DEMING BROWN

The Art of Andrei Siniavsky

The imprisonment of Andrei Siniavsky in 1965 stilled, in mid-career, the most original and enigmatic voice in contemporary Soviet literature. At the time of his arrest he was known in the USSR solely as a gifted, liberal literary critic and scholar. Abroad he was known as Abram Tertz, a mysterious Russian author—possibly not even a resident of the Soviet Union—who had written a brilliant, devastating critique of socialist realism, two short novels (*The Trial Begins* and *Liubimov*), six short stories, and a small collection of aphorisms (*Unguarded Thoughts*).

As Siniavsky he had written (sometimes collaborating with A. Menshutin) reviews and essays on contemporary Soviet poetry, several articles in literary histories and encyclopedias, and a superb introduction to a collection of Pasternak's poetry. He had coauthored, with I. Golomshtok, a book on Picasso. Nearly all of these writings were remarkable for their intellectual discipline, liveliness, erudition, and aesthetic sensitivity. At the same time these writings, though often controversial in their liberal bias, were well within the prevailing ideological limits.

As Tertz, on the other hand, he was both the advocate and the practitioner of what he called, in his essay *On Socialist Realism*, a "phantasmagoric art," a literature of the grotesque which strove to be "truthful with the aid of absurd fantasy." Such an art was not without precedent in Russian literature. The strain of the grotesque and fantastic, stemming primarily from Gogol, had been prominent in the nineteenth century. It had been even more pronounced in the first two decades of the twentieth century, in such writers as Sologub, Bely, and Remizov, and it was prominent during the early years of the Soviet period, in the prose fiction of Zamiatin, Olesha, and others. With the imposition of socialist realism as official doctrine in the early 1930s the use of the grotesque and the fantastic as artistic devices was suppressed. (One genre—science fiction—was somewhat exempt.) Only in the late fifties, in such a work as Dudintsev's *A New Year's Tale,* did they begin timidly to reappear. Tertz's advocacy of such means, if not altogether heretical, was well in advance of the times. It was understandable that one who held such views might, if he were a Soviet citizen, wish to mask them under a pseudonym.

Until Siniavsky was unmasked by purely extraliterary means no one suspected on the basis of the texts alone that he was Tertz. The fine literary intelligence and sophistication of Siniavsky are paralleled by the creative inventiveness of Tertz, but there the similarity between the two ends. Siniavsky had mastered two quite distinct voices and had managed to keep them separate. This article will be concerned almost exclusively with the Siniavsky who wrote as Tertz. But it should be kept in mind that a writer who is adroit enough to sustain two independent literary personalities may also be capable of launching and maintaining still others. Siniavsky-Tertz is an exceedingly complex thinker and artist.

Siniavsky's direct pronouncements on the fantastic in literature are few. His article on science fiction, published in a Soviet journal in 1960, urges Russian writers of this genre to be less "practical" and "earthly" and to give more rein to their imaginations. In the context of the times the article is at most mildly unorthodox, and it develops no real theory of the fantastic. *On Socialist Realism,* his genuinely bold and daring theoretical essay published abroad under the pseudonym Tertz, is almost totally devoted to demonstrating the bankruptcy of the official literary ideology of the past quarter-century. Only at the very end of this essay, as if in an ironic afterthought, does he explicitly advocate a "phantasmagoric art," and he does not elaborate on its principles. For his view of the fantastic, then, one must see what is implicit in his fiction and in his critique of socialist realism.

On Socialist Realism is a carefully reasoned indictment of the theory and practice of Soviet literature. Siniavsky's polemic strategy is to describe and seemingly accept the ideological premises on which this state-controlled literature is based while he simultaneously—through example, paradox, and arguments based on the history of Russian literature—undermines the whole concept of socialist realism by reducing it to absurdity. This basic strategy, however, is augmented by such a profoundly ironical treatment of the ideological premises underlying socialist realism that considerable doubt arises as to whether the author accepts even these premises. For the sake of argument Siniavsky accepts the teleological notion that history has a direction, goal, and Purpose, and that it is a function of literature to serve this Purpose—the attainment of communism. He then proceeds to show that the literary models that have been arbitrarily selected as methodological guides for this purposeful literature—the nineteenth-century Russian realists—are ill-suited to this function. The method of "realism," he argues, is inapplicable to the kind of heroic mythmaking that the building of communism requires. A more suitable model, he suggests, would be eighteenth-century Russian neoclassicism, which was rigid and stable, affirmative, expansive, and devoid of the poisonous subtlety of doubt and irony that are inherent in nineteenth-century realism. In Siniavsky's opinion Mayakovsky was the only Soviet artist who had understood that literature which truly serves the Purpose must not aspire to be realistic: Mayakovsky relied on hyperbole.

Siniavsky's essay is more than just a literary argument. It is a savage attack on Stalinism, among other things, and an examination, with copious illustrations from Soviet cultural history, of the problem of ends and means. The essay is so loaded with sarcasm, moreover, that it is often impossible to determine whether an assertion is serious or tongue-in-cheek. At times, he seems to burlesque his own ideas. The ostensible purpose of the essay is to find a viable Communist literary *aesthetic,* but Siniavsky comes very close to saying that this is *ethically* impossible. One could interpret his last-minute advocacy of a "phantasmagoric art," for example, as a statement of desperation: since it is impossible to write "realistically" in Soviet society (i.e., to tell the truth), let us stop fooling ourselves and frankly resort to fantasy. If this interpretation were correct, *On Socialist Realism* would best be considered a kind of Swiftian modest proposal. And perhaps that is what it is.

