A Writer’s Handbook*

NIKOLAI CHUZHAK

Written by Nikolai Chuzhak as an introduction to the 1929 collection The Literature of Fact: The First Anthology of Documents by the Workers of LEF, “A Writer’s Handbook” is a messy and unsystematic piece of writing: its rhetorical structure is circular and repetitive, its idioms are bizarre and capricious, its style is aggravatingly desultory, and its numerous contemporary references are glib yet opaque. All of this gives the impression of a thoroughly occasional and improvised text. This very ephemerality is indeed the primary lesson of the “Handbook,” a user’s guide with no intention of reducing its subject to a series of axiological tenets, but which instead provides only probative “points of orientation” to serve as theoretical impulses for a factographic practice which, as it announces about itself, must proceed inductively. If factography’s pragmatist epistemology only recognizes knowledge that is synthesized through its own effectuation, an introduction to its mutable methodology must by nature be fugitive and, to use one of Chuzhak’s favorite words, provisional.

Chuzhak characterizes the historical logic that sustains this mutability as the “dialectic of devices.” It is a dialectic that has two sources in Russian Formalist thought: first and most obvious is Viktor Shklovsky’s understanding of aesthetic form as a dynamic operation—“art as device,” rather than art as a stable ontic category; equally influential upon the “Handbook” is Iurii Tynianov’s understanding of genre and medium as precipitates of the metabolic exchange between the instrumental forms of everyday communication and the canons of autonomous literary-aesthetic discourse. Like Tynianov, Chuzhak proposes here that aesthetic evolution be conceived as a ceaseless exchange between the two systems of quotidian discourse and major canonical forms. Although prose, for example, was once situated outside the canon because of its mundane character, with the exhaustion and automatization of other aesthetic forms that were previously dominant (such as the lyric), in the eighteenth century, it came to be recognized as a major literary form, and the genre of the novel was born. When this epic form, whose function in the nineteenth century was to interpellate

* “Pisatel’skaia pamiatka,” in Literatura fakta, ed. Nikolai Chuzhak (Moscow: Federatsiia, 1929), pp. 9–28. Translators Devin Fore and Douglas Greenfield would like to thank Masha Chlenova for her helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this translation.
the bourgeois subject by providing it with a coherent world-picture, ceases to be able to perform this task, its cultural and ideological function would invariably be taken over by a different aesthetic construction that more closely corresponds to contemporary social formations. At some point, every canonized genre will be depleted and replaced by new forms taken from the stock of devices provided by everyday life.

For the factographers the realist novel had arrived at this point. While acknowledging that traditional aesthetic realism was in its own time a perfectly legitimate, and even advantageous, phenomenon (its vagueness, for example, allowed it to circumvent censorship), Chuzhak explained in the following essay that it had become an “alien” device in the postrevolutionary epoch, which confused the aesthetic formula for verisimilitude with reality itself. Passive realism had become a liability for an art of production that sought to construct experience rather than simply cognize it. Its “reflectionism” [otobrazhatel’stvo] and “representationalism” [izobrazitel’nost’] were “sores” on the organism of proletarian literature.1 Just as they would champion replacing painting with photography, the members of Lef claimed that the realist novel was now only a dead letter that must be replaced by a variety of extraliterary, utilitarian genres such as the ocherk, the memorandum, the travelogue, the newspaper, or the memoir.

With its call to eradicate outmoded aesthetic codes and to construct new devices more congruent with the current social order, Chuzhak’s case for factography followed a familiar Futurist logic that had as its foremost tenet the demand for constant innovation. Factography did not need to circumvent this inexorable cultural logic of modernity, this cycle of invention and obsolescence, because factography was this logic: it conceived of artistic production as an aesthetic revolution in perpetuity.2 Hence, again, the provisional and experimental nature of the contributions in The Literature of Fact. The new factographic forms which corresponded to the dynamic character of the class of producers, Chuzhak observed, were by their nature unfinished aesthetic propositions that had not yet acquired recognizable generic contours. Ideally this “literature of becoming,” as he called factography, would never stabilize. Thus its greatest enemies, Chuzhak noted in his 1929 “Handbook,” were not its detractors, but its imitators, those who sought to canonize its tentative devices and prematurely inhume factography in the crypt of petrified genres. This ultimately did happen in the following decade, when attempts were made to transform the ocherk into major literary form (even if it continued to elude normative definitions),3 and when documentary was reconstructed as a realist genre with a recognizable set of fixed stylistic markers.

3. Consider the All-Union Conference on the Artistic Ocherk, held in Moscow at the beginning of June 1934, on the eve of the famous 1934 First Soviet Writers Conference.
What Every Young Writer Needs to Know

The Bolsheviks used to zealously distribute a “Soldier’s Handbook.” We now need to distribute a “Writer’s Handbook.” What does every worker-corrrespondent and Soviet writer need to know?

