

"The Prophetic Element," *In General and Particular* (Cleveland and New York, 1964), 223-240. Sir Maurice Bowra's essay, originally his Presidential Address to the English Association, 1959, deals with poetry and prophetic vision. 10. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "The Relentless Cult of Novelty and How It Wrecked the Century," *The New York Times Book Review*, February 7, 1993, 17. The translation of the text of Solzhenitsyn's acceptance remarks, upon receiving the medal of honor for literature of the National Arts Club in New York City, is by his sons, Ignat and Stephen.

Coping with the Loss of Political Faith

PAUL HOLLANDER

Proofs and Three Parables, by
George Steiner, *New York: Granta
Books/Penguin Books, 1993. 114 pp.*
(paper \$10.00).

IT IS A CURIOUS ASPECT of Western intellectual and literary life that, while the disillusionment with the Soviet Union between the 1930s and 1950s had stimulated a substantial outpouring of writings, the subsequent discrediting of other communist systems has not produced similar public soul-searching. In vain would one look for volumes addressing retrospectively the grotesque infatuation with Mao's China, Castro's Cuba, communist Vietnam, and Sandinista Nicaragua, each of which had earlier inspired an abundance of devotional literature. Similarly forgotten are the accolades stimulated by "African socialism" and its putative embodiments in countries such as Tanzania, communist Angola, and Mozambique.

It is not easy to explain why many Western intellectuals found it easier to confront their misguided affection for the Soviet Union (and the communist movements it supported abroad) than to acknowledge similar lapses of judgment and common sense as regards the other

communist states which, at least initially, modeled themselves after the Soviet Union. Not even the recent collapse of Soviet communism has sufficed to inspire public discussion and candid examination of why and how such regimes could have attracted and enchanted segments of the educated public in the West and especially many intellectuals.

In the United States, at any rate, the cultural-institutional after-effects of the 1960s best explain why such discussions failed to take place. During the 1960s the attitude of anti-anti-communism among large portions of the American intelligentsia became institutionalized, a disposition that became part of an entrenched and expanded adversary culture. Since the public display or avowal of anti-communist sentiment came to be discouraged and virtually proscribed among self-respecting liberal academic intellectuals (and their audiences), the atmosphere has been far from congenial for public self-scrutiny aimed at understanding why communist systems and ideologies—despite their massive and proven flaws—exercised such abiding attraction for so many American intellectuals. In turn the impressive growth in the numbers of those who came to constitute the adversary culture, clustered around universities and other cultural institutions, made it easier for erstwhile admirers of these systems to live with their old beliefs and avoid feeling compunction over political misjudgments which were so widely shared. There have been millions of people with similar beliefs, biases, hopes, and disappointments not in the least inclined to reevaluate these beliefs since they constituted a critical mass large enough to sustain them. Even if the communist systems collapsed and became totally discredited among their own people anti-communism was not to be rehabilitated in these circles.

Although a fair amount has been written of late about the political and eco-

conomic costs and consequences of the collapse of communism (as distinct from its attractions for Western intellectuals and their followers), little is known about the emotional impact this collapse had on those who used to believe in the communist ideals and their existing incarnations. George Steiner's *Proofs* may well be the first successful literary attempt in the West to chronicle and probe the psychological dimensions of and responses to the decay of communism.

The other "three parables" in this volume deal with different topics and are on the whole far less memorable; they are exercises in erudition and literary, or literary-philosophical, virtuosity. They have little in common with one another or with *Proofs*.

Proofs may be read as a meditation on the interaction between spiritual needs, political commitment, and disillusionment in contemporary Western societies. It is a "parable" of the political beliefs and attachments of Western intellectuals and their pursuit of meaning in an increasingly secular and consumption-oriented world. Although none of the characters (former supporters of the Italian Communist Party) are portrayed—sociologically speaking,—as typical intellectuals, they act and talk as if they were.

