

# The Imaginative Dialectic in the Novels of Victor Serge

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*I have agitated in seven countries*

*I have written twenty books*

*I own nothing. Behind us*

*A revolution gone astray*

*And so many massacres*

*As to inspire a certain dizziness,*

*Yet I have more confidence*

*In the future than ever before.<sup>1</sup>*

These eight lines capture the life's journey of Victor Serge, his struggles, his writing, the interactions of revolutionary victory and defeat ("a certain dizziness"), and his enduring optimism. Most socialists are aware of Serge from his nonfiction reporting and as the Bolshevik revolutionary and Left Oppositionist who likely coined the term "totalitarianism" in describing the transformation of the 1917 Russian Revolution into its opposite, the Stalinist counter-revolution.<sup>2</sup> But appreciating Serge solely for his nonfiction limits the scope of what he has to offer. Peter Sedgwick, one of Serge's translators, attributed the emphasis on Serge's nonfiction to "impersonal political thinking."<sup>3</sup> This sentiment was held as well by Trotsky, who considered Serge's artistic writing overly psychological and "insufficiently political."<sup>4,5</sup> Serge acknowledged the difference between political writing and artistic writing:

Political intelligence, based though it is in the revolutionary's case upon deep idealism, demands a scientific and pragmatic armour, and subordinates itself to the pursuit of strictly defined social ends. The artist, on the contrary, is always delving for his raw material in the subconscious, in the pre-conscious, in intuition, in a lyrical inner life which is rather hard to define.<sup>6</sup>

When Serge's novels are read, they are often subject to a kind of reductionism that ascribes value

only to their depiction of political issues and events. Thus, the polarization of politics and art is maintained, and the political left, stuck in its “pragmatic armour,” is deprived of the richness and insights that Serge’s art provides, a way of understanding how human beings respond and relate to each other before, during, and after a revolution. Serge’s imagination allows us to appreciate revolutionary contradictions at a level of complexity that logic alone cannot reach. C.L.R. James was one of the few Marxist thinkers who appreciated the importance of “imaginative structures” as a way in which human beings mediate thought and activity, giving cultural phenomena political meaning.<sup>7</sup>

Victor Serge integrated art and politics in his novels. He wrote seven novels which can be divided into the two groups originally conceptualized by Richard Greeman as Serge’s “witness novels.”<sup>8</sup> The first group, written while Serge was still in Russia, includes *Men in Prison* [1930], *Birth of Our Power* [1931], and *Conquered City* [1932], and entail the contradictions and ambivalences within revolutionary victory. This “cycle of revolution” is followed by a second group, the “cycle of resistance,” written when Serge was in exile. It includes *Midnight in the Century* [1939], *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* [1942], *Unforgiving Years* (1945), and *The Long Dusk* [1946]. Serge explores the contradictions inherent in resistance to Stalinism in these books. Richard Greeman, translator of most of Serge’s novels, points out that the two cycles together address the contradictory nature of defeat in victory (the seeds of authoritarianism in Bolshevism) and victory in defeat (the resistance of Oppositionists to Stalinist persecution).<sup>9,10</sup>

### **Overview of Serge’s Novels**

Serge delves deeply into the psyches of his characters, into their relationships with their circumstances. He does so in a manner which reveals *how* consciousness develops from both internal and external contradictions over time, and how self-activity occurs on an individual, social, and political level. In all his novels, Serge portrays his characters as multi-dimensional, giving them sometimes both contradictory and conflicting thoughts and feelings. He develops agency in his characters; they are never depicted as wholly passive victims of their circumstances, but always as actors in their own history.

Taken together, Serge’s novels show a progression of consciousness in men and women who were committed Bolsheviks, who became Oppositionists, and who were then persecuted by the Stalinist regime. This examination of individual and collective consciousness becomes even more meaningful as many of Serge’s characters reappear in several novels, allowing the reader to observe changes in a character’s consciousness over time.

### **The Dialectic and Victor Serge**

The word “dialectic” has become ubiquitous in political writing, often with the unfortunate assumption readers know what it means. I use the Marxist-Hegelian interpretation of the dialectic, one of human movement, self-activity, and overcoming previous limitations of an individual’s or group’s essential human being.<sup>11</sup> This is a version of the dialectic through which we can understand the process of changing consciousness; of how people see their circumstances as “impossible,” and the ways in which they begin to supersede that impossibility. This dialectic presupposes that people’s ideas, and their social groups, have internal contradictions, or negativity, which can lead to a change in consciousness and activity that negates this negativity.<sup>12</sup> This is part of the “mediation” Hegel speaks of in reference to the transition of something confronting its limit and becoming something else.<sup>13</sup>

What are the connections between Serge and the dialectic? In re-reading Serge’s *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, I was struck by his very first sentence:

Even before I emerged from childhood, I seem to have experienced, deeply at heart, that paradoxical feeling which was to dominate me all through the first part of my life: *that of living in a world without any possible escape, in which there was nothing for it but to fight for an impossible escape.*<sup>14</sup>

This sentence provides the lens through which we can view Serge's life and work, and captures that essential aspect of the Marxist dialectic, the creative principle of transcendent self-movement beyond limits.

