



David Jackson

## Enigma variations

### **The search for meaning in Ilya Repin's *They did not expect him***

David Jackson geeft in dit artikel zijn interpretatie van Ilya Repin's schilderij *They did not expect him* (1884), dat het huiselijke drama van een teruggekeerde politieke balling portretteert.

Few works of Russian art have received such sustained critical analyses as Repin's seminal documentation of the contemporary political scene – *They did not expect him* (Не ждали) (fig. 1) – a work produced at the height of the artist's creative maturity and during a period of the nation's most sensitive political agitation. Since the painting's first public exposition at the twelfth Peredvizhnik exhibition in St. Petersburg in February of 1884, it has attracted consistent cultural scrutiny to such an extent that in Russia alone a bibliography of textual material decoding, deciphering and vivisectioning the canvas from a multiplicity of perspectives would fill more than the word allocation for this entire article. Legions of commentators have picked over the painterly runes of this undoubted masterpiece of critical realism seeking a definitive reading, which so far eludes us. Yet whilst in its enigmatic reticence the work has assumed a totemic significance for Russian art, it also sheds valuable light on the strategies adopted by the protagonists of visual culture in their attempts to circumvent official obstructionism and offer a commentary on artistic, cultural and political issues.

It should be understood then that Repin's ambivalent painting is never likely to give itself up to a simple explanation of any unitary 'meaning', and since contemporary art historical imperatives do not favour such an approach, investigation in that direction is unlikely, for the time being at least, to be pursued. Ironically then for this icon of the realist school and its once derided methodology of objective classification, the work's interdisciplinary appeal and diversity of interpretive possibilities can now be regarded as its abiding appeal. Within postmodernist discourses the painting's inherent ambiguity, its refusal to conform to the status of a sociological painted sermon but instead to offer a series of potential appraisals can rightly be

construed as integral and premeditated strengths. From this perspective the claustrophobic events of this small domestic space offer an extensive and incisive examination of Russian society, informed by a subtle nuancing of contemporary and traditional motifs drawn from artistic and cultural semiologies.

As the leading exponent of the dissident realist school, the Peredvizhniki, Repin's work was frequently mired in official controversy and stifled by state censorship. It could have come as no surprise to all, therefore, that this imaging of a Russian revolutionary's return to an unexpected household should have provoked state consternation as well as an exceptional level of critical abuse from the conservative, loyalist press. Superficially, the events described seem simple enough: revolutionary, family, servants, the home. Yet if this were a simple piece of propaganda proposing sympathy for the exhausted political prisoner stumbling back to the domestic hearth, and by inference, condemnation of the draconian autocracy that treated its dissidents with such barbaric ferocity, the painting would be spent on first glance. It is true to say that a partial Soviet art history has been content to regard the painting in this light, as a critique of imperial and capitalist intransigence, a perhaps understandable bias mirrored by more recent attempts in the West to overstress the work's aestheticism and underplay its critical content. Yet even at the time of its production Repin's letters and diaries confirm that of all his major works *They did not expect him* caused him the greatest personal anguish in trying to perfect an image that would not be confined by narrative or tendency, but would mark instead a more subtle and ambitious attempt to delineate the contemporary political scene beyond the scope of other images of revolutionary activity produced by himself or the Peredvizhniki.

In this respect Repin's utilisation of a domestic interior marks an intentional transgression of a convention of political paintings that focussed almost exclusively on lone individuals suffering gloomy incarceration for their misdemeanors, or proposing a not always subtle contrast between the revolutionary and overt symbols of state oppression. Into the first category can be fitted Nikolai Yaroshenko's *Convict* (1878, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow), Vladimir Makovsky's *Sentenced* (1879, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg) and Repin's own *Spurning confession* (1879-1885, Tretyakov Gallery), whilst amongst the latter are Repin's *Arrest of a propagandist* (1880-92, Tretyakov Gallery) and most infamously Yaroshenko's lost magnum opus of 1881 *At the Litovsky fortress*, depicting a female insurrectionist in



