

**Avant-Garde Poetics of Language in Central and Eastern Europe:  
Vladimir Mayakovsky's and Karel Teige's  
Responses to the Crisis of Language and Representation**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Avant-Garde Poetics of Language in Central and Eastern Europe: Vladimir Mayakovsky's and Karel Teige's Responses to the Crisis of Language and Representation**

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This dissertation is a comparative study of the Russian and Czech avant-gardes and their responses to the crises of representation and artistic language in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In particular, it examines the theoretical and creative output of two artists who worked at the intersection of the word and image: the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and the visual artist Karel Teige. Both artists were central figures in the founding and theoretical articulation of Russian Futurism and Czech Poetism, respectively. The chapters trace these artists' artistic evolutions, from their earliest conceptions of a crisis in art to the development of solutions for overcoming this crisis. The theoretical and creative output of these figures is examined both within the artists' individual oeuvres, as well as in light of their respective artistic movements and the broader tendencies of the international avant-garde.

Chapter 1 traces Mayakovsky's response to the crisis from his initial impulse toward abstraction, characteristic of the Russian Cubo-Futurist movement in the verbal and visual arts more broadly, to the introduction of a political agenda into his art. On the basis of Mayakovsky's participation in collective Futurist publications, his individually authored theoretical essays, and narrative poems, this chapter argues that the poet's solution to the crisis of language coalesced around the possibility of realizing democratic representation in art. The chapter shows that in poems written between 1914 and 1921, Mayakovsky was concerned with the question of how to accommodate others' voices in lyric poetry, how to allow them to speak in and through his works. His vision of a more democratic form of representation necessitated the poet's metaphorical self-sacrifice, which he repeatedly performed in his poems on the level of plot. This

sacrifice enabled him to realize his vision of democratic representation in the idea of collective authorship performed in his narrative poem *150,000,000*.

Chapter 2 highlights Karel Teige's response to the crisis of artistic language and representation in his theoretical essays and artworks. By contrast to Mayakovsky's politicized response, Teige prioritized formal innovation. More specifically, this chapter argues that Teige viewed the fusion of the word and image in a multimedia art form as a solution to the parallel crises that afflicted the visual and the verbal arts. This desired fusion remained a constant of Teige's artistic solutions throughout the 1920s. His first attempts to overcome the crisis are contained in the Poetist conception of "image poetry," which incorporated words, painted images, photographs, and other materials. The photograph, understood as a direct imprint of reality, introduced the element of the real into image poetry and thereby transfigured the word and image. After image poetry, Teige went on to replay his formal solution to the crisis of representation in another fused form—the typophoto, which was integrated into the experimental multimedia book *ABCs*.

The introduction and conclusion frame these case studies in terms of the broader trends that inform the artistic experiments of these figures. More specifically, the introductory chapter grapples with questions of how the crisis of language and representation at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be conceptualized. Arguing that the artistic experimentation of the 1910s and the 1920s represents a continuity of what Foucault calls the modern episteme, the introduction at the same time seeks to address the fissures and breaks represented by abstraction in art and the proto-structuralist understanding of the sign in linguistics. The conclusion addresses the role of figurative language in the articulation of the crisis and maintains that while the language of crisis was productive for artistic experiment, it confined the avant-garde to perpetual renewal of forms and artistic language.



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*In memory of my father*

Mikhail Mikhailovich Denishchenko  
(1950–2009)



## INTRODUCTION

### *The Crisis of Language*

I have written to Schleyer, I have written to Zamenhof [...]: you think, my naive friend, that the Volapük you've composed can save the world from not understanding, you are happy that the grammar you've thought up allows you to create one hundred and eleven forms from the base "to love." Haha! You wish! You rightly assume that the evil that comes from misunderstanding, from the impossibility to explain anything, has language as its physical body and is transferred from person to person through words, using people as a nourishing environment [...] having determined that language is the means for multiplying evil and transferring it through space and time, you, my dear, want to break this endless chain of lies by creating a new language of universal understanding! Bravo! [...] But how can you not get that by translating words you also translate non-understanding? [...] You've only poured the poisoned potion from one vessel into another, nothing more! And you, Mr. Zamenhof, I wrote to the Warsaw doctor, [...] you wanted to cut excesses, to nurture what is successful by means of vivisection—to rear a breed of words, in the veins of which pure, uninfected blood would flow—alas! [...] Rejecting thousands of possible declensions, countless numbers, I won't even mention voice, modality, gender, aspect, you hoped to recreate that pure, clear language, in which God spoke to man before the Babylonian catastrophe, so to speak, to isolate from the filth that which has been mixed up and scattered by His hand over our cawing and lispings idioms, and, through this mechanical means, to clean the world of evil.<sup>1</sup>

Mikhail Shishkin, *The Taking of Izmail*

Mikhail Shishkin's novel *The Taking of Izmail* (*Vziatie Izmaila*, 1999) condenses and dramatizes the crisis of language that has come to characterize postmodern thought. Language betrays us at

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<sup>1</sup> “Я писал Шлейеру, я писал Заменгофу [...] Вы думаете, наивный мой человек, что сочиненный Вами волапук спасет мир от непонимания, Вы счастливы, что выдуманная Вами грамматика позволяет образовать от основы «любить» сто одиннадцать форм. Ха-ха! Как бы не так! Справедливо полагая, что зло, происходящее от недоразумения, от невозможности что-либо объяснить, имеет своим физическим телом язык и передается словами от человека к человеку, используя его, как питательную среду [...] установив, что язык есть средство размножения зла и передачи его по пространству и времени, Вы, дорогой мой, хотите прервать эту бесконечную цепь лжи, создав новый язык всеобщего понимания! Bravo! [...] Но только как же Вам невдомек, что переводом слов Вы переводите и непонимание! [...] Вы лишь перелили отравленную настойку из одного сосуда в другой, не более того! И Вы, господин Заменгоф, писал я варшавскому доктору, [...] хотели путем вивисекции: лишнее отрезать, удачное прирастить — вывести породу слов, в жилах которых течет чистая, незараженная кровь — увьи! [...] Отказываясь от тысячи возможных падежей, от бесчисленных чисел, я не говорю уже о залогах, модусах, родах, видах, Вы думали воссоздать тот самый чистый, ясный язык, которым говорил Бог с человеком до Вавилонской катастрофы, так сказать, вычленив из скверны рассыпанное и перемешанное Его рукой по нашим каркающим и шепелявящим наречиям, и таким механическим образом очистить мир от зла” (Mikhail Shishkin, *Vziatie Izmaila* [Moscow: AST, 2011], 233–35). All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

every step, binds us to an eternal, unbridgeable misunderstanding—warns one of Shishkin’s characters, Evgenii Borisovich. According to this aging meteorologist, who lives in almost total isolation in the Russian Far North and engages in anachronistic correspondence with inventors of international artificial languages, the fatal flaw of all such projects is their continued reliance on words.<sup>2</sup> In his estimation, the hopes of eliminating strife by creating a shared international language are naive, since it is *words* that transmit misunderstanding.<sup>3</sup> Words, according to Evgenii Borisovich, are the most basic “units” of misunderstanding, and as such, words are material embodiments of “evil” itself.<sup>4</sup> By translating words, the inventors of artificial languages translate misunderstanding. Evgenii Borisovich’s own efforts to correct the errors of previous artificial languages prove futile:

Believe me, [...] I’ve tried everything. I’ve tried to create units of speech from numbers, from musical notes. Solla—time. Sollado—day. [...] Or, take the seven colors of the

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<sup>2</sup> Evgenii Borisovich’s imagined pen pals are the German Catholic priest Johann Martin Schleyer, who proposed the artificial language Volapük in 1879, and the Polish Jew Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof, who invented Esperanto between 1873 and 1887. On the history of these two international artificial languages, see Arika Orkent, “Trouble in Volapük Land,” in *In the Land of Invented Languages* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2009), 153–78.

<sup>3</sup> Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof or, as he was better known, Dr. Esperanto (literally meaning the “one who hopes”) made his ambitions to overcome interlinguistic strife clear in the introduction to his grammar of international language: “Различие языков составляет сущность различия и взаимной вражды национальностей, ибо это прежде всего бросается в глаза при встрече людей: люди не понимают друг друга и потому чуждаются друг друга. Встречаясь с людьми, мы не спрашиваем, какие у них политические убеждения, на какой части земного шара они родились, где жили их предки несколько тысяч лет тому назад: но эти люди заговорят, и каждый звук их речи напоминает нам, что они нам чужие. Кто раз попробовал жить в городе, населённом людьми различных, борющихся между собою, наций, тот почувствовал без сомнения, какую громадную услугу оказал бы человечеству интернациональный язык, который, *не вторгаясь в домашнюю жизнь народов*, мог бы, по крайней мере в странах с разноязычным населением, быть языком государственным и общественным” (Ludwik Lejzer Zamengof, *Mezhdunarodnyi iazyk. Predislovie i polnyi uchebnyk* [International Language: Introduction and Complete Textbook] [Warsaw: Tipo-litografia Kh. Kel’tera, 1887], 4–5, emphasis in original). “[D]ifference of speech is a cause of antipathy, nay even of hatred, between people, as being the first thing to strike us on meeting. Not being understood we keep aloof, and the first notion that occurs to our minds is, not to find out whether the others are of our own political opinions, or whence their ancestors came from thousands of years ago, but to dislike the strange sound of their language. Anyone, who has lived for a length of time in a commercial city, whose inhabitants were of different unfriendly nations, will easily understand what a boon would be conferred on mankind by the adoption of an international idiom, which, without interfering with domestic affairs or the private-life of nations, would play the part of an official and commercial dialect, at any rate in countries inhabited by people of different nationalities.” (Ludwik Lejzer Zamengof, *Dr. Esperanto’s International Language. Introduction & Complete Grammar*, trans. R.H. Geoghegan [1889], ed. Gene Keyes [Halifax, Canada: Verkista, 2000]).

<sup>4</sup> “А единицей непонимания является слово” (Shishkin, *Vziatie*, 228).

rainbow. Their infinite combination allows one to explain something, but, alas, once again without any hope of being understood.<sup>5</sup>

Hopelessly consumed by his own skepticism and failures, Evgenii Borisovich concludes that no artificial languages—neither those that depend on existing languages and words, nor those that rely on imagined non-verbal alternatives, such as musical scales, colors, and gestures—can overcome the fundamental rift between our consciousness and that of the other, between our word and the word of another.

The inadequacy of language becomes a metanarrative concern that unifies Shishkin's otherwise fragmentary novel. When the narrator and implied author attempts to compose a few lines, "all that comes out is a necrology." In hopes of finding inspiration, he pages through a volume, but, to his horror, discovers that "it is not a dictionary, but a cemetery."<sup>6</sup> But while Shishkin's characters remain skeptical of overcoming alienation in and from dead language, the novel silently works above their consciousnesses, reversing this fallenness of words on the metanarrative level. Partially written in stylized Old Church Slavonic, *The Taking of Izmail* gestures toward the possibility of a return to a pure language, to the alleged beginnings of Russian letters in writing that came directly from God.<sup>7</sup> Far from an artificial historical stylization, the language of the novel, which takes place in present time and in no time (or before and after time) and switches styles and registers constantly, is integrally linked to a mission to save language, and thereby redeem humanity.

The critique of language depicted in and enacted by Shishkin's novel is closely associated with the philosophical position of postmodernism, which exposes language's false

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<sup>5</sup> Shishkin, *Vziate*, 240.

<sup>6</sup> Shishkin, *Vziate*, 22.

<sup>7</sup> According to the *Life of Constantine*, the first alphabet used to transcribe Old Church Slavonic was revealed to Cyril by God. Shishkin seems to metonymically extend this special status of the alphabet to Russian language and literature more broadly.

claims to objectivity and reveals that understanding, insofar as it is linguistically mediated, is always partial, incomplete, and relative.<sup>8</sup> In its broader aspirations, this dissertation pursues a genealogy of the suspicion and distrust of language that comes to a climax in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in postmodern literature and post-structuralist criticism. The main focus of my research, however, is the language crisis at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. More specifically, this dissertation highlights the artistic and theoretical cultural production of the 1910s and the 1920s, which shaped the directions along which the postmodern critique of language would later unfold.

What is the source of such suspicion of language? On an abstract theoretical level, one could argue that language is always already in crisis: condemned to a mediating function, it endlessly shuffles between the internal and the external world, the mind and concept, the speaker and the listener. As an intermediary, language is neither part of ourselves nor of a reality external to us, never fully present, always impermeable, and opaque. Our inability to formulate or even conceive of the nature of language reflected in the metaphors we use to describe it—metaphors which never yield to anything other than another metaphor, as Jacques Derrida points out.<sup>9</sup> Before we can reflect on the experience of language acquisition, language, we are told, shapes or even determines the most fundamental categories of our mind, such as our conceptions of space and time.<sup>10</sup> It is no wonder then that language continues to be a source of both fascination and fear.

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<sup>8</sup> For a brief summary of the postmodern philosophical position in relation to language, see: Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 19–21, 69–75.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” *New Literary History* 6, no. 1 (1974): 7, 14, 17.

<sup>10</sup> Cognitive linguists argue that language helps shape our mental categories. For instance, see Dan Slobin, “Cross-linguistic Evidence for the Language-Making Capacity,” in *The cross-linguistic study of language acquisition*, vol. 2: *Theoretical Issues*, ed. Dan Slobin (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1985), 1157–1249; Melissa Bowerman and Soonja Choi, “Shaping Meanings for Language: Universal and Language-Specific in the Acquisition of Spatial Semantic Categories,” in *Language Acquisition and Conceptual Development*, ed. M. Bowerman & S. C. Levinson

## *Crisis in the Ur-text in the Philosophy of Language*

Thinking in more historical-discursive terms, one could argue that the crisis of language is already embedded in a foundational text for (western) philosophy of language, Plato's "Cratylus." Named for one of its participants, the dialogue interrogates the nature of the connection between language and the outside reality it describes. Although "Cratylus" has sometimes been interpreted as representing a naïve naturalist view of language, the position advanced in the dialogue—to the extent that a central position can be identified in a dialogic genre from which the author himself is ostensibly absent—is more complex than the assertion that words bear an essential connection to things.<sup>11</sup> While the character of Cratylus does indeed present the view that each "name" (*onoma*) names "by nature" and is, in this sense, directly linked to the thing it names, two other points of view compete with this position in Plato's dialogue.<sup>12</sup> Socrates' friend Hermogenes speaks strongly in favor of language "convention,"

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(Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2001), 475–511. The position of linguistic determinism is often associated with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: "We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages [...] We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, *but its terms are absolutely obligatory*; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data, which the agreement decrees" (Benjamin Lee Whorf, "Science and Linguistics" [1940], reprinted *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, ed. John B. Carroll [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1956], 213–14; emphasis in original).

<sup>11</sup> Alongside the classical interpretations, some contemporary takes on "Cratylus" tend to conflate the position offered by the dialogue with the view of language advanced by the character Cratylus. For example, this conflation, which originates in the reception of the dialogue rather than the text itself, is implied in Steven Cassedy's summary of Cratylus's position in *Flight from Eden. The Origins of Modern Literary Criticism and Theory* (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1990), 21–22. In *The Word Made Self*, Thomas Seifrid likewise equates Socrates' view of language to that of Cratylus: "In this dialogue Socrates approvingly cites Cratylus to assert that there is a natural propriety of appellation for things that exist, so that names serve to point out the quality of the things they denote and one can, via a name, '[lay] hold of an entity, so as to imitate existence.' This is so, he reasons, because names are produced by the 'artificer of names,' who ensures that they are true. Socrates thus sees language as enjoying a direct link with essence, as a result of which explorations of language can lead to knowledge of true being" (*The Word Made Self. Russian Writings on Language, 1860–1930* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2005], 8). While Seifrid's summary adequately describes Cratylus' position, it does not apply to Socrates.

<sup>12</sup> Plato, "Cratylus," in Plato, *Plato. Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 102. The Greek *onoma* ("name") refers not only to proper names such as "Socrates," but also to nouns (substantives), verbs, and adjectives, as well as to words and vocabulary of a language more broadly. See the gloss on "word" in Marc Baratin et al., "Word," in *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed.

anticipating ideas that would make Ferdinand de Saussure one of the most important linguists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup> Though, as a result of Socrates' interrogation, Hermogenes begins to waver between stronger and weaker claims of conventionalism, his initial position asserts that a name is correct provided that the community in which it is used agrees on it. That is, he suggests that there is no essential connection between names and things.<sup>14</sup>

As in other dialogues, in "Cratylus" Socrates' task is to arbitrate and indicate which view, in his opinion, is correct. After playfully entertaining both positions, Socrates advances a third point of view—a hybrid of the two. He concedes to Cratylus that the name or word (*onoma*) can tell us something about the thing it names: viz., the name-giver's view of the nature of a thing. Moreover, Socrates admits that a name may, in some cases, be a "likeness" of the true nature of a thing. However, he cautions against investigating the nature of a thing by examining the name, since names (and their etymologies) often point the investigator in contradictory directions.<sup>15</sup> Without rejecting the existence of higher truths (existing, presumably, as Platonic Forms), Socrates holds that language does not give access to those truths. Together with Socrates'

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Barbara Cassin et al. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2013). If one assumes the position of Cratylus, this polysemy of *onoma* leads to the privileging of nouns, adjectives, and verbs as the carriers of the nature of a thing.

<sup>13</sup> Hermogenes' and Saussure's common emphasis on convention notwithstanding, there are important differences in their views. For example, Saussure's reliance on the idea of the "sign" stands in marked contrast to the Platonic "name."

<sup>14</sup> Hermogenes states, "[N]o one is able to persuade me that the correctness of names is determined by anything besides convention and agreement. [...] No name belongs to a particular thing by nature, but only because of the rules and usage of those who establish the usage and call it by that name" (Plato, "Cratylus," 103).

<sup>15</sup> Socrates states, "It's clear that the first name-giver gave names to things based on his conception of what those things were like. [...] And if this conception was incorrect and he gave names based on it, what do you suppose will happen to us if we take him as our guide? Won't we be deceived?" (Plato, "Cratylus," 152). While suggesting that names reflect what name-givers thought about reality, which may or may not be true, Socrates' broader point is about method of investigation: things cannot be known from names alone. Some names may correspond to reality, while others do not. He goes on to illustrate the latter point by disputing names that suggest that reality is in a constant state of flux, for if that were true, knowledge would not be possible at all (Plato, "Cratylus," 154–55). In addition to analyzing etymologies of words, Socrates also engages in eponymy—an alternative lexical analysis that allows him to disassemble words not according to their actual etymological composition, but according to the rules of resemblance to other words. That is, at times, Socrates adds, deletes, and substitutes letters to create false etymologies. Socrates himself does not distinguish between the two practices of etymology and eponymy. Rather, he seems to use eponymy to playfully mislead his opponents. On the practice of eponymy, as distinct from etymology, see Thais E. Morgan, "Invitation to Cratylusland," forward to Gerard Genette, *Mimologics*, trans. Thais E. Morgan (Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 1994), xxiii–xxiv.

repeatedly stated desire for names to be the *correct* designation of things, his affirmation of the existence of truths creates a kind of tension between *language as it is* and *language as it could or, perhaps, should be*.<sup>16</sup> The dialogue concludes with all parties agreeing to further meditate on this question.

One could say that the crisis of language is already implicit in the ambiguous view of language offered in “Cratylus.” First, the central question posed by the dialogue—how do names or words relate to reality—already intimates a crisis, since the connection between words and things is posited as non-transparent and therefore open to debate. Second, the variety of presented responses further leads toward a crisis, since language, in its current state, appears to be an imperfect medium for all three parties, including Cratylus, who (persuaded by Socrates) concedes that some names fail to reflect the true nature of things.<sup>17</sup> Far from bringing clarity into the matter or providing unambiguous answers, Socrates’ position raises further questions. After proving the unreliability of names or words for investigating the thing’s nature, Socrates does not embrace the role of convention and arbitrariness in language. Instead, he opts for preserving the category of correctness, deferring the idea of accurate naming to a future, more perfect state of

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<sup>16</sup> Socrates states, “*I myself prefer the view that names should be as much like things as possible, but I fear defending this view is like hauling a ship up a sticky ramp, as Hermogenes has suggested, and that we have to make use of this worthless thing, convention, in the correctness of names. For probably the best possible way to speak consists in using names all (or most) of which are like the things they name (that is, are appropriate to them), while the worst is to use the opposite kind of names*” (Plato, “Cratylus,” 151; my emphasis).

<sup>17</sup> Unlike the Judeo-Christian narrative about language (e.g. in *Genesis*), Socrates’ view does not necessarily presuppose an initial perfect state of language that was somehow corrupted or lost. It seems entirely possible that, for Socrates, perfection—that is, the (mimetic) accuracy of names—is rather an aspiration or a future possibility than an attempt to recover an ideal mythical past. In subsequent writing about language, the narrative of the imperfect state of language is often mapped onto the narrative of a fall from grace. However, the articulation of the fall does not necessarily imply a desire to return, as Steven Cassedy suggests in *Flight from Eden*. Under the influence of Romantic thought about history and language, many figures who wrote about language in the 20<sup>th</sup> century desired not so much a return to origins, as a reinstatement of an ideal in their own historical reality. For instance, the Russian avant-garde poet Velimir Khlebnikov (1885–1922) complemented his search for truths that were already contained in language with his own creations (Velimir Khlebnikov, “Khudozhniki mira!” [“Artists of the World!”] in *Velimir Khlebnikov. Sobranie sochinenii* [Collected Works] [Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2005], 6: 153–58). Henceforth, when referring to Khlebnikov’s collected works, I use the following notation: Khlebnikov, “Title,” SS volume: page number.

language. This deferral, in turn, raises the question: what does ideal correspondence between word and referent entail and how can this ideal be realized practically? Although Socrates does not provide direct answers, his exploration of the mimetic quality of certain phonemes, as well as the formulation of ideal correspondence in terms of “likeness,” suggests that “correct” names in language would display a *mimetic* relationship to their objects.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, “Cratylus” anticipates or perhaps even invites crisis by: 1) juxtaposing the ideal to the real or the actual situation, where names do not correspond to the nature of things, and 2) by desiring the correctness of names, which only further drives the wedge between names and things, between language as it is and the world. In this sense, an earnest genealogy of the crisis of language could reach at least as far back as Plato, tracing the development of the philosophy of language from its concern with the connection between names and things, to the epistemic shift that makes possible a new conception of language in relation to the world of mental concepts (the relationship between words and ideas or concepts), to the liberation of language from the necessity of correspondence and the recognition that language not only transmits meaning, but also creates it and, consequently, structures our perception of reality. The focus of this dissertation, however, is on the artistic response to the crisis of language in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the chapter that form the body of this dissertation, I trace how two representatives of Central and Eastern European avant-garde, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Karel Teige, registered the crisis of language in their writing and their artworks and shaped directions in which the crisis would unfold in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>18</sup> Much of Socrates’ etymological analysis of names in fact focuses on what Genette calls “mimophonetics,” that is the appropriateness of phonemes to the meaning of a word (Genette, *Mimologics*, 21). For example, Socrates criticizes the word “sklērotēs,” which means “hardness,” because “r” and “l” suggest opposing meanings, the former indicating hardness, the latter—softness. Thus, the ideal version of the word for “hardness” would be “skrērotēs,” in which the “l” is switched out for an “r” (Plato, “Cratylus,” 150).



***Historical Developments Animating the Crisis of Language in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Foucault's Modern Episteme, and the Non-Representational Function of Language***

Delimiting precise borders of a project that concerns the history of ideas is a somewhat arbitrary task; nevertheless, the period of theoretical and artistic creativity of the 1910s and the 1920s offsets the crisis of language in a particular way. First, this period witnessed the birth of modern structural linguistics, which displaced (or at least complemented) the diachronic methods of historical linguistics and comparative philology of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and paved the way toward a new synchronic “science” of language.<sup>19</sup> Renewed theoretical attention to the sign that characterizes the semiotic approach reactivated the age-old discussion of the referential function of language and animated the discourse on crisis of language. Questions that were set aside in historical investigations of language in the 19<sup>th</sup> century once again came to the fore: What do words refer to? Do they refer at all? If so, how do they refer? Is the process of reference separate from the process of meaning creation?

Alongside developments in linguistics, an independent study of literature, distinct from philosophical aesthetics, was emerging at this time, in part, thanks to the work of the Russian Formalists.<sup>20</sup> By focusing on the form and function of language in a work of art, this new methodology brought linguistics and poetics closer together, intermixing their concerns.<sup>21</sup> The cross-pollination of these fields contributed to an intensified perception of the language crisis,

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas A. Sebeok, *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics. Second Edition* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2001), 5. The significance of the Central and Eastern European context to the development of structural linguistics is addressed below.

<sup>20</sup> By “philosophical aesthetics” I mean the philosophy of art that emerges toward the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* and Hegel’s lectures of fine art, rather than to the philosophical interest in the arts more broadly.

<sup>21</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory. An Introduction* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008), 2–3. The overlap between linguistics and poetics can be clearly seen the work of the linguist Roman Jakobson. On the special relevance of the Central and Eastern European context to the development of modern literary theory, see Galin Tihanov, “Why Did Modern Literary Theory Originate in Central and Eastern Europe?”, *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 1 (2004): 61–81.

since the necessity for renewal in *artistic* language was folded into a broader crisis. In the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the crisis of artistic language—that is, the crisis of representation in both the verbal and the visual arts—was closely linked to the critique of realism as the mimetic principle in art. The rejection of mimesis as a mode of representation opened up a realm of possibilities for what art and language could and should do.

Aside from new disciplinary formations and alliances that refracted the language crisis through the gradient of their particular concerns, technological developments and discoveries, such as the typewriter, wireless telegraphy, film, X-rays, among others, likewise inflected thought about language in this period. According to the media theorist Friedrich Kittler, the emergence of new communication technologies and nonprint ways of storing information at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century created a worldwide anxiety about the fate of the written word and the painted image, forever altering artistic modes of production.<sup>22</sup>

The early 20<sup>th</sup>-century developments in the study of language and literature in particular can be linked to what Michel Foucault calls the “modern episteme.”<sup>23</sup> According to the French philosopher, beginning roughly with the 19<sup>th</sup> century, thought about language is distinguished by

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<sup>22</sup> Friedrich A. Kittler, *Aufschreibesysteme, 1800 / 1900* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1985); Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1999). Although Kittler’s analysis of art since 1900 focuses primarily on Western European and American writers, his evaluation of the impact of technology on Western modernism can be extended to artists practicing in Central and Eastern Europe as well. For example, the use of handwriting and other non-movable-type printing modes in early Russian Futurist books can be read as a display of anxiety about the erasure of personality from texts in the process of mechanical reproduction. For a theoretical articulation of the Russian Futurists’ concerns in their artist’s books, see the manifesto “Bukva kak takovaia” (“The Letter as Such”): “The word is still not valuable; the word is merely tolerated. Otherwise, why is it clothed in a gray prisoner’s uniform? You have seen the letters of their words—lined up in a row, humiliated, with cropped hair, and all equally colorless and gray—these are not letters, but stamps!” (Velimir Khlebnikov, Aleksei Kruchenykh, “Bukva kak takovaia,” in Khlebnikov, *SS* 6: 339–42). Wireless telegraphy, film, and X-rays transformed the art of the Czech avant-garde. See, for example, Jaroslav Seifert’s *Na vlnách TSF* (On the Waves of TSF) (Prague: V. Petr, 1925), which playfully alludes to the transformational role of telegraph for poetic form, or the multimedia book *Abeceda* (ABCs) (Vítězslav Nezval, Milča Mayerová, and Karel Teige, *Abeceda* (Prague: J. Otto, 1926), which shows signs of cinematic thinking in book form, or the surrealist paintings of Jindřich Štyrský and Toyen, which make use of the idea of invisible light waves.

<sup>23</sup> According to Foucault, the “episteme” is what “defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge” at a particular time in any given culture (Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* [New York: Vintage Books, 1970], 168). It should be noted that Foucault adjusts his definition of episteme in his later work, but here I rely on this early formulation.

a turn away from the representational function of words. He argues that certain developments in philology, such as the scholarly focus on words' relations within grammatical systems and on grammatical inflection, implicitly prioritized the non-representational function of language and, in this way, revolutionized ways of knowing in the modern episteme.<sup>24</sup> As a result of this shift of attention away from the representative values of words, roots, and sounds, the entire conception of language experienced a major transformation:

Language [in the modern episteme] no longer consists only of representations and of sounds that in turn represent the representations and are ordered among them as the links of thought require; it consists also of formal elements [...] which impose upon the sounds, syllables, and roots an organization that is not that of representation.<sup>25</sup>

According to Foucault, it is only after this shift away from *language as representation* to language as *a system of grammar* that language was able to become a proper object of knowledge.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, Foucault argues that at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the shift of attention away from representation characterized not only the domain of language, but also biological and economic discourses:

This somewhat enigmatic event [...] occurred [...] in these three domains, subjecting them at one blow to one and the same break [...] the event concerns [...] the relation of representation to that which is posited in it. [...] representation has lost the power to provide foundation.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> According to Foucault, both the Renaissance and Classical epistemes, which preceded the modern, treated language as a representational medium. While the Renaissance episteme was characterized by resemblance between words and objects and prioritized natural signs, the Classical was characterized by conventional representation in language and therefore prioritized conventional signs. I follow Foucault's capitalization rules in using the lower case for "modern" and upper case for "Renaissance" and "Classical."

<sup>25</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 235. Foucault gives an illustrative example from comparative grammar: "Languages are no longer contrasted in accordance with what their words designate [as had been done before], but in accordance with the means whereby those words are linked together" (236). For more on the significance of attention to inflection, see *The Order of Things*, 232–36.

<sup>26</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 296. In the previous epistemes, language was a form of knowing or knowledge itself.

<sup>27</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 238.

The confluence of discourses, each of which questioned representation in its respective domain, is what allowed the developments Foucault observes to transcend the status of gradual evolutionary change and become an epistemic shift—a leap and a break from the previous ways of knowing the world and legitimizing that knowledge.

