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# The Problem of “Knowledge” in LEF and A. Voronsky’s Literary Controversy

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## Abstract

In the 1920s, the avant-garde group LEF advocated the “art of life construction” and proposed the “literature of fact,” a distinct documentary literature. A notable critic opposing LEF was A. Voronsky, who believed in “art as the cognition of life”. This report compares their contrasting views on the role of “knowledge” in art.

Voronsky saw art as depicting the world’s essence. According to him, writers must cultivate a pure, direct sense within themselves. For this, they need an infantile “ignorance” of the subject matter they depict. Voronsky’s discussion of knowledge in art is a combination of V. Shklovsky’s *ostranenie* and the ideas of philosopher, H. Bergson.

The “literature of fact” starts by trying to overcome such infantile knowledge. S. Tretiakov discusses perspective in literary works based on his experience flying in a passenger plane. Tretiakov compares his first bird’s-eye view of the country to a pair of unwiped glasses. According to Tretiakov, the world cannot be fully perceived without a detailed knowledge of the subject. For the avant-garde, who sought to incorporate human action into the cycle of material production, documentary literature about the production process was a means of involving people in it. LEF’s emphasis on depicting knowledge of the production process was also a strategy to involve the reader in that very process.

**Keywords:** Russian avant-garde, LEF, literature of fact, Voronsky, Tretiakov, Shklovsky

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In the 1920s, the avant-garde group known as “LEF,” advocated the concept of “art of life construction” and theorized a unique documentary literature style, “literature of fact,” as a form of its literary realization. In contrast, one of the leading proponents of “art as the cognition of life” and an opponent of LEF in the literary world was Aleksandr Voronsky, a right-wing critic and editor-in-chief of the journal *Red Virgin Soil*. Voronsky, like several Bolsheviks in the political center, including V. Lenin, who believed in him, was an advocate of a return to the classics in his view of literature. Therefore, he clashed on many points with LEF, a leftist group oriented toward literary innovation, and they engaged in a series of mutual exchanges of criticism. The points of contention between the two were extremely fundamental and radical, ranging from the representational system to the role of literature, and were related to the foundations of literature. This report focuses on their contrasting ideas about “knowledge” in works of art, providing insights into the differences in logic between 19th-century realist literature, to which Voronsky aspired to return, and the final destination of modernist literature attempting to overcome it.

### 1 Voronsky’s “art as the cognition of life”

Voronsky’s problematic knowledge is about the “nature of the world,” the knowledge behind the visible world, which eschews LEF’s emphasis on social knowledge based on the relations of production. Voronsky (Воронский, 1987, pp. 539-540) argues in his article, “Art of Seeing the World,” that for the perception of reality, it is important to perceive the world directly, with fresh sensations, in a way that is “wonderful in itself.” Following this method, one can see the object in a new light and from a new aspect, as if a shell that has been shielding the world has been broken. Even in the most mundane of objects, one finds character-

istics that were previously undetectable, and the surrounding environment begins to take on a life of its own. This way, Voronsky advocated the necessity of approaching the world from a perspective different from the mundane. His position was based on his positive conviction that the essence of the world is wonderful and beautiful. However, in Voronsky's view, such a worldview is not possible for everyone. For the majority of people living ordinary lives, this perception of reality is next to impossible and is possible only in very few moments of their lives, except during childhood and adolescence. This is because the basic emotions evoked by habits, preconceptions, and worldly affairs distort one's perception. According to Voronsky, the primary significance of art is to bring back to life and present images of the world that are "wonderful in itself" and seldom glimpsed by ordinary people, and the artist alone has this ability. Voronsky (Воронский, 1987, p. 545, p. 549) believed that the secret of realizing such art is a primitive, pure, unmediated, and direct sense, which the artist must cultivate within himself. What is needed to have such a sense is an "ignorance" about the world.

