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BELINSKI AND RATIONALITY



by
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Forgotten Books

G.V. Plekhanov

**Belinski and
Rational Reality**

(1897)

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Translated by John G. Wright.

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Editor's Note

The Russian intellectuals, the only revolutionary intelligentsia in modern Western history, have left us a great heritage of theory. Their literary and artistic productions are relatively well known abroad (Pushkin, Gogol, Mussorgsky, etc.), but the Russian pioneers in the field of thought are virtually unknown, especially in our country. This is true in particular of V.G. Belinski (1811-1848) and N.G. Chernishevski (1828-1889).

These two great Russian scholars, critics and thinkers were, like François Fourier in France (1772-1837), true disciples of Hegel (1770-1831). They headed the galaxy of intellectuals who paved the way for Marxist thought in Russia.

G.V. Plekhanov, founder of Russian Marxism, a profound student of philosophy and best trained Marxist of his day, dealt systematically with Chernishevski, writing a book as well as essays about his life and work. Plekhanov held Belinski in equally great esteem, considering him “the most remarkable philosophic organism ever to appear in Russian literature.”

Belinski's chief merit in Plekhanov's opinion was that he was the first “by the genius flight of thought to pose before us those problems of theory whose correct solution led directly to scientific socialism.” Plekhanov intended to present Belinski to the Marxist movement in a systematic way, but never got around to writing his projected book, leaving only articles which nevertheless constitute a sizable volume.

The finest of these essays, *Belinski and Rational Reality*, he wrote in 1897 at the pinnacle of his brilliant Marxist career, years before he deserted the cause to which he owes his fame. Even for Plekhanov's leisurely epoch and his leisurely way of writing, this was a lengthy article. It had to be

published in two installments in the revolutionary periodical *Novoye Slovo* (*New Word*, 1897, Nos.7 & 8). Plekhanov begins his treatment of Belinski with the fourth chapter of the eight he wrote.

He thought this lengthy beginning necessary, because he decided first to expound the real meaning of Hegel, more accurately, the meaning of Hegel's general statement of the dialectic: All that is real is rational; all that is rational is real. It was little understood in Russia at the time. The study of Belinski that follows further develops the basic ideas of Hegel's school of thought.

This essay on Belinski and Hegel thus supplements Plekhanov's earlier article in 1891, *The Meaning of Hegel*, written on the sixtieth anniversary of Hegel's death and published in our magazine, April and May 1949.

V.I. Lenin said

“it is impossible to become a real communist without studying, really studying, everything that Plekhanov has written on philosophy, as this is the best of the whole world literature of Marxism.”

In 1922 Leon Trotsky wrote:

“The great Plekhanov, the true one, belongs wholly and exclusively to us. It is our duty to restore to the young generations his spiritual figure in all its stature.”

This translation was made from the original Russian text by John G. Wright.

(Part 1)

Lucifer: Was not thy quest for knowledge?

Cain: Yes, as being the road to happiness.

– Byron, *Cain, a Mystery*.

Chapter I

“THE ROOT question of Hegel’s influence upon Belinski’s world outlook has been posed by most Russian critics, but it has been analyzed by none with the necessary thoroughness ‘through a comparison of Belinski’s well-known views with their original sources,’ says Mr. Volynski: “No one has analyzed attentively enough Belinski’s esthetic ideas in their original content, nor subjected them to impartial judgment on the basis of a definite theoretical criterion.” (A. Volynski, *Russian Critics*, p.38.)

All of this is by no means surprising because prior to Mr. Volynski’s appearance among us, there existed no “real” philosophy, nor was there any “real criticism.” If some of us did happen to know something, we knew it merely in a confused, disorderly way. By way of compensation, as of now, thanks to Mr. Volynski, we shall all rapidly set ourselves in order and enrich our meager Stock of learning. As a guide Mr. Volynski is quite reliable. Observe, for instance, how neatly he solves “the root question of Hegel’s influence upon Belinski’s world outlook.”

“Maturing and developing, in part under the influence of Stankevich’s circle, in part independently by digesting his impressions of Nadezhdin’s articles, Belinski’s thought swiftly attained its peak, and its highest pitch of enthusiasm, For Belinski, the Schelling period had already concluded by 1837; and Hegel’s philosophy, as it reached him through talks with friends, through magazine articles and translations, occupied a central place in his literary and intellectual pursuits. And so it is precisely here, and most strikingly, that there emerges Belinski’s inability to draw independent logical conclusions concerning political and civil questions in which philosophic theorems are involved; systematic thought was beyond Belinski’s powers. He was astounded by Hegel’s doctrine, but he lacked the strength to think this doctrine through, in all its several parts and several conclusions.

“Hegel charmed his imagination, but provided no impetus to Belinski’s mental creativeness. For the complete analysis of the

basic propositions of idealism, one had to arm oneself with patience. It was necessary to call a halt for a while to flights of fancy and of emotion, so as to give them new wings later on. But Belinski was incapable of calmly poking and prying into the truth – and his whole Hegelianism, together with his infatuation with Schelling, as expounded by Nadezhdin, was bound in the end to degenerate into thought that was inharmonious, shot through with logical mistakes, admixed with queer dreams of a conciliationist-conservative bent.” (*ibid.*, p.90.)

Mr. Volynski was thus greatly shocked by Belinski’s temporary conciliation with reality; and he is able to explain it in one way only, namely, Belinski grasped Hegel poorly. To tell the truth, this explanation is not exactly new. It may be found in the memoirs (*My Past and Thoughts*) of A.I. Herzen, as well as in the recollections of I.S. Turgenev and even in a letter by N.V. Stankevich to Neverov, written almost immediately after the publication of Belinski’s famous articles on the Battle of Borodino and on *Menzel, Critic of Goethe*. What is Mr. Volynski’s own is composed of snide comments concerning the ignorance of Belinski coupled with subtle hints anent the unquestionable and incomparable superiority of his own (Mr. Volynski’s) *Prometheus of Our Times*.

At first glance the above explanation reproduced by Mr. Volynski – and it circulates in several versions – appears quite plausible. Hegel proclaimed: *Was wirklich ist, das ist vernünftig* (what is real is rational); and on this basis Belinski rushed to proclaim as rational, and by this token, sacred and untouchable, the whole rather unpretty Russian reality of his times; and he started passionately to attack everybody who was not satisfied with it. The articles in which Belinski expressed these conciliationist views were “nasty” articles, as the liberal Granovski said moderately and accurately at the

time. But Hegel bears no responsibility for them; he put a special meaning into his doctrine of rational reality and this special meaning escaped Belinski who neither knew the German language nor had the capacity for “pure thought.”

Later on, and especially under the influence of his moving to Petersburg, he saw how cruelly wrong he had been; he perceived the true attributes of our reality and cursed his fatal straying into error. What can be more simple than all of this? Sad to say, however, this explanation simply explains nothing.

Without entering into an examination of all the different variants of the foregoing explanation, let us take note here that our present-day “advanced” *patriae patres* (honor-laden sociologists included) look upon Belinski’s articles on Borodino and on Menzel through the same eyes as the biblical patriarch must have regarded the “youthful errors” of his prodigal son. Magnanimously forgiving the critic-genius his “metaphysical” strayings, these “advanced” persons are loath to refer to them, in accordance with the folk-saying, “Whosoever recalls the past, stands to lose an eye.” But this does not deter them from hinting, relevantly or irrelevantly, that they, the “advanced” persons, who while still virtually in diapers grasped all the philosophic and sociological truths; they hint, I say, that they understand perfectly the whole profundity of those strayings into error and the whole horror of that “fall” into which Belinski was led by his misplaced and imprudent – but happily, only temporary – passion for “metaphysics.”

Betimes young writers are also reminded of this “fall,” particularly those who tend to be disrespectful toward the

Crowned Ones of literature, those who dare doubt the correctness of our “advanced” catechism, and who turn to sources abroad in order better to clarify for themselves the problems which are agitating modern civilized humanity. These young writers are told: “Watch out! Here’s an example for you ...”

And in some instances, young writers do take fright at this example, and from being disrespectful turn into being respectful; and they mockingly pay their respects to “foreign philosopher caps” and prudently “make progress” in accordance with our home-developed “recipes of progress.” In this way, Belinski’s example serves to shore up the authority of our “honor-laden sociologists.”

According to one such sociologist, namely Mr. Mikhailovski, Belinski was nothing all his life but a martyr to the truth. As an art critic he was remarkably gifted. “Many years shall pass, many critics shall be replaced, and even methods of criticism, but certain esthetic verdicts of Belinski shall remain in full force. But in return only in the field of esthetics was Belinski able to find for himself a virtually uninterrupted sequence of delights. No sooner did an esthetic phenomenon become complicated by philosophic and politico-moral principles than his flair for truth betrayed him to a greater or lesser extent, while his thirst (for truth) remained unslaked as before, and it is just this which made of him a martyr to the truth, the martyr that emerges in his correspondence.” (See the article *Proudhon and Belinski*, with which Mr. Pavlenkov saw fit to adorn his edition of Belinski’s works.)

Since the flair for truth generally betrayed Belinski each time an esthetic phenomenon became complicated by philosophic

and politico-moral principles, it goes without saying that the period of Belinski's infatuation with Hegel's philosophy falls under this same general law. This entire period in Belinski's life obviously rouses nothing in Mr. Mikhailovski's breast except a feeling of passionate sympathy toward the "martyr to the truth," coupled, perhaps, with a feeling of indignation toward "metaphysics." Compassionate sympathy walks here arm in arm with great respect. But this respect pertains *exclusively* to Belinski's truthfulness with regard to the philosophic and "politico-moral" ideas expressed by him at the time; Mr. Mikhailovski sees nothing in them except "rubbish."

Substantially this view on Belinski's period of temporary conciliation is identical with the view of Mr. Volynski cited previously. The difference is this, that in Mr. Mikhailovski's opinion the conciliation "came from under the spell of Hegel," whereas in Mr. Volynski's opinion, borrowed by him from Stankevich, Herzen, Granovski, Turgenev and others, Hegel had nothing whatever to do with it. But both Mr. Volynski and Mr. Mikhailovski are firmly convinced that Belinski's conciliationist views are erroneous from top to bottom.

However authoritative are the opinions of these two stout fellows – of whom the one is as potent in sociology as the other is in philosophy – I take the liberty of not agreeing with them. I think that precisely during this conciliationist period of his development, Belinski expressed many ideas which are not only fully worthy of a thinking being (as Byron once somewhere said), but which merit to this day the utmost attention of all who seek a correct standpoint in order to evaluate the reality around us. To prove this theoretical approach, I must begin from somewhat afar.

Chapter II

In 1764, in a letter to Marquis de Chauvelin, Voltaire predicted the impending downfall of the old social order in France. “It will be a beautiful *tapage* [a French word meaning both a show and an uproar],” he added. “The youth are lucky; good things are in store for them.” Voltaire’s prediction was fulfilled in the sense that the “*tapage*” really turned out a thing of beauty. But it may be said with assurance that it did not turn out to the liking of those who lived to see it and who belonged to the same tendency as did the sage of Ferney. This sage never spared the “mob”; yet, toward the end of the Eighteenth Century, it was primarily the “mob” that staged the “*tapage*” and carried it through.

True enough, for a while the conduct of the mob corresponded fully to the views of “respectable people,” i.e., the enlightened, liberal bourgeoisie. But little by little the mob flew into such a temper, became so disrespectful, impertinent and full of vigor that “respectable people” fell into despair. And perceiving themselves conquered by the wretched, unenlightened mob, they sincerely started to doubt the powers of *reason*, in whose name Voltaire and the Encyclopedists had worked; that same *reason* which, it seemed, ought to have placed at the head of events none but its own torch-bearers and representatives, i.e., the self-same enlightened bourgeoisie.

Beginning with 1793 faith in the powers of reason declined noticeably among all those who felt themselves driven from their positions and overwhelmed by the unexpected and fearsome triumph of the “mob.” The ensuing events brought a train of interminable wars and overturns, wherein naked

military force triumphed .more than once over what all enlightened people had held the most indisputable of rights. This could only feed the disillusionment that had set in. It was as if the events were mocking the demands of reason.

And so we observe, toward the close of the Eighteenth Century, that faith in reason falls away completely; and although in the days of the Consulate and the Directory, the so-called ideologists continue, out of habit, to extol reason and truth (*la raison* and *la vérité*), they no longer do so with the same verve as before; the former enthusiasm is gone, and so is their influence. The public refuses to listen to them. The public, like Pontius Pilate, smiling skeptically, now wants to *know*, “And what is truth?”

Madame de Stael, who knew intimately the French intelligentsia of that era, states that the majority (*la plupart des hommes*), taking fright at the terrible march of events, lost all inclination toward self-perfection and “overwhelmed by the might of the accidental, ceased to believe altogether in (the power of human capabilities.” (*De la Litterature considerée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*, 1800, Intro, p.xviii.) (On page iv of the same introduction she expresses herself even more categorically: “The contemporaries of a revolution,” she says, “frequently lose all interest in the search for truth. So many events are decided by force, so many crimes are absolved by success, so many virtues stigmatized with obloquy, so many unfortunates abused by those in power, so many generous sentiments subjected to mockery, so many swinish acts of selfishness philosophically glossed over, that all of this drains away the hopes and confidence of people who remained most loyal to the cult of reason.”)

