

1923

Art as the Cognition of Life, and the Contemporary World  
(Concerning Our Literary Disagreements)

I.

A GROUP OF Communist writers has decided that the time has come to save the socialist fatherland and its citizens from the invasion of many and various “outsiders,” namely the fellow-travelers of the revolution who have captured our publishing houses and journals. In the name of this rescue mission and in order to straighten out the Communist Party’s line, this group has founded a journal *On Guard*. The first issue, with Comrades Volin, Lelevich and Rodov serving as general editors, appeared in June. Here there is something for everybody. Everyone gets his due, and even more so: LEF, “Kuznitsa” [Smithy], the Serapion Brothers, “Krug” [Circle], Pilniak and Erenburg, Gosizdat, Red Virgin Soil, Siberian Fires, the classics, and Gorky. The reader learns that “it is necessary to take emergency measures to prevent a breakthrough in the literary sector of the ideological front.” But from other statements it is evident that the breakthrough has already occurred, and that “emergency measures” are needed right this second. In the opinion of these stern critics, however, despite the fact that it is not so easy to save the day, in essence it is not so difficult either. What it comes right down to is that the fortunate exception, refreshing oasis and only bright spot in this whole gloomy picture is a group of writers and poets known as “October,”

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From *Krasnaia nov'*, no. 5 (1923): pp. 347–384.

i.e., the same group headed by none other than Rodov and Lelevich. In place of the earlier musicians who were creating a loathsome literary cacophony, we must place this group at the center and only then, somewhat like onto the footboard of a carriage, one must allow on board, after the most fundamental purge, of course, a few of the upright people belonging to “Kuznitsa,” LEF, various Vsevolod Ivanovs, “not to mention even the Pilniaks and Centro-serpent Gorkys.” It is proposed that the proletarian writers, the basic nucleus of whom are in “October,” with “October,” at “October,” and through “October” will organize “the psyche and consciousness of the reader in the direction of the finite tasks of the proletariat,” while the petty-bourgeois Ivanovs and Tikhonovs busy themselves with “dulling” the hostility toward the revolution in the camp of the enemy.

The journal’s offensive on the literary front is conducted in a manner and on a plane which is categorical and rigorous, without any indulgence and without acknowledgment of any mitigating circumstances. Appeals such as, “Be vigilant, consuls,” alternate with impressive and imperative cries: “We will allow no more of this from them”; complaints about Glavlit’s permissiveness accompany admissions of a “blush of shame on one’s cheeks.” Nevertheless, this gloomy interpretation of the modern literary scene by no means hampers a polemical friskiness and playfulness of the pen, liveliness, facility of devices, indefatigability, frivolity and even an inclination to vaudeville. Similarly the campaign against the “neologizing LEF” on behalf of the language of Pushkin and Gogol serves as no obstacle to such colorful and “resounding” neologisms as Glavsokol [Chief-falcon] and Tsentrrouzh [Centro-snake], which are directed at M. Gorky. A boarding school nervousness verging on hysteria alternates with the type of ideological puritanism from which one feels that something isn’t quite right. And somewhere on the side, with the interjections of his bass voice, Comrade Averbakh gives fatherly encouragement to Pravda. But one must pass from appeals to all these people to the depiction of living man, and once again there are the vows and assurances to “stand on guard” until disgrace has fallen on the outsiders, “some editors,” and certain “highly educated people who tolerate everything,” but who nevertheless remain in mysterious obscurity. And over and over and over again resounds the triumphant declension: “October,” “of October,” “to October,” “with October,” which evokes not the slightest “blush of shame on one’s cheeks.”

In short, like the well-known merchant of Gleb Uspensky, the critics sleep

not; they extend the “space” around themselves with the greatest energy. They throw into motion elbows and legs; they reach for axes, shafts, whatever they can get. To use Pilniak’s expression, “they foocion [ὁὐὐὐὐὐὐ] energetically.”

There are serious reasons to doubt that the positions taken by the editors have been shared by the significant cadre of collaborators whose names appear on the masthead. It is also not difficult to perceive significant disagreement in the articles appearing in the first issue. But given all that, the situation is not accidental; it is no idle exercise or bit of occasional writing. On the contrary, their position reflects the contemporary literary moods of a section of our comrades, despite the narrow group interests which appear in several articles and with such clarity to any unbiased reader. Quite serious literary differences exist in our communist milieu. The present article will deal with them and with the reasons for their existence. In passing we will be forced to touch on other modern literary tendencies to the degree to which it appears necessary.

The explanations of these differences and debates given by critics in the journal *On Guard* sometimes sound so strange that one is left with nothing more to say. Indeed. According to the strongest affirmations of our puritans, “certain editors” and publishers, experienced communists who on the whole are not bad people—while accommodating and finding room for sensible articles on political economy—due to some kind of criminal softness have allowed themselves to become tangled up with petty-bourgeois fellow-travelers, to the extent that the reader is experiencing “dislocation of the brain,” as well as other unpleasant and regrettable occurrences. What kind of *qui pro quo* [mix-up, misunderstanding] is that? It turns out they are very good-natured fellows. “Long ago, as a matter of fact, it became known that communists are overly good-natured fellows. But precisely because this is well known, precisely because our opponents and our enemies are taking advantage of this fact, we must put an end to the situation” (“Slanderers”—B. Volin). Such explanations from the lips of a Marxist actually show evidence of good will, but unfortunately they don’t help matters one bit. It is necessary, therefore, to seek out other, less “good-natured” reasons. They do exist. They must be seen first of all in a different approach to art, and to the artist. Everything else flows from this chief, fundamental difference. To the ideological cross section corresponds a certain psychological cross section. By explaining both sides of the question, we will more clearly conceive the character and meaning of

our literary arguments; and this in turn will help us to outline more precisely the perspectives of our young Soviet literature.

## II.

Let us begin with general propositions about art, which now are quite often under dispute, or else which are accepted only verbally, but not in practice.

What is art?

First of all, art is the cognition of life. Art is not the free play of fantasy, feelings, and moods; art is not the expression of merely the subjective sensations and experiences of the poet; art is not assigned the goal of primarily awakening in the reader "good feelings." Like science, art cognizes life. Both art and science have the same subject: life, reality. But science analyzes, art synthesizes; science is abstract, art is concrete; science turns to the mind of man, art to his sensual nature. Science cognizes life with the help of concepts, art with the aid of images in the form of living, sensual contemplation. "Poetry," as Belinsky previously wrote, "is truth in the form of contemplation; its creations are realized ideas, visual, contemplated ideas. Consequently, poetry is the same as philosophy, the same as thinking, because it has the same content.... The poet thinks in images; he does not prove the truth, but shows it.... The highest reality is truth; and since the content of poetry is truth, the works of poetry are the highest reality. The poet does not embellish reality; he does not portray people as they should be, but as they actually are" (From the article "Woe from Wit").

The genuine poet, the genuine artist is one who sees ideas. Belinsky gives us an inspired description of this essence of artistic creation, which stands unto this day:

The creations of the artist are still a secret for us all. He has yet to take pen in hand, and already he sees them clearly, already he can count the folds of their dresses, the furrows on their brows which are creased with pain and sadness, and already he knows them better than you know your own father, brother, friend, your mother, sister or beloved sweetheart. He also knows what they will say and do, he sees the entire thread of events which will wind around them and bind them together (Article on Gogol).

The artist cognizes life, but he does not copy it, he makes no photographs; he is not a photographer; he re-embodies it “with the all-seeing eyes of his feelings.” Max Martersteig, the German critic and moderate expressionist, recalls the shrewd comment by Goethe: If you portray a pug dog which is an exact copy of nature, then all you get is one more pug dog on the earth, and no one will be any richer by this occurrence. The artist sees ideas, but he does not see everything; he must omit, not notice, whatever has no cognitive value, whatever is accidental, uninteresting, well known. In this case, it is true that the artist must be able to be blind and unseeing. The true work of art always strikes one with its novelty; it excites one profoundly, it is always a discovery. The life which surrounds us flows by from day to day in a familiar and accustomed channel. Even if it is broken, if its strongest dams are destroyed—our consciousness, our feelings invariably and inevitably lag behind in their development; they do not correspond to the new; we are still in the power of what has been before. Our eye is unable to discern, to make out what is being born amidst the rumble, in the flood, amidst all the change, or in the catastrophe. In this customary array of colors, or in the dizzying whirlwind of life, the true artist, with his artist’s eye, his ear, his “inner being,” grasps that which we pass by, which we don’t even notice, and which is imperceptible as yet. From small, insignificant details he synthetically creates the large, the great; he enlarges objects and people in his artistic microscope, passing by what is known and cognized. He raises life to a “pearl of creation”; properties and traits, which are tossed and scattered about, he brings together, extracting what is characteristic. Thus what is created in our imagination is a life which is condensed, purified, sifted—a life which is better than it is, and which is more like truth than the realest reality. Together with the artist we begin to see what we had passed by without noticing, but what is given around us or what is maturing in the prophetic anticipation of days to come.

That is why the artist must have his own eyes; that is why he must see and hear not as people usually see and hear. This is the individuality of the artist.

The eyes of the prophet were opened,  
Like the eyes of a frightened eagle....

Art is the cognition of life in the form of sensual, imaginative contemplation. Like science, art gives objective truths; genuine art demands precision

because it deals with the object, it is empirical.

Belinsky's assertion that the poet does not "depict people as they should be, but as they are," has need, however, of one substantial correction. When the poet or the writer is not satisfied with surrounding reality, he naturally tries to portray it not as it is, but as it should be; he attempts to partially lift the veil of the future and show man in his ideal. He begins to view today's reality through the prism of an ideal "tomorrow." The dream, yearning and longing for man drawn up to his full height has been and continues to be the foundation of the creative work of the best artists. But this by no means contradicts the definition of art as the cognition of life in the form of living, sensual contemplation. The ideal "tomorrow," the reality of tomorrow, the new man replacing the ancient Adam, is not a naked, abstract dream only if the contradiction between this "tomorrow" and today is relative; that is, if this "tomorrow" matures within the depths of the current reality, if the prototype, the individual properties and traits of the future have been planned and are "borne in the air." Otherwise it would be a fairy tale, an enchanted dream, a series of mirages which evaporate when they first come into contact with life, with reality as it is given. True, man almost always takes his dreams about the future to be meditations on it, but only strict meditation or truly comprehending feeling sees such a future that actually is replacing the past and the present. Since in this instance the true artist cognizes life, the foundation of his work is experience.

Artistic cognition may be objective and precise, like any scientific discipline. This is not contradicted by lyric poetry which transmits the intimate experiences and feelings of the poet. Feelings and moods, thoughts and experiences of the poet must have value for a more or less wide circle of people, for a class, stratum, and so forth, if not in the present, then in the future. Otherwise the poet is threatened with the danger of spinning, like a squirrel on an exercise wheel, in his own moods which are neither necessary, nor understood, nor interesting to others. In Jack London's novel, *The Iron Heel*, Everhard, the leader of the workers says during an argument with representatives of the old world:

You are anarchists in the realm of thought. And you are mad cosmos-makers. Each of you dwells in a cosmos of his own making, created out of his own fancies and desires.... No two of you can agree upon anything.

Each of you goes into his own consciousness to explain himself and the universe. As well you may lift yourselves by your own bootstraps as to explain consciousness by consciousness.<sup>1</sup>

It is fully understandable that such individualists, such creators of special little worlds—who have become a common and normal phenomenon in our epoch of the decay and decomposition, the disintegration and disorganization of capitalist society—it is no wonder that they create art which is thoroughly subjective, that they busy themselves with the transmission of such “trans-rational” movements of feeling which interest only themselves. True lyrical poetry has nothing in common with all this subjective refinement and perversity. It transmits feelings of the poet which are of interest to humanity as a whole or to a given class. It is also based on experience, only the starting point is different here: the lyricist observes himself, while the prose-writer deals with objects located outside himself. Here only the artistic attention of the writer is shifted.

Just as in the area of scientific disciplines there are pseudo-sciences, so, too, in art there is pseudo-art. The artist may tear himself away from actuality (ideal or real), he may devote himself to the free play of imagination, to the transmission of moods which interest no one. Thus arises the idealist tendency in art which corresponds to idealism in philosophy and in science. Instead of an image, the artist may use a symbol. Instead of thinking in images, he may pass over to discursive thought. In these instances, the work is overcrowded with arguments, publicistic debates, and so forth. Furthermore, the artist always colors his works with a corresponding ideology, sometimes consciously or unconsciously distorting the types, portrayals, events, and so on. Then the work becomes tendentious.

