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From Aesop to Orwell: The Roots of Doubletalk

Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* opens with a brief survey of predictions of the end of the world by seers ranging from monks to Anabaptists to Communists, the author's interest being in the persistence of the apocalyptic mentality and especially its way of surviving the falsification of its prophecies. Not cited by Kermode is one of the most influential works of fiction of the nineteenth century, whose author predicted the advent of a new era within two years of its publication in 1863. Cast in the form of a novel but in truth something more like a tract, Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* was a sacred text for generations of Russian revolutionaries, including Lenin, author of a 1902 pamphlet by the same name. The original *What Is to Be Done?*, a work both didactic and prolix, alludes everywhere to an impending revolution as to a millennial event, although because the work was subject to censorship (and its author imprisoned) these references are all encoded—Aesopian. If the true believer in apocalypse has a shaky grasp of material reality, the imminent revolution that is the true though not explicit subject of *What Is to Be Done?* is completely without material specification. Asked by the novel's rather wooden heroine to explain how it will be possible "to

organize life in such a way that there's no more poverty," Lopukhov answers, "I can't but my fiancée could. Without her I can only say that she's working on it; she's very strong, stronger than anyone else on earth"¹—this great personage being, in fact, a figure for revolution itself. So it is throughout *What Is to Be Done?* Only in the most mysteriously allegorical manner can the author can speak about the day of revolution. How the transformation will take place, the blood it will cost, is nowhere mentioned. Indicatively, in a section of *What Is to Be Done?* summarizing the course of history, the revolution by which Russia will enter the age of happiness is represented by a blank on the page. Though censorship is oppressive, the censor may have done Chernyshevsky a favour by giving him such a good justification for purveying a fairy tale.

A novel more in form than substance, *What Is to Be Done?* tells the story of Vera Pavlovna (Verochka)—her refusal to marry a suitor she does not love and her virtual imprisonment by her mother as a result; her deliverance by and marriage to the then-medical student Lopukhov; her founding of an exemplary dress-making cooperative; his allegedly rational decision to free her to marry another man (Kirsanov) by faking suicide, thus making Verochka a widow in the eyes of society and the law; and the eventual return of Lopukhov and his marriage to a mutual acquaintance, whereupon the two couples settle down to a happy life as a foursome. The meat of the novel, however, consists of lectures, analyses, and didactic dreams. As an example of the expurgation of the real in *What Is to Be Done?* consider one of the latter—Verochka's second dream, which treats of matters like soil drainage (a code-word at the time for revolution) and promises the flowering of humanity once the social conditions in which people

“develop” are corrected. One of the voices in the dream sequence says things like “In an anthropological analysis labour constitutes the fundamental form of movement which provides the basis and content of all other forms”—an index of the unreality of much of the work’s dialogue, and its estrangement from the traditions of “the dialogic imagination.” Toward the conclusion of the dream a figure identified as “The Bride of her Bridegrooms, the Sister of her Sisters,” representing a regenerated humanity, assures Verochka that while at present the wicked serve her ends despite themselves by spurring others to “develop,” the time will soon come when their services will not be needed.

“When the good are strong, I won’t need the wicked. This will happen very soon, Verochka. Then the wicked will see that they can no longer be wicked. Those who were already developing will become good, since they remained wicked only because it was disadvantageous for them to become good. Since they know that good is better than evil, they’ll come to love the good as soon as it’s possible to do so without harming themselves.”

Here then in a nutshell is Chernyshevsky’s vision of a transformation of humanity, at least Russian humanity, overseen by the very principles of reason. Notable in this prophecy of a brave new world are something like the same aura of imminence that once filled mystics with the sense of an ending, as well as the virginal nature of the new order itself. “The wicked will see that they can no longer be wicked.” No bloodshed.

The only blood the reader of *What Is to Be Done?* is likely to remember is voluntarily shed by the novel's shadowy superman Rakhmetov in a feat of revolutionary, not religious, asceticism. Eulogized as "an extraordinary man," a Hercules both of labour and intellect, Rakhmetov makes his entry into *What Is to Be Done?* reading Newton's reflections on the Apocalypse. One day, as we learn, in order to test his mettle Rakhmetov slept on a home-made bed of nails, hundreds of them, only to proclaim when he woke up soaked in blood, "A trial. It's necessary. Improbable, of course, but in any case necessary. Now I know I can do it." The trial was necessary in the same sense that history is proceeding toward its necessary destination, now at hand. Exactly what this ascetic hero does to bring about the revolution is left blank, like the particulars of the event itself. Upon returning to Petersburg, Rakhmetov devoted three-quarters of his time "to matters of concern to others or to no one in particular." Says the author as Rakhmetov departs in the middle of the novel,

