The Writer and the Socialist Village*

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Between 1928 and 1930 Tret'akov visited a collective farm [kolkhoz] in the northern Caucasus region four times, first as a reporter and later as a standing member of the commune. He was certainly not the only cultural producer at the time who wanted to understand and participate in the epochal social and psychic transformations that collectivization was introducing into the undeveloped Soviet countryside at an unprecedented pace: from Eisenstein's 1929 film The General Line (The Old and the New) to Aleksandr Luriia's famous psychological studies of Uzbek kolkhozniks, which later became the basis for Walter Ong's book Orality and Literacy (1982), countless figures from the scientific and intellectual community swarmed the collective farms to observe one of the most striking object lessons in modernization and social revolution. This "domestication of the savage mind," to borrow Jack Goody's apt phrase, represented nothing less than a total restructuring of premodern consciousness, for it was not just tractors that the first Five-Year Plan brought to the provinces, but countless other forms of machine production (recall the creamer in The General Line), abstract mechanical time, collective child care, political representation, administrative bureaucracy, radio, literacy, and technical culture, as well as functionally differentiated modes of production and specialized labor.

Tret'akov performed a wide variety of duties on his kolkhoz, the Communist Lighthouse. He edited a newspaper serving sixteen different localities, wrote as a kolkhoz correspondent for Pravda, managed the administrative communications between the commune and the Moscow authorities, and organized radio and traveling movie programming in the village where he lived. Thus he was in a privileged position to witness the dramatic impact of the modern media on a largely illiterate, rural populace. And yet "The Writer and the Socialist Village," written to accompany a slide-show presentation given by Tret'akov in Berlin, does not dwell upon the effects of these developments on the kolkhoznik mind. The real primitives in his account are the urban intellectuals who visit the communes and continue to work in outmoded genres, with time-consuming techniques, using inefficient...

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craftsmanship methods. These benighted artists and writers could not fathom the way in which modernization had reconfigured the relationship between subjectivity, representation, and reality. Futurist in conception, the cataract of neologisms that opens his essay announces the fact that the very systems of language had undergone an extraordinary metamorphosis as a result of the social and technical revolution, a linguistic metamorphosis that was not only lexical but also structural. Human relations had changed, forces of production had changed, consciousness itself had changed—and so too must change the protocols of signification and art.

Based upon Tret’iakov’s experiences on the kolkhoz, the following text was delivered in German at Berlin’s Society for the Friends of the New Russia on January 21, 1931. To claim that this revolutionary export made a significant impact on his Weimar audience would be an understatement, for in the wake of Tret’iakov’s talk everyone from Siegfried Kracauer to Gottfried Benn and Johannes Becher published responses that were in many cases critical, but in every case fervent and engaged. Of course, the most remarkable reply to this talk would be Walter Benjamin’s address at the Paris Institute for the Study of Fascism three years later, “The Author as Producer.” A host of Benjamin’s central theses are in fact borrowed directly from Tret’iakov’s 1931 talk: first are Benjamin’s observations about the “literarization of the conditions of living,” which recall Tret’iakov’s demand that “the new reality must be adapted by literature” using aesthetic forms congruent with the changed conditions of experience. The Soviet’s corollary to this statement—that the age of the novel has concluded and that the newspaper is actively restructuring the “literary weapons” of genre—is similarly echoed in Benjamin’s argument that the newspaper forces writers to “rethink our conceptions of literary forms or genres” and thereby initiates “a mighty recasting of literary forms.” Tret’iakov’s remarks about the deprofessionalization of literary production are also repeated in Benjamin’s comments on the attenuation of the distinction between author and reader. Finally, and most famously, Tret’iakov’s platform for an interventionist writing that participates “operatively” in the constitution of reality is at the heart of Benjamin’s model of an author who is not a describer, not a reporter, but an active producer.

Most foreigners have an image of the Soviet Union that was fashioned primarily by the Russian classics. American boys arriving in Moscow dash through the streets looking for the brothers Karamazov, the Sonia Marmeladovs, the Raskolnikovs. And in the process they unwittingly imitate The Idiot. One of the most popular books among young intellectuals in Japan and China is Tolstoy’s Resurrection. The song about Katiusha has become a popular folk song in Japan.

The other day an American writer published an open letter in response to my statements about the activity of the writer on the kolkhoz. He wrote the following:

“The most zealous study of Marxist theory cannot provide any more knowledge about the muzhik than that already contained in prerevolutionary classical literature.”

The expert in our classics doesn’t suspect that in today’s village the words muzhik and baba carry the force of insults.

If the word “muzhik” was once associated with the following vocabulary: property, patron, pogrom, vodka, whip, samovar, sarafan, icon, cleric, plow, beard, little old man, lice, oven, local community, pub, illiteracy — then today the following concepts are connected with the term “farmer”: smychka (alliance between city and country), tractor, silo, club.

