

ROGER HAGGLUND

## The Russian Émigré Debate of 1928 on Criticism

Less than a year before his recent death, the distinguished émigré poet-critic Georgii Adamovich published one of his last essays in the New York *Novyi Zhurnal*. One section of it was particularly striking. Here was the “dean” of Russian émigré criticism and the author of hundreds of critiques and articles over the past fifty years questioning the purpose of literary criticism and whether there was a need for it at all: “In criticism . . . what is amazing is that behind all the innumerable articles and pieces of research, even the most penetrating of them, one never discerns the least perplexity about why, in fact, the article was written. . . . Do Tolstoy, Dickens, and the others really require explanation and commentary? Wasn’t Tolstoy right . . . that ‘criticism is when the foolish write about the wise’?”<sup>1</sup>

The peculiar position and tone expressed in the article probably was no surprise to Adamovich’s regular readers. After all, this was the poet who had once written a long and earnest essay called “The Impossibility of Poetry,”<sup>2</sup> a lifelong admirer of Leo Tolstoy inclined to look skeptically into the very heart of matters and question basic premises. What was perhaps more interesting here than Adamovich’s doubts about criticism, or even his attempts to define it, was that this 1971 essay should echo so clearly an unresolved discussion that had begun some forty years before in Paris, during the spring and summer of 1928.

The mid-twenties had been a period of vigorous activity and a gradually deepening self-consciousness in Russian émigré culture. Now, in 1928, a decade had passed since the Revolution, and hopes of returning to their abandoned homeland had begun to fade among Russians in Paris, Prague, and Berlin. Writers were beginning to focus seriously on the problems facing their large cultural community in exile, eager to draw conclusions from the disturbing experiences of the recent past and compelled to face the future with whatever it might hold. Grave and fundamental questions were being asked about the role of culture under these new conditions. Russian émigré literature was trying to get its bearings.<sup>3</sup>

1. “Opravdanie chernovikov,” *Novyi Zhurnal* (New York), no. 103 (1971), p. 87.

2. “Nevozmozhnost’ poezii,” *Opyty* (New York), 9 (1958): 35–51; reprinted in G. V. Adamovich, *Kommentarii* (Washington, D.C.: Kamkin, 1967), pp. 187–208.

3. Gleb Struve in *Russkaia literatura v izgnanii* (New York: Chekhov, 1956) writes

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The 1928 debate on criticism took place mainly in the columns of newspapers, as was often the case with such discussions at that time. In Paris, lively capital of the Russian emigration then, three major papers appeared daily—P. N. Miliukov's *Poslednie Novosti*, P. B. Struve's *Vozrozhdenie*, and A. F. Kerensky's *Dni*. Vladislav Khodasevich, a well-known and "established" poet before the Revolution, had arrived to settle in Paris in 1925. He had worked as poetry editor of *Dni* for two years, and was now *Vozrozhdenie*'s chief literary commentator and critic. Georgii Adamovich, a promising younger poet from Petrograd, where he had been associated with Gumilev's Guild of Poets, had been in Paris since 1924 as head critic for a weekly newspaper called *Zveno*. By 1928 Adamovich was also contributing regularly to both *Dni* and *Poslednie Novosti* (for which he was soon to become head literary critic), and in addition was writing a regular literary column for the latter newspaper under the pseudonym "Sisyphus" (*Sizif*). It was these two poets, incidentally, who were to become easily the most controversial and widely read critics in the émigré community during the thirties. The literary-page editor for *Dni* in 1928 was Mikhail Osorgin, a journalist and prose writer who also held the post of book review editor for the important and prestigious Paris "thick journal," *Sovremennye Zapiski*.<sup>4</sup> Also involved in the debate were the poetess and critic Zinaida Gippius (writing as "Anton Krainy," a pseudonym she saved for her critical prose), the young poet Nikolai Otsup, the writer Alexander Bakhrakh, and others.