In Marx's interpretation of the Hegelian dialectic, alienated labor was the limit, the negation of the worker's full human being. Because Marx saw human beings as creative beings, he saw them as capable of superseding, or negating, that alienation, as subjective agents of their own history, in what Raya Dunayevskaya called "the process of becoming."<sup>15</sup> This relationship between circumstances which negated human essence and the struggle for transcendence of those circumstances was the Hegelian double negative, the "the negation of the negation."<sup>16</sup> The dialectic meant, as Marx paraphrased Hegel, "in the midst of degradation, a revolt against degradation."<sup>17</sup> If Hegel's dialectic remained at the level of thought, and Marx's dialectic described the contradictions of classes, then Victor Serge takes the dialectic to an even deeper individual and social level, as he portrays his characters confronting the crises of their lives.<sup>18</sup> It is in these novels that Serge explores the various ways people "in the midst of degradation" revolt against that degradation. He explores how people move from revolutionary enthusiasm to early amorphous doubts about the revolution (early negation), to more specific doubts, and finally to a need to transcend their circumstances and take actions (negation of the negation) which allows hope for the future.

Serge developed the concept of a revolutionary writer's "double duty,"<sup>19</sup> an acknowledgment that the revolution contains contradictions within itself. "Double duty" meant the duty to defend the revolution against its external enemies, but also against the internal forces of destruction carried within the revolution and *within the people who made it*, of counter-revolution—bureaucratization, authoritarianism, repression, and dogma. Over the course of Serge's novels, his characters struggle with this "double duty." They struggle with themselves and among themselves, in maintaining their faith in socialism and the ideals of 1917, while confronting the realities of Stalinism.

### **Serge's Concept of the Novel**

Serge thought a great deal about the meaning of the novel. He wrote at a time when most Russian writers were increasingly constrained by Stalinism, when "socialist realism" of the proletarian novel was the only approved genre. He had respect and empathy for his fellow writers as he witnessed "the smothering of their creative freedom...with their humiliations and their suicides."<sup>20,21</sup>

Serge did not believe that the concept of a proletarian novel had meaning and would not have meaning until enough time had passed for a mature socialist society to develop its own culture. He was interested, however, in finding "a new road for the novel." He wanted to show human beings "as they really live, dismantling their inner workings and penetrating deep into their souls."<sup>22</sup> He wanted to avoid a single protagonist, without obliterating the individual uniqueness of his characters, by looking at individuals in their interrelations as a group. This approach came from his concept of the relationship between the individual and the social group. Each person's personality, he wrote, "contains many possible destinies...through countless roots, affinities and communications...it is mingled with other human existences."<sup>23</sup> The writer's role was to "liberate the confused forces one feels fermenting within oneself and by which the individual dives into the collective subconscious...writing thus becomes a search of polypersonality, a way of living several destinies, or penetrating the Other."<sup>24</sup> In this regard, Serge's theories resemble those of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), the Russian philosopher and literary critic who coined the term "heteroglossia,"

describing existence of several voices, and differing viewpoints interacting with each other in a novel. As they interact, these differing voices create still newer and different meanings. For Bakhtin, the novel “as a genre is dialogic, developing, self-critical, in process, inconclusive, containing a diversity of social speech types and individual voices interpenetrating each other.”<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting that the origin of the word “dialectic” comes from the Greek ‘dialektike,’ meaning discourse between two or more people, or even within a single person, holding different points of view.

The important role of differing voices in Serge’s novels presents a complex challenge to his translators, who must be able to capture the tonal and emotional variations among the characters, as well as colloquial differences, and the changes in meaning that words may have between languages and over time. It is to our great benefit that all of Serge’s translators, particularly Richard Greeman, Peter Sedgwick, Ian Birchall, Mitchell Abidor, and Willard R. Trask, fulfill what Walter Benjamin called “the task of the translator”: “The unfathomable, the mysterious, the poetic something that a translator can reproduce only if he is also a poet.”<sup>26</sup> The nuances of meaning and language in these translations that enable us to savor Serge’s art, is in great part due to the poetic skill of his translators.

