillsides. Cultivated fields are divided like a mirror into winter crops and row crops. More fields, with row crops followed by winter crops. We have left behind Dzhambul which is growing rapidly, throbbing with the breathtaking rates of urbanization, and which used to be a caravan station called Aulie-Ata. From here trains carried my countrymen to the fronts and here we brought our grain for the front . . . Far ahead the snows of Mount Manas are becoming visible under the clouds . . .

Khasan Bekturganovich Bekturganov, first secretary of the Dzhambul Party Committee, who was the political instructor of a skiers' company during the defense of Moscow, once said that each soldier must fulfill the mandate of his fallen fellow soldiers—to make life such that the dead heroes could be remembered with pride and a clear conscience.

We could say the same about ourselves, the countless army that toiled in the rear during the war years.

Such were my thoughts as I traveled past the snowy mount of our fathers, Manas-Ata.

Monument to the Kirghiz Epic Hero, MANAS

"Manas ascended the heavenly peak on horseback and looked around: From where will the enemy come? . . . . Imagine what an immense territory he could behold from such a height! It was truly on an epic scale! That was how our forebears would like to see their son and hero, Manas the Generous."

# 4

## EPIC OF HEROISM

An epic has always been a tale of and by the people. Our time, a time of individual creativity, is no exception, and the 20th-century epic of the Soviet people expresses a philosophy of life rooted in their experiences, their history and culture. Its greatest chapter evolved from the drama of the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945 waged and won by the Soviet people. This epic was inspired by the victory of the Soviet people, a victory bought with suffering, with the lessons learned in the shock of our repulsion of the onslaught of fascism. Homer's *Iliad,* ageless though it be, pales by comparison.

The greatness of this modern epic dawned on me when I visited a new Victory Square, or *Jenish-Ayant,* in my home city, Frunze. It seemed to symbolize this new and extraordinary folk legend.

I belong to the wartime younger generation, although I never fought at the front (had the war lasted another year, I would have taken part). I have a vivid memory of the war, from the beginning—when our big village of Sheker learned the news from a messenger riding from house to house as he would do in case of fire—to its very last day, Mary 9, 1945, which we had long yearned for, counting the hours. News of victory spread like the wind. Happy but incredulous—it was so hard to believe the war was over—we wanted proof. Mounted messengers from all the villages of the Sary–Kubinsky area gathered in our district administrative center to spread the news among the population as soon as it was broadcast over the radio. Their mounts were the fastest available, for at that time we had no radio or telephone communication (the younger generation might not believe it, perhaps). The villages closest to the district center were the first to hear, but our Sheker had to wait. It was the remotest village of all, with nothing but mountains behind, their snowcaps visible against the horizon.

Soldiers who came home from the front wept when the mountains at last came into view as they approached the village.

That day we gathered on top of the hill (the houses were spread on its slopes)—young and old together, waiting for our messenger. We were too impatient to wait at home. Some women had to sneak back to their recently calved cows, but they rushed to the knoll as soon as they could. When at last we saw the dust raised by a galloping horse, we shouted in exultation and, rejoicing, rushed forward to meet the messenger. We knew we had won—there was no doubt about it. At last! Some walked rapidly or ran all the way, others rode on horseback. I remember our schoolmistress running as fast as she could—her son had been in an artillery unit since the very beginning of the war. The wounded servicemen followed, some of them hurrying on crutches. Mothers, wives and sweethearts of the frontline soldiers joined teenagers, children of the war who had plowed and sowed all those years. Naturally, we were running far ahead of the rest . . . Much later I would describe this episode in my story *Early Cranes*. That day we ran out to meet the herald of victory.

Our strength and truth triumphed over Nazism in fallen Berlin! The victory was won thanks to the efforts of every Soviet citizen, all the peoples, the entire multinational society of the Soviet Union. If you are part of your people and the people is made up of millions of persons like you, and you cannot imagine your life without your people, there cannot be a greater happiness than your country's victory.

This noble feeling found poetic expression in the ancient Kirghiz epic *Manas:*

*Look at your people,*
*Look at your people before a mortal battle,*
*Look at your people when it is defeated,*
*Look at your people when it is victorious,*
*look at it on the march,*
*Look at it after you've joined it on the march across the mountains,*
*Look and see with whom you've come to live on the mountain,*
*Look at your people before you die and part with them forever,*
*Look and see if there could be a better fate for you . . .*

Later I often saw in my dreams the day we ran to meet the herald of victory. All we felt and suffered in those years, I have remembered for good. The major and minor memories of those days would rush back to me, as if in a newsreel. I would see the soldiers marching to war, with packs on their backs; the muster in the courtyard of the army enlistment office; the women who

sobbed and whispered something when their men's names were called out; the farewells at railway stations, the night trains taking Kirghiz soldiers to the front . . .

I recall the first Kirghiz serviceman to become a Hero of the Soviet Union—he came from our parts. The news of his deed spread over Kirghizia.

Cholponbai Tuleberdiev, nineteen, in a heroic act at the front, near Voronezh, threw himself at a blazing gun-port, covering it with his own body. We went to see his house, so anonymous only a short while before. It was a simple clay hut with small windows and a flat roof of clay. Our hearts ached for Cholponbai's mother, old and lonely, but we were proud of him—as proud as of Manas. We swore by his name, as we swore by the name of Manas, for Manas also died defending his homeland and people from the enemy.

The epic contains a lament for Manas, a folk hero known to every Kirghiz. That lament was now associated in our minds with the heroism of Cholponbai, who was scarcely older than ourselves. We saw his face in a wartime snapshot, and remembered it afterward. Such a handsome and inspired face! We began to think of him as an elder brother whose name was the pride of the people, and that filled our hearts with courage.

I also recall how we met a soldier back from the war, and how we hung on his every word. I recall how terrible I felt every time I had to deliver notifications of soldiers' deaths to the bereaved families. Another of my duties was to collect the war tax from the impoverished population who contributed their last kopecks to the war loans or to the building of another tank corps because they wanted to defeat the nazis and bring the boys home soon.

The life of the wartime generation that bore the brunt of the world war against Nazism has passed so quickly! Forty years have elapsed since the end of the war, but it seems only yesterday, and I'm still running to meet the herald of victory. Meanwhile, a whole era has come to an end, leaving a deep imprint on the world.

Plenty of water has flowed under the bridge, and many other events have taken place, some for the first time in history, but nothing can obscure the victory the world celebrated on May 9, 1945. People owe to that victory the best that has happened to them since. It gave them, those who remained alive, their chance in the very different postwar world.

An epic is a great tale of peoples, to which every era contributes something new. This is true of the memorial in Victory Square in Frunze. The more of that ensemble I saw and the longer I con-

templated the message of that unique architectural and sculptural masterpiece, the better I realized that its authors had penetrated to the very roots of their nation's history and portrayed it on an epic scale.

Victory Square is laid out in Frunze's center, on the site of an old marketplace. The square is a stone and bronze symbol of the epic of victory and glory for the gallant defenders of the homeland.

The central character of the memorial is a traditional Motherland figure, Meken-Ene. This particular mother symbolizes all mothers of the world, dead and living. Great and eternal-like Nature, Meken-Ene waits for the victorious soldiers to come home to her fireplace, which is also an eternal flame to those who will never come back. Her expectation is muted because many of her sons have fallen in action. Kind and courageous, Meken-Ene stands in the center of the square against the background of the eternal snowcaps of the Ala Tau dominating the city. Meken-Ene's head is crowned with a semblance of a yurta (tent), its three granite pylons like the sides of a traditional Kirghiz home. Mother, home and fireplace symbolize Life and Homeland.

The creator of the ensemble is the outstanding Kirghiz sculptor Turgunbai Sadykov, who also made the sculpture group of soldiers greeted by children. They face the Mother waiting outside her yurta, by the fire. From the figures of the soldiers who have survived the great battle emanates an epic spirit of courage, confidence and calm. There is another group of soldiers, also walking towards the Mother, and they are the ones who carry the message of the memorial. It is one of the most moving works of art in Kirghizia. The two machine-gunners molded by the famous sculptor Mikhail Anikushin are a fragment of cruel front-line reality. The tired young soldiers carrying a dismantled machine gun on the march seem to smell of fire and gunpowder. They mature before our eyes, while making their last physical and moral effort. These dramatic figures leave no one indifferent: they urge us to stand by their side.

I am very pleased that one of Anikushin's masterpieces has been installed in Kirghizia's capital. The epic memorial to victory, created jointly by a Russian and a Kirghiz master, emphasizes the internationalism of multinational Soviet society—the main idea of the memorial. Thus, one of the soldiers is Kirghiz and one Russian. In the Great Patriotic War, a time of trial for the entire USSR's people, Soviet patriotism attained a nationwide scale. We are proud that all the peoples of our country rose to defend their

socialist state, an act of civic and revolutionary duty, both national and international. This is the meaning of our Victory Square.

In olden days the Kirghiz epic was only oral, but now it is also material, for in the new square the past has merged with the present, showing the continuity of the generations.

The soldiers are coming home, and the Mother is waiting for them by the fire . . .

**In the studio of sculptor T. Sadykov**

The ancient legend will come alive and be given utterance in our descendants' hearts when eternal nature comes into action. A scene from a folk epic, *Kurmambek*.

# 5

## A FEW ESSENTIAL POINTS

The fate of many books which in their time have gone through the treadmill of criticism shows that when recognition is earned as a result of a clash of different views, it is the most real recognition of all. In the end a dispute is always useful. Polemics become particularly important when the argument goes beyond the discussion of a given work and acquires a general literary meaning. How high and professional the level of the discussion is determines to a large extent not only the book's reputation but probably the character of the writer's creative work, as well as in broader terms the general development of our literary conscience.

I think that the discussion of *The White Steamship* in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (Literary Gazette) is worthwhile and I hope it will be instructive for more than just me. While using this opportunity to speak on the substance of the debate, I want to point out that I am not at all thinking about "self-defense," for the instinct of self-preservation is not always justified in our work.

Naturally I have my own opinion of *The White Steamship,* but this does not mean that I am deaf to others. The critical articles in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* of course deserve respect. Besides, I would like to thank all the readers who responded to my short novel with letters. It is great to know that one's work stirs readers' minds. . . .

I could have noted the viewpoints of my literary colleagues without joining the debate. But in literary matters the reader is vitally concerned with the search for truth. I am sure he or she would like to know all the opinions, all the viewpoints, including those of the author whose work is the cause of the argument. It should be remembered that a literary polemic is in a way also literary training and an active way of promoting human culture.

Therefore, in a public discussion one must be as convincing as possible and have a thorough knowledge of the subject.

Let us turn our attention to myths and legends themselves. They are, as we all know, the memory of the people, the quintessence of their life experience, their philosophy and history expressed in the form of a fairy tale, a fantasy. And finally, myths and legends are the people's behests for future generations. Man shaped his spiritual world through his knowledge of Nature surrounding him and felt himself to be a part of that Nature. I was struck by the fact that the problems posed in the ancient parable of the Mother Deer still retain their moral relevance today.

The legend not only offers an impartial reflection of man's eternal and tireless striving for good, for rational domination over Nature, but also critically assesses that striving. The criterion for humaneness here is man's attitude towards Nature. What naturally follows from this is the problem of conscience as one of the vital functions of consciousness, one of the qualities distinguishing human beings from everything else in the world.

It transpires that man has been attempting to protect Nature "from himself" for a very, very long time, has long been trying to tackle this truly eternal problem of preserving the wealth and beauty of the world around him. The question was so vital that even back in ancient times people put it into the form of drama and tragedy and thought it necessary to "criticize" their own attitude towards Nature, to rebuke their conscience. That was also a warning to their descendants never to forget their sacred duty to the Mother Deer, in other words, to Nature, the mother of all that exists. If the legend is to be deciphered further, its meaning may be understood as a kind of "protective reflex" of man against violence and cruelty. Have human vices been altogether eliminated from the sinful Earth and do we no longer need to warn ourselves against them, especially in the form of ancient parables?

Legends, parables and myths served as lessons in the moral education of the people. This education, as we all know, may be based not only on positive examples and fairy tales with happy endings, which we like, but also on an anxious look into the future, on "self-criticism" by the people of their own past mistakes.

I do not see any "despondency" in this. Arguments of this kind usually boil down to the thesis that art should evoke feelings of joy, cheerfulness and optimism. And this is correct. But it is equally correct that art should plunge people into emotional upheavals and profound thought, arouse in them powerful senti-

ments of compassion and protest against evil; it should give them reason to grieve, to be distressed and to strive to defend and restore those precious things in life that have been trampled upon or destroyed.

The notion of "despondency" is not always the same in life as it is in art. What is the death of Juliet in terms of everyday life? It is despair and despondency, the suicide of a person weak in spirit. And what is Juliet's death in art? It would seem to be almost the same, but Shakespeare's pen invests this "despondency" with a powerful reverse force, which is the power of the spirit, indomitable and irreconcilable, and uncompromising conviction. This is love and hatred at the same time, challenge and loyalty, and, finally, self-assertion at the cost of one's own life. And there is much more than could be said about the "despondency" in *Romeo and Juliet*.

This tragedy by Shakespeare is certainly life-asserting despite its "despondent" ending, the death of the heroes. Yes, it is high tragedy condemning the evil of that time. Yes, the "positive" heroes are defeated in their clash with the "negative" characters, but at the same time the story of Romeo and Juliet compels us to understand and appreciate the meaning of the right to be free people. It is for this right that they gave their lives, and this is what makes them majestically beautiful for the living.

In mathematics there is the rule of opposites. This method can also be found in art, but in a form peculiar to art. Having heard all the various opinions during the debate on *The White Steamship,* I as the author gave much thought to the most controversial point in the short novel, the death of the boy. Even the vehement refusal of some readers and critics to accept such an ending indicates to me that it only seems as if the short novel is "despondent." The way out of this "despondency" does exist, though beyond the confines of "paper"—in the souls of the readers. Herein lies what is to me the secret of the rule of opposites. There are times when narration formally ends, and with what event it ends, whose victory and whose defeat, is not of decisive importance for art. The actual victory consists in producing such an artistic effect on the reader that his or her feelings and thoughts erect a "barricade" on the basis of the truth, even though the truth may have been "defeated" in the given description of reality. What is important is the reader's determination to fight for that truth which for various reasons the literary heroes may have failed to affirm physically.

A classic example of this in Soviet literature is the novel *Razgrom* (Rout) by Alexander Fadeyev. A detachment of guerrillas perished in battles for the revolution, for a new life, but the

reader is wholly on their side and that is where the real victory of *Rout* lies.

In showing the boy's death in *The White Steamship,* I by no means put evil above good, but rather pursue a life-asserting task through the rejection of evil in its most irreconcilable form, the hero's death. It is not for me to judge how successful I was. Yes, the boy dies, but spiritually and morally he is superior. Some readers complain: was it not in the author's power to deal with the hero's destiny differently? No, it was not. Such is the logic of artistic design, which has principles of its own that are beyond the author's power. The only choice I had was to write or not to write my story. And I could write it only the way I did. I am speaking of myself in relation to the given work. The outcome would probably be different in another case with another author.

The tragic ending of *The White Steamship* proved inevitable not because it was "predicted" by the Pock-Marked Lame Old Woman but because the good in the boy's person was incompatible with the evil in Orozkul's person. The boy was only a boy who could oppose Orozkul's brute force only with his irreconcilability. Momun's passive kindness fails and the boy's irreconcilability to evil remains with him. It is with this irreconciliability that he "sails away." . . . And if he finds refuge in the hearts of the readers, this will be his strength, not "despondency." Frankly I am proud of my boy.

As for the "grim predictions" of the Pock-Marked Lame Old Woman, we should not be frightened by them because they should be regarded not as incantations and curses but as a warning. Many of mankind's bright hopes have come true and many will do so in the future. History is making a turn towards the better. But this does not mean that evil has been entirely defeated.

The words of the old woman from the legend are an echo of the hard experience of hard times when man was an enemy to man. The legend elevates conscience and human duty to the level of a supreme moral principle, and if one ignores this principle one serves evil. Even at that time people were so keenly aware of the significance of this moral problem that they were not afraid to express it for themselves and their descendants in the form of such a terribly "grim warning." Here again I see the wisdom of the people, not "despondency." In this, if you like, lies the vital relevance of everlasting moral values.

But can a fairy tale be an instrument for conveying our present-day ideas? A fairy tale is a word from the past and as such should be treated historically. Unless an old legend can actively appeal to the tasks of our day, its shadow should be left undisturbed.

There is another controversial thesis with which I most resolutely disagree—that old man Momun could not shoot the Mother Deer. It would be good, of course, if people never gave in to any circumstances to strike a compromise with their conscience, if they never capitulated to evil. Alas, humanity will evidently have to make considerable efforts to rid all people of these "weaknesses."

Is my attitude towards the boy hard-hearted and devoid of pity? What can I say? There is always an element of spontaneity in sincere feelings, while the form of their manifestation depends on a person's spiritual makeup. And then, is it so important that the boy should be pitied? In my view he should first of all be understood and then, if one is so inclined, pitied.

The season of hay-making. Chinghiz Aitmatov with his sons.

"Literature is my life."

# 6

# THE LAW OF GRAVITATION

Literature is my life. Dare one say this about oneself, considering the truly great examples of impassioned service to literature so numerous in the centuries-long history of human culture? And which of the writers who were proclaimed "prophets," "rulers of minds," "geniuses," etc., thought this of themselves? It is we, their grateful descendants, who say: "Literature was his life" or "He gave himself entirely to literature." In this way we pay a tribute of admiration to the creators of the immortal works, those who maintained and preserved artistic integrity in spite of all temptations and hardships, and sometimes persecution.

If, nevertheless, I do speak on this subject, it is only because as a professional writer I want to share with the reader—in Tvardovsky's words, "My friend and supreme judge"—certain considerations that seem to be of mutual interest. I should admit that I have an ulterior motive, for, while I do not tremble before the "supreme judge," I want his or her judgment to be just, I want us to speak the same language and understand each other at once. Our language should be not the common, everyday parlance but the language of poetry, which manifests the true nature and essence of art. As all writers always have, I cannot help thinking of literature's role and place in the spiritual life of society. This may seem to be a purely professional matter, a concern of writers alone. But the fact is that the fate not only of a given book but of the writer depends on how readers receive the work of art, what they hope and thirst for, and what possibilities they expect from it. In the final analysis the fate of literature as a whole depends on this, but so does the fate of the readers themselves. This is a case of feedback. Without attempting to prophesy, and still less to

generalize, I daresay that a person who has discovered and absorbed Tolstoy or Chekhov, Sholokhov or Katayev—it is not essential that they be one's favorite authors—such a person is capable of thinking and feeling more deeply and hence of living a more meaningful life than—say—a fan of detective stories. The reader of detective stories is only tickling his nerves. Such a fan of "easy," light reading prefers as a rule to maintain equally easy, superficial, and smooth relations with other people.

Today, in the age of the scientific and technological revolution, in the era of an unprecedented information explosion and the turbulent and all-embracing development of the mass communication media, literature faces a very serious test. It must demonstrate and affirm a new quality in the features that have always constituted its essence and content—its inimitability, the irreplaceability of its moral and aesthetic values and properties, and its inexhaustible spiritual potential. Not so long ago skeptics in the West and in this country as well predicted the inevitable decline of literature as a fully modern art, denying it the ability to meet the demands of the epoch and the tastes of 20th-century people; and they predicted the disappearance in the future of the book itself in its present form, claiming it to be an odd anachronism . . .

This decline was depicted as predestined, at least in Western science fiction. The novel, they claimed, had died; its heart could not cope with the pace and rhythm of a fast life. The reader could rejoice, they insisted, for he no longer had to read bulky "serious" books; he no longer had to fight his way through the classics, subjecting his soul to the high tension of their thoughts and feelings; the "telegraphic style" was much more simple and pleasant . . .

Perhaps I am exaggerating, but the bourgeois theoreticians of the "new" art are more than willing to help the reader get over his attachment to the "old" mode of thinking because it incorporates such concepts as truth, conscience and humanism. And these theoreticians even claim to be moved by good intentions, ostensibly meeting the reader's own needs and desires.

Does this concern me personally as a writer and a human being? The humiliation and denigration of human dignity, no matter where, when, or in what form or manner, cannot but revolt all honest people in the world, and writers especially. I am particularly disturbed as a Soviet writer, all the more so since this is simply inconceivable in socialist conditions.

The choice is not between "horror novels" and "serious" literature. Porno literature, for example, is all too serious in pursuing

its goal of stirring up base and primitive instincts in the human subconscious, of reducing man to an animal, trying to convince him that this is modern, in the spirit of the epoch.

The essential conflict lies elsewhere: in the choice between humanity and cruelty, between truth and falsehood, good and evil, false romanticism and realism.

What can and must real literature do, precisely now that Hamlet's question "To be or not to be?" has gone beyond the scope of an individual's personal concerns and become an urgent problem for all of humankind, a matter of preserving peace on Earth?

The task of literature is to unite people in their striving for truth and social justice, for the inexhaustible and ineradicable love of life, peace and the future, in the name of which man, if he is a human being in the full sense of the word, must be ready to overcome all external obstacles and his own despair, suffering and frustration. Tolstoy reflected on this with passion and pain, and he bequeathed his idea to people, believing that art has the power to inflame and is called upon to encourage people to love life in all its manifestations.

By appealing to what is best in people—their dignity and honor, by revealing to them the world's boundless horizons and beauty and by directing their thoughts to themselves, literature enables people to live full-blooded intellectual lives. The duty of every honest artist is to remind people incessantly, despite fatigue and disillusionment (even when they would prefer not to hear about it), what they are, lest they forget that we all are people, brothers in spirit.

We are perhaps the only creatures of intellect in the boundless universe. Shall this life-giving source of light and kindness indeed be extinguished? Are we really capable of doing this of our own will, with some perverted desire for suicide? It should finally be recognized and clearly seen that humankind has created, through labor and suffering over the millennia, a far too thin layer of civilization, one that is almost invisible in terms of the universe. And should that not make it all that more dear to us?

We writers are obliged to think for ourselves, to decide our own destiny. To think means to lead a fuller life, to act. It also means that we must create and continue literature, remembering all the while that literature has always been the keeper of the lofty aspirations of the human spirit, of the poetry of truth and of faith in man and in the future.

But what about the art "theoreticians" who have conducted many a funeral service for literature? They should in fact be

thanked, because the blind extremism of the saboteurs of "old" culture has evoked a sharp reaction and encouraged us to treat humankind's spiritual wealth more carefully and preserve it.

At the same time Gabriel García Márquez, who was either unaware of the demise of the novel or unwilling to believe the rumors about it, began writing in utter abandon the great novel of the 20th century, *A Hundred Years of Solitude,* a novel that draws people together. I have no doubt that it is particularly near and dear to readers in various countries because it seethes with an indomitable spirit and faith in the inexorable revolutionary transformation of the world, roars with the wind of freedom that sweeps away the stagnancy of life, and resounds as a powerful symphony glorifying humankind.

I cannot help thinking about the essential internationalism of all literature, and the unique internationalism of Soviet literature, which the October Revolution introduced into our lives. Soviet literature is unique in that it is not spontaneous but is purposefully guided. Every Soviet writer is aware of being a member of a single multinational community, of a fraternity of interrelated literatures centered around the great Russian literature with its longer "service record" and rich experience. Russian literature, having given the world Alexander Pushkin, Leo Tolstoi, Anton Chekhov and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, now serves as a catalyst in the general cultural and historical development of Soviet literature.

Socialist realism is not an abstraction of an invention by literary scholars, but the living essence of our Soviet art. This method is a means of ethical and philosophical study, of an understanding and poetic vision of the world and of people in the light of grand historical events, of life in a truly real sense—in movement, in the flowering of radiant youth overjoyed and anticipating the future. It is true that Soviet multinational literature has, like any process, its difficulties and contradictions. It would be wrong to ignore them. Yes, we are no longer confined by narrow national boundaries, we have broken them down and made our appearance on the world scene. But the presdent-day literary situation also has its negative aspects, including a second-rate literature that produces potboilers instead of art. Resolute efforts should be made to rid our literature of the burdens of mediocrity, banality, sketchiness and speculation on "hot" issues, of all that discredits the lofty mission of literature.

The fact that critics have not been tough on me probably justifies my frank censure of our criticism. I cannot, for instance, agree with the view that criticism today has "overtaken" literature, that it is "more interesting." It is really hard to grasp how this could be

possible, since criticism can never be anything more than a derivative of the available literature.

What does happen, and by no means infrequently, is that criticism falls far behind the events. There have been works recently, for instance, that readers argue about and heatedly debate but which the critics seem to ignore. Why is this so? This silence often stems from timidity, from the fear of making a wrong first move. The logic obviously seems to be to let someone else take the risk, and then to act in keeping with developments. Even worse is the practice of ignoring a new work, of pretending that a newly published book does not exist at all. All this can do is breed resentment, perplexity, suspicion and false rumors not only among readers, who are anxious to hear the "learned word" and compare their views with those of professional experts, but also among writers. Nor is this silence of any use to criticism itself. How can I remain indifferent to this problem when criticism is a part of literature and hence a part of my own life? An unjustified assessment of the work of one of my colleagues is of direct concern to me.

There is nothing good about a talented work being lambasted, but there is always hope that it will stand the test of time; it is much more harmful when a worthless, feeble work is extolled for various reasons and passed off as a standard to be aspired to. This is often the case with "local" critics who are guided evidently by their "patriotism," by a desire to have a Pushkin of their own, even if on a regional scale. But the blame does not lie entirely with the local critics. There are also those critics guilty of eroding the criteria of appraisal and distorting the image of fiction. An essay or a sketch, even when described by epithets such as "imaginative," "lyrical" or "dramatic," is not by its very nature a short story, a work of art, and should not be regarded as such.

The same is true of social and political journalism, which is after all a "seasonal" genre. Already I can hear sharp objections on this score. There is no questioning the importance of this militant and effective branch of journalism. But to each its own. I would compare the relationship between journalism and fiction to that between the skim-colter* and the plow. First the skim-colter cuts through the weeds; then the deep plowing is done with the plowshare. Does the skim-colter take offense for having to clear the field? It seems to me that people can also easily find a common language in such cases. Not long ago the world was

*A sharp disc attached to the beam of a plow so that it cuts the turf ahead of the plowshare.

shaken by the tragic story of the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro. Thousands of articles, reports and essays were printed about this incident, both in Italy and around the world. The tragedy astounded and pained everybody. Will journalists "take offense" if a creative writer makes use of the abundant facts to produce a work of Shakespearean power and scope? Or would Italians be offended should this writer be a foreigner? I think that everyone would be grateful to that writer for having depicted a tragedy that concerns all.

I do not know whether I would like to write on this subject. But I do know that the "Italian tragedy" strongly affected my mood as a writer and as a person. It is painful to know that such dreadful things can take place in our time and on the Earth we all share. And somehow this tragedy was reflected in the maturing of the novel, *A Day That Lasts Longer Than an Age*. Perhaps it was reflected in a still deeper love for the "ordinary" man faced with cruelty, malice, thirst for power and career-seeking and yet creating the wonderful world we live in with his own hands.

On whose shoulder does the Earth rest? Once I asked myself this question and my imagination began to draw a certain image that finally materialized in *Stormy Yedigei*. What was the "kernel" here? A much used metaphor. But it was as if I had "discovered" this metaphor, its poetical and philosophical essence, for the first time. *Stormy Yedigei* reflects my attitude to the basic principle of socialist realism, the main object of which has been and remains the working person. Work is to Yedigei not a mere means of subsistence but, above all, his purpose in life, his vocation, his duty to people. He is free to make his choice, which requires courage and nobility, and that is why he is man in the full sense of the word. He seeks no profit or advantage. Any privilege he could be granted would be an offense to his dignity. But the main thing is that this attitude to work enables him to identify himself with his time and his people, without which he and his destiny make no sense. He owes his very ability to think to his time and his people, for thinking is to a person like Yedigei not just idle rumination and speechifying. His "last words" were born in his soul at the saddest moment of his life, in the face of implacable eternity; they were addressed both to his dead friend Kazangap and to all the living because it was Yedigei's duty to speak about the great and wise life of a working man. What Yedigei doesn't say should be said by me, the writer. Everyone has a duty. As for Yedigei, he will go on living, affirming the power and beauty of the human spirit. He approaches the humane in himself through many trials—war, fam-

ine, snowstorms and bitter love—accepting all this as inevitable, without cursing his "wretched" fate or seeking vengeance on life. He embodies what I would call genetic humanity. On his way towards himself he comes to people, to the future. A child's smile saves him at a difficult moment. But his grim silence also helps people in their life. When one is next to him one cannot help but become a better person.

And, lastly, what good is war to Yedigei? He has no time to think about this. He lives by the most important law for working people—a striving for peace and for one another, which to him is as universal as the law of gravity.

Yedigei dreams of bringing "paradise" back to the now barren steppes. His friend, the Russian geologist Yelizarov, had told him what they used to be like. What can be more "interesting" than growing a living, flowering garden amid the sands? It would probably be easier to destroy the planet with the modern weapons of today, but this is not for Yedigei, not for normal people. I want people like Yedigei to live long enough to see their grandchildren and maybe even great-grandchildren and to share with them the beauty of their souls.

How do I as a writer measure my age, meaning my creative age? Alexander Blok once said that "a writer is a perennial plant," so one should be prepared for a "long" life. The saddest thing of all is that we do not notice that we are ageing, that our emotions are waning. In no time at all, it seems, you're already an old man, ready to preach to the young, to share your wisdom and grumble. But the saddest thing of all is when you no longer feel the need to wonder at the immortal poetry of life.

Can this be helped? One should, I think, consciously cultivate in oneself a dramatic perception of the world. An artist who is aware of the drama of life can conquer age.

I also believe that every writer, regardless of his age, should repeatedly experience the profundity of thoughts and feelings that the same Blok had when he said: "I serve literature!"

Looking back over fifty years. The celebration of Chinghiz Aitmatov's 50th jubilee.

# 7

## SPEECH AT THE 7TH CONGRESS OF SOVIET WRITERS

The other day I finished reading a book a scientist had written about longevity. It captivated me as no bestseller could. I thought, THIS is how one must write, so that the reader finds the subject of the work so vitally important that he cannot tear himself away from it till the last line, will regret when he finishes the book and will long afterwards ponder what he had read.

A utopia? Yes. But utopia is also necessary in life. One cannot offer a person a book that is not an utmost revelation, a kind of a new Bible for him. And so it should be every time, even if not always attainable. And such should be the law of art, the law of an artist's activity.

What captivated and astounded me in that scientific work? It was the poetry of philosophy! And while I by no means intend to compare such a book with a work of fiction, for these are entirely different spheres, I want to mention one great quality or, more exactly, advantage that art has. A true work of art does not end on the last page, it does not exhaust its message when the story of the heroes ends. A true work of art finds a place in the reader's heart and mind and continues to live and act as an inner force, as the pain and light of undying conscience, as the poetry of truth which embraces not only a cloudless and complacent perception of the world but also the suffering and the courage needed to overcome the tragedy inevitable in the life of every man.

There is no end to what has been said over and over again throughout the centuries about the purpose and nature of creative artistic work. There are mountains of books on the subject. But the fact is, and this is another immutable quality of art, that it is possible to go on forever reflecting on the ways and destinies of

literature, because every era has its own cares, difficulties and hopes.

As we got ready for our congress, each of us certainly thought about the time in which we live, for there is nothing in this world of people on Earth encompassed by the two all-inclusive words—"good" and "evil"—there is nothing in the past or present of the life of human beings and society that is not related to literature and art. In this sense everything in the world exists for us, and we exist for everybody.

One should think about this constantly, endlessly, in the same way as life itself is endless. In the end these thoughts crystallize into an idea, which develops into the plot, content and form of a work. Hence our responsibility, the responsibility of an artist of his time.

Keeping this in mind as we check and recheck our observations with the reality of socialism, with its actions, with the ideas it has proclaimed and the practical implementation of those ideas, we ask ourselves: How do we live, where are we headed, what awaits us tomorrow, how can we be most useful to people in their striving to build the most just, most sensible and most beautiful life on Earth? For such is the ultimate goal—the great and sacred hope that everybody everywhere will always know happiness. And this hope is eternal, irrepressible, forever slipping away and reappearing just as the phoenix from the ashes. Such is the immortal and powerful illusion of the eternal spirit of struggle.

The question arises here as to how truthful one's word in art is in historical and aesthetic terms, to what extent it agrees with the ideals, reality and requirements of the society of which one is a member and, above all, how much it contributes to the cardinal discoveries of our epoch made by the October Revolution.

The answer to this question is not at all simple and is at times torturous, for our times are complex, contradictory and multifaceted. A motley confluence of diverse manifestations of life of a personal, social or historical nature can be seen everywhere, and these manifestations demand an artistic examination that takes into consideration the universal poetic and philosophical experience.

If an artist is to create with his characters and actions a historical experience that will be pondered by many generations, he must think and act not as a mere genre painter but as a citizen, as judge, defendant and prophet all at the same time, performing in his creative work the roles of both Jesus and Pontius Pilate. Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Gorky and Sholokhov are such artists for us. We have now proclaimed a new era for which we are responsi-

ble. Therefore, I daresay, it is only by developing and renewing the basis of artistic traditions and not retreating a single step from revolutionary ideas that we can satisfy the spiritual requirements of modern human beings who personify the complexity of today's world and return over and over again, inevitably and irresistibly, to the eternal questions: we are—but who are we and how have we become what we are on this eve of a new millennium on Earth?

In general, for many of us, the question becomes—what to write, how to write and why write?

Yes, the number of people who write is great. It is also true that we are all guided by good intentions. But far from everything that is printed has something to do with literature. Neither the topicality of the plot nor the importance of the subject can in itself be some kind of self-sufficent value for which it is worth writing a book. This should be stated frankly, without passing off false values as genuine ones.

A subject for art is not a topic entered in the long-term plan of action but rather stems from the most acute problems of life, the contradictions and conflicts of the epoch, the system of relations between the individual and society, and the resultant destinies, stories, images and actions of people.

The synthesis of problems and conflicts is the soil on which art is built and out of which characters of the present and the future grow. People want to know the truth about themselves. This truth may be bitter, since in striving for the ideal the human spirit has eternally fought against itself. And this struggle can be conveyed only by means of genuine realism.

So-called village prose, for which critics have failed to find a better name, has been accused of every mortal sin possible, including nostalgia for patriarchal life, narrow-mindedness, opposition to the town, and so on.

We were simply deceiving ourselves, afraid of being burned and claiming that fire was not fire at all. But now it is clear that the best samples of this prose came into being due to literature's vital need to respond to the dramatic events that took place in villages after the Second World War, the need to preserve and, what is more, restore but in a new way, in new historical conditions, the spiritual, moral, ethical and labor traditions and values that had passed the test of time. This prose, rural in terms of geography and of the heroes' way of life, is universally human in its message because it describes people and through them time and history—if you wish, the characteristics of an epoch.

"Village prose" has in a way become an epic of contemporary times.

I want especially to stress the fact that this prose, which has been categorized as rural with barely concealed snobbishness, was in fact the greatest achievement of Soviet literature in the '70s because, I repeat, it broached the most painful problems of our day. It showed persons deeply affected by pain, by their guilt about abandoned plowland and unmown meadows, guilt for having lost that feeling of being the land's conservators, keepers and creators of the people's way of life.