On the other hand, there is no evidence in Siniavsky's writings to indicate that he is a conscious disbeliever in communism (which would in fact make a "Communist art" inimical in his view) or that he thinks that all avenues to the truth in Soviet literature are closed. What seems to disturb him is that socialist realism demands in the writer a pose of certainty, a dogmatic self-assurance which a truly intelligent and sensitive writer must find impossible to maintain. It is this feeling, I believe, that leads Siniavsky to espouse, at the close of his essay, a "phantasmagoric art with hypotheses instead of a Purpose and the grotesque instead of a depiction of ordinary life." Truth in art, he seems to imply, can only be reached, if at all, through guesses, indirection, tentative exaggeration, and distortion, and through the language of metaphor.

Siniavsky's art, then, is based on an ironic understanding of his own uncertainty and confusion, a lack of teleological confidence in orderly and purposeful processes, and a fascination with the bizarre and the irrational. By dealing in opposites and incongruities and by creating ironic analogies, he seems to be bent on conjuring up actuality rather than describing it. Although there are patterns in his writings taken as a whole, his work at first produces an effect of extreme fragmentation, of polyphony without harmony. His apparently undisciplined and illogical swarms of impressions suggest an artistic personality that is intricate without being integrated. And it is true that some of his works—one thinks of the stories "You and I" and "Tenants" and of several passages in *Unguarded Thoughts*—seem hopelessly chaotic and abstruse. As a rule, however, his writings are not as disjointed and obscure as they at first appear to be. One suspects that his excesses come from the fact that he is an enemy of artificial coherence, of intellectual and artistic systems that sweep contradictions under a rug.

All of Siniavsky's fiction has contemporary Russian settings. Soviet mores and linguistic peculiarities, Soviet institutions, mental habits, and attitudes are essential to its fabric. The problems and conflicts he depicts are recognizably those of contemporary Soviet civilization. *The Trial Begins*, for example, is set in Moscow at the time of Stalin's death and tells of specific events and places with considerable—if impressionistic—accuracy. There are allusions, in several of the stories, to actual public events and personages, and many of the details of Soviet life are set down with fidelity. Siniavsky is therefore a "realist" in the sense that his works tangibly reflect the Soviet environment. At the same time, however, "plausible" characters, objects, and occurrences frequently blend into "implausible" ones, in violation of the laws of nature or commonly accepted principles of cognition. His method of shifting back and forth between the real and the grotesque and fantastic can perhaps best be called surrealism.

The most prominent surrealistic element in Siniavsky's fiction is the supernatural. In "The Icicle," for example, the hero—an ordinary Muscovite—suddenly becomes clairvoyant. He is cursed with the ability to see both backward and forward in time so that he "lies adrift in the waves of time and space." He can read minds, foresees the circumstances of his own death, and, since souls are transmigratory, he lives simultaneously with his and others' past and future incarnations. In *Liubimov* the hero is magically endowed with the power of mass hypnosis, which enables him to delude the populace of a provincial town into believing, for instance, that he has turned mineral water into spirits, a tube of toothpaste into a fish, a river into champagne. With these powers he becomes the local dictator for a time, and improvises an illusory utopian state. The novel abounds in supernatural tricks and creatures, ghosts, spells, and folk magic, so that, in distinction to "The Icicle," it has many of the qualities of a fairy story or folk tale, and in fact seems in part to be a conscious exploitation and parody of that genre. A third and still different use of the supernatural is found in "Pkhentz," whose hero is a creature from outer space, a cactuslike vegetable who manages to exist on earth by disguising himself as a man.

Siniavsky's friend Alfreda Aucouturier has testified to his fondness for "authentic accounts of witchcraft and magic" and has stated that "he believes in the power of fantasy to attempt by a trick to offer an explanation of reality, while simultaneously recording a mystery."[1] At the same time, she does not state flatly that he believes in the supernatural, and there is on record no statement from Siniavsky himself to this effect. The question is moot, but whether or not Siniavsky does "believe in ghosts," it is certain that his use of the supernatural in his fiction is rational, calculated, and sophisticated. Its employment is largely a matter of artistic strategy, in the tradition of Bely and Sologub. And like these two writers he sometimes makes it difficult to distinguish between patently supernatural phenomena and purely psychological ones, between demonic happenings on the one hand and dreams, delusions, and hallucinations on the other. The story "Tenants," for example, consists entirely of a monologue which appears to be the ravings of a dipsomaniac writer who thinks he sees a woman turned into a rat, who fancies he can transform himself into a glass, and whose world is populated by sprites and spirits. He argues that industrialization has so polluted streams, rivers, and lakes that water nymphs have fled to the cities:

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[1] Alfreda Aucouturier, "Andrey Sinyavsky on the Eve of His Arrest," in Leopold Labedz and Max Hayward, eds., *On Trial: The Case of Sinyavsky (Tertz) and Daniel (Arzhak)* (London: Collins and Harvill, 1967), p. 343.

> What a lot of them perished! Countless numbers. Not entirely, of course—after all, they are immortal beings. Nothing to be done about that. But the brawnier specimens got stuck in the water mains. You've probably heard it yourself. You turn on the kitchen tap, and out of it come sobs, various splashings, and curses. Have you thought whose antics these are? The voices are those of water nymphs. They get stuck in a washbasin and it's murder the way they sneeze![2]

This story, then, may be the psychological portrait of a fevered imagination. But there is also much evidence to support the notion that the narrator is actually a goblin who has possessed the drunken writer, and that the story is this devil's monologue, in which case the tale would be basically supernatural.

Whatever the orientation of this particularly puzzling story, there are others, devoid of the supernatural, in which the fantastic element comes purely from the psychological derangement of the individual characters. Such is the case in "You and I," a story of divided personality, and in "Graphomaniacs," whose dominant note is paranoia. In still others a fantastic effect is created through the detailing of normal workings of the imagination and the unconscious—dreams and reveries that have no particular pathological significance. Thus in *The Trial Begins* the prosecutor Globov and his idealistic schoolboy son Seryozha attend a symphonic concert. The music stimulates contrasting private fantasies in them. For Seryozha:

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[2] Professor Assya Humesky has suggested to me that this passage may be a reference to a popular parody of the prologue to Pushkin's *Ruslan i Liudmila* which circulated in the Soviet Union in the 1920s as an ironic protest against the new regime's attacks on romanticism.

