

A Game in Hell, hard work in heaven: Deconstructing the Canon in Russian Futurist Books

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*A Game in Hell, hard work in heaven
our first lessons were pretty good ones
together, remember?
We nibbled like mice at turbid time
In hoc signo vinces!*¹

This poem, whose first line has, in retrospect, acquired symbolic importance, may be a key to understanding the major quest behind the poetics of the early Russian avant-garde. Written in 1920 by Velimir Khlebnikov and dedicated “To Alesha Kruchenykh,” it refers to the first lithographed Futurist book, *A Game in Hell*, that Khlebnikov co-authored with Kruchenykh and published in 1912 (p. 70). In it the proverbial “Futurist devil,” seen through the lens of dark irony and the grotesquerie of *lubki* (cheap popular prints of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), appears for the first time, playing with a sinner who has bet his soul in a card game.

“A Game in Hell” and “hard work in heaven” are phrases that describe the first creative lessons for all Russian “Futurians,” poets and painters alike, who learned to prefer riddles and paradoxes and ignore determinism in life and art. They refrained from sinking into predictability, and although they existed in the “hell” of the quotidian, they refused to belong to it. Early Russian Futurism was one of the most resistant movements of the avant-garde: resistant to tradition and to any ideological or aesthetic compromise. An awareness of history allowed the Russian Futurists, especially Khlebnikov, to perceive the rhythms of “turbid time” that exists beyond

any defined goal or purpose, “without why,” according to its own laws. They believed that one can break through to this experience only by means of “work” and “a game”: in other words, by making art as if it were a game. The open space for this game was a new kind of art, and the fundamental condition for its existence was the maximal union of creativity and unbounded joy in the element of play (accidentally, there is one and the same word—*igra*—for “play” and “game” in Russian), with its vital energy and spontaneity. The poetics of play and chance manifested themselves in the aesthetics of the early Russian avant-garde as an *anarchic* method of making art without rules, not just a technique.

The concept of the Futurist book emerged as a strong reaction against the creation of any absolute model, against any perception of art as an ordered, rational structure. It represents a constant deconstruction (or *dis-konstruktsiia*, as the Russian Futurist poet, artist, and theoretician David Burliuk put it in 1913) of the established canon, rather than a pure demolition of it.

deconstruction is the opposite of construction.
a canon can be constructive.
a canon can be deconstructive.
construction can be shifted or displaced.

*The canon of displaced construction.*²

This sequence of binary oppositions leads to affirmation through negation, and makes it clear to the



Fig. 2. Aleksei Kruchenykh, David Burliuk, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Nikolai Burliuk, and Benedikt Livshits. 1913. Private archive, Moscow



Fig. 3. Sergei Dolinskii and Georgii Kuz'min. 1914. Courtesy of A. Vasiliev, Paris. © A. Vasiliev

group called Gileia; they were also known as Cubo-Futurists. Together they not only devised an absolutely new aesthetic concept of the artist's book, but in so doing they broke all ties with traditional book production.

First of all, the Russian Futurists did not have publishers in the strict sense of the word; most of the books were produced by the artists and poets themselves, sometimes with the modest financial support of friends who did not censor or control the work, or expect any profits. Several lithographed books were published in this way with monetary assistance from Sergei Dolinskii and Georgii Kuz'min (fig. 3), young aviators and friends of Mayakovsky. Kruchenykh's albums *War* (with linocuts by Rozanova; 1916; pp. 100–102) and *Universal War* (1916; pp. 103–05) were fully sponsored by Andrei Shemshurin, a scholar of Old Russian manuscripts. Of course, the production costs were extremely low.⁷ By working in the most economical way possible, the Futurists achieved total artistic control over the final product, which allowed them to create a book as an artistic form that was independent of the whims of the publishing enterprise or the art world. It also enabled them to avoid dealing with expensive and often imperfect reproduction machinery. Ironically, in the age of mechanical reproduction, the most extreme innovators, Kruchenykh and Rozanova, freed themselves from any technological process involving expensive machinery.

What should be emphasized in this regard, however, is the primacy of the visual element over the literary and poetic one in the development of the tendency toward *zaum*, often translated into English as “transrational” or “beyondsense.”⁸ The concept of *zaum* was conceived by poets through their direct contact with visual abstraction, and the transformation of the written (not yet transrational) word into an autonomous visual form in the early Futurist books.⁹ One cannot just read a Futurist book: as the Russian modernist writer Aleksei Remizov put it, to experience a Futurist book, one should “see, listen to, and feel it.”¹⁰ When Kruchenykh reworked his 1913 manifesto “Declaration of the Word as Such” in 1917, he attempted to illustrate the process of the creative poetic act, concluding with the formula “in music—the sound, in painting—color, in poetry—the letter (thought = vision + sound + line + color).”¹¹

A crucial part of the aesthetic of Futurist books is their tactile, physical quality: they are small, almost palm-size, and made of cheap, rough paper but of rich texture and particular color tones (sometimes they used flashy wallpaper). Since the Futurist book still remained an object, its authenticity was closely related to its “thingly” nature, its texture. The Russian Futurists assigned particular importance to handwriting and the handcrafted quality of their books; they believed that only an original manuscript in the poet's or artist's own hand is capable of fully conveying the music, texture, and rhythm of the verse.

