The Aesthetic Component of Socialism

11 October 2008

The following lecture was delivered on January 9, 1998 to the International Summer School on Marxism and the Fundamental Problems of the 20th Century, organised by the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) in Sydney from January 3-10, 1998.

David Walsh, is arts editor of the World Socialist Web Site, and the author of many incisive and critical essays on contemporary art and culture from a Marxist standpoint.

Following the lecture is the important contribution made by Joanne Laurier of the SEP (US); A Comment on Art and the Marxist Party.

The attitude of classical Marxism toward art

I would like to begin by noting that the first work Karl Marx produced as a revolutionary journalist, at the age of 23, was a comment on a set of instructions issued by the Prussian government censor.

The instructions had contained the observation that "the censorship should not prevent serious and modest investigation of truth." In his derisive response Marx asked rhetorically, "Is it not the first duty of the seeker after truth to aim directly at the truth, without looking to the right or left? Will I not forget the essence of the matter, if I am obliged not to forget to state it in the prescribed form?"

He continued: "Further, truth is general, it does not belong to me alone, it belongs to all, it owns me, I do not own it. My property is the *form*, which is my spiritual individuality. *Le style c'est l'homme*. [Style is the man] Yes, indeed! The law permits me to write, only I must write in a style that is not *mine*! I may show my spiritual countenance, but I must first set it in the *prescribed folds*! What man of honour will not blush at this presumption ... ?

"You admire the delightful variety, the inexhaustible riches of nature. You do not demand that the rose should smell like the violet, but must the greatest riches of all, the spirit, exist in only *one* variety? I am humorous, but the law bids me write seriously. I am audacious, but the law commands that my style be modest. *Grey, all grey*, is the sole, the rightful color of freedom. Every drop of dew on which the sun shines glistens with an inexhaustible play of colours, but the spiritual sun, however many the persons and whatever the objects in which it is refracted, must produce only the *official color*!"

So wrote Marx in early 1842, five years before the writing of the *Communist Manifesto*. I cite his words by way of underlining, or if necessary -- arguing, that those who founded our movement one and a half centuries ago had incorporated in their world outlook a certain attitude toward culture, artistic expression and intellectual freedom. That attitude, I am convinced, remains an objectively-significant and irreplaceable component of the Marxist view of things. Our efforts here today are aimed principally at attempting to elaborate, at least in an initial way, what might make up the aesthetic component, if one can call it that, of socialist consciousness.

If the defence of artistic and intellectual freedom is so indispensable to Marxism, why, one might reasonably ask, is the holding of our discussion today such an unusual, not to say, unprecedented event? The answer to this has many sides, too many to go into in any depth in this forum. But I think the question does require some response, particularly as addressing it might shed light on the problems under discussion today.

There are, most obviously, the objective implications of the relationship of politics to art in the struggle for socialism. Leon Trotsky began his classic *Literature and Revolution*, written in 1922 and 1923, by remarking that the place of art in the Soviet Union could be determined by the following general argument: if the Russian workers had not defeated the counterrevolutionary armies in a bitter civil war, the Soviet state would no longer have existed and Marxists in Russia would not have been thinking about economic problems, much less intellectual and cultural ones. Distinctly non-artistic means must be employed in bringing into being a society where art will flourish.

Combined with that is the reality of class oppression under capitalism. Trotsky warned in *Literature and Revolution* against any uncritical identification of the historical destinies of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The capitalist class seized political power centuries after it had begun the work of developing its own culture. It assumed control of society as an already wealthy and educated social grouping. Things are very different for the working class.

A great portion of the energy of socialist-minded workers which remains at their disposal "after meeting the elementary demands of life" necessarily goes into the study of politics and history and the effort to educate and organize the entire class on the basis of Marxist principles. The enormity and urgency of the tasks make this inevitable. This holds true, to a large extent, even for the members of our own party.

In other words, while the historic rise of the bourgeoisie took place with a relative evenness in all spheres of social life -- economically, philosophically, culturally -- the process of self-determination of the working class, in Trotsky's words, "a class unfortunate economically, assumes an intensely one-sided, revolutionary and political character," and reaches its highest expression in the revolutionary socialist party. We struggle against this one-sidedness, but we understand its objective roots. There would be no need for the social revolution if humanity could develop itself in an all-rounded fashion under capitalism. The working class must take power precisely because it is deprived of culture in the broadest sense of the word.

These are general considerations to which I think no one should shut his or her eyes, or needs to, but, in my view, it is perhaps more directly relevant to refer to certain historical problems in attempting to explain both why we have found it necessary and why we are now able to devote a special session of this school to cultural problems.

An irony that must be taken into account in such a discussion is that it would have been taken for granted, it seems to me, by all the great exponents of Marxism in the first three-quarters of a century or so following the publication of the *Communist Manifesto* in 1847, that the struggle for socialism and the struggle to defend freedom of artistic creation were essentially inseparable.

After all, one need only consider again the character of the individual whose name is identified with the founding of scientific socialism, Marx himself. Here was a man, in addition to all his other extraordinary attributes, of immense culture. In his reminiscences Paul Lafargue, the French socialist leader and Marx's son-in-law, recalled, "He [Marx] knew Heine and Goethe by heart and often quoted them in his conversations; he was an assiduous reader of poets in all European languages. Every year he read Aeschylus in the Greek original. He considered him and Shakespeare

as the greatest dramatic geniuses humanity ever gave birth to. His respect for Shakespeare was boundless: he made a detailed study of his works and knew even the least important of his characters He ranked Cervantes and Balzac above all other novelists He had an incomparably fertile imagination: his first literary works were poems. Mrs. Marx carefully preserved the poetry her husband wrote in his youth but never showed it to anybody. His family had dreamt of his being a man of letters or a professor and thought he was debasing himself by engaging in socialist agitation and political economy, which was then disdained in Germany."

At the request of Karl Kautsky in 1895 Eleanor Marx wrote a comment on the friendship of Heine and Marx. It read in part: "I remember both my parents ... speaking much of Heine, whom (in the early forties) they saw constantly and intimately. It is no exaggeration to say that Mohr [Marx's nickname] not only admired Heine as a poet, but had a sincere affection for him. He would even make all sorts of excuses for Heine's political vagaries. Poets, Mohr explained, were queer kittle-cattle, not to be judged by the ordinary or even extra-ordinary standards of conduct...

"Heine used, at one time, to run up constantly to their rooms, to read them his 'verses' and ask their opinion. Again and again, Mohr would go over some 'small thing' of eight lines, discussing, analyzing...

"Politically, as far as I can understand, they seldom discussed things. But certainly Mohr judged Heine very tenderly, and he loved not only the man's work, but also the man himself."

Or to take the case of Trotsky himself, all one has to do is read the chapter of his autobiography entitled "Books and Early Conflicts," in which he describes how as a child he devoured works by Pushkin, Nekrasov, Dickens and Tolstoy; the powerful impression produced by his first trip to the theater; and the enormous impact of the visits paid to his home by a family friend who was known in the south of Russia as an authority on Shakespeare.

From the middle of the 19th century on, what we call classical Marxism as represented by its greatest figures -- Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Franz Mehring, Georgi Plekhanov, Lafargue, Antonio Labriola, and of course countless other figures of lesser stature -- did more than simply provide a political program; that would be the narrowest view.