Whenever a new social group, especially a new class, first appeared in history, it was seized for a time with a kind of fever to build. People would joyously start to remake the face of the earth in the image and likeness of their own conceptions of social justice, and their very literature acquired an earthy, insistently urgent, and efficacious quality. Literature’s social purpose changed; the writer’s class agenda became more clearly pronounced; every work was coordinated with the pressing issues of the day; a revolutionary form was invented that most hit the mark, so to speak. (“So to speak” because this in no way negated either the constant turnover of forms, their continuity, or their apparent transmission from one epoch to another.) That is what we members of Lef call a new culture’s literature of becoming [literaturoi stanovienia] (i.e., a literature of the condition of becoming) and of the construction of life [zhiznestroenia]: something that different epochs and critics have always designated differently, but with labels that are hardly any more precise.

A social group or class feels completely differently when it is establishing itself securely on the earth, when it is completing a building program, achieving a widespread and stable peace and is not yet aware of the approaching master and director of the new life that has come to take its place. All art of these classes—in particular, literature—is clearly recognizable by its grand reflectionist serenity (Classicism), by its retroactive glorification of the status quo through reason (Naturalism), and by its blatant isolation from the concrete issues of the day (monumental Realism). What still seemed provisional, utilitarian, and subordinate yesterday (such as a pamphlet, an inscription, or the mutable feuilleton) is now affirmed as an unconditional, major form, disdaining the “minor genre” and openly proclaiming its sovereignty.

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4. Zhiznestroenie, or the “construction of life,” was the neologism Chuzhak used to designate a monistic art of production that spanned both art and everyday experience. See his “Pod znakom zhiznestroeniia,” Lef, no. 1 (1923), pp. 12–39.
This is the literature of stabilization; there is no better way to put it. Critics make its goal the cognition of life [zhiznepoznaniia],\(^5\) but how can you cognize reality in a “mirror” that is forever slightly warped?

Finally, there is a third phase in the developmental sequence of a given group or class, a stage that we can characterize as one of social exhaustion and manifest decline. This period in the life of every group or class may be drawn out and, depending on the nature of its extinction, may assume many different forms. Either because it senses its imminent demise or because it is in the immediate presence of its enemy, every dying group inevitably develops postures of mysticism and fantasy, generalized anxiety, barely concealed pseudoheroic bravado, a longing to lose itself in all manner of refinements, and of flight from reality. The literature of extinction: this is an exact definition of the literature of these groups, despite their names at different points in history (Romanticism, Modernism, Decadence, psychologism, etc.). And we must keep in mind that necrosis in literature can infect life’s neighboring sectors.

**In Search of the Necessary Form**

Lenin once said that it is easier to make a revolution than to retain the revolution’s achievements without a corresponding culture. This statement would seem entirely applicable to literature as well. Revolutionizing literature is much harder than just throwing it into the revolution’s torrent.

For want of culture among other things, our young Soviet writers dash about from one sector of life to another in search of the necessary new form, clearly wanting to brighten up the revolution with old-fashioned literature, but with no thought of the revolution in literature itself. They claim to be students of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky; they also bring along Zhukovsky and Edgar Allan Poe; they invent their own particular “proletarian realism”; they always see to it that the established bourgeois-feudal forms do not disappear from Soviet literature, and they make sure to copy something from the rotten literature of the most recent reactionaries. One gets the impression that the comrades are dabbling amateurishly in literature—which wouldn’t be so bad, if we lived in feudal times with nothing else to do but contemplate good deeds with tenderness, think about the afterlife, and . . . if only the best of our youth weren’t drawn into this costly game.

It is for their sake that we have initiated this discussion of the soldier’s, or rather, the writer’s handbook.

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\(^5\) The target of these remarks was the literary critic, author, and publisher Aleksandr Voronskii, who postulated that art’s purpose was to facilitate the “cognition” [poznanie] of experience, and who supported classical aesthetic conventions as the best means to realize this understanding. According to Chuzhak, Voronskii’s conceptualization of artistic production was subtended by a reflectionist epistemology which was capable only of cognitively depicting life—rather than actively restructuring it. Voronskii responded to Chuzhak’s polemic in “Iskusstvo, kak poznanie zhizni, i sovremennost’,” *Iskusstvo i zhizn’* (Moscow: Krug, 1924), pp. 7–57.
The Erstwhile Role of Belles Lettres

Yes, we would like it if every uncorrupted young writer were really a “soldier” for the new construction, rejecting the path of least resistance paved by devices and forms organically alien to our era. This explains our categorical aversion to two equally malignant developments (“malignant” because they consistently undermine the tasks of our time): the diversion of thousands of potential proletarian writers away from direct work upon reality, and the redirecting of their attention toward literary fiction. We are against the literature of fiction that is called belles lettres. We are for the primacy of the literature of fact. For too long writers have “transfigured” the world by spiriting the passive, aesthetically stupefied reader away into a world of representations. When, if not now, could we reconstruct this world through the concrete changes required by the proletariat?

The members of Lef did not invent the theory of the literature of fact, nor did they invent the slogan of art as the construction of life. Their contributions consist only in having detected our time’s greatest demand, and having made the first attempt to systematize an idea that was already in the air through a few simple propositions whose very simplicity may be frightening.

“Simplification,” they tell us. This is wrong. In no way are we opposed to the provisional acceptance of the element of fantasy as a certain dialectical anticipation that connects and mobilizes facts that have otherwise been shunted aside. We are only against fantasy as an absolute. We think that it is just as harmful to fetishize the idea of factography as it is to “fashion an idol” out of representationalist literature.

