Proust’s Marxist Critics in the Early Years of Socialist Realism

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The publication of Marxist critical studies on Marcel Proust and *A la recherche du temps perdu* spanned a period of five decades, from the time of Proust’s death in 1922 to around 1970. Especially from the latter half of the twenties on to the end of the thirties, studies by important Marxist and Marxist-leaning critics appeared both within the Soviet Union and without, in Germany, England, and the U.S.A. (but, curiously enough, not in France). The years of the Second World War and after, until after Stalin’s death in 1953, saw a cessation of writing on Proust in the U.S.S.R. and a lull and finally a cessation of Marxist critical studies on Proust in the West as well. The later fifties and the sixties witnessed a revival of Marxist-inspired Proust studies and the publication of much new work.1

The most important event in the history of the Marxist critical reaction to Proust and modernism was the proclamation, in 1934, of “socialist realism” as in effect the one common and accepted method or path of Soviet art and letters thenceforth. “Socialist” realism was supposed to supplant in a Marxist society the role of social criticism that traditional nineteenth-century “critical” realism had played in capitalist countries now that Soviet writers were no longer living in a capitalist society. “Socialist” realism was to show the way the new society would take. The doctrine of socialist realism redirected and controlled the focus of Soviet writers and critics and strongly influenced Marxist critics in the West in the nineteen-thirties and forties as well. As for the interruption during and after the Second World War, with regard to Proust and modernism Marxist critics in the later fifties and sixties, especially Soviet critics, picked up most of the threads that had been forcibly dropped in the 1930s, carrying on and reevaluating from there.

A survey of the writings of Marxist critics on Proust and his masterwork *A la recherche du temps perdu* over those five decades sketches the broad outlines of the Marxist critical response, fairly constant but varying somewhat with the years, to literary modernism as well. It also provides a kind of history of the question of realism in Marxist criticism. The present study offers a glance at one phase of that critical response, that of the early years following the proclamation of socialist realism in the U.S.S.R. and its espousal by certain Marxists in the West. It is an era that is interesting for the contrasts it brings to the fore between the Marxists’ appreciation of Proust’s art in the West on the one hand and in the U.S.S.R. on the
other—contrasts arising in part from the differences in the reception of socialist realism in the two areas.

"L'Univers proustien," the Soviet scholar S. Bocharov's preface to a Soviet French-language edition of *Du côté du chez Swann*, appears to have been the last Marxist criticism on Proust published. It came out in 1970, some twenty years before the reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev ultimately gave way to the collapse of Marxism-Leninism in the Soviet orbit. In "L'Univers proustien" Bocharov offers a positive assessment of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, thus continuing, as W. Jane Bancroft point out, Soviet critical tendencies of the 1960s by calling him a sociological observer and stressing his portrayal of society as realistic or even satiric (14–18). Just a few years earlier in a long essay on "Prust i potok soznaniya" (Proust and the stream of consciousness) Bocharov calls him an impressionist. There Bocharov sees the stream of consciousness in works such as Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* and James Joyce's *Ulysses* as playing the role of social critic that would be played in the traditional novel of "critical" realism (such as Balzac's) directly by the person himself or herself. If, in sum, Bocharov judges Proust in effect a realist, "L'Univers proustien" and "Prust i potok soznaniya" reflect the legacy of the debate among Proust's Marxist critics from the beginning as to whether *A la recherche du temps perdu* is decadent or possesses some redeeming quality of "critical" realism.

The beginnings of the Marxist critical debate over whether to regard the author of *A la recherche du temps perdu* as a realist or a decadent goes farther back than to the beginning of the socialist realism doctrine, however; they are clearly evident in the writings on Proust by critics in the twenties and early thirties. The struggle to define the value of *A la recherche du temps perdu* from a Marxist perspective predates the publication at least of the final two volumes of the novel in 1927.

