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October 1917: A Changing Landscape for
Peasant Literature. The Role of the Journal
Na postu

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Abstract – The article analyzes the role of the journal *Na Postu* in the complicated and in many ways conflictual transition from a peasant literature, in the 1930s declared as *kulak* literature, to the literature of *kolchoz*. The journal *Na postu* provided a forum for discussion and debate, at time heated, developing along lines which, in light of current knowledge and the concept of governmentality elaborated by M. Foucault, allow us to rework certain viewpoints that have proven inadequate to interpreting Soviet literature from the 1920s.

Keywords – Soviet Literature; Peasant Literature; Soviet Literary Criticism; Foucault; Governmentality.

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October 1917: A Changing Landscape for Peasant Literature. The Role of the Journal *Na postu*

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The consequences of the revolution of 1917 by the industrial proletariat and peasants were not long in coming. A significant turning point in post-revolutionary Russian culture came in the early 1920s with a clear delineation of the respective roles of the working and peasant classes.

Our contribution examines the initial reduction and subsequent exclusion of the peasantry from Soviet Russian culture in a complex period in which their weight and contribution to class struggle would be debated for years to come. The clearly negative bottom line dictated the exclusion of an entire current of thought and expression from the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian literary tradition and the imposition of a new, negative attitude towards the countryside, peasants, and their culture.

The proletarian literary journal *Na Postu* played a prominent role in the campaign to discredit *krest'ianskaia* or *derevenskaia literatura* (peasant or village literature), inflaming and actively contributing to debate on policies adopted by the government in the early post-revolutionary years. It thus gained the status of main interface for both government representatives and emerging authors. The strategies adopted by the journal testify to the different phases in the process of formation of socialist realism (Zalambani 150) and its spread as method to be applied in the choice of topics and communication styles. More generally, *Na Postu* identified, tested, and implemented an entire series of effective manipulative practices that proved to be useful in strengthening governmental action (Khestanov 123-128). In the early post-revolutionary years, in keeping with Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality, this action involved new realms beyond the state and guidelines accompanied by measures to lead, direct, and orient behavior of the subjects towards outcomes assumed to be desirable and opportune for the betterment of the people:

The art of governing will no longer lie in evoking an essence or maintaining faith, but in manipulating, maintaining, distributing, and reestablishing power relations in a competitive arena generating growing contention. (Laborier 171)

This was the arena in which *Na Postu* staked out its role.

But let us begin by describing what got its start as the least prestigious literary journal of the 1920s. The title: *Na Postu. Ezhebemesiachnyi literaturno-kriticheskiĭ zhurnal* (On guard. Monthly journal of literary criticism); the programmatic aim: «[...] our ranks are dominated by the most unpardonable disaccord, the most absurd confusion on literary questions. This must end» (*Na postu*, no. 1, 1923, p. 5). The editors were ready to extend this mission to other areas, as we read in a statement in the final issue, published at the time of the Resolution of 1925:¹

¹ On June 18, 1925, the political office of the central committee of the Russian Communist Party (of the Bolsheviks) issued the resolution *O politike partii v oblasti khudozhestvennoi literatury* which bridled the attacks of the so-called proletarian writers on the *poputchiki* and urged them to set aside a certain

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And if before we dealt solely with narrative, we are now forced, with our readers, to extend our criticism further afield as proletarian creativity ventures into other fields of art with the development of labor genres. [...] *Na Postu* is the organ of the history of orthodox Marxist art, propagator of the Bolshevik literary tradition. The cause of the cultural revolution goes on. In the struggle for proletarian art, we remain, as before, on guard. (*Na postu*, no. 1, 1925, pp. 7-8)

The six issues shared similar, orderly graphics. The characters with decorative serifs on the large, thick cover betray a certain pretense of refinement. It was scorned but feared, ambitiously termed *monthly* but in the end published at irregular intervals, often with long gaps – four issues in 1923, one in 1924, one in 1925 – and only apparently with a crowded editorial department. In addition to the chief editors Boris Volin, Grigory Lelevich, and Semën Rodov, the long list of contributors on the inside front cover included numerous critics, politicians, poets, and writers: Leopold Averbakh, Demyan Bednyj, Aleksandr Bezymensky, Mikhail Koltsov, Yuri Libedinsky, Pavel Lebedev-Polyansky, Karl Radek, *and others* (*Na postu*, no. 1, 1923, p. 5) But many of them never contributed anything, and many of those who did had already departed by the third issue.

Ridiculed in Sheshukov's monograph *Neistoye revniteli* (Sheshukov 1984), the members of *Na Postu* followed different paths, but some names remain etched into history for the roles they played in the following decades. We must at least mention Leopold Averbakh,² the cynical³ organizer of the 1929 defamation campaigns against Zamyatin, Pilnyak, and Platonov, who was executed by firing squad, probably in 1937, and Boris Volin,⁴ the first Party emissary to appear in the frontispiece of a dictionary, the *Tolkovyj slovar' russkogo iazyka*, edited by Ushakov. This was in 1928, after the first volume, already in the printing process, was withdrawn for ideological revision.

Exhibiting total allegiance to the dominant ideology, declaring themselves «combatants on the ideological and literary fronts» and «recruits of Communism», the *Na Postu* writers gave

'Communist conceit'. Because the Party saw in them the future ideological leaders of Soviet literature, it pushed them to fight in any way possible the superficiality and contempt for the cultural heritage of the past, as well as the specialists in the art of the word.

