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THE GUILTY SILENCES OF HISTORY¹

ABSTRACT

Focusing on the work of Iurii Trifonov, the present essay analyzes the Soviet author's prose, which originated from the categorical imperative to safeguard the memory of what happened during the years of Stalin's Terror, and to make Soviet society – condemned for too long to experience forced amnesia – aware of the betrayal of its homeland perpetrated by the State. With a cryptic strategy, in contexts that apparently describe common events of Soviet daily life, Trifonov has taken on the task of addressing the problems of a complicated memory. He has also drawn a portrait of 1970s Soviet society, depicting their anxieties and obsessions, thus revealing the subtext of an uninterrupted history of repression, censorship, terror.

KEYWORDS: memoiristic prose, Soviet society, Stalin's Great Terror, Soviet censorship, Soviet repression

Le rôle de l'écrivain, du même coup, ne se sépare pas de devoirs difficiles.
Par définition, il ne peut se mettre aujourd'hui au service de ceux qui font
l'histoire: il est au service de ceux qui la subissent
(Albert Camus, *Le discours de Stockholm*)

In his speech for the Nobel Prize for Literature (1957), Camus dwells on the task of the writer in contemporary society. "Heir to a corrupt history in which failed revolutions and deranged techniques, the death of the gods and ideologies driven to paroxysm merge", the writer must oppose the "destructive motion of history", fight for "the rejection of lies", live and write to remember; "vulnerable but stubborn,

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unjust and passionate about justice” he must at every opportunity of existence reiterate that the mission of art is “to be at the service of truth and freedom” (Camus 1958). With a strategy that is cryptic, between the lines in contexts that ostensibly describe events of everyday Soviet life, in his mature years, Iurii Trifonov actually took on the task of dealing with the problems of remembrance, focusing the narrative on both those who made history and those who endured it. With constant allusions, in a delicate tone reminiscent of Chekhov, he drew a portrait of 1970s Soviet society, linking simple fragments of life: his characters are our equals, they have our weaknesses, our fears and our obsessions. With a dry narrative he traced their loneliness and anguish, with bitterness he told of their anxieties, subtly revealing to the most acute readers the subtext of an uninterrupted history of oppression, censorship and terror.

In the years following the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1956 and the exposure of the Stalinist crimes, a decade of great expectations opened up in the USSR for literature, engaging in intense condemnation of the guilty silences and omissions of official history (cf. Ferretti 1993: 112–139; Geller 1974: 155–178; Svirski 1979: 99–107), in a determined struggle against “the process of eradication of memory” (*process vykorchevyvaniia pamjati*), to use the words of Lidia Chukovskaia (Chukovskaia 2007: 327). An entire society condemned to amnesia for far too long, slumbering in the torpor of the official oleographic image, tried to recompose the fragments of its identity. Struggling fiercely against censorship, literature became the bearer of collective memory and historical truth, making desperate appeals not to forget, to pass on the echoes of what Russia had suffered for so many years: men disappearing in the night, the wives of repressed men being sent into exile and their children transferred to orphanages, queues of women in front of the desks of the “judicial machine”, desperately searching for news: “10 years without the right to exchange letters” – a vicious euphemism to hide the death sentence.

Victims of the years of Stalin’s Terror were not only those who were unjustly persecuted, deported or executed, but also the millions of Russians who had escaped those dreadful experiences and were forced to live as slaves of terror. In the foreword to *Zapiski ob Anne Akhmatovoi*, Chukovskaia recalls that reality, which exceeded all “capacity for description”:

the torture chamber that completely and concretely swallowed up entire districts of the city and ideally all our thoughts, whether we were asleep or awake, the torture chamber that shouted its gross lie from all the newspaper columns and all the radio megaphones, simultaneously demanded that we not take its name in vain, not even within the four walls or one to one.

