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Comment Unica

My subject is what happens to culture, to literature in particular, during the struggle for socialism - what happens to a writer when he becomes aware of that struggle and realises that in socialism lies the only possible resolution of the worsening contradictions of class-society - with a glance at how ~~xxxx~~ literature develops under socialism itself.

Before 1917 the issue had hardly come up in any clear or sustained way - though there had been several writers who gave their allegiance to socialism. Zola for instance became a sort of utopian socialist, though he achieved a great novel of proletarian struggle in *Germinal*.  
<sup>In Denmark there was Nexø.</sup>  
William Morris wrote stories and poems as a conscious Marxist. And above all there was Maxim Gorki in Russia, who was directly influenced by Lenin -- Mother his most directly socialist work.

But with the foundation of the Soviet Union the question of what constituted socialist culture came urgently to the fore as a necessary part of building the new society; and more and more writers in bourgeois countries began to link their work in some degree or another with the struggle for socialism.

In the early 1930s at the first Congress of Soviet Writers the term socialist realism was accepted as describing the new kind of art-expressions that were linked with the struggle to build and develop a socialist society -- though it was some time before the term was further applied to works in the bourgeois world that had socialist objectives. Oddly though a socialist inspiration of one sort or another has had much general effect there in novels, the most effective direct development of a socialist consciousness has appeared rather in poetry - for instance in the work of Neruda, Hikmet, Brecht, Rotz, McDiarmid, Aragon, Eluard, and many others.

There is however a very great difference in the situations of the socialist writer in a bourgeois or a socialist land. There is a deep kinship in the whole impulse driving each writer to incarnate the values of socialism in his work, and many of the problems they face are the same; but whereas the writer under socialism gets every encouragement to realise and define socialist man, the writer in the bourgeois world meets obstacles on every hand. Not that the situation is quite as simple as that; we shall see in a moment that the writer under socialism has



a many-sided and complex task in his own way, which means that he is not concerned only with the positive side of his world.

The socialist writer in ~~the~~ bourgeois society however has a very heavy set of obstacles, hindrances, distorting pressures of all kinds to fight against. He has the whole weight of bourgeois propaganda, of the mass-media, and so on, against him; and I think he can justly complain that he does not get the sort of full support from the Left political forces that he has the right to claim. Not enough is done to support or popularise the creative work of the writer who sets himself against bourgeois society and thus deprives himself of almost all the aids that consciously or unconsciously work on behalf of the writer who, even if he gives some shows of dissidence, essentially conforms to the needs of the bourgeoisie. To take one example of the novel. There was Aragon's series, *Les Communistes*, which was never translated into English in the postwar years when it could have been very effective.

But I want to talk mainly about what happens to the writer himself, what sort of new problems he faces in his work when he turns to socialism, whether inside a socialist country or a bourgeois one. I have always maintained in arguments in the Soviet Union that the artistic problems are essentially the same in either case, despite the obvious differences in material and in situation. The ultimate aims are the same: the active liberation of a socialist consciousness. The criteria that are brought to bear are the same. The socialist writer, whatever his ~~circumstances~~, seeks to show all that the awakening of a socialist consciousness entails, and the development of a new kind of man, however different the situation in which the struggle goes on.

First, let us consider the term Socialist Realism. This has often been criticised as inadequate, especially after 1956; and indeed I do not see how any single phrase could be expected to cover adequately all the facets of a socialist culture. The main thing is to have a phrase that does suggest the key-points of the new expressions. For the rest the significance it takes on will depend on practice, on the way that the theory is worked out and applied.

No doubt Socialist Realism has at times been narrowly interpreted



But this could have happened to any phrase. If we take the term <sup>realism</sup> Socialist in a nondogmatic to define any expression that lays hold of human reality in an effective way, and Socialist to express the new kind of consciousness with which human reality is approached, there seems to me no reason why the term should not be accepted. We do not need to modify it by some such phrase as that of Garaudy, realism sans rivages, without shores, definite lines of demarcation -- which robs the idea of socialist culture of any specific characteristics. Certainly we must resist the idea that realism is limited to certain kinds of method; the test is rather the content. If the work of art has a <sup>vital</sup> ~~living~~ content born out of life and reacting back in it, and in the process deepening our sense of reality, it deserves the term realism.