Fig. 1 Ilya Repin, *They did not expect him* (Не ждали) 1884; 1888, oil on canvas, 160.5 x 167.5 cm, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

front of this notorious prison, a work which uniquely occasioned the artist's house arrest.<sup>1</sup> Not merely content with bringing the political drama into the home and so substituting public space for the private sphere, Repin initially planned his work with a female protagonist sporting the plain dress and short hairstyle that had become emblematic of radical female activism. *They did not expect her* (fig. 2) as the work is known (although the Russian title carries no gender specificity and would still be rendered as *Не ждали*) was undoubtedly prompted by Yaroshenko's image of a female student, *Kursistka* (1883, Kiev Museum of Russian Art) which was exhibited the previous year at the eleventh Peredvizhnik exhibition to great controversy. This was regarded by many as a positive symbol of feminist enlightenment

1 E. Valkenier, *Russian realist art. The state and society. The Peredvizhniki and their tradition* (New York 1989) 208.



Fig. 2 Ilya Repin, *They did not expect her*, 1883; 1898, oil on wood, 44.5 x 37 cm, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

and emancipation in the mould of the cooperative workers portrayed in Chernyshevsky's utopian novel *What is to be done?* (Что делать?), but by others as emblematic of disruptive forces following disturbances which swept through Russian universities after the admittance of women in the

early 1860s. Repin's choice was also highly topical in making reference to the role played by female protesters in the planning and realization of tsar Aleksandr II's assassination in 1881.<sup>2</sup> Repin decided however not to retain the female exile, doubtless seeking to circumvent certain censorship, and when it was shown at the Peredvizhnik exhibition of 1884 the now familiar male revolutionary was in place.

Repin's difficulties in perfecting the image that we now see are well-documented; on four occasions between 1883 and 1888 the canvas was reworked, at one point using the writer Vsevolod Garshin as the model for the revolutionary, but whilst the artist and his patron, Pavel Tretyakov, were at different times happy with the outcomes, the final version, over-painted and amended to the point of exhaustion, pleased neither. Both agreed that a vitality and strength manifest in previous versions, showing a more robust and confident protagonist, had been displaced by a despondent note redolent of guilt, suffering or even shame (fig 3). During the period of its painting political events in Russia moved inexorably from largely peaceful agitational protest to greater extremism and the advent of terrorism as a strategy for change. It is tempting therefore to conjecture that during the work's gestatory period Repin responded, possibly subconsciously, to changing political currents as the revolutionary become more estranged from society.<sup>3</sup> It is speculative, however, as to what extent political imperatives or technical difficulties inform the diffident portrayal of the returning exile. Though Repin recorded his distress at the bloody repressions following Alexander II's assassination there is no evidence of a correlation between the consecutively less positive repaintings of the exile and the waning of public support for revolutionary activity as political violence replaced benign idealism.

Whilst we can be sure that the artist was not content with this final ver-

- 2 On Yaroshenko's portraits of progressive females see И. Зильберштейн, 'Образ передовой русской женщины в малоизвестных произведениях Репина (1880-е годы)' in: И. Зильберштейн и И. Грабарь ed., *Художественное наследство. Репин I* (Москва-Ленинград 1948-1949) 169-172. Possible affinities between *Kursistka* and *They did not expect her* are explored at 172-173.
- 3 E. Valkenier, 'Repin's search for the revolutionary's image in *They did not expect him*', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 91 (1978) 207-212, details the successive repaintings. On the use of Garshin as model see D. Jackson, 'Garshin and Repin. Writer and artist in a creative relationship' in: P. Henry, V. Porudominskii and M. Girshman ed., *Vsevolod Garshin at the turn of the century. An international symposium in three volumes III* (Oxford 1999-2000) 108-109.