{i} We were disobedient, we named it over and over again, although we vaguely suspected that even when we were alone we really weren’t, that someone never took their eyes – or, more precisely, their ears – off us. Surrounded by dumbness, the torture chamber wanted to maintain its omnipotence while remaining non-existent; it didn’t allow a single word, from anyone, to evoke it from its omnipotent non-being; it was there, within reach, but at the same time it was as if it didn’t exist; the women stood in line silently, or whispering, using indeterminate forms: ‘they came’, ‘they took’ (Chukovskaia 1976: 10).

During these years, reinventing the places of memory – a particular interweaving of autobiography and memoir, of history and personal life, of political theme and individual drama – imposed itself as the primary duty of literature. This found its place first and foremost in the pages of Tvardovskii's "Novyi Mir", the journal of the legal opposition to Soviet power, in which the falsification of the past and, above all, the eradication of collective memory was condemned. For a short while, the memoiristic pages of "Novyi Mir" briefly saved shreds of the Russian past, misrepresented and annihilated by Stalinism: writing to remember had become an unavoidable premise of the tireless struggle of many writers for freedom of thought and expression, to expose the "unspoken". In 1961, Viktor Nekrasov's novel *Kira Georgievna* about the return from the concentration camp and the impossibility of communicating this experience, appeared in "Novyi Mir". In 1962, Iurii Bondarev's *Molchanie* exposed the abuses perpetrated by the secret police. Between 1955 and 1963, Vasilii Grossman finished *Vse techet*, in which the writer born in Berdichev narrates the difficulty of those returning from the concentration camps to become reintegrated into a world marked by personal meanness and terror (published in Germany in 1970, it would see the light in the USSR only many years later, like Anna Larina Bukharina's memoir *Nezabyvaemoe*, or Evgeniia Ginzburg's *Krutoi marshrut* and many others). Nadezhda Mandel'shtam's memoirs and Anna Akhmatova's *Rekviem* were published abroad, while Ehrenburg's memoirs *Liudy, gody, zhizn'* were published in the USSR. Countless witness accounts lined up:

My whole life came back to me,
my life remembered everything that year,
when, from the bottom of the seas, from the canals,
friends suddenly began to return (Berggol'ts 1983: 343).

Among the texts devoted to the tragic events of the Stalin years – written retrospectively, largely during the Thaw – Lidiia Chukovskaia's works stand out for the indomitable courage of her condemnations. In her short story *Sof'ia Petrovna*² she gives a terrible account of the years of the Great terror that struck Soviet society after the assassination of Kirov. The story was written between 1939 and 1940, while this tragedy was taking place. Through the emotions of a simple typist, Sof'ia Petrovna, whose son had been arrested, Chukovskaia tells the story of the Ezhov years, which led even a mother to distance herself from her son and submit herself to the decisions of the state. *Sof'ia Petrovna* is an emblematic account of the social anaesthesia in which the population lived, of its loss of sensitivity in the face of repression, and above all of the people's blind faith in Soviet power: "you don't go to prison here for

² The book was published in Paris in 1965, under the title *Opustelyi dom*; a year later it was published under its original title in the New York journal "Novyi zhurnal"; it circulated in Russia for a long time typewritten in Samizdat and was finally published, 48 years after it was written, in the journal "Neva" (1988, no. 2).

no reason" (Geller 1974: 192).³ The inability to "see" reality that paralyses Sof'ia Petrovna also paralysed the majority of the country's intellectuals at that time, "children of the terrible years of Russia" to use the words of Blok, crushed by the desire to be in tune with their own time, who succumbed to lethargy, to the hypnosis of official propaganda (Nivat 1982: 197).

The story of Sof'ia Petrovna ends with the gesture of a suffering and deranged mother who betrays her son (she burns the letter containing his plea for help), because this is what society has led her to, emotionally enslaving her with its falsehoods. Next to her, omnipotent and cruel, stands the figure of a motherland Russia that annihilates her children and condemns them to ruin and death.

"Writing meant saving myself", confesses Chukovskaia in an interview in 1988, describing how what was happening was an attempt not to go mad, to understand the causes of the total blindness by which she felt herself surrounded, to prevent her own terrible experience (the disappearance in 1937 of her husband, physicist Matvei Bronshtein, arrested and executed during the Terror) from being erased from reality.