This disillusion with the powers of reason, far from confining itself within France's borders, found its expression elsewhere as well. In Byron, for instance. Byron's *Manfred* thus declares philosophy:

To be of all our vanities the motliest,
The merest word that ever fool'd the ear
From out the schoolman's jargon ...

Byron regards contemporary socio-political events as the senseless and cruel whims of "Nemesis," a goddess inimical to humans. "Nemesis" is just another name for accident. But at the same time Byron's pride is roused against the sway of this blind force. The pathos of *Manfred*, as Belinski would have phrased it, consists precisely of the mutiny of a proud human spirit against blind "fate," of his urge to bring under his control the blind forces of nature and history. *Manfred* solves this task in part by means of magic. Obviously such a solution is attainable only in the realm of poetic fancy.

The Third Estate's reason, or more accurately the bourgeoisie's level of understanding – a bourgeoisie that was striving to free itself from, the yoke of the old order – failed to pass the harsh historical test that fell to its lot. It proved bankrupt. The bourgeoisie itself became disillusioned in reason.

But while individuals, even though in considerable numbers, could rest content with such disillusionment and even flaunt it, such a state of mind was absolutely ruled out for the class as a whole, for the entire *ci-devant* Third Estate, in the historical situation at the time.

By their swiftness, by the large-scale and capricious changes they wrought, the political events impelled the social activists at the close of the Eighteenth and the start of the Nineteenth centuries to doubt the powers of reason. These same events, in their subsequent movement, were bound to give a new impulse to the growth of social thought, bound to evoke new attempts by thinking people to discover the hidden fountainheads of social phenomena.

In France, during the period of the Restoration, the age-long tug of war between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy (lay and clerical) was resumed with new vigor and under new socio-political conditions. In this struggle each side found itself in need of at least some ability to foresee events. And although the huge majority of the combatants pinned their trust, as is the custom, on their “good horse sense,” and “the school of hard knocks,” nevertheless, among the bourgeoisie, then still full of youthful vigor, there appeared, already at the beginning of the 1820’s, not a few gifted individuals who sought by means of *scientific* foresight to triumph over the blind forces of accident.

These attempts evoked debates over the need to create social sciences. Likewise these attempts gave rise to many remarkable figures in the field of historical science. But a scientific investigation of phenomena is the province of nothing else but – reason. In this way, the very course of social evolution acted to resurrect the faith in reason, even if it did pose new tasks before reason, tasks unknown, or at any rate, little known to the “philosophers” of the Eighteenth Century. That century’s reason was the reason of the “Enlighteners.”

The historical tasks of the Enlighteners consisted in evaluating the given, then existing, historically inherited set of social relations, institutions, and concepts. This evaluation had to be made from the standpoint of those new ideas to which the new social needs and social relations had given birth. The urgent need at the time was to separate as quickly as possible the sheep from the goats, “truth” from “error.” Therewith it was immaterial to learn whence a given “error” came, or how it originated and grew in history. The important thing was to prove it was an “error,” and nothing more.

Under the heading of error everything was included that contradicted the new ideas, just as everything that corresponded to the new ideas was acknowledged to be the truth, eternal, immutable truth.

Civilized mankind has already traversed more than one epoch of enlightenment. Each epoch possesses, of course, its own specific peculiarities, but they all have one family trait in common, namely: An intensified struggle against old concepts in the name of new ideas, which are held to be eternal truths, independent of any “accidental” historical conditions whatsoever. The *reason* of the Enlighteners is nothing else but the *level of understanding of an innovator* who shuts his eyes to the historical course of mankind’s evolution, and who proclaims his own nature to be human nature generally; and his own philosophy – the one and only true philosophy for all times and all peoples.

It was just this abstract *understanding* that suffered shipwreck thanks to the “*tapage*” at the close of the Eighteenth Century. This “*tapage*” disclosed that in its

historical movement mankind obeys, without comprehending, the irresistible action of some sort of hidden forces which ruthlessly crush the powers of “reason” (i.e., the powers of abstract understanding) each time “reason” runs counter to these hidden forces.

The study of these hidden forces – which first appear in the guise of blind forces of “accident” – henceforth became a more or less conscious aim of every scholar and thinker who was occupied with the so-called moral and political sciences. Saint-Simon gave this the clearest expression. “The science of man, to the present day, has never been more than a conjectural science,” he says. “The aim I have set myself in this memoir is to affix to this science the seal of the science of observation.” (*Memoire sur la science de l’homme*).

The Eighteenth Century ignored history. Henceforth everybody is seized with history. But to study a phenomenon *historically* means to study it in its *evolution*. *The standpoint of evolution* becomes gradually dominant in philosophy and in the social sciences of the Nineteenth Century.

As is well-known, the evolutionary viewpoint produced especially rich fruits in German philosophy, that is, in the philosophy of a country which was a contemporary of the advanced European states *only in point of theory* (in the person of its thinkers). Germany was therefore then able, free from the distractions of practical struggle, to assimilate in tranquility all of the acquisitions of scientific thought, and painstakingly to investigate the causes and consequences of social movements taking place in the West. (*In den*

Westlichen Ländern, as Germans often used to say in those days.)

The events that occurred in France toward the end of the Eighteenth Century met with strong sympathy on the part of advanced Germans right up to the year 1793. That year scared out of their wits the overwhelming majority of these people and drove them into doubts about the powers of reason, just as was the case with the enlightened French bourgeoisie. But German philosophy, then flowering luxuriantly, was quick to see the ways in which it was possible to gain victory over the blind forces of accident.

“In freedom there must be necessity,” wrote Schelling in his *System des Transcendentalen Idealismus*. Schelling’s book was published exactly at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century (in the year 1800). Schelling’s formula means that freedom can manifest itself only as the product of a certain, *necessary*, i.e., lawful, historical development; and it therefore follows that the study of the course of this lawful development must become the first duty of all true friends of freedom. The Nineteenth Century is rich in all sorts of discoveries. Among the greatest is this view on freedom as the product of necessity.

What Schelling started, Hegel finished, doing it in his system wherein German idealist philosophy found its most brilliant consummation. For Hegel world history was the progress of the consciousness of freedom, but a progress that *must be understood in all of its necessity*. To those who held this point of view

“the history of mankind no longer appeared as a confused whirl of senseless deeds of violence, all equally condemnable

before the judgment seat of the now matured philosophic reason, and best forgotten as quickly as possible, but as the process of development of humanity itself. It now became the task of thought to follow the gradual stages of this process through all its devious ways and to trace out the inner regularities running through all its apparent accidents.” (Engels.)

To discover the laws governing mankind’s historical development means to assure oneself the possibility of consciously intervening in this process of development; and from being a powerless plaything of “accident,” becoming its master. In this way German idealism opened up for thinking people exceptionally broad, and in the highest degree pleasant, horizons. The power of accident was bound to be supplanted by the triumph of reason; necessity was bound to become the firmest foundation of freedom.

It is not hard to imagine how enthusiastically these pleasant horizons were greeted by all those laden down by sterile disillusion, and who down deep in their tormented hearts pro-served an interest in both social life and in “the striving toward self-perfection.” Hegel’s philosophy revived them to new mental activity and in the transports of initial infatuation it seemed to them that this philosophy would swiftly supply answers to every single great question of knowledge and of life; would provide solutions to all contradictions, and inaugurate a new era of conscious life for humanity.

Carried away by this philosophy was everything youthful and fresh, all who were thinking in the Germany of that day; and, yes, as is generally known, not in Germany alone.

(Part 2)

Chapter III

“The latest philosophy is the product of all the preceding philosophies; nothing has been lost; all the principles have been preserved,” said Hegel in concluding his lectures on the history of philosophy. “Before contemporary philosophy could arise, much time had to pass ... What we are able quickly to survey in our recollection, took place actually at a slow pace ... But the world-spirit does not stand still; it constantly strides forward precisely because this forward movement constitutes its nature. Sometimes it seems as if it is halted, as if it has lost its eternal urge to self-cognition. Actually, all the while, there is deep internal work taking place, not to be noticed until the results come to the surface until the shell of old outlived views falls apart into dust and the world-spirit strides ahead in seven-league boots. Hamlet, turning to the ghost of his father, exclaimed, ‘Well dug, old mole!’ The same can also be said of the world-spirit, ‘It digs well’.”

The author of *My Past and Thoughts* called Hegel’s philosophy the algebra of progress. The correctness of this appreciation is amply confirmed by the above-cited views of the great thinker. The idealist philosophy, which solemnly proclaimed eternal forward movement as the nature of the world-spirit, could not be a philosophy of stagnation. On occasion Hegel expressed himself even more categorically. Let us cite that section of his lectures on the history of philosophy where he discusses the trial of Socrates.

In Hegel’s opinion the spread of Socrates’ views threatened to destroy the old Athenian way of life completely. For this reason one cannot blame the Athenians for condemning to death the thinker whom they placed on trial and in whom they sensed a mortal enemy of their cherished social order. Nay more, it is necessary to say flatly that they

were *obliged* to defend their social order. But it is likewise necessary to affirm that there was right on the side of Socrates. He was the conscious representative of a new and higher principle; he was a hero who possessed for himself the absolute right of the spirit.

“In world history we find that this is the position of the heroes through whom a new world commences, and whose principle stands in contradiction to what has gone before and disintegrates the old order: they appear to be violently destroying the old laws. Hence individually they perish, but it is only the individual, and not the principle, which is annihilated in punishment ... The principle itself will triumph toiler, if in another form.”

Historical movement offers not infrequently the drama of two opposed rights coming into collision. The one power is the divine right of the existing social order and of the established relations; the other is the equally divine right of consciousness (self-cognition), of science, of subjective freedom. The collision between the two is a tragedy in the full sense of the term – a tragedy in which there are those who perish but in which there are no guilty ones; each side being right in its own way. Thus spake Hegel.

As the reader can see, his philosophy was truly in its nature an algebra of progress, although this was not always understood by those progressives who were contemporaries of Hegel. Some were confused by his terminology, beyond laymen's comprehension. The famous proposition: *What is real is rational; what is rational is real*, was taken by some as a philosophic expression of the crassest kind of conservatism. Generally speaking, this was a mistake. For, according to Hegel's logic, far from everything that exists is real. The real stands higher than mere existence (“*die Wirklichkeit steht höher als die Existenz*”). Accidental existence is real existence;

reality is *necessary*: “reality unwinds as necessity.” But as we have already seen, according to Hegel, not only what already exists is necessary. By its uninterrupted mole’s work, the world-spirit undermines what exists, converts it into a mere form, void of any real meaning, and makes necessary the appearance of the new, tragically destined to collide with the old.

The nature of the world-spirit is to stride forward eternally. Hence in social life, too, what is necessary and rational, in the final analysis, is only uninterrupted progressive movement, only the constant foundering more or less rapidly, of everything old, everything outlived. This conclusion is inescapably suggested by the entire character and meaning of Hegelian philosophy as a dialectical system.

Hegel’s philosophy, however, was *not just a dialectical system*; it also proclaimed itself to be *the system of absolute truth*. But if absolute truth *has already been found*, then it follows that the goal of the world-spirit – self-cognition – *has already been attained*, and its forward movement loses all meaning. This claim of possessing the absolute truth was thus bound to bring Hegel into contradiction with his own dialectic; and put him in a posture hostile to further successes of philosophy. More than this, it was bound to make him a conservative in relation to social life as well. By his doctrine, every philosophy is ideally the expression of its times (“*ihre Zeit in Gedanken erfasst*”). Since Hegel had found the absolute truth, it therefore follows that he lived at a time which corresponded to the “absolute” social order, i.e., a social order expressing the absolute truth, discovered by theory. And inasmuch as absolute truth doesn’t age and thereby turn into error, it is therefore evident that every inclination

to change a social order that expressed the absolute truth would be a rude sacrilege, an impertinent uprising against the world-spirit. In this “absolute” order there are, to be sure, some partial improvements to be made, removing partial imperfections inherited from the past. But on the whole this order must remain as eternal and immutable as the eternal, immutable truth of which it was the objective expression.

A profound thinker, the greatest genius-intellect of the first half of the 19th century, Hegel was still a child of his times and country. Germany’s social position was favorable for a calm, theoretical study of the march of world events; but it was quite unfavorable for the *practical* application of results gained by theory. As touches practice, the bold German theoreticians remained not infrequently the meekest of philistines. There was not a little philistinism in even such great men as Goethe and Hegel. In his youth Hegel sympathized warmly with the French Revolution; but with the passage of years, his love for freedom waned, while the urge waxed to live in peace with the existing order, so that the July 1830 revolution depressed Hegel very much.

One of the “left” Hegelians, the well-known Arnold Ruge, later criticized the philosophy of his teacher for always limiting itself to a contemplation of phenomena and never striving to pass over to *action*; for cohabiting peacefully with slavery in practice, while proclaiming freedom as the great goal of historical development. These criticism’s, one must admit, are justified; Hegel’s philosophy did suffer from the indicated shortcomings.

These shortcomings – which, by the way, were expressed in the claim to absolute truth – are to be noted in the lectures on the history of philosophy which we have already cited and which are filled with courageous and vigorous striving forward. In these same lectures Hegel tries to prove that in modern society, in contrast to the ancient, philosophic activity can and should be limited to the “inner world,” the world of ideas, because the “outer world” (social relations had arrived nowadays at a certain rational order, “has composed itself” and “has become reconciled with itself” (“*ist so mit sich versöhnt worden*”).

