

REVIEW AND COMMENT

Socialist Realism

“WE MUST dare, Comrades.” It was with these words that Nikolai Bukharin closed his memorable report on poetry in the U.S.S.R. at the Congress of Soviet Writers a year ago—a report which, by virtue of its analytical power, catholicity of view, depth of insight into the nature of the poetic process and profound erudition must long remain one of the outstanding critical achievements of our time.

“We must dare, Comrades.” But it was precisely this quality, this willingness to dare that characterized not only Bukharin’s report, not only Karl Radek’s eagle’s-eye survey of contemporary world literature, not only Maxim Gorky’s enormously provocative generalizations on the history of culture—but the Congress as a whole. Was it not a daring, an unheard-of thing for the writers of a given country—not the writers of this school or that, but all the significant writers of all schools—to get together for the purpose of hammering out a new philosophy of literature, a new plan of procedure that should be commensurate with the new society in which they live and work? Was it not a thing unknown in the annals of letters that out of such a congress should come more than slogans and resolutions—important as these may be, a well-rounded, crystal-clear thesis, a thesis dynamic enough to inspire a nation’s writers, broad enough and at the same time definite enough to open their eyes to the vast horizons within their reach, and above all actually to point out the road to those horizons?

I waive the matter of workers and farmers pointing out to writers their shortcomings as artists, of factory and collective farm representatives attending so august a gathering as a congress of writers, of newspapers devoting more space to an authors’ convention than the bourgeois press gives to a championship prizefight or a genteel murder, of the prodigious nation-wide ferment over culture—all those things which must still arouse the skepticism of the writer under capitalism, inured as he is to isolation, the indifference of “the public,” the lack of faith in his own ultimate significance. But where is the man of letters who can read these key reports of the Soviet Writers’ Congress without undue bigotry or ignorance and not be roused by the sense of something new in the world of literature?

You would think a group of authors who could swing anything as impressive as such a congress, who could command the attention and respect of an entire people and of their government, whose books sell in as-

tronomical figures—you would think that a gathering of such authors might pardonably indulge in a little bragging. You find instead a self-criticism that is almost unknown among us, a drastic examination of their own failings, an ultimatum against “provincialism” and a demand that their work be judged by nothing less than world standards.

“Self-criticism is necessary, Comrades,” says Gorky, inveighing against “leaderism” and “philistinism.” “We are working before the eyes of the proletariat which, as it grows more and more literate, is constantly raising its demands on our art, and, incidentally, on our social behavior.¹

“Communism of ideas does not coincide with the nature of our actions and the mutual relations existing among us—relations in which a very grave part is played by philistine mentality, finding vent in envy, trivial gossip and mutual disparagement.”

“The day is over,” declares Bukharin, “when we could say: ‘A poor thing but mine own.’ We must apply world scales of measurement.” And flatly denying such loose assertions as the one, for instance, that the lyric poet Svetlov is the equal of Heine, Bukharin admits that Svetlov is “a good romantic poet who can achieve much if he will work,” and then goes on to say: “I have heard that many comrades, including Comrade Svetlov, are not—to put it mildly—particularly well satisfied with such restrained appreciation. But I must say that in my opinion the standards we customarily apply have already become out of date. I consider that Svetlov is one of our very best Soviet poets, but it must be argued that now, in the period of reconstruction, when we are triumphantly carrying out the Second Five Year Plan and setting ourselves tasks of gigantic scope, it is no good at all trying to measure poetry by the standards employed, let us say, somewhere in the provinces of our country, or by those in use among apothecaries.” Compared with the extraordinary erudition displayed by the young Pushkin, Bukharin declares again, “ours could be put under a three-penny bit! We must put a stop to this.”

The weight of self-criticism, however, can be measured only in terms of the ultimate objective. Only when we realize the goal that the Soviet writers have set themselves can we understand the real significance of their self-criticism. And it is fascinating to see how from the positive thesis of socialist realism are derived those standards for mea-

suring an heroic literature of the new Socialist epoch.

I remember when first reading the abbreviated report of Karl Radek’s address on contemporary world literature, resenting his attack on James Joyce as the antithesis of socialist realism. I must admit, however, that a closer examination of Radek’s speech, and especially his answer to the discussion which followed, reveals a cogency of argument that is pretty hard to refute. “His [Joyce’s] basic feature is the conviction that there is nothing big in life—no big events, no big people, no big ideas. . . . A heap of dung, crawling with worms, photographed by a cinema apparatus through a microscope—such is Joyce’s work.”

