VINTAGE

KOBA THE DREAD

MARTIN AMIS

Contents

PART II

Iosif the Terrible: Short Course

PART III

When We Dead Awaken

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Martin Amis is the author of two collections of stories, six works of non-fiction, and thirteen novels, most recently *Lionel Asbo*.

ALSO BY MARTIN AMIS

Fiction

The Rachel Papers
Dead Babies
Success
Other People
Money
Einstein's Monsters
London Fields
Time's Arrow
The Information
Night Train
Heavy Water
Yellow Dog
The House of Meetings
The Pregnant Widow
Lionel Asbo

Non-fiction

Invasion of the Space Invaders
The Moronic Inferno
Visiting Mrs Nabokov
Experience
The War Against Cliché
The Second Plane

Martin Amis

Koba The Dread

Laughter and the Twenty Million

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

To Bob and Liddie
—and to Clio

PART I

THE COLLAPSE OF THE VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE

Preparatory

Here is the second sentence of Robert Conquest's *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*:

> We may perhaps put this in perspective in the present case by saying that in the actions here recorded about twenty human lives were lost for, not every word, but every letter, in this book.

That sentence represents 3,040 lives. The book is 411 pages long.

'Horse manure was eaten, partly because it often contained whole grains of wheat' (1,340 lives). 'Oleska Voytrykhovsky saved his and his family's … lives by consuming the meat of horses which had died in the collective of glanders and other diseases' (2,480 lives). Conquest quotes Vasily Grossman's essayistic-documentary novel *Forever Flowing*: 'And the children's faces were aged, tormented, just as if they were seventy years old. And by spring they no longer had faces. Instead, they had birdlike heads with beaks, or frog heads – thin, wide lips – and some of them resembled fish, mouths open' (3,880 lives). Grossman goes on:

> In one hut there would be something like a war. Everyone would keep close watch over everyone else … The wife turned against her husband and the husband against his wife. The mother hated the children. And in some other hut love would be inviolable to the very last. I knew one woman with

> four children. She would tell them fairy stories and legends so that they would forget their hunger. Her own tongue could hardly move, but she would take them into her arms even though she had hardly the strength to lift her arms when they were empty. Love lived on within her. And people noticed that where there was hate people died off more swiftly. Yet love, for that matter, saved no one. The whole village perished, one and all. No life remained in it.

Thus: 11,860 lives. Cannibalism was widely practised – and widely punished. Not all these pitiable anthropophagi received the supreme penalty. In the late 1930s, 325 cannibals from the Ukraine were still serving life sentences in Baltic slave camps.

The famine was an enforced famine: the peasants were stripped of their food. On 11 June 1933, the Ukrainian paper *Visti* praised an ‘alert’ secret policeman for unmasking and arresting a ‘fascist saboteur’ who had hidden some bread in a hole under a pile of clover. That word *fascist*. One hundred and forty lives.

In these pages, guileless prepositions like *at* and *to* each represent the murder of six or seven large families. There is only one major book on this subject – Conquest’s. Again: it is 411 pages long.

Credentials

I am a fifty-two-year-old novelist and critic who has recently read several yards of books about the Soviet experiment. On 31 December 1999, along with Tony Blair and the Queen, I attended the celebrations at the Millennium Dome in London. Touted as a festival of high technology in an aesthetic dreamscape, the evening resembled a five-hour stopover in a second-rate German airport. For others, the evening resembled a five-hour attempt to *reach* a second-rate German airport – so I won't complain. I knew that the millennium was a non-event, reflecting little more than our interest in zeros; and I knew that 31 December 1999 wasn't the millennium anyway.[1] But that night did seem to mark the end of the twentieth century; and the twentieth century is unanimously considered to be our worst century yet (an impression confirmed by the new book I was reading: *Reflections on a Ravaged Century*, by Robert Conquest). I had hoped that at midnight I would get some sort of chiliastic frisson. And I didn't get it at the Dome. Nonetheless, a day or two later I started to write about the twentieth century and what I took to be its chief lacuna. The piece, or the pamphlet, grew into the slim volume you hold in your hands. I have written about the Holocaust, in a novel (*Time's Arrow*). Its afterword begins:

> This book is dedicated to my sister Sally, who, when she was very young, rendered me two profound services. She awakened my protective instincts; and she provided, if not my earliest childhood memory,

then certainly my most charged and radiant. She was perhaps half an hour old at the time. I was four.

