higher plane of creativity the following day when he blacked out everything in the letters but a, an, and the. That erected more dynamic intralinear tensions, he felt, and in just about every case left a message far more universal."

We laugh at Yossarian, and if we happen to be thoroughly postmodern types, we just might laugh at ourselves. Talk about market correction! If *Catch-22* is a shade less than the perfect novel that Heller's eulogists blathered on about, it is surely one helluva book. Indeed, if there is a need for "market correction" anywhere, it is probably among those people who would not be at all ashamed to talk about a novel in terms of its "dynamic intralinear tensions." Such people need to reread *Catch-22*, and, this time, to catch the joke.

POLITICS AND THE ENGAGED IMAGINATION
EASTERN EUROPEAN FICTION
DURING THE COLD WAR

GLADYS SWAN

Soldier, there's a war between
the mind and sky . . .
—Wallace Stevens

In 1988 I went to Yugoslavia on a Fulbright appointment, as a writer-in-residence. It was not only my first visit to a socialist country; it was also my first chance to meet European writers, particularly those from Eastern Europe. I traveled as well to Prague and Budapest, dreary places in those days, the population quite spiritless, particularly in Prague. When I returned there again just before the elections that gave the victory to the Civic Forum, the city was transformed. Crowds stood in Wenceslas Square, listening to the speeches of the various newly formed political parties. The Communists had three cherries as their emblem; no one knew why. Before and during all this activity, musicians in the square played jazz and rock as well as traditional music. All this had been forbidden. One Czech, on seeing the musicians there for the first time, called up a friend of hers in great excitement, saying, "Democracy has arrived."

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My visits were an eye-opening experience. I had, of course, known of the exile and imprisonment of writers under the Nazi and Communist regimes and other kinds of dictatorships, but as one largely isolated in a small mid-western city, whose literary concerns were at a considerable distance from the arena of politics, I met for the first time writers who could not conceive of their literary existence apart from a political stance. At times it was not a question of who had or had not gone to prison, but how many years one had been detained. It raised for me the issue of just what it is that makes inevitable for certain writers a confrontational stance with the powers that rule.

I read for the first time Nadezhda Mandelstam’s two volumes, *Hope Against Hope* and *Hope Abandoned*, a play on her name, which means “hope”; and I discovered the terrible consequences of making what Nadine Gordimer defines so brilliantly as “the essential gesture.” In a small private gathering, as we know, Osip Mandelstam had read a poem about Stalin, “murderer and peasant slayer,” with fingers “fat as grubs” and “cockroach whiskers.” For this he was arrested and sent to the notorious Lubianka Prison, from which he emerged in a state of psychological collapse, and attempted suicide. His subsequent years he spent in exile and grinding poverty, depending for survival primarily on donations from friends, until he was finally seized at a health retreat where he and his wife had been assigned a space by the government, very likely to keep an eye on him. She did not have a chance to say goodbye. Apparently he died on the way to Siberia.

The story is well known: since his poems were forbidden reading, Nadezhda Mandelstam committed each of them to memory as it was composed and kept reciting them over and over. Finally, during the Khrushchev years, they could appear without reprisal. Meanwhile those who had copies of his work circulated them, putting themselves at great risk.

It is clear that Stalin and other such dictators take poetry and the arts seriously and that the pressures on writers to prevent their influencing public opinion cast them into a political role both in their work and outside it, in all the various aspects of being a writer. In his essay on that subject the Czech writer Jan Hrachnor discusses the predicament: “So he is driven by these extremities not to behave like an artist, whose civic and political stance is contained within works of art with their indirect, vicarious impact, but, since he cannot publish, to act in sheer defense.” Writers are thus forced, he adds, to concern themselves with letters of protest and manifestos about oppression and freedom when “they’d rather be sitting at their desks penning poems, short stories, novels and plays.”

