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## LEF AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY SOVIET PROSE

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The search for a new literary system is what gives a distinct tonality to the Russian prose of the early 1920s. The fragmentary, multi-leveled lyric prose of the Modernists had finally reached a stage in which verbal innovations lost effectiveness.<sup>1</sup> The sense of a formal crisis was intensified by the instability of the general cultural climate. The emerging Soviet literature could not remain unaffected by such factors as the impact of the new Marxist socio-political values, the legitimization of the new middle and low-brow audience, the great popularity of film, and finally the commercial pressures arising from the profit-oriented book market functioning within the New Economic Policy (NEP). Under these circumstances, prose pieces written “v ožidanii literatury” and “v poiskax žanra” had a nobility of purpose which compensated for their literary shortcomings.<sup>2</sup>

The wide spectrum of forms and styles in the early 1920s illustrates the fact that individual prose pieces were intended by the authors, and also received by the audience, as indicators of possible future trends of Soviet prose. The apparent confusion of literary tendencies reflects a rapid evolution of prose, which during half a decade changed its focus from style to plot and then to material taken from the new Soviet reality. In the earliest Soviet literature, written in the immediate post-Modernist stage, the dominant feature of prose was its diction which reflected a continuing interaction between prose and poetry. Following this emphasis on the verbal fabric, in the subsequent stage, plot emerged as the organizing factor in prose, with special interest in plot construction adapted from the mystery or adventure story and brought into the mainstream from popular literature. The evolution culminated in the middle of the decade with an ultimate focus on material. This material was introduced into literature either as an account of the psychological reaction to the new Soviet *byt* or as an unembellished description of a social and political fact taken from the new reality and presented as *literatura fakta*. Although from the historical perspective these changes undoubtedly represented a progression, to contemporaries the short time span in which they occurred made them appear as an oscillation among literary alternatives.

This oscillation of early Soviet prose among the three “dominanta” of style, plot, and material is particularly visible in the avant-garde journal *LEF* (1923-25), published by the Left Front of the Arts (LEF).<sup>3</sup> *LEF*, a product of combined Futurist and Formalist thought, supplemented by a strong dose of leftist political sentiment, was designed as a “laboratory” of the new Soviet culture. Among the journals of the early 1920s, *LEF* most successfully combined the political awareness of the need for new art with an excellent sense of form.

As a group, LEF was most interested in designing art which would have a maximum impact on the modern audience. According to LEF theories, modernity required a radical departure from the realistic canon and the creation of an anti-philosophical, anti-psychological art which would shape, not reflect, reality.<sup>4</sup> This new art could, through an appropriately designed form, modernize the social habits and reactions of the audience along the lines of rationality, flexibility, and creativity. LEF members insisted that such modification could be accomplished by literature, art, film, and theater in which “deliberately impeded form” (*zatrudnennaja forma*) demanded a consciously active response rather than passive reception.<sup>5</sup> Utopian as the program was, it enabled LEF to act as an umbrella organization for much early Soviet experimental art. It brought together such groups and individuals as the Futurists, the Constructivists, the Formalists, *proizvodstvenniki* (the industrial artists) in the fine arts, and Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov in theater and film.<sup>6</sup> Even if some of these associations were only episodic, LEF succeeded in creating the appearance of an avant-garde movement in place of the earlier disconnected experiments.

LEF members, mindful of the rather extreme character of their formal proposals, viewed them as laboratory experiments aimed at the creation of new art. In such a way, in the laboratory context of the militant LEF, otherwise unremarkable prose pieces acquired a programmatic character and a theoretical support through the framework of the avant-garde journal. Although LEF did not arrive at its theory of modern prose until the second half of the decade with the development of *literatura fakta*, its experiments in the early 1920s reflected sensitivity both to the cultural currents of the time and to the formal predicaments of Soviet prose.

The reorientation of prose from style, to plot, and then to material, ostensibly came in a response to the preferences of the new reader, of the new audience created by the Revolution. This preoccupation with the reader whose figure provides a motivation for the thematic and formal explorations of the new prose is a development unique to early Soviet literature. In particular, left-wing writers, the proletarians as well as the avant-garde LEF, attempted to anticipate the direction of Soviet literature from the preferences of the new audience. Despite their opposing concepts of art and its social effect, both groups regarded themselves as the favorites of the new

reader created by the Revolution, and the figure of the reader loomed as an abstract presence in whose name their literary battles were fought.<sup>7</sup>

In reality, throughout the first half of the 1920s, the most persistent leit-motif in critical evaluations of the literary scene was the reader's lack of interest in a native literature and the clear preference for popular, action-filled stories translated mainly from English.<sup>8</sup> The search for literary models for Soviet literature took on such an intense character because it became obvious that none of the Russian literary groups had managed to establish a connection with the new audience.

Symptomatic of this lack of contact with the reader were the difficulties with publishing and sales of the new native literature. Under the mandate of NEP, 1921-28, the profit-oriented literary market functioned relatively unhampered by esthetic values and ethical notions of the role of literature which had been held by the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia. The NEP publishers experienced little pressure toward the didactic conformity that later restricted Soviet literature, and thus could easily meet reader demands. From the profile of the NEP literary market it became evident that the pre-revolutionary sub-culture of the 1910s, the popular culture of the middle and lower classes, claimed legitimacy in the new social order.<sup>9</sup> The pre-revolutionary favorites continued to enjoy popularity; sentimental romances by A. A. Verbickaja, innumerable detective serials about Nick Carter and Nat Pinkerton, or the adventures of Tarzan stole the limelight from the new Soviet literature.<sup>10</sup> On a higher literary level, the same wave of popularity of action-oriented prose gave prominence to such foreign story tellers as Jack London, O. Henry, and science fiction writers like Wells, Bellamy, and Edgar Rice Burroughs, the author of popular Marsian tales. It became clear that the Soviet mass audience sought the occasional diversion of a good plot and an exotic setting rather than the intellectual experience cherished by the traditional pre-revolutionary intelligentsia reader. (See Ejxenbaum, "V ožidanii literatury," 278-80.)

