

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION IN LITERATURE AND ART

SINCE art is an expression, an emotional systematisation, of feeling and experience, it was natural that the Russian Revolution should have a profound influence in this sphere. The emotions aroused by a social conflict as deep as that of 1917 are generally richer and more profound than the emotions of individual experience ; and the pains and the heroism, the uprooting of old relationships and affections of this period, were bound to enrich artistic experience, and the sudden revolutionary break with the past to loose a flood-tide of creative energy.

In the hectic days of hunger and civil war there was little pause for finished artistic creation. Emotional energy was fully absorbed in the rhythm of machine-guns or of the hammers in the railway shops : it had no room for the rhythm of the sonnet. The artist was employed to rush out posters overnight, to splash illuminated slogans on pavement and hoarding, to compose political lampoons or to sing of the Revolution in ballad and verse. The staccato pattern of his art, like a drum, served to whip tired emotions into activity, to add strength and pungency to mass appeals. In the realm of the theatre there sprang into being the revolutionary satire of the workers' theatres, the creations of the Proletcult theatre, and later the "Living Newspaper" of the "Blue Blouses"—half-cabaret shows, half-*Chauve Souris*, given by troupes of actors who toured the factories and workers' clubs, illuminating and explaining the topics of the day in verse and song and ballet. Art was used for direct and immediate ends ; and what this early work (which was often crude and hasty) lacked in form and finish, it gained in vitality, in originality and in riot of colour and rhythm. Moreover, it was close to the masses and was a direct product of their own mass experiences.

Later, men who had passed through the fire and thunder of the heroic days had respite to frame in concrete images the torrent of experience which they had undergone. They had not merely shouldered a gun like mercenaries : they had taken part in the building of a new world ; and the experience to which they had to give expression was in consequence exceptionally rich. These writers had not self-consciously to "create an atmosphere" like the bourgeois *litterateur* : the deep emotional imprint of that experience, compelling expression, forged a form and style for itself from its own inner rhythm. Moreover, these experiences were social experiences, in which the individual had been subordinated to the

mass, and individual conflicts and emotions had been absorbed and merged in mass struggles and emotions; and the new art which resulted was, consequently, both more complex and powerful and of more universal mass appeal. Of works of this kind we have only a few in English. There is Libedinsky's *A Week*, the tale of a week of Soviet rule and counter-revolutionary rising in a remote village, possessing all the quiet beauty of the classic Russian work, combined with a simplicity of form and a new vigour of "atmosphere," which serves to drag one into the sweep of a great movement, transcending individuals and temporal events, carrying one forward with it beyond the final page of the book into a new future. There are also the sketches included in the collection, *Flying Osip*, telling of incidents of the revolution, which seem to have the burr and beat of machinery about them, while others echo the hum of hurried voices mingled with the click of a hundred typewriters—energy, creation, organisation. There is the cold horror of the "photographic" method of Semenov's "Hunger"; the feeling of clumsy, primitive forces being slowly shaped and moulded in Zozulya's "A Mere Trifle"; the charm and freshness of liberated youth in Seifulina's "Lawbreakers." We should soon have also in England Gladkov's *Cement*, which epitomises the giant creative forces of the revolution, building out of the ruins of civil war a new Russia.

Meanwhile, Russia's old *intelligentsia*, with its writers and artists, divided and went different ways. Some emigrated to Paris and Berlin or Prague. Others stayed in Russia, but shrank into themselves away from the new forces which they abhorred and could not understand. Some of them, on the other hand, like Count Alexei Tolstoy, Maxim Gorki,* and Alexander Blok, were willing to accept the new order, and tried to understand it and interpret it in their art. The two former groups soon tended to become barren, for the reason that they had lost their social roots: great art can seldom gain inspiration for long from contemplation of one's own shadow or admiration of one's own reflection. These persons turned their attention inwards, sought to escape from reality by introversion, and became neurotically ultra-individualist and mystical.

Many of the third group, however, while retaining the old forms and often casting their work in an individualist mould, managed to give a very interesting interpretation of the new forces and the new ideas. Because of their previous training, they were able to reach a higher perfection in form than newer writers among the workers,

* Gorki's latest book *Decadence*, recently published in England by Cassell (7/6), is interesting as a picture of the rise and decline of the Russian bourgeoisie over three generations.

and their energies were less absorbed in political and economic tasks. As Trotsky says in his *Literature and Revolution* :—

“It is untrue that revolutionary art can be created only by workers. . . . It is not surprising that the contemplative intelligentsia is able to give, and does give, a better artistic reproduction of the Revolution than the proletariat, even though the re-creations of the intelligentsia are somewhat off the line.”