It feels necessary to record that, between Millennium Night and the true millennium a year later, my sister died at the age of forty-six.

[1] The millennial moment was midnight, 31 December 2000. This is because we went from B.C. to A.D. without a year nought. Vladimir Putin described the (pseudo) millennium as ‘the 2000th anniversary of Christianity’.

Background

In 1968 I spent the summer helping to rewire a high-bourgeois mansion in a northern suburb of London. It was my only taste of proletarian life. The experience was additionally fleeting and qualified: when the job was done, I promptly moved into the high-bourgeois mansion with my father and stepmother (both of them novelists, though my father was also a poet and critic). My sister would soon move in too. That summer we were of course monitoring the events in Czechoslovakia. In June, Brezhnev deployed 16,000 men on the border. The military option on 'the Czech problem' was called Operation Tumour … My father had been to Prague in 1966 and made many contacts there. After that it became a family joke – the stream of Czechs who came to visit us in London. There were bouncing Czechs, certified Czechs, and at least one honoured Czech, the novelist Josef Skvorecky. And then on the morning of 21 August my father appeared in the doorway to the courtyard, where the rewiring detail was taking a break, and called out in a defeated and wretched voice: 'Russian tanks in Prague.'

I turned nineteen four days later. In September I went up to Oxford.

The first two items in *The Letters of Kingsley Amis* form the only occasion, in a book of 1,200 pages, where I find my father impossible to recognize. Here he is humourlessly chivvying a faint-hearted comrade to rally to the cause. The tone (earnest, elderly, 'soppy-stern') is altogether alien: 'Now, really, you know, this won't do at all, leaving the Party like that. Tut, tut, John. I am seriously displeased with

you.’ The second letter ends with a hand-drawn hammer and sickle. My father was a card-carrying member of the CP, taking his orders, such as they were, from Stalin’s Moscow. It was November 1941: *he* was nineteen, and up at Oxford.

1941. Kingsley, let us assume, was sturdily ignorant of the USSR’s domestic cataclysms. But its foreign policies hardly cried out for one’s allegiance. A summary. August 1939: the Nazi-Soviet Pact. September 1939: the Nazi-Soviet invasion-partition of Poland (and a second pact: the Soviet-German Treaty on Borders and Friendship). November 1939: the annexation of Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia, and the attempted invasion of Finland (causing the USSR’s expulsion, the following month, from the League of Nations). June 1940: the annexation of Moldavia and Northern Bukovina. August 1940: the annexation of Lithuania, Lativa and Estonia; and the murder of Trotsky. These acquisitions and decapitations would have seemed modest compared to Hitler’s helter-skelter successes over the same period. And then in June 1941, of course, Germany attacked the Soviet Union. My father rightly expected to participate in the war; the Russians were now his allies. It was then that he joined the Party, and he remained a believer for fifteen years.

How much did the Oxford comrades know, in 1941? There were public protests in the West about the Soviet forced-labour camps as early as 1931. There were also many solid accounts of the violent chaos of Collectivization (1929–34) and of the 1933 famine (though no suggestion, as yet, that the famine was terroristic). And there were the Moscow Show Trials of 1936–38, which were open to foreign journalists and observers, and were monitored worldwide. In these pompous and hysterical charades, renowned Old Bolsheviks ‘confessed’ to being career-long enemies of the regime (and to other self-evidently

ridiculous charges). The pubescent Solzhenitsyn was ‘stunned by the fraudulence of the trials’. And yet the world, on the whole, took the other view, and further accepted indignant Soviet denials of famine, enserfment of the peasantry, and slave labour. ‘There was no reasonable excuse for believing the Stalinist story. The excuses which can be advanced are irrational,’ writes Conquest in *The Great Terror*. The world was offered a choice between two realities; and the young Kingsley, in common with the overwhelming majority of intellectuals everywhere, chose the wrong reality.

