

On the Epic of the Collective: Erik Reger's *Union der festen Hand* (1931)

Francesca Goll

Abstract

The present contribution intends to investigate Erik Reger's positions on the relationship between culture, literature and the industry – including its technological advancements and its influence on the workers as individuals – by scrutinizing several different sources. Reger, who was a journalist and later editor and director of the Berlin based newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel*, has written numerous articles on the subject and his archive is kept at the *Akademie der Künste* (AdK) in Berlin. By drawing on reviews, archival materials and writings, this article will highlight Reger's specific position and relate it to Sergey Tretyakov's pamphlet "The Biography of the Object" (1929).

Keywords

industrial literature; Ruhr; Weimar Republic; Tretjakov; Erik Reger; Mining

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1.

In an article published in 1929 – and reprinted in a comprehensive collection of his writings edited by Erhard Schütz more recently – with the programmatic title “Industrieviertel und Zeittheater” (Reger 1993: 88-94) Reger argues for leaving behind the traditional forms of «Gesellschafts- und Bildungstheater» (*ibid.*: 88) and for the development of new forms of theatre, more apt to embrace the wake of a new time. He states:

Es gibt kein Gebiet in Deutschland, das mehr Anfang, mehr Gegenwart wäre als das Industriegebiet an der Ruhr. Kein Gebiet, in welches das abgewirtschaftete, vergreiste Theater weniger hineinpaßte. Kein Gebiet, in dem eine Kunst mit fertigem Gesicht isolierter dastünde. (*Ibid.*: 88)

Reger identifies specific characteristics of the vast industrial landscape by the Ruhr and auspices that the technological and economic developments shall be accompanied by a renewal of cultural and artistic forms. A few years earlier, in 1922, Egon Erwin Kisch had visited the area and described Essen in *Der rasende Reporter* (1925) in very gloomy terms, which stand in stark opposition to Reger's attitude:

Immer dunkler tönt sich das Grau der Häuserwände, immer dunkler, und bald sind sie beinschwarz. Nackte, kahle, rußige Ziegelmauern unendlicher Fabriken und unendlicher Arbeitshöfe sind die Seitenkulissen der Straßen, das Balkengewirr eines Förderturmes und Schlotte von ungeahnter Breite mit eisernen Wendeltreppen an der Außenseite und ein unmutiger Himmel sind ihr Hintergrund.

Nirgends eine Zierde, nirgends ein Schmuck, außer dem Kuppelturm des Verwaltungsgebäudes, einem Mausoleum gleich. (Kisch 1925: 73)

In his sub-chapter dedicated to Essen with the title “Das Nest der Kanonenkönige: Essen” Kisch’s sardonic tone is not to be overread: a gloomy industrial province revering generations of Krupp family members, who have fueled warmongering world-wide. Nonetheless, Kisch overlooks significant developments taking place in Essen in the very same year. As Andreas Rossmann stresses in his afterword to the latest edition of Reger’s *Union der festen Hand*, in 1922 the city of Essen and the specifically founded Museum Association acquired equal shares of the pioneering collection of contemporary art patron and philanthropist Karl Ernst Osthaus (Rossmann 2022: 623-638). The Folkwang Museum in one fell swoop to an internationally acclaimed house which Paul J. Sachs, one of the seven founders of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, raved about as «the most beautiful museum in the world» after his visit in 1932. In 1927 the stage designer Heinz Heckroth, the choreographer Kurt Jooss and the opera director Rudolf Schulz-Dornburg founded the Folkwang School of Music, Dance and Speech (Rossmann 2022: 627). United with the University of Applied Sciences for Design the following year, this institution formed influential artists and choreographers as Anton Stankowski, Agnes Giebel, Pina Bausch, Jürgen Prochnow and Frank Peter Zimmermann.

