

*Gerald Popiel*

## THE ABSURD MAN:

### ILYA EHRENBURG AS A SOVIET MAN OF LETTERS

"LAYEVSKY HAD THRUST his own dim star out of the sky." This is not Ehrenburg describing one of the numerous spiritual breakdowns chronicled in *People and Life*, but Chekhov bringing to a very Chekhovian crisis a very Chekhovian character—which goes to show, once again, that art is stronger than life. As he will do again further on, by quoting a better writer than himself, Ehrenburg has produced one of the rare insights of the book, this time about the most obscure figure of this autobiography. I am like Layevsky, says Ehrenburg on page 10 of *People and Life*. "Good", the reader cries, being able for the first time since he opened the book to look the hero in the face if only in a mirror. An awkward view, but it helps, as this will be the last as well as the first chance at a steady look at the author who is elsewhere too mobile, too restless a figure to be observed.

Layevsky is of course fictional, the central figure in Chekhov's novella *The Duel*. Just a few pages of Chekhov can give us Layevsky's full measure, for every now and then he fixes this figure by letting us hear what he says about himself and what others say about him, which like a movie still arrests him in a characteristic pose. A good portrait, and it does well for a mirror. Fixed by the greater artist's words, it fixes Ehrenburg's own. It is the only way, the author lacking such powers and such inclinations himself.

It does not help if Ehrenburg married journalism to art, as he claims, being the chronicler *par excellence* of the decline of the West. The journalist-artist, like performers of other hyphenated roles, may evade the responsibilities of both. As a journalist he meets notable people of his time and seeks to become involved in notable events; he has an eye open for modern experiences and another for modern situations. All this Ehrenburg has done in a remarkable degree. As an artist, however, a quondam poet, he had felt free to convert these actualities into fiction,

which gave him the basis for taking liberties with both roles. The journalist-artist need not speak the literal truth even as conceived at the night desk of a newspaper, but he also need not say much for himself or the personal conditions of his art. Layevsky the figment. And of another's mind. The rare intellectual light is on only for a moment, but that is enough for us to be able to do what has so far escaped us, take some measure of the real man, of this busy unsatisfactory personality, so restless that he cannot stand still even for an autoportrait, to win a glance of his spiritual beginnings and of some of his possible spiritual endings as well, the endings he has escaped.

Ehrenburg is of course Layevsky only in a degree, but that first volume of an autobiography which is also and mainly a chronicle teems with live Chekhovians, as Ehrenburg describes them, and Layevsky helps us realize that Ehrenburg is one of them. In many ways, in most ways—consider the years it covers—it is post-Chekhov. But, after all, these years could have been just as much pre-L. as post-C., especially since Ehrenburg did meet Lenin during those years, or so he alleges. (Souvarine, who is an authority, puts much of that kind of stuff in doubt in his review for *Preuves*). But then Ehrenburg had met everybody. To his reminiscences of Lenin he gives a whole if short chapter, but that, like so many other episodes of this kind in the book, might be an afterthought in a chronicle which has many of the proportions of a textbook. There is indeed a strong streak of respectability in Ehrenburg's literary motivation. He might never have combed his hair in his youth, but he has been always prepared to give attention to the subjects to which the world pays attention. Boyhood memories include a page on Tolstoy, who happened to be visiting next to the house where Ilyusha lived with his parents, while a rat on fire, an event which took place about the time of Tolstoy's visit, is dismissed with a phrase. In a more disinterested biography, where boys are boys and not future radical intellectuals, the rat on fire would take up more space and Tolstoy less. That same treatment is given to Lenin, who belongs to the Paris period where Ilya went after expulsion from the Russian *gymnasium* and arrest by the Czar's police. In Paris, there were so many rats on fire for him to watch that one begrudges the puffed-up space given to Lenin. That whole short chapter about Lenin in Paris is very much like a Soviet historical painting: the youthful Bolshevik, the fatherly Lenin bending over his papers (that "amazing skull")—we skip sentence after sentence, nothing is really happening—the youthful Bolshevik, the fatherly Lenin (there were two visits), but—for all that the pages render—he may not have visited him at all, and then all of a sudden the page comes alive. Another rare insight. Ah, a quote again. This time it is Gorky speaking,