“Everything in its own time,” said the late G. V. Plekhanov.

There was a time when simple historical necessity directed social activists toward bellettristic forms, which were the ones that had the greatest impact on life at the time. The general paucity of scientific research, the paltry number of newspapers with even a primitive agenda, and the almost total absence of statistics—all naturally drove the writer to the idea of broadly applying the devices of literary diversion as provisional means, not only for new cognizance, but also for construction (although only from a distance). If you consider the other “advantages” of belles lettres such as its hazy symbolism, its inconclusiveness, its Aesopianism, the arbitrariness of its constructions, etc.—which made it possible for the writer to slip in a few forbidden ideas, even in the period of harsh Nikolaevan censorship—you will understand not only the dizzying success of belletrism among people of the old culture, but also why the form of the novel flourished famously in the Nikolaevan period.

“The poverty of real life is the source of imaginary life,” stated one of our not-quite-classic authors (Pismensky), who wrote countless stories and novels. Construction by means of representations (and imagination) was the fate of more than one generation of ancestors. From Chernyshevsky to Bel’tov-Plekhanov, the whole theory of so-called “artistic creation” is based on this misery. People experienced “real life” in novels, and it comforted them.
The very same poverty in the means available for scientific research, for journalistic commentary, and simply for information—but above all, the complete absence of any kind of collective leadership (not even a parliament, not to mention contemporary social organization)—created the demand for an individual and “creator.” He would not only collect and record the essential stuff of life (what we call a worker-correspondent), but would also use an intuitive preconception to both transform and generalize this material (what we call montage); he would consequently be recognized by others as a shaman, or rather, a teacher of life. This individual had a very vague way of posing problems; a different individual, called a “critic,” tried to answer them in an equally vague manner (recall the censorship!); and, as a result of reading one or the other, the best people of the age fretted about trying to reorganize life, albeit only in their minds.

Whole generations were compelled to play the splendid game of imitating life. Life was built not upon factual, real truth, but upon some kind of pseudoreal verisimilitude that existed only in the imagination. It’s as if people tacitly accepted this innocuous counterfeit for real life. Everyone essentially made an allowance for fantasy in his own mind. For them, so-called realism (“so-called” because in reality it was idealism) was a definitively conventional language that allowed them to avoid the obstacles then facing them. All our realist criticism, including that of Plekhanov, is, moreover, based upon this language, and to this day no one has exposed its conventionality. On the contrary, the literary critic who used fantasy most cunningly was always crowned with laurels . . .

And Time Moves On

Yes, time moves on . . .

The literature of fiction was once historically indispensable and socially functional. It once carried a certain social weight and as a result was historically rather useful. With changes in the social environment, however, it ceased to be a provisionally progressive phenomenon: it gradually lost its malleability, became aesthetically stabilized, and was overlaid with absolutism. With the promotion of the strata of young administrators, with the expansion of scientific cognition and of the public sphere, the didactic role of the writer as a “cognizer” [poznavatelia] and a “builder” lost its relevance. The pretense of aesthetic convention as an end in itself was the only thing that did not disappear. For no good reason, fiction was canonized. What was

6. The work of Georgii Plekhanov (1856–1918), in particular his Art and Social Life (1912), was recognized as one of the first systematic attempts to establish the foundations of a Marxist aesthetic upon the tradition of classical Realism, and was subsequently made into one of the theoretical cornerstones for the Socialist Realist production of the 1930s. Like Georg Lukács after him, Plekhanov was hostile toward the stylizations of modernist art and supported a “simple” realism that privileged the content of art over its formal aspects.
“legally possible” in the Nikolaevan era was declared to be a timeless form. The didactic novel assumed an authoritative tone.

A relatively brief period of bourgeois influence followed, but it did not substantially undermine the prestige of bellettrism. It is true that the role of the writer faded away, and that literature itself was being consumed recreationally—but the foundations still remained the same.

What Next?

You would think that things would then proceed differently. The times changed dramatically. The revolution radically abolished the preconditions that had driven the writer away from fact and into fiction. The need for fiction became totally irrelevant, and the opposite demand for the fact came into being. The revolution has already been rebuilding life for twelve years, but it’s not possible to build anything on a foundation of fiction. You would think preconditions for “diversion” are now lacking, that this diversion has no “reasonable cause” at all. And yet, fiction is not disappearing, and diversion from the facts continues to exist without cause!

Why is this? “Dearer to us is the falsehood that exalts / Than a host of base truths” (Pushkin)? There are no such “base truths” at hand, and no reason for the Soviet writer to join the camp of “falsehood.” What is at issue? Does redemptive inertia (which saves them from the revolution) have the upper hand? Does the stupidity of the ubiquitous critics who lead the writer down the path of “falsehood” have the upper hand? For all we know, the motive is Pushkin’s “O, give me oblivion.” Or maybe the cause lies in the shortcomings of the revolution itself. We don’t know. As it is, we are often accused of premeditation anyway, because life, they say, cannot be built by design.