Under the pen of the "villagers"—that wonderful group of writers today—"village prose" has attained universal aesthetic and historical significance and this is where, it would seem, the magic of art lies; this literary trend established one of the main lines of development of modern literature and marked a new level of realism, Party spirit and devotion to the interests of the people in the true sense of the word. "Village prose," which depicts the life of the people, has come to signify lofty civic awareness, the great filial love of artists for their people and their role in the deeds and destinies of their contemporaries. If we speak about the national attributes of literature, this is exactly a profound penetration from a national point of view into the essence of characters, relations and traditions, and without such penetration there can be no real and viable art addressed to the world at large. A time may very well come when "village prose" will signify a high quality of literature in general.

At the same time I cannot help mentioning something that worries me. I have a feeling that the time has come to start sinking new "boreholes" in the fields of the rural theme since the output of the old holes seems to be almost depleted. I may very well be mistaken, but there is in any case a need for a profound philosophical comprehension of the resurging life of the people in the countryside.

No matter what topic we write on—production, moral or historical subjects, as they are usually classified—we must always remember the main thing: people are more than merely workers in a given field. They want to see and understand the world not as mechanics, architects, doctors or tractor drivers but as persons, as whole and balanced individuals. In enjoying culture and communicating with people, each person acts as a man or a woman in general and not as a member of a certain profession or trade. But if they want to take a detached look at themselves, they have to rise to a great height and it is the duty of art to help them do this. Our books written about builders, geologists and people of other occupations, however, are much too narrowly specialized to fulfil this duty.

To write well is our foremost duty. As Gabriel García Márquez said, that is an artist's revolutionary duty—to write well. It seems so simple and clear. But it is not all that simple. A writer may dwell as long as he or she likes on devotion to an ideal, but if all they can do is illustrate it, if they are incapable of expressing it with full artistic force and passion, they may very well discredit that ideal. But it is very hard to say what writing well really is. This requires, it seems to me, a powerful initial concept, ideological conviction and the ability to enter in one's mind the human universe where the most cherished ideas of the human race meet in one knot . . .

One of a writer's principal tasks is to diagnose the moral state of society, to foresee evolution in the spiritual atmosphere of his or her time.

In this connection I would like to say a few words about the problem of the schoolteacher as instructor, language and literature teacher, and promoter of culture, as the main figure in society linking generations and shaping the character of young citizens. Yes, there is such a problem. Not because there is something wrong with teachers; they are there and they provide education. But education and upbringing are entirely different things. While the family cannot be left out of the problem, of course, much depends on the teacher as to what moral principles the pupils will be guided by in the future, what they will read, whether they will be able to cope with Dostoyevsky and Tolstoi in their early youth or will limit themselves to detective stories.

And what will they read? Will they be able to find their bearings and make choices in contemporary, current literature? A teacher, to be a real teacher, must have the respect of the people. In this sense a teacher is in a difficult position in our time, supposed to be a high authority, a mentor and an example, and to possess the best qualities of a cultured person. You should recall what a teacher was like in our school years, what respect he commanded, especially in the village and especially in the East. He was a teacher for all, young and old alike.

Are they like that today, our schoolteachers? I dare not make any assertions, but there is no sense in concealing concern.

Teachers are a great power in our country. Their spiritual potential determines a great deal in our life. The rudiments of knowledge, culture and patriotism are instilled in children's minds with the direct, daily participation of their teachers. But they have now come up against a force that is not at all easy to overcome.

The problem is that the rise in people's living standards has its dialectical negative aspects. Of course, life needs to be improved

and people *should* be better off and have greater comforts and amenities. There is no question about that. What is alarming is an old disease. It is not just a coincidence that people have said since olden times: *"Ash kep bolso, kaada kep."* ("Great satiety leads to great arrogance.")

We have turned out to be inadequately prepared in social, moral and cultural terms for the sharp growth in material opportunities, and this has led to the disease of consumerism among certain sectors of the population. This in turn has resulted in a weakening of spiritual values and ideological principles, encouragement of the acquisitive instinct on the notorious basis of "scratch my back and I'll scratch yours," and other baleful manifestations of philistinism, including embezzlement, profiteering and bribery.

Schoolteachers are faced with this creeping flood that distorts truly human and moral values. And they do not feel very secure since they cannot "produce" anything in short supply and therefore do not amount to much in the eyes of the philistines. Teachers are the first to be struck by this lack of spiritual values; philistinism attacks us day in and day out and the teachers will not be able to check this attack if everyone engaged in culture does not come to their aid.

This is a matter not of the process and quality of teaching literature but of something more important, the teacher as a person. And it requires the attention of everyone having anything to do with culture.

We are all obliged to help raise the professional and social prestige of schoolteachers if we want our children's instructors to be Teachers with a capital T and not persons lacking purpose and vocation and weary of the educator's burden. That is why this question leads to the general problem of the enrollment and selection of students for teachers' colleges and reveals all the snags and shortcomings in the enrollment procedure.

Let us not forget that both journalism and literature are indebted to schoolteachers!

That's the way things are, as Vonnegut's characters would say.

In addition to all these issues and concerns, there is the most terrible problem of all—never before has anyone faced as incredible, improbable, and unimaginable a danger as that threatening us now.

How can peace be preserved?

Human beings have long been preoccupied with the end of the world and have tried to foresee and even depict it since the dawn

of their self-consciousness. It took the form of the Deluge in the Bible, and of various other natural calamities in other writings. Chinese mythology, for instance, predicts the appearance of a gigantic crocodile that will swallow up the sun and thus put an end to everything.

At any rate, people felt compelled to imagine the demise of the world, but in doing so left a loophole—in the form, for instance, of the Second Advent.

But no one in history before us could possibly have imagined that the end of the world might come as a result of self-extermination, by suicide of a human race that had accumulated arsenals of lethal weapons of cosmic dimensions.

No one could ever have dreamed up anything like that in the past. This possibility in fact eliminates any loophole, any Second Advent. Indeed, where and how could there be an advent? Not after the implementation of the plans conceived by people who got swelled heads due to their surfeit of power, military achievements and their ability to mainpulate public consciousness unhindered, using the mass media they dominated. These people already place themselves above gods. We should speak about this as forcefully as possible, and let the Americans realize that their rulers are committing a crime against America itself. Such is the logic of developments.

In the course of our fight for peace, for our Soviet initiatives, we should comprehend and reflect, not only in journalism but also in literature and in the destinies and lives of people, the tragic contradiction of the end of the 20th century. This contradiction consists in the boundlessness of human genius and the impossibility of implementing it, the impossibility of making use of its fruits due to the political, ideological and racial barriers erected by imperialism.

Humanity's economic and ecological needs today demand that this possibility be realized for the sake of continuing civilization on Earth. Fomenting discord among nations and wasting material resources and intellectual energy on the arms race therefore constitute a most heinous crime against the people living today and their descendants.

This squandering of the human potential must be ended!

It should be realized that the artist today must work on a scale heretofore unknown in history, teach and inspire people with the idea of the need to feel, understand and think about others as about themselves; artists must appeal to the whole world, reach every individual with this lesson.

Only then may it be hoped that human beings will escape turning into beasts and that a technological savage and will not dare push the nuclear button to which all lives are connected.

The world awaits anxiously and is rising as though a formidable, seething ocean wave. But meanwhile, unfortunately, alarm signals become lost in the rhetoric of ordinary, daily situations and barely touch people's consciences, alerting them for only a brief moment since their lives are taken up by their work, family and daily concerns and chores.

While people are inclined to live in the here and now, literature and art are called upon to transfer ideas from the global to the personal plane so that every person can understand and think about the problems of peace as his or her own.

This is the mission, task and concern of all those engaged in literature and art, above all of Soviet artists, because the objective of socialism is to secure a balance between general well-being and happiness and the satisfaction of the requirements of every person and the guarantee of their right to happiness.

This is our motto which, I think, we shall hold sacred.

"T. Sadykbekov was not only the founder of the Kirghiz novel but also the keeper of its traditions. He raised the Kirghiz novel to its present professional level. . ." Aitmatov visiting T. Sadykbekov

# 8

## THE MIRACLE OF THE MOTHER TONGUE

The poet Rasul Gamzatov explains with his characteristic good humor that his mountainous Daghestan has so many languages because God was in a hurry, there being a snowstorm, and poured a whole sackful of languages on Daghestan. In the past, the linguistic differences between the Daghestan peoples, who were close in spirit and in their way of life, divided them so radically that it was as if they lived on different continents rather than right next to each other in neighboring ravines. Each village in that eastern portion of the Northern Caucasus had its own language which did not resemble and had nothing in common with any neighboring tongue.

Rasul says that in the past the history of Daghestan was written by sabers and it was only in the 20th century that Daghestan obtained the pen. When Soviet specialists undertook to create an alphabet for the Daghestan languages, they discovered that no alphabet in the world contained letters suitable for transcribing the sounds in the Daghestan languages, so special letters and combinations of letters had to be added to the characters of the Russian alphabet. Today nearly two million Daghestanians speak more than thirty languages. Newspapers and literary anthologies are published in five of them, national theaters perform in seven of them and books are published in nine of them. Those languages include not only Avarian, the most widespread language spoken by about 400,000 people, but also the language of, say, the Tates, who number not more than 15,000. As a matter of fact, there are poets in Daghestan who write in languages spoken by a mere two thousand people.

UNESCO *Courier,* August 1982

The problems of numerically small peoples, which can be found in the most diverse parts of the world, may seem insignificant to an outsider. As the saying goes, a shoe pinches only one's own foot. But to the small peoples their problems are in fact big, very important and at times alarming.

The issue here is the fate of the national culture of the small peoples of our time. This involves first and foremost the fate of their languages, for without them, there can be no development of national identity. While language is the most essential element of a national culture, it is also a means of its development. The language of any people is a unique phenomenon created by the genius of that people, and its loss leads to grievous consequences.

Languages may disappear—many have—but new languages are not likely to appear. The time when languages came into being is probably gone forever. We must cherish what we have, for this is an asset of all humanity.

The world lives in a linguistic universe. The ecology of languages, which came into being at certain point in history, is as complex and fragile as the ecology of nature. Here, just as in nature, one cannot be guided by the pragmatic considerations that might be useful in automation but not in culture. It is quite possible for minor languages to be crowded out and swallowed up by major ones. Obviously it is necessary to treat with extreme caution those opinions that make an ardent appeal for integration at the cost of forfeiting the national merits and specific features of cultures. Such views distort the essence of the problem. If peoples are to unite to their mutual advantage, they and their cultures should differ somehow from one another; when peoples lose their self-identity mutual enrichment becomes impossible and the very need for integration disappears.

I am firmly convinced that it is quite feasible to preserve the existing languages of small peoples and to create conditions not only for their active participation in the new forms of intellectual and material life among nations, but also for their further perfection both through internal evolution and through direct and indirect enrichment by the culture of the world's advanced languages. This is confirmed by the experience of our country, for the Soviet Union is made up of over 100 peoples, nations, nationalities and ethnic groups which voluntarily united the Soviet republics into a single federal state.

Back then we were faced with the choice of relying entirely on one highly developed language or taking the course of coexistence, i.e. the development of national languages in parallel with the use of an advanced language. It would have been easiest of all,

of course, to switch over entirely to the highly developed language with its rich literary and scientific traditions and use it as a medium for creative work without bothering too much about one's own culture. Such freedom of choice might seem tempting. But would it not result in the atrophy of national cultures? Would it be conducive to their full-blooded development in the spirit of the times? And last but not least, would such a state of affairs meet the common interests of the historically "programmed" diversity and multifaceted character of the world community? Who would dare assert what should be kept or discarded in the arsenal of human culture?

One has to weigh all the pros and cons, remembering that in choosing a language one should be guided both by the possibilities of free choice and the considerations of civic duty to the people from whom one stems and from whom one has received that supreme treasure, their language.

We shall never stop wondering at the marvel of our mother tongue. Only the native word, learned and first savored in childhood, can open the soul for poetry born of the experiences of the people, stir in a person the first feelings of national pride, provide the aesthetic pleasure of grasping the diversity of meaning and dimension of the language of one's ancestors. It is in childhood that the foundation of true knowledge of a person's language is laid and it is then that he becomes aware that he belongs to the people surrounding him, to the environment, to a specific culture.

I must say, at least this is true from my own experience, that in childhood a person is capable of organically assimilating two languages used in parallel, probably more, if these languages are employed in equal measure from an early age. To me the Russian language is as native as Kirghiz, native since my childhood and native for my whole life.

But it was impossible to advance the spiritual culture of our multinational peoples without borrowing the achievements of highly developed cultures. That is why we chose the second way, which is more difficult but more fruitful. The more than one-third of our peoples who had no written languages of their own were given alphabets. As a result, Soviet literature comprises more than eighty national literatures. The principle of equality of all languages within the bounds of their ethnic and administrative circulation has fully justified itself.

Here I would like to point out the role of the Russian language, the language that has been like a bridge and for the first time in history has linked the artistic resources of peoples who not long before had not even known of one another's existence. And these

peoples stood far apart as regards their degree of civilization and their cultural and social experience; they adhered to diverse customs and traditions and spoke languages unintelligible to one another. The Russian language has become a language of international communication in the multinational Soviet Union, a language of a new "civilization" and cultural interaction both because it is the language of the biggest nationality and because, while influencing other languages of the peoples of our country, it has also enriched itelf in the course of its interaction with them.

We can now state that we have created a single multilingual Soviet culture, a culture unprecedented in human history, which has absorbed the best achievements of the country's peoples and which is as universal and internationalist as it is diverse in its national forms. And those peoples, large or small in number, have retained the specific features of their thinking, psychology and everyday life. The internationalism of Soviet culture is not the replacement of national cultures by a certain general stereotype, as some people erroneously contend, but is the maximum development of all national cultures and languages on the basis of the ideological unity of the entire society.

We preserve and develop the national identity of our peoples, in opposition to the total leveling and erosion of national values that regrettably still happens in the world, giving rise to a natural anxiety for the destinies of world culture. The integration of socialist national cultures leads not to a loss of national identity and originality but to the enrichment, perfection and growth of those cultures, to the tapping of the potentialities inherent in every people and deriving from their best national traditions, their spiritual heritage and the historical experience they acquired in the course of their long existence.

This process is by no means simple. Our common experience has cost us immense and sometimes torturous labor, endless searches and efforts along unexplored roads of developing creative thinking; we overcame numerous survivals of the past and "infantile" growing pains. The development of a big multinational state like the USSR constantly gives rise to new processes and problems in the sphere of national relations. Suffice it to say that in the last few years in several republics there has been a considerable increase in the number of people of non-indigenous nationalities who have their own specific requirements as regards language, culture and everyday life.

The boundaries of national existence are becoming broader and every day life is changing in such a way that features long regarded as intrinsically national are disappearing from people's lives and

consciousness, though in some cultures these features are becoming fetters impeding our advance. When we speak of the national peculiarities dividing us, we sometimes forget to take into account the fact that there is much in life that brings us together, for we are people of the same destiny, same social formation and same epoch. One should take into consideration the environment, the concrete situation, and the occupation and, most important, the psychology of the new person.

Very profound changes have taken place precisely in the world outlook, psychology and behavior of Soviet people. We representatives of different nationalities now share common views on very many aspects of life, and we have common comparisons, assessments and criteria.

I think that we should welcome new, modern motifs and new trends in the development of national cultures. This can enrich the former national form and broaden its horizons, provided, of course, that these developments can be expressed in a nation's own language.

We are now rising to new heights, exploring new features of the national character and learning to take a modern view of contemporary life, and for that reason the national form is taking on a modern coloration.

Now what can happen if a culture crawls entirely into its own shell? The result would be an essentially pseudo-national culture that would at best reflect only one aspect of the national character. To prevent interaction with other cultures, especially if they are more developed, means to close off the source of one's own development. When "national identity" becomes an end in itself, it leads to separation, isolation and national narrowness, which make it difficult for national values to leave the confines of the national boundaries.

National pride and conceit are of course absolutely different things. In the first case people take pride in their undeniable merits without making an ostentatious display of them, while in the second case they boast of their dubious merits, even their shortcomings, passing them off as being signs of national "originality." Interaction with other nations and peoples greatly helps the process of reaching an awareness of this difference.

National forms naturally change in the course of this process. They interact, enrich one another and get rid of what is obsolescent and has outlived itself. But whenever we speak of things that are national we almost always tend to look back at the past, even though artistic throught has at all times reflected the spiritual state of contemporary society. National identity is more than just the

totality of national features dating back to distant ages. National characteristics include not only what was established long ago and has been tested by time, not only the accumulated experience of the past, but also new features born of modern reality.

The best achievements of the national cultures of the Soviet Union as a rule promote inspiring social and humanistic ideals, and their national aspects are inseparably linked with international aspects that acquire an original national form. Their harmonious combination marks that level of maturity at which universal human awareness begins and in which the desire to be understood and to understand others is rooted.

I have spoken of this at such length because the national problems of culture are a subject of much controversy throughout the world. The national features of a people make its culture unique. A culture's ties with its native land and people, with the specific problems of that people's existence, help it rise to the level of universal human culture because the lives of different peoples and their perceptions of the world have very much in common. That is why it is absolutely wrong to set off the national against the international.

One can certainly understand the reasons for certain prejudice on the part of, for instance, some Asian or African intellectuals, against Eurocentrism, against European civilization's mode of thinking, which they associate with colonial domination and the humiliation of their national dignity. But the progressive representatives of the Afro-Asian intellectuals have for a long time sought to use the European experience for enriching their own national cultures, regarding this experience as a universal human heritage belonging to all who live on Earth.

# 9

## THE GRAIN AND THE MILLSTONES

The rich content of the word "grain" attracts me. Grain is the seed of life, a symbol of heredity, the quality of genetic conservation that operates only under certain circumstances and in a particular medium. But grain is also a source of the changes that result from breeding and mutation. And grain becomes bread, the staff of life . . .

A similar rich content is in national cultures and in national identity.

Cultural identity comprises the traditions, the folk customs, the linguistic characteristics and rules, the artistic and literary experience and the entire system of cultural values inherent in a nation, region or even continent. But in modern times all this undergoes a series of changes that will have far-reaching consequences.

This is evident today in the era of unprecedented interaction between different cultures, especially Western and Oriental. Increasingly similar lifestyles, industrial progress and the development of mass communications and information systems, all affect this. Much also depends on social and political factors. Consider the interaction and cross-fertilization of cultures of the developed and developing countries, and their consequences for the preservation of national identities.

Cultural identity is the shared capital of the nation, amassed in the process of its historical evolution, but this contemporary leveling process is irreversible and painful, destructive and creative, all at the same time.

The process we observe now is a long-term one which we must learn to understand. For myself, I stand at the juncture of two different cultures. I belong to an Asian nation and at the same time

to a large community of Soviet peoples. I am a bilingual writer: Kirghiz is my mother tongue and Russian is the tool of communication in our multinational country. My awareness of national identity is part of my self-awareness in our complex society.

The Kirghiz people went through enormous changes of historic importance, which made us part of contemporary international civilization. And that fact is a reason to focus on the issue of national identity in our times.

National identity should be regarded as a system of values inherent in an ethnic group that has developed its own authentic culture. The world until recently was a complex pattern of national cultures with their foci in the West and the East. Yet modern civilization makes uniform the lifestyles of nations sharing in technological progress. The grain of our national identity is now ground between the millstones of modern civilization, above all of the mass media, a revolutionary achievement of the 20th century.

Emergence of these media has both accelerated and complicated cultural contacts. The bulk of the media are controlled by the West, producing an unlimited stream of advertisement for Western mass culture. Often alien to Afro-Asian countries, this imported culture is readily available to the consumer, becoming a natural part of his life. The process is extremely complex, leading to a gradual erosion of traditional culture and the eventual loss of national identity, but also producing a reaction. Attempts are made to restore and canonize tradition in order to check this erosion. This in turn tends to transform national awareness into narrow nationalism. Both processes have a negative effect on culture.

The question is whether there is anything positive in this phenomenon. There is, in the sense that the mass media, advancing upon the nation's identity, promote a new exchange of cultural values. In challenging ethnic culture, the mass media induce it to develop its own creative potential, to look for new sources.

Thus these powerful tools of mass culture help national cultures to reveal their most viable components. A convincing example was the broadcasting over radio and TV of the early Kirghiz epic, *Manas*. Formerly only a few neighbors were likely to hear it recited, even by the most famous bard. Today its potential audience has no limit. Here again the mass media play a dual role with regard to national identity; radio and TV threaten to obliterate folk art, but they are also the best ways to record and popularize it at a new stage of the nation's evolution.

However, no matter how favorable the situation might seem, the mass media, seeking to entertain, often focus on exotica, debasing

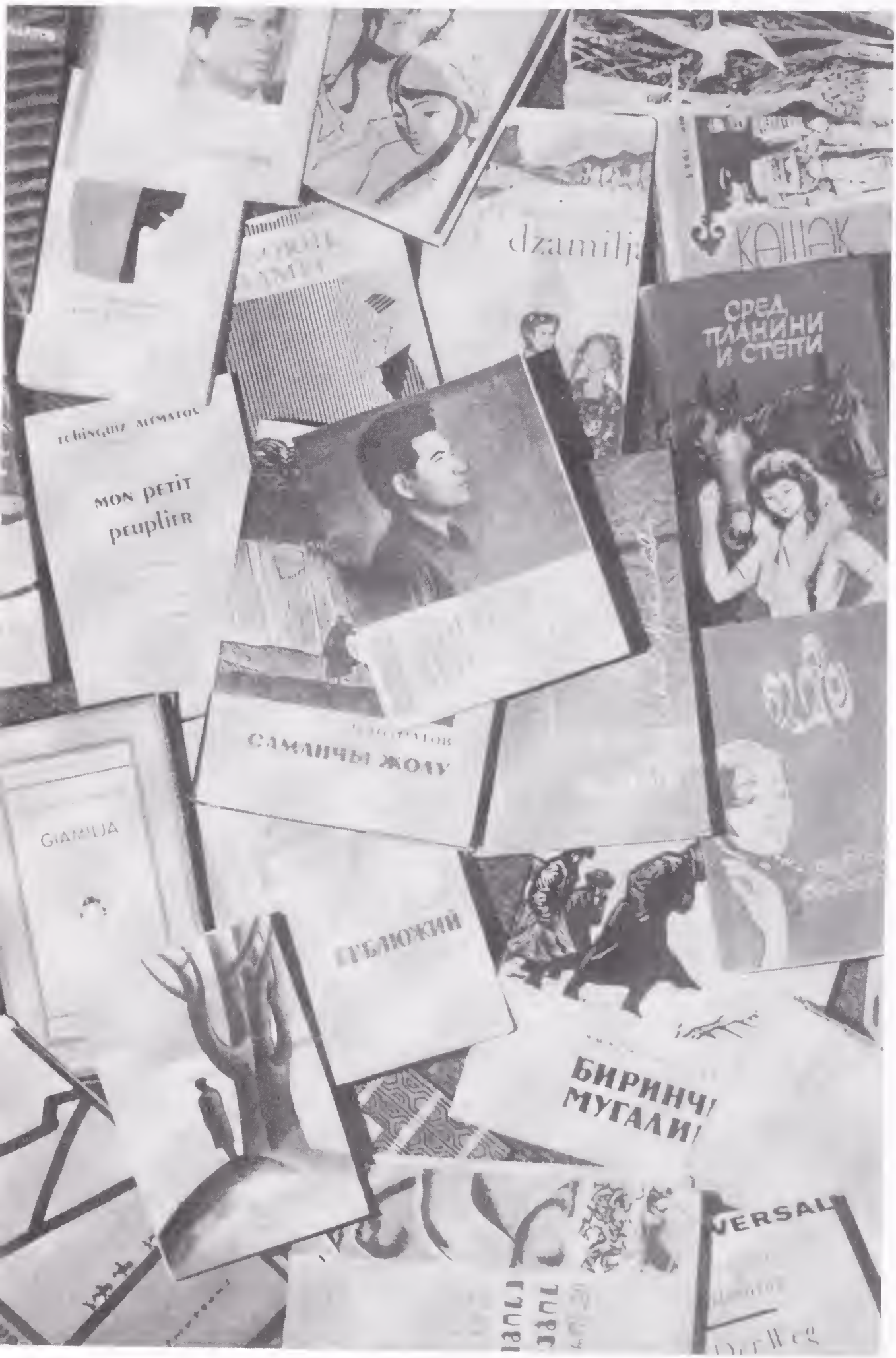
the national culture. Yet audiovisual media in countries with low literacy, with a film version or radio broadcast of a book that dwells on acute social problems that can make the book easily available to the masses.

More denunciation of the destructive effect of the mass media on traditional cultural assets can resolve nothing. People do not distinguish between the mass media per se and their obliterating impact on mass culture. Here an important question arises: Can a work of art be considered part of mass culture only because it is presented by various media?

Mass culture existed in all times and countries. Strictly speaking, any culture breeds stereotypes of its own. What matters, is the level: only a genuine culture enables people to be themselves, frees them from the wish to imitate.

Today we see two types of attitude: an independent outlook and morality that enable the individual to choose between good and evil, beauty and ugliness; and a stereotype mentality, communal or tribal, making a person's behavior determined by tradition and often prejudice. In the latter case mass culture inculcating such stereotype mentality hampers the development of one's personal outlook, without which cultural identity easily turns into cultural chauvinism; that is, conservatism disguised as national awareness.

Cultural identity, will, no doubt, be subject to more tests in the era of the mass media, where the benefits are balanced by the threat of loss of identity. The millstones continue to grind the harvest of national cultures. How much chaff will there be in the flour? The taste of the bread will depend greatly on the bakers.


dzamilja
КАШАК
СРЕД ПЛАНИНИ И СТЕПИ
MON PETIT PEUPLIER
САМАНЧЫ ЖОЛУ
GIAMILJA
ГЪЮЖИН
БИРИНЧ МУГАЛИ

# 10

## BEARER OF CONSCIENCE

A sense of the absurdity and insignificance of the individual as compared with history and eternity has dogged us down the ages. Why should I, a speck of sand, mortal dust, seek justice and right? Why forge revolution or take arms against an evil which seems inherent?

However, this existential predicament has not stopped the struggle, sacrifice and revolt that are the birth pangs of our development. People gave their lives, fought at the barricades, made war and revolution, refusing this verdict of meaninglessness. And though the advances of industry, science and art were lit by the executioner's pyre, triumphant art could still portray our spiritual life, our universe of emotions, and could still exalt humankind as creator.

Art is a universal treasure, therefore, and William Shakespeare, more than most, belongs to humanity as a whole. His jubilee is about much more than just paying tribute to England's most famous playwright. In common with other geniuses of different times and places, Shakespeare, philosopher and poet, is an inalienable part of our inner world. His name symbolizes the power of the human intellect, its continuity, immortality and universality. The Bard is a symbol of the social power of art.

In Shakespeare's time there were other writers and poets as famous as the Bard himself, not only in England but in other countries as well. Yet hardly any of them except Shakespeare and Cervantes created anything that has survived unfading till our day. Permit a lay critic to speculate why. If Shakespeare and other

Speech at the Bolshoi Theater in commemoration of the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, 1964. *Literaturny Kirghizstan, No. 2*, 1964

writers of his time formed a caravan into the future, Shakespeare was certainly the caravan's master—its conscience. Where others have long been lost on the roads of history, sinking into oblivion because their ideas were devalued or rendered obsolete by revolutionary storms from which arose a new social and moral order, the Shakespearean caravan continues its timeless traverse of state borders, mountains, deserts and rivers. The farther it goes, the more universal its ideas become. The more time elapses, the wider grows the sphere of Shakespeare's influence. Shakespeare has been translated into every language and dialect. It seems to me that the Russian language and its literature have done a special service to Shakespeare. Indeed, it was the Russian language that helped many Oriental peoples bridge the gap between their own oral epics and Shakespeare's plays, thus gaining access to the treasures of this sacred heritage.

Why has Shakespeare's heritage survived and why does he continue to fascinate us, to attract 20th century people? It's a difficult question. For three centuries many authors have written innumerable serious papers on the genius of Shakespeare, his philosophy, social problems, his characters and controversies. Paradoxical as it may seem, Shakespeare as an artist and philosopher is as simple as he is great. That is why he is so popular and appealing. I don't think we are attracted mostly to the exotic aspects of his historical dramas, court intrigues or royal biographies. The secret of Shakespeare's success is in the fact that he took the most acute, basic and eternal problems of human life and relationships between the individual and society, put them into striking artistic images and eventually resolved them in a simple and convincing way. What enabled him to probe into the very heart of the matter was his awareness that art was above all, a study of life.

It seems to me that Shakespeare was concerned with the same basic and eternal problems—the essence of man, his mission and the meaning of life—as we are now. To answer those global questions, Shakespeare had to possess creativity and a philosopher's insight. He had to be capable of volcanic emotions. To be able to answer those simple questions, Shakespeare had to become an ardent opponent of evil, perfidy, ambition and tyranny. To answer them, he eulogized his heroes' freedom of thought and spirit, and dramatized the eternal conflict of good and evil. He glorified champions of justice, men of pure conscience. He idolized the heroic and noble-minded people who had a clear conscience and were capable of perfect love and pure thought. He succeeded in all that, and his endeavor immortalized him.

Though many of his characters die tragically, fighting against

the dark forces of evil, or meet disaster (that's what lends his plays verisimilitude), we realize that his tragedies are life-asserting because they show the moral victory of light over darkness, the new over the obscure and of the positive over the negative.

My approach to Shakespeare's works might seem too simple; everyone is aware of the profoundness and complexity of his heroes, but I acknowledge the unsurpassed realism of this Renaissance genius. To us the heroes he created are flesh and blood possessing the greatest human qualities; individuals with acute spiritual controversies, doubts, jealousy, love, hatred, thoughts and torments of their own stemming from their acute sense of civic duty and personal experience.

Contemporary writers dealing with current problems sometimes lack scale in depicting our day, which is full of historic events and heroic deeds. We authors still owe a great deal to society. What we ought to do is learn more from Shakespeare's creativity. He was the master who above all created the type of a noble literary hero, humane and purposeful. In all his plays there are plenty of people with strong, integrated and passionate character. I would like to emphasize that Shakespeare was the "father" of the literary hero, a product of the author's own personality, ideals and feelings.

His formidable heroes, consumed with great passion, irreconcilable in their struggle against evil and evil-doers, seem incapable of compromising with their restless consciences. Disregarding the titles, life circumstances and other temporal characteristics of Othello, Hamlet, King Lear, Romeo and Juliet, we are keenly interested in their fate and share their joys and sorrows as if they were our contemporaries. What we admire in Shakespearean characters is the infinite depth of their souls, comprising a whole range of features, from the amazing intellect and undaunted courage of Hamlet who falls a victim to scheming courtiers, to the perfect love of the young Romeo and Juliet and the turmoil of their feelings and thoughts that fills our hearts with compassion and pain and instills kindness in our souls.

There is a tendency in the West to reduce literature and art to empty entertainment, to deny its educational mission and to encourage meaninglessness. These are the people who think that Shakespeare is naive and out of date. Of course, the world has changed since his time, but the aspiration of art is still the same—to serve the people and truthfully portray man and life.

Shakespeare's immortal works prove that only genuine, truly democratic and beautiful art depicting all phases of an individual can be eternal and serve society.

In the footsteps of Time, we can always distinguish the echo of

the Shakespearean caravan on its way to eternity. Shakespeare is the bearer of conscience, a symbol of man's integrity and greatness, who passes from one generation to the next on his everlasting journey.

After the October 1917 Revolution in Russia, Shakespeare's caravan reached Central Asia. As soon as our national theaters came into existence, they began to stage Shakespeare's plays in our ethnic languages, and that gave us an opportunity to drink from the fresh spring of his art and quench our longing for humanity's cultural heritage, to which we had had no access for many centuries. Today many Shakespearean plays are produced at Central Asian theaters, including dramas, tragedies and comedies, not to mention operas and ballets based on them. Outstanding actors famed for the performance of Shakespearean characters have emerged there during the Soviet period. Speaking on behalf of Central Asian intellectuals, I would like to express our high appreciation of and deep respect for Shakespeare, a unique genius of all times and peoples.

Shakespeare, always with us, maintains the continuity of human experience, our cultural heritage accumulated throughout millennia and our immortal folk spirit.

That humanity has produced a genius like Shakespeare proves that man is certainly not a speck of dust.

The Bard is like a ceaseless tide washing the shore of Life!

# 11

## REFLECTIONS NEAR A FUTURE MONUMENT

Kirghizia is now celebrating the centenary of its remarkable son, the great poet Toktogul. Each of us, whether engaged in literature or art, returns over and over again to Toktogul, to his spirit and image, to review the road he traversed and his role and significance in the history and life of the Kirghiz people.

Here, at the pedestal of a future monument to Toktogul, I would like to draw your attention to a circumstance which in my view serves as testament to the great poets who combined their lofty qualities as artists with those of fighters and public advocates.

Those great poets lived and worked at different times and in different countries, and wrote their verses in different languages and were from different sectors of society. But what united them in time and space into a single constellation of mankind's mighty sons, into a single poetic thought, was the revolutionary spirit of their work and its devotion to the interests of their peoples. A bridge of time rests upon their shoulders, as it were, a bridge along which we are walking and which has been built from the poet's verses, rhymes and hearts.

The kinship of these poets derives not only from the poetic word, from their harmonious songs, but also from their destinies, from the passes they crossed in their lives and struggles. They fought for their ideals to the death. Byron died fighting for the freedom of Greece, and tsarism killed Pushkin, just as the same dark forces did away with Mickiewicz and Petofi. Taras Shevchenko, the great son of the Ukraine, marched into exile in fetters, and the jingle of his chains sounded as a bell of the people's wrath

Speech at cornerstone ceremony for monument to poet Toktogul Satylganov, 1965. *Sovetskaya Kirghizia,* June 17, 1965.

against the oppressors and as a voice of tender affection for the ordinary man, the toiler. And in our time, the fascists shot García Lorca.

Our Toktogul is one of the men of this constellation.

He had no academic education. But he was a highly talented improvisor, an unsurpassed bard of Kirghizia, and it is our proud belief that Toktogul, as a revolutionary bard, a thinker of national caliber, a fighter and an artist, belongs in the same category as the world's greatest poets. He stands together with those for whom the poetic mission was inseparable from their own lives and from the destiny of their peoples, with those whose revolutionary spirit and talent have made them the mighty piers of the poetic bridge of history. Our Toktogul is such a pier.

As today we lay the first stone of the monument to Toktogul, acting on behalf of the Kirghiz people and through the person of a Kirghiz poet, we pay tribute once again to the great poets of all nations for whom service to the people was the foremost, the most important, concern of their lives.

But I shall not be mistaken if I also say today that we are laying the foundation to a monument to our national hero Toktogul Satylganov.

One more essential point. The humanism and democracy of Soviet government have raised the importance and value of all human beings to unprecedented heights. Toktogul's destiny is one example of this. The Soviet government has preserved for us and glorified the name of Toktogul, and we thank the Party for its deep concern for national cultures.

We have been living side by side with the Russian people for more than a hundred years. There is nothing that could divide us. On the contrary, we are united in everything; in our work, in our struggle and in our aspirations. And the Russian people have joined us in marking Toktogul's jubilee as a celebration of their own national poet. For this we thank them once again as brothers.