describing Lenin's attitude towards music, which reveals the man a bit. No, the book definitely is not literature; it is first of all a chronicle, as the author claims, but then it is also a defence plea into the bargain, one of those defence pleas we have come to know the pattern of so well since the trials of 1936. The accused notable is perhaps no longer young, but in court he assumes the postures of immaturity: "I did not know it then, but I can tell my mistakes now." The adolescent hodge-podge, which is what the book as a whole amounts to (the details are adult enough), is like a real plea before a Soviet court, with all kinds of irrelevant facts and opinions sticking out of it just as in an examination paper by a clever student. Precisely—this book has a school flavour about it. But then, just like America, that other Utopia come alive, Russia is a schoolhouse. This theory also helps one to understand the shape Ehrenburg's destinies took, the reason why in the end he did escape Layevsky's fate. Although Ehrenburg has not been a really good student, either in point of learning the right lessons or of behaving himself, he knows that teachers can be conciliated by occasional signs, so every now and then he sticks in something correct, a fact or an opinion or a reservation more or less in the appropriate place. Leninist bits stick out of Chekhovian contents. For in the end, there are more Layevskys in the book than Lenins or Bukharins. And it is one of the keys to the book that there is a side to Ehrenburg that is like Layevsky, an original superfluous man of literature, one of those embarrassing liabilities that Bolshevik Russia will inherit from the nineteenth century, an unfocused "intelligent," whose class had lost ground from under their feet when the serfs were liberated, and whose mind had been fragmentised by Western ideas that kept coming at the Russian educated class like shrapnel from the time when that intellectually prolific and irresponsible century had reached its middle point. But to return to Layevsky: a charmer and a ladies' man. Also a drifter and a malcontent. Still, probably Russia would not have had a successful revolution without him. That is one of the paradoxes of history. Communist Russia has not been prepared to acknowledge this: in the end Communist Russia has found it best to treat Layevskys not as victims, but as the worst type of culprit. Which of course Ehrenburg knows very well: "Thrust his dim star out of the sky." More likely the star had been thrust out, we murmur. How did the Chekhovian Ehrenburg manage to escape that fate?

He says that it was by sheer luck. According to Souvarine, it was because he has lied, flattered, seized his chances. Of course the case—for it is a case, Ehrenburg himself makes this clear—is much more complex than either makes it out. Souvarine is too harsh. That is of course expected from an *émigré* "intelligent"

about another who might have been an *émigré* several times over but chose bondage instead. It might be that Souvarine regards survival in itself, especially when it has been as successful as Ehrenburg's, as evidence of guilt, which makes him as barbarous as those Egyptian kings who executed messengers bringing tidings of defeat. Liar, toady, opportunist? Perhaps he has been all these, but still so much more a poor dog of a nineteenth-century Russian liberal, a Layevsky, messy, superficial, and yet with a certain disarming charm of humanity peculiar to that kind of victim. Still, that Layevsky had energy enough to go to Paris rather than give up to the Czarist police—also to arrive there at just the right time. Yes, timing is Ehrenburg's real talent, that Jewish talent that saved him from Layevsky's fate—for Layevsky was after all descended from serf-owners, no clock watchers. Ehrenburg's father, on the other hand, was a factory manager. This is the secret of his survival and his successes: to be in the right place at the right time, to adopt the historically correct cultural attitudes, to make at important turns of one's life the historically correct choices. His career, as suits a man of destiny, begins at an early age; he is expelled from the *gymnasium* for political activity, and then is arrested by the police. That this happened only a decade before the revolution might have been just a bit of good luck; the flight to Paris was of course merely a consequence of the first event. Every political refugee went to Paris at the time. But once in Paris, to become a fixture of the fateful Rotonde, the Mermaid Tavern of the *fin de siècle* artists and writers—this involved choice and persistence. It is there he meets the future princes of European art—in the guise of beggars. He is, of course, in Paris when the war breaks out, just as he finds himself in Moscow at the height of the revolution, having in the meantime visited the Western front, where he took note of the absurdities rather than the horror. Moscow, Paris, Rotonde, the Western front, Moscow again—what a preparation for his future role as the post-Chekhovian man of Russian letters. Yes, Ehrenburg has been correct in his choices most of the time—not in some petty bureaucratic sense, but in the grand sense of classical Marxism, even more grandly of Hegelianism—the man with a true nose for *Zeitgeist*.

