Realism, Surrealism and Socialist Realism

Western criticism has usually tried to maintain a *cordon sanitaire* round the literary theory of the socialist world. This cultural containment is particularly evident in the case of socialist realism, a concept which has been around now for some fifty years. Excellent studies do exist in English, dealing with it almost exclusively as a product of Soviet Russia. But rarely is it shown in the context of the wider European literary tradition. The purpose of this essay is to show that, for two of its leading exponents at least, socialist realism grew from the main stream of European literature, as a response to the problem of the writer's relationship with society.

The birth of socialist realism is an oft-told tale, but a necessary starting point.[1] There is common agreement that the term was first used in May 1932 during preparatory discussions to set up the Soviet Writers' Union. Accounts differ on precisely when, where, and by whom it was coined. Most probably it was injected into the discussion by the Communist Party leadership, possibly even by Stalin himself. Certainly it was soon credited to Stalin. Its function at that point was to act as an umbrella concept, uniting the various contending schools of literary thought, and defining a general social and political framework for their development. From there it was taken up extensively by writers and critics, and became common currency after the First Congress of the Soviet Writers' Union in 1934, where it was launched in major keynote addresses by Gorky, Radek, Bukharin and Zhdanov.

From the outset, socialist realism brought together two unruly partners: politics and literature. Only the most

eccentric would deny that there is a real relationship between the two, but defining the contours of that relationship is fraught with hazards, and reaching out to found a new relationship is more perilous still.

In 1934 the politicians and the writers spoke in apparent unison. The politicians were keen to press forward with a programme of planned socialist construction, in which literature should have a definite role. The writers were anxious to develop the scope and power of literature to the point where it could play a distinct role in the construction of socialism. The two objectives were complementary rather than identical. The tension generated by their difference has subsequently proved to be both creative and destructive.

From a political perspective, three broad questions were posed. Does literature have any social importance? Can it be given direction? Can it be brought within a rational plan? Most people would answer positively to the first question. Almost any socialist would answer to the second that the attempt should at least be made. The third question only arises with the emergence of a state in which social planning becomes a matter of policy rather than chance. The hard questions, however, are not those of broad principle, but those of practice.

The received wisdom which regards socialist realism as purely a Stalinist means of regimenting literary output draws its strength primarily from the grim toll of Stalin's repressive rule during the later 1930s and at the height of the Cold War. But the received wisdom also depends on ignoring or denying two points. First, state or party policies formulated around the theory of socialist realism have not, before or since, been so

narrow, restrictive, or authoritarian. Second, the impetus to develop the theory itself came in large measure from writers and critics articulating needs arising from the practice of their craft. This second point constitutes a key strength of socialist realism historically and internationally. Its truth can readily be observed in the development of two writers of unassailable literary stature, both in the Soviet Union and elsewhere: Maxim Gorky and Louis Aragon.

Gorky is often regarded as the founder of socialist realism. So closely is he identified with the movement that it is easily forgotten how his work grew historically out of the Russian literary tradition.[2] As a young writer and populist revolutionary in the 1880s, he shared Tolstoy's hatred for the depredations of nascent capitalism in Russia. Gorky, however, came to see it from inside the new teeming industrial centres. A Tolstoyan mystical faith in the soul of the Russian (peasant) people could scarcely survive transposition into a slum environment. From his early romantic tales of the countryside, Gorky turned to critical realism and a Zolaesque dissection of the dregs of city life, the 'lower depths' of his famous play.

In due course some of the mystical faith re-emerged, but now centred on the urban working class, in whom he detected a growing mood of combativity and optimism. Recognising that a reliance on people's inherent moral and spiritual qualities as a force for change had played Tolstoy false, Gorky looked to the political and organisational strengths which were growing among workers. Then began his turbulent life-long association with Lenin and the Bolsheviks. This was the context in which The Mother and Enemies were produced.

The revolutionary romanticism of Gorky's writings after

the first Russian revolution of 1905 added a new dimension to the critical realism which was the dominant literary movement in Europe. The exposure of a corrupt society ripe for change was completed by the adumbration of the forms that change might take, and of the means by which it might be achieved. That in many respects was already socialist realism, in practice if not yet in theory. But it was socialist realism under capitalism, representing the last logical stage in the European realist tradition. What was different about socialist realism in its theoretically developed Soviet form, was that it arose in a socialist society, and aspired to be the first stage in a new literary tradition.

