
CHAPTER XIII

VORONSKY'S FIGHT FOR TRUTH

IT WAS IN RESISTANCE TO THE AT-YOUR-POSTITES AND THEIR creature, RAPP, and to this carefully nurtured public hysteria in which the revolutionary passion was converted into a passion of conformity and religious obedience, and hatred of the unconverted replaced the hatred of oppression and exploitation—it was in resistance to this madness that Voronsky and Polonsky proved their mettle.

When men look back from saner heights, the names of these two editor-critics, who were entrusted under Lenin with the task of nourishing a genuine new art of literature in the relative freedom achieved by the revolution, and who did not betray the trust, will stand very high. These men were both handicapped, in my view, by their strict adherence to the dialectic metaphysics. They were compelled, as all orthodox Marxians are, to invent quaint devices of ratiocination in order to make room in a world whose "reality" is "practical action," for the interest which poets have in suspending action and becoming conscious of the being of the world in its impractical variety. Within the limits imposed by their theoretic belief, however, they fought valiantly for the manhood of art against the "mere left childishness," as Voronsky

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described it, of the soldier-propagandist slogans.

Voronsky, for instance, defended Turgeniev's view that the artist's business is not to preach ideas but to present "the reality of life," and he borrowed from Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* the conception of the artist as one who "removes the veils" from things as they are. One of his books is called *The Art of Seeing the World*, and there he describes the poet, with penetration and rare charm, as one who has the gift to "look with simple eyes at the world as though seeing it for the first time." Nevertheless he is unable to state boldly that since we have been born into this world and here we are, it is *worth while* to see it—and see any part of it, if only a puddle of water or a wash-bowl—with fresh eyes, and that therefore certain ranges of art have no reference to a practical effort by class struggle to revolutionize the world. He is compelled to conceive the class program not as a specific purpose but as a general "essence" of man, and so conclude that no artist after all, no matter how "simple" his glance, can see the reality of any object for any instant except with the "selective" vision of his class. And in order to endow the vision of the proletarian artist with a value superior to that of his class enemy, he lugs forward, of course, that antique Marxian argument-in-a-circle which runs as follows: Since reality is an evolution toward communism, the "rising class" which sees it so, has a truer vision than the classes in decline which see it otherwise.

"An artist who knows the class character of art will therefore throw over all contrary theories," concludes Voronsky, "decide to which class his thoughts and feel-

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ings belong, and if he is on the side of the proletariat think how he can best 'remove the veils' in the interest of his class."

It was ably argued by another thoughtful critic, P. S. Kogan, that no fundamental disaccord existed between Voronsky and the leaders of the Literary Inquisition. Theoretically there was none, and there could not be, they all being strict adherents of the State Religion. RAPP's trick of calling Voronsky an "idealist" is but one small item in the Stalin policy of brutal and disloyal falsification of his critics' views. Nevertheless, the opposition between Voronsky and the leaders of the Inquisition was absolute—more absolute perhaps than theoretic disagreements can be. For within the limits of the State Religion, Voronsky was defending the right of artists to an independent vision of the world. Creative art, he said, is in its very nature "individual." And he made a distinction between the individualism of the "art epoch of decadence, the decline and decay of bourgeois society" which "recognized nothing but creation for self and out of self," and the individualism of the artist as such, whose creative effort, no matter how many men it serves, is of necessity a lonely act. This was, of course, in its logical meaning a remark quite obvious to common-sense. But in its *political implication*, it was a revolt against the control of the bureaucrat and nothing else. For that slogan, the "collectivization of art," means nothing downright—as I hope the previous pages have made clear—but that artists are to put on uniforms and take orders from a political machine.

It is wasting ink and paper, when the fighting issues

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are so clear, to write long dissertations on the theoretic formulæ. Kogan neatly demonstrates how Voronsky merely stressed the "artistic moment," RAPP the "revolutionary content" of a proletarian art. All true enough—and futile talk and foolish. Voronsky was a man of art and not a bell-boy of the politicians—that is where they differed.

