

II. RECENZJE

SOVIET COMEDY. AN INCOMPLETE VIEW (Peter Yershov, *Comedy in the Soviet Theater*. Published for the Research Program on the USSR. Frederick A. Praeger, New York 1956).

In recent years American specialists in Russian literature have been paying increased attention to the Soviet theatre, to Soviet literature, its formative processes, its various genres and art forms¹. Attention has also been paid to Soviet dramatic writing. In 1956 Peter Yershov published *Comedy in the Soviet Theater*, a book which has not yet been reviewed in detail by Soviet critics, if we except the very short and general assessment given in 1959 in *Russkaya Literatura* (No. 1) by A. Brukhański in an article surveying the critical work of American Russian specialists on Soviet literature². Yershov's book has come to hand very late, which accounts for its not being dealt with until now.

The development of Soviet comedy is one of the least studied fields of Soviet literary

history. Not only does no complete study exist of the process of its formation in all its complicated aspects, but there is even a lack of monographs on the leading comedy writers such as Romashov, Shkvarkin, Katayev etc., the only exception to this being Mayakovski. In works on the Soviet drama very little space is devoted to comedy, and even though tribute has often been paid to its lasting importance, nevertheless this has often been merely a way of avoiding the problems of comedy, which in actual fact has not been fully appreciated as a dramatic genre.

So far only one book has been devoted to Soviet comedy, which deals at length with the problems involved. (V. Frolov, *On Soviet Comedy*, Moscow 1954). This was the first attempt to work out a line of development for Soviet comedy and to formulate a number of interesting questions dealing with the history and the theory of comedy as a genre. But one of the deficiencies of this work is its limited outlook and the purely descriptive character of its analyses of plays, apart from considerable gaps in the material dealt with, both dramatic and critical (especially in the chapter "The Beginning of the Road"). It gives only a very general idea of the historical formation and development of comedy, the author for example paying very little attention to the difficulties and obstacles with which it was faced. The path of development of Soviet comedy was much more complex than is indicated by Frolov, who omits to mention the principle innovative features which Soviet comedy adopted in the historical process of its formation.

We can thus approach with great interest the book of this "American" research worker, who has dealt with so little-known a field,

¹ G. Struve, *Soviet Russian Literature* 1917-1950. University of Oklahoma Press 1951; M. Slonin, *Modern Russian Literature: from Chekhov to the Present*, New York 1953; *Through the Glass of Soviet Literature*. A collection of essays edited by E. J. Simmons, New York 1953; *Continuity and Change in Russian and Soviet Thought*, Harvard 1955; W. Harkins, *Dictionary of Russian Literature*, New York 1956; *Russkij literaturnyj archiv*, New York 1956; *Soviet Theaters, 1917-1941*. A Collection of Articles... ed. by M. Bradshaw, New York 1954; N. Gorchakov, *The Theater in Soviet Russia*, New York 1957; and a whole series of further works.

² A. Brukhański, *Izucheniye ili falsifikatsiya?*, „Russkaya literatura”, 1959, 1, p. 204-216.

and consider whether it really does enlarge our knowledge of Soviet comedy, while attempting to define the intellectual position and aesthetic criteria according to which Yershov assesses the formal and intellectual characteristics of his subject.

The seven chapters of the book survey a comparatively wide field of comedy production of the period from the October Revolution to the beginning of the Fifties. The book contains a comparatively wide apparatus of notes and as far as material goes covers a wider field than Frolov's book. These positive features, however, we may as well state at the outset, by no means compensate for serious inadequacies in the work itself. No amount of care in production, exhaustive quotation and detailed references can conceal its lack of true scholarship.

In our opinion the time has long since passed, when it was possible to pass off as a serious, scientific assessment of Soviet or any other literature, a politically-weighted survey of literary phenomenon, and no-one will now be satisfied with a factographical and purely descriptive catalogue presented in a politically vulgarised manner, which ignores the objective, scientific approach to the processes of creative literature. Scientific generalisations must be based on the analysis of the intellectual and artistic individuality of a work of art and not deduced from a preconceived political thesis. Nor is the mere analysis of the intellectual and aesthetic premises of a work of art any longer sufficient for our time. And yet assessment of opinions and themes, or rather political and thematic criteria form Yershov's basic line of approach to Soviet comedy and the main principle of his method of research. At the same time he has frequently limited himself to reproducing the mere contents of the plot.

