

The Biography of the Object

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## The Biography of the Object\*

SERGEI TRET'IAKOV

*Tret'iakov wrote "The Biography of the Object" (or "The Biography of the Thing" [biografiia veshchi]) at a time when the champions of the new proletarian realism were campaigning for the reinstatement of the sovereign human subject at the center of the fictional narrative. Under the slogan of the "living person" [zhivoi chelovek], members of VAPP (The All-Union Association of Proletarian Writers) and the Na literaturnom postu [On Literary Guard] group advanced the psychological novel as the most suitable means for constructing an image of the person that was nuanced and complex enough to reflect the psychic density and existential inscrutability of human experience. But as some members of Lef pointed out, this cultivation of psychological complexity usually yielded stories that did not make sense. For example, Osip Brik noted in a review of Fyodor Gladkov's Cement (1925) that it was impossible for the reader to reconcile the novel's two plots: the protagonist Gleb's reorganization of production at the local cement factory, and the simultaneous foundering of his relationship with his wife. Although Gleb the producer and Gleb the husband coincide chronologically, they never converge. Brik explained that the schizoid structure of the novel's hero originated in a literary device that compresses multiple actants into a single character. What seemed to endow the heralded "living person" with emotional complexity and richness was, in other words, just an aesthetic convention which in no way corresponded to the actual psychic structure of living people. The hero of the psychological novel was not one person, but a compound figuration of the multitude, as Brik explained: "Heroism is a literary device that makes possible the attribution to a single person (the hero) a sum of deeds (exploits) that in reality have been produced by the labors of an entire series of people."<sup>1</sup>*

*Tret'iakov's biography of the object can be understood as a method for unpacking these impossibly dense accumulations of deeds within the device of the hero. Unlike the traditional novel, which filtered the complicated interactions of manifold social groups through the impacted psyche of a single character, Tret'iakov's object biography is a kind of anti-Bildungsroman that focused not on psychological consistency, but on people who are declined*

\* "Biografiia veshchi," in *Literatura fakta*, ed. Nikolai Chuzhak (Moscow: Federatsiia, 1929), pp. 66–70.  
1. Osip Brik, "Pochemu ponravilsia Tsement," in Chuzhak, *Literatura fakta*, p. 85.

by a variety of production processes. If the traditional novel was held together by the hero, the biography of the object was held together by the act. The latter thus responded to Brik's call for a literature organized not around the living person, but around the living deed: "We need to give literature the following task: not to provide us with people, but with the deed; not to describe people, but the deed; not to be interested in people, but in deeds. The human being is important to us not because he experiences emotion, but because of his role in the deed."<sup>2</sup>

Of course, a new method of storytelling based on the act rather than on psychic interiority would, as Tret'iakov notes in this essay, require completely restructuring the novel's closed narrative economy. This overhaul was not just a matter of enthroning objects at the center of the novel where the hero once was, for that would still leave the disproportionate and latent humanist structure of the novel intact. What was needed was a narrative technics that would not hierarchize the space of representation in this "Ptolemaic" fashion, one which would take the points of intensity concentrated by the novel's intrigue in the hero's emotional biography and distribute them among a plurality of actants over the entire work. The result would be a narrative free of one of the novel's major vices, what Brik elsewhere called *tsel'nost'* [unity]: the sense of fatefulness that the novel generates by concatenating all events within the psyche of its hero. In a literature that follows the red thread of the psychological plot, each event follows upon the next in an orderly teleology, a sequence that Tret'iakov characterizes here as "fatalist." (Roland Barthes too would describe narrative as "language of Destiny" in *S/Z* [1970].) But in a literature organized around the act, in the biography of the object, each event is succeeded by a potentially infinite number of other events. Its structure is not linear, but isotropic. Only a story constructed in this way, Tret'iakov suggests, would make it possible to follow "the development of a large number of people without disrupting the proportions of the narrative." It would be an epic of the collective.

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In the classical novel that is based upon the individual hero's biography, the relative scale of the characters is largely reminiscent of Egyptian wall paintings. The colossal pharaoh is on the throne at the center; near him, in a slightly smaller size, is his wife; still smaller are the ministers and army commanders; and finally, in faceless heaps of copper coins, is the entire varied mass of the population: the servants, the soldiers, the slaves.