### ***Conquered City***

I will focus primarily on three of Serge’s novels, *Conquered City*,<sup>27</sup> *Midnight in the Century*,<sup>28</sup> and *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*,<sup>29</sup> encompassing a time frame roughly from 1919-1936 in Russia.

*Conquered City* takes place in an embattled Petrograd during the Civil War, in 1919, beginning with a panoramic view of the city. The opening scenes place Red Petrograd in winter, covered in white snow and frozen rivers: “This white, silent, weightless shroud stretched out to infinity in time and space.” We get a visceral image of what the book is about, as the newly created revolution, the Red city, is at risk of succumbing to the Whites, weakened further by cold, hunger, epidemics, and popular discontent.

We meet Comrade Ryzhik, whom we will follow through this and the next two novels. Ryzhik joined the revolution in 1914; by 1919 he has become a bureaucratic official, giving and receiving orders. He sleeps where he works, in an abandoned palace, along with other functionaries, where “mattresses were laid out on the floor of the great reception rooms, transforming them into dormitories.” Here Serge uses one of his frequent literary tactics, that of metaphor. By juxtaposing palaces and dormitories, Serge contrasts Tsarist reality with a revolutionary one, as reflected in people’s lives, showing the symbolic and subjective reality beneath the surface appearance of objective facts.<sup>30</sup>

Ryzhik is carrying out orders to arrest people from a list transmitted by the early Cheka, or secret police. At the same time, he begins to have “murky second thoughts ... stirring under his brow, in those dark corners where we tirelessly, pitilessly repress a strange multitude of desires, dreams, suspicions.” He reads a newspaper announcement of the execution of “counter-revolutionaries, spies, and criminals” and sees the name of one of his old friends. “Names take strange shapes on the list, coming to life, then bizarrely dying before our eyes ... And the man reading these names thinks of himself; a double within him, who would never admit his own existence, substitutes his name for these names ... his life for these extinct lives.” In *Conquered City*, we see in Ryzhik and others, nascent forms of doubt about aspects of the revolution. The characters in *Conquered City* feel ambivalence, the beginnings of negation of their previous revolutionary enthusiasm and activity, and we begin to understand how the Hegelian dialectic of continuing negations occurs.

Ryzhik’s early uneasiness will eventually give way to more specific criticisms, leading him to join what will become the Left Opposition. That opposition will be the negation of Stalinism’s ability to

fully eliminate all dissent. This novel, as with all of Serge's novels, shows that the "revolt against degradation" is not instantaneous, but is a process that develops over time, and may be different for various characters. By the end of the novel Rhyzik, feeling suffocated by what he sees, tells himself the three magic words, "It is necessary." He is not yet ready for the second negation, for action against what will become Stalinism.

Although *Conquered City* takes place in 1919, Serge wrote the book in 1931, after he had joined the Opposition and was expelled from the Communist Party (CP). His own political transformation, from anarchist to Bolshevik to Oppositionist, and his historical hindsight, enabled him to articulate his characters' early ambivalence about the Red Terror. In 1919, however, when he himself was in Petrograd, and new to Bolshevism, he, like his characters in *Conquered City*, was not entirely willing to look beyond his own revolutionary zeal.

In *Revolution in Danger*, a collection of essays written between 1919 and 1921, he anticipated the character of Rhyzhik when he wrote, "it is important to stress that the measures enforced by the revolution, terrible as some of them may be, have been made necessary by the audacity, perseverance, and unscrupulousness of its enemies"<sup>31</sup>

By 1921, Serge was already expressing embryonic forms of negation of his earlier zeal. While he supported the revolution against the Tsarist regime, he also recognized the growing apparatus of coercion paving the way for Stalinism. Yet even with this comprehension, he still defended the state against the Kronstadt sailors. In the years following, Serge continued outwardly to support the Bolshevik government and its policies, even as his inner sentiments opposing the counter-revolution grew stronger.

In the early twenties, becoming an agent for the Comintern in Germany, Serge promoted the Party line. However, in private discussions with confidants, Serge articulated more developed criticisms of the abuses of Bolshevik power.<sup>32</sup> The ambivalences, or contradictions, expressed by Serge indicate his evolving consciousness, and demonstrate the psychological processes necessary for dialectic transformation.<sup>33</sup>

### **Midnight in the Century**

Between 1926 and 1928, Serge was expelled from the CP, arrested, and imprisoned. His political consciousness continued to progress during this period. He officially joined the Opposition in 1926, and by 1933 he was deported to Orenburg, a bleak town on the border of Russia and Kazakhstan. There he joined the political, social, and spiritual interactions among fellow deportees, as they struggled to preserve their revolutionary ideals in the midst of severe persecution. It is this context of the GULAG,<sup>34</sup> that *Midnight in the Century* explores.

