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Socialist Realism in the Australian Literary Context: With Specific Reference to the Writing of Katharine Susannah Prichard

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On 26 December 1933 Katharine Susannah Prichard, ill and thin, was helped down the gangplank onto the Fremantle wharf. Earlier, in London during her return trip from a voyage to the Soviet Union, she had learned from a newspaper headline that her husband, Captain Hugo Throssell VC, had committed suicide at their Greenmount home. Regardless of her fragile state, Prichard’s luggage was thoroughly searched. The customs inspector responsible for the search, claimed that ‘[t]he examination of Mrs Throssell’s luggage was conducted privately and without any undue unpleasantness,’ but several items were removed from her luggage and confiscated. A commonwealth investigations branch statement, dated 12 January 1934 notes, ‘only three novels written in Russian were found. She also had some copies of international press correspondence, which is on our prohibited list, and these were confiscated’.

In his second major work on the writings of Prichard, Jack Beasley questions Drusilla Modjeska’s appraisal of Prichard’s commitment to socialist realism. In Exiles at Home Modjeska states that, ‘In 1933 Katharine Prichard went to the Soviet Union and she returned committed to socialist realism. ... This was not a sudden or dramatic change for Katharine Prichard, rather a strengthening and confirmation of one aspect already in her work’. Beasley sarcastically criticises the work of customs department officials who, on that ‘bright and sunny day in Fremantle,’ were responsible for the inspection of Prichard’s luggage:

what the negligent, or myopic, officers, no doubt anxious to get home to holiday gatherings, overlooked was to become a scourge, an introduced species that would overrun the land like the rabbit, sparrows and starlings, foxes, cane toads and literary critics. For there, ingeniously concealed in Mrs. Katharine Throssell’s baggage, was a foreign literary curse, a chancre called socialist realism which all too soon would claim Katharine Susannah Prichard as its first victim.

There is a generally accepted understanding that Prichard’s literary career was compromised by her commitment to politics and that her work, especially her later novels, is inherently flawed by a propagandist slant and a didactic tenor. The tendency to criticise Prichard’s novels in this manner is symptomatic of a general trend in mainstream literary criticism in its commentary on communist writers. The notion that the occupations and demands of politics and writing are necessarily incompatible was and is widely held in literary circles. This tendency has led to a general apprehension of communist writers, such as Prichard, as having been crippled by a theory of literary production which was transplanted into Australia and which stifled their creative powers.
The recurring inadequacy of many critical arguments about Prichard’s writing and, indeed, about the work of any author involved in the communist movement around the world at this time, is a tendency to utilise the term socialist realism in a flippant or dismissive way. Yet, when the term is analysed at close quarters, few commentators agree on its exact meaning and fewer still choose to position it within any historical context.

It is important to remember that the theory of socialist realism is unique in that it was derived as political policy and was intended to be applied in the practice of cultural production rather than critically to a completed work. It was formulated and instigated in a country which was experiencing enormous political upheaval and in a time of great uncertainty in world politics. For these reasons it is, on the one hand, quite strictly defined in official policy documents but, on the other hand, it has proved to be a malleable and mercurial theory. It is in failing to acknowledge these factors that so many literary critics present essentially inadequate commentaries on socialist realism in Prichard’s work.

I want to look briefly first at the development of socialist realism in the USSR. The union of writers of the USSR was established by party decree on 23 April 1932. The first congress of the union was held in August-September 1934. On 17 August 1934, Andrey Zhdanov, a secretary to the central committee of the communist party, presented the assembled writers with their first taste of an enforced theory of literary production:

Comrade Stalin has called our writers the engineers of human souls. What does this mean? ... It means, in the first place, to know life in order to depict it truthfully in works of art, to depict it not scholastically, not lifelessly, not simply as ‘objective reality’, but to depict actuality in its revolutionary development. Moreover, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of artistic description must be combined with the task of the ideological transformation and education of the working people in the spirit of socialism. This method of literature and of literary criticism is what we called the method of socialist realism.5

Even though other speeches were focused on the importance of creative freedom and competition, the Zhdanov speech was accepted without question as a Politburo order.6 The statute of the union of soviet writers stated quite clearly the union’s commitment to the practice of socialist realism.

