

L. S. Vygotsky's Participation in The Debate on the Belarusian National Question: Between Art, Language, and Politics / A participação de L. S. Vigotski no debate sobre a questão nacional belarussa: entre arte, língua e política

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ABSTRACT

This article presents three texts by Vygotsky, unpublished in Portuguese and English, on the topic of Belarusian theater and literature. Published in 1923, this material is virtually unknown and reveals the participation of this renowned author within the field of psychology in the cultural and national debates of Belarus. To better understand the issues raised in this corpus, we present a brief history of the establishment of the Belarusian State as well as the Soviet policy of Belarusization carried out throughout the 1920s. Next, we present a close reading of Vygotsky's texts, with the aim of identifying and analyzing the points of view presented, and explaining references that may be little known to a foreign reader, particularly regarding Belarusian literature. The presented corpus reveals Vygotsky as a literary and theatrical critic as well as an activist of culture, facets that precede and presuppose the great psychologist that he would later become.

KEYWORDS: Belarusian Literature; Belarusian Theater; Belarusian Language; Policy of Belarusization; Vygotsky

RESUMO

O artigo apresenta três textos de Vigotski, inéditos em português e inglês, sobre a questão do teatro e da literatura belarussa. Publicado em 1923, esse material é praticamente desconhecido e revela a participação deste renomado autor do campo da psicologia nos debates culturais e nacionais de Belarus. Para melhor compreensão das questões levantadas nesse corpus, apresentamos um breve histórico sobre a constituição de um Estado Belarusso bem como sobre a política soviética de belarussização conduzida ao longo da década de 1920. Em seguida, é apresentada uma leitura atenta dos textos de Vigotski, com o objetivo de identificar e analisar os pontos de vista apresentados, e explicitar referências que podem ser pouco conhecidas do leitor estrangeiro, em particular sobre a literatura belarussa. O conjunto apresentado mostra Vigotski como crítico literário e teatral e, sobretudo, um ativista da cultura, facetas que antecedem e pressupõem o grande psicólogo que ele viria a se tornar.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura belarussa; Teatro belarusso; Língua belarussa; Política de belarussização; Vigotski

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Lev Semionovich Vygotsky (in Belarusian: Leŭ Vyhocki) is well known and studied all over the world for his work in the field of psychology and human development, as he was one of the most prominent names of Soviet psychology and the founder of what is currently known as Cultural-Historical Psychology. Born in 1896 in Orša,¹ Vygotsky lived in Homiel until he entered the University of Moscow, where he studied for a law degree, while also studying for another degree at the Shaniavsky People's University. His intellectual life in Homiel during his youth was very active, as he led a study group on issues related to Judaism and, between 1912 and 1913, wrote a study on the problem of anti-Semitism in Dostoevsky's literature (Vygodskaya; Lifanova, 1999; Feigenberg, 2000). There are indications that his early education was consistent, with interests that spanned the fields of literature, arts, and history. Despite his Russian-speaking upbringing, his daughter Gita Vygodskaya recalls hearing her father recite Belarusian poems during her childhood (Vygodskaya, 1994, p. 11).

After completing his higher education, Vygotsky went through a troubled period, with family difficulties, and then ended up settling back in Homiel, where, after the installation of the Soviet government, he began to work intensively in the educational and cultural fields. There, between 1922 and 1923, he stood out as an active contributor to the local press, publishing numerous reviews of the city's theatrical season.

Of particular interest to this paper is a small corpus made up of three short texts published in 1923 in the newspapers *Nash Ponedelnik* and *Polesskaya Pravda*, entitled "Belarusian Theater (On the Homiel Tour)," "Belarusian Theater Tour"² and "On Belarusian Literature."³ With very little circulation, these texts remain virtually unknown to this day, and are only available in a Belarusian translation recently published by the authors of this article (Franco, Marques, 2024). To better illustrate the discussion, we will present several excerpts from this material, translated by the authors of this paper.⁴

As contextual background about the debates surrounding this material, we present a brief history of Belarus and the Soviet policy of Belarusization in the 1920s. Next, Vygotsky's texts will be discussed in two sub-items: one dedicated to Belarusian theater

¹ For Belarusian names, the traditional Belarusian Latin alphabet, *lacinika*, is used (Viačorka, 2017).

² Published, respectively, in number 40 (June 11th, 1923) and 42 (June 25th, 1923) of *Nash Ponedelnik* and republished in the first volume of Vygotsky's complete works (Vygotsky, 2015).

³ First published in number 1075, December 16th 1923, of *Polesskaya Pravda* and later republished in *Literaturnoe Obozrenie*, n. 7/8, 1994, with commentary by Gita Vygodskaya, Vygotsky's daughter.

⁴ Vygotsky's texts and all other cited foreign sources were translated by the authors of the paper.

and the other to Belarusian literature. Finally, in the concluding remarks, we will point to the relevance of the historical discussion raised here for thinking about contemporary issues that are still resounding in the country.

1 Belarus at the Beginning of the 20th Century

Between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the Belarusian people lived under the condition of being colonized by the Russian Empire for more than a century, being considered part of the empire's northwestern territory. The history of modern Belarus had an important milestone with the first proclamation of an independent State, the Belarusian Democratic Republic (also known as Belarusian People's Republic, BNR), on March 25, 1918. Shortly afterwards, on January 1, 1919, the Soviet Socialist Republic of Belarus (SSRB) was created. Although the BNR was short-lived — exiled in 1919, it has become the world's longest-standing government in exile — its proclamation was essential for the subsequent formation and autonomy of the SSRB within the Soviet Union, established in 1922 (Murzionak, 2022, p. 32).