In all this I am speaking, I should like to say, as a writer who for some forty years has been seeking to develop a large number of literary forms in socialist terms. Not as a theorist looking on from outside.

Every writer of any significance has a worldview. Such a worldview is a social product, though refracted and expressed in terms of an individual sensibility. As a social product, it reflects the attitudes, emotions, ideas of a class, and as such is an ideological construction. But it will also embody a great deal of reality, expressing the degree to which the class is tackling the task of grappling with the real world and transforming it. Not that the worldview will be a spontaneous or automatic projection of a given class-situation. Thus a writer may deepen his grasp of reality by bringing together elements from conflicting class-viewpoints. Balzac for instance may be said to embody the ideology of the rising French bourgeoisie of his epoch; but his intuitive sense of deep underlying conflicts makes him draw also on the reactionary positions of the aristocracy and the church to bring to bear at the same time a sharp critique of the cash-nexus of the bourgeoisie. Using the critical focus of a moribund ideology, an out-of-date concept of social unity, he defines the humanly destructive aspects of bourgeois society in ways that in effect look to the future, to a concept of human unity that will overcome the contradictions of the present -- though he cannot consciously follow up this position. Thus in a great writer there can result a many-sided viewpoint which takes in a great deal of reality,



and in many ways truly represents the nature and direction of his society, its inner conflicts as well as its outer manifestations.

But there remains a strong ideological element which is used to bring about an illusion of the social totality; and there is thus in the writer's work a conflict between the ideological unity and the realistic vision which penetrates deeply into the living social whole with its dialectical conflict of opposites.

For the socialist writer this sort of mixture of ideology imposed on realistic elements to produce an illusion of the social whole will no longer work. Because he looks forward concretely to a society in which the contradictions of the class world have been resolved, his idea of society must coincide with the reality.

That is, he must be a Marxist, using the Marxist dialectic to lay hold of the deep essential conflicts and contradictions of his society, and at the same time to realise the way in which they can be truly resolved. He sees the forces at work with a fullness and in a perspective that has no parallel in the past. His position clarifies the world in which he lives, and thus helps him to enter into its conflicts with an enriched and stable consciousness that cannot be shared by those who are still at the mercy of ideological illusions and of the nature of the conflicts around and in them.

Or perhaps we should rather say that he now has the potentiality of all that. No advance in dialectical understanding, however clear and decisive, is going to clarify everything, at all times. But he now has an intellectual instrument that can save him from falling into the confusions or limitations of past writers, and which, if truly grasped and developed, can keep on steadily deepening his grasp of reality. Once he has made this step, he has no choice but to go forward along the new lines. He has lost the ideological innocence of the non-Marxist, and he must either stop writing altogether or continue struggling to embody his new sense of dialectical unity and conflict in his work, in his comprehension of reality.

The step he has taken thus opens up vast new possibilities, but in a sense it makes things more difficult. He cannot rely on intuitive convictions as did the writers of the past, for he must test everything



in terms of his new knowledge. From one angle he has simplified his picture of the world; and he may well be tempted to simplify unduly the way in which he depicts that world -- to put an abstracted pattern of class-conflict everywhere in place of the enormously complex situation that in fact must be facing him. He must marry afresh his new simplifying grasp with a sense of the entangled diversity of any actual situation. The new understanding can be a most valuable guide, but it must not be used to replace the direct and concrete experience of many-sided reality.

And indeed however subtly and concretely he uses his deepened understanding he is sure to seem schematic and arbitrary to the non-Marxist who clings to some ideological concept of the social whole and of the role of individuality inside it. In bringing out the true pattern and order of events he will seem to be imposing pattern and order to those who deny the existence of such qualities in human life and the movement of history. Or who can accept them only in much smaller relations or in purely subjective terms, the inner patterns of experience divorced from the social whole conditioning them.