Marxism represented a current of immense intellectual breadth and depth. It contained within itself quite consciously the greatest achievements of bourgeois philosophy, political economy, historiography and, I would maintain, at least implicitly artistic production. Marxism provided the only rational and coherent explanation of the contradictions and growing crisis of bourgeois society and offered the only progressive way out of that crisis. The reverberations set off by the idea of socialism, with its vision of a world free of exploitation and misery, whether or not they were met with sympathy, were felt in every sphere of intellectual life.

And, conversely, every current and individual that offered insight into the structure of the physical, social or mental universes had its impact, in some form or other, on Marxism. Whether it was the work of physicists, anthropologists or psychoanalysts. One does not want to gloss over the immense contradictions of the socialist movement between 1890 and 1914, but in the most general sense there is no question that during those years the revolutionary self-consciousness of the masses experienced an immense growth, a process which found its highest expression in the October Revolution of 1917.

If one begins to examine, even superficially, the history of the period, one comes up with all sorts of material. One could refer to the meeting in 1890 that founded the Freie VolksbÃ¼hne, a major theater, in Germany, which, in the words of one historian, "united the leaders of the Berlin avant-garde with the leaders of Social-Democracy in a common endeavor that brought a series of meetings where writers and industrial workers joined in literary discussions."

Or consider, as another example, the arts department of the Belgian Workers Party. Its programs in 1891-92, organized for workers, included the study of modern Russian literature, Ibsen, Wagner, folk music, Shakespeare, Flemish painting, William Morris and the poetry of Paul Verlaine.

In Germany, of course, the Social-Democratic party organized workers' associations around a variety of questions -- including culture -- numbering in the thousands. One work I looked into gave the example of a small German city of between ten and twenty thousand people which had 100 workers' associations, from cycling clubs to groups devoted to poetry and theater. Socialists considered questions of culture and art to be of central importance in raising the working class to the level of its historic responsibilities.

In France the anarchist journal *La RÃ©volte* published literary supplements including the works of Tolstoy, Flaubert, De Maupassant, the Goncourt brothers, Anatole France and Zola. When the publication's subscription list was seized in 1894 it included a who's who of some of the most refined and "decadent" aesthetes, including Stephane MallarmÃ©, as well as the names of the painters Paul Signac and Camille Pissarro and Anatole France himself -- a cross-section of French intellectual life.

One useful work, *The Artist and Social Reform*, a study of the socio-cultural situation in France and Belgium in the latter part of the 19th century, notes: "When Gustave Kahn [well known literary figure and future Dreyfusard] wrote in 1886 of the stagnant state of contemporary French society in which the triumphant bourgeoisie blocked all that was new in art and ideas, he was echoing a far older complaint, the complaint that for him, as for others, combined both artistic and social motives. And now the note of social concern was to become ever more important in the attack on the bourgeoisie. Not only did the artist feel himself a victim of society, as he had for some time, but began to identify himself with the working class, as both victims of the same sort of injustice."

Even in semi-legal conditions in Tsarist Russia during this period the Marxists struck up a relationship with the Decadents, "a young and persecuted [literary] tendency" (Trotsky) and came to their defense.

It would be foolish to suggest that the relations between the artists and the socialists, in even the best of these cases, were simple, harmonious or without contradiction. How would that have been possible? Bohemianism, individualism and egotism -- associated with a definite social existence -- are not precisely unknown qualities within artistic circles. Nor is philistinism, for that matter, unknown to the Marxist movement. And aside from inevitable class and political friction, there is the matter of the significant, although not absolute, difference between scientific and artistic cognition.

I discussed this a few years ago in relation to the Russian avant-garde artists: "The very process by which the artist cognizes the world, through images; the close link of his or her realm to sense perception, immediate impressions and emotions; and the greater role of intuition and the unconscious in artistic work -- this almost guarantees that the artist 'lags behind' the politics of the day." Whether artistic consciousness lags behind, or at times leaps ahead, it is in any event rarely synchronized with political-revolutionary consciousness.

Taking all that into account, I think it remains, in a general sense, a historically demonstrable proposition that in the period leading up to the Russian Revolution the socialist movement certainly viewed itself -- and was viewed by those artists and intellectuals who sympathized with its general aims -- as an ally and defender of artistic creation and as a determined champion of intellectual freedom in general.

Is that the widespread popular perception today of Marxism? One would truly have to fool oneself to believe so. If "Marxism" at the present moment is not identified openly with the stamping out of critical thought and artistry by brutal and stupid bureaucrats, with banishment to the Gulag being the punishment for the independent-minded, it is most likely to be identified with the idiocies of postmodernism, identity politics and

the entire panoply of anti-artistic prescriptions put forth by the petty bourgeois Left.

In regard to the identification of Marxism and the totalitarian suppression of ideas, the right-wing ideologue can be counted upon to have his say. "You see," he will say, "the claim by socialists to represent freedom proved to be a ploy and a deception. These were power-mad individuals who would promise anything to gain their objective. Once on top they showed their true colors."

This would be a compelling argument if it were not entirely contradicted by historical fact. The October Revolution provided an enormous impulse to artistic creation, particularly in the fields of the visual arts, poetry and cinema. The mere names -- Malevich, Mayakovsky, Tatlin, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Vertov, Shostakovich, Rodchenko, Popova, Stepanova, El Lissitsky, Meyerhold, Babel, Mandelstam and many others -- evoke an artistic universe. The cultural impulse provided by the revolution was grudgingly acknowledged even by its more honest political opponents. Leading figures of the Bolshevik Party -- Lenin, Trotsky and Lunacharsky in particular -- encouraged artistic work and countered the attempts to impose supposedly "proletarian" and artificially "revolutionary" criteria on Soviet artists. When the workers' state, wrote Trotsky in *The Revolution Betrayed*, "had a seething mass-basis and a perspective of world revolution, it had no fear of experiments, searchings, the struggle of schools, for it understood that only in this way could a new cultural epoch be prepared. The popular masses were still quivering in every fiber, and were thinking aloud for the first time in a thousand years. All the best youthful forces of art were touched to the quick."

It is outside the scope of this discussion to examine the character, growth and significance of Stalinism, but clearly its suppression -- and eventual destruction -- of Soviet cultural life carried out from the mid-1920s onward was one of the great intellectual crimes of the century. The ascendancy of the bureaucracy created what Trotsky called "a kind of concentration camp of artistic literature." The best artists committed suicide, became silent or faced extermination.

Not only did the bureaucracy murder, corrupt or demoralize entire generations of artists in the USSR and abroad, it borrowed or invented theories to justify its tyranny over art: "proletarian culture" and "socialist realism" in Stalin's day. The cultural impact of Stalinism did not end with the tyrant's death in 1953, nor was it felt destructively only in the USSR, Eastern Europe and China. One can trace the origins of various schools of "people's art" to its baleful influence. Of course Stalinism was not the only influence at work; various homegrown populist and bourgeois-nationalist conceptions also played a role, but it has certainly functioned as a critical ideological and organizational cement.

