IURII OLESHA : HIS ENCOUNTER WITH SOVIET CULTURE

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INTRODUCTION

Even on his deathbed Chekhov played at being king. This was in character. His life had been spent hastening about the Soviet landscape, together with an incongruous baggage of crown jewels, looking for his kingdom, the realm where he would be worshiped as lord, where he would play all the roles he had sighted it as a child. Several times that summer he proved to be a failure, but the slightest of failures is a victory.

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INTRODUCTION

Even on his deathbed Olesha played at being king.  

1 This was in character. His life had been spent hastening about the Soviet landscape, together with an incongruous baggage of crown jewels and royal robes, looking for his kingdom, the realm where he would be recognized as lord, where the currency would be metaphors and dreams, where machines would be proscribed by law, and circuses would play all the year round. He declared several times that he had sighted it on the horizon, but it always proved to be a false alarm. So he died still playing the part.

This slightly pathetic figure was the author of a novel of great artistic promise, Envy, 2 and a successful children's story which has remained popular as a book, a play and now a film, to this day. 3 He produced several originally conceived and written short-stories, and was considered a prominent playwright about the turn of the 1930's. Beginning with the early 30's however, his creative output conformed more and more to the socialist realist stereotypes, his creative pivots and thematic concerns became obsessions and slogans, his short-stories and plays turned into statements of government policy or remained forever unfinished.

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1 See S. Bondarin's description in 'Razgovor so sverstnikom', p.182.
2 Zavist', first published in Krasnaia nov', 1927, nos 7,8.
3 Tri tolstiaka (The Three Fat Men) first published by "Zemlia i fabrika", M.-L., 1928.
fragments. After his death in 1960, his 'farewell' book, Not a Day without a Line, was published, artistically scarcely more satisfying than any of his other literary notes and reminiscences of the preceding three decades, but throwing a lot of light on the question of why, to use one of Olesha's own favourite images, the ugly duckling had failed to change into a fully-fledged swan.

This thesis, while determining Olesha's position in Russian literature with regard to themes and style, traces the decline of Olesha's art as he acceded to the demands of socialist realism and battled to find a place for himself in the Soviet society of his era. It attempts to show that the writer's 'cancer of the imagination' and growing inability to write anything but featureless sketches and abject pieces of propaganda for obscure magazines were not attributable to inner elements of sterility alone but also to the official literary policy of the times and the social conditions under which Olesha lived. In order to trace these developments accurately, Olesha's works are examined virtually in chronological order, except where his drama and short stories have been grouped and analysed separately to facilitate comparison and in the case of some of his publicist and literary articles and reminiscences.

This thesis does not encompass any criticism of Olesha's poetry, although some general observations on the nature of the

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verse written under the pseudonym 'Zubilo' are included in Chapter One in order to clarify certain aspects of the author's later development. An attempt is made to cover Olesha's fiction and drama as comprehensively as possible. However, some of Olesha's 'sketches' and 'tales' have not been considered, particularly those of a purely sporting, political or patriotic nature. Similarly, a selection has been made from his film scenarios and numerous articles, interviews and speeches on literary and other matters. Articles published in the Soviet Union and the West dealing with various aspects of Olesha's creative work have been read selectively according to the source and the aspects discussed.

1 For example: 'At the Match' (Turkey v. Dynamo), Vecherniaia Moskva, 19 September 1936; 'They Will Pay Dearly' (protest against fascist submarine attacks on ships of the Republic of Spain), Literaturnaia gazeta, 5 September 1937; 'On Election Day', Literaturnaia gazeta, 15 December 1937.
CHAPTER ONE : THE BEGINNINGS

Although Iurii Olesha made his literary début as a poet, his poetry is not the basis for his literary reputation. Without some conception, however, of the kind of literary activity that occupied Olesha for almost ten years before he turned to prose, it is difficult to understand the dualism that characterized his style and themes in later years.

Whether writing his verse in the lyrical mould (such as his early poems 'In the Steppe' and 'Winter') or in the feuilleton tradition (as in the collections Zubilo and Salute), Olesha exhibited a constant penchant for simplicity in rhyme and rhythm, for brevity, directness and strong, bright, visual images, all of which equally characterized his better prose at a later period.

Olesha not only worked as a feuilletonnist on the railwaymen's journal Gudok but was well-known for his personal appearances at railwaymen's meetings and cultural evenings at which he would frequently compose impromptu witty, well-aimed and resourceful propagandist pieces in verse. Although these extempore compositions have not been recorded, Olesha's propagandist style

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1 Olesha's first published work was the poem 'Klarimonda' (in Iuzhnyi vestnik, Odessa, 1915).
2 'V stepi' and 'Zima', written 1915; see Voprosy literatury, 1965, no. 11, article by E. Rozanova.
3 Published 1924.
4 Saliut, published 1927.
as a feuilletonnist is well enough established for us to surmise that they were distinguished by the same qualities of brevity, colourful imagery, simplicity and even bluntness.

It must not be forgotten that the verses of Olesha-Zubilo, ('zubilo' meaning 'the chisel'), were the work of a political 'agitator' in the revolutionary sense of a writer who, for many years of intense literary activity at a critical time of personal formation as an artist, chose to devote himself and his art to revolutionary ends. Among the poems included in the 1927 collection, *Salute*, (1927 being the same year in which *Envy* appeared), are 'The Red Army', 'The Black Memory of the Tsar', 'Christmas' ('Not a star, but lights at the depot ...'), 'The First Communard', 'In order to Conquer' ('Technology is all-powerful ...') and 'The Proletarian Woman'. I. Ovchinnikov's introduction to this volume is entitled 'Zubilo: Poet of Labour and the Revolution'. In this light the progression from Olesha-Zubilo to Olesha - author of *The Three Fat Men* is possibly unexpected but understandable. The further progression to Olesha - author of *Envy* and the earlier short stories needs further clarification. The well-known Soviet critic K. Zelinskii, in an article called 'Snake in the Grass', expressed the opinion that Olesha and Zubilo 'must merge' - the artist with the forward-looking agitator, the intellectual and his concern for the

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1 'Zmeia v bukete', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 10 September 1931.
individual and his world of feelings with the propagandist for the developing proletarian society. Zelinskii's remark, since it was made in 1931, at a time of conflict and stress for Olesha personally and Soviet literature as a whole, was probably less an over-optimistic prophecy than an urgently suggested solution to Olesha's problems and injunction to like-minded fellow-travellers. Nevertheless, in his first prose work, The Three Fat Men, the dual influence of both the Gudok poet and Olesha - the circus-lover from Odessa, the alchemist of the imagination, can indeed be felt.

This children's story has a rather charming history attached to it. While walking one day along Myl'nikov Lane in Moscow, Iurii Olesha espied a young girl, Valia Griunzeid, sitting in her window, reading Hans Christian Andersen. Olesha's romantic pride was challenged and he vowed to write a fairy-tale that would be even more beautiful than Hans Christian Andersen's and to present the winsome creature in the window with a handsome edition of his story. The story turned out to be The Three Fat Men, which he wrote in 1924, but he did not have the opportunity to present Valia with the finely-bound edition of it that he dreamed of until Envy had already been successfully published some three years later. Since that time this story has enjoyed wide popularity for fairly obvious reasons: it is told in a lively and colourful manner, the characters are romantically appealing, the plot is fanciful and fast-moving, the moral irreproachable. The Three
Fat Men was also performed as a play at MKhAT in 1930 (during Stanislavskii's absence), is still a popular item in the MKhAT repertoire and in 1966 was made into a highly successful film.

It is little wonder that Olesha should have felt impelled to create a stage version of his book for, as he wrote much later,¹ the theatre of his childhood always presented fantasies and adventure stories, which he continued to associate with it, and *The Three Fat Men*, cast in this romantic, fairy-tale mould, is captivating for its pantomime-like qualities of fantasy and adventure. Imagined events are used to illustrate social truths, clowns and magicians, such as Dr Arneri, who in essence is merely a combination of the fabled court magician and the socially integrated intellectual, or the little Suok, who can imitate a doll to perfection, act out against a background of the Middle Ages the modern myth of the working class rising up successfully to fight its oppressors. Although the work is not devoid of realistic elements of the normal kind, its whole charm lies in its tonality of fantasy: there is the fairy-tale town with its Square of the Star (and working-class quarter), the collapsing tower that leaves Dr Arneri uninjured, the pantomime characters of the fat men, always portrayed on the stage as fantastically obese, the dancing instructor Razdvatris ('One-Two-Three'), and the airborne balloon-seller. Elements of adventure of the kind

¹ In 'Zapiski pisatelia', *Iskusstvo i zhizn*', 1938, nos 11-12.
that appeals especially to children have a prominent place in the story: narrow escapes, a secret tunnel, heroic deeds, a dramatic pursuit, a tiger, battles, and, of course, a happy ending, with Suok and Tutti turning out to be brother and sister and other threads of the story tying together conventionally. In fact this enjoyment of action and adventure, with a minimum of characterization, was typical of the times, and not only in the genre of children's fiction. In the early twenties many writers, such as A. Tolstoi, Vs. Ivanov, V. Kataev, M. Shaginian, B. Lavrenev, and M. Bulgakov, turned to the adventure novel, sometimes in allegorical form. No doubt the Civil War was in large part responsible for this interest in the adventure story, as was, on the part of some of these writers, perhaps, the desire to 'venture forth' spreading the Revolution.

Although the humour has been called 'Rabelaisian' for its grotesque comparisons, it is in general of the most elementary kind: mockery of the fat men's obesity, or the dancing instructor's foppishness, laughter at the maid who drops the mousetrap, at the beauty whose teeth fall out and the pompous old man whose wig falls off.

Giraudoux's intriguing approach of interweaving elements of the 'réel' and 'irréel' (which cannot be translated literally into the English 'real' and 'unreal') is basic to the whole

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1 V.V. Badikov, 'Nabliudenie nad iazykom i stilem Iuriia Oleshi', p.140.
concept of The Three Fat Men and constitutes much of the story's originality. L. Ershov remarks that in The Three Fat Men 'the fabulous and the real are mixed ... and the magical-operatic Middle Ages and the ultra-modern are interwoven with particular whimsicality.'

Ershov calls the novel a satire but this description is probably too grandiose. Elements of satire of a gross and familiar kind are involved in the portraits of the three fat oppressors, but the hyperbola and exaggeration of negative characteristics is more simply attributable to the basic conception of the novel as a children's fantasy.

Olesha writes with admirable simplicity, considering the complexity of the plot. His style has grace, clarity and colourfulness. The colours are strong and unsubtle like the costumes and backdrop in a puppet-show, the exterior effects and tactile impressions, as in his later works, forceful and precise. The presence of the railwaymen's poet, chisel in hand, is still strongly felt both in the style and the political import. It is the chiseler's world of things - despite the moral of the story - rather than of people.

The general reception of this work has always been very favourable for obvious reasons. The oppressors of the workers

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1 In Sovetskaia satiricheskaia proza, p.206.
are vanquished, the 'people' are victorious. The issues are all made very clear and simple: the bad men are fat, the oppressed are thin. It is the optimism, the faith in the victory of the 'people', of which critics approve so heartily. Lunacharskii writes perceptively, for example, of the stage version of The Three Fat Men that it is a whole-hearted apologia of the artistic intelligentsia accepting the Revolution.¹

but this does not mean that the novel was found to be politically or socially, and hence artistically, irreproachable in every aspect. Even Lunacharskii modifies his admiration of the stage version of the novel to comment that although Prospero is in 'the front ranks', the other protagonists of the piece, such as Dr Arneri, Tibul and Suok, are 'chudaki' (eccentrics), an 'auxiliary detachment', a 'light cavalry', and everything they do is mixed with adventurism and eccentricity.² 'They are badly connected with the earth', he comments, probably not intending any Dostoevskian implications to his remark.³ Their volatility is beautifully expressed, according to Lunacharskii, in the form of the balloon-seller.⁴ It is difficult to accept Lunacharskii's last conclusion, for the balloon-seller is surely carried aloft by his balloons not in order to symbolize his volatility or

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¹ "Tolstiaki" i "chudaki"", p.467.
² Loc. cit.
³ Loc. cit.
⁴ Loc. cit.; 'letuchest', a word derived from the verb 'to fly'.
'letuchest', but because flying man is a piece of Wellsian fantasy that has great appeal for Olesha. Kavalerov dreamt that he could fly. In a certain sense, Olesha is being reprimanded, not, it should be noted, for the first time, for his failure to provide adequate heroes of the Revolution.

M. Gurvich, in his book In Search of a Hero, charges that 'the author uses the bourgeois social structure as one would a Christmas tree ... to hang all sorts of balloons, stars and flickering lights on it.' Of course this is a valid comment on Olesha's literary approach, if not a valid criticism. Olesha derives a childlike enjoyment from decorating the Christmas tree of his little world and inviting us to admire the effect. 'It is unfortunate', writes Lidia Chukovskaia, 'that the basic theme is smothered by the caprices of the subject-matter ... that the roses of Olesha's style do not bloom on the path of the theme.' Another critic, V. Badikov, in the article already quoted, is of the opinion that only a believer in socialism could write with such 'joie de vivre' as Olesha.

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1 Envy, p.125.
2 V poiskakh geroia, p.78.
3 'Iurii Olesha : Tri tolstiaka', p.47.
4 p.140.
Implicit in Gurvich's and Chukovskaia's brand of criticism, as in Lunacharskii's charge of 'hofmaniada', is, of course, an attack on the lack of social purpose and flights into a world of dreams and whimsicality, which were hardly felt to be in accord with the demands of the times. 'The spectacle squeezes out the drama', Gurvich complains. Fortunately the moral of Olesha's story saves its reputation.

In the stage version the 'spectacle' side and the fairy-tale aspect have always been emphasized. In 1930 the critic N. Oruzheinikov was already observing with marked disapproval: 'The author's flight of fancy is free of the encumbering ballast of everyday, historical laws of normality'. Oruzheinikov obviously feels that the play has too much of the skazka or fairy-tale about it, and is not instructive enough. Writing some 32 years later, however, the young Moscow actress N. Guliaeva, who took the part of Suok, felt that the fairy-tale aspect of The Three Fat Men was most important, and claimed on the basis of a personal conversation with Olesha that it was also very important to him.

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1 "Tolstiaki" i "chudaki", p.466, in reference to the play.
2 Tri dramaturga, p.125.
3 'Tri tolstiaka', Sovetskii teatr, 1930, no. 8, p.21.
4 'O zhivoi skazke', Ogonek, 1962, no. 25.
Gurvich attempts to connect this work of Olesha's with Envy by casting Prospero as a prototype for Andrei Babichev and Volodia Makarov, and ultimately for Avel' in 'The Cherry Stone' and Fedotov in A List of Blessings, discerning in Dr Arneri the seeds of Ivan Babichev and in Suok and Tibul, the circus folk, the beginnings of the Kavalerov archetype. The attempt is imaginative and not wholly fruitless: Dr Arneri and Ivan Babichev are both 'wonderworkers' of sorts, and Prospero and Andrei Babichev are expressions of a certain social type towards which Olesha had a defined attitude, but to speak of a prototype is unnecessary and apart from these connections there are few points of comparison between the characters of the two novels.

It is not unhelpful to note Olesha's already established penchant for chudachestvo, or 'eccentricity', but it does seem far-fetched to search for similarity in theme, except in one aspect: Dr Arneri's refusal to replace Tutti's heart with an iron one. 'I said that it is wrong to deprive a man of his human heart, that no heart - whether iron, ice or gold - can be given to a man in place of a simple, real human heart.' Olesha cherished this human principle for many years, and it finds very beautiful expression in his early short stories, the first of which were published in the same year as The Three Fat Men, 1928.

1 Tri dramaturga, p.123-4.
2 The Three Fat Men, p.245.
The extent to which the scenario The Iron Heart\(^1\) coincides with the stage versions of The Three Fat Men cannot be easily ascertained as the manuscript has never been published. In the two scenes that have been published some character changes are noticeable but the familiar motifs and tone are present.

\(^1\) Zheleznoe serdtse, two scenes of which were published in \textit{Tridtsat' dnei}, 1928, no. 12.
CHAPTER TWO : ENVY

Part I : The Critics

Envy, ¹ Iurii Olesha's first published prose work, remains his best-known and most interesting literary achievement. Seizing upon perhaps the most critical theme for the writers of the day - the agonizing question of the place of the intelligent and of personal values in the new Soviet society - Olesha explores with acute perceptiveness and creative insight the conflict of the two humanisms, or humanitarian ethics ² - communism and individualism - on the battlefield of NEP, reflected and refracted through the warped and embittered consciousness of the author's alter egos, Nikolai Kvalerov and Ivan Babichev.

That the conflict should have been seen through the eyes of effete, self-centred derelicts, rather than from a more objective

¹ All quotations from Envy are from the 1956 edition of Iurii Olesha's Izbrannye sochineniia (GIKhL).

² 'Humanism' is here a translation of the Russian 'gumanizm'. Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia entry under 'Gumanizm' is based on the opposition of communist 'humanism' and bourgeois 'pseu­do-humanism'. 'In the wide sense the term "humanism" characterizes views, ideas and works of art which are infused with respect for the dignity of man and which educate in people high moral qualities.' Humanism in this sense was referred to by N.A. Nekrasov writing about Belinskii: 'You taught us to think humanely ('gumanno'). You were almost the first to remember the people ... equality, brotherhood, freedom ....' Gor'kii makes several references to the 'two humanisms' in such articles as 'Proletarian Humanism' (1934) or 'On Cultures' (1935).
or 'progressive' standpoint, was at once an original and refreshing departure from the normal run of post-revolutionary narratives, and the source of severe difficulties in interpretation. Probably no other novel of the Soviet period, apart from Il'ia Erenburg's *Julio Jurenito* and Isaac Babel's *Konarmiia*, had been written from such an ambiguous position. Although many novels were subject to widely varying interpretations, not all being of the order of Furmanov's *Chapaev* or Serafimovich's *Iron Flood*, critics were accustomed to having 'to the left virtue, to the right vice, formed up in rows like soldiers in a barracks', as the novelist L. Leonov once expressed it. They concentrated their critical powers on weighing up the social significance and implications of the theme, plot and characterization in a given work, referring sometimes in passing to the style or adducing some stylistic comparisons, but rarely managing to isolate the intrinsically literary qualities of a work or evaluate them. The textual analyses of the Soviet critics tend to have quite a different aim from those of their more formalist colleagues in the West.

After the first enthusiastic hailing of *Envy* as a novel radiating 'the beauty of full-blooded optimism',¹ 'a jolly,

¹ The Thief, p.354.

² N.N. in *Na literaturnom postu*, 1927, nos 17-18, p.83.
bright and talented book, a great contribution to modern literature,\textsuperscript{1} and a 'victory' for Soviet literature in which 'the positive characters are convincingly and unironically victorious',\textsuperscript{2} the possibility of hidden barbs, of interpretations less flattering to Soviet society than had at first been thought, began to dawn on the critics. 'Olesha's secret is extraordinarily simple', declared O.M. Brik in one of the more reactionary reviews in the journal \textit{Novyi LEF}. 'He has presented the saboteurs as not responsible.'\textsuperscript{3} 'We must learn to see the enemy not only when he is advancing on us with a weapon in his hands, but also when he pretends to be mad, drunk, or not responsible, when he wants first to lull you to sleep in order to smother you.'\textsuperscript{4}

Although Kavalerov's basic nature as an unproductive meshchanin and selfish dreamer with a 'contemplative-aesthetic and subjectivist-romantic attitude to life',\textsuperscript{5} a superfluous man in the new era of socialist construction whose 'song had been sung', was never in question, the character of the main protagonist on the socialist side, Andrei Babichev, came under suspicion. There were some who maintained, like the \textit{Krasnaia nov' } critic, D. Tal'nikov,

\begin{itemize}
\item[I. Mashbits-Verov in \textit{Molodaia gvardiia}, 1928, no. 4, p.199.]
\item[E. Zhurbina, 'Iurii Olesha : Envy', \textit{Zvezda}, 1928, no. 5.]
\item[1928, no. 7, p.1.]
\item[Ibid., p.3.]
\item[A. Prozorov in article on 'Olesha' in \textit{Literaturnaia entsiklopedia}, vol. 8, p.280 (1934 edition).]
\end{itemize}
that 'any negative sides to Andrei Babichev's character are purely the distortions wrought by Kavalerov's unbalanced mind and that, furthermore, Olesha makes this fact plain.'¹ An ardent supporter of Andrei Babichev as the novel's 'positive hero',² Tal'nikov took some pains to assure the reader of Andrei's capacity for human feelings and imagination - 'he wears an elegant grey suit and smells of eau-de-cologne'.³ The critic was convinced that, in the celebration scene in honour of Babichev's new variety of sausage - 'Babichev, taking in his hands a slice of this intestine, blushed crimson and at first even appeared bashful, like a bridegroom noticing how beautiful his young bride is and what a delightful impression she is making on the guests'⁴ - the reader 'believes in Andrei's rapture'.⁵ Similarly, B. Galanov considers 'beyond question' Babichev's 'kindness, tender-heartedness, delicacy and even a distinctive, romantic loftiness of spirit'.⁶ To counteract the usual cries of iron-souled bureaucrat and inhuman organizer, evidence is as a rule adduced in Babichev's favour, on the one hand, of his selfless and active

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1 'Literaturnye zametki', Krasnaia nov', 1928, no. 6, p.232.
2 loc. cit.
3 Ibid., p.234.
4 Envy, p.48.
devotion to the ideal of wiping out the drudgery of the kitchen and introducing more civilized, collectivized eating habits, and, on the other hand, of his generosity in taking Kavalerov into his home and his love for his niece Valia and his protégé Volodia Makarov. Thus, while being upheld as a creator, a builder of socialism, and a man of action, he is at the same time defended from attacks on the grounds of soullessness, lack of feeling and machine-like indifference to human values. Babichev is 'a good man and not only a good organizer', V. Pertsov asserts in his introduction to the 1956 edition of Olesha's works.¹

Many critics, however, while finding Andrei's active, productive participation in 'making the toilers' lives easier, more beautiful'² as commendable as their colleagues, suspected that he was not beyond reproach in the domain of human feelings. Thus, in his article quoted above, B. Galanov goes on to suggest that 'all the same, a certain narrowness, a certain cautiousness and distrust of all these feelings'³ - kindness, tender-heartedness, delicacy and so on - is discernible in Andrei. 'It is not difficult to see that the writer has endowed the jealous and ambitious Nikolai Kavalerov with the purest faculty for perception of objects and for relating first impressions', Galanov

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¹ p.11.

² V. Pertsov, op. cit., p.12.

³ p.10.
observes rather sourly.\(^1\) 'Even today one is involuntarily
offended on behalf of those whom Olesha calls in his novel "good
sons of the times"',\(^2\) he continues, complaining that Andrei
Babichev and his protégé, although 'men of action', have been
reduced to 'machines'. The rather 'right-wing' critic, A. Lezhnev,
while conceding the 'physical and moral victory' to Andrei,\(^3\)
points out that in many ways Babichev is a shallower character
than Kavalerov: less intelligent, less subtle, less poetic in
his vision, less sharp in his observations, implying that
Kavalerov's fears for the individual's fate under communism may
have some justification.\(^4\) Even Lunacharskii, who regarded the
novel as not only very promising and spirited, but the best of
the 'fellow-traveller novels',\(^5\) felt impelled to chide Olesha
with producing 'too few images of the new man',\(^6\) observing that
it was 'difficult to say exactly with which of the characters
the author is in sympathy'.\(^7\)

A third class of critics, however, were of the opinion that
not only did Babichev's callous behaviour towards his brother,

\(^1\) Ibid., p.7.
\(^2\) Ibid., p.9.
\(^3\) Literaturnye budni, p.216.
\(^4\) Ibid., pp.213-4.
\(^5\) In answer to questionnaire in Ogonek, 28 February 1929, see Sobranie sochinenii v 8 tomakh, vol. 2, p.653.
\(^7\) Ogonek questionnaire, p.254.
impersonal attitude to Kavalerov and total absorption in food production form an image of a machine-like man without human feelings or understanding, but that even his positive side was treated satirically, and instead of a well-rounded hero of socialist labour, the reader was confronted with a wholly negative picture of a mindless deliaga. In the opening scenes, where Babichev is singing raucously in the toilet, performing physical exercises on the carpet, washing himself amid much splashing of water, snorting and gargling, and devouring large quantities of food and drink ('His eyes became bloodshot, he kept taking his pince-nez off and putting them on again, and as he champed, and wheezed, his ears wiggled up and down.'), it was felt that the impression produced was not so much one of zhizneradostnost' ('joy in living') as of animality. The usual reaction is to reproach Olesha, with varying degrees of severity, for failing to show that 'Bolsheviks do not crush out love, poetry, human feelings', that the human personality is not in danger of extinction in the socialist society of the future, and that there is no reason why the inner world of bourgeois decadents of Ivan Babichev's and Kavalerov's ilk should be so much richer than Andrei's or Volodia Makarov's. This line of

1 Envy, p.28.
2 A. Gurvich, 'Iurii Olesha', p.213.
3 A. Prozorov, op. cit., p.281.
4 Loc. cit.
criticism is not infrequently met with among Soviet critics of the RAPP and Onlitguardist schools, and constantly confuses the literary characters and their social prototypes. Since these critics also often played the part of public prosecutor or defence attorney in a case of treason, examining the author's work as evidence for or against him, rather than of a literary critic, it was vital that the author's relationship to his characters and theme should be established with some precision. In this light V. Ozerov's wrathful attack on Olesha in his recent book, Obraz kommunista v sovetskoi literature, for producing a novel which he deems 'artistically contradictory' because of the author's 'indefinite attitude to the new man, the practical worker and man of action' falls neatly into place. 'The economic reconstruction of the country is to the author merely boringly prosaic, boring people have devoted themselves to it, people without any spiritual needs or interests', writes Ozerov, calling Babichev 'an unintelligent caricature of the new man', a 'primitive bodriachok whose life is purely physical ... only joy is progress in sausage production ....' Disconcerted by the extent to which Andrei Babichev appears in a wholly negative light, the critic T. Kostrov, writing in Molodaia Gvardiia, calls Babichev 'a

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1 p.165.
2 Loc. cit.
3 Ibid., p.166.
4 1929, no. 1, p.87, 'Tip kommunista v literature'.
businessman in the American mould ... just a male animal'.

Kostrov would also have been mollified if Olesha had shown 'how Babichev's sausage, over an infinite number of transformations, is connected with the world revolution'. 1 V. Polonskii, in his article 'Rebuttal of Envy' in Novyi mir, 2 while admitting that Babichev appears to have 'no inner world' and no imagination, to be petty, distrustful, fussy, ignorant, gluttonous and dull, and conceding that such a portrait must be a parody, cannot forgive Olesha for drawing the portrait 'seriously'.

There was a fairly high degree of agreement among Soviet critics that the portrait of Volodia Makarov was too schematic and abstract, 3 that he was 'just another of Andrei Babichev's successful sausages', as the critic D. Gorbov once put it, 4 scarcely a live human being. In his letter to Andrei, Volodia actually declares: 'I am a machine-man ... I've turned into a machine. Or if I haven't turned into one yet, I want to ... I want to be indifferent to everything except work ... I'm copying you in everything. I even champ in imitation of you.' 5 Although he is loved by Valia, and claims to love her, there is no evidence of any deep feeling or development to a more human level in Volodia.

1 Ibid., pp.88-9.
2 1929, no. 5, p.199, 'Preodolenie Zavisti'.
4 'Opravdanie Zavisti', p.223.
5 Envy, pp.65-6.
Even in the scene on the playground where Volodia and Valia are high-jumping, 'a hymn to health and youth', and Ivan admits to his daughter: 'I was mistaken, Valia ... I thought all feelings were extinct - love, devotion, tenderness ... but they're all still here, Valia ....', the dominant impression is of a naked body - as later, after the victorious football match - and a 'glittering, machine-like array of teeth'. Pertsov considers, however, that Volodia's relationship with Valia is characterized by 'purity and chastity', feelings of 'the new people'. In a similar vein, adding up the points won by each side, Galanov stresses that at least Valia was won by Volodia and not by Kavalerov, who, unable to compete with the new 'hero of our times', had to seek consolation in the promiscuous embraces of a revolting middle-aged widow.

It is this aspect of Kavalerov's portrayal which seems to have been generally accepted as Olesha's saving grace. Despite Kavalerov's mental acumen, his poetic soul and rich range of human feelings, his end is an ignominious one. He slides downhill very rapidly into obyvatel'shchina of the most repulsive kind, his dreams of marriage to Valia, the almost ethereal image of future womanhood, crumbling ironically into the sordid reality of the

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2 Envy, pp. 113-4.
3 Ibid., p. 112.
widow Anechka's embraces. Gorbov, in his already quoted article in *Novyi mir*, was alone in taking the extreme position that Kavalerov in fact had nothing to be jealous of in the men of the new world, that he was no use either to Ophelia or the Chetvertak kitchen, and that his ending up with the widow Anechka was certainly no sadder than Andrei Babichev's ending up with his sausages.¹ It was for views such as these, no doubt, that Pertsov once saw fit to brand Gorbov as a 'trotskyite'.² In what Pertsov elsewhere calls Olesha's 'merciless satire on meshchanstvo',³ the contrast between Kavalerov's high-flown speeches on poetry and the human heart and the ending in Anechka's huge rococo double-bed is grotesque. All his dreams of fame come to nothing, nor are his plans to kill Andrei Babichev and to protest against the personality-crushing, mindless bureaucrats and samodury of Soviet society ever realized. His envy is never assuaged. His protests of equality with Andrei 'in his essence' remain mere words.⁴ Pertsov is convinced that Kavalerov reaches the point of 'condemning his own egotism' and 'recognizing the humanism of the construction era', but his 'decline had gone too far'.⁵ Most critics, however, seem cautious on this score and would also

² 'Lichnost' i sotsialisticheskoe delo', *Oktyabr*, 1937, no. 7, p.176.
³ Introduction to 1956 edition, p.11.
⁴ Envy, p.57.
⁵ Introduction to 1956 edition, p.10.
probably hesitate to agree wholeheartedly with Pertsov's judgment that Olesha 'does not spare his hero or evoke pity for him'.

Random references to Dostoevskii's influence on the formation of Kavalerov's character aside, most critics trace Kavalerov's and Ivan Babichev's literary antecedents to the 'superfluous man' tradition in Russian literature. Even where the words 'superfluous man' are not actually used, the tendency of most articles is to emphasize the uselessness and alienation of individualists of Kavalerov's type in a society geared to feverish reconstruction, exceeding production norms and epoch-making mass movements. 'A unique satirical variant of the superfluous man' is how L. Ershov describes Kavalerov.2

The solution to Kavalerov's and Ivan's problem is usually seen to lie in 'unity with the people', or with the 'zhiznestroiteli', as one critic has it,3 taking the transformation of the heroes and heroines of Aleksei Tolstoi's trilogy The Road to Calvary as an example of this salvation through identification with 'the fate of the people'. It is a solution that Olesha's Kavalerov could never have found: his sense of individuality and distaste for mass projects, such as the Chetvertak scheme, maintain his dissonance with the epoch. Unlike the intelligenty in I. Sel'vinskii's novel in verse, Pushtorg, Kavalerov had no technical knowledge which

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1 Ibid., p.13.
2 Sovetskaia satiricheskaia proza 20-kh godov, p.220.
3 M. Kuznetsov, Sovetskii roman, p.225.
could have been applied to Revolutionary tasks. Ivan Babichev, too, although he had some potential, as far as one can judge, as an engineer, is still unable to identify himself with the great transforming process. His transformations are of a different order.

Few Soviet critics touch on the question of a 'change' in Kavalerov - or, as Soviet critics would prefer, in Olesha's attitude to Kavalerov - in Part Two of Envy, where the narrator is no longer Kavalerov. Lezhnev, for example, was clearly disconcerted to discover that Andrei Babichev's image does not change for the better when examined from a supposedly more balanced position, a discovery which immediately cast doubt on the author's relation to Kavalerov: was Kavalerov's often hysterical, distorted vision to be blamed for Babichev's unattractiveness, or was there some objective truth in his pathologically envious outbursts? Lezhnev concludes that Olesha has a 'double attitude towards Kavalerov' and considers this a flaw in the novel. Pertsov, however, considers that in the second part of the novel the tone changes from one of mockery of the 'new men' to one of admiration of the beauty of activity.

In his article on Olesha in Literaturnaia entsiklopediia, A. Prozorov sees Ivan Babichev as a 'hyperbolic development of Kavalerov', commenting that he at least is open about being an

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1 Literaturnye budni, p.215.
obyvatel', for he describes in detail his 'conspiracy of feelings' to the security police and shares his fantastic notions for a machine to destroy all machines with Kavalerov. In common with Kavalerov he represents the slightly ridiculous petty-bourgeois jetsam of the Revolution, living in a world of decaying dreams, soul-raking, revenge and envy. A failure in every sphere of life, his decline, at least as pitiful and complete as Kavalerov's, is in some ways more drastic, because Ivan admitted no limitations on the power of his imagination, but turned out to be impotent. Ivan commits the unpardonable sin of being a false prophet.

The two remaining characters in the novel, Valia and Anechka, have presented Soviet critics with few problems of interpretation, Valia being a 'delightful portrait' of the new woman, 'untouched by the decay of the old world', and Anechka a symbol of the utter moral degradation in which the Ivan Babichevs and Nikolai Kavalerovs of the world are doomed to moulder away.

Iurii Olesha seems to have received on the whole little serious attention from Western littérateurs and reference appears to be made to him almost exclusively as part of a wider coverage of the Soviet literary scene. One of the West's most prominent admirers of Iurii Olesha, and of his novel Envy in particular, Gleb Struve, is a good representative of the tendency to let sympathy weigh far more heavily on Kavalerov's side than on Andrei

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1 p.280.
Babichev's. Struve agrees with Kavalerov's own estimation of himself, that, despite his inefficiency, he is 'more intelligent and more gifted than ... the 'sausage-maker' ...'. He goes on to say that '... it is not unintentionally that he [Olesha] endows Kavalerov with talent and imagination, that he sympathizes with his assertion of the worth of the individual and his proud rejection of a fame derived from the manufacture of improved sausages ...'. Elsewhere, however, Struve admits that Kavalerov is conscious of both his superiority and inferiority to Andrei Babichev and that in this dual position lies his tragedy.