The Oxford Communists would certainly have known about the Soviet decree of 7 April 1935, which rendered children of twelve and over subject to ‘all measures of criminal punishment’, including death. This law, which was published on the front page of *Pravda* and caused universal consternation (reducing the French CP to the argument that children, under socialism, became grownups very quickly), was intended, it seems, to serve two main purposes. One was social: it would expedite the disposal of the multitudes of feral and homeless orphans created by the regime. The second purpose, though, was political. It applied barbaric pressure on the old oppositionists, Kamenev and Zinoviev, who had children of eligible age; these men were soon to fall, and their clans with them. The law of 7 April 1935 was the crystallization of ‘mature’ Stalinism. Imagine the mass of the glove that Stalin swiped across your face; imagine the mass of it.[2]

On 7 April 1935, my father was nine days away from his thirteenth birthday. Did he ever wonder, as he continued to grow up, why a state should need ‘the last line of defence’ (as a secret reinforcing instruction put it) against twelve-year-olds?

Perhaps there *is* a reasonable excuse for believing the Stalinist story. The real story – the truth – was entirely

unbelievable.

[2] It will be as well, here, to get a foretaste of his rigour. The fate of Mikhail Tukhachevsky, a famous Red commander in the Civil War, was ordinary enough, and that of his family was too. Tukhachevsky was arrested in 1937, tortured (his interrogation protocols were stained with drops of 'flying' blood, suggesting that his head was in rapid motion at the time), farcically arraigned, and duly executed. Moreover (this is Robert C. Tucker's précis in *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928–41*): 'His wife and daughter returned to Moscow where she was arrested a day or two later along with Tukhachevsky's mother, sisters, and brothers Nikolai and Aleksandr. Later his wife and both brothers were killed on Stalin's orders, three sisters were sent to camps, his young daughter Svetlana was placed in a home for children of "enemies of the people" and arrested and sent to a camp on reaching the age of seventeen, and his mother and one sister died in exile.'

More Background

It was in the following summer of 1969, I think, that I sat for an hour in the multi-acre garden of the fascist mansion in southern Hertfordshire with Kingsley Amis and Robert Conquest. A scrap of the conversation sticks in my mind, because I pulled off a mildly successful witticism at a time when I was still (rightly) anxious about my general seaworthiness in adult company. Kingsley and Bob (a.k.a. 'Kingers' and 'Conquers', just as Bob's future translatee, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, would be referred to as 'Solzhers' – pronounced *soldiers*), were deploring a recent production of *Hamlet* in which the Prince was homosexual and Ophelia was played by a man. In retrospect that sounds almost staid, for 1969. Anyhow, I said, 'Get thee to a monastery.' No great thing; but it seemed to scan.

In 1967 Kingsley had published the article called 'Why Lucky Jim Turned Right'. The ex-Communist was developing into a reasonably active Labourite – before becoming (and remaining) a markedly noisy Tory. In 1968 Bob had published *The Great Terror*, his classic study of Stalin's purges of the 1930s, and was on the way to assembling a body of work that would earn him the title, bestowed at a plenum of the Central Committee in Moscow in 1990, of 'anti-Sovietchik number one'. Both Kingsley and Bob, in the 1960s, were frequently referred to as 'fascists' in the general political debate. The accusation was only semi-serious (as indeed was the general political debate, it now seems. In my milieu, policemen and even traffic wardens were called fascists). Kingers and Conquers referred to their own weekly meetings, at Bertorelli's in Charlotte Street, as 'the fascist lunch'; here they would

chat and carouse with other fascists, among them the journalist Bernard Levin, the novelists Anthony Powell and John Braine (an infrequent and much-feared participant), and the defector historian Tibor Szamuely. What united the fascist lunchers was well-informed anti-Communism. Tibor Szamuely knew what Communism was. He had known them: purge, arrest, gulag.

