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LITO: A Lift to Parnassus

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LITO: A Lift to Parnassus

Why does the poet need to be heard and accepted, or on the other hand, rejected by the other poets? What makes it necessary to search for poetry circles, to join them, to gain—or, more aptly, *win* the recognition from colleagues? Isn't it a reader who determines popularity? Isn't it a critic who tells the reader about the hidden meanings of the literal words? Isn't it an academic, an expert in literature, who at last places the poet and his poetry into a national and global hierarchy?

Why should you care about another poet's opinion, and even desire it to be expressed publicly?

Once I heard Victor Krivulin, the renowned Russian poet, who belonged to the circle of "Ahmatova's orphans" along with Brodsky and Naiman, and Rein, say in an interview that a poet needs a special "acoustic space" for developing his talent. In other words, he needs his texts to be understood and echoed by people with a similar conception of language as the poet's.

The poets are united by having a common feeling of a certain weirdness which is essential to the art of poetry. This often leads to the feeling of exclusion or inclusion in a special community; and consequently, the differences in style and artistic aim split and segment the larger literary community.

In Russia, literature has always been socially important, though now it is losing its social position and relevance due to the attack of mass media. In Soviet times poetry was a kind of substitute for religion—the last resort of the intelligentsia, and paradoxically, a powerful instrument for propaganda. Starting to write often in the early school age of 8-9, a young author of poetry always knew he would be making his first step to Parnassus, where perished classics reside along with the living—even if he didn't show his opuses to anyone. But rarely could one resist the desire to be heard.

So the next step for a new-born poet was often a literary club, a studio or a seminar, which most often takes the name LITO, as an abbreviation coming from the Russian words "literaturnoye ob'edinenie" (literary union).

The LITO's main function is in fact tutoring—or giving the opportunity to improve and develop poetical skills within a group. Here I have to mention specially that what is awarded for this study is not a diploma, but is, sometimes, a reputation. The first one uniting young poets for study was, I guess, founded by Nikolai Gumilev in 1910s, and is remembered by the name "Sounding Shell". LITO's should be distinguished from the volunteer artistic unions and also movements such as the Futurists, the Dadaists and other groups based on a common artistic ideology or goal. Different LITO's had clearly different styles and maintain different trends of poetry. They were still more like schools, dealing with differently writing young people.

I surely could put out heaps of names and characteristic poetry, but in fact I think it's better to limit the story to general features. LITO's are different by their ideology, initiation (entering procedure), style, a choice of trends, and atmosphere. It's also worth mentioning the age of the participants, because some LITO's, being formed decades ago, are still existing almost like closed clubs, whose members are adults, where the membership is obtained by years of patient presence and participation.

The most usual form of LITO is a permanently working seminar, voluntarily lead by a respected poet, taking a group of 10-20 youngsters, sharing the latest verses and relying on the Teacher-poet to help them with promotion and publication because of his vast contacts in the literary community. They are often known by the leader's name: like Alexander Kushner's, Aleksei Mashevsky's, Vyacheslav Leikin's seminars. Their work is mostly reading and discussing one another's verses, thus helping the individual with the development of his talent. To enter, or, it is better to say *to be invited* to a LITO you're supposed to give a representative sample of your verse to a leader, who then decides whether your ability level corresponds to the LITO's.

The leader's poetry is usually not to be discussed by the younger members. He is performing the last judgment and announcing the sentence. To make the procedure of discussion more serious, "the critic" and "the defender" are to be specially picked among the participants for a thorough and detailed analysis of the poems presented for the discussion. Their task is to stress the poetry's both strong and weak points; thus ideally showing the author his limits and potentials. The others may add their own impressions and observations. This method can seem quite organized, but the reality often turns out to be different. What happens is that the leader of the LITO, the poet, more or less openly feeds his personal tastes and preferences to the others. For example, in A. Kushner's LITO, which has existed already for more than 20 years, the dominating tradition is classical and melancholic, with no taboo vocabulary or formal experiments allowed. The young poet bringing expressive texts may face a suggestion to write on some other subject, or to read more classics, or even to be asked why he's mentioning God's name in his poems, or being too abstract, because the *real* poetry should deal with the visible and concrete, making it poetical for the reader. The *real* poetry should be clear, preferably a bit sad and minimalist—and rhymed. This is what I call "the subjective authoritarianism"—the full confidence in one's own experience, taste and importance being transferred to another's creative evolution.

The other LITO's, left over from Soviet times in former pioneer houses, now renamed as "The Children's Creative Centers", are led by minor verse-makers on a pitiful public wage, being hardly ever noticed—but bearing the poet's name. What happens there is that teenagers, not actually being taught to analyze and criticize, start discussing the author's personality instead of the texts, often throwing into the air psychiatric diagnoses, which hurt the author being discussed. One gets angry, another scared, some suffer, thinking this to be the only way to join the herd. Moreover, many say that for grown-up poets this kind of traumatic initiation is useful; for it sweeps away pointless pride.

Both described types of LITO's are characterized as being damn serious about what they do. Their activities are seen from inside as a certain cultural mission.

The other type of LITO is represented, for example, by Vyacheslav Leikin's group, being developed from a literary club at a youth weekly-newspaper. There teaching and studying are done through endless games, developing formal skills and abilities to play with the word and sense. There seemed to be no clear preference for style; neither were discussions organized. The usual practice is to make positive remarks so that the silence of being ignored is the only kind of criticism. This seems psychologically much milder than the method mentioned above; but the bad side of that practice is that it makes the young writer dependant on pleasant company where no one speaks nasty things to each other. This clearly leads to somewhat of a literary isolation when one develops a disability to coexist with others.

All three listed LITO types have a certain inner hierarchy. Besides the leaders' favorites, the most promising poets, there is always a "manager", who handles information, preparation for the readings, and is connected with the leader, etc. The "manager" is often less talented, by the way.

But recently there appeared a new trend: a company of young poets, desiring a kind of spiritual leader, will choose and invite a Teacher-poet, sometimes even paying him for his time spent in the session. I know at least one such case. The group of poets, previously belonging to a LITO, whose leader left the position for private reasons, stayed together looking for someone capable of advising them on their creative practice. They visited several different LITO's before "hiring" a leader, trying to find a match. And when the first leader "hired" didn't satisfy, they called for the second one, who finally turned to be the perfect choice.

This seminar, led by Valery Shubinsky, fruitfully working now for more than four years and gaining more and more attendants, is based on different principles and attitudes. When verses are discussed, the first things to be picked out from the author's poetics are the specific features that distinguish these poems from the others—in other words, what makes the poet original. Secondly the students are to assist the author in identifying himself with one or several existing traditions in order to let him know that he's not alone, but shares in the classical heritage and contemporary achievements of others—while still being himself.

The LITO, as a steady institution of literary life, is an important part of one's identity—for the teacher-poets and the attendants the same—and a helpful instrument for promoting yourself at an early stage. This explains why many of them still exist on completely voluntary grounds: they fulfill a need for the romantic and ambitious idea of having one's own "school" in almost a medieval meaning, and the feeling of belonging to the "school" warms the heart. It's honorable and flattering to have pupils following you— no one can deny that. And the phenomenon of volunteering there without any official warranties or benefits tells something of poetry's role in Russian society, where it seems still to be more a thing of worship than of self-expression, more for the others, than for yourself.

The name of a LITO works as a brand and a clear reference to a certain tradition; it places one in the literary system of coordinates, telling something of him that is more than he can imagine himself.