Serge begins the novel with Mikhail Ivanovich Kostrov, a lecturer on "Historical Materialism," who is arrested for opposing forced collectivization and for leaving unanswered a question about his relationship to the Opposition. He is moved from prison to prison, finally ending up with a group of exiled Oppositionists in the fictional Siberian town of Chernoe, the name meaning "black town," conveying the darkness, the "midnight," of the setting. The group members differ among themselves, from the Bolshevik Ryzhik to the young worker, Rodion. These characters have moved from their early revolutionary enthusiasm, through their embryonic ambivalences about destructive elements in the revolution, to a definitive Opposition to Stalinism. In *Midnight*, the characters face the degradation of exile and isolation. Despite the repressive nature of their circumstances, they revolt in various ways. First they develop ways of communicating with each other; they interact and debate how to maintain the idealism of the 1917 revolution. Through a network of deported Oppositionists, they connect with other exiles throughout Russia. Messages are written on thin slips

of paper the size of postage stamps with “microscopic calligraphy” that can only be read with a magnifying glass. Some of these messages are copies or summaries of the *Bulletin of the Opposition*, others are discussions, “letters, which were words, thoughts, truths for the Revolution.” The messages are carried by “miracles of ingenuity,” through toilet pipes, hidden in book bindings, in holes in walls, from window to window. The messages enable the exiles to feel a part of a community of Oppositionists, and this sense of community is itself a negation of their imposed isolation. The regime cannot eliminate their communication and sees “imperfect isolators in which thought has still not been extinguished...the heresy shines out again over the whole USSR.”

The characters also communicate and maintain their humanity and inspiration through their appreciation of the natural world, a strong theme of life and hope in all of Serge’s novels. They are heartened by the coming of Spring and the breakup of ice on the Chernaya river. They stare at the stars, which “shine with a supernatural brilliance which heightens your taste for life.” Ryzhik is enthusiastic, “The springtime, comrades! It’s magnificent!” He recalls spring on the Yenisey River, where “you see the birds arriving...They’re coming with great flapping wings and the light is climbing, the stones have a luminous polish, there are flowers...nothing happens to you, of course, but everything is possible.” “Everything is possible” expresses a frame of mind negating hopelessness. When another comrade ridicules Ryzhik’s lyricism, perhaps recalling Trotsky’s criticism of Serge, Ryzhik replies, “Go to hell. I would never have seen the amazing flowers of the North.” His joy negates the power of Stalinism over his psyche.

It is the young Rodion, a proletarian youth, who best represents resiliency and hope for the future. He had been a truck driver and was arrested for questioning the inequality of wages. He is constantly thinking and reading. When an older comrade asks, pessimistically, “What’s to be done if it is midnight in the century?” Rodion replies with realistic optimism, “Midnight’s where we have to live then.” Facing reality, he simultaneously accepts his circumstances and revolts against them. He berates his friends, “What are we doing in these prisons?” He wants to escape; he sees the futility of hanging on to the old conception of the Party. “The only way we can appeal against the sick Party...is by appealing to the healthy Party...But where is it? And what if we were outside the Party...It’s no longer true; something has been lost forever. Lenin will never rise again in his mausoleum.” Rodion sees his comrades hampered by their attachment to the past. He sees the unchanging conception of the Party weighing his comrades down, limiting their options.<sup>35</sup> He quotes Hegel as best he can, “History is something we make, we are historical too, like all the poor devils...Another revolution. We will make one, and in a very different way.”

In the end, the last chapter, ironically titled “The Beginning,” Rodion does escape, guided by the stars, and feels a “lucidity as if he had opened new eyes of flesh...with which to see reality.” He sees all the contradictions in his comrades, and in the revolution, “...the tortured earth of the Revolution...its clouded water, its clear waters...its deadly waters, its invigorating waters...its countless living prisoners, its countless executed ones in graves, its masses...and all the seeds germinating in its womb.” *Midnight*, which has throughout contrasted the lightness and darkness of its characters and their notions of the Revolution and counter-revolution, ends on this strong note of hope.