Don’t think that Turgenev would have understood words such as Soviet, ispolkom (executive committee of the Soviet), brigadier (the foreman of a farmer group), registratsiia (official marriage procedure), zags (office of registry), sovkhoz (state property), kolkhoz (collective farm).

Dostoevsky would hardly have known what to do with udarnik (a member of a shock-brigade), partiets (member of the Communist Party), komsomol (Communist Youth League), activist, combine, overalls, iasli (nursery), rabfak (worker’s university), proizvodstvennoe soveshchaniie (company conference), tekhnoruk (technical leader), kursantka (female auditor of courses), class enemy, partden’ (day for party assembly).

Tolstoy could barely have grasped the meaning of aviakhim (society for the advancement of aviation and chemistry), socialist competition, dekulakization, vykhodnoi (person who has a day off), the five-day work week, uninterrupted work week, wall newspaper, red corner, Lenin corner, mopr (International Red Aid), mezhrabpom (International Worker’s Aid).

And without having carefully studied Marxist theory, they would definitely be unable to grasp what is most essential: the transformation of human relations that lies behind these words.

There can be no doubt that the new reality must be adapted by literature [literatorisch bearbeitet]. And this task is being fulfilled by Soviet literature. Equally uncontested is literature’s second task: not simply to capture reality, but also to change it in the course of class struggle. The fact that literature becomes a weapon in the hands of a class raises the third question about methods of literary depiction: are the methods and genres used by the classics of any use?

We doubt it. Because reality’s forms were so stable and changed only gradually, the writer was able to work on a text for years. The demand that the writer be a polyhistorian created the epic breadth of literature. The reality of a capitalist

2. Tret’iakova refers here to Ezra Pound’s “Open Letter to Sergey Tret’yakov,” Front, no. 2 (1931), which was a response to Tret’yakov’s “Report” from the kolkhoz that appeared in the preceding issue. The passage from Pound’s letter that is loosely cited by Tret’iakov reads: “It is largely because of this ‘bourgeois’ pre-revolution Russian Literature that the rest of the world was in no way surprised at the Russian Revolution and that most of us thought it was due. A mere study of Marxist theories would not have told us much about mujiks.”
society that develops anarchically created an intense interest in the biological and emotional life of the hero, to the neglect of his social and intellectual aspects.

While working on the kolkhoz, I was already confronted with artists representing the movement to immortalize the events of our time in old forms. In the previous summer a letter arrived at the party collective of the village where I was working. The letter, from a writer who had visited the commune three years earlier, contained among other things the following: “What I saw when I stayed with you three years ago has taken the form of a novel that I am currently writing. My only request is that you inform me if you have already acquired the fourth tractor and if you have equipped the poultry stall. In particular, give me some concrete figures on your operation.”

The hapless novelist didn’t suspect that the sixth tractor was long since running, and that the tractors were no longer managed by the individual kolkhozy but had been consolidated into a shared tractor station.

The chicken stalls had grown into a gigantic poultry farm that provided the surrounding villages with poultry for breeding. But it then had to be shut down because the removal of the railway made the conversion over to egg production unprofitable and inefficient.

The integrated commune that once had many little branches of production—a dairy plant, sheep breeding, chicken breeding, pig breeding, apiculture, rabbit breeding—had already been reorganized into a specialized operation: a milk concern. Poultry breeding was consolidated on a different kolkhoz, and pig breeding on a third. In a word: what had still appeared yesterday to be useful and progressive turned out today to be inefficient and even harmful. And the novelist would have had to acclimate himself all over again to the transformed material if he wanted to avoid writing a false panegyric or a work that was only of historical value.

I also had the opportunity to meet artists who worked according to classical perspectives. One artist arrived on the kolkhoz and wanted to make an oil painting of an activist.

And what did he mean by “activist”? He had to have keen eyes, powerful cheekbones, scarred skin, iron hands.

But what if a malingerer looks the same way?

Well, whatever. They were able to find an activist whose appearance was adequately expressive—he had a beautiful beard. He was the kolkhoz’s wine grower, as well as a patriarch related to almost the entire commune. The artist worked for a long time looking for the one satisfactory angle of his head. After several sittings the wind-tanned skin had appeared on the canvas along with a thick brown impasto depicting the beard.

The tenth anniversary of the commune was approaching then, and in honor of the celebration the “activist” shaved his face clean since he no longer wanted to walk around looking like a hairy monster. And he wanted to continue shaving so that he would look young. And so his face became an ordinary one.
Mikhail Kaufman (The Man with the Movie Camera) on location, probably for Kino-Glaz (1924), a film essay that analyzes the relations between agricultural production, urban commerce, and consumption.
What should we have done with the artist? Should we have said to him, "Go get a camera and, rather than photographing the activist’s wrinkles, photograph him while he’s at work"; “Get rid of the old idealist fairy tale about the face being the mirror of the soul”; “Think about whether social reality can always be found in appealing or unappealing facial features”?