Still, the lack of a broad response to the new Soviet literature could not be blamed only on the democratization of the literary audience. Literature itself was plagued by a formal crisis. In the early 1920s, after more than a decade of the Modernist trends which dominated the literary scene, formal experimentation lost its novelty. The attempt to renovate style by introducing the spoken dialect of the new audience proved to be only a temporary solution: *skaz* narratives of ornamental literature, even when reflecting the major theme of the confrontation of the old and the new in Soviet Russia, were tiresome in their lack of perspective. At the same time, the popularity of translated literature and the overwhelming impact of film, which used simple plots and simple motivations, pointed out the appeal of the story-telling quality of art.

It was only natural that the search for a new prose with special focus on the recipient was pursued in the neo-Futurist journal *LEF*. The Futurists had originally entered literature under the banner of the democratization of the arts. In the early stage, they scorned the refinements of the Symbolists, professed an orientation toward and a contact with the common reader, and sought inspiration in "urban folklore." Later, their intention to create a modern, post-revolutionary culture, combined with their strong ties to the Formalists and to the film industry, led to expectations that their journal *LEF* would show interesting solutions to the problem of modern prose.

*LEF* first appeared at the beginning of 1923, at a time when the options for Soviet prose were still wide open. At that stage, ornamentalism coexisted with plot-oriented literature, although critics increasingly stressed the necessity to redirect literature toward new material, toward facts. In the general cultural climate of the time, the appearance of *LEF* with its program of an avant-garde art for a proletarian society was intended as a counter-measure to the rapidly developing petty bourgeois culture of the NEP period. *LEF*'s avant-garde orientation, however, could find only a limited response and a somewhat restricted field for experimentation, since the publication of the journal also coincided with official attempts to re-establish continuity with the realistic tradition. The campaign began officially on the hundredth anniversary of Ostrovskij's birth, on the occasion of which A. V. Lunačarskij came out with the slogan "Back to Ostrovskij!" This slogan inaugurated a gradual withdrawal from the experimental theater and renewed the importance of the nineteenth-century classics for Soviet culture.

*LEF*, whose editors believed the arts should activate the recipient, emphatically opposed both the petty bourgeois values of NEP and the official reinstatement of Realism. *LEF*'s preoccupation with the uniqueness of the Soviet historical situation translated into a determination to design an entirely new, functional kind of art aimed at the modernization of society. With varying degrees of success, *LEF* explored alternatives to the realistic tradition, alternatives which could—at least theoretically—affect the new post-revolutionary reader. Admittedly, the prose corpus of *LEF* is relatively small and represents no special literary achievement in absolute artistic terms. Prose presented a new field for the group which had a far stronger tradition in poetry and a better sense of direction in verbal experimentation. Indeed, part of the reason for *LEF*'s relative lack of impact in the first half of the decade was that the group propagated poetry at a time when the popular interest already had turned to prose, while in prose *LEF* lacked a unified program which could carry the day. The program of *literatura fakta* which eventually developed in *Novyj LEF* in the second half of the 1920s could no longer counteract the reinstatement of the realistic novel.

In the initial number of *LEF* published in January 1923 Brik and Majakovskij, who coauthored *LEF* neo-Futuristic declarations, equated all literature with verbal experimentation. They refused to draw a distinction between poetry and prose, claiming that:

We do not want to distinguish between poetry, prose, and practical language. . . . We work on the organization of the sounds of the language, on the polyphony of rhythm, on the simplification of speech pattern, on increased expressiveness, on the creation of new thematic devices.

We do not treat this work as an aesthetic end in itself, but as a laboratory for finding the best way of expressing the facts of contemporary life. (*LEF*, 1 [1923], 40-41.)

*LEF* was also clear in the types of prose the avant-garde found unacceptable. In the same declaration, Majakovskij and Brik ridiculed contemporary trends:

I poezija i proza imeli svoi jazykovye kanony.

Proza—osobo-xodul'nyx geroev (on + ona + ljubovnik = novellisty; intelligent + devuška + gorodovoj = bytoviki; nekto v serom + neznakomka + xristos = simvolisty) i svoj literaturno-xudožestvennyj stil' (1. "solnce sadilos' za xolmom" + "poljubili ili ubili" = "za oknom šelestjat topolja", 2. "skažu eto ja tebe, Vanjatka" + "predsedatel' siroetskogo suda pil gor'kuju" = "my ešče uvidim nebo v almazax;" 3. "kak stranno, Adelaida Ivanovna" + "širilas' žutkaja tajna" = "v belom venčike iz roz"). (*LEF*, 1 [1923], 40.)

The alternatives to modern prose proposed in *LEF* developed along three basic lines: new variations of poetic prose, political adventure stories, and *literatura fakta*. Nikolaj Aseev, a poet closely associated with *LEF*, and Artem Veselyj, a follower of the Pil'njak prose school, sought new ways for ornamental, or poetic, prose, one through Expressionism, the other through dialect and phonetic distortions of the language which occasionally resembled the Dadaistic experiments of Kručenyx. Samples of political adventure stories showing special emphasis on plot construction came from Boris Kušner, Viktor Šklovskij, and Osip Brik, associated with the Formalists. Sergej Tret'jakov, a theoretician of left arts and a poet, introduced a model of *literatura fakta* in the form of travel notes, a model which eventually came to dominate *Novyj LEF* (1927-28). Finally, Isaac Babel' published in *LEF* excerpts from *Konarmija* and *Odesskie rasskazy*, which in the context of the journal offered a curious synthesis of ornament, adventure, and fact. In Babel's stories contemporaries at last saw a possible indication of the future direction of Soviet literature. The promise, however, remained unrealized. Babel' failed to establish a trend; he never managed to further develop and surpass the literary model offered by his *LEF* stories.