To give free rein to artistic potentialities, one must become ignorant and foolish, detaching oneself from everything that causes one's initial perception. The artist must be able to view the world with simple eyes as if seeing it for the first time. These reasoning corrections, which create the initial perceptions in our minds, are valuable and necessary in scientific and practical activities. Without them, we cannot take a single step in the analytical knowledge of the world, but in art, they are not only not necessary, but, on the contrary, often only harmful.

(Воронский, 1987, p. 546)

In Voronsky's view, reasoned knowledge, which prevents us from seeing the world with primitive and naïve eyes, must be avoided by art. The artist must face the subject in a state of ignorance, "as if seeing it for the first time."

## 2 Voronsky's literary theory and Shklovsky's *ostranenie*

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The avant-garde of the 1920s consistently opposed Voronsky. For example, *ostranenie* (defamiliarization) in art, advocated by V. Shklovsky, a member of LEF, was proposed as a counterargument to Voronsky's literary theory in which the artist depicts the subject as a comprehensive image. Shklovsky's article, "Art as Technique," in which he first advocated *ostranenie*, began as an objection to the axiom "Art is thinking with images." Shklovsky's assertion that art, by its *ostranenie*, essentially serves to make us perceive the familiar in a fresh and unfamiliar way (Eskin, 2019, p. 12) overlaps, to a significant degree, with Voronsky's argument that fresh perception should allow us to see reality from a different perspective than mundane. Voronsky responded quickly to the idea of *ostranenie*, which was highly influential in the art world at the time.

However, Shklovsky and Voronsky greatly differ on the quality of "ignorance," which is the premise of *ostranenie*. "Ignorance" in Shklovsky's argument is a conscious lack of social common sense that has an ironic character similar to that of Socrates and, therefore, has an enlightening and demythologizing function (Хансен-Лёве, 2001, pp. 14-15). Tolstoy, whom Shklovsky (Шкловский, 2018, p. 262) cites as an example in his article "Art as Technique," shook his own faith because of creating "ostranenie." This technique has the potential to lead to a critical spirit that jeopardizes the self-evident nature of authoritative objects through decontextualization. In contrast, Voronsky's work is not a "decontextualization" of the authoritative object. His "ignorance" is an intellectual state modeled on infants. This reveals the true beauty of the subject. However, this unreserved eulogistic position on the subject is incompatible with Shklovsky's criticism.

Voronsky's discussion of knowledge in art combines Shklovsky's *ostranenie* and Bergson's ideas. His contemporaries have noted his influence on Voronsky. As the critic R. Messer (Мессер, 1930, pp. 46-49, p. 52) points out, in Voronsky's theory of art, the work of art becomes unconscious, instinctive, and intuitive since it teaches the abandonment of everyday moods by opening the eyes to instinct and intuition. In Messer's view, Bergson's opposition of intuition to intellect and intuition that

is supposed to be outside consciousness, as inborn knowledge of the subject, places art in the realm of intuitive perception. Bergson's view formed the foundation for Voronsky's theory of art. What Bergson calls "intuition" in art is realized through a process analogous to development in an infant. Thus, the infantile nature of the artist's "ignorance" that Voronsky assumes is derived from Bergson.

### 3 Tretiakov's emphasis on technical knowledge

However, the "literature of fact" advocated by LEF starts by trying to overcome such infantile knowledge. This is well illustrated in S. Tretiakov's reportage, "Through Unwiped Glasses," first published in the journal *Novyi LEF*, No. 9 in 1928. The "point of view" in literary works is discussed here through the experience of flying in a passenger plane, which had only just become popular in the Soviet Union at the time. The perspective of looking down on a country from the sky should be a fresh one that enables us to see the world with new eyes. In this sense, Voronsky would have thought that such an experience would make it possible to recognize the world in its true form. Tretiakov, however, likens his own gaze to "unwiped glasses."

