

THE APPROACH TO THE MASSES

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THIS is a subject which by its very nature seems remote from the sphere of esthetics. Even to consider it in such a connection is difficult. What one can do at best is recognize the immediacy of the problem, cite some general points already made about it, and discuss it in relation to art and its evolution. I remember how the movement began and I can already see how it is going to end, or more exactly, I can observe it drawing to a definite conclusion which is really obvious to anyone. In art the general recognition of a movement as such is the unmistakable sign of its death rather than of its life, even though it lingers on through sheer inertia.

But what is the movement we are discussing? It is the approach to the masses, art for for the people. Here is the core of that problem, around which cluster such questions as the "Simplification of Means," the "Breakdown of Isolation," "Overcoming Formalism," the "Means of Expression," "Humanization." But these latter are not in themselves new, they have existed for a long time within the modernist movement. The "approach to the masses" is, by contrast, a fruit of only the last twenty-five years. It was born in Russia, today it has penetrated America.

The most recent phases in the history of art are summarized in the two slogans "art for art's sake" – the artist thus creating an illusion of complete liberty and being in some measure an anarchistic organism in the community; and "art *without art*" – a modern decadence of the first movement. Having attained a savage formalism which was a goal in itself, the second phase ended in dehumanization on all planes of art. The perfect form emptied of all ideological content became the esthetic ideal.

Finally, today, there is a new stage which might be described as the seeking after a moral-esthetic unity. As a social-esthetic problem this is new here in America. In Russia it represents a return to old and long-abandoned positions. Such a movement existed there from the 'sixties to the 'eighties; engulfed by symbolism, it was reborn, on a new foundation, after the revolution.

To establish a parallel between Russia's two populist movements, that of the 'eighties may be called a reaction against pure-classic-romanticism in favor of an approach to the masses. Populist art of that period was closely bound up with the ideology of the naissant revolution. Today's populism is a reaction against that modernist decadence which wound up in formalism devoid of humanity. It has been nourished by Marxist ideology in which it was born and which prescribes it.

If we consider the second historical phase, "art without art" as transitory and negative to the point of degeneracy, we then face two alternatives. The first is "art for art's sake," which is founded on an eternal ideology, being by nature intimate, secret and not controversial; the second is art to serve the social collective. Under present conditions of life the artist must renounce the esthetic principle of art for art's sake if he wants real activity in a practical sense. For that principle does not meet any necessity except the absolute one of the artist himself; it conforms neither to "social" nor to "commercial" needs; it serves neither the socialist nor capitalist state.

Actually, the problem we are studying falls into three parts: Folk Art, Proletarian Art and Populist Art. Time and space prevent a thorough examination of the three aspects here, but we can return to the subject some day. Let us now merely discuss the general phases.

Folk art is made by the people themselves through the organically creative forces which are their own. It disappears when, in place of the people, the professional element becomes active, changing its specific nature and parodying it. The people do not need to have their image caricatured. Like children, they cannot bear an untruth. It is the transfiguration of daily life which is essential to their creative impulse. Folk art has always existed, in every country it lies at the foundation of the *national* culture. It is a historic reality in all culture. Proletarian art on the other hand is a theory intended to serve neo-Marxist dogma and be the foundation of an *international* art.

Proletarian art was summoned to form an absolutely new esthetic culture bearing no resemblance to the culture of the past which, by the same decree, is considered "bourgeois art." It was supposed to develop from the psychology of the new man, freed from the past, and thus pose an absolutely new problem. It has been one of the great Utopias of the Russian Revolution, never successfully realized, although there has been a long period in which the professionals and even the masses themselves collaborated.

Populist art was created in Russia as a compromise attempt at proletarian art. It appeals to the masses rather than to the people. Instead of raising the masses toward art, it talks down to their level and imposes upon the people its own counterfeit image. Populist art therefore is a fiction and a practical adaptation to the taste and tendencies of the moment. The present status of the movement might be termed "populist-modernism" because the characteristics of modernism have co-existed with it, just as, during its first period from the 'sixties to the 'eighties, the romantic characteristics (more than the classic) co-existed with the populism of that period. But in spite of simplification and adjustment of technic, it is sealed off from the masses the minute it tries to realize purely musical tasks. The conflict lies at the heart of the process of musical composition. It is, so to speak, the consequence of the musician's personality itself. For him, the direct realization leads always to proper goals; it will be diverted and break like a wave on an ideologic concept the moment there is an adjustment to external aims.

