The Literary Life of Leopold Averbakh

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In 1922 a few dissenting members of the proletarian literary circle The Smithy established a unique kind of literary organization, an organization modeled on the Leninist principle of *партийность*.[1] Emphatic advocates of proletarian literature, these communist idealists believed to have discovered the most revolutionary mechanism for building a socialist literary culture — a highly centralized cohort of writers and critics unwaveringly loyal to the Communist Party. The publication of their thick journal, *On Guard* (*Na postu*), radically transformed the course of Soviet cultural politics. Believing that the position of *напостовство* in literature should mirror that of the vanguard party in politics, the editors of the journal aspired to forge a disciplined movement of professional proletarian writers committed to waging an ideological class struggle on the literary front. The main tasks of this vanguard were to inculcate workers and peasants with a socialist ethos and to promote cadres who would obediently execute the directives of the Party. In the late 1920s, propelled by the militancy of the Cultural Revolution, *напостовство* became the dominant literary movement in the Soviet Union.[2] One critic emerged as the primary interpreter of *напостовство*'s overarching politico-aesthetic vision — Leopold Averbakh.

A prolific critic who hoped to apply Karl Marx's understanding of historical materialism to literary production, Averbakh's theoretical contribution to Soviet literary scholarship cannot be negated. At the age of twenty-six, he presided over the most powerful organization of writers in the Soviet Union, The Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP). An exploration of his critical writings, including the collections *Our Literary Disagreements*, *On the Path of the Cultural Revolution*, and *The Creative Path of Proletarian Literature*, demonstrate how Averbakh's aesthetics shaped the course of Soviet postrevolutionary literary culture. Regardless of his legendary status

[1] *Партийность (partiinost')* roughly translates as 'party-mindedness.' Refer to Lenin's "Party Organization and Party Literature."

[2] The founding members of the movement included Grigorii Lelevich (Kalmanson), Illarion Vardin (Mgeladze), Boris Volin, Semën Rodov, and Leopold Averbakh. Lelevich was a critic and poet, one of the editors of *October* and *On Guard* who also served as a co-secretary of both VAPP (the All-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers) and MAPP (the Moscow Association of Proletarian Writers). Vardin was a critic and writer, founding member of the Octobrists, and a supporter of the Left Opposition from 1925 to 1928. Volin was a critic and prominent journalist, one of the editors of *On Guard* and *On Literary Guard*. Rodov was a critic and poet, one of the first editors of *October* and *On Guard* and a co-secretary of VAPP from 1924 to 1926.

as the petty tyrant responsible for the degradation of Russian literature, Averbakh's body of work captures a remarkable moment in history — the desire to build an entirely new proletarian culture using the abstract tools of Marxism-Leninism and deriving inspiration from the daily struggle to render permanent the social revolution. Until his fall from power in 1932, Averbakh propagated *напостовство*'s radical vision of class-conscious literature. He did so despite the outcries of his vocal opponents who, by the end of the 1920s, included not only the majority of Soviet literary figures, but also the very Party whose goals he still claimed to be serving.

In her journals, Anna Karavaeva, a fellow member of RAPP, had the following to say about Averbakh:

> "there was a figure, only an organizer (like a 'general secretary'), who had literary connections, but no actual relation to the artistic craft. Someone once spoke of Leopold Averbakh as a harsh, yet knowledgeable, man. A publicist, an agitator, he wanted to organize everything according to a designated 'proletarian base,' as he explained. Correctly acknowledging that there was a class war in literature, Averbakh, in my opinion, presented it very narrowly, not wanting to comprehend the specifics. [...] Oversimplifying, though not realizing it himself, he often simply administered, thereby turning many people against him."[3]

Karavaeva's observations echoed the judgments of many of her contemporaries whose negative opinions of Averbakh left a dark stain upon his reputation. Notoriety remains his single, most memorable historical imprint. Renowned for igniting vitriolic attacks on fellow writers, scholars have avoided a thorough analysis of Averbakh's literary aesthetics precisely because of the belligerent polemicizing prevalent in his articles. Such criticism, however, fails to illuminate the ways in which Averbakh managed to consolidate a literary organization capable of defying its critics, securing the financial and moral support of the Central Committee, and presenting a comprehensive theoretical framework for building proletarian literature. Most of the historiography has focused upon the disputes, personality clashes and backdoor alliances that epitomized the internal dynamics of RAPP. Much less has been written about Averbakh's concrete aesthetic designs and ambitions. His body of work, albeit highly caustic in tone and presentation, nonetheless shows the striking cohesion of his thought. Altogether, his writings attest to his belief in the indispensability of proletarian literature, his hopes for the cultural and intellectual advancement of the masses, and

[3] Anna Karavaeva, *Svet vcherashnii: vospominaniia* (Moskva: Sovetsii pisatel', 1964), 285.

his faith in historical materialism as the ideological weapon of the working class. Moreover, his views capture the essence of the Cultural Revolution — the attempt to incorporate workers and peasants into the larger Soviet body politic.

What was *напостовство*?

The instigators of *напостовство*, originally known as the Octobrists, stipulated that the culture of a given society always rests in the hands of a dominant class and therefore serves to advance the particular interests of this class. Clearly deriving this notion from Marx and Engels' famous dictum that "the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class," the Octobrists maintained that the proletariat must destroy the bourgeoisie's monopoly on culture by inventing works of art that reflect the values and aspirations of workers (and, by extension, the universal needs of mankind).[4] According to them, only by creating its own literary canon would the proletariat hasten the immanent triumph of the still nascent socialist order. In contrast to other literary groups at the time, however, the Octobrists also believed that the construction of proletarian literature necessarily implied curtailing the dissemination of the so-called bourgeois literature of the fellow travelers.[5] The duty of the *напостовец* was to erect a "communist cell" in the heart of a decaying bourgeois republic of letters by promoting the general proletarianization of culture.[6] Considering the Party the infallible arbiter in all things, the Octobrists yearned to acquire its official sanction to oversee literary affairs. Averbakh emphasized the need to scrupulously follow the dictates of the political leadership. For many of his contemporaries, the unabashed willingness to subordinate the supposedly higher interests of art to those of politics was to debase the very meaning of art. Countless writers viewed Averbakh as a demagogue imposing draconian measures of partisanship, a disciplinarian whose crude application of Marxist-Leninist theory to literary production was, by definition, uncompromising. As historian Robert Maguire remarks in his monograph, *Red Virgin Soil*,

[4] Karl Marx, ed. Eugene Kamenka, *The Portable Karl Marx* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 225.
[5] The term fellow traveler (*попутчик*), invented by Lev Trotsky, referred to a writer, who, while sympathetic to the socialist cause, had not officially joined the Communist Party. The proletarian writers often used the term in a derogatory way, deeming any writer not supportive of RAPP's platform a fellow traveler.
[6] Robert Maguire, *Red Virgin Soil: Soviet Literature in the 1920s* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), 162.

> "somehow the Octobrists epitomized everything that had been worst about [the literary organizations], and, it was feared, everything that was inevitable if the organizations now gained too much power: strident self-promotion, below-the-belt fighting tactics, and intolerance of dissension. [...] people could remember Averbakh's dictum that writers did not appear spontaneously, but had to be developed out of a powerful, monolithic organization."[7]

Arguments that only highlight RAPP's instrumental role as the de facto organ of the regime, however, oversimplify Averbakh's larger politico-aesthetic project.

In his article, "What is *напостовство*," Averbakh delineated the main ideological and stylistic characteristics defining the movement as a literary and political phenomenon. Asserting that one should evaluate *напостовство* from an objective, rather than polemical, point of view, he delved into the three key questions lying at the heart of the still embryonic movement: the imperative to build proletarian literature, the politicization of the aesthetic, and the relationship between militant leftist writers allied with the Party and nonaligned bourgeois and petit-bourgeois writers (or fellow travelers).[8] In the article, Averbakh resolutely declared that "*напостовство*'s point of view on the question of the possibility or impossibility of proletarian literature turns out to be categorically clear: proletarian literature exists, grows, and the future belongs to it."[9] What was at stake for Averbakh was the progression not only of proletarian literature, but of "class culture, in general, the understanding of the cultural revolution, the principle of the hegemony of proletarian literature, and the compatibility or incompatibility of the dictatorship of the proletariat with a dictatorship of un-proletarian ideology."[10] In other words, challenges rooted in the Bolshevik experiment of building socialism without a concrete historical blueprint and in conditions completely unsuited for the task. The project of constructing proletarian culture inherently served the ultimate objective of the regime — to realize the transition to a classless society after having guided the proletariat in overthrowing its class adversary, the bourgeoisie. The means of *напостовство* ran parallel to the means of the state for only the vanguard party, whether of professional revolutionaries or of proletarian literary cadres, could bring communism to fruition.

