

Moral Dilemmas in the Work of Yury Trifonov

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Moral dilemmas showing Soviet citizens suspended between moral behavior and convenience make better reading than industrial or agricultural production dilemmas. For this and other reasons the maturation of Yury Trifonov (1925–81) brought a breath of fresh air to Soviet literature and reminded the reader of the hope expressed by Ilya Ehrenburg's *The Thaw*, written shortly after the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, that personal feelings and individual considerations would become vital literary themes. This essay will illustrate the moral and ethical choices found in Trifonov's work, and show that even though it is proper to speak of a marked development in his work, it is also possible to see the roots of that development in his earliest efforts.

Trifonov presumes that morality is at the base of life and that literature must seek it out. In a 1974 interview with the critic A. Bocharov, Trifonov observed that "All literature from time immemorial has been directed toward morality. Literature has never been involved with anything else and indeed should not be. Where there are no moral issues, there is no literature."¹ Soviet literature during the trying Stalin years viewed morality in a political and social light, but that was never Trifonov's perception of either the nature of literature or of life. Individuals and personal issues were always paramount. In answer to the question "What must one believe in?" Trifonov responded to a *Komsomolskaya Pravda* reporter "One must believe in good people" (268).

The question of what is good and moral can be speculative, however. Trifonov's view of man and life belies a simple resolution. In a 1976 article entitled "No, Not About the Humdrum—About Life!" the writer observed that "We write about a complicated life, where everything is intertwined, and about people, concerning whom it is difficult to state whether they are good or bad, healthy or ill. They are

alive and exhibit both characteristics. Just as there are no absolutely healthy people—every doctor knows this—there are no absolutely good ones—this is something that every writer should know. . . . We don't write about bad people but rather about bad qualities."²

Of prime importance is the search for morality and the process of discovery. Trifonov in the same article commented that "In the phrase 'the quest for morality' it seems to me that the word 'quest' is particularly important, because to search means to be in motion. That implies that all is not yet discovered, all is not yet perfected, and all is not yet clear" (545). In a society that often presumed socialist morality to be a rigid set of black and white party platitudes, Trifonov's writings were welcome and fresh.

Trifonov sought a moral base in the cultural heritage of the past. In a 1978 article on Tolstoy entitled "For All Times" the author characterized Tolstoy's moral stance as "living by truth and conscience." He then applied this maxim to contemporary Soviet life by observing:

As opposed to many contemporaries who presume that one must first repair the deficient mechanism before occupying oneself with man and his fleeting morality and short-lived conscience, Tolstoy was persuaded that one must tackle both at the same time. Otherwise, this would be the result: first I'll repair the apartment and then I'll live by my conscience, since so long as there is dirty wallpaper and old furniture I have the right to live badly. It would turn out that the wallpaper would be to blame for man's immoral deeds. (551)

Trifonov concentrated his writings on man and his deeds and paid little attention to the mechanism of society or of the state. He portrayed man in his everyday context, a context that provided ample opportunity for man to demonstrate both his positive and his negative side. In the words of critic T. Patera:

He [Trifonov] did not establish a goal to condemn or to cure human foibles but rather to expose the sickness. . . . He set up as heroes of his works not those who, like his own father, were physically crushed by Stalinist millstones, but those of his more "fortunate" contemporaries, who lived "in freedom" on the other side of the barbed wire of the Gulag Archipelago.³

It is customary to divide Trifonov's work into two periods and to assert that his mature work dates from the story "The Exchange" (1969), which inaugurates his so-called Moscow period. In examining the stories and novels of both periods one discovers an increasing preoccupation with life's choices and a developing willingness to provide both insight and solutions. The interplay of choice, insight, and resolution is typically focused on a dilemma that offers the possibility and even the seeming necessity of a moral compromise. The dilemmas are produced by one or both of two factors—strained interpersonal relations or the potential of acquiring some material good. The following chart is illustrative:

	Early Trifonov 1950–1968	Late Trifonov ⁴ 1969–1980
Works	17	9
Works containing dilemmas	7	9
Number of dilemmas	18	34
Dilemmas resolved negatively through moral compromise	15	22
Dilemmas resolved positively	3	12
Cause of dilemma		
Interpersonal relations	10	20
Material goods	8	14
Representative dilemmas		
Extramartial affairs	4	9
Abortions	0	2

