

A.K. Voronsky's "Art as the Cognition of Life"

Art as the discovery of truths, large and small

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Art as the Cognition of Life, Selected Writings 1911-1936,
Aleksandr Konstantinovich Voronsky,
Mehring Books, Michigan, 1998,
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This book is a revelation in many ways. It brings to vivid life some of the critical disputes between classical Marxism and its opponents in the 1920s; it develops a positive method of literary and art criticism which is of burning contemporary relevance; it elaborates a philosophy of art which stands on the shoulders of the greatest nineteenth century thinkers and writers; it exemplifies the greatest critical tradition in history, which Stalin and his cohorts exterminated out of fear; and it is written in the most lucid, attractive, compelling and direct style.

The political roots of Stalin's genocide against the socialist opponents of the Soviet bureaucracy is best analysed in another publication of Mehring Books, Vadim Rogovin's 1937: *Stalin's Year of Terror*. In these writings of Voronsky we hear a voice from the other side of that river of blood in which the bureaucracy drowned the progressive socialist culture which made the Russian Revolution. And what an outstanding voice it is.

Anyone who has been repelled by the doctrinaire intellectual fakery of Stalinist 'socialist realism' and has looked for a critical method which approaches artworks as contributing to human knowledge and sensitivity in their own ways, rather than mechanically reducing them to an abstract and false class criterion, will discover here a leading representative of genuine Marxism who knew how to uncover and articulate the truth which is contained in great literature. He does this in rich detail and in many colours.

And anyone who has tried to labour their way through the schools of formalism, semiotics, hermeneutics, postmodernism and the rest, which infest the worlds of academic and radical criticism, will want to keep this book close by and consult it regularly for many years to come.

The translator and editor of this book, Frederick S. Choate, provides a brief introduction to the author in his foreword:

'Aleksandr Konstantinovich Voronsky was born in the small town of Khoroshavka, in the Russian province of Tambov, in September 1884. He was shot by a Stalinist executioner on August 13, 1937, and buried in a mass grave on the outskirts of Moscow. With a life that spanned one of the stormiest periods of modern history, Voronsky actively participated in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, the building of the first Soviet regime, and the struggle against its degeneration. He participated as an underground Bolshevik, political exile, leading member of various committees in state power, editor of several influential newspapers and journals, as an oppositionist, once again as an exile, and finally as a persecuted 'Old Bolshevik,' who, like the majority of Marxist revolutionaries of his generation, sought ways to survive in a regime increasingly hostile to everything for which he had fought.' (Editor's Foreword. Unattributed quotations below are from this source.)

After the October Revolution Voronsky held responsible party positions first in Odessa, and then from 1918 to 1920 in Ivanovo, described by

Choate as the third most important Bolshevik stronghold after Petrograd and Moscow. Amongst his responsibilities in Ivanovo was the editorship of the newspaper *Workers' Land*; four of some four hundred articles which he wrote for it are contained in this collection. In 1921, on the basis of the quality of this work, he was called to Moscow where 'he founded and became the first chief editor of the journal *Red Virgin Soil*, which was the best literary journal of the 1920s.'

At this time--after the ravages of the Civil War--the work of economic reconstruction preoccupied the working class and its revolutionary leadership. Choate writes:

'Raising the cultural level of the broad masses was crucial to the country's recovery, and Voronsky was one of many who devoted themselves to this painstaking work. Some of the greatest challenges in this regard came from unexpected places: not from open enemies of the revolution, but from poorly educated supporters of the Soviet regime in general, and from representatives of the 'Proletarian Culture' movement in particular.'

The central strand in Voronsky's literary itinerary of the 1920s originated in the struggle against the Proletcult. This movement claimed that a purely proletarian culture could be built, and that this required the rejection of all the cultural achievements of the past, on the grounds that these were aristocratic or bourgeois in essence. It was a mass movement 'embracing perhaps 400,000 members by 1920,' and the struggle against it raised fundamental issues in the philosophy of Marxism. Lenin wrote, 'Marxism has by no means discarded the most valuable achievements of the bourgeois epoch, but, on the contrary, has assimilated and reworked everything that was valuable in the more than two thousand-year development of human thought and culture' (quoted in Foreword). To suppose it possible to leap over and ignore this entire heritage of mankind would be to sabotage in advance the struggle for a human, classless, socialist culture.

The false historical perspectives of the Proletcult were analysed in detail by Leon Trotsky, especially in Chapter 6 of his book *Literature and Revolution*, to which Voronsky's writings correspond closely. Indeed the struggle against the Proletcult began to merge itself with the larger fight which Trotsky led against the bureaucratisation of the party, and then against the theory of socialism in a single country, which came to define the political course of the bureaucracy. Voronsky is a major spokesman of the Left Opposition, and his writings enable us to grasp concretely the tremendous intellectual stature of this tendency, the forerunner of the Fourth International.