The conservative side of Hegel’s views was expressed most graphically in his *Philosophy of Right*. Whoever reads this work attentively will be struck by the genial profundity of many thoughts Hegel expresses. But at the same time it is readily to be noted that Hegel here, more than anything else, tries to reconcile his philosophy with Prussian conservatism. Particularly instructive in this connection is the famous introduction in which the doctrine of rational reality is given a meaning not at all the same as in the *Logic*.

Whatsoever exists, does so by reason of necessity. To know the necessity of a given phenomenon is to discover its rationality. The process of scientific knowledge consists in this, that the spirit striving toward self-cognition recognizes itself in what exists, recognizes its own reason. Philosophy must grasp what is. In particular the science of right must grasp the rationality of the state. Far from Hegel was any intention “to construct a state such as it ought to be.” Constructions of this sort are silly; a world “as it ought to be” does not exist; more accurately, it exists only as a particular, personal opinion, and personal opinion is a “soft element,”

easily giving way to personal whim, and frequently changing under the influence of caprice or vanity.

Whoever understands reality, whoever has discovered the reason hidden in it will not rise up against it, but will reconcile himself with it and take joy in it. (We ask the reader to note that the expression, “reconciliation with reality” – “*die Versöhnung mit der Wirklichkeit*” – is used by Hegel himself.) Such a person doesn’t renounce his subjective freedom; but this freedom manifests itself not in *discord* but *harmony* with the existing state. In general, discord with what exists, discrepancies between cognitive reason and the reason that is embodied in reality are evoked only by an incomplete comprehension of this reality, by lapses of abstract thought. Man is a thinking being; his freedom, his right, the foundation of all his morality are lodged in his thought. But there are persons who regard as free only that thought which diverges from everything commonly accepted. Among such people the highest and most divine right, of thought is converted into rightlessness. These people are ready to sacrifice everything to the whim of their personal judgment. In law which subjects man to certain *obligation* they perceive only the *dead, cold letter*, only *fetters* placed upon subjective conviction. They pride themselves on their negative attitude to reality; but their attitude testifies only to a weakness of thought and to an utter inability to sacrifice the caprice of personal judgment for the sake of social interests. It was long ago said that while half-knowledge weakens belief in God, true knowledge, on the contrary, strengthens it. The same may also be said concerning people’s attitude to the reality about them: Half-knowledge rouses them against reality; true

knowledge reconciles them with it. That's how Hegel reasons here.

It is interesting to juxtapose this view of the greatest German idealist with the views of a contemporary, the French genius Saint-Simon.

“The philosopher,” wrote the Frenchman, “is not only an observer; he is an activist of the first order in the world of morals because what govern human society are his views on what the world should become.” (*Travail sur la gravitation universelle*)

It is perfectly correct that the science of right need not at all occupy itself with “the state as it ought to be”; its task is to comprehend what is and what was, and to elucidate the historical development of state institutions. Hegel is fully justified in attacking those superficial liberals (today we would call them subjectivists) who, incapable of linking “ideals” with the reality about them, remain permanently in the realm of impotent and unrealizable subjective dreams. But Hegel doesn't attack only liberalism of this sort. He rises up against every progressive tendency which does not stem from official sources.

Moreover, “what exists” by the mere fact of its existence is already recognized by him here as necessary, and hence “rational.” An uprising against what exists is proclaimed to be an uprising against reason. And all of this is bolstered by arguments as far removed as heaven is from earth from the above-adduced arguments concerning the fate of Socrates and the right of self-cognition and of subjective freedom. From a thinker who attentively probes into the social development of mankind and who arrives at the conclusion that movement forward constitutes the reason of the world-spirit, Hegel becomes converted into an irritable and

suspicious custodian, ready to shout, "Help! Police!" at every new exertion of the mighty and eternal "mole" who undermines the structure of old concepts and institutions.

It follows from this that if Hegel's doctrine that everything real is rational was understood by many in a completely wrong way, then he was himself primarily to blame for this, for he invested his doctrine with a very peculiar and *not at all dialectical* interpretation of the Prussian social order of his day and proclaimed it as the embodiment of reason. It may therefore seem strange that Hegel's philosophy did not lose its influence over the thinking people of those days. But strange as it may seem, the fact is that the uprising against the conservative conclusions drawn by Hegel from his essentially wholly progressive philosophy did not come until much later. In the epoch of the publication of the *Philosophy of Right*, opposed to Hegel were only a few superficial liberals, while everybody who was serious, everything young and energetic followed him with enthusiasm, despite his self-contradictions, and without even noticing them. The explanation for this is, of course, to be found in the immature development of social life in Germany of that day.

But in the previous century, in Lessing's epoch, this life was even less developed, and yet the then dominant philosophic concepts bore no resemblance whatever to those of Hegel. Had it been possible for Hegel to have appeared at the time, no one, assuredly, would have followed him. Why is this? Because "sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," and because only the 19th century posed before thinking mankind the great task to which Hegel's philosophy promised to provide the answer, namely:

The scientific study of reality, the scientific elucidation of mankind's historical development, in social, political and intellectual relations as a necessary and therefore lawful process.

As we have already stated, only such an interpretation of history could eliminate the pessimistic outlook on history as the kingdom of blind accident. Young minds everywhere, wherever the underground work of the "world-spirit" was being accomplished even on! a tiny scale and wherever the "mole" was preparing the soil for new social movements, were bound to throw, themselves eagerly into the study of Hegelian philosophy. And the more serious the demands of theoretical thought were in the young minds, and the stronger the urge was in the young hearts to sacrifice personally for the sake of common interests, all the more complete should have been, as it actually was, the infatuation with Hegelianism.

The uprising that came later against the conservative conclusions Hegel drew was absolutely justified. But it ought not to be forgotten that in the theoretical sense it was justified only to the extent that it based itself on Hegel's dialectic, i.e., primarily on the interpretation of history as a lawful process; and on (the understanding of freedom as the product of necessity.

Chapter IV

Let us now return to Belinski.

In approaching the history of his intellectual development, we must note first of all that in his early youth he rose up indignantly against the Russian reality of those days. As is well known, the tragedy which he wrote during his stay in the University and which caused him so much unpleasantness was a passionate, if scarcely artistic, protest against serfdoms. Belinski was wholly on the side of the serfs.

“Can it be that these humans were born into this world only to serve the whims of other humans, the same as themselves!” exclaims one of his heroes. “Who gave this fatal right to some people to enslave to their will the will of others, other beings just like them and to take away from them the sacred treasure of freedom? ... Merciful God, Father of Men, tell me, was it Your all-wise hand that created on earth these serpents, crocodiles and tigers who feed on marrow and meat of their kin and who drink like water their blood and tears?”

This tirade would have done credit, in its passion, to Karl Moor himself. And actually Belinski was under the strongest influence of Schiller’s early works, *The Robbers*, *Cabal and Love*, *Fiasco*. As he put it, these dramas made him “wildly hostile to the social order, in the name of an abstract ideal of society, torn out of geographic and historical conditions of development, and erected in mid-air.” This influence, incidentally, was not exerted on him only by the works of Schiller we listed above.

“*Don Carlos*” said Belinski, “threw me into an abstract heroism, which made me scorn everything else; and in this condition, despite my unnatural and intense ecstasy, I was quite conscious of myself as a cipher. The *Maid of Orleans* plunged me into the same abstract heroism, into the same social and general abstraction, empty, faceless, of the substance but with nothing individual about it.”

We ask the reader to note this interesting testimony of the famous critic about himself. His youthful infatuation with “an abstract ideal of society” is a most important page in the history of his intellectual development. Up to now the attention it merits has not been paid to it. So far as we know, no one has stressed this circumstance that a gifted and passionate youth filled with “abstract heroism” was at the same time “conscious of himself as a cipher.” Such consciousness is extremely painful. It must have evoked, on the one side, equally painful doubts over the workability of the abstract ideal; and, on the other, attempts to find a *concrete* soil for his social inclinations.

This tormenting cognition of oneself as a “cipher” was not peculiar at the time to Belinski alone. The aspirations of the advanced intelligentsia of the 1820’s had shortly before suffered a cruel shipwreck, and sorrow and despair reigned among the thinkers. It is customary in our country to repeat that Nadezhdin had a strong influence on the development of Belinski’s views, at all events in the first period of Belinski’s development. But was there much solace in the views of Nadezhdin himself? Early Russian life appeared to him as a “sleeping forest of faceless names colliding in a void of lifeless chaos.” He even doubted that there was any real living in the course of Russia’s thousand years of existence. Mental life started in our country only with Peter the Great; up till then everything European came to our country “by

way of ricochets, through thousands of leaps and tangents and therefore reached us in weak, dying out reverberations.”

“Up to now our literature has been, if I may use the expression, a *corvée* of the European; it has been worked over by Russian hands but not in a Russian way; it exhausted the fresh, inexhaustible juices of the young Russian spirit in order to educate foreigners and not ourselves.” The notes to be heard here are almost those of Chaadayev. (Not having Nadezhdin’s articles at hand, we are compelled to quote from Mr. Pypin’s book, *Belinski, His Life and Correspondence*; vol.I, p.95. Needless to add we have borrowed from the same work most of the facts relating to Belinski’s intellectual development, but we have grouped these facts differently.)

In his famous first article, *Literary Dreams*, Belinski obviously expressed a rather rosy outlook about our future, if not our past or present. Pointing out that what we need is not literature, which will make its appearance in its own due time, but enlightenment, he cries out:

“And this enlightenment will not become ossified, thanks to the sleepless solicitude of the wise government. The Russian people are clever and amenable, diligent and zealous about everything that is good and beautiful, once the hand of Czar-Father points out the goal to them, once his sovereign voice summons the people to this goal!”

The single institution of domestic tutors was bound, as he put it, to perform genuine miracles in the sense of enlightenment. Besides, our nobility has finally become convinced about giving their children a solid education, while our mercantile estate “is rapidly taking shape and in this connection is not far behind the highest estates.” In a

word, the cause of enlightenment prospers among us: “The seeds of the future are ripening today.”

All this was, of course, written in perfect sincerity. At the time Belinski wrote this article he wanted to believe, and carried away by enthusiasm while writing, he did believe that enlightenment would swiftly engulf Old Mother Russia. But in calmer moments, when the flame of enthusiasm had cooled, he could not fail to see that the foundations on which his faith rested in a swift growth of enlightenment in Russia were somewhat shaky. Besides, could even the successes of enlightenment – however “swift” they might be – satisfy a man “hostile to the social order” in the name of an ideal, and permeated with “abstract heroism”? Such perspectives were not needed by such a man. In brief, the rapturous tone of *Literary Dreams* was the product of a momentary flash-fire and did not at all exclude a depressed mood on the author’s part, a mood resulting from the touchy recognition of himself as a cipher, and from the unresolved contradiction between the abstract ideal, on the one side, and the concrete Russian reality on the other.

In July 1836 Belinski journeyed to the village of B—kh in Tversk province, and there with the aid of a hospitable host, a well-known “dilettante of philosophy” or “friend of philosophy,” M.B. (Bakunin) became acquainted with the philosophy of Fichte, for the first time if we are not mistaken. “I seized hold of the Fichtean outlook with vigor and fanaticism,” he says. And this is understandable. As Belinski put it, his eyes always saw double: there was life ideal and there was life real. Fichte convinced him that “life ideal was nothing else but life real, positive and concrete, whereas the so-called real life is a negation, a phantom, a

nullity, a void.” In this way the vexing contradiction between the abstract ideal and concrete reality found the sought-for philosophic solution. It was solved by reducing to zero one of the sides of the antinomy.

Having proclaimed reality a phantom, Belinski was able to wage war against it all the more vigorously in the name of the *ideal* which now turned out to be the only reality worthy of the name. In this “Fichteian” period, Belinski sympathized strongly with the French. “We know of an episode in Belinski’s life at the time,” says Mr. Pypin. “At a big gathering, completely unfamiliar to him, in talking about the French events of the 18th century, he expressed an opinion which embarrassed his host by its extreme bluntness.” (loc. cit., vol.I, p.175). Later on, recalling this episode in a letter to an intimate friend, Belinski added:

“I do not at all repent of this phrase, and I am not at all embarrassed by it. It expressed, in good conscience and with the fullness of my violent nature, the state of my mind at the time. Yes, that is *how* my thoughts ran then ... Sincerely and in good conscience I expressed in this phrase the tense condition of my spirit through which *of necessity* I had to pass.”

It would seem that Belinski could now rest from the doubts that tormented him. Actually he now suffered almost more than before.

In the first place he came to doubt his own capacity for philosophic thought. “And I learned about the existence of this concrete life only to come to know my impotence, to familiarize myself with it. I came to know paradise only to become convinced that the only possible life for me was an approach to its gates, not the delights of its harmony and scents, but only pre-perceptions.” Secondly, the denial of

reality, as is evident, did not long rid him of *old theoretical doubts*, either. Real life was proclaimed a phantom, a nullity and a void. But there are phantoms and phantoms. From Belinski's new standpoint, French reality was no less a phantom than any either, including the Russian. Yet there were manifestations in French social life with which he warmly sympathized, as we know, while in Russia there was nothing of the sort. Why then were the French "phantoms" so unlike our native ones?