Not far from Struve's position on Kavalerov is that of V. Zavalishin, who, calling Kavalerov a 'gifted man', attributes his degradation and sad decline into indifference to his 'meeting with one failure after another' which turned him into a nonentity. He calls him 'an odd mixture of the Chekhovian intellectual with the sad tramp of American movies'. All the blame is heaped by Zavalishin on Soviet society: 'his idealism founders against the dull meanness of daily life and he sinks lower and lower into filth.' It is difficult, however, to give much credence to the extreme position in this direction held by R. Poggioli who declares

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1 Soviet Russian Literature, p.99.
2 Ibid., p.103.
4 Early Soviet Writers, pp.299-300.
5 Ibid., p.299.
6 Ibid., p.300.
Kavalerov 'a rare variant of homo soveticus, the man who despite his good will toward the régime remains congenitally unable to conform'. Kavalerov's attitude toward the régime could at no point be described as one of good will.

The same writers, predictably enough, express very negative attitudes towards Andrei Babichev and the 'new man'. 'With all their vulgarity and meanness the two romantic rebels of Olesha are human, while the two main representatives of the new world, the world of sausages, machines, and ideal hygienic canteens, are inhuman and also vulgar', writes Struve, and, attempting to take the wind out of one of the Soviet critics' main sails, remarks that Andrei is vulgar whether seen through Kavalerov's eyes or not. Van der Eng-Liedmeier, in his book Literary Characters, compares Olesha's treatment of Babichev favourably with the treatment of the machine-like bureaucrat by such writers as Pil'niak, Slonimskii, Platonov and Maiakovskii, calling it 'one of the most convincing parodies of the Soviet man in the NEP period', precisely because Babichev is not wholly inhuman and machine-like.

In a section on Iurii Olesha in her book A History of Soviet Literature Vera Alexandrova makes the interesting suggestion that 'the personal faults of Kavalerov and Ivan were the price the

1 Poets of Russia, p.297.
2 Introduction to Envy and The Unknown Artist, p.v-vi.
author paid for the right to bring to discussion urgent questions of moral values'. Her view of Kavalerov is wholly sympathetic, for, as she puts it, 'despite his occasionally repellent traits, Nikolay Kavalerov is defending genuine values. Many of his observations are entirely just, even when his insights are prompted by personal frustrations.'

E.J. Brown, who pays more attention than most to Dostoevskii's influence on the character of Kavalerov, emphasizes the 'adolescent' nature of his envy, to which he also ascribes the overtones of sexual attachment to his father image and enemy, Andrei. Professor Brown's position with regard to Andrei is far less hostile than most critics' in the West:

The sausage manufacturer has a real affection for his young protégés, though doubtless different from the feeling of a father for his children. The sausage manufacturer, though presented through the eyes of those who hate him, is a sympathetic character. His sausages are the product of a kind of art, and the creation of the 'Ten Cent Piece', his communal dining room, called for idealism and imagination. Olesha's novel seems to have a prescience of new 'feelings' coming to birth as the old die out.

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1 p.192-3.
2 Ibid., p.190.
3 Russian Literature since the Revolution, p.89.
4 Ibid., pp.93-4.
Part Two: The Characters

Before Envy's total meaning can be grasped, Olesha's satirical snares must be carefully untangled. In this novel the use of satire is particularly ambiguous, inasmuch as even the satire is in danger of being understood ironically. It must be decided to what extent the portrait of Andrei Babichev is purely satirical and to what extent the mockery of an unbalanced mind's distorted image.

The most savage and bitter satire is directed by Kavalerov at Andrei Babichev in the first chapter of the novel: his singing in the lavatory is a 'reflex action', tuneless, wordless, conveying a sense of repellently rude health: 'How good it is to be alive ••• ta-ra-ta-ra! ... My bowels are resilient ••• ra-ta-ta-ta-ta-ra-ri ••• my vital juices are flowing as they should ••• ra-ta-ta-du-ta-ta- ••• relax, bowels •••.' \(^{1}\) His bulky body, replete, as Kavalerov's naturalistic eye does not fail to remark, with breasts that shake when he walks, fills the entire lavatory. As he lies on his back doing his exercises, Kavalerov, pretending to be asleep, admires his 'magnificent' groin, the 'groin of a producer', such as Kavalerov has only seen on a buck antelope.

\(^{1}\) Envy, p.25.
Such a commotion does he cause when washing — hopping about the room, whistling shrilly, snorting, letting out piercing yells, throwing handfuls of water at his armpits, swearing when the soap blinds him and gargling lustily — that people in the street stop and peer up at his balcony door. At night he snores so loudly that he wakes Kavalerov. His gluttony is described in fascinating detail by Kavalerov, who seems to relish his description as much as Babichev relishes his food: in one sitting he devours, with slight help from Kavalerov, half a pound of ham, a tin of sprats, a tin of mackerel, a loaf of bread, half a block of Dutch cheese, four apples, ten eggs, jam and tea. He eats to bursting point. 'Tuck in, Kavalerov', is his only table conversation. 'He is a great sausage-maker, confectioner and cook. And I, Nikolai Kavalerov, am his court jester.'\(^1\) The court jester clearly resents his inferior position, however, and rebellion is brewing. The tone cannot be mistaken. But the portrait cannot be dismissed as the extravagant fabrication of Kavalerov's febrile imagination: his behaviour, and his washing and eating habits in particular, is offensively bovine throughout the chapter, while his complete lack of consideration for Kavalerov's presence is at least boorish.

The same viciously satiric tone pervades the second chapter: Babichev is in charge of everything that concerns 'guzzling';\(^2\)

\(^1\) Ibid., p.28.
\(^2\) Loc. cit. ('zhran'e').
he wanted 'to give birth to food. He gave birth to "Chetvertak"'; a picture is drawn of 'Haroun-al-Rashid', in pince-nez, elegantly dressed, briefcase under arm, inspecting in lordly silence a canteen with its viragos milling around him in the smoke, the primus spluttering out, glass breaking, and the soup being oversalted. An example of his notes to co-workers - his substitute for friends - is given:

To Comrade Prokudin:
Sweet wrappers (12 types) are to be made in accordance with customer demand (chocolate, filling) but must be newly designed. Cut out 'Rosa Luxemburg' ... choose something from science (poetical - geography? astronomy?) with an impressive and attractive sounding name: 'Eskimo'? 'Telescope'? Ring me tomorrow, Wednesday, at the office, between one and two. Without fail.2

Olesha's portrait of Babichev is grotesque - distortion is being practised to the point of comic absurdity, ugliness and repulsiveness are introduced for their aesthetic effect. Yet, even when Babichev's image is looked at as objectively as possible and Kavalerov's outbursts are seen in their right perspective, the impression of Babichev as an impersonal deliaga is scarcely mitigated. By way of contrast, however, Kavalerov's attempt to uncover Babichev's 'weak side' and his discovery of Babichev's birth mark, which revealed his true nature as a 'barin',3 are only evidence of Kavalerov's jaundiced viewpoint and satirize the

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1 loc. cit.
2 Ibid., pp.29-30.
3 Ibid., p.32.
tendency in fellow-traveller novels of the mid-twenties to unearth a hidden 'aristocratic' strain in the new communist men of action. Although Babichev's attitude to Kavalerov does have impersonal overtones, especially, for example, where he is shown tossing Kavalerov, the namer of things, random questions as if he were a pocket compendium ('Who was Jocasta?'; 'Do you like olives?'),
justification for Kavalerov's exasperated 'He crushes me' so far seems slight. In Chapter V he has continual trouble in focussing his attention on anything Kavalerov has to say, and informs Kavalerov without ceremony when the latter asks what will happen when Volodia returns: 'You'll have to give up the divan.' The same mixture of indifference and callousness in his relations with Kavalerov is observable also in Chapter VI where Kavalerov, holding forth on the subject of fame, touches at last on suicide as an irrational, but attractive, bid for fame. Babichev, scarcely listening to Kavalerov's impassioned outpourings, only comments to suggest a more 'effective' place to commit suicide.

Babichev's attitude to his brother Ivan leaves room for some doubt about his basic humanity: Ivan's irritating, but harmless, appearance in the street below the flat where he taunts his brother with his discovery of Ophelia, the machine to destroy all machines, sends Babichev into a rage. Ivan is 'lazy, harmful and

1 Ibid., pp.32-3.
2 Ibid., p.33.
3 Ibid., p.39.
infects other people with his ideas. He ought to be shot.'

Although Kavalerov also harbours murderous intentions (against Babichev), one cannot help feeling that a threat of this kind coming from Babichev's lips is a more serious matter. Later, speaking on the telephone to Ivan's daughter, Valia, he is again heartless in his attitude to his brother, where he suggests putting him in a mental asylum. When Valia repeats to him the rather poetic, and oft-quoted, words that Kavalerov spoke to her: 'You rustled past me like a branch covered in blossoms and leaves', Babichev dismisses the line as the raving of some alcoholic, which serves as an effective comment on the poetic side of his nature. His crassness and insensitivity are, of course, underlined by the placing of Kavalerov's lyrical offering immediately before an example of his own prose: 'Thus, blood collected at the slaughter can be used in food production, in the preparation of sausages or the manufacture of white and black albumen, glue, buttons, paints, fertilizers ....' and so on.

Chapter VIII, in which the discovery of the new variety of sausage is related, is a satirical tour de force because of the incredible commotion raised over an ordinary sausage - 'kolbasa kak kolbasa' - Babichev rings from every room in the building,

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1 Ibid., p.38.
2 Ibid., p.44.
3 Ibid., p.45.
4 Ibid., p.44.
5 Ibid., p.45.
in exultation, to communicate the news of his discovery, 'roaring' into the receiver, the sausage is to be sent to Milan to an exhibition, pompous speeches are made ('in the hot sun it will smell like a rose') and Babichev is shown shyly disclaiming all praise, being 'unworthy'.

This event, ridiculous because of the contrast between the commotion made and the lowly object exciting it, succeeds in casting scorn on the shallowness of Babichev's personal life. His undeniable affection for Volodia Makarov and kindness in taking Kavalerov into his home seem to be evidence of a richer inner life than appears on the surface. This affection for Volodia, however, is affection for a self-styled 'machine-man', whose only claim to the epithet of 'remarkable', applied by Babichev, would seem to lie in his prowess on the football field, affection which will in any case be curtailed at short notice if Volodia fails to turn into a proper 'new man'. The true reason for his helping Kavalerov also comes to light in a later chapter: he had 'acted stupidly', momentarily confusing Kavalerov with Volodia, and letting 'sentimentality take its course', to quote Babichev's own regretful words. In this fifth chapter in Part II of the novel Andrei Babichev is found in a mood of reflection,

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1 Ibid., p.47.
2 Ibid., p.48.
3 Ibid., p.36.
4 Ibid., p.96.
5 Ibid., p.98.
rare for this man who works 'all day and half the night'\(^1\) and almost the only evidence we have that Babichev is not identical with one of his own sausages. He satisfies himself that, although a paternal love will 'flower' in the new society, and 'not all feelings will perish', his love for Volodia is not fatherly, rather Volodia is for him a cherished hope.\(^2\)

Babichev is a man of action: he is physically powerful - 'a giant'\(^3\) - a 'fakir' who is 'in ten places at once',\(^4\) as Kavalerov puts it, disclosing his almost superstitious awe of Babichev's dominion over the world, and an indefatigable worker. His comparison with Kavalerov is symbolised neatly in the scene at the football match where Kavalerov remains 'passive'\(^5\) when the ball falls at his feet in the grandstand and only Babichev has the presence of mind and strength to throw it back onto the field.

There can be little question that, regardless of Kavalerov's warped view, Babichev comes through as a basically unattractive, philistine character, concerned with productivity rather than questions of human feelings, moved by collective farm problems rather than personal relations - except with regard to Volodia, where a mixture of political idealism and sexual attachment come

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1 Ibid., p.95.
2 Ibid., p.96.
3 Loc. cit.
4 Ibid., p.29.
5 Ibid., p.120.
into play - almost totally absorbed with his work as a sausage-maker and organizer of the canteen project. That the satire on him can itself sometimes be taken ironically is clear, but little insight is needed to see, beyond the distorted images of satire, the essence of Babichev, which, if not monstrous, if not tyrannical, is at least tedious, shallow, and unresponsive to the deeper things of life.

Despite a feeble attempt in the chapter mentioned above\(^1\) to paint over Volodia's portrait in brighter colours by referring to his unselfishness, concern for others, and popularity as a boy, - an impression to be reinforced at the football match where he is somewhat pointedly compared with Hetzke, the 'individualist' player from Germany, interested in his own glorification rather than the team's - Volodia remains a character to whom it is hard to warm. Not easily erased is the impression left in most readers' minds by his letter to his mentor and friend, Andrei Babichev, in which he declares his intention to become a 'machine-man', his rationalization of cruelty as a variant of 'magnanimity' demanded by the logic of history,\(^2\) his boorish behaviour on first meeting Kavalerov,\(^3\) his Japanese grin and cocky self-assurance. Kavalerov's summing up of him as a 'barchuk'\(^4\) is felicitous. Yet,

\(^1\) Part II, ch. 5.
\(^2\) Envy, p. 97.
\(^3\) Ibid., p. 63.
\(^4\) Ibid., p. 64.
Volodia, together with his fiancée Valia, represents the vital, youthful aspect of the revolutionary generation.

The representatives of the old and new worlds are drawn up in battle array with three on each side. However, the third member of the team of 'new men', Valia Babicheva, saves the division from geometric artificiality. From her first appearance she is an attractive figure, with a charming naturalness about her that her comrades are not shown as possessing: she knocks over a vase in the window when she first looks down at her father calling her from the street, and calling out to him to wait, dashes down into the street to catch him and is quite lost to find he has already disappeared - even a little tear trickles down her cheek. She tells her uncle that she cried all evening after her father had gone, remorseful lest she had caused him pain. Her legs are scratched, sunburnt and shiny, she has trouble keeping her dress down in the wind at the football match, she shouts her encouragement to the Soviet team as inelegantly and lustily as the next man, and in her agitation during the match grasps her neighbour's hand, pressing it to her cheek. At the same time her love for Andrei Babichev and Volodia Makarov seems sincere, to judge from her behaviour on the playground where she and Volodia are highjumping and at the football match in the following chapter.

1 Ibid., p.43.
2 Part II, ch. 7.
To Kavalerov's romantic vision, however, she is a much more ethereal being than the one the world sees. To him 'she was lighter than a shadow, even the lightest of shadows might have envied her - the shadow of falling snow.'

The sunlight slid across her shoulder, she swayed, her collar-bones were thrust out like daggers. They looked at each other for a tenth of a second, then immediately Kavalerov realized with a shiver that an incurable yearning would remain with him forever for this being from another world, remote and wonderful, and he sensed how unattainably beautiful she looked, how cruelly out of reach her purity ... how unfathomable her charm ....

'Valia,' said Kavalerov, 'I've been waiting for you all my life. Take pity on me.'

But she didn't hear. She was whisked off by the wind.

In a sense, then, Valia joins both worlds, is an ideal for both, and although she is to be Makarov's wife, she seems to retain an affection for the old world, even if she is uncontaminated by it.

Kavalerov's inner world can be probed more deeply than that of the other characters because the whole first part of the novel is written in the first person through his eyes. Right from the start a picture is formed of a man who values his powers of imagination and observation. When Babichev lies down on the floor to do his exercises, Kavalerov observes: 'The blue and pink world of the room turns circles in the mother-of-pearl lens of his button.' Later he admits:

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1 Ibid., p.59.
2 Ibid., p.122.
I amuse myself with observations. Have you ever noticed how salt slides off the end of a knife without leaving any trace - the knife gleams as if it had never been touched; how pince-nez ride the bridge of the nose like a bicycle; how man is surrounded by little inscriptions; a straggling ant-heap of little inscriptions; on forks, spoons, plates, spectacle-frames, buttons, pencils? No one notices them. They struggle for existence. 

But evidence for Kavalerov's observant eye, his poetic and refreshing outlook on the world of pedestrian realities, his delight at viewing the world indirectly through reflections (condemned by some as escapist, avoiding reality), his unique phraseology, is abundant.

In his embarrassingly childish letter to Andrei he makes his declaration of war

... against you, the most common barin there is, an egotist, voluptuary and dullard, who is convinced that everything is going to work out well for him.

I'm fighting for your brother, for the girl who has been deceived by you, for tenderness, pathos, individuality, exciting names, like Ophelia, for everything you crush, oh remarkable man.

He is the defender of the individual's right to a private world of emotions and dreams and 'unproductive' feelings, he is thirsty for fame, of even the most Herostratian type, he wants to act according to his will, not the dictates of society or any 'higher logic', he wants to 'show his personality's strength'. These high-flown phrases are never more than empty words. His

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1 Ibid., p.28.
2 Ibid., p.61.
3 Ibid., p.39.
confrontation with Babichev, where he returns to apologize for screaming 'sausage-maker' at him in public at the aerodrome, turns into a nightmare: insulting words spring unbidden to his lips, he loses control of his tongue and is violently ejected from the room.

In the beginning of the novel it is already obvious that Kavalerov's relations with the external world are far from happy. He declares darkly in the first chapter that 'things don't like me' - 'a varnished corner once literally bit me', his relations with blankets 'are always complicated', his soup never cools, the sideboard laughs at him when he crawls around the floor searching for a coin that rolled under the furniture. He feels crushed by the exterior world and its representatives and has to resort to his imagination to avenge this wrong. As he listens to Babichev chuckling over something he is reading in the newspaper, he is convinced that Babichev is saying to himself: 'You're a philistine, Kavalerov, you don't understand a thing.' Kavalerov is not merely indulging in wilful misinterpretations of fact but is suffering from a persecution complex of almost Dostoevskian proportions. Yet there is some foundation for Kavalerov's sense of alienation, which he perhaps feels in its most concrete form at the aerodrome, when he is excluded by some insignificant official from rejoining the official party of which he had been

1 Ibid., pp.26-7.
2 Ibid., p.31.
a member. He is living in a hostile, non-comprehending world which has no time for dreamers and soul-rakers, demanding that every ounce of physical and mental energy be devoted to more practical ends. In this world of things Babichev is at home. Things like him. He is little more than an object himself. Kavalerov only gives things names. Master of their names, he is still dominated by the things themselves.

Kavalerov is painfully aware of his own redundancy and deficiencies, as his beer-hall confession, in which 'self-abasement and arrogance merged in one bitter stream',¹ shows: his words are insolent, provocative, he flings insults of the most abusive kind at all present, having been rejected in his gallant offer of 'tenderness, wit, caresses and devotion'² to a damsel who turned out not to be in distress. Yet all the while he is aghast at his own words, acting uncontrollably as if it were all a dream he is about to wake out of. He takes umbrage at the condescension he senses in all those around him. He is piqued, like a man who has been roughly elbowed out of the way, at being ignored or treated as an object that can be disposed of and replaced, a messenger-boy, a telephone answering service. But he half suspects that they have good cause for their attitude: 'What reasons made a famous personality condescend to the point of

¹ Ibid., p.33.
² Ibid., p.34.
helping an unknown, suspicious-looking young man \( \text{like me?} \) he wonders. Yet he derives pleasure — in fact 'administrative bliss', \(^2\) to repeat his own words — from his submission to Babichev's domineering sway, from repeating, word for word, for example, Babichev's instructions over the telephone for contacting him at the Glavkontsesskom.

There is something pathetic about this 'parasite' who knows he is a parasite \(^3\) and 'the degree to which he has sunk', \(^4\) this little man who knows he will never be handsome or famous \(^5\) yet yearns to marry a beautiful girl and make his mark in the world; who is constantly being thrown out of other people's premises, and has never been loved by anyone 'free of charge', \(^6\) although even prostitutes only charge him a quarter (the same price Babichev charges his customers). There is also something childlike about his directness with Babichev and Valia, his habit of falling off to sleep and dreaming — 'I drop off to sleep like a child. On the divan I complete my flight into childhood' \(^7\) — the freshness of his sense impressions, the impulsiveness of his reactions.

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1 Ibid., p.35.
2 Ibid., p.32.
3 Ibid., p.57.
4 Ibid., p.127.
5 Ibid., p.41.
6 Ibid., p.42.
7 Ibid., p.40.
Although he represents the quintessence of bourgeois decadence, Kavalerov is perhaps not so much a satiric figure as a clown, inasmuch as he inspires pity rather than simple mockery. It is true that his character has a number of negative sides to it, including a practically pathological condition of jealousy, but it is a character with rich potentiality for creativity, even if not of a very concrete kind, that slides with fatal speed into apathy, debasement and self-disgust.

Ivan Babichev is at once a more lively character than Kavalerov, although no doubt more dangerous to the Soviet régime. To Ivan, as the novel's third narrator, belong most of the interesting monologues. In some ways he is an exaggerated image of Kavalerov: his disreputable hobo's appearance is taken to the point of a Chaplinesque gesture for here is Chaplin's exuberance, ebullience, sentimentality, the little man's hopeless opposition to 'massive men', the failure-image fighting the success-image, the grubbily genteel tramp opposing the aristocrat, the battle with the machine, the symbolism - not to mention the ridiculous bowler hat and pillow. Olesha later claimed that Ivan was in fact modelled on H.G. Wells' Mr Marvell in The Invisible Man.¹ Ivan is also a more integrated character than Kavalerov - his attitude to the world he finds around him is more clearly defined than Kavalerov's. In his long and highly entertaining explanations of

¹ 'Beseda s chitateliami', p.157.
his behaviour to the police, he airs his plans for 'opening the
eyes of the decadents' to their fate ¹ and 'arranging the last
parade' of the feelings of the old world, 'a conspiracy of
feelings'. He wants to 'shake the heart of the burnt out epoch'
so that it might light up in just one last blaze of glory, like
filaments in an electric light-bulb. He wants to see such
decadent feelings as jealousy, love for women, and ambition live
again, however briefly. Moreover, after his choir has sung its
last notes, he, Babichev, the conductor, will be the last to leave
the stage. This long tirade of Babichev's, the first explicit
probing of the motives underlying his and Kavalerov's revolt, is
a magnificent piece of persuasive rhetoric, overflowing with
strikingly colourful metaphors. It is appropriately diffused
with touches of terse humour, because, as Babichev makes his last
exit, he does not slink out, but thumbs his nose at the new order.
In fact, his last words, to Kavalerov who is sitting on the edge
of Anechka's bed, are in a cheerful, not melancholy, mood: 'I've
got something nice to tell you ... today, Kavalerov, it's your
turn to sleep with Anechka. Hoorah!'²

Whereas Kavalerov was merely a poshliak, Babichev announces
himself to the police inspector, in a scene reminiscent of Jesus
before Pilate, as 'korol' poshliakov'.³ The religious image of

¹ Envy, p.86
² Ibid., p.128.
³ Ibid., p.85.
the martyr is sustained later when he compares himself to Jesus being 'led away to Golgotha', and more than once his behaviour is suggestive of the 'holy fool' archetype in Russian folklore and literature. Just as he must be 'king' of the decadents, and leader of the last parade, so the egotistical strain in Babichev is strongly expressed, for example, in his role as 'prophet' or 'preacher' where he stands on the restaurant table to deliver his dramatic sermons or in the middle of the road to make his grandiloquent challenge to his brother: 'Halt, ravisher of other people's children!' He strikes an interesting note, too, for the light it casts on Andrei's new role as Soviet aristocrat, when he goes on to demand, in a typically perceptive thrust, that his brother allow him to ride in his automobile as well: 'Why do you ride in a car while I go on foot? ... I don't find walking very comfortable either. You're a leader, but then so am I.' Similarly, he has the clear-sightedness to realize that Valia, his daughter, is not a mere 'incubator', but a human being deserving deep affection and appreciation for her personal qualities. He despairs for the future of women, who were the glory of the old world. Much of his bitterness stems from the fact that his most cherished hope, Valia, whom he had dreamt of

1 Ibid., p.94.
2 Ibid., p.84.
3 Loc. cit.
carrying aloft before him like a flaming torch, has also 'flown away', enticed from him by Andrei and Volodia, whom Ivan despises to the point of violent hatred.

Ivan sees clearly that he and Kavalerov are a dying breed, teetering on the brink of a dark, rotting hole, into which the rising generation will push them. He has no qualms about giving Kavalerov the straight facts:

'You're a clot, so to speak. You're a clot of jealousy of the dying epoch. The dying epoch envies what is taking its place.'

'What should I do?' asked Kavalerov.

'My dear friend, in a case like this you have to reconcile yourself to things or else - kick up a great row. You must go out with a bang. Slam the door ... so that a scar is left on the face of history ....' ²

The motive of malicious revenge is thus strong and open in Ivan Babichev. A most vivid example of his propensities in this direction he relates in his tale of his jealousy, at the age of thirteen, for the queen of a ball he was attending. Consumed with hatred and envy, mixed with a perverse fascination for her, he attacked her, beating her head against a column and tearing her hair. At the same time, he 'loved this little girl more than life itself.'³ The analogy with his battle with the new era could not be clearer; it is an agonizing love-hate relationship,

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¹ Ibid., p.90.
² Ibid., pp.91-2.
³ Ibid., p.92.
provoking a passionate and malicious desire for revenge on Ivan's part. And the ending is the same, too: 'The disgrace fell on me. I was sent packing.'

Ivan's fantastic machine, Ophelia, is the incarnation of irrationality, the jealous man's craving to destroy the object of his jealousy. It is the symbol of the revolt of the doomed 'feelings' against the machines, the dehumanizing, organizational elements in society, but as a machine-destroying machine, it is the supreme irony, Ivan's ultimate joke in bad taste.

From the Soviet point of view, Ivan's behaviour is particularly reprehensible because, despite every opportunity to apply his considerable talents in the engineering field to the task of reconstruction, Ivan failed to find a place for himself in the new society. He tells Kavalerov: '... I was the darling of my generation. I came top of my class, I used to break all the records.' ¹ Similarly, in the first chapter of Part Two, equalled only by the first chapter of Part One in its brilliantly satirical touch, Ivan is shown to have been an exceptionally gifted and imaginative lad, if already showing signs of a penchant for the dramatic, the theatrical, the trompe-l'oeil - in fact, for downright charlatanism. ² Even his pose as prophet-cum-priest seems to parody the charismatic treatment of the Revolution by such poets as Belyi, Blok and Esenin. Thus, despite his pre-war

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¹ Ibid., p.92.
² For example, the dream incident, the tale of the wart, the magic bubble.
qualifications in engineering, the Soviet period finds him
sketching customers in beer-halls, performing memory-tricks and
similar feats of an unconstructive nature. ¹

He has a small verse he repeats as he finishes each
performance:

I am not a German charlatan
I do not deceive people!
I am a modest Soviet magician
I am a modern wonderworker! ²

As in the case of Kavalerov, Ivan Babichev is a far more
attractive character than any of the representatives of the new
order, including his own daughter, Valia, simply because he is
a man who values all the feelings and emotions which make life
the wonder that it is, as well, of course, as those which make
it the misery it can be, and he provokes here not mockery so much
as a slightly sad, wry smile. I. Erenburg relates how he once
said to Diego 'that [he] felt afraid: the funny little man in
the bowler hat [Chaplin] exposed the whole absurdity of life.
Diego replied: "Yes, he's a tragedian."³ It would be trite to
expound a 'laughter through tears' viewpoint, or to talk of the
'tragic clown', so suffice it to remark that the reader who can
only sneer self-righteously or remain fundamentally unmoved when
Ivan is forced to conclude at the end of the novel that
'indifference' is the only path for his kind to follow now, must

¹ Envy, Part II, ch. 2.
² Ibid., p. 80.
³ Childhood and Youth, p. 199.
be exceptionally insensitive to the play of Olesha's irony. For the question must be asked: why did a man like Ivan Babichev become 'superfluous' while his brother became 'necessary'? Olesha gives no explicit answer, and perhaps had none, but in no sense is the 'last laugh' on Ivan. Valia is his daughter and not Andrei's.

The third member of the doomed trio, Anechka Prokopovich, is an uncomplicated character. She is a grotesque parody on Andrei Babichev in one sense - she, like him, is a cook, and she, too runs a kitchen, although of a very different sort: she cooks for a hairdresser's artel and a multitude of cats. Her floor is covered with saliva and offal. As a licentious, dirty, fat middle-aged woman, she is also a grotesque distortion of Valia, the pure and attractive ideal woman of the future.

As was shown earlier, much of the literary criticism of Olesha's novel revolved around the central question of moral victory. Who was justified, who condemned? Surely victory belongs to neither side. Kavalerov and Ivan Babichev are forced to lapse into apathy, but it is not apparent that Andrei and his henchmen are in any positive sense 'victorious' or that life for them promises any more than to their opponents. In fact, in a sense, Andrei is doomed to be thrown on the same pile of historical flotsam and jetsam as his brother and Kavalerov. But Olesha is

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1 Envy, p.41.
seen to have been less concerned with the outcome of the conflict than with examining satirically the two sides in the conflict, suggesting that the old, dying world has much that was of value, as well as much that did not deserve to survive, that would be strangled by the new era.

Olesha's satire is not all of a kind. In his treatment of Andrei Babichev and Volodia Makarov, his satire is of an explicit and bold kind, with its elements of iconoclasm and moral outrage nicely covered by placing the most brazen attacks in the mouth of Nikolai Kavalerov, an approach dictated, no doubt, by prudence.

Kavalerov and Ivan Babichev are also ironical figures, however, because, despite all their moral shortcomings and ridiculousness, and their complete rout at the end of the book, they are colourful and pathetic characters, as much sinned against as sinning. There is some kind of ironical balance, delicately maintained, between revulsion and relish.

7 Auro of Kaciuki on podpol'ia (Notes from the Underground), 1864.
8 'Dva skorosti', Krasnaya stenka, 7 November 1933.
Part Three: The Background

There is a similar ambivalence in the character of Dostoevskii's 'underground man',¹ who, like Olesha's Kavalerov and Ivan Babichev, fulfils the dual roles of hero and anti-hero. Dostoevskii's hero likewise suffers partly because of the oppressive nature of society, and partly because of his own degeneracy. Kavalerov and Babichev show many signs of the Underground Man's torment and reactions to his milieu, despite the fact that in 1935 Olesha wrote that the 'lonely, embittered youth dreaming of a battle against all' (in other words, a modern Underground Man) was impossible or hard to imagine in Soviet society.²

A hate-envy relationship with a 'successful' man in society symbolizes the struggle of the down-trodden in both novels. While scorning and despising the insensitivity and vulgarity of Zverkov, for example, the Underground Man at the same time craves his popularity, self-confidence and success in life. Olesha's heroes also heartily despise many aspects of the new Soviet man, his crassness, callousness and insensibility, while envying him his vitality, zeal and energy, his strong nerves and identification

¹ Hero of Zapiski iz podpol'ia (Notes from the Underground), 1864.
² 'Dva simvol', Krasnaia gazeta, 7 November 1935.
with social forces. Of Zverkov the Underground Man says however: 'I hated the sharp, self-assured sound of his voice, the adoration of his own witticisms ... his handsome, but stupid face ....' ¹

Could this not have been Kavalerov speaking? 'Long live the underground ... but I'm lying, because I know as well as 2 x 2 that the underground isn't best at all, but something else ... that I'm greedy for, but will never find.' ² Easily recognizable in these words is Kavalerov's and Babichev's strange mixture of self-deception and sharp insight.

Dostoevskii was reacting in this story, as elsewhere, against the new man of his era, the self-confident, monolithic and rational egotist hero of Rakhmetov's ilk, contrasting with him a vacillating, ambivalent, perverted and irrational anti-hero. To the self-assertive and rationally motivated mentality Dostoevskii opposed the slave mentality, the psychology of resentment.

Like Olesha's heroes, Dostoevskii's Underground Man fears the atomization of the individual in society, and the atrophying of humane instincts. '"I'm just one, but they're everyone", I thought ....' ³ Dostoevskii and Olesha doubtless shared a horror of 'ant-hill' civilization. In 'Winter Notes on Summer Impressions' Dostoevskii writes that to a socialist 'an ant, any old inarticulate, insignificant ant is cleverer than he is because

¹ Notes from the Underground, p. 52.
² Ibid., p. 32.
³ Ibid., p. 37.
in the ant-hill everything is so good, everything is so ordered, everyone is replete, happy ... man has a long way to go before he can measure up to the ant-hill! Dostoevskii was criticizing the socialists, in other words, for their lack of concern for the 'living soul', a criticism implicity hurled at the new order in Envy and of course made the slogan of a whole group of literary critics in the late twenties in the U.S.S.R. Thus the Underground Man loathes the Crystal Palace, the triumph of scientific rationalism, for its aloofness from the sufferings of millions, and Kavalerov despises Babichev's Chetvertak for annihilating the personal joys of family life as well as its discomfort and drudgery.

Although outwardly submitting to society's monoliths, the Underground Man inwardly rebels against them and nourishes, like Kavalerov and Ivan Babichev, a secret belief in his own moral superiority: '... I am a fly before the whole world, a filthy, obscene fly - cleverer than them all, more mature, nobler - ... but a fly that yields to everyone all the time, that is humiliated and abused by everyone ....' Again, in the same vein, he complains to the prostitute Liza that he is perhaps 'the foulest, pettiest, most ridiculous, stupid and jealous of all the

1 'Zimnie zametki o letnikh vpechatleniiakh', p.109.
2 Voronskii, Libedinskii, Ermilov, Averbakh, Fadeev and others connected with RAPP.
3 Notes from the Underground, p.44.
worms on earth', but they 'are in no way better than I am, only, God knows why, they never back down.'

In Kavalerov the Underground Man's 'terribly self-opinionated ... and touchy' nature is at once discernible. Both are morbidly expectant of insults and humiliation and both plot malicious revenge. 'If I take vengeance, then it will be only out of spite.' Despite his oath to murder Babichev, in practice Kavalerov is never so maliciously cruel as the Underground Man — he never approaches the degree of sadism attained by Dostoevskii's hero in his treatment of Liza — but he suffers from the same urge to strike out at those who have elbowed him aside.

Another point of strong similarity between the Underground Man's psychology and that of Olesha's heroes lies in their anarchical principle. 'Man, always and everywhere, whoever he might be, has loved to act as he wished and not as reason or advantage dictated', declares the Underground Man, who vigorously defends his right to act according to his own caprice, governed only by the 'fatal element of the fantastic'. His 'intellection is without moral pivot', as R.L. Jackson aptly describes the Underground Man's state of mind. Kavalerov and

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1 Ibid., p.105.
3 Ibid., p.21.
5 Dostoevskii's Underground Man in Russian Literature, p.36.
Babichev are similarly sworn enemies of rationalism, and seek refuge in the world of dreams and poetry. Rationalism can only have the effect, these 'underground men' would agree, of annihilating free will and making of man an ant or a machine. The questions of free-will and self-assertion, and their inherent contradictions, are no less central to Dostoevskii's works than to Olesha's early writing, and to Envy in particular.

