FINAL REPORT TO
NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR SOVIET AND EAST EUROPEAN RESEARCH

TITLE: Dissidence, Diffidence, and Russian
       Literary Tradition: The Lonely
       Dialogue of Abram Tertz

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COUNCIL CONTRACT NUMBER: 801-15

DATE:

The work leading to this report was supported by funds provided
by the National Council for Soviet and East European Research.
This report is one of 13 separate papers by different authors which, assembled, will constitute the chapters of a Festschrift volume in honor of Professor Vera S. Dunham, to be published by Westview Press. The papers will be distributed individually to government readers by the Council in advance of editing and publication by the Press, and therefore, may not be identical to the versions ultimately published.

The Contents for the entire series appears immediately following this Preface.

As distributed by the Council, each individual report will contain this Preface, the Contents, the Editor's Introduction for the pertinent division (I, II, or III) of the volume, and the separate paper itself.
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No one surpasses Vera Dunham in the ability to suggest the complex interaction between social and personal conditions that gives rise to a poem, a short story or a novel. She is, in short, not an arid formalist, but she nevertheless scrutinizes the verbal texture and sets beside the work being examined other texts that provide startling illumination.

The materials retained by Vera Dunham's students include poems that she copied by hand during the years when she had no access to xerox machines. She said spell-binding things about the significance of those poems and that literature. She brought to life for her students the tragic struggle of Soviet writers to be true to the obligation bestowed on them by Pushkin and his illustrious successors.

Vera Dunham understands the plight of Soviet writers: their special role, so different from that of the American writer; their struggle against the shifting dictates of a realism that is socialist rather than critical. The remarkable book that grew slowly and painfully in her piano bench focused on the years of Stalinism, but she knows no less well the years of fluctuating temperature that followed Stalin's death: the determined attempts to salvage the past, to restore the memory of a society systematically subjected to amnesia.

This set of papers considers some of those attempts. Monuments had to be erected: to the millions condemned like Solzhenitsyn to the camps,
Jews who died at Babi Yar, to the father that Trifonov lost in the purges. Sinyavsky claims even the right to desecrate monuments.

Vera Dunham has meditated on these figures and events not in an ivory tower, but in a sad armchair, reminding us constantly not to underestimate the lethal pressures, not to judge too quickly or too harshly. We are all her students. We remember and admire not just the quality of what was transmitted—the intellect, the intuition, the provocative formulations—but also the quality of the commitment and the deep, abiding humanity.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this paper the authors juxtapose Solzhenitsyn and Sinyavsky/Tertz as the poles of a spectrum on which virtually all significant Russian writers today may be placed in their traditional role as exemplars and reformers of society. Each, in strikingly different fashion, exercises the tradition, recently revitalized in uncensored writing, of the writer as citizen, not of the country as defined by its leaders, but of the country as experienced by its people, for whom a great writer is an alternative source of authority, "a second government". Solzhenitsyn's role has been writer as witness, testifying to the truth he has lived, seen, and discovered, compiling with admirable tenacity, an authentic record of the life of his country. His exemplary activity as public figure lends force and authority to his work, obliterating any clear division between life and art, between the artist and the man. In Andrei Sinyavsky is found duality--an honest intellectual serving the cause of his writerly double, Abram Tertz, who is too elusive for emulation, but able to goad his reader, and, in the end, unaccountable, the essence of authorial freedom. Sinyavsky's belief that the writer is not the man and that the source of writing must forever elude readers underlies Tertz's sly and unremitting provocation of his Russian reader, whose restricting ideals and assumptions regarding the writer's obligations and taboos Tertz threatens with his self-liberation. Whereas Solzhenitsyn's art seeks maximum coincidence with life, Tertz's aspires to self-transcendence--beyond the confines of genre, style, and one's own life--paradoxically, extending tradition through challenge, revealing at the same time its contemporary vigor.

*Prepared by the National Council for Soviet and East European Research
DISSIDENCE, DIFFIDENCE, AND RUSSIAN LITERARY TRADITION:
THE LONELY DIALOGUE OF ABRAM TERTZ

Donald Fanger
Gordon Cohen

It must be remembered that in his assertions and his language [he] was very often reacting against something.
Sinyavsky, writing about Rozanov

iskrennost’--maska, i podpis'
opodtverzdajuscaja ee vsegda
psevdonim.