"Fichteanism" had no answer to this question. And yet it was a simple variant of the old vexing question: Why did concrete reality contradict the abstract ideal? and how to remove this contradiction? It turned out that proclaiming reality a phantom availed in essence exactly nothing; and, as a consequence, the new philosophic outlook proved dubious, if not altogether a "phantom." After all, Belinski had cherished it precisely to the extent to which it apparently promised to supply simple and convincing answers to the questions that beleaguered him.

Later, in one of his letters (June 20, 1838) Belinski expressed a conviction that he "hated thought." "Yes, I hate it as an abstraction," he wrote. "But can thought then be acquired without being an abstraction? Should one always think only in moments of candor, and the rest of the time think nothing at all? I understand how silly such a proposition is, but I am by nature an enemy of thought." These simple-hearted and touching lines characterize best of all Belinski's attitude to philosophy. He could not rest content with "abstractions." He could be satisfied only with a system, which itself stemming from social life and explainable by this life, would, in its turn, explain life and

offer the possibility for broad and fruitful action upon life. His supposed hatred of thought consisted precisely of this. He hated, understandably enough, not philosophic thought in general, but only such thought as, contented with philosophic "contemplation," turned its back upon life.

"At that time we sought in philosophy everything in the universe, except pure thought," says Turgenev. This is absolutely correct, especially in relation to Belinski. He sought in philosophy the way to happiness, "the road to happiness," as Byron's Cain put it. Not to personal happiness, of course, but the happiness of his near and dear ones, the weal of his native land. Because of this many have imagined that Belinski did indeed lack "philosophic talent," and it became customary to look down upon him with a certain patronizing air by people who, so far as ability for philosophic thought is concerned, are not fit to untie his shoelaces. These smug fellows forgot or never knew that in Belinski's day the road to social happiness was sought in philosophy by virtually all of the intellectuals in Europe. That is why philosophy then had such enormous social significance.

Today when the road to happiness is *no longer* pointed out *by philosophy*, its progressive meaning has been reduced to zero; and nowadays the lovers of "pure thought" can tranquilly occupy themselves with it. We wish them success with all our heart, but this does not prevent us from having our own opinion concerning Belinski's "philosophic talent." We think that he had an *extraordinary instinct for theoretical truth*, left unfortunately undeveloped by systematic philosophic education, but an instinct which, nonetheless, indicated to him quite correctly the most important tasks of social

science of his day. "Belinski was one of the highest philosophic organisms I ever met in my life," said one of the best educated Russians of that era, Prince Odoyevski. Our conclusion is that Belinski was one of the highest "philosophic organisms" ever to appear on our literary scene.

For better or for worse, the vexing questions gave Belinski no rest throughout the "Fichte period." These questions were exactly the ones to which the German poet demands an answer in his beautiful poem where he asks:

"Why is the just man forever doomed to bear the cross? And why is the rich man everywhere met with honor and acclaim? Who is responsible? Or is it that the power of truth cannot attain everything on earth? Or are we just its playthings?"

Modern social science has definitely solved these questions. It recognized that "not everything as yet is attainable to the power of truth," and it explained why "truth" still weighs so little when it comes to social relations, especially the relations between classes. From the standpoint of modern social science the questions that excited and tormented Belinski may seem quite naive.

But for his times they were not at all naive; the best minds of his day were occupied with them. These questions flow logically from the root question of why accident proves so often stronger than reason. And it is not hard to understand that Belinski could be satisfied only with a philosophy that would give him plain and firm answers to precisely these questions.

Why can crude physical force mock with impunity the finest, the noblest aspirations of human beings? Why do some

nations flourish, while others perish, falling under the rule of harsh conquerors? Is it because the conquerors are always better than and superior to the conquered? Hardly so. Often this happens for the sole reason that the conquerors possess more troops than the conquered. But in that case by what is the triumph of force justified? And what meaning can “ideals” have, which never leave their supra-galactic province while leaving our poor, practical life a prey to all sorts of horrors?

Call these ideals *abstract*, and reality *concrete*, or vice versa, proclaim reality an abstraction, and ideals the reality – you will in either case be compelled to grapple with these questions, provided, of course, you are not gifted with Wagner’s “philosophic talent,” i.e., are not bathed in “pure thought,” and provided you do not belong to a coterie of *decadents* capable of amusing themselves with wretched “formulas of progress” which solve nothing and disturb nobody. As is well known, Belinski was neither a Wagner nor a decadent. And this, of course, does him great honor; but for this honor he paid dearly. The “Fichtean period” he afterwards called the period of “disintegration.” Understandably, he had to strive to free himself from this onerous condition; and it is equally understandable that this struggle had to lead to a break with Fichte’s philosophy.

For lack of data, the history of this break unfortunately remains little known. But it is known that by the middle of 1838 Belinski was already strongly under the influence of Hegel, although he had as yet become acquainted only with certain parts of Hegel’s system. It is also known that during this period he was already conciliating with that reality against, which he had warred so resolutely before. His mood

at the time is illuminated quite clearly by a letter from Piatigorsk he wrote on August 7, 1837 to one of his young friends. He hotly urges his friend to take up philosophy.

“Only in it will you find answers to the questions of your soul; only philosophy will bring peace and harmony to your soul and make you a gift of happiness beyond anything the mob suspects; a happiness which external life can neither give you nor deprive you of.”

Politics has no meaning in Russia because “Russia is destined to a fate entirely different from that of France, where the political bent of the sciences and of the arts, as well as the character of the citizens has its meaning, its lawfulness and its good side.” Russia’s entire hope lies in the spread of enlightenment and in the moral self-perfection of her citizens. “If each of the individuals who make up Russia were to attain perfection by way of love, then Russia would, without any politics, become the happiest country in the world.” This view is, of course, perfectly non-Hegelian, but, as we have already said, Belinski’s acquaintance with Hegel was quite incomplete at the time. What is important to us is this, that Belinski came to *conciliate with Russian reality* by way of *elucidating her historical development*, even if he did so incorrectly, and, in general, very superficially.

Why does our social life bear no resemblance to that of France? Because Russia’s historical destiny bears no resemblance to France’s historical destiny. Such an answer made impossible any parallels whatever between Russia and France. And yet these parallels, only a short while before, were bound to bring Belinski to depressing and almost hopeless conclusions. At the same time, such an answer made possible conciliation not only with Russia’s social life but also that of France, for instance, those events toward the

end of the 18th century which Belinski quite recently had regarded with such passionate sympathy. Everything is good in its place. And as we saw, he justified the “political bent” of the French. Incidentally, his infatuation with the “absolute” truth of German philosophy causes him no longer to respect this bent. The French possess “no eternal truths, but daily truths, i.e., new truths for each day. They want to derive everything not from the eternal laws of human reason, but from experiment, from history.” This made Belinski so indignant that he sent the French to “the devil.” French influence, according to him, never brought anything but harm; and he proclaimed Germany as the New Jerusalem of contemporary mankind, urging the thinking Russian youth to turn their eyes to Germany with hope and trust.

But it would be a gross mistake to present as a *custodian* the Belinski who had “conciliated” with Russian reality. At that time, too, he was far removed from conservatism. He likes Pester the Great precisely because of his resolute break with the state of affairs that existed in his day. “The emperors of all nations developed their people by resting on the past, on tradition; Peter tore Russia loose from the past, destroying her tradition.” Let us agree that such talk would sound strange on the lips of a custodian of the old order. Neither was Belinski at all inclined to idealize contemporary Russian life; he finds many imperfections in it, but he explains these imperfections by the youth of Russia.

“Russia is still an infant, who still needs a nurse whose heart is filled with love for her foster-child and whose hands hold a rod, ready to punish pranks.” He now conciliates even with serfdom; but does so only up to a given point. He conciliates only because he considers the Russian people not mature

enough as yet for freedom. As he wrote, “the government is emancipating little by little.” And this circumstance gladdens him as much as the fact that owing to the absence of primogeniture in our country, our nobility “is dying out by itself, without any revolutions, without domestic convulsions.”

Genuine custodians of the old order viewed matters through entirely different eyes; and had one of them read the foregoing letter of Belinski, he would have found it full of the most “nonsensical ideas,” Belinski’s negative attitude to politics notwithstanding. And this would be entirely correct from the “custodial” point of view. Belinski made peace not with reality but with the sorry destiny of his abstract ideal.

Only a short while before he was tormented by the realization that this ideal could find no application to life. Now he renounces it, convinced that it can lead to nothing except “abstract heroism,” a barren hostility toward reality. But this doesn’t mean that Belinski turned his back on progress. Not at all. It simply means that he was now prepared to serve progress in a different way from that in which he had prepared to serve before.

“Let us emulate the apostles of Christ,” he exclaims. “They entered into no conspiracies, and founded no open or clandestine political societies in spreading the teachings of their Divine Teacher. But they refused to renounce Him before czars and judges; and feared neither fire nor the sword. Meddle not in things that do not concern you, but remain true to your cause; and your cause is – the love of truth ... To hell with politics, long live science!”

(Part 3)

Chapter V

A negative attitude toward politics, however, was no solution to the problem of why evil so often triumphs over good, force over right, lie over truth. And so long as this problem remained unsolved, the moral gains from “conciliation” were not substantial. Belinski remained, as before, beset by doubts. But he was now confident that Hegel’s system would help him get rid of doubt forever. His further acquaintance with this system was aided by the same “dilettante of philosophy” who had expounded Fichte’s doctrine to him. How powerfully Hegelianism reacted upon Belinski and exactly which of his wants it filled, is shown by the following lines from his letter to Stankevich:

“I came to Moscow from Georgia, there came B. (‘dilettante of philosophy’); we are living together. In the summer he went through Hegel’s philosophy of religion and the philosophy of right. A new world opened before us. Force is right; right is force. No, I can’t describe my feelings when I heard these words. This was emancipation. I seized the idea of the downfall of empires, the lawfulness of conquerors. I understood that there is no reign of savage material force; that there is no sway of bayonet and the sword; there is no club-law, no arbitrariness, no accident. And my guardianship over mankind terminated, and the meaning of my native land rose before me in a new cast ... Previously, K—v [Katkov], too, had passed on to me and I accepted, as best I could, a few results of [Hegel’s] esthetics. Good God! What a new, luminous, boundless universe! ... The word, ‘reality’ has become for me the synonym for the word, ‘God.’ And you needlessly advise me to look more often up into the blue sky, into the stamp of infinity, so as not to stumble into scullery reality. My friend, blessed is he who sees infinity symbolized in the stamp of sky, but, after all, the sky is frequently cast over by greyish clouds, therefore more blessed is he who is able to illuminate a scullery, too, with the idea of the infinite.”

There now followed a genuine conciliation by Belinski with reality. A man who tries to illuminate even a kitchen with the thought of infinity, will not bother, naturally, to reconstruct anything in the life about him. He will enjoy the consciousness and contemplation of life's rationality and the more he venerates reason, all the more is he bound to be irritated by any criticism of reality. Understandably, Belinski's passionate nature was bound to lead him far in this direction. It is hard even to believe today that he used to enjoy the contemplation of reality about him in the same way an artist enjoys looking at a great work of art.

"Such is my nature," he said, "under stress, sorrowfully and with difficulty, my spirit accepts both love and hate, and knowledge, and every idea and feeling, but once having accepted, it becomes saturated with them down to its most secret, innermost bends and windings. Thus in my spirit's forge has worked out independently the meaning of the great word, reality ... I look on reality so scorned by me before, and tremble with a mysterious joy, comprehending its rationality, seeing that nothing can be cast out of it, nothing sullied or rejected ... 'Reality!' I repeat as I arise or go to sleep, night and day; in this new mutation which becomes more and more noticeable with every passing day, reality envelops me and I feel it everywhere and in everything, even in myself."

This "mysterious" joy face to face with rational reality resembles the joy some of us experience when communing with nature, those who are able simultaneously to enjoy nature's beauty and the consciousness of being indivisible from nature. A man who loves nature with such a love, simultaneously philosophic and poetic, will observe all of life's manifestations with equal satisfaction. Just so Belinski now followed everything about him with the same loving interest.

"Yes, reality ushers one into reality," he exclaims. "Viewing everyone not from a preconceived theory, but in accordance with

the facts each individual himself supplies, I am beginning to gain the ability to enter into real relations with him, and for this reason everybody is satisfied with me, and I am satisfied with everybody. I am beginning to find interests in common in discussions with people with whom I never dreamed I had anything in common.”

Accepting a post in a surveyors’ institute, he was inordinately satisfied by his activities as teacher, not high-sounding but useful.

“With insatiable curiosity I look into the means, so crude, so tedious and prosaic on the surface, by which this lacklustre and imperceptible usefulness is created, imperceptible unless one follows its development in time, invisible, from a superficial standpoint, but great and bountiful in its consequences for society. So long as my strength endures I am determined at all cost to bring my offering to the altar of social welfare.”

Not a trace is left of “abstract heroism.” Worn out by previous mental effort, Belinski seems to have lost even theoretical interest in great social questions. He is ready to be content with an instinctive contemplation of how rational is life about him.

“Knowledge of reality consists,” he said, “of a kind of instinct, or tact by reason of which each step a man takes is a sure step, each proposition rings true, all relations with people irreproachable, unstrained. Naturally, he who through his thought adds the conscious to this penetrative mental faculty, is doubly able to possess reality; but the main thing is to know reality, no matter how.”

