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This is an essay that I have wanted to write for a long time. Perhaps not exactly this essay but one like it. In fact, I once did so, about twenty years ago. That essay was all about the rights of conscience: how our consciences are formed; and how to be Catholic means to be free. But the article was turned down by the editor of the journal in question because my remarks on conscience were 'meat being offered to babes who can only take milk'. If the Catholic 'babes' had been given such meat twenty years ago perhaps they would not have suffered such pains from the diet which recent events have provided for them. Yet what saddened me most about the episode was the editor's assumption that anything written by a Catholic must in some sense be 'definitive'.

This notion that an article has to be definitive leads to articles being mass-produced, all of the same form and, above all, identical in tone, very solemn, rather omniscient, final in their judgments, giving an air of finality even to their non-judgments, donning the judge's black cap even when pronouncing the accused not guilty. This means to say that writers are encouraged to pretend that one of their half-thoughts is a thesis, and two of their half-thoughts a whole book (a publisher once asked me to turn an article of twelve pages that I had published into a book of 140 pages, saying 'You needn't add anything of substance to it'; he produced a series of such books). The fact of the matter is that almost none of us have illuminations sufficient to occupy a book, and we deceive ourselves grievously if we imagine that there is anything under the sun upon which our opinion is definitive. But most of us, at some time, 'have ideas' which we would gladly put forward as possibilities, suggestions, hints, approximations, in the hope that someone else may take them up, develop them, refine them, appropriate them, give them back. We bring out such ideas in a playful, comradely, trusting spirit and they can only remain alive if they are received in the same spirit; they are sentenced to death once they are judged definitive.

It is one such idea that I wish to put forward now.

In the late summer of 1939 the bridge at Brest-Litovsk spanning the frontier between Germans and Russians was occupied at one end by N.K.V.D. men and at the other end by members of the Gestapo. One day the N.K.V.D. men marched a group of prisoners from their side of the bridge to the German side, handed them over

to the Gestapo, with whom they checked their lists, and then went back. The prisoners were mainly Germans, who had sought asylum in the Soviet Union away from the Nazi régime, and who were now being returned as part of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. Similar exchanges were made at a later date, in the other direction, the Gestapo handing over prisoners to the N.K.V.D.

That bridge at Brest-Litovsk in late 1939 has become in my mind a symbol of how easily and constantly and stupidly we mislead ourselves and others with labels. If you had asked many influential people in the West at that time whether the action of the Communist and/or Nazi régimes in handing over these political refugees was wrong, they would have replied 'Yes . . . BUT . . .' and then, according to whether they were right or left wing they would have excused the actions of either the Nazi or the Communist régime: the same action was judged by the same people as different according to the label (Communist or Nazi) attached to the people performing the act.

So remove the labels. One way to do this is to imagine yourself for a moment to be a visitor from another planet who can see what human beings do to one another but cannot read their manifestos and commentaries. Such a visitor would have only a limited understanding of what was going on but he would be preserved from the illusion of labels. He would not be tempted, for instance, to regard the suffering of a prisoner in Katorga Camp as different from the sufferings of a prisoner in Dachau Camp simply because one was inflicted under the label of Communism and the other under the label of Nazism; he would also see quite clearly that the behaviour of the Gestapo is the same sort of behaviour as that of the N.K.V.D. men, and that those in authority who order such behaviour are the same kind of people, no matter what label they stamp upon their actions.

Now and again one needs to remove labels; it is a way of allowing the scales to fall from one's eyes. Just for a precious moment one glimpses the human landscape with great clarity before the mist closes in again.

When trying to understand the last fifty years of European history, I usually find myself shrouded in such mists. I see signposts saying *Russian Revolution, Treaty of Locarno, Yalta, Communism, Cold War, Spring Time in Prague*, and so on, each of the posts having inscribed upon it millions of words explaining what each means. However, one signpost simply leads to another so that I can hardly see the landscape or any human beings, but only further mist and further signposts.

But then there emerged the bridge at Brest-Litovsk; the labels vanished; the scales fell away; for a moment there lay before me an area of the earth's surface centred on Brest-Litovsk and stretching out to a radius of a thousand miles and a span of fifty years.

And what was there to see?

I saw sixty million human beings killed in this area, in this time, by their fellow human beings.

The second, and only other thing I saw, was a 'biological' mutation, the emergence of a new species, *homo stalinensis*, the 'man of steel'.

