



A.K. Voronsky

Scoundrels and Toadies

(1926)

From Pereval, no. 4 (1926): pp. 156–160.

During the years of my homeless, underground wanderings; of sleeping in conspiratorial apartments; of prison cells and transfers along the way to exile; during years of forced inactivity among the swamps and fog of the gloomy North, and of lonely and wearisome nights—I harbored a stubborn and inexhaustible hatred for the literary toadies inhabiting the newspaper and journal world of that time. Their venal adaptability, cowardly wiliness and open flattery went hand in hand with their self-confident insolence, monstrous superficiality, dubious know-it-all behavior, loose familiarity and hail-fellow-well-met attitude. Whenever I accidentally found myself in their midst, I always began to feel that the human heart and mind had created nothing of value. The most cherished thoughts and impulses suddenly faded, and I began to feel bored; indeed a gray emptiness engulfed me, so great was their cynicism.

When the first revolution was pushed back and bodies of executed prisoners swayed in the predawn wind; when prison fetters rattled beneath vaulted cells in the north, south, east and west—these newspaper satirists, scathing review-ers, and authors of bold articles and short pieces, before anyone else and in plain view of all—renounced what they had seemingly so fervently defended not so long ago. And they did even worse. Using the printing press for the fun and profit of all the spirits who had barely recovered from the revolutionary shocks, but who had already become fat and brutish, they mocked, reviled, denounced and slandered those who had not surrendered to the enemy. During the war years they performed one of the most despicable of comedies: they wrote about the second patriotic war, about the new tsar-emancipator, about the courageous and mighty victories of the glorious Russian troops. They wrote in this vein right up until the moment when these same troops used bayonets and rifle-butts to drive them out of their editorial offices, studies, cabarets and cafés. Scattering with a flutter of coattails, overcoats and pigtails, losing their galoshes, pince-nez and newsrags, they disappeared in an instant. Some fled abroad, others sat it out God knows where. These were the best of times. Then I fell victim to an illusion which was completely logical during those amazing days. It seemed to me that the newspaper and magazine vermin had scurried away for all time. I praised both the bayonets and divine obscenities of the soldiers who had crawled out of the trenches. I praised them because they had driven away the hacks and brigands of the pen.

...Now I know that I was naive. The very moment that we began to acquire a new economy, a new culture and a new art, the literary toadies and scoundrels began to raise their heads, at first timidly and then with ever greater confidence. But what is worse, the former literary do-nothings were joined by new, younger ones. There was life in the old dogs yet! It turns out that it was much easier to shatter tsarism, drive out the landowners and capitalists, repulse the attacks of the “twenty tongues” and lay the foundations to the edifice being newly erected than to crush this scoundrel.

The devil only knows what holes and cracks he crawls out of. But he has already laid out his notebooks, straightened out his pince-nez and found a new suit. He speaks with a deferential, ingratiating, but velvety and sonorous voice. He scurries here and there, first with a pleasant smile, then with a furrowed brow, sometimes with a weighty naturalness, sometimes with a grandiose or light offhandedness; he is satisfied, satiated and indefatigable. He has already become impudent. Throwing back his hair, he becomes inspired, dashes off some lines, then makes some arrangements and organizes some endeavor. One minute he flies by in an automobile with a well-known communist, the next minute he moves around the editorial office authoritatively—and then he’s gone; he’s already busy with some new people. Nothing fazes him; he is driven away from one place and he shows up in another, he is unassailable and indestructible. Not long ago he busied himself with organizing some kind of ultramodern theater—but that collapsed. Then he gathered some artists around himself and tried to create a new tendency, but that fell through. Then he started to write a novel, but never reached the end. He did, however, receive an advance for a conspectus of the novel which was submitted in good time. He belonged to some secretariats, founded a journal, fussed over an exhibition, and gave some lectures about worker- and village-correspondents.

There are many varieties of literary scoundrels, but there are two main types: some “energetically foonction,” while the others “foonction” altogether quietly. But the quiet toady deserves something too. Not long ago I met such a type; he crawled into the editorial office like an ingratiating louse. Twisting his beard, he latched onto the sleeve of the editor, and holding him lightly by the elbow, pulled at the buttons of the man’s jacket. The editor was a bit taken aback, but then the eyes of the quiet scoundrel were on the verge of shedding tears of entreaty. Then his eyes began to take everything in with an all-enveloping stare, they shone moistly and sweetly, and their attractive and engulfing power was stronger and more irresistible than the gaze of a boa constrictor. The poor editor was unable to resist. The quiet scoundrel received some kind of commission. When he had left, I asked the editor why he hadn’t refused, for the fellow was an obvious rascal. The editor sighed in agreement: yes, of course, and the worst kind!

Everyone knows that passionate literary debates are still taking place. There are two literary camps, and here the scoundrel and rogue are having a field day.

How is this done? Very simply!

A smart fellow walks into the editorial office. He is free-and-easy, but modest. He has small, but sharp and shifty eyes. He wants to publish something. After a few days the editors return his manuscript, letting him know that they hold different, and you could even say, absolutely opposing views.

“Indeed,” the sharp-witted rascal agrees as fast as lightning, “maybe you are right. I’ll rework it...”

“?...”