The beginnings of that struggle can be discerned in the numerous comments on Proust by his first Marxist critic, the Ukrainian intellectual and revolutionary A. V. Lunacharsky, who served as Lenin's People's Commissar for Education until 1929. In a 1926 sketch of Proust as the author of the then partially published *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Lunacharsky expressed his distaste for Proust's class psychology and social snobbery and called him "in the deepest sense of the word, a decadent" (*Literaturnye silueti* II 37). Still, in the piece he recognized Proust as "one of the conscious or unconscious masters of social psychology" (13) and in his posthumous essay "Marsel' Prust" (1934) he defended Proust's impressionist refashioning of reality through "artistic fantasy," concluding that "in general he is a realist" (*Stati o literature* 668). And in a 1928 essay Lunacharsky's Soviet compatriot A. K. Voronsky, the founder and editor of the review *Red Virgin Soil* and an ardent Marxist, wrote of Proust's sensitivity to impression and in this context termed him "a realist in art" ("Marsel' Prust" 316): Proust's main goal, Voronsky pointed out, was to find and communicate a direct perception of the world, even if there is much in it that is illusory or inaccurate and needful of being set aright by the reader's reason.

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Outside the new Soviet Union, two Marxist-leaning critics and essayists—Walter Benjamin in Germany and Edmund Wilson in the United States—published essays on Proust in the period preceding the era of socialist realism (in 1929 and 1931 respectively). Less concerned than Lunacharsky or Voronsky with labels such as realist, they nevertheless seemed to arrive at views similar to the two Soviet critics' about the worth of *A la recherche du temps perdu* as social criticism—the essential component, from the standard Marxist critical perspective, necessary to regard a literary work as one of critical value or not. Benjamin, a Marxist intellectual *sui generis*, called Proust a satirist and asserted that in *A la recherche du temps perdu* he used comedy wherein "the pretensions of the bourgeoisie are shattered by laughter" ("The Image of Proust" 209). Edmund Wilson, for a time Marxist (of his own sort), found that Proust was chief among the later symbolist writers who "supplied us, as a matter of fact, with a good deal of interesting social criticism; but it is usually a criticism which does not aim at anything..." (Axel's Castle 290).

It can be seen that Bocharov and Soviet critics like him in the 1960s were concerned with the same questions of Proust as realist or impressionist (or decadent) as their Marxist predecessors in the twenties (and thirties, as will be seen below).

The broad general consensus among these four earliest of Proust's Marxist critics that *A la recherche du temps perdu* contains social criticism was challenged by some of the early proponents of socialist realism. If Edmund Wilson was the most unforgiving of Proust from the standpoint of the value of his social criticism and the Soviet critics Lunacharsky and Voronsky the most accepting, perhaps, in calling Proust a realist, it is a pattern mirrored to some extent in the thirties by Proust's Marxist critics in the U.S.S.R. and the West respectively.

In August of 1934, at the convening of the first All-Union Soviet Congress of Writers, the Union of Soviet Writers was officially launched. This organization had first been proposed and authorized by the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party to replace the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP). RAPP had grown powerful enough between 1929 and 1932 to stifle creativity and output in literature with its demands for "proletarian art" and its attacks on more traditional writers (whom Trotsky had defended as "fellow travelers" of the Revolution). Debates had continued through the twenties among Soviet intellectuals and leaders about the desirability of "party art" (demands for official sanction of which Lunacharsky, incidentally, had rejected in 1925—in favor of "socialist art"). As Edward J. Brown has pointed out, literary realism had been equated with materialism in philosophy in discussions on Party policy in the arts in the late twenties, so that as the 1934 Writers' Congress approached the problem was not whether to endorse realism as the standard for Soviet writers or not, but what kind of realism (33). 4

It is not clear exactly who suggested the term "socialist realism," but "socialist" was applied to "realism" in 1932 and it was the term used at the 1934 Writers' Congress. The term was vague but in concept "socialist" realism was to contrast with
the traditional “critical” realism of the bourgeois, presocialist era. Whereas critical realism objectively portrayed the social relations of bourgeois society and tended therefore to pessimism, socialist realism would look forward to the new society to be built and hence would be optimistic; indeed, more than that, it would constructively anticipate or depict the socialist future as one of its tasks.

Socialist realism seems to have originated as a remedy to the disruptive and negative attempts by RAPP to dictate the nature of Russian literature in the new socialist era. Socialist realism was presented and promoted as the new method of Soviet socialist art at the 1934 Writers’ Congress, as an all-Union guide to be followed. It became in effect an official, and eventually obligatory, doctrine. Its influence traveled far, as it was espoused, sometimes slavishly, by critics in the West during the thirties. Its popularity, voluntary or not, gave stimulus to, among other things, a great deal of debate among literary critics about whether there was anything of value in the modernist writers—writers like Proust, Joyce, Dos Passos—to be emulated by socialist writers.