Although the journal gave no indication of a concise theoretical framework for prose, such a framework was shared by individual prose pieces. The three trends of ornamental prose, adventure story, and *literatura*

*fakta* had in common an illusion of authenticity and a quality of literariness, a deliberate artificiality of form. Stylization for authenticity, which gave the effect of a historical validity to the new prose, was achieved through the inclusion of documentary material such as letters, chronicles, and newspaper excerpts, and historical data, geographic detail such as the descriptions of local customs and street names, or by the use of linguistic features peculiar to certain social or national groups. While such stylization had been generally practiced in early Soviet literature, in *LEF* the core information in a prose work was actually supposed to be connected with the real fact. Such emphasis on authenticity specifically answered *LEF*'s theoretical demand that art be socially relevant and demonstratively connected with life.

At the same time, the effect of literariness revealed the structures and conventions which entered into a prose work and created a distance from the subject matter. "Baring the device" (*Obnaženie priema*) destroyed the illusion that literature necessarily offers a realistic image of the world, or that the narrator was a trustworthy witness of described events. His point of view was usually subjective, ironic, or ambiguous. The literary play with the conventions of prose was meant to stimulate the analytic capacities of the reader. "Deliberately impeded form" in literature performed the same function as the design of a theatrical performance from minute fragments called *attrakciony* and practiced in early experiments of Eisenstein or the Constructivist collage of Rodčenko, both of whom worked within the *LEF* group.<sup>11</sup> Underlying these formal experiments was the avant-garde belief that complexity of form, which demanded the audience's intellectual involvement, would force the recipient to develop his analytic capacities and become a more rational, better organized member of the new society.

The view of literature as a field for verbal experimentation in which little distinction is drawn between poetry and prose allowed *LEF* to accept a variety of styles as long as they stayed away from Realism and psychological reflections. In 1923 the concept of poetic prose was hardly a novelty; nevertheless, it fitted well into the *LEF* neo-Futuristic framework because of its preoccupation with verbal texture and because of a perspective which refashioned reality into an artifact, a verbal construct. With the idea of prose writing as a verbal laboratory, *LEF* undertook a somewhat belated attempt to renovate ornamentalism. These efforts are visible in the Expressionistic prose pieces by Aseev, and in the stylized phonetic transcriptions of the revolutionary turmoil by Artem Veselyj.

Aseev's prose piece "Tomorrow" ("Zavtra"; *LEF*, 1 [1923], 172-79) opened the literary section the first number of *LEF* and accordingly offered a metaphorical illustration of the concept of left art. The story describes the final minutes in the life of a poet dying of a heart attack. This episode is used as a frame which incorporates the poet's dream about a future inventor who

restructures traditional patterns of human existence. In the dream, the inventor, known for successful experiments which change human habits through a change of environment, begins his greatest project—the experiment with flying cities. For a moment heart trouble brings him to the operating room where his old human heart is replaced by an artificial apparatus made from rubber and silver. After the operation he continues his project, but a mistake in design causes the specially constructed city to be smashed into rubble. The inventor remains unperplexed by this turn of events and looks forward to the continuation of his tests, since he knows that his artificial heart assures him virtual immortality.

On this uneasy note the dream ends and the poet wakes up, to die immediately of a heart attack. For the poet the dream had been wish-fulfillment: while the poet's situation was dependent on the physiological processes whose malfunctioning stopped his creative work, the inventor in his dream (living ca. 1961) experienced no pain, had his heart replaced, and proceeded with his projects.

The inventor, a scientist who remodels the human psyche, is an embodiment of the future role of the artist in modern society. The poet pursues his goals through an art which, in accordance with LEF ideas, emphasizes flexibility, progress, and a constant renovation of life. The inventor lives in a society in which the poet's art has failed to promote "aptitude for living" (*žiznesposobnost'*): "apathy and indifference became the most dreadful epidemics on earth" (174). In contrast to the poet's unsuccessful attempt at changing forms, the inventor must radically, even brutally, restructure the world through scientific experiment in order to assure its survival.

The story clearly reflects the LEF belief that the purpose of art is to create new, activating forms. This message, however, is a side effect of the new formal framework for prose which Aseev apparently adapted from Expressionism. Although Expressionism represents a key critical category in modern European art and literature, it seldom surfaces in Russian prose and poetry.<sup>12</sup> Still, while Aseev can not be rightly called an Expressionist, his prose pieces indeed incorporate features visible in the Western European current. Historically, their publication coincides with the popularity of Expressionism in Russia. Expressionistic tendencies within LEF must also have been evident to contemporaries, since Lunačarskij, well-versed in European literature, applied the term to Majakovskij, Kamenskij, Aseev, and Tret'jakov, who made up the poetic core of LEF. Admittedly, in *LEF* Aseev made no statements indicating his connection or his interest in Expressionism, although his esthetic perspective is uncommon for Soviet literature of this time.

By focusing a story on the moment of death, Aseev, in a typically Expressionist fashion, telescopes the experience of his hero into a brief moment



of intense, highly concentrated vision.<sup>13</sup> Characteristically for Expressionism, the physical pain leads to a state of higher awareness which allows the protagonist to see life abstractly, simultaneously in the present and in the future through the dream. The entire story projects a violent moment, a soul-state not of a specific individual but of an abstract representative of collective artistic consciousness.