There are minds which are sponges, there are minds which are networks; some minds, as everyone knows, are like eyes. Ehrenburg's mind is a nose. Well, why not, for if a mind can be an eye, it can be a nose as well. But a nose is at best a means of discrimination, not organization—the associations which Ehrenburg's mind makes are, as Macaulay observed of Milton's, remote, but they are not as significant as those of the great poet.

Indeed, originally Ehrenburg had wanted to be a poet. He became one by choice. He was a bad poet. He became a journalist by accident, but for this he

has a real gift. His true paths he has found by accident. Journalism, of course, is just the field for a mind that is a nose. That nose of Ehrenburg's has been indeed a Darwinian trait. It has helped him to survive and to succeed. Witness his later feats of timing: resignation from the Jewish cultural committee just before the beginning of Jewish persecutions, or joining of the Soviet committee on peace, that concept of peace which was symbolised by Picasso's dove, also on schedule. This is opportunism, but the timing talent behind all this is also capable of being moved by quite abstract interests. As everyone knows, Ehrenburg also wrote the anti-Stalinist *Thaw* just when the real thaw was beginning, which required at least as much of that Hegelian intuition as of courage, perhaps more. It is difficult for the reader to resist the feeling of virtually automatic writing. That is why absence of literary quality is beside the point, something that is missed by both those relentless critics of anything connected with the Soviets, Souvarine and Russell Kirk. One does not hear critics judge Yevtushenko's poetry on literary grounds. Of course, there is an unwholesome complexity about Ehrenburg which the young Communist will probably never live to develop. By the time he had written *The Thaw*, Ehrenburg had survived many changes and had enjoyed unique privileges. Ehrenburg shuttling between Paris and Moscow at a time when such travels were beyond the dreams of all Russian intellectuals might seem a baroque intriguer, a Jew Suss transported from the eighteenth century into ours. The fact is that Stalin trusted him because he realized that Ehrenburg had that gift of correctness functioning without interference from reason or intention. He was right: Ehrenburg did not write against him until the dictator was dead. Of course, by then he was reaching seventy, but in this first volume he is hardly out of his teens, and yet his natural inclination to scramble up towards the crest of the wave of the future is very much in evidence. In Paris the young exile met—as one would expect—Modigliani, Picasso, Rivera, A. Tolstoy, Cendrars, besides Lenin and a score of others. This was a real education, for his instinct was not merely to meet the princes of the future when they were beggars, but also to have them teach him the attitudes that would complete his life's outlook in the way that the future required. It is there, at the Rotonde, that he finds that wholly modern guise which, like the magic garment in the fable that makes the wearer invisible, has saved his life. That magic guise was the guise of innocence, Paris made.

The fun, the bemusement of watching the act but not seeing the actor. The invisible man brings down the chandelier, or opens the door of some sanctum sanctorum. We laugh while the guardian ogre looks on in confusion. The innocent are also not seen behind their acts, the madman behind his jests, the child behind

the harm done by its pranks. The king's jester could tell the king things which would cost another man his head, his jests flying like arrows shot by an invisible hand. Was indeed Kent mad? Not in the way King Lear was, but as jesters are, being carried away by the savoury freedom—the frenzy, the inspiration of innocence once it discovers its freedom in society, the things the innocent may say, the thresholds they may cross. Only invisibility could make as great intruders. And what a trespasser Ehrenburg has been. Passport-men were no more to him than doormen to Shirley Temple. But what connection did Ehrenburg have with innocence, being neither child, madman, nor fool? His career of Chekhovian intrusion into Revolution began when he was long past the natural age of innocence. Had he repossessed it at some fountain he had found in his exile? Even in the fables the fountains give back only youth but never innocence.

