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Leon Trotsky's Views on Literature

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Abstract

This paper is on Marxist definition on literature as conceived by Leon Trotsky in his book *Literature and Marxism*. Trotsky tried to find out the epistemology of literary production as well as reception, and how it coped along with the changes in the society. In this book, he provides an explanation on literature and the proletariat's understanding of it. Literature delves into the materialistic derivative within social relations and it is the proletariat who primarily explores it through his class consciousness. The paper highlights this endeavor of the proletariat as described by Trotsky. A Marxist idea evolves out of such a reading of the book, which has its relevance even in the modern age.

Key words: Marxism, Proletariat, Intelligentsia, Revolutionary Art, Futurism.

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Leon Trotsky (1879 – 1940), to some of the students of Marxism at present, may appear as a person of Machiavellian ethics than a true revolutionary. His ideas were subjected to acute criticism, both by Marxists and non-Marxists. Nevertheless, his written works stand as a perfect resource material for one who tries to sketch the trajectory of Marxism during first-half of the previous century. It is a fact that his notions took diversions at critical times of the movement, but it was not politically motivated.

In his book, *Literature and Marxism* (1924), Trotsky attempts to figure out how literature and art can be utilized for the revolutionary movement. He defines the politics of various writers who can arbitrarily be considered within certain groups like the “émigré intelligentsia”, “the fellow travelers”, “the changing landmark” etc. But irrespective of what these writers thought, he observed that they were totally helpless to accelerate the movement. He says, “Art showed a terrifying helplessness, as always in the beginning of a great epoch.” (16) Those revolutionary years were the time of utter poetic silence to Trotsky. He described the émigré intelligentsia as a group who “hoped” the bourgeois to come back in power. At the same time he finds the works of Nicolai Kliuev, Sergey Yessenin and some others as having the revolutionary tendency who he categorized as the “fellow travelers”. Kliuev supported the revolution because it freed the peasant. He was a writer of the rustic life. Trotsky says, “He promises paradise through the Revolution, but this paradise is only an exaggerated and embellished peasant kingdom” (26) He criticizes Kliuev’s works for it lacked political dynamics and historical perspective. Nevertheless, Kliuev meant revolution as a medium for the peasant’s emancipation and that made him a fellow traveler to the Revolution of the proletariat. Yessenin, on the other hand, gave more importance to imagery and his revolutionary consciousness had been swept away in the overflow of poetic images. Trotsky found the traits of Futurism in him.

The Serapion Fraternity which included Nikolai Nikitin, comprised of young writers who came to literature through revolution rather than the other way round. Trotsky despised them for lacking tendency and showing themselves as the brooding sort. At this juncture, he finds an artist as a person who links life with its social relations in an organic period which is almost without the involvement of critical reason. The slogan of ‘art for art’s sake’ seemed very significant to the Serapions, which Trotsky, being a Marxist, could not accept. He makes it clear that spontaneity which is the nature of youth has to be replaced by creativity which is well-shaped by technique. It happens only through discipline. Therefore, by analyzing Serapions, Trotsky is indirectly suggesting the features that an artist of revolution should have. Like Georg Lukacs, he condemned spontaneity and notion of spontaneous expression as pure art. This generation of poets and writers has drawn themselves into the whirlwind of revolution without prior preparation and political knowledge. Trotsky clarifies that revolution is not an apparatus which provide apparent joy which these artists vision, instead, it is “a conception, an organization, a plan, a work” (28). Even though these artistic “fellow travelers” (including the Serapions) cannot be taken as contributors to revolution, they still remain inseparable from it. Being outside the revolution according to Trotsky means being a part of the émigrés, that is the intellectual bourgeois. (29)

Boris Pilnyak turns out to be an ideal contributor to revolution. Trotsky, while citing him, makes it clear that revolution if taken episodically is rather significant. The success of an artist lies in overcoming this episodic character and realizing the historical crystallization which lies within. An artist, like a proletariat has to strive through endless trails to find the best way of creating a well established society which Trotsky identifies with a well-based house. Pilnyak emerges as a true revolutionary artist for Trotsky, because in the midst of lice and mud he emerges with the agony of birth. He says, “. . . he (Pilnyak) wants to make one feel birth.” (29)