Well, you may say this is the political man speaking, the new Soviet puritan, who cannot appreciate a work of art for its own sake. “But,” Radek goes on to say,

It is sufficient to consider the picture that he gives in order to see that it does not fit even those trivial heroes in that trivial life which he depicts. The scene of his book is laid in Ireland in 1916. The petty bourgeois whom he describes are Irish types, though laying claim to universal human significance. But these Blooms and Daedaluses, whom the author relentlessly pursues into the lavatory, the brothel and the pothouse, did not cease to be petty bourgeois when they took part in the Irish insurrection of 1916. The petty bourgeois is a profoundly contradictory phenomenon, and in order to give a portrayal of the petty bourgeois, one must present him in all his relations to life.

Joyce, who is alleged to give an impartial presentation of the petty bourgeois, who is alleged to follow every movement of his hero, is not simply a register of life; he has selected a piece of life and depicted that. His choice is determined by the fact that for him the whole world lies between a cupboardful of medieval books, a brothel and a pothouse. For him, the national revolutionary movement of the Irish petty bourgeoisie does not exist; and consequently the picture he presents, despite its ostensible impartiality, is untrue. . . . If Joyce did not turn his eyes towards the Irish uprising that was preparing, this was not because it took ten years to come, but because all that appealed to Joyce was the medieval, the mystical, the reactionary in the petty bourgeoisie—lust, aberrations—everything capable of impelling the petty bourgeoisie to join the side of revolution was alien to him.

I quote Radek at this length on Joyce because the standards by which he is measuring the Irish genius spring directly from the concept of socialist realism, which demands that the author realize all the contradictions, the contrarities and the complexities of the world in crisis; which demands that the artist not only see things as they are—statically, but where they are going—dynamically; and which demands not only that the author see where things are going, but himself take a conscious part in leading the reader through the maze of his-

¹ *Problems of Soviet Literature*. International Publishers. \$1.50.

tory toward Socialism and the classless society.

What purely esthetic standards, for instance, can give us so succinct a criticism of the work of John Dos Passos as the following brief paragraph of Radek's?

Dos Passos' form is his weakness—a weakness not only of a formal character. What is the source of this weakness? The young American intellectual went to the war. There he became a revolutionary; he began to hate war. He saw the spectacle of ruin, but he lacked an integral view of life. For this reason he writes the biographies of his heroes one after the other, so that these biographies may compose a general picture. But he feels that these biographies are taking place against the background of history and he cannot present this background of history, for he cannot generalize. He therefore puts in insertions and excerpts from newspapers in order to glue together that background which his inability to generalize prevents him from portraying.

Socialist realism demands the ability to generalize, to "seek out the main phenomenon in the totality of phenomena."

As Bukharin points out, just as the positivism of August Comte had its counterpart in the naturalism of Emile Zola, just as Russian symbolism had its philosophical base in "a peculiar mystic idealism, a cross between Kant and Vladimir Solovyev," so the basis of socialist realism is dialectical materialism, "the translation of the latter into terms of art."

Finally, socialist realism does away with the split between realism and romanticism; it "dares to dream and should do so, basing itself on real trends of development."

If socialist realism is distinguished by its active, operative character; if it does not give just a dry photograph of a process; if it raises the heroic principle to the throne of history—then revolutionary romanticism is a component part of it. . . . Socialist realism does not merely register what exists, but, catching up the thread of development in the present, it leads it into the future, and leads it actively. Hence, an antithesis between romanticism and socialist realism is devoid of all meaning. (Bukharin.)

For years we have been bewailing the plight of the artist in a world in chaos, the impossibility of creating an heroic, an integrated literature in a world that lacks a sustaining body of ideas, an unbroken circuit of thought and action, a community of interest between writer and audience, a common faith and purpose shared by the overwhelming majority. In the Soviet Union, for the first time in the period of our lives, we have the spectacle of an integrated society releasing the creative energies of its people. The Soviet Writers' Congress was a harbinger of what we may expect in the way of a new and mighty literature from such a society.

EDWIN SEAVER.

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