And yet Ehrenburg is not a hypocrite. His innocence is acquired but genuine. An impossibility? The fact is that in the Paris of Ehrenburg's exile a fountain of sorts was in operation effecting transformations even beyond the mythical imagination, which had conceived of flights, rejuvenation, and our other achievements. But the formula was in completely modern terms, the terms of the latest psychologies, sociologies, and metaphysics, quite as scientific as that of Pavlov, quite as psychometaphysical as that of Picasso. No hocus pocus, drinking of elixirs, flights to the Bald Mountain, or for that matter bathing in fountains. No, at the Rotonde you ate, drank if you had the money. But mainly you talked.

Come to think of it, the Rotonde was nothing like a fountain with its murmuring sounds. The works of modern magic are noisy, and there was nothing refreshing in this particular process of regaining innocence. The Rotonde was more a kind of playground, like the Bald Mountain—gay though noisy and squalid. Yes, that is a closer simile. Magic was science and science magic. The opposites met: Rotonde, the forge of the most modern magic, the hysterical, noisy womb of modern art, the meeting place of beggars destined to become princes. We mentioned the boyhood interest in live rats on fire. There was a sufficiency of live rats on fire in Paris, and many of them were to be seen there. And that is where Ehrenburg drifts, having by a wholly-beyond-Layevsky instinct exchanged the Sorbonne for it. Rotonde was to Ehrenburg what the Fabian Society was to Shaw, except that the proportions between the man and the institution were different, and here it was the institution that made the man. The Layevsky-like incompetent is turned into something amazing and amusing, is drawn into the twentieth century, and the post-Chekhovian man of Russian letters, the Picassoian four-dimensional figure, is completed. The Rotonde graduated Ehrenburg into that order of men

whom Camus described in his celebrated novel *The Stranger*. The Stranger, as M. Sartre tells us in his remarkable interpretation of his colleague's work, is the absurd man, the man all of whose values are equal. Meursault, The Stranger of the title, is remarkable for the flatness of his way of expressing himself. He kills a man, and then says: "I killed him because of the sun." Being absurd, he cannot feel emotions regarding human relations. Camus is not the Stranger, as one can tell by the style of his expository works. As for Ehrenburg's style, this patchwork of a biography contains statements which could not have been improved by Meursault himself: "when my mother died I felt orphaned." That sums up Ehrenburg's reaction to his mother's death. Already in boyhood Ilyusha indicated absurdist tendencies: when his father lost a job, he was glad because it meant the beginning of hotel life for the family; he disliked home life. But it was not until he came to Paris that absurdism, from being a tendency, became a full-fledged literary attitude.

He probably had his literary start in Russia, this absurd man, at the desk of Dostoevsky, of Chekhov, or even earlier, of Gogol. Layevsky with his shattered mind is an early absurdist hero. He is already presented as such, as absurd and nothing else, by Gide in the figure of Lafcadio in *Les Caves du Vatican*, upon whose heels Ehrenburg's *Julio Jurenito*, the novel that Lenin liked, closely treaded. Ehrenburg's attitude towards his illegitimate daughter could be compared to Lafcadio's attitude towards his illegitimate father. In *Julio Jurenito* there is even a character by the name of Ilya Ehrenburg. But the personal literary prototype of Ilya is Leybik Roytshvaniets, the hero of a later novel of the same period, the Jewish absurd man; of course, being Jewish he can never be quite as absurd as post-Christians such as Meursault or Lafcadio, whose absurdism gives them an irresistible taste for death. Leybik Roytshvaniets, on the contrary, wants to live, and has developed considerable skill in the service of that cause. Human relations may make no more sense to him than human institutions, but his zest—no, not for life, only for survival—remains undiminished. After all, that is a Jewish specialty. True, Hemingway, who knew about the close connection between inflicted death and absurdism, said that the important thing in life is to survive, but it took a Jew to turn absurdism into a saving grace. The absurdism of Ehrenburg is also a plea, a jointless performance.

