

Victor Serge

Is a proletarian literature possible?*

In 1921, with the introduction of *Nep*, the Russian civil war ended. A move by Lenin scuttled the chaotic peasant revolt which followed the Kronstadt, Tambov, and Volga uprisings. That same year was the year of the great famine. Wrangel was still holding out in the Crimea but, by the end of the year, peace was in the air and the beginnings of a literary renaissance as well.

“Never have we had so many and such promising young writers,” Maxim Gorky said later. I have already described this new generation of Russian writers in various articles for *Clarté*. *The Serapion Brothers*, a literary group speaking for peasant Russia (Boris Pilniak, Vsevolod Ivanov, A. Yakovlev, N. Nikitin, N. Tikhonov), was beginning to make itself heard at the same time as the young proletarian writers. In June 1923, the appearance of the review *On Guard (Na Postu)* in Moscow initiated a surprisingly vigorous struggle for a proletarian literature.

This was only a renewal of the attack however. During the heroic years 1918-21, at the height of the civil war and intervention, the *proletcults* had battled for a proletarian culture, founding circles in the smallest towns, covering city walls with posters, producing poets, putting on plays, elaborating theories, setting up courses, and even founding an international committee which lived out its allotted day.

This grandiose program was premature, and it was recognized as a failure. After all, what cultural work could be expected when every committed party member lived on 200 grams of black bread a day, plus three dried herring a week? Nevertheless the *proletcults* had formed the young poets Alexandrovsky, Kirilov, Vassily Kazin, and

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Obradovitch, and their efforts were highly useful. It is a great thing when social war activists can give some thought to culture.

Such is the creative capacity of the Russian people that, after one year of peace, an entirely new literature emerged. It was a revolutionary literature, of course, but full of ambiguities and quick to change direction. Oriented sometimes toward mysticism, toward a kind of neo-nationalism, or even more often toward bourgeois thought, it was neither proletarian nor Communist. This was a surprise. Communist writers, still under the influence of other recent battles, immediately attacked the tendencies in this new work. The review *On Guard* was their organ.¹

This was one of the best and most characteristic of the Russian reviews, irreproachable in presentation, easy to read, and rigorously consistent in ideological stance. Its claim was, in a word, to “bolshevize” the new literature. Volumes 2 and 3 carried the following lines on the flyleaf: “In literature we declare war without quarter on calumnious petit-bourgeois deformations of the revolution; we will denounce untiringly any petit-bourgeois literary deviations in our midst; we will found and defend a proletarian literature, for this is the only way to continue our party’s glorious tradition.” Another declaration specified further that the review “aimed at a Marxist-revolutionary criticism of contemporary literature” and “a merciless struggle against literary tendencies which, either openly or under a revolutionary guise, were inspired by reactionary ideas.”

This was stating the problem with useful clarity and brutality. The time had come to shatter entrenched ideas, especially those of inveterate bourgeois hypocrisy, such as the ancient lie of art for art’s sake when true intellectual culture is restricted to the propertied classes; the old ideology which separates thought and literature from politics when no one can escape his social class and our entire baggage of ideas and words belongs to a society in which labor and production are the dominant laws; and the idea prevalent in the democracies of

¹Published under the direction of Boris Volin, G. Lelevitch, Semyon Rodov, with the collaboration of L. Auerbach, L. Sosnovsky, I. Vardin, Yu. Lebedinsky, A. Tarasov-Rodionov, and others.

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the intellectual hovering above the class struggle on wings of printed paper. These deceptions may last for a long time in decadent Europe; on soil reclaimed by the Revolution they should be totally unmasked.

A characteristic of these post-revolutionary Russian writers, however, was to avoid committing themselves. "If Russia evolves toward bourgeois democracy," I wrote two years ago in *Clarté*, "in ten years they will become perfect *gens de lettres*. If Russia approaches socialism, they will become Communist writers. They will drift with the tide." And the Communist Zorin told me, "You're right. Only, in the first case, it wouldn't take ten years; ten weeks would do it." When Communist writers attacked the equivocal ideology of Pilniak, the most representative of them, there erupted the literary counterpart of the current class struggle in Russia.

