

**The Representation of Soviet Poetry in Postwar Decade
in the Literary Journal "Oktyabr"
(Initial period)**

In modern literary criticism, the period of so-called “late Stalinism” is characterized as a period of exceptional monotony in literature; as the domination of formulaic art, in which any creativity would be suppressed by communist party decrees; and a time in which the quasi-realistic model of Soviet literary life was artificially created in literary journals. Unfortunately, the cornerstone of literary analysis in some of Soviet postwar journals was not the text itself, but rather, the method of its selection: a selection that could either open the way to literature to a certain author, or lock it out. According to the conditions of this formulization of literature, and of poetry, in particular, the question should be posed as not the monotony of literature, but rather, about the way in which even through the distorted reality of literary journals, a genuine image of Soviet poetry and Soviet literary criticism shows through.

The subject of this paper is the understanding of poetry as formulated in the literary journal “Oktyabr’,” one of the leading Soviet literary journals in the period between two remarkable events: the Tenth Plenary Session of the Administrating Board of the Union of Soviet Writers in May, 15th, 1946, when the primary aims of post-war Soviet literature were approved, and the notorious decree “About the Journals “Zvezda” and “Leningrad” of August, 14th, 1946, when the last spirit of independence was removed from Soviet literature for a long period of time. At the Tenth Plenary Session of the Union of Soviet Writers, poetry was proclaimed the vanguard of Soviet literature, with four main aims: 1) the depiction of the “severe truth of life”, 2) achieving the “maximum closeness to human’s inward life”, 3) “a multitude of creative methods”, and 4) “civic consciousness” [History of Russian Soviet Poetry 1984: 78-79]. During the Second World War, Party control over literature was weakened in the name of wartime propaganda; as a result, the writers’ community was able to make use of a relative liberalization to take certain initiatives. The aims of literature as proclaimed at the Tenth Plenary Session would seem encouraging and rather

independent, but their realization can only be ascertained by a close analysis of journal publications.

“Oktyabr” is considered to be the most conservative of Soviet literary journals. Its editorial board was formed by officially recognized writers, most of whom were also the recipients of the Stalin prize. During the period in question, members of the editorial board included the writers Vasiliy Il'yenkov, Pyotr Pavlenko, Stepan Shchipachyov, Vsevolod Ivanov, Arkadiy Perventsev, Boris Polevoy, Il'ya Marshak (under the pseudonym of Mikhail Il'yin), Leonid Leonov, Grigoriy Sannikov, as well as the literary critics Valeriy Kirpotin, Ivan Shamorikov and Minna Younovich. For a very long period, from 1931 to 1954, then from 1957 to 1961, the chief editor of “Oktyabr” was Fyodor Ivanovich Parfyonov, a winner of the Stalin prize for novels about the lives of peasants.

The personality of the chief editor often determines the policy of the journal, which is true of Fyodor Panfyorov and “Oktyabr”. An enthusiastic preacher of communist party ideology in literature, this writer and chief editor still remains one of the most ambiguous characters of Soviet literary life. He is known not only as a peasant writer, but also as an author of multiple letters to Stalin, containing complaints, petitions, expletive remarks and innovative proposals on both obvious and hidden problems of Soviet literary life. Panfyorov's letters to Stalin, beginning in the 1930s, show that he had correctly understood the personally inflected nature of Soviet policy, and that he had bet on a certain person – that is, Stalin. This position proved its value in the postwar period, when the concentration of power reached its apogee and the name of Stalin replaced all previous ideological formulas in the Soviet press. With no doubt, this position was shared in “Oktyabr”.

The image of poetry in the short period of quiet liberalization was not univocal. On the one hand, poetry was the most active part of Soviet literature, while on the other, the image of poetry was remarkably degraded as the result of the growing distrust of literature on the part of the Soviet government in general.

The poet Iosif Utkin provides the most precise position of and attitude towards poetry in the immediate post-war period:

Administrating literature! Administrating poetry! It is forbidden to administer poetry; one can only create the appropriate conditions for it, and then it flourishes. But one can put a straitjacket on poetry, and then it becomes what is published in our journals: a governmental penny whistle!” [Information 1992: 95].