A.S. Naprasnikov, Zapisi
na zuzbine

"Dissidence" is by now a threadbare word, and it may well be that the only justification for employing it in any but a historical sense is to register that point. If, as has frequently been claimed, to speak of "dissident writing" is simply to speak of "uncensored writing," then the latter must be now the term of preference for what is unquestionably the major new phenomenon of recent years; namely, the efflorescence of a Russian literature unconstrained by external censorship. We have in mind not only the products of samizdat in its heyday, but the flood of Russian books currently being published in Paris, Lausanne, Tel Aviv, Munich, Ann Arbor, New York, and elsewhere in the West. The ramifications of this phenomenon are by no means all clear yet, but that very unclarity—the not knowing where the current
situation may lead—must be recognized as constituting in itself a sign of vitality restored. And not merely for what used to be labelled emigre literature: even to writers who remain in the Soviet Union it guarantees the possibility "of choosing and being oneself—not only writing for the desk drawer, for oneself or for posterity, but of coming out today into the cold wind of history."\(^1\)

Two pioneers in demonstrating that possibility some twenty years ago continue to demonstrate it today in Cavendish, Vermont, and in Paris. Each, more or less isolated linguistically from his surroundings, has continued to draw on the "camel's hump" of his Soviet experience to keep going, and each has continued "promulgating the traditions of Russian culture and art" while in exile.\(^2\) The traditions in question, of course, contrast sharply with each other; the same contrast can be seen in the shape of the two careers and in the principles to which those careers have remained dedicated. Our argument is that precisely for that reason—i.e., because they represent the poles of a spectrum on which virtually all significant writers in Russian today may be placed—it is both legitimate and useful to juxtapose them. Solzhenitsyn, of course, is by far the better known (and will therefore receive less detailed attention in these remarks). He incarnates the miraculously-resurrected model of the Russian writer as artist and as the conscience of his people. For magnitude of ambition and achievement alike he has no rivals. It may be too much, however, to say that he has no peers in view of the continuing evolution of Sinyavsky/Tertz, a phenomenon rather less familiar to the Western public though (apparently) far closer to some of its notions of contemporary writing.

In one crucial respect at least, the authority of these two writers is comparable because it rests on similar credentials—and a shared belief.

\(^1\)\(^2\)
Both underwent the transforming experience of the Gulag; as a result, each can say of his own subsequent writing what both would say of Russian literature in general—that "it is and always has been written with blood," a fact that accounts for "its advantage, its primacy in world literature."  

But Solzhenitsyn's role from the beginning has been that of the writer as witness who testifies to the truth he has lived, seen, and discovered. For all the variety of its forms, that testimony remains social both in its referents and in the effects it seeks to produce. With admirable tenacity, Solzhenitsyn has worked to produce a record of life in his country in his time—an authentic record, to be set against the lies, the half-truths and the crippling silence of the official record as shaped by the censorship (whether directly or through the worldly prudence of editors and writers themselves).  

The purpose is restoration in several senses: of complexities of experience that Soviet taboos had suppressed or simplified out of recognition; of a free and direct language adequate to the reality it reports; of a culture where things may be called by their true names; and hence of a moral community, brought into being by the catalysing example of the writer.  

To the (remarkable) extent that it has furthered these aims, Solzhenitsyn's writing resurrects the century-old tradition of the writer as citizen, not of the country as defined by its leaders but of the country as experienced by its people, for whom a great writer is an alternative source of authority, "a second government."  

Aiming to exemplify and communicate moral responsibility, such writing centers on the world of common experience. Its truth is meant to be directly testable against the reality it records (and vice versa), so that it may change the social reality in which it participates. Solzhenitsyn's provocative "Letter to the Soviet Leaders," like
his interviews and speeches, is only an alternative expression of the impulse behind his art.

For Solzhenitsyn, then, the pursuit of his calling is ipso facto a pursuit of something beyond his calling. Writing is a means, an exemplary appeal for the shaping of free and authentic selves, by quickening the overself or conscience in his readers. It is in the confluence of self and conscience that decency and integrity are born—those two prime but endangered virtues in his fictional world. The third area of the psyche as Freud conceived it—the irrational "It"—has little place in his writing since it contains the obstacles to authentic selfhood and requires not to be explored but to be overcome. Solzhenitsyn's own selfhood, in the eyes of the world, at least, is reciprocally related to this basic thrust of his writing. He became a public figure on the strength of his first published work, and his exemplary activity as a public figure gave a particular force and authority to the work that followed, obliterating once more, in the manner of Turgenev and Tolstoy, any clear division between life and art, between the artist and the man.