G. V. Plekhanov pointed to the inevitable intrusion of political polemics into art. Anatole France also spoke of this phenomenon. Such an intrusion is not only necessary, but in certain epochs it is highly desirable and beneficial. It is also true that in the sphere of art subjectivism is more easily incorporated than in other scientific disciplines, for we are dealing with human feelings. But here the difference is not qualitative, but quantitative. Such subjectivism very strongly intrudes upon political economy, sociology and psychology as

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1. Jack London, *The Iron Heel* (Lawrence Hill Books, 1980), pp. 9-10 (first published in 1907).  
Trans.

well. And we still don't know where it is greater: in art or in these scientific disciplines. The fundamental task, however, lies not here, but in seeing to it that subjectivism, ideology and political polemics not distort the artistic creations of the writer, that subjective moods correspond to the nature of the object, that polemics and political activity also remain on the level of the best ideals of mankind.

There are no new revelations in what has been said here about art. From Belinsky and Chernyshevsky this view of art as a special method of cognizing life was embraced by Marxism, first and foremost by the best philosopher and theoretician of art in the Marxist milieu, G. V. Plekhanov. But we must now repeat these elementary truths with a special insistence, since we have witnessed not rare but very frequent attempts, under the banner of the Marxist struggle against bourgeois theories, to implant views which are absolutely foreign to Marxism, and which each time are ironically directed to those who love to remember "Plekhanov, who is the father among our saints." On the other hand, as we will try to demonstrate below, in the practice of the comrade critics from the journal *On Guard*, their obliviousness to the elementary truths which we have mentioned in questions of the theory of art will lead to the most regrettable consequences.

### III.

Art is a means of cognizing life with the help of images.

"Yes," answers one of the theoreticians of modern futurism, Comrade Chuzhak, "but that was true of bourgeois art, of old art. New, proletarian art must overcome this old art. Its task is reduced not to the cognition of life, but to its construction." "Art as a method of cognizing life (hence—passive contemplation) is the supreme and at the same time the carefully adapted content of the old, bourgeois aesthetics. Art as a method of constructing life (hence, the overcoming of matter) is a slogan which expresses the proletarian conception of the science of art."

The fundamental evil of the old art, in the opinion of Comrade Chuzhak, lies in its passivity, contemplativeness, in its peculiar "lack of will-power" [iâââîêâîêâ]. "The old not only assumes, it demands, a passive, soft, wax-like, so-called 'receptive' psyche, which is necessary during contemplation. The principle of weak-willed irresoluteness lies in the very nature of the old



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**ЖУРНАЛ**  
**ЛЕВОГО ФРОНТА**

**ИСКУССТВ**  
ИЗДАТЕЛЬ: ГОСИЗДАТ  
ОТВЕТСТВЕННЫЙ РЕДАКТОР  
**В. В. МЛЯКОВСКИЙ**

**ЛЕФ**

Cover of the journal LEF, 1923

art” (LEF, no. 1).

Obviously the same must be said about science, for the old science went no further than the cognition of life. Thus Comrade Chuzhak says:

While accepting the auxiliary nature of the moment of cognition, the working class each and everywhere—both in real, actual science, and in real, actual artistic creation, and in the actual, bone-breaking struggle for the necessary social order—each and everywhere the proletarian center of gravity is moving from the moment of cognition to the immediate construction of things, including here even an idea, but as a definite engineering model.

The provisional declaration about auxiliary nature, however, does not change the essence, and that is revealed by the fact that, putting into circulation such words as passivity, irresoluteness, and so forth, Comrade Chuzhak is waging war against science and art as means of cognition. As a result, voluntarism and subjectivism are counterposed to objectivism. Comrade Chuzhak vainly proposes that this is the point of view of the proletariat. A whole series of bourgeois theoreticians are defenders of voluntarism and subjectivism. In particular, German expressionism, which is, as a whole, a typically decadent tendency, now busies itself with propagating a peculiar life-construction, understood, it is true, somewhat differently from the way Comrade Chuzhak understands it.

Comrade Chuzhak confuses different moments and lumps everything together. Cognition is also in a certain sense an act of volition. During the cognitive process the attention and activity of man are directed so that his subjective sensations, moods and thoughts correspond to the nature and properties of the object under investigation. The scientist or the artist controls and audits what is given in his perceptions and thoughts with what is given outside himself. The moment of volition is not only included in this work, it is revealed by the way attention is directed at those or other phenomena: the artist or scientist focuses his attention on one thing, not wishing to notice anything else. Volition enters into the act of cognition as an indispensable element. This act in no way resembles blissful contemplation, or an aimless stare. The overcoming of matter in this sense is the essence of scientific or artistic creation. To go on. The reader who apprehends the results of this creativity must of necessity, one way or another,

reproduce the work of the artist, relive in a weakened, more distant form the main stages of this work, otherwise he will not understand the work. Here also the act of volition has its place. It is also true that the basis of the process of cognition is the fact that the bringing of subjective perceptions into correspondence with the nature of the object overwhelms all other acts of volition.

The process of activity follows the process of cognition. "Science is based on knowledge, activity is based on knowledge." Man first cognizes, then he acts, "he builds."<sup>2</sup> No one has yet discovered a science where the process of cognition has been made auxiliary. As long as no such science exists there is no basis to propose that this will change in the future, insofar as we anticipate the future. The same applies to art. It is completely inexplicable why the "apprehension" of Gogol's *Dead Souls* bears an involuntary, passive character. On the contrary, Sobakevich and Manilov, Pliushkin and Nozdrev awaken very determinate feelings, after which also follow very definite actions which are by no means to the benefit of these Gogolian characters.

If the old art had been passive, contemplative, lacking volition, then it would not have compelled people to act, to struggle. But it is sufficient to remember the honorable, beneficial and noble role which was played by old Russian art (as a whole) in the struggle with tsarist despotism, with Russian *rasteryaevism* and *okurovism*,<sup>3</sup> for the assertions of Comrade Chuzhak to dangle in midair.<sup>4</sup>

Chuzhak's comments make greater sense with regard to certain tendencies in art: sentimentalism, reactionary romanticism, art-as-play, art for art's sake. But after all, such "art" is the most subjective and least of all aims at the cognition of life. By the way, Comrade Chuzhak battles precisely against realistic, i.e., genuine art. This becomes especially clear from other arguments he offers, from his arguments about reality.

"What are," Comrades Chuzhak and Tretyakov ask in unison, "reality,

2. Let us remind the reader of Marx's famous argument about the bee and the architect in volume 1 of *Capital*. It is in this sense that we are discussing cognition and activity.

3. "Ðàíðàäÿââùèíà" and "íêóðíâùèíà," pejorative terms derived from Uspensky's «Íðàâù Ðàíðàäÿââèé òêèòù» [The Mores of Rasteryaev Street] and Gorky's «Ãèðèâèê Íêóðíâ» [The Town of Okurov], meaning, according to one Soviet literary scholar, "the state of being morally and spiritually lost ... accompanied by lethargy, fear of life and of one's superiors and authorities, spiritual emptiness, debased human relations, confusion, indifference to intellectual and social questions, and perpetual poverty and sorrow." (N. I. Prutskov, *Gleb Uspensky* [New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972], p. 34.) Trans.

actuality, experience, facts, and so forth?” And they answer: that which is; that which is dead, frozen, inert; which means banality, tradition and conservatism. “Everyday routine is a profoundly reactionary force” (Tretiakov). In light of these words, the task of the artist is not to cognize life, but to construct a new society, and new man. These are the laws and the prophets as far as the theoreticians of modern futurism are concerned. Disdain for the realistic form in art is postulated with the help of the dialectic of Marx and Engels. Here is what Comrade Chuzhak writes: “If at the base of every activity, including artistic activity (dialectical materialism), there lies some material reality, then this reality is already something transitory”; that is, it contains within itself “not only the positive understanding of what exists, but also the understanding of its negation. Then it is clear that the task of art is not to record what has been deposited by everyday life (which until now has been the view of many who call themselves Marxists), but the realization of the imagined antithesis, based on study, the exposition of which holds interest for tomorrow—the presentation of every synthesized (realized) form ‘in its movement,’ that is, under the sign of the ever newer process of matter which is eternally renewing itself and developing from within” (LEF, no. 1).

Thus the task of proletarian art is not the recording of what has been deposited by everyday life, but the exposition of the “antithesis,” the depiction of life “in its movement.”

This “already” in Comrade Chuzhak’s statement is wonderful. It reveals the basic quirk of the contemporary theoreticians of futurism. It must be sought in their view of immediate reality which already ceases to be immediate reality. All this has nothing in common with the dialectic of Marx, Plekhanov and Lenin. Over these and similar writings blows the wind of absolute relativism, denying all sense of stability. We communists are also relativists, but our relativism is not absolute, but relative. “The dialectical conception of the universal whole and of the relativity of the being of every thing,” writes one of the best authorities on Marx’s dialectic, L. I. Akselrod, “by no means excludes the indestructible truth, that in a given space, at a definite time and

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4. In their own manner and form, the circles of Enchmenists are futurists in science. The Enchmenists are sure that “after the overthrow of the exploiting classes there begins a mass process of the withering away of ‘reason.’ ” In place of “reason” and “knowledge,” the future belongs to a “unified system of organic movements.” In place of life-cognition a peculiar form of life-construction also arises.

under given, existing circumstances, A equals A” (L. Akselrod-Orthodox, L. N. Tolstoy). Thus immediate reality, under certain conditions, in definite time and space, is immediate reality, but by no means something which is already passing away. Comrade Chuzhak argues not according to Heraclitus, who asserted that everything flows, everything changes, but according to Zeno, who proposed that it is impossible to step into the same stream twice, for “everything flows, everything changes.” Heraclitus was a dialectician, while Zeno was a metaphysical relativist. In the camp of bourgeois scholars there are now very many such relativists. Chuzhak and Tretiakov are relativists of this type, who transform dialectics into metaphysics by denying the stability of immediate reality in space and time. Here there is not a grain of Marx’s dialectics.

In full correspondence with this genuine dialectics, which is opposed to the “dialectics” of Comrades Chuzhak, Brik, and Tretiakov, in her book about Tolstoy, Comrade Orthodox establishes the truth, that dialectical materialism in art leads to realism as the basic form, i.e., to the cognition of life, to its objective and exact portrayal. What does it mean to be a dialectician in art? Comrade L. I. Akselrod-Orthodox gives an answer in her analysis of Tolstoy’s works:

The law of development permeates not only nature, which surrounds us, but also social relations and our individual existence. According to this all-embracing law, the basis of scientific cognition consists in the reduction of all qualitative to quantitative relations. This law should become the basis of artistic creation for the great master-classics as well. By radically destroying absolute contrasts, and by viewing each object not in isolation, but as part of a single whole, the dialectical world view opens up for the artist a wide, boundless expanse to fully show the subtleties and depth of perceptions, the accuracy of observations and the art of reproducing what has been observed and apprehended....

In Tolstoy’s purely artistic reproductions, everything unfolds in space and time, everything lives and dies there.... Birth and death, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, joy and sadness; all these values and their opposites occur in the artistic creations of our genial master not in absolute, eternal forms, they are not irreconcilable metaphysical essences. But, on the contrary, they are links of the same, universal, living, unbreakable chain, where the quality of each individual link is determined by quantitative

relations.... That is the dialectical view of things, and, at the same time, the most human view.... In other words, like scientific research, Tolstoy's work rests upon experience.... In following this strictly objective method, Tolstoy was a realist in the true sense of the word.<sup>5</sup>

May the reader forgive the use of this excerpt. But it is necessary, in order to show how the experts in dialectical materialism applied the latter in questions of art. And Marx himself? One of his favorite writers was Shakespeare, who was undoubtedly a realist. The point is not that Marx "acknowledged" Shakespeare or gave him his due as an historian, or even that he received profound aesthetic pleasure from him, but that he recommended that his best contemporaries imitate him in his realism. In his and Engels's recently published letters to Lassalle, when discussing Lassalle's play *Franz von Sickingen*, he advises him to Shakespearize, and not follow in the footsteps of Schiller with his transformation of individuals "into simple mouthpieces of the spirit of the times." And Engels openly advises Lassalle "not to forget the realistic beyond the ideal, and Shakespeare, beyond Schiller."<sup>6</sup>

Who is to be believed—the theoreticians of futurism, who claim that dialectics in art leads from the cognition of life to some kind of life-construction, from realism to "the turning of individuals into simple mouthpieces of the epoch"—or "those who call themselves Marxists," Marx, Engels, Plekhanov and Orthodox, and who claim that dialectics in art leads to Shakespeare, to Tolstoy, to realism, and to an exact cognition of life?