It is a generic feature of Russian Futurism that a letter must be perceived as a visual sign, a word as an object. What the Italian Futurists wanted to achieve in dramatic phonic declamations of their poetry the

Russians sought to achieve in inimitable visual images of the word: “The letter is not a means but a goal in itself. Those who realize this cannot reconcile themselves with the factory letter-label (script) . . . to give verbal art complete freedom, we use arbitrary words to liberate ourselves from the subject and study the color, the music of the word, syllables, sounds.”¹² If words can be perceived as objects, they can become painterly themes. The unity of the page, produced by lithography, approaches an organic synthesis of design and text in which one flows out of the other, and the “pictorial” nature of the letter and handwritten text is inseparably connected with the lines of the drawing.

In all of the Futurists' poetic declarations, this visual image of the word is accorded definitive significance, and the concept of the “word-image” became a kind of symbol of the synthesis of poetry and painting to which the Russian avant-garde aspired. The specific essence of this notion in the “auto-writing” (Kruchenykh's term) of Futurist books becomes apparent when it is compared with the Italian *tavole parolibere* (free-word pictures).

The first experiments in this direction appeared in 1912, in Marinetti's *parole in libertà* (words-in-freedom) in Italy (see fig. 4) and in Kruchenykh's first lithographed books in Russia. They were followed the next year by Marinetti's manifesto *L'immaginazione senza fili e le parole in libertà* (*Unbound Imagination and Free Words*) and Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov's booklet *The Word as Such* (1913; p. 74). Marinetti declared that the Italian Futurists had liberated not only meter and rhythm but also syntax, and introduced a new orthography and means of deforming words, attaining a new level of graphic “plurality.” In *parole in libertà* he generally took the machine as his ally—a “typographic revolution,” which produced a suprapersonal, extraindividual result. By contrast, Kruchenykh entrusted “the word as such” not to the typographer but to the individuality of the artist, who restores to it the uniqueness of the pictorial quality of writing, thus transforming the written or printed “word” into an artwork. This presence of the artist's hand is what erases the boundary between poetry and visual art, two forms of creative activity.

Even in the handwritten Italian *tavole parolibere* of 1914 and 1915 and later, none of the authors permitted themselves such a bold fusion of the poetic and painterly canons. After all, the manuscript of the poet—even if he is experimenting with the potential of the graphic shape of the word—still belongs first of all to the autonomous poetical tradition rather than to the painterly one. Also belonging in equal measure to this tradition are Khlebnikov's and Kruchenykh's original manuscripts, but not their Futurist books.

In Rozanova's 1914 composition dedicated to the memory of the poet Ivan Ignatiev and executed to verses by Khlebnikov, there is a reverse metamorphosis in which the poetic “text” appears with the immediacy of an image, initially perceived as a drawing and subject to the laws of painting. This graphic sheet, executed using a two-tone (black and blue) hectographic printing technique,¹³ which gives each impression a very individual texture sim-

ilar to watercolor, creates a painterly impression.

The synthesis of color and sound, the painterly and the poetic, became complete in Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh's *Te li le* (1914; pp. 84, 85), created with the same hectographic technique using seven colors. It was in this edition that Rozanova (Kul'bin was her co-illustrator of Khlebnikov's verses) brought her art to a culmination. Kruchenykh wrote of this work:

The word (letter), of course, has undergone a great change here; perhaps it has even been replaced by painting, but what does a “drunkard of paradise” care about all this prose? And I have already met persons who bought *Te li le* without understanding anything about *dyr-bul-shchyl* [Kruchenykh's first transrational poem] but who admired its painting . . .

On the matter of instantaneous writing:

1. The first impression (by correcting it 10 times we lose it and perhaps therefore lose everything).
2. By correcting, thinking over, polishing, we banish chance from art that in momentary art of course occupies an honored place; by banishing chance we deprive our works of that which is most valuable, for we leave only that which has been experienced and thoroughly acquired, and all of the life of the unconscious goes to pot! ¹⁴

In *Te li le* (published in an edition of fifty) Kruchenykh included his own and Khlebnikov's poetry from their earlier books, where they had widely exploited the potential of the “irregularities” of *zaum* and the rich possibilities they offer for creating that laconicism of “implied meaning” that Guro claimed “forces one to decode the book and ask of it a new, partially revealed potential.”¹⁵ In some respects Kruchenykh's instantaneous auto-writing anticipates the method of automatic writing developed by the French Surrealists.

The hieroglyphic quality or visual image of the word is intensified, and its ornamental nature eclipses the concrete, everyday meaning contained in it. At some moment the poetic word is completely transformed into image and is primarily perceived visually as an inimitable, enigmatic picture. The word is viewed rather than read, and what is comprehended above all is not its semantic meaning but its graphic, visual sense, which is apprehended momentarily (as though its meaning is unintelligible or unknown). “Writing and reading must be instantaneous!”¹⁶

In advertisements for new Futurist editions, often printed on the back covers or the last pages of the preceding publications, books do not “come out” or get “published”; instead, they “take off” and “fly out.” A dynamic aspiration to overcome the laws of gravity is expressed in this airborne metaphor, a striving for new dimensions, for metaphysical “victory over the earth” that the poet Il'ia Zdanevich cited, a symbolic “earth” which Malevich called an all-too-human “green world of

