The Age of Free Jongleurs: The Art of the People and the Czech Avant-Garde

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This article explores the Czech interwar avant-garde's interest in folklore and popular culture. Like most of its international counterparts, the Czech avant-garde was convinced that institutions like art and literature had outlived their historical validity. It also had little use for bourgeois conceptions of "the nation" and "the people," so often seen as the basis of folklore. But it engaged intensely with the cultural legacy of marginalized classes and with the possibility of new ways of expressing the cultural attitudes of the masses, both in the current moment of heightened social struggle, and in a vision of a future society where class differentiation would be abolished alongside the differentiation between specialist artists and non-specialist audiences or consumers. The search for a new art of the people found expression, most notably, in poet Vítězslav Nezval's demonstrative vitalization of low genres; in artist and theorist Karel Teige's championing of the circus and urban street culture, which he saw as elements of a "new folk art"; and in literary critic Bedřich Václavek's attempt to trace the circulation of modern poetry and songs that entered the shared repertoire of emerging classes. This complex interplay of new and old, I argue, offers a model for the prefiguration of a new world that still might survive the end of this one.

Keywords: Czech literature / avant-garde / folklore / popular culture / proletarian culture / poetism / Teige, Karel / Nezval, Vítězslav / Václavek, Bedřich

1.

> Painters paint no longer for art, but for people [*pro člověka*]. Not excellent and splendid works as ends in themselves, but poems of a new, free, communal life. Perhaps, they believe, they will again be folk artists [*lidovými umělci*]. (Teige, "Nové umění" 177)

June 1921. The Czech avant-garde is still in its infancy. The now-legendary association of radical artists Devětsil had been founded only

eight months earlier. Karel Teige, who would become the group's most active theorist and organizer, is only 20 years old. The young artists have been given the chance to edit a special issue of the left-wing cultural review *Červen*, published by the famed anarchist-turned-Communist poet Stanislav Kostka Neumann. It was now their chance to present themselves to the public, to lay out their revolutionary call for a clean break with past styles and forms, in the name of a new "proletarian poetry." Karel Teige's contribution to the issue: an article about folklore titled "The New Art and Folk Creativity" ("Nové umění a lidová tvorba").

> We are that band of street urchins,
> athletes, poets, and whores in one formation …
>
> In a workers' bar, to rifles' shooting music,
> we'll stammer out our lines … (Nezval 29)

Three years later, Vítězslav Nezval puts out a poetry collection that becomes the foundational document of a new phase of the Czech avant-garde. Just as the young group was growing tired of "the tumult of proletarian poetry," Nezval published *Pantomima*, and, as Teige later reflected, "his generation found its orientation" (Teige, "Manifest" 325). What was so remarkable about the new collection of poetry? For Teige, it was all a "magical fairy tale" (325).

> When literary work finds itself in trouble, … it turns to the folk reservoir of verbal art. (Václavek 280–281)

1940. In all practical senses, the Czech avant-garde is dead. After its feverish activity in the early 1920s, it had slowed down for a time, before experiencing a remarkable reawakening in the mid-1930s, when Nezval and Teige declared their adherence to surrealism. Then, in March 1938, Nezval broke with the rest of the Surrealist Group, declaring it dissolved. Six months later, the Munich Accords dissolved Czechoslovakia. By 1939, all the Czech lands were occupied by Nazi Germany, and the former avant-gardists lay low. Bedřich Václavek, a longtime collaborator of Teige's and avant-garde literary critic, who continued to respect the avant-garde legacy even after turning to socialist realism, devoted the rest of his intellectual life to the study of folk tradition. At the beginning, middle, and end of the interwar Czech avant-garde lies folklore.

Why should I read so much into these scattered lines, these mentions here and there of "folk" and "the folk," English words I have been

invoking as translations of the Czech *lidový* and *lid*? The same words, after all, could also be translated as "popular" and "the people," and is it really so surprising that the avant-garde was interested in the people, since it everywhere supported socialist or populist movements and decried the old elites, preferring the inspiration of low, popular culture? Why should I consider such forward-looking vernacularism in the same breath as old-fashioned folklore? And even if Teige and Václavek flirted with traditional folklore in 1920 and 1940, why should I speak of folklore in the intervening years, when the avant-garde devoted its attention to urban street culture and popular entertainment?

Because: when we separate the notions of folk and folklore from the notions of people and popular culture, we dig a conceptual chasm between two bodies of thought and political-aesthetic practice that have historically been closely interrelated. When the avant-garde addressed the problem of the people in art, it addressed the same problem as folklorists and folklorizing artists, even while offering new answers.

The search for new sources and new forms of folklore was the interwar Czech avant-garde's contribution to the perennial modern pursuit of an art for the people and by the people. They believed they found what they were looking for on the margins of society, in the culture of the outcast and the ignored.