An artist should recognize revolution as the invisible axis which can change the course of chaotic and unsettled life. At the same time he (artist) has to be aware of Reformation, Renaissance and Revolution as part of a whole. But Pilnyak ceased to become so because of duality in precision. He proclaims revolution but could not rationalize it artistically. It is because

he was not able to grasp it intellectually. It is this inability which makes him consider revolution as “retrogressional”. (30) Pilnyak, also in this manner, accentuates what the fellow travelers like Kliuev had to say, that is transformation of revolution into peasant revolts. Trotsky reiterates that such a perception merely simplifies these artists’ creative abilities. He responds thus: “The proletarian revolution can be technically and culturally completed and justified only through electrification, and not through a return to the candle, through the materialistic philosophy of a working optimism and not through woodland superstitions and stagnant fatalism.” (31) The romantic and ideological depiction through art, which these artists ardently comply with, only leads to rejection of Revolution. Trotsky is of the view that all these ideals embellished through art, morals, religion and philosophy served only to deceive the oppressed. (31) In place of it, Revolution should emerge with its objective tasks which are historic. It is possible only with the proletariat leading from the front, that too from the city. Diverting the protests to rural towns will weaken the whole action. There is also a chance, if it becomes a peasant’s revolt; for the bourgeois intelligentsia to take control of it based on regional idealistic superstitions. These artists along with the thinking lot from the rural sections thus constitute a ‘national’ ideology which will only end up in a narrow understanding of persisting problems of the nation. It is worth questioning how Trotsky took the 'return to bast shoe' and other imageries used by the writers of intelligentsia as an obstacle to revolution (32), and how the conscious turn to the past as seen in fashion and literature, as Pilvanov suggests, be taken for elements favoring revolution. Trotsky considers the nationality preached by these artists thus: “It follows that the national is only that which represents the dead weight of evolution, from which the spirit of action has flown and which the national organism in the past centuries has digested and thrown off.” (32 - 33)

Revolutionary art is not supposed to uphold the heroism of the fallen or triumph of victorious because, Trotsky observes, these are part of war of violence too. Its main objective is to create a revolutionary class which has mastered all these instruments of struggle, there by constituting a new ideal for man. It carries on the struggle along with the proletariat in his rise and fall until the achievement of victory.

After the defeated Revolution of 1905, war erupted in 1914, which according to Trotsky, intersected with the growing line of the new Revolution. Nationalism and military struggle took the main stage, and expressed itself as the will of the nation. Socialism at this juncture seemed to be buried forever. But it re-emerged at the moment of its imminent fall by transforming the imperialistic war into civil one, which culminated in the comprehensive victory of the proletariat in 1917. Trotsky owes this success to the perseverance and compassion showed by the proletariat. They remained calm when the bourgeois was lashing out during the war with their pseudo-nationalistic spirit. Trotsky observes that the aesthetics and romance of the writers would help only to herald the heroism of a revolution which is unsuccessful. The true element of a victorious revolution lies in the materialistic dialectics of class struggle. Revolutionary strategy is perfect like a mathematical formula. He says, “. . . clarity, realism, the physical power of thought, a merciless consistency, a lucidity and solidity of line, which come not from the village, but from industry, from the city, from the last word of its spiritual development - are the fundamental traits of the October Revolution . . .” (34)

Labor is teleological according to Trotsky as far it contains within the rationally directed expenditures of energy. Similarly, art also is teleological provided that it is not diverting from real-life activity. Politics is an embodiment of teleology and revolution is condensed politics.

Therefore art is related to revolution, that too teleologically, unless it deviates from the purpose of labor. This teleology is made available more in the present than in the past or future. The present implies that which is conscious of the changes happening and not the conservative conscious which rely more in the joys of the past as followed by “fellow travelers” and others. The latter are in fact not aware of their teleological presence. That is the reason why they tend to believe Revolution as a mere agrarian revolt.