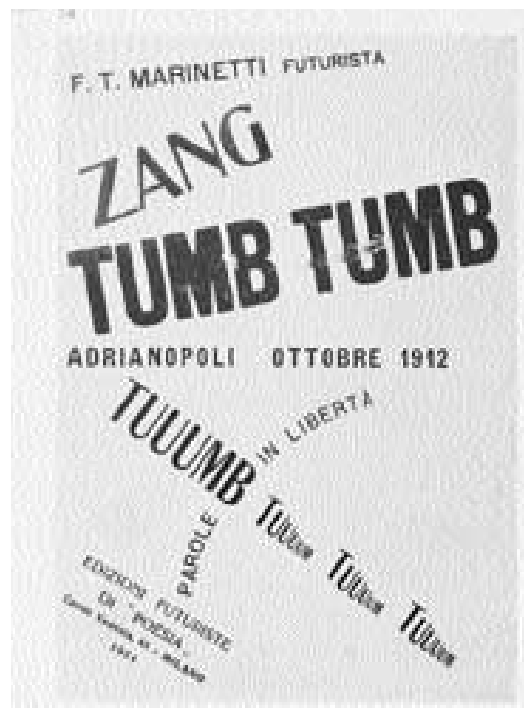


Fig. 4. FILIPPO TOMMASO MARINETTI. *Zang Tumb Tumb: Adrianopoli Ottobre 1912: Parole in Libertà* by Marinetti. 1914. Letterpress, 8 x 5½/16" (20.4 x 13.5 cm). Ed: unknown. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of The Judith Rothschild Foundation (Boris Kerdimun Archive)

flesh and bone.” This trope of “flying books” with pages as wings had been envisioned by Stéphane Mallarmé, but it could have been introduced into the poetics of Russian Futurism from yet another source. There is a peculiar commentary on the Russian word for “book”—*kniga*—in the most authoritative Russian dictionary, edited by Vladimir Dal' in the second half of the nineteenth century. Among other meanings of this word, Dal' mentioned that in a certain dialect of the Czech language, the word *kniga* is a name for a bird. The etymology of the word *kniga* remains ambiguous, and there are several versions of its origin. Futurists, with their cult of the word, did not miss an opportunity to flirt with this ambiguity: their playful imagination created one metamorphosis after another, and in their provocative artistic space, including their book titles, a book becomes a bird (“new books fly out” from a Futurist advertisement), a bomb (*Explodity*), a nest (*A Little Duck's Nest . . . of Bad Words*), and a parasite (*Transrational Boog*; in Russian the title is *Zaumnaia gniga*, with its contamination of the words *kniga* and *gnida* [nit]).

In the very title of his book *Explodity* (1913; fig. 5), Kruchenykh insinuates a break or abrupt shift. In a letter to her sister, Rozanova discloses that the Futurist neologism “explodity” means a bomb. In the beginning of the twentieth century, following Friedrich Nietzsche and Mallarmé, the book as a simile for a bomb used to be a key metaphor in modernist discourse. It stood for the strife produced by art, the aggressive collision of two realities: art and life.¹⁷

In his wordplay, Kruchenykh goes one step further, and intentionally arrives at a realization of the modernist trope, the projection of a rhetorical device into artistic reality, the turning of a poetic metaphor into a



Fig. 5. NATAN AL'TMAN, NATALIA GONCHAROVA, NIKOLAI KUL'BIN, KAZIMIR MALEVICH, AND OLGA ROZANOVA. *Explodity* by Aleksei Kruchenykh. 1913. Lithographed cover by Kul'bin, 6 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 4 $\frac{5}{8}$ " (17.5 x 11.8 cm). Ed.: 350. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of The Judith Rothschild Foundation



Fig. 6. OLGA ROZANOVA AND ALEKSEI KRUCHENYKH. *Visual Poetry*. 1916. India ink and watercolor, 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 2 $\frac{15}{16}$ " (8.6 x 7 cm). Courtesy of the Manuscript Division, © Russian State Library, Moscow

fact, a real object, which takes the shape of a book. To name something is an intentional act of creation that in Futurist poetics becomes a "magical" act. As Kruchenykh proclaimed in "Declaration of the Word as Such": "The artist has seen the world in a new way and, like Adam, proceeds to give things his own names."¹⁸ In this respect the avant-gardists are rather like savages who know how to invoke, worship, and play with objects. For them, to name or to draw something means to possess and control it and create it anew.

One of the main poetic principles in *Explodity*—the composing of verse using disharmonious, alliterative cacophony—merges with the split visual appearance of the book. Sheets with words printed by rubber stamps are mixed with pages handwritten in lithograph crayon and interspersed with equally intense lithographs in which, as in a dream, recognizable details disappear into an infinity of splitting, shifting, and even "exploding" forms. Later, in the 1920s, Kruchenykh recalled that in his two books, *Explodity* and *Worldbackwards* (1912), "Very significantly . . . there was a tremor, an explosion, that was expressed not only in the structure of phrases and lines, but in the exploded script as well."¹⁹

Following this technique, initially used by Larionov in *Pomade* (1913; p. 67), Rozanova and Kruchenykh painted some of the copies of *Explodity* by hand in watercolor over lithographs. As a result, the rich visual texture mirrors various poetic devices—deformations, shifts, plays on the non-coincidence of a unit of meaning and a word—paralleling deliberate coloration in painting (free-flowing color, as seen in *Iubok* or in children's drawings) that ignores and goes beyond the outline of the depicted object. The artist has the same recourse as the poet to devices of deformation of the object and realized metaphor to convey dissonance and an intonation that the Futurists called *zloglas* (cacophony). The increasing tempo of Kruchenykh's poetic speech is impetuous, structured on his principle of "incorrectness" in which his abstract *zaum* is interjected into traditional narration.

