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Leon Trotsky Between Literature and Revolution

Summary

Key words: literature, revolution, proletariat, eschatology.

Leon Trotsky (1879-1940), one of the leaders of the Bolshevik coup of 1917 and the subsequent Soviet state, resting at the government cottage in the summer of 1922, when he was People's Commissar of Military Affairs of the Russian Federative Socialist Republic, decided to edit his previously published articles on literature and to publish them as a single collection, but then he resolved to gradually expand and postpone its completion to the following summer, 1923: during this time the collection was reworked, expanded, filled with new material and soon after the end of the work, in the autumn of the same year 1923, published as a book, titled: "Literature and Revolution".

At that time, Trotsky already held the position of the People's Commissar of Military and Naval Affairs of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, although not only this circumstance caused the work of the famous Bolshevik to receive a wide response in the Soviet Union and various countries of the world. The collection of articles was soon translated into many languages and gradually published in almost every country. The book, in an abbreviated form, was also published in Georgia in 1926.

The collection of texts of different content, purpose and scope conveys, of course, shows the personal literary views and impressions of the leader of the

revolution himself, but at the same time, the whole book is an eloquent source for understanding how he or the founders and ideologists of Bolshevism saw the place and importance of literature or, more broadly, art in the communist state.

One circumstance should also be taken into account: it might be assumed that, since the Leninist-Trotskyist period of Bolshevik ideology differed in its attitude towards art (even the formal aspects) from the Stalinist period, it would be expected that the book would show a clear difference from the directions of the ideological-artistic dimension, took in the Soviet Union, that followed, such as the 1930s-1940s, but it is remarkable that the inheritance between these two periods is visible and clear.

The book discusses the relationship between literature and politics, individual writers and their literary works, but also the issues of theater and painting, sculpture and architecture, and the artists of these artistic fields.

In general, Trotsky believes that art is crucial to the evaluation of each epoch, because “the development of art is the highest test of the vitality and significance of each epoch”. Accordingly, art is the highest and visible manifestation of life, but according to the author of the book, as a materialist, as a Marxist, material provision is necessary for artistic achievements, that is, a poor environment cannot create, cannot bring high culture: “for art, you need wealth, you need abundance”, “for the culture to increase, complicate and improve, a material increase is needed”. Thus, from this point of view, only prosperity will bring great art as a result, and in this situation, the personal aspirations of the artist are given less importance. It is worth noting that, according to the leader of the revolution, even the revolution itself, that is, the age of excitement, is barren for creating a creative environment.

It is noteworthy that, from Trotsky’s point of view, art not only reflects reality but also shapes it, – in each case, it is art that helps the proletariat as a group to find its face. But, at the same time, for the author, as a materialist, there is no doubt that the word reflects the action and the matter is primary.

At the same time, Trotsky believes that a work of art should be evaluated not from an ideological point of view, but from its essence, its nature. It seems that the intrinsic value of artistic works is separated from each other here, which should be determined based on the dimensions of art (how?), but the explanation of what led to their creation, i.e., what material circumstances gave rise to them (why?), is separated from such assessment. General aesthetic criteria serve and manage to clarify the first one, while for the second one, it is necessary to invoke and use Marxist teaching.

When understanding the essence of literature and, in general, art, one of the founders of Bolshevism faces two almost insurmountable dilemmas, the solution of which will be difficult to find:

First, – works of art are created by individual artists, and according to Marxism, a person exists to the extent that he is a representative of the collective and reflects or expresses the goals and aspirations of the collective. Trotsky, as he is a Marxist, believes that everything private must disappear in the common; that the individual

must merge with the universal; that there must be only a “collective man” and, therefore, the owner must be only a collective. Accordingly, the question arises: is the author of an artistic work the owner or not, that is, the creator and owner of his work, when “the revolution arises from the central idea that the sole owner should become a collective person”. According to this point of view, the establishment of communism should also bring about the abolition of the individual author (as well as his personal responsibility) and the formation of a collective author, a view that was noticeably influenced by the creation of the communist state and in the early days of its existence. But Trotsky still turns aside the judgment of such issues arising around him, and even when he discusses the writings standing against the revolution (which he calls “pre-October literature” and the vast majority of whose representatives found themselves in exile at that time), as a whole, about complete ideological or artistic exhaustion, still discusses individual Russian authors and their books.

It is significant that, on the one hand, Trotsky declares: “Bourgeois poetry, of course, does not exist, because poetry is a free art, not a class service”, but immediately retreats, because these words published earlier he received serve critics from an experienced and well-read journalist (of course, a Marxist), because, according to him, these “sarcastic words were perceived in a positive sense”. And this well-educated journalist himself undoubtedly proved the “class character of literature” for him, which, even though it can be seen from the ironic context, was clear and unquestionable for the author of the book.

Second, – Leon Trotsky, as a literarily educated and culturally developed person, cannot in any way deny the impermanent, unshakable cultural value of the art of the past, the so-called classical art, and openly admits that, unlike this art, the so-called proletarian art and, in particular, literature lags behind its predecessor, i.e. feudal or bourgeois-capitalist art with Marxist names. But, in the view of the revolutionary, overcoming this backwardness is only a matter of time.

It must be said that, despite of the author’s respectful idea related to the book “Literature and Revolution” and the responses that the publication received, from the point of view of literary criticism, it is very mediocre. Despite the literary confidence of the famous revolutionary, the collection seems to have had a predominantly political purpose.