I didn't read *The Great Terror* in 1968 (I would have been more likely, at that time, to have read Conquest's poetry). But I spent an hour with it, and never forgot the cold elegance of the following remark about 'sources': '1. *Contemporary official accounts* require little comment. They are, of course, false as to essentials, but they are still most informative. (It is untrue that Mdivani was a British spy, but it is true that he was executed.)' I have recently read the book twice, in the first edition (which I must have successfully stolen from my father), and in its revised, post-*glasnost* form, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*. When asked to suggest a new title for the revised work, Conquest told his publisher, 'How about *I Told You So, You Fucking Fools?*' Because the book, itself revolutionary at the time of its appearance, has since been massively vindicated. In the mid-1960s I joined in hundreds of conversations like the following (the interlocutors here are my father and A. J. Ayer):

'In the USSR, at least they're trying to forge something positive.'

'But it doesn't *matter* what they're trying to forge, because they've already killed five million people.'

'You keep going back to the five million.'

'If you're tired of that five million, then I'm sure I can find you another five million.'

And one can, now. One can find another 5 million, and another, and another.

Alongside all this there was, in England then, a far hotter debate: the one about Vietnam. A certain urbanity was maintained in arguments about the USSR. It was in arguments about Vietnam that people yelled, wept, fought, stalked out. I watched my father forfeit two valuable friendships over Vietnam (those of A. Alvarez and Karl Miller). For he, and most but not all of the frequenters of the fascist lunch, broadly backed American policy. And this was, of course, the position of a minuscule and much-disliked minority. In my first term at Oxford (autumn, 1968) I attended a demonstration against the resuppression of Czechoslovakia. About a hundred people were there. We heard speeches. The mood was sorrowful, decent. Compare this to the wildly peergroup-competitive but definitely unfakeable emotings and self-lacerations of the crowds outside the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square, where they gathered in their tens of thousands.

In 1968 the world seemed to go further left than it had ever gone before and would ever go again. But this left was the New Left: it represented, or turned out to represent, revolution as play. The ‘redeemer’ class was no longer to be found in the mines and factories; it was to be found in the university libraries and lecture halls. There were demonstrations, riots, torchings, street battles in England, Germany, Italy, Japan and the USA. And remember the Paris of 1968: barricades, street theatre, youth-worship (‘The young make love; the old make obscene gestures’), the resurgence of Marcuse (the wintry dialectician), and Sartre standing on street corners handing out Maoist pamphlets … The death throes of the New Left took the form of vanguard terrorism (the Red Brigades, the Baader-Meinhof gang, the Weathermen). And its afterlife is anarchistic, opposing itself to the latest mutation of capital: after imperialism, after fascism, it now faces globalization.

We may note here that militant Islam cannot be made to fit into this ‘model’ – or into any other.

But red wasn’t dead, in 1968. During my time at Oxford they used to come to your room: the believers, the steely ones – the proselytizing Communists. One might adapt the old joke. Q: What’s the difference between a Communist car and a Communist proselytizer? A: You can close the door on a Communist proselytizer. To glance quickly at a crucial dissonance: it has always been possible to joke about the Soviet Union, just as it has never been possible to joke about Nazi Germany. (Hitler attracts mockery, but his actions repel it). This is not merely a question of decorum. In the German case, laughter automatically absents itself. *Pace* Adorno, it was not poetry that became impossible after Auschwitz. What became impossible was laughter. In the Soviet case, on the other hand, laughter intransigently refuses to absent itself. Immersion in the facts of the Bolshevik catastrophe may make this increasingly hard to accept, but such an immersion will never cleanse that catastrophe of laughter …