But, these problems apart, the new understanding cannot but introduce a new clarification, and a new active relation, into the work of art. However complex the situation with which the writer is dealing, he now cannot lose his sense of the relation of individual and fundamental social conflict, and of the only ways in which incidental conflicts can be ultimately overcome and resolved. He cannot cease to be aware that his society is at every point moving back into reaction into decay, into potential or actual forms of fascism and war, or else moving forward into a socialist resolution. However private personal the issues with which he is dealing, he cannot but be aware of the ultimate connection, of which indeed for the most part his characters will be quite unaware. In one sense he is distanced from his characters, in another sense he is brought inside them, inside the full reality of their problems, as the non-Marxist cannot be.



Every action, small or large, extremely personal or directly political, becomes charged with a new depth of significance. There must always be present the socialist criterion; At this crucial moment in history does an emotion, a thought, an action, whether apparently isolated or dyhically collective, move towards socialism or away from it?

There is a link with existentialism in the sense that every moment is seen and felt as one of crucial choice. But whereas existentialism isolated the choice subjectively, the Marxist writer sees the choice as simultaneously personal and social. And once this grasp of the critical choice facing men and women every hour of the day or night in our world has entered the writer's mind it must urgently inform every aspect of his work. I do not mean that he must shallowly repeat this point in some propagandist way, but that in the last resort the understanding of the ceaseless conflict, the ceaseless moment of choice, must pervade his work, determining even the tone and direction of themes that do not seem at first glance to have any connection with politics or the uneasy balance of our world between fascism and socialism, the destruction of man or the achievement of human unity.

The new active relation cannot help but draw the writer one way or another into political work on behalf of socialism. In breaking down the notion of the writer as observer who interprets or reconstructs, the new consciousness tends to break down old distinctions between pure art and ephemeral writing. A large number of possible forms arise in which direct action of one kind or another can be carried out, from the simplest forms of agitprop or pamphleteering to poems for mass declamation and scripts of all kinds -- festival forms, slogans, songs, and so on. At the same time the importance of the largescale and deeply meditated work remains. One kind of work no longer excludes the other. And in my opinion the more that one moves into the struggle for socialism, and into the struggle to develop socialism itself, the more the old kind of gaps between writer and audience, between high art and art of the moment, should break down -- without producing however a sort of chaos in which anything goes.

But this is another matter. Here I want mainly to talk of the way in which a writer, achieving a revolutionary consciousness, seeks to



develop and transmute the given forms of his craft.

As we have said, the writer who realises what the contradictions of capitalism are and how they can only be resolved in socialism, cannot but feel the need to add his clarifications to the world defined in his world -- to show concretely how the conflicting forces in his world appear in the new perspective.

The new activity in the writer cannot but appear in his work; for it is not a chance activity. It is related to his central understanding of his world. In the past many great or lesser artists have dedicated their work to some contemporary cause. Virgil set himself to glorify the Augustan synthesis that put an end to the revolutionary movements of the last century BC; Dante set out at full length the world-picture of medieval Catholicism; Milton was bound up in all ways with the revolutionary puritan struggle of his era. But there is a new aspect in the partisanship of the socialist writer. The worldview that he achieves may have its limitations owing to his weaknesses as an artist; but it will own a radical strength that could not belong to the earlier attempts. His concept of human unity is liberated from the partial or utopian elements that could not but be present in past formulations. He has the key to a method which grasps the forces and direction of history with a new certainty of insight.

His art does not therefore become superficially propagandist; for he has no need to falsify reality in order to make his point. He may of course do so through incompleteness of control of the method or lack of artistic capacity. And where he does so, hostile critics will lay hold of any points of failure and try to use them as proof that the marxist or socialist viewpoint is necessarily limited and puts the artist in straightjackets. But such failures cannot rightfully be laid at the door of the new method and the new consciousness it expresses and develops.

On the contrary, Marxism as the necessary culmination of socialist activity and theory at last makes possible a world-view which is not distorted by special pleading or limited by a class-ideology. By throwing in his lot with the revolutionary proletariat, who alone can end class ~~formulations~~ <sup>mations</sup>, the artist realises at last in full concreteness what human unity is and can be.