# 12

## HIS RUTHLESS REALISM

As one ponders the significance of Dostoyevsky for modern culture and his services to the past and the future, one is invariably struck by the uniqueness of this outstanding and complex artist. His uniqueness lies in the fact that, as time passes, his name and works more and more preoccupy human minds. A destiny like his is rare for even a great talent. This can and should be explained in different ways, Dostoyevsky being what he is.

In entering literature, Dostoyevsky crossed over a much-trodden threshold. By that time the world knew many celebrated writers, masters of the artistic word. The descriptive capacity of literature had become highly analytical and concrete. Realism had finally established itself as the most authentic and most comprehensive method of artistic representation of multifaceted human life. The "literary maps" had clearly shown new "continents" discovered by the classics.

However, Dostoyevsky made his own discoveries on those "discovered continents." He investigated their depths, the depths of human souls, and made his original contribution to the aesthetic culture of a whole epoch. As a great artist Dostoyevsky made a revolutionary impact on the literary process of the 19th and 20th centuries. Thanks to his works, the artistic thought of subsequent generations concentrated on an in-depth scrutiny of the human personality, its psychology and its aspirations, as inseparably linked with reality.

But Dostoyevsky's most sacred and lasting effect in literature was, I think, his boundless compassion for men drowning in the

Dedicated to the 150th Anniversary of F. M. Dostoyevsky's birth [Oct. 31, 1821, old calendar]. *Pravda,* Nov. 11, 1971.

whirlpool of the cruel and cynical society of exploitation. Dostoyevsky entered Russian literature as a writer seized with overwhelming anxiety and pain for man tormented by social tragedies and the contradictions of his own mutilated nature. It was during those terrible times that the Russian writer highlighted a most important task of humanistic literature—that of the moral education of man, of teaching him to be compassionate, without which he cannot be a complete human being.

Dostoyevsky elevated the capacity for compassion to the level of a supreme measure of humaneness, seeing in it the most essential spiritual quality, given to *homo sapiens* alone. In today's world with its nuclear weapons, a world plagued by racial problems and violence, Dostoyevsky's alarm bell rings incessantly as an appeal to humanity and humanism. It is in this that I see the essence of Dostoyevsky's genius, of his all-embracing compassion, and also the main reason for his lasting influence and ever growing popularity.

Those in the West who now try to interpret in this or that way the complexities of Dostoyevsky's works, to falsify them to suit their narrow selfish interests, should remember that Dostoyevsky, as an artist and one of the greatest humanists of all times, earned the right to be the conscience of the oppressed and humiliated through the suffering of vast Russia, destined to live through the horrors of capitalism in its harshest form. It is sheer sacrilege for anyone to distort Dostoyevsky to suit his or her own egoistic ends.

Dostoyevsky views the human race with undying sorrow on his immortal brow, like a wise man who has learned a great deal from his own experience and has voiced many cherished thoughts. Dostoyevsky's importance for modern man lies in the fact that he is merciless to evil, and that his unrelenting, precise analysis also reveals the causes of evil. By so doing Dostoyevsky helps us to live and fight for our lofty ideals.

Dostoyevsky wrote with the simplicity of a genius about people among people, about the everyday life of his time, which did not seem special in any way. But what he saw in that life and what he depicted through the destinies and characters of his heroes was the revelation of the epoch.

Dostoyevsky's artistic mastery, his clinically accurate analysis of characters and the motives for their actions as well as his exposure to the dependence of a person's destiny on society are of no small importance here. While he depicted all kinds of humiliated and offended people and portrayed misfortunes, distress and ugliness, he never stooped to sentimentality. Serious literature rejects triviality—whether turning to tragedy, heroism, the affir-

mation of man's reason and dignity or to the ridicule of conceit or intoxication with power. Dostoyevsky's works teach us that in all and everything literature must know the only true sense of measure which divides really talented and inspired endeavor from trivial and speculative hack works.

As an artist Dostoyevsky is always great—in things both large and small, on jubilee and non-jubilee days. He always teaches us to think of the past and the present, of the eternal strife of human existence, of the struggle between good and evil.

"In the beginning was the Word...."

# 13

## RECIPROCITY OF TRADITIONS

Each writer has a sphere of life that is nearest to him. This is a medium where the artist draws his life-blood and from which his talent is nourished. Whenever a writer turns to "his own material" and speaks about people close to him both in spirit and time—"kindred spirits"—he feels at ease and usually creates fine works, long remembered by the reader. The history of literature tells us of many authors of great talent who attempted to write about things unfamiliar and alien to them, which they perceived speculatively, whereupon good fortune often abandoned them. One can cite very many such examples. For instance, American literature there were frequent attempts to reproduce the image of the Indian. What was the result? The characters were either artificially idealized and sugary or tendentiously denigrated. This is the way the stereotypes of, say, "treacherous infidel" or "noble servant" are usually established. In a word, the result is impoverished oversimplification.

But every rule has exceptions which in turn create a new rule. Consider Tolstoy. his novelette *Haji Murat* has no equal in its mastery, its refined finish and perfection of form. Its theme is local but the idea is broad, in fact global. The most striking thing is Tolstoy's deep psychological penetration into a character of a different nationality. Both Haji Murat and his *naibs* (fellow men) are credibly pictured. I had a chance to speak to Haji Murat's descendants, who affirmed this. How did Tolstoy manage to achieve this? This is the artist's great mystery, Tolstoy's great heart, capable of understanding "man in general." This the bril-

*Questions of Literature,* 1972, No. 12

liant creator of *Haji Murat* sets us an example from the past of deep penetration of a national, "alien" character, penetration into the essence of objective phenomena. Here is a sample of inner reciprocal influence of "national cultures" and of their mutual enrichment, a sample that remains alive to this day.

Now, what was an exception in the last century becomes a rule in our days. This does not imply, of course, that success will come automatically to a writer who dares to choose as a subject "other" national material. This is always difficult, now as before. And of course what one values in every writer above all is his own "national face." Yet in our time powerful "additional conditions" arise which help an artist to assimilate a foreign-language culture. Each modern Soviet literature is now based on two principles: its own national tradition and the tradition of Russian culture to which we are introduced in our childhood. Thus two currents, two streams are joined. This process, which is very complex, varied and rich, undoubtedly helps to form a new type of writer.

This process, though it develops most vigorously in Soviet conditions, also proceeds in other areas of modern world culture. One of them is Latin American culture and literature. Latin American prose is an example of a peculiar combination of most diverse elements, artistic traditions and methods. It includes myth and reality, authentic facts and fantasy, social and philosophical aspects, political and lyrical themes, the "particular" and the "general." And all this merges into one organic whole. The cause is the reunification of national cultures, of the numerous "patches" of variegated Latin American life, which nurture one another.

Of great importance in our Soviet conditions is, of course, the Russian artistic tradition, which has an extremely broad range of capacity. What does it mean to be a Russian writer? It means that one must preserve in one's soul the artistic and spiritual experience of one's predecessors as one's own, intimate and loved. The Russian literary traditionally naturally serves today not only Russian writers but all of us writers of the sister republics. It is impossible to create modern prose without drawing on the classical realism of Tolstoy and Chekhov. The experience of Russian artistic thought is interesting in itself, in its own wealth as well as because it gives access to world culture. Then there is the important factor of language. The resources of the Russian language are inexhaustible. When I write in Russian I feel (though the proper "formulation" of this feeling is almost impossible) that I express myself in a very specific and inimitable manner.

Any other language of our country certainly possesses vast

resources, including my own Kirghiz language. Some of its expressions are also inimitable and untranslatable. For example, we have words that describe the manner and place of the "landing" of a winged creature. I have to put the word "landing" in quotes because the phenomenon discussed is much broader. In the Russian sentences "A butterfly sat on a tree branch" and "A plane has landed on an airfield" the verb "to seat" is used in both cases. In Kirghiz there are two words for the purpose—*konot* and *konuu*—each with a separate meaning. When I write in Kirghiz I also feel the inimitability of what I am saying, the inimitability of expressing my "self." I believe that fate has graced Soviet writers with a very interesting possibility—that of drawing on two national cultures, of drinking from two national springs. Compared to the past, our possibilities have grown immensely.

We should improve many forms of communication among the writers of the sister republics. The ten-day festivals of national culture should not be reduced to superficial contacts and personal acquaintance. Mere campaigning is contra-indicated in literature. An author writes alone, by himself. What does he get from group "raids" into one "national area" or another, into a "national theme"? All such "raids" can produce are reportage at best. If you want to write about Siberia, go there alone, live there quietly for a while; only then begin to write. Nothing good can come from parade noise and fanfare. When they devote a whole issue of a magazine, for instance, to any one literature, the effect is artificial and farfetched. It is much more fruitful to conduct substantial studies unrelated to one particular date or another and handling the subject in a serious manner. What is needed are exacting, critical newspaper and magazine articles, without any allowances. We must strive to make all our undertakings efficient.

# 14

## OUR BYELORUSSIAN BROTHER

They were formed up in a column, haversacks on their backs. When they marched off, stretching along the road in a long file, we were running alongside the men, saying goodbye. Last greetings, best wishes, smiles. Lads born in 1924, eighteen years old, whom we youngsters treated as equals only yesterday, were going to the front in the winter of 1942.

I remember tying in pairs the four riding horses I was instructed to bring back and driving them in a little hard, as if from a battlefield, into the mountains, turning to look now and then at the disappearing column.

None of those who entrusted their horses and saddles to me came back. Their mothers are also gone. Only one old woman is left. My heart aches when I meet her.

"Do you remember driving the horses back?" she asks every time.

"I do, mother," I say and fall silent.

When I read Vasil Bykov's stories, when I think about him as a writer and a person, I cannot but recall his peers, those who went along a winter road to win the hard victory for their Homeland, those who this year would be past fifty, like Vasil.

I cannot get rid of the thought that fate saved Vasil Bykov for us so that he, having gone through the crucible of war, having suffered the bitter hardships of guerrilla warfare in Byelorussia, could afterwards speak his revealing and inimitable words, filled with unsparing truth and filial anguish in the name of all those eighteen-year-old soldiers to whom fell the hardest—tragic and heroic—lot. To them who had lived so little, who had not yet quenched the

*Literaturnaya Gazeta,* June 25, 1974

insatiable thirst for knowledge, war was a cruel discovery of the world practically from the first steps of their life, a cognition of the meaning of good and evil through the global, historic events of the struggle against nazism.

The important thing was not only to stand up and defeat the enemy but also to prove oneself a person of great moral fortitude during the war, in fields of terrible combat. It was essential not to break down, not to become inhumanly hardened, not to lose faith in human kindness; finally it was important to comprehend the war with a mind matured by the common and personal experience acquired at the fronts, to see in it man's greatest moral trial before his Homeland, in the face of fighting and death.

War and morality, war and the individual, these are the great problems posed to artists probing the essence of twentieth century man. These problems seem to me to have found the most serious and consistent treatment in the best works of Vasil Bykov. His hero, Soviet man, performed feats of arms, but, most important, also displayed in the war the moral qualities of a humanist, a person of socialist society. Herein lies the merit and the artistic and civic distinction of the works of Vasil Bykov the writer, thinker and soldier.

Who is not moved by Bykov's splendid short novels? Like soldiers clad in gray trench coats, these short novels march in grim closed formation. But what astounding power, what frankness and remarkable talent he employs to describe in them the lives and destinies of people, immutable problems that stir souls to this day, that compel one to suffer, reflect and feel gratitude . . .

Yes, to thank fate for preserving Vasil Bykov for us so that he may live and write in the name of a whole generation, in the name of those who grew familiar with war at a tender age and matured in spirit with arms in hand, those to whom a day of life was equal to an age of life . . .

None of Vasil Bykov's peers who entrusted me to take their horses back to the village came home. Yet I know about them from our Byelorussian brother, writer Vasil Bykov, for we are all one family, we are all Soviet people.

Hail, Vasil, brother of my brothers to whom I happened to do the last horse-holding service . . .

I wish you a long life, Vasil, and an inexhaustible talent!

# 15

## SKETCHES FOR AN ARTIST'S PORTRAIT

An ancient adage says: If your father has died, pray that people who knew him live long. There is good reason for this saying, because the memories of contemporaries serve as it were, to prolong the dead person's life. Through recollection the living forestall irreparable loss.

Reminiscences are our anguish and our affirmation of the past.

The eternal and imperishable memory of Dmitri Dmitriyevich Shostakovich lies above all in his music, counted among the supreme artistic achievements of 20th century music. Here was an artist of rare destiny, whose genius was recognized during his lifetime. And despite the profound philosophical nature of his work, Shostakovich was popular with broad sections of the people.

However, human nature is such that we seek new recollections and observations of the people who knew Dmitri Dmitriyevich well in everyday life. This need stems from our desire to recreate a collective portrait of the great composer out of the reminiscences of his contemporaries.

I first met Dmitri Dmitriyevich in Moscow in the early 1960s, at a session of the Lenin and State Prize Committee. That we "got acquainted" is not quite the proper phrase, for it seemed to me that I had always known him; it would indeed be unpardonable for anyone interested in art not to have known Shostakovich. I knew it was he the first moment I saw him.

During the committee's meetings I noted the particular respect and attention with which numerous distinguished committee members listened to him. This highly intelligent man—no longer young, fragile, with heavy, thick glasses through which peered

penetrating gray eyes with great dilated pupils, with his quiet, low voice—commanded attention. In keeping with an unwritten law, Shostakovich's opinion always weighed heavily in judging the arts. He was not gifted with eloquence; his strength lay elsewhere, in his utter honesty facing facts (he would say without beating about the bush that a certain work was feeble, time-serving, etc.) and the inner conviction of his rightness. The flair of a great artist never failed him. I cannot remember ever doubting his views.

Great sincerity and an unsurpassed sense of beauty, combined with an uncompromising power of judgment, were key features of Shostakovich's character. I admired and was proud of him. This modest and even shy man who, unlike many others, did not need flowery phrases and striking effects, was a thinker and artist overwhelming in his humanity and his obsession with the need to nurture talent in both life and art.

I was attracted by Shostakovich also because my own views and thoughts always coincided with his. I was surprised at being able to consistently predict where we would agree. This evidently was the basis of our closer acquaintance and, later, friendship. We were first presented to each other officially by Alexander Trifonovich Tvardovsky.* Once, as we lounged about in the Committee lobbies, Tvardovsky called to Shostakovich, who was nearby: "Dmitri Dmitriyevich, I want to introduce to you Aitmatov, of whom we have spoken."

Shostakovich turned to me, smiled vividly, and awkwardly extended his slim hand. Thus began a friendship of many years. Dmitri Dmitriyevich won my heart because, despite a considerable difference in our ages, he treated me as an equal. It may seem strange, but Shostakovich, like Tvardovsky and Urusevsky,** never addressed me with the familiar "thou," which would have been quite natural considering the differences in our age and status. My senior comrades seemed to have sensed my ingrained Oriental respectfulness toward older people, and responded to it.

Incidentally, these three great friends of mine had much in common—but above all, a rigorous dedication to truth in art. Artistic truth, despite the vast variety of its forms, is a category that is great and immutable in principle. That is evidently why it was to them a matter of vital importance, the essence of their life. I witnessed this on many occasions. They were repelled by people who interpreted the tasks of art in keeping with the current ruling trend. Tvardovsky was of a sterner character and less restrained in

*A famous Soviet writer of poetry and prose.

**Sergei Urusevsky, a well-known film director.

expressing his feelings, while Shostakovich and Urusevsky were trusting and pure, like children. Spiritual twins is what I called them in my mind, and I am ardently thankful to the fate that allowed me to know these people.

Essential to friendship and mutual understanding are common interests and convictions. And then there is the constant need to share one's dearest ideas, the desire to preserve whatever serious observation or discovery one may have made for oneself in order when the chance comes to share it with a person one respects. This is a source of spiritual satisfaction, for it is crucial to hear a friend's opinion. Very often such an exchange can give rise, like a little brook, to a river of big and memorable conversations about life, about everything that pains the soul and is vitally important.

Dmitri Dmitriyevich and I had frequent talks. For twelve years we exchanged views between the committee's sessions and sometimes during them, during previews of plays and films, and at concerts and art exhibitions. These were among our most valuable contacts. Today it is hard to reconstruct details of our long talks. Regrettably, we do not always appreciate the importance of some concrete moments and do not commit to paper what at the time seem ordinary conversations, only to realize later that they have unusual significance.

I remember a talk about Kozintsev's film *Hamlet*. I was greatly impressed, particularly by Shostakovich's score. The mere presence of the names of Kozintsev, Smoktunovsky and Shostakovich (without forgetting Shakespeare) "doomed" the film to inevitable success. The richness of the production's content was enhanced by the music, which seemed to be in the spirit of Shakespeare, of the prince of Denmark's tragic passions.

We discussed the nature of conflict in Shakespeare's tragedies. I said, provocatively, that the time of Shakespearean thinking had ended, just as had epic and fairy-tale folklore. Therefore, I claimed, by virtue of this historical imperative, no one anywhere could recreate Shakespearean themes.

I expected Shostakovich to laugh the matter off with: "Aren't you modern writers looking for a way of justifying yourselves?" But he was very serious about everything that concerned art. Although he often willingly agreed with the reasoning of others, he objected this time.

"I am not sure, it is probably not quite so," he said.

Shakespeare's eternal themes were alive, he said, and would live in every era, while there were people on Earth. And all periods have Hamlets and King Lears of their own. The point is that each time the passions and problems of such persons acquire

new forms of expression in keeping with their epoch. The task is to discern them in humdrum life and to study them.

"So you believe that a new Shakespeare will come?" I asked.

"If not Shakespeare, then another genius."

"Hardly; I doubt it very much."

"But I am confident," Shostakovich insisted. And then he said what both surprised and delighted me and what I'll always remember. He said that there was a much greater chance for new Shakespeares in the modern world, for never before had humankind reached in its development such universalization of the spirit and, therefore, when an artist of such greatness arrived he would, like a musician, be able to carry and express the whole world in himself alone . . .

The entire world in himself alone . . .

Ours was a casual talk and only later, when I was alone, did I understand the significance of what I had heard: Shostakovich expected from literature a universal, "musical" comprehension of life.

The whole world in himself alone . . . A difficult task, but there can be no greater dream for an artist!

And at the same time, Shostakovich enjoyed realistic, true-to-life works that made no philosophic claims but were written by talented people.

Once I caught up with Dmitri Dmitriyevich on the stairs leading to the third story of the building that housed the Lenin Prize Committee. The old mansion had no lift, which caused great difficulties to Shostakovich during the last years of his life. I took him by the arm and we went up together, cautiously, making stops. He was pale and breathing heavily, leaning with one hand on the banister and with another on me. But he tried heroically to smile. I did not know what to say or do to alleviate his weakness.

As if in answer to my difficulties, he suddenly asked: "Have you read one remarkable story in Science and Life?"

"I have," I said confidently, smiling because I was sure I knew which story he meant. "Troyepolsky's short novel *White Bim*. . . ."

"How did you guess?" Shostakovich's eyes suddenly shone with interest. "You see, I read the story with such great pleasure, with such a bitter-sweet feeling . . ."

He appreciated and valued modern literature. In spite of his colossal creative effort and constant illness, he missed none of the new works and was always an active and discriminating reader.

I have kept two of his letters. They have become family relics and will be bequeathed to my children. One he wrote after reading

*Farewell, Gyulsary!* and the other in connection with *The White Steamship.* Both are dear to me, but the second letter, is especially so. He was in Kurgan, under supervision of the famous Dr. Ilizarov, and he wrote that his legs had become steadier and the strength in his arms was growing so that he hoped he would soon be able to play the piano, for himself and while composing. Each time I reread it, that letter moves and amazes me with its jumping, laboriously spelled and inimitable characters and with the endless humanity, courage and attention of the great composer, my friend and reader. For this letter alone I will always be grateful to Shostakovich.

Regrettably all that is left now for me is to remember and recall with joy or sorrow the particular events of our friendship.

In the winter of 1971 our families stayed at Barvikha sanatorium. Dmitri Dmitriyevich rarely came out for a walk and then only with the help of his wife, Irina Antonovna, but we met and talked whenever it was convenient. We talked sitting on the benches along the lanes in the forest or, more frequently, inside the sanatorium—in the dining room, the cinema hall, the library. We also visited one another in our suites.

That was a beautiful, quiet and snowy winter, such as often occur in the countryside near Moscow. The snow, constantly replenished at night, subdued the surroundings and was conducive to the unhurried, deep flow of our talks. Shostakovich, who was of a somewhat choleric temper, was very concentrated and pensive that winter. Possibly he was thinking of the life he had lived, of what he had done and what he would probably never be able to accomplish, for no one has ever exhausted all his or her knowledge and strength before leaving the world. Perhaps for that reason during his stay in Barvikha he repeatedly touched upon a subject that is a tender spot for me (and for many others, I guess): the ability to subjugate all of one's life to creative work. (This matter remains my number one problem.) He often pointed out to me with regret that I was giving too much of my time to public and mundane affairs, to the detriment of literature. He reminded me that what is missed when one is young can never be made up later. For everything should be done in its proper time and what is given to an artist at one time is not given at another. Life's experience flows like a river, and one cannot step into the same water twice.

He was right, of course. Now I try, and may yet be able to remake my life. I came to understand, from my own experience, everything he had meant . . .

It was a stroke of luck that a TASS photographer came to Barvikha and immediately I took him to Shostakovich's suite, where joint family photographs were made. They are now the

pride of our home. We were to leave Barvikha several days before the Shostakoviches. Dmitri Dmitriyevich amazed and confused me with his friendly attentiveness. I came early to say good-bye to him, and he was not feeling well. He asked me at what time we were going. Five p.m., I said. The car came by five, but I was in no hurry since we were leaving only for Moscow, where we were to stay for a while. It took me some time to gather my papers and to say good-bye to the nurses and doctors. When we came out of the sanatorium entrance some twenty minutes later, I saw Dmitri Dmitriyevich, who must have been quite frozen waiting outside for us. That was a complete surprise. Had I known that he would come to see us off, we would not have wasted a minute. I was thoroughly ashamed before the sick man. But Dmitri Dmitriyevich would not listen to any excuses. He smiled disarmingly with his kindly childish smile and said his wise parting words, looking me straight in the face with his understanding eyes.

I often recall that departure and the way Shostakovich saw us off. It even seems to me sometimes that should I go once again to Barvikha I would surely see him sitting thoughtfully, the fur collar of his overcoat raised, on a bench along the snowclad paths, listening to the silence of the forest.

A year later there was another big, noisy, joyful and merry meeting in the summertime, when our whole family went to visit the Shostakoviches at their summer cottage in Zhukovka.

That was an unforgettable meeting! Dmitri Dmitriyevich was cheerful, and although he was not absolutely well, it was a period of comparative stability of his health. He was able to work, and everything in the house had been arranged to help him. There was even a small lift to the second floor. It looked like a toy. Dmitri Dmitriyevich gaily told us how he was using it, a personal lift of a rare design, and even allowed my younger son, Askar, to take a ride up and down.

As we sat around the table, the mood was also jolly. Dmitri Dmitriyevich drank some vodka with us (at least not less than I did), which soothed me somewhat for it showed that, thankfully, Shostakovich's spirit was strong. I was also glad that when Irina Antonovna had phoned us in Frunze in the spring of that year, asking that we find the "Issyk-Kul root" (a potent medicinal plant) for Dmitri Dmitriyevich, I had managed to meet her request quickly. Friends and kinsmen in Talas had started promptly for the mountains in search of the root and a week later brought me a goodly quantity. Dmitri Dmitriyevich either did not know that he was being treated with a solution made from our root or would not reveal his wife's secret; for my part, I tried to convince myself that

his good mood was due to the action of our mountain herb. On the other hand, I had to acknowledge that this remedy was resorted to in exceptionally serious and dangerous cases.

Be that as it may, that day there was no talk about any diseases as Shostakovich's summer house shook from our voices and the tramp of many feet. After lunch we gathered in Dmitri Dmitriyevich's study to listen to his favorite records.

The most memorable meeting of all took place about a year and a half before Shostakovich died. During one of my trips to the capital, he phoned me at the hotel where I was staying. He invited me to supper and said that before supper he would listen for the first time to a performance of his new work, the *Quartet No. 14,* and if I wished to hear it I should be at his flat at 7 p.m. sharp. I was certainly happy to accept the invitation. Later in the day, however, I found that, because it was necessary for me to read proofs at the *Izvestia* office, I would be late.

When I phoned to excuse myself, Irina Antonovna answered the phone. She told me not to worry. The concert would start at seven sharp, she said, but there was nothing terrible in being a little late. She also said that the concert would probably be repeated. At 7:10 p.m. I was in front of the Shostakoviches' door, through which strains of music could be heard. Irina Antonovna, who opened the door, stifled my loud greeting by pressing a finger to her lips and, stepping cautiously, silently led me through the corridor to a large room where the quartet was playing.

Shostakovich was sitting at a table with his back to the door and next to him sat Kara Karayev.* In front of them, in the center of the room, four musicians were playing.

I found a place on a sofa next to the door. No one even glanced at me. The musicians were fully absorbed in their performance. Shostakovich and Kara Karayev were both bent forward, listening with tense concentration, as though something incredible were about to happen, as if they were watching an event invisible to me. Little by little, I adjusted myself to the situation and began to take in the music. I cannot say that it was easy, for I had to isolate myself from all other thoughts. I was not altogether successful. Dmitri Dmitriyevich listened to the music with unflagging tense attention as if he wished to discern and identify in the sounds something that had not yet been expressed or discovered, and his expression seemed to me alienated, unfamiliar, even stern and closed. I looked at his stooped stiff back, at the rigid face half-turned to me, in perplexity and fear.

*A well-known Azerbaijanian composer.

My instinct proved correct. When the musicians finally stopped playing, Dmitri Dmitriyevich did not change his tense eaglelike pose, but Kara Karayev said immediately, with a feeling of sincere admiration and excitement though trying to maintain a restrained, matter-of-fact intonation: "Dmitri Dmitriyevich, it's a work of a genius!" Then he cordially thanked the performers.

Shostakovich nodded in appreciation but remained cold. I did not recognize him. Rising in him were the forces of his ruthless demands on himself and on others. He too thanked the musicians and then began a very rigorous analysis of the performance. Kara Karayev even had to soften his remarks somewhat. God's truth, the musicians played brilliantly, not only with all their heart and soul, as they say, but putting every effort into the performance, as horses strain themselves in a merciless race. But the composer demanded still greater mastery, greater precision, greater inspiration. He even told one of them that he breathed too hard while working his bow. And this to a quartet who shared with him thirty-odd years of creative work. Dmitri Dmitriyevich was quite ruthless! They spent much time discussing and arguing—the composers and the performers now agreeing, now differing in their opinions. It was a conversation among people creating music. Yes, a work by Shostakovich was worth such labor and such uncomprisingly responsible approach to art.

Then they decided to play the *Quartet* once again. As I listened, I thought wonderingly: "Here you are! Here is your nice, kind, self-conscious Shostakovich. He's ferocious when he is at work!"

Thus I thought at that hour about Shostakovich—with pride, respect and admiration.

And that's how I wish to remember him.

# 16

## ONCE AGAIN WE URGE ON THE COACH

Every year on this day in February it seems as though the white snow at the Black Brook has been stained with blood once again . . .

The fatal shot has been fired and the frightened ravens have again settled in the bare treetops . . .

And once again we pick him up in our arms, mortally wounded, with a drooping head . . .

And once again we urge on the coach as if there were still a way of saving him . . .

But the bell is already ringing . . .

And once again we speak of him . . .

The century and a half that separates us from Pushkin seems not a short period. But then we recall that long before him the European poetry scene was dominated by such powerful figures as Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Goethe, and by one who was almost a contemporary, the romantic Byron, whose works were revered by Alexander Pushkin himself. In this context, Pushkin's genealogical path, the great distance and height of his spiritual origin that we see through years and centuries, through the curtain of epochal changes following one another, becomes clear. It would seem that very little could remain of those days when worlds were toppled and social systems collapsed and when mutually exclusive ideologies and theories clashed, could survive until today, when, at last, humankind's mind, perplexed and frightened by its own fearsome scientific creation, has become shackled to a heretofore unknown and accursed dilemma—will the light of reason survive on earth or will it go out forever? And then there will be endless darkness in the world because the sun's cycle will be of no practical significance for people . . .

In the course of this desperate search for ways to sustain light, hope and inspiration, we compare past and present over and over again and turn to the geniuses of the past who recorded in art the arduous history of the establishment of the human spirit. In this search we must often turn to Pushkin, his poetry, his thoughts and sufferings, drawing from him joy, sorrow and life energy, because Pushkin was not only a martyr but also a herald and heroic builder of great Russia. Herein lie the dialectics and uniqueness of Pushkin. That an artist is a self-contained personality, which a people need as they do air, was by Pushkin's time already recognized worldwide in humanity's aesthetic experience and cultural consciousness. The giants of the unsurpassed Renaissance epoch, Pushkin's predecessors, also played a role, and the criterion they set was a rather high threshold, even for Pushkin. But he made the step, and together with him Pushkin's Russia stepped into the world, opening the way for the constellation of immortal names of 19th-century Russian literature that followed—Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, Chekhov . . .

Russia was in this sense, even in Pushkin's time, not on the outskirts of progress; it was one of the main catalysts at the crossroads between West and East, one of the mighty sources of the thought and spirit of the epoch despite the monarchic and serf-owning despotism reigning in the country, against which Pushkin's best contemporaries rose up in arms and perished. Then again, Pushkin did not begin from scratch, for there had already been Derzhavin, Karamzin and Griboyedov.

But it was Pushkin who was destined to make a revolutionary, qualitatively new leap, transforming the Russian nation's philology, literature, art and social thought, reviving the intellectual resources and imagery of the more than thousand-year-old development of Slavic chronciles and book writing, and by so doing, as we can now see, contributing to the history of all world literature. He was able to do this because the main source of the development of universal human spiritual values has always been and will remain the national element, the experience of national culture and folklore.

What is important in this process of universal spiritual integration is not only the immediate contribution of an artist of genius but also, to a large extent, what follows, what appears as its continuation, what has an enriching or, to use the language of poetry, divine impact on the entire course of growth and renewal of a given society's intellectual life and those of the other peoples who have cultural contacts with it, especially its historical neighbors. I am absolutely positive that Pushkin has no equal as regards

his beneficial influence on the perfection of the national arts and cultures of peoples adjacent to Russia.

This is truly so. Having died quite young as compared to the other giants of the second half of the present millennium (only Raphael lived nearly as brief and fleeting a life), Pushkin became the father of a new Russian literature, the herald of a modern type of fiction for the culture of a vast and ever-expanding part of Europe and Asia. As a matter of fact, all of us, all of multinational Soviet literature, stand on Pushkin's heritage the way mountains stand on bedrock. Viewed in broader, global terms, Pushkin's humanist ideals and the aesthetic perfection, realism and national character of his poetry attain the level of the biggest milestones of world literature and in effect represent a powerful, spontaneous continuation of the art of the Renaissance, the resurrection of absolute Renaissance harmony and absolute Renaissance classicism on the soil of Russian reality, where the Russian revolution had already begun to stir. Thus epochs and cultures come together, thus the Renaissance was echoed in Pushkin. And in this way the works of the Russian poet acquired the timeless and universal qualities of great art.

But for all that, we love Pushkin and cling to him with all our heart because he is our own, our near and dear, our incomparable Pushkin. It is amazing that Pushkin's fate, the tragic way his life ended, is to this day still a source of such great pain for us. Each and every one of us learns about this tragic event in childhood and is forever reliving this experience as keenly as if this heinous crime of tsarism had been committed only yesterday; we still cannot believe it and are not prepared to come to terms with this staggering loss. But even more remarkable is the fact that, despite the implacable action of time, which mercilessly drags both great and small deeds into the waters of Lethe, covering them with the sand of oblivion, Pushkin's work triumphs, continuing and multiplying in new generations, new languages and dialects, acquiring new spheres of existence in time and space and revealing, in step with our spiritual evolution, a new profound meaning and eternal beauty each time we turn to him. This is how in concrete terms we discover Pushkin as Pushkin discovers us.

Thus Pushkin has lived throughout the ages and generations amid the boundless love of the people and their great reverence as the leading poet of one of the greatest literatures. Such is the unique status of Pushkin and his people—the Russian people—for the written word has been revered in Russia since ancient times and, thanks to the fates, a reflection of this reverence has survived and is being preserved in our electronic-technology age of cold

rational thinking. It is being preserved as a priceless example of a lofty and continuous aesthetic tradition, a quality that still exists in society and that is so rare and so fast diminishing in our days, in conditions of militant mass culture, consumerist hedonism and the information and publicity deluge. While I speak about this with a certain anxiety, I deem it my duty to stress that this gratifying and pleasing quality that we have inherited and preserved since Pushkin's time—love for the book, which has become a generally recognized and distinctive national feature of our people, love for the world of knowledge and beauty, which we cultivate among the people—may and should be regarded as a special merit of our country, since nowhere else in the world is imaginative literature published in such huge editions and nowhere else is the reader as personally interested as our reader is. In other words it would be just to say that we have preserved, thanks to Pushkin, an ability to love and admire our native speech as we admire the light of morning; we have preserved the pristine purity and depth of emotions. And in our time this is by no means a small achievement.

This wonderful gift of love inherited from Pushkin, the worshipping of the beauty of native speech and hence of the people who have cultivated with the sweat of their brow and with a flaming spirit the oasis of the word, helps us, as Pushkin expected, dreamed and bequeathed, to value and love all the tongues of our boundless homeland, finding in each of them its own inimitable features, charm and rare merits. All those languages, taken together, are an incredible invention of the mind of homo sapiens, our powerful and eternal instrument in mastering the countless worlds of terrestrial and universal reality, and all of them combined comprise the spiritual unity that helps us believe in the ideas of international community that we have reached through suffering and have proclaimed throughout the world, helps us acquire internationalist awareness as a natural frame of mind in a socialist conglomeration of peoples.

While holding sacred our native language and revering other languages of our country, helping them flourish, giving them all equal importance and never allowing any instance of petty-bourgeois deviation, whether this be due to arrogance and disdain or local ambition, we must all value the historically derived polyphony of languages and work together to create common cultural and spiritual values on the basis of the unity of ideas and the counterpoint of national characters. This is the basis on which Soviet multinational culture should grow and this is the bounteous

harvest of Pushkin's great poetry and of the foresight of his genius for centuries to come.

Such are our thoughts about Pushkin today. The fatal shot has been fired and the frightened ravens have again settled in the bare treetops . . .

And once again we pick him up in our arms, mortally wounded, with a drooping head . . .

And once again we urge on the coach as if there were still a way of saving him . . .

But the bell is already ringing . . .

And once again we speak of him . . .

Film director, actor and writer Peter Ustinov;
prose writer Graham Greene (Great Britain)

# 17

## THE SPIRIT OF HELSINKI

Obviously we have had good reason to gather in Sofia. Actually, there are plenty of serious reasons: we live in a turbulent time, when the human spirit has to overcome its own frailty. Now the struggle to do so has become global and intense. We have gathered here to exchange our personal concerns—which we usually keep to ourselves—when thinking of life, humanity and the future of contemporary society. Never before has the world been so complicated, or have we observed such shattering changes all around. Never before has humankind been aware of such prospects for development or such threats to its existence.

That has inevitably had an impact on our culture, art and philosophy. There are always many things waiting to be put into words and images. I will speak of ideas that have long haunted me, but first I would like to assure all those present of my deep respect.