In quoting from the works of Siniavsky I have used the following translations, altering them occasionally on the basis of my own interpretation of the original Russian: Abram Tertz, *Fantastic Stories* ("You and I" and "The Icicle," trans. Max Hayward, "Graphomaniacs," "At the Circus," and "Tenants," trans. Ronald Hingley) (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963); "Pkhentz," trans. Jeremy Biddulph, in Peter Reddaway, ed., *Soviet Short Stories*, vol. 2 (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968), pp. 214-63; Abram Tertz, *The Trial Begins*, trans. by Max Hayward (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960); "Thought Unaware" [*Unguarded Thoughts*], trans. Andrew Field and Robert Szulkin, *The New Leader*, July 19, 1965, pp. 16-26.

> The music was like his private image of the revolution. The flood drowned the bourgeoisie in a most convincing way.
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> A general's wife in evening dress floundered, tried to scramble up a pillar and was washed away. The old general swam with a vigorous breast-stroke, but soon sank. Even the musicians were, by now, up to their necks in water. Eyes bulging, lips spitting foam, they fiddled frenziedly, randomly, below the surface of the waves.
>
> One more onslaught. A lone usher, riding on a chair, swept past. The waves beat against the walls and lapped the portraits of the great composers. Ladies' handbags and torn tickets floated among the jetsam. Now and then, a bald head, white like an unripe watermelon, slowly floated up out of the sonorous green depth and bobbed back out of sight.

Globov, on the other hand, thinks in images of authoritarian power:

> He, too, was fascinated by the flood, but he understood it better than Seryozha. What struck him was that this surge of music wasn't left to its own devices; it was controlled by the conductor.
>
> The conductor built dams, ditches, aqueducts, canalizing the flood; at the sweep of his arm one stream froze, another flowed forward in its bed and turned a turbine.
>
> Globov slipped into a seat in the front row. Never had he sat so close, never had he realized how hard was the conductor's work. No wonder! Think of having to keep an eye on all of them, from flute to drum, and force them all to play the same tune.

The reveries of both Seryozha and Globov are presented in grotesque patterns of imagery. In neither of them, however, is there an indication of mental illness. Rather, their thoughts are metaphorical expressions of their personalities.

Whether dealing with the supernatural, with hallucination and delusion, or with the normal subconscious, Siniavsky makes extensive use of subjective, introspective modes of narration. His first-person narrators are usually engaged in confessing or complaining to an unspecified audience that seems to be unsympathetic or uncomprehending. Sometimes his narrators appear to be mumbling to themselves. Moreover, these subjective voices often switch barely perceptibly, and sometimes imperceptibly, so that the reader cannot always be certain of the narrator's identity. This combination of subjective narration and ambiguity concerning the narrator emphasizes the aura of the fantastic.

Much of what *seems* fantastic in Siniavsky is in fact simply grotesque. He distorts his material in order to find new angles, fresh emphases, unusual perspectives. The "unreality" of much of *The Trial Begins,* for example, comes from its technique of montage, its kaleidoscopic juxtaposition of scenes and characters to reflect the atmosphere of confusion that surrounded the demise of Stalin. A similar distortion for the purpose of intensifying thematic concepts and epitomizing feverish psychological states is found in the story "At the Circus." Like his predecessors in the writing of ornate prose—such as Bely, Remizov, Zamiatin, and Pilniak—Siniavsky makes special use of shapes, shadows, and reflections. In *The Trial Begins*, the beautiful, self-centered, and depraved Marina gazes at her reflection in the display window of a beauty shop:

> There she saw herself as in a distorting mirror. People walked across her, trolley-buses drove past, and flasks of scent and pyramids of colored soap drove through them.
>
> "All these beauty preparations only spoil your skin," she thought as she looked sulkily at her image. But her face, smudged with shame and temper, trodden by the shadows of the passers-by, remained beautiful enough.

In this scene the world is not unreal or fantastic, but merely "strange." Much in the manner of Iurii Olesha (who, however, scrupulously avoided the supernatural), Siniavsky portrays a "different" order of reality and suggests that things are not what they seem. He does this also by means of caricature, hyperbole, and downward comparisons, and by deliberately depriving phenomena—such as sex—of their conventional romantic overtones.

Despite his formal similarities to the Russian symbolists, he is much less interested than they were in using art as an approach to metaphysics. For one thing, he seems too earthy and ironic by nature to commit his art to such solemn purposes. The absurd for him tends to be a source of satire, not of metaphysical speculation. At the same time, he is obviously in earnest when he uses the bizarre and the illogical as a device for exploring the world of common experience. He employs the unreal and the unusual to speak vividly and arrestingly about the real and the usual—to examine actual psychological states, spiritual and moral problems, historical and cultural essences. But his art is one of impressions and fragments rather than consistently unified generalizations, and this, I believe, is why he writes in *On Socialist Realism* of the importance of "hypotheses." In his view, art can only pursue the truth indirectly; the image is a kind of tentative proposition.

Siniavsky is a self-consciously *literary* writer. His works are peppered with allusions, both overt and covert, to a wide variety of literary schools and figures, chiefly Russian and West European of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The temptress Marina in *The Trial Begins* is said, at thirty, to be of a "Balzacian age."[3] Lyonya Tikhomirov, the mesmerizing young dictator in *Liubimov,* liberates the prisoners in the local jail and exhorts them to remember: "The word 'man' has a proud ring!"—Siniavsky's sarcastic reference to Gorky's much-abused line from *The Lower Depths.* There are zany misquotations and puns, such as one in which the title of Gogol's *Dead Souls* emerges as "The Dead Smother." Siniavsky's most brilliant literary allusions, however, are in his parodies. A long apostrophe to Soviet railroads in "The Icicle," for example, is an exact parody of Gogol's famous apostrophe to the Russian troika. *Liubimov* is largely patterned on Saltykov-Shchedrin's *History of One Town,* and this novel also has long passages of calculated, purple Gogolian rhetoric. In *The Trial Begins* there are numerous parodies of the jargon used in Stalinist literary criticism.