So a new issue in characterisation comes up, formulated in socialist theory ~~as~~ under the heading of the Positive Hero. Such heroes are generally lacking in the bourgeois novel, except in priggish or unconvincing forms; but for the socialist novel it is necessary to be able to depict people fighting with varying degrees of understanding <sup>or imperfection</sup> for the socialist goal. That does not mean that the socialist writer is only concerned with creating such heroes. His insights will enable him to grasp with a new fullness just what class-society has done and is doing to people - what it is doing today as capitalist contradictions reach their height, with all sorts of inner divisions as well as outer ones generated in its members: all that we group under the heading of alienation and that Marx saw in a trifold form: alienation of man from himself from his fellows, and from nature.

The vision of what may be - incarnated most strongly at this phase in the person struggling with all his faculties for socialism or building socialism in its initial ~~phx~~ stages -- cannot be seen truly except against the background and inground of the alienations generated by class-society. To express and define truly and concretely the new man struggling for wholeness we need to understand and plumb the forces making for disintegration, distortion, dehumanisation. Only this can the full conflicts of our age be defined, and our characters be real - not mere figments of wishful thinking. (SU, add a few foibles...

A socialist writer who seeks to define his heroes merely against an abstract background of economic oppression cannot compass the great drama of our days. Of course the class-struggle in all its aspects, and importantly, in all the forms it takes of working-class resistance to the capitalist system, is of the utmost significance for our writer. But in order to grasp and define the struggle as a whole, expressing all that it entails in human bondage and liberation, he must penetrate into the full nature of the capitalist system as a demoralising and dehumanising system as well as an exploiting one.

The problem for the writer is then to start from things as they are, not from some point in his mind where he would like them to be. His



positive heroes must <sup>emerge</sup> ~~start~~ from real struggles, the ~~real~~ struggles of our day; and they must be defined as having against them the full weight, not only of a callous exploiting system, but its vast ideological force that confuses and diverts people from passing in clear revolutionary objectives. I see in a review of this week's Listener, "Heroic images are unreliable." That is true enough when the real nature of a society is not realised by the struggler, and his goals are at least in part illusory. The task of socialist realism is to make heroic images reliable

Often we hear today that the Novel is dead. Indeed in the same issue of the Listener I found the statement: "I have long felt that the novel is not so much dead as hypochondriac. No longer concerned with society at large, it skulks in the sickroom self-obsessed and neurotic."

But there is little difference being dead and sick-to-death. To understand the fate that seems to have come on the Novel we need to glance back at ~~the~~ <sup>its</sup> origin and nature; and this glance-back instructively helps us to understand just what the new birth of the form in socialist hands means. The Novel is the one great literary form that we can see emerging in history, unlike the immemorial poem, whether lyric or epical narrative the drama, the short story. It could arrive only when society had reached a high point of complex articulation - under the bourgeoisie -- defining as it does a highly complex set of social and personal interrelations. In fact it appeared in Spain of the 16th century, as a result of the convergence of three forms: The Romance with its adventurous tale and its theme of some high quest; the Picaresque Story, in which the picaresque in his wanderings experiences the full weight of the new money-system or cash-nexus; and the Pastoral with its dream or utopian picture of a harmonious society living without divisions in happy union with the earth <sup>individual</sup>

Thus we get the mixture of the adventurous quest, the search for a way of life; the criticism of bourgeois society and its central money-collective values; and the ultimate dream-hope of some sort of solution. The first great novel, drawing these elements together, was Cervantes's Don Quixote.



But to produce a stable form capable of indefinite development, one thing more was needed: the revolution of the bourgeois forces against the feudal world under Cromwell. The essence of the revolutionary experience, in a situation where the revolution itself seemed to have failed, survived in the patterns of deeply-dissident religious formulations -- a pattern of conflict, death or defeat, and renewal or success expressed in terms of salvation. Bunyan set out this pattern in realistic terms in his *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the dissenter Defoe carried on his work in secularised form, which, aided by the work of the artist Defoe, issued in the great 18th-century novel tradition - Fielding, Smollett, Richardson, Sterne - leading on to Scott and Balzac.

I have sketched this development in necessarily brief terms here. But I think it can be shown how in varying degrees of mixture the three major strands I have mentioned carry to the climax of the bourgeois ~~which~~ novel in Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. With the advent of imperialism, a new crisis sets in in culture, exemplified for the novel most clearly by Proust and Joyce. The quest ceases to be vitally a part of social life and struggle, and is turned, made subjective. A dissolution of the three crucial elements sets in, growing ever more evident till we reach the state we are in today, with the death of the novel proclaimed.