The participants in this forum are fiction writers, day by day filling their books with their own experience and emotions. Time will show what our quest for truth and beauty will amount to, or how much we can contribute to the pictures of reality created by the great authors who preceded us. Time will show how much of our own selves we have put into the everlasting tale of men and women as told by them, and what we have failed to do because of our weaknesses. History will be our judge.

Yet there are things we cannot leave to history—things that have to be dealt with now, for it is clear that the peace effort is vital for humanity today. The artist cannot postpone voicing support for life on earth indefinitely—the testimony cannot wait. That

*Literaturnaya Gazeta*, June 22, 1977

is what we have to do if we want to remain true to the writer's calling and duty to the end.

We write for our contemporaries, believing it to be the task of literature to bring forth the best traits arising from humanity's whole experience, that is, the best human ideals. Such an approach to contemporary fiction, which is capable of depicting the subtlest and most contradictory manifestations of human spirit and intellect, might appear primitive at first sight. Nevertheless, eternal ideals always remain in the focus of fiction and other arts. The function of literature might change with them, but its main subject, the human soul, will remain the same. That is why the ability of literature to make us aware of others, to come to know them as well as we know ourselves and bring home to us that other people love life, fear death and fight for their places under the sun as intensely as we do, is more important today than ever before.

The fact that the subject of literature never changes does not mean that its expressive means also remain unchanged. On the contrary, the development of our ideas of man, society, the universe and our place in its encourages the realistic trend in literature, for realism is the climax of artistic thought and the most effective means of depicting reality. The realistic trend in the world's fiction literature has undergone such dramatic changes that now it differs from the realism of the past as much as Lobachevsky's geometry differs from Euclidean. For the first time literature has become a principal factor in one's spiritual life, and it certainly imposes many obligations on authors.

I am not going to dwell on the transient and the eternal in fiction, or on the ideological categories stemming from a particular economic order or political system, which may either further artistic cognition of the world or inhibit it. This is a special issue. Every intelligent person realizes that the eternal evolves from the immortal beauty of the idea and spirit embodied in an object of art.

As for the confrontation of ideas, the dialectics of social life tell us that such conflict is inevitable and, therefore, eternal, for it is the motive force of social progress.

I would like to discuss something that all of us have in common. I mean our future and the creative pursuits all the 20th century writers are involved in—something that has set us a number of specific tasks to be implemented urgently, and that makes us heed one another's opinion.

We differ from our literary predecessors for a number of rea-

sons, and our successors evidently will be just as different from us. All of us have come here because of an emergency, an unprecedented threat to life, to civilization and to the environment. We realize it only too well and we feel equal to the threat and equally responsible for averting it.

That is why writers from different countries, representing different traditions, cultures, political and aesthetic views, acutely aware of the peril, have come to Sofia to attend this conference. I will try to describe the factors that make us different from writers of the past and that unite us. We have come together not only because the global peril looms large in our minds but because today is our only chance.

Naturally, we are aware of our common responsibility for the future of humankind and for the moral atmosphere on earth, and this awareness unites us. We have to make a choice that will determine the future of the world, thus taking on an enormous responsibility, for we cannot postpone solving the problem—tomorrow depends on what we undertake today.

The question is whether human intelligence, culture and art, under conditions of acute struggle between opposing forces and ideologies and at a time when scientific and technological progress have become global, can still encourage people's eternal urge for creativity, continuity and preservation of humanity, as well as their efforts to understand themselves and their destiny. Human beings will only continue to be considered intelligent beings if they go on resisting the destructive forces of inhumanity and immorality, if they maintain humanitarian ideals and enhance them. This is the only way—there is no alternative.

Indeed, history presents us with an implacable choice: life or death. I am not going to appeal to those present to safeguard peace—I am sure they take that for granted, for there is no alternative to peace. Could we doubt that each of us is, and will be, doing his or her best to protect life on earth? We must strive to implement (both theoretically and practically) the resolutions of the Helsinki Conference aimed at making detente irreversible. There is no alternative to the spirit of Helsinki. We will have to decide whether we want it or not, for peace and humanism are inseparable. Isn't it the writer's duty to regard reality through the prism of Helsinki?

I am by no means a fatalist, and I realize that if humanity has managed, thanks to continuous effort—above all of the Soviet Union (I am sure many people will share my view on the matter)—to avert nuclear disaster, it certainly does not grant us one

hundred per cent security or peace of mind. A far greater effort should be made to uproot the social causes of violence, cruelty and misanthropy.

The current scientific and technological revolution has provided people with a network of international communications and enabled them to cover great distances very quickly, which has made us far more dependent on each other than we used to be. We are in one boat now, with nothing but infinity overboard.

Scientific progress affects everyone. Brilliant discoveries made in all spheres have changed our life-style but triggered a fierce and sometimes ruthless pragmatism in our attitude towards individuals, nations and cultures. The concept of efficiency—first applied to technology and later introduced into the spiritual, moral sphere—is now used to justify the unjustifiable—violence, humiliation and dehumanization. From the point of view of such "efficiency," every individual is replaceable, whereas from the humanitarian point of view every one of us is unique. Indeed, Romeo is the only one for Juliet, a son is irreplaceable for his mother, fallen soldiers for their nearest and dearest.

Stereotypes come and go, but their mass reproduction by audiovisual and other means breeds indifference in people. That is what makes standardization of ideas and a consumerist attitude towards culture so distressing and destructive. It has taken us some time to realize that technological advances do not necessarily imply moral progress.

Appraising a person according to his or her "efficiency" inevitably leads to a lack of concern for individuality, actually reversing our efforts to boost man's moral progress. People are seen merely as consumers, and culture is looked upon solely from this point of view. Such an outlook is bound to lead to a cult of violence and cruelty. I am sorry to say that a monstrous industry catering to the cult of strength and ruthlessness has attained a terrifying scale in the West. We regard it as a grave danger. This is what happens when society fails to maintain its spiritual balance, and that is how the terms of fascism penetrate human minds.

We cannot afford to underrate the risk of growing accustomed to the inevitability of violence. It is even more unpardonable to mistake cruelty and ruthlessness for courage and heroism. The contempt we tend to feel for consumerism often prevents us from seeing the sinister link between the propaganda of thoughtlessness and the actual war threat, which must concern writers.

Therefore I see the most urgent task facing literature today is improving the moral atmosphere of the world. It is as vital today

as environmental protection, without which we cannot live normal, healthy lives.

Our common goal, absolutely vital for all our contemporaries today, is the development of a new way of thinking, not only because we all happen to live in the same period of time, but mainly because we have many features in common. These embrace an ability to think progressively and globally, which implies a truly internationalist attitude and a respect for other cultures, languages and forms of art. We all share an ability to see life in perspective and discern the seeds of the future in the present. Were such an outlook to become second nature, the new mentality would be a real guarantee of peace.

It is up to writers to promote this new outlook. I do not believe us to be messiahs. Politicians work for peace in their own diplomatic way, and they certainly play a decisive part in the peace effort, but literature has its own means of depicting life and moving human hearts. Naturally, we writers absorb in our creative endeavor progressive political ideas of achieving the greatest historical goal of all times, based on the principles of peaceful coexistence and protection of our main assets—life and culture.

I wish to emphasize, with pride and hope, that the course of events in the 20th century has proved that Lenin's principles of peaceful coexistence are the highest achievement of the human spirit and the supreme manifestation of common sense and humanity. This is no exaggeration. We appeal to the rest of the world, our hearts filled with hope and confidence:

Friends, comrades, we live in a world of dramatic changes. Ancient Indians used to say that only change was constant, and we have never been as acutely aware of this as now. We change the world, and the world changes us.

In our time it is not enough for literature to reflect the increasingly complex picture of life as in a two-dimensional mirror: this picture has to be projected through a multidimensional prism, thus enabling writers to show life and the destiny of man truthfully and profoundly. That's the purpose of writers' lives.

A scene from the Sary-Chelek Wildlife Preserve

# 18

## THE BRITTLE PEARL OF THE ISSYK-KUL

In the history of human society there has always been an inner conflict: satisfying urgent requirements of the day often runs counter to needs of a higher order that are not of a daily nature. This contradiction seems to have manifested itself most strikingly in the relations between human being and Nature.

People engaged in the solution of immediate problems and immersed in such activity and worries consider these tasks most important and urgent. But we live and act not in a vacuum but in a world of Nature. Carried away by the concerns of everyday living, we sometimes believe that we draw on natural resources as much as we please and whenever we please.

But the illusory nature of such belief in the inexhaustibility of these resources has become increasingly evident during the last decades. Let us take for example Lake Issyk-Kul, close at hand and therefore most painful for me.

Lake Issyk-Kul's unsurpassed beauty has won it the name of blue pearl. Surrounded by a circle of snow-clad mountain ridges, it strikes the eye with the indigo blue of its water and its crystal transparency. I have visited the coasts of the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, where the turbid surf rollers, mixed with silt, sand, dirt and oil, very often literally cast out anyone who dares to enter the water. At such moments I always recalled our high-mountain lake and its "maritime" properties. How much more pacifying and kind to man are its waters and how salubrious and versatile is the recreation it offers.

A blue pearl . . . When we use this phrase we have in mind above all the lake's exterior qualities. But pearls are brittle, and if split and crushed they lose all their value.

The pearl of the Issyk-Kul has proved to be brittle, tender and vulnerable. I am not the only one alarmed and saddened when thinking of the lake. It keeps shrinking like a piece of shagreen leather. Its waters are retreating farther and farther from the shore. Its water level has dropped by nearly three meters in the last decade alone.

If nothing changes, scientists expect the lake's level to drop by another three or four meters in the next ten years. According to the planning committee of the republic [Kirghizia], the potential economic damage could run into hundreds of millions of rubles. But what currency can be used to calculate the ecological, social and moral damage?

The list the scientists have drawn up of possible losses is quite extensive. The shoreline may recede by 500 to 1,000 meters. The water temperature will drop by 0.6° Centigrade. The swimming season will be shortened by nearly a month, so children's summer camps will have to drop back from three shifts to two. Nearly two million tons of medicinal mud, which has taken thousands of years to form, is to be lost. The sea buckthorn and fir surrounding the lake will dry up. The spawning ground will disappear. The navigational situation will deteriorate. The natural beaches will be lost. The sanatoria and recreation centers already built around the lake will be useless . . .

This list could go on forever. But the point is that already the annual shortage of water in the lake has reached 400–500 million cubic meters and is expected to double by the year 2000. The cause of this shortage is very simple: more than one hundred rivers, rivulets and brooks that flow into the Issyk-Kul no longer carry the water that is now used for irrigation. The area of irrigated land near the lake has already exceeded 150,000 hectares.

In short, the interests of people conflict with the needs of the lake. This is paradoxical—we need the Issyk-Kul very much! Actually, this contradiction should be formulated in a different way: is is not people versus the lake but people against themselves.

Do we take the path daily economic demands require of us, or do we reject our current requirements and share with Nature the water so important for it?

This could be put even more simply: let's stop the growth of agricultural production in the area around the lake and redistribute the tasks set for this area among other districts of the Republic or even of the country, for the Issyk-Kul has been legally declared an all-Union resort center. The number of people from all over the country who come here to vacation may reach one

million by 1990. Therefore, providing them with food is a common concern.

At the same time, we should keep in mind that the lands near the Issyk-Kul that have already been reclaimed cannot be excluded from agricultural production. There is no way back. But they should be oriented to growing fruits and vegetables, producing mountain honey, etc., which cannot be brought in for the vacationers from faraway places except at prohibitive cost.

In short, it is impossible to cut off consumption of water and give all of it to the lake. An alternative must be sought. In the past few decades there have been numerous projects for saving the Issyk-Kul, but none ever got beyond the planning stage. We were greatly relieved and truly overjoyed to find out that the guidelines for the development of our country approved by the 27th CPSU Congress envisaged measures for the integrated use of the raw materials, land, water and energy resources of the Issyk-Kul region and the districts in the Chu valley.

It is necessary to stipulate and confirm the lake's share of overall water consumption as an immutable and inviolable quantity. The hundreds of millions of cubic meters of water needed annually to preserve the lake and stabilize its water level should be legally stipulated and sealed by legislation so that no official, no matter under what "objective" pretext, would dare to use the waters of the Issyk-Kul for other, however necessary, purposes. This legislation is also important because no one can be held personally responsible for depleting the lake, no one can be reprimanded or fired for it. But if production plans are not fulfilled, someone will most definitely be held responsible . . .

We must courageously and discriminately seek and find a rational balance between future and present needs. This is of course difficult, and that is why serious and guaranteed restrictions are required. The fate of Lake Issyk-Kul should become an example of how relations between Nature and man should be, now proof that the most progressive society in the world is capable of finding the means and resources for maintaining an intelligent balance in the indissoluble link between man and Nature.

As a matter of fact, it is not only Lake Issyk-Kul that we should be concerned about—there are lakes Baikal, Sevan and Onega, the Belovezhskaya Forest, and many other gems of Nature which should be preserved for coming generations.

We have now become so highly civilized that we must be not only a "consumer" of Nature, but also its patron and co-creator. Today not only do we depend on Nature but Nature also depends on us. It is with our will and intellect, the greatest gifts to us of

time and space, of Nature and history, that we should oppose upsetting the ecological equilibrium.

State borders should not be an obstacle in the struggle for conserving and replenishing natural wealth, and for stabilizing ecological systems, because the balance of Nature that is upset in one place can "detonate" painfully and sometimes catastrophically in another part of the world. The Issyk-Kul is no exception here. Since the lake lies along the routes of birds migrating from Siberia to India, the Soviet Union has assumed certain obligations before international organizations. Thus, by saving this rare body of water we will once again demonstrate to people the world over the noble and humanistic principles of the socialist way of life.

The project of maintaining the water balance of the Issyk-Kul is an immense undertaking that will take at least three or four five-year plan periods to implement. But the Issyk-Kul needs help now, as though screaming for a first-aid ambulance. And as is the case with any first-aid treatment, the sooner help comes the better.

Intensive work is already under way on projects for transferring part of the run-off of the rivers Karakara and Arabel-Su into the Issyk-Kul basin. This will take only three to four years, and the level of the lake will then begin gradually to stabilize. The costs will be comparatively low. We hope the project will not be held up for some reason or other . . .

But adding water to the Issyk-Kul is only a partial solution. Its waters must be protected from being contaminated by poisonous chemicals, and the air above it from pollution. Industries in the nearby towns should not be allowed to grow excessively. In short, a lot of things should be thought over and carefully studied.

We look towards the future with confidence and optimism; we are tirelessly preparing for that future and building it. May the blue pearl of Issyk-Kul pass into the hands of the coming generations unblemished and shining, may it become a precious gift to those who will come after us.

# 19

## A CONQUEROR CANNOT BE A HERO

I had the honor of taking part in our first meeting five years ago. I was given the opportunity then to speak in detail of my cherished thoughts from this high rostrum. That was quite some time ago. We now see that our initiative is not dying out but, on the contrary, is attracting ever more attention from the world's writers. Meeting in Sofia are people who write and whose mastery of the pen enables them to influence the hearts and minds of their contemporaries. This is both wonderful and necessary.

If every book published could confirm in the conscience and world outlook of the reader the noble ideas of which we speak here, we would consider the tremendously difficult tasks the 20th century has set for us accomplished.

The 20th century has given the writings of the world an entirely new function, which could be called their additional load, their burden, their new mission. In the past the classics of our literature heralded humanism in more tranquil conditions. Even when in the recent past Rolland, Gorky and Hemingway voiced alarm, there was no danger like the present one, no situation that posed the question: Are we to be or not to be?

The alternative is precisely this: either we preserve everything humankind has worked so hard to create throughout its long history or we lose it all. At this very moment, as we gather here to share our impressions, ideas, anxieties, and despair, other people—and this should be distinctly realized—are busy calculating the relative ratios of possible casualties in various military operations. Right now someone probably is calculating how much it costs to train one soldier to fight in a nuclear war. I am sure that such calculations are being made.

*Foreign Literature,* No. 5, 1983

I recall something a friend once said to me: "You are always talking about peace, fighting for peace, trying to convince other people to take an active part in this struggle too, to share your convictions. But have you ever stopped to think for a moment that some young general, whose military service is his career and who has so far failed to distinguish and glorify himself, is at this very moment dreaming of having his name written in the annals of military history? That there may be such people who would be willing to become the Alexander the Great or Napoleon of our time?"

I really gave long thought to what he said. How many human sacrifices were made while Alexander the Great was conquering the world? Do many people remember those sacrifices today? And Alexander the Great remains one of the most famous persons of that epoch. Or take Napoleon, who is closer in time for us: how many human sacrifices were offered at the altar of war during his reign?

We shall not now go into why and how those wars began. What drives me to despair is the fact that it is Napoleon who is often made a hero while those who perished seem never to have existed; they are not real for us and we have forgotten them. And I am thinking how important it is now for each of us to employ every word of ours, every line of our books, which are the only weapons in our hands, to influence the minds and moods, the consciousness and views of young people. We must show them how dangerous it is to glorify this in the past, to turn this into a symbol of glory and grandeur, to help in any way the birth of some newfangled Napoleon. How much more frightening it would be today if an individual possessing present-day weapons were to think: "What is a human life worth after all? Wasn't there Napoleon? See how he is evaluated by history—what conclusions have we made? Look at his image and the halo around him. And where are those nameless soldiers, those armies and divisions that fell on the battlefields of those wars?"

Are there people who think along these lines? Aren't there people today who would like to rise to glory once again in this manner? It is hard to say. Our task is to oppose this thirst for glory, this human vice, to promote other values and other criteria.

We must implant everywhere, in all languages and in all literatures, those ideas and sentiments that are genuinely humane and salutary, ideas that enable us to call ourselves people, intelligent beings. For some reason we appeared in this nature on this planet, and we should not end our existence in such an ignominious manner.

# 20

## ECHO OF THE WORLD

I will begin with a statement which is no paradox and to which I attach only one meaning: the time has come to look upon literature not only from a traditionally aesthetic point of view but from that of the most topical and urgent demands of our day.

By splitting the atom, humanity came to face enigmas of creation that only a divine intellect could comprehend. Now that we hold the universe's energy in our hands, everything depends on human good will. If used rationally, this energy can benefit humanity, but levity and lack of responsibility will inevitably bring about global disaster—all life will be effaced from the Earth. By and large we have realized how unbearable it is to be God. Literature cannot claim to be modern which fails to make people aware that while possessing the power of gods they still are mortal. Literature must promote a supreme ideal of humanity, that of socialist humanism, whose ideas we have to oppose to the lack of spirituality and to the prevalence of inhumanity that is characteristic of imperialism and militarism.

If literature is capable of promoting the loftiest ideals, it can breed a new mentality and enable different societies, nations and individuals to develop mutual understanding. No one will deny that such a literature is consonant with the times.

I think this yardstick should be used when judging our own work and the work of others. Modern literature must work on this assumption. Its mission is to promote progress and breed artists of the stature of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky.

Why Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky? Because they are the models of artistic self-awareness and insight. The great Russian painter of

the 19th century, Ivan Kramskoy, wrote in a private letter about the first edition of *The Brothers Karamazov:* "After I finished reading The Karamazovs (and even in the process of reading) I began to look around in terror, wondering how everything could continue the old way and why the world had not stopped turning on its axis. I tried to understand how it was possible that after the Karamazovs' meeting at old man Zosima's and after "The Great Inquisitor" story, there still could be people robbing their neighbors, politicians openly professing hypocrisy or archbishops whose piety about Jesus Christ was scarcely evident in their everyday lives. In short, this novel is so prophetic, passionate and apocalyptic that I cannot now be what I was or think of other things than the Last Judgment."

Well, the earth abides forever but always in a flux of change . . .

What was the world like before Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Gorky and Mayakovsky, and how much has it changed since?

It is to their greatness that we owe progress in art.

I do not think it was easier for the classic writers in their time to see into and influence the human heart—it has always been hard. But contemporary authors must live with the fact that they will inevitably be compared with Pushkin. Many literary giants, among them Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Blok, were aware of that heritage, and Tolstoy referred to Pushkin as "Father." Every modern author is bound to reflect on Tolstoy's approach—although art is uniquely individual and cannot consist of imitations.

The essence of genuine literature, and this applies to modern literature, is in something else, which did not escape Tolstoy, either. He believed that a writer had to share the life of the people, to be part of the world's developments, if he wanted to convey essential truths.

And today the life of mankind as a whole must inform the outlook, the historical, ethical and philosophic views of any artist whose mission it is to say something vital to the rest of humanity; that life comprises, among other things, the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia, the victory over Nazism (the plague of the 20th century), man's space exploration and, finally, our general concern for the world's future.

It is essential to develop an insight into all the global historical developments and tragedies that have transformed the world and changed humanity's destiny, and to feel personally involved.

To grasp the truth one must acquire personal experience.

In other words, the writer (who, according to Maxim Gorky, is an echo of the world) should have historical insight. Only if his

heart is aching, loving and wrathful will he serve literature and have a moral right to be called a writer, not simply a hack.

It is necessary to restore the original meaning to the words that express the essence and mission of art—the concepts that used to be sacred to those whom we call the classics. Their ideas were larger in scale and more daring than the outlook of many of us who also want to appear to be "apt thinkers."

It is easy enough to complain that classical literature arose in a world where there were no Hiroshimas or Nagasakis, no Nazi death camps, no fear of a nuclear holocaust. Some modern writers are prone to wonder if the classic authors would have been able to write half as masterfully had they experienced such horrors.

But I believe we must anticipate the emergence of artists of Tolstoy's and Dostoyevsky's stature. They, in their time, managed to portray man's spiritual abysses and climaxes, to denounce the insolence of evil forces that humiliate and insult people, and to encourage a love of life.

To see and comprehend the realities of today and of those who inhabit the contemporary world means not simply to observe life but above all to contribute to the creation of a harmonious life for ourselves and many generations to come. This also means to experience an incomparable feeling of participation of oneness with the immortal human spirit, for a person who consciously creates is seeking his or her own place in time and space.

I don't want the reader to think that I do not appreciate existing literary achievements. World literature from Sholokhov to Faulkner, from Thomas Mann to Leonov and from Auezov to Marquez, shows how 20th century authors have exhaustively described our thoughts and feelings.

There is another reason why we have to apply the highest moral and aesthetic criteria to our own achievements and see if our contemporary literature really keeps up with the times, and if so, to what extent. For we cannot regard literature as merely part of the technological revolution or as a local development. We cannot permit officious poetry or commonplaces passed off as revelations to shape our awareness.

Perhaps people are becoming impervious to art. We have become brutalized, and even the biblical prophecies of Doomsday have begun to look naive in face of the holocaust threatening us today.

Are there forces opposing that threat from which literature can draw inspiration and energy? Of course there are! But the question is whether we can recognize them. An instance to illustrate this thesis:

A hardened U.S. infantry squad had entrenched itself in the outskirts of the jungle and was shelling a Vietnamese unit at the other end of the clearing. The Americans were razing the place with large-caliber shells.

Through this sweeping fire appeared a group of Vietnamese farmers, laying one furrow after another, ignoring the explosions. They walked steadily, following their plows, their heads lowered, and the women scattering seed walked slowly in their wake.

Like a ritual eulogized by Biblical prophets, this life-asserting procession of sowers symbolized the indestructible Vietnamese spirit and the patient opposition of endeavor and reason to the fatality of war.

An American journalist who witnessed the episode expressed the bitter truth when he wrote of the disgrace and shame of this incident, which showed the Americans, acting as shameless aggressors, that they could never defeat the Vietnamese.

How can literature acquire a moral right to speak on behalf of the plowman challenging death?

Today humanity progresses under the "sweeping fire" of large-caliber shells—a deadly outpouring of Western propaganda devastating souls.

Gabriel García Lorca wrote that the poet is a creator of myths, but a myth sometimes looks like a faded photo compared to reality.

Perhaps many centuries from now the history of our days will also seem like a legend, and the participants in a similar discussion will have to struggle to perceive the reality.

Let us hope that they see beyond our naivete and do not succumb to an over-materialistic view of history; they should know that the element of myth in our reality was real, not a hollow abstraction.

Our morality, our humanism and civic awareness are central to the personality of our modern people, whose ideal is the hero or heroine of socialist realism. These ideal, canonized persons may never have existed, yet we cannot doubt their evocation.

We cannot, for instance, reproach Dostoyevsky for his dream of "a hero, a wonderful man," merely because this ideal type was never realized in his writing. It is the truth the writer was seeking along with his characters. It is the truth that he strove to instill in his readers.

Today we must be grateful for the fact that the hero cannot be canonized or fitted into the framework of actions, feelings and thoughts set up by time-serving critics.

Our task is to depict the hero or heroine as a benevolent thinker.

Modern literature is as up-to-date as the characters it portrays. And this depends on how much involved they get in the struggle for social justice, how great is their concern for the future of the world and how profound and acute is their historical memory and hope for a better future.

Nikolai Tikhonov used to say that a poet's muse is his "inner sun."

If a book does not generate that inner sun of hope, which will shine even when the sky is overcast, we will have every right to say that such a book is out of date and even backward.

Modern literature (whose goal is to help us make the right choice) can hope to carry out its mission only if it attains the highest standard of moral, philosophical and artistic thought.

# 21

## HUMAN INTELLIGENCE AND/NUCLEAR ENCIRCLEMENT

Several weeks of the year 1985 have elapsed, and we no longer think of it as new. Another year of our life is over and, as always, it seemed an instant. A new spiral of time and events urged on by history has started its motion. And this will never cease as long as there is life on Earth.

Yet each time a new year is ushered in people begin wondering what it has in store for them. They feel uncertain because they do not know whether happiness will be theirs to hold. Their idea of happiness depends greatly on society's moral values and their own personal aspirations. Our wish to catch a glimpse of the future at the beginning of a new year is something more complex; it takes in all the realities that manifest themselves in the most vital problems of the day, in great ideals and undertakings as well as in an anxiety connected with the earning of our daily bread.

Only fifteen years remain before we enter the 21st century. Teenagers who are now fifteen will be only thirty in the year 2000, with a long and significant life ahead. They will be entering the third millennium in the prime of life. I envy them and I hope for their happiness. These fifteen years will pass quickly enough—if, of course, humanity actually lives to see the 21st century.

Will humanity cross the threshold of the third milennium as an intelligent and advanced civilization? If we consider the immense span of evolution, the remaining fifteen years are mere hours, if not minutes, in comparison. The year 2000 is already upon us. Naturally, we are anxious to know how people are going to live in the 21st century.

We have laid the foundations for the new century; what does it

have in store? As a member of the European Academy of Arts, Science and Humanities, an international non-governmental organization uniting scientists and artists from many countries, I attended its recent conference in Stockholm. Many speakers at the convention indulged themselves in scientific forecasts and predictions concerning the year 2000. The intention was to make people think about tomorrow.

Continuous growth and multiplication are a law of human evolution. Life is bound to triumph over evil. This is the ultimate law of nature, which can also be defined as protein's continuous self-preservation. When applied to society, it means the determination of the masses to maintain peace, to secure a better future for humanity, to live and give life to future generations.

Today bellicose militarism threatens the foundations of life. The intention of U.S. administration to ignore Soviet appeals and go on with their plans to manufacture weapons for "star wars" (which they hypocritically call defensive) is a plot against the world at large. Those who intend evil can easily rationalize their actions. The ultimate purpose of these forces is to speed up the development of space weapons. The next thing would be to challenge the God in whom they claim to believe.

That is what occurs to me when I hear the collective appeal for peace on earth, which is so frequently repeated in all parts of the world that it sounds like an incantation. The call itself, "secure peace," sounds so simple, appealing and humane. However, one might think we beg for peace appealing to ourselves. What an irony of Fate!

Without going into the well-known details of the present nuclear crisis, I would like to draw attention to what should be of concern to every individual, as important as earning his or her daily bread, the most vital problem of the day—averting nuclear war, which will be fatal for our civilization if it ever breaks out, because it will destroy human intelligence as a form of matter on our planet.

All that humanity has achieved throughout the millennia of its cultural evolution, unique in our galaxy, would be reduced to ashes by a nuclear fire, and humankind would perish in a final act of self-destruction. The time has come for all nations to agree to a universal ban on the production and use of nuclear weapons. If such a global agreement is reached on the threshold of the next millennium, that would be humanity's greatest victory and the best gift to our children and the many generations to come.

It has suddenly dawned upon me that I reason like a naive pacifist and idealist. It is not that easy to impose a ban on nuclear weapons in our turbulent world, with its atmosphere of continuous

ideological struggle between the two opposites, the socialist and capitalist systems. Will it takes years of heated debates, mutual accusations, negotiation, and talks to reach a strategic agreement between the East and West? Is the present state of affairs so gloomy that we could never hope to come to terms? Has the human spirit so tragically degraded that the discovery of the structure of matter and the atom will be the last, fatal attempt to solve the enigmas of creation only because the parties concerned cannot think of a political decision that would suit them? Will the nuclear madness overwhelm common sense and human intelligence?

There is a legend, probably based on actual events, that shortly before the Second World War twelve European physicists made a joint attempt to agree on concealing the results of their nuclear research. They would have succeeded had they only come to terms. The incident allegedly took place at an early stage of nuclear research, when it was carried out by a limited number of laboratories. Yet, for various reasons, the twelve failed to find a common language when they eventually met, and only because a human soul is far more complex than the nucleus of an atom. Some people might regret these scientists' failure without, however, sensing its importance.

Many still think it's a pity that the physicists could not slow down progress in this field or even nip nuclear research in the bud. Had they succeeded, events would not have followed such a dangerous course. Even if the story never happened, it is difficult "to cork up history in a test-tube." It would be futile, nonsensical and even highly regressive to hope for such a turn of events.

Man's most powerful weapon under any circumstances is intelligence. The human mind is omnipotent as far as knowing the world and transforming and adjusting to human needs are concerned. For me the creative potentials of the human mind are like the energy resources of the sun. They say that beauty will save the world. Well said, but I believe human intelligence to be our last resort. Indeed, in our times, when all nations are involved in the fight against the bomb, humanity's collective intelligence is acquiring a new quality, that of a communal consciousness as yet unprecedented in history, in the "nuclear reactors" of struggle and the "accelerators" of the mass media. The peace movement eats away at the militarist mentality shaped through millennia and helps humanity develop a universal philosophy of life. This is a new factor which no sensible politicians will try to ignore or deny.

Moreover, the time has come to analyze the phenomenon of a

global change in public attitudes. A book recently published in our country is *New Mentality In The Nuclear Age* by Anatoli Gromyko and Vladimir Lomeiko, two men with solid background and responsible approach. The authors, who are realistic about the arms race, discuss the shocking attempts of the imperialists and the military to manipulate the public mind. Gromyko and Lomeiko compare various doctrines and theories, and derive their conclusions from a most complex phenomenon of our day, the public efforts to avert the nuclear threat and to resolve various problems linked with it.

Seafarers in an ocean of problems, hopes and doubts, we are seeking another shore which we know to be densely populated. By another shore I mean a new mentality, historical morality and ethics—a new system of humanitarian values based not so much on the Biblical commandment "Thou shalt not kill" but rather on the principle "Thou shalt not think murder," based on considerations of universal security and on humankind's inherent instinct of self-preservation. It is common sense that no political goals would justify the first use of nuclear weapons. Nuclear blackmail for political purposes or, say, to revive the ambitions of those who would like to review the state borders for which we paid so dearly during the last war, is both criminal and extremely dangerous because it could trigger a "nuclear reaction" resulting in a global holocaust. Such is at present the imperative of life on our planet, which is not a product of somebody's will but the only chance for our mutual survival. The least we can do is get used to the idea.

The new mentality in the nuclear age is a result of reflections, observations and analysis of the international situation from a geopolitical point of view. It is also remarkable because the ideas of socialism are not regarded separately but in interaction with other ideas, as part of modern history with all its ups and downs, losses and gains. It is quite clear that by its very nature socialism is a basic factor that makes it possible, within the framework of the principle of peaceful coexistence of nations with different political systems, to discard "corporative," "bloc" mentality and develop a global awareness of life as an entity, as well as to promote collective thinking in face of the growing nuclear threat.

Our intelligence is our only resort. To apply its achievements to practice, all nations and their citizens should make a special effort to find guidelines for the development of civilization, and basic moral laws and criteria to establish humanity's place in the nuclear world and its destiny.

It seems to me that the idea of ushering in the year 2000 on a global scale could serve a common ground for all peace-loving

forces in all countries and for all kinds of trends and movements, religious ones included. United, they can work out a plan of major actions to promote peace, which would be of paramount humanitarian and cultural importance for our own and future generations. The idea of seeing the year 2000 as the time of triumph of humanitarian ideals and a jubilee of our civilization, celebrated to review its major achievements on the threshold of the third millennium, could answer the question of what humanity has actually achieved, and which of its social, cultural, scientific and technological achievements can be elaborated to ensure its happy future.

If all nations join to implement this idea, we might find a way out of the nuclear encirclement.

We can and must pledge to get rid of nuclear missiles and space weapons by the year 2000, and to ensure prosperity for all on the threshold of a new era.

**At the International Forum for a Nuclear Free World, for the survival of Humanity. Chinghiz Aitmatov and writer Bernt Engelmann (West Germany).**

# 22

## WE HAVE NOTHING TO CONCEAL

The idea of the Issyk-Kul Forum—an unprecedented international meeting of writers, scientists and intellectuals—occurred to us—myself and friends—a long time ago. We wanted to bring together informally a group of people with similar outlook, participants who would share the same views on the message and meaning of contemporary literature and art. To ensure informality (there are too many formal occasions nowadays), I invited my close friends to my home in Kirghizia. When we gathered in Frunze's suburb, Ala-Archa, to compare views and share concerns and hopes, we realized that we had needed such a meeting for a long time. It was important for those present and for all those, regardless of their international status, striving to resolve problems relevant to all nations.

We wanted to pour our hearts out to people who shared our concerns. We were not confined to any agenda, and the discussion turned into a free dialogue of intellectuals who had many interests in common. Among those present were many renowned, well-informed personalities who were capable of making correct assessments. I refer, for example, to Mr. and Mrs. Toffler, both distinguished American philosophers, as well as to Alexander King, president of the Club of Rome. As to the issues of literature and art, Arthur Miller, James Baldwin and Claude Simon tried to analyze the present state of modern fiction. They argued that literature should promote a new outlook to solve global problems. Aesthetics and ethics should mold a different image of the world, appropriate to a new consciousness.

A meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev, lasting for nearly three hours, was the event of the forum, and no mere formality. We were

able to "hoist our banners" and voice our opinion on all the issues of mutual interest. Each of us told Mikhail Gorbachev what he or she thought of modern culture and the world at large; it was actually another round-table discussion, attended by the General Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee. Mikhail Gorbachev managed to sum up the experts' opinions, different as they were, and to point out the ideas they had in common and draw exhaustive conclusions. That was not an easy, but an exciting and profound dialogue, and it produced a great impression.

The Issyk-Kul Forum was dedicated to confront the very idea of war, to persuade humanity to reject war as a mental concept. That is what the Forum participants have been striving to do, and what they call on other artists and writers to do.

Human life has an absolute value, for there may be no other civilizations in the universe. Everything that culture and technology has achieved has an absolute value, too. Our task is to preserve for humanity its heritage acquired through the millennia.