Proofs is the story of the changing and unchanging political attitudes of an Italian master printer, also known as "*Professore*" on account of his erudition and articulateness. He is an appealing and interesting figure who combines modesty, meticulousness, devotion to work, and a rigidly but satisfactorily routinized life with intense political convictions and an abstracted idealism. His political ideals and attitudes are more characteristic of the mind set of a privileged academic intellectual than an Italian working class printer. Like many memorable literary heroes he, too, is a somewhat tragic character, compassion-

ate yet fallible, unprotected by his theoretical knowledge from a basic wrongheadedness, irresistibly drawn to bonds and beliefs which sooner or later will fail him. On top of it all, his eyesight—the key to his work and pursuit of meaning in life (the printed matter)—is beginning to fail him and gets worse as the story unfolds. It is not clear what precisely this metaphoric device intends to convey: it could mean that he achieves greater insight with poorer eyesight, or his worsening vision could symbolize his resistance to confronting the new, unwelcome political realities.

This is also a novella about a group of people politically associated with the printer who are also trying to cope with the loss of faith and the erosion of political community set into motion by the developments in the Soviet Bloc and its final collapse. They include Anna B. (the statistician), a priest (Father Carlo Tessone), a school teacher, and an engineer. They do not seem to include authentic representatives of the proletariat. Evidently the group is constituted by what might be called quasi-intellectuals or aspiring intellectuals and one authentic, if exceptional, member of the working classes, the learned printer. Grappling with the political events of the late 1980s in what used to be the Soviet Bloc, the actors debate the major political-philosophical conflicts and dilemmas of our times.

The events in Eastern Europe deliver the final blow to their faith; the group disbands. Concurrently, the hero, the erudite proof reader, undergoes a process of physical decline and especially a deterioration of his eyesight. The story somewhat unexpectedly ends with his pursuit of admission (or re-admission) into the new and unauthentic incarnation of what used to be the Italian communist party, now called the "Party of the Democratic Left."

Contemporary political infatuation

and disaffection with communism is a vast topic particularly when it includes both those who lived under such systems and those who admired them from afar. Paradoxically, the outlook of those who had lived under the now defunct communist regimes is more accessible, less intriguing, and easier to grasp than the convoluted sentiments of former true believers in the West. Steiner wisely chose to concentrate on a sample of the latter, whose beliefs are presented in the process of erosion or collapse.

Such groups of true believers would have been difficult to locate, or plausibly conjure up, in the former communist states. True believers have long been extinct in the countries where the attempt was made to realize their beliefs. It defies the imagination and even memory, at this historical juncture, to visualize any group of people in what used to be the Soviet Bloc, who would gather regularly to discuss reverentially the ideas of Marx, as do the characters in this book in their Circle for Revolutionary Theory and Praxis.

Similar groups are far from extinct in the West. They are most readily found (under various designations) on or about college campuses rather than in big cities and least of all in working-class neighborhoods. They are descendants of what used to be the "New Left" and the counterculture; their most striking attribute is a combination of the (by now) traditional hatred of capitalism with a loss of faith in reason and rationality that represents a radical departure from the perspectives of the Marxism of the old left.

Western responses to the fall of communism are morbidly fascinating, untainted as they are by the actual experience of living under these systems. Such beliefs have been more "pure" and driven primarily by unfulfilled spiritual longings, a misdirected idealism, and more or less obscure psychological needs. In the East it was harder to separate disinterested

or "pure" belief from opportunism, since survival, let alone success, required a show of belief and support for the system. Western communists, including party members—unlike their counterparts in countries run by these parties—could not, as a rule, expect better jobs, housing, or other tangible benefits on account of their political beliefs and positions. On the other hand, it has become of late useful in the United States for one's career in academia to adhere to some form of watered down leftism, to signal that one is a member in good standing of the adversary culture. These attitudes do not require taking Marxist ideas seriously. It has been sufficient to convey that one dislikes American society and capitalism in order to be accepted by a subculture which has gradually become dominant in academic institutions and has come to play a part in distributing the rewards academics seek and receive.