In the previous period of his development Belinski tried, as we have seen, to solve the contradiction that tormented him, the contradiction between abstract ideal and concrete reality, by equating to zero one side of this antinomy. He proclaimed as a *phantom* all reality that contradicted the *ideal*. Now he does just the opposite. Now he equates to

zero the opposite side of the antinomy, that is, he proclaims as a *phantom*, as an illusion, every ideal that contradicts *reality*. In point of theory this new solution is, naturally, just as wrong as the first one. In the second instance, as in the first, there is no sufficient ground for reducing either side of the antinomy to zero. Nonetheless, the new phase of Belinski's philosophic development represents a giant step forward from the prior phase.

To clarify fully the meaning of this new phase it is necessary to pause a while on his article on the battle of Borodino.

Of chief interest in this article is Belinski's attack on the rationalistic interpretation of social life and its elucidation of relations between individuals and society as a whole. The rationalistic view with which Belinski lived in obvious harmony during the Fichtean period, now seems to him the acme of absurdity, fit only for French babblers and liberal abbots.

"From the days of old, concerning which we know only from history down to the present, there has not been and there is not a single people which was consolidated and shaped through a mutual, conscious compact of a certain number of individuals, desirous of becoming a component part of this people; nor did it take place in accordance with anyone's idea, not even the idea of a genius. Let us take, say, the origin of monarchical power. A liberal babbler would say that it arose as a product of the depravity of the people who, upon becoming convinced of their incapacity for self-rule, found themselves in bitter need of submitting to the will of a single individual, chosen by them, and invested by them with unlimited power. For superficial attitudes and abstract minds in whose eyes ideas and events do not contain within themselves their own causality and their own necessity, but sprout like mushrooms after a rain, not only without soil and roots but suspended in mid-air – for such minds there is nothing simpler or more satisfactory than such an explanation; but to those to whom the profundity and inner essence of things lies open by virtue of the spiritual clarity of

their vision there cannot be anything more foolish, laughable or senseless. Everything that lacks cause within its own self and appears only thanks to some 'other,' something 'outer' and not 'inner' to it, something alien to it, all such things are bereft of rationality and therefore also of sanctity. Basic state decrees are sanctified because they are the basic ideas not merely of a certain people, but of every people; and also because, by passing over into phenomenal, by becoming facts, they obtained their dialectic development through the historical movement. So that the very changes they have undergone constitute moments of their own idea. And for this reason the basic decrees are not laws promulgated by man but appear, so to speak, before their time and are simply expressed and cognized by man."

Evident here is a certain indexterity in the use of philosophic terms. For example, from the foregoing lines it would seem that, in Belinski's opinion, the *inner essence of things* may lie open to a philosopher. But what is this *inner essence*? As we see it, Goethe was absolutely correct when he said:

*Nichts ist innen, nichts ist aussen
Was ist drinnen,, das ist draussen.*
(There is nothing inner, nothing outer.
Whatever is from within, is also from without.)

But let us not dwell on details. Let us instead recall the general character of Belinski's views at the time.

From his new standpoint, what is the role of an individual in the dialectic process of social development?

"With regard to individuality, a human being is particular and accidental, but with regard to the spirit, to which this individual gives expression, he is general and necessary," says Belinski. "Hence flows the duality of his position and of his strivings; the duality of the struggle between the I and whatever lies beyond the I, and constitutes the not-I ... To be real and not illusory, a human being must be a particular expression of the general, or a finite manifestation of the infinite. He must therefore renounce his

subjective individuality, recognizing it as a lie and a phantom; he must submit to the world, to the general, recognizing it as truth and reality. But since the world, or the general, is located not within him but in the objective world outside, he must grow akin to it, merge with it, in order anew to become a subjective individuality but, this time, already real, already expressing not some accidental particular, but the general, the universal, in a word, become spirit in the flesh.”

To avoid remaining just an illusion, a human being must strive to become a particular expression of the general. The most progressive world outlook is compatible with this view of individuality. When Socrates attacked the outmoded conceptions of the Athenians, he was serving nothing else but “the general, the universal”; his philosophic doctrine was ideally the expression of a new step forward by the Athenians in their historical development. That’s why Socrates was a *hero* as Hegel called him. In this way, discord between an individual and the reality about him is wholly valid whenever the individual, as a *particular expression of the general*, prepares by his negation the historical soil for the new reality, the reality of tomorrow.

But that is not how Belinski reasons. He preaches “submission” to the existing order of things. In the article on Borodino and especially in the article on Menzel, Belinski falls with indignation upon the “little, great men,” for whom history is an incoherent fairy tale, full of accidental and contradictory collisions of circumstances. According to Belinski, such an interpretation of history is the sorry product of the human understanding. Human understanding invariably grasps only one side of an object, whereas reason surveys the object from all sides, even if these sides seemingly contradict one another. And on this account, reason does not create reality but cognizes it, taking

in advance as its dictum that “whatever is, is necessary, lawful and rational.”

“Reality constitutes the positive in life,” says Belinski in another article, “illusion is its negative.” If we grant this, then his attacks on the “little, great men” who deny reality become perfectly comprehensible. Personalities who deny reality are sheer phantoms. It is likewise comprehensible why Belinski should fall into an extreme optimism. If every denial of reality is illusory then reality is faultless. It is instructive to follow Belinski’s attempts to prove by historical examples that the “destinies of the earthborn” are not left to blind accident.

“Omar burned down the Alexandria library. Cursed be Omar, for he wrecked enlightenment in the ancient world for ages to come! Pause, gentlemen, before you curse Omar! Enlightenment is a wonder-working thing. Were it an ocean and some Omar dried it up, there would still remain beneath the earth an unseen and secret spring of living water that would not long tarry before breaking out in clear fountains and become converted into an ocean ...”

Naturally, this argument is quite strange. From the fact that the “Omars” cannot succeed in drying up all the sources of enlightenment, it by no means follows that their activities are harmless and that we should pause “before cursing them.” On his optimism Belinski reaches the extreme of naivete. But we have seen that this optimism stems ineluctably from his new outlook on reality. Arid this new outlook owed its origin not to the fact that Belinski had understood Hegel poorly, but rather to this, that he had fully assimilated, the spirit of Hegelian philosophy, a spirit which found its expression in the introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*.

The views Hegel set down in this introduction have already been dealt with in detail. Let the reader compare them with Belinski's "conciliationist views," and he will be struck by the virtually complete identity. The sole difference is this, that "furious Vissarion" became much more heated than the calm German thinker and therefore went to extremes Hegel avoided.

Belinski said that Voltaire

"resembles a Satan, freed by the Highest Will from adamantine chains by which he had been held in the fiery habitation in eternal darkness and who used his brief span of freedom to the ruination of mankind."

Hegel said nothing of the kind and would have never said it. Not a few similar examples could be adduced, but all of these are details which do not alter the gist of the matter which is this, that in expressing his views Belinski remained wholly, true to the spirit of Hegel's *absolute* philosophy.

And if these conciliationist views appear "strange" to Mr. Volynski, then it shows how poorly acquainted he is with the works of "a man who thought eternity," i.e., Hegel. True enough, Mr. Volynski happens to be repeating on this occasion only what had been previously said by N. Stankevich, by Herzen, Turgenev and others. But he had promised to review the question of Hegel's influence on Belinski's world outlook "with the necessary thoroughness" and "through a comparison of Belinski's well-known views with their original sources." Why then did Mr. Volynski confine himself to repeating the errors of others? Could it be; perhaps, that the "original source" is rather poorly known by him?

More fully than any of his friends, say, M.B. or N. Stankevich, Belinski had assimilated the conservative spirit of the Hegelian philosophy which claimed to be *absolute, truth*. The likelihood is that he felt this himself because friendly admonitions designed to cool his “conciliationist” ardor did not sit well with him at all. After all, these friends held the same standpoint of alleged absolute truth which Belinski was now, in Hegel’s footsteps, advocating, and from this standpoint any concession to, “liberal babblers” was only a sad inconsistency. (In a letter to L.M. Neverov, Granovski says that Bakunin was the first to rise up against Belinski’s articles on Borodino, etc. It is unfortunately unclear from Granovski’s letter just what Bakunin’s uprising consisted of. Anyhow, it could not have been based on an understanding of the progressive side of Hegel’s philosophy to which M.B. was to arrive much later.)

Of course, it may be argued that while Hegel in the days of the publication of the *Philosophy of Right* did make his peace with Prussian reality, it doesn’t therefore follow that Hegel would have conciliated with Russian reality. That is so. But there are negations and negations. Hegel would have pronounced Russian reality to be semi-Asiatic; he generally held that the Slav world constituted an entity midway between Europe and Asia. But Asian reality is likewise “reason embodied” and Hegel – not Hegel, the dialectician, but Hegel, the herald of “absolute truth” – would have scarcely approved of an uprising against reality in the part of finite reason of individuals.

Chapter VI

Let us now approach Belinski's conciliationist views from another side.

Social theories of "liberal babblers" kindled his ire by their superficial, anti-scientific character. "Babblers" imagine that social relations can be changed by popular whims, whereas, actually, social life and development are regulated by "immutable laws, lodged in the essence of society." Babblers see arbitrariness and accident there where in reality an ineluctable process of development is taking place. Social phenomena unwind dialectically, from within themselves, by inner necessity. Whatever bears no cause within itself but appears on account of something alien to it, something from "without," is devoid of rationality, and whatever is irrational is nothing more than an illusion, a phantom. Such are the views Belinski counterposes to the rationalist outlook on social life, inherited from the 18th century. And his views are incomparably more profound and more serious than the rationalistic outlook, which leaves no room for a scientific explanation of social events. One has to be very much an honor-laden Russian sociologist to be able to discern nothing except philosophic "rubbish" in Belinski's conciliationist views. Similarly, only a very honor-laden Russian sociologist could, in view of Belinski's foregoing outlook on life and the evolution of human society, make the remarkable discovery that his "flair for truth" more or less betrayed our genius-critic each time an "esthetic phenomenon became complicated by philosophic and politico-moral principles." If by flair for truth is meant an instinct for theoretical truth – and in questions of this sort there cannot be talk of anything else – then it is necessary to

admit that Belinski disclosed a highly developed instinct for truth when he hastened with enthusiasm to acquire and with heat to propagate the interpretation of history as a necessary and therefore a lawful process. In this instance, Russian social thought in the person of Belinski grappled, for the first time and with the boldness of genius, with the solution of the very same great problem which absorbed, as we have seen, the best minds of the 19th century.

Why is the position of the working class so bad? Because the modern economic order in Europe began to take shape at a time when the science “in charge of” this cycle of events “didn’t as yet exist.” That is how Mr. Mikhailovsky philosophizes. Belinski would have recognized in this ratiocination the rationalistic outlook he despised so much and he would have likened it – by its inner worth – to the light-minded pronouncements of *liberal abbots*.

“Reality as the manifestation of embodied reason,” he wrote, “always comes prior to cognition, because it is necessary to have the object for cognition, before the act of cognition can take place.”

For this reason, a science “in charge of” a given economic order could make its appearance only after such an order had taken shape; but to elucidate by its later appearance one or another positive or negative quality of this economy is as full of wisdom as it would be to ascribe the existence of contagious diseases to the circumstance that when the world was created there were no physicians from whom nature could have acquired the concept of hygiene. Needless to add, Belinski would be perfectly right, from the standpoint, that is, of modern objective science. And it therefore follows that as far back as the end of the 1830’s Belinski’s instinct for theoretical truth was more highly developed than it is today

in Mr. Mikhailovsky and other honor-laden sociologists like him. It cannot be said that this is a consoling conclusion for all the friends of Russian progress, but the truth must be served above everything else and so we shan't suppress it.

Take another example. The Populists have written a lot in Russia about the agrarian commune, the *obshchina*. They were often wrong – erring more or less sincerely – in talking about its history, or its present-day conditions. But let us grant that they didn't make a single mistake and pose a simple question: Weren't they wrong to clamor that it was necessary to “strengthen” the *obshchina* at all cost? What were they guided by? They were guided by a conviction that the present day *obshchina* is capable of growing over into the highest economic form. But what are the existing economic relations within the *obshchina*? Can their evolution lead to the transition of a modified, present-day *obshchina*, to the highest form of communal life? No. Because their evolution leads, on the contrary; to the triumph of individualism. The Populists themselves agreed more than once on this; anyhow, the more sensible among them did. But in that case what did they count on? They counted on this, that the external influence exercised on the *obshchina* by the intelligentsia and the government would overcome the *inner logic* of its development.

Belinski would have dismissed such hopes with scorn. He would have correctly noted in them a residue of the rationalistic outlook on social life. He would have rejected them as illusory and abstract, since everything is illusory which bears no cause within its own self and appears because of something else alien to it, something from “without” and not from “within.” Again, this would be

perfectly correct. And again it is necessary to draw the conclusion, unflattering for Russian progress, that toward the close of the 1830's Belinski had already drawn closer to a scientific understanding of social phenomena than have our present-day champions of old principles and institutions.

(It is worth noting, however, that only a few Populists continue nowadays to dream about the transition of the *obshchina* into the highest form of communal life. The majority of these worthy people, turning their backs on all "nonsensical" ideas, are "concerned" only about the prosperity of the business-like little mouzhik in whose hands the *obshchina* has become a fearsome weapon for exploiting the rural proletariat. It is undeniable that "concerns" of this sort have nothing "illusory" about them nor have anything in common with the "abstract ideal")

Basic state decrees "are not laws promulgated by man but they appear, so to speak, before their time and are only expressed by man." Is this so, or not? Belinski's reasoning on this subject is considerably obscured by his custodial ardor at the time, owing to which he sometimes expressed himself with foggy pomposity. However, in these reasonings, too, it is not hard to find a perfectly healthy kernel. From the standpoint of modern social science [Marxism] there is no doubt whatever that not only basic state decrees but juridical institutions generally are an expression of actual relations into which people enter, not arbitrarily but by dint of necessity. In this sense all legal institutions in general are only "expressed by man." And to the extent that Belinski's words carry this meaning they must be recognized as absolutely correct.