[7] Maguire, 395.
[8] Averbakh, *Nashi literaturnye raznoglasiia* (Leningrad: Rabochiee izdatel'stvo priboi, 1927), 13.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 16.

The ultimate objective of all proletarian literature, according to Averbakh, was to promote the ideals of the Cultural Revolution. "The enduring tendency of *On Guard*," he wrote, was "the integration of literary questions into the broader questions of the cultural revolution."[11] The proletarian writers intended to foster the intellectual, indeed ideological, uplifting of workers and peasants deemed crucial to overcoming the bourgeoisie's hitherto unchallenged monopoly of culture. Thus, *напостовство* conveyed the class struggle to the literary front. It strove to form a literary movement loyal to the aspirations of the regime itself, a movement that had only been rendered possible because of the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in the first place. Averbakh routinely quoted the following lines from a poem by Aleksandr Bezymenskii as the motif of *напостовство*:

Прежде всего — я член партии
А стихотворец... потом.[12]

Similarly, in an article commemorating the death of Dmitri Furmanov, Averbakh characterized the late writer as the emblematic figure of the proletarian movement precisely because, in addition to being a writer, he had been a "commissar, an organizer, an administrator, a leader of the collective, and a party-warrior."[13] Even after RAPP fell into disfavor with the authorities, Averbakh still championed proletarian literature as the only literature suited to the masses of workers and peasants aspiring to cultural enlightenment. He rightly claimed that the goals of *напостовство* remained inseparable from the larger goals of Stalin's Cultural Revolution. Yet, it should be noted that, although *напостовство* brazenly asserted that literature must not deviate from the official party line, it did not argue that literature had no substantive aesthetic merit of its own. The proletarian writers sought to publish works that reinforced the Party without succumbing to purely propagandistic ends.

In "The Theory of Proletarian Literature," writer and revolutionary Victor Serge commented on the importance of these new proletarian theoreticians, like Averbakh, who believed that the literary craft reflected a writer's political convictions and allegiances. For the proletarian writers,

[11] Averbakh, *Nashi literaturnye raznoglasiia* (Leningrad: Rabochiee izdatel'stvo priboi, 1927), 17.
[12] Ibid., 24. *First of all — I am a member of the Party / And poet... second*. Bezymenskii was a proletarian poet, one of the founders of October, and one of the leaders of MAPP and VAPP from 1923 to 1926.
[13] Furmanov joined the Octobrists in 1923, serving as the leader of MAPP. RGALI, f. 522, op. 3, d. 8.

literature was an activist vocation that empowered the voices of workers or, perhaps more accurately, the voices of the patrons of the working class — the Communist Party. Serge wrote that proletarian writers "will have much to destroy and suffer: the world has to be refashioned. But like the armies of old, they will have their bards, their story tellers, their musicians and their philosophers."[14] His words resemble Averbakh's own proclamations that the creation of proletarian literature encapsulated the revolutionary project for change — the total transformation of the social order and the universalization of communist ideals. Moreover, Serge added, "the revolutionary work [proletarian literature] is achieving thus has a cultural value in and of itself. In this historically limited sense there will be, and there always is, a culture of the militant proletariat."[15] Throughout his literary career, Averbakh claimed to be doing precisely that — making possible the cultural victory of the militant proletariat. As he exclaimed, "in its literary work, *напостовство* has always followed the steady implementation of the party line, Lenin's theory of the cultural revolution, and the necessary efforts of the proletarian movement, which it has theoretically interpreted. Because *напостовство* not only has an acclaimed past, not only a present of which it should not be ashamed, but also a great future."[16] An ingenious agitator, Averbakh was the very personification of *напостовство*. Defining the movement would be fruitless without exploring the nature of the man himself, the evolution of his thought, and the lasting legacy of his literary exploits.

Who was Averbakh?

Leopold Leonidovich Averbakh was born in Saratov in 1903. His father was the owner of a small steamship on the Volga and his mother was the sister of Bolshevik revolutionary Iakov Sverdlov. Shortly before completing fifth grade at the lyceum, Averbakh joined the Komsomol and spent some time abroad with the Young Communist International. He became a member of the Communist Party in 1920. In his youth, Averbakh was involved in many of the newly burgeoning proletarian literary circles, remaining a prolific contributor to the major thick journals *Young Guard*,

[14] Victor Serge, ed. Al Richardson, *Collected Writings on Literature and Revolution* (London: Francis Boutle, 2004), 47.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Averbakh, *Protiv men'shivizma v literaturovedenii* (Moskva: Ogiz RSFSP Moskovskii rabochii, 1931), 4.

October, *On Guard*, and the one most intimately associated with his name, *On Literary Guard*.[17] Having acquired the reputation of being one of the most outspoken defenders of proletarian literature, Averbakh was appointed as General Secretary of RAPP in 1926.[18] It was not until 1928, coinciding with the inauguration of the First Five Year Plan, however, that *напостовство* would become a force to be reckoned with. Despite its claims to hegemony, the movement, especially under Averbakh's directorship, was unceasingly plagued by fractious disagreements and vicious power struggles.[19]

For instance, in her journals, the writer Karavaeva chronicled her many disillusionments after joining RAPP in 1928. She remarked,

> "as time passed, I became more and more convinced that the many sessions and meetings in which I participated left the impression of unending discussions over the problem of organization. Often it was frustrating to think that all of our RAPP meetings resembled commissions to dismantle the unending clashes and conflicts amongst the different literary circles. Some comrades even acknowledged that organizational problems took so much time and attention, but nothing ever changed."[20]

Indeed, as Averbakh's own publications illustrate, the organization was constantly unmasking new — real and imagined — ideological enemies. Much of Karavaeva's criticism was not directed against the notion of forging a powerful proletarian literary front, but against the methods resorted to by the dictatorial leadership. Significantly, her critique of *напостовство* was mostly a reflection of her aversion to Averbakh's administrative style. "Known to all writers of those years," she disclosed, "was the 'tiger-like' gaze (I no longer remember who called it so) that signaled nothing good for the one who provoked its angry stare."[21] Maxim Gorky shared Karavaeva's belief that RAPP, clearly incapable of resolving its many structural problems, failed to cultivate an atmosphere of literary camaraderie. In 1932, in a letter to a fellow writer, Gorky wrote that "egotism, yearning for fame, sympathies and antipathies, and uncalled vulgarity between the writers are motives that play a great role in RAPP, and one may understand them as the result of a lack of cultural education, a lack of time for individual self-growth, and, of course, the general nerve-racking

[17] The first editorial board of *On Guard* included Averbakh, Boris Volin, Iurii Libedinskii, Mikhail Ol'minskii, and Fëdor Raskol'nikov.
[18] Before 1928, RAPP was known as VAPP (The All-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers).
[19] The diaries of Dmitri Furmanov, for example, vividly capture the strife within the Octobrist faction.
[20] Ibid., 179.
[21] Karavaeva, 182.

overwork these youngsters are under."[22] Even the staunchest supporters of RAPP's institutional and ideological role on the literary front disapproved of Averbakh's dogmatism and resented his tendency to provoke disputes within the ranks of the RAPP leadership.

Critical of the innerworkings of RAPP, writers like Karavaeva and Gorky still considered the organization a necessary stepping-stone in the foundation of socialist culture. As Gorky noted, "one might conclude that I am against the 'leading role' of RAPP. That's a false conclusion. On the whole, RAPP is barely capable of securing such a role for itself, and moreover, the responsibility for such work. If one could choose the brightest, the most knowledgeable communist workers from RAPP — then the question of its 'leading' role in this project is definitely affirmative."[23] In fact, Gorky appraised Averbakh as one of the most "knowledgeable communist workers." One of Averbakh's closest colleagues, the writer Aleksandr Fadeev, shared many of Gorky's impressions. Responding to one of Gorky's letters, for example, he wrote, "I'm afraid it must be admitted that some of [Averbakh's] mannerisms — his familiar bluntness and his egoism, in which, of course, there's a lot of liveliness and childishness… alienate him from you."[24] Even so, Fadeev qualified, "[Averbakh] is a wonderful comrade, and it's not accidental that he is involved in literature, he was meant to be, and his effort is exceedingly beneficial."[25] While critical, often indulgently so, the perspectives of these writers shed light on the kinds of ambivalent relationships Averbakh built with his fellow associates. These perspectives, moreover, greatly contributed to the conflicting legacy of *напостовство*. Yet, for better or worse, in the late 1920s, at the time of RAPP's apogee, Averbakh stood at the center of Soviet literary life. Having overcome several oppositions to his consolidation of power, he managed to transform RAPP into the kind of highly centralized, albeit conflict-ridden, organization the Octobrists had desired all along.