C Vaughan James traces the two distinct hypotheses postulated by literary historians on the origin of the theory which became socialist realism. To its opponents, he argues, socialist realism is the cultural manifestation of Stalinist policy. In other words, socialist realism was invented by Stalin, Zhdanov and Gorky and was inflicted upon unwilling artists in the early thirties through the artistic unions. To its proponents, however, socialist realism is a world-wide development in literature which manifests only local peculiarities. Far from being a new theory forced upon the unwilling artist, socialist realism is seen to be more of an interpretation, within a Marxist-Leninist ideological context, of artistic developments throughout the rise of the proletariat in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The theory — as opposed to the tendency — was simply not named or defined until 1932-34.7 Socialist realism came to be the official ‘style’ of soviet literature. At that time, and ever since, the problem of defining exactly what socialist realism means and what it
Cath Ellis

constituted as a literary theory has been a difficult one. The theory is, of course, positioned within the realm of realism which was seen to have evolved from the realist art movements of the twenties which were equated with materialism in philosophy, thus receiving official party sanction as being correct for Marxist writers. As Damian Grant has observed:

the word realism ... must surely be the most independent, most elastic, most prodigious of critical terms. Nothing illustrates the chronic instability of the word more clearly than its uncontrollable tendency to attract another qualifying word, or words, to provide some kind of semantic support.

Combining the terms ‘socialist’ and ‘realism,’ then, presents an interesting equation. Edward Brown observes that:

since the term socialist had a generally positive connotation but no meaning at all as applied to literature, the meaning of ‘socialist realism’ could be worked out in practice and by directive, and would be, in the end, whatever the going authority said it was.

The developers of socialist realism have been described as calculating planners, focused as ‘engineers of the human soul’ and, alternatively, as unprepared, emotional revolutionaries driven by near panic to establish some form of control.

So, was Prichard, or wasn’t she, a socialist realist, and what implications did this have for her writing? nineteen thirty three was, without doubt, the most tumultuous year of her life. It was the year in which she travelled for the first and only time to the Soviet Union and the year her husband committed suicide. Even though it would be another year or so before the theory of socialist realism was officially endorsed and then enforced in the Soviet Union, it is widely recognised that its influence in the writers unions — including the foreign writers union where Prichard spent a lot of her time during her visit — was fairly well established by the beginning of 1933. It was a threshold year for Prichard’s writing — through which she passed from being a romantic writer interested in generalised human tragedy, to being a committed socialist realist. I think we must accept Modjeska’s assertion that Prichard did indeed come into contact with socialist realism during her visit to the Soviet Union and that she readily and enthusiastically adopted it as a valid and valuable approach to literary production. Whilst there is little evidence to prove this historically, a textual analysis of the first publication after her return, The Real Russia, reveals the extent to which she was applying herself to the theory as well as applying the theory to her writing.

On her return to Australia, Prichard found herself in a severe financial crisis and gladly accepted the offer from the Melbourne Herald to publish a series of fourteen articles detailing her observations and experiences of the Soviet Union. The Real Russia — a compilation of these articles — appeared in 1935, published by Modern Publishers of Sydney. It was praised by the communist press and by Nettie Palmer in All About Books as being a factual and honest account of life in the Soviet Union. Indeed, the volume does present a glowing account of life in the young socialist republic with chapters covering everything from collective farming to the theatre.

Within the idiom of the text, Prichard is a witness and reporter of events rather than a communist visiting a communist country. The chapter reads very much like
journalistic reportage. This not only establishes them within their original context as articles intended for newspaper publication, but also as ‘news’ — presenting to the reader a Russia that is indeed ‘real.’ The chapter headings much like newspaper headlines — ‘Comrade Baby and His Mother Have Precedence,’ ‘A Woman Engineer Tells Her Story’ and ‘Social Justice and the Soviet Courts.’ Prichard establishes herself as a traveller ‘taking [her] own willful way’ and ‘roam[ing] about by [her]self.’

This, as David Carter has observed, authorises her — ‘the tourist who writes, and writes to be published. The author is a seer, not just a sight-seer.’

Prichard shies away from giving a travel account of her journey. Instead, as each chapter opens, the reader lands in medias res in another account or story. The procession of chapters has no sense of chronological order or any over-riding image of an itinerary. Rather, each chapter stands as a thumbnail sketch of Russian life which, once joined together, form a portrait of the Russian people and their existence in a communist utopia. The text of The Real Russia yields a surprisingly accurate and telling account of Prichard’s experiences in the Soviet Union. In search of hints, and perhaps a starting point, it is useful to examine the reportage of theories and theorists which are established as authorities by the text. The most poignant and important of these theorists, Maxim Gorki, emerges late in the volume, in chapter 21 entitled ‘Literary Culture in the Soviet Union.’ This chapter, like the rest of the publication, speaks in glowing terms of the people, politics, culture and social life of the Soviet Union, particularly heaping praise on the newly-formed union of soviet writers. Prichard is most enamoured with the way in which this newly formed union was keen to establish connections between themselves and the working people of the Soviet Union. She goes on to quote, at some length, the utterances of Gorki espousing the tenets of the prevailing attitude amongst writers to Soviet socialist literary theory. Gorki’s pronouncements that ‘[t]he simpler the language the better,’ ‘[t]rue wisdom expresses itself plainly’ and ‘[m]ost Soviet writers accept the axiom that “truth is stranger than fiction” and work on it, literally’ are typical of the pronouncements which would be used to support the newly-decreed and established socialist realism within only a year or so.

