

Conference Paper

Evidence and Violence: Factography Evolution from the Avant-garde to the Absurd and Camp Prose

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Abstract

This article focuses on the Russian literary avant-garde and its development in prison camp prose and documentary writing. These texts reflected an anthropological experience and response to oppression and violence in human society. In this context, it is possible to see how literature and art in general are able to change ourselves and our reality, rather than just to entertain, console and bring subjective satisfaction. The experience of alienated labor, interpreted as the experience of violence, was expressed by avant-gardists in exaggerated imagery in their works. Therefore, I propose to study the avant-garde in the context of the extreme experience of violence, in which the political and the poetic are sometimes entwined.

Keywords: avant-garde, camp prose, media-aesthetic, Soviet literature, violence

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Artistic depiction of events is the author's trial of the world around him.

The author is omnipotent – the dead rise from their graves and live.

Varlam Shalamov

1.

I infer the idea of Russian avant-garde based on the failure of the October Socialist Revolution as a project to reorganize social and industrial relations, culture and art on a communist basis. I notice this idea in violence, or, to be more precise, in attempts to overcome violence by means of artistic work. The violence required for the shift of power in 1917 returned to the Russian society very soon, making it impossible to tell friends from foes, "us" from "them". Artists found themselves in the eye of the storm, nolens volens becoming victims thereof. The art of left avant-garde therefore was

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looking for alternative ways to solve the social conflicts by changing attitudes towards labor management, as well as towards things, their production and consumption.

But failure of the left political project doesn't mean that the artistic achievements of left Russian avant-garde were compromised. It cannot justify relocating them to the archive, museum and market, as Boris Groys puts it, because it is impossible to valorize, capitalize or properly express them under the hostile social and political conditions [4]. That is why, having taken a turn, history should have come back to jumping ahead of itself into the future of art, without being distilled down to design, or to place in an art museum, not to turning into the currency in the market of contemporary art.

From this retrospective point of view, I compared Walter Benjamin's media-aesthetic ideas to the political and aesthetic doctrine of "LEF" (Left Front of Arts) manifested in constructivism, industrial art and factual literature on the 1920-s. The protagonist for that matter was Sergey Tretyakov as an "operating" writer, that is, a writer who also manages production. My main goal was to expose the structure of somewhat reverse evolution of the avant-garde poetry, literature and art, adhering to the understanding of history developed in Benjamin's late works [2]. His view of history rejects perceiving it as progressive development of the mankind, perfecting its technical capacities, production and institutions throughout the timeline that begins at the point of creation and has an infinite perspective of the future. Instead, he sees history as a perpetual return to unsolved contradictions and antagonisms of the past that keep on determining our present and preventing the free and just future from happening. According to Benjamin, such returns were supposed to "save" that future, its sovereign moments, and not let the consequences of unjust events into the present. The method for accomplishing it was citation of the past in the form of testimony, images and gestures of the underdogs: pariahs and losers. This aspect of Benjamin's approach matches both Sergey Tretyakov's theories [7] and Varlam Shalamov's, Primo Levi's and some other postwar writers' search for the ways to express prison camp experience in prose and documentary writing.

My assumption is that the scope of studying industrial art and factual literature poetics should not be determined by the catastrophe that the Soviet experiment had led to after its fall in the late 1930-s. On the contrary, the poetics of prison camp prose can be seen as the key to understanding the factographic and industrial ideas of Tretyakov's LEF. Within the aforesaid retrospective, the [failed] Socialist Revolution of 1917 in Russia had rather an imitative nature in relation to the earlier social catastrophes (Russian tsarist regime, WWI, etc.), which had been projected in the poetic and aesthetic manner of Russian cubo-futurism of the 1910-s. It was characterized

by objectlessness and demonstrative abandonment of realistic depiction tradition, as well as avoiding the use of communicative language. That was caused by the fact that the prerevolutionary critical artists and working people had realized losing means of production and the integrity of social experience. On the other hand, being object- and fact-oriented in literature, perceiving words as things-in-themselves was a common trend for the historical avant-garde. It is demonstrated by such examples as V. Khlebnikov's and A. Kruchenykh's "self-sufficient word" and "zaum" ("beyond sense"), K. Malevich's suprematist forms, V. Kandinsky's abstract compositions, N. Yevreinov's "Theater as Such", the industrial art and factography of LEF, and the constructivism of "VHUTEMAS" (Higher Art and Technical Studios) and "INKHUK" (Institute for Artistic Culture). In some sense, the industrial art and factual prose of the 1920-s were merely an extended version of cubo-futurism in the new social conditions. It is important to mention that the late post-revolutionary avant-garde was a form of artistic response to the failure of the social revolution, rather than its application to the sphere of art and literature, as it is commonly believed.

