

9103-RFV

**THE
RUSSIAN
FUTURIST
VISION**

**by
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Introduction

The Futurist movement in art has been described as a period of “artistic rupture,” the rupture of established genres and verse forms as well as of the integrity of the medium; categories such as “prose” and “verse”, and most important “art” and “life” were questioned. It is the time when collage first makes its appearance and media such as painting, poetry, theatre and music are used in conjunction: Futurism is the time of performance art, of sound poetry.¹ It was a brief Utopian phase when artists felt themselves to be on the verge of a new age that would be more exciting, more promising, more inspiring, than any preceding one. Although it became a phenomenon that was to spread throughout Europe, most of the creative activity was spawned in Italy and Russia, economically backward countries that were experiencing rapid industrialization. In the prewar years, political and aesthetic decisions seemed to be viewed on a parallel plane, hence the extraordinarily rich artistic production. Although art historians have been quick to stress the similarities between Italian and Russian futurism, closer examination soon reveals that it is only possible to compare them in the broader context of politics and large scale movements in art. Probably because of the more accessible and much more widely translated work of Marinetti and his clan, Italian futurism is largely viewed as the dominant figure in the art world at this time. This is unfortunate, because although the work of Marinetti was undoubtedly influential in Europe and has left an indelible impression on art, many of the fascinating treasures that Russian futurism has had to offer has been largely ignored. As more research is done into an area that was for so many years inaccessible, we at last have the opportunity to discover the true scope of these artists who have left us with a collection of truly unique experimental art works and theory.

We can thank the Italian futurists for the generally accepted contemporary interpretation of the futurist movement: A nihilistic rejection of the past and a glorification of the city, speed and war. In his *Manifesto of Futurism* he speaks of risk-taking, of the love of danger, of courage and revolt. Through a disjointed and feverish language Marinetti was able to capture something of the mood of a human crowd in motion.² His aggressive artistic front found wideranging application in the arts: Painting, sculpture, music and especially theatre and performance. The tools for this new art became the deconstruction and fragmentation of the traditionally accepted art forms, irrecoverably changing the face of aesthetic values. Marinetti was dynamic, vital and completely different to anything society had previously had forced upon it, and his work was truly pressing upon traditional boundaries in the arts. This extremist stance was accepted as the aim of the movement, and was reflected in the work of other Italian futurist artists. Because of the dominant nature of these claims, it is largely accepted that the general nature of all futurist art is based on these precepts, supporting deconstruction through negation and chaos. It is a mistake to try and analyse Russian futurism as an extremist movement that mercilessly deconstructed all that preceded it. The purpose of this essay, then, is to discuss these radical and often misinterpreted Russian artists who presented new ways of interpreting reality and representing it in their art, without becoming obsessed with images of war or the burgeoning industrial age.

¹Perloff, *The Futurist Moment* (University of Chicago Press, 1986): Chapter One.

²Istvan Anhalt, *Alternative Voices* (University of Toronto Press, 1984)

The Russian futurists first called themselves “budyetlyane”³, a plural form of the word “budyetlyanin,” which means “a man of the future.”⁴ The name “futurism” was foisted upon them by the press, which resulted in them eventually adopting it, although they were never happy about its use. This reflects the deep antagonism that was felt by the Russian futurists for the Italians. The theoretical distinction between Italian and Russian futurism can be shown by examining a discussion that was held in Moscow between Marinetti and Benedikt Livshits (1886-1939), an important Russian futurist practitioner and theoretician.

Livshits: Your struggle is superficial. You are struggling with separate parts of speech and are not even trying to penetrate beyond the plane of etymological categories... You don't even want to see in a grammatical sentence only the external form of logical reasoning. All the arrows which you are aiming at the traditional syntax are missing the mark. Despite your innovations, the connection of the logical subject with the predicate remains firm, for from the viewpoint of this connection, it makes no difference by which part of speech the aspects of logical reasoning are expressed.

Marinetti: Are you denying the possibility of shattering the syntax?

Livshits: Not at all. We are only asserting that by those means which you, the Italian futurists, are limiting yourselves to, one cannot achieve anything.⁵

Livshits is basically suggesting that Marinetti's work in shattering syntax does not go far beyond representational onomatopoeia, which certainly fails to free the word from the strict confines of semantic meaning. As we will discuss in this paper, the Russian futurists expanded these notions beyond the point of rational explanation. As far as Livshits was concerned, Italian futurism already belonged to the past because they created a “romantic idealisation of the present” rather than a religion of the future.⁶ Vadim Shershenevich (1893-1942), an artist who was an important figure in one of the lesser known futurist groups, found similar complaint with Marinetti. He felt that the Italian futurists failed to provide a new form for the new content and that Marinetti's own poetry was boring, tasteless, and imitative: “Marinetti discovered only one aspect of an important creative process, about ‘dissolving’ in the city, but not our further re-creation.”⁷

There is no doubt that the Italian futurists reflected their dislike for the rigid conventions of its society in the break-up of grammar, words, and the pictorial image, which provided a new platform to appreciate art. This deconstruction is one of the factors common with Russian futurism, although the Russian futurist vision took these notions further, using the deconstruction of different mediums to recreate something new, vital and exciting for the changing world. As is only natural for a country in relative isolation, there are a totally contrasting set of influences to Russian futurism compared to the Italian movement. These influences reflect an interest in a positive change of aesthetics, and are intricately bound up with the Russian language and culture, the relationship between the visual and written mediums, and new ways of interpreting ancient language and art through primitivism. This is certainly a contrast to the Italian futurist's obsession with speed, war and the city.

³ coined by Velemir Khlebnikov

⁴ Vladimir Markov, *Russian futurism* (MacGibbon and Kee Ltd., 1968): Introduction.

⁵ Vahan D. Barooshian, *Russian Cubo-futurism* (Mouton, Paris 1976): Chapter 7.

⁶ Vladimir Markov, *Russian futurism* (MacGibbon and Kee Ltd., 1968): Chapter 4.

⁷ Markov: Chapter 3.

The Russian futurists were fascinated by the sound of their own language: Alexei Kruchenykh (1886-1969), an important futurist poet and theoretician, said of his critics “everything was done to stifle the primeval feeling for one’s own native tongue.”⁸ The Russian language contains a fascinating array of vocal sounds, and the words themselves were fragmented by these artists into their constituent particles creating material for experimental work with neologisms. Osip Brik (1888-1945), a supporter of futurism and later a literary critic, discussed the fragmentary nature of the Russian language and the exciting potential for creating new words and meanings from “sewing together” the fragments.⁹ The Russian futurists took this even further by extending poetry to include non-referential sounds that could nevertheless be enjoyed “by themselves”, more closely associated with the condition of music. This was to see its extreme expression in *zaum* - a word invented by the Russian futurists to define trans-sense language, language that went beyond semantic meaning. The work of these artists in rediscovering language as a powerful creative force has been perhaps the most overlooked of all movements in poetry (and the graphic arts), and although there were undeniable contradictions, this ‘creative storm’ has left us with an exciting and sometimes incomprehensible collection of works by a wide variety of artists.

There is little doubt that all of European art was affected by a series of scientific developments which began about the middle of the nineteenth century. This was no less true in the specifically Russian context. Science was beginning to present a flexible notion of reality: As the Newtonian universe changed into the Einsteinian one, science appeared to become as elastic as its concepts of space and time. The idea that truth could be grasped simply by the rigorous application of logic gradually disappeared, so too did the division between science and art. Just as science began to construct models which were put together intuitively, attempting to synchronise all available information, art also became a kind of model-building, a means to knowledge of a reality which is not accessible by purely deductive means. Such a situation lent itself readily to a holistic view of the universe; all types of information now seemed legitimate: rationalistic, intuitive, mystical, artistic. Because the scientists were busy rearranging their visions of the universe, artists suddenly felt free to do the same. It is remarkable how many of the Russian futurists were trained in science.¹⁰ One could speculate about the attention Darwin paid to primitive child behaviour in order to discover something about learning processes and innate behaviour, and the Russian futurists who were interested in primitive and child art as a means of unlocking the psyche. These dynamic, perception changing influences helps to explain the rather radical output of these extreme modernists who had a new vision for the future. They can also be reflected in the post-modernist movement: From the many possibilities made available by science and art, we try to piece together our own fragmented image of reality.