Voronsky's "fat journal" was called *Krassnaia Nov*, which means "Red Virgin Soil." Its founding was inspired by Trotsky, and its policy was based upon that concept which he shared with Lenin of the revolutionary power as a gardener rather than a drill-sergeant in the field of art. Even this journal was, however, to many in the party who loved literature, too close to politics. And Voronsky himself, if I remember rightly, participated in an effort made in 1923 by a group of these poetic-minded Bolsheviks, who were hospitable enough to include me in their number, to found a journal which should give even a wider range to literary experimentation. It is interesting, in view of the subsequent canonization of party propaganda as the sole form of revolutionary art, to remember that Demian Byedny, subsequently the poetic staff-officer of the Stalin clique and certainly the most propaganda-hearted of all the poets of this world, was an enthusiastic member of our group. I recall with particular pleasure his enthusiasm over the article I contributed to our first number, a whimsical tale of my arrival in Russia and my first impression of the people, as remote as *Alice in Wonderland* from the problems of a party propaganda. Sosnovsky, the most eminent literary

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figure in the party press, a master of what we call human interest stories, was also a member of this group. The bureaucracy, however, already then crystallizing under the cunning hand of Stalin, failed to see the utility of our poetic venture. We were too good friends with Trotsky. The funds voted for our sustenance were revoked after the first issue. We little guessed that within two years no printed utterance could appear in Russia, rhymed or reasoned, until it had been filtered to take out the last residual grains of "Trotskyism." Demian Byedny fled to the Stalinist camp, and I am sure he would be shocked to recall how he once patronized "this American Dickens," as he used laughingly to call me—and that is no insult in Russia—who was able, while in full sympathy with the revolution, to see and smile at things from other angles than their communist utility. Sosnovsky went the way of all those Russian Bolsheviks who combine three qualities—honesty absolute, a high intelligence and extreme courage. He languishes with hundreds more of the old fighters for communism in one of Stalin's "isolators" in Siberia, while Stalin tells his public that in five years more we shall arrive in the Cooperative Commonwealth.

Voronsky fought not only for the artist's right to see the world, but for his right to see it variously and coolly, and with emotion "recollected in tranquillity."

"We are one-sided . . ." he cried, "we can not be otherwise in our days, and that is our strength." But that prevents us from standing apart from ourselves and our compositions and viewing them in a

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mood of "cold-blooded appraisal." "We are exclusively purposive; our wills, minds, feelings, are all collected into one, focussed in one; all their varieties issue with us in the political struggle . . . the fighter and politician, swallows up the artist in us. . . . Our party . . . has not yet produced one great artist."

With these heresies against the church administration upon his lips, what profit to Voronsky that he adhered to the religion, cried "We lack the dialectic!" and endeavored to bring his plea for poetry within the sanctions of a metaphysics for which "reality" itself is "practical action"? Voronsky was beaten down, slandered, vilified, misquoted and misrepresented, his great prestige, resting upon party-membership and association with Lenin since 1904, reduced to vapor and destroyed, his name and the name of his strong group "Pereval" identified with counter-revolution, his editorship taken from him, and his right to defend his views. In 1928 he was expelled from the party as a "Trotskyist" and shipped off to Siberia. He is now back in Moscow, writing his memoirs, and spending his rare gift of luminous thinking and strong prose and subtle criticism in editing editions of the classics.

A summation from the *Literary Encyclopedia* of Voronsky's sins of heresy against Marx, will give the reader one more glimpse of that system of scholastic logistics—that revival of a mediæval mental barbarism—which the dialectic metaphysics, with its talk of "essences," has made possible to Stalin's narrow zealots of

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subservience. After quoting from Voronsky what I gave above about seeing the world with simple eyes, the ex-communication reads:

“Hence follow conclusions directly hostile to the teaching of Marxism that the essence of man is a complex of social relations, and that the whole world exists for him only as the member of a class. . . . A class-being has no need to renounce his essence in order to ‘look with simple eyes at the world as though seeing it for the first time.’ Not by denying the class envelope, alleged to destroy the world, but through the experience and practice of classes, society moves forward. With Voronsky, however, what becomes of art as an understanding of life in images, an understanding achieved in the interest of one class or another? Art now seems to have another task: ‘Art,’ he says, ‘has always striven and will strive to return, restore, discover the world, beautiful in itself, to give it in the most purified and immediate sensations.’ Thus we see that the chief task of art is not to understand the world in the interest of a class, but to ‘remove the veils,’ ‘discover it.’”

And that is the end of Voronsky.