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SYNOPSIS

Russian Cubo-Futurism

1. The place of Symbolism was taken by Futurism, another artistic trend with worldshaking ambitions, questioning the cultural past of the world in the name of a utopian vision. During the storms and winds period, Russian Futurism chose the mission of announcing a new order. The order unlike anything that existed before. It was to find its expression in art, theatre, literature and poetry. It was to create a new "transrational language" (zaum x) and rules of a free word. In the futuristic parade marched poets and painters, whose motto was "a slap in the face of public taste" and being convicted that they would keep pace with history. This group was not big, though, however employing new methods of publicity; manifestos, declarations, leaflets, advertisements, public disputes connected with scandals, provocative conduct (e.g. appearing on the streets in gaudy clothes with made-up faces) and verbal duels. Among them the leading place was taken by David Burliuk, a painter and poet (after the Revolution he emigrated to the United States in glory of the "father of Russian Futurism"), also Mayakovsky, a rising poetic star.

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x zaum - the language that is, so to speak, personal, with words having no definite meaning, but affecting the emotions directly (Shklovsky).



The futurists activity, their literary and artistic creativity was criticized by many circles. The fear of a brutal breaking off with the tradition brought together both academics - realists, modernists, aesthetes and the partisans of the West, as well as the ones who promoted Neo-nationalism in art. They reacted to the more basic programic goals of futurists with the warning: "there is the Boor coming, who raises his hand against the temple of art" (Merezhkovsky, Benois), or "one turns sad at the sight of old age willfulness of the young artists submerged in cubo-futuristic mania and cosmopolitic fashion (Tugendkhold). Benois the defender of the ideals of Russian modernism against conservatism in art at the threshold of the 20th century became, in turn, the object of attacks himself from the young generation. Malevich, in an open letter to Benois, having rejected the offensive "Boor an cave" nature of Futurism claimed for the right of the young to their own point of view in accordance with the coming times: "is it the boor that wishes to raise up what is new? Is it a boor that is striving to leave yesterday behind and to enrich himself with a new, healthier form of art?". Burluk with a typical nonchalance disputed with Benois, presenting him as ignoramous enemy of new art. This argumentation was presented in a specially issued pamphlet for this occasion ("The Noisy Benois and the New Russian National Art": 1913). Against the deep divisions between the enthusiasts of Futurism and "new art" in general, one could distinguish moderate opinions calling for tolerance. Among the others, a respected painter and critic I. Grabar, a co-founder of the "World of Art" found the hearing. Cutting off decidedly from



"futurists, all sorts of Burliuks and Khlebnikovs" the 42-year-old modernist, understood a difficult position of "a new" that arrived.

The examples of another great polemics (the first one also acute was turned against Impressionism) were discussed here in order to show the background against which "the new" was awakening to life, how strong were inhibitions and fears (psychological, aesthetic, ideologic) against Futurism, against anything unknown, reaching to radically ahead of time, how sensitive was intelligentsia to any attempts of violating the roots of national art. This stigma of orthodox belief related with a fragile inclination to tolerance on one hand, and maximalism of the outright messianistic type on the other (an outstanding historian N. Berdyaev draws the attention to it), makes easier to understand the mechanisms governing the society, which helped to abolish a despotic state, but remained in its essence deeply conservative. A scornful, often brutal relation to the ones, who think differently in the herd, was additionally supported during the proletariat dictatorship, by the authority of the Center, that recognized itself competent in granting or refusing the right for artistic manifestations. Such is the answer explaining the actions of avant-garde when their leaders became allies of a new system.

3. Futurism as all-Russian movement was crystalized in 1910, a year after publishing the First Futurist Manifesto by Marinetti. It was not of uniform character, as in Italy, but consisted of several, competing with each other groups, which formed different kinds and shades expressed, among others, by their names:



cubo-futurism - aiming at the synthesis of visual and verbal spheres (Burliuk, Livshits, Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, Kamensky, Mayakovsky; painters - Guro, Malevich, Matyushin, Pougny); budietlyane - men of the future (Khlebnikov); Hylaea group of poets formed at the Black Sea coast (Livshits, three brothers Burliuk, Mayakovsky, Kruchenykh); ego-futurists poets (Severyanin). The split into groups was, at any rate, of stipulated character. Alliances were signed, or broken, new configurations were formed, mainly in the editorial aspect. Never before such an indentation of the environment of poets, painters expressing themselves in manufactured almanachs or miscellanies took place.

The name "cubo-futurists" comes just from the poets-futurists and painters-cubists acting together. There was not, however, sui generis futuristic painting in Russia, if not include some paintings having futuristic approach to the movement and dynamism, which can be compared to the painting of Boccioni (Malevich, Goncharova, Larionov, Rozanova). Futurism in this country, contrary to the Italian one, found its best expression in poetry, but could not have been brought to existence if not for a sequence of changes, which took place in visual art of Russia within the first decade of the 20th century. The revolution in the sphere of pictural language was ahead of time before poetic word, announced the beginning of a great futuristic adventure with "the word as a such", with its autonomous value, which expressed nothing but itself (Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh).