The Russian futurist’s splintering of words and the dismemberment of pictorial images can also be associated with this new unified world view: A sensibility which allowed for previously incongruous elements to exist in the same art work, creating new possibilities for perception. This is clearly suggested by the strong relationship between the visual and written mediums, although this phenomenon was certainly not limited to Russia.

⁸ Markov: Chapter 4.

⁹ Osip Brik, “On Khlebnikov,” *The Ardis Anthology of Russian Futurism* (Ardis Lakeland Press 1980)

¹⁰ Charlotte Douglas, “Views from the New World,” *The Ardis Anthology of Russian Futurism* (Ardis Lakeland Press 1980)

Painters and writers often belonged to the same organizations and aesthetic principles were meant to apply to both media.¹¹ Futurists consistently and frequently tried to add the visual element to their poetry using different typefaces, introducing offbeat illustrations and employing the author's handwriting; it is not until today that the "Russian futurist book" is finally getting the recognition it deserves as a revolutionary landmark in the history of publishing. Modern painting was "not only a new vision of the world in all its sensuous magnificence and staggering variety, it was also a new philosophy of art which shattered all established canons and opened breathtaking perspectives."¹² Alexei Kruchenykh began his career as a painter, and he grafted the principle of artistic distortion onto language by equating the stroke on the canvas with sounds or phonemes, both of which were to him free from 'reality', and which apparently liberated him from it. Velemir Khlebnikov (1885-1922), another important Russian poet, adopted cubist principles in his work even though he was not trained as an artist. Instead of lines, planes, and colours, arranged in an unexpected order on canvas in order to present a fuller interpretation of reality, Khlebnikov 'dislocated' the words and phrases of his poems.¹³ Both of these poets were to adopt the creed of *zaum* poetry.

¹¹ Charlotte Douglas, "Views from the New World," The Ardis Anthology of Russian Music (Ardis Lakeland Press 1980)

¹² Vladimir Markov, Russian futurism (MacGibbon and Kee Ltd., 1968): Introduction.

¹³ Susan B. Compton, The World Backwards (British Museum Publications 1978).

History

During the first decade of this century, Russian symbolism, strongly influenced by French symbolism, dominated Russian poetry. It began in the 1890's and changed the literary climate of Russia beyond recognition. It dealt a mortal blow to the already disintegrating realism, turned Russia's face towards Europe, where new ideas had been rampant for some time, and made poets form again after decades of stagnation.¹⁴ Symbolism was in no sense a 'mass' or 'democratic' art; it was a highly suggestive and intellectual art intended for the trained and initiated reader. This feature of Symbolism is important for an understanding of the reaction against it by the futurist poets. According to Kruchenykh, the obsession with meaning, reason, psychology and philosophy placed serious limitations on poetic imagination, invention, verbal play and spontaneous intuition. He dedicated the poem below to the "fathers" of Russian literature as a means of solving all their "fateful" problems:

Let's quickly put an end
to this meaningless comic-act
of course
you won't surprise anyone with this
life is a stupid joke and a fairy tale
our elders repeatedly said
we don't need instructions
and we don't understand this rot.

By 1910, symbolism had exhausted itself. A critical appraisal of symbolism and the nature and aims of poetry were made, and new poetic groups were formed.¹⁵ Those who were to call themselves futurists could not withstand the impact of their symbolist "fathers"; individual futurists and whole futurist groups made their debuts as imitators of symbolism or as neo-symbolists and several of them were encouraged or even sponsored by symbolists.¹⁶ Although Russian futurism rejected this movement, many of the poetic innovations were absorbed into the new futurist poetry, in one way or another.

One of the primary influences on Russian futurism from Italy is possibly their manifestos. One of the first important Russian futurist manifestos was published in Moscow at the end of 1912, and it certainly rings to the revolutionary "we will change the world" tone reminiscent of the Italian futurists. It was provocatively titled *Slap in the face of Public Taste*, and below is an excerpt from a translation:

We alone are the face of our time.
The horn of time blows through us in the art of words.
The past constricts. The Academy and Pushkin are less intelligible than hieroglyphics.
Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and so on must be thrown overboard from the
Ship of Modernity.¹⁷

¹⁴ Vladimir Markov, Russian futurism (MacGibbon and Kee Ltd., 1968): Chapter 1.

¹⁵ Vahan D. Barooshian, Russian Cubo-futurism (Mouton, Paris 1976): Introduction.

¹⁶ Vladimir Markov, Russian futurism (MacGibbon and Kee Ltd., 1968): Chapter 1.

¹⁷ "A Slap in the face of Public Taste," Ardis Anthology of Russian Futurism, (Ardis Lakeland Press 1980).

The group which published this manifesto were not known at this stage as futurists, although many of the artists within the group were to go on to become important futurist poets when the label of “futurism” was inescapable. This group called itself “Hylaea”- a name chosen to stress a special relationship between Southern Russia, the homeland of the Burluik family who were among the founders of the group, and ancient Greece. Hylaea was part of the land near the Black sea which had been settled by the almost mythical forebears of the Greeks, the scene of some of the exploits of Hercules and the country of the Scythians. By emphasising these primitive roots, the group of artists and writers wished to trace their heritage back to pre-classical settlement, by-passing the Western European classical inheritance by joining up with their own pre-classical primitivism. In this way they both challenged the Russian symbolists and found their own answer to the contemporary French avant-garde interest in non-Western and primitive art forms.¹⁸ Primitivism presented itself in the work of the Hylaea group relatively strongly. The first was through the collection of children’s drawing and writing. Another area that interested these futurist poets was pre-history (an imaginary “Slavic stone-age”). Also an interest in the naive and “illiterate” imitation and distortion of literature is presented, especially of romantic poetry in numerous songs, ballads, and poems which seldom attracted the attention of scholars, who to this day tend to dismiss them as having no artistic merit.¹⁹

One of the main participants and driving forces behind the Hylaea group was David Burliuk (1882-1967), and without his support there is unlikely to have even been a Russian futurist movement. His ability to organise and enthuse others to create, and his shrewd judge of talent makes up for the dubious quality of much of his own work. He organized the first futurist publication, presenting a selection of new artists that were soon to be unified under the title “Hylaea.” This publication was called *A Trap for Judges*, and was the first real appearance of Russian futurism as a group. At that time, Velemir Khlebnikov and Vasily Kamensky (1884-1961) along with David Burliuk and his two brothers Vladimir and Nikolai (who were never to make an impression on futurist art) were the main participants.

Burliuk brought together a fascinating group of artists who became united as the Hylaeans, sharing the same belief that they, as a group, could change the world, even if the works produced were contrasting and sometimes contradictory. Alexei Kruchenykh was a high school art teacher when he met the Burliuks in 1907. Vladimir Mayakovsky²⁰ (1893-1930), who was to become famous for his poetry during the early days of communism, began his writing with the futurist movement. He was studying at the Academy of fine arts, where he met David Burliuk: This is considered the greatest discovery in the history of futurism because Mayakovsky was convinced by David Burliuk to give up painting and concentrate on his poetry, where his real talent evidently lied. Benedict Livshits was introduced to David Burliuk in Kiev by a fellow artist Alexander Exter in December 1911, and he was the last addition to futurism.²¹

The three Burluik brothers, and Benedict Livshits founded the “Hylaea” group. This

¹⁸ Susan B. Compton, *The World Backwards* (British Museum Publications, 1978): Introduction.