Although this marked a significant step in the direction of strengthening the arts in an industrial region, the relationship between the arts and the industrial estate still remained fragile: when in 1927 Bertolt Brecht, Kurt Weill and the film director Carl Koch visited the Ruhr area with the idea of developing a multimedia theatre project called “Ruhrepos”, the cultural minister of the region suddenly aborted the planned industrial opera house, justifying it with rising costs. Despite this failed attempt, Reger continued to vocally advocate new forms of art for the Ruhrgebiet, demanding that the theaters should not only represent but also be located in the very places where the labour force lives and works. The «Kunst mit fertigem Gesicht» named in the article quoted above, refers, so Reger, to values which no longer apply, they are long overcome:

Dieser Teil [der Werktätigen], der tagsüber im Büro und Betrieb die harten Wirklichkeitsanforderungen des Wirtschaftslebens an sich verspürt, will sich abends keinen blauen Dunst aus Regionen vormachen lassen, die nie existiert haben, oder deren Grundlagen sich längst verschoben haben. Werte, die dem romantischen Bildungsideal

entspringen und den Widerspruch zwischen Schein und Sein verschärfen, sind deplaziert. Werte, die der heutigen Lebensform entstammen und das primitive Kollektivgefühl nicht mit privaten Gefühlen und Ausnahmezuständen verfälschen, sind notwendig. (Reger 1993: 92)

One aspect certainly affecting the «heutige[n] Lebensform» is the rising advent of technology, which has in different ways played out on the workers' routines, both with regard to industrial mechanization and innovation processes, and in relation to an acceleration of the rhythm of life and work. Reger does not partake in the veneration of technology, he is aware of the advantages it brings, but also fears its effects of the individuals.

In a different article published in 1929, Reger addresses the relationship between technology and poetry in very sharp terms, arguing that the introduction of new terms and vocabulary does not suffice to capture the process of innovation, as well as the emerging new worldview. The totality of a technical world calls for a new literary totality and he names Hanns Küpper as example for the type of poetry he has in mind. The worker has, so Reger, long served as cliché for different types of poetry:

Wenn eine Lyrik, die nach dem an allen Mittelschulen eingeführten ästhetischen Leitfaden arbeitet, den Industriearbeiter zum Anlaß eines Gefühlsergusses nahm, so mußte sie zugleich, bei allem Naturalismus der Motive, eine idealistische Färbung annehmen. Sie strebte von Mitleidsdichtung und sentimentaler Armeleutepoesie über die doktrinäre Klassenkampfesinnung hinweg wieder zum ethischen Gefühl hin und endete zwangsläufig in Ekstasen von Menschenverbrüderung und Völkerbefreiung. Nur die Achtung vor der artistischen Substanz hält uns heute noch und vielleicht schon morgen nicht mehr davon zurück, Dehmels Verse vom Arbeitsmann, dem, um frei sein, wie die Vögel sind, nur die Kleinigkeit Zeit fehlt, verlogen zu nennen. (Reger 1993: 126-130 (128))

«Economy, technology, industry, all very much in demand, all very modern, we're going along with it, we're really not backward»¹, was how

¹ Reger published the article „Maschinenwelt und Gartenlaubenromantik“ under the pseudonym Heinz Lamprecht in the journal *Der Scheinwerfer* in April-May 1930. The most significant articles have been reprinted by Erhard Schütz and Jochen Vogt in 1986 (Reger in Schütz, Vogt 1986: 42-46).

Reger ironically described the literary attempts of his contemporaries in 1930, who were dealing with a theme that was fashionable in the Twenties and at the beginning of the Thirties. What was considered «modern», at the time, was the reference to the motif of technology, but upon a closer look it becomes evident that this was not entirely new: just like the representation of the production sphere, technology also belonged the subject matter of naturalism, as well as to the early – and – working-class literature of expressionism. What was different, though, is the fact that while naturalism and early expressionism were reacting, challenging or, at least, observing, the emergence of modern industrial societies, the literature of the 1920s and 1930s is tied to a very advanced form of capitalist society. Within the Weimar Republic, new forms start to develop, which attempt to respond to an increasingly industrialized and technological society. These partly very divergent approaches can be subsumed under the umbrella term *Neue Sachlichkeit*, which despite all differences still had a number of common traits, such as the turning away from a psychological focus and towards social issues, creating typical figures with an exemplary function, describing work processes as precisely as possible and revealing the grievances in the working sphere, assessing literary forms according to their utility value and oscillating between technological exhilaration and disillusionment. This is the context within which Reger is active: he advocates new forms and sharply criticizes those attempts, some made by fellow journalists as Heinrich Hauser, who enthusiastically embrace technology in anthropomorphic terms².

