

the validity of objective truth" (Stalin). It is untrue to say that all our knowledge is relative.

Here is Lenin's statement on this point, with an illustrative example:—

"This distinction between subjectivism (scepticism, sophistry, etc.) and dialectics, incidentally, is that in (objective) dialectics the difference between the relative and the absolute is itself relative. To objective dialectics there is an absolute even within the relative. To subjectivism and sophistry the relative is only relative and excludes the absolute."

Utopian Socialism provides one example. Keeping in mind the given historical conditions, Utopianism corresponded to the scientific achievements and to the general social and industrial levels of its time. Later, the advent of Marxism, of Scientific Socialism, revealed the inadequacy of Utopianism. It was only relatively true. But there was a core, a grain, of absolute truth within Utopianism (e.g. want in the midst of abundance), which was retained when Marx and Engels transformed Utopian into Scientific Socialism.

But to Dr. Lewis, this core of absolute truth does not exist.

Two further quotations from Lenin on this point:—

"Human thought then by its nature is capable of giving, and does give, absolute truth, which is compounded of the sum-total of relative truths. Each step in the development of science adds new grains to the sum of absolute truth, but the limits of the truth of each scientific proposition are relative, now expanding, now shrinking with the growth of knowledge." "It is unconditionally true that to every scientific ideology (as distinct, for instance, from religious ideology) there corresponds an objective truth, absolute nature."

One mystifying feature of the booklet, and actually its basic defect, is that, while attempting to defend Marxist materialism against idealism, Dr Lewis fails to present the main principles of dialectical materialism. Throughout the essay he counterposes mechanistic materialism to idealism. Why only mechanism? It is as though a writer, setting out to defend Communist theory and practice, relied almost entirely upon the ideas and principles of

the Utopian Socialists. Since Dr. Lewis does bring in the mechanist philosophers of the past, it was obligatory upon him to show, first, that if mechanism is no longer adequate philosophically, the mechanists did advance human knowledge precisely by their consistent opposition to idealist fantasy; and secondly, to show how mechanism with its limitations (the "at that time inevitable limitations to classical French materialism"—Engels), was developed and transformed by Marx and Engels into dialectical materialism.

This particular shortcoming results in another series of errors, namely, his handling of the epistemological problem. The Marxist conception of how our knowledge of nature and its laws advances with the progress of social-historical experience ("the education of the five senses is the product of universal history"—Marx), receives far too little attention. Dr. Lewis is too preoccupied with the "refutation" of mechanistic materialism by mythical powers of idealism.

Among other oddities is the type of "authority" he selects to "confirm" Marxist materialism, such as Joad, Whitehead, MacMurray, Laski and G. K. Chesterton. Readers may recall the introduction written by Dr. Lewis for the "Leningrad" *Textbook of Marxist Philosophy* (Left Book Club, 1937), in which Prof. Schlick, founder of the "Vienna Circle" of "scientific empiricism" and linked with the school of "logical positivism" and other peculiar idealist trends with peculiar names, is there quoted to "confirm" Marxist materialism! That introduction is as disappointing as the present booklet.

If the foregoing criticism is severe, it is not due to lack of appreciation of Dr. Lewis' abilities and services in defence of democracy, of Marxist principles generally, and his consistent championship of the Soviet Union against the slanderers. It is because of his prominent position in the literary and philosophical world (he is now editor of the London *Modern Quarterly*), and the rather extensive sale of *Marxism and Modern Idealism* in Australia, that his glaring philosophical inaccuracies cannot be allowed to go unchallenged.

## ARTISTS AND THE CLASS STRUGGLE

PAUL MORTIER

THE rapid deepening of the general crisis since the first world war has swept the artists of the capitalist world into its vortex. Many of them, their view limited by their class alignments, have seen only chaos and destruction, and have sought either to dope themselves with sensual mysticism (Huxley, Debussy, Norman Lindsay) or to escape into obscure formalism (Joyce, Stravinsky, Dali). But an ever increasing number have felt the glory of the working class leading its army of "little

people" in the battle for a new world, and have joined our ranks.

They bring with them important additional weapons to our arsenal, and we must make use of every available weapon in our fight against the ruling class. For this reason alone it is important that we Communists have a clear understanding of the nature of art and its relationship to society. The fact that it is the historical destiny of the working class to be the preservers of world culture makes it

doubly important that we define art in the light of Marxism.

