

The Real Ideal
An illustrated guide to Vygotsky's *Psychology of Art*
David Kellogg
Seoul National University of Education



Caravaggio, the Sacrifice of Isaac, (1603)

INTRODUCTION: LOOKING FORWARD, BACK, AND AROUND

My contribution to the discussion of Vygotsky's early work *The Psychology of Art* is an exegesis and an interpretation. But it is also an attempt at contextualization: historical, theoretical and methodological. On the one hand, I am going to try to use Vygotsky's early work *The Psychology of Art* as a kind of theoretical afterword to two chapters of his earlier book, *Educational Psychology*, specifically the chapter on esthetic education and the chapter on ethical education. On the other, I want to consider it as the methodological prologue to the mature work on intellectual development that we find in *Thinking and Speech*.

The stakes are high. It seems to me (and some of the recent work from the Vygotsky family archive would confirm this) that Vygotsky died with a great deal of work in mind. Among the many books he did not have time to write appears to have been a long work on the emotions which might run parallel to his work on cognition; a work that combines structural, functional and genetic analysis into a causal-dynamic account of the emergence of higher esthetic experiences: sociogenetically, ontogenetically, and

eventually microgenetically in the way *Thinking and Speech* describes the emergence of concepts. These higher affects, capable of overcoming the baser ones and forming the basis of ethical concepts, are transformed and transmitted by works of art.

Part 1. In the Beginning: Problem and method

When we read the two chapters in *Educational Psychology* on esthetics and ethics, we get a pretty good idea of what Bruner means when he calls Vygotsky a master of suspense. In each case Vygotsky sets up a problem that appears unsolvable, a problem with deep roots in the learning paradox and also in the old adage about leading a horse to water. How can we lead children to a thirst for something of which they have no real experience and of which they cannot even form a real concept?

One by one, Vygotsky examines the extant solutions and finds that all of them substitute something other than ethics or other than esthetics for the object of instruction. At last he emerges with the true object of instruction: the higher esthetic concept, or the higher ethical one. We experience enormous satisfaction; we feel that this must be where the true solution to the problem lies.

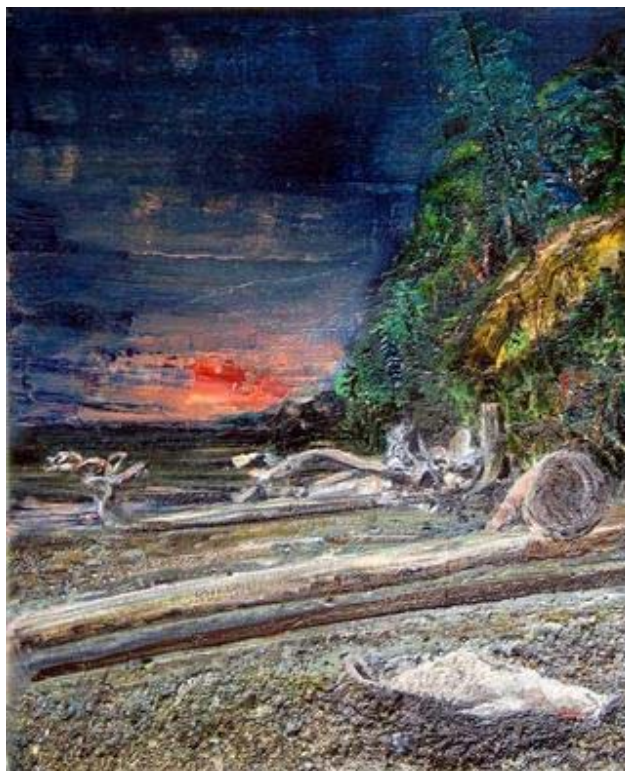
Not so, and not so for the same reason that direct instruction in concepts proves impossible in Chapter Six of *Thinking and Speech* (1987: 170). Vygotsky shows us that esthetic instruction for esthetic appreciation alone also replaces the higher concept with something that is not a concept. It replaces the esthetic concept with a purely “culinary”, hedonistic pleasure (Brecht, 1968: 39-42). It enables the child as a consumer, but it does not empower the child as a producer of art; it cannot “infuse art with life”, as 19th Century realism demanded, nor can it infuse life with art, as 20th Century futurism asked.

The situation is no better with ethical instruction. Neither the idea of an “inherent” moral concept in the child nor the use of teaching methods extrinsic to ethical concepts (“consequentialism”) can possibly lead to ethical self-regulation in children. When we simply let a hundred flowers blossom, the result is not ethics but botany, or rather biological satisfaction. On the other hand, introducing moral autonomy from the outside, as an extrinsically motivated concept, is not simply an oxymoron; teaching ethical self-regulation with carrots and sticks is a contradiction in terms.

As teachers we know that the mere fact that something is theoretically impossible does

remarkably little to prevent it from actually happening. Some children DO grow up esthetically responsive and even morally autonomous. So we are left in the position of the fussy classroom theoretician Professor Smagorinsky mentions in his work on teacher education (2003: 1400): Yes, that’s all very well in practice, but what I want to know is how it works in *theory*.

Well, here Vygotsky provides some answers, or at least some ways of answering. But to do this he inevitably broaches, or at least encroaches on, the themes of his later work on concept formation in children, *Thinking and Speech*. Readers of that book will invariably be reminded of this one, and readers of this one will have a hard time not thinking of that one, just as in Homer the lines “and they lay down to sleep by the shelving sea” invariably call to mind the refrain “When rosy fingered dawn touched the sky...”.



David Kellogg, *The Dead Seal and the Shelving Sea* (2004)

EPIGRAPH AND PUNCH LINE: AN OVERVIEW

We begin the book with an epigraph from Spinoza, to the effect that “it is impossible that solely from the laws of nature considered as extended substance we should be able to deduce the causes of buildings, pictures, and things of the kind which are produced

only by human art". Let me offer, tentatively, three ways of reading this epigraph.

The first way is a rather behaviorist way, which says that human consciousness, including imagination, can be seen as a property of the body and the body alone; there is no need to "fix the limits of the body's power or say what can be concluded from a consideration of its sole nature"; there is not even any need to posit a "mind" capable of leading it. This is probably how Vygotsky's "reactological" colleagues, including his supervisor Kornilov, might read it. As we'll see in various places in the book Vygotsky himself is not immune to this reading; the author of this book is still trying to extend the substance of behaviorism and reflexology into consciousness, without breaking with its basic assumptions.

But the phrase "extended substance" (for body) can also be read in another way. The "extended substance" might be the body extended using tools, such as paint brushes, chisels, musical instruments, and signs, such as words, clauses, and texts. This is certainly a more promising way of reading the book than the first one: there is a place for the social and the cultural, if only as "congealed" in the form of artifacts, that is, tools and signs. This is probably how Vygotsky's "instrumental" colleagues, including his close collaborators Leontiev and Luria, would read it. And as we'll see in various places in the book, Vygotsky is also given to this interpretation: works of art are "tools of the mind", which allow us to solve problems of everyday life and problems in the care and feeding of our own consciousnesses which cannot be solved in any other way.

Finally (and this is the reading that I am going to advocate here) the "extended substance" that Spinoza refers to might be the extension of the social body into the individual one—the psychology of art, then, would refer to the psychology not of a single mind but of a whole society and a culture as instantiated in a single mind. So the metaphor we want for the mind is not a homunculus, or a "room with a view", but a city-state, or even a nation.

Actually, this is not so much a metaphor as a metonym, or even a microcosm. Viewed socioculturally, city-states and nations are made up of minds and not bodies. Art, in this view, is not the personal, interpersonal, or even social expression of individual creative emotion. It is the other way around. Art is the individual instantiation of an idealized "good life" that is sociocultural from its very inception.

At the very end of this book, Vygotsky illustrates the power of art with two Jewish jokes, both taken from the Gospels. The first is the story of Christ feeding the four thousand with a few loaves and a few fishes (Matthew, 14 19-20; Mark, 8: 1-9; Luke 9: 12-14). It is, of course, miraculous viewed from above, but from the point of view of each individual down amongst the multitudes there isn't anything on offer except what we get in everyday life: more bread and more fish. One can imagine the great unwashed complaining "Is that all you got?" and looking ruefully over each others' shoulders to see if their neighbors have bigger loaves or plumper sardines.

The second Jewish joke is the wedding at Cana (John, 2: 6-9). Christ goes to a wedding, and the wine runs out. The mother of the bride is having a fit. Christ directs the servants to fill some empty jugs with plain water and we inwardly groan that he's going to do the same old loaf and sardine trick and send everybody home with a glass of water and a couple of parched anchovies.

But lo! The water changes into wine. Not just wine but AMAZING vintages—the kind of thing that the devil tries to serve out in the tavern scene in Faust, where everybody gets exactly the sort of tipple they have only ever dreamed of swilling, in the exact quantity required to get them in the right mood and nobody gets a hangover the next day. Instead of getting down on their hands and knees and thankfully lapping what is on offer, some Cana crank cracks, "Hey! You saved the really good stuff for last instead of ladling on the good stuff first and then serving cheap plonk when everybody is too drunk to notice. What kind of a Jewish wedding is this, anyway?"

In this painting by Paolo Veronese, the Wedding at Cana (1563), the blue of water and the red of wine are both linked and distinct in almost every corner of the complex painting (see, for example, Christ's dress). Yet as the eye travels from background to foreground, the overall impression is that blue changes into red, and as our eye travels to the lower right hand corner, we see water being poured into jugs and observe the sommelier critically sampling the result. We understand, at least subliminally, why this is. Notice that although there are over a hundred people at this wedding, nobody is talking. The painting was originally produced for a Benedictine monastery where speech was forbidden. One wonders, then, how many monks really understood the working, as well as the meaning, of the painting.



The Wedding at Cana is a good joke. Like any good joke, there is a certain element of generalization, a suggestive allegory afoot. It is more than a simple statement of the transcendental, transformative (not merely additive or even multiplicative) nature of the esthetic experience. Also, like any good joke, and like a good artwork, the effect lies partly in the form, in the way conscious realization takes place.

Like Veronese's painting, the story of the wedding at Cana has a kind of "aha" moment, a moment where the viewer/hearer, lost in the crowd, at last finds his or her bearings. For me it is the moment where the wedding guest remarks "Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine; and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse: but thou hast kept the good wine until now."

This "punch line" is what Vygotsky really means when he offers us, near the end of the book, the rather disappointing explanatory term of "catharsis". "Catharsis" is a tired, thin term, weary from millennia of Herculean labors in the Augean stables of Aristotle's *Poetics* and worn threadbare in Freud's work on jokes when we at last encounter it. But then Vygotsky transforms it into something new, intoxicating, and, as a consequence, rather oddly named.

CHAPTER ONE: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEM OF ART

Careful readers of Vygotsky's first chapter will notice its affinity, not only with the first problem/method chapter of *Thinking and Speech* but even more strikingly with the essay *The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology*, written more contemporaneously. We find ourselves in a field divided between a subjectivist "esthetics from above", an esthetics of introspection and speculation based on Neo-Kantian German idealism, and an objectivist "esthetics from below", an esthetics of trivial pursuit concerning the peripheral circumstances of art, based on biographies of the great artists and an extremely crude sort of behaviorism directed at the consumer of art. Between the metaphysical approach from above and the vulgar materialist emergence from below a single front-line divides the battlefield, and the name of that battle front is psychology.

Looking to Marxism, Vygotsky finds that "(i)nstead of the old antagonism, we now find some harmony between the psychological and anti-psychological trends in esthetics," he writes. "There is also a more precise demarcation between them on the basis of Marxist sociology." Art, we learn, is a form of ideology (though we must keep in mind that Vygotsky uses the term "ideology" to mean, quite literally, the production and transmission of ideas). What, Vygotsky asks, marks out art as a distinct form of ideology that differs from other ideological forms? It is the kind of ideas that are being produced and transmitted: "Art systematizes a very special sphere in the psyche of social man—his emotions (p. 13)."

Vygotsky next gives us the well stratified vision of base and superstructure articulated by Plekhanov, the founder of Russian Marxism and the pre-eminent Marxist theoretician of his day. Plekhanov's world resembles nothing so much as the ancient Hindu, and later Buddhist, view of the world seated on the back of four elephants, resting on a turtle, which rests, perhaps, on the back of another turtle. Everybody has heard this description knows the punch line: a physicist asks what the other turtle is standing on, and a crotchety old Indian lady says "You are a very clever young man, Young Man, but it's turtles all the way down!"

For Plekhanov, the ideologies of any epoch are expressions of the social psychology of the period. This "social psyche of man" is in turn determined by the extant sociopolitical regime, as defined by the economic conditions (the relations of production), which rest, ultimately, upon the forces of production (which rest, in turn, on the biological endowment bequeathed to us by our evolutionary ancestors, such as

elephants and turtles).



(A Buddhist Thangka of Mount Meru resting on the backs of turtles, showing the stratified sociopolitical, cultural and economic bedrock of any ideology.)

All this seems to Vygotsky very propitious for his task of replacing the opposition between “esthetics from above” and “aesthetics from below” with an *alliance* between an approach from above “in the spirit of historical materialism” and an approach from below embodied by a newly emergent “social psychology”.

“The sociological system, the philosophy of historical materialism, is of course not likely to explain anything on the basis of human psyche as the ultimate cause. But it is also not likely to reject or ignore the psyche and the significance of its study as an auxiliary mechanism, which, together with economic relationships and sociopolitical regimes, generates ideologies. (p. 12)”

Vygotsky then makes an argument which will seem extremely peculiar, anti-Marxist and even dangerous to anyone whose view of Marxist esthetics has been dimmed by decades of Stalinist “socialist realism”. The distance from “the state of the productive forces” at the very base of man’s ideological life to the “various ideologies reflecting the properties of (social) psyche” (including art) is not constant; the number of turtles is not always the same. Specifically, the more we approach the modern era, the less art can be explained by appealing to economics. So bourgeois art is not nearly as bourgeois,

ideologically, as feudal art was feudal.

There was nothing peculiar about this argument at the time. In fact, this *was* the mainstream Marxist argument. Plekhanov says that the dances of Australian aborigines are almost always directly connected with the themes of economic production (hunting and gathering) in a way that is simply not true for the eighteenth century minuet. As man frees himself from the immediate and direct influence of his environment, the economic factor in artistic production necessarily yields to a psychological factor.

This passage and others like it have been interpreted as saying that in some important sense Vygotsky believes that the art of aborigines is somehow inferior or lower or at any rate not so much a psychological phenomenon as an economic phenomenon. I think that there are three things we really ought to keep in mind, though.