¹⁹ Vladimir Markov, *Russian futurism* (MacGibbon and Kee Ltd., 1968): Chapter 2.

²⁰ Mayakovsky does not play a large role in this study because he was essentially a lyric poet who was working in the fairly confining regions of verse, rhythm and meter.

²¹ Vladimir markov, *Russian futurism* (MacGibbon and Kee Ltd., 1968): Chapter 2

name was used for more than two years before they began to call themselves futurists. It went without saying that Khlebnikov was one of them, and shortly thereafter, Mayakovsky and Kruchenykh joined the group.²² *A Trap for Judges 2*, a follow up to the first futurist publication, was published in 1913, but this time under the Hylaea label. It contained an exciting manifesto that found expression for its precepts through the deconstruction of language, and although there was nothing else of interest in the volume, it set a precedent for the future. Selections from the “new principles of creation” (occupying a large part of the manifesto) are listed overleaf:

1. We have ceased to look at word formation and word pronunciation according to grammar rules, beginning to see in letters only the determinants of speech. We have shaken syntax loose.
2. We have begun to attach meaning to words according to their graphic and phonic characteristics.
6. We have abolished punctuation, which for the first time brings the role of the verbal mass consciously to the fore.
7. We think of vowels as space and time; consonants are colour, sound, smell.
8. We have smashed rhythms. We have ceased to look for meters in textbooks; every new turn of movement gives birth to a new and free rhythm for a poet.²³

Even before Hylaea’s first publication, there appeared three little books by Kruchenykh: *Igra v adu* (A game in hell), *Starrinaya Lyubov* (Old-time love), and *Mirskontsa* (worldbackwards). These three books by Kruchenykh aimed at a creation of primitivistic poetry, but in some of them he went much further than that in his technique. *Mirskontsa* was the most experimental of the three, and was published in 1912. The texts are only printed on odd pages, some in handwriting, others as if individual rubber stamps of various sizes had been used for each letter. Lapses and errors reign supreme in this book, with wrong word transfers, incorrect spelling, spaces of varying length between words, capital letters inside words, and repetitions of some texts (sometimes printed upside down). Many of the letters in one poem are printed in mirror image form. Most interesting in the book are attempts to write a new kind of prose: There are twenty pages of text printed without punctuation, with sentences overlapping and blending, under the title “A Voyage Across the Whole world,” which does describe some kind of travel despite the inclusion of much irrelevant material and seems to be an exercise in automatic writing. This pre-empted the work of the French surrealists.

In January 1913, Kruchenykh published a very small volume of poetry called *Pomada* (pomade). The book’s value in reference to the history of futurism lies mainly in the fact that it opens with three tiny poems written, as the author says “in my own language differing from the oth[ers]: its words do not have definite meaning.” This poem begins with energetic monosyllables, some of which slightly resemble Russian or Ukrainian words, followed by a three-syllable word of shaggy appearance. The next word looks like a fragment of some

²² A section from it has been previously listed.

²³ Sadok Sudei II, (Moscow 1913).

other word, and the two final lines are occupied with syllables and just plain letters, the poem ending on a queer, non-Russian-sounding syllable. Below is an approximate transliteration. Here Kruchenykh introduced what later was to become known as *zaum*, the so-called transrational language, of which he would later become the main practitioner and theoretician.

dyr bul shchyl
ubeshshchur
skum
vy so bu
r l éz

Alexei Kruchenykh (poem) and Mikhail Larionov (drawing).
Pomada, Moscow, 1913.²⁴

Around the same time as the development of Hylaea, another futurist group existed in St. Petersburg. They called themselves “Ego-futurists,” and unfortunately, because of their symbolist orientation, it has become customary to disregard Russian ego-futurism as an ephemeral and insignificant movement that can boast of little poetically and scarcely deserves to be called futurism. However, the group did produce some interesting work worthy of note.

Ego-futurism was the creation of Igor Lotarev (1887-1942), who published his poetry under the name of Igor-Severyanin. Even though the movement would not have started without Lotarev, it would hardly have been noticed had it not been for Ivan Ignatyev (1882-1914). He was a writer of literary criticism, had some money and was a good organiser; he played in ego-futurism a role approximately the same as David Burliuk with Hylaea, and discovered Vasilisk Gnedov (1890-?) who was to become the most radical of the ego-futurists. Early publications of the group were rather conservative, and probably accounts for their lack of popularity among the other futurists.

Vasilisk Gnedov’s second book, *Smert Iskusstvu* (Death to Art) which was published in 1913, was quite radical in conception compared to the earlier work of the ego-futurists. Of fifteen poems by Gnedov, nine are one-line poems, most of them consisting of neologisms. One poem uses seemingly meaningless syllables, another simply repeats a word (or name) three times. Others consist of one neologistic word each, and two of just one letter each. The last poem, which is also the back cover of the book, has only the title of the poem: “Poem of the End”. This poem made Gnedov a celebrity, and at public appearances, he was often asked to recite it. A memoirist described such a recitation as follows: “This poem had no words and consisted only of one gesture, the arm being quickly raised in front of the head, then sharply dropped, and then moved to the right.” The hand was drawing a line: from left to right and vice versa (the second one cancelled the first). “Poem of the End” is actually “Poem of Nothing”, a zero is in fact drawn graphically. In terms of abstract representation through performance, Gnedov pre-

²⁴ Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment* (The University of Chicago Press, 1986).

empted the experimental work of the more influential “cubo-futurist” group that was to precede him.

Ignatyev continued publication of almanacs with arresting titles. In the volume *Bei* (Strike!), he printed the very ambitious work called “Third Entrance,” whose printed text is interspersed with notes of music and angular symbols. A footnote states that this “melorato-grapha” combines word, colour, melody, and movement. Probably the most successful piece in this volume is Ignatyev’s

attempt to write futurist prose. Entitled “Sledom za . . .” (following the . . .), it is a stream-of-consciousness fragment in which each sentence, rather than ending, becomes another, with punctuation either lacking or present where not expected. In the fall of 1913, Ignatyev published his most ambitious attempt to explain and outline his movement. It was his treatise “Ego-futurism”, discussing among other things, the groups attempts to write in illogical sequences of words similar to the French surrealist practice of “automatic writing,” which was of course pre-empted by Kruchenykh in 1912.

Unlike the Hylaeans, ego-futurists attached much more importance to metaphysical questions, and the first part of their name forced them to do so. For them, their movement could be described as discovering and revealing oneself by creating poetry. Their input was important to the development of the futurist movement, but they were overshadowed by the cubo-futurists and largely forgotten.²⁵

In 1913 members of the Hylaea group became known as “cubo-futurists”; however, the designation “Hylaea” was not abandoned and it continued to appear on the covers of futurist publications. Some scholars think the Hylaeans themselves added the term “cubo-” so as not to be confused with the ego-futurists or the Italian futurists. Others credit the press because of the connection between cubist painting and Moscow futurist ideas ; there is no doubt that cubist theory was more influential than the Italian futurist manifestos in restructuring and extending the creative language. Because so many Russian futurists approached writing from a background of visual art training, they turned their attention to adapting cubism to words.²⁶ Cubism saw its most extreme expression in the *zaum* of Kruchenykh and the ‘ferro-concrete’ poetry of Kamensky.