The career, practice and principles of Sinyavsky/Tertz present a polar opposition. To the unity of man and writer as found in Solzhenitsyn, we find counterposed a duality: Andrei Sinyavsky, "an honest intellectual inclined to compromises and to an isolated and contemplative life," and his writerly double, "the impudent, fantastic Abram Tertz," disembodied, unavailable for interviews, too elusive and too patently insubstantial for emulation; able nonetheless to goad his flesh-and-blood reader in much the way Dostoevsky's Underground Man does; but finally unaccountable, the very essence of authorial freedom. It was reasonable to suppose, as many did, that the Tertz pseudonym
was only a protection against the police, a necessary guarantor of tranquility for Sinyavsky while he lived and wrote in the USSR, and therefore destined to disappear once the author was in the West. Indeed, the very conception of Tertz as reported in his latest book, Spokojnoj noci, strengthens such a supposition. The year was 1951, the occasion a search of the family apartment, in which—though the target was Sinyavsky’s father—the searchers went on to examine the son’s perfectly anodyne college notebooks, pausing over one where a standard quotation from a textbook was introduced by the phrase, “The official definition of social realism has it . . .” The MGB man had been quick to see what the student had not: "In other words, according to you there is another, unofficial definition of socialist realism . . .?" That question, together with the setting in which it was put, "is what probably led five years later to the scandalous article concocted by Abram Tertz" (237).

If Tertz was thus called into being when Sinyavsky first turned to the area of the unofficial, how are we to understand his persistence long after the author’s escape from the prohibitions and constraints of Soviet officialdom? The answer is partly a matter of definition and partly of biography. In the case of the first, “unofficial” has clearly proved a concept too broad to be equated simply with “forbidden by the authorities.” That is the sort of equivalence that obtains most often in Solzhenitsyn’s work: "To fight against untruth and falsehood, to fight against myths, or to fight against an ideology which is hostile to mankind, to fight for our memory . . . of what things were like—that is the task of the artist."10 For Sinyavsky, however, "unofficial" has never been so narrowly bound to its political opposite; it denotes, rather, a free, undetermined alternative to the prescriptions as well as the proscriptions (from whatever quarter) alleged
to be incumbent on a Russian writer.

So, though Tertz may have begun as an agent of liberation, he quickly came to represent a commitment to the exploration of freedom;¹¹ an alternative self, dedicated to risk; the sign of a process of self-discovery through self-transcendence—and therefore a fate. His first publication (in Paris) already made this evident. Sinyavsky reports learning of it only by chance, from the remarks of a fellow-worker at the Institute of World Literature in Moscow. Tertz's career had begun, beyond the control of Sinyavsky. Soon after proving his autonomy, life was to confirm the reality of his art by imitating it in the trial that sent Sinyavsky to the camps (paralleling the close of his first fiction, The Trial Begins)."¹² Sinyavsky recalls his initial indignation at the trial, and the cynical voice of Tertz in reply: "What are you acting the virgin about? You've been asking for this, preparing yourself for this as if it were the ultimate satisfaction in life. You're the one who kept spouting off about the fantastic!"(22).

The lives of Tertz and Sinyavsky had converged, putting the seal of authenticity on Tertz, who "suggested then that everything was going as it should and must ... carrying to the end, to the truth, all those similes and metaphors for which it is natural that the author should pay with his head...."¹⁹ If Tertz was the cause of condemnation, it turned out, Tertz could also be a source of survival. Spokojnej noci describes how, after the judicial proceedings had ended, Sinyavsky was sustained by the thought of the

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¹²An important contrast with the case of Solzhenitsyn, for whom the Gulag experience became a turning-point. For Sinyavsky it was rather the realization of a prophecy; i.e., of the logic of an art to which he was already committed. The camps to a large extent formed Solzhenitsyn as a writer; Sinyavsky, already formed as a writer, was arrested for that very reason.
book he might eventually write, unrelated to his current trials. This, he notes, was not a matter of literary ambition, but the instinct for self-preservation: "It was important for me to remain a writer in my own mind: only thus could I hold out" (86).

