

# SALADOFPEARLS

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## ABOUT

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*As consumption-oriented wealth, e.g. in imperial Rome, it [capital] therefore appears as limitless waste, which logically attempts to raise consumption to an imaginary boundlessness, by gulping down salad of pearls etc.*

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## Viktor Shklovsky's Monument to Scientific Error (1930)

by antiknee

I've been looking for a translation of this text for sometime and rather fortuitously this turned up (thanks to [David Bordwell](#)) ahead of a conference on 'Retro-Formalism', in April organised by Anke Hennig (see [link](#)), at which I'll be presenting a paper entitled, Viktor Shklovsky's Critique of a Political Economy of Art

*Shklovsky begins his seminal text, 'art as device', with critiques of diverse formulations of the 'laws' of economy governing creative effort and perception in poetic and prose language. These 'laws' are turned on their head to describe the process by which 'the device of art makes perception long and 'laborious'. For Shklovsky, art, in short, is not efficient. For Leon Trotsky, this aspect of Shklovsky's thought is framed as a betrayal of materialism and Marxism, for he insists 'man tries to maintain an economy of energy in every kind of creation, even in the artistic.' Yet, recent Marxist accounts insist that both communism (Theorie Communiste, Endnotes) and art's (Stewart Martin, John Roberts, Marina Vishmidt) contemporary viability are premised on the critique and destruction of economy rather than their realisation under improved management. Excusing Boris Eichenbaum's scientific gloss, we might assert that if '[formalist] science lives not by settling on truth but by overcoming error', then errors must be made in order to be overcome. Art, proceeding interminably by digression, responds to economy negatively, in tension with every effort to coerce, regulate or contain it. Without shying from critiques of vitalism (Mikhail Bakhtin and Benjamin Noys), can Shklovsky's dismissal of a political economy of art, contribute to the understanding of the current 'aesthetic relations of production' (Theodor W. Adorno)? And can this understanding be brought into meaningful alignment with forms of critical, anti-productivist and anti-instrumental thought today?*

I'll add some further background to Shklovsky's questionable technique of 'ostensible surrender' in relation to this text later, but for now with a gratuitous monumental folly to scientific socialism here we go...



*Monument to the Founding of the North Korean Worker's Party*

**Viktor Shklovsky:**

**Monument to a Scientific Error**

**[Pamiatnik nauchnoi oshibke]**

**Literaturnaia gazeta, no. 4, 27 January 1930, p. 1**

**Translated by Maria Belodubrovskaya**

I

The heightened attention now directed at the so-called Formal Method and the hostile nature of this attention are easy to explain.

A person who maintains or maintained that class struggle does not extend to literature neutralizes certain sectors of the front by doing so.

It is impossible to say that today's art lacks social purpose. It also seems natural that research interest in literary history shifts to the most purposeful, publicistic so to speak, periods.

At the same time it turns out that where a neutrality or a lack of social purpose actually existed, that neutrality was actually pursuing its own, strongly directed goals.

At the same time the so-called Formal Method should not be viewed as a

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reaction against the revolution.

Our initial works appeared in the period between 1914 and 1917.

The Formalists' initial works were directed at the creation of a typology and morphology of a literary work.

At the nascent stage of scientific literary study, such work was necessary but insufficient, as it constituted not even an anatomy of literary works but a protocol for their autopsy.

To abstract the literary plane from other social planes was a working hypothesis useful for the initial accumulation and systematization of facts.

Engels wrote that when studying nature, history, or human spiritual activity, the student first captures only the general picture of diverse connections and interactions.

"...But this conception, however correctly it grasps the general character of the phenomena as a whole, yet is insufficient to explain the separate parts out of which that whole is composed; and so long as we do not know these, neither are we clear about the whole itself. In order to learn to know these separate parts, we must take them out of their natural or historic connections, and inquire, in each case separately, into their qualities, their special causes, their operation, etc."endnote1

Our error was not that we provisionally separated the literary plane, but that this separation became fixed.