The existence of a territory is one of the fundamental conditions for international recognition of a State's independence. This issue was highlighted by the delegation of the Belarusian Democratic Republic, led by Anton Luckievič, during the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. On that occasion, the French Foreign Ministry stated that if the BNR had control over a territory, independence could be recognized and there would be international support. However, the territory inhabited by the Belarusians was claimed by neighboring countries: the Lithuanian National Movement, Poland, the Ukrainian People's Republic and Russia, which left the BNR without an indisputable territorial base. Belarusian territory has been shaped over the centuries, most notably during the period when it was part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, whose capital was in Navahrudak and later in Vilnius. After losing sovereignty in 1795, its lands were disputed by more powerful neighbors, and the Russian Empire tried to suppress Belarusian identity. At the end of the 19th century, scholars such as Doŭnar-Zapolski and Karski mapped out Belarusian ethnographic borders, based on the population's use of the Belarusian language, references used in the founding of the BNR in 1918 and the creation of the SSRB in January 1919 (Saŭko, 2016, pp. 111–112). These ethnographic borders cover

the current territory of Belarus and go beyond it, also including the regions of present-day Vilnius (Lithuania), Białystok (Poland) and Smolensk (Russia).

In February 1919, the Bolsheviks formed the Lithuanian-Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (LitBel), which included the regions of Vilnius, Hrodna, Minsk, Kaunas and part of Suwałki, while the rest of Belarus was declared Russian territory. In 1921, the Treaty of Riga, signed between Poland, Soviet Russia and Soviet Ukraine at the end of the Polish-Soviet War, defined that the western part of Belarus (Vilnius, Hrodna and Brest regions, part of the Minsk region) would fall under Polish control. This situation continued until the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. With the dissolution of LitBel and the creation of the Soviet Union on December 30, 1922, the SSRB was reorganized as the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), but with a reduced territory. The BSSR included only six districts of Minsk province, totaling around 52,400 km² and a population of approximately 1.6 million people. Faced with this limitation, Belarusian leaders such as Alaksandr Čarviakoŭ and Usievaład Ihnatoŭski requested the return of Belarusian lands, which led to the first expansion of the BSSR on March 3, 1924, which incorporated parts of the Viciebsk, Smolensk and Homiel regions, doubling the territory to 110,584 km² and increasing the population to 4.2 million. On November 18, 1926, a second expansion took place, which reincorporated the Homiel and Rečyca districts, three districts from the former Viciebsk region and four from the former Chernihiv region, adding 15,727 km² and an additional population of 649,000 people (Saŭko, 2016, pp. 112-113).

It should be noted that both the city of Orša (in the Viciebsk region, northern Belarus), where Vygotsky was born, and the city of Homiel (southern Belarus), where he grew up, studied and began his professional life, were impacted by these territorial disputes and changes of government, being reintegrated into the Belarusian state only after the BSSR expansions in 1924 (Orša) and 1926 (Homiel). Thus, in 1923, when Vygotsky published his reviews of Belarusian theater and literature, Homiel was under the control of Soviet Russia, and the newspapers *Nash Ponedelnik* and *Polesskaya Pravda* were published in Russian. Meanwhile, in the territory of the BSSR, the policy of Belarusization promoted the development of local culture, influencing the themes that Vygotsky addresses in his publications.

2 The National Question in Revolutionary Political Thought and the Policy of Belarusization in the 1920s

The issue of national self-determination was present in left-wing political debates long before the revolutionary process that began in 1917. The program of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party already defended this right in 1909, a point that generated controversy and a negative response from Rosa Luxemburg, for whom nationalism should be seen as petty-bourgeois ideology and therefore not compatible with the anti-capitalist revolution.⁵ In 1914, Lenin responded to Luxemburg's criticism with a perspective of national movements as a step towards the establishment of national states, in which there would then be conditions for the proletarian revolution. The Bolshevik leader returned to the subject in 1922 (Lenin, 2017), defending the inseparable link that binds movements in favor of the political emancipation of the working class and overcoming the colonial yoke that had left its roots in the history of all these peoples. Thus, not all nationalism should be condemned as a petty-bourgeois deviation, but must be critically analyzed within its concrete historical conditions and determinations: "Lenin criticizes the abstract analysis of nationalism and takes up the important distinction between the nationalism of the oppressor nation and the nationalism of the oppressed nation" (Ruseishvili, 2022, p. 33).⁶

The Leninist orientation of favoring the right of nations to self-determination, expressed in two speeches (1914 and 1922), meant that the formation of the Soviet Union in the early 1920s was accompanied by major movements to promote the national cultures of the different ethnic and national groups that made up the Union. In the case of Belarus, there was a large-scale policy of Belarusization of the newly formed Soviet republic. Led by the Communist Party, the Belarusization policy was aimed at promoting the development of the Belarusian language. According to Alaksiej Karol, one of the first historians to comprehensively study Belarusization, this policy was based on the ideas and practices of the Belarusian national movement, which dated back to the time of the Belarusian Democratic Republic (BNR) (*apud* Marková, 2022, p. 6).

⁵ The opposition between Marxist thought and nationalist movements dates back to the 19th century: "Negativism in relation to nationalism in nineteenth century Marxist position was stipulated by their conviction in the priority of class awareness in relation to the national identity, as well as the bourgeois character of the latter" (Bekus, 2010, p. 57).

⁶ In Portuguese: "Lênin critica a análise abstrata do nacionalismo e retoma a importante distinção entre o nacionalismo da nação opressora e o nacionalismo da nação oprimida."

Before this policy, Belarusian language was spoken mainly by rural populations and in oral form. The absence of Belarusian in the public sphere was due to the long periods of Polonization and Russification to which the population was subjected, including the prohibition of any printed publications in Belarusian language during the Russian Empire. Until 1905, the use of national languages was banned by tsarist Russia and, for a period of 150 years, education took place only in Polish or Russian (Silitski; Zaprudnik, 2010, p. 172). Undoubtedly, this situation posed a major obstacle to the widespread adoption and consolidation of Belarusian as a written language and a means of communication for official matters across various spheres of society.

