

Georg Lukács
Emmanuel Levin

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In their critiques, Western humanist writers frequently fault Soviet literature for expressing the face of the new socialist person with insufficient clarity. To a certain degree this criticism is correct and should be taken into consideration. In many works [of Soviet literature] (even some that stand on a quite high level), amidst a realistic picture of the socialist land's life environment and human interrelations, certain people are depicted as socialist heroes though in their psyche they belong almost wholly to the old, capitalist world.

However, the arguments of this Western European critique are quite often completely false. This critique expects the new person to be shown "ready-made," as a fully complete ideal that has already been achieved.

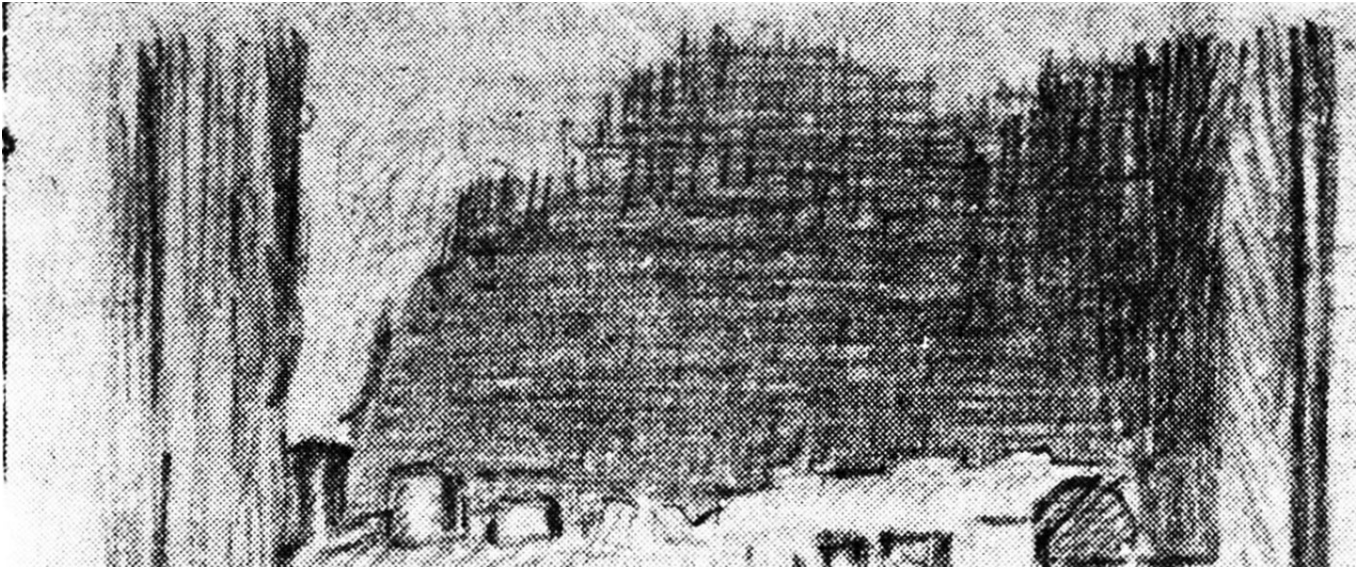
Similar false tendencies can also be observed in some works of Soviet literature. After all, it is relatively easy to construct abstract and, at the same time, utterly definite, "pure," "socialist" features and contrast them sharply to other features, which are also strictly defined and isolated and would be characteristic for a class-based society (a sharp and unconditional contrast between optimism and pessimism, etc.). It is much more difficult to show vitally and truthfully the complex process, so full of contradictions, by which the new person *comes to be* in a social environment that is also experiencing a period of becoming and is still suffering from the economic and ideological survivals of capitalism.