In the 1960s, literature fought fiercely to stop the spread of oblivion. It became the main forum from which to expose the enforced slumber of society, the eradication of memory, and the censorship of speech. Reconnecting with the tradition of 19th century Russian *intelligentsia*, from Herzen to Chaadaev, Chukovskaia fights against the disinformation and omissions of History in open letters, telegrams, essays and memoirs, the publication of which is never authorised but which circulate clandestinely in the Samizdat. She fights against the deliberate silence that "pushes the past towards non-existence", and, above all, she reasserts the power of the written word, its strength against the violence of the State, the independent role played by the word in the whole cultural history of Russia and the Soviet Union. The word is action, the word is salvation from amnesia: "a word of truth is invincible", "the word, sanctuary of the soul, cannot be commanded. With the word one can beguile, heal, rejoice, unmask, worry, but one cannot command" (Chukovskaia 2007: 396, 394).

In the 1980s, when a myriad of historical documents came to light after the opening of the secret archives of the Cheka-NKVD-KGB, Chukovskaia approached autobiographical writing in *Procherk* (the work continued for 16 years, until her death, and remained unfinished), retracing her own existence and that of her husband, parallel to the events of the "Ezhovshchina", in evocative detail, recalling with restrained sorrow the story of those who suffered an identical fate.

With the same attitude – there is no escaping memory – in the last years of his life, Iurii Trifonov wrote *Vremia i mesto*, a complex autobiographical novel in which

³ An identical reaction – showing the citizens' certainty that Soviet power cannot make mistakes – can be found in the pages of *Dnevnik zheny bolshevik* by Iuliia Piatnitskaia. The wife of an old Bolshevik and a member of Comintern, Piatnitskaia wavers between faith in the bright future of the revolution and love for her husband. She rejoices in the fact that the proletarian dictatorship is striking down its enemies ("the worms"), but even goes so far as to suspect her husband of being a traitor to the people. The historical meaning of the *Diary* lies precisely in the double perspective with which the author sees and assesses the events, in her dual position of victim and persecutor (Pyatnitskaya 1990).

he retraces the life of Sasha Antipov, a Muscovite writer (his moral alter ego), between stories of work, love and family, revealing Russian history from the 1930s to the 1980s in encrypted form and between the lines.

Trifonov belonged to the generation after Lidiia Chukovskaia, in the years of the Great Terror he was still a boy, but he knew state violence and repression well: his Bolshevik father was arrested in 1937 and later executed, his mother sentenced to eight years of deportation, his family ostracised. The future writer grew up with his maternal grandmother, a member of the old revolutionary guard. In August 1941, he celebrated his sixteenth birthday under the bombs, to the sound of the air-raid warning, while all around Moscow burned, as he recalls in his diary. At the end of the war, he laboured in a factory during the day and attended the Gorky *Literaturnyi institut* in the evenings. In 1950, he began publishing his works, but his debut publication, *Studenty* (which was awarded the Stalin Prize), repudiated in his maturity, was still no different from the writings of his contemporaries.

Subsequently, a profound crisis distanced him from writing, and it was only in the 1960s that History resurfaced with its imperative not to forget in the novels *Utolenie zhazhdy* (1963) and *Otblesk kostra* (1965); the first, devoted to the political changes following the 20th Congress and Soviet society's desire for truth and justice, is a text still conceived to remain within the limits allowed by the official standard; the second, which was published with significant edits, is the result of extensive work in the archives and among the papers of his father Valentin, to reconstruct his biography as a revolutionary. In *Otblesk kostra* Trifonov touches on the thorny problem of the fate of the old Bolshevik guard, exterminated as traitors to the motherland and counter-revolutionaries. Above all, Trifonov focuses on the main events of the revolutionary years, their concatenation and authenticity. The backbone of this documentary reconstruction is the fate of his father, which connects episodes and supporters of the revolution in a historical synthesis of the time (Ivanova 1984: 84).