Yershov has made no attempt to establish the way in which Soviet comedy has evolved as a dramatic genre, nor has he investigated its individual characteristics as art. These profounder aspects do not interest him and he is looking for something quite different. His main aim is to discover in Soviet comedy whatever can be used against the Soviet land

and people, whatever will cast some sort of shadow on Soviet life³. Not even his own claims to be "objective" can absolve Yershov from the charge of confining himself to the surface of the artistic process, as we now propose to substantiate by closer examination of his work.

The decisive factor of the artistic process in Soviet literature is not, according to Yershov, life itself, but politics, political decrees and resolutions, and Soviet literature according to his view is merely the illustration of these decrees. This would seem to be the decisive moment for Yershov's approach, and he thus blocks his own way to a successful analysis of the real springs of art, without which creative literature cannot come into existence. To seek the basis for Soviet comedy in political decrees and not in the actual life of the Soviet people, is nothing but a vulgarisation and cannot lead to accurate conclusions.

This whole conception is shown in a series of statements by the author, which illustrate very well his basic attitude. "The succession of Soviet comedy genres, their themes and characters", he proclaims in his Foreword, "are determined by the literary policies of the Communist Party", and he reaches the conclusion in the last sentence of his book that "The history of Soviet comedy is one of tragedy, a microcosm epitomizing the development of all Soviet art" (p. 269). Naturally we cannot expect that a critic setting out with this preconceived thesis will succeed in producing any profound critical deductions or even in giv-

³ Yershov throughout dwells on details which he lifts out of their context and represents as the main motifs of the play under discussion, while he "works them up" to suit his own purpose. Thus Mayakovski in *The Bedbug* is said to be exposing the bleakness and poverty of the Comsomol (the hostel, the lack of shoes and the yearning of the girls for a little beauty and romance in life (p. 119). Katayev in *A Million Torments* (1931) and *The Primrose Path* is poking fun at "the discomforts and inconveniences of Soviet life" (p. 79). All these plays in fact attack various aspects of middle-class folly and weakness and lay them open to healthy laughter, but Yershov prefers to see this as an officially dictated and "weighted evaluation" of the social scene.

ing a credible picture of Soviet comedy as an art form.

Soviet comedy, like any other dramatic genre, at various periods reflected the life of the country and the people in all its contradictory and complex aspects, endeavouring to give a complete picture. Yershov's attitude merely denigrates Soviet art as art and ignores its function as a means of recognising the truth about society.

Yershov makes no attempt to distinguish the artistically most valuable comedies from the second rate. He has no means of classifying works according to the artistic and intellectual content. What he gives us is a cross-section, enumerating a certain number of plays, arranging them into thematic groups, and assessing their political attitude. This failure to assess the plays critically would doubtless not be felt by Yershov as a valid criticism, since his conclusion that the history of Soviet comedy is one of tragedy obviously leads him to consider it as a whole weak and valueless, for "The art of Soviet comedy has long been in a state of decline" (p. 267), and "It is precisely the 'attention' of the Party and the directions given to comedy to proceed along roads laid out to serve the Party only that have brought Soviet comedy to a dead end" (p. 269). We thus find him placing Romanov's artistically weak comedy *Earthquake* (1924), which left practically no impression on the history of Soviet comedy, alongside Erdman's *The Mandate* (1925) and Romashov's *The Sweet Soufflé* (1925), without any reference being made to the artistic aspect of these plays, their method of representing life, or of the fact that Romanov simply used the old equipment of comedy mechanically in order to represent a new content of life.

With regard to Erdman's *The Mandate*, it is interesting and instructive to note how Yershov assesses it. The fate of this comedy in Soviet dramatic history was not altogether fortunate. The negative attitude of Soviet dramatic criticism towards the Meyerhold Theatre, an attitude which prevailed until recently, affected the attitude towards *The Mandate*, which was produced there in 1925. Various works on the history of Soviet litera-

ture, drama and the theatre *Russkaya sovetskaya literatura*, Collected essays, Uchpedgiz, Moscow 1955; *Ocherk istorii russkoi sovetskoi literatury*. AN USSR, Moscow 1954; V. Frolov, *O sovetskoi komedii*, Iskustvo, Moscow, 1954, p. 80; *Ocherki istorii russkogo sovetskogo dramaticheskogo teatra*, t. 1, AN USSR, Moscow 1954, p. 411-412) assessed the play as reactionary, as a calumniation of Soviet life. Although much has since been done to overcome out-moded critical attitudes to the theatre, nevertheless this play has not yet been given its due place in the history of the Soviet comedy, although some writers have shown a more favourable attitude towards it (e.g. V. Frolov in his book *Zhizn' sovetskoi dramaturgii*, Sov. pisatel, Moscow 1957).