If these artists represented the peasants, there came another group which carried the forebodings of the future. They are the Futurists. They might resemble the proletariats in their rejection of the past. But it is an inflated form of ‘bohemian nihilism’ than “proletarian revolutionism” according to Trotsky. For Futurists it is an involuntary activity whereas for the proletariats it is a part of the living process. Futurists delve outside the realms of poetry. At certain point of Russian Revolution, Futurism was used as a tool, and Futurist poets began to be considered as communists. But they too, like the peasant poets began to preach duality. Their objective sometimes got centered towards the revolution and most of the time towards style of their poetry. Trotsky finds similarity between the futurists and the intelligentsia, since both gave importance to images than reality. Futurists concentrated on the form and intelligentsia the content to this image. Thus both groups form part of the same family, that is the old bourgeois, though their origins were different. Futurists are bohemian, whereas the intelligentsia is rustic.

One school which emerged from futurism and challenged Russian Marxism was Formalism. It was represented by the Futurist Viktor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson along with others. To them, verbal art ends in word itself and depictive art in color. They consider the social and psychological content, which provides an inherent meaning to work, as a mere alchemy. For them, and Futurists as a whole, form determined content. There had been dispute always between the prominence of form and content over poetry, but according to Trotsky it is materialistic dialectics which analysed work of art beyond this level. Any form of art, when taken dialectically, “. . . is always a social servant and historically utilitarian.” (50) He identifies the artist and the spectator as living people with a “crystallized psychology” with a certain unity between them since this “psychology” is a product of social relations. One cannot overcome it by force. It is a historical necessity. The verbal form is not a preconceived idea but an active element which influences the idea itself. Such a transcendence of form into content is possible in social and biological relations as well. But this doesn’t justify the formalists’ rejection of Marxism and Darwinism. Trotsky says, “Even when the artist creates heaven and hell, he merely transforms the experience of his own life into his Phantasmagorias” (51) By saying thus, what he meant is that an artist’s life is inextricably linked with his social and psychological conditions, and they leave mark in whatever exploits he is involved in. Trotsky identifies economics as a reflection of the dialectical relation between man and nature, where the former has to struggle with latter to acquire food and shelter. So, economics comes only after the fulfillment of these material requirements. Similarly, art is also a result of materialistic, if not material, process where social and psychological factors play an important role. “But”, Trotsky claims, “Marxism alone can explain why and how a given tendency in art has originated in a given period of history; in other words, who it was who made a demand for such an artistic form and not for another, and why.” (52)

Artistic creation initiated a complete reform of old forms of art, where new forms were the necessary result of changed living conditions. The artistic needs vary under the influence of economics through the development of a new class. At this juncture, the reduction of social

relations into its absurdity by considering it as superstitions and thereby breaking the link between art forms and its inherent associations makes the formalists to be identified along with the bourgeois and the church. Material laws in art are not formed through logical deduction but through empirical analysis and adjustment to the economic needs of the ruling class. Trotsky says, "To a materialist, religion, law, morals and art represent separate aspects of one and the same process of social development." (52) On the other hand, an idealist tries to find the origin and explanation of these factors within themselves. Idealism also works in materialistic conditions through dialectics which enhances a genetic unity within these separate aspects. This idealistic reduction, provides a historical reality during the division of this unity into various factors in the process of dialectical manifestation. Trotsky says, "The multiplicity of independent factors, 'factors' without beginning or end, is nothing but a masked polytheism." (53) The formalists believe that "In the beginning was the word", but Marxists believe the deed to be in the beginning and word as its mere "phonetic shadow". (53)

Trotsky does not support the notion of a proletarian culture, because the cultural reconstruction that might occur after the disappearance of dictatorial powers will not have a class character. It is not a fact to be regretted about since the proletariat acquires power to do away with class culture and thereby make way for human culture. The proletarian dictatorship is not for the production of culture for a class less society but a revolutionary system struggling for it. Thus, when such a society is formed, even the proletariat will slowly start to vanish. Trotsky tries to track down human history thus, "The fundamental stages of the development of mankind we think will be established somewhat as follows: pre-historic "history" of primitive man; ancient history, whose rise was based on slavery; the Middle Ages, based on serfdom; Capitalism, with free wage exploitation; and finally, Socialist society, with, let us hope, its painless transition to a stateless Commune." (56) He also mentions that proletariat can take over the capitalist forces only by politically possessing the elements of old culture. The intervening proletarian culture, even if it is short lived, will help the people in lower sects to develop through education. Thus it weakens its own class character and wipes out the basis for proletarian culture. It is impossible to create a class culture behind the back of a class. It was possible through hegemony.