First of all, it's a quotation: these are not Vygotsky's words but those of Plekhanov. In general, when Vygotsky uses direct quotation, it is rarely a sign of complete agreement; Vygotsky hardly ever seems to feel that somebody else has expressed a thought better than he could have done (even Marx, as we shall see, gets a paraphrase).

Secondly, Plekhanov is talking about how much and what kind of background knowledge we need to understand a particular artwork. In the case of the Australian aborigines, we need to know something about women gathering plants. But in the case of the non-productive classes of eighteenth century France, this information is useless, and so we resort to explanations that are more obviously psychological and less obviously economic.

Thirdly, our own society may also be counted amongst the lower strata, for the "lower" strata of this differentiation do not disappear. Just as biological evolution results in a wide variety of species, economic differentiation results in a wide variety of art forms, some of which clearly are still linked in a fairly direct way to economic production, and others less so. But who will argue that the industrial novels of Dickens or Gaskell are in some way "inferior" to their domestic fiction on that basis?



David Kellogg, Farmers Work Hard, and I Will Work Hard Too (1999)

Turning from Marxist esthetics to the social psychological strand in the proposed “new alliance between esthetics from above and esthetics from below”, Vygotsky is much less happy with what he sees. Now psychology itself is split down the middle. There is the psychology “from above” of Freud and the psychology “from below” of Pavlov. So once again we have an irreconcilable opposition in need of the kind of unstoppable synthesizing force that lies beyond both extremes, a synthesizing force that only an outflanking, overleaping unity of opposites can provide.

Vygotsky will eventually provide this force, an objective, *cultural-historical* psychology based on the ideological artifact rather than the Freudian “creative drive” or the reflexological “esthetic reaction”. But this cultural-historical psychology has yet to come into existence. First, there are many incisive distinctions which need to be made: the surgical separation of social psychology from Wundt’s “*Volkerpsychologie*”, and the amputation of Bekhterev’s “collective” psychology. Finally, Vygotsky wants to annex the whole of individual psychology to his now purified “social psychology” and provide an objective, empirical basis for it.

As we all know, Wundt divided psychology into “social psychology” (that is *Volkerpsychologie*, the psychology of whole peoples) and an individual, empirical psychology. Vygotsky rejects this distinction altogether; for Vygotsky the individual

comes to psychology fully socialized, and the proper study of social psychology is precisely the study of the individual psychologies which are its concrete realization. What Wundt was studying, under the rubric of social psychology, was not psychology at all but rather the various forms of ideologies, one of which was, of course, art. So Wundt's "social psychology" is really what Vygotsky refers to as "collective psychology". For Vygotsky, the psychology of artistic creativity is an individual psychology, but for precisely that reason it is a social, cultural, and historical psychology.

When the Arkhangel fisherman recreates a "*bylina*" (a folk epic) by changing, cutting, and expanding parts according to the limits and capabilities of his memory and imagination, his creativity differs only quantitatively from Pushkin, drawing variously on the resources of the epistolary novel and the humorous bar-room ditty in composing *Eugene Onegin* (p. 16). This is very far from an elitist view of art.

It is also very hard from a view of the mind that places a heavy premium on the development of volition. Creativity is not simply aleatory error in reproducing a particular genre; creativity is systematic and *deliberate* error which engenders a new genre or at least a new subgenre. To Adorno, the poet deliberately cutting and redrafting appears to be engaged in a very different process from the folksinger who forgets and has to reconstruct. Adorno hated jazz, precisely because he found it indifferent to mistakes of any kind (1991: 71).

But Adorno is wrong about jazz; it is in no way invariant to errors in rhythm or key, and the few musicians who appear to be so (e.g. Coltrane at his zaniest) are unquestionably engaging in deliberate error. Chinese painting has a much higher aleatory (accidental) component than oil painting, but the end result and even the process is much the same: the Chinese painter simply wastes a lot more paper, and the oil painter who is careful to destroy all preliminary drawings, is able to cover up mistakes a little better (or at least he was until we started X-raying the work of Caravaggio). So perhaps Vygotsky is right about the *bylina* too: the Arkhangel fishermen differ from Pushkin in number but not in kind. The combination of speech genres which we invariably find in folk art is a volitional and even highly analytical activity.

In the twentieth century in Europe, a number of studies by Parry and Lord, translators of Homer, attempted to infer the history of *the Iliad* and *the Odyssey* through studies of

Yugoslavian folk singers (Knox, 1996: 19). Similar studies have been done in China on the apparently miraculous singing of the *Song of King Gesar*, the longest known poem in any language, by peasant girls who are essentially illiterate and certainly not fluent in the eighth century Tibetan in which the poem must be performed.

In both cases, there is, on the one hand, a synthesis of many different traditional tales, often from completely different speech genres, which hardly suggests a nonanalytic approach to sources. On the other, there are clear signs of deliberate revision, expansion, and innovation, as indeed we find in Homer. Homer did not simply recall and recount; he wrote.



(Aleatory painting by Chen Rong, Song Dynasty China. The aleatory painters would mix ink and wine, and then spit it on the paper, adding details like this.)

The psychology of art is precisely and very specifically a psychology of social man, but it is a “differential” psychology of social man, that is, a psychology that must constantly study individual differences. We are, therefore, uninterested in what Bekhterev describes as “clarifying how social products of a correlative activity are obtained by the correlation between single individuals in social groups and by smoothing away their individual differences” (p. 17).

This is as true when we are studying the reception of art as it is when we are studying its creation. The esthetic response is a response, and not a reflex; it cannot be modeled

as a Galton photograph (similarly, in *Thinking and Speech*, the child's concept is a work of art in progress, and cannot be understood as a process of compiling photographic images, or smoothing away correlations).

Vygotsky associates this collective psychology with historical esthetics (e.g. trends in mass taste) and not with normative esthetics (e.g. individual standards of judgment). So "collective psychology" might be something like the concepts expressed by speech communities, in the poetics and the prosaics of their everyday languages as well as in their literature (e.g. Isak Shpilrein's "Language of the Red Army Soldier" which was just then being researched in the Institute for Psychotechnics at the University of Moscow [Brandist and Chown, 2010: 151-168]).

Vygotsky is looking for something that is simultaneously more universal and more particular than "collective psychology", and yet still historical and sociocultural rather than narrowly biological (the brain of the "genius") or individual (the biography of the poet, including his childhood traumas). Vygotsky easily finds his bearings in verbal art, where the very medium of art connects the artist to the historical and cultural endowment by a hundred threads and a thousand strands.

That verbal artistic medium is thus, necessarily, a many-stranded thing. Verbal art is not simply an art of meanings, like law or religious scripture, it is also an art of sound, like music. In fact, there are art critics who would probably like to reduce it to the art of sound. So, on p. 19, Vygotsky takes Grigoriev to task for assuming that there is a natural normative link between trochaic (DA-da) stress and "cheerful, dancing" moods.

CLOUDS	are	RAC-	ing	CLOUDS	are	WHIRL-	ing
DA-	da	DA-	da	DA-	da	DA-	da

Actually, in English, trochaic stress works rather differently; because our vocabulary has a GERMANIC (DA-da) root and a LATINATE (da-DA) one, the trochee sounds primal, brute, and male:

TI-ger, TI-ger, BURN-ing BRIGHT
DA-da DA-da DA-da DA!

And the iamb has a much more refined, humane, and female tone:

I ASK thee FOR a CON-stant LOVE
da-DA da-DA da-DA da-DA...

But Grigoriev says that to use a trochee to express a solemn mood (as we often do in English) is like sculpting a black man out of white marble. Vygotsky says caustically that it is a “witty” remark, or half-witty at any rate: “(o)nly a bad sculptor would paint a white marble statue of a Negro black, and only a bad psychologist would decree trochaic verses to be fit for expressing only cheerful, dancing moods (p. 20). ”

Vygotsky concludes from the facts of cultural variation that “*Volkerpsychologie*” and “collective reflexology” are simply overgrowths to be cut off from a psychology capable of explaining the universality of the esthetic response. So when Vygotsky approaches the distinction between “subjective” and “objective” psychology on p. 18, we may be forgiven for expecting him to employ exactly the same radical surgery that he proposes in *The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology* (1997a). Sure enough, on p. 19 he identifies subjectivism and introspectionism with “pure Bergsonianism” and objective psychology with American behaviorism, German Gestalt psychology, reflexology, and Marxism, trends with which, at the time, Vygotsky was more or less in sympathy.

But here, instead of simply excising the former and embracing the latter, Vygotsky demands a much more precise delineation of the object of investigation. It is already clear to him that most of what behaviorist psychology has to say about art is simply the result of studying behaviors that are easy to quantify. Not everything that can be counted really counts.

By now it is equally clear to Vygotsky that Marxist sociology by itself cannot explain how a given artwork works, and his authority here is none other than Marx himself. For Marx, the mystery of Homer was not uncovering what Homer meant to men of his own age; that had been handled pretty well by Homer himself, who is quite careful about explaining and contextualizing the lives of his characters (See “Odysseus’ Scar” in Auerbach, 1968).

The mystery, says Marx, is explaining how this mish-mash of pirate plunder-fests, just-so stories, and old wives’ tales could still mean anything to us, long after their gods had lost their magical powers, their mores had lost their authority, their very

limited knowledge of science had lost its explanatory force and the social circumstances to which the events refer had completely disappeared (*Grundrisse*, Chapter One, Section Four).

Precisely because the social conditions are part of the explanatory framework, they must be excluded from the object of investigation, else the explanation will become tautological: social conditions outside the artwork are what explain the social conditions we find within it. The social conditions of the artist and his audience, are not the object of investigation for psychology; they belong to art history and sociology, not esthetics.

Perhaps, then, the pleasure conferred by artwork is the proper object of study? Not so. Vygotsky says that, as often as not, pleasure and critical appreciation are byproducts and afterthoughts, in no way essential to the experience. In “The role of play in development”, Chapter Seven of *Mind in Society*, Vygotsky makes a very similar argument about whether or not the child “enjoys” running in a race; kids may experience extreme displeasure at losing, and even pain and suffering when they win, but neither displeasure nor pain diminishes the essential subjective experience of the race or impinges on its essential nature as an objective event. Children do not take part in races to experience pleasure, but in order to win, and races exist regardless of whether or not kids enjoy them.

Esthetic pleasure may not even be representative of esthetic experience. Vygotsky says that verbalized responses and conscious judgments may only be entered into evidence with caution, because the conscious state of a person undergoing an esthetic experience is quite different from the conscious state of a person reporting that experience. Artists and audiences are notoriously prone to false consciousness, such as, for example, a sense of the overwhelming importance of the writerly point of view or readerly point of view.

Vygotsky proposes instead that “the work of art, rather than its creator or its audience, should be taken as the basis for analysis (p. 23)”. He admits that this is an unusual proposition, since a work of art does not really have a mind and cannot therefore itself be the object of psychological study. But he points out that all history, and even jurisprudence (both subjects he had recently studied in college) proceed indirectly, by examining artifacts and taking testimonies “with a grain of salt”.

The same indirect procedure of inference from artifacts, he argues, can be used to establish the way an artwork and even a genre “thinks” and the way that we think with genres. “Here is the formula of this method,” he writes. “From the form of the work of art via the functional analysis of its elements and structure, recreate the esthetic reaction (sic) and establish its general laws”.

The use of the word “reaction” suggests, of course, “reactology”, the cod-behaviorist technique which Kornilov was promoting at the time. But Vygotsky’s use of “reaction” has something of the ancient (or perhaps not-so-ancient!) Jewish legend of the Golem about it. The Golem is a dead thing which has been reanimated, usually by affixing a piece of Jewish scripture. So too Vygotsky has a tendency to bring to life words that are intellectually dead in the hands of others, by affixing his own meanings to them.

Mahler and Strauss admired, but did not seek to acquire, each other’s enormous talents, and Strauss remarked that they were tunneling different sides of the same mountain. In some of their works (e.g. Strauss’s “Eine Alpensinfonie” and Mahler’s lieder) the tunnels appear to meet, and in others they miss each other entirely (e.g. Strauss’s operatic work, and Mahler’s more grandiose symphonic works). In a strange and devious way, Vygotsky’s Golem of “reaction” is tunneling towards the Bakhtinian concept of answerability (Bakhtin, 1990). Perhaps “response” would be a better translation?

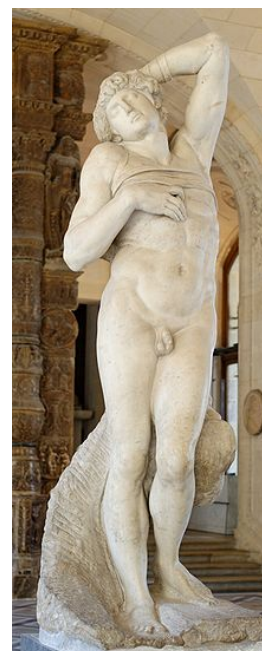


The Rabbi of Prague creates a Golem out of the mud of the Vltava River and brings it to life by inscribing the word “emet” (truth) on its forehead. To kill the monster, he has only to erase the first letter, turning “emet” into “met” (dead). Mikolas Ales (1899).

Part 2. Critiques from Within: Art as Apperception, Art as Technique, Art as Psychopathology

CRITIQUES FROM WITHIN

Michelangelo created the figure of “The Dying Slave” from a motif taken from an anonymous Roman statue, “The Dying Gaul”. But there are (at least) three senses in which his statue is a critique of the earlier one. First of all, Michelangelo stands the figure vertically, which gives us a much stronger sense of the mass and height of the figure...the distance he will fall. Secondly, he uses “estrangement”: the “non-finito” marble base includes a barely discernible “ape” clutching the left shin, a device which stood for “aping” or mimesis. Thirdly, he introduces allegorical meanings. For example, he heavily eroticizes the figure (“die” is often used as a euphemism for orgasm in Renaissance poetry). He also made a companion piece called “The Rebellious Slave”.



Vygotsky too is going to upend his predecessors, expose what their edifices are made of, and create his own rebellious theory. But he begins this section by favorably contrasting all three of theories he examines here (“Art as Perception”, “Art as Technique” and “Art and Psychoanalysis”) with eclectic, piecemeal approaches. All three theories are systematic and fully worked out, and all three represent “objective analytic” methods of the type he demanded in the first chapter.