As in Expressionism, and rather uncharacteristically for LEF, the heightened state of awareness caused by pain allows the subconscious to come to the conscious surface; in fact the words *soznanie* and *podsoznanie* appear several times within the story. Although such a perspective is familiar from Symbolism, the subconscious which here is formulated through the dream has little to do with the mystical levels of existence. The only truly definable level is the physiological, the biological existence of man. At the same time, the surfacing of the subconscious translates the higher level of physiological awareness caused by the pain into a new visual perspective. Stylistically, it leads to extended metaphors which develop into separate pictures:

Но мысли были совершенно живыми. Они ворошились в мозгу, как раздраженный клубок змей: свивались в кольца, вставая на хвосты, переплетались друг с другом. Другие были как созревшие груши. Их нельзя было тронуть за ветку. Они гулко падали, обрываясь—полные сока и переспевшие. Но собирать их в темноте было нельзя. (LEF, 1 [1923], 172-73.)

(But the thoughts were totally alive. They moved about in his brain like an irritated skein of snakes: coiled up, standing on their tails, entwining with one another. Others were like ripe pears. One could not touch the pear branch. They dropped resonantly, falling off, juicy and overripe. But to gather them in the dark was impossible.)

Within his poetic descriptions Aseev uses technical vocabulary which deliberately destroys the story's metaphysical implications. In addition to the technical terms *turbina*, *vibracija*, and *mikroskopičeskie prilivy*, he introduces such neologisms as *myšlemotory*, *ozonatory*, *vozduxoemy*, *svetorazgovor*, and *primagnetit'*.

Though this story presents LEF's notion of the role of art by providing the model for the future (utopian dream) within the present situation (the poet's health problem), in general the turn to Expressionism does little more than introduce a new, visual quality into an ornamental narrative. Expressionism did not produce any remarkable prose in Western Europe, and its belated incorporation into Russian literature in the early 1920s could not solve the predicaments of Russian prose by offering still another version of ornamentalism.

In his second story, "War with the Rats" ("Vojna s kryсами"; LEF, 2 [1923], 20-26) Aseev makes his connection to Expressionism more explicit by dedicating the story to Georg Grosz, a German Expressionist painter involved in the German leftist art movement. This short, first-person narrative is an account of progressive madness caused by a subconscious fear of death

and decay, symbolized by rats. The narrator's disturbed mind allows for an exaggerated plasticity of images reflecting urban squalor, creating a grotesque world peopled by rat-like creatures. At the beginning, we trust the narrator's judgement, since he introduces himself as a scientist, an entomologist with a meticulous mind. It is hinted, however, that he has tuberculosis. The fear of death lurking in his subconscious mind brings him to a high emotional pitch upon seeing rats. The abrupt and disjointed plot becomes cohesive only in the last paragraph when the narrator finds himself in what apparently is a madhouse and the reader realizes that the narrator's emotional state made him project rat-like features onto his surroundings, and consequently the misshapen world is a product of a disturbed mind.

"War with the Rats" is written in a rhythmic, orchestrated language. Figurative speech, sound repetitions, and parallel constructions intensify the emotional tone which carries even into the descriptions of objects:

Как осмыслить, например, одну из продранных, вязанных перчаток, брошенных кем-то из жильцов на встречу весне; одну из них, с протертыми, растопыренными пальцами, обморочно распростертую еще утром на сером цементе, при сером скудном свете, чуть одолевая грязные слезы неумытых окон. Лежавую еще сегодня, когда вы сходили с лестницы, бессознательно оттиснувшуюся в памяти своим желто-грязным цветом и безнадежным видом: чуть согнутыми пальцами в угол затканый пыльной паутиной. И вдруг при нищем свете спички, ставшую на дыбы, крабом поползшую к вашим ногам. (20-21.)

(How does one interpret, for example, one of the torn, knitted gloves, thrown by one of the tenants to meet spring; one of them, with worn out, wide fingers, limply spread on the sixth step of the third floor. How does one interpret it, weakly washed this very morning on the grey cement, by a meagre grey light, which almost overcomes the dirty grey tears of the unwashed windows. Still laying today, when you came down the stairs, unconsciously registered in your memory by its dirty color and a hopeless look; with slightly bent fingers, in the corner woven with a dusty cobweb. And suddenly, by the poor light of the match, getting up on its hind legs like a crab and crawling up to your legs.)

The verbal texture of Aseev's narratives puts him within the dominant current of ornamental prose at the time when *LEF* was interested primarily in stylistic experimentation. The Expressionist psychological motivation of these stories—the subconscious surfacing in critical emotional states and causing a grotesque distortion of reality—is irrelevant in the context of the antipsychological attitude of *LEF*. In the framework of the journal the stories need to be viewed purely descriptively, as the dedication to the painter Grosz suggests. Yet the disregard of a psychological perspective, of the fear of death as a motivation for the visual sensitivity destroys the logical structure of the stories.

While Aseev's ornamental prose presents finished episodes with allegorical characters and a developed plot, the examples of ornamental writing by Artem Veselyj published in *LEF* are open-ended fragments. In these fragments, Veselyj, nicknamed "a peasant Pil'njak," writes about the Revolution and, in the Belyj-Pil'njak tradition, presents it as a spontaneous

mass uprising and a liberation of all instincts. Although *LEF* did not support Pil'njak's type of Modernism, apparently it found in Veselyj a valuable contributor. Veselyj was the only *LEF* author who had been an authentic proletarian before the Revolution, became a writer after the Revolution, and subscribed to experimental literature. Although from 1923-26 he was connected for the most part with Pereval, Veselyj admitted that the Futurists Xlebnikov and Kručenyx influenced his work which focused on verbal experimentation. While Aseev's ornamentalism was directed toward conveying the maximum of visual experience in a tightly constructed story which stressed the estrangement (*ostranenie*) effect, Veselyj's fragmentary prose had a primarily auditory quality. In the context of the narrative stylized as a spontaneous folk speech, Veselyj incorporated phonetic distortions which resembled the Dadaistic experiments of Kručenyx.

