MARXISM AND MODERN ART

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FOREWORD

By Professor Benjamin Farrington

This series of booklets was begun in 1943, the sixtieth anniversary of the death of Marx, as a tribute to his memory by British Marxists. The aim of the series is not so much to expound the classics of Marxism as to offer a Marxist commentary on contemporary problems. Marxism has a contribution to make to world reconstruction. The world cannot be rebuilt except on the basis of democracy. Democracy does not mean only freedom from want, from disease, from fear; it means also the widest possible extension of intellectual freedom. Democracy requires that every man has not only the right and duty to labor for the common good but also the right and duty to think for the common good. For the achievement of this end Marxism is a mighty engine. Where else in the world shall we find such faith in science, such faith in knowledge, such faith in reason, and so earnest an endeavor to expand their sway? These essays, written by Marxists, are a contribution to the creation of confidence among men in their ability to control their own destiny. The writers are fortunate in that they employ a tongue which has a long and honorable tradition of expressing the most difficult subjects without jargon or pedantry. They have tried to be worthy of this tradition. It is their further good fortune that this tongue enables them also to communicate directly with their brothers in the United States of America.

PREFACE

The battle of Britain was a landmark in the life of our people. There have been few moments in our history—moments of great peril, such as 1588 or 1803—when our nation was as firmly united in mood and will and action as in the winter of 1940-41. Fighting Hitler's bombs as wardens, firemen or stretcher-bearers side by side with men and women from every walk of life, artists could not fail to share in the common spirit of defiance. The works which reflect that spirit, the blitz paintings of 1940-41, are a landmark in the history of British art.

The response of the people to these pictures greatly encouraged all who had felt alarmed at the growing isolation of British art in the recent past. It gave a new impetus to the efforts of private individuals, educational bodies, public authorities and the artists themselves to bring art back to the people. Exhibitions in factories and barrack rooms, no less than in galleries, all over the country, and a concerted drive for the decoration of works canteens and British Restaurants, were the fruits of their enthusiasm. But the main lesson of the blitz has still to be assimilated: the people will respond if the artist gives imaginative form to their own experience.

How does this conclusion square with the current conception of good art and of its relation to life? Does it imply a revision of the principles which still guide the practice of our foremost artists? What lessons can be drawn from the tradition of English art and from the great teachers of dialectical materialism in the present crisis of aesthetic feeling? Such are the questions I have attempted to formulate in this essay. The artists themselves will answer them—by their actions in the coming offensive and by their contributions to the post-war work of construction.

AN APPROACH TO SOCIAL REALISM

Roger Fry's Formalism

Of all the critics who have helped to mold our present standards of appreciation none can equal the influence of Roger Fry, the founder of British post-impressionism. What did he teach concerning the nature of art and its relation to life?

The first systematic account of Fry's attitude to these questions is the important "Essay in Aesthetics" of 1909. He himself later summarized its main conclusions as follows:

"I conceived the form of a work of art to be its most essential quality, but I believed this form to be the direct outcome of an apprehension of some emotion of actual life by the artist, although, no doubt, that apprehension was of a special and peculiar kind and implied a certain detachment. I also conceived that the spectator in contemplating the form must inevitably travel in the opposite direction along the same road which the artist had taken, and himself feel the original emotion. I conceived the form and the emotion which it conveyed as being inextricably bound together in the aesthetic whole."[1]

Although by 1909 Fry had already abandoned the "idea of likeness to Nature, of correctness or incorrectness as a test"—he had just discovered Cézanne—he was, as he himself says, "still obsessed by ideas about the content of a work of art," for he still felt that the "aesthetic whole" somehow reflected "the emotions of life." To rid himself of that "obsession" was the main preoccupation of his later thought.

"I want to find out what the function of content is," he wrote in 1913 to G. L. Dickinson, "and am developing a theory . . . that it is merely directive of form and that all the essential aesthetic quality has to do with pure form. It's horribly difficult to analyse out of all the complex feelings just this one peculiar feeling, but I think that in proportion as poetry becomes more intense the content is entirely remade by the form and has no separate value at all. You see the sense of poetry is analogous to the things represented in painting. I admit that there is also a queer hybrid art of sense and illustration, but it can only arouse particular and definitely conditioned emotions, whereas the emotions of music and pure

painting and poetry when it approaches purity are really free, abstract and universal."*

Consequently, when Fry restated his theory in 1920 (essay "Retrospect" in *Vision and Design*), he discarded the emotions of life and confined aesthetic feeling to what Clive Bell had meanwhile called "significant form." His final views are expressed in a letter which he wrote in 1924 to the Poet Laureate Robert Bridges:

"I very early became convinced that our emotions before works of art were of many kinds and that we failed as a rule to distinguish the nature of the mixture and I set to work by introspection to discover what the different elements of these compound emotions might be and to try to get at the most constant, unchanging, and therefore I suppose fundamental emotion. I found that this 'constant' had to do always with the contemplation of form. . . . It also seemed to me that the emotions resulting from the contemplation of form were more universal (less particularized and colored by the individual history), more profound and more significant spiritually than any of the emotions which had to do with life. . . . I therefore assume that the contemplation of form is a peculiarly important spiritual exercise. . . . "*

This passage is particularly revealing, first, because it emphasizes the goal to which Fry's aesthetic development was inevitably leading him—he himself admitted that any attempt he might make to explain "significant" form would land him "in the depths of mysticism"—and secondly because it illustrates his peculiar method of analysis. Conscious that works of art inspire different kinds of emotion, he attempts, by introspection, to isolate one specific emotion which is common to all these various compounds, on the assumption that this "constant" factor would reveal the "substance," the irreducible atom, so to speak, of aesthetic experience. In adopting this method of analysis Fry necessarily assumes that a given factor will have aesthetic significance in proportion as it is generalized, lacking in individuality, and constant. It will be necessary at a later stage to enquire whether this assumption is valid in so individual, so richly varied and so constantly changing a sphere as art.

*Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry, a Biography*. London, 1940, p. 230. The following sentence from Fry's *Reflections on British Painting*, published in 1934, may be added to complete the evidence:

"For the power to see and feel plastic form is almost a measure of an artist's power to free himself from the interests of ordinary life and attain to an attitude of detachment in which the spiritual significance of formal relations becomes apparent." (p. 27.)

For the moment let us note that it entails a great impoverishment: by restricting aesthetic feeling to "pure" form, i.e., to form divorced and abstracted from that which it forms, Fry excluded everything which art was ever intended to convey to mankind. The same applies to the theories put forward by Fry's successors: those who regard art as an emanation of the "sub-conscious" exclude the whole vast realm of human consciousness; while the advocates of a biological "sense of form" reduce art to the level of a pre-human, because pre-social, reflex.

These theories are not, however, the products of perverse reasoning—they merely reflect what has actually been happening in English art since about 1910. To quote Fry's own account, the discussion stimulated by the appearance of "post-impressionism" revealed "that some artists who were peculiarly sensitive to the formal relations of works of art . . . had almost no sense of the emotions" of life which he had supposed them to convey. Hence his attempt, after say 1912, to disentangle the "purely aesthetic" elements from their accompanying "accessories" was in fact an attempt to explain the indifference of certain artists to the problems of life and the growing isolation of art from all other spheres of existence.

Though greatly accentuated since the beginning of the twentieth century, this isolation of the artists was not new, and in Fry's case, too, the tendency of divorcing art from life was already implicit in his theory of 1909. It is one of the main points of the *Essay in Aesthetics* that art has nothing whatever to do with morals. Fry admits that art is communication, i.e. essentially social. Nevertheless, he bases his analysis exclusively on what he takes to be the psychology of the individual, or rather of "man" in the abstract. Whereas in ordinary life perception is followed by responsive action—the sight of a bull rushing towards us makes us turn to instant flight—Fry claims that artistic perception is of the kind we experience when we see the bull, not in the flesh, but on the screen of a cinema: we enjoy the emotion of fear because we need not act upon it. Action implies moral responsibility. Artistic contemplation, being removed from action, is thereby released from all moral ties. To quote his own words:

"Art, then, is an expression and a stimulus of the imaginative life, which is separated from actual life by the absence of responsive action. Now this responsive action implies in actual life moral responsibility. In art we have no such moral responsibility—it pre-

sents a life freed from the binding necessities of our actual existence. . . . Morality appreciates emotion by the standard of resultant action, art appreciates emotion in and for itself."[3]

Though brilliant and plausible, this argument will not bear examination. In the first place, moral responsibility only begins where the type of action Fry calls instinctive—i.e. the reflex behavior inherited from the pre-human stage of our evolution—ends. Indeed, moral behavior not infrequently implies the suppression of inherited responses: to act morally, when faced by a bull, I must curb my impulse of self-preservation sufficiently to help my less agile companion. In other words, the interval of reflection which Fry claims as the distinguishing feature of artistic perception, is just as essential in any behavior that can be subjected to a moral test.* It is essential also in scientific perception. But who would claim that science does not lead to responsive action or that it is "freed from the binding necessities of our actual existence"?

Secondly, moreover, it is untrue that artistic perception itself is never followed by responsive action. If this were true, there could be no art: what else is the work of art but the creative reproduction of the artist's perception? And in so far as he communicates the image of his perception to his fellow men, the artist is morally responsible for it. This does not mean that a work of art can always be justly valued in terms of the moral standards ruling at the time—on the contrary, one need only think of Goya's *Caprichos* or of a book like *The Grapes of Wrath* to realize how often art has been an indictment of those standards. But it does mean that society cannot be indifferent whether a given work of art inspires by its profound insight, whether it stirs to action, whether it soothes and refreshes, or whether, on the other hand, it opiates and disrupts. And it also means that the *aesthetic* value of a work of art must in some way be related to the effect it produces, not merely in its own time, but as long as it survives.

In 1909 Fry still seems to have felt this, for he was prepared to accept the idealist point of view that life, far from being the touchstone of aesthetic value, should, on the contrary, itself be judged by the standards of art:

* *See* the amusing illustration of this point in Smollett's *Humphry Clinker* (1771) where the advocate Micklewhimmen tries to excuse his outrageous behavior during the fire at the inn at Scarborough by pleading that his actions had been dictated by the instinct of self-preservation, which had momentarily suspended his "faculty of reason."