2.

There is a widespread understanding that folklore represents the past while the avant-garde represents the future, and that, for this reason, the avant-garde must be opposed to folklore. But this understanding overlooks just how much the two phenomena were entangled with one another.

Those who pay close attention have long noted the avant-garde's interest in aesthetic expression shared by the non-expert masses. Some have written on the close relationship between the avant-garde and modernist popular culture or "vernacular modernism" (Hansen; Lacey). Others have noted the connections between avant-garde expression and traditional folklore, though usually they have focused on cases other than the paradigmatic interwar avant-garde (Ulehla; Dian; Middleton; Montero). Boris Groys, in his exaggerated takedown of the Russian avant-garde, observed that Malevich and Khlebnikov were inspired by the simplicity of folk art and vernacular language when they set out to radically reduce aesthetic form (Groys 18). But rarely have observers closely analyzed how much the historic avant-garde

looked to folk forms as models of horizontal semiotic circulation and collective creation.

It is tempting to accept at face value the avant-garde's own dramatic calls for absolute novelty, its frustrations with the prevailing culture of both masses and elites. Such polemic simplifications, however, conceal complexity. First, because the avant-garde did *not* wholly reject the past or the popular culture of its day; and second, because folklore as a concept is not limited to the past. The avant-garde was not a revolt against the entirety of the past, but against a part of the past that persisted in the present. And in order to attack that antiquated part of the present, it championed other parts of the past alongside disregarded parts of the present, in order to make an alternative future. In doing this, the avant-garde sometimes criticized the culture of the people, but it did so primarily to the extent that the masses accepted what was offered to them by the old elites.

The avant-garde did differ from other artistic tendencies in its approach to the people. It did not uncritically embrace the folklore that others had championed as a way of inscribing new work into the culture of the nation; nor did it present its own work as "excellent and splendid" work (Teige, "Nové umění" 177) that could elevate the people. The avant-garde was a vanguard in the sense that it set out to find a new relationship to the people, provoking and inviting the people to express culture in new ways.

By posing the question of the *folkness* of the avant-garde, I pose the question of how the work of the avant-garde articulated past and future, people and vanguard, recipient and creator, consumption and production, in art and life. When the avant-garde called for abolishing or liquidating Art, it did so in order to revive other art forms that did not need to be liquidated, because they had never claimed for themselves the lofty title of Art. When the Czech avant-garde sought an art of the proletariat, which would be a "new folk art" (Teige, "Nové umění proletářské" 272), or when it composed poetry inspired by circus and vaudeville, or when it imagined "ragtime on the barricades," or when it collected folk songs of the urban masses, it was trying to approach the people obliquely, working out its simultaneous connection with and disconnection from the collective subjects and objects of social transformation. If it did not approach the people directly, as other folklorizing tendencies had done and would later do, this was because the revolutionary processes favored by the avant-garde would also change the people or enable the people to change themselves. Even if the old world was ending, the new world would again be old. It would be old in new ways.

The Czech avant-garde sought to achieve these goals in three ways. (1) It introduced into its creative work the principle of popularity or folkness (in Czech, the term used is *lidovost*), attempting to address the people in ways that differed radically from the folklorizing approaches of earlier high art. (2) It looked beyond its own creative work, in order to find allies and sources of inspiration among non-expert creators. (3) It conceptualized and experimented with new forms of aesthetic expression that could enable the people to collectively mobilize their imagination.

3. The avant-gardist as popular entertainer

The Czech avant-garde began as a movement for proletarian culture. Like the Soviet Proletkult movement that inspired it, it made known its class-based understanding of aesthetic expression and its commitment to a radically transformed modernity. It was rather less enthusiastic than its Soviet counterpart, however, about the actually existing industrial society that had produced the revolutionary working class. As the collectively signed founding statement of Devětsil stated in 1920, "It was a fateful mistake to suppose that the art of machines could really be the art of a worker who is imprisoned and beaten down by monstrous machines, to think that workers could be captivated by art that sings praises to automobiles in which they will never ride and to airplanes in which they will never fly" (U. S. Devětsil 82). More than the conditions of the proletariat, what the young avant-gardists hoped to express was the consciousness of a proletariat that protested against industrial civilization. The "proletarian" aesthetic, for them, was not a complement to the factory, but a counterpoint to it—the imagination struggling to liberate itself from a repressive society and from exploitative working conditions.

Perhaps because of this approach, the Czech avant-garde initially appeared less interested in formal experimentation than many avant-gardes. Teige was far more interested in the principle of imaginative fancy that was already present in the everyday life of workers when they weren't working, and which artists and poets could express in their work. Painters connected to the movement, like Otakar Mrkvička, developed a kind of proletarian primitivism, which depicted working-class life as both simple and exotic, exuding a *joie de vivre* that waited to be unleashed from the oppressive conditions that contained it.