Because conditions have changed a good deal since I was in Prague and Budapest, it would be interesting to determine to what degree writers still feel a sense of political necessity as an impetus for their
work. One Hungarian writer I spoke with in the summer of 1991 was casting about for a new identity. When the regime of Janos Kadar was intact, he told me, writers knew what to write about, how to veil their words, what position to take. Now that things were open, it was less clear. Various articles about Russian writers indicated the same. They couldn’t use the language they had created prior to Gorbachev; they couldn’t go back to folk traditions. Something else had to emerge. Yet the terrible pressures of political realities certainly remain for the writer in various parts of Central and Eastern Europe. When you read, not to mention everything else, of the calculated destruction of one of the major libraries in Sarajevo, with its collection of priceless manuscripts, you feel that a great blow has been struck at the future, of the sort that raises a good many questions about a writer’s role—if there is one.

In the midst of the Bosnian conflict, as I was browsing in a bookstore, I came across a new paperback edition of Ivo Andrić’s The Bridge on the Drina. The sign beneath said: “Read this to understand the events in Bosnia.” The novel does offer such a basis of understanding. As both historian and fiction writer, Andrić has, as he imagined the interactions of Turks, Serbs, and Austrians, given real insight into racial conflicts, cultural repressions, and the resurgent efforts of the Serbs for autonomy. And one of his letters reveals his understanding of the irrational forces at work:

But what I have seen in Bosnia—that is something different. It is hatred, but not limited just to a moment in the course of social change or an inevitable part of the historical process; rather, it is hatred acting as an independent force, as an end in itself. Hatred which sets man against man and casts both alike into misery and misfortune or drives both opponents to the grave; hatred like a cancer in an organism, consuming and eating up everything around it, only to die itself at the last; because this kind of hatred, like a flame, has neither one constant form nor a life of its own: it is simply the agent of the instinct of destruction or self-destruction. It exists only in this form and only until the task of total destruction has been completed.

The statement seems to apply as aptly to the events in Kosovo. But, if Andrić’s novel were concerned only with such forces, it would lack something of its impressive magnitude. For it is a novel both epic and tragic in scope, with the building of the bridge as a powerful imaginative conception by a Serb who becomes second in command in the Turkish Empire in the fifteenth century. More than just an easier means to cross the river, providing a link between Serbia and Bosnia, where the Muslims rule, the bridge becomes part of a whole complex that offers to the community not only a central fixture of life, and to the traveler a
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welcome refuge, but an image of the eternal. The bridge stands as a spiritual principle that transcends generations and the tides of empire, a continual presence upon which the individual dramas are played out: a suicide by a young girl who refuses to marry the man her father has chosen for her; the disgrace of a young soldier who is seduced away from his duty; the triumph of the town drunk, the loser, when he is challenged to walk the rim of the span and experiences the transcendent moment of his life. All of these people are caught in the shifting tides of events they cannot control, but in many cases can only suffer. Such as the unfortunate Jewish woman who keeps a prosperous tavern, supports family members in various parts of the Austrian empire, but meets financial ruin in the depression that is taking over Europe and which will end in World War I. This is truly a monumental work. Is it then that we depend on such voices to give context and meaning to those events that seem unimaginable to those who experience them? Is that still possible?

Let the question linger in the background as I mention several novels I've come across in my eclectic and quite unorganized fashion, books that in different ways deal with political realities. I have chosen works perhaps less generally known than some obvious ones by such writers as Kundera, Skvorecky, and Solzhenitsyn: Danilo Kiš's A Tomb for Boris Davidović, Andre Sinyavsky's Goodnight, Bohumil Hrabal's I Served the King of England, and György Konrád's The Case Worker.