Now it’s tempting to ignore what this completeness and finality really implies and begin by saying that each represents a partial truth awaiting a synthesis. For example, we might try to associate each method with some particular explanatory strand (e.g. reader, text, author) and then try to braid them together.

We might recall that at the time it was traditional to divide an artwork into a triad of “material”, “form”, and “content” (rather than, as today, the dyad of form and content). For example, the white marble would be material, Michelangelo’s “non finito” style would be the form, and the motif of “The Dying Slave” would be the content. We could, with a bit of stretch, suggest that the notion of art as perception corresponds to perceiving the material, art as technique corresponds to appreciating the form, and art

as psychoanalysis involves interpreting the content.

Vygotsky himself speaks of the possibility comparing the outcomes (the “facts” and the “rules”) of various eclectic studies done with his own. But he also says that to do that would assume that we have the outcome of his own study in hand and he has not even worked out the method yet. Besides, the three theories he has chosen are not eclectic studies; they are fully worked out methods with coherent methodologies. Vygotsky’s real goal here is not to compare his results with those obtained by others, and then add on something new, or to “create a research space” by establishing what other methods have not done.

The real purpose of this part of the book is methodological. By examining each theory and finding out precisely where that theory is lacking, we will create a much clearer idea of what a successful theory has to do. This is particularly true if we examine the theories historically, for in history each theory must in some way make up for the *lacunae* of the previous theory and in turn reveal new lacks to be made up for by the next one.

So Vygotsky intends a methodical taking out of methodological garbage. To do this, he plans a set of three immanent critiques, where he takes on a particular method, follows its assumptions to their logical conclusions, largely through the use of long quotations—and largely rejects their results. He is interested not so much in establishing outcomes (“facts” and “results”) as in examining assumptions, and in the end he will take each method as a cautionary tale, a negative example of how not to set out and where not to go.

CHAPTER TWO: ART AS APPERCEPTION

Perhaps the title “art as perception” will be momentarily misleading, at least to those of us who consider perception synonymous with the five senses. It doesn’t help us very much to add a syllable as I have done, and say that what is really talked about is “apperception”, or verbal perception or “apprehension” of an art object as opposed to a direct glimpse or a prehensile grasp.

But it does help us when Vygotsky, on p. 30, cites the great Prussian educator von Humboldt and the now obscure Russian linguist Potebnia (“*Thought and Language*”) as

the forerunners of this trend. It helps even more when Vygotsky adds that “art as perception” is a theory which “approaches the widely held theory that comes to us from antiquity according to which art is the perception of wisdom and teaching and instruction are its main tasks”.

Following on from von Humboldt and Potebnia, we are given as exemplars the exponents of Russian symbolism, the literary movement which gives us Khlebnikov, Andrei Byely, and V.V. Ivanov (who wrote a big-hearted, loving commentary to this volume, despite the many criticisms directed against himself and his followers). Let us add one voice more, that of Joseph Conrad. In “The Task of the Artist”, he says:

“My task, which I am trying to achieve, is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is before all, to make you see. That—and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts, encouragement, consolation, fear, charm—all you demand—and perhaps also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.” (Norton Anthology of English Literature, 7th Edition, Vol. 2, p. 1955)

That reads like a fairly well worked out manifesto, to which almost all of the people on our list, from von Humboldt to Ivanov, would subscribe. It does contrast favorably with an eclectic approach based on disparate psychological studies, it does sound like a coherent artistic programme, and above all it has the ring of an objective, analytical method focused on the artwork itself. So it appears that what is meant by “art as perception” is something like “art as speech perception” or “art as symbol perception”. And in fact we soon learn that this approach to art is perversely logocentric, treating music, paintings and sculpture by analogy with the word.

The Russian symbolists held that the word “neither represents nor expresses, but signifies” (Mevedev/Bakhtin, 1978: 57). But to understand what this means we will indeed need the threefold distinction between “outer form”, “inner form” and “content”, which Vygotsky lays out on pp. 30–31. Later, in *Thinking and Speech*, he associates the “outer form” with what he calls the phasal characteristics of language (we may think of them as the horizontal dimension, that is, the succession of sounds and words and sentences). The “inner form” is what he calls “sense”, that is, the long chain of associations that accrue to a word down through trillions of uses in history and hundreds of thousands of uses in the lifetime of the individual (we may think of this as

the temporal dimension). Only a small area of “sense” forms its abstract, decontextualized, universally accepted present day “signification” or “content” (which we may think of as the vertical dimension).

Vygotsky suggests on p. 39 that sometimes a “theory is best evaluated by means of (...) extreme conclusions, concerned with entirely a different field, which make it possible to verify its laws by using facts of a completely different category.” The curious thing is that Potebnia’s triumvirate, although it is based on his philology, seems to work rather better for Michelangelo’s marbles than for artwork made of words.

With marble, we can distinguish pretty easily between material, style (form), and content (meaning). Sure enough, Michelangelo did actually refer to his blocks of white marble as “meat” and to the act of carving as an act of releasing an “inner form”. And of course Michelangelo does make us see right through white marble material to the unfinished figure, makes us feel the weight of his body if not the color, which in turn signifies the glimpse of truth we forgot to ask for.

But how can we maintain this threefold distinction between “material”, “form”, and “content” in a work of verbal art made of words? Ovsianko–Kulikovsky employs a kind of “*Gedankenexperiment*” (a “thought experiment” rather than an actual laboratory study) that William James often employs, similar to the procedure that Descartes and Avicenna both attempted when they mentally abstracted away all of the sensations of man to try to determine if there was anything like consciousness left. James tried to mentally strip a given emotional experience of all the physiological trappings of emotion, and opined (rather dubiously) that there would be no emotional content either: without tears, there would be no sadness.

So we are told by Ovsianko–Kulikovsky to imagine Homer’s account of the scene in the Iliad, where Hector says farewell to Andromache and to his infant son (our poor translator seems to think that Homer wrote a play called *Andromache*). The “outer form” is that of the elaborate Greek hexameters that Homer uses to tell the tale, accompanied on a cithara, or a lyre. We simply abstract this “lyricism” away; this is easy enough to do, particularly if you don’t know any ancient Greek. The inner form is the emotion we feel for Hector, knowing full well that he will die at the hand of Achilles, that his wife will be raped and sold into slavery, and his infant son flung living from the walls of burning Troy.

Now we can see the distinction between “outer form” and “inner form” very clearly, (although the exact border might be a little obscure for us if we know enough Greek to really hear, feel, and see how Hector speaks through the hexameters). But what about “signification”? Does the scene signify something quite beyond the effect of the hexameters and the emotion we feel when we empathize with Hector?

It does not. On p. 39, Vygotsky points out that Greek social ideology has entirely lost all of its ability to act as a signifier (and he suggests somewhat unkindly that Russian symbolism has as well)! On the other hand, as Vygotsky (and Marx) pointed out, there seems to be some element of the psychology of art that is practically eternal (p. 41).

It is not in the hexameters and the lyre; you had to be there for that. It ought, by the theory of perception, to be in the “signification”, the synopsis, the paraphraseable plot, since this is the most stable and lasting, conventionalized zone of “inner form”. But is it? Why does Thomas Bullfinch’s *Mythology* produce such a very different effect than Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*? Why does Lamb’s “Tales from Shakespeare” actually feel so much more DATED than the original?



On the left hand side is Hamilton’s period painting, “Hector’s farewell to Andromache”, done in 1760, at the height of the original Neo-classical period sweeping Europe (see the obligatory architecture in the background). On the right is a de Chirico version of the same scene, Hector and Andromache, done in 1917. Notice the similarity in Hector’s posture. There does appear to be something which connects the two paintings, and even connects both paintings to a folk epic nearly three thousand years old. But we are hard put to say that it is “inner form” or “outer form”, and it is certainly not material in any physical sense of the word.

Perhaps it is simply the echo of history? Vygotsky demands that the *Gedankenexperiment* on Homer be replicated using *Anna Karenina*, by a then living writer. What would the paraphrase of *Anna Karenina* look like, and most important, how would it make us feel and see? As it happens, this is really no longer a *Gedankenexperiment*. Simplified readers are widely available for English learners.

But take the scene where Anna is traveling to the train station (to kill herself, but she does not know that yet). She imagines that everybody is talking about her or talking for her benefit one minute, and then she imagines they are all trying to annoy her; the horizon seems to revolve about her head in a thorny, tightening crown of ill will. Nobody can read this in paraphrase and imagine they are seeing and hearing and feeling what the original intended, still less that they are glimpsing the truth for which readers of the original have forgotten to ask.

Tolstoy says that *Anna Karenina* is made of sense and not meanings; a true paraphrase of *Anna Karenina* would have to be identical, word for word, to the original. Paraphrase can only be tautological: "I have said what I have said". Potebnia and the symbolists suggest that Tolstoy did not say what he said but rather something else (p. 40), and that something else has to be audible, palpable, and perceptible. It should, then, be paraphrasable, like Homer without the hexameters.

Vygotsky finds at least three good reasons to doubt this. First of all, this theory requires that art works should be redundant. That is implicit in the idea that an artwork is a representation, an image that redounds and reduplicates some other form of human experience. Vygotsky suggests that if artworks are only perceptible images, then they pursue the same basic goals as scientific representations by slightly different methods. But as Vygotsky points out (p. 43), the Würzburg school demonstrates that even intellectualistic thinking processes cannot be conceived as a stream of images; even by its own terms, the theory does not stand up.

Secondly, this theory requires that art should be intellectualistic. Art, like any other form of the interpretation of symbols, is "pure brainwork" (p. 33), a matter of converting materials into content. The emotion of form, the lyricism of the work, is really a kind of unnecessary byproduct, which we can dispose of through paraphrase if it keeps getting in the way. But studies which attempt this, Vygotsky points out on p. 49, end up

producing a rather warped and distorted social history rather than an esthetic understanding.

Thirdly, the theory requires that the consumption of art be passive. “The (...) parasitic enjoyment of exploiting somebody else’s labor free of charge is the source of artistic enjoyment,” he writes. “All the enjoyment we experience in reading Othello comes from the pleasant use of somebody else’s work and from the exploitation without expense of someone else’s artistic creativity.” (p. 32). Of course, part of the bile he is expressing here is his contempt and loathing for associationistic psychology and the lazy “Galton Photograph” method of concept formation he will later criticize to such devastating effect in *Thinking and Speech*.

In the conclusion of this chapter, Vygotsky points out that the logical outcome of the theory of apperception is to enshrine typicality rather than encourage insight into the “truth for which we have forgotten to ask”. If art is perception, then the true ideal to man has been striving throughout tens of thousands of years of art history appears as the flickering superimposition of hundreds of images per second on a glass screen.

No, we must begin by saying that a fully realized artwork is not a commodity, not the esthetic “concept” created by the “collective reflexology” of the mass market, not a mechanically derived typicality created like a Galton photograph, by superimposing different images, splitting the differences, and taking the lowest common denominator. We must begin, he says, with the ineffable *feeling* created by a specific artistic form.

Consider this painting, “Tierack Samsara, or Broken on the Wheel of the Knot of Eternal Suffering” which I did in 1995 when the “cynical realist” movement was sweeping the art world in China (and I felt both insufficiently cynical and insufficiently realist to be swept up by it). It’s a rather crowded version of the “Wheel of Life” paintings found in Tibetan temples. Instead of a transparent images superimposed like a stack of turtles, the universe appears as a great washing machine: textiles produced in my wife’s hometown of Xi’an are fashioned into socks and ties and exported to the UK. Re-exported as used clothing, they are burned on the docks at Shanghai. China was undergoing an AIDS panic and used clothing were briefly considered to be a source of contagion, before it was discovered that the real roots of the crisis lay in the rapid spread of the sex trade, drug dealing, and blood selling, all encouraged by the government’s liberal economic reforms.



CHAPTER THREE: ART AS TECHNIQUE

We said at the beginning of the three critiques that they could not be braided together into a single three stranded rope, and that Vygotsky's purposes in this section really have much more to do with cutting through the theories under discussion than in attempting to join them. Yet the three theories are historically linked; each one solves problems which the previous one cannot, as well as leaving problems unsolved for the next.

We saw in the last chapter that what was missing from the "perceptualist" account was the ineffable emotion created by the inner form. Paradoxically, it is this and not the material or the paraphraseable "content" of an artwork which tends to the immortal; it is this which defies the temporal dependency of social ideology upon the many turtles of sociopolitical regimes, economic systems and relations of production that Plekhanov theorized.

Formalism clearly does supply the specific moment of form as the starting point that Vygotsky demanded. In formalism, art is neither redundant, nor purely intellectualistic,

nor vulgar and typical. And Vygotsky does say that the new approach greatly expands the concept of form from a psychological viewpoint, replacing the “perceptualist” notion of form as merely the empirical, outward surface of things with a much more psychological concept, the process of artistic creation itself (53).

So, as Vygotsky says, “it was very tempting to conclude that the entire effect of a work of art is due exclusively to its form” and to counterpose this to the perishable “material” (pp. 32–33). This was particularly tempting in the intellectual climate of the early twentieth century: as Volosinov points out in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, the intellectual pendulum was swinging against romantic individualistic subjectivist idea that language is always and everywhere personal and creative and towards trends that he calls “abstract objectivism” (Volosinov, 1973).

Saussure had launched the great project of structuralism, a view of language as a synchronic system quite frozen in time, a flashbulb moment standing above the laws of historical development and beyond the reach of individual creativity. T.S. Eliot was arguing for an impersonal tradition to which each individual poet has to surrender the way that a good Catholic submits to his church. Wölfflin was trying to write an art history entirely without names. Art was to be reduced to a set of techniques that were discovered rather than invented, the way that the technique for tying a shoelace seems to stand quite outside human consciousness and even outside human culture, an affordance offered by the shoelace itself rather than by the cultural practice of wearing shoes.

History itself was providing the kind of extreme conclusions that Vygotsky considers the test of a good theory. Within Russia, the symbolist movement had split (around 1910) into the futurists (close to Mayakovsky and the Bolshevik party) and the acmeists including Anna Akhmatova, her husband Gumilev (cited in *Thinking and Speech*, Chapter Seven) and Vygotsky’s friend Osip Mandelstam (also cited).

The key issue appears to have been the nature of word meaning. For the symbolists, as we’ve seen, the word is largely a sign standing for something else. The acmeists, in the name of “beautiful clarity”, acmeists demanded a return to images. They chose the name “acmeist” to emphasize the “acme” of human experience, namely Hellenism!