This brings to mind an oral tradition that contrasted with the written canon, namely, the ritual language of the Khlyst flagellant sect.²⁰ In this discourse all the usual coordinates of "practical speech" have been lost, and the logical intellect does not have time to grasp a word it has recognized submerged in the alogical context.²¹ The result is that the texture, color, and rhythm of each page convey more than an "exploded" logical meaning. The entire book reads like a single poetic theme, played out with a vital, indomitable, irrational energy of creation—that very "joy of creation" that produces art.

There is a strong element of artistic aggression in such an approach. In the early Russian avant-garde, as opposed to Italian Futurism, the anarchist concept of "creative destruction" was linked not so much to the notion of destruction as to resistance, the fight not *with*, but *for*. Destruction, but always for the sake of new creation. This approach was almost deconstructive in shattering old poetic and artistic canons into pieces to be

recycled as building materials for the creation of the new *designs from fragments*.²² With the publication of *Worldbackwards* (pp. 68, 69) this became one of the main aesthetic devices in Futurist books.

The dynamics of the Futurist shift—temporal, spatial, and semantic displacement, the dislocation of form, rhythm, and time—shape the unique image of this book. Its title, *Worldbackwards*, expresses the refutation of linear physical time. In appearance the book was no less innovative than its title. Its design united the traditional Neo-primitivist style with the early abstractions of Rayism invented by Larionov: a scattering of laconic lines seem only to suggest a drawing, and are ready to rearrange themselves in ever-new patterns in the spectator's eye, like the shapes in a kaleidoscope.

Later a similar perception inspired Kruchenykh's notion of "swirling letters" in his minimalist reduction in the editions of 1917–19 published in Tiflis. He explained the orchestration of the visual appearance of his poetry (fig. 6) in his letter to Kirill Zdanevich, who designed Kruchenykh's book *Learn, Artists! Poems* (1917; p. 111): "Please do not alter (out of artistic absentmindedness) the verses I'm sending when you copy them; I want the letters and words to follow the attached model—swirling letters—i. e., the drawing inside the letters, the letters in the frame of the drawing and intersected by the drawing, but in general I'm relying on your taste and imagination."²³

In their transrational poetry, or *zaum*, Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh appealed not to logic but to intuition, the irrational, unconscious knowledge that exists beyond any linguistic structures. This emphasis on the difference between notion and experience sheds some light on the epistemology of the early avant-garde. The process of creation becomes the final goal and result, more important than the accomplished work of art itself. The subject of transrational speech becomes speech itself, and in this art the creative process takes precedence over end results. In this case the Futurist principle of the world reversed, the "world backwards," becomes an anarchic principle: the deconstruction of teleological tradition and of the "World as a Book" archetype which perceives the whole universe as a text, a structure, an *arche*, in its unalterable monumentality.

For the Futurists, first and foremost, a book represented a perfect laboratory for their formal experiments. However, it also paved the way for their independent place in the art world, and played a very important role in Futurist politics at a moment when the shocking challenge of aesthetic message was being substituted for the criterion of quality. From the very start, Futurist books were intentionally turned against everything in the Symbolist's *livre d'artiste*; in a sense, they were conceived and advertised by their authors as anti-*livre d'artiste*. Kruchenykh wrote in *The Three* (1913; p. 75): "I really don't like endless works and big books—they can't be read at a single sitting, and they do not give you any sense of wholeness. Books should be small, but contain no lies; everything is its own, belongs to that book, down to the last ink stain."²⁴

Unlike the expensive and refined art books (see fig. 7), Futurist books were small, rough, loud inside and out, and cheap (see fig. 8). Most of the lithographed editions cost 30 to 70 kopecks. The only cheaper books were those in popular series aimed at the lowest social classes.²⁵ By putting such prices on their work, Futurists were able to create an audience, mostly of students. “Aleksi Kruchenykh and I have illustrated some books together which are selling very well, so we should clear quite a bit on them,” Rozanova informed her sister in 1913.²⁶ But the situation was not always the same. “In Moscow no one knows of the existence of your new books,” wrote Jakobson to Kruchenykh in February 1914. “I pointed this out to the clerk at [the bookstore], asked him to put them in the window. He answers: ‘Thank God no one knows!’”²⁷

The reaction of the bewildered clerk marks an important aspect of the Futurist book: its provocative nature. It was an intense, aggressive, artistic gesture. Retrospectively, Kruchenykh stressed that “Futurist scandals” had nothing to do with common “hooliganism” or refusals to follow societal rules. They were, instead, a super-tactic, the most effective advertising strategy, the fastest way to market a new aesthetic ideology and enable the movement to succeed. The history of Russian Futurism as a literary movement started with such a strategic episode. Mikhail Matiushin relates in his memoirs a case of artistic provocation involving the first edition of *A Trap for Judges* (1910; p. 63) that was aimed against Symbolists, in this case members of the poet and writer Viacheslav Ivanov’s inner circle: “This book fell like a bomb among the mystics at Viacheslav Ivanov’s. The Buriuks came to him very piously, and Ivanov welcomed them cordially. Then, as they were leaving, these ‘scoundrels’ stuffed every pocket of all the coats and cloaks of those present with a copy of *Trap*.”²⁸

By spreading their most extreme aesthetic ideas in book form, avant-gardists broke into the reality of ambivalent social space, and dictated their own conditions:

Not so long ago the artists fled the crowd and locked themselves up in a secluded place. This was known as art for art’s sake. It is time to come out, time to dictate the conditions, time to take over . . . We do not conceive of artistic activity apart from endless oppression of the crowd and forcing upon it that which we think necessary. To be an artist is to be an aggressor—we gladly accept this epithet. Only when you have understood this will you understand us and our goal.²⁹

In a sense, Russian Futurists were anarchists in their art, but anarchists throwing books as if they were bombs. They saw themselves engaged in the radical liberation of the human spirit. As realized in Futurist books, this anarchic anti-canoncity of the early Russian avant-garde was not so much an attempt just to *épater le bourgeois*, but a method of cognition, or new epistemo-



Fig. 7. **ALEXANDER BENOIS** *Queen of Spades* by Aleksandr Pushkin. Letterpress, 11 5/8 x 9" (29.5 x 22.9 cm). St. Petersburg: R. Golike and A. Vil'borg, 1911

logy, a conscious expansion of artistic space through the deconstructing of aesthetic cliché. It was an attempt to explode traditional, academic, symbolist, and other established models of rational perception based on book learning (even inside the avant-garde movement itself): “They ask us about the ideal, about pathos? It’s not a question of hooliganism, or of heroic deeds, or of being a fanatic or a monk. All Talmuds are equally destructive to the wordwright, what constantly remains with him is only the word as (such) itself.”³⁰

Alexander Benois, who sarcastically called the first Futurist books “buffoonish little albums,” was actu-



Fig. 8. Russian Futurist books by **OLGA ROZANOVA**. 1913–16



Fig. 9. **DAVID BURLIUK, VLADIMIR BURLIUK, AND VASILII KAMENSKII.** *Tango with Cows: Ferro-concrete Poems* by Vasilii Kamenskii. 1914. Letterpress on wallpaper by Kamenskii, 7⁷/₁₆ x 7⁹/₁₆" (18.9 x 19.2 cm). Ed.: 300. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of The Judith Rothschild Foundation

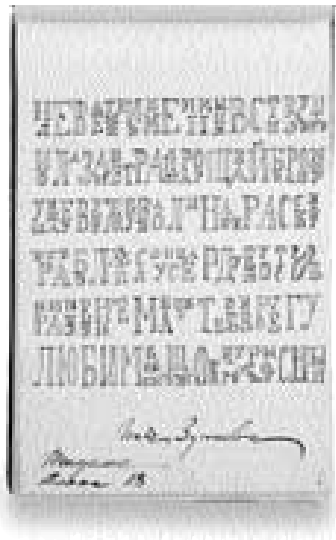


Fig. 10. **LADO GUDIASHVILI, ALEKSEI KRUCHENYKH, SER-GEI, IGOR' TEREENT'EV, AND IL'IA ZDANEVICH.** Salon album of Leonid Baushev. 1915–25. Pen and ink by Zdanevich, 6¹¹/₁₆ x 10³/₄" (17 x 26 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of The Judith Rothschild Foundation

ally not so wrong. He was responding to the provocative, performance-like nature of these Futurist creations, with their ambivalence toward genre and canon, their vitality of farce and spectacle, where boundaries between “the stage” and the audience do not exist, reality and play merge, and art is made without rules. The infamous opening line of Alfred Jarry’s performance of *Ubu Roi* (1896), consisting of a single word—*merdre* (for “shit”)—is of the same nature as the aggressively ironic gesture in Kruchenykh’s *Explodity*, with its final word—*shish* (taboo equivalent of the English “prick” in slang)—spread all over the last page.

The Futurist aspiration to broaden the limits of the book by driving it toward performance is reflected in the expanding notion of the book, in the “explosure” and annihilation of its canonic form. “Destroy completely the book in art (an inert form of conveying words by means of paper and typeface), and turn directly to the art of life, putting poetry and thoughts on fences, walls, houses, factories, roofs, on the wings of airplanes, on the decks of ships, on sails, with electric projectors in the sky, on clothing.”³¹ So Kamenskii urged his fellow Futurists. In *Tango with Cows* (1914; p. 92), he started by mapping his visual “ferro-concrete poems,” printed on bright wallpaper. Being an airplane pilot himself, fascinated with technology, Kamenskii was practically the only Futurist of this early period who experimented exclusively with typography and letterpress. Most of the poems in his book are conceived as a blueprint, describing and visually depicting a fragmented space with an “entrance” and “exit” to the text, in which scattered events of poetic memory—the excursion to the Shchukin art gallery, a walk in Constantinople, even the flight of an airplane—are precisely recorded in spatial succession each on a single page.

Thus the visual construction of the poem “Shchukin Museum” (fig. 9) consisted of a big square divided into several segments, separated by line, with words and names of artists inside of each: one had Matisse, and word associations with his paintings; another Monet and the exclamation “No!” next to it; another Picasso, etc. The arrangement exactly follows the display of paintings in the museum, room by room. Kamenskii energetically involves his reader in a dialogue, an interaction, as if inviting him to come along. What is interesting, however, is that the author does not force his reader-spectator to take a certain route, does not lead him only in one direction; instead, Kamenskii allows his reader-companion to wander, to get through the poem and make sense of it in his own way. A Futurist author always avoids closure, leaving an open space for endless interpretations, re-readings, and re-writings, enabling his reader-spectator to become a co-author, a co-creator.