Another approach was presented, meanwhile, by Jaroslav Seifert, the later Nobel Prize winner, and by Jiří Wolker, who was then the most prominent representative of Czech "proletarian poetry." In contrast

to the imaginative joy celebrated by Teige and the primitivist painters, they emphasized working-class suffering. While Seifert employed largely modernist free verse to explore proletarian subjectivity in his first book, *City in Tears* (*Město v slzách*, 1921), Wolker took inspiration from folk ballads (and their reinterpretation in the work of Karel Jaromír Erben), repurposing the narrative genre to recount the small and great tragedies of working-class life. In Wolker's famous "Ballad of the Stoker's Eyes" ("Balada o očích topičových," 1933), a boiler attendant comes home blinded from his work before the fire. His wife cries, "Why did you make love / to that cursed dame / that mistress made of iron / of shovel and of flame?" (Wolker, *Těžká hodina* 54). The folk ballad's classic plot of love and betrayal is transposed onto the class struggle, the worker having been seduced by the machines that will destroy him. Wolker's diction, meanwhile, is simple, his meter and rhyme scheme relatively regular, in a form meant to be accessible to working-class readers (Vlašín 15). In a theoretical essay, Wolker admitted that great art demands something of the celebratory and exceptional (he used the word *nedělní*, meaning "Sunday" but also, literally, "non-working," the opposite of "everyday" or "workaday"), but this is not enough: "It is in the gray acts of daily life that the artist finds the divine spark" (Wolker, "Umění všední" 219). Although artists should be "builders of a new beauty" in the new world built by the proletariat (Wolker, "Proletářské umění" 224), this beauty should express the totality of workers' collective experience, including the dull suffering that will not be ended by pure and sublime art, but only by struggle.

Throughout this period, Devětsil sought to ensure that its activities be "as popular as possible, accessible to everyone," as it declared in its founding statement (U. S. Devětsil 82). The group even invited "revolutionary workers" to support its activities by becoming dues-paying members, in exchange for which they would receive discounts as well as "an artistic bonus worth in itself more than the cost of membership" (82). I have found no evidence on whether any workers took them up on this offer, but Seifert and Wolker were widely read, reaching many living-room bookshelves. Their attempt to give aesthetic expression to the proletariat captured the imagination of the middle-classes much as earlier artists had succeeded in winning the middle class's affection for peasant folklore. But Teige, for his part, had other designs for the notion of proletarian culture, which was to be more than artists' imaginative expression of proletarian consciousness, but an entirely new kind of folk art, to which I will return below. First, I will discuss the next phase of avant-garde attempts to make their own work popular.

It is well known that the Czech avant-garde soon moved on from proletarian culture. Wolker, who remained devoted to proletarian poetry and broke with Devětsil around 1922 (Vlašín 14), died of tuberculosis in 1924, the same year that Teige declared it was poetry's role to capture not the "six days of work" but "the seventh day of the soul" (Teige, "Poetismus" 556), which was likely, at least in part, a polemical reference to Wolker's defense of the "workaday" (*všední*) against the "Sunday" (*nedělní*) in poetry. While Teige's notion of proletarian culture had encompassed both labor and leisure, the two dimensions of modern life would now be separated, as he placed the hard daily work of building a new world under the rubric of "constructivism," while he conceptualized the "leisurely, jocular, fantastical" art of living after work (556) as something different, called "poetism." Both categories of activity were necessary to the revolutionary movement and to the avant-garde, but they were not to be confused.

Gone from Teige's conceptual apparatus was the emphasis on unmediated collectivism in poetic creation, and gone was the immediate identification of this collective with the proletariat. Teige's collaborators largely replaced the somber, emotional, and formally more traditionalist proletarian poetry with joyous and playful formal experimentation. But the newly "poetist" avant-garde did not retreat from society into the individuality of poets. When poets ceased to appear as unmediated mouthpieces of the proletariat, they began to appear as mediators between artists and a broader social collective.

It was the poet's role to be a popular entertainer, taking up the lowest and most overlooked genres. Nezval's *Pantomima* would contain a "broadside ballad," an alphabet with childish rhymes for each letter, and of course a script for a pantomime. Seifert's 1925 book *On the Radio Waves* (*Na vlnách TSF*), clearly influenced by Nezval, set out to capture the excitement of waterfronts, shop windows, imported fruits, cafes, busy streets—cheerful impressions of the city that, four years earlier, had shown him nothing but tears. The city itself appears in this book as a site for poetism, which Teige now called "the art of wasting time" and whose aim was "to make life into a grand amusement park" (Teige, "Poetismus" 557). The theatrical section of Devětsil, which began calling itself the Liberated Theater (Osvobozené divadlo), drew heavily on the methods of circus and music hall, soon performing wildly popular variety shows and writing songs that are so well known today they can be considered a part of modern Czech folklore.