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[22] *A. M. Gor'kii i sozdanie istorii fabrik i zavodov: sbornik dokumentov i materialov v pomoshch' rabotaiushchim nad istoriei fabrik i savodov SSSR* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoi literatury, 1959), 49.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Aleksandr Fadeev, *Pis'ma i dokumenty* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Literaturnogo instituta im. A. M. Gor'kogo, 2001). Fadeev was a prominent Soviet writer who served as one of the leaders of RAPP from 1926 to 1932, making him one of Averbakh's closest associates. He was the chairman of the Union of Soviet Writers from 1946 to 1954.
[25] Ibid.

Напостовство in Theory: Averbakh's Aesthetics

Literary life immediately following the October Revolution, but especially after the end of the Civil War, was fluid and volatile. The New Economic Policy allowed for relative liberalization in the arts. Its reign still not entrenched, "the Party had worked out no norms, practical or theoretical, for a good many things, among them literature, and tolerated a relatively free discussion almost until the end of the twenties."[26] Many literary circles vied for superiority in the artistic realm as they tried to define the meaning of socialist culture and to set the tone for the new literary regime. Averbakh's aesthetic vision was very much the product of this acrimonious political and cultural climate in which the fate, let alone the hegemony, of proletarian culture was undecided. In May of 1924, at a press conference discussing the role of the Party in literary affairs, Averbakh delivered a brief speech defending the creation of proletarian literature and requesting funds to finance the proletarian writers. Criticizing Aleksandr Voronskii, the main spokesman at the conference, for his failure to acknowledge the rising influence of proletarian literature, Averbakh argued that a proletarian writer could not intellectually flourish in an environment still heavily dominated by bourgeois fellow travelers. The spread of proletarian literature, according to him, was impossible without the solidification of a mass proletarian movement since "a group of emerging working-class writers is more important than individual rising talents." By establishing more publications and printing presses sympathetic to the views of the proletarian movement, revolutionary cultural institutions, he argued, should "guide the emergence of new writers."[27] Specifically denouncing the proliferation of bourgeois thick journals, Averbakh accused Voronskii of having permitted them to flourish. Bourgeois journals, Averbakh remarked, only validated the views of the old intelligentsia and were thus inherently anti-revolutionary. Indeed, one of Averbakh's main criticisms of Voronskii was the failure of the latter to lure enough bourgeois writers to the communist cause. "The real fellow traveler," Averbakh exclaimed, "should remain with us [the proletarians]."[28]

The debate at the press conference pitted two contrasting visions of the future of Soviet

[26] Maguire, 150.
[27] *K voprosu o politike RKP (b) v hudozhestvennoi literature* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo krasnaia nov', 1924), 41.
[28] Ibid., 42.

literature against each other. On one side stood Aleksandr Voronskii, editor of the thick journal, *Red Virgin Soil*, and one of the most respected and influential literary thinkers. Voronskii passionately believed that art should not be reduced to ideology, to socioeconomic determinism, to the politics of class struggle. Literature that purely functioned to promote the interests of a particular class (class relativism), rather than to manifest the universality of human existence, in his eyes, ceased to be literature.[29] He was convinced that the nature of the creative process could neither be fully comprehended nor fully articulated because writers' impulse to create rests as much upon intuition, emotion and impressionability as upon methodology, reason and logic. Since all genuine works of art have an aesthetic value that cannot be objectively qualified or schematically categorized, aesthetic judgments should not be crudely based on an adherence to a particular ideological or political agenda. The literary vocation, while not isolated from state affairs, must retain a certain distance from the political lest it forgets its own *raison d'être* — the cognition of life. The literary group The Pass (*Pereval*), though not officially led by Voronskii, was representative of his aesthetic beliefs, which, importantly, also included a defense of the fellow travelers.

On the other side stood the representatives of proletarian literature whose offensive against Voronskii — branding him the custodian of bourgeois art, a decadent Freudian, an esoteric who lacked empathy for the plight of the toiling masses — cemented their reputation as the most militant of literary fronts. As defenders of proletarian aesthetics, they claimed that all hitherto existing literature had served the particular interests of the ruling class, the bourgeoisie. In order to transcend the bourgeoisie's monopoly on cultural capital, the proletariat needed to create its own literature. An ideological class struggle necessarily accompanied the material transition from a capitalist to a socialist mode of production. In this ideological struggle, the proletariat, waving the red banner of socialism, had to obtain hegemony. Criticizing *Pereval* for its avowed humanism (in the eyes of the proletarian writers, a system of values foreign to the working class), Averbakh argued that "under the banner of *Pereval* the proletarian revolution has retreated back to bourgeois literature."[30] The followers of Voronskii, according to him, lacked the vigilance and intolerance

[29] Refer to Voronskii's *Art as the Cognition of Life.*
[30] RGALI, f. 631, op. 3, d. 15.

required of revolutionaries under the dictatorship of the proletariat, the period of transition to socialism. Even though the dictatorship already ruled, it remained vulnerable to the possibility of retreat and counterrevolution. Seeking reinforcement to thwart such a retreat, the proletarian writers looked to their natural ally — the Party. They did not have to wait long.

On July 1, 1925, the Party issued a decree, which legitimized its right to intervene in literary affairs. The political leadership hoped to stifle the growing enmity between the competing literary circles once and for all. "While morally and materially supporting the proletarian and proletarian-peasant literature and aiding the fellow travelers," the decree announced, "the Party cannot offer a monopoly to any of these groups."[31] As Robert Maguire suggests, "by letting a number of different theories and viewpoints clash, expose their weaknesses, and work out their imprecisions, the Party in effect was encouraging the development of a solid body of Marxist esthetics; and when the time came, there would be something substantial from which to pick and choose in order to construct an official theory."[32] Nevertheless, the decree's declaration that an indisputable class war existed on the literary front, that "in a class society there is not, nor can there be, a neutral art," vindicated the confrontational stance of *напостовство* rather than the politically detached stance of the fellow travelers.[33] Not yet superior, the proletarian writers now harbored hopes that they might govern the future aesthetic order. The immediate effect of the decree, however, was to split *напостовство* into two factions: the Left, headed by Illarion Vardin and Semën Rodov, and the Right, headed by Averbakh and Yuri Libedinskii. At the heart of the debate between the two factions was the question whether or not to recognize the viewpoints of the fellow travelers. After a heated debate, Averbakh and Libedinskii, pledging allegiance to the resolution, favored a détente with the fellow travelers. As their manifesto, "Against the Left Liquidators," declared,

> "the extraordinary all-union conference of proletarian writers recognizes the false line of the Menshevik leadership (comrades Rodov, Lelevich and Vardin) and considers them guilty of weakness of leadership, as noted of late. The substance of comrades Rodov, Lelevich and Vardin's mistakes consists of the following: a) their overestimation of bourgeois literature, their panic about it, and their distrust in the strength of proletarian literature. Hence their fear of expanding the VAPP federation of Soviet writers because then, in the opinion of the Menshevik leadership, bourgeois

[31] *Vlast' i hudozhestvennaia intelligentsia: dokumenty, 1917-1953*, ed. Andrei Artizov and Oleg Naumov (Moskva: Mezhdunarodnyi fond 'Demokratia', 1999), 53.
[32] Maguire, 167.
[33] *Vlast' i hudozhestvennaia intelligentsia: dokumenty, 1917-1953*, 54.

and petit-bourgeois writers would be able to overwhelm and to degenerate the proletarian writers."[34]

Averbakh and Libedinskii criticized the Left Opposition for its failure to grasp that the Party's decree had essentially permitted the proletarian writers to broaden their literary movement and to garner more sympathizers. Only three years later, writer Vladimir Sutyrin could publically proclaim, "of course, some [writers] would like that there be no party leadership [in the field of literature], but they are afraid of saying this aloud, because that would be proof that before us stand class enemies."[35] Political neutrality during the height of the Cultural Revolution was not a position many fellow travelers openly embraced unless they were assured they could withstand the wrath of RAPP.