It would not hurt to recall them repeatedly even now to those bearers of the “abstract ideal” among us who imagine that juridical norms are created by popular crotchets and that a people can make of their legal institutions any eclectic hash they please. (Thus, for example, there are many among us who believe, on the one side, that Russia could with comfort “strengthen the *obshchina*” and, on the other, transplant on this “strengthened” soil, that is, on the soil of Asian landownership, certain institutions of West European social law.)

Russian social thought, in the person of our genius-critic, let us repeat, for the first time and audaciously, undertook the solution of that great task which the 19th century had posed before all the thinking minds of Europe. Comprehending the colossal importance of this task Belinski suddenly felt firm, soil beneath his feet; and, enthused by the boundless horizons opened before him, he, as we saw, surveyed for a while the reality about him through the eyes of an Epicurean, anticipating the bliss of philosophic cognition. And, after all, how could one not get angry at the “small, great people” who with their idle talk – *and it is time to recognise this* – their absolutely groundless talk in point of theory, hindered the tranquil and happy enjoyment of the unexpectedly discovered treasure-trove of truth? How not attack the bearers of the “abstract ideal,” how not heap ridicule upon them when Belinski, from his own experience, knew its utter practical worthlessness; when he still remembered that grievous cognition of self as a “cipher” which constantly accompanied the intense joy this ideal had aroused? How not despise those who, although they wanted happiness for their near and dear ones, nevertheless, out of

myopia, considered harmful the only philosophy which Belinski was convinced could make mankind happy?

But this mood did not last long; conciliation with reality proved shaky. By October 1839, departing for Petersburg and carrying with him the still unpublished article on *The Sketches of the Battle of Borodino*, Belinski was already far removed from the radiant and cheerful view of everything about him, which came upon him in the first period of his infatuation with Hegelian philosophy.

“My inner sufferings have burned into a sort of dry embitterment,” he said. “For me no one existed, because I myself was dead.”

True enough, this new oppressive mood was conditioned to a considerable degree by lack of personal happiness, but knowing Belinski’s character it can be said with certainty that he would not even have noticed this lack had Hegel’s philosophy given him so much as a fraction of what it had promised.

“How laughable it is and how exasperating,” he exclaims in a long letter to Botkin, written from December 16, 1839 to early February 1840. “The love of Romeo and Juliet is love in general; but the need of love, or the reader’s love is an illusion, a particular love. Life in books, that there is; but in life itself there is nothing.”

Note these words. They show that Belinski was already cohabiting poorly with Hegel’s “absolute” conclusions. In fact, if the task of a thinking man is limited to cognition of reality about him; if every attempt on his part toward a “creative” attitude to reality is “illusory,” and condemned to failure in advance, then for him nothing really remains except “life in books.”

Furthermore, a thinking man is under obligation to reconcile himself with whatever is. But living is not “whatever is.” Whatever is, has already ossified, the breath of life has already sped from it. That lives which is in the process Of becoming (*wird*), which is being worked out by the process of development. What is ‘life if not development? And in the process of development the element of negation is indispensable. Whoever in his outlook fails to assign adequate room for this necessary element, for that individual life does actually turn into “nothingness,” because in his conciliation with “whatever is” he engages in transactions not with life but with what used to be life, but had ceased living in the interim.

Hegel’s absolute philosophy, by proclaiming contemporary reality to be immune from negation, thereby also proclaimed that life can exist only in books, but outside of books there was to be no life. It correctly taught that an individual ought not place his personal crotchets and even his vital personal interests above the interests of the “general.” But to this philosophy of the general, the interests were the interests of stagnation.

Belinski sensed this instinctively much earlier than he was able to become cognizant of it through reason. He expected philosophy to point out the road to human happiness. The general question of the triumph of accident over human reason often appeared to him in the shape of a particular question of *why does force triumph over right?* What was Hegel’s answer? We saw what it was: “There is no reign of savage material force; there is no sway of bayonet and the sword; right is force and force is right.” Leaving aside the somewhat paradoxical manner of this answer (the

formulation is not Hegel's but Belinski's), it is necessary to admit that it encloses a profound truth, the sole prop for the hopes of the partisans of gradual progress. It is strange, but it is so. Here is a graphic example. "Our feudal rights are based on conquests," shouted the defenders of the old order in France to Sieyes. "Is that all?" he replied. "Very well, it's now our turn to become conquerors."

In this proud answer was expressed the cognition that the Third Estate had already matured for rulership. And when it became truly a "conqueror," its rule was not exclusively the rule of material force; its force was likewise its right, and its right was validated by the historical needs of France's development. Everything that does not correspond to the needs of society, has behind it no right whatever; but, contrariwise, whatever has behind it corresponding right will, sooner or later, have force behind it as well. What can be more gratifying than such assurance to all the true friends of progress?

And such assurance is ineluctably instilled by Hegel's attitude on the interrelation of right and force, *provided it is correctly understood*. But in order to understand it correctly, it was necessary to regard both history and present-day reality from the standpoint of *dialectic development* and not that of "absolute truth," which signifies a cessation of all movement.

From the standpoint of absolute truth, the right of historical movement became converted into the sanctified and immutable right of the Prussian Junkerdom to exploit the peasantry dependent on them; and all of the oppressed were condemned to eternal servitude solely because "absolute truth," on making its appearance in the realm of cognition,

found the peasants weak and hence without any rights as well. *C'était un peu fort*, as the French say. And Belinski was bound to notice it, too, as soon as he started to take stock of his new world outlook.

From his correspondence it is evident that his so-called break with Hegel, mentioned so often in our literature, was provoked by the inability of Hegel's "absolute" philosophy to answer social and political questions which tormented Belinski.

"I am told: Unfold all the treasures of your spirit for the freest enjoyment thereof; weep so that you may be consoled; grieve so that you may be joyful; strive toward perfection, scramble up to the top rung of the ladder of development, and should you stumble, then down you go, and the Devil take you ... Thank you obediently, Yegor Fedorovich. I bow to your philosophical conical hat; but with all due respect to your philosophic philistinism, I have the honor to inform you that even if I did succeed to climb the topmost rung of the ladder of development, from there, too, I would ask you to give an accounting for all the victims of life and history, for all the victims of accident, superstition, Inquisition, Phillip II, and so on. Or else I would jump head first from the ladder's topmost rung. I don't want happiness even for free, unless I can rest tranquil about every one of my brothers in flesh, and blood ... It is said that discord is the premise for harmony. Maybe so. This is quite advantageous and delightful for music lovers, but, after all, it is not so for those whose lives are destined to ex-press the idea of discord ..."

What does it mean to get an accounting for the victims of accident, superstition, Inquisition, etc? In the opinion of Mr. Volynski it means exactly nothing.

"To these perplexities," he says, "which Belinski set down, for wit's sake, in the form of a departmental report, with a malicious questionnaire of a compromising nature attached, Hegel, with a condescending smile, would have cut his excited opponent short and would have said: 'Development demands sacrifices of man, the

onerous exploit of self-renunciation, a mighty grieving over the welfare of the people, failing which there can be no individual welfare, but the philosophy of idealism does not hallow accidental victims, nor does it reconcile itself with superstition, with Inquisition. The dialectic process of development contains a mighty weapon – negation, which leads people out of the caves of inquisitorial casemates, out into the free air, into freedom. Accident is an anomaly and that alone is rational which bears the stamp of divine justice and wisdom ...” (*Russian Critics*, page 102.)

In these eloquent lines there is, as usual, a lamentable lumping of undigested concepts, peculiar to the philosophic talent of Mr. Volynski. To begin with, Hegel would have said exactly nothing to Belinski anent the sacrifices and self-renunciation that are demanded of an individual by his own intellectual and moral development. That’s for sure. Hegel would have understood that Belinski is not talking about sacrifices of this sort at all.

To be sure, the German idealist would have thereby let slip a precious opportunity to coin eloquent phrases in the rhetorical style of Mr. Volynski but by way of compensation he would have come sooner to the point. And the point here touches precisely the following question: Wasn’t the element of *negation*, this truly “mighty weapon,” reduced to zero by the “absolute” conclusions which Hegel drew and by the conciliation with reality which he preached in the introduction to his *Philosophy of Right*? We have already seen that the answer is – yes; that such a contradiction did actually exist and that it flowed from the root contradiction, inherent in Hegel’s philosophy generally, i.e., the contradiction between the dialectic nature of this philosophy and its pretensions to the title of “absolute truth.” Mr. Volynski apparently doesn’t even suspect the existence of this contradiction. This does his “philosophic talent” no

honor. Belinski, in contrast, already sensed as early as the end of the 1830's that this contradiction existed.

“I have long suspected,” he says in the above-cited letter,” that Hegel's philosophy is only a moment, even though a great one, but that the absoluteness of his results isn't worth anything*; that it is better to die than reconcile oneself with it.”

(* A footnote of Mr. Pypin accompanies this phrase; it reads: “A sharp expression used in the text of the letter has been altered by us.”)

A Russian who “suspected” such things, and this, moreover, toward the end of the 1830's had truly to possess a high “philosophic organism.” And feeble indeed are “philosophic organisms” who to this day fail to understand Belinski. What they deserve is not a “condescending” but the most scathing smile that can be smiled.

Belinski, naturally, doesn't hold Hegel responsible for the exploits of the Inquisition, for the cruelty of Phillip II, and so on. When he asks Hegel for an accounting of all the victims of mankind's historical movement, he charges Hegel with not remaining true to his own philosophy. And this charge is as valid as any charge could be. According to Hegel *freedom* is the *goal* of historical development and *necessity* is the means leading toward this goal. A philosophy, which interprets history from this elevated standpoint, cannot of course be held responsible for what has happened, independently of its will and influence. But one may justifiably demand from it that it point out the means wherewith reason shall triumph over blind accident. And these means can be supplied only by the process of development. By proclaiming himself as the possessor of absolute truth and by reconciling himself with the existing conditions, Hegel turned his back on all development and

recognized as *reason that necessity* from which mankind of his day suffered. This was tantamount to proclaiming oneself a philosophic bankrupt. And it is exactly this act of bankruptcy that aroused Belinski. He was vexed that he, following in Hegel's footsteps, had been able to perceive "a most perfect state" in the Russia of his day.

This most perfect state rested on the exploitation (through extremely antiquated methods) of the majority for the benefit of a privileged minority. Rising up against Hegel's "absolute" philosophy, Belinski understood this perfectly. He went over wholly to the side of the oppressed. But these oppressed did not appear in his eyes as producers, living under given historical conditions. He regarded them as people in general, as oppressed human individuals. For this reason he protested in the name of individuality.

"It is high time," he exclaims, "for human individuality, unfortunate enough as it is, to free itself from the ignoble shackles of irrational reality, from the opinions of the mob and from traditions bequeathed by barbarous times."

On this account there are some who would not be averse to picture Belinski as something akin to a liberal individualist. But this is absolutely groundless. Belinski himself clarifies his state of mind at the time quite excellently.

"Within me has grown a sort of fantastic love for freedom and independence of the human individuality, which is attainable only in a society based on truth and courage ... Human individuality has become a focal point on which I am fearful of losing my sanity. I am beginning to love humanity in Marat's way: to make a tiniest fraction of it happy, I would, it seems, destroy the rest with fire and the sword."

Liberal individualism this does not represent in any case. Nor has the following categorical declaration anything in common with it:

“I have now fallen into a new extreme – it is the idea of socialism which has become for me the idea of ideas ... the alpha and omega of faith and knowledge ... For me, it has swallowed up history and religion and philosophy. And therefore I now explain by it my life, your life and the lives of all those whom I have met on life’s highroad” (letter to Botkin, September 8, 1840).

Mr. Pypin hastens to assure us that Belinski’s socialism was at bottom perfectly harmless. The honor-laden scholar, in this case, labors in vain. Who doesn’t know that the socialism of Belinski’s day generally contained nothing dangerous to the social order of the time? But Belinski’s infatuation with socialism, while containing nothing dangerous, happens to have been a very important event in his mental life. And for this reason it ought not be left in the shadows but must be brought out into the clearest possible light.

(Part 4)

Chapter VII

Why did Belinski pass so swiftly and resolutely from “absolute” idealist philosophy to Utopian socialism? In order to clarify this transition it is necessary once again to return to our great critic’s attitude toward Hegel.

Even after Belinski condemned his own article on Borodino as foolish and unworthy of an honest writer, he continued to consider the period of his return from, Georgia, i.e., the period of *his complete infatuation with Hegelian philosophy*, as the beginning of his spiritual life. To him this period seems to have been “the best, at any rate, the most remarkable period” of his life. Another article on Borodino he considered foolish only because of its conclusions and not at all because of its basic propositions. He wrote:

“The idea I tried to develop in the article about Glinka’s book, *Sketches of the Battle of Borodino*, is true in its essentials.” He had only failed to take full advantage, as he should have, of these true essentials. “It was likewise necessary to develop the idea of negation as a historic right no less sanctified than the other historic right and failing which, mankind would be converted into a stagnant, stinking swamp.”