Dokhlaya Luna (The Croaked Moon) was the first collection in which the group officially assumed the name “futurists.” The main item of interest in this volume is the essay by Livshits, “Liberation of the Word”, his first and last opportunity to appear as a theoretician of the group. Livshits made a careful and honest effort to delineate a new concept of poetry, which was to be dynamic and directed toward a complete autonomy of the word:

Any poet seeks and finds a pretext for creation in the surrounding world; and his choice, no matter how free it seems to him, is conditioned by the subconscious. But there is freedom as soon as one moves those criteria to the area of the autonomous word. Here our poetry is free, and, for the first time, we do not care whether it is realistic, naturalistic, or fantastic; except for its starting point, it does not place itself in any relationships with the world and does not coordinate itself with it; all other crossing points of this poetry with the world are *a priori* accidental.

²⁵ Vladimir Markov: Chapter 3.

²⁶ Susan B. Compton, *The World Backwards* (British Museum Publications 1978): Introduction.

The rest of *Dokhlaya Luna* is occupied by poetry. Livshits himself contributed three poems, which are among his best and in which he tried to apply the principles of the newly liberated painting to poetry, especially in “Teplo” (warmth). Kruchenykh is represented by only two poems, one of which was written in *zaum* and was also the first attempt in Russian poetry to write in vowels only:²⁷

Heights
(universal language)
e u yu
i a o
o a
o a e e i e ya
o a
e u i e i
i e e
i i y i e i i y²⁸

One of Khlebnikov’s longer works included in *Dokhlaya Luna* was a drama written in prose and entitled “Gospozha Lenin” in which Khlebnikov tried to use “the smallest elements of art.” The scenes for the two short acts are the heroine’s house and the psychiatric ward; but the heroine herself is fragmented into a number of senses and emotions, and we hear only what the voices of her sight, hearing, reason, memory, logic, will, fear, attention, and so on, speak.²⁹

At the beginning of 1913, another futurist collection appeared. It was *Troe* (The Three). The most interesting among Kruchenykh’s contributions is his article “The new ways of the word” (Novye Puti Slova) in which he attempts to be the groups theoretician:

The word has been in chains in its subordination to meaning. The futurists have discovered this shortcoming and have devised a free language, transrational and universal. Whereas artists of the past went through the idea to the word, futurists go through the word to direct knowledge. As new artists discovered that movement creates the fourth dimension, so the futurists have discovered that incorrect structure of sentences brings about movement and the new perception of the world.³⁰

This insight into a new form of perception can be easily interpreted as a new reconciliation of science and poetry, a gathering of all the multiplicities of life in order to see it steadily and see it as a whole. Kruchenykh’s reference to the awareness of a fourth dimension can be directly traced to a publication that was well known to the futurists, *The Fourth Dimension* by Charles Hinton, published in New York in 1904. Hinton, by means of a series of detailed drawings and mental exercises, attempted to teach his readers to imagine clearly a four-dimensional cube. Such an instantaneous vision of an elusive whole was also the purpose of Russian futurist art.³¹

²⁷ What actually stands behind these vowels is the Russian text of the prayer “Credo”.

²⁸ *Dokhlaya Luna* (Moscow 1913).

²⁹ Vladimir Markov, *Russian futurism* (MacGibbon and Kee Ltd., 1968): Chapter 4.

³⁰ Kruchenykh, “Novye Puti Slova,” *Troe* (Peterburg 1913).

³¹ Charlotte Douglas, “Views of the New World,” *The Ardis Anthology of Russian Futurism* (Ardis Lakeland Press 1980)

Vasily Kamensky, a poet who was a major part of Hylaea's activities but retired for a time to the country to nurse his wounds after the failure of one of his books, rejoined the group at a time when it definitely had switched from the impressionism of the old days to new, avant-garde techniques. Kamensky not only welcomed the change, but wanted to proceed even further in this direction. Following the premises of Russian cubo-futurism, he attempted to break down language and reconstruct it in a totally new form. Overleaf is an example of one of his poems where he deconstructs a word fragment by fragment. The fact that the removal of every syllable or letter produces a new word demonstrates the Russian languages natural tendency for fragmentation:

Вркexbcnfz	Izluchistaya	<i>Radiant</i>
Kexbcnfz	Luchistaja	<i>Beaming</i>
Xbcnfz	Chistaya	<i>Pure</i>
Bcnfz _{Istah}	Istaya	<i>Melting</i>
Cnfz _{Stah}	Staya	<i>Flock</i>
Nfz _{Tah}	Taya	<i>Concealing</i>
Fz _{Ah}	Aya	<i>Groaning</i>
Z	Ya ³²	<i>I</i> ³³

Kamensky probably went further than any other Russian Futurist in using the graphic aspects of words.³⁴ He is responsible for the invention of "ferro-concrete" poetry, which is a term now abbreviated to 'concrete poetry', signifying modern avant-garde poems with an unusual layout. The fuller term implies the (then new) technology of reinforced concrete - pouring concrete into a prepared mould in which rods have been laid to give structural strength. If the five-sided page is seen as the mould, the lines dividing it up can be interpreted as rods giving the poem strength. Since the Russian futurists had been criticising Marinetti for the onomatopoeic character of his poetry, it is fitting that in his new writing Kamensky began to explore words in a new kind of framework. He appears to have chosen the term "ferro-concrete" to describe the arrangement of words on the page in direct contrast to the Italian futurists' 'words in freedom'.³⁵

³² Futurist:Roaring Parnassus, (Moscow 1914).

³³ Translation by Michael O'Toole, Murdoch University Department of Humanities.

³⁴ Vladimir Markov, Russian futurism (MacGibbon and Kee Ltd., 1968): Chapter 5.

³⁵ Marjorie Perloff, The futurist Moment (The University of Chicago Press).

In Kamensky's ferro-concrete poems, the visual aspects virtually eliminated all others, and it is nearly impossible to read these poems aloud. The poems are printed on a page that is divided into segments of different shape and size. The title of a poem can, as a rule, be found in the upper central segment, where it is printed larger than other words, but still is not separated from the rest of the poem. The segments are filled with groups of letters, which are printed in different typefaces; sometimes these letter groupings are words and sometimes they are only parts of actual words. Often these groupings are arranged in columns only one word in width. These columns are sometimes simple lists of words or word fragments, one under the other, and sometimes the result of dropping one letter from the preceding word to form another meaningful word below, a device used by Kamensky more than once. Some of his poems from this experimental stage that are not divided into segments are also worthy of note. The "Telephone Poem" is probably the most diversified futurist poem of the period, consisting of onomatopoeia (imitating the ringing of a telephone), many numbers, and a series of street impressions: a funeral procession complete with mourners, horse, and the hearse - the later being represented by an elongated 0 lying on its side - is very graphically depicted by the different letters in the word "procession."³⁶

³⁶ Vladimir Markov, Russian futurism (MacGibbon and Kee Ltd., 1968): Chapter 5.

Theatre/Performance

Some of the most interesting and revolutionary work of the Italian futurists was in the area of experimental theatre and performance based again on anti-aestheticism and deconstruction. Early Italian futurist theatre sought to include elements of cabaret and the participation of the audience, and Marinetti's *Manifesto of Dynamic and Synoptic Declamation* (first performed in 1914) extended performance through use of the whole range of the voice, bodily movements and all parts of the theatre, so that the spectator could no longer remain in a cool position of critical detachment.³⁷ The Italian futurist's position was typically of avant-garde extremism, and a negative, even violent, reaction from the audience was considered the paramount achievement. If examined under the same terms as Italian futurism, the performance work of the Russian futurists may appear tame, but although they may have been influenced by the early work of the Italians, the differences between the two movements again suggest an individual and alternative stream: The Russians are revealed to have experimented in different areas and with highly contrasting results.