How does the Issyk-Kul Forum intend to influence public opinion? First, through the correspondence of the participants. The fifteen of us promised to approach one another with any problem, personal or social, whenever necessary. Our letters will be available for publication in any part of the world whenever we find it appropriate. In this way we hope to influence public opinion.

The Issyk-Kul Forum was the first in a series of such conferences to be held on a regular basis in different countries. On Peter Ustinov's suggestion, we intend to convene the next meeting in Geneva. In fact, we have already compiled a whole waiting list of hosts willing to receive us in their countries. One of them is Imre Varga, a Hungarian sculptor, who missed our forum but sent us a message of greetings. Turkish writer Yashar Kemal invites us to Istanbul. Another participant, the Spanish scholar, poet and diplomat Federico Mayor, wants us to meet in Granada soon after the Geneva forum. So we have a vast program of trips, meetings and conferences.

Participants in the Issyk-Kul Forum.

# *Interviews and Dialogues*

**"Through the eyes of a wise man, and a child..."**

# 23

## A SPIRITUAL SUPPORT

*An interview with L. Lebedeva*

*Lebedeva:* What features do you consider most characteristic of modern literature?

*Aitmatov:* This is a complex question to which no simple answer can be given. The written word and literary technique have attained much in our time. Of course we have the magnificent legacy of the past, beginning with antiquity, but the culture of the word and standards of artistic thinking have now risen higher than ever, while the spread of literature, its openness to the masses, has grown immeasurably. The restless human intellect is developing all the time, increasingly so today. The prime cause of this is the revolutionary character of our epoch, in terms not only of social transformations but also of scientific and technological progress. Amazing events are taking place in our age and before our eyes.

It was very difficult for people of medieval Europe to communicate even if they lived in neighboring towns or villages, to say nothing of countries and continents. Language, culture and artistic traditions could develop only within local limits. Things have been changing with time. Today the process of interaction has become so intensive and vigorous that we are hardly able to comprehend it properly. Information media, communications and transport facilities enable, even force, people of different countries and continents to see themselves, despite profound political differences and sharply opposed state systems, as members of a single human community whose life is complex and contradictory, full of contrasts and collisions. This cannot but affect the interaction of literatures. We can now read, in translation or in the original, the works of contemporary writers from different countries, say, England or Japan, and they read our books. Thus there

is a constant exchange of artistic values that gives writers opportunities to share in the worldwide experience of the written word, which is certainly very important and which was not possible on this scale for previous generations.

*L:* Do you think there is a demarcation line in time marking this character of intercommunication?

*A:* I believe that this line passes where the Second World War ended and a struggle began to put an end to international conflicts, to explosive collisions between different political systems. Humankind has discerned the existence of a single goal. The ideological struggle does not cease but proceeds under conditions in which an active and intensive exchange of experiences of different national literatures, both within countries and between them, has become possible and necessary.

*L:* Do you feel this multinational interaction increased and acquired new features in our country in this period?

*A:* I entered literature in the mid-1950s. I saw the level of mastery in our literature rise in this postwar period and the subsequent decades. The best works very soon became the property of *all* our literatures. It should be noted that this process of mutual enrichment of our Soviet culture has been pointed out in the new Constitution.

*L:* Do you connect this interest in the culture of the word, the striving for high technique, with the writers' attitude to the content of literature?

*A:* I am certain of that. I cannot define everything like an expert in the theory of literature but I think that the scope of modern literature, including Soviet literature, is consistently broadening and that literature covers ever new spheres of human life. There has been a particularly marked increase of interest in psychology, the inner life, daily cares, social status and position in society, and in moral gains and losses. It seems to me, however, that a sense of proportion is essential both for literature as a whole and for each writer. Certain spheres of human existence cannot and must not be the subject of imaginative literature, and I am almost frightened by the invasion of certain Western authors into areas that are off limits for aesthetic comprehension and artistic study.

*L:* It is perhaps appropriate here to put the question of not *what* but *how,* isn't it?

*A:* Perhaps. While the possibilities of the art of the written word are very great indeed, there are things that I, as writer and as person, do not want to read about and do not want to see in

pictures or in the theater. Certain problems and facts are so intimate that they are not subject to public scrutiny.

*L:* That is clear. Let me ask you, as a writer who gives so much attention to the word as the raw material of literature, what is the correlation between language itself and the language of literature?

*A:* Literary language includes, among other layers, the languages of official relations, of the press and journalism. I understand that these layers should manifest themselves functionally. But the great language of imaginative literature is extracted and created anew by the author from the common language of the people, from the treasure house of traditions, from current usage, every time he or she writes anything. When I begin a new work I wish to get rid of the verbal material I hear on the radio and read in newspapers and magazines; more exactly, I wish to transfer everything I need to the area of literature. A writer must have a filter in order to separate what is needed from what is not. Even a talented writer requires both his own experience and that of his predecessors and contemporaries.

Sometimes one comes across books where the word is not properly honored. One regrets that the author, with the untold wealth of the language at his disposal, does not feel what should be used and when, and what should be left out.

*L:* I think there is another side to this. You are right in saying that the standard of literary language has risen. But there is real artistic mastery on the one hand and mere pen-pushing on the other. There is mastery of the word as an instrument of literature without which it cannot exist, and there also is play with words almost as an end in itself, an image for the sake of an image, with no real commitment to what is depicted. Don't you find this to be quite widespread now? This is more often said about poetry, it is true, and said by poets themselves.

*A:* Yes, the standard of literary mastery has risen in prose and even more in poetry. This is notable in our national literatures in particular. Mastery has grown out of the evolution of creative thought, but the phenomenon of "play with words" may develop in certain conditions.

No literature is homogeneous in the sense of creating genuine values. This is an immense stream consisting of a multitude of books and involving hundreds of writers, not all of whom grasp the organic subtlety of the word; this requires intuition in addition to knowledge. It requires an ability to handle the word, as well as talent.

I fully agree that we often come across masterfully written works with a very high standard of literary language, which is also modern, but these works seem to be written about a mirage. At first they seem to capture your imagination, but then you realize they are about nothing. This is particularly evident in dramaturgy. You often find yourself watching a play, written in a modern snappy manner, which peters out in the end like a punctured toy balloon. Such a play inevitably soon leaves the stage.

So it is with prose. So many books that were not objected to either by reviewers or their editors in the publishing houses disappear without a trace. Neither readers nor publishers ever return to them. But I would not rebuke anyone, for this seems to be a normal literary process whereby something has to go so that something else may remain. But sometimes this second "something" does not appear for a long time; therefore what you mentioned is true and literature naturally does not benefit from it.

Everyone who puts pen to paper is faced with the problem of this "balance." The ability to master the word and to make it a fact of art is a compulsory condition for anyone who takes up writing. If he proves to have this ability, he will create a genuine literary work. If he does not, nothing will be added to imaginative literature no matter what subject he may try to write on, what problems he may pose. By the same token, a writer may possess enough words and devices but will produce nothing of value if his book carries no message.

*L:* You often turn in your works to folklore images—legends and songs—selecting what can serve as a tuning fork to the content and emotional coloring of a short novel or a story. How important for you is the word structure, the verbal imagery of a song or a fairy tale?

*A:* Have you ever asked yourself whether new languages can appear in our time? They don't. And have you asked yourself why people today, any people, do not compose fairy tales? Fairy tales do not appear because life is now different from what it used to be.

*L:* But fairy tales are created in literature.

*A:* These are not folk fairy tales. The same is true of the legends and myths of all peoples of the world. They came into being at a certain epoch, at a certain stage of development, as a very ancient form of human thinking. Today's world is dashing headlong towards unification.

A modern Arab writer thinks and writes in much the same way as I do. Our types of thinking and methods of expression are similar. Therefore all that remains and has been preserved from past epochs should somehow be included in our literary system

and kept within it, as we cannot preserve it otherwise. Ancient myths and legends help us to see our remote forebears through modern eyes, and we must use them, "adjusting" them to our modern perception of the world. This enriches us and helps us see what has been part of the past, as, for instance, a person sailing in a boat along a lake can see in calm weather the roofs of houses or the steeple of a bell tower flooded by the lake. I have in fact heard from someone about a reservoir on the bottom of which a village, a small town, had been left. A person sails in a boat above all this and thinks that *there* live people of times long gone, that life goes on there which he could see through the eyes of today if he went down there. . . . This multiplicity of approaches is essential to me. Legends and songs, their entire structure, help me in my search of such multiple, multi-dimensional approaches. If I have not yet succeeded in this and am only approaching my goal, perhaps I will attain it in my new works.

It is hard to say now, but I believe we must move our literature from the single plane on which we have been standing so firmly and so stubbornly. We see only our wonderful reality, only our deeds, only our history and only our life. But it seems to me that such single-dimensional vision in literature is becoming obsolescent and what is required is "sideways" and in-depth vision directed into the past. All this taken together concentrates the strength of an artistic image.

I realize that this is difficult. Perhaps not all readers will understand, and as a result some writers may have fewer readers, but all the same, literature must have its experimental shop, its advance echelon if you wish. This echelon will at its own risk diverge from the literary plane on which we appeared and developed, and it would be wrong to hinder it.

I too have fewer readers than in previous years and receive fewer letters, but they are much more profound and are more attractive for me. I used to receive hundreds of letters that gave me nothing intellectually. Those were good, well-wishing letters, but their senders expressed a positive attitude toward me and nothing more. Today both writer and reader need something more.

Such are our times. Relations between the writer and the reader are in the final analysis always determined by the epoch. For instance, during the fight-for-literacy period it was necessary to write what could be understood by everyone. In the postwar years it was necessary to write for people who had lost much and gone through great suffering during the war, to write so that everyone could feel the spiritual link between literature and the people and acquire spiritual support. Literature should at all times be one's

spiritual support. A literature that fails to be such a support does not fulfill its noble mission to the full.

Even these peaceful and seemingly safe times breed their own problems, which are, paradoxical as it may sound, many times more difficult than wartime difficulties. Vital problems have arisen which we never came across and which we did not even suspect when we were fighting for the preservation of life. Because of these new complexities, literature should restructure itself and find new resources.

*L:* And contemporary man must try to comprehend himself as a personality with the help of literature, isn't that so?

*A:* Indeed. This is what it comes to in the final count. A literature that does not fulfill—does not even set this task—finds itself beyond the boundaries of art.

Yes, precisely as a personality, with the entire complexity of its social links. A personality whose life, spiritual makeup, aspirations and especially intellect reflect our time. But we must see this time in the context of past and future epochs. This is the most difficult of literature's tasks, but not to undertake it means to ignore the acquisition by literature of one of its principal ideological and creative qualities.

# 24

# TIME TO SPEAK

*An Interview with V. Korkin*

*Korkin:* Once, reflecting on literature and its mission, you said: "I think that the main task of literature today is to take part in improving the moral climate on our planet, which is as vital these days as the environmental protection without which we cannot live a normal, healthy life."

Do you stick to this idea today? What is the main social and ethical problem facing international literature now?

*Aitmatov:* To develop a new mentality, by which I mean, an ability to think in terms of the most progressive humanitarian ideals. To begin with, this implies true internationalism, a profound respect for ethnic cultures, national languages and the spiritual values accumulated by nations. It is also an ability to think historically, and to discern the seeds of the future in the present.

Such an outlook on modernity will be priceless if it becomes man's second nature.

*K:* A philosopher remarked that he who thinks philosophically becomes joined in universal thought. How do you conceive this synthesis of a new way of thinking?

*A:* At present humanity's main concern is peace—there is no alternative to it. I am convinced that this idea should become an overwhelming passion and necessity for every one of us, the measure of humaneness in every person.

*K:* What do you think is this measure, in a world of amazing things and novel facts? For instance, there was an item in a popular science magazine describing the death in Paris not so long

*Friendship of the Peoples*, 1982, No. 12

ago of exotic flowers, once brought from Latin America. The flowers died though the weather was perfect and the scientists could find no reason. Apparently they died because of a drought that had killed that particular species in their home country the same year.

What a shattering lesson and bitter warning for us humans!

Can you say that the measure of humaneness is the child's conscience, as you wrote in *The White Steamship?*

*A:* I wouldn't be surprised, you know. I wonder what our past and present would have been like if each of us humans who think of ourselves as *"the beauty of the world"* could have felt the same about other people and shared the joys and sorrows of every other individual or nation.

*K:* You say "if." Do you think it possible in principle?

*A:* Well, it sounds utopian, doesn't it? Still, what's the point in man being "the paragon of animals" if we deny this possibility completely? We ought to seize the opportunity! As for me, I do believe in Man!

How can we let humanity, with the millennia of spiritual evolution and innumerable sufferings gone through, as well as with a new awareness of the magic of life and of itself as part of its powerful stream, doom itself to the point of self-destruction? That would mean the end of the great ideals for which we have paid such a dear price of self-knowledge ever since man became human . . .

Pessimism is lack of purpose, which, I think, is worse than death.

*K:* What do you think a person living without a purpose should feel?

*A:* From time immemorial this was believed the most horrible thing that could happen to man. The Bible says: "And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them."

*K:* What could ever show people the true purpose of life, which would help them avoid these apocalyptic torments?

*A:* Life itself. Without the ultimate goal life would long have ceased, its tree dried up and its intelligent branch, humankind, would have grown extinct, for without hope anything we do would be pointless.

*K:* But you must agree that seeking the purpose of life only out of fear . . .

*A:* . . . would be an act of self-deceit, you mean to say? It would be, indeed, and it would soon lead us into an even more desperate blind alley, or even reverse our progress to the Stone Age.

The powerful drive for peace that has embraced many nations on an unprecedented scale is not a campaign that was launched by sheer chance and that will, as it might seem, subside as soon as the sinister shadow of war is dispersed. It is an irreversible process of social awakening of the masses and of humanity's spiritual revival. Humanity entered a new era in October 1917, after the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. It seems to me that people have never been, or could have been, happier than now, the first time in history that they have grown aware of that true virtue which I can define as intelligence inspired by liberty.

People are the motive force of history. The greatest and the most significant idea of the revolution, tested in fierce struggle and inspired creative work, became a most powerful factor that united once alienated peoples into a great nation. This power enables us to notice what I call a new evolutionary meaning of life. That power is embodied in socialism, and we represent a new historical entity called the Soviet people.

All that determines our duty to and responsibility for the future of the world and its inhabitants. Indeed, has there ever been anything like the 20th-century world peace movement? We are proud that Lenin's Decree On Peace was a cornerstone of this movement.

*K:* Do you mean that the purpose of this movement implies the developing of a new, planetary mentality?

*A:* I do indeed, for the opposite of peace is sheer madness. By the opposite I mean nuclear war, all kinds of ideas and doctrines leading to the use of weapons of mass destruction. The unprecedented drive against this madness—madness that has surpassed all extreme ideas of evil and its manifestations—has brought about an extraordinary wave of humanitarian aspirations which we could not imagine ourselves capable of, humaneness that manifests itself in action and struggle more than in anything else.

The peace movement, like no other current movement, reflects a new awareness of the greatness of historical endeavor, of the ideas of peace and the unity of nations striving for friendship and fraternity.

*K:* Do you think that the new mentality presumes the discarding of some old ideas and practices? What should man discard?

*A:* I'm convinced that he should discard global, humiliating fear, loneliness, indifference and cruelty—everything that Western propaganda, a servant of madness, is so insolently forcing him to believe. What promotes our inner liberation is that we've come to understand what they want to reduce us to. I think there can't be anything more insulting than an attempt to turn people into marauders. What I mean is the Western media's deliberate soothing

of people with the idea of a war that their own people will survive and that will sweep other nations from the face of the earth, thus giving the survivors a chance to enjoy the fruits of the victims' work.

*K:* But surely that can have only the opposite effect?

*A:* True enough, but I'm more concerned with another thing: how could such an idea occur to anyone at all? It's sheer madness!

The longer we live the less likely we are to be satisfied with anything less than perpetual evolution, preservation and continuation of life on earth. Indeed, who would voluntarily give up the precious gift of Nature which Einstein described as the joy of seeing and understanding?

*K:* What did he mean by seeing?

*A:* I think he meant seeing the world through the eyes of a child and a wise man at the same time.

Life is an everlasting wonder—we adults know that to be a sacred truth. The question is whether we can feel it the way a child does, innocently and unbiasedly, without words, for the child can see the world revived in his own heart time and again. His discovery of the world is always as fresh and as beautiful as on the first day of creation, when the earth sparkled with morning dew.

This natural and eternal love of all living things is a spontaneous and touching manifestation of man's eternally revived nature.

Children are not easily surprised. Paradoxical as it may seem, childhood is the most serious period of a person's life. The child loves the world around and the people inhabiting it. The child never looks upon people as strangers, aliens. His or her existence is not temporal, and childhood will be over only when the spiritual development has gone through all the phases of human evolution. Do you have an idea what the child can see and how he sees the world?

*K:* Incidentally, this enigma is attractive not only to artists but to scientists as well. Not long ago I read an article that made me realize that biologists have a nostalgic yearning for probing into the inner world of newborn babies. They claim that if young babies could only remember and speak, they'd be able to tell us stories as wonderful as Homer's as soon as they were born. They would describe the magic of conception and "the ballet" of the nerve cells—billions of them—dancing a *pas de deux* in the process of building the compounds necessary to inspire intelligence into matter. All that would be as amazing as, say, a single stroke of white paint on the canvas suddenly turning into the multicolored magnificience of the Sistine Chapel ceiling.

It seems very poetic to me, and I find this poetry far more meaningful than thousands of stanzas.

*A:* This is only natural, you know.

*K:* Why?

*A:* A scientist trying to probe into the enigma of life and touch a miracle (not with his hands, of course, which would be fatal for the miracle) is bound to be a poet and, what is essential, he can see and feel something that no one has ever seen or felt.

*K:* Do you think that to be a poet today, that is, to see the unusual in the ordinary and the ordinary in the unusual, is only a scientist's privilege?

*A:* By no means! Each of us has seen the faces of those who create and take pride and pleasure in their pursuits.

*K:* It's wonderful when a whole nation and everyone who has made a contribution to the common cause can admire the results of their work. What do you think a person should feel and think at such a moment?

*A:* With regard to a nation, I can describe it as a sense of history, which is a product of the people's efforts. Every person is a history maker, which means that individuals regard history as part of their own existence, being aware that each one's lot is rooted in his or her own heart.

*K:* It seems to me that such an understanding of life is typical of Blizzard Yedigei, the hero of your book *A Day That Lasts Longer Than An Age*. Incidentally, apart from the present, you portray in the book our recent past; the hard postwar years are shown there through the eyes of the hero and derived from his memories. Why did you choose to to describe that period of our history?

*A:* You see, it was a heroic time, and its developments were the product of the spirit of the nation which had just routed the most terrible evil on earth, fascism. In those days such notions as homeland, nation, courage, honor and conscience had a very special meaning because we paid such a dear price for them—sacred blood shed by the heroes who had fallen gallantly on the battlefields to save life on earth, heroes whose mothers were still waiting for them to come home and who returned in their mothers' dreams, alarmingly real and alive.

As for the character of Blizzard Yedigei whom you've just mentioned, I think he looks on life through the prism of war. He wanted other people to be as good as he had wished to be himself, provided he had survived. Yedigei became a real man after going through the terrible ordeal that had befallen his country and people, the trials he had shared with his people in the same way he would have shared anything else.

We don't wish such trials again even if they turn man into Man. God forbid my contemporaries forget the heroic deeds committed

for their sake or denounce the sacred duty of remembrance!

*K:* You're right, of course: it is the hardest lesson history has taught us. Whom the Gods wish to destroy, they first make mad. It's a real tragedy. Bitter as it might seem, no one would dare condemn or mock the demented. Yet, it's much worse if man is deprived of memory by his own kin, not God, and turned into a monster capable of killing his own mother. I am referring to the legend of the Mankurts you told in the same book. It's not a tale, is it?

*A:* What do you think?

*K:* I don't think it is. I also know of people much worse than that. I call them voluntary Mankurts. Take your character Sabitzhan, for instance, who chose to be a robot, not human, of his own free will. The most dangerous thing in people like him is the pleasure they derive from being robots and concealing it from other people who don't realize that they could make the same choice and benefit by it. I cite: "The time will come when it's possible to control people by radio, as if they were robots. Do you understand: control people, all people, from babies to grandfathers! We have obtained enough scientific data to believe it possible—science has enabled us to, out of supreme considerations."

Among other things, Sabitzhan wants to convince himself that he is a new man, a kind of superman aware of those "supreme considerations."

*A:* That's why he is so ridiculous! My idea was to emphasize the vulgarity and absurdity of his philosophy, whose origin is no secret: spiritual poverty and consumerism . . .

*K:* Which lead to loss of memory as a consequence, you mean?

*A:* I'd say cause, not consequence, for our memory is, in fact, our non-compromising conscience that'll never let us betray our ideals unconsciously or, which is even worse, deliberately. Sabitzhan has to cease to be human (for a superman is no longer human) to satisfy his greed, make a career, etc. His desire to "infect" others with his own philosophy is also quite logical from his point of view: by converting the "naive" people into his own faith he hopes to deprive them of the moral right to judge him. People are in the robot's way, so to speak, and even their silent reproach annoys him. That's why Sabitzhan feels so embarrassed and confused, making so much fuss in the presence of his father and especially Yedigei. He simply cannot bear their glance. The life of a worthy, dignified man enables him to unmask evil in any disguise.

People's history and destiny are kept in their memory, making them turn their eyes inward to their souls and think about the world and their place in it.

No one would choose a trial by time of one's own free will. A weak person would shy from it, and a strong one would prefer to face it, but no one can avoid it.

*K:* You often test your heroes also with "blind," hostile elements—steppes, mountains and ocean. Why?

*A:* The elements are blind as long as we fear them, until we come to understand them. Strange things always look hostile.

The question is why, from time immemorial, man has tried to face the elements so persistently. Why does he want to understand them at all? Isn't it because he is a thinking element himself and because he desperately tries to recall the time when he could understand the language of the animals and birds he regarded as his "younger brothers" rather than "game"?

Mind you, I don't insist on everybody going vegetarian. I'm against inhumanity that has become a norm and that considers it permissible to exterminate all living things for the stomach's sake. I'm in favor of "a good attitude towards the horses," as Mayakovsky put it.

If we assume such an attitude, it'll prove that we are truly progressive, while we cannot claim that an individual is such if he molests Mother Nature and if his imagination is so limited that he cannot understand to what a meager and humble existence he thus dooms his descendents, those who will be ignorant of the fact that once there existed songbirds, flowers and white stags fascinating in their gracefulness.

I agree that man's calling is to transform the world. But he will be able to do this properly only if he remembers that he can do this, as a poet put it, "as the co-author of land and water."

I'm sure this will be so. "The Law on Nature" is a state law in our country wholeheartedly supported by the entire people. Future generations who will inherit our beautiful land will think of us with gratitude, the way we think of those who turned up the soil of the virgin lands and revived them by sleepless, selfless work.

*K:* Do you believe that in this way man makes himself immortal?

*A:* I do indeed. This is the only "privilege" of a creative person whose work is inspired by profound love of the people, eagerness to help them go through ordeals and win, no matter what the person is—a composer writing a symphony, a farmer growing grain, a worker building house or a seaman crossing oceans . . .

*K:* Or a writer?

*A:* A writer too, provided his or her books have the same impact as that most dramatic and poetic word, "Land!" shouted by a look-out high up on the mast at the critical moment when the rest of the crew are desperate to hear it. It's more important today then ever before because humankind seems to be going through the most crucial time in its history and because, in spite of and even thanks to it (I know it sounds paradoxical), people are so acutely aware of the beauty of the world and are yearning for a full-fledged life, more intensely than ever. This is quite natural, for they are worried about their future.

Anyway, what is clear is that by nature human beings are prone to yearn for things they've never seen before: they ought to see them to be happy.

*K:* It's like an old Russian folk tale: "Go I know not where, fetch I know not what," isn't it?

*A:* Exactly. Apparently, fairy tales are based on solid facts—they are an insight into the future:

*The sense of eternity is a gift of our childhood.*
*The yearning for the new is sure to make us wise.*

Both make the poetic and philosophical essence of a new mentality.

*K:* Do you mean a fresh insight as well?

*A:* I think there is a feedback between the two: the more you see the more you understand, and the more you understand the deeper is your insight.

When they ask me what I mean by "new writing," I always reply (we'll return to the subject later) that it means to try and express man's harmonious perception of the world. New writing means to reconstruct the majestic picture of the world seen through the admiring eyes of our contemporaries or reflected in their thoughts, feelings and actions that transform humankind and increase self-awareness.

*K:* This idea of yours is consonant with what you wrote in the preface to *A Day That Lasts Longer Than An Age:* "Fantasy is a metaphor of life that enables one to see reality at a fresh, unexpected angle. Metaphors are essential in our times, and not only because of the introduction of scientific and technological ideas considered fantastic only yesterday, but because the world we live in is fantastic in itself . . ."

By putting it this way, did you try to avoid a possible reproach

that the inserted sci-fi episodes only spoiled the realistic impact of your book?

*A:* On no account. I think it unnecessary to insure myself against my readers' criticism. On the contrary, it is vital for me as a writer. As far as I'm concerned, criticism indicates that I have moved or hurt my readers and thus made them argue or express their approval—that's what's so precious for authors. I'm very grateful to my readers for their involvement, friendship and severe criticism.

In the preface I tried to express my idea of man's perception of reality (for some queer reason, authors often refer to man as "ordinary") when he has suddenly discovered the hidden beauty of the world in which humankind has lived for millennia, utterly unaware of its wonders.

Isn't this the greatest tragedy of all? Doesn't it concern me personally?

This, I think, explains why one suddenly feels most sad at the moment of ultimate bliss: one always keeps thinking of the world and the people who are living, or who lived in it long before one's time. A happy person always does his best not to insult others who are not so blissful by the demonstration of his own wild joy. I think it's a sacred feeling.

I believe that we humans who are growing ever more human in this respect as time goes on, should always have a concern for those who live a humble life full of privations in any part of the world, be it Chile, South Africa or the United States.

The suffering of a person tormented and killed only because he wants to be a free human being, not a slave, is a fantastic terror rooted in reality.

Another fantastic terror is a triumph of that which is inhuman—that torments and kills human beings. That terror has many names: apartheid, racism, colonialism and their sum total, imperialism.

*K:* It goes without saying that the portrayal and overcoming of such atrocities is the main ideological, philosophical and moral task of national literatures in the countries that have recently cast off the colonial yoke or are still suffering under it.

As a leader of the Association of African and Asian Writers, you certainly know well the problems facing your colleagues: What are the main ones?

*A:* The Afro-Asian people's liberation movement is a most impressive force of the 20th century. Such a powerful and simultaneous awakening of many nations is unprecedented. Literature

is always the first to sense new historic developments. Therefore, it is only natural that today writers of Asia and Africa feel most acutely the urgency of consolidating their efforts in anti-imperialist struggle. Writers from the emergent countries see the necessity to soberly assess their cultural heritage from the point of view of the latest achievements of civilization. They are to determine which cultural assets are progressive and which out of date, what can promote their countries' advance and what can only hamper it. Their task is to pinpoint the factors preventing their nations from establishing themselves in the international arena and those promoting their unity and the attaining of common humanitarian goals, or alienating the nations and thus playing into the hands of neocolonialists who do not intend to give up their positions.

Among other tasks I would like to point out the major mission of Afro-Asian writers today—psychological and moral liberation of their people from the aftermath of colonialism.

To free people from a centuries-old inferiority complex, raise their dignity and persuade them to accept internationalism as a norm, it is essential to analyze the consequences of colonialism that crippled their spiritual development. One can only guess what an enormous and lasting effort it will take to erase them from the peoples' minds and souls.

The artist will have to make a social and philosophical assessment of the aftermath of colonialism, which can be defined as a terrible, self-imposed slavery. Only after that shall we be able to write books revealing the inhumane and absurd character of various doctrines that proclaim national, state or racial exclusiveness.

*K:* It seems to me that what has happened to literatures of Africa and Asia (at least, from the social point of view) echoes, among other things, the problems of growing self-awareness that many Soviet literatures, Kirghiz included, had to deal with in the past. Am I right?

*A:* I couldn't agree with you more. The famous phrase "Ten Days That Shook the World" is not merely a poetic metaphor.

The history of the world's first socialist country has proved the advantages of a new social order. The 60 years that have elapsed since the formation of the USSR seem an instant as compared to the history of humankind, but how many events and of what magnitude those years have witnessed, and the most important of all has been the molding of the Soviet person. This explains the impact of Soviet literature on the development of new national literatures. Naturally, the former, for its part, borrows the best and most progressive features from other countries' fiction.

*K:* What do you think of "world literature" as a concept?

A: I think that Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Balzac, Sholokhov, Faulkner, García Márquez and other great writers belong to the world.

What unites poets (I mean in essence, not in genre) in time and space and makes them a single family of humanity and an integral, consolidated poetic force—the universe of poets—is the revolutionary spirit and national character of their poetry. Poetry is a revolution of the soul. Poets are like bridges on the road of life, the bridges of thought and spirit linking generations and uniting the world in attempts to resolve the moral and philosophical problems of "an integrated human community." They are the vessels accumulating cultural assets and scientific data, which are inspired by our inherent and deeply felt concept of humanness.

Humankind's present views, including artistic vision, would have been impossible without a nostalgic yearning for the idea which, according to our great critic Belinsky, stems from the supreme idea present in all works by great artists and gradually developing into the symbol of faith in the inimitably beautiful life and perfection of people who will be happy because they are born for happiness.

*K:* What is the main criterion for ethnic literature in this particular case?

*A:* I agree with the Bengal critic Sarwar Murshid who said at a conference of Afro-Asian writers that today it is up to every national literature to decide whether it should consider itself part of world literature or strive for greatness on a local scale. The latter will inevitably lead to vanity and finally to dogmatism. That's why a literature seeking to be progressive should apply the highest ideological and aesthetic criteria to itself. Only thus will it be able to break through national isolation and avoid parochialism.

Spiritual parochialism alienates people, while world literature—represented by authors of genius—has created and continues to perfect the great language of art, the poetry of the truth, which appeals to and is clear to humanity as a whole.

A true artist is an instrument of communication.

Thus, I meet a person who says he likes Chekhov, and I know I've made a new friend. If a stranger of any extraction who, when hearing *Manas* recited for the first time, is capable of appreciating the power and beauty of this oceanic epic, I know he is my brother.

*K:* It would be most distressing to imagine, even for an instant, that people of different nationalities not only feared but completely misunderstood one another.

Being Kirghiz, you are grateful to the Great October Revolution for liberating your people from slavery. Being Russian, I gladly praise the Revolution for delivering my people from the shame of the Russian tsarist autocracy that enslaved other peoples.

Our national literatures' ideological, ethical and philosophical experience has proved invaluable to writers from newly free countries. Our best books have depicted the noble and turbulent process of revival of man who takes friendship and fraternity for granted—they come naturally to him. What can you say on the subject?

*A:* There is no doubt that many national literatures of the Soviet Union have achieved a great deal in the artistic comprehension and portrayal of reality. Now we have every right to be proud of having created a unique multilingual and multinational Soviet culture. It was a long and difficult process, for many nations and ethnic groups had to cover all the distance from the images of oral folklore and early epics that lacked a hero as a personality to the deep social and psychological insight characteristic of presenting an individual in contemporary fiction.

I want to emphasize here that while attaching a special meaning to the national spirit of art we cannot consider that national identity is all-important and should, therefore, be regarded as the end in itself in the artist's work. The socialist content is, no doubt, far more essential for national literatures, whose social message should be based on ideological and artistic principles that are quite definite and universal for all, namely those that assert the party spirit in literature and the other arts.

*K:* I remember your saying that it is impossible to write prose today without absorbing Tolstoy's and Chekhov's classical realism. Could you elaborate on the subject?

*A:* The history of Russian artistic thought is extremely interesting in itself because it is so right in content and also because the great and powerful Russian language has given us access to world culture.

*K:* What do you feel when you write in Russian?

*A:* I can hardly describe it in so many words, but when writing in Russian I feel I can express myself in a very special and original way.

I know by my own experience that a child can learn two, or even more languages at the same time, if, of course, they are introduced to him very early in his life.

The Russian language is as dear to me as my mother tongue, Kirghiz, and I will always think of it as my native language.

*K:* Why do you think people today take a special interest in the Russian language?

*A:* As Mayakovsky put it, it would be worth learning Russian if only because Lenin spoke it. We love the Russian language because it is the language of the Revolution.

Mind you, Lenin highly appreciated and deeply understood classical Russian literature, seeing in it the bearer of great ideals and an ardent champion of humanity's liberation. Indeed, that's what makes it consonant with our times. That's what explains its tremendous impact on writers who have undertaken to carry out a difficult mission—continuing man's eternal tale of himself.

If I had to choose an epigraph to Russian literature, I would pick an emotional and bitter line by Alexander Radischev, who wrote: "I looked around, and my heart ached for suffering mankind."

*K:* Don't you think that those words could also make a good epigraph to the entire world literature, for "around us" today is our whole planet?

*A:* I fully agree with you. From time immemorial humankind, looking at the starry sky, dreamed of the boundless universe. Wasn't it because people wanted to look upon themselves from the outside? I think that the cosmonauts' description of Earth, the cradle of human civilization, as a blue planet, is truly poetic and human.

*K:* I doubt that those who lived before us, even great poets, had such a vision of it. It's utterly new! Don't you think that it can bring forth man's second nature?

*A:* Exactly! We used to have too light-minded and selfish an attitude towards the Earth (which is especially obvious today). Thus we took it for granted that it should feed, clothe, protect us and quench our thirst, asking in return for nothing but our contemptuous recognition of its existence.

Now that we begin to travel in space, we have suddenly realized, with a profound tenderness and acute pain, that it needs *our* protection.

*K:* You mean protection from ourselves?

*A:* Unfortunately yes. Or fortunately, for it's still not too late.

Literature's duty is to promote and popularize this idea in order to prevent people from thinking that violence is inevitable in the world and that nothing depends on each of them personally, or that they are but hostages who will sooner or later be sacrificed to madness.

*K:* Do you mean only Soviet literature and its counterparts in

socialist countries, where any hint of war propaganda or advertising of hatred or violence is considered a crime incompatible with the very nature and principles of socialism? Or do you refer to international literature as a whole?

*A:* I have great confidence in the entire progressive literature of the world. More often than not progressive-minded artists in the West (I've met with many of them) sense much more acutely the deadly threat of anti-humanism emanating from bourgeois propaganda, and try to avert it much more resolutely than we do. This is their significant contribution not only as writers but above all as citizens. I admire my colleagues' courage and fearlessness and am proud of them.

We Soviet writers don't have to work in a poisonous atmosphere of mass pseudo-culture with its compulsory cult strength and violence and idealization of murder or, contrariwise, an idyllic make-believe that deprives one of conscience and the will to live. Make-believe is necessary to prepare one for a painless and even desirable departure from this world to the other, where one will, allegedly, be free of mundane cares and enjoy eternal bliss . . . That worries us very much. Naturally, when I write a book I can't be sure that it will reach foreign readers and help them recognize the shameless lies used to brainwash them and stir their worst instincts. If my book does reach them, I want it to evoke their honor, conscience, dignity and self-confidence, and their trust of other people.

*K:* Should every author write with regard to an international readership?

*A:* With regard to human beings, I'd say.

*K:* Tolstoy insisted on the same idea. He wrote that the mission and purpose of literature was to make man love life in all its manifestations. Aren't you surprised that he used the verb "make"?