The defeat of the Left Opposition marked Averbakh's emergence as the indisputable leader of the Octobrists. In 1926, those loyal to him, supporters of the resolution, founded the journal *On Literary Guard* and the Federation of Organizations of Soviet Writers (FOSP). Even though many eminent literary groups participated in FOSP, the federation was neither democratic nor representative; VAPP, the largest standing organization, ruled behind the scenes, at times rigging votes in the electorate. Indeed, "Averbakh had maneuvered skillfully, combining the old Voronskii idea of federation with the VAPP idea of strong, centralized control. The result, the FOSP, suited the Party's palate admirably, and provided the prototype of the Union of Soviet Writers: the mass organization under tight Party control."[36] By 1926, few writers doubted that a consolidation of power into the hands of one organization — VAPP — had transformed the entire literary scene. The head of this powerful organization claimed to represent the orthodox Marxist-Leninist vision of literature and the legacy of the October Revolution. In the words of Averbakh, RAPP was "the pillar of the Party's literary politics."[37] Thus,

> "RAPP was the organization to which the Party would naturally turn as the chief support of its policy in the field of literary organization, literary production, and literary criticism. And while there is no statement of the Central Committee which definitively names RAPP as the spokesman of the Central Committee, yet it soon became clear that the Party depended upon RAPP to consolidate all Communist literary forces, to fight against 'deviations' in the literary field, and to aid in carrying out

[34] Averbakh, *Nashi literaturnye raznoglasiia*, 249.
[35] RGALI, f. 1698, op. 1, d. 1404.
[36] Maguire, 412.
[37] RGALI, f. 1698, op. 1, d. 1404.

literary directives."[38]

The history of the proletarian literary movement before Stalin's Revolution reveals significant facts about Averbakh's ability to manipulate political developments to the benefit of *напостовство*. Circumstances leading to the ascendancy of *напостовство*, however, were determined not only by the rapidly changing political context, but also by the movement's particular aesthetic vision — a vision of proletarian literature synthesized in Averbakh's own critical writings.

At the heart of Averbakh's entire aesthetic project was the attempt to apply the theory of dialectical materialism, Marx's understanding of the movement of history and the class struggle, to literature. Applying even the rudimentary tenets of Marxism to literary production, however, posed a few complications, not least because Marx himself was not very interested in aesthetics. Regardless, the Bolshevik revolutionaries understood that literary affairs were intricately related to the affairs of state building. The question of the role literature played in an embryonic socialist state, which, in theory, proceeded to transfer power from the hands of a ruling elite to the hitherto disempowered and dispossessed, could not remain unanswered for long. After all, the revolutionaries did not only aspire to overhaul the capitalist mode of production, thereby solidifying the dictatorship of the proletariat, but to initiate the radical reorganization of every facet of social life, human relations, and cultural praxis. To orthodox materialists, the restructuring of the means of production, distribution, and exchange (the economic base) affected an individual's mentality and mode of everyday life. A ruling class owning the means of production in a given society, possessing a disproportionate amount of intellectual capital, also framed the parameters of this society's dominant cultural practices. In a socialist workers' state, which the Communist Party claimed to be building, the overthrow of the bourgeoisie would pave the way for the creation of proletarian culture. Averbakh remarked that, in the Soviet Union, "we have a dictatorship of the proletariat. Does this mean that the ruling working class has become the ruler of both material and spiritual power?"[39] Given that proletarian culture had not yet achieved cultural hegemony, he concluded that the proletariat had not attained spiritual empowerment. According to him, the policies of NEP

[38] Brown, *The Proletarian Episode in Russian Literature, 1928-1932*, 90.
[39] Averbakh, *Nashi literaturnye raznoglasiia*, 21.

had created an anachronism — the solidification of a communist political regime in the absence of proletarian ideology.[40] The existence of a still powerful bourgeois intelligentsia, nurtured by NEP's conciliatory policies toward the fellow travelers, was seen as the primary reason for the relative primitiveness of proletarian culture. The prerevolutionary noncommunist intelligentsia, Averbakh claimed, had managed to dominate in the cultural realm due to its privileged socioeconomic status. For him, the fellow travelers constituted the greatest barrier to the progress of proletarian culture. Therefore, the Manichean struggle against the bourgeoisie represented nothing less than "the struggle for the exclusion of un-proletarian ideology [...] the struggle for the transformation of the proletariat into a ruling spiritual power, a struggle for the growth of proletarian ideology into socialism, into communist humanism. The proletariat will either become the ruling spiritual force or it will not succeed in the construction of socialist society."[41]

Not all Marxist theorists advocated the creation of literature serving the exclusive interests of a particular class (the proletariat) or favored the declaration of class war on the cultural front. Lev Trotsky, one of RAPP's most famed critics, vehemently spoke out against the concept of proletarian (class) literature. In *Literature and Revolution*, he wrote, "there can be no question of the creation of a new culture, of construction on a large historic scale during the period of dictatorship. The cultural reconstruction which will begin when the need of the iron clutch of a dictatorship unparalleled in history will have disappeared, will not have a class character; the proletariat acquires power for the purpose of doing away forever with class culture and to make way for human culture."[42] Trotsky believed that "such terms as 'proletarian literature' and 'proletarian culture' are dangerous, because they erroneously compress the culture of the future into the narrow limits of the present day. They falsify perspectives, they violate proportions, they distort standards and they cultivate the arrogance of small circles which is most dangerous."[43] The arguments presented by Trotsky, and shared by Voronskii, Averbakh's archenemy, were precisely the kinds of arguments Averbakh and his fellow co-conspirators felt the need to fend against. If,

[40] Averbakh, *Nashi literaturnye raznoglasiia*, 20.
[41] Ibid., 22.
[42] Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 186.
[43] Ibid., 205.

as Marx once wrote, "philosophy can only be realized by the abolition of the proletariat, and the proletariat can only be abolished by the realization of philosophy," then Averbakh's ultimate goal was to grant the proletariat the weapon with which to abolish the notion of class altogether.[44] Contrary to Trotsky, Averbakh did not regard the creation of proletarian literature as antithetical to a Marxist worldview. The proletarian writers thought that, regardless of how long it may take to realize a classless society, the working class had to immediately begin the process of rapid cultural accumulation, guided by *напостовство*.

Disagreements between the proponents and opponents of proletarian literature reflected not only diverging interpretations of revolutionary aesthetics, but also two irreconcilable views of the role the Party should play in literary production. True to the Leninist principle of *партийность*, Averbakh recoiled from Trotsky's positive appraisal of the fellow travelers, contending that it offered a false sense of neutrality that was dangerous during the period of fierce ideological class struggle. "To speak of free competition," argued Averbakh, "means to aid whomever has the most means, and not the proletarian writer."[45] Despite Averbakh and Libedinskii's professed détente with the fellow travelers, *напостовство* continued to treat nonaligned writers with suspicion and disdain. Criticism of the fellow travelers invariably touched upon the fear that proletarian literature would fail to gain hegemony without the explicit interference of the Party. Only the Party could force the bourgeois writers to yield. Since the proletariat lacked the resources needed to challenge the bourgeoisie's technical and professional expertise, only the Party could sanctify RAPP's partisanship as the true interpreter of the Marxist heritage. Lastly, only the Party could provide the material and moral support necessary for the growth of new proletarian cadres. In other words, a *смычка* between the proletarian writers and the fellow travelers remained a theoretical and practical impossibility.

For Averbakh, literature, like all art, was inseparable from the notion of class. Literature was one of the ideological tools for the aggrandizement of the class in whose hands belonged the material and cultural riches of a given society. Averbakh's endeavor to translate dialectical materialism,

[44] Marx, 124.
[45] Averbakh, *Nashi literaturnye raznoglasiia*, 53.