"It might even be," he wrote, "that from this point of view we should rather justify actual life by its relation to the imaginative, justify nature by its likeness to art. I mean this, that since the imaginative life comes in the course of time to represent more or less what mankind feels to be the completest expression of its own nature, the freest use of its innate capacities, the actual life may be explained and justified by its approximation here and there, however partially and inadequately, to that freer and fuller life." [4]

It is interesting to note that Fry was by no means critical of the moral standards of his own age, when he wrote this passage. He even compared them favorably with those of the thirteenth century, although he regarded the latter period as more artistic. But he was rudely shaken out of his complacency in social matters by the events of 1914-18. To Fry, as to most other intellectuals of his generation, the first world war came as a shattering bolt from the blue. Unable to comprehend the causes of the collapse, he was glad to escape into what now appeared to him as a "revolutionary advance" in art—i.e. the tame still-lives and the harmless holiday scenes of the post-impressionists (*not*, it is significant to note, what was really new in English art, the war paintings of 1914-18). In order to fortify his own retreat he was now anxious to minimize what connection he had hitherto still assumed to exist between art and life. "The usual assumption of a direct and decisive connection between life and art is by no means correct," he told the Fabian Society in 1917, "if we consider this special spiritual activity of art we find it no doubt open at times to influences from life, but in the main self-contained—we find the rhythmic sequences of change determined more by its own internal forces—and by the readjustment within it of its own elements—than by external forces. I admit, of course, that it is always conditioned more or less by economic changes, but these are rather conditions of its existence at all than directive influences. I also admit that under certain conditions the rhythms of life and of art may coincide with great effect on both: but in the main the two rhythms are distinct, and as often as not play against each other." [5]

Lest any Fabian should be crude enough to suspect that the lecturer was referring to ordinary human beings, when he spoke of "life," he hastened to explain:

"And here let me try to say what I mean by life as contrasted with art. I mean the general intellectual and instinctive reaction to their surroundings of those men of any period whose lives rise to

complete self-consciousness, their view of the universe as a whole and their conception of their relations to their kind."[6]

From this there was but a small step to the position Fry maintained in his post-war essays and letters, where he defines art as a "spiritual exercise," as remote from actual life as "the most useless mathematical theory," but of "infinite importance," to those who experience it. Those capable of doing so are, he admits, but few: "in proportion as art becomes purer, the number of people to whom it appeals gets less,"[7] he had already told the Fabians in 1917. In 1920 he added: "true art is becoming more and more esoteric and hidden, like an heretical sect—or rather like science in the middle ages."[8] About the same time he also confessed: "what a rarity the individual is . . . more and more I understand nothing of humanity in the mass and *au fond* I only believe in the value of some individuals . . . I know that I have no right to detach myself so completely from the fate of my kind, but I have never been able to believe in political values."[9] In the light of this confession it is not difficult to understand the curious phrase which Fry used in a letter to D. S. MacColl (1912) to define his own aim as a practising artist: "I've always been searching for a style to express my *petite sensation* in."[10] Estranged from life and indifferent to the fate of mankind, art, as here defined, has no other function but to cultivate the sensibility of the few elect.

The Palace of Art

Formalism both in the practice of art and in aesthetic theory was not the revolutionary turning point which Fry claimed it to be. The sterile character of the "modern movement," its significance as the last refinement of a dying era in the history of art, is incontestible when that movement is considered in its relation to the wider tradition of British painting.

With the appearance of Hogarth in the early eighteenth century British painting lost its provincial backwardness and assumed a leading rôle in Europe. Hogarth's art is essentially "moral," i.e. it is constantly and intimately concerned with contemporary social life. This social interest survived in the marvelous school of English caricature based on Hogarth which reflected the interests and aspirations of our people from the time of the South Sea Bubble to the

rise of Chartism. To appreciate how essentially popular this tradition was one should compare, say, one of Hogarth's own engravings or a caricature of the Napoleonic period with the club and drawing-room witticisms which fill even the earliest volumes of *Punch*. Popular pictorial art disappeared in the 1830's with the rise to power of the Victorian middle class of industrialists and business men whose narrow class outlook *Punch* reflected. But as soon as this vital substratum of popular, socially conscious art had disappeared, British art as a whole relapsed into provincial eclecticism. Whereas Turner, Constable and the Norwich School had anticipated the impressionists (just as Hogarth, Gillray, Rowlandson anticipated Daumier and his contemporaries), their successors followed in the wake of foreign fashion. First the Pre-Raphaelites imitated the German Nazareens in attempting to escape from the vulgar commercialism of their time into a romantic, mystically sensuous mediævalism. Later, when the French impressionists and post-impressionists became increasingly preoccupied with the technique of art, to the neglect of its content, it was their work which was imitated, until finally, in the 1920's and '30's both leaders and imitators completed their escape from reality into the arid desert of pure form and the various other brands of neo-mysticism.

Thus the development of British art has verified William Morris' warning of 1879, when he foretold the emergence of "an art cultivated professedly by a few, and for a few, who would consider it necessary—a duty, if they could admit duties—to despise the common herd, to hold themselves aloof from all that the world has been struggling for from the first, to guard carefully every approach to their palace of art. It would be a pity to waste many words on the prospect of such a school of art as this, which does in a way, theoretically at least, exist at present, and has for its watchword a piece of slang that does not mean the harmless thing it seems to mean—art for art's sake. Its fore-doomed end must be, that art at last will seem too delicate a thing even for the hands of the initiated to touch; and the initiated must at last sit still and do nothing—to the grief of no one." [11] Eight years later Morris repeated his warning:

"I repeat, that every scrap of genuine art will fall by the same hands (i.e. the hands of those actuated by the greed for Commercial Profit) if the matter only goes on long enough, although a sham art may be left in its place, which may very well be carried on by *dilettanti* fine gentlemen and ladies without any help from below;

and, to speak plainly, I fear that this gibbering ghost of the real thing would satisfy a great many of those who now think themselves lovers of art; though it is not difficult to see a long vista of its degradation till it shall become at last a mere laughing-stock; that is to say, if the thing were to go on: I mean, if art were to be for ever the amusement of those whom we now call ladies and gentlemen."[12]

The dilemma implied in the retreat of art from life affected all the more sensitive artists and writers of the later nineteenth century in one way or another. Moreover, it had already been expounded with striking force at a time when the development from which it arose had scarcely begun.

To appreciate the significance of the "modern" movement one should compare Fry's aesthetic writings with Tennyson's poem, *The Palace of Art.*

The first version of this poem was written in 1831-2, at the height of the great struggle for Parliamentary reform, when Tennyson, who had just left Cambridge, was still profoundly influenced by the ideas of the *Apostles,* that same exclusive undergraduate society to which Roger Fry belonged half a century later. The second version of *The Palace of Art,* which appeared in the volume of poems Tennyson published after ten years of silence in 1842, was largely recast. Apart from a few important later additions it represents its present form. It was in the decade between 1832 and 1842 that the social struggle assumed its specifically modern form, created by the industrial revolution, of the class war between labor and capital. From the horrors of the early factories Chartism appeared as the first independent political movement of the workers, and the Chartist struggle, already nation-wide during the crisis years of 1838-39, culminated in the second great National Petition presented to Parliament in May 1842.

It was from this conflict that Tennyson—and three generations of British artists after him—sought to escape.* Sitting in her "lordly pleasure house" on a "huge crag-platform" towering above mankind, the artist's soul exclaims:

* The development of Tennyson's own attitude to politics has been summarized in the following terms by Mr. Harold Nicolson (*Tennyson,* London, 1923, p. 252): During the fifty-five years up to 1886 the poet "passed from an early suspicion of democracy, through a wholesale dislike of democracy, to a loathing of democracy so fierce and so violent that it upset not only his health and his temper, but even his prosody." When Garibaldi visited the Laureate in 1864, the latter advised him "not to talk politics in England"; yet in 1830 Tennyson had accompanied his friend Hallam on a secret mission of support to the underground Liberal leaders in Spain!

"O God-like isolation which art mine,
I can but count thee perfect gain,
What time I watch the darkening droves of swine
That range on yonder plain.

"In filthy sloughs they roll a prurient skin,
They gaze and wallow, breed and sleep;
And oft some brainless devil enters in,
And drives them to the deep. . . .

"I take possession of man's mind and deed.
I care not what the sects may brawl.
I sit as God holding no form of creed,
But contemplating all."

Like Fry's aesthetic contemplating in 1909, that of Tennyson in 1842 is freed from all moral responsibility:

"And let the world have peace or wars,
'Tis one to me . . ."

Full oft the riddle of the painful earth
Flashed through her as she sat alone,
Yet none the less she held her solemn mirth,
And intellectual throne."

But the "riddle of the painful earth" only occupied a minor place in the soul's contemplation. Indeed, the struggles of men merely formed the pattern which was inlaid in the mosaic floor of her palace, and "over these she trod," gazing at the walls which were painted with

every legend fair
Which the supreme Caucasian mind (!)
Carved out of Nature for itself . . .

What is most remarkable in the eight stanzas in which Tennyson recounts these legends is his love of abstruse allusions. The walls of the Palace of Art depict not only "the maid-mother by a crucifix," Europa and Ganymede, but also "the wood-nymph and the Ausonian King," and "Uther's deeply wounded son watched by weeping queens." These are not yet, it is true, the interests which were of "infinite importance" to the Fry generation. But regarded from the point of view of their relevance to contemporary social life they are, clearly, the Victorian equivalents and antecedents of, say, the

Oedipus Complex or of the Sex Life of the Trobriand Islanders. Moreover, to appreciate Tennyson's allusions the contemporary reader was as much dependent upon the Encyclopædia Britannica as are the readers of Aldous Huxley or Eliot today.

But Tennyson did not stop, where Fry stopped in the 1920's, at the stage where the artist, content with his "God-like isolation," holds his "solemn mirth and intellectual throne." He anticipated the inevitable result of that isolation, the haunting fear and the escape into mysticism which have played so prominent a rôle in the art of the 1930's. What better description could there be of the imagery of the surrealists than the stanzas in which Tennyson paints the soul's sudden relapse into despair after she had rejoiced for three years in her solitude:

Deep dread and loathing for her solitude
Fell on her, from which mood was born
Scorn of herself; again from out that mood
Laughter at her self-scorn.