Characteristic of the early portrayal of moral choices was Trifonov's first work, the novel *The Students* (1951). Six of the eighteen dilemmas of the first period are found in this novel, which was awarded a Stalin Prize and which predictably speaks positively of the Party system and of the work of the Komsomol. Ethical conflict is portrayed rather superficially, in that positive characters make ethical decisions, negative characters make unethical decisions, negative characters reform themselves, and all thematic strains are resolved satisfactorily. It is significant, however, that even in this somewhat primitive first literary effort Trifonov was most interested in individual ethics and in life's choices and that he placed his characters in circumstances that forced decisions between right and gain, morality and security.

Conflict in *The Students* occurs in an academic setting, a setting to which Trifonov would return in his mature years. The novel features a student who resorts to conspiracy and innuendo in order to compete for a scholarship and to publish an article, and a certain Professor Kozelsky who tries to manipulate students while remaining proudly aloof from what he considers to be banal student concerns. This same professor as a student had supported repressive official measures against a progressive professor, who later becomes his dean. Rather than avenge himself upon his former tormentor, the dean charitably tries to teach him a higher level of moral responsibility. A mistreated student also rises above Kozelsky by agreeing to write him a letter of support in connection with his being investigated by the university Komsomol. Even though the conniving student and egocentric professor fail their moral tests by choosing status and possessions rather than integrity, they later discover penance and moral insight through the efforts of committed communists, who are much wiser than they. Such reversions to altruism were common for Soviet literature in the 1940s and 1950s, and in this regard Trifonov's novel was quite typical of its time. What is unusual in 1951, however, is that a moral choice is the center of conflict rather than a social or economic issue. It is this kernel that Trifonov would develop.

Trifonov's evolution as an artist resulted eventually in his placing ethical choices at the psychological and structural core of each work. Of particular interest is what produces the dilemma and how it is resolved. In the earlier period, while a substantial number of the dilemmas result from interpersonal concerns, these concerns are generally less emotionally wrenching than those of the later period and do not reveal the breadth and depth of the human condition to the same degree. Of the ten dilemmas based in interpersonal relations only four are focused upon family relationships, potentially the most fertile ground for development, and all of those dilemmas involve extramarital affairs. While rather traditional among interpersonal problems, extramarital affairs nonetheless hold great opportunity for examining the psyche. This depth of examination is not realized in the earlier Trifonov, however, primarily because marital relationships are neither developed nor analyzed. The resulting lack of psychological depth produces minimal insight and resolution.

An example is the story "The Unfinished Canvas" (1955). In the tale Vera marries during the Second World War and is thereby able to endure the difficult years with emotional security. She is

crushed when her husband brings home another woman after the cessation of hostilities, but it is three years before she can muster sufficient courage and indignation to leave him. She is subsequently emotionally abused by an artist, who resumes painting because of her support and encouragement. After he is once again successful, he dismisses her by asserting that he cannot trust her because she praised what he considered a worthless unfinished canvas. Trifonov develops neither the marital conflict nor the relationship with the artist, but instead emphasizes the insensitivity of the male characters. This is done with no real attempt at psychological insight or development. The men are insensitive, while Vera is a victim. The characters fail at moral decisions, but these failures simply move the plot along and provide only slight characterization.

Toward the end of the first period Trifonov's treatment of marriage and betrayal became somewhat more insightful, for example in the novel *Thirst Aquenched* (1963). This may be viewed as a transitional work leading into his mature period. In the novel Lera's marriage to Sasha Zurabov is subject to more analysis and is rendered in greater detail than are interpersonal relationships in earlier stories. Trifonov's move into a deeper evaluation of individuals and their problems led him away from the story to the novella and novel, which became imprinted with his peculiar convoluted time scheme. From this standpoint the fact that *Thirst Aquenched* is a novel underscores its role as a transitional work. The triangle of Lera, her husband Sasha, and the construction engineer Karabash is not drawn in detail, but Trifonov does allow the reader to gaze into the mind of each character to witness a struggle with integrity and the psychological lure of confessing an indiscretion. The poignancy of the affair is muddled, however, because of its economic context. What seems ultimately important is the construction of the Karakum Canal, and the affair is played out against the background of a controversy over the bulldozer method of excavation. Yet feelings are considered to be important, and the fact that they are prominent and seek to rise above the plot line of the canal held out the promise of greater things to come.

