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On Proletarian Art and the Artistic Policy of Our Party

I.

AT FIRST GLANCE the question seems to be extremely simple. In the Soviet Republic there are three basic class groupings: the proletariat, which is in power, the intermediate layers of the petty bourgeoisie, and the remains of the shattered big bourgeoisie and nobility. Then there is literary art. In accordance with this class division, literature must also be divided into three basic categories: proletarian, petty-bourgeois and bourgeois-landowning. Since in Russia the proletariat is now in power, its literature must also be in power. Petty-bourgeois literature is admissible only to the extent that it draws closely toward proletarian literature and serves as an auxiliary detachment. We must wage a ruthless war of destruction against the literature of external and internal emigration; any other point of view in the final analysis plays into the hands of the enemies of the proletariat, and represents literary Menshevism and restorationism. Taken to the extreme it is confusion, eccentricity or naked aestheticism.

Despite their simplicity and lapidarian quality, similar views suffer from one serious deficiency: they don't take into account our concrete, real, social and literary milieu, and they are based on naked, abstract and simplified schemas. For the thousand and first time they demonstrate the simple truth that Marx's method in the hands of simplifiers can easily turn into primitive

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vulgarizing; that it is transformed from a refined analytical instrument into a club which can be swung around to the right and the left, but which has nothing in common with the painstaking work of the Marxist anatomist who deals with complex social phenomena.

To begin with, let us pause to examine a few general propositions which are more or less commonly acknowledged.

The working class came to power and continues to do so in a far different way than the bourgeoisie did in its own time. Both economically and culturally the bourgeoisie matured to a significant degree within the framework of feudal society. By its very position inside bourgeois society, the proletariat remains economically and culturally deprived. It is enslaved and enserfed, and deprived of the possibility of not only rising to a cultural level which is higher than that reached by the bourgeoisie, but it is given truly pitiful crumbs from the luxurious table of bourgeois culture. Therefore, when it overthrows the bourgeoisie and takes power into its own hands, one of the sharpest and most acute problems is the problem of assimilating the entire enormous sum of cultural achievements of past epochs. In order to reorganize society on new foundations, it must, before anything else, master the cultural heritage in science, art and other fields. Without doing this, it will not be able to strengthen and fortify its victory, it will not establish the socialist order. In illiterate, hungry, plundered, destitute and wooden Russia, with its remnants of Asiaticism and serfdom, we are ominously reminded of this at literally every step. We must also remember that the working class, which comprises an insignificant portion of the population here in Russia, has borne on its shoulders for the last six years the burden of bloody battle, repelling the furious attacks of its class enemy. We can say without any exaggeration that the entire mind of the proletariat, its entire will, has until now been devoted to this struggle. Now, while enjoying a questionable breathing space, the Russian worker has obtained a certain chance to engage in cultural work. He is rushing to use this opportunity by sending his young people to school, to the workers' programs, to the universities; he is instructing and preparing cadres of professors, teachers, engineers and technicians; he is trying to eliminate illiteracy and chase away the rural darkness. It is absolutely clear, however, that any self-deception in this endeavor is extremely harmful. There are many branches of cultural life which will be won quickly by the proletariat, and rather easily; others will be taken after a more prolonged siege, after setbacks and even serious defeats.

Finally, there are even branches that will demand a very long and unusually difficult struggle, with complex flanking movements and great flexibility, where a frontal assault will accomplish practically nothing at all, and at best will result in a few bumps. Science and art belong precisely to such branches. Science and art demand cultural skills, great cultural apprenticeship, long study, and cultural habits; this is often achieved only after generations, that is, it is not accomplished in years but in decades. Of course, it is not difficult to assimilate the general rudiments of science and art. But in order to move science and art forward, in order to be capable of scientific and artistic discoveries, what is needed besides talent is a great deal of sweat and nerves. Great preparation is required in the general cultural sense. There is no doubt that the ruling class will have to use the services of the scholars, engineers, and artists of the old bourgeois world for a long time to come. We must also not forget that among our Red Professors, even at the summit of the Communist Party, the intelligentsia dominates; that people who come from the petty-bourgeois rural and urban milieu are the dominant element in our institutes of higher learning; and, finally, that the layers of the old Russian intelligentsia will for a long time continue to give us the Pavlovs or Bekhterevs. This is facilitated by prolonged cultural training, and by the fact that these layers, as a general rule, don't take an active part in the struggle of the proletariat; they stand aside and have both the opportunity and the leisure time to observe and study. The Russian working class, meanwhile, even in relatively peaceful times, is compelled to devote the bulk of its energy to the solution of urgent tasks.

Under these conditions one of the main and most difficult tasks is for the ruling class to be able to assimilate, ideologically subordinate to itself, and politically and socially reeducate the enormous cadres of the intelligentsia, peasantry and middle class. Here any thoughtless rushing about, any undue haste will lead to no good, nor will mechanical measures achieve anything beneficial. If the party decrees—let the Red Professors occupy the center of the scientific world, and let the Pavlovs, their comrades, occupy secondary positions—this will produce nothing but nonsense and absurdities. However we have people who reason in approximately that way. In the realm of science, this leads to Enchmenism, and in the realm of art, the On-Guardists talk that way. It is of course true that our modern literature reflects the thoughts and feelings of the proletariat, intermediate layers and the bourgeoisie. What is wrong is that this schema is used without any further consideration of the

concrete circumstances in which our art is developing. Hence the schema becomes dry, stultifying, dead, naked and abstract.

In actual fact, if one proceeds from these preliminary general observations, which serve as only the outline of the extremely complex and colorful living literary design, to the latter, then matters become even more complex.

II.

Do we have any proletarian writers?

Yes, if by that name you mean writer-communists and people who come from the workers' milieu. We do have such writers.

There is one strange thing, however. There are several writers, who are undoubtedly proletarian, for whom this honorable and responsible title somehow doesn't quite apply: Lunacharsky, Serafimovich, Podyachev, Arosev, Kasatkin and others.