² Leopold Leonidovich Averbakh (1903-1937? Posthumously rehabilitated). He joined the Communist Party at the age of 17. At the age of 19 he became a writer for the journal *Molodaia Gvardiia* thanks to support from Trotsky. A writer for *Na Postu*, when the journal was disbanded, he founded *Na literaturnom Postu*. He was one of the founders of the RAPP and secretary general of VAPP. Co-author of the book on the construction of the White Sea–Baltic Sea canal by prisoners, and editor of the series *Istoriia fabrik i zavod* (History of factories and workshops).

³ We should not be surprised at Averbakh's ability, shared with many Party and cultural exponents, to conform to the dominant current, at this point Trotskyism. He was later a follower of Bukharin and finally a die-hard Stalinist. If at all, his cunning emerges in the nonchalance with which he accelerated the decline of *Na Postu* and took the reins, with the blessings of the Party, of the new journal *Na literaturnom Postu*.

⁴ Boris Michailovich Volin (1886-1957), defined by L. Fleishman as «one of the most sinister figures in Soviet literature». Party member since 1904, he earned a law degree in Moscow in 1917 and in 1918 joined the Moscow staff of *Pravda* while also sitting on several provincial executive committees. Recalled to Moscow in 1921, he went on to hold several important offices, indicating the trust placed in him by the government: he wrote for the newspaper *Vechernaia Moskva* (Moscow evening news) until 1924. He was one of the founders of *Na Postu* in 1923, a diplomat in France in 1924-25 and later director of the Vienna office of TASS. From 1927 to 1929 Volin was director of the press office of the Foreign Ministry, and lastly, starting in June 1931, the head of GLAVLIT (*Glavnoe Upravlenie po delam literatury i izdatel'stv* – General office for literary issues and publishing). In the years of the great purges, he was deputy director of the People's Education Commissariat. From 1936 to 1945 he wrote for the journal *Istoricheskii zhurnal* (History Journal). He became researcher at the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute of Moscow in 1945, and from 1946 to 1951 professor of Marxism and Leninism at the University of Moscow.

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life to the phenomenon of the first Soviet decade called, after the name of the journal, *napostovtvo* (on-guardism), crucible of theory and practice in which the RAPP (Rossiiskaia associaciia proletarskikh pisatelei – Russian Association of Proletarian Writers) was forged.

The resolution of June 18, 1925 titled *O politike partii v oblasti chudozhestvennoi literatury* (On Party policy in the field of literature) must unquestionably have aroused disconcertment and disappointment among the contributors to *Na Postu* – the *napostovtsy* –, but their reactions were short lived because duty was calling. And yet, there had been difficulties finding a publisher since 1924 because of growing conflicts with the Party (Clark 9), whom the *napostovtsy* accused of being excessively tolerant.

The publishing house *Novaia Moskva* has expressed the desire not to continue publishing our journal. Other publishers have also refused to host a “seditious” journal such as *Na Postu*. Consequently, there has been a pause in our activity. This is the superfluous and glaring proof that the Party’s political management of our publishing houses absolutely does not work. (*Na Postu*, no. 1, 1924, p. 27)

That notwithstanding, the *napostovtsy*, hostile to any literary orientation that did not jibe with their idea of proletarian literature – a term yet to be precisely and unanimously defined in the early 1920s⁵ –, continued to take stances that exacerbated conflict with the Party. The constant and virulent attacks on their *poputchiki* (fellow travelers) led to clashes among the directors of the journal and, in 1926, the exodus of G. Lelevich, S. Rodov, and I. Vardin. At that point journal disbanded.

A new group, including Leopold Averbakh, Aleksei Selivanovsky, and Aleksandr Zonin, with the support of the Party and the imprimatur of the MAPP (Moskovskaia Associaciia Proletarskikh Pisatelei – Muscovite Association of Proletarian Writers) and the VAPP (Vserossiiskaia Associaciia Proletarskikh Pisatelei – Pan-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers)⁶ founded a new journal, *Na Literaturnom Postu* (Clark 2000, 209-224). The first issue, edited by Averbakh, came out in April 1926 with space afforded to new contributors. The best known among them would be Vladimir Ermilov,⁷ to whom Mayakovsky would dedicate the final polemical lines of his farewell note to the world.

⁵ A workers’ literature had existed since the 1890s, both the fruit of the creativity of worker-writers and a corpus of works on their lives. Despite high levels of illiteracy, poetry was very popular among the working class and union pamphlets usually featured at least a couple composed by members. It was autodidact Gorky to bring about change offering a voice to many emerging writers of humble origins in his journal *Znanie* (Knowledge). In the mid-1910s he promoted the publication of certain collections of worker-themed short stories (*ocherki*), for example: *Pervyi proletarskii sbornik* (The First Proletarian Miscellany) in 1914 and *Proletarskii sbornik* (Proletarian Miscellany) in 1917. Naturally, the most significant work is *Mat’* (Mother) of 1907, the story of a worker who became a revolutionary.

⁶ It was constituted in October 1920 during the convention of proletarian writers convoked by members of *Kuznitsa* (The Smithy). In 1921 it was recognized by the People’s Education Commissariat as the principal literary organization. Vladimir Kirillov, a proletarian poet who left Proletkult to found *Kuznitsa*, was put in charge. With the introduction of the NEP, Kirillov, like many other *Kuznitsa* militants, left the Party. In April 1924, VAPP came under the exclusive influence of the group *Oktyabr* (October). Under this new leadership it became the main Soviet literary organization until 1928.

