

CRITICISM OF THE STRUGATSKY BROTHERS' WORK (1972 – 3,950 words)

Note 2019: *My original longish essay in Canadian-American Slavic Studies 6.2 [1972]: 286-307, to which the reader is respectfully referred, went in for a select survey of the critical reception accorded to the Strugatsky Brothers based on the bibliography of 96 units of criticism, including a dozen of their own articles and a few outside the USSR. Its intention was to plot the USSR ideological debate as my intervention into the conflict between the critical “cold” and “warm” stream, aiming to be fair, without idolatry, and yet sympathetic to the “warm” stream. There is both technical difficulty and little urgency to reproduce the full debate for the general reader of post-USSR times. Still, historical memory is always a good thing, since the rulers’ have, in all class systems, remained prone to not only blame but also materially harass and bully critical intellectuals. I have therefore opted to keep a simplified overview of the main points from my original essay (while my essay evaluating the Strugatsky opus and a summation coda in an e-mail from 2003 can be seen in my book PARABLES OF FREEDOM AND NARRATIVE LOGICS: POSITIONS AND PRESUPPOSITIONS IN SCIENCE FICTION AND UTOPIANISM, edited by Eric D. Smith, forthcoming in the Ralahine Series at P. Lang, Oxford). The last sentence is new.*

The Strugatsky brothers, working in tandem, have indubitably been the path-breakers of Soviet SF since 1958, when they began publishing their first stories. Considerable critical attention has been devoted to them inside, and some outside, the Soviet Union. Their works and horizons have in fact been in the center of Soviet critical debates on SF for the last dozen years or so. Not only can the intensity and direction of debates about this genre be gauged from their fortune, but their work has posed the most interesting theoretical and sociopolitical questions for SF.

A chronological table of their works is indispensable for the understanding of this article. It can be found at <https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Братья-Стругацкие>, while my original article listed 15 titles, from the *Country of Crimson Clouds* in 1959 to *The Inhabited Island* in 1971. An appended list of translations of the Strugatskys' work into English by that date is now fully superseded by the list on en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arkady_and_Boris_Strugatsky

1. The work of the Strugatskys up to and including 1970 can be divided into three phases: their first "cosmic trilogy" and the accompanying early short stories, all to 1962; the second phase embracing the long stories or novellas (*povesty*) and novels from 1962 to 1965; and the third phase embracing the looser and more grotesque novels and long stories from 1965 to roughly 1970. Public opinion and critical reaction followed these phases rather faithfully. A frequency tabulation of criticism by year might serve as a good introduction (added in parentheses are "non-critiques" i.e., units representing bibliographies, statistics, the Strugatskys' own articles, and similar):

YEAR	1959	1960	1961	1962	1963	1964
NO.	2	4	5 (+1)	8 (+1)	4	8 (+2)

YEAR	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970
NO.	9 (+4)	11 (+1)	4 (+3)	8 (+1)	9	9 (+2)

This can, of course, only serve as a rough indication, since it gives equal weight to such different critical units as a brief newspaper notice or mention within a general survey, and a major essay. Nonetheless a picture seems to emerge of three periods of critical interest, culminating in 1962, 1966, and 1970. This correlation is confirmed by a weighted analysis, taking into account only longer essays or parts of books exclusively devoted to the Strugatskys' opus:

1962	63	64	65	66	67	68	69	70
1	-	4	1	3	-	1	1	3

It remains to be seen whether a qualitative analysis of the criticism will confirm the working hypothesis of a threefold periodization.