Well, it’s true, brother writers, that life cannot be built by design. But don’t forget one thing: if you deviate from it dramatically, the design will avenge itself. And so, if you deviate from the design for literacy, for example, you then have to requisition distinguished teachers from abroad to drill literature into the public’s head . . . by design.

We do not advocate being taught by teachers from abroad. And we support even less learning our abc’s from “the time of Ochakov.”

We would like to teach ourselves.

The New Literature

The new literature is a literature that asserts the fact. This is quite a complex matter, and for some reason our wise theoreticians of art have still had no time to consider it. We have neither methods for the literature of fact, nor even the simplest accounts of the way in which the factists themselves understand it. The experiences of the writer-ocherkists of old have not been able to be consolidated in
theories. Let’s two-year experiment in this domain has already made it possible to establish a few tenets, but only as general points of orientation. For the wise men it is only a “minor genre,” but for us it is a question of life and death.

There used to be a section in the old journals called “Literature and Life.” Life was opposed to literature, and literature to life. We don’t frame the question that way. Literature is a fragment of life like any of life’s other sectors. We don’t think that the writer can be cut off from the object of his writing. We now find the praise of spectators from the sidelines ridiculous, and we are only convinced by a satire whose object has clearly been influenced beforehand by the satirist. We demand the writer’s constructive connection to his subject.

[. . .]

We Have to Reconsider the Devices

Although we are undertaking the transition to a new literature, we still study the old. We do need to learn from someone; it cannot be done without any heritage whatsoever. Of course, it is best to learn from those close to us and to repel strangers. Radishchev with his “Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow,” Pushkin with “Journey to Arzrum,” Goncharov with The Frigate Pallas, Aksakov with Notes of a Fowler, Dostoevsky with The Diary of a Writer, and others—they’re all more or less our distant, albeit only “formal,” relatives. We need to take their devices and augment them. Insofar as there are no strict divisions between genres, we must also take from fictional literature, adapting whatever we do take to our current place and time, i.e., utilize it provisionally.

Literary history shows frequent cases of genres that were occasional and subordinate transformed into permanent and nonutilitarian genres. And the opposite phenomenon is equally valid. Gulliver’s Travels was written as an urgent political pamphlet, but time canonized this subordinate genre as a timeless literary tale. So consider the moment when this children’s amusement turns back into a toy with a sharp bite. Yesterday’s satire Don Quixote became an object of aesthetic consumption; and so what is stopping us from borrowing an aesthetic tool to make it serve the needs of our own time—*with its conventionality in mind*? There are no absolutes in the world, and all phenomena acquire significance only when bound to a time and place.

The same can be said about literary heritage.

The Dialectic of Devices

The old literature rested solidly upon several foundations. A principal foundation was the *image*. The critic Belinskii expressed it with the phrase “the artist thinks in images.” He thereby established the primacy—if not the absolute dominance—of the image in art (and particularly in literature).

Are we completely rejecting the theory of the image? Not at all. It’s just that
we’re opposed to absolutes. We don’t support the primacy of any single phenomenon. We acknowledge the huge ancillary role of resemblance as an element that, first, anticipates a thought, and second, leads to a precise concept. But we are hardly inclined to elevate an instrument of thought that is clearly subordinate and ephemeral into some kind of literary dominant. The most important thing is that we make a maximum effort to rationalize this device by diligently emphasizing its relative significance among other literary devices. The old writers took too seriously the imperative to think in images and tried to invent images even when the object was plain to see. All old poetry is based on this mystification, and even today plenty of freaks still live off this tradition of pulling the wool over people’s eyes!

The new literature is for the first time remedying the situation of the image. (Here in particular, we note the colossal role of Mayakovskv, who liberated poetry from mysticism.) The new literature is already 75 percent rational. Its path of influence is through consciousness. Not imagery, but precision. Not cheap symbolism, but the truth of the living fact. For too long artists have perverted reality in the name of apparitions. It is time to declare war on artistry!

More on Several Foundations of Artistry

On to typification and generalization [obobshchenie].

What do we think of generalization? It’s not bad at all. Neither the old nor the new literature is conceivable without generalization.

But there’s a difference.

What guided the classic novelist when he reduced his invented reality to some kind of unified whole? Above all it was class instinct, of course—even if he denied this instinct. Everyone pictured reality in the way that mattered most to him. Still, we do not disparage the old literature because of its class instinct. Quite the opposite: all the best work of different eras, from The Captain’s Daughter to The Precipice, from Fathers and Sons to War and Peace, are both manifestly classist and as timely as they could be (considering the limitations of belles lettres. But class was rejected as a defining factor, because this literature replaced reason and will with intuition, because it declared the process of “creation” to be something involuntary and mysterious. We are hardly taken in by that organized form of deception known as objectivism, and we’re trying to construct a form of class-based generalization without doping anyone. Within the literature of fact, generalization, i.e., montage, is the scientific provision of facts for the future that is called dialectical materialism. In no way does the latter exclude class as a defining factor. On the contrary. It uses science to expose class as a defining factor beneath the guise of historical conventions. It says: Look! Here is a class, and this is what it brings. Is a certain class failing to resolve the task assigned to it? Can you act to correct this?