In The Real Russia, Prichard interweaves a variety of different modes of expression and composition, apparently haphazardly, into a volume which defies easy categorisation. Although it must be seen as reportage, the non-fictionalised assumptions that must be made in such cases are problematised by the utilisation of socialist realist devices. The definitions of literature and literary production are often indistinct in soviet socialist realist theory. Little distinction is made, for instance, between literature as art and literature as journalism. Whilst this can be seen as another example of politicians clumsily legislating art, it can also be seen as symptomatic of the effect which socialist realism has on literary production. It requires fiction, or literature as art, to be more concerned with political and social ideas than with entertainment, as well as requiring it to be of a didactic nature. Thus, fictional writing tends towards being more factual, whereas literature as reportage, or non-fiction/journalism, is required to present events as positive and inspirational — this, out of necessity, leaving such writing as tending towards fiction. Accordingly, the tendency of both of these kinds of literature to move towards a central, conflated, semi-fictional compromise is not surprising.

This tendency is amply demonstrated in The Real Russia. Prichard opens her travelogue with an introduction to the approach which she intends to take in her
writing: ‘I want to write about [the places I travelled to] in splashes of colour, gouts of phrases as Walt Whitman would have, or Mayakovski: paint them after the manner of the French Symbolists, images seething and swarming over each other, as they lie in my mind.’\textsuperscript{15} The decision immediately to position the text of this travelogue in an artistic and, by inference, fictional mode is interesting. Whilst this serves to distance the text from ‘journalese’ or dry reportage, it also renders the authority of its observations questionable. Choosing to portray the images and experiences of her travels in a painterly rather than, for instance, a photographic manner suggests something less than ‘warts and all.’ The narrator’s gaze is so consistently focused in this way, that the narrative voice very quickly loses its authoritative power. This is no more striking than in the account of a ‘chiska’ otherwise known as ‘Party cleaning’ in chapter 16. After a brief definition, explanation and history of the ‘chiska’ process, Prichard records her observations of one such event. First, the story of comrade Marya Seroshtanova, an elderly woman who has worked long and hard throughout her life for the good of the party. She concludes her tale with the statement ‘[i]t is hard not to work when there is so much to do.’ She is, somewhat predictably, given an ovation as she comes down from the stand and gathered up in the crowd of laughing, chattering comrades. The second story is of Olya Smimova, who is deemed less trustworthy than her predecessor on the stand. She tells her story crisply and clearly, but is then challenged by her co-workers who accuse her of growing away from the workers, forgetting who helped her to be a good engineer and neglecting her political classes.

The chapter presents a good example of Prichard using each of the elements of socialist realism together to construct her text. It opens with an example of ideynost, or the embodiment of political and social ideas of a progressive nature, as the elements of communist party disciplinary measures are outlined in quite minute detail. The element of klassvost, or the expression of the characteristics of class in art, is prevalent when repeated claims of serving, or failing to serve, the proletariat in the work environment are presented. Partynost, or the expression of party spirit in accordance with the objectives and methods of the communist party is, of course, inherent in the overall structure of the chapter, for the party is presented as being an organised, fair, vigilant and democratic organisation. Narodnost, or the expression of a typical national style, is utilised in the presentation of the stories, with names, ages, occupations and locations, giving a local or typical tone to them. Each of the stories has an ending which is positive in terms of the working people and their party. And each person is measured against the ideal or perfect worker — the socialist hero. No attempt was made to criticise the practice of ‘chiska’ and no negative aspects of it are portrayed. Rather Prichard, stands in awe of the action which takes place around her. The practice of self judgement and judgement by one’s peers is applauded — perhaps even longed for — without a thought given to the validity of the moral and legal scales on which these judgements are made. This tendency to ignore the overwhelmingly obvious areas for criticism reverberates throughout the text.