“Hellenism means consciously surrounding man with utensils (utvar) instead of

indifferent objects; the metamorphosis of these objects into the utensil, the humanization of the surrounding world; the environment heated with the most delicate teleological warmth. Hellenism is any stove near which a man sits, prizing its warmth as something related to his own inner warmth.”

Accordingly, acmeists rejected the mechanistic vision of things suggested by symbolism and futurism.

“Man’s domestic eye had no place to relax, nothing on which to rest. All utensils were in revolt. The broom asked holiday, the cooking pot no longer wanted to cook, but demanded for itself an absolute significance (as if cooking were not an absolute significance). They had driven the master from his home and he no longer dared to enter there.” (Mandelstam, 1977: 76).

Above all, acmeists asked that the “inner form”, the ineffable sense, of words should be restored to their place in poetry.

“How is it to be then with the attachment of the word to its denotative significance? Isn’t this a kind of bondage that resembles serfdom? But the word is not a thing. Its significance is not the equivalent of a translation of itself.” (Mandelstam, 1977: 76)

Why is Vygotsky so very critical of Russian formalism, since it produced a movement so clearly congenial to his views on tools and signs? There are (at least) three reasons, and they are all good ones.

The first reason is probably that Vygotsky shares at least some of the criticisms that his acmeist friends were making of the more mainstream formalists, the futurists and symbolists. The empirical results of formalism, brought forward with much fanfare by the futurists, have been either meagre or in flagrant contradiction to the original theoretical principles.

After the “abolition” of rhythm in the futurist manifesto, Pasternak raised it to new heights, and after the “abolition” of punctuation, Mayakovsky introduced a proliferation of dashes. Although futurists objected to both “sense” and “meaning”, Mayakovsky wrote dazzlingly effective advertisements in verse for Soviet agricultural products (p.62). All in all, Vygotsky finds that what is new in futurism is not particularly good

(e.g. the attribution of ideological meanings to phonemes, discussed on p. 67) and what is good is not particularly new (e.g. Mayakovsky's work on tragic love). Lincoln Steffens famously remarked, on his first visit to Lenin's Russia, that he had seen the future, and it worked. Verily, Vygotsky has seen futurism, and it does not work.

Secondly, as Vygotsky points out, formalism is a profoundly "anti-psychological" doctrine. Human thoughts and human feelings are to be treated as just so much material on which technique operates, and not part of technique itself. In this sense, formalism is very much a throwback to the great split between "aesthetics from above" and "aesthetics from below". The formalist idea is that the essence of art is external to human psyche and objective; form consists merely of ratios, of relationships between materials, rather like a recent cooking book which eschews recipes in favor of mathematical ratios between ingredients. For Vygotsky, art can be perfectly objective without being external to the human psyche at all, because the human psyche itself is always and at every point embedded in objective social conditions. Vygotsky cites Köhler's experiments on chickens, who can distinguish between gray and grayer, and then between grayer and grayest, to show that there is nothing inherently esthetic about ratios when they are independent of human psychology (60). How, Vygotsky asks, can we take seriously the process of artistic creation newly included in the notion of form without some psychological understanding of what makes a stone "stony" and how Hamlet's hesitation in killing the king creates tragedy, as opposed to simple farce?

Thirdly, the formalists cannot really answer the simple question of what "technique" is a technique for (56). In theory, the purpose of technique is the transformation of materials. But for the formalist, material is immaterial: "The formalists assume that material is of no importance in art and that a poem on the destruction of the world and a poem about a cat or a stone are identical from the point of view of their poetic effect (57)." Lear's inability to recognize Kent serves no actual story-telling purpose; it is only there to realize a particular technique, namely "deceleration" (Shklovsky, 1990: 37). The "non finito" use of apparently uncut marble around the base of the "Dying Slave" and the unfinished monkey which can barely be discerned grasping the left shin are not there to influence the perception of the observer and make the stone feel stony, because that would involve us in a psychological explanation; it is simply done to realize the technique of "estrangement" (that is, alienation from the sculpture as figure, realization of the sculpture as sculpture). There is, therefore, a kind of materials-blindness in this theory that is quite reminiscent of the tone-deaf form-blindness of the old

“perceptualist” school. Technique is not the subordination of materials to content, but simply the subordination of materials to technique.

If the material is fundamentally of no importance, why does technique bother to transform it? The formalist answer, strangely enough, appears to be the trite old cliché of art for art’s sake. Technique, hedonistically, pleases itself. In his chapter on esthetic education in *Educational Psychology*, Vygotsky argues that hedonism, or “art appreciation”, is hardly a more worthwhile pedagogical goal than babysitting or entertainment. In any case, “art appreciation” is a very poor competitor to real play in a child’s eyes.

Here, Vygotsky points out indignantly that the goal of “art for art’s sake” simply takes us right back to Kant (63) for whom “beautiful is what we like, irrespective of its meaning”. Vygotsky is no puritan, but like Tolstoy he is perfectly appalled by the idea that art, like pornography, serves no other purpose than pleasure. As Adorno remarks, the bourgeoisie would like art to be voluptuous and life to be austere, but we would all be far happier with things the other way around (1997: 13).

CHAPTER FOUR: ART AS PSYCHOPATHOLOGY

Vygotsky begins with the remark that if we have learned one thing from Chapter Two and Chapter Three it is that “we are not likely to find a solution to the fundamental problems of the psychology of art if we confine ourselves to analyzing processes that occur only at the conscious level. (71)” Artworks, as we’ve seen, are ineffable, and that means that neither the processes by which they are created nor the emotions which they create are susceptible to verbalization, conscious awareness, and direct study.

They are, however, subject to indirect study, in which verbalizations play a role, and that is precisely the purpose of psychoanalysis as an analytical system. Psychoanalysis, we learn, locates art somewhere between a dream and a pathogenic condition. Freud and Rank liken it to the daydream of a child who cannot play as he or she wishes. They say it is similar in three important respects: the use of painful materials (e.g. violent death, sexual shame, punished crime), the need for disguise and concealment from others (though they note this is more pronounced in art than in play), and their source (the repression of desires).

The psychoanalysts, on the face of it, supply much of what was wanting in the “perceptualist” theory. Their notion of art is not redundant; there is no correlate for art in conscious life. They do not have an intellectualistic view of art which places brainwork before emotion. Nor is their view passive; the artist and the audience have fundamentally the same purpose and the same task: the repression or sublimation of forbidden desires. The psychoanalysts certainly recognize the “emotion of form” which Vygotsky requires as a starting point for an analysis.

Psychoanalysis also represents a step forward with respect to formalism. It is an ostensibly humanistic if not a Hellenistic approach; there is none of the mechanical approach to art concept formation we found with futurism. It cannot be said to be anti-psychological, and there is certainly a major role for materials. Unlike the formalists, who posit that technique pleases itself, the psychoanalysts see two sources of esthetic pleasure in art: first, a “shallow and superficial” bait to entice the artist and the audience to the real task of interfacing the subconscious, and second, the pleasurable revelation of forbidden desire to the subconscious in an esthetic disguise which allows us to deceive the repressive apparatus of the conscious.

We have seen that Vygotsky is not overly fond of theories that place pleasure at the end of art. He notes with some distaste that in addition to the two theorized sources of pleasure, the psychoanalysts offer an eclectic portfolio of diverse perverse pleasures in practice (e.g. the rhythm of poetry as a mimicking of the sexual act, and landscape painting as a release of the Oedipal love for Mother Earth). For Vygotsky, this “pansexualism” is the first of the two main flaws of psychoanalytic theory as applied to art. In the very first chapter, we established that art is a one form of social ideology, the social making and sharing of ideas.

Whether or not we accept the (for Vygotsky, exaggerated) claims that the psychoanalysts make for pansexualism in individual psychology, we must admit that by their own theory of repression sexuality must be excluded from and cannot be made to account for the very diverse forms of social ideology we find in everyday life of which art is one—unless, that is, we make all of conscious social life the plaything of individual subconscious psychological life.

And that is the second of the two main flaws of psychoanalytic theory as applied to art: the reduction of consciousness to a puppet on a string. Vygotsky leafs through, with

deepening disdain, a biography of Dostoevsky which attributes all of his artistic output to an Oedipus complex. But, Vygotsky asks, since Oedipus is theorized to live inside every man without exception, how does it come to pass that artists of Dostoevsky's stature are so exceedingly rare? And why should the earliest traumas in a man's life outweigh the later ones?

“Why should we assume that the conflicts of childhood sexuality and of the child with the father exercise a greater influence on Dostoevsky's life than later traumas, experiences and emotions? Why can't we assume that the experiences of awaiting execution, of forced labor, and so on are the sources of new and complex sensations? (82)”

Vygotsky ends the chapter, as he generally does, with a rise to the concrete and some critical remarks on empirical studies and works inspired by the theory under review. In this case the works include Freud's biography of da Vinci, and here he finds it hard to hide his disgust, both as a psychologist and as an art critic. In the end, he offers psychoanalysis “a practical application” in a future programme of art psychology, but only if it will renounce pansexualism and re-evaluate the role of conscious awareness.

I can understand his annoyance. In my own field, language teaching, Richard Schmidt (1990) has pointed out that language teachers are even more strong in their beliefs about the role of the unconscious than psychiatrists, since they have attributed the whole of first language acquisition and even successful second language acquisition to this mechanism. Schmidt also points out that, like psychiatrists, applied linguists have largely accomplished this misleading attribution of acquisition to unconsciousness by virtue of leaving “consciousness” undefined and amorphous, confusing consciousness as awareness, consciousness as noticing, and consciousness as intentionality.

How might psychoanalysis “re-evaluate” the role of conscious awareness? In Chapter Six of *Thinking and Speech*, Vygotsky remarks that the word “conscious” really means two very different things (“awake” and “aware”). Of course, he says, the child is conscious from a very early age when awake that he or she is not asleep. The child is conscious from a very early age that the child is feeling and even thinking. But although the child knows clearly when he or she is awake, the child is not fully aware of and in conscious control of conceptual thinking processes until much later, so for a long time he or she is partly conscious and partly unconscious concerning his own feelings and

thoughts.

Vygotsky then complains that Freud and Piaget have muddled things up by mixing in a third meaning from psychoanalytic theory, namely the opposite of “subconscious”. This “subconscious”, however, is not the same as the residual unconsciousness concerning his own thought processes, because it comes later and is hollowed out of consciousness by repression.

So Vygotsky then goes on to introduce a *fourth* meaning, the opposite of “non-conscious”:

“(T)here is a large difference between the unconscious and the non-conscious. Non-consciousness is not at all partly unconscious and partly conscious. It does not mean the degree of consciousness but another area of activity of consciousness.”

This meaning is more microgenetic. Yet it is clearly linked to the development of conscious control of thought processes. It is also linked to technique, and in fact Vygotsky ends with the precise example much beloved of formalists, a technique which appears quite separate from individual consciousness and cultural practices, a technology which seems to have been discovered rather than created:

“I make a knot. I do it consciously. I cannot, however, tell you exactly how I did it. My conscious act is unconscious, because my attention is focused on the act of the tying, not on how I do it. Consciousness is always some piece of reality. The object of my consciousness is tying the knot: the knot, and what was happening to it, but not those actions that I make when tying it, not how I do it. However, the object of consciousness can be just that – it can be awareness. Awareness is an act of consciousness, the object of which is itself the very same activity of consciousness. (6.2)”

It is certainly possible to shift the object of consciousness from the knot itself to the tying of the knot, and in fact this is precisely what we do when we learn to tie our shoelaces—or when we hold a pen in our hands for the first time in order to learn how to write, or when we learn a foreign language (p. 57). The process of mastery is, in fact, nothing more and nothing less than the outer expression of this inner analysis of the process, this ascent to volitional control and freedom.

The child's task, in elementary school, is to make the activity of his or her own consciousness the object of awareness. And that, too, is the task of the psychology of art! Vygotsky ends this chapter with an admonition to psychoanalysis: "It will have to understand that art can never be fully explained from the limited viewpoint of one's own life, but requires a wider approach of social life."

And then, uncharacteristically, Vygotsky gathers his thoughts into a slogan: "Art as the subconscious is a problem; art as the social solution for the subconscious is its likely solution." (85). With this rather circular slogan on his lips, and a deep dissatisfaction with extant approaches in his heart, Vygotsky turns to the actual analysis of art works.



This painting, "Lin Zexu, the incorruptible official, burns British opium and ignites the Opium Wars" was my attempt at producing a "cynical realist" image. It was done the year my stepfather died of smoking related esophageal cancer. It is hard for me to find any evidence of Oedipal feelings in this painting, although there are other, later, experiences, of which I was not conscious at the time, that seem omnirelevant now. (1996)

Part 3. Literary Studies: Fable, Short Story, and Tragedy



To the left is the illustration for La Fontaine’s ‘The Grasshopper and the Ant’, by Jean-Baptiste d’Oudry. Notice that the main characters, the ant and the grasshopper, are dwarfed by the lyrical, purely formal, elements of the drawing. (Eighteenth Century) On the right is Jules-Joseph Lefebvre’s painting, “The Grasshopper”, which appeared alongside a quotation from La Fontaine in the 1872 Salon (“And then the cold North wind blew in!”). At the time, it was interpreted as a critique of the improvidence of the Napoleon the Third; now it seems a fairly straightforward illustration of the dangers of not laying in warm clothing for the winter (or even sufficient pubic hair).

These two tensions, the lyrical, purely formal elements of the fable and the illustration of moral maxims, are what preoccupy Vygotsky in his analysis. They are also, in an important sense, matters that still obsess us today. Formalists saw the main tension in art as being between material and form, or even between “outer form” and “inner form” (in the case of poetry). But what is most striking about fables, about the “moral” art of the eighteenth century, and about crime thrillers today is the constant tension between sanctimonious (and often openly cynical) moralizing and sheer, voluptuous pleasure, a tension which may indeed be expressed through form, but only because it exists within content and between particular kinds of content.

THE LITERARY STUDIES

We often think of *The Psychology of Art* as being mostly about *Hamlet*, and of course Vygotsky thought long and deeply about the gloomy Dane and spent some ten years writing, unwriting, and rewriting the final chapter in this section (which as a consequence is easily the most “patchy”, or palimpsestic, of the four chapters here).

But when we look through *Educational Psychology* and Chapter Seven of *Thinking and Speech* we find hardly a mention of *Hamlet*. What we do find, in both works, is quite a few references to Krylov’s fables, and in particular to the Russian version of Aesop’s “The Grasshopper and the Ant”, which is called “The Ant and the Dragonfly”.