"What! is not this my palace of strength," she said,
"My spacious mansion built for me,
Whereof the strong foundation-stones were laid
Since my first memory?"

But in dark corners of her palace stood
Uncertain shapes; and unawares
On white-eyed phantasms weeping tears of blood,
And horrible nightmares,

And hollow shades enclosing hearts of flame,
And, with dim fretted foreheads all,
On corpses three-months-old at noon she came,
That stood against the wall . . .

And death and life she hated equally,
And nothing saw for her despair,
But dreadful time, dreadful eternity,
No comfort anywhere;

Remaining utterly confused with fears,
And ever worse with growing time,
And ever unrelieved by dismal tears,
And all alone in crime:

Shut up as in a crumbling tomb, girt round
With Blackness as a solid wall,
Far off she seem'd to hear the dully sound
Of human footsteps fall . . .

Tennyson's resolution of the soul's dilemma, his answer to her howl of anguish:

"What is it that will take away my sin,
And save me lest I die?"

is contained in the two concluding stanzas of the poem:

So when four years were wholly finished,
She threw her royal robes away
"Make me a cottage in the vale," she said,
"Where I may mourn and pray.

"Yet pull not down my palace towers, that are
So lightly, beautifully built:
Perchance I may return with others there
When I have purged my guilt."

An extraordinary anti-climax that offers as little hope to the artist, as do the sophisms of the formalists and of the other brands of modern mystics! All the issues are blurred and confounded. What is the artist's "guilt," the sin he has committed for which the penalty is death? Clearly, his self-imposed isolation from his kind. Yet how does he propose to purge himself of that guilt? Not, it will be noted, by returning to his kind, to the teeming cities filled with the noise and clamor of productive labor and with its struggle for a better life. But, first, by a renunciation of art—the soul throws her royal robes away in order to "mourn and pray" in the country cottage which, presumably, the common herd will be indulgent enough to make for her, or which the village laborer, driven by enclosures into the factory, has vacated. Immediately afterwards, however, the soul is struck with doubts. She suspects that she may tire of her penance and long to return to her so lightly and beautifully built palace towers. And then comes the significant admission that to enjoy their splendors she must return "with others." But who are those "others"?—are they Fry's "few elect" who can appreciate the refinements of "pure" art, or are they the people at large? We can only guess.

The quality which is most striking in *The Palace of Art* is its ambiguity. On the one hand the poet is tempted and passionately desires to escape into the "God-like isolation" of pure art,* on the other hand he realizes that isolation will lead him to despair and death. Tennyson became the Laureate of the Victorians because, on the surface at least, he spurned the blandishments of art for art's sake and accepted the "mission" of teaching and consoling his fellow men. Yet precisely in so far as he did accept this mission he all but destroyed his poetic inspiration. It is not difficult to explain this seeming paradox; for if one examines Tennyson's work one soon discovers that the "others" with whom he returned to his Palace were neither the people at large, nor the "few elect," but the Victorian middle class.

It was not, therefore, to the conflicts and the squalor of the real world that Tennyson returned, but to the sham idealism with which the Victorian squire and business man sought to conceal the contradictions of that world. While rejecting the escape into pure art in the name of morals, he made his art the handmaid of an even baser form of escape, the escape of insincerity. But there was also another side in Tennyson's work. The haunting fear, the doubt that all was not as it appeared to be, the agony and the despair, which the Victorians tried to conceal under a mask of complacent decorum, break out with unsurpassed intensity in many of his poems. And it was here, where he ceased to be pontifical and gave free vent to his emotions, that Tennyson became the true mirror of an important aspect of his age.

Compared with the degradation of art, when it served as the mouthpiece of Victorian cant, the doctrine of art for art's sake was a great step forward. It freed the artist from complete subservience to a false morality and enabled him to preserve something, at least, of his integrity. Moreover, in its early stages art for art's sake was not incompatible with a critical attitude to contemporary society.

* That Tennyson desired ever more fervently to escape from social reality is evident from the successive alterations of his poem. Most of the passages with a distinctly reactionary flavor appeared in 1842, but some of the more lurid references, notably that to the "darkening droves of swine," were added even later. It was not until 1853, for example (i.e. after the revolutions and counter-revolutions of 1848-52), that the line "I care not what the sects may brawl" replaced the far less detached "I live in all things great and small."

But from about 1870 onwards, as the pressure increased, this critical attitude was more and more replaced by assumed indifference, the artist retreated into ever remoter realms of "purely" aesthetic experience, and the further he retreated, the more rapidly did the sweets he coveted turn to ashes in his mouth.

"What matters in art is the contemplation of form" and "in proportion as art gets purer, the number of people to whom it appeals gets less," say the formalists. Their conception of good art and of its relation to life is thus on their own admission incompatible with the present need of reuniting art and the people. Nor can we derive much help from the conception of art which the Victorians admired in Tennyson: It is the artist's mission to console his fellow men, "even as the calm, gentle, self-reliant physician inspires the fevered sufferer" by "throwing a divine grace over the happier emotions"; he should "transport them from the cankering cares of daily life, the perplexities and confusion of their philosophies, the weariness of their haunting thoughts, to some entirely new field of existence, to some place of rest, some 'clear walled city by the sea' where they can draw a serene air undimmed by the clouds and smoke which infest their ordinary existence."[13] We may agree with the formalists that the artist who makes his work an opium for the people is a traitor to his calling. But it is easy to exaggerate the difference between these two conceptions of art. They differ in degree, but not in kind. Both imply an ideal realm of "beauty" or "pure form" which is superior to the ordinary life of men. Both agree that the real world in its rich and concrete actuality has no aesthetic significance.

There have always been artists who have taken the opposite view of art and of its relation to reality. In our own tradition this was true of Shelley and Constable, no less than of Fielding and Hogarth. But whereas the Victorians tolerated a realistic attitude to Nature and society only if it was overlaid with sentimentality, as in Dickens or in the later work of George Cruikshank, the tradition of uncompromising realism continued to advance in nineteenth-century France and Russia. The aesthetic assumptions of realism were first systematically defined by N. G. Chernyshevski, a contemporary of Balzac and Daumier, Gogol, Aksakov and Shchedrin, whose thesis *Life and Aesthetics* was published in 1853.

Chernyshevski's thesis is an attack on the aesthetic theory of philosophical idealism, especially its classical culmination in the

work of Hegel and his follower F. T. Vischer. In the view of these philosophers what appears beautiful to man is that which he accepts as the complete realization of a given idea. But an idea can never be fully realized in a particular thing and therefore art, which aims at ideal perfection, always contains an element of myth or illusion. This mythical element is progressively destroyed by the advance of science which, consequently, results in a decline of art. Stripped of its illusions, the ideal beauty depicted by art loses its power to console men for the imperfections of reality.

Against this theory Chernyshevski advances the claim: "Reality is greater than dreams and essential significance more important than fantastic pretensions." Hence he seeks beauty not in any ideal sphere remote from reality and opposed to it, but in the essence of reality itself.

"The most universal of all things cherished by men and the one cherished more than anything else in the world is life itself; most of all the life men would like to live but also every other kind of life, for it is in any case better to live than not to live and all live things by their very nature are afraid of death, of extinction—and they all love life.

"It would seem that the definitions 'Beauty is life,' 'Beautiful are all things in which we see life as, according to our conceptions, it should be,' 'Beautiful is an object which expresses life or reminds us of it' give a satisfactory explanation of all the ways in which the feeling of beauty is roused in us."[14]

Life, reality in general, is more rich and varied, fuller and more significant than any figment of the imagination. It follows that art, too, far from being superior to reality can only be a pale reflection of it:

"All that finds expression in science and art can be found in life in a more perfect and complete form, with all those vital details in which the true meaning of the matter usually lies and which are often not understood and even more often disregarded by science and art.

"In real life all happenings are true and correct, there are no oversights, none of that one-sided narrowness of vision which attaches to all human works. Life as a teacher, as a channel of knowledge, is more full and accurate, even more artistic than all the works of all the scientists and poets. But life does not trouble to explain its phenomena to us nor to draw conclusions as men do in the works

of science and art. True, such conclusions and ideas are much less complete and universal than life. But had they not been drawn for us by men of genius, our own conclusions would be even more narrow and inadequate.

"Science and art (poetry) are textbooks for those who are beginning to study life. Their purpose is to prepare us for the reading of the original sources and later to provide an occasional reference. Science does not claim to be anything else, nor do the poets in their cursory remarks about the essence of their work. Only the aesthetes still assert that art is superior to life and to reality."

Chernyshevski sums up by stating that it is the essential function of art *"to reproduce everything that interests man in life."* But in reproducing life, the artist also, consciously or unconsciously, expresses his opinion of it, and it is by virtue of this that "art becomes a moral activity of man."

Chernyshevski's conception of the moral function of art has nothing in common with that of Tennyson:

"The attitude of some people to the phenomena of life consists almost entirely in a preference for certain aspects of reality and avoidance of others. The minds of such people are not very active and if a person of this type happens to be a poet or an artist, his work will have no significance beyond reproducing the particular aspects of life which he prefers. But when a person endowed with artistic gifts is intellectually stimulated by problems arising out of the observation of life, his work will consciously or unconsciously embody a tendency to pronounce some vital judgment on the phenomena which occupy his mind (and that of his contemporaries, for a thinking man hardly concerns himself with trifling matters of no interest to anyone but himself). In his pictures or novels, poems or plays such a man will bring up or solve some problem with which life faces thinking men and women. Such works will be, as it were, composed on themes set by life."

Thus, according to Chernyshevski, the significance of a work of art is proportional to the comprehensiveness and truthfulness with which it faces and attempts to solve the problems set by life.

Chernyshevski anticipated Fry in pointing out that beauty in nature is entirely distinct from the aesthetic element in art. Although, in his view, beauty is that which evokes life and although art reproduces what interests man in life, it by no means follows that art reproduces only what is beautiful in nature. "To paint a

face *beautifully*" is quite distinct from "painting a *beautiful* face." "Everything that interests man in life" includes the ugly, as well as the beautiful, the forces that frustrate and crush life, as well as those that support it, death as well as life. Chernyshevski's conception of "life" as the *content* of art is thus dynamic, dialectical, it is the *struggle of life*, life as it is in reality and not in blissful dreams.