The study of literary technique is necessary; "Technique is noticed most markedly in the case of those who have not mastered it. One can say with full justice about many of the young proletarian writers that it is not they who are the masters of technique, but that the technique is their master." (58) For those who are talented this abstention from technique is mere tool ("disease") of growth, but those who refuse to master the technique since it being of the bourgeois mould are falling into some error. They claim even for "pock-marked" art, but it should be of their own. Such art doesn't deserve to be called as such according to Trotsky. For him they are simply demagogues who believe in "reactionary populism" and it doesn't suit proletarian ideology. Trotsky accepts the fact that a proletariat writing a poem might be assuming bourgeois technique but that is a historical necessity. It is just like the process of reification in the case of an industry worker, where he considers himself along with his creation to be an object. This is a stage which eventually concludes in class consciousness of the proletariat. Therefore, one who sets forth for a proletarian culture at once is committing a serious error "because", Trotsky says, "they erroneously compress the Culture of the future into the narrow limits of the present day." (59)

Trotsky observes that more than the proletariat it is the intelligentsia who was able to contribute to proletarian literature with their passive politics at hand. The Marxist method helps

to understand the development and scope of this literature but cannot do more than that; “Art must make its own way and by its own means.” (63) In this context, the party considers the fellow travelers not as competitors but the real or potential helpers of the working class in the reconstruction process.

These artists of peasantry who believe the union of peasants and the proletariats as necessary and vital, will be historically progressive; “. . . the point of view which opposes the organic, the age-old, the indivisible, the "national" village to the whirling city, is historically reactionary; the art resulting from such a point of view is inimical to the proletariat, incompatible with progress and doomed to extinction.” (63) This is an important point made by Trotsky in the midst of two extremely positioned arguments, as by Georg Lukacs on one side and Antonio Gramsci and Rosa Luxembour on the other. It is Lukacs who stressed on an absolute inorganic movement led by the proletariat, which is somewhat true with regard to the proletariat revolution whereas, Trotsky is of the view that we should not forget the organic lifestyle of the peasant though it may not comply with the historicity of the proletariat. This notion is upheld by Gramsci, the defects of which he had tried to explain in a non-Marxist way using the concept of the State that is run by hegemony and dictatorship. Though Trotsky didn't throw light on this aspect of the organic nature, it is not a matter of concern until the hegemony of proletariat becomes relevant. Trotsky identifies the importance of art at this context. He says, “It is clear that the peasantry and the intelligentsia will not come to Communism by the same road as did the workers. These roads cannot help but be reflected in art.” (63) Art of the intelligentsia shows the dialectical relation between the organic peasant and the urbanized proletariat.

Even if the proletarian culture has not evolved definitely, the present events have heightened the objective quality and subjective consciousness towards such an existence. A proletariat has to get acquainted with art produced in the organic labyrinth by the intelligentsia just as in his development as part of the animal race from the embryo and his psychological and biological passing through the entire human race. Trotsky says, “This class cannot begin the construction of a new culture without absorbing and assimilating the elements of the old cultures.” (64) It is only as a social class instead of being a biological individual that this process of absorption and transformation acquires a freer and more conscious character. The proletariat needs the creative tradition of art which is determined by the complexity of its evolution and its internal many-sidedness.

More than a revolutionary art, it is the revolutionary man who is in the making, where art plays an inevitable part. It is the necessity which demands this revolutionary man and not the need for freedom. According to Trotsky, the idea of content does not refer to a subject matter but a social purpose. The relation between form and content is determined by the fact that a new form is discovered and proclaimed under pressure of an inner necessity, of a collective sociological demand which has its roots in society. That is, the relation is determined by the “becoming”. This is enough to show that the relation is dialectical, since it shifts from the individual to the collective. Art, when spread from one place to another mainly because of this reason is often subjected to criticism on the grounds of bore-some repetition. Trotsky identifies people who take art thus, as pseudo-revolutionists because they grasp only the abstract content instead of observing the social element within. They are displacing art from reality.