Here, in *The Psychology of Art*, we find two whole chapters on the fable, nearly fifty pages. They are almost a book in themselves; one section on the analysis of the genre into prosaic and poetical fables and the second on their re-synthesis in Krylov’s work. Bunin’s short story gets short shrift: about fifteen pages, padded out by including the short story itself. Then we have only thirty pages devoted to *Hamlet*: “His purse is empty already; all’s golden words are spent.” (*Hamlet*, Act V, Sc. II”).

Throughout Vygotsky’s studies there is a restless search for a basic “cell”, a “unit”, a simplest whole containing all of the qualities and characteristics of the phenomenon under investigation. This restless search becomes quite conscious in the first chapter of *Thinking and Speech*, written just before Vygotsky’s death.

Hamlet, as we shall see, is the explanandum, the thing we need to explain; it was, at least in English, the first truly psychological drama, as opposed to the simple horror show on which it was directly based. The hero of *Hamlet* is human consciousness, and the plot is an ultimately Pyrrhic struggle to establish the unity of that consciousness with the object of its activity.

But that means that *Hamlet* cannot be the explanans, what Kozulin calls the explanatory principle (1990: 253). Neither will “sociopolitical man” resting on the back of “homo economicus” suffice; Plekhanov’s stratified scheme of “turtles upon turtles” cannot explain the curious longevity of, for example, Greek art in our own time, nor can it explain why Shakespeare has outlived all attempts to paraphrase and to Bowdlerize him.

In order to explain these phenomena, Vygotsky wants to find, somewhere in the history of literature, a much more basic form composed of mutually defining elements. It cannot be too basic, for it must include all of the human contradictions that we later find in *Hamlet*. But it must be short, simple, and susceptible to analysis and re-synthesis in a way that will reveal the way in which longer, more complex, and less easily analyzed works emerge from it.

I think that Vygotsky finds this “unit” in the esthetic contradiction, a nonreducible whole which is created by the tension between the real and the ideal. True, he mislays it in formalism; he tries to locate the esthetic contradiction as something between “inner form” and “outer form” and then generalize it to the contradiction between form on the one hand and content on the other. But here in his study of the fable, he locates it correctly; it is a contradiction between two strains of social ideology.

It is a simple matter to show how this esthetic contradiction develops in the fable. It emerges first as a tool of ethical instruction, where it appears in the guise of a contrast between “good” and “bad” characters or as a contrast between “is” and “ought” within a character). Then, sometime after the Renaissance, the fable becomes lyrical and descriptive rather than moral and prescriptive, and the esthetic contradiction becomes much more a matter of materializing the ideal and of idealizing the real.

CHAPTER FIVE AND SIX: ANALYSIS AND SYNTHESIS OF THE FABLE

Here are two paintings painted at roughly the same time by the Venetian master Tintoretto: The Biblical “Just-so” story of “God Creating the Animals”, and the ribald story of “Venus, Mars, and Vulcan” which is told in Book Eight of *the Odyssey* to entertain revelers at a feast (Mars’ helmet can just be glimpsed poking out from under the table where he is hiding from Venus’ enraged husband). Not exactly a plaything for children, though Venus’ son, Cupid, seems to be having a pretty good laugh! Note the blasphemous similarity of the face of the cuckolded husband to that of God.



The great rooted chestnut tree of the Renaissance has two roots and two branches, but when we examine the ideology of the Sacred and the Profane branches of its art, we often find that each one is more like the Carnival of the medieval trunk than like the Classical ancient roots. It is surely no accident that the materials of the fables of La Fontaine and Krylov come from Aesop and Plautus as well as from the Bible. But it is also no accident that when we examine them closely we find that they resemble in their social ideology and even in their style the stories of Chaucer, Boccaccio and of course Rabelais rather than the “just-so” stories of Genesis or the parables of Christ or even the Psalms.

Both Lessing and Potebnia consider that the prosaic, moralistic Classical fable of Aesop and of Phaedrus is the true prototype of the genre. Both discard neo-Classical retellings by La Fontaine and Krylov as playthings for children. The stone which was despised by the builder becomes Vygotsky’s cornerstone. He chooses the post-Renaissance retellings as prototypes for what he calls the lyrical fable, the poetical fable, a fable which contains in embryo not only the musical lyric, but also the epic, the drama and the tragedy.

Vygotsky’s task is threefold. First, he wishes to demonstrate that his “cell”, the lyrical fable, contains all the emotion of poetic form of later literature, and that this form is not redundantly allegorical and metaphorical but rather ineffable and inimitable, the way that *Anna Karenina* was found to be. Secondly, he wishes to demonstrate that the characters of this unit are real characters, based on living, breathing and above all speaking human beings, and capable of growing into characters such as Anna Karenina. Thirdly, he wishes to find in the fable the narrative tension, the esthetic contradiction, the double plot structure of rise and fall that characterizes, for Vygotsky, the whole of the epic, the drama, and ultimately the novel.

In order to do this, he employs a technique which is clearly related to the *Gedankenexperiment* of paraphrase we performed on Hector's parting from Andromache in the *Iliad* and on *Anna Karenina*: Vygotsky alters or removes some key element in a fable, and then observes the effect.

First of all, Vygotsky demonstrates that, like supposedly "higher" forms of literature, an allegory, or a metaphor, or a metonym which is *more* transparent and representative is actually *less* lyrical and poetic. For example, *Moby Dick* and *Animal Farm* both contain many elements of the fable (e.g. the use of animal characters). *Moby Dick* is nowhere near as transparent an allegory, but it is certainly a more poetic one.

Animal Farm of course is not an example that springs to Vygotsky's lips (it wasn't published until a decade after his death). Instead, Vygotsky takes the well known fable of the dog that lost a bone or a morsel of meat to his own reflection from Phaedrus. In the original, the dog does not cross the river over a bridge but instead swims for it.

Lessing complains that a dog swimming in a river cannot see his own reflection in it because of the turbulence caused by his own dog-paddle. Come to that, Vygotsky says, the whole subplot about inner speech in dogs is a little far-fetched. So we remove the whole river; the dog is ambushed another dog and runs away, leaving the meat. There. How's that?

Hmm. Well, we appear to have removed a number of lyrical moments from the fable. And we seem to produced something even more dull and insipid than the original. We have lost, with the river, the dog's reflection, the false impression that the reflected meat is bigger, and the suggestive link to the self-envy insinuated by modern advertising (Berger, 1972: 131).

Some of Vygotsky's "deformation experiments" are really naturally occurring experiments, much as the teaching of foreign languages or the teaching of science concepts forms a naturally occurring experiment for the teaching of "artificial" concepts in *Thinking and Speech*.

Aesop, for example, writes a version of this story in which the role of the greedy dog is played by a housewife and the role of the envied reflection is played by a hen. The hen is fed extra grain in the hope that it will lay an extra egg. The hen becomes fat and

stops laying altogether, and in the meantime the fable has become much less than fabulous.

Another “natural” deformation experiment brings us to the second point that Vygotsky needs to demonstrate, which is that fables contain, in embryo, real characters of the sort we find in short stories, tragedies, and even full-fledged novels. It appears that some of the failure of the Aesopian version can be blamed on the introduction of a housewife, a human character. Why, asks Vygotsky, do fables tend to rely on talking animals?

Potebnia argues that animal characters are flattened, reducing the character to a single characteristic (e.g. the cunning fox, the brutal lion, the foolish donkey, etc.) Lessing argues that animal characters are far removed from our feelings, allowing us to concentrate on the rational content of the moral. But Vygotsky demonstrates, once again, that the truth lies not in the middle, but beyond both extremes simultaneously.

The use of animal characters creates poetic, i.e. nontransparent, parallels with known human types (the foxy plebeian and the patrician jackass, the wolfish priest and the sheeplike parishioners, the wrongly accused magpie, etc.). The distancing “estrangement” functions as a picture frame. Thus, introducing a housewife and a hen into a fable is “equivalent to taking the frame away from a picture on the wall and allowing the picture to blend into the surrounding environment. (102).” By framing the picture, we are able to concentrate on its lyrical qualities.

Vygotsky’s third task, demonstrating the link between the fable and later genres, is more complex, because it covers the whole story and not simply the characterizations or the allegorical punch line. In order to complete this third task, Vygotsky turns his whole method inside out. Previously, it was a matter of experimentally deforming a fable into a non-fable. Here, however, Vygotsky will take something that is not (yet) a fable and deform it into something much more like one. A fisherman pulls a net from the sea. The large fish remain in the net, but the smaller fish escape through the meshes. Lessing remarks that there is not much of a fable here, and he attributes the failure of this particular fable (again from Aesop) to the lack of action. It cannot be a lack of descriptive lyricism, for the image is easily represented in a drawing, and the drawing may be made elaborate, but this will only detract from the action and the moral of the story.

Vygotsky comes to exactly the opposite conclusion. We divide the image into two descriptive story-lines. The first concerns the larger fish, who because they are large feel confident of their general chances of survival. Some of the ebullient fish pretend to devour the smaller fish, while others taunt them with their frailty and their tenuous hold on life.

Meanwhile, the smaller fish live in terror of the larger fish—particularly as the contracting net around them concentrates their numbers. As the net tightens, the large fish generously offer the smaller fish protection, and even portions of their food, etc. As the net is drawn upwards, the small fish escape...perhaps with a tart parting aphorism about the compelling advantages of downward mobility (e.g. “Race to the bottom, boys!”).

It is now a real fable. Yet no action was added at all. What we have added, instead, is an aesthetic contradiction: the more the large fish bluster, the more they are doomed, until finally doom and bluster meet and “short-circuit” in the parting riposte of the small fish. Of course, Vygotsky points out, this kind of counter-point, this use of dialogic plot lines, this use of a crescendo of tension between the points of view, and even the emotional short-circuit of the parting retort (Wolf to Lamb: “You are guilty, because I am hungry”, Ant to Dragonfly: “Go and dance”) are, in embryo, the very stuff of the lyric, the epic, and the epigrammatic short story.

This third point, like the previous ones, is an application of the general principle of distancing from graphic imagery that underlies the points he just made on non-transparent allegories and indirect characterizations (and which will underline his work on concept formation in *Thinking and Speech*). Rather than having a single, simple story that is easily summed up in a single plot line or a single set of cartoon drawings, Vygotsky demonstrates that a good fable needs at least two story-lines, treble and bass, often arranged in contrasting harmonies, and often in outright counterpoint.

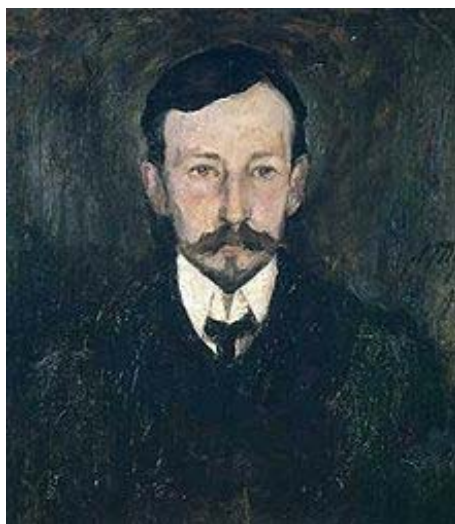
Vygotsky tells us (that La Fontaine tells us) that Plato, who did not trust poets to enter The Republic, allowed the entrance of musicians and even fabulists. Socrates was allowed to study music before his death, and used his studies to set Aesop to meters and rhymes much as La Fontaine himself was later to do (103).

The musical metaphor is highly significant, for music is linear, syntagmatic, non-graphic, symbolic, and can be intensely meaningful, and emotional, without the use of visual imagery. But music is only a metaphor. This drawing away from a concrete, factual, graphic set of links between ideas and pulling closer to a much more abstract, intangible, symbolic connectivity is nothing more and nothing less than the great transition from percepts to concepts which Vygotsky describes in *Thinking and Speech*.

CHAPTER SEVEN: SHORT STORY

Is a short story more like a long fable or more like a song lyric? Let us look and see. A sixteen-year-old schoolgirl of good family “ruins” herself first with a fifty-six-year old friend of the family and then a lower class Cossack officer, and is shot by the latter (there is some evidence in the girl’s diary that it is an assisted suicide).

The writer Bunin sandwiches this repellent and rather slight material between two lyrical descriptions of the same scene. We move from a cloud covered sky to “this cloud covered sky”, “a new cross” to this new cross, a young girl’s gentle breathing to “this gentle breath is dissipated again in the world”.



Leonard Turzhansky, Portrait of Ivan Bunin (1910)

The whole story might be summed up in a single formal point: “Once upon a time there was a girl. The girl...” New information, introduced by the story teller with *stress* and an *indefinite* article (“a girl”), is dissipated by the story teller into old information which has the demonstrative or the definite article and the gentle breath of non-stress (“the girl”). I rather suspect that this, or perhaps the tendency of air pressure in the lungs to

decrease when we read long sentences aloud, is the real, and completely trivial, cause of Vygotsky's finding from "pneumographic recordings" that the story gradually induces gentle breathing in subjects who read it (160).

Fortunately, Vygotsky's real method of analysis is not so much pneumographic as musicological. He wants to establish the presence of an esthetic contradiction, and to so he wishes to show the existence of polyphony, more than one musical line in the story. He divides the story into the disposition of events, the "material" (plot) as it would be experienced linearly in life or in history, and the temporal arrangement or "form" of the materials in the story. "(T)he events are connected in such a way that they lose their turbidity. They are associated as in a melody, and in their crescendos, diminuendos and transitions they untie the threads connecting them (154)". By disrupting the time sequence of the materials, Vygotsky claims, the writer is able to create the emotional short-circuit we found in the fable: the cloudier the life of the heroine becomes, the more light and airy is her mood, until finally she is quite blown away.

It must be said that this musicological analysis hits a number of sour notes. First of all, a number of Vygotsky's claims about the story are either extravagant or plain wrong. In the former category, we have "Artistically, it is most likely one of the best short stories ever written, and by general consensus it stands as a true model of its genre (p. 150)." In the latter category, we have Vygotsky's claim that "there is not a single bright spot in the entire story", when in fact much of the story is devoted to recounting a perfectly idyllic childhood, and just before her seduction the heroine writes "I played the piano for an hour, and the music made me feel as if I would live forever, happy as no one else!" (p. 164). With respect to the story in general and the diary in particular, Vygotsky says "the word *love* is neither mentioned nor hinted at". But just a few lines after the piano playing is mentioned, the heroine writes that Miliutin said jokingly that he "had fallen in love with me long ago". The word "love" is used at least four times, once in a sentence that Vygotsky has just quoted when he claims that it is never used and foreign to the whole spirit of the story.