⁷ Vladimir Ermilov (1904-1965), child of a Muscovite petite bourgeois family, joined the Party in 1927. From 1926 to 1929 he was a writer for the journal *Molodaia Gvardiia* and from 1928 to 1932 for *Na literaturnom Postu*, which became a quarterly in 1931. From 1932 to 1938 he was editor-in-chief of *Krasnaia Nov’* and from 1946 to 1950 of *Literaturnaia gazeta*. He was secretary of RAPP since its founding.

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The *napostovtsy* hailed from *Oktyabr'* (October), a literary group with its own journal⁸ formed within the publishing house *Molodaia Gvardiia* (Young Guard) (Dobrenko 193-208) in 1922. The new organization included former members of *Molodaia Gvardiia* and *Rabochaia Vesna* (Workers' Spring). The latter were mostly young industrial workers who were not necessarily Party members, while the former arrived from the Komsomol (Kommunisticheskii soiuz molodëzhi – Young Communist League). The members of *Oktyabr'* were openly Communist and claimed inheritance rights to proletarian literature, their objective being to *implement the Communist line in literature*.

In Spring 1923, *Oktyabr'* convoked the first Conference of Proletarian Writers, during which the motion was passed to establish the MAPP with a description of the platform published in *Pravda*. The first issue of *Na Postu* was published shortly thereafter, presented as organ of the MAPP. In just under a year the 'Mappists' joined the VAPP. Although it had been established only three years earlier (1920) and was recognized by Narkompros (Narodnyj komissariat prosveshcheniia – People's Education Commissariat), VAPP was already reeling from the disillusionment triggered among militants by Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP). In 1924, with the support of MAPP leadership, in part composed of *Oktyabr'* militants, the *Oktyabristy* took the reins of the VAPP, the most influential literary organization in Russia up to 1928. The MAPP did not disappear but represented the Muscovite section of VAPP until 1928, when it became the local section of the RAPP.

This brief reconstruction is not meant to repeat well-known information or illustrate the complexity of the first post-Revolution decade. It seeks to underscore how, by overlapping and multiplying offices, stints, and responsibilities, the members of *napostovtsy* occupied key posts in the principal cultural institutions. In the mid-1920s, when they ceased activity – resuming later with greater intensity –, the *napostovtsy* had a presence in about a dozen literary and artistic journals.⁹

The *napostovtsy* did not initially arouse much enthusiasm among the leaders of the revolution. Lenin himself saw them as limited both politically and culturally. Leafing through the first issue of their magazine, he caustically commented, «Now we're in trouble!» His perplexity regarding the words of Valerian Pletnev, one of the leaders of MAPP, published in *Pravda* is well known: «I marked two idiocies and added a number of question marks. The author doesn't have to learn proletarian science, he simply must study. How is it possible that the *Pravda* editors don't explain his mistakes to him?» (Sheshukov 28).

The initial polemics between the *napostovtsy* and the many groups, formations, and individual personalities crowding the literary arena in the 1920s eventually ballooned into open conflict. But the early hostility with the *poputchiki*¹⁰ erupted into all-out warfare, albeit with

⁸ *Oktyabr'* absorbed *Rabochaia vesna* and *Molodaia Gvardiia*. These two groups, composed mainly of proletarian poets and aspiring poets, had broken away from *Kuznitsa*, which had risen from the ashes of Proletkult. In their eyes *Kuznitsa's* state of crisis, expressed in morose disillusion and pessimistic disenchantment triggered by the introduction of the NEP, was not conducive to consolidating the position of proletarian culture with sufficient expressive power. Over the years, *Oktyabr'* became a bona fide *tolstyĭ zhurnal* (thick journal) composed of different sections. Naturally the literary section, completely in the hands of proletarian writers, was the most important. While echoing the positions of *Na Postu* and *Na Literaturnom Postu*, *Oktyabr'* outlived them both and became an organ of *Soiuz pisatelei* (Writers' Union), continuing to publish – with ups and downs – to the present day (Ermolaev).

⁹ As well as *Na Postu*, an incomplete list would also include *Oktyabr'*, *Molodaia Gvardiia* (both journal and publisher), *Kuznitsa*, *Saratovskie izvestiia*, *Bolshevik*, *Rabochaia Moskva*, *Gudok*, *Zvezda*, and *Krasnaia pečat'*.