While the epistemic shift that characterizes Foucault’s modernity begins to take place at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the full significance of this “event” is not realized until later. That is, at first, the critique of representation is not explicit.<sup>28</sup> Foucault suggests that the direct, uncompromising challenge to representation occurs only toward the end the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in philosophical discourse that addresses the fragmentation of language.<sup>29</sup> Thus, only at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century do the different spheres of knowledge begin to consciously address the consequences of a shift that began nearly a century before.<sup>30</sup>

Whether or not one agrees with Foucault’s historical narrative, his characterization of the changes that took place in systems of knowledge as an epistemic shift has been influential in the history of ideas concerning language. Secondary scholarship on the situation of language in the 20<sup>th</sup> century often relies, explicitly or implicitly, on the shift of epistemes described by Foucault. For example, in *Flight from Eden* (1990), Steven Cassedy employs Foucault’s periodization to motivate the chronological borders of his own project, which links post-structuralist concerns to modernist thought. Even as he attempts to complicate Foucault’s theory by adding the views on language of “literary critics, theorists, and aestheticians” to those of “professional philosophers” described in *The Order of Things*, Cassedy locates the defining paradigm shift in the 19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 240.

<sup>29</sup> Foucault suggests that Nietzsche was the first to reflect on the “dispersion” and “fragmentation” of language that resulted from the shift away from representation. Mallarmé subsequently took up Nietzsche’s challenge and tried to “confine the fragmented being of language once more within a perhaps impossible unity” (Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 305).

<sup>30</sup> In Kittler’s alternative to Foucault’s periodization, the modern episteme roughly corresponds to what the media theorist calls the “discourse network of 1800.” Kittler holds that a new “discourse network” characterizes the 1900s (Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, 177–264).

century, beginning with the Ukrainian linguist Aleksandr Potebnia (1835–1891) in the Russian-language context, and with Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898) in the French. In this sense, Cassedy accepts Foucault’s historical narrative of the modern and, moreover, still “contemporary” episteme.<sup>31</sup> To a certain extent, Thomas Seifrid’s seminal study on Russian philosophy of language, *The Word Made Self: Russian Writings on Language, 1860–1930* (2005), also implicitly relies on Foucault’s periodization.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, looking closely at the artistic and theoretical activity of the 1910s and 1920s, one can easily extend some of its characteristic features and tendencies to the modern episteme more broadly. The birth of modern structural linguistics, which is often associated with the posthumous publication of *The Course in General Linguistics* (1916), paradoxically, has its roots in 19<sup>th</sup>-century philology and historical linguistics, if in no other way than through the mysterious figure of Saussure. While the Swiss linguist delivered his lectures that eventually became the basis of the famous *Course*, in his research he was preoccupied with a project of historical linguistics par excellence: the reconstruction of the Indo-European vowel system.<sup>33</sup> In fact, Saussure’s emphasis on the inseparability of diachrony (which could be known only through the accumulation of synchronic moments) and synchrony has been unfairly downplayed

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<sup>31</sup> Cassedy, *Flight*, 26–28; 73. At the time Foucault wrote *The Order of Things* in 1966, he viewed contemporary ways of knowing as still entrenched in the modern episteme (*The Order of Things*, 304). Cassedy seems to accept this premise, likewise positioning himself on the threshold of a coming epistemic shift (*Flight*, 1–16).

<sup>32</sup> Seifrid, *The Word Made Self*, 1–5.

<sup>33</sup> *The Course in General Linguistics* (1916) was compiled by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye on the basis of lectures Saussure gave in Geneva between 1906 and 1911. Saussure’s seemingly contradictory pursuits in synchronic and diachronic linguistics are detailed in Boris Gasparov’s *Beyond Pure Reason*, which links them with the legacy of early German Romanticism. On the contradictions within the *Course*, see Boris Gasparov, *Beyond Pure Reason. Ferdinand de Saussure’s Philosophy of Language and Its Early Romantic Antecedents* (New York: Columbia UP, 2013), 52–60.

in intellectual histories of structuralism and linguistics, which often reductively present the linguist as an advocate of strictly synchronic methods.<sup>34</sup>

Like linguistics, the emerging field of literary theory was no less entrenched in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, despite the new theorists' avowed dismissal of past literary scholarship. For instance, despite his continued rhetorical denunciations of Aleksandr Potebnia, Viktor Shklovsky, who became one of the main representatives of Russian Formalism and of the theoretical avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s, was deeply indebted to the linguist's philosophy of language and its implications for art.<sup>35</sup> Scholars have also shown Shklovsky's dependence on 19<sup>th</sup>-century cognitive aesthetics, which explored the physiological effects of art on the viewer.<sup>36</sup>

The belongingness of the intellectual developments of 1910s and the 1920s to the modern episteme is perhaps most visible in literature and art. In literature, the critique of mimetic modes of representation and of the subordination of language to the task of creating the illusion of reality can already be glimpsed in the realist critique of early 19<sup>th</sup>-century naturalism, which was accused of mirroring reality too slavishly.<sup>37</sup> This critique was more poignantly articulated in symbolism, which reconceptualized the word as a symbol that mediates between human beings

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<sup>34</sup> The oversimplification of Saussure's views can be observed in early philosophies of language, hostile to structural methods, such as Valentin Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, as well as in more contemporary writing that places Saussure's ideas in the context of literary scholarship, such as Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory* (84–85, 95–100). For Voloshinov's critique of Saussure, see "Dva napravleniia filosofsko-lingvisticheskoi mysli" [Two Directions of Philosophical Linguistic Thought], in *Filosofia i sotsiologiia gumanitarnykh nauk* (St. Petersburg: ACTA-Press LTD, 1995), 273–76.

<sup>35</sup> For a brief summary of Shklovsky's indebtedness to Potebnia, see Seifrid, *The Word Made Self*, 70–73. As Seifrid has convincingly shown, Potebnia himself was dependent on Wilhelm von Humboldt's philosophy of language, which the Ukrainian linguist undertook to translate into Russian. See "Potebnia and the Revival of Russian Thought about Language," in *The Word Made Self*, 7–52.

<sup>36</sup> Radislav Borislavov, "Viktor Shklovsky—Between Life and Art" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2011). On cognitive approaches to aesthetics more broadly, see Nicholas Dames, *The Physiology of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007); John Onians, *Neuroarthistory* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007); and Robert Michael Brain, *The Pulse of Modernism: Physiological Aesthetics in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (Seattle, WA: U of Washington P, 2015).

<sup>37</sup> For a brief summary of the correspondences between French and Russian naturalism and realism, see Priscilla Meyer, *How the Russians Read the French: Lermontov, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy* (Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 2008), 36.

and higher, directly inaccessible truths.<sup>38</sup> The symbolist focus on the mediation of language challenged what the adherents of this movement perceived as a transparent use of language by 19<sup>th</sup>-century prose in general and, in the Western European context, by the positivist naturalism of the 1880s and 1890s.

In the visual arts, a parallel challenge to naturalistic representation became apparent already in impressionism, which implicitly drew attention to the mediation of reality in painterly language. What was derisively evaluated as the unfinished, sketch-like nature of impressionist painting was, from the impressionists' point of view, an attempt to capture the momentous quality of reality that was always in a state of flux.<sup>39</sup> As an aspiration toward a different kind of realism than the one that was propagated in artistic academies, impressionism implicitly exposed the conventional nature of realist painterly language.<sup>40</sup> The rejection of mimetic representation on the grounds of the conventional nature of artistic language evolved into a more radical critique in Cubism, which aspired to a higher realism, not grounded in limited human perception.

In connection with the development of new technologies that changed art and artistic modes of production, the challenge photography posed to painting is well known. Already in 1839, the French painter Paul Delaroche proclaimed the death of painting due to the invention of

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<sup>38</sup> In the French literary context, the poem "Correspondences," written by the forerunner of the symbolist movement Charles Baudelaire, is representative of the idea that words are symbol-mediators (*Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan [New York: Oxford UP, 1993], 19). In the Russian symbolist context, which was closely linked to the religious renaissance of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, attention to the symbol as a mediator between the visible and invisible worlds can be observed in the work of the religious philosopher Pavel Florenskii, who defined the symbol as follows: "A symbol is a window to another, not immediately given essence" (cited in Judith Deutsch Kornblatt and Richard F. Gustafson, introduction to *Russian Religious Thought*, ed. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt and Richard F. Gustafson [Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 1996], 15).

<sup>39</sup> Margaret Samu, "Impressionism: Art and Modernity," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), accessed 20 Jun 2018: [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/imml/hd\\_imml.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/imml/hd_imml.htm)

<sup>40</sup> The example of one of the founders of Impressionism, Edgar Degas, who preferred to be called a "realist," bespeaks the importance of the real for impressionism (Robert Gordon and Andrew Forge, *Degas* [New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988], 31). On the flexibility of the notion of realism, see Roman Jakobson, "On Realism in Art" (1921), in *Language in Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1987), 23–24.

the early photographic process of daguerreotype in the same year.<sup>41</sup> In dismissing photography as a legitimate art form and relegating it to the realm of science, Charles Baudelaire tried to counteract the encroachment of photographic modes of representation onto artistic forms, especially in literature.<sup>42</sup> Baudelaire's efforts failed, as photography not only came to characterize naturalistic prose of writers like Émile Zola, but also became a supplement to books in form of illustration, eventually becoming an independent art form in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>43</sup> In this way, the artistic activity of the 1910s and the 1920s is integrally linked to developments in various spheres, from linguistics and literary studies to art and technology, within the modern episteme more broadly.

***Discontinuities within the Modern Episteme, Saussure's Theory of the Linguistic Sign, and the Response of the Avant-Garde***

I have transformed myself in the zero of form [...] I have destroyed the ring of the horizon and got out of the circle of objects, the horizon ring that has imprisoned the artist and the forms of nature. This accursed ring, by continually revealing novelty after novelty, leads the artist away from the aim of destruction.<sup>44</sup>

Kazimir Malevich, *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism. The New Painterly Realism*

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<sup>41</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 63. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Walter Benjamin is among the better-known voices that attributed the evolution in 19<sup>th</sup>-century painting away from mimesis to the invention of photography (Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" [1935], in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. [Boston: Belknap Press, 2008], 106–109). In connection with the influence of photography on linguistic thought, one may note Saussure's "photographic" understanding of diachrony as a series of synchronic "snapshots." Saussure even invokes photography as a metaphor when he illustrates diachrony using the example of a man who took a photograph of himself every month (cited in Gasparov, *Beyond Pure Reason*, 119).

<sup>42</sup> "It is time, then, for it [photography] to return to its true duty, which is to be the servant of the sciences and arts—but the very humble servant, like printing or shorthand, which have neither created nor supplemented literature. Let it hasten to enrich the tourist's album and restore to his eye the precision which his memory may lack; let it adorn the naturalist's library, and enlarge microscopic animals; [...] But if it be allowed to encroach upon the domain of the impalpable and the imaginary, upon anything whose value depends solely upon the addition of something of a man's soul, then it will be so much the worse for us!" (Charles Baudelaire, "The Modern Public and Photography" [1859], in *Art in Paris: 1845–1862*, ed. Jonathan Mayne [London: Phaidon, 1964], 151–155).

<sup>43</sup> François Brunet, *Photography and Literature* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009).

<sup>44</sup> Kazimir Malevich, *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism. The New Painterly Realism* (1915), in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, ed. and trans. John E. Bowlt (London: Thames and Hudson, c1988), 118.



While supporting the idea of the dominance of the modern, non-representational episteme in different spheres of knowledge from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward, Foucault nevertheless gestures toward certain departures from it, notably in connection to the “counter-discourse” of literature.

According to Foucault,

[t]hroughout the nineteenth century, and right up to our own day [...] literature achieved autonomous existence, and separated itself from all other language with a deep scission [...] by finding its way back from the representative or signifying function of language to this raw being that had been forgotten since the sixteenth century. [...] In the modern age, literature is that which compensates for (and not that which confirms) the signifying function of language.<sup>45</sup>

Foucault suggests that instead of fully embracing the modern episteme, literature of this period, with its emphasis on “the living being of language,” revives the “more complex,” “ternary” organization of the sign characteristic of the Renaissance episteme.<sup>46</sup> Foucault’s suggestion implies that literature from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century does not fully conform to the general developments within the modern episteme, even as it is an integral part of this episteme.<sup>47</sup>

Although in *The Order of Things* Foucault does not address the notion of discontinuities within broader epistemic frameworks and historical narratives on a theoretical level, he nevertheless gestures toward the potentially disruptive significance of certain departures.<sup>48</sup> For example, in connection with Mallarmé’s attempt to reconstitute language and overcome its

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<sup>45</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 43–44.

<sup>46</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 42.

<sup>47</sup> When Foucault calls the literature of the modern episteme a “counter-discourse”—a term he does not define in *The Order of Things*—he does not seem to suggest that literature stands in direct opposition to the non-representational tendency of other discourses. That is, he does not seem to suggest that literature in this period was representational. Rather in calling it a “counter-discourse,” he wishes to capture literature’s turning inward on itself, as if the language of literature formed its own independent reality. Later on in the book, Foucault discusses the role of literature as a compensatory measure to the fragmentation of language in the modern episteme, but does not return to the idea of counter-discourse (*The Order of Things*, 299–300).

<sup>48</sup> The question of discontinuities and how to conceptualize them informs Foucault’s later study, *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (1969) (trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith [New York: Vintage Books, 1972]).

fragmentariness, Foucault writes: “To discover the vast play of language contained once more within a single space *might be just as decisive a leap toward a wholly new form of thought* as to draw to a close a mode of knowing constituted during the previous century.”<sup>49</sup> In this passage, Foucault seems to suggest that Mallarmé’s “leap” within the modern episteme may be no less significant than the shift itself that brought about his episteme in the first place.

Foucault does not explicitly frame Saussure’s theory of the sign as a “leap” or a “scission” within the modern episteme; however, he hints at Saussure’s departure from the non-representational trend:

It is well known that Saussure was able to escape from this diachronic vocation of philology only by *restoring the relation of language to representation*, at the expense of reconstituting a ‘semiology’ which, like general grammar, *defined the sign as the connection between two ideas*.<sup>50</sup>

In this passage and elsewhere, Foucault points toward the link between Saussure’s sign, which consists of the signifier and the signified, and the Classical episteme, in which language was treated as representation. Saussure’s formulation of the bifacial structure of the sign, he suggests, necessarily relies on the idea of representation (even if it is arbitrary). More specifically, by emphasizing the connection between the signifier and the signified in the process of signification, Saussure’s conceptualization of the sign evokes pre-modern thought about language, which was dominated by discussions of the sign’s connection to concepts and ideas.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *The Order of Things*, 307; my emphasis.

<sup>50</sup> *The Order of Things*, 294; my emphases. “General grammar” for Foucault is associated with the Classical episteme more broadly, and specifically, with Port-Royal grammarians (*The Order of Things*, 83).

<sup>51</sup> “If the sign is the pure and simple connection between what signifies and what is signified (a connection that may be arbitrary or not, voluntary or imposed, individual or collective), then the relation can be established only within the general element of representation: the signifying element and the signified element are linked only in so far as they are (or have been or can be) represented, and in so far as the one actually represents the other. It was therefore necessary that the Classical theory of the sign should provide [...] a general analysis of all forms of representation, from elementary sensation to the abstract and complex idea. It was also necessary that Saussure, rediscovering the project of a general semiology, should have given the sign a definition that could seem ‘psychologistic’ (the linking of a concept and an image): this is because he was in fact rediscovering the Classical condition for conceiving of the binary nature of the sign” (*The Order of Things*, 67).

The return of the concern with the representational function of language—whether in reference to the outside world or to an internal interplay between the signifier and the signified—goes against the grain of the modern episteme. In this sense, Saussure’s theory of the sign could be interpreted as a scission or discontinuity within the modern episteme, similarly to Foucault’s oblique discussions of literature as “counter-discourse.”<sup>52</sup> I argue that it is in part in response to this “return” of the representational function of language in emerging structural linguistics that the art and literature of the 1910s and the 1920s becomes a more radical reinstatement of the modern episteme.

As noted earlier, the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a crisis of representation, in part caused by the mounting challenge that photography posed to painting as the more perfect form of mimesis.<sup>53</sup> Against this challenge, painting was forced to redefine its task and mode of representation as non-mimetic or, at least, not *simply* mimetic. A similar resistance to mimetic representation can be observed in the verbal arts of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. Here, the resistance was framed around the question of using language for the purposes of creating an illusion of reality, which masked the non-transparent connection between language and the world it was said to describe. As symbolism made clear, such use of language ignored the word’s mediating function, in which reality—whether of this world or some distant, inaccessible other—underwent a degree of refraction. For the symbolists, in language, we could only observe the shadows cast in Plato’s cave. Since Kant’s critique of metaphysics, the transparent use of language, in literature or elsewhere, was seen as simply dishonest, for it beguiled readers into thinking that they were

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<sup>52</sup> Note that the idea of scission or discontinuity does not imply a complete break and does not form a binary opposition to the dominant trend.

<sup>53</sup> In literary and artistic discourse of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, depending on the orientation of individual polemics, the words “naturalistic” and “realist(ic)” representation, as well as the word “representation” itself, were often understood as synonyms for what can be more accurately described as mimetic representation or mimesis.

apprehending reality, the things in themselves, when they only grasped at appearances.<sup>54</sup>

Moreover, using language to create illusions misrepresented the “essence” of language, since such use ignored the reality of language itself, which is subordinate neither to the external reality of the world nor to the internal reality of the mind.<sup>55</sup>

In this sense, art and literature were moving along the same path as 19<sup>th</sup>-century historical-linguistic thought as defined by Foucault, that is, away from representation.<sup>56</sup> The establishment of the synchronic study of language, with the theory of the sign that accompanied it, confronted this non-representational movement with an opposing current. Arts and literature responded with a more radical break from mimetic representation—abstraction. Although a break with past modes and a new beginning in artistic representation, abstraction was not a discontinuity in the modern episteme, but rather its most poignant formulation, the reinstatement of the non-representational mode.<sup>57</sup>

In the visual arts, abstractionist artists like Kazimir Malevich traced their pedigree to cubism, which, they argued, finally broke away from mimesis. The new Suprematist

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<sup>54</sup> It should be noted that Kant’s critique experienced a revival at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as philosophical positivism increasingly came into question. The revival of Kantianism toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is associated with the Marburg School.

<sup>55</sup> The myth of the essence of language was not only supported by the Symbolists, but also by different members of the avant-garde. Along a similar line of inquiry, Velimir Khlebnikov proposed an international alphabet based on the essential—if abstract—spatial relations contained in the sounds of language, implying that there is in fact an essence of language that was there to be discovered. See Khlebnikov, “Khudozhniki mira!”, *SS* 6: 153–58.

<sup>56</sup> Art and literature, however, defined representation as mimetic, which did not trouble linguistic thought, according to Foucault, since the Classical episteme. The Classical episteme, he argued, questioned the mimetic resemblance that characterized the Renaissance episteme and proclaimed the arbitrary, non-mimetic connection between the sign and that which is external to it. Thus, one could say that the crisis of representation in the arts mixes the linguistic concerns of the Classical and modern epistemes, according to Foucault’s typology. I should also note that my reading of the artistic situation contemporary to the modern episteme differs from that of Foucault, who sees literature from the 19<sup>th</sup> century up “to our own day” as a “counter-discourse” to the dominant discourse of ideas (*The Order of Things*, 43). While I agree with Foucault that, in the literature of the modern episteme, language “curves back in a perpetual return upon itself” and that literature becomes a “manifestation of language,” I argue that certain developments in literature are more in line with the modern episteme than he seems to suggest. Foucault’s evaluation of the literary situation within the modern episteme is informed primarily by symbolist-modernist poets. He does not discuss the avant-garde.

<sup>57</sup> My theoretical framework thus attempts to account both for the continuities between avant-garde art of the 1910s and the 1920s and the modern episteme, as well as for their departures from it.

compositions, which took the place of the earlier Cubo-Futurist experiments, were meant to be pure form, free from representation and dependency on the external world.<sup>58</sup> In the verbal arts, one can observe a similar tendency toward abstraction in various experiments in sound poetry. From the Futurists to the Dadaists, various avant-garde writers experimented with nonsensical language that could not be put into the service of reference and representation.

The canonical Russian Futurist poem “Dyr bul shchyl” illustrates well how abstraction undermined representation, offering a more radical break from representation than the previous experiments of impressionists and symbolists.<sup>59</sup> Published in a 1913 Futurist book by Aleksei Kruchenykh and Mikhail Larionov, the poem and its supertitle read:

3 poems  
written in  
private language  
differs from others:  
its words do not have  
definite meaning

\*

#1. Dyr bul shchyl  
Ubeshshchur  
skum  
vy so bu  
r l ez<sup>60</sup>

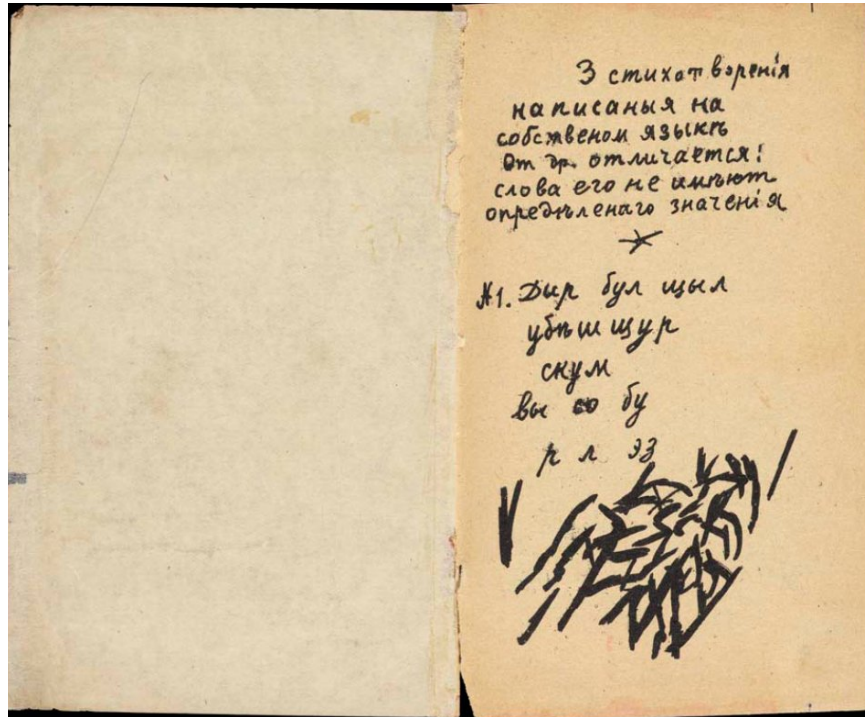
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<sup>58</sup> Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich: Proceedings of a Conference in Celebration of the 125th Anniversary of Kazimir Malevich's Birth* (New York: Pindar Press, 2007), 70. Several of Malevich's suprematist paintings teased the viewer's desire to see representation in non-representational art by providing misleading titles. For example, Malevich's composition that features two squares, one black square and one off-kilter red square, is labeled “Painterly Realism of a Boy with a Knapsack.” It should be noted that at the time when Malevich assigned such titles to his works, he was already claiming the status of a new, higher realism for his Suprematist compositions. Malevich's 1915 booklet *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism* was subtitled “New Pictorial Realism” (*Ot kubizma i futurizma k suprematizmu. Novyi zhivopisnyi realizm* [Moscow, 1916]).

<sup>59</sup> I draw on this example to make a theoretical point about abstraction, not to reconstruct historical context. A similar point can be made in regards to Dadaist poetry like Hugo Ball's sound poem, “Karawane” (1916), which, like Kruchenykh's poem uses phonemes as the basic units for experimentation.

<sup>60</sup> Aleksei Kruchenykh, Mikhail Larionov, *Pomada* [Pomade] (Moscow: Izd. G.L. Kuz'mina i S.D. Dolinskogo, 1913), [12]. The original Russian reads:

3 стихотворения  
написанные на  
собственном языке  
от др. отличается:  
слова его не имеют  
определенного значения



**Fig. 0.1 Aleksei Kruchenykh, Mikhail Larionov, a page from the Russian Futurist artist book, *Pomade* (1913), featuring Kruchenykh’s poem “Dyr bul shchyl”**

Kruchenykh’s “transrational” (*zaumnaia*) poem, as the supertitle helpfully informs the reader, “does not have definite meaning (*znachenie*).” The choice of the word *znachenie* for “meaning,” in conjunction with the word *opredelennyi* (“definitive”), is significant. In Russian philosophy of language, *znachenie* often refers to the denotative meaning of a word and, as such, is often contrasted with *smysl* as the word’s pragmatic meaning, which takes into account context.<sup>61</sup> The use of *znachenie* in the supertitle of the poem suggests that what is at stake is the sign’s specific

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№1. Дыр бул щыл  
убѣшщур  
скуп  
вы со бу  
р л эз

<sup>61</sup> See, for instance, Voloshinov, *Filosofia*, 282, 295. Insofar as the word *znachenie* is etymologically linked to *znak* (“sign”), it also suggests the meaning of “the signified,” which likewise refers to the specific meaning expressed.

referent, rather than “meaning” in a broader sense, though, to a certain extent, both meanings of the word are invoked. The invocation of *znachenie* as denotational meaning is reinforced by the adjective “definitive,” since contextual meaning can never be “definitive” in the sense of dictionary definitions.<sup>62</sup>

An examination of the poem confirms the assertion of the supertitle: the poem does not yield any recognizable “meaning” that can be correlated to existing objects or mental concepts, since “Dyr bul shchyl” is composed entirely of phonemes that fail to form meaning-carrying morphemes.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, the poem is composed of phonemes that rarely combine with one another in the Russian language, creating additional obstacles for assigning meaning, since one cannot rely on existing words as guides to the unknown words’ possible meanings. Reading Kruchenykh’s experiment side by side with Saussure’s theory of the sign, one could say that the poem consists only of signifiers, since its “words” have no signifieds or specific referents in the world of concepts (or the physical world, for that matter).<sup>64</sup> The poem’s very condition of possibility, it seems, challenges the necessity of the signified component in a sign. The poem confronts Saussure’s theory of the sign on another front as well. Saussure’s definition of signification as the interplay of the signifier and the signified implicitly identifies signification with meaning production. Kruchenykh’s poem suggests that this conflation of meaning in the

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<sup>62</sup> The Russian *opredelennyi* (“definitive”) is etymologically connected to *opredelenie* (“definition”).

<sup>63</sup> Implicitly referring to his own linguistic experiments, Kruchenykh writes in the co-authored preface to *A Trap for Judges II*: “Мы стали придавать содержание словам по их начертательной и фонетической характеристике” (“We began to give content to words based on their graphical and phonetic characteristics”) (*Sadok sudei II [A Trap for Judges II]* [St. Petersburg, 1913], 1; emphasis in original).

<sup>64</sup> To be clear, I am not suggesting that Kruchenykh is responding directly to Saussure, though there is reason to believe that Saussure’s ideas may have been available to the Russian theoretical avant-garde before the publication of the *The Course in General Linguistics* in 1916. According to Roman Jakobson, Sergei Kartsevskii (sometimes transliterated as Karcevskij), a former student of Saussure, popularized his teacher’s ideas in Russia already in the 1910s, especially among members of the Moscow linguistic circle, which had strong ties to the Moscow-based avant-garde (Roman Jakobson, “Serge Karcevskii,” *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure*, No. 14 [1956], 9–13). But even outside of the possibility of direct influence, one could motivate the dialogue between competing views of language and meaning in terms of “convergence of theories that arose from the general intellectual climate of the period” (Jindřich Toman, *The Magic of a Common Language: Jakobson, Mathesius, Trubetzkoy, and the Prague Linguistic Circle* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995], 55).

broader sense (*smysl*) with signification as the correlation of the signifier and the signified is unwarranted.<sup>65</sup> Although the linguistic signs in the poem have no signifieds, with which the signifier can enter into a relationship of signification, they nevertheless have meaning. On the one hand, the poem's meaning is displaced to the space outside of the poem's signs themselves—that is, to the level of exegetical commentary, which prefaces the poem and guides the reader toward interpretation.<sup>66</sup> On the other hand, the meaning of the poem is channeled into performance.

The performative dimension of poetry that does not consist of existing words is more obvious in cases when it is read aloud, such as in the recitation practices of Dadaists like Hugo Ball and Kurt Schwitters; nevertheless, a somewhat hidden performative dimension can be found in Kruchenykh's text as well. Instead of the oral, however, here the performative lies in the written, since the poem stages (or, represents the staging of, since one can never escape representation) the singular event of writing. Although lithographically reproduced in 480 copies, the poem presents itself as a handwritten text, which includes variations in font size, slant, and general neatness, as well as doodles typically found between the lines of a manuscript.<sup>67</sup> According to the Russian Futurist manifestoes, such performance of writing was

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<sup>65</sup> In this sense, the poem playfully instantiates Gottlob Frege's philosophical distinction between reference (*Bedeutung*) and sense (*Sinn*). See Frege's "On Sense and Reference" (1892), where this distinction is elaborated (Gottlob Frege, "Über Sinn und Bedeutung," *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik*, Band 100 (1892): 25–50, accessed 15 Jul 2018: [http://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/book/show/frege\\_sinn\\_1892](http://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/book/show/frege_sinn_1892)).

<sup>66</sup> In the case of the more abstract poetic experiments, the Futurists often relied on the manifesto form to explain the meaning of the poems.

<sup>67</sup> Some Futurist books featured individually hand-written texts that were not reproduced lithographically. See, for example, *Transrational boog* by Aleksei Kruchenykh, Aliagrov, and Olga Rozanova, *Zaumnaia gniga* (Moscow: Tip. I. Rabotnova, 1916). Though on the cover the book is dated to 1916, it was actually published in August of 1915. Among the Cubo-Futurists, the practice of manipulating dates of publication or composition was common. In the edition of *Zaumnaia gniga* held at the Getty Research Institute, the the rubber-stamped text of the book is complemented by Kruchenykh's handwritten additions: [http://primo.getty.edu/GRI:GETTY\\_ALMA51148033260001551](http://primo.getty.edu/GRI:GETTY_ALMA51148033260001551), accessed 3 May 2018. Those Futurist books that were lithographically reproduced often appeared in multiple versions, made from different lithographic stones, and, occasionally, with the participation of different artists. See, for example, *Igra v adu* (A game in hell) (Aleksei Kruchenykh, Velimir Khlebnikov, and Natalia Goncharova, *Igra v adu* [Moscow: G.L. Kuz'mina i S.D. Dolinskogo,



meant to record and convey to the reader the author's or transcriber's mood at the time of writing.<sup>68</sup> In this sense, the poem has performative meaning just as much as a live oral performance might.