To each his own. As for us, let us say with regard to the references made by Chuzhak, Tretiakov and others to dialectics as the basis of their position: "Go somewhere else. Don't bother us." Comrade Mayakovsky and Aseev sometimes write exceptional things, but their theoreticians and interpreters bandy about the term "dialectical materialism" in vain.

Only by acknowledging the absolute character of the opposition between

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5. For the reader's information, this refers to Tolstoy the artist, insofar as he does not introduce his ascetic philosophy into his works.

6. Truly striking are the research by Comrade Arvatov in no. 3 of LEF and the treatment he gives to Marx. Marx's famous comment about Greek art, that "the difficulty consists in this, that they [the works of Greek art—A. V.] continue to provide us artistic pleasure and in a certain sense serve as a norm and unattainable model"—he manages to explain in such a way that the result obtained is that Marx supposedly considered this art "a monument," reminding one of ancient culture, but incapable of infecting the

the ideal and the real, of the contradictory relation which is derived from “dialectics” in quotes, can one understand the negative attitude toward realism in art shown by the theoreticians of futurism. For them, such a separation actually exists.

Consider the following tirade from Comrade Chuzhak:

The proletariat is a social group which has a dual nature. On the one hand, it is only a class, with all the characteristics of its class position, i.e., first and foremost concerned with the narrow class struggle for existence, the struggle for a concrete piece of bread, for the subsistence of its family, and so forth, and this means with a definite, narrow, class psychology. On the other hand, it is the class upon whose banner is inscribed liberation from class enslavement, and this, speaking concretely, is the last class” (LEF, no. 1).

There is no such class “on the one hand and on the other”; there is simply one class. The ideal of the working class—the liberation from class enslavement—is organically bound up with what our critic calls its narrow class psychology. As the starting point in our struggle for socialism, we socialists take “the concrete piece of bread.” We distinguish ourselves from every sort of utopian by being able to connect “the struggle for subsistence” with the ideal of socialism. With Comrade Chuzhak it comes out quite differently: on the one hand there is the struggle for subsistence, on the other there is the struggle for socialism. Without understanding that one is organically connected with the other, he keeps on repeating phrases about “a certain fate,” “fatal nonconformity,” “tragedy” and other things. But it’s all very simple: “Fate” is in the thinking of Comrade Chuzhak who is unable to construct a bridge from the

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contemporary reader with aesthetic emotions, and consequently unnecessary and harmful for new art. Comrade Arvatov leads the reader to these and other amazing discoveries by means of citing such places from Eighteenth Brumaire as: “The social revolution of the nineteenth century may derive its poetry only from the future, and not from the past,” and so forth. To be sure, he is speaking here about social revolution and not about art, but Marx uses the word “poetry” in a completely different sense, which is absolutely clear from the context; this doesn’t trouble comrade Arvatov: Marx’s idea, that previous revolutions needed great historical memories and illusions, but that the socialist revolution has no need for these illusions, he manages to rework in the following way: art must live for the future, and both “norms” and “unattainable models” must be thrown over the side of modernity. All this is already very ... awkward.

present to the future. With such an outlook, all that is left to say is what the theoreticians of futurism actually do say: everyday life is banality, tradition, inertia, “struggle for subsistence,” “narrow, class psychology,” and so forth. For the dialectical materialist, all opposites are relative; even the opposition between the ideal and reality is relative. Proletarian art must, of course, focus its attention on the future, but this obligation by no means contradicts the aspiration to cognize reality. On the contrary, only by cognizing it can one build the future in a scientific way.

By denying that art is the cognition of life, the futurist comrades slide into complete subjectivism. “The very term ‘designation,’ ” says Comrade Tretiakov, “instead of ‘content,’ has already been given in futurist literature” (LEF, no. 1). This is subjectivism. There is nothing to add here except to recall once again Marx’s wonderful expression about art, in which individuals are transformed “into simple mouthpieces of the spirit of the age.” The theorists of futurism lead art in this direction. Sometimes this is also useful, but then it isn’t art.

Our futurists are thrown off track by Marx’s comment: “The philosophers have only explained the world in a number of ways, but the task is to change it.” From this statement they draw the conclusion: not life-cognition but life-building. It is sufficient, however, to get a slight grasp of Marx’s theses on Feuerbach to become convinced that this statement has nothing in common with the futurist demands about not cognizing life, but building it. “In practice man must show the truth ... of his thinking,” and not by means of theoretical abstractions. That is what Marx is talking about here.

Those who stress the objective, precise, empirical aspect of art “in nowadays times” must be prepared in advance to be rebuked for outmoded thinking, bourgeois attitudes, philistinism, preaching pure art, and so forth. We may pass by accusations of bourgeois attitudes or philistinism without any particular loss, but we must stop to consider the question of pure art in order to avoid all possible confusion.

In its most classical expression, the theory of pure art states that the artist, like the biblical Jehovah, creates from “nothing.” Secret recesses of the soul are the alpha and omega of artistic creation: the artist does not take as his subject vulgar reality. Art is intrinsically valuable, its tasks are reduced to “the enchantment of fine flights of fantasy,” and so forth. Our propositions are opposed to these and other similar statements. The basis of genuine art is experience. The



artist is an experimenter and observer. His work is always conditioned by the spirit of the epoch, and the psychology of the class, stratum or group to which he belongs. It serves definite vital interests, whether the artist wants this or not. In equal measure the beautiful is no self-sufficient value. Art in the final analysis is utilitarian. From this, however, it is not correct to draw conclusions in the sense that Comrade Tretiakov does, for example, when he writes: "Futurism must use it [art—A. V.], by counterposing in its own arena: agitational activity to the depiction of everyday life; energetic word-experimentation to lyricism; the adventurous, innovative novella to fictional psychologism; and the newspaper feuilleton or agitational piece to pure art" (LEF, no. 1). One can therefore understand the full consistency of the call "to struggle within art with its own means for its destruction." Communism has thus far had no grounds whatsoever to set as its goal the destruction of art or the replacement of art with agitational material. Agitka [agitational material—Trans.] is a useful thing, and very valuable, but it is applied art; the specific weight of the agitational piece, the feuilleton, and so forth, is extraordinarily great during our times. Does it therefore follow that we must turn away from art as a means of cognizing life? By no means. G. V. Plekhanov was right when he repeatedly attacked Pisarev's utilitarianism. But Pisarev with his utilitarianism didn't go as far as the Comrade Tretiakovs have gone. Pisarev demanded that the poet or the artist be of real use with his works, and not be concerned with enchantment for its own sake. "We want the creations of the poet to outline clearly and sharply before us those sides of human life which we need to know in order to think and act fundamentally" ("Realists"). Pisarev did not reject art as a means of cognizing life. Our futurists have adopted a position more to the left, insofar as it is to the left of common sense. They've lost their wits.

Whoever says in art: "Down with cognition, long live agitational material," must say the same about science: "Down with exact sciences, down with theory, long live scientific agitka, long live the popular pamphlet and applied sciences, which serve immediately utilitarian goals." The Tretiakov comrades are very bold people, but they are bold only because they examine everything very superficially.

Here it is fitting to recall the beautiful lines written by Comrade K. Timiriazev regarding the dispute about theoretical and applied knowledge; lines which with full justification can be applied to our debate about art.

The following picture arises involuntarily in my mind. About forty years ago, one such indignant moralist made it to the attic of the Ecole Normale, and finding there a sickly, pale man surrounded by innumerable bottles and test tubes, burst into eloquent denunciations.

“You should be ashamed,” he says to the scientist, “you should be ashamed. All around you there is poverty and hunger, and you busy yourself with some sort of mash made out of sugar and honey. All around you people are suffering from terrible living conditions and diseases, and you are worried about where that gray mud on the bottom of some test tube comes from. Death roams all around you, takes away a father who is the support of his family, tears a child from the embrace of his mother, and you wrack your brains over the question of whether some spots under your microscope are alive or dead. You should be ashamed. It would be better to smash all your test tubes, run from the laboratories, share your labor with the working people, give help to the sick and provide a word of comfort where a physician’s art is powerless.”

The attractive role, of course, would have fallen to the lot of the indignant moralist, and the scientist would have had to mutter something in defense of his ridiculous, egotistical pastime.

But how these roles would change if our two imaginary people should meet again forty years later. Then the scientist would say to the moralist something like this: “You were right, I didn’t share my labor with the working people, but here are a host of workers to whom I returned their millions in wages. I didn’t give help to the ill, but now there are whole populations whom I have protected from disease. I didn’t go with words of comfort to those in distress, but now there are thousands of fathers and mothers to whom I returned children that had been condemned to certain death.” And in conclusion, our scientist would add with a condescending smile: “And all this was there in that test tube with sugar and honey, in that gray muck at the bottom of that test tube, and in those spots which were wiggling under my microscope.” I suppose that this time the one filled with shame would be the nobly indignant, but nearsighted moralist.

Yes, the question is not whether scientists and science should serve their societies and mankind; there can be no such question. The question is which path is shorter and leads more surely to this goal. Should the scientist follow the bidding of the practical, worldly wisemen and near-

sighted moralists, or follow, without worrying about their objections and orders, the only possible path which is determined by the inner logic of facts which governs the development of science; should one persistently but helplessly stay around or near a complex phenomenon which still doesn't yield to scientific analysis but which is practically important? Or should one concentrate one's forces on a phenomenon which is there at hand even though it is at first sight far from life's concerns, but the explanation of which will provide the key to a whole series of practical riddles? No one need argue that science has its own trivial pursuits, its oftentimes empty amusements in which idle people exercise their virtuosity. It's not enough that like every force science has its flatterers hanging around it and parasites attached to it. Of course, it's not for either the worldly men of wisdom or the nearsighted moralists to look into this. And in any case, the criterion of true science is not that superficiality of the nearest, narrow use with which the adepts of pseudo-science cover themselves, most successfully, thereby easily winning for their parodies recognition of their practical importance, and even their usefulness to the state.<sup>7</sup>

If you replace the words "science" and "scientist" with "art" and "artist" in these beautiful and profoundly true, passionate lines by the great Russian scientist and our comrade, then you can use them without any omissions against our modern ultra-utilitarians. There are epochs, periods, when applied art, applied sciences, agitational material, feuilletons, and propaganda naturally take on overwhelming significance; when the artist and the scientist must be, before all else, agitators and tribunes; when the tasks of theoretical or concrete knowledge recede into the background. There are moments which are even stronger and simpler: the scientist and the artist, if they are living people and want to go stride for stride with the creators of the future, must refrain even from agitation and take gun in hand in place of the pen, or stand behind the machine gun. At these moments it is criminal to engage in agitation. But whoever draws from this circumstance the conclusion: "let art and science be abolished" would be such an enormous simpleton that nothing more need be said.

Having abolished immediate reality and replaced it with Zenoistic becoming, raised to an absolute, the theoreticians of futurism have, with full consistency,

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7. Cf. Mikh. Zavadovskii, "A Study of Timiriazev," *Krasnaia nov'*, no. 12, 1923.

adopted the point of view of extreme relativism in the question of “linguistic-creativity” as well. To consciously “create” new language is a very admirable and modern task, but here one must observe restraint and caution. Once upon a time Anatole France was visited by a certain captain, a fervent Esperantist, who set out to convince the writer in every way possible about the great attributes of Esperanto. France let him have his say and then remarked: “Listen, my dear captain. Let us suppose that you are given a miraculous doll ... she talks with you. She calls you: ‘My dear!’ Would you love her? Let us suppose that you are stranded with her for a long time on an uninhabited island, and suddenly there appears a real woman, even one who is quite homely, but nevertheless a real woman. Would you then turn with your madrigals to the doll? Your Esperanto is a doll. The French language is a woman.” Our Esperanto-futurist comrades, forgetting that every language develops organically, suddenly present us with a doll instead of a woman. The living language is replaced by dead, artificial, and forced word-formations.<sup>8</sup>

The reader, of course, has noticed that here we have deliberately, and with special sharpness, emphasized the objective, so to speak exact, moment in art and left aside other significant questions connected with the theory of art: the question of conscious and unconscious creation, inspiration, form, and so forth. There are rather serious reasons for sharpening our focus in this way. Today the question of art as an exact cognition of life has not only a theoretical, but deeply practical character. We are entering the type of social phase when, besides agitational work, we must arrive at a serious artistic cognition of reality. Meanwhile, rather strange views in this area reign among us. The revolution produced not only beneficial shocks, but it also stripped many people of any psychological stability, forcing them to forget what had been considered ABC. The notes of one of our comrades, which have been presented for editing but have yet to be published, contain the following instructive comments about the contemporary moods of those who grew up and matured in the last decade:

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8. Let not the reader take us to mean that we see nothing positive in the work of LEF with regard to language, form, and so forth. A whole series of articles in their journal are undoubtedly valuable and interesting, all the more so since they are as yet unique. It would be very good, however, if the comrades from LEF restrained themselves in the area of self-advertising, their somewhat unnecessary, harmful and overly familiar manner, and the satirical spirit of interpretation which is a particular weakness of the first half of issue no. 3 of their journal.