That is why I consider that the factual literature poetics and industrial art doctrine found their completion not in Stalin-era modernism or socialist realism, but in post avant-garde: the absurdist poetic manner of OBERIU (the Union of Real Art), Andrey Platonov's dystopia, but most importantly – in the documentary prison camp prose by Varlam Shalamov. Therefore, in that context, the 1930-s absurdism and the 1950-s prison camp prose can be referred to as negative manifestation of the factographic trend in Russian literature of the 1920-s, which has always been closer to the absurdist poetics than to the traditions of Russian realistic literature.

2.

As opposed to our distinguished colleagues, Slavic literature scholars, my interest doesn't lie all that much in the fact that Shalamov made the scientific labor management techniques his literary devices, nor that he followed A. Gastev's and S. Tretyakov's factual literature poetic manner of the 1920-s. In fact, I'd like to focus on the shimmering light that Shalamov's prose throws on the project of the manufacturers and factographers of the 1920-s. That is, to look at Tretyakov's works through Shalamov's prose in melancholic retrospection, and to see it as some sort of evidence of the two catastrophic realities: tsarism that preceded the 1920-s period, and Stalinism that followed it.

In order to realize the value of this impossible avant-garde tradition, it is not enough to point out the similarities in formal poetic manner, vocabulary, or the irony of history. It is necessary to reinterpret the historical context and the nature of literature, as well as the connections between the author, his artistic means and plot in the context of structurally similar social and political processes of the 1910 – 1950-s in Russia. Then it will be possible to prove even more radical idea: the factual literature project became completely manifested and substantiated in its tragic truth not in the country of triumphant communism, but rather at the bottom of Platonov's foundation pit and in Shalamov's prison camp. The question is: does it discredit the left project in general and factography as a form of its expression in literature and art?

3.

Factual literature introduces a conceptually new type of relationship between the plot and the artistic form, between the artist and the society. Unlike the majority of literary and art genres, avant-garde poetry is conditioned by the specific nature of its material. It is connected to artistic expression in a special way, assuming authentic and valid recording of events, the author's involvement in social changes, and emotional impact on the reader. Merely observing the facts of socialist construction was not enough, to say nothing of aestheticizing it or campaigning for it, because it was impossible to stop the momentum of master-slave relations merely by reflecting its existence, even if such reflection was critical, with no embellishment or apologetics. That is why the factographers of LEF were not simply collecting or combining the facts, but they perceived the reality as a historical chance, looking for tokens of "communist deciphering" (Dziga Vertov) and testifying about the presence of loads of violence remaining in the social institutions and in the interpersonal relations.

The nature of such testifying and its objectives made the factual prose document-oriented, although not in legal terms, but artistically expressed and emotionally charged. In this case, artistic does not mean fictitious, and emotional does not imply affective disposition. According to S. Tretyakov, literary work consists not so much of transferring aesthetic information, as in affecting the reader emotionally, which does not implicate one-sided affectation. As he repeatedly stated in "LEF" magazine (also, in "New LEF"), the artist is both an "intellectualizer" and an "emotionalizer". That dual nature of an artistic act was supposed to make the artist responsible for the outcome of the influence his works have over readers and listeners. Tretyakov relentlessly criticized art, calling it some kind of aesthetic drug with manipulative and entertaining

effect achieved by isolating one of the senses of perception (for instance, separating words from visual images) [7].

Tretyakov's understanding of art as sort of production and labor activity was not reduced to producing goods. It was seen as work aimed at changing the production means and conditions, establishing non-violent relations between people. Being an "operating writer", Tretyakov did not reduce the organizing functions of literature to propaganda. Benjamin linked the author's involvement in industrial process with disappearance of old genres (such as novels) and emerging of the new mass genres and expressive means (newspaper short stories) in the context of the "powerful re-fusion of literary forms" that was happening in the world literature of the day. Newspaper as a powerful medium and a new literary form (Shklovsky), being owned by the working people themselves, was intended to eliminate contradictions between science and fiction, between different literary genres, between writers and readers. At the same time, it was supposed to stop being merely a medium for news, entertainment and advertising. Labor itself could have its say in order to solve domestic and social problems, and saying the right words was "part of the skillset required to exercise labor" [2].

Examining connections between the artistic quality of a piece of work and the political views of its author, Benjamin wrote about "functional correlation that exists between the correct political tendency and progressive literary technique". They are not mutually opposed, but instead, presuppose and precondition each other: "the tendency of a literary work can be politically correct only if it is also literarily correct... the politically correct tendency includes a literary tendency. And I would add straightaway: this literary tendency, which is implicitly or explicitly contained in every correct political tendency of a work, alone constitutes the quality of that work. The correct political tendency of a work thus includes its literary quality because it includes its literary tendency" [2].