Material goods that produce dilemmas in the first period include the promise of a published article, the promise of a scholarship, retention of a job, achieving money and status, and improving a soccer team by adding a quality player. Of particular interest is the story "The End of the Season" (1955), which deals with the attempt to pirate a promising soccer star from an up-and-coming team by a

declining established one. The aging star who has been given the task of luring away the budding star is brought face to face with himself through the medium of a fan who places the star on a pedestal. The fan lauds the aging star Malakhov for having consistently resisted during his career the economic blandishments of other teams. The fan's statement that "He who is easily lured from one team is disloyal to any team" causes Malakhov to re-examine his mission.⁵ He ultimately cables his team that the budding star does not fit into their style of play. Malakhov lies because he is unable to be openly ethical. The fact that he abandons the plan is laudable, but his inability to be honest with his peers exposes a potentially fatal weakness. The story is more sophisticated than others of the same period, in that it avoids an easy solution and deals with a more serious topic—the limitations of a Soviet individual.

Exposing the individual had been rather standard fare for Soviet literature since the 1920s. By focusing on individual abuses writers were able to discuss problems without indicting the system. This has been a convenient political ploy as well, affording leaders a chance to alter the course of events in the name of the system. The system would thus remain inviolate, while individuals would bear the symbolic and real burden of guilt. The type of guilt in the two decades prior to "The End of the Season" had generally been economic, social, or political, and exposing an individual was a commentary on issues such as production or reconstruction. In his story Trifonov portrays an individual with a very human flaw rather than an individual consumed with excavating canals with bulldozers. In this sense Malakhov is timeless and could exemplify human frailties in any society.

The fact that the vast majority of the dilemmas in the early period are resolved negatively, that is, through moral compromise, illustrates literary convention as well as unethical behavior. Exemplary is the story "The Last Hunt" (1956), which was written in an era when negative social elements could be portrayed in Soviet fiction only if they were depicted as isolated instances. In the story the bureaucrat Sapar routinely hunts game illegally and lavishes his trophies only on those he deems worthy of impressing. These worthies are typically highly-placed bureaucrats who can promote his career. He is juxtaposed to an honest game inspector, whose ethical manner makes him unique in Sapar's world. Sapar allows an innocent man to be accused of taking a trophy illegally. Rather than expose himself, he

determines simply to exercise more caution. In such stories Sapor's negative resolution is predictable and is part of the genre itself.

Trifonov's later period offers not only a much greater frequency of difficult decisions but also a much more comprehensive and serious evaluation of the manner in which the Muscovite middle class deals with them. This Moscow period concentrates on Muscovites and on the intellectually-oriented middle class. However, in addition an attempt is made to evaluate man more generally in his moral context. The setting may be Soviet, but the issues far transcend Soviet middle-class typicality. Every work of the period contains at least one dilemma, and this dilemma stands at its thematic and structural center. The result is a poignancy that exposes the strengths and weaknesses of humankind and contributes to Trifonov's position of prominence in Soviet literature.

The works of the Moscow period focus upon the family. Fully fifteen of the twenty dilemmas resulting from interpersonal relations center on the family. Dilemmas and conflicts become the very dynamics of the family and create deep psychological rifts that clarify the psyche of the individual as much as the ostensible issue. Even though extramarital affairs become quite common in the families of this second period, the issues at hand go far beyond simple fidelity. Whereas the marriages of the first period were not developed and in effect had no inner dynamics, those of the second period are filled with stress—second marriages, extended families, mothers-in-law, attempts at emotional control, the nature of intimate relationships, etc. Such portrayals transfer the emphasis to personal issues and in particular to personal weaknesses. Issues simmer under a deceptively calm surface or simply stagnate when it appears simply easier not to deal with base dishonesty within oneself.

