CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Fedor Gladkov

Cement

Цемент (Cement)

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“The central event of our century remains the Russian Revolution.” (Howe, 207) Even if it does not narrate the revolutionary October, *Cement* contains much of the revolutionary unrest that did not abate with the turning of the calendar, but reverberated across time (especially the 1920s, but also the following decades) and space (Russian and Soviet metropolises and provinces). The political dimension of this novel is generally recognised by critics in the specific design of the New Woman and in the adherence to the normative poetics of socialist realism (this especially applies to the numerous revised editions of the novel). However, the fact that the first edition of *Cement* negotiates rather than imposes the idea of revolution has been neglected by critics – and this is essentially the political and truly revolutionary dimension of this novel.

In *Cement*, the pull factor of the narrative is not the male character Gleb Chumalov, but his (ex-)wife Dasha. The action is set in a cruel environment framed by a cement factory nearthe inhuman, almost lunar expanse of barren seashores, where Dasha as an individual remains the true, if somewhat tragic, example of the New Woman. Against this backdrop of a harsh natural landscape and unrelenting social and wartime circumstances (the Russian Civil War and the general restructuring of social institutions and morality are two processes that play out in parallel), Gladkov’s heroine abandons her pre-war femininity to fulfil immediate revolutionary tasks. This is why Dasha is referred to early on as “[t]he new, proletarian revolutionary. The equal fighter in the construction of socialism. The comrade of the workers. The tireless, self-sacrificing party fighter. The nameless woman in the army of millions of the revolution. But also the leader in the committees, on the economic front – the red director” (Biha, 25). To a contemporary reader, however, Dasha’s commitment to building the new world may seem strange, even disturbing. For not only does she shed the pre-revolutionary identity of a wife bound to home and hearth – or what is considered the traditional private sphere – she even relinquishes her role as mother. Leaving her only child in a crèche, she notices how her daughter’s health slowly but inexorably deteriorates – until she can no longer be saved. This episode is varied in another, later case in the novel, in which the former bourgeois (and therefore potentially vacillating) intellectual Sergej discovers the body of a dead infant lying abandoned by the river. People pass by without bothering to cover the little corpse, and Sergej feels a strong pain in his chest, while at the same time speaking to himself (“without the participation of his consciousness”, 449): “It must be so […]. That’s the way it is.” (449)

Women and men, factory workers and intellectuals, poor and bourgeois, voluntarist individuals and careerists, protagonists of different political colours (red, white, green) pass before the reader’s eyes – all changed by the great event of the Revolution, and many shaken. Starting from a crisis situation – the standstill in cement production, which Gleb desperately wants to restart – *Cement* constructs the revolution not as a fait accompli, but as a chain of crises, with Gleb and Dasha’s marital and personal crisis virtually playing only a minor role. Perhaps the central question or

common denominator of the events is the question of building a new society on the ruins of the old: how can workers, who have been taught and disciplined to obey the masters (capital owners, directors and engineers), take the initiative into their own hands? What is needed and what sacrifices must be made to reinvent privacy and the intimate life so that a woman ceases to be a hatcher (an example of this is Dasha and Gleb's neighbour Motya)? Is it even possible to build a communist economy in a social and natural environment that is so cruel and threatening, with class enemies still roaming the land – and what happens when concessions to the capitalist mode of production are made (e.g. with the introduction of the New Economic Policy [NEP] in 1921)? Glatkov creates his characters in such a way that they raise these questions in an exemplary manner, and he presents a tableau that is by no means exonerating: a revolutionary new beginning is not a clean and innocent experiment. It demands sacrifices, not only from the children who are still the offspring of the old era, but also from the innermost feelings of the characters who remain attached to their pre-revolutionary passions – to have a private life (as Gleb still desires), to be seduced by the lure of the new and glittering goods (like Polya, Gleb and Dasha's close friend, when the NEP is introduced), but also to accept the violent suppression of members of one's own (bourgeois) family for the sake of the higher goal of eliminating the class enemy (to which Sergej submits) or to tolerate the careerist rise of counter-revolutionary elements (like comrade Bad'in) if the collective of workers and party members agrees.

Cement is a political novel, as Irving Howe understands this phenomenon, if only because in it "political ideas play a dominant role [and] the political milieu is the dominant setting" (Howe, 19). But this novel is also more than just a container of ideas and milieus. It was repeatedly adapted to keep pace with later changing Soviet politics and poetics – including Stalinist repatriarchalisation and the invention of socialist realism. While the original version can be read as reflective of the multiple ideological and political conflicts and controversies of the early 1920s, the later adaptations served as a tool to support the conservative politics (including gender politics) of the Stalin era. As Pavla Veselá notes, "*Cement* is one of the many novels that changed along with the real world" (118) – but this too is political art. The "cleaning up" of Cement (Busch, 355), its "hardening" (Veselá), affected not only the gender constellation, but also the style: after being criticised by authoritative voices in the Soviet literary public, e.g. Maxim Gorky, Glatkov increasingly toned down the ornamentalist and expressionist elements of his style (which in the original version revolves around the symbolism of blood and uses images from the animal world) and removed the folkloristic idiom and obscene scenes (such as rape). Also removed were references to Bolshevik ruthlessness, signs of terror and scenes illustrating injustice in the lower ranks of the party, including party purges (Busch, 356). The result is that the novel, especially after the 1941 revision, evolved towards the new ideal of Soviet literature – its "beskonfliktnost'," i.e. conflictlessness (Busch, 359).

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