According to a 1928 document, the policy of Belarusization, in a broad sense, had the following objectives:

- 1) The development of Belarusian culture (schools, establishments of higher education in the Belarusian language, Belarusian literature, publication of Belarusian books, academic research activities on the comprehensive study of Belarus, etc.);
- 2) The appointment of Belarusians for party, Soviet, professional, and civil work;
- 3) A transfer of the activity of party, state, professional, and cooperation apparatuses and regiments of the Red Army to the Belarusian language (“Practical Solution to the National Question in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic,” Marková, 2022, pp. 26-27).

The policy was launched in April 1923, during the 12th Congress of the Russian Communist Party, despite the great controversy that existed among communists regarding this type of initiative. A group of Bolsheviks (Bukharin, Dzerzhinsky, Pyatakov, Radek and others) advocated proletarian internationalism or national nihilism (Marková, 2022, p. 39), an understanding that placed the class struggle above and with priority status over the national question. Instead of national unity, class unity. The winning position, defended by Lenin, held that fostering national movements would be a good antidote to Russia’s long and oppressive chauvinist past. *Pari passu* with the promotion of the Belarusian language and culture, the policy rested on yet another pillar: *korenizatsiya*, or indigenization, of the State apparatus, i.e. the absorption of the local, ethnically non-Russian population into the institutions of the party and the State.

The rationale behind this policy is based on the same ideology of class struggle that underpins every proposal for communist revolution. If the language of the simple,

indigenous people, the one used in everyday life, is Belarusian, this must be the language of the political education that will lead to emancipation. Any attempt to form grassroots political movements to support the Bolshevik project would only succeed if it spoke to the people in their language:

In reality, learning the Belarusian language could provide “the worker with an opportunity to unite with the Belarusian peasant, to know him better, to approach him better and to connect with him in a stronger way.” And because “the main political goal of the worker is to produce proletarian influence on the peasant, to guide him in political, economic, and cultural life, it is necessary for the worker to learn the language of the [Belarusian] peasant, and not the other way around” (Marková, 2022, pp. 45-46).

Speaking the language of the masses and promoting it as a vehicle for expressing the widest possible range of communications, from schools to literature, from politics to the press: this was the aim of the Soviet Belarusization project, which was officially implemented from 1921 onwards. One should not lose sight of the fact that Belarusization was a means to a certain end. The ultimate goal was the Sovietization of Belarus and ideological alignment with the Bolsheviks was a prerequisite for the implementation of Belarusization. According to Marková (2022, p. 72), “in accordance with the political trends of the period, teachers considered that the Belarusian language to be a fertile ground for disseminating Marxism among a wide stratum of the population,” or in Stalin’s formulation: “proletarian in its content, national in its form — such is the universal culture towards which socialism is headed” (quoted in Marková, 2022, p. 167). It is also true that the country’s history of oppression favored the union of the national and socialist movements in the specific case of Belarus. In the words of historian Usievaład Ihnatoŭski, “when the 1917 Bolshevik revolution abolished all social distinctions, for the Belarusians this outcome amounted to national liberation because the class and national composition of the Belarusians almost coincided with each other” (quoted in Bekus, 2010, p. 56).

One of the measures taken in the context of this policy was to transfer the entire education system to the Belarusian language. In order to do this, it was necessary not only to hire teachers who were proficient in the language, but also to produce teaching materials in Belarusian to teach all the school content in basic education and academic disciplines in higher education. Another fundamental step was the strategic alliance with

the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia, which was at the forefront of activities in the fields of education and culture. The Belarusian intelligentsia was not necessarily pro-communist, but it was a key player at first. It could be divided into four groups: intellectuals with no party affiliation; former members of other parties (SR, Bund, etc.); members of grassroots movements (the most favorable to the communists); and the politically passive (Marková, 2022, pp. 59-61). This period of truce and collaboration did not last long, and the purges of the counter-revolutionary intelligentsia began as early as 1921.

The integration of the country through the dissemination of the language was intended to bridge a large gap between the countryside and the city in the different regions of the country. In the cities and *miastečkas* (smaller urban agglomerations), the Yiddish, Polish and Russian languages predominated.⁷ Thus, when the policy of expanding Belarusian began, there were few speakers of the language who had a high level of education and who could potentially contribute to the implementation of this policy, the result of more than a century of Russian genocide and epistemicide against the Belarusian people.

In the context of a broad, multi-pronged effort (literacy, the production of teaching materials, the creation of a press and the establishment of Belarusian as the official language of State communication), the project to build communist soft power in the Belarusian vernacular included some less subtle legal measures, such as the obligation to pass a test in this language in order to access higher education or even quotas for ethnic Belarusians in government institutions. Another proof that there was no separation between the Belarusization policy and the communist project of overcoming class society that underpinned it was the implementation of quotas for students in higher education.⁸

However, changes to the law would not be enough to achieve the proposed goal. Pedagogical work was needed to raise awareness of the value of the Belarusian language and the need to promote it to the status of a national language. Paradoxical as it may seem, it was necessary to advocate for the language:

⁷ Statistics from 1897 indicate that in Minsk the Belarusian-speaking population accounted for only 9% of the total, Yiddish speakers were 51%, Russian speakers were 25,5%, and Polish speakers were 11,4% (Marková, 2022, p. 78).

⁸ According to a 1925 resolution, quotas should be distributed as follows: 50% for peasants, 30% for workers, and 20% for members of the intelligentsia (see Marková, 2022, p. 115).

It was also necessary to persuade the Belarusian population of the need to open Belarusian schools, as it often pushed for schooling in the Russian language. It was especially the case in the recently added Belarusian regions. Such advocacy campaigns had to be conducted for several reasons. One of them was that as a result of multiple unfavorable conditions, first and foremost as a result of the previous longstanding russification and polonization, Belarusian peasants did not consider their language to be something valuable, something that distinguished them from other nations and that could be an object of national identity or even pride. But most importantly, they did not believe that the Belarusian language could in any way assist them in achieving a “better life” (Marková, 2022, p. 83).