My approach consisted of taking remote examples from literatures of different eras and national contexts and of asserting their aesthetic equivalence. I studied each of these works as a closed system, outside of that system's correlation with the literary system as a whole and with the primary, culture-forming economic plane.

Empirically, in the process of inquiry into literary phenomena, it became clear that every work exists only against the background of another work and that it can be understood only as part of the literary system.

I incorporated this observation into my work, but failed to draw main conclusions from it.

This was my error.

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## II

The emergence of literary forms is a mass social process. *Vechera zabavnye* [Funny Evenings], *Vechera melankholicheskie* [Melancholic Evenings], *Vechera sel'skie* [Village Evenings], and *Vechernie chasy* [Evening Hours] have been succeeded by Narezhnyi's *Slavenskie vechera* [Slavic Evenings] and Gogol's *Vechera na khutore bliz Dikan'ki* [Evenings Near the Village of Dikanka].endnote2

Compare also the accumulation of similar pseudonyms in the poetry of the 1860s: "Denunciatory Poet," "Mornfut Poet," "Dark Poet," "New Poet," and even "New Poet 2."

Boris Eichenbaum attempted a revision of the Formal Method. This revision started with rightly substituting the term "morphological" method for the term "formal" method. This rid [the method] of the ambiguity in the expression "formal" and at the same time described more precisely the method of analysis. Extremely important works by Yuri Tynianov, who introduced to literary study the concept of literary function (the idea that literary elements have different significance at different times), marked a turning point in the method's evolution.

Very little remained here of the initial, then already naïve definition that a work equals the sum of its devices. Parts of a literary work do not add up but correlate. A literary form seems to be semantically all of one piece, but actually it is semantically quite diverse, even when its formal features seem similar to those in other works.

It became clear that one could not study individual devices in isolation, as all of them correlate with one another and with the literary system as a whole.

This transitional point of view was a difficult one and in my case was accompanied by a number of relapses to the old way of thinking.

The main difficulty was in determining the relationship between the literary plane—and in general between the planes of so-called culture—and the base plane.

## III

In Jules Romains' novel *Donogoo Tonka*, a city built as a result of a scientist's error erects a monument to a scientific error.

I had no desire to stand as a monument to my own error.

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This is why I tried to move on to historical-literary work.

My first historical study was the book *Material i stil' v romane L'va Tolstogo "Voina i mir"* [Material and Style in Leo Tolstoy's War and Peace].

In this book, I was interested in the laws of deformation of historical material that are determined by the author's class. Tolstoy's goal led him to create a nobility agitka [propaganda piece]: to portray the victory of pre-reform Russia by pre-reform means.

Tolstoy's task was thus to contrast the War of 1812 with the Crimean War.

He wanted to propose not a reform but a retreat.

Tolstoy's contemporaries grasped this tendency in the novel. Curiously, a caricature in the *Iskra* magazine (No. 16, 1868) showed Tolstoy writing in front of a fireplace decorated with a statuette of Napoleon—not Napoleon I but Napoleon III. In the caricature, Tolstoy was shown seated with his back to the viewer. The writer's face was yet unknown, but his tendency was clear.

Further in the book, I discussed the very important question of the novel's assimilation of inertial literary forms. I did not show extensively enough in the book (and plan to do it here) that the entire belletristic arsenal employed by Tolstoy and all the novel's situations had been known before from works of Ushakov (*Posledniy is knyazey Korsunskikh*), Zagoskin (*Roslavlev*), Bulgarin (*Pyotr Vyzhigin*), Vel'tman (*Lunatik*), and Pert Sumarokov (*Kol'tso i zapiska*).

However, in Tolstoy's novel all of these traditional situations have a new function and are presented as interactions derived from the poetics of the school of naturalism. The novel correlates familiar novels in a new way and presents them on a different lexical plane. The author's intent was not fully realized. Class groupings of readers serve as resonators to a literary work. The author failed in his task to write a novel against *raznochintsy* [19th century Russian intellectuals not of gentle birth], an anti-reform novel so to speak. The author's goal failed to coincide with the objective role of his work.

#### IV

Inquiry into literary evolution should take social context into account and should be complicated by a consideration of various literary trends. Each of these seeps into various class strata to a different extent and is variously recreated anew by these strata.