A poet of worker-peasant Russia, or a writer-communist is just fine, but a proletarian writer—here there is something unusual and it grates the ear. It grates not because one or another of them are not of proletarian origin, but for some other, totally different reason. According to the origin, the character and basic motifs of their writing, they—these writers—have, so to speak, “the full right” to be called proletarian no less than all the others. Nevertheless, they don't call themselves proletarian writers, nor do others call them that. It just isn't accepted.

In this issue there is no misunderstanding. Taken historically, the proletarian writer is not simply a writer-communist, nor simply a proletarian by origin, but chiefly a specific literary type which has emerged over the last several years. Meanwhile, we continually replace his living social and literary face with an abstract visage which is divorced from reality and constructed exclusively according to reason. What is not taken into account is that the proletarian writer has his own brief but instructive history; that we are not dealing with a proletarian writer in general, but with a writer possessing certain features, views, skills and a definite profile.

It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that one of the most essential of these features, which we cannot pass by, is the proletarian writer's overwhelming conviction, or feeling, that he is called upon primarily to overcome the art of past epochs. This art served the ruling classes, the bourgeoisie and the nobility;

it viewed, evaluated and cognized the world through the eyes of these classes. Therefore, it isn't appropriate for the proletarian artist. Of course, the proletarian writer is not against using the acquisitions of past centuries in the realm of art, or at least in words, but his heart is essentially distant from these verbal, feeble, and sometimes forced confessions, uttered for propriety's sake. His pathos, however, lies elsewhere: in creativity, in the production of new things as opposed to and independent of the elements of the old culture. He clears the place overgrown with the moss of the past, blows up the dead piles of rocks, lays the cornerstone in the foundations of a new socialist art, and raises this edifice. Past art, past culture.... The large majority of these dwellers in nooks and crannies (to use the apt turn of phrase suggested by Comrade Sanzhar) were outcasts of this art and culture. It wasn't for them, but against them. They were cheated out of their fair share, abandoned and deprived of everything. For them, the culture of the past showed its negative sides, but most importantly, they had no access to it, and, in order to evaluate a thing, you have to know it. Besides, it contained much that was alien, superfluous, unnecessary and hostile; it contained a mass of trinkets, knickknacks and absurdly amusing bonbonnières; it was outright dangerous, enervating, softening, decadent and tenacious with the grip of the dead which seizes the living at every step. Better a bit worse, but our own. The sooner we are done with the past, in which there is much that is harmful, the better off we'll be. Hence arises the task of emancipation from the heritage of the past. We have already heard their appeals: they recommend that we burn Raphael, and throw Pushkin overboard from the ship of modernity, or else study him in the way people go to museums to look at and study mummies, or tools and weapons of the Stone Age. All this is useful, but in an age of steam and electricity it belongs in a museum and presents exclusively historical interest. Of course, this is only what they write and say, whereas in actual fact it is often not difficult to catch a sense of concern. They are trying to convince us that they are talking about a mummy, but only because they are well aware that the mummy is essentially alive, i.e., is not a mummy, but something modern and contemporary.

There are grounds for their concerns. As we noted above, the working class comes to power, having been denied the opportunity in the past of mastering the cultural heritage. Naturally there is the danger that, having conquered physically, the working class will fall captive culturally to its enemy. In order to avoid or overcome this danger, there must be a major

sorting out, a careful review of the old cultural baggage.¹ In Soviet Russia, at the present stage of the revolution, the danger is increasing to an even greater extent because the NEP creates conditions for the rebirth of bourgeois ideology. Things, however, begin to go wrong when, instead of critically absorbing the cultural heritage, the tendency begins to dominate to create a new culture and a new art in opposition to the old culture and the old art, without seriously and fundamentally assimilating either one. That's the way it almost always is. People advocate the creation of a new proletarian art and culture in a milieu which never had the opportunity to master the past heritage and which is sometimes instinctively hostile to it. To advocate such policy is untimely and simply harmful. It is futile to try to convince a person by speaking about the potholes in bourgeois culture and by focusing his attention on the new proletarian culture and art if he is almost completely unfamiliar with this old culture and art. In the milieu of our Komsomol and Rabfak youth, it is sometimes much more difficult to advance the idea that it is necessary to assimilate the cultural heritage than to advocate a new proletarian culture and art. As a whole, our young people are "vigorously gnawing away at the granite of science with their young teeth." At the same time they are not at all opposed, or at least a considerable portion of them are not at all opposed, to entertaining doubts about the position stated by Comrades Lenin and Trotsky that the main task in the realm of mass cultural education lies in the assimilation of bourgeois culture by these masses. They feel like hurdling across this boring and gray prose of life into the realm of new socialist cultural construction as a counterweight to the old culture of the past. For this very reason our party and leading organs of the press never stop repeating our elementary cultural

1. What we mean by the critical assimilation of this "baggage" in the realm of literature—is not difficult to say. Take, for example, Gogol's *Dead Souls*. In Gogol's poem there are a number of reactionary moods dictated by the fact that Gogol supported serfdom. These moods and ideas distorted his artistic work, particularly in the second part, and drove the brilliant writer into an impasse. This must be shown and proven by clear and lively examples. But in showing and proving this, we must try to have our young people remember for all time Chichikov, Nozdrev, Sobakevich, Pliushkin and the others, so that they know how, on what basis, and why it was that they "multiplied in Russia"—what were the social and political causes behind the creation of such heroes. We must further demonstrate why it is that even now these types have a universally human quality, and are not limited to a narrow historical significance or bound to the life of those times. If, in the future, a new writer were to emerge from the intelligentsia who is able to give us the Sobakeviches and Nozdrevs of our time, he would be making a major contribution to society and to literature.