2. The first 20 items can be taken as the take-off phase of Strugatsky criticism. It is perhaps symptomatic and certainly prefigurative that from their very first book they gave fuel to disagreements and polemics. Most critics felt their cosmic adventures were earthier and more realistic than those of other writers, but some adverse voices attacked them by concentrating on certain secondary elements and pronouncing those weak. An early juvenile novel was even called "a crude and stupid book"; similar intemperate language has also been the mark of most opponents — and some prominent defenders — of the Strugatskys from the very beginning of their career. Their own language, breaking up the greyness of most Soviet SF by a bold use of slang and juvenile colloquialisms, irritated many second-rate critics and guardians of literary morals and decorum; one is left with the impression that a number of attacks on them came as much from that kind of "gut level" incompatibility (which is, of course, highly ideological) as from any rational divergences about the "man of the future." The Strugatskys' own first pronouncement was therefore a polemical jibe at those who imagined such a "communist man" as a self-satisfied, affluent, and boring prig -- a theme picked up later in their satirical SF such as the *Tale of the Troika* (further *Tale*). However, their own writing was in this first phase anchored in an absolute ethical utopianism. As Arkadiy Strugatsky himself best formulated it, their stories showed forth a conflict of "good against good," between "two or more positive heroes... friends, comrades, brothers in spirit." In practice this meant, as some critics readily noted, the conflict of a human group, no longer an isolated hero (i.e., of a "collective Robinson") with Nature. The Strugatskys thus adopted the basic utopian horizons of Soviet SF, and portrayed it better than anyone else at that time, and they also claimed SF characters should be moulded on avantgarde young scientists. Therefore, by 1962, though the opposition was by no means nonexistent, the Strugatskys had won over a clear majority of the audience, as well as the perceptive critics. By then, the dean of Soviet SF critics Andreev and the combative SF critic and writer Ariadna Gromova both stressed the Strugatskys as the most noteworthy of the whole post-Yefremov generation; the first essay devoted exclusively to their work, again by Andreev, also appeared in 1962 as a brief preface to a book of stories which marked the culmination of their early writing. But at that successful point their horizons began to change, and critics were faced with new problems.

In the 1962-65 phase, the Strugatskys' utopian ethics are joined by a growing awareness of historical obstacles on the way to their enthronement: the dialectic of innocence and experience became the main tension and pathos of their opus. The first two Strugatsky masterpieces, however, were *Far Rainbow* and *Hard To Be a God*, and criticism really hit its stride with successive salvos from Gromova and another friendly and impressive young critic, Rafail Nudelman, who identified their central situation as the "situation of tragic choice" with which the protagonists are faced in rationally unforeseen yet ethically demanding whirlpool periods of history. Such contradictions are transposed from those in the present epoch, e.g. the triumph of reason in nuclear physics vs. Hiroshima, "and, perhaps, sharper than all others, the mighty Five-year Plans — and the camps of Vorkuta, Kolyma, Norilsk." Against them, the Strugatskys' heroes proclaim "the necessity of continual cognition" as a historical law. This essay of 1964 is the first lasting contribution to Strugatsky studies. Another interested voice was the rising young SF critic Revich, who just a year later found one could not read a dismissal of

SF without the Strugatskys being mentioned — in glaring opposition to their success with the readers. On the whole, it can be said that 1964-65 were the *anni mirabiles* of benevolent Strugatsky criticism. It expanded into a wide range, from reviews in evening papers to essays of an admirable theoretical level; it acquired a nucleus of interested and even partisan critics identical with the best names of Soviet SF criticism. The Strugatskys opus was in the center of debates polemics, and symposia; *Hard To Be a God* immediately became the number one Soviet SF book in all popularity statistics, and *Monday Begins on Saturday* soon joined it as number two (65). Their opus became exemplary for other SF writers — positively or negatively; furthermore, Arkadiy Strugatsky's job as editor in the central SF publishing house gave him considerable influence on the field. However, they also acquired influential opponents.

The fall of Krushchev in 1964 soon turned his important if limited thaw into a trend toward frozen rigidity. Not so coincidentally, 1966 became the year of the counteroffensive of the "cold stream" and a turning point in their critical fortune. In mid-January, Vladimir Nemtsov — a much-published third-rate SF writer of the 1950s — let off a blast in the daily *Izvestiya* against ideological deviation in SF, lamenting the Strugatskys misuse of talent as leading the young reader astray. The attack, full of factual misrepresentations, was a petulant outcry of a "cold stream" scribbler deprived of his leading position by the post-1956 thaw. It would have been of no account had it not been the second intervention of the central Soviet government newspaper into SF affairs, around which the debate had been conducted in literary and youth periodicals and in a way which had allowed for a fairly self-regulating formation of public opinion on the merits of the case. Almost the entire SF community rose solidly up in arms against Nemtsov. Yefremov hastened to pen a strong counterblast in the Komsomol newspaper, defending social SF in general — and the attacked Strugatsky works in particular — as the most interesting works of their generation and ideologically anticapitalist. The most prolific "centre" critics, Brandis and Dmitrevskiy, participated in a conference on SF held on January 29 in the Press Committee of the USSR Ministerial Council, and published an article in the central literary newspaper defending the "warning" type of SF which depicts possible social difficulties that have to be overcome by heroic deed. *Izvestiya* — by now clearly trying to salvage a bad situation — turned to a political-science academician (Frantsev) who pointed out, with little knowledge of scientific or artistic modelling, the lack of literal verisimilitude of the social situation in *Hard To Be a God*, fusing medieval and fascist tyranny (and Stalinist too — but nobody outside of Nudelman's mention of the Gulags had the gumption to remark on that).