Some of them, indeed, who had shared the workers' experience in the days of civil war were able to interpret the emotions of those days with power as well as perfection of form. For instance, in Veressaev's *The Deadlock* (which is in an English translation) one feels the primitive force and creativeness of the Revolution grappling cumbrously with the old order, brushing aside like flies the impotent theories and ideals of well-meaning *intelligentsia*. The conflict is here less impersonal than in Libedinsky, and is shown as reflected in individual feeling and conflicts ; but the spirit of the Revolution is there, unadorned, gargantuan and real.

Some of this group, however, particularly the younger among them, reacting violently against the circumstances of their birth and the traditions which had formerly held them in thrall, sought in an ecstasy of release to out-revolutionise the revolution. They were anarchists in the cultural sphere : old forms, old traditions must be scrapped and the classics must be banished to museums. Some of the new forms and rhythms which these “Leftist” experiments produced had particular interest. The ecstasy of breaking all ties with the past produced several works of high artistic value, such as those of the peasant poet Yessenin and the futurist Mayakovsky. But as Trotsky says of the futurists :—

“Futurism carried the features of its social origin, bourgeois Bohemia, into the new stage of its development. . . . A Bohemian nihilism exists in the Futurist rejection of the past, but not a proletarian revolutionism. We Marxists live in tradition, and we have not stopped being revolutionists on account of it. . . . The working class does not have to, and cannot, break with literary tradition, because the working class is not in the grip of such tradition. The working class does not know the old literature, it still has to commune with it, to master Pushkin, to absorb him and overcome him.”

Present-day art in Russia is, therefore, transitional : like Russia's economics it is at present a mixture of various streams. As the confusion of a transition period passes into the completer, more homogeneous society of the future, these various currents are likely to merge to form a Socialist art.

Meanwhile Communist criticism exercises a selective judgment among this transitional variety. This it does by taking, not merely the usual criterion as to perfection of form, but also a judgment as to value as a constituent of a new art adapted to the new order. To judge art by this criterion is a recognition of the fact—a recognition possible only to the Marxist—that art is a product of social conditions. Art is the formulation of complex emotions in symbols, and

it is successful to the extent that those symbols (be they sounds, colour, lines or words) have sufficient generality and similarity of appeal to awake a similar complex of emotions in the minds of others. (I. A. Richards in his *Theory of Literary Criticism* says that it evokes in the nervous system a complex of "attitudes" or incipient impulses to action.) The deeper the layer (so to speak) of emotions which these symbols touch, and the fuller the gamut of emotions stimulated or released by the symbol, the more powerful the art. Art will have value in so far as it "systematises" emotions and gives them more harmonious and effective expression than they would otherwise have had. Since emotions are the result of experience, and the richest of them the product of social experience, a new society, with new experiences and relationships, will require a new art. Since the new art, to fulfil its social function and to have value and permanence, must, therefore, be adapted to the new society, one can judge a work of art from this point of view; and in this sense one can speak of a Socialist art and consciously help in its creation.

We in this country are still too circumscribed by circumstance to present an alternative as yet to bourgeois art. Our efforts in this sphere are necessarily confined to political satire through the workers' theatre movement, to songs and verses and cartoons. Isolated attempts of writers, close to the proletariat, there may be to anticipate the future, and express the class struggle in art, such as Toller's plays and Martinet's *Night*. Some may try to interpret the new Russia through the eyes of an observer, like Ralph Fox in *The People of the Steppes*, in which there lives the spirit of the East and of Bolshevism as a new leaven at work slowly transforming Asiatic Russia into something orderly and new, or Maurice Hindus' *Broken Earth*, which mirrors the working of the new forces against the old in the Russian village. But not all which have a Socialist theme are necessarily either literature or proletarian; and much of what is thrown up by our movement at present is bound to lack form and quality, while some of it may be defeatist in spirit and not revolutionary, or a mere copy of bourgeois forms, with the hero reversed. For the renaissance which will replace the decadence of bourgeois art—its introvert preciousness and tendency to mysticism, or its sheer commercial philistinism as seen in the cinema and the stage—we must wait till the bursting of the shackles of bourgeois society has unloosed here as in Russia new creative spirit and new creative experience.

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