Look at each one of us. Indeed we all inhabit various nooks and crannies. We grew up stealthily, in out-of-the-way places, as eternal outcasts. We don't even resemble petty tradesmen, we have never been even slightly domesticated, or tamed by regular feeding; for the "has-been," we are like people brought in from some unknown island. We are never like others, we're always different.... We grew up at a frantic pace, in an insane hurry, and in never-ending poverty. And therefore our approach to everything is serious, urgent and especially agitated.

These words are very true and to the point. It becomes psychologically understandable how, on the basis of such an "urgent" and "serious" approach, extreme relativism and urgency in questions of art and science hold certain sway. Sometimes you have to act with extreme haste, but the damage that is sometimes done by this haste remains real damage; we have already seen how our comrade futurist-critics have arrived at the rejection of reality, art and science. The position of the journal *On Guard* leads to the same rejection in our current literary scene. Comrades Tretiakov and Co. have gone crazy over Marx's dialectic, and having assimilated it in a very superficial way, they have fallen into untenable relativism. The comrade critics from the journal *On Guard* have lost their way in questions of class art, and they have floundered about in the same relativism, although in a somewhat different manner.

Let us consider their positions.

#### IV.

In the most forceful manner and on every page the colleagues from *On Guard* employ the word "class": class literature, class psyche, class poetry, and so forth. This, of course, is not bad, especially in our strained, exclusively "class" times. However, in what sense do our critics use the concept "class"?

"Art has always served and now serves as a powerful weapon of immediate influence on the sensual perception of the masses" ("From the Editors").

"Literature undeniably serves one or another social layer... Literature of past epochs was permeated with the spirit of exploiting classes" (Vardin), and so forth.

All this is, of course, true, but it is insufficient for the task of defining art.

Meanwhile the journal *On Guard* limits itself to such general proclamations. Nowhere is it clearly and firmly stated that art is a special means of cognizing life, and that in genuine art there is just as much an exact, objective moment as in philosophy or in science. Not to say or mention this, while continuously using the concept "class," means to throw overboard one of the main elements which form the "soul" of art. Literature and art undoubtedly serve one or another class in a society which is thus divided. But it by no means follows that what is given or achieved as a result of artistic experience is lacking objective value.

Consciously or unconsciously the scientist or artist fulfills the tasks of his class. The products of his labor go first of all to meet the interests of this class. The successes, character, direction and methods of scientific and artistic activity are conditioned by the ruling psychology of one or another class, by a psychology which in the final analysis depends on the state of productive forces of a given society. Consequently, in studying and showing being, the artist and scientist examine this being through a psychological class prism. But among the tasks which the class obliges the scientist and the artist to carry out, the major one is reduced to an exact, empirical cognition of life, insofar as this is necessary for the given class. Sometimes this assignment is consciously or unconsciously made in such a way that the artist or scientist engages in the distortion of reality; then what is produced is pseudo-science, or pseudo-art. Usually the distortion takes place when the objective truth is for some reason unfavorable to the given class. And further. Nearly always, especially in art, while cognizing life, the artist interprets it and embellishes it with his own moods and with his own "ideology," which have received a class stamp.

From this it follows that, in addition to subjective moments in art and science, there are also objective moments. Therefore, while examining art from a position of the class divisions in society, our best Marxist theoreticians who have written about art never forgot to stress from the very beginning the objective, universally significant value in genuine, great works of art. On the contrary, taking his lead from those of the Enlightenment, G. V. Plekhanov never tired of emphasizing that art and philosophy share one and the same subject. In his books, in articles, in his research, he was able to note, delimit and reveal what in the works of a given artist has objective significance, as opposed to those voluntary and involuntary distortions which occur due to the subjectivism of the artist and due to his incorrect views, the prejudices of his layer, group or

class (cf., for example, the brilliant and classic articles by G. V. Plekhanov on Uspensky and other Narodniki, on Gorky, Ibsen and Tolstoy).

Having overlooked this objective moment in art and having forgotten that the task of the artist is the cognition of life, the journal's critics actually have adopted the point of view of subjectivism in the questions of art. But their subjectivism is special; it is the subjectivism of people who have turned the theory of the class struggle into a metaphysical, absolute category. Their method and approach to the artist is something like this: since the artist serves a definite class with his works, and the life of a class is determined by its interests, therefore in his pieces there is nothing and can be nothing except naked class interest, directed against another class. There can be no talk about any objective content.

We have seen how the theoreticians of futurism crossed out "content" by replacing it with "purpose," and cognition with goal. The comrade critics of the journal *On Guard* also strike out "content." They always replace it with ideology or world outlook. But ideology in science and art is one thing, and content, which almost always with a scientist or artist contradicts his ideology, is something else. Content here is interpreted exclusively as the transmission of subjective moods, thoughts and feelings of the artist, and not as the result of work on the object. In this subjectivism the points of view of both the futurists and the stern *On Guard* critics coincide, despite their differences in other areas. Not without reason does Comrade Rodov write: "In understanding the tasks of art they [the futurists—A. V.] came rather close to the formulation given to these tasks by the October group." In Rodov's opinion, the central concern is that, unfortunately, the futurists as before are attracted by aesthetic exercises, language construction, the creation of new words, and so forth. From our point of view the basic sin of futurism lies not here, but in their subjective understanding of the tasks of art, which the Rodovs don't notice since they are subjectivists themselves.

Having assimilated the general propositions that there is no pure or classless art, that the artist is a son of his epoch and class, that the theory which interprets artistic creation as a self-sufficient and self-contained goal contradicts Marxism—the *On Guard* critics have decided that there can be no talk of objectivism and that all art is thoroughly saturated with narrowly utilitarian and narrow class subjectivism. This vulgarization of the theory of class struggle is a special variety of relativism, taken to the absurd. In this conception,

theory is transformed from the refined weapon of Marxist criticism into the head of a hammer with which they pound to the right and the left, wildly and indiscriminately. Society no longer exists as a special organism developing within the framework of the class struggle. That all society as a whole goes forward, progresses or develops in forms of class struggle, and that in these forms are accumulated material and intellectual values—from such a point of view this must seem to be an absurd, harmful heresy. The class struggle is transformed into a goal in itself, it is self-sufficient, and it doesn't serve as a means for the forward development of human society. There neither is, nor can there be, any continuity from one class to another. Science, art, and so forth, lie in the hands of one class, are suitable only for the demolition of its class antipode, since there is nothing in it except class subjectivism, focused against the interests of one or another class. It is enough therefore to say the word “bourgeois” regarding this or that scientist or artist for the ideologue of the proletariat to take the hammer into his hands and begin to “energetically” “flatten things out” [ðàñîðîñððáíÿòü ïðîñððáíñðâî].

That is what our critics are doing.

Art of the past is the art of the ruling classes, the bourgeoisie and the nobility. In accordance with their conception of the class character of art, the Leleviches and Rodovs feel that the basic task of the literature of our times is reduced to liberation from the content (ideology) and form of the classics. The programmatic statement from the editors says: “First of all, we must finally free proletarian literature from the influence of the past, both in the realm of ideology and in the realm of form.” And further: “We will struggle with those old-fashioned thinkers in their reverential pose, who have stopped being critical enough as they have stood frozen before the granite monument of old bourgeois-aristocratic literature, without wanting to throw this oppressive ideological burden from the shoulders of the working class.” This theme is repeated several times in other articles, taking the form in Comrade Bersenev's comments of the naive, but very characteristic assertion that “neither these nor any other bourgeois writers” can evolve “to the side of the proletarian construction of life.”

G. V. Plekhanov found natural and unavoidable the negative attitude of the new class, which has arrived to replace the old, toward the literature of the latter. And indeed this is so. But this feeling is justifiable only to the degree in which it correctly and rationally takes account of what the young literature of



the new class must take from the literature of the previous epoch as an inevitable condition of its own further development, and what it must discard as an unnecessary and harmful remnant. G. V. Plekhanov himself never committed the sin of showing an indiscriminate attitude toward the science and art of the bourgeois-landowner culture. He was able to find the “measure of things,” for example, while pointing out the limited nature of the views of the French and Russian enlightenment, he invariably distinguished in them what was objectively valuable and effective from the point of view of dialectical materialism. For our subjectivists the problem is as simple as can be. If something is bourgeois, one must strive to become utterly free from its influence.

The same G. V. Plekhanov saw that one of the basic tasks of Marxist criticism is to find the sociological equivalent of a work. Such a determination is necessary; thanks to such an analysis we discover that a given work matured on the basis of certain features of class psychology. We determine to what degree this psychology, these feelings, thoughts and moods correspond to the interests of all society as represented by the most advanced and most vigorous class in a given historical period. This method accounts for the place and role, and determines the weight of a given doctrine or artistic generalization in the current social struggle. But no matter how far our analysis proceeds in this direction, we would not have managed to establish the correspondence of the scientific or artistic discovery to the objective truth. Therefore the great Marxist theoretician supplemented his first requirement with another: the need to aesthetically evaluate a given work of art. The aesthetic evaluation in art corresponds to logical evaluation in science. The aesthetic evaluation as we understand it is not some walk across a tightrope, or the savoring of beauty for the sake of beauty, or aesthetic appreciation in the name of aesthetic appreciation. To aesthetically evaluate a work means to determine the extent to which the content corresponds to the form; in other words, the extent to which the content corresponds to objective artistic truth. For the artist thinks in images: the image must be artistically true, i.e., it must correspond to the nature of what is portrayed. In this lies perfection and beauty in the work of an artist. A false idea, a false content cannot find a perfected form, i.e., cannot aesthetically move us in a profound manner, or “infect” us. And if we say: the idea is incorrect, but it has found a beautiful form—then this must be understood in a very narrow sense.

As we will show later in their attitude toward the fellow-travelers, instead

of seeking the sociological equivalent, our stern critics limit themselves to a naked, general schematism: bourgeois, petit-bourgeois, proletarian. In a number of their critical articles, the aesthetic evaluation of a work simply does not exist. In this sense, Comrade Volin's article is very revealing; in his article any aesthetic evaluation is replaced by a search for criminal phrases and expressions.

Comrade Vardin is completely correct in recommending that writers who are trying to be "neither with them nor with us" make a serious study of a course in elementary political education. Many of our artists would find it extremely useful to listen to such advice. But just because of this one cannot forget that an artist has his own basic goal: to reproduce life in a true and artistic manner. The problem, consequently is not only the assimilation of political ABCs, as Comrade Vardin thinks; it is much more serious and profound. Of what use is it that we have whole circles which busy themselves with transposing newspaper articles into rhymed verses? They read the lead articles, yet the "poetical" political ABCs very quietly continue to lie there and encumber the syllable, demonstrating only good intentions, with which, as they say, the road to hell is paved. Comrade Vardin advises our writers who are flaunting their disdain for politics to learn from the Bunins and Merezhkovskys, who have adopted a definite, well-defined party line. This is also timely and appropriate advice. One must not forget, however, that having achieved "self-determination," the Bunins and Merezhkovskys have produced not one piece of art, but they have written wretched newspaper articles for Burtsev. We have no need of such "self-determination." The Bunins and Merezhkovskys have become literary impotents because they achieved "self-determination" on the side of obscurantism, which has no historical future. "Self-determination" on the side of communist political education will lead the artist to the best ideal which mankind has yet produced. This is an essential difference. Our vacillating artists are obliged to march shoulder to shoulder with new builders, but let them do this in such a way that the reader will say: this is artistically truthful and honest. And to do this they must not think things up, or adapt their things to ready-made clichés, or transpose lead articles, but more deeply, attentively and with greater concentration examine reality and portray life by uniting artistic truth with the ideals of communism.