The emphases here are instructive. For Sinyavsky, the writer, far from being a witness or a teacher or the servant of a cause, is simply the source of an activity, the servant of a mystery:

When you write, you don't know what it will lead to. But you keep writing. With closed eyes. . . . Strictly speaking, there was neither a theme nor a plot that demanded embodiment. There were no protagonists, no images, apart from that dream of a book, its reason and its starting-point unknown . . . It was rather a matter of a book that would not be written but remain somewhere out there, like a seed that might eventually come to life—a wish, sufficient unto itself, remote from its author. I did not write that book and am scarcely likely to write it. But touching the idea of it has always sustained me in the bleakest times . . . It is full of unclear and unappeased possibilities . . . free to exist disconnectedly, unrelated to any obligation, filling itself to the brim with the dreams and images . . . of a still unknown, still unutilized freedom. (86-87).

If Sinyavsky suffered during his six years of labor in the camps he also found there (as Dostoevsky had a century before) a life "fuller and more inspired" than life on the outside. He writes in Spokojnoj noci of never again having met "that style, that rhythm, that stimulus to life which makes prison terrible and attractive and comforting." (40). Locked up with hardened criminals, social outcasts and religious zealots, Sinyavsky found himself for the first time in a Tertzian world that gave his creative double a new grounding and a new amplitude, as is proved by the three books he wrote there.

A Voice from the Chorus is an on-the-spot record—not of how the inmates lived and worked but of what the author heard, saw, and thought. Its predominant theme, as Max Hayward observed, is "art in all its forms and if there is a paradox in the pursuit of that theme in such a context it must lie
in the absence of any paradoxical note, in the perfect congruence between the voices of the unlettered prisoners and the voice of Tertz, in his element for once, pondering the quasi-religious mysteries of that element. Repeatedly he insists on the ineffable nature of art, as in this passage:

When people ask me what art is, I start laughing to myself out of sheer amazement at the immeasurable vastness of it and at my own inability to say in what it actually consists, to define something that changes so continually and fascinates like light. I have spent all my life, for heaven's sake, trying to grasp its meaning and am still none the wiser or any more able to explain it. ... It really takes your breath away to listen to all those pundits who know precisely what it is (as if anyone has ever succeeded in finding the answer, as if it were possible to know!). Art is always a more or less impromptu act of prayer. Try to catch hold of smoke. 12

Repeatedly, too, he speaks of art as a process or activity—as in Spokojnoj noci:

The depiction of reality, they say. I have my doubts. ... [The artist in prose] endeavors to exceed reality by retreating from it in the direction of--what? The answer is unknown... When you write you connect willy-nilly with another reality that is already writing itself, going parallel or at an angle, at a tangent to the flow of life. This is not a matter of deception or invention. God preserve us from estheticism. The artist cannot and must not be a snob... It is simply that the laws are other. You are acting in a different dimension. And all the things that happen to you--dream and waking and the struggle, which is always to the death--remain, jump about as you will, on the level of the page. (372-73).

Such statements, we submit, provide the key to understanding the persistence of Tertz once Sinyavsky's need for anonymity had ceased to exist. The Tertz signature is Sinyavsky's way of insisting that the writer is not the man, that the source of the writing is precisely what must forever elude biographers, memoirists, friends and acquaintances, in much the same way that the art he produces eludes all accounts that may be given and exceeds all uses that may be made of it. Pushkin had suggested as much in a famous lyric (Poka ne trebuet poeta), and it is that idea that Tertz made the basis of his
Strolling With Pushkin (Progulki s Puskinym), another of the books written in Dubrovlag, sent out in the guise of letters, and published in Paris to cries of outrage from emigre critics. The outrage in question involves, if one can phrase it so, the historical component the reason for the persistence of Tertz—and its broadest continuing rationale.

To understand this it is important to bear in mind that the role of Russian literature in society—and of the writers who produced it—was by and large the creation of Russian readers in the great age of the nineteenth-century novel, chief among them the corps of censors and the legions of the intelligentsia, who shared a conviction that they were reading subversive messages out of literary works when, much more often, they were reading them in. We do not wish to simplify what was undoubtedly a complex process to which writers (never referred to merely as novelists) and poets on occasion contributed. Still, it seems clear that it was the needs of intelligentsia readers, as articulated and formed by critics in the tradition of Vissarion Belinsky, that made of Russian literature a Bible and of the Russian writer a prophet whose virtues as an individual were a warrant for the moral and social efficacy of his art. Fiction was widely recognized as a moral agency; the word was potent. But the attitudes we have cited go much deeper. Honored both in practice and in the breach, they are the heritage of all Russians of all generations. all Russian writers for the past hundred years have worked in their shadow with whatever degree of comfort or discomfort.