During the same years that Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, and Kamenskii were concentrating on the visual texture of their books, Il’ia Zdanevich was developing, in his words, “polyphonic, polycorporeal creation” of “multi-poetry” to convey “our many faced and split existence.” In his search, Zdanevich concentrated on the category of sound, but later, during his Tiflis period (see

fig. 10), found a unique visual form, structured almost like a musical score, to reflect the polysemous chords of the truly “symphonic” sound of his poetry: “Correcting our defective mouths, we have come to orchestral poetry, speaking in crowds and everything different . . . And multi-poetry, which you cannot read silently, runs flushed onto the stage to take the trenches by storm.”³²

Ivan Ignatiev, a member of another Futurist group competing with Gileia and called Ego-Futurists, attempts a synthesis of the arts in his poem “The Third Entrance”: verbal fragments are accompanied by musical notes, and the poet explains that “‘to the reader’ (this term sounds strange here, for the reader must also be a viewer, and a listener, and most of all, an intuitive) is given: word, color, melody, and a *schema* of rhythm (movements) *noted down* at the left.”³³ The most radical poetic performance of the era was accomplished by another Ego-Futurist Vasilisk Gnedov, who often took part in Futurist evenings and debates together with the Gileias. His collection *Death to Art* contains fifteen poems. The final work, “Poem of the End,” consists only of the title and a blank page. Here Gnedov, anticipating the theoretical positions of Conceptual art in the latter half of the twentieth century, seems to be pointing to the limits of traditional literature: “Poem of the End” existed not only as a minimalist visual text—reduced to its zero form—but also as a gesture, as a pure performance. Markov mentions that Ignatiev gave a description of Gnedov’s recitation of the poem: “He read with a rhythmic movement. The hand was drawing a line: from left to right and vice versa (the second one cancelled the first, as plus and minus result in minus). ‘Poem of the End’ is actually ‘Poem of Nothing,’ a zero, as it is drawn graphically.”³⁴

No less provocative was a book that Kruchenykh prepared in 1914, *Transrational Boog* (p. 82), which was mentioned earlier. His co-author this time was the young Roman Jakobson, using the pseudonym Aliagrov. Although the cover reads 1916, the work was done in 1914 and appeared in 1915.³⁵ The imperative “*I forbid you to read this in a sound mind!*” that stands as the book’s introduction refutes rationality and the logic of communicative function, and rejects any intellectual values, thus implying complete freedom from words as means of communication. Through “words as such” the reader is forced to turn to “life as such,” to its organic, irrational essence existing outside all canons. In his *zaum*, Kruchenykh is not appealing to his readers’ logic and their ability to solve verbal rebuses, or their book knowledge. Instead, he is manipulating spellbound readers to look into the depths of their unconscious, of their irrational visions, their sensuality, to produce allusions and associations beyond the boundaries of the intellect. In some sense, transrational poetry could be compared with the unconscious of the soul, the core hidden behind the “poker face” of the poet—who is the bluffer, the creator of the unspoken enigma: “The enigma . . . A reader, who is first of all curious, is sure that the transrational has some meaning, some logical sense. So that he is caught by a ‘bait’—on the enigma, mystery . . . Whether

an artist is hiding in the soul of the transrational intentionally—I do not know.”³⁶

The object of transrational discourse here becomes the discourse itself, and the creative process is abstracted and ritualized so it acquires the meaning of both the object and the result of creation. This discourse is self-sufficient. Present in this extreme broadening of the space of poetry is the danger that poetry will self-destruct and “dissolve” its own structure.

As a visual counterpart to the poetry in *Transrational Boog*, which was printed in ink with rubber stamps, Rozanova used color linocuts from her playing cards series of 1914 that were in no way connected with the verses. The forms of card signs appear here in a collage in the draft version of the cover (1915; Mayakovsky Museum, Moscow). Rozanova dramatically modified this for the final version of the cover. The blazing heart cut from glossy red paper, as if tattooed on the cover, was actually pinned to it by a button from a man’s underwear, pasted on the very heart. The irony and alogism of this collage with a real button—it now seems a timid parallel to Marcel Duchamp’s Readymades—were ideal visual counterparts to Kruchenykh’s and Aliagrov’s “shocking” transrational poetry (*zaum*) of 1914.

One of the first theoreticians of transrational language, Viktor Shklovskii, reminisced about this in the 1980s: “Above all, it is not meaningless language. Even when it was deliberately stripped of meaning, it was a form of negating the world. In this sense it is somehow close to the theater of the absurd. Transrational language is a language of pre-inspiration, the rustling chaos of poetry, *pre-book*, *pre-word* chaos out of which everything is born and into which everything disappears.”³⁷

In the syncretic spectacle of the Futurist book, the visual reality of transrational words, like that of play, is deprived of any communicative, utilitarian function and becomes not only dominant but self-sufficient. Sprinkling “correct” language with *zaum* and phonetic sounds is shocking because it is unexpected and puts the readers (or spectators) in the desired state of “weightlessness,” calling into question their notions of reality. A Futurist book became a form to capture chaotic flux, immediacy, spontaneity—all the ephemeral elements of life.

The poetics of Alogism, of dissonance, of the absurd is at the core of Russian Futurist aesthetics, where boundaries of balanced harmony are dismissed. In the realm of Futurist books, as in the theater of the absurd, the imagined and the real are melded, and fantastic details merge with an everyday context, creating a new, irrational projection: “Our verbal creativity is generated by a *new deepening* of the spirit, and it throws new light on everything. Its genuine novelty does not depend on new themes (objects).”³⁸ Two decades later, in the first manifesto of Antonin Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, a similar magic of creation found its full realization.