Let us further assume that the “reworking” has not even been successful. Two or three weeks pass. The scoundrel takes up arms in the other camp. That’s all there is to it. And about a week later, at one of the literary gatherings you hear, with gaping mouth and bulging eyes, his impassioned speech about the social command of the proletariat or something else in the same vein. Today he is a fervent Freudian, and tomorrow he will adhere to the strictest Plekhanovian orthodoxy, although he has heard about Plekhanov fourth-hand. Today he will extol Pilniak, and tomorrow he will accuse a genuine proletarian poet of petty-bourgeois deviations. He has already become hardened and merciless, he is “ideologically consistent” to the last neuron of his nervous system.

But his main energy is devoted to following the “situation” with his restless and attentive eyes; depending on which way the wind is blowing, his “ideology” and his entire appearance change accordingly. Cold irreconcilability and patronizing self-assurance give way to an obliging readiness to sacrifice his skin for you.

We have no small number of literary simpletons, of people who make mistakes, get carried away, who underestimate, bite off more than they can chew, or fall flat on their face; people who are infected with circle or group attitudes, or with communist-boasting. The scoundrel and intriguer is from another category: he is quite different. He never gets carried away, because he is too calculating. His inner core is as cold and amorphous as aspic. But he is always running ahead. He adapts himself to unknown and incidental people. Therefore he almost always is excessive in his statements. He extols the poet or prose writer who should still study his craft and jealously hide his filled-up pages and notebooks from others; but he mutters something incoherent and ill-willed about a major young talent; he is immoderate in his praise and damnation, he will go on at great length about Leninism, yes, of course, about Leninism, until you don’t feel quite right; he, the scoundrel feels no qualms about referring in a speech, in a debate or in an article to a private conversation, or to one which he has overheard. He doesn’t know the difference between a literary debate and a denunciation. By the way, the literary simpleton doesn’t know the difference here, but the scoundrel and intriguer knows. Oh, how well he knows!

Such cunning scoundrels walk around disguised as critics or reviewers, sometimes they move about in the guise of an artist. Such an “artist” swears both in verse and in prose by the sacred name of communism, although everyone knows that communism only makes him nauseous. Having published some little article, story, or poem, in a moment of candor (if he is among his own people) he will confess: “They took it and printed it, I gave them a half-pound of Kremlin homilies, and it sailed through.”

Many naive people take a “half-pound of Kremlin homilies” for “ideological consistency” and then talk about shifts, turning points, further evolution, and so forth, and so on.

The literary simpletons love to talk about the demoralizing influence of NEP and about the dangers concealed within the journals *Russia* and *Russkii sovremennik* [Russian Contemporary], which, by the way, have not been published for a long

time. They expose the deviations of the fellow-travelers, who, for some reason do not please such experienced fighters for communism as Rodov. And yet they don't see that the demoralizing influence and dangers of NEP threaten us more in literature from the side of the toadies, hack-writers, job-seekers, and bold and overly familiar people of assorted age and gender. It is they who infuse our evening papers, weeklies, satirical and other journals and magazines with sometimes light and sometimes heavy doses of yellow-press journalism; it is they who introduce lack of principles, Khlestakovism and Nozdrevism into our literary milieu; they are the ones who clamor into the ears of the reader with outlandishly triumphant and overly exultant communiqués, generalizations and announcements. These smart operators of every rank and degree publish something on the front page about Lenin's heritage, and on the second page give the reader "luxuriant" beauties and ladies of the "demi-monde". Meanwhile they drag our publishers and editors along the easily traveled path of hack-work and of adaptation to petty-bourgeois or philistine tastes. It is they who speak almost candidly about the half-pound of Kremlin homilies, and about how they have to "satisfy" people for a while, and "then we'll see." And when some stern critic who is upset by NEP muses on the pages of his journal that at the very least, given the absence of certain necessary conditions, it is better to write less sincere and polished verses as long as they are "needed," then he doesn't realize what he is advocating. In our present circumstances, this means encouraging the toadies, sycophants and "today's" people ("we are here, we are now"), although subjectively, of course, the critic had altogether something else in mind.

The scoundrel and toady, the scribbler and place-seeker does indeed try to give us less "sincere" but "necessary" works. And the main misfortune is that in this walk of life he always outstrips those who try to produce what is "sincere" and "perfected." You can be sure that he runs right by everyone else. While the "sincere" writer chews on his pencil, bites his fingernails, is plagued by doubts, messes up his hair, suffers, puts things aside, tries to combine sincerity with what is needed, makes mistakes, wanders off in the wrong direction and accepts all the lumps of a poor Makar for inconsistency, for being confused, for all kinds of deviations and for not being in step with the times—the clever fellow has long since received the necessary honorarium by the page or by the line, sung the praises of heroic October, been published in several editions, arranged for a friend to write a flattering review, received a new "social command" and found time to run about, always fresh and vigorous, visiting movies, restaurants and various literary gatherings.

People will say: it may be so, but you don't have to exaggerate. There have always been toadies and scoundrels, there are now, and there will always be, but they are not the ones, after all, who make the weather.

Yes indeed! It hasn't turned out that in the ninth year of the Soviet Republic they have been making the weather. But their numbers are not small, their considerable army is growing with each year, and while they are not making the weather, they have begun to have a noticeable influence on it. They are advancing very quietly. And few people are resisting them. That is what's at issue.

Isn't it time, isn't it time at last to launch an offensive? Isn't it time to try to disperse this swarm of insects?

We are not naming any names here for reasons that are obvious, but no editor or publisher will be hard-pressed to find those who should be dragged out into the open for all to see.