It is true that various aesthetes who have grown tired, let themselves go, and lost their faith—degraded "living corpses" who have lost everything—love

to don the mask of objectivity and drag along behind this mask the ideological rubbish of the philistine, the merchant, the old nobility and the bourgeoisie. But we are not talking here about this fake objectivity; nor are we suggesting that the artist remove himself to the heights of some unknown Parnasse. Here we are discussing the exactness and objectivity which we find with Shakespeare, Gogol and Tolstoy, and finally, that which combines the cognition of life with lofty exhortation, driving out the darkness, banality, rubbish and filth from our lives.

Let us now consider the fellow-travelers.

## V.

The position of the journal *On Guard* in relation to the fellow-travelers is very significant. It may be said without exaggeration that the main goal of this journal is to drive the fellow-travelers from the place which they now occupy in today's literary life. "We will struggle," it says in an editorial article, "with those Manilovs who are trying to build an aesthetic bridge between the past and the present from the rotten threads of the written word of the 'fellow-travelers,' who are distorting our revolution and slandering it."

How an aesthetic bridge is built from the rotten threads of the written word, and why it is necessary to struggle with particular zeal against such an obviously insane undertaking, we simply don't know. But that is beside the point. Earlier we noted that the journal *On Guard* intends to struggle for the "final" liberation of the socialist fatherland from the ideology and the form of the old art. But the old art in its best form and from the best times is the most powerful, most advanced, most serious and most reliable fellow-traveler of the revolution. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the modern-day fellow-travelers are very, very guilty of building an "aesthetic bridge" between the old art and the art of today. Such a "bridge" actually does exist. The Rodovs and Leleviches prove to be very consistent here: having announced a campaign against the "monuments" of the old art, they had to declare a holy war against the contemporary literary fellow-travelers of the revolution.

For a more complete elaboration of the journal's position, we must also pause to consider the theses which were proposed by Comrade Lelevich and accepted by the "October" group of writers. There it says: "The petty bourgeois groups of writers who 'accept the revolution,' but who have not recognized

its proletarian character and perceive it only as a blind, anarchic, peasant rebellion (the ‘Serapions’ and others), reflect the revolution in a crooked mirror and are incapable of organizing the psyche and the consciousness of the reader in favor of the finite tasks of the proletariat.” They therefore can have no positive educational significance for the working class. But at the same time, they are capable of playing a certain role in blunting the hostility toward the revolution shown by the vacillating petty-bourgeois circles, and in introducing into the consciousness of these circles thoughts of the necessity of everyday collaboration with the ruling proletariat. In connection with this, the “theses” insist that proletarian literature be made the main foundation, and the literature of the fellow-travelers be used as an auxiliary force “for the disorganization” of the enemy’s consciousness. This is called the establishment of a unified party line.

How in practice our critics intend to carry out the establishment of this line as a counterweight to the “muddle” and the “literary-critical leapfrog” of which “certain editors” and “highly-educated permissive people” are guilty—the entire contents of the journal’s first issue speak unequivocally about this. As noted above, they propose that we “once and for all liberate ourselves” from the old literature of Europe and Russia. They intend to introduce a percentage quota for the fellow-travelers—judging everything according to the strictest severity—since the fellow-travelers busy themselves primarily with slandering the revolution, or at best, with reflecting it in a crooked mirror. It is unclear how they are able with these attributes to help the proletarian writers disorganize the enemy. What remains, according to Comrade Averbakh, is LEF, “Kuznitsa” and “October.” But things are rather dismal with “Kuznitsa.” According to Comrade Lelevich’s explanation, they are “decadents.” Ingulov proposes that they are “weak-willed whiners,” while Comrade Averbakh considers that they are gradually being absorbed by the petty bourgeoisie. Things are going extremely badly with LEF as well. In any case, despite his assertions that in their formulation of the tasks of art LEF comes close to “October,” Comrade Rodov nevertheless draws the following conclusion: “At the present time we have a small group of futurists, from whom only a few, and those with significant reservations, can be acceptable for the revolution.” That leaves “October.” There no one needs to be brushed aside; there lies the cradle of young Russian literature; “there lie wonders, there lies an enchanted world.” Our puritans have not yet reached the level of today’s “great” or “average” Western literature:

Wells, Kellerman, Leonhard Frank and others. But that, of course, is only for the time being. Judging from all the evidence, the critics will be strict even here and will insist on the banishment of even these philistines, for they belong to circles of the Western bourgeois intelligentsia and are not communists. That is how things stand “on the literary sector of the ideological front.”

The picture is so dismal that you either fall plop into the water or else stand on guard, with arms in hand. We are surrounded with the petty bourgeoisie, with slander, distortion, and decadents, and even the sole cause for rejoicing—“October”—doesn’t help the situation. Because, despite all its achievements and despite all its indominability and desperation, it has been unable to save the “literary sector.” From the side this is even more evident.

Turgenev had a certain administrator named Kurnatovsky declare, with regard to art, that “although it is not necessary, in a modern and well-equipped state it is allowed.” The Rodovs hardly go along with this attitude. In a more serious vein, we have before us an obviously wild phantasmagoria, which is really an absurd muddle. In practice, the position of On Guard leads not to the rectification of the party line, but to the destruction and suffocation of Soviet literature, both proletarian and nonproletarian. What is going on? What are they all about?

The confusion of our comrades, which has reached the point where they are forced to repudiate both the old and new literature, with the exception of one very small and very young group, originates entirely from the same inability to apply the theory of class struggle to questions of art. Neither in their editorial statement, nor in the theses which we have mentioned, do they make a serious attempt to answer the question: “Who are the petty-bourgeois fellow-travelers?” Even more importantly, Comrades Lelevich and Rodov never pose the questions: “Are there elements of artistic, objective truth in their works, and how are these elements expressed, if they are expressed?” Our critics are satisfied with one thing: petty-bourgeois and—that’ll do; the petty-bourgeois writer can contribute nothing of positive value to the consciousness of the reader. Reference to the fact that they perceive the revolution as an anarchistic, blind, peasant rebellion is very general, insufficient, and, in many cases, simply not true. Our fellow-travelers are people of many stripes. Some of them must be ascribed to the new intelligentsia fostered by the revolution. They are nonparty, but they fought for us, for Soviet soil. They grew up out of the revolution, they are children of the revolution, its pupils. They come from the places

where workers' schools and Soviet schools are replenished. Such are Vsev. Ivanov, Seifullina, Nik. Tikhonov, Aseev, A. Malyshkin, the nonparty writers of "Kuznitsa," N. Ognev, Pyotr Oreshin, A. Sigorsky and others. It is not true that they perceive the revolution to be an anarchistic, blind, peasant elemental outburst. Usually their attitude to the peasant is watchful; they understand the limited nature of his outlook. But they know our peasant; they know that, while making the revolution, our peasant colored it in a different way than the worker, and as genuine artists they were unable to pass by this fact. But all their sympathies are on the side of the city, the workers and the communists. They acknowledge their iron, organizing and disciplining hand (Ivanov's Nikitin, Seifullina's city, and so forth). The shortcomings which they display in their approach to communists is explained by the complexity and novelty of the theme, since the "leather" people in Russia are a phenomenon of recent years. They know little about the internal everyday life of the Communist Party and this lack of knowledge also leaves its imprint on their works. But artistically they are honest; their works give pieces of real life, and not saccharine legends; they began to depict vivid life and living man long before the exhortations of Comrades Averbakh and Lelevich. These fellow-travelers were the first to aim their blows at wooden agitation pieces, at abstractness and schematism in art. They approached the Russian revolution, and not revolution in general, outside of time and space. But they are also far from nationalism, the ideology of the Changing-Landmarks group, and so forth. Such things as *The Child*, *Polaia Arapiia*, *Colored Winds* and *The Armored Train* by V. Ivanov, *Humus* by Seifullina, *The Fall of Dair* by A. Malyshkin, the poetry of Tikhonov, Aseev, and other less significant things will remain the valuable artistic documents of our epoch. By reflecting and depicting real life, and by helping to cognize it, in this sense they are even capable of organizing the psyche of the reader in a manner which is necessary for communism, for our needs are answered not only by elementary political education, but by whatever helps to enrich us with artistic and other knowledge. The general enlightenment which they have given the revolution is acceptable to us, and they are trying to free themselves from their limitations to a degree matching their strength and abilities. And no matter how much comrade Lelevich demands a percentage quota for them, they will occupy a place in literature which rightfully belongs to them by virtue of their talent and the benefit they bring.

Another group of fellow-travelers, also rather varied, consists of the old

intellectuals (“great” literature) and their children who matured during the revolution. Examples of these from the “old men” are M. Gorky, V. Veresaev, A. Tolstoy and I. Erenburg, and from the youth—Boris Pilniak, Nikolai Nikitin, V. Lidin, Mikh. Zoshchenko and many others. These are fragments of the old intelligentsia. Despite all their psychological and artistic differences, they are related to each other by the fact that they have “nowhere to go” other than to go along and serve the Russian Revolution in their own way and within their own powers. They have a host of prejudices of every kind. One is shocked by the cruel and Asiatic spirit of Russian life (M. Gorky); another justifies Bolshevism from some kind of otherworldly heights beyond the stars while helplessly standing “at an impasse” in the face of today’s life (V. Veresaev); a third sees new Gusevs, but believes in the Russian spirit rather than in Europe (A. Tolstoy); a fourth also sees only the destruction of Europe, finds no creative historical forces at all and is infected with a peculiar historical nihilism (Ilya Erenburg); a fifth mixes up leather jackets and pre-Petrine Russia (Boris Pilniak); a sixth portrays the struggle between Reds and Whites as an assault on real life, which goes at its own pace (N. Nikitin). The communist critic must conduct a skillful and hard struggle against all these prejudices and against this subjectivism. But to conduct a struggle is one thing, and to demand banishment is something else altogether. Many of the “old men” reconcile themselves to the revolution only at the expense of the greatest exertion, but they are reconciling themselves. The disintegration of bourgeois civilization, the indisputability of the Russian Revolution, the collapse of the old intelligentsia’s ideology, the first fresh sprouts of new Russian activity in the soil which has been richly ploughed by the revolution—all this and much more compels these writers, each in his own way, to go along with the Russian Revolution and not against it. In particular, the new generation of intellectuals represented by Boris Pilniak and N. Nikitin is not a generation of new Sanins, but Sanin’s children who have witnessed the nakedness of their fathers. They themselves, to a large degree, are poisoned with their fathers’ venom, but they are trying to find a way out in the direction of the new revolutionary society. Such is the creative force of the Russian Revolution. Their “hosanna” to the revolution is almost always interrupted by reactionary, semireactionary or petty-bourgeois attitudes; their eroticism often pulls them away from the new society. They know and understand the worker poorly. Where many of them will finally drop their anchor is unknown, but as long as the Soviet regime

exists, as long as “the revolution continues,” it seems they will say: “Although I’m not a Bolshevik, it’s generally easier for me to keep company with the Bolsheviki. They are cheerful and courageous” (Boris Pilniak).

What the “old men” have available is great mastery, an understanding of the essence of art, ability and output. A few of them enjoy a European and even an international reputation. We are not advocating piety, but we must be able to put everything in its proper place. The youths are also artistically gifted writers. It is not true that they are lifeless trash, centro-snakes, lampooners and slanderers. Since the revolution Gorky has given us a literary masterpiece in the literature about Tolstoy (*Reminiscences of Tolstoy*). His *Autobiographical Tales*, *Notes* and *The Hermit* call to mind his best works. It’s as if he has suddenly found himself again. One can think as one likes about Tolstoy’s novel *Aelita*, but his *Gusev*, the central figure in the novel, is an interesting artistic generalization. The novel is already translated into several languages and in its own way will proclaim our Red Army to the Gusevs in the West. *Khulio Khurenito* by I. Erenburg is a very interesting and valuable artistic satire. Pilniak began with pre-Petrine Russia, rebellion and the maelstrom, passed through Spenglerism (*The Third Capital*) and arrived at a distinctive factory romanticism, acknowledging the “blackened hand of the worker,” which “like the eagle talon” reached into the maelstrom. From here he began to advocate the union of the intelligentsia with communists on the basis of concern for culture to the exclusion of politics (*Tales about Black Bread*). It is not true that he writes only about sex and eroticism. Pilniak is split between individualism, eroticism and the new social spirit. “Beckoned away from the mortal enemy,” he stubbornly seeks his way toward the Russian October and to the new life which now is being forged. N. Nikitin, one of the most talented young fiction writers, has long confused those whose “eyes are more trustworthy and more brazen than buttons” with his semireactionary and petty-bourgeois approach to the revolution, although subjectively he has not been a reactionary. In *Rebellion* the author moved away from this divergence. In this sense, particularly characteristic is the last revision of the novella *Night*, in which Nikitin finally has found the necessary words for the kulak Kuzmin.