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[3] This may also be a reference to Lermontov, who uses the same term in *A Hero of Our Times.*

To a certain extent Siniavsky's abundant literary references and parodies are simply a clever writer's game, a form of exuberant play. As a rule, however, these exercises also have a satiric purpose and constitute serious literary commentary, for the subject of much of Siniavsky's fiction is literature itself. *The Trial Begins* is, among other things, a story about socialist realism: in its prologue the narrator is given an assignment to depict a group of characters and events in the prescribed official manner; the body of the story is his defiantly unorthodox response to the assignment; the epilogue describes his punishment. The novel as a whole is an implicit demonstration of the absurdity of socialist realism: the very nature of the characters and events with which the narrator is dealing—contemporary Soviet citizens in contemporary circumstances—is such that the formula does not work. Although *Liubimov* is not as neatly programmatic as *The Trial Begins,* it too is extensively concerned with literary problems as such. It is, in part, a novel about novel writing, a novel which talks to itself. Within its loose and elaborate structure there are two primary narrators, whose styles clash, who interrupt one another and quarrel over strategy, fumble, and sometimes cancel each other out. His main narrator, a good-natured, pedantic philistine with literary pretensions, is given to confusion, false starts, and Sterne-like confessions to the reader (he dislikes the fantastic!) through which the author himself engages in wry and sophisticated spoofing of novelistic techniques and devices.

In other works Siniavsky is more specifically concerned with the conditions under which literature exists in the Soviet Union. "Tenants" features a devastated, drunken writer—by no means a uniquely Soviet phenomenon, but under conditions which suggest that this peculiar society has caused his downfall. "Graphomaniacs" is, indirectly, about censorship. Its hero is a writer who has not published, surrounded by writers who are also unpublished:

> But do you know what we owe it to? To censorship. Yes, censorship is the dear old mother who's cherished us all. Abroad, things are simpler and harsher. Some lord brings out a wretched book of *vers libre,* and

> immediately it's spotted as crap. No one reads it and no one buys it, so the lord takes up useful work like energetics or stomatology. . . . But we live our whole lives in pleasant ignorance, flattering ourselves with hopes. . . . And this is marvelous! Why, damn it, the state itself gives you the right—the invaluable right—to regard yourself as an unacknowledged genius. And all your life, all your life you can—

In this situation of frustrated creativity, where everyone is possibly a stifled genius, the hero develops the paranoiac conviction that successful, *published* writers have plagiarized his works.

Literature traditionally examines itself, and fiction that is concerned with literary problems and conditions per se is not, of course, unusual. There is special significance, however, in Siniavsky's overt preoccupation with problems of writing, with the psychology of art and the principles of creativity. His concern epitomizes the situation of a post-Stalinist literature that is trying to reassert and, to a great extent, remake itself, that is rediscovering techniques and approaches to artistic expression from which it has been cut off for more than three decades. More than any other contemporary Soviet writer, Siniavsky represents a return to the devices and interests of the 1910s and 1920s.

In the structure of his works and in his stylistic devices Siniavsky most strikingly resembles such early twentieth-century writers as Bely, Remizov, Pilniak, and Zamiatin. His chief structural characteristic is a fondness for abrupt transitions and the scrambling of chronology, settings, and characters. Scenes and dialogues shift rapidly and sometimes barely perceptibly, without apparent bridging or connection. At times this gives his narratives a jerky, staccato quality. In most cases, however, passages that seem merely to be randomly juxtaposed turn out, on closer inspection, to be related thematically. *The Trial Begins*, for example, is a carefully constructed progression of scenes that are connected to each other not so much through their characters and the development of plot as through recurrent imagery and the ironic association of ideas. But even in this novel—Siniavsky's most tightly knit and symmetrical work—there are authorial digressions, direct apostrophes to the reader, and flights of rhetoric that are strongly reminiscent of the loose and discursive structures of Bely and Pilniak. In other works the narrators seem to be purposely unidentified or, at best, calculatedly unreliable or pooly individualized. The narrator of "At the Circus," for example, is omniscient, but sometimes gives the illusion of being confused and uncertain of his facts. The narration in "You and I" is shared by two halves of the same personality: they address each other, the point of view shifts constantly between them, but at times they are indistinguishable. In "Tenants," written in the form of a conversation in which only one side is recorded, the narrator lacks a consistent identity. It should be emphasized that these are not innovations in Russian literature:

Gogol and Dostoevsky used similar techniques, and they became the stock in trade of writers in the first decades of the twentieth century. But they have been almost totally absent from Soviet literature for the past thirty years.

Siniavsky's most ambitious and, on the whole, most successful experimentation with narrative structure is in the novel *Liubimov.* Its basic form is that of a historical chronicle, recorded by an eyewitness scribe. This scribe, Savely Proferantsov, is subjectively involved as a participant in the events he records and is, moreover, a bumbling, self-conscious stylist. He is particularly fond of and confused by the writing of footnotes. It is through the medium of these footnotes that a second narrator appears—the ghost of Samson Proferantsov, an eccentric nineteenth-century liberal intellectual. Samson's voice is first heard as the usurper of Savely's footnotes: he takes them over to criticize the way in which Savely is writing his chronicle, and a quarrel ensues between the notes (Samson) and the text (Savely). A few pages later Samson again intrudes himself into the notes, then leaps into the text to propose that he and Savely finish the story together by writing it "in layers." From here on, despite Savely's violent objections, his spectral collaborator periodically takes over the narration at will. In contrast to Savely's halting, clumsy, and bemused prose, Samson's is elegant in the finest nineteenth-century tradition. But there is yet a third voice, for occasionally the author becomes his own narrator, in passages of sharp and witty commentary. The existence of these three voices, which clash and yet amalgamate, is fundamental to both the thematics and the structure of the novel. They offer a variety of perspectives on the fantastic events that take place and enhance the novel's narrative interest by providing a change of pace.