The “theater of Alogism” of Russian Futurist books is not so much a total theatricalization of life, “theater as such,” as it is a model of the free and spontaneous “game as such.” Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that the principle of the experience of play is similar to the

experience of art: it is the process of the game, with its temporality, its unpredictable yet repetitive rhythm, that rules the player.³⁹

In the early Russian avant-garde, the rhythm of the game, of art and of life itself, overlapped and intertwined, fast and intense as a heartbeat, as irregular and repetitive as Mayakovsky’s “ladder” verse (*lesenka*). The avant-garde expressed a fascination with temporality, reflected in the physical movement of human beings, in their “live” rhythm: “We shattered rhythms. Khlebnikov gave status to the poetic meter of the living conversational word. We stopped looking for meters in textbooks; every motion generates for the poet a new free rhythm.”⁴⁰

The motif of the game in Futurist books became not only a representational motif, but a means of self-cognizance, *self-presentation*. On this stage it grows into a dynamic and unpredictable model of esoteric being, a way of life. “Despite its ‘senselessness,’ the world of the artist is more sane and real than the world of the bourgeoisie, even in a bourgeois sense of the word,” wrote Kruchenykh.⁴¹ One cannot explain the unexplained, transform the unconscious into the world of consciousness. It is impossible to explain the irony and anarchic humor of the game by everyday logic, from the perspective of common sense. The very logic of the game—as well as of the creative process—is different: it is the logic of the absurd, of the dream, of the unconscious.

Indeed, if we consider any creative process as desire (the desire to materialize one’s own unconscious, to liberate oneself from the heaviness of those repressed “demons” of one’s own, and to exorcise, spit it out) then this creative process can be considered as ritual, and literary or artistic work as the creation of “the kinship between writing and death.”⁴² I interpret this famous expression by Michel Foucault as referring to partial death in an initiation. The physical process of painting or writing can be compared with the ritual performance of initiation in which the writer exiles a part of his unconscious, inevitably “killing” that part of his “self,” hidden in the unconscious: “Writing is now linked to sacrifice and to the sacrifice of life itself.”⁴³ This partial “death,” however, is necessary and becomes the origin of a new spring for the author’s creative unconscious.

The process of creating a work of art, like the process of creating a game, is a physical one. In the poetics of Russian Futurist books the process and the experience are, in the end, more important than the result or the experiment: “Wordwrights should write on the cover of their books: *once you’ve read it – tear it up!*”⁴⁴ In creative practice, the artist attunes himself to the very flow of being, with its changeable, elusive motion. The open acceptance of chance, of the moment, creates the essence of “being present,” the essence of bringing forth the moment of truth. This is the most important moment in the poetics of initiation and play, as it is in the poetics of artistic creation within the early Russian avant-garde.