To sum up, in deleting the signified, Kruchenykh's poem does not toss meaning out with the bathwater; rather, it relocates meaning to the performative dimension of the act of writing. Moreover, Kruchenykh's experiment releases the word from the bounds of representation, since it is by means of representation that the word is connected to its referent, and the signifier is connected to the signified.<sup>69</sup> Such liberation is not merely a local phenomenon, but has broader implications for language. The two poems that follow "Dyr bul shchyl" in the *Pomade* make clear that Kruchenykh's erasure of the signified, as well as his separation of meaning-production from signification (as the interplay of the signifier and the signified), is applicable to language more broadly, not just to its transrational (*zaumnyi*) variant. By contrast with "Dyr bul shchyl," the two poems that follow not only employ morphemes, such as roots and grammatical endings that transform non-existing words into verbs, but even entire words that exist in everyday vocabulary:

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1912]; Aleksei Kruchenykh, Velimir Khlebnikov, Kazimir Malevich, and Olga Rozanova, *Igra v adu* [Moscow: G.L. Kuz'mina i S.D. Dolinskogo, 1914]). As this example illustrates, the same book sometimes appeared in more than one version with slight variations in handwriting, illustrations, text, and other such features. For a broad survey of Russian Futurist books, see: Margit Rowell and Deborah Wye, eds. *The Russian Avant-Garde Book, 1910–1934* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002) and Susan Compton, *The World Backwards: Russian Futurist Books, 1912–16* (London: British Museum Publications, 1978).

<sup>68</sup> In the joint manifesto "The Letter as Such" (1913), Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov argue: "1. That mood changes one's longhand during the process of writing. 2. That the longhand peculiarly modified by one's mood conveys that mood to the reader, independently of the words. [...] A piece may be rewritten in longhand by someone else or by the creator himself, but if he does not relive the original experience, the piece will lose all the charm acquired by means of free handwriting during 'the wild snowstorm of inspiration.'" (A. Kruchnykh, V. Khlebnikov, "The Letter as Such," in Anna Lawton, ed., *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes, 1912–1928*, trans. Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle [Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1988], 63–64). The Russian formulation is much more emphatic about the experience of the one who is writing: "Вещь, переписанная кем-либо другим или самим творцом, но не переживавшим во время переписки себя [lit.: "the one who does not experience himself at the time of writing"], утрачивает все те свои чары, которыми снабдил ее почерк в час 'грозной вьюги вдохновения.'" (Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, "Bukva kak takovaia," *SS* 6: 342; my emphasis). A similar idea was articulated in the collectively authored *A Trap for Judges II* and in David Burliuk and Nikolai Burliuk, "Poeticheskie nachala" (Poetic beginnings) in *Pervyi zhurnal russkikh futuristov* (Moscow: 1914), 81–84.

<sup>69</sup> Representation applies equally to essential (mimetically-motivated) and conventional signs.

#2  
 frot fron yt  
 I don't object I'm in love  
 black language  
 even the wild tribes  
                   had it

#3  
 Та са мае  
 ха ра бау  
 Саем сиу дуб  
 радуб мола  
           al' <sup>70</sup>

Only the first line of the poem numbered two includes words that do not have “definite meaning” in everyday language, while the rest can be easily found in dictionaries and, moreover, constitute poetic clichés. The third poem features the “word” *saem*, which by virtue of an ending that overlaps with the first person plural of verbs (-em to indicate “we” as the performer of action) becomes a kind of action (“we sa”), the definite meaning of which eludes the reader.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, the first line of poem three appears to be a phonetic transcription of the words “to samoe” (“that exact”), broken down into syllables. The words that appear in the second line (“ha ra bau”),

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70

№ 2  
 фрот фронт ыт  
 не спорю влюблѣн  
 чѣрный язык  
 то было и у диких  
                   племѣн

№ 3  
 Та са мае  
 ха ра бау  
 Саем сию дуб  
 радуб мола  
           аль

(Kruchenykh, *Pomada*, [13]).

<sup>71</sup> It is also possible to see in *saem* the act of eating “sa em” (“I eat sa”). “Words” like *saem* fit into the category of “morphological zaum,” as defined by Gerald Janecek (*Zaum. The Transrational Poetry of Russian Futurism* [San Diego, CA: San Diego State UP, 1996], 5). Alternatively, one could say that such words have grammatical meaning even in the absence of lexical meaning. The category of morphological *zaum*’ seems particularly interestingly to consider against Foucault’s description of the focus of 19<sup>th</sup>-century linguistics on the function of words in systems of grammar and on grammatical inflection.

although nonsensical, imbue the first line the neuter gender, producing the reading: “to samoe harabau” (“that exact harabau”).<sup>72</sup> The third poem also includes dictionary words like *dub* (“oak”), *siu* (“this”), and *al’* (“or”).

The above-cited supertitle to the three poems suggests that all three have the same status as “Dyr bul shchyl”: none have definitive *znachenie* (meaning as denotation). The deliberate gesture of mixing non-existing, transrational words made of phonemes like “dyr bul shchyl” with words of everyday language, as well as the hybridization of invented words with standard language by means of inflection, bestows the freedom from referent—and hence representation—onto all of language.

By abolishing the representational connection between the sign and referent, Kruchenykh and fellow Futurists alter not only language, but also the relationship of poetry and art to reality. The sign no longer represents, and, by extension, art does not either.<sup>73</sup> But if language and art do not represent, what do they do? Is there something that takes the place of representation, or is abstraction, linguistic or visual, driven merely by the nihilistic desire to raze to the ground existing artistic language that is caught up in reference and illusions?

In the 1910s and the 1920s, different artists answered the challenge of abstraction to create non-representational art differently. In the case of the early Russian Futurist books, the idea of recording—instantiated in the creator’s or the transcriber’s handwriting—displaced

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<sup>72</sup> Both Kruchenykh and Larionov, who collaborated with the poet on this book, frequently used non-grammatical transcription of speech in their artworks. The principle of violating the rules of grammar and spelling was also proclaimed in the preface to *A Trap for Judges II*, which advanced the Russian Futurist platform: “Во имя свободы личного случая мы отрицаем правописание” (*Sadok sudei II*, 1). (“In the name of the freedom of individual chance we reject correct spelling.”) Thus, these particular lines could be read as a combination of nonsensical words (*harabau*) with those deformed by the written representation of the oral.

<sup>73</sup> In the Russian context, the space between words (*slovo*) as units of language and art (*iskusstvo*) is traversed rather easily, perhaps thanks to the polysemy of the Russian word *slovo*, which can mean an individual word, language, as well as verbal discourse more broadly, including literary texts like *Slovo o polku Igoreve* (translated into English variously as *The Tale of Igor’s Campaign*, *The Lay ...*, or *The Song...*). In the context of Russian thought about language, both Potebnia and Shklovsky discuss the fate of the word and art as if they were synonymous. For example, see Shklovsky’s essay, “The Resurrection of the Word,” where, without any explicit justification, the moribund state of words is transferred to art.

representation, at least partially. In the age of photography as objective record of the world (made possible by the unmediated “writing of light” (*svetopis*’)) and the phonograph as the recorder of sound, such swap of representation for recording as the model of creative activity was not unique to the Russian Futurists; and yet, the idea of recording instantiated in the early Russian Futurist books had its own particularities.<sup>74</sup> In contrast to the Italian Futurist F. T. Marinetti’s onomatopoeic experiments with recording noise, Kruchenykh experimented with phonemes or the sounds *of language*.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, these sounds were not meant to *imitate* language; while evoking the idea of recording, Kruchenykh rejected the mimetic principle. What “Dyr bul shchyl” apparently recorded was not something directly apprehensible. On the one hand, the materiality of handwriting served as a record of internal states that were not perceptible to the writer himself.<sup>76</sup> On the other hand, experiments like “Dyr bul shchyl” were engaged in a search for higher truths.<sup>77</sup> Thus, for the Russian Futurists, even in the idea of recording there was an angle of refraction that forestalled the mimetic. A parallel refraction can be observed in the work of Malevich and Khlebnikov, whose insights about language are, in part, inspired by the painter’s abstract compositions. For example, in “Artists of the World!”, Khlebnikov suggested

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<sup>74</sup> In Russian, the word *svetopis*’ was commonly used in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially among the avant-garde, to refer to photography.

<sup>75</sup> See, for instance, Marinetti’s imitation of the sounds of war in “Battle of Tripoli” (Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Zang Tumb Tumb* [Milan: Poesia, 1914]). The distinction between sounds or noise expressed in language and phonemes as the sounds of language goes back to “Cratylus,” where Socrates distinguishes between simple imitations of sound by means of language (“vocal image”) and those that express the essence of the objects (“vocal sounds” or “letters and syllables”). See also Genette, *Mimologics*, 21.

<sup>76</sup> Unlike the Surrealist practice of automatic writing, the Futurists did not seem to believe that the writer’s lack of awareness of his or her mood at the time of writing is necessarily an expression of the unconscious.

<sup>77</sup> In some essays, such as “Declaration of the Word as Such,” Kruchenykh position assumes the existence of something akin to Platonic forms, which are given to us in a corrupt form in language: “The lily is beautiful, but the word ‘lily’ has been soiled and ‘raped.’ Therefore, I call the lily, ‘euy’—the original purity is reestablished” (Kruchenykh, “Declaration of the Word as Such,” in *Russian Futurism Through Its Manifestos*, 67–68). The Russian reads: “Лилия прекрасна, но безобразно слово лилия захватанное и «изнасилованное». Поэтому я называю лилию еуы — первоначальная чистота восстановлена” (Kruchenykh, *Apokalipsis v russkoi literature* [Moscow: Tip. TSIT, 1923]). The original 1913 leaflet that contained this declaration went through revisions in subsequent printings, making the exact periodization of his thought difficult to determine; however, from 1913, Kruchenykh his publishing enterprise “EUY,” presumably in reference to his new word for “lily.”

that the existing sounds of language contain records of spatial truths about the world. They are not expressed in the sounds directly, but must be analytically derived. Thus, on the one hand, language was a record of essential truths about the world, and on the other, it was not a direct mimetic record, but one that has been encoded into language by means of abstraction.

Differences in their approaches to language notwithstanding, both Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov sought an alternative to the representational function of language and art in the idea of recording. Other avant-garde poets and artists took a different path. After the “purification” performed by abstraction, some returned to representational—though not mimetic—figuration, as was the case with Malevich and Picasso. This dissertation addresses the question of how artists responded to the realm of possibilities that opened up when the representational mode of language and art was put into question. It attempts to answer the question, how did artists experience the crisis of language and representation and what solutions did they seek in their art?

### ***Vladimir Mayakovsky’s and Karel Teige’s Responses to the Crisis of Languages and Representation***

From the tumultuous period of the 1910s and the 1920s, I have selected two figures to guide the exploration of the crisis of language and representation in this dissertation: Vladimir Mayakovsky and Karel Teige. Both artists found themselves at the heart of the crisis and transformation of artistic language not simply as witnesses of the modern episteme more broadly, but also as participants in the artistic and theoretical movements associated with the development of structural linguistics. Their proximity to certain linguistic developments that animated the crisis of language and representation from outside of the artistic sphere, such as the structuralist bracketing of the contextual-historical aspect of signification in favor of a synchronic scheme,

contributed to their attempts to overcome the crisis in their artworks and, to a certain extent, shaped their particular solutions.

Initially trained as a painter, Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893–1930) joined the Russian Futurist movement as a poet, performer, and instigator of public scandals in 1911.<sup>78</sup> By the mid 1910s, Mayakovsky began to distance himself from the more scandalous activities of early Futurism and, even before the Revolution of 1917, began to align his leftist revolutionary political interests more closely with his art.<sup>79</sup> After welcoming the October Revolution, he put himself in the service of the new regime, becoming, arguably, the first Soviet poet. Throughout the 1910s Mayakovsky attended the meetings of the Moscow Linguistic Circle and OPOJAZ (Society for the Study of Poetic Language), out of which Russian Formalism emerged, and was personally acquainted with the theoretical leaders of these groups, Roman Jakobson, Viktor Shklovsky, Osip Brik and others.<sup>80</sup> After the Revolution, Mayakovsky took part in public educational campaigns as both a poet and visual artist, creating agitprop posters known as the “ROSTA windows” (*okna ROSTA*), and became a prominent member of the Left Art Front (LEF). By the mid 1920s, the poet was precipitously losing popularity among the masses, who,

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<sup>78</sup> Mayakovsky credited his poetic transformation to David Burliuk, whom he met in 1911 at the College of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in Moscow (Bengt Jangfeldt, *Mayakovsky. A Biography*, trans. Harry Watson [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2014], 8–9). In 1911, the group that later became known as the Russian “Cubo-Futurists” was called “Hylaea” (Gileia), after the Greek name for the Kherson region, where the group was founded in 1910. For a history of this group, see Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1968), 29–60, and Lawton, introduction to *Russian Futurism*, 12–20.

<sup>79</sup> According to Mayakovsky’s autobiographical accounts, his political interests predated his artistic explorations. Before he joined the nascent Russian Futurist movement, he had already been engaged in subversive political activity, which repeatedly landed him in jail (Jangfeldt, *Mayakovsky*, 7–8). It was during his third arrest in 1909, which led to his longest confinement, that Mayakovsky allegedly became acquainted with contemporary Russian literature and the classics, and wrote his very first poems, which were “thankfully confiscated” by the prison guards (Vladimir Mayakovsky, “Ia sam” in *Sobranie sochineii v dvenadtsati tomakh* [Collected works in twelve volumes] [Moscow: Pravda, 1978], 1: 50–51).

<sup>80</sup> Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History—Doctrine* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1955), 64–69. Mayakovsky publicly read his utopian narrative poem *150,000,000* for the first time in front of the Moscow Linguistic Circle.

along with the critics, increasingly judged his poetry too difficult to understand.<sup>81</sup> On April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1930, Mayakovsky died of a self-inflicted gun-wound to the heart.

The Czech modernist Karel Teige (1900–1951) began his artistic career as a writer and translator of literature. In the 1920s, Teige turned to visual art, joining the Artistic Union Devětsil, an association of forward-looking artists who wanted to modernize and internationalize Czech art.<sup>82</sup> Instrumental in founding a new artistic current known as Poetism, Teige became a prominent leftist avant-garde artist and theoretician in the mid 1920s. In his critical writings and editorial work for Czech periodicals, he frequently referred to and promoted the theoretical work of the nascent Prague Linguistic Circle, and was especially fond of Roman Jakobson.<sup>83</sup> In the late 1920s, Teige turned to architecture, authoring his famous study on collective housing, *The Minimum Dwelling*, in 1932.<sup>84</sup> Although Teige flirted with surrealist ideas throughout the 1920s, he officially joined the Czech Surrealist Group in 1934. Among the group's other members were the poet Vítězslav Nezval and the painters Jindřich Štyrský and Toyen (Marie Čermínová), all of whom had earlier been associated with the Poetist movement. The group eventually imploded over a political conflict between Nezval and Teige, who disapproved of Stalinist tactics. In the Communist Czechoslovakia of 1950, Teige became subject of a smear campaign in the press and died shortly after of a heart attack.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Jangfeldt, *Mayakovsky*, 263–64.

<sup>82</sup> Although “Devětsil” could be translated as “nine forces,” the title was first and foremost a reference to the butterbur flower (Karel Šrp, “Karel Teige in the Twenties: The Moment of Sweet Ejaculation” in *Karel Teige 1900–1951: L’Enfant Terrible of the Czech Modernist Avant-Garde*, eds. Eric Dluhosch and Rostislav Švácha [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999], 42 fn1). For a brief introduction to Devětsil platform, see Timothy O. Benson, ed., *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910–1930* (Los Angeles: 2002), 85–86; Thomas G. Winner, *The Czech Avant-Garde Literary Movement Between the World Wars*, ed. Ondřej Sládek and Michael Heim (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 46–48.

<sup>83</sup> The Prague Linguistic Circle was officially founded in 1926; however, many of its members knew each other and each other's work from the early 1920s.

<sup>84</sup> Karel Teige, *The Minimum Dwelling* [1932], trans. by Eric Dluhosch (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

<sup>85</sup> For a summary of Teige's biography and artistic career, see Rumjana Dačeva, “Appendix” in *Karel Teige, 1900–1951*, 348–82.

As members of the artistic avant-garde in Central and Eastern Europe, who, moreover, maintained close ties with new theoreticians of language and literature, both Mayakovsky and Teige were acutely aware of the crisis of language and representation that enveloped the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>86</sup> In the following chapters, I trace each artist's response to this crisis, showing how their artworks are deeply informed by concerns with the fate of artistic language and representation. Rather than highlighting the more general tendencies of the movements to which Mayakovsky and Teige belonged during the period in question—Russian Futurism and Czech Poetism, respectively—this dissertation focuses on the individual artistic trajectories of these two figures as reflected in their oeuvres. Nevertheless, I contextualize these two figures within the artistic movements with which they were affiliated, as well as discuss the broader intellectual and artistic context the European avant-garde.

The revolution and the purification of form that was accomplished by abstraction confronted artists with the question: what can language and art do, if their primary task is no longer oppressive representation that has subordinated them for centuries to the task of describing reality?<sup>87</sup> In the mid 1910s, Mayakovsky's response to the crisis of language and representation took on a political valence. In his critical articles and narrative poems, on the covers of his books, as well as through intertextual references to other works of art (both verbal and visual), Mayakovsky engaged in polemics with existing modes of representation. The poet transformed the question of what art ought to do after the purification of forms into a quest for a

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<sup>86</sup> Throughout the dissertation, I use the word "language" in reference to both verbal language and artistic language more broadly, which includes visual and verbal materials. The general context clarifies my usage in each case.

<sup>87</sup> Malevich's "White on White" (1918) represents just such radical purification of painterly forms: it dispenses even with color, present in his other non-objective works. Although critics jokingly said that it is Malevich's best work because something could still be painted on the white canvas, they missed the point that this purification is what made painting possible again. At the beginning of his poetic career, Mayakovsky also flirted with abstraction, though not to the extent that either Kruchenykh or Khlebnikov did. For an example of Mayakovsky's tempered abstraction, see the first lines of "Iz ulitsy v ulitsu" (1913) or "Ischerpyvaiushchaia kartina vesny" in Mayakovsky, *SS 1*: 67 and "My" in *Dokhlaiia luna* [Croaked Moon] (Moscow, 1913), 59–61.



more democratic mode of artistic representation. Such representation meant not only that previously underrepresented themes would finally find their expression in artworks, but that those themes would speak for themselves, using the poet as their vehicle of articulation.

Beginning with his first narrative poem, Mayakovsky expressed his concern with finding the means through which those who cannot speak, those who do not yet have a language, can articulate their experience. Rather than singing love songs, exposing the horrors of the street and war, or capturing pain and other traumatic experiences, the poet's task, Mayakovsky suggested, was to help the voiceless speak. Moreover, it was not enough for the poet to become a representative who speaks on behalf of the masses. Mayakovsky proposed a more radical vision of artistic (and, by implication, political) representation. In Mayakovsky's utopian vision, the poet was transformed into "one enormous pair of lips," through which the masses could speak for themselves. Such transformation of the poet into both the "lips" and the collective body of others' voices, Mayakovsky suggested, entailed a sacrifice of the poet's individual self. For this reason, his narrative poems abound with repeated stagings of the poet's self-execution—a redemptive offering that begets the desired democratic mode of representation, at least metaphorically, if the reader is willing to engage in Mayakovsky's game of make-believe.<sup>88</sup> In other words, in Mayakovsky's poetic world, the death of the poet and of his individual word was necessary for the resurrection of the poet as a collective body of previously unheard voices.

Although Mayakovsky offered his solution to the crisis of language and representation, for the most part, on the level of themes and images, he nevertheless also attempted to address the possibility of a democratic mode of representation on the level of form. Mayakovsky's formal suggestion consisted of dislodging the lyric from its concerns with the individual

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<sup>88</sup> I am referring to Kendall Walton's concept of "make-believe" as the basis of the reader's participation in representational art and the possibility of truth in fiction (*Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1990]).

experience and hybridizing it with forms that are more closely linked to collective creativity—epic poetry and, to a lesser extent, the folktale. Moreover, the general tendency of Mayakovsky’s poetry toward prosaization introduced another genre into the lyrics—the novel, which, in the decades of Mayakovsky’s poetic practice, was hailed as a form most capable of accommodating a plurality of voices and which carries the most democratic potential of other art forms.<sup>89</sup>

Insofar as Mayakovsky’s solution relied on images, metaphors, and borrowed narratives, he did not eschew representation altogether and his solution differed from that of the abstractionists. Nevertheless, for Mayakovsky, representation—as the desire to capture and reproduce reality, an experience, or a feeling—was no longer the main objective of an artwork. For Mayakovsky, representation was replaced by the task of imagining future utopias, which carried the potential to bring about real cognitive and epistemic change. In line with the cultural politics of the post-revolutionary time, Mayakovsky believed that the long-term success of the 1917 political revolution depended on the cultural revolution that, at the time, still had to be carried out. In his artworks and in his private life, Mayakovsky repeatedly showed that the new political organization of Soviet Russia had to be complemented by a cognitive revolution that would uproot old ways of life. For Mayakovsky, this epistemic-cognitive shift was to be accomplished through defamiliarization, which estranged human beings from the present reality and from everything that conditioned them to recognize, rather than see anew, to repeat, rather

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<sup>89</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin would later praise Mayakovsky for the “prosaization” of poetry he was able to accomplish (“K voprosam teorii romana” in Mikhail Bakhtin, *Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh* [Collected Works in Seven Volumes] [Moscow: Russkie slovari, 1997], 48–62). While, on the surface, Bakhtin’s comment seems like a rather general observation, it should be noted that, for him, “prosaization” is a value judgment. Prose, and especially the novel, Bakhtin argued, was the privileged carrier of the possibility of polyphonic representation of others’ voices, present in the text on equal terms with the author’s. The democratic character of the novel is explored both by Bakhtin and György Lukács. See, for example, Bakhtin’s essays on the novel (*The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist [Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 1981]) and Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT P, 1971).

than act, to acquiesce to the comfort of *byt* rather than embrace a new existence.<sup>90</sup> Figurations of an alternative future, such as the ones Mayakovsky conjured in his poetry, carried the potential to break us out of the old habits, “nailed into us by the slavish past.”<sup>91</sup>

By contrast with Mayakovsky’s prioritization of utopian imaginaries, Karel Teige’s solution to the crisis of language and representation was driven by formal innovation. Teige sought to overcome the crisis by creating a new multimedia form. In his view, only by fusing the word and the image could the artist address the parallel crises that afflicted these media. Such fusion, moreover, was meant to accomplish more than a simple translation of one medium into another. Translating painting into poetry by, for instance, introducing Cubist fragmentation into verbal images or into the visual arrangement of a poem, would be insufficient to accomplish the desired fusion, he argued. Translating poetry into painting by, for example, placing words on a canvas or by providing the poetized object within the visual arrangement of a poem, such as we see in Apollinaire’s calligrammes and pattern poetry more broadly, would produce a similarly sterile result, which was incapable of addressing the crisis. According to Teige, the word and the image had to be fused in a multimedia form in such way that neither would be subordinate to the other.

The first solution Teige proposed, together with other members of the Poetist movement, was the “image poem.” This art form integrated words, painted images, clippings from magazines and newspapers, and photographic images into a shared semiotic space. On the

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<sup>90</sup> For Shklovsky, defamiliarization worked against the overwhelming automatization of life, which, he wrote, “devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war” (Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher [Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990], 5).

<sup>91</sup> Всё,  
что в нас  
ушедшим рабьим вбито,  
всё,  
что мелочинным роем  
оседало  
и осело бытом (Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Pro eto* [About That] [Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1923], 39).

surface, this form was barely distinguishable from parallel experiments in collage and photomontage undertaken by other avant-garde artists across Europe; however, the image poem's formal surface hid a quiet theoretical complexity connected to the significance of photography for the Poetist movement.<sup>92</sup> By the mid 1920s, Teige and other Poetists had come to view photography as a non-representational mode of artistic creation that allowed reality to imprint itself directly on the photographic plate. As such, photography enjoyed a special, non-mediated connection to reality. When introduced into the multimedia space of the image poem, the photograph brought along this special link to reality, allowing the word and image to partake in non-representational modes of artistic creation. In this way, the photograph aided the word and painted image in overcoming their respective crises—a task the word and image could not accomplish while remaining within the confines of these two media. Moreover, the photographic image was itself transfigured by the semiotic connections it formed with other media within the space of the image poem.

After experimenting with individual image poems, Teige turned to a different multimedia form—the “typophoto”—in order to realize his dream of creating “books of image poems.” As the portmanteau “typophoto” suggests, this new medium fused typography and photography into a single whole. By contrast with the Poetist experiments in image poetry, Teige's typophoto experiment was realized in book form, with the help of other artist collaborators. The resulting book *ABCs (Abeceda)*, (1926), which contained Vítězslav Nezval's cycle of poems, photographs of Milča Mayerová's dance performance of Nezval's verses, and Teige's typophotos and design, has been hailed as one of the most outstanding artworks of the Czech avant-garde. In parallel to the photograph in image poetry, the presence of the typophoto in the book transfigured the image

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<sup>92</sup> It should be noted that the grid-like organization of space in Czech image poems stands in stark contrast to the chaotic photomontages of Dadaists like Hannah Höch and Kurt Schwitters, or the Constructivist photomontages of Rodchenko (as we see in Mayakovsky's *About That*).

and especially the poetic word, allowing them to transcend their individual limits. Unlike the more static image poems, the time dimension of *ABCs* (the book unfolds over a series of pages) created a cycle of endless correlations and deferrals, where neither the word nor the image was subordinate to one another, catching the reader in a perpetual interpretative cycle.

Despite their radically different solutions to the crisis of artistic language and representation, both Mayakovsky and Teige conceptualized the crisis as a problem that afflicted the visual and verbal arts alike. While rejecting representation as mimesis of reality, neither artist chose to pursue the path of abstraction, viewing its excessive obsession with form as in conflict with the connection between art and life. Nevertheless, for both Mayakovsky and Teige abstraction played an important purifying function, cleansing old forms before construction could begin anew. Even as the two artists worked out radically different solutions, both strove to maintain contact between art and reality. Mayakovsky's response to the crisis focused on how art can cognitively transform the reader-viewer, bringing about the change in perception that was a necessary condition of actual material and historical changes. Teige's solution was driven by more formal innovations connected to the transformational role of photography in literature and painting, but he too engaged with avant-garde ideas about how art can affect positive change in viewers, teaching them the art of enjoying life.

## *Comparative Framework, Methodology, and Structure*

Къ брадобрию приидохъ и рекохъ  
Хоштж отъче да причешеш ми оуши.<sup>93</sup>

Vladimir Mayakovsky, “They Don’t Understand  
Anything,” trans. Roman Jakobson

Although the artistic paths of Mayakovsky and Teige diverged—the former moved toward literature, while the latter embraced visual art—the word and the image remained fundamental categories and media for both throughout their oeuvres. This persistent dual orientation toward the word and image in their thinking and in their artworks helped Mayakovsky and Teige conceptualize the crisis of representation in broader terms and allowed them to develop solutions that incorporated both visual and verbal elements. Moreover, both artists were engaged in articulating the broader theoretical positions of their respective movements (Russian Futurism and Poetism), producing expository prose that contextualized their art within the artistic questions of their day.

In addition to Mayakovsky’s and Teige’s individual qualities that positioned them to apprehend the crisis of representation and artistic language from a broad, cross-disciplinary perspective, the Czech-Russian cross-cultural historical connection also serves as grounds for comparison in this dissertation. While emphasizing the existence of broader discursive frameworks, such as the non-representational orientation of various discourses in the modern episteme, I also explore the historical links between the avant-garde in Russia and Czechoslovakia. At the center of the flow and exchange of ideas between Russian Futurism and Czech Poetism stands the figure of Roman Jakobson (1896–1982).

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<sup>93</sup> “Walked into a barbershop and said perfectly calm, / Would you be so kind as to give my ears a trim?” (Mayakovsky, “They Don’t Understand Anything,” in Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Selected Poems*, trans. and ed. James H. McGavran III [Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2013], 47). These lines, along with the entire poem, were translated from the Russian into Old Church Slavonic cited in the epigraph above by Roman Jakobson.