On Guard was a review of demolition and savage attack, as well as of criticism. No one was spared. Here Sosnosky defined Gorky as "the ex-falcon turned hedgehog" for his continual bitterness and obstinate defense of the old intellectuals. With complete justification the review condemned "the poetic counterrevolution" of the poet Maximilian Voloshin. Pilniak, Ehrenburg, and Nikitin were called calumniators of the Revolution. Mayakovsky came under heavy fire for his claims of a proletarian Futurism, Alexandra Kollantai for her novels on free love, Lunatcharsky for his theater, and the directors of the State Library for their clumsy editing. It published a kind of small anthology of "mutual attacks by Bolsheviks" which is a joy to read.

There are some critical studies in this review which seem to me hardly models of the style, among them, G. Lélévitch's Marxist analysis of Anna Akhmatova's love poetry from a class point of view. I note also Lebedinsky's vigorous study on "The Writer's Personality."

While this movement had strong points, it showed the reverse side of the coin as well. Sound and legitimate claims were carried to flagrant extremes. Criticism by lampoon became niggling at times, and the debate shrank in on itself. Dishearteningly oversimplified articles were published (Yu. Lebedinsky's "Subjects Awaiting Authors," for instance). The polemic against A. Voronsky, director of *Krasnaya Nov* and an old Communist writer who had contributed a

great deal to the 1922 literary renaissance, grew as acrimonious as a strictly political one.

At last the Moscow Association of Proletarian Writers joined with *On Guard* to insist that the party intervene and set up a kind of “literary protectionism.” It proposed with great pride “an artistic program, ideological in form and content, on which the future development of proletarian literature would be based.”² *On Guard* demanded that the party undertake “the rational and tactical leadership in art,” while the Association defined proletarian literature by its “Marxist-revolutionary world-view” which placed it “at the antipodes of bourgeois literature.”

Here we come to the heart of the debate. The answers to this tendency which make the most sense seem to have come from N. Bukharin, whom no one could suspect of approving, even in literature, the laissez-faire attitude of old-style liberalism. “We should have a peasant literature,” he said, as well he might, since peasants constitute ninety-five percent of the country’s population. Also, “Don’t forget that the cultural problem differs from the military problem in that it cannot be resolved by mechanical violence.” Proletarian literature should assert itself by criticism and competition, not by restrictive measures against its rivals. “We must recognize that our proletarian writers should write works instead of theses.” One work of art is more convincing than twenty platforms. And again, “Abandoning free competition is the best way to kill the young proletarian literature.”

The Pilniaks and the Vsevolod Ivanovs, interpreting rural Russia’s hesitations and confused thinking, should not be “beaten over the head” – at least not exclusively. It is better to influence them, to win them over if possible. Finally, Bukharin pointed out the danger of modeling writers’ organizations on the party and the army. A multiplicity of groups and tendencies is necessary to liberty in the field of artistic creation, he felt, and the party should give Communists only directives of the widest latitude.

In the propositions submitted to the R.C.P. Central Committee

²Platform of the first conference of the Moscow Association of Proletarian Writers, 1923.

in the spring of 1924, A. Voronsky drew attention to a crisis in Russian literature due mainly to the *Nep*. He reproached the proletarian literature in the reviews *October* and *The Young Guard* for wallowing in "holy imagery," "official optimism," and "bureaucratic clichés." The romantic view of the Revolution, still ardent two years before, had declined. Bohemia returned with commerce. "We have lost one of our most talented poets," wrote Voronsky of Serge Esenin, "corrupted under our very eyes by Bohemian life." Young writers have a hard life: young proletarian writers were suffering from the contrast between what they hoped for and what the *Nep* offered. They were working in great physical misery. The suicide of one of them, N. Kuznetsov, drove home the meaning of many of the poems. B., for instance, noted simply:

Over there ballerinas dance
And hearts are filled with violets!
While I freeze in front of the window,
Clenching my fists, clenching my fists.

