

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

NPC-12

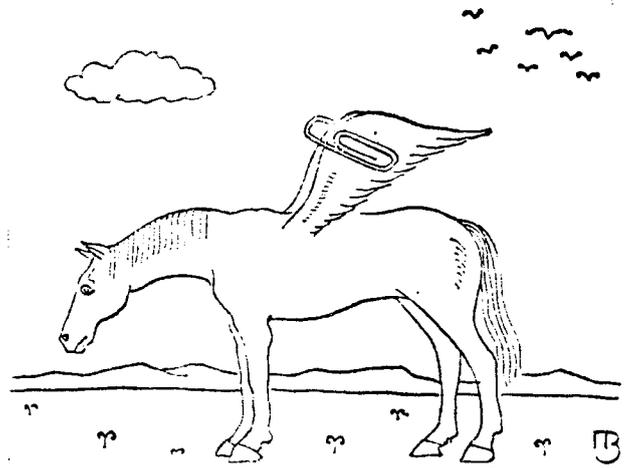
Moscow, U.S.S.R.
1 November 1985

Literary Cartoons: Wingless Pegasus and Rider's Cramp

Literary cartoons, which appear every few weeks on the pages of such major weekly newspapers as Literaturnia gazeta and Literaturnaia Rossiia, constitute an illuminating subgenre of cultural politics in the Soviet Union. The literary cartoon serves as a kind of pictorial gadfly, a parasitic insect whose existence is tolerated as long as it remains only a minor irritant. Its subject is writing: as a white-collar profession, intellectual piece-work, a comfortable life-style, and a set of devalued historical myths. Similar to the gadfly, the literary cartoon directs its bite at the very bureaucratization of literature that ensures the cartoonist his livelihood. In Item 1 below, for example, by the cartoonist Dmitriev, the Muse confronts the Writer as he stands at the window marked "Payment of Honoraria." Her demand for a cut of the earnings suggests a reduction of both Writer and Muse to the level of office co-workers. In a similar vein (Item 2), Peskov's Pegasus is prevented from his legendary flights of inspiration by the most banal of office items, the paper clip, an object which forces him to eat more and fly less.



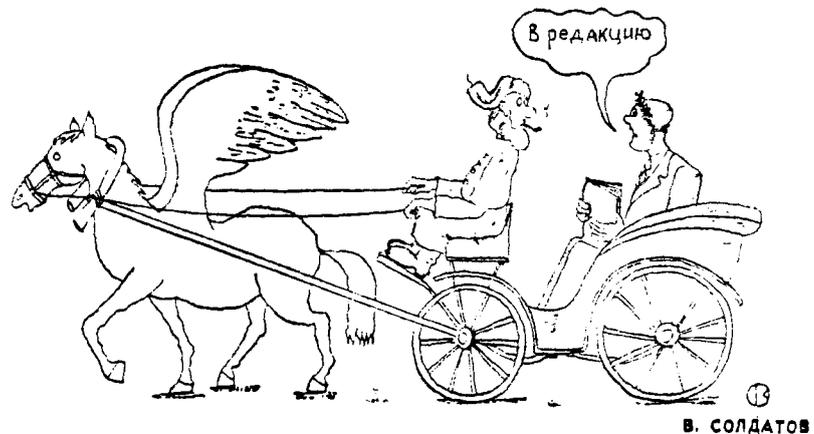
Item 1. A Dmitriev (Lit. gaz. date and page unknown).



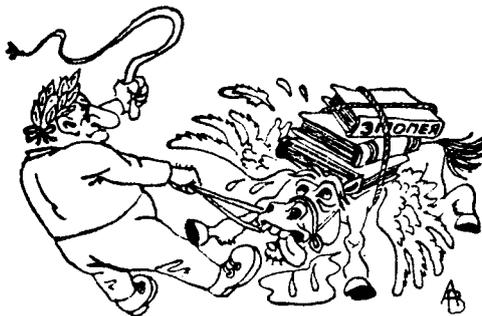
Item 2. V. Peskov (Lit. gaz. 18 May 1983, p. 3).

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Undoubtedly the cartoonists' most frequent barb directed against the Union of Writers' nine thousand professionals is the suggestion that they are engaged in literary production solely as a way to maintain a standard of living, rather than for the sake of literature itself; hence, the frequent depiction of inspiration as a means of transportation. In Item 3, for example, V. Soldatov's Writer orders the driver "To the editor's!" Pegasus, here again unable to fly, serves only as a means to get there. V. Agfonov's Pegasus (Item 4) collapses under the burden of his Writer's epos, while A. Pomazkov's Writer (Item 5) has exchanged his winged horse for a wingless rhinoceros, a more reliable beast for breaking down the doors of the editorial office. Tucked under the Writer's arm is his equally behemoth narrative poem.