The hero is what holds the novel's universe together. The whole world is perceived through him. The whole world is, furthermore, essentially just a collection of details that belong to him.

Idealist philosophy asserts that "man is the measure of all things"; "man—how proud that sounds";<sup>3</sup> "when man dies, so too dies the world"; this idealist philosophy is sovereign in the novel's structure. Indeed, these formulas are nothing

2. Osip Brik, "Razgrom Fadeeva," in Chuzhak, *Literatura fakta*, p. 93.

3. Reference to Maksim Gorky's *The Lower Depths*. See "Art in the Revolution and the Revolution in Art," p. 13, note 4.

other than the grains of sand around which bourgeois art crystallizes—the art of an epoch of open rivalry and rapacious competition.

In order to determine the power of this idealism in the novel, you have only to consider the weight within it of the objective world (the world of things and processes) relative to the weight of the subjective world (the world of emotions and experiences).

The Onegin, Rudins, Karamazovs, and Bezukhovs are the suns of independent planetary systems around which characters, ideas, objects, and historical processes orbit submissively. More accurately, they aren't even suns, but just common planets that have mistaken themselves for suns and have not yet come into contact with a Copernicus who will put them in their place. When today's obedient students of idealist literature try to "reflect reality synthetically" by constructing literary systems with Samgins, Virineias, and Chumalovs at their center, they end up re-creating the same ancient Ptolemaic system of literature.

In the novel, the leading hero devours and subjectivizes all reality. The art of different periods shows the individual from different perspectives. More precisely, it shows his integration into a variety of systems. These systems can be economic, political, productive-technical, everyday, biological, or psychological.

The classical novelist is not interested in the person as a participant in an economic process. Do not forget that idealist art has its roots in feudalism, where the dominant figure is that of an idle, magisterial, and privileged rentier. Isn't this the origin of the novel's contempt for the laboring person? Do you see how little space is accorded to the hero's technical and productive specialization. Heroic engineers, doctors, and financiers do exist in the novel, but typically only a minimal number of lines are given to what they do and how they do it. But then again, the novel has a lot to say about how they kiss, how they eat, how they enjoy themselves, how they languish, and how they die.

Because the novel's characters have been removed from the systems of production and transposed into the psychological systems of the everyday, the novel usually takes place in the hero's leisure time. This produces particularly monstrous results in contemporary novels by "students of the classics" who write of the "suffering of proletarian Werthers in their leisure hours."

The classical novel, which barely even touched upon the active person in his professional life, was similarly unwilling to analyze him within political, social, or physiological systems. If we recall that the novel's aesthetic rules invented a particular fantastic illness for the hero and the heroine—the nervous fever—and that it also made sure that wounds and grave illnesses never afflicted the hero below the belt, we come to realize just how arbitrary the novel's physiology actually is.

With its doctrines of predetermination and doom, with its absolute dominance of elementary forces, idealist philosophy had its way with the novel, which began to interpret the human from a fatalist perspective. The novel cultivated genetic psychophysiological traits rather than the professional diseases characteristic of social groups. Recall all the tragedies of the epileptics, the freaks, the sick,

the insane, and the cripples. The novel was interested only in unconditioned reflexes. Hence the tragedies of hunger, love, and jealousy “as such.”

Sociopolitical conflicts were conceived only as breaches of ethics (betrayal and treason) and in terms of the nervous disorders that arose from them (the pangs of conscience). Following this course, the person became completely irrational within the novel. Pathological emotional hypertrophy removed him from social and intellectual systems. Where else but in the novel can emotions celebrate such an absolute and insolent victory over the intellect, over knowledge, over technical and organizational experience?

In a word: the novel based upon the human hero’s biography is fundamentally flawed and, currently, the best method for smuggling in the contraband of idealism.

This applies even to those attempts to incorporate the hero using different methods, which approach him from a professional, social, and physiological perspective. The power of the novel’s canon is so great that every professional moment is perceived as an annoying digression from the novel’s usual plot, and every piece of physiological information is regarded either as a symptom of a psychological experience or a tedious diversion of the reader’s attention.

I came up against this in my own practice when I wrote the bio-interview *Den Shi-khua*, the biography of a real person whom I followed with the highest possible degree of objectivity. The reader is constantly tempted to lapse into the habitual routines of biographical psychologism, and the factual numbers and observations are on the threshold of aesthetic metaphor and hyperbole.