Nonetheless one can only show the new person in this way, for thus is he born in reality. In life there exists no "ready-made," complete person who would be one-hundred-percent opposed to *everything* old. The being of the new person is in his becoming. He is formed by overcoming the weighty legacy of a class-based society both in the outside world and within himself, first and foremost in decisive areas of life. He is formed, moreover, by executing the tasks that history sets before him by the necessary – and therefore the only presently possible – means. The content, direction, and intensity of this labor determine the new person's character. The problems which a person struggles to resolve and the very character of this struggle show who he is and what he represents: whether the new, socialist person is really being born within him and how far he has gone along the path of socialist rebirth.

Modesty and simplicity are the most characteristic traits of A. Platonov's story ["Immortality"], in which he draws a beautiful portrait of the new person, namely the railway station chief Emmanuel Levin. In his striving to achieve simplicity and avoid rhetoric Platonov

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simplifies his composition to the maximum degree. He depicts the life of a small, distant station called Red Peregon in the course of a very short segment of time, which does not differ in any significant way from the usual flow of life before and after the events described.

Thus this story is a simple picture of Soviet everyday life. But Platonov's story once again proves the truism that one must not judge literary works formalistically, by exterior features.

Rank-and-file, everyday reality; workdays: these are the favorite topics of naturalism. The naturalists draw pictures of usual, unchanging states, fearfully avoiding unusual and extraordinary events and characters which would rise above grey and boring mediocrity in any way.

The everyday life that Platonov depicts has nothing in common with such naturalistic greyness.

Platonov's main task is to reveal the tendencies of the development of people fighting for socialism within a picture of Soviet workdays. We see their difficult struggle with fatal survivals of class-based society: the struggle for overcoming darkness and ignorance in people's consciousness and hearts, of the disorder in life and work, that are the legacies of precapitalist or backwards capitalist lifestyles. In this struggle they also use the capitalist legacy, assimilating the organizational experience of developed capitalism in individual details of economic life; at the same time, however, they struggle against the capitalist legacy in all areas of life: against methods of organizing labor that are specifically limited by private property; against capitalist egotism and individualism; against the greed and inhumanity that are characteristic of people crippled by capitalism and slavishly subordinated to its division of labor. Only in its universal struggle against these survivals of a class-based society does the socialist economy grow. People who build this economy consciously, by overcoming all outer obstacles and inner difficulties, become socialist people in the process of their work and thanks to it.

One of these people is Emmanuil Semyonovich Levin.

He establishes order at his little railway station. He realizes, on the small scale of this station, the program for the reorganization of railways that comrade L. M. Kaganovich has proposed. He regards himself merely a small cog in the enormous mechanism of Soviet railway transport.

True, he is an idiosyncratic cog in an idiosyncratic mechanism.

We do not know how long Levin has worked at this station, but we see that his concern for it has entered into his flesh and blood: deathly

tired, asleep at night, he subconsciously feels whether everything is in order on his line and in his depot. This is what he says one night during a telephone conversation with the night watchman: "I'll find out who's responsible in the morning ... Why aren't I asleep? No, I am asleep, but I dream everything that's happening there ... Hang on a minute! Listen to the hump yard! ... "

And on another occasion: "I can't fall asleep anyway when everything is so quiet over there ... What? No, I will just doze. Let the locomotives whistle, and then I'll be able to fall asleep."

It stands to reason that technology and organization occupy the foreground of Levin's work. He is passionately interested in all improvements in both areas. He has become a specialist. He has introduced a system of "preliminary notification"; he confers with anyone who knows even the slightest bit about further rationalizing measures, about the possibility that factory methods of labor might expediently be deployed in the transport sector, etc.

But his passion for technology and organization has never, not even for a second, given rise to the dry one-sidedness that is typical of managers of capitalist enterprises. For Levin the person and the machine, the person and technology, are inseparably linked to each other. The former controls the latter, and out of their fruitful interaction arises the socialist organization of the economy – and is born the new person. "Just in case, Levin did not put his full trust in either technology or people, instinctively loving both the one and the other."