Liubimov is also Siniavsky's most versatile display of narrative devices and tricks, most of them, it would seem, tongue-in-cheek. Here again the footnotes play a prominent part. In describing the Soviet government's ineffectual attempt to bomb the revolutionary town of Liubimov, for example, Savely portrays the approaching airplanes in the text itself and the town in the footnotes, alternating rapidly between the two in an awkward attempt to create a cinematic effect through the typography of the printed page. And when he is stumped over the problem of narrating two simultaneous events, Savely again trots out his footnotes to handle one of them. There are also numerous digressions in which Savely discusses his notions of literature and takes the reader into his confidence to talk over his methods of writing and his compositional difficulties. This mixture of candor and ineptness produces a good-natured spoof of bad writing.

In his approach to characterization also, Siniavsky is reminiscent of Bely and Zamiatin. His characters are intentionally flat and two-dimensional. There is very little concrete description of them, a minimum of biographical detail, and little, if any, growth and development. Their distinguishing marks, as a rule, are a few carefully highlighted, often grotesque physical, mental, or verbal traits that serve as leitmotivs. Despite their lack of "roundedness," they are made vivid and striking by caricaturelike details of appearance, gesture, speech, and behavior. They are important not as individuals but as types, as personifications of elements, forces, and problems—they all "stand for something." In *Liubimov* each of them represents—although not in a rigidly allegorical fashion—aspects of the Russian national character, or particular traits of Russian political, cultural, or social behavior. *The Trial Begins* is a kind of symbolic organism, each of whose interlocking or carefully juxtaposed characters stands for a cardinal phenomenon in the Moscow society of 1953.

Siniavsky makes extensive use of heavily laden images and symbols. At a soccer game in *The Trial Begins* a particularly aggressive attempt to score a goal becomes a metaphorical commentary on the novel's theme of sexual frustration and that of ends and means. When the goal is scored and then disallowed, additional symbolic meanings accrue that are related to the novel's themes of creativity, sterility, and abortion. In both *The Trial Begins* and *Liubimov*, the KGB agents Vitya and Tolya dream of creating a "psychoscope" —a remotely operated mind-reading machine that resembles, in its general conception, fantastic instruments of thought control that serve as symbols in works of Zamiatin, Leonov, and Olesha. In the story "The Icicle" an icicle hanging menacingly above a Moscow sidewalk becomes the symbol of inescapable fate whose power transcends even that of the hero's clairvoyance and, as an ironic reminder of the ultimate freezing of the planet, of the absurdity of the "march of history." Like those of Zamiatin and Pilniak, Siniavsky's symbols tend to be either exceedingly primordial or supermodern, and his imagery to be ominous and violent. (Marina's announcement to Globov that she has had an abortion produces in her husband the effect of an atomic bomb exploding.) In common with the prose fiction of the Russian symbolists, however, Siniavsky's writing contains many prominent images whose associations are neither limited nor absolutely clear. In "At the Circus," for example, the circus symbol and the character named Manipulator suggest a multiplicity of meanings, some of them contradictory. Likewise, the pathetic, alienated, nonhuman hero of "Pkhentz" invites a wide variety of interpretations.

Ultimately it is Siniavsky's prose style that brings him closest to the "ornamental school." Whole passages resemble, in their texture and devices, the prose of Bely, Remizov, and Pilniak and hark back to the stylistic father of them all—Gogol. The ingredients are various. Siniavsky has, first of all, an extremely sensitive ear for contemporary Soviet speech and can both reproduce and parody it with great fidelity. The characters in *Liubimov*, especially the hero Lyonya Tikhomirov, speak in clichés and use heavily the political and ideological jargon of Soviet newspapers. The language of "Pkhentz" is current pseudo-intellectual urban slang, larded with bureaucratese and, like that of the narrator Savely in *Liubimov,* with archaic, high-flown, bookish expressions. Hackneyed slogans in *The Trial Begins* and *Liubimov* are burlesqued and ironically distorted to add symbolic overtones and satiric nuances. In *The Trial Begins* Stalin speaks like Jehovah and his presence is always described in Biblical language. Many of the works, most notably *Liubimov,* contain passages of brilliantly idiosyncratic, Gogolian *skaz.*

Another characteristic that attaches Siniavsky to the ornamental tradition is his proclivity for mixing first, second, and third-person narration. In "Tenants" and "You and I" the narration alternates between first and second person, and "You and I" culminates in a bewildering mixture of the two. "At the Circus" combines all three persons. Moreover, Siniavsky is capable of achieving great variety and complexity within the confines of a single mode. "Pkhentz," written in first person, combines reported dialogue, narrative monologue, and interior monologue. In the two novels Siniavsky's interior monologue closely resembles that of Bely and Pilniak, especially when it conveys fragmented, semicoherent thought and impressionistic representations of speech.

A hallmark of "ornamentalism" is exuberant verbal experimentation. Siniavsky indulges in this with gusto, sometimes to create ironic effects, but often seemingly for the sheer fun of it. In the novels there are rhetorical passages whose syntax is so carefully balanced that the author seems to be proclaiming facetiously, "Here, readers, is prose rhythm." English, French, and German words are frequently inserted, producing a comic incongruity. There are numerous ridiculous and grotesque puns—to show stream-of-consciousness associations in the private fantasies of characters, to convey satiric authorial double meanings, and sometimes, apparently, just for the hell of it. There is much alliteration, sound repetition, and word repetition, at times for rhetorical effect and at others purely for decoration. Like Bely, Remizov, Zamiatin, and Pilniak—and Gogol before them—Siniavsky plays games with the letters of the Cyrillic and Roman alphabets, fascinated by their shapes and associations. The voluptuous Marina in *The Trial Begins* notices that the profile of her torso resembles the letter *S*. In the same novel a letter tries to squirm away from a secret police search:

> [The detective] ran his hand over the first page and, presumably by way of censorship, scooped up all the characters and punctuation marks. One flick of the hand and there on the blank paper was a writhing heap of purple marks. The young man put them in his pocket.
>
> One letter—I think it was a "z"—flicked its tail and tried to wiggle out, but he deftly caught it, tore off its legs, and squashed it with his fingernail.