These premises determined my most recent work on Matvei Komarov, *zhitel'*

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goroda Moskvyy [Matvei Komarov, an Inhabitant of the City of Moscow].

I felt that the question of a sudden emergence of Russian prose in the 1830s had not been sufficiently clarified.

As I searched for its origins, I established its connection with 18th-century prose. From Vel'tman through Kashchii Bessmertnii and from Dal' through the fairytale *O vore i buroi korove* I came to Mikhail Chekhov. From Tolstoy with his folk tales and his attempts to cater to the muzhik [peasant man] I came to Komarov.

Eighteen-century prose was mass prose. Many books had fairly large print runs and came out in multiple editions. This prose served the lowest stratum of nobility and the merchant class, as well as the part of peasantry that gravitated towards petty bourgeoisie.

The elevation of Russian prose can probably be explained by the elevation of the class it served. Russian prose did not emerge anew in the 1830s; it changed its function.

V

When studying questions such as these, one needs to remember that the rate at which various ideological superstructures evolve does not need to necessarily coincide with the rate at which the base develops.

In his unfinished Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, Marx pointed to these discrepancies.

"6... the Unequal Development of Material Production and, e.g., that of Art. The concept of progress is on the whole not to be understood in the usual abstract form... However, the really difficult point to be discussed here is how the relations of production as legal relations take part in this uneven development."

"For example the relation of Roman civil law (this applies in smaller measure to criminal and constitutional law) to modern production."endnote3

Thus, for example, many forms of feudal law have remained untouched in bourgeois England. As opposed to this, in France after the revolution the old Roman law was adapted to fit the newest capitalist relations.

At times in literature such adaptation is accomplished through parodying.

Thus, to create denunciatory civic poetry, Nekrasov and Iskra poets (Minaev, Kurochkin, etc.) adapted parodied forms of Pushkin's and Lermontov's verse. <sup>14</sup>

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is not an individual work or an individual image (obraz) that correlates with the social plane but literature as a system.

One might think that we often label classical precisely those works that have lost their initial purpose and have fully become inertial forms.

Old-time censors understood this very well. Censor Ol'dekop (1841) supported tragedy. He wrote:

"In general, similarly to opera and ballet, tragedy can be considered the most harmless branch of dramatic art."

And elsewhere:

"If tragedy was given a wider field, the influence of comedy would decrease. The Inspector General will less engage the public that has seen King Lear. Having found in tragedy pleasure of purely literary and artistic sort, the public will be less eager to look for a hint in comedy."

It is clear that tragedy, and Greek and Shakespeare tragedy in particular, had a clear social purpose at some point in time. However, later (by Ol'dekop's time) tragedy became "literary pleasure."

As we think of the importance of learning from the classics, we undoubtedly need to incorporate into our very conception of classicism its quality as "literary pleasure."

## VI

The emergence of a new form is preceded by the process of quantitative accumulation in the inertial form (in its non-consequential sites, so to speak) of elements that seep from neighboring social planes.

Processes happen through leaps and through the transformation of a deviation into a quality of a new genre. The old form itself exists and remains unchanged formally but changes functionally.

A *tolstovka* was originally a nobleman's (hunting) outfit. Both Tolstoy and Turgenev wore this outfit. This same outfit became *tolstovka* when Tolstoy wore it to social gatherings (in place of a frock coat). Then it was a different outfit, although it remained exactly the same. In the case of a Soviet office worker, *tolstovka* takes a third form, so to speak; it attains the third change in function. The matter is complicated even further by the fact that *tolstovka* is influenced by the service jacket and the sports coat.

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The emergence of a new form does not completely eradicate the inertial form, but changes (usually narrows) its area of application. Thus, the genres of fairy tale and chivalry novel, which have become obsolete as high literature, are shifting to children's and lubok [popular folk] literatures.

Literary evolution needs to be understood not as a continuous flow and not as an inheritance of certain assets, but as a process that is accompanied by a succession of contesting forms, by a reconception of these forms, and by leaps, breaks, and so forth.