Steiner chose the Italian master printer with a life of long commitment to the theory and practice of communism (insofar as Party work was a form of practice) and the group around him to present a literary case study of what happens to true believers when the objects of belief disintegrate. In doing so he leads the reader into a long forgotten political culture: the world of Party loyalists and activists diligently and dutifully attending meetings, reverently poring over the "classics," analyzing current events through the lens of their political correctness. They are people for whom joining the Party was a pivotal event of their lives, an admission "into that freemasonry of hope," providing access to community and brotherhood. Following the death of Stalin the characters in this story "had become orphans huddled in somber bewilderment." Subsequently, despite his fine mind and germinating doubts, the *Professore* defends Soviet intervention in Hungary in 1956 since its

purpose was to crush the "CIA financed coup" which has "the evident potential for a Fascist resurgence."

Despite a long record of disciplined loyalty the point comes when *Professore* can no longer stomach the dictates of the Party and the deeds of its great role model and ally; he is incapable of approving of the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968. (We do not learn from the narrative why that was less acceptable than the Soviet crackdown in Hungary, why it became the final disillusioning experience he could not rationalize in the time-honored ways). Awaiting his expulsion from the Party, "he had sat in his room, motionless, made stone. He had sat like a paralytic, his temples pounding as in cold fever. Knowing that he was being read out of the scroll of the saved, of the elect to hope and meaning. The loneliness of that hour branded him irreparably. It was more solitary than death."

It was the disillusionment with Soviet policies that led to the formation of the Circle for Marxist Revolutionary Theory and Praxis, numbering less than twenty active members. In it the faithful gathered to salvage and renew their commitment and continue their earnest discussions of matters largely theoretical. Thus, Comrade Anna B., by occupation a statistician at the psychiatric social service of the General Clinic, treats her comrades to an analysis of "the radical differences in social infrastructure and peer-group communication as between coffee drawn from, and consumed near, a mechanical dispenser and that brewed in one's own kitchen and poured into one's own cups for a neighbor" She also raises a troubling question, "What had Marxist and Gramscian sociology to contribute to a better understanding of these gender-bounded and gender-oriented socializations? Had Kautsky or C. Wright Mills said anything to the point?"

The tone and the topics of these meet-

ings conjure up the ambience of campus-based feminist (and other radical-left) groups in the United States rather than the plausible gatherings of former Party activists in a quasi-working class setting in a large Northern Italian city. We are reminded of communications in faculty lounges or English department meetings rather than of the deliberations and debates of former communist activists in an Italian center of industry and commerce. Still, given the content and the quality of these discussions, one inclines to overlook the questionable authenticity of their setting.

Five pages are devoted to the Western television coverage of the events in Eastern Europe. We are left in no doubt what Steiner thinks of Western television and its reflections of the less than admirable aspects of Western culture and society, including the undignified scramble for publicity among intellectuals. For example:

The titles, credit and presenter's overture had been breathless. Picture, action sequences, interviews, exclusive documentary footage would be shown over the next two hours to mark 'the greatest blossoming of freedom history had ever known.' There would be expert commentaries from Minister X, Professor Y, and novelist Z. They would, in turn, join a panel assembling further luminaries As the celebrated compère spoke, his mouth an almost perfect o of bounteous excitement, bursts of Beethoven deployed their great wings on the soundtrack and the chorale of the Ninth rose towards the fiercely spotlight Brandenburg gate Shots of teenagers from the east tumbling into West Berlin supermarkets, rocking in wonder before the shelves, emptying them in a sleep-walker's sweep. Bright-tinted toothpaste, lacquer for toenails, soft toilet paper in the hues of rainbow . . . jeans bleached or mended

The first of the pundits in a professorial study. Yes. He agreed entirely. An earthquake. Promethean. The liberation of the

man's spirit from the shackles of Marxist-Leninist folly and despotism . . . the camera glided tastefully behind the sage's brow to show a panorama of the Milan skyline A second break for ads The round-table which was to crown the programme had harvested politicians, more professors, the winner of this season's stellar prize for fiction

The unmistakable tone of irony is not to suggest that Steiner wants to trivialize the significance of the failure of communism. Rather, he uses the opportunity to convey his aversion to Western mass culture and media, a theme which his protagonists subsequently pick up.