The shift from opposition to government, from subversion to construction, necessitated changes of literary strategy comparable with the changes of political strategy undertaken by the successful Bolsheviks. Principally, the balance in Gorky's work between critical realism and revolutionary romanticism had to be reversed. The difficulty of this enterprise is reflected in his return to autobiography and memoirs of his earlier life, and in his predilection for pre-revolutionary settings in his fictional writings. It was no doubt also a factor in his early hostility to aspects of Bolshevik rule in the first months following the October Revolution.

After the consolidation of Soviet power, Gorky came to recognise the increasing priority to emphasise the promise of the future rather than to dwell on the shortcomings of the present. Inevitably, this necessity transformed the nature of his realism. Where once a thoroughgoing exposure of the status quo had been both the most truthful and the most politically

effective portrayal of society, it became more truthful to present the rapid changes in post-revolutionary society, and more politically important to point to the achievements and prospects. Such a realism could no longer be called critical, since construction rather than criticism was its essence.

In his address to the Soviet Writers' Congress, Gorky saw only a residual function for critical realism, that of 'throwing light on the survivals of the past, ... fighting them, and extirpating them'.[3] Of necessity, it was a function which could only diminish as the pre-revolutionary order receded further into the past. The constructive realism which replaced it was profoundly transformed by the romanticism which became the dominant partner. Like the Five-Year Plans, the new socialist realism was goal-oriented, with tomorrow's targets stitched into the fabric of today. Where once the new world was to be built on the ashes of the old, now it was to be built with the bricks and mortar already to hand. Increasingly, Gorky's writing was informed by a vision. His address sums it up:

> Life, as asserted by socialist realism, is deed, creativeness, the aim of which is the uninterrupted development of the priceless individual faculties of man, with a view to his victory over the forces of nature, for the sake of his health and longevity, for the supreme joy of living on an earth which, in conformity with the steady growth of his requirements, he wishes to mould throughout into a beautiful dwelling place for mankind, united into a single family.[4]

Gorky's work during the last few years of his life was marked by the tension between his visions of present and future reality. His complex and problematic novel The Life of Klim Samgin is

racked by it, almost to the point of disintegration - though the first three parts appeared between 1927 and 1931, he was unable to finish the novel before his death in June 1936. The new literary tasks he set himself in the name of socialist realism demanded great courage, lucidity and balance. It could scarcely be denied that many of Gorky's followers came to grief in trying to meet those tasks.

Threading between the Scylla of viewing the present through rose-coloured spectacles and the Charybdis of over-assiduously documenting its shortcomings, Soviet writers were set a daunting task. In the circumstances, it is perhaps surprising that there were works, like Sholokhov's Don novels, which succeeded in giving a living, breathing picture of socialist construction, warts and all, in its present and its aspirations. Certainly, it is no surprise that there should have been too many others which sacrificed veracity for edification, when the penalties for demoralising the masses with tales of gloom could be extreme.

There are many accounts, sympathetic or hostile, of how socialist realism developed in the Soviet Union from these early beginnings. Its history is part and parcel of the history of the country itself, with all its splendours and tragedies. But what is less often realised is that there were movements in other European literary traditions which in one way or another converged on similar conclusions.

A striking example of this process is the development of the French poet and novelist Louis Aragon, who died on Christmas Eve 1982. Though his literary achievements are less well known in the English speaking world, his stature in France is evidenced by the plethora of tributes and commemorative publications, and his international standing is very considerable. Curiously,

Aragon has two reputations: the first as a key figure in the surrealist movement, the second as a major socialist writer. The boundary is usually drawn in the late 1920s after he joined the French Communist Party, a commitment he maintained until his death. But these two stages of his development were by no means as separate as they sometimes appear.[5]

Aragon first rose to prominence as a leading figure in the Dada movement of the early 1920s. Dada was an assault on traditional literary and artistic forms, on the pretension of art to refer meaningfully to the world, and even on the notion of art itself. It aimed to shatter the chains which bound human perception in a narrow confinement. It sought liberation through destruction - liberation of mind through destruction of art-forms. Very quickly, however, its enthusiasts began to recognise the limited and temporary scope of its ambitions, and several Dadaists, Aragon among them, shifted the emphasis to a more constructive aim of exploring the new dimensions now opened to view. This enterprise of revealing the supra-reality usually hidden behind conventional perceptions of reality earned them the lasting name of surrealists.

Initially, the supra-reality was envisaged as a psychological and spiritual sphere. Access was gained by tricks and traps and shocks to subvert or bypass the conscious, rational ordering of experience. But it slowly became apparent that the limitations of conventional awareness were not only, and perhaps not even primarily, inherent in the structures of consciousness as such. They stemmed partly, and perhaps mainly, from the structures of social life.