A very different style from Andrić's in handling of political realities occurs in the work of Danilo Kiš, also a Yugoslavian writer, but of Jewish origin, who lived in Paris for many years and writes about Jews caught in the throes of revolutionary activity. On the jacket of the little paperback edition I have, printed in English in Sarajevo, he is described as a "poet of the negative experience of the 20th century, a poet of death and man's anxieties, and of the traumas and dreams of modern times." A Tomb for Boris Davidović is, in effect, the same story told several different times, one of these occurring in the fourteenth century; the title piece, during the Stalinist purges following the revolution. Kiš uses a documentary style that achieves a lyrical power, for biographies that sound as though they ought to be true, mixing facts and footnotes with his inventions. Davidović, or Novsky, the name he works under, is a revolutionist caught in the very system he worked to bring to power. Imprisoned and tortured, he refuses to confess to a crime he didn't commit even when his refusal brings about the bloody shootings of men standing directly in front of him. When he finally breaks, he and his torturer spend hours arguing over the wording of his confession, ironically a pure fiction. But because Davidović wishes to preserve a kind of integrity—he is not the common thief his prosecutor's accusations would make him out to be—he agrees to almost anything in order "to fulfil his biography." At one point, he speaks of his revolutionary passion, certainly in conflict with any kind of personal emotion:
As soon as I entered the university I found myself in prison. I was arrested exactly thirteen times. Of the twelve years that followed my first arrest, I spent more than half at hard labor. In addition, three times I walked the painful road of exile, a road that took three years of my life. During the brief periods of my 'freedom' I watched, as in a movie theater, the passing of sad Russian villages, towns, people, and events, but I was always in flight . . . on a horse, on a boat, in a cart. I never slept in the same bed for more than a month. I've come to know the horror of Russian reality in the long tedious winter evenings when the pale lights of Vasilevsky Island barely blink, and a Russian village emerges in the moonlight in a false and deceptive beauty. My only passion was this arduous, rapturous, and mysterious profession of revolutionary. . . . Forgive me, Zina, and carry me in your heart; it will be as painful as a kidney stone.

In a curious way both the revolutionary and his torturer are caught in the same illusions, in which people are sacrificed for the sake of an idea—an idea that assumes a kind of religious significance. So the narrator, offering the reader this biography, comments: "Lastly, I believe that both acted from reasons that transcended narrow egocentric goals. Novsky fought to preserve in his death and downfall the dignity not only of his own image but also that of all revolutionaries, while Fedukin, in his search for fiction and premises, strove to preserve the consistency of revolutionary justice and of those who dispense this justice; for it was better that the so-called truth of a single man, one tiny organism, be destroyed than the higher interests and principles he questioned."

Through the events Kiš imagines, though they occur in various contexts and historical periods, perhaps because his treatment is historical, detached, he gives one a sense of the interplay of absolute power and revolutionary counteractivity as a present phenomenon as well, quite as horrifying in its effects as one continues to see its reality. Yet it is perhaps Kiš's intent to dignify the individual even though he doesn't necessarily blink at Davidović's lifelong obsession to create a bomb as small as a walnut but of great destructive power. His aim lies in this statement: "The ancient Greeks had an admirable custom: for anyone who perished by fire, was swallowed by a volcano, buried by lava, torn to pieces by beasts, devoured by sharks, or whose corpse was scattered by vultures in the desert, they built so-called cenotaphs, or empty tombs, in their homelands; for the body is only fire, water, or earth, whereas the soul is the Alpha and the Omega, to which a shrine should be erected."

Like the Holocaust the influence of Stalinism will no doubt continue to exert its impact on literature, in the effort to make available for the imagination the effects of absolute power. My Century, a moving biographical account by the Polish intellectual Aleksander Wat offers one more instance of how those who militated for social change were ground
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under by the regimes that came to power, labeled enemies of Communism, and systematically eliminated or imprisoned. A recent novel, whose power lies in its imaginative reconstruction of the ordeal of the individual in a totalitarian state, is Andre Sinyavsky's Goodnight. First published in Russian in Paris under the pseudonym Abram Terz, it is the account of Sinyavsky's apprehension and trial in 1965—for writing. For some years his books had been smuggled out of Russia and published abroad.