NOTES

- 1 Translated by Paul Schmidt in *Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov. Vol. III: Selected Poems* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 79.
- 2 David Burliuk, "Cubism," in John E. Bowlit, ed., *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902–1934* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988), p. 76.
- 3 Nina Gurianova, ed., *Iz literaturnogo nasledia Kruchenykh* (Berkeley: Berkeley Slavic Specialties, 1999), p. 190.
- 4 "The course of art and a love of life have been our guide. . . . After the long isolation of artists, we have loudly summoned life and life has invaded art, it is time for art to invade life" (Ilya Zdanevich and Mikhail Larionov, "Why We Paint Ourselves: A Futurist Manifesto, 1913," in Bowlit, ed., *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, p. 81).
- 5 Roman Jakobson, *My Futurist Years*, edited by Bengt Jangfeldt and Stephen Rudy (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1997), p. 177.
- 6 Cited in the collection *Zhiv Kruchenykh!* (Moscow: Vserossiiskii soiuz poetov, 1925), p. 18.
- 7 "Both *A Game in Hell* and my other (also irreverent) little book *Old-Fashioned [Old-Time] Love I* [Kruchenykh] copied myself in lithographic pencil. . . . Natalia Goncharova's and Mikhail Larionov's drawings, of course, were a friendly gratis favor. We were forced to scour Moscow for the three-ruble down payment to the printer. . . . It cost me nearly the same effort to publish my subsequent 'EUY' [EUY was Kruchenykh's press] works (1912–1914). The books published by 'Gileia' were done on David Burliuk's modest means. The burden of *A Trap for Judges I and II* was shouldered by Elena Guro and Mikhail Matiushin" (Gurianova, ed., *Iz literaturnogo nasledia Kruchenykh*, p. 56). On book production see V. Poliakov, *Knigi russkogo futurizma* (Moscow: Gileia, 1998).
- 8 Paul Schmidt invented the latter term.
- 9 In 1919 Malevich published his essay "On Poetry," the principal concepts of which are based on the thesis that there is a generic similarity between certain abstract categories—like rhythm and tempo—in painting, poetry, and music: "There is poetry in which there remains pure rhythm and tempo, like movement and time; here rhythm and tempo are based on letters, as signs containing one or another sound . . . the same as in painting and music" (Kazimir Malevich, "O Poezii," in *Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo* 1 [1919]: 32).
- 10 Letter from Remizov to Kruchenykh, August 26, 1917, archive of the Mayakovsky Museum, Moscow.
- 11 Gurianova, ed., *Iz literaturnogo nasledia Kruchenykh*, pp. 203–04.
- 12 A. Kruchenykh and V. Khlebnikov, "Gamma glasnykh," unpublished manuscript, 1914, private archive, Moscow.
- 13 Practically abandoned nowadays, this technique uses a duplicating machine that operates by transferring ink from an original drawing to a gelatin slab, from which prints are made. The usual number of copies that can be printed is fewer than one hundred.
- 14 Letter from Kruchenykh to Andrei Shemshurin, September 29, 1915, manuscript department of the State Russian Library (ex-Lenin Library), folder 339. 4. 1.
- 15 Anna Ljunggren and Nina Gourianova, eds., *Elena Guro: Selected Writings from the Archives* (Stockholm: Almquist & Wiksell, 1995), p. 92.
- 16 See note 14, folder 339. 4. 19.
- 17 See, for example: "My writing is a bomb that I throw; life outside myself is a bomb thrown at me: one bomb striking another bomb in a shower of shrapnel, two sets of intersecting sequences. The shrapnel fragments of my writing are the forms of art" (Andrei Bely, "Arabeski," in A. Zis' et al., eds. *Andrei Bely: Kritika. Estetika. Teoriia simbolizma* [Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1994], vol. 2, p. 200).
- 18 Kruchenykh, "Declaration of the Word as Such," in Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle, eds., *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes, 1912–1928* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 67.
- 19 Letters from Kruchenykh to A. Ostrovskii, in R. Ziegler, "Briefe von A. E. Krucenyx an A. G. Ostrovskij," *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach* 1 (1978): 5.
- 20 It should be noted that Kruchenykh's correspondence from this period indicates that he was reading works on sects and the Old Believers.
- 21 In 1913 Kazimir Malevich introduced the theory of Alogism in art and created a whole group of paintings and drawings in a style he called Alogism or Transrational Realism, which was immediately picked up by other artists and poets. It played a crucial role in the development toward abstraction in art and poetry. Alogism is based on the refutation of logic and common sense in order to engage intuition and the unconscious, and broadly corresponds to the play of dissonance and displacement (or Futurist *shift*, as it was defined by Kruchenykh in 1912).
- 22 "You know, poetry up to now was a stained-glass window (Glasbilder), and like the sun's rays passing through its panes, romantic demonism, imparted picturesqueness to it. But here is victory over sun and the f-ray (from your own works). The glass is blown up, from the fragments . . . we create designs for the sake of liberation. From demonism, from zero, we create any convention whatsoever, and in its intensity, its force, is the pledge of aristocracy in poetry" (Jakobson, *My Futurist Years*, p. 104).
- 23 Letter from Kruchenykh to Zdanevich, 1917, archives of the State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, folder 177.
- 24 A. Kruchenykh, V. Khlebnikov, and E. Guro, *Troe* (St. Petersburg: Zhuravl, 1913), p. 13.
- 25 Among modernist editions, one issue of the literary and artistic Symbolist journal *Apollon* in 1913 cost 1 ruble and 75 kopecks, approximately four times more than most of the Futurist productions; a typical *livre d'artiste* like Pushkin's *Queen of Spades* with facsimile illustrations by the renowned artist and writer Alexander Benois cost 10 rubles; and the special numbered edition for connoisseurs of the same book cost 35 rubles, making it fifty times more expensive than *Exploidy*.
- 26 Letter from Olga Rozanova to Anna Rozanova, 1913, archive of Chaga-Khardzhiev Foundation, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.
- 27 Jakobson, *My Futurist Years*, p. 105.
- 28 Mikhail Matiushin, "Nashi pervye disputy," *Literaturnyi Leningrad*, October 20, 1934.
- 29 Il'ia Zdanevich, "Notes," unpublished manuscript, 1914, archive of the State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, folder 177, doc. 26.
- 30 Aleksei Kruchenykh and Velimir Khlebnikov, "The Word as Such," in Lawton and Eagle, eds., *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes*, p. 56.
- 31 Vasilii Kamenskii, *Ego-moia biografia velikogo futurista* (Moscow: Kitovras, 1918), p. 6.
- 32 Zdanevich, "Mnogovaia poeziia," unpublished manuscript, 1914, archive of the State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, folder 177, doc. 22.
- 33 I. V. Ignatyev, "Ego-Futurism," in Lawton and Eagle, eds., *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes*, p. 128.
- 34 Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), p. 80.
- 35 "Kruchenykh and I together published *Zaumnaia gniga* ('Transrational Boog') . . . By the way, it's not true that it came out in 1916. Kruchenykh put the date 1916 so that it would be a book of the future. But it actually appeared earlier; in any event, all the work on it was done in 1914" (Jakobson, *My Futurist Years*, pp. 17–18).
- 36 Gurianova, ed., *Iz literaturnogo nasledia Kruchenykh*, pp. 201, 202.
- 37 V. Shklovskii, "O zaumnom iazyke. 70 let spustia" in M. Marzaduri, D. Rizzi, and M. Evzlin, eds., *Russkii literaturnyi avangard. Dokumenty i issledovaniia* (Trento: Universita di Trento, 1990), p. 304.
- 38 A. Kruchenykh, "New Ways of the Word" (1913) in Lawton and Eagle, eds., *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes*, p. 77.
- 39 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 1999), p. 105.
- 40 From "A Trap for Judges, 2," in Lawton and Eagle, eds., *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes*, p. 54.
- 41 A. Kruchenykh, *Vozroshchem!* (Moscow: EUY, 1913), p. 9.
- 42 Michel Foucault, "What is An Author?" in Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 116.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- 44 A. Kruchenykh and V. Khlebnikov, "From *The Word as Such*," in Lawton and Eagle, eds., *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes*, pp. 61–62.