In the 75 years since Trotsky wrote *Literature and Revolution*, in other words, various conceptions essentially hostile to art and intellectual creation, have been passed off as "Marxist" and have come to be so identified in the minds of large numbers of people. We insist, and this is perhaps the significance of the organization of this discussion here today, that the period in which it was possible to perpetrate this fraud has come to an end.

For a number of years now in the International Committee we have been attempting to revive a genuinely Marxist approach to art. This has been one feature of what I think we have justly referred to as a renaissance in Marxist theory which has come about since the decisive break with opportunism, in the form of the British Workers Revolutionary Party, in the mid-1980s. It feels very much as if the Trotskyist movement -- Marxism in its modern form -- has freed itself from a host of alien influences, has, so to speak, truly found itself again.

This is not of course simply due to the break with a group of opportunists, as significant as that was. Very powerful historical processes are at work. This renaissance is bound up with a change in the relationship between Marxism and opportunism, between the working class and bureaucracy, a relationship that was extremely unfavorable to the revolutionary socialist movement for an entire historical period. It is my belief that the domination of the working class by the Stalinist and reformist bureaucracies had a direct bearing on the prevalence of those notions of art that masqueraded as Marxist, and were taken for good coin or at least went unchallenged even by many sincere and honest socialists for half a century.

I believe that if we are now able to liberate ourselves from the influence of these false and harmful conceptions, this has profound objective significance. It underlines our own evolution, as the tendency that stands unalterably opposed to the bureaucratic apparatuses, and points to the emergence of the working class once again as a class acting in its own independent historical interests. I will go into more detail about this aspect of the matter later in my presentation.

Certain disagreements

As I say, over the last number of years we have made a conscious effort to raise the level of our writing about artistic matters and to treat problems of contemporary culture, as well as historical questions, in the light of the Marxist heritage to which I have briefly referred. Much, much work remains to be done, but I think the road at least has been cleared of a certain amount of debris.

Our emphasis on the need to grasp the objective significance of artistic production and to take seriously its laws of development has encountered opposition recently, as the majority of you probably know, from a reader of *Workers News* here in Australia. Mr. Brad Evans wrote to the paper at the end of August to express his disagreement with an article that appeared last summer briefly evaluating the significance of Oscar Wilde's life and work.

We replied to the letter in the newspaper, and he has recently responded in turn with another letter which I think brings the differences in our outlooks into even sharper focus. I would like to return to these issues today, because I think the views expressed by Mr. Evans are typical of an entire social milieu. He naturally has the right to his opinions, but so do we. And we do not intend to be bashful in defending our conceptions and demarcating them from what we believe to be false and retrograde ideas.

I am assuming that most of you here have read the original piece on Wilde and the exchange of letters that appeared in November, but it might be useful, nonetheless, if I briefly sum up the issues, as I see them.

The article on Wilde itself had a prehistory. It was written under the influence, so to speak, of the work that had gone into the piece we published on AndrÃ© Breton and Surrealism earlier in the summer. I continue to believe that Breton is a crucial figure. I am convinced that his principled stand on political questions -- his rejection of Stalinism and his support for Trotsky and the Fourth International -- was connected to his emphasis on the role of the subjective, of consciousness, in art and history. I know of few human beings in history who more truly and sincerely believed that the workings of the absolutely unfettered creative imagination were critical to the success of the revolution.

When I approached Wilde I was struck by the fact that certain similar themes emerged in his work. Of course one has to take him with a large grain of salt. Wilde is or can be a terrible snob; he often rubs one entirely the wrong way; most of his poetry is impossibly stilted; the majority of his plays never rise above the level of drawing room comedy of a fairly innocuous sort. And yet And yet, one cannot help but feel that he is sometimes on to something extremely profound. Particularly in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, in *The Critic as Artist*, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in *SalomÃ©*, in *De Profundis*, perhaps in *The Importance of Being Earnest* as well.

When Wilde provocatively asserted that art did not reflect nature and life, but that nature and life in fact imitated art, i.e., that they bore the imprint of human action, he demonstrated a grasp of the dialectic which was very unusual for that epoch. That comment, again of course read

critically, always brings to my mind the passage on Feuerbach's materialism in the *German Ideology* in which Marx and Engels point out that "nature, the nature that preceded human history, is not by any means the nature in which Feuerbach lives." In other words, whether faced with products of thought, society or even nature, human beings are generally confronting the results of their own activity or the activity of previous generations.

Again, what struck me in Wilde was his emphasis on human subjective activity and his categorical refusal to view art as a vehicle of passive reflection; that seems an unusual stance in a period where tendencies toward passive materialism were manifested even within the socialism of the Second International. And I found it very moving and inspiring that here was a man who proclaimed in the teeth of complacent British bourgeois public opinion, "It is through the voice of one crying in the wilderness that the ways of the gods must be prepared."

And it seemed to me, furthermore, that this sort of outlook had to be linked to his advocacy of "art for art's sake." His insistence that the artist was not the 'spokesman of his time,' the docile transmitter of its values, was clearly bound up with an insistence on the independence of art from bourgeois morality, immediate political reality and other similar considerations. For Wilde aestheticism and the notion that art was useless represented a rejection of the existing social order and its demands. One can see the obvious limitations of his view, but I do not think anyone should underestimate the depth and seriousness of his rejection.

So I wrote about these things. And Mr. Evans wrote in to express his disagreement on several points. He asserted, as far I could understand, that Wilde could not have been an advocate of art for art's sake because such a "petty bourgeois" view was incompatible with being a socialist. He further asserted that art must have, in his words, "ethical involvement or sociopolitical function."

In my reply to Mr. Evans I emphasized that Marxism in my view conceives of art as a sphere of human activity with its own relatively autonomous laws of development. It is of course a product of social man, one of his forms of social consciousness, but it cannot be reduced to any one of the other forms. "Does art," I asked, "embrace within its scope, problems and subject matter that are distinct from those treated by science, politics, philosophy and ethics? Does it make use of distinct materials? If not, if its role overlaps substantially with, or can even be replaced by other forms of social consciousness, why does art exist?"

In another passage I wrote: "Art, it seems to me, navigates freely between the inner and the outer worlds, between the world dominated by the striving, in Trotsky's phrase, for 'a harmonious and complete life' and the world of immediate reality. In my view art is very much bound up with the struggle, as old as human consciousness, to shape the world, including human relations, in accordance with beauty and the requirements of freedom, with life as it ought to be

"It is also the case, in my opinion, that artistic form has an independent and objectively significant power, an ability to enrich spiritual experience and refine feeling..."

In his most recent letter Mr. Evans reiterates the points he made in his first letter. He suggests furthermore that I hold the view "that art does not have a purpose other than to please the aesthetic eye of the arts' ministers in various societies." He makes a number of remarks along the same lines. I do not understand the purpose of these sorts of comments, which have no bearing on reality. I have never expressed interest in nor approval of "pure art," art that merely indulges in the play of pure form. So this is a red herring and I am not going to spend my time responding to it.