Dostoevskii's Underground Man was one of the first fully-conscious 'little men' in a long line of 'little men', clerks, dreamers and poor folk, including Kavalerov and Babichev, going back to Pushkin's Vyrin in The Station-master, Gogol's Akakii Akakievich in The Overcoat and also to Dostoevskii's own Devushkin in Poor Folk. They all appear, as Kavalerov and Babichev so often do, in a tragi-comic light, pathetic buffoons despite themselves, going to absurd extremes in their behaviour, helplessly falling victims of their own insignificance. Some of the most outstanding later developments in this line of characterization are to be found in Chekhov's short stories.¹

Despite the battle of pride with timidity, the moral outrage and the lust to avenge their hurt, these 'underground men' as a rule end up in a state of inertia, helplessness and degradation (although the Underground Man himself swears he will keep up the battle for survival), so that Kavalerov's and Babichev's fate was

¹ e.g. 'Smert' chinovnika', 'Toska', 'Tolstyi i tonkii' and the one-act plays.
in no way an innovation. The Underground Man admits peevishly:
'I was never a coward inwardly, although I was always a coward when it came to action.'

Another crucial problem facing both Dostoevskii's Underground Man, not to mention other of his characters, and Olesha's heroes, is that of alienation from society. In this divorce from the life of the people, who appear in a philistine light, and in the consequent introspective and inverted existence, lies much of these superfluous characters' torment and misery. It is precisely in this regard that Dostoevskii's and Olesha's characters fit into the 'superfluous man' tradition. Their sense of isolation and despair drives them to seek man's integrity and worth in his separateness and individuality, but without hope of ultimate success.

In this pathos of suffering and despair Dostoevskii finds the essence of man's identity, but at this point Olesha parts company with Dostoevskii, not burdening himself with any philosophy of happiness through suffering.

Of course Dostoevskii's Underground Man and Olesha's heroes, Kavalerov and Babichev, by no means coincide in every detail. The latter are far more attractive characters than the 'underground men', and even if to Simonov they are rotten

1 Notes from the Underground, p.41.
justifications for schizophrenia and little else besides, ¹ to most readers they are considerably more than 'worms' or sadistic psychopaths. They are poets, particularly Kavalerov, who succeed in finding a certain amount of beauty in their lives, whereas the Underground Man is almost entirely a negative character. In neither Kavalerov nor Babichev is the same pitch of frenzied hate and jealousy apparent as in the Underground Man, nor the same mad urge for power (as distinct from 'fame'). 'Without power and tyranny over someone I can't survive ....', writes the Underground Man, ² forced to carry on his battle of self-assertion, whereas Kavalerov and Babichev both succumb, for all their attempts at power, to inertia and degradation.

Nevertheless, the number of similarities between Dostoevskii's hero in Notes from the Underground and Olesha's two decadent heroes, or anti-heroes, in Envy, is considerable. 'The realization by man of his legitimate right to be himself and to find genuine, complete, and independent expression of his personality was the driving force in the behavior of Dostoyevsky's heroes', writes V. Seduro in his book Dostoevsky in Russian Literary Criticism 1846-1956, ³ and this realization was certainly

¹ At the Conference of Moscow Writers, May 1955, quoted in H. Swayze, Political Control of Literature in the U.S.S.R. 1946-59, p.131.
² p.107.
³ p.15.
in some considerable measure the motivating force of Olesha's heroes as well.

The parallels are not surprising since Olesha could scarcely have avoided contact with Dostoevskii's writings, considering his own preoccupation with the known Dostoevskian themes of free-will, the rights of the individual, estrangement from the people, suffering, disintegration and the conflict between East and West. When Envy was written, Dostoevskii was still being widely read and written about - Pereverzev, Bakhtin, Gorbachov, Lunacharskii and L'vov-Rogachevskii, all prominent critics, were discussing Dostoevskii and his value under Soviet conditions. The question of the relevance of the Russian literary heritage to contemporary literature was one of the most pressing of the day. Even though the critic R.S. Kogan had written earlier in the decade that the most urgent task of Soviet literature was the 'liquidation of dostoevshchina, of voluptuous self-analysis',\(^1\) other critics, such as Lunacharskii, still felt - in the twenties - that Dostoevskii could serve as a guide to the mind of 'the enemy' and to the quality of human beings,\(^2\) that the younger revolutionary generation should 'harden [its] teeth by gnawing through Dostoyevskii until [it] understands' the warning against individualism.\(^3\)

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3 Goroachov, quoted by V. Seduro, *loc. cit.*
Although, as an educated person, Olesha must certainly have read Dostoevskii's main works, any Dostoevskian influence on him may have been as much indirect as direct, for Dostoevskii's Underground Man has descendants in the works of such writers as Leonid Andreev, Mikhail Artsybashev, Alexei Remizov, Fedor Sologub and even Chekhov, Korolenko and Gor'kii, with whom Olesha must have been familiar.

Andreev's Story of Sergei Petrovich, for example, is the horrifying account of the disintegration and self-destruction of a 'little man', Sergei Petrovich, who is neither clever nor successful, and who can find only one solution to his problem of loneliness and self-abasement: suicide - a solution also contemplated by Kavalerov. Andreev's nightmarish story The Wall, the title of which seems to echo the Underground Man's cry: 'I have come to the last wall', paints a lurid picture of the human condition, of man's senseless suffering at the mercy, not (in 1901) of a society of 'machine-men', but of an inhuman and coldly silent universe.

In Fedor Sologub's novel Petty Demon an Underground Man's final disintegration into violence and lunacy is depicted. His faculty for correct perception and evaluation corrodes away, his persecution complex develops into perverse cruelty and sadism - he defaces walls, uses foul language, spreads vicious slander.

1 Notes from the Underground, p.6.
This diseased picture of the final stages of decay in bourgeois society has no truly positive characters at all, for even the school-boy, Sasha, the most innocent of all, indulges in abnormal erotic pastimes and transvestism. Although little in Olesha's novel can be compared in its darkly pessimistic tones with Sologub's work, perhaps because Olesha's sense of Weltschmerz had not reached the same critical stage as had Sologub's, the elements of disintegration, perverse violence, hallucination and jealousy find parallels in Olesha's work.

M.P. Artsybashev was another widely read writer at the turn of the century whose works show very clearly the influence of Dostoevskii. Writing after the 1905 revolution, his works naturally reflect the atmosphere of cynicism and despair that reigned in those years. His 'underground' hero Sanin, in the novel of that name, searches for life's meaning in the satisfaction of all desire, this being an extreme form of egotism and anti-rationalism, doubtless owing much to Dostoevskii, which also attracted Olesha's attention (it is the credo of one of his characters in his film scenario A Strict Youth). Overtones of individualism and often quite extravagant eroticism were felt in the works of all the writers of the 'decadent' school. The Serapion Brothers in the twenties still held to the belief that the author must retire into his own mirok in order to be able to create original imaginative works, although, like Olesha himself, they laid greater emphasis on craftsmanship than on any mystical concept of inner genius, as the Symbolists tended to do.
In more general terms Dostoevskii can be seen as the initiator of a series of literary types characterized not only by such qualities as self-sacrifice and humiliation, but also dissoluteness and degeneracy. Prince Myshkin is perhaps the epitome of this type, but such diverse characters as Oblomov, Anna Karenina and even Dr Zhivago could be considered as links in the chain. To this 'passive' hero is opposed the 'rebellious' hero, who has his source in the byliny - Razin, Pugachev, Pechorin, Rakhmetov and so on. If this dichotomy of Russian literary characters has any validity at all, then Kavalerov and Ivan Babichev plainly come out on the side of the former, although they do not share with Prince Myshkin the quality of self-sacrifice, even if they are sacrificed to the new era. With Pechorin, and the 'superfluous man' in general, they share a frustration at being crushed by society in their attempt to assert their own individuality, an inability to find an outlet for their talents and creative urges and a bitter sense of alienation and uprootedness, of futility and cynicism, resentment and despair.

Kavalerov and Babichev belong, too, to the tradition of deheroiization, which has continued in Soviet literature up to this day.\(^\text{1}\) But traditions explain only partly the direction which characterization or development of theme follow. Olesha's writing also formed part of a young Soviet tradition.

\(^{1}\) Aksenov, Tendriakov and Kazakov are examples of writers in this tradition.
On the question of the theme of Envy, Soviet critics again take up quite widely divergent standpoints. Almost all, of course, see the novel, to some extent at least, as representing the battle of the old, bourgeois world, with its ineffectual individualism and decadent self-analysis, with the new - and victorious - world of mechanization and men of action. Some, such as D. Tal'nikov, stress the conflict of the remnants of the bourgeois society with the new socialist order,¹ some the problems, dismissed by Galanov as 'long since solved',² involved in the transformation of society. A. Selivanovskii is not alone in calling attention to Olesha's tendency to 'flirt with the difficulties' involved.³ Prozorov also feels that Olesha accentuates the difficulty of the change for the bourgeois,⁴ while, according to M. Serebrianskii, in an article entitled 'Farewell to the Past', 'the pathos of the reconstruction of human material'⁵ is emphasized in Olesha's novel. Pertsov seems

³ V literaturnykh boiakh, p.69 ('koketnichat' trudnostiami').
⁴ Literaturnaia entsiklopediia (1934), vol. 8, p.279.
⁵ 'Proshchanie s proshlym', Sovetskaia literatura na novom etape, p.40.
to see the theme of the novel in the wider context of 'the question of the intelligentsia' in the new society, and comments together with most other critics on the old world's 'jealousy' — inactive and pointless — for the new. L. Ershov, for example, writes that 'the theme centres around the jealousy of a mashchanin for the new epoch and its people, healthy in spirit, strong in body, a mashchanin so starved and crushed by his previous way of life, that he has lost all urge to be reborn ....'  

However, it is Lezhnev with his 'living man' background and the formalist Victor Shklovskii who probably express most concisely Envy's thematic essence, exposing the novel's pith with a candour more orthodox critics lack. Lezhnev conceives of the theme on two levels: on the first, that of the old world giving up the battle against the new as defeat becomes clearly inevitable, and surrendering to the rule of machines and machine-men; and, on the second, the inner wealth of the 'living man' who is doomed to extinction. (Admittedly this was largely Prozorov's view, also, when he spoke of the two 'streams' in Olesha's fiction: the romantic, in which the inner world is idealized and examined closely, epitomized in the story 'Love'; and the realistic, or satiric, in which these dreams, recognized as illusory and out-worn,

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1 Introduction to 1956 edition, p.6.
are described ironically, as in the story 'The Prophet'.

Perhaps no critic could have been expected to seize on the essence of Envy more succinctly than Shklovskii, intelligent par excellence, who writes that in his 'beautiful and bitter' book Olesha shows 'how enviable are the new morals and new rules for human relations, and how hard it is to wash the filth of the old world from man's soul'. All the critics were agreed that Kavalerov's song was sung. For many there were hidden cadences, and not all found the song melodious. Even among those who did, there was disagreement as to whether he ought to have been allowed to sing it. Some found its notes, whether impassioned or wistful, entrancing, and full of meaning.

Numbered among the latter are the Western writers, who seem to agree in looking on the theme of conflict as basic in Envy. Unusual, perhaps, is Struve's concept of Olesha's 'principle theme' as 'the place of ethics in the Revolution' and even his later formulation of the theme as 'the place of personal ethics, of human emotions and human dreams in this new mechanized, planned, totalitarian society, which has just discarded all ethical ballast and has proclaimed that the end justified the means' accentuates to an unusual extent the question of ethics. The view Alexandrova

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2 'Ob avtore i ego knige', Oktiabr', 1961, no. 7, p.147.
3 Introduction to Envy and The Unknown Artist, p.iv.
4 Soviet Russian Literature, p.103.
adopted of the theme as the 'conflict between the moral values of the old vanished world and those of the new, born of the victory of the revolution', while undistinguished, allows for a variety of different facets of the central theme: the individual against collectivization, human feelings against the impersonality of 'shock workers' and the historical process, the world of dreams against external reality, and so on. Brown, commenting on the unoriginal nature of the theme, which he holds to be the 'debate of the intellectual with himself over "accepting" or "not accepting" the Soviet régime', praises the richness and universal significance it acquires when transposed into concrete terms as 'a conflict between a successful Soviet sausage manufacturer and two drunken and dissolute poets who envy, hate, and maybe at times love him'.

In touching on these themes in Envy, Olesha was probing at problems that occupied many of the leading Soviet writers of his day, both communist and fellow-traveller. In the forefront of the attention of such writers as Erenburg, Leonov, Fedin, Fadeev, Gor'kii, Tolstoi and many others, were various questions related to the intellectual's place in the new proletarian society, and particularly the question of a twentieth-century 'superfluous man'.

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3 Loc. cit.
One of the most thorough examinations of various aspects of these problems is contained in I. Erenburg's rather rambling and artistically unexciting novel about the NEP period, *The Grabber*, which appeared in 1925. Although lacking in some of Kavalerov's sensitivity and poetic disposition, the main character of this novel, Mikhail Lykov, exhibits a surprising number of traits which reappear in Nikolai Kavalerov two years later. This upholder of the 'primacy of the personality' seeks 'not pleasure, but some great act', praise, the centre of attention. He acknowledges that the Revolution brought him out into the world, but in fact he became a hero of the Revolution more through force of circumstances than conviction. Now he wanders around Moscow, a 'Hamletized intellectual', a latter-day 'hero of our times', repressed in his desire to live life to the full. His 'romantic soul suffered, craving mascarades, footlights, a part to play, applause', but he is a 'hero, a poet, a romantic among Scythes. No, worse, among sheep.' When asked in court why he was expelled

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1 *Rvach.*
2 *The Grabber,* p.103.
3 Ibid., p.123.
4 Ibid., p.122.
5 Ibid., p.53.
6 Ibid., p.289.
7 Ibid., p.213.
8 Ibid., p.227.
from the Party ('iskliuchen iz partii') he answers sourly: 'For my exceptional nature' ('Iz-za moei iskliuchitel'nosti').

At the same time the Underground Man's self-abasement is not lacking: at the time of his confession he admits that he is a petty, pitiful, vile man, and his confession has much truth in it, for on the whole he is a singularly unattractive character, a complete self-seeker, full of self-pity.

Like Kavalerov and Ivan Babichev, Lykov is supplied with a concrete target for his abuse in the form of his brother Artem, a Bolshevik, who displays an 'astounding poverty in what is called his "personal life" ... good communists don't have any biography.' Artem's feelings, such as they are, are dictated by the general drift of the 'ant-heap', for Artem's heart is not 'an independent organ, but a part of an enormous group heart ....' His wife attacks him for his lack of human feeling, 'the hateful heartlessness of the machine-man'.

In the case of Mikhail Lykov, social instinct is drowned in a sea of self-interest, disillusionment with the Revolution, sense of superfluousness in the new society and bitter contempt for the emergent mass-produced machine-man. It is the tragedy of

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1 Ibid., p.332.
2 Ibid., p.218.
3 Ibid., p.141.
5 Ibid., p.331.
Napoleon, he remarks\(^1\) - and, it might be added, of Pechorin, the Underground Man, Raskol'nikov, Svarogich in Artsybashev's Sanin, Startsov, and, supremely, of Sergei Esenin. As Gor'kii said of Esenin: 'You can't hide Sergei Esenin, you can't strike him out of our reality ... he is a bright and dramatic symbol of the irreconcilable cleavage of the old and the new.'\(^2\) Esenin, although refusing to be 'muzzled', as he once told Voronskii,\(^3\) still finally felt cast aside, superfluous, out of tune with the times - the young people were reciting Demian Bednyi's propagandist rhymes rather than his soul-filled and mystical outpourings. These lines from his poem Soviet Russia must have echoed the feelings of many:

My poetry is no longer needed here
And even I, perhaps, am no longer needed here.

I shall render my whole soul to October and May
Only my sweet lyre I shall not surrender.
I shall not surrender her to strange fingers.\(^4\)

As early as 1922, in the novel Julio Jurenito, his elegant picaresque satire on bourgeois and socialist societies, always referred to by napostovtsy as a sort of calumny on the Revolution, II'ia Erenburg had expressed his dread of the mechanization of

\(^{1}\) Ibid., p.227.
\(^{2}\) M. Gor'kii, Sobranie sochinenii, vol. 17, p.212 (GIKhL, 1952).
\(^{3}\) See de Graaff, Serge Esénine, p.44.
feelings and the regimentation of art, his horror at the prospect of a planned society of millions of Sammidts without even the tiniest Napoleon among them.\(^1\) The wittily mocking tone of anarchy and nihilism constitutes in itself a protest against the regimentation of artistic feeling or enforced belief in a rationally organized society, in support of the individualist, the eccentric, the egotist.

In 1932 Erenburg published *The Second Day*\(^2\) in which he attempted to solve some of the problems he raised in *Julio Jurenito*, *The Grabber* and *In Protochayi Lane*. His reconciliation with 'the wall of Soviet reality' in this novel remains, however, in considerable doubt.

Parallels with the subject-matter of *Envy* are numerous: his hero, Volodia Safronov, who considers Wostoevskii's writings 'letters from a dear friend', is a sensitive, self-centred intelligent who feels stifled, as did Kavalerov, in a society where people are little more than ants, although 'the place of human feelings' in this society is not of such importance to Safronov. Whereas Volodia, spiritually crippled, an orphan of the times, pained at his estrangement from his fellow men, finds it impossible to live a full enough life, languishes and commits suicide, the 'positive' hero and heroine, Kolia and Irina, find

\(^1\) *Julio Jurenito*, p.269.

\(^2\) *Den' vtoroi.*
fulfilment in their work and devotion to Kuznetsk, to a machine-dominated existence. An attractive, thoughtful girl, who, like Valia, provides a link between the two worlds, Irina is won by the man of the future, Kolia, a rather stereotyped, two-dimensional figure in the Makarov mould.

Like Kavalerev, Safronov alternates between self-abasement before Irina, and a feeling of moral superiority over everyone: 'They're not my rivals.'

Unlike Envy, The Second Day is not a satire, and the characterization is therefore on a deeper level. Safronov's alienation is more complete than Kavalerev's, who at least has some allies. One senses, however, that, like Olesha, Erenburg is still unable to answer all his hero's questions, for Safronov's doubts about communist ideals are hard-headed and realistic. If Volodia Safronov is a spiritual cripple, then the 'positive heroes' - Kolia, Vasia Smolin, Shor (the staryi bol'shevik of the piece) and others - are stereotyped puppets.

That Erenburg did not finally resolve these inner conflicts is also suggested by the fact that he was still preoccupied with these themes some 20 years later: Volodia Pukhov in The Thaw is descended from Volodia Safronov in The Second Day and hence ultimately from Dostoevskii's Underground Man as surely as Peredonov, Andrei Startsov or Nikolai Kavalerev. Young, handsome, clever, the artist Volodia already feels 'an old man tired of life',

1 The Thaw (Ottepel'), p.36.
stifled by a society where Raphael would not be admitted to the
artists' union and where, in order to act according to one's
innermost promptings, to express one's subjective experience in
art and to be successful, a man must be a schizophrenic.

Volodia's attitude towards other people, with few exceptions, is
contemptuous, and he resents the way society mentally immures
him, feeling, in a manner very reminiscent of the Underground
Man, as if some monstrous joke has been played on him by life.

One of the most artistic and psychologically convincing
treatments of the clash between the two humanisms - individualism
and communism - is found in K.A. Fedin's Cities and Years,¹
where the ethic of Andrei Startsov, based on love and humanity,
runs counter to the ethic of the 'new man', Kurt Wann, who is
motivated by revolutionary ardour and hate for the old order.

Many years later Fedin wrote of Startsov that 'he could not
subordinate his personal life to the rigorous, but great tasks
of the time, and for this revenge was taken on him'.² In fact
Andrei himself writes to his beloved: 'My fault lies in the fact
that I am not made of wire.'³ His main fault in fact does lie in
succumbing to the human feelings of pity and gratitude, by freeing
von Schönau, and this is where he errs fatally. His act is
condemned as 'betrayal' by communist critics. It would have been

¹ Goroda i gody (1924).
² Quoted in B. Brainina, Konstantin Fedin, p.66.
³ Cities and Years, p.30.
applauded by Ivan Babichev. In more general terms, his ruin comes as a result of his incapacity to commit himself to any cause in life, to find an active outlet for his principles. As one critic expresses it: his prekrasnodushie remains aimless as well as harmful to the Revolution.\(^1\) Could Ivan Babichev have found a more eligible recruit for his band of 'conspirators'?

Fedin's most grievous shortcoming lay, as did Olesha's, in 'failing to reveal the moral superiority of the victor \(\text{Kurt Wann}\) inasmuch as he has not shown that fidelity to the advanced ideas does not impoverish man but makes him intellectually richer and more complex.'\(^2\) Indeed, there is no doubt about which character is drawn with more sympathetic care, and psychological depth, or which is the deeper thinker, Startsov or Wann.

The influence of Dostoevskii or Remizov can be seen in Startsov's failure to act, his moral suffering and sense of superfluousness - he feels like a little dog in a snow storm which scratches at the door to be let in until its paws bleed, 'unable to understand that it is unnecessary in the world'.\(^3\) Andrei, however, does understand. The strain of 'intellectual anarchism' and individualistic soul-searching, the compassion for the oppressed, the tendency to dwell morbidly on the pitiful and grotesque - of these tendencies Fedin was gradually to

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1 M. Kuznetsov, Sovetskii roman, p.227.
2 V. Ozerov, op. cit., p.110.
3 Cities and Years, p.28.
attempt to free himself in accord with the 'social command', as was Oleska with less artistic success. The intelligent's problems of adjustment were also at the crux of Fedin's subsequent novel, *The Brothers*,¹ which appeared in 1928. The hero, Nikita, is a direct descendent of Andrei Starsov, introspective, alone, déraciné, but a much more finely drawn and balanced personality than Olesha's Kavalarov. Could Kavalarov have been perceptive enough, as Nikita was, to reflect: 'He understood that to uncover others' souls is a great art, and he imagined he would uncover his own. And - nothing, thoughtless emptiness! - there it is, uncovered, his soul, and nothing in it but chaos and confusion.'²

As a musician, he derives all his inspiration from within - his great symphony is not the outcome of revolutionary fervour but of an intense personal experience. '... he must turn his gaze inwards on himself and convey what he sees.'³ He is never really at one with his people or moved by social impulses, except, perhaps, where he admits to his niece: 'I have no right to stay silent if I have something to say and I am obliged to give all these people everything I have.'⁴ His attitude to life is contrasted, in the manner typical of the times and exemplified by

¹ *Brat'ia*.
² *The Brothers*, pp.152-3.
³ Ibid., p.155.
⁴ Ibid., p.282.
Envy, with that of Rodion, the communist 'man of action', who, while not a wholly unsympathetic character, is a far shallower and less sensitive person than Nikita. The impression gained is certainly that sensitive, inward-looking men of Nikita's stamp must lead a lonely existence in Soviet society. Of course Fedin came under the same sort of fire for his treatment of this theme as Olesha had a year earlier. V. Pertsov, for example, predictably enough berates Fedin for his justification of Nikolai Karev's individualism and egotistical devotion to his music, claiming that to solve his problems Karev should have joined in the revolutionary struggle, fought in the war and identified himself with the people.¹

P. Romanov's novel Comrade Kisliakov² (1930) also has much in common with Envy, including a similar satirical approach. It is the story of an intellectual who at heart is selfish and personally ambitious, fearing the encroachment of the masses on the individual and deeply mistrusting everything proletarian. 'The general feeling amongst the intelligentsia,' observes an intelligent friend of his, Arkadii Nesnamov, 'is that they are like Egyptian slaves, set to build a pyramid which will form their own grave.'³ Kisliakov agrees, but cannot resist trying to ingratiate himself into the new order, almost convincing himself that he really does

¹ 'Lichnost' i sotsialisticheskoe delo', p.184.
² Tovarishch Kisliakov.
³ Comrade Kisliakov, pp.125-6.
feel the brotherly ties with the proletariat that he should feel and that he is being converted to Marxism; but his conversion is bought at the price of the disintegration of his intellect and character. At the end of the novel he becomes a murderer.

Although, as in *Envy*, the main representatives of the old order are fairly negative, self-seeking, unproductive individuals, a certain amount of sympathy goes out to them because their inability to find an outlet for their creative urges does not seem to be entirely their own fault. The chief villain of the piece, however, the communist Lopukhin, who is partly cast in Andrei Babichev's mould, dismisses and turns out into the street without any qualms whatever perfectly capable workers and normal, harmless human beings whose only crime is to have a non-proletarian background. The main indictment in the novel is certainly against the inhumanity of the new régime and its tendency to allow 'personality and individual initiative ... squeezed out of existence.'¹ One suspects, also, that Romanov, like Olesha, depicts the bourgeois remnants with a communist brush to legitimize the novel as a whole for the intelligentsia outwardly conform to the by now standard communist image of them as effete, meek, helpless and confused.

In another book sometimes linked with *Envy*, *The Woodcut*² by B. Lavrenev, the author attacks very sympathetically similar

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¹ Ibid., p. 128.
² *Graviura na dereve* (1928).
problems of an intelligent battling against an unthinking, philistine, and even inhuman milieu, against Soviet beskul'tur'e, personified this time by a woman, the hero's wife, a sort of female Andrei Babichev. Another point of comparison with Envy in this novel is a call for the recognition of personal feelings, however pessimistic or Dostoevskian, as legitimate. Lavrenev's hero, however, is a Party member.

The fate of bourgeois individualism in its various forms was of intense interest to Maksim Gor'kii also. In 1924 he wrote two short stories in which he explored this subject: the first, 'The Story of a Hero', tells of a shy, thoughtful and very sensitive young man who feels 'different' from everyone else, and, fearing that under socialism his individuality will be crushed and he will be unable to act, he becomes a monarchist, and eventually a counterrevolutionary bandit. His mentor recommends as suitable reading material Dostoevskii, Leont'ev and Nietzsche, being of the opinion that 'everyone is really an anarchist at heart.'¹ In 'Karamora', the story of a revolutionary who betrays the cause in order to save his own life, the crucial question facing every bourgeois individualist is posed: 'Is life given to man to control or is man given to life to be devoured?'² The danger of violation of basic human values is clearly recognized: 'The revolutionary needs only enthusiasm and faith

¹ 'Story of a Hero' ('Rasskaz o geroe'), p. 96.
² p. 167.
in himself. Interest in the diversity of inner experience is definitely harmful to him,¹ says Karamora.

Some authors showed their intelligent heroes and heroines faced by more dramatic circumstances where the questions of human values were literally a matter of life and death: I. Babel's tales of Red Army life as told in Konarmiia (1926) derive much of their piquancy from the clash of a sensitive intellectual's feelings and observations with the barbarity and slaughter of the Civil War; an intellectual's fear of her personality's being swallowed up and exterminated by the new ruthless, monolithic society is the dominant theme of V. Veresaev's novel Dead-end² which, centring as it does on the Civil War years, also touches on the question of reconciling the cruelty and violence of the Revolution with personal humane values; in his story 'Sky-blue Cities'³ (1925), as in 'Gadiuka' (1928), A. Tolstoi is aware of the destructive effect on a sensitive mind of the violence and brutal anarchy of the Civil War followed by provincial meshchanstvo, and in the former story his dreamer and idealist finally goes mad and commits a murder.

Tolstoi's unusually sensitive awareness of the intelligentsia's problems also comes to light in the first part of his trilogy Road

¹ pp.144-5.
² V tupike (1924).
³ Golubye goroda.
to Calvary, 'The Sisters', written abroad in 1919. Attention is focussed on the intelligentsia's alienation from the Russian people, with whom the country's real strength lies, and its sense of despair and aimlessness during the pre-war years. The characters' inner turmoil is perceptively examined and their supreme values are shown to be love and devotion. An interesting note is struck by a speaker at the Philosophical Society who warns:

In the paradise of which you dream, for the sake of which you are ready to convert man into a living mechanism, number so-and-so - a human being into a syllogism - in this terrible paradise lurks the menace of a new revolution. The most terrible of all revolutions - the revolution of the spirit.

Happily Tolstoi's intelligentsia are this time fated to find relief from their anguish without being turned into 'living mechanisms', although clearly Tolstoi was still conscious of the problem facing intellectuals in 1928 when he published the second part of his trilogy, '1918', in which the attention is transferred from the personal plane to the battle-field of the First World War and the Civil War. A German, talking to Katia in a restaurant, says: 'You, Madame, belong to the last remnants of the old era. That is why it makes me so sad to look at your face. The new era does not want it, any more than it wants anything that is useless, inimitable, capable of exciting obsolete feelings -

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1 Khozhdenie po mukam: 'Sestry'.
2 Road to Calvary, vol. I, p.29.
love, self-sacrifice, poetry, tears of joy ....' 1 Fortunately, in the final part of the novel, 'Bleak Morning', 2 published in 1941, all the characters' doubts about their place in the new society are resolved, and Tolstoi finds an answer to the question which he once put to Erenburg as troubling the Russian intelligentsia: 'Shall we intellectuals have our throats cut or shall we stay alive?' 3 His characters discover happiness and fulfilment, both in their personal lives and in the new social framework, through identification with the Revolution, like the intellectual heroes of I. Sel'vinskii's novel Pushtorg (1929) or Gor'kii's Klim Samgin, 4 also an intelligent at first at odds with the Revolution.

L. Leonov's Skutarevskii, in the novel bearing his name, 5 also overcomes his doubts and inner struggles to become a 'new man', although, as in the case of The Thief, the idealistic ending where complete regeneration is promised has the kind of unconvincing ring to it that is associated with endings of Dostoevskii's Crime and Punishment or Tolstoi's Resurrection. The Thief, Leonov's novel about the disillusioned revolutionary Mitka Vekshin, appeared in 1927, the same year as Envy. Although

2 'Khmuroe utro'.
3 In the summer of 1917; see I. Erenburg, First Years of Revolution, p.15.
4 From the novel Klim Samgin (1927).
5 Skutarevskii, published 1932.
the plots of the two novels are quite dissimilar and the psychological analysis is much deeper and more realistic in Leonov's work, there are a number of undercurrents common to both: for example, the sense of disillusionment and superfluousness that afflicted many during the NEP period, particularly those revolutionaries who had been swept along by the elemental excitement and fervour of the Civil War rather than by Marxist convictions, and the intelligent's distrust of the mechanization of human life. There is the communist official Atashuz who says to Mitka: 'The heart beats more slowly because we're economizing. We even have to economize in heartbeats',¹ and the Tsarist official turned communist bureaucrat, Chikelev, also wants a completely planned, regimented society, destroying every vestige of mental privacy. The questions of the cultural revolution that Leonov touches on and the presence of characters from 'the lower depths' also fit into a recognizable pattern.

As a fellow-traveller who, like Erenburg and Fedin, was considerably influenced by Dostoevskii, particularly in his methods of psychological analysis, Leonov had earlier written a story about a superfluous intelligent which ended differently: 'The End of a Petty Man'.² Here he recounted the disintegration

¹ The Thief (Vor), p.136.
² 'Konets melkogo cheloveka' (1924).
and death of a world-famous paleontologist, Likharev, engaged for thirty years on epoch-making work in his field and impervious to external events such as the Revolution. Suddenly he finds that the new society has jettisoned him, that he and his work are not needed by the Revolution. His decline and death are pure Dostoevskii: hallucinations, conversations with a diabolical double, encroaching insanity, attendance at bizarre meetings of effete flotsam and jetsam of the Revolution.

The tendency in a whole range of novels at the end of the decade was to attempt to come to grips with the problem of the intellectual's role in the new mechanized society. The hero of Ia. Il'in's novel The Great Conveyor (1933) says:

Surely we can see this new order of feelings, coming to life all around us, where we have fame purged of conceit and self-love, competition purged of personal rivalry,¹ and love, and dreams, and the practical man's sobriety - surely we have one immeasurably more elevated feeling, unknown to the Cheizes, the Kavalerovs and Babichevs - the feelings of the master of one sixth (so far), and citizen of all six sixths of the world .... Yes, technology brings us closer to this .... And that's why we're in favour of technology.²

Olesha also tried to believe in the reality of this dream, but not all had his fortitude.

As early as the first years of the Civil War, dark murmurings presaging the Russian intelligentsia's coming conflict

¹ 'sorevnovanie, ochishchennoe ot konkurentsii'.
² Quoted by V. Ozerov, op. cit., p.172.
with the Soviet way of life could be heard. In 1918 Zamiatin's novel The Islanders was published. It was principally a satire on middle-class life in England, but its relevance to Soviet conditions lies in its trenchant criticism of all attempts to enforce universal conformity to a 'rational' way of life or to schedule the emotions. In the imaginative and masterfully original satirical novel We, written only two years later but never published in the Soviet Union, these themes were developed into a horrifying spectacle of human life organized to the exclusion of all personal whims, of every element of irrationality. Even mental processes are mechanically controlled. It is an attack on monolithic, depersonalized, mechanized society, on any threat on the part of 'the new Catholicism' to man's right to his caprices and his own opinions.

Another satirical writer whose heroes were the product of the same environment as Olesha's Kavalerov was Zoshchenko. The heroes of both authors were crushed by the ubiquitous stupidity and vulgarity of Soviet society, and in many of his escapades Zoshchenko's hero, like Kavalerov, and of course Charlie Chaplin, is battling in vain against 'big men' - bureaucrats, officials, society's 'high priests'. The luckless 'little men' of Zoshchenko's 'Sentimental Stories' written between 1922 and 1927

1 Ostrovitiane.
2 My (1920).
'The Goat', 'Apollo and Tamara', 'Wisdom', 'People', 'A Terrible Night' and 'What the Nightingale Sang About') are struck in the Kavalerov - Ivan Babichev mould: all are beset by failure, humiliation, frustration, pettiness, boredom, hopelessness and loneliness. In his Blue Book (1935) Zoshchenko shows himself interested in the fate of many of the 'feelings' championed by Ivan Babichev, parading before the reader love, intrigue, despair, heroism (one of the 'Surprising Incidents'), nobility, magnanimity and courage. Of course, in Zoshchenko's case the satire is of a different kind because his hero, not always wholly conscious of the extent to which he is being victimized, does not become embittered.

Olesha's Andrei Babichev was a part of the Soviet 'leather jacket' tradition. The reading public was presented with some of the finest portraits of communist 'leather jackets' in Boris Pil'niak's collection of Civil War sketches called The Naked Year,¹ which was published in 1922. These rational, regimented Bolsheviks, efficient, energetic, handsome, brave, opposed to the sectarian and anarchist supporters of freedom from compulsion, are not wholly unsympathetic characters. They reappear in Machines and Wolves² in 1925, whose very title implies the opposition of the efficiently organized fighting man to the

¹ Golyi god.
² Mashiny i volki.
elemental, anarchical fury of the enemy. Unflattering portraits
of Bolshevik apparatchiki, coldly making tactical manoeuvres
with men's lives, decorate 'A Story of the Unextinguished Moon'¹
(1926), which caused a furor and was banned when Stalin
recognized in one of the least flattering portraits an indelicate
allusion to himself.