It is hard to do justice to this complex, technically brilliant, autobiographical novel. Although Stalin is not an actual character, his presence is ubiquitous, and the unreality thus conditioned is brought home with the vividness of nightmare. Sinyavsky's father, who appears in the book, one who was also apprehended for political reasons, emerges from the experience thinking that "they" can see into his brain, into the workings of his thought processes. Through fragmented glimpses of the process of interrogation, with the hallucinatory effects of photographs thrown on walls, loud music, and sleep deprivation, Sinyavsky shows the way reality itself is fractured:

The bastards! A song from the revolution! The singing became louder. Grew closer. Then it was there. Was it coming from under the table? Louder. From all four walls. Overwhelming . . . Cover your ears, now, to keep from going deaf! . . . The peephole. In the tomblike silence, the supervisor's voice: "What are you doing? No sleeping allowed . . . Out of your cell!"

Interrogation. The cell. Interrogation. The cell. Interrogation.

"A psycho! Ho-ho-ho!"

An echo. Faster. The brain was starting to go. The main thing was not to fall to pieces! The brain!

Later Stalin's funeral is described, but people can't believe that Stalin is dead: like a god such a figure is beyond death. The book culminates with a particularly telling moment that locates the moral crisis of the individual in such a society, when Sinyavsky, back in 1948, reveals to a foreign woman how he is being used as a cat's paw in a plot to betray her by offering her a proposal of marriage:

At the critical junctures, the soul has no more power of choice than we have a choice of our children or our parents. And I was not acting of my own free will when I informed you of the plot against you, even though that may have been the most serious crisis in my life, after which it was emotionally impossible for me to return to the ranks of moral and political unity with the Soviet people and Soviet society, placing my hopes in the initial purity of the revolu-
tion. Think of it like this. What if you were ordered to murder a child in the name of the highest moral ideals. Would you be making a choice there—to murder or not to murder? And afterward wouldn't those very ideals seem slightly bloodstained, to put it mildly, not with our own blood or the proletariat's, but with the blood of others, of innocent children.

Mirroring these events, this time from Prague in very different fashion, is Bohumil Hrabal's *I Served the King of England*. But certain issues are parallel. The novel begins with a busboy trying to find his way in the world, one who does little to question its values. Through him the reader is led into the moral loneliness of one who sees beyond ideology, personal advantage, and power over others. No doubt this wonderful novel owes a good deal to the special magic of Prague itself and not only to the inheritance from Kafka but from Jaroslav Hašek, who, beyond his literary efforts in *The Good Soldier Schweik*, made his life something of the fantastic as well. For a time he earned his living writing for a zoological journal; however, his highly interesting and learned-sounding articles were written about animals that didn't exist. In the election of 1911 he founded the Party of Moderate Reactionaries within the Limits of the Law and promised every voter a pocket aquarium. According to one commentator, "[Hašek's] humor was directed against the Church, petit bourgeois corruption, the nobility, bureaucracy, against all weakness of history and society." One has the impression that with very little modification this could be said of Hrabal, and that when two of his characters rage at their fellow men, calling them "evil, stupid, criminal sons of man," there is some degree of such feeling on the part of author.

But it is also a work of great humor and compassion. We watch Ditie, the busboy, move on in his career, trying to find his way up in the world as a waiter, at one time serving the emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, the extraordinary dish he cooks have concocted, a barbecued camel; inside of each chunk, a piece of antelope and inside that a piece of turkey and within that, fish and stuffing and eggs at the center. Ultimately Ditie becomes a millionaire hotel owner under the Communists, fulfilling his dreams of wealth and success. Food, particularly as it is displayed in excess in the orgiastic raptures of those in power, points toward the corruption of the society. But, though Ditie hungers after the appearances that would make him a somebody, always he reveals other potentials as well—good-heartedness, an appreciation of the aesthetic and the erotic. It is an underlying passion that ultimately saves him. Just before World War II, he had married a German girl out of love, thereby finding himself regarded as a criminal by the Czechs and treated with contempt by the SS men. But look at what he gets into. When Lise, his wife, insists on a program for conceiving a child, the marriage that had
begun with Slavic spontaneity turns drearily in the direction of duty. “I could do anything in the emotion of the moment, but when Lise told me to get ready because that night she was set to conceive the New Man, the founder of the New Europe, I felt exactly the way I had when the Reichsdoktor, acting on the Nuremberg Laws, asked me to bring him a bit of my sperm on a piece of white paper.”

