

# Socialist Realism

## EXTRACTS FROM A DOCUMENT BY A YOUNG SOVIET WRITER

*"The following extracts have been translated from the French text, which originally appeared in the February, 1959, Esprit. They are reprinted here with kind permission of the Editors. It is written by a young Russian writer, and is undoubtedly the first criticism of official 'academism' to reach us from a Russian writer living in that country. One will easily understand why it could not be published in the Soviet Union, and why the article appears here anonymously. The cuts we have made in the text are indicated: but they alter neither the tone nor the structure of the document. Certain passages may seem strange, or exaggerated to Western readers, but they must be read within the context of official literary policy which he is attacking. He uses a devastating irony to make his points, but his point of view is not backward-looking or 'reactionary'. It is a most important statement. It is important to remember that the document was written before the 'Pasternak affair' broke, and that, being translated here from the French, there have been some insurmountable problems about rendering accurately in English Russian idioms and turns of phrase.*

WHAT is socialist realism? What does this odd expression which grates on the ear, signify? Can we speak of a socialist, capitalist, Christian or Muslim realism? Does this irrational idea correspond to something real? Perhaps it does not exist. Perhaps it is a dream of an intellectual, paralysed with fear, arisen from the frightening darkness of the Stalin dictatorship? Or it may well be a question of the crude demagogy of Zhdanov or of a senile whim of Gorky? Is it fiction, a myth, a propaganda trick?

Apparently these questions are often posed in the West; they are ardently discussed in Poland; we also meet them in our society where they agitate the restive spirits who fall into the heresies of doubt and criticism.

At the same time, literature, painting, the theatre and the Soviet cinema are striving to prove at all costs that they exist. The output of socialist realism is estimated in thousands of millions of printed sheets, in miles of canvas and film, in centuries of hours. Thousands of critics, pedagogues and art critics worry their heads off and lose their voices in the process of establishing, explaining and making understood its materialist character and its dialectical nature. And the Head of the State in person, the First Secretary of the C.P., tears himself away from urgent economic questions in order to pronounce weighty words on the aesthetic problems of the nation.<sup>1</sup>

"Moreover, it must contribute to the ideological transformation and education of workers in the spirit of socialism".-

This harmless formulation serves as the foundation for the whole structure of socialist realism. It defines both the relation of realism of the era of socialism to that of the past and that which distinguishes the one from the other. Both aim at an image *conforming to reality*; but socialist realism supplies a new element because it grasps life *in its revolutionary motion* and is able to develop the mind of readers and spectators as a consequence of this perspective, that is, *in the spirit of socialism*.

The old realists or, as they are often called, the realistic critics (because they criticised bourgeois society)—Balzac, Tolstoy, Chekhov, etc., gave reality a true picture. But they were not aware of the genius of Marx's teaching, they could not foresee the future victories of Socialism and in any case, they had no idea of the actual concrete means to take in order to attain it. That was their tragedy, their "historical limitations".

Socialist realism has for its weapons, the doctrine of Marxism; it is enriched by experience of struggle and victories; it is the Communist Party, its friend and most vigilant teacher, which inspires it. While describing present reality, it hears the march of history and casts a look towards the future. It sees "visible traces of communism" not discernible to the ordinary eye. It thus constitutes definite progress in proportion to the art of the past and attains the highest peak of artistic evolution of humanity, the most realistic realism.

Such is, in a few words, the general outline of our art, an astonishingly simple scheme and, at the same time, sufficiently elastic to allow Gorky, Mayakovsky, Aragon, Ehrenburg and a hundred other socialist realists, great and small, to be included. But we shall understand nothing if we glide along the surface of this dry formula without attempting to penetrate its deep and hidden meaning.

At the basis of the formula which preoccupies us (accurate and historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development) is found the idea of the Aim, of this ideal which is all embracing and towards which reality tends—of which one gives an accurate picture—in an inevitable revolutionary movement. To direct this movement and to help the reader, by transforming his consciousness, to advance towards the Aim, such is the meaning of socialist realism which is in our time, the art which is most clearly orientated towards a defined aim.

This aim is Communism, known in its early days under the name of Socialism. The poet does not only write poetry; he helps Communism to be built through his poetry. It is just as natural as to see alongside him, engaged in the same task, the sculptor, the musician, the agronomist, the engineer, the labourer, the policeman, the barrister; the machines, the theatres, the guns, the newspapers. . . . As with all our culture and our whole system our art it totally theological. It is subordinate to the supreme end which confers upon it *its lettres de noblesse*. In the end, we are all living only to hasten the coming of Communism. . . .

There are periods in history when the presence of the Aim is evident, when the paltry passions are engulfed by the search for God and when He begins to openly attract humanity to himself. It is thus that the culture of Christianity has arisen and it has seized upon the Aim in perhaps its most inaccessible (obscure) meaning. Next the era of individualism proclaimed the liberty of the individual and with the Renaissance one began to bow before it as before the Aim. Humanism, the Superman, Democracy, Robespierre and other entreaties. Now we

have entered the era of a new world system, the era of Socialism.

A dazzling light pours down from this summit. "This world that we imagine is more material and conforms more to the needs of man than the Christian paradise . . ." said the Soviet writer Leonid Leonov about communism.'