sion (he had to be dissuaded from repainting it a fifth time!) this does not necessarily suggest that in further finessing the image he would have altered the mien of the revolutionary. It can not be assumed that the dejected figure is the result of indecision or ineptitude. In conjunction with the rest of the canvas it would appear that the psychological inscrutability of this central figure is calculated rather than accidental. The reactions of the painting's characters to the events portrayed present a further series of uncertainties that complement the exile's confused state; indeed we cannot even be sure who these people are and in what relation they stand to him. A young girl stares suspiciously at the exile's entrance; clearly she does not recognize him. Possibly his sentence has been sufficiently long that she does not remember him, but maybe she has never seen him before? A maid impassively shows the hesitant figure into the room, seemingly indifferent to the events. The older female with her back to the viewer is startled to her feet, whilst the younger woman at the piano seems to have recognised the intruder and registers wide-eyed surprise, her hand clutching convulsively at her chair arm, but in neither case are we sure whether joy or shock is their motivation. The young boy is the only character clearly delighted to see the exile and so presumably knows who he is and possibly has some relationship with him suggestive of intimacy? But this leads us only so far. We can describe the events, but we cannot fully decipher them.

That this introspective performance is consciously constructed to remain unresolved is confirmed by Repin's refusal to clarify the content or insist on a definitive elucidation of the work, divining correctly that its ambiguity is also its intellectual potency. The older woman is often presumed to be the exile's mother, the younger woman his wife or sister, and the children his own. Stasov however identified the children as younger siblings, but ultimately we will never know who precisely these people are, what relationship (if any) they have to each other, and more importantly, what *exactly* is taking place. Repin has succeeded in arresting narrative time at the point of maximum psychological charge. Perhaps the family are on the point of exploding into domestic rapture at this prodigal's return, or maybe we see the prelude to bitter recriminations. The exile's return might be unexpected, but could it also be unwelcome? There can, however, be no exegesis; the work is permanently suspended in this state of vacillation, creating an unresolved tension which is its abiding fascination.

The masterstroke that allows Repin to carry this off so successfully is the unprecedented removal of political events from public to domestic

space; the drama is a personal and insular one centering on a family crisis rather than the revolutionary 'cause', yet at the same time it addresses topical contemporary concerns, directly and tangentially. Complementing the



Fig. 3 Ilya Repin, *They did not expect him*. Detail: head of the exile.



uncertainty of characterisation and response is a more detailed iconography which broadens the scope of this frozen instant, placing and contextualizing events from micro- to macrocosm, but augmenting the painting's characteristic elusiveness of interpretation. The interior (clearly a country dacha) is prosperous, well-furnished and attended by servants, attesting the predominantly affluent and educated backgrounds of political activists at this time. Pictures and prints on the walls confirm the cultured standing of the family but are semiotically confusing. On the back wall a large print of *The Golgotha* by Karl Steuben may denote conservative tastes, religious proclivities or one of many contemporary links often made between altruistic revolutionary activity and Christ's self-sacrifice for a greater good. A sense of martyrdom permeates many Peredvizhnik images of revolutionary events, whilst in a vital sense Repin's painting may be read as a resurrection; possibly the family are simply surprised to see the returning exile alive?

To the right of Christ is a portrait of the eminent liberal poet Nikolai Nekrasov and to the left an image of Taras Shevchenko, a self-taught peasant artist and political activist who suffered a ten year internal exile for his radical convictions. But to whom do these images belong? As if counterbalancing or destabilizing the ideological import of these symbols, the right hand wall shows the edge of a large map of the Russian empire and small photo of the assassinated Aleksandr II lying in state. The latter confirms the modernity of the events depicted, contemporaneous with the political terrorism following the tsar's murder, but this creates a conflict for the viewer. One set of signs speaks of an involvement with anti-state non-conformism (Christ included) and an adherence to the liberal-reformist ideals which have been usurped by terrorism, represented through the dead tsar's photo. Yet simultaneously the photo and the map of the empire seem to denote an allegiance or sympathy within this respectable family for the nation and its reforming 'tsar liberator', suggesting that the exile's political convictions are not shared. The uniting irony may be that the exile has been released as part of an amnesty to mark Aleksandr III's coronation in 1881, in which case the painting could be read as an image of ideological reconciliation, the death of one adversary precipitating the resurrection of the other. The domestic space thereby becomes a metaphor for the wider arena of political discord and the family's divided loyalties symbolic of a potential rapprochement. Unique amongst his contemporaries Repin takes the viewer into the uncharted territory of the home to propose to his audience that belying the stereotype of the committed, robotic sociopath, revolutionary



activists do not live in isolation, but that their acts have personal as well as public repercussions.