The avant-garde is best remembered for its commitment to the free development of artistic-poetic impulses, but it was equally committed

to making its work enjoyable for the public. The Czech avant-garde in particular sought to accomplish this by inscribing itself in the existing tradition of popular entertainment. As Nezval suggested with his image of poets as street urchins marching in step with athletes and whores, this meant not only making their own work popular, but also seeking out the broader crowd of people who created, together, the experience of modern life.

4. A vanguard that follows the people

Even when they called their people "the proletariat," their idea of the proletariat was hardly limited to the "idealized proletarians, barricades, and red flags" that Teige later denounced as inadequate objects of poetry (Teige, "Manifest" 326). In fact, Teige's early writings on proletarian culture are marked by the same kind of colorful, life-loving, and proudly unpretentious urban elements that he would later champion under the banner of poetism. In one of his first articles, from February 1921, Teige would write of a new "biocentrism" that supplants the anthropocentrism of earlier art, drawing on the "love of life" found in "folk art, children's drawings, and folk songs [*národní písně*]" (Teige, "Novým směrem" 95). The proletarian quality of the new art lay not in its connection to hard labor but in its primordial quality, its ability to draw on natural forces that bourgeois society, with its artificial sophistication, had concealed.

Folk art, in this conception of modernity, only gained in relevance. In the June 1921 essay with which I opened this article, Teige begins with a polemic against folk art as it is most stereotypically known, but he goes on to argue for the importance of folk art of a different kind. "Folk art?" he asks.

> Ah, yes, our national costumes, which we say the whole world should envy. … What a pasture for the eyes when national and Slavic banners wave. … Even the great master Mucha sweetens his inexhaustible and unartistic lemonade with motifs of embroidered ornamentation! … This is where fashion and our patriotic, wholly anti-artistic fever has gotten us! This truly peculiar mania has made many people disgusted by the adornments of our folk clothing. And no wonder. (Teige, "Nové umění" 175)

Teige has little use for this old-fashioned appropriation of folk motifs. But he turns his attention to another folk culture that is "still alive" (Teige, "Nové umění" 176). This is the urban and peri-urban folk art

of "vulgar ditties and anecdotes told in the streets" (176), of signs hung in front of stores, of ordinary furniture and amateur photography, all of which had been vividly described in a recent book by the modernist painter Josef Čapek, *The Humblest Art* (*Nejskromnější umění*, 1920). This was art that belonged neither to the village nor the nation, as Teige would write later, but to "the entire repertoire of life on the globe" (Teige, "Umění dnes" 377). This reflection on folk art then opened the path to a programmatic statement on the "new art," which would be "revolutionary, proletarian, folk" (377).

While Čapek conceptualized this "humble," unspiritual art as a mediator between people and the materiality of things, Teige situated contemporary folk art between the past and the future. He identified the current moment as "a critical interregnum between tendencies and styles," when "primal and folk creativity" could "reinforce new work" (Teige, "Nové umění" 176) and prefigure a new "age of style" when there would be "no separation between the so-called great ruling art and the forgotten, second-class, and conditional art of the people" (177). In the meantime, before that age arrived, it was important to identify the sources of creative energy that pointed to it, and the people who wielded that energy.

In the fall of 1922, Teige published, for the first time, a text wholly devoted to "The New Proletarian Art" (as the title read). He later described the text as a "revision of the program of 'proletarian art'" (Teige, "Manifest" 325), and it did present a vision very different from that of Lunacharsky and Bogdanov in the Soviet Union or Stanislav Kostka Neumann in Prague. But the text was consistent with Teige's own writing that had preceded it: he sought the sources of new proletarian art in already-existing forms of proletarian expression experienced by workers. "If cubo-futurist art was derived from the machine of a defective civilization," Teige wrote, "we want to derive proletarian art from the human being, to look for it in the people [*lid*] and the crowd [*dav*]" (Teige, "Nové umění proletářské" 268). Proletarian art could therefore take inspiration from great writers but also from stories printed in popular almanacs and from dime novels sold by wandering book peddlers (269). Proletarian art could draw on the tradition of political art, like songs from the revolutionary barricades, broadside caricatures, and political cartoons, but more important were the daily sources of workers' entertainment, like Westerns, sentimental novels, Chaplin films, amateur theater, *jongleurs* in variety theater, traveling singers, popular festivals, and Sunday football matches (271). "Love these works," he urged his readers, "without prejudice" (272). And here

we can see that what speakers of English may be inclined to understand as distinct concepts, the "folkness" of old folklore and the "popularity" of modern popular culture, exist in Teige's framework as a single concept, *lidovost*, which denotes the people's historically changing share in aesthetic expression, from peasants' songs through the latest popular theatrical revues. Sometimes this folkness indicated active participation in aesthetic creativity; at other times, it indicated a kind of popular reception that, implicitly, meant the works expressed the consciousness of those who appreciated them.