It was Osorgin who opened the discussion. His unsigned Sunday literary editorial in *Dni* seemed at first only of passing interest, focusing, as it did primarily, on a point that was far from new and dealt with personal and political prejudices in literary criticism.<sup>5</sup> But the article proved timely and catalytic. The reaction to it was significant, and as the discussion developed in the weeks ahead, especially after Adamovich and Khodasevich had joined

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of the discussion among the émigrés about their own literature (pp. 199 ff.), and notes that the general controversies began around 1926. Three early essays touching on problems of criticism specifically were D. Sviatopol'k-Mirsky (D. S. Mirsky), "O nyneshnem sostoianii russkoi literatury," *Blagonamerennyi* (Brussels), no. 1 (1926), pp. 90–97; Marina Tsvetaeva, "Poet o kritike," *Blagonamerennyi*, no. 2 (1926), pp. 94–125 (reprinted in M. I. Tsvetaeva, *Nesobrannnye proizvedeniia* [Munich: Fink, 1971], pp. 584–615); and Mikhail Tsetlin, "O literaturnoi kritike," *Novyi Korabl'* (Paris), no. 1 (1927), pp. 31–35.

4. V. F. Khodasevich (1886–1939) remained with *Vozrozhdenie* until his death. G. V. Adamovich (1894–1972) wrote for a large number of émigré publications and turned out to be one of the Russian emigration's most prolific cultural critics. Mikhail Osorgin (pseudonym of M. A. Il'in, 1878–1943) had been *Russkie Vedomosti*'s correspondent in Italy before the Revolution. All were well-known literary figures in the Paris émigré community.

5. "Literaturnaia nedelia," *Dni*, Apr. 29, 1928.

in, deeper questions emerged which can provide important insights into this moment in the Russian emigration's unique cultural predicament. After briefly considering the content and course of the debate, then, I would like to examine some conclusions that may be drawn from it.

Osorgin first pointed out that in the dozen or so major émigré literary publications, contributors were usually grouped by strict ideological ties and expected not to deviate from the political position of the editor. But he maintained that even when free from the restrictions of political acceptability, as critics sometimes were, they often failed to be objective in their work, displaying instead attitudes which led at worst to squabbling and at best to what he called "friendly" (*druzheskaia*) criticism. By this he meant not only judgments influenced by personal relations, but in general a strong bias in favor of any prose or poetry written by established émigré, as distinct from Soviet, writers. Osorgin observed that the émigrés tended to regard themselves as guardians of all the literary traditions overthrown by the Bolsheviks. Consequently they considered it "reprehensible and indecent" to speak negatively about the recognized literary "idols" in emigration, whom one should only praise. Conversely, one was expected to regard Soviet writers as anathema and never to utter the thought that Soviet literature might possibly flourish. Providing a concrete example of this, the editor remarked candidly that it had become difficult to find a "selfless volunteer" to review the latest issue of *Sovremennye Zapiski* (the journal in which most of the "idols" published their work), because such a reviewer, if he were objective, would run the risk of spoiling relations with important people, or alternatively of having to act against his conscience (*pokrivit' dushoi*) by not telling the truth.<sup>6</sup> Criticism in emigration had become a "kind of family affair," he remarked, instead of the service to society Osorgin felt it ought to be, and he characterized what had been called criticism as either "abuse with political overtones, or babbling brooks of familial effusions" (*bran' s politicheskimi namekami ili zhurchashchie ruch'i rodstvennykh izliianii*). "Attempts at objective, apolitical, purely artistic criticism," he continued, "are interpreted as personal attacks and gestures of hostility."<sup>7</sup> As Osorgin summed up his view of the émigré situation, one statement stood out clearly and was picked up by nearly every writer who responded to him: "There is essentially," he said, "no serious criticism."

The following Thursday in his regular *Poslednie Novosti* column, "Sisy-

6. Alexander Bakhrakh spoke of the difficulty of reviewing *Sovremennye Zapiski* without calling down "all the thunder of Olympus," and then went on to tell of a young poet who claimed to have purchased not only favorable but extensive reviews of his new book in all three Paris Russian newspapers. See "V zashchitu chitatelia," *Dni*, May 27, 1928.