Read this way the exile's sacrifice might seem to have been negated by the trend towards terrorism, but even if he does not obviously constitute a positive image of political dedication, he can be seen as encapsulating a set of artistic ideals and social ethics which for Repin were inseparable and to which he wished to pay homage. Writing during the period of the painting's production he commented:

'Beauty is a matter of taste; for me it is to be found in truth (...) I would despise myself if I started to paint carpets which please the eye, to weave lace, to busy oneself with fashion (...) to adapt oneself to the new spirit of the times (...) No! I am a man of the sixties, I am a backward person for whom the ideals of Gogol, Belinsky, Turgenev, Tolstoy and other idealists, are not yet dead. With all my small strength I aspire to embody my ideas in truth; contemporary life affects me deeply, it does not give me peace, it begs to be represented on canvas (...)'<sup>4</sup>

Whilst this quotation is usually read as Repin's reassertion of an ideological comradeship with the protagonists of educative socialism, it underlines also a creative conviction; the role of art as a didactic agent in promoting social and political progression. In affirming the validity of tendentious narrative over the rise of a purely aesthetic and politically disinterested art, Repin verifies his manifesto for the arts as well as his political credo, but again the canvas confounds even his own agenda in that its 'truth' is neither explicit nor comprehensible, but subtle, finely nuanced but variable. If Repin ever intended the viewer to reach certain, specific conclusions, he nevertheless allowed them the freedom to stumble upon alternative readings that might totally alter the work's significance. This is perhaps reflected in the ambivalent critical reviews the work received, although in tsarist Russia a lack of press freedoms and the imposition of censorship meant that most cultural commentary was pretty much conditioned by the state, polarising largely between robust loyalist condemnation on one side and meek liberal approval on the other, since too much approbation would inevitably be suppressed.

More importantly perhaps, Repin draws attention to the fact that for him, first and foremost, *They did not expect him* is a work of art, a painting,

4 Letter to N. Murashko, 30th November, 1883, И. Е. Репин. Избранные письма, в двух томах I (Москва 1969) 291-292.

a piece of coloured canvas. If it is bad art with a good message, or good art with a bad message, neither will content him. Within the constraints of space this is not the place to launch on a full aesthetic consideration of the canvas, but it has long since been recognised as one of Repin's finest works in terms of its freshness and painterly dexterity in rendering setting, characterisation, surfaces and fabrics, and particularly the effect of diffused sunlight permeating the interior. By any standards it is a masterful piece of painting by an artist at the zenith of his powers.

At the time of its reception, however, aesthetics were ousted by debate over the work's intent, its 'purpose', and the Russian press had little time for artistic niceties. The ambiguous nature of the narrative led some to speculate on the emotional states of those portrayed, but in general the hunt for unhealthy critical commentary resulted in a predictable if unprecedented level of abuse being heaped upon this supposedly unpatriotic and politically unsound critique of modern society.<sup>5</sup> One conservative writer found the work guilty of 'too much tendentiousness', the environment 'unattractive, untidy and comfortless', the children 'scrofulous and emaciated', and the painter's intentions bogus and full of 'pseudo-liberal denunciations and protests'.<sup>6</sup> Even cruder and illogical assessments included one that rejoiced that the artist had defeated his tendentious purpose by making the exile 'offensive and ugly', concluding: 'there is evil, discontent, rage and animosity in his appearance (...) he looks at his family with hatred.'<sup>7</sup> Outside of Repin's circle of friends and admirers – the critic Vladimir Stasov, the painter Ivan Kramskoy – it is difficult to find a positive review for a painting which clearly hit an exposed nerve in conservative circles. Even Tolstoy, with whom Repin enjoyed a close association, failed to comprehend its significance noting in his diary for 7 April praise for Kramskoy's *Inconsolable sorrow* (1884, Tretyakov Gallery), a restrained image of a grieving young widow, whilst laconically dismissing Repin's work: 'Went to the exhibition. Kramskoy's excellent, Repin's didn't come off.'<sup>8</sup>

