chilling their enthusiasm with outwardly convincing arguments about the standardization of their art and its use by the state. The reader would be obliged to accept them, I said, but inwardly feel repulsed... These "theories" led to painful contradictions, the collapse of personal and artistic values, and created an atmosphere of dissatisfaction and discontent.

Babel went on to describe his closest friends.

In conversations with Eisenstein in 1936 and 1937, the main theme was the need to find a subject that would emphasize, rather than dilute, his negative qualities, i.e. Eisenstein's tendency towards mysticism, trick effects and naked formalism. Stubbornly, we continued to work on the flawed Bezhin Meadow, with considerable expense of time and money, a film in which the death of the Pioneer Pavlik Morozov took on the nature of a religious, mystical performance of Catholic extravagance.

My talks with Mikhail, who was trying by every means fair and foul to get my excluded play Sunset back in the repertoire, were of the same kind. So were those with Gorunov, one of the managers of the Vakhutnog Theatre, who wanted my play Maria, banned by the State Repertory Committee, to be allowed again. Their efforts to get my plays back on the stage went hand in hand with our propaganda against the current Soviet repertoire and its supporters, and against the new policies of the Moscow Art Theatre. Its productions of such plays as Enemies, Earth and Dostigiev and Others were, we declared, inevitable and predictable failures. The attention devoted to the best theatre in the country had created a hothouse atmosphere, we said, and this was dulling the brilliance and innovation that formerly distinguished its work... Our love for the People was artificial and theoretical and our concern for their future, simply an aesthetic category. We had no roots among the People, hence the despair and nihilism that we disseminated.

One of the missionaries of such despair was my fellow Odessa Olesha, whom I have known for 20 years. He deformed himself as the living embodiment of the damage inflicted on "art" by the Soviet system. A gifted man, he attracted young writers and actors who bore grudges, or were cheap sceptics and high-living failures, with his passionate denunciations of this harmful influence. His film A Severe Young Man cost the Kiev film studios several million roubles to make and then turned out to be an indescribable lampoon of the Komsomol. It was never released and the costs had to be written off. His other film The Bog

Soldiers received a frosty, almost hostile, reception from the public which only made him more embittered. Nothing came of his attempts, over many years, to write a play (widely advertised before he had ever written it). This inevitable and predictable series of failures placed him in the ranks of complaining, embittered and resentful people... Quite naturally, neither Olesha nor Eisenstein were operating in a vacuum in 1936-7 and we felt the mute but, to us, clear sympathy of a great many other artists and writers: Valeria Gerasimova, Shklovsky, Pasternak, Boris Levin, Sobolev and many others. This sympathy exacted a heavy toll since the flaw of inner confusion and impotence could also be felt in their work...

Babel was incriminating his friends. Yet we should not be quick to condemn or pardon him from our safe distance. Interrogation by the NKVD reduced individuals to a point where they were no longer responsible for their words. Emotional torture, added to the physical torments they suffered, drove them to a mental disorder verging on insanity. In his letter to Molotov, Meyerhold described this condition:

... There was one other terrible circumstance that contributed to my collapse, and total loss of control over myself... Immediately after my arrest I was cast into the deepest depression by the obsessive thought, "This is what I deserve?" The government thought, so I began to convince myself, that the sentence I had received... was not sufficient... for my sins... and that I must undergo yet another punishment, that which the NKVD was carrying out now. "This is what I deserve?" I repeated to myself and I split into two individuals. The first started searching for the "crimes" of the second, and when they could not be found, he began to invent them. The interrogator proved an effective and experienced assistant and, working closely together, we began our composition. When my fantasy started running out, the interrogators took over... they prepared and revised the depositions (some were rewritten three or four times)...

I still could not think at all clearly because a Damoclean sword dangled over me: constantly the interrogator repeated, threateningly, "If you won't write (invent, in other words?) then we shall beat you again, leaving your head and your right arm untouched but reducing the rest to a hacked, bleeding and shapeless body." And I signed everything...

False testimony against themselves and against others was torn from individuals reduced to the final stages of suffering. There were cases when the person