It was only at the end of the 1960s, however, and in the 1970s that Trifonov's prose addressed the great theme of the historical tragedy that befell Russia, subtly narrating the history of the Soviet years while exposing the stereotypes, lies and opportunism of contemporary society. His attention focuses on the exploration of the meanness and wretchedness of Soviet man in refined and elegant writing that alternates between a colloquial tone and slang expressions, sometimes evoking a stream of conscience and an inner monologue: in *Vera i Zoika* (1966) he describes the contrasting personalities of the two main characters, the generous dreamer, Vera, and the cunning gossip, Zoia; in *Byl' letnii polden'* (1966) he concentrates on the memories of an old woman, the wife of a revolutionary, that surface when she returns briefly to the place where she was born; in *V gribnuiu osen'* (1968) he recalls the bewilderment of a woman after the death of her mother and the insensitivity to her grief of the world around her; more than the previous works, *Golubinaia gibel'* (1968) exposes the ruin of the Russian people, forced to give up even the intimacy of private life, their carefree everyday pastimes. It does so by narrating the pain and

loneliness of two old pensioners, forced by the bullying of a woman who lives in the same building to give up the company of three doves. The bewilderment of the main character in the short story *V gribnuu o sen'* is the same as that of every Soviet citizen, helpless and defenceless with their burden of memories, desires and sorrows within the confines of a society that prevails over the individual in every sphere. For Trifonov, the land of realised socialism is a desolate wasteland, inhabited by a society of unhappy people, who have been robbed not only of the memory of great history, but also of their private lives. Of this dehumanised, enslaved existence, one might say, quoting the protagonist of Grossman's *Vse techet*, "that barbed wire was no longer necessary, that life on this side of the wire could be compared, in its most hidden essence, to that of the huts in the concentration camps" (Grossman 1970: 55).

Trifonov makes no mention of the controversial themes of the Stalinist years, but using a colloquial tone, almost in a whisper, urges the reader to look *beyond* the words on the page, to recompose the fragments of that History that lingers, sometimes forgotten, within every one of us. In his diary from 1973, he writes: "the writer's task is to tell the story *beyond* the book; the reader must understand not only what the book is about, but also what the book *wants* to express" (Trifonov 1999, № 2). If Lidiia Chukovskaia fought to expose "the real history of entire decades, replaced by a fictitious history" and to tear down the "solid wall of fear" that separated "every man from the other who had lived through the same experiences" (Chukovskaia 2007: 8), Trifonov does not suggest demolishing the wall of falsifications or the shortcomings of official history (after a few years of thawing, in the 1960s Soviet literature once again submitted to power). His aim is not to educate the reader, supplying predefined answers, but to encourage them to decode the clues scattered throughout the book, to prompt them to reflect and draw conclusions, developing an awareness of what came out of that cruel period: the loss of social values, the disintegration of human bonds, the brutalisation of everyday life.

In *Obmen* (1969) the backdrop is again the city of Moscow, the emblematic and nerve centre of that arid Soviet present: here, an unhappy citizen, subservient to his wife, exchanges the serenity of the latter part of the life of his mother, to whom he is very close, for a new flat, following the advice of those who "know how to live" in this new reality. In contemporary Russia, men are no longer divided into superior or inferior beings, as in the case of Raskol'nikov, but into those who are able and those who are unable to adapt to the new course of communist society. Trifonov does not moralise, nor is he overly explicit in condemning the social malpractice or lack of ethics of his fellow citizens, but takes a melancholy and disillusioned approach to describing their vices and virtues.