In this camp, we repeat, at the present time far from everything is as it should be. More than once communist critics will still have to “drag in by the ear and expose” everything that is flabby, petty-bourgeois and decadent. But we will not forget what is positive that they give, we will not busy ourselves



with catching sentences and isolated lines, while leaving aside the content as a whole, so that the artistic essence of a work remains unknown to the reader.

Both groups of the fellow-travelers share certain general traits, especially among the youth. They are not mystics, but realists when they write, and this is a very healthy and positive phenomenon. They are trying to reflect life, and not fit it to certain patterns, even very good ones. Their attitude towards bourgeois civilization is negative. They hate the old tsarist structure, the spiritual emptiness [дѣла и жизнь] and human degradation [жизнь и труд], as well as the flaccidity of our intelligentsia, and they recognize that only with the Bolsheviks and through them will there be a real escape from the blind alleys created by the swindlers and parasites which plague the toiling masses. Together with and standing alongside the communist artists—with Demian Bedny, Arosev, Yurii Libedinsky, S. Semionov, with Gladkov, the “Kuznitsa” [Smithy] writers—with Mayakovsky, standing somewhere at a distance but very close to us, they are a clear argument for the revolution. They bear witness that the Soviet regime is not alone, that it is not isolated in the land, that it has and contains within it enormous attractive power, that its position is solid enough, that it has won over a whole cadre of talented artists “by the grace of god.” They bear witness that the Russian Revolution is not impotent in an intellectual, and consequently, in any other sense, and that the workers, peasants and most democratic intelligentsia from the less privileged classes (“the children of cooks”) who have made the revolution are not the destroyers, but the genuine creators of the future. If, for instance, the journal *On Guard* falls into the hands of our foreign emigration, it will arouse there only the satisfied rumbling: “Excuse me, ‘they’ have nothing in literature except Rodov and Lelevich, plus another tiny grouplet. Even the proletarian writers have forsaken them and come over ‘to us.’ ‘They’ are alone in the land, ‘they’ are a caste, a closed group without support, ‘they’ live in a desolate atmosphere of universal distrust.” Fortunately for the Soviet Republic, the picture painted by the puritans of the journal *On Guard* does not correspond to the truth. Month by month the Soviet regime is strengthening its position both domestically and internationally, despite the slowing of the pace in the West, despite the most severe conditions in the economy and the rather rotten administrative apparatus. This reinforcement of the position in art corresponds to an attraction to us, a Soviet orientation, disintegration in the camp of our enemies, and sympathy in the best, significant circles of the bourgeois intelligentsia in the West and in Russia (Wells, A. France, Romain

Rolland, Bernard Shaw, A. Tolstoy, Erenburg and others). And for good reason has the Russian emigré community flung mud at the Wellses and Tolstoys, the Gorkys and Erenburgs. For good reason they have passed over in silence our new, young Soviet literature: the Ivanovs, Kazins, Seifullinas and Malyshkins. They know quite well what is involved here. They feel quite well and recognize that a wager on the intellectual isolation of the Bolsheviks will be just as disastrous as the wager on their material isolation has been.

Comrade Lenin once noted that every group, every layer comes to communism in its own special way, that the path to communism, let us say, of an engineer, is altogether different from that of a worker. This we must keep firmly in mind, and we must not fear differences, deviations or ideological quirks; nor must we go into childish hysterics when an artist, in reproducing life, sometimes colors his work with suspicious ideology and introduces into it a host of prejudices of every type. In our hands lie the press, typography, the publishing houses, the newspapers and journals. We will be able to separate what is objectively valuable from the author's inner thoughts.

What have our literary fellow-travelers given that is objectively valuable?

Not very much, but they have given something.

Vsevolod Ivanov has given Vershinin, Sin-Bin-U, Nikitin, Kalistrat Efimich, partisans in a number of stories which are sometimes unusually powerful and colorful, such as *The Child*, *Vaska Zapus* and *Kirill Mikeich*. Tikhonov produced new people who are as strong and simple as nails. Mayakovsky gave a giant man who is above everyday nonsense. With Malyshkin there are Red Army men who are taking Dair. Pilniak has life of the provinces during the revolution ("The Mar Station," and so forth). Tolstoy has given us Gusev; Seifullina wrote about peasants and poor peasant committees. Nikitin produced Anton Cherniak and "spetses" [bourgeois specialists]; with Neverov there is the old new village, starving children, new pathfinders. Veresaev's intelligentsia are at an impasse. Pilniak and Erenburg describe the decline of the West. A number of scenes from everyday life are described by these and other writers; old, terrifying Russia in M. Gorky's latest things—here is a haphazard, incomplete, and of course, selective list of what our fellow-travelers have given in this period. They clearly have not kept pace with life, but over the last two and a half years of literary awakening this is truly not so little. In any case, they give the reader real artistic material, they depict and show. The issue here is not the scoundrels and intriguers who have swindled

the “good-hearted” Bolsheviks, but the fact that we have a situation in which 95 percent of Russia consists of fellow-travelers of the Communists, and this cannot help but find its reflection in the fate of our new literature. Our journals do not cordially open their doors to the fellow-travelers because, due to the influence of the NEP, they have a special and criminal passion for them, but because modern Soviet literature cannot limit itself to Demian Bedny and Yurii Libedinsky’s novella *One Week*. Indeed, it is a fact that we find the clearest talent with Ivanov, Tikhonov and other fellow-travelers, and that they were the first to speak real words about the real people of our revolution, if we exclude Blok’s “The Twelve” (Blok was also a fellow-traveler), Demian Bedny and a very few others. The writer-communists have their place and their due, but in degrees commensurate to their talent and their creative ability. A party card is a great thing, but to wave it around is out of place.

Comrades Lelevich and Rodov are very fond of insisting on organizing the psyche of the reader. One must, however learn and understand how the artist organizes this psyche. Everything seems very simple to the opponents of the fellow-travelers: all the artist does is transmit “ideology.” But things are much more complicated: in art and in science there must be an objectively valuable content, otherwise it is not art or science. This content is interwoven with “ideology” in very complex ways. After getting all tangled up in subjectivism, our critics naturally arrive at a method which is so simplified that it becomes vulgar. For instance, Comrade Lelevich writes: “We must critically review our attitude toward the petty-bourgeois fellow-travelers. Here the issue is not so much quality as quantity. But even Mayakovsky ... already knows about the transition from quantity into quality.... The Ivanovs and Nikitins will be able to carry out their mission of disorganizing the consciousness of our enemies only when the basic commanding heights of literature are in the hands of the proletariat and its party.” Quite simply and frankly: the issue is not quality but quantity. Introduce a percentage quota, and everything is in the bag. Do the proletarian writers have sufficient artistic qualities? And are they safe when it comes to rudimentary political education? What do the petty-bourgeois Ivanovs and Tikhonovs give us? Is there anything of objective value in their works? What is their ideological position? Where have they come from and where are they going? Almost nothing is said about all these questions, and what is said is mentioned only in passing. No, the issue here must be quality, and not quantity. We are concerned not about how many fellow-traveler writ-

ers are accepted by the publishing houses or journals, and how much space is devoted to communist writers, but about the artistic and other qualities of their works. "We are concerned not with quality, but with quantity." From this point of view, we can well understand the position of a journal which has found nothing deserving attention in literature except "October," and therefore has reached the conclusion that we find ourselves in sad and mournful solitude "in the literary sector." It seems that debate is superfluous here. No matter how much we have shown that a given group of fellow-travelers displays talent, depicts true life, and arouses no special objections in the ideological sense, a ruthless and crushing argument is always ready. What is involved is not so much quality, as quantity. Understandably and naturally it follows that for the triumph of another quantity (of "October" first and foremost), the "enemy" must be compromised; it must be proven that, essentially, the fellow-travelers have given us nothing more than libel and slander. The journal *On Guard* is engaged in finding such proof.

And what crafty Ulysses they are! By introducing a percentage norm, quantity will pass into quality: Vsevolod Ivanov, N. Tikhonov, Pilniak, Nikitin, Aseev, Mayakovsky, M. Gorky and others from among the centro-serpents and slanderers will turn into disorganizers of the consciousness of our opponents, while the proletarian writers ("October") will "organize" the psyche of the reader in the necessary way. In journal such-and-such, for instance, Rodov and Lelevich will publish their poems, and N. Tikhonov will be added to lend them a hand. The poems of Rodov and Lelevich, who outperform Tikhonov, will "organize" in the necessary way, while the poetry of Tikhonov will throw into confusion the ranks of the petty-bourgeois masses; his poetry can give nothing which is useful or enlightening to the proletarian reader, and it is better in general not to read it: why should one read what is incapable of producing a positive effect? Don't believe their statements, proletarian readers. The poet Tikhonov, as Comrade Lunacharsky correctly noted, is a star of the first magnitude, whereas many of the "communards" will end up fertilizing the soil, for despite all their superb ideological qualities, artistically they are very weak. Do not believe that Tikhonov is useful only for the petty bourgeoisie, and for you he is useless. Without being fully conscious of it themselves, these zealous critics want to supply you with third-rate authors, while the best—the Tikhonovs, Ivanovs, Gorkys, and so on—they want to give to the philistine, the petty bourgeoisie. This is nonsense.

Moreover, why can't writers who, according to Lelevich, are able to introduce the idea about the necessity of a working relationship with the ruling proletariat have any positive educational significance for the workers? Since they are capable of this, even to a certain degree, it means that they see in the ruling proletariat something positive, historically valuable and necessary; they must, obviously, understand the role of the proletariat in the revolution, its relative weight. But then they are not useless to the working class. And if we take into account that the artist is obliged to give artistic truth and reflect actual life, and not simply agitate; that the Tikhonovs and Ivanovs are called upon to instill the consciousness of collaboration in the heads to the petty-bourgeois masses, which compose 95 percent of our population; that our young proletarian literature is still very weak, but among the fellow-travelers there are writers "with a god-given gift," and that they were the first to begin speaking in their prose and poetry about the living man of the revolution; if you take all this into account, then the demand for a percentage quota for the fellow-travelers seems only to be a regrettable misunderstanding. And if you add to this the fact that we live surrounded by a very dangerous enemy, who is ready to sink his teeth or claws into us at any moment, then under these conditions every person who, even in his own distorted way, very inconsistently, and carrying with him even the very great burden of the past, but who wants to benefit the Republic of Soviets, must find his place and not be thrown overboard.

The difficult and complex question of the fellow-travelers, of artistic policy in today's literary life, is replaced by a very easy "means"—by looking at their work-booklets and by introducing a percentage quota. It is always useful to look at a writer's work-booklet, but it is definitely not worthwhile to follow the "dialectics" of Comrade Lelevich, for the simple reason that the theory of the class struggle when applied to questions of art is one thing, but the "dialectical" arguments about quotas is quite another altogether. It is true that once they had turned the theory of class struggle into metaphysics, into an absolute, and once they had vulgarized it, our critics had to declare all our young literature either useless, or counterrevolutionary, and demand a quota for it. In doing so here too they fell into a number of absurdities; one mustn't assign quotas to those who dislocate brains, to decadents, slanderers, and those who distort; one should allow them to "go wherever they may, just leave."

Once they had identified art with propaganda, looking at it as a product of exclusively subjective moods, the comrade critics from the journal *On Guard*

had to busy themselves with digging up quotations rather than analyzing the content, leaving the artistic essence of the work almost always to the side, or else touching upon it only in passing. In doing this, if the artistic sketch does not correspond to the cliché which is guiding the critic, then the artist is sent to the other side of the barricades, he is declared a decadent, mediocrity, and so forth.

Two or three examples. Comrade Volin shudders at the way Ilya Erenburg sketches the portraits of the leaders of our revolution. About Lenin is written: he is as exact as a machine, that he is condensed willpower in a jacketed container; that first he was a stay-at-home, reading books, or drinking a mug of German beer, and then in two weeks became a myth. We are told that Trotsky is a homebred Bonaparte, leader of the hordes from the steppes, with a triangular hat. As for Bukharin, he is a youngish, joyful rodent. You can't write that the Cheka has a stable of automobiles, that the secretary of the Central Committee sticks his fountain pen into an inkwell, that the communist Ash has little hairs in all the wrong places, and eyes like a puppy, that he gives his ration to someone, and that another communist has a pimply nose. To Nikitin is ascribed the "basic idea," which he supposedly advances in "Fort Vomit," that nothing has changed since the revolution, and this is done on the basis of what he noted about the military specialist Dandriukov: that under his command everything in the fort continues as it did in the good old days under Catherine the Great. In Comrade Rodov's evaluation of LEF, Kamensky's same old "zgara-amba"<sup>9</sup> flutters about; Pilniak gives us erotica, which proves that he longs for the old banished princes, that in the muzhiks he sees only beasts, and so forth.