I don't know where Rakhmetov is now, what he's doing. . . I have neither facts nor guesses, except for those that all his acquaintances share. . . . In any case, it would be "necessary" for him to be in the North American states, the study of which he considered to be more "necessary" than that of any other country. He would remain there a long time, perhaps over a year, perhaps forever, if he found appropriate pursuits. But it was much more likely that in three years he'd return to Russia because it seemed that there—not now, but then, in three or four years—it would be "necessary" for him to be in Russia—

necessary because of the imminence of the moment of transformation. Inasmuch as the author speaks, as here, in Aesopian circumlocutions we have almost no idea what Rakhmetov is actually doing, but perhaps his sense of an ending tells him that the destined consummation of history justifies any and all means of attaining it (promising as it does the elimination of oppression and the deliverance of humanity just as the heroine, Verochka, was delivered from the misery of her domestic circumstances earlier in the novel). In lecturing the heroine he does say offhandedly at one point, “What do fifty people matter?”

The ascetic virtue and rigorous rationality of the mysterious Rakhmetov (his self-sacrifice replicated at a lower level in the willing surrender of Verochka by her first husband) gave revolutionaries of Chernyshevsky’s time and later an idealized image of themselves as superior beings. Literature in general may exert little if any direct effect on history, but here is a work that entered importantly into the making of history. If readers have been known to imitate literary heroes even to the point of committing suicide after their example, many were moved to imitation by Chernyshevsky’s portrayal of heroes at once rational and self-sacrificing, as pedantic as his art may be.

“Innumerable cooperatives” were even founded in imitation of Verochka’s dress-making operation.² Inspiring as it did a generation of radicals who went on proselytize among the people, carry out assassinations, or convert to Marxism, *What Is to Be Done?* took root among the forerunners of the makers of the Russian Revolution, a revolution that

did more than convert the wicked to goodness by demonstrating that wickedness no longer had any point. Lenin deemed Chernyshevsky

the greatest and most talented representative of socialism before Marx. . . .

Under his influence hundreds of people became revolutionaries. . . . After my brother's execution, knowing that Chernyshevsky's novel was one of his favorite books, I really undertook to read it, and I sat over it not for several days but for several weeks. Only then did I understand its depth.³

By depth Lenin presumably refers to the covert meaning of a text expurgated by its author in order to get past the censor. ("It would be necessary for [Rakhmetov] to be in Russia.") By no means did whitewashed language die out with the fall of the Czarist state.

In his classic exposé of doubletalk "Politics and the English Language," published in 1946, a decade after the Moscow show trials, Orwell protests long words, moribund metaphors, and passive constructions, but the real object of his attack is simply the use of language to deceive. "The great enemy of clear language is insincerity." The point is not so much to speak crisply as not to lie. "A mass of Latin words falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outlines and covering up all the details." *What Is to Be Done?*, patches of which are crisply written, might be likened to a vast landscape of white, with the facts of the Rakhmetov conspiracy blanketed with vagueness ("I have neither facts nor guesses"), as is the animating vision of a New Russia where the good

remain good and the wicked become good. Even if Chernyshevsky had been free to speak his mind one wonders if he was interested in descending from the heights of abstraction, or indeed open to the possibility that his utopia might prove as fallacious as every other predicted Second Coming. Even matters as close to home in this novel as the doings of Verochka's workshop or Kirsanov's hospital are lost in what Orwell calls "sheer cloudy vagueness." If, as Orwell alleges, "the whole tendency of modern prose is away from concreteness," Chernyshevsky saturates with vagueness the most earthbound and detailed of all literary forms, a form which Orwell himself practiced and in whose tradition he was steeped: the novel. Given that "Soviet Marxist-Leninist ideology is itself a form of utopian thought, which officially acknowledged the entire tradition of utopian thinking as its predecessor,"⁴ it perhaps stands to reason that the studied vagueness and contempt of reality found in *What Is to Be Done?*—the cardinal Russian utopia and a work highly esteemed, as we have seen, by Lenin himself—should have been reflected in Soviet rhetoric.