"The absurd man—says Sartre—is innocent." Precisely. Ehrenburg resolves the horrendous contradictions of his situation by means of shocking puerilities, but he keeps a perfectly innocent expression. Take his attitude toward Pasternak: Pasternak was a great poet, but he lacked historical sense. Just as Khrushchev said. But then he goes beyond Khrushchev to say that Pasternak did not intend

the political effects of the novel. That is a curious and baseless point, but Ehrenburg is at pains to make sure that neither the poet, whom he loved, nor the system, toward which his attitudes are ambiguous, are blamed. In fact, the attitude of blame is altogether suspended in the book. This, of course, is a mark of the absurdist attitude, but first of all, that suspension of blame works for Ehrenburg himself: "others have perished, I have survived." And a little lower down: "There are times when the fate of man is not like a game of chess, but like a lottery." Pasternak presumably drew the losing ticket. This, quite rightly, has not disarmed Souvarine, but does carry the whole point of Ehrenburg's autobiography: "I am innocent." He turns both East and West, for he belongs in both worlds, a victim and a symptom, and both worlds have disapproved of him. An opportunist, a liar, and a toady. Perhaps all these, for Souvarine, being an authority on Stalin, should know the facts, but still mainly a poor dog of a nineteenth-century Russian liberal with a purely Jewish talent for survival. Also a damn careless writer. As for facts, Ehrenburg has a penchant for them too, being a born journalist, and I leave it to Souvarine to tell me which of them are right. At times, he must be merely careless, for he misrepresents facts in which he has no particular interest, for example the place of Ernest Toller's suicide, which took place in New York, not in London, as he implies. He is a careless writer, for he is not an artist and has no patience with his craft, and besides having led a charmed existence under a ruthless regime, he might very well be expected to have what the psychologists call autistic memory. The whole is such a patchwork of opinion and incident that it is difficult to resist the impression of naïveté or artlessness. His doubts about Communism stick out as do his loyal opinions. For he is also *vis-à-vis* the Communist order, the honest doubter.

"*Eppur si muove*"? No, he is no Galileo. He does not speak in whispers, and besides he is also much more naïve. The doubt is expressed not because of courage, but because of a very basic simple-mindedness, because for all his receptivity, Ehrenburg cannot really think; his mind's movement depends too much upon external influences, which stick in his mind only partly absorbed—a man whom no ideology can ever wholly claim. No, the man cannot be trusted. Is not this what Picasso is saying in his drawing of him which appears on the jacket cover of the book? This heavy-lidded, intense man, delicate with a thin-lipped sensuality of accentuated face lines peculiar to the refined East European Jewish type who looks at you so—an almost feminine glance that makes contact with you like a touch of fingers, suggesting, insinuating. Picasso drew a heavy stroke across the man's neck—There! A dismissal or a warning? The man could not be dismissed, try as hard as



you can. Probably Picasso tried, as might have the whole Rotonde, at one time or another. So the next best thing to a dismissal—a warning. This man has all the intensity, persistence, yes, the sincerity of the gifted people of his race—this Picasso said in the drawing. But then, having shared the same monkey cage at the time, he played a monkey trick on the monkey, a monkey much inferior to himself to be sure. Rotonde! What a name! A woman's name—and what a woman! Rotonde, oh Rotonde; the barless cage, the noisy womb of modern art, open through all the hours of the night, hospitable to all who want her embraces. They could not get away from each other, held in that loose embrace, even though a good deal of the time they could not stand the noise. Yes, that heavy line is a sort of warning. Picasso remembers from the times of the Rotonde, from the time of the embrace that held them all. The man's nose—I mean, of course, the super-sensitive, the ever-alert nose of his mind: Picasso could not draw that; so, with a heavy horizontal stroke of his pencil, he drew a warning—no, this indubitably sincere man cannot be trusted. But for other reasons than Souvarine's. Beware of the alert, the innocent, the sincere. Beware of a man whose mind is a nose—that is to say, a mind which discriminates but cannot organize.