7. Bakhrakh's jocular suggestion (*ibid.*) for writers insulted by critics was to call them out in the open to a duel, but not to agitate behind the scenes.

phus" (Adamovich) echoed these words.<sup>8</sup> He wrote that the literary editor of *Dni* was quite right in saying that no criticism existed in emigration, and agreed that there was only "abuse" or "babbling brooks." "But Russians are living under exceptional conditions right now," he continued, "where much, if not forgivable, is at least explainable." Pointing out the same sort of innocuous "babbling" in contemporary French criticism, he concluded: "But the French are older and more weary than we Russians; they have come to terms with what still stirs us up."

In his next (unsigned) column, Osorgin referred to the remarks of "Sisyphus" and then moved on to a question somewhat closer to the center of a problem that was being skirted. He noted that the "illness" in émigré criticism was caused not only by political and personal attitudes but by a degeneration of love and enthusiasm for literature and a weakened impulse to separate its interests from political ones.<sup>9</sup> "There is no joy," wrote Osorgin, "at the success of a brother writer, no thirst to discover new talents, to support them and lead them forward. There are not even any serious writers' organizations." After a decade of exile Osorgin could observe a definite lack of contact between the generations, a lack of interest and even a scorn for the classics and their sources—in general an impoverishment of ideas and style throughout émigré literature. The "exceptional conditions" that "Sisyphus" had spoken of were surely serious, he agreed, and could be identified at once: "The émigré branch has been broken off from the Russian literary trunk." But his article ended on an idealistic and vaguely programmatic note, with the suggestion that if the older generation could not overcome these difficulties through "personal and collective energy" and through a vital, active love of literature "free of political bias and personal pride," then the younger generation would have to do it. This, as Osorgin and the others were to learn with time, was easier said than done.

Now "Anton Krainy" (Gippius) joined in, with her usual vigor and sometimes scathing wit. "An anonymous person in the paper actually says we have no criticism," she wrote in *Vozrozhdenie*,<sup>10</sup> apparently surprised by the candor and aptness of the observation. She agreed wholeheartedly, and soon had focused more clearly than anyone yet on one of the reasons: "Artists even so are the most sensitive people. But now, in emigration, they have no hide at all. You must approach them with flowers, and tenderly at that." She remarked that it was so extremely close and awkward in émigré circles that one could hardly make a move for fear of injuring someone, and the critic had a choice of resigning himself to "babble" quietly, pouring out tender feelings

8. "Otkliki," *Poslednie Novosti*, May 3, 1928.

9. "Literaturnaia nedelia," *Dni*, May 13, 1928.

10. "Polozhenie literaturnoi kritiki," *Vozrozhdenie*, May 24, 1928.

for the sensitive writers, or of being silent. A third alternative—to tell the truth in spite of everything—she acidly dismissed on the grounds that the truth could not possibly get printed in the émigré press.<sup>11</sup> Gippius pointed out that all émigré publications had their “art corners” for poetry, literary discussion, and the like, but claimed that all were politically controlled, and that the literary “overseers” permitted no latitude whatsoever. The result was that many critics simply spent their time “picking forget-me-nots for their friends and neighbors.”

Then turning specifically to Osorgin, who had published his first novel that year and whom Gippius had, rather provocatively, just identified by name as one of the literary “overseers” of the émigré press, she remarked that there had been a number of reviews of this novel of his, but that none of them was real criticism. The critics all knew the truth, claimed Gippius, but they wouldn’t write it: “They won’t say that it is impossible to read the book, that you can’t even hold it in your hands because it slides through your fingers like sand. . . .”<sup>12</sup> Émigré critics had learned “to play the game” (*meledit’*), she observed. But this was better than total silence, since even the game players managed sometimes to slip the truth into their articles. She then named Adamovich as one of the most capable of these—as if inviting him into the discussion.

Adamovich was, in fact, the next to be heard. His article in *Dni* was entitled “On Criticism and ‘Friendship,’”<sup>13</sup> and began with a seeming contradiction of the statement he had made about three weeks before as “Sisyphus.” He now affirmed that there was indeed real criticism in emigration. But as he continued to develop his view it became clear that he did not mean by “criticism” what Osorgin, Gippius, and “Sisyphus” had meant. He distinguished between real literary criticism, which he viewed as creative and primarily interpretive, and critical “appreciations” (*otsenki*), which were commonly mistaken for criticism but were of little value. Often neither impartial nor relevant, such “appreciations” were impossible to verify and often full of error. It was not the valuer with labels marked “good” and “bad” who was needed in criticism, Adamovich continued, but someone with a “gift of creation [*dar tvorchestva*], capable of reflecting the light of someone else’s fire and building his own world, as it were, alongside another’s.”