This is where the immediate polemic died down after four months; but its effects were to be fairly far-reaching. It could be argued that it definitely turned — or helped to turn — the Strugatskys to parabolic or analogic modelling, to localisations in fantastic countries or planets and away from any extrapolation which could be criticized in terms of "scientific" verisimilitude; in a special issue of *Foreign Literature* devoted to SF they affirmed that in our increasingly complex world they want to use sociological models turned toward tendencies and not realistic details. Eventually, significant critical discussion of their work was to split up into attacks or generalities on one hand and, on the other, to contributions of a handful of courageous critics willing to put their position on the line.

3. A relative lull ensued in criticism for about two years after that, due partly to the stand-off reached at the beginning of 1966, and partly to the fact that the very prolific Strugatskys did not publish books between 1966 and 1968 — part 1 of *Snail on the Slope* (further *Snail*) was published in an anthology "ready for press" in January, 1966 (!) and part 2 in a Siberian magazine at the beginning of 1968. In effect, both this work and their *Tale* were prevented from appearing in book form, and their sympathising editors began to be persecuted. They could still be defended in print when a counterblast appeared from the pen of one Yu. Kotlyar in *Oktyabr'*. This unfortunate scribbler was the subject of an article in the *Komsomol'skaya pravda* a few months later (Sept. 13, by V. Skuratnik) which is a rare sociological document: it seems that Kotlyar began writing adventure and SF stories at the beginning of the 1960s, encountering universal rejections for "illiteracy and total literary impotence." By dint of much persistence and servility he managed to publish a story or two; but this "success" was cut short when a reader phoned pointing out the published story reminded him very much of one by Arthur Clarke. Kotlyar did not publish many more stories, but he became a regular poison-pen writer against those refusing his manuscripts. Finally the publishing house *Detskaya literatura* had to arrange a "symposium" about him where a number of top-editors, writers, and critics were co-opted to pass on Kotlyar's -- as Yefremov put it -- "monstrous knot of political charges and crudest accusations" to superior instances, which were inclined to check them out. The "symposium" unanimously found "his work scribomaniac and his behaviour impudent," and the article gave chapter and verse from his letters. A less comical rebuttal of the benevolence toward the Strugatskys was published by the Soviet Communist Party monthly *Kommunist*, written by writer-turned-editor Saporin. He argued that to postulate a society in which all classes share the consumerist ideology means "forgetting basic Marxist-Leninist doctrines" (maybe he meant Stalinist), and that the novel is pessimistic and not properly focussed. This seems to have been a sign that at least a part of the SF "Establishment" had come to a parting of ways with the Strugatskys.

By 1968 *The Second Martian Invasion* (further *Martian*) had been published as a book, and part 2 of *Snail* had appeared in a provincial magazine and provided the final impetus for a second storm of disagreements. Increasingly, however, from this time on the conflicts appear to have taken place behind the scenes, so that they have to be inferred from second-hand sources and results, with all the attendant opportunities for unchecked speculation and mistakes. The Soviet critiques published represent thus the tip of the iceberg, and the foreign ones more or less educated guesses, in a still evolving and unclear cultural and political whole.