Efficacy is the first conclusion to be drawn from our idea of generalization.
While the old literature built its conclusions on sand, the literature of fact is conceived as a catalyst for action. (There is little effective generalization in our newspapers, and that’s a shortcoming.)

Now: about typification. Typification in the old sense belongs to the same order as generalization. To typify means reducing the great diversity of reality to a single phenomenon.

Whether through ignorance of the organization required for the reconstruction of society, or deprived of the will to action, people sought a way out of the “fatal” insolubilities by rushing from one chimera to the next. Having come upon a solution in the form of one particular type, they dashed on in a panic to the next one which, just like the last, seemed to explain everything for a time, and which, just like the last, was—alas—socially ineffective. As a result, humanity is driven into hysteria by “artistic” complexes such as “jealousy,” which has been elevated to a primal principle; or “love,” which makes the world go around; or “loyalty,” “betrayal,” “miserliness,” and similar dominant clichés that survive to this day under the false title of “the great questions.” The primordial impotence of thinking in images is particularly prevalent in countries—like Russia—where bourgeois revolutions were long delayed, and where the feudal culture was almost continuous with that of antiquity. In the same way that the artist “thought in images,” entire generations of Russia’s so-called thinking society thought in terms of types. Someone concocts the cliché of “Oblomov,” and all of Russia runs around under the sign of “Oblomovery.”7 The critics, i.e., the priests in the era of the raznochintsy gentry,8 connect the Onegins to the Oblomovs and the “superfluous men,” while the more resolute not-quite-Marxists haphazardly link Baron Oblomov to Tolstoy’s peasant Platon Karataev. This was how they used classical literature to “cognize” [poznavalas’] life, and how the old “classless” teacher of life worked through the use of types. The new Soviet “conceptualizers” [osoznavateli] are trying to mitigate this traditional “classlessness” with new thematics, but of course the problem has nothing to do with thematics. The problem lies in the faulty application of a device that is obviously obsolete.

What do we think about typification? Not much. We regard it without due reverence and, above all, highly provisionally.

Fortunately, we can no longer think in terms of fabricated types. It was fine that our fathers, for example, thought in terms of “Oblomovery” for nearly an entire decade. How can we think in terms of fixed “-eries” when every daily paper (literally) brings us some new “-ery”?! Let’s leave these “-eries” to the corresponding institutions (for example, the Central Statistical Bureau [Tsentral’noe Statisticheskoe Upravlenie, or TsSU]), and reduce the literary device of typification to a “minor genre”!

7. Taken from the name of the ineffectual protagonist of Ivan Goncharov’s novel Oblomov, “Oblomovery” (also rendered in English as “Obloomovitis” or “Oblomovism”) designated the lethargic condition of a character incapacitated by indecision and capable of experiencing the world only vicariously.

8. The raznochintsy were a disenfranchised intelligentsia class who assumed cultural leadership in the 1830s and exercised great influence over progressive public opinion through journals and other publishing forums.
Shchedrin already used “types” for the purpose of urgent satire.° “The New Leo Tolstoy” (Tret’iakov) ably adapted lit-typage for the purposes of the little feuilleton. Zorich and Sosnovskii “think in types”; doesn’t that sound proud in its own way.\textsuperscript{10} 

\begin{center}
\textit{Toward a Methodology of the Literature of Fact}
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We still have to construct a methodology. Obviously the belletrists won’t be doing it. Nor those meeting in the art academies. The first words must come from the new ocherkists, from the newspaper workers, from the worker-correspondents. But unfortunately our factist comrades remain silent. We have to leave behind speculation, and grope our way forward.

Here are what seem to be the primary methodological tenets that are clearly emerging in the fact-writers’s practice:

First: \textit{decisively reorient all new, authentically Soviet literature toward efficacy}. The writer no longer writes at random, and the reader does not merely read occasionally. Down with the writer’s isolation from production, down with the perversion of good worker-correspondents into agents of literary deception. Literature is only one specific part of the construction of life [zhiznestroeniia]. We’ve already written enough on that topic.

Second: \textit{concretize literature completely}. Nothing “in general.” Down with incorporeality, nonobjectivity, abstraction. All objects will be called with their proper names and classified scientifically. This is the only way that we can cognize [poznavat’] and construct life. We are the bitterest foes of nominalism [nominalizma], but we are in favor of denomination [imenovannost’].

Third: \textit{shift the focus of literature from human emotional experiences to the organization of society}. The old literature is thoroughly individualistic, insofar as it is based upon the inner life of the individual (“character”). It is, moreover, thoroughly idealistic, insofar as it refracts the “process” of the struggle for new material through the human, while ignoring the “material” itself. The result, for better or worse, is that we know the human “soul,” but are completely ignorant of the world that is the object of his remaking.

It is this from which humanity suffers.

The issue of human progress can only benefit by “strangling psychologism.”

\textsuperscript{9} Editor of the journal \textit{The Contemporary} after the death of Nikolai Nekrasov, Mikhail Saltykov (pseud. Shchedrin) savaged his contemporaries in numerous satirical sketches. As Chuzhak explained in his essay “The Literature of the Construction of Life,” Shchedrin belonged to a minority current within the realist tradition that wrote not in esteemed genres such as the novel, but in subliterary journalistic fields such as the essay and the feuilleton. See Chuzhak, “Literatura zhiznestroenia,” which first appeared in two parts in \textit{Novyi lef}, nos. 10 and 11 (1928), and was republished in the \textit{Literatura fakta} anthology the following year.

