

# PROBLEMS OF SOVIET ÆSTHETICS

*(The following discussion was held in March, 1948, by the Academy of Social Sciences attached to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. It is given here as an example of Soviet artistic controversy, and as a useful reminder that discussions of this kind are continuous and frequent in the U.S.S.R., and the questions dealt with not disposed of once and for all by some "decree" from on high.)*

*This particular discussion, which has been condensed from "Voprosi Filosofii," No. 1 of 1948, has been chosen as being of convenient length, but there are in the S.C.R. Library, and in some cases available for purchase, translations of other papers.)*

Opening Statement by M. M. Rosenthal

**T**HE undeveloped state of our theory of æsthetics is one of the reasons for the shortcomings in literature and art.

Æsthetics is the science of the laws of artistic development and of the principles of artistic creation. Like all sciences, it is historical, being the result of philosophical generalisation of particular stages in the development of art. As the theory of art, it is of great importance for artistic creation, since it arms the artist with a definite ideology, points out general principles, and links art with the class struggle and the Party.

Æsthetics is the theoretical foundation of art criticism. A criticism which is not based on a scientifically developed theory becomes subjective, arbitrary, without principle and dependent on the senses.

Soviet æsthetic theory has critically transmuted all that is valuable in the æsthetic theories of the past, particularly the ideological inheritance of the Russian revolutionary democrats of the 19th century. It generalises the experience of socialist art, which, arising for the first time in history, deals with completely new social relations, morality, and heroic figures. The greatness of our epoch is reflected in the art of socialist realism.

Soviet æsthetics is founded on a materialist interpretation of history. Its aims as a science is to arm Soviet art, artists, and cultural workers, with a clear and accurate Marxist æsthetic conception, and to inculcate a healthy artistic taste in the people of the U.S.S.R. corresponding to the structure of the whole of Soviet society. During the discussion on Soviet philosophy,

Comrade Zhdanov\* spoke of the necessity of a fighting offensive against the remnants of capitalism in people's consciousness. The rôle of Soviet art in this task is to develop a socialist consciousness among the masses and to educate the people in the selfless spirit of Soviet Communist patriotism.

The ideologists of dying bourgeois art moan *ad nauseam* about the Communist Party's "interference" in the "free" sphere of artistic creation. They are unable and unwilling to understand that, in the Communist Party's struggle to find the right way of development for Soviet art, there has been abandoned the old lordly, anarchist, individualist view of art as creative work for a chosen few, as a realm inaccessible to the ordinary mass of the people—a view which flourishes in the soil of bourgeois society and is fatal for art.

Soviet æsthetics must criticise contemporary bourgeois æsthetic theory, which reflects the disintegration of capitalist art; must struggle against formalism and other manifestations of decadent art; and must define the relationship between Soviet socialist art and the classical heritage.

For many years a fierce battle has raged round the place of the heritage of the past in Soviet art. Many representatives of the pre-revolutionary bourgeois intellectuals tried to foist on to Soviet art, in its earliest days, the stock-in-trade of the bourgeois formalists, in the name of "innovation." By setting its face against formalism and naturalism, and concentrating on classical realism as the most valuable element in the art of the past, the Party raised to a higher plane the struggle for progressive art waged by

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Belinsky\* Herzen, Dobrolyubov, and, in his best works, Plekhanov.

Soviet art owes its present success to the Party's stand against the numerous groups and coteries (ranging from the Futurists,† Bogdanovites, and the Constructivists, to the Litfront and vulgar sociologists (such as Fritsche and Pereverzev), who were pushing Soviet art to the abyss of bourgeois modernism. Nevertheless, remnants of this attitude, and of an idealist approach to art, still exist in Soviet literature, art, and music. The struggle against them to-day, when the world is dividing into the hostile camps of democracy and imperialism, is bitter and politically important.

Because the principles of Marxist aesthetics have not been sufficiently worked out, our criticism has not been able to evaluate the heritage of the past, or to combat the formalist influence and remnants of liberalism in Soviet art.

**D**EVELOPMENT of the classical heritage does not mean reviving it together with its weaknesses. Socialist realism is a new form, reflecting a fundamental turning point in the development of social relations. The new art of a freed people produces the highest form of artistic realism—socialist realism. This is the kernel of Soviet aesthetics: we must define the distinction between Socialist realism and all other forms of artistic realism in the past—a distinction not always clear to our literary men and art theorists. Pavel Antokolsky,‡ for example, writes that perhaps the most important requirement of art is "the novelty of discovery" as opposed to "the familiar."

This demand for novelty in general, regardless of ideological content, leads to the purest formalism. Some critics (B.

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\*Vissarion Belinsky (1811-48), Nikolai Dobrolyubov (1836-61), Alexander Herzen (1812-70)—Russian literary critics, 19th century revolutionary democrats and social thinkers. Georgi Plekhanov (1856-1918)—One of the founders of Russian Social-Democracy and Marxism, writer on problems of aesthetics, culture, and history.

†Groups of extreme pseudo-Left workers in the intellectual field, appearing soon after the 1917 Revolution and maintaining their sway in the early 1920s. Lost influence after 1930.

‡Poet. Born 1896. Biographical material on life and work in "Soviet Writer's Reply" (S.C.R. 2s.), as well as his answers to questions put by British writers. Stalin prize-winner. Article on poetry and culture in journal "Znamya" No. 1, 1947. Comments on his reviews of work in "Novy Mir" No. 5, 1948.

Byalik\* and others) define socialist realism as a kind of synthesis of old trends—realism together with romanticism. They consider this the whole difference between Soviet art and the art of the past, in which these trends were separate.