¹⁰ After the publication in 1922 of a series of articles by Trotsky in *Pravda*, the term came into use both in the argot of critics and in Party resolutions. Trotsky ended up repeatedly finding it necessary to explain the actual meaning, resisting all attempts to extend its range and protesting the inclusion of

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occasional lulls. The *napostovtsy* shared Trotsky's hostile view both of the *muzhik* (peasant) and the *novokrest'ianskie poety*, as Esenin and the peasant poets were known. Trotsky did not underestimate the importance of the agrarian question and the peasantry, but he considered rural communities to be incapable of political autonomy and inclined to internal division. As he saw it, the only hegemony possible in Russia was that of the proletariat. In *Literature and Revolution*, he wrote:

Peasant Russia, deprived of the leadership of the city, not only will never get to Socialism, but will not be able to maintain itself for two months, and will become the manure and the peat of world imperialism. (Trotsky 87)

This explains the insistence with which he emphasized «the inadequacy of the Bolshevik formulation of *democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry*» (Salvadori 177). The formula contained, according to the political leader, an element of truth, because only an alliance between the masses of workers and peasants would have been equal to the task of revolutionary struggle, but at the same time it erroneously suggested that peasants could assume an autonomous role, complementary to that of the proletariat in the political arena. In this regard, Trotsky and the *napostovtsy* agreed on the function of the peasant masses, considered inevitably subordinate to the role played by the proletariat. This position became a genuine criterion assumed by the *napostovtsy* – hewing to the Party line on the peasant question – to distinguish proletarian writers from the so-called *rustic or peasant-singing writers*, another term coined by Trotsky (86), or, in general, from those who were considered nostalgic for now outdated cultural traditions that had to be erased from popular memory.

But the friction with Trotsky did not arise with respect to the peasant question but regarded the *poputchiki*. According to the *napostovtsy*, not only was Trotsky wrong in defending them, but by so doing he prejudiced the definition of a proletarian literature, confusing its aims. The *napostovtsy* viewed the position assumed by Trotsky as simple capitulation.

The first issue of *Na Postu* caused a great stir, particularly for the hostility expressed towards Russian classics: «first and foremost, proletarian literature must finally be liberated from the influence of the past in terms of both ideology and form». This stance - at least at the beginning, and partly for the shared bellicose tones - signaled a certain kinship with the Futurists. That relationship would inevitably transform into an explicit rejection of the Futurist position, leading to vicious attacks, especially on Mayakovsky.

And we must not forget that, in spite of glaring differences, the *napostovtsy* offered refuge also to the Formalists, who did not have a journal of their own. Quite soon, however, the Manichaeic positions expressed in editorials and articles isolated them from all the other cultural groups, burying their efforts at communication in what has been termed a sort of autism (Dobrenko 2011).

Napostovstvo, a phenomenon that was generally disparaged in Soviet journalism and little regarded in literary manuals, has been largely reconstructed in several recent publications (Sheshukov; Kornienko 2011). And yet, we do not feel that enough emphasis has been given to certain questions. What was the source of the *napostovtsy*'s power? They were ignorant and coarse, incapable of navigating theory – how could they be so influential? Furthermore, most

literature purportedly *alien to October* among the ranks of the *poputchiki-literati*. Take for example the dispute that erupted in 1924 precisely with the *napostovets* F. Raskol'nikov. Trotsky's fiery response: «One cannot engage in such bald-faced trickery! In literature and politics we use the name *poputchiki* for those who, slogging and vacillating, get to the point via the same path that we follow, albeit going well beyond. He who goes against us is not a *poputchik*, he is an enemy and, if necessary, we shall send him abroad, because what's good for the revolution for us is law» (Kornienko 16).

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of them hailed from the petite bourgeoisie, something that would have been of secondary interest had they not put pedigree as *sine qua non* for being an authentic proletarian writer.

In the first place, the *napostovtsy* distinguished themselves for unparalleled organizational fervor, a heritage of the *Proletkul't*, whence came many of their number.¹¹ They engaged in endless committee meetings, plenary sessions, collectives, conferences, and congresses where they adopted resolutions and a succession of new platforms; they approved, renegotiated, and finalized lists of enemies and traitors; they drafted agreements, elaborated theses, and so on. All this was printed in the journal and later published in books or brochures and sent to the organizations of core writers so that the resolutions could be implemented with all urgency.

The *napostovtsy* thus ensured capillary transmission of the political line as regards cultural matters; right from the beginning they strove, collectively or individually, to establish relations not only with the Central Committee, where Ilya Vardin¹² oversaw the press office, but also with local Party and Komsomol organs and with regional Party committee press units. They were also actively supported by Glavlit (*Glavnoe upravlenie po delam literatury i izdatel'stv* – Central executive organ for literary and editorial matters), then directed by the former *proletkul'tist* critic Pavel Lebedev-Polianskii, by Komakademiia (*Kommunisticheskaia akademiia obshchestvennykh nauk* – Communist Academy of Social Sciences), whose director, Michail Pokrovsky, regularly published in the journal *Molodaia Gvardiia*. Having taken power initially in the Muscovite proletarian organization (MAPP), and then in the entire federation (VAPP), the *napostovtsy* led a powerful apparatus for the creation and control of the new proletarian literature. This all had an unquestionable influence on the spread of the Party line.

Their works helped consolidate mistrust in writers and literary critics and favored the emergence of a new, more politicized category of functionaries – or better, ‘cultural inspectors.’

Firmly interweaving the question of *partiinosť* (party spirit or party-mindedness)¹³ with that of peasant literature, the *napostovtsy* attacks prejudiced the fate of the latter for the coming three decades and brought about a veritable change of direction in the development of Russian literature in the Soviet era. But that's not all. As has been observed, all these discussions on proletarian culture actually laid the groundwork for the creation of a set of organizational practices by which the Soviet state began to mold the type of citizen best suited to fulfilling the political choices made at the top. The role of the *napostovtsy* was unquestionably fundamental in consolidating Foucauldian ‘governmentality’ (*gouvernementalité*) (Foucault 1991), that is, the expansion of organizational practices and tactics aimed at regulating mentalities and social behaviors. However, to our mind, the most interesting aspect in Foucault's thinking on governmentality is his perception of the change in this type of power: the new art of government becomes immanent in society. Multiplicity of forms of government and immanence are thus the two characteristics of governmentality. Immanence indicates that the government will no longer be steered by ‘superior’ rationales but by those within the social tissue; it indicates an

¹¹ It is nevertheless important to restate the principal difference from Proletkul't: the *napostovtsy* would never even consider the idea of a proletarian literature free from Party control.