tasks. Such a point of view assumes great caution in the approach to science and art; it assumes consistency, moderation, circumspection, an attentive and careful attitude toward everything that has come to us from the past, and lastly a sharply critical attitude toward whatever bears the seal of new discoveries without a thorough assimilation of the old discoveries. Herein lies the source of the disagreement, the absence of contact between the party, the proletcultists and the circles of proletarian writers, for a significant portion of them, if not the majority, suffer from these “sins of youth.” They want to leap directly into a new art, by escaping or circumventing the old. They want to speak, shout and write in a deliberately new way, thereby violating the natural continuity of art; most importantly, let the new life, the new content or the new form be different from whatever existed previously. The demand for something new and fundamentally outstanding becomes self-sufficient. Of course, the artist must endeavor to discover new artistic truths. This is the meaning of all philosophy in the realm of art. But this is justified only to the extent that the artist is the master of what was done before him. Otherwise, one of two things happens: either the artist reinvents the wheel, which was long ago discovered, or he gets up on stilts and engages in innovation for the sake of innovation, making it a self-sufficient goal. In today’s proletarian literature it is not difficult to detect both tendencies. They tell us that in the past there was rot, decay, mummies, things that should be scrapped or put in a museum of antiquities. They direct our attention to the fact that as a counterweight to all that is old and decrepit we must engage in the creation of new proletarian things. Meanwhile they show us a ramshackle hovel and try to convince us that it is a new palace. They discover new prophets for us who, on the very next day, turn out not to be prophets at all. They try to convince us, as if we were small children, that this is no toy, but the real thing; that right here, in these poems, in this story, you can find a whole complex of the newest, freshest, most unexpected and wonderful discoveries, truths, achievements, and a gigantic leap from the traditional, habitual and familiar into the world of absolutely unknown poetic enchantments. The modest results are proclaimed from all the rooftops (and there are special heralds engaged in this), and so on, and so forth. We have, after all, read Lelevich: “We don’t renounce it [our literary heritage—A. V.] in the same way that Marx didn’t renounce the heritage of Hegel and the French materialists.” This is written in connection with the present state of proletarian literature. And he doesn’t even choke on his tongue! It would be much better

if he renounced everything altogether, for the reader, perhaps, would then be spared having to endure this boastful arrogance. After Marx, it might have been possible to speak of having surpassed Hegel, but with our proletarian literature there is not even a whiff of Marx.

Besides everything else, their arrogance is sustained by the idea that in principle the ideology of communist-writers is incomparably higher than the ideology which permeated the works of the old art. This is beyond any doubt, but the distinguishing feature of an artist is that he sees, hears and feels ideas. There is a generous distance between good ideology and its good artistic incarnation, even if one leaves aside other elements constituting art, which we will address below.

It should also not be forgotten that among the proletarian writers there are a number who are essentially indistinguishable from the average intermediate writers. They call themselves proletarian only because they are members of proletarian associations, and there are no small number of such writers: Neverov, Nizovoi, Novikov-Priboi, Volkov, Poletaev, Artamonov and others. They can be considered representatives of proletarian art to the same extent as V. Ivanov, Tikhonov, Malyshkin and writers like them.

On the other hand, the chase after new forms, language, rhythm and style often degenerates before our very eyes into something fancifully deliberate, far-fetched and overly refined, into the creation of trans-sense words, into tightrope walking, poetic somersaults and into affectation, as a result of which the poetic works are rendered almost inaccessible, and often become simply incomprehensible to wide circles of new readers. This is one of the sins of LEF, in particular, which also has pretensions to being the monopolist of communist art. Of course these qualities can be found among intermediate writers. It could be said that the impetus to engage in juggling words and images often comes from them. But it is precisely this dependence of the proletarian writers on the fellow-travelers, and their tendency to imitate them, which is indicative of our entire literary scene.

III.

Comrade Trotsky was absolutely justified in noting that great confusion has been introduced into the concept of proletarian culture and art. "In the epoch of dictatorship," he wrote, "there is no need to talk of creating a new

culture, that is, of construction on a great historical scale; moreover, the cultural construction, which cannot be compared with anything in the past, and which will begin when the need for the iron grip of the dictatorship falls away, will no longer have a class character. Hence we are required to draw the general conclusion that not only does no proletarian culture exist, but that it never will, and there is really no reason to regret this: the proletariat took power precisely in order to be done with class culture once and for all, and to pave the way for human culture” (Literature and Revolution). In accordance with this view, Comrade Trotsky never tires of pointing out that the task of the Communist Party in the transitional period consists in inculcating in the worker and peasant the fighting qualities necessary for their final victory over the bourgeoisie. With this in mind, one of the main tasks he sees is the assimilation by the masses of the elements of the old culture—in a critical way, of course. Among the proletarian writers one often finds the tendency to try and weaken the meaning of these propositions by pointing out that this is only Comrade Trotsky’s personal opinion. It is not difficult to show, however, that this is not so. Anyone who recalls Comrade Lenin’s last articles in the winter and the spring must admit their full agreement with Comrade Trotsky’s point of view. In the article, “Better Fewer, But Better,” Comrade Lenin wrote: “We involuntarily are inclined to become infused with this quality [doubt and skepticism—A. V.] with regard to those who too much and too readily hold forth, for instance, about ‘proletarian’ culture: for a start, we would be satisfied with genuine bourgeois culture; in the beginning, we can get by without the particularly pronounced forms of the cultures of the pre-bourgeois order, that is, of the cultures of officialdom, of serfdom, and so forth. In questions of culture, haste and impetuosity are most harmful. Many of our young writers and communists would do well to keep this in mind” (N. Lenin, Collected Works, vol. 18, part 2). And finally, it wouldn’t do any harm to recall the articles by Comrade Yakovlev in Pravda against our Proletcultism, which were read and approved at the time by Comrade Lenin.

The objections which are usually made in these matters are absolutely unconvincing. One of them can be reduced approximately to the following idea: the proletariat will approach non-class society, culture and art by means of dissolving the rest of society in itself. Its ideology, its world outlook will also become the ideology and world outlook of the whole society. In creating proletarian science and art today, the proletariat is creating the non-class,

universal human literature of future society; through class art, it moves toward simple, human, socialist art. Therefore those who now find themselves compelled to talk about proletarian art are correct.

All this is a complete muddle. The basic task of the transitional period is to make a fighter out of the worker, the peasant and the intellectual. He must love his friends and hate his enemies. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, blood for blood. He must have great love, and just as great hatred. He must create and sharpen his instruments of struggle and violence. And he is doing this. He is organizing his own state, his own Red Army and his own economic bodies primarily in order to win. In accordance with this, the cultural tasks in the transitional epoch must also be resolved in the spirit of these fundamental requirements. In the future socialist society the tasks will be different. They will begin to be replaced by peaceful, organic and broadly human ones. Socialist art of the future will also set different goals for itself. Of course, something from the epoch of the dictatorship of the proletariat will be included as an indispensable element in this art. But first of all something will also be included from the art of past centuries, and probably no small amount; secondly, socialist art will nevertheless differ qualitatively from the old art and from the art of our time.