In the first years of the Revolution, as a rule psychological
realism had little place in the works of either the non-communist
or communist writers. Such works as Furmanov's Chapaev (1923) or
Revolt (1925), Serafimovich's Iron Flood (1924) or Seifullina's
Virineia (also 1924) are noteworthy for the simplicity of their
thematic development and the superficiality of their psychological
analysis. As the decade progressed there was a drift away from
this oblichitel'nyi approach, as Ershov calls it,² to
characterization where the negative character is portrayed
satirically while the positive characters are superficially
drawn. Writers began to examine in greater depth the inner
struggles of the intelligenty in post-Revolutionary Russia. By
the end of the NEP era, interest was switching in literature from
the problems posed by the Revolution to the characters confronted
by them - the literary careers of Erenburg, Fedin and Leonov all
reflect this shift. The Rout,³ by A. Fadeev, also written in 1927,

¹ 'Povest' nepogashennoi luny'.
² Sovetskaia satiricheskaia proza, p.269.
³ Razgrom.
is an example of this deepening interest on the part of communist writers in the communist's inner conflict. Instead of caricaturing or satirizing the communist hero, the communist writers took the approach of 'tearing off the mask', to use Voronskii's famous phrase. In The Rout, the inner struggle of Levinson, the modern, more humanized version of the 'iron man', is faithfully depicted, although at the same time the individualistic approach to life is objectified very unsympathetically in the person of Mechik, an intelligent and Social-Revolutionary, whose instincts of self-preservation are so disastrous for the communists.

The Pereval writer, Ivan Kataev, a practitioner of Voronskiite humanism, presents an interesting point of view in two stories 'Heart' (1928) and 'Milk' (1930), in which the class conflict is portrayed from a very sentimental standpoint, with communist protagonists not at all devoid of human feelings such as pity and compassion. In 'Heart', the communist hero Zhuravlev is quite the opposite to Babichev: he strives never to divorce the human factor from his duty, but despite the 'positive' treatment of 'iron communists', it is clear that the old problem of the clash of two humanisms was still occupying the thinking of the writers such as Kataev. He, too, opposed his communist hero to a non-communist towards whom he was forced to

1 'Serdtse'.
2 'Moloko'.
be indulgent. Kataev's humanistic viewpoint with regard to opponents of the régime, as in 'Milk', brought him into official disfavour. Ivan Kataev was in fact the first Pereval writer to be arrested in 1937 and the date of his death is still unknown.

A communist's inner life is the subject of Erenburg's novel The Life and Demise of Nikolai Kurbov \(^1\) (1923). A fanatical Chekist falls victim to an irrational love and, unable to untangle his emotional problems, commits suicide. The theme of the communist whose personal life is almost non-existent and who is unable to meet problems of an emotional kind is not an uncommon one during the first two decades of Soviet power.

It is echoed in the former Serapion Brother and fellow-traveller M. Slonimskii's story 'The Emery Machine' \(^2\) where a salt-mine director Oleinikov, whose ascetic life is entirely dedicated to his work at the expense of all personal considerations, receives a letter from a disillusioned communist friend who, suffering from the conflicting demands of the Party for cruelty and harshness and of his conscience for compassion and tolerance, commits suicide.

Communist writers were no less sensitive to the problem of 'iron communists' and the clash of two irreconcilable concepts of humanity than their fellow-traveller contemporaries, although, once the presence of the conflict had been recognized, their

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1 Zhizn' i gibel' Nikolaia Kurbova.
2 'Mashina Emeri', (1923).
approach to its literary expression was more likely to be along the lines of psychological realism, an approach specifically encouraged by A.K. Voronskii, editor of the influential literary journal Red Virgin Soil. For example, F. Gladkov treats harshly the repellent bureaucrat Bad' in in Cement,¹ and also, in three stories written between 1928 and 1930,² by means of a series of grotesquely satirical portraits, he ripped the masks from the climbers, meddlers, intriguers and hypocrites in Soviet industry.

Through all Libedinskii's works runs the consciousness of man's inner complexity and the impossibility of treating human beings as statistics or matchsticks in a game. In A Week,³ in particular, the problems of sacrifice and murder for the cause are examined with a depth of psychological realism and interest in the viewpoint of individual human beings that were uncommon in 1922.

Olesha was sensitive not only to the main currents in Soviet literature and to the rich heritage of Russian literature, but also to some of the tendencies in literature and the arts in Europe and America. An obvious influence on Olesha's characterization was wielded by the film character Charlie Chaplin, of whom Olesha makes admiring mention on a number of occasions.⁴

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¹ Tsement (1925).
² 'Golovonogii chelovek', 'Neporochnyi chert', 'Vdokhnovennyi gus'.
³ Nedelia (1922).
⁴ In A List of Blessings, 'Thoughts about Chaplin' ('Mysli o Chapline') and Not a Day without a Line (see pp. 75, 229).
Indeed, one Soviet critic went so far as to claim that 'Olesha's principal, and, in fact, only theme is "chapliniada".'\(^1\) In Chaplin's scruffy aristocrat is found the prototype for the Kavalerov whose name is 'both distinguished and plebeian',\(^2\) for Ivan Babichev and a number of other trampled 'little men' as well. Chaplin's aristocrat is disarmingly childlike, and in Kavalerov and Babichev, the aristocrat who automatically wishes to subject the world to himself, even if only in his imagination, and the child, with the freshness of its perceptions, the pettiness of its reactions, and its naïveté, also merge.

Chaplin may well have inspired also the failure-image which Olesha's heroes present: in common they have their bungled, impractical approach to life, disastrous confrontations with success-images and failure in their relations with the opposite sex, who always appear unattainable.

When Chaplin's personal biography is compared with Olesha's, it is not surprising, perhaps, that Olesha should have found so much to appeal to him in Chaplin: both came from families where the father lost his position and sought consolation in alcohol, both had rather ambitious and self-centred dispositions, both yearned for fame, both dreaded the machine-age. Olesha, of course, mouths the expected commonplaces about Chaplin: he shows

\(^{1}\) K. Zelinskii, 'Zmeia v bukete'.
\(^{2}\) Envy, p.89.
up the loneliness of man in capitalistic society, and the decay and breakdown of the capitalist system. He reproaches Chaplin for not seeing that there is a way out of this shabby, dead-end existence: communism. Beyond these stock evaluations, however, it is clear that Olesha's appreciation of Chaplin's art has its roots at a deeper level and found an echo in his own art.

Olesha could hardly have avoided Chaplin's films at the time of writing Envy: many were released in the U.S.S.R. between 1923 and 1925 (including The Tramp and the Keystone films), and in 1929 there was a fresh spate of Chaplin films, among which were A Dog's Life and The Idle Class.

In some ways both Chaplin and Olesha were drawing on an even more ancient tradition in story-telling. Their characters hark back to the court-jester tradition: just as the court-jester would parody the king himself, so Ivan is a kind of gross distortion of Andrei Babichev, a mask of Andrei with the lips cracked into a grotesque laugh, and like the court-jester with his background of inventive story-telling, black magic and witchcraft, Ivan Babichev also relates fantastic stories and loves to imagine that he practises his own kind of witchcraft - growing a flower from a wart, trying to create dreams to order, constructing an animate machine and so on. Kavalerov, too,

1 'Thoughts about Chaplin', pp.438-9.
recognizes himself as a clown\textsuperscript{1} and as Babichev's 'court-jester', although in many ways it is Ivan who exhibits more of the jester's characteristics.

In his short novel \textit{Envy} Olesha clearly managed to shed some light on many of the themes dominating the thought of Soviet intellectuals: he was writing squarely in the mainstream of Soviet literature when he asked who was to inherit the world of fine feelings, of love, jealousy and beauty, in the new world of socialism, dominated by a crude materialism and utilitarianism, a world where old concepts of humanism were fighting to remain alive, where old beliefs in the sanctity of the individual personality were being uprooted, and the machine age seemed to be threatening man's individuality, and right to an inviolable inner world. If in these themes there was little that was original, there was much that was original in Olesha's literary approach to these subjects.

\textsuperscript{1} \textit{Envy}, p.55.
Part Five: The Style

One of the salient aspects of Olesha's style in *Envy* is the primacy of the subjective element which permeates it. In reviewing contemporaneous novels, it is difficult to understand how Olesha could have written the novel as it stands, with this primacy of the subjective playing such an important part, without the influence of the French surrealists. Of course the Serapion Brothers also preached the importance of the subjective and personal view in art, and were deeply interested in questions of literary style, but *Envy* bears so many traces of a purely surrealist method that a comparison with the French surrealists inevitably arises.

André Breton, the great apologist of the surrealists—and, like his fellow surrealists, a great admirer of the Soviet Union—wrote in his 'Second manifeste du surréalisme': 'Tout porte à croire qu'il existe un certain point de l'esprit d'où la vie et la mort, le réel et l'imaginaire, le passé et le futur, le communicable et l'incommunicable, le haut et le bas cessent d'être perçus contradictoirement',¹ and surrealists, he avers, try to determine that point. Nothing must bind the imagination.

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¹ p.154.
The subjective holds sway, the artist's vision is often nightmarishly solipsistic. The surrealist's world is a world of half-realities, dreams, intercepting planes. This subjective approach to reality is borne out in the use of images in particular. Of some pies being sold in Khar'kov during the famine, Olesha writes that they 'were almost muttering under their cover and wriggling around like puppies.'¹ Again, during the scene where he goes back to apologize to Babichev, only to end up by insulting him, Kavalerov writes:

There is a draught. The door is still open. The draught has given me a wing. It flaps agitatedly over my shoulder, fanning my eyelids. Half my face is anaesthetized with the draught.

"It isn't as simple as that", I say, pressing myself against the door-jamb so as to crush the horrible wing ....²

An outstanding example is the lane 'made of joints. Like heavy rheumatism I make my way from joint to joint. Things do not like me. The lane is suffering from me.'³ One translator renders this passage: 'Weighed down with rheumatism, I make my way .... The street makes me suffer.'⁴ He thus misses entirely the surrealist inversion of the normal view. Just as the wing actually grows out of Kavalerov's shoulder, so church-chimes are

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¹ Envy, p.40.
² Ibid., pp.68-9.
³ Ibid., p.43: 'Ia tiagostnym revmatizmom dvigaius' iz sustava v sustav .... Pereulok boleet mnoiu.'
⁴ Envy (P. Ross's translation), p.31.
actually transformed into a 'romantic Western European character', Tom Virlirli, who in turn actually becomes Volodia Makarov. So Ivan 'calls the vase' in the window - not in the direction of the vase or Valia behind the vase. Even when Valia appears at the window, the reader's attention does not wander far from the vase: as she appears, Valia knocks it over and, for no obvious reason, we watch the water drip from the vase onto the cornice. When Valia begins to cry, her tears flow down her cheeks 'kak po vazochke' - not 'like water trickling down a vase' but simply 'po shcheke, kak po vazochke'. Two very disparate objects, the vase and Valia's face, 'cessent d'être perçus contradictoirement'.

When Kavalerov writes to Andrei that 'I look at you, and your face begins to expand strangely, your torso expands - the clay of some fetish or idol is swelling up and bulging', no one would pretend that he really sees Andrei expand, but Kavalerov all the same is relating a very real subjective experience, which has its roots in his desire to have power over the world and those who threaten to dominate him. By means of 'psychical automatism', (although the degree to which craft yields to automatism must remain suspect), the surrealist lets his words express the 'real

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1 Envy, p.63.
2 Ibid., p.43.
3 Ibid., p.44.
4 Ibid., p.56.
functions of thought', and Olesha lets his imagination fructify in the same way. There is also some hint of 'pataphysical' devices, as applied by Jarry, Prévert, Queneau, Ionesco and others, with their theory of 'describing a universe which one can see - must see perhaps - in place of the traditional one'. This is how Kavalerov and Ivan Babichev defend themselves against external reality.

The question remains: why are these images, similes and metaphors so arresting? The surrealists, particularly Aragon and Breton, were renowned for their verbal inventiveness, and this is one of Olesha's outstanding merits. In this regard he would probably have preferred to be compared with Maiakovskii, whom he admired so sincerely for his linguistic inventiveness, but the comparison with the surrealists still holds good because the inventiveness seems to have been guided in the main by similar principles - or perhaps lack of principles. For Maiakovskii images are rarely just descriptions of his poetic inventory or an aim in themselves (a charge regularly levelled at the imaginists and not irrelevant to Olesha's style at times), they express his position as a revolutionary writer. Olesha's attitude to imagery and metaphors is often nearer that of the surrealists because, although his juxtaposing of two realities

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1 A. Breton, 'Manifeste du surréalisme', p.40.
2 Aragon visited the U.S.S.R. in 1930, attending the Second International Congress of Revolutionary Writers in Khar'kov.
is not as a rule completely arbitrary (despite the charges made by some critics, such as Berkovskii, Ostrovskii and others), his aim is not to create 'revolutionary lyrics', hint at the bright future through the present mists or otherwise politically orient his creativity.

André Breton writes at some length, and perhaps not wholly in accord with his own avowed principle of 'psychical automatism' when composing, on the surrealist attitude to metaphors. To him a metaphor is the 'rapprochement de deux réalités, plus ou moins éloignées',¹ and 'plus les rapports des deux réalités rapprochées seront lointains et justes, plus l'image sera forte ....' Some kind of divine spark results from the juxtaposition, lending the metaphor its brilliance and power. The example Breton gives of a surrealist image is typical of Olesha for its bizarreness: 'il y a un homme coupé en deux par la fenêtre'.² This is exactly the process Olesha carries out and the effect he achieves with such images (admittedly more 'directed' than Breton's example) as the following: 'A lamp stands between us. The lamp-shade, from where I am looking, annihilates the upper portion of his face, it doesn't exist.'³ Some Soviet critics might complain, as does L. Borovoi, that Olesha is 'dressing things up', 'obscurring

¹ 'Manifeste du surréalisme, p.34.
² Ibid., p.35.
³ Envy, p.38.
the correct view of his own genuine possibilities and aspirations', that he is indulging in 'pisatel'stvo'. In fact, the question is never whether the top half of Babichev's face exists or not, or even whether it seems that way to Kavalerov. It is a question of subjectively creating the impression of a mindless machine by juxtaposing two 'realities': in the first instance, a face partly obscured by a lamp-shade, and in the second, a brainless, depersonalized shell of a man. That the second 'reality' is not on the same plane as the first is linguistically irrelevant. It is a 'reality', if of a different order, to Kavalerov, whose every description of Babichev, in fact, makes of him a headless trunk. The same effect is produced by such metaphors as the following in a description of Andrei's face from a distance: 'It had no eyes. There were the two discs of the pince-nez, gleaming dully like quicksilver.'

Shortly afterwards, when he is seeking Andrei at the construction site, he writes: 'I saw a figure flying immobile above me - I didn't see a face, only nostrils: two holes, as though I was looking up at a statue.' The inhuman, machine-like, Olympian impression is conveyed masterfully by this surrealist juxtaposing of two realities: a statue and Babichev. In the latter case, of

1 'Novye slova', Krasnaia nov', 1940, nos 9-10, p.262.
2 Envy, p.53.
3 Ibid., p.55.
course, the association is less bizarre, incongruous or unexpected than many - the two 'realities' are not so distant - and therefore the effect is not so startling.

Other successful images of this kind are the one where Andrei is shown 'splaying his legs, through which an army of Lilliputians is to pass', the nurse 'holding a child arrayed like a Roman pope', the kisses of an aging aunt which made Ivan feel as if he were being 'shot at from a brand-new catapult', the tramp whom Kavalerov and Ivan, from the top of a hill, had taken to be an old cast-off harness. Other images are notable purely for their extravagance and the unexpected mental jolt they effect. Anechka's bed, for example, 'was like an organ. Half the room was taken up with it. Its summit melted into the gloom of the ceiling.' A bird on a branch 'flashed, fluttered and trilled, reminding one of hair-clippers'; an enormous cloud is shaped like South America, and stones are missing from a wall 'like loaves taken out of an oven'. Kavalerov is struck by the

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1 Ibid., p.67; P. Ross renders it: 'as though to let through an army ....' (p.65).
2 Envy, p.70.
3 Ibid., p.78.
4 Ibid., p.103.
5 Ibid., p.99.
6 Ibid., p.43.
7 Ibid., p.67.
8 Ibid., p.112.
resemblance between a padlock and Anechka's face. These images, unlike some quoted earlier, serve no purpose. They were outgrowths of Kavalerov's fruitful, if twisted, imagination, his odd-angled vision. There is no reason to 'rapprocher les deux réalités' of the stone wall and a bread-oven, there is no hidden significance in the shape of the cloud - it could as well have resembled Scandinavia. The connection is only visually 'juste'. Olesha is simply letting his imagination off its leash in a very Bretonesque fashion and enjoying its playfulness and verve.

Olesha's taste for reflections finds interesting expression in the following passage:

The day turned the corner of a shop. A gipsy in a blue waistcoat, with rouged cheeks and a beard, was carrying a clean copper basin on his shoulder. The day was receding, borne on the gipsy's shoulder. The disk of the basin shone blankly. The gipsy was walking slowly, the dish rocked slightly, and the day revolved in the disk ....

The disk set, like the sun. The day drew to a close. 

This is no more than a passing observation, irrelevant to everything except his own interest in light, socially insignificant, delightful. It is exactly this sort of writing which draws the criticism that the use of metaphors, 'oppositions and unifications' by Olesha becomes 'samotsel' - an end in itself - which is levelled at Olesha in the volume Russian Soviet Literature of the

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1 Ibid., p.55.
2 Ibid., p.89.
Institute of World Literature.  

The interpretation of this usage is summary: 'This "inverted" perception of the world, which is emphasized by unusual metaphors and unexpected comparisons, could not characterize better the unsound state of mind of the hero, this last dreamer cast out of life.'

Refraction and inversion are common images in Olesha's work, almost assuming the proportions of symbols. Even here the surrealist overtones are strong. Well-known is Kavalerov's predilection for street-mirrors. He is enchanted with their magic, delighted at the way they break the 'rules of the world' - a very anarchistic, surrealist note. Looking in a street-mirror, one finds 'optics and geometry are shattered, shattered is the essence of what had been your gait, your movement, your desire to go where you were going. You begin to think you can see with the back of your head ...' Kavalerov is intoxicated, dizzy with his seeming ability to transcend the world of appearances. He watches the street scene in a window. 'A tram which has just passed out of your line of vision reappears before you, cutting across the edge of the avenue like a knife cutting a cake.'

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2. Loc. cit.
3. envy, p.70.
4. Loc. cit.
5. Loc. cit.
Your face hangs motionless in the mirror, it alone has a regular shape, it alone is a remnant of the true world, when all has crumbled, changed and acquired new norms, to which you would never become accustomed, even if you stood for a whole hour before the mirror, in which your face appears to be in a tropical garden. The greens are intensely green, the sky is intensely blue.  

Sergei Bondarin, in a section of his manuscript about Iurii Olesha entitled 'Monologue before the Mirror', speaks of Olesha's almost morbid attraction for mirrors. He would often stand in front of the mirror, examining his reflection, horrified to find himself growing old. For Olesha the mirror was a symbol of meshchanstvo, of private property, self-centredness. It was 'mysticism' and 'aestheticism'. Hence his obsession with mirrors. Hence his remark to Bondarin: 'Under communism there should be no mirrors.'

Kavalero also likes to look through the wrong end of binoculars: it gives him a sense of power to be able to miniaturize the world at will. 'I find that the landscape observed through the wrong end of the binoculars gains in brilliance, colourfulness and stereoscopic effect. The colours and contours seem to be sharpened. An object, while remaining a familiar object, suddenly becomes laughably small and unusual ...

It's like a dream ....'  

1 Ibid., p.71.  
2 P.74 of manuscript.  
3 Envy, p.69.
Kavalerov and Ivan Babichev meet in a mirror, this world of heightened colour and freshened perception, of new proportions and new laws. When Kavalerov asks Ivan which side he came from (because directions get confused in the world of reflections), Ivan gives his classic reply: 'Where did I appear from? I am a figment of my imagination.'¹ Not always, however, are the symbolic overtones so strong.

If parallels with the surrealists can be drawn in the area of Olesha's subjectivism, inclination towards the bizarre and anarchical, and escape from the usual sense of things (of this Kavalerov's interpretations of Babichev's actions are striking examples), his symbolism is probably more closely related to that of such writers as Belyi, particularly in the realm of recurring images — for example, mirrors, Volodia's flashing teeth, Ivan's huge yellow pillow, sleep and so on. In a sense, the whole Chetvertak project, which never achieves any degree of concretization, remains a symbol of Babichev's activity. Its most 'concrete' appearance is in fact in the fictitious story recounted by Ivan: 'The Story of the Meeting between Two Brothers'.² Ophelia is no more than a symbol, existing solely in Ivan's imagination and Kavalerov's dream, representing the spiteful revenge of Ivan's epoch on the new, Ivan's mockery of the new emergent ideals. It also symbolizes the 'brain of a

¹ Ibid., p.71: 'Ia sam sebia vydumal'.
² Ibid., p.103.
generation ... that composes songs as well as formulae. A brain filled with dreams ..." \(^1\) Anechka Prokopovich is likewise little more than a symbol of Babichev's and Kavalerov's degradation. As a result of symbolization of this kind, character analysis lacks depth. Only Kavalerov, and, to a slight degree, Ivan Babichev, are developed as 'living' characters and the reason is doubtless that these characters alone share Olesha's own view of the world. Envy was admitted by Olesha to be an autobiographical work in the sense that Kavalerov 'looked at the world with my eyes'. \(^2\) It is not an autobiographical work in the more profound sense, however, in which Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* or Tolstoi's *Anna Karenina* are autobiographical. Olesha is not attempting to 'find himself' through his work or further elucidate his own inner problems.

It became increasingly apparent in his short stories and plays that the only character Olesha really understood was his own, hence the sparse gallery of interestingly drawn characters in his work: Kavalerov, Goncharova (*A List of Blessings*), the young hero of the story 'The Chain' and perhaps 'The Cherry Stone'.

It is important to note, however, that Olesha's symbolism lacks the mystical and of course religious overtones characteristic of the work of the Symbolist school. The main characters are too

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developed to be regarded simply as symbols and nothing else. They are _obobshchenia_ — generalizations. They are incarnations of world-views. In fact, in an acceptable sense, the real heroes of Olesha's works, both prose and drama, are _mirooshchushcheniia_ rather than persons. Struve has given this mixture of awareness of the concrete world and symbolism the name 'symbolic realism'.

Olesha's imagery does not lead to ornamentalism on the scale practised by Belyi, for example, although sometimes the reader might wish that Olesha had been less eager to squeeze in yet another exotic image, assemble yet another bizarre comparison, focus on yet another picturesque detail. At the same time, Olesha's style retains its masculinity and vigour — any debt to Chekhov must be sought in other directions — and essential simplicity and limpidity. Although these traces of ornamentalism are to be found, Olesha's style never becomes rococo. The whole novel is written simply, but it is not the simplicity of Gor'kii's or Hemingway's style, but of sentence structure, plot and character analysis. Olesha manages to combine simplicity and lucidity, which only gain from the patches of opalescence, with a colourful, image-enriched style. This simplification sometimes fringes on the gross and even the melodramatic: the broad strokes which form Andrei Babichev's portrait in Part I of the novel are

1 'Pisatel' nenuzhnykh tem', p.140.
particularly reminiscent of the grotesque characterizations of the early French modernist rebels such as Alfred Jarry (especially in his play *Ubu roi*) and Apollinaire, precursors of the surrealists, although probably not through any direct influence, but more because of the common action of the anarchic imagination rebelling violently against bourgeois - or communist - philistinism. The kind of hyperbola indulged in by Olesha is also typical of the satire of the early 1920's, of the Erenburg of *Julio Jurenito*, of many of Zamiatin's stories, Zoshchenko's early attempts at social satire, and of course of non-satirical works such as *Chapaev*, *The Iron Flood* and *Virineia*. Il'f and Petrov also wrote in a satirical manner reminiscent of Olesha's and also occasioned doubt in certain quarters as to the victim of their satire: the degenerate Ostap Bender, his 'establishment' adversaries, or both.

In *Envy*, as in later works, shades of the supernatural are in evidence, as in a work such as Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes* or even Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*. Olesha's 'supernatural' elements are confined to stories and dreams, however dramatized, as in the case of Ophelia or Kavalerov's ability to fly, and to phantoms of the imagination, and for this reason might be better described as elements of fantasy, rather than the supernatural. It is impossible nevertheless, to avoid, particularly in scenes such as the one where Ivan takes Kavalerov to see Ophelia, a feeling - surrealistic, as indicated in Breton's definition -
of the 'irréel' intruding on the 'réel', of something 'au-delà du premier plan' of reality intruding uncannily into the more immediate plane, in a manner reminiscent of Giraudoux or even Poe. In speaking of Envy, Mirskii goes so far as to call all the characters 'irreal'ny'.¹ 'Irreal'nyi Olesha', he continues, 'disguised in the grotesquely hideous masks of Kavalerov and Ivan Babichev, fights with the 'irreal'nye', although illusorily alive-looking puppets of the 'sausage-maker' and physical culture devotee ... It is in this 'irrealité' that the unique charm of the novel is to be found.' This 'irrealité' must be distinguished from the 'unreality' which the critic V. Bragin claims characterizes the heroes of Envy, and Kavalerov in particular.² By 'unreality' Bragin seems to mean: 'atypical', 'accidental', 'socially abstract' and 'impressionistic'.

There is much in Olesha, as has been observed on a number of occasions, that hints of an acquaintance with the works of Jean Giraudoux. Giraudoux writes: 'Le poète est celui qui lit sa vie, comme on lit une écriture renversée, dans un miroir, et sait lui donner par cette réflexion qu'est le talent et la vérité littéraire, un ordre qu'elle n'a pas toujours.'³ How easily these lines could have been Olesha's. Giraudoux likewise was a great

¹ 'Iurii Olesha', Literaturnaia gazeta, 2 June 1934.
² 'Osoboe mnenie o Zavisti', Vecherniaia Moskva, 7 July 1928.
³ 'Gérard de Nerval', Jean Giraudoux: Littérature, p.100.
believer in the power of the 'imagination fantaisiste' and loved, like Olesha, to play whimsical word-games with the basically unappealing world that surrounded him, to dream up fanciful explanations for everyday occurrences. The similarities in their literary approach are more noticeable in Olesha's short stories which invite comparison with Giraudoux's Provinciales.

Interesting, also, in this connection, is a note by Dostoevskii, written shortly before his death, on the subject of the fantastic element in The Queen of Spades:

... the fantastic in art, he writes, has its limits and rules. The fantastic must touch the real closely enough for you almost to believe it ... The Queen of Spades is the supreme point in the art of the fantastic. You even believe that Herman actually had a vision, one corresponding to his outlook on life, but at the end of the story ... you cannot decide whether the vision was the result of Herman's nature or whether he was actually one of those people who are in contact with another world, one of those spirits, malicious and hostile to humanity ... That is art! ¹

The idea of the fantastic being very close to the real is not far from Olesha's own conception. The 'fantastic' element in Envy has nothing in common with a view of the world as inherently mysterious or sinister, as in the case of Nathaniel Hawthorn, Franz Kafka or Heinrich von Kleist, for example. It is expressed more simply in an extravagance of conception, a penchant for unrestrained imagination, whimsicality, and a

¹ See L. Grossman, Dostoevskii, p.488.
tendency to allude to happenings outside this plane of reality - flying, black magic and so forth. Olesha himself wrote that 'Wells' Invisible Man and not French writers such as Jean Giraudoux ... had the greatest influence on me'. The universe is neither mysterious nor horrifying to Olesha. His tastes are simply romantic, as his inordinate love of H.G. Wells and the 'science fiction' genre testifies, a genre where, against a completely realistic background, 'fantastic' events, or events possible only in the imagination, take place, all described in a realist manner.

While its influence on Olesha must have been considerable, Olesha does not, in Envy, cross into the realm of sheer fantasy, after the manner of a writer like Grin. He covers himself by relegating all these phenomena to subjective impressions, dreams and stories.

One critic, A. Beletskii, in his cursory examination of the history of vymysel and domysel in Russian literature, finds vymysel the rarer approach, domysel characterizing the style of the 'greats' of Russian literature - Pushkin, Tolstoi, Turgenev and others. Beletskii is in fact discussing the relative influences of German and Western European romanticism compared with the realist strains, related no doubt to similar tendencies in French literature of the 19th century, to Flaubert, Stendhal,

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1 'Beseda s chitateliami', p.157.
2 'Vymysel i domysel v khudozhestvennoi literature, preimushchestvenno russkoi' (1955).
Maupassant and Lola. The influence of German romanticism on
Olesha cannot be determined with any certainty, although he did
share with Romantics in general a passion for the right to dream,
an interest in the affairs of the heart, distrust of rationalist
society; but vymysel for Olesha was probably not a means of
escape from the world and its problems in the same way it was
for the Romantics or a writer like Giraudoux. The question of
Soviet deistvitel'nost' always seems to determine, however,
remotely, the direction of his creativity, his stories are woven
out of the materials of present-day life.

In fact, for all his 'subjectivity' and treatment of the
vagaries of the mind, his style affirms rather than denies the
materiality of the world. It is little wonder that he was
attracted to such poets as Bagritskii whose style was also very
sensuous, playing on such little-used senses as smell, taste and
touch, a direction his own style takes on occasions. He writes
of one of Andrei Babichev's associates, for example, quite
suddenly in the middle of a long paragraph listing Babichev's
visitors: 'He smelt of flowers in the fields and milky
dishes' \(^1\) and of Andrei, as if he were himself a sausage, he writes: 'His
body was tenderly yellow with oil'. \(^2\) Sometimes the physical
details are so tactile that they shade into naturalism, notably

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\(^1\) Envy, p.30.
\(^2\) Ibid., p.32.
in the detailed bodily descriptions of Andrei in the first chapter of the novel - his breasts, groin, stance in the lavatory and so on. After being thrown out of the beerhall, Kavalerev lies on top of a drain-grating: 'In the drain, whose air I was inhaling, it was dank, it swarmed with dankness; in the curling black cloud of the drain something was moving, the refuse was alive ....'\(^1\) Then there are the naturalistic descriptions of Anechka's kitchen: for the cats 'she scatters around intestines. This is why the floor is decorated with mother-of-pearl traces of saliva. Once I slipped on the heart of some animal - a small, tightly formed one, like a chestnut. She walks around cluttered with cats and animals' entrails ....'\(^2\) Olesha seems particularly partial to these naturalistic details when Anechka is in the picture: we see her washbasin swimming with hairs that she has combed out,\(^3\) we hear her snoring, moaning and champing at night, and watch the 'tents of her armpits' covering Kavalerev's head.\(^4\) Not all of Olesha's attention to physical detail is as purely naturalistic as these examples would indicate, although when his attention alights on an object it often rests there for the sake of emotional effect.

\(^1\) Ibid., p.34.
\(^2\) Ibid., p.41.
\(^3\) Loc. cit.
\(^4\) Ibid., p.123.
The similarity between this approach and the prevailing mode in Soviet film techniques is striking, especially those of the FEX producers - Grigorii Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg, who in such films as *The Adventures of an October Child* (1924) and *The Cloak* (1926) 'achieved a curious form of expressionism based on exaggeration of gesture by the actor and distortion of angles by the camera, both producing an impressive if artificial heightening of the emotional content of the scenes.'

Could not this in fact be a description of Olesha's method in the prose sphere? Olesha wrote much later that in the years 1923-5 he and his friends 'devoured foreign films' so that he must have been at least aware of trends in the film world at that time. Olesha, figuratively speaking, 'zooms' his lens, focussing suddenly on previously insignificant details - the little girl in the red headband 'with a sun-flower seed hanging on her lip', a detail that draws attention to her innocence and simple childlikeness. Or when Kavalerov meets at the street-mirror Ivan Babichev, who is sucking a sweet, he remarks: 'But out of the corner of his lips in a sweet stream came a trickle of candy.' How much of Ivan's childlikeness, grubbiness, ineffectuality, and even philosophy of life is summed up in this quick 'zoom' to his lips!

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1 A. Knight, *The Liveliest Art*, p.70.
2 'Pamiati I. Il'fa', p.181.
3 *Envy*, p.70.
4 Ibid., p.72.
Another film producer belonging to the years in which Olesha wrote *Envy*, Lev Kuleshov, was 'concerned with the emotional and psychological potentialities inherent in joining one image to the next ... the fine art of cutting.'¹ Olesha applied this device, which happens also to be the core of the surrealist philosophy of the metaphor, with great effect, for example, when Babichev's paragraph on the use of slaughtered animals' blood and Kavalerov's lyrical words to Valia are juxtaposed and when the portrait of Volodia's smiling, plebeian face is made to greet Andrei's threat that his brother ought to be shot.²

Kuleshov's disciple, V. Pudovkin, whose films *Mother* (1925), *By the Law* (1926) and *End of Petersburg* (1927) Olesha may well have seen, also made the viewer 'tactilely aware' of details in the characters' physical surroundings — the mud of the road, the stone of a prison wall, the boards of the floor, the plaster of a hovel and so on, which is an effect Olesha seems often to have striven for.

It was as well the age of the filmic metaphor, the symbol, as Eisenstein's art testifies. In his film *Ten Days*, for example, he makes a point very effectively by focussing continually on the slowly-swinging, richly panelled doors of the Old Guard's offices and the constantly opening and shutting door of the Bolsheviks.

¹ *The Liveliest Art*, loc. cit.
² *Envy*, p.38.
Is not this much the same device as Olesha employs with his recurrent reference to Anechka's bed, to Volodia's teeth, to Ivan's pillow, to mirrors, food and sleep?

As a writer, Olesha approaches the physical world from an unusual angle, combining with surrealist imagery an emotional relationship with material objects. There is constant confusion of different orders of reality, there are people and parts of people that become objects, and objects which become animate beings. To a certain extent this is a feature of all metaphorical writing, of course, but Olesha was almost certainly adopting this form of expressionism because it was an effective outlet for his personal nature and view of art. It was not dictated by a coherent philosophical system, as in the case of writers such as Maiakovskii or Jean-Paul Sartre.