But it is the bourgeois novel that dies. The novel of socialist realism sees a rebirth of the triadic element. The quest becomes the struggle for socialism; the critique of bourgeois society, its money-values and alienations, reaches a decisive level at last; and the pastoral dream is brought down to earth, now realisable in socialist classless society. The transition can be found in works like Zola's *Germinal* and Gorky's *Mother* - indeed, <sup>also</sup> in the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky in which a deep moral dissatisfaction with bourgeois society, an unrelenting moral struggle for some kind of <sup>total</sup> regeneration, drives the protagonists painfully and exaltingly along.

As examples of novels of socialist realism of varying degrees of success in the 1930s here I could point to Grassie Gibbon's trilogy of Scotland



trilogy of Indian village-life. Here were works that importantly showed ways of breakthrough from the bourgeois impasse.

In the Soviet Union, while we inevitably meet a certain percentage of schematic works, we also find a new vital tradition that effectively takes up the problem of reintegrating the novel on the lines I have outlined. Leaders in this work have been Sholokhov, Lenov, Fadeyev, Fedin, Kataev and many others. Taken by and large the products here provide the basis for a rebirth of the novel; and it always surprises me that so many socialists lack interest in soviet writings. There have been setbacks, regressions and phases of halt; but if we look at the whole span we see in the novel as in poetry and drama genuine new birth.

With the achievement of socialism the problem of all the regressive tendencies I have grouped under Alienation does not cease to exist. The question has often been presented as if the obstructive elements under socialism are merely inherited elements from the class-world which will die of themselves as things move ahead. But there has also been a realisation that such atavistic elements get a renewed life through distortions and bureaucratic obstructions in the socialist structure itself. It is quite untrue that Solzhenitzyn was the first writer to tackle such issues. He was no means even the first to deal with the the prison-camps and the man returning from them. While his faults, so overwhelming in his later work, are all his own, his virtues belong to soviet literature. From early days for instance there has been the important theme of the man with a valuable new idea who has to fight his way through all sorts of obstacles and resistances.

There is one more element in the novel of socialist realism that I cannot must at least glance at. The new importance that the theme of work takes on. Work is seen, as in no bourgeois novels, as the sphere of the renewal of life; as the centre both of exploitation and of the gathering of men in a brotherhood that will end exploitation. The positive concept of work is inseparable from the new concept of the positive hero.

One last word. There is an important role for the critic in all this, both in the days of the struggle for socialism and under socialism.

He can clarify the methods and objectives; he can show where works succeed and where they fail; he can do an essential work as mediator between the new work and its public, helping to build and extend that public.



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 The best work in this respect was done during the Thirties. And in the last years of the war and a few years after it we had the monthly Our Time. Then came the full onset of the Cold War, followed by 1956. Though there have been some promising turns in our culture since then, they have never been effectively built upon. There have of course been many objective difficulties which help to explain the weaknesses over this period, and of late years there have again been promising signs, the dissident elements in the youth scene, the sessions of the Communist University, and so on. The fact that we are meeting here like this today is another sign of the changing times - reminding me of the big party cultural conferences we held in the early 1950s and many good ideas that were then being worked out by the Cultural Committee then.

I should like to appeal for more confidence, boldness. It is true that we have beware of crudities and sectarianisms, the sort of false simplifications of the tasks that I have tried to indicate earlier. But at the same time we must be ready and keen to see all signs of a revolutionary culture, to welcome them and stress their virtues. It is easy to fall into a sort of snobism, to fear to show all the pseudo-subtleties that the bourgeois-bound critics manufacture in their over-estimation of the exponents of decay and disintegration. We have to feel in our bones the truth that the future is with us if there is going to be a future at all -- that is, with <sup>all</sup> those who struggle to create, develop, support and carry out in its manifold possibilities the revolutionary culture that ~~is~~ can play a great part in freeing the people from the spells of alienation and make them realise the new world that is within their grasp.

Jack Lindsay