Therefore Levin's task is one of reworking and reeducating people. Platonov's great artistry is evident in the way that the small, outwardly insignificant segment of life that he depicts shows us an enormous multiplicity of processes that reveal this inner reconstruction of people. True, Platonov only charts the direction, the tendency of these processes, and – this is another strong side of his art – we do not see in his work any completely changed people, seeing only the "fulcrums of Archimedes" to which Levin applies his lever; we see the movement elicited by his stimulus and the wholly definite *direction* of this movement.

Levin's passion for such a remaking of people is a very characteristic trait of his personality. But in order to understand the socialist character of his personality one must first understand the concrete content of Levin's major passion. He is no moralist, nor an abstract "educator of humanity." The first task before him is to make good railway workers of his employees (who are peasants or semi-peasants). The socialist meaning of this reeducation reveals itself in the complex dialectic with which the

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personal, individual inclinations and peculiarities of individual people are consciously brought into accord with work; at this the personality is emancipated from all chains, and its abilities and human dignity grow. The progress of labor is organically combined with the flowering of personality.

The reworking of the peasant or craftsman “human material” into industrial workers was one of the important historical missions of capitalism. It carried out this mission by utilizing the threat of hunger. It turned backward peasants into obedient “parts” for its machines, and the revolutionary workers’ vanguard had to conduct a stubborn struggle with the capitalists in order to counteract the dehumanization of these backward peasants.

Levin knows that to cultivate the backward peasant or craftsman into a real worker who has mastered the high technology of socialist production one needs to turn him into a conscious member of society, full of a sense of responsibility. The same sensitivity that keeps him awake at night, whenever he fails to hear the whistles of locomotives and the noise of shunting, causes Levin to hearken to the words of his employees. And he not only hears their words, but also the pauses and lapses in their speech, in order to find the ailing places in these people’s souls that have thus far prevented them from developing their abilities and, in the first place, becoming good railway workers.

Work at the station, its precise and uninterrupted functioning, is the originating point and goal of Levin’s concern. But here also the unique dialectic of the socialist system – the means which Levin utilizes for the achievement of this immediate goal, to expose “defects” in people’s personal lives and to “repair” these defects – exceeds the concrete tasks of organizing labor at the little station. They enable the growth of all of a person’s abilities, not just his “railway” ones, and help him to escape the petty, narrow, crippling frames of the rural or urban petty-bourgeois world. The cultivation of a good worker is not limited to teaching him to execute his immediate job correctly; it elevates and fills a person’s *entire* life, giving him also energy, intelligence, and stability in his personal life. A person is indeed, as dialectics teaches us, the product of his labor, in the broadest sense of the word.

Levin knows this. For him it is not only a well-learned Marxist truism, but also the basis of everyday life, of normal everyday work. One of the interesting traits of Platonov’s art is that he is very sparing with technical descriptions, despite the fact that he is evidently much more deeply and thoroughly acquainted with the technical issues of railway transportation than

writers who fill entire chapters with the descriptions of machines on the basis of hurried notes. All of his attention is directed at people. Learning technology, the inability to master it, etc. – all this is shown in the mirror of human tragedies and tragicomedies, human heroism and common incompetence.

All the human fates that Platonov depicts are concentrated around Levin’s figure. They are interesting in and of themselves, but their main purpose in the story is to reveal in vivid colors the role that a person like Levin can play in changing the lives of other people.

From the exterior, Platonov’s story seems to lack a strong compositional backbone. It consists almost entirely of a series of Levin’s conversations with his employees and of his preceding and subsequent thoughts. The point of departure and culmination of these discussions is always the everyday work at the station, while their central concern is some petty, homebound, “private” concern of the worker. One worker needs a well-bred rooster for his wife, who raises fowl; another makes clay pots in his free time; a third wants to work only at night, so as not to leave his child alone in an empty house during the day, etc.

The human and artistic significance of these conversations is that they reveal important questions of life. Marriage to a woman who has failed to find a place in life and seeks forever new, but always frivolous activities, disorganizes her husband’s personal life and work. One employee’s greed spoils his productive work. And Levin’s critical comments about the direct link between “personal” life and work evoke in people new thoughts and feelings, which affect their entire existence.

