

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1930s, when the powers-that-be in the Soviet Union decreed that henceforth the avant-garde had no right to exist, various local authorities and the enforcers of the general line within newly created artists' unions, as well as within the interior-ministry system, actively took up the task of liquidating these "artist-daubers" as a class, and in the unprecedentedly short historical span of the first five-year plan (1928–32) had accomplished that task "on the whole and in general."

Until the early 1990s, this was practically the only way that the liberal intelligentsia in the USSR viewed the avant-garde's demise in the 1930s at the hands of the Bolsheviks. It remains the dominant view even today. But in point of fact it is scarcely valid or historically correct. The avant-garde movement did not die; it merely adapted itself to a new historical situation. Moreover, it would be a mistake to see relations between the avant-garde and the Soviet regime as nothing

more than ideological antagonism and a collision of the “innocent victim” with the “senseless executioner.”¹

Roughly twenty years later, at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s, when everything was indeed built, finished, and done with on the whole and in general, the authorities declared a certain respite in honor of the occasion, and seemed to admit that mistakes had been made and that excesses had taken place—all of which provided a powerful stimulus to the revitalization not only of artistic practice but of the entire set of ideas associated with avant-garde art. “Stark style,” minimalist graphics, and the fight against architectural extravagance were all articulated with greater clarity once the formal language of 1920s Constructivism was returned to use. There were also para-artistic factors at work. The aura of righteous martyrdom surrounding those sacrificed to “the period of repression,” plus the fact that the authorities very quickly began having second thoughts (for example, Khrushchev’s pogrom in the early 1960s of the Manège exhibition “Thirty Years of Moscow Artistic Union”), laid upon every member of the Soviet intelligentsia a moral duty to express nothing but praise for the avant-garde and “leftist” artists, and to contend that, one, they were *not* enemies of the people, and two, they were in fact very good artists. Of course, with just a few exceptions that was indeed the case; but today, with the world of only a few years ago turned upside down, and those once officially persecuted now proclaimed heroes, there is no longer any need to defend them against unjust accusation.² Perhaps for the first time, we have the opportunity to approach the work of these artists—major and minor, great and obscure—more calmly. Avoiding both the knee-jerk class antagonism of Socialist Realist zealots and the “Let’s just thumb our nose at the system” attitude of the intelligentsia, we can simply look at them as artists, typical of their time, who as a rule expressed that span of time pointedly and brilliantly.

At this juncture it might be worthwhile to point out that I do consider the Russian artistic avant-garde—from the interpreters of Cubism to the Constructivists and Suprematists—the most significant and interesting

artistic and cultural phenomenon of the 1920s. Its newness, its creative force, its depth of formal expressiveness all have been justifiably praised by leading scholars and critics, Western and Soviet alike. The work done by Soviet avant-garde artists during the first few years of that regime—be it in easel painting, *prozodezhda* (work-clothes design), or children’s illustration—occupies a rightfully prominent place in the history of twentieth-century art.

Artists are the voice of their time. This commonplace (no less meaningful for being one) is true both for artists who, in Joseph Brodsky’s words, “smell the roses,” and for those who firmly believe that their songs help us all to “live and build.” It was the latter who were in the majority in the 1920s. They consciously strove to develop a language of new artistic forms, one that might express the content of life itself, a revolution both spiritual and earthly.

There are several reasons why the history of avant-garde–Constructivist children’s book illustration in the 1920s is particularly suited to the focus I have chosen. We might start with the generally acknowledged artistic quality of these illustrations. As Anatoly Lunacharsky, Commissar of Enlightenment (education and the arts) until 1929, put it in the introduction to his 1931 essay collection entitled *Children’s Literature: A Critical Sketch*:

To the envy of all Europe, illustration of children’s books is developing in our country in a most interesting and significant fashion. . . . Illustration, too, has its exploration of new paths, its fierce competition among schools, but all this is being done so richly, so vividly and confidently; the artist of the word has on the whole and in general fallen behind the artist of the image.³

Among other primary causes at the heart of this situation, two nonaesthetic ones bear mentioning. Both the absence of an art market and increased government pressure forced artists to look for various ways to

adapt. Drawing pictures for children was possibly the very best option. It was not technically burdensome, it was not badly paid, and it had less censorship potential (if we may use such an expression).

Beyond this, and more essential to the topic at hand, is that in this relatively localized sphere, what manifested itself in a particularly forceful and programmed fashion was the postrevolutionary period's chief ideological mission: the creation of a New Man. This is precisely what we have in children's publishing of the time—an ideology-driven attempt to shape the minds of citizens of Bolshevik Russia to a worldview, a set of social attitudes, an everyday ethic and behavior that conformed to Communist teaching.