Trotsky identifies faith as an inevitable fate which discloses the narrow limits within which ancient man is confined, who is clear in thought but poor in technique; “If one were to remove religious faith, not the vague, mystic buzzing that goes on in the soul of our modern

intelligentsia, but the real religion, with God and a heavenly law and a church hierarchy, then life is left bare, without any place in it for supreme collisions of hero and destiny, of sin and expiation.” (68) As far as a medieval author is concerned, “In fact, the author does not care for tragedy, because the laws of tragedy are nothing to him as compared to the laws of heaven.” (68) It is the Reformation which made religion more individualistic and thereby, art too. The religious symbols of art having cut their link from the heavens began to rely on individual consciousness. In the tragedies of Shakespeare, that can be considered as works of Reformation art, the ancient thought regarding fate and the medieval passions are displaced by individual human passions like love, jealousy, greed etc. But still in Shakespeare, art is more human though he could not imbibe the medieval passion as in *Oedipus Rex* which expresses the consciousness of a whole people.

The bourgeois destroyed all remaining elements by inculcating a new factor to determine art that is “personal emancipation”. (68) They separated art from the super-personal element which is available in religion. The super-personal or larger than life content is above all the social element itself. Trotsky says, “Tragedy is a high expression of literature because it implies the heroic tenacity of strivings, of limitless aims, of conflicts and sufferings.” (69) This is similar to what Plato had to say about tragedy. He despised art only for the fact that it diverted man from his purpose. Trotsky adds, “Bourgeois society, individualism, the Reformation, the Shakespearean dramas, the great Revolution, these have made impossible the tragic significance of aims that come from without; great aims must live in the consciousness of a people or of a class which leads a people, if they are to arouse heroism or create a basis for great sentiments which inspire tragedy.” (69) The same is applicable to any form of art. For instance, sculpture as of now, is enjoying its “fictitious independence” which makes it relegated to the backyards of life as in “dead museums”. (69) It has to assume a utilitarian purpose by reviving its connection with architecture. The wall between art and industry has to be demolished. In accordance with the industrial culture, artistic imagination has to be directed towards forming an ideal thing and not towards attributing an aesthetic element to itself. This kind of merging of art, or transition from imaginary to practical activity will happen only when some kind of phenomena happens between art and nature. Here Trotsky makes a significant point which is repeated by Lukacs; “This is not meant in the sense of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that art will come nearer to a state of nature, but that nature will become more ‘artificial’.” (70)

It seems that Trotsky took a leap while discussing this shift from art to industry, whereby which he openly elaborates the prospect of transition from theory to praxis. All the basic needs of man thus constitute for him not mere contents in the superstructure, but elements which will lubricate the basic machinery of production in any society; “The care for food and education, which lies like a millstone on the present-day family, will be removed, and will become the subject of social initiative and of an endless collective creativeness. Woman will at last free herself from her semi-servile condition.” (70) The whole life process thus gets involved in the phenomena of “becoming”. Man will try to acquaint with his psychological system like the unconscious and subconscious by mastering his feelings, and biological system like breathing, digestion and reproduction by controlling reason and will. Thus, “Even purely physiologic life will become subject to collective experiments.” (71)

Trotsky finally ventures into Freudian principle of psychoanalysis by taking a radical Jungian kind of stand by proposing a state achievable to emancipated man, where he can be aware of the deeper darker part of his unconscious; “Man will make it his purpose to master his

own feelings, to raise his instincts to the heights of consciousness, to make them transparent, to extend the wires of his will into hidden recesses, and thereby to raise himself to a new plane, to create a higher social biologic type, or, if you please, a superman.” (71) It is a stage where both social construction and psycho-physical self-education occur as part of the same process. But still, he considers all kind of arts as a mere contributor of beautiful form to this process. Through this, he visions, “Man will become immeasurably stronger, wiser and subtler; his body will become more harmonized, his movements more rhythmic, his voice more musical. The forms of life will become dynamically dramatic.” (71)

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