Of the fourteen dilemmas centered around material goods, four have a locus within the family. Material items that cause dilemmas include living quarters, career and promotion, an accepted dissertation, the publication of a first book, and the production of creative art—all of which are not unlike the material goods of the first period. The essential difference is that the material goods are secondary to the interpersonal considerations and that there are no oversimplified character portrayals.

Exemplary of the family focus and the subordinate role of material goods is the *The Exchange* (1969), which initiated

Trifonov's mature period. In *The Exchange* Viktor Dmitriev is caught between his wife Lena and his mother Ksenya. Lena dislikes her mother-in-law and avoids her as much as possible, until there arises the possibility that a larger apartment can be obtained by having Ksenya live with them. Ksenya's serious illness provides the exchange of apartments with a modicum of respectability. The ostensible problem is the nature of Moscow housing, but the emphasis is actually on the individuals and their feelings rather than any social issue. Viktor's initial response to his wife's suggestion that his mother move in with them—clearly a manipulation of people in order to acquire material goods—is to criticize her from an ethical standpoint—"Good Lord, you have some kind of a moral defect, underdeveloped feelings, something, forgive me, inhuman."⁶

Viktor's essential weakness transcends his ethics, however, and it is not long before he convinces himself that having his mother live with them would be good psychological therapy for her. He even comes to praise Lena's insight into the situation and to agree to tell his mother that the idea is his own. Viktor's final act of moral compromise is to ask Tanya, a woman with whom he has had an affair, for the necessary money to secure the new apartment. He dislikes asking for money, but he is quite willing to do so, knowing full well that Tanya still cares for him. He had begun his relationship with her because of his unhappy marriage, but even though he periodically rails against Lena, his weakness makes his rebellion ineffectual. He and Tanya are the actual victims of his unhappy marriage.

The net result of Viktor's dilemma is acquisition of a larger apartment, moral compromise, and broken health which is a metaphor (as is his liaison with Tanya) for his weakness and self-serving approach to interpersonal relations. The story offers no glib solutions, and what matters most is the process of resolving life's dilemmas. The ethics of the individual are more important than the resolution of the dilemma per se, and one senses that one is eavesdropping on the common dramas of life. As Klaus Mehnert has written:

I found the reason for Trifonov's popularity expressed most concisely as I was leaving a performance of the dramatization of his *Exchange* in the Taganka Theater. As I was waiting in line with hundreds of others to get my coat from the theater's overcrowded checkroom, I heard a woman in front of me, probably in her thirties, say to her companion: "Let's stick together for

awhile. If I go home now, I shall go to bed and weep. What we just saw on the stage is not a play. It's our life."⁷

This perception is corroborated by biographer and critic Natalya Ivanova, who has written the only lengthy Soviet study on Trifonov. She has commented that "Upon first reading Trifonov one is struck by the deceptive ease of his prose, a plunge into familiar situations, and a confrontation with people and issues which are well-known from life. Trifonov's social material is we ourselves."⁸

The fact that Trifonov's later work is so close to life illustrates how well he has captured man's foibles. Judgment is neither ready nor obvious, and his characters are simply permitted to live as best they can. Extramarital affairs are a retreat from unhappiness and a search for emotional security. Abortion is a sorrowful way of family planning. Selfishness reigns. But ultimately, we see weakness rather than malice.

Taking Stock (1970) is illustrative of this point. The male protagonist, Gennady Sergeevich, has been a constant, if somewhat pious, advocate of the need to love one's fellowmen. His is a voice of service and concern. A ready application of his teaching is found in Nyura, a close family friend who also does domestic work for the family. She has suffered greatly because of the Second World War, and needs both physical and emotional support. Nyura is hospitalized but receives permission to be released, provided the release is directly into a person's care. Gennady is the logical person to care for her. He finds himself between Nyura and his wife Rita, between doing a good deed and Rita's groundless objections. Faced with this dilemma, Gennady resorts to condemning his wife rather than trying to do something positive for Nyura. He loses sight of charity toward others, and by assailing Rita attempts to avoid any responsibility for the situation. In *Taking Stock* the moral dilemma serves to characterize Gennady rather than develop the plot. Gennady perceives his weakness but does nothing to correct it.

