

The End of Art-Speech

Aleksandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn 1918–2008

The BBC naturally reported the death of Solzhenitsyn—and in 2008 Radio 4 thought it important news—as that of the prime opponent of Stalinism, who revealed the extent of the Gulag. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was mentioned, then “other, later novels”. That is not good enough. Solzhenitsyn’s work was the latest, perhaps the last demonstration of the power of art. Even the magisterial three-volume *Gulag Archipelago* is not as strong as the fiction. *Ivan Denisovich* was so influential not just because of the facts it conveyed but because it is a work of art of the direct truth-telling Tolstoyan kind. Its impact made a great though not measurable political difference, perhaps more in western Europe than in Russia, but if it had had no political effect at all it would still have had the permanent life of a work of art.

Matthew Arnold, as is well known, called poetry a criticism of life. Solzhenitsyn’s novels go deeper than denunciation; the judgement they make of Russia is by way of convincing portayal of whole intertwined lives. *Cancer Ward* is probably the best of the lot, and least directly about Soviet totalitarianism. The cancer ward of the title is a sort of functioning university (and the book has something in common with a Socratic dialogue), but only as it is a beautifully made evocation of a real cancer ward. The final sequence *The Red Wheel*, not much known in the West, is about Russia before the Bolsheviks seized power; it is on the borderline between historical novel and history proper, but works (when it does, being too mixed and expansive) by the convincingness of the lives of individually created characters.

To have a criticism of life you have to have a writer, in this case a creative artist as commonly understood, but also a readership capable of the requisite seriousness. If there is more to life than you would ever guess from novelists fashionable in the West, if (for instance) politics is actually a serious matter, this is so only if there is a community of readers who manage to be serious about life. Eastern Europe in the decadence of the Soviet Empire was a place with common readers, if only of *samizdat*, and Solzhenitsyn had large sales in the West and serious readers. We are not apologetic about our own record: see for instance Robert Marchant in *Human World* 10, 1973, and the following editorial exclamation: “It makes a great difference to modern life that, despite all the appearances, it is still possible for a great novelist to do his work, get it published, and be recognised . . .” People looked out for the next Solzhenitsyn eagerly! and the first version of *August 1914* was a literary event.

After the implosion of the Soviet Union, after his illegal exile, Solzhenitsyn returned to Russia and lost his audience. His recommendation of a constitutional monarchy was ignored, and he died not exactly forgotten but with a much diminished presence. Though the West was not the centre of his interest, and he of course saw the West as a Russian, he was as true a critic of Western decadence as of the Gulag system: which is not what the newly freed ex-Soviets wanted to hear. In Russia there is some revival of the Orthodox Church, and still some seriousness about politics, but they have imported some of the worst sorts of Westernisation. Leavis remarked, prophetically, that poetry no longer matters. Can art-speech matter in the new Russia any more than in the West? (The new president is reported to be devoted to heavy metal and hard rock.)

Solzhenitsyn’s books should go on being read, particularly *Cancer Ward* and *The First Circle*.