Besides those attempts, there was a very partisan left-wing literature targeting the representation of everyday proletarian life, as Ludwig Turek's autobiography *Ein Prolet erzählt* (1930), Hans Marchwitza's *Schlacht vor Kohle* (1931) and *Walzwerk* (1932) or still Willy Bredel's *Maschinenfabrik N. und K.* (1930). Those novels describe the everyday life of the industrial worker, the hand movements at the workbench, the assembly line, the accidents, the strike movements and mostly draw on their authors first-hand experiences. The industrial enterprise is viewed from the workplace. However, while there are significant overlaps between Reger's approach and this type of novels, this factual literature follows a political agenda, it's a party literature which simplifies much more complex relations. In an openly polemic article published in the *Dortmunder General-Anzeiger* in January

² Cf. his articles published in spring 1928 in the series „Mensch und Maschine“ in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

1931, Reger summarizes his criticism to the party literature, underlining that, despite its facticity, it manages to eschew reality:

Wären die Kapitalisten und die Machtorgane so einfältig brutal und so sadistisch wie sie in den sogenannten proletarischen Romanen geschildert worden, so wären sie längst erledigt. Diese Schilderungen verhalten sich zur schwierigen Realität ungefähr so wie die an Drähten gezogenen Ziele auf Schießübungsplätzen sich zur faktischen Beweglichkeit lebender Heere verhalten. (Reger 1931: 9-11 (10))

While his position against left-wing party literature is unforgiving, Reger is equally harsh to the literary attempts made by the workers themselves, the Arbeiterdichter. In the same piece quoted above, published in *Der Scheinwerfer* in 1930, he sharply criticizes the Arbeiterdichter by ridiculing their lyric attempts: «Eichendorff als Mechanikus. Es schienen so golden die Sterne, am Fenster ich einsam stand und hörte aus weiter Ferne Maschinenlärm im Land» (Reger in Schütz, Vogt 1986: 43). For him, as he argues elsewhere³, this is grotesque, since the poets are led by the naïve assumption that the industrial boom has destroyed the sentiment for the beauty of the fine arts. In his programmatic essay “Die publizistische Funktion der Dichtung“, published in March 1931 in the *Dortmunder General-Anzeiger*, he self-declares his own passage «vom Poeten zum Publizisten», «vom privaten Stoff zum öffentlichen Thema». Literature and art need to take up an enlightening function: «Wenn der Künstler überhaupt noch eine Funktion hat, so kann es nur eine publizistische, keine poetische sein» (Reger 1931: 14).

2.

Reger's understanding of literature as a secondary, or rather follow-up function, to his main journalistic activities, as well as the merging of the two aspects, can be easily detected in his novel *Union der festen Hand* (1931). The novel was published by Rowohlt and covers 588 dense pages – some of those, just to testify to the merging of genres, are slightly modified versions of his own articles and journalistic contributions. His novel is dedicated «Dem deutschen Volke», the same exact wording as the inscription on the

³ Fritz Schulten ten Hoevel (Erik Reger): „Literatur der komischen Käuze“, in *Der Scheinwerfer*, April 1931.

architrave above the west portal of the Reichstag building. The patriotic slogan expresses the book’s aspiration to represent all citizens, which are in the course of the novel addressed as *citoyens*, testifying both to his understanding of literature as actively partaking in the social restructuring, as well as homage to the Enlightenment. The novel provoked a very vivid and controversial response. Carl Zuckmayer awarded Reger (and Ödön von Horvath) the Kleist-Preis and, as Rossmann’s carefully researched afterword reports, in his laudatory speech he attested to the novel’s sociological meticulousness and to the author’s ability of portraying spiritual and physical conditions with almost biological fidelity and impartiality (Rossmann 2022: 632). The reviews by the leading left-wing and liberal intellectuals gave a differentiated and overwhelmingly positive picture of opinion. Alfons Goldschmidt proclaimed *Union der festen Hand* in the newspaper *Weltbühne* to be the «best German industrial novel». Ludwig Marcuse, in his long and insightful review praised it as a «highly significant event in post-war writing» and Ernst Weiß described it as a «factual novel of unusual format». The Austrian intellectual and communist Ernst Fischer was also enthusiastic:

Das ist das große, immer wiederkehrende Leitmotiv des Romans: der Sieg der Maske über das Wesen, der Phrase über das Leben, der Illusion über die Wirklichkeit. [...] Eine Geschichte der Phrasen und Schlagworte, die seit 1917 wirksam waren – das ist dieser Roman. Aber er ist auch noch mehr; er ist das erste, große, unverlogene Epos der deutschen Industrie, die schonungslose Darstellung ihres äußeren Aufstiegs und ihres inneren Zusammenbruches, in Röntgenaufnahmen ein Film des deutschen Kapitalismus. (Fischer 1931, AdK, Erik-Reger-Archiv, 224)

What Fischer partly refers to in his emphasis on «Phrasen» and slogans is Reger’s incessant polemic against culture as media and propaganda establishment. In the novel, he ridicules the work-loyal after-work decorators, such as the Christian working-class poet Christoph Wieprecht, as well as the travelling reporters, as Kisch or Heinrich Hauser, who fall for the industry’s staging and are incapable of sharp vision. They are represented as the duped cheap suppliers of the information industry. In the end, apart from the main figure of the disillusioned, lone wolf worker Adam Griguszies, all that remains is the press spokesperson – drawn in a markedly grey way – who sits at the centre of information production and analysis. For readers who expected political handouts or a positive outlook, the

novel was disappointing, because it drew an almost totally closed world of self-deception and propagandistic illusion, of dangerous retardation and negligent illusion of the future.

Despite the positive reception, the novel's success was more political and literary than commercial. In 1946 the novel was reprinted by Aufbau: Johannes R. Becher, president of the Kulturbund, pushed for the reprint of several novels in the immediate post-war years. In an interview he stated:

Es wird in Kürze im Aufbau-Verlag eine größere Anzahl schöngestiger Werke erscheinen, darunter der Roman *Stalingrad* von Theodor Plivier, neue, bisher unveröffentlichte Gedichte Gerhard Hauptmanns, der Roman *Verwandte und Bekannte* von Willi Bredel, Adam Scharrers *Maulwürfe*, eine Neuausgabe von Heinrich Manns *Der Untertan* und Erik Regers *Union der festen Hand*. Somit ist ein Anfang gemacht, der Literatur die geschichtliche Rolle zuzuweisen, die ihr bei der geistigen Neugeburt unseres Volkes zukommt. (Becher: 1945, AdK, Erik-Reger-Archiv, 224)

While in his preface to the new edition Reger states that the first edition of 1931 enjoyed the echo he wished for when he wrote it, in the end the two editions were printed in ten thousand copies of which just under eight thousand were sold. Reger the antifascist, once again, was trapped between the new political fronts: he opposed the forced unification of SPD and KPD and was rapidly declared a political enemy in the Soviet occupation zone (DDR after 1949). The novel hence fell into oblivion on both sides of the Iron Curtain: in the DDR because of the anti-communist standing of its author and in the BRD because it critically commented on the industrial and economic boom. In 1965 Jost Hermand wrote an influential article which marked the beginning of a phase of rediscovery of Reger's novel. Hermand wonders why the novel has received so little attention and formulates his assumption:

Man fragt sich, wie es dazu kommen konnte? War das Antifaschistische inzwischen veraltet, oder empfand man das andere Thema des Romans, die ideologische Massenbeeinflussung von Seiten der führenden Wirtschaftskreise, nicht mehr aktuell genug? Mit der nötigen Ehrlichkeit kann man beide Fragen nur mit „nein“ beantworten. Der eigentliche Grund dieser Nichtbeachtung liegt wahrscheinlich in der unbestechlichen Sachlichkeit dieses Buches, das sich nicht in den Dienst einer bestimmten Weltanschauung einspannen läßt. Die *Union der festen Hand* fiel daher in die Kategorie der „unbequemen