Political elements do not disappear in the later period. Such elements were prominent only in *The Students*, *The Last Hunt*, and *Thirst Aquenched* in the early period, and dealt with the themes of the positive role of the Party and the Komsomol, the negative bureaucrat, and the remnant of the Stalinist past. In the later period the themes of denunciation, prison camps, and the censorship of art are raised, but the reader never senses that he or she is witnessing a political harangue. One

is confronted by universality despite the Soviet setting, and the emphasis is always on the individual's confronting him or herself.

Toward the end of the Moscow period—an end that came all too soon because of Trifonov's untimely death in 1981—the author began to provide some conclusions and solutions. In *The House on the Embankment* (1976) the old Bolshevik Ganchuk philosophizes “nowadays people don't fully understand what they are doing. Hence the arguments within themselves. . . . The conflict is *internalized*—that is what is happening.”⁹ This internal conflict is much more difficult to deal with than the external rigors of a revolutionary society, and it both produces and illustrates man's weakness. This is not a summons for judgment, however. In *The Old Man* (1978) the venerable protagonist Letunov comments: “That's what I don't understand: black and white, obscurantists and angels. And no one in between. Yet everyone is in between. There's something of the angel and something of the fallen angel in everyone.”¹⁰ Despite his insistence on the culpability of man, Letunov is able to act in an ethical manner and emerges as a positive, yet thoroughly believable character.

Letunov's personal dilemmas, as is typical for Trifonov's later work, are centered in his family. When his children Ruslan and Vera pressure him to help them obtain a house, it would appear that the proper thing to do would be to help one's children, particularly in the face of the ongoing Moscow housing crisis. The house, however, is owned by a close friend of his deceased wife, and he determines not to intervene out of reverence for her memory. His children thereafter treat him badly, and his resulting feelings of parental obligation compel him to seek a meeting with an official who could exert pressure on the owner of the house. The meeting occurs out-of-doors since the official and some friends are maliciously shooting dogs. When Letunov's own dog appears to be in danger, he is faced with the choice of defending the dog and possibly losing a chance at the house or allowing the cruel sport to continue and retaining a chance at the house. He quickly defends the dog, knowing that the official will now be of no help but relieved that he can again follow his conscience. Letunov's conduct is effectively contrasted with that of the homeowner's son-in-law, who resorts to bribes and other unethical schemes to obtain control over the house, and continually compromises himself.

Letunov's scruples extend beyond his family as well. Decades prior to the action of the novel Letunov had been in love with Asya,

who married a rival named Migulin. Letunov finds himself in charge of a tribunal that is investigating Migulin, and he has the opportunity to exact revenge. Rather than give vent to his feelings, he quickly begins the process of rehabilitating the memory of Migulin and his place in party history, motivated by a sense of justice that transcends any personal concerns. Letunov's conduct provides the best example to date of a moral character.

In *Time and Place* (1980) the angel/fallen angel protagonist, a writer named Antipov, reveals a further development of Trifonov's ultimate answer. Confronted with a choice between honesty and the possible publication of his first book, Antipov exhibits what is undoubtedly Trifonov's solution: "Antipov understood that his book was tied to his performance in court. Not his book only but also his fate. And since there was no way to side-step the issue, nothing to be gained by complaining, and cowardice did not befit him, he understood that there was only one solution—to learn the truth."¹¹ Antipov discovers the truth, testifies honestly, loses the possibility of publishing his book, but is self-fulfilled in his ethical response. The authorial statement about Antipov that "It seemed to him that the entire circumstance held an interest for only one person—for himself" (348) reflects the view that each man must learn for himself and that that which is gained from resolving a dilemma is hardly communicated to others. The fact that Antipov loses interest in his wife, engages in a lengthy affair, stoops to deceit and is in no way lionized by Trifonov reinforces the fragile nature and moral failures of man despite the successful resolution of a particular moral issue.

