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SOME PROBLEMS OF TEACHING RUSSIAN--PUSHKIN OR EVTUSHENKO.

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ALTHOUGH CAUTIOUS TRADITIONALISM, TEXT AVAILABILITY, LITERARY VALUE, AND PREFERRED LANGUAGE USAGE APPEAR TO FAVOR USING READING TEXTS BASED ON 19TH-CENTURY CLASSICS IN RUSSIAN LANGUAGE COURSES, AMERICAN STUDENTS, WHO IN THEIR CAREERS WILL NEED TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE CURRENT GENERATION IN RUSSIA, WILL FIND AN EXPOSURE TO MODERN READINGS MORE REWARDING. THE RELEASE OF SOME NEW TEXTS ON CONTEMPORARY LIFE HAS HELPED OVERCOME THE OBJECTIONS TO THE PREVIOUS COMMUNIST-SATURATED MODERN READING MATERIALS THAT WERE AVAILABLE. HOWEVER, THE MORE COMPLEX PROBLEM OF UNDERSTANDING THE DIVERSITY OF CONTEMPORARY SOVIET SOCIETY CAN BE HANDLED ONLY BY A WELL-PREPARED TEACHER WHO IS CAPABLE OF SELECTING, FOR CLASSROOM USE, APPROPRIATE VEHICLES OF THE CHANGING, OFTEN COLLOQUIALLY UNGRAMMATICAL LITERARY LANGUAGE, AND WHO CAN GUIDE HIS STUDENTS THROUGH THE MAZE OF TECHNICAL TERMS, NAMES, ABBREVIATIONS, AND INDEPENDENT RESEARCH PROBLEMS INHERENT IN INVOLVEMENT WITH MODERN RUSSIAN. THIS PAPER WAS DELIVERED AT THE UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY FOREIGN LANGUAGE CONFERENCE (20TH, LEXINGTON, APRIL 28-29, 1967). (AB)

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Some Problems of Teaching Russian: Pushkin or Evtushenko?

From the experience gathered during Intensive Summer Programs one can assume that the more contemporary is the reading material, the more it is interesting for the students and the more rewarding results it gives at the end of the course. When a story by Jurij Nagibin Vecher v Helsinki was introduced after Tolstoy's Kavkazkij Plennik and Lermontov's Bela as a reader during an Intensive Summer Program in Finland, the student reacted with enthusiasm, for they were able to recognize places and names they had seen before. The simple conversational language and style of that story appealed to them much more than the style of the 19th Century prose. The results proven by the final examination were more than satisfactory.

And so a question arises whether we should still have our texts for reading in Russian based on Pushkin and the 19th Century classics, or should we be more modern and introduce more and more authors of our own age. It is the purpose of this paper to find an answer to the question posed in its title, or at least suggest such an answer.

Experience, availability of textbooks already prepared for class-room usage, and a cautious, traditional approach seem to indicate a preference for the first of those two choices. Such a method has an additional benefit, providing the student with good knowledge of language and some knowledge of Russian literature at the same time, even if he will find only a limited use of such beautiful phrases as u lukomorya dub zelënyj in his future professional or academic career. However,even those books which have been used at many universities and colleges seem in

very many cases to be of a doubtful value, both linguistically and literarily. What is the use of studying Gorkij's Chelkash, a story written almost entirely in some jargon of Black Sea thieves? How much can an American student learn from a symbolic story by Garshin about a wild palm dying in a glass house? Do Russian schoolboys still talk the same language as Chekhov's schoolmates did exactly a hundred years ago?

Nobody proposes, of course, to follow Mayakovskij's famous advice to get rid of "Pushkin and the other classic generals", but in this writer's opinion more emphasis should be put on contemporary, everyday language, in order to familiarize the students with modern forms of speech, idioms, even names, thus making teaching of Russian more pragmatic and useful.

To fulfill such a task one does not have to rely upon the conversational booklets of easy readings and dialogues, such as those imported from the Soviet Union or, what in many cases is even worse, home-made by unqualified teachers. The students do not have to be taught how to buy a ticket to the movies, or how to mail a post card to a girl friend. They find out very quickly their ways around not only in Saigon and Guana, but also in Leningrad and Moscow, without being exposed to Berlitz method. Such supplementary materials can and should be introduced in class by the instructor, but they cannot be considered the main goal of teaching Russian.