Secondly, Vygotsky refers to the "compositional" musical line as the "melody" (152), but he is not very clear what the "dispositional" line represents, since it is not actually present anywhere in the story. It is only what Brown (1997: 239) refers to as an "unplayed melody", a virtual tune that only the musician will hear. In the table where Vygotsky compares the two lines, he does not include the crucial event of the affair

with the Cossack officer in either chronology (Vygotsky claims that somehow Olia “betrayed” him with Miliutin, but the story clearly implies that the affair with the officer takes place after she “became a woman” with Miliutin). Vygotsky misplaces the crucial conversation about “gentle breath” by only including it in the life of the school teacher and not in the life of the school girl. In fact, we are told the schoolteacher merely overheard the conversation on the playground; the schoolgirl and her best friend are the conversation’s principals.

Thirdly, Vygotsky says that the heroine’s schoolteacher, who takes an interest in her memory and her image, merely serves “as a frame for the entire narrative” (154). If this is true, it is a poorly fitting frame; the schoolteacher appears only in only two paragraphs, at the very end of the story: one devoted to the schoolteacher’s walks to the graveyard and the other to the “delusions which to her are a substitute for life’s reality (165).” One such is her passionate devotion to the heroine (Bunin smirks that she is a “maiden lady of thirty”, a reference apparently lost on Vygotsky).

It seems to me that all of these problems are easily solved if we simply treat the short story as a long fable. The story does indeed have two contrasting musical lines (though I think it would be wrong to describe them both as melodic and so the story fails as polyphony). The two lines even intersect at a single, critical juncture, the conversation about “gentle breath”, at which point the short story short-circuits and ends. But the two musical lines of the story are not the imagined “disposition” of events and their actual composition on paper. They are objectively present in the story, and each has bright as well as dark moments; they are living, breathing, human voices. If we must conceptualize the story musically, then “Gentle Breath” is a duet, composed of a flighty, melodramatic melodic line sung by the murdered schoolgirl Olia, and a dull background harmony intoned by her unnamed teacher who is merely bored to death.

So, as we might have surmised from the beginning and ending scene in the graveyard, the whole story turns out to be the outpourings of the school teacher’s consciousness which is projecting, as hearsay, those of the schoolgirl. This distancing focus, a seizing hold of awareness, a grasping from of our own thought processes through the feelings of another, will play a very important role, first in Vygotsky’s analysis of *Hamlet*, and then ultimately in *Thinking and Speech*.

So too will the idea that acting and feeling, or speaking and thinking, represent different

lines of development which at a vital moment must intersect and mutually transform each other. Andy Blunden (2008) has spoken of such lines of development as if they were actual narrative lines of stories, similar to what Sterne, Shklovsky and Vygotsky map out when they analyze literary works. As far as literary history is concerned, these lines of development are not so much lines as braided cables: collections of story lines which develop over time.

Or perhaps they are literary currents. In this way, the Hebraic parable and the Hellenistic epic meet and merge in the Renaissance. That confluence creates a new stream, from which many new mouths issue. But in each mouth we find the waters of both the sacred and the profane: the lyrical fable, the pilgrimage tale, the use of blank verse as in scripture, Revenge tragedy, and ultimately the almost entirely psychological tragedy whose first and in some ways still greatest exemplar is *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*.

CHAPTER EIGHT: TRAGEDY

We begin with the question: Why does Shakespeare make Hamlet delay? Once he has been told of his uncle's treachery by the ghost, why does Hamlet not simply set to and settle Claudius? Although it receives a number of trivial answers (e.g. "Because then the play would only be a one-act"), it is really a nontrivial question. It touches directly on the emergence of modern rationalism. Edwards (1985) reminds us that if Shakespeare stands at, and even helps to create, the modern moment of rationalist skepticism about the supernatural, he stands rather closer to its inception than to its denouement.

For example: Is the ghost a being or not a being? Elizabethans do not altogether believe in ghosts (or completely disbelieve in them either); those Elizabethans that do so believe they are often demons or devils in disguise, a fear Hamlet shares. At bottom, Hamlet has to determine whether the "voice" of revenge is really some external, communicating voice or whether it is a purely psychological, self-directed, "egocentric" one.

Exquisitely, Vygotsky warns us that to attempt to answer the riddle of Hamlet's dithering rather like trying to lift the veil from the surface of a canvas where it has been painted. Perhaps the metaphor is too exquisite: Vygotsky and friends spend much

of this chapter attempting to do just that.

First, Vygotsky examines a set of “subjective” explanations. According to Heine, Berne, Turgenev, and Coleridge, Hamlet’s weakness as a character is precisely that he is weak in character. But the evidence of the play belies this: Hamlet tests the guilt of the king (and the truth of the ghost) using a primitive lie detector (along the lines of the one designed by Vygotsky’s disciple Luria). Before committing the murder, he acts to protect his lover from the consequences of his actions. He then confronts his mother, kills Polonius, outsmarts and dispatches two old schoolmates who have a contract on his life, and even (if his letter can be believed) boards a pirate ship single handed, cuts a deal with the pirates when he finds he cannot overpower them, and makes his way back home to face the son of the man he murdered in single combat.

Nietzsche makes the key observation that Hamlet “speaks more superficially than he acts”. He adds.

“Understanding kills action, for in order to act we require the veil of illusion; such is Hamlet’s doctrine, not to be confounded with the cheap wisdom of John-a-Dreams, who through too much reflection, as it were a surplus of possibilities, never arrives at action.” (*Birth of Tragedy*, 7, p. 51)”

Action, not ratiocination, is the chief end of human life; as you gather your consciousness to the sticking point, you find that life has already passed you by. As Brecht (1968: 202) remarks, Horatio and Hamlet have both received good, rationalist, Renaissance educations at the University of Wittenberg which would rather hamper them in the sort of medieval blood feuds that are the family business back in Denmark.

Vygotsky next examines a number of “objectivist” explanations for Hamlet’s inaction. Goethe and Schlegel both held that Hamlet has a profound and justified skepticism about the utility of action. Volkenshteyn, who had just produced a performance of *Hamlet* at the Moscow Theatre, presents him as a man of action faced with enormous difficulties, who hardly ever puts his sword down but is simply overcome by circumstances.

Vygotsky points out that the objective explanations are, like the subjective, ones, refuted by the evidence of the play itself. There are a number of incidents when Hamlet could easily have done the deed, and does in fact refrain, e.g. immediately after the lie-

detector test and most memorably when the King is at prayers. Vygotsky simply does not accept the explanation given, that killing a man who is repenting will mean the salvation of his soul and his own damnation. But unlike the doctrine of ghosts, this was the canonical belief at the time; it was precisely in order to convince play-goers that the truly damned do not repent at the end that Tierzo de Molina wrote the play of Don Juan, later made into an opera by Mozart. Perhaps Vygotsky's objection to the objectivist explanation can find a better toe-hold in Act 4, when Claudius gives Hamlet a meaningless errand to run in England, the king is not praying; nevertheless, Hamlet desists.

Vygotsky then attempts to unask the question, by entertaining an ingenious, but ultimately unconvincing, "dramaturgical" explanation; it is that Hamlet does not delay at all. Vygotsky emphasizes that plays of the time obeyed the principle of continuous action; there were no intermissions. Time is, therefore, quite fluid in the play, and we are never really told how much of it has elapsed between the appearance of the ghost and the slaying of the King. Now, it is precisely here where Vygotsky's distinction between the "dispositional" structure of time and its "compositional" structure might come in handy. For even if there is no intermission between Acts 1 and 2, we are told that Laertes has returned to Paris, Ophelia, heeding her father, has returned Hamlet's letters and broken off their engagement, the King and Queen have become alarmed by Hamlet's behavior, and the King has sent ambassadors to Norway to try to stop Fortinbras from using a private army to reclaim his father's lands. These ambassadors have now returned home. Even if this were not true, there is the matter of Hamlet's own trip abroad. The "dramaturgical" explanation for Hamlet's hesitation will not hold up either.

At this point, around p. 177, Vygotsky despairs of literary critical explanations for Hamlet's hesitations. He turns to Tolstoy. Now, for Tolstoy, the question "Why does Shakespeare make Hamlet delay?" simply does not exist. Shakespeare does not make Hamlet delay; Hamlet dithers and delays from the emotion of fear and Shakespeare is simply mauling and ruining an earlier, and much better, play in which all is made clear.

Tolstoy is factually correct. Except for the tragic ending, Hamlet is based quite faithfully upon the twelfth century account of "Amleth" in the *Historiae Danicae* of Saxo Grammaticus, printed in 1514 and already written up by one of Shakespeare's rivals, possibly Thomas Kyd, author of *The Spanish Tragedy*. In Grammaticus' version, Amleth

marries the princess of England and returns home to disrupt his own funeral, kills his uncle and is acclaimed as the new King. Grammaticus makes Hamlet delay because the King has powerful and dangerous friends; Denmark is not a hereditary monarchy but rather one in which the new king is often a usurper who must be acclaimed by powerful king makers (and Shakespeare acknowledges this at the very end of the play when Hamlet casts his vote for Fortinbras with his dying breath). All Shakespeare does is to turn the happy ending into a tragic one and add a number of ranting speeches addressed to no one in particular.

As is well known, Tolstoy considered Shakespeare a bad writer and thought *Hamlet* an especially badly written play, precisely because of these ranting speeches. Surprisingly, Vygotsky agrees that Hamlet is not a coherent or consistent character. He even agrees that Shakespeare is a “bad” writer and *Hamlet* a “bad” play, so long as we interpret the word “bad” in Tolstoy’s rather idiosyncratic ethical sense rather than in the esthetic one. Above all, Vygotsky agrees with Tolstoy that the play must be approached without any kind of interpretative baggage, the way a little boy approaches a naked emperor.

And that is exactly what Vygotsky attempts to do next (though it must be said he cannot resist lapsing into literary critical accounts again barely a page later, and in the end of the chapter undertakes a garrulous digression on portraiture instead of drawing conclusions). This time Vygotsky does not bother with the formalist comparison of the disposition of materials and their composition. He correctly identifies the two musical lines of the play, and they are both real rather than virtual: On the one hand, Hamlet does not act to kill the king, and on the other hand, he does almost nothing else. (Ivanov, in the commentary, tries once more to substitute an “unseen” line of development, by arguing that the two conflicting lines are simply the reversible “Hamlet kills Claudius” and “Claudius kills Hamlet”, but it is easy to see that this removes the psychological element, and reduces it to a vulgar thriller.)

The mortal tension between these two contradictory lines builds throughout the play, as we have seen, and is finally “short-circuited”. Hamlet, in deference to the double plot line, kills the king not once but twice, once with Laertes’s sword and again with the poisoned goblet that has just killed Hamlet’s mother. Vygotsky says that the double death of the king is “inexplicable” without the idea of two conflicting lines of development. But as with Bunin’s short story, there are some trivial and not so trivial problems with Vygotsky’s analysis.

First of all, the trivial. The “inexplicable” double death of the king is really a perfectly explicable triple death (once with the fast acting sword, once with the slow-acting venom on the blade, and finally with the poisoned chalice). Contrary to what Vygotsky says on p. 187, the overkill is well-motivated; the King’s final words are “Oh, yet defend me, friends, I am but hurt!”, and he is calling on his friends to cut down his enemies. Vygotsky is also wrong when he says on p. 174 that Fortinbras is superfluous and only appears at the end of the play to remove the bodies from the stage; Fortinbras, who wishes to avenge his own father’s death at Hamlet’s father’s hand, also appears as Hamlet is departing to England. With Laertes and Hamlet himself, Fortinbras completes the trilogy of sons avenging their fathers’ deaths. Contrary to what Vygotsky says, Laertes’s change of heart is not at all inexplicable; as we have seen, the Elizabethans may not be too sure about ghosts, but they certainly believe in the redeeming value of deathbed repentance; Laertes and Hamlet forgive each other.

Secondly, and less trivially, Vygotsky does not really address Shakespeare’s essential focus on the mental processes and the emotional motivations of his characters, a very curious omission for a psychologist with a strong interest in language. Vygotsky barely mentions, for example, the motifs of madness and suicide, which are so strongly emphasized in the fate of both Hamlet and his intended, Ophelia. Nor does he tackle the ranting speeches which so offend Tolstoy’s ear. How are these related to each other, and how are they related to the two lines of development which unfold and eventually intersect and “short-circuit”? Vygotsky does not say.

Thirdly, there is the non-trivial issue, also raised by Tolstoy’s criticisms, of whether a play can be esthetically good but ethically bad. In his lectures on ethical education in *Educational Psychology*, Vygotsky points out that children will often ignore the obvious moral point of a fable, and sympathize with the fox rather than the crow, or the grasshopper rather than the ant. Vygotsky has even explained to us why this is so, how the most lyrical characters attract the children’s attention. On p. 192, Vygotsky remarks that “(p)sychoanalysts are right in asserting that the substance of the psychological effect of a tragedy consists in our identification with the hero.”

If this (spectacularly vulgar) premise is correct, then perhaps Tolstoy is right; only heroes with happy endings provide secure moral models for children. On the other hand, how can such heroes provide objective judgments, non-consequentialist concepts of

ethics, and the moral autonomy and self-regulation implicit in “faire ce qu’on doit, advienne que pourra”? (We leave aside the ethical problem of whether it is right to use the name of art to tell such obvious lies about the way societies are structured and the way children should act to get on in the world.)

Once again, it seems to me that many of these difficulties disappear when we simply stick to the methods which Vygotsky has taught us in his chapters on the fable: paying careful attention to time and place, differentiating between the lyrical and the prosaic, and above all teasing out different lines of development, ethical and esthetic, which only occasionally intersect and transform each other.

First of all, we must situate the art work as an utterance in response to another utterance, in an ongoing dialogue with Shakespeare’s audience and with the rival playwrights who are contesting that audience. Shakespeare is responding to a craze (contemporary, alas, in both senses of the word) for horror shows that focus on the theme of vengeance deferred and ultimately conferred by the violent actions of a loner. In fact, he may be directly and shamelessly plagiarizing his dramatic material, by rewriting a concurrently running play by the schlock-horror master Thomas Kyd himself (Maus, 1995).