I have to say that for a while I rather creepily, but very loyally, toed my father’s line on Vietnam. Soon I changed my mind and we argued about it, often bitterly, for thirty years.[3] As I now see it, America had no business involving itself in a series of distant convulsions where the ideas, variously interpreted, of a long-dead German economist were bringing biblical calamity to China, North Korea, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. The prosecution of the war by America, I came to think, was clearly intolerable, impossible, not only because of what it was doing to Vietnam, but also because of what it was doing to America. There was a ghostly epiphany, a ghostly confirmation, when, in the late 1980s, the number of home casualties in the war was officially exceeded by the number of suicides among its veterans. That is strong evidence of an

ideological brutalization of the motherland. The veterans returned, as we know, not to flowers and embraces, but to isolation.

The Szamuelys. All four Szamuelys – Tibor, Nina, Helen and George – were staying at the fascist mansion on the day I drove from there to Oxford, in 1972, to be orally judged for my degree. When it was over I crowed the news home by telephone, and returned to a scene of celebration. At about one o'clock that night I made a cordially unrequited pass at Helen Szamuely and then blacked out on the chaise longue in the drawing room. I awoke at about five, and stood up wonderingly, and headed for the door. When I opened it, all the fascist burglar alarms went off and I roused everyone in the house, my father, stepmother, step-uncle, and all four Szamuelys.

[3] Conquest was strongly anti-Vietcong, but his support for the American conduct of the war was never emphatic, and has evolved in the direction of further deemphasis. (Here we may recall that, despite his donnish accent and manner, Conquest is an American. Well, American father, English mother; born in the UK; dual nationality; now a resident of California.) Kingsley was never less than 100 per cent earnest on Vietnam, right up until his death in 1995.

The Politicization of Sleep

Having analysed a particularly violent tackle by a particularly violent player, the ex-footballer Jimmy Greaves remarked: ‘Put it this way. He’s a lovely boy when he’s asleep.’ With the Bolsheviks, there was no such respite. In 1910 a political opponent said of Lenin that you couldn’t deal with a man who ‘for twenty-four hours of the day is taken up with the revolution, who has no other thoughts but thoughts of the revolution, and who, even in his sleep, dreams of nothing but revolution’. The actual Revolution, of course, had no effect on this habit. As the young secretary Khrushchev said to a cheering audience of Party members, ‘A Bolshevik is someone who feels himself to be a Bolshevik even when he’s sleeping!’ That’s how a Bolshevik felt about sleep,

> The death of each day’s life, sore labour’s bath,
> Balm of hurt minds, great nature’s second course,
> Chief nourisher in life’s feast.

Sleep was just another opportunity to feel like a Bolshevik.

But that is what they want, the believers, the steely ones, that is what they live for: the politicization of sleep. They want politics to be going on everywhere all the time, politics permanent and circumambient. They want the ubiquitization of politics; they want the politicization of sleep.

Soon we will look at what Stalin did to the Meyerholds: the extreme example of the politicization of sleep.

* * *

This is from a letter addressed to Maxim Gorky concerning the status of intellectuals under the new regime:

> The intellectual strength of workers and peasants grows in the struggle to overturn the bourgeoisie and their acolytes, those second-rate intellectuals and lackeys of capitalism, who think they are the brains of the nation. They are not the brains of the nation. They're its shit.

That isn't Stalin. (That is Lenin.) Stalin hated intellectuals too, but he cared about what we call creative writing and had an uneasy feel for it. His famous and much-mocked remark, 'writers are the engineers of human souls', is not just a grandiose fatuity: it is a description of what he wanted writers to be under his rule. He didn't understand that talented writers cannot go against their talent and survive, that they cannot be engineers. Talentless writers can, or they can try; it was a very good thing to be a talentless writer in the USSR, and a very bad thing to be a talented one.