Inspired by a week of listening to Wagnerian operas, Lohengrin and Siegfried, and having gazed at friezes of Teutonic heroes and demigods, Lise is now ready to conceive. “That evening Lise appeared in a long gown, eyes full of duty and blood and honor, and she put her hand in mine, babbled something in German, and rolled her eyes upward, as though all the denizens of the Teutonic heaven were gazing down at us from the ceiling . . . all the Nibelungs, and even Wagner himself . . . so that her womb would be graced by the New Man, who would establish and live in the New Order of the New Blood and the New Thinking and the New Honor. When I heard all this, I felt everything that makes a man a man drain out of me, and I just lay there staring at the ceiling, dreaming about a lost paradise.”

The child she bears, moronic but physically powerful, has but one activity—hammering nails into the floor. The sound pounded into one’s head day and night becomes a fitting image for the consequences of the New Thinking. Lise herself is caught and killed in the warfare supposed to bring about the triumph of her cherished ideas. Significantly, though her body is discovered in the rubble, those searching never find her head.

Finally seeing through the illusions that have shaped his life, Ditie takes up the simplest work of repairing roads, living alone with his cats. In that solitude he finds that what matters is some sort of moral integrity, becoming aware of his past and its meaning, becoming aware of himself: “As a matter of fact whenever I was in the pub I realized that the basic thing in life is questioning death, wanting to know how we’ll act when our time comes, and that death, or rather this question of death, is a conversation that takes place between infinity and eternity, and how we deal with our own death is the beginning of what is beautiful, because the absurd things in our lives, which always end before we want them to anyway, fill us, when we contemplate death, with bitterness and therefore with beauty.” The significant events of his life are a glimpse into a period of Czechoslovakian experience from the period just before World War II until after the Communists appear on the scene. In this journey he comes to represent not only Czechoslovakia but Everyman.

Marxism, and its subsequent application, did indeed offer a social program and the ideal of the classless society—the withering away of the state. The novels in question remind us of the limitations of social theories as opposed to the will to power. But politics aside, how do social theories appear in their application? In turning to György Kon-
rúd’s *The Case Worker*, a novel that comes from the writer’s experience as a social worker, one calls to mind Joseph Conrad’s statement that “inherent in the nature of action is the degeneration of the idea.”

Here the protagonist leads us into the files of cases and the various and flawed humanity that has landed there: the retarded and malformed, the rejects—the scrapings from the pot. The focus rests on the case of an idiot child left behind for the authorities to deal with after his parents have committed suicide. The caseworker’s journey takes him to the lower depths of Budapest, to that irreducible level of human suffering that no social system, socialist or otherwise, can adequately address. Abandoning his other responsibilities and roles, the narrator seemingly takes on this child, who exists at a purely animal level, unable to control even its bodily functions. But it is, in effect, an imaginative journey, to the heart of the city, to the heart of humanity and one’s relations with it. In the end, after the caseworker does indeed return to his office, to his desk, there follows a remarkable litany, in which the procession of those who appear before him are somehow given recognition and taken into a large compassion: “In the meantime I wait for my clients. Let the children—our examiners—come with their hot hands and fragrant round heads, their laced shoes that swing like pendulums, and the smiles they display like medals, their atavistic fears and amazing ability to learn, their obsessions and cajoleries, their relentless selfishness and irresistible weakness, their vulnerable docility and their mirror images of our own depravity.”

Let them all come, he continues: “let the runaways come, those caught after nights spent in the woods, in confessionals, cotton bales, sandboxes, or empty pigsties; the boy who is ininsolable because his mother has moved him to the floor to make room in her bed for her new lover; the girl who was going to put her half-sister’s eye out with a red-hot poker but dropped it at the last minute.” And the litany goes on: “let them all come with their manias and threats of vengeance, their porno-collages, their short-wave transmitters hidden in shoe-polish tins, their electrical masturbators, their jars of poisoned jam, their cakes full of pins, nails, and fishbones, their vaginas full of jewelry, and all the rest of their cunning little dodges.” And then: “let the bungling mechanics come, those who can never put themselves together out of their component bits and pieces, who can never be real for the want of a shirt button, a telephone token, or an aspirin, the neglected who have never been given anything for nothing, the underprivileged whose wildest dream it is to be next to last.”