Volumes 1 and 2 (May and August 1924) of *October*, the review of the Moscow Association of Proletarian Writers, have appeared. Where the criticism produced by proletarian writers in *On Guard* seemed well-realized, here their work appears weak. On the other hand the poems are good (Ivan Doronin's "At War," Bezymensky's "The War of the Stages," A. Gvozdev's "Fragments on the War"). The romantic view of the war which poets still hold is obvious in the topics themselves. They cannot restrict or pare down their work, so the poems are long-winded, diffuse, and uneven, but they are lively and striking as well, with frequent flights of lyricism.

During the Revolution, as I noted earlier, poetry was much richer than prose. Here also the prose works are weak, too weak. A. Filipov's *At the Workbenches* rolls out an interminable story of factory life. With exasperating patience he has recorded several workers' remarks and gestures for a week, carefully eliminating, however, any swearing, rough language, crude jokes, or any of the recriminations which would certainly be heard in a country as ravaged as the Soviet

Union – in fact, almost everything that does not fit his preconception of workbench conversation. The story, in short, is as boring as an *image d'Epinal*. We mention it only because it is typical.

These really gifted writers are so hamstrung by their preconceptions and so theory-obsessed that, in the end, they can produce only flops. This work is not good proletarian literature because it is not good literature at all, in spite of a few successful pages. For instance, A. Tarasov-Rodionov, the author of *Chocolate*, a dramatic short story, attempted a great work (*Linev*) on the heroic year 1918 which was a total failure. The same thing is true for Yu. Lebedinsky who recently wrote *The Week*, one of the best works, if not the best, of the new Russian literature. *Tomorrow*, his novel on the revolution in Germany published in *The Young Guard*, was obviously so poor that even the author, with the greatest simplicity, agreed. The characters in these two novels are hopelessly stilted, made to order in a discussion on agitation and propaganda. In *Linev* there is a counterrevolutionary French officer imbued with the politico-economic principles of . . . Frédéric Bastiat. Now there certainly is no lack of counterrevolutionaries in France or anywhere, but I cannot imagine that Frédéric Bastiat is still exercising a decisive influence on them. Here we catch the writer in the act of creating literature from abstractions. He follows this simplistic line of reasoning: French, radical, middle class, liberal economy, Bastiat. The character is a labeled store dummy.

The Association of Proletarian Writers has issued a number of statements of justifiable condemnation. One attacks the exclusive cult of form promulgated by the “formalist” school, founded in Leningrad by V. Shklovski, Professor Eichenbaum, and others. Another censures the Futurists’ verbal acrobatics and the grandiloquence of *The Forge* (*Kuznitsa*), a proletarian group which has dreamed of a cosmic revolution, no less. But then the Association asks writers “not to imitate bourgeois art forms, but to surpass them to create new forms” and, in addition, to write only “monumental” works on proletarian life. These pronouncements make good points, but the best theories must be adapted to concrete reality with a certain amount of insight. In the

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immensity of rural Russia, where cities are islands of advanced civilization, would a young writer *from a workshop* be able to *surpass* the expertise of bourgeois art methods? Perhaps, in isolated cases, after fifteen years of struggle and with good luck. But does literary apprenticeship ever start with monumental work? It appears highly dangerous, in short, to subject a young man's first creative efforts to this kind of unadulterated theory.

On the other hand, there are certain great accomplishments recorded in *October*. You must know where to find them and how to read them. Hidden in the back pages under the modest heading of news, we discover, for instance, that the *October* group will soon publish a dozen booklets of verse. Just like that! And that the fifty workers in the Workers' Springtime group have been turning out "intensive work in the last period, having tackled 15 plays, 76 short stories, 261 poems and 20 lectures, in 96 evening meetings attended by 450 writers." Don't laugh at these laconic statistics. Remember that two-thirds of these workers walk in the winter snows of Russia with holes in their boots. They don't go to the café. They work and write with the lovely candor of children determined to grow up.