Stalin personally monitored a succession of novelists, poets and dramatists. In this sphere he wavered as in no other. He gave Zamyatin his freedom: emigration. He menaced but partly tolerated Bulgakov (and went to his play *Days of the Turbins* fifteen times, as the theatre records show). He tortured and killed Babel. He destroyed Mandelstam. He presided over the grief and misery of Anna Akhmatova (and of Nadezhda Mandelstam). He subjected Gorky to a much stranger destiny, slowly deforming his talent and integrity; next to execution, deformity was the likeliest outcome for the post-October Russian writer, expressed most eloquently in suicide. He endured Pasternak; he silenced him, and took a lover and a child

from him; still, he spared him ('Do not touch this cloud-dweller'). But this is what he did to the Meyerholds.

The world-famous Vsevolod Meyerhold had displeased Stalin, at the height of the Great Terror, with his production of a play about the Civil War. Meyerhold was savaged by *Pravda* (that was a ritual, something like a promissory note of disaster) and his theatre was shut down. After a while he was given some employment and protection by Stanislavsky. Stanislavsky died in August 1938. Just under a year later Meyerhold was given an official opportunity to recant at a conference organized by the Committee on Art Affairs. He did not recant. He said, among other things:

> I, for one, find the work of our theatres pitiful and terrifying … Go to the Moscow theatres and look at the colourless, boring productions which are all alike and differ only in their degree of worthlessness … In your effort to eradicate formalism, you have destroyed art!

A few days later he was arrested. The file on Meyerhold contains his letter from prison to Molotov:

> The investigators began to use force on me, a sick, sixty-five-year-old man. I was made to lie face down and then beaten on the soles of my feet and my spine with a rubber strap … For the next few days, when those parts of my legs were covered with extensive internal haemorrhaging, they again beat the red-blue-and-yellow bruises with the strap and the pain was so intense that it felt as if boiling water was being poured on these sensitive areas. I howled and wept from the pain … [which] caused my eyes to weep unending streams of tears. Lying face down on the floor, I discovered that I could wriggle, twist and squeal like a dog when its master whips it … When I

> lay down on the cot and fell asleep, after eighteen hours of interrogation, in order to go back in an hour's time for more, I was woken up by my own groaning and because I was jerking about like a patient in the last stages of typhoid fever.

You know that your sleep has been politicized – when that is what wakes you. The interrogator, he added, urinated in his mouth. Meyerhold wrote this letter on 13 January 1940, having confessed to whatever it was they wanted him to confess to (spying for the British and the Japanese, among other charges). Stalin needed confessions; he followed the progress of certain interrogations (lasting months or even years), and couldn't sleep until confessions were secured. So *his* sleep, of course, was also politicized.

A few days after Meyerhold's arrest his young wife, the actress Zinaida Raikh, was found dead in their apartment. She had seventeen knife wounds. The neighbours had heard her screams; they thought she was *rehearsing*. It is reported that her eyes, presumably closed in sleep when the doorbell rang, had been cut out.

Meyerhold was shot on 2 February 1940.

I had just begun this book when I came across the following, in an account of the Soviet-exported Hungarian 'revolution' of 1919:

> With some twenty of 'Lenin's Boys' [the terror wing of the Revolutionary Council], Tibor Szamuely … executed several locals accused of collaborating with the Romanians … One Jewish schoolboy who tried to plead for his father's life was killed for calling Szamuely a 'wild beast' … Szamuely had requisitioned a train and was travelling around the

country hanging any peasant opposed to collectivization …

My first thought was to fax Bob Conquest with the question: ‘Was Tibor Szamuely related to Tibor Szamuely?’ Then I recalled the piece about Tibor, our Tibor, written by my father in his *Memoirs*. I settled down to it, thinking that I knew Tibor’s story pretty well, and thinking, moreover, that it was a happy story, a story of struggle, heroic cunning, luck, escape, subversive triumph. And I finished the piece with a pain in my throat. This is not a Meyerhold story; but it is another story about the politicization of sleep.