“We have our own Sovnarkom, our own Sovnarkhoz. Why can’t we have our own Sovnarkoms and Sovnarkhozes in literature?” Here the confusion is, so to speak, palpable. The Sovnarkom and Sovnarkhoz are first of all fighting organs, organs of violence created to organize the victory of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie in a country where the proletariat has conquered, but is still surrounded by the enemy. In socialist society there will be neither Sovnarkoms nor Sovnarkhozes. The organs of the planned economy which will begin to exist then will to a very small degree resemble our Sovnarkhozes, and there will simply be no need for Sovnarkoms or any other instruments of violence. The analogy between proletarian art and the Sovnarkom or Sovnarkhoz is directed against those who try to connect the art of the transitional period to the art of socialism.

At times, and recently with great insistence, in speaking about proletarian art people have tried to give this concept a livelier and more contemporary content. They argue in this way: we are not talking about socialist, non-class art, but about proletarian art of the transitional period, that is, about art which tries to reflect the ideas and outlook of the new class. “Any literature is prole-

tarian which organizes the psyche and consciousness of the working class and the broad laboring masses to the benefit of the finite tasks of the proletariat” (platform of the group “October”). There is bourgeois literature, which looks at the world through the eyes of the bourgeois, there is the literature of intermediate layers; why shouldn’t there be literature which looks at the world through the eyes of the proletariat?

It is absolutely true that there are bourgeois and aristocratic writers. Their works reflect the ideology of these classes. There are working class writers, usually not workers, and their writings reflect the communist ideology of the proletariat. But that doesn’t mean in any way that we therefore have proletarian art. Let us take, for example, L. N. Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. In order to write such a work, there had to be other conditions besides the genius of the artist. The old aristocratic way of life and cultural structure had to exist and more or less have become firmly situated: aristocratic “nests,” estates outside Moscow, the palaces of Petersburg and the mansions of Moscow; house serfs, peasant serfs, aristocratic lords; quitrent, the whole aristocratic economic, political and family life, with all its “aromas” and customs. Above this structure, in the form of a superstructure, there arose a multifaceted complex of instinctive reactions and habits, followed by views, ethical norms, opinions, convictions, aesthetic tastes, scientific knowledge, beliefs, superstitions, doubts, and so forth. Andrei Bolkonsky, Pierre, Kutuzov, Denisov, Natasha and all the rest are born and bred by this milieu. They receive an upbringing, and assimilate the entire complex, organically interwoven system of instincts, knowledge, norms and tastes which dominate at that time. Here we are not talking about merely ideas, but about an entire interlinked and unique cultural complex. The artist dealt with an aristocratic culture which developed over centuries and reached completed form. The same could be said about bourgeois art. It is based upon the entire bourgeois culture of many centuries, and by culture we mean not only ideas, but the entire sum of developed instincts, habits, ways and means of thinking, ethical and aesthetic postulates, and so forth, plus the corresponding structures of economic and political life as a foundation.

How do things stand in the cultural realm for the proletariat? As noted above, the working class, especially in Russia, was a cultural outcast. The primary task during the epoch of dictatorship, therefore, is to be able to master the cultural heritage of the past. This means: we have no proletarian, communist culture and could not have it for the time being; the problem still remains of

assimilating the old culture. Insofar as we lack the multifaceted complex of instincts, skills and methods which inseparably go into the concept of culture, then we cannot put so-called modern proletarian art on the same level as bourgeois and aristocratic art, for the latter rests on centuries of culture, something that proletarian culture does not have. To put it another way: there is no proletarian art right now, and there cannot be as long as we stand before the task of assimilating the old culture and the old art. Here is what we do have: there is bourgeois culture and art, to which the proletariat has gained access for the first time. The bourgeoisie is now exerting all its strength, using all its cultural and other capabilities, to deprive the Russian worker of what he has won. To the extent that it can, art is also being used for that purpose. At the same time, there is the working class, and the Communist Party, striving to master this heritage for the final victory of the proletariat. Likewise, there are writer-communists. Their task should amount to mastering for this purpose the art of the past, thereby forging a weapon for the proletariat against the bourgeoisie out of the weapons the bourgeoisie uses against the proletariat. Much like in the Civil War, when the worker used artillery, machine guns, and tanks, without paying attention to the fact that they were a product of bourgeois society, the writer-communist must also use the old art in order to conquer. In actual fact, that is what is happening. What is called proletarian art is the former art, having, however, a special purpose: to be useful not to the bourgeoisie, but to the proletariat. Our proletarian art falls completely within the framework of this "antique realm." Most of all, each proletarian writer who understands his role must work on the basis and level of the artistic discoveries and achievement made previously. He is obliged to keep in mind always and unerringly the multifarious and rich content of the art of the past; he must know it and utilize it in order to "add something." He will not provide a single significant artistic generalization, not a single artistic type, not a single new image, if he ignores or forgets to take into account what the art of the past has given. It is impossible to write about today's peasant if you don't know Platon Karataev, Ivan Ermolaevich, or the peasants found in Chekhov. You cannot produce something valuable about today's Soviet police types, if you don't know Gogol, Uspensky, Shchedrin. You can't even approach the modern worker, or the modern communist, who had found almost no reflection in earlier literature, if you haven't absorbed a whole number of artistic incarnations of the past. You must know Shakespeare, Cervantes, Goethe, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and others.

In modern proletarian literature, for instance, it is not difficult at all to find the strongest dependence and continuity in this realm.