The statement "this is beautifully painted" means that the artist has succeeded in expressing what he intended to convey. In other words, it refers to the *form* and not to the content of the artist's work. Chernyshevski admits that beauty in this sense of perfection of form, or in the language of classical philosophy, of the "unity of idea and image," is an essential element of art. But he immediately points out:

"Perfection of form (unity of idea and form) is not a characteristic of art in the aesthetic sense of the term 'fine art' only. Beauty as the unity of idea and image, or as the perfect realization of an idea, is the aim of art in the widest possible sense of the term, the aim of all *skill;* it is, in fact, the aim of all practical activities of man."

It is scarcely necessary to point out that this profound idea is utterly incompatible with the formalism of Roger Fry. For Fry seeks the aesthetic element precisely in the contemplation of form *apart* from its purpose and *divorced* from the content which it forms. Chernyshevski's conception, on the other hand, anticipates the theories of William Morris and of all modern exponents of "functional" design.

But it is when he defies the specific manner in which art reproduces reality that Chernyshevski differs most radically from the assumptions on which Fry's analysis, in common with all other idealist systems of aesthetics, are based. Unlike mathematics which interprets reality by reducing its multiplicity to abstract laws, art reproduces reality by means of *images*. "The beautiful," says Chernyshevski, "is an individual, live object and not an abstract thought." In this respect the images created by art resemble beautiful objects in nature. They, too, can obtain general significance only through a profound reflection of the particular. This principle applies in one way or another to all forms of art,* but it may be illustrated most simply

* Classical Greek sculpture is often regarded as the idealized image of human beauty in general. But as Marx has pointed out, Greek art is inconceivable without Greek mythology. In that mythology general human qualities, such as love or courage or wisdom, come to life in the concrete, highly individualized shapes of the

by means of a topical example. Suppose that a painter, sculptor, writer or film director sets out to create a striking and significant image of, say, the soldier of the 8th Army. He might attempt to compose an ideal figure embodying courage, toughness, a weather-beaten appearance, all those general qualities, in short, which the experience of desert warfare has imprinted on each member of that veteran force. But, as Chernyshevski points out, "alcohol is not wine." The image that would result from such an attempt to distil only what is general from a multitude of living individuals, would be of the type which is only too familiar from hundreds of war memorials up and down the country. It would be false and unconvincing precisely because of its character as a lifeless abstraction. A genuine front-line newsreel sequence far surpasses even the best war film in dramatic power and intensity. Hence it would seem that to obtain an inspiring and significant image the artist should endeavor to create an authentic, *documentary* image of the living reality before him. To achieve this he should study the actual soldiers of the 8th Army at their daily work; he should observe just how the various qualities which have made that Army what it is are reflected in the behavior and bearing of particular individuals, how they modify and are in turn modified by the idiosyncrasies of those individuals; and the more faithfully he succeeds in recreating particular, living characters with all their idiosyncrasies—say the London busman who is now driving a tank or the Australian gun-

various Olympian deities, and it is these magnified human beings with all their individual traits that are depicted by the classical artists. To appreciate how alien the conception of a general norm is to classical art, one should study the superb freedom and variety of the individual figures in the Parthenon frieze. It is true that the inventions of the classics were canonized into binding norms in Hellenistic and Roman times, and also later at a certain stage in each "classical revival." But that is precisely what distinguishes truly classical art, based on living observation, from academism which imposes a servile imitation of authority. Why, to take another example, were all the efforts of the Gothic revivalists to re-create the "pure thirteenth-century style," "pure perpendicular," etc., fruitless, despite their painstaking study of the originals? Obviously because of that study, which petrified into a norm what had been a living, individual and ever varied inspiration. Even within those styles which impose a norm for certain important images—e.g. in the Egyptian statues of kings or in figures of the Buddha—the aesthetic significance of any given work depends on the life which the artist has succeeded in imparting to the abstract norm by his individual observation and intensity of feeling. Moreover, in all these styles the stereotyped uniformity of the "important" image is more than offset by the exuberant variety and individuality of the "minor" characters—slaves, animals, etc.—in scenes from ordinary life, in battle pictures, or even in the various adventures of the hero himself (e.g. at Borobudur, Ankor-Vat, or in countless Egyptian tomb paintings).

ner—the more real and therefore also the more typical and universally significant his image will be felt to be.

The assumption which is inherent in all idealist theories of aesthetics, including formalism, that the general is necessarily more fundamental and significant than the particular is thus a fallacy. Far from being more significant, the general can only be a pale reflection of the particular, an insubstantial shadow of its rich and vital individuality. What is more fundamental and hence more significant, Chernyshevski asks, Koramasin's *History of Russia* or the *Children's History of Russia* which a writer named Tappen abstracted from that work? Translating this example into more familiar terms we may ask: which are more significant, aesthetically and from every other point of view, Shakespeare's plays or Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare?*

But to deny that the general is more significant than the particular does not imply the reverse proposition that the particular *as such* is what matters in art. The statement that it is the function of art to reproduce everything that interests man in life implies that the particular image created must be "of interest to man generally and not merely to the artist." It is therefore necessary to amplify the previous definition of the function of form in art—the complete expression of the artist's aim—by stating: to paint, model, write, compose, act, film, etc., beautifully means *so to express the particular that it attains general significance.* Art is thus a striking and at the same time a peculiarly revealing illustration of the key conception of dialectics, the unity of opposites. For in art the particular becomes the general, the general reveals itself in the particular, and it is the unity of content and form, which makes art an inexhaustible source of significant experience.

Realism: Marx and Engels

Whatever its limitations, Chernyshevski's approach with its resolute rejection of all forms of philosophical idealism and mysticism clears the ground for a conception which regards art as a means of expressing the interests and aspirations of the people.

It is important to stress that it is not a theory of *formal* naturalism (although it may well have been interpreted as such in the mid-nineteenth century, at any rate as far as the visual arts are concerned). Chernyshevski explicitly differentiates his conception of

"reproduction" from the ancient view of art as the "imitation" of nature which applies the test of "correctness or incorrectness" to the arts. His own demand for realism—the demand that art should reproduce and interpret what interests man in life—refers, on the contrary, exclusively to the *content* of art, and not to its form. All he claims regarding the *form* of art is, in the first place, that it should fully express what the artist means to convey and, secondly, that it should impart general significance to the artist's image of a particular aspect of reality.

This restriction of the meaning of realism to the content of art, which leaves the artist free to express his vision of reality in whatever manner he deems best, corresponds to the evidence of history. There has always been a realist current in art, in the sense that certain artists have endeavored to depict the actual conditions of life and not its idealization, although for centuries at a time this trend was submerged in the neglected undercurrent of folk-art or popular satire. But whether one takes the ancient mime or fifteenth-century misericords, the paintings of Bruegel or those of Goya, Gargantua or Don Quixote, Gulliver or the Drapier's Letters, Robinson Crusoe or Moll Flanders—the great tradition of realism has at all times been distinguished by a combination, or else by the alternate use, of quite distinct forms of expression. Side by side with the endeavor to depict the actual appearance of things in a frank and often drastic manner—side by side, in other words, with realism in the *formal* sense of the term—there has always been a simultaneous urge to express the hidden meaning of things—or else the necessity of concealing their plain meaning from the censor's inquisitive eyes—either through a caricature-like exaggeration of reality or else through more or less fantastic symbols (e.g. the animal fable, monsters, grotesques, etc.).* The great realists of Chernyshevski's own age also employed these two main forms of expression. Balzac wrote *The Unknown Masterpiece* as well as *le Père Goriot*, Shchedrin his *Fables* as well as the *Golovlyov Family*.

Nevertheless, to be useful for us today, Chernyshevski's broad formulations need to be refined and amplified. We want to know

* Many of these symbols betray their realistic content by their origin: they are *burlesques* of the religious symbols ruling at the time (e.g. the grotesque Zeus or Hercules of the ancient mime; the parody of the Nativity in the Coventry Miracle Play; the mock ceremonies, ridiculing the most sacred rites of the Church, of the mediaeval "Feasts of Fools"; the conversion of Satan into the comic devil and later Harlequin, etc.).

more fully how the artist has succeeded in the past and can succeed today in giving general significance to his particular image of reality; and we also need to know precisely how the test of truth can be applied to the evaluation of different kinds of images.

Chernyshevski's theory is particularly interesting for Marxists, because this great forerunner of Russian revolutionary socialism, who spent many years in exile in Siberia, adopted the materialist point of view of Feuerbach* for his attack on the Hegelian conception of art. Indeed, he claimed no more than to have applied Feuerbach's methods of analysis to the special sphere of aesthetics. Chernyshevski's thesis can therefore be regarded as the immediate predecessor of the Marxist theory of art, and its limitations can be discovered by turning to Marx's and Engels' critique of its philosophical basis, the materialism of Feuerbach.

In the first of his famous *Theses on Feuerbach* Marx wrote:

"The chief defect of all materialism up to now (including Feuerbach's) is, that the object, reality, what we apprehend through our senses, is understood only in the form of the *object* or *contemplation;* but not as *sensuous human activity,* as *practice;* not subjectively."[15]

This statement is of great significance for evaluating Chernyshevski's conception of "reproduction." Chernyshevski follows Feuerbach in regarding reality as an isolated sphere, distinct from "man," an "object" which the artist reproduces for "man" to contemplate. Marx, on the other hand, insists that humanity is an inseparable part of reality, and that our consciousness is but the reflection in our minds of our own *practical activity* in changing reality. Art, too, is part of this practical activity of changing the world. Far from reproducing an eternally unvarying "Nature" for the contemplation of "man," it reflects the unceasing struggle of humanity to master the forces of Nature. Indeed, the artist is in the vanguard of that struggle, for by virtue of his sensibility he is continually discovering new aspects of reality of which his fellow men are not as yet aware. Thus "beauty" is not eternally the same; its ever-changing substance must be continually discovered and rediscovered by the artist and transmitted by him to his fellow men. As Marx puts it:

* The revolutionary significance of this point of view is evident from the fact that the Tsarist censor did not allow Chernyshevski even to mention Feuerbach's name either in the first edition or in the edition of 1888. It was not until 1906 that the original preface which mentions the names of Hegel and Feuerbach was allowed to appear.