The sparkling dialogues and disputes in the Circle go to the heart of the contemporary conflicts between communism and capitalism, the discontents of modernity, the various conceptions of human nature, and the quest for meaning in our times. There is, for instance, a lively debate in the Circle over the East Germans and other East Europeans abandoning their polluting Trabant vehicles at Western borders as they seek to escape their socialist societies in 1989. One member of the group asks, ". . . [W]hy do they have all those foul machines in the first place? Polluting, wasting raw materials, consuming fossil fuels. It's pure lunacy. As bad as capitalism Even the worst of these automobiles is totally beyond the reach of the Third World" He goes on to argue—as do the politically correct social critics in this country—that "superfluity enslaves," but at least he perceives wastefulness in both socialist and capitalist systems.

For the *Professore* the issue is different and more subversive: "Why can a Marxist economy, in a country with a history of industrial strength and a skilled labor force, [i.e. East Germany] not produce a satisfactory internal combustion engine and chassis? Isn't that the real question?"

More fundamental disagreements arise between *Professore* and Father

Carlo, the politically incorrect or regressive priest. They clash over ends and means, the nature of American society, the subordination of the present to the future, and on the question as to who was the greater victimizer, the Church or the Party. For the Father, the fate of a single human being is decisive:

A figure like one million means nothing Twenty-five million . . . we are told was the number of men, women, and children Stalin starved, froze, tortured to death So I focus on single human being . . . a nun they arrested for counterrevolutionary attitudes and sabotage . . . in 1937. They transported her to Kolyma, to the Arctic Circle Her feet froze to the ground . . . other women in the labour squad had to chop down her body with an axe. Her eyes were still open.

So I do my best to make Sister Evgenia stand for 24,999,999 human beings done to hopeless death There is not, just now . . . a day when they are not digging up mass graves in the forests of the Ukraine, skulls by the ten thousands, each with a neat little bullet hole in its back That's what came of your Messiah for man. A savagery beyond understanding Arise ye prisoners of starvation So we can push you into the limepits. Break your chains. So we can flog you to death with them.

The crimes of the churches were committed

. . . in the name of a revealed, transcendent verity. The fires were no less hot or the censorship less suffocating. I know that But those who did these hideous things were laboring to save souls They held themselves, poor imbeciles, to be God's agents. The stakes were so high, so pure and free of earthly benefit . . . but at the heart of Communism, there is a demeaning of man and woman worse than the tyrannies and depravities of Christendom, foul as these are At the heart of Communism is the lie. The central, axiomatic lie: a kingdom of justice, a classless brotherhood, a

release from servitude here and now. That's the great lie. The systematic bribing and betraying of human hope.

But the learned printer will not lightly let go of what had given meaning to his life:

Consider the source of our error. Of that great lie. And mark you, I don't accept that it was. Or that there were only venal butchers at the top

Marxism did man supreme honour. The Moses and Jesus and Marx vision of the just earth, of a neighbor's love, of human universality, the abolition of barriers between lands, classes, races . . . that vision was . . . an overestimate of man A possibly fatal, possibly deranged, but none the less magnificent, jubilant over-estimate of man. The highest compliment ever paid to him. The Church held man in doleful contempt. He is a fallen creature Marxism has taken him to be almost boundless in his capacities A reacher to the stars. Not mired in original sin . . . the big error, the over-estimate of man from which the mistake came, is the single most noble notion of the human spirit in our awful history.