*A:* Why should I be? I am sure that Tolstoy used it on purpose. According to him, to make one love life means to stir that person's imagination and ennoble his or her soul.

The great artistic world created by his genius is boundless. I'm in awe of his heroic struggle against a monstrous power visible only to himself and threatening to humiliate and destroy everything human. Would he have plunged himself into that battle had he been guided by other considerations than his great love of the truth and people? I don't think he would have. Anyway, there would be no Tolstoy without that love, and the mere thought of that horrifies me, for without his genius we'd have to live with a gap in our souls. It is equally painful to think how much the best of

men suffered, seeking to instill hope for the triumph of good over evil in people's hearts.

*K:* Yet good and evil are social categories that cannot exist alone in the abstract. As you put it, what is known of evil today would have seemed impossible in the past. To what means should a modern artist resort in order to depict the nature and essence of evil and stir the imagination of 20th century people? You are quite right when you say that reality is more fantastic than science fiction. Besides, reality is often more terrible because it's so real.

*A:* Very true. Today it is not easy at all to move people with a work of art—the tolerance of pain of those who have witnessed the horrors of nazism, of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as the atrocities committed in different parts of the world today, has increased significantly.

Take the Apocalypse, for instance. In former times the description of Doomsday instilled a holy terror:

> *"And the shapes of the locusts were like unto horses prepared unto battle; and on their heads were as it were crowns like gold, and their faces were as the faces of men.*
>
> *"And they had hair as the hair of women, and their teeth were as the teeth of lions.*
>
> *"And they had breastplates, as it were breastplates of iron; and the sound of their wings was as the sound of chariots of many horses running to battle.*
>
> *"And they had tails like unto scorpions, and there were stings in their tails . . ."*

Obviously, the purpose of art is not to scare readers but to help them overcome despair and fear of life and stir noble feelings in their hearts, which will enable them to oppose evil no matter what shape or disguise it might assume. It seems to me that this gives rise to the issue of tragedy as a genre capable of expressing our modern attitudes better than any other.

*K:* Do you believe that sooner or later a new Shakespeare will be born?

*A:* You know, once I asked Dmitri Shostakovich the same question. I was amazed and delighted when he said that the modern world offered a far better chance for a new Shakespeare, for the human spirit has now attained global scale. That's why, he said, when a new Bard emerged, he will be able to express the entire world through himself, as in music . . . That was a casual conversation, and only later, when I was on my own, did it occur

to me that what Shostakovich meant was that he expected literature to create a universal, musical picture of reality.

"To express the entire world through oneself"—utopian as it seems, this is the greatest dream of every true artist.

Literature's greatest and loftiest mission is, in Tolstoy's words, to make people love life and the world around them. This is the duty of every honest artist who understands that the time to speak has come and that his or her word is vital for humankind. That's what it means to be a realist.


Presentation of the Nehru Award to Chinghiz Aitmatov

# 25

# INDIA HAS BECOME NEAR TO US

*An interview with M. Salganik*

*Aitmatov:* I am sincerely thankful to know that my work has been noted and marked by such a high prize [the Nehru Prize]. A writer works alone, and every proof of the necessity of his efforts and their usefulness encourages him and gives him new strength. Of course I am glad that the heroes of my books have "settled" in India.

*Salganik:* You have never written about India although you have visited there several times. What does India mean to you?

*A:* India is not the only country about which I have not written. I have not done so simply because I cannot write about something of which I do not know enough. Still, I consider travelling around the world very important for my work. It enables me to breathe the atmosphere of other countries, of their history and present-day concerns. It provides comparisons that help us better see our own life. Everything seen, heard or gleaned goes into the artist's "reactor." There is no knowing what all this will lead to, or when and how, but it is of colossal significance. In this sense, India has given me very much. To me India is a unique source of spiritual experience accumulated over the millennia. It is the cradle of world civilization and the original mother of the Indo-European languages. This alone stands for something in the history of world culture. This grandeur of India's philosophic and artistic thought evokes in me a feeling I can only describe as awe.

*India's independence was proclaimed on August 15, 1947. On the eve of that date in 1985, Chinghiz Aitmatov was awarded the Nehru prize.

Another source of India's attraction for me is the notion, dating back to my childhood, of its being a wonderful and mysterious fairyland. Not only is India mentioned in the Kirghiz epic *Manas* but all of Central Asia has been linked with India in fascinating ways since ancient times. There is also evidence of Central Asian influence on India.

But there is more to it than the undeniably important reciprocal cultural influences. India is a country whose presence is felt in our time more keenly than ever, for its prestige in the international arena, and the growing interest in its culture and ethical teachings.

During a visit to India I was immensely impressed by the motto inscribed on the Indian state emblem: "Truth alone prevails." These glorious words were the ancient Indian king Asoka's; having routed the neighboring state of Kalinga, he was granted an insight into a profound characteristic of human nature. He realized that violence, even if it yields victory, breeds more violence in an endless cycle. So Asoka refused to use force and admonished his descendants to remember that rulers should not seek conquests. And "if they have to take up arms, let them not forget that truth alone prevails."

It is perfectly clear that our foremost concern today is to preserve life on earth. But does this mean that humankind, terrified by the threat of nuclear immolation, will silently endure its pains and live only in order to survive? No matter how, at what price, only to survive? I don't think so. Inseparably linked with this concern is another: How to live in a dignified manner? The peace we need as never before is something more than the absence of war; it must proceed from the establishment of relations among people that ensure their dignified and tranquil existence. This is bound to bring about an unprecedented flowering of civilization. Peace bolstered by the fear of war is insecure, as is everything based on fear. Durable peace should rest on the conscious interdependence of everything that makes up the human universe.

*S:* What, in your view, should literature do to help us live in dignity?

*A:* The eternal mission of literature and the arts is to comprehend reality and study the human soul. But today literature and art are charged with a special mission connected above all with the faster rate of life.

The scientific and technological revolution has enormously increased the scope of material opportunities open to us, but it has placed a premium upon quick assimilation. The rate of living has increased. Literature and art also circulate faster, both nationally and internationally. Hence their new mission as catalysts of the

most important process of our time, that of confidence-building among the people, which also means among nations, for we the people are the fount of nations. It is essential today to shape a view of the world as an ecological unit: a single earth populated by a single human race.

The human race is, fortunately, diverse. Cultural characteristics vary, and there is a difference in the historical development of East and West. But cultural and geographic factors are now making room for another difference—between national insulation and doctrines of national superiority on the one hand and the perception of humankind as a "unity of diversity," to use Rabindranath Tagore's formula, on the other. To promote such a perception is the mission of literature above all, because of its unique generalizing capacity.

*S:* Does this mean you do not believe that interest in books is waning as a result of the immense proliferation of the mass media?

*A:* As far as I can judge, this is not diminishing in the overall human balance. Of course the audiovisual media with their spectator appeal and other attractions lead to less reading. But on the other hand the scientific and technological revolution gives man more leisure, more free time. The number of people who have more time free from earning their daily bread is growing. Their different uses of leisure indicate varying levels of cultural development. But books have maintained their position and I don't think they will become the property solely of an intellectual elite. And since today books are international, they should serve to instill good will, respect for other points of view and an understanding of the similarities between peoples that may be concealed by external differences.

Here I would like to turn again to India's lessons. The spiritual development of that country, which is based on a synthesis, strikes us with its continuity, its richness and the breadth of its world outlook. This is consonant with the times. It means purposeful interaction—an imperative form of cooperation among nations. It means the exchange of artistic thought between nations, to enrich cultures and affirm universal human ideals, and to combine scientific disciplines that open new vistas for human quests.

*S.* Does this synthesis include relations between our country and India, the relations that have been developing successfully for nearly four decades?

*A:* I would like to make a special point concerning Jawaharlal Nehru, who was the architect of these relations on the Indian side.

Soviet-Indian ties can serve as a model of relations between

states with different political systems; here are two neighboring countries, multinational and multilingual, separated by the Himalayan barrier, countries with different world outlooks and different ways of life, united by a desire for peace and friendship and cooperating successfully in a broad range of fields. This, without exaggeration, is an embodiment of humanity's hopes. It proves in practice that such relations are possible and beneficial.

Jawaharlal Nehru, who stood at the source of our friendship, was a man whose personality was formed at the junction of East and West. When he became the first prime minister of indepenent India he charted its development, enabling the country to live in new conditions and to synthesize the best of its own traditions with contemporary achievements of human thought.

One of Nehru's greatest merits is the fact that he correctly understood the potential of socialist experience and the long-term potential of friendly relations with the Soviet Union. These helped India get on its feet and break with the colonial legacy.

Soviet experience and socialist reality, which have also absorbed the advanced experience of other countries and nations, enrich India just as India's spiritual experience broadens our vision of the world.

History confirms at every step the correctness of the foresight of the great son of the Indian people.

It is a great honor and joy for me to have been awarded a prize named after Jawaharlal Nehru, a stateman and a person of a poetical bent, a dreamer and a practical man who did so much for the cordial unity of our two countries.

# 26

## AT THE PRICE OF LIFE

*A conversation with Irina Rishina*

*Aitmatov:* I think I'll express everyone's opinion if I say that this Congress was quite different from all the previous ones.* There were many reasons for that, too. Our society is going through a new phase, carrying out radical reforms in all spheres of life and changing popular psychology. The latter is essential for our revival, for the human element is the beginning and end of everything. The writers' forum was very timely indeed. The speakers touched upon most serious and acute issues. They spoke frankly and with feeling about the problems facing society and literature. Among the issues on the agenda were improving social justice, solving ecological problems, the promotion of ethnic cultures, etc. Naturally, we also discussed some organizational and professional issues important to us.

*Rishina:* You didn't take the floor, though, did you? If you had, what would you have said?

*A:* Regrettably, I was too busy to prepare a speech properly, though it wasn't my fault. Had I spoken, I would have dwelt upon ethnic problems and the interaction of cultures, literatures and languages. These issues are especially vital today because ours is a federal, multinational state; what happens in each republic finds echos in the rest of the country. We don't always think in such terms, but it is so. In fact, our civic, moral and cultural potential depends, to a great extent, on the development of ethnic literatures in the constituent republics and on how real and important

*This interview with Chinghiz Aitmatov took place soon after the 8th Congress of Soviet Writers (1986) and the author speaks first about the Congress.

are the problems they try to deal with both on their native soil and on a nationwide scale. People have a potential to bring benefit or damage to their own country and the rest of the world. They may promote friendship or discord, the triumph of the national spirit, respect for other peoples' feelings and the wish to be respected in return as a nation's representative, or they may promote contempt for and indifference to people speaking other languages. These issues are not abstract but very topical, and they should be resolved within the shortest time. That's why *glasnost,* symbolizing the fruition of a new mentality, is so essential to us.

Glasnost is expedient, and we should do our best to promote it.

As I said at a Party congress held recently in Kirghizia, we will have to give up our old stereotyped thinking for good. With regard to the present state of our ethnic cultures, we are still prone to recall that only some time ago they lacked alphabets and that their representatives were completely illiterate. We keep referring to this all the time, as if there still were literacy courses, but they are far back in the past and cannot serve as a starting point now. Why on earth should we compare the present state of our industry and economy with what it used to be in 1913? It's plain silly, for ours is the era of high technology. A different standard of judgment should also be applied to the progress of our ethnic cultures and literatures. We cannot possibly rejoice at the fact that everyone can read and write, or that we have newspapers, radio, TV, theaters and other mass media. Obviously we are happy to have them, but we should not use those achievements to diminish the scale of the very real problems facing society. If I had spoken at the writers' congress, I would have said to all my colleagues, and especially to journalists and critics: please don't pretend that all ethnic problems have been resolved. Stop praising our past achievements—they are elementary enough. Now all of us ought to be interested in more important things.

We'd better discuss the profound democratic changes occurring in our ethnic cultures and the concept of national identity within the framework of our internationalist society. Internationalism is not an arithmetical sum of its parts—it is an algebraic expression of many national cultures, each of them developing independently. Still, national identity would be impossible without a certain common denominator of our entire country and active borrowing from more advanced cultures. That's what we ought to discuss, and we should try to find a proper solution to the problems.

Now take the evolution of a national literary language. What's going on in it as far as, say, the borrowings from other languages are concerned? Are they organic, natural and timely? Don't they

sometimes result from a conservative or sluggish thinking, when words from one language are mechanically introduced into another, often without a particular reason?

The Russian language is a great language, and to doubt its tremendous impact on all the national cultures of the Soviet Union would be as foolish as breaking down an open door. But this doesn't mean we should ignore other languages' inner regularities and introduce into them, borrowing from the Russian, alien elements and phrases. I can illustrate with a typical example: there are two regional newspapers published in Kirghizia, *Ysyk-Kol Pravdasy* and *Naryn Pravdasy*. Thus their names employ the Russian term, "pravda," for "truth," "facts" or "justice." This is preposterous. What kind of people (with an ancient history) can it be whose language lacks words for "truth," "facts" or "justice"? Who wants such a ridiculous distortion of the Russian language and humiliation of the Kirghiz when the latter has at least a dozen synonyms of the word "pravda"?

Ethnic literature, no matter how talented its authors, depends on many other factors, including the people's cultural and educational level. For some reason, in Kirghizia's capital, Frunze, the number of schools where all subjects are taught in Kirghiz does not show a tendency to grow, though there are new schools springing up by the hundred. No one objects, but no one really cares. It is most regrettable, for no culture can exist without a solid national foundation. In our republic's capital it is high time to open child-care centers where Kirghiz is taught.

When such bitter considerations are voiced, however, one can expect to be reproved for nationalism and narrow-mindedness. I am sorry to say that such demonstrations of super-vigilance—stemming, to a great extent, from careerism—are never condemned for what they are. As a result, a specific type of demagogue has sprung up. Praising the Russian language whenever an opportunity, suitable or unsuitable, presents itself, such people diminish their mother tongue.

The diminishing of one's native language and national identity is an extreme, of course, but there is also its exact opposite which is doing just as great a damage. I mean the tendency to paint one's people as only pure, to see nothing but their achievements and to ignore their faults completely. This tendency, understandable as it might seem, impedes progress.

When we assume (purely theoretically, of course) that in some remote future all languages will converge into one or two, we feel too delighted with the prospect to realize that it would do great harm to the world at large. No wonder: the new synthetic lan-

guages would have no nutritious national soil to breed on, and homogeneity cannot guarantee progress. That is why it is essential to preserve as many languages as possible as long as we can. In our age of mass information, when we observe the process of levelling in all spheres of life, linguistic "sponging" can do no good to anyone. I am all for the existence of many literary languages, and I want them to have good opportunities for developing.

Its language makes a nation immortal. Each language is great as far as the people who speak it are concerned. Every one of us has a filial duty to the people that gave us their most valuable asset, their national language, and we should do our best to preserve its purity and replenish its treasures.

Today's community is intertwined, and mutual contacts between its innumerable elements are essential for each. Under the circumstances, everybody should have a command of several languages. Thus some Soviet republics have bilingual authors, and I'm one of them. Among others I could name Vasil Bykov, Ion Drutze, Maksud and Rustam Ibragimbekov, and Timur Pulatov. I know a lot of people who have a good command of several languages, both their own country's and foreign ones, which gives them access to the entire fabulous world of literature and culture. I am sure that in the near future this beautiful world will be open to all. Not long ago I met with a group of young Algerian trilinguals who knew Russian fairly well, their mother tongue, Arabic, perfectly, and French excellently. A young schoolmistress from their group also had an adequate knowledge of Berber. They are the future.

*R:* Let's talk about your new novel, *The Executioner's Block.* Its first part was published in the June issue of *Novy Mir* and another part in the August issue.

As Albert Schweitzer remarked, it is invaluable even to contemplate the meaning of life. The heroes of your books try hard to comprehend the innermost meaning of life under the influence of their own moral and philosophical principles. Naturally, each can do it at his or her own level, be it the wisdom of the old peasant woman Tolgonai of *The Mother's Field,* or the outlook of Tanabai from *Farewell, Gulsary!,* referred to as a "peasant philosopher." What you wrote about Yedigei and his ideas of the world and himself is apparently continued in your new novel, which proves that you thought about writing it even when you were working on *A Day That Lasts Longer Than an Age.* "My hero," you wrote, "Blizzard Yedigei, is prone to think intensely about the meaning of human existence . . . There are people for whom this issue has a religious connotation (if they are believers), but for many God is

but a measure of morality, conscience and self-awareness. The same is true about my hero, a Soviet worker and not a religious sect member, who ponders over the matter and finds it harder to resolve than a travelling political lecturer can usually do."

*A:* Indeed, in my previous novel I dwelt upon the subject at some length. It cropped up in Yedigei's mind at the time he was burying his deceased friend, Kazangap. After a long and hard search for the place to commit the body to the earth, before performing the traditional ritual, Yedigei prayed to God: "I want to believe in Thee, to know that Thou existeth in my mind. When I pray to Thee, I thus appeal to myself through Thee . . ."

As you can see, Yedigei appeals in fact to himself because no one but himself and his like could resolve his doubts and put an end to his apprehensions. If Yedigei is what I call a natural philosopher, the hero of my new novel, *The Executioner's Block,* Avdi Kallistratov, is inclined to theosophical contemplation and is a scholar. But the two characters, though contrasting, have a similar attitude to life, a sense of justice and righteousness.

*R:* The action of the two published parts of your novel falls into several lines—those of Avdi Kallistratov, the Moyunkum "junta" and the wolf family—but it is obvious that Avdi Kallistratov is your main concern. It seems to me that this character has been quite a surprise even for those readers who know that your new books never repeat what was written before and that they are bound to differ in plot and artistic images. *The Executioner's Block* is the first book of yours whose hero is a Russian, isn't it?

*A:* Yes, Avdi is Russian all right, but I regard him in a wider context: he is a Christian, though what is going on in his soul is just as important to those of my countrymen who were born into other religions. I sought a way to man through religion. I mean to man, not to God. As far as I'm concerned, Avdi's quest is what counts.

*R:* Still it was not by chance that you chose a Christian, not a Muslim, for a hero, was it?

*A:* Of course not. The figure of Jesus Christ gave a powerful momentum to Christianity. As for Islam, to which I ought to have belonged by origin, it lacks such a personality, for Mohammad is not a martyr. He had his hard days too, but I can't imagine him crucified—or forgiving people if he was. I used Jesus Christ's life story as a pretext for saying something very important to my contemporaries. That's why, atheistic as I am, I chose to depict him in my book. That was also the reason why I chose Avdi Kallistratov for a hero: he is what he seems to be.

*R:* Reading *The Executioner's Block,* one is bound to think of Dostoyevsky and recall Prince Myshkin and Alyosha Karamazov. As for your Pontius Pilate and Jesus of Nazareth, they remind us of Mikhail Bulgakov's characters . . .

*A:* Well, what do you expect me to say? I'm pleased to hear it, not because I want to rub shoulders with my great predecessors. In this particular case I just happened to face the same problems they once attempted to deal with. These are eternal categories and problems that many more writers are sure to deal with after me. Of course, I thought about Bulgakov because his Pontius Pilate and Jesus Christ are the same people as my Pontius Pilate and Jesus of Nazareth, and they find themselves in the same situation. However, I hope that an attentive reader will be able to see that I tried not so much to show them in a different light but to attach quite a new meaning to their meeting. It's been a long time since Bulgakov wrote his *Master and Margarita,* and we live in a different world now. I wanted to introduce elements of our world outlook into that episode, particularly our awareness of the global vulnerability of humanity now. It would not occur to me to claim that we should interpret Doomsday as a nuclear holocaust. Yet, the understanding that such a threat is real has made me try to prove that we must beware of self-destruction, an act that may become a horrible reality rather than the mystical end of the world.

*R:* The critics are sure to review your novel in full as soon as its publication is completed. The question is what you can say to those readers who think that the author of *The Executioner's Block* has assumed a conciliatory attitude towards religion.

*A:* I suppose the novel will give rise to different opinions and interpretations. As soon as it is published in full, I expect a serious literary and critical, or even philosophical discussion. What I am sure of is that no one has the right to judge the author's attitude towards religion (that is, his sympathy or lack of sympathy for it) merely by spotting what looks like a familiar pattern and ignoring the author's ideas and purposes, which, in this case, are not religious at all. It would mean looking into the book and seeing nothing.

*R:* Judging by your works, music and songs mean a great deal to you. I heard you wanted to call one of your first stories "Melody," in the sense of music of love. Is it true? I mean the story that Alexander Tvardovsky published in *Novy Mir* under the title of "Jamilya." Didn't you call your first book in Kirghiz *Ovon,* which also means "melody"?

*The Executioner's Block* contains an episode that carried the

philosophical message of the novel. I mean the scene where Avdi Kallistratov attends a recital of early Bulgarian church singing at the Pushkin Art Museum. The music reminds him of a Georgian short story he read once—a ballad titled "The Six and the Seventh," and he suddenly understands its implications.

Legend, fable, tale and song play an important part in your writings. Did you invent the ballad yourself, or is it a version of an old Georgian tale? What's its message? I interpreted the finale of the ballad, the death of the Seventh, as a fatal conflict between individual and social morality. The Seventh kills the Six without the slightest hesitation for he knows that if the enemy refuses to surrender, he is to be destroyed. He does it for the sake of the common cause and out of ideological consideration. But, as a person, he is appalled at what he has done, for he regards murder as immoral. It is equally important that Avdi contemplates on the cause of the Seventh's suicide, and that he does it during the recital of church music, for a Christian commandment says: "Thou shalt not kill."

*A:* You may put it that way. Actually, here is a chain reaction: the Six put up a fierce resistance and killed people, and the Seventh punished them for it. It was an act of revenge, but it was committed in such a cruel way that, having destroyed them, he realized that he had thus destroyed himself as a man. What a tragic vicious circle! Of course, I wrote the ballad myself, and I'm a bit apprehensive about my Georgian readers' and colleagues' response to it. I am not sure I've managed to make it sound genuine enough, though that's not the main thing. I needed this inserted story to stress that every civil war is a national tragedy causing suffering and bloodshed, and that all this can be expressed in music and singing that not only glorify struggle, heroism and the joy of victory but also make one remember the victims and mourn them.

*R:* Your novel is entitled *The Executioner's Block.* They say you intended to call it "The Rounds." In fact, I found the ideas related to the initial title in the text itself: "I am to plunge into a different life, the life that circulates in the voids of vanity and *the rounds of events . . .*" or ". . . there was a link between his destiny and all *the rounds of time.*" Why did you change the title? I've always thought that a title is very important to you.

*A:* Indeed, I was going (and still intend) to write a big synthesized novel under the title The Rounds. Its initial idea was to combine the stories of Avdi Kallistratov and the wolves as well as many other events. To embody my ideas by connecting all the lines of the plot and the chronology so as to make one whole

proved to be extremely difficult. When I realized how much time it was going to take, I decided to write Avdi's life story separately. It did not occur to me then that it would assume the shape of a novel. I expected it to be a novella, but its action developed spontaneously.

As for the title, *The Executioner's Block* seems to fit the content of the book perfectly. The block is not only a scaffold where a person is executed. It so happens that man finds himself on the scaffold many times in his life. Sometimes he is morally executed, though still physically alive; in other cases he faces no such danger. In this particular case the title is to show the amount of suffering one has to take for his faith and to make people think whether there is a reason to walk all the way to Calvary.

*R:* Your novel begins with a tragic note—the terrible episode of *saiga* [antelope] slaughter in a unique wildlife preserve and the story of the family of wolves. Your readers take it for granted that you write about nature and animals. Suffice it to recall Gulsary the trotter, Karanar the camel and Arkbara and Tashchainar, the wolves, all portrayed with a profound psychological and emotional insight . . .

*A:* Kirghiz folklore has a fabulous animal world because it was created by herdsmen. A hero is bound to have a horse. Thus many episodes of the great *Manas* are linked with horses, for instance, equestrian competitions and the feelings aroused by them in the hero—the passions consuming the contestants and the crazy clashes among them. We have another amazing and very ancient epic, *Kodjodjash,* which goes back to the time when man, nature and animals were not yet alienated. I used one of its ideas in my story *Farewell, Gulsary!* The epic goes that a young and brave hunter, Kodjodjash, who provides for a whole tribe, is out to kill all the wild goats in the mountains. A Lame Gray She-Goat pleads with him to spare her and her Old Gray He-Goat because if they die there will be no one to continue their kin. The Gray She-Goat unintentionally hurts the hero's feelings by saying that if he does not leave them alone he will be severely punished. The hunter laughs at her. Indeed, what can the goats do to him? Then he kills the Old Gray He-Goat. Though lame, the Gray She-Goat manages to escape. Chasing her, the hunter finds himself among such steep rocks that he feels he is trapped for good—there is no way leading up or down. "This is your punishment," says the Old Gray She-Goat, leaving him to die.

That was how the ancients imagined an ecological catastrophe. Of course, the epic can be interpreted in many ways. I understand it as follows: man warning his like against an unreasonable, waste-

ful attitude towards Nature, particularly against exterminating animals even if it seemed necessary. As early as this, human beings were capable of seeing an ecological problem that is now so acute.

I admit I am partial to animals, but my sympathy is rooted in early Kirghiz folklore.

*R:* In your earlier works, Tanabai and his horse Gulsary, and Yedigei and his camel Karanar are inseparable friends who share all the trials that befall them. As for *The Executioner's Block,* the wolves therein are more righteous than the people with their vile motives. Thus during the antelope hunt in the Moyunkum Savannah, "the she-wolf, Akbara, saw a human face suddenly coming out of the apocalyptic silence. The face was so close and stood out so clearly that the animal shuddered . . ."

*A:* The animal saw a beast.

*R:* Akbara, a predator, saw a beast in human shape and found it frightening. The wolf family depicted in the book is put between two human worlds. One is a world of humans like Avdi with his benevolent attitude towards living things and his striving to understand why humans are corruptible, and to help them less by preaching than by personal example. Avdi is a man yearning for love ("It could never occur to me that thinking about my beloved and writing letters to her would become the essence of my life . . . I will love as long as I live . . ."). The other world is that of inhumans, that is, "the junta," as a gang of alcoholics and bums called themselves. They were responsible for the Moyunkum saiga slaughter and lived according to the same cruel, beastly laws as another part of their community, a group of young marijuana traffickers. There is nothing human about "the junta," whereas the two wolves are attached to each other and devoted to their offspring. The contrast struck me as soon as I started reading the book. This effect is enhanced by the episode at the Pushkin Museum where Avdi listens to the Bulgarian choral recital shortly before leaving for the steppes with a group of marijuana addicts: "What a contrast these divine hymns present to the vicious craving of railway terminal bums like Utyug for the bad smoke of a bad grass!" I don't know whether you created such a contrast between the first and the second part of the novel deliberately, but I saw it at once.

*A:* This contrast also continues into the next part and the finale of the novel. In the third sequence the dramatic story of the wolf family continues to link the two worlds. It is related to the stories of two families whose heads are two opposites, the shepherd Boston Urkunchiev and his enemy, Bazarbai Noigutov. They

are antipodes in the same way as Avdi Kallistratov and Grinshan, the chief of the addict gang, who seeks to convert the young souls into his "faith" by claiming that "everything in the world can be bought and sold," that "money is everything."

*R:* Why did you become involved in youth problems?

*A:* Chiefly because they have sharpened so much. I remember going to college in the immediate postwar years, when we had just started falling back into peacetime routine. Those were hard times, but our young souls, often naive and childish, were inspired by the spirit of collectivism and international solidarity, probably because the war had been our common trial.

*R:* You showed that very well in your *Early Cranes.*

*A.* I wouldn't like to be young now, though.

*R:* You mean young in years?

*A:* Exactly. Anyway, I can't possibly be, can I? But I wouldn't like to be a young man now because I feel ill at ease among our youngsters.

I think we are, to a great extent, to blame for what is going on in the young, immature part of our society. Now that we have achieved prosperity (we no longer have starving, homeless or impoverished people), the inadequate moral upbringing and lack of inner culture in our younger generation have resulted in consumerist attitudes and sponging. It's happened because material well-being has become all important and the spiritual potential of society is close to nil.

I am inclined to blame this on the family and especially the schools. Our schools are not able to keep pace with the times and the controversial developments we are going through. Not long ago I talked to a man keen on school reform, though not the one we are trying to push through. His is an entirely different idea—that of a radical reform that would turn school into an instrument of our children's harmonious development, education and upbringing. He set the main emphasis on early involvement of children of two or three in work they are physically capable of doing, as well as in literature, music and painting. He wants to set up small groups of children, with an individual approach to every child.

*R:* Who is going to cover such tremendous expenses?

*A:* I think it's preposterous to grudge expenses for education! Huge classes, even if taught by perfect teachers, bring down the quality of education and do moral damage to the pupils. Indeed, it would be ridiculous to think that one teacher can give an adequate education to fifty children at once!

Speaking at the recent congress of Kirghizia's Communist Party, I drew the attention of its delegates to the problem and illustrated my opinion with an example of Frunze's best school, No. 5. I emphasized that for many years the republic's planning committee, the ministry of education, and Frunze's municipal council, as well as the respective departments of the Party's Central Committee, had failed to cope with the problems facing that and other schools where the number of pupils had kept growing beyond reason, tripling within the same walls and budget. Our society should go out of its way to increase education funds even at the expense of other sectors. Only then could we find ourselves in a position to speak about high technology and discover a multitude of young talents with great intellectual, moral and cultural potential.

The Komsomol (YCL), too, had better change its routine. It seems to me that it has grown too conventional and passive in its activity. Where is its sparkling enthusiasm, organizing ability and fraternal spirit that used to inspire us? I think the Komsomol will have to undergo a radical reform in order to enhance its impact on the younger generation and play an important part in its life—as important as it used to play when I was young. My generation sincerely called their youth "Komsomol" and they meant it.

I think that the "goodies" turned out by pragmatic art also have a stupefying effect on our younger generation.

*R:* In this connection Valentin Rasputin remarked that had Pushkin been brought up on the songs of a popular pop star instead of the tales of his nanny, Arina Rodionovna, he would have grown up a D'Anthes*, not Pushkin. It is, of course, a figure of speech, an exaggeration on the part of the writer worried about the spiritual aspect of our younger generation's life and wanting to have the issue broadly discussed. What matters is not so much the stuff turned out by a trendy pop star but the fact that a multitude of cheap and banal songs, meant only to entertain and distract but incapable of encouraging creative pursuits or awakening noble feelings, have filled the youngsters' leisure time.

*A:* And what about Western movies with their violence, pursuits, fighting and murder? We adults are prone to take them with a grain of salt, but children and teenagers, inexperienced and immature, accept them literally and even try to imitate them.

Only we ourselves can bring up our children and mold their souls. We cannot afford to rest on our laurels and vainly hope that

*The French dilettante who killed Pushkin in a duel.

nothing awful will happen to them. We have no right to think that cruel, heartless and contemptuous as they might be today, we can easily reform them tomorrow. We won't, for it is extremely difficult to reform a spent youth. Moreover, it is naive to believe that by granting mass high school education to all we can resolve all problems. On the contrary, the higher our children's educational standard, the harder it will be for us to bring them up well. We have to think of more subtle and flexible ways to succeed.

*R:* What facts did you have at your disposal when elaborating the marijuana line of the plot?

*A:* It was by no means accidental that I turned to this problem. A bitter letter written recently by a mother of two drug-addicted sons to the weekly *Literaturnaya Gazeta* emphasized once again the acuteness of the drug problem. For many years we pretended it was nonexistent, but I kept wondering why some of our young people became addicts, what personal or family reasons caused that social disease, why it could take us unaware and what kind of social problem was responsible for the youngster's introduction to drugs.

I believe we adults can find answers to these questions and must take responsibility for their solution.

One day I came out to meet a train at a remote steppe station. As the train was several hours late, I paced up and down the platform to kill time. A local policeman who had recognized me invited me to wait inside the police station. When I entered I saw, behind bars in one corner of the premises, a group of youngsters removed from freight trains and detained by the police for possessing and transporting wild marijuana, and the material evidence of their offense—packs, bags and suitcases full of the grass—were in another corner. I felt sick, for I knew I could not help them: they had already been charged with illegal possession of narcotics. The letter written by the poor mother of two addicts to *Literaturnaya Gazeta* stirred my memories and brought back all I had thought and felt at the time, including my decision to write at least a documentary report on the matter. Indeed, those young men had committed a criminal offense and deserved punishment, but I knew they needed help badly, and it was up to us to help them. Such wretches are in need of treatment, and our task is to look for efficient ways of dealing with the problem.

*R:* May I ask you what have you been reading these days?

*A:* I was so busy writing *The Executioner's Block* that I could hardly read anything, but I've just started reading a new book by Ales Adamovich, *Nothing More Important*. Though its subtitle is

"Modern Problems of Wartime Prose," as far as I can judge by the few pages I've read, its scope is broader than that. The author is concerned with the most topical issues of the literary genre and also with all the major problems of literature and life at large. In this new book he dwells upon ethics and insists that humanism is our only way out.

We have always been against a general, non-social interpretation of humanism. But, in this nuclear age, when our civilization faces a real threat of self-destruction, we have developed a broader outlook. We need a universal approach to problems common to all humankind. Now that the world has reached a very high level of scientific and technological development and faces dramatic controversies, our moral progress has started lagging behind the world's intellectual and material achievements. Therefore, it is extremely important that literature and other arts prove that no convictions, ideas or goals may justify our self-destruction. We artists will have to drive it home to everyone that the main commandment of our day is "Peace, and nothing but peace!"

Louis Aragon referred to Chinghiz Aitmatov's love story, *Djamilya*, as the world's best. He translated it into French.

# 27

## RESPONSE TO OUR WORD

*A Dialogue with N. Anastasiev*

*NA:* Dear Chinghiz Torekulovich, some ten years ago you said: "Sheker is . . . my principal capital while 'many other things' are resources drawn from elsewhere. It is possible that these resources will with time become predominant in my work."

Was that a premonition of a new novel? I cannot say that Sheker is not, figuratively speaking, seen in *The Executioner's Block;* it is seen quite well, especially in the concluding part. There is no doubt, however, that the author is no longer satisfied with his "own little postage stamp of native soil," to use Faulkner's oft-quoted words, which was quite enough for you as the author of *The White Steamship* to say nothing of earlier works. In the novel *A Day That Lasts Longer Than an Age,* for instance, the mighty Karanar only provided the necessary "black light" for events taking place at a remote railway junction. In *The Executioner's Block,* Karanar's brothers are the image of the wolves which symbolically organize the entire narrative space, locating the action in immeasurable depths of time. Then comes Avdi Kallistratov who is a stranger in these parts (though a "stranger" whose homeland is the whole world). Finally, there is an evangelical legend, no less.

Why this change? Whence this need for universal symbols that humankind has known for two thousand years? And what has made you in the end return to your native parts?

*Ch.A.:* I am somewhat baffled by the fact that dust has hardly settled on the road when talk begins about the rider and his horse, about river crossings, obstacles and other hardships involved in a

long ride. The novel, *The Executioner's Block,* so far exists only in a magazine version.

I shall begin with Sheker. My relations with it or, more correctly, my sensations, have been changing with time. At first it was only the place of birth, childhood, the home, the mountains and the people who surround me. Then it was something bigger. The roots, the blood made themselves felt. I covered the forty kilometers between Jambul, where I then studied, and Sheker, either on foot or by stealing a ride on a freight train. For the young people of today a trip of forty kilometers is a forty-minute bus ride. But at that time . . . I can still remember in every detail how impatient I was to reach my village, which was big enough by the standards of the day.