In the 1910s, the Russian Formalist, soon to become Prague Structuralist, Jakobson was not only a budding scholar of language and literature, but also an active participant of the Futurist movement in Russia. Although he published only a few transrational poems in Kruchenykh's Futurist books under the pseudonym of Aliagrov, Jakobson was, nevertheless, one of the first and most devoted advocates of the new Russian art in the then-still-hostile artistic world dominated by various offshoots of symbolism.<sup>94</sup> After relocating to Czechoslovakia in 1920, Jakobson continued to promote Russian literature abroad and became an advocate of the new Czech art as well. In Prague, Jakobson went on to publish *The Latest Russian Poetry* (*Noveishaia russkaia poezia*, 1921), which included a detailed study of the quiet linguistic genius of Velimir Khlebnikov, followed by *On Czech Verse* (*O cheshskom stikhe*, 1923), which concluded with an examination of Mayakovsky's poetic innovations.<sup>95</sup> Jakobson also actively participated in various Czech periodicals, where his contributions, including critical articles and translations, appeared alongside those of the Czech avant-garde.<sup>96</sup> Jakobson even made the

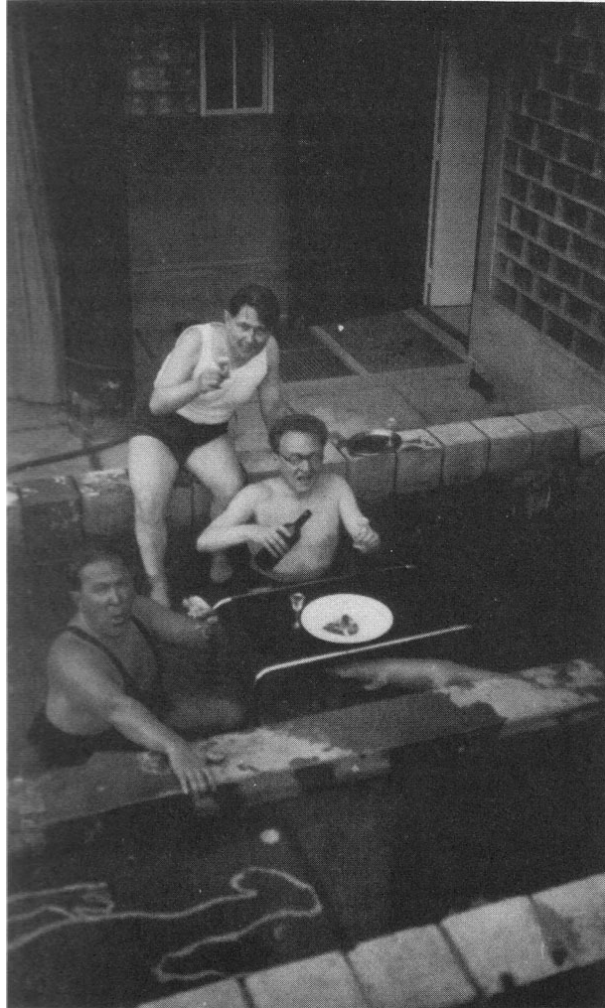
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<sup>94</sup> Two of Jakobson's poems appeared in *Zaumnaia gniga*, alongside Kruchenykh's verbal antics and Olga Rozanova's color linocuts. Several poets who ended up joining the Russian Futurist movement, including Khlebnikov, had previously been rejected by the elitist establishment of Ivanov's Tower. Jakobson was one of the first scholars to appreciate Khlebnikov's poetic talent. On the influence of Khlebnikov's poetic experimentation onto Jakobson's phonology, see Boris Gasparov, "Futurism and Phonology: Futurist Roots of Jakobson's Approach to Language," *Cahiers de l'ILSL*, no. 9 (1997): 105–24.

<sup>95</sup> The first edition of *O cheshskom stikhe* was written in Czechoslovakia, but published in Berlin and Moscow. The first complete edition of the book in Czech was published in Prague in 1926 (Roman Jakobson, *Základy českého verše* [Praha: Odeon, 1926]). Note that the publisher Odeon specialized in avant-garde books, including those of Karel Teige and other Poetists. Teige designed the cover of this 1926 edition. Jakobson later summarized his interaction with the Czech avant-garde as follows, "I came to Prague in 1920 and made the acquaintance of [the poet Jaroslav] Seifert in 1921. A little later, but still in the early twenties began my friendship with Biebl and especially with Nezval. I brought to Czechoslovakia the first information about Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky. Even their names were completely unknown in Prague before I came. Often I spoke with the Devětsil people about the above-mentioned Russian poets and about the current problems of Russian poetry of that time" (Jakobson, Letter to Angelo M. Ripellino, in Angelo Maria Ripellino, *Storia della poesia ceca contemporanea* [Roma: D'Argo, 1950], 26; quoted in Toman, *The Magic of a Common Language*, 219).

<sup>96</sup> One of Jakobson's first publications in Czech periodicals was a Czech translation of a fragment from Khlebnikov's poem (Velimir Khlebnikov, "V. Chlebnikov: Z poematu 'Sestry blýskavice'," trans. R. A. [Roman Aliagrov or Jakobson], *Den* 1, No. 20 [1920], 19). In the 1920s, he also published articles in the following Czech periodicals: *Čas*, *Červen*, *Pásmo*, *Nové Rusko*, among others.

personal acquaintance of Karel Teige and Vítězslav Nezval, among other Czech avant-garde artists.<sup>97</sup>



**Fig. 0.2 Vítězslav Nezval (front left), Roman Jakobson (right), and Karel Teige (top center) in Brno in 1933. Photograph by the Czech avant-garde architect, Jiří Kroha.**

When Mayakovsky visited Prague in 1927, Jakobson helped arrange his readings. Earlier, Jakobson had been instrumental in seeing that Mayakovsky's verses were translated into Czech

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<sup>97</sup> In the 1930s, Nezval dedicated several poems to Roman Jakobson, whom he explicitly addressed by name: "You of all, Roman, / correspond to my secret levers / I produce song and I cackle / just as I please" (Vítězslav Nezval, *Skleněný havelok* [A Glass havelock] [Prague: František Borový, 1932], 109). See also Nezval, *Zpáteční lístek* (Return ticket; 1933) or *Praha s prsty deště* (Prague with the fingers of rain; 1936). The relationship between Jakobson and Nezval is explored in more detail in "The Linguist Remains a Futurist: Roman Jakobson and the Czech Avant-Garde between the Two Wars," in Toman, *The Magic of a Common Language*, 217–41.



and kept Mayakovsky abreast of the reception of his poetry in Czechoslovakia.<sup>98</sup> Thus, Jakobson's activity in Czechoslovakia extended far beyond the better-known story of his participation in the Prague Linguistic Circle and included facilitating the exchange of ideas between the Russian and the Czech artistic avant-garde. To bring out this historical link between the developments of the avant-garde in Russia and Czechoslovakia, throughout the dissertation I refer to Jakobson's contributions to the exchange of ideas between these two intellectual contexts as well as to the study of the avant-garde more broadly.

In connection with Mayakovsky's work, this dissertation highlights the earlier stage of his creative activity, roughly from 1913 to 1921, the year that Mayakovsky published his collective utopian vision in *150,000,000*. My research on Teige, who was seven years Mayakovsky's junior, focuses on the 1920s, which were the beginning of the Czech artist's theoretical and artistic career. Rather than exploring simultaneity and parallelism of artistic developments within the Czech and Russian contexts, this dissertation operates according to the principle of continuity and extension—Teige picks up where Mayakovsky leaves off. The figure of Jakobson, as I noted, is one reason why the comparison between the earlier stage of Mayakovsky's career and Teige's artistic development in the 1920s is productive. Another reason is that, arguably, the avant-garde—as a phenomenon distinct from broader modernist tendencies—did not exist in the Czech lands before the end of the First World War and the birth of independent Czechoslovakia in 1918.

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<sup>98</sup> Jangfeldt, *Mayakovsky*, 210. In addition to translations that appeared in various Czech avant-garde periodicals, in 1925 the poet Bohumil Mathesius, a cousin of the Prague linguist Vilém Mathesius, translated Mayakovsky's *150,000,000* into Czech its entirety.

Peter Bürger has famously defined the avant-garde in terms of the attack of the various movements that fall under this umbrella term on institutions of art in bourgeois society.<sup>99</sup> Unlike other theorists of the avant-garde, like Renato Poggioli, Bürger locates the avant-garde within a specific time frame in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that encompasses different movements from futurism to Dadaism to surrealism. Although I do not share all of Bürger's stipulations about the avant-garde, I nevertheless follow his theory in separating the avant-garde artists I discuss in this dissertation from their modernist predecessors.

The Russian avant-garde was born in the 1910s, in part, out of the opposition to and, at the same time, appropriation of Italian Futurism.<sup>100</sup> Thus, Russian Futurism was, on the one hand, distinguished by a certain orientation toward international artistic trends, and, on the other, by the resentment and rejection of European ideals of art, which implicitly positioned Russia as the artistic periphery of Europe and made Russian artists into epigones of western trends. This oppositional tendency contributed to a certain level of nationalism among the early Russian avant-gardists. Even before the Russian encounter with Italian Futurism—an encounter that ended in a dramatic break—Russian poetic practice, seemingly independently, came close to some ideals of Italian Futurism. However, this historical conflict changed the scale and the significance of this experimentation; that is, it elevated Russian Futurism from a local

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<sup>99</sup> “The European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men. When the avant-gardistes demand that art become practical once again, they do not mean that the contents of works of art should be socially significant. The demand [...] directs itself to the way art functions in society [...]” (Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw [Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 1994], 49).

<sup>100</sup> As the later designation of Russian Futurism as “Cubofuturism” suggests, Cubism was also appropriated by Russian artists. However, by contrast with Italian Futurism, Russian artists did not display such a tense, contradictory attitude about embracing Cubist ideals and techniques. The difference of attitudes toward two international artistic movements probably has to do with the deeper entrenchment of Italian Futurism in the specific artistic vision of F.T. Marinetti, whose Napoleonic aspirations and condescending attitude alienated the Russian Futurists.

phenomenon to the level of international significance, in part, contributing to the creation of the Russian avant-garde.<sup>101</sup>

By contrast with the artistic situation connected to the reception of futurism in Russia, the futurist moment did not find similar resonance—polemical or otherwise—in the Czech lands. At the time of the First World War, Dadaist groups, which were springing up all over Europe, did not make a significant impression on the Czech artistic scene.<sup>102</sup> In the 1910s, what would soon become the independent nation state of Czechoslovakia was, in its artistic cultural life, under the French sphere of influence.<sup>103</sup> The Czech resistance to “German” culture, informed by ethnic conflicts in the Austro-Hungarian empire of which the Czech lands were part prior to 1918, did not amount to a broader rejection of Western European culture and its domination of the artistic world. Although I do not mean to suggest that the relationship between the development of national identity and of the avant-garde is a causal one, nevertheless there appears to be a correlation between them, especially when it comes to countries on the artistic periphery of Western Europe. The desire to decolonize oneself from the cultural-artistic dominance of Western Europe was often accompanied by an upsurge of national ideas.

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<sup>101</sup> Of course, the Russian Futurists recognized the international significance of their own art before the rest of the art world did, but an international recognition did follow.

<sup>102</sup> As Toman has argued, before the mid-1920s the Czech artistic scene remained largely unaffected by Dadaism, though there was some early (post-war) reception of Dada among the German-speaking artistic public of Prague (Jindřich Toman, “Now You See It, Now You Don’t: Dada in Czechoslovakia, with Notes on High and Low,” in *The Eastern Dada Orbit: Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, Central Europe and Japan*, eds. Gerald Janecek and Toshiharu Omuka [New York: G.K. Hall, 1998], 12–13).

<sup>103</sup> Symbolism and Decadence were one manifestation of the French influence on early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Czech art, Cubism was another. Although Marinetti announced the birth of Futurism in the French newspaper *Le Figaro* (1909), in comparison with Cubist painters, the Egyptian-born Italian remained a marginal figure on the French artistic scene. It was Cubism, rather than Futurism, that found fertile ground in the Czech lands among artists like Václav Špála, Emil Filla, Bohumil Kubišta, Josef Čapek, Antonín Procházka, and others. Czech artists took Cubism much further, implementing it into applied arts and architecture, which, at times, did take on nationalist overtones. Czech Cubist architecture, with its attention to the natural play of light and seemingly morphing shapes that suggested impermanence, stood in stark contrast to the monumental “German” architecture of Austro-Hungary. Still, this manifestation of Czech nationalism directed against German dominance did not become an impulse for a broader cultural decolonization from the rest of Western Europe, including its main artistic center, Paris.

In the case of early Russian Futurism, we can observe a Pan-Slavic, if not entirely Russia-centric, orientation. Similarly, throughout roughly ten years of Poetism's existence, one can observe in the movement's theoretical statements implicit assertions of the superiority of Czech art to that of Western Europe. For example, in captions to reproductions of western artistic works, Teige rarely missed an opportunity to compare them to the more advanced solutions of his own group. The establishment of the avant-garde on what is considered the artistic periphery of Europe meant decentering the artistic center. Such a gesture often went along with a kind of turn inward, toward the national, even if it was not necessarily articulated in openly nationalist terms. Due to this correlation between the development of an independent national consciousness that positioned itself against a broader cultural dominance and the emergence of avant-garde in the Czech context, a comparison of Czech-Russian avant-gardes will necessarily have a disjointed chronology. Thus, if one is concerned with the emergence of the avant-garde as a carrier of unique ideas about language and representation, one must begin in the early 1910s in the case of Russia and after the First World War in Czechoslovakia.

The cross-cultural comparison in this dissertation is driven not only by similarities between compared phenomena, movements, trends, and specific art objects, but also by the differences between them. Structuralist methods, which, as a general rule, highlight abstract relations within structures in order to motivate broad-scale comparisons, often reduce and downplay specific historical and contextual differences between compared objects. In some cases, ignorance of the local context may lead to misreadings. For example, one may compare the status of archaisms in 20<sup>th</sup>-century poetic language in Russia and Czechoslovakia. On the surface, the use of archaic words in poetry may appear to have the same function; however, when considered against specific historical contexts, archaisms can distinguish conservators of poetic

language from its revolutionaries. In the Czech 20<sup>th</sup>-century literary context, archaisms, which are closely linked to conservative language reforms of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century national revival, mark a conservative tendency in poetry. By contrast, in Velimir Khlebnikov's poems, archaisms become as a source of language renewal, associated with the avant-garde "breaking" of language. In this sense, structuralist-semiotic approaches that exclude historical development from their comparative frameworks often turn out to be inadequate to the material at hand. What may appear as a similarity on the level of semiotic analysis often turns out to be an incompatible difference, when concrete historical context is taken into account.

Rather than motivating my cross-cultural comparison by appealing to structuralist methods, I focus on historical connections and local contexts, which, at times, challenge neat narrative unities. The historical connections I trace can be roughly organized into three types. The first concerns specific intellectual exchanges between the Russian and the Czech avant-garde, such as the ones enabled by direct exchanges between artists or by migrating figures, like Jakobson. The second reconstructs broader networks of exchange that formed around avant-garde publications, and especially around the periodicals, which, by the 1920s, were becoming increasingly more international in orientation and circulation. The third type concerns broader discursive frameworks, such as those that characterize Foucault's idea of the modern episteme. Such broader discursive frameworks rely neither on the idea of direct exchange nor on diffused influence through networks of actants; rather, they address broader discursive tendencies that are driven by specific historical changes connected to modernity, such as the development of new technologies. In my methodology, I thus seek a balance between local histories and the broader cultural significance of the projects at hand, between concrete networks of exchange and broader discursive tendencies.

My dissertation also relies on the idea of an artist's oeuvre, which not only evolves and changes over time, but also returns and replays the same concerns in different forms. Moreover, an oeuvre provides another point of access for the historical specificity of an artwork as a speech act, addressed to a particular audience at a particular time. When reading specific artworks, I pay careful attention not only to ideas expressed in texts and images, but also to the overall materiality of the art object, including design features, media employed, format, size, quality of paper. In my analysis of formal elements of avant-garde print publications, such as artists' books and magazines, I rely on methodologies of book history and periodical studies.<sup>104</sup> Finally, when discussing how different elements and media in an artwork interact with one another, I rely on semiotic analysis.

In the two chapters that follow, I explore Vladimir Mayakovsky's and Karel Teige's individual solutions to the crisis of language and representation within their own local artistic histories as well as with an eye to the broader developments of the international avant-garde. In chapter one, I take up Mayakovsky's search for a more democratic form of representation, which displaced his more abstract poetic experimentation of the early 1910s. In chapter two, I discuss Teige's search for a new medium that could fuse the word and image in an effort to help them overcome their crises. In both chapters, I trace the evolution of the artists' ideas from the moment that they first register the crisis to the elaboration of their proposed solutions. The concluding chapter returns to the experience of crisis of language and representation discussed in the introduction and explores the significance of the figurative language in which it is couched.

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<sup>104</sup> Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1994), and Sean Latham and Robert Scholes, "The Rise of Periodical Studies," *PMLA* 121, No. 2 (2006): 517–31.

## CHAPTER 1

### The Crisis of Language, Mayakovsky's Word, and the Politics of Representation

Война, расширяя границы государств, и мозг  
заставляет врываться в границы вчера  
неведомого.<sup>1</sup>

Vladimir Mayakovsky, "A Drop of Tar"

#### *Introduction*

As I suggested in the introductory chapter, the 1910s and the 1920s were characterized by an intensified crisis of language, animated, in part, by the increased interaction between linguistics and poetics. While structural linguistics prioritized synchronic methods for the study of the sign, which reinstated a representational relationship between the word and the referent (in the guise of the signifier and the signified), poetics increasingly emphasized the independent existence of language, "the word" and "the letter as such." Moreover, in this period, the crisis of language was beginning to be historically apprehended as part of the broader crisis of representation in the world of art—that is, as part of the crisis of mimetic representation in the verbal and visual arts. The invention of abstraction, which avant-garde artists linked to Cubist experimentation of the early 1910s, was perceived as the long-awaited liberation of artistic language from enslavement to mimesis.<sup>2</sup> The term "Cubo-Futurism," which from 1913 onward designated a specific fraction of Russian Futurist poets, is both an homage to poetry's alliance with the visual arts and an

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<sup>1</sup> "War, while expanding the borders of nations, also forces the brain to break through the frontiers of what yesterday was unknown" (Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Sobranie sochineii v dvenadtsati tomakh* [Moscow: Pravda, 1978], 11: 75). Henceforth I cite all collected works (*sobranie sochineii*) using the shorthand *SS*, followed by the volume and page number.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Kazimir Malevich's 1915 booklet, *Ot kubizma i futurizma k suprematizmu. Novyi zhivopisnyi realizm (From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism. New Painterly Realism)* (Moscow, 1916); translated in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, ed. John Bowlt (London: Thames and Hudson, c1988), 116–35. For an early statement on the Russian avant-garde's alliance with Cubism, see Nikolai Burliuk's essay, "Cubism" in the programmatic 1912 Futurist publication *Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vskusu (A Slap in the Face of Public Taste)* (Moscow: Izdanie G. L. Kuz'mina, 1913), 95–112.

invocation of the genealogical connection between Cubism and Futurism, which hinges on their common anti-mimetic stance.<sup>3</sup>

Freed by abstraction from the necessity of representation, literature and visual art could pursue alternative goals. These goals were realized in different ways by avant-garde artists and did not necessarily exclude representation altogether. Rather, the avant-garde perceived abstraction as a kind of cleansing force, a purification process that made possible a new art. The end goal of this new art was no longer representation or, at least, not representation narrowly construed as the attempt to imitate reality without attention to the medium. Even the radical abstractionists like Kazimir Malevich and Aleksei Kruchenykh eventually returned to representation (perhaps unable to escape it), but redefined its role and function in their subsequent works. It is hardly a coincidence that in this period Viktor Shklovsky advanced his concept of defamiliarization or estrangement (*ostranenie*) as a theory of art.<sup>4</sup> Although this concept did not necessarily privilege non-representational art, it nevertheless implied that art had an alternative purpose.<sup>5</sup> Instead of depicting reality, (good) art estranged us from it—from everything that has become automatized and invisible in everyday life. Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarization registered a shift in focus, made possible, in part, by the crisis of language and representation: the question of how and what art represents was replaced with the question of how art affects the viewer. This shift toward the experience and reception of art articulated a new relationship between art and reality. Art no longer merely represented reality; it acted on that

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<sup>3</sup> The Cubo-Futurists also used this designation in part to distinguish themselves from a competing Futurist group, the Ego-Futurists. In invoking the legacy of Cubism, fragmentation of the object and the principle of simultaneity was also important for the poetic experiments of the Russian Futurists, who frequently depicted disjointed urban landscapes. For a brief history of Russian Cubo-Futurism, see Anna Lawton, introduction to *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes, 1912–1928*, ed. Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988), 12–20. See also Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1968), 117–63.

<sup>4</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, “Iskusstvo kak priem” in *Sborniki po teorii poeticheskogo iazyka II* (Petrograd: 18-ia gosudarstvennaia tipografiia, 1917), 101–13.

<sup>5</sup> Many of Shklovsky's examples are taken from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian literary canon, which, from the literary avant-garde's perspective, is representation par excellence.



reality, changing the audience's perception and experience of life. In the 1910s and the 1920s, this shift in the relationship between art and reality deeply informed avant-garde artistic practices.

The Russian Futurist Vladimir Mayakovsky, like so many of his contemporaries, internalized the anti-mimetic lesson of abstraction and used the newly gained freedom from mimesis to introduce a political agenda into art. Between 1914 and 1921, Mayakovsky experimented with the word and image in his poetry in search of a new, in his view, more democratic mode of representation. This mode was to relate to reality precisely in the terms articulated by Shklovsky's defamiliarization: rather than depicting reality, the poet's vision of democratic representation aimed to intervene in life and change it. Mayakovsky's search for a more democratic mode of representation began with the question of how the poet could become the "lips" of the people.<sup>6</sup> By the beginning of the 1920s, it was transformed into a utopian vision of collective creativity, which speaks through the poet's body. This transformation of the poet into a conduit for the collective voice was made possible through the poet's repeated, almost ritualized performance of self-sacrifice on the level of narrative. Only such self-sacrifice could displace the individual subjectivity of his lyrical "I" and enable him to become a visionary of a future, more democratic form of representation, embodied in the idea of collective creativity.

Although Mayakovsky did not explicitly define his agenda as "democratic representation," his continued concern with finding ways that voiceless subjects could speak through his poetry points to just such a mixture of artistic and political questions. For the Russian Futurist, democratic representation did not simply mean extending art into spheres where it had not gone before; it was not simply a question of depicting new themes, finding new subjects,

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<sup>6</sup> In this sentence and in the discussion of Mayakovsky's narrative poems that follows, I use the word "poet" to refer not to the author Mayakovsky, but to the lyrical "I", who is always a poet in the poems in question. See my discussion of the lyrical "I" of Mayakovsky's poetry later in this chapter.

extending the author's gaze onto all of the world's creation, including its darkest corners. Mayakovsky wanted his subjects to speak for themselves and to assume subjecthood that was denied to them in the absence of language. Although Mayakovsky is often accused of retrospectively playing up his own leftist revolutionary fervor, he had been engaged with the political implications of welcoming those who do not yet have voices into the space of artistic representation even before the October Revolution. In the more democratic representational modes and art forms, Mayakovsky saw the potential for transforming reality, including the existing political order. Mayakovsky's utopian vision of collective creativity, where the previously voiceless spoke together with the poet through his now collective body, was meant to transform reality by allowing readers to imagine alternative futures.

This chapter explores Mayakovsky's response to the crisis of language and representation, tracing his evolution from the more formal concerns that characterized the early stages of Russian Futurism to his utopian vision of democratic representation in the early 1920s. I begin by analyzing Mayakovsky's early articulations of his poetic agenda in collective Futurist manifestoes and in individually authored theoretical essays. Next, after noting the peculiarities of Mayakovsky's lyrical "I", I turn to his narrative poems. In my analysis of *A Cloud in Pants*, I show that already in his very first narrative poem Mayakovsky was concerned with the question of how to artistically represent those who do not have a voice. In my examination of *War and the World*, I discuss how Mayakovsky develops the idea of self-sacrifice as a prerequisite for transforming representation. Analyzing *Human Being* and *Backbone Flute*, I suggest that Mayakovsky portrays romantic love as an obstacle to democratic representation, which requires a more radical displacement of the poet's ego than romantic love permits. I conclude with an

analysis of *150,000,000*, which, I argue, embodies Mayakovsky's vision of democratic representation in the idea of collective authorship.

### ***The Early Futurist Manifestoes and Mayakovsky's Position in the Crisis of Language and Representation***

Mayakovsky witnessed the crisis of language and representation that affected the arts in the 1910s and the 1920s first hand, as his participation in collective Russian Futurist publications indicates. Already in 1912, the budding young poet appeared as one of the signatories to the first Russian Futurist manifesto, "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste." Co-authored by David Burluk, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Mayakovsky, and Velimir Klebnikov, the manifesto proclaimed the value of the "Self-sufficient (self-centered) Word" ("*Samotsennoe (samovitoe) Slovo*") and demanded the "expansion" of vocabulary "with arbitrary and derivative words" ("*proizvolnye i proizvodnye slova*").<sup>7</sup> Arbitrariness in this manifesto referred not to the arbitrary connection between the signifier and the signified in Saussure's theory of the sign, but to the willful decoupling of the word from referent, or the signifier from the signified. Such decoupling, as I have suggested in connection with Kruchenykh's transrational poem "Dyr bul shchyl," resulted in new freedom for words as well as for meaning, which became contextually defined in a specific utterance or performance and, consequently, flexible.

The theory of the "Self-sufficient Word" was subsequently elaborated by Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov in another manifesto-like essay, "The Word as Such," which praised Mayakovsky's poetry as an example of such "self-sufficient" words. More broadly, according to

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<sup>7</sup> David Burluk, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Velimir Klebnikov, "Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu" ("A Slap in the Face of Public Taste"), in *Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu* (Moscow, 1913), 3–4; trans. in *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes*, 51–52. The manifesto was actually signed by "Aleksandr Kruchenykh," which was Aleksei Kruchenykh's pseudonym, and by "Viktor Khlebnikov," who had not yet changed his name to "Velimir."

the essay's authors, Mayakovsky's poems represented a revolutionary trend in poetry, which made readers stumble over words, instead of gliding over them. Mayakovsky's poetry, Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov argued, gave the reader "splinters."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, they suggested that Mayakovsky's experiments with language ran parallel to "Dyr bul shchyl" in that both were directed against the boring harmonies of earlier poetry.<sup>9</sup>

In another manifesto, printed as a preface to the almanac *A Trap for Judges II* (1912), Mayakovsky, Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, and other Russian avant-gardists proposed to "assign content to words based on their graphic and phonetic characteristics."<sup>10</sup> The manifesto was followed by experimental poetry, including two of Mayakovsky's poems. In "Worn-out tents" ("*V shatrakh istertykh*") and "Departure by Sea" ("*Otplytie*"), Mayakovsky translated the Cubist fragmentation of the object from the painter's canvas into the verbal medium, creating Cubist cityscapes in verse.<sup>11</sup> These poems, however, were less experimental on the level of form than on the level of content. Mayakovsky's more radical formal experiment appeared a year later, in the Futurist collection *The Crooked Moon* (1913). Alongside texts and images by other Russian avant-garde artists in this volume, Mayakovsky published his poem "An Exhaustive Portrait of Spring" ("*Ischerpyvaiushchaia kartina vesny*"):

Лис—  
Точки  
После  
Точки  
Строчек

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<sup>8</sup> Aleksei Kruchenykh, Velimir Khlebnikov, "Slovo kak takovoe" ("The Word as Such"), in *Slovo kak takovoe* (Moscow: Izdanie G. L. Kuz'mina, 1913), 3, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Kruchenykh, Khlebnikov, "Slovo kak takovoe," 4.

<sup>10</sup> David Burliuk, Elena Guro, Nikolai Burliuk, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Ekaterina Nizen, Viktor (Velimir) Khlebnikov, Venedikt Livshits, Aleksei Kruchenykh, preface to *Sadok sudei II (A Trap for Judges II)* (St. Petersburg: Zhuravl': 1913), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Mayakovsky, "V shatrakh istertykh" and "Otplytie" in *Sadok sudei II*, 62. Cf. painted Cubist cityscapes of Aleksandra Ekster, such as "The City" (1913) or Liubov Popova's "Cubist cityscape" (1914).

Лис  
—точки.<sup>12</sup>

*Lis—  
Tochki  
Posle  
Tochki  
Strochek  
Lis  
—tochki.*<sup>13</sup>

In this untranslatable poem, Mayakovsky splits the word *listochki* (“leaves” and also “sheets of paper”) into two constituent parts: *lis*, which transforms before the reader’s eyes into the genitive plural of the word for “fox,” and *tochki*, which is the nominative plural of the word “dot” (or the punctuation mark “period”). By being fragmented, the single word evokes the meanings of both “sheets of paper” (or “leaves”) and “dots of foxes.” From there, the poem develops into a performance of itself, unfurling on the page in a description of its own graphic form. Notice how the Cubist fragmentation of the object has been translated onto the level of form, with the word

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<sup>12</sup> Mayakovsky, “Ischerpyvaiushchaia kartina vesny,” in *Dokhlaia luna (The Croaked Moon)* (Moscow, 1913), 59. The formatting, which is crucial to understanding Mayakovsky’s experiment (but which is often modified in reprint editions), is reproduced above as it appears in the original publication. A parallel graphic experiment can be observed in another poem by Mayakovsky published in the same volume:

Ле—  
Зем  
Зем—  
Ле

(Mayakovsky, “Мы” [We], in *Dokhlaia luna*, 60).

<sup>13</sup> Transliteration rather than translation of this poem is more important to my argument about its form. Translated into prose, however, the content could be read as: 1) “Dots of foxes; after the dot at the end of dots of foxes, there are dots”; 2) “Sheets of paper; after the period at the end of lines, there are sheets of paper”; and 3) “Leaves; after the period at the end of lines, there are leaves.” Thus, several possible meanings are simultaneously activated in the reader. The title of the poem, “An Exhaustive Portrait of Spring,” guides the reader toward the first suggested reading, since spring coincides with the fox’s reproductive time. That is, the multiplying “dots of foxes” possibly refer to newborn cubs. This reading, in turn, prompts the reader to visualize something like a censored stanza, represented by a series of dots:

..... [dots of foxes]  
..... [dots of foxes]  
..... [after the period of the dots of foxes]  
..... [there are (more) dots of foxes].

Since there are more “dots of foxes” after the “period,” the stanza transforms into an entire page or a *listochek* of poetry. In this way, the poem builds a system of autoreferentiality that is impossible to reproduce in translation or to capture in verbal description.

itself becoming typographically splintered. Echoing the preface to *A Trap for Judges II*, the content of these verses is indeed guided by the graphic features of words, which function in the poem not as lexical units, but as pieces of a Cubist collage.

Mayakovsky's poems in *The Croaked Moon* were preceded by Benedikt Livshits's essay "The Liberation of the Word," which opened the volume. In this essay-manifesto, the poet, translator and (later) chronicler of Russian Futurism argued that "free creativity" could stem only from the "autonomous word."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Livshits claimed that Russian Futurist innovation in the verbal sphere was truly revolutionary and unprecedented:

Does the primacy of the verbal conception, first proposed by us, really have anything in common with the purely ideological values of symbolism? Did not the dearly departed symbolists share the fateful *slavish conviction that the word, as a means of communication, intended to express a known concept and the connections among such concepts*, should also serve the very same function in poetry? From whose lips was issued the proclamation that if the means of communication were not the word but something else, then poetry would be free from the lamentable necessity of expressing logical connections between ideas, just as music has been free since days immemorial and as, since recent times, have been painting and sculpture?<sup>15</sup>

In this passage, Livshits suggests that the symbolists' verbal experiments failed to free the word from its communicative function. In his view, this failure amounted to the enslavement of the word to the concept it was assigned to represent. By contrast, the words of Futurist poetry were freed from their servitude to concepts, ideas, and logical connections. Moreover, Livshits argued that Futurist art renounced all ties to the outside world, insofar as such connections threatened to make art subject to external causality:

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<sup>14</sup> Benedikt Livshits, "Osvobozhdenie slova," in *Dokhlaia luna*, 5–11.