Shakespeare has already tried, in *Titus Andronicus*, to do a splatter-fest: the Goth Queen Tamara’s son is ritually murdered to have his entrails burnt on the altar, in return for which Titus’ daughter is raped and has her tongue cut out and his sons are taken captive. The father, eschewing vengeance, cuts off his own hand on stage and offers it, and his two son’s heads are presented to him in return, whereupon he kills Tamara’s two sons and bakes them into a pie which he serves their mother.... This body count and this gore-quotient are then trumped, and by a considerable margin, in Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, which features, among other horrors, a real live ghost on stage. Top that, Shakespeare!

Shakespeare proceeds to do so. But he does so by reinventing the Revenge tragedy as a *psychological* genre. Revenge and regicide are problematized, and rationality and good conscience are to be foregrounded in the set of ranting speeches that Tolstoy remarks upon. In order to do this, Shakespeare uses the brilliant device of dramatizing “egocentric” self-directed speech, that is, the soliloquy. The public oratory of Anthony after the murder of Caesar, on which Shakespeare is concurrently working, is reshaped,

and moved to the forefront of (in)action; it is moved within the character. And as a consequence, Shakespeare makes a transformation in his action hero that is every bit as significant as the transformation of the animals in Aesop and Plautus performed by La Fontaine and Krylov.

Very early on (p. 169) Vygotsky lets drop a casual remark (by Berne) to the effect that Hamlet is a “lyrical character who defies dramatic processing.” In Tolstoy’s terms, this means that Hamlet has “no character at all”, but it would be more accurate to say that he has the multiplicity, the pliability, of consciousness itself. Far from urging us to “identify” with that consciousness, Shakespeare is seeking to distance us from it; we have already seen how the lyrical element has this objectifying function, referred to as “estrangement” by the formalists and as “alienation” by Brecht.



Jean Millais, Ophelia Amidst the Flowers (1850)

This explains the “madness” of Hamlet, why only he can hear the voice of the ghost, and why the second time it appears, in Gertrude’s chamber, Hamlet alone can see him. Hamlet *is* more than a little bit mad. Brown points to Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* as a “gothic” text which casts a light on the question of consciousness by raising the question of who actually sees ghosts, whether we see them when we are in our right minds, and whether we actually see them at all. Brown contrasts this “psychological” gothic text, related to the then modern ideas of Kant and Rousseau about consciousness emergent, to earlier texts which took ghosts as real entities and later ones (e.g. Anne Radcliffe) which eventually find a rational explanation for all

supernatural phenomena (Brown, 2005: 19).

So *Hamlet* represents a transition between plays which take supernatural causes for granted and stories that must end with rational explanations; Hamlet himself represents a transitional character between the action hero and the personality whose heroism lies entirely in the workings of his consciousness. This explains the incoherence of Hamlet as a character (and also the “method” that Polonius finds within his madness). Hamlet is not one character, but a number of different lines of material, mental, and verbal activity, artistically related to each other (Ginzburg, 1991: 222) in such a way as to suggest inner speech, external speech, and the *mental* tergiversation which accompanies, and *ought to accompany*, any violent action. It is a strong element of the strength of the one thousand year old tradition in Chinese opera; a character does not simply commit murder or suicide without explaining, at some length, his precise reasons for doing so. Dilly-dallying is explained (and explained and explained and explained) by shilly-shallying.

Hamlet is not a bad play, at least not in an esthetic sense. But is it bad in Tolstoy’s sense, in an ethical sense? In Chapter Thirteen of *Educational Psychology*, Vygotsky retells Chekhov’s short story, “The House”, the tale of a public prosecutor who makes a living out of consequentialist ethics, and who one day discovers that his son has taken up smoking. He bends his very considerable talents to dissuading him with punishments to no avail. He even tells the son about an uncle who died of smoking, but the son then associates the smell of smoke with the beloved uncle who played so charmingly on the violin; he becomes even more attached to tobacco. At last, the father cobbles together a crude story, a garbled combination of *Mazeppa* and *Boris Goudunov* (with perhaps a walk-on by Fortinbras) about a tsar whose son smokes and dies of consumption, whereupon foreign enemies conquer the country, and kill the old tsar, burn his palace, and leave the garden without either sweet cherries or birds to enjoy them. The father himself does not really comprehend the story that he has just told. But the son says solemnly that he has understood and that he will never smoke again.

Part 4. Coda: Catharsis, the Psychology of Art, and “Infusing Life with Art”



David Kellogg, Breakfast Bell, (2002)

CODA

Vygotsky has pinpointed his object of investigation, the esthetic response. He has isolated a unit of analysis, the esthetic contradiction. He has shown us how this unit exists in the fable, in the form of interwoven points of view and intertwined plot lines. He has demonstrated how it exists in a short story, in the form of a contrast between “gentle” breathing form and a rather heavy-breathing melodrama. Finally, he has shown how it exists in Hamlet, in the form of two unrolling lines of development, one centred on Hamlet attempting to kill the king, and the other on his failing to do so.

In this final section, I want to do something similar, though on a somewhat less ambitious scale: I want to show that there is a contradiction at the heart of Vygotsky’s own book, namely the contradiction between his statement in the first chapter to the effect that art is the dominance of material over form, and the results of his own research, especially the last section, which appear to show precisely the opposite relation, the dominance of form over material.

It seems to me that there are two ways to resolve this problem. The first is theoretical, because it has to do with how we theorize time. It is to argue that both relations are

true, but at different time scales. Each individual artist may microgenetically achieve the domination of his material by his own form, but in the long run, sociogenetically, it is form which is dominated by material. When, for example, the great nineteenth century realists such as Gaskell and Eliot exapted the dialogues of Austenian domestic fiction in the interests of a wider panorama of industrial life, they were dominating the material by recasting it in the form of a new genre (See Li, 2009 for an excellent analysis of how this was done). But when the industrial novel as a genre disappeared into the broader current of the “naturalist” and the “social realist” novel, we must say that writers such as Gaskell, Eliot, and Zola are dominated by the materials of historical circumstances.

The second way of resolving the problem is more methodological, because it has to do with how we pose the question. It is to demonstrate the opposing principles of “form” and “material” are illusory, and that the true mutually defining “elements” of the esthetic contradiction are much less abstract and much more concretely social in their nature. They are the two great tendencies Vygotsky traces throughout *Thinking and Speech*, the imaginative zigging away from reality that occurs when we think and the practical zagging towards reality that happens when we speak. They are, in brief, what is socially real, and what is psychologically ideal.

CHAPTER NINE: CATHARSIS

“Art,” says Vygotsky, “is based on the union of feeling and imagination” (215). So here is what Vygotsky proposes to do: “We can regard a fantasy as the central expression of an emotional reaction (210)”. Now, you might think that this will lead in fairly short course into the brilliant kind of discussion we find in Chapter Two of *Thinking and Speech*, where, contra Piaget, Vygotsky argues that the “autistic” flight from reality is not a primal characteristic of children but a late arising function indirectly oriented towards reshaping that reality in an ideal form.

Alas, development ever follows a winding road, and Vygotsky’s development of this idea is no exception to the rule. Instead, following the formalists and even the psychoanalysts, Vygotsky attributes the “extraordinary power” of an esthetic emotional reaction to the “delay in the external manifestation” (212): something like its repression! Then, directly contradicting his introduction, where he stated that the “(t)he central idea of the psychology of art (···) is the recognition of the dominance of material

over artistic form”, Vygotsky writes: “A work of art always contains an intimate conflict between its content and its form, and the artist achieves his effect by means of the form, which destroys the content (p. 215).”

Here it really does appear that the content of Vygotsky’s esthetics has been destroyed by his formalism. His earlier discovery that form is not merely the surface of things but includes an “inner form” that is clearly related to emotional content is simply allowed to disappear like smoke. Now form is quite explicitly connected to the hexameters of Homer’s *Iliad*, which, unheard by most of us, are so clearly unrelated to its immortality. Instead of raising psychology to the level of his appreciation of art, he appears to have lowered his appreciation of art to the miserable level of then current psychology.

CHAPTER TEN: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ART

Vygotsky begins his penultimate, eponymous, chapter by remarking the “contradiction is the essential feature of artistic form and material.” If we take this opening remark at face value, it appears to mean that the key contradictions we must consider are not necessarily between “form” and “material”. They might lie within form itself, or within material. Emergent contradictions in form, for example, might include his initial distinction between inner and outer form. The contradictions within material might be even more productive, and help us to understand the key problem he sets for this chapter, the analysis of *Eugene Onegin*.

First, let us consider the contradictions within form itself. Take the following chant, which we sometimes teach to children (stresses are marked in capitals, and it is chanted to a regular 4-4 beat):

1 2 3 4
FIVE, FIVE, FIVE-five, FIVE
IT is FIVE o’CLOCK! (rest)
(DA-da, DA-da, DA····
(Proctor and Graham, *Sing, Chant & Play*)

As you can see, there is an inherent tension: Five words, five syllables, but four beats, four stresses. In the first line, expectations are built up by repeating the single syllable twice, and then shattered by interpolating an unstressed half-note “five” on the third

beat of the measure. By doing this, the conflict between five words and four beats is resolved.

In the second line, the tension appears somewhat differently. The “DA-da” device, which is called a trochaic foot (not, as Vygotsky has it on p. 218, an “iambic” foot) is repeated for TWICE...and then, as soon as expectations begin to form, we have a one and a half beat rest.

The “meter” is the four-beat structure. But because we are using actual words, the meter is never perfectly realized; if it were, as Vygotsky points out, all the lines would have to be exactly the same. The exception (which proves the rule) would be a group of ROTC cadets jogging and chanting “1, 2, 3, 4”, or “R, O, T, C”. But on my campus, even the ROTC cadets have to liven up the plodding meter with some tension between the ideal “meter” and the real “rhythm” (usually the insertion of grunts, barks, and Korean obscenities).

Now of course the use of speech, which has to obey the prosodics of normal conversation, automatically creates this kind of tension between a completely idealized meter and the actual speech rhythm. This tension between ideal meter and the prosodics of normal speech creates a kind of “back-beat”. The poet has to speak as naturally as he can around the beat, or (what amounts to the same thing) compress and extend the beat to match the stresses in his speech.

This tension is found in many art forms that blend music and speech (e.g. poetry, song, hip-hop) but also those that are blends of music and gesture (e.g. aerobics, figure-skating, dance). Some of us prefer, or imagine that we prefer, “pure” music, without any accompaniment, or at least without an accompaniment in words or motions, in much the same way as there are people who prefer paintings unencumbered with narrative or even figures.

There are even people (such as Tolstoy) who demand that music and motion be perfectly redundant, that the movements must repeat when the music repeats, and that words must repeat when the music does, rather the way that chanting and running is redundant when you are a Marine at boot camp. But the idea that this perfect match is somehow ideal is highly problematic, not to say highly vulgar.

Equally problematic is the idea that this kind of purely physical tension between “form” and “content” is a universal principle of all art. To try to generalize this tension between speech prosody and meter to all literary art forms (e.g. to speak of the “rhythm” of Bunin’s cold pretentious sentences as Vygotsky does on p. 214) is (at best) a bad metaphor, and (more accurately) a grotesque exercise in conceptual inflation. It’s a little like a theory of humor which is entirely based on the pun.

Let’s consider a blend of music, speech, and gesture, i.e. opera. In opera, music and speech may take the form of a recitative, the “speaking” part of an opera that is accompanied by a single instrument, originally invented by Galileo’s father, Vincenzo Galilei. Recitatives have melody but not meter. We often don’t consciously think of recitatives as sung because they obey speech rhythms rather than the musical beat that we find in the rest of the opera. Does this mean that recitative has NO esthetic contradiction, or that it somehow has a lesser contradiction than an aria?

Of course not. First of all, there is the contradiction between the recitative itself and the arias that precede and follow it. This contradiction within the work, between the different speech genres which compose it, is resolved very differently from the way it is resolved in a Broadway musical, where the artists simply talk to each other and then (inexplicably, and disgustingly, for Brecht) stop talking and suddenly start singing apparently without even noticing.

A lot of the truly dialogic action in opera is found in the recitative rather than in the aria, which often serves a more expressive or declamatory function, similar to Hamlet’s soliloquies. As a result, the recitative and the aria have very different structures; the former is much more personal and concrete, and focuses on fleeting sensations. The latter is far more general and stylized, and it is constructed of parallel strophes. The difference we have here is the difference between self-directed (“egocentric”) speech and other-directed speech, and ultimately between personal sense and generalized, social meaning.

Consider, for example, the following from the last act of *The Marriage of Figaro*. On the left hand side, there is the recitative that Figaro sings (for it IS sung) as he is hiding in wait for his fiancé, whom he believes is coming to an assignation with his employer. On the right, there is the famous “cuckold’s aria” which Figaro sings immediately after the soliloquy (in which Mozart, in a pun, uses two French horns to symbolize the two horns

supposedly growing from a cuckold's head).

Everything is ready; the hour must be near. I hear them coming; it's she; no, it's no one. The night is dark and I'm already beginning to ply the foolish trade of cuckolded husband. Traitoress! At the moment of my wedding ceremony he enjoyed reading her letter, and seeing him I laughed at myself without knowing it. Oh, Susanna, Susanna, how much pain you have cost me! With that artless face, with those innocent eyes, who would have believed it? Ah, it's always madness to trust a woman.

Open your eyes for a moment
Rash and foolish men!
Look carefully at these women.
See them as they really are!

You call them goddesses,
With your befuddled senses
You pay them tribute
With your weakened minds.

They are witches who work spells
To make you miserable
They are sirens who sing
To make you drown! (etc. etc.)

Here we see that the different structures are linked to different functions. We do not need any purely imaginary, ideal meter accessible only to formalist analysis to understand it, any more than we need to know the invisible "real" sequence of events to appreciate the Bunin short story, or the unheard hexameters of Homer's ancient Greek to appreciate *The Odyssey*. We only need to know that they are both different expressions of a relation between people, specifically between Figaro and his intended, on the one hand, and men and women on the other.

You might think that Vygotsky's analysis of *Eugene Onegin* would treat the poem as an aria and not as a recitative, and contrast Pushkin's mastery of versification and rhyme with the constraints imposed by the story line. Fortunately, you would be completely wrong. We may demur somewhat at Vygotsky's assumption on p. 227 that only an esoteric analysis of form will reveal the development of the characters (and indeed were this assumption true we would have to say that Pushkin has failed as a communicator). But we can only agree when Vygotsky concludes (pp. 230-231) that sometimes the fact that characters speak in poetry is of no more significance than the fact that at other times they speak in prose. He focuses instead upon the development of the characters which brings about their role reversal, and the "short-circuit" of Eugene's letter to the married Tatyana at the end.