There is in the anguish of this parade, ironically, a kind of vitality, a certain dignity, for these can “in a privileged moment of tenderness, light the Christmas sparkler of mescaline-induced recognition and exalt the law of inalienable freedom about the experience of their own insignificance.”
We are faced with the inefficacy of systems—by extension our own, not with the mandate to abandon them, but rather to recognize and respond to the humanity of those who share our existence. If social systems fail, one might infer, they do so because they are systems and cannot answer to the complexities of our condition. We are reminded of the ways that Dostoevsky satirized those who think that human reason can provide ultimate solutions, who would reach perfection through social systems, men such as Lebezyatnikov, whose socialism will answer to all human ills. Konrád, too, suggests the opposite. There is no solution; there is only the imperfect, muddling bureaucracy. But, within it, there is a man who can participate in the humanity of those who approach him: “Let all those come who want to; one of us will talk, the other will listen; at least we shall be together.” And then?

This brings us back to this vexing question: if politics fails, if social systems brutalize, if we face a world continually terrorized by violence, what can be the role of the artist? In Admitting the Holocaust Lawrence Langer argues that no redeeming message can be salvaged from that experience. His position is that a “realistic” view of the catastrophe is necessary, that the writer cannot really fathom such bottomless evil. In his terms there are only victims—such words as survivors and martyrs he finds dishonest. In an interview he says: “There’s nothing dignified in standing by while 10 members of your family are killed and there’s nothing triumphant about staying alive when you’re powerless to help the people you love to stay alive. The efforts to make the Holocaust a metaphor for evil or the backdrop of fiction remove one from the physical reality.” The article goes on to quote Jean Amery, a Viennese-born Jew, who wrote about his torture at the hands of the Nazis. “The shame of destruction cannot be erased. . . . That one’s fellow man was experienced as the anti-man remains in the tortured person as an accumulated horror. It blocks the view into a world in which the principle of hope rules.” One thinks of those who survived the experience only to commit suicide later, and of recent conditions not only in Bosnia and Croatia or Cambodia, but Kosovo, Chechnya, Rwanda, Iraq, Algeria, and East Timor. For certain minds, the horrors of the twentieth century mark a radical shift: the Holocaust and Stalin’s extermination of thirty million people have changed the valuation of art as well as morality. For the millions slaughtered, any argument is purely academic and no doubt futile. When he fled to America from Czechoslovakia in 1970, under the threat of a third term of imprisonment and the economic destruction of his family by the regime, the writer Jan Benes gave up writing fiction, because the activity seemed to him frivolous in the face of circumstance.

Here, indeed, the distinction T. S. Eliot made between the man who suffers and the mind that creates takes on other dimensions initiated by the state in which we find ourselves, not simply as the inward struggle of the writer wrestling with his experience, but with the large-scale
suffering of whole populations. What Wallace Stevens calls “the pressure of reality” transcends the fate of the individual, and even war becomes “part of the war-like whole.” “Malignity has found its motive and the victims, on any given day, are those the crossfire catches.” Though Stevens gave his lecture “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” in 1942, his description of that pressure seems increasingly apt: “in speaking of the pressure of reality, I am thinking of life in a state of violence, not physically violent, as yet, for us in America, but physically violent for millions of our friends and for still more millions of our enemies and spiritually violent, it may be said, for everyone alive.”

It is not just the violence that threatens us in the form of atom bombs and missiles, but its pressure in the form of “news” that becomes too much for the imagination to take in. In his essay “Political Intrusion” Terrence Des Pres carries the implications of Stevens’s ideas still further. He regards the poet’s assessment not only as correct, but even prophetic. The news as Stevens described it—“incomparably more pretentious than any description of it, news, at first, of the collapse of our system, or, call it, of life; then of news of a new world, but of a new world so uncertain that one did not know anything whatever of its nature, and does not know now”—has become more intrusive than ever. It is not only that “the world comes at us every day nonstop,” in Des Pres’s words, or suggests “an impermanence of the future,” in Stevens’s terms, but that it comes “in ways that undermine the distance imagination needs to make sense of what we behold.”