11. Khodasevich took issue with Gippius on this question a number of times over the years. Finally in “Eshche o pisatel'skoi svobode,” *Vozrozhdenie*, Aug. 2, 1934, he pointed out that Gippius had been complaining of censorship for years and at the same time publishing in four different journals!

12. The well-known émigré writer, Mark Aldanov (Landau), was one of those who reviewed Osorgin’s novel, *Stvseu Vrazhek* (in *Poslednie Novosti*, Mar. 15, 1928). “The artistic achievement is very remarkable,” he said. He called the novel “one of the best books in recent times.”

13. “O kritike i ‘druzhbe,’” *Dni*, May 27, 1928.

Adamovich went on to say that a critic should give some sort of evaluation of the author he is discussing, but whenever he does he places a question mark after it and hopes time will bear him out. Concerning the tendency toward “friendly” criticism and the “illness” of bias which had been discussed recently in the press, he said: “We won’t be able to heal this illness *here*, and to explain why I would have to draw the whole picture of our existence here. There is consolation in the fact that the illness is not fatal.” Returning to the question of “real” criticism, he spoke of the Formalists who refused even to hand out “appreciations” to authors, having probably learned from recent history that time honors no one’s diplomas. But Formalism, with all its scholarship and devices, did not count as criticism, he felt,<sup>14</sup> because it was not creative work, any more than the literary guides were which said, “Look here, stop there, read this,” and in the end informed you that Pushkin, Balzac, and the Roman Forum are “interesting.” “What should a real critic do?” Adamovich asked. His answer, to which there were puzzled responses later in the newspapers, seemed enigmatic: “He should write about life, like any writer.” Only when the writer understood this, Adamovich added, would he be able to produce the uncompromising, honest, and unbiased work of a real critic.

Khodasevich had not read Adamovich’s piece in *Dni* when he wrote his own article for the May 31 issue of *Vozrozhdenie*,<sup>15</sup> so it is quite interesting to note the coincidence on this occasion of their two sets of reactions and views. Khodasevich said that one of the points he wanted to take up with “Anton Krainy” and the literary editor of *Dni* (Osorgin) was the way they had both grouped all critics together, as though all were the same. “Criticism is creative work [*tvorchestvo*],” he said, almost exactly echoing Adamovich’s words of a few days before. He went on to point out that criticism is not necessarily diminished by being secondary to the art it seeks to illuminate. In order to do his job properly (“to lay bare the artistic work, its sense, its internal and external structure”), the critic must express his own self, as the artist does. The sense and value of criticism are in this self-expression, not in the “appreciations” (again *otsenki*) he gives of the work. For the serious critic, Khodasevich said, “truthfulness and conscientiousness . . . arise in him automatically, since he creates primarily, like the artist, for himself.” And he asked: “Who is consciously going to lead himself around by the nose?”

14. Partly for political reasons, both Adamovich and Khodasevich were at this time quite negative toward the Russian Formalists and consequently blind to their achievements. For some early statements, see Adamovich, “Literaturnye besedy,” *Zveno* (Paris), Jan. 5, 1925, and Khodasevich, “O formalizme i formalistakh,” *Vozrozhdenie*, May 10, 1927.

15. “Eshche o kritike,” *Vozrozhdenie*, May 31, 1928. At the end of the article, Khodasevich noted that he had read Adamovich’s essay after finishing his own.

Khodasevich named a few émigré writers (including Iu. Aikhenvald, P. Bitsilli, and W. Weidlé)<sup>16</sup> who were producing the kind of criticism he called creative, and whose independence, definition of position, and solid literary knowledge could not be doubted. "If those [others] who are capable of judging competently and independently would only take up criticism," he continued, "we would not have to talk of 'friendly babbling,' because the approval of a competent and conscientious critic is not 'babbling' but the result of serious, thoughtful work."