### ***The Case of Comrade Tulayev***

*Midnight of the Century* takes place in and around 1930, marked by the arrests and deportations of the old Bolsheviks and Oppositionists. In 1934, Sergei Kirov, a Party bureaucrat, was assassinated by a young Communist. Stalin and the Politbureau interpreted this act as a threat to their regime and saw an opportunity to escalate the persecution of Trotskyists and Oppositionists, as well as any Party members who questioned the Party line. Thus began the era of “show trials” and the bloody purges of the Great Terror. This is the setting for *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*.

*Tulayev* explores the responses of several characters caught in the Terror following the impulsive shooting of the fictional Comrade Tulayev by a young Communist, Kostia. Kostia, angered by the recent suicide of a fellow worker, and the execution of men caught stealing food for their starving families, holds the bureaucrat Tulayev responsible for these events. Though Kostia's action sets the stage for the novel, he does not reappear until its end.

The novel begins, like *Conquered City* and *Midnight*, in the dead of Russian winter. Here, Serge describes snowstorms sweeping over the country, "before which packs of wolves fled here and there." The storms, and the erratic wolves, provide the emotional terrain of the Terror that follows the assassination. The novel's characters appear, some recurring from previous books, others new, old Bolsheviks and Trotskyists and some who had been loyal Stalinists, all now caught in the web of Terror, all accused of Tulayev's murder. We experience their different histories and fates as they face more than "mere" exile; now they face certain execution. There are five major characters in the book; three are sentenced to death. Their varied responses to this new degradation, and their interactions with each other, convey the dialectical interaction between consciousness and politics which is the heart of this novel.

In his review of *Tulayev*, Christopher Hitchens<sup>36</sup> noted a feature of the book as "chiaroscuro," a term usually associated with the visual arts, describing the contrast of light and dark, light and shadow. It was Rembrandt who first used this technique to give his paintings life rather than flatness. In *Tulayev*, as in all of Serge's novels, one can appreciate the literary application of this technique as he develops his characters, each of whom has depth, and experiences contrasts of lightness and darkness. Interestingly, through his use of literary chiaroscuro, Serge achieves what Marx felt was a necessary aspect of political fiction:

Nothing is more desirable than that the people who stood at the head of the revolutionary party, either before the revolution, in secret societies, or in the press, or later in official positions, *be finally depicted in strong Rembrandtian colors, in all their living qualities.*<sup>37</sup>

The first three characters are initially disciplined Party members. Maxime Andreyevich Erchov is High Commissar for Interior Defense, listing thousands of names destined for arrest and execution. But when ordered to arrest an academic, his old friend Rublev, he finally balks. He says to his higher up, "There is not a shadow of a connection between all this and the Tulayev case...you're trying to set a trap for me." Erchov is arrested for questioning the order. Later, in prison, he is torn between his loyalty to the revolution and his realization of its corruption. Ultimately, he capitulates, confessing to non-existent crimes.

Comrade Artyem Artyemvich Makeyev rises from peasant origins to become Regional Secretary of a rural outpost, loyally repressing all dissent in his region. Yet he begins to see the failures of forced collectivization imposed on the peasants. When he is ordered to begin a new purge of resistant peasants, he refuses, then immediately tries to rescind his refusal. Nevertheless, he is arrested and signs a confession that he was part of the plot to murder Tulayev. His signature on the confession reveals his contradictory emotions: "The M was still strong, the other letters looked crushed."

The academic historian, Kiril Kirilovich Rublev, has no doubt about the corruption of the revolution. Rublev, too, capitulates, but asks his interrogator to take his statement to the Central Committee: "That I have lived my whole life only for the Party. Sick and degraded though it may be...That if I must perish, crushed by my party, I consent...But that I warn the villains who are killing us that they are killing the Party."

What is interesting about these three capitulating characters, torn between their Party loyalty and their recognition of the Stalinist counter-revolution, is the compassion and empathy with which

Serge portrays them. He is neither judgmental nor condescending to these capitulators, never reducing them to caricatures. They have autonomy, as he allows a character's "internal life to follow its own course. It isn't me, though there is some of me in him; that is, I understand him."<sup>38</sup> He understood, but disagreed with, the principles of those who capitulated in life and in fiction, "Better to err with the Party than to be right against it."<sup>39</sup>

Two characters resist in different ways. Ivan Kondratiev begins as a Party agent working internationally. While in Barcelona, he becomes aware of the obstructive role that the Communists are playing in the Spanish Civil War, with their vicious attacks on Trotskyists and anarchists. He is shaken by the executions of a comrade who merely spoke with Trotskyists and intervenes to prevent the murder of another Trotskyist. Returning to Moscow, Kondratiev is ordered to give a morale boosting speech to students. He goes off script, telling them: "we are covered with crimes and errors...the old Party members of my generation have all perished...They had roused the world...all in the service of truth...I have not come in the name of the CC of our great Party...I ask you to look at reality, be it baffling or base, with the courage of your youth." Kondratiev is spared execution only by his long friendship with "the Chief," the Stalin character in the novel, and is sent off to work in Siberia.