When Teige turned to poetism, he no longer directly invoked the aesthetic demands of the proletariat as a defining factor in avant-garde art, but his sources of inspiration remained the same. Now the *jongleur* became a paradigm of art "as natural, delightful, and accessible as sport, love, wine, and all delicacies," as Teige welcomed an age of "clowns, dancers, acrobats, sailors, and tourists," a "harlequinade of feelings and imaginings," an "eccentric carnival and grand amusement show" (Teige, "Manifest" 326).

When he wrote a two-part collection of essays from 1928 and 1930, situating poetism in the history of art, Teige titled the project *On Humor, Clowns, and Dadaists* (*O humoru clownech a dadaistech*). In it, popular entertainment like circus and music hall receives as much attention as literary and artistic movements; the Czech avant-garde is presented as just one part of "a magical theater of variety [*divadlo rozmanitosti*]" that encompasses the world (Teige, *Svět* 50). One noteworthy element of these theatrical forms, for Teige, was their lack of strict separation between artists and the recipients of art, as "modern directors want to have the spectator at the center of the theatrical event"; music hall was especially exemplary for "consciously and deliberately utilizing the cooperation of the audience" (65).

In addition to actual circus and theater, Teige described the wondrous dimension of everyday life that makes the whole world so amusing a stage—one "where we could not remain passive spectators" and where, when we leave at the end of the show, "we can at least say on the road to the underworld: we had a good laugh" (Teige, *Svět* 22). In a long list of examples of poetism in life, which Teige presents as facts drawn from various published and oral sources (35–46), a folklorist can clearly recognize the marks of exaggerated tales told by friends of friends. In other words, Teige had become a collector of urban legends.

Teige, however, never devoted himself methodically to the study of folklore. He never became an expert in the urban lore and popular art that he embraced, the way he was an expert in the history of art that he

largely rejected. In his essays, he often retraced the history of painting, in order to offer a coherent narrative of its development and ultimate crisis; when approaching folk and popular culture, he drew from it haphazardly, applying a method of montage, piecing together striking juxtapositions of what captured his attention. But his longtime collaborator in Devětsil, Bedřich Václavek, was committed to the systematic study of folk expression.

Although there is no dearth of avant-gardists around the world who took an interest in folklore, Václavek was rare in having studied it as a scholar. In 1923, just as the Czech avant-garde was maturing, Václavek defended a doctoral dissertation on secular Czech "folklorized" (*zlidovělé*) songs. Studying under literary scholars as well as the prominent folklorist Čeněk Zíbrt, Václavek was interested in the phenomenon of newly authored songs that are so widely sung they "become folklore" (*zlidovějí*). Although many socialist writers and artists took inspiration from folklore after the rise of socialist realism in the mid-1930s, and although Václavek's first major publication on the topic did not come out until 1938, this was hardly a new interest for him then. His long engagement as an avant-garde literary critic and theorist slowed his academic work, to which he did not return in a sustained manner until after the avant-garde had broken up. But in many ways, he was carrying out a research program that Teige, in his essays and manifestoes, had proposed. Václavek sought to demonstrate, through rigorous study of text circulation, that folklore did not die when peasant society gave way to industrialization, but instead took new forms in the urban spaces inhabited by workers and the bourgeoisie (see Feinberg).

But even as Václavek, Teige, and Nezval looked for allies and inspiration in the present, they continually gestured to something that still belonged to the future.

5. A "new art" made by all

It was not enough to make work that the people could enjoy, or to enjoy work made by the people; it was necessary that both artists and audiences actively take part in new aesthetic practices.

In the period of proletarian culture, what the avant-gardists imagined was a "new style" that would replace the constant succession of schools and "isms" as the liquidation of art led to something like a unified civilizational aesthetic. Bourgeois society had separated "the

so-called great ruling art" from "the forgotten, second-class … art of the people," but Teige wrote that "a true age of style is coming, an age such as last appeared in the Gothic, when there existed a single, unified trunk of art" (Teige, "Nové umění" 177) and there was "no difference between the ruling art and the undercurrent of primal production" (Teige, "Nové umění proletářské" 272). Or as Wolker wrote, "proletarian art will be but the vanguard of a great epoch of the lifestyle of social fellowship" (Wolker, "Proletářské umění" 224). In the short run, proletarian art would be tendentious and partial, competing with the art of other classes, but in the long run it would become the ruling art. Then, when proletarian rule gave way to a classless society, what had been proletarian art would "disperse in all directions out from the narrow limits of class, growing into new cathedrals of socialist culture" (224). This, for Teige, was what made proletarian art different from older folk art: this "new folk art" would not copy the styles of ruling-class art, but would become the ruling art of its age, gaining "the strength that built the Gothic cathedrals" (Teige, "Nové umění proletářské" 272).