Osorgin's next literary editorial in *Dni* summed up the discussion and returned the focus, which Adamovich and Khodasevich had shifted to the critic-creator, back to the reader-consumer.<sup>17</sup> He observed that Khodasevich was right in identifying criticism with creation, and that Adamovich was correct in saying that a critic, like any writer, should "write about life." But both were wrong in their semicontemptuous attitude toward the work of literary reviewers in saying that no one needs "appreciations." He went on to point out that though writers may not need book reviewers, thousands of readers benefited regularly from their work. "Talented writers should not forget this," he concluded.<sup>18</sup>

The discussion of the nature, purpose, and responsibilities of literary criticism, which was really just beginning, continued with some spirit among the émigrés on into the 1930s. In fact, it continues even to the present, as evidenced by the recent Adamovich article mentioned earlier. But, for the moment, this first 1928 burst of energy had spent itself.

The question, then, is what does this controversy tell about the historical experience of the Russian emigration? Of the first two points introduced by Osorgin—personal and political prejudice in criticism—doubtless the former was a problem more essentially peculiar to the émigré situation. The "closeness" that Gippius described and the resulting friendships or frictions among literary people were not simply random or accidental developments. The writer's need for emotional and "cultural" support from his own people was intensified amidst the cold and alien realities of foreign exile, and people tended to move closer together. Such personal conditions, not to mention the added trials of private misfortunes and serious material deprivation, had an

16. Iu. I. Aikhenval'd or Eichenwald (1872–1928), head critic for the Berlin émigré newspaper *Rul'*, was killed in an accident a few months after this article of Khodasevich's was written. P. M. Bitsilli (1879–1953) contributed regularly to *Sovremennye Zapiski*, then various other émigré publications after the war. W. Weidlé (V. Veidle, b. 1895) writes and lectures on a broad variety of topics and lives in Paris.

17. "Literaturnaia nedelia," *Dni*, June 3, 1928.

18. Nor, he concluded, punctuating his point sharply, should "writers with good names" lower themselves to the scoffing of the "Anton Krainys."

impact not only on criticism but on émigré literature in general. During this 1928 exchange of opinions Alexander Bakhrakh wrote (with some exaggeration but with accurate insight) that people who probably would never have met in Russia now saw each other five times a week and spent four nights a week together at each other's homes.<sup>19</sup> How could they regard one another's work objectively?

As for Osorgin's second point, Russian criticism had frequently shown "political" bias of one kind or another in the past, since it had so often been produced by those who were committed to certain sociophilosophical or literary trends. In general, "pure" objectivity had been the rare exception and tendentious appraisals of literature all too often the rule since before the middle of the nineteenth century. The difficulty in emigration, then, was not in identifying a new problem but in trying to uproot what could almost be regarded as established tradition in Russian criticism. There was a growing feeling that literary and sociopolitical questions, so often linked in the past, should be discussed and resolved quite separately. Behind this, of course, was the realization that now, in the freedom of their exile, the expatriates could air previously forbidden discussions in the press.

Adamovich, with this "tradition" of nonobjective criticism in mind, had already written in 1925 of the need for a critical reassessment of all Russian literature. He commented that Russian criticism from Pushkin's death to the end of the century had perhaps many merits, but often it could not boast of much of an understanding of art. "We cannot accept their evaluations on faith," he continued; "a review is needed" (*nuzhen peresmotr*).<sup>20</sup> Whether this 1925 article was meant to be an announcement of personal intention, or simply of an ideal, was not then clear. But the tendencies toward commitment in criticism of which Adamovich spoke were recognizable. By 1928 the question had become an issue. Writers were gradually learning that political pressures in literature had not been left behind in escaping Russia. Not only did political feelings of various kinds run high in emigration, but the cauldron in which the émigrés were stewing together, to use another apt image of Bakhrakh's, was very small indeed.<sup>21</sup> What could be done about these "cooped up" qualities of life, and about what some viewed as political censorship in the press, had not been resolved. But the problem had been stated.

When Osorgin spoke of the expatriates as guardians of a threatened culture, he had in mind what was sometimes referred to later as the "émigré mission." This was another important part of the picture behind the 1928 discussion. Even before World War I, many people all over Europe had begun

19. Bakhrakh, "V zashchitu chitatelia."

20. "Literaturnaia besedy," *Zveno*, Apr. 27, 1925.