The image of poetry in postwar “Oktyabr” was formed by several components. The first is the poetry publications themselves. The authors who were published in “Oktyabr” can be divided into five categories: 1) poets of war generation, such as Mikhail Dolmatovsky, Mikhail Matusovsky, Victor Urin, Ivan Baukov, Lev Chernomortsev, Vladimir Turkin and others; 2) officially recognized poets whose publications were guaranteed success according to their famous names, such as Sergei Mikhalkov, Stepan Shchipachyov, Anatoliy Sofronov, Alexander Yashin, Mikhail Lukonin, Nikolai Gribachyov and many others; 3) “repentant” members of the poetic schools of the beginning of the 20th century, previously rejected by official literary criticism, such as the former Constructivist Il’ya Sel’vinsky and the last Futurist Semyon Kirsanov; 4) authors of philosophical and love lyrics, such as Maxim Ryl’skiy, LiudmilaTat’yanicheva, VeronikaTushnova and Dmitry Kedrin; 5) and finally, various representatives of older and contemporary poetry of various nations of the USSR, such as Nikoloz Baratashvili, Simon Chikovani, Avetik Isaakyan, Arkadiy Kuleshov and Anton Belevich.

An analysis of poetry published in the literary journal “Oktyabr” shows that in general the conservative literary journal lived up to its reputation. The majority of poems are devoted to glorifications of Soviet victories, to the “bright optimistic future” and the lively postwar reconstruction process. But one cannot say that the predominance of war themes necessarily denigrates the artistic value of all the published poems: not all of them reveal senseless rhetoric and repetitions of common formulas. Poems by Mikhail Isakovsky, Mikhail Matusovsky, Victor Urin and Lyev Chernomortsev sound originally and rather individualistic: the theme of war in those poems slowly gives way to the theme of peace as revealed from the perspective of the individual. Representatives of philosophical and love lyrics, such as Maxim Ryl’skiy, LiudmilaTat’yanicheva,

Veronika Tushnova and Dmitry Kedrin, make up a very modest percent of total publications, but their presence in the journal supports the idea that the Soviet “formula” is not the only thing that directs literature. This idea is also supported by the publications of the poets not fully approved by the authorities, such as Semyon Kirsanov and Il’ya Sel’vinskiy. The poetry in translation from various national literatures shares a common heroic theme and thus can be subsumed to the central national-patriotic tendency of the journal. That said, it is nonetheless remarkable that in this period the name of Boris Pasternak appears in the most conservative Soviet journal, albeit not with his own poems but as translator. While these poems cannot be considered “his”, given the attitude of Soviet authorities to representatives of the “older generation” of poets, these translations deserve attention. In general the analysis of poetic publications in “Oktyabr” proves both the tendency towards liberalization in Soviet literature as well as the intentional inequality in the representation of Soviet poetic movements.

As important as the publication of poetry itself may be it is the literary criticism published in the journal that tells more about the state of Soviet poetry than the publications themselves.

In “Oktyabr” as well as in the other Soviet literary journals the genre subdivision of literary criticism plays an important role. Three main genres prevailed in “Oktyabr” in the postwar period: the vignette, the critical essay, and the critical review. It is from these articles that one can conclude that poetry played a very modest role in “Oktyabr”.

In the critical essays of “Oktyabr”, the inductive approach, which appeals to new tendencies and fresh names, is virtually absent. In other words, there were no attempts to reconstruct out of different pieces the full image of postwar Soviet poetry. The lack of the genre of the critical review points to the same fact. The only critical review to appear in “Oktyabr” in this period was devoted to wartime ditties, which are considered to be folk poetry.

Nevertheless, in the structure of this journal there is a section that didn’t satisfy the Party before the war and didn’t change after it. This is the bibliography section, in which short reviews and annotations regarding new books were

published. This section of “Oktyabr” is distinguished by its extreme instability and a certain negligence. In most volumes, it is simply missing, but when it *is* included, the reviews are published unsigned, with significant differences in style and without the typical uniform comprehension of poetry, which suggests that the reviews belong to different authors. However, it is in this section where the inductive approach of postwar literary criticism finally finds its way.

The journal “Oktyabr” was among the first to join the anti-cosmopolitanism campaign. Even before it started, in the first postwar volume of the journal there appeared an article written by a famous ideologist of literature, Alexander Leites, who specialized in presenting Soviet literature in a global context and comparing it with the literatures of other countries. The critic was disapproving of the sensational headlines of American newspapers that regarded the Soviet victory in the Second World war as a “miracle”, but rather than as a logical result [Oktober 1945, 5-6: 254]. In the same volume of the journal in the bibliographical section called “New Books”, a panegyric review of Walt Whitman’s book was published. In this brief review, not only “American democracy” was complimented, but also “the great American writer” Walt Whitman was accorded the highest Soviet recognition; he was compared to one of the symbolic figures of Soviet literature Vladimir Mayakovsky [Oktyabr 1945, № 5-6: 264-265].