Marxism-Leninism, to literary production was premised on the understanding that "art is a part of the ideological superstructure."[46] In his book, *Russian Literature Since the Revolution*, historian Edward Brown remarks that amongst the avant-garde "the idea was widely accepted that the new literature would be, not 'created,' but produced, by verbal craftsmen cognizant of the facts of life and instructed in Marxist ideology."[47] Whereas Voronskii emphasized the individual subconscious creation of the writer, Averbakh prioritized the production of literature as a non-spontaneous and highly regimented process. The interconnectedness between art and politics, however, raised a pivotal question — how does a communist writer insert ideology into a literary work without degrading the very essence of that work, without rendering it a propagandistic instrument on behalf of political power? In response to the question of how the proletarian aesthetic differed from that of other literary schools, proponents of proletarian culture were, of course, attentive to the issues of form and style, characterization and plot development. In one article, for example, Averbakh attempted to salvage RAPP from accusations of an excessive preoccupation with purely political and organizational matters:

> "it would be completely wrong to view *напостовство* as a movement concerned solely with general questions regarding the cultural revolution, class warfare on the ideological front, literary politics. With a united vision concerning these problems, we strive to achieve a uniform position regarding our artistic platform, considering ourselves one of the schools of proletarian literature; we are working towards the unification of a school whose goal is the elaboration of an artistic method based on dialectical materialism. We advance the banner of realism, tearing down all masks (as Lenin has said of Tolstoy), realist art, exposing that which the romantics cover, the varnishing of reality."[48]

Throughout the 1920s, the *напостовство* leadership desired to forge a literary movement that would exemplify dialectical materialism ("the worldview of the proletariat"[49]) and uphold the ideals of socialism. As Averbakh stated, "the works of the proletarian writers taught and cultivated in our organization — that's the weapon with which our organization serves the triumph of communism."[50] Many of his most salient theoretical works particularly focused on the question of literary style.

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[46] Averbakh, *Tvorcheskie puti proletarskoi literatury* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1928), 267.
[47] Brown, *Russian Literature Since the Revolution*, 200.
[48] Averbakh, *Tvorcheskie puti proletarskoi literatury*, 303.
[49] RGALI, f. 1698, op. 1, d. 1404.
[50] RGALI, f. 1698, op. 1, d. 835.

In the collection of articles, *Creative Paths of Proletarian Literature*, Averbakh elaborated the stylistic objectives of *напостовство*. According to him, "style means a certain totality of images, ideological and formal, which categorically distinguishes one literary movement from another."[51] Style meant the totality of a given literary school's aesthetic vision, including the texture of a particular work and the impression it made upon the reader. Averbakh emphasized that "for [VAPP] the question of style, broadly understood, is of primary, not secondary, importance."[52] Given the fundamental precept of Marxist theory — a materialist worldview — Averbakh's endorsement of realism as the most suitable literary style for the proletarian writer was unsurprising. Proletarian realism, as conceptualized by the leading *напостовство* theorists, was realism framed by the unfolding of the historical dialectic. "The leadership of VAPP," Averbakh stated, "has issued the resolution [...] that realism will be the path that proletarian writers are to follow."[53] Realism represented the natural application of historical materialism to literary production for it rejected the intrinsic features of "bourgeois" idealism: subjectivism, abstraction, and romanticization. The principal obligation of the proletarian writer was to capture objective reality as discerningly and pointedly as possible, documenting the most minute changes affecting the material and social life of ordinary men and women engaged in the process of building socialism. In order to distance proletarian realism from classical (bourgeois) realism, Averbakh further qualified,

> "it would be impossible for the tempo of our epoch not to be reflected upon plot development and the overall structure of a work of art; proletarian realism illuminates the organic awareness of the ultimate aim of the proletariat fighting for the building of socialist society; the realistic portrayal of the individual because proletarian literature will pay great attention to the clash with the collective, displaying the interiority of the person not only to enhance the analysis of the specific individual, but, most importantly, to show the individual's contact with the social environment; the main psychological analysis of the person not only on the individual development of the character, but also on the process of change enacted upon this individual by the social environment."[54]

The rejection of idealism constituted the first facet of proletarian realism. As Averbakh explained, "more than anything, materialism is defined by its recognition of the real, material world. Materialism, examining the whole world as one living matter, including nature and man for

[51] Averbakh, *Tvorcheskie puti proletarskoi literatury*, 101.
[52] Ibid., 6.
[53] Ibid., 7.
[54] Ibid., 8.

whom life determines consciousness, always contradicts idealism."[55] For him, material life granted the proletarian writer everything he or she needed in order to create a work of art. Reality existed, objectively; the writer, seeking to reproduce the authenticity of real life without embellishment or falseness, simply illuminated a fragment of lived existence. Like a photographer taking a snapshot of his or her immediate surroundings, the writer elucidated the meaning of a specific image, occurrence, or an individual's physical and psychological state of mind. Unlike the bourgeois writer, the proletarian writer was not supposed to contemplate the multiplicity of Truth or harbor doubts that artistic objectivity may be an unreachable ideal. On the contrary, the proletarian writer, armed with true consciousness (dialectical materialism) and an ethos of avant-gardist militancy, was supposed to depict the facts of the daily class struggle. Clearly, Averbakh traced these ideas — the notion that the external material world shapes human consciousness and that human beings act upon the world as much as the world acts upon them — to Marxist theory. He also distinguished between metaphysical materialism and dialectical materialism. Only dialectical materialism, he remarked, accurately portrayed social reality since "one event always proceeds from another, the world being the constant movement of the development of the dialectic, of interpenetration."[56] The world the writer encountered, the world of the dialectic, was a world conditioned by uninterruptible regeneration, a world in which antithetical forces constantly clashed together only to resuscitate again. Hence, the contradiction of all art — the desire to freeze an image, a moment in time, that, in reality, cannot stand still.

The redefinition of the relationship between the individual and the collective constituted the second facet of proletarian realism. As an integral part of the epic narrative of the building of socialism, the proletarian writer could not depict a character as a being disconnected from the community at large or separated from the greater human collective. "For our proletarian writer," wrote Averbakh, "the 'I' is a part of the world, the real world."[57] Naturally, the individual character did not cease to exist as an autonomous agent, but he or she was an agent conditioned by

[55] Averbakh, *Tvorcheskie puti proletarskoi literatury*, 15.
[56] Ibid., 19.
[57] Ibid.

historical forces beyond his or her control. As Averbakh explained, "the writer takes up questions that stand before collective man, his perception of external circumstances, his approach to these circumstances, etc. External reality and the social environment in whose orbit he finds himself dictate all of this. To us, the writer is the free creator of his own ideological product."[58] Once again, Averbakh derived these ideas from Marxist theory — the assertion that the individual realizes his or her full potential only in community with others and that all individuals, whether they realize it or not, remain constrained by objective conditions beyond their immediate physical, even psychological, control. In the words of Marx, "communism as a truly developed naturalism is humanism and as a fully developed humanism is naturalism. It is the definitive resolution of the antagonism between man and nature, and between man and man. It is the true solution of the conflict between existence and essence, objectification and self-affirmation, between freedom and necessity, between individual and species."[59] By illustrating the changing relationship between the individual and the collective, the proletarian writer, as a creator keenly aware of the everyday experiences impacting the lives of ordinary people, was equally contributing to the building of socialism.

In other words, the writer performed a social function. Averbakh described this social function by the term "social command" (*sotsial'nyi zakaz*): "when a writer says that he is free to choose his theme, we affirm his freedom to do so. But we prove to the writer that his freedom is conditioned. This conditioning of the free will of the writer, in general, is expressed by the term, 'social command.'"[60] The creative labor of the writer, according to Averbakh, was always socially, and economically, determined. In detailing certain daily occurrences — e.g., the construction of a new factory or the interaction between two *kolkhozniki* — the writer fulfilled the larger goal of advancing socialism by helping the reading public interpret, understand, and engage in communal life. Many times Averbakh repeated that "proletarian art is not art necessarily made by the proletariat itself. Proletarian art is the kind of art that helps the proletariat in the construction of socialism,

[58] Averbakh, *Tvorcheskie puti proletarskoi literatury*, 10.
[59] Marx, 149.
[60] Averbakh, *Tvorcheskie puti proletarskoi literatury*, 10.

which organizes our thoughts and feelings in the direction of the building of communism."[61] More than an individual creator, the proletarian writer was the voice of the working class and the agent of the Revolution. Averbakh characterized the relationship between a proletarian writer, a member of the "the avant-garde of his class," and the proletariat by the writer's sense of pride to belong to the same class whose leader was Lenin.[62] Clearly, the proletarian writer was not to remain detached from ordinary people, but inspired, and even guided, by them. The relationship between the two was reciprocal; the writer glorified the deeds of the builders of socialism — "the heroes of our time"[63] — and the people were stimulated by the literature the proletarian writer published specifically for them.