Tertz's Pushkin book is an attack on the most exalted icon in this tradition. The depth of its respect for Pushkin's art could not, for many readers, redeem its flouting of ingrained, traditional, sincere pieties, its
shocking violation of readerly decorum. (Pushkin there is presented as a vacuity, a poseur and a parasite, who produced in Eugene Onegin "a novel about nothing," and produced it "only because he knew that it was impermissible to write in that way."¹⁴) This book is exemplary of Tertz's entire activity as a writer; thus the continuing relevance of his legendary namesake in the Odessa thieves' song, doubly outcast as a criminal and a Jew. For the Tertz who writes exists, by definition, only as an outsider within his culture. Tertz signifies a standpoint and the attitudes it implies—attitudes elicited as well as expressed (indeed the knowledge of those that are bound to be elicited already shapes the expression, figuring there as a kind of preemptive attribution). He is outrageous, in other words, on principle—the principle that lies at the heart of his vocation: freedom from the once-liberating but by now restrictive ideals and assumptions of the great Russian reading public. Tertz is not alone in claiming or advocating this freedom; others have done so by example, or by indirect or partial argument; but Tertz is unique in making central his assault on the tradition through a sly and unremitting provocation of his Russian reader in a whole spectrum of genres.

He does this directly in his articles, where he warns against "the temptation of truth"; denies art as service to society (among social institutions, only art is "an idle and non-obligatory occupation"); rejects art as a mirror of reality ("Art is higher than reality and more important than life"); condemns everyday experience as a basis for judging art ("Art is possessed by a sense of reality never even dreamed of by "practical" people"); and jettisons "decency—particularly decency in language—as a crippling restrictive value."¹⁵ Yet having proclaimed liberation from all the noble-sounding purposes assumed to command the writer's allegiance and
having advocated a writing that recognizes no predefined obligations and no taboos, Tertz nonetheless insists repeatedly that he is not proposing art for art's sake!

Such statements at their most categorical show his strategy at its most fundamental. It is one that bears a striking relation to the thinking of Mikhail Bakhtin, that other profound revisionist of traditional Russian notions of literature in our time. Thus, recalling Bakhtin's reminder that no utterance can be understood apart from its context, we might note that Tertz's aspiration is not to the "authoritative discourse" that commands assent. Such discourse is, in fact, one of the prime objects of his attack. Nor does he seek (yet, at any rate) what Bakhtin calls "the internally persuasive word," though his work does address its precondition by creating some of its strongest effects in the area of receptivity. Instead, his writing is calculatedly "dialogical." His strongest words are "words with a sideward glance" at the suppositions of his reader, and hence provisional, "words with a loophole" that allow for quite other meanings in a future, altered context.

Tertz is--and has been from the beginning--an ironist,* cultivating a language whose ultimate sense, though not necessarily stable or easily specifiable, is clearly different from its surface meaning. Thus the full irony of his earliest remarks on the subject (in the essay, "On Socialist Realism") became understandable only later, as the mission of Tertz became clearer. Consider the phrases we have underlined in his citation of the words of Alesandr Blok: "The most vital, the most sensitive children of our century

*Sinyavsky's use of the Tertz signature is a guarantee of irony each time he uses it, just as it is an unfailing instrument of self-liberation and the liberation that ultimately threatens his reader.
have been stricken by a disease unknown to the physicians of body or spirit. This disease is related to the psychological ailments and can be called 'irony.' Its manifestations are fits of exhausting laughter which begins with a satanically mocking provocateur's smile and ends with rebelliousness and blasphemy."16 Irony, Tertz summarizes deadpan, "is the laughter of the superfluous man at himself and at all that is holy in the world." That it is the only free—hence optimally positive—response in certain situations is made clear a page later when Tertz comments on the constricted nature of laughter in Soviet literature: "Our laughter has ceased to be indecent and disrespectful; it has taken on a purposeful character: it eradicates faults, corrects manners, keeps up a brave spirit in the young. This is laughter with a serious face and an admonishing finger: 'That is no way to do things!' This is laughter deprived of the acid of irony." The ironic laughter celebrated here is precisely the carnival laughter described by Bakhtin in his dissertation on Rabelais (written fifteen years before, published only twenty years later)—"ambivalent," "gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives."17 Carnival laughter in Bakhtin's analysis expresses a vital irreverence that is not incompatible with free reverence but rather feeds and sustains it. By the same token, carnival indecency—which plays grotesquely and familiarly with all the bodily appetites and functions—is shown to carry a deeply affirmative cultural function.