The keynote speaker at the Congress was Andrey Zhdanov, later to become (in 1946) Stalin’s representative in matters of literature. Zhdanov declared that Soviet literature could not help but be “tendentious”; it would ideologically reeducate in the spirit of socialism. The writer Maksim Gorky in his speech echoed Zhdanov’s dictum that an element of “revolutionary romanticism” must reside in socialist realism: in this respect he affirms the right of the social writer selectively to enhance reality toward the desired and the possible. Gorky mentions Proust with the aim of contrasting revolutionary romanticism with traditional or “bourgeois” romanticism: Proust’s romanticism is based on individualism; it is “sundered, detached from reality, it is not built on convincingness of imagery but almost exclusively on the ‘magic of words’” (Problems of Soviet Literature 44).

Karl Radek also mentioned Proust in his “Contemporary World Literature and the Tasks of Proletarian Art.” In a part of his talk entitled “James Joyce or Socialist Realism?” Radek contrasts the new socialist writing with bourgeois writing in terms of form and content. Although he acknowledges that Soviet writers have much to learn with respect to form from the “old classics” and also from the “literature of dying capitalism,” he argues that they must decide whether current experiments in writing from abroad help indicate their own “highroad” (151).

One such experiment was Proust’s, and Radek, even though admitting his greatness in art, doubts the value of his work as an example for Soviet writers: “Is it necessary,” he asks his listeners, “to learn from great artists, such as Proust, the ability to sketch, to delineate the slightest emotion in man?” (151). Proust is one of those writers who have tried to escape the inevitable flight of bourgeois literature into the “abyss” (182) by searching for a new form. But new form will not be sustained by empty content. Proust’s heroes are trivial because his method is not selective. Radek, like Gorky, finds nothing redeemable in Proust as an example to
contemporary Soviet writers.

Philip Henderson’s *The Novel Today* (London, 1936) is a study of the post-World War I novel in the West. The author never uses the word “Marxist” but his starting point of an assertion of social determinism and an appeal to the dialectical process in shaping artistic production all within the historical context place him within that camp. At the outset he states his object in writing the book has been to discover to what extent the changing attitudes of present-day writers are “determined by the writer’s position in relation to the society of his time” (13). And in “The Function of the Novel,” the first division of his tripartite study, he contrasts the worth of Proust’s art, despite Proust’s admitted genius, with that of Balzac’s from a determinative socio-economic and historical perspective:

> When his class is performing a progressive role in history, as the middle class still was in the earlier nineteenth century, a writer such as Balzac, who expressed with such abundant energy both the decline of the aristocracy and the aspirations of his class in the world of business, will tend to be altogether more vital than such a writer as Proust, who came at a time when the same class was in a relative state of decline. (18)

The expression “socialist realism” likewise does not appear in the book. This omission must be judged deliberate despite the newness of the doctrine at the time of writing. It seems clear that the program of socialist realism had been conceived as a domestic policy of the Party intended to guide, indeed to control, writers within the new Soviet state. It had declared itself a new ingredient of humanism in the new socialist literature, an emphasis which derived no doubt from the relatively successful intervention in 1932 against the repressive policies of RAPP. *The Novel Today,* not being concerned with Soviet writers, addresses different concerns, different writers, as the remaining divisions of the book (“The Romantic Novel,” “The Revolutionary Novel”) suggest.

Nevertheless, Henderson assigns to the “revolutionary” writer two “functions” that seem to be very much in line with requirements of socialist realism: to “see life whole” and, “by his realization of the conflicts and contradictions in the present, to see what life is becoming” (39). *The Novel Today* illustrates how rapidly the influence of socialist realism, a Soviet ideology, traveled to the West.

In “Marcel Proust and the Pure Aesthetic” Henderson reiterates his injunction that we must judge a writer, in the final analysis, by the direction in which he leads us. Like Engels and unlike Zhdanov he cautions that the writer must not “actively preach” lest “we cease to believe in the reality of his creation” (73). This is not to say that a writer should not have a “system of values” (73). A system of values is necessary to any novel that deals directly with social problems; Proust’s values, however, are “entirely subjective” (74). Henderson finds Proust’s to be “the type of mind that has become entirely assimilative and therefore without genuine creative
force other than that required to follow to its last nostalgic tremor the complexities of his own sensibility” (80).