<sup>15</sup> "Неужели примат словесной концепции, впервые выдвинутый нами, имеет что-либо общее с чисто идеологическими ценностями символизма? Не разделяли ли блаженной памяти символисты рокового рабского убеждения, что слово, как средство общения, предназначенное выразить известное понятие и связь между таковыми, тем самым и в поэзии должно служить той же цели? Из чьих уст до нас изошло утверждение, что будь средством общения не слово, а какой-либо иной способ, поэзия была бы свободна от печальной необходимости выразить логическую связь идей, как с незапамятных времен свободна музыка, как со вчерашнего дня — живопись и ваяние?" (Livshits, "Osvobozhdenie slova," 6; my emphasis).

Creativity in an “airless space” seems impossible to us [...] in this case, each word of a poetic work is doubly causally determined and consequently, doubly unfree [...] But if by free creativity one means **that which posits the criterion of its value not in the plane of interrelations between being and consciousness, but in the realm of the autonomous word**, then our poetry is, of course, free only for us and for the first time it does not matter whether our poetry is realistic, naturalistic, or fantastic: **with the exception of its point of departure, our poetry does not place itself in any relationship to the world [and] is not coordinated with the world.**<sup>16</sup>

Appropriating the language of philosophical phenomenology, Livshits suggests that language and poetry exist in a realm of their own, outside of the relations of being and consciousness. As such, Futurist creativity [*tvorchestvo*] is simply unconcerned with representation, naturalistic or otherwise. In this way, Livshits explicitly links the Futurist treatment of the word with the non-representational task of Futurist art in general.

In his own essays, Mayakovsky makes it clear that he shares the convictions and principles articulated in the various collective Futurist manifestos and book publications. In “Meat for Us Too!” (“*I nam miasa!*”, 1914), for example, Mayakovsky reproduces the four tenets advanced in “A Slap in the Face to Public Taste” without attribution or citation.<sup>17</sup> Such a gesture confirms his allegiance to these principles and reaffirms his status as a co-author of the collective manifesto. In the essay “War and Language” (“*Voina i iazyk*,” 1914), Mayakovsky raises the question of how to represent the experience of war in poetry on the level of form. He

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<sup>16</sup> Due to a missing punctuation mark in the original, it is unclear whether “only for us and for the first time” is meant to apply to “free” or to the clause that follows (“it does not matter...”). My translation reproduces the ambiguity. “Нам представляется невозможным творчество в ‘безвоздушном пространстве’ [...], и в этом смысле, каждое слово поэтического произведения вдвойне причинно-обусловлено и следовательно, вдвойне несвободно [...]. Но если разуметь под творчеством свободным — **полагающее критерий своей ценности не в плоскости взаимоотношений бытия и сознания, а в области автономного слова**, — наша поэзия, конечно, свободна единственно и впервые для нас безразлично, реалистична ли, натуралистична или фантастична наша поэзия: **за исключением своей отправной точки она не ставит себя ни в какие отношения к миру, не координируется с ним**” (Livshits, “Osvobozhdenie slova,” 7–8; bold emphasis in original).

<sup>17</sup> Mayakovsky shortens the tenets slightly:

“Свобода творить слова и из слов.

Ненависть к существовавшему до нас языку.

С негодованием отвергать из банных веников сделанный венок грошовой славы.

Стоять на глыбе слова ‘мы’ среди моря свиста и негодования.” (Mayakovsky, “*I nam miasa!*”, SS 11: 42).

suggests that in order to “speak war” (“*razgovarivat’ voinoi*”), in order to convey to the reader how those “who have heard the singing of bullets [...] experience life,” one must innovate language, use new “word-creations (*slovotvorchestvo*).”<sup>18</sup>

Commenting on the symbolist Valerii Briusov’s attempt to capture the war experience in poetic language, Mayakovsky writes, “‘Swords,’ ‘helmets,’ etc. can one really sing of today’s war with such words! This is the language of a grey-bearded witness of the crusades. A living corpse, really, a living corpse.”<sup>19</sup> Instead, Mayakovsky makes the following proposal to his fellow poets:

We need to sharpen words. We need to demand speech that presents each action economically and precisely. We want words in speech to burst apart like a landmine, then to whine like the pain of a wound, and to roar as joyously as a victorious hurrah.<sup>20</sup>

At first sight, Mayakovsky seems to advance two somewhat contradictory propositions about how poetic language should convey the war experience. On the one hand, the above passage suggests that words should, on some level, imitate the events they describe. As such,

Mayakovsky’s prescription seems to invoke the Italian Futurist F.T. Marinetti’s onomatopoeic “records” of war.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, Mayakovsky advocates for word economy, citing

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<sup>18</sup> Mayakovsky, “*Voina i iazyk*,” *SS* 11: 53.

<sup>19</sup> “«Мечи», «шлемы» и т. д., разве можно подобными словами петь сегодняшнюю войну! Ведь это язык седобородого свидетеля крестовых походов. Живой труп, право, живой труп” (Mayakovsky, “*Voina i iazyk*,” *SS* 11: 53–53).

<sup>20</sup> “Мы должны острить слова. Мы должны требовать речь, экономно и точно представляющую каждое движение. Хотим, чтоб слово в речи то разрывалось, как фугас, то ныло бы, как боль раны, то грохотало б радостно, как победное ура.” (Mayakovsky, “*Voina i iazyk*,” *SS* 11: 53).

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s *Zang Tumb Tumb* (Milan: Poesia, 1914), excerpts from which appeared in various periodicals from 1912 onward. The Russian Cubo-Futurists broke with Marinetti in 1914, during the Italian’s visit to Russia. At his public reading in Petersburg, Velimir Khlebnikov and Benedikt Livshits disrupted the event by distributing a brochure with the following content: “Today [...] the Italian colony on the Neva river [is ...] falling at the feet of Marinetti, betraying the first step of Russian art on the road of freedom and honor, and bending Asia’s noble nape of the neck before the yoke of Europe” (“*Na priezd Marinetti v Rossiiu*” in Velimir Khlebnikov, in *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh* [Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2005], 6: 345; trans. in Velimir Khlebnikov, *Collected Works 1. Letters and Theoretical Writings*, trans. Paul Schmidt [Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1987], 87). Khlebnikov and Livshits were referring to artists like Nikolai Kul’bin, who welcomed Marinetti in Russia. Mayakovsky, who had been traveling when Marinetti first arrived, attended the Italian futurist’s final lecture in Moscow, publically objecting to the discussion being carried on in French (V. Katanian, *Maiakovskii*).



Khlebnikov's verbal coinages as models. In Mayakovsky's view, Khlebnikov's "word-creations" such as *l'tets* ("flyer"), which was to replace existing, "inefficient" words like "aviator," were more economical because they made use of existing words and roots of the Russian language (e.g. *letet'*, "to fly") rather than of foreign loanwords. To borrow Khlebnikov's own metaphorical description of such linguistic economy: "Who would go from Moscow to Kiev via New York?"<sup>22</sup> Thus, Mayakovsky apparently wishes to implement both strategies, the raw expression of sound, such as the one found in Marinetti's war "records," and the morphological word-creation of Khlebnikov's *zaum'*.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps Mayakovsky's position in "War and Language" is merely the inconsistency of a young poet who is still in search of his voice and his poetic principles. However, the example he offers following his demands of economy and mimetic expressiveness of words suggests otherwise. Mayakovsky takes up another coinage from Khlebnikov, the word *zhelezovut* (roughly, "ironsummon"). In Mayakovsky's view, this word-creation embodies both principles:

The word "cruelty" [*zhestokost'*] says nothing to me, but ironsummon [*zhelezovut*] does. Because the latter sounds to me like the cacophony of what I imagine war to be. In it, the clang of "iron" [*zhelezo*] is welded to the feeling of hearing someone summoned [*zovut*], and seeing how the summoned person "was crawling" [*lez*] somewhere.<sup>24</sup>

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*Literaturnaia Khronika* [Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1961], 59). For more on Marinetti's visit to Russia, see Markov, *Russian Futurism*, 147–63.

<sup>22</sup> Khlebnikov, "Nasha osnova," *SS* 6: 167.

<sup>23</sup> For a comparison of Marinetti's and Khlebnikov's linguistic innovations, see Boris Gasparov, "Futurism and Phonology: Futurist Roots of Jakobson's Approach to Language," *Cahiers de l'ILSL*, no. 9 (1997): 107–109.

<sup>24</sup> "мне ничего не говорит слово «жестокость», а «железовут» — да. Потому что последнее звучит для меня такой какофонией, какой я себе представляю войну. В нем спаяны и лязг «железа», и слышишь, как кого-то «зовут», и видишь, как этот позванный «лез» куда-то" (Mayakovsky, "Voina i iazyk," *SS* 11: 54). Though *zhelezovut* can be roughly translated as "ironsummon," this portmanteau does not clearly reflect the third-person plural verbal ending of the Russian (*-ut*), which expresses both "they summon" and the passive "is summoned." Moreover, this translation does not reproduce the verb "lez" ("was crawling"), which is embedded in *zhelezovut*, as Mayakovsky points out (Mayakovsky, "Voina i iazyk," *SS* 11: 54). The centrality of *zhelezovut* to the solution advanced in "War and Language" is also suggested by its placement as the very first word of the essay, which begins as follows: "«Железовут», «льтец», «льтица». Неправда, какие нерусские слова?" (Mayakovsky, "Voina i iazyk," *SS* 11: 52). Mayakovsky goes on to suggest that these words are more Russian than meets the eye.

Although Mayakovsky attributes certain onomatopoeic qualities to the letters “zh” and “z” (the clang of iron as “*liazg ‘zheleza’*”), it is these sounds *in conjunction with the images invoked by the meaning-carrying morphemes* that create the “cacophonous” effect Mayakovsky attributes to the word. This combination disorients readers by simultaneously activating their visual and auditory senses and, as a result, conjures the experience of “one who has heard bullets.”<sup>25</sup>

Regardless of whether or not Mayakovsky offered a consistent solution to representing the war experience in “War and Language,” he soon distanced himself from the more formal concerns of the early stage of Russian Futurism. His 1915 essay “A Drop of Tar” (“*Kaplia degtia*”) registered the shift of attention toward the ideological issues involved in representation, a shift which had already begun taking place in his poetry. In this essay, Mayakovsky joined his voice to the various pronouncements of Futurism’s death that circulated in the press after the movement’s implosion in 1914.<sup>26</sup> By contrast with the other obituaries, however, Mayakovsky’s essay did not endorse “mourning” the deceased. The poet suggested that the death of Futurism was merely a transformation. In his view, the movement died only as an artistic mode practiced by a few select artists. Today, Mayakovsky wrote, Futurism has entered into everyone’s lives: “Yes! Futurism has died as a specific group, but it has filled all of you like a flood.”<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, in “A Drop of Tar” Mayakovsky argued that it was only the destructive agenda of Futurism that had come to an end: “The first part of our program—destruction we

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<sup>25</sup> “вам интересно знать, как чувствуют жизнь те, уже слышавшие и пение пуль и нитье шрапнелей” (Mayakovsky, “*Voina i iazyk*,” SS 11: 53). “you want to know how life feels to those who have already heard the singing of bullets and the whining of shrapnel.”

<sup>26</sup> For example, following Marinetti’s visit, Khlebnikov separated himself the Cubo-Futurist group due to what he perceived as some members’ passive acceptance or tolerance of Italian Futurism. As Markov notes, “It was as if the guest [Marinetti] clearly showed the Russian futurists not only how different they were from Italian futurists, but how they differed among themselves as well” (Markov, *Russian Futurism*, 157).

<sup>27</sup> “Да! футуризм умер как особенная группа, но во всех вас он разлит наводнением” (Mayakovsky, “*Kaplia degtia*,” SS 11: 76).

believe has been completed.”<sup>28</sup> He linked this destructive phase specifically to the Futurists’ formal experiments, such as their attempts to “break the old language” and “deform words” with their “word-innovations.”<sup>29</sup> He deemed such destructive program necessary in order to undermine “the frozen stuff of all sorts of canons.” Commenting on the accomplishments of Futurism thus far, Mayakovsky wrote: “As you can see, not a single building, not a single furnished corner, [only] destruction, anarchism.”<sup>30</sup> But, he argued, once the destructive agenda was “completed,” new creation could take place:

Don’t be surprised if today instead of a jester’s rattle in our hands you see an architect’s plan, and if the voice of Futurism, just yesterday still soft from sentimental dreaminess, today will pour into the copper of prophesy.<sup>31</sup>

In “A Drop of Tar,” Mayakovsky did not elaborate further on how he envisioned the constructive side of Futurism. However, his poetry written at this time bespoke his “architect’s plan.”

The Futurist almanac *SEIZED (VZIAL, 1915)*, where “A Drop of Tar” was first published, featured Mayakovsky’s anti-war verses on the very first page. Like other Futurist publications, *SEIZED* presented a united front and a consistent ideological agenda, even if, on the formal level, different writers and artists realized this agenda differently. The title of the

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<sup>28</sup> “Первую часть нашей программы — разрушение мы считаем завершенной” (Mayakovsky, “Kaplja degtia,” *SS* 11: 76).

<sup>29</sup> The Russian reads “Сломать старый язык” and “Изламыванье слов, словоновшество” (Mayakovsky, “Kaplja degtia,” *SS* 11: 75). Interestingly, among the examples of the Futurist “breaking of language” cited in “War and Language,” Mayakovsky included an anecdote from “Mr. Shklovsky’s” unnamed “lecture.” The anecdote recounted the story of a student who became indifferent to being called a fool (*durak*) until the teacher “deformed” the word, calling the male student a female fool (*dura*). As a result of this deformation, the student burst into tears (Mayakovsky, “Voina i iazyk,” *SS* 11: 54). This anecdote appeared in “The Resurrection of the Word” (1914), one of Viktor Shklovsky’s earliest theoretical statements that contained the seeds of his concept of defamiliarization (*ostranenie*). “The Resurrection of the Word” was first read as a lecture in 1913 at the Stray Dog Cabaret, where Mayakovsky probably heard it. Mayakovsky’s citation attests to how Futurist experimentation with language was informed by the need for perceptual renewal and the nascent concept of defamiliarization. For a detailed discussion of Shklovsky’s essay, see the concluding chapter.

<sup>30</sup> “Как видите, ни одного здания, ни одного благоустроенного угла, разрушение, анархизм” (Mayakovsky, “Kaplja degtia,” *SS* 11: 75).

<sup>31</sup> “не удивляйтесь, если сегодня в наших руках увидите вместо погремушки шута чертеж зодчего, и голос футуризма, вчера еще мягкий от сентиментальной мечтательности, сегодня выльется в медь проповеди” (Mayakovsky, “Kaplja degtia,” *SS* 11: 75–76).

almanac, printed in bold capital letters that took up one third of the first page, was borrowed from the following line in “A Drop of Tar”: “**Futurism has SEIZED Russia in a deathly grip.**”<sup>32</sup> As the only bolded line in Mayakovsky’s essay—with the word “**SEIZED**” bolded and capitalized as in the almanac’s title—visually, this sentence alluded to the continuity between the contents of *SEIZED* as a whole and Mayakovsky’s essay.<sup>33</sup>

In comparison with his earlier poetic efforts, Mayakovsky’s untitled poem published on the first page of *VZIAL* showed few signs of Futurist experimentation with form.<sup>34</sup> Dedicated “to you who are on the home front,” the poem’s main message was its content, which condemned the decadence of those who continued to lead comfortable lives at home, while their fellow men met gruesome deaths in the First World War. That is, the poem’s task was not to renew language by breaking it, nor to challenge the reader by presenting an object from an unexpected visual perspective as in Mayakovsky’s Cubist verses; rather, the poem aimed to communicate, clearly and straightforwardly, the poet’s stance against the war and expose the hypocrisy of the contemporary poets. Although the poem did not create visual or formal puzzles, it nevertheless aimed to defamiliarize, to jolt contemporary readers out of passivity by juxtaposing images of war violence with scenes of eating, fornication, and recitation of poetry, performed by “those” who remained “on the home front.”<sup>35</sup> This poem evinced a new political orientation in

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<sup>32</sup> “**Футуризм мертвой хваткой ВЗЯЛ Россию**” (Mayakovsky, “Kaplia degtia,” *VZIAL* (Dec 1915): 2; formatting reproduced as in original).

<sup>33</sup> Although *VZIAL* included texts of other writers and poets, all in all it was a Mayakovsky-centric publication. Besides his anti-war poem and “A Drop of Tar,” the almanac featured a fragment from the “Backbone Flute,” Viktor Shklovsky’s review of Mayakovsky’s “A Cloud in Pants,” as well as Osip Brik’s manifesto that discussed the same narrative poem.

<sup>34</sup> While in *VZIAL* the poem appeared without a title, in later collections, an edited version of the poem appeared under the title “To you” (“Vam”).

<sup>35</sup> Relevant lines from this poem include:

Mayakovsky’s poetry, which began to displace the formal concerns of the first, “destructive” stage of Futurism from their primacy.<sup>36</sup> As such, the poem contained a more specific suggestion of what Futurism’s constructive stage may look like than the allusive descriptions provided in “A Drop of Tar.” As I show in my analyses of Mayakovsky’s longer narrative poems, the poet used the “destructive” lesson of Futurist formal experimentation, which he, along with other avant-gardists, viewed as a purification of form, to introduce new ideological and political goals into questions of artistic representation. Before I turn to Mayakovsky’s narrative poems, however, I will briefly discuss the peculiarities of Mayakovsky’s lyrical “I.” The close proximity—or, more precisely, numerical identity—that Mayakovsky enacts between himself and his lyrical “I” is, paradoxically, central to his project of transforming the lyric into a form that can accommodate the voices of others.

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Вот вы прохвосты бездарные многие  
 Все думаете нажраться лучше как  
 А может быть сейчас бомбой ноги  
 выдрало у Петрова поручика.

Did you know, you talentless flock –  
 thinking about how best to stuff yourself –  
 that perhaps just now a bomb has taken  
 the legs of some Lieutenant Petrov?

Если бы он идущий в бой  
 Вдруг увидел израненный  
 Как вы измазанной в котлете губой!  
 Похотливо напевае Северянина.

And what if he, torn to bloody strips,  
 Given over for liquidation,  
 Could see how you with your chop-chomping lips  
 Warble the poems of Severyanin?

Вам ли любящим баб да блюда  
 Жизнь отдавать в угоду  
 Я лучше в баре блядям буду  
 подавать ананасную воду.

To give life for you and yours,  
 you lovers of partridge and the pink trombone?  
 I’d rather be barman to a barful of whores,  
 Serving them pineapple champagne!

(Mayakovsky, “<Vam kotorye v tylu>,” *VZIAL*, 1; trans. in Vladimir Mayakovsky, “*Vladimir Mayakovsky*” & *Other Poems*, trans. and ed. James Womack [Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2016], 62). Subsequent translations from this source are marked with citations in the following format: Womack 62. It should be noted that Futurist paronomastic play can nevertheless be observed in the last stanza, where Mayakovsky creates a series of complicated rhymes and transpositions between the words *liubiashchim* (“lovers”), *bab* (derogatory word for women), *bliudo* (“dish” or “course”) and *bliadiam* (“whores”). By contrast with poems like “An exhaustive portrait of spring,” here, formal experimentation was placed in the service of content. The word *bliad’*, as well as the words *idushchii v boi* were censored in the original publication in *VZIAL*.

<sup>36</sup> This political orientation, which aligned with the uncompromising Bolshevik position on the war (the Mensheviks did not agree amongst themselves), went beyond the romantic anti-capitalism associated with the Russian Futurist movement more broadly.

## *The Lyrical “Mayakovsky”*

А иногда мне больше всего нра-  
вится  
Моя СОБСТВЕННАЯ фамилия

**ВЛАДИМИР МАЯКОВСКИЙ**<sup>37</sup>

Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Vladimir Mayakovsky. A Tragedy*

As if intending to tease nosy readers and the emergent Formalist movement, in his poetry Mayakovsky provides detailed insight into his private life.<sup>38</sup> His verses not only convey the author’s mental states, but also divulge specific biographical details, such as his address, phone number, and the names of his lovers.<sup>39</sup> But beyond such scandalous information for the lyric form, Mayakovsky makes another crucial adjustment that prompts the reader to identify the poet with his works: he inserts his name into the body of his poetry, transforming the lyrical “I” into the lyrical “Mayakovsky.”

Commenting on Mayakovsky’s first play entitled *Vladimir Mayakovsky. A Tragedy* (1913), Boris Pasternak noted: “The title revealed the ingeniously simple discovery that the poet is not an author of the lyric, but its object [*predmet*], which addresses the world from the first person. The title was not the name of the creator, but the last name of the contents.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, by giving the work *Vladimir Mayakovsky* his own name, Mayakovsky made explicit what

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<sup>37</sup> Mayakovsky, *Vladimir Maiakovskii. Tragediia* (Moscow: Izdanie 1-go zhurnala russkikh futuristov, 1914), 44. “But sometimes / I like / my own name best of all / Vladimir Mayakovsky” (Womack 33).

<sup>38</sup> The Russian Formalists famously advocated the irrelevance of the author’s biography to literary analysis.

<sup>39</sup> Viktor Shklovsky characterizes Mayakovsky’s “thirst for concreteness” as follows: “Маяковский вставляет в свои стихи адрес своего дома, номер квартиры, в которой живет любимая, адрес своей дачи, имя сестры” (Viktor Shklovsky, “Anna Akhmatova,” in *Gamburgskii shchet* [Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1990], 143).

<sup>40</sup> “Заглавие скрывало гениально простое открытие, что поэт не автор, но предмет лирики, от первого лица обращающийся к миру. Заглавие было не именем сочинителя, а фамилией содержания” (Boris Pasternak, “Okhrannaia gramota,” in *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh* [Moscow, 1991], 4: 219). I chose to translate *predmet* as “object” here to avoid the confusion that arises in English with the multiple meanings of the word “subject” (as “subject matter” and as “thinking subject”). In invoking the category of the lyric in reference to Mayakovsky’s play, Pasternak seems to have in mind the book version of the play published in 1914, rather than to the performance that preceded the publication.

was already implicitly contained in the lyric mode: that its ‘object’ is the poet himself as an experiencing subject.<sup>41</sup> Mayakovsky’s title literalizes the identity between the lyric poet and the contents, making the speaker’s “I” into the poet’s. Taking Pasternak’s observation further, one could say that by virtue of giving the work his own *proper name*, which normally serves to uniquely identify a specific referent in the world, Mayakovsky invokes a more radical identity: not simply between the contents and the poet, but between the contents and the specific poet and unique referent “Mayakovsky.”<sup>42</sup>

In *Vladimir Mayakovsky*, the author’s name appears not only in the title, but constitutes the play’s very last words (quoted in the epigraph), a gesture that playfully makes the author into the alpha and omega of his own narrative. That Mayakovsky’s evocation of his own name in the body of a poetic text occurs, for the first time, in *Vladimir Mayakovsky* seems hardly accidental. Before the play was published as a book in 1914, it was performed at the Petersburg theater “Luna-park” in 1913. In the main role, the play featured a “poet of 20–25 years” named “Mayakovsky.” This lead character was played by no other than Mayakovsky himself. As I noted in the introductory chapter in regards to the Russian Futurist use of handwriting, performance

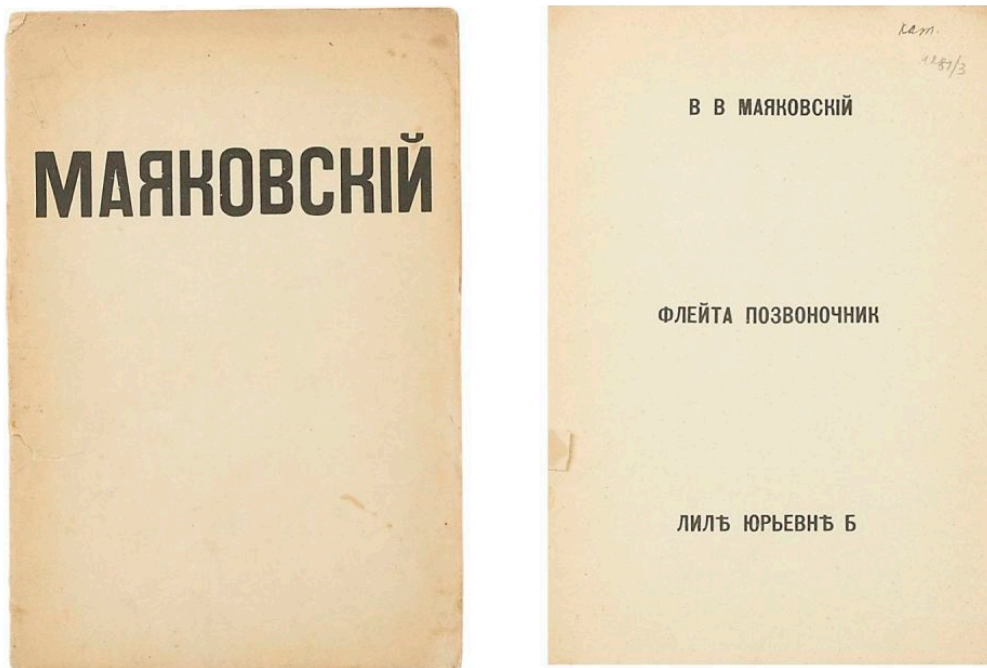
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<sup>41</sup> Pasternak seems to be evoking Hegel’s definition of the lyric: “[The] content [of the lyric] is not the object but the subject, the inner world, the mind that considers and feels, that instead of proceeding to action, remains alone with itself as inwardness, and that therefore can take as its sole form and final aim the self-expression of the subjective life” (G.W.F. Hegel, *Selections from Hegel’s Lectures on Aesthetics* (London, 1886), Part 3, Section 3, accessed 15 Jul 2018: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/ae/part3-section3-chapter3.htm>).

<sup>42</sup> As a point of contrast, consider the poetry of Walt Whitman, who influenced Mayakovsky via Kornei Chukovskii’s translations. The use of indexical constructions like, “Song of *myself*” (Whitman; my emphasis) and “I. A Few words about *my* wife. ... about *my* mother. And now about *me*.” (Mayakovsky, *Ia* [I] [Moscow: Izdatel’stvo G.L. Kuz’mina, 1913], 2, 7, 12; my emphasis), permits a certain level of ambiguity and potentially allows different “I’s” to inhabit the subject position. By contrast, poetry that features a specific proper name like “Vladimir Mayakovsky” prompts a very different process of identification, not between the reader’s self and the lyrical “I” but between the lyrical “I” and the author. The reader’s “I” is, to a certain extent, displaced by someone else’s proper name. On Walt Whitman’s influence on Mayakovsky, see L.F. Katsis, *Vladimir Maiakovskii. Poet v intellektual’nom kontekste epokhi* (Moscow: Iazyki russkoi kultury, 2000), 56–64.

was a key category in avant-garde experimentation. Here, performance helped transform the poet's lyrical "I" into the lyrical "Mayakovsky."<sup>43</sup>

From 1914 onward, manipulating his own name became central to Mayakovsky's project of blurring boundaries between author and content and he continued to push the reader toward this identification throughout his oeuvre. Following the publication *Vladimir Mayakovsky*, Mayakovsky's name began to compete with his titles, at times displacing them entirely.<sup>44</sup> For example, on the cover of the first book edition of *Backbone Flute* (1916), typeset by Mayakovsky himself, the place normally reserved for the title is taken up entirely by the author's last name, which boldly stands on the cover in all capital letters.



**Fig. 1.1 Vladimir Mayakovsky, cover and the title page of the first edition of Vladimir Mayakovsky's *Backbone Flute* (1916)**

<sup>43</sup> Prior to this play, Mayakovsky frequently intimated that he is speaking about himself in his poetry; however, he used the indexical "I" form, rather than his own name. See, for example, his first book publication, *Ia*.

<sup>44</sup> Nearly twenty of Mayakovsky's books, as Andrei Rossomakhin notes, contain the author's last name in the very title, and several implicitly suggest that "Mayakovsky" is the title of the book. Rossomakhin also points out that, based on the poster-like layout of the cover, the title of Mayakovsky's tragedy could be read as *Vladimir Mayakovsky. A Tragedy by Vladimir Mayakovsky*, thus embedding the author's name in the title twice, as object and author (Andrei Rossomakhin, "Imiaslavie Maiakovskogo," in *(Ne)muzykal'noe prinoshenie*, eds. Aleksandr Dolin, et al. [St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo evropeiskogo universiteta v Sankt-Peterburge, 2013], 350–59).



The use of all capital letters, which visually obliterates distinctions between titles, proper names, and other parts of speech, prompts readers to identify the author with the title of his work and vice versa. Mayakovsky's experiment with cover design proved successful in confusing at least some of his contemporary readers, as attested by the following review: "in the suffocating verses of Mayakovsky [...] no one wanted to see the most important thing [...]: Love. Meanwhile, where can one find more love, enormous and gentle, than **in the book that is called *Mayakovsky***."<sup>45</sup> Larisa Raisner, who reviewed Mayakovsky's book in 1916, showed no doubts that *Mayakovsky* was the title of the narrative poem that was actually entitled *Backbone Flute*.

One more example will suffice to illustrate Mayakovsky's manipulation of book design to promote identification between the author and the lyrical "I" of his poems. In the 1923 *About This (Pro eto)*, the title of the book is omitted from the title page, though it does appear on the cover.

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<sup>45</sup> "в задыхающихся стихах Маяковского [...] никто не захотел увидеть главного [...]: Любви. А между тем, где её больше, громадной и нежной, чем в книге, которая называется "Маяковский" (Larisa Raisner, "Cherez Al. Bloka k Severianinu i Maiakovskomu" (1916), cited in Anna Sergeeva Kliatis and Andrei Rossomakhin, "'Fleita-pozvonochnik': kommentarii," in *Fleita-pozvonochnik Vladimira Maiakovskogo* [St. Petersburg: Evropeiskii universitet v Sankt Peterburge, 2015], 8; my emphasis in bold).