Literatur,“ in der man so manche Größen der späten zwanziger Jahre eingesargt hat, um sich nicht in den gängigen Alternativen beirren zu lassen. (Hermand 1965: 113)

He argues, in somewhat hyperbolic terms, that the 1920s have been retrospectively hyped as a wild, hedonistic and mostly merry decade of expressionists, dadaists and bohemians, while the more engaged authors, as Ernst Toller (*Hoppla, wir leben!*, 1927), Arnold Zweig (*Grischa*, 1927), Ludwig Renn (*Krieg*, 1928), Hermann Broch (*Die Schlafwandler*, 1931/32), the early Ödön von Horváth or Reger, have been largely disregarded. What Hermand implies here is a growing distance between political and literary matters, along the lines of Oscar Wilde’s famous statement about Zola: «Zola sits down to give us a picture of the Second Empire. Who cares for the Second Empire now? It is out of date. Life goes faster than Realism» (Wilde, 1954: 931).

Probably the most important question arising in this context concerns the literary representation of those seemingly anonymous complexes of reality hidden behind the expression «modern economic world». Is the novel, which has largely dealt with single individual characters, at all capable of representing collective enterprises of sorts? A quick flashback into the history of the industrial novel shows that the narrative form and the stylistic devices in the Twenties and Thirties, in Reger’s time, are still tied to the tradition of bourgeois realism: focused on the individual, increasingly aware of the group, but as yet ignoring the masses. The narrative perspective plays a crucial role, the options appear to be two: either a perspective from above, hence through the lens of the employer, or a view from below, recounted by the employees. The first type was much more popular, since it allowed to fuse the industrial novel with a family saga, whereby the generational unfolding of the family stands in the foreground, while the business matters increasingly fade into the background. The specific newness of modern large-scale industry, namely the concentration of capital and thus the growing anonymity of economic and political power, remains largely unacknowledged even in such works, which try to tie the depiction of industrial contexts to specific places, rather than families. Bernhard Kellermann’s *Stadt Anatol* (1932) is set in a Rumanian city and recounts, partly in a very humorous way, the workings in the oil industry, while Dierck Seeberg’s novel saga *Die Metallstadt* (1924-30) covers different labour environments in the Ruhr area, whereby each novel focuses on a specific context: *Die Unterstadt* (1930) with mining, *Die Zwischenstadt* (1927) with small agents and people working in offices, and *Die Oberstadt* (1927) focus-

ing on the industry and its most influential figures as Kirberg, Thyssen and Krupp. Seeberg too, in *Die Oberstadt*, fails to distance himself from these individual figures and to portray a «type», who stands for much more than just himself. Even these authors are still tied to bourgeois group ideas, instead of envisaging the supra-individual dimension of this world: the increasing mechanization of work processes, the impact of mass media, the internal erosion of previous liberalism and the increasing alienation of humans from their pre-industrial living conditions. This is precisely the point, it seems to me, where Regener sets a completely new standard. In *Union der festen Hand*, for the first time, an attempt is made to present the collective in a collectivist way, and to do so as objectively as possible, in that Regener sticks purely to the organisational, the mechanical and the apparatus-like aspects.