¹² Ilya Vardin is the pseudonym of Illarion Vissarionovich Mgeladze (1890-1941), an early Bolshevik activist. He would later support the leftist opposition. Accused of being a Trotskyist, he was expelled from the Party in 1927 but readmitted the following year. In 1935 he was arrested and sentenced to ten years in prison but was executed by firing squad in 1941. He was finally rehabilitated posthumously in 1959.

¹³ The term reflects the content of Lenin's article *Party organization and Party literature*, published on November 13, 1905 in the twelfth issue of *Novaia zhizn'*. According to Vittorio Strada, Lenin's insistence on the need for the subordination of Party literature (*partiinaia literatura*) to Party organization (*partiinaia organizatsiia*) derives from the broad meaning of the Russian word for *literature*, including the idea of public information campaigns (Zalambani 121).

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art of non-coercive governing innate to society and having its precursor in pastoral power (Foucault 2005). As Gianluca Vagnarelli (156) has aptly pointed out:

For Foucault, pastoral power is a power that is not exercised over a territory but over a multiplicity, a power in which the beneficial character, the purpose of doing good, is not a marginal aspect but its very *raison d'être*. In sum, it is a power intended, directed, and oriented to those over whom it is exercised and not aimed at higher units such as cities, states, or sovereigns. The pastorate, writes Foucault, announces *governmentality* because it implies non-coercive direction of people and souls, direction that subjugates them via obedience networks and, at the same time, subjectifies them by extracting from them the truth that will then be imposed upon them.

It will be helpful to review a series of circumstances to fully grasp the context in which the *napostovtsy* line took form. The 1920-21 revolts had driven Lenin to make political choices that were hotly discussed within the Party, and first among them the adoption of the NEP (Novaia Ekonomicheskaiia Politika – New Economic Policy). The ability to treat the revolts with an iron fist had favored Trotsky's rise also in the cultural sphere: he was a candidate for the helm of Narkormpros because Lunacharsky (Fitzpatrick) was deemed overly permissive and stained with the sin of having supported the Proletkul't movement.¹⁴ Trotsky's actions regarding *novyi byt* and *kul'turnichestvo* were generally viewed positively by the leaders and for much of the decade he would play a fundamental role (Kaznina). The idea was gaining traction in the government that the proletariat had to lead the peasantry on the road to Communism at all costs. In the very first years after the revolution, Yesenin – unbridled, rebellious pessimist poet of rural Russia – was as popular, if not more so, than Mayakovsky.

Hence, to achieve the supremacy of proletarian literature, not only were commissaries needed, but also instructors tasked with organizing and directing a deeply penetrating cultural process. This was the *napostovtsy's* role.

Much has been written about the effectiveness of the role of the literary critic in the post-revolution years, but few threw themselves into Party emissary functions like the *napostovtsy*, foregoing all critical spirit and autonomy. Their contradictions, retractions, and frequent sudden changes of course reflect both the fluidity of political debate and the adaptation of government measures to changing circumstances. Their aggressive tone was driven by the single-minded objective of creating a new proletarian literature at the expense of any other form of narrative.

However, a question of no small importance remains: were they simply emissaries of the decisions made by Party leaders or did they somehow influence them, seeding the choices with their policy positions shouted to the four winds? The question resurfaces in the reinterpretation of Soviet literature. The positions of scholars diverge precisely as to the beginning of the ideological instrumentalization of critical discourse, placing this involution at different points along the timeline.

While frequently unpredictable shifts in politics led to no less abrupt changes in literary criticism, judging by the number of diverging perspectives in the volume, the hardest periods to read are the Twenties and the Stalinist era. For example, there appears to be a disagreement on the exact time when the political instrumentalization of literary criticism became the order of the day. According to Natalya Kornienko, state institutionalization of literary criticism and its attendant censorship begins as early as 1922, while according to Dobrenko, such developments do not occur until the late 1920s and early 1930s. Dobrenko suggests that a struggle between different groups was still quite possible during most of the Twenties, because only in 1928, one group, specifically the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP), gained official support. Dobrenko proposes a distinction between RAPP and the preceding groups who often employed

¹⁴ Among the last studies on Proletkul't see Carpi 361-372.

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political language, by arguing that the latter were still interested in literary matters while for «RAPP functionaries and critics literature was merely a pretext. The sole focus of RAPP criticism was politics» (p. 48). Furthermore, Kornienko argues that attempts to unify literary discourse started as soon as the early Twenties; Dobrenko suggests that this uniformity was taking over literary struggles by the thirties; and Clark and Tikhanov remark that the distinctly different trends coexisted well into the thirties. (Vaingurt)

Indubitably, the *napostovtsy* were not the only ones aligning against peasant literature, but unlike eminent figures such as Trotsky, they succeeded in reaching and persuading a broad audience thanks to clear and effective catchwords. Providing unconditional support to any budding writer showing absolute allegiance to the official Party line, they enjoyed greater approval than figures who were more authoritative, but little loved among the masses or popular among Party comrades – like Trotsky¹⁵ (and if that weren't enough, he also showed tolerance towards the *poputchiki*).