Item 3: V. Soldatov (Lit. gaz., 22 December 1982, p. 16).



Item 4: V. Agfonov (Lit. Rossiia, 20 September 1985, p. 21).



Item 5: A. Pomazkov (Lit. gaz., 20 October 1982, p. 16).

Implicit in these last two cartoons, and obvious to the educated Soviet reader, is the criticism that the contemporary writer is not only careerist, but venal as well. Whatever level of payment the writer is permitted to receive, the

epic novel and the narrative poem (poema) are considerably more remunerative than the shorter genres. The resulting "graphomania," as it is referred to here, is a frequent subject of Pomazkov's cartoons.

Item 6 depicts Pegasus's inevitable revolt against this overwork; V. Git's horse literally digs in his heels. Tattooed with the emblem of a taxicab, this symbol of inspiration announces "I'm going off duty!" In a world in which inspiration is reduced to a form of transportation, Pegasus has a right to demand regulated work conditions. In this respect, his interests are identical to the office-worker Muse in the first cartoon. Both have earthly concerns: work hours and pay scales being chief among them. If the modern-day writer can sport both the laurel wreath of a previous era and the necktie of today (Items 3, 6, 8, 11, and 22) - a temporal incongruity that renders him ridiculous - then the Muse and Pegasus must be forgiven their "spatial incongruity" as other-worldly beings with worldly demands.



Item 6: V. Git (Lit. gaz., 22 July 1981, p. 16).

Variations on the theme of inspiration-as-means can be found in Items 7-9. In the first of these Pegasus's freedom to fly is replaced by his/her function as milk-cow, producing manuscripts for the eager writer. Items

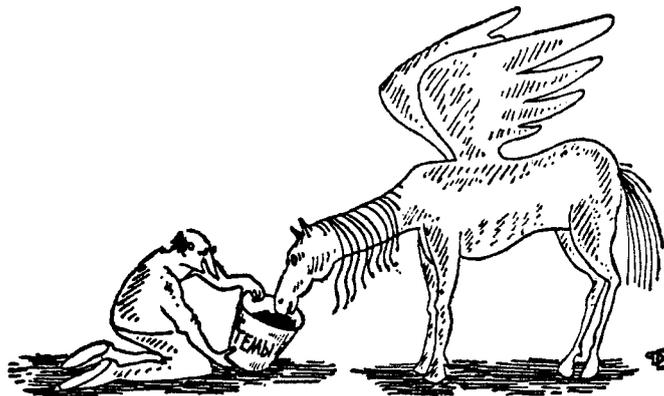


Item 7: I. Surovtsev (Lit. gaz., date and page unknown).

8 and 9 call attention to the hack Writer's eternal search for a "theme" or subject that will provide an easy way to turn out the next cheap novel (and the next honorarium). Rybalko's Pegasus (Item 8) is a hunting dog, commanded by the Writer to "Find a theme!" V. Dubov's Pegasus (Item 9) is fed themes by his pot-bellied, balding Writer; what the fodder will turn into at the other end is a matter of biological inevitability, suggested by the placement of Dubov's own monogram in the lower right-hand corner.



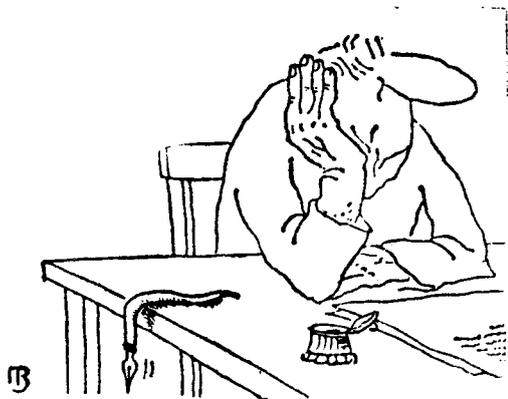
Item 8: K. Rybalko (Lit. gaz., 18 May 1983, p. 3).



В. ДУБОВ

Item 9: V. Dubov (Lit. gaz., 1 December 1982, p. 16).