In the story "Freebooters" ("Vol'nica"; *LEF*, 5 [1924], 36-47) sailors in Novorossiisk in the spring of 1918 wait in town for the arrival of guns and pass their days in joyful debauchery. Veselyj conveys the emotional essence of revolutionary events with no attempt to impose a rational system on the material. The narrator, one of the sailors, has no binding force. Instead, the story presents the masses as the collective hero and concentrates on the revolutionary, anarchic atmosphere indicated by disorganized, fragmented, grammatically imprecise, and emotionally loaded speech, with folk style and vocabulary serving as a basis.

The fragmented character of the narration is amplified through the graphic lay-out of the story. A speech can be set off to emphasize the rhythmic element:

Успокой ты свое солдатское  
сердце Христарди  
Будь уверен  
Оружья мы  
тебе достанем  
Слово олово  
Действительно долой кислу  
меншевицку власть (38.)

In the more extreme cases Veselyj illustrates sounds visually, imitating, for example, a radio announcement:

В  
сем  
всемв  
семсегод  
днявечеро  
мвгорсадуот  
.....  
.....  
..... (39.)

Like Pil'njak, also indebted to Kručenyx, Veselyj conveys emotions through onomatopoeic play with the phonic power of words: "Xa xa xa / Gu gu gu" (42), or "BBBBBBAAAAAASSSSSTTTTAAAA," or "eeex bratiški" (43).

In Veselyj's second story, "Native Land" ("Strana rodnaja"; (LEF, 7[1925], 59-69) peasants who have hoarded grain are having a spree to celebrate the arrival of spring and the abundance of food. Elements characterizing the style in "Freebooters" reappear here but they are more subdued. "Native Land" has a narrator who describes the setting; the speech of the characters is distinguishable, and a certain plot revolves around the hoarding of grain and its later consumption. The use of dialect, which to the reader appears exotic, is of key importance in both pieces. The identical topics of both stories—in either story a celebration—reveal the limited application of this style. There is, however, a difference of degree in Veselyj's reliance on ornamentation. In "Native Land" the appearance of a vague plot line indicates a tendency away from modernistic prose toward a traditional novel.

The new ornamentalism was not sufficiently innovative to revive the popularity of prose. It provided no vital models, and in reality closed a chapter on Russian Modernism. The subsequent impulse for establishing models for Soviet prose came with the revival of interest in the problems of the plot construction. The experimentation with plot initially developed in the framework of prose stylized as popular literature. In the early 1920s it seemed obvious that a connection to the new audience could be found if literature made use of such sub-standard, plot-oriented genres as the mystery, romance, or science fiction. With this formal solution, however, came the need to allocate a place within the new prose for the new political ideology. The official encouragement of the Bolshevik leader Nikolai Buxarin that such literature had a legitimate place within the new culture led to the creation of Sovieticized versions of Western popular literature. In particular science fiction as well as Soviet adventure and detective literature known as "red Pinkerton" enjoyed a broad appeal. The actual trend-setter in the Sovieticized popular literature turned out to be Marietta Šaginian, who rode the crest of fame with proletarian detective novels about Jim Dollar and Mess Mend and stories such as "Adventures of a Society Lady" ("*Priključenija damy iz obščestva*"; 1923), about the unhappy love of an aristocrat for a party activist.<sup>14</sup> The scheme of such novels showed the influence of film in their linear plots built from a string of adventure episodes. As an innovative element, such stories were intended as parodic treatments of popular literary clichés with the intention that the familiar frame of popular literature could carry the Soviet ideological message. Despite such theoretical intentions, the prose written by Šaginian and her imitators offered little in the sense of formal innovation. Her writing was nothing more

than an adaptation of a foreign model of popular literature with a superimposed thin Soviet veneer and a crude ideological message. The parodic intent was not perceived by the audience, so the objective of revealing the mechanics of popular literature and therefore raising the audience to a higher level of literary awareness was not met. The attempts of numerous other authors to develop Soviet popular literature with a parodic bend also encountered the same problem (Ejxenbaum, "O. Genri," 209).<sup>15</sup> Eventually, it became clear that the audience could not comprehend the parodic intent and the political message was trivialized by the framework of popular literature.

Within *LEF*, Viktor Šklovskij, who had always shown a remarkable sensitivity to the cultural trends of the time, propagated the need for modernizing literature through the introduction of the elements of popular culture into the mainstream writing.<sup>16</sup> Commenting on the phenomenal popularity of Tarzan adventures among Soviet readers, he pointed out the need to turn to the new reader and to react to the cultural impact of film and newspaper. He observed that:

On the street the janitors talked with the militiamen about Tarzan. In the bookstores it was reported that the orders were coming from places in Siberia so remote that they had not been heard of for twenty years. Never, probably from the time of young Gorkij, had the country experienced such a mass fascination with a literary work. We have overlooked moving pictures; we do not study the newspaper, and, to tell the truth, are interested only in one another. One can forget about Tarzan, and that will be traditional, but foolish. We must study popular literature and the reasons for its success.<sup>17</sup>

Influenced by the tastes of the new audience and by the objectives of the left arts, Šklovskij advocated the use of devices from the adventure story, including the construction of a conflict around a mystery. But by 1924 the adventure scheme had become automatized in Russian fiction, so Šklovskij innovated it in line with *LEF*'s polarity of authenticity and literariness. He insisted both on the presence of factual material within the adventure *štam* and on a play with literary conventions. In the introduction to the prose piece which he published in *LEF*, he wrote:

The purpose of the novel was to fill out the adventure scheme not with conventional literary material as in the stories of Jim Dollar (Marietta Šaginjan), Valentin Kataev, etc., but with descriptions of a factual nature. It seems to me that the crisis of the genre can be overcome only by introducing new material. We accept the stylized nature of the adventure novel. We play with stereotypes and imitate a translation. The aesthetic effect is secondary and emerges only as a result of subsequent interpretation. (*LEF*, 7[1925], 70)

Šklovskij's story "Yperite" ("Iperit"; *LEF*, 7[1925], 70-76) and a similar adventure story "Unextinguished Vibrations" ("Nezatuxšie kolebanija"; *LEF*, 6[1924], 55-88) published by Boris Kušner claimed to be fragments from novels. They contained only a construction of a mystery, without a resolution. The model for popular prose which emerged from

their laboratory experiments was marked by several features. The hero and the setting are foreign, preferably exotic. Šklovskij's hero is a South African Black living in London; Kušner's hero is a German whose activities take him to different parts of the globe. The plot is constructed using traditional devices of the adventure and mystery story, such as mistaken identities, ominous hints, unexpected appearances and disappearances, cloak-and-dagger confrontations, unidentified medallions which have an emotional effect on the hero, and strange phone calls which force him to act. The adventures are connected with the class struggle or with party politics. Šklovskij's hero takes odd jobs in order to send generous contributions to the South African Communist Party. Kušner's hero is a worker-agitator in Berlin during the days immediately preceding the Communist uprising in Hamburg in 1923. Authentic factual information is given about the places of action. Šklovskij provides extensive data concerning topography, statistics, and social customs in London. Kušner gives detailed route descriptions with authentic Berlin street names.

Since Šklovskij's talent is well suited to feuilletonistic accounts, his use of factual material provides an effective contrast to the mystery surrounding the hero. In such a way, his story acquires credibility without a psychological dimension. Kušner in "Unextinguished Vibrations" operates with the same requirements of fact, exotica, and political moral, but develops the plot in a fragmentary, non-chronological sequence. This modernistic method is similar to the one Fedin uses in the novel *Cities and Years* (*Goroda i gody*, 1924) where the constant time shifts build up the tension and reveal the hero in crucial moments of his life rather than in his overall development. The two works share generic similarity since Fedin also claimed that his main interest was the "romantic-adventure plot" rather than the hero (See Belaja, 129). For Kušner, as for Fedin, composition becomes the most active element in a prose work. Yet Kušner makes his protagonist so mysterious that his presence fails to unify the stylistically and thematically disconnected fragments. In effect, his story succeeds neither as high nor as low-brow literature.

A more consistent model for popular literature appears in Brik's story "She's not a Fellow-Traveller" ("Ne poputčica"; *LEF*, 1[1923], 109-42) which takes its inspiration from a film scenario. The story is in fact a most interesting failure in which the familiar triviality of the plot overshadows the experimental design. The story was announced in *LEF* as an "experiment in laconic prose on a theme of today" (41). It presents a socially relevant conflict: a love affair between a Communist functionary and a bourgeois woman. The plot is structured on a love triangle in which the hero abandons his Communist lover for the glamorous but unscrupulous wife of a NEP entrepreneur. The NEP temptress draws the unsuspecting hero into suspicious financial deals until the story is resolved *deus ex machina* when the Party in-

tervenes from above. Justice triumphs when the NEP entrepreneur is arrested; his wife is unmasked as an alien element; the protagonist is transferred to Siberia, and his lover, who out of jealousy helped his downfall, loses her Party card.

The trivial love plot combined with a political message aims at popular appeal. Brik, however, is consciously innovatory. He transcends the trivial to create non-realistic literature which demands analytic and synthetic skills from the reader. Scenario-like, "She's not a Fellow-Traveller" is constructed from thirty brief dialogues supplemented with occasional narrative comments on movements or facial expressions. Such a layout used within a framework of a short story creates an impression of authenticity and directness because no one mediates between the reader and the world of the story. In a complete barring of device the narrative is reduced to plot alone, to bare construction. At the same time, the lack of transitions between the dialogues forces the reader into providing a synthesis of the plot line and supplying the framework for the events. Since Brik also destroys the possibility of an emotional identification of the reader with the hero essential to trivial literature, the reader must develop a detached, analytic perspective on the characters in an exercise intended as a contribution to the development of a rationalistic world view.

It must be said, however, that neither the new ornamentalism nor the stylized political adventure story had an impact on the direction of Russian prose. Neither trend received theoretical confirmation in *LEF* as a satisfactory solution to the problems of prose. Finally, it appeared that literature must be reoriented toward new material, toward facts.

The beginning of this material-oriented literature appears in *LEF* in the form of travel notes from a trip to China written by Sergej Tret'jakov (*LEF*, 7[1925], 33-58). It is these notes which mark the beginning of *literatura fakta*, eventually developed in *Novyj LEF* with Tret'jakov as a leading practitioner and theoretician.<sup>18</sup> In *LEF*, travel notes were still not a recognized genre, as the subtitle term "Film travelogue" (*put'fil'ma*) indicates. It can be assumed that in the early 1920s a scenario was considered a more prestigious literary form than travel notes and also fitted better into the utilitarian framework of *LEF*.

In the text, however, they are also referred to as travel notes (*putevyje zametki*) of a new kind. Instead of using the usual subjective, individual perspective of travel notes, Tret'jakov operates with an illusion of a collective point of view. In the introduction, Tret'jakov explains that the notes were written at the suggestion of Osip Brik, who advised him to stress the visual quality of the setting instead of the personality of the narrator:

Thus spake Osja.

—You are traveling to Peking. You must write travel notes. But make sure that they are not just notes for yourself. No, they must have a social meaning. Make a plan according to NOT;

with an alert eye of a master register what you see. Show sharpness of perception. Let not one trifle be overlooked. You are in a train—note every stroke of the landscape, every conversation. You are at the station—notice everything down to the posters washed off by the rain. (33.)