Literature needs to study the continuity of the changing system of means of social impact.

People still think of the Formal Method in terms of its initial stage, when elementary conceptions were being defined, the material was being selected, and the terminology was becoming established.

As far as I am concerned, Formalism is a road already traversed—traversed and left several stages behind. The most important stage was the shift to taking into account the function of literary form. The only thing left over from the Formal Method is the terminology that is now being used by everybody. Also left over is a series of observations of a technological nature.

But to study literary evolution on the social plane the crude sociological approach is absolutely worthless.

It is essential to turn to the study of the Marxist Method as a whole.

Obviously, I am not declaring myself a Marxist, because one does not join scientific methods. One masters them and one creates them.

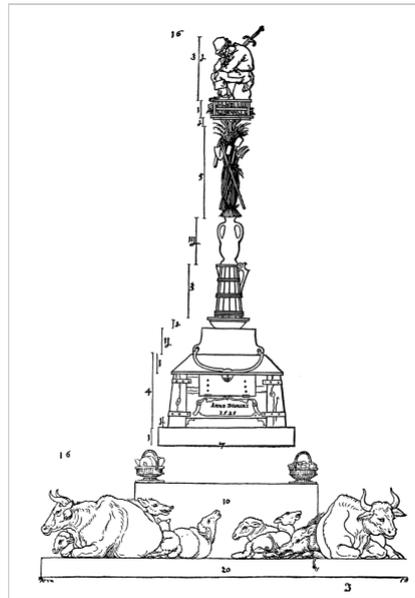
### Endnotes

1 : F. Engels's, *Razvitie sotsializma ot utopii k nauke* (Moscow, 1924), p. 53 [Frederick Engels, *The Development of Socialism from Utopia to Science*]. Trans. note: The exact quotation from Engels reads: "When we contemplate either nature, the history of man, or our own intellectual activity, the first picture presented to us is one of an endless intertwining of mutually connected forces."

2 : Trans. note: These titles are translated literally to maintain Shklovsky's repetition. English titles of these works may vary.

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3 : Karl Marx. *K kritike politicheskoi ekonomii* (PTG, 1922) Trans. note: The quotation appears in Appendix 1 (section 4) of Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.



*Dürer's Monument to the Vanquished Peasants, c.1525.*

*If someone wishes to erect a victory monument after vanquishing rebellious peasants, he might use paraphernalia according to the following instructions: Place a quadrangular stone block measuring ten feet in width and four feet in height on a quadrangular stone slab which measures twenty feet in length and one foot in height. On the four corners of the ledge place tied-up cows, sheep, pigs, etc. But on the four corners of the stone block place four baskets, filled with butter, eggs, onions, and herbs, or whatever you like. In the centre of this stone block place a second one, measuring seven feet in length and one foot in height. On top of this second block place a*

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*strong chest four feet high, measuring six and a half feet wide at the bottom and four feet wide at the top. Then place a kettle upside down on top of the chest. The kettle's diameter should be four and a half feet at the rim and three feet at its bottom. Surmount the kettle with a cheese bowl which is half a foot high and two and a half feet in diameter at the bottom. Cover this bowl with a thick plate that protrudes beyond its rim. On the plate, place a keg of butter which is three feet high and two and a half feet in diameter at the bottom. Cover this bowl with a thick plate that protrudes beyond its rim. On the plate, place a keg of butter which is three feet high and has a diameter of a foot and a half at the bottom, and of only a foot at the top. Its spout should protrude beyond this. On the top of the butter keg, place a well-formed milk jug, two and a half feet high, and with a diameter which is one foot at its bulge, half a foot at its top, and is wider at its bottom. Into this jug put four rods branching into forks on top and extending five and a half feet in height, so that the rods will protrude by half a foot, and then hang peasants' tool on it – like hoes, pitchforks, flails, etc. The rods are to be surmounted by a chicken basket, topped by a lard tub upon which sits an afflicted*

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*peasant with a sword stuck  
into his back  
Albrecht Dürer, Unterweisung  
der Messung (Treatise on  
Measurement), 1525*

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