

February 11, 2009 11:04:11 PM

Dear Editor:

I appreciated Keith Gessen taking time, in the online edition of *Bookforum*, to reply to my criticism of his Dec./Jan. review of *The Soul and Barbed Wire* by Edward Ericson, Jr. and Alexis Klimoff <<http://www.bookforum.com/inprint/015_05/3373>>. While I don't want to drag matters out, Gessen's reply deserve a response.

Possible speculation about my thoughts on Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn - the reference to "anyone who emerges" seems precipitated by my letter - can be dispelled quickly. He has some important opinions and beliefs I don't share; and I've never thought of him as "a sainted battler," or any kind of saint. Where this theme comes from is unknown; it's source is not my letter. What I did indicate was that Gessen's review of *The Soul and Barbed Wire* is unhelpful and erroneous in certain places. He fails to offer a response to these things, and perhaps no response is possible. A reader will learn very little about the book from Gessen's review. He didn't talk about its structure, its arrangement, its value (or limitations) as an introduction to Solzhenitsyn's works, or its thoroughness (or lack thereof). I imagine that Gessen could find it puzzling if a review of his fiction dwelt extensively on, say, whether or not he was right-handed, where he lives, feuds he may have with others, and barely mentioned the literary work at hand. For after all, it's a book under review, not anyone's life.

Gessen courageously admits to being misleading. That's appreciated. He says we differ on matters of interpretation. I find that he glossed over and made banal various parts of Solzhenitsyn's active and intense life. This flattening, and the accumulation of small errors of fact, combine to cast doubt on Gessen's ability to provide a fair portrait of the book in question, and of Solzhenitsyn.

In an effort to clear up a particular matter, for instance, Gessen makes things murkier. In his review he stated that "Jews have lived in Russia for two hundred years. They are Russians." In his letter he writes: "The Russians, as a people, have engaged in anti-Semitic violence for centuries; what I can't understand is in what sense, exactly, the Jews, as a people, can be said to have 'treated' the Russians 'terribly'—unless you think, as I'm afraid Solzhenitsyn thought, that the Bolshevik Revolution was at some level an act of aggression against the Russians by the Jews." Gessen appears to be saying both that the Revolution was an act of aggression against Russians by Russians (as Jews "are Russians"), and that Jews and Russians are separate peoples. Clarification on this matter would be appreciated. (In the interests of space, rather than quoting from *The Soul and Barbed Wire* I'd refer interested readers to pages 163 to 165 where a summary is provided of Solzhenitsyn's views on this matter, as expressed in *Two Hundred Years Together*.)

I agree with Gessen that skepticism about a writer is useful. At some point, though, it becomes important to base your skepticism on, or challenge your skepticism with, evidence gathered in a search for truth. That truth may be elusive, unpalatable, risky, or unpopular, and perhaps no final opinion, or interpretation of the evidence, can be rendered. Certainly, if there's insufficient caution, interpretation can become eisegesis.

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