A major point of interest is another review of a new critical study devoted to the poetry of Valeriy Briusov and the correlation of this review to the content of the journal. In the same volume of “Oktyabr” there was published a thorough critical essay by Vladimir Pertsov devoted to a comparison of Vladimir Mayakovsky and the Russian poetic tradition of the previous period. In this essay, the representatives of the poetic schools of the beginning of the 20th century were called “the epigones of middle-class decadence” [Oktyabr 1945, № 5-6: 245]. As one of the main theorist of Russian symbolism, Valeriy Briusov could hardly expect a positive evaluation after these words. However, the impossible happened: the representative of “middle-class decadence” was compared to the icon of Soviet literature, Maxim Gor’ky: “It was Briusov’s thrust into human labor reforming life that determined the path of his creative work. <...> This

humanistic worldview, the pathos of creative labor, unites Briusov with Gor'ky". Such a review overturns the traditional Soviet comprehension of a poet belonging to a rejected literary circle. The compliment to Briusov as an author of "masterpieces of Russian political lyrics" is followed by a compliment to another Symbolist, Alexander Blok, who is called "the poet-patriot in the highest and most honorable sense" [Oktyabr 1945, №10: 268]. Another review devoted to the new edition of Briusov's poetry defends it again with a quotation from Gor'ky who called Briusov "the most cultured writer of Rus". [Oktyabr 1945, № 10: 189].

The bibliographical section "New Books" also fills in the blanks in the field of Soviet literature, mentioning poets who could not be published in the main section. This is the purpose of the review of the first edition of the book "Lukomorie" by Leonid Martynov, in general rejected by Soviet literary criticism. In "Oktyabr" it was immediately included in the literary context: "The new book of poems of Leonid Martynov serves as a proof of the wide diapason of his talent", it correlate with the spirit of time: in it there is seen: "...our motherland with its geography, history, economy, culture, with its 'old and new glory', with its ancient cities and heroes, with its mighty creative power" [Oktyabr 1945, №10: 187].

The style of literary criticism in "Oktyabr" can be defined as peremptory. In the 1930s, the chief editor Fyodor Panfyorov decided for himself to speak the language of his book about peasant life, "The Whetstones" – and spoke in his articles in this same language, straightforward, sometimes rude and full of naturalistic comparisons. This style was inherited by the journal. However, at the same time, the bibliography section of "Oktyabr" was publishing an alternative view of literature in small print.

The vignette was one of the most important genres of Soviet literary criticism. As a rule, vignettes were devoted only to recognized writers with unblemished political and literary reputation. Following the conservative style of the journal, the criticism in "Oktyabr" used the language of formulas and the method of literary deduction, explaining literary events from the approved

positions of communist ideology. During the period in question, only certain writers were analyzed in vignettes. Those included V. Mayakovskiy, M. Gor'ky, Yuri Krymov, Mikhail Isakovsky, John Keats, Arkadiy Perventsev and Vera Inber.

The articles devoted to the most important and approved figures of Soviet literature – Gorky and Mayakovsky– were used to propagate the utilitarian purpose of literature. In Victor Pertsov's article "Mayakovsky and the Russian Muse," the analysis of the connections between Mayakovsky's poetry and the tradition of Russian poetry was replaced by an attempt to construct the ideological continuity of all Russian literature. In this instance, Mayakovsky is not the subject of the article, but merely an illustration of the utilitarian direction of literary criticism. The destruction of the usual approach to literature engenders severe stylistic consequences and the destruction of any logic. The literary critic starts making statements without any proof. For example: "The theme of poet, his fate and his mission – this is the theme of revolution in Russian literature" [Oktyabr 1945, № 5-6: 248]. Logic is replaced by ideological scholastics. Thus the real purpose of this article is to propagate the superiority of modern Soviet literature over the earlier literary tradition, with Mayakovsky's poetry as illustrative material.

These obvious propaganda aims are also noticeable in the essays of Nadezhda Pavlovich, Vladimir Yermilov and Ivan Gutorov.

However, not all the articles in "Oktyabr" served propaganda aims. For example, the vignette of Mikhail Isakovsky, written by Ivan Rozanov, is a decent example of the vignette as a genre. But, of course, even this critic cannot avoid the traditional glorification of the leader. However, he uses it as a mere obligatory formula: "Indeed, as the Soviet national poet, Isakovsky knows what the people are living, he knows these 'simple, common, modest' people for which the great Stalin raised a toast at the celebration of the Victory. And that is why the poems of Isakovsky, devoted to millions of 'common, modest people' and devoted to Stalin are so beautiful" [Oktyabr, 1945, №7: 144].