There were numerous tangential points and similarities in both Italian and Russian futurist programs. There were, however, more



differences in the field of ideology. What was in common for both of them was the rebel of the generation facing the new epoch of inventions, transforming the old world; also the delight with the industrial future, leaning out from the smoke of factory chimneys, delight with humming of an aeroplane, disdain for museum-like past, teasing the bourgeoisie and scandals. In Russian Futurism the rebel against bourgeoisie mentality, parochialism and conservatism in mortality did not lead to idealizing of the coming epoch of machines and technique, including the apotheosis of physical strength, though it employed a characteristic iconography and rhetoric. Fundamental differences were revealed in the relation towards the national culture. However radical was the rhetoric of manifestos and declarations (e.g. "Only we are the face of our time. The past is crowded, the Academy and Pushkin are more incomprehensible than hieroglyphics. Throw Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy et al. from overboard the Ship of Modernity") and world-shaking cubo-futurism, rejecting the heritage of Russian enlightenment.

Cubo-futurism turned back for imaginative inspiration of folk sources, making it the closest propinquity. Following the aesthetics of primitivists from Knave of Diamonds and Donkey's Tail, the ideal of the primary and archaic-primitivist beauty was created. The "barbarian" Burliuk from Cherson steppes, and Khlebnikov from Astrachan ones, the prophets of Russian Futurism in love with primaeval history of the East on one hand, and a rebel, though aesthetizing Marinetti on the other, formed two different worlds. A directed against modern civilization tendency that



prolonged as if an old aversion of Slavophiles to the West, manifested itself in a striking contradiction with the cult of a town and machine-symbols of future in the vision of Italian futurists. It was not coincidental that the arrival of Marinetti in Russia (1914) evoked not only unfriendly feelings against Italian participants of a related trend, but turned against Western avant-garde altogether. Livshits, who was the most "western" in his cubo-futurist expression, stated then: "we should recognize ourselves as Asians and rid ourselves of European yoke" (Markov. Russian Futurism). Let us remember here that still earlier the Larionov-Goncharova's Donkey's Tail group declared the independence of national art, opposing a slave-like subordination to the West and western epigonous art, destroying their own and eastern forms of culture ("We are aiming at the East" - Larionov).

4. Cubo-futurism in visual arts is connected with the group, the Union of Youth (1910-1914) founded in St. Petersburg by M. Matiushin, a painter and composer, together with his wife, E. Guro, a poetess and painter, and O. Rozanova. N. Kulbin, a mecenat and amateur painter, representing an outstanding personality, was accepted to it. This group established the alliance with the Burliuks' Hylaea groups. Later it was joined by the painters from the Moscow environment - Malevich, Tatlin, Udaltsova, and others, by the ones who no more supported the program of primitivists and cezannists. The Union of Youth also sustained the ties with the group of Kandinsky, the Blaue Reiter from Munich. A known businessman and collector L. Zheverzheev



provided the group with modern forms of financing the artistic activity. The model was taken from the West. Such financial support was unknown to former artistic groups in Russia. Even such a well-known group as the World of Art was not included in the organized support. Artists were dependent on the good will or caprice of protectors. The Union of Youth organized exhibitions and public discussions awakening the interest in new futurist art and poetry. The group published books and poetry collections, employing graphic design in the futuristic spirit. It also issued its own magazine - "Union of Youth". We may say that the group inspired establishing of the beginning of the futuristic theatre. Several ephemeric spectacles became famous events, the ones that entered the history of European avant-garde theatre. Among them was "Vladimir Mayakovsky - a tragedy" and the "Victory Over the Sun" (1913) which, as if summing up of the experimental results, both in poetry, semantics and painting of cubo-futurism. They were enriched in a new approach to the movement, gesture in combination with reaching far ahead of time, geometric style of a costume and design (Kruchenykh, Matyushin, Malevich, Shkolnik, Filonov, Tatlin).

5. Experiments with words, semantic transformation, poems written according to the new liberated word on one hand, and fascination with the primordially programmed "anti-aesthetism" on the other, changes the visual shape of poetry. This poetry, violating habitual logics of associations difficult in perception, needed another unconventional form of design. Its word and sound



searched for a visual individuality, while "trimmed" print with its regular lines pushed to uniformization. Hence the tendency to resign from a regular book, sophisticated print and elegance appeared. There were attempts to use something more primitive in its place, beginning with a bad quality paper (as a rule it was a wrapping or wall paper). As a result of this attempt there came to being something that we would call today "other book" or "artist's book", hand made, partly or wholly, duplicated on a lithographic stone or zinc plate. Prints were occasionally coloured by hand imitating in this way a folk lubok. Primitive rubber stamps were also used. In "antibooks" appeared, in result of poets and painters union, a new type of dialogue between the words and graphics was formed. The output of the above books (1912-1914) was unique on European scale, most spectacular among Russian avant-garde. It was at the same time the training ground for numerous ideas. The experimental, futurist book of the 10th turned back to them to mention "silmultaneous" book by Blaise Cendrars and Sonia Delaunay "La prose du Transsiberien et de la petite Jeanne de France" (1913). Out of over twenty publications - "poor" books, let us mention the most interesting ones:

"Worldbackwards" - Kruchenykh, Khlebnikov, Goncharova, 1912.

"A Game in Hell" - Kruchenykh, Khlebnikov, Goncharova, 1912,

"Pomade" - Kruchenykh, Larionov, 1913.

"Te li le" - Kruchenykh, Rozanova, 1914.