Ever since that moment of illumination I have found myself back amidst the signposts, mystified still but now realizing that the professional signposters keep fixing up their ideological labels (*The Christian Democratic Experiment, The Thaw, The Death of God*, etc.) in order to make sure that people don't see the sixty million human beings killed or the appearance of *stalinensis*. And now I too am scribbling upon a post, but in order to retail what I saw when the scales fell away.

Scribble one. It is laughable to a point beyond belief that these people who have killed one another to the number of sixty millions should be so brazen as to imagine that they can go off to Africa, Asia and Latin America in order to teach other peoples *how to live!* Surely the peoples of Africa, India and Latin America would be better advised to try to earn from the tiger, the elephant or the duck-billed platypus than from these monstrous beings who slaughter one another on this scale. Similarly, any being faced with the choice of re-incarnation would surely choose to become a bear or a wolf rather than one of those monstrous characters?

Scribble two. Killing on such a scale is bound to breed a new type of being out of those who survive. Modern war depends upon steel; the product of modern warfare is *stalinensis*.

Scribble three. Notice how often the metaphor of 'steel' is applied to human beings. The obvious instance is the choice of the name *Stalin*, 'man of steel', by Josef Vissarionovich Djughashvili. Similarly, Hitler spoke of himself as a magnet drawing to himself the steel elements out of the dungheap of the German nation. Hitler also said he wanted German youth to be like the steel that emerges from the Krupps armaments works: the most popular book in Germany during the twenties was *In Stahlgewittern*—that *Storm of Steel* in which Jünger describes how he was 'tempered in a storm of steel'—the very same phrase that was used by the young Communist writer Ostrovsky as the title for his autobiographical novel *How the Steel was Tempered*, which the Soviet authorities made into a best-seller during the Purge period. Ostrovsky's second novel, predictably enough, was entitled *Born of the Storm*—that same storm as gave birth to the *Stahlhelm*, the 'steel-helmeted ones' who were the shock troops of German nationalism. When Hitler and Mussolini embraced each other, their embrace was named 'The Pact of Steel'. Not that the metaphor is always precisely of steel; but when one of Stalin's companions chose to become 'a hammer', *molotov*, he was claiming that he was made of the same material—though how that happened to a Scriabin remains a mystery. Of course one had encountered

similar metaphors previously; we had an Iron Duke, and an Iron Chancellor before the new men of Rumania formed themselves into an Iron Guard. But the Iron Duke and the Iron Chancellor seemed so hard in contrast to the flesh around them whereas the Iron Guard are part of an iron machine: the Rumanian refugee shuttled between Nazis and Communists in *La vingt-cinquieme heure* realized that he was not in the presence of humans at all but of monsters begotten upon women by machines—those machines, *apparati*, which turn out their *apparatchiki*, servants of the machine in Eastern Europe and Western Europe, those beings depicted in the drawings and sculpture of the Soviet artist Neizvestny, more or less human in shape but held together by nuts, bolts and levers.

'We Communists are people of a special type', said Stalin at the funeral of Lenin. 'We are carved out of special matter.' Hitler made exactly the same claim for the Nazis.

Scribble four. Then it should show in their faces and not only in Neizvestny's art. It does. 'One of the most tangible and painful changes which came about as a result of the revolutionary upheaval was the astounding transformation in the appearance of many men and women. A new type of man seemed to have emerged. There was none of the tolerance and kindness in him so characteristic of the pre-revolutionary type of Russian. . . . These new faces showed eyes firmly fixed on the external realities; sympathy and mercy for others, especially for those holding heretical views, became an unknown quality' (Berdyaev).

We should have recognized what this new type was up to if instead of learning to read labels and books we had learnt to read faces: see again Leni Riefensthal's film on the Nuremberg rally and watch the faces of Ley, Goering, Streicher, Hitler, as they come to the rostrum. Only the facially-illiterate could fail to read them, and know that destruction lay ahead.

Or look again at the photographs of those who have ruled Eastern Europe for twenty years. You see there the result of a mutation: *stalinensis*. No wonder the Czechs kept hoping that de-stalinization meant 'giving Communism a human face'. (Though how can you have a human face without a human heart? All you get is façade.)

Has the species *stalinensis* been observed in the West? On a number of occasions during the nineteen-thirties *stalinensis* was to be seen in Western Communist parties but occurs nowadays more frequently amongst the *apparatchiki* of capitalist countries: amongst NATO chiefs and defence ministers, for instance; there are several easily recognizable aspiring 'men of steel' in the upper échelons of the English Conservative Party; the portrait gallery of the American magazine *Time* features them regularly; saddest of all, they have begun to appear amidst the people who have suffered most from them, the people of Israel, by whom they are misnamed 'hawks'.