I would like to quote two passages that I think are worth considering:

At one point in his letter Mr. Evans writes: "In page five of your response to me, you mention: 'Our view is that when art is truest to its own, distinct purposes it cuts a path closest to that of the social revolution'. This comment presents an interesting concept. If the issue is not to struggle against class and oppression in a collective and empowered interest, then how will the proletariat be able to gain their freedom? What is your motive in supporting the individual tastes of aesthetic art? If art does not present realist perspective concerning the class struggle, how will a majority of people understand their objective? At present, the majority of people don't have an understanding of class through such things as education from the State. Those people are too busy working to survive, let alone have the time to learn the concept of class, potentially it's art as a re-educational tool through various media which can allow for that."

And later in his letter he writes: "On 'artistic form', you have stated that this has 'an independent and objectively significant power, an ability to enrich spiritual experience and refine feeling'. If Marx heard these words of 'spiritual experience' he'd be laughing in your face!

"What kind of 'spiritual experience' is going to change the material (political and economic) state of this world? Material forces can alter material states, leave the spiritual experiences for the New Age."

I would like to address these two issues: Is the purpose of art primarily to present a realistic picture of the modern class struggle? And what role -- if any -- does "spiritual experience," which Mr. Evans suggests we laugh at, play in the struggle for socialism?

I would like to do it, however, in a somewhat indirect fashion, by a consideration of Trotsky's writings in the early 1920s on problems of art and culture, particularly *Literature and Revolution*.

The significance of Trotsky's work in the 1920s

Literature and Revolution, in my view, is the most significant contribution yet made to a Marxist approach to art. Yet in English at least the book is very difficult to obtain. I am hopeful that we will publish it ourselves at some future date, perhaps in a new translation -- the present one leaves a great deal to be desired.

It is an extraordinary work, but it has certainly suffered from neglect, most noticeably from what one might think an unexpected quarter -- "left" writers on Marxism and art. In perusing the countless volumes produced by academics and self-styled Marxist critics on aesthetic problems one comes upon precious few references either to *Literature and Revolution* or Trotsky's other writings on culture.

Georg Lukacs as part of his pact with the Stalinist devil could make no references to Trotsky, of course, except hostile ones. Herbert Marcuse, who did not have the excuse of fearing for his life, ignored Trotsky entirely in *The Aesthetic Dimension*, a work supposedly devoted to making a critical analysis of Marxist views on art. I have not run across any significant effort by Adorno or Horkheimer to come to terms with Trotsky's work. Fredric Jameson, the American academic, in his pretentious *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*, managed to mention Trotsky's name only once in passing. Equally remarkably, in his work entitled *Marxism and Literature*, the late Raymond Williams made one essentially misleading and disparaging reference to *Literature and Revolution*. To this list one might add Cliff Slaughter as well. In his *Marxism, Ideology and Literature*, published in 1980, Slaughter did indeed devote a chapter to *Literature and Revolution*, but it is of the most perfunctory and ritualistic character, without a single significant insight.

I think this collective silence and hostility speaks in the most general sense precisely to the problem referred to earlier: the dominance of Stalinism and Stalinist conceptions to which these intellectuals either accommodated themselves or to which in any event they could offer no coherent and worked-out alternative.

The hostility still directed against *Literature and Revolution* today is entirely logical when one takes into account that the work was in effect one of the opening shots in the struggle of Marxists in the Soviet Union to cultivate resistance to the rise of the bureaucracy. It provided a perspective on art, life and society entirely at odds with the outlook of the complacent, nationalist petty bourgeois layers who made up the Stalin

camp -- and entirely at odds, one might add, with that of our contemporary petty bourgeois Left. By taking forward the genuine Marxist tradition of literary criticism through its application to then current cultural problems Trotsky posed an alternative to the corrosive social atmosphere encouraged by the ruling group.

The circumstances in which the book was written have some significance. In the summer of 1922, during his vacation, Trotsky devoted himself to writing a preface to a volume of pre-revolutionary essays on literature which the Soviet state publishers intended to issue as a special volume of his works. The preface, a consideration of the evolution of Soviet literary life since 1917, grew in size and remained unfinished in 1922. The next summer he returned to it and completed the work eventually entitled *Literature and Revolution*.

Trotsky wrote his book, in other words, in the course of the year which immediately preceded the formation of the Left Opposition in October 1923 and the commencement of the openly-declared battle against the bureaucratic caste in the Soviet Union. This was a period marked by ominous and increasingly tragic events: the last days of Lenin's political life; the campaign of slander organized against Trotsky conducted by the triumvirate of Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev; the consolidation of Mussolini's fascist regime in Italy; counterrevolution in Bulgaria, aided by the passivity of the Communist Party; the revolutionary crisis in Germany provoked by the French occupation of the Ruhr and the ultimate failure of political nerve by Stalin and Zinoviev and the German Communist Party leadership in the fall of 1923.

I know there are those who believe Trotsky made a political miscalculation in devoting himself to a work on art at a time of such momentous events. I think that this view is somewhat shortsighted. I admit a personal bias. *Literature and Revolution* is an irreplaceable work as far as I am concerned; I cannot imagine not having it as a guide and a source of knowledge. But I think I can provide a somewhat more substantial justification.

With the subsiding of the wave of insurrectionary struggles that followed the end of World War I, the Bolshevik regime faced a more or less protracted period as an isolated workers' state. Lenin, before illness forced him into inactivity, sharply warned of the dangers to the revolutionary regime represented by the legacy of Russia's economic and cultural backwardness, including its reflection within the Bolshevik Party. A collaborator with Lenin in the first battles against the conservative, bureaucratic elements, Trotsky, upon Lenin's death, took up the challenge of elaborating a Marxist response to the new problems confronting the party and the regime.

That Trotsky responded *in part* by turning to work on cultural problems surely expressed his perception that the fate of the Soviet Union did not hang simply on the elaboration of the proper political program, much less on the raising of certain slogans or the development of clever tactics. In the first essay, published in July 1923, of what was to make up the work entitled *Problems of Everyday Life*, Trotsky expressed quite forthrightly his frustration with that very approach. Of course, this was before the organization of the Left Opposition and does not speak directly to the question of organizing resistance to the ruling faction, but I think the sentiment clearly reflects his thinking of the time.

The piece is entitled "Not by politics alone," and Trotsky begins by pointing to the significance of that phrase: "This simple thought should be thoroughly grasped and borne in mind by all who speak or write for propaganda purposes. Changed times bring changed tunes. The prerevolutionary history of our party was a history of revolutionary politics. Party literature, party organizations -- everything was ruled by politics in the direct and narrow sense of that word ... *At present the working class is perfectly aware of the fundamental results of the revolution. It is quite unnecessary to go on repeating over and over the story of these results. It does not any longer stir the minds of the workers, and is more likely even to wipe out in the workers' minds the lessons of the past* ..... [O]ur chief problems have shifted to the needs of culture and economic reconstruction." [My emphasis]

The Russian workers, Trotsky pointed out, had broken relatively easily with the Russian bourgeoisie, which had never done them any good; but he added: "History gives nothing free of cost. Having made a reduction on one point -- in politics -- it makes us pay the more on another -- culture."

Trotsky, in all the writings of this period, clearly identifies a "monstrous" (and he uses that adjective again and again) spiritual and cultural backwardness as the chief obstacle to the laying of socialist foundations in the Soviet Union and one of the principle social realities contributing to the emergence of a crude, selfish and ignorant bureaucratic caste.

