

UPON SEEING A SKETCH AT AN EXHIBIT

By ARTHUR GREGOR

These were the initial points of visual perception:

She is dead
and holds their dead child in her arms.
Now weeps the willow tree in branches
brittle are the weeping leaves . . .
The sun slimy within pits of mud
talks of universe concentric
in typhoid trenches,
of hills without shadow
of air too lean for hungry breath
and of their death;
mirrors in yellow filth
the mood of this white-framed oblong,
portrays the frozen hearts
that left bodies and came to nip
the quartz of weeping trees . . .

All upside down within this scene:

The paralysed mouth,
the stares that scream
and balance the drastic two-tone
of bloodshot iris wild within the skeleton.
We see him standing there
and from his look and color differential
derive that he has come home,
has wandered across lands of living bones
to find that his are not alive.
What once was farm
is now an open grave,
deprived of moves to touch
he cannot without arm
dig sorrow in the earth,
cannot even feel how cold the mass
that he had hoped would heal
as breath the empty pits
where arms should be,
would sooth the pains
knifed with flame into his flesh,
numbers that strike us like
veins gone mad upon his back;
cannot scream of suppressed embraces,
can only blur their faces
with flood-like reflections
of his barren eyes.
While our eyes are screen
for twisted, painful pulses of the heart,
we know we cannot ever part this scene
from our mind,
where now you take on forms that live,
and tell of grief, your utter disappointment
and hopes now ultimately lost.
Now part of us, you grope queerly—without arms—
in strokes of hate
in our hearts and minds for answers

to questions hard to formulate,
with words you cannot shape—paralysed mouth.
But as you have been carved within our flesh,
have been swerved within our heart,
we understand your pulses
as we know our own.

You meant no harm, wrought into your farm
young sweat and hope and love,
cheered the sun when cooling your body
in her reflections in the water pits nearby,
restricted tears in your lover's eye
when the smiling moon threw white
between the lovers' shady moods of night,
helped the peasants build their homes
as they had helped you build your own,
never a frown, gay costumes, dancing with her
at the country fair,
her hand, she said, felt like silken gloves
hiding her passion in your hair,
while your hands would build and build and build
for her and child. . . .

And then the years which you could never understand . . .
Why . . . why away from wife and child,
why why this beating, this laughing in slave-depth,
ploughing their insanity within my flesh
and whips in sweating earth . . .
and then they screamed with laughter
rolling in low depth,
ripped your arms with flames
and insane dreams of blooming farms
and insane screams that exploded orbits torn from space,
paralysed your face, made lame brain movement.

You ask us WHY?

Impossible, utterly impossible
to equate in logic such bestial festivity,
Impossible to answer in direct emotional terms
and give reasons.

We can only tell you
that they have lashed upon you
the morbid tortures of a treason
that they have committed,
that they have admitted upon us,
Can only tell you that they tried to whirl
the globe balanced by a finger,
tried to sip the heat from the equator
with insulated straw, but
could not.

And so we have paid for all the vileness of their action,
because they know we understand
and shrink from their sanctimonious protection,
which they know we do not need.

Let freely bleed the thoughts upon this sight
beneath the blue-white fluoroscope.



review and comment



MAXIM GORKY AND WRITERS

How one man fused his revolutionary values with warmth and concern for creative tasks.

By CHARLES HUMBOLDT

MAXIM GORKY: REMINISCENCES. *A Pursuit Press Book. Dover Publications.* \$2.75.

EVERYONE is attracted by the reflections of key figures of history or art, but none are more fascinated than writers by the notes of their own kind. The pool of memory becomes a fountain of youth, half real, half legendary. One is teased by naive hopes in which he knows better than to believe. What will it do to me to drink here? Will I learn how to become immortal? A kind of primitive faith seizes the writer in the grip of greatness.

