

## Art of Experience

*Within the Whirlwind*, By Eugenia Ginzburg, translated by Ian Boland, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981. 422 pp. \$17.50.

CRITICAL THEORISTS have increasingly abandoned the notion that a literary work, even a work based upon experience, must be "made up" in order to qualify as art. Joyce Cary, in his *Art and Reality*, even goes so far as to say that a newspaper article about absenteeism in the mines is art because: "It is a composition requiring selection, valuation. And again, the work of art always does have reference to some universal value: in this case, to human nature as it affects economics." If we adopt Cary's notions, then we must accept Eugenia Ginzburg's *Within the Whirlwind*, the second volume of her experiences in Stalinist Siberia, as a work of art, and dismiss any misgivings we may have about drawing wholesale comparisons between this work and, for example, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch*.

On the other hand, if we adopt the definition of aesthetics offered by James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*—"The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails"—then we are compelled to consider Solzhenitsyn's work as art and Ginzburg's merely as memoir, or as "the art of experience." I do not make this distinction out of condescension to Ginzburg, whose tale of raw endurance offers, as we shall see, a testament equally as powerful as Solzhenitsyn's "art," but only to differentiate the approaches of the two authors to their experiences inside the "Gulag Archipelago."

Ginzburg's work offers what we might call a "panorama of terror," depicting her fifteen-year struggle against an evil as frequently bureaucratic and anonymous as it is human and palpable. Solzhenitsyn's *Ivan*

*Denisovitch* embodies the Aristotelian concept of "the universal within the particular," portraying a "microcosm of terror." The title of each work makes clear its particular scope. Ginzburg attempts to encompass the "whirlwind" whereas Solzhenitsyn focuses simply upon "one day in the life."

*Within the Whirlwind* opens in 1940, near the beginning of Ginzburg's Siberian experience. As described in *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, which the present volume summarizes in a few pages, Ginzburg, a teacher and wife of an important Communist Party member, had been arrested in February 1937, receiving a ten-year sentence for "lack of vigilance amounting to complicity with enemies of the people." (She had failed to denounce a former colleague.) *Within the Whirlwind's* long and harrowing series of exquisite ironies commences with something one of Ginzburg's cellmates says to her: "Well, frankly I'm glad that some of you Communists are in jail at last. Perhaps you will learn in practice what you couldn't understand in theory." Ginzburg's story ends in the year 1955, long after she learned in practice, with her complete "rehabilitation" and her re-admission into the Party (two events made possible largely by the death of Josef Stalin in March 1953). She spent ten years as a prisoner in the camps of Kolyma, five years in exile there as a "free" person with no civil rights, and two more years in the post-Stalin bureaucratic chaos as a *persona non grata* awaiting passport to Moscow.

The fifteen years represented here form a collage of sharp and unexpected turns of fortune in the life of Eugenia Ginzburg, each turn occasioned by the bureaucratic whims of unseen manipulators or the personal idiosyncracies of underlings both benign and evil. Throughout this work the question of "who wields the axe?" looms paramount as Ginzburg struggles to ensconce herself in conditions of relative warmth and security, only to discover she inhabits a mere "house of cards." Throughout, the appalling Soviet bureaucracy towers over this pitiful

scenario like a huge, unfathomable beast whose motives are uncertain, whose behavior is entirely unpredictable, but whose blows arrive with lightning impact and rapidity.

Beginning her prison career as a nurse attending the ill-fated offspring of inmate miscegenations, Ginzburg is transferred by a mere fluke to the relative paradise of a hinterland dairy farm, where the prisoners may steal sufficient milk and eggs to survive comfortably so long as they do not upset production quotas. Ginzburg is then just as suddenly transferred to a harsh labor camp as punishment for removing an incriminating letter from the pocket of her commandant's jacket. In similar fashion Ginzburg shuttles, pawn-like, from one encampment to another throughout the war years, narrowly avoiding starvation, fatal diseases, the permanent debilitation brought about by forced labor, and an overwhelming temptation to commit suicide upon learning of the death of her oldest son, Alyosha, in the siege of Leningrad. Eventually Ginzburg's fortunes take a turn for the better. Realizing she will probably never see her first husband again (his arrest came two years after hers), she marries Dr. Anton Walter, an eminent homeopathic specialist of Germanic descent, whom she meets while serving as a nurse in the prison hospital.