According to Orwell, political writers resort to the intentional obscurity of doubletalk not to circumvent the police but to defend practices that couldn't otherwise be defended. "People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*." How many in the Soviet Union met the fate of unreliable elements no one can say even now to the nearest million. Chernyshevsky's vision of a Russian earthly paradise where the happy and the free live among vines, figs, dates, and crystal palaces, proved a mass grave. And the distance between death's trench and

Chernyshevsky's land of milk and honey may not be as great as it seems. To the extent that *What Is to Be Done?* tells a story, its crux is the decision by Lopukhov, the heroine's deliverer and first husband, to "quit the scene" for the greater good by staging his own suicide. As we are told, Lopukhov saw "the necessity of dying," just as the Rakhmetov at the age of sixteen launched his own conversion into an extraordinary man when he "cursed the things that must perish". It is true that Lopukhov doesn't actually die but merely pretends to—that is part of the novel's bloodlessness—but through his story Chernyshevsky hints despite himself at the sort of sacrifices that may be "necessary" as the Iron Age makes way for the Golden. Lenin and Stalin certainly enforced the necessity of dying. It is no great leap from Chernyshevsky's play with the idea that certain things "must perish" to the argument that people, and a lot of them, must perish—or as an imaginary defender of mass murder in "Politics and the English Language" puts it in language as roundabout as Chernyshevsky's: ". . . we must, I think, agree that a certain curtailment of the right of political opposition is an unavoidable concomitant of transitional periods . . ."

While foretelling the imminent destruction of the existing Russia, *What Is to Be Done?* pretends not only to the censor but to the reader and indeed to itself that this event will be accomplished as by a magic wand, without conflict, chaos, and slaughter. In the eyes of *What Is to Be Done?* the human costs of establishing the New Russia are nil. They are simply passed over, whited out. Through the agency of heroes like Rakhmetov, says the author-narrator, "everyone's life will flourish . . . they make it possible for all people to breathe," as if humanity were to be transported to Candyland

and no one at all (not even the bourgeois readers hectored and reviled by Chernyshevsky in an inversion of the “dear reader” formula) would be marked down as an enemy by the new regime. In this respect the language of Chernyshevsky’s Aesopian fable comes close to the sort of doubletalk exposed by Orwell. In either case anything unmentionable is buried under drifts of denial. Merely by making characters into abstractions Chernyshevsky sets a precedent for the loss of concreteness which, as Orwell argues, is so noxious a feature of political prose. Incantations like “In an anthropological analysis labour constitutes the fundamental form of movement which provides the basis and content of all other forms” likewise prefigure the anti-language quoted in Orwell’s essay.

Though Orwell observes that “a bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation,” he doesn’t seem to consider it a possibility that such a practice as the whitewashing of reality could actually descend from the past in the manner of a tradition, gaining power over the decades and generations. One reason the argumentation of “Politics and the English Language” seems thin is that Orwell insists on viewing bad writing as a product of bad habits, and tradition is more than a collection of habits. It is a river that flows from the past to the present. Veneration of *What Is to Be Done?* was itself a Soviet tradition. At the time of “Politics and the English Language” millions of copies of the novel were probably in existence in the Soviet Union, and twenty years later it was said that “the effects of Chernyshevsky’s novel can still be traced in the attitudes and behavior of men who are leading the Communist world at

this very moment.”⁵ Effects could also be traced in Marxist apologetics, the rhetoric Orwell most detests.

By the time “Politics and the English Language” was written, some eighty years had passed since Chernyshevsky fashioned his utopian solution to the riddle of history and bequeathed it to the revolutionary movement. Such was the name of Chernyshevsky in that movement that simply to model oneself after him made one a member of the intelligentsia.⁶ The mysteries of his Aesopian prose must have given readers who understood them a keen sense of being initiates, members of a secret society of the enlightened. Chernyshevsky also underwrites the Leninist ideal of the Bolshevik as a professional revolutionary, a spirit at once rational, selfless, and devout—like Rakhmetov; hence Lenin’s appropriation of the famous title for his pamphlet. With Chernyshevsky, in short, the vision of a millennial transformation, coupled with an indifference to its costs and casualties, entered formatively into radical thinking and imagining. If denials of the state crimes committed under Lenin and Stalin represent calculated acts of deception, they may also represent a legacy of the utopian tradition as passed down by Chernyshevsky, according to whose vision the New Russia seems to come into existence by the magic of reason. As the graves filled in the decades after the Russian Revolution, the principle that the human casualties of the New Russia are details not worth attending to—that to attend to them is in fact to betray the utopian ideal—grew all the more urgent. Dostoevsky, who countered Chernyshevsky in *Notes from Underground*, went on to interrogate the notion of a paradise so beautiful that the terrible suffering on which it is built becomes as nothing. *What Is to Be Done?* holds

forth the vision of an earthly paradise that, supposedly, was never built on suffering in the first place, and decades later under Lenin and Stalin this denial of factuality performed heavy duty indeed.