These notions illuminate, among other things, Tertz's own defence of indecency, and his willingness to write of "matters which my readers will probably find unseemly, terrifying or disgusting."18 His disquisition on the anekdot—the jokes that Soviet Russians tell each other, perhaps the most
significant new art form produced by Soviet culture and one whose function shows clear parallels with that of medieval carnival—emphasizes its freedom, which consists exclusively in the transgressing of boundaries and limits. To illustrate this he begins with one that is genuinely emetic, then goes on to cite others which run the gamut from the merely obscene and the grossly offensive to the broadly humorous. Tertz anatomizes the anekdot to draw from it the least obvious and most philosophical conclusion:

These very properties of the anecdote, which does not seek to issue in morality, or agitation, or politics, or psychology, or even in reality (insofar as it represents in itself an ideal image of reality), this feeling of its own form which informs the anecdote—all these things make it possible to see the anecdote as a model of 'pure art'. . . . As a result of the anecdote and under its effect, I would say that reality begins to move. It takes on plot, bearing, phenomenality. . . . Isn't the anecdote in general (like all art) an expression of the phenomenality of existence . . . ?

The same process occurs in the article "I and They," where he cites in explicit and graphic detail instances from camp life of what is regarded by virtually all shades of Russian opinion as unprintable—homosexuality, onanism, self-mutilation, cannibalism—only to find (once more) art, and the enactment of the myth and ritual that underlie it. In his explanation of such acts we encounter yet again echoes of the Bakhtinian world-view. The acts in question are seen as forms of communication, attempts to start a dialogue in circumstances where

the natural interaction of 'I' and 'you' has been replaced by the relationship 'I' and 'they,' 'They' are the people to whom 'you' are not 'you' (and not 'I') but simply another cipher from the impersonal, alien category, 'they.' Communication [under such circumstances] takes the form of challenge, insult, mockery and ridicule. What happens is that some part of one's own human 'I' splits off and becomes alienated, and a struggle begins which threatens the personality with disintegration: 'I' am going to make a spectacle of 'him' (that is, of myself) for the benefit of 'them' . . . a spectacle in the form of an experiment verging on mockery and blasphemy!
This text, in its centrality, merits extended quotation. It is the most direct statement of the beliefs that underlie the Tertzian enterprise, and it is the more arresting for the way Sinyavsky’s voice comes to the fore to justify its own modulation elsewhere into the accents of its impalpable double:

What I have described here is infinitely sad. It is, however, worthwhile to try not to view the facts simply in the context of local color, as indications of the savage way of life exclusive to the camps. They are also the products of certain basic human stimuli which even have a distant connection with the writer’s work and with art as such. Not art in its entirety, perhaps, but certain aspects and forms of artistic activity, especially in our time, when the creative author stands sharply aloof from society and regards it with suspicion, in a situation, as it were, of extreme solitude and extreme want of understanding and contact. Here too, confronted by a public or a readership which, as well as the friendly ‘you,’ also bears the stamp of the hostile, blank ‘they,’ art too sometimes resorts to extreme methods to obtain its effect—epatage the grotesque, the absurd, the fantastic and various kinds of eccentricity, which may be generally described as forms of intensely expressive, aggressive and at the same time communicative ‘speech.’ This is not simply a rupture with people, a rejection of the listener and the spectator. Odd though it may seem, this break in communications sometimes leads to the appearance of a language of heightened communicative significance, heightened precisely because of its creator’s solitariness and estrangement... [Whatever its formal qualities it is] a total, prison-defying language, in which the author dies in order to rise again in it, or be dissolved, reduce himself to nothing and bury himself in his work. Is this not the reason why art perpetually tries to leap outside the encirclement of ordinary life, the state, the land and art itself? To cross the boundaries of style, genre and his own life: is this not, very often, the artist’s path and his mission?  