Upon her conditional release in 1947, Ginzburg was able to find work as a freed exile, teaching small school children via songs she composes on the piano to love Josef Stalin and to hate his enemies. After surviving a nightmarish bureaucratic ordeal, she was even able to bring her only surviving son, Vasya, whom she had not seen in twelve years, to live with her and Anton Walter in a fragile but compelling recreation of domestic bliss. This bliss was shattered when Ginzburg and many other freed "terrorists" were rearrested alphabetically in 1949. Luckily, the rearrests were a mere "formality" designed to ensure that the exiles were to remain exiled, and Ginzburg was eventually able to fight her way back into her old position, even giving piano lessons to the children of wealthy

bureaucrats to make ends meet. With the death of Stalin she managed to attain a post in higher education, teaching Russian literature to former captors. Her passport to Moscow received its precious stamp of authorization in early 1955.

The miracle of Eugenia Ginzburg is not merely that she survived, but that she survived with dignity, even nobility. Poetry forms the motif of *Within the Whirlwind*, holding it together even as it held the prisoners together. Ginzburg and her intellectual colleagues used poetry as both salve and sinew, composing and reciting it to one another in the night, transcending the immediate horror of existence through the sheer power of imagination. While the survivability of the human animal under great stress has been rendered almost a cliché by a spate of prison literature, Ginzburg imbues the mechanism that makes this endurance possible with a new and greater humanity. In this respect, her work perhaps transcends Solzhenitsyn's, though she possesses little of his narrative gift. Ginzburg, like Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, is truly "emotionally great"; her experience is as rich and profound as it is exhausting and horrible.

There is great understanding, if not great execution, in every passage of this work. For example, in recounting her emotions while awaiting her second arrest, Ginzburg even goes so far as to provide the antithesis to Dostoevsky's prescription of redemption through suffering. "In '37," she says, "when I first came to realize my personal responsibility for it all, I used to dream of purging my guilt with suffering. By '49 I already knew that suffering can only cleanse one up to a point. When it drags on for decades and becomes a matter of routine, it no longer cleanses; it simply dulls all sensation." And again, when she was severely chastised by some of the former inmates for "giving lessons to our jailers," Ginzburg responded by saying

. . . ours was an age in which events affected such huge numbers of people, and the dividing lines between butchers

and their victims were so blurred . . . that barricades which divided *them* from *us* no longer existed. The systematic corruption of people's souls by means of the Great Lie . . . had resulted in thousands and thousands of ordinary people being caught up in the charade. Well then, were we to revenge ourselves on all of them? Should we rival the tyrant in cruelty? Was the ritual of hate to be prolonged indefinitely?

We find also in this work some eerie Orwellian overtones, for in Siberia, as in the system of Big Brother, hardened criminals receive preferential treatment and soft jobs while the intellectual political prisoners must endure brutal labor, short rations, and corporal abuse. Comparisons, too, are drawn between the Soviet system and that of the Nazis, the "rational terror" of the Soviets appearing relatively desirable

because there was always at least a human being to whom one could appeal in spite of regulations in the Soviet camps, whereas the Nazis stood for total destruction. It is one of the book's supreme ironies that when the Germans invaded Russia in June 1941, the Soviet prisoners almost to a man begged to be released so they could defend "Mother Russia."

Ginzburg ends her book with an epilogue in which she expresses the hope that "if not my son, then perhaps my grandson will be able to read this book, published in full in our own land. . . ." The brutal practices of the Stalin regime have received so much publicity through the offices of Nikita Khrushchev that one is tempted to think of them as over and done with. Yet persistent voices, Ginzburg's among them, remind us that this is not so.

Reviewed by LARRY WILLIAMS