The entire public, educational and cultural apparatus was mobilized for this purpose: the organization of plays, lectures, public readings of books and newspapers, musical concerts, etc. In a report, Alaksandr Krynicki, secretary of the party’s central committee, reinforced the need to employ the “method of explanation,” that is, to carry out practical actions to promote the spread and use of the Belarusian language, which would involve “provide a theatre company in the Belarusian language, a song in Belarusian language, to provide a good, understandable Belarusian newspaper” (quoted in Marková, 2022, p. 86). In addition to the schools themselves, the organizations responsible for these advances were the Institute of Belarusian Culture, founded in 1922, and the various community centers and reading houses. In the latter, group reading aloud of books and newspapers was popular. Moreover, Belarus was not left out of the massive Soviet campaign to eradicate illiteracy (known as *likbez*, an acronym for *likvidatsiya bezgramotnosti*). However, in the cities, much of the work was still done in Russian, and the first alphabet book for adults in Belarusian, by Mikoła Bajkoŭ and Sciapan Niekraševič, only came out in 1925 (Marková, 2022, p. 125).

Officially ended in 1929, the Belarusization policy was short-lived and had partial achievements: on the one hand, it was effective in establishing more and more institutional spaces for the use of the language, not only for its dissemination but also for its development as a vehicle for the circulation and manifestation of culture, science, the press and government institutions; on the other hand, it did not last long enough to guarantee the stabilization and consolidation of such achievements. Despite the initiatives, the cities remained predominantly Russian-speaking and the presence of ethnic Belarusians in certain layers of society showed the limits of this program. With the end of the policy, the space was opened up for an intense return of the tendency to

Russification, which never completely disappeared. This manifested itself most clearly in the spheres of government and education. The Belarusian intelligentsia that remained faithful to the principles of the Belarusization policy began to be publicly persecuted and attacked. Any nationalist discourse came to be identified as counter-revolutionary or even “fascist” (Marková, 2022; Bazan, 2014; Bekus, 2010).

3 Vygotsky and Belarusian Theater

Vygotsky saw his role as a critic as being to build “air bridges” between the audience and art (see Vygotsky, 2022, p. 205). In this role of mediator, his task is to aim at both the formation and enrichment of the audience’s perception and the formation and enrichment of the artistic sphere itself, in a double task, therefore. The first text, “On Belarusian Theater,” reports on the start of the tour in Homiel and points to this theater as a novelty that deserves to be followed on the cultural scene: “One of the most interesting phenomena of the national revival in the USSR and, at the same time, one of the most original and remarkable forms of scenic art, is the Belarusian theater, whose tour has started in our city. This theater has its roots in folk rites and festivals” (Vygotsky, 2015, p. 389). Vygotsky echoes the reception in the Moscow press, quoting the critic Khersonsky, for whom “the Belarusian theater is on an interesting path of development, as it can grow into a very precious and entirely original creative cultural achievement” (quoted by Vygotsky, 2015, p. 389). Vygotsky then gives a brief summary of the plays that make up the tour.

In the second review, “Belarusian Theater (On the Homiel Tour),” Vygotsky gives a properly critical appraisal of the productions presented in the city:

The tours of the Belarusian theater did not attract much attention from the general public, nor did they become a major event of the theatrical season. In fact, it is neither a wealthy nor a dazzling theater; its art is modest, much like its name. However, these performances offered something fresh, good, and noteworthy—something that should not go unnoticed (Vygotsky, 2015, p. 390).

This comment, and the very existence of such texts, reveal that the national theme did not escape Vygotsky’s radar; on the contrary, it was considered a relevant

object of discussion and of general repercussion. The observation about the “modest” character of Belarusian theater should be read against the background of the general development of the arts in this vernacular, since no permanent Belarusian theater company had existed until 1910. A central aspect of Vygotsky’s discussion concerns the language in which it is performed. Thus, for Vygotsky, the first and perhaps greatest merit of *Belarusian* theater is that it puts the *Belarusian language* on stage, spreads it and makes it a vehicle for artistic manifestations.

The first and foremost aspect is the language itself — the culture of language, the conscious creation and formation of Belarusian literary language unfolding before our eyes. For the inhabitants of our region, this is a kind of celebration of language, as the ear is bathed in its melodic speech. All the particularities of the local speech (mainly peasant), which city dwellers perceive as errors and mistakes (“he speaks incorrectly, like a *muzhik*”), all those softened *ts* sounds and hard *r* sounds⁹ — regarded in Great Russian speech as linguistic deformities, perversions, and corruptions — suddenly, within the framework of an entirely different phonetic system, begin to sound melodious and harmonious, becoming recognized as meaningful sound patterns of a new and magnificent speech (Vygotsky, 2015, p. 390).

Vygotsky recognizes these stage performances as true ceremonies celebrating the Belarusian language: “The actors pronounce Belarusian words each time with a special reverence, with an inner lyricism, as if performing a ritual.” Furthermore, he considers the development of language and theater to be interrelated processes, in which one element guarantees the existence of the other: “This sense of language and its laws of sound is the first foundation for the future: if there is language, the theater will follow.”

Another crucial element is the educational potential of a Belarusian-language theater. It is, after all, the mother tongue of practically the entire peasant population of Belarus:

For the local peasant population in particular, the educational potential of this theater is enormous. *It is the only literary language* fully comprehensible to our peasantry. Ostrovsky and Pushkin must be translated for them to fully understand. The Belarusian literary

⁹ Vygotsky gives as an example the Belarusian words “*žyćcio*” (life), with a soft “*ts*” (“*ć*”), and “*rečki*” (rivers), with a hard “*r*.”

language is their key to both Russian and world literature (Vygotsky, 2015, p. 390).