Rereading the *napostovtsy*'s works on peasant literature allows us, first of all, to retrace the process of annihilation of a genre that was characterized by ambivalence right from the start. It also makes it possible to recognize the attempts to accelerate the various phases of its expulsion from the literary arena, and to identify methods suggested and later implemented on a large scale by the Party to ensure total submission of literature to ideology.

Dobrenko (2011) has a point in arguing with Kornienko because of how drastic the latter's position is, and we can all share doubts on the preeminence of Trotsky's role in the 1920s. He played an unquestionably important role, but – all things considered, and despite appearances – it was not rock-solid, a circumstance shared with many of his Party companions. That notwithstanding, the six issues of the journal clearly offer explicit indications of the orientation sought by the *napostovtsy* and later assumed by the Party: absolute party-mindedness (*partiinosť*), vigilance (*bditel'nost'*) against the enemy, and the championing of the mass reach (*massovost'*) of proletarian literature. In spite of the petite bourgeoisie origins of many of the *napostovtsy*, they were the first to advance the equation: Proletariat = Soviet, which would be imposed only at the beginning of the following decade. By focusing excessively on the figure of Trotsky we lose sight of the meticulous work by a rather lackluster group of provincial intelligentsia to construct a powerful and finely branched network for the transmission of a chosen conception of proletarian literature.

It mattered little that the contents were not yet clear, this was certainly no deterrent for the *napostovtsy*. They unabashedly borrowed, dismembered, and adapted the conceptions of others (the Prolekul't idea of a proletarian literature purified of bourgeois influence,¹⁶ the Trotskyian rejection of *peasant-singing* writers, Bukharin's *rabsel'kory* (worker-village correspondents),¹⁷ and even the intolerance of the *émigré* – as they considered him – Gorky toward the *muzhiki*),

¹⁵ We do well to remember that Lev Davidovich Bronstein (1879-1940), 'Trotsky', after years of unremitting disputes with Lenin, joined the Russian Communist Party only in August 1917 and – exceptionally – without self-criticism. This means that he was accepted with his entire stock of theory, something which led to conflicts with the leaders on more than one occasion. A man of immense culture, brilliant writer, and compelling orator, he aroused hostility, contention, envy, and that would prove fatal. He paid a high price for his vacillations on questions that turned out to be vital for his political and physical survival. Although he was in charge of the Red Army there are many reports of antipathy aroused among laborers for attitudes and poses he exhibited during visits to or inspections of factories or military units (See Service).

¹⁶ As Vittorio Strada points out: «Bogdanov did not demand a total repudiation of past culture, but his take on the question of *cultural heritage* opened the door to such repudiation, which in fact took place, and to absolute faith in a completely new culture» (197).

¹⁷ The *rabsel'kory* or *rabochie i sel'skie korrisspondenty* (rural and worker correspondents) were a movement of volunteers who sent brief reports or articles from factories and farmlands to local journals (Gorham).

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carving out a privileged niche in the cultural arena right from the beginning. The effectiveness of their action did not derive from the originality of content but from an organizational attitude based on strict oligarchic criteria promulgated in catchwords that were as self-evident as they were vague: exactly what was needed for an unmoored country.

Starting from the first issue, the *napostovtsy* engaged in direct struggle for party-minded literature and Party control of cultural spheres in a unified system, from the creation to the publication of each work that fit the canon of proletarian literature then taking form. To them a literature free of the influence and control of the Party was unthinkable, and this distinguished them from Proletkul't.

In the first issue in 1923, Lelevich opened with the article *Nam nužhna partiinaia liniia* (We need the Party line) and in the fourth issue returned to and expanded his positions in an article titled *Partiinaia politika v iskusstve* (The Party line in art). A. Bezymensky wrote *Proletarskie pisateli i partiia* (Proletarian writers and the Party) and Averbakh *O literaturnoj politike partii* (On the Party's literary policy): both articles appeared in the first issue (1923) and the last issue (1925). The first issue of *Na Postu* emphasized that «proletarian literature can and must be a broad social movement» (*Na Postu*, no. 1, 1923, 206) and the journal made an unquestionable contribution to consolidating the mass reach of proletarian literature. With their ramified presence, the *napostovtsy* influenced all the small associations of proletarian writers that sprouted like mushrooms in big cities and in the provinces. Neutrality was immediately likened in the first issue to a hostile position vis-à-vis the power of the Soviets. More importantly, the need was stressed to unmask those in bogus revolutionary garb who were actually working for the opposition. *Bditel'nost'* (vigilance) is the third catchword heralding stances that would become typical in the following decade. At a time of constant and unpredictable changes, confusion, and abstruse language, the *napostovtsy* guidelines were clear and incontrovertible.

The theme of farmlands appeared in the first issue in an article by a contributor writing under the pen name Derevensky¹⁸ titled *Derevnia v sovremennoi literature* (The countryside in contemporary literature). The second part of the article would be published in installments in the following three issues. It was a broad review of the voices considered most meaningful in the so-called peasant literature. The analyses of the individual works left something to be desired in terms of depth, but the author of the series had very clear ideas on the criteria to apply in his judgments. The article is a first rudimentary model of a critical approach that would be applied, with minimal adjustments, by the new figure of critic-instructor who substituted explicit political judgments for scholarly literary analysis.