To go a step further. The proletarian writer uses old methods in working over artistic material. He turns to the modern reader, assuming the presence of the same cultural elements, skills, knowledge and ability to accept and perceive (fundamentally) which the reader in bourgeois society possessed. Modern innovations, “energetic word development,” stress patterns, the density of phrases, dynamism, liberation of rhyme, and so forth—all this is at best a series of innovations which differ in no way from those that occurred sometime in the past. No matter how significant or modern they may be, they are completely interwoven with the solid roots of the old art. What about the new content, and new world outlook? All the urbanism, industrialism, cosmism, and so forth, which the proletarian writer tries to employ in order to set himself apart from the art of the past, is simply a product of bourgeois urban culture, and doesn’t go beyond its limits. Here there is nothing that is fundamentally hostile to the old art. Modern proletarian poets and writers assiduously expunge their works of all demonism, forest sprites, house demons, angels, gods, clericalism and vulgar animism. And they are doing a good thing. But then in England we find the writer Wells. All of his wonderful science fiction comes from the dynamo, the airplane, chemistry and physics. Everything that our poets and writers are arguing about has already been done by this mechanized science fiction writer. Take the dynamism of city life.... In the stories of the American writer O. Henry there is so much of it that here, among the Russian city readers who have still not forgotten our quiet plains, forests and thickets, our heads spin from this carousel, from the cinematography, from the dazzling array of faces, street hubbub and noise. Call to mind other writers such as Verhaeren, Walt Whitman and Oscar Wilde, and combine their motifs with those of the modern proletarian poets and writers. Then it will not be hard to understand what are the basic artistic elements which go into modern proletarian creativity. What about the new feelings, new moods and new ideology which are maturing in the worker and belong only to him as opposed to the bourgeoisie and landowners? Such as collective unity, the spirit of discipline, proletarian solidarity, internationalism and the Marxist world outlook, etc.? Of course all this exists. But it is only the premise for a new culture, and consequently, for a new art, but it is not the new culture itself. We are still far away from that. Collectivism, internationalism and Marxism have existed and still exist in

the bowels of bourgeois society, but in that society what dominated and still dominates is bourgeois culture and art. The taking of power by the proletariat only gives the possibility for the latter to master this culture, adapting it (and its art) to its own internationalism, Marxism, and so forth. That is all. Internationalism, proletarian discipline and Marxism themselves are products of bourgeois society; they developed on the basis of the culture of this society. They will only enter into the culture of socialist society as elements; they will be reforged, and the resultant amalgam will be quite different, qualitatively different from these elements.

In short, we have no proletarian art in the sense in which bourgeois art exists. The attempt to present the contemporary art of the writer-proletarians and writer-communists as proletarian art, independent of and opposed to bourgeois art—on the grounds that these writers and poets reflect the ideas of communism in their works—is both naive and based on a misunderstanding. For in actual fact the best that we have is an art that is wholly, organically and consistently bound up with the old, an art which people try to adapt to the new demands of the transitional period of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Ideological slant doesn't change the situation at all, and doesn't justify the counterposition of this art to the art of the past, as an original cultural value and force. What is involved is a particular form of adaptation. Of course, the proletariat, bourgeois and petty bourgeois utilize art for different and often opposed ends, but this fact doesn't lead to the division of art, science and culture into three categories: bourgeois, proletarian and petty-bourgeois. For what we actually have for the time being is the culture, science and art of previous epochs. The man of the future social structure will create his own science, his own art and his own culture on the foundations of a new material base. For the time being, in the transitional period, particularly in Russia, "to start with we would be satisfied with genuine bourgeois culture."

People can and actually do say: our own, new, culture and way of life is being created. The basis for this is the new economics (nationalized industry, trusts, syndicates, and so forth), plus Soviets, the Red Army and the party. That is absolutely true. But what is also just as indisputable is Comrade Trotsky's statement: "In its foundations, the dictatorship of the proletariat is not the productive and cultural organization of a new society, but the revolutionary and military order which will fight for it" (*Literature and Revolution*). This "revolutionary and military order" in the cultural realm first gives the work-

ers the chance to master the science, technology and art of past epochs. It, the new order, presents the problem as the most urgent and fundamental. The new way of life, the new "Soviet" morality, new tastes, customs, methods of thinking, and so forth, are adapted to the requirements of this order. Under such circumstances, the tasks in the cultural realm are very difficult. They can be solved only through very stubborn and slow work. There are no instant means, nor could there be. You can't overthrow the "regime" here; that would be ridiculous, absurd, stupid and naive at best. However, that is how the question is sometimes posed: people demand a "workers' and peasants' government" in literature, in science, etc. Unfortunately, there are no magical and hasty measures which can be taken, and the Soviet regime is acting wisely when it injects the new worker and peasant youths with bourgeois science and culture, all the while making the appropriate selection and criticism. Our entire educational program is built upon that principle.

There is no doubt that our writer-communists and workers have already given something valuable in the artistic illumination of our transitional epoch. We have more than once pointed out what is valuable. The artistic significance of their works is acknowledged by such writers as Zamiatin. In one of his latest reviews he noted Kazin, Obradovich, Aleksandrovsky, Arosev, Libedinsky and Neverov. This list could be expanded. In recent months our party youths have noticeably begun to push ahead: Bezymensky, Svetlov, Malakhov and others. If they are not devoured and ruined by circle-oriented political intrigues and official optimism, our literature will become enriched by bold and fresh new voices. Nevertheless, all these unquestionable successes are the successes of the same old art which a significant portion of our proletarian writers shuns so strongly.

Of course, the "revolutionary and military order" of the transitional epoch isn't something closed, fixed or immutable. The order itself changes, and there are a number of stages in its own development; in every country, in the government which it has, there will be unique distinguishing characteristics and features. It is also without doubt that there are elements, too, of the "productive and cultural organization of a new society," in certain places and in certain ways, even now, even in such a backward country as Russia. It's quite possible that here is the way it will be: at a certain moment, on the foundations of the elements of a new material base (socialized production, cooperation, etc.), a corresponding cultural life will be created and begin to grow, and this

life will in turn make it possible for the new art of the transitional period to occupy an independent position with regard to the art of past epochs, having incorporated all the basic and necessary attainments of this past. This living dialectic of social development must never be allowed to slip from view.