Critical dismissal or willful misinterpretations by reactionary forces

5 See for instance 'Летопись искусства', *Всемирная иллюстрация*, № 790, 3 March, 1884; 'Передвижная выставка', *Русские ведомости*, № 91, 1 April, 1884; С. Васильев, 'Художественные заметки', *Московские ведомости*, 1884, May, № 128.

6 'Rectus', С. -Петербургские ведомости, 1884, № 63.

7 Гражданин, 1884, № 10, 2.

8 R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's diaries I* (New York 1985) 209. I differ in opinion from E. Valkenier, *Ilya Repin and the world of Russian art* (New York 1990) 118, who suggests only one review was critical of Repin's canvas.

were perhaps to be anticipated, but despite Repin's long history of enraging official sensibilities it must have been a severe disappointment to see a work of subtle analysis and sophisticated elucidation assessed and denounced by crude and partisan criteria. That it was exhibited at all, however, must be regarded as a victory of sorts. Earlier works such as *Spurning confession* and *Arrest of a propagandist* had been suppressed, whilst the example of Yaroshenko's *At the Litovsky fortress* provided a paradigm for the bold, denunciatory statement which ultimately came to nothing since it was swiftly pulled from public view. Repin's pragmatic approach in this respect, his ability to construct an image that would offer a multiplicity of readings whilst circumventing censorship, shows a degree of calculated shrewdness and creative maturity; less of a retreat from the power of his earlier images but a more a prudent accommodation to ensure the varied agenda of his work received wide exposure. It is not insignificant also to note the dimensions of the canvas, larger than any other offerings in this genre, ensuring that Repin's statement on political destabilisation could hardly be ignored by the authorities or the public. Size does matter.

I have attempted here to shed some light on the genesis, motivation and reception of Repin's mercurial canvas, but whilst *They did not expect him* continues to defy an adequate exposition it can be recognised in the context of Repin's oeuvre and that of the Peredvizhniki as an unusually ambitious and complex undertaking, a unique experiment in controlled psychological subtlety that addresses the past, images the present and poses questions about the future; both for his family and the nation. The interpretative impenetrability of the painting, which allowed critics to see a condemnation of political oppression or, according to taste, a discourse on the inadvisability of political activism, attests the strength and enduring appeal of the painting's central enigma. The overtones of religiosity that permeate both the physical details of the room and the martyred figure of the exile might suggest an overriding humanitarian concern,<sup>9</sup> for the exile and his family, but also for Russia itself, of which this domestic drama is both sign and symbol. Whether or not they are pleased at his return, the episode is a tragic and sorry one, which might have prompted observers of

9 G. Sternin, *Ilya Repin. Painting, graphic arts* (Leningrad 1985) 16-17, and A. Hilton, 'The revolutionary theme in Russian realism' in: H. Millon and L. Nochlin ed., *Art and architecture in the service of politics* (Cambridge Mass. 1978) 126, make parallels with Aleksandr Ivanov's *The appearance of Christ to the people* (1832-1857, Tretyakov Gallery).

both political persuasions to ask why matters had come to this lamentable pass and, as Repin must surely have intended, to seek a solution. Though the work undoubtedly addresses a private suffering, the human price that both the exile and family have paid for upholding personal principles or political ideals, it is also a moving and eloquent attempt to create a contemporary document encapsulating a timeless and universal commentary on the individual cost and wider consequences of ideological conflict. And if, ultimately, it offers no prescription for the ills portrayed, this is surely testament to the intellectual astuteness of the work, which insists, then as now, on the necessity of shared responsibility and independence of thought.