In *Predvaritel'nye itogi* (1970), he reflects on forty years of the life of a sick and mediocre translator of poetry, Gennadii Sergeevich, with a "past numbed by crushed hopes", to whom "nothing terrible happens, just the things that happen to everyone from time to time – illness, failure, a sort of evaporation of the spirit" (Trifonov 1985–1987, 2: 100). Reflecting on the original idea of the story in the article *Neskonchaemoe nachalo* he explains why he did not end the narrative, as he had

originally intended to, with the death of the protagonist: “my project was not to reveal the fate of Gennadii Sergeevich – one fate is as good as another! – but the kind of life that had resulted from it for many and varying reasons. Of course, death also entered into this type of life, because every man, in the way that he lives in his own way, also dies. I could have ended the story with death, but in that kind of life it would have been a kind of impulse, a catharsis, a purification. Whereas my project corresponded to a life without catharsis” (Trifonov 1985–1987, 4: 537). *Dolgoe proshchanie* (1971) is another tale about the humiliation of the individual, about his loneliness: the characters adapt to daily compromise and meanness in order to achieve their modest careers in the world of theatre. They live a monotonous existence that highlights the lack of perspectives of a liberal *intelligentsia*, once again enslaved to dogma.

MAN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH HISTORY

Every man is burdened by the reflection of history. It falls on some with a violent and menacing light, on others it is barely noticeable, it only warms, but everyone is affected. (*Otblesk kostra*)

In the 1970s, with increasing determination, Trifonov focused on the role of the writer in contemporary society and his relationship with history. Then, between 1976 and 1982, the five issues of *Pamiat'*, the first Samizdat magazine of historical materials, were published, condemning the arbitrary nature of official history and, alongside the falsified rewriting of entire periods of history, the outrage of civil rights and human dignity in the USSR in no uncertain terms: the editors – we read in the first volume – consider it “their primary duty to save all historical events from oblivion” along with the names doomed to extinction, the names of those who disappeared, or were persecuted or slandered, the fates of families destroyed or annihilated, but also the names of those who punished, slandered and reported. There are no phenomena, processes or human destinies unworthy of becoming the object of historical study, there are no facts that someone is entitled to keep secret from the “profane”. “There, where collective memory is impoverished, culture too is impoverished at its very vital sources and, with culture, also morality in all its manifestations, from politics to everyday life”. Thanks to the “continuous rewriting of history in compliance with yesterday's directives and today's personification of power” the names of people who once played an important role in social, state and cultural life have been buried forever. Entire currents of thought have disappeared from the landscape of Russian civilisation. The school of orientalism and Soviet biology has been annihilated, the destinies of certain political forces (Mensheviks, revolutionary socialists) have been erased, and history has been replaced by an invented myth (*Pamiat'* 1976: V–XI).

The *fil rouge* of many articles published in *Pamiat'* is the theme of repression, which tragically punctuated time in the Soviet Union from 1917 onwards and indiscriminately touched all spheres of social life: factories, the countryside, politics, culture, science. With similar intent, Trifonov reweaves the threads of history, meditates on the unstoppable passage of time, writes about the past that is always present in everyone's today, indulges in the meaning of memory and oblivion, respect and insult of time ("what is memory? A blessing or a torment? Why are we given it?") and concludes: "memory is given to us as a relentless, devouring inner judgement, or more precisely, a self-punishment", the pain of what cannot be forgotten and must be remembered, yet in its torments there is also the consolation of not becoming detached from what one has loved, "memory is a reward for what man holds most dearest and has lost" (Trifonov 1985–1987, 3: 418). Constantly projecting the narrative backwards – to the revolution, to the civil war, to the purges – in *Starik* (1976) the writer narrates the efforts of an old communist, Pavel Letunov, to prove the innocence of a comrade, unjustly sentenced to death during the civil war. Much of the book is devoted to the tragic historical moments of the past, reflected in the fires that enveloped central Russia in 1972, and to the old revolutionary's present. Using Aesopian language, Trifonov brings into focus the persecution of the Don Cossacks in 1919, the waves of repression in the 1920s and 1930s, mass terror and political fanaticism, interweaving them with everyday themes of the present – old age, indifference to others, the pursuit of wealth. And language mimics the difficulty of narrating history with hyphens, suspension points, litotes, questions.