"The work of art—like any other product—*produces* a public conscious of its own peculiar beauty and capable of enjoying it."[16]

Another fundamental limitation of Feuerbach's approach which is shared by Chernyshevski is defined in the sixth thesis of Marx:

"Feuerbach resolves the essence of religion into the essence of *man*. But the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each separate individual. In its reality it is the *ensemble* (aggregate) of social relations.

"Feuerbach, who does not enter more deeply into the criticism of this real essence, is therefore forced to abstract from the process of history . . . and to postulate an abstract—*isolated*—human individual."[17]

There are passages in Chernyshevski's essay which show that he was not unaware of the inadequacy of the abstraction "man"—thus he points out that the peasant's conception of life and hence of beauty differs from that of the aristocrat and that there are similar differences between the standards of taste prevailing at different historical periods—but it was left to Marx and Engels to point out the full significance of such differences. "Man" in the abstract is a fiction. "The essence of man" can have no meaning other than the social relations of men in their struggle with Nature. Consciousness is the reflection in the minds of men of these social relations.

"Language," wrote Marx, "is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness, as it exists for other men, and for that reason is really beginning to exist for me personally as well; for language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity of intercourse with other men. . . . Consciousness is therefore from the beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all."[18]

"Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life." Consequently, to understand consciousness, or any particular manifestation of consciousness, such as a work of art, one must start from the "real living individuals themselves, as they are in actual life" and consider "consciousness solely as *their* consciousness."[19]

"Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with their real existence, their thinking

and the products of their thinking."*

Nevertheless, there is a modicum of truth in Roger Fry's claim "that the usual assumption of a direct and decisive connection between art and life is by no means correct" (even if we take "life" in the broad meaning of the term and not in Fry's sense of the self-consciousness of the elect). But Fry's conception of what constitutes a "direct and decisive connection" is purely mechanical. In the "violently foreshortened view of history and art" which forms the first part of his Fabian lecture he shows that there have been many periods in history when there was "progress" in life while art stagnated or even declined, and *vice versa*. This is, of course, perfectly true; but it never seems to have occurred to Fry that an inverse relationship may also be due to a "direct and decisive connection." Indeed, as early as 1846 Marx and Engels had proved that a contradiction between consciousness (including art) and life was not only possible but under certain circumstances even inevitable. In the *German Ideology* they point out that this contradiction is inherent in the division of labor with its resulting stratification of society into classes which arose at a certain stage in the development of the material forces of production:

"Division of labor only becomes truly such from the moment when a division of material and mental labor appears. From this moment onwards consciousness *can* really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it is *really* conceiving something without conceiving something *real;* from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of 'pure' theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc. But even if this theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc., comes into contradiction with the existing relations, this can only occur as a result of the fact that existing social relations have come into contradiction with existing forces of production. . . ."[20]

and further:

"The forces of production, the state of society, and consciousness, can and must come into contradiction with one another, because the division of labor implies the possibility, nay the fact that intel-

* *German Ideology*, p. 14. To forestall misinterpretation it is useful to remember Engels' statement: "Political, legal, philosophical, religious, literary, artistic, etc., development is grounded upon economic development. But all of them react, conjointly and separately, one upon another, and upon the economic foundation." Letter to Starkenburg, 25 January 1894. Marx-Engels, Selected Correspondence, p. 517.

lectual and material activity—enjoyment and labor, production and consumption—devolve on different individuals, and that the only possibility of their not coming into contradiction lies in the negation in its turn of the division of labor."[21]

In the second part of the same work the authors show more explicitly how the division of labor and its final negation affect the arts:

"The exclusive concentration of artistic talent in certain individuals, and its consequent suppression in the broad masses of the people, is an effect of the division of labor. Even if in certain social relations everyone could become an excellent painter, that would not prevent everyone from being also an original painter. . . . With a communist organization of society, the artist is not confined by the local and national seclusion which ensues solely from the division of labor, nor is the individual confined to one specific art, so that he becomes exclusively a painter, a sculptor, etc.; these very names express sufficiently the narrowness of his professional development, and his dependence on the division of labor. In a communist society there are no painters, but at most men who, among other things, also paint."[22]

Marx and Engels believed that of all forms of society that of fully developed industrial capitalism, in which the division between material and mental labor reaches the extreme point, was most hostile to art. The consequent decline of art, so palpable in the nineteenth century, manifested itself on the one hand in the disappearance of craftsmanship and of beauty in the sense of fitness for its purpose from all the practical arts, and on the other hand in the ever increasing specialization of the fine arts and in their ever greater remoteness from life. Yet at the same time this decline was accompanied by spectacular advances in the technique of production, including the technique of artistic production. This contradiction was expressed in the remarkable speech which Marx delivered on the occasion of the anniversary of the Chartist "People's Paper" in April 1856:

"There is one great fact characteristic of this our nineteenth century; a fact which no party dares deny. On the one hand there have started into life industrial and scientific forces which no epoch of former human history had ever suspected. On the other hand there exist symptoms of decay, far surpassing the horrors of the latter times of the Roman Empire. In our days, everything seems pregnant with its contrary: Machinery, gifted with the wonderful

power of shortening and fructifying human labor, we behold starving and overworking it. The new-fangled sources of wealth, by some strange, weird spell, are turned into sources of want. *The victories of art are bought by the loss of character.* At the same pace that mankind masters nature, man seems to become enslaved to other men or to his own infamy. Even the pure light of science seems unable to shine but on the dark background of ignorance. All our inventions and progress seem to result in endowing material forces with intellectual life, and in stultifying human life into a material force. This antagonism between modern industry and science, on the one hand, and modern misery and dissolution, on the other; this antagonism between the productive forces and the social relations of our epoch is a fact, palpable, overwhelming, and not to be controverted. Some may wail over it; others may wish to get rid of modern arts in order to get rid of modern conflicts. Or they may imagine that so signal a progress in industry wants to be completed by as signal a regress in politics. For our part, we do not mistake the shape of the shrewd spirit that continues to mark all these contradictions. We know that to work well the new-fangled forces of society, they only want to be mastered by new-fangled men—and such are the working men. . . ."[23]

It is evident from these quotations that Marx's explanation of the temporary estrangement of art from life had nothing in common with Hegel's view of the irredeemable decline of art; for Marx pointed out that the very factors which lead to a temporary decline of art at the same time create the conditions for its resurrection once men have freed themselves from their enslavement "to other men or to their own infamy."

But Marx's resolution of the abstraction "man" into the concrete, historically conditioned and ever changing relations of men in society, and his method of explaining all forms of consciousness in terms of those relations, also laid the foundations for a scientific history of art which attempts more than a mere *description* of its ever changing forms. Just as Marx was able to explain the characteristic trend of nineteenth century art—the trend which culminated in the formalism of today—in terms of the contradictions of nineteenth century life, so historical materialism can accomplish what Fry's mechanical conception of "progress" could never do: namely to disclose the social roots of the entire, complex, history of styles.

It is a measure of Chernyshevski's profound insight that, in spite

of the limitations of his approach, he recognized, *why* the peasant's conception of beauty differs from that of the courtier. The peasant cannot live without work, Chernyshevski writes, therefore "the country beauty cannot have small hands and feet . . . and folksongs do not mention such features. . . . The description of beauty in folksongs will not contain a single tribute of beauty which would not be a sign of flourishing health and balanced strength of body, the consequences always of a life of plenty with constant, hard, though not excessive work." But precisely those features which are a sign of fitness for work in the peasant—the ruddy complexion, the sturdy figure, the strong hands—are considered "vulgar" by the sophisticated man of leisure who despises work. Instead of these he admires the languid pallor, the fragile form, the delicate extremities of the town-bred lady of fashion whose ancestors have lived for generations "without putting their hands to work." The ideals of beauty of the peasant and the nobleman are thus determined by their respective positions in the process of production and by their resulting conceptions of a "good life." What is true of their ideals of personal beauty is equally true of their artistic tastes. The aesthetic standards of the different classes differ, because their conditions of life differ; and the artist who wishes to please his public must conform to one or other of these standards. The same applies to different periods in history; differences in the conditions of life are reflected by corresponding differences in the standards of art.

This has important implications for the critical evaluation of art. While the courtier despises peasant art as crude and vulgar (unless, of course, he is a modern enthusiast for the "naïve"), the peasant on his part is no less contemptuous of sophisticated art. If a member of one class applies his own standards of appreciation to a work produced in another class or period, he does no more than express his own subjective, class- and time-conditioned preferences. He cannot do justice to the particular work, unless he *also* attempts to appreciate it in terms of *its* own standards.

But if it is true that all art must be judged in terms of its own *relative*, class- and time-conditioned standard of appreciation, does it necessarily follow that there is no *absolute*, objectively binding standard of value which can in turn be applied to these various relative standards?

Furthermore, if all art reflects the standards of a given class and period, does it follow that the artist is inevitably and rigidly bound

to the standards of one particular class and period? Is Plekhanov right when he states: "Apple trees must give forth apples, pear trees, pears. . . . The art of a decadent epoch *'must'* be decadent; this is inevitable; and it would be futile to become indignant about it"?*

It will be appreciated that the answers to these questions are of fundamental importance for all artists at the present time, but especially for those who are striving to express the interests and aspirations of the people.

Relativism

The standpoint of aesthetic relativism was advocated in the following terms by Taine in 1865:

"The new method I am attempting to follow, and which is beginning to find its way into all moral sciences, consists of viewing all human works and particularly works of art, as facts and phenomena of which it is essential to mark the characteristics and seek the causes—nothing more. Science thus understands, does not condemn or condone, it only points out and explains. It does not say: 'disdain Dutch art—it is vulgar; admire only Italian art.' Nor does it say: 'disdain Gothic art—it is morbid; admire only Greek art.' It leaves everyone free to follow his own tastes, to prefer that which conforms to his temperament and study with closer attention that which is more agreeable to the development of his spirit. With respect to art itself it is equally sympathetic to all its forms and all schools, even to those who seem diametrically opposed; they are considered different manifestations of the human spirit."[24]

Plekhanov agrees with Taine that it is impossible to compare the relative merits of different periods and styles in art. But that Marx maintained the opposite point of view is evident from his references to the decline of art under capitalism, i.e. during an entire era which produced a whole series of styles.