Now *Martian* is a Swiftian tongue-in-cheek satire in which the Martians subjugate a nation not by super-arms but by corruption, misinformation, and conformism. *Snail* is a Kafkian visionary universe reduced to a swampy forest bereft of information and history; the first part gives an inside view of its destructive forces, but the second part supplements this by a view of the outside Forest Study and Exploitation Authority, a bureaucratic monster (see more in my preceding/ following essay). The Soviet Communist Party newspaper of the region where part 2 was published took it — in touching unanimity with some later foreign and émigré critics — "as a slander on our [Soviet, D. S.] reality." The "Strugatsky side" — fronts having by now apparently been drawn so clearly that it was impossible not to be either pro or con — managed to answer after six months in *Novyi mir*. It pointed out that significant modern SF writes about

the present and not the future, quoting the Polish SF writer Lem, whose influence on the development of the Soviet SF was great, but that it writes about present potentialities which only a strange conception of the USSR could equate with its actualities: a neat polemical turning of the tables.

By that time, *Tale* had already appeared in Soviet periodicals; it concentrated on a bureaucratic triumvirate that has usurped power in a country of fantastic phenomena, which it proceeds to "rationalize" by misusing or explaining away. Charlatanic science has by now been identified as a simple handmaiden of the Troika, described in its prejudices, militaristic mannerisms, internecine infighting, and semiliterate jargon by means of a wildly hilarious black humour. And the MS of *Ugly Swans* apparently depicted "an unsympathetic but very clever and good kind of human being," modelling the Jewish situation. A studious silence enveloped these and other Strugatsky Brothers' works for more than a year, accompanied by furious activity behind the scenes, with discussions in literary circles, no doubt including CPSU forums. This resulted in the suppression of *Ugly Swans* and all but a rare mention or two of *Tale*, which was not allowed to appear in book form. On the other hand, the Strugatskys had strong friends and/or fought well, since a rather slightly expurgated *Inhabited Island* appeared three years later in book form. Still, yellow-press style attacks on *Martian* persisted. Much more ominous was a sideswipe at it for ironical treatment of patriotism and military virtues (a total misreading of the text), because it appeared in an article on literature about the Red Army signed by the chief political officer of the Leningrad military region and by the head of the agitprop department in the Leningrad CPSU Committee.

At that point, *Literaturnaya gazeta*, the weighty weekly of the Union of Writers, opened a regular discussion column on SF which lasted from September, 1969 to March, 1970. This useful idea was vitiated by the same compromise that seems to have brought it about: equal space was given to writers and critics who had become popular in the 1960s and to fossils of the Nemtsov kind. Furthermore, the basic sharp division among participants — whether SF should be restricted to imagining a beautiful classless future plus some critique of pragmatic capitalist and fascist loci, or whether it should be able to present in parabolic and other allegorical forms general social problems of the world (including the USSR), for ex. people vs. the State apparatus and similar — was never fully expressed nor carried to its logical conclusions. The debate seesawed between opposed views and was concluded by a conciliatory editorial favouring a vague coexistence of various types of SF. This seems to be where the matter rests now. But the history of the Strugatskys seems to indicate that such a "coexistence" has fairly clear bounds, and excludes further dissemination of first-rate socio-philosophical SF such as the Strugatsky have been writing since 1964. Ground already gained in *Hard To Be a God* may be held, *Martian* is just barely tolerable (with much gnashing of teeth), but the line is drawn to exclude the depth exploration of *Snail*, *Tale*, and *Ugly Swans*. The 1969-70 works of the Strugatskys, *Hotel to "The Lost Climber"* and *The Kid*, are in my opinion the proof that they have for the time being recognized such boundaries and are keeping within them, while no doubt writing a lot for the drawers.

