

# 1). Introduction

**Anatoly Osmolovsky**  
(Translated by S. Ogurtsov)

**SO, TEL QUEL. WHAT IS TEL QUEL? LET US LOOK AT THE LEGAL DEFINITION FIRST.**

**TEL-QUEL – (FRENCH, "AS IS") IS TERMS OF TRADE, ESPECIALLY FOR CROPS, WHICH IMPLY THAT BUYER ASSUMES TO ACCEPT GOODS IN CONDITION IT ARRIVES. COMMONLY UNDER SUCH TERMS, QUALITY OF GOODS IS CHECKED AND CERTIFIED PRIOR TO SHIPMENT.**

Thus, crucial here is the invariable quality, quality that remains immutable during the full circle of its representation. Thereby, the name of the magazine points out: you are reading literature tel quel. Tel quel: transaction via corporeality, textuality straight into politics.

Also important with this name is coincidence of the signified and its signifier, which exposes main methodological principle of the Structuralist literature, minimization of the symbolic meaning: what magazine? – Such as is!

The two key Tel Quel authors were Denis Roche, poet and Philippe Sollers, writer and theorist, editor-in-chief and initiator of the magazine.

Roche's poetics is among the most radical in the XX century. It develops Surrealist traditions employing

a completely different, Structuralist perspective.

Roche's poetry, being purely convulsive writing, is the most consistent realization of the Surrealist ideal. Reader can literally feel how the poet's body, his hands and fingers and eyes lag behind his own thoughts and images. Speed of writing reaches the limit of physical abilities. Roche is also notable for his extreme "exoticism". Not only exotic words create almost ungraspable metaphors of his texts, but often themselves are equivalent to metaphors. The line "Poetry is unacceptable. Not that it existed, though.", which became his business card, tells not of the absence of poetry, but of poet's inability to be adequate to Poetry.

If Denis Roche is a pure feeling at the limit of human capacity, then Philippe Sollers is ultimately rational. Each of his novels is conceived and realized as a battle

royal for obtaining new, hitherto unprecedented expressiveness.

Apparent mutual discrepancy of these texts promises, of course, to leave most readers bewildered. On one hand, we have the most complex writing at extremes of abstraction, on the other there is radical Maoism (set forth, however, in the language no less complicated, that of Structuralist theory).

What is the role of Maoism in *Tel Quel*? This question is extremely interesting. And Western culture does not really bother answering. Sollers spoke subsequently of utopian desire to join revolutionary politics with aesthetic radicalism, yet however important that is, it does not explain the very essence of this desire. In my opinion, all types of so-called Leftist radicalism in any avant-garde of every era (starting with Courbet) performed a complementary function of aesthetic difference. Purely aesthetic distinction was backed up by political difference. This achieved a few aims simultaneously. On one hand, it slowed down communication with society to the maximum (and that is the main purpose of any avant-garde), on the other, there appeared illusion of integrity of artistic phenomenon. Why was it illusionary? Because the avant-garde developed in a severed world was immensely inconsistent itself. Political engagement acted as external clamps holding together tendencies which often pointed in polar directions.

More than fifty years have passed since the 1960ies when *Tel Quel* was founded, and yet sympathies for the Left still dominate in contemporary arts. Likewise it seems to be built into the very logic of contemporaneity. How, exactly? As a wreck, a brake, an excess? – In the end it does not really matter: this still stimulates imagination, intensifies fervors, provokes arguments.

Maoism is a distant topic for Russian readers (and quite naturally so), and yet it is still interesting to trace mechanisms clutching experimental literature

with radical politics. It is very educational. Especially today, as our society's disappointment with so-called liberalism just grows.

In Perestroika times, the idea of renewal of socialism gave our generation hopes for the most serious breakthrough in culture, which could return it to dynamic cultural revolution of the 1920ies. Unfortunately, almost no one shared this optimism in the context of culture. Underground figures were radically anti-Soviet, with overtly petty-bourgeois ideals. Those murderous talks of "normalization", hails to the "honest philistines" started just then, with kitchen dreams of "fair and caring master" (while unemployment is surely the best way to get rid of "loafers"). All this "gon" (Russian for "bullshit blether") heard at communal kitchens seemed abominable for its outright mythic nature (the extent of which nobody realized), yet even more so for being absolutely inartistic, multiplied by "common sense" and refuse to experiment. Soviet reality was experimental throughout, and Perestroika opened its mechanism up for renewal. Alas, nothing like this happened.