The relativist attitude evidently entails an unresolved contra-

* G. V. Plekhanov: *Art and Society*. Critics Group Series, No. 3, p. 93. Plekhanov is, of course, perfectly aware of the fact, and indeed he expressly goes on to state that "in times when the class struggle nears the decisive hour" certain bourgeois artists join the revolutionary camp. But, as we shall presently see, he never resolved the contradiction between these two sets of ideas. It is not my intention to belittle the profound importance of Plekhanov's contributions to the history of art and to Marxist thought in general. If the negative elements in his theory are emphasized in the present essay, this is solely due to the fact that they come to the surface precisely in his treatment of the problems which concern us here.

diction. However "objective" the historian may claim to be in his approach to all styles of art, he almost invariably betrays his own preferences in his choice of the particular schools or works which he studies in detail; and it is remarkable how closely his selection has coincided during the last eighty years with that of the avowed aesthetes. In the 1910's and '20's both "discovered" such phases as sixteenth century mannerism or primitive art, which had been neglected by their Victorian predecessors; neither has shown much concern for popular art ever since the sophisticated public for whom they wrote lost interest in its democratic implications.*

But while the historians claim scientific validity for their analyses of the relative standards of other periods, they rarely define the standard of their own time and class which has conditioned their choice of theme; indeed, when challenged, they generally deny that their own subjective tastes, and therefore the aesthetic conceptions of their own time, have any scientific basis at all. Thus they shelve the problem which is of main interest to the artist and his public. To the question "what is good art?" they reply: "this is what the Victorian middle class thought good art—that appealed to the feudal lord—that to the citizen of Athens—but there is no objective reason for preferring one to the other; true, we ourselves do prefer this or that period, but that is purely a matter of our own subjective taste, or of our class interests, and we cannot justify our choice in aesthetic terms."

The study of art is thus reduced to the aim of explaining the historical origin of the various styles, either in terms of social structure or in terms of such half-way-house conceptions as the "spirit of the age." But the problem of aesthetics proper, i.e., the problem of value, is evaded.

This was inevitable as long as it was of supreme importance to establish an objective historical approach in opposition to the subjective interpretations of the idealists: and that is why profound writers like Plekhanov and Mehring mainly emphasized the historical basis of Marxist thought. But it cannot be denied that the idealist reaction, which gained strength in this as in all other spheres

*The last comprehensive studies in this field (not, of course, the last special studies of certain aspects of popular art) in English are those of Thomas Wright, published in the 1840's and '60's. Wright's contemporary, Michelet, was also greatly interested in popular art; Champfleury's history of caricature was begun in 1865: the later works by Eduard Fuchs, a friend of Mehring and a staunch socialist, have been consistently ignored by art historians and aesthetes alike.

since the early years of the present century, was in part at least provoked by the shallow distortions which the historical approach had suffered in the hands of the sociological relativists and other vulgarizers of Marxism.

It is in the answers which are often given to the second and related question—how far is the artist bound by the standards of his class and period?—that these distortions are most glaringly revealed. Writers who adopt a relativist point of view tend to assert that the artist is insolubly bound to his class. Hence they reduce the tasks of a "Marxist" art historian to a kind of crime detection which "exposes" the class affiliations of all the great artists of the past. Their attitude is summarized in the fallacious proposition that the art of the past has always expressed the interests of an exploiting class, whence it is to be expected that the classics will gradually fall out of favor with the advance of Socialism. The unprecedented and ever growing demand for all the classics in the Soviet Union and the great controversy on aesthetics which took place in that country in 1935 [25] have exploded this fallacy. But it lingers on in the view which is still widely held among English artists that nothing can be done about the chaotic state of art in this country, since "the art of a decadent epoch *must* be decadent," and that, in particular, the Socialist art of the Soviet Union can have no meaning for us at all.

Marx's own views concerning the relation of artists, and ideologists in general, to the class they represent is perfectly unambiguous:

One must not imagine, he writes, that the theoretical representatives of the democratic lower middle class "are all shopkeepers or enthusiastic champions of shopkeepers. According to their education and their individual position they may be separated from them as widely as heaven from earth. What makes them representatives of the petty bourgeoisie is the fact that in their minds they do not go beyond the limits which the latter do not go beyond in life, that they are consequently driven theoretically to the same tasks and solutions to which material interest and social position practically drive the latter. This is in general the relation of the political and literary representatives of a class to the class that they represent." [26]

Hence it is a distortion of Marxism to assert that the content of an artist's work is rigidly determined by his own economic and social

position. The artist inherits a particular conception of the world, because it corresponds to the practical attitude of the class into which he was born; if that is also the class to which his patrons belong he will, as a rule, be perfectly satisfied with that conception and express it in his work. But under certain circumstances he *may* adopt a position which is opposed to the interest of his own class, and there are even times when he *must* do so, if he is to preserve his integrity as an artist.

Consciousness, including art, is not therefore an automatic reflex of the individual's own position seen in isolation; it is the reflection in his mind, and consequently in his scientific or artistic work, of the sum-total of his social relations.

"The consciousness of the masses of the workers cannot be genuine class consciousness," wrote Lenin, "unless the workers learn to observe from concrete, and above all from topical, political facts and events, *every* other social class and *all* the manifestations of the intellectual, ethical and political life of these classes; unless they learn to apply practically the materialist analysis and the materialist estimate of *all* aspects of life and activity of *all* classes, strata and groups of the population. Those who concentrate the attention, observation and the consciousness of the working class exclusively, or even mainly, upon itself alone are not Social-Democrats; because for its self-realization the working class must . . . have a practical understanding . . . of the relationship between *all* the various classes of modern society." [27]

This idea which Lenin expressed in 1902 had been applied by Marx in 1846 to the interpretation of art:

"If he will compare Raphael with Leonardo da Vinci and Titian, he will see to what extent the works of art of the first were conditioned by the flourishing of Rome, then under the influence of Florence: how the works of Leonardo were conditioned by the social milieu of Florence, and later those of Titian by the altogether different development of Venice. Raphael, like any other artist, was conditioned by the technical advances made in art before him, by the organization of society and the division of labor in his locality, and finally, by the division of labor *in all the countries with which his locality maintained relations.*" [28]

In other words, the sum-total of relations which conditions the artist's work is coextensive with the practical contacts of his own society. Thus Dvorák was undoubtedly right when he asserted, in

conscious opposition to the narrow, mechanistic approach of the "sociological" interpreters of art, that the great artist is always abreast of the most advanced spiritual (i.e. religious, philosophical, scientific, aesthetic) tendencies of his time, whatever their country of origin.[29] It is clearly inadequate to interpret, say, the art of Bruegel purely in terms of the Flemish tradition. His work became the mirror of his people's great struggle for political and spiritual liberty precisely because he had mastered the outstanding intellectual and aesthetic achievements of his Italian, Spanish, French, German, English contemporaries, as well as his native heritage. But we cannot agree with Dvorák and his followers in divorcing the spiritual tendencies of an age from their material roots; hence we shall not fail to give due weight also to the tremendous influence which the discovery of the new world and the consequent extension of the relations of Europe exerted on Bruegel's interpretation of reality. Today the complex of social relations which conditions the outlook and the work of every artist embraces the entire globe; and the fact that an entirely new type of social relation has been established over one-sixth of the earth's surface cannot but have the most profound influence, either directly or indirectly, on the work of every artist in this country at the present time.

Seen in this light, the statement "the art of a decadent epoch must be decadent" is a fatalistic perversion of the truth. There is no such thing in history as a period of decline which is not also at the same time a period of growth. While the old forms are declining, the conditions for the emergence of the new society are maturing. Hence the description of a given period as a "period of decline" can only mean that the old, declining forces still predominate over the growing forces which will eventually replace them. As long as the declining forces predominate, their decadence will, it is true, be reflected in the *dominating* trend of art (and if these forces are themselves inimical to art, as they are in capitalist society, that decadence will be expressed in the ever-increasing estrangement of art from life); but the dominating trend is never the only trend in the art of a "period of decline," nor is it ever the most significant trend. The most significant art in a decadent epoch will be as much in opposition to the dominant trend of decadent art, as the growing forces are to the declining, but still dominating, forces in all other spheres of life. "Mankind," wrote Marx, "always takes up only such prob-

lems as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, we will always find that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions necessary for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation." [30] And Stalin adds: "New social ideas and theories arise precisely because they are necessary to society, because it is *impossible* to carry out the urgent tasks of development of the material life of society without their organizing, mobilizing and transforming action." [31] "Theory becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses," and it grips the masses if it goes "to the roots of things." [32] The artist, too, must go to the roots of things. If he spurns to reflect the decadence of a declining age: "To invent," wrote Gorky, "means to extract from the sum of a given reality its cardinal idea and embody it in imagery —that is how we got realism. But if to the idea extracted from the given reality we add . . . the desired, the possible, and thus supplement the image, we obtain that romanticism which is . . . highly beneficial in that it tends to provoke a revolutionary attitude to reality, an attitude that changes the world in a practical way." [33]

Realism: Lenin

Plekhanov adopted the standpoint of aesthetic relativism because, as Lunacharski pointed out, he regarded historical materialism primarily as the scientific method of *interpreting* the world. In reasserting the essential significance of Marxism as a *guide to action*, Lenin resolved the contradictions which had crept into Plekhanov's exposition.

For the artist, too, an aesthetic standard is a guide to action, and not a neutral platform for the contemplation of the past. The standard he adopts is *relative*, because conditioned by the circumstances of his time and class. But is it impossible to conceive of a standard which, though relative, cannot also have *objective* validity?

In his *Notes on Dialectics* Lenin wrote:

"The distinction between subjectivism (scepticism, sophistry, etc.) and dialectics, incidentally, is that in (objective) dialectics the difference between the relative and the absolute is itself relative. For objective dialectics there is an absolute even *within* the relative. For subjectivism and sophistry the relative is only relative and excludes the absolute." [34]

In applying this principle to the theory of knowledge Lenin reasserts that existence, including social existence, is unconditional, absolute, and he examines what relation the relative truths, discovered by science and verified by their practical application, bear to this unconditional, absolute truth.