And yet this comedy, along with Faiko's *Teacher Bubus* (still a neglected work) and Romashov's *The Sweet Soufflé*, were landmarks in the development of Soviet satirical comedy of the twenties, and the Soviet critics' neglect cannot be justified. *The Mandate* is a sharp anti-Nep satire attacking the vain attempts of the "émigrés within" to secure the return of the "good old days", showing the inevitable downfall of the spineless climbers who wanted to use the new social order for their own ends, and attacking petty-bourgeois social hypocrisy and pretence under new historical conditions. *The Mandate* dealt a destructive blow at the remnants of bourgeois society by means of effective satirical farce. As a comedy it leaves no doubt whatever about the author's attitude to the old, dead world.

Doubtless Yershov realised this very well, and thus he does his best to deny the vitality and importance of the problems dealt with in the play and the truth to life of the characters, and states that it is "full of exaggerated satire, improbable situations and grotesque figures", which suggest "the phantasmagoria of a museum of wax monsters rather than living people from the recent past" (p. 65). Thus Yershov naturally comes to the conclusion that Erdman is weakest in depicting the Nepmen (p. 66), while "The play contains not a single character typical of the people produced by the NEP" (p. 66). Thus the comedy is reduced to "empty triviality" (p. 67).

And yet life itself provided evidence of the profound truth of Erdman's play, of the typical nature of the characters he created, and of the justice of his satire. *Izvestiya* in 1926 published a note on *The Mandate* which pointed out that the play really described the case of the so-called Romanov committee in Odessa: "Here the dramatist's imagination was carried out in real life. The absurd comedy of the discovery of the Tsarevich Alexei and his Most Serene sister Olga was enacted in broad caricature in Odessa. Here the insane fantasies of hysterical types and madmen combined with those actual counter-revolutionary purposes which had been foreseen by the criminal code and whose punishment had been provided for by it. This incident — is sheer Erdman, the authentic *Mandate*"⁴. The paradoxical nature of similar happenings in Soviet life had a rich comic content and demanded satirical treatment. It is thus itself somewhat paradoxical, that Soviet literary criticism has not yet sufficiently recovered from the neglect of this play to give it an adequate assessment — while a bourgeois critic has correctly grasped its purpose and naturally, in accordance with his political creed, rejects it.

The political bias of Yershov's account is shown in the "abstract" generalities, with which he comments on the thematic development of Soviet comedy: "A passage from Karl Marx on the function of the comic in art [...] was to become the touchstone [...] It was in the spirit of this pronouncement that Soviet comedies were 'manufactured'. They were designed to 'kill the past' (p. 60). But Soviet creative literature was always concerned with life as its starting point, and not with political theories. It was thus a logical development that in the first stage of its growth Soviet comedy in its negative characters dealt with anachronisms that had arisen from the absurdity of the old and outworn continuing to exist under new historical conditions. It was perfectly logical that the new society should have bid an amused and cheerful farewell to the dreary and useless

past through the form of the comedy-farce. Farce became the natural form for depicting the vain expectations of the bourgeoisie that the regime would change, and that for the very reason that the actual situation of the bourgeoisie in real life was farcical and demanded such an interpretation. Yershov evidently is unable to comprehend that even Marx's interpretation of comedy was deduced from the "irony of history", from experience of life and not from a bare thesis or abstraction.