Cherished images and faces sparkle through the veil layer of the years, with the sounds and smoky smells that make up my recollection of a life, with much that was good but also with its dark moments. One's gaze becomes sterner and one judges the past and oneself more harshly. But it is also a pity that not only what should go has gone or is going but also what deserves to be preserved and what our hasty civilization is sometimes thoughtlessly inclined to reject. In short, had there been no Sheker I would hardly have been able to write something coherent and different from others, who also had their Shekers only under different names.

And yet. . . Had I remained in Sheker for good I would have kept writing only new versions of *Jamilya* and *Farewell, Gulsary!*

*NA:* Are these books only the past for you?

*Ch.A:* Oh, no, I value them even now as the beginning of my writing experience. While Sheker is constantly living in me and will most likely always continue to do so, time flows on, and it is impossible to remain static. Were Faulkner, who is so frequently quoted these days, still alive he would also feel that his native Yoknapatawpha was becoming too small for him. The fact is that life is developing in our time in such a way that lines of interaction become stronger and more important. Everything depends on everybody, regardless of his or her occupation. More than that, there is one common danger looming over all of us. We curse it and try to prevent it (and I believe that these efforts are not in vain), but still the threat is with us, above us. And it also unites us. Here is a horrible paradox of our time—people are united by the fear of a common calamity. That is why a sense of the world's division is constantly diminishing in the artist's mind, being replaced by the desire to depict universal trends.

Some say that in the past writers managed quite well without

the constants of life, while today. . . This is a strange and absurd idea. I am not, of course, denying the significance of a writer's purposeful effort. Yet I still believe that the striving for generalization is explained by the inner course of history, the action of the forces it has awakened and the specific feature of the historical moment. When a person finds himself in a new sociopsychological atmosphere he seeks to understand everything preceding the present-day world and maybe to look ahead. Otherwise it is impossible to know what is going on today.

Many of my generation, including myself, are quite critical of young people. The bulk of them lead an inert, listless life, or so it seems to me, and many are too egocentric. There is no visible core in their life. The other day I had a talk with my second son, Askar, who works at our embassy in Ankara. I asked him what his college classmates, language students, were doing. He said that none of them was particularly prominent: some were in the diplomatic service, others worked as translators or journalists or guides. I thought that he misunderstood me, thinking I was speaking of their posts. I did not mean that, for a person can prove his worth in any job. But I wanted to know who of the people that had grown up together with him became a personality, a leader if you wish. These were not idle questions, because we are getting older and the burden of life is being shifted to the younger people's shoulders. I explained my thought but the answer was the same; my son did not see such a leader, at least among people he knew, for everybody seemed satisfied with a quiet life. I suspect that his circle is no exception.

This is saddening. What we now have is the handiwork of those before us and of ourselves. Though I cannot say that we have achieved much, we have, however, something to show. But who will come next? Will they stand up to it? Do they realize what load they will have to carry?

Avdi Kallistratov in *The Executioner's Block* is my attempt to answer this question and partially, if you wish, a challenge to the frequent inertia of the young. Of course, he is vastly different from the positive hero our literature used to portray. Who was that former hero? A leader charged with energy, a commissar, an individual with immense will, tackling the urgent tasks of the day. He made the revolution, fought on civil-war fronts, fulfilled five-year plans, and repelled the invasion of fascism at enormous cost. He lived during hard times, something we seldom speak about frankly enough. The principle of glasnost should cover the Stalin personality cult. That's my firm conviction. By keeping silent about our negative heritage we drive the disease inside instead of

getting rid of the burden of the past. But to return to the traditional literary hero. This is a wonderful Soviet man and we still regard him as an example of courage and selflessness although the revolution and the war are now history. If we ask ourselves what was most developed in him, the answer will be class awareness, which was justified.

*NA:* Excuse me for interrupting. I can't understand why you speak in the third person. And again: didn't your character Tanabai Bakasov have a developed class consciousness? Or are you giving him up now?

*Ch.A.:* Why are you so categorical? Let us first of all sort things out. Class consciousness does not at all consist in ardently proclaiming one's class views and declaring that the class principle is above all. I assume that the concept of class consciousness can develop and become richer, as everything in the world does. Tanabai Bakasov and Yedigei Zhangeldin, not to speak of heroes from still more remote days, were people of their time. Much water has run under the bridges since then. To overemphasize class sentiment, as some critics do, to reduce everything to class, always to find a class position in any action, is today an anachronism and vulgarization, interfering with freedom of thinking. The modern world cannot be seen in terms of black and white. People like Avdi Kallistratov are being formed, or I wish them to be formed, in the new generation. They are enriched by their fathers' experience, and have gone through much themselves. They are working out another, broader outlook. This is, of course, my vision, with which many may not agree. I may be accused of eroding class boundaries. I am even prepared to admit that this is not a typical hero in terms of the language of literary critics. But I hope very much that many young people who have met him will recognize him as one of them, at least listen to his words and agree that he is a product of our time.

Avdi is not satisfied with what lies nearby, he does not feel comfortable inside his own shell and wants to be an heir to the entire human culture. Hence the use of Christian symbols, which have not lost their significance to this day. It is not for me to say, of course, how convincing and real he is. Much may not have come off; I feel I may have not quite coped with the tasks I set myself. There is no limit to perfection! But one thing I am quite sure of is that we must break away from a narrow politicization that shackles us. We must seek to reveal the ties that link people.

*NA:* But, as the first reaction has shown, Avdi's figure can be perceived in a way opposite to what you expected. The question is: was there a necessity for the episodes on the Arch Terrace of Herod's palace? Is it not a case of exerting excessive pressure on

the reader and of certain mistrust of our associative ability to grasp the linking ties of the novel? In fact it was before the action was shifted back two thousand years ago that I realized whom we had under the name of Avdi Kallistratov and that Pontius Pilate who washed his hands and thus entered history was reflected in the figure of Grishan who calmly watched the principal hero being killed.

*Ch.A:* It never came into my head that someone's imagination might draw an analogy between Grishan and the Roman procurator. Who is Grishan? A punk playing a cynical superman, especially in comparison, if we must have one, with Pontius Pilate whose figure is prominent, significant and, as portrayed by Mikhail Bulgakov, even tragic. This, incidentally, is a great merit of Bulgakov's version. Now for artistic necessity. There is nothing surprising that ties were felt at an early stage, as you say. It is characteristic of European mentality, whenever it has to deal with the concepts of morals, ethics, good and evil, inevitably to turn to the person who, according to legend, was crucified at Calvary. That marked the beginning of things real; all that happened before, all events and people, even real ones, are conceived as legend, as myth. But legendary Christ, who was quite possibly invented by people, stands in our imagination as a living figure who taught the greatest and unforgettable lesson of courage and nobility. There were after him great figures in all walks of life, there were martyrs, righteous men and, on the contrary, anti-Christs. For some peoples the adherents of Christian teaching captured human minds and souls, but their names were neglected by history with the passage of time. Christ outlived them all, because he appeals equally to people of the 2nd and of the 20th centuries. That is why, I repeat, the readers' analogies are quite natural, and although I did not seek specially to evoke them I certainly presumed that they would appear.

Calvary has no parallel, belonging equally to all people and all times. Just as there is no monopoly on the history of Buddha; once a connecting link is found, Buddha can figure in modern European writing as an image of universal significance.

*NA:* Chinghiz Torekulovich, have mercy; you anticipate my favorite questions. Hardly had I begun, following you, in speaking about Bulgakov. . . .

*Ch.A.:* . . .And also Dostoyevsky, Faulkner, Thomas Mann. . . There is a custom nowadays to draw a file of names, like hurdles on a racing track. . .

*NA:* . . .About them also, to be sure. . . But be that as it may, these hurdles are classic.

*Ch.A.:* As I was saying, there is a common heritage. It is

another matter that people of different generations seek to address this past for their own purposes. As a person living at the end of the second millennium and one who has grown up under socialism, I had my own reason to turn to this common source. We have promised the world a great deal, we promised to make man free and happy as never before. Well, we have done something, we have freed man from humiliating dependence and put an end to the evil of direct exploitation. In any case we are on the way towards this. But we are much, very much short, of all that we promised. Therefore there is a need to compare achievements with shortcomings, self-image with the image others hold of us and with an image that has reached us from the dawn of civilization.

*NA:* And yet you could not be unaware, whether you wish it or not, that the reader of *The Executioner's Block* would immediately recall *The Master and Margarita.* This is not a matter of making use of truly common heritage, the Gospel texts, but also of common points in the works.

*Ch.A.:* Of course I was aware, as I was aware how risky it was to follow the path once walked by such a wonderful beloved writer as Mikhail Bulgakov. Still, I could not give up what was needed by me, precisely me. Besides, I wished to rearrange the pieces on the board. I think that Pilate in *The Master and Margarita* somewhat overshadows Joshua, who in a way seems one-dimensional against the background of the procurator's intensely strained personality. And Bulgakov might have intended just this. I had to return Jesus to the focus, to make him the essential, central figure.

*NA:* So there was even a kind of polemic, conscious or hidden, with Bulgakov?

*Ch.A.:* Not conscious, in any case. I simply wrote as the artistic logic of the narrative prompted me.

*NA:* Well then, if not Bulgakov, was there a polemic with Faulkner?

*Ch.A.:* What do you imply?

*NA: A Fable,* of course. The same general plan: modernity in form, as Faulkner said, "It is every person's individual code of behavior by means of which he makes himself a better human being than his nature wants to be." The same transparency of coincidences: Faulkner's Corporal, a veteran of the First World War, who persuaded the soldiers to stop fratricidal slaughter and paid for it with his life, is as much Christ as Avdi Kallistratov. And lastly, the coincidence of the main ideas. One of *A Fable*'s heroes says that man is above the image of sinless morality which he created himself with his imagination. Which means that a contem-

porary man has no one on whom to shift the burden of responsibility for the present and the future. Avdi utters similar words: "Every man is himself the judge and the creator of his every day."

*Ch.A.:* All this is very interesting, to be sure, but the fact is that I have not yet read *A Fable*.

*NA:* Indeed? Well, this makes the spontaneous dialogue still more interesting and instructive, at least for a literary critic. But perhaps it was inevitable, since we are speaking about 20th century writers. But let me turn to a problem of a purely creative nature.

*A Fable* was to Faulkner (as, it seems to me, *The Executioner's Block* is in many respects to you) an unusual work, for in it he went away from his native parts and immediately ran into great difficulty. He had to keep rewriting. Did this happen to you when writing *The Executioner's Block?*

*Ch.A.:* I can't say for sure, it's difficult to say. I had to rewrite, of course, and more than once. First came the story of Pontius Pilate and Christ, then I felt it needed material support. Then there came the wolves, dashing around and weaving the narrative fabric. Then Avdi entered this pattern. Each writer faces his own problems and difficulties and each copes with them in his own way. But there is something else (and the awareness of this also comes with time and experience): every concrete episode must fit in a general plan and be related to one's entire experience, even if the latter is not embodied in art. Unless an artist has cultivated what I would call a sense of the universal scale of events, he may be able to write a work beautifully on a certain subject (it may be a story, a novella or a novel), but he can hardly count on reaching for a broad human circle and runs the risk of isolation.

*NA:* It is said somewhere in *The Executioner's Block:* "There can be no isolated human destinies. . ." It seems to me that, while discoursing on diverse subjects, you always view world literature as a process in which everything is tied in, where different trends as well as individual writers' destinies enter a dialogue no matter what form it may assume, either of mutual attraction or of mutual repulsion. (For nonacceptance is also a variety of connection.) This is, to use your own expression, an "assemblage of world literature." What figure in the history of literature has been to you what Tolstoy was to Sholokhov and Rolland, Goethe to Thomas Mann, Balzac to Proust?

*Ch.A.:* Let us begin with the very concept of "assemblage" (literally "cathedral"). I understand the word to denote not only a collective but also an individual structure. Every writing person is possessed by the desire to build his own cathedral. For Tolstoy it

was the *War and Peace* epic. While fully realizing that I may become a target for scoffers and that even well-wishers may suspect me of immodesty, I still must say as I have said before: If you do not aim to equal Pushkin or Tolstoy when you sit down to write, you should not bother to begin at all. A writer should always aspire for more than he is able to do. But to return to the cathedral. Yes, everyone starts building it alone. Not from scratch, to be sure, for other cathedrals have already been built nearby, which must be what you call the architectural climate of world culture. In truth, the metaphor itself does not seem accurate enough to me. Culture, like the earth itself, has different climatic zones, which change with time, even if not as quickly as in nature. Our country has its own climate, which is now favorable for creative work. It is favorable not in the sense that there are no problems and everything goes without a hitch. No, of course not. Simply put, we now have a time when one can write what and how one deems necessary, even if it may seem unusual. One can write and be printed. It may happen, however, at another place and at another time, that the socio-political conditions take a different turn. Distant and recent history remind us of this far too vividly. By the time the Nazi dictatorship was established in Germany, Thomas Mann was already of world reknown. Also on his side was what he called the spirit of Liebeck, a powerful humanistic tradition capable, it seemed, of opposing any, even the most ferocious aggression. But I am sure that even that outstanding talent would have pined away had he remained in Nazi-ravaged Germany. Then we would have been unable to read either *Joseph and His Brothers* or *Doctor Faustus.* In short, culture needs a nutritive social environment. Sometimes whole regions suspend their aesthetic sphere of activity. Take, for instance, Indonesia, where prolonged social disturbance seems to impede the growth of literature.

*NA:* Perhaps we simply do not know what is going on there.

*Ch.A.:* We would know at least by hearsay if anything were stirring. If not directly, then via Britain or Holland, which have ties of long standing with that Asian country. However, I am far from establishing direct dependencies between these phenomena. Dostoyevsky the artist is to me an unattainable and inscrutable summit, while Dostoyevsky the thinker is pain and despair. I am afraid that we often underestimate this astounding complexity in our assessments. From absolute negation we swing to the opposite—blind acceptance, when Dostoyevsky is pronounced to be almost a prophet of revolution. I accept and understand the thesis that Dostoyevsky paved the way for the 20th century novel. But I

entirely refuse to understand those who regard him as a preacher of socialist ideas.

*NA:* This is in fact a very special subject. Let us return to our theme, which is the reciprocal influence between the author's self-awareness and a given cultural atmosphere.

*Ch.A.:* But have I really diverged from it? I seem to have been speaking about nothing else. The fact is that everything is so intermixed that some situations are explainable while others cannot be explained at all. During my last trip to France I asked my friends there whether they had a figure equal to Aragon. No, they said, we cannot see one.

*NA:* Incidentally, your friends' opinion is supported by Graham Greene, who has long been living in France. He said during his recent visit to Moscow that France has had no novel since the generation of Mauriac, Malraux, Sartre and Camus.

*Ch.A.:* There you are. And who can say why? Let us not forget the self-generating power of talent. Besides there are unpredictable phenomena and accidents. It well may be that growing there, in France, or some other place, is an unknown genius. And who can calculate how many splendid writers and scientists, whose names have remained unknown, perished during the last war?

*NA:* So, one should understand you as saying that history, let us say, literary history, is only chaos, a freak of chance?

*Ch.A.:* Not at all. There is, of course, a certain general state of world culture as there is objective movement. The same applies to the state of the earth's atmosphere. But these are abstract concepts, except among scientists. For example, here, in Frunze the autumn is excellent, there is no wind, it is dry and the temperature is about 25 degrees C. But the radio tells us it's raining and cold in Moscow now. There may be some interdependence, but are you personally affected in any way by the Moscow weather? I am not. This may be a poor comparison, but still. . . . Now what is in fact European literature? There are Danish, Swedish and Dutch literatures. But I am almost unfamiliar with them. Why is that? Because of the lack of translators or the laziness of book publishers? Or is it simply because nothing significant is taking place there today? It may be that television has to a certain extent ousted the printed word. Or perhaps more or less quiet living in the region is not very conducive to the development of literature, at least a literature that would find a response not only at home. I don't know. But I know that Scandinavian literature has practically no part in my spiritual and creative experience while Spanish, En-

glish and German literatures somehow participate in it to a greater extent. There is nothing offensive in this for anyone, for it is a matter of selective perception.

*NA:* It may be so, all right. But isn't there, except for what you said, any regularity that lends itself to rational explanation? Or is this also a mysterious matter? Like any reader of yours I think I understand your affinity with the Latin American novel. But you said during an interview that you were staggered by reading *Steppewolf* though, as I understand it, Hermann Hesse's prose—intellectually refined, stylistically and geometrically streamlined—. . .should be far distant from you. So it is not simply a matter of style?

*Ch.A.* "Staggered" is probably too strong a word. But it did affect me a great deal. When one is reading one does not think whether the subject is near or far. You have a text before you. If it is written by a strong and masterly hand, if there is not a single unnecessary word, if the tension of the narrative speech is constantly felt, if the dialogue flows naturally, how can all this leave one unmoved? Such, I think, is Hermann Hesse's prose. Besides, one may be particularly impressed by what one is incapable of by virtue of the nature of one's own thinking and writing. This is a case of different objectives and different means of attaining them. I must have been attracted by contrast.

*NA:* Well then, Hesse attracted you by contrast; the same must be true of Hemingway—you once said you admired his ability to build a dialogue. But it was, on the contrary, due to similarity in the case of Gabriel García Márquez.

*Ch.A.:* When it is repeated so often that there is similarity it must be there, for the onlooker sees most of the game. But I myself feel a great difference. While García Márquez freely transfers mythical situations and mythical heroes into modern conditions, I leave them in their natural environment, trying to achieve maximum authenticity in presenting a legend.

*NA:* I hope we shall have another chance to talk about mythology. Now I would like to point out something else. Certain links are established between creative individuals, even if in an unpredictable and irrational manner. An influence can be either a benefit or a burden. How independent are national literatures, including those with newly acquired alphabets? How can the temptation to seek national insulation be evaded while preserving and defending national identity?

*Ch.A.:* There are no absolute concepts here and everything is changing and fluid. Take for instance Chinese literature. I am

almost unfamiliar with it. Is this literature so peculiar that the mind of a modern person educated on other samples of culture is simply unable to comprehend so highly specific an artistic language? And will it be only our grandchildren who will be able to develop such a capacity? I don't know.

I have said more than once and repeat again that literature does not exist outside a certain national environment. It is linked in certain ways with a definite language and its development, with a specific ethnic medium and culture. It is impossible to "jump out" of them, no matter how great the will and wish to do so. But on the other side there is the danger of self-isolation. It is necessary to be understood not only by your own people but by "others" as well.

Here numerous subjective and objective factors operate. Take García Márquez. Can we say that the literature of the little country of Colombia has become a part of world consciousness? I don't think so. But the author of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* has become a part of it because he is a remarkably talented artist, a writer with an extremely powerful imagination.

There are also examples to the contrary. Georgian literature does not seem to have produced a figure equal in stature to Garcıa Márquez. But the objective situation has made its exceptionally generous and original imagery find response far beyond the republic (which is no bigger than Colombia). Sometimes national traditions with no such originality enter the circle of world culture; this happens because they seek encounters. This is like being in a forest—where you will find nothing if you stay put, and can at best admire your own reflection in a brook should one run nearby. But if you move and change direction, you will remain yourself and meet other wayfarers. You will part ways with some of them with nothing to remind you of the meeting, while you may have something to talk about with others. In any case there is no development without movement. And no discoveries. They are made on the way and become the common property of culture.

This is the supreme task. But there remains, of course, the immediate, direct task of communing with your own people, of their spiritual education, of responding to their pains, needs and joys. This task cannot be neglected, nor can one limit oneself to it.

*NA:* Everything seems intermingled here, so that in some cases the situation takes shape spontaneously while in others it is a result of purposeful efforts. In some cases a dialogue beyond one's own national environment simply cannot be started because of various subjective or objective circumstances. Isn't there purposeful cultivation of local and only local traditions? For instance, here in your Central Asia?

*Ch.A.:* This is a complex question. The whole of Central Asia, you see, is a vast region whose culture has had two branches from ancient times: a settled, urban culture, and that of the nomad cattle breeders. Each had traditions of its own. But times have changed. We used to have wonderful bards, the last of whom was the poet, composer and improvising singer Toktogul. He was a poet of genius. But he least of all thought of being heard beyond Kirghizia's boundaries; he was quite content to know that he was heard with rapt attention by his fellow countrymen. Today, as we have already noted, everything has intermingled, so who will strive to remain at home all his life? Even the smallest poet wants to be known, to be translated into other languages.

*NA:* Should not this be attributed to petty vanity and conceit?

*Ch.A.* To some extent. But if we discard the sometimes unjustified personal ambitions, this aspiration is in principle fruitful and inevitable. In order to implement it, to make your book not a collection of printed characters in a foreign language but a part of the spiritual experience of a multilingual readership, it is essential to think in terms of universal life while speaking about your own in your own way. But we have already talked of this.

*NA:* One question that suggests itself here is of the progress of literature and its criteria. Is progress in literature linked with progress in its perception? And since the normal existence of literature requires, as a minimum, two sides, the writer and the reader, I permit myself to inquire whether you have an ideal image of your books' future customer.

*Ch.A.:* I give no thought to the readers when I am writing, but once a book has been published I anxiously await their reaction. Right now I am receiving the first comments on *The Executioner's Block,* some of which are very interesting and are at times quite unexpected outcroppings of the human soul. The inexhaustible, boundless and unpredictable human nature is amazing.

This should not be understood to mean that I advocate an elite literature. One must have a right to experiment, and experiment should be facilitated. This can best be illustrated by the theater. In the West there are many small theaters. But we have huge halls seating thousands of spectators. This determines certain aesthetics. I have nothing against academic theaters, which are doing great and necessary work. Yet there must be experimental stages designed for a certain kind of spectator, because the circle of theater-goers, like that of readers, cannot be homogeneous.

*NA:* As you know, more and more theaters of the studio type are now appearing in Moscow.

*Ch.A.:* That's fine. The situation in literature is in principle the

same. I do not suggest, of course, that editions should be artificially diminished, but we should take account of the stratification of the readership.

*NA:* You said that you are not bothered by the contraction of your readership. Well and good. But aren't you worried by the mounting predominance of mass literature? Are you really indifferent to what may arbitrarily be called the Pikul phenomenon? [Pikul is an author of best sellers on historical subjects.]

*Ch.A.* While I do not envy this kind of popularity, I find nothing reprehensible in the wish to be popular, for, after all, everyone wants to be heard by as many as possible. But there are certain criteria in this area too. A serious writer will never allow himself to win the favor of his readers at any price. It is true that solitude is a disaster for a writing man and to court it is absurd. But to bow and scrape before the reader is humiliating. A writer should not imitate the pop singer who begins to clap his hands in order to warm up his audience. This pitiful, shameful behavior is found in literature.

I am struck by the plethora of all kinds of adventure stories. A major change must have occurred in this area. In my childhood people avoided talk of spies. Now it's the other way round, as if a dam has burst. But have these fiction and films produced anything serious and significant? I think not. But I am afraid we have to put up with mass literature. It cannot be abolished by any decree or by articles in the literary publications. Demand creates supply. Had the reader and spectator not cared for all these mysteries, violent intrigues, flight and pursuit, and so forth, and had not people been prepared to spend hours watching all these breathtaking games, probably there would not have been this kind of writing.

*NA:* Should we really reconcile ourselves to it? Really do nothing? Have we nothing to fight with? Not along administrative lines, of course. . .

*Ch.A.:* Perhaps I didn't put it accurately enough. Of course we must fight. But this is a long, laborious and painstaking task. The inculcation of proper aesthetic tastes should begin early, in school, even in kindergarten, so that a person entering adulthood should be able to distinguish an original work from cheap imitation.

Take, for example, the so-called Americanization of daily life: hamburgers, etc., when everybody gets the same things in the shortest possible time, top-level service, and so on. All this is reflected in the state of affairs in art. It gives rise to certain expectations and affects the assimilation of spiritual (or pseudo-

spiritual) food. Western Europe is now groaning, suffocating under the pressure of American cinema. Even France. Even Italy with its strong cinema traditions. I fear lest this wave should reach us. I must confess to thinking that should we open the gates for the American film industry we would have to close our own. Here I am a resolute supporter of barriers. Otherwise we shall be swept away, because we are in this regard even more defenseless than Western Europe. We have not yet raised our film art to a sufficiently high ideological, artistic and even technical level to be able successfully to oppose such powerful pressure.

This also concerns literature to a certain extent. What will happen if we begin today to translate all kinds of comics? Will we be strong enough to stand up to them? I am not sure. Everywhere one hears that our reader has matured. This is most probably true. But I am not sure, not by a long shot, that we in our mass have developed an immunity to potboilers, cheap stuff. There is too much interest in all kinds of consumer goods. They become even more popular when they are manufactured with the competence and skill in which Americans have no equal. This makes me really concerned about the future of literature.

It may sound surprising but in order to oppose this plague and affirm our genuine spiritual values we must raise labor productivity and the level of our daily life. . .

*NA:* Wait a minute, I want to make sure I understand you correctly. Is our mass literature or cinema a kind of compensation for being unable to make good tape recorders?

*Ch.A:* I am simply trying to explain why we are in difficulty. We have to begin from rock-bottom in order to enable values to acquire free breath, to shine as genuine values should. Imagine that someone goes to the theater and is lucky enough to see a good play, to spend two or three hours in a highly artistic atmosphere. Is he able properly to savor it when in daily life he constantly comes across minor troubles that need never have existed?

*NA:* Suppose we raise the standard of daily life to a very great height. Excellent. You are satisfied, I am satisfied, everybody is happy. Will this be directly followed by an uplift of the spirit, of culture and, accordingly, of art appreciation?

*Ch.A.:* I admit that everything I have said is open to question. Besides there is naturally no direct dependence. And still I am sure that a person freed from unnecessary worry is better prepared to meet genuine culture than a man pestered by daily troubles. Will it benefit our culture and art if we do not make things better and quicker? Nothing of the kind. Say what you will,

a person dressed in a good suit, chosen without any difficulty from among a lot of other suits in the shop, is likely to read or to watch a film or play differently from one who had to stand in lines for a poorly sewn suit and buy whatever shoes one could get so as not to go barefoot. One may discourse as long as one wants to, and in general correctly, on the fact that our cultural values are permeated with the spirit of humanism and that we have a wonderful and ideologically inspired art; these words simply do not reach people whose minds are busy with something quite different. I do not have the courage to throw a stone at those who are called philistines.

There is no need to despise what are known as the exterior aspects of life. In the case of classical music, for instance, the quality of recording and packaging are also important.

*NA:* As for that, any rubbish can be well recorded. Take for instance the film *Jaws*, which was made with superb special effects.

*Ch.A:* That is why I say that while adopting the material culture of high-quality daily life, we should keep away from all that. It should be admitted, however, that such stuff reaches us through various chinks, ousting whatever real art is also created in the West. This is where talents should compete.

*NA:* We have spoken about the intricate system of interdependence between spiritual and material cultures. We have also talked about the relations between the writer and the reader. Do you think that criticism plays a role in this process? Does literature need criticism in general? Some say that writers themselves are the best critics since professional critics either strive to sting as painfully as possible or are captured by group prejudices and therefore do not pass objective judgment. What is your opinion on this score? Do you need criticism?

*Ch.A.:* There is no need to prove that criticism is an independent branch of creative activity, side by side with literature, with fiction writing. They are inseparable companions. I personally would take it very badly, would simply feel a void in my soul if, for instance, *The Executioner's Block* evoked no critical response. Criticism can approve or debunk. That criticism which propagandizes mass culture is one thing, while criticism dealing with genuine literature is another. Nor is the latter monolithic. Some critics concentrate on universal human values, while others are above all concerned with the national spirit of culture. In any case criticism is absolutely necessary for the existence and development of imaginative literature.

*NA:* I now want to ask you the following. When Hemingway

was awarded the Nobel Prize, he pointed out in his speech that the life of a writer who has attained prominence is one of solitude. When he ends his solitude he grows as a public figure, and this is often detrimental to his creative work. When another American writer, Henry Thoreau, who lived in the last century, was asked whether he travelled much, he said that he did, in Concord and its environs. I don't know whether you have visited that small town in New England, on the Atlantic coast of the United States. How many people live in Sheker?

*Ch.A.:* Something like three thousand.

*NA:* Well, Concord of the 19th century was probably even smaller. If we take into account the fact that Thoreau left the town for one and a half years and built a hut on the shore of Walden Pond (his famous book was the result of that hermitage) we may conclude that even little Concord was too crowded for Thoreau. Like many other contemporary writers you travel all over the world and speak at various congresses; you are a deputy to the Supreme Soviet, the head of your republic's Writers' Union and a member of the leadership of the USSR Writers' Union; then there are various committees, councils and so on. I realize that you must have a public temperament. But do you need all that as a writer? Does the experience of this life spent in public add anything to your creative work?

*Ch.A.:* You know, even if I were freed from all this and were told: just write, nothing else is required of you, I would all the same continue to travel, meet people and make speeches. I don't know how else one can get better acquainted with and understand the world. There may be people capable of writing 365 days a year. It's hard to imagine, but there may be. The fact is that I am not one of them. Among the thousands of people I meet I am sure to find dozens of interesting, remarkable persons.

Of course, everybody lives his own life, everybody pursues his own interests.

*NA:* In his youth, Hemingway travelled throughout Europe as a newspaper correspondent; when he was already a famous writer he spoke at a Paris congress in defense of culture, and went to Spain, then fighting fascism. Without all that there would have been none of his best works, except for a few excellent short stories and *The Green Hills of Africa.*

*Ch.A.:* There you are. And after the last war, Hemingway's talent began to decline. Wasn't this because he really attempted to find solitude?

*NA:* Now you are really exaggerating. It is true that Hemingway wrote his best books during the '20s and '30s, but one

outstanding work, *The Old Man and the Sea,* appeared after the war.

*Ch.A.:* Yes, it is a splendid short novel.

NA: Do you read anything except fiction?

*Ch.A.:* The fact is that fiction has been in the background with me in recent years.

*NA:* And what is in the foreground?

*Ch.A.:* Various books. Histories, biographies, autobiographies. Scientific works, especially those connected with the Renaissance. The two volumes of *Myths of the Peoples of the World* are now on my desk. I have become very selective about fiction. If I open a book and my interest is not aroused after the first five or six pages, I simply put it away. It was quite different before.

*NA:* Now for my last question. Are you writing anything or intending to? Some six or seven years ago you mentioned that you were thinking of a book recreating the patriarchal mentality with its joyful and dark aspects. What happened to it?

*Ch.A.:* It is in fact a well so full of water that the bottom cannot yet be seen. Nor is it a subject I would like to discuss now. The first reason, there are a lot of current affairs to be attended to. The second, and most important one, is the awareness that an original conception made public beforehand may prove entirely different from what will be actually written. One thing I am sure of is that I am going to write. And I will have to begin the way I always have—as if there is nothing behind and everything is happening for the first time.

# 28

## THE VALUE OF AN EYE-OPENER

*An interview with Felix Medvedev*

*M:* Chinghiz Torekulovich began to speak about the most important, urgent questions.

*A.* At last we have seen the light, rubbed our eyes open and, looking back, seen the gaping voids. It is fearful to think what would have happened to us had everything remained as before, when real issues were supplanted by ritual verbiage. Until now so much was couched in hackneyed, sickeningly abused interjections about the most advanced society in the world. . . . This sugary self-bewitchment dimmed our vision of real and concrete things; we sought to ignore the fact that the world around us had outrun us in many races. The goal was rendered intangible by the phrase: "The present generation of Soviet people will live under communism. . . " It was sheer profanation, monstrous voluntarism. Our goal, communism, was pushed still farther back. Moreover, many socialist principles were perverted.

*M:* Tell me, why did you decide to launch in *The Executioner's Block* the theme of drug addiction, which until only recently was forbidden for the press, and along with it the problem of man's spiritual bankruptcy? Was this an anticipation of social change?

*A:* Yes, there was probably presentiment. Drug addiction in this case is only a detail. More importantly, in recent years I felt we were enduring an insipid period of history and that a revelation could come at any moment. Could we be so stupid? You must agree that what is taking place now is revelation. . . .

*M:* Chinghiz Torekulovich, when we spoke in January 1984 you said: "Real history is just beginning. Only now will we see

how mature our society is, and to what extent we can consolidate our gains . . . We must triumph and it will be an unparalleled victory." You emphasized these words. I repeat that it was January of 1984, not April of 1985 or 1986.

*A:* You know, I always felt—like many others, perhaps—a tremendous lack of, and at times a complete absence of, democracy. We are still unprepared to accept it fully. Democracy is a profound responsibility that has to be cultivated for generations. There is more to it than the freedom to speak and to publish, which are only external manifestations. Democracy in action is an intricate compound of tolerance and respect reciprocated between people and between social strata. It is a difficult and dramatic formation of new visions of our social destiny.

The democracy we always needed existed mostly only on paper. I believe that the true meaning of socialism is becoming more tangible now. I also think that everything supremely important is attained only through democracy. No matter what a social system may be called, nothing will come of it if it does not provide a basis for the emancipation of the spirit. While happiness may be personal and individual, there is also such a thing as public happiness. Happiness in socialism is possible only when there is complete and clear-cut democracy that permeates all spheres of life.

*M:* We had a similar period in our history after the 20th Party Congress. Literary critics believe those years to be decisive in your creative work, for it was between 1956 and 1963 that you wrote *Tales of the Mountains and Steppes,* which won the Lenin Prize.

*A:* Yes, I am thankful for those years, for living and working at that time. Those were a valuable six or seven years. It was then that a group of writers was formed that is still the leading force of modern writing. It is good that we were young. We were able to preserve our dignity and hope.

Today, I am happy to say, the curtain has risen again, and while the former opening produced only a vague sense of hope, now there is a vivid awareness of the inevitability of changes. I expect volcanic eruptions in literature and art. A certain void is apparent in the work of those who came after Valentin Rasputin (who is now 50). Something has been impeded in Russian as well as non-Russian literature. The potential latent in the formula "and the Word was God" has vanished.

Now, I think, a favorable time has come for major discoveries. It would be natural for a remarkable writer or poet to appear tomor-

row. We won't mind being pushed aside by that person, for this is something we have long been waiting for.

*M:* To me this process does not seem so easy and painless. The concept of "tomorrow" is likely to be a protracted process where the development of democracy is concerned. Not all men of letters clearly understand or are sympathetic to what is going on in the streets. It was no accident that Mikhail Gorbachev mentioned the "settling of accounts," which has become a common expression and which applies to matters far removed from genuine art.

*A:* This is pitiful and contemptible. Using old-boy networks to square accounts is fruitless, and experience shows it never leads anywhere. Vain and haughty people thirsting for fame are repulsive, especially if they are writers. They poison their own lives and those of others. Hatred drains the spirit. This is what we have to think about. I know young people whose souls are devastated by hatred and envy. I also know people who have lived a long life but failed to acquire wisdom and are therefore prepared to do anything to avenge their chronic emptiness. We all should understand that life is short. The longer we live,the more chance of our realizing that happiness is what matters, not self-assertion at any price. A person poisoned with hatred, envy and malice becomes a slave of the night, not the creator of light.

*M:* Is it true that your father, Torekul Aitmatov, and his brothers, village activists Ryskulbek and Alemkul, were subject to repressions in 1937? I learned about this only recently.