However, “sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.” Right now we are still very far away from this situation. Despite the presence of “productive and cultural” elements in the military order of our transitional epoch, at the heart of this epoch lay not these elements, but very concrete ones, which are martial tasks. In any case, the path to an independent, new art lies now, in these days, in these years, primarily in the assimilation and mastery of the “heritage” which was denied the proletariat in the bowels of bourgeois society.

IV.

The situation is complicated by the very “Keep away from me!” which we wrote about earlier. For real, genuine socialist culture, we don’t have the corresponding material and cultural foundations. At the same time, in our proletarian literary circles the opinions that dominate are that the task of the proletarian writer is to have done with the old art as soon as possible (often even without any serious acquaintance with it) and to raise up on its ashes their own, proletarian artistic edifice. In advancing this idea, one part is vainly trying to catch the elusive bluebird of this socialist, proletarian art. Another, feeling that the sole distinguishing feature of art is the presence of communist views, doesn’t want to find anything but these views in works of art. It is natural that some, instead of artistically reproducing reality, fall into schematism and abstractionism. Instead of the real October Revolution they give some kind of planetary revolution; instead of real people who act in definite time and space, they create abstract, far-fetched schemas and symbols. Peasant-cottaged, wooden Russia is turned into one enormous factory, dynamo or hydroelectric station. The real features of the living contemporary world are dissolved, wiped away, and replaced by theoretical constructs in the spirit of what is ostensibly a new proletarian literature. Instead of the materialist world outlook, they preach cosmism, paving the way to the most mundane and retrograde anthropomorphism. Having emptied the revolution of its living matter and concrete content, the proletarian writer logically and psychologically cannot discern the entire complexity of its twists and turns,

potholes, curves and detours. He easily trips over these potholes, as happened during the days of NEP with some of the proletarian writers. The reasons for these and other literary wanderings must be sought, insofar as we are dealing with views and opinions, in this yearning for the bluebird of socialist art, in this Proletcultism. Until recent times, the poets of “Kuznitsa” [Smithy] were guilty of these shortcomings. It now seems that this is a stage they have passed through. The tasks posed before art by our days have so violently burst into this entire laboratory and experimental milieu that the writer must one way or another refashion himself in a more quotidian and life-oriented way.

A section of proletarian writers who have assimilated a number of Marxist postulates are behaving very boisterously. They have decided to incorporate them in their works, and assume that by doing this they have created proletarian art. They are in search of “ideology” and world outlook. All the rest interests them “to this or that extent,” and sometimes doesn’t interest them at all. Of course, communist ideology is a phenomenon of supreme importance, but we are dealing with works of art, and art is not a feuilleton, it is not a propaganda or agitational speech, and it is not a polemical article. It has its own methods and its own peculiar features. Since the essence of art is crossed out and only “ideology” remains, then what happens is that writers and their works are evaluated only according to this or that ideology; the artistic evaluation of a writer and his work is replaced by the evaluation of his ideology. On this basis, Gogol and Tolstoy would have to be recognized as deleterious writers, since one was an open defender of serfdom, and the other was a count. That is essentially what people are saying, sometimes in disguised form, or vaguely, or unclearly, and sometimes more or less openly. When it comes to the fellow-travelers, it is said absolutely candidly. We must admit that many fellow-travelers are not favorably inclined toward communism, and for that reason they are fellow-travelers. But in the artistic sense, this is the strongest wing of contemporary literature. We just have to name them: from the poets—Mayakovsky, Esenin, Aseev, Pasternak, N. Tikhonov, Oreshin, Vera Inber; and from the prose writers—B. Pilniak, V. Ivanov, Seifullina, N. Nikitin, Budantsev, Malyshkin, Babel, Kreptiukov, Yakovlev, Zozulia, Zoshchenko, Mikhail Kozyrev and others. From the pre-revolutionary writers—M. Gorky, A. Tolstoy, M. Prishvin, N. Nikandrov, M. Shaginian and others. These nonparty groups are working hard on the artistic depiction of the old and new ways of life. In essence, our proletarian writers, despite a certain independence in choosing and elaborating

certain themes, have not as a whole emerged from the stage of imitating one or another of these writers. These writers stand on the side of October, and some of them are spontaneous communists. The main thing is that, despite all their differences from the proletarian writers in views and opinions, both groups are working and writing—and it couldn't be otherwise—on the basis of the old art, the old heritage and the old culture, since as yet there is no other.

Meanwhile the demand is made to place proletarian literature in the center, and to allow the fellow-travelers to function as auxiliary detachments who are useless for the proletariat, but powerful in disorganizing the enemy. Our dashing subduers don't even raise the question about artistic value, about the relative weight of intermediate nonparty writers, or about whether the literature of proletarian writers has the artistic qualifications to stand in the center. For them, one thing is clear: when it comes to communism, the fellow-travelers are in an unfavorable position, therefore the question is unequivocally decided. In order to leave no doubts about whether the proletarian writers are able to occupy center stage, the following is usually done. The artistic successes among the members of a given circle (successes which are sometimes significant, sometimes mediocre, and sometimes very questionable) are exaggerated to the fullest, whereas they try to discredit the fellow-travelers, to overemphasize one of their negative sides while ignoring all that is positive, valuable, interesting and substantial. We have already written about this problem and it is not worth returning to now. However, it doesn't hurt to stress that this entire literary campaign has assumed the character of badgering not only a number of nonparty writers, but also those communists who are considered to be guilty of tolerating or shielding them. Petty political intrigue has been introduced into literature, circles are hastily cobbled together, people are expelled or excommunicated, obscurantism is fostered and such an anti-literary atmosphere is created that it is becoming hard for a writer to breathe. Intermediate writers are slighted as second- or third-class citizens, and not only in individual cases, but as a whole. It is as if people were deliberately trying to erect a wall between the Soviet regime, the ruling party and proletarian writers on one side, and these groups on the other. The problem has become so sharp that the party, if only in the form of its ruling bodies, indeed must speak out decisively.