In my point of view, such definition is conditioned by the literary forms radically changing the materials, and eventually even overriding it. Benjamin himself described such influence as "the literarization of the conditions of living that masters the otherwise insoluble antinomies" [2].

The aforementioned specificity of the material in the early Soviet period meant its immanence to the process of making literary art, constituting its basis. The literature itself, as social and anthropological practice, was a part of this material, not an external entity. Their relationship implied transfusion and interchange, although without merging indistinguishably. In this respect, one of the main characteristics of the material is

its variability, insofar as it is connected with the literary practice. That material consists of the fabric of the diverse social relationships. Literature and art have dealt with its predominantly violent nature throughout history, oscillating between radical rejection and almost total fusion.

In the early Soviet Russia, at the beginning of the 1920-s, the social reality in its forms was trying to get rid of violence, and artists had to catch up, to use all their skills and devices to fit into the fairway of the revolutionary changes. Whilst at prison camps, and, later, in labor camps, such possibilities were unavailable, especially the ones connected to the potential liberation of man and labor. By the end of the 1920-s, the writer's learning from the material took the opposite direction. However, nothing changed for the factual literature that was not limited by observation and informing, but was actively meddling with its material. That is why, in Shalamov's words: "The new prose is the event itself, it is the battle, not its description. That is, a document, the author's direct involvement in the events of life", – is Tretyakov's verbatim quote [6]. Now we can see what that militarist metaphor meant, and what the causes, aims and consequences of that "battle" were. Herein lies the bifurcation point of the modern literary revolution that is connected with self-reflection of literature and art in the "times after" – that is, with it realizing having been involved in the experience of social violence, and with passively contemplative, apologetic or radically critical, degewaltizing attitude towards it. But the problem is, there is no "after", just as there is no "before": the camp is set up in the field of everyday social life, and the only thing that the artist has to do in order to make the future possible is to free the past from oblivion, testifying about the tragedy unfolding.

The actual difference between factual literature and documentary witness prose is that the representatives of the former tried to overcome violence relying on the intensely changing social material itself. On the contrary, Shalamov worked with the social material returning to the chaos of social violence, trying to record all these processes and, where possible, decrease the level of such violence using the language of his prose. That is why he used the factographic methods and the most advanced literary technique of his time – feature story – following the left political tendency, i.e. trying to look from the point of view of the most oppressed and outcast social group of "weaklings", the new proletarians of GULAG. The methodology of factual literature helped Shalamov find a literary way to express his prison camp experience that cannot be unambiguously documented without losing its essence. Just like authentic poetry, Shalamov's prose cannot be retold "in one's own words" only following the plot and contents, as if it was a document containing some information. The actual knowledge

of prison camps helps too little for that matter. But the prison camp material admits no fiction per se. In a similar context Tretyakov wrote that for writing a feature story it is necessary to combine fiction and social-journalistic genres: "... a Soviet feature-story is born by cross-breeding literary fiction and newspaper genres. From fiction it inherits artistic devices, figurativeness and narrative structure, and from the newspapers genres – the immediate relevance, specificity and promptness" ([7], 175).

In the described historical regression, Shalamov can be considered an ideal writer according to the standards that Tretyakov had set for Soviet feature stories in 1931 – the time when Shalamov got out of Vishlag. Tretyakov wrote: "How to grow into the material? There are two main approaches to getting involved in that process: one is specializing in a certain topic, long and active participation in real construction, expedition, research; long-time observations, when a writing is returning to a certain place for a number of years. The other way to develop such close relationship with the topic is for the working people themselves to get involved in writing feature-stories" ([7], 178-179). In the context of Shalamov's biography, Tretyakov's recommendations sound ominous: too high a price the writer had to pay to prove the theory of his older colleague, and one should remember that it didn't help Tretyakov himself survive. In order to gain writer's integrity, Shalamov had to return to "a certain place" (Soviet prison camp) at least twice to testify of the mass death production from within. That is why, while there are little structural differences between collective farm feature stories by Tretyakov and, for instance, "The Kolyma tales" by Shalamov, there is still one significant difference that has to do with political and social status of the characters. Although Shalamov puts a weakling in the center of his stories, he doesn't see any historical truth in his naked life, nor does he see the prison camp experience as something meaningful and applicable in civil life.