Envy is in no sense a great novel, but it is an exciting novel for what it promises. It attacks the problem of the sensitive intelligent in early Soviet society in a cleverly ambiguous and uniquely expressionistic way. From an artistic point of view, Envy was a brilliant beginning to a young writer's career. Who knows what further refinement of his use of imagery, of his surrealist approach and satirical style, or development of his highly individual method of psychological analysis, may have produced? In some aspects of his work, in the short story form, Olesha, during the next few years, did venture further along several avenues he had only begun to explore in Envy.
CHAPTER THREE: THE STORIES

In the short stories, to which he turned after the first two novels, Olesha does not at first lose sight of the themes which attracted him earlier - the richness of the inner world, the place of the imagination in the new society, the fate of the intellectual and dreamer in a proletarian dictatorship. Although, as in the case of Jean Giraudoux's short stories, Provinciales, with which a comparison is often drawn, Olesha's short stories are largely a reflection of his own view of the world, with many elements of childlike enchantment with the world and a tone of playful whimsicality at times, Olesha, even less than Giraudoux, could justify the appellation of 'irresponsible dilettante', nor could his stories ever deservingly be described as 'a meal composed entirely of hors d'oeuvres', as Giraudoux's work was once called. 1

In his short stories a shift to a more philosophical plane is evident - nearly all the stories are quite clearly written à thèse - but this does not inhibit, at least in the early period, their lyrical and personal expression or Romantic overtones. Without some kind of simple idea underlying them, 1

1 Bernard Crémieux in introduction to Provinciales, p.33.
these stories would suffer from a certain formlessness. Their coherence and inner consistency is maintained only by the unity of mood, artistic vision, tonality and basic idea.

According to Pertsov, Olesha's stories reflect the 'struggle for the discovery of the world, for the affirmation of its materiality, for the feeling of the primacy of existence over consciousness'. Pertsov's remarks are not without their relevancy, but tend to cramp an appreciation of the style and subject of such stories as 'Love' and 'The Cherry Stone' which in a number of ways are perhaps the best Olesha ever wrote. 'The Cherry Stone' is a sensitive and imaginative assertion of man's inalienable right to the 'third world' - the world of imagination and 'attention to details'. On the surface it is the account of a young man's unrequited love and his burying of a cherry stone in memory of his love. In his imagination the tree flowers - his love bears fruit. The dream elements and objective reality - the 'third world' and the 'old' and 'new' worlds - are thus delicately interwoven in Olesha's accustomed style. The narrator creates for himself 'in the face of everyone, of order and society ... a world which

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1 Introduction to 1956 edition, p. 19.
3 'Vishnevaia kostochka', first published in Oktiabr' 1929, no. 8.
4 'Vnimanie'.
is subject to no laws, except the spectral laws of [his] own sensation'.\(^1\) If an outsider were to watch the narrator passing, for example, he would see nothing but a passing man, but the narrator sees his pale shadow and its head being cut off when it falls against a wall.\(^2\) He constructs his own private world out of indirect views, the play of light and shade, reflections and imagination. It is a half-way world in which he is all-powerful.

In the first romantic episode, Fedia's love for Natasha is rejected, and, feeling alone and thrown back on himself, he begins his exploration of the world of the imagination where he can dominate and direct. Standing at a tram-stop waiting for his beloved, Natasha, to arrive, he is gradually turned into an information service by passers-by. The reader senses again here something so reminiscent of existentialist writers and hinted at in Kavalerov in *Envy*: the 'objectification' or depersonalization of human beings by their surroundings – the pathetic fallacy oddly in reverse.

Finally, in his own imagination, he becomes a militiaman, directing the traffic, and thereby restoring his self-respect in his own eyes. He even goes through the outward motions and is observed in this strange pose by his neighbour, Avel', a Party member, to whom he remarks: 'How strange is the crossing of the

\(^1\) 'The Cherry Stone' (1956 ed. of *Izbrannye sochineniia*), p.263.
\(^2\) Ibid., p.262.
practical and imagined worlds.' ¹ This throws no light on the
subject at all as far as Avel' is concerned and he dismisses
Fedia's reasoning as 'some kind of Bergsonism'.²

Fedia's planting of his cherry stone is a symbolic act, yet
not unconnected with reality. It is the act of a romantic, but,
as Fedia touchily points out: 'Romanticism is a manly thing,
you shouldn't make fun of it.'³ The cherry blossom, according
to a quaint Japanese notion, is the 'soul of man'.⁴ The tree
that grows is to be Fedia's child by Natasha. Fedia is concerned
with substituting an artistically creative attitude to life for
an active participation in life.

In fact, in a moment of supreme self-justification as an
artist rather than as an active member of society, he suggests
to Avel' that 'dreamers shouldn't produce children. What use
to the new world are dreamers' children? Let dreamers produce
trees for the new world.' Avel' replies: 'That has not been
taken into account by the plan.'⁵

Fedia then goes on to examine further the world of
observation - or 'attention to detail': his eyes single out
myopically the variegated strands of wool in his socks, look anew

¹ Ibid., p.265.
² Loc. cit.
³ Ibid., p.266.
⁴ Loc. cit.
⁵ Ibid., p.267.
at anthills, try to bring the physical attributes of a stone into relief in a manner that recalls Flaubert or Maupassant. In Olesha's case, however, it is never a question of simply cataloguing physical details. Rather it is a facet of his artistic perception, enchantment with the powers of vision.

In the final section, Avel' is leading a group of excursionists to see the planned site of future construction work. Avel' calls for 'imagination' - but only according to the plan. Fedia, however, can see further - to the flowering of his tree, untouched by the plan, in the garden of the new buildings. This was interpreted as an optimistic ending by some Soviet critics. R. Miller-Budnitskaia, for example, crowed that the 'legend' about the demise of romanticism in the new socialist world had been 'smashed' in 'The Cherry Stone'. ¹ Another critic, G. Korabel'nikov, in his rather over-optimistic article 'The End of the Chekhovian Theme', also sees the 'theme of reconstruction' running through all Olesha's works, and particularly in 'The Cherry Stone'. ²

In fact, this story, with its rather equivocal relation to the Five-Year-Plan during which it was written, is a romantic treatment of the place of private dreams and visions in the new society: it is not clear whether the lyrical tree will bloom

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¹ 'Novyi humanizm', p.105.
² 'Konets chekhovskoi temy', p.90.
because of or despite the plan. And, indeed, Fedia's dreams can hardly provide grounds for conviction in their idealism.

The story contains the basic kind of contrast associated with Olesha: the somewhat infantile, ineffectual dreamer, jealous of and inadequate before the 'normal', active man, represented by Natasha's lover, Boris, or the Party member, Avel'.

Love and romance of the more common variety in general play little part in Olesha's stories, and it comes, therefore, as no surprise that the love theme should be treated in a strange way in 'The Cherry Stone': declarations of love are made in a normal fashion, but there is no real sense of love conveyed. One of his stories is actually called 'Love', however. It is remarkable not only for its originality and imaginativeness, and particularly for the way in which its surrealistic devices are woven into the very texture of the story, but also for the consistency of its development. 'Love' continues the line of the lonely dreamer in conflict with a 'machine-man', but this time the victory is more clearly on the side of dreams, love and emotions.

While waiting for his beloved to arrive, a young man named Shuvalov, sitting in a park, observes that the 'architecture of the flight of birds, flies and insects is illusory, but it is possible to catch a few dotted lines, the outline of arches, bridges, towers, terraces - a sort of quickly moving, ever-
Shuvalov is concerned because he is starting to see what does not exist. He is prey not only to the play of imagination, but also, as is the hero of 'The Cherry Stone', to the whim of his vision - he observes minutely the insects, grass, leaves and colour composition of the soil. This kind of myopic attention to details also evokes comparison with Giraudoux.

He talks with a man suffering from colour-blindness and both feel that the other's sight defect is the more regrettable. The colour-blind man, who is, of course, related to Andrei Babichev and Volodia Makarov, who were also morally and emotionally purblind, warns him that he is on a dangerous path.

Metaphors poetically materialize as they are wont to do in Olesha's works. Lelia, when she comes, is 'met with an ovation of leaves' - but this kind of error of perception on Shuvalov's part is pronounced worse than the colour-blind man's. Shuvalov sees an apricot tree spring up where Lelia throws away an apricot stone. Love has turned him into an idealist of the purest water.

Shuvalov is suffering from Olesha's own proclivity to materialize thoughts, to confuse the real and imagined. He half-fears a tiger and so he half-sees a tiger - even if in ordinary terms it is only a striped wasp. He not only feels he is on 'the

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1 'Love', p.275 (1956 ed. of Izbrannye sochineniia).
2 Ibid., p.277.
wings of love', he actually walks on air. The effect is that of a surrealist film, with ideas taking concrete shape. Isaac Newton appears to him in a dream - the voice of rational thought and material laws, challenging the subjective fantasy of 'wings of love' - asking him: 'Did you fly? Did you fly today, young Marxist?' The young Marxist is himself disturbed at his impressions of having flown: 'just think, I'm a perfectly healthy man, a materialist ... and suddenly before my own eyes a criminal, anti-scientific deformation of substances and matter starts taking place ...' Shuvalov is worried by his mental freedom, but despite his pressing requests, the colour-blind man is unwilling to exchange his irises for Shuvalov's love. When Shuvalov has seen his Lelia again, however, and his love is refreshed, it is he who rejects the colour-blind man's reconsidered offer of exchange. He has been won over by Kavalerov's 'image view of the world'. 'Go and eat your blue pears', says Shuvalov, preferring to suffer the perceptual aberrations for the sake of the delights of love. Blue pears are inedible - unacceptable. Sensibly adding to the aura of unreality in this story is the constant reappearance of motifs - fruit, the fruit-stone, the tree that grows from it, the lizard,

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1 Ibid., p.279.
2 Ibid., p.281.
3 Ibid., p.282.
4 Ibid., p.283.
the chameleon, various insects, sleep and dreams. In this masterpiece there is little sign of Pertsov's feeling of the primacy of existence over consciousness. 'Love' asserts the validity of the kind of vision that transforms rather than reconstructs the world.

A love affair is also the pivotal point of the story 'Aldebaran', written in 1931, which is one of the first to exhibit the strains of poignancy which came increasingly to characterize Olesha's fiction. The pathos in this case is based on a familiar kind of opposition: an old man's fruitless love for a young girl, Katia, in competition with a young man of the new generation - a ramming-machine operator, who eventually wins the girl. They manage to rationalize away their deception of the old man, Bogemskii, whom Katia had promised to meet at the cinema if it rained, by going to a planetarium where the stars still shone while the Republic still benefited from the rain outside.

Although 'new love' is sometimes clothed in pious phrases, it is essentially as selfish and sentimental as 'old' love was and all classes and generations are subject to the infection.

Despite the reappearance of the 'jetsam of the revolution' type - Bogemskii - the story is soberly told, and remains relatively free from sentimentality. It is told with

1 'Al'debaran', first published in 30 dnei, 1931, no. 8.
characteristic simplicity and whimsicality with arrestingly phrased appeals to the senses, of which the opening paragraphs provide an example:

On a bench sat a small gathering: a girl, a young man and a certain learned old gentleman. It was a summer morning. Above them stood a mighty tree with a hollow. A dank smell came from the hollow. The old man remembered going down into the cellar as a child.

The young man said: 'I've got the whole day off.'
'So have I,' said the learned old man.

......

A little gypsy girl, as big as a besom-brush, came up to them. She offered them lilies.

This kind of vigorous, 'stripped' style has its roots in the feuilletons of the immediately post-Revolutionary years and the writing for children in The Three Fat Men.

A device used by Olesha several times previously is employed again here with effect: when an element of depersonalization enters a conversation, usually as a result of the participation of a member of the 'new order', Olesha introduces a dramatic form of dialogue: In 'Aldebaran', for example, Bogemskii and the young man, Tsvibol, are exchanging a few words quite normally, when suddenly

the radio interferes.

RADIO. There have been heavy falls in the central black-earth region.

BOGEMSKII. Did you hear that?

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TSVIBOL. It's good they were heavy.
RADIO. Meteorological data suggests that precipitation ....

This method is used with similar effect, underlining the main character's state of mind, in 'The Cherry Stone', when Avel' appears on the scene:

Natasha won't come, that's clear. I call Avel'.
I. Did you see me, Avel'? AVEL'. Yes. You're mad.
I. Did you see me, Avel'? I've turned into a militiaman.

Later, when Avel' appears again, Olesha resorts to the same device, to which he has recourse at the very end of the inspector's interrogation in Part II, chapter three, of Envy:

INSPECTOR. Well, have you managed to find anyone yet?
IVAN. I made appeals and searched for a long time ....

Apart from giving an impression of impersonality, this method serves to emphasize rather effectively the importance of whatever is being said.

Not all of Olesha's early stories take such an 'idealist' view of subjective experience. In the strange story 'The Prophet', Olesha gives expression to a very materialist interpretation of subjective processes. This story is of particular interest

1 Ibid., p.296.
2 'The Cherry Stone', p.265.
3 Envy, p.88.
4 'Prorok', first published in 30 dnei, 1929, no. 7, under the title 'The Dream' ('Son').
because in a sense it is an analysis of Olesha's own artistic method: having seen an angel in a dream, the main character, Kozlenkov, comes to the conclusion that he is a prophet. He wilfully misinterprets the effects of a breeze in the office as a sign of his own power; he thinks he has worked a miracle when, demanding two weeks' pay in advance, he receives it; he mistakes the house-porter on top of the fire-escape at sunset for a heavenly apparition; and even sees himself as a martyr when he is mistakenly beaten for having jilted a young girl and caused her to attempt suicide. It turns out, however, that his dream is nothing but the after-effects of eating leeks, and the approach of his angelic visitant merely incipient heartburn.

This story expresses rather neatly Olesha's ironic sense of humour, his piquantly original approach, his concern with subjective experience and personal vision, and determination to interpret the world fancifully, as it pleases him, and at the same time limited faith in dream-experiences. This approach is highly reminiscent of Giraudoux's device of advancing whimsical and wholly impossible explanations for everyday events — for tears, stars, common sounds and ordinary human actions, although with Giraudoux the explanation remains on a metaphorical level.

It is odd that this story should not have been reprinted since the 1936 edition of Olesha's works, because it seems to bear out well Pertsov's thesis, quoted above. In this story the objective materiality of existence is affirmed, although there
are sides to the story that Soviet critics could consider negative: the 'dreamer' - another failed miracle-worker like Ivan Babichev - lapses into indifference at the end when it becomes apparent that everyday reality holds man firmly in its grasp leaving imagination and ideals ultimately powerless.

This is also the case in a story written two years earlier in 1927 called 'Liompa'. An old man, Ponomarev, is dying, and the story concerns his changing relationship with the material world, and, on a wider level, various possible ways of relating to the world. 'On its way to him death annihilates things.' In gradual succession, his world draws in on him: first of all other countries disappear, then the possibility of a family vanishes, then the street, his work, the post-office, the corridor, and finally even his own boots and overcoat.

In his delirium he talks with his blanket, which passes on news to him. The pitcher beside his bed becomes a duchess being wed. But the tap in the kitchen that blows its nose and converses and the chimney-pots chattering on the rooves are less Ponomarev's imagination than Olesha's expressionistic approach and delightful indulgence in the pathetic fallacy.

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1 'Liompa', first published in Vecherniaia Moskva, 8 October 1927.
3 Ibid., p.270.
Ponomarev, who no longer knows objects, only names, and is consequently close to death, is contrasted with a little boy who does not yet know any names, only the objects themselves. Ponomarev tries to tell the boy: 'You know, when I die, nothing will be left. No courtyard, no tree, no father, no mother. I'm taking everything with me.'\(^1\) He wants to believe that he is master of the world, whereas it is actually the world that rules him. He tries physically at the moment of death to grasp familiar objects. But the symbol of youth and innocence - the model aeroplane - soars out of his reach. It is the last object he sees. The little boy, who understands nothing of death, runs ahead of the coffin when it comes, calling out to the dead man: 'Grandad! Grandad! They've brought you a coffin.'\(^2\)

Although basically an attack on solipsism of every kind, and a probing into man's relationship to material objects, this story is artistically interesting for its inner cohesion, which is greater than in 'The Cherry Stone', and its use of metaphors and symbols, which always were Olesha's delight, whether his own invention or some other writer's, such as Maiakovskii's.

All these early stories of Olesha's, despite a treatment of physical objects that is certainly strongly reminiscent of Jean-Paul Sartre in a work like _La Nausée_, are introspective, dealing from the inside with Olesha's private preoccupations.

\(^1\) Ibid., p.273.  
\(^2\) Ibid., p.274.
An attempt at introspective writing of quite a different kind is embodied in the story 'I Look into the Past'\(^1\) (1928), which earns the seal of approval of most communist critics because of its unambiguous anti-bourgeois bias. The writer draws a picture of a quiet, taciturn, aloof sort of child, given to reading in seclusion and indulging his emotions, enjoying manufacturing a sense of hurt and savouring his solitude. He feels superior to his petty-bourgeois surroundings. In short he is a young Nikolai Kavalerov in a different milieu.

The title, 'I Look into the Past', sounds promising, especially when for Olesha the mind often acts as a kind of time-machine. There is, however, very little that is outstanding, either about the story, which is a rather eventless and loosely arranged set of reminiscences, or about the style, which lacks the imaginative expressionistic touches and use of metaphors naturally associated with Olesha's style. Even the Soviet critic N. Berkovskii finds the 'moulding' of Olesha's style unsatisfactory, calling it 'secretarial' and oversimplified.\(^2\) Many fellow-travellers, wrote Berkovskii, are denuding the text of metaphors as if they were taking dry washing from the fence. There remain only the black palings. They can be seen by all, but look wooden.\(^3\)

\(^1\) 'Ia smotriu v proshloe', first published in \textit{30 dnei}, 1929, no. 10.
\(^2\) 'O prozaikakh', p.153.
\(^3\) Ibid., p.154.
There were, then, early signs of the fate of Olesha's politically tendentious prose.

Nor is there anything exceptional about the character of the child in the story, whose experiences and reactions are not shown to differ from those of multitudes of children all over the world. There would seem to be little point in relating unexceptional stories unless some fresh insight or perspective is gained. But Olesha was never able to accept this viewpoint in practice, as his literary career was later sadly to demonstrate. He always found his own experiences and thoughts of absorbing interest and sometimes showed little discrimination in his choice of what to relate. Consequently, as has been pointed out, in none of his works does he create a convincing depth-study of any character apart from himself — and this includes the heroine of A List of Blessings.

In 'The Chain',¹ written in 1929, the reader again sees the world through the eyes of Olesha, the child. It is a well-told story about a little boy who borrows a bicycle and loses the chain: in his panic he retreats into his fancies. "I couldn't extricate myself by lawful means. There remained only one thing to do: break the law. I decided to act as if in a dream."² We follow the little hero through a number of imagined scenes

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solving the situation before he actually chances upon a half-magic deliverer - a rich eccentric aviator (therefore for Olesha already partly not of this world) who delivers him and his bicycle home in fairy-tale style in his great carriage, his automobile: 'Suddenly I appeared with thunder and lightning like a spectre! Bold! Unbending!' The irony of his arrival is rounded off when his strange deliverer reprimands the innocent owner of the bicycle for 'stealing the chain' and deceiving the child.

Although the subject itself is simple enough, Olesha's treatment is unusual: the internal dialogue is not so minutely detailed as to belong to the 'stream of consciousness' tradition, but has some similar aspects such as the different moods, however irrelevant to the whole, that pass through the child's mind and are recorded - his embarrassment every time he speaks ("I was still at the age where you swallow saliva before speaking"), his physical sensations as he rides the bicycle, his thoughts when a fly gets into his eye. He imagines to himself in detail the scene at home if he were to come home and pretend he knew nothing about losing the chain. He also dreams, as children do in self-pity, that he kills his mother. It all fits neatly into the familiar 'lonely child against philistine parents and family' pattern.

1 Ibid., p.259.
2 Ibid., p.254.
Olesha's evocations of physical objects are impressive for their concreteness and the rather strange effect of cataloguing and seizing upon just one or two characteristics to emphasize:

The wooden table was wrinkled, on the table stood a flower-pot, the student blew the flowers, the flowers turned away. The student looked into the distance and saw the blue rim of the sea. ¹

Or, describing the driver of the car:

He is dressed in something that reminds you of a sack, soiled, shiny, cut open at the top. He is finishing eating a cream pie. His hands are in leather gloves. The pie is dripping on his gloves like lilac. Persian lilac is on his lips and cheek. The motor starts up and begins to shoot like a canon, the ground shakes, a whirlwind is whipped up .... ²

Physical objects acquire a solid identity of their own as animate and inanimate merge. He even writes: 'We are a triangle: the bicycle, the student and I.'³

Olesha makes an attempt at symbolism in the final paragraphs, likening the noisy, powerful new car as it flies away, 'like a tempest', to the new era, and sees himself running bravely after it. 'See how hard it is for me to run, but I am running, although my feet get stuck - I am running after the thundering tempest of the age.'⁴ Tragically, Olesha had to jettison much of value in order to keep up the pace.

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¹ Loc. cit.
² Ibid., p.259.
³ Ibid., p.255.
⁴ Ibid., p.260.
⁵ Loc. cit.
'Human Material' is a perennial favourite of communist critics because, even if it is introspective, it is forward-looking. Olesha describes in wry, sombre and even bitter tones, remarkably reminiscent of 'I Look into the Past', aspects of parental attitudes towards him as a child: he was to be 'an engineer and householder'. But this quiet, intelligent, anaemic child had other ideas: he is to be a writer.

Many points of style are recognizable as typical touches of Olesha. This early paragraph following directly on the statement that he is to be an engineer and householder provides an example:

The balcony door is wide open. You can hear the noise of the harbour. On the balcony an oleander grows in a green tub. Mr. Kovalevskii has come to lunch. He is silhouetted against the balcony door, dark, like a shadow, standing with his thin legs apart.

Then there is the captivating, and probably not unrelated, description of the compass, in the very middle of a passage of straight prose: 'I unclench my fist. The compass stands on the table, looks around, walks, stops and falls on its head, its legs spread apart.'

1 'Chelovecheskii material', first published in Izvestiia, 7 November 1929.
3 Ibid., p.252.
4 Ibid., p.249.
5 Ibid., p.252.
The ending of the story is its redeeming feature in the eyes of those subscribing to the canons of socialist realism. Olesha embarks on a little dissertation on the 'new justice' ... 'Only that is just which helps the liberation of the oppressed class.'

He affirms that he wants to crush within myself the second 'I', the third and all 'I's' which crawl out of the past. I want to crush within myself petty feelings. If I cannot be an engineer of the elements, then I can be an engineer of human material ... I will cry loudly: 'Long live the reconstruction of human material, the all embracing engineering of the new world!'

Indeed Olesha did make attempts to crush the kind of subjective approach which had proven so artistically fruitful and which came from 'that I which thinks that everything that happens is only his life, unique and inimitable, my own all-embracing life, which with its own end cuts off everything existing outside me.' But it was never really a question of simply rooting out latent solipsist tendencies in his world-view, but also of 'keeping up with the age' and manufacturing positive socialist heroes. Only one kind of engineer was in demand in the Soviet Union in 1930's.

A valiant attempt is made in the story 'At the Circus' (1928) to take a modern attitude to an aspect of the old bourgeois world.

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1 Ibid., p.253.
2 Loc. cit.
3 Loc. cit.
4 'V tsirke', first published in 30 dnei, 1930, no. 1.
which held great fascination for Olesha: he compares the old circus with the new Soviet variety, in favour, of course, of the latter. He finds the new clowns and the new tightrope-walker superior to the old, whose sense of humour was debased and vulgar. The modern clown is more refined and childlike, representing a more humane sort of humour. 'We want sport and humour in the circus! We have no desire to be horror-struck at the circus. We have no interest in seeing an actor being smashed as he falls from the trapeze.'

All the same, one feels that Olesha derives considerable pleasure from his own descriptions of the old tightrope-walker and the traditional red-headed clown. The righteous pronouncements strewn throughout the story stand out by virtue of their moralizing tone from the warmth of description so characteristic of Olesha at his best.

During the early 1930's, years of great inner conflict for Olesha, whose art was clearly declining as the intelligent in him wrestled with the proletarian propagandist, he wrote several other minor pieces, all of them verging on the 'literary notes' genre rather than literature itself. In 1931, for example, he produced the 'short story' 'A Day' which is a loose collection of notes and impressions on a day's wandering in a city: watching

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1 'At the Circus', p.367 (1956 edition of Izbrannye sochineniia).
a church being destroyed, chatting on a park-bench, a stroll round the zoo, notes on metaphors. Olesha himself calls it a 'series of descriptions', but it is in fact a little more than that. The main question raised in it is the attitude of the young generation to the past: why does the unnamed youth in the story applaud the demolition of the church of Christ the Saviour yet call out 'Long live Bernard Shaw!' when he sees Shaw getting off a bus? (Why, indeed?) What does the new generation value in the old? The answer — only that which has historical significance — is not so important as the fact that the question is raised.

Another sketch written at this time that deserves mention for the originality of the style among Olesha's other works is 'Divano-krovat' ('The Convertible Divan'), a short, vaguely humorous article of a straightforward anecdotal kind describing the difficulties encountered in trying to turn a divan into a bed. The satire spreads to encompass various aspects of Soviet public service — goods delivery, train services, new-fangled gadgets that do not work and so on. The reader is struck by the good humour of the satire and by the total absence of any of the usual Olesha themes. Not even a mirror appears in the story.

1 'A Day', p.35 (Ogonek edition).
2 Ibid., p.36.
3 Krokodil, 1934, no. 23.
Of far more consequence was the article that appeared in one of Olesha's favourite journals _30 dnei_ in 1932 called 'From the Secret Notes of Fellow-Traveller Zand'. Rather than an article, story or composition, it is a cry from the heart of Olesha the egotist, the mirror-watcher, the artist, Olesha - Kavalerov. Of Olesha - Zubilo there is no sign. Symptomatically, Olesha is bemoaning the fact that he is unable to become the Schiller of Soviet society - the poet of the rising class. He dreams of writing his own _Kabale und Liebe_ 'to shake the proletariat as Schiller's drama once shook the burghers'. He is jealous of Jack London, of Balzac, of Pushkin. Life smiled on them, they were popular, they found a place for themselves. Olesha feels that his arrival on the scene, through no fault of his own, was somehow ill-timed. To write for the present epoch one must be strong. Olesha wants to be strong, but to be strong a writer must be an objectivist, concentrating his attention on the exterior world, and he must unite with the masses. He can do neither.

Depict events, characters, passions - be outside. Passions? But how can I depict someone else's passion if I haven't become infected with the bacteria of that same passion? ... In other words, I am again left with my attention concentrated on myself, my inner world ... My very profession - the

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1 'Koe-chto iz sekretnykh zapisei poputchika Zanda', _30 dnei_, 1932, no. 1.
2 'From the Secret Notes ....', p.12.
profession of a writer - is such that my attention cannot be concentrated only on the exterior world. 1

Olesha finds his position as a subjectivist in a society demanding objectivism intolerable. 'It is a great misfortune to be a man of art,' 2 he writes, and muses that suicide is the only escape one has from oneself. He later modifies his views and, following in the footsteps of his own Ivan Babichev, decides that the solution is 'to be a fool' and 'have no views'. 3

Besides these revealing remarks, Olesha philosophizes in this collection of 'notes' rather enlighteningly on the subject of mirrors which offer not only 'new perspectives' but represent egotism, self-absorption, childishness, weakness. 'I'll never look in a mirror again!' cries Zand. 'I'll leave the pathetic, infantile habit of looking at myself. It's a sign of weakness ...' 4 Zand protests in vain.

As was to be expected, Zand's 'Secret Notebooks' raised quite a controversy. In the same journal, two issues later, was published an 'Open Letter from the Workers' Literary Circle "Dvoretsstroi" to the Writer Iurii Olesha', 5 in which Olesha was berated for seeing the solution to his problems but not accepting

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1 Ibid., pp. 15-16.
2 Ibid., p. 16.
3 Ibid., p. 17.
4 Ibid., p. 16.
5 'Otkrytoe pis'mo rabochego litkruzhka "Dvoretsstroi" pisatelyu Iuriu Oleshe', 30 dnei, 1932, no. 3.
them. Clearly there has been little progress on this score since
1927.

You are at present occupying yourself with
questions of art and the fellow-traveller. But
how do you go about it? You sit in your room,
in front of the mirror, inside yourself. While
Bolsheviks are throwing themselves into the
fight of the working class, and daily linking
revolutionary theory with practice, you stand
at your mirror, consumed by 'noble envy' for
Benvenuto Cellini. 1

The literary circle nurtures the charitable hope, however, that
'rabkor Zubilo' will again come to the fore. 2

The article of M. Bachelis, 'Our Answer to Fellow-Traveller
Zand', published as a sort of appendix to Olesha's work, 3 was
hostile: he virtually claims that Zand's statement of his
predicament is 'slander on the U.S.S.R.' 4 Why is it harder to
be 'strong' in the U.S.S.R. than in the U.S.A.? Bachelis' advice
to Zand - Olesha is to accept the advice of those who urge him to
join with the broad masses. There he will find his strength. 5

In the fifth issue of the journal 30 dnei for that year (1932)
Olesha had an article entitled 'The Necessity for Reconstruction
is Clear to me', 6 in which he urgently called on his readers 'not

1 Op. cit., p.64.
2 Loc. cit.
3 'Nash otvet poputchiku Zandu', 30 dnei, 1932, no. 1.
5 Ibid., p.20.
6 'Neobkhodimost' perestroiki mne iasna', 30 dnei, 1932, no. 5.
to identify me with Zand!" Zand, he maintained, was only one half of his reminiscences, the other half being occupied by Zubilo. The main aim of the article seems to be Olesha's concern to convince his readers that 'of course, I am striving with all my mind and heart to become a writer producing works worthy of our epoch.' Then he touches on perhaps his central tragedy: the superfluousness of his themes, from which he cannot separate himself, in Soviet society: '... over many years themes grow and develop in a writer. And suddenly one day the writer sees that these themes which were his life, turn out to be unnecessary. It is a jolt of monstrous strength ....' Olesha had been writing with a note of crisis in his voice on this theme for at least two years. In 1930 he wrote an article 'The Theme of the Intelligent' in which he declared himself 'a beggar between two doors': he claimed to 'despise belles-lettres with all the fibres of my soul', saying that 'the proletariat can find nothing in common with our so-called subtelty. That's all gentility stuff.' At the same time about all he can offer

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2 Ibid., p.67.
3 Ibid., p.68.
4 'Tema intelligenta', Stroika, 1930, no. 3.
6 Loc. cit.
7 Ibid., p.17.
proletarians as an intelligent is a 'stripping off of the masks from ourselves, our intelligentnost'.¹ By 1932 he was declaring himself to be a proletarian writer in his speech at the Leningrad All-Union Conference of Dramatists.² In practically the same breath, and in a preview of his performance at the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers, he admitted his desire to reform - 'perestroit'sia'.³ He proclaimed his loathing for his status as intelligent. 'It is a weakness I want to renounce', he cried.⁴

By February 1934, virtually on the eve of the First Congress, he was already eulogizing communist ideology in Izvestiia, calling the world of his childhood 'a world of falsehood',⁵ and in July of the same year he was exulting in Pravda over the abundance of themes in the new society. 'Every thought, touching our actuality, radiates out,' he wrote.⁶

All this was being written against a background of increasing criticism of Olesha for his failure to produce anything further of interest or to come to terms with his personal problems. Referring

¹ Ibid., p.16.
² 'Khudozhnik i epokha' ('The Artist and the Times'), in Sovetski teatr, 1932, no. 3 (excerpts), p.30.
³ Loc. cit.
⁴ Loc. cit.
⁵ 'Zametki pisateleia', Izvestiia, 18 February 1934.
⁶ 16 July 1934, p.4 ('Nasha muza - revoliutsiia').
to Olesha's 'Theme of the Intelligent', the critic A. Shteinman accused the author of becoming 'hysterical' about his difficulty in saying farewell to the past and feeling out of touch with the proletarians. He was only one of the commentators on Olesha's situation who came to the conclusion that he was too preoccupied with himself. This is the dominant impression also from V. Sobolev's interview with Olesha in 1933: Olesha bound up exclusively in himself and his 'cancer of the imagination', as he chose to call his disability (for 'one idea consumes another').

Shortly before this, Sobolev had published another article, 'Banishing the Metaphor', in which he quotes Valentin Kataev, who, as it transpires, had also suffered from Olesha's problem of stagnation, describing Olesha as 'completely decadent', 'talented but uncultured' - all symptomatic of the growing impatience which other writers and critics were feeling towards Olesha.

Also writing in Literaturnaia gazeta, L. Levin pointed out that Olesha did not seem to be able to grow out of his themes of failure, impotence, despair and misfortune. He forfeits progress, according to Levin, because he 'is devoid of an integrated feeling of life. He is capable of analysing the world in its tiniest,'

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1 In his article 'Moskva, Olesne', Stroika, 1930, no. 4.
2 'Guliaia po sadu', Lit. gaz., 29 May.
3 Ibid.
4 'Izgnanie metafory', Lit. gaz., 17 May 1933.
truly microscopic manifestations."¹ What a sad comment on the literary milieu that could advise such a stylist only 'to look at the world from outside and not dabble in ideological claptrap.'² Olesha was to make a definite attempt to come to terms with it in his speech at the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers.

Meanwhile, if the thirties were unproductive for Olesha on the prose front, he was being more active on the drama front.

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¹ 17 June 1933, 'Tema odinokoi sud'by'.
² Loc. cit.
CHAPTER FOUR : THE DRAMA

Olesha was a poor playwright and remained so all his life. Indeed it is incomprehensible, except in psychological terms, why he insisted on trying his hand at the theatre when the results were so unfailingly mediocre. That the spectacle of the theatre - the stage, the costumes, the scenery - should have fascinated him is understandable, but Olesha never learnt how to create *drama* - how to present the elements of build-up, climax and dénouement - while his plots clearly call for such ordering. When working with someone else's material, he could write a successful scenario - for example, his scenario for Dostoevskii's *Idiot*, and with Meierhold's masterful powers as a producer even *A List of Blessings* has been called 'electrifying'.

Nevertheless A.D. Popov's production of *A Conspiracy of Feelings*, which is based on *Envy*, at the Vakhtangov Theatre in Moscow has been called 'prekrasnyi spektakl', 'a brilliant play'.