"From the standpoint of modern materialism, i.e. Marxism," Lenin writes, "the *limits* of approximation of our knowledge to the objective, absolute truth are historically conditional, but the existence of such truth is *unconditional,* and the fact that we are approaching nearer to it is also unconditional. The contours of the picture are historically conditional, but the fact that this picture depicts an objectively existing model is unconditional. When and under what circumstances we reached, in our knowledge of the existing nature of things, the discovery of alizarin in coal tar or the discovery of electrons in the atom is historically conditional; but that every such discovery is an advance of 'absolutely objective knowledge' is unconditional. In a word, every ideology is historically conditional, but it is unconditionally true that to every scientific ideology (as distinct, for instance, from religious ideology) there corresponds an objective truth, absolute nature." [35] And Lenin adds:

"Human thought then by its nature is capable of giving, and does give, absolute truth, which is compounded of the sum-total of relative truths. Each step in the development of science adds new grains to the sum of absolute truth, but the limits of the truth of each scientific proposition are relative, now expanding, now shrinking with the growth of knowledge." [36]

Such is Lenin's conception of relative and absolute truth as applied to the *scientific* reflection of reality. Does it similarly apply to its *artistic* reflection?

It is evident that art differs in certain important respects from science. Lenin points out that to every scientific discovery which is verified by practice there corresponds an objective truth, absolute nature; this is not the case with every work of art. There are many works, and, indeed, whole styles of art, with their corresponding relative value scales, which are more or less divorced from objective reality and which reflect the religious or idealist dreams of humanity, rather than its scientific search for truth. Nevertheless, the extent to which a work of art does reflect an objective truth (and in our conception of objective truth we must include its projection

into the future, i.e., the possible tasks which history sets mankind) undoubtedly provides an objective, absolute standard, verifiable of experience, which can be applied to the evaluation not only of individual works of art but also of its various relative standards.

In the second place, even where it does reflect reality, art differs from science in the manner of its reflection and also in the manner in which its separate relative reflections of truth combine to form a cumulative and ever closer approximation to the absolute. Scientific knowledge consists of the sum-total of concrete, experimentally verified discoveries which have been made up to a given time and which scientific theory seeks to correlate in a more or less consistent picture of the world. With the further advance of discovery this general picture is sooner or later invalidated and many of the facts previously ascertained may assume an entirely new meaning. In other words, as science advances its successive theories become obsolete, while their concrete kernel is absorbed in the ever expanding approximation to truth.

It is different with art. The work of art is an indivisible whole, and it survives as a whole. It is true that it may mean many different things to those who admire it at different periods. But its power to inspire resides at all times in its imaginative unity. Nor is it invalidated by the further advance of art. For long periods at a time men may be blind to its significance, but if it is a truly great work (or even a crude copy of a great work that has been lost) its beauty will sooner or later be rediscovered. The history of art is full of such moments of "re-birth," such dialectical leaps in the trend of taste, when long neglected works dating from the distant past suddenly acquire a tremendous influence on aesthetic life.

This peculiar quality of art which makes each individual work significant as a unity may also be demonstrated in another way. Whereas it is a waste of effort—unfortunately all too frequent in the present chaotic state of science—for several scientists to make the same discovery, several artists working simultaneously or successively on the same theme will produce entirely different results, and mankind will be enriched by each. Hence the cumulative approximation of science to objective truth differs in kind from the cumulative reflection of reality by art. The former is an intellectual generalization, ever expanding and continually changing as the progress of discoveries "adds new grains to the sum of absolute truth"; the latter is an imaginative reflection of reality in its infinite

diversity, built up, like reality itself, through the interplay of its individual *images*.

Thus we are led back to Chernyshevski's conception of the artistic image as a unity of the particular and the general, and it is in the light of this conception that we must examine the significance of Lenin's theory of relative and absolute truth for the problem of aesthetic value.

Bearing in mind Lenin's statement that "for dialectics the absolute is also to be found in the relative," let us turn to his explanation of the various ways in which the unity of the particular and the general can be said to exist. Even a simple proposition, such as "the leaves of the tree are green," implies that "the *particular* is the *general*":

" . . . consequently," Lenin writes, "opposites (the particular as opposed to the general) are identical: the particular exists only in that connection which leads to the general. The general exists only in the particular and through the particular. Every particular is (in one way or another) a general. Every general is (a fragment, or an aspect, or an essence of) a particular. Every general comprises all particular objects merely approximately. Every particular is an incomplete part of the general, and so forth, and so on. Every particular is bound by thousands of threads and nuances with other *kinds* of particulars (objects, phenomena, processes), etc. There are found here *already* the elements, the germinal conception of *necessity* of objective connection in nature, etc. The contingent and the necessary, appearance and essence are already existent here. For in saying, 'John is a man, the poodle is a dog, this is a leaf of a tree, etc.,' we disregard a series of characteristics as *contingent;* we separate the essential from the apparent, and put one in opposition to the other."[37]

It is thus that the particular fragment of reality which is reflected in the artistic image is linked "by thousands of threads and nuances" with all other particulars and becomes a symbol of the "necessity of objective connection in nature." But Lenin also points out:

"The unity (the coincidence, identity, resultant force) of opposites is conditional, temporary, transitory, and relative. The struggle of the mutually exclusive opposites is absolute, as movement and evolution are." [38]

We may therefore expand and amplify Chernyshevski's conception of a work of art as a unity of the particular and the general, the significance of which is proportional to the comprehensiveness

and truthfulness with which it reflects reality, by the following propositions:

(1) A work of art is satisfying because in it the artist has fixed that fleeting, conditional and *relative* unity of opposites in which the particular is identical with the general. But a work of art is significant only if that *relative unity* of opposites at the same time contains and reflects the *struggle* of those same, mutually exclusive, opposites which is *absolute,* as movement, evolution and life are. Hence a work of art must stimulate at the same time as it satisfies. While revealing the unity of opposites, it must at the same time reveal the transient and merely relative nature of that unity, thus driving the spectator onward in the ceaseless struggle for an even greater, more profound and comprehensive unity. A work of art which lulls the creative faculties, which drugs and deflects men from the struggle of life, is unconditionally bad.

(2) In a sense it is true that every work of art reflects some aspect of reality, for illusions, dreams and mystifications are also a part of existence. But a work which reflects *only* such illusions and mystifications is obviously much more restricted in its significance than another work which resembles a scientific discovery in that to it there corresponds an objective truth. The former image is *purely relative;* the latter is a *relative truth which contains a "grain of the absolute."* The significance of the former is transient; it ceases to inspire as soon as men cease to believe in the illusions which it reflects. The latter retains its significance as long as the objective truth which it reflects remains important for society. The significance of the former does not extend beyond the sphere of consciousness (and of false consciousness at that); the latter links consciousness "by thousands of threads and nuances" with objective reality.

Hence the extent of the relationships contained in and revealed by the particular image of a work of art, the specific weight of the objective, absolute truth which is contained within its relative truth, provides an objective, unconditional and absolute standard for the evaluation of art.

(3) Marxist theory applies a dual standard to the evaluation of art; it first appreciates a given work in terms of its own *relative* standard which is conditioned by its period and to that work the *absolute* test whether its relative value contains a kernel of objective truth.

How this dual standard works may be illustrated by applying it to some of the artists mentioned in the course of this essay. The poems in which Tennyson transported the Victorians from the "cankering cares of daily life" and the "confusion of their philosophies to some entirely new field of existence, some place of rest," are perfect, if judged by the relative standard of Victorian middle class taste. They are far better, in terms of that standard, than most of the poems which his less distinguished contemporaries contributed to the Victorian "keepsakes" and "annuals." But they have ceased to have any meaning for us today, indeed they arouse our antipathy, because they are the complete expression of Victorian cant. Judged by the standard of objective truth they are unconditionally bad, because they evade the issues which were set to the poet by life.

This is not true, however, of those other poems in which Tennyson's true emotions break through the surface of assumed complacency. Judged by their own relative standard these poems seem to us today as perfect as the former type (although a careful study of contemporary criticism may reveal that the Victorians themselves were by no means always of the same opinion). Yet these poems can still stir us today, because the haunting fear and the perplexities focussed in them are a genuine, if confused, reflection of the realities which Tennyson's other poems ignore.

Thus Tennyson's poems fall into two main categories. Both reflect the relative standard of the Victorian middle class, both are perfect in terms of that standard. But the significance of the first group is purely relative, conditional and transient—so transient, in fact, that it has already vanished (except, of course, for the historian); while the significance of the second group survives, because their relative value contained a substratum of objective reality, a grain of the absolute.

The relative standard of appreciation exemplified by Tennyson's poems was only one of several standards existing at the time. What Tennyson himself thought of one of these other standards may be seen from the following lines which Mr. Harold Nicolson has rescued from the oblivion of the Collected Works:

"Authors—essayist, atheist, novelist, realist, rhymester, play your part,
Paint the mortal shame of nature with the living hues of Art.
Rip your brothers' vices open, strip your own foul passions bare;

Down with Reticence, down with Reverence—forward—naked—
let them stare.
Feed the budding rose of boyhood with the drainage of your
sewer;
Send the drain into the fountain, lest the stream should issue pure.
Set the maiden fancies wallowing in the troughs of Zolaism,—
Forward, forward, ay and backward, downward too into the
abysm."

Tennyson's aesthetic standards differed from those of Zola, as they did from those of Balzac or Shchedrin, because the theoretical positions taken up by these writers reflected the practical attitudes to life of much more progressive classes and strata of nineteenth century society. Hence their relative value scales are incompatible, and a consistent relativist should confess himself unable to compare the merits of their respective works. Nevertheless, we have no hesitation in assigning a far higher aesthetic value to the *Comédie Humaine* or to the *Golovlyov Family* or even to Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* cycle, than to Tennyson's best poems, because the works of Balzac and Shchedrin and Zola are far more profound reflections of objective truth than Tennyson's fragmentary and uncomprehending concessions to it.

Turning to another period and medium we shall arrive at the same conclusion if we compare Tennyson with Hogarth. Hogarth, too, is more significant, his work is better art, if judged by the absolute standard of objective truth, than that of Tennyson or, say, of Millais, to take a contemporary painter whose outlook resembled that of the Laureate. But it is interesting to note that Hogarth was also the pet aversion of Roger Fry. From his idealist standard of "pure form"—that relative standard of bourgeois decadence which he proclaimed as absolute—Fry was unable to appreciate the relative standard embodied in Hogarth's work, that is to say the fidelity and power with which Hogarth's images reflect the outlook of the great mass of the English people during the Walpole era. Still less was Fry able to recognize the objective truth contained in that relative standard. But what incensed Fry most of all was that "Hogarth, with his superficial common sense, his fundamental Philistinism" (!) turned "his back upon the cultured world and made an appeal, through his engravings, to a less sophisticated public," although he realized that "the only art that would attract them must tell a story with rather crude insistence."