Careful study and appreciation of the works of nineteenth century realist authors constituted the third facet of proletarian realism. In many of his writings, Averbakh highlighted the proletarian writer's need to emulate the style of certain classical literary icons. Echoing Lenin, Averbakh declared, "more than anything, our writers need to learn, learn, and learn."[64] Only by scrutinizing the traditional literary canon, according to him, would the proletarian writers be able to create for the working class the kind of literature bourgeois writers had created for the bourgeoisie. Only by mastering the style and form of the great realists of the past century would the proletarian writers be able to present to the masses the kind of literature that truly deserved to be called timeless. In this quest to imitate the great realists, one writer's example prevailed above all of the others — the example of Lev Tolstoy. Tolstoy captivated the proletarian writers not only because of his ability to capture, vividly and evocatively, the complexity of existence and to delineate characters whose internal worlds he meticulously unveiled, but also because his prose was easily accessible to the masses.[65] According to Averbakh, Tolstoy wrote in the unadorned language of ordinary people, conveying complex phenomena plainly and clearly. "At this moment in time, a moment of a great psychological revolution, the method of Tolstoy is the most appropriate for us," concluded

[61] Averbakh, *Tvorcheskie puti proletarskoi literatury*, 11.
[62] RGALI, f. 1698, op. 1, d. 1404.
[63] RGALI, f. 1698, op. 1, d. 838.
[64] Ibid., 28.
[65] It should be noted that the proletarian writers were not the only ones inspired by the works of Tolstoy. Voronskii, for example, wrote at length about Tolstoy.

Averbakh.[66] He added, "when we speak of learning, we mean that more than anything we need to learn from — Tolstoy."[67] Averbakh continuously emphasized that Lenin himself considered Tolstoy the greatest master of Russian realism; "Lenin has said that the works of Tolstoy are a step ahead in the creative development of mankind."[68] The attempt to imitate Tolstoy's method of in depth psychological characterization became one of the kernels of *напостовство*, and, one might argue, a theme that eventually caused a fracturing of relations between RAPP and the Party.

The psychological revolution to which Averbakh alluded was the concept of "the living man" (*zhivoi chelovek*). The consolidation of the dictatorship of the proletariat, he argued, engendered the unprecedented revolutionary transformation of social life — labor practices in factories and on farms, norms of familial and sexual relations, the most basic and private human desires and needs. Caught in the midst of it all, the ordinary Soviet citizen had to react and relate to this total reconfiguration of social reality, but could not do so alone. Hence the literary vanguard's tutelary relation with the people, guiding the masses' self-transformation into the new Soviet citizens of the "workers' state." How to grasp the changing mentality of these new men and women was a crucial component of Averbakh's aesthetic vision. In one article, for example, he remarked, "it is obvious that the analysis of individual psychology is the best literary path towards the understanding of social psychology. The deeper, the wider, the more multifaceted, artistically confident, detailed portrayal of the individual in literature, the vaster and the more endurable the type of the living man."[69] The prototype of the living man epitomized Averbakh's appropriation of Tolstoy's technique of in depth psychological character development to proletarian literature. Averbakh believed that the individual did not simply merge in the greater collective as if his or her own personality ceased to have any value, as if the conflict between the individual and the collective had been definitively resolved, as if one's personhood was submerged in an anonymous mass. As he explained, "we are certainly not afraid to summon writers to analyze individual psychology because we do not counterpose individual psychology to social psychology, but remember Marx's assertion that 'the

[66] Averbakh, *Tvorcheskie puti proletarskoi literatury*, 29.
[67] Ibid., 28.
[68] RGALI, f. 341, op. 3, d. 15.
[69] Averbakh, *Tvorcheskie puti proletarskoi literatury*, 112.

essence of man is an aggregate of social relations.'"[70] The prototype of the living man signified that Averbakh appreciated multifaceted and dynamic characters, not one-dimensional caricatures.

In order to provide insights into the transformative power of the new regime, the proletarian writer needed to delve into the innermost sentiments, yearnings and thoughts of the living man. Averbakh imagined the Revolution taking place within each man and woman as a struggle to embrace socialism and to abandon the outdated ways of prerevolutionary life. "It is necessary to fight against the elements of the past in each of us. It is necessary to cultivate and stimulate the spurts of the new. For this it is necessary to know man. For this it is necessary to know how to portray him as a living man."[71] Averbakh cautioned against portrayals of particular characters as purely good or purely evil. He believed such schematic characterization would defy the basic principles of realism because, in reality, individuals possess both positive and negative qualities — having the potential to commit appalling injustices or to demonstrate sacrificial moral fortitude. Heroes who never fail to defeat the forces of evil and wrongdoers who have no shred of virtue would simply not correspond to the notion of the living man. Interestingly, in his discussion of LEF, another prominent literary proletarian organization at the time led by Vladimir Mayakovsky, Robert Maguire mentions that the revolutionary writer was supposed to become a psycho-engineer. For the psycho-engineer, Maguire states, "genuine art builds life by producing 'things that organize the emotions' and because these 'things' serve a higher and still-to-come stage of reality, they exert an 'emotionally organizing influence on the psyche, in connection with the task of the class struggle.' The true artist is therefore a 'psycho-engineer' or 'psycho-builder;' his work serves the class that serves reality — i.e., the proletariat."[72] The living man was intended as a literary pedagogical model for inculcating workers and peasants with a socialist (non-capitalist) credo. Most importantly, Averbakh considered the living man an integral part of the Cultural Revolution. In many ways, the advent of Stalin's Revolution further radicalized *напостовство* by sanctioning its role as the de facto official vanguard on the cultural front and galvanizing its promotion of

[70] Averbakh, *Tvorcheskie puti proletarskoi literatury*, 112.
[71] Ibid., 115.
[72] Maguire, 190.

communist writers to fill the ranks of the growing corps of proletarian literary cadres.

One year after the inauguration of the First Five Year Plan, Averbakh wrote *On the Path of the Cultural Revolution*, one of his most exhaustive theoretical treatises. The text recapitulates many overarching *напостовство* themes and sheds light on the intricate connection between Averbakh's political and aesthetic convictions. On December 28, 1928, the Party issued a resolution concerning the importance of creating mass literature, strengthening the efforts of all literary organizations and popularizing Marxism-Leninism. "The Central Committee considers it necessary," the resolution announced, "to a greater extent than heretofore to see to it that mass literature be an instrument for the mobilization of the masses around the basic political and economic tasks [...], for the active class education of the workers and of the wide masses of the toilers against bourgeois and petit-bourgeois influences and survivals."[73] Averbakh obliged. *On the Path of the Cultural Revolution* addressed problems directly relevant to material production in the USSR, the industrialization drive, collectivization, and the literacy campaign. According to Averbakh, these large-scale political and economic developments — the penultimate stage in the dethronement of the bourgeoisie — had to be captured in the works of proletarian writers as the foundational moment in the building of socialism.

Averbakh's monograph introduced several themes previously unexplored in his theoretical writings, including humanity's prerogative to reign over nature and the need to mechanize production (to shift from labor- to capital-intensive production). He stated that, as beneficiaries of industrialization, the Soviet people would soon "be able to expand the power of man over nature, to develop all industry, to ensure the greatest results by the least exertion of human energy, to guarantee all human needs to the highest level than ever before, to prevent hard labor and enslavement by the machine for the benefit of the free man."[74] Averbakh's very language mimicked the vocabulary of the First Five Year Plan. While his earlier works also included general commentary about the level of Soviet industry, such commentary was only conjured up in relation to applying a Marxist (class) economic analysis to literature and rarely constituted a meaningful assessment

[73] *Vlast' i hudozhestvennaia intelligentsia*, 242.
[74] Averbakh, *Tvorcheskie puti proletarskoi literatury*, 9.

of larger socioeconomic processes. In addition to the glorification of man's conquest over the natural environment, he also stressed the need to cultivate a novel kind of worker — a worker adapting to the socialist ethic — and the pressing urgency to counter the detrimental tendencies of bureaucratization. While the text only vaguely explained how proletarian writers were to integrate these important themes in their literary works, it certainly placed the First Five Year Plan at the center of RAPP's platform. In light of the 1928 Party resolution, it validated Averbakh's allegiance to Stalin's political designs.