Earlier in these remarks we noted how, for Solzhenitsyn, “the artist’s path and mission” lay in exploring the territory of the Ego and Superego, or self and conscience; for Tertz, as this piece makes clear, the territory to be explored is rather that of the Ego and that repository of impulses and irrationalities which Freud could only name with a helpless gesture: das Es —“the It,” or, as it is unfortunately scholasticized in English, the Id. Solzhenitsyn’s accounts of camp life consequently, show little interest (and
none of it positive) in the common criminals (blatnye) confined there. Sinyavsky liked them; Tertz writes about them with a fellow-feeling newly proved by experience. To put it another way, Solzhenitsyn's art seeks the maximum coincidence with life; Tertz's aspires rather to self-transcendence in a different direction—escape from the confines "of style, genre and [one's] own life." And this he does in a multiplicity of ways—in the stories, most literally (hence most parabolically) in "Pkhentz," but also in "Little Tsores," where, as Boris Shragin points out, the very assumption of readerly misprision is actualized in the manner as well as in the overt thematics of the text, making it an exhibition twice over of "the tragedy of life and art and the fate of the artist." Everywhere he finds parables of the artist, the apparent reason being that he finds art everywhere. "A man enters into art in rather the same way as he comes into the world at his birth. Thereafter everything is art for him, and like the cricket in Krylov's fable, he finds his home 'under every little leaf.' People say of someone: 'He has a good eye' (because he is an artist). But what does he see with his 'good eye'? Only this: that the world is filled with art." Art, he conjectures elsewhere, may be "higher than reality," because prior to it.

There is a danger in citing these paradoxes outside their contexts, where they are developed with a subtlety and intelligence that resist abbreviation. But the danger of misunderstanding, we submit, persists unless even larger contexts are borne in mind.

One is the continuing evolution of the Tertz-Sinyavsky relationship. Alongside articles and books by Tertz, we have articles and (in 1982) the first book to appear under the signature of Andrei Sinyavsky (V.V. Rozanov's "Fallen Leaves," Paris: Sintaksis; in Russian). The distinction is one of
intonation (and of all that intonation implies); the signatures by now act as
genre signals, alerting the reader to the kind of receptivity a particular
text requires. Sinyavsky's writing, to borrow a term from poetic theory,
respects the prohibitions (zaprety) of the kinds it practices; it sets the
reader on a footing of equality and demands of him no more (if no less) than a
certain level of commitment and attentiveness. Tertz's discourse, by
contrast, operates with a logic of its own, accepts no prohibitions on
principle, and executes rather than delivers its meanings. It puts the reader
in a different situation and demands constant wariness. The words "Abram
Tertz" on a title page translate as Caveat lector.

That injunction, however, changes its meaning—or may do so—with each
new appearance. It does not signal the return of something familiar but the
potential presence of something new. Tertz's latest fictions (Kroska Cores
and Spokojnoj noci, originally a single enterprise) show this by naming the
protagonist Sinyavsky. In the first case, full biographical identification is
impossible. The story is a complex parable, and sorting out its meanings is a
little like entering a hall of mirrors. But it is clear at least that in it
"Sinyavsky" becomes a generic term for a situation: that of the writer in
society. The second case adds new dimensions of complexity alongside new
elements of simplicity. Identified as a novel by Abram Tertz on the title
page of the Russian edition, it begins and ends as straightforward
autobiographical memoir by Andrei Donatovich Sinyavsky, who speaks of his life
during and after the "magical Stalinist night" with affecting directness and
explicitness. Tertz (whose inception and function are discussed here) is
present less as a dominant voice than as a license for fanciful excursions
outside the memoir form. The book at once proclaims his effective but
provisional presence and his literal but irrelevant unreality. It is clearly by Sinyavsky about himself and Tertz, and just as clearly by Tertz about himself (through Sinyavsky). Inviting us to ponder those matters, it also invites us to ponder the meaning of "novel" and of autobiographical candor; of writing as process and product; of fantasy and reality. In all these cases the invitation is enforced by the demonstration of how permeable, shifting and ambiguous are the boundaries separating these notions.

The recent and growing rapprochement between Tertz and Sinyavsky can be seen as well in the Rozanov book. Though it neither names nor uses Tertz, it extends the context for understanding his enterprise that was already supplied in his book on Gogol, with its ruminations on the Russian tendency to harness literature in the service moral or social goals, as in Strolling With Pushkin, with its celebration of the poet's path to "pure art."27 The context in question is the historical-traditional one of the assumptions that guide the Russian reader's response to literature, which is to say, the assumptions that Tertz exists not to replace but to put in question. Soberly addressing the scandalous Rozanov, Sinyavsky shows how he became "a writer without a program, without a theme and without a subject" in order to combat "the inertia and the tradition of existing genres," his manner, adopted for the purpose, being that of "a holy fool," externally repellent but serving nonetheless "good, beauty, truth."28 Characterizing Rozanov's fundamental strategy, Sinyavsky tacitly identifies that of his own literary alter ego:

In Rozanov in general one observes a striving to pose any question upside-down, in the most unexpected way. That is necessary in order that the writer's thought, as he says, screw itself into the object and, correspondingly, into the soul of his reader, making it friable and so more accessible to the broadest and most active possible perception of the world. . . . Rozanov wants his being struck as a writer by some thing or thought to be transmitted to the reader. Therefore he tries in the very posing of the question or the form of
the exposition to wrench the reader of out his habitual, accustomed rut.