That Henderson finds Proust’s art wanting in objective selectivity certainly must be understood in the context of the Marxist idea of artistic realism, of Engels’ preference for the socially typical and of the newer, post-1934, emphasis on the novelist’s “duty” in “critical” (as distinct from “socialist”) realism. Henderson does not escape the influence of the latter, as when, in approaching Proust and other “romantic” novelists he declares the necessity of risking simplification and doing less than full justice to a writer, which as we have seen, his essay on Proust indeed does:

It is not enough to bow before a writer of genius. If we are ever to find our way through the conflicting cross-currents of the modern world, it is necessary to be quite clear in our minds of the direction in which he leads us. And to do this involves risking a simplification that will sometimes do less than justice to his achievement as a whole. (71)

Ralph Fox, Proust’s other Marxist critic in the West (England) in the early years following the introduction of socialist realism, like Henderson in much of The Novel Today deals with the problem of the individual as a unique and at the same time a social being in the novel. His study of the modern novel, The Novel and the People, was published posthumously in 1937, without benefit of a final draft.

The work has been called a classic of Marxist literary criticism. In the book Fox begins by boldly grappling with the thorny problem of the theoretical contradictions in Marx’s and Engels’ scattered pronouncements on literature, an unresolved issue lurking in the background of Marxist aesthetics from the beginning. Acknowledging the difficulties, at the same time he defends the correctness of fundamental Marxist principles, including the teaching that being determines consciousness. Reaffirming this determinism in the sphere of art, he insists: “Whether or not this is in the actual view of the artist it must, in fact, be the basis of the creative work” (22).

The Novel and the People seeks to articulate a Marxist aesthetics of the modern novel constructed on the precepts of the new program of socialist realism. It discusses a large number of modern novels consistently according to the standards of socialist realism. In Fox’s hierarchy the novels best meeting those criteria receive the highest marks.

Fox’s stated concern is with the the individual in the modern novel. In a phrase highly reminiscent of Henderson, he observes that the function of the novel is “to see the individual as a whole, as a social individual” (86). Again like Henderson he also refers to “function,” in a way that suggests a new historical role for the novel: the novel, he submits, has the unique ability to show man’s inner life, but also the special function of showing man in society—“the first art to attempt to take the whole man and give him expression” (15).

Fox shares the general Marxist critical view of the modern novel as having
been affected by the decay of contemporary bourgeois society; to this he links his argument that it has failed in its function of showing "the whole man." In a section of the book on "The Death of the Hero" he mentions Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* as an example of this failure. The expression "the death of the hero" signals Fox's thesis in this section that the creation of character is no longer the chief concern of many contemporary novelists, except in the formal sense. Thanks to "the decay of realism" (73) human personality has disappeared from the modern novel and along with it the hero and the villain as well.

The personages of *A la recherche du temps perdu* are one manifestation of the decay of realism. In the modern novel, villain and hero have disappeared for fear of unleashing the powerful social forces which would accompany the creation of the truly "whole man." Interpreting Proust's choice of characters in this light, Fox explains: "Better therefore to take the quiet world of Swann, the gardens, the drawing rooms, the long conversations and the delicate analyses of feeling, the more refined perversions of flesh and spirit" (79). In novels such as Proust's personality no longer exists except (borrowing Zhdanov's metaphor directly) in "iriscent cuttings placed on the microscope slide" (79).

Fox places much of the blame on Freudian psychology. Modern psychology has failed to see the individual as a whole, as a social individual. Lamenting the death of the individual "in the name of the sanctity of individualism" (80) Fox makes this direct appeal to the new hope of socialist realism:

> In the absence of a world outlook, of an understanding of life, no full and free expression of human personality is possible. The novel cannot find new life, humanism cannot be reborn, until such an outlook has been attained. That outlook today can only be an outlook of dialectical materialism, giving birth in art to a new Socialist Realism. (80)

While in principle *The Novel and the People* recognizes the unique ability of the novel to show the individual's "inner life," it actually greatly limits the novelist's choices. For one thing, Fox would deny the novelist the liberty to depict the individual around a "mechanically isolated" (79) aspect of the personality, in effect generally rejecting the possibility of discovering socially significant or otherwise human truth in the modern subjective hero.