The passage makes clear the dual function envisaged for the promotion of theater in the Belarusian language: on the one hand, it helps to develop and enhance the language itself, elevating it to the status of a means to artistic expression; on the other hand, it guarantees the native population access to the vast array of arts produced by humanity. Elsewhere, Vygotsky returned to the theme of arts and the function of aesthetic education in a similar vein, that is, considering contact with the arts as the key to cultural inclusion and the development of sensibilities. In “Aesthetic Education,” written in 1925, Vygotsky¹⁰ argues that “The overall structure of public education is oriented towards expanding the scope of finite personal experience as far as possible” (1997, p. 260), bringing the child into contact with “the broadest possible spheres of the social experience accumulated so far” and being included “the broadest possible network in the world” (Vygotsky, 1997, pp. 260-261).

The review goes on to criticize the current state of the Belarusian scene. This theater is evaluated as a young manifestation, with a lot of potential, but still somewhat immature, and perhaps closer to a collection of popular, folkloric themes. The focus is ethnographic rather than aesthetic.

It’s true that this forms the core of all the performances — an “ethnographic concert in costumes,” always staged with good taste and cultural refinement. Yet, even within it, there is something naïve and romantic: these “pretty peasants” in freshly starched white blouses gracefully waving their rakes carry a sense of artificiality. This naïve imprint of idealized beauty — these mermaids waving their arms, these showy costumes, this sugar-coated, polished ethnography — gives off the feel of a children’s play (Vygotsky, 2015, p. 391).

The tone of this final comment, which is more critical and problematizing, is common to this Vygotskian corpus. In his reviews, he did not fail to point out deficiencies, limitations and all sorts of problems that he identified in reviewed performances. It is clear that Vygotsky believes it is part of his task as a critic to point out these aspects so as to contribute to overcoming the problems and raising the overall

¹⁰ Vygotsky, Lev Semyonovich. *Educational Psychology*. Translated by Robert Silverman, Florida, St. Lucie Press, 1997.

level of art produced in the province (and not only). For Vygotsky, “criticism is a two-sided activity: on the one hand it must be rooted in aesthetics [...], on the other hand, it is expected to be engaged in a concrete social context” (Marques, 2019, p. 29).¹¹ Finally, just after these harsher remarks, the text closes on a positive and encouraging note: “But I deliberately write about the theater, not the actors. Among them, there are experienced and talented performers, as well as young newcomers stepping onto the stage for the first time. Yet both are united by a strong aspiration to create a Belarusian theater — one that, undoubtedly, *will exist*.” (Vygotsky, 2015, p. 391). Closing with this emphasis on the verb “will exist” expresses both the realization that there is not yet a Belarusian theater (the verb is in the future tense), as well as an enthusiastic desire and conviction that it will exist (use of emphasis — italics — in the original).

4 Vygotsky and Belarusian Literature

The text “On Belarusian literature” stands out for its subject matter, as almost all of Vygotsky’s contributions to the local press consisted of theatrical reviews. It is also longer than his other works. The starting point for his discussion is the 1886 novella “The Blind Musician,” by Vladimir Korolenko (Ukrainian: Volodymyr Korolenko), which tells the story of a visually impaired boy who takes classical piano lessons but becomes captivated by the sound of the Ukrainian flute, an instrument played by a peasant working on his family’s estate. The novella serves as a kind of parable, prompting reflection on the relationship between popular and classical art.

In Korolenko’s story about a blind musician, there is an instructive tale of an unusual contest between a magnificent Viennese piano and a simple Ukrainian wooden flute. The contemplative, sorrowful melodies of the flute deeply moved the soul of the blind boy. His mother, envious of her son’s attachment to the muzhik’s flute, ordered a piano. But the Viennese instrument proved no match for a mere piece of Ukrainian willow. The Viennese piano had its strengths: fine wood, exquisite strings, the craftsmanship of a Viennese master, and the richness of a wide register. Yet, the flute had its own allies — it was at home, embraced by its native Ukrainian nature. ...It was nurtured by the Ukrainian sun, which warmed both the instrument and

¹¹ In Portuguese: “a crítica é uma atividade dupla: por um lado deve estar fundada na estética [...], por outro deve se engajar em um contexto social concreto.”

its owner's skin, and it resonated with the same familiar wind. He had learned its simple melodies from nature itself — the rustling of the forest, the gentle whisper of the steppe grass, and the solemn, ancestral song that had once lulled him to sleep in his cradle. Even the gracious lady, whose fingers were swift, nimble, and capable of playing a melody far more complex and refined, had to concede defeat to a simple coachman with his foolish little whistle. She soon came to realize that the flute carried a true and profound poetry (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 10).

The metaphor of the Ukrainian flute, representing the sound linked to the land and the people, with its appeal to the senses and to life, is chosen by Vygotsky as an appropriate metaphor for thinking about the state of Belarusian literature, which, in comparison with other literatures, is “as humble as a flute before a Viennese piano” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 10). Behind this comparison there is a strong reasoning within Marxist aesthetics, which implies a correlation between the state of the productive forces and the development of the most diverse aspects of civilization. This view is expressed by some of the main authors of Soviet Marxism, such as Plekhanov, who states that “the art of any people [...] always maintains a very close causal relationship with its economy” (Plekhanov, 1969, p. 124),¹² and Bukharin, for whom “in the same way as science or any other reflection of material production, art is a product of social life” (Bukharin, 1945, p. 109).¹³ This is how Vygotsky elaborates on this kind of convergence between the social environment and artistic production:

This literature, like the *muzhik's* flute, is strong and enduring, above all because it is made of the same substance as the *muzhik* himself. It has not yet fully separated from folk poetry, and like an embryo in its mother's womb, it is still nourished by the same lifeblood as the popular song. This gives it a certain primitiveness — its motifs are neither refined nor elegant, its content is neither lavish nor rich, and universal human themes have been explored more deeply and vividly in other literatures. Yet, in the great chorus of human voices, it has its own irreplaceable voice — simple, powerful, unmistakably of the common people. It is no coincidence that one of the poetry collections bears the title *Belarusian Flute*.

