

Vissaron Belinsky

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[Artful Dodge, A Forged Letter from Vissaron Belinsky](#)

I am Vissarion Belinsky, and I lived from 1811 to 1848, a scant thirty-seven years. I am unknown to you perhaps and not so elegant as my predecessors in these "forged letters." I offer this as an introduction, not an apology.

I am used to being considered insignificant and unpolished. You see, I, the son of a poor provincial doctor, was the first member of the common class of nineteenth century Russia to raise his voice within the artistic and intellectual world. I could rely on no aristocratic family name to pave my way into the learned circles of Moscow and St. Petersburg. I had only my voice-often shouting from indignation and choking from disease at the same time-and an ideal-already firmly planted within myself and a future goal for many after me-and with my voice and my ideas, I pointed Russian literature upon a road that would lead to Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Pasternak, and Solzhenitsyn.

I cried out for literature to be involved in the lives of the people: describing, understanding, and searching; that literature form a powerful current within the mainstream of my country's incessant social struggles, not a pleasure boat gliding idly above, and heading for shore when the water grew too swift. Even if an author could only talk in whispers for fear of repression, I wanted thunder to echo from these whispers.

Unfortunately, too much of the literature I encountered was coated with the foul saliva of the "reptile press," as we called the self-confident nothings of the official literature, which admonished the people to be contented with little food and even littler freedom-because the Czar loved them so very much and knew what was

good for them! Ornamenters, religious shysters, professional gilded tongues all slithered their way to the foot of the Czar to offer up fawning words of praise to his infinite wisdom. Oh how I wanted to pull out the tongues of all these toadies!-so that the voice of humanity, of the artist sensitive to his people, might be heard for the first time in my land.

I once published a letter to a write of my time named Nikolai Gogol. This man had once outlined the squalor of our people, the horrid effect of our uncaring system upon the meek and lowly-now he had taken to writing apologies for the Czar. I wrote my letter to denounce him swiftly and furiously, to let him know that others still felt a sensitivity to the strivings of humanity that he-because of age, greed, or weakness-had grown callous to. But my letter, when others got wind of it, suffered repression. And when a fervent young man read it aloud before a private circle, he was betrayed by some stooge to the secret police, and sent to the harsh prison camps of Siberia. This man who suffered much for his contact with my views was named Fyodor Dostoevsky. . .

So do not think that loss of freedom in Russia is an invention of the Soviets. The only thing that they have added to the stifling of free speech and thought in my country is the use of technology . They now have tape recorders as well as wagging tongues. Neither has the "reptile press" become extinct. It still flourishes in the bureaucratic swamps, decrying the true artists who often must emigrate to find higher, unsoiled ground.

But throughout the turmoil of my country's history during the past two centuries, a literature that expresses the fervor, the agony, the hope, of the people has yet remained. As an editor, reviewer, and critic, I lifted my voice in harmony with these impassioned artists-even after my voice became grated with consumption, and when I was often forced to break off in mid-sentence because blood would

come to my lips instead of the words I sought. I died before forty; yet my legacy stuck in the hearts of many, as the Russian people and their artists struggled for freedom from the Romanov autocracy, jumped from the frying pan into the fire, and began anew their time-worn struggle, this time against the oppression of the Soviet "dynasty."

So have I sprung from the unfortunate history of my country to speak to you in your land of comparative freedom, freedom hopefully that is not wasted on trifles until it is all spent. Do not be dismayed with the views of those that have said it is because the Russians take their literature seriously that the rulers must always suppress subversive material, and that in your country, no one listens to the artist, therefore the government need not worry about what is said. I find it hard to believe that literature can be this impotent and disregarded by your society. For you too have had cases where literature and other artforms have made an impact on the attitudes of many of your people. You too have had outrage poured before you on the printed page. You too have heard the songs of the slaughtered.

Therefore, I feel that many of the readers of your magazine desire more than arrangements of words that are merely clever and entertaining. They might make not claim to erudition or objectivity in their perspectives on art-but just look at their fierce opinions! When the individual is a sensitive and developing one, this condition is not so much foolish and outspoken ignorance as it is the fact that art flows through us all, affects us all, and though we do not systematically study it, we know the patterns which please us and the messages which are truly able to reach into our souls.

I should hope that your publication reaches out to these people. Let your literature be integrative, not fragmentative. Let not the artists

become as isolated in perspective as was the chasm between artist and aristocrat in my day. Let your various styles of expression be complementary to the other, as they reach out from the consciousness of the individual artists to their interpreters.

Let you be the dream in the midst of your slumbering culture. The interval of illumination within the darkness. Let yourselves be significant enough to be remembered when the sleeper awakens. Let your energy be sufficiently vital to be drawn upon the next day.

But if you are slumbering, too, what then? What if the writers of your time offer no new perspectives, release no new feelings, explore no new pathways? As editors of a magazine, you of Artful Dodge should encourage and struggle to enlist the artistic voices swirling in the current around you. And these fertile creative forces must offer their services to make your publication vibrant. Only they can make your publication ring true long after its note is played.

Since I have left the realm of the living, I am no longer so fiercely supportive of this or that philosophical commodity. But I still hold firm in my belief that for the artist to survive, he must address in a sure manner the needs of his receptors. He must transcend himself to reach his audience. But not through the mind, not through philosophy or admonitions. Instead, through the heart, through illumination and suggestion. And it is the author's choice, whether he will seek to anesthetize the onlookers who gather around his work, to divert them from their difficult path so that they may lick their wounds, safe from the battle, or to sting them into awareness of their pain and perplexity, hope and fortitude, heritage and possibility. This probably is the difference between entertainment and enlightenment. If both are needed, then the latter is perhaps needed more.

In any case, the artist must offer a gift of vitality to his people, not drain it away.

Most respectfully yours,
Vissarion Gregorovich Belinsky