The motor shouts in different voices. The pilot reads in the voices of the motor, the state of the metal, the wear of parts, the health of valves, and the strength of the traction. And I don't even know how many revolutions of the propeller these different voices correspond to. I see the motor through unwiped glasses. I lack numbers, and the primitive flight experience I have accumulated consistently is no greater than that of a Zulu in my position.

(Третьяков, 1928, p. 20)

The American cultural historian, E. Papazian (2009, pp. 42-43) points out that the metaphor of "unwiped glasses" implies seeing the object with untrained eyes; what Tretiakov and his colleagues at LEF emphasize in productionist literature, for example, is the technical knowledge

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of the object, in this case, the motor.

From this standpoint of emphasizing knowledge in artistic representation, Tretiakov criticizes Voronsky's view of art.

From the above, I know Moscow only from the plans on which districts, police stations, and streetcar lines are marked in different colors. Naturally, at takeoff, one cannot judge which new buildings under construction are marked, which factories in Moscow are growing, in what condition the construction sites of workers' settlements are, whether the green areas have improved or deteriorated, whether there is enough sulfur for repainting roofs, in what position the fairway of the Moscow River is. The city plans in all their colors still need to be adjusted to aerial photography. That is why the mechanisms of a poet and a literary man begin to work for me – a chain of primitive habitual associations that bring everything visible or part of it to the so-called artistic images.

(Третьяков, 1928, p. 21)

Tretiakov reminds us that when an artist is ignorant of his subject, he depends on artistic images. The image of the subject seen through the eyes of infantile ignorance, which Voronsky considers the essence of the artist, is, in Tretiakov's opinion, nothing more than a product of commonplace associations. Such a mode of representation, far from exposing the true nature of the world, condemns even aspects that we see for the first time in a banal, conventional image. To avoid falling into this trap, one must "fit the color-coded plan of the city" exactly to the aerial photograph; that is, have information about the subject hand-down to the smallest detail. This is what Tretiakov considers "ideal" reportage.

Papazian (2009, pp. 43-44) points out that the emphasis on knowledge in the "literature of fact" appeared where the *ostranenie* was also overcome. In "Art as Technique," Shklovsky cites an example of *ostranenie* in Tolstoy's novel, *Kholstomer*, which depicts society from the perspective of a horse that is ignorant of human civilization and culture. The *os-*

*tranenie* here is based on the subject's ignorance. Shklovsky attempted to overcome existing literary conventions with this technique in 1917. However, Tretiakov, almost a decade later, went one step further than Shklovsky and tried to destroy art itself as a system. In his essay "The New Leo Tolstoy," published in the first issue of *Novyi LEF*, Tretiakov claimed, "We have nothing to wait for the Tolstoys, for we have our epic. Our epic is the newspaper." (ТРЕТЬЯКОВ, 1927, p. 36) Within the newspaper-modeled literature of fact, the conventions of the traditional novel, such as protagonist and plot, were to be eliminated. Instead, a narrative of the social production process was to take center stage. Eventually, Tretiakov rejected the conventions of the traditional novel to depict the life and psychology of an individual and advocated for "the biography of the object," which describes the production and distribution of things (ТРЕТЬЯКОВ, 2000, pp. 68-72). Hence, LEF's literature emphasized concrete knowledge about the industrial structure.

As the Italian cultural historian M. Zalambani (Заламбани, 2003, p. 82) suggests, citing the arguments of LEF theorist Arvatov, productivist art denied the existence of "reality" in art. In Arvatov's view, the role of art was not to reflect reality or tell the "truth." It is to manage the process by which life itself is produced by producing not only things but also types of behaviors and bodies. Therefore, LEF rejected Voronsky's "literature of perception" and promoted "literature of fact" that relies on knowledge. LEF's coterie, aiming to integrate human action into the cycle of material production, viewed literature on the production process as involving people.