In these cartoons, as elsewhere in official Soviet culture, the severity of criticism lies in the eye of the beholder. While some cartoons are merely whimsical--V. Peskov's "burnt out" Writer (Item 10) or Rybalko's Writer who has exchanged his laurel wreath for the more seasonal and festive New Year's wreath (Item 11)--other cartoons are aimed at specific factions



Item 10: V. Peskov (Lit. gaz., 17 April 1985, p. 16).



Item 11: K. Rybalko (Lit. Rossiia, 18 January 1985, p. 21).

within contemporary literature. Items 12 and 13 are examples of this factionalism. In the first instance, one Pegasus explains to the other, "Mine is now trying his hand at the collective farm theme." The horse's harness and plow, appropriate accoutrements for the chosen subject matter, preclude any flight of imagination—a fact that is borne out by reading the novels themselves. The trappings nevertheless ensure publication, security, and the respectable honorarium, so often the subject of Rybalko's cartoons. Item 13 hints at the tensions between two literary groups: the russisty, or Great Russian writers, who here represent established literary values (the traditional winged Pegasus); and the so-called multi-national writers—i.e., non-Russian minorities, here, judging by the winged camel, specifically Central Asian writers. This cartoon, which, it could be argued, verges on being racist, suggests that the non-Russian minorities are themselves not only unaware of how parochial and strange their own literary practices are, but are also ignorant of established literary traditions.



К. РЫБАЛКО

Item 12: K. Rybalko (Lit. gaz., 24 August 1983, p. 16).



А. ПАШКОВ

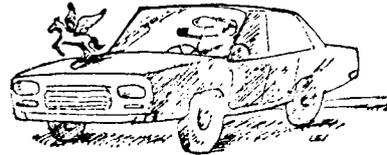
Item 13: A. Pashkov (Lit. gaz., 22 December 1982, p. 16).

Another frequent criticism in these cartoons suggests that Soviet state support of literature has transformed an organic process, in effect, a living being, into a dead or inanimate acquisition. In Item 14, Pegasus is a dead animal skin; the Writer's prowess is demonstrated by his success in killing inspiration. Item 15 by the same cartoonist depicts inanimate inspiration again on display as proof of prowess. Here again, venality is the subject. The Writer has acquired enough money through hack-writing to buy himself a car, thus exploiting one means of transport—Pegasus—to obtain another, a more practical one. The hood ornament stands as a vulgar monument to sham

art. In Item 16, cartoonist L. Samoilov returns to the metaphor of inspiration as a slaughtered animal. Its choicest "cuts" are indicated on the chart above the butcher's head. They read, top row, left to right: ballet libretto, Grade-A epic novel, Grade-A novella. The bottom row, left to right, offers a television script, film script, and Grade-A novel. It is significant here that we see neither Pegasus, nor the Writer, but only an official middleman, complacently engaged in the buying and selling of literature.



Item 14: B. Shul'gat (Lit. Rossiia,
19 April 1985, p. 21).



Item 15: B. Shul'gat (Lit. Rossiia,
19 April 1985, p. 21).



Item 16: L. Samoilov (Lit. Rossiia
18 January 1985, p. 21).

Even if literature can survive the bureaucratization of the Writers' Union and the acquisitiveness of the professional writers, these cartoons suggest, it still suffers a devalued and banal existence in contemporary society. In Item 17, the Muse, now frumpy, heavy-set, and middle-aged, has set down her lyre to take up a soup-plate and spoon. The Writer, himself an ill-kempt homebody, continues to pound out his work, oblivious of its decline in quality. The Muse, in Item 18, is engaged not in art but in a virtually universal activity for Soviet boys from the ages of nine to thirteen, namely the collecting of unwanted paper for recycling. The implication of her question ("Any paper for recycling?") is twofold: first, the modern writer produces a great deal of paper only good for scrap and, second, the

Muse best furthers the welfare of literature not by bringing material to the writer, but by taking it away. In both cartoons, the Muse's ephemeral sexual allure is displaced by dint of age. Her productive/reproductive powers are denied in the first instance by the suggestion of middle-age; in the second instance by the association with male pre-adolescence.