We must first of all state clearly that the line adopted by the comrades who have launched a campaign against fellow-travelers, supposedly in the name of defending the rights of proletarian literature (both from a social and literary standpoint), brings nothing and will bring nothing but harm. In essence, we are not talking about proletarian writers in general, who are supposedly oppressed so readily by those who indulge the fellow-travelers, but about proletarian writers of a special type and frame of mind. Demian Bedny, Serafimovich, S. Podyachev, Kasatkin, Arosev, Semionov, Libedinsky, Kazin and many others already have long since occupied "center stage," and they truly cannot complain about being impeded. What is demanded is that the party recognize the leading significance of those groups and literary circles who feel that they have been called upon to lay the foundation for and build the new, socialist, proletarian art in opposition to the old. Since the surviving "old men" (M. Gorky, A. Tolstoy and others) and the fellow-travelers have not set themselves such a goal, and remain a living link between the past and the present, then the demand to put an end to their "domination" becomes quite understandable. In our opinion, the party cannot adopt such a position. It cannot make concessions to the bombastic, oftentimes semi-ignorant and always light-minded promises and proclamations on the theme of proletarian culture and art, when the corresponding material and intellectual basis of such culture and art does not and could not exist. It will not indulge the wandering around in abstractions rather than the resolution of genuine cultural and artistic problems of our time. The party cannot create a theory of proletarian art, proposed self-assuredly as a replacement for and in opposition to the old art, precisely when the issues are the assimilation of this "antiquity" and continuity. And the party must not recognize this theory as the official line of the party. Meanwhile this is exactly what the people have in mind who are demanding a single party line, if we discard the personal and group demands and insults. On the contrary, the party must carry out a stubborn struggle, mainly among the ranks of the young, and give a sharp rebuff to these and other loudmouthed and boastful moods. Until now the party has done this. And since it has done so, it is natural that there has not been and could not have been contact between the party and such literary circles. This partially explains the complaints from circles of proletarian writers about how the party isn't paying them enough attention, how they are in disfavor, and out in the cold; how a permanent lack of understanding and disdain for proletarian prose and

poetry has become established in the party ranks. In actual fact, this has not been the case. Despite their search for bluebirds, the proletarian writers have fairly often lowered themselves down to this sinful earth and given us simple and excellent things. To the degree that they have been in keeping with the epoch and our days, and, of course, to the extent that they show talent, they have been supported both materially and morally. We don't want to say that all is fine here, but they have not been intentionally kept down or passed over in silence. Proletarian circles and associations enjoy both the attention and support of the party.

When it comes to the fellow-travelers, the ruling circles of our party have also generally stood on good ground. If the proletarian writers have their own individual and valuable contributions, and their own shortcomings, then the group of nonparty writers who are closest to them also have their strong and weak sides. Their weak side is undoubtedly the ideological jumble and confusion in their works, but then they were the first to firmly undertake a depiction of revolutionary life, and they have given us a number of valuable types, pictures, sketches, and so forth, despite their ideological instability. Artistically, I repeat, this is the largest and most talented group. Both the proletarian writers and the intermediate artists—given all the differences in their ideological coloring—have been writing and continue to write within the framework of the old art. Both have contributed, in their own way, the results of their labors to the general literary scene. To make a vulgar and schematic balance sheet, it could be said: the communist-writers have concentrated their attention on the life of the Communist Party, on the communist youth, and on literary agitation at the same time as the nonparty Soviet writers have chosen as their themes the peasant, the urban petty bourgeois, our backwaters, and our provinces during the years of the revolution. Therefore it is both difficult and incorrect to compare from this standpoint the literary work of one camp with the achievements of the other. Each of the two basic groups has its own field of endeavor, its own favorite themes, its own shortcomings and its own merits. Without giving preferential treatment to one or the other, the party has taken into account the real state of affairs in literary life and has made the corresponding orientation. If, at the present moment, people are demanding quotas for the fellow-travelers, engaging in squabbles, stirring things up and badgering their opponents, then we must first of all understand the source of all these literary arguments. People demand ideological purity from nonparty

writers. We must firmly and decisively straighten out the political line of many of these writers, but we must never forget that we cannot demand communist ideology, let alone clearly defined and consistent communist ideology, from a nonparty artist. We have already noted which ideological misconceptions lead to such demands from the strictest adherents of literary morals. Theoretically, they are explained by the fact that they reduce all art to ideology and actually see nothing else but that. Practically, we have before us the clear vestiges of war communism in the guise of anti-specialist moods, transposed into the realm of literature. Since as a whole our party has outgrown these moods, then objectively the demands of the simplifiers and vulgarizers leads them into conflict with Comrades Trotsky, Lunacharsky, Bukharin, Meshcheriakov, Steklov and others. The On-Guardists conduct their work primarily among the youth, in a milieu which is rather unsteady and ideologically unstable. Here all the abstractions about socialist art and about the harm done by the fellow-travelers, all the oversimplifications and revolutionary phraseology, might well find themselves a receptive audience.

Under these conditions, demands to place proletarian literature “at center stage” in actual fact mean handing over the “commanding heights” to a peculiar breed of literary Enchmenists. We therefore must not only reject such pretensions, but launch an offensive among the youth against this oversimplifying and vulgarizing, which has already done enough damage to our literary life and has already managed to take the squabbling to great extremes. Instead of “producing things” they are conducting purges, voting on resolutions, and exploiting drunken scandals (the Esenin affair). Today LEF is described as a counterrevolutionary and gloomy offspring of hell; tomorrow they will cobble together an alliance, and the surprised citizens will be told that LEF (meaning Mayakovsky) has mended its ways under the influence of articles written by Rodov, if not by someone else. In general, the On-Guardists have recently come to their senses a bit, it seems, having noticed, at long last, that you cannot conduct a “single party line” amidst squabbles, expulsions and persecution, even if you unleash various Tarasov-Rodionovs for such purposes. Besides LEF, they are flirting with “Kuznitsa” and the fellow-travelers, which is undoubtedly facilitated by the internal disintegration of the “October” group. In all this there is of course a great deal of “tactics,” and the new position of these critics should most likely be seen as a camouflaged On-Guardist position, slightly smoothed out and slicked down.