In the person of Savely, the naïve narrator of *Liubimov,* Siniavsky makes sport of his own creative processes:

> You write and don't understand what's happening to you, and where all these words come from, which you have never heard and haven't thought of writing, but have suddenly emerged from the pen and swum, swum over the paper like some kind of ducks, some kind of geese, some kind of black-winged Australian swans. . . .
>
> At times you write in such a way that terror seizes you and the fountain pen falls out of your hands. I didn't write this! Honest, it wasn't I! But you read it over, and you see that it's all correct, that this is the way it was. . . . Lord!

But for the erudite Siniavsky, inspiration is obviously only partly a fortuitous matter. His vocabulary—at all levels—would seem to be enormous. He has an impressive command of colloquial, vulgar (including scatological) language, he exploits fully and ironically the stale hieratic words of official propaganda and ritual, and he is a master of archaisms and the ecclesiastical lexicon.

His language, moreover, is exceedingly figurative, with bizarre tropes that frequently develop, as do those of Mayakovsky, into elaborately extended metaphors. Whole stories, such as "At the Circus," are based on a central metaphor (a restaurant, sexual activity in a bathhouse, religion, society, and life itself are portrayed as a circus). In contrast to Solzhenitsyn, for whom the image is a direct quintessence, an epigram, Siniavsky assiduously exploits his images for their secondary and tertiary meanings. There is a multiplicity of meanings, for example, in the fact that the hero of "Pkhentz" is not an earthling but a cactuslike vegetable who subsists on water. Not only is he an alien, he is also cleaner and, in his physical and mental purity, intrinsically superior to the filthy human race. His estrangement is something like that of the artist Siniavsky, whose lack of dogmatic self-assurance compels him to communicate by means of ironic indirection:

> How could they understand me, when I myself am quite unable to express my inhuman nature in their language. I go round and round it, and try to get by with metaphors, but when it comes to the main point—I find nothing to say.

In his oblique manner Siniavsky does, of course, have "something to say." In sum, he is saying, like Dostoevsky, that the world is more complex and mysterious, good and evil less tangible, human nature more intricate, human behavior less rational, than we generally suppose them to be. And he is likewise saying that the human situation is more pathetic and absurd than the official Soviet literature of mandatory affirmation can show it to be. One of his major themes is alienation, the estrangement of the individual not only from society at large but also, at times, from his immediate neighbors, his family and sexual partners, and even from himself. The collective is hostile and confusing, one's intimate associates (especially those of the opposite sex) disgusting and irritating. Life itself is a desperate and lonely muddle, governed by weird and incomprehensible, mischievous, and malevolent forces. This theme is not totally consistent throughout all of Siniavsky's fiction, of course, and the emphasis on its various aspects fluctuates from story to story. In *Liubimov,* for example, it is lightened by a vein of rollicking satire, and in such works as *The Trial Begins* and "Graphomaniacs" it is narrowed and localized by the element of civic protest. Nevertheless, the portrait of the individual as a victim, isolated from his fellow men by suspicion, incomprehension, and fear and powerless to shape his destiny, is a consistent one. Siniavsky seems particularly fascinated by Jewish characters and the phenomenon of anti-Semitism; his choice of a Jewish pseudonym—Abram Tertz—is in keeping with his preoccupation with those whom the world crazily singles out for abuse.

The atmosphere of alienation is emphasized by Siniavsky's use of the grotesque. To his bewildered and suffering characters, the ordinary world seems strangely predatory, ugly, and distorted. The divided, paranoiac hero of "You and I" feels that his fellow guests at a dinner party are transvestites, "clicking their knives and forks and thereby communicating with each other in a secret code." The lonely hero of "Pkhentz," who has a number of plantlike arms which he conceals by strapping them tightly to his body, is, in human terms, deformed; in his eyes, however, the human female figure is repulsive and terrifying. In *The Trial Begins,* the mutual isolation of nearly all the characters is underlined by a myriad of grotesqueries. A banquet of secret police starts with animated conversation; as the drinking increases the participants all fall discreetly silent.

It is tempting to interpret Siniavsky's theme of alienation, in its various forms, in terms of the opposition between the individual and the centralized, omnipotent state. Surely, much of the psychic disaffection in *The Trial Begins* is shown to be attributable to the personality of Stalin and to the ponderous, corrupt, inhumane machine that he created. The maladjustment of the hero in "Graphomaniacs" is triggered by the ubiquitous state censorship of literature. One could conclude that the hero of "At the Circus" turns criminal in protest against the deadening routine of a rigidly controlled social system. The nervous, suspicious, conspiratorial atmosphere of the police state permeates the fantasy of "The Icicle" and "You and I." And the hero of "Pkhentz" is a creature who has fallen into a conformist society where individualism is suspect, and who must therefore conceal his identity: he is, metaphorically, an "internal émigré." But despite this sampling of evidence from the stories, it would be erroneous to conclude that Siniavsky is attempting to demonstrate that alienation is exclusively, or even primarily, the product of the Soviet political and social system. More likely, the Soviet scene simply provides material-at-hand, to be used in conjuring up a more generalized vision of the contemporary human situation.