\textsuperscript{10} Reference to Maksim Gorky’s \textit{The Lower Depths}. See “Art in Revolution and the Revolution in Art,” p. 13, note 4.
The Latest: The “Question of Fate”

Which is also of a methodological nature.

In one of his articles, Viktor Shklovsky poses the question in roughly the following way: now that we’ve destroyed the story in prose [fabul’nuui prozu], what will hold together the thing that is beyond plot [vne-siuzhetnye veshchi]? This is hardly a trivial question. And not only because we have to put something equally “captivating” in the place of the plotted prose that we struggle against, but also because the plot has until now been the most effective ligament for prose literature. Like verse without rhyme, prose falls to pieces without plot. What exactly will replace plot?

First of all, we must clear up one misunderstanding, comrades. We are not destroying plot intentionally: plot is decaying on its own. It is decaying because the traditional novel is decaying. Moreover, when speaking provisionally about the destruction of the plot, we have in mind the artificial plot, i.e., the story [fabulu], and not the plot in general. Let’s leave the story to recreational literature that is read on the train and “on the cusp of dreams.” It also has an auxiliary function within utopian literature (the new science fiction), within satire, within the little feuilleton, within children’s literature, etc. But let’s discuss the plot that is beyond artifice.

All descriptive ocherk literature has a plot that is not invented. Memoirs, travel accounts, human documents, biographies, history: all of these are as naturally plotted as reality itself. We don’t plan to destroy such plot, and besides, we couldn’t anyway. Life is a pretty good inventor, and we favor life in every way. We’re only against invention “in imitation of life.” We don’t plan to destroy plot, but rather the opposite: we must welcome this natural plottedness. The more plotted, i.e., the more naturally plotted, that something is, the more naturally interesting it is—which makes it more easily assimilable and its results more tangible.

What we’re getting at here is how to construct natural plotting where it is absent or very slight. Or more accurately: how to uncover this plottedness when it remains hidden from an eye that cannot discern it. This, comrades, will be an art (i.e., an ability): first, an art of vision, and second, an art of transmission. The art of seeing the plot that is hidden from the unarmed eye will thus be a literature that advances facts. And an art that expounds thus will promote facts (for the sake of brevity, we will simply say the literature of fact), i.e., an exposition of the secretly interlocked facts in their internal dialectical arrangement.

How can we uncover this internal interdependence of facts (more precisely: their purposiveness)? How can we do this in a way that does not disperse these facts? How can we make all of the literature of fact naturally plotted?

11. The essay by Shklovsky to which Chuzhak refers appeared in the Literatura fakta anthology under the title “K tekhnike vnesiuheetnoi prozy” [Toward a Technics of Prose Beyond Plot]; it also appeared the same year as the final chapter in Shklovsky’s Theory of Prose (Moscow: Federatsiia, 1929), under the title “Ocherk and Anecdote.”
The existing literature of fact has already answered this question in an ade-
quately comprehensive manner. After examining the best of this literature, the
following conclusions become clear:

First. There is no need to fear taking “uninteresting” moments as subjects for
exposition. Nothing in nature is uninteresting. You just have to convey this “unin-
teresting” thing. Some of us are still of the opinion that an entire series of
subjects are not “appropriate” for writing. Everything simple, everything quotidi-
ian, is inappropriate. Life begins only once labor and service have ended. How
this labor or service is conducted, the everyday life of labor and service, not to
mention the wages of daily work—none of this is a “topic.” The topic is what a
human “experiences emotionally” at work. Work itself exists in the writer’s imagi-
nation only as a territory for emotional experiences. Work is not alive; it is not
active. Work is only about serving time, just like everything else quotidian. Do we
have to go into the origins of this point of view?

The practice of the best ocherkists testifies to the fact that such a view of the
“topic” is of no use. The ocherkist Semen Sibiriakov (In the Struggle for Life) talks of
nothing but the labors of a settler and how they are paid, and the “labors” in his ocherk are
thoroughly plotted. The ocherkist M. Adamovich (On the Black Sea) narrates the
course of a ship’s strike. In his place, the novelist—or a bad factist—would have
based his narrative on the psychology of the characters, but Adamovich talks only
about technics: the technics of conspiracy, the technics of approaching the masses, the
technics of carrying out the strike, the technics of working out the terms. The latter
he even enumerates point for point. He has no characters; there is only the deed accom-
plished by them. Why is this purely “technical” plot so dramatically compelling, and
why does the most striking moment turn out to be the “dry,” plotless formulation of
the demands, which lacks even a hint of pathos? The factist Shklovsky (Sentimental
Journey) talks about tinkering with automobiles, with the theory of the plot, with dirt,
with firewood, with the reevaluation of Sterne, and with lice—and nowhere does he
“feel.” And yet Shklovsky’s scholarly prose is more stirring than specialized lyrics!