*A:* Yes, it is true. This happened half a century ago but the memory still rankles. I never mention this in public; this is in fact the first time I have spoken of it. I do not want it to be misinterpreted by some people. But even if it had not happened I would have opposed the personality cult with all my might. Even today many people fail to understand what immense damage it inflicted on Soviet society. The personality cult dealt an irreparable and disfiguring blow to the image of socialism. We were caught for much too long in the trap of the authoritarian regime established by Stalin and it is only now, almost thirty-five years after he died, that we have begun to free ourselves. This is not a simple task, for there are still many adherents of the past. They do not wish to see anything and do not seek change. If we succeed in putting an end once and for all to this legacy of the past, that will be a great achievement of perestroikà, politically and spiritually.

*M:* As I listened to him, I realized that Aitmatov is clearly passionately involved in the processes going on in the country. Perestroika is close to his heart, as a son of his homeland, and he

has clearly thought and felt deeply about many problems. A statesman, Hero of Socialist Labor and a deputy to the country's highest governing body, the writer speaks with understanding about concrete issues and about what should be changed for the better. In this discussion he spoke of individual cases as well as making broad generalizations, analyzing conclusions in an inspired and enthusiastic manner. I did not interrupt him and the interview became for a while a passionate soliloquy on the most urgent problems of our times.

*A:* Here is a paradox I have been thinking about: while we have been building socialism and giving preference to everything collective, through collectivism we have lost much of what concerns the individual, the personality, one's self, as it were. We must proceed from the premise that if there is self, the rest is the world. How keenly is this basic loss of awareness felt today! It affects the quality of work, interpersonal relations, and the perceived loss of human potential.

We have not defined the value of the individual. We keep ignoring these problems, waving them aside and disregarding them. But they have been accumulating and reaching a crucial point; they have affected people's attitude to the state, the stance of the state, and people's attitude to the collective. All this demands what we now call "perestroika." This itself is a large concept. Some people think that perestroika concerns only organizational matters, the reshuffling of personnel; others believe that it applies only to technological, technocratic problems. I regard it as the most crucial interface between public and social affairs and the individual. I am not a sociologist, so I approach these problems empirically. I think this should certainly be the province of qualified specialists. We need no more dogmas and predetermined formulas. We have already had enough. We must put an end to levelling, depersonalization and standardization in the name of the collective, which have a deadly effect.

We are people and our whole life, regardless of our occupation, is made up of the events of everyday life and of our daily cares. A part of society produces goods, another part consumes them, the sphere of services being in between. Everything is nationalized. In days gone by, a self-reliant subsistence economy could be based on private property and land. Now the state takes care of everything. This approach may be a manifestation of socialist principles, but it is disappointing that we have not been able to properly organize many spheres of our life. Take housing for instance.

Before, a man tended his own dwelling, sought to maintain it

properly and improve it and therefore took care of every nail, but today everybody expects a comfortable flat gratis. Funds are allocated to the building industry for this purpose. This situation may make life easier but we have failed to make our homes cozy, to cherish them. Look at what is going on in house entrances, in elevators and on stair landings! What have we made of our houses? High-rise barracks? We seem to be punishing ourselves. But why are we thus wreaking vengeance on ourselves or, more exactly, on the state that has undertaken this unparalleled obligation? Is there some truth, after all, in the philistine saying: Don't do good and you won't incur bad? We have not learned to live in multistory apartment houses or to properly care for our dwellings. We build our homes badly. The initial design is faulty, not properly thought out, and even then many of its requirements are not observed in the course of construction. Things are often done in a slipshod way, in order to complete a project as soon as possible.

The new housing developments in Moscow are the best our building industry can offer. I am afraid that the younger generation does not even suspect that people are supposed to take care of their dwellings all their lives. Young people presume that everything in the world comes readymade. All they have to do is ask for the keys!

The second problem is transportation. It has been nagging us year after year. To begin with aviation: I have visited other countries and used airplanes of different air companies so I know well what good aviation is. Let me say that I see no progress in our air service. Today it is a crowded and nerve-wracking system of moving people in very uncomfortable conditions. The aircraft fleet is being renewed very slowly while the number of passengers is growing enormously. Domodedovo airport, for instance, reminds one in summer of the unorganized evacuation of refugees during a natural calamity or war. Our airports, as well as our railway stations have become multitudinous and chaotic gatherings of passengers. Where are the signs of a high civilization? This often causes great anxiety, because all of us come in touch with aviation. Aviation is indispensable today, essential to cope with the strenuous rate of present-day life. And it is this vitally important link that is slackening.

The condition of municipal transport is beneath all criticism. The subways, buses, trolley-buses and trams are overloaded in Moscow and everywhere else. Transportation facilities lag behind mounting passenger traffic. Transport-induced stress affects people's capacity for work, their moods and their relationships.

Every day of our life we find ways of adjusting to all kinds of shortcomings, humble ourselves, are irritated but learn to accept and tolerate things as they are and reconcile ourselves to what seems to be our inescapable lot. But why?

I am not grumbling. I seek improvement. What is the way out? Many people believe that the labor process should be better organized. This is important but is not the main thing. The question is where to get the funds necessary for overcoming the difficulties, for winning a higher living standard? Shall we raise wages in the services industry? That is impossible. Can we raise the prices of foodstuffs and services? We probably can, but then wages and salaries will have to be increased. It's a vicious circle, which we must break at any cost. Every generation has its life span, and everyone should live in decent conditions.

Though everybody has a living wage, work and a roof over their heads, and people live without the fear of unemployment and sudden social upheavals, that is not the point. The point is that our advanced social system, boundless expanses and vast resources, and our achievements in science and engineering could place us at the head of all humanity.

There is no war, thank God. But why then do so many problems remain unresolved year after year and even become aggravated? Probably because we give little thought to them. And when we do think and speak about them the result is not always effective. Why? Each of us is a dogmatist of sorts, each to one extent or another "shell shocked" by the Stalinist epoch and unused to thinking and acting without orders from above.

Many of my colleagues attempt to find answers in a scholastic process of political reasoning. It is easy to state that socialism has potential advantages, but much more difficult to prove them in practice. How can this be done? Not many can answer this question. How good it would be if our scientists, theoreticians, practical workers, sociologists and economists could overcome the inertia of demagogy and conservatism . . .

I think that restructuring should solve many of the problems I have mentioned. In any case I want to believe that it will help solve them.

*M:* We spoke about the June 1987 plenary meeting of the CPSU Central Committee, which was the most important event of recent times.

*A:* The plenary meeting of the CPSU Central Committee must radically change many of our notions about the future of the

economy, of our whole life. It was a revolutionary plenary meeting. Both the report and the participants' speeches heralded the victory of restructuring over the obstacles that have blocked transformation and progress for so many years.

*M:* Chinghiz Torekulovich thought for a while.

*A:* I can tell you something if you wish: my reason tells me that we have not yet reached such a high level of production that the funds required for defense do not detract from our living standards. This is what my reason tells me, but my heart . . . Aren't we all today asking the same banal question: how could it happen that a half-trained amateur pilot, a youngster, managed despite everything to penetrate all the barriers of our protective systems and calmly landed, as if on a deserted island, on Red Square, the holy of holies of our Motherland? The guilty have been fired. But still . . .

I think that much could be achieved if we could solve foreign policy problems. If the world achieved agreement, the endless arms race would become senseless. We have been telling one another for a long time: we must not disturb and bully one another or provoke a duel because the world stands on the verge of a nuclear apocalypse. But what is the use of these mutual admonitions and warnings? We wish so much that our peaceful initiatives prompted by the logic of life would elicit a favorable response from the opposite side.

During the visit of U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz to Moscow, I was one of the writers who met him. He was very much interested in how we understand glasnost here. He was very excited by this, for the old stereotype of relations with our country no longer applied. Shultz asked us many questions about glasnost and perestroika and inquired whether we believed in the prospects that have opened . . .

The best outcome for the 20th century would consist in the West and the East finding a common language and eliminating forever the possibility of resolving ideological contradictions by military means.

If a statesman of Shultz's caliber hesitated, even for only a minute, a moment, and pondered the truth of our concepts about the future of peace on Earth, then every single opportunity should be used in order to agree not to fight each other.

*M:* My talk with Chinghiz Aitmatov began in Moscow, was continued in a plane, then in Frunze, and then on the shore of Lake Issyk-Kul, in the small village of Cholpon Ata, the writer's "abode of labor and inspiration," which stands about 300 kilom-

eters from the capital of Kirghizia. He invited *Ogonyok's* photographer Dmitri Baltermants and me to what was neither a pleasure trip nor just another visit to his native parts.

Many people are familiar with Aitmatov's peacemaking activity. He is the founder and organizer of the Issyk-Kul Forum. Prominent representatives of world culture—scientists, politicians, writers and artists—gathered at the shore of Lake Issyk-Kul in October 1986. They came to the USSR as Aitmatov's personal guests and on their return to Moscow they were received by Mikhail Gorbachev.

Thus began another movement of intellectuals in the struggle for peace, for humanity's survival, for saving civilization. Before and after the formation of the Issyk-Kul Forum, Chinghiz Aitmatov travelled extensively, organizing this initiative.

This time the writer and peace champion of world renown played host to John Roberts, Director of the Great Britain–USSR Association, and John le Carre, a popular writer in the West and one whose novels are well-known in our country. Aitmatov met them in Moscow and took them on a tour of Kirghizia.

I had a chance to assess the significance of Aitmatov's initiative. It was quite evident that a writer's personal participation in informal contacts at diverse levels exemplifies the role of the individual in the world.

I told Chinghiz Torekulovich that we had first exaggerated and then had begun almost to deny altogether the role of the individual in history. But today we realize that we can succeed in rebuilding all aspects of our life, from economy to culture, only by relying on the energy, initiative and talent of outstanding personalities, of talented people.

*A:* Such as Dr. Svyatoslav Fyodorov, who is, incidentally, a member of *Ogonyok*'s editorial board. I have known him for a long time. He is much written about today and his organization of work is cited as exemplary, but he was just as outstanding when silence greeted his struggle to raise basic questions about the organization of work, about how production should be organized under socialism, and his notion that any undertaking should be treated as a highly personal matter. This is particularly true of medicine.

Speaking about restructuring means speaking about crusaders and talented people, organizers. But we should not forget the powerful factor of self-interest. Many of our ideas will remain on paper until we establish a framework of personal recognition everywhere. Yes, what is required is personal interest, which we

were wrong to reject right after the Revolution when we relied wholly on collective psychology. Honest personal interest leads to creativity. Too often we argue that someone else should do something, not us. This starts a chain reaction of retrogression and stagnation.

*M:* Many people believe that restructuring has had an insignificant effect in the provinces, in areas far removed from the center. Are the results of restructuring noticeable, for instance, in Kirghizia?

*A:* They certainly are. People are thinking in a different way and have become more demanding. Gone are the lack of accountability and the indifference.

*M:* Can you mention what may be called an ordinary man who has emerged in the course of restructuring as a real reorganizer of life?

*A:* Yes, I can. It is shepherd Tashtanbek Akmatov. Though he is by no means alone, Akmatov is a striking example of a shepherd-thinker, a shepherd-manager. He has thought out everything and anticipated any eventuality. He is advancing towards his goal well equipped with knowledge and experience. He is certainly an exemplary farm leader.

*M:* The root of the word glasnost is *glas,* or voice, and the vanguard role today belongs above all to writers, poets and journalists, who can voice, express, publish their opinion.

*A:* Of course, for writers glasnost is as necessary as air. But I understand glasnost not only as a voice. I have my own interpretation. Glasnost is a component of freedom, which also entails registering the opinions and wishes of the majority. These are the beginnings of freedom. Further development, or improvement in productivity, is now impossible without greater freedom. Journalism is certainly a first sounding board of developments and makes the first attempt to influence events. Books and literary works fulfill their own functions, and their possibilities are quite different from those of journalism. There are times when journalism plays a more important role than literature, and this is such a period now. People queue for newspapers early in the morning. The responsibility of journalism grows during such a social upsurge. We usually understand responsibility as juridical, as Party or service duty, i.e. as a restriction or prohibition. I understand responsibility in a different way, as a responsibility for shaping people's opinion.

Progress means overcoming difficulties. Progress is impossible if things are hushed up or if there are taboos. It is better to grapple

openly with difficulties. This leads to great social understanding.

I think that if journalism depicts the times in a clear and truthful manner, this will help us find our role in restructuring.

*M:* Please tell me, frankly, Chinghiz Torekulovich, did you consider yourself "glasny" (outspoken) even before the epoch of glasnost?

*A:* Yes, more or less . . .

*M:* Why?

*A:* It always seemed to me that I was basically honest in approaching everything I wrote about. But now it seems that I could have introduced new scenes into the novels *A Day That Lasts Longer Than an Age* and *The Executioner's Block.* Yes, I could have renewed, sharpened or strengthened certain things. But I won't do this. Let everything remain the way it was written. Let me repeat: we writers now have a wonderful opportunity to write what is necessary and to speak of what we want to write, without looking over our shoulders.

*M:* Don't you think that too many critical articles and generalizations have been appearing in our press, or is it normal for our time? Isn't there a distortion of sorts?

*A:* Society must have a sense of self-irony and a sense of self-criticism. Quite recently satire was treated as sacrilege. There was no self-criticism and vanity fed on servility. We formally acknowledged the importance of deeds. But reliance on empty declarations brought us to a point when falling labor productivity began to have catastrophic effects on our economy. That is why it is always better to tell the truth ourselves . . .

*M:* Can you imagine the process of democratization being reversed?

*A:* What, back to the personality cult? To diseases concealed within society? To the violation of elementary human rights? To stagnation? Never! This must never happen. The guarantee of social development is onward movement. If we stop we shall again begin to move in the opposite direction. Isn't that so?

*M:* Yes, a stop will emasculate everything.

*A:* And that will be a catastrophe for everyone. I don't think that there are any social groups interested in a return to the past. Even the bureaucracy that we revile as the root of all evil is not interested in that. After all it is not its own enemy . . .

*M:* Do you think there can be limits to democracy?

*A:* Limits to democracy? Freedom and discipline. Paradoxical as it may sound I cannot conceive freedom without discipline, and discipline without freedom. These two concepts are neces-

sary to each other to the extent to which they are different. Freedom is as wonderful as it is dangerous when it is abused. When there is no freedom, it is demanded; when there is freedom, it can be abused.

*M:* Doesn't the existence and functioning of the "Memory" (Pamyat) organization amount to "excessive democracy"? The fact is that "Memory" was conceived as a useful organization but has become a tool of chauvinists and anti-Semites.

*A:* Where there is excess, it is no longer democracy.

I think that we have not yet learned to use the fruits of democracy. For instance, we have introduced competitive elections for leading executives and managers. Naturally, only one candidate is elected. But I have observed that the candidate who has not been elected begins immediately to be treated as an inferior character. How can that be? A person who only a moment ago could have become the head of an enterprise is suddenly discarded and his or her prestige reduced to zero. Is this just? Candidates who have failed in elections are worthy people capable of effectively contributing to restructuring. They should be usefully employed, not ignored as if they had no prestige and background.

*M:* You said you had a presentiment of certain changes in society before you sat down to write *The Executioner's Block.* What presentiment do you have now and is it connected with your new work? What will it be about, if it isn't a secret?

*A:* Any foreknowledge I have is vague but it is there. Perhaps it consists in the wish that we should stand the test we are undergoing now. This is a great self-trial. It is a trial by the future. I know what it will cost us to pass it. It is not easy to give up customary and unpunished self-delusion, falsity and mendacity. Impartial criticism and the censure of shortcomings involve strain, and we have avoided self-criticism for a very long time.

If I write anything now (and I have already begun a new novel), it will be connected with this presentiment . . .

*M:* Relations between the peoples of our country were only recently among many other spheres prohibited for discussion. We were afraid to speak of a subject that seemed reprehensible to some. But participants in the recent plenary meeting of the Union of Soviet Writers frankly spoke on the nationalities question. They pointed out with alarm, for instance, that the number of schools and other educational institutions in which instruction is done in indigenous languages is diminishing in the republics. They also spoke of so-called provincial nationalism.

What do you think about all this?

*A:* This is a vitally important question for us, a multinational

country, a question that brooks no uncertainty or delay. Lately we have been writing and speaking less about the real (rather than merely imaginary) merits of socialism. I cannot agree with this. The advantages of socialism have been demonstrated to the whole world. This cannot be denied. I include among these merits above all equal opportunities for national economic and cultural development.

The very concept of "man" has risen under socialism and grown to a new and generally recognized social level. During the years of Soviet power we have eliminated class domination. People have become aware of their rights, their significance. And it gives me the greatest joy, and grounds for being proud, as we all should be proud, that we have been tirelessly working for seventy years so that the peoples of our vast multinational state, without exception, should be aware of their full human value. When I go abroad I always say with pride that we Soviet people have learned to lead a human life.

Of course, we often take the word "internationalism" in vain. We much cherish this term. It is possible to build new factories, attain new heights in production and achieve much in the material sphere, but it is very difficult to restore the inner unity of our peoples once it is broken. That is why every nation and ethnic group inhabiting the Soviet Union must revere the fraternity of the peoples.

There has been some friction in the nationalities question in recent years. This is explained by the fact that the current international process is unfolding along with a growing national self-awareness. This process seems contradictory. But under socialism, international unity grows along with national awareness. And we must maintain this process.

So-called national problems to a great extent mirror daily life. You and I were at a specialized school in Frunze when it was visited by British writers. We saw the innocent faces of children eager to learn from new people—in particular, about Britain. We saw the trust in their beautiful eyes, but I shuddered to think what a tragedy it would be if harmful seeds were sown in the minds of children and they were told a distorted truth. And I thought of the efforts that must be made not to confuse the rising generation with controversial national issues both outside and within the USSR. It is very easy to mislead them, to break the fine threads linking people of different nationalities.

Internationalist education is among the most complex of problems because we have burdened it with incantations and slogans. We load little children, school pupils who yearn to learn every-

thing from adults, with phraseological ballast, without imparting its significance or teaching them the vital necessity of internationalism with the help of concrete examples that concern them, their families, the environment, a town, a region, the republic. What our inept educators do is not durable and intelligible to children. There are reports, salutes and high-flown phrases instead of a vivid living example.

Now to writing. There is no such thing as supranational literature. Any word comes from some national source. Yes, one person may know several languages, and some know only their own tongue. Even before our times peoples, countries and regions communicated, influencing and enriching one another. But our time and our country are in a very special situation in this respect. We have been the proving ground of a great experiment and we have done well. I consider this experiment one of the main achievements of our society compared to what is going on in the world. Wherever you look—at the Middle East, Africa, Europe—there are unsolved problems driven to a dead end: terrorism, assassinations, capture of hostages, animosity and hatred. . . .

We have been spared that, thank God, and we have built the world's biggest multinational state. What of China or India, some may ask. But the peoples of these countries are close to each other culturally, ethnically and economically. We had to unite the most diverse linguistic cultures and peoples living at most different stages of social development. We are now "evening out" the potentialities of various peoples and nations. However, it would be naive to assume that the question has been settled. National self-awareness is growing along with its development. We should not fear that. What we should fear is unnecessary and harmful interpretations of this growth, paranoia and selfish attempts by certain persons to aggravate the situation in order to curry favor.

Language policy is one of the main aspects of internationalism. Whereas we discussed this obliquely in the past, it should now be emphasized that bilingualism is the best path of development for several regions, the Turkestan area first of all. The fact that all the nations living there are closely related is attributed, among other things, to the role of the Russian language and culture. Our life is so intertwined economically and culturally that it is pointless to limit ourselves to a single national language both within the region and within the national republics. On the other hand, rejection of the national languages and adoption of only one language (in this case Russian) would be an unsatisfactory and biased settlement of the question.

Historical experience argues for bilingualism, which to a cer-

tain degree has already been put to test. Equality of the indigenous language with Russian should be constitutionally guaranteed. "Fully equal" means that a local language has all necessary facilities for its practice and development, alongside Russian. This includes, of course, the press, radio, television and information. But much more important is the root question: where and at what age does language skill originate and take shape? It is necessary to organize kindergartens and schools where the national language is basic and where Russian would also be taught. Bilingualism will ensure the preservation and development of the national language as well as knowledge of Russian. Such a process is feasible for both children and teachers. Bilingualism is a new historical phenomenon, a cultural attainment of the end of the 20th century, potentiating the spiritual development of our peoples. Just as a bird has two wings, every person in the national republics will have the mastery of two languages: his or her mother tongue and Russian, which is common for the whole country.

But I must repeat that this is a complex question. Many dogmatic people do not want to accept or understand this, neither in the republics nor in Moscow. Unfortunately there is a tendency among minority nations to denigrate themselves. I call this national nihilism. This phenomenon is as reactionary as nationalism itself. And since national nihilism is not mentioned in the press, is not condemned or censured in any way, some people think that they are playing an acceptable no-risk game. Some of these "players" assume the halo of "super-internationalists" in pursuance of their own selfish aims.

The sensible settlement of this question consists in combining languages and in establishing what I would call the the protocol of internationalism. Just as there is protocol in diplomatic relations, stipulating what should take place, the protocol of internationalism should make legislative provision—in official circulars, in the methodology of education and upbringing, and in social mores—for the legal equality, the equal value and importance of each language. This protocol is to ensure equality in issues big and small. Today we do not observe this anywhere. In some republics one cannot find Russian inscriptions while in others it is just as difficult to find national ones.

I believe that all the problems and complexities of national relations should be treated in a normal, tolerant manner, without hastening to brand any issue or action as a manifestation of nationalism. Some leading local officials do not make speeches in their native language for fear of being accused of nationalism. But

the important thing is obviously not in what language you are speaking but what you are saying, what your idea and your message is . . .

Everybody understand this. But the '30s, the Stalin years, are still under our skin, so each seeks safety above all . . .

*M:* I have heard the expression "national bar." The idea is that each republic has writers who cannot clear the "bar" marking a certain national level. The readers accept such a writer as a prophet in his own country. Neither the writer nor his readers seek wider horizons. They treasure above all what is near and dear to them. Even if it is not great, it is their own.

*A:* These criteria are imposed artificially. If there are any such barriers I am sure that young forces will arrive who will step over them.

*M:* Chinghiz Torekulovich, why did you begin to write in two languages?

*A:* There are several reasons. At first, writing in Russian was prompted by a subconscious instinct of self-preservation. The narrowness and aggressiveness of local criticism and its criteria can make things very difficult for an author. Labels are stuck and unjust criticism begins. Moscow literary circles are broader and their views are more advanced.

So I began with Moscow editorial offices. The initial impulse was to get established in the center.

*M:* But it seems to me that the Kirghiz reader should understand your works more deeply and keenly because everything there is near and familiar to him.

*A:* The ordinary, decent, honest Kirghiz reader is exactly the same as the Russian reader. He, too, likes books written with feeling and skill. I am aware of that and I trust both Kirghiz and Russian readers. But there are also pseudo-literary circles that strive to make an immediate negative appraisal, often with a political brand. By publishing my works in Moscow, I avoided such pitfalls.

*M:* Chinghiz Torekulovich, don't you think that some of your works were written in their time on the spur of the moment and have not stood the test of time?

*A:* I have to admit that my journalistic pieces, speeches and interviews were written on the spur of the moment. There's no denying that. But I realize to the extent of my possibilities that even in journalism one had to keep one's stuff warm as long as possible. So I tried to aim "for longer."

*M:* How long can a literary work live?

*A:* Now this is a very complex question. I don't think anyone

can predict which works will endure. Each has its own fate, just like any writer. At the same time there are general laws of art, literature and culture. There are the laws of a given historical formation. A new attempt at assessing the meaning of literature was made in our time. Everything was tested by what we called the method of socialist realism. I am not against the term, for what matters is the essence, not the term. One may speak of socialist realism, critical realism, magic realism, etc. The important thing is for a work of art to be full-blooded. But how a given novel, poem or drama comes into being and what its fate will be, cannot be predicted by anyone.

I do not join in pompous statements and jubilant declarations to the effect that we have opened a new era of socialist realism, that all of our literature and culture is unique and original. This is not so. Yes, we have made a profound attempt to change the essence and purpose of art. I think that there are stages when art may be designed for certain sections of society, certain classes, a particular cultural stratum—such as a novel that depicts people's everyday life, whose readers are the witnesses of and participants in a given historical fact or episode. But art may rise to another, in my view higher, level when it assumes universal significance. This marks a new horizon when art not only depicts everyday life, what actually takes place, but also resorts to the myth, the legend, to comprehensive philosophic generalizations and major historical excursions, relating them not only to the realities of a certain limited region and a certain environment but attempting to apply them to humanity at large. Perhaps our literature is only now trying to rise to this level. This does not mean that I toss out our entire cultural inheritance; we have had major and interesting achievements. But it should be said honestly and openly that we may have wasted many efforts as well. It is probably wrong to put it that way. What happened in our art was a great experiment, and not all experiments are known to have been crowned with total victory. We have had our share of successes and of setbacks. These setbacks are now part of our experience.

It is difficult to measure something not only subjectively. But it is also true that literature has its time of dying. You can see for yourself that everything is growing obsolete. Much of what we read and admired in the '50s and '60s is gradually passing into oblivion. There have come different readers with a different psychology and life experience. I foresee that these words will cause many rebukes on the part of literary scholars who have researched and painstakingly classified all these phenomena, but the fact is that I am not always impressed by their findings. They

must not take offense. Scientific theories are certainly necessary in order to explain phenomena and processes. But today, it seems to me, literary science should renew, change and restructure itself since we all are going through a process of inner restructuring and renovation. Our literary scientists are in fact the greatest conservatives in our literature.

*M:* Can you name works of literature of the '40s and '50s that have not stood the test of time?

*A:* I think that each of us will draw his own conclusions on this score.

*M:* Then what has not aged?

*A:* Very little. Much has sunk into oblivion through the sieve of time. What has remained? Of course, *And Quiet Flows the Don,* which is a powerful stage in the development of our literature and artistic throught. This is one pole, that of epic literature of the people, which is rooted in life. At the other pole is what I would call the refined—and that is its merit—highly intellectual prose of Bulgakov. One can range between these poles what still commands the reader's interest.

*M:* What about Tvardovsky?

*A:* Judging poetry is more difficult for me. Of course, Tvardovsky is a great master and exponent of profound social sentiments.

*M:* Now Nobokov has entered our literary life and is within the range of readers' perception. How do you assess him?

*A:* I believe that Nabokov and other names that have been returned to the reader are all ears of the same sheaf, the sheaf of Russian literature. Even what Nobokov has written in English belongs to Russian literature. It is another matter that some like him while others don't. The fact is that we are not used to reading this sort of Russian literature. Incidentally, it seems to me that we have invented our own criteria which we apply even though they differ from the general understanding. Hence the numerous complaints against Nobokov. Still I consider him a major literary artist, a highly interesting stylist.

But I like Bunin better; he is closer to me and easier to understand. He is more melodious and I can feel the warmth of his words almost physically. Nabokov is sophisticated. But the one does not cancel or detract from the other. The more varied the palette, the richer the literature. Therefore, I believe that Nobokov has been justly returned to the fold.

*M:* My favorite question. Gauguin said: "In art I am right." Can you say the same about yourself?

*A:* Yes, I can. Not in the sense that I have attained certain

heights in art and all the things I have done are absolute masterpieces, but I am right in that I consider beauty to be just and evil to be abhorrent.

*M:* Do you have your own laws of art?

*A:* I have not thought about what my laws are and how I establish them for myself. But there is the primordial, the universally human understanding of what is good and what is bad.

*M:* Do you have pangs of creation?

*A:* To me these are purely subjective matters. Let us talk of something else.

*M:* Such as?

*A:* I deeply envy Rasputin, the author who is protecting Lake Baikal. That alone is enough to make our descendants forever thankful to him, to say nothing of the fact that he is talented. Unfortunately, I too have two concerns of the same kind. Our Lake Issyk-Kul also demands prompt decisions and considerable efforts because all the water, to the last drop, that should replenish it is being used up for economic purposes. More than 60 rivers and rivulets that used to fall into the lake no longer reach it. The lake is irrevocably shallowing. We are all aware of this, we speak up and write, as I do, for example, but we cannot obviate our own economic needs. No one is personally responsible for the lake, while people do bear personal responsibility for the fulfillment of production plans. Herein lies the contradiction between social needs and ecological problems. As I look at the lake, shallowing and decreasing in size, I recall another lake that is also the people's sanctuary; it is their language. Unless the new powerful rivers of new generations fall into it, unless they manage to master their mother tongue—unless they have the necessary conditions for that, such as children's institutions and schools—we will see a shallowing of the language in a disaster that is not ecological but national. Now that we discuss this out loud, we feel how great the inertia of the past is.

One more problem is that of the Aral Sea. I do not separate the Aral Sea from the Issyk-Kul, just as I do not separate Lake Baikal from these two bodies of water, which are among the biggest in the country, but I am glad to know that Baikal has its protectors and advocates. The cotton monoculture has literally wreaked ecological devastation, since the incessant drive for greater harvests has long been killing the Aral. We are told that much cotton has gone and still goes for export. I understand that the state needs hard currency. Be that as it may, we are faced with an immense ecological catastrophe, for the sea is disappearing; it has already receded more than forty kilometers from its old shores. The area thus formed has become a barren zone, a desert. This in

turn has resulted in climatic changes, social calamities, diseases and poisoned air. In vain have we tried to warn the responsible agencies about many of these things. Kazakh writer Nurpeisov, a prominent prose writer who knows the problems of the Aral Sea well, wrote a long essay about them three years ago. It has not been published to this day. Meanwhile very much has been irreparably lost.

I would also like to say a few words about comments on *The Executioner's Block.* Until recently, responses to writer's works were generated as if on the same wavelength, often following the favorable comments of some critic. Once the signal was sounded, all the organs of the press began to pour out their opinions, down the line.

The polyphony of most diverse voices and discordance of opinion tell us that the time has come for a broad democratic discussion of any work. *The Executioner's Block* seems to be a trial balloon, for it has brought forth a shower of most diverse, sometimes diametrically opposed, readers' comments. I can see, of course, which ones stem from profound understanding and a sincere viewpoint and which are the result of superficial or tendentious judgment. I can see behind all this the most different motives, including malicious intent, but I am also aware of a high level of critical thinking, which suits me professionally, for I am not afraid of broad discussion and of seething passions.

Some readers' letters cannot be read at one go. They carry our pain and our anxieties and make proposals. They speak about what we have not spoken of for many years.

*M:* Chinghiz Torekulovich, the Issyk-Kul Forum continues its work these days. Today its working participants are you, John Roberts and John le Carre. Please, say a few more words about it.

*A:* I regard this trip of ours as an offshoot of the Issyk-Kul Forum. Formerly, official contacts seldom developed into friendly personal relations. This is no longer a mere acquaintance but a process of mutual enrichment, of sharing one another's concerns and anxieties. I am very glad that John le Carre, who had been little known to me as a person, has made interesting observations and expressed views that often coincided with my own. Of course we are neither philosophers nor scientists, but we believe that the state is now so immensely powerful that man is under its full dictation.

The collective and the individual are eternal since man cannot

live by himself. These relations are shaped differently in different socio-economic structures. But nowhere yet has an ideal basis been found for the happiness of each particular individual. This constitutes the cherished goal, the meaning of human existence and the dignity of human life. How can it be attained? An artist is obliged to ponder over it, to propose ways of achieving this goal. Such was the theme of one of my talks with le Carre. The second talk took the form of reflections on the phenomenon of secrecy in our world. Le Carre has written a novel on this subject. What is secrecy? Who needs it? In what proportions? We realize that state secrecy is inevitable as long as different political systems exist. But it is bad when it becomes a thing unto itself. It seems to me we are too fond of classifying things. Some people make a privilege out of secrecy and attain a special position. Besides that, secrecy requires a special mechanism, around which it is necessary to have another mechanism, and so on ad infinitum. This brings forth in any society a certain section of people who pursue their selfish aims and claim certain benefits . . . I am speaking about this honestly and some people who stand guard over secrecy may hate me for this frankness. But it's a great pity that we spend so much energy and funds to ensure secrecy. Not so long ago we classified all our space flights. People were shown from the back and a cosmonaut reported to or said good-bye to a person of whom we could see only a shoulder. But I think that this was a secret kept only from us, while those who wanted to know, did.

*M:* When and where will the next meeting of the Issyk-Kul Forum be held?

*A:* On Peter Ustinov's suggestion, it will be held in Geneva in the autumn [1987]. The founders of the Issyk-Kul Forum have agreed to meet at least once a year. The agenda is open, we do not draft it beforehand and make no attempt to predetermine our conversations. Each of us nurtures his own attitude to the painful problems of our time. And in our discussions we express above all our own selves.

I think that the Issyk-Kul Forum is an example of glasnost. Nobody interferes with us, nobody controls the agenda or what we say. Nor are we told about what not to discuss. This is a great achievement, what I may call one of the new definitions of freedom in our time. Some people talk a great deal about freedom but do nothing. It seems to me that many people simply have no idea what freedom is. Some think that freedom is when everything is permitted and everyone is free to do or say whatever one may take

into one's head. But that is not so. Freedom means the acquisition of new spiritual spaces, a new step in the moral and spiritual perfection of humanity.

My impressions of our trip to Kirghizia were many and varied. Outside of this interview were Chinghiz Aitmatov's interesting reflections on other, no less important problems of our present life and of our recent past. These were talks with a man who analyzes life in his own way, deeply ponders its processes and proposes the ways of its positive restructuring.

I saw Aitmatov surrounded by people who trust and believe in him as a writer and a man, for his life, his creative work and his devotion to social causes reflect the dilemmas of our time and its tragic essence.

I believe that an austere and powerful current of contemporary life should touch each of us, the way it touches Aitmatov's destiny in everything: from philosophical talks with a famous British writer, to fatherly chats with his daughter, Shirin, who accompanied him on the trip, to admiring the splendor of the Zailiyski Ala-Tau mountains, to painful reminiscences on the fate of ancestors at cemeteries we visited; the way it touches what is most important in his life, his books, and what originates in the soul of a writer, the creator of new works.

TIME TO SPEAK

**Chinghiz Aitmatov** is a noted Soviet Kirghiz fiction writer, public activist and organizer of the Issyk-Kul Forum. This collection includes autobiographical essays, articles and speeches on past and contemporary cultural personalities and their works, reflections on the writer's profession and on his own work, as well as on topical subjects: peace, ecology, and perestroika.

"The author [Aitmatov] sees life as a moment of eternity which contains, in condensed form, the history of the human race . . . [He] does not deal with solitude in the existentialist sense; on the contrary, he stresses a steadfast sense of life and human solidarity that wins no matter what. . . . [another] consistent theme is the unbreakable link between man and nature.

"Chinghiz Aitmatov has been one of the first Soviet writers to deal with the tragic conflicts of Soviet times. . . . the *irreconcilable* contradiction between the future which is not ready to take over yet, and the past which has already outlived itself. . . . In his preface to the novel *Farewell, Gyulsary!,* Aitmatov wrote: 'The most tragic contradiction of the late 20th century has to be the infinity of human genius and the impossibility of its realization due to political, ideological and racial barriers. . . .'"*

*Excerpted from an article for Aitmatov's 60th birthday by Evgeni Sidorov, *Soviet Literature*, November 1988

Write for a complete catalog

INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHERS
381 Park Avenue South,
New York, N.Y. 10016


ISBN 0-7178-0669-3