Regardless of the apparent ease with which Prichard applies the theory of socialist realism in The Real Russia, the transposition of it into pre-socialist Australia was extremely problematic, especially when the subject matter became something other than the Soviet Union. A 1951 article entitled ‘Art can be a Front Line Weapon,’ by Vic Williams, examines the problems faced by Australian communist writers in their
Katharine Susannah Prichard attempts to put socialist realism into practice in a non-socialist country.\textsuperscript{16} Williams states that the role of the arts in the class struggle has been consistently underestimated and under-utilised. This is, Williams argues, primarily ‘because progressive art in Australia often goes no further than critical realism.’ Williams goes on to outline the role that literature plays within the Soviet socialist society in ‘this new-born unity of hand and head’ as proof of Gorki’s theory that creative labour is the ‘tap root of culture.’ He then asks the question: ‘But what of us who have not achieved socialism. Have we the basis under capitalism to create our own socialist art?’ Gorki says ‘Socialist realism in literature can manifest itself only as a reflection of the facts of creative labor under socialism’.

Williams concludes that the equivalent to this creative labour in the Australian context is the ‘political, class conscious struggle to build a revolutionary movement and a revolutionary party to abolish capitalism and create socialism’. Evelyn Walters in 1952 reports that JD Blake criticised members of the Victorian artists’ society for creating works where the emphasis was ‘still on the critique of the old’ which ‘could still belong in a category of true bourgeois realism’. Walters agrees with this assessment and adds: ‘This failure to sufficiently indicate the new ... shows how advanced concepts are abortive unless their artistic translation in paint is also mastered’.\textsuperscript{17} The practical implications of these types of assertions are apparently lost on Blake and Walters, but were definitely not lost on Evelyn Healy who opens the section titled ‘realism’ in \textit{Artist of the Left}: with the exclamation ‘Artists do not normally work to definitions’! In direct response to Walters’ article and Blake’s criticism, she raises the question:

How could an artist working in a non-socialist society, insert a socialist goal into the space-frame of a painting except by some cliche such as a flag, a sun, a clenched fist or a text ... Moreover in the Soviet Union, paintings of confident workers were supposedly reflecting socialism, a new society. In Australia, art depicting confident workers could be reflecting job satisfaction or acceptance of the system.\textsuperscript{18}

Prichard’s application of the theory of socialist realism in a non-socialist country was never going to be easy. Prichard had many struggles: with the CPA leadership which insisted that she submit manuscripts to them prior to publication with the CPSU which, through one of its periodicals, accused her of not presenting the role of the communist party well enough in her Goldfields trilogy, even though no such communist organisation existed at the time with finding publishers for her later works, especially for her last novel, \textit{Subtle Flame} and with the less than enthusiastic responses from mainstream critics. All of these struggles are well documented. Torn between the demands of both extremes of the political spectrum, Prichard remained committed to socialist realism as a theory regardless of the obstacles which it set in her way. Her approach to literary production was, by this stage in her career, echoing the thoughts of the great communist aesthetic theorists like Gorki, Lukács and Brecht: progressive political content was vital in the establishment of a literature which went beyond mere entertainment or escapism, but which confronted the capitalist publishing system and educated the people it must not exist in nationalist isolation, but must incorporate an understanding of the great literature of other countries; it must present the ideas of the communist party, but not by merely parroting them or
dragging them in by the scruff of their neck. Rather ‘[t]he ulterior motive must never obtrude in a work of art: it must be so part and parcel of the whole that it is swallowed in a gulp as it were.’

What this serves to highlight is the complex existence which socialist realism enjoyed in Australia from the time of its introduction in 1933. While it was undoubtedly a theory which, in the end, served to stifle and discourage more writers than it nourished and encouraged it was, for some, an exciting and stimulating new development in literary and aesthetic theory.

Endnotes

1 Katharine Susannah Prichard Security notes. Date 11/12/33. ANL MS 8071/22/5/155 (Ric Throsell MS 8071, Box. 22, series 5, Folder 155).
2 Ric Throsell, My Father’s Son, Richmond, 1987, p. 141.
3 Drusilla Modjeska, In Exiles at Home, 1991, p. 120.
9 Edward Brown, Russian Literature Since the Revolution, New York, 1963, p. 33. This is an idea which is pursued further by Gleb Struve in Russian Literature Under Lenin and Stalin, London, 1971.
10 James, op. cit., pp. 42-3.
11 Modjeska, op. cit., p. 120.
14 The Real Russia, op. cit., pp. 254-5.
15 Ibid., p. 1.
18 Evelyn Healy, Artist of the Left: A Personal Experience 1930s-1990s, Left Book Club, Sydney, 1993, p. 9. She points out that ‘Texts at that time made a work either “commercial” or “literary” and were largely unacceptable in western “fine” art until the promotion of pop art in the sixties’.
19 Throsell, op cit, p. 126.