The trope of translating the ideological class war to the literary front permeates through the pages of the text. For instance, Averbakh commented, "the cultural revolution turns out not to be outside of class *культурничество*, but to be one form of our class struggle. Therefore, we need to struggle for proletarian hegemony in the cultural revolution."[75] The struggle for proletarian hegemony, however, had now become symbolically charged with the discourse of industrialization, de-*kulakization* and the assault on so-called bourgeois specialists. The need to culturally uplift workers and peasants — to create a new Soviet/proletarian intelligentsia of professionals, technicians, government functionaries, writers, and artists — had long been an undercurrent in Averbakh's defense of proletarian literature. It often rationalized the belligerent rhetoric of *напостовство*. The Cultural Revolution, instigating "a new way of being, a new culture of work, a new culture of socialization," may be interpreted as the fulfillment of Averbakh's brazen intent, once and for all, to emasculate the fellow travelers.[76] A proletarian victory in the Cultural Revolution, according to him, would make possible the advent of real socialism (NEP's system of state capitalism having been an ideological deviation from socialism). The promotion of proletarian cadres would create the conditions necessary for the realization of a new moral code, a code unsullied by the vestiges of bourgeois individualism and hypocrisy, or the history of socioeconomic inequality and class exploitation. Quoting liberally from Lenin's statements about Russian culture, Averbakh entreated the proletarian writers to be vigorously self-critical and conscious of what the past has, or has not, taught humanity. "The proletariat leads the cultural revolution, not only learning about, but also

[75] Averbakh, *Tvorcheskie puti proletarskoi literatury*, 59.
[76] Ibid., 60.

realizing in, mass culture a proletarian culture, based on the critical mastering of the whole cultural legacy of mankind."[77]

Bringing cultural enlightenment to the masses — an integral component of the politico-aesthetic agenda of *напостовство* — was all the more important during the Cultural Revolution because the drive to eradicate the remnants of capitalism acquired apocalyptic proportions. According to Averbakh, a precipice had been reached; in order for the Revolution to progress toward communism, the proletariat (allied with the peasantry) needed to immediately replace those politically suspect bourgeois still occupying positions of power. The literary vanguard's aims remained unchanged: "to create new cadres of cultural workers on the basis of raising literacy and the general level of culture in the whole country. To rationalize the life and work of the laborers, starting with the fight against the most glaring remnants of Asiatic backwardness."[78] Averbakh also claimed that the policies of the Cultural Revolution, an undertaking of monumental proportions, could not be executed without the further centralization of the state apparatus, without "planned organization and systematized direction."[79] Serving as the mouthpiece of the Party, *On the Path of the Cultural Revolution* clearly legitimized Stalin's absolute consolidation of power. Much of the failures of NEP, Averbakh added, were the result of poorly orchestrated governmentality — widespread dysfunctional bureaucratism and negligence, excessive waste and mismanagement of funds, lack of discipline and harshness. If all of these criticisms did not suffice to prove RAPP's *партийность*, he also singled out Nikolai Bukharin, one of NEP's architects, as the main political culprit.

Overall, Averbakh's assessments suggested that the Soviet Union remained a backward country. According to him, not only did the Soviet Union lag behind advanced capitalist nations in terms of gross economic output, but also the majority of the Soviet population, the peasantry, was very ignorant. "The majority of workers, let alone their peasant allies, are not only insufficiently informed about the basics of Marxist thought, but they are also backward in

[77] Averbakh, *Tvorcheskie puti proletarskoi literatury*, 61.
[78] Ibid., 62.
[79] Ibid., 64.

terms of basic culture and *культурность*."[80] According to official statistics, between 1923 and 1927, 17 million citizens were to receive a full education; however, only 3,138,000 had actually received it (fulfilling a meager twenty percent of the plan).[81] "What a pathetic figure!" exclaimed Averbakh.[82] While calling the disappointments of the literacy campaign an irrefutable indicator of massive bureaucratic oversight, Averbakh ironically suggested that more bureaucratization would eventually solve the problem, albeit bureaucratization conducted by vigilant proletarian cadres rather than bourgeois specialists. "We need a literate country of cadres of our own specialists. We need cadres in cultural cooperatives [most likely a reference to RAPP] and cadres of proletarian engineers and scientists."[83] Most vividly, his statements regarding collectivization — extending the class war to the countryside —confirm his unflinching endorsement of Stalin's policies.

Averbakh stated that, mistakenly, *напостовство* had overwhelmingly neglected to reflect upon the conditions of the peasantry. For instance, he commented,

> "the question of supporting the peasantry's cultural initiatives is the same question as whether or not it would be appropriate to mobilize the peasantry under our leadership during the implementation of the cultural revolution. Of course it would be appropriate, and our party organizations are beginning to pay more attention to these questions. We have awoken the countryside. We will help it to widely open its eyes. We will give it the right perspective of its surroundings. We will widen its gaze. The proletarian revolution will do it — only the proletarian revolution can do it."[84]

In the changing political context of collectivization and industrialization, Averbakh was convinced that the eventual triumph of the Cultural Revolution depended upon the uplifting of the peasantry, the existing state of which supposedly prevented the Soviet Union from achieving both material prosperity and cultural refinement. To help the peasantry overcome its backwardness became one of the new obligations of the *напостовство* leadership. No longer solely interested in advocating on behalf of the proletariat, Averbakh now considered collectivization a pivotal part of the transition to socialism. According to him, the peasantry, rooted in darkness, yearned for enlightenment. As the state provided new modern agricultural tools and machinery, as industrialization transformed the landscape of the countryside, as urbanization facilitated peasants' migration to capital cities,

[80] RGALI, f. 1698, op. 1, d. 1404.
[81] Ibid., 76.
[82] Averbakh, *Tvorcheskie puti proletarskoi literatury*, 76.
[83] Ibid., 135.
[84] Ibid., 101.

напостовство was to raise the class-consciousness of those peasants joining the growing ranks of the proletariat. Averbakh inveighed against illiteracy in the countryside, the absence of cultural (and local political) institutions, and the rampant alcoholism that frustrated efforts to build functional socialist collectives. Turning peasants into new kinds of workers, as well as new kinds of readers, was a mission both the Party and its literary cadres ventured to accomplish.

Ultimately, Averbakh's *On the Path of the Cultural Revolution* reiterated the fundamentals of his total politico-aesthetic vision. Firstly, the monograph upheld his method of applying historical materialism to literature. "Questions of life for the proletarian mass are inherently linked to questions of the material conditions of their future existence," he noted.[85] The material reconstruction of town and country, engendering new forms of social organization, had refashioned both the individual and the collective. Secondly, the monograph reaffirmed Averbakh's belief in the need to create a mass reading public of workers and peasants. "Learning how to work in a new way and learning how to live in a new way — these two tasks are co-dependent."[86] Literature should not only be a mirror to reality, reflecting the changes necessitated by the Cultural Revolution, but should also serve as a means of political education. As Averbakh remarked, "literature, in general, as is known, has an immensely great meaning for the upbringing of its readers, influencing their thoughts and feelings. It represents an immensely powerful weapon for understanding life."[87] Thirdly, the text constructed a cult of Lenin, prevalent in nearly all of Averbakh's writings. Averbakh maintained that Lenin, a firm believer in the pedagogical value of the written word, had always insisted that a political revolution would be impossible without a social revolution.[88] The dictatorship of the proletariat would not be able to subdue its ideological enemies unless the whole of society partook in the building of socialism, unless everyone knew what was at stake in the historic undertaking of founding the world's first socialist revolutionary order.

85 Averbakh, *Tvorcheskie puti proletarskoi literatury*, 145.
86 Ibid., 141.
87 Ibid., 189.
88 Averbakh, *Tvorcheskie puti proletarskoi literatury*, 187.

Toward Dissolution

Despite Averbakh's fervent support for the First Five Year Plan, his steadfast affirmations of *партийность* and his personal acclaim for Stalin, the Party soon began to disassociate itself from RAPP's agenda. The dissolution of RAPP, a major shift in the regime's cultural policy, signaled that the Party no longer considered *напостовство* an indispensable weapon for the building of proletarian literature. Throughout his literary career, Averbakh maintained that the politico-aesthetic program formulated by *напостовство* presented the only veritable path of proletarian literature. As he remarked, proletarian writers "are not saddened by the fact that everything which is righteous in our line will eventually cease to be *напостовство* — that it will become *общепартийный*. No, this does not sadden us; on the contrary, it is precisely what motivates our work at *On Guard*, what gives meaning to our efforts."[89] In light of the continuing fractional strife within its ranks, however, the possibility of RAPP becoming the sole unquestionable authority on the literary front seemed doubtful. Challenges to Averbakh's position as General Secretary foreshadowed future conflicts, especially after the formation of the small oppositional group, Litfront.[90] Two publications by the *напостовство* leadership in this period, *With Whom and Why Do We Fight* and *Against Menshevism in Literary Creation*, demonstrate the difficulties of solidifying the kind of Leninist organization the Octobrists had always dreamed of. In the preface to *With Whom and Why Do We Fight*, Averbakh reported that RAPP had earnestly "begun a period of reconstruction."[91] The most dangerous oppositions to *напостовство* — Voronskii and LEF — had disintegrated, while The Smithy was in a state of permanent disarray. Boastfully, he noted, "the danger of communist conceit is at its highest nowadays since *попутничество* has already lost its leading role in contemporary literature."[92] Nevertheless, Averbakh had discovered a new counterrevolutionary threat — Professor Valerian Pereverzev and a contingent of *переверзевцы* trying to subvert RAPP's interpretation of Marxist theory. Averbakh seems to have been aware of

[89] Averbakh, *Nashi literaturnye raznoglasiia*, 35.
[90] Litfront was a faction formed within the ranks of RAPP, which began at some point in 1930 over a dispute concerning RAPP's attack on V. Pereverzev and his followers. It basically consisted of the Right Opposition (de facto headed by Pereverzev) and the Left Opposition (represented by S. Rodov and A. Bezymenskii).
[91] *S kem i pochemu my boremsia*, 3.
[92] Ibid., 202.

the rising discontent. Many of his articles illustrate that he was not completely unfavorable to the idea of halting the attack on the fellow travelers. Regardless of his avowed wishes to reform RAPP, however, vigilance on the literary front always remained a *sine qua non*.