Hence it was Fry's view that Hogarth's "influence on British art has been bad upon the whole. It has tended to sanction a disparagement of painting as a pure art—has tended to make artists think that they must justify themselves by conveying valuable, or important, or moral ideas." In the light of these views it is not surprising that Fry was blind also to the specific quality of Hogarth's formal designs. He censures Hogarth's "uncertain grasp of plastic form," his lack of composition, his insensitive drawing, etc., without in the least suspecting that Hogarth's often highly complex and most carefully thought-out designs might obey special laws of their own. Thus Fry must fall back on "the silvery tonality" of Hogarth's sketches or the "fat, buttery quality of his pigment," when compelled to pay a grudging tribute to the outstanding figure in British art.[39]

At this stage it is necessary to point out that the test of relative and absolute truth must never be applied exclusively to the content of a given work of art. It follows from the essential quality of the artistic image as a unity of content and form, that the truth embodied in its content can only have *aesthetic* significance if it is expressed in a form which strikes the imagination, instead of appealing *merely* to the intellect. A work of art which carries its message straight into the feelings and emotions of men by virtue of its vivid, concrete imagery, has greater value than one which lacks this vital power, even though the intellectual content of the former work may be less profound, less comprehensive and more encumbered with illusions.

What this means in concrete terms is shown by that masterly example of a Marxist appreciation which Lenin provided in his six articles on Tolstoi. The point at issue is defined in the sharpest possible way in the opening sentences of the first of these articles, *Tolstoi, Mirror of the Russian Revolution:*

"To link the name of this great artist with the revolution which he manifestly did not understand, from which he manifestly kept aloof, may at first sight appear strange and far-fetched. Can that be called a mirror which, admittedly, gives an incorrect reflection of things?"

Lenin then proceeds to show that, however faulty his interpretation of the revolution, Tolstoi was a great artist because he did reflect "at least some essential aspects" of his epoch. But that is only part of the answer. Even more significant, in the present context, than

this profound axiom, is the passage in a later article, *L. N. Tolstoi and the Modern Labor Movement,* in which Lenin defines the specific manner in which content and form are fused in Tolstoi's work:

"Tolstoi's criticism is not new," Lenin writes. "He has said nothing new, nothing which had not been said long ago both in European and Russian literature by those who were on the side of the toilers. But the peculiarity of Tolstoi's criticism and its historical significance consists in that he expressed with a power, of which only genius is capable, the crisis in the views of the widest masses of the people of Russia in the period mentioned, and of village, peasant Russia in particular. Tolstoi's criticism of modern customs differs from the criticism of these customs by the representatives of the modern labor movement in just the fact that Tolstoi adopted the point of view of the patriarchal, naïve peasant; that Tolstoi transfers the latter's psychology into his criticism, his doctrine. The reason Tolstoi's criticism is charged with such feeling, passion, conviction, freshness, sincerity, fearlessness in the attempt 'to get at the roots,' find the real reason for the state of the masses, is that his criticism really expresses the crisis in the views of millions of peasants who had only been emancipated from serfdom to find that this new freedom means only new horrors of ruin, starvation, a homeless life among city 'sharps,' etc. Tolstoi reflects their mood so accurately that he brings into his doctrine their own naïveté, their estrangement from politics, their mysticism, their desire to escape from the world, 'non-resistance to evil,' impotent anathemas of capitalism and the 'power of money.' The protest of millions of peasants and their despair—that is what is fused into Tolstoi's doctrine." [40]

Commenting on this passage in his article "Lenin and Literature," Lunacharski adds:

"Two ideas must be distinguished in this quotation: Tolstoi reflects the frame of mind of those whom he expresses 'so faithfully' that it mars his own teaching from the ideological point of view, because his protest is interwoven with despair, as distinct from the labor movement, also full of protest but to which despair is alien. Such 'faithfulness' is, of course, regrettable from the point of view of social content, from the point of view of revolutionary effectiveness, purity of influence. But this 'faithfulness' lends Tolstoi

'power of feeling, passion, conviction, freshness, sincerity, relentlessness,' and all this is, according to Lenin, Tolstoi's main merit—because 'Tolstoi's criticism is not new'—in other words, had Tolstoi given his criticism without this power of passion he would have added nothing to culture. In view, however, of the power of passion his 'criticism,' though 'not new,' proved to be 'a step forward in the art of mankind.' "[41]

There remains, finally, the problem which Plekhanov raised when he wrote, in commenting on Taine's definition of aesthetic relativism: "aesthetics—science—does not give us any theoretical basis, supporting ourselves on which we could say that Greek art merits admiration and Gothic art condemnation, or the reverse."[42]

To deal with this problem it is necessary to distinguish the aesthetic principles represented by the relative standards of the various styles from the works of art actually produced more or less in accordance with those principles. The distinction between the principle of a given style and the works actually produced in it is analogous to that between a philosophical or scientific system and the concrete discoveries made within the framework of that system. A principle or system which tends to deflect the artist or thinker from reality is unconditionally inferior to one which directs his energies towards objective truth. But one need only think of Hegel to realize that some of the greatest advances in human understanding have been made within the framework of a reactionary system of thought—or rather in spite of it. In other words, style in art, like system in philosophy or hypothesis in science, is historically conditioned, transitory and *relative,* but if we use the term in the wider sense of a period style (e.g. Greek, Gothic, etc.), there is not a single style in the history of art which has not produced some concrete advances towards the *absolute.* It is the task of scientific criticism to discover these concrete achievements of permanent significance within their relative and transitory shell.

If the history of art is examined from this point of view, it will be found that there is a continuous tradition of realism which started with the dawn of art (e.g. in the palaeolithic cave paintings) and which will survive to its end, for it reflects the productive intercourse between man and nature which is the basis of life. At that important phase in the development of society, when mental labor was divided from material labor, there emerged another,

secondary tradition of spiritualistic, religious or idealistic art. This, too, is continuous until it will vanish with the final negation of the division of labor—i.e. in a Communist world.* During this entire period of development, i.e. as long as society is divided into classes, the history of art is the history of the ceaseless struggle and mutual interpenetration of these two traditions. At successive, though widely overlapping phases corresponding to specific stages in the development of society, both these traditions, and also the results of their interplay, assume the historical *forms* which we call the "Classical," "Gothic," "Baroque," etc., styles. A Marxist *history* of art should describe, first, the *struggle* which is *absolute* between these two opposite and mutually exclusive trends, and secondly, their fleeting, conditional and *relative union*, as manifested in the different styles and in each work of art, and it should explain both these aspects of art in terms of the social processes which they reflect. Marxist *criticism* consists in discovering the specific weight within each style, each artist and each single work of those elements which reflect objective truth in powerful and convincing imagery. But it should always be remembered that, unlike science which reduces reality to a blue-print or formula, the images of art reveal reality in its infinite diversity and many-sided richness. And it is in its infinite diversity and many-sided richness that art, too, must be appreciated.

Conclusion

Realism, the attitude of the artist who strives to reflect some essential aspect of reality and to face the problems set by life, is from its very nature popular. It reflects the outlook of those men and women who produce the means of life. It is the only standard

* This is, of course, a schematic simplification of extremely complex historical processes. In particular, it is essential to be on one's guard against any *mechanical* correlation between materialism and the productive classes on the one hand and idealism and the exploiters on the other. In ancient Greece, for instance, as G. Thomson has shown, the spontaneous materialism of primitive Society was preserved and consolidated by the Ionian philosophers who represented the outlook of a merchant aristocracy, while Orphic mysticism, with its promise of a better life after death, appears to have originated among the dispossessed peasants and slaves who were worked to death in the gold and silver mines of Thrace (*Aeschylus and Athens*, London 1940). The outlook of the exploited classes always contained ele-

25. See *Literature and Marxism, A Controversy*. Critics Group, No. 9, New York, 1938.

26. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Selected Works, Vol. II, p. 347.

27. *What Is to Be Done?* Selected Works, Vol. II, pp. 88-9.

28. *German Ideology*, quoted in Lifshitz, *op. cit.*, p. 92 (my emphasis).

29. *Cf.* Max Dvorák: *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte*, Munich, 1924, esp. the paper on Bruegel, pp. 217 *et seq.*

30. *Critique of Political Economy*, Preface, English edition, 1904, p. 13.

31. *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, p. 17.

32. Marx: *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie*. Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe, Vol. I, p. 614.

33. Maxim Gorky: Soviet Literature, in Problems of Soviet Literature, Reports to the First Soviet Writers' Congress, London, 1934, p. 44.

34. Selected Works, Vol. XI, p. 82.

35. *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. International Publishers, New York, 1935, pp. 128-29.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

37. *Notes on Dialectics.*

38. *Ibid.*

39. Roger Fry: *Reflections on British Painting*. London, 1934, pp. 34 *et seq.*

40. Five of these articles are available in English in No. 6 of *Dialectics*, published by the New York Critics Group. All six are given in French in *Sur La Litérature et L'Art*, Vol. II, Lénine et Staline, edited by Jean Fréville, Paris, 1937. I have taken the present quotation from Lunacharski's article, *Lenin and Literature* in *International Literature*, 1935, I. 77-8.

41. *Op.-cit., pp.* 77-8.

42. Plekhanov: *Historical Materialism and the Arts*, quoted by Lunacharski, *op. cit.*

43. Clara Zetkin, *Reminiscences of Lenin*. International Publishers, New York, 1933.

44. William Morris: *The Art of the People* (1879). Nonesuch Press, 1942, p. 537.

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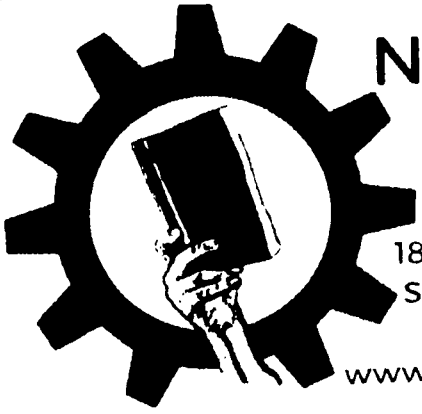

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