Everywhere one sees Levin’s sympathetic attitude towards people and his readiness to come to their aid. He tries to discover and fulfill his employees’ desires, even completely private ones that seem quite distant from “the task at hand,” from work – and all of this in order to help them to strengthen in work and in life. At the same time he is no philanthropist, no soft-hearted man who answers “yes” to any personal request. He poses, for instance, the question of excluding one evidently hopeless employee from the party; he sharply denies work to a man who has left his collective farm and is counting on finding an easy wage on the railway without real, intense labor.

Thus, depending on the circumstances, on what the people he deals with deserve, Levin can be kind or stern; he either sympathizes with people and meets them halfway or becomes implacable. This is a true Bolshevik, the kind that socialist construction needs. He carries out the line of the party, and he does it in his own area –



V. Chernetsov, *Portrait of Emmanuil Levin*. Illustration from the journal *Literaturnoe obozrenie* 19–20 (1937).

not in a mechanical way, but as an independent, flexibly thinking, and deeply feeling person, as a leader and educator of the masses.

But, thanks to these very same qualities, does he not then turn into one of the boring, lifeless “ideal characters” that evoke readers’ fully justified tedium?

This is entirely out of the question. And not because some secondary “negative” trait has been “sewn onto” the “ideal character” of the Bolshevik (as this, unfortunately, is still frequently done in Soviet literature), in order to make him a “living person” precisely on account of his frailty. Such an approach helps nothing. A wind-up doll remains a wind-up doll, a piece of wood, and will never become human simply because some insignificant detail has intentionally been spoiled.

Negative traits in and of themselves are incapable of vivifying a literary image. The living interaction between a person’s virtues and mistakes; an understanding that these mistakes are no exterior contingency, but very frequently emerge from those very virtues; an understanding that these positive traits, as a whole, are linked with a person’s social fate and with the main problems of modernity: this is the only possible basis for creating a living literary image.

This is exactly the way that Levin’s image has been drawn.

No special perspicacity is required to recognize in Levin the traces of hidden suffering. They are felt in conversation with Pirogov (Levin wants to raise the question of Pirogov’s exclusion from the party): “... I am also a poor man, perhaps even poorer, even more unfortunate than you!” exclaimed Levin, letting go of his will for an instant.”

This hidden sadness, suppressed by an act of will, is explained by various recollections about humiliations suffered in childhood, about an unhappy love – memories that arise once in a while in a flood of conscious activity, like bubbles in water. We know nothing of Levin’s life path. But his entire intellectual and moral image, as well as the style of his work, show that he had to pass through a difficult path before becoming the self-abnegating and conscious fighter for socialism that we see in him ...

But nor is Levin’s emotional life free of inner conflicts at the present time.

He has long understood that transportation is, in its essence, a simple, easy matter. “But why then,” Levin asks, “does it sometimes require not usual, natural labor, but a sacrificial tension? A dead or hostile person: that’s the difficulty!”

What does this tension of labor cause in Levin’s creative work? We have already seen that it evokes in him a concentrated attention to all

the people with whom he works: “It is necessary constantly, unceasingly to warm another person with one’s breath, to hold him close, so that he not become dead, so that he feel his necessity and – if only from shame and conscience – return the warmth of aid and consolation he has received from without in the form of honest life and work ... ” But at the same time, inseparably linked to this quality, Levin harbors a certain *asceticism* that characterizes his entire inner image.

We have already mentioned the clerk who asks Levin to allow him to work at night. Levin finds this request suspicious and he sends Galya, his household worker, to the clerk’s apartment in order to become better acquainted with his living conditions. He learns from Galya that the clerk and his wife work at the same time, leaving their child alone to cry behind the door. Levin asks Galya to remain in the clerk’s apartment in order to sit with the child until its parents return from work. “But who will make you dinner? But what will you eat?” Galya exclaimed. ‘I won’t eat,’ answered her boss. ‘I will live on an empty stomach ... ’”

In this case Galya turns out to be not only more intelligent and practical, but also more humane than Levin. She tells him sharply off and decides to bring the child to Levin’s apartment so as to take care of both of them at once.