The ambiguous atmosphere of the Seventies under Brezhnev, poised between repression and tolerance, cautious openness and ideological prohibitions, allows Trifonov, a philosophical observer of the human soul, to sketch the torment of Ol'ga, the main character of *Drugaia zhizn'* (1976), who – following the untimely death of her husband – retraces her life, her marriage, her conflicting relationship with her mother-in-law, her love for her daughter, petty meannesses at work, jealousies and friendships, in a long and desperate female inner monologue, akin to the confessions of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* or of the husband in his *A Gentle Creature*, filled with unanswered questions, expressed in a feverish, anguished, almost somnambulist tone.

There are numerous references in the diary, which Trifonov kept for years, to Dostoevsky's work and writing, from which he quotes whole sentences or passages from *Demons*, *Crime and Punishment*, judgements on realism and on the Russian people. He notes in amazement in April 1962 the strange eloquence of Dostoevsky's heroes: "Dostoevsky's dialogues are not the habitual dialogues of human beings, men do not usually express themselves in this way... these dialogues reveal the innermost core of man, character and ideas, and precisely because an uninterrupted revelation of new aspects of character and new nuances of ideas takes place, the reader is not struck by the unnaturalness of Dostoevsky's dialogues" (Trifonov 1998, № 11). The uninterrupted dialogue with Dostoevsky emerges very vividly in the novel *Neterpenie* (1973), dedicated to the revolutionary movement *Narodnaia Volia*

and to the birth of terrorism, in which the origins of Dostoevsky's prophetic characters – the Nechaevs, Verkhovenskiis and Shigalevs – lie.

Trifonov's novels, however, in which the interrelation between past and present, between the terrible Russian history and the events of today appears most vividly are *Dom na naberezhnoi* (1976) and *Vremia i mesto* (1980), in which the account of today, in a retrospective tangle, embraces the entire Soviet period, evoked by *flash-backs, digressions and* lapidary direct interventions of the narrator's ego. Two novels linked by the dimension of memory, which represented an absolute novelty in the sphere of Soviet fiction, in which the writer focuses his attention on "those who have endured history" to quote Camus, on the unsuspecting apathetic citizens of the USSR, on the inner conflict of the *intelligent*, unable to adapt to the surrounding world that denies history, but also unable to remove or expose a past that torments him.

The pages of both novels are animated by a world of unresolved men, either good-natured, superficial or cynical men, whose inner stories are intertwined with the anxieties and falsifications of the Soviet present, an amorphous mass of individuals, crushed by fear or governed by an incomprehensible need to exist. From the notebooks and diaries we learn of the writer's enormous work on their individual elusive silhouettes, worn down by family conflicts, unfulfilling professions, regrets, perpetually searching for compromises to survive.

In his Nobel speech, Camus had lucidly pinpointed the writer's mission "in the convulsions of time": to reject lies, resist oppression, "to be at the service of truth and freedom" (Camus 1958). With the same lucidity, Trifonov, a sensitive seismographer of his era, places himself at the service of truth, recreating the past to oppose oblivion, sadly narrating a defeated, exhausted and unhappy society, crushed between the past and the present of history. And his reading of Russia's past-present skilfully circumvents censorship thanks to the "unspoken", the allusion of what is behind the story, the metaphors, the sudden narrative deviations. In the wake of Chekhov's writing (Chekhov "was the first to discover the great power of the unspoken", he writes in the essay *Pravda i krasota*), the writer artfully uses subtexts, questions, turns of phrase, blank spaces and sudden interruptions. Also from Chekhov comes his analysis of the character of man, with his desires, passions and frustrations: "Chekhov did not write about humanity, but about men", not "about human existence (*bytie cheloveka*), but about the life of a concrete man, Uncle Vanya" (Trifonov 1985–1987, 4: 522–523).