There is no need to dwell on the fact that art, along with Marxist Holy Writ and political agitation by ideologues on many levels, played a tremendous role in the process of creating a new consciousness. When expressed in the language of artistic forms, the core ideas of the times penetrated far deeper levels of consciousness than direct and didactic instruction or slogans ever could. Images from literature and art reinforced and developed the dominant ideologemes and in some measure even anticipated them. Moreover, they performed a twofold function: they articulated a field of semantic tension within the society, creating a language for society-building; at the same time they facilitated a subconscious psychological adaptation to new conditions. All this is understandable enough. Suffice it to recall Lenin's "Monumental Propaganda Project," conceived as the iconic embodiment of a host of figures from a new social mythology, to be imitated and revered; or else the staging and design of those first revolutionary holidays, which were in essence attempts to create, through art, a ritual time and space for each of the semantically marked moments of the new yearly cycle.

We should also note that the texts of secondary modeling systems let us draw finer distinctions in social consciousness than do purely historical or documentary sources. Compared with either politicians or philosophers, artists often—to their own surprise—speak of their times with more truth and less mercy. In an artistic text, some reflection of a particular epoch's

mindset always filters through, even in the work of opportunists and hacks. Given the nature of the artistic text, what we have is less speech than a slip of the tongue; that is, the suprainformative features of the artist's message carry more than just some outwardly dictated ideological norm. They hold the real content of the artist's consciousness. The reality of an epoch—a notion definable only in semiotic terms—filters through a psychological reality recreated by means of signs. It is in the choice of themes and subjects, in the specific twists and turns of form, in the manner of organizing individual components into a whole that the zeitgeist (perhaps the most intriguing subject of history) makes itself manifest.

Studying artistic texts with the aim of reconstructing the mental clichés of the early Soviet era is an enterprise prompted not only by general considerations but by the peculiarities of the Soviet power structure, which managed to turn the regime itself into a sort of artist-demiurge.⁴ And the new regime's objectives were best embodied in children's books.

Picture books for toddlers and young children might seem rather slight material on which to base a reconstruction of the message brought to the masses by leading figures in the art world of the 1920s, but we can find much in them that is both edifying and instructive, for besides artistic factors one should keep several circumstances in mind. Children's books and, accordingly, the illustrations in them, were aimed at an audience numbering in the thousands, and by virtue of that fact alone had a much broader social impact than so-called serious easel painting, which despite the slogan "Art—to the masses" was doomed to remain largely an art for the elite. More important, works made for children had particular significance for the builders of the new world, since here it was not a matter of re-forming the intended audience, but of forming them in the first place, both aesthetically and socially. The role played by the children's artist (and writer too, of course) was immeasurably greater than that of the "adult" easel painter. The former's effect—the response to his "word"—might not be evident immediately, but would become so as years and decades passed, and his children entered adult life. As Naum Gabo wrote, "Art like this needs a new society." And so art in the high "constructive" style sent out a shoot,

branching out in the form of children's illustration *ad usum Delphini*, with the idea that those who had been fed on milk would later be ready to take solid food.⁵

But it's not as if this effect was some sort of delayed-action land mine. Or, if one *were* to call what had been planted deep in the cultural consciousness of a people on the first stage of their "shining path" a mine, then the artists themselves might be called the detonating fuse (perhaps a more accurate formulation than the oft-used "drive belt"). Ignited by sparks from all those ideas colliding in the air, they (these creators of a new world) would burn themselves out, leaving behind symbolic images of their times, images born in the smoke and flame of a "fire over all the earth"—or at least over that famous one-sixth of it that concerns us here.

As a rule, from the very beginning people in the arts made a distinction between the ultimate social objective and what were essentially aesthetic issues. And it wasn't just the left wing that did so. For example, Pavel Dulsky, a well-known art historian from Kazan, wrote in a 1925 work that "contemporary children's books and contemporary illustration (in this respect) must educate the citizen in the child, the citizen who will be ready to build the culture of a new world."⁶

In the 1920s, it was in children's book illustration that the new principles of graphic design were taking shape. Leading illustrators found support in the work of the previous decade's avant-garde: the experiments of Kazimir Malevich and his circle; the first formal experiments in book design by publishing houses such as Union of Youth (practically all the noted artists of the time were working in book design, from Tatlin and Ekster to Larionov and Goncharova); the 1914 volume *Futuristy: Pervyi zhurnal russkikh futuristov*; the Futurist group Hylaea; and the publishing house Zhuravl' (Crane), with its Futurist lithograph editions often written by hand or set in a variety of typefaces. And they were intrigued by the *lubok* (a cheap popular print) and other folk or primitivist art. Children's book illustration, by dint of its pragmatic character, most fully absorbed the ambivalent essence of the Russian avant-garde—both its enthusiastic impulse toward

a de-psychologized technicism and its reductive impulse to the simplest of archaic structures.