At first glance the failure of Viktor Dmitriev in *The Exchange* and the success by comparison of the venerable Ganchuk in *The House on the Embankment* and of Letunov in *The Old Man* would suggest that there is something gained by living a lengthy life and by profiting from life's experiences. Ganchuk and Letunov fall into the category of "old revolutionaries" whose previous political struggles have been replaced by the more important individual struggles of life. Historical aggressiveness on the external front seems to have served them well as they are able to be aggressive also on the internal front later in life. Viktor Dmitriev's moral compromise can be traced to weakness and passivity. Ganchuk and Letunov are culpable like Dmitriev and the rest of mankind, but they are not shackled by passivity. One senses that effort and morality are synonymous and that there may be something terribly wrong with modern, middle-class

Muscovite society, which is beyond the era of revolutionary struggle. Yet Trifonov does not make this indictment. He implies rather that internal struggle is perhaps more challenging than external struggle and that it is not necessarily age or experience that make the difference. Antipov's success in *Time and Place* is the triumph of honesty in a given situation rather than of experience or the life style of a paragon of virtue. The fact that he is younger and is a representative of the Muscovite middle-class intelligentsia suggests that moral compromise need not occur continually. Behind his triumph, however, is the ominous reality that he fails in his family, a common occurrence for Trifonov's characters. The author focuses increasingly on the family in his mature period and throughout shows it to be an arena of dilemma and failure.

One discovers by way of summary that dilemmas are present in Trifonov's work from the beginning, that their number increases as he matured as a writer, that they become more complex and less solvable through ready formulas, that more of them come to be resolved in an ethical manner even though moral compromise remains the predominant solution, that they become focused on complex family relations, that interpersonal relations create more dilemmas than material goods, that the aura is more universal than Soviet in nature, and that the emphasis is on personal issues and personal weaknesses.

NOTES

1. Yury Trifonov, *How Our Words Resound* (*Kak slovo nashe otzovyotsya*) (Moscow: Sovetskaya Rossia, 1985), 253.
2. Yury Trifonov, *Collected Works in Four Volumes* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1987), 4, 544.
3. T. Patera, *A Survey of the Work and an Analysis of the Moscow Tales of Yury Trifonov* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1983), 324-25.
4. Works evaluated in the early period include: *The Students*; (*Studenty*); *White Gates* (*Belye vorota*); *The Conqueror of the Swedes* (*Pobeditel shvedov*); *The Unfinished Canvas* (*Neokonchenny kholst*); *Far Away in the Mountains* (*Daleko v gorakh*); *The End of the Season* (*Konets sezona*); *A Winter Day at the Garage* (*Zimny den v garazhe*); *The Doctor, the Student, and Mitya* (*Doktor, student i*

Mitya); *The Last Hunt* (*Poslednyaya okhota*); *In the Steppes* (*V stepi*); *Out in the Sun* (*Pod solntsem*); *Thirst Aquenched* (*Utolenie zhazhdy*); *The Transparent Sun of Autumn* (*Prozrachnoe solntse oseni*); *A Spanish Odyssey* (*Ispanskaya Odisseya*); *Memoires of Genzano* (*Vospominanie o Dzhezhensano*); *Campfires and Rain* (*Kostry i dozhd*); and *The Reflection of the Campfire* (*Otblesk kostra*). Works considered in the later period are *The Exchange* (*Obmen*); *Taking Stock* (*Predvaritelnye itogi*); *The Long Goodbye* (*Dolgoe proshchaniye*); *The Impatient Ones* (*Neterpeniye*); *Another Life* (*Drugaya zhizn*); *The House on the Embankment* (*Dom na naberezhnoy*); *The Old Man* (*Starik*); *The Overturned House* (*Oprokinuty dom*); and *Time and Place* (*Vremya i mesto*).

5. Yury Trifonov, "The End of the Season," *Out in the Sun; Stories* (*Pod solntsem; Rasskazy*) (Moscow: Sovetsky pisatel, 1959), 86.
6. Yury Trifonov, *Tales* (*Povesti*) (Moscow: Sovetskaya Rossia, 1978), 10.
7. Klaus Mehnert, *The Russians and their Favorite Books* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1983), 199.
8. Natalya Ivanova, *The Prose of Yury Trifonov* (Moscow: Sovetsky pisatel, 1984), 293.
9. Yuri Trifonov, *Another Life; The House on the Embankment* tr. by Michael Glenny (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 344.
10. Yuri Trifonov, *The Old Man* tr. by Jacquelin Edwards and Mitchell Schneider (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 52.
11. Yury Trifonov, *Eternal Themes* (*Vechnye temy*) (Moscow: Sovetsky pisatel, 1984), 347.