I cannot remain silent here about Comrade Rodov's criticism of the literary section of Red Virgin Soil, which he gives us in no. 21 of "Sputnik kommunist" [The Communist's Companion]. I am not about to judge how successful everything is here. I will gladly agree that there were serious blunders, but I will parry Comrade Rodov's hand, for his criticism is, how shall we say, well, subjective.... It turns out that Vsevolod Ivanov in *Armored Train* discovered that he is distant from the revolution. Why is this? You see, he has muzhiks who feel nothing for the "internasynal." Then, the "moving force of the revolution" for the muzhik turns out to be land. And then, his communist Peklevanov is portrayed "almost as a caricature": the author presents him as a "small, freckled man, in tortoiseshell glasses," unlike the muzhik-partisan, and so forth. The rest is much the same. Comrade Rodov doesn't even ask the question about

how the Siberian peasant-partisans think about the International, or to what degree they actually feel that land is the moving force, or whether it is true that Peklevanovs who are very short really do exist. No, according to Rodov, the Siberian partisans must have stood only for the International, they should not have considered land to be the moving force, and all the Peklevanovs must be tall, strapping fellows. With no less success one could reply to this entire “criminal indictment” with quotations saying just the opposite. In LEF one could point to a number of interesting articles on the theory of art. There is the wonderfully sincere, talented poem by Comrade Mayakovsky “About That;”<sup>10</sup> Pilniak shows that the revolution continues, writing about leather jackets, the decline of Europe, and about the singular muzhik form of Bolshevism. Nikitin writes about “copper buttons,” and all “Barka” [The Wooden Barge]; Erenburg has pages describing communists as heroes. But this is not what is important. Both with Erenburg, Pilniak and Nikitin there is much that gives rise to sharp protests. Their weak points were briefly noted above, and earlier in other articles we deal with this in greater detail. But in order to show this in a serious way one must evaluate the entire work as a whole, analyzing both the content and the form. To complain about Ash, who has little hairs growing where he shouldn’t, is simply ridiculous.<sup>11</sup>

Objectively, the position of the journal *On Guard* will drive the fellow-travelers away from the Soviet regime into the clutches of the Nepmen. The introduction of a “percentage quota,” as Comrade Lelevich is demanding, would lead, under the present conditions, to a situation where the fellow-travelers, whether freely or not, would begin to be pushed in the direction of the various Nepman private publishing houses, rather than collaborating with the Soviet regime. But such a literary policy would lead also to the isolation of the young writers and poets belonging to “October” and other similar circles. They would be isolated from the fellow-travelers, and from Western European literature as it is represented by its best figures. This process has already begun. The campaign against the “decadents” and “philistines” from “Smithy,” the dealing with LEF, and with the excessive glorification of “October” have led so far only to the widening of the gap between “October” and these organizations. Both LEF and “Smithy” in many ways do indeed evoke very serious objec-

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9. From Kamensky’s poem, “Æííããð” [The Juggler]. An example of “trans-sense language,” [çàóííúé ýçúê]. Trans.

tions. But objections are one thing, and letting them have it with the head of an ax is something else. Moreover, it is not difficult to see that for “October,” as well, the approach to art and to the writer practiced by the On Guard critics, leads to their literary death, for you can’t take one step forward if you approve of the critical methods adopted by the various Comrade Rodovs. If “October” doesn’t understand this, then soon they will understand, and they will be convinced in practice.

It is not true that the line being carried out by “certain editors” and various “highly educated, overly tolerant people” is confused, quickly changeable, etc. The Voronskys and others are fired upon only because our critics are not brave enough to name the “highly educated, overly tolerant people”; they are not brave enough to acknowledge that the higher party organs keep track of the line which the Voronskys carry out. This the Rodovs know all too well. Of course the party is not to blame for isolated slipups or blunders committed by the editors and “tolerant people.” And the Voronskys do not presume to be so bold as to claim that in this very complex and new sphere they have not made and are not continuing to make mistakes, blunders, and so forth. Far from pretending to be without sin, we nevertheless hope that the party will not follow after the Rodovs and Leleviches, who propose that when we are talking about the fellow-travelers, the heart of the matter is not so much quality as quantity, and that we have nothing else besides “October” which deserves the attention of communists.

Our literary disagreements cannot be forgotten when calling to mind the inner-party debates of the not-too-distant past about the specialists. The position of the Rodovs and Leleviches results from transferring these debates from the realm of the economy, military and administration into the realm of imaginative

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10. Comrade Chuzhak’s opinion of this work by V. Mayakovsky is extremely wrong, and shows only that Mayakovsky’s “practice” (and Aseev’s, too) differs greatly from Comrade Chuzhak’s theoretical outpourings, which are far more dubious than this “practice.”

11. As an illustration, we must consider for a moment in greater detail Comrade Volin’s criticism of Erenburg’s novel *The Life and Death of Nikolai Kurbov*. While filling his article, which deals in part with Erenburg’s novel, with his favorite quotations about how the writer depicts communists, Comrade Volin remains completely silent about the main hero of the novel, Nikolai Kurbov, if you don’t count his condescending remarks about his “rapturous love affair” with the counterrevolutionary Katya. This surprising silence about the main character is, however, quite understandable; Kurbov is an ascetic, a devotee, a man of great willpower, who understands the party as an enormous “dynamo,” as an organization of heroes like himself, as an organization which has set itself the goal of



literature, or, to be more precise, of literary policy. This false and inherently incorrect point of view is not the domain of a small literary group; it reflects the moods of wider circles within our party, and the party youth in particular. The negative and decadent traits in the works of some of the fellow-travelers (erotica, philistinism, ideological confusion and ignorance, etc.) strengthen and reinforce these moods. Indeed, demanding a percentage quota, open declarations that we are dealing not so much with quality as with quantity, groundless characterizations of the fellow-travelers, the reluctance to look in their works for any artistic truth, words about highly educated, overly permissive people, preaching that we must finally free ourselves from the “monuments” of the old art, neglecting the aesthetic evaluation, claims that bourgeois writers cannot adopt the point of view of the proletariat, or that petty-bourgeois writers might be useful in educating the worker—these and other similar propositions and views transfer the anti-specialist line into literary life. Nothing else can be stated, asserted or written by any comrade who applies our old arguments to the new, literary realm. He must write only in the same vein as the comrades from the journal *On Guard*. It would not be a bad thing at all, however, for our fellow-travelers, who are indifferent to politics but very mindful of Eros,

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rebuilding the world according to a mathematical formula, having fully crushed the psychology of “chickens” (“Chickens also want to live”). This is his tragedy. He is an individualist; in Erenburg’s novel there is no living, human, toiling mass, nor the warm, enormous, living, talking, misbehaving, suffering and celebrating conglomeration, in whose name the Communist Party struggles with the old world. Nor does this mass exist for Kurbov; with its own interests, pain, work and love of life, this mass brings the ideal of communism down to earth, gives it flesh and blood, makes it earthly, and links the “formula” to the “chicken,” the ideal to the real. Neither Kurbov nor the author feel this way. Therefore, with them socialism turns into a naked blueprint, where everything is carefully laid out, noted down, taken into account and weighed, where the formula devours real life. It is in this understanding of socialism where one must look for the “Achilles’ heel” of Erenburg’s novel. But such an approach to the novel does not give the critic the chance to focus his attention on digging up quotations. Moreover, with such an approach one must absolutely say that not only Ash and Kurbov, but many other communists, are portrayed by the author as ascetics, saints or heroes, and that is certainly not what Comrade Volin needs. The Kurbovs are very characteristic of those isolated individuals who come into the party from the milieu of the Zavalishins, overstrained, haggard, bent low by life, filled with an enormous hatred for the Zavalishins, but unable to understand that the party is not simply a guillotine, nor a dynamo, nor a formula, but a living, impassioned collective of people, welded together by the “intoxicating warmth” of life. If not for the maddening, somewhat dislocated manner of the author, the novel could have become a work of very high literary merit. But even in that form, it would be unspeakably distant from what Comrade Volin has said about it.

to take into account in their works these moods, which they have also had a hand in inspiring. There is a somewhat discernible shift in considering these moods, but that is still not enough.

The presence of the peculiarly anti-specialist tendencies in literature leads the Rodovs to try to use these tendencies in narrowly group and circle interests, in order to seize “the commanding heights.” They are trying to capture these “heights” by hook or by crook. A frontal attack on “Smithy” is launched; meanwhile they are not the least bit shy about classifying the “Smithy” writers as “decadents,” “philistines,” and so forth. We should call a conference, but “Smithy” gets in the way. Rapid fire and separate volleys are directed at removing from the commanding heights not only the Pilniaks, but also the Ivanovs; the same “zgara-amba” from LEF flutters about. Here the critics make allowances for nothing. Their severity is intemperate and insuperable. Here they fasten their unsleeping eye on every line, every sentence; they forgive nothing and everywhere they find a hidden attack against the proletariat. Meanwhile they remain silent about Chocolate [a novel by Tarasov-Rodionov]; they remain silent about the fact that the pages of the Komsomol newspaper contain foul language; they remain silent about the advocates of winged Eros, about the truly animistic vestiges which are offered under the guise of the latest communist consciousness; they remain silent over the fact that the prose and poetry there is often gray and boring. We won’t fall into hysterics over all this; mistakes are mistakes, and Young Guard on the whole is doing a good and useful job. We know how difficult it now is to serve on the literary front. But we cast legitimate doubts on the literary conscience of our judges. All this is then supplemented with mutual glorification and eulogizing. Evidently they feel that this hail-fellow-well-met attitude will lead to the creation of a “single party line.” If this attitude produces a bad impression on us, then later, a bit lower down in the ranks, the younger and more open comrades will lose all restraint in following the example of their elders. In issue no. 3–5 of *Znamia Rabfaka*, Comrade Platonov, a member of the “Young Guard” writers’ group, characterized this group in the following manner: “As for members, it (the group) consists of Comrades Aleksandr Bezymensky, Aleksandr Zharov, Artem Vesely, Sergei Malakhov, Aleksei Platonov, Simka Ogurtsov, Ginzburg, Mishka Golodny, Vanka Shubin ... and others.” Further. About Zharov: “In a number of poems Sashka was able,” and so forth. About Ogurtsov: “Simka Ogurtsov is our link with the revolutionary

village youth.” About Artem Vesely: “Artemka is a salty navy komsomolets.... Artemka writes well....” What does this resemble, comrades?!

There are talented young people in the group “October”: Yurii Libedinsky, Artem Vesely, Bezymensky, A. Makarov. It is fine if the Comrade Libedinskys and Artem Veselys take “the commanding heights.” But the literary policy of the Leleviches and Rodovs, demanding percentage quotas, working with the head of an ax, and praising without restraint, bring only harm to this group.

In addition to what we have said, their writings contain a great deal of simple Russian Asiaticism, the inability or unwillingness to pay attention to any useful cultural force. And yet we are amazingly poor, beggarly, wretched and ignorant. We have a devastated economy, the savagery and darkness of the forests and villages, the “yearning for the fields,” difficult, and sometimes nightmarish everyday life. Our cultured layer is extremely thin. We would have to be self-obsessed Narcissuses not to see or hear reality; if we insist on finally freeing ourselves from the art of the past; if we declare the Ivanovs to be useless to the party and the workers, or if we push them towards the NEP and show the resolve to remain with “October.”

## VI.

The statement that in their manner, method and approach to questions of art, the critics from the journal *On Guard* show in their own way a subjectivism which denies the objective elements in art, seems not to agree with a number of their declarations about reality as the necessary starting point for the works of proletarian writers. We deliberately left this question for the end of the article, so that along the way we could deal at greater length with certain urgent questions of modern-day literary life.