Hence the welter of contradictions which are neither overcome nor reconciled. The doubting results from this inability, which is what accounts for both his sincerity and his unreliability. That he has never been assimilated by the Revolution is of course officially recognized by the Soviet Union. "*Nourri de bohème déclassée*" hisses that *Petit Encyclopedie Soviétique* of 1931. In the book, his non-conformity comes out in diverse kinds of places not unlike his correct opinions, but with so much greater obliqueness than when he was writing *Leybiķ Roytshvaniets* that we can take this as evidence of the degree to which the grip upon minds has tightened since then. A good deal of the time he is simply vague: "In my own life I had often seen human beings persecute, torment and kill other human beings without the least necessity." Sometimes he is sly and bitter: "It is difficult to uproot fully grown plants. In Russia they practise winter transplanting, a good method, especially as a tree has no memory." More oblique is his device of attacking some historical phenomenon. He would rather say that he has no love for the Renaissance school of Bolognese painters than attack socrealism. Of this type the best is his discussion of the effects of the Inquisition on artists, a discussion brought on by his viewing of Tintoretto in some Italian gallery—a rather unusual connection unless one is a Russian writer trying to face certain facts and not daring to state them. The Inquisition stands you know for what, which lessens the shock of seeing him try to find some justification for it. Besides, there is a tradition for it in Russian

literature—remember Dostoevsky, the friend of the Czars, and his Grand Inquisitor.

Ehrenburg's sympathies are not with Inquisition any more than Dostoevsky's. They are with Tintoretto, just as they were with Pasternak, not with Khrushchev, just as Dostoevsky's were with Christ. This does not prevent him from saying something in its defence, although his point is much more feeble than Dostoevsky's. It seems that the Inquisition was good for the artist: was it not a kind of challenge to Tintoretto? Would he have painted the kinds of pictures he did, if he did not have to take it into account? These of course are excuses, not justifications, and such miserable excuses that they imply the worst kinds of misgivings about you know what. The bourgeois Philistine says starving in the garret helps develop the artist's talent. Ehrenburg says it is good for him to have the police watch him. Yes, Picasso's heavy line is a warning—his old friend, his fellow Rotondian. God preserve us from our friends. Did Picasso speak on behalf of the arts or of Communism? After all, he belongs to both. Being a universal artist, it could be that he meant both viewpoints or perhaps something even more general.

Ehrenburg is a Philistine at heart, which simply means among other things that he will seek to reconcile the needs of the arts with the exigencies of the prevailing order. Sincere but contemptible, but then most survival skills are contemptible. In any case, it was not sheer luck that had preserved him. As is, after all, true of all that is most successful in our age, there is nothing pure about him, not even his bohemianism. "*Bohème déclassée*," as the *Encyclopedie Sovietique* said, but they were fooled, for that was as much a *petit bourgeois* pose as was his poetry. Yes, to top it all, a poseur, with his poetical mutterings, his Italian travel reflections, his brooding on lives of people who had perished twenty-five hundred years ago. What a passion for *Kultur*—the fate of the inhabitants of Pompeii interests him more than that of his contemporaries. Still, take it all in all: the insincerity of his intellectual passions, the snobbery of his cultural interests, the wildness of his philosophical references, this man is at heart a friend of *Kultur*, an enemy of systems. But, like Leybik Roytshvaniets, he wants to survive, and it is a Jewish tradition that it is possible to say flattering things about oppressive authorities without forfeiting one's soul. Otherwise, a poor dog of a nineteenth-century liberal. This love of *Kultur* is quite concrete, just as concrete as the love of the people is abstract—quite what you would expect of a Layevsky, in all very bourgeois—touching off nostalgias with its nineteenth-century, pre-Nietzschean air of simple reverence. For if the *Kultur* is superficial, it is a real driving force, while the love of the people is a mere final principle, something to refer certain outlooks or judgements to, as when he says that he liked Italian movies not because they were good but because they showed him the Italian

people. And yet of *il popolo*, or any of the people, Italian, French, or Russian, we never meet any in the book. The *Kultur* on the other hand is a recurrent experience; it waits for him behind every threshold he crosses, it frames every commonplace observation he makes. He drops cultural references as he drops famous names.