Whatever the answer, the quest for the correct method of grasping and holding reality is one of the most burning questions in Soviet art.

In my opinion, it has three decisive aspects:

First: the choice of object. Investigating the facts in their specificity and in their concrete manifestations.

Second: the journalistic processing of found factual material. Enhancing its characteristic moments. Extracting the dialectical chain from the process in which the fact is the essential, determining link. Dressing the fact in an effective agitational form. Testing the fact’s public, social interest and significance. The fact thereby becomes an argument, a signal, a concrete proposal.

Third: the practical conclusions. Operationalizing the literary contribution within the reorganization of reality in accordance with socialism.

Working in this way means that you can’t set yourself apart, without accountability, from the object of labor. You can’t just observe the object. Instead, by constant work with it, you have to become organically connected with the object. You have to be aware of your social responsibility vis-à-vis the object you are cultivating, since it above all concerns living people and collectives.

The task cannot be: first invent a subject and then collect material for it. Just the opposite: you have to create out of reality, out of concrete struggle and labor. Insofar as the living word is one of the weapons in this struggle or in this labor, the subject will generate itself.

Style arises out of social practice. Genre is created as the new life forces the application of literary weapons in new ways. More consideration of reality and its demands. Less writerly arrogance toward the nonprofessionals writing books about facts and toward the journalists creating that marvelous literary event of today, the newspaper.

In 1924, I went to China with a plan to write The Blue Express, a play which was based on all of the rules of art. (I ultimately did not write it.) And Chinese reality gave me a fact—the incident in Wanhsien—in which I discovered the contours of ideas that extended far beyond the particular local case. (The play Roar, China! is the result.) There are unwritten books that are locked up in people, books that people have experienced but that they aren’t able to put to paper. One of the duties of the writer is to incubate these books. As a literary secretary—more aptly, as a literary midwife—I helped a member of the Communist Union of Youth [Kommunisticheskii Soiuz Molodezhi, or Komsomol] to compose the notes from his trip to the Republic of Tannu Tuva (next to Mongolia).

But in each of these works I had no organic, personal connection to the material that went beyond (productive) relations based only upon composition.
I always remained just a spectator. The man at the desk.

Relations to the material that are based merely upon composition make you responsible for the accuracy of the described events and for their literary form—but not for their future fate.

I call participation in the life of the material itself an operative relation. To put it simply: inventing something important is belletristic novelism; discovering something important is reportage; constructing something important is operativism.

In the era of the Five-Year Plan, literature becomes an actual weapon in the revolutionary, operative activity of the huge masses who have been summoned to socialist construction. This task exceeds the power of a limited circle of professional writers. An interesting process is beginning: the deprofessionalization of literature. The books appearing nowadays are not primarily written by littérateurs. They are reports of deeds, books that are parts of biographies.

The person at work on socialism, equipped with literary skills: that is the point of departure for the new literature. The professional writer is incorporating himself organically into the work of construction, learning not only the art of drawing life’s likeness, but also how to change life.

The infiltration of the udarniki [members of shock-brigades] into literature and the incorporation of the professional writer into the labor of construction are signs of the times: the métier of the writer is no longer a unique, individual skill, but is becoming the property of public education.

By incorporating himself into economic processes, the writer ceases to be confined in a guild. Entering into operative collective brigades, he separates himself from the fetishists of individual, artisanal work. The participation of these brigades is particularly extensive in the newspapers. Literary brigades are already being formed that exhort their coworkers with the pen, that denounce the negligent and deleterious, that report about their operations, sovkhoz, or expeditions, about overcoming the difficulties of construction. These brigades have not yet produced any famous works. The future will bring success to this new form.

One should not overlook the twenty-seven books already published by udarniki, among which Mikhailov’s Struggles for Metal and Solov’s The Birth of the Operational Unit are particularly significant from an operative perspective.

On my first trip to the country it was made clear to me that desultory work had no value. They tried to talk me out of the trip at the District Kolkhoz Association in the city. They told me:

“Right now everyone there is busy threshing.”

“What is precisely why I’m interested.”

“What are people thinking when they send these visitors on outings that end up burdening the kolkhozes?”

“I’m not on an outing. I’m a writer.”

“A writer was just there a little while ago.”

The members of the kolkhoz also received me with mistrust: they thought that I was some strange guy snooping around. And in general I was wandering
around like a fool. I studied everything around me. I asked questions without being able to check the answers. A kolkhoz demands a specialized background. And at last I grasped that one single person could never master all of the material.

And so at the beginning of 1930, I became a permanent member of the kolkhoz's council. I became the leader of educational work.

Thus the kolkhoz, my literary subject, has become the site of my civic activity. I integrated myself not just to get to know the heroes of my book, not just to record their transformations. Side by side with my heroes, I struggle for the reorganization of their life, I make efforts to further their development, and together with my fellow workers on the kolkhoz, I assume complete responsibility for the paths that are chosen, for their successes, mistakes, and flaws.