Comrade Ryzhik surfaces again in *Tulayev*, resistant to the end. When the regime feels the need to further bolster its case against the "perpetrators" of Tulayev's murder, they demand "a genuine Trotskyist," whose confession will seal their case. That Trotskyist is Ryzhik, who is transferred to Moscow for trial. Ryzhik, now old and exhausted, feels he has no strength for further struggle. On the sleigh carrying him to Moscow, however, he becomes fascinated by the night's stars, and feels "that convulsions raged beneath their apparent immobility." He thinks about the significance of his death and dreams of dying. He begins to see the power he can exert beneath the "apparent immobility" of his death: "it was as simple as the end of night; and all lights, the brightness of the stars, the brightness of the sun, the brightness of Northern Lights, the more remote brightness of love, continued to pour down upon the world, nothing was really lost." He wonders, "What use would anyone have for the last cry of the last Oppositionist, crushed under the machine like a rabbit under a tank?"<sup>40</sup> Ryzhik decides to stop eating, and his suicide confounds the regime's attempt to use him: "It was an act of will which restored him to complete self-control." News of his impending death brings panic to all levels of the regime, finally reaching the Chief: "Ryzhik dying?" says the Chief, in the low voice of his repressed anger, "I order him saved!" In true dialectical manner, Ryzhik brings power to his powerlessness.

The final chapter of the novel returns to young Kostia, now working on a collective farm devastated by multiple purges and famine, with no fodder for livestock, and no seed to plant. They lack even transportation to get seed from the next township. These peasants, too, supersede their oppressive circumstances. They agree to walk to the neighboring town and bring the seeds and provisions back to town, carrying sixty loads of seeds on their backs by relieving one another. This spontaneous act of self-activity inspires Kostia with hope for the future, "the authentic magic of this night in which there is no miracle; from the waiting earth; from all the confused power that lies within us." Kostia has moved from his early individual and impulsive anger to an appreciation of the potential of "all the confused power" that he sees in spontaneous collective action.

The *Case of Comrade Tulayev* demonstrates, often with great lyricism and poetry, the many ways in which people chose to "revolt against degradation," and maintain their humanity. They did this even if it meant only a decision to deny the regime another confession or another death, or when it was manifest in the ability to find moments of joy and hope in repressive circumstances. Serge's novels, both the cycle of victory and of defeat, are testament to his own revolutionary resilience and his abiding confidence in the future referred to in the opening lines of this article.<sup>41</sup>



## The Illumination of Serge's Dialectical Imagination

Although we can find analogies to events in Victor Serge's life in these novels, it would be a mistake to see them only as *roman à clef*, fictionalized presentations of Victor Serge and other well-known Bolsheviks. Serge's characters have a more universal and mythic purpose in reaching into the hearts of us all. Serge was conscious of the impact of his art on future generations. While the first sentence of *Memoirs* revealed his dialectical approach to life, the last sentence expressed his hope for all his writing: "May the passion, the experience and even the faults of my fighting generation have some small power to illumine the way forward." By bringing his characters to life with their "Rembrandtian colors," with all their contradictions, victories, and defeats, Serge gives us the opportunity to consider how we approach our own circumstances. When we find the current situation overwhelming, with attacks on working people, people of color, women, with the global rise of the extreme right, and with the threat of environmental catastrophe and nuclear conflagration, Serge's novels encourage us to confront reality, "be it baffling or base," and avoid demoralization by finding ways, not only to resist, but to creatively transform our circumstances.

Serge's characters encourage us ask questions about the nature of the socialism we espouse, how we best achieve it, and about what happens the day after the revolution. As Rodion does in *Midnight*, perhaps we too need to examine our attachment to past definitions of socialism, along with the cultural remnants of Bolshevism, Leninism, and Trotskyism, or even to concepts such as vanguard, leader, and party, so we can envision a renewed and more humanistic socialism. Erich Fromm, who knew Serge during his years in Mexico, said "I believe indeed that to rescue the humanist tradition of the last decades is of the utmost importance, and that Victor Serge is one of the outstanding personalities representing the socialist aspect of humanism."<sup>42</sup> I would turn this around and say, rather, that Serge represents the humanist aspect of socialism. Serge's confidence in the future of socialism was dependent on the need for socialism to be revitalized and renewed.