His principal writings and remarks of the mid-1920s on culture and social life -- *Literature and Revolution*; *Problems of Everyday Life*; *Culture and Socialism*; the party discussion known as *Class and Art*; *Radio, Science, Technology, and Society*; *Young People, Study Politics!* and numerous other works -- constitute an extraordinary body of objective knowledge, as well as one of the most compelling arguments in favor of the socialist reorganization of human relations.

It would be entirely wrong to suggest that there was anything fatalistic in Trotsky's attitude toward the situation in the USSR, or that he was resigned to the victory of the Stalinist faction, but he clearly recognized that the only possible basis for the success of the Marxist tendency was a profound change in the cultural level of the Soviet masses and he set about working to create that change. We know the Marxists were unable to prevent the growth of the bureaucratic cancer, but that is not an argument against Trotsky's efforts. His work proves today to be one of the most valuable weapons we possess in our struggle to create a climate conducive to the growth of socialist ideas.

Marxism versus "proletarian culture"

Literature and Revolution, *Culture and Socialism* and *Class and Art* form a substantial and densely-argued body of work. It would be inappropriate, even if I were in a position to do so, to review all the questions they take up. For our present purposes, which include considering the implications of this history for our own work, as well as providing answers to the issues I raised before in relation to Mr. Evans' letter, it might be useful to concentrate on the following problems: What is culture, including spiritual culture, from an historical and scientific standpoint? What is the value and what are the limitations of applying a class criterion to culture and art? What are the contributions that art and the aesthetic experience itself make to the cause of human liberation?

I would like to frame this part of my presentation in the following manner. If we seem to speak here with approval of the "contribution" that art makes it should not be interpreted in a narrow, utilitarian sense, nor should it be taken as an implication that artists, frankly, require our stamp of approval to carry on with their work. Art works have profoundly influenced human beings for a very long time, and they would go on doing so even if we were to withhold our validation. The attitude that one of our tasks is to bestow a Marxist blessing on this or that work or artist or style has always irritated me in the extreme, and I still see traces of it in some of the articles that appear in our press.

We do not begin a consideration of Marxist aesthetics, in other words, with a question in our minds as to whether we should, for example, recommend Elizabethan drama or Italian painting of the 14th and 15th centuries to workers or not. It is an assumption of this presentation at least that we are as ardent in our partisanship of artistic creation and unhindered access to its products as we are of the right -- and responsibility -- of scientists to explore the physical universe and make their discoveries known to the widest possible public. We are speaking of objective advances made by the human mind, which are not up for debate. And this has implications for the way in which we treat these cultural and historical

issues. We enter into such a review with a definite conception and purpose.

In everything that Trotsky wrote and said about art and culture in the years 1922-26 he was responding, at least in part, to the theoretical and political challenge represented by middle class layers, gravitating toward the Stalin leadership, within the Communist Party who were transforming Marxism into a vulgar, schematic substitute for serious analysis. One of the forms this schematism took, to which I made reference earlier, was the uncritical identification of the bourgeois and proletarian revolutions. This often went hand in hand with the elaboration of theories according to which it was the task of the Soviet working class to discard all past cultural achievements and construct its own, "proletarian" culture.

According to this anti-Marxist conception, which was not only the intellectual property of the ProletCult movement proper, but began to hold considerable sway within party circles, humanity's past cultural accomplishments were incurably infected with alien class influences. What could the old intellectual representatives of Russian capitalism and landlordism, for example, possibly have to say to the citizens of the new workers' state?

This type of argument echoed the thinking of 19th century populism far more than it did that of classical Marxism. If one reads Tolstoy's *What is Art?*, written in 1896 following his 'spiritual rebirth,' one can find similar formulations. He denounces contemporary art in the strongest terms, as upper class culture, which could "evoke in a workingman only bewilderment and contempt, or indignation." He leaves room for only two kinds of art, Christian art, and "art transmitting simplest feelings of common life ... the art of a people -- universal art." As for the rest of art, it "should be driven out, denied and despised." The point, of course, is not to amalgamate Tolstoy the novelist with the Stalin bureaucracy; we are speaking of certain class and ideological currents.

Trotsky's attitude was quite different.

And Lenin's too of course. As a point of reference, one might consider the *Draft Resolution* Lenin wrote up in response to what he took to be favorable comments by Lunacharsky in regard to Proletarian Culture in October 1920. His proposed resolution read in part: "Marxism has won its historic significance as the ideology of the revolutionary proletariat because, far from rejecting the most valuable achievements of the bourgeois epoch, it has, on the contrary, assimilated and refashioned everything of value in more than two thousand years of the development of human thought and culture."

Trotsky, in *Culture and Socialism*, defined culture as "everything that has been created, built, learnt, conquered by man in the course of his entire history, in distinction from what nature has given...."

He then pointed to the contradiction that lies at the heart of human cultural achievement. He wrote, "We will then consider it as firmly established that culture has grown out of man's struggle with nature for existence, for the improvement of his conditions of life, for the enlargement of his power. But out of this same basis classes also have grown ... This means that historical culture has possessed a class character ... But does this mean that we are against all the culture of the past?

"There exists, in fact, a profound contradiction here. Everything that has been conquered, created, built by man's efforts and which serves to enhance man's power is culture. But since it is not a matter of individual man but of social man ... culture is found to be the basic instrument of class oppression."

And yet, Trotsky points out, we urge workers to study and master this culture. How is this possible? He notes that many had stumbled over this contradiction, forgetting that fundamentally class society is the organization of production.

"What," Trotsky continues, "is the basis of bases -- the class organization of society or its productive forces? *Without doubt the productive forces* ... In the productive forces is expressed the materialized economic skill of mankind, his historical ability to ensure his existence." [My emphasis]

I think this is quite important for our present discussion. Trotsky is emphasizing, it seems to me, the primacy of culture, as an objective achievement of humanity, as the materialized form of its historically-acquired skill and abilities, as an absolute, over its class character, its transitory and relative repository. I would like to return to this point later.

Art, as a form of spiritual culture, also had this objective character in Trotsky's eyes. "It is one of the ways in which man finds his bearings in the world; in this sense the heritage of art is not distinguished from the heritage of science and technique -- and it is no less contradictory than they. Unlike science, however, art is a form of cognition of the world not as a system of laws but as a group of images."

This side of the question was expounded in its most worked-out form in Aleksandr Voronsky's *Art as the Cognition of Life* . Voronsky was a critical figure in Soviet literary life, later a member of the Left Opposition and in 1937 a victim of Stalin's anti-socialist genocide. As many of you know, we will shortly be publishing an important selection of his articles and essays. Voronsky wrote: "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 ... The genuine poet, the genuine artist is one who sees ideas."

It is not difficult to see that this approach promised much richer and more rewarding results than those opened up by the simplistic formula of "proletarian culture." In *Literature and Revolution* Trotsky applied Marxist conceptions to Soviet literary life and the more general problem of artistic creation, with extraordinary results.