But why does such a man write? Because he is a writer, although he is a very bad writer. There are men who write very well, but they will never be writers. Ehrenburg writes very badly, but he belongs to the species. He is even, apart from that gift of timing and the nosiness of his mind and the sheer volume of his work, important enough as a type to set off a chain of general reflections: could there be anything less dramatic than our way of dressing; yet ours is an era of horrors, and in this dress people had gone down to the most horrible fates ever inflicted by man upon man. I remember the first photos of middle-class Jews who had been herded by the Nazis. Standing at gun point they hold on to their valises, the men appearing foreshortened in their double-breasted suits and broad trousers, while the women stand pigeon-toed as in an unposed snapshot. A tragic vision? Far from it. They only look uncomfortable and ridiculous. Or rather, the up-to-date word is "absurd". Let it be. It is a good word. Twentieth-century man leads an abnormal life, has repeatedly lived in hell, yet seeks normality in appearance. Can there be anything less dramatic than Ehrenburg's way of writing? A baroque career, clownish, ubiquitous, studded with failures, narrow escapes, sudden successes. But try to get the pulse of it from the text? His writing style is flat, commonplace, and can be counted upon to fail to rise to whatever occasion offers. Here is his description of the Western front in World War I: "Life in the trenches was a life of the damned and yet an everyday life. Men waited for letters, killed lice, cursed the officers, and swapped dirty stories. Then they died." And then, led by that fatal instinct that had betrayed him before, a quotation from Apollinaire on the same subject: "There are thousands of pine trees broken by shells; there are soldiers who, at night, saw up boards for coffins." The same soldiers who were swapping dirty stories? Apollinaire's passage has the actual tension of a life where sudden death is an everyday affair. Ehrenburg's is a series of fragmentary observations.

Nothing ever comes alive from under that deadly pen—no more than if you tried to read the enormities of our age from the houses which that age has built, the furniture it uses, its way of dressing, its letter-writing style, or its public expression. Great writers—as Bertrand Russell pointed out—lead uneventful lives. Shaw says it is the man that counts, not the experience. With Ehrenburg, it is the other way around.

So, why does he write? Well, because he is a writer. He has gifts; he has

discrimination, that nose for the contradictions of the time, for the details that bring them out. Otherwise he would not have written *Leybiḳ Roytshvaniets*. Still, not a writer, rather a superior note-taker. For his mind exhibits all the wretched distractedness of the modern mind with its half-baked distinguishing between the real and the unreal. The war was real, the Rotonde was unreal. The Norman house painter is more real than Léger or Modigliani. A realism that is post-Chekhov, post-Zola, post-Maupassant, and that disintegrates the mind. The reality is always that which is closer to some simple human need, the simpler and more physical the better. Events are more real than emotions, action more real than thought, workers more real than artists. A mountain is real, but a mountain with a coal mine in it is more real. This is the kind of thinking that drove liberals to take up radical causes. Ehrenburg is always looking for this kind of reality; that is why he left Rotonde for the front, wartime Paris for revolutionary Moscow. And that is why he never attains what Gerard Hopkins called "the strain of address", while Apollinaire's passage, for example, has it. A note-taker rather than a writer. The man who prides himself on having married journalism to literature, and thus helping to bring forth modern style, is inhibited by that modern sickness, inability to become eloquent, a talent which flourishes in sturdy-minded periods, for it is simply refusal of the mind to become fragmentized by the inertia of the facts which it confronts outside itself. The style of the absurd man is remarkable for its lack of connectives. Each sentence stands apart like an experience that happened by accident. Children speak this way, some murderers, Hemingway characters, and in contemporary Europe those who survived the age without feeling culpable. "Others have perished, I have survived." The literary merit of Ehrenburg's writing comes from the fact that it has the rhythm of modern living, the rhythm of lives which come off by accident.