The reader has perhaps not forgotten the passage which we have already cited from Hegel’s lectures on the *History of Philosophy*. This passage shows that to the extent that Hegel remained true to his dialectic, he fully recognized the historic right of negation. Belinski thought that by having rejected Hegel’s “absolute” conclusions, he had completely rejected Hegel’s entire philosophy. Actually, he was only

passing over from Hegel, the herald of “Absolute Truth,” to Hegel, the dialectician. Despite his jibes at Hegel’s philosopher cap, Belinski still remained a pure Hegelian. His first article on Peter the Great is saturated with the spirit of Hegelian philosophy. The same spirit pervades the second article, although here Belinski tried to take a different standpoint in his judgments concerning the influence of geographic environment on the spiritual qualities of various nations. But his rather unsuccessful reasoning does not in the least change the general character of his world outlook at the time; it remained thoroughly idealist. All of his co-thinkers likewise remained idealists at the time.

His biographer has apparently failed to grasp this accurately. Mr. Pypin declares that in Herzen’s *Letters on the Study of Nature* – published in *Otchestvennyye Zapiski*, 1843 – “the tasks of philosophy and science were posed in the same way that the best minds pose them today.” (*Belinski* by Pypin, Volume 1, page 228.) This is a major blunder. Mr. Pypin was evidently misled by the categorical statement of the author of the *Letters* to the effect that “Hegel had raised thinking to so high a level as to make it impossible, after Hegel, to take a single forward step without absolutely leaving idealism behind.”

But this statement in no way hindered Herzen from remaining an idealist of purest water both in his views on nature (wherein he is wholly Hegelian) as well as in his views on the philosophy of history. He thought that “in materialism there is nowhere to go beyond Hobbes.” He said that the materialists in history were those to whom “the entire world history seemed to be a matter of personal inventions and a strange confluence of accidents.” (It is an

interesting sidelight to compare this view with the charges levelled nowadays, from all sides, against the economic materialists.) Up to the middle of 1844, Herzen spoke throughout as an idealist in his *Diary*. Only in July 1844 did he refer commendingly to an article by Jordan in *Wigand's Quarterly*. But this comment, too, did not at all signify any decisive turn in Herzen's views.

Mr. Pypin also remarks that Belinski's "last philosophic interest" was the positivism of Auguste Comte and Maximilien Littre "as the categorical rejection of metaphysics." Mr. Pypin has unfortunately failed to print in full the letter in which Belinski, according to Mr. Pypin, dwells at length on positivism. Judging solely by the passage cited from this letter by Mr. Pypin, our great critic's opinion of Comte was not overly favorable, as Mr. Pypin himself concedes. "Comte is a remarkable man," says Belinski, "but the chances are rather slim, that he shall prove to be the founder of a new philosophy. For this genius is required, and in Comte there is not a sign of it." This leads us to conclude that Belinski would not have inclined toward positivism, if death had not carried him off so prematurely.

If speculations are in order, then we shall take the liberty to speculate that Belinski would have become ultimately a zealous partisan of dialectic materialism which, in the second half of the 19th century, came to replace outlived idealist philosophy. Historical development, which absorbed Belinski's philosophic thought, led precisely in this direction; and it was not for nothing that he read with so much satisfaction the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* in which the future founders of dialectic materialism were then writing. If Belinski found nothing objectionable in their

views in 1845, then why should he have risen up against them later on, after these views had been developed and given a firm foundation?

Let us note here, by the way, that the logical affinity of philosophic ideas speaks in favor of our speculation. And against it, one may say that Belinski, removed as he was so terribly far from, the centers of West European intellectual life and loaded perpetually with pressing work, would have found it hard not to lag behind the best minds of Europe. The greatest of geniuses requires for his development, the favorable influence of the surrounding milieu upon him; in Russia this milieu was fearsomely undeveloped in every respect. Therefore it is possible that Belinski might not have been able to the end of his days to reach a full, definitive and harmonious world outlook toward which he strived passionately and constantly. It is also possible that the social ferment which began in the second half of the 1850's would have made of him the leader of our enlighteners of those days. As we shall presently see, in the last years of his life, there were not a few elements in his views that could have made comparatively easy such a transition to the wholly justifiable views of the Russian enlighteners at the time.

But enough of speculation; let us return to the facts.

Belinski felt the need of developing the idea of negation. Following in the footsteps of the author of *Sketches of the Gogolian Period of Russian Literature*, Mr. Pypin thinks that Belinski was greatly aided by Herzen in this particular development. He is of course correct in the sense that discussions and debates with so dynamic, clever and many-sidedly educated a man as Herzen were not and could not

have been without some influence on Belinski's views. But we think that the meetings with Herzen while they gave a strong impulsion to Belinski's intellectual activity, offered him little in the way of assistance toward developing dialectic views on social events. Herzen and the dialectic got along poorly. As is well known, to the end of his days he saw in Proudhon's *Contradictions économiques* a most successful application of the dialectic method to economic life. Herzen saw that, correctly understood, Hegel's philosophy could not be a philosophy of stagnation (Hegel to the contrary notwithstanding). But if there was any one in Russia who understood poorly the Hegelian affirmation of the rationality of whatever exists, then it was surely none other than the brilliant but superficial Herzen. In *My Past and Thoughts* he says:

“The philosophic phrase which has done the greatest harm and on the basis of which German conservatives have sought to reconcile philosophy with Germany's political life, namely, the phrase to the effect that ‘whatever is real is rational,’ was merely another way of stating the principle of *sufficient reason* and of the correspondence between logic and facts.”

But such a commonplace as “the principle of sufficient reason” would have never satisfied Hegel. The 18th century philosophers likewise recognized this principle but they remained very far removed from the Hegelian view of history as a lawful process. The whole point is this: Where and how does a given theory of society seek the sufficient reason for social events? Why did the old order in France fall? Was it because Mirabeau was so eloquent? Or was it because the French custodians (of the old order) were so untalented? Or was it because the flight of the royal family failed?

The “principle” singled out by Herzen vouches only for this, that there was some reason behind the downfall of the old order, but it offers no indications whatever as to the method of investigating this reason. This is the woeful condition that Hegel’s philosophy sought to remedy. Interpreting man’s historical development as a lawful process this philosophy eliminated therewith the standpoint of *accident*. (To be sure, Hegel said that there is an element of accident in everything that is finite – *in allem Endlichen ist ein Element des Zufälligen* – but by the whole meaning of his philosophy it is only at the point where several necessary processes intersect that we meet with *accident*. That is why the concept of accident accepted, and quite correctly so, by Hegel does not at all obstruct a scientific examination and explanation of events. Moreover, to understand a given accident, one must be able to find a satisfactory explanation for *at least two necessary* processes.)

And *necessity*, too, was not at all understood by Hegel in the commonplace meaning of the word. If we say, for example, that the old order in France fell because of an accidental failure of the royal flight, then we immediately recognize that the moment this flight failed, the downfall of the old order became *necessary*. Understood in this crude and superficial manner, necessity is simply the other side of accident.

With Hegel necessity has a different meaning. When he says that a given social event was necessary, he means that this social event had been prepared by the internal development of the country where it had taken place. But even this is not all. By the meaning of his philosophy each event creates in the process of its development, from within itself, those

forces which negate it later on. Applying this to social life it means that every given social order itself generates those negative elements which will destroy it and will replace it with a new order. Once you understand the process whereby these negative elements are generated, you likewise understand the process that will bring the old order to its death.

By saying that he needed “to develop the idea of negation” Belinski wanted thereby to say that he needed to negate the historical necessity of the indicated elements in every given social order. In overlooking this important side of the matter, he had committed a serious blunder at the time. But the principle of “sufficient reason” suggested by Herzen was not at all sufficient to correct Belinski’s logical error. In this respect Belinski was left completely on his own resources.

To develop the idea of negation meant, among other things, to recognize the right of the “ideal” which in the heat of his infatuation with Hegel he had sacrificed to reality. But the ideal, lawful from Belinski’s new standpoint, could not be an “abstract ideal.” Since the historical negation of reality comes as the result of its own development it therefore follows that *only that ideal can be recognised as lawful which itself rests on this development. Such an ideal* will not be “torn out of geographic and historical conditions of development” and it cannot be said to have been “erected in mid-air.” It only expresses in image and thought the results of the process of development *already taking place in reality*. And it is *concrete* to the same extent as the unfolding development is itself concrete.

In the first phase of his development Belinski sacrificed reality for the sake of the ideal; in the second, he sacrificed the ideal for the sake of reality and finally in the third phase he sought to reconcile the ideal with reality by means of the *idea of development* which would give the ideal a firm foundation and transform, it from the “abstract” into the concrete.

This was now Belinski’s task. It was a great task. So long as men remain unable to solve such tasks, they are unable to influence consciously either their own development or that of society and therefore remain playthings of accident. But in order to pose oneself this task, it was necessary to break with the *abstract* ideal, to understand and feel thoroughly its utter impotence. To put it differently, Belinski had to live through the phase of reconciliation with reality. That is why this phase does him the greatest honor. And that is why he himself considered it later on as the start of his spiritual life.

But to set oneself a given task is one thing; to solve it, something else again.. Whenever a dispute arose over some difficult question, among the young people who belonged to the Stankevich-Belinski circle, after tussling with it, they sometimes came to the conclusion that “only Hegel could solve it.” This is just what Belinski might have said to himself now when it fell upon him to apply the dialectical method to the interpretation of Russian historical development. But Hegel would not have justified his confidence, either. Dialectic idealism posed correctly the great task of social science in the 19th century, but it did not solve it, although, true enough, it did prepare this solution to a considerable degree.

To study an object means to explain the development of this object by all of the forces it itself generates. Thus spoke Hegel. In his philosophy of history, he indicated very accurately in isolated instances the motor forces of historical development. But *generally* his idealism pushed him away from the correct path of investigation. If the logical development of the “idea” supplies the basis of all other development, including historical development, then history is to be explained in the final analysis by the logical properties of the “idea” and not by the dialectic development of social relations. And Hegel actually appealed to these logical properties each time he ran up against this or another great historical question. And this meant that he explained perfectly concrete events by means of abstractions. Precisely herein lies the error of idealism. It ascribes to abstraction a creative, motive force. That is why, as so often happens with idealists, arbitrary logical constructions take the place of the study of actual causal connections of events.

A correct, a genuinely scientific theory of historic development could make its appearance only after dialectic idealism had been replaced by dialectic materialism. Belinski did not live to see this new era. True, not a little variegated material had been collected in his day for the elaboration of a correct interpretation of history. The April 1897 issue of the magazine *Novoye Slovo* published certain views of V.P. Botkin on the role of economic interests in the historical development of mankind. There is nothing surprising in Botkin’s having held such views. Before being attracted to Hegel’s philosophy, Botkin was a follower of Saint-Simon, and Saint-Simon explained the entire modern history of Europe by the struggle of economic interests. (See in particular his *Catechisme politique des industriels*, where

this view is expounded with special clarity in connection with French history; see also his letter to the editor of *Journal General de France*, May 12, 1818 where Saint-Simon says that “The most important of laws is the law which organizes property. It is the law which serves as the foundation of the social order.”)

There was not a little in this connection that Botkin could have borrowed from other Utopian socialists, for instance, Victor Considerant and even Louis Blanc (especially Blanc’s *Histoire de dix ans*). Finally there is a good deal he might have obtained, from the French historians, Guizot, Mignet, de Tocqueville. It is difficult to assume that Botkin remained ignorant of Tocqueville’s famous book, *De la democratie en Amerique*, the first volume of which was already out by 1836.

The dependence of social development on economic relations, more accurately, on property relations, is accepted as an incontestable truth in this book. According to Tocqueville, once property relations are given they “may be regarded as the first cause for laws, customs and ideas which determine the activities of the people.” Even that which these relations do not engender, at any rate changes correspondingly with them. In order to understand the laws and morals of a given people it is therefore necessary to study the property relations dominant among them. (See, in particular, Tocqueville’s *Destinée sociale*.) The last two volumes of Tocqueville’s first work are wholly devoted to the study of how the existing property relations in the United States influence the intellectual and esthetic habits and needs of the Americans. As a consequence of all this Botkin could have arrived without too much difficulty at the conviction that spiritual development is determined by the course of social development. This conviction of Botkin’s

was assuredly known to Belinski. It was expressed, for example, in Belinski's views on the historical significance of Pushkin's poetry. But it could not serve him as a reliable guiding line in the elaboration of a *concrete ideal*. The point is this, that Saint-Simon as well as Considerant and other Utopian socialists, along with the historians who discerned in property relations the most important basis of the social structure, remained nevertheless *idealists* with regard to the evolution of these relations, i.e., with regard to the main cause of social movement. They understood the social significance of economics; what they failed to see was the root cause upon the action of which depends the economic order of every given society. In their eyes the cause was in part accident, fortunate or unfortunate, (for example, advantageous geographic position, conquest, and so forth) and in part human nature. That is why all of them appealed chiefly to human nature in support of social institutions or plans they cherished. But to appeal to human nature means to take your stand on the side of the *abstract ideal*, and not on the vantage point of the dialectic development of social relations. Precisely therein lies the essence of the *Utopian outlook* on society.