21. Bakhrakh, "V zashchitu chitatelia."



to be concerned about the future of Western culture in general. The sorry state of literature and art has always been a favorite worry of those hungry for masterpieces and impatient with the puny efforts of their own times. But by the late twenties the realities of modern consciousness—disorientation, alienation, the fragmentariness of contemporary existence—led many writers in the West to discuss the general cultural predicament in particularly solemn tones.

But if the situation looked dim to, say, a French or English intellectual, it appeared almost hopeless to many a Russian émigré, especially by the 1930s. Russian literature's ultimate "break-up" (*raspad*, a word heard not infrequently those days) seemed imminent. Not only was no great literature being produced because of the general cultural situation, but there were unmistakable indications for the émigrés that the cultural traditions which they had managed to save from the destruction of revolution and war, at a price only they could know, would perish along with them. If such a view seems exaggerated in retrospect, or if the concerns behind the controversy sketched above seem somewhat overblown, one should bear in mind that they were in fact all very real to the émigrés at a time when it appeared that the Stalinists meant to administer the final *coup de grâce* to what free literary movement had developed during the twenties under the earlier regime. Many thought that Russian literature would no longer exist at all except in emigration, and this thinking gave rise to some extreme introspection throughout the whole émigré literary community.

By the late 1920s the responsibility weighed heavily on the uprooted Russians not only to "remember" Russian culture but to keep it nurtured and growing. Already some attention was being given to the aspect of this problem that seemed gravest of all: the question of a literary replacement (*smena*) for the older generation.<sup>22</sup> Literary traditions could not be permitted to die out so that only distorted "Soviet" forms remained. The "real" Pushkin and Tolstoy must be kept alive, along with the ideas, values, and general heritage which these and so many other writers had left behind. Younger writers must be trained outside of Russia. For the sake of future generations of Russians, the expatriates felt they must not fail in this task. But how could this future "replacement" be assured? Where would young writers find the necessary guidance and encouragement? Questions like these, so timely in the middle-to-late twenties, lay at the back of many minds. And it is not difficult to see why literary criticism was one of the first areas to be explored for answers.

22. One of the earliest articles of substance dealing with this problem was M. Tsetlin's "Émigrantskoe," *Sovremennye Zapiski* (Paris), no. 32 (1927), pp. 435–41. Speaking mainly about prose writers, he was skeptical that without the "home soil" of Russia a "worthy replacement" could develop.

Critics, especially those with experience as writers or poets, were the logical candidates to take on the responsibility of formulating guidelines and tasks for émigré literature, of discovering and encouraging talent.

But the youth had other interests and gradually were being assimilated by a society into which they had been transplanted at an early age. As Adamovich put it several years later, the young Russian in Paris was drawn to emulate the affluent Frenchman who dined in expensive restaurants much more than the elder émigré Russian “huddling [in his room] on the eighth floor and running down for his own milk in the morning . . . the pitiful wreckage of an unknown past.”<sup>23</sup> In 1928 the youth problem (later called the “replacement crisis”) was already assuming significant if not yet crucial proportions. It was hoped that literary critics would be able to provide sympathetic encouragement for prospective young writers as well as objective evaluations of their efforts. Literary criticism was being summoned to help resolve what came to be viewed more and more as a question of the life or death not only of émigré literature but of all Russian literature.

What Adamovich and Khodasevich were doing in 1928 was as eloquent a commentary on the problems of the times as what they were saying. Both poets were writing critical prose and very little poetry. The fact itself perhaps gives testimony that the conditions of life in emigration did not provide a situation conducive to creative productivity—at least not for poets. Early in 1928, in fact, Adamovich had written rather subjectively about the difficulties of not “withering away” in exile, and of the strength needed to survive in “this new desert.”<sup>24</sup> If these two now found it difficult to write poetry themselves, they could hardly have regarded their task of stimulating poetic activity among the younger poets as an easy one. Yet they felt that literature *must* continue to exist in emigration. The question was how.