Unlike our contemporary "critical theorists," who write endless, contemplative and abstract theses which never provide any insight into the actual development of art or any guidance to its creators, Trotsky devoted himself to a quite concrete discussion of the various trends, works and individual figures of contemporary Russian and Soviet literature. His analyses of the careers and writings of Alexander Blok, Boris Pilnyak and Vladimir Mayakovsky, for example, whether or not one is familiar with their artistic efforts or not, are models of Marxist criticism.

Throughout the book Trotsky's tone is neither arrogant, nor self-effacing, nor condescending. He says what he thinks *is*, forcefully, without a trace of bullying or bluster. He is engaged in several tasks at once: attempting to raise the cultural level of the Soviet workers and the party membership, polemicizing against what he considers to be a false and narrow conception of culture, and engaging the artists themselves -- to the extent that they may be willing to participate -- in a dialogue over artistic and social perspectives.

He spells out precisely what he thinks to be his and the Marxist party's role: "There are domains in which the Party leads, directly and imperatively. There are other domains in which it only cooperates. There are, finally, domains in which it only orientates itself. The domain of art is not one in which the Party is called upon to command. It can and must protect and help it, but it can only lead it indirectly." What the Marxist method can do, he suggests, is "to help the most progressive tendencies by a critical illumination of the road." *Literature and Revolution*, in my opinion, embodies that process of "critical illumination."

I would like to return to the opposition between Marxist aesthetics and the various theories of "proletarian culture," which brings us to the core of our subject today and to the core of our differences with Mr. Evans.

What is really at issue here? Perhaps at this point I could speak somewhat less formally.

What is it that we value in art? Mr. Evans and others suggest that art's role should be to provide a realistic perspective for the class struggle. In

the first instance, that is the proper role of the revolutionary Marxist party, not the artist. He is both asking too much and too little of art, in my view. Furthermore, if the purpose of art is to illuminate the reality of the modern class struggle, what is to become of past culture? I must admit that I am afraid to ask. Everything written before 1848 or 1871 or 1917, or whatever the cut-off date is determined to be, is apparently consigned to the scrap heap. And what about painting, abstract or otherwise, or instrumental music, or architecture, or a dozen other art forms that have no practical value for the proletarian cause? To the scrap heap with them. We know perfectly well where this kind of thinking leads, and we reject it.

Let us return to the problem of past culture. Why do people continue to read Homer or Dante or Shakespeare? In 1990 the appearance of a new English translation of *The Iliad* was considered a major intellectual event. Scholars estimate that Homer's work was set down some two thousand seven hundred years ago. It recounts certain episodes that the author claims to have taken place in the tenth and final year of the Trojan War, centering on the rage of Achilles and its nearly fatal consequences for the Greek forces. Gods intervene on the battlefield, conspire against one another, favor heroes of one army or the other; all sorts of improbable events take place. Thousands and thousands of copies of the new translation have been sold. Is that to be explained merely as an affectation on the part of the book-buying public? Or the result of an inexplicable interest in a fragment of ancient Greek history or mythology? I do not believe so. I cite this example to indicate that the pragmatic, ultra-utilitarian approach to aesthetics tells us nothing about the power or enduring value of art, not the first thing.

Precisely this issue was at the center of the party discussion, held in May 1924, at which Trotsky so brilliantly intervened, and which is known to us as *Class and Art*. Prior to Trotsky's remarks that day the Bolshevik leader Fyodor Raskolnikov had spoken. Included in his remarks was a statement to the effect that Dante's *Divine Comedy* was of value to the modern reader because it enabled him or her to understand the psychology of a certain class in a certain epoch.

In his remarks, Trotsky noted that this approach to works of art ignored that which made them works of art. Raskolnikov turned the *Divine Comedy* into a mere historical document. A work of art, Trotsky observed, must speak directly to the reader or the viewer in some fashion, must move or inspire or depress him or her. A historical approach might be useful, but it should not be confused with an aesthetic one. How is it possible, Trotsky asked, that there should be a directly aesthetic relationship between a modern reader and a book written in the early fourteenth century? He answered: because in society, despite the great variations in immediate social circumstances, there are certain common features. Artistic genius is capable of registering these common features, and the feelings and thoughts they provoke, and transforming them into images in such an indelible manner that we find they speak to us too, although we are hundreds or even thousands of years distant from the creation of the work.

Trotsky speaks, by way of example, of the fear of death. The manifestation of this fear has of course changed along with changes in epoch and milieu. But nonetheless what was said on this subject by Shakespeare, Byron, Goethe, and also by the Old Testament Psalmist still moves and affects us.

Why do we recommend Pushkin to the workers, he asks? Is it because we want them to understand how a nobleman and a serfowner encountered the changing of the seasons? Clearly not. Of course this social element exists. "But the expression that Pushkin gave his feelings is so saturated with the artistic, and generally with the psychological, experience of centuries, is so crystallized, that it has lasted down to our times ... And when people tell me that the artistic significance of Dante for us consists in his expressing the way of life of a certain epoch, that only makes one spread one's hands in helplessness."

Here everything is to the point. We enjoy Dante not because he was a Florentine petty bourgeois of the thirteenth and fourteenth century, "but, to a considerable extent, in spite of that circumstance."

In addition to the historical, class-motivated, class-determined element in art, there is in the greatest works a transhistorical, objectively truthful, relatively universal component. And that component -- containing grains of absolute truth -- is primary; it is of the greatest interest and significance to us. Indeed one might say that this is one of the defining features of a great work: that it does not impress us, above all, with its class bias, with its immediacy, although it grasps the immediate and the fleeting, but raises the experience of an epoch to a tremendous artistic height. The character of Homer's Achilles, whether or not we choose to believe that his mother was a sea goddess, affects us still; the artistic portrayal of his rage, his pride, his jealousy, continues to strike us as representing something truthful about human beings.

Does all this mean that application of a class analysis or criterion has no value? Absolutely not. It is an essential part of the critique of any work of art, because it reflects the reality of social life, the reality that gave birth to the work. Only Marxism can explain how and why a given tendency in art has emerged at a given time -- what social force or reality provided the psychological impulse for the artist to create his or her work. "Artistic creation is always a complicated turning inside out of old forms," Trotsky explains, "under the influence of new stimuli which originate outside art." Art is "not a disembodied element feeding on itself, but a function of social man," as much as science, philosophy or any other form of social consciousness.

But the task of clarifying the historical and social circumstances in which a particular work emerged should not be confused with the task of evaluating it from an aesthetic viewpoint, which is what so often still happens with us. Once we have made clear the class outlook of a filmmaker or novelist our work is not yet done, it is not even half done, to be frank. I recognize that overcoming this sort of approach is not simple, that it is most often the product of inexperience and not of ill will, but we must say what is: this is not yet Marxist aesthetics.

There has to be an attempt to confront the new thoughts and feelings that the work has evoked, the actual content of the aesthetic experience itself. Here I agree with the comment by Breton that "any speculation about a work of art is more or less futile if it fails to reveal anything about the heart of the matter: namely, the secret of the attraction exerted by that work." What psychic process has the work initiated or failed to initiate within us?

To return to the USSR in 1923, the slogan of "proletarian culture" seemed to many one entirely compatible with Marxism, a militant slogan, a principled slogan. But what social processes lay behind its sudden popularity? To whose interests did it -- and similar theories advanced today -- correspond?