This literature is, first and foremost, profoundly national. It was born under oppression and, in response, developed a spirit of stubborn resistance. All its poets are, above all, singers of their homeland, of

¹² In Portuguese: “a arte de qualquer povo [...] sempre mantém estreitíssima relação causal com sua economia.”

¹³ In Portuguese: “da mesma forma que a ciência ou qualquer outro reflexo da produção material, é a arte um produto da vida social.”

their land's austere beauty. And this humble nature — of sparse woods and heather,¹⁴ poor in colors and sounds — always tunes its flute to a mournful melody (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 10).

Thus, historical and material circumstances have favored the fact that, in more economically complex societies, art can become detached from concrete life and immediate experience, becoming increasingly abstract and “artificial.” In any case, for Vygotsky, art not only reflects social conditions, but *aesthetically* reworks a certain cognitive and emotional material, with a more immediate utilitarian function (in its less developed forms) or not. This is the case with music that accompanies work, facilitating its rhythm, or that is chanted by military troops in combat, in other words, manifestations whose utilitarian aspect is more evident. The evolutionary tendency of art, according to this Marxist view, presupposes that it emancipates itself from more direct determinations that come from life.

Next, Vygotsky draws an interesting parallel between the eminently rural Belarusian folk poetry and the nascent proletarian art, since both arise from oppressed classes.

However, these national motifs, so closely intertwined with the landscape, possess a distinctive and somewhat unusual character. They are inseparable from social and political themes. Due to historical circumstances, Belarusian nationalism has been shaped as the poetry of the lower social strata, of the oppressed classes, of the *muzhik's* bitter poverty. That is why, when speaking of their land, Belarusian poets do not merely evoke their native sedge,¹⁵ nor only the national revival of their people and the struggle for independence and happiness but *with those same words* they speak of social liberation, of the reconstruction not just of the small world of the swamps, but of the very foundations of centuries-old human suffering. It is no surprise that within this poetry, there begin to emerge voices — still simple, yet already discernible — of proletarian verse (Vygotsky, 1994, pp. 10-11).

This correlation between the oppressed classes of the countryside and the city also appears in a text published in a previous issue of the same newspaper, where Vygotsky writes about the writer Demyan Bedny, whom he calls a “bad *muzhik*” and “a

¹⁴ A plant from temperate regions, typical of Belarusian woods and forests. The name of this plant in Russian, *veresk*, also named the literary magazine edited by Vygotsky in 1922, in Homiel.

¹⁵ Common plant on the banks of the Belarusian marshes.

huge, peculiar poet.” The son of a worker and a peasant, Bedny would embody “equally a poet for the workers and the peasants. These two forces of the revolution, two distinct psychologies, are usually represented by very different and dissimilar poets. But Demyan Bedny merged one and the other in his voice” (Vygotsky, 2022, p. 115).

Vygotsky’s text is permeated with quotations of Belarusian literature in verse. Despite having written his article in Russian, Vygotsky quotes these various excerpts in Belarusian. In this gesture, which can be seen as an appreciation of this literature, it is noteworthy, however, that the names of all the authors were omitted. Thus, despite opening up space for the Belarusian vernacular in his printed text, something that had been forbidden for decades, Vygotsky presents an anonymous Belarusian literature, without any proper names. Almost as if it were something folkloric, straight from the popular tradition, a production that emanates from a general national spirit and not from particular personalities. This is an intentional act, which was acknowledged by the author himself: “Of course, with these passing remarks we have in no way exhausted Belarusian poetry. I haven’t mentioned a single name that is dear to this literature. I’ve simplified things on purpose. But the essence, it seems to me, has been correctly indicated” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 11). Vygotsky’s view that national art should move beyond this phase towards greater refinement is not unanimous. According to Maltsev, “many figures in Belarusian culture [...] see, not without reason, the natural and genuine national path of the Belarusian scene precisely in the affirmation and development of the folkloric and ethnographic orientation” (Maltsev, 2012, p. 151).

In quoting the poetry, Vygotsky uses excerpts in Belarusian, albeit imprecisely, possibly quoting from memory, without checking the accuracy of the text (and also with the limited resources of the newspaper printed in Russian, which lacked Belarusian letters). This detail gives the text a folk art authenticity, reflecting the orality and spontaneity with which Belarusian culture was transmitted and reinterpreted. However, a hundred years later, we can easily identify the authors of the poems quoted by Vygotsky, even without textual research. They are masterpieces which, for the most part, have become classics of Belarusian literature, taught in schools and memorized by students throughout their lives.

Thus, Vygotsky cites the collection *Dudka białaruskaja* [Belarusian Flute] (1891), by Francišak Bahuševič (1840-1900), whose preface became a manifesto of the

Belarusian national revival and gave a strong impetus to the development of Belarusian culture: “Don’t abandon our Belarusian language lest you perish !” (Bahuševič, 1991). Another popular musical instrument, the *Skrypka bielaruskaja* [Belarusian Violin] (1906), is the title of the book by Ałaiza Paškevič (1876-1916), the only woman quoted in this article, better known by the pseudonym Ciotka, but who published this book under a male pseudonym, Haŭryła from Połack: “To tear the heart apart with song, / If only strings were tough and strong”.... (Ciotka, 1918, p. 1).

As examples of descriptions of nature, Vygotsky quotes the poem *Z piesień ab svajoj staroncy* [From Songs about my Homeland] (1905-1907) by Janka Kupała (1882-1942) (1995, p. 192): “That’s a sorrowful land, / Our Belarus”; and brings up the final part of the poem *Paleskija vobrazy* [Images of Palessie] (1909) by Jakub Kołas (1882-1942):

Willows, lonely pear so bare,
Low dark groves in misty air.
This is you, our land of swamps!
This is you, Palessie lands! (Kołas, 1952, p. 203).