This seemingly minor and insignificant episode illumines some fundamental traits of Levin’s character and his self-assessment not only as a personality, but also as a sociohistorical type. Platonov repeatedly returns to this question. These are the thoughts that occur to Levin in his exhaustion:

But within him there still churned plenty of whole, pure force; and it was strange that he desired to spend this force as soon as possible, to exhaust himself in labor and concern, so that the other, unknown, better, happy heart might make use of the result of a life spent without mercy to itself, while Levin himself, as he thought, would never be able to live a life of full value. He considered himself a provisional, transient being that would quickly pass in historical time, and there would be no more people like him, anxious and uninteresting, puzzled by carriages and locomotives, and perhaps this was a good thing.

It is typical that both here and in other similar cases, in his low assessment of his own personality Levin constantly upbraids himself for what is actually his best quality – for his passionate immersion in work. This is no contingency, no purely individual trait, and even

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less is it Levin's simple eccentricity. This is a broad problem of the contemporary transitional period, a reflection of the social division of labor at the contemporary stage of the development of socialism – true, given in subjectivist distortion, but at the same time necessary in this very form.

The social division of labor under capitalism was always inwardly contradictory. On the one hand, it was a powerful engine that aided the growth of material productive forces and, at the same time, of a person's personal qualities – ability, knowledge, and experience. However, on the other hand this division of labor crippled people (and not only workers, although they were crippled most cruelly, of course), turning them into one-sided “specialists,” into a mechanical supplement of machines. Thus the social division of labor in capitalist society hinders the development of personality. The works of major artists and thinkers of the capitalist period constantly convey a decisive protest against the obstacles that block the path of the free development of personality and lead to the destruction of individuality. Since he highly valued the many-sided, broad development of individuality in the great people of the Renaissance, Engels underscores that the social basis of this culture was an as-yet-undeveloped capitalist division of labor.

Under socialism this situation changes radically but, of course, not instantly, not immediately.

Let us take a person's attitude to labor for example. It is typical that, when listing the economic and ideological premises of the *supreme phase of communism*, alongside the abolition of “the slavish subordination of personality to the division of labor,” alongside the comprehensive development and growth of productive forces, Marx also underscores that “labor becomes not only a means of existence, but also the most urgent necessity of life.”

These premises of the supreme phase of communism begin to develop at the first stage of the construction of socialism, but naturally they cannot yet exist in their final, complete, and harmonious form. The path to their realization inevitably faces its own contradictions.

These contradictions are very diverse. The most primitive and widespread are obstructions to the correct organization of labor, with which Levin struggles indefatigably. However, Levin's own inner contradictions grow on the same social roots; only in his case they rise to a higher stage of consciousness.

The majority of Levin's employees have yet to understand what the new socialist labor entails. They must free themselves from their petty bourgeois limitations in order to see how socialist labor educates them, makes them the

kind of comprehensively developed people that they could not have even imagined themselves as before.

Levin stands incomparably higher than this level. His ascetic sadness and self-abnegation arise from his impatience, from his mental leaps across the contemporary stage of development. This mental leaping ahead and this gaze, untiringly aimed at the future, are not only subjectively justified, but also objectively necessary. The conscious restructuring of social reality, of the economy, and of people would be impossible without such a mental anticipation of the future.

The great leaders and teachers of socialism know how to combine the correct understanding of future development with a courageous and realistic approach to contemporary reality, with an understanding of its contradictions and failings.