It is not hard to notice, in this respect, that the basic thrust of Rozanov's paradoxes is directed against stereotypes and cliches in the broad sense. The world has been encrusted with cliche, and that requires overcoming if we wish to break through to the souls of men, to the soul of the world.²⁹

Seen in this light, the case of Abram Tertz reveals its largest paradox and ultimate irony. For he, too, turns out to represent, however deviously and in however strange a guise, the Russian writer as exemplar and reformer--one whose very challenging of the tradition extends it, providing a major proof of its contemporary vigor.
Notes


2 The phrases quoted are Sinyavsky's, in Michael Beausang, "Exile and Writer (Interview with Sinyavsky)," Mosaic 8, iii, 1975, p. 16.


4 See Martin Dewhirst and Robert Farrell eds., The Soviet Censorship (Metuchen, N.J., 1973), especially the remarks of Arkadij Belinkov; see also Solzhenitsyn's analysis of self-censorship as practiced by the writer Galakhov in The First Circle, ch. 57.


6 The phrase is Innokenty Volodin's from ch. 57 of The First Circle.


9 Abram Terc, Spokojnoj noci: Roman (Paris, 1984), p. 18. Subsequent references are to this edition and included in parentheses in the text.


17 Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and his World (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1968), pp. 11-12. Tertz's view of laughter in general seems to parallel strikingly that of Bakhtin, who writes: "Laughter has a deep philosophic meaning, it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; it is a peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint. Therefore, laughter is just as admissible in great literature, posing serious problems, as seriousness. Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter" (Ibid., p. 66).


20 '"I' and 'They',' p. 280.

21 Ibid., p. 282.

22 It is important to bear in mind that the power of the blatnye in the camps, which had been great in Solzhenitsyn's time, was far less in Sinyavsky's. The point is made by Laszlo M. Tikos, "On Abram Tertz's A Voice from the Chorus," International Fiction Review, 2, 1975, pp. 169, 171.


24 A Voice From the Chorus, p. 11.

25 "Iskusstvo i dejstvitel'nost'," p. 118. Given such beliefs, it is not
surprising to find Sinyavsky declaring in an interview, "You see, the whole meaning of my life is in art" ("Sinyavsky: Fiction and reality," The Times Literary Supplement, 23 May 1975, p. 560). Compare Solzhenitsyn's equally characteristic statement of his thoughts as he contemplated writing his Nobel speech: "To reflect on the nature of literature or on its possibilities for me a secondary matter, dull and burdensome . . ." (Bodalsja telenok s dubom [Paris: YMCA Press, 1975], p. 336).

26 It does this with particular force in the central third chapter, entitled "Father," which evokes the author's father, an idealistic and uncorrupted revolutionary (but not a Communist), who was arrested in the last years of Stalinism and who, after being released, leads his son into a forest, to describe there how a psychological control instrument was implanted in his brain during his stay in prison. The idea is fantastic, the account sober and plausible, the event itself hauntingly ambiguous—perhaps the product of simple paranoia, perhaps not, in either case pregnant with meaning. It is to this meeting that Sinyavsky traces his heretical belief in the identity of "reality" and "the fantastic"; his conviction that mysteriousness is required by art in order to respect the mysteries that surround us; and his image of writing as a kind of forest haven, a privileged place where the logic of everyday existence gives way to, or intersects with, the logic of dream and myth.

27 V teni Gogolja ("In the Shadow of Gogol") is the third of the books written in camp. See Donald Fanger, "Conflicting Imperatives in the Model of the Russian Writer" (in Gary Saul Morson ed., Literature and History: Theoretical Problems and Russian Case Studies [Stanford University Press, 1986]), which approaches the thesis of this paper somewhat differently.

28 Andrej Sinjavsky, "Opavsie list'ja" V.V. Rozanova (Paris: Sintaksis, 1982), pp. 128-29; 175.