Despite the fact that a substantial number of objects and production processes have been incorporated into the narrative, the figure of the hero is distended. Thus, this figure, instead of being conditioned by these objects and influences, begins to condition them himself.

The biography of the object is an expedient method for narrative construction that fights against the idealism of the novel. It is extremely useful as a

*Boris Ignatovich. Export Forest,  
from Let’s Give, no. 4, 1929.*



cold shower for *littérateurs*, a superb means for transforming the writer—that eternal “anato-mist of chaos” and “tamer of the elements”—into someone at least somewhat educated about the present. And most important, the biography of the object is useful because it puts the novel’s distended character in his place.

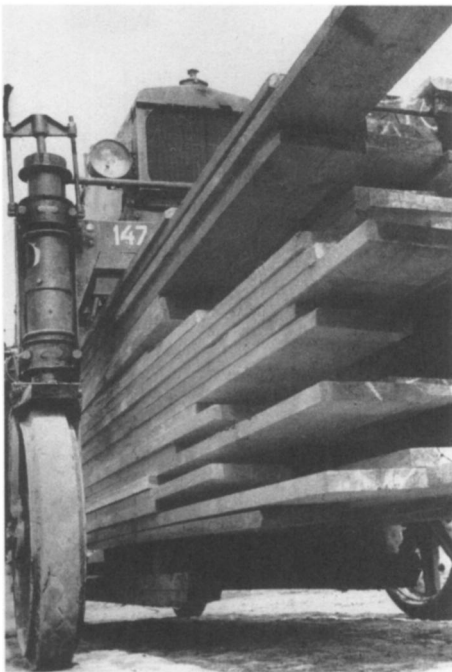
The compositional structure of the “biography of the object” is a conveyer belt along which a unit of raw material is moved and transformed into a useful product through human effort. (This is how Pierre Hamp constructs his works, in particular his *Svezhaia Ryba* [Fresh Fish].)

The biography of the object has an extraordinary capacity to incorporate human material. People approach the object at a cross-section of the conveyer belt. Every segment introduces a new group of people. Quantitatively, it can track the development of a large number of people without disrupting the narrative’s proportions. They come into contact with the object through their social aspects and production skills. The moment of consumption occupies only the final part of the entire conveyer belt. People’s individual and distinctive characteristics are no longer relevant here. The tics and epilepsies of the individual go unperceived. Instead, social neuroses and the professional diseases of a given group are foregrounded.

While it takes considerable violence to force the reader of a biographical novel to perceive some quality of the hero as social, in the “biography of the object” the opposite is the case: here the reader would have to force himself to imagine a given phenomenon as a feature of a character’s individual personality.

In the “biography of the object” emotion finds its proper place and is not felt as a private experience. Here we learn the social significance of an emotion by considering its effect on the object being made.

Remember too that the conveyer belt moving the object along has people on *both* sides. This longitudinal section of the human masses is one that cuts across classes. Encounters between employers and workers are not catastrophic, but organic moments of contact. In the biography of the object we can view class struggle synoptically at all stages of the production



*Ignatovich. Plank Transport. 1929.*

process. There is no reason to transpose class struggle onto the psychology of the individual by erecting a special barricade that he can run up to waving a red banner.

On the object's conveyer belt, the revolution is heard as more resolute, more convincing, and as a mass phenomenon. For the masses necessarily share in the biography of the object.

Thus: not the individual person moving through a system of objects, but the object proceeding through the system of people—for literature this is the methodological device that seems to us more progressive than those of classical belles lettres.

We urgently need books about our economic resources, about objects made by people, and about people that make objects. Our politics grow out of economics, and there is not a single second in a person's day uninvolved in economics or politics. Books such as *The Forest, Bread, Coal, Iron, Flax, Cotton, Paper, The Locomotive*, and *The Factory* have not been written. We need them, and it is only through the "biography of the object" that they can be adequately realized.

Furthermore, once we run a human along the narrative conveyer belt like an object, he will appear before us in a new light and in his full worth. But that can happen only after we have reoriented the reception practices of readers raised on belles lettres toward a literature structured according to the method of the "biography of the object."