

The Works and Dadys of Svistonov

Konstantin Vaginov

Howard Shernoff, Translator

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The order went out in 1934 from the Soviet government to arrest Vaginov. His writing was far too independent for Communist ideologues. He died before the order could be fulfilled, but this book, translated for the first time into English, gives substantial evidence of his perceptiveness and integrity.

Vaginov (pronounced Va-GEE-nof, with a hard g) tells the story of Andrey Svistonov, a writer with little imagination, whose work consists mainly of rewriting the works of others, especially those dealing with the distant past. He decides one day to “collect” characters for his next work, and he begins observing the people he runs into each day around Leningrad. Pretending to befriend them, he plumbs the depths of their thinking, spots their weaknesses, then transplants them into his book. When they read his drafts they are horrified at the way their “friend” has treated them. “For Svistonov,” the narrator says, “people did not divide into good and evil, pleasant and unpleasant. They divided into necessary for his novel and unnecessary.” Finally, Svistonov disappoints and alienates so many people that he has no world to live in and simply begins living in his novel: “Svistonov had crossed over into his creation altogether.”

Vaginov’s novel, however, goes beyond the story of one cynical writer. Between the lines, the book is a portrait of an artistic society cornered, desperately trying to continue its work while dodging the thugs of Bolshevism. There is an underlying sadness in the book, reflecting the problem facing someone who wants to write the truth in Soviet times. Referring to Svistonov,

the author says, “He wrote about his own epoch as another writer might write about distant times not entirely familiar to the reader. He generalized events of everyday life instead of individualizing them. Unwittingly, he described the present using a historical method that was extraordinarily insulting to his contemporaries.”

Vaginov is a good stylist. His descriptions of the people and environment around him can be stunning. As a man stood inside his house, “Snow fell outside the windows with splendid little thuds.” His greatest contribution in this book, however, may be his portrait of the dilemma in which he and his fellow artists found themselves in the decade after the Bolshevik uprising. Artists who wanted to continue their art had to conform to the materialistic worldview of the new government. If one didn’t conform to this view, one would become increasingly isolated and eventually made irrelevant and eliminated. The Works and Days of Svistonov shows the writer who has chosen, not out of courage but simply because he couldn’t think of any other way, to pursue the latter course, with the predictable result that he simply disappears.

KEITH COLLINS (May / June 2001)

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