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1 L.P. Klimova in *Ocherk istorii russkoi sovetskoi dramaturgii*, vol. 1, p.303.
2 *Zagovor chuvstv*, first published (excerpts) in *Oktyabr*, 1929, no. 1; also scene vi published in *30 dnei*, 1928, no. 7; full version still unpublished.
3 B. Gusman, "Zagovor chuvstv!", (Pravda, 17 March 1929) p.5.
4 V. Kirshon, 'Sotsialisticheskaia dramaturgiia', p.6.
and 'a significant event in Soviet drama'.\(^1\) A more sober view is held by the writer L. Nikulin who considers that the play *A Conspiracy of Feelings* was far less successful than *Envy*, and, that in general Olesha was 'not a successful playwright'.\(^2\)

The Soviet critics, of course, spent quite a bit of time discussing the same issues they had just finished arguing over in connection with *Envy*. In other words, ignoring *A Conspiracy of Feelings* as a piece of drama, just as they had largely failed to recognize *Envy* as a novel, they leapt into a discussion of whether Andrei Babichev was a real communist or not, and if not, why not, and so on. V. Sobolev, for example, considers that Andrei is 'still a prosaic delets',\(^3\) but F. Gordeev goes further and calls Andrei 'a monster', remarking indignantly that at least we know where we stand with Olesha now.\(^4\) 'Are sausage-makers the builders of the new world? Is it true that there will be no lovers, no courageous men? ... that feelings will find no place in our life?' asks V. Kirshon.\(^5\) Gusman does feel that on the whole Andrei is 'better'\(^6\) and in a sense he is right. Not only is he more human and talkative, but in Act One, scene i, Andrei

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1. 'V pomoshch' zriteliu', p.10.
3. 'K bol'shoi teme', *Lit. gaz.*, 7 May 1929.
4. 'Nitsshe iz tresta', pp.119-20.
waxes quite lyrical on the subject of water in a bowl: '... the water looks better in the bowl than outside. Look how blue the bowl is. Beautiful. There's the window, but if you come over here and bend down you can see the window dancing in the bowl ....' This is pure Olesha, playing with reflections and indirect glimpses, it is Kavalerov, it is not Andrei Babichev as he was in Envy.

In the main, however, the play is a restatement of themes and tendencies expressed in Envy, despite some changes in characterization and emphasis, and represents the early stage in Olesha's growth as a dramatist: the dramatic statement of the place of feelings and emotions in Soviet society. Some of the issues of the novel have been simplified: Kavalerov can no more be taken as anything more than a parody of an intellectual than Andrei Babichev can as a parody of a communist. When Andrei suggests to Kavalerov that he write a poem about cabbage soup (Act One, scene i) or an opera about the community kitchen (Act One, scene iv), it is Kavalerov who becomes a figure of fun as much as Andrei.

In fact, the satire is of such a gross variety — or, as A.D. Popov expressed it, 'has such pamphlet-like urgency'¹ — that it soon becomes apparent that Olesha has written a comedy with an appropriately tragi-comic ending: Kavalerov suddenly

¹ Quoted by Klimova, op. cit., p.301.
kills Ivan instead of Andrei at a football match to commemorate
the new sausage:

KAVALEROV. There, I've killed him. I've killed
my past. Let me speak.
ANDREI. Passions are over. Peace is beginning.
(Whistle. Players run out onto the oval.)

This ending seems to be an unsuccessful attempt on Olesha's
part to legitimize his play, to give the victory to Andrei and
the new world. There is, however, no clear progression to this
act and its climax appears arbitrary and deprived of a dénouement.
Only in a limited sense, surely, can Ivan be said to be
Kavalerov's past. He represents his potential future as much as
his past. Ivan is more than ever, in this play, an exaggerated
Kavalerov - wittier, sprightlier, more talkative, more extreme
in his views. Ivan is more clearly and directly opposed to
Andrei as one inventor to another - Ophelia to the Sausage.

The overall impression from the play is of a series of wordy
and tendentious vignettes on the theme of Envy strung together by
the one band of characters and consistency of theme. Only the
sixth scene - which has been published separately as 'The
Birthday Party' - approaches what might be called 'theatre'
and despite the conventionality of its device - a collection of
self-revealing, partially inebriated and desperately festive
bourgeois sitting around a table - succeeds in being entertaining.

1 'Imeniny', 30 dnei, 1928, no. 7.
In *A List of Blessings*, published some two years after *A Conspiracy of Feelings* was first performed, there was little sign that Olesha had learnt many lessons as a dramatist, although as a fellow-traveller he had reached the stage of trying to side more obviously and unequivocally with the proletarian Revolution, even if he was as baffled as ever by the task of solving the *intelligent*'s problems dramatically.

Olesha himself was apparently rather partial to this work:

"When this play is being rehearsed," he writes in *Not a Day without a Line*, 'I see how well on the whole *A List of Blessings* was written. You could even use the words "what an outstanding work"!' Not everyone shared his enthusiasm, however, despite the ideological turn for the better, and the more realistic, less fantasy-cluttered method (there are no dream sequences at all).

*A List of Blessings* is about the temptation of a righteous woman by a devil and an angel, with the victory going very properly to the angel, but only at the price of martyrdom. In eight scenes the story is told of the visit to Paris, during the Five-Year-Plan era, of a noted Shakespearian actress from Moscow, Lelia Goncharova, a member of the intelligentsia whose mind is divided on the question of the Revolution: she can accept it intellectually but not emotionally. This division is concretely

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1 *Spisok blagodeianii*, first published in *Krasnaia nov'*, 1931, no. 8.

expressed in the form of a diary, which she takes with her to Paris and which is divided into a list of 'blessings' of the Soviet régime and a list of its 'crimes' — and not just food queues and housing shortages, but crimes 'against the personality'.¹ In Paris the actress falls foul of émigré Russians of a particularly unsavoury kind who try to compromise her with their villainous machinations. Goncharova is very tempted to stay in Paris, but when she is implicated in a fabricated plot, involving publication of the list of 'crimes' from her diary, she opts for the Soviets and finally dies defending the cause of the unemployed workers in a Paris street demonstration.

The communist critics, of course, concentrate in their criticism on the social import and thematic implications of the play. The Literaturnaiia entsiklopediia concedes² that in A List of Blessings Olesha at least succeeds in having his heroine recognize the moral supremacy of the communist system, which is an improvement over his position in Envy, where few critics are confident of distinguishing a positive hero with this conviction. Furthermore, however indeterminate the ending might be in terms of solving Goncharova's inner problems, she at least dies in the name of a just cause and does not lapse into indifference like the heroes of Envy.

¹ A List of Blessings, p.5.
A. Gurvich in his article on Olesha\(^1\) seizes upon this very point: he asserts that Olesha, unable to picture Lelia's future life back in Moscow without the 'third world' so dear to her, and not knowing how to resolve her dilemma, was forced to kill her. This assertion is probably well founded. In the person of Lelia Goncharova, Olesha presents us with a representative of the entire Russian intelligentsia in one important regard, for Lelia vows that if, by having a list of crimes of the régime against the personality as well as a list of its blessings, she is a traitor, then the entire intelligentsia is made up of traitors,\(^2\) for the entire intelligentsia struggled with the same misgivings. At the Theatre Club discussion on the play Karl Radek also said in support of the play that it had some value as 'everyone has a private list of crimes'.\(^3\) Lelia Goncharova felt impelled to support her intellectual conviction, the problem of the soul riven by the opposing claims of blessings and crimes has been by no means solved. There is no reason to suppose that once back in Moscow Lelia would have suffered any less than before she left, for there is no indication of any lessening of the number of crimes against the personality. 'Goncharova would eventually have become an enemy of the Revolution if she had lived,' wrote Prozorov.\(^4\)

\(^1\) 'Iurii Olesha', p.220.
\(^2\) A List of Blessings, p.24.
\(^3\) N. Goncharova, 'Mimo tseli'.
\(^4\) 'O Spiske blagodeianii', p.40.
Lunacharskii, a critic of no small insight or experience, attacks Olesha on the grounds that he does not really know the West, where most of the action of the play takes place, and that therefore he is in no position to hold up to scorn whatever aspect of it he chooses. Hence, in Lunacharskii's opinion, the rather brazen attacks on Western culture abounding in the play, constitute something of a 'plevok protiv vetra' and would raise only laughter from a Western audience. Why pretend that there is no art in the West? asks Lunacharskii, doubtless referring to the scene where Lelia, needing money for a ball-dress, offers to act some excerpts from *Hamlet* but is turned down in an offensive manner by the entrepreneur she approaches and offered a part in a vulgar sketch instead. Just as it was indeed naive to hint snidely that Shakespeare was unappreciated in the West, so it was a crude oversimplification, worthy of only the lowest levels of propaganda literature, on Olesh's part to suppose that Western police are little more than corrupt hoodlums, that the Western press is full of provocative lies or that the streets are crowded with unemployed, and so on.

Another point of criticism is taken up by the RAPP critic, A. Prozorov, who points out that the intellectual's conflict with his environment is not presented in *A List of Blessings* as a

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2 *A List of Blessings*, scene v.
dialectical development in the proletarian direction.¹ Lelia's decision to return to the Soviet Union seems to be motivated by little other than a growing revulsion with life in Paris, largely induced by contact with some particularly obnoxious members of the émigré community. This revulsion leads to rather extreme pronouncements on Lelia's part: 'On the whole I do not know of any crimes of Soviet power,' she asserts to Tatarov, the repulsive editor of the émigré press on one occasion. On another she declares that 'there are no ugly ducklings' in the U.S.S.R., only swans.² Lelia arrives at her change of heart through a combined intellectual and emotional process. 'I want to go home,' she says. 'Native land, I want to hear the noise of your disputes. Worker, only now do I understand your wisdom, and magnanimity, your face turned to the starry heaven of science.'³ Her dying words, in fact, are to the effect that she has 'understood everything' at last.⁴ To an Onlitguardist this kind of self-analysis, smacking of 'psychologism' and 'living man' theories, is no substitute for action, and actions must be motivated by external conditions, not mental peregrinations and deep, emotional soul-searching.

¹ 'O Spiske blagodeianii Iuriia Oleshi', p.35.
² A List of Blessings, p.17.
³ Ibid., p.21.
⁴ Ibid., p.30.
To some Western commentators, by way of contrast, it is in this tragic picture of the 'riven soul' reaching out for the new, yet clinging somehow to the old, that the play's greatest merit lies. There can be little doubt that Olesha is in fact portraying his own dilemma, just as he did in Envy, although in Envy he let different characters represent the two sides of his soul, whereas here they are expressed in one character, Lelia Goncharova.

van der Eng-Liedmeier is of the opinion that A List of Blessings, which he calls a 'fantasy', is actually 'only concerned with the inner discord of a famous actress', although obviously the significance of this discord is much wider. This remark highlights, however, the fact that in this play only Lelia Goncharova is portrayed in any depth at all, the other characters, from the dressmaker to the music-hall entrepreneur, are all papier-mâché figures, who mouth stereotyped sentences and act out their parts stiltedly according to the whim of some orthodox puppeteer. Only Goncharova comes alive and escapes being schematic, yet even her character is somehow circumscribed by the rather transparently devised plot: communism and capitalism at war in the mind of the intelligentsia and communism fated to be the victor. Lelia is also clearly only a 'reflection of

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1 'gespaltene Seele' (see von Ssachno, Der Aufstand der Person).
2 Soviet Literary Characters, p.95.
3 Loc. cit.
historical movement' just as the other minor characters are, which from a socialist realist point of view may be perfectly acceptable and which can certainly find support from such authorities as Fadeev and even Plekhanov,¹ but which does not deepen the character study. Olesha's approach to Goncharova is still too subjectivist for Prozorov, who reminds the playwright that his heroine is revealed 'from inside' instead of 'from outside'.²

The contrast is not such a completely black and white one, however, as van der Eng-Liedmeier would claim.³ In fact Olesha recognizes and criticizes quite directly many negative sides to communist reality in 1931 and takes no pains to whitewash representatives of the Soviet system: Fedotov is little more than a stereotyped fanatic with little imagination - consider his reply to Lelia's question: 'Well, tell us, what is it like over there in America? 'Oh, nothing special, there's a lot of everything, but it's sort of disorganized. There aren't any identity cards ....'⁴ Or his opinion that matters are quite simple: one shoots either the police or the worker, there is no middle course.⁵ To Fedotov, also, Lelia's early desire to stay

¹ See Fadeev, 'Stolbovaia doroga', Oktiabr', 1928, no. 11, p.171.
² 'O Spiske blagodeianii', p.35.
⁴ A List of Blessings, p.22.
⁵ Ibid., p.11.
in Paris and cultivate her personality is indistinguishable from the kulak's desire to hold onto his farm.\(^1\) The theatre manager in Moscow in scene i is made into quite a figure of fun for his pettiness and orthodoxy and fear of heretical statements on Lelia's part as she answers questions from the audience. The communist Baronskii considers artists to be just 'parasites'.\(^2\) Olesha does not shirk questions about Soviet art either. In scene i, he has Lelia announce on stage - the irony of it probably did not strike Olesha - that 'modern plays are schematic, false, devoid of fantasy, rectilinear'\(^3\) and elsewhere the charge is at least voiced that the Soviet Union is 'the country where art has been lowered to the level of propaganda for pig-breeding or silo-constructing'.\(^4\) The question of executing counterrevolutionaries is also aired.\(^5\)

One is not surprised, however, to find that Lelia's principal objection to Soviet power is in her case that 'I do not have the right to feel that I am better than everyone else.'\(^6\) She dreams about the fate of the 'little man' and wants to meet her ideal,

\(^{1}\) Ibid., p.10.
\(^{2}\) Ibid., p.7.
\(^{3}\) Ibid., p.3.
\(^{4}\) Ibid., p.13.
\(^{5}\) Loc. cit.
\(^{6}\) Ibid., p.6.
Chaplin, the little man pathetically hoping for a win in the capitalist lottery of life; she dreams of fame and the sweetness of being humiliated and taking revenge.¹ The ending is presumably meant to provide a satisfactory answer to these longings to show that her desire for fame ('slava') and concern for the little man have been broadened to a concern for the underprivileged and unemployed masses. The ending is, however, unconvincing. Her death is no solution to the problems raised by the play. Olesha claimed at the dispute at the Theatre Club, according to Gurvich,² that he had purposely had Goncharova killed by an émigré with a Soviet revolver to show that 'both sides execute Goncharova'. Nevertheless, her death seems to be more an evasion of the issues confronting her in life: the fate of the artist in the U.S.S.R.; of art itself, in fact; an intellectual's reconciliation with the list of Soviet crimes; the questions of ambition, fame, freedom. There is no answer to these questions in Olesha's play, just the death of the enquirer. It even smacks of subconscious suicide. Her death was not the death of a revolutionary but of a romantic. At the time of writing A List of Blessings, Olesha said to Bondarin: 'We're all liars. At the bottom of our hearts we feel this falsity, feel higher than the worker. The intelligentsia has accepted the revolution romantically,

¹ Loc. cit.
² 'Pod kamnem Evropy', p.28.
aesthetically. It has created the romanticism of battles on the barricades.\(^1\) Goncharova's romantic death blends in very well with the general melodramatic tone. (Olesha himself referred to the play as a 'pathetic melodrama'.\(^2\))

Not only is the tonality of the whole play melodramatic, but the language totally undistinguished. As a work of art, in fact, the play is insignificant. It is marred by a number of incidents which seem only to interrupt what little continuity the play has: for example, at the close of scene iii, a man is chased by the police onto the stage crying, it would seem apropos of nothing at all, 'Long live Moscow!', and thereby providing an unexpectedly comic note in this particularly humourless drama;\(^3\) there are the hasty concealments behind curtains, and the detective-story type gun scenes. The final scene itself, with Lelia being shot as she tries to protect a comrade, to the workers' cries of 'Big kitchens to help our wives', is surely not even melodrama, but farce.\(^4\)

As a piece of literature the play has understandably received very scant attention from critics, despite the spate of articles following its performance in 1931 in Moscow's Meierhol'd Theatre. The fact remains, however, that Lelia Goncharova is virtually the

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1 See Bondarin's manuscript, 'Monolog pered zerkalom', p.75.
2 'Tema intelligenta', p.16.
3 A List of Blessings, p.12.
4 Ibid., p.29.
last of Olesha's serious characterizations with any depth at all, and *A List of Blessings* virtually his last major work of literature.

While he was writing *A List of Blessings*, Olesha was struggling with another play, *The Death of Zand*, of which there remain in the archives in Moscow three main incomplete variants, plus ten other sketches and drafts entitled *The Death of Zand*. Nothing could be more symptomatic of Olesha's critical inability to produce a work of art under pressure from RAPP critics and other conservative elements. Olesha worked on this play from 1929 to 1933, yet could never get the work to the stage of a performance. We have a short excerpt from the play published in *Literaturnaiia gazeta*, 19 October 1930, in which we find a confrontation between the communist Zand and a beggar (one of Olesha's beloved symbols of the superfluous little man) who wishes to merge his identity with Zand's, to become Zand's second ego — to merge the worlds of dreams, the subconscious and 'Kantian ethics' with the new proletarian society. If the plan had been successful it must be presumed that a play would have resulted.

In the version published in 1964 in the first issue of *Teatr* (only four pages), the beggar has disappeared and Zand is a talented, sensitive intellectual writing a play called *The Smert' Zanda*.

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1 *Smert' Zanda.*
Death of Zand which is to be a 'great and deep work about our times'\(^1\) and meeting — Olesha-like — opposition. In the scene published the opposition is personified by a philistine and boor, descended from Andrei Babichev, with whose wife Zand has fallen in love. Olesha was apparently also unable to bring this line of thought to a satisfactory conclusion.

No less in the Olesha mould, and no more successful, was the sketch of the play The Black Man\(^2\) which appeared in 30 dnei in 1932\(^3\) — in other words, during the period of his work on The Death of Zand. From the few pages we have it is clearly a version of The Death of Zand, although Olesha made a statement in Literaturnaia gazeta\(^4\) referring specifically to The Black Man, expressing his dissatisfaction with his work and saying that he would not return to it but would incorporate its better elements into his next play, of which there is to date no evidence (although one of the versions of The Death of Zand still unpublished in Moscow may throw light on this). The Black Man is dedicated to Zand's fight with the Black Man (a charlatan and murderer), 'the fight of the idea of death in creative writing with the idea of reconstruction of the world through creative

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\(^2\) Chernyi chelovek.

\(^3\) No. 6.

\(^4\) 'Iurii Olesha o svoei rabote v oblasti dramaturgii', 29 September 1932.
writing', Olesha wrote in an accompanying manifesto. Naturally Zand's search for a fruitful theme, 'rejecting harmful, reactionary and pessimistic ones', and his attempt to 'reconstruct' in such a purely artistic, idealistic sense, were unproductive.

One is struck by the inordinate amount of dialogue in these draughts, as in many scenes in A Conspiracy of Feelings and A List of Blessings. They are overburdened with scenes of inactivity and philosophizing and the question again arises: why did Olesha feel compelled to try his hand as a playwright when everything that made his work interesting was native to the novel?

Much more in the tradition of The Three Fat Men was the short 'tragicomedy' A Game of Executions² published in 1934, which is a short farce in verse about actors from the 'people' who fool a king (wicked tyrant) into taking part in their play in which his head is eventually, and inevitably, cut off. The tragicomedy is humourless because completely lacking in subtlety, irony or sustained satire: the joke is the situation, and even the joke falls flat because of the ending's predictability. The verse is of the socialist 'all levels of society' kind. The theme - 'kill the oppressive tyrant' - is unsophisticated. A Game of

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1. 30 dnei, 1932, no. 6, p.27.
2. Igra v plakhu, 30 dnei, 1934, no. 5.
Executions reads as if it had been written before The Three Fat Men rather than ten years after it.

Towards the middle of 1934, just two months before his speech at the First All-Union Congress, Olesha wrote a screen-play called A Strict Youth,¹ which may not be regarded as a literary work but which is of interest because of the renewed endeavour to answer some of the questions concerning him for so many years: how a sensitive person could reconcile his intellectual acceptance of communism with his emotional pull towards a more individualistic way of life, the place of feelings in the new society - questions already asked in Envy, A Conspiracy of Feelings, A List of Blessings and the short stories with dramatic effect.

Olesha called it a 'play about mutual respect', and not realizing, in a manner that became quite typical of him, that he was stating the obvious, also said that it was a play about how mutual respect places limits on freedom.² No wonder there were cries of alarm from old faithfuls such as Prozorov who felt compelled to warn Olesha of the danger of attributing old world qualities and psychology to the new world.³

Olesha, in line with his policy of the 1930's, meant the play as a kind of hymn to the new socialist youth: the play has

¹ Strogii iunosha, first published in Novyi mir, 1934, no. 8. Filmed but not released.
² 'Komsomolke Chernovoi', Molodaia gvardiia, 1935, no. 4, p.159.
³ 'Diskussiia o sotsialisticheskoi morali', p.13.
many young actors in it, and includes a scene almost reminiscent of Ancient Greece with the young people assembled on the sporting arena, in the sun, philosophizing, a half-naked youth throwing the discus in the background. Little wonder that there were whispers of 'utopianism'.

The story itself concerns the fortunes in love of a man of the stock Soviet hero variety, at least on the surface: strong, handsome, silent, self-sacrificing. Grisha Fokin has fallen in love with the wife of a famous surgeon, Stepanov, who, through jealousy, breaks up the friendship. Grisha magnanimously consents to this arrangement because of his respect for the surgeon as a useful and gifted member of society. Later, however, on learning of Grisha's intelligent ideals and sensitive outlook, the surgeon's jealousy is dissipated, although the ending is enigmatical, it not being clear whether Grisha and Masha Stepanova are to maintain some kind of relationship and if so, what kind, or whether they are simply separating happily. Masha goes to bring Grisha home to a party, but he is unwilling to come. They meet and part tenderly, however, and she returns home radiantly happy.

Grisha Fokin stands out amongst Olesha's early characters as a man who really believes he has found the answers to problems of living in socialist society, who feels at one with his society and whose feelings and intellection are at peace. He represents Olesha's most successful attempt at a completely positive, non-satirized hero in the best Soviet sense of the term. Lelia
Goncharova, although not a satirical heroine, had no opportunity to prove herself truly positive. Grisha Fokin is of particular interest because he manages to formulate his beliefs into a 'kompleks' or 'codex' — in the first place, a moral codex of inner qualities which the communist must foster, including modesty, sincerity, generosity, unselfishness and even such normally bourgeois qualities as chastity and sentimentality ('liking not only marches but also waltzes'). In fact, the list of qualities to be striven for by the new man would appear to differ little from the list of those to be striven for by the old man. The difference, however, as is pointed out, lies in the fact that the motive of money no longer exists. This reasoning may not have been sufficient, as Swayze suggests, to convince some communist critics that Fokin really is a positive product of the new society.

But Grisha's codex goes significantly beyond the mere upholding of these human and humane virtues, which constitute a denial of the values incarnate in Andrei Babichev, for he also believes in the innate inequality of human beings, even under socialism, and in the necessity for socialist competition to replace the pretence of equality. 'A komsomol member should

1 A Strict Youth, p. 219 (1935 edition of Izbrannoe).
2 Ibid., p. 220.
3 Political Control of Literature, p. 121.
compete with the best. The best are those who create science, technology, music, thoughts ... These are the great minds ... who fight nature, the conquerors of death.'¹ The models to emulate, interestingly enough, are quite specifically members of the intelligentsia whose contribution to society is more in the area of 'feelings' and 'the heart' in many cases, rather than of physical construction.

Grisha feels that people of Dr Stepanov's calibre are very rare. Dr Stepanov on the other hand, once having realized how thoughtful Grisha is in his striving for a higher sense of humanism, tells Grisha that in fact he, Grisha, is very rare. As far as Soviet society as a whole is concerned, neither observation is particularly flattering. From a 'human', 'individualistic' point of view, of course, symbolized by that of the 'mother', Olesha makes it clear that every individual is actually unique and rare. A Strict Youth can still be said, therefore, to come within the orbit of what Bondarin sees as Olesha's basic dramatic situation: 'A great passion (Othello) amid the primuses of the kitchen in a communal flat.'²

Olesha's theories about happiness, hammered home in a somewhat heavy-handed and doctrinaire fashion, would seem to be at some variance with the more orthodox Marxist ideas of his day:

¹ A Strict Youth, p.244.
² 'Razgovor so sverstnikom', p.181.
'... the extermination of capitalism does not imply the extermination of unhappiness ... Man's life is comprised of an alternating line of joy and sadness,'\textsuperscript{1} says the wise Dr Stepanov. After all, he reasons, only a 'thinking man'\textsuperscript{2} can really be happy, but thinking means doubting and hoping, which exclude complete happiness. A komsomol member even reads a quotation from Karl Marx to back up the doctor's argument: according to Marx, man will never be happy unless he can arrange for continuously requited love, which is an unlikely state of affairs. Hence, even in a classless society, man will be sometimes unhappy.\textsuperscript{3}

Love is, of course, one of the central themes of the film. Olesha is clearly eager to portray the human love of a real, committed communist, Grisha Fokin, blessing it with a particularly lyrical ending in order to prove to himself and others that this highest and most precious of human emotions can indeed flower under socialist rule. In fact, however, the plot is unsatisfactory: it tells of the love of a young man for a married woman, yet the foundation for this love remains undisclosed; it shows the breaking up of this budding relationship, through jealousy, and the tentative rapprochement at the end. The future remains shrouded in mystery.

\textsuperscript{1} Ibid., pp.242-3.
\textsuperscript{2} 'zadumyvaiushchiisia chelovek'.
\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., p.243.
The characterization in *A Strict Youth* is not wholly successful. Grisha Fokin, the central character, never comes completely to life: he is a puppet in Olesha's hands and the manipulations are all too obvious, as Soviet critics repeatedly pointed out. 'The characters are drawn like icons,' wrote one reviewer while 'hypothetical' was the epithet used by another for the characterization. Like the other characters, Grisha exists in 'artificially created, semi-utopian conditions, apart from productive interests', as Ozerov describes it. Ozerov thinks that Olesha has really made little advance over his previous position: this work contains the 'essential flaw' of all of Olesha's works: 'the contrast of a man of action with a finely feeling dreamer.' It is true that Fokin, despite Olesha's efforts, just does not fit into society. He mouths all the right things for a positive hero, and has the same obsessions, and even has the same looks:

There is a type of masculine appearance, which has been formed, it would seem, as a result of the fact that technology, aviation and sport have been developed in the world. Out from under the leather peaked cap of the pilot, as a rule, grey eyes look at you. And you're sure that when the flyer takes off his cap, fair hair will shine before you ...

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2 V. Pertsov, 'Zagovor vysokikh umov'.
3 Obraz kommunista, p. 167.
4 Loc. cit.
Light-coloured eyes, fair hair, a lean face, triangular torso, muscular chest — this is the type of modern masculine good-looks.

It is the good-looks of Red Army men, of young men wearing on their chest the badge of the GTO. ¹

A young man of this very appearance is standing before Masha now. ²

Yet somehow Grisha remains a 'dreamer' living in the rarified atmosphere of theoretical considerations, indulging in 'pseudo-problematical' discussions. He is only superficially a Soviet hero. 'Grisha Fokin deduces new moral qualities not from the conditions of life, not from social practice, but ... speculatively in the form of a certain codex he has composed ....'³

The other characters are even more stereotyped: Tsitronov, Stepanov's parasite, whose precise function is unclear, apart from being the 'underliner of inequality', is one of the more realistic. Significantly, Tsitronov is Kavalerov's closest descendent — a kind of jealous court-jester and hanger-on. Masna Stepanova is also a relatively realistic, three-dimensional character, existing completely apart from the world of the komsomol and its codex. But Grisha's young friends, who, like ideal communist heroes and heroines, 'make communist assertions at home and at work, in friends' homes and on lonely walks, on the love couch and on the deathbed', as Abram Tertz typifies the heroes of

¹ 'Gotov k Trudovoi Oborone'.
² A Strict Youth, p.211.
³ Ozerov, loc. cit.
socialist realism,¹ are vague, shallow characters. Nor are they wholly positive: Liza, for example, rationalizes all her desires in a rather unprincipled way, reminiscent of some heroines of the early 1920's (although Olesha later assured his readers that she was an ironical heroine, 'the most likeable character in the play, and she knew she could not fulfil all her desires'²) and the boy discus-thrower could not be described as wholly committed to the cause. Grisha is meant to occupy the position of the model komsomol member, but as an ideal he falls short. However, it must be remembered that A Strict Youth was to be a film, not a short story, and details that would have humanized and rounded out the character of Grisha Fokin and others were left to be supplied by the actors.

For this reason, a comment on style is barely in place here but there are a few points of method which are of particular interest with regard to Olesha's way of looking at the world and which hint at some acquaintance with the expressionistic films of the twenties, to which he refers in Not a Day without a Line.³ First of all there is the attitude to physical objects which appeals to Olesha's photographic mind. It is not until the sixth scene, in fact, that there are any words spoken: the camera

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¹ On Socialist Realism, p.56.
² 'Komsomolke Chernovoi', p.159.
³ P.229.
lights upon the garden, the verandah, the table set for four, Tsitronov's face, his limp lower lip and so on. The camera gives us a very good idea of the situation well in advance. The materiality of the surroundings is very clear. One successful touch is the little Eros, sitting in a high window, who sends shafts of light down to pierce the hearts of Masha and Grisha with his little mirror, but apart from this, little symbolic use of the camera is made. The approach is realistic, but meaningful.

Olesha does fall back on a dream sequence in order to indulge in a little fantasy of the surrealist kind. Fokin dreams that he is at a party at the Stepanovs'. He is in love with Masha. Thus, true to the surrealist imagination, and in the tradition established in his own short stories, when he declares of Masha that 'she is music itself', ¹ Masha turns out to be literally music itself: when he lifts her arm, it sings; her hair sings, her heart, their kiss. 'All of her sings. It is the melody of Masha.'² Olesha must have been glad of this opportunity to objectify with maximum graphical effect Fokin's subjective feelings about Masha.

Another anti-realist note is provided by the fact that this dream of Grisha's in many important respects becomes reality at

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¹ *A Strict Youth*, p.234.
² Ibid., p.235.
the end of the play. On both planes Tsitronov comes off the worse for wear, on the one having pies thrown at him, on the other a bottle; on both, a young man applauds Masha's beauty; on the first, the pianist is unable to keep playing virtually because of the physical presence in the room of Grisha's love for Masha, and on the second there is a pianist who comically refuses to play background music to anyone's love-making.

This 'play for the cinema', almost mask-like in its delineation of character, is in itself of scant importance perhaps, but it marks a phase in Olesha's development. It illustrates the point, although not successfully from an artistic standpoint, that he was to make at the First All-Union Congress several months later: 'Somewhere within me lies the conviction that communism is not only an economic, but also a moral system and the first to embody this aspect of communism will be young men and women.'

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2 Ibid., p.65.

3 L. Nikulin, 'Nezabyvanoe-nedoskanannoe' (Nockta, 1966, no. 2), p.189. Nikulin himself calls the speech 'brilliant in form and original in the thoughts expressed' (loc. cit.).

In August, 1934, Iurii Olesha delivered a speech at 'that great literary circus', as the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers has been called, which served as a confession of past sins and an oath of reformation. It has been called 'one of the most moving speeches of the Congress' for its 'embarrassing frankness', its abjectly apologetic tone and presentation of Olesha's personal problems. Even Gor'kii reportedly found the speech of absorbing interest. It is an interesting speech not only for the light it casts on Olesha's relationship to his work in the past, but also for the way it prophesies his artistic demise.

Apart from a number of remarks of a fairly banal, if painfully sincere, nature, bearing a Dostoevskian imprint, concerning the basically divided nature of man, in which he

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2 Ibid., p.65.
3 L. Nikulin, 'Nezabyvaemoe-nedoskazannoe' (Moskva, 1966, no. 2), p.189. Nikulin himself calls the speech 'brilliant in form and original in the thoughts expressed' (loc. cit.).
asserts that no one is unfamiliar with vainglory, cowardice and egotism, Olesha broaches the problem of creativity in a writer, claiming that it is impossible to invent anything that doesn't exist in nature. ¹ This is a view that he himself clearly interpreted liberally, as The Three Fat Men, such stories as 'Love', 'The Cherry Stone' and even parts of Envy, show. But his point is that an author is not separate from what he writes, that he must in some wise be the characters he portrays. 'When you depict a negative hero, you become negative yourself ....'² He reaches the heart of the matter, however, where he says:

Yes, Kavalerov looked at the world through my eyes. Kavalerov's colours, tints, forms, comparisons, metaphors and speculations belong to me ... As an artist, I expressed in Kavalerov the purest strength, the strength of a new thing, the strength of the telling of first impressions.³ Few other speakers grapple in such depth with the thorny problem of personal vision. So close is Olesha's identification with Kavalerov that when Kavalerov is attacked as a 'poshliak i nichtozhestvo',⁴ Olesha's whole world collapses and he suffers deeply from depression and a sense of superfluousness.

What is needed is rebirth, a new spring of youth. He explains with humility that the First Five-Year-Plan 'was not my

¹ 'Rech' na I vsesoiuznom s'ezde sovetskikh pisatelei', p.425.
² Ibid., p.426.
³ Loc. cit.
⁴ Loc. cit.
theme. I could have gone to a construction site, lived at the plant with the workers, described them in a sketch or even a novel, but it was not my theme, not the theme which came from my blood and my breath ... It is hard for me to understand the worker type or the revolutionary hero type. I cannot be him.'

Olesha claims, however, in an attempt to vindicate himself at least partially, that there is much in his 'imagination, life and dreams' which make him equal with the workers and komsomol members. In this kind of self-justification there are overtones of the opposition so salient in 'The Cherry Stone' of artistic creativity to physical construction work.

In spite of this apparent perception of the source of his creativity within himself, he goes on to affirm the following fatal credo:

In this state the first young generation is growing, the young Soviet man. As an artist, I throw myself on him: 'Who are you, what colours do you see, do you dream, what day-dreams do you have, how do you feel, how do you love, what sentiments do you have, what do you reject, what do you accept, what sort of person are you, which is dominant in you — feeling or reason, do you know how to cry, do you have tender moments, do you understand everything that frightened me, that I didn't understand and feared, what sort of person are you — young man of socialist society?'

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1 Ibid., p.428.
2 Ibid., p.429.
3 Ibid., p.429.
Olesha courageously assigns himself the task of writing about young people. 'I will write plays and stories, where the characters will solve moral problems.' He went on to try to do just this, as he had done in A Strict Youth, to emphasize that true humanism finds its purest expression in the new socialist society. As a consequence, all that made Olesha's writing unique and charming began to disappear, as Olesha must inwardly have feared it would. The more he turned outwards for his inspiration, the more the poet in him faded. Another writer at the same conference, the poetess Ol'ga Berggolts, also asserted that when the 'poetic individuality' disappeared, poetry would be impoverished.

Two other important speakers who struck hopeful notes in their addresses were Karl Radek and Nikolai Bukharin. Radek did find it necessary to emphasize that 'we do not photograph life. In the totality of phenomena we seek out the main phenomenon.'

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1 Loc. cit.

2 Berggolts was later to spend several months in prison, but she survived to become one of the initiators of the 'thaw' in Soviet literature. In Literaturnaia gazeta, 16 April 1953, she claimed that Soviet lyrical poetry was almost non-existent and championed the right to find the sources of poetry within oneself.