The article opens with a brief presentation of the author, closer to a *kharakteristika* (attestation of service) than to an introduction to the works and poetics. This is followed by a brief synopsis highlighting the passages deemed to be most meaningful for illustrating the writer's position on the peasantry issue. It concludes with a negative assessment or perhaps a few words of encouragement. The names of two authors stand out among Derevensky's collection: Boris Pilnyak, who is obviously attacked, and Fedor Gladkov, in whom the *napostovtsy* had already discerned the characteristics of a writer for the masses.

¹⁸ Pseudonyms did not disappear after the October Revolution but became a means for emphasizing one's presence in the literary arena. A pseudonym incorporated a more expressive element that stirred reader emotions: take for example Maxim Gorky or Andrei Bely. Two of the senior editors at *Na Postu* used them constantly: Iosif Efimovich Fradkin signed his name Boris Michailovich Volin, and Labori Gilevich Kalmanson became G. Lelevich. We do not know who Derevensky was, except that the name was clearly chosen to underscore the content of his articles, whereas *Fabrichnyi* was chosen (perhaps by the same writer) for an essay published in the second and third issues of the journal dedicated to the worker group *Rabochaia Vesna*. The pages of *Na Postu* were rife with cryptonyms: M.P., R-č, ELEM, etc. Furthermore, for the *napostovtsy* the use of pseudonyms was the subject of disputes and attacks on political and cultural adversaries (Iakovleva).

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It is not surprising that Pilnyak was the first to be examined, and not just because he was unquestionably a well-known writer at the time. What is surprising, however, is that several other articles are dedicated to him in the same issue, heralding the brutal campaign of denigration in 1929 that would mark the beginning of a rapid decline in his literary career. Derevensky extracted Pilnyak's point of view from *Golji god* (Naked year) and *Ivan da Mar'ya* (Ivan and Maria) and characterized it as the expression of a disappearing intelligentsia that looks at the *muzhiki* not as representing the peasant class but as barbarians to be feared and at best fascinating relics of the past. Derevensky sees the authors he examines as outdated figures incapable of perceiving the bright future taking form in the reworkings then underway: «Pilnyak does not love, thus he is not able to speak of the living men of contemporary Russia that October has given us. If in the Russia of our day there are only forests, steppes, and soggy swamps populated by forest sprites, icons, and rituals, whence comes the October Revolution?» (*Na postu*, no. 1, 1923, 155).

The image of the post-revolutionary countryside portrayed by Pilnyak is bereft of 'majesty', it lacks that epic element that would become indispensable in works of socialist realism. According to Derevensky, Pilnyak's rural portrayals reduce «to a revolutionary *lubok*, a caricature of farmland» (*Na postu*, no. 1, 1923, 158).

Furthermore, the *Na Postu* critic is not satisfied with the language in which Pilnyak's *muzhiki* express themselves, terming it a mangled idiom. These are the first signs of the normalization of the literary language that was promoted in numerous writings Gorky would later publish in the early 1930s. It is also interesting to note how the *napostovtsy* intuit the interweave of language, ideology, and culture that characterizes both the question of peasant literature and the wave of new writers hailing from the countryside, anxious to find a space in which to express their ideas and experiences.

As we know, Gorky had expressed all his hostility towards the countryside since the pre-revolutionary years. We see this at least in his *Dve dushi* (Two Souls) of 1915, and he then picks up and expands the scope of the question in *O russkom krest'ianstve* (On the Russian Peasantry) in 1922. In both works Gorky criticized the cult of the *muzhik* that had characterized the populist line in the literature of the late nineteenth century, reaffirmed early in the following century in neo-peasantry poetry. For Gorky, the peasant's world is one that escapes rationality, a barbarous, 'Asiatic' universe to which the intelligentsia, the rationality of Western thought must put a stop. Gorky applies the same approach to linguistic experiments, like the exaltation of the pre-Peter Russia so dear to Pilnyak, that were alien to him. This explains the initial convergence between Gorky's positions and those of the *napostovtsy*.

It was a first step in discrediting an entire line of post-revolutionary narrative, conventionally termed 'ornamental' (Kozhevnikova 55-66) that aimed to highlight, with maximum expressivity, stylistic peculiarities of the contemporary language. According to the *napostovtsy*, this attention to form in all its multifaceted expressions worked against what they saw as the purpose of proletarian writings. As one member of the group put it: «A proletarian writer is a writer whose works rally the psyche and conscience of the working class and the masses of workers towards the ultimate goals of the proletariat» (Iakubovskii 308). According to Gorky, who at the First Congress of Writers in 1934 would call the 1920s the most shameful period in Russian culture, the writer's task lies in eliminating any ambiguity that could cloud the clarity of an ideological position and the transparency of the political message. These thoughts clearly reveal the continuity between the attacks by the *napostovtsy* in the early 1920s and the directives formulated during the First Congress of Writers, when socialist realism was proclaimed the only acceptable method for Russian culture.