Both essays define tellingly the problem the artist wrestles with. Stevens maintains that the pressure of this reality is “pressure great enough and prolonged enough to bring about the end of one era in the history of the imagination, and if so, then great enough to bring about the beginning of another.” Then the recurring question might very well be what the imagination can do, how it can respond to events that are, to Langer and others, unimaginable.

Certainly Stevens’s position is that the artist must somehow take on the world that exists, however extreme its pressure: “Rightly or wrongly, we feel that the fate of a society is involved in the orderly disorders of the present time. We are confronting, therefore, a set of events, not only beyond our power to tranquillize them in the mind, beyond our power to reduce them and metamorphose them, but events that stir the emotions to violence, that engage us in what is direct and immediate and real, and events that involve the concepts and sanctions that are the order of our lives and may involve our very lives; and these events are occurring persistently with increasing omen, in what may be our presence.”

Des Pres also takes up the question of how to deal with the world that is always with us: “The question is whether it can be evaded or
whether, when it intrudes too far, it must be resisted. If the latter, then how shall the ‘possible poet’ carry on?” Along with the bombardment of images, the Gulf War, the events in Kosovo or East Timor always in our living rooms, the sense of transience and helplessness is heightened as well. In The Unbearable Lightness of Being Milan Kundera speaks of the moral perversity of a world of the ephemeral, a world of continual nostalgia, of an inability to condemn anyone, “where everything is pardoned in advance and everything is permitted.”

Not quite. The task of living, for Kundera’s characters as well as ourselves, places us on a battleground. In “confronting therefore a set of events that stir the emotions to violence, that engage us in what is direct and immediate and real,” Stevens insists, “the violence without engenders a violence within.” Des Pres calls our attention to “the noble rider” as a militant figure, the necessary position for the artist, in which reality, by its nature violent, engenders the violence of imaginative act.

What might be the nature of that battle? Although it has been obvious to many long before this, it still seems to me an ongoing task to engage American consciousness in those events that have shaped the consciousness of Europeans and others during this century. And what a large task it is to consider the effects of totalitarianism upon both culture and individual: to look into the fragmentation of personality, the breakdown of the basic levels of community and trust, the efforts to stifle inquiry and discovery and to put knowledge in small and tightly sealed boxes. At this juncture of our public life it appears a critical task to become increasingly conscious of these matters in order to keep from being victimized by the same forces. Forces that offer as much peril as they ever did. To consign any experience to words suggests a commitment to the future.

One cannot otherwise imagine Nadezhda Mandelstam’s efforts to memorize and keep her husband’s poetry alive. It was as much as anything an act that would preserve what Osip Mandelstam lived and died for and thereby create a fitting cenotaph, but it was also to preserve what would, in any case, outlive the man: a poetry that keeps alive an image of the culture he imagined as well, an ideal that endures beyond the collapse of the Soviet empire. But aren’t these acts of memory, this recovery and reclamation of experience, also contributions to the imagination? When I was in Prague and Budapest just after liberation and before the elections, the cities had set up displays that would give people an opportunity to view what had been suppressed. A great banner across Wenceslas Square spoke the first line of the National Anthem, “Where is my home?” Along the walking street leading from the avenue hung giant posters of the figures and events that had influenced Czech history, beginning with Stalin and members of the Politburo, the Czech leaders, the entrance of the tanks, and those who sacrificed their
lives in protest. There were duplications of newspapers, videos, and, in the display at the end of the exhibit, life-size figures and films recreating the experience.