As with Italian futurism, Russian futurist performance/theatre grew from a reaction against the conservative representational work that had dominated the theatre scene for so long. However, reform in Russian theatre began as early as 1882. The work of Nikolai Evreinov (1879-1853) undoubtedly influenced the futurists with his theory and performances. Evreinov was a theatre director in the line of Stanislavsky and Meyerhold and his theories must be seen in the then recent tradition of Russian theatre: Plays staged not for commercial success, but for their value as an art form. His revolutionary productions from 1907 until 1908 was a revival of medieval theatre forms which he explored during research into the history of drama.³⁸ Medieval theatre certainly deals with conventions that extend traditional Western theatre, including the use of a circular stage surrounding the audience, sudden changes of setting, mime and dance, and audience participation; all elements that would have been new to Russian theatre. In 1908 Evreinov set out his theory of monodrama, based on the premise that every play could be the drama or comedy of a single hero and that one could produce externally all the variations of the hero's state of soul, extract them and project them in the form of characters. This fragmentation of self in performance could certainly have influenced Khlebnikov when he wrote his short dramatic piece "Gospozha Lenin." Evreinov took his theories even further when in 1912 he went so far as to locate the action of "The Greenroom of the Soul" inside the chest of the human body.

The first productions of Russian futurist theatre occurred towards the end of 1913. It started with publicity stunts to propagandize their movement, but eventually resulted in full-scale experimental productions that were to change the face of Russian theatre. The first performance took place in the hall of the Society of Art Lovers in October 1913: The posters announcing this event were printed on toilet paper, and they described it as "the first recital of speech creators." David Burluik arranged a long-range strategy for the group, including his plans for a series of publicity stunts before the recital. The group were costumed and paraded while reciting futurist poetry. The tickets for the first concert were sold out within an hour of the the time they went on sale; and the recital

³⁷ Caroline Tisdall and Angelo Bozzolla, *Futurism* (Thames and Hudson Ltd. London 1977): Chapter 4.

³⁸ Susan B. Compton, *The World Backwards* (British Museum Publications 1978).

was a tremendous success. Those in the audience were delighted, and applauded even when Mayakovsky insulted them or when Kruchenykh shouted that he wanted to be hissed off the stage. The audience accepted everything, even Kruchenykh's spilling a glass of hot tea on the first row of the orchestra seats. In future performances, the group invariably drank tea and then spilled it on the audience and sometimes they tried to vary their recitation by simultaneous verse reading, thus anticipating Dada.³⁹ The success of these early performances resulted in a tour of Russia which proved to be equally successful and lucrative for the cubo-futurists. In terms of Italian futurism, these performances would have been considered a failure because it had not enticed the audience into violent derision. This would suggest that the Russian futurists were not setting out to shock through anti-aestheticism, but instead provide an interesting platform for new forms of performance. This is more in line with the Russian audience of the time who were evidently excited by anything new.

In December 1913, the most interesting and ambitious performances took place. Sponsored by the Union of Youth, two new works were presented Mayakovsky's *Vladimir Mayakovsky: A tragedy*, and Kruchenykh's opera *Victory over the Sun*. Mayakovsky not only produced and directed his tragedy, but played the starring role. Other roles were played by university students, coached by him personally: He did not want any professional actors. Although his own basic themes of hysterical despair, of lack of understanding, and of the soul of a new man and the soul of the artist are present, the performance itself was of a highly experimental nature. Mayakovsky as hero evidently appeared at centre stage, whereas the actors surrounding him had costumes on canvas stretched on figure frames, which they pushed in front of them. They thus took on the air of cardboard puppets, each exemplifying a single trait: The man with a stretched face, the man without an ear, the old man with cats, a man with two kisses, a man without a head and so on. Indeed, the stage design was in keeping with the spirit of the play, which is less drama, let alone "tragedy", than it is what we now call performance art: A verbal-visual improvisation that assaults the spectator's senses, drawing him or her into the poet's orbit. Mayakovsky remarked the following year in *The First Journal of Russian Futurists* that "theatre should fuse the ingredients of ballet and *zaum* language: the intonation of a speech that has no special meaning and the invented but rhythmically free movement of the human body work together. Both sound and movement are in turn closely coordinated with the visual image of the stage." This tragedy was originally called *The Revolt of Objects*, and indeed the play presents us with a world in which the distinction between subject and object, self and world is curiously obliterated. The sky "weeps uncontrollably", the sun "has swollen fingers sprouting reddish hairs, the "side streets roll up their sleeves for a fight". The various characters who confront him are fragments of Mayakovsky's own self.⁴⁰ This was undoubtedly influenced by Evreinov's theories of monodrama.

The immediate problem that arises when trying to discuss Kruchenykh's opera *Victory over the Sun* is that it was written almost entirely in the new Russian *zaum*, and therefore impossible to translate into any foreign language. Substitution in English of one word by another, or even by a group of words, cannot convey the suggestions and echoes which arise in the mind when language is distorted by *zaum*. Ilya Zdanevich (1894-1975) was perhaps the first to solve this problem by writing his plays completely in phonetics, but that will be discussed further on. Kruchenykh's opera is a prime example of

³⁹ Vladimir Markov, *Russian futurism* (MacGibbon and Kee Ltd., 1968): Chapter 4.

⁴⁰ Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment* (The University of Chicago Press 1986).

deconstruction as the means for the creation of a new vision. In this case, the material for fragmentation was music as well as spoken language. The music was composed by Mikhail Matyushin (1861-1934) who was an important futurist artist, and the music was described by one listener to sound like “a distorted Verdi”; the singers were told to deliberately sing flat. Like Mayakovsky’s tragedy, the casts were recruited through an advertisement in a newspaper and professional actors were discouraged from auditioning. Kruchenykh wanted from his performers a special kind of reciting “with a pause after every syllable.” Matyushin describes his impression of the opera:

Kruchenykh presented the first performance on a stage in St. Petersburg of the disintegration of concepts and words, of old staging, and of musical harmony. They presented a new creation, free of old conventional experiences and complete in itself, using seemingly senseless words - picture sound - new indications of the future that lead into eternity and give a joyful feeling of strength to those who reverently will lend an ear and look at it.⁴¹

Another example of Kruchenykh’s experimental performance work is a dramatic fragment taken from a book by Kruchenykh called *Let’s Grumble* (1913). The whole book may be described as an exercise in alogism, bordering on automatic writing. The dramatic fragment may be called a predecessor of modern dramas of the absurd, in many respects more avant-garde and consistent than its descendants. It begins with a brief parenthetical preface attacking the Moscow Art Theatre. The alogical quality increases throughout the play. At first the words spoken by the characters have some semblance of meaning, but this is constantly violated by the irrelevant intrusion of grammatical incongruities, strange words, or fragments of words. During the soliloquy of the Woman, who seems to be the protagonist, the bed rises into the air, and later objects begin to fly around. Toward the end of her monologue, the Reader begins to recite a *zaum* poem, which, according to the directions, must be read fast, in high pitch, and with the voice often dropping and gliding. At this point, the woman’s monologue becomes an unintelligible sequence of words unfinished or not begun, of auxiliary words, alogical neologisms, and actual Russian words (often misspelled or ungrammatically connected) in combination with meaningless syllables, letters and numbers. The play ends with the actors leaving the stage, and someone begins to read Kruchenykh’s old *zaum* verse.⁴² In this short piece, both language and everyday objects are treated to Kruchenykh’s alogical method of representing reality.

⁴¹ Susan B. Compton, *The World Backwards* (British Museum Publications 1978).

⁴² Vladimir Markov, *Russian futurism* (MacGibbon and Kee Ltd., 1968): Chapter 5.