We have already stated that Yershov does not make use of the evolutionary principle. Thus we learn nothing from his book of the way in which Soviet comedy writers of the first half of the twenties dealt with the new material offered by life, of how they sought for new means of treating this material artistically, how they overcame the natural contradictions between new experience of life and treatment by old artistic means. To treat purely the thematic aspect, classifying comedies merely by political themes (peasant comedy, proletarian comedy of manners, youth comedy, industrial and agricultural comedy, etc.) tells us nothing about the formal characteristics of these genres. Yershov is not interested in the shifting of comedy genres or in the structural and compositional traits of Soviet comedy. He thus does not follow the development of satirical comedy in the twenties and thirties (Erdman, Romashov, Mayakovski) and the artistic means it used, he fails to show the beginnings in those years — on however low an artistic and intellectual level — of the optimistic lyrical comedy of A. Tolstoy and Bill-Belotserkovski, and the initial process as early as the twenties of the rebirth of vaudeville (Ardov, Mass, Katayev, Shkvarkin), the development of which has still not been fully treated by the historians of Soviet comedy. The development of theoretical thought in the field of drama and satirical literature in the twenties and thirties is completely neglected by Yershov.

And yet it was the twenties which saw particularly interesting developments in Soviet comedy. Up to 1925 we may say that soundings of the appropriate themes for comedy were being made, and there were no great

⁴ "Izvestiya", 1926, n. 229, 5/10, p. 4. A similar report had been published even earlier. cf. *The Daughter of Nicholas — The Mandate in real life*, „Krasnaya gazeta", 1925, 9/10.

successes. Mayakovski in *Mysterie-bouffe* (1918) had shown how romantic feeling, expressing the greatness of the Revolution, could be organically combined with the satirical treatment of forces inimical to the Revolution, but his example was not immediately taken up in the drama that followed. The comedy of everyday life was still bound to traditional methods, traditional characters, and traditional subject matter, which suffocated vital thought and prevented dramatists from dealing with contemporary life (cf. A. Neverov, *Laughter and Grief*, 1922; D. Chizhevski, *Sivolapinskaya*, 1923; P. Romanov, *Earthquake*, 1924; N. Shapovalenko, *In Our Days*, 1926, etc.). There were a whole series of comedies whose authors re-wrote the theme of Gogol's *Inspector-General* in a "new" way (cf. D. Smolin, *Comrade Chlestakov*, 1922; I. Sarkizov-Serazini, *The Sympathisers*, 1925; N. Lerner, *Brother Narkoma*, 1926, etc.). The mechanical application of Gogol's method simply resulted in a pointless and meaningless stylisation and obvious plagiarism, without even the most elementary truth to life. The lack of success of these comedies confirmed the impossibility of simply applying old forms to new material.

The first real successes can be seen in comedies which appeared practically simultaneously with those mentioned above: Faiko's *Teacher Bubus*, Erdman's *The Mandate* and Romashov's *The Sweet Soufflé*. *Teacher Bubus* and *The Mandate*, though the emotion they embodied was a negative one, nevertheless dealt with progressive ideas, for they sprang from a conviction that the achievements of the Revolution had come to stay and they bore witness to the lack of power of all attempts to turn back the wheel of history. This negative emotion, aimed against elements and phenomena profoundly foreign to Soviet life, was produced by revolutionary ideals. The creation of a satirical comedy with purely negative characters was a logical feature for this period, carrying on as it did the line of Russian 19th-century comedy and using all its wealth of dramatic devices.

It is true that both Erdman and Faiko depicted only one sphere of life — that which stood in sharp, antagonistic opposition to the

revolutionary principle. Nevertheless this was a fruitful experience for Soviet comedy in its early stages; and the history of Soviet drama should not be without a critical analysis and assessment of it.

In the course of seeking for a profound picture of life and its real contradictions the next aim of Soviet comedy was to show directly the victory of the new over the old. An important part in this undertaking was played in the mid-twenties by Romashov's comedy *The Sweet Soufflé* and by his satirical melodrama *The End of Krivorilsk*. Undoubtedly the highest peak of Soviet satirical comedy in the twenties was the dramatic work of Mayakovski, who succeeded in assimilating all the foregoing successes and discoveries and in carrying on the tradition of classic Russian comedy. His work was a pioneer example of militancy and humanism in socialist art.