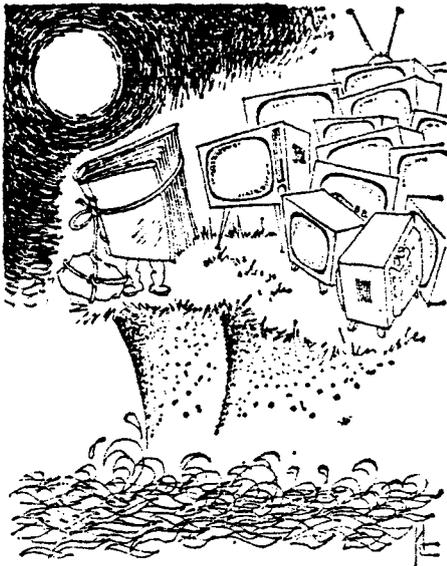
И. СУРОВЦЕВ (БОРОКЕР)

Item 17: I. Surovtsev (Lit. gaz., 24 December 1982, p. 16).



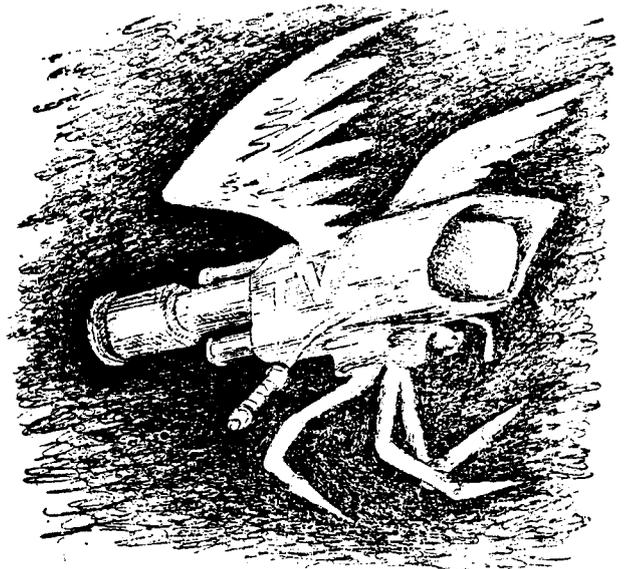
Item 18: A. Pomazkov (Lit. gaz., 16 October 1985, p. 16).

In the many depictions of the trivializing effect of modern life, television and film play an ambiguous role. Sometimes, as in the earlier cartoon of the



Игорь СУРОВЦЕВ (БОРОКЕР)

Item 19: I. Surovtsev (Lit. gaz., 24 July 1985, p. 16).



Item 20: E. Milutka (Lit. gaz., 18 May 1983, p. 3).

butcher shop, scripts are enumerated among other legitimate media. Elsewhere, an antagonistic relationship clearly exists between literature and the visual media, as in Item 19, in which the book, crowded out by the television sets, contemplates self-annihilation. In Item 20, the winged Pegasus is transformed into a hideous, insect-like television camera, significantly the only depiction I have found of successful flight. One of the most pointed cartoons of this sort to appear recently--and the most impenetrable to the Western reader--is unquestionably Item 21 shown here. It depicts the Writer presenting his script to the Editor, behind whom we see the office door of the Director. The Editor is explaining to the Writer, "You'll be third," a phrase normally recognized among Soviets as a question, not a command ("Will you be a third?"), and usually posed by a heavy drinker to an unknown passer-by, a prospective drinking mate. Together, three drinkers can pool their rubles, buy a cheap bottle of vodka, and spilt it three ways in the privacy of a stairwell or a dark courtyard. The third man in this transaction is the necessary addition, but he is also the latecomer and the last to drink. In this cartoon, by analogy, the Writer, who provides the crucial and most creative element, namely the script, is nevertheless low man on the literary totem pole. Only by accepting the Editor's demand for two additional co-authors (first the Director, then the Editor, and only last the Writer himself) will the Writer have any assurance that his script will at some point see the light of day. Co-authorship, of course, necessitates a corresponding splitting of royalties, to the actual Writer's detriment.



M. ЕЛИН

Item 21: M. Elin (Lit. gaz., 29 September 1982, p. 16).

Occasionally, however, the sharpest cartoons require no words at all. Zhigotskii's depiction (Item 22) of the current state of literature, while not necessarily condemning the entire system, spares no one depicted here. Inspiration is nothing but a phoney horse, set into motion by an editorial committee; the wings, traditionally a symbol of literary freedom, of fantasy and play, have become purely theatrical ornaments; and the Writer, the

biggest sham of all, sits astride this example of charlatanism with all the arrogance and self-importance of an experienced, professional rider.



Item 22: N. Zhigotskii (Lit. Rossiia,
18 January 1985, p. 21).

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