In contrast, Voronsky criticized productionist literature from the standpoint of defending its conventions. In his article "About Industrialization and Art" (1928), Voronsky (Воронский, 1987, p. 590) noted that "We have as much adoration of materialistic things as we like, but, for example, the average worker, with his complex structure of feelings and thoughts, is almost entirely absent from our modern literature." He then asserts, "but the most important thing in art is the person and their relationship to another person."

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The theme of industrialization is not only about things but also about the social man and relations between people. Until our industrialist poets and novelists feel this, their works will remain cold and unconvincing.

(Воронский, 1987, p. 591)

Voronsky's literature about production relations also differs from LEF's because he advocates fiction with the worker as the protagonist. While LEF's coterie attempted to engage real readers with documentary literature about the industrial structure, Voronsky proposed a novel that engages readers' thinking by presenting a fictional image of people living within the industrial structure and inviting their empathy. The basis of the conception of both novels is the expectation of a propaganda function for the recipient. However, while the protagonists of the "literature of fact" correspond to the real readers, in the traditional novel, which is the basis of Voronsky's conception, the protagonists are the fictional image, and the readers are the only living reality. The process by which a propaganda message is sent to the reader fundamentally differs between the two forms.

Furthermore, the novel about industrialization envisioned by Voronsky does not require a detailed knowledge of industry.

In order to get closer to the worker, it is often suggested to direct the artist to the machine. It is unnecessary to prove that such measures yield positive results. We need to create our own artistic culture; we need to seriously fight bureaucracy and bureaucratic optimism. We need to remove the "scaffolding," and then the building and those who live in it will be properly visible. Otherwise, even those writers who have, until recently, been workers themselves will be systematically disconnected from working life. Be that as it may, our poets and prose writers look at modern industrialization more from the outside than from the inside. Industrialization is the building of a new plant or factory and a new complex of feelings, thoughts, habits, and customs.

(Воронский, 1987, pp. 590-591)

## 4 Conclusion

Voronsky's method, which emphasizes digging into the essence of a subject based on incomplete knowledge rather than conducting on-the-spot interviews and becoming thoroughly familiar with the subject, had already become out of fashion by the end of the 1920s, when he advocated it. Voronsky's arguments may have sounded outdated in the context of the First Five-Year Plan, when writers were sent to interview exemplary factories and farming villages, one after another. In fact, in 1927, prior to this article, he was expelled from the party on suspicion of Trotskyism. In the 1930s, when reportage as a literary genre was becoming increasingly important in society, it appeared that LEF's "literature of fact" had won, over Voronsky's ideology of restoration of the classics.

Nonetheless, LEF could not be a winner for long either. The group quickly weakened after its leader, V. Mayakovsky, left due to internal conflict. The editorship of the journal, *Novyi LEF*, was taken over by Tretiakov, one of the main theorists of "literature of fact." However, the journal eventually ceased publication with issue 12 of 1928, and the group disbanded. Mayakovsky committed suicide in 1930. By the end of the 1920s, after all these events, the hegemony of the literary world was in the hands of the *Rossiyskaya Assotsiatsiya Proletarskikh Pisateley* (RAPP), an organization of proletarian writers that left no room for dissent on literary matters.

Thus, the literary controversy between LEF and Voronsky ended, with both sides being stifled by that time. However, the literary theories proposed by each flowed into the subsequent socialist realism in different forms. LEF's literature, as a propaganda reportage covering exemplary factories and farms, became a documentary genre emblematic of the Stalinist period. Indeed, artists such as Tretiakov and Rodchenko, formerly members of LEF, participated in the *USSR in Construction*, a journal of national prestige. On the other hand, Voronsky's novels about production workers were already a precursor of the coming socialist realism, both in terms of theme and their method, which was modeled

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on the psychologism of 19<sup>th</sup>-century realist literature.

Their clash on the issue of knowledge in artistic representations was ultimately unanswerable. However, the radical literary theories discussed in this report have not lost accessibility.

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[received December 30, 2023  
accepted March 25, 2024]