Concrete men (including historical personalities) are, in fact, the protagonists of *Dom na naberezhnoi*, who reside in the huge building opposite the Kremlin, built by the architect Boris Iofan in the early 1930s for members of the *Nomenklatura*, many of whom later disappeared, like Trifonov's father, in the Stalinist purges. An endless phalanstery of "spacious rooms with high ceilings", featuring the technological breakthroughs of the time (telephone, gramophone, radio, running water, lift), equipped with a cinema, gymnasium, library, kindergarten, outpatient clinic, post office, laundry, canteen and carpentry shop, which can accommodate up to five

thousand people and, with its location overlooking the Kremlin, seems to reproduce, in its exclusive space, Stalin's ideal dialogue with the revolutionaries administering the construction of socialism (Piretto 2010: 137–138).⁴

This house “with a thousand windows, almost a whole city or even a whole country” (Trifonov 1985–1987, 2: 372) is the privileged place from which the memory of the protagonist, the opportunistic Muscovite academic Vadim Glebov, moves. Accustomed to erasing what he dislikes (“he strove not to remember, what he did not remember, ceased to exist, was never there”, Trifonov 1985–1987, 2: 483), he finds himself, against his will, recalling the events of past history in successive sequences, “like at the theatre: act one, act two, act three, etc. Every time, the character seems a little bit different, but years, decades even, pass between one act and the next” (Trifonov 1985–1987, 2: 370). In the interview granted to “Literaturnoe obozrenie” after its publication, Trifonov specifies his intent, to perceive the “mysterious phenomenon” of time, “to portray the race of time, to understand what happens to men when everything around them changes, to suggest to the reader that “this ‘thread that connects the ages’ runs through every one of us and is the backbone of history” (Trifonov 1985–1987, 4: 101).

Time moves the development of the events and the evolution of personalities (“man is similar to his time”, but it is also the driving force behind historical variations); the plot of the novel, which begins and ends in the 1970s, does not unfold consistently. The different time planes are amalgamated and confused by continuous interruptions or digressions. Through flashbacks and forays into the past, Glebov recalls his own childhood in the post-revolutionary years when, under the nickname Vad'ka “Loaf of bread”, he used to sneak into the riverside house as a classmate of the boys who lived there. And with good-natured irony, Trifonov sketches their adventures at school, their skirmishes and thuggish rivalries between *gangs*.

The bulk of the novel evokes the years following the Second World War, characterised by pride in the victory and hopes (soon to be dashed) for greater prosperity and intellectual freedom: some of Glebov's friends died in the war, the tenants of the house have changed and are more down-to-earth, the snooty political inspectors and lift attendants are no longer present at the various entrances, only in the stairwells do the smells of the past persist (“shashlyk, fish, tomatoes, sometimes expensive cigarettes and dogs”). Now Glebov is dating Sonia, the daughter of the Marxist professor Ganchuk who still lives in the house on the riverbank, to which he is irresistibly drawn by “the smell of the carpets, the circle traced on the ceiling by the huge lampshade on the desk, the walls lined with books up to the ceiling and on top, lined up like soldiers, the small plaster busts of philosophers” (Trifonov 1985–1987, 2: 405). Anguished by the developments in his own academic career, by a tangle of

⁴ Most recently, in 2017, a study by Russian-American historian Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government. A Saga of the Russian Revolution* described Boris Iofan's building and its tenants as a metaphor for the homeland of socialism realised in the Stalinist variant, reconstructing its history from numerous memoiristic accounts and an extensive bibliography related to Russian history.

light-heartedness and fear (“fear is the most imperceptible and secret spring of our conscience”, Trifonov 1985–1987, 2: 476), Glebov is incapable of acting in the present and, when the intellectual and political prestige of Sonia’s father is attacked, he manages to avoid taking sides, saved by chance, by the death of his grandmother.

Intervening in the narrative in the first person, Trifonov claims the role of objective witness and assigns the story being told the value of truth with respect to his hero’s forgetfulness: “for a long time, I saw this Vad’ka “Loaf of bread” as an enigmatic character. Perhaps because so many people wanted to make friends with him. He was made in such a way that he adapted to all those who approached him, neither good nor bad, neither very greedy nor very generous, he was not a ‘pure knight of science’ but nor was he a nerd, neither coward nor brave, he was not particularly clever but he wasn’t a simpleton either. [...] He was an absolute ‘nobody’, Vadik “Loaf of bread”. And, as I realised later, it is a rare gift: to be a ‘nobody’. Those who are capable of being ingeniously ‘nobody’ go far” (Trifonov 1985–1987, 2: 433).