Osorgin spoke of relations between critics, their editors, and their readers, and he was perfectly correct in doing so. Part of the problem lay there. A new generation of Russian writers, not to mention the still active and productive older generation, would need disinterested, competent critical response—free, that is, from the biases already discussed above. No one disagreed with this. But Adamovich and Khodasevich, each in his own way, seemed to see more deeply into the plight of émigré literature and to sense the need for something beyond the “objectivity” of descriptive criticism—something that they, not as poets but as poet-critics, could give.

23. G. V. Adamovich, *Odinochestvo i svoboda* (New York: Chekhov, 1955), p. 15.

24. “Prazhskie poety,” *Dni*, Mar. 4, 1928. Two years later Adamovich wrote that a changeover from verse to prose was being dictated by the times: “These days verse comes easily to practically nobody. . . . Briusov once said, ‘Write prose, gentlemen.’ Now Time itself tells poets, ‘Write prose, gentlemen.’” See “Kommentarii,” *Chisla* (Paris), no. 2-3 (1930), p. 176.

Both affirmed the existence of “real” criticism (in the face of some opinion to the contrary) not only as simple evaluation but as *sui generis* creative endeavor. Khodasevich had already described his view in part in a 1927 article in which he wrote about the critic’s *re-creation* of poetry in his criticism: “The poet, using manifestations of reality as material, creates a new world from them—his own world. The critic does the same, only with different devices. He creates *his* world using as raw material the manifestations of the poetic world.”<sup>25</sup> This meant that in order to stimulate the creative urge, literature must assume the personal meaning for the critic that certain experiences in life assume for the poet, which was really almost the same as what Adamovich was saying when he asserted that the critic should “write about life.”<sup>26</sup> Good literature becomes a momentous and memorable part of a man’s life, and as such it may inspire the real critic in his work.

Osorgin had spoken of the lack of “enthusiasm” for Russian literature among the émigrés. This situation had been seen as symptomatic of an “illness.” The times did not promote enthusiasm. The muses were silent, or nearly so. In emigration both Khodasevich, with his well-deserved reputation before the twenties, and Adamovich had found it difficult to provide young writers with much encouragement through example—by writing poetry. But they knew Russian literature. This they could “re-create” for their readers in critical essay after critical essay with hopes that the needed inspiration would come, through them, from Pushkin, Tolstoy, and the many others they could talk about. They could, in effect, bring the great masters of Russian literature to the aid of their own now threatened legacy. Both were inclined to be pessimistic, but both nevertheless sought to stimulate their readers by illuminating the great moments and figures of Russian literature (more often than not the ones that had been of inspiration to them) through the light of their own “creative” critical work.

In general, Khodasevich and Adamovich may be said to have abandoned their own poetry in the late twenties for criticism, though they both continued to write some verse. Although it would be a mistake to regard either as a martyr who sacrificed his poetic glory for a greater cause, there can be little doubt that each keenly felt the need for what he could offer as a critical guide. The 1928 controversy marked and dramatized a moment near the beginning of a period in the history of Russian émigré culture which was clearly dominated more by criticism than by great imaginative literature. It was a period of stocktaking, re-evaluation of the past, and attempts to adapt to the present. The curious relation between literature and society had taken a special twist,

25. “Pushkin v zhizni,” *Poslednie Novosti*, Jan. 13, 1927.

26. Osorgin, who understood this, agreed. The poet Nikolai Otsup took Adamovich more literally and was puzzled. See “O literaturnoi otsenke,” *Dni*, June 24, 1928.

as the supports necessary to the life of a literary community shifted or disappeared altogether. Through the next decade Adamovich and Khodasevich continued, sometimes polemically,<sup>27</sup> to explore various aspects of the questions about literary art and criticism in emigration that they themselves had helped define during the 1928 debate.

27. The so-called Adamovich-Khodasevich polemic, itself a topic for a separate discussion, took place mainly in 1935. See Struve, *Russkaia literatura v izgnanii*, pp. 220–22. For two important essays dealing generally with the problems of émigré literature, see G. V. Adamovich, “O literature v emigratsii,” *Sovremennye Zapiski*, no. 50 (1932), pp. 327–39, and V. F. Khodasevich, “Literatura v izgnanii,” *Vozrozhdenie*, May 4, 1933 (reprinted in his *Literaturnye stat'i i vospominaniia* [New York: Chekhov, 1954], pp. 225–71).