In this idealization of the Gothic, one hears an echo of John Ruskin's writing on the nature of Gothic in *The Stones of Venice* (1851–1853). Ruskin too had hoped to restore the lost unity of an architectural project that depended not on refined artists striving for perfect reproduction of ideal forms, but on numerous worker-artisans, each of whom left his unique mark on the final work precisely because he worked imperfectly. But whereas Ruskin and his followers like William Morris had tried to revive this form of creative labor by establishing collaborative artistic workshops and calling for more creativity in the labor process, Teige explicitly rejected their methods. "Ruskin and Morris wanted to ennoble life and craft with art," Teige wrote, "but today, instead, it's a matter of innervating art with the concreteness of contemporary life" (Teige, "Nové umění proletářské" 260). This critique is not well elaborated, but the implication is that Ruskin and Morris still placed faith in Art, when in reality Art was the problem. Life could not be redeemed by giving it more of this Art, which had grown old in its isolation from life. Rather, in a society-wide movement that transformed life itself, the expressive potential of the people could be liberated from the strictures of Art, producing the modern equivalent of the Gothic cathedral. This vision might remind us of Groys's notion of the "total work of art" that, in his view, would enable the avant-garde to transform society like a great dictatorial demiurge. The key difference, nonetheless, is that avant-garde artists are wholly absent from Teige and Wolker's early vision of a unified creative society.

Before the deeper theoretical consequences of these formulations could be worked out, Wolker died and Teige abandoned the idea of a new unity under the banner of a proletarian culture on the way to becoming classless culture. Now, under the influence of Soviet constructivism and Czech functionalism, Teige criticized Ruskin from a new angle: against Ruskin's condemnation of the division of labor—"It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided," Ruskin wrote, "but the men" (Ruskin 18)—Teige insisted that the "practical" (*užitné*) arts would adopt industrial organization. And against Ruskin's embrace of imperfection, the practical arts would embrace straight lines, simplicity, and technologies of perfect replication. But Teige's most influential contribution to the theory of the avant-garde was not in the realm of constructivism itself; it was in the relationship between constructivism and the poetism that would retain a place beside it. In the *poetic* arts (which could be verbal or visual), the imagination would roam free.

Teige, in this period, seems to abandon the humanist dream of those who imagined all labor becoming creative work. He counts instead on hard work, aided by technological innovation, economic progress, and revolutionary politics, to create a built environment conducive to the poetic imagination, and to allow more and more free time for workers to pursue their creative impulses. The practical and poetic dimensions, which had been united in the vision of a post-proletarian Gothic, would now be distinctly separated as a constructivist-poetist duality. As Teige writes in his book on humor in popular culture, *The World That Laughs* (*Svět, který se směje*, 1928), "In cities built by constructivists, let there be a marvelous poetist magic-city," a city within a city, the outer city solid and practical, the inner city imaginative, built on the model of the circus (89). The people are now a two-sided artist, at once the practical builder of the world and its freewheeling poet-decorator.

Yet Teige is ambivalent on the relationship between constructivism and poetism. The two forces are presented sometimes as separate and complementary (after six days of construction, there is one day of poetry, neither one infringing on the time of the other); at other times, they appear in tension. The tension is productive, but it also seems to leave Teige uneasy. In 1930, he seems to contradict the complementary polarity he laid out earlier, writing that poetism will "overcome the antagonism between poem and world," leading toward "a new synthesis of … construction and poem" (Teige, "Báseň" 498). He champions the "purification" of poetry, the poetic impulse freed from the strictures of literary genre and from the demands of serving a class of patrons. But even this autonomy of "pure poetry" is, in itself, a crucial

part of social life. At this point, however, Teige has no concept of a force that could mediate between these two basic tendencies of modern liberation, poetry, and construction.

After 1934, when Teige followed Nezval in declaring himself a surrealist (after displaying a growing interest in surrealism since 1929), he no longer wrote of the polarity of constructivism and poetism. It would seem that surrealist principles made the strict polarity unnecessary, now that Breton had incorporated Marxism into surrealism. While Teige continued to champion constructivism in architecture, the general construction of society no longer appeared divided into separate processes of practical work and poetic play; it could now appear as history, in which the objective and subjective dimensions interacted dialectically (see Kreft 224–225). People make history with their hands and imagination, with consciousness and the unconscious, under conditions of constraint and in rebellion against constraint.