The Vagranka group in the Rogoysko-Simonovsky suburb of Moscow is made up of sixteen workers who write for the press. Perkati-Polé, an old Bolshevik writer, a forgotten man, blind and dirt poor, gathers them in his comfortless lodgings and teaches them how to get rhythm into their verse and prose. There are not enough chairs; they crouch in a circle on the floor. They arrive smelling of tar, machine oil, and metallic dust. Naturally the works of this little literary group are still very imperfect, but you must agree that even the appearance of this group is of cardinal importance and promises more for human culture than any exquisite literary salon in Paris. In Tsarytsin an association of unpublished proletarian writers includes a locksmith, a turner, a cook, and some laborers; neither Pierre Hamp nor Gorky would make fun of that. We know that the Soviet press for years has been encouraging initiative among its correspondents — workers, peasants, soldiers, and sailors. There are thousands of

them. In the backward countryside, obscurantism tracks them down and kills them. But we should be equally aware of a whole Russian Communist Youth literature, which includes remarkable poets like Bezymensky, Doronin, and A. Yarov, interesting prose writers like Seyfoulina and Artyom Vesioly, as well as critics and militants of unquestioned worth like Auerbach.

In a recent issue of *Literary News* M. Frédéric Lefebvre asked in an interview with the English novelist Swinnerton if it were possible for a poor man to get published in London. "It's practically impossible," the novelist answered, "for a man who is both poor and a provincial." In Moscow, Tsarytsin, Tver, or Tashkent, a poor man *can* get published. A carpenter or a ferryman can write for the daily newspaper of his province or the capital, certain of receiving encouragement if his work merits it.

This production of worker-correspondents, of little groups, of Communist Youth, this awakening of an entire people — imagine what fruit it will bear after fifteen years. Obviously Russian proletarians have already advanced beyond their brothers in the old cultivated Western countries. When a whole generation has matured in this atmosphere of work, conscious of the duty to conquer culture and capable of doing so in actual practice since it has won the class war, we will have in proletarian literature something powerfully new, built on foundations laid by Lenin's generation.

Under the category of literary accomplishments several names spring to mind. Demian Biedny is an inexhaustible creator of truculent popular poetry. The social criticism of masters of proletarian journalism like Sosnovsky and M. Koltsov pictures the living face of Russia today, not those factory stories written to fit an official ideal.

Do these beginnings and these prospects justify a delay in the arrival of a true proletarian culture? In *Literature and Revolution* L. D. Trotsky gives an answer to this much debated question which seems virtually definitive. Culture is the product of centuries. The dictatorship of the proletariat can only be a transitory period filled with struggle and hard work. Can it at the same time build a culture of its

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own? “There is some doubt of it since, during a revolution, destruction overbalances creation.”

But after victory? “The more stable the new regime, the greater the possibility of creative cultural work and the more the proletariat will dissolve into socialist society, shedding its class attributes, that is, ceasing to be the proletariat.” “The proletariat takes power with the precise intention of ending class culture forever and opening the way for human culture.”

This is exactly our assessment. The development of any intellectual culture presupposes normal production, fairly high technology, well-being, leisure, and time. The time factor will diminish in importance since the masses by collective effort will produce works of culture at a rate beyond all hopes. But the revolutionary period, the period of transition from capitalism, will last decades, perhaps half a century. Until then, the workers’ Republics will remain isolated strongholds in which the arts will take only the secondary place they now hold in capitalist society.

For Trotsky even the term “proletarian literature” is dangerous, since it “anticipates a fictitious future culture within the strict compass of the present.” We feel, however, that it corresponds to the transitional period’s hunger for new values. Many generations of workers may very possibly never know other times. More than anything they will have to fight; they will have to destroy and suffer enormously to remake the world. But like the armies of antiquity, they will have their bards, their story tellers, their musicians, and their philosophers. In order to conquer, the proletariat must be led by real thinkers and strategists who, like Marx and Lenin, have assimilated the essentials of modern culture. In short, the proletariat must have *its own* great intellectuals. It needs lesser ones as well, for the smaller but equally vital tasks. What is imperative is that both these groups serve it alone. Then the revolutionary work it accomplishes will have an intrinsic cultural value. In this historically limited sense, there will be, in fact there already is, a militant proletarian culture.

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