He is neither concerned with the senseless, excessive juxtaposition of figures and episodes, nor with a false idealisation of the collective, but with the uncannily perfect apparatus behind it: the «Union der festen Hand». Regener constructs the novel in five stages, structured along the main political and economic events between 1918 and 1929: collapse, revolution, inflation, stabilisation and world economic crisis, whereby he places the «Bericht des Generalanzeigers», hence the press report in the newspaper, as the «official» interpretation at the end of the first four chapters, leaving only the conclusion – the victory of the Nazis – to the readers' power of thought. The author makes use of an exemplary episodic technique through which certain political or social constellations are illuminated in a flash. One of the most convincing is found right at the beginning: the unexpected visit of Emperor Wilhelm to the Geschoßdreherei III in the summer of 1918, during which «embarrassing» incidents strike the already insecure emperor a severe blow. Other constructed but “typical” scenes are a supervisory board meeting, a factory owners' breakfast, a workers' wedding, a workers' and soldiers' council meeting, a strike procession, the description of certain work processes and other recurring routines from the factory milieu. The crucial point is that Regener avoids any inner sympathy in these scenes and strictly adheres to the boundaries of the real circumstances. He delivers a cross-section in which the decisive factor is not the narrative setting but the uncovering of the economic driving forces. To make this intention even clearer, he opens the novel with «instructions for use», warning the «user» of this work not to be deceived by the fact that this book is described as a novel on the title page: «Gebrauchsanweisung. 1. Man lasse sich nicht dadurch täuschen, dass dieses Buch auf dem Titelblatt als Roman bezeichnet wird» (9). With regard to these instructions Hermand's

otherwise very lucid and detailed analysis overlooks an aspect which, it seems to me, is crucial: the influence of Sergej Tretjakow's pamphlet "Biography of the Object".

3.

On 12th October 1931, shortly after the publication of his novel, Reger receives a letter by Annemarie Ittmann, living in 8, rue Philippe de Champagne, XIII arrondissement, Paris. She writes on behalf of Ilja Ehrenburg, whom she does background research for, stating that she is currently seeking information «über die Herren Hugenberg, Flick, Bosch, Petcek und Jakob Goldschmidt» (Adk, Erik-Reger-Archiv, 55). In particular, she seeks insights into their relationship to Russia, as well as personal details about them. Ittmann has read *Union der festen Hand* and raises a few questions:

Die *Union der festen Hand* [handwritten, no italics in the original, F.G.] habe ich übrigens mit sehr viel Freude gelesen. Da ich nun aber auf diesem Gebiet unwissender bin als vielleicht der Durchschnitt, habe ich zwar Menschen wie Krupp etc. Hugenberg, Kirdorf, Duisberg herausgefunden; finde mich aber mit dem anderen schlecht zurecht. Können Sie mir da helfen? Kann ich das, was Sie bezgl. Hugenberg-Hachenpoot sagen als Dokumentation verwenden, besonders die Programmrede und den Unterrockausspruch bei der letzten Generalversammlung. Hugenbergs Weggang soll, wie mir vielfach gesagt wurde, auf eine Unterredung Stresemanns bei Krupps zurückzuführen sein daher auch sein besonders starker Hass gegen Stresemann. Des Weiteren: Wo hat Hugenberg nach dem Ausscheiden von Krupp gelebt und welche Rolle spielt er in den Fragen der Ruhrbesetzung? Desgleichen liegt mir an den Bedingungen, unter denen bei den verschiedenen Herren gearbeitet wird. (Adk, Erik-Reger-Archiv, 55).

Ittmann treats *Union der festen Hand* as a *roman à clef* and is looking for the right combination in order to decode the text. She is certainly aware that Reger (actually Hermann Dannenberger) had detailed insights and the greatest expertise, having worked as a technician, accountant, balance sheet critic and press officer at the Krupp-Werke until 1927. Her long letter consists in a series of questions about prominent figures in the Ruhr industry, she asks for further bibliographical indications and quite cheekily ends by auspicing a quick answer: «Und wenn Sie mir bezgl. der übrigen Fragen helfen und bald Antwort schreiben würden, wären Ihnen Herr Ehren-

burg und ich besonders dankbar» (*ibid.*). Reger does not reply to her letter, a few weeks later she writes him a short note, he answers that he never got the original letter and therefore she sends him a copy of it. His answer, dated 17th November 1931 is very insightful, both with regard to the way he works and to his poetics:

Sehr geehrte Frau Ittmann,
ich nehme an, daß Herr Ehrenburg Verständnis dafür haben wird, wenn ich ihm sage, daß ich ein peinlich genaues und intimes Material, das ich in jahrelanger persönlicher Arbeit gesammelt habe, nicht für fremde Zwecke zur Verfügung stellen kann. Es würde Sie auch nichts nutzen, wenn ich Ihnen den Weg angäbe, auf dem ich dieses Material gesammelt habe, denn dieser Weg ist für Sie nicht bestreitbar. Ohne die lebendige Gegenwart der Dinge, ohne ihre lebendige Anschauung hilft das beste Material nichts. Ich sage Ihnen das offen und nehme keine Zuflucht in Ausreden. Eine kleine Berichtigung noch hinsichtlich der „Union der festen Hand“. Zwar habe ich dokumentarisch gearbeitet, aber die Namen sind keine einfachen Decknamen für lebende Personen, sondern selbstständige Inkarnation industrieller Typen, die aus den wirklichen Vorbildern herauskristallisiert wurden. (Adk, Erik-Reger-Archiv, 55)

Reger highlights Ittmann's crucial misunderstanding, while temporarily making his procedure explicit: his material is drawn from real observation and expertise throughout his years of employment at Krupp, but his literary transposition goes far beyond the individual figures of the entrepreneurs. Quite opposite to that, *Union der festen Hand* highlights the extent to which individuality is swallowed by the dynamics governing labour relations within the large-scale industrial sites. In that sense, Ehrenburg and Ittmann completely misunderstand the novel: its aim is not representing the roles and workings of these influential figures, but rather showing the relations within these contexts by exemplifying specific "types" of figures, which retain its validity in any other equivalent context. Reger's answer clearly recalls the poetic vision of the Soviet avant-gardist Sergej Tretjakow, who claimed the necessity for new visions and new forms facing the radically new society inaugurated with the Bolshevik Revolution. The novelty of the details, conditions and processes, so Tretjakow, must be described and must not disappear in the retracing of known older things. What the fighters and the struggles of socialist industrialisation and collectivisation were really like and in what world-historical circumstances they stood could not be determined by world-historical recollections alone.

New industrial policies imply new labour relations, which call for new artistic forms. The epoch-comparative representation of the new object required the meticulous research of the new social facts and relations, the inclusion of all units of socialist activity, in order not to take the contemporary phenomena for mere side pieces of older phenomena (Mierau 2007: 9).

In the first issue of the journal *Nowy LEF*, Viktor Schklowski summarises the procedure at the end of his essay as follows:

One must learn to write correspondences, chronicles, essays, feuilletons, short stories, theatre reviews, sketches of milieus, and also that which replaces the novel; that is, one must learn to work towards the future, towards the form that you must create yourselves. Teaching people literary forms, that is, teaching them how to solve problems instead of mathematics – that is stealing from the future and breeding banalities. (Schklowski 1927: 33) (my own translation)

This focus on finding a new form, as well as on the merging of literary genres, recalls Reger's observations voiced in the articles written just a few years after the *Nowy LEF* publications. More than that, when Reger states in his letter to Ittmann and Ehrenburg that his material, even if they had it, would be of no use to them, verges on the idea that «dead» material resulting from indirect sources is useless: it is necessary to have first-hand experience and to then abstract from there. The starting point, for Reger as much as for Tretjakow, is the real, lived observation – not observations from the vantage point of visitors (which is what Reger reproaches, for instance, to Kisch), but from the vantage point of within, of someone working there in whichever function. This requires, firstly, the practical cooperation of the writer and, secondly, a long-term continuity and renewal of contact with the explored regions. In the Soviet context, for Nikolai Tikhonov or Vladimir Lugovskoy, the Central Asian Soviet republics became a space of discovery of new facts and circumstances at the turn of the decade. Valentin Katayev, Marietta Shaginyan, Ilya Ehrenburg, Alexander Besymensky, Ilya Zelvinsky went to the large construction sites of the first Five-Year Plan. Tretjakow himself worked this way, too. In the discussions about new forms of literature, two main aspects come to light: on the one hand, it is a question of determining the working method and the social competence of the writer, while on the other hand, the increased inclusion of memoirs, experience and travel reports, diaries, letters etc. imply a redefinition of what literature is, ultimately promoting an expansion of the concept of literature. The mentioned merging of genres takes Reger's own

poetic one step further: while Reger argues, as discussed above, that if at all, the artist's function is «publizistisch» and not poetic, thereby maintaining a distinction, the Nowy LEF advocates a renewed understanding of literature and poetry, so as to include different types of texts.

