

Castle Hedingham. Halstead. Essex. Feb 7 1963

To George Lukacs, Budapest V, Belgrade Rkp 2 V E M S

My dear Lukacs

Martin Eve has sent me a copy of your The Meaning of Contemporary Realism. (Eve is an old friend of mine and has published a book of mine on my field archaeology.) I at once asked the Daily Worker if I could review it, but they had sent it out - I enclose the review - not so bad - that D. Craig did of it. I shall ask James Klugmann if I can do a long essay on it for Marxism Today, which will in fact be better than a short review.

There are a few points I'd like to raise out of the endless ideas which this very exciting and important work has stirred in me.

Terminology. One of the difficulties is that the terms Romantic and Naturalist have both an historical and a general critical significance. I think one way of getting over this unfortunate duality is to use capitals for the historical use (Romantic and Naturalist), lowercase for the critical (romantic and naturalist).

2. Naturalist as an historical term involves Tolstoy as well as Zola, Ibsen as well as Flaubert, etc. Historically it means a big advance in the handling of everyday material, a new sense of Time, a new sense of complex interrelations. It thus represents (historically) an advance on the romantic phase (which runs from Fielding and Sterne to Balzac and Dickens), which involved a new sense of the interrelation of individual and society, of the massforces and the individual; again a new time pattern.

3. The critical terms romantic and naturalist we use generally for the weak and failing side of these 2 movements. Thus, naturalist as a critical (and pejorative) term expresses the ways and extents to which the writer was weighed down by the new range, the new need to incorporate a vast amount of newly-realised detail and relationships inside the artistic form; "romantic" as a critical term is used to express the ways in which the writer lost himself in the necessarily confused aspirations of the new breakthrough.

4. Realism. If one is using this term to express the concrete grasp by the writer of life in its fullness, in its dialectical movement, then there is no one realism. There is a whole series of realisms from the days of the paleolithic painters on, and there is an accompanying set of evasions or distortions of reality.

Of course there is also continuity. There is something in common between, say, the painters in the French limestone caves and Renoir or Van Gogh (to take some of the latest examples of artists with a considerable realist element), just as there ~~are~~ is something in common between the abstractions of the late paleolithic period and modern abstract art. But one is going to create an extreme confusion unless one stresses that realism

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is an historical as well as a general critical term.

I have seen this confusion at work in the Soviet Union, partly because of over-rationalist elements in the working out of Marxism, partly because of the remarkably brief period of literature in Russia -- essentially only since 1800 (the patriotic efforts to inflate the preparatory work of the 18th century do not convince). Therefore the only realism that Russia has known is a variety of the Romantic (given its particular direction by Pushkin), and the Naturalist (given its classic and realist form by Tolstoy).

In talking with Russians I have found they are proud, rather that sorry, that they lack the great continuity of say English literature with its splendid beginnings in tribal forms (Beowulf) etc; its rich medieval or Gothic tradition (Langland, Chaucer, the Grene Knight etc etc), its Renaissance forms, its important Baroque developments.... All these forms of realism are very different from those of the Naturalism of ^{the} Tolstoyan Epoch and so are looked on as derelictions from a god-given (bourgeois-given) norm. In this sense Tolstoy overshadows Russian literature in a bad as well as a good way.

If Naturalism (in the historical sense) is taken as the climax and end-all of realism, then the road to the future is cut; and this is one of the critical ~~reasons~~ reasons for the confusions of Socialist Realism that you admirably trace, its turning into an abstract or utopian form. The basis is lacking for a new unification in which the relation of individual and ~~society~~ society is grasped within the new dialectical totality.

Of course many other factors have played their part in the turning of socialist realism into an abstract form - above all, social and political factors - but the above sort of critical confusion helps to make the distortion possible.

Another point I'd like to raise, on which you briefly touch. For X The "modernist" beginnings of writers like Mayakovsky, Neruda, Aragon, Eluard etc. Soviet critics with their usual opacity treat such beginnings as a mere pis-aller which the writer had to discard. True, he had to outgrow it, but by absorbing it in a larger whole, not by discarding it.

The Soviet viewpoint cuts the writer off from reality and shows the typical contempt for the realities of art tradition - as if a writer's aesthetic was a sort of spontaneous combustion from his social position. In fact, all that you so powerfully define as modernism is also a true reflection of bourgeois reality (in the spiritual sense). To ignore it and to try to start from some abstract point of "absolute realism" is to run at once into the abstract socialist realism you define. The bourgeois or modernist forms are a part of social reality, an essential part though not the whole part. The writer must take them in and transform them by adding what is missing in them.

Otherwise he cannot truly define bourgeois alienation, what comes over into socialism (I will do so ^{in the ending of the State} as division of labour)

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What he will take, the exact angle of his absorption and new-departure, will of course depend on many factors - his artistic character, his social position, his age etc etc. But he must struggle with modernism, not ignore it. Why Soviet pictorial art is so barren and empty is ~~not~~ because it ignores Cezanne and all the following developments -- does not struggle with them and in the process transform them. It tries to start from an abstract point of socialist realism, which is in fact an abstraction from bourgeois Naturalism (in both its historical and its critical pejorative senses).

If Mayakovsky had never been a futurist, he would never have been the revolutionary poet he was. If Eluard had never been a surrealist, he would never have attained the subtle definition of personal relationships in a series of new (fundamentally socialist) harmonies.

These points are I think in the key of your argument though you do not make explicit this particular point.

There are many other things I'd like to say, out of the stimulus of your short though wonderfully rich and fecund book. I'll try to say some of them in Marxism Today.

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I know you are very busy, but I am going to send you a copy of the 3rd vol. of my autobiography, Fanfrolico and After. Though couched in personal terms, this is the story of the transformation of modernist and subjective-idealist existentialist positions into those of marxism. Told not in abstract terms but in terms of personal struggle involving all aspects of the personality. I think I am correct in saying that it is the only book in any language to attempt to do so.

Its theme is therefore very close to your own critical theses, to the question of Marxist ethics etc etc. And I would like you very much to read it. The full dialectical picture needs the 2 previous volumes (Life Rarely Tells, youth in Queensland - spontaneous poetic and revolutionary outbreak without understanding; The Roaring Twenties, the surrender to a particular brand of modernism, Australian Nietzscheanism etc), but the 3rd volume in which the two opposites are brought together and resolved can stand by itself and is the one that I think would most interest you.

with all good wishes for yourself and your work

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