Serge's novels encourage us to appreciate and value the importance of psychology and spirituality to a revolutionary movement which strives to restore wholeness to human beings. As Serge's characters "revolt against degradation," they get strength from their connections with each other, even when differences of opinion suffuse those connections. They allow themselves, like Ryzhik, to appreciate the natural world, even in situations appearing to be futile. Serge uses the images of stars and starlight, seeds and germination, to signify the importance of joy and love and hope. "Revolutionaries need to understand and to love," he wrote as early as 1922.<sup>43</sup>

Serge's novels free us from the political one-way relationship with art which asks only how to make art political. Serge's novels present the possibility of a reciprocal relationship between art and politics. His novels suggest that the problem of political activity and art has been wrongly posed; it is not how to bring politics to art, but how to bring an artistic sensibility to politics.

Most important is what Serge contributes to our sense of identity as socialists and revolutionaries. It is here that his dialectical imagination challenges us most strongly. Serge's novels and his characters illustrate what Marx recognized as the essence of the dialectic, "the self-creation of (humans) as a process."<sup>44</sup> Over the course of Serge's novels, we see the transformation in his characters, through their own creative agency, and we can reflect on our own ability to change, our own agency, and that of those around us. Victor Serge also inspires us to make philosophic leaps in our concepts of politics and political activity. As Grace Lee Boggs articulated, socialists, "In order to change/transform the world... must change/transform themselves."<sup>45</sup> Victor Serge inspires us to see the dialectic working within ourselves, to allow our own self-movement, and to have the audacity to create new visions of socialist transformation, and see new possibilities for radical change in circumstances that seem unchangeable.

## Notes

1. Christopher Z. Hobson, "Victor Serge 1890-1947," *Prairie Schooner*, (Vol 62, No 1), (University of Nebraska Press, 1984). The lines are taken from Serge's *Memoirs of a Revolutionary 1901-1941*.
2. Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary 1901-1941*, Translated by Peter Sedgwick, (Oxford University Press, 1963) 132.
3. Peter Sedgwick, "Victor Serge and Socialism," *International Socialism*, (Autumn, 1963).
4. Letter from Trotsky to Serge, referenced in Susan Weissman, *Victor Serge: The Course is Set on Hope*, (Verso, 2001), 230, fn 159, 313.
5. The contrast between artistic and political writing is discussed in Kunal Chattopadhyay's insightful article, "Different Forms of Truth: Victor Serge and Leon Trotsky on the Fate of the Russian Revolution," in *Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature*, (Vol 44).
6. *Memoirs*, 265.
7. Kenneth Surin, "Programmatic Notes on the Culture of Politics of C.L.R. James", *The C.L.R. James Journal*, (Vol. 2, No 11, Winter, 1991), 9.
8. Richard Greeman, "Victor Serge and the Novel of Revolution," originally published in *Socialism* (Brussels, July-October 1991), 226-227.
9. As a writer who paid attention to words, Serge saw the signs of authoritarianism in the language that Bolsheviks used, pointing to the domineering, intolerant, and intransigent tone of much of Bolshevik speech, what he called "the Bolshevik polemicist verve." See unpublished manuscript, a response to Trotsky's "Their Morals and Ours," translated by Richard Greeman.
10. Greeman, "Victor Serge and the Novel of Revolution."
11. My concept of the dialectic comes from multiple sources: Raya Dunayevskaya, *Philosophy and Revolution*, (Delta, 1973); Raya Dunayevskaya, *Marxism and Freedom*, (Pluto Press, 1958); Raya Dunayevskaya, *The Power of Negativity*, edited by Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson, (London, Lexington Books), 2002; Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, (Beacon Press, 1941); Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change*, (University of Minnesota Press, 1998); *Karl Marx Early Writings*, translated and edited by T.B. Bottomore, (McGraw-Hill, 1963); *Karl Marx, Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy*, translated by T.B. Bottomore, edited by Bottomore and Maximilien Rubel, (McGraw-Hill, 1956); Kevin B. Anderson, *Dialectics of Revolution*, (Ottawa, Daraja Press, 2020).
12. *Anderson*, 13-14.
13. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, quoted in *The Power of Negativity*, 241.
14. *Memoirs*, 1. Emphasis is mine.
15. Dunayevskaya, *Philosophy and Revolution*, 7.
16. "Critique of Hegel's Dialectic," Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, 3<sup>rd</sup> manuscript, in *Karl Marx Early Writings*, 202.
17. Karl Marx, *The Holy Family*, (Moscow, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956). 51