We lack words to speak about it. We suffocate with enthusiasm, and to describe this splendour which awaits us, we use many negative comparisons. There, in the communist world, there will be neither rich nor poor, there will be neither money nor wars, prisons or frontiers; there will be neither sickness, nor perhaps even death. Everyone will eat and work as much as he wishes, and the work instead of being a misery, will bring only joy. As Lenin promised, we shall make the toilets out of pure gold. But what do I say?

*What colours and what words would suffice*

*To conjure up these grandiose pinnacles?*

*Where the hangmen are as gentle as mothers*

*And the prostitutes as modest as virgins.*

The modern mind is powerless to imagine anything as beautiful and as sublime as ideal communism. What it can do better is to put the old ideas of Christian love or the freedom of the individual back into circulation. But for the moment it is not in a state to launch a more up-to-date aim. . . .

The ingenious discovery of Marx was to have been able to prove that the earthly paradise about which many people before him had also dreamed was the aim assigned to humanity by destiny. Going beyond the sphere of moral efforts of isolated individuals (where are you, age of gold?) communism, with the help of Marx, has entered on to the stage of world history which has taken a direction, unknown until now, by becoming the history of the march of humanity towards communism.

In a single stroke, everything has been put into place. An iron necessity, a strict hierarchy have ordered the course of centuries. The monkey has got up on his hind legs and started his triumphal march towards communism. The world of primitive communism was necessary for the emergence of the slave system; slavery was necessary for the appearance of feudalism; feudalism was indispensable to the arrival of capitalism; capitalism so that communism might arise. That is all! The magnificent aim is achieved, the pyramid is crowned, history is completed. . . .

The theological essence of Marxism shows itself above all in the articles, expositions and works of its later theoreticians who have adopted the clearness, the accuracy and the direct style of military orders and economic decrees. As an example, we can cite the judgment of Stalin on the significance of ideas and theories taken from the IVth chapter of the Short History of the C.P.S.U. (B):

"There are different kinds of social ideas and theories. There are old ideas and theories which have outlived their day and which serve the interests of the moribund forces of society. Their significance lies in the fact that they hamper the development, the progress of society. Then there are new and advanced ideas and theories which serve the interests of the advanced forces of society. Their significance lies in the fact that they facilitate the development, the progress of society . . ."

For a long time, as long as its remarkable author was of this world, the Short History of the C.P.S.U.(B) was the favourite book of every Soviet citizen. Everyone who could read and write was invited to study it ceaselessly, and particularly Chapter IV which contained the quintessence of Marxist faith and which was written by Stalin personally. So that one might understand the universal value attributed

to it, I will quote an extract from the novel of V. Ilienkov "The Highway":

"Old Degtiariev brought a little book and said: 'Here in Chapter IV everything is said'. Vincenti Ivanovich took the book and thought: 'There is no book on earth where everything necessary to man is said'. But soon Vincenti Ivanovich, a kind intellectual sceptic, understood that he was wrong and accepted the opinion of Degtiariev which united that of all progressives: 'In this book all that man needs is stated'."

Here, each word is subordinated to the idea of the Aim. Even that which does not contribute to the progress of humanity towards the Aim has a meaning: to hinder it (without doubt Satan had in older times a comparable value). "The idea", "the Super-structure", "the base", "the natural law", "the economy", "the forces of production", all these abstract and impersonal categories are suddenly brought to life, have taken on flesh and blood, they have taken on the looks of gods and heroes, of angels and demons. They have produced aims and through the rows of philosophic treatises and scientific manuals have retained the voices of a great religious mystery: "The superstructure is created by the base precisely in order to serve it . . ."<sup>4</sup>

Thus the world history of human thought has existed, so to say, only to prepare the way for the appearance of "historical materialism", that is of Marxism, the philosophy of communism.

## ***In The Name of The Aim***

Thus has it been set up before us, this unique Aim of creation, beautiful as eternal life and obligatory as death. And we rushed towards It, smashing the barriers and throwing behind us all that could retard our frantic course. We have been liberated and without regret from belief in the other world, from loving one another, from freedom of the individual and other prejudices, rather worn out and above all much more miserable than the ideal which was opening before us. In the name of the new religion, thousands of martyrs of the revolution gave up their lives, eclipsing by their sufferings, courage, and sanctity, the deed of the first Christians:

*Five-pointed stars on our backs*

*By aristocrats were branded*

*Up to the neck*

*While yet alive*

*We were buried*

*By the bands of Mamontov*

*Locomotive boiler burned by Japanese*

*Who fill our mouths with lead and tin.*

*Forswear.' They scream*

*But from their fiery throat three words :*

*Long live Communism!*

(Mayakovsky)

But it is not only our life, our blood, our bodies which we have given to the new God. We have sacrificed to him our soul, white as the snow, and we have splattered it with all the filth of the world.

It is good to be nice, to drink tea with our jam, to plant flowers, to cultivate love, humility, non-resistance to evil and other philanthropies. But who have they saved and what have they changed in the world, these old men and these withered virgins, these egotists through humanism who have made for themselves penny by penny an easy conscience and have assured for themselves a good little place in the other world? We have not wanted health for ourselves but for the whole of humanity. And instead of a sentimental sigh, of individual perfection and charity galas for the benefit of the starving, we have begun to put