In Teige's most fully elaborated theoretical work of this period, *The Marketplace of Art* (*Jarmark umění*) from 1936, Teige returns to the question of folklore. At first, his position appears diametrically opposed to his earlier championing of the people's urban culture: "In the past," he writes, "the peasant was the creator and bearer of folk art. Today, the proletariat is a popular stratum that doesn't produce and cannot create original and refined folk art" (52). The capitalist art market has taken from the proletariat the means of artistic production, offering back to it only a "pseudo-art and sub-art" (53). Despite this (and despite never working out a thoroughgoing theory of "pseudo-art," or kitsch or bad taste; see Stefański), Teige maintains a fundamental anti-elitism alongside his occasional expressions of dismay at the art consumed by the people. Earlier, in 1928, he had written: "Here, amidst unbelievable petty bourgeois and popular non-taste, lustful brutality, raucous profanity, intense obscenity, … we can find elements of a new, unknown poem, *a reservoir of still untapped forces*" (Teige, *Svět* 85). In *The Marketplace of Art*, he still hopes to drink from this reservoir, where taste and non-taste seem to mingle: "The people, when they are torn away from the stupor that is a contagion of bourgeois and petit bourgeois culture, have a much higher aesthetic sensitivity than the bourgeoisie, which is a class that is fundamentally unaesthetic" (61). The people are not wholly contained within the "stupor" that has infected them; they are capable of appreciating and, as Teige later insists, of creating high-quality aesthetic work. But how to "tear them away" from the contagion of bourgeois and petit bourgeois culture?

At this point, Teige invokes "Lautréamont's prophecy that 'poetry will be made by all, not one.'" As he explains, "Poetry made by everyone

will also be heard by everyone, it will be within the reach of everyone, it will be for each and all: not only that, it will also be a fusion of the creator with the spectator" (Teige, *Marketplace* 63). Even if this moment is displaced to the future, Teige finds it "at least in traces" in the present, especially in the methods of surrealism, which "de-emphasize the notion of the professional author and the significance of special talent" and allow "armless Raphaels" to paint, developing "a general, non-professional creativity and poeticness" that can be put "in the hands of everybody, without training or specialization" (63). Once again, Teige puts forth a vision in which the end of (bourgeois) Art means the dispersion of creativity throughout social life.

Teige no longer calls this future aesthetic practice a new "folk art" as he had done in the early 1920s. But a close reading reveals that his new position is close to the old. He begins by describing what sounds very much like folk art: "On the extreme edge of the avant-garde, embryonic elements of a future art of the people are emerging" (Teige, *Marketplace* 64). Then he corrects himself: this "art of the people" is better called "non-specialist creativity," because "'folk art' will then only be an archaeological term" (64). Folk art as such is a thing of the past, but this is not because the principles of popular expression are disappearing; rather, since art itself "will no longer exist in its current forms," so too will "the folk" (*lid*) cease to exist as a separate sphere of society (64). Whether all artists will become folk artists, as Teige mused in 1921, or none will be, it makes little difference: in a classless society, art will be made by all of society the same way folk art was made by all of its denigrated and forgotten community. Until that day comes when art and poetry will be made by all, the overlooked creators should earn the attention of those who want to transform art and life; they have formed a "republic of unregistered individuals" (69) that cannot be identified with any specialized group or any single class, but subverts the social and aesthetic hierarchies that have excluded it from power and prestige. This "republic" has a history: it can be identified in the waves of creators left out of the history of great Art. And it can expand: into a "community that could not come into being in the space of the present," but "will come into being in time" (71).

It is in this context that Teige invokes the tradition of "revolutionary romanticism," represented by the more radical and more forgotten figures of romanticism and, later, by the *poètes maudits*. Because they have been excluded from the heights of Art, they have been able to develop their poetry freely, poetically, against the demands of the art market and capitalist ideology. In the same way, the "armless Raphaels" who bear the legacy of folk art are rescued from bourgeois culture by

the fact that they have been excluded from it, much as Rancière's "people" can redeem the *polis* because they are excluded from it (Rancière, *Disagreement*). Teige, like Rancière, begins from the premise that the people can create, that even the overworked proletarian has the freedom of night to write (Rancière, *Proletarian Nights*) or, for Teige, to enjoy all the sensuality of life. This is a first principle, not a last principle. The fate of the creating people remains open, in a society that is always changing.

6.

Many hold up the avant-garde as a movement of individualist artistic freedom against the imposed collectivity and folklorism of later socialist realism. Others, like Groys in *The Total Art of Stalinism*, criticize the avant-garde precisely for its collectivism—expressed in an authoritarian impulse to make the artist a general creator of social sensibilities. For Groys, the avant-garde's interest in the people can be explained by its will to transform the ordinary aspects of people's everyday life. With its cult of creation, the avant-garde appropriated for itself the role of the creator. Groys seems to assume one can only be a creator or the people, and never a bit of both.