One of the most striking aspects of *Union der festen Hand* are the instructions for use, which give away much of its author's poetic. His four instructions mark a progression from a provocative genre statement about the novel and its role (points 1 and 2) to its effects on the readership (points 3 and 4). The first point introduces the genre question by addressing the tension between reality and fiction: «1. Man lasse sich nicht dadurch täuschen, dass dieses Buch auf dem Titelblatt als Roman bezeichnet wird» (9). What Reger implies is that it is all real, nothing has been invented – and in order to address the reader's objections to that, he continues: «2. Man beachte, dass in diesem Buche nicht die Wirklichkeit von Personen oder Begebenheiten wiedergegeben, sondern die Wirklichkeit einer Sache und eines geistigen Zustandes dargestellt wird» (9). This is the indication which Ittmann (and possibly Ehrenburg) overlooked: Reger draws from real facts and figures, but then constructs representations of it which are typologies, models which are valid beyond the exact setting they originate from. Nonetheless, the relationship between reality and fiction is further complicated by the next indications, which highlights the extent to which the two aspects are merged:

3. Wenn man in den Reden einzelner Personen Stellen findet, die besonders unwahrscheinlich klingen, so hat man es mit tatsächlichen Äußerungen führender Geister der Nation zu tun, oder wenigstens mit Gedankengängen, die auf solche zurückgehen. (9)

Here, he emphasizes the extent to which his novel draws on reality by stating that, in fact, reality is much more «unwahrscheinlich» than fiction can ever be. The oddest and unlikeliest statements are those derived from speeches, statements or at least positions voiced by some among the most influential figures in the country. While up until here he played with the opposition between real and imaginary, in the second part of this instruction, he mentions the reasons why he decided not to highlight those quotations:

- a) weil es das Auge stören würde;
- b) weil der Leser sich angewöhnen würde, darüber hinwegzusehen;
- c) weil der Leser sich vorzeitig einbilden würde, diese Stellen von

selbst erkannt zu haben. (9)

These three arguments are of different nature: the first one is aesthetic, the second one verges on the readers habit of overlooking reality and the third one on their blind ambition to recognise the passages in advance. In all three cases, the function of those quotations remains ineffective, as the readers are distracted either by their different formatting, or by their reality. Instead, as Reger highlights in his last instruction, he calls for an active and participative readership:

4. Man beachte, dass in diesem Buch fünf Stationen durchlaufen werden, und bemühe sich, die Zahnräder des Getriebes zu erkennen. Der jeweilige Haltepunkt wird auf den ersten vier Strecken durch den „Bericht des Generalanzeigers“ kenntlich gemacht. Bei genauer Befolgung dieser Anleitung wird es dem Leser möglich sein, nach der fünften Strecke den „Bericht des Generalanzeigers“ selbst zu schreiben. (9)

In the best case, in the course of the novel the readership acquires the capacity of a clearer outlook, which enables them to formulate the last report themselves. Unlike the traditional novel, which filtered the complicated interactions of manifold social groups through the impacted psyche of a single character, Reger's poetic resounds Tretjakow's object biography, which promotes a kind of anti-Bildungsroman focusing not on psychological consistency, but on people who are declined by a variety of production processes. If the traditional novel was held together by the hero, the biography of the object is held together by the act of labour. Both Reger and Tretjakow, as well as, a few years later, Walter Benjamin in his essay *Der Autor als Produzent* (1934), regard the novel as a *Gebrauchsobjekt*, geared at representing an increasingly complex social and economic set-up, while challenging the role of the media within this power structure. Merging the concepts of reality and fiction, facticity and imagination, provokes a powerful reflection on the role of literature in contemporary societies, which is as crucial today, as it was hundred years ago.

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