Steiner brilliantly captures the animating spirit of Marxist idealism that enthralled generations of Western intellectuals still reluctant to give it up. Capitalism cannot be forgiven for using a far less inspiring conception of human nature that continues to offend intellectuals:

The free market takes man at his mean average. And *mean* is the word. It invests in his animal greed It caresses his appetites for goods and comforts and mechanical toys and holidays in the sun Capitalism has not left man where it found him, it has lessened him. We are become a pack snarling for luxuries, grunting at the trough. That second car. A larger refrigerator. We are indeed possessed By unnecessary, idiotic wants That is the very genius of capitalism: to package, to put a price tag on men's dreams

How accurately America has priced man, reducing him to well-being, making peace between human desires and fulfillment. Stalin starved millions But America made the hungry, the drugged, the ugly invisible. Which is worse? It buttered the souls of man . . . they have thirty different sorts of bread over there

These are familiar enough critiques of capitalism and American society pouring forth since the 1960s. There is an unexpectedly spirited rebuttal from Father Carlo:

The old Party-line blood-libel on human nature and America To me it sounds like the society which says to every man and woman: Be what you want to be. Be yourself. This world was not made only for geniuses or neurotics, for the obsessed or the inspired If you choose to try and be an artist or a thinker or a pure scholar, that's fine If you prefer to be a couch-potato, an auto-mechanic, a break dancer . . . a broker . . . a truck driver or even a drifter, that's fine too. Perhaps even better. Because it so happens that ideological passion and ascetic illumination . . . have not brought only light and aid to this approximate world of ours. They have sown interminable hatred and self-destruction. And when America said, 'just be yourself' . . . it is saying 'Go after the Nobel prize if that's what fires your soul. Or that heated swimming pool.' Not because America believes that heated swimming pools are the Parthenon or even a necessity. But because they seem to bring pleasure, and not very much harm America is just about the first nation and society in human history to encourage common fallible, frightened humanity to feel at home in its skin.

The dialogue clarifies both the main-springs of anti-Americanism *and* the attraction the United States continues to exercise around the world despite the bitter denunciation of intellectuals, American or foreign:

. . . . There are in American affairs black

pages, stupidities in plenty. But on balance America does stand as the one and only great power and community, which, unlike any other I know of, is aiming to leave the globe a little better off, a little more hopeful than it finds it. Hope has, in fact been America's gross national product and export Ask if you dare the millions who have survived under Marxism-Leninism, whether they would rather endure such a regime a day longer or be penniless immigrants to America, or even tenants to an American slum. You know the answer.

American society has often been rebuked for not taking ideas and intellectuals seriously enough. *Professore* is one among such critics. He once observed that "to exile a man because he differs from you on Hegel and on points in Party orthodoxy is proudly to honor the human spirit." Communist movements and systems have taken ideas very seriously which earned them the admiration of intellectuals not living under them. Those who did were acquainted with the sometimes fatal results of this seriousness.

Father Carlo also addresses the horrors of mass culture, another venerable theme in the critiques of America:

Like you, *Professore*, I cannot abide Rock music. My stomach turns at most television, at the plastic and porn, fast food and illiteracy that pours out But I wonder whether even these things are inflicting on man a fraction of the pain, of the despair which all our Athens, all our high culture have inflicted They lectured on Kant and played Schubert and went off the same day to stuff millions into gas ovens.

America may not be for you or me. Not for a Communist dreamer and glutton for the printed word. Not for a mendicant friar But I cannot see by what authority, by what right, you or I can cram *our* values . . . down other men's throats. You claim to be arguing from love of the common man But that love is filled with contempt and oppression. The pur-

suit of quality, your blueprint for excellence come with a lash. The price is too high. We have seen that.

But the master printer persists:

I am a socialist. I am and remain a Marxist. Because otherwise I could not be a proof reader If California triumphs there will be no need of proof readers. Machines will do it better. . . . Carlo, you must see what I'm driving at. Utopia simply means *getting it right!* Communism means taking the errata out of history. Out of man I believe in my beliefs. What else is there for me now?