Not “Politics and the English Language” so much as Orwell’s culminating work, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, answers the utopianism of *What Is to Be Done?* Written in the conviction that the end was nigh, *What Is to Be Done?* foresees the imminent arrival of a new order where human needs are so well fulfilled that the question of the methods used to bring this end about cannot even be posed. The “end” effaces the “means.” In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which is as detailed as the other novel is spectral, the use of terror has become an end in itself. According to “Politics and the English Language”, defenses of atrocities like “the Russian purges and deportations” have to be couched in euphemisms because otherwise the apologist would have no choice but to employ “arguments which are too brutal for most people to face”. The torturer-pedagogue O’Brien in Orwell’s anti-utopia proclaims point-blank that the Party exercises power for its own sake and for no higher reason whatever, although in making this declaration he ceases to sound like a human being. The ice-cold rationality of Rakhmetov, the “extraordinary man,” returns as the ice-cold voice of a power-figure who seems to dwell outside of human life.

Recall that in the climactic torture scene of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Winston Smith is asked by his interrogator O’Brien why he supposes the Party clamped a dictatorship on the population of Oceania. Hardly knowing what to say, Smith gives what he imagines to be the politically safe answer, that the Party does it all for the people’s

good. Wrong, he is told—the Party does it for its own gratification. “The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power.” Human beings as we know them do not affirm their complete and utter depravity thus, do not strip their deeds of justification the better to parade them in nakedness. As Orwell, who in “Politics and the English Language” defined politics as the defense of the indefensible, well knew, in the world as we find it no human being would talk like O’Brien. Why then does Orwell strain belief in this way? Evidently in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Orwell chose to depart from the familiar terrain of realistic fiction in favor of the novel of ideas, a category to which Chernyshevsky’s *What Is to Be Done?* also belongs. The immediate precursor of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* would be Zamyatin’s *We*, which as an anti-utopia contests *What Is to Be Done?* on its own ground. The supposedly ideal society of *We* had its beginning in an apocalyptic bloodletting in which almost the entirety of the human race was wiped out. OneState is founded on annihilation. (Nor has the state forgotten its beginnings. “There are many executions in Zamyatin’s Utopia,” as Orwell notes.) *Nineteen Eighty-Four* thus engages tradition as “Politics and the English Language”—bits of which are incorporated into the novel—really does not.

When the world fails to end in compliance with their prophecies, true believers are known to alter the numbers instead of discarding their system of belief. When the secular end of days called utopia failed to come closer and closer in accordance with the presumed laws of history, the officers of the Soviet state adjusted the dates and blamed hidden enemies: a formula for endless purges, forced confessions, deportations, killings.

To those in the Soviet Union who saw the Red Terror, collectivization, the Great Famine, the Great Terror of the 1930s, the gulag—one mass execution succeeding another as if they were finally independent of any object except the production of terror itself—it might well have seemed that O’Brien spoke truly after all. The horror of totalitarianism is radically imagined in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

“Politics and the English Language” concludes, “Political language . . . is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind. One cannot change this all in a moment, but one can at least change one’s own habits, and from time to time one can even, if one jeers loudly enough, send some worn-out and useless phrase . . . into the dustbin where it belongs.” Orwell doesn’t seem to have much faith that changing one’s diction will purify the political atmosphere, nor should he, because the problem transcends the use of this phrase by that person. Only a few years before “Politics and the English Language” he himself, a clear writer, was able to say that “It is only by revolution that the native genius of the English people can be set free” and that “whether it happens with or without bloodshed is largely an accident of time and place” (*The Lion and the Unicorn*). “What do fifty people matter?” Not until Orwell got down to the utopian mentality itself could he take on the abuse of thought responsible for the glossing over of murder, and this he did in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The official contradictions of Oceania, such as “War is Peace,” represent a malignant variant of the contradiction on which the utopian tradition is founded: that it is named for a place whose name means “no place.”

¹ Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, tr. Michael R. Katz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 100.

² Joseph Frank, "N. G. Chernyshevsky: A Russian Utopia", *Southern Review* 3 (1967): 83.

³ Cited in Introduction to *What Is to Be Done?*, p. 32.

⁴ Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 398.

⁵ Frank, "N. G. Chernyshevsky": 69.

⁶ Gary Saul Morson, "Prosaic Bakhtin: *Landmarks*, Anti-Intelligentialism, and the Russian Counter-Tradition", *Common Knowledge* 2 (1993): 42.