They emphasise the importance of romanticism in Soviet art, and it unquestionably contains the beginnings of a revolutionary romanticism. These beginnings, enabling us to depict the to-morrow of our society, stem from the very nature of our kind of realism, which arises out of the heroic character of Soviet life. Byalik wrongly maintains that this revolutionary romanticism appears because realism is flat, empirical, and naturalist. He has described a socialist realism *without* realism, talking about anything in the world except reality, except the need to know it, study it, and depict it truthfully. He drowns the understanding of the realist nature of Soviet art in abstract discussions about "thought."

The appearance in history of the proletariat, its heroic struggle against capitalism and to establish a new socialist system, brings fresh life to art and to realism, its most important trend. But this is not just a return of life—it is the truth of the new and only consistent realism—socialist realism. Only Soviet art can be realistic in the full sense, because of the tremendous changes which have taken place in the life of society and the history of mankind as a result of the October revolution.

Socialist realism is a method of art to reflect the new and the excellent in our reality, and to struggle for a new, Communist world. This must be the starting point for an aesthetic analysis of socialist realism. To call it a synthesis of realism and romanticism ignores its position as a new qualitative development, which for the first time in the history of art fuses ideology and artistic truth. The philosophical foundations of socialist realism make it possible for the artist to understand the dialectics of reality, to examine life as it develops, to feel the new and see to-morrow and to fight for the future. It demands of the artist, not only a truthful picture of reality, but also that he influences human consciousness in the construction of a new world, fighting against everything which hinders the advance of Soviet society and for the success of the great principles of Communism.

Hence the fundamental value of the best in Soviet literature lies in its realism, which is a socialist realism. One cannot ignore, as Byalik does, the essence of Soviet art and reduce the whole matter to a question of "raising" above reality the heroes of Soviet literature. This is to ignore reality, when all that is needed is to depict reality truthfully.

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\*Writer and literary critic. Specialist on Gorky. Articles in connection with discussion on socialist realism appear in the journal "Oktyabr" No. 11, 1947, and Nos. 2 and 5, 1948.

Continued on Page 32

# BIOLOGY IN THE SOVIET UNION

By A. G. Morton

**T**HE Session of the All-Union Lenin Academy of Agricultural Science, held in August, 1948, was devoted to a discussion of fundamental biological theory, which centred round the conflict between two opposing trends in genetics, between the Weismann-Morgan-Mendelist trend, the basis of contemporary genetics outside the Soviet Union, and the Michurinist trend, represented by Academician T. D. Lysenko and his co-workers.

The main report\* (now available in English) was given by T. D. Lysenko, and after a lively, exhaustive, and hard-hitting discussion, in which the opposition had full opportunity to put their case, the Lysenko-Michurinist standpoint was fully endorsed and thus accepted as the future line of development of biological science.

This controversy has aroused much interest and not a little excitement among geneticists and other scientists outside the Soviet Union, and has also been made the occasion for a number of ill-informed and sometimes ill-natured attacks on Soviet science. A study of the detailed report of this conference (shortly to be available in English) is sufficient answer to attacks of this kind.

In the first place, the serious nature of the discussion is evident; the scientists and agricultural specialists from all over the Soviet Union who took part in it were fully conscious of the vital importance for the future progress of Soviet agriculture of a correct solution of the questions at issue. In the second place, it must be admitted, even by those who disagree with Lysenko, that he has made a very important challenge to current biological theory, which will require serious consideration and which cannot be answered simply by abuse.

Before giving an account of Lysenko's standpoint, it is necessary to remind the reader of the background of the biological controversy in the Soviet Union, since this is essential for a correct understanding of the questions at issue. The conflict between the Mendelists and the Michurinists has, in fact, been going on in the Soviet Union for something like twenty years, although only occasionally has any echo of it reached the British public, owing to the haphazard and often distorted selection of information from Russia by the Press and radio. Thus, to the

Soviet republic, the recent discussion represented the final summing-up and settling of a long and familiar controversy.

Furthermore, the theoretical decision in favour of Michurinism as against Mendelism was only taken when the question had already been settled in practice by the relative contributions of the two theories to the development of Socialist agriculture. Michurinism, as developed by Lysenko, made tremendous contributions to solving the problems of the collective farms, which were reflected in greatly increased yields of agricultural products. Mendelism on the other hand, is considered to have played a relatively insignificant role in the progress of socialist agriculture, and to hold little hope for the future. Any appreciation of Lysenko's theoretical position must take these facts into consideration.

The first part of Lysenko's statement is concerned with the criticism and rejection of the chromosome theory of heredity, which Lysenko regards as merely a development of Weismann's doctrine of the existence of a changeless hereditary substance (the germplasm or, in modern terminology, the genome), which bears the heredity and controls the development of an organism, but which is itself unaffected by the conditions of life of the organism and is passed on unchanged from one generation to the next.

The modern chromosome theory, for all its elaboration of genes and plasmogenes, is essentially based on the Weismann conception of a special hereditary substance isolated from the internal and external environmental conditions of the organism. It is, of course, recognised that certain definite environmental conditions are required for the actual development of an organism and for the realisation of its hereditary potentialities. What Mendelism denies is the existence of any effect of these environmental conditions on the hereditary material, and therefore the possibility of the inheritance of acquired characters is also denied. Changes in the hereditary material are indeed recognised, but these mutations are entirely fortuitous and undirected, even though they may be deliberately induced by the use of colchicine or X-rays.

**L**YSENKO rejects the basic assumption of Mendelism, the existence of an unchanging hereditary substance, because it is contrary to facts and is idealistic and metaphysical. It is inconsistent, for example, with the existence of vegetative hybrids which the Michurinists

\*Lysenko, T. D. *Soviet Biology*.  
Birch Books. 1948. 2s. 6d.