The critical voice of the narrating ego continually insinuates itself into the narrator’s story to portray a time of irreparable silences and unspoken words, of arbitrary cruelty and moral emptiness, to highlight the mechanisms of self-denial, of compromise. Trifonov’s memory obeys the role of critical conscience of contemporary society undertaken by the writer: with lucid bitterness, and with no nostalgic accents, he recalls human meannesses and responsibilities of the Soviet past, points out the historical omissions of a society that has now abandoned all ethical dilemmas, and underpins the description with countless details of everyday life, with significant objects, symbols of power or wealth: “the more objects you possess, the more important you are”, says the narrator of *Dom na naberezhnoi*, the loss of these objects condemns you to social exclusion: “whoever left that house ceased to exist” (Trifonov 1985–1987, 2: 449).

In the novel *Vremia i mesto*,⁵ completed in December 1980, Trifonov’s autobiographical power is even more manifest: the writer interweaves the narrative with the memory of history, linking historical periods and the existential choices of the characters, dividing the story into chapters inspired by emblematic places from his own memory: the beaches of the 1930s (1937), the central park (1939), the Iakimanka (1941), the alley behind the Belorusskaia station (1943–44), the Tverskoi Avenue (1944–1951), the Trubnaia (1953), the Bol’shaia Bronnaia (1956–57), the Moscow suburbs (1969–1980). In a counterpoint of static and dynamic, every place refers to a different period of Russian history, to significant years in the life of the writer and of Soviet citizens (disappearances, the commitment of relatives to the

⁵ The novel was published after the author’s death in the journal “Druzhba narodov” (1981, n. 8–9), then reprinted in *Sobranie sochinenii* with significant edits (on censorship editing, see Venturi 1984). Trifonov’s last unfinished book, *Disappearance*, an autobiographical story about his father’s arrest, was published in the same journal in 1987. He devoted many years to writing it, discontinuously, certain that it would never pass the censorship barrier.

children of those who disappeared, Stalin's death,⁶ people returning from the concentration camps). In a game of mirrors, political and social events acquire prominence thanks to their connection with the events of each person's private life, because only in human contact can one find the strength to "bear the unbearable" (Trifonov 1985–1987, 4: 442).

According to Vittorio Strada, Trifonov creates a "transfigured chronicle" of the past in the present, where private history is interwoven with public history, where life is a memory of the post-Stalin Soviet era, a past that is "condensed into an amorphous and heavy mass that only in memory and reflection is filtered and refined" (Strada 1985: 170–171).

With a stern eye, Trifonov performs a self-analysis, assessing his own uncertainties, hesitations and fears, wistfully questioning himself about time slipping away and erasing everything: "Is it necessary to remember? My God, that is just as silly as saying: is it necessary to live? Remembering and living are one and the same, so connected that one cannot be destroyed without destroying the other, and all together they make up a verb that has no definition" (Trifonov 1985–1987, 4: 260). With the attitude of Herzen, who considered *My Past and Thoughts* "the reflection of history in a man who just happened to be passing by", he reflects on the task of the writer in modern society and the importance of memoir writing as a significant trace of an era, leaving an exemplary warning to future generations against the spread of oblivion and in defence of freedom of thought and expression.

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⁶ Quite impressive are the pages that allude to Stalin's death without naming it (censored in *Sobranie sochinenii*) and to the crowd that "like black liquid pitch" pours towards the House of Trade Unions, where the deceased is exposed, roaring "with inhuman screams", "a mass of caps, collars, bare heads, gathered in a crush so compact that they cannot move", "a congealed river of stones, a frozen flow. The blood circulation had stopped" ("Druzhba narodov", 1981, n. 8–9).

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