3 These two speakers were, of course, to come to a much more untimely end than Olesha. Both were arrested early the next year on charges of conspiracy. Bukharin was shot in 1938, while Radek presumably died in prison about 1939.

4 Problems of Soviet Literature, p. 181.
Of course Radek was going on to advocate selecting the phenomena from the point of view of guiding principles, thereby justifying socialist realism, and he was at the same time attacking the portrayal of everything 'without discrimination',¹ as the surrealists were inclined to do under the influence of their theory of automatism, but he was at least against vulgar or naive realism. He did not deny that something can be learned from writers like Proust with his skill in representing the 'slightest movement in man'.² This kind of comment, needless to say, was not to bear fruit, and its Voronskiite implications were out of place on that occasion, but it must have given Olesha some hope.

Gor'kii developed this theme in a most heartening way: 'we writers tend to become mere chroniclers of the bare facts,' he said, 'doing scant justice to the emotional process of these transformations.'³ Bukharin said, on an optimistic note that was to be echoed by Olesha, that 'the new man is being born and the whole world of his emotions, including even "new erotics"'.⁴

Bukharin's speech was concerned with poetics, and in it he encouraged the use of metaphors: 'Everything that enhances the

¹ Loc. cit.
² Ibid., p.151.
³ Ibid., p.56.
⁴ Ibid., p.255.
sensory effect can and does find a place in the poetic lexicon.'

He affirmed also that socialist realists do not agree with Zola that there is no further use for imagination and that reality must be described as it is. 'Socialist realism dares "to dream",' he said. It is doubtful, in view of the context of his remarks, that he was confining his assertion to the kind of dreams Zhdanov or Gor'kii had in mind - the dreams which make up the new socialist romanticism, 'completing the idea by the logic of hypothesis'.

But social commands had to be obeyed: 'I consider,' declares Olesha in his speech, 'that the writers' historical task is to create books which would evoke in our youth a feeling of imitation, a feeling of the necessity to be better ... A writer must be an educator and a teacher.' An educator or a moralist is something that Olesha had never been, or no more than a writer like Zoshchenko, whose stories are full of implications but no lessons. But Soviet youth proved unamenable to his designs. His assertions of the coincidence of his own rejuvenation with the youth of the country faded and he soon began to complain of premature old age (see 'In the World').

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1 Ibid., p.252.
2 Ibid., p.44 (M. Gor'kii, 'Soviet Literature').
3 'Speech at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers', p.429.
In March 1936, after another conference at which Olesha again expressed solidarity with socialist realist aims, one commentator wrote: 'we remembered Olesha's so effectively delivered speech at the Writers' Congress and the question naturally arose: when will comrade Olesha realize his correct propositions in his concrete creative practice?'

In an effort literally to justify his continued existence, Olesha suddenly became very active in a literary way that year. Many of the stories he went on to write were never republished after an initial appearance in some journal. Few have been retained in later collections of his works.

'Natasha', is one of the better of the short stories that appeared in 1936, containing the usual opposition of old, represented by an old professor, and new, represented by his daughter. It is also distinguished by a deftly ironical ending: the professor knows that his daughter is secretly parachute-jumping, a pastime symbolic of the new freedom and energy of youth and one of Olesha's sanctified 'flying' occupations, but believes that she is deceiving him with lies about meeting a young man called Stein. When she is injured in a jump and her father visits her in hospital, she is surprised that he already knew of her parachuting, and for his part, the professor is

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2 'Natasha', first published in 30 dnei, 1936, no. 7.
surprised, unpleasantly, to discover that the tale is true, that Stein exists, for it sets the seal on his solitude.

It is an essentially inconsequential little story, drawing its main appeal, if such it can be called and as Olesha's stories seem increasingly to do, from its sentimentality: an old man, lonely, kind-hearted, feeling abandoned by his only daughter, yet loving her to distraction, goes out unfailingly to watch her jump. His sentimental love proves inadequate beside the full-blooded love of a young man, active in the world.

One looks in vain for the old signs of Olesha's sharp observation and surrealistic similes and metaphors. The old material is there: 'The table was set for one. There was a coffee-pot, a milk-pot, a glass on a saucer with a spoon burning blindly in the sunlight, and a little dish with two eggs lying on it.'¹ Now his style seems to lack point, expressing no inwardly felt relationship with reality, little enchantment with visual experience. It is a method which is applied out of circumspection rather than inspiration. If it avoids ideological moralizing, it contains the socialist realist elements of the anti-individualistic, anti-subjectivist variety. It is not hard to imagine the intoxication that would previously have gripped Olesha at the idea of a parachute - a man flying, the ridiculousness of a man hanging helplessly from a huge expanse of

cloth in the sky, the scientific advances, the swarms of ideas for comparisons. But the professor only remarks tamely: 'What is that? A shell? ... Striped! How funny. A striped parachute.'¹ At this point Olesha's imagination apparently reached its bounds. But even this passage sits uncomfortably amid the pedestrian prose of the rest of the story.

The socialist realist emphasis on simplicity of style serves to underline this trait in Olesha's normal approach.

At this point, Olesha's powers of invention seem to wane significantly. Needless to say, the line between fiction and non-fiction is ill-defined, and, almost every detail in Olesha's works, early or late, can be related back to incidents in his experience. All the same, after 'Natasha', there is a noticeable decline in his imaginative output. All the other 'stories' of 1936 are more in the style of reports exemplifying Olesha's attempt to conform to the socialist realist demands for objectivity, optimism, portraits of the new man, and narodnost', all liberally coated with utilitarianism. At about this time in his career the distance between the author and his characters becomes negligible, hence creativity as such virtually disappears and the artistic level of his work plummets.

¹ Ibid., p.301.
The three accounts of different episodes in his life, that assume the title of 'Three Stories'\(^1\) (1936) are fairly typical of this new realistic tonality in his work. One recognizes without much difficulty the influence of socialist realism. The first of the three, 'Eugène Dabit'\(^2\) recounts Olesha's presence at the funeral of this French author who died in the Crimea in 1936 while visiting the Soviet Union as a member of the delegation headed by André Gide. It is difficult to find anything distinctive about the story: one learns nothing about Eugène Dabit as a man - it would have been hard, anyway, since Olesha never knew him, coming face to face with him for the first time when Dabit was lying in his coffin. One learns nothing about Olesha, either, unless one considers such passages as the following knowledge of Olesha rather than of prevailing social winds: 'We were once regarded as barbarians and destroyers of culture. Now we are attracting the most intelligent and

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\(^1\) 'Tri rasskaza ' ('Ezhen Dabi', 'Polet', 'Letom').

\(^2\) Dabit: a French writer and painter of minor importance and working-class origins. His best-known novel is \textit{L'Hôtel du nord}. His death was of such a mysterious nature that foul play was suspected.
sensitive people in the West. They have realized that the future of the world is being built here.\(^1\)

One cannot help noticing, either, the new tendency to rely on emotional devices for winning the readers' sympathy. For no clear reason other than the evocation of emotionalism we are treated to the spectacle of a friend of Dabit who is deeply grieved by the death: '... her face and eyes were those of someone who has been crying. Obviously Dabit's death was for her the death of someone close.'\(^2\) Later: 'The girl cried, a lady belonging to the group of Frenchmen embraced her. The girl cried unrestrainedly, people looked at her.'\(^3\) Later still:

Before me I saw the features of the weeping girl. She saw what I could not see. She remembered him and in her memory there stood a living man. She could not show him to me, it was impossible for me to see this living man with the eyes of her memory - the fact that she was crying was for me the only reflection of his life.\(^4\)

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\(^1\) This passage on p.304 of Izbrannye sochinenia is particularly ironic considering the vitriolic attack on Gide by the Soviet press when he returned home and made some mildly critical remarks on aspects of Soviet life. Concerning speeches made at Dabit's burial in Paris, Gide writes: 'Les discours de Vaillant-Couturier et d'Aragon ont présenté Dabit comme un partisan actif et convaincu. Aragon en particulier a insisté sur la parfaite satisfaction morale de Dabit en U.R.S.S. Hélas!' (A. Gide, Journal 1889-39, Bib. de la Pléiade, Dijon, 1951, p.1256). The whole company of Frenchmen, with the sinister exception of Dabit, shared Gide's complete disillusion with the U.S.S.R., echoing his question: how many Rimbauds, Baudelaires and Stendhals were being stifled in Russia? (See A. Gide and the Communist Temptation, pp. 133, 136.)

\(^2\) 'Eugène Dabit', p.303.

\(^3\) Ibid., p.304.

\(^4\) Ibid., pp.304-5.
No one would deny the sincerity or sensitiveness of these words. There is even in the last quotation a flash of the old Olesha with his fascination for perspectives. But somehow the whole lacks profundity. The touches of psychologism seem clumsy and unconvincing. Almost in parody of himself, and especially of the oft-quoted passage in *Envy* where Babichev's notes on the uses of slaughtered animals' blood follow on the heels of Kavalerov's lyrical allusion to Valia, the above-quoted passage on the girl's grief is directly followed by this paragraph which concludes the story: 'I looked at the coffin and first of all thought about his proportions. The girl's friend was a tall man. I imagined him like one of those Spaniards who even now are fighting with the fascists — a broad-shouldered man in a beret, a gun in his hands.'

This attempt at a romantic flourish of the imagination is a desperate, dismal final gesture.

The title of the second of the three, 'The Flight', is promising, especially given Olesha's predilection for images of flight, lightness and soaring. In fact, one's expectations on this score only increase the colourless impression of the story. It is the account of an utterly uneventful flight made by Olesha from Odessa to Moscow. The point of the literary exercise is obscure. The whole is related in a very pedestrian fashion.

1 Ibid., p.305.
Here, for example, are the opening sentences of the first few paragraphs:

I arrived at the airport ....
I saw the field on which two aeroplanes were standing ....
I sat in the buffet on a couch ....
I ordered a glass of tea ....
Then a man came in and sat down at the table ....
I thought it was the pilot .... I started looking at him ....
I went out onto the verandah and looked at the planes for a while .... 1

Again it transpires that this style of presentation does not illustrate any 'view of man' or the universe. Olesha is not expressing, for instance, man's isolation or arbitrary relation to the external world. The style is pedestrian because personal insight and new perspectives have been suppressed.

Some ten years later, during his Ashkhabad period, Olesha was still writing in this style, as in the story 'The Little Mirror', 2 where successive sentences begin as follows:

Mered went ....
He found ....
Mered arrived today ....
Mered was visiting ....
Mered took the dütär ....

A rather good opportunity for humour and a literary approach combining simplicity with a minimum of explanation for the simple-minded is provided by Olesha's fellow-traveller on the flight 'in whose behaviour the desire to show that he is not flying for the first time and that it was an accustomed business for him was

1 'The Flight', p.305.
2 'Zerkal'tse', in Turkmenskie rasskazy, 1945.
evident.' But instead of merely describing his behaviour and reporting his words — or even inventing words the actual man never spoke — Olesha merely tells us that the man was like this.

"They've overloaded with mail," said my fellow-traveller. Again he was showing his experience.2

Despite the abundant opportunities for the fertile imagination to give birth to exciting and novel comparisons, comments on the transformed world below are completely and prosaically realistic:

'I saw canals, railways, factory chimneys, buildings, the shining squares of some pools. This was the Moscow district.'3 Almost on the level of an airline timetable are the passages of which the following is an example:

And so we flew on.
The touches of the old Olesha are few: 'The impression was one of the plane hanging motionless in the air ... Pressing against the window, I saw the plane's wheel and it was strange to see this earthly object hanging in space.'5 These words are a faint echo of the old delight for incongruous details, juxtaposed for their whimsical effect.

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1 Ibid., p.305.
2 Ibid., p.306.
3 Ibid., p.307.
4 Loc. cit.
5 Loc. cit.
But the whole situation, to a fertile mind in those days when aviation was still an adventure and an extravagant means of transport, is fraught with incongruities, novelties, excitement, colour, new delights to the eye and unfamiliar perspectives. Why is all this barely sensed here? What has emasculated Olesha's prose?

The same air of self-centredness and self-admiration, to which the author quite openly alludes in 'The Flight', pervades the last of the three stories, 'In Summer'. Although free from the propaganda that mars the other two stories from an artistic point of view - witness the incongruous burst on 'how complete ("polnotsennyi") is the life of our country'¹ as the finale to 'The Flight' - this story again is strikingly inconsequential. The episode related - Olesha's meeting with and befriending of a young author who reveals to him the wonders of amateur astronomy - was probably of no small significance to the author, but he fails to convey this sense of excitement of discovery and the warmth of human contact.

It is recognizably Olesha's writing because of the style, the attention to the development of inner responses to the situation, the interest in the astronomy, which excite speculation, the mystery of the unexplored, and so on. But the depersonalizing,

¹ 'In Summer', p.308.
anti-psychological use of language, characteristic of socialist realism, is slowly gaining the upper hand.

The growing relationship of the two men is handled mawkishly.

You should see with what rapture this charming young man gave me his explanations. He led me from place to place. He stood me now here, now there. As he did so, he would lightly touch my shoulders. He stood behind and lifted my head ...

Suddenly he stopped. I felt that he was searching, without looking round, for my arm. I stretched my hand out to him .... ¹

The ending to the story has its unusual and whimsical side: the young man thanks Olesha 'for being interested'.² Olesha is struck by this fanciful attitude to the heavens - the young man somehow considers himself responsible for the whole spectacle, as if the sky were his own. This relation to the sky - one of mastery over it through naming it - fascinates Olesha, but he can no longer find imaginatively artistic expression for that legitimate, 'idealistc' fascination.

The other contributions made by Olesha to Soviet literature in 1936 can scarcely be classified as 'stories' at all. 'The First of May'³ is little more than an interesting series of impressions connected with Odessa. Looking at his old home in Theatre Lane, Olesha reminisces about his childhood reading. His mind drifts back to the enchantment of Don Quixote, Robinson Crusoe

¹ Ibid., p.310.
² Ibid., p.311.
³ 'Pervoe maia', first published in 30 dnei, 1936, no. 6 (called 'Za tri dnia').
and *Gulliver's Travels* - an innocent enchantment, as he emphasizes, oblivious of social significance, satirical barbs and so on.

He remembers in very concrete terms the old theatre, its luxury and opulent patrons, he remembers it the night of the *Potemkin* bombardment. His attention centres for a while on Pushkin, a favourite of his, especially as seen from a child's point of view. He reflects quite stimulatingly on the different light that Pushkin appears in to a child.

Finally, May 1st arrives and

I went out onto the balcony in the morning. The boulevard is flooded with sunshine. The sea. Above the ships are multicoloured little flags.

In spring there are a few days when trees which have just burst into flower and the earth, covered with grass, lend the general face of nature a look of having been manufactured. Even the clouds look made. ¹

It appears for a moment that the old Olesha is about to reassert himself over Zubilo but such hopes are unrealized. The final paragraphs, when one understands Olesha's potential, are sadly wooden:

In the evening - fireworks.

Over the same port, over the same city and boulevard, over the same beautiful buildings, over the same Odessa, which used to belong to adventurers and purveyors of human merchandise, burst the fireworks of the First of May holiday of workers, students and toilers. ²

¹ 'The First of May', p.316 (1956 edition of *Izbrannye sochinenia*).
² Ibid., p.317.
'Stadium in Odessa'\textsuperscript{1} is a 'story' much in the same vein. The theme is the wonder of the transformation of cities and landscape under socialism. The transforming processes of the times were certainly not without their romantic sides, but, try as he might to become carried away with his old theme, the result is hardly intoxicating. In one of his more lyrical moments, Olesha is gazing at a new stadium: 'It is revealed suddenly, the oval, the staircases, the stone urns on socles and the first thought you have after you have taken in the spectacle, is the thought about how dreams have become reality.'\textsuperscript{2}

How is it that even through the transforming strokes of Olesha's pen reality turns out to be so mundane?

This is preeminently the right thing to say. It is praising the construction of a new society, it is in the spirit of the new official romanticism - progressive, optimistic - while not wholly divorced from the old Olesha's thrill with dreams. 'This stadium is like a dream - and at the same time is real.'\textsuperscript{3}

But is this not the writing of a tired mind, an exhausted imagination? The race to keep up with the century is taking its toll. 'My knack for comparisons turns out to be powerless. What is it (the stadium) like? I don't know. I have never seen

\begin{footnotes}
\item[\textsuperscript{1}] 'Stadion v Odesse', first published in Vecherniaia Moskva, 2 June 1936.
\item[\textsuperscript{2}] 'Stadium in Odessa', p.361 (1956 edition of Izbrannye sochineniia).
\item[\textsuperscript{3}] Loc. cit.
\end{footnotes}
anything like it. It is a picture of the future. No, that's not right. It is actually a borderline, a crossing, a realized stage in the crossing from the present into the future.  

Where is the youthful élan, the magic eye, the psychological sensitivity? In 'Komsorg', which came out in the same year, Olesha endeavours to examine artistically the nature of modern socialist heroics. Petr Rykin, a komsomol organizer, died fighting a fire on board the ship Transbalt - 'perished saving socialist property', as Olesha expresses it rather unlyrically. The story is told in a prosaic, impersonal way, the only signs of Olesha's pen being the desperate attempts at self-rehabilitation along the lines indicated at the 1934 Congress.

He makes special mention of the appearance of 'human qualities' in physical labour 'which are not now limited to just tolerance, strength and accuracy - in addition to these mechanical traits there are appearing traits of personality, character, those special characteristics which comprise a man's individuality.' Not only does one wonder why 'tolerance, strength and accuracy' deserve the epithet 'mechanical', but one wonders if the last part of the sentence has any meaning whatever. Workers, Olesha avers, now experience jealousy of others' success, and

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1 Loc. cit.
2 'Komsorg', first published in 30 dnei, 1936, no. 8.
4 Ibid., p. 320.
there is a sort of 'romanticism' now about the workshops. He also finds an outlet for his own urge 'to stand out from the rest' by striving to break work records. Olesha seems very excited at the new 'spiritualization of physical labour' which he feels he perceives going on.

Earlier Olesha's grappling with this problem of human feelings versus proletarian society, artistic creativity versus physical reconstruction, produced art. Now instead of art we have merely a list of affirmations of what should be. This kind of droning of the catechism cannot atone for the loss of Olesha's touch of magic.

'Spectacles', written the following year, 1937, is a fairly factual account of watching trick motorcyclists. What makes the account interesting is not so much the manner in which the events themselves are described, but some enlightening comments on the nature of man's attraction for spectacles of this kind: what is the secret?

The secret is in the fact that in the spectacle of a man, moving vertically, is a most strongly fantastic element, attainable to our consciousness. It is the same fantastic element when, before our earthly eyes some occurrence takes place which is caused by insubordination to the law of gravity.

Such occurrences are the limit of the fantastic. They are the most unusual for our earthly perception,

1 Ibid., p.321.
2 'Zrelishcha', first published in Literaturnaia gazeta, 30 August 1937.
because, as they take place, for a second before us a picture arises of a non-existent world with physical laws opposite to ours. ¹

Further on he adds: 'The circus speaks in a magic language about science.'²

Is he not explaining here what he tried to do a decade previously through the medium of art but now feels unable to do: to express in a language of beauty and magic truths about modern man? Did he not always find impressions of the 'other world' tantalizing and challenging, while always at heart recognizing them as impressions and not reality? Socialist realism, however, demands that science be expressed in scientific language and impressions be passed over for objective reporting.

The collection of notes that generally goes under the title 'In the World'³ and which is attributed to the year 1937, also sheds an interesting light on Olesha's attitude to literary creation. It is not surprising to find that these notes actually appeared in practically identical form in 1930 under the title of 'A Writer's Notes',⁴ prior to his confession at the 1934 Congress and at a time when he was still writing in the vein of 'Love' and 'Aldebaran'. Even where he is talking casually about his birthplace, Elizavetgrad, and related subjects, his ability to look at

² Ibid., p.351.
³ 'V mire'.
⁴ In 30 dnei, 1930, no. 9 ('Zapiski pisatelia').
things from an unusual viewpoint stands out: he becomes conscious of his age, for example, when it hits him that the militiaman sitting opposite him in the tram is younger than he is - a grown man, with a family, yet younger than he is! He reflects that he has been able to read for 25 years because he remembers himself reading in the newspaper the declaration of peace after the Russo-Japanese war.

From these random reminiscences he goes on to give some impressions of a novel he intends writing, The Beggar, one which he never did manage to write and from which only a few projected excerpts are printed here. He manages at the same time to drop a couple of rather unexpected comments about his writing technique, claiming for instance, that he 'cannot think up anything beforehand. Everything I've written I've written without a plan.' ¹ It is hard to take this seriously, even if one rejects planning of the very exact kind practised by such writers as Emile Zola, especially since almost the next sentence is: 'I have been thinking about a novel for a year now.' Notes for his forthcoming novel follow.

The excerpt from the proposed novel has some familiar sides to it: the beggar is an old favourite of Olesha's; and here the beggar, whose coat is coming apart at the back of the armpits and peeling back slightly, 'quickened his step and then ran,

flapping his little wings.'¹ There is also the old Olesha's wealth of physical detail.

In the section where Olesha is sitting on a bench above the sea, observing a lone umbrella-shaped plant growing on the very cliff-edge, he finds that proportions are relative and cannot resist indulging in a game with them, trying to assert his authority over his surroundings in the only way he is able: subjectively.

I stare more and more concentratedly and suddenly a certain shift occurs in my brain: there is a twist of the lens of an imagined pair of binoculars, the search for focus.

Now I have it in focus: the plant is standing before me, brought clearly into view like a specimen under a microscope. It has become gigantic.

My sight has acquired microscopic powers. I am turning into Gulliver, when he landed in the land of giants.²

Olesha is most anxious to point out that it is 'not a matter of eye-peculiarity but of objective conditions: of a combination of space, an object and a point of view.'³ 'You must look at the world in a new way,' he declares and he is a master of the art. 'It is extremely useful for the writer to occupy himself with this magic photography. At the same time, this is no eccentricity, no expressionism! On the contrary: it is the purest, healthiest

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¹ Ibid., p.343.
² Ibid., pp.344-5.
³ Ibid., p.345.
realism.' 1 Surely this depends on one's definition of such terms as 'expressionism' and 'realism'. That this was Olesha's conviction is a reasonable surmise. All the same, his later works were to make it clear that by realism at this stage he did not mean the kind of realism that the Party felt could come under the heading of socialist realism. Hence the righteous indignation of such critics as Iurii Ostrovskii 2 and A. Gurvich 3 at Olesha's use of the term 'purest, healthiest realism'. The method itself, as here illustrated, cannot perhaps be categorized as expressionism, but there is no doubt that in most of Olesha's early work — *Envy*, 'Love', 'The Cherry Stone' and others — it was used as a vehicle for expressing the author's or characters' feelings, emotions, personality and preoccupations, which is what expressionism is. It is certainly not socialist realism, being far too subjective.

In the last section, which deals with the visit of an old dispossessed aristocrat, Vysotskaia, to the site of her old estate, there are excellent illustrations of Olesha's fascination with perspectives. The old lady starts 'seeing' — and hence 'possessing' — non-existent things which she remembers:

'This was ours,' said the old woman, sticking a finger at the air.
'What?' asked the granddaughter on the left.
'The park,' said the old woman.

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1 Loc. cit.
2 'Problema intelligentsii v tvorchestve Iuriia Oleshi', p.127.
3 Tri dramaturga, p.148.
'What park?' asked the granddaughter on the right. 'This one,' answered the old woman. There was no park. There was just yellow space. The grandmother saw the park. 

She sees a house with columns. She does what other of Olesha's characters do: they materialize their thoughts, their mind wanders off on a different plane of reality where they regain their imagined preeminence. 'The old lady sees what cannot be seen. It is like paleontology. The lady is a paleontologist: she sees the earth's past.'

In the same tone, Olesha describes, with complete sobriety, the rest of the conversation:

'The sea,' she says, 'was formed later. Before, there used to be dry land here. Was it ours?' ask the granddaughters. 'Yes,' I say. 'It was all yours. Some scientists claim that the moon is a part of the earth which was once torn away by a comet. In the place it was torn out the Pacific Ocean has been formed. The moon now exists independently... But that means nothing. It was also yours!'

In the year 1937, when this work appeared in its final form, its style and contents were already incongruous, when compared with other of Olesha's rasskazy being published at that time, such as 'We are in the Centre of the City'. In this story, Olesha expresses his lively appreciation of Disney's ability to see human likenesses in animals and himself adopts a lively style.

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1 Ibid., p.346.
2 Ibid., p.347 (my italics).
3 Loc. cit.
4 'My v tsentre goroda', first published in 30 dnei, 1937, no. 9.
in describing the animals at the zoo, trying to capture the
fantasy and incongruity of a zoo in the middle of the city. But
for all the surface brightness and enthusiasm, the style remains
disconcertingly pedestrian and uninspired. The availability of
all that metaphor material — a zooful of animals — had few
congruent results: an elephant 'in some way reminiscent of a
baby', 1 a kangaroo whose face looks like a dog's, 2 ostriches,
cassowaries and maraboux remind you of Disney's cartoon
characters, 3 a tiger looks like a cat, 4 parrots like vases and
pitchers 5 ... These are not even metaphors. The procession of
clipped sentences begins to offend the ear because it expresses
no inner laconicism, no wryness, no relationship to the objects
described. It seems merely to be the result of a lack of
inspiration. 'No, the swans are not disappointing. We look
around at them as we move from the pond. A beautiful bird!
The bird of legends, songs, metaphors.' 6

Written as if it were intended for children, this story was
actually first published in 30 dnei and therefore was obviously
intended for adult readers.

1 'We are in the Centre of the City', p.353 (1956 ed. of
Izbrannye sochineniia).
2 Ibid., p.354.
3 Ibid., p.355.
4 Loc. cit.
5 Ibid., p.356.
6 Ibid., p.353.
Nothing of significance in the way of short stories was published by Olesha until after the war, although four came out between 1943 and 1945.

Everything that had lent Olesha's stories their charm and originality had by this time faded - the expressionistic approach to physical objects, the microscopic vision, the colourful use of language, the pithy, often outlandish similes and metaphors, the flights of fancy. It is sad to find the author now relying for effect basically on sentimentality and patriotism, although the requirement for the latter is understandable not only in terms of socialist realism but also of current conditions.

Excellent examples are provided by the stories 'Reminiscence'¹ (1947) and 'The Oriole'² (also 1947). In the first, which tells very simply the story of the news of the German capitulation spreading through a train and how it touched a mother and some soldiers, there are no metaphors or similes, no comparisons, no evocative use of language, no levels of understanding, no wider significance. It is told with a maximum of photographic realism. The episode which features a little girl, and subsequently her mother, seems designed to underline the emotion of the occasion and nothing else.

¹ 'Vospominanie', first published in Ogonek, 1947, no. 18.
The ending is unbelievably trite: Olesha says of an officer who has just overflowed with emotion and good will, that if the train had not come to another station, 'he would have stood for goodness knows how long, in wonder at how beautiful Russian names are and Russian faces, and everything connected with his native land for which he fought.'

In stories such as these one cannot help reflecting how much more a writer such as Chekhov could have made of them, sacrificing none of their simplicity, yet giving them so much more significance.

'The Oriole', the story of a girl and an old man, who, while following the call of a bird in the forest, come across some Red Army men and have a wounded man left to their care, belongs to the same period and evidences the same decaying powers of dealing artistically with important themes. The wounded man recognizes the bird they were following and tells them its name, thereby demonstrating that feelings for beauty, poetry and nature are not the preserve of a privileged intellectual élite but can be felt by these simple Soviet people. Apart from this message, the story seems to be of little consequence, resting for its appeal on the emotions that are supposedly roused by mentioning words such as 'Red Army men', 'the wounded man', 'the old man', 'our fighters' and sketching in scenes from the Russian forest. These

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1 'Reminiscence', p.337 (1956 ed. of Izbrannye sochineniia).
trappings cannot conceal the underlying emptiness of the story and the absence of artistic quality.

Much the same sort of criticism also applies to the Turkestan stories: 1 'The Turkoman' 2 written in 1948, with its all-pervading bathos, 'friendship between the Soviet people' moral and further variations on the 'new Soviet heroics' theme; 'The Little Mirror' (1945) with its saccharine sentimentality, unsuccessful posing as an example of 'narodnyi' romanticism and heavy predictability; 'The Skates', 3 a longer story with a war background, heavy with nationalist moralizing and anti-German emotionalism; and 'From my Ashkhabad Diary' 4 with its pedestrian attempts at lyrical evocations of nature and crude 'friendship' propaganda. Later stories such as 'Everyday Life in the Soviet Union', 5 'The Wall of Scientists' 6 and 'Seventeen Refusals' 7 are similarly undistinguished pieces of writing geared to an emotional effect above all and lacking in serious characterization or plot development.

1 Olesha himself appears to have spent most of the war in evacuation in Soviet Turkestan.
2 'Turkomen', first published in Vokrug sveta, 1948, no. 3. Also called 'Klych'.
3 'Kon'ki', published in Edinaia volia, Ashkhabad, 1944.
4 'Iz ashkhabadskogo dnevnika', published in Edinaia volia, Ashkhabad, 1944.
5 'Sovetskaia povsednevnost', first published in Ogonek, 1947, no. 44.
6 'Stena uchenykh', published in Ogonek, 1947, no. 32.
7 'Semnadtsat' otkazov', published in Literatsurnaia gazeta, 23 April 1953.
Although no dividing line can be set up on one side of which Olesha's short stories are of outstanding literary merit while on the other side they are only stereotyped 'socialist realist' writings, it is nonetheless true that after his public avowal of his intentions to reorient his literary approach his themes changed radically and the individualism of his style disappeared. The air of solitariness and the importance of 'the private view' and private feelings which pervades all he wrote in the earlier years of his literary output passes and the civic view comes to the fore, the scepticism about the new Soviet man is replaced by apparent faith in him and heroization of him, there are no more passages of introspection nor journeys down the corridors of the imagination. Even the sense of humour seems dimmed. Olesha was trying, as he had promised, to conform to the canons of socialist realism – to realism of an objective and upward-looking kind. The effect of conformity to the arbitrary standards of socialist realism are all the more tragic because Olesha was promising to be a short-story writer of originality and importance. Like Zoshchenko, with whom he had much in common both as a writer and a human being, he was unable to develop as a writer because all the directions in which he might have been able to surge ahead were closed off to him.

The surrealist Paul Eluard once wrote: 'Le poème désensibilise l'univers au seul profit des facultés humaines, permet à l'homme de voir autrement, d'autres choses. Son ancienne vision est morte,
ou fausse. Il découvre un nouveau monde, il devient un nouvel homme.'

Olesha's former vision was indeed dead, and when his 'new world' discoveries turned out to be heretical and the new man he was becoming turned out to be the wrong variety, there was nothing left but sterility, self-contemplation, slogans, imitations and artistic death.

Donner à voir (1939), quoted in Nadeau, Histoire du surréalisme, p.337.
CHAPTER SIX : THE NOTEBOOKS

Apart from his novels, plays and short stories, Iurii Olesha is known for his reminiscences and articles on literary and other topics, which comprise his 'Notebooks', especially since excerpts from them appeared in the notorious second volume of Literaturnaia Moskva in 1956. In the two collections of Olesha's works, published in 1956 and 1965, these notes are divided into 'Reminiscences', 'Articles' and a section called 'From the Notebooks' which includes notes written between 1954 and 1956 in the former edition, and 1954 and 1960 in the latter posthumous edition. Included in this latter section is a collection of notes headed 'Not a Day without a Line', many of which had appeared for the first time in the Literaturnaia Moskva volume and had aroused interest and admiration at that time for their then unorthodox views on art and the creative process. A volume entitled Not a Day without a Line, published separately in 1965, embraces not only those notes previously headed 'Not a Day without a Line', but the entire section 'From the Notebooks' and a number of the articles and reminiscences as well.

1 'Zapisnye knizhki'.
2 'Iz zapisnykh knizhek'.
This long-awaited literary event was to be, in fact, the justification of Olesha's virtual absence from the literary scene for twenty years, except for the occasional articles and short stories published, for the most part, in minor periodicals. As far back as 1934 Il'ia Erenburg had felt pressed to plea on behalf of Babel' and Olesha at the First All-Union Congress that it was wrong to reproach such writers with their silence for 'elephants are pregnant longer than rabbits'. \(^1\) Erenburg did not suggest a suitable reaction should the elephant, after years of travail, produce a rabbit. Yet such is the impression this fragmented collection of articles, however diverse in nature, however studded with references to men of letters and literary events, with personal glimpses of people and places, after such a pregnant pause, must give. To read these notes is above all a disheartening experience, because they promise so much, hinting at a wealth of talent and originality, illuminating Olesha's approach to literary questions, yet in themselves they realize so little. The 1965 volume inevitably suffers from the fact that Olesha died before he could arrange or polish up his notes and the resulting disorder and roughness, despite the efforts of the editor, Mikhail Gromov, can only detract from their effect. The earlier 'Reminiscences' and 'Articles', however, are in a more completed form and deserve separate consideration.

\(^1\) Quoted by R. Mathewson, 'The First Writers' Congress: A Second Look', in Literature and Revolution in Soviet Russia, ed. Hayward and Labedz, p.73.
All these articles and reminiscences deal with literature or literary figures. This is the air Olesha breathed. His fascination with questions of theme in socialist society, the nature of literature and literary style, the essence of the creative act, and the place of fantasy and imagination in modern writing, is reflected on practically every page.

The subject of 'theme in socialist literature' is broached in 'A Playwright's Notes'. He suggests that at some future date 'the main theme will be competition between human qualities'. Ever conscious of and hopeful for a solution to the literary problem of how to accommodate in socialist literature human emotions and personal experiences as a source of dramatic power, he goes on to aver that 'such competition, which can be very tragic, will in fact create the acutest conflicts. But its aim is pure and high: to become better.'

It is interesting to note that Olesha, while seeing the main theme of bourgeois drama as money, observes that money had often magical overtones to it in bourgeois art because of its capacity to transform people's lives, making their dreams come true. Instead of money, Olesha was now claiming to be using socialism to work the wonder.

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1 'Zametki dramaturga', (1933).
2 Ibid., p.405 (1956 ed.).
3 Ibid., p.403.
4 Ibid., p.404.
In the essay headed 'Work on a Play' we can see Olesha at work. This is simply a scene from a projected play which was begun in the early thirties but was never completed because, as Olesha himself explains in the article 'Literary Technique', he could not think through his conception to the end, could not grasp it as a whole, could not see to the heart of things. Why he could never think through any artistic conception to the point of completion had in fact become apparent over the intervening twenty years or so.