It turns out that the secret of hidden plottedness does not lie in the flight
from “uninteresting” topics, but in just the opposite: fearlessly diving to the bot-
tom of the “uninteresting,” the “simple,” the “quotidian”—until you reveal the
“quotidian” process (be it the process of working, of striking, of repairing pants . . .
whatever you can think of) in its inner being—in its technics! The secret lies in a
high degree of intensity, in dynamics, in an attempt to overcome the environment.
We have to focus on the object’s magnetism, on its organization—as already dis-
cussed, writers have to shift the center of gravity from the experiences of the hero to the
experiences of processes. The hero will not be worse off; he will just be speaking with-
out words. And things will come to life and begin to work much better for people.
The process of overcoming matter is the best hidden heroic plot of our time. It is also
the best linking agent beyond plot. All that comes first.

Second: the nature of the writer’s own view. Most of our writers approach the
object as aliens, but we have to approach the object as its “intimates.” Once again,
we already find this among our best ocherkists. B. Kushner (103 Days in the West) looks at the world with the eyes of a master, and moreover, a Soviet master who is a little acquisitive: Isn’t there something to be gained from it, as they say? His terminology is also that of a master. These eyes, greedy for their object, also make Kushner’s little book plotted in its own way. The remarkable autocorrespondence of Tret’iakov, “Through Clouded Glasses,” is specific through and through. Having made himself into a kind of apparatus that absorbs everything, the writer-specialist tests every conceivable point of view, and sincerely desires to learn how to see. This specific intensity is what makes Tret’iakov’s essentially theoretical ocherk “entertaining,” like belles lettres.

Shklovsky is also enormously attentive to the object and to its specificity. For him, “every flea is a flea,” and there are no “uninteresting” objects. No insult to the writer is meant if we say that he sniffs at the entire world like a puppy that has opened its eyes for the first time. (The only other person who sniffs like this is the worker-correspondent M. Gorky.) His interest in Sterne is the same as his interest in an intentionally damaged automobile. And he will fix both Sterne and the automobile then and there. Shklovsky even comments like a great specialist on the lice at the front (you’ll excuse me if I don’t quote him). Whether in jest or in earnest, he is a master of the production method. Here is a detail: a chauffeur by profession, the author runs off to Stettin, and you read: “Then I went to Stettin by ship. Seagulls were flying behind us. To me, they had the ship under surveillance. Their wings were bent as if they were gesturing. Their voice was like that of a motorcycle.” Isn’t it because comrades aren’t afraid of specificity that they are readable and plotted from within?

Shklovsky worries about the patchwork construction of his little book, and confesses on the spot: “And all of my life is made of pieces that are connected only by my habits.” Is that really such a bad kind of link?

We must understand any object in its specificity and approach objects “as intimates.” It’s not enough to be able to “see the object”; we must also want to see it. We must try to adapt objects efficiently to human needs—and then we won’t have to worry about the plot.

Who Our Enemies Are

Is it worth talking about external enemies? Fortunately they’re dying out. Some discussion of our adherents is much more interesting. Yes, the literature of fact is already so powerful, it seems, that it can afford the luxury of having its own “parasites”! Who are they? The gourmands of the old artistry who have gorged themselves on “beauty”; the aesthetes, the consumers of a fiction that has lost its taste and who are drawn to something “piquant.” In Vecherniaia Moskva (no. 203, 1928), one of them even made the following slip: “We are already sufficiently stuffed with the fabulist’s intricacies. The complicated, tangled intrigues of the adventure
story have already ceased to intrigue us. Actual events and real occurrences, the mere chronicle, or guileless [?! –N. C.] memoirs, are displacing so-called belletristics.” An excellent acknowledgment! Just what do “they” need? “Lately, interest in the literature of facts has grown so much that . . .” Well, and? “Wouldn’t you want to write novels as enthralling as the biographies of Cherniavskii, Dobroliubov, Nekrasov, Polezhaev—to name a few at random? The history of their lives is worth as much as the inventions of the belletrists. The facts of their biographies are more vivid than any fiction” (Iurii Sobolev, “Novels Without Lies”).

Do you see what “they” want? They’d like to take what we’re standing on its feet and turn it upside-down. Citizens, keep an eye on your pockets!

In addition to our adherents, there are the naive ones. They would like to work with the fact, but their organism has been poisoned by a manorial aesthetics. They are legion. Take the good young communist, Comrade Evgenii Cherniavskii (Patches of Light from a Country Town, published by the Moscow Association of Writers, 1928). Talking about the new Samarkand, he becomes affected: “But then something new and unexpected grows.” . . . “But there’s something in it that is unusual, something that is not everyday,” . . . “Something that imparts it with a certain special charm.” . . . “Isn’t it true that there’s something curious and pleasing about the appearance of the East.” . . . “And in this house—which is a bit strange, but wonderful—there is one room, practically a hall, that is the most strange and the most wonderful.” . . .

Evgenii, my friend, don’t speak beautifully!