It is important to mention that the end of this period was the fatal August 14th of 1946, on which date the decree on Leningrad journals was announced. After this date, the amplification of the Stalin cult increased, while the liberal inductive tendency in the journal “Oktyabr” suffered. If the notion of Stalin in Ivan Rozov’s article was an illustrative one, then in Ivan Gutorov’s article, devoted to the “Partisan war in folklore,” the ideological formulas and other names that were traditionally used for comparison are all replaced by reference to the singular personality of Stalin. Even in a discussion about folk ditties, Stalin becomes the ultimate truth: “The life-giving <...> influence of great Stalin was always a mighty organizing power and the rallying cry for the partisans. That is why in folklore, the appreciation of Stalin is praised as the highest ideal of struggle” [Oktyabr 1946, № 3-4: 196].

The result of this Stalinization is announced in another article by Ivan Gutorov, entitled “Maxim Gorky on the work of the writer”. This article devoted to the remarkable figure of Soviet literature announces the concrete results achieved by Soviet literature after the optimistic Tenth Plenary Session of the Union of the Soviet Writers: “Literature should become a mighty instrument in mobilizing all Soviet people for the fulfillment of historical purposes as predetermined by our great leader and teacher comrade Stalin” [Oktyabr 1946, № 6: 186]. Without a doubt, Gorky’s opinion fulfilled a mere illustrative function in this article.

Until the decree on “Zvezda” and “Leningrad”, the names of Akhmatova, Pasternak, Blok, Balmont and Briusov were still appearing in the journal “Oktyabr”. In every case, they were mentioned in comparative conjunction with Soviet writers. These were generally mentions without evaluative function, as it was in the first postwar volume of “Oktyabr” in the bibliography section. The omission of certain names even in the wartime served to eliminate certain writers from the literary process. Thus the mention of a writer can be considered an attempt to return him to that process. The most remarkable article serving this purpose is the vignette “Vera Inber. On the 35th anniversary of a literary career,” written by Korneliy Zelinsky. In this article the author uses a quotation from

Mayakovsky alongside a quotation from Pasternak, thus conjoining two remarkable figures of Soviet literature, of which one is recognized and one is not. This conjunction in a critical essay shows that Pasternak is not less important than Mayakovsky and cannot be simply eliminated from the literary process.

What can explain the fact that an extremely conservative journal is discussing the names of disgraced authors? And why did the process of Stalinization begin in “Oktyabr” earlier than in other journals? The explanation can be found in the analysis of the chief editor’s attitude to the literary process and his unforgettable article “Of shards and thinking mugs” that was published in the section called “The Tribune of a Writer and Literary Critic” in № 5 of 1946. Talking about the main issue in Soviet literature – malicious literary critics, whom he calls the “thinking mugs”, Fyodor Panfyorov uses the method of an imaginary dialogue with those critics. Talking for both sides, he smashes to smithereens the malicious “thinking mugs”. It is interesting that in this article Panfyorov avoids any names or notions¹ that could somehow identify his opponents, so that it appears that his dialogue is an imaginary projection of a problem with no real conflict at its base. Thus all of his discussion turns into an exorbitant and unscreened scholastic that gives us a clue to the chief editor’s own comprehension of Soviet literary process. And the trouble is that he does not understand it at all. He uses an imaginary dialogue, because he cannot start a real one, because he cannot define what is good and what is bad about Soviet literature of this period. This inability to define a simple opposition results in a lack of arguments and conclusions and forces Panfyorov to gesture to the “ultimate truth” of Stalin all the time. In his appeal to Stalin’s words, Panfyorov reveals the essence of the policy of the journal “Oktyabr” in the beginning of the postwar period. That is what he says:

Am I saying anything new? Nothing of the sort! For, indeed, when several years ago some “mettlesome” ones started crying at all literary intersections: “The authors should first study the marxism, and only then begin writing” – comrade Stalin said in the talk with the writers:
- Do not press the writers into marxism. Help the writer to learn the truth of life properly, and he will come to marxism in any case.

¹ Except one – the name of critic Erlih, who criticized an author that was frequently published in “Oktyabr”.

Do not press, but help.

And Stalin also used to say:

- Literature is a subtle thing.

- Treat the writers with care.

- Do not administrate.

- Mind that sometimes a writer sees further than we, politicians, do”
[Oktyabr 1946, № 5: 156].

The chief editor of the journal “Oktyabr” confesses in the very first line that he is not saying anything new, and this phrase explains the policy of the journal: the editors board is afraid to say something new, or, to be more precise, to say something wrong.

In conclusion, we should say that the analysis of the poetry published in the journal “Oktyabr” reveals not an absolutely uniform image of Soviet poetry in the first postwar years. The leading motif of partisanship is obvious, but the positive evaluation of Russian symbolism and American poetry certifies that there was no univocal attitude to literature in general. If the variety of poetic publications looks rather monotonous, then in the critical essays there is a certain impression of uncertainty that is common for the crucial points of history. And this is that uncertainty that makes possible the inductive approach of literary criticism even in the most conservative Soviet literary journal “Oktyabr”.

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