Jakub Kołas is quoted twice in the article. The second time is a fragment from his poem *Bard*, from the poetry book *Pieśni- Žalby* [Songs of Sorrow] (1910):

Do I not feel pain inside?
Did my sorrow come so light?
I will sing as I abide —
Joyful songs I cannot write (Kołas, 1952, p. 87).

Proletarian poetry is illustrated by Vygotsky with a fragment from the poem *The Tanner’s Songs* by Ciška Hartny (1987, pp. 49-50), pseudonym of Žmicier Žyłunovič (1887-1937), writer, poet, translator, member of the Academy of Sciences of the SSRB (1928), creator of the Manifesto for the Creation of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Belarus (1919) and head of its Provisional Government. Žmicier Žyłunovič was one of the victims of Stalinist repression, shot on the night of October 29-30, 1937, among 132 Belarusian intellectuals. In the 1912 poem quoted by Vygotsky, Ciška Hartny glorifies the hard work of the leather worker:

I am a tanner, strong and proud,
A knight of toil, with hands so tough.
My soul is steel, unbent, unbowed,
My heart burns bright, yet never enough.

I will not stand with idle hands,
Nor waste my days in sloth or ease.
I am a tanner, firm I stand,
I live to work, I do not cease.

Another example of the “songs of struggle, calls for strength and vigor, songs full of lively hope” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 11) is a fragment of the lyrics of the so-called *Belarusian Marseillaise* (with the melody, however, diverging from *La Marseillaise*), written in 1906 by Alaksandr Mikulčyk (1882 - after 1918):

We'll rise up as one with our scythes and our sickles,
And drive out the lords from our land!
Let fields and meadows, in sunlight that trickles,
Greet us — hardworking and grand! (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 11).

The author of this song, which was the *de facto* anthem of the BSSR in the 1920s and of the Belarusian national movement abroad, remained unidentified until 2007 (Chursik, 2012, p. 171).

To conclude his collective portrait of Belarusian literature, Vygotsky mentions “a very symbolic poem: ‘*The Weavers of Stuck*,’ a translation of which is being published in the same issue” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 11). This is a reference to the poem *Stuckija tkačychi* (1912) by Maksim Bahdanovič (1891–1917), one of the founders of modern national poetry in Belarus, who was also a translator and literary critic:

In the manor house, some weaver women are set to weave a Persian design. But, lost in thought, their hands weave the familiar image of a cornflower¹⁶ instead. This is exactly what happens to all poets: whatever the pattern, they end up with the familiar image of a cornflower. And it is precisely because of this cornflower — this unconscious connection with their homeland, with their heart — that the Belarusian flute is strong and dear (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 11).

¹⁶ A blue flower, common in the Belarusian countryside. Its image is often found in handicraft decoration.

The text ends by circling back to Korolenko's novella, in which the duel between the flute and the piano is ultimately won by the latter:

In Korolenko's story, however, the piano ends up winning. In the end, the piano prevails over the flute. How? It — or rather, the lady who played it — took on the flute's warmth, its uniqueness, its poetry, and it was precisely this that sounded so powerful, strong, and throbbing on the Viennese master's instrument. The time has come for Belarusian literature to carry the song of the flute to the piano. In doing so, its main concern must be not to lose the fragrance of the native cornflower and to master the complex music of contemporary poetry — in its themes and its strings (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 11).

This position of recognizing a kind of evolutionary line between artistic manifestations is a very striking feature of Vygotsky's thinking, which also applies to his understanding of the psyche in his later work. It is worth remembering that in *Psychology of Art* (Vygotsky, 2001),¹⁷ the analytical part is organized according to levels of complexity, from the smallest to the largest: fable, short story, and tragedy. At the basis of his aesthetic visions is the consideration of the elaboration of means and technique and the degree of abstraction in relation to concrete life. Here, from the point of view not of artistic genres, but an intercultural one, Belarusian art is called upon to rise, nourishing itself from the relationship and dialogue with other arts, without annulling itself, but towards an elaboration of its own voice and should be added up to the pantheon of great national literatures.

According to Maltsev, Vygotsky found no successors in Belarusian criticism. The subsequent tendency was to sociologize theatrical commentary, to adjust it to rigid social postulates: “those free emotional connections between the stage and the audience, the critic and the reader, about which Vygotsky constantly spoke as the first and necessary condition for the perception of art, were violated and deformed” (Maltsev, 2012, p. 152).

¹⁷ Vygotsky, Lev Semyonovich. *Psychology of Art*. New York: MIT Press, 1971.

Final Thoughts: on Yesterday and Today

The establishment of the Belarusian national theater was one of the elements that contributed to the construction of the newly proclaimed Belarusian Republic. The promotion of theater and language were inseparable processes and were two sides of the same effort to forge a national identity, which, given the religious and ethnic diversity characteristic of this population, had few other links to unity than the language itself (Marková, 2022). It is therefore not surprising that the theater was a very important stage in this process. Just as in the USSR, due to the high levels of illiteracy, theater was a preferred medium in the field of culture in Belarus.

Vygotsky refers in his reviews to the Belarusian State Theater. Under this name, it was founded in 1920, but its roots trace back to the former Minsk Governorate Theater, inaugurated in 1890. For decades, this venue hosted major theater companies from Saint Petersburg and Moscow, as well as itinerant troupes performing in Ukrainian, Polish, and Yiddish. Amid revolutionary events, the First Belarusian Circle of Drama and Comedy, founded by actor and director Flaryjan Ždanovič, staged in 1917 the plays *Paŭlinka*, by Janka Kupała, and *On a Winter Night*, based on Eliza Ażeška. With the policy of Belarusization, in 1920, the theater was reorganized and renamed the Belarusian State Theater, adopting an initial program that reflected the country's diversity, featuring a Belarusian, a Russian, and a Yiddish troupe. From 1944 onward, it became known as the Janka Kupała Theater.