4. It is to be feared that in such circumstances the Strugatsky opus is becoming an object of pragmatico-political rather than ethico-esthetical criticism. The signs are already on the wall. An Austrian Slavist, Hermann Buchner, wrote a hasty and slanted book on "Social Criticism in Soviet Utopian Literature" dealing with Zamyatin, A. Tolstoy, Yefremov, Sinyavsky, and the Strugatsky's *Hard To Be a God* and *Monday*. Using long quotations and content explanation exclusively for comparison with norms of Soviet ideology, his superficial and sensation-mongering book may contribute to Cold War virtue but not to the understanding of the Strugatskys. More sophisticated but following a similar "party line" was the young American Slavist John Glad informing the readers of the émigré *Novyi zhurnal* on the anti-utopian character of four Strugatsky books. Fresh from a year in the USSR writing a Ph.D. on Soviet SF, he gave in this brief article some inside insights, and came to a rather unargued conclusion that they amount to a "refusal of utopia"; it would seem more useful to see in them an agonizing conflict of a utopian protagonist with anti-utopian surroundings. In another émigré periodical, a long essay on Soviet SF picked out of it elements satirizing dictatorships and analyzing its component parts and aspects. Such a method, separating "content" from literary works, and indiscriminately using aspects of writers as different as Yefremov, Bakhtin, and Strugatsky -- even Lem from Poland! -- to fill in a monolithic picture, may be useful as ideological weaponry but it seems to me as indifferent toward literary contexts and structures as that of any Stalinist bureaucrat. However, the worst offender outside USSR has so far been Marc Slonim in a brief note from his column in the *New York Times Book Review*, where he managed within three paragraphs to suggest that "The Hellenic Secret" (a story of Yefremov's which gave name to the anthology in which part 1 of *Uns* was printed) was a Strugatsky work, then to discuss part 2 of *Snail* as the whole book, and finally to confuse the regional *Pravda Buryatii* with the powerful Moscow *Pravda*; his article thus relies on second-hand and unchecked hearsay.

Finally, one should report on the thus far most systematic Soviet exploration of SF by the Leningrad literary scholar Britikov in *Russkii sovetskii nauchno-fantasticheskii roman* (1970). Disappointingly, his rich and professional basic handbook of the field is methodologically and ideologically weakest when dealing with new phenomena such as the Strugatskys. Britikov misreads the basic thesis of *Monday* on the sense of life lying in "continual cognition of the Unknown" as a call to hard work (p. 294), and repeats charges of undecorousness even for the early characters and language of the Strugatskys (pp. 335-37) to the point of special pleading against them. On the other hand, he is interesting and stimulating on the compositional principle of the early "cycle" (pp. 302-03, 306-13), level-headed in dealing with *Martian*, and at his best in analyzing the most "realistic" *Hard To Be a God* (pp. 340-54). But as soon as he reaches *Snail* part 1 (his work stops at 1968) he has to balk: though conceding the masterly depiction of background, he makes his final point by analyzing the title and epigraph -- from a Japanese haiku -- in a rather arbitrary way, and concluding that "the warning utopia" has turned "into such allegories that it has lost its sense, leaving the field at the same time free for the most subjective guesses" (pp. 354-58). Britikov's obviously "embedded" book is thus a good indication of the middle-ground or compromise attitude toward the Strugatskys: a certain dominant taste is prepared to follow and defend them thus far (i.e., short of *Snail* and *Tale*, and of course the officially non-existing *Ugly Swans*) and no farther. This point was dramatically underscored by the final Soviet contribution on my list — addressed to unnamed "young writers" of allegory

and parody in SF — which clearly meant the Strugatskys and their followers. It is almost too pat and dialectical an ending to my survey, since it could be called "The Recall": the critique pointed out that anticipations — e.g., of remoulding Siberia and the Arctic (sic!) — are more important than cosmic themes and suchlike *l'art-pour-l'art* stuff (let alone the suspect allegories and parodies). This brings the circle suspiciously close to its starting point in the debate around Yefremov in 1958 that established the "right to winged imagination" as against the Stalinist theory of *blizhnego pritsela* (nearest aim, limited to near-future technological advances within a static social situation). Ironically, the young 1958 critic who launched the "right to winged imagination" slogan, Vladimir Dmitrevsky, has the same name as the writer of the *Pravda* article. For, finally, this seems to be the first time since 1958 that *Pravda*, the apex of the Soviet press pyramid, has intervened into Soviet SF.

This may be a big leap in the career of a once young critic. However, in the world of modern sciences (where the Strugatskys find their readers and pathos) and of modern arts (in which they write), even in the force-field between *Pravda* and the *New York Times* the proposition *Roma locuta, causa finita* seems not to be safe anymore. Never mind what Pope or Caesar say, there is really little doubt that the atheist Lucretius was among the very best poets of the Latin language.