ZAUM

Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov were the first poets to adopt *zaum* as a creative medium, and they shared a close working relationship and friendship. Kruchenykh undoubtedly listened with fascination to Khlebnikov's utopian projects, one of which was the primitive way of life, including an idea of a primitive language. Khlebnikov's vision of *zaum* was, however, quite different to Kruchenykh's, and although Khlebnikov supported the futurist movement and contributed to it some of his most important achievements, he was essentially a poet who would probably have written the same type of poetry even if futurism didn't happen;⁴³ he was a dreamer and had a truly unusual vision. His work is 'timeless' in a different way to Kruchenykh's *zaum* experiments, timeless because of the way they deal with language as an infinitely redefinable medium, and historical fact on a constantly occurring time continuum. Khlebnikov's chronic obsession with and perhaps mystical belief in numbers as the magic key to the structure of history and reality are central to an understanding of his vision. This obsession with numbers was poetically productive. As a futurist he is an ambiguous figure because in his poetry he yearns for the past and antiquity, and is almost religiously devoted to the East. For Khlebnikov, poetry was not an end in itself, or a 'realistic' description of reality, but a means of exploration and discovery of language and new forms: "He showed us aspects of language whose existence we did not even suspect."⁴⁴

As a theoretician of Russian Futurism, Khlebnikov's linguistic experiments with *zaum* fall into two basic categories: (1) the creation of neologisms from Slavic morphemes by analogy with other words, and (2) the creation of a universal language. Khlebnikov expressed his 'attitude towards the word' as follows:

To find, without breaking the circle of roots, the philosopher's stone for transforming all Slavic words one into another - this is my first attitude toward the word. This self-contained word is beyond daily life and everyday uses. Having observed that roots are only spectres which conceal the strings of the alphabet, to find the unity of world languages in general, constructed of units of the alphabet - this is my second attitude toward the word. The road to the world of trans-sense language.

Related to the first category, were Khlebnikov's numerous creations of neologisms by replacing the initial consonant of a word with another consonant. For example, he would replace the consonant "k" in the word *knjaz* (prince) with the consonant 'm' and create the word *mnjaz* which Khlebnikov defined as a thinker. A neologism does not necessarily evoke a definite object, although it can convey a meaning. Neologisms can enrich poetry in that they produce an awareness on the part of the reader and compel him to think etymologically.⁴⁵

Khlebnikov's second concept of *zaum* evolved after years of meditation about the nature of language "molecules" (i.e. speech sounds, especially consonants). Knowing the power of the word as manifested in charms and incantation, Khlebnikov dreamed of taming this

⁴³ Vahan D. Barooshian, Russian Cubo-futurism (Mouton Paris 1976): Chapter 4.

⁴⁴ Osip Brik, "On Khlebnikov," The Ardis Anthology of Russian Futurism (Ardis Lakeland Press 1980).

⁴⁵ Vahan D. Barooshian, Russian Cubo-futurism (Mouton Paris 1976): Chapter 1.

power and of turning transrational language into a rational one, but with a difference. Unlike the languages we use, this one would be a universal language of pure concepts clearly expressed by speech sounds.⁴⁶ Below is an excerpt from one of Khlebnikov's works called "Zangezi", where he improvises on the Russian word "um" meaning "mind", adding to it both conventional and unconventional prefixes. Khlebnikov chose meanings for each of these words which he included at the end of the poem, and the resulting sound was most likely intended to represent a ritual chant:

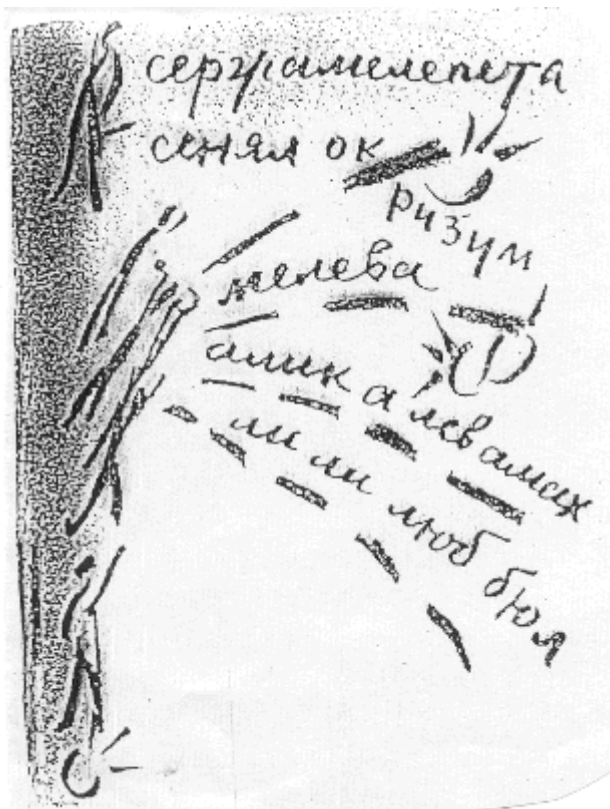
Quiet! Quiet! He will speak!
 Zangezi: Ring the glad tidings of the mind! All the
 different shades of the brain will pass before you in a
 review of all the kinds of reason. Now! Everyone sing
 after me!

Ujev m	Goum
Jev m	Oum
Eev m	Uum.
Gfevm	Paum.
Cjev vtyz	Soum of me
B nt[rjdj	And of those
yt pyf.	I don't know
Vjev m	Moum.
<jev m	Boum.
Kfevm	Laum.
Xtev m	Cheum
-<j v@	— Bom!
<bv@ _{Bim!}	Bim!
<fv@	Bam! ⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Vladimir Markov, *Russian futurism* (MacGibbon and Kee Ltd., 1968): Chapter 7.

⁴⁷ Khlebnikov, "Zangezi," *The Ardis Anthology of Russian Futurism* (Ardis Lakeland Press 1980).

⁴⁸ Khlebnikov, *Tvoreniya* (Sovyetiski Pisatel' Moscow 1986).



serzhamyelyepyeta
 syenyal ock
 rezum
 myelyeba
 alik a lebamax
 le le lyoub byoul

Explodity, 1914. Lithographed page of *zaum* writing by Kruchenykh, illustrations by Kulbin.

Undoubtedly, *zaum* was one of the most important and exciting creations of Russian futurism, and Alexei Kruchenykh was to become one of its primary supporters. For Kruchenykh, trans-sense was basically to consist of arbitrary and logically meaningless but sometimes suggestive phonemic sequences. Kruchenykh seems to have seen in these phonemic sequences a new way of perceiving the world. For Kruchenykh, it gave one freedom “to crumble words according to a definite phonetic (or other) task.” He was determined to see *zaum* as a leading mode of expression because he believed that trans-sense language was demanded by the confused character of contemporary life and served as an antidote to the paralysis of common language.⁴⁹ These reasons also justified for Kruchenykh the destruction of syntax and grammar: “We have realized that to depict the dizzy world of today and even more of the on-rushing future, we must combine words anew; and the more chaos we introduce into the structure of sentences, the better.”⁵⁰ The absurdity of Kruchenykh’s most experimental works was a very specific

⁴⁹ Vahan D. Barooshian, *Russian Cubo-futurism* (Mouton Paris 1976): Chapter 4.