The collective point of view encompasses the narrator, his friend Osja (Brik), and the new Soviet reader whom Tret'jakov frequently addresses as sharing common interests and attitudes. The intimate tone which Tret'jakov develops serves to emphasize the existence of a uniform, consciously Soviet perspective from which the foreign setting is observed.

The influence of the scenario technique is visible in a very laconic style, prominence of visual detail, a narrative structure in which the individual scenes are presented without transition and without connection other than the chronological progress of the trip. Tret'jakov surveys the setting and the people with a movement of a movie camera which registers the exotica of the landscape and the "otherness" of the non-Russians.

Despite its trend-setting orientation, *LEF's* only claim to fame in prose between the years 1923 and 1925 came with the publication of Babel's fragments from *Red Cavalry* (*Konarmija*) and *Odessa Stories* (*Odesskie rasskazy*) (*LEF*, 4,5[1924]). Although officially Babel' never became a member of the Left Front of the Arts, his stories can be considered a culmination of avant-garde tendencies.<sup>19</sup> They incorporate the dominant features of the remaining pieces published by *LEF* and offer a perfect blend of the authenticity and literariness which characterized avant-garde prose. *LEF* especially reinforced the illusion of authenticity by adding an editorial comment on the credibility of the author and the genuineness of his heroes. What is created is an impression of on-the-spot coverage, while in fact the stories were written a few years after Babel's experiences. Babel' also furthers the illusion of reportage by giving the narrator the name which he personally used as a correspondent of "ROSTA" and by dating the incidents described in *Red Cavalry*. This illusion of authenticity serves to balance a refined literary structure. As in Tret'jakov's notes or Aseev's stories, the narrator combines authentic details into images which are reflections of an extremely subjective mind. The intellectual Ljutov, a stranger amidst the exotic Cossacks offers a romanticized view of the soldiers who appear as heroes of an adventure tale. The setting is also romanticized and described hyperbolically. Babel' presents the world in a revolutionary flux which lacks realistic proportions. His narrator conveys this through an inversion of tone: horrible, repulsive detail is presented matter-of-fact, as peripheral comment, while things of incidental nature are celebrated or eulogized in an elevated manner.

At the same time, in Babel's stories it is not the style but a well-developed dramatic plot which emerges as the dominant. His stories can be seen as miniature adventure tales, complete with exotic characters and foreign setting, and thus comparable to those proposed by Kušner and Šklovskij. Like them, Babel' further supplements his narratives with a



political moral by putting the sympathies of the narrator on the Soviet side. Similarly, Babel's use of the subtitle "From the Book *Red Cavalry*" ("Iz knigi 'Konarmija' ") in order to create an illusion of a larger framework, is a frequent device in *LEF*. When in reality, only a few stories have been completed, the reference to a larger form forces a thematic unity on individual episodes which seem unrelated. But even when all stories are completed, *Red Cavalry* still defies realistic conventions because it lacks a logical progression and contains only descriptions of disjointed, self-contained events. The larger context referred to in Babel's stories and in other *LEF* prose never exists, since the avant-garde reflects the world in search of moral and literary values at a time when revolutionary turmoil defies organization.

Babel's prose combines the three directions for prose explored in *LEF*: the ornamental narrative with a heightened visual and aural sensitivity, the political adventure story, and the journalistic report. Not only *LEF*, but also *LEF's* more conservative adversaries saw Babel's stories as possible cornerstones for Soviet literature, promising both for their formal design and for their psychological dimension, which *LEF* ignored.

Yet, despite such hopes, Babel failed to establish a literary trend. What eventually succeeded were the insignificant travel notes which inaugurated the later popular current of factographic prose. The eventual popularity of sketches (*očerki*), memoirs, travel notes, and reportage in Soviet literature can largely be credited to the model of *literatura fakta* originated by the avant-garde Left Front of the Arts in the early 1920s.

## NOTES

- 1 The key presentation of the problems of early Soviet prose is found in "Diskussii o sovremennoj proze," *Russkij sovremennik*, 1924, No. 2, 271-78. For a recent detailed analysis see also: G. A. Belaja, *Zakonomernosti stilevogo razvitija sovetской prozy dvadcatykh godov* (M.: Nauka, 1977); V. V. Buznik, *Russkaja sovetская proza dvadcatykh godov* (L.: Nauka, 1975); N. A. Groznova, *Rannaja sovetская proza 1917-1925* (L.: Nauka, 1976); N. I. Velikaja, *Formirovanie xudožestvennogo soznaniia v sovetской proze 20-x godov* (Vladivostok: Dal'nevostočnoe knižnoe izd-vo, 1975); and *Russkaja sovetская povest' 20-30-x godov*, ed. V. A. Kovalev (L.: Nauka, 1976).
- 2 See the essays by Boris Ejxenbaum, "V ožidanii literatury," *Russkij sovremennik*, 1924, No. 1, 280-90, and "V poiskax žanra," 1924, No. 2, 228-31.
- 3 Reprints of *LEF* and *Novyj LEF* have appeared in Slavische Propyläen, Texte in Neu- und Nachdrucken, 91, I-IV (Munich: Fink Verlag, 1972) and in Slavic Printings and Reprintings, 196 (The Hague: Mouton, 1972). The references in the text are made to the Fink Verlag edition.
- 4 On *LEF* theories of art and literature see Miroslav Drozda and Milan Hrala, *Dvacátá léta sovětské literární kritiky (LEF—RAPP—Pereval)* (Acta Universitatis Carolinae, Philologica Monographia, 20; Prague: Universita Karlova, 1968); Gerd Wilbert, *Entstehung und Entwicklung des Programms der "Linken" Kunst und der "Linken Front der Künste" (LEF) 1917-1925: Zum Verhältnis von künstlerischer Intelligenz und sozialistischer Revolution in Sowjetrußland* (Marburger Abhandlungen zur Geschichte und Kultur Os-