The “contradiction” of “material” and “form” that we find in poetry, then, is only a bad metaphor; an abstract way of speaking of real contradictions between real people and within them as they are reflected most concretely in works of art. The formalists present the opposition between meter and speech prosody realized in “rhythm” as a kind of universal opposition between “form” and “content”. It might be more correct, or at least truer to Vygotsky’s emphasis on development, to see it as a fairly low-level instance, belonging to the infancy of art, of a much more interesting tension: that between the “autistic” tendency towards the “ideal” and the pragmatic inclination to the “real”.

In order to theorize these opposing tendencies, we do not need a purely abstract “form” and “content” built on the model of meter and prosodics. We need only look at literary genres sociogenetically, that is, historically. The evolution of poetry and prose does bear out Vygotsky’s key thesis in the introduction, which is that materials, in the end, will dominate form. Prose, in which real speech rhythms predominate, historically do emerge as the dominant genre in the place of rhyming, metrical poems, of which *Eugene Onegin* is really the last hurrah.

Methodologically, we need to see BOTH the opposition between “outer form” and “inner form” and the opposition between “form” and “content” as a very early and rather vague awareness of a more essential contrast, between emotion/imagination on the one hand and realism on the other. This is the task of Vygotsky’s essay “Imagination and Creativity in the Child” (2004) and more broadly it is undertaken in the early chapters of *Thinking and Speech*, where Vygotsky discusses the “autism” of the normal, healthy adult. But, precociously, it is also the task of our very last chapter.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: INFUSING ART WITH LIFE AND LIFE WITH ART

This painting, hanging on the wall at the National Gallery in London, was done within a year of the world premiere of Shakespeare’s psychological reworking of the horror show *Hamlet*, (which must have taken place not too far from the gallery). On a good day, you can see people stop in front of this painting, give it a cursory glance, and then look at the title. After reading the title, “The Supper at Emmaus” they sometimes look at the painting with some puzzlement, and then suddenly, with an “Aha!”, you can see some realization dawning on their faces. I have seen viewers throwing out their hands in

amazement and gripping their sides as if they were arm-rests; I have done it myself. “The Supper at Emmaus” is an example of the second kind of miracle that Vygotsky talks about in this chapter: not the miracle of the loaves and fishes, where bread and sardines were quantitatively multiplied, but the one of the wedding at Cana, where water was qualitatively transformed. Art leaps off of the wall and is qualitatively transformed, from a representation to a re-enactment.



Caravaggio, The Supper at Emmaus (1601)

In Luke 24 (13-32) a man named Cleopas, and another disciple are leaving Jerusalem after the death of Christ, and a third falls in with them. They tell the newcomer of the recent events, and invite him to supper at an inn. As the newcomer breaks the bread, they recognize the risen Christ. But Caravaggio’s painting is taken from the much briefer account in Mark (16: 12) which does not mention the names of the disciples or give their destination, but which does give a reason why the disciples did not recognize the master. We are told that Jesus appeared “in a different form”. As you can see, Caravaggio has taken the liberty of having him appear in the form of a woman. For this reason, it takes some time for us to “realize” the painting’s title, and when we do so, it seems, miraculously, to occur precisely at the time that Christ blesses the bread for us to eat. For a brief instant, art leaks out into our real lives, and the ideal becomes real.

That is not the only liberty that Caravaggio takes with the story. The disciples are incredulous old men with holes in their shirts. The waiter cannot quite understand what all the fuss is about, and seems mostly concerned with keeping the wine flowing. The basket of fruit (which includes an apple with a blemish) is about to fall out of the painting into our hands. It's an almost perfect illustration of what the great nineteenth century realists in French and English, Hugo and Zola, Gaskell and Eliot, were trying to do: to infuse art with ordinary, everyday persons and their ordinary everyday lives.

Vygotsky, for all the formalistic chatter about having the form contradict the message, consistently chooses a form of exposition that re-enacts his message: "we may (...) call art a delayed reaction" (253). As in the lectures on ethical and esthetic education, and as in the Hamlet chapter, Vygotsky asks a difficult question and delays a correct response with a long string of inadequate answers.

Art owes its very genesis to the circumstance that it is not really part of life, that it is an emotional separation from practical, everyday life in the direction of the ideal. But what would happen if everyday life and art became one? Or, as Vygotsky asks at the beginning of the chapter, "What is the relation between (the) esthetic response and all other forms of human behavior?" In particular, what is, and what will be, the relation between the esthetic response and ethical responses, the (apparently) individual form of the ideal, and the more socialized one?

The first answer that Vygotsky addresses is that of Tolstoy, but it was also the ruling artistic dogma of the time, the Bukharinist theory that art was fundamentally identical to other emotions, but socialized. Now, for Tolstoy this really means that art is immoral, or at least, amoral, for the infection of one person by the emotion of another is, out of context anyway, pointless. Peasants need peasant art for labor, weddings and funerals. Dancers need music to coordinate complex motions. Soldiers need military music to overcome their thoughts of death, be able to think of killing others, and feel the warmth of the similarly minded pack around them (think of the use of heavy metal "combat mixes" in Iraq). But what is the point of a Beethoven sonata, since all we are going to do with the vast emotions created by the music is to nibble at snacks and make small talk with over-dressed semi-strangers?

Vygotsky's answer to this owes a lot to the work of Hippolyte Taine. Like Tolstoy, Taine believes that art is only meaningful in context, that people prefer their own

inventions. Seventeenth century man was bored by landscapes and preferred paintings of urban hustle-bustle and hurly-burly (e.g. Brueghel or Hogarth) or refined elegance (Holbein and Vermeer). Like Plekhanov, Taine wants to explain why the art of a particular epoch appeals specifically to that epoch (and like Plekhanov, he ignores the rather touchy question of why art, as opposed to other forms of human behavior such as fashion, seems to outlive the epoch which brings it forth).

On the one hand, Taine has the very great disadvantage of founding his theory of artistic creation on three constructs (rather than the many turtles of the relations of production, the means of production, the sociopolitical regime, and ideology). Taine traces all style to “race”, “milieu” and “moment”, and it turns out that the latter two are ephemeral, while the first is a kind of unmoving bedrock, and therefore cannot account very well for development (in addition to the problem of reducing any phenomenon to a single causative factor, a rhetorical move which inevitably results in the phenomenon being entirely implicit in the original causative factor). Vygotsky probably takes from Taine the hypothesis that art involves first the ordering of labor, and then escape from it. But it is a simple matter to show that each of these can only be part of the picture, for each leaves out the enduring component of the esthetic reaction, the part transcends the conditions of labor.

Taine wanted to seize the high ground and examine art from the central stem, taking in the system as a whole, rather than attempting to look at each individual leaf (this is the exact trope that Vygotsky employs in his critique of Piaget). For this reason, what he examines is not the conceptual content of works of art, but instead the “lack of content” which he calls “style”. A style is not conceptual; it is as Brown remarks, a “determinate relationship to content” rather than the content itself, “the personal element in the collective discourse” rather than the discourse itself, and “the public stance of private expression (1999: 87).”

But which is it? If style is the personal element in a collective discourse, we may say that it is the collective discourse which is in the long run determinate. But if, on the contrary, style is at bottom a private expression, then it appears that it is individual creativity which is shaped by its public form rather than the other way around.

On page 249, Vygotsky writes:

“Art is the social within us, and even if its action is performed by a single individual, it does not mean that its essence is individual. It is quite naïve and inappropriate to take the social to be collective, as with a large crowd of persons. The social also exists where there is only one person with his individual experiences and tribulations (249).”

This is a social discourse given individual expression. But here Vygotsky returns to the distinction he made in the very first chapter between social psychology, which includes individual psychology. We remember that Vygotsky excluded “collective psychology”, Wundt’s *Volkerpsychologie* and Taine’s notions of “race” (and of course also Bekhterev’s idea of collective reflexology).

Vygotsky continues:

“A fundamental characteristic of man, one that distinguishes him from animals, is that he endures and separates from his body both the apparatus of technology and that of scientific knowledge, which then become the tools of society. Art is the social technique of emotion, a tool of society which brings the most intimate and personal aspects of our being into the circle of social life (249).”

This is the public stance of private emotion. But perhaps we are simply talking about different time scales. After all, Vygotsky compares artworks to technical tools for production and scientific knowledge, whose invention may be individual, at least viewed as microgenesis, but which form the very substance of sociogenesis.

CONCLUSION: THE SMILE OF LITTLE BACCHUS

In the closing pages of the book, Vygotsky turns to the curious case of Tolstoy’s short story “The Kreutzer Sonata”. The story itself is narrated in the form of an encounter on a train in which the narrator meets a man who has murdered his wife and her lover. The man is exonerated by the court because of the wife’s infidelity, and he uses his notoriety to warn us of the evils of, among other things, music and marriage. Teddy Roosevelt, who had the book banned in the USA, called Tolstoy a “moral and sexual pervert”, and one can certainly understand his point of view.

Tolstoy adds a lengthy exegesis in which he explains that the true purpose of his book

was not simply to excoriate the enjoyment of music, but rather to point out the sinfulness of all carnal relations, both within marriage and outside it. Perhaps disingenuously, Bakhtin, in his prefaces to Tolstoy, attributes the genesis of Soviet social realism to this and other religious tracts by Tolstoy (Morson and Emerson, 1985).



Rene Francois Xavier Prinnet, The Kreutzer Sonata (1901)

And now Vygotsky, to paraphrase Marx's comments on what he did with Hegel, has found Tolstoy standing on his head; he must attempt to place him securely on his feet again. Where Tolstoy believed that art was the spreading around of an individual emotion, Vygotsky shows that it is the instantiation of a social one. Where Tolstoy held that the decontextualization of an emotion, the separation of the emotion from the activity that it enjoys, reduces it to irritation, Vygotsky must now show that it is this decontextualization, this objectification, that allows art organize future behavior and not simply the behaviors of the past.

Art is a method for building life, he says. One way to interpret this statement, of course, is the sociogenetic way: the art that we create today is a blueprint for the future of mankind under socialism. This fully explains Adorno's remark that all forms of art, even the very worst, have some implicit sense of "the good life", even if it is only implied in contrast, and it will explain the strong sense man has always had, at least until our own time, that art and ethics are somehow connected (1991: 104).

Does this not mean that when life is infused with art under socialism, art, the expression of man's desire for "the good life" that class society has deprived him of, will simply cease to exist? The futurists certainly thought so. But Vygotsky ends the lecture on esthetic education with the view that, contrary to the futurist view, infusing life with art will not mean an end to art, or even an end to the creative tension between art and life. On the contrary, an end to the purely negative portrayal of the "good life" will mean opportunities for truly determinate styles of "the good life" to emerge.

The second way to interpret Vygotsky's idea that art is the construction of the future life is more ontogenetic. Vygotsky writes:

"Dwellings and dress, conversation and reading, school holidays and strolls, all may serve in equal measure as the most gratifying substance for esthetic treatment. Beauty has to be converted from a rare and festive thing into a demand of everyday existence. And creative effort has to nourish every movement, every utterance, every smile of the child's." (1997b: 261)

This is why Vygotsky rejects, violently, the idea that children's literature should be cute or nonsensical; his opposition to Chukovsky's book *Crocodile* is well documented (Kellogg, 2009), and in the lecture on esthetic education he even suggests that fables should not be taught to children (1997b: 266). Art has to build the next stage of the child's life ontogenetically and sociogenetically upon the child's most advanced forms of thinking and not upon the silliness of adults and the foolishness of feudalism.

Yet cognitive development may proceed by negation and not simply by incremental elaboration of old knowledge. Vygotsky does admit, on p. 258, Chukovsky's idea that "topsy-turvies" (e.g. "I saddled a horse but it would not budge. I saddled a gnat and it sped to the barn") reinforce the child's grip on reality rather than weaken it (Chukovsky, 1968). Perhaps, then, we may say the same thing of ethical, and even of esthetic concepts in artwork, that they may aid ethical and esthetic development through the devious, sinuous, ultimately unpredictable paths of negation?

Consider the two Carvaggios that begin and end this paper. In "The Sacrifice of Isaac", we have a visual rather than a verbal sentence, written from upper left to lower right: Subject, Verb, Object. An ignorant old man will cut the throat of his own beloved child,

and that for no other reason than that he has heard voices. Framing this scene of horror and insanity, there is a faint promise of something better: an angel, admonishing the would-be killer, and a ram almost smiling at the thought of offering himself in the place of the terrified child. We have a definite sense of “the good life”, but the good life itself is indefinite, as it is in the form of a general negative.

In the Bacchus, Caravaggio offers us something that is, on the surface at any rate rather more positive, more determinate, and more definite about what constitutes a “good life”. We have a generous chalice of Vygotsky’s central metaphor: turning the water of life into the wine of art. Notice that the child Bacchus offers the wine with his left hand; this suggests that Caravaggio modeled the arms himself, using a mirror. There is a tiny portrait of the artist at work in the reflection on the carafe, inviting himself to the party.

Yet just as the sinister “Sacrifice of Isaac” comes framed in hope, the knowing smile of the child has a somewhat tense historical background—it was painted for a cardinal well known for preying on adolescent parishioners. Surely there is no art free of the extant sociopolitical regime today, just as there is no artwork that is entirely bound to it. Every artwork is a real ideal, a realization of the ideal in a real object and an idealization of a real desire. We can no more dissolve this opposition than we can abolish the opposition between theory and observation in science.

In the smile of the child Bacchus we may well find that the ontogenetic sense in which art is the construction of future life is linked to a microgenetic one. Caravaggio, it is said, did not use preliminary sketches (I think what this really means is that his preliminary sketches were done directly on the canvas and obliterated in the final work, rather the way that children draw). As Marx remarks, the difference between a very skilled bee and a very unskilled architect is that the latter erects his sloppiest work in his mind before he attempts to do so on paper (1995: 116). Of course, part of the purpose of esthetic education will always be the provision of copiable models, blueprints for the child’s immediate art work, full of errors both nonvolitional and deliberate.

But in the child’s artwork, we may well find that the microgenetic sense in which art is the construction of future life is linked (indirectly, through ontogenesis) to a sociogenetic one as well. As the child’s errors become voluntary and volitional, they create new genres we adults cannot predict or even imagine. The artworks we give our

sloppy little architects today, they will rework, and re-rework, and ultimately give back to us tomorrow, yea, and tomorrow's morrow too.



Caravaggio, Bacchus (1595)

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