Trotsky argued against the program of proletarian culture on the following basis. Its advocates based themselves, as I mentioned before, on vulgar analogies drawn between the bourgeois and proletarian revolutions. The bourgeoisie took power and gave life to bourgeois culture, therefore, the proletarian revolution will give rise to proletarian culture -- the formula was as simple as that. There was only one difficulty with this argument. Marxists, including the Bolsheviks, had never viewed the taking of power by the working class as ushering in an entire historical epoch of proletarian rule, much less culture, but the transition to a socialist, that is, a classless society and culture. Proletarian culture, Trotsky stated categorically, "will never exist, because the proletarian regime is temporary and transient."

Herein of course lay the key to the disagreement -- at issue were two entirely opposed perspectives. Trotsky, the defender of the Bolshevik prognosis of 1917, began from the program of the world socialist revolution. Thus his view of the political and cultural situation in the

Soviet Union: "We are, as before, merely soldiers in a campaign. We are bivouacking for a day. Our shirt has to be washed, our hair has to be cut and combed and, most important of all the rifle has to be cleaned and oiled. Our entire present-day economic and cultural work is nothing more than a bringing of ourselves into order between two battles and two campaigns ... Our epoch is not yet the epoch of new culture, but only the entrance to it."

One can imagine the sort of furious reaction this argument elicited from the self-satisfied Nepman or state official who wanted, above all else, to distance himself from the demands of the world revolution and enjoy what he considered to be his rightful place in the newly-stabilized Soviet order. The contention of the nascent bureaucracy and its petty bourgeois hangers-on that the Soviet state faced an extended period of isolated development during which time a "proletarian culture" could flourish implicitly accepted the continued existence of capitalism outside the USSR and the need to find an accommodation with it.

The embracing of "proletarian art" was a reflection in the field of culture of the same deep skepticism toward the revolutionary capacities of the working class and the potential for the overthrow of capitalism internationally that found expression, in the field of politics, in the program of "socialism in one country." Despite its 'left' sound proletarian culture is always accompanied in politics by nationalism, opportunism and reformism.

The advocates of proletarian culture denounced a concern for aesthetic values and for refinement in art in general. Trotsky responded: "'Give us,' they say, 'something even pock-marked, but our own.' This is false and untrue. A pock-marked art is no art and is therefore not necessary to the working masses. Those who believe in a 'pock-marked' art are imbued to a considerable extent with contempt for the masses."

It is not the business of revolutionaries to glorify or idealize working class life, the life of the oppressed, whether immediately after a social revolution, as in Trotsky's case, or prior to it, as in ours. We judge these things quite soberly. There is, however, a social grouping whose interest it serves to extol the virtues of "working class culture" as it presently exists; to obstruct any attempt to raise the popular intellectual level; to direct the attention of workers to the most immediate and banal issues; to arrogate to itself the right to decide what the workers can and cannot see; to reject as "esoteric" and "decadent" anything it cannot understand. Which social grouping possesses this sort of mentality in abundance? That middle class layer that lives parasitically off the oppressed condition of the proletariat: the labor bureaucracy, whether Stalinist, social democratic reformist or "pure," all-American trade unionist.

And I would further maintain that the prevalence for an entire historical period of anti-Marxist conceptions hostile to aesthetic value in art, invariably including "formless talk," as Trotsky called it, about the possibility of an independent proletarian culture, was bound up with the dominance of bureaucracy over the working class at the expense of the socialist movement. The proponents of proletarian culture and social utility as the sole criterion in art are essentially the representatives of this bureaucracy within the petty bourgeois intelligentsia. And I would suggest furthermore, as I indicated toward the beginning of my report, if we are able to hold this discussion today -- from the point of view of its objective basis -- it is because these bureaucracies are breaking up, having exposed themselves as worthless and rotten, and we are therefore in a far better position to free ourselves from these false aesthetic theories, just as we are in a far more favorable position to help workers liberate themselves from the political hold of these apparatuses.

I might add, on a personal note, that I have never yet encountered a thinking worker, a socialist-minded worker who only wanted to see films or plays or read books about working class life and the modern class struggle. Genuinely revolutionary workers want to educate themselves about every aspect of life, history and culture. And neither have I ever yet met a thinking worker who was terrified by experiment and difficulty in art, even if he felt it went over his head, as long as it was honestly done, not merely for effect. Because we have confidence in the working class we do not feel the need to set up prescriptions as to what ought or ought not be discussed. This is the spirit of *What Is To Be Done?* as well as *Literature and Revolution*.

While we are on the subject of taboos, let me refer to the residue of prudery from which we still sometimes suffer. I cannot resist quoting from an article Engels wrote in 1883 for the *Sozialdemokrat*. It is not necessary to cite Engels to make the point, but the article is delightful.

The piece was a tribute to the German poet and revolutionary Georg Weerth, who had been the cultural editor of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, the journal edited by Marx and Engels in 1848-49.

Engels wrote: "There was one thing in which Weerth was unsurpassable, and here he was more masterful than Heine (because he was healthier and less artificial), and only Goethe in the German language excelled him here: that was expressing natural robust sensuousness and the joys of the flesh. Many readers of the *Sozialdemokrat* would be horrified, were I to reprint here the individual *feuilletons* of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*. But I haven't the slightest intention of doing so. Yet, I cannot refrain from pointing out that there will come a time when German Socialists, too, will triumphantly discard the last traces of German philistine prejudices and hypocritical moral prudery -- and anyhow, they only serve as a cover for surreptitious obscenity.....

"It is high time that at least the German workers get accustomed to speaking in a free and easy manner as do the peoples of the Romanic lands, Homer and Plato, Horace and Juvenal, the Old Testament, and the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, about the things they themselves do every day or night, these natural, indispensible and highly pleasurable things."

Art and social revolution

As you may recall, Trotsky asked in *Class and Art* why it was that Marxists recommended Pushkin -- a poet of the serf-owning class -- to the workers. I would like to return to this issue again, as it points us even more concretely toward the relationship between art and social revolution.

Mr. Evans objects to the phrase "spiritual experience." Notwithstanding his objection, the spiritual impoverishment of broad layers of the population remains a very real and material obstacle today to the development of the socialist movement. The Marxists face a considerable challenge in creating an audience that can grasp and respond to their political program and perspectives. To belittle the need for the enrichment of popular consciousness under the current conditions seems highly irresponsible.

How does a revolution come about? Is it simply the product of socialist agitation and propaganda brought to bear in favorable objective conditions? Is that how the October Revolution came about? We have spent a good deal of time as a party thinking about this in recent years. One of our conclusions has been that the revolution of 1917 was not simply the product of a national or even international political and social process, that it was as well the outcome of a decades-long effort to build up an international socialist culture, a culture which brought into its orbit and assimilated the most critical achievements of bourgeois political and social thought, art and science. The essential intellectual bases for the revolution of 1917 were established of course by those political theorists and revolutionists who had consciously made the end of capitalist rule their goal. But the streams and tributaries that feed into and make possible a revolutionary torrent are vast in number, a complex system of influences that interact, contradict and reinforce one another.