We could continue to show the development of Soviet comedy in the Thirties, its extension as a genre and the enrichment of its tradition. Yershov's book says nothing of how the social-heroic comedy (Pogodin, Katayev) at the beginning of the Thirties threatened the loss of purity in the comic genre, nor do we hear anything of the processes connected with the lyrical comedy (Finn, Kirshon, Mikitenko, etc.) which represented a new artistic wave, but which, however, produced the artistic atmosphere at the beginning of the Thirties in which the theory of "no conflict" was born. Yershov deals with the theoretical problem of the positive character in comedy in connection with the theoretical question of socialist realism (Chapter V), which he considers to be a form of neo-classicism, and he quotes a Soviet school textbook as praising classicist art as "the cult of state and civic virtues, to which the personal aspirations of men were to be sacrificed". Positive figures in Soviet comedy are for Yershov either a continuation of the figures of classical Russian drama, or else imaginary fabrications, or else they represent the expectations and hopes of authors who "essentially, are writing at the command of the government" (p. 221). Yershov sees as common to the writers of French and Russian classicism and to socialist realist writers the

schematism of "invented" positive figures. The positive heroes in the Soviet comedy of manners "represent an element not drawn from life, the romantic element in socialist realism, which might well be called 'Soviet government literary instructivism', a prop of ottolitarian absolutism" (p. 221).

Yershov's explanation of Soviet comedy in terms of political themes continues for the further periods of its development. When he treats post-war comedy dealing with the period of World War II, he complains of its incomplete, one-sided view of life. In Pogodin's play *The Creation of the World* (1946), dealing with the end of the war behind the front, as it affects civilians preparing to re-build their life on the ruins of what the Nazis have destroyed, Yershov complains that „There is not a single incident which would explain how and why people collaborated with the Germans, what these people hoped for and in what they believed" (p. 234). Yershov feels aggrieved that the dramatist failed to submit to "harsh ridicule" those who meted out rough justice to the collaborators.

This piece of criticism finally exposes Yershov's whole political position and makes it all too clear just where his sympathies lie. In this concluding section of the book, dealing with post-war comedy, the author's aggressive, anti-Soviet tone becomes shriller and the mask of "objectivity" which he assumed at the beginning of the book is at length thrown off for good.

This type of political tract in the guise of literary criticism may conceivably serve as anti-Soviet propaganda, but it is certainly of no use as an objective, scientific enquiry into the development of dramatic genres in world literature. The author's political prejudice renders any objective account of Soviet comedy quite impossible. Aesthetic criteria are completely ignored and no attempt is made to assess the literary value of the plays dealt with, either by comparison with each other or by reference to general literary principles.

There is however no point in arguing with Yershov's "conclusions" since he did not even set out to write with the intention of carrying out real literary research. As he says

himself, his book merely seeks to provide materials for a history of Soviet comedy. But in order to serve even this limited aim, this very roughly thrown together „material" would have to be separated from the mass of political banalities with which it is clogged.

"Despite the fare offered", says Yershov with tolerant pity, "Soviet people still laugh in the theatre, of course, but they laugh most of all to themselves, and their laughter is bitter, not the laughter desired by their masters, but the laughter of victims convulsively making a grimace as they are offered in sacrifice" (p. 269).

It is true that Soviet people laugh in the theatre, whether it pleases everybody or not. They laugh at performances of plays by Mayakovsky, Katayev, Shkvarkin, Korneichuk, Mikhailov, Solodov and others. They laugh the cheerful laugh of people who have got rid of the old world. They laugh in the teeth of all the "prophets" who cannot see reality except in terms of what they themselves desire to see.

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Roy Pascal, *DESIGN AND TRUTH IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY*, London 1960, ss. 202.

Tytuł pracy Roy Pascala — *Zamierzenie i prawda w autobiografii* — sugeruje, że jej głównym tematem będzie problem stosunku prawdy i fikcji jako dwóch zasadniczych czynników rzeczywistości przedstawionej.

Zagadnienie jest nader interesujące i aktualne, gdyż literatura pamiętnikarska, autobiografia, zbeletryzowane biografie i wszelkiego rodzaju wspomnienia są charakterystycznym zjawiskiem naszej kultury i stały się według słów Roy Pascala jej powszechnym i typowym elementem. Przyczyny tego stanu rzeczy są aż nadto zrozumiałe w epoce ostrych i wyraźnych cesur i przedziałów historycznych, narzucających tendencję osobistych życiowych bilansów i rozrachunków z przeszłością. Historia sprzyja rozwojowi specyficznych gatunków literackich.

Praca Roy Pascala wybiega daleko poza