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CHAPTER XIV

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POLONSKY'S PERSECUTION

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POLONSKY'S STORY IS STILL SADDER IN ITS END. HE JOINED the communist party in 1919—the year of hunger and desperate fighting against the White Guards, when Lenin deemed it safe to leave the party doors wide open, for only men ready for martyrdom would enter them. Polonsky found his martyrdom, but not at the hands of the White Guards. He too was appointed in the days of Lenin's influence to cherish with a "fat journal"—for all Russian literary movements must have their fat journals—the natural growth of a new art and poetry. His journal, *Press and Revolution*,\* was founded soon after Voronsky's *Krassnaia Nov*, and was only second to it in the work of literary gardening. He was also curator of the Moscow Museum of Fine Arts.

Polonsky, too, in my opinion, was hampered by the dialectic metaphysics in his search for the true equilibrium of a revolutionary critic-cherisher of art. He was compelled to think up elaborate ingenuities for escaping from its rigidly practical and, as all practical schemes must be, inherently monotonous conception of reality. In his essay on Lenin, to be found elsewhere in this book,

\* The word press in Russian refers to all printed things, and not so exclusively as with us to the newspapers.

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you will see how in order to explain, or even admit into his mind, the simple fact that Lenin loved Beethoven and was moved by Sarah Bernhardt's acting, as any man in full possession of fine faculties must be, he has to invent and piece together a totally scholastic rigamarole about the class character of the "perceptive medium." The artist, he has to explain, may be bourgeois, and the work of art also may be "bourgeois," but at the same time the "perceptive medium"—which means Lenin's brain and nervous system—may be "proletarian." By this circuitous process it becomes possible for a dialectic materialist, without relinquishing his antique doctrine of the "class essence" of everybody, to admit the simple fact that works of art, like circus tricks, or tea, or cigarettes, or games of chess, or mother-love, or swimming, swearing, mountain-climbing, laughing at a joke—have values that appeal to human nature as such, and are not related to the class struggle for the seizure of power. Lenin, for example, loved to hunt—a sport of lords and bourgeois gentlemen. He hunted the same animals the czar did, or their lineal descendants. The animals, you see, were bourgeois, but the shooting medium was proletarian. What dreadful nonsense! And yet Polonsky was destroyed for insisting, even by this circuitous method, upon introducing a contemplation of some honest facts into the "Marxo-Leninist aesthetics."

Here let us read a breezy word from Lenin to Maxim Gorky, which will show what he thought, as a practical man giving advice in a crisis, of the idea of the "class essence" of man with its corollary of the "Bolshevik creative line." He is speaking about science and not art.

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But science, in a lesser way, has suffered much as art has under Stalin. Honest men were ditched, and lackeys and fanatics not ashamed to talk of "Marxist medicine" and "Marxist mathematics," put up high above them. Here is Lenin:

"Dear A. M.,

The news that a 'Bolshevik,' even a former one, is treating you by a new method disturbs me a lot. God save us from comrade-doctors in general, and doctor-Bolsheviks in particular! Believe me, in 99 cases out of 100 the comrade-doctors are 'asses,' as one *good* doctor not long ago told me. I assure you that you must be treated *only* by first class celebrities. To try out on yourself the inventions of a Bolshevik is terrible!!"

How different this sounds from those mediaeval ratiocinations about the "perceptive medium" with which poor Polonsky endeavored to make it conceivable to the Scribes and Pharisees that Lenin when he went to the theatre liked to see a "first-class celebrity"?

Nevertheless Polonsky struggled heroically, and with a fine clear stubbornness of mind, to hold some genuine thought of art and culture up out of this Stalin swamp. And Polonsky too was attacked by Stalin's adjutant, Auerbach, with his RAPP and MAPP and LAPP, his Russian, his Moscow, his Leningrad, his All-Union Association of Proletarian Writers, which had become little but an All-Union Association of Art-Spies and Political

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Dicks and Tattle-Tales. Polonsky too was attacked and falsified and libelled, hammered, haunted, hounded out of office, out of party, out of press, out of all social breathing space, and out of life. I leave to Louis Fischer, who is a staunch supporter of Stalin's regime, the question why Polonsky died. I can not agree that when a man is destroyed by a typhus germ any other "cause of death" can properly be introduced, but as a mode of suggesting the insensate lengths of RAPP's campaigns of persecution this does not pass beyond the facts.

"If RAPP frowned on a writer," he says, "his career was crippled. It persecuted the fellow travelers, or *popuchiki*, with a bitterness and relentlessness which merely indicated that it had no respect for art . . . RAPP drove . . . brilliant literary figures into silence. RAPP critics never cared about artistic quality. They scarcely ever appreciated ability. Their only criterion was politics, and if the novelist deviated a hair's-breadth from the orthodox dotted line, they stamped him a 'counter-revolutionary'—which finished him completely. Hundreds of manuscripts lay imprinted in the state publishing house because RAPP disapproved of their contents and their authors."

"RAPP wished to destroy all that was not 'proletarian literature.' It certainly has plenty of destruction on its conscience. I think it may be blamed for the death of Vyacheslav Polonsky, the most talented and cultured of Soviet critics, whom it expelled

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from the editorship of Novy Mir and hounded until, sick of heart and pained and worried by the injustice of RAPP's attitude toward him, he became an easy victim to the typhus germ."