The creation of an environment in which it becomes suddenly possible for large numbers of people to rise up and consciously set about the dismantling of the old society, casting aside the prejudices, habits and learned behavior built up over decades, even centuries; prejudices, habits and behavior which inevitably take on a life of their own, with their own

apparently independent powers of resistance -- the overcoming of this historical inertia and the creation of an insurrectionary climate cannot possibly be conceived of as merely a political task.

We recognize that the all-rounded socialist human being is only a creature of the future -- the not-too-distant future, we trust. But that is not the same thing as saying that there need to be no changes in the hearts and minds of masses of people before the social revolution can become a reality. We live in an age of cultural stagnation and decline, in which technical marvels are primarily used in an effort to numb and anaesthetize masses of people and render them vulnerable to the most backward conceptions and moods.

The sharpening of the critical faculties of the population -- its collective ability to distinguish truth from lies, the essential from the inessential, its own elementary interests from the interests of its deadliest enemies -- and the raising of its spiritual level to the point where large numbers of people will demonstrate nobility, make great sacrifices, think only of their fellow men and women -- all of this arises out of an intellectual and moral heightening which must be the product of the advance of human culture as a whole.

Art expresses things about life, about people and about oneself that are not revealed in political or scientific thought; its great power consists in its ability to connect human beings, as though by invisible wires, at the most profound and intimate levels. To become whole, human beings require the truth about the world, and about themselves, that art offers.

The art of past centuries has made man more complex and flexible, Trotsky comments in *Culture and Socialism*, has raised his mentality to a higher level, has enriched him in an all-round way. In *Literature and Revolution*, after noting that genuine individuality is precisely what the average worker lacks, Trotsky suggests that art contributes to a heightening "of the objective quality and the subjective consciousness of individuality." He goes on: "What the worker will take from Shakespeare, Pushkin, or Dostoyevsky, will be a more complex idea of human personality, of its passions and feelings, a deeper and more profound understanding of its psychic forces and of the role of the subconscious, etc. In the final analysis, the worker will be richer."

And in what does the disturbing or subversive quality of art consist? Does that quality manifest itself exclusively, or even primarily, through the presentation of an explicitly social and political content in art? Can one speak, on the contrary, about the subversive quality of a piece of orchestral music, or an abstract painting, or a love poem, or a popular film? I certainly believe one can and, indeed, must.

The impulse to freedom, the striving for a complete and fulfilling existence, mentally and physically, in opposition to the unbearable reality, is an absolute. Lyricism, says Breton, is the beginning of a protest. This protest, conscious or unconscious, is an element of every creative work.

A true work of art appeals to and sets loose powerful forces within the beholder. It brings to the point of highest tension, if only in what Freud called "the deepest layers of the psychic mechanism," the conflict between life as it is and life as it has hitherto appeared only in humanity's dreams. The products of art unleash libidinal and destructive energy, evoke needs and desires which cannot be satisfied within the immediate circumstances of the individual or within the existing oppressive social structure as a whole, needs and desires which demand a response, a response which in the end can only be found in the social revolution. Breton speaks of aesthetic perceptions which "are of such a nature as to be bewildering and revolutionary, in the sense that they urgently call for something to answer them in outer reality."

I believe some of Marx's earliest writings, despite their unresolved political character, speak to these issues. He grasped brilliantly the age-old and inexhaustible striving for liberation, that element that never disappears, no matter how disheartening the social conditions, from mankind's artistic efforts.

He wrote in 1843: "Hence, our motto must be: reform of consciousness not through dogmas, but by analysing the mystical consciousness that is unintelligible to itself, whether it manifests itself in a religious or a political form. *It will then become evident that the world has long dreamed of possessing something of which it has only to be conscious in order to possess it in reality***.** It will become evident that it is not a question of drawing a great mental dividing line between the past and the future, but of *realising* the thoughts of the past. Lastly, it will become evident that mankind is not beginning a *new* work, but is consciously carrying into effect its old work." [My emphasis]

Bringing this "dream of something" into humanity's conscious and unconscious life is the eternal labor of art.

Conclusion

In bringing this presentation to a conclusion, I would like to turn briefly to our own tasks. The revolutionary party has immense responsibilities today in the sphere of art, and culture generally. We have made the point that so much that would have been taken for granted by socialists and artists alike sixty or seventy years ago -- an elementary hostility, for example, to bourgeois morality, patriotism, the forces of law and order, religious superstition -- is virtually unknown in intellectual circles today. The reconstruction of a culture, or more properly the building of a new one, is not a simple matter, nor something that is done overnight.

We have made the point, as well, that the spark of human genius has not gone out, but that, blocked particularly by the paralyzing impact of Stalinism, it has poured itself one-sidedly into the scientific and technical side of cultural life for half a century. An artistic and social renaissance is inevitable. Perhaps this school indicates that it has already begun.

I have used this word "one-sided" a number of times today, more often than I would like. I will throw caution to the wind and suggest that we declare a war on one-sidedness. The social upheavals to come will demand an unprecedented all-sidedness of Marxists.

I hope that I will not scandalize anyone here if I suggest that there are objective dangers in the "revolutionary and political" one-sidedness that Trotsky described -- I believe -- in somewhat regretful and anxious tones in *Literature and Revolution*. The warning that AndrÃ© Breton issued, notwithstanding the fact that it was issued against the narrowness of the increasingly Stalinized Communist Party of France in the early 1930s, is still worth bearing in mind. What a risk the revolutionary "would be taking," Breton declared, "were he only to count, in order to arrive at his goals, on the tension of a cord along whose whole length he would have to pass while absolutely forbidden, from the moment he started out, to look up or down!"

Gerry Healy, the leader of the British Socialist Labour League and later Workers Revolutionary Party, used to say in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in admitting quite candidly his own lack of knowledge about the subtler cultural problems, "We didn't have time, we didn't have time to study these things." And I am not in any position to render judgment, or to suggest that such a specialized study was objectively possible under the immensely difficult conditions faced by the Trotskyist movement in the postwar period. I am only speaking of objective facts. Again I think the one-sidedness of our own party for an historical period was in part a function of the dominance of the reactionary, uncultured, anticommunist labor bureaucracies and the isolation of the Marxist tendency.

I am certainly not ascribing the degeneration of the Healy WRP leadership to its failure to pay proper attention to the significance of cultural matters, but I will argue that its unpreparedness on a series of questions made it politically and theoretically vulnerable when a new set of political problems arose in the 1970s, including quite centrally the challenge represented by an influx of middle class intellectuals, and that this unpreparedness proved to be an destabilizing factor.

Modern history has demonstrated that all critical thought under capitalism gravitates toward Marxism. The artists and intellectuals who

have eyes in their heads and who have something to say will inevitably be drawn to this party. We will not be allowed the privilege of improvising and making up our response as we go along.

I think this school and the entire development of the party over the past period are cause for great confidence. Our party has a clean banner. We are the declared enemies of capitalism and bureaucracy. No other movement can appeal on such a basis to workers. And no other movement can make our appeal to the artists. I have no reason to alter the words with which Trotsky and Breton concluded their 1938 manifesto:

"Our aims:

"The independence of art for the revolution.

"The revolution for the complete liberation of art!"

A Comment on Art and the Marxist Party, *a comment by Joanne Laurier*