The characters (despite Olesha's claim that he worked spontaneously) are forced to act out an illustration to a thesis Olesha himself strove to accept: that socialist society should be perfect and there is no place in it for egotists. In his 'Playwright's Notes' he expresses his interest in the theme of the 'egotist', also, claiming to find it 'extraordinarily interesting for the stage'. The reason for this interest is not hard to find: Olesha himself, as the work *Not a Day without a Line* brings gradually to light, was an extremely self-absorbed person. The lines he penned reflect egocentricity whether he was reviewing a novel, writing an obituary, describing a childhood friendship or delving into the germination of ideas. Nothing

\[1\] 'Rabota nad p'esoi', 1933 or 1934 (it is probably one variant of the play *Smert' Zanda*).
\[2\] 'Literaturnaia tekhnika' (1931 according to 1956 ed., 1934 according to 1965 ed., 1937 according to Bibliography).
\[4\] p.408.
could be more natural than that he should have found the theme of
the egotist alluring and challenging. The approach to literature
taken in 'Work on a Play', however, is exceptionally didactic and
is an example of moralistic prose at its most flagrant. It is
not surprising that a writer of Olesha's innate sensitivity was
ultimately unable to finish the play.

In the article 'Literary Technique' mentioned above, Olesha
also discusses three aspects of literary creation which were of
perennial importance to him: metaphors, imagination or 'vydumka'
and 'realism' of the kind practised by Tolstoi, Stendhal, Defoe
and so many other writers.

Metaphors are preeminent in Olesha's world of stylistics.
They comprise for him the paragon of artistic virtue. It was
Maiakovskii's facility in this direction that won Olesha's
unflagging admiration. For Olesha brilliant metaphors afford 'a
fresh perception of the world',¹ forcing the reader to react to
what he reads. Like other writers before him he warns against
using ready-made formulae and metaphors in writing,² connecting
this inclination with 'the exhaustion of one's own relationship
to the world', advice he would have done well to remember some
years later when embarking on his socialist realist career.

¹ 'Literary Technique', p.428 (1956 edition).
² Ibid., p.430.
The inventive use of the imagination is of course allied with the emphasis on the importance of metaphors. He speaks with enthusiasm of the many dream sequences in Lev Tolstoi's work and even calls Tolstoi 'the magician of literature'. In a number of these articles he returns to this theme of fantasy, which evidently captivates him, analysing the nature of his enchantment. In the little article 'A Writer's Notes', in which the author expresses his admiration for Chekhov in such glowing terms, he praises the elements of 'fantasy', not with its usual connotations of unreined imagination and caprice, but with incongruity - the beggar boy demanding oysters and having his wish miraculously granted, his dream come true. In Olesha's opinion this kind of 'fantasy' can be compared with the work of French avant-garde writers and directors. Only an adventurous mind could conceive of such a situation, associating the two incongruous states. He speaks in 'Literary Technique' of 'another quality of writing before which you really stop with delight ... vydumka', explaining that he means the 'vydumka' of Jack London, Edgar A. Poe, Gogol' (as in Vii), H.G. Wells and Aleksandr Grin. Olesha thrills to the workings of the imaginative human mind. These

1 Ibid., p.422.
2 Ibid., p.433.
3 'Zametki pisatelja' (1937).
5 Loc. cit.
writers are in many regards very different but share a capacity for introducing elements - bizarre, whimsical, fantastic - beyond the normal range of experience into basically realistic settings. Grin alone, perhaps, writes of realms of pure fantasy.

From Olesha's point of view there is a necessary and almost magical connection between the 'fantastic' and the 'real'. In his article eulogizing H.G. Wells, for example, 'On the Fantastic in Wells', he speaks of Well's 'ability to portray fantastic events so that they seem to be occurring in fact' which he considers 'constitutes the principle distinction of Wells' talent'. Wells' realistic approach consists in his ability to paint a picture with realistic detail of a completely normal, familiar world. His depiction is confined to externals, as is the case with most brands of realism. His fantasy is 'intoxicated with the world'. It is an uncanny photographing of wonders. Against this background, events that are 'supernatural' but integrated with their surroundings take place. Dante, too, is extolled by Olesha for his ability to describe 'fantastic' or other-worldly happenings against a realistically evoked background. Olesha unabashedly compares Dante with Wells because of the 'authenticity of the fantastic element' in his works. He is

1 'O fantastike Uellsa' (1937).
2 P.455 (1965 edition of Povesti i rasskazy).
3 Ibid., pp.457-8.
4 Ibid., p.455.
5 'From the Notebooks', p.484 (1965 edition of Povesti i rasskazy).
entranced that people should have called out in the street when they passed Dante: 'My God! He's been in hell!' Aleksei Tolstoi's authenticity he calls somewhat paradoxically 'simply magical, bewitching!'

Olesha's remarks on Karel Čapek's attitude to fantasy are most revealing. Of Čapek's *War with the Salamanders* he writes: 'The novel is brilliantly fantastic but in that highest artistic sense of the fantastic when it becomes similar to the real and authentic, as can be observed in Dante or Wells...'

It is worth noting at this point that in his literary judgments Olesha is not at all reticent about drawing comparisons of this nature: Dante, Wells and Čapek are not odd bedfellows as far as Olesha is concerned, and he even has the imprudence to compare Čapek with Proust to the disadvantage of the latter because Proust kept gazing back at his *temps perdu* while Čapek had the vision to go forward into the future.

Olesha also enjoys Mark Twain's works for several reasons, including allegedly Mark Twain's sympathy for the underdog and unrelenting criticism of capitalist society, but obviously one of the most appealing sides from Olesha's point of view is the

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1 Ibid., p. 508.
2 'Meetings with Aleksei Tolstoi' ('Vstrechi s Alekseem Tolstym'), p. 397 (1956 edition).
4 Loc. cit.
romance - or 'fantasy' - of Twain's novels. In the article quoted, he lavished praise on Twain's novel, *The Prince and the Beggar*, calling it 'one of the best subjects invented in world literature, standing among the first ten', yet at base it is only a fairy story, however fanciful in its conception, of the 'prince disguised as beggar' kind.

Understandably enough, Olesha is always at some pains to justify by reference to realistic method his fascination for the concept of fantasy, and all its associated facets of magic, wonderment, dreams, romanticism, the bizarre and so on. He places great emphasis on enumeration of physical details as the implied keynote of realism, which he avers gives him great pleasure to read, even if it is in a sense 'unnecessary'. Stendhal and Tolstoi are both acclaimed on these grounds, as is Hemingway, whose images express his love for the world.

In praising Hemingway's 'observational' method, he says that it is 'life-asserting' and 'optimistic', 'evoking in us a taste for life'. This illustrates a basic fallacy in Olesha's literary criticism in these articles. He evaluates works in the main according to their 'effect' on himself. Some of his remarks

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1 Loc. cit.
2 See 'Reading Hemingway' ('Chitaia Khemingueia'), p.479 (1965 edition).
3 Loc. cit.
along these lines appear in the article mentioned above, 'Meetings with Aleksei Tolstoi', where he takes up the question of 'authenticity' seriously. He decides that it is produced 'as a result of the crossing of very many reminiscences from life.'\(^1\)

But his theory is wholly affective: the author's merit, as far as Olesha is concerned, lies in his ability to evoke in Iurii Olesha dramatic and detailed mental images which give Iurii Olesha pleasure. This inner reenactment leads him to describe a work as 'authentic'. When indulging in this kind of criticism, Olesha is guilty of the 'affective fallacy'. When the substance of a writer's critical articles consists in fact of comments in this vein, the error is being committed that Anatole France recognizes when he says that the critic committing it 'ought to say:

"Gentlemen, I am going to speak about myself apropos of Shakespeare, apropos of Racine."'\(^2\)

In fact this is Olesha's standard approach to works he admires: 'Hemingway's artistic power is exceptional', he begins in the article 'Reading Hemingway',\(^3\) and after this quite meaningless opening remark, he makes other of the same kind:

'How superb, for example, is the scene from A Farewell to Arms where ....'; 'Or how could the part in To Have or Have Not not

\(^1\) P.398.

\(^2\) Wimsatt, W.K., The Verbal Icon, p.29.

\(^3\) P.476.
be acknowledged as magnificent, which ...." In this article, as in the one on Mark Twain, on H.G. Wells, or in 'Doberdo - a novel by Mate Zsalka', he also indulges the peculiar habit so beloved of Russian critics of retelling with gusto and in laboured detail the story that has so captivated him, imagining that thereby he is fulfilling some literary or critical function.

In his reminiscences of literary figures, one is also disturbed to find dominant a tone of almost unalloyed adulation of the person in question. This is taken to the point of a declaration of love in the case of Maiakovskii for whom Olesha appears to have conceived an adolescent passion. Aleksei Tolstoi becomes a demi-god of wit, intelligence, poise and sophistication. Il'f, whom Olesha knew well during his Gudok days, also appears in the article written shortly after his death, 'About Il'f', as a paragon of all the virtues - modesty, childlikeness, subtlety of understanding, poetic soul, originality, refinement - as does Bagritskii in the article written about him under similar circumstances. In the latter article, however, as in Olesha's references to Maiakovskii, the tone of adoration and deification is mitigated by the number of specifically literary comments made. Although Olesha, probably not insincerely, and possibly in

1 Loc. cit.
2 "Doberdo" - roman Mate Zalki' (1937).
3 'Ob Il'fe' (1937).
4 'Eduard Bagritskii' (1934).
admiration and humility, pays due tribute to Bagritskii's place as a 'poet of Bolshevism's joyfulness' and 'fighter for the Revolution' \(^1\) and is happy to hail him as 'the most perfect example of an intelligent coming by his own paths to communism', \(^2\) he examines in some depth here the literary reasons for his enjoyment of Bagritskii's verse, complete with many quotations - their sensuality, colourfulness, outstanding metaphors and creative, original use of language and word combinations.

One following remark he makes with reference to Bagritskii is illuminating because it hints at the source of Olesha's fascination for fantasy and the supernatural from a different angle: 'This in fact is the strength of his art', he says of Bagritskii, 'that he transforms the material of his life into a vision, available to all and exciting all ....' \(^3\) The final 'democratic' or Tolstoian overtones aside (they are almost certainly a sign more of a desire for personal glory than of love for the 'people'), here the secret of art's bewitching power over Olesha is well defined and his own intentions in much that he wrote are implied.

It is disappointing, but understandable, to find Olesha writing, not so very much later (1937) that 'the value and

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\(^2\) Ibid., p.381.
\(^3\) Ibid., p.382.
significance of modern literature depends on the presence in it of a journalistic tendency.\(^1\) Certainly about 1937 Olesha himself demonstrated his faith in the new genre by writing 'stories' that were little other than journalistic tracts. The explanation partly lies in Olesha's own past, of which he seems quite proud,\(^2\) on the staff of the railwaymen's journal *Gudok*. It was Zubilo reasserting himself.

Another subject that naturally claims Olesha's attention is the place of technology and machines in man's life. Olesha, judging from his imagery, sincerely feared subordination to mindless machines and the loss of his individuality under their power. Thus, with a feeling akin to relief, Olesha can assert in his article on Čapek\(^3\) that the 'snuffing out of genius', the enforced uniformity of the human soul and the demand that man be a 'soulless machine' can be now blamed on the fascist system instead of the socialist. And although he is interested in Wells' treatment of technology, he cannot agree with Wells' technocratic conclusions for he deeply fears the kind of future world Wells conjures up and consequently applauds Čapek who also wrote on the theme of the machines and who is carried away with their

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1 'Ob Il'fe', p.388.
2 See his article 'At the Journey's Beginning' ('V nachale puti'), (1957).
3 'Vysokii um - vysokaia dusha', p.471.
'fantastic' qualities, believing in a 'working relationship between man and the machine'¹ that reassures Olesha and quiets his fears.

To search for a coherent aesthetic system in these 'Reminiscences' and 'Articles' would be futile. The best they can give is a generalized impression of Olesha's literary likes and dislikes with a rather inexperienced attempt to analyse why. They are also imbued with a sense of Olesha's endeavour, sincere but immature, to 'feel a part' of the revolutionary process engulfing his homeland. He points out eagerly, for instance, in the opening lines of the article 'A Journey's Beginning', referring to his first connection with the journal Gudok: 'It was at the time of my youth, and the youth of my Soviet homeland and the youth of our journalism ....'² The same striving for identification with dominant forces is felt in his declarations of friendship with various prominent literary figures, his yearning for their approval, his acclamation of their success in writing for the masses. Of course, these articles were written over a wide period: from the early thirties to his death.

Perhaps this is why the 1965 collection of notes, not a day without a line, being principally the jottings of the last six years of his life, conveys the impression of having more substance

¹ loc. cit.
and coherence beneath the formal disorder than the earlier miscellaneous articles.

Viktor Shklovskii, the formalist and friend of Olesha, writes the introduction to this edition and obviously values the new work very highly. 'Before us is a book of very great significance, full of talent, courage and masterfulness', writes Shklovskii, who finds that it is an example of the 'new Soviet prose' which combines in one whole 'the short story, article, philosophical research; it is diverse, as our new life is diverse.'

The Western writer on Soviet literature, Zavalishin, compares the effects of forced silence on Olesha on the one hand and on Akhmatova, Zoshchenko and Druzhinin on the other, finding that while it impaired their talent, 'Yuri Olesha is a brilliant exception. His contribution to the anthology Literary Moscow ... gives evidence that he has lost none of his powers under the terrors and alarms of the "unlyrical era".' B. Galanov is more precise in his evaluation of the book itself, praising the 'sharpness of the observations, the alert eye, the originality of the judgments, the ability to explain the secrets of the creativity of great masters with such penetration ....'

These are not untruthful descriptions of the highlights of this collection of notes and articles for Olesha has considerable

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1 P.7.
2 Early Soviet Writers, p.348.
3 'Mir Iuriia Oleshi', p.15.
and enchanting powers of observation, originality of viewpoint and perceptive comments on the birth of ideas and workings of the artistic imagination. Despite their comparative disorder and the mediocrity of much of what has been included, the style remains lucid, if less highly coloured or richly textured than Olesha is capable of — there are no half-tones, as one critic has remarked¹ — and there are many flashes of insight into literature and life itself and a general impression is produced of a lively mind at work sorting out its position in the incredible world it finds itself in.

_Not a Day without a Line_ is a pot-pourri of self-analysis, views on art and artists, writers and literature, music and musicians, autobiographical reminiscences, anecdotes and philosophical reflections on life and its meaning.

It is not Olesha's fault that he was unable to complete the book and assemble the parts himself. It has in fact been efficiently edited, having been divided into five sections entitled 'Childhood', 'Odessa', 'Moscow', 'The Golden Shelf' and 'The Amazing Crossroad'. The first three parts, as their headings suggest, represent jottings of a largely autobiographical nature. But here Olesha immediately runs into trouble. Particularly when the title 'Childhood' appears, comparison inevitably arises with works of a much higher quality, such as Lev Tolstoi's _Childhood_,

¹ O. Voronova, in review in _Don_, 1965, no. 9, p. 174.
or Maksim Gor'kii's, and of course it cannot stand up to the comparison. In the first place, it is less a work of art than a compilation of notes bearing quite often the 'journalistic' stamp Olesha came to favour. Olesha himself even invites the comparison by remarking on one occasion: 'I should like to be able to pass back through my life, as Marcel Proust was able to do in his time.' Yet he has no conception at all of the method enabling Proust to create a work of genius such as A la recherche du temps perdu - the associative method whereby the imagination lets one memory evoke another without conscious direction. He does strive, like Proust, for fresh, personal images. But the mere idea of comparing what Olesha has produced as a result of working to the principle of 'not a day without a line' and what Proust has created in his monumental voyage of discovery is ludicrous.

Even if Olesha was not embarking on a voyage of self-discovery, a portrait emerges from these jottings. It is the portrait of a man who is interested in origins, in boundaries: in the human birth and death process, the moment of birth, the line between existence and non-existence. He asks, for example, what would have happened if his parents had never met. 'Had I still to appear from another pair of people? Precisely I?'

Similarly, when speaking of his age, he sees it in this light:

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1 Not a Day without a Line, p.59.
2 Ibid., p.13.
'Only eleven years separated me from my non-existence in the world.' He reflects that 'it is possible that the fear of death is nothing other than a remembrance of the fear of birth', but in general seems far less obsessed with death than many other writers. He describes the deaths through scarlet fever and typhus of a friend and his own sister, but neither dwells on these harrowing scenes nor attempts to draw deeply significant conclusions from them.

As for himself, he writes how he thought in his youth that he would never die. As a child of his times, however, he felt that immortality would come through some scientific discovery. Again, the 'fantastic' and the pragmatic are linked. But it was not, in fact, of an earthly immortality alone that Olesha dreamt. 'All the same, I have an absolute conviction that I shall not die ... I do not admit for a moment, that I shall die. Perhaps I really shall not die? Perhaps everything - life and death - exists in my imagination? Perhaps I extend to infinity, perhaps I am the universe?' This is the kind of idealism and solipsism that he had satirized in such stories as 'Liompa' and 'The Prophet' some thirty years previously. Obviously statements such as 'Long live the world without me!' reflect only one side of

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1 Loc. cit.
2 Ibid., pp.94, 127.
3 Ibid., p.295.
4 Ibid., p.272.
Olesha. The egotist in him refused to bow before materialist reasoning. Olesha apparently suffered from attractions in two directions: he wanted to be a self-abnegating Soviet citizen, conscious of his role as part of the historical process, acclaimer of those who turned out revolutionary verses, worker on the railwaymen's journal, but at the same time he could cogitate on the subject of immortality, or come to the very individualistic conclusion that 'in the final analysis it is unimportant what I have achieved in life, it is only important that I should have lived every moment',\(^1\) which is not a very communistic view of life or the individual's place in the social complex. If he no longer craves fame, he now desired only 'a world tour',\(^2\) prompted by characteristic curiosity and love of new experiences and widened horizons. This is a key feature of Olesha's make-up: his is an enquiring mind, delighting in making discoveries, whether of Sputnik\(^3\) or a clock.\(^4\)

His eye delights in observing incongruous situations, a penchant that is of course brilliantly reflected in his literary works. He smiles to see a Soviet girl reading Anna Karenina on an escalator,\(^5\) to think of the hoary old pomeshchik, Lev Tolstoi,

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1. Ibid., p.22.
2. Ibid., p.175.
3. Ibid., p.293.
4. Ibid., p.279.
5. Ibid., p.69.
looking at an early flying-machine. As a child he was intrigued to think that the tongue used by the priest, or ksendz, was once used by the Roman warriors. He is surprised to find the sheepdog that killed a cat can still be so loveable and endearing. There are numerous examples of his wry vision.

Another preoccupation of Olesha's in this book is the working of the imagination. He is heretic enough to write:

The working of the imagination is amazing. We recall something for a reason that is totally unknown to us. Say to yourself: 'Now I'm going to recall something from childhood.' Close your eyes and say that. You'll recall something completely unforeseen by you. The will plays no part. The picture lights up, turned on by some engineers behind your consciousness.

The reflections are heretical because they emphasize too much the 'automatic' element favoured by such groups as the French surrealists. Certainly, if Olesha had mentioned the minimal importance of the personal will in literary creation, yet had brought out the guiding effect of the historical process in shaping his thoughts, his ideas would have been more orthodox.

But to Olesha the imagination always seems to be more of a kaleidoscope than anything else - a colourful, unpredictable game. He is attracted to the notion of recalling his first

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1 Ibid., p.68.
2 Ibid., p.79.
3 Ibid., p.263.
impressions of the world.\textsuperscript{1} Olesha prizes the subjective view and therefore muses that the child must have seen quite a different world from the adults.\textsuperscript{2} It is, however, not simply a question of subjective vision but of poetic vision. He conceives of himself turning from an ordinary person into a poet: "... where is the dividing line? Where did he begin to see?" Poets have a special way of seeing the world, it seems, and this is what distinguishes them from ordinary human beings. This special, and for Olesha, exciting vision, is transmitted to the reader by imaginative linguistic devices, especially metaphors. As his articles and recollections showed, metaphors are a source of joy for Olesha.\textsuperscript{3} He knows he has the gift of 'naming things differently' and feels that this gift is needed because it 'makes life brighter'.\textsuperscript{4} But to do this, it must come freely, unforced, unfettered by any plans or preconceived notions, says Olesha.\textsuperscript{5} Presumably it is because of this adventurous, unconventional, 'free' nature of Maiakovskii's metaphors that he calls him 'the king of metaphors'\textsuperscript{6} and declares that he shares his views on art,\textsuperscript{7} a declaration which

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\textsuperscript{1} Loc. cit. \\
\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., p. 36. \\
\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., p. 149. \\
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., p. 257. \\
\textsuperscript{5} Loc. cit. \\
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., p. 152. \\
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., p. 151.
is not substantiated either here or in practice. Obviously the deep personal attachment mentioned earlier played some part in coaxing this avowal of loyalty from Olesha's lips. ('I was in love with Maiakovskii', \(^1\) and even more significantly 'I was a woman, in love with the matador ....' \(^2\) But the tone of all Olesha's references to Maiakovskii is one of adolescent, subservient and slightly abnormal adulation.) As a rule he was sceptical of thoroughly 'committed' literature: he disliked G.B. Shaw precisely because he preached too much, without any compensation in terms of art. \(^3\) He also writes in what may well be a veiled attack on the 'optimistic portrayal of the future' sort of socialist realism that it is 'immoral' for art to make everything look beautiful. One can only wish that the author himself had been more aware of this while writing some of his own short stories.

The essence of Olesha's art seems always to be found in the spontaneous, fresh, childlike vision: 'It seems to me that this is the more correct approach: to decide everything as you go along, with a fresh eye, immediately trusting in one's own fantasy.' \(^4\) Again, this conflicts somewhat with the approach one finds in 'Work on a Play', for example, where every move is

\(^{1}\) Ibid., p.150.  
\(^{2}\) Ibid., p.176.  
\(^{3}\) Ibid., p.236.  
\(^{4}\) Ibid., p.216.
carefully worked out ahead, or with the advice given by Aleksei Tolstoi, so reverently accepted by Olesha, about patiently working over what you have written and strict self-control. ¹

It does not necessarily clash with his expressionism.

The kind of art that most appeals to Olesha, understandably enough, is the 'strange, fantastic' kind. The artist is at heart a magician. He is a magician for the pleasure of being one, not for any higher purpose. Olesha registers amused surprise at Grin's assertion that his (Grin's) fantasy was supposed to be symbolic - a flying man, according to Grin, symbolizes 'the soaring of the spirit'. ² Olesha loves to contemplate man flying because it stretches the imagination, enriches one's mental experience, represents, at least subconsciously, freedom and mastery over the world and its laws, and it is also enchantingly within the range of human accomplishment. So much for one critic's comments on The Three Fat Men. ³ Olesha has no time for goblins, witches, haunted castles or other phantasmagoria of the German Romantics. There is little of Hoffmann in Olesha. It is the science fiction sort of fantasy that intrigues him more.

H.G. Wells was Olesha's favourite author, not Shakespeare, Dante, Tolstoi or Goethe.

¹ 'Meetings with Aleksei Tolstoi', p.396.
² Not a Day without a Line, p.232.
³ Lunacharskii, see p.11 above.
Not a Day without a Line abounds in examples of Olesha's old infectious, childlike glee at discovering the world's magic. He speaks of the 'magic' of rockets, mentions magic-lantern shows, calls electric light 'a miracle', as he does Maiakovskii's creation of metaphors and a lighthouse. To live in a lighthouse he considers would be 'not a bad fantasy'. Predictably, aviation 'bewitched' Olesha and he is fascinated by the phenomenon of parachutes. The priest, or ksendz, of his Catholic childhood is a 'figure from the world of mysteries, terrors, threats and punishments' which lends him an aura of fascination and, importantly, authority and power, which partly redeems him in Olesha's eyes. Even pole-jumping, a facet of Olesha's athletic youth, is seen as 'fantastic' because it appears to appertain to 'a different realm of physics'. It is real, but 'above' everyday reality. To understand how it is possible one must be one of the 'initiated'. This is what enthralls Olesha about the

1 Not a Day without a Line, p.32.
2 Ibid., p.35.
3 Ibid., p.69.
4 Ibid., p.143.
5 Ibid., p.122.
6 Loc. cit.
7 Ibid., p.72.
8 Ibid., p.79.
9 Ibid., p.114.
circus, which he loved most of all spectacles. The circus is a mystery, but to be initiated into it is tantalizing and exciting. It is not simply the sensuality, colour and excitement of the circus: the performers represent a 'fantastic' world outside everyday experience, defying the world and its laws, and Olesha experiences the thrill of being initiated into its secrets. This is psychologically consistent with his innate desire to be one of the 'elect', one of the 'dominant' of the world, and is connected with his 'fame' complex.

Then, of course, there is the 'fantastic' experience of looking into the mirror and in a weird, unexpected way finding that looking at one out of the mirror is an old man, not a youth! It is the 'fantastic' side of the transformation process that grips Olesha. 'This is a book with a subject, and a very interesting one. A man has lived and grown old. That is the subject. It is an interesting, even fantastic subject.' But mixed in with the fantasy is the horror of growing old, particularly strongly felt by egotists and those with a strong sense of themselves as human personalities. Death calls out to him: 'Old man! What a fool he is - he doesn't look round! It's me, Death!' Olesha cannot bear to look round and accept

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1 Ibid., p.103.
2 Ibid., p.171.
3 Ibid., p.289.
the identification, but is not unaware of the piquancy of the situation. What really grieves Olesha is that his mind is growing duller, thoughts of 'an unusual, higher order' are not coming to him, he is losing his taste for the new experience, no longer wanting to see shows, new opera, Picasso's exhibition, or even international football matches. He is growing old, his taste for life is fading, a circumstance he regrets but is unable to correct. He is even losing his ability to create exciting metaphors. In one extended metaphor he describes how he finally has to close down his metaphor shop because only his cheap wares were in demand - 'straight as a poplar' and 'pale as death'.

Thus the blame is settled squarely on the shoulders of society - rightly or wrongly.

Olesha's essence as a writer is caught in his own description of himself as 'not even an artist, but simply some kind of chemist, a wrapper of powders, a roller of pills ....' Olesha's art is that of a chemist, and not only of a chemist, but an alchemist. He is motivated by the magic law of transformation, even when it can be rationally explained, by the search for colour and sparkle, by the thrill of being able to name things anew, rediscover the world under new names, to arrange the world's elements in new

1 Ibid., p.228.
2 Ibid., p.258.
3 Loc. cit.
4 Ibid., p.257.
combinations. The usefulness of what he concocts is of less importance than the pleasure derived in concocting it. Olesha is a creator, not a teacher or philosopher. Nevertheless, Not a Day without a Line is overflowing, mainly in the sections 'The Golden Shelf' and 'The Amazing Crossroad', with allusions to all the great names of literature, music and other arts, giving an impression of wide culture. Apart from those writers already mentioned, Olesha mentions and gives some attention, usually with approval, to a wide variety of writers from all over Europe such as Ibsen, Mann, Hoffmann, Shakespeare, Montaigne, Anatole France, Wilde, G.B. Shaw, Conan Doyle, not to mention Hemingway, Mark Twain, and E.A. Poe from America. He constantly refers to Russian authors, of course. In his notes, he alludes to Brahms, Beethoven, Mozart and Rakhmaninov and to Raphael, Velasquez, van Gogh, Rembrandt and Michelangelo. It can be fairly safely said that little that Olesha has to say about these figures from the world of art is very original or illuminating, and, as has been pointed out, he certainly does not obviously hold to any principle of literary criticism more refined than 'I like this'. He describes Wilde ecstatically, for example, as 'a wonderful writer!' without explaining why he is 'wonderful'. He is content to recapitulate several of Wilde's stories, mentioning Wilde's tragic end. Sometimes he is willing to make judgments

\[1\] Ibid., p.192.
of a most dubious kind - claiming, for example, that Bunin has 'too many colours' \(^1\) and that consequently he prefers Chekhov, who has 'fewer colours'. \(^2\) Such a judgment probably corresponds to his own 'pale period' during which he even came to see Envy as too 'rich' in its colouring and 'disorganized' in its use of metaphors, \(^3\) but his obvious personal antipathy for Bunin may also come into play.

Olesha will be remembered neither for his 'Notebooks' nor for *Not a Day without a Line*. It was historical accident that enabled him to earn respect and praise from more forward-looking readers in his own society and foreign observers long depressed by the tedium of socialist realist manifestoes for his contribution to *Literary Moscow*. If these writings had been accepted for publication in a Western literary journal they would have attracted no attention at all. They are the jottings of a mind starved of external stimulation, deprived of cultural intercourse, rich in potential, once agile, adventurous, innovating, youthful, clear-eyed, full of esprit and droll, salty humour. Despite the flashes of this original Olesha, the tone of these notes is characterized by a tendency to platitudinize, by a dearth of ideas, and a jejune, heavy-gaited style. The untrained mind

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1 Ibid., p.245.  
2 Ibid., p.247.  
philosophizes, the self-absorbed Romantic attempts to become a Marxist, the solipsist tries to practise self-abnegation. The exercise is not a success. Perhaps Olesha should have held less slavishly to the maxim of 'not a day without a line', making it a less laborious task to sift the wheat from the tares.

Why did Iurii Olesha, a writer whose early works - his novel Envy and his first short stories - had found a unique place in the young Soviet literary tradition and won the acclaim of many Soviet and Western critics, become arid, repetitious and laconic, and lose his ability to write?

Olesha's early work, perhaps as a result of an historical accident, had coincided thematically with the mainstream of fellow-traveller writing during NEP. In fact, Envy only acquired its full significance when seen against the background of what Erenburg, Tvardovsky, Zoshchenko and Sakhno were writing at the time. Olesha was only to grapple with the same problems as writers of the stature of Erenburg and Erenburg, and, bringing to these problems a new socialist realism perspective, be attempted to transform the banalities and greyness of life into a vision, a many-hued, life-affirming, orchestrated vision. But 'a day without a line' is proof that

1 Not a Day without a Line
CONCLUSION

'I have completely lost the ability to write.' ¹ This line bears no date. But no date is necessary. It is true of any period of Olesha's life from the early 1930's to his death. Why did Iurii Olesha, a writer whose early works — his novel Envy and his first short stories — had found a unique place in the young Soviet literary tradition and won the acclaim of many Soviet and Western critics, become arid, repetitious and imitative, and lose his ability to write?

Olesha's early work, perhaps as a result of an historical accident, had coincided thematically with the mainstream of fellow-traveller writing during NEP. In fact, Envy only acquires depth and full significance when seen against the background of what Erenburg, Fedin, Leonov, Zamiatin and even Pil'niak and Zoshchenko were writing at the time. Olesha was coming to grips with the same problems as writers of the stature of Fedin and Erenburg, and, bringing to these problems a new non-realist perspective, he attempted to transform the banalities and greynesses of life into a vision, a many-hued, life-assertive, orchestrated vision. Not a Day without a Line is proof that

¹ Not a Day without a Line, p.51.
the vision remained. Why was Olesha unable to find literary expression for it?

It has been shown that the reasons for Olesha's artistic unfulfilment lie in part in the increasing unacceptability of his themes for the Soviet literature of his day. Olesha saw as crucial the intellectual situation in a totalitarian, proletarian mechanized society; he feared the replacement of inner transformation by the externally imposed processes of reeducation and reconstruction; he was the poet of the mind's kaleidoscope and resisted attempts to impose rigid laws on his imagination; he was the poet of light and flight, of freedom from earth-bound vision in an era of materialistic logic and utilitarianism. From the evidence, Olesha was a romantic at a time of classicism at its most philistine, an aesthete in a society with time for nothing but the practical concerns of life - reconstruction, economic planning, political reeducation. Yet, as Bondarin comments, 'saving romanticism from dissolving in surroundings of bourgeois mediocrity, he is unable to give these aesthetics a new arena.'

In the 1930's when it might have been expected that Olesha would blossom as a creative talent, it was for political reasons impossible to acquire an 'arena' for these kinds of themes and Olesha, in the interests of self-preservation, felt obliged to

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1 'Razgovor so sverstnikom', p.181.
take part in the mass demonstrations on the arena of socialist realism. The disastrous results of his attempts to interest himself in the accepted themes of his day — the rise of new positive socialist heroes, the dawn of a bright communist future, processes of moral reeducation — have been analysed showing the atrophying effect the change had on his skill as an artist.

But were the architects and policemen of socialist realism wholly to blame for the withering of Olesha's imaginative powers? It has been seen that, noticeably after his affirmation of solidarity with the spirit of socialist realism at the First All-Union Congress, despite a sharp rise in literary output, Olesha became absorbed with fruitlessly mulling over his old themes, without any significant new statements on the problems involved; characterization became barren; his prose became colourless — realistic, denuded of his beloved metaphors, of his expressionistic and surrealistic glimpses and word-play; in his drama, as well as in his prose, he began to mistake speechifying on a given theme for dramatization of that theme. Even in his personal life Olesha's decline began to pattern that of his famous heroes of thirty years earlier. From personal testimony,¹ in his latter years Olesha was extremely depressed and bitter, irritable, unsociable, and given to heavy drinking. Could Olesha's

¹ See especially the article by M. Charnyi, 'Zagadka Iurii Oleshi' ('The Enigma of Iurii Olesha') in Literaturnaia Rossiiia, 7 April 1967.
failure to become a 'hero of his times' be justly blamed on the times alone?

Not entirely. For Olesha art was always a sort of continuing redefinition of self, it revolved around his own personality and its permutations, its images were those of reminiscences, he continually focussed on the past. All of Olesha's fiction is suffused with the sadness of a 'riven soul' desperately seeking some dialogue with the new order, yet never able to sever its ties with the old world still resounding with the voices of the myriads of oppressed, humiliated, soul-searching descendents of Gogol' and Dostoevskii. Other themes did not seem to fire his imagination, no other seeds would germinate.

There is built-in sterility also in what has been called Olesha's 'holiday vision' - his complete severance of art from some of the more tiresome but real processes of life - work, mature relationships, growth, death. Even in Olesha's best work life appears more or less in the form of a circus: bright colours, stunning acrobatics, exotic animals, glamorous show personalities, a myriad of surface impressions. Once the much more mundane Soviet reality of every day had drained him of some of his lust for this kind of life, and had deprived him of his most deeply felt themes, there was little left. Even the much vaunted Olesha 'metaphor' (frequently a very ordinary simile) could do little to adorn the resulting undistinguished mixture of publicist tracts, confessions, recollections, literary opinions and pot-boilers.
'I am very sad just at the moment,' Esenin once wrote to a friend, 'for history is crossing a difficult epoch of murder of the personality ....' For all his own inner weaknesses, Olesha can be justly considered one of the victims of that epoch. This dissertation has traced the path and import of that wasteful and humiliating demise.

1 In the letter quoted by Marienhof, *Roman bez vran'ia*, pp.93-4.
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