At the center of Siniavsky's art, one suspects, there is a fierce ethical consciousness, a thirst for moral certainty, and a deeply frustrated idealism and sense of what is rational and just in human affairs. He exaggerates, and arranges observed and imagined data into ugly and ridiculous patterns, to express his dismay and ironic wonderment at the gulf between human pretensions and human actuality. As an artist he is motivated by the associative powers of metaphor and hyperbole, but as a moralist and satirist he uses them to startle and shock. To a certain extent Siniavsky's world of fantasy is private and closed, like the "third world" of Olesha and the darkly grotesque one of Sologub, but like theirs it also has an intrinsic moral relevance.

The Trial Begins is a systematic exploration of the problem of ends and means, with tightly interwoven references to ideology and religion, sex, politics, art, and history. As a kind of fictional counterpart of the essay *On Socialist Realism* it presents a society in which authoritarian means have so corrupted the pursuit of the Glorious Purpose that the Purpose itself has become perverted. Every character in the novel has either been infected with the falsity and brutality of this way of life or has been psychologically traumatized by it. Even the innocent and idealistic schoolboy, Seryozha Globov, who asks callow and honest—and therefore excruciatingly difficult—questions of his elders, and who is ultimately imprisoned for his naïve rebellion, can only conceive of a revolutionary utopia in which "any man who hurts another man's feelings will be shot." *Liubimov* is a similarly ironic treatment of misguided idealism, in which a village bicycle mechanic, suddenly given magic powers, sets up a benevolent dictatorship based on deception, which rots and crashes under its own weight.

Although Siniavsky's writings are not explicitly anti-Marxist (they stress heavily, in fact, the element of determinism in history), they debunk the notion that the course of history is "scientifically" measurable and predictable. We have seen that in *The Trial Begins* and *On Socialist Realism* he calls in question the smug assumption that everything can be justified in terms of the Purpose. He seems to be making further sport of the activist Leninist notion of historically aware volition in "The Icicle," where the hero is given the occult ability to foresee the future but is unable to do anything about it, despite the urgings of a colonel of the secret police, who is anxious to speed up the inevitable victory of communism. The hero says that the colonel "was evidently confusing me with God."

At the same time, Siniavsky is acutely conscious of history. Although *Liubimov* is set in the Soviet period, the novel so resounds with references to the Russian past and the Russian cultural tradition that it becomes a kind of fantastic, impressionistic historical compendium. A word might be said here about the frequent interpretations of this novel, in Western reviews and commentaries, as a parabolic satire on the Revolution or an allegorical history of Russian communism. The trouble with such interpretations is that they simply do not withstand close scrutiny. It is true that the novel makes many specific allusions to developments and figures in Soviet history—including Lenin—and that it treats ironically many Soviet policies, slogans, institutions, prejudices, phobias, and patterns of behavior. There are likewise Aesopian or metaphorical treatments of topics that relate to the Soviet experience. But neither the direct nor the figurative references are comprehensive or systematic. Attempts to read this novel as a kind of *Animal Farm* are doomed to failure; the evidence is too random and fragmentary. On the other hand, as an examination of the Russian national character that *includes* the Soviet experience and draws heavily upon it, *Liubimov* does suggest some historical conclusions: the arrogant attempts of individuals to meddle with the natural, and unchartable, course of history culminate in disaster. And one of the reasons is that the human race—as illustrated in this instance by the Russians—is ultimately too intractable and primordially perverse to tolerate such interference.

In *Liubimov* and elsewhere Siniavsky's observations about the Russian national character are so numerous, varied, and often contradictory that it is impossible to make a consistent composite of them. If one were to extract from *Liubimov,* for example, a catalogue of Russian qualities, the most prominent of them would probably be backwardness, indolence, irresponsibility, drunkenness, superstitiousness, and deceptiveness. Such an exercise would be pointless, however, for *Liubimov* is obviously a work of hyperbolic satire, in which one might well expect to find a low estimate of human nature. But there is another source—*Unguarded Thoughts,* which is not fiction—in which Siniavsky makes similarly uncomplimentary remarks about his countrymen. Under duress at his trial, Siniavsky seemed partially to disavow the views expressed in *Unguarded Thoughts* when he testified that this was "not entirely" the author speaking. Nevertheless, these views must be considered as representing the general cast of his thought. Here is one of his observations:

> Drunkenness is our most basic national vice, and more than that our *idée fixe.* The Russian people drink not from need and not from grief, but from an age-old requirement for the miraculous and the extraordinary—drink, if you will, mystically, striving to transport the soul beyond earth's gravity and return it to its sacred noncorporeal state. Vodka is the Russian muzhik's White Magic; he decidedly prefers it to Black Magic—the female. The skirt-chaser, the lover take on features of the foreigner, the German (Gogol's devil), the Frenchman, the Jew. But we Russians will surrender any beauty (consider the example of Sten'ka Razin) for a bottle of pure spirits.

> Together with our propensity for theft (the absence of firm faith in actual, concrete ties), drunkenness gives us a certain wanderer's familiarity and places the *lumpen* in a suspicious position in the eyes of other nations. As soon as the "centuries-old principles" and the class hierarchy crumbled and were replaced by amorphous equality, this devious nature of the Russians pushed up to the surface. Now we are all devious (who among us does not feel something knavish in his soul and fate?). This gives us unquestionable advantages in comparison with the West, and at the same time it gives the life and strivings of our nation the stamp of inconstancy, frivolous irresponsibility. We are capable of putting Europe in our pocket or of loosing an interesting heresy there, but we simply are incapable of creating a culture. As with a thief or a drunkard, one must be prepared for anything from us. It's easy to knock about, to direct us by administrative measures (a drunkard is inert, incapable of self-direction, he drags along in the direction they pull him). And one should also keep in mind how difficult it is to rule this wavering people, how oppressive this direction is for our administrators!