Prior to the appearance of the historical theory of the author of *Capital*, all socially minded public figures who were not completely carefree about theory, from the extreme left to the extreme right, were Utopians to one degree or another. It is therefore understandable why Belinski, too, on concluding his truce with reality, had to take the Utopian standpoint, contrary to his own striving toward the *concrete ideal*. This striving could leave its stamp only on a few of his isolated views, considerations and judgments.

Chapter VIII

“In Moscow,” Kavelin notes in his memoirs, “Belinski put forward, during a conversation with Granovski ... the Slavophile idea that Russia would perhaps be better able than Europe to solve the social question and put an end to the hostility between capital, property and labor.” This is indeed a pure Slavophile point of view, later adopted by Russian populists and subjectivists. Belinski, the irreconcilable enemy of the Slavophiles, could have entertained, such an idea only by dint of his attraction to Utopian socialism.

We have already observed that in his sympathy for the oppressed, Belinski regarded them not as beings living and working under specific historical conditions but as a sum total of “personalities” unjustly deprived of rights which are the natural rights of human individuals.

From this abstract viewpoint the future development of social negations was bound to appear not so much dependent on an inner logic of their own as, on the contrary, on the personal traits of a people, oppressed in one way or another by these relations. The *dialectic* was bound to cede place to *utopia*.

Betimes Belinski also approached the future destiny of Russia from the standpoint of the traits of the Russian “personality.” In the article, *A Glance at Russian Literature of 1846*, he says: “Yes, through us there pulses national life; we are called upon to speak our word to the world, to utter our thought.” What is this word? Belinski refuses to engage in speculations and guesses on this score, “for fear most of all

of conclusions that are arbitrary and merely subjective in their import.” (His attitude toward subjectivism, as we see, remained unchanged from the time he wrote the article on the anniversary of Borodino.)

But just the same it seems to him that the many-sidedness with which Russians understand other foreign nationalities, permits of certain judgments concerning Russia’s future cultural mission.

“We do not affirm it as ineluctable that the Russian people are destined to express through their nationality the richest and most many-sided content; and that this is why a Russian has a remarkable capacity for assimilating and adapting everything foreign to himself,” says Belinski. “But we are so bold as to think that a kindred idea expressed as a supposition, without boastfulness and fanaticism, would not be found lacking in justification.”

He expressed himself quite sharply in the same vein in his March 8, 1847 letter to Botkin:

“Russian personality is still only an embryo; but what breadth and strength there is in the nature of this embryo! How stifling and repulsive to it are all limitations and narrowness! It fears them and most of all it is intolerant of them; and in my opinion it does well to be meanwhile satisfied with nothing rather than become enslaved by some shabby one-sidedness. The contention that we Russians are all-embracing because there is actually nothing we can do – is a lie, the more I think of it all the more convinced am I that it is a lie ... Don’t think I am an enthusiast on this question. No, I came to solve it (for myself) along the hard road of doubts and negation.”

A similar “solution” opened wide the doors for the Slavophile view on the social question in Russia. It is commonly known that this view was based on a completely false conception of the historical development of the

Russian *obshchina*. Incidentally, the sort of conception held by the most advanced thinkers at the time is graphically shown by the following comment Herzen made in his *Diary*: “The model of the highest development of the Slav *obshchina* is the Montenegrin.”

But the Montenegrin *obshchina* is a consanguine community completely unlike the Russian village *obshchina* which has been created by the Czarist government for the better securement of its fiscal interests, long after the consanguine tribal community disintegrated among us. In any case, our village *obshchina* could never evolve along the lines of the Montenegrin. But at the time our Westerners regarded the *obshchina* as abstractly as did the Slavophiles. And if among them a conviction occasionally arose that there was a brilliant future for the *obshchina*, then this came about as a mere act of faith, the product of a pressing moral need for an escape, even if through fiction, from the onerous impressions of surrounding reality. Herzen says flatly in his *Diary*:

“Chaadayev once made the splendid remark that one of Christianity’s greatest traits is to raise the hope in virtue and place it alongside of faith and love. I agree completely with him. This side of putting trust in sorrow, of firm faith in an apparently hopeless situation must be realized primarily by us.”

Why did men like Herzen feel themselves in a hopeless situation? Because they were unable to work out for themselves any kind of *concrete ideal*, i.e., an ideal indicated by the historical development of a reality they found so unpleasant; and failing to attain such an ideal they underwent the same moods of oppression through which Belinski had passed in the days of his youthful infatuation with the *abstract ideal*. They felt themselves completely

impotent. “We fall outside the needs of the people,” complained Herzen.

He would not have said this had he seen that the “idea of negation,” he had allegedly made his own, was the result of the inner development of a people’s life. He would not have then felt himself outside of the needs of the people. Just like Herzen, Belinski exclaims:

“We are the unhappy anchorites of a new Scythia; we are men without a country, nay, we are worse off than men without a country; we are men whose country is a phantom and is it surprising that we ourselves are phantoms? that our friendships, our love, our strivings, our activities are phantoms, too?”

Owing to such moods, a temporary inclination toward Slavophile fantasies is quite understandable even in a thinker so strong in logic as Belinski.

It was a temporary inclination, we just said. From all indications with Belinski, in contrast to Herzen, it was not only temporary but brief. Not in vain did Herzen say of Belinski that he “cannot live in expectations of the life of a future age.” What the Germans call *jenseits* (the beyond) exerted little attraction on Belinski. He needed the firm soil of reality. In the article, *A Glance at Russian Literature of 1846*, from which we have extracted some dubious hypotheses about the future of Russian civilization, he refutes the attacks of Slavophiles on the reforms of Peter the Great and notes:

“Such events in the life of a people are far too great to be accidental and the life of a people is not a flimsy little boat to which anyone may impart an arbitrary direction by a slight movement of an oar. Instead of pondering the impossible and making oneself a laughing stock by intervening with so much conceit in historical destiny, it is

much preferable, recognizing the existence of irresistible and unalterable reality, to act upon the foundations of this reality, guiding oneself with reason and ordinary sense, and not with Manilovist fantasies.”

In another passage, recognizing that a certain reform had exerted some unfavorable influence on the Russian national character, he adds the following important qualification:

“But it is impermissible to stop with the recognition of the validity of any fact whatsoever; it is necessary in addition to investigate its causes, in the hopes of finding in the evil itself the means for a way out of this evil.”

The means of struggle against the unfavorable consequences of Peter the Great’s reform must be sought within the reform, itself, within the new elements it introduced into Russian life. This is a wholly dialectical view on the question; and to the extent that Belinski upholds it in the dispute with the Slavophiles, to that extent his thoughts are alien to all utopianism; to that extent his thoughts are *concrete*.

lie feels this himself and deals in passing several blows to his old, ever-present enemy – the *abstract ideal*. “The unconditional or absolute method of thinking is the easiest one,” he says. “But, in return, it is the most unreliable; today it is called abstract thinking.” In his opinion the main source of Slavophile errors is “that they arbitrarily anticipate time; they take the results independently of the process of development; they demand to see the fruit before the blossoms, and finding the leaves tasteless, they pronounce the fruit to be rotten; and they propose to transplant a great and vast forest to a different location and to take care of it in a different way. In their opinion this is not easy but it can be done.” These lines contain so profound and serious a view of social life that we warmly recommend it to the study of our

present-day Slavophiles, i.e., populists, subjectivists, Mr. N—on and other “enemies of capitalism.” Whoever assimilates this viewpoint will not venture, like Mr. N—on, to try to impose on “society” a remarkable task which society is not only incapable of carrying out but is not even in a condition to understand; nor will he think, like Mr. Mikhailovski, that to follow in “Peter the Great’s footsteps” is to nurse Utopias; in brief, he will never reconcile himself with an “abstract ideal.”

Three months before his death on February 15, 1848, Belinski, then cruelly ravaged by illness, dictated a letter to Annenkov in Paris. It contains many interesting ideas which have only recently begun to attract the attention of thinking Russians.

“Whenever I called you a conservative during our debates over the bourgeoisie,” he said, “I was foolish and you were wise. The whole future of France is in the hands of the bourgeoisie; all progress depends exclusively upon it and the people here can only play a passive, auxiliary role from time to time. When I remarked in the presence of my ‘believing friend’ that Russia now needed another Peter the Great he attacked my idea as a heresy. He claimed that the people ought to do everything for itself. What a naive, Arcadian notion! Furthermore, my ‘believing friend’ expounded to me why God was obliged to save Russia from the bourgeoisie while today it is clearly evident that the inner process of civil development in Russia will not begin before the Russian nobility becomes transformed into a bourgeoisie ... What a strange fellow I am! Each time a mystical absurdity falls into my head, those who are capable of rational thought rarely succeed in knocking it out by arguments; for this to happen I must congregate with mystics, pietists and screwballs who have gone mad on the same idea – and then I shy away. My ‘believing friend’ and the Slavophiles have done me a great service. Do not be surprised by the juxtaposition; the best of the Slavophiles take the same attitude toward the people as my ‘believing friend’ does; they have imbibed these concepts from the socialists ...”

This was one of the results of Belinski's trip abroad. In Paris social life and thought were very vigorous at the time and the socialists of various schools had acquired a considerable, although unstable, influence on the world outlook of the French intelligentsia. In Paris there then lived not a few Russians who were passionately interested in social questions, as is evident from Annenkov's memoirs. Strongly stimulated by the social milieu, our fellow Russians became apparently bent on speculating even more eagerly and vehemently than they did at home on the theme of Russia's future role in the solution of the social question. Clashing with extreme views of this sort, thanks to his powerful instinct for theoretical truth, Belinski instantly took note of their weak side: complete abstraction, complete absence of any rational, conscious connection with the historical course of Russia's development. The old Hegelian must have felt again the long familiar and long vexing need to tie: up the ideal with life, to gain from dialectic the explanation of today's reality. And so he made Russia's future destiny dependent on its economic development; Russia's internal process of civil development would not start until the Russian nobility had turned into a bourgeoisie. Therewith the historical conditions for such a transformation remained unclear to him. He failed to see that the economic consequences of Peter the Great's reforms are quite adequate for the development of capitalism in Russia.

Likewise unclear to him is the historic relation between the bourgeoisie and the people of Western Europe. The people appear to him to be condemned to a "passive, auxiliary role." This is, of course, an error. But all of the socialist Utopias assigned to the people a perfectly passive role; with this difference that the people, in accordance with Utopian views, were bound to play a "passive, auxiliary role" not in the process of the further development of the already

existing social order, but in respect to social reform. Here the initiative and the leading role belonged of necessity to the well-meaning and honorable intelligentsia, that is, essentially the offspring of the self-same bourgeoisie.

Belinski was contemptuous of the socialists and was evidently ready to denounce them, too, as pietists and mystics. He was by and large correct; in their views there actually was a lot that was completely fantastic and unscientific. And their chief error, just as in the case of the Slavophiles, was – as Belinski noted – that they saw nothing but evil in evil and failed to note the other side of this evil, namely the drastic alteration effected by it in society's foundations. (Belinski, by the way, expressed a negative attitude toward the socialists even before his trip abroad. He approved of the French philosopher Littré, for example, because Littré did not adhere to the Utopian socialists. See his letter to Botkin, January 29, 1847.)

Belinski unsuccessfully tried to correct the error of the Utopian socialists by condemning the “people” to an eternal, passive role. But his correct understanding of the error is proved precisely by his extolling the significance of the bourgeoisie, i.e., of capitalism. In his eyes capitalism now represented the idea of development which had failed to find a sufficient place in the teachings of the socialists.

This attitude toward the Utopians involuntarily recalls Belinski's contemptuous attitude toward the “little, great people,” whom he had so savagely lashed in the days of his conciliationist moods. His ire was aroused against the “little, great people” who approached social life from a rationalist standpoint, without even suspecting the existence of the inner dialectic peculiar to this social life. Belinski's attitude toward the Utopians was much milder, although he did call them mystics. He understood that their enthusiasms were not guided by caprice or vanity but by a striving toward the

social good, whereas the “little, great people” seemed to him vainglorious phrasemongers, and nothing more. But his dissatisfaction with the Utopians stemmed from the very same reasons that had previously led him to scorn the “little, great people,” namely: *the abstract character of their ideal*.

I.S. Turgenev designated Belinski as a *central figure*. Our designation is the same, but in a different sense. In our view Belinski is the central figure in the whole course of development of Russian social thought. He posed to himself, and therefore to others as well, the great problem, failing whose solution we can never know what the ways are civilized mankind must travel to attain happiness and the triumph of reason over the blind, elemental force of necessity; failing whose solution we would have forever remained in the sterile domain of “Manilovist” fantasies, the domain of the ideal “torn out of geographic and historical conditions of development and erected in mid-air.” A more or less correct solution of this problem must serve as the criterion for evaluating the entire future development of our social concepts. Of his co-thinkers Belinski said: “Our generation are Israelites, a tribe wandering in the desert and not destined to see the promised land. And all of the leaders are Moseses and not Joshuas.” Belinski was precisely our Moses, who, even though he failed to rid himself of the Egyptian yoke of the *abstract* ideal, nevertheless tried with all his might to free himself and those near him from it. This is the great, inestimable merit of Belinski. And this is why the history of his intellectual development should have been long ago analyzed from the standpoint of the *concrete* views of our time. The more attentively we study this history, all the more deeply are we convinced that Belinski was the most remarkable philosophic organism that ever came forth in Russian literature.