

Why We Read and Write

Were it not for readers and writers, the very ideas of truth and openness might have disappeared behind the iron curtain forever.

Periodically a moment occurs when the full human and social meaning of the acts of reading and writing is dramatized with a clarity that renders it impossible to miss. As a result of *glasnost* and *perestroika*—the opening of the iron curtain mind—the present is such a moment. It's true that recent events in Russia and Eastern Europe are seldom discussed, either here or there, in the context of reading and writing. People are preoccupied with collapsing economies on one hand and prospects for ending the cold war on the other; they believe that these are the vital, bread and butter realities and practicalities that will determine the future of civilization.

All quite understandable, of course. Still, it's worth pausing to remember that, had it not been for writers and readers, the very ideas of truth and openness—concepts crucial to the current renewal of world hope—might have disappeared for good behind the iron curtain. A vast propaganda machine devoted itself for the better part of a century to the manufacture of falsehood. A vast, repressive, bureaucratic apparatus undertook to wipe out dissent. Yet because truth-telling story writers, poets, and novelists endured appalling punishment rather than stop writing, and because readers were willing to take extreme risks to avail themselves of underground manuscript copies of their work, the memory of a standard of truth survived. The architects of re-

form were ultimately wholly dependent upon that memory.

What exactly was it that the brave men and women of Russian letters contributed to their country and to the world? First, knowledge of what it felt like to cope, day by day, with a government that lied ceaselessly to itself, its people, and the world. Second, knowledge of how the individual person could try to live decently and honorably, in right relationships to fellow human beings, in an age and culture that appeared totally oblivious of ethical obligation. The great works of the Stalin and post-Stalin periods—the greatest, arguably, is Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Cancer Ward*—

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confirmed for their readers the sanity of feelings both of outrage and of confidence that one was not alone: there were others near or remote whose daily responses—and aspirations to honor—matched one's own.

People who have not weathered massive repressions of individual thought find it difficult to believe in the cultural centrality of reading and writing. The terrible unslaked thirst and hunger for truth, the fearful sense of being cut off from every other thinking mind—these are, blessedly, wholly unfamiliar experiences.

But however unpleasant and distant they may seem, they are experiences that need somehow to be brought alive, here and now, in order that we retain our grasp on the fundamental values underlying the acts of reading and writing. We do not write and read primarily in order to ensure that this nation's employers can count on a competent, competitive work force. We write and read in order to know each other's responses, to connect ourselves more fully with the human world, and to strengthen the habit of truth-telling in our midst. No national resource is more precious—more essential to our promise and our true security—than that habit. And no knowledge is more essential to the preservation of the ideal of community than the knowledge of common feeling and common longing. □

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