In fact, as one reads Gorky's memoirs it seems there is at least one kind of human grandeur that can be studied: greatness of heart. Two contradictory forces operated in Maxim Gorky, an unswerving sense of principle and a wonderful tolerance which could envelope others with hatred as flamingly as with love, yet not destroy them. Neither of these powers could once and for all overcome its rival, and so ethics and imagination both grew mighty in their equal contest for Gorky's mind. They were always being torn apart by the paradoxes of reality and each time re-fused in his revolutionary consciousness. The need to judge men and the drive to recreate them which, separately, provide a life's work for any one prophet or artist, both found expression in this man who became as vital to the story of mankind as to the history of literature.

Leonid Leonov, speaking in commemoration of the ninth anniversary of Gorky's death, remarked that he possessed a gift bestowed only upon the truly great: he was able to increase the quality and productivity of any seed that he held in his hand but for a few minutes. Gorky's relations with other

writers are the best evidence of this creative force. He wrestles with Tolstoy, Chekhov, Andreyev and Blok like a dramatist with his characters, continually drawing from them astonishing revelations, tempting them to surprise him, scaling their heights and letting them lead him into the blackest caves of the mind. He is at once man and playwright, sufferer and artist, a man whose questions and remonstrances always drew truthful cries from his subjects.

It is this aspect of Gorky's notes that provides such valuable lessons for us. He shakes our critical complacency, allowing us to see the writer not merely as a sociological phenomenon, nor a simple ideologue of reaction or progress, but as a creature complex, slippery, looking for truth in places about which the textbooks are silent. "So-called great men are always terribly contradictory: that is forgiven them with all their other follies." That is how he wrote of Tolstoy, that cross between an Old Believer and a dancer in the Rites of Spring. The almost perverse backwardness of Tolstoy infuriated him: "In Lev Nikolaevitch there is much which at times roused in me a feeling very like hatred, and this hatred fell upon my soul with crushing weight." Tolstoy's impulse to martyrdom evoked in him feelings of deep repulsion: "It was an attempt to use violence upon me, a desire to get hold of my conscience, to dazzle it with the glory of righteous blood, to put upon my neck the yoke of a dogma."

At times he equates Tolstoy's mentality with that of the most retarded peasant: "His attitude toward science too, is certainly national: one sees magnificently reflected in him the old, Russian village-scepticism which comes

from ignorance. Everything is national in him and all his preaching is a reaction from the past, an atavism which we had already begun to shake off and overcome." Yet even in this passage the word "magnificently" reveals the ambivalent feelings that Gorky had toward this man who taught him so much without ever becoming his master.

One cannot help feeling that it was the incessant conflict between Tolstoy's perceptions and his confused social outlook, and between his natural impulses and his conscience, which drew Gorky to him. The phrase "noble suffering" is not out of place here. Gorky saw a man in continual anguish and self-blame, claiming that he had never known one happy day in his life: "The flesh should be the obedient dog of the spirit, running to do its bidding; but we—how do we live? The flesh rages and riots, and the spirit follows it helpless and miserable." It is no wonder that he could remark in momentary discouragement, "Men have become worn out, exhausted, terribly separated, and they are all chained to a loneliness which dries up the soul."

Yet Gorky was able to see that the very qualities for which Tolstoy reproached himself, as did Gogol out of a similar religious obsession, were the springs of his greatness. While Tolstoy spent his strength in futile abasement of himself, Gorky pictured him as an incarnate force of nature, whose will the sea and stones obeyed. He watched this giant in whose eyes inanimate things became alive, animals turned half human, and whose thoughts had to become men and women before he could rest untroubled by them. In Tolstoy he saw part of himself, much that he warned himself against becoming, and still more that he wished to be. He could well say, "I am not an orphan on the earth, so long as this man lives on it."

CHEKHOV was immeasurably closer to Gorky intellectually. He had a precise and contemporary social vision, free of mystical baggage. He despised gentility and banality, and observed with horror and contempt the waste of effort and creative power in bourgeois society. With all this, "he felt pity, and, if in his presence you abused anyone, Anton Pavlovitch would immediately defend him.

"Why do you say that? He is an old man . . . he's seventy.' Or: 'But he's still so young . . . it's only stupid-