In addition to the naive, there are those who have lost their way. They are also legion. Take for example the author of the fine essay “The Beginning,” I. Zhiga (Moscow, 1928). Although he is clearly working with facts, once in a while he slips into second-rate belletrism: “As you drive into St. Petersburg, something always excites you. You always expect to find something unusual. It’s just like you’re going to meet with a great man and you think: I wonder how he’ll receive me, I wonder what he’ll say!” The author would have liked to say outright just who this “great man” is (the great ones are always few and far between), but instead he played it safe. But think about how obsolete that awkward, typologized “in general” would sound if you were to insert a concrete figure into this algebra! . . . Or, having just conveyed the resolution adopted at Smol’ny point for point with utmost precision, like an amateur, the comrade loses his way in conventional symbols: “The black autumn sky enveloped everything harshly and coldly. The windows were weeping. . . .” (Is this still from “the sea was laughing”?)

We will fight those who still cling to belletrism!

In addition to those who have lost their way, there are the exotics. The word almost sounds like “narcotics,” and not without reason. It turns out that any subject can be made into a means for an addicted aesthete to get a fix. There are two kinds of exoticism. First, in order to catch a glimpse of a “fact,” people go somewhere far away, as far beyond the blue sea and the distant mountains as possible, to a place where facts never seen before are scattered about and where all they have to do is gather them up. We won’t talk about “factists” such as the Leningrad journalist
Evgenii Shuan (*To Argentina Aboard the Sailboat “Comrade”*, Moscow: State Publishing House, 1928), who traveled around half the world only to describe to “dear Triapichkin”\(^\text{12}\) how Soviet sailors are received in which kinds of brothels. Unfortunately many of our best *ocherkists* are attracted to easy loot. A childhood illness of *ocherkism*?

A second case of exoticism: stringing together a bunch of words from the local dialect. “The woman who broke the dread law of Sharia, the woman who had taken off her *parandzha* and *chachvan*, was running through the sleeping streets of the *kishlak*\(^\text{13}\) (Cherniavskii).

*Brother writers! We must write about what is nearer to us!*

Besides exoticism, there is frivolousness. To put it politely, this is called dilettantism. Apparently it has become fashionable to take a three-week trip abroad, view things “through the window of the coach,” and then publish a little book that gives our external enemies sufficient grounds to celebrate cheap victories over *ocherkism*.

*Ah, but dilletantism is a great vice! And so is frivolousness.*

Are there more enemies? There are. And serious ones.

Here and there in our writings you can still find a definite, purposive orientation to be lacking. Facts being recorded for their own sake. But this is already like “incidental” writing, and has nothing in common with the *ocherkism* that we need.

There is still vulgarization here and there. Phenomena are isolated from their dynamics. Ineffectuality and dubious epicism are the result.

*Conclusion*

Russian literature is at a difficult turning point. The galvanized cadaver of a preachy belleslair still weighs like a stone on the consciousness of our publishers. But the literature of fact is already clearing the right path. Our young comrade-writers have to pause and decide:

*With whom do we go?*

Answering this question wouldn’t be so hard if one could approach it purely abstractly, proceeding only from the demands of the time and ignoring the heavy burden of tradition and the writer’s skills. And then there are still the demands of the petit bourgeois reader! Truly, it is easier for the petit bourgeois to enter the heavenly kingdom of distracting fiction than it is for the writer who has been corrupted by the members of ZIF\(^\text{14}\) to wrap himself in the camel-skin of the constructor. This is where they start compensating with thematics. Comrades think that as long as they don’t serve up the revolution like Pil’niak does, then the

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\(^{12}\) In Gogol’s satire *The Inspector General*, the character Khlestakov writes a letter to “dear Triapichkin” in which he exposes the indiscretions of provincial Russian bureaucrats.

\(^{13}\) Three Uzbek words that respectively designate a burka, a traditional gridded veil, and a rural village.

\(^{14}\) ZIF (Zheleznyi Fil’mshtukaturnyi Institut) is the Russian state film and television institute.
revolution in literature will immediately be realized. No, the matter is much more difficult than that.

Anyone is at least somewhat familiar with the dialectics of the literary genres can attest to the fact that any historically necessary form is first perceived as a fact, but then operates the second time only as parody. Form is inseparable from social function. And so whenever we drag in a foreign form, we naturally also incorporate some element of its function. Here we must say outright: the more we utilize an old form in a blatantly parodic manner, the less danger there is of infection by its function; and the more seriously ZIF’s members dabble in belles lettres, the better it is for . . . the clergy.

Belles lettres is opium for the people. Those who oppose ZIF are for the literature of fact.

Only the decisive transition to new, rational, and effective devices will save our literature from necrosis. The introduction of other thematics will not help. We must put the issue of literary training itself on a new track. We must put a decisive end to the shamanism of literary priests.

The struggle between literary genres is identical with the struggle between social groups and classes that we find in every other clash of superstructures. And so the “Writer’s Handbook” begins and ends with an active call to bring down alien devices.

14. One of the primary publishing organs of VAPP (Vsesoiuznaia Assotsiatsiia Proletarskikh Pisatelei [The All-Union Association of Proletarian Writers]) between 1922 and 1930, ZIF (Zemlia i fabrika [Earth and Factory]) published a variety of books written in traditional narrative forms, from Fedor Gladkov’s Cement to worker-peasant editions of classics by Chekhov and Tolstoy.