For the “leftist” artist of the 1920s, illustration was, at its most superficial and primary level, just one variety of the command to serve society, a phenomenon no different from any other sort of service in the common good. As Dulsky penetratingly wrote shortly thereafter:

With what elan and enthusiasm the left wing of Russian art took over the artistic life of the country in 1918–1919. . . . Clearly, this organization of young artistic forces was not born overnight; it was conceived in 1908–1909, when new western experiments were finding favor among the youth of Russia. The communication of dynamism and the urge to reflect the surrounding world in the simplest of terms (Cubism), in Expressionism, Constructivism—these became the preferred means of transmission of new methods and forms in the art of those who were creating “a contemporary aesthetic.” And when the October Revolution broke out, it was the leftist artists themselves who went to the Winter Palace and offered the young regime their experience, their labor and their strength. The artists’ task force, which set up the visual arts department of Narkompros and managed to recruit the arts to the cause of nationwide construction, included a number of important names: Natan Al’tman, Nikolai Punin, Sergei Chekhonin, Fal’k, A. Shevchenko, Korolev, Shterenberg, Kandinsky, Tatlin and others.⁷

As early as 1918, when this task force had barely had time to set up anything at all, the regime had already adopted a somewhat apologetic tone, as in the following statement by Commissar of Enlightenment Lunacharsky from an article written that same year:

There is no harm in the fact that the worker-peasant government has shown considerable support for the new artists and innovators:

they were indeed cruelly rejected by their elders. I hardly need mention that the Futurists were the very first to come to the aid of the Revolution, that they, of all intellectuals, proved to be the closest and most responsive to it, that in many practical ways they proved to be good organizers.⁸

What is interesting here is not only the tone of this statement by a high-ranking Bolshevik and old-line nineteenth-century intellectual, but also the chance slip about the innovators being “cruelly rejected by their elders.” This idea (which was never expressed explicitly, but was furtively sensed by many, including the “young artists” themselves) shifts the locus of the conflict away from aesthetic and even social problems and into the realm of conflict between generations. In this we can see another, more profound reason behind the boom in children’s illustration. And it matters not one whit that some of the leaders of the avant-garde were by this time over forty. Real collisions between real generations was of little interest to anyone here. Avant-garde movements are generally prone to the feeling that everything done before—by their “elders”—is bad, and must be destroyed or replaced (“Dump Pushkin,” “raze the museums,” and the like). In essence, the avant-gardists had something of an Oedipus complex in regard to the cultural traditions of their fathers. For so long the “elders” who wielded power in society and art had rejected them, thus forcing the insulted and frustrated “youth” to finally join together and form the Soyuz molodyozhi, the Union of Youth.

Aside from a hypertrophic urge to tear things down to their foundations, this festering, pent-up youthful negativity gave rise to a certain type of infantile personality.⁹ On the one hand this manifested itself in a passion for children’s books. In addition to the previously mentioned reasons why graphics and literature for children flourished in these years, we should note this one too: there was a quite deliberate escape into childhood, into play, into lighter and smaller forms, into the modeling of a world of “make-believe.” To some degree, all the literary-artistic activity in the forefront of children’s publishing in the 1920s and early 1930s was a sort of enor-

mously expanded and anxious Oberiu game.¹⁰ On the other hand, the element of play in children's books was a milder version of the socially repressed and internally exhausted "serious" avant-garde game carried on from 1910 into the 1920s. In that period of Sturm und Drang, artistic "output" mainly took the form of what might be called *études*, consisting of purely formal motifs like the interaction of planes, combination of materials, experimental division of color, and the like. All these formal innovations were a search for a visual poetics socially and psychologically suited to a revolutionary mentality. Another way out of the formal-playful modeling of the new artistic strategy led into production art or directly into "production." (On the next curve of the spiral of Constructivist discourse there was a conditional return from "production" back to children's play, or the "production book." Our third chapter will deal specifically with this genre, which most fully represents Constructivist practice in the making of children's books.)

As a rule, the avant-garde negative personality type finds the parental superego in almost any situation. Hence before the Revolution it was found in the "inert old world," and after the Revolution (with a short breather for sorting out the confusion) in the iron logic of iron commissars, whom the child-artists were neither willing nor able to obey.

The game of re-creating the world ended rather sadly for the avant-gardists, when their simultaneously radical and run-amok rules began to get in the way of the similar but far more ordered game being played by the Party leadership. But for a while, until the early 1930s, children's books would remain a last refuge for all the devices and designs, the elements and rudiments of Constructivist avant-garde aesthetics.