**Fig. 1.2 Aleksandr Rodchenko (in consultation with Vladimir Mayakovsky), the cover and title page of Mayakovsky's *About This* (1923)**

Visually evoking the design decision of *Backbone Flute*, Mayakovsky's name stands on the title page font and center, accompanied only by an indexical dedication ("to her and me") in the top right corner and the publisher's information below.<sup>46</sup>

In the language of advertising, Mayakovsky transforms his own name into an instantaneously recognized "brand."<sup>47</sup> In the terms of the philosophy of language, he imputes the

<sup>46</sup> Although it was Aleksandr Rodchenko who designed this edition of *About That*, he worked closely with Mayakovsky on the book's design (Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Pro eto. Faksimil'noe izdanie. Stat'i. Kommentarii* [St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Evropeiskogo universiteta v Sankt-Peterburge, 2014], 35, 50). As the book unfolds, the identity between the author and contents is further reinforced by the fact that Rodchenko's photomontages employ actual photographs of the author and his real-life lover, Lilia Brik. Moreover, in the context of the sexual revolution of the 1920s, the cover and title of *Pro eto* playfully promises details of the protagonists' sexual relationship.

<sup>47</sup> Already in 1914 Mayakovsky was keenly aware of the language of marketing and advertising. Comparing the label "Futurism" to a "brand" of galoshes, he wrote:

"Вы знаете, есть хорошие галоши, называются 'Треугольник'.  
И все-таки ни один критик не станет носить этих галош.  
Испугается названия."

characteristics of his name—insofar as it uniquely identifies him as an author—to his works and vice versa. Such language games exert a particular effect on the reader-viewer: each work entitled “Mayakovsky” becomes a synecdoche not just of the author’s body of work, his oeuvre, but also of the actual author Mayakovsky. Mayakovsky’s works—and his words—become stand-ins for the author as a result of a metonymic cross-contamination of meaning, encouraged by Mayakovsky himself. As a result, the lyrical “I” of his poetry is experienced by the reader not simply as the subjective experience of a poet, who may or may not have something to do with the author, but specifically as the experience of Mayakovsky, or at least so the author prompted his readers to believe.<sup>48</sup> The relationship of identity between the lyrical “I” and Mayakovsky characterizes most of his poetry from the 1910s, including his longer narrative poems, to which I now turn.

### ***The Seeds of Futurism’s Constructive Platform and the Search for Democratic Representation in A Cloud in Pants***

Mayakovsky’s first narrative poem, *A Cloud in Pants* (*Oblako v shtanakh*, 1915), registers the beginning of his shift from the early, more formal concerns of Russian Futurism to more politicized questions of representation that characterize Futurism’s constructive stage, at least according to Mayakovsky. The status of *A Cloud in Pants* as a poetic text notwithstanding, this narrative poem is no less engaged in polemics concerning representation than the author’s

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Галоша, объяснит он, должна быть продолговато-овальная, а тут написано ‘Треугольник’. Это ногу жать будет.

*Что такое футурист — марка, как ‘Треугольник’.* (Mayakovsky, “I nam miasa!”, *SS* 11: 41; my emphasis formatting as in original). (“You know, there are excellent galoshes called ‘Triangle.’ But all the same, not one critic will wear these galoshes. He’ll fear the label. Galoshes, he’ll explain, should be oblong and oval, but here it is written a “triangle.” It’ll hurt my foot. What is a futurist—a brand, like ‘Triangle.’”)

<sup>48</sup> Mayakovsky dramatic performances of his poems also encouraged the identification of the lyrical “I” with the author himself. See, for example, Lilia Brik’s account of Mayakovsky’s dramatic reading of *A Cloud in Pants* (Lilia Brik, *Pristrastnye rasskazy* (Nizhnii Novgorod: Dekom, 2011), 52).

critical essays. Mayakovsky not only implicitly positions *A Cloud in Pants* as an illustration of his take on the task of representation, but he also explicitly polemicizes with the representational modes of his contemporaries on the level of narrative. More specifically, Mayakovsky problematizes the absence of the masses and their voices from works of art. To remedy the situation, Mayakovsky's lyrical "I" (or the lyrical "Mayakovsky") offers to become the "lips" of the people, through which they can speak until they find their own language. This image becomes central to Mayakovsky's quest for more democratic forms of representation in art and grows over the course of his subsequent narrative poems into a vision of collective authorship expressed in *150,000,000*.

Composed between 1913 and 1915, *A Cloud in Pants* consists of a prologue and four parts.<sup>49</sup> The prologue introduces the "insolent" speaker—a poet who intends to provoke his audience with his announced heroization of the lower classes. The first part recounts a painful period of waiting for his tardy lover Maria and ends with a scandalous breakup.<sup>50</sup> The second takes up the ostensibly unrelated theme of the "languageless" (*beziazykaia*) street, which repels other poets with its grotesque, primitive scenes. In the third part, the poet incites the lower classes to revolution. The fourth and final part returns to the initial confrontation with Maria, as the poet escalates his demands for sexual intercourse, and concludes after the poet threatens to kill God. According to Mayakovsky's preface to the second edition of *A Cloud in Pants* (1918),

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<sup>49</sup> Before *A Cloud in Pants* was published as a separate book edition in 1915, the poem was excerpted in the journal *Strelets* (Mayakovsky, "Oblako v shtanakh (otryvok iz tragedii)," *Strelets*, No. 1 [1915]: 87–90). The journal publication included a stanza from the prologue and altered versions of the verses from Part I and IV.

<sup>50</sup> Mayakovsky's poet, predictably, shares many biographical details with Mayakovsky himself, including a failed love affair with Mariia Denisova, who is the model for the character of Maria (Mayakovsky, "Kommentarii" [Commentary], SS 1: 424).

it is the poem's second part that explicitly addresses issues of artistic representation.<sup>51</sup>

Accordingly, I begin my analysis with this part.

After briefly invoking the Futurist artistic credo at the beginning of Part II,

Mayakovsky's poet immediately launches into a critique of other poets' representation:<sup>52</sup>

И ПОКА ВЫКИПЯЧИВАЮТ РИФМАМИ ПИЛИКАЯ  
ИЗ ЛЮБВЕЙ И СОЛОВЬЕВ КАКОЕ ТО ВАРЕВО  
УЛИЦА *КОРЧИТСЯ* БЕЗЪЯЗЫКАЯ  
ЕЙ НЕЧЕМ КРИЧАТЬ И РАЗГОВАРИВАТЬ.

AND AS THEY BOIL AWAY CHIRPING THEIR RHYMES  
A STEW OF LOVE AND NIGHTINGALES  
THE STREET *WRITHES* TONGUELESS  
IT HAS NOTHING WITH WHICH IT CAN SCREAM OR SPEAK.<sup>53</sup>

In this stanza, Mayakovsky's poet articulates the central problem that animates this part: while others are busy singing of the traditional subjects of poetry—"love" and "nightingales"—the street remains without a language. The poet's disdainful attitude toward others' poetic efforts is evident not only from his description of their poetry as a "stew," but also from his choice of the verb *vykipiachivat'*, a non-existent form of the perfective *vykipiatit'* that suggests that other poets both "boil away" (or "out") their subject matter, as well as "sterilize" it.

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<sup>51</sup> Mayakovsky characterized the four-part structure of the poem as "four cries": "'Down with your love,' 'Down with your art,' 'Down with your regime,' and 'Down with your religion'" (Mayakovsky, "Kommentarii," *SS* 1: 423).

<sup>52</sup> The destructive agenda of Futurism is evoked in the following line: "Я НАД ВСЕМ ЧТО СДЕЛАНО СТАВЛЮ «НИИЛ»" (Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Oblako v stanakhk. Tetraptikh* (Petrograd: Tipografiia 'grammotnost', 1915), 25. ("OVER EVERYTHING THAT'S BEEN DONE I STAMP 'NIHIL.'" Trans. in Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Selected Poems*, trans. and ed. James H. McGavran III [Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2013], 166). Subsequent translations from this source are cited in the following format: McGavran 166.

<sup>53</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 26; Womack 44, trans. modified; my emphasis. When citing the original 1915 edition, I reproduce the punctuation, line breaks, and capitalization of that edition in both the Russian text and the English translation. In this edition, all the uncensored passages were printed in capital letters with no commas. When I cite censored passages from this edition, I leave the text uncapitalized. These passages are reproduced in accordance with the copy that was filled in by Lilia Brik. In some cases, Lilia Brik's version differs from what was printed in the second, 1918 edition. Although today many of Mayakovsky's poems, including early works, are printed using his famous *lesenka* or "stepladder" technique, Mayakovsky began using this form only in 1923. Consequently, none of the poems discussed in this dissertation were originally printed in the *lesenka* format. For more on this technique, see Mikhail Gasparov, *Sovremennyi russkii stikh* (Moscow: Nauka, 1974), 391–93, and Michael Wachtel, "Heirs of Mayakovsky: The Poet and the Citizen" in *The Development of Russian Verse* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1998), 206–38.

The description of the street as “languageless” or, literally, “tongueless” (*beziazykaia*) and the choice of the verb “writhe” (*korchitsia*) humanize the street, transforming it into a suffering body. The anthropomorphization of the street is reinforced on the level of diction and poetic images, which echo the poet’s descriptions of his own suffering from Part I:

МЕНЯ СЕЙЧАС УЗНАТЬ НЕ МОГЛИ БЫ:  
ЖИЛИСТАЯ ГРОМАДИНА СТОНЕТ *КОРЧИТСЯ*.  
ЧТО МОЖЕТ ХОТЕТЬСЯ ЭТАКОЙ ГЛЫБЕ?

RECOGNISE ME? NO YOU WOULDN’T:  
A VAST GANGLY THING THAT GROANS AND *WRITHES*.  
WHAT COULD SUCH A CLOD WANT?<sup>54</sup>

The parallel between the poet and the street is established not only through the repetition of the verb “writhes,” but also through other images used to describe the poet and the street’s lack of language. While the street “has nothing with which it can scream or speak,” the poet too is capable only of “groaning” or “moaning” (*stonat*). The implicit contrast between the anthropomorphic description of the street and the non-anthropomorphic descriptions of the poet as a “vast gangly thing” (*gromadina*) and a “clod” (*glyba*), which render the poet inhuman as well as inanimate, paradoxically brings the street and the poet closer together. By constructing such parallels between his own suffering and that of the street, Mayakovsky’s poet gestures toward his personal investment in the search for the street’s language: the street’s missing tongue implicitly becomes the poet’s own language and vice versa.<sup>55</sup>

Although the street may not have a “tongue,” the other elements of its speaking apparatus, such as throat and chest, appear to be intact:

УЛИЦА МУКУ МОЛЧА ПЁРЛА  
КРИК ТОРЧКОМ СТОЯЛ ИЗ *ГЛОТКИ*

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<sup>54</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 11; Womack 38, trans. modified; emphasis added.

<sup>55</sup> The parallelism between the street and the poet, as well as the violence of bodily mutilation evoke Aleksandr Pushkin’s poem, “The Prophet” (“Prorok”). In this poem, Pushkin depicts the poet-speaker’s tongue being violently ripped out in order to transform the poet into a prophet and conduit of god’s message.

ТОПОРЩИЛИСЬ ЗАСТРЯВШИЕ ПОПЕРЕК *ГОРЛА*  
ПУХЛЫЕ ТАХИ И КОСТЛЯВЫЕ ПРОЛЕТКИ.

*ГРУДЬ* ИСПЕШЕХОДИЛИ  
ЧАХОТКИ ПЛОЩЕ.

[...]

*ВЫХАРКНУЛА* ДАВКУ НА ПЛОЩАДЬ  
СПИХНУВ НАСТУПИВШУЮ НА *ГОРЛО* ПАПЕРТЬ

THE STREET SILENTLY GOES THROUGH TORMENT  
A SCREAM STANDS STRAIGHT UP IN THE *GULLET*  
PUFFY TAXIS AND BONY HANDSOMS  
BRISTLE STUCK IN THE *THROAT*.

THE *CHEST* HAS BEEN TRAMPLED ON  
WORSE THAN BY TB.

[...]

THE STREET *HACKS UP* A CROWD ONTO THE SQUARE  
HAVING PUSHED OFF THE PORTICO THAT STEPPED ON ITS *THROAT*<sup>56</sup>

Such physiology suggests that the street has the potential to speak. However, without a tongue, the site of the potential language production is reduced to pre-linguistic screams and bodily processes, such as “hacking” (*kharkat*).

When the street does occasionally produce sounds intelligible as language, it resorts to using profanities and words directly related to eating:

А ВО РТУ  
УМЕРШИХ СЛОВ РАЗЛАГАЮТСЯ ТРУПИКИ  
ТОЛЬКО ДВА ЖИВУТ ЖИРЕЯ  
«СВОЛОЧЬ»  
И ЕЩЕ КАКОЕ-ТО  
КАЖЕТСЯ «БОРЩ».

BUT IN THEIR GOB  
LITTLE CORPSES OF WORDS DECAJ

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<sup>56</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 27; my emphasis in italics; Womack 45, trans. modified. Cf. Mayakovsky’s metaphor of the poet’s downtrodden soul as a trampled-on street in his book *I*:

По мостовой  
моей души изъезженной  
шаги помешанных  
вьют жестких фраз пяты. (Mayakovsky, *Ia*, 3).

ONLY TWO PULL THROUGH  
“BASTARD”  
AND ONE MORE  
PROBABLY “BORSHCH.”<sup>57</sup>

The street’s mouth, the poet suggests, is taken up by obscenities and food, while the potential language “decays.” In another grotesque Rabelaisian image, the street appears to call someone to dinner, while squatting, seemingly, in an act of urinating or defecation:

А улица присела и заорала:  
«Идемте жрать!»

And the street squatted and yelled:  
“Let’s go chow!”<sup>58</sup>

Thus, screaming, eating, and swearing, which have the mouth as their locus, all displace the process of speaking. In carnival logic, all these activities, and especially swearing, send one down to the lower material realm and conflate the mouth—and by extension its functions—with other orifices.

Mayakovsky’s poet positions the grotesque realism of his own descriptions in opposition to the language of other poets, who concern themselves with “love” and “nightingales” and ignore the street’s suffering. Instead of unflinchingly facing the street in all of its vulgar reality and helping it grow beyond its two locutions “bastard” and “borsch,” these poets run away in horror:

И ПОЭТЫ РАЗМОКШИЕ В ПЛАЧЕ И ВСХЛИПЕ  
БРОСИЛИСЬ ОТ УЛИЦЫ ЕРОША КОСМЫ  
«КАК ДВУМЯ ТАКИМИ ВЫПЕТЬ  
И БАРЫШНЮ  
И ЛЮБОВЬ  
И ЦВЕТОЧЕК ПОД РОСАМИ».

POETS SODDEN WITH WAILING AND SOBS

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<sup>57</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 28; Womack 45, trans. modified.

<sup>58</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 28; Womack 45. The censors’ choice to redact these lines points to the likelihood of their potential (if not necessarily intended) obscenity.



RUSH AWAY FROM THE STREET TOUSLING THEIR MOPS  
“HOW CAN WE SING USING JUST THOSE TWO WORDS  
THE LADY  
THE LOVE  
AND THE WEE FLOWER WET WITH DEW.”<sup>59</sup>

Trusting these false prophets, the people closest to the street likewise turn away from it:

А ЗА ПОЭТАМИ УЛИЧНЫЕ ТЫЩИ  
СТУДЕНТЫ ПРОСТИТУТКИ ПОДРЯДЧИКИ.

BUT FOLLOWING THE POETS THOUSANDS WENT AWAY FROM THE STREET  
STUDENTS PROSTITUTES BUILDERS.<sup>60</sup>

As the narrative of Part II gains momentum, Mayakovsky’s poet transforms from a conjurer of grotesque street vignettes into a prophet, who models himself simultaneously on Jesus and “the shoutlipped Zarathustra.”<sup>61</sup> Addressing the masses directly, the poet reminds them of their strengths and urges them not to abandon the street:

«ГОСПОДА  
ОСТАНОВИТЕСЬ  
ВЫ НЕ НИЩИЕ  
ВЫ НЕ СМЕЕТЕ ПРОСИТЬ ПОДАЧКИ».

НАМ ЗДОРОВЕННЫМ  
С ШАГОМ САЖЕНЬИМ  
НАДО НЕ СЛУШАТЬ А РВАТЬ ИХ  
[...]

ИХ ЛИ СМИРЕННО ПРОСИТЬ ПОМОГИ МНЕ  
МОЛИТЬ О ГИМНЕ ОБ ОРАТОРИИ  
МЫ САМИ ТВОРЦЫ В ГОРЯЩЕМ ГИМНЕ  
ШУМЕ ФАБРИКИ И ЛАБОРАТОРИИ.

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN  
STOP RIGHT THERE  
YOU AREN’T BEGGARS

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<sup>59</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 28; McGavran 168.

<sup>60</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 29; Womack 45.

<sup>61</sup> “КРИКОГУБЫЙ ЗАРАТУСТРА” (Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 31). Mayakovsky’s choice of Zarathustra as one of his models is significant. Like Nietzsche’s prophet, who is connected to the murder of God (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann [New York: Vintage, 1974], 181–82; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Thomas Common [New York: Dover, 1999], 187), Mayakovsky’s poet threatens to kill god in Part IV of *A Cloud in Pants*.

YOU CAN'T ASK FOR CRUMBS.”

*WE* THE ROBUST ONES  
EACH STRIDE SIX FEET LONG  
*WE* MUSTN'T LISTEN TO THESE PEOPLE BUT TEAR THEM APART  
[...]

ARE THEY THE ONES WE SHOULD ASK FOR HELP  
PRAY THEM FOR A HYMN OR AN ORATORY  
*WE* OURSELVES ARE CREATORS IN A BURNING HYMN  
IN THE NOISE OF THE FACTORIES AND THE LABORATORIES.<sup>62</sup>

While in the above stanza the poet recognizes the people's status as “creators” (“*tvortsy*”), he locates their creativity in “factories” and “laboratories,” alluding to non-verbal character of their creation. Although, on the level of narrative, the poet separates himself out as the prophet of the masses, on the level of grammar, he invites himself in and begins to speak from within. The change of personal pronouns from “you” into “us” and “we” in the above stanza (italicized) anticipates the poet's impending dissolution in the masses. Parallels between the people's “robust” and “enormous” (*zdorovennyi*) physical condition and the poet's self-description (from Part I) as “huge” (*gromadina*) further reinforce his unity with the masses.

As the poet-prophet presses on with his sermon, he merges completely with the masses:

МЫ  
С ЛИЦОМ КАК ЗАСПАННАЯ ПРОСТЫНЯ  
С ГУБАМИ ОБВИСШИМИ КАК ЛЮСТРА

МЫ  
КАТОРЖАНЕ ГОРОДА ЛЕПРОЗОРИЯ  
ГДЕ ЗОЛОТО И ГРЯЗЬ ИЗЪЯЗВИЛИ ПРОКАЗУ  
МЫ ЧИЩЕ ВЕНЕЦИАНСКОГО ЛАЗОРЬЯ  
МОРЯМИ И СОЛНЦАМИ ОМЫТОГО СРАЗУ.

ПЛЕВАТЬ ЧТО НЕТ У ГОМЕРОВ И ОВИДИЕВ  
ЛЮДЕЙ КАК МЫ  
ОТ КОПОТИ В ОСПЕ.

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<sup>62</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 29–30; Womack 45–6 and McGarvran 168–69, trans. modified; my emphasis in italics.

WE  
WITH OUR SLEPT-ON RUMPLED FACES  
WITH LIPS THAT HANG DOWN LIKE A CHANDELIER

WE  
PRISONERS IN THIS COLONY OF VICE  
WHERE GOLD AND DIRT ARE BOTH TAINTED WITH LEPROSY  
WE ARE CLEANER THAN ANY LAGOON IN VENICE  
WASHED BY THE SEA AND THE SUN PERMANENTLY.

WHO GIVES A TOSS THAT IN HOMER OR OVID  
THERE'S NO ONE LIKE US  
COVERED IN SOOT.<sup>63</sup>

Speaking from within the collective “we,” the poet suggests that the lower classes have not yet been subjects of epic poetry (“in Homer and Ovid / there’s no one like us”). Although the phrase “who gives a toss” (*plevat*) at first suggests indifference, the rest of the poem’s narrative points to the centrality of this lack of representation for *A Cloud in Pants*. Rather than showing indifference, *plevat* could be read as a resolution to take matters into one’s own hands. Indeed, the poet-prophet encourages the people to do just that:

Жилы и мускулы молитв верней  
Нам ли вымаливать милостей времени  
Мы каждый держим в своей пятерне  
Миров приводные ремни

This is the true prayer muscles and veins  
Are we the ones who should beg for time’s charity  
Every one of us has the reins  
To guide the world lying in his palm<sup>64</sup>

Note the evocation of Greek mythology in the image of the “world’s reins,” which rhetorically connects the people’s task to Homer and Ovid.<sup>65</sup> The implicit suggestion is that the people will themselves create their own glorifying narratives.

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<sup>63</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 31–2; Womack 46–7.

<sup>64</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 32; Womack 47.

<sup>65</sup> Specifically, Mayakovsky seems to be evoking Ovid’s version of the Phaethon myth in *Metamorphoses*.

But while the poet-prophet of Part II laments this lack of representation and invites the people to create their own narratives, the poet of the prologue positions the entire four-part narrative of *A Cloud* precisely as an attempt to represent such people in art. As if preemptively answering the call of the poet-prophet in Part II, the poet of the prologue formulates his task as follows:

НЕ ВЕРЮ ЧТО ЕСТЬ ЦВЕТОЧНАЯ НИЦЦА  
И МНОЙ ОПЯТЬ СЛАВОСЛОВЯТСЯ  
МУЖЧИНЫ ЗАЛЕЖАННЫЕ КАК БОЛЬНИЦА  
И ЖЕНЩИНЫ ИСТРЕПАННЫЕ КАК ПОСЛОВИЦА.

I DON'T BELIEVE IN ANY FLOWERY NICE  
GLORIFIED BY ME ONCE AGAIN ARE  
MEN GONE STALE LIKE A HOSPITAL  
AND WOMEN WORN RAGGED LIKE A PROVERB.<sup>66</sup>

Contrasting his task with creating descriptions of “flowery Nice,” the poet suggests that his subjects are tattered men and women. While the image of the men seems to evoke those who have been injured and incapacitated by war, the image of the women, “worn ragged like a proverb,” hints at prostitutes, who make frequent appearances throughout the four parts of *A Cloud*. That is, the comparison of women to proverbs, which are widely circulated and overused in speech, suggestively points to the circulation of women among different partners.<sup>67</sup>

Mayakovsky’s choice of the word *slavoslovitsia* (“to glorify”) to describe the poet’s task in the above stanza gestures towards the poem’s epic aspirations, linking the men and women of the prologue to the poet-prophet’s desire for a Homer of the lower classes in Part II.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 8; McGavran 160. The Russian adjective *istrepannyi* has the double meaning of “ragged” or “tattered” (like an old piece of clothing) and “worn out.” To be clear, I am not suggesting that there are two different speakers in *A Cloud*; rather, there is a kind of separation of consciousnesses connected to the four parts being a kind of four act performance.

<sup>67</sup> This suggestion is reinforced by the comparison of words (*slova*) to prostitutes in Part I. The auditory and etymological link between *slovo* and *poslovitsa* connects the four different items of comparison—women, proverbs, words, and prostitutes.

<sup>68</sup> The word *slavoslovitsia* also evokes the context of religious hymns. Moreover, out of other possible words for glorification, Mayakovsky selects *slavoslovitsia* for its etymological link to *slovo*, which can mean “word.”

Continuity between the task of the poet as described in the prologue and the poet-prophet's message in Part II is reinforced by multiple rhetorical parallels. In the prologue, the poet states:

НЕЖНЫЕ! ВЫ ЛЮБОВЬ НА СКРИПКИ ЛОЖИТЕ  
ЛЮБОВЬ НА ЛИТАВРЫ ЛОЖИТ ГРУБЫЙ  
А СЕБЯ КАК Я ВЫВЕРНУТЬ НЕ МОЖЕТЕ  
ЧТОБ БЫЛИ ОДНИ СПЛОШНЫЕ ГУБЫ.

TENDER PEOPLE! YOU LAY LOVE ON VIOLINS  
A BRUTE BANGS HIS OUT ON KETTLEDRUMS  
BUT YOU CAN'T TURN YOURSELVES INSIDE OUT LIKE I CAN  
TO BE ONE ENORMOUS PAIR OF LIPS.<sup>69</sup>

Contrasting his own approach with the violin-love of others, the poet of the prologue depicts himself as “one enormous pair of lips.”<sup>70</sup> This image reappears in various guises throughout Mayakovsky's oeuvre and is worth noting here for several reasons. First, the image of the lips links the poet of the prologue to the “shoutlipped” (*krikogubyi*) prophet of Part II. This connection is reinforced by the ungrammatical use of the verb “to lay” (*ložhite* instead of *kladete*), which signals the poet's belongingness and allegiance to the uneducated masses. In this sense, *A Cloud* contains both a prescription for proper representation (in Part II)—the masses must be represented in (epic) narratives—and, at the same time, a performance of it over the course of the entire poem, according to the framing of the prologue.

Second, Mayakovsky's image emphasizes the lips, which are located on the outermost part of the articulatory apparatus. Unlike the voice, which is situated inside the poet and associated with individual talent and the soul, the lips are on the surface. Mayakovsky's image

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“language,” “discourse,” and, significantly, an epic “tale,” such as “Slovo o polku Igoreve” (“The Tale of Igor's Campaign”). Mayakovsky uses the same word in noun form (*slavoslovie*) in his vision of collective authorship in *150,000,000*.

<sup>69</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 7; McGavran 159, trans. modified. Note the link between the sound that a violin makes and *pilikanie* (“chirping”), which was used to describe the inferior rhymes of other poets in Part II. The collocation of *pilikat' na skripke*, meaning “to play badly, annoyingly,” is common in Russian.

<sup>70</sup> The Russian word *sploshnoi*, here translated as “enormous,” can also mean “continuous” (as in “single-piece”) or “total.”

choice not only defamiliarizes the reader from the synecdochal identity between the poet and his voice, but also shifts the focus from non-material contact between the poet and the world to physical and tactile interactions between them. In this way, the image of the lips emphasizes his proximity and material intimacy with the world. Such connection gestures toward the poet's privileged position as a material conduit between the real world and the world of representation. Moreover, thanks to the displacement of the poet's individuality associated with his voice, the image of the lips transforms the poet into an instrument through which the masses can speak directly; that is, such image allows the poet to become—if only imaginatively—something more than a representative who speaks on their behalf.

Third, Mayakovsky's image registers the violence involved in becoming a poetic prophet: the process requires turning oneself "inside out," exposing everything that is meant to be protected by the skin. The last two lines of the above quoted stanza suggest that the process of becoming the lips of the people requires self-sacrifice. In order to better understand the sacrificial aspect involved in the search for the language of the street and for a poet who can become the lips of the people, I now turn to another important motif in *A Cloud*: the relationship between the poet and Jesus. I argue that Mayakovsky's persistent analogy between the poet (as his lyrical "I") and the Son of God advances the motif of self-sacrifice, which becomes a prerequisite for a more democratic mode of representation in Mayakovsky's subsequent narrative poems.

*Mayakovsky = Jesus: Crucifixion and Self-Sacrifice in A Cloud in Pants*

Я поэт разницу стер  
Между лицами своих и чужих  
В гное **моргов** искал сестер  
Целовал узорно больных<sup>71</sup>

Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Vladimir Mayakovsky. A Tragedy*

When the first edition of *A Cloud in Pants* was published in 1915, approximately “six pages” of the text were censored.<sup>72</sup> The excisions from this edition show that it was Mayakovsky’s blasphemous treatment of religion, more so than his incitement of the masses to rise up, that made his work so subversive in the eyes of the censors. In addition to the scenes that depict the poet’s ascent into heaven in Part IV, lines that were substantially censored include suggestive parallels between the poet and the Son of God. In this section, I discuss Mayakovsky’s appropriation of Jesus’s identity to advance a parallel between the sacrifice of Jesus and that of the lyrical “Mayakovsky.”

According to Mayakovsky’s preface to the second, uncensored edition of *A Cloud in Pants* (1918), the poem’s original title was *The Thirteenth Apostle*.<sup>73</sup> On the one hand, this title

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<sup>71</sup> Mayakovsky, *Vladimir Maiakovskii*, 19; emphases and formatting as in the original edition.

“I am a poet I’ve wiped away the differences / Between what I look like and how *others* look / I have sought my sisters in the **morgue’s** pus / And artfully kissed the sick” (Womack 21; formatting modified).

<sup>72</sup> Mayakovsky, “Ia sam,” *SS* 1: 56. According to Mayakovsky’s later reminisces, when he presented the poem before the censorship committee, he was asked how he felt about hard labor: “Что вы, на каторгу захотели?” (Mayakovsky, “Kommentarii,” *SS* 1: 423). Mayakovsky recognized how provocative his poem must have been when he took away Velimir Khlebnikov’s copy of the book where the censored lines were written in by hand, fearing that the absent-minded Khlebnikov might leave the uncensored copy on a park bench (Lilia Brik, “Iz vospominanii” in *Imia etoi teme: liubov’! Sovremennitsy o Maiakovskom* [Moscow: Druzhba narodov, 1993], 90).

<sup>73</sup> Mayakovsky, “Ia sam,” *SS* 1: 56. One legend has it that Mayakovsky owes the poem’s present title to his encounter with the censors. To the censors’ charge of his un-poetic “coarseness,” Mayakovsky allegedly replied, “if you like, I will be most gentle, not a man, but a cloud in pants,” an ironic statement that has become one of the poem’s most quotable lines and a verbal image that competes for instantaneous recognition with photographic images of the poet (Mayakovsky, “Kommentarii,” *SS* 1: 423). However engaging, this story is unlikely to be true, since, as I noted, fragments of this poem had already appeared in the journal *Strelets* under the title “A Cloud in Pants (a fragment from a tragedy),” before Mayakovsky submitted the complete poem as a book to the censorship apparatus. Thus, *The Thirteenth Apostle* was not the original title of the poem, but rather of the first complete book edition.

suggests that the poet, who is explicitly identified as the thirteenth apostle in Part III, claims to be a disciple of Jesus.<sup>74</sup> On the other, the number thirteen, as the sum of twelve plus one, co-opts Christian number symbolism in order to signal the beginning of a new era, which is alluded to throughout the poem. In this sense, the title also suggests that the poet is a new Messiah, who supersedes Jesus. The original title thus creates a tension between the implied continuity with Jesus and his message on the one hand, and a radical break that signals a new creed, on the other.