In marked contrast to Fox's misgivings about Proust's art stands an evaluation by the Soviet Marxist critic N. Rykova of *A la recherche du temps perdu* in her 1936 essay "Poslednij ėtap buržuaznogo realizma" (*The final stage of bourgeois realism*). It calls Proust a critical realist in a sense that the authors of the classics of bourgeois realism were. The scholar Gaston Boichidzé observed decades later (in 1971) that Rykova's thesis remained unique [in the U.S.S.R.], citing the relevant passage from her essay in French translation\(^1\) for an article published in France:

> Si nous parlons de réalisme, c'est parce que, tout comme les grandes œuvres des classiques du roman bourgeois, comme la *Comédie humaine* de

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\(^1\) For article published in France.
Baizac ou Les Rougon-Macquart de Zola, *A la recherche du temps perdu* est aussi un roman-épopée traitant de “l’homme” et de la “société” dans leurs rapports mutuels. Plus que ça, le réalisme de Proust est aussi “critique,” quoique, comme nous le verrons plus loin, son esprit critique n’a rien à voir avec l’esprit critique de Balzac, de Stendhal, de Flaubert, et provient d’une source toute différente. (189)

Proust’s innovation, Rykova continues, consists in his showing the real world as the content of the consciousness (le contenu de la conscience). This leads to an inevitable narrowing of the social horizons of the novel, but Rykova particularly stresses the broadening of knowledge of man’s “interior” as one of Proust’s most important achievements (conquêtes) (189).

In 1939 Rykova published *Sovremennaja francuskaja literatura* (Contemporary French literature) in Leningrad. Here, as earlier, her concern is realism. She considers literature in Europe from the early 1890s to the late 1930s as essentially “a struggle for realism” (4)—a struggle that continued despite the fact that French bourgeois literature reflected all the characteristic aspects of an epoch of “decadence... decay and decline” (4). In this context she justifies her lengthy remarks on Proust: insofar as her main concern is the struggle for realism the problem of style must be considered and moreover Proust is so characteristic of the impasse which even the best of the bourgeois writers reached, that to say little about him is to say nothing at all. One gets the impression, considering the increasingly repressive Party control of every aspect of Soviet economic and cultural life during the 1930s (Stalin had conducted his purge of the Communist Party in 1934–1938) that Rykova’s justification quite possibly corresponds not only to a need for an academic but a political defense of her study as well. She cautions that Proust, while obviously a writer of decadence, is nevertheless a writer of the first rank, but that her recognition of Proust’s talent should not be taken as an apology for his art.

Her perspective is obviously Marxist, but it is broader than Henderson’s or Fox’s. So also is her interpretation of determinism: even a writer as purely bourgeois and politically indifferent as Proust in *A la recherche du temps perdu* registers “a kind of anxiety” which leads to the inclusion of “certain elements of social criticism” (277).

Proust in a certain sense continues classical bourgeois realism, including its concern with the problem of man and society. He is separated from the great nineteenth-century realists such as Balzac and Flaubert, however, because he “deprived” (286) the contemporary bourgeois world of its original objective reality by representing it not as a direct given but as the content of the hero’s consciousness, “that vast complex of imaginings, thoughts and experiences... of the narrator’s I” (286).

As for Proust’s style, it is “in peculiar contradiction to the fundamental irrationalism of his perception of the world” (296). For his impressionism is rational,
analytical: he carefully tries to avoid showing psychological experience and the like; instead most of all he reasons about feelings—those of others and his own. Proust's style, however, is classical in that one sense only, for his "rationally constructed sentence too often draws out the real object of which it speaks" (299). It works to negate not only the objective experience of things, but the objectivity of values as well.

Equally as traditional as the preceding criticism is Rykova's assessment of Proust as social critic. She terms the strong autobiographical identification between author and narrator-hero a "personified author's point of view" (308) and finds that it injects "an element of social criticism and unmasking" (308). For despite being a snob, the narrator Marcel's snobbery is "cardinally different" (307) from the Verdurins', Legrandins', Blochs's and Gilberte's. The latter are "comical, pitiful, and in every case petty" (307) whereas the object of Marcel's snobbish longings—the aristocratic milieu of the Guermantes—is for him merely the symbol of a certain aesthetic ideal of beauty. Proust's narrator becomes disenchanted, for Proust the writer correctly observes the incongruity between the aesthetic ideal and reality.

