I found “A Gentleman in Moscow” such a pleasure to read, not just because it is about Russia and one of finest representatives of elite Russian nobility, the fictional Count Alexander Rostov. For me it is Towles’s use of language: his unhurried description of key events, his recording of nature in minute detail, his delight in the aromas and tastes of food. Because the novel is written predominantly as a monologue of the Russian count, it makes us observe the world through his eyes: the noble, educated, worldly, compassionate perspective of a true “gentleman.” He takes us on a half-century journey through the evolving development of Soviet ideology, ethics, politics and social attitudes. Two areas of that evolution that were particularly interesting for me were, first, how one keeps one’s personal dignity and follows one’s own best judgment in the face of changing times, changing regimes, and even the threat of death. Second, I found the attitude toward arts and artists also quite interesting.

The novel explores what it means to be a “gentleman.” Respect for oneself and for others is one of its major themes. The theme reminded me of a famous Confucius quote: “The green reed that bends in the wind is stronger than mighty oak, which breaks in a storm.” Throughout the book Count Rostov remains unwaveringly loyal to his principles, ideals, moral understandings. We see a person who is “mastering the circumstances” and standing tall in the face of challenging times. He does not abandon his motherland and does not bend under the fear and oppression that surround him. He is also supportive of women and children, kind and caring to friends, and loyal to his country. Personally speaking, I often find myself not being the person I know I should be, even when I seem to have valid excuses. With time it feels almost normal to behave that way. But with that moral failure I lose self-respect. The book reveals that being true to yourself and following your ideals, no matter the circumstances, is not only possible, but also a desirable and praiseworthy way to live.

Another interesting theme for me in the novel is its exploration of the relationship between the Soviet regime and Russian artists. Artists are independent, innovative, and often rebellious, individuals. In the novel, Sofia played the music she wanted to perform—the music she felt connected with—in the competition. Being true to herself and expressing herself helped her to win the competition. In the end, the win gives her a chance to travel and ultimately to escape the Soviet Union.

When I was growing up in Russia near the end of the Soviet era, music education had become very accessible. Music schools with well-educated teachers were in every town. Admission to music colleges and conservatories was based on talent and performance abilities, and the education was free for everybody. Many music competitions helped young musicians to enter and flourish in the arena of professional music. Today, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, participants and winners of the most famous
Tchaikovsky international competition are performing and teaching all over the world. I like to think that musical artists like Sophia helped to make that dream possible.

In another medium of the arts, the Count’s friend, Mishka, wrote a revolutionary poem for which he would be expelled from the University if it were ever revealed that it was his. We later discover that the new regime loved that poem. It was praised for its inspiration to action for masses of people. Being attributed to the Count, the poem saved the Count’s life at the trial before the court. In our country, we have long understood that for the arts to flourish society must be supportive, providing freedom of expression within a broad variety of media. During the Count’s lifetime, the Soviet regime carefully restricted artistic freedom. The regime suppressed and disciplined artists through withholding publicity as well as through restrictive management of galleries and music venues. A totalitarian regime is afraid of the artist. Just as with Mishka’s poem, the work of other artists and their call for freedom inspired revolutionary movements in 1905 and 1917. Eventually, the role of artists in revealing the unfulfilled promises of better life and the oppression of human freedoms contributed to the collapse of Soviet regime.

There are many more ideas you can find in the novel. But for me its most powerful message is to be true to oneself, to embrace and express one’s own ideals and beliefs while respecting and helping others, even in the face of potential arrest and punishment. Art shows people what is possible, inspires dreams of a better future, and often shows the way. The life of an artist has never been easy. For that reason also, a healthy society should support, encourage and promote the development of creativity and artistic expressions, just as this novel inspires many of us to be true to ourselves, our friends, and our country.

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