In Budapest it was a history of terror, suppression, and imprisonment, with a retelling of the stories of individuals and exhibits with the artifacts that bespoke their agony. The displays revealed the improbable efforts of the Soviets to turn the land to the cultivation of cotton and oranges, a disaster for Hungarian agriculture and, among other things, showed the corruption of art for socialist ends and other such chimeras. A Hungarian editor gave me her explanation of what had happened. ‘They tried to put knowledge into ten boxes or say a hundred boxes, tried to put everything in these, when you need . . .’ Her hands defined what could not be contained. And I thought of the professor of Oriental studies in Prague, who lost his position, and who, his wife told me, had been incapacitated by depression for what should have been his academic career.

And weren’t these exhibits, as well as the efforts to exhume the corpses of the Polish military executed and thrust into a mass grave, and the attempts in Russian villages to trace lost family members, another such effort of reconstruction and recovery? And now the bodies in the mass graves of Kosovo. Not only to create their cenotaphs, but somehow to recover the truth of what happened, what was buried and suppressed, denied, or obliterated by fiat. So the stories of World War II, of the Holocaust have been told and retold, the experience continually grappled with, not only by those who experienced it but also by those who have reimagined it.

Perhaps the task of imagination is to keep open and define experience until it becomes part of the living consciousness, until the irrational and destructive forces rooted deeply in us are given full recognition as a continuing struggle for the individual, as part of the fight for civilization under the threat of barbarity for something other than chaos. Those connections to the past and those claims of the spirit “forgotten” and repressed in closed societies have no doubt contributed to the disorientation of the individual. The battle to reconstruct our own history, as well as that of Europe, may be to help counter the isolation and shallowness of a good deal of current American fiction, as well as to expose the brutal side of nostalgia and sentimentality, and to challenge the urge for simple solutions that suggest large illusions about history and human behavior.

One might do worse than to insist upon the imagination as a faculty of knowing, one that deserves to be educated. If poetry hasn’t made men better, in the light of Shelley’s argument, still literature exists to create the empathy that would allow the entrance into another’s experience. If indeed the moral basis for thought and action has been relativized and dissipated, called into question, still the notion that there is a
violence within to respond to the violence without suggests that the potential for moral feeling exists and that the feeling for the other can become an imaginative act. How else is one to discover the impetus not only to create the tombs for such actors on the human scene as Boris Davidović but also to find horrifying the act of torture or murder of a single individual?

Flannery O’Connor located the arena for discovery and the possibility of knowledge and redemption in those unfamiliar and violent territories on the edge of consciousness. No doubt salvation is difficult, whether one blunders into these by way of innocence or ignorance. Very likely one like me must stand outside the position even of the young boy in John Gardner’s story “Redemption,” a boy who when driving a tractor accidentally kills a younger brother. Locked into grief and guilt, the boy is virtually immobilized until, in his efforts to live past his grief, he takes horn lessons from a Russian refugee. Yegudkin, who had barely escaped death at the hands of Bolsheviks, survived to play in major European orchestras. At one point the old man plays on a horn he’d ordered from Germany for a graduate student, and the boy, moved to admiration, says without thinking: “You think I’ll ever play like that?”

His teacher laughs. “It seemed he grew larger, beatific and demonic at once, like the music; overwhelming. ‘Play like me!’ he exclaimed.”

One can only attempt to “see” what lies behind the old Russian. And at least the sense of what his personal history points toward by way of the wholesale suffering of a people can release the boy somewhat from his own preoccupations. No doubt our own social realities, the struggles with matters of race and gender, the disintegration and economic collapse of families are sufficient preoccupations. Yet, as the network of “news” continues to create that kind of political intrusion Des Pres speaks of, it seems more and more compelling for the writer to take on the events that have occurred in Europe and elsewhere during the cold war and beyond to see what they mean to our own consciousness and our sense of this era, individually and collectively. Imagining the world of the artist in a struggle with the overwhelming forces he can never fully apprehend is better than imagining a world without his existence, where the violence may be even more lethal for being unconscious. If this is what Wallace Stevens meant in saying that the imagination is necessary for our survival, for preserving our lives, then, by virtue of its being “the Necessary Angel,” he also suggests a sphere of immanent possibility that, through the task of exploration, might reveal to us a way to live.