Margaret Ziolkowski, "Imagining Stalin in Literature and Art"

By now everyone has read Rybakov's *Children of the Arbat*. The novel's publication in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s attracted much attention, but from a literary-historical perspective, it is only one in a long series of works that seek to deglamorize Stalin and, in order to do so, make use of similar physical, verbal, and psychological characterization. The result is often a series of commonplaces. Examined in context, *Children of the Arbat* emerges as a typical product of a tradition of stereotyping.

An appreciation of the image of Stalin presented in critical literary compositions requires an awareness of two major, generally antithetical bodies of cultural material. One of these is the massive corpus of official literary, artistic, and other propaganda dating from the Stalin era that surrounds the person and personality of the dictator and serves as a constant tacit object of literary polemics. The other is the negative historical and memoiristic works devoted to Stalin and Stalinism. The interaction of these very different bodies of material has had a remarkably consistent impact on the features of literary Stalins of recent decades, contributing above all to the development of a stereotyped persona, a demonic embodiment of socialist evil.

The genesis of Stalin's official persona in literature and art of the Stalin era can be traced in large part to the dictator himself. As early as the 1920s Stalin singled out for praise in Lenin qualities which he later sought deliberately to have ascribed to himself. His desire to be admired for the same qualities attributed to the near-deity Lenin was readily apparent to the Soviet intelligentsia. The virtues of modesty, simplicity, intellectual acuity, devotion to the people, and commitment to Leninist ideology rapidly became canonic in contemporary appraisals of Stalin. Wise, calm, unassuming, in touch with the people--such is the Stalin represented by mainstream

Soviet literature of the mid-twentieth century. His static iconic quality is often enhanced by reference to physical constants, like his pipe, boots, mustache, shining eyes, and penetrating glance.

Soviet artists also played an important role in fostering the national adulation of Stalin. Artistic representations emphasize the same qualities purveyed by literature--modesty, devotion to the people, wisdom, and commitment to Lenin's legacy, which is underscored by the frequent presence in the background of busts and other representations of the dead leader. Stalin's godlike status is emphasized by his isolation. Even in the midst of groups of people he is clearly set apart (slide examples).

Recent literary and artistic portrayals of Stalin appear to have been composed in direct opposition to the image of the leader propagandized during his lifetime and still subscribed to among some Russians. These works single out for debunking and satire the canonic positive qualities and traits Stalin supposedly possessed and engage in an implicit dialogue with conventional notions about his greatness. To achieve the subversion of what was once the dictator's near divine status, writers often make use of the historical and memoiristic works published since the death of Stalin that seek to demolish his received image. The Stalin who emerges from the pages of many revisionist literary works represents a compelling example of the dualism that may result when traditional motifs are turned on their heads. In fact, the new Stalin often appears to constitute a synthesis of traits that are the antitheses of those described in orthodox literature and art of the Stalin era and of details, many unflattering, culled from historical and memoiristic literature. Such syntheses are generally remarkably consistent with one another, so consistent that they result in the production of no less marked a stereotype than their

predecessors.

The similarities in the various depictions of Stalin in literature begin with the delineation of his physical characteristics, appurtenances, and mannerisms. The difference is that, whereas formerly such details were mentioned in a neutral or positive context, now they may acquire a negative or ironic cast. For example, a dramatic reversal of a positive motif in the physical description of Stalin often occurs in discussion of his eyes. This negative assessment can be traced at least as far back as Trotsky, who talks about the ``glint of animosity" in Stalin's ``yellow eyes." Novels like *Children of the Arbat* and Solzhenitsyn's *The First Circle* reiterate this notion as a signpost of an evil personality.

Recent works also take issue with tradition by highlighting physical features deliberately ignored by earlier literary and artistic representations of Stalin, for example, his short stature, low forehead, and pockmarked skin. These motifs may not all appear simultaneously, but often several occur in the initial description of Stalin in a given work. In *Children of the Arbat* a visitor observes: "Stalin seemed shorter than average height, thick-set, somewhat pockmarked, with slightly Mongolian eyes. In the thick hair over a low forehead grey hairs were showing." A moment later, ``Stalin's eyes suddenly became yellowish, heavy, tiger-like, malice flashed in them." The accumulation of such details imparts a remarkably formulaic quality to Stalin's literary portrayals.

A similar, if less mechanical, consistency, informs critical literary representations of Stalin's verbal manner and intellectual ability. Critical portraits of the dictator also often share additional assumptions about his psychology, about, for example, his suspiciousness, even paranoia, his capriciousness, false modesty, sadism, crudeness, anti-Semitism, and hostility

toward Lenin. As with many of his physical and verbal characteristics, where some of Stalin's purely psychological traits are concerned, the reversal of received orthodox assertions occurs, thus contributing to the creation of a totally antithetical image.

What we are confronted by here is a coherent process of stylized disparagement, an exaggerated process of negative characterization that reflects broad cultural developments initiated soon after Stalin's death. Russian literature repeatedly exhibits literary Stalins who are the mirror images of their 1930s and 1940s predecessors and carbon copies of their contemporaries. In this context, it becomes difficult to speak of realism. Above all, critical literary portraits of Stalin seek to delineate the contours of contemptible but pernicious evil. In so doing, they often resort to evocative commonplaces, commonplaces that may represent themselves as realistic detail, but are essentially stock motifs. At least for the present, Stalin in literature remains, as before, a predominantly abstract, symbolic figure. In Russian art as well, it is still too early to talk about realism in the representation of Stalin (slide examples).