In one conversation with Gorky, Lenin speaks of the happiness of children who will no longer have to bear the difficulties of contemporary reality on their shoulders; but he immediately adds: “And yet I don't envy them. Our generation has been able to fulfill a task that is exquisite in its historical significance. The forced cruelty of our life will be comprehended and justified. Everything will be comprehended. Everything!”¹

But such a profound understanding of the contradictions of reality is no simple matter and does not simply stand to reason. It can be achieved in full only by real, great leaders. People of a smaller scale frequently display a psychological conflict between the contradictory parts of this complex unity: either the glow of the future that they foresee eclipses the comparatively boring reality, or the achievements of the present day evoke a smugness, a self-satisfaction, that conceals its real failings behind various surrogates.

Let us return to the main problem of Levin's life.

It is incorrect to believe that the comprehensive development of human personality has been achieved completely and in full at the contemporary stage of development; but it is just as incorrect to see the person of this period as *merely* a boring preparer of the material premises of the future, as *merely* transitory phenomenon, as a kind of “manure for history.”

Levin inclines towards this latter point of view. It is doubtlessly more heroic, profound, and useful for work than the vain smugness that some workers display; nevertheless, this point of view is also false.

Levin fails to understand the independent value of the contemporary person, even if this

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person is a transitory phenomenon. This is the psychological basis of his sadness and his asceticism. Out of his correct self-limitation, which is necessary in his position, he draws the excessively far-reaching conclusion about his imagined lack of full value. However, by underestimating himself, he unconsciously and unwittingly underestimates the socialism to which he is so passionately devoted and to which he sacrifices his entire life every minute.

Surrounded by his employees, Levin is a true comrade and a good educator, who leads them towards socialism. However, Platonov shows that this very educator also needs to be educated. We have already mentioned the lecture read to him by Galya, his cook. The second “lecture,” even more important and more profound, issues from comrade Kaganovich.

During their brief nocturnal telephone conversation, so full of the deep and modestly unspoken love of good workers for each other, Kaganovich reinforces Levin’s prescribed correct working methods in his own work, raising them to a higher level and making generalizations from them. Kaganovich says: “A person should not get accustomed even to himself, otherwise he will reconcile himself to the entire world, though it is still in a bad way ...” But at the same time he says: “Listen, Emmanuil Semyonovich. If you cripple yourself at Red Peregon I will demand compensation as if you had ruined a thousand locomotives. I will check when you are sleeping, but don’t make a nanny out of me ...”

Kaganovich is also wholly dedicated to his work and, like Levin, sacrifices his nocturnal rest. This sacrifice is illustrated very finely and delicately in Levin’s remark: “It’s probably night now in Moscow as well, Lazar Moiseyevich. There also people don’t wait for morning to go to bed.” But the words of the People’s Commissar also contain a serious warning, a comradely critique of Levin’s excessive, ascetic intensity. On the night following this telephone conversation, inquiries are once again received from Moscow about Levin, about his health, about whether he is asleep. “As if you were a great, immortal man,” the night watchman jokes. But that is indeed the truth, however much Levin might deny it in his asceticism.

This problematic is the problematic of many of the best, most profound people of our time, the typical problematic of the contemporary socialist person. Impatience and irreconcilability with respect to imperfect reality also characterized revolutionaries of an earlier generation; it remains one of their important character traits today. The manifestation of such impatience in Levin’s work and in his relationships with people is truly socialist. We have tried to show that the problematic

characteristics of his personality are also borrowed from reality and are marked by a character typical of today, that is by a socialist character. But at the same time, despite their typicality, these characteristics contain an aspect that remains to be overcome; moreover, this negative aspect cannot be overcome in the way Levin thinks it can, i.e., ascetically. This thought is subtly developed in the story without at all impoverishing its vital, complex truth. It is precisely on the strength of his problematic nature that Levin is a living person of our time: he is not a dead “ideal character,” no “bookish invention,” but a true “person with his contradictions.”

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Georg Lukács (1885–1971) was a Hungarian Marxist philosopher and literary critic.

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Maxim Gorky, "V. I. Lenin," at
marxists.org
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/gorky-maxim/1924/01/x01.htm>.

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