From this point it was a short step to the acceptance of a need for fundamental social and political change. The much-

published decision of the five leading surrealists to join the Communist Party was a logical consequence in the context of 1927. For Aragon, there was a further stage in the argument. It was not so much the hidden movements of mind as the hidden movements of society which held the key to human emancipation. That part of reality could not be explored by subverting consciousness, but only by equipping it with a coherent rational analysis, such as Marxism offered. The new realism towards which Aragon was working both exceeded and subverted the surrealist project. Travelling to the Soviet Union in the early 1930s, he discovered that the theoretical debates taking place there converged with the direction of his own thoughts. Henceforth his work as a novelist and critic focussed on exploring the theory and practice of socialist realism.

Like Gorky, Aragon took the novel to be his major vehicle. 'The novel', he argued, 'is a machine invented by man for the apprehension of reality in all its complexity.'[6] Without abandoning poetry, he began to write the monumental series of novels to which he gave the overall title 'Le Monde Réel' ('The Real World'). The first volume appeared in 1934. Though he had come from a different point of departure, Aragon's novels share with Gorky's the balance of critical realism and revolutionary romanticism which characterises the socialist writing under capitalism. Taking as his subject the French experience of capitalist society in deep crisis, Aragon delineates in fine detail the mechanisms of economic, political and social oppression, and their effect on the lives of individuals. He also shows the forces which oppose and may eventually end oppression: the organised working class and the progressive elements of the bourgeoisie who go over to them.

Necessarily, the optimism about the future is limited by a realisation of the continuing power of the capitalist class and above all its willingness to resort to extreme measures, including bloody repression at home and murderous wars on a world scale. The scope for rose-coloured spectacles is restricted to depiction of the progressive forces, and although Aragon is not totally exempt from this, he dwells massively on the declining bourgeoise and the vacillating petty-bourgeoisie.

Within the French tradition, Aragon stands in a kind of continuity with the critical realists, represented in inter-war France by Henri Barbusse and Romain Rolland. But this continuity is by no means linear, as his surrealist development demonstrates. And his criticism is sharpened by a hard-edged Marxist political and social philosophy which contrasts with the instinctive pacifist radicalism of Barbusse and Rolland.

As well as being avowed socialist realists, Gorky and Aragon were both committed communists. The two facts are inseparable, since the concept of socialist realism has been claimed almost exclusively by writers who were part of, or close to, the world communist movement. The term itself functions almost as a badge of membership. In this respect, the social and historical core of socialist realism is the communist movement itself. On the other hand it is wholly possible for the essence of socialist realism, if not the term, to be accepted by non-communist socialists. This possibility is evident if the conceptual core is taken to be the combination of critical realism and revolutionary romanticism which both Gorky and Aragon exemplify. That is, critical realism understood as a development of the tradition of literary realism, informed by a lucid awareness of the workings of contemporary society; and revolutionary

romanticism understood as a perception of the forces for progressive social change, with a view to promoting their development.

Such a characterisation of socialist realism is broader and less precise than is usually offered in manuals, East or West. But it does not exclude either the rigorous definitions of fully developed Marxist aesthetics or the looser approach of progressive artists who would prefer not to be tied to a precise political or philosophical programme. For this reason, it is a view which offers a bridge towards the thought and art of socialist countries, but is primarily adapted to conditions prevailing in capitalist countries.

So conceived, socialist realism appears clearly in its historical perspective, as a product of the mainstream European realist tradition. It also appears, more surprisingly perhaps, in its critical perspective as a flexible concept with room for growth. Whether it does grow, even under a different name, will depend on the extent to which progressive writers can perceive the forces for change within the grim realities of capitalist society which they continue to depict.

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Notes

1. See H. Ermolaev, Soviet Literary Theories, 1917-1934: The Genesis of Socialist Realism, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1963; and C. Vaughn James, Soviet Socialist Realism: Origins and Theory, London, 1973.

2. See R. Hare, Maxim Gorky. Romantic Realist and Conservative Revolutionary, London, 1960; and F.M. Borras, Maxim Gorky the Writer, London, 1967.

3. Soviet Writers' Congress 1934, London, 1977, p 65.

4. Ibid, pp 65-6.

5. See R. Garaudy, L'Itinéraire d'Aragon, Paris, 1961; and M. Adereth, Commitment in Modern French Literature, London, 1967.

6. L. Aragon, 'C'est là que tout a commencé', reprinted in the 'Folio' edition of his novel Les Cloches de Bâle, Paris, 1978, p 12 (my translation).