In his disenchancement Proust begins, similarly to Balzac, Stendhal and Flaubert, "a competition with reality" (309). But Proust is not a conscious critic of the bourgeoisie; his social criticism results from the fact that he permits the fate of his society and the milieu he describes to turn out very differently from what he would have wished. What began for Proust as aesthetic criticism grew, ironically, into social criticism. This assessment places Rykova squarely in the critical tradition of Engels' praise of Balzac's social satire which he had judged no less effective for Balzac's personal class sympathies having lain with exactly those whom he satirized.

Indeed, Rykova goes beyond Engels to point out the irony of this unplanned result of Proust's creative process; she shows how in this manner irony actually enters into Proust's style itself. Proust's analysis of psychological situations such as between Marcel and Albertine, intended by Proust to be carried out on a subjective level, in actual fact discloses the "social psychology" (314) of those involved.

It has been said that converts to a faith are often more zealous in their beliefs than those who were born in it. Perhaps this observation helps explain to a degree the differences between the critical evaluations of Proust by Philip Henderson and Ralph Fox on the one hand (writing outside the land of the true faith) and N. Rykova on the other. At any rate, the differences are real and significant. Chiefly, as we have seen, the two English Marxists deny Proust the quality of objectivity or objective selectivity (hence, by inference, recognition as a social critic); Rykova agrees only with the first proposition. Both male critics charge Proust with the failure to show the individual as the "whole man" or social being, citing the "decline of realism." Neither calls Proust a realist.

Rykova's criticism does not show this undoubted influence of socialist realism;
there is nothing in her evaluation of Proust to suggest she embraces its ideology. She remains clearly within the Engellant realist tradition in calling Proust a realist and a social critic, even if an unwitting one.

But Rykova’s criticism could not remain unscathed as the dominance of socialist realism as a political ideology grew. In 1936 she discovers in *A la recherche du temps perdu* true critical realism, whereas in 1939 her praise is more reserved: the novel *in a certain sense* continues the tradition of classical bourgeois realism and its concern with man and society, however unwittingly. It is perhaps surprising, given the Stalinist repressions in the U.S.S.R. by 1939, that Rykova as a Marxist could speak so highly of Proust as she did. It was not until more than two decades later, when L.G. Andreev in his *Francuzskaja literatura 1917–1956 godov* (French Literature 1917–1956) and V.D. Dneprov in his *Problemy realizma* (Problems of realism, 1960) took up the challenge of reassessing the scope of literary realism from a Marxist approach, that a Soviet critic considered the question of Proust once again.

**Notes**

1 I base these statements on my study “Marcel Proust and Marxist Literary Criticism from the Nineteen Twenties to the Nineteen Seventies,” completed in 1977, of critical writings on Proust by Marxists and Marxist-leaning critics published in the western languages from the 1920s to the 1970s, from the U.S.S.R. to central and western Europe, Great Britain and the U.S.A. It is believed that this study represents a fairly exhaustive survey of the field.

2 For a discussion of all of Lunacharsky’s Proust criticism and the problem of determining the actual composition date of “Marcel Proust” see my article “A.V. Lunacharsky: Proust’s First Marxist Critic.”

3 For a discussion of Wilson’s Proust criticism and the question of Marxist content in it see my article “A Note on Edmund Wilson and Marxist Literary Criticism.”

4 The Marxist preference for realism in literature undoubtedly derives from comments made by Engels in two letters to two now-forgotten social novelists, written after Marx’s death. In one (to Minna Kautsky, 1885) he described the socialist novel as most effective when it faithfully portrays real relations in bourgeois society and in the second (to Margaret Harkness, 1888) he remarked that realism to his mind implied the “truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances.” He also warned against overt social tendentiousness as self-defeating (in the earlier letter). For a fuller discussion and selected bibliography see my “Marcel Proust and Marxist Literary Criticism....”

5 The Russian-language original could not be obtained for the examination in the present study.

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