- teuropas, 13; Giessen: W. Schmitz, 1976); A. I. Mazaev, *Koncepcija 'proizvodstvennogo iskusstva' 20-x godov* (M.: Nauka, 1975), esp. ch. 1, 3. For a critical account by a contemporary of LEF see: A. Ležnev, *Voprosy literatury i kritiki* (M.-L.: Krug, 1924), 91-157.
- 5 This idea originated with Bogdanov's "organizational theory" and was also propagated by the Proletkult. See V. Rogovin, "Problema proletarskoj kul'tury v idejno-estetičeskix sporax 20-x godov," *Iz istorii soverskoj èstetičeskoj mysli: Sbornik statej*, ed. L. F. Denisova (M.: Iskusstvo, 1967), 59-119.
  - 6 Majakovskij, in a somewhat inflated account, listed ten groups which worked within LEF, but in order to do so, he presented one-time publications as steady contributions and individual appearances as group cooperation. Vladimir V. Majakovskij, *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij* (13 vols.; M.: GIXL, 1955-61), XII, 280-82.
  - 7 LEF went as far as to conclude an alliance with MAPP in order to protect the Soviet literary audience from the influence of "fellow-traveler" literature which at the time was supported by the official publishing enterprises. LEF and MAPP shared the same political platform, but differed on questions of literary form.
  - 8 B. Ejxenbaum, "O. Genri i teorija novelly," *Literatura: Teorija. Kritika. Polemika* (L.: Priboj, 1927), 166-68; N. Aseev, "Ključ sjužeta," *Pečat' i revoliucija*, 1925, No. 7, 67-70.
  - 9 Mazaev, 81, mentions that in 1921 200 private publishers were registered (seventy of whom were active and printed mainly "boulevard and semi-boulevard literature" (*bul'varnaja polubul'varnaja*)).
  - 10 For a rare discussion of pre-revolutionary popular literature and its connection to film see Neia M. Zorkaja, *U istokov massovogo iskusstva v Rossii 1900-1910* (M.: Nauka, 1976).
  - 11 Eisenstein explained his theory of theater in an article "Montaž atrakcionov," *LEF*, 1923, No. 3, 70-75, where he discussed his Proletkult staging of Ostrovskij's play "Na každogo mudreca dovol'no prostory." At that time Eisenstein worked together with the LEF members Tret'jakov and Arvatov. Rodčenko was in charge of the graphic side of *LEF* and also designed the covers for the journal as well as for the books published by the LEF members.
  - 12 On Expressionism in Russia see Vladimir Markov, "Russian Expressionism," in *Expressionism as an International Literary Phenomenon*, ed. Ulrich Weisstein (Paris: Librairie Marcel Didier; Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1973), 315-27. For an analysis extending the concept of Expressionism to the general panorama of early Soviet literature see Arkadij El'jaševič, *Lirizm. Ekspressija. Grotesk: O stilevyx tečenijax v literature socialističeskogo realizma* (L.: GIXL, 1975).
  - 13 Ulrich Weisstein, "Expressionism as an International Literary Phenomenon," and in "Expressionism: Style or *Weltanschauung*?", *Expressionism*, 15-44, gives an excellent description of Expressionism.
  - 14 Marietta Šaginian, "Priključenija damy iz obščestva," *Krasnaja niva*, 1923, Nos. 48-51; Džim Dollar [M. Šaginian], *Mess Mend, ili Janki v Petrograde* (M.: GIZ, 1924); Džim Dollar [M. Šaginian], *Lori Len, metalist* (M.L.: GIZ, 1925); all rpt. in Marietta Šaginian, *Sobranie sočinenij* (6 vols.; M.: GIXL, 1956), II.
  - 15 The idea of a parodic treatment of adventure and mystery plots as a way of opening new possibilities in prose was strongly supported by the Formalists who, however, did not share LEF's utilitarian view of literary forms.
  - 16 Šklovskij, who had earlier been an influential figure among the deliberately non-political Serapion Brothers, joined the politicized LEF after his semi-emigrant stay in Berlin (summer 1922-fall 1923). LEF's experiments in prose do in fact formally parallel the writings of the Serapion Brothers, but the framework of the *LEF* journal gives them a more forceful programmatic character.
  - 17 V. Š. [Viktor Šklovskij], "Tarzan," *Russkij sovremennik*, 1924, No. 3, 253. A detailed discussion of the adventure literature of the 1920s is found in A. F. Britikov, "Detektivnaja

- povest' v kontekste priključenceskix žanrov," in *Russkaja sovetskaja povest'*, 408-53. Together with Vsevolod Ivanov, Šklovskij eventually published an adventure-detective novel *Iprit* (M.: GIZ, 1926).
- 18 On Tret'jakov and *literatura fakta* see Fritz Mierau, *Erfindung und Korrektur: Tretjakows Ästhetik der Operativität* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1976), esp. ch. 6. See also Růžena Grebenčíkova, "Literatura faktu. Na okraj historie a mythologie," *Československá rusistika*, 4 (1958), 216-26, and "Literatura faktu a teorie románu," 3 (1968), 162-67. See also Vahan D. Barooshian, "Russian Futurism in the Late 1920s: Literature of Fact," *SE EJ*, 15 (1971), 38-46.
  - 19 A Czech critic, Miroslav Drozda, *Babel Leonov Solženicyn* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1966), esp. 34-35, argues that Babel's role in the early Soviet prose parallels the role which Majakovskij played in poetry and that both of them represent the highest achievement of the Soviet literary avant-garde. See also: Jiří Franek, "Babel a avantgarda," *Československá rusistika*, 3 (1968), 155.