My reading of the avant-garde, by contrast, suggests that it, like every art form, was shaped by a specific articulation of creator and public. And I propose the notion of "the folk" as a placeholder for that articulation. Rather than understanding "the folk" as a specific content, defined by predefined characteristics, we can understand it is a term that points to this relationship—between creator and public, between the artist and society—and which compels us to ask how an individual creator can represent anything collective at all.

There is no reason to deny that the avant-garde exhibited tendencies to elitism and authoritarianism. But it also exhibited democratic tendencies that cannot be reduced to the desire for individual artistic freedom. We see this not only in the most overtly collectivist activities, which often involved exclusive collectives of experienced artists (even if they developed methods that could be used by anyone). We also see this democratic tendency in the impulse to tear down the boundaries of art. The avant-garde artist was not so much a demiurgic creator, the sole creator of a new world, as an articulator among various creating subjects. In some ways, their role was like that of the psychoanalyst: they sought methods to draw out the popular imagination that society

had repressed. The notion of "new folk art" could serve as a referent for this moment of articulation, an attempt to give expression to an emerging social subject that was larger than any collective of artist-individuals.

The avant-garde was characterized by this contradiction between the desire to lead the people in a radical social-aesthetic transformation and the desire to follow the people as they took social-aesthetic creation into their own hands. Often, when the people were attracted by conservative culture, the avant-garde seemed to find itself too far ahead of the people; at other times, when the avant-garde found itself entranced by the allure of high art and expert poetics, it seemed, in its own terms, to fall behind the people that were more open to unpretentious cultural forms. But this was a process that did not end at one extreme or the other.

The avant-garde has been too often reduced to a moment in the supposedly inexorable forward development of the history of art, which textbooks show moving from innovation to innovation, from artist to artist, from "ism" to "ism." Behind the constant innovation lay attempts to inscribe new work in alternative histories; behind the individual artists stood the people with whom the artist sought connection; behind the "isms" was concealed a succession of differing articulations between artists and the people whose aesthetic experience the artists hoped to influence and to express.

Folklore, too, has been too often reduced in the popular imagination to one or another style of peasant expression, usually associated with a paradigmatic national figure in a given national context. But the fundamental idea of folklore, the idea that aesthetic expression can be connected not only to individual artists or authors, but can also be connected to a collective figure with representational claims, which Anglophone political tradition calls "the people" and Anglophone aesthetic tradition calls "the folk," and which Czech tradition calls simply *lid*—this idea is far suppler, more open to contestation and innovation, than is typically supposed. The avant-garde's attachment to folklore, manifested in its experiments with disaggregating aesthetic practice from the institutions of Art and reconnecting art to one or another form of the people, shows folklore as an element of rapidly transforming modernity.

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Doba svobodnih žonglerjev: umetnost ljudstva in češka avantgarda

Ključne besede: češka književnost / avantgarda / folklora / popularna kultura / proletarska kultura / poetizem / Teige, Karel / Nezval, Vítězslav / Václavek, Bedřich

Razprava raziskuje zanimanje češke medvojne avantgarde za folkloro in popularno kulturo. Tako kot večina njenih mednarodnih sopotnikov je bila češka avantgarda prepričana, da so institucije, kot sta umetnost in literatura, izgubile svojo zgodovinsko veljavo, podobno kot kapitalistična družba in buržoazne predstave o »naciji« in »ljudstvu«. Hkrati se je intenzivno in dolgotrajno ukvarjala s kulturno dediščino marginaliziranih slojev družbe ter z možnostjo novih načinov izražanja kulturnih stališč množic – tako v tedanjem času zaostrenih družbenih bojev kot tudi v viziji prihodnje družbe, v kateri bi bilo odpravljeno tako razslojevanje na razrede kot tudi ločnica med umetniki-specialisti in nespecializiranim občinstvom oziroma potrošniki. Iskanje nove umetnosti ljudstva se je izrazilo predvsem v demonstrativnem oživljanju nizkih žanrov

pesnika Vítězslava Nezvala, pri predstavljanju cirkusa in ulične urbane kulture kot elementov »nove ljudske umetnosti« umetnika in teoretika Karla Teigeja ter v prizadevanju literarnega kritika Bedřicha Václavka, da bi sledil kroženju moderne poezije in pesmi, ki so postale del skupnega repertoarja nastajajočih razredov. Ta kompleksna prepletenost novega in starega, kot pokažem v prispevku, ponuja model za prefiguracijo novega sveta, ki bi lahko preživel tudi po koncu tega.

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