The journal *On Guard* writes enough about reality, everyday life, and the way people live. In an editorial article, for instance, they write: “It is necessary to put in one row both labor and the building of the proletariat, and in the artistic reflection of the struggle we must fully use our modern-day life, which is rich with heroism and our great epoch; closer to the living, concrete reality of today.” In other articles the authors always insist that we must pass from empty, abstract slogans to the depiction of living man, our everyday life, and so forth. Finally, in the declarations of the “October” group, they refer to the primacy of content, and about the way contemporary proletarian

literature must have as its basis “contemporary reality, the creator of which is the proletariat; there must also be the revolutionary romanticism of life and the struggle of the proletariat.”

The contradiction between these declarations and the statement about subjectivism is, however, only apparent. Our critics adopt not the standpoint of objective artistic cognition as the basic method in art, but the standpoint of using reality. Whether their employment of the word “using” was accidental or intentional, it provides an extremely accurate characterization of their position. To use reality, to take it as a starting point in no way means to place before art the task of cognizing life. The standpoint of “using” is a step forward compared to the theory of art for art’s sake, of art creating from itself, independently from life. The journal *On Guard* counterposes its position precisely to such art. But this standpoint is far from a step forward if one compares it to the theory of art as the cognition of life. Any propaganda piece, even the most tendentious and stereotypical work, “uses” reality. Every subjectivist uses reality if he simply believes that the artist doesn’t create his worlds out of nothing, like some biblical Jehovah. In all these and other analogous instances reality is only the starting point, but not the object which is studied from all sides. The primacy of content is stressed by our critics as opposed to the primacy of form, against excessive neologizing, against verbal acrobatics, against the elevation of form into a goal per se.

In full accord with this theory, they talk not about reality in general, but only about that reality “which is created by the proletariat.” The task, therefore, becomes much narrower, for the proletariat under the present conditions, insofar as it has not overthrown capitalism in the most important countries and states, is the creator of a very limited reality. Unfortunately, reality is created by the capitalists to an incomparably greater degree. And the task of the proletarian artist is by no means to depict only that reality which is created by the proletariat, but all contemporary reality taken in its entirety. The only thing needed is to see this reality with the eyes of a communist.

Furthermore, in what sense and how concretely do the critics and publicists of the journal envision this use of contemporary proletarian reality? “Now,” writes Comrade Averbakh, “we must show the Red Army soldier in his barracks, learning how to read. This is the most serious task assigned by the revolution. We must show the Komsomol member, fighting against homemade spirits in the name of the international unity of the proletariat; we must find the pathos

of the revolution in the clumsy correspondence of the worker-correspondent, addressing disorder at the factory.” In a sermon to “Smithy,” Comrade Ingulov quotes Bezymensky, who advises them to search for the revolution at the police department rather than in electropoems.

The contemporary artist must, of course, portray the revolution in the police department; he must depict the communist youth eradicating home-brew, and the Red Army soldier learning how to read. But this is only part of the assignment which the modern artist is called upon to fulfill. It is very good to talk about the revolution among the police, but I think that it would not be bad to portray the policeman who takes from the living and the dead, for at times both proletarian and non-proletarian reality groan from the activity of this policeman. It is becoming for the writer to tell about the communist youth who fights against home-brew, but it wouldn't be at all bad to show the type of battle which amounts to the destruction of home-brew by means of energetically gulping it down in healthy doses. We must proclaim the Red Army soldier who is learning how to read, but let the writer not forget about the Red Army man who returns home from the Red Army, and assimilates into the dark, illiterate and greed-filled village.

But unfortunately, we are not talking here only about how to portray such Red Army soldiers, communist youth or policemen. The matter is much deeper and more complex.

Not long ago Comrade Lenin wrote about our state apparatus:

Matters with our state apparatus are so pitiful, not to say repulsive, that we must begin to reconsider in earnest how to fight with its shortcomings, remembering that these deficiencies are rooted in a past, which, although turned inside out, has not been outlived, and it has not even receded into the stage of the culture which goes back to the distant past (“Better Fewer, But Better”).

Let us note that Comrade Lenin advances the struggle with these pitiful matters as an immediate task: “We must come to our senses in time.” In light of these statements, the above-mentioned policeman, who causes people to groan, takes on special significance. He is not an accident, but is bound up with all the deficiencies of our state apparatus.

Our state apparatus is pitiful. But our economy is rather pitiful also; and

our everyday life is also in bad shape. Alongside the joyful sprouts of the new, at every step we find lack of culture, ignorance, darkness, the inability to work, lack of discipline, Asiaticism, con men, bribe-takers, bureaucratism, and so forth. The dead seize upon the living.

Having received a peaceful breathing space, our party has been very consistent and determined in having turned and continuing to turn to the tasks of introducing culture. This is not an epoch of petty matters in the sense that some of our comrades sometimes think, because for us, revolutionaries, the main concern is not in petty or major matters, but in solving the problems presented by modern-day life, and solving them in the light and from the standpoint of the ideals of communism. Precisely because we never lose this thread, these general socialist perspectives, we are as far from the opportunists as heaven is from earth. For opportunists solve minor and major problems by proceeding from instance to instance, without guiding socialist principles, which they keep tucked away in their pocket to be pulled out only for parades, or for show.

So one of the most important tasks is the reorganization of the state apparatus, the reorganization of our everyday life, in short, a whole series of cultural matters. But Comrade Trotsky was right a hundred times over when he said: "In order to rebuild our everyday life, we must cognize it." Precisely. The basic task of modern art is to artistically cognize everyday life. That is why in the present article we have placed so much emphasis on the question of art as the objective cognition of life. Particularly now this aspect of art must be highlighted; for if we don't, our young literature will wander about in various "empyreans and ineffable wonderlands," it will lag behind life more than it should, it will degenerate into propaganda, self-glorification, into "using" reality for the gallant communards. By the way, we also now need the communards and revolutionary romanticism, but we need even more so the all-sided artistic cognition of life, both in its past forms which hang over us, and in its present forms. But the communards are also needed only when they are not reduced to forced clichés.

Art must help eradicate the old, outmoded way of life and inspire the new. This by no means excludes either the most unrestrained fantasy, or even more expansive artistic generalizations. One cannot reduce art to a narrow depiction of contemporary life. On the contrary, it is precisely the most wide-ranging and most profound reproduction of reality which, in the final analysis, yields the greatest good in the realm of practice. Gogol's *Sobakeviches* and *Manilovs*

have yet to lose their freshness, and yet they grew out of the depths of the old, aristocratic way of life. Everyday life, actuality, must be the author's starting point.

Despite the fact that the realistic slant now dominates in literature, today's art has no contact with contemporary life. We have fairly good stories and novellas about the partisans; something about the struggles of the Red Army, or about moods in the intelligentsia; tales about petty Nepmen, and about how difficult it was for the philistine to live, and how embittered he became, and how he went hungry. There is something about the provinces, something about the inner life of the Communist Party, and about the peasants in 1918. Treatment of the past, which was broken off by the revolution, has begun anew (M. Gorky, Mikhail Prishvin and others), but the major part of the most burning problems remains untouched. There is no light shed on the absolutely new living conditions of the worker, his life in the factory or at home with his family. What is new and young is presented in stereotypical form, which corresponds to well-established examples. Not so long ago we published Comrade Yakovlev's honestly written book, *The Village As It Is*. Where, when and how have our contemporary portrayals of everyday life tried to tell about the village the way Comrade Yakovlev has done? Until now the village we have been given is touched up, prettified. We have absolutely nothing about the Chichikovs, Manilovs, Sobakeviches who run the show in our state apparatus and in economic departments as rigorously as they did "in the good old days." We have almost nothing about the havoc of the modern family, about the new everyday routine which is developing here. Komarovism<sup>12</sup> and other everyday phenomena find their reflection only in the columns of fine print in our newspaper chronicles. There is nothing "about church affairs."

All these and similar tasks confronting literature are in the air, insistently demand to be resolved, and the young Russian Soviet literature has set out to do so. The guarantee lies in its healthy, firm tendency toward realism and even to naturalism. Art is conservative; it usually lags behind life and rarely anticipates it, but for our feelings and consciousness the artistic incarnation of the past, which seems to be a stage already passed, is and is perceived to be a series of new truths and discoveries.

If the critics from the journal *On Guard* had pointed to the fact that contemporary literature avoids the burning questions of our everyday lives, that it lags way behind life at times, they would have been right. But then they

would have better understood both the partiality of the “well-meaning” communists toward the fellow-travelers, and the difficulty and peculiarity of the tasks at hand. What is complicated and difficult is the fact that Soviet Russia is still a besieged camp, and that it may at any moment be attacked by a crafty and well-armed enemy; that thousands of hostile eyes follow its life; that our “breathing space” may in the end prove to be a very short one. We must therefore be extremely cautious and tactful. We must remind Erenburg and many other of the fellow-travelers about this. On the other hand, our everyday routine must be restructured, and in order to do this, we must cognize life, study it carefully, discover and be able to talk about not only what is positive, but about our wounds, about all that it is repulsive and distressing in our reality. From this point of view the methods of the criticism and the approach to the writer by the Comrade Rodovs and Leleviches—with their percentage quotas for the Ivanovs, with their struggle against “monuments,” with their criminal “indictments” which resemble those introduced above—can only hinder the wider posing of the tasks before contemporary proletarian and non-proletarian literature. We must call to order Pilniak, Erenburg, Brik and Nikitin, but we must not do this in such a way that the author might draw the conclusion that he cannot write about the muzhiks, who hold quite another opinion about the International than the communists, and so forth. While calling to order the Pilniaks and Nikitins, it would not be a bad idea to sometimes apply the same methods to ourselves, for we are often guilty of demanding propaganda, of fearing to look closely at life, of petty and ridiculous fault-finding, of mocking objections, etc.

Attempts to approach living man and life among the communards, to tell “about Brigade Commander Ivanov,” etc., have proven to be inauspicious. This is not life, but an imitation of it. With Tikhonov, who gave us all these “communards,” we find real live people. You see them and hear them. Here, on the contrary, we find wooden, stilted figures, written according to stereotypes. There isn’t even a hint of real live people here. This is not reality, but only the use of reality:

The dashing cavalryman,  
Plays checkers and wields his rifle,  
He’s just as good at speaking at meetings  
As he is at trick-riding ...



Not a single fresh characteristic. It is hackneyed, clichéd. I would hardly be mistaken in saying that someone from “October” thinks that he will exhaust the theme of contemporary living man with these dashing cavalrymen on wooden horses, conquering the wooden daughters of village priests. And we are not talking here only about talent, but, most of all, about the theory of “using.” Enough of using. It’s now time to switch to the genuine depiction of reality, when the author is not only a propagandist, but a person resembling the scientist who carefully studies a phenomenon. The reader doesn’t want any more books about wooden cavalrymen. Nor is he satisfied with the superficial portrayal of everyday life which we have been giving him. He wants to really “sink his teeth” into everyday life. Otherwise we are threatened with shallowness, and both the writer and the reader are so threatened. We already detect certain symptoms giving cause for reflection. The literary sensation is taking its own course, and in belles lettres, both in prose and poetry, we are witnessing a certain kind of stagnation, of marking time. Meanwhile the most popular type of literature being sold is the adventure story Tarzan and others. And let no one say that the Nepman and the philistine are creating the demand for such things. Our midlevel party worker is attracted by them.

Both the journal Red Virgin Soil and the writers’ collective “Krug” have set as their goal the artistic cognition of life. This is how they differ both from LEF and from the journal On Guard, and from many other publications.

## 1

G. V. Plekhanov once noted that a one-sided glance at things is also sometimes very useful. This is true. The views held by the comrades from the journal On Guard are very one-sided, but in their one-sidedness there is more harm than good, for their point of view hinders our immature literature from moving on to an all-sided grasp of reality. In addition to this, they have no real love of the literary word; it is nowhere to be felt in their journal. On Guard doesn’t sense, doesn’t understand that we have been given an amazing liter-

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12. Refers to Matvei Komarov, an author of the eighteenth century who wrote lowbrow literature [lubochnaia literatura] that circulated widely among barely literate peasants in the nineteenth century. His most popular works were “The Detailed and True Descriptions of the Life of the Glorious Russian Scoundrel, Vanka-Kain, and the French Scoundrel, Cartouche” (1779) and “The Tale of the Adventures of the English Milord George and the Brandenburg Markgravine Frederika Louisa” (1782).

ary heritage, and that on us, communists, lies the most serious responsibility. We are responsible for the type of literature that New Russia produces after Pushkin, Gogol and Tolstoy. That is why they are so categorical, why they so easily put people on trial and mete out punishment, why they so decisively throw overboard all, with the exception of "October," and why they are so busy with mutual self-proclamation.

That is their business. I am sure that the party will not follow them.