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In the second part of the article titled *Derevnia v sovremennoi literature, stat'ia 2-aia*, the author turns his attention to the work of Aleksander Stepanovich Iakovlev¹⁹ a writer we could include among Gorky's *bosyaki*. While recognizing Iakovlev's sincere love for the countryside and its inhabitants, the article underscores the attention to religious tradition, deeply rooted in the peasant masses, but identified particularly as a specific characteristic of the writer's conceptions:

[...] he refraction of the soul of the *muzhik* through the religious essence, as if it held people together, is mostly a characteristic not of the peasant of our day, in the garb of the youthful social stratum that has survived imperial and civil wars, but of the artist himself, who considers the peasant to be the depositary of the highest human truth, of the conscience, because it, according to Yakovlev, produces the strength to create good, to strengthen the fellowship among peoples... (Na Postu, no. 2-3, 1923, 205)

For the *napostovtsy* it was a question of navigating a critical moment in the relations between the Party and the peasant masses, and Derevensky's cautious final judgment reflects this awareness: «Iakovlev, as an artist, is deeply steeped in the juices of current Russian life, he simply is not yet completely developed, he is not sufficiently endowed with creative serenity...» (Na Postu, no. 2-3, 1923, 208).

The article then examines the work of Fedor Gladkov, he who would become with his *Tsement* (Cement) a model to be imitated in the coming years. Gladkov's story titled *Ognennyi kon'* (The Fiery Steed) published in 1923 reflects the inclination to grasp the revolution 'with one's heart' before understanding it with the mind that characterized the 1920s. As underscored by various scholars, it is a question of the struggle between *stichinost'* (spontaneity) and *razum* (reasoning); the *soznanie* (awareness) produced by the victory of the latter will mark the storylines of most of the leading works of the 1930s, consolidating the spread of socialist realism.

By defending Gladkov from the accusation of being a writer bereft of talent, incapable of using the language or weaving credible storylines, (Discacciati 71-97) the *napostovtsy* also appreciate the negative descriptions of a part of the peasant class; they will exploit those flaws in the political struggle to demolish the figure of the *muzhik* bound to traditions and religious belief and build the new figure of the 'worker of the land', the future *kolkhoznik* (collective-farm worker). It is interesting to note that in the eyes of the *Na Postu* critics, the contraposition of the *batrak* (laborer) and the official in *The Fiery Steed* is a mere condition of life and has nothing to do with the class struggle underway in the countryside. The *napostovtsy* tend to downplay this factor and highlight the heroism of the mass of urban workers. The reviews of the critic Derevensky conclude in the fourth issue of the journal. The last two writers reviewed have now fallen into oblivion. Michail Ivanovich Volkov, once published by Proletkult houses, won partial approval for his ability to convey local color without falling into Pilnyakian excess. But he is also criticized for his incapacity to create broad epic narratives and a certain superficiality emerging from the lack of a well defined ideological line. Pavel Georgievich Nizovoy, author of *Chernozem'e* is accused by Derevensky of only being able to scratch the surface of an

¹⁹ A. Trifonov-Iakovlev (1886-1953), son of an illiterate house painter and a devoutly religious woman devoted to old beliefs, lived an errant life that eventually took him to St. Petersburg, where he managed to study philology for two years before volunteering for the army. A sympathizer of the Social Revolutionary Party, like all the *esery*, he first suffered arrest by the Tsarist police and then ostracism by the Bolsheviks. He eventually settled in Moscow and joined the staff of *Utro Rossii* (Russian Morning), a newspaper of liberal inspiration hostile to the October Revolution. But with the publication of his first story in 1920, Iakovlev became one of the first writers to address, with some modicum of success, the farmlands. He reached the apex of his fame in 1936 with a *povest'* (short story) dedicated to Pavel Morozov, the boy who denounced his parents and was mythicized during the Stalin era.

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important theme, one which, if addressed with conscience, could open new perspectives for the reader on the conquests of the Bolsheviks in the countryside:

[...] missing in this design is the luxuriant power of the 'black soils', rendering the implications of the revolutionary countryside incomplete. It is more a chronicle of the revolution, of unrefined material, of single pieces of life, of the first steps in the revolution; all of this the writer has to show anew, in a new artistic design, after having delineated the principal line along which the dense black earth of the farmlands passes in its multiplicity, in the form of a feral humanity, in the fight for October, or against it. (*Na Postu*, no. 4, 1923, 150)

Thus closes Derevensky's review. However, in the last issue of the journal, published in 1925, there is an article by F. Raskol'nikov dedicated to the new writer figure promoted by the *napostovtsy*. This writer is a worker-correspondent, thanks to whom new methods will be introduced for the management and diffusion of literary culture. As has been said, Bukharin characterized support for the movement of the worker-correspondents a bona fide Party strategy to 'de-peasant-ify' the countryside (Kornienko 2010, 129).

Within the literary debate surrounding the formation of Soviet era Russian literature, a significant role was played by a journal of little prestige, whose contributors nevertheless succeeded in interpreting the needs of the Party and of a large segment of the public, introducing new catchwords into literary discourse and forming a new front of young and inexperienced writers ready to conform to the political line set forth by the leaders. As argued by Ruslan Khestanov, the cultural arena became the privileged space within which new models of organizing a totalitarian state were tested. The action of the *Na Postu* group facilitated the formation of a new generation of 'deresponsibilized writers' (Chudakova), inclined to quash doubts and contradictions because actively enlisted in and disciplined by an omnipresent state. The *napostovtsy* were able to discern the needs of the new Soviet state and anticipate, by testing them, its practices.

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