It is not possible in a review of reasonable length to introduce all the materials contained in this book. But certain major threads and motives underpin the outlook of essays which address many different subjects. The heart of this outlook, to which Voronsky returns again and again, is best stated in his own words, as follows, in the essay which gives its title to the collection:

'What is art? First of all, art is the *cognition* of life. Art is not the free

play of fantasy, feelings and moods; art is not the expression of merely the subjective sensations and experiences of the poet; art is not assigned the goal of primarily awakening in the reader 'good feelings.' Like science, art cognizes life. Both art and science have the same subject: life, reality. But science analyzes, art synthesizes; science is abstract, art is concrete; science turns to the mind of man, art to his sensual nature. Science cognizes life with the help of concepts, art with the aid of images in the form of living, sensual contemplation.' (p. 98)

With one stroke all those aesthetic prejudices which try to limit art to the realm of the sentiments, to mere decoration and to a peripheral place in the development of human knowledge, are cut away. Art is not something whose call on people's attention needs justification. On the contrary it belongs with science in the centre of the most human vocations: the discovery of truths, large and small, and their social dissemination as the property of all, in the banishment of ignorance, superstition and backwardness. Later Voronsky writes:

To evaluate a work aesthetically means to determine the extent to which the content corresponds to the form; in other words, the extent to which the content corresponds to objective artistic truth. For the artist thinks in images: the image must be artistically true, i.e. it must correspond to the nature of what is portrayed. In this lies perfection and beauty in the work of an artist. *A false idea, a false content cannot find a perfected form.*' (p.120)

On the basis of this fundamental principle of materialist literary criticism Voronsky engages in the defence of the works of the fellow-travellers (nonparty intellectuals and writers who have gravitated towards the Soviet regime and who seek to contribute to its constructive work) against the attacks from the Proletcultists around such journals as *On Guard*. Repeatedly he returns to the discussion of writers like Vsevolod Ivanov, Seifullina, Tikhonov, Malyshkin, Pilniak, Zoschenko and others, who for all their limitations are creating artistically honest depictions of life, of the huge convulsion through which Russian society is passing, of the real experience of the peasants, and so on. Rejecting such writers as 'petty bourgeois,' the Proletcultists never inquire to what extent their writings contain elements of artistic objective truth, and thus seek to cut off the working class from the insights, the enlightenment, the elevation of the human stature, which such writings contain.

This aesthetic method, the principle of art as the cognition of life, was not invented by Voronsky, but was defended by him as a conquest of Marxist theory. In two essays on Plekhanov he draws to our attention the outstanding contribution of that older Marxist to the theoretical armament of the socialist movement. It was Plekhanov's profound mastery of dialectics, of the writings of Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx and Engels, as well as his detailed study of the great nineteenth century revolutionary democrats Belinsky, Chernyshevsky and others, which fostered the achievements of Marxist criticism in that great socialist culture which Stalinism was later to liquidate.

The following essays (many published originally in Russian as pamphlets) develop this method, and form the backbone of the collection: 'Art as the Cognition of Life' (1923); 'On Art' (1925); 'Notes on Artistic Creativity' (1927); 'On Artistic Truth' and 'The Art of Seeing the World' (1928). But aspects, details and concretisations are ubiquitous throughout the book.

The collection contains essays in appreciation of Gorky, Pilniak, Esenin and other writers. There is a stimulating and closely-argued article on 'Freudianism and Art'. There are sketches of revolutionary figures and polemics against enemies. There are five appendices of documents from the 1920s which trace the unfolding of the crisis in artistic policy. And there is much more which readers will undoubtedly seize upon, as exemplary pieces of living criticism and theory.

Voronsky also returns frequently to the writings of L.N. Tolstoy, in illustration of numerous issues and points which he argues in connection

with artistic truth. I conclude this review by outlining one such place. In 'On Art' Voronsky opens his discussion with a quotation from Anna Karenina, from the pages where Vronsky and Anna meet with the artist Mikhailov. Voronsky describes these pages as 'filled with meaning, simplicity and artistic truth.' In the passage in which Mikhailov uses an accidental candle grease spot on a drawing to unlock the pose which he had been striving to capture, Voronsky finds the basis of a reply to those who belittle the creative element in art. He quotes from Tolstoy:

'[Mikhailov] laughed with joy, for the inanimate, unnatural figure had become alive, and was just the thing. The figure was alive, clear, and well defined. It was possible to correct the drawing to accord with the requirements of the pose.'

What Tolstoy wrote about Mikhailov's intuitive and inspired modification of the drawing--for example, his use of the word 'suddenly' three times in as many paragraphs--shows an elementary truth about artistic creativity, and it is in this sense that Tolstoy is a realist. In this and thousands of other episodes his eye is so accurately attuned to a vital and revealing truth, that his readers are drawn in to that truth. A few pages later Voronsky writes:

'Darwin discovered and explained the origin of species. L.N. Tolstoy discovered Platon Karataev, Eroshka, Anna, Natasha, Pierre and Kutuzov. Each acted as a genuine innovator, but one proved while the other showed. The true artist, like the true scientist, always adds to what existed before him.'

This is merely a sample, almost at random, from the symphony of critical insights contained in this work. In this review I have attempted simply to introduce the book and to suggest its great strength and beauty. The detailed absorption of its message will occupy and inspire its readers for a significant portion of their future lives.

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By Aleksandr Konstantinovich Voronsky

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Remarks of Frederick Choate, the translator of Voronsky's *Art as the Cognition of Life*

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