Twenty years afterwards, now it seems like artists start to see the missed opportunity.

There were, of course, the deepest traditions of "Leftist" thought in Russia. A full spectrum of "Leftist" positions developed in the first quarter of the XX century as a result of the well-known events of the 1917. Advances of "Left" art in the West did hardly add anything substantially new to those positions. Even Situationism could be deduced from Soviet Constructivism with certain approximations. Yet all this is past.

Soviet culture, just like the Russian culture before it, remained totally self-tormenting. In 1990ies, new generation of artists and writers sought for their political identity anew. There were two opposite approaches. Conventionally, we can call them anarchist and academic. The former was a process of identification from "below", based on natural discontent of younger

generation with its social position. The academic approach, contrastingly, unfolded from "top", as a mostly aesthetic rebellion of academy students against social and political outrage of the 1990ies. One side was Anatoly Osmolovsky and "Radek" magazine authors, on the other we find Dmitry Gutov and "Lifshits Institute". Between these divergent vectors the Russian left "scene" of the 1990ies was formed.

The Leftist art does not have anything to do neither with rejection of artistic "production", nor with manipulations on traditional leftist symbols, nor even with following certain historically approved methods, like *Verfremdungseffekt* (distancing or defamiliarization) developed by Shkolovsky, Brecht and Godard. These are merely instruments, effective at a certain historical stage for consolidation of the following guidelines in ethics and politics:

1. Voice of the weak must sound. It means that in politics of culture, the Left always supports the forgotten, the repressed, the excluded, the prohibited. This exactly explains the ever-present interest in archaic cultures. The latter's aesthetics and historical context has been under extreme pressure of the predominant Western-European culture. (Even though we may see different processes now.)

2. Art has its own history and progressing logic of development (not necessarily ascending). This means that changes of eras and styles do not occur out of anyone's voluntarism. Understanding of such a logic, in its turn, provides certain chance to foresee things which would be most adequate to the spirit of the time. Of course, perfect lucidity is impossible here, as each new period adds up various previously hidden aspects to our knowledge, yet it is absolutely intolerable to claim total voluntarism, like the Liberals do.

3. Solidary freedom. This term of G.Lukács implies that so-called democratic freedom is the freedom of the powerful. In 1930ies power belonged to white, Anglo-Saxon, rich heterosexual male. He was (and still partly is) the subject of freedom. And liberal democ-

racy is merely the most effective mechanism administering such a freedom. Solidary freedom assumes the others' lack of such. Those who share the idea of solidary freedom are not free, in part, as they have to sacrifice their own freedom in solidarity with calamities of the weak – other nations, cultures, social classes and sexes. In art, solidary freedom implies certain limits to self-expression. Such restrictions aim to reduce "striking effects" first of all. Such effects, intensified to extremes, are evidence of ethically inadequate artwork, or "not a Leftist work", if you will.

What is interesting about *Tel Quel* in our times and for our culture? It seems that the era of political art has long gone, leaving obscure ruins behind. Indeed, *Tel Quel*'s peculiar jargon, extremely loose manipulations with citations, Chinese hieroglyphs and Structuralist terminology impedes reconstruction of their Leftist project. Yet, this complex knot of politics, literature, psychoanalysis and structuralism is more interesting for the connections between the aforementioned elements (even if the latter resulted from some delusions). How and what politics develops out of the language? Is there dependence between theory and practice of literature? Does discourse possess a natural political extension in practice? What is the connection between political and aesthetical revolutions? These are the central questions. And there is a great shortage of comprehension of such topics in contemporary Russian culture. This is why *Tel Quel*'s experience is invaluable.

And yet, the main achievement of *Tel Quel* magazine was not only (and not so much) the discourse, but literature. Both Sollers and Roche presented a whole array of head-spinning experiments in writing. Translations of their texts should raise a bar of thoughtfulness for the contemporary Russian literature scene. Any return to traditional narration in prose, or to accentual-syllabic system in poetry is absolutely illegitimate without studying the *Tel Quel* experience.