Tibor Szamuely was Tibor Szamuely’s *uncle*, and a famous associate of Lenin’s. Tibor, our Tibor, ‘had a framed photograph, prominently displayed, of the two monsters side by side facing a crowd from a platform’, my father writes. It was, then, as a scion of an émigré Hungarian political family that Tibor was born in Moscow in 1925. When he was eleven his father disappeared into the mouth of 1936. Tibor fought in the Red Army while still in his teens. In the early 1950s Tibor happened to say, in the hearing of somebody he thought he could trust, that he was sick of the sight of that ‘fat pig’ Georgi Malenkov (Prime Minister of the USSR, 1953–55). Representatives of ‘the Organs’ came for him in the middle of the night. He got eight years, to be served in the northern camp of Vorkuta – a name that means as much to a Russian, perhaps, as the name Dachau means to a Jew. Or means more. I choose Dachau advisedly and maybe pusillanimously. Many people died in it but Dachau did not have time to become a death camp (its gas chambers were built too late). Vorkuta was not a death camp. The gulag had no death camps of the Nazi type, no Belzec, no Sobibor (though it had execution camps). But all the camps were death camps, by the nature

of things. Those not immediately killed at Auschwitz, which was a slave camp and a death camp, tended to last three months. Two years seems to have been the average for the slave camps of the gulag archipelago.

'Write to your mother' were Tibor's last words to his wife as he was led away at three o'clock in the morning. It used to be his boast that he was the only prisoner ever freed by Stalin – by Stalin personally. Nina Szamuely's mother had apparently had close relations with Hungary's Stalinist dictator Matyas Rakosi. Stalin was duly called or cabled by the Stalinist; orders were dispatched to Vorkuta. The KGB man sent to liberate Tibor apologized to him, on the railway platform by *kissing his shoes*. The convicted slanderer of the state was now in favour. And Tibor, by a series of wonderful feints and flukes, escaped to the England he had visited as a boy. He escaped with his wife, his two children, and also (a great coup) his vast and irreplaceable library. So this was a happy story, I thought: a happy story.

It didn't take Tibor long to establish himself: historian, academic, journalist, USSR-watcher. When his naturalization papers came through, the fascists held a celebratory lunch. Of his new citizenship he later said to my father, 'You know, this means I have no more worries. Nothing matters to me now. Not even dying. I'll be able to say to myself, well, at least it's in England.' And it *was* in England: two years later, at the age of forty-seven. And Nina died two years after that: the same day, the same cancer. I remember her with greater clarity and feeling than I remember him. I used to smile at it: her air of worry, her constant *activity* of worry. And I remember her funeral, too, and 'one of the most harrowing sights imaginable,' as my father writes, 'that of the two young orphaned children, Helen and George, there at the top of the church steps to greet the mourners, standing completely alone …'

Tibor was an unusually late riser, and Kingsley once complained to Nina about it. She said that her husband sometimes needed to see the first signs of dawn before he could begin to contemplate sleep. Even in England. He needs, said Nina, ‘to be absolutely certain that they won’t be coming for him that night’.

We cannot understand it, and there is no reason why we should. It takes a significant effort of imagination to guess at the ‘fear that millions of people find insurmountable’, in the words of Vasily Grossman, ‘this fear written up in crimson letters over the leaden sky of Moscow – this terrible fear of the state’.

More Background

‘Hugh MacDiarmid: what a bastard,’ said my father in about 1972, referring to the man widely believed to be the greatest Scottish poet of the twentieth century. ‘He became a Communist in 1956 – *after* Hungary.’

‘And what’s his stuff like?’ I asked.

‘Oh, you know. Nothing but Marxist clichés interspersed with archaic “Scotch” expletives.’

‘For instance?’

He thought for a moment. My memory exactly vouches for lines two and four, though it can’t do the same for lines one and three, where, for that matter, any old rubbish would have done. He said something like:

> Every political system is a superstructure over a determining
> socioeconomic base.
> Whah-hey!
> The principle of distribution according to need precludes the
> conversion of products into goods and their conversion
> into value.
> Och aye!
> The objective conditions for the transfer to socialism can
> only—

‘Enough,’ I said – though now I wish I had let him go on a bit. It was easy to joke about Communism. That was one