18. See Bill Marshall's discourse on this topic in *Victor Serge: The Uses of Dissent*, (Berg French Studies, New York Oxford, 1992), and in his article, "The Meaning of History: Representation and Dialectic in Victor Serge," *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, (Vol. XXIV, April 1998). Marshall's interpretation of the dialectic differs somewhat from mine.
19. The concept of "double duty" originally appeared in Serge's book, *Literature and Revolution* (1932), but is also mentioned in *Victor Serge, Notebooks 1936-1947*, translated by Mitchell Abidor and Richard Greeman, (New York Review Books, 2012), 124.
20. Serge, *Memoirs*, 265.
21. Stalinist restriction of art was replicated in the American Communist literary world of the 1930s. Michael Gold, then editor of *New Masses*, set out three criteria for the artist: a) The artist should be proletarian, b) the content "must have a social theme or it is merely confectionary, and c) as few words as possible. We are not interested in the verbal acrobat—this is only another form of bourgeois idleness." *New Masses*, (Sept 1930), 4-5. By 1931, the *New Masses* followed the demands of the 1930 Kharkov Conference of Writers, that writers and artists "openly...adopt the political line of the Communist Party." *New Masses*, (Feb., 1931).
22. *Memoirs*, 262-263.
23. *Notebooks*, 399.
24. *Notebooks*, 398.
25. Gary Kim, "Mikhail Bakhtin: The Philosopher of Human Communication," *University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology*, in *Totem*, (Vol 12, No 1, 2004). The connection to Bakhtin is also brought out in Bill Marshall, "Viewpoints and Voices: Serge and Koestler on the Great Terror," *Journal of European Studies*, (xvi, 1986).
26. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *Illuminations*, (New York, Schocken Books, 1969) 69-82.
27. Victor Serge, *Conquered City*, Translated by Richard Greeman, *New York Review of Books*, (1975).
28. Victor Serge, *Midnight in the Century*, Translated by Richard Greeman, *New York Review Books*, (1981).
29. Victor Serge, *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*, Translated by Willard R. Trask, *New York Review of Books*, (2004).
30. Richard Greeman discussed the use of symbolism and metaphor in, "The Laws are Burning: Literature and Revolutionary Realism in Victor Serge," *Yale French Studies*, (No. 39, 1967), 146-159. Referenced in Susan Weissman, 116.
31. *Revolution in Danger, Writings from Russia 1919-1921*, translated by Ian Birchall, (Haymarket Books, 1997), 33.
32. Ian Birchall, Introduction to *Revolution in Danger*, 9.
33. For a more one-dimensional view of Victor Serge, which does not address the evolution of Serge's consciousness and politics, see Ernie Haberkern, "The Politics of Victor Serge," in *Against*

*the Current*, (No.142, October 2009).

34. GULAG is the Russian acronym for the vast expanse of deportation camps to which dissidents and Oppositionists were sent.

35. Rodion's sentiments recall Karl Marx, "The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living." "The 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Selected Works*, Vol I, (Foreign Language Publishing House, 1962) 247-249.

36. Christopher Hitchens, "Pictures from an Inquisition," *The Atlantic*, (Dec. 2002).

37. Karl Marx, in a book review, quoted in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Literature and Art, Selections from their Writings*, (International Publishers, 1947), 40.

38. Serge, *Notebooks*, 400.

39. Serge, *Notebooks*, 442.

40. The image of slaughtered rabbits recalls Serge's recounting of Trotsky's ultimatum to the Kronstadt sailors: "Surrender or you will be shot down like rabbits!" in *Memoirs*, 129.

41. The perspective of Serge's novels, and especially *Tulayev*, contrasts sharply with the perspective of Koestler in *Darkness at Noon*, which evoked a fatalistic sense, equating Stalinism with Marxism. Koestler's book enjoyed much more popularity than Serge's, as Koestler allied himself with the anti-communism of the 1950's, typified with his essay in *The God That Failed*. For an in-depth discussion of the contrasts between Serge and Koestler, see Bill Marshall, "Viewpoints and Voices: Serge and Koestler on the Great Terror," in *Journal of European Studies*, (xvi, 1986). George Orwell, though an anti-Stalinist rather than an anti-communist, also presented bleak and pessimistic viewpoints in *Nineteen Eight-Four* and *Animal Farm*.

42. In Richard Greeman, "A Neglected Marxist Classic: Victor Serge," in Academia.com.

43. Quoted in Weissman, 68, in fn. 75, 291, *Clarte, "Les Ecrivains Russe et la Revolutions,"* 1922.

44. Karl Marx, "Critique of Hegel's Dialectic," in *Karl Marx, Early Writings*, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, 202.

45. Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change*, 76.