⁵⁰ Alexei Kruchenykh, “Novye puti slova,” *Troe* (Peterburg, 1913).

zaum behaviour; it was different from the seemingly absurd with a hidden message, different even from the surreal type of subconscious associations. This absurdity was a pointless, mindless, stubbornly senseless, irresolvable condition meant only to reveal new and previously invisible realms of the psyche.⁵¹

Although Kruchenykh's *zaum* seems to be taking an extremist stance on language deconstruction, on closer examination an interesting duality is presented: Kornei Chukovsky, a literary critic, commented on the primeval nature of this poetry. He said that, "Trans-sense was not a 'language', but a "pre-language, pre-cultural, pre-historical. . .when there was no discourse, conversation, but only cries and screams. . ." The strange irony of the situation was, according to Chukovsky, that in their passion for the future, the Futurists had "selected for their poetry the most ancient of the very ancient languages."⁵²

The genesis of *zaum* can also be related to another form of language: "Glossolalic" or "speaking with tongues", where members of a sect in a state of religious ecstasy utter nonsense words. In the early days of *zaum*, Kruchenykh published a volume called *Explodity*, and it is here that Kruchenykh refers for the first time to the glossolalic manifestations among Russian religious sectarians as predecessors of his own *zaum*. He quotes a sequence of meaningless words by

Shiskov, a member of the flagellating Khlysty sect and sees in this "a genuine expression of a tormented soul." For Kruchenykh, such "speaking with tongues" is proof that man resorts to a free "transrational" language "in important moments."⁵³ The source of Kruchenykh's theories, in this instance, is an article he never mentions "Religious Ecstasy in Russian Mystical Sectarianism."⁵⁴

In 1921 Kruchenykh formulated his ideas in his second manifesto, and although it seemed to water down his initial uncompromising use of *zaum*, it gave trans-sense language a complete theoretical basis. He was to reprint this in many of his future publications:

Declaration of Transrational Language

1. Thought and speech cannot catch up with the emotional experience of someone inspired; therefore, the artist is free to express himself not only in a common language (concepts), but also in a private one (a creator is individual), as well as in a language that does not have a definite meaning (is not frozen), that is transrational. A common language is binding; a free one allows more complete expression.
2. *Zaum* is the primary (both historically and individually) form of poetry. At first comes a rhythmic, musical agitation, a protosound (a poet ought to write it down, because it may be forgotten in the course of further work).
3. Transrational speech gives birth to a transrational protoimage (and vice versa, which cannot be defined precisely).

⁵¹ Charlotte Douglas, "Views from the New World," *Ardis Anthology of Russian Futurism* (Ardis Lakeland Press 1980).

⁵² Kornej Chukovksy, *Futuristy* (Peterburg, 1922)

⁵³ Vladimir Markov: Chapter 5.

⁵⁴ D Konovalov, it was serialized in "Theological Herald," 1907-1908

4. Transrational language is resorted to
- (a) when the artist produces images that have not yet taken definite shape (in him or outside).
 - (b) When it is not desired to name an object, but only to suggest it.
 - (c) When one loses one's mind
 - (d) When one does not need it - religious ecstasy, love (a gloss of an exclamation, interjections, purring, refrains, a child's babbling, affectionate names, nicknames - such *zaum* can be found in abundance in the works of writers of every school).

5. *Zaum* awakens and liberates creative imagination, without offending it by anything concrete. Meaning makes the word contract, writhe, turn to stone; *zaum*, on the other hand, is wild, fiery, explosive (wild paradise, flaming tongues, glowing coal).

6. Thus one should distinguish between three forms of word creation:

I— The transrational

- (a) sung and incanted magic
- (b) revelation (naming and depicting) of invisible things, mysticism.
- (c) musical-phonetic word creation - orchestration, texture.

II—The rational (its opposite is the mad, the clinical, which has its own laws), establishable by science; what is, however, beyond scientific cognition belongs to the area of aesthetics, of the aleatory.

III— The aleatory (alogical, fortuitous, a creative breakthrough, mechanical combination of words: slip of tongue, misprints, lapses; partly belonging here are shifts of sound and meaning, national accent, stuttering, baby talk etc.)

7. *Zaum* is the most compact art in the length of the way from perception to reproduction, as well as in its form.

8. *Zaum* is a universal art, though its origin and initial character may be national. Transrational works may result in a worldwide poetic language which is born organically, and not artificially like Esperanto.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Vladimir Markov, Russian futurism (MacGibbon and Kee Ltd., 1968): Chapter 7.

Although Vasily Kamensky's poetic theory and practice are very much in accord with the fundamental premises of Russian Futurism, his use of *zaum* presented an alternative emphasis: After postulating the 'musical' orientation of the word, Kamensky asserted the poet's right to his own unique understanding and vision of poetic beauty so as to discover new poetic paths. A Russian futurist critic wrote that "perhaps no one has felt the sound as an aim in itself, as a unique joy as Vasily Kamensky."⁵⁶ Overleaf is an example of one of Kamensky's rhythmic sound poems:

Zgara-amba
Zgara-amba
Zgara-amba
Amb.

Amb-zgara-amba
Amb-zgara-amba
Amb-zgara-amba
Amb.

qar-qor-qur-qir
Cin-drax-tam-dzzz

Zgara-amba
Zgara-amba
Zgara-amba
Amb.

Amb-zgara-amba
Amb-zgara-amba
Amb-zgara-amba
Amb.

tsar-tsor-tsur-tsir.
Chin-drax-tam-dzzz⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Vahan D. Barooshian, Russian Cubo-futurism (Mouton Paris 1976): Chapter 5.

⁵⁷ Vasily Kamensky, Sto poetov (Moscow, 1923).

Final e

Sometime in 1916 Kruchenykh, like Kamensky, dodged the draft by retiring to the Caucasus. There he found work at a railway construction site, but found enough time for literature. Tiflis (now Tbilisi), the capital of Georgia, had become a literary and artistic oasis of Russia by the time Kruchenykh arrived there. Futurism found especially fertile soil, in fact one might say that the inexorable development of what is known as Russian futurism from impressionism through primitivism to abstractionism found here the final point beyond which it never went. Kruchenykh, Ilya Zdanevich, and other lesser known artists lectured and recited their verse at a nightclub called “The Fantastic Tavern”, and formed a group called 41°. The name of this group has never properly been explained. Perhaps it had something to do with the latitude and longitude of Tiflis. Also, it is one degree stronger than vodka and is the body temperature that may be fatal. The group, though in existence from the end of 1917 to 1920, did not formally announce its formation until 1919, when the group published the first and only issue of the newspaper 41°, in which it printed the following manifesto:

The company 41° unites the left-bank [avant-garde] futurism and affirms *zaum* as the obligatory form of manifestation of art. The aim of 41° is to make use of all great discoveries by its contributors and to put the world on a new axis. The newspaper will be a haven of the events in the life of the company, as well as a cause of constant troubles. We are rolling up our sleeves.

Although Kruchenykh continued expounding his theories about *zaum* and other ways of looking at the aesthetics of poetry, after his manifesto published in 1921 he had little new to say. The most unmistakable achievement among the members of 41° must be credited to Zdanevich. His major contribution to Russian futurism took the form of series of five plays called “Aslaablichya.”⁵⁸ Zdanevich called the whole thing a “vertep”, thus emphasising its primitivistic nature. “Vertep” was a form of puppet folk theatre of Ukrainian origin, which mixed episodes from the Bible with comic scenes of everyday life. In Zdanevich’s work, a comical absurdity prevails and the religious theme remains in the background, occasionally manifesting itself in parodistic and blasphemous passages. Also in the tradition of folk theatre is the figure of the Master, who begins each play with a short talk with the audience, providing hints as to the possible meaning of the play. These talks are always clever imitations of spoken Russian, but a clear meaning emerges from them only occasionally, for sentences overlap or are broken and what results is nonsense that sounds like Russian. The text itself is not Russian, but *zaum*, and it is perhaps the most consistent and large-scale use of *zaum* in Russian futurist literature. The spoken element is further enhanced by the fact that every word, including stage directions and the title, is given in phonetic transcription; an important development for solving many of the problems of interpretation presented by Kruchenykh’s work. Its verse texture is occasionally emphasized by clear meter, phrase repetition, and even rhyme. The *zaum* changes from play to play and from character to character, and Russian is not completely excluded from it. The first “dra” (as Zdanevich called his dramatic works) in the cycle was written in 1916 in Petrograd and published in May 1918, in Tiflis. It was *Yanko krul’ Albanskai*, and it was ostensibly written in Albanian, with the