While the censors redacted the blasphemous title *The Thirteenth Apostle*, they left the poem’s subtitle, *A Tetrptych*, intact.<sup>75</sup> Aside from denoting the four-part structure of the poem, this subtitle gestures toward a number of provocative parallels. Taking into account the religious register of the word “tetrptych,” as well as the poet’s self-representation as the thirteenth apostle, the subtitle evokes the Gospels. Like the structure of Mayakovsky’s poem, the Gospels of the New Testament are four in number. The subtitle could thus be read as an allusion to the Gospel-like status of Mayakovsky’s word. In Part III, Mayakovsky makes this latent comparison more explicit when his poet suggests that future generations will “christen their children with [his] verses.”<sup>76</sup> The parallelism implicitly suggests that, just as the New Testament in its own time superseded the Old, *A Cloud in Pants* is intended to replace the New Testament, or, at the

<sup>74</sup> The relevant lines from Part III were partially censored in the first 1915 book edition (excised words in lowercase):

Я	I
ВОСПЕВАЮЩИЙ МАШИНУ И АНГЛИЮ	WHO SING THE MACHINE AND ENGLAND
МОЖЕТ БЫТЬ ПРОСТО	AM PERHAPS NOTHING MORE
В САМОМ ОБЫКНОВЕННОМ евангелии	THAN THE THIRTEENTH apostle
ТРИНАДЦАТЫЙ апостол	IN THE ORDINARY gospel

(Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 46; McGarvran 177, trans. modified; uncapitalized words indicate redacted content). On the secular significance of the number thirteen for the Russian avant-garde, see Andrei Rossomakhin, *Magicheskie kvadraty russkogo avangarda: sluchai Maiakovskogo* (St. Petersburg: Vita Nova, 2012), 11–21.

<sup>75</sup> Mayakovsky changed the subtitle of the poem from “a tragedy,” which appeared in the partial publication of the poem in journal *Strelets*, to a “tetrptych” in the first 1915 book edition. It is likely that at the time Mayakovsky published excerpts of the poem in the journal, he did not yet have a complete draft that became the 1915 book.

И БУДУТ ДЕТЕЙ КРЕСТИТЬ	AND LET THEM BE CHRISTENED
ИМЕНАМИ МОИХ СТИХОВ.	WITH THE NAMES OF MY POEMS.

(Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 46; Womack 53).



very least, to supplement it with the Gospel according to Mayakovsky. Furthermore, by invoking the Gospels, the subtitle anticipates Mayakovsky's analogy between the poet's life and the life of Jesus that unfolds over the course of the poem's narrative.

Beyond such hidden allusions to the Gospels, the word "tetraptych" is also meant more literally, as a reference to an icon with four scenes or four panels. In this context, the number four, like the number thirteen, seems to indicate surplus, since icons consisting of three panels (triptychs) are more common. The surplus of three plus one once again gestures towards the dawn of a new era. Beyond this possible number symbolism, Mayakovsky's tetraptych alludes to the fellow Cubo-Futurist Natalia Goncharova's a four-panel painting "The Evangelists. A Tetraptych" (1911). At the time Mayakovsky was composing *A Cloud*, Goncharova's painting caused a scandal at an art exhibition in St. Petersburg and was removed for its "anti-religious" character.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> "Natalia Goncharova, Evantelisty," Russkii muzei [The Russian Museum], accessed May 12, 2017. <http://rmgallery.ru/ru/3598>. The tetraptych was first displayed at the exhibition "Oslinyi khvost" in 1912 (Maksimilian Voloshin, *Liki tvorchestva* [Leningrad: Nauka, 1988], 287–89).



**Fig. 1.3 Natalia Goncharova, “The Evangelists. A Tetraptych” (1911)**

Notably, the evangelists in Goncharova’s painting appear to hold blank scrolls, suggesting that the word of God remains to be written. *The Thirteenth Apostle*, then, could be read as Mayakovsky’s attempt to fill the gospels with his own content. More broadly, Mayakovsky’s evocation of Goncharova’s tetraptych signals his alliance with the Cubo-Futurist movement and the Russian avant-garde.

Mayakovsky’s multivalent reference to the Gospels and Goncharova’s four evangelists does not exclude other possible meanings of the subtitle. The tetraptych could also be read as four scenes from the life of Jesus, intended to present the poet as the new Messiah.<sup>78</sup> Although

<sup>78</sup> In yet another alternative reading, the critic Efim Etkind has interpreted Mayakovsky’s “tetraptych” as an evocation of the four-part cycle of Aeschylus’ tragedies (Etkind, *Tam, Vnutri. O russkoi poezii XX veka. Ocherki* [St. Petersburg: Maksima, 1996], 276). Etkind grounds his interpretation of the “tetraptych” in the subtitle used in

uneven in its narrative progression as compared to an icon, the poem could be read as depicting the incarnation in the first part, Jesus's preaching in the second, his crucifixion in the second and third, and his ascension in the fourth and final part.<sup>79</sup>

The events depicted in Part I could be read a theatrical parody of the Annunciation (mixed with other Biblical scenes): the arrival of a woman named Maria causes the poet to transform from a wordless mass of nerves into a verbal Vesuvius, which begins to spew out words uncontrollably. As noted in an earlier discussion of the parallels between the suffering body of the poet and the street, the poet's self-portrait in Part I emphasizes his non-verbal physicality:

МЕНЯ СЕЙЧАС УЗНАТЬ НЕ МОГЛИ БЫ:  
ЖИЛИСТАЯ ГРОМАДИНА СТОНЕТ КОРЧИТСЯ.

[...]

СКОРО КРИКОМ ИЗДЕРЕТСЯ РОТ.  
СЛЫШУ  
ТИХО  
КАК БОЛЬНОЙ С КРОВАТИ  
СПРЫГНУЛ НЕРВ.

RECOGNISE ME? NO YOU WOULDN'T:

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the journal *Strelets*, where the excerpted poem was qualified by the words, "fragment from a tragedy" (Mayakovsky, "Oblako" in *Strelets*, 87). It should be noted that in the journal, the excerpt from "Oblako" was not divided into four parts and stanzas from Parts I and II appeared next to one another. In advancing his reading, Etkind disputes Mayakovsky's own interpretation of the "tetraptych" as the "four cries" against old love, art, regime and religion. Since Mayakovsky provided this interpretation in the preface to the 1918 (post-Revolution) edition of the poem, Etkind suggests that the poet retrospectively assigned greater revolutionary significance to "Oblako" than the poem merits (Etkind, *Tam vnutri*, 274–75). Etkind's argument fits into a larger narrative common in the secondary literature, according to which Mayakovsky's early work was largely without revolutionary content and it was his participation in Bolshevik revolutionary politics after 1917 that both added a political dimension to his poetry and killed his poetic talent. This chapter aims to question narratives that strictly divide Mayakovsky's poetic career into the pre- and post-revolutionary periods and assign implicit value judgments to the poetry produced under each of these rubrics. Beyond Aeschylus and the religious significance of the "tetraptych," Mayakovsky's subtitle also evokes the four-part structure of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The significance of this intertext for Mayakovsky's poem is beyond the scope of the present analysis.

<sup>79</sup> In a later narrative poem, *Human Being* (*Chelovek*, 1916–17), the appropriation of the structure of Jesus' life becomes even clearer. This poem is divided into the following sections: "The Birth of Mayakovsky," "The Life of Mayakovsky," "The Passion of Mayakovsky," "The Ascension of Mayakovsky," "Mayakovsky in Heaven," "The Return of Mayakovsky," "Mayakovsky for Centuries," and "Finally."

A VAST GANGLY THING THAT GROANS  
AND WRITHES.

[...]

SOON A SCREAM WILL TEAR MY MOUTH TO PIECES.  
LISTEN  
QUIETLY  
A NERVE HAS JUMPED UP  
LIKE A SICK MAN FROM HIS BED.<sup>80</sup>

Instead of the expected image of an insolent poet who has a way with words, in Part I the reader encounters the poet's non-verbal body.<sup>81</sup> As soon as Maria arrives and announces the breakup, however, the poet erupts with language:

И ЧУВСТВУЮ  
«Я»  
ДЛЯ МЕНЯ МАЛО  
КТО-ТО ИЗ МЕНЯ ВЫРЫВАЕТСЯ УПРЯМО  
—ALLO!  
КТО ГОВОРИТ!  
МАМА?

МАМА!

ВАШ СЫН ПРЕКРАСНО БОЛЕН  
МАМА!  
У НЕГО ПОЖАР СЕРДЦА  
[...]  
КАЖДОЕ СЛОВО  
ДАЖЕ ШУТКА  
КОТОРЫЕ ИЗРЫГАЕТ ОБГОРАЮЩИМ РТОМ ОН  
ВЫБРАСЫВАЕТСЯ КАК ГОЛАЯ ПРОСТИТУТКА  
ИЗ ГОРЯЩЕГО ПУБЛИЧНОГО ДОМА.

AND I FEEL THAT  
“I”  
IS NOT ENOUGH FOR ME

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<sup>80</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 11, 14; Womack 38.

<sup>81</sup> The image of the insolent poet is familiar from the Prologue, as well as from earlier poems like “Take That!” (1913):

А я вам открыл столько стихов шкатулок,  
Я, бесценных слов мот и транжир.

And here I've revealed to you so many boxes of verse,  
I, the spendthrift and prodigal of priceless words.

(Mayakovsky, “Nate!”, *Rykaiushchii parnas* (1914): 5; McGavran 46).

SOMEONE TEARS AWAY FROM ME STUBBORNLY  
—HELLO!  
HELLO, WHO’S SPEAKING!  
MOTHER?

MOTHER!

YOUR SON IS SERIOUSLY ILL  
MOTHER!  
HIS HEART IS ON FIRE  
[...]  
EVERY WORD  
EVEN THE JOKES  
THAT BURP OUT OF HIS BURNING MOUTH  
THROW THEMSELVES OUT LIKE PROSTITUTES JUMPING NAKED  
FROM A BLAZING BROTHEL.<sup>82</sup>

As these stanzas indicate, the poet not only explodes with words, which jump out of him “like prostitutes [...] from a blazing brothel,” but also with others’ voices. Such a transformation stands in stark contrast to his earlier non-verbal state and possibly signals a parody of the incarnation of the Word in the body of the poet. In Mayakovsky’s poem—framed as both a gospel and an icon—the word becomes incarnate thanks to Maria’s refusal to enter into a sexual relationship with the poet.<sup>83</sup>

In parts II and III of Mayakovsky’s tetraptych the figure of the poet recalls Jesus’s ministry. The poet is depicted as associating with and preaching amongst the impoverished, including prostitutes and those who are not even capable of expressing themselves in language. Like Jesus, the poet propagates an anti-materialistic message, suggesting that money is a source of corruption:

МЫ  
КАТОРЖАНЕ ГОРОДА-ЛЕПРОЗОРИЯ  
ГДЕ ЗОЛОТО И ГРЯЗЬ ИЗЪЯЗВИЛИ ПРОКАЗУ

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<sup>82</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 19–20; Womack 42.

<sup>83</sup> The parody is also directed at the virgin birth of Jesus, with the implicit suggestion in the poem that the word can be conceived only through abstinence. Part IV makes it clear that the poet and Maria had not yet consummated their relationship (Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 56).

WE  
THE INMATES OF THE LEPROSARIUM CITY  
WHERE GOLD AND FILTH HAVE GIVEN LEPROSY ULCERS<sup>84</sup>

In Part III, the poet takes Jesus's message to an extreme, calling on the last to rise up:

Выньте гулящие руки из брюк  
Берите камень нож или бомбу  
А если у которого нету рук  
Пришел чтоб и бился лбом бы.

ИДИТЕ  
ГОЛОДНЕНЬКИЕ ПОТНЕНЬКИЕ ПОКОРНЕНЬКИЕ  
ЗАКИСШИЕ В БЛОХАСТОМ ГРЯЗНЕНЬКЕ  
ИДИТЕ!

Passerby take your hands out of your pants  
pick up a stone or a knife or a bomb  
and if you don't happen to have any hands  
butt your foe with your head or kick him.

O COME  
ALL YE HUNGRY YE SUBMISSIVE YE SWEATY  
YE APATHETIC IN YR FLEA-BITTEN DUDS  
COME ALONG!<sup>85</sup>

Not surprisingly, the first stanza, which incites the masses to revolutionary violence, was redacted from the 1915 edition. The second stanza, left intact, appropriates biblical imagery (with doses of Dostoevsky mixed in) of the hungry and the submissive to propagate a message of revolution. In parallel to the significance of the thirteenth apostle, in these stanzas Mayakovsky signals the poet's continuity with Jesus's message on the one hand, and a break, implied by the violent radicalization, on the other.

By far the most dominant scene or panel in Mayakovsky's "icon" is the crucifixion, which appears in the poem thrice: twice at the end of Part II and once more in Part III. All three

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<sup>84</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 31; McGavran 170.

<sup>85</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 42; Womack 51.

scenes were redacted from the 1915 edition. In all instances, Mayakovsky refers to the untimeliness of the poet's message and to the crowd's readiness to crucify the poet:

Это взвело на голгофы аудиторий  
Петрограда Москвы Одессы Киева  
и не было ни одного который  
не кричал бы:  
«Распни распни его!»

Golgotha took place again  
in the auditoria of Petrograd Odessa Kiev Moscow  
and there wasn't anyone  
who wouldn't shout:  
“crucify him crucify him now!”<sup>86</sup>

This stanza from Part II interweaves the fates of Jesus, the poet, as well as the author Mayakovsky, insofar as the four listed cities refer to the places visited by the Russian Futurists on their infamous tour of 1913–1914 (“*turne futuristov*”).<sup>87</sup> Part II ends with the image of the crucifixion having taken place:

Где глаз людей обрывается куцый  
Главой голодных орд  
В терновом венце революций  
Грядет *который-то год*  
*Вам плакать больше незачем и нечем*  
Я где боль везде  
На каждой капле слёзовой течи  
*Распят я как на кресте.*

[...]

И когда приход его мятежом оглашая  
Выйдете к спасителю  
ВАМ Я  
ДУШУ ВЫТАЩУ  
РАСТОПЧУ  
ЧТОБ БОЛЬШАЯ  
И ОКРОВАВЛЕННУЮ ДАМ КАК ЗНАМЯ.

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<sup>86</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 32; Womack 47.

<sup>87</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako v shtanakh. Stat'i, kommentarii, kritika*, ed. D. Karpov (Moscow: Gosudarstvenny muzei Maiakovskogo, 2015), 29.

Over there where the normal gaze falls short  
As a leader of hungry hordes  
Comes *another year*  
In the revolutions' crown of thorns  
*You have nothing left to cry for and nothing left to cry*  
Where there is pain I am there  
In every falling tear  
*I am crucified as though on a cross.*

[...]

And when his arrival resounds with mutiny  
Come out to your savior  
I WILL  
PULL OUT MY SOUL  
TRAMPLE ON IT  
HAND IT BACK TO YOU  
BLOODY LIKE A BANNER.<sup>88</sup>

In these lines, images of the revolution, the poet's crucifixion and his sacrifice intersect and cross-pollinate: the poet becomes the crucified body of yet another year of revolutions, which is adorned with a crown of thorns. In the first quoted stanza, the year and the poet form a composite crucified body of Jesus. In the second, the poet becomes the "savior" more explicitly, as he offers up his torn-out and trampled-on soul as a bloodied flag of the coming revolutions.

Mayakovsky evokes the crucifixion image once more in Part III, prompted by the poet's meeting with the Mother of God, who eyes the drunk poet from an icon in a tavern. In this scene, the poet addresses her image directly:

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<sup>88</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 33–34; Womack 48, trans. modified. The poem is quoted in accordance with the first 1915 edition. My emphasis in italics indicates lines that were altered in the 1918 edition. In this later edition, the lines, "Грядет который-то год. / Вам плакать больше незачем и нечем" ("Another year is coming. / You have no reason to cry anymore") are replaced by "Грядет шестнадцатый год / А я у вас — его предтеча" ("The sixteenth year is coming / And for you I am its forerunner"). Such replacement retrospectively makes Mayakovsky's poem prophetic. A crucial change is also made in the last line of this stanza, as the image of a crucified Jesus-poet—"Распят я как на кресте" ("I'm crucified as if on a cross")—is transformed into active self-sacrifice in the 1918 edition—"распял себя на кресте" ("I crucified myself on the cross"). The change in the later edition of the poem from a more passive process of being crucified, to a more active process of crucifying oneself is indicative of Mayakovsky's later intensification of his willingness to sacrifice himself for the cause of the revolution. Such change also emphasizes the Nietzschean motif of man becoming equal to god after the latter's death. Note also the suggestive hybridization in the later edition of the figure of crucified Jesus with John the Baptist (Иоанн Предтеча, lit. "forerunner"), which possibly evokes a continuity between the pre- and post-revolutionary Mayakovsky.



Видишь  
Опять Голгофнику оплеванному  
Предпочитают Варавву

You see  
Once again it's Barabbas they prefer  
To the spurned man of Golgotha<sup>89</sup>

Evoking “The Grand Inquisitor,” where Ivan Karamazov suggests that Christ would not be welcome if he were to return, the word “again” suggests that the people are willing to crucify the Messiah even at his second coming. Mayakovsky reinforces the analogy between the poet and Jesus as the latter continues his imagined conversation with the Mother of God:

МОЖЕТ БЫТЬ НАРОЧНО Я  
В ЧЕЛОВЕЧЬЕМ МЕСИВЕ  
ЛИЦОМ НИКОГО НЕ НОВЕЙ  
Я МОЖЕТ БЫТЬ САМЫЙ КРАСИВЫЙ  
ИЗ ВСЕХ ТВОИХ СЫНОВЕЙ.

MAYBE I'M HERE ON PURPOSE  
IN THIS HUMAN MASH  
WHERE NOBODY'S FACE IS NEW  
OF ALL YOUR SONS IT IS I PERHAPS  
WHO AM THE MOST BEAUTIFUL.<sup>90</sup>

In addition to presenting himself as crucified, in this stanza the poet suggests his identity with Jesus by claiming to be one of the Mother of God's sons.

The final scene of Mayakovsky's tetraptych involves the poet's ascension to heaven in

Part IV:

И КОГДА МОЕ КОЛИЧЕСТВО ЛЕТ  
ВЫПЛЯШЕТ ДО КОНЦА  
МИЛЛИОНОМ КРОВИНОК УСТЕЛЕТСЯ СЛЕД  
К ДОМУ МОЕГО ОТЦА.

ВЫЛЕЗУ  
ГРЯЗНЫЙ ОТ НОЧЕВОК В КАНАВАХ  
СТАНУ БОК О БОК

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<sup>89</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 45; Womack 53.

<sup>90</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 45; Womack 53.

НАКЛОНЮСЬ  
И СКАЖУ ЕМУ НА УХО  
«ПОСЛУШАЙТЕ  
Господин Бог  
[...]

AND WHEN MY TALLY OF YEARS  
FINALLY PLAYS ITSELF OUT  
A MILLION DROPS OF BLOOD WILL COVER  
THE ROAD TO MY FATHER'S HOUSE.

I'LL CLIMB UP TO HEAVEN  
I'LL BE DIRTY FROM SLEEPING GUTTERS  
I'LL STAND NEXT TO HIM  
BEND DOWN  
AND SPEAK INTO HIS EAR  
“LISTEN UP  
Mister God  
[...]<sup>91</sup>

Even as the poet distances himself from his “father” by calling him “Mister God,” he depicts his own ascension as a return of a prodigal son. Moreover, the return journey lies along a path that is marked by blood, which suggests the necessity of death and also alludes to Jesus’s sacrifice.

Once in heaven, the poet challenges God to combat, in a gesture more reminiscent of Jacob than of Jesus. But the identity of the poet and Jesus is nevertheless maintained through repeated evocation of the poet’s association with prostitutes. In another parodic parallel to Jesus’s teachings, the poet proposes to “repopulate heaven with Eves [...] from the boulevards.”<sup>92</sup>

Moreover, the specific issue that provokes the poet to threaten his father with murder is God’s refusal to allow his son “kiss kiss kiss” “without suffering.”<sup>93</sup>

Beyond the analogous events in the lives of the poet and Jesus, the dual nature of the Son of God as human and divine finds a parallel in the image of the poet. In *A Cloud*, the earthly

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<sup>91</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 59–60; Womack 57; trans. modified.

<sup>92</sup> “опять поселим Евочек [...] со всех бульваров” (Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 61).

<sup>93</sup> “Отчего ты не выдумал / Чтоб было без мук / Целовать целовать целовать” (“Why didn’t you think / To make it possible without torment / To kiss kiss and kiss” (Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 62–63; McGavran 183–84).

motherhood of Mary combines with the divine fatherhood of God to create a being who is at once human and divine, a *bogochelovek* (“godman”).<sup>94</sup> However, the earthly side of Jesus is brought down to the level of the lower material bottom. The very title of the poem, *A Cloud in Pants*, can read as an allusion to Jesus’s two natures and, by extension, the poet’s. While the divine nature of Jesus in Mayakovsky’s image is represented by the cloud—that ephemeral stuff of the heavens, his human nature here is represented by the pants.<sup>95</sup> In Russian, the grammatically neuter word for “cloud” (*oblako*) opposes the masculine image of the pants. This image is selected not only because human beings are in need of clothing after the Fall, but also because pants are metonymically connected to the lower material bottom (specifically, to the reproductive organ) that they cover. The following lines from the prologue seem to reinforce such reading of the title:

ХОТИТЕ БУДУ ОТ МЯСА БЕШЕНЫЙ  
И КАК НЕБО МЕНЯЯ ТОНА  
ХОТИТЕ БУДУ БЕЗУКОРИЗНЕННО НЕЖНЫЙ  
НЕ МУЖЧИНА А ОБЛАКО В ШТАНАХ.

IF YOU WANT I’LL BE RABID FROM FLESH  
AND LIKE THE SKY CHANGING TINT  
IF YOU WANT I’LL BE IRREPROCHABLY GENTLE  
NOT A MAN BUT A CLOUD IN PANTS.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>94</sup> This term was frequently used in Russian religious philosophy from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. See, for example, Vladimir Soloviev’s *Lectures on Godmanhood* (New York: International UP, 1944).

<sup>95</sup> Cf. visual depictions of Christ covered by clouds, as in, for example, Giotto di Bondone’s “Scenes from the Life of Christ,” # 22, “Ascension.” In Mayakovsky’s verbal image, Jesus’s body strata are carnivalistically reversed, with the upper part of his body invisible, while the lower is “placed” front and center. The medieval iconographic tradition of Jesus’s “disappearing feet,” which depicts Jesus’s feet while the rest of his body is absorbed into a cloud, may also be relevant to Maykovsky’s image; see, for example, Hans Suess von Kulmbach’s, “Ascension” (1513). By contrast with Western representations, Orthodox iconography favors the mandorla depiction of ascension with Christ seated in the middle of a (radiating) circular shape. While my reading focuses on the connection of Mayakovsky’s image to Jesus, I also want to note that “a cloud in pants” may be a parody of Konstantin Bal’mont’s poem “I Know No Wisdom” (“Ja ne znaiu mudrosti,” 1902): “Do not curse me, oh sages. / What could you want of me? / I am but a cloud full of fire. / I am but a cloud. / You see: I am floating. / And I call to the dreamers... I do not call to you!” (“Не кланите, мудрые. / Что вам до меня? / Я ведь только облачко, полное огня. / Я ведь только облачко. / Видите: плыву. / И зову мечтателей... Вас я не зову!”)

<sup>96</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 8; McGavran 159–60; trans. modified. These lines also appeared in the 1915 excerpt of the poem published in *Strelets*, suggesting that this image was central to the poem from the very beginning.

In this stanza, while speaking about himself in an imagined conversation with a critical audience, the poet elaborates on the image of the cloud in pants, aligning it even more closely with Jesus's dual nature as both human and divine. Note how in this passage the “rabidity” caused by (the desires of) the flesh is contrasted with a gentle, almost non-material, intangible cloud. Attuned to this coding of flesh as connected to irrational, impulsive behavior, one can observe how throughout the poem Mayakovsky parodically invokes theological debates on the human status of Jesus and inverts them to signify the connection of flesh to sexual desire.<sup>97</sup>

In an extended profaning gesture, the human nature of the poet-Jesus becomes intertwined with, at times identical to, his sexual drive. The poem's main narrative thrust is, after all, the poet's unreciprocated and sexually unfulfilled love for a girl named Maria, who simultaneously references the Mother of God and Mary Magdalene. In scenes that escalate from a love confession, to begging Maria not to leave, to violent, physical demands for sex, the poet repeatedly emphasizes his status as a human being:

А Я ЧЕЛОВЕК МАРИЯ  
ПРОСТОЙ

ВЫХАРКАННЫЙ ЧАХОТОЧНОЙ НОЧЬЮ В  
ГРЯЗНУЮ РУКУ ПРЕСНИ.  
МАРИЯ ХОЧЕШЬ ТАКОГО?  
ПУСТИ МАРИЯ.  
[...]

МАРИЯ  
ПОЭТ СОНЕТЫ ПОЕТ ТИАНЕ  
А Я  
ВЕСЬ ИЗ МЯСА  
ЧЕЛОВЕК ВЕСЬ  
Тело твое просто прошу

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<sup>97</sup> The debates on the human and divine nature of Jesus, which were finally resolved at the Council of Chalcedon, were revived in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian religious philosophy. Mayakovsky would have been familiar with these discourses if in no other way than through symbolism. For an analysis of Mayakovsky's poetry in the context of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian religious thought, see Katsis, *Vladimir Maiakovskii*, book 1, 23–270.

Как просят христиане  
Хлеб наш насущный даждь нам днесь

BUT I AM A *HUMAN BEING* MARIA  
SIMPLE

HACKED UP BY CONSUMPTIVE NIGHT INTO  
PRESNIA'S DIRTY HAND  
MARIA DO YOU WANT SUCH A MAN?  
LET ME IN MARIA.  
[...]

MARIA  
THE POET SINGS SONGS TO TIANA  
BUT I  
*AM WHOLLY MADE OF FLESH*  
*HUMAN ENTIRELY*  
I simply ask for your body  
As Christians ask  
Give us this day our daily bread<sup>98</sup>

In these stanzas, the poet's "human" nature is cited as an explanation and excuse for his violent sexual desires. In the final profaning image of this stanza—which was too blasphemous not to be redacted by the censors—the poet demands Maria's body as "daily bread." This demand ritualizes sexual intercourse as the fulfillment of basic human needs.

Mayakovsky's blasphemy goes as far as blurring the human, fleshy side of the poet-Jesus with the apocalyptic image of the beast, who is ridden by a whore in the Book of Revelations:

ДЕТКА!  
НЕ БОЙСЯ  
ЧТО У МЕНЯ НА ШЕЕ ВОЛОВЬЕЙ  
ПОТНОЖИВОТЫЕ ЖЕНЩИНЫ МОКРОЙ  
ГОРОЮ СИДЯТ:

BABY!  
DON'T BE SCARED  
THAT ON MY BOVINE NECK  
A SOGGY MOUNTAIN OF SWEATY-BELLIED WOMEN  
IS PERCHED:<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 54, 57; McGavran 179, 181, trans. modified; my emphases in italics.

<sup>99</sup> Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 55; McGavran 180, trans. modified.

Through such unexpected combinations of Biblical images and storylines, the poet is cast as both the true prophet who is awaited in the Second Coming and the false prophet who precedes him, in addition, of course, to Jesus himself. In the poetic world of *A Cloud*, Jesus's flesh—by virtue of the connection between the poet and Jesus—is reinterpreted as the source of carnal desires, while Jesus's association with fallen women and the lower strata of society more broadly, is sexualized. Even as Jesus's image is profaned, however, the analogy between Christ and the poet continues to hold.

In this section, I have argued that in *A Cloud in Pants* Mayakovsky constructs an analogy between the poet and Jesus by invoking 1) Jesus's life, including scenes of the incarnation, Jesus's preaching and association with the lowest strata of society, his crucifixion, and ascension; and 2) Jesus's dual nature as a "god-man" (*bogochelovek*), both human and divine. Although in *A Cloud in Pants*, this analogy functions, to a certain extent, as a motif independent from the questions of representation raised in Part II, these concerns nevertheless overlap: both Jesus and the poet become prophets for and "representatives" of the lower classes in their respective narratives. The metonymic contact between these motifs produces a contamination of meaning that is played out in Mayakovsky's subsequent narrative poems. More specifically, the necessity of the poet's sacrifice develops along the lines suggested by Jesus's crucifixion.

### *The Poet's Self Sacrifice in War and the World as a Vehicle of Utopian Vision*

о любите, неразлюбляемую олюбовь, любязи и до не любии-долубство любо,  
любенный, любиз любиз, любенку, любеник, любичей в любят любвицы,  
любенный любех и любен о любенек любун в любку, бубочное о любун.  
Любить любовью любязи любят безлюбиц.<sup>100</sup>

Velimir Khlebnikov, "Liubkho"

The necessity of the poet's sacrifice becomes a central motif in Mayakovsky's narrative poem *War and the World* (*Voina i mir*, 1917).<sup>101</sup> Written between 1915 and 1916, the poem was published only after the February Revolution due to its unambiguous stance against the First World War.<sup>102</sup> The first complete edition appeared as a separate volume in November of 1917. Like in *A Cloud in Pants*, in *War and the World* Mayakovsky engaged in polemics with other poets and artists concerning questions of representation. Rather than focusing on representing the voiceless masses, however, in *War and the World* he problematized depictions of war. Rejecting his contemporaries' solutions, Mayakovsky offered not so much a specific prescription for how to represent war, but rather a redefinition of the poet's role in representation. According to Mayakovsky's implicit suggestion, the poet had to become a vehicle of utopian visions. The poem's narrative intimated that such transformation was possible only through the poet's radical self-sacrifice.