Besides a decisive ideological offensive against this literary vulgarization in our press, journals and youth circles, other organizational measures must be taken. Without in the least bit infringing upon the independence of the presently existing proletarian groups and circles, we should acknowledge the desirability of uniting the writer-communists and those who are sympathetic on a wider basis than now exists. Instead of confused theories about proletarian culture and art, the basis of such a unification should be the cultural program under which the work of our party as a whole is being conducted. Such an association would include in its ranks, besides the existing circles which could maintain their independence, a number of writer-communists who do not belong to the circles and associations which advocate the creation of proletarian art. At the same time, significant cadres of fellow-travelers would undoubtedly take an active part in such an alliance. In large measure, this would purify the stuffy hothouse atmosphere in the literary circles, and would also make our literary life a lot healthier in general.

In summing up everything we have said on the problem of proletarian art and our literary policy, we can turn to the formulation provided by Comrade Trotsky: "Our policy in art during the transitional period can and should be directed at making it easier for various artistic groups and tendencies who have taken the side of the revolution to fully assimilate its historical meaning and, after presenting them with one categorical criterion—for the revolution or against it—to give them full freedom in the realm of artistic self-determination" (L. Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, p. 9).

This is the line that has been conducted so far. And there are no grounds for revising it, for it is the only correct line.

We must make a few comments about our political censorship. In this realm, far from everything is as it should be. The On-Guardist tendency of going too far extended rather deep roots in this area long before it published its "literary" articles in the journal *On Guard*. No small number of anecdotal episodes and misunderstandings have piled up, but the misfortune lies not only there. Political censorship in literature is in general something very complex, responsible and very difficult, and it demands great firmness, but also elasticity, caution and understanding. We have no shortage of firmness. But when it comes to elasticity and other similar qualities the situation is rather dismal, to say no more. First of all, our comrade censors must stop interfering in the purely artistic evaluation of a work, and then they must understand that you

cannot demand communist ideology, much less clearly defined communist ideology, from nonparty, intermediate writers. They shouldn't argue over trifles, and must, to the fullest extent possible, avoid narrow subjectivism in their approach to the artist. They must limit themselves to one demand: that a work not be counterrevolutionary; and they must not detect a counterrevolutionary spirit in a writer's particular deviations from the norm, in the depiction of the dark sides of Soviet life, and so forth.

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As a Post Scriptum.

One of the devices which people are resorting to rather frequently is to assert that attention is not being paid to the proletarian writers, that they are being kept down, and that their material conditions are terrible at a time when the dubious nonparty writers, who sometimes openly slander the revolution, are flourishing when it comes to literary and material considerations. It is true that we have such journals as *Red Virgin Soil* which allocate space mainly to M. Gorky, Vsevolod Ivanov, N. Tikhonov, M. Prishvin and others. But this is because Gorky, and Vsevolod Ivanov and M. Prishvin remain great masters of the written word, they remind the new writer what genuine mastery is, and they are doing great cultural work. It is possible to disagree in the evaluation of this or that particular writer, but to whine about their domination is unwise and inappropriate. Here there is nothing being done deliberately. We must proceed from the concrete, from what, in the given literary year, is artistically the most valuable and at the same time most acceptable. You can be or remain unsatisfied, but that, once again, is another question—the question of the given level or state of modern literature and of individual evaluations. What did literature give this last year that was noteworthy from proletarian prose and poetry? Yuri Libedinsky's *One Week*, F. Gladkov's *Horse of Fire*, Neverov's *Tashkent—the Grain City*, Novikov-Priboi's *Heroes*, Arosev's short stories, Bezymensky's poetry, perhaps something else less noteworthy. The majority of this was either published or reprinted by those who are “overly permissive.” On the other hand, look what was published during the same period in *Young Guard*, which the journal *On Guard* depicts as the only journal which doesn't allow “everyone.” Isn't it clear that it is very easy to holler that someone isn't being allowed somewhere, but it is something quite different when the simple,

direct, but ticklish question is asked about things which have actually been written and about artistic successes which have been achieved. We, for our own part, will say that what was published in *Young Guard* explains why the Gorkys and Prishvins, Vsevolod Ivanovs and Pilniaks find their place in *Red Virgin Soil*. We have before us, so to speak, a rather graphic illustration. We hope to demonstrate this in the next several issues.

Leaving these questions aside, however, as individual questions, let us be bold enough to say that the manuscripts of the proletarian writers which have artistic and social value are finding their way to the reader. Let someone show us which interesting manuscripts, which stories, novels, etc., produced by the proletarian writers have been left to gather dust. On the contrary, our publishers are very frequently very lenient toward many things simply because they belong to a proletarian writer or poet. It would not be difficult to provide examples should this be necessary. By the way, it should be noted that it is precisely with the intermediate writers that no small number of manuscripts have piled up, with which they wander about from month to month without any results. This is happening not because a given work is counterrevolutionary or devoid of talent, but for absolutely other reasons. We have almost no private publishing houses, and the ones that we do have are eking out a miserable existence. Meanwhile there is a significant group of writers whose things "are inappropriate" for our Soviet publishers, not because of political reasons, but because of their peculiar structure, content, manner, etc. In such cases, the writer is told without any diplomacy: "It's not bad, it should be published, but nevertheless it doesn't really ... somehow, in general ... really suit us."²

In general, the proletarian writers cannot complain about being ignored in reviews and articles, or about an unfavorable bias directed against them.

The material situation for the modern writer is extremely difficult. The proletarian writers find it difficult to survive, but it is no less difficult for the fellow-travelers. However those who are "overly permissive" have nothing to do with this. In order to improve the situation, we need a whole system of measures on a Soviet scale, starting with royalties, which are often miserly, and continuing right up to the housing question, which for the profession of the artist is often a problem of decisive significance.

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2. By the way, rumors are continuously spread that enormous sums are spent on supporting the “fellow-travelers,” and they are paid extremely high royalties. Often people nod their heads in the direction of Krug when they spread such rumors. These and other claims do not correspond to reality. Krug pays less than Gosizdat, since there are no face-value advances. The “sums” received by Krug are small (they total no more than forty thousand rubles). Krug has published N. Liashko, Arosev, P. Nizovoi, Novikov-Priboi, Kazin, and other “prolet-” writers. And we aren’t talking about the inexpensive series of works put out in the Krug Library: there, the majority of writers are communists.