Well then, what is art? In the September *Communist Review* Comrade Oldham defined it as "that particular quality attached to products and activities of man, which gives us an emotional and intellectual stimulus, distinct from the material use-value of the work."

But such a definition explains nothing. What is that "particular quality" of which Cde. Oldham speaks? Is it possible to assess it objectively? As expressed by Cde. Oldham, obviously not. Because an "intellectual and emotional stimulus" is by its very nature subjective.

If we were to accept this definition all art criticism would be meaningless, and art would be denied any important social function.

For example, a musical philologist is entitled to describe Joyce's *Finnegans' Wake* as great art because he receives from it an emotional stimulus (from the musical cadences in the metrical tonal arrangements of the words) and an intellectual stimulus (from the juxtaposition and combination of words from different language groups). And who is able to contradict such a viewpoint of Joyce's work—a viewpoint which has been expressed many times by the defenders of the Joyce myth.

To prove I am not judging Comrade Oldham too harshly, I quote from him again: "If a musical composition is just an arrangement of notes which brings out fully the quality and beauty of the notes themselves, and which doesn't attempt to represent anything exactly from life, we can still admire it, even though we are not great students of music."

Such a statement will bring ready applause from the art-for-arts-sakers of the bourgeois press. They are, constantly hammering at us, imploring us, threatening us with intellectual ostracism if we refuse to admire music which is "JUST an arrangement of notes which brings out fully the quality and beauty of the notes themselves." But we still insist that music is a mode of expression and therefore, to have any validity as art, a musical composition must spring from ideas which the composer wishes to express. In short, it must mean something.

Comrade Oldham's confusion is revealed more clearly in the tail of his definition: "distinct from the material use-value of the work."

What is the material use-value of a novel, a painting or a symphony? By exemplifying his definition with a chair, Cde. Oldham is perhaps suggesting that only such handicrafts have a use-value. But this is not true. All art has a social function or "use-value" which is measured by its contribution to culture—that is, by how much it has added to man's knowledge of himself and his environment.

Russell Drysdale is a great landscape painter because he reveals to us the destruction being wrought on our beautiful countryside. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is great art not only because of

its harmonic and contrapuntal excellence, but because it makes articulate man's emotional and social need for a real "brotherhood of man." Both these artists possess a quality to give an "emotional and intellectual stimulus" but that quality is not distinct from the "material use-value of the work."

On the contrary, in both artists form and content are an integral whole.

Another grave weakness is revealed in Cde. Oldham's definition when we seek from it an explanation for capitalism's antagonism to art. If art is merely "that special quality, etc.," why should capitalism be hostile to it? After all even a capitalist can receive a stimulus. Why then is capitalism hostile to art?

Because, like the workers, the bourgeoisie's art tastes are determined far more by content than by any "special qualities."

The revolutionary bourgeoisie produced and supported Beethoven, Dante, Da Vinci, etc. The counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie rejects Shostakovich, Steinbeck (of *The Grapes of Wrath*) and the Picasso of Spain. It is true, as Cde. Oldham says, "that capitalism demands that art be ordered, romantic, express serene beauty, gloss over ugliness." But it is not the whole truth. The capitalists are willing to welcome any art which perverts its social function. Thus they foster jazz and the comic strip because instead of inspiring to action, they dope to sleep.

They sanctify the futile mouthings of James Joyce and Gertrude Stein because instead of recreating life, these people retire within themselves and give forth inanities. In fact anything which robs art of its vital function is welcomed by the bourgeoisie. Hence the art critics that decry the Leningrad Symphony as musical pamphleteering, find hidden meaning in James Gleeson's *Skull and Crossbones*. Artists and Marxists must clearly understand the basis of Capitalism's antagonism to art, if that antagonism is to be defeated.

And this basis is clearly revealed when we analyse the nature and function of art.

Art is the synthesis of the objective with the subjective. It is not just "representing" things from life. It is recreating human experience, crystallising it so that all its facets are visible and clear. This is the special gift of the artist—that is the function of art.

We don't ask artists to cease experimenting with form, but we do insist that there be no metaphysical divisions between form and content. The form will spring from the content—that is why Cde. Gould says: "Be Communists! Feel, as a Communist should, a hatred for social oppression and injustice . . . you will imbue your art with greater feeling and vision." We must avoid any tendency to demand that our artists become only pamphleteers, but we must never relinquish the struggle to win ideological clarity in art as in all spheres.