There is no way to disguise compromise between art and ideology. It makes itself known by the blocking of the tonal material, by extra-musical characteristics which mechanize the creative spirit and even the technic. It comes to grief between the desire for a link with the masses – the longing to be easily grasped by catering to the crowd's already developed reflexes – and the desire to create, at the same time, art, not its simulacrum.

Revolutions, war, historic cataclysms interrupt the flow of the eternal verities that are beyond time, confronting us with immediate necessities, temporal and practical. That is why, during turbulent periods, we meet enforced simplifications, debasement and an impoverishment of culture. The real spirit of Russian culture remains obscured by the current drama. And in America, culture demands the closest scrutiny in order that we may discern its young spirit through the apparent tumult.

I have already made a distinction between the people and the masses. The essential point is that the people have traditions, the masses none. I speak of the people as an active force participating in the national, cultural life. One might say that in Russia it is the people who are active, while in America it is the masses, the people not having yet been called into action. The direction in Russia would be *from the people to the masses* while in America it would be *from the masses to the people*. On this premise one can assume that in Russia, culture has arrived at populism, while in America populism might yet be surmounted and thus arrive at

culture. That will be the real solution of the "melting pot" – a new race with its own specific culture.

There is a parallelism today between the masses of Russia and America, which poses its distinct problems on the cultural level. Affinities establish themselves more easily between masses than between peoples. The Russian populist movement finds a warm welcome here, perhaps because it destroys those folk elements which lock music up in traditional nationalism.

One cannot say of a people that it is not cultured, it is *above* culture itself. It bears culture within it like a superior value, which must only be recognized to be understood – and that is the business of genius. It is thus that Moussorgsky, despite the then current populism, found a direct link with the people. Unification of the masses ends only in *non*-culture. The customs of existence give the masses an apparent uniformity of emotion and taste which are utilized for practical ends and interests, to the detriment of art and to the profit of the exploiter. And here lies the danger of commercial art; if badly handled (it is nearly always badly handled) it can become through perfected technical tools – radio, movies – an anti-cultural instrument establishing false reactions and creating artificial needs.

The essential process of art never changes; the realization of form remains the prime necessity always, despite the variety and changes of methods. But the emotional subconscious of art does continually change. It is the state of being which develops with the inner experience of the artist. To refuse experience is to refuse life itself.

But it is the desire for activity of a practical nature, acquired no matter how, which has given rise to the movement for simplification. This very desire for a super-imposed activity has now infiltrated and even been propagated here.

What exactly has been accomplished in the populist movement? Practically nothing. The music created in Russia today seeks to retain its connection with the national source, and yet has drawn away from it by adopting means of simplification foreign to the national language. Russian populist music differs from that written here only to the extent that it remains linked with tradition, and to the extent that it is folk music rather than populist.

The populist movement is not a problem of esthetics, it is not a problem at all, but a mere degeneration of folk-art. And it is for this reason that at the beginning of my article, I prophesied its end. Nonethe-

less, within it lies the germ of an important future movement, for by freeing itself from folk art, which is essentially national, populism nurtures the first striving toward an international art, a free art, created by free men, beyond national frontiers.

The war has given a new impetus to populism today through demands for a redoubled and active patriotism on the part of musicians, as well as of all other artists. But how can martial patriotism be manifested in music? Only through the action of music upon the masses, through its stimulation to self-sacrifice, to renunciation. That is to say, by working through the tonal substance, since words in themselves alone are too feeble.

But then, has not this always been the goal of music? Indeed the great symphony of the nineteenth century responded essentially to the same problem. Containing all the folk elements, it had no meaning except in relation to the great audience. Here was oratorical art par excellence. But symphonic oratory has progressed by paths that are appropriate to music, while the populism of today follows the path of least resistance. To return to the nineteenth century, it made use of emotions already experienced, of the common bond, from which it derives its eclectic nature in the epigonic style. But the current populist movement is only a temporary state, for the path of least resistance can never lead to the true center of art. There is only one really creative solution, it lies in the sphere of music itself. The necessity of establishing a new rapport between the individual will of the artist and the collective state of culture is one of the great difficulties which must still be overcome.

There is naturally a great temptation to establish an immediate connection between historic events and art, but such a connection cannot be forced. No event can change the secret meaning of art, which is its whole value. The artist must preserve his integrity through any historical event whatsoever. No one can deny him that. *Nolite perturbare circulos meos*. It is true that Archimedes paid with his life for these words, but at the same time he established the independence of the artist over the world around him.

It is not as an "expression of the times" that populism can be justified in our eyes. And since we have already excluded it from the esthetic problem it remains in the end a rather tiresome question. To do more than merely pose it is to invite the soldiers of Syracuse to help Archimedes draw his circles.