⁵⁸ Relating to image of a donkey.

revealing admission that this Albanian “derives from his own,” that is, Zdanevich’s. The action is simple: A gang of Albanian bandits forces Yanko, a sexless creature, to become a king. Because he is frightened, they glue him to the throne. He tries to unglue himself with the help of a German doctor (a typical figure of folk theatre), but the bandits surprise them and kill Yanko. The funniest part of the play is its *zaum*. The Albanians, for example, speak or sing, for the most part, nothing but the Russian alphabet (words consisting of Russian letters in alphabetical order, organized into smaller or larger, pronounceable or unpronounceable, units, delivered with different intonations). There is much more variety in the speech of the main characters, where one can find sequences of invented words which produce the illusion of morphology with their *zaum* “endings,” utterly fantastic long verbal formations, distorted Russian phrases, and some real words or names. The best parts are Yanko’s soliloquies, especially the first one, when he reacts to his capture with words resembling a child’s language, or the one where he tries to unglue himself and whines with words bursting with vowels.⁵⁹ The title suggests both Marinetti’s early play *Le Roi Bombance* and its nineteenth century precursor *Ubu Roi* by Alfred Jarry: The sexless frightened king, who has to be glued to his throne, sounds like a parody of the earlier heroes.

Zdanevich found himself an expatriate after he was sent to Paris to organize an exhibition of modern Russian art. A change of directives from Russia killed the project, and Zdanevich, probably disappointed but also defiant, remained in France, becoming a member of the Dada movement. Although his time in Paris is beyond the boundaries of this study, this is where his last dra was published, and this is certainly worthy of mention. This play was called *Le-Dantyu as a Beacon*, and in writing this he was drawing together a wide spectrum of ideas. In the final publication of the book he outstripped most western European typographical invention, while continuing the Russian futurist tradition which he and Kruchenykh had pushed further in Tiflis, anticipating both dada and surrealism.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Vladimir Markov, Russian futurism (MacGibbon and Kee Ltd., 1968): Chapter 7.

⁶⁰ Susan B. Compton, The World Backwards (British Museum Publications 1978).

Conclusion

In retrospect, Russian futurism appears to be a true oddity in the history of twentieth century art, perhaps because of its rather incongruous historical position. Today their vision for the future seems an enigma in a country that was to develop out of futurism into constructivism under a communist system. In Western Europe, the next stage in the avant-garde was dadaism and then surrealism. Some of the important theoretical and political concepts and practical innovations behind these movements were prefigured by Russian futurism and not Italian futurism. Dadaism shared the interest in aleatory: Chance events as the basis for exciting creation, simultaneous recitation of poetry and even nonsense poetry of a highly rhythmic nature. Of course, they also shared an important artist - Zdanovich. Through 'automatic writing' and other poetic innovations of Russian futurism we can see immediate practical connections with French surrealism, but there are also important links in terms of theory and politics. Their passion for scandal, action and shock often concealed their 'positive' aim: "to transform the world" and "to change life." The very nature of the surrealists social objectives and their beliefs in the fundamental 'rationality' of 'bourgeois' society were partly responsible for their political commitment to Bolshevism.⁶¹

One of the most prominent criticisms of Russian futurism has been the lack of homogeneity among the works produced, largely because we have been left with a confusing array of styles and genres. Like trying to classify this movement through the very militant precepts of Italian futurism, this view shows a lack of understanding or complete knowledge of the aims of the movement itself. Although these Russian artists were working for the same goal in a united rejection of the past, and shared many common themes, they sought to discover their own way to express this vision. It is surely a natural and exciting process to have contrasting interpretations, and it would stifle creativity to expect all artists to create similar work. In any case, the Russian futurists realized that classifying themselves under the title of 'futurism' was misleading. Mayakovsky, perhaps the least radical of all the cubo-futurists, was the first to admit that 'futurism' was merely a brand name that did not encompass the movements varied contents.⁶² In our desire to unfathom and classify we inevitably avoid that which doesn't fit the mould, and this helps to explain why Russian futurism has been largely ignored by the art world.

The interest of the Russian futurists in ancient culture, expressed first through primitivism and later *zaum*, was perhaps the most unusual aspect of a movement devoted to the future. A possible explanation as to why their interpretation was so different to that of Western Europe, and even the earlier symbolists who incorporated elements of ancient culture and mythology in their poetry, can be possibly explained by the Russian futurists' recognition of ties with Asia. Khlebnikov was religiously devoted to the east, and much of Kamensky's ferro-concrete poetry was influenced by his trips to Persia. Even Livshits, who was perhaps the most European of Russian futurists came to the conclusion that "we should recognize ourselves as Asians and rid ourselves of our European yoke." He described the West and the East as two completely different systems of aesthetic vision. Russia was presented as an organic part of the East, and

⁶¹ Vahan D. Barooshian, Russian Cubo-futurism (Mouton Paris 1976): Chapter 9.

⁶² Vladimir Mayakovsky, "We want meat," The Ardis Anthology of Russian Futurism (Ardis Lakeland Press 1980)

Livshits drew parallels between Russian icons and Persian miniatures, Russian and Chinese lithographs, and Russian “Chastushkas” (popular ditties) and Japanese tankas.⁶³ The French surrealists who were to take the most similar political and theoretical stance to Russian futurism, also valued the Asian continent because it was unsullied by European rationalism. Aragon and Breton called upon the soviets to lead Asia to the destruction of bourgeois pseudo-culture even if this meant the destruction of the surrealists themselves, so long as reason and the “all-strangling principle of bourgeois” were also destroyed in the onslaught.⁶⁴

Perhaps the most ambiguous tribute left by the Russian futurists was their *zaum*, trans-sense language. *Zaum* looked like the outer limit of poetry, its extreme and pure manifestation, where sounds can create meaning but are not subordinated to it, making all avant-garde vocal work that was to follow the Russian futurists seem derivative or tame. The two major proponents of *zaum*, Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh, certainly shared a vision for new ways of dealing with language, even if their methods were decidedly different. In both cases, the absurdity of *zaum* had a purpose and was never anarchic. For Khlebnikov that purpose was connected with an intimate understanding of words and sounds, and an obsession with new ways of harnessing language as a means of communication, whereas Kruchenykh totally abandoned rational interpretation, wanting to connect on a level that went beyond rational processes and deep into the psyche. Even Kamensky was to develop the concept of *zaum* through his interest in the musical nature of nonsense verse.

For the Russian futurists this was “an appeal to a higher sense, one that is implicit only in the form of the work itself. The spatial-temporal universe is one that is destroyed for the sake of a simultaneous universe, one that is stable and pervasive.”⁶⁵ This interpretation of Russian futurism as a transcendent movement is comparable to Zen Buddhism, which treats allogical language as the key to enlightenment and a complete understanding of the world. This is totally fitting considering the Russian futurist’s link with Asia. Now that Eastern philosophy and culture plays such an important role in contemporary art, and we are attempting to integrate elements taken from the past in order to discover new forms of meaning and experience, perhaps Russian futurism will finally take its place as the most important and revolutionary art movement in the twentieth century.

**“It is not *new* objects which should be used in art,
but a new and fantastic light should be thrown
upon the old ones.”**

—Kruchenykh

⁶³ Vladimir Markov, Russian futurism (MacGibbon and Kee Ltd., 1968): Chapter 4.

⁶⁴ Vahan D. Barooshian, Russian Cubo-futurism (Mouton Paris 1976): Chapter 9.

⁶⁵ Charlotte Douglas, “Views from the New World,” Ardis Anthology of Russian Futurism (Ardis Lakeland Press 1980).