The year 2020, which was to mark the centenary of the Belarusian State Theater's founding, was instead a year of major upheaval. After the season ended, two hundred theater employees signed a petition demanding that the votes from the presidential elections that allegedly brought Łukašenka back to power be recounted (cf. Höppner, 2020). The endorsement of company director Paweł Łatuška led to his summary dismissal, and in a domino effect, almost sixty employees (including most of the actors) left the theater, including artistic director Mikalaj Pinihin (Neviadomskaja, 2021).

The “official” theater is still active, with a few veteran actors and many newcomers with little experience, staging plays no longer exclusively in Belarusian, but

also in Russian, a clear step backwards when compared to the advances made during the Belarusization process. According to Bratachkin,

Since 2020, this trend towards a soft Belarusification seems to be over. The authoritarian regime and other groups, including those with a nationalist agenda, have different political resources. At the moment, the Lukashenko regime controls the public space, supports Russia's war in Ukraine, and these are all signs that the historical narrative will be minimally 'national,' at least within official history policy (Bratachkin, 2024, p. 306).

The dissidents of the Janka Kupala Theater formed another company, *Kupalaŭcy*, which has continued, first clandestinely and now in exile, to perform in Belarusian (Savickaja, 2024). Theater also persists as a site of political resistance and affirmation of Belarusian identity with the Belarus Free Theater,¹⁸ founded in 2005, which dramatically elaborates contemporary issues semi-clandestinely in apartments, cafés, and clubs outside the city. The historical and contemporary examples presented in this paper, based on the case of Belarus, help us to think of art as a sphere to reflect on national identity and to imagine possible futures.

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Reviews

Due to the commitment assumed by *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso [*Bakhtiniana*. Journal of Discourse Studies] to Open Science, this journal only publishes reviews that have been authorized by all involved.

Review I

The title of the article is appropriate to its content. The objectives of the article are clearly presented at the beginning of the text. Its main goal is to discuss L. S. Vygotsky's participation in the debate on the Belarusian national question. To this end, three of the author's texts, which are little known to the Western public, were analyzed. Before addressing Vygotsky's texts, the author provides a detailed introduction to the historical and social context of Belarus, particularly the aspects of national culture, with a special focus on language, the central theme of the article. Vygotsky's engagement with the cultural debate in Belarus is presented in an original manner, even when compared to international publications. The author demonstrates how Vygotsky was involved in discussions on the appreciation of the Belarusian language, particularly regarding the role of theater and literature in shaping the national identity of the Belarusian people. A notable aspect is the connection made between artistic criticism and Vygotsky's psychological work. This highlights the author's deep knowledge of both his aesthetic analysis and psychological writings. Thus, the author exhibits a strong command of the literature on the history of Belarus, especially regarding its relationship with the formation of the Soviet state, and how Vygotsky was aware of this process.

The subheadings accurately correspond to the content presented. The final considerations provide current data on Belarus that demonstrate the continued relevance of the discussions presented. The text includes an extensive bibliography, reflecting a commitment to documentary sources and methodological rigor. Regarding the text's presentation, the language used is appropriate for a scholarly work.

The analysis and dissemination of this material greatly contribute to studies on Vygotsky, as biographers and researchers have focused primarily on later periods of his life and work in recent decades. Given the above, I conclude that the authors have successfully achieved their stated objectives. APPROVED

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Review II

The article under discussion presents readers with a set of three texts by Vygotsky, written in 1923, a period when Belarus was facing clashes and expansionist movements by the USSR, in tension with the construction of its own autonomy and identity within its national territory.

Acknowledging that “in the case of Belarus, there was a large-scale policy of Belarusization in the newly formed Soviet republic,” the authors provide an important historical contextualization of the political movements and disputes of the time, in which Vygotsky was involved as a teacher and art critic in the city of Homiel. The issues of a national language, cultural production, education, and popular participation in the process of Belarus's incorporation into the Soviet Union are highlighted. Thus, the article contributes new information and elements to the knowledge and understanding of the historical-cultural perspective on human development, of which Vygotsky is today considered the main representative. It broadens its scope to historical and political issues

while pointing to the ways in which this theorist participated in the cultural environment of the time.

Regarding these forms of participation, the authors select and analyze three texts by Vygotsky published in periodicals of the city. In two of them, the Belarusian author comments on theatrical performances, the staging of plays, costumes, and the Belarusian literary language, identifying its limitations while at the same time valuing local production.

The third text selected by the authors specifically concerns Belarusian literature, in which Vygotsky's comments address the relationship between traditional and high art, Belarusian traditional poetry, and emerging proletarian art, identifying peasants and workers as two powerful revolutionary forces.

The authors further expand the analysis of poetry, music, literature, the status, and the meanings of art in the constitution of the psyche, highlighting Vygotsky's conception of aesthetics and its relationship with concrete life.

The text is dense, clear, original, and well-constructed. A remarkable contribution not only to the studies of the historical-cultural perspective but also to studies on art, aesthetics, politics, and the history of ideas.

In this sense, I have two minor suggestions to make, considering, above all, the nature of Bakhtiniana and its emphasis on issues of discourse and aesthetics, which have characterized the journal:

1. That the title highlights some of the following aspects: the relationships between politics and aesthetics, or between language and (conditions of) life; or between language and national identity; or between art and life... in short, whatever the authors consider most relevant, in the sense of making explicit or emphasizing the ways in which Vygotsky participated in the cultural environment of the time.

More concretely, for example, and this is just a suggestion, the authors could add to the title some of the spheres of activity of the Belarusian:

“L. S. Vygotsky's Participation in the Debate on the Belarusian National Question: Education, Politics, Language, and Art.”

2. In the last three lines of the abstract, rather than reiterating the readers' access to little-known texts, the authors could emphasize, in the “careful reading of the texts,” Vygotsky as an art critic, concerned with the issue of language, with the people's culture, with the meanings of artistic expressions, and with the possibility of the aesthetic reconfiguration of life... APPROVED

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