Importantly, whatever mistakes Averbakh openly assumed responsibility for, he refused to renounce his method of psychological characterization — the ideal of the living man. In *With Whom and Why Do We Fight*, he wrote, "our Soviet country has never needed and will never need writers who deliver red slapdash, who deem honesty a prejudice, sincerity a crime, the polishing of reality — heroic deeds and a false 'one-hundred-percent' — a good."[93] He did not abandon his belief that the writer's principal task was the portrayal of objective reality. To romanticize the efforts of the First Five Year Plan by glorifying nonexistent heroic feats would be to mislead the masses. Averbakh considered the theory of the living man to be an inseparable ingredient of realism as a literary style. Realism implies the deliberate rejection of embellishment and inauthenticity in favor of an unidealized portrayal of contemporary existence — an exploration of the complexity of life and not its overt simplification. Averbakh envisioned the living man as a honest and simple worker partaking in the revolutionary remaking of the world: "the crossing from the 'general' to the 'individual' does not mean the straying away from the revolution, but the appearance of the revolution in the depths of individual psychology."[94] As Rufus Mathewson summarizes in *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature*,

> "it is surprising to discover that the RAPP leaders emerge as the true, and very nearly the last, defenders of the classical Russian tradition. They made substantial concessions to expediency and they vulgarized what they defended, but they continued to speak for an essential fund of literary values, which included a notion of apolitical objectivity, an insistence, with qualifications, of course, on the author's right independently to judge of all he treated, and, what concerns us most, a demand for full human portraiture in fiction."[95]

In the end, RAPP stood for a higher literary ideal and not mere polemical verbiage. Averbakh promoted the creation of class-conscious literature that would still grant the writer the freedom to interpret objective reality. Even in *On the Path of the Cultural Revolution*, arguably his most militant text, Averbakh declared, "the role of the individual, not only everyone together, but also everyone

[93] *S kem i pochemu my boremsia*, 206.
[94] Ibid., 17.
[95] Rufus Mathewson, *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 269.

independently, is an enormous, discernable feature of our conditions for the transformation of life."[96] The most collectivist endeavors — e.g., mythical overfulfillments of the plan — still had to be presented from the perspective of the individual. "We cannot limit ourselves to general directives: portray the factory, the new life, the working family. We should give the writer more difficult tasks."[97] Averbakh believed that the proletarian writer should foment readers' belief in socialism, awakening in them an ethos of social activism and an understanding of the universality of their historic mission to found communism. While Averbakh was invariably guided by party policy, remaining true to the enduring principle of *партийность*, he had his own utopian vision of the future path of the proletarian literary movement. Although a meaningful analysis of RAPP's relationship to the Party lies beyond the scope of this paper, a brief trajectory of Averbakh's life and work after the Cultural Revolution helps situate his aesthetics in a broader historical perspective.

On April 23, 1932, by decree, the Party liquidated RAPP and outlined a plan for the unification of all Soviet writers in a single union of writers. With RAPP dissolved, the literary front finally lowered the flags of the ideological class war. Two years later, all writers loyal to the regime gathered at the first Congress of Soviet Writers. Averbakh, the leader of what only a few years earlier had been the most powerful literary organization, was noticeably absent from the congregation. Targeted as the chief miscreant responsible for the degeneration of Russian literature, the campaign to purge Averbakh from all literary activity constituted one of the most remarkable events in literary politics. In a journal entry recounting a meeting of prominent Soviet writers and party apparatchiks at Gorky's apartment, Kornelii Zelinskii, writer and theorist of constructivism, disclosed how Averbakh was ostracized from the larger literary community. Interestingly, his journal shows that Gorky remained one of Averbakh's principal supporters, even amidst the series of recriminations hurled against *напостовство*. "Gorky's inclination, even love, toward the *рапповцы* can be noted in his eyes. [...] Gorky cherishes the *рапповцы*. He welcomes them with love, with a smile, like good friends."[98] In fact, Gorky defended Averbakh long after

[96] Mathewson, 139.
[97] Averbakh, *Tvorcheskie puti proletarskoi literatury*, 9.
[98] Kornelii Zelinskii, "Odna vstrecha u M. Gor'kogo (zapis' iz dnevnika)" *Voprosy literatury* 1991: 146.

the liquidation of RAPP, finding him work on the *History of Factories and Plants Project* and maintaining a personal correspondence with him.[99] He once even pleaded Stalin to grant Averbakh a respite from work, perhaps by sending him to a sanatorium.[100]

Nonetheless, the primary purpose of the meeting was to condemn *напостовство* outright. Some writers present were even hostile to the idea of including former RAPP members in the committee assigned the task of building the Writers' Union (headed by Ivan Gronskii). Despite a few writers' positive appraisals of RAPP's legacy, including those of Vsevolod Ivanov, Vladimir Kirshon, and Leonid Leonov, the verdict had already been determined. In the words of writer Lev Nikulin, "RAPP has outlived its role."[101] Late into the night, as Stalin delivered his own, most commanding, reprimand of RAPP, Averbakh's fate was sealed. Four years later, several apparatchiks accused Averbakh of having gathered and trained, under the auspices of his organization, a whole cohort of so-called enemies of the people.[102] In April of 1936, for example, Vladimir Ermilov, a former member of RAPP, wrote a letter unmasking Averbakh as a conspirator who had been involved in the counterrevolutionary operations of Dmitri Maznin, a fellow proletarian writer. Similarly, in November of 1937, Vsevolod Vishnevskii wrote a letter to Vladimir Stavskii, the Secretary of the Board of the Union of Writers, describing the views of Averbakh and a few other RAPP members as "trotskyist, subversive."[103] During the Great Terror, even Fadeev, one of Averbakh's closest colleagues in RAPP, pronounced, "I was never involved, and cannot possibly be ever involved, in any of Averbakh's clandestine dealings."[104] In 1937, shortly after his brother-in-law, the head of the NKVD, Genrih Iagoda, Averbakh was himself arrested and subsequently executed.

Features of Averbakh's politico-aesthetic vision endured long after his disappearance from the frontline of the proletarian literary movement. As representatives at the First Congress of

[99] A mixture of journalism, memorialization and historiography, HFP recounted the histories of various factories in prerevolutionary Russia and the transformation undergone during the industrialization drive.
[100] *Vlast' i hudozhestvennaia intelligentsia*, 168.
[101] Ibid., 152.
[102] *Literaturnyi front: istoriia politicheskoi tsenzupy 1923-1946 sbornik dokumentov*, ed. D. Babichenko (Moskva: Entsiklopediia possiiskih dereven', 1994), 18.
[103] *Schast'e literatury: gosudarstvo i pisateli, 1925-1938 dokumenty* (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 1997), 256.
[104] Fadeev, 68.

Soviet Writers championed the new model of socialist realism, some of Averbakh's ideas remained permanently embedded in the corpus of Soviet literary theory. The notion of ideologically saturated works upholding the values of socialism and portraying the aspirations of the working people, became significant elements in all officially sponsored Soviet works. Averbakh's aspirations to apply dialectical materialism to literary production, to capture the process of building socialism and to depict living men and women's daily struggles in a revolutionary society, encompassed many of the defining tropes of socialist realism. Ultimately, his comprehensive and consistent aesthetic endeavors made him a notable contributor to Soviet literary scholarship. A staunch defender of proletarian culture, a believer in a particular kind of class-conscious literature, Averbakh's body of work remains crucial to understanding literary politics immediately prior to and during the Cultural Revolution.

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