In other passages of *Unguarded Thoughts* there are mitigating statements of admiration and praise, but most of Siniavsky's profound brooding over the Russian national character has a similarly somber hue. What is important, however, is not the degree of praise or censure but the quality of the meditation that underlies it. Siniavsky's thought has a Dostoevskian intricacy and spiritual charity; his deep concern over Russia's failings is the concomitant of an equally deep love of Russia. In an age in which the official image of the New Soviet Man is tinged also with prominent vestiges of Russian chauvinism, Siniavsky's painful efforts to understand his countrymen in their true complexity are remarkable for their tonic, demythologizing flavor.

Because of its aphoristic nature, *Unguarded Thoughts* presents few fully developed ideas, and many of the entries are exceedingly cryptic. They do serve, however, to mark out areas of Siniavsky's concern that are also treated in his fiction. One of these is sex, which he treats with a candor that is never found in works published in the Soviet Union. Siniavsky is not an erotic writer. Sterility and impotence, and the ugly, perverse, and spiritually destructive features of sex are so heavily emphasized that sex as an aspect of love is almost totally excluded. In the novels and stories Siniavsky employs sex not for its own intrinsic interest but as a device for characterization and thematic emphasis. In *The Trial Begins,* as we have seen, sexual imagery is brought to bear on the question of ends and means. The theme of abortion (including a grotesque fantasy involving the transformation of human fetuses into fish to increase the food supply) complements the novel's image of the state as a deadening institution that inhibits creativity. Similarly, Vitya and Tolya, a pair of secret police who crop up periodically in the novel, are presented as a homosexual couple. The emasculating effects of state servitude are suggested in the character of Karlinsky, a "liberal" but corrupt lawyer who, at the culmination of an elaborate campaign to seduce the beautiful and narcissistic Marina, proves impotent. And the presumptuous futility of Lyonya, the young dictator in *Liubimov,* is underlined when he turns out to be an impotent husband, masochistically tormenting himself as his wife Serafima regales him with the details of her past affairs.

In other works—notably "At the Circus"—Siniavsky portrays sexual activity as a nasty romp, inane and repulsive. To a certain extent he seems to do this to stress a general atmosphere of alienation. But in *Unguarded Thoughts* he expresses such a frank and explicit loathing of sex (although also, characteristically, a sinful appreciation of its charms) that his use of it in fiction seems not merely an aesthetic matter but one of conviction. In one passage he argues that the basic attraction of sex is its quality of shameful defilement, its re-enactment of the Fall. Women are not only enigmatic (in sexual activity woman "becomes a priestess, guided by dark forces"), they are physically disgusting (there is even something repulsively libidinous in the way they eat sweets). Sex is a joyless burden: "If only one could become a eunuch, how much one could accomplish!" These and many other observations in *Unguarded Thoughts* do not necessarily indicate a striking abnormality in Siniavsky. But they do show a highly developed sense of the dichotomy between the flesh and the spirit.

In *Unguarded Thoughts* it is evident that Siniavsky is a profoundly religious thinker who believes in God with a visceral faith that seems to be based largely on wonder at the beauty of nature and the mystery of creation. He is distressed over modern man's lack of intellectual humility and, like Dostoevsky, he mistrusts refined, abstract philosophizing. At the same time, he maintains a small, Dostoevskian reservoir of intellectual doubt. He asks, mischievously:

> Lord, let me know something of You. Affirm that You hear me. I don't ask a miracle, just some kind of barely perceptible signal. Let, say, a bug fly out of that bush. Let it fly out right now. A bug is a most natural thing. No one will suspect. And it will be enough for me to be able to guess that You hear me and are letting me know it. Just say it: yes or no? Am I right or not? And if I am right, then let a train whistle four times from beyond the forest. There's nothing difficult in that—to whistle four times. And then I shall know.

Despite his intellectual's love of paradox (God is "unknowable and recognized everywhere, inaccessible and nearer than close, cruel and kind, absurd, irrational and utterly logical"), he values the simple and intuitive faith which he attributes to the ordinary Russian. At the same time, his faith is not so solemn as to prevent ironic or blasphemous treatment of religion. (*Liubimov,* for example, is full of comic references to the very same folk belief that he extols in *Unguarded Thoughts.*) He is preoccupied with death, but not morbidly so: his numerous remarks about death emphasize its finality and stress the importance of a life of dignity on earth.

In his criticisms of the quality of contemporary life—its excessive materialism, frantic complexity, blind reliance on scientific progress, hostility to quiet contemplation, and inhibition of sincere communication between individuals—there is an implicit longing for some other, spiritually purer culture. Only the dim outlines of this hypothetical superior culture can be deduced: his only utopia, *Liubimov,* is a negative one. Surely it would not be modeled along Western lines: Siniavsky is unmistakably opposed to capitalist ethics, and he suggests that the liberal concept of "freedom of choice" is an illusory one. If he believes in the goal of communism, his acceptance of it is undoubtedly qualified by strong ethical reservations. He seems to believe that man's nature is so sinful that it is not amenable to institutional measures. His ideal culture, then, would be governed by a charitable acceptance of human imperfectibility. It would also embody large elements of the Russian cultural tradition, for despite his satiric treatment of Russians, he obviously views his cultural heritage with nostalgia and feels that Russians as a nation have a uniquely profound—if tragic—understanding of life. All of this would suggest that Siniavsky is ultimately a conservative with strong neo-Slavophile tendencies.

Any summary of Siniavsky's personal philosophy based on his fiction, his literary criticism, and his motley collection of aphorisms is bound to do him an injustice. One can speak with some assurance about his art, but not about his beliefs. As a true ironist, he is so inconsistent and self-contradictory that his convictions are bound to elude a firm definition. One suspects, moreover, that his is a voice that has been muffled before its maturity. We can only hope that when he has served his prison sentence a way can be found for him to resume his career as a creative writer, to pursue the truth with the aid of his marvelous imagination.[4]

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[4] The author wishes to express his indebtedness to three of his seminar students, whose interpretations are reflected in this article: Ray J. Parrott, Jr. ("Pkhentz"), Susan Wobst ("At the Circus"), and the late Guy W. Carter (*Liubimov*).