As the Circle reluctantly dissolves in the wake of the events in Eastern Europe in 1989-1990 the members grasp at various straws. As Anna B. speaks of 'the movement' ". . . the phrase made it plain that it was not the nine members of the Circle actually present . . . but a vast throng progressing out of time, out of perennial enslavements . . . and millenarian uprisings, the Communards and the innocent and the kneeling shot down on that grand square in St. Petersburg in 1905, a column without end of the mutinous and the vanquished giving their lives to the cause"

As to the *Professore*, he was to convey at this last meeting that

No tearing down the wall, no overthrow of a regime, not even the collapse of the USSR, could refute the verities shared by those whom he now addressed. On the contrary. A new phase of imperialist exploitation, racism and wage slavery, in short, an Americanization of the planet would attest to the unshakable foresight of Marxist theory Marxist revolutionary theory had (not) been disproved or made obsolete. The exact opposite was the case Never had there been more need of theoretical clarity

The day would come when its membership (of the Circle) would no longer total twenty or a dozen but hundreds and thousands thereafter!

At the end of the story, as the printer applies for reinstatement in the Party, the irony and the absurdity of this quest for faith and community are brought home. No longer tormented by the “de-ranked conviction that a deserted universe, like a house unlocked after the removal vans had gone, would sink into oblivion. . . ” he walks out of the dingy building (where his pursuit of membership took him) more sure-footed, his eyesight improved.

It is not clear whether or not the author intends for the printer to represent either a struggling and fallible individual in search of meaning in a world that offers little assurance about the ends of life, or Western intellectuals unable or unwilling to come to grips with a world which discredited their dearest beliefs. In any event, *Proofs* offers the reader a penetrating summary of the major political-ideological dilemmas and divides of our times. More than that, it lays bare the discontents and conflicts which will not go away with the collapse of communist systems and which also help us to understand why Western sympathizers hold on to their moral indignation and discredited ideals.

Russell Kirk:
The Scrimmage of Appetite

ROBERT CHAMP

Beyond the Dreams of Avarice, by
Russell Kirk, *Peru, Ill.: Sherwood
Sugden & Company, 1991. ix + 349 pp.*

ADMIRERS OF RUSSELL KIRK will find in this handsome paperback a revised edition of the work first published in 1956 by Henry Regnery. The new edition features two welcome additions: a foreword entitled “Contending Against Decadence” and an index. In the former, Kirk traces

some of the social and intellectual developments connecting the intervening decades; remarks on the fate of individuals, mostly friends, who appear in the essays; and offers an assessment of our current condition. It is a succinct account that will enlighten, sadden, and disturb readers. Its perspective is bracing. Many of the fine things Kirk defends in the course of the book could nowadays no longer be defended: They are gone forever. Many of the worst things he attacks, on the other hand, have taken on new strength and new forms. We are invited then to participate not in nostalgia, although there is much to be nostalgic about, but a recollection of some of the people and events, some now obscure, which hied our chaos on its way.

Last year saw the thirty-fifth anniversary of the founding of *Modern Age*. *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice* appeared the year before that occasion. It helped to show not only the need for such a periodical but the eminent qualifications of the founder. In 1956 Russell Kirk was thirty-seven years old and already an imposing presence in the intellectual world. Works such as *John Randolph of Roanoke* (1951), *Academic Freedom* (1951), and the sweeping and magisterial *The Conservative Mind from Burke to Santayana* (1953), had established him not only as a defender of the conservative intellectual tradition but also as one of its ablest interpreters. In these books he had dispelled certain troubling opacities in conservative thought, a condition rising largely from the conservative’s instinctive distrust of definition; and in the last especially, he had set forth its hitherto neglected history vividly and without apology. And what results his work bore! Before Kirk, many serious readers had taken conservatism to be little more than a synonym for narrow-mindedness; after Kirk, it had necessarily to be viewed as an articulated whole, having a shape and direction—a body of