Another way GULAG has become the historical extreme and the implementation of factual literature according to LEF is by making it fundamentally impossible to describe its reality without having been behind the barbed wire, as a prisoner or as a warden (like S. Dovlatov). Soon after the "reforging" process gained its momentum, it was impossible to stay unaffected by and ignorant of forming the prison camp system that was absolutely foreign to the communist theory in early Soviet Russia. Here began the personal dramas of such artists as Alexander Rodchenko, to say nothing of Viktor Shklovsky. I might add that in his aforementioned speech made in 1931, Tretyakov farsightedly doubted the success of the notorious factographic project of the early 1930-s – that is, the multi-authored study "The Stalin White Sea – Baltic Canal: the

construction history, 1931 – 1934”, edited by M. Gorky, with feature stories by Shklovsky and photos by Rodchenko.

4.

The problem of social violence, that had not been solved by the revolution, made itself felt here. The issue was only raised by the early Soviet left avant-garde, but it was solved in practice neither by mass production of things both pretty and useful, nor by establishing communist social relations. The things were supposed to become the allegory for the futility of existence and everyday life, and the relations – to show the society the perspective of good collective death. The problem was, in such a perspective an innocent individual could not achieve happiness, but continued to suffer. The impossibility to solve this issue is independently discovered by S. Tretyakov, V. Benjamin and A. Platonov. And only the factography of the stories that Shalamov brought with him from Kolyma managed to cut that knot and, taking an inconceivable turn, returned to Tretyakov’s unfinished project, illuminating it with the glow of prison camp half-life. In his stories Shalamov brought the prison camp itself from Kolyma, but he tried to prevent it from going any farther than his words, and wanted it to be buried in the stories. I would call his literary method “degewaltization” of the language in prose that was experienced as a document.

This methodology may be precisely attributed to the witness, but it does not refer to information collected by an investigator, nor to crime victim’s or eyewitness’ testimony, nor to conviction or acquittal. We should rather call it a projection of a secular version of the Last Judgment onto history, where the judge and the defendant have switched places, and the investigation itself has turned into punishment. This is exactly the kind of judgment Shalamov meant by writing the phrase that became this article’s epigraph: the judgment that resuscitates the dead with real life artistic depiction.

5.

Being a borderline cultural phenomenon, Russian avant-gard was transitive (or finalizing) by nature, matching the revolutionary social changes that implied the radical transformation or eradication of the previously accepted violent forms and norms. In the prerevolutionary and early revolutionary periods Russian futurists hoped for the elimination of violent institutions and for the changes in certain social relations in Russian society. But finding themselves in Stalin era prison camps, the survived artists

could only testify about the social short circuit, of the violent relapse. Obviously, under those circumstances Russian avant-garde poetics once again lost its practical and pragmatic resource that had allowed it to influence the forms of collective production, without losing its artistic features. But it preserved and even intensified its critical function, retracting from the external aesthetic qualities of the beautiful, made-up images and fictitious stories. At the same time, the agitational and pedagogic side of the left avant-garde concentrated on powerful emotional influence on the reader, which would not, however, purify passions, but would instead cause deep and irresistible aversion and anti-catharsis, the “shame to be a human” that Primo Levi wrote about [5].

It is noteworthy that Shalamov did not identify the figure of “A Hero of Our Time” – that is, a weakling, with biomass [1], although it was almost pushed to the sidelines of “naked life” and death, the “grey zone” of their indistinguishability. It goes without saying that no literature was possible under such circumstances. In Shalamov’s case, it was not the result of “cast-iron will and honor of a man who always remains himself” (like in “One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich” by A. Solzhenitsyn), but rather, the duty to testify about the silent victims of terror, talking “instead of them, but not for them” ([3], 11), from the perspective of a survivor that happened to become a writer. Poetry, just like fictional prose and representational art, became impossible long before Auschwitz, but one should not equate the impossibility of post-Auschwitz poetry with the actual impossibility of literary work in the times of GULAG, to say nothing about the art that would aestheticize this traumatic experience in the traditional fictional forms.

Turning to the witness literature does not boil down to merely stating or proving the facts of mass repressions of a whole generation of Soviet people (as a version of Holocaust), but it is dedicated to formulating some sort of a negative anthropology, which still remains a relevant objective nowadays. The anthropological images and the corresponding relations are still dividing people, now in the fields of historical, philosophical, literary and sociological studies of GULAG and Nazi death camps.

The main lesson of the desperate attempts to deliver the “impossible testimonial” and “literarization” of camp experience was that the liberal democratic societies understood the selective but significant inheritance of the political and legal regime of social and anthropological models of the totalitarian era (“camp as nomos of today”) [1]. Only recognizing camps as self-replicating structures of exclusion in the modern society and trying to testify in our own way about the excluded of today – that is, migrants and refugees – can we fully appreciate and understand Benjamin’s theories, Tretyakov’s feature stories and Shalamov’s prose, inevitably going outside the framework of traditional historical, sociological and literary studies.

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