The most logical solution therefore seems to be in introducing on a much broader scale the texts dealing with contemporary Russian life, Russian society, its habits and customs, its original forms of speech. Such texts written by contemporary Soviet writers not only exist but many of them possess quite a high artistic value. Such texts one can find e.g. in a small volume published recently by a team from U.C.L.A. under a title New Voices (New York, Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1966).In an introduction to that volume of contemporary Soviet short stories, its editor most correctly remarks that "the visitor to Moscow will find that the idiom of Tolstoy's peasants hardly is the best preparation for easy conversation with the man on the subway" (p.ix). Another linguist, Leonid Rzhevsky, in an excellent

paper dealing with the new idiom, published in a book on Soviet literature in the sixties, made many interesting remarks on "democratization" of contemporary Russian, explaining it as follows:

> By this nonphilological term I denote the approximation of Standard literary usage to the level of pure colloquialism. This process has many stages and is very complex. Colloquial lexical and phraseological elements and forms, regional words, professional jargon and the slang expressions of certain social groups become, under the influence of very varied stimuli, firmly entranched in the everyday conversational language of the masses who are not particularly fastidious about the precise forms of the words they use. They later penetrate into the speech of educated well-read people, i.e. into the educated colloquial language, and so into the dialogue of stories and novels. To some extent they even creep into monologue - the speech of authors themselves, both poets and prose writers, seeking thus to be confirmed as standard usage.
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> (Soviet Literature in the Sixties, New York-London, F.A.Praeger, 1964, p. 58)

There are however, some problems connected with introducing the modern texts into a class room. Two of them, at least, seem to be disappearing when one deals with modern Soviet prose: there is very little if not at all Communist propaganda in them, and they are much more "moral" in the traditional sense of that word than most of Western literature. Much more complex is the problem of understanding contemporary Soviet society and its life, with all its little details which nonetheless are important for practical dealing with it. At first it is indeed hard for an American student to distinguish between MGU and GUM, but it is precisely the moment when a well prepared instructor comes in. He should guide his class through the forest of various terms, names, and abbreviations which will be indispensable for any work in Russian literature, both fictional and scientific. It is a difficult task, for such a teacher has to be expert in almost any field of Soviet life. It is fairly easy to under-

stand Babel's stories full of various kombr[illegible], komdivs, and kombats, however when a student of history is going to study Istorya velikoy otechestvennoy voyny, his knowledge of military terminology has to be much larger than those simple abbeviations. And the deeper one goes into the problems of technical sciences, agricuture and economics, the more complex those problems become, and no dictionary can solve them unless the student has a solid command of the basic special vocabulary in his field. There is his teacher's task to introduce him to those problems he might encounter in his independent research.

Besides those special, merely technical problems, there is above all the literary language undergoing significant changes in the last decade or two, permeated with more and more colloquial expressions, often ungrammatic forms, often closer to slang than to the standard Russian, present in almost every contemporary Soviet short story or novel. In many instances the situation is so alarming that Konstantin Paustovskij decided to issue his famous warning against illiteracy in the Soviet letters against "the barrenness of bureaucratic and philistine language with its poverty and phonetic ugliness". Nonetheless it is an existing factor, and one has to cope with it, and to prepare the students to understand it in its incorrect forms. In a novel Yuzhnee glavnovo udara by G. Baklanov, a soldier does not ask his camerade "Kotoryi chas?" as a student would expect after being taught such form in every Russian course, but says:

A nu gl'an', skolko na tvoikh namotalo?

(G.Baklanov, Tri povesti, p. 8)

The most edifying examples could be found in Solshenitsyn's famous novel written in a new idiom, full of neologisms, new expressions, and grammatical forms entierely different form standard Russian usage. Leaving completely aside its political significance, that novel must be regarded as one of the most important works of modern Soviet literature, and its style ought to be recognized as a decisive factor in that significance. And since its truthfulness cannot be denied, there is no reason to deny its contribution to Russian language, and not to enable the students to read it in original. One has to admit the importance of the new idiom and eventually to teach it when necessary.

One has to be selective, to be sure. Many expressions of the contemporary Russian simply do not belong in a class room, being either too dialectic or too vulgar. But there is a whole new group of words and expressions which have to be introduced by the simple right of their common usage. No matter how sad is the fact that Russian teen-agers (and not only teen-agers) spoil the beauty of the language used by Russian classics, one has to recognize its existence. They do not say any more Kushat', replacing it with rubat'; they do not say on napilsya but nakirylsya; and when they walk along the streets they talk about podkleit' kadrishku by that rather technical term meaning "to pick-up a girl". Bearing in mind the fact that thousands of American students go to the Soviet Union, it seems advisable to teach them what podkleit' kadrishku means...

The question of dialects and local expressions presents another problem since it has been widely used by Soviet authors. Although those expressions cannot be introduced on the first, or even more advanced level, some special courses should deal with them for it would be hard to expect a student to read Leskov, Zoshchenko or Sholokhov without being able to cope with dialects. And how can a student expect a degree in Russian literature without reading Lëvsha in original? According to all indication, the tradition of Leskov and skaz will live in Russian literature for many years to come, and the students have to be prepared to deal with it.

During the last fifty years which have passed since the Bolshevik Revolution several new generations have grown up in Russia, and each of them has made its important contribution to Russian literature as well as to its language. With all esteem and admiration for Pushkin, one has to admit that it is not the author of Evgenii Onegin but Evgenii Evtushenko who speaks the language of the new generation. If American students want to communicate with them, they have to master that language in order to learn, to speak, and to be able to express their thoughts, hopes, and even dreams.