Scribble five. Nevertheless, human nature (or God) is very fertile;

so if the abyss of nothingness and darkness threatens us through the masks of steel worn by the faceless ones, at the same time the presence of man and God amongst us is guaranteed by a face—so long as there exists upon earth a face such as that of Chagall, darkness cannot swallow men entirely up. And there are other like faces: Martin Buber's; that of Elie Wiesel. One such face appeared earlier this year on television at a discussion between Jewish writers: some of them were spreading hawkish wings when the quiet Pyotr Rawicz, who had lived through Auschwitz, gently drew the steel splinters from their hearts.

All these faces reflect the Jewish hasidic tradition, which arose and flourished in Russian lands and probably owes something to a strikingly similar Russian Christian tradition: tales of the hasidim and the tales of the *yurodivi* could almost be interchanged. *Yurodstvo Khrista radi* (foolishness for Christ's sake) is illustrated in the story of the holy fool of Pskov, St Nicholas: when Ivan the Terrible came to him for a blessing, Nicholas offered the tsar raw meat, despite its being Lent. Ivan refused indignantly, saying, 'I am a Christian and do not eat meat during Lent', to which the holy fool replied, 'No, but you drink Christian blood'. (There is a touch of *yurodstvo* in Fr Berrigan, the American priest who poured blood into the filing system of the army recruitment office.)

The latest witness to this Russian tradition is Solzhenitsyn. Among the many characters in his writings who draw strength from this source is the aged Matryona in *Matryona's House*: the story ends, 'We all lived right beside her and never realized she was that very just one, without whom, according to the proverb, no village can stand.

Nor any city.

Nor any land whatsoever.'

Matryona seems to have been one of those people referred to in the hasidic legend: the world would fall apart were it not for the presence in it, at every moment, of thirty-six just men; no one knows who they are, they don't know it themselves and they don't know one another.

A fool for Christ is not a buffoon. Perhaps Valery Tarsis has not always realized this, but Sinyavsky has. And the incredibly balanced Solzhenitsyn has realized it so exactly that he drives Ivan the stalinist to distraction—one such, the editor of *Pravda*, said of Solzhenitsyn, 'he is a psychologically unbalanced person, a schizophrenic'.

Scribble six. Schizophrenia is also a label used in the West to stick upon those whose broken hearts remain an irreducible reminder to the steel ones that men of flesh have not yet been 'normalized' (as the Soviets say of Czechoslovakia) or *gleichgeschaltet* (as the Nazis used to say). This is what the psychiatrist R. W. Laing is getting at when he says that schizophrenia is one of the forms in which—often

by means of quite ordinary people—the light begins to break through the cracks in our armour-plated minds.

The note of *yurodstvo* heard in Laing's work is also echoed by Gironella (Spain), Böll (Germany) and Mihajlov (Yugoslavia).

Gironella's novel, *The Cyprusses Believe in God*, was more than the steel ones of the Falangist movement could stomach: the central character was not tough enough to be a Falangist hero; so the Falangists pursued Gironella with the same zeal as the stalinists pursued Solzhenitsyn, driving him into that schizophrenic state of which he tries to make some sense in *Phantoms and Fugitives*.

Heinrich Böll has almost consciously been searching for *yurodstvo*; perhaps he detected a hint of it during his soldiering in Russia. Anyway, Hans Schnier, the narrator of *The Clown*, manages in his foolish way to highlight the inhumanism of Catholic marriage regulations; and Böll is constantly being denounced by the *apparatchiki* of the Church; but he does not go schizophrenic even when he is attacked in pastorals, probably because he wears open-necked shirts and is a devout bicyclist.

The directness of the holy fool is practised by the Yugoslav Dostoievski scholar, Mihajlov, but perhaps without the same sure touch; his blundering reminds one of Prince Myschkin. But it is liberating to see him in Russia, blithely asking questions which no one else dare raise, explaining unabashed to such an establishment lion as Ehrenburg that his vision of life is abominable and beneath human dignity. Mihajlov collects the words of underground songs and prison-camp songs and stories, runs out of money and then goes back to Yugoslavia and publishes an almost comically candid account of what he saw and heard. For his troubles he is tried twice, being sentenced on the second occasion to four and a half years imprisonment (less, one notes, than Fr Berrigan!). From prison he serenely continues to explain that only faith in immortality gives freedom and affords justification for life. The trouble with being a fool is that people consider you foolish.

Scribble seven. The most human are regarded as fools. How can this be, for Christ's sake?