Like most of Mayakovsky's narrative poems, *War and the World* is divided into several parts: a prologue, dedication, and five parts of the narrative poem itself. The prologue introduces the lyrical "I" as a poet and a "herald of coming truths" (*glashatai griadushchikh pravd*), who

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<sup>100</sup> Velimir Khlebnikov, "Liubkho" in *Dokhlaia luna*, 31. In this untranslatable poem, Khlebnikov plays with the various transformations of the root *liub* ("love").

<sup>101</sup> Although invisible after the orthographical reform, the original Russian title of the poem was "Война и мир." The spelling of the word "мир" with an "i" rather than "и" points to the primary intended meaning of "world" rather than "peace."

<sup>102</sup> Prior to the February Revolution, Mayakovsky attempted to publish the third part of the poem in Gorky's monthly journal *Letopis'*. The excerpt from the poem was accepted with enthusiasm, but war censorship stopped the publication.

must preserve “love for the living” even through the most catastrophic events. The dedication, in addition to citing Mayakovsky’s personal experience with war, specifies the poet-prophet’s message: “every person, even one who is not needed, should live.”<sup>103</sup> Predictably, this untimely message falls on deaf ears. Scenes of debauchery, decadence, and degradation dominate Part I of the poem, as the poet’s world, characterized as a “Babylon” and a “Sodom,” is headed for the apocalypse. Part II depicts the ruthless war machine that propels even the “Tolstoys who hide behind the gospels” to serve the cause of violence.<sup>104</sup> In Part III, European nations face off in a bloody battle, creating a “spectacle of the greatest theater.” Only a lonely “lighthouse” (“*mayak*”)—a figure that appears much out of place in a “Colosseum” among the “gladiators” and serves as a substitute for the poet himself—looks on the bloody spectacle with tears.<sup>105</sup> Part IV depicts the poet’s self-sacrifice, which redeems the sins of man and gives rise to the post-apocalyptic scene of resurrection imagined in Part V. The following analysis highlights the last two parts of the poem.

While the entire narrative of *War and the World* is structured around the question of how to represent the war experience, Part IV of the poem makes Mayakovsky’s dissatisfaction with existing modes of representation most explicit. After saturating his narrative with images of

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<sup>103</sup> “Каждый, / ненужный даже, / должен жить” (Mayakovsky, “Voina i mir,” SS 1: 261). In the prologue, Mayakovsky cites the date of his military draft, suggesting that his poet is identical with the author (Mayakovsky, “Voina i mir,” SS 1: 261). In 1914 Mayakovsky volunteered for military service, but was rejected due to his political unreliability (Sergeeva-Kliatis and Rossomakhin, “‘Fleita-pozvonochnik’: kommentarii,” 32). Nevertheless, a year later, Mayakovsky received a draft notice and was assigned to the motorized division together with Osip Brik (Bengt Jangfeldt, *Mayakovsky. A Biography*, trans. Harry Watson [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2014], 72–73).

<sup>104</sup> “Выволакивайте забившихся под Евангелие Толстых!” (Mayakovsky, “Voina i mir,” SS 1: 267). (“Drag out the Tolstoys who hide behind the Gospels!”).

<sup>105</sup> Mayakovsky, “Voina i mir,” SS 1: 270. Mayakovsky repeatedly uses the Russian word *mayak* (“lighthouse”) as a playful nickname for himself on the basis of its shared etymology with his last name. Moreover, the image of the lighthouse also alludes to Mayakovsky’s tall stature. See, for example, his children’s book, *Eta knizhechka moia pro moria i pro mayak* (This book of mine is about seas and lighthouses; 1926), where the device is laid bare, or *150,000,000*, where the parallel between the lighthouse and Mayakovsky is more subtle. Cf. David Burliuk’s illustration in Mayakovsky, *Vladimir Mayakovsky. A Tragedy*, between pages 22 and 23.



violence in the first three parts, in Part IV Mayakovsky's poet suddenly attacks the reader for perversely enjoying the scenes of mutilation and death he has conjured:

Эй!  
Вы!  
Притушите восторженные глазенки!  
Лодочки ручек суньте в карман!

Hey!  
You!  
Dim down those enthusing eyelets!  
Stick your open handlets into your pockets!<sup>106</sup>

In this stanza, the poet refuses to continue to feed the reader's voyeuristic desire, interrupting the climax of the earlier violent scenes with a digression on representation. As if dismissing the first three parts of *War and the World*, in Part IV the poet asserts that it is impossible to represent the experience of war in verse:

Нет!  
Не стихами!  
Лучше  
язык узлом завяжу,  
чем разговаривать.  
Этого  
стихами сказать нельзя.  
Выхоленным ли языком поэта  
горящие жаровни лизать!

No!  
Not in verse!  
Better  
tie my tongue into a knot  
than to speak.  
This  
you cannot say in verse.  
Not for the well-groomed tongue of a poet  
to lick frying pans so red-hot, they hiss.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Mayakovsky, "Voina i mir," SS 1: 276; trans. in Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Selected Works in Three Volumes, vol. 2 Longer Works*, trans. Dorian Rottenberg (Moscow: Raduga, 1986), 43; trans. modified. Subsequent translations from this source are cited in the following format: Rottenberg 43.

<sup>107</sup> Mayakovsky, "Voina i mir," SS 1: 277; Rottenberg 44, trans. modified.

Echoing Mayakovsky's own position in the essay "War and Language," in this stanza the poet rejects the possibility of representing the horrors of war with the "well-groomed tongue" or "language" (*vykholennyi iazyk*) of poetry. To represent such an experience, he suggests, one has to learn directly from pain:

Боль берешь,  
растишь и растишь ее:  
всеми пиками истыканная грудь,  
всеми газами свороченное лицо,  
всеми артиллериями громимая цитадель головы —  
каждое мое четверостишие.

Не затем  
взвела  
по насыпям тел она,  
чтоб, горестный,  
сочил заплаканную гнусь;  
страшной тяжестью всего, что сделано,  
без всяких  
«красиво»,  
прижатый, гнусь.

One takes one's pain,  
and grows and grows it;  
a bosom pierced by all the spears,  
a face twisted by all the gases,  
a citadel-head by all cannon hit-  
is every one of my four-lined stanzas.

The pain  
didn't lead me up  
mountains of mincemeat  
for me  
to ooze crybaby rot, full of woe.  
By the awful burden of everything committed,  
without any  
"beauties",  
pressed down, I bow.<sup>108</sup>

As these stanzas suggest, pain guides the poet away from both, glorified images of war ("beauties") and from "cry-baby rot" ("*zaplakannaia gnus*"). Although in Part IV

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<sup>108</sup> Mayakovsky, "Voina i mir," *SS* 1: 276–77; Rottenberg 44, trans. modified.



machine guns.<sup>109</sup> Such imitations of the sounds of war also gesture toward Marinetti. By the time Mayakovsky composed *War and the World*, Marinetti’s “orchestra of war noises” was certainly known to him, if not from primary sources, then from the fellow Futurist Vadim Shershenevich’s translation of excerpts from *Zang Tumb Tumb*.<sup>110</sup> Placed throughout the first three parts of *War and the World*, Mayakovsky’s musical scores are notably absent from Part IV, where his poet begins to articulate his own poetic platform, and Part V, which contains the poet’s attempt at realizing his vision of representation.

Mayakovsky’s hidden polemics with Marinetti can be found as early as the prologue:

Сегодня ликую!  
Не разбрызгав,  
душу  
сумел,  
сумел донести.  
Единственный человеческий,  
*среди воя,*  
*среди визга,*  
голос  
подъемлю днесь.

Today I rejoice:  
without a drop of it splashing  
I’ve managed  
managed to carry  
my soul  
all the way.  
The only genuine human –  
*amidst all of the howling*  
*and screeching* –  
voice  
I lift up this day.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Mayakovsky, “Voina i mir.” *SS* 1: 262, 263, 270, 274.

<sup>110</sup> Shershenevich, who initially belonged to the rival Futurist groups of Ego-Futurists and Mezzanine of Poetry, published a Russian translation of Marinetti’s “Battle of Tripoli” in 1915 (Marinetti, *Bitva u Tripoli*, trans. V. Shershenevich [Moscow: Universal’naia biblioteka, 1915]).

<sup>111</sup> Rottenberg 30, trans. modified.

The “howling” and “screeching” in this stanza refers not only to the sounds of war, but also to the representation of such sounds in contemporary poetry, including that of Marinetti and his imitators. By contrasting the poet’s “*human* [...] voice” with others’ inhuman “screeching,” Mayakovsky rejects Marinetti’s way of representing war from the very outset of his poem. Moreover, the emphasis on the “human” in this stanza, though no longer sexualized as in *A Cloud*, evokes the analogy between the poet and Jesus, as well as Mayakovsky’s poetic self-image more broadly. The former reference is reinforced by Church Slavonic archaisms such as *donest’* instead of *donesti* (“to carry”) and *dnes’* (“today”), which impart a Biblical quality to the poet’s speech.<sup>112</sup>

In addition to polemicizing with Italian Futurism, in *War and the World* Mayakovsky also engages in critical dialogue with “local” artists. Moreover, these artists are not only Mayakovsky’s usual targets, such as the symbolists identified in “War and Language” or rivals from other Futurist groups, like Igor’ Severianin.<sup>113</sup> Mayakovsky also addresses his fellow (former) Cubo-Futurists. In particular, Natalia Goncharova’s lithographed book *The Mystical Images of War* (*Voina: misticheskie obrazy voiny*; 1914), created during the painter’s brief return to Russia at the beginning of the First World War, is another important intertext for Mayakovsky’s narrative poem.

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<sup>112</sup> Since Old Church Slavonic is the liturgical language of Russian Orthodoxy, to a Russian ear it sounds distinctly Biblical.

<sup>113</sup> Mayakovsky criticizes Severianin’s poetry not only in *Oblako* (39, 57), but also in his untitled anti-war poem from *VZIAL*. In a later, co-authored article “What does Lef fight for?”, Mayakovsky, Aseev, and others wrote about Futurism’s position on the war: “The **Futurists** were the first and the only ones in Russian literature to **curse the war** drowning out the saber rattling of the war-singers (Gorodetsky, Gumilev, etc.), and to fight against it with all the weapons of art (Mayakovsky’s ‘War and the World’)” (N. Aseev, et. al, “Za chto boretsia Lef,” *Lef*, No. 1 [1923]: 4; bold emphasis in original).



**Fig. 1.5 Natalia Goncharova, a page from *The Mystical Images of War* (1914)**

In comparison with Goncharova's apocalyptic depictions, which have an air of holy or Biblical seriousness about them, Mayakovsky's poetic images of the end of the world are deliberately grotesque: an enormous belly enters the stage in all its shiny sweatiness; drunken fat people "crawl together to sweat on top of one another"; the ruble appears as "a gold-legged microbe in a gnawed-out soul."<sup>114</sup> Mayakovsky's poet does not treat the apocalyptic scenes he is depicting with reverence, respect, fear or pathos, but rather with critical distance and even humor that anticipates Mayakovsky's later caricatures for the ROSTA posters.

In Part II, the poet reveals how such apocalyptic rhetoric can be manipulated by pro-war propaganda:

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<sup>114</sup> Mayakovsky, "Voina i mir," SS 1: 264.

и стало невыносимо ясно:  
если не собрать людей пучками рот,  
не взять и не взрезать людям вены —  
зараженная земля  
сама умрет —  
сдохнут Парижи,  
Берлины,  
Вены!

Чего размякли?!  
Хныкать поздно!  
Раньше б раскаянье осеняло!

till it grew unbearably clear:  
if people weren't bungled into company-bundles,  
if people's veins weren't instantly slit,  
the infected earth  
would by itself kick the bucket,  
Viennas,  
Parises,  
Berlins—  
every bit!

Why wilt so now?!  
It's too late to whine!  
Remorse should have arisen long before!<sup>115</sup>

Narrated in the third person, the first stanza provides an apparently objective depiction of the world at its end, which echoes biblical images from the Book of Revelation. However, the objectivity of this description is put into question by Mayakovsky's framing. In the second quoted stanza, that same voice suddenly addresses an invisible "you" directly. Note how the speaker in this stanza manipulates the "objective" rhetoric of the first stanza in order to convince his audience to go to war. That is, the voice of the second stanza uses the apocalyptic description of the world to manipulate the implied "you," forcing them to admit that the apocalypse is their own fault.

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<sup>115</sup> Mayakovsky, "Voina i mir," SS 1: 266; Rottenberg 35, trans. modified.

While the poet's message in Part IV of *War and the World* focuses primarily on how *not* to represent, in Part V the poet gestures towards a more positive program. This final part of the poem contains not so much an explicit prescription for representation, as much as an outline of the poet's task: the poet must become a visionary of future utopias and guide his audiences toward this alternative world through his art. Before I explore this suggestion in more detail, I will briefly pause on the motif of self-sacrifice, which leads up to the redefinition of the poet's task in Part V. I argue that in *War and the World* the poet's self-sacrifice becomes a prerequisite for his transformation into a visionary of utopias.

Following the suggestion that the poet must let pain guide his representation, the poet offers the following image of his own work:

Эта!  
В руках!  
Смотрите!  
Это не лира вам!  
Раскаяньем вспоротый,  
сердце вырвал —  
рву аорты!

This thing!  
In my hands!  
Look!  
That's no lyre to you!  
Ripped asunder by remorse,  
heart torn out —  
I tear my aorta!<sup>116</sup>

The graphic visual images in this stanza are reinforced by the sounds of tearing and ripping embedded in words like *vsporoty*, *vyrval*, *rvu*, and *aorty*. The resulting effect of this cacophonous correspondence is not unlike what Mayakovsky described in “War and Language,” in connection with Khlebnikov's coinage *zhelezovut* (“ironsummon”). The readers' senses are simultaneously assaulted from different directions, amplifying the pain the poet wishes to

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<sup>116</sup> Mayakovsky, “Voina i mir,” *SS* 1: 277; Rottenberg 44, trans. modified.



convey. Moreover, this stanza phonetically harks back to an earlier scene from Part III, which depicts the execution of a soldier:

Подняли одного,  
бросили в окоп —  
того,  
на ноже который!  
Библеец лицом,  
изо рва  
ряса.  
«Вспомните!  
За ны!  
При Понтийстем Пилате!»

They picked up a man  
and flung him in the trench  
the One  
on the bayonet.  
Him-  
Biblical of face,  
his cassock a fluttering streamer,  
“Remember!  
For us,  
under Pontius Pilate...”<sup>117</sup>

Although ripping and tearing in the above stanza is not the primary meaning of “*izo rva riasa*,” which seem to refer to the dead soldier’s cassock peeking out of a trench, the sounds nevertheless fuse with violent visual images (the soldier’s body being torn by a knife), as the reader unwillingly combines them into the verb *izorvat’* (“to tear apart”). In this way, the reader is conditioned to associate the sound combination of *r* and *v* with violent content. Interestingly, after death, this same soldier with a “biblical face” transforms into the poet’s lyrical “I,” as their voices and perspectives fuse without explanation or warning. The image of the sacrificed soldier thus fuses with the poet’s on multiple levels and anticipates the self-sacrificial scenes that follow.

After the poet rips out his own heart at the beginning of Part IV, he defends his choice rhetorically:

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<sup>117</sup> Mayakovsky, “*Voina i mir*,” *SS* 1: 273–74; Rottenberg 41, trans. modified.

В кашу рукоплесканий ладош не вмесите!  
Нет!  
Не вмесите!  
Рушьяся, комнат уют!  
Смотрите  
под ногами камень.  
На лобном месте стою.

Your palms won't be mashed into the porridge of applause.  
No!  
They won't be mashed!  
Apartment comfort, be smashed!  
Look  
there's stone under my feet,  
I stand on the scaffold.<sup>118</sup>

In this stanza, the poet's refusal to join the crowd of war enthusiasts transforms into a scene of the poet's execution. Instead of Golgotha, however, the poet finds himself at *lobnoe mesto* (translated here as "the scaffold"), the mythologized site of public executions in Moscow's Red Square and a loaded topos in the Russian historical imagination.<sup>119</sup> In this scene, beheading replaces the more common image in Mayakovsky's poetry—death by crucifixion. While successfully specifying the chronotope of the unfolding events (ruthless pre-revolutionary Russia that continues to shed the blood of its own people), Mayakovsky's replacement of one form of execution with another does not erase the Biblical inflection of the sacrifice. Even as the poet is beheaded, Jesus's sacrifice remains an analogue. Consider, for example, the following loaded images:

Вытеку, срубленный,  
но кровью выем  
имя «убийца»,  
выклейменное на человеке.

I'll bleed out, chopped down,

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<sup>118</sup> Mayakovsky, "Voina i mir," *SS* 1: 277–78; Rottenberg 45, trans. modified.

<sup>119</sup> At the time of Marinetti's visit to Russia some newspapers reported that the Italian Futurist, after visiting the *lobnoe mesto*, requested to see Russia's present day site of public executions (cited in Markov, *Russian Futurism*, 149).

yet with blood I'll erase  
the name of "killer"  
branded on man.<sup>120</sup>

The blood of the executed poet will purify humanity by erasing (*vyest'*, which literally means to "eat away") the word "killer" written on the human race, just as Jesus's death was to redeem the sins of humanity.

The recurrent motif of cleansing by spilling blood likewise alludes to the sacrifice of Jesus:

Кровь!  
Выщеди из твоей реки  
хоть каплю,  
в которой невинен я!

Blood!  
Strain from your river  
but one drop  
for which I am not to blame!<sup>121</sup>

Moreover, the poet's assumption of guilt for the deaths of innocent people reinforces the Biblical implications of his execution:

каюсь:  
я  
один виноват  
в растущем хрусте ломаемых жизнью!

I confess:  
I  
alone am to blame  
for the mounting crackle of breaking lives!<sup>122</sup>

Mayakovsky suggests that only by assuming responsibility in this way can the poet's self-sacrifice expiate everyone's sins. In a Christ-like gesture, the poet thrice asks for forgiveness.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Mayakovsky, "Voina i mir," *SS* 1: 278; Rottenberg 45, trans. modified.

<sup>121</sup> Mayakovsky, "Voina i mir," *SS* 1: 280; Rottenberg 46, trans. modified.

<sup>122</sup> Mayakovsky, "Voina i mir," *SS* 1: 278; Rottenberg 45, trans. modified.

<sup>123</sup> Mayakovsky, "Voina i mir," *SS* 1: 278–79.

Although initially the scenes seem to suggest that the enthusiastic crowd of war supporters is behind the poet's execution, the reader soon learns that the poet performs the execution himself:

Сам казнится  
единственный людоед.

the only cannibal  
performs his own execution.<sup>124</sup>

On the level of narrative, it is as if the poet's willingness to take on others' sins transforms him into a cannibal:

Сегодня  
не немец,  
не русский,  
не турок, —  
это я  
сам,  
с живого сдирая шкуру,  
жру мира мясо.

Today  
no German,  
no Russian,  
no Turk –  
it is I  
myself  
from the living world jerk the bleeding skin,  
gorge myself on its meat.<sup>125</sup>

Moreover, the latent parallel of Jesus's assumption of others' sins becomes intertwined with that of the poet's guilt for his early flirtation with war:

это я,  
Маяковский,  
подножию идола

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<sup>124</sup> Mayakovsky, "Voina i mir," *SS* 1: 280; Rottenberg 47. Cf. the second edition of *A Cloud*, where Mayakovsky changed crucifixion from a passive event into an active process: "raspiat ia" ("I am crucified") became "raspiat sebia na kreste" ("I crucified myself on the cross") (Mayakovsky, *Oblako v shtanakh: tetraptikh* [Moscow, 1918]). Mayakovsky's decision to alter this line in *A Cloud* may have been informed by his work on *War and the World*.

<sup>125</sup> Mayakovsky, "Voina i mir," *SS* 1: 279; Rottenberg 46, trans. modified.

нес  
обезглавленного младенца.

it is I,  
Mayakovsky,  
to the idol's dais  
bring  
a headless baby.<sup>126</sup>

In this stanza, the poet is no longer simply an “I,” but, explicitly, the lyrical “Mayakovsky.”<sup>127</sup> Such enacted embodiment of the author in his text gestures toward the significance of the act of self-purification beyond the narrative level, even as it remains a practical impossibility. Part IV concludes with a scene of a new people born from the spilled blood of the poet.

Mayakovsky’s placement of these scenes of self-sacrifice between questions of representation raised at the beginning of Part IV and the utopian vision offered in Part V suggests that it is the sacrifice that makes possible the poet’s transformation that follows. In the final part of *War and the World*, the poet assumes the voice of Jesus in the Last Judgment, calling for a resurrection of the dead:

Земля,  
встань  
тыщами  
в ризы зарев разодетых Лазарей!

Earth,  
arise  
in your millions  
of Lazaruses in fire-glowing raiments arrayed!<sup>128</sup>

The first to rise are geographic regions, which are, notably, not aligned with existing national or imperial borders. As the earth “opens up its black lips” and makes people promise that they will “not cut anyone down,” “buried bones rise up from burial kurgans and grow covered with

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<sup>126</sup> Mayakovsky, “Voina i mir,” *SS* 1: 279; Rottenberg 45.

<sup>127</sup> Following this invocation, Mayakovsky calls himself by name two more times, for a total number of three that runs parallel to his pleas for forgiveness.

<sup>128</sup> Mayakovsky, “Voina i mir,” *SS* 1: 282; Rottenberg 48.

flesh.”<sup>129</sup> In his grotesque vision of the resurrection, legs look for their owners, heads call out to their bodies, bodies float up from the bottoms of oceans and seas.<sup>130</sup> Moreover, a new man, who is notably still “a boy,” is born, while the poet observes from the side:

А тут и я еще.  
Прохожу осторожно,  
огромен,  
неуклюж.  
О, как великолепен я  
в самой сияющей  
из моих бесчисленных душ!

And here I myself come too;  
cautiously planting heel and sole,  
huge,  
uncouth.  
How grand am I as I come to you  
in the most radiant  
of my innumerable souls!<sup>131</sup>

At first, the poet appears as his old self, still “huge” and “awkward,” even after his resurrection. But soon this apparent identity gives way to a suggestion that now the poet has become God, who looks down on his own embodiment. The poem ends with the poet pleading that the earth look through his enormous eyes (*glazishcha*), which are compared to the “open doors of a church” in their readiness to share his love and loving gaze with others. If the earth agrees to

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<sup>129</sup> “Это встают из могильных курганов, / мясом обрастают хороненные кости.” (Mayakovsky, “Voina i mir,” SS 1: 283).

<sup>130</sup> These images, which graphically reimagine the Christian resurrection as well as millenarian fantasies such as those proposed by Nikolai Fedorov, are presented in the following lines:

Было ль,	Who such a sight can remember:
чтоб срезанные ноги	cut-off feet
искали б	searching
хозяев,	for their owners?
оборванные головы звали по имени?	or torn off heads calling them by name?
Вот	There,
на череп обрубку	on the skull of a human remnant
вспрыгнул скальп,	jumped a scalp;
ноги подбежали,	two legs ran up
живые под ним они	and alive underneath him became!

(Mayakovsky, “Voina i mir,” SS 1: 283; Rottenberg 49–50)

<sup>131</sup> Mayakovsky, “Voina i mir,” SS 1: 286; Rottenberg 52.

look through his eyes, it will see, he suggests, that “he, / the one who’s free, / about whom I scream—/ a human being—/ he will come.”<sup>132</sup> It is this vision of the coming future that is implicitly offered as an alternative to other representations of the horrors of war.<sup>133</sup>

Rather than glorifying violence or depicting it apocalyptically, Mayakovsky’s poet offers a vision of a post-apocalyptic future, where violence has been eradicated and man reborn. In *War and the World*, the poet becomes not so much the lips of the people, as their eyes. That is, the poet becomes a vehicle of future utopias as well as the means through which people can access them, if only imaginatively. But in order to become the conduit of utopian visions, as well as the body through which others can take part in them, *War and the World* suggests, the poet must sacrifice his individual self.

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<sup>132</sup> “И он, / свободный, / ору о ком я, / человек — / придет он” (Mayakovsky, “Voina i mir,” *SS* 1: 289).

<sup>133</sup> Interestingly, Mayakovsky chose to publish precisely this vision of the future as the first fragment of the poem, implicitly gesturing towards its importance to his proposed form of representation. Part V of *War and the World* appeared in the journal *Letopis’*, 2–4, Petrograd, 1917, followed by the prologue in a later issue of the journal (issue 7–8).

*A Vision of the New Human Being in Mayakovsky's Human Being*

Эта тема придет,  
калеку за локти  
подтолкнет к бумаге,  
прикажет:  
— Скреби! —  
[...]  
И пускай  
перекладиной кисти раскислены —  
только вальс под нос мурлычешь с креста.  
[...]  
Эта тема день истемнила, в темень  
колотись — велела — строчками лбов.  
Имя  
этой  
теме:  
.....!<sup>134</sup>

Vladimir Mayakovsky, *About That*

The announced arrival of the “Human Being” in *War and the World* illustrates well how Mayakovsky’s longer narrative poems form a cycle that continues to develop common the themes and plots across the borders of individual works.<sup>135</sup> In his next narrative poem, Mayakovsky elaborates on his vision of the reborn human being. Composed between 1916 and 1917 and published as a book in 1918, *Human Being* is a stellar example of Mayakovsky’s understanding of the book as a multimedia art form and of his attention to the sematic potential of text arrangement, typography, and layout. The cover, designed by Mayakovsky, becomes an integral element of the book design and serves as an index to the contents of the book.<sup>136</sup>

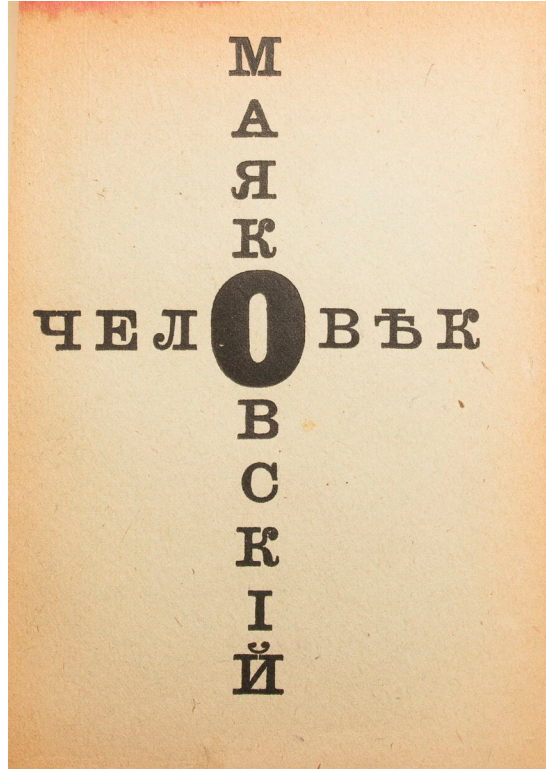
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<sup>134</sup> Mayakovsky, *Pro eto*, 5–6.

<sup>135</sup> Roman Jakobson noted that Mayakovsky’s poetry “is one and indivisible. It represents the dialectical development of a single theme. A symbol once thrown out only as a kind of hint will later be developed and presented in a totally new perspective” (Jakobson, “On a generation that squandered its poets,” in his *Language in Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1987): 275). Although in the same article he goes on to discuss the presence of different themes in Mayakovsky’s oeuvre, suggesting that his assertion may be an exaggeration, the thematic continuity between Mayakovsky’s longer works is nevertheless hard to deny.

<sup>136</sup> Rossomakhin, *Magicheskie*, 26, 35, 74.





**Fig. 1.6 Vladimir Mayakovsky, front cover for *Human Being* (1918)**

On the cover, the author’s name intersects with the word “human being” (*chelovek*), which served as a coded reference to the miracle of the incarnation and to the fleshly side of the Son of God in *A Cloud in Pants*. Recalling this reference, an avid reader of Mayakovsky may see that on this cover the author’s name has replaced the word “god” (*bog*), which was part of the composite “god-man” (*bogochelovek*). The vertical arrangement of Mayakovsky’s name—versus the horizontal placement of “human being” (*chelovek*)—corroborates such reading, since God traditionally occupies the vertical axis, while the “human being” inhabits the horizontal.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Mayakovsky’s play with the vertical and horizontal arrangement of text can also be seen on the covers of the 1915 and the 1918 editions of *A Cloud in Pants*, the typography of which he designed himself (Rossomakhin, *Magicheskije*, 72–75). The 1918 edition turns vertical the horizontal arrangement of letters in the first edition, boldly suggesting that “cloud in pants,” that is, Mayakovsky, occupies the vertical axis of God. In the 1915 edition the title appears thus:

Moreover, the human being and the new (self-proclaimed) God Mayakovsky overlap with one another in the letter O, which, bolded and stretched out lengthwise, resembles a zero.<sup>138</sup> Indeed, we are prompted to read the letter O as the number 0 (zero) by the context of the poem, which sings of ordinary people, and at times calls them the zeros of our society.<sup>139</sup> The zero significantly stands at the center of both “human being” and “Mayakovsky,” pointing to the centrality of this concept for this poem and for Mayakovsky’s conception of the human being in general. The bolded O or zero also evokes the image of the poet as “one enormous [or continuous] pair of lips” (“*odni sploshnye guby*”) from *A Cloud in Pants*. The cover thus becomes a poem unto itself and an index of the content that is to come.

As an example of pattern poetry, the words on the cover form the figure of the cross, which not only confirms the significance of the God-man (*bogochelovek*) reference—since it was Jesus as *bogochelovek* who was crucified—but also suggests the poet’s crucifixion.

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OBLAKO

V

SHTANAKH

While in the 1918 edition, it appears thus:

O		SH
B		T
L		A
A	V	N
K		A
O		KH

The vertical arrangement of the 1918 cover suggests that Mayakovsky is god and simultaneously pulls god down from the heavens, as one’s eye follow the downward movement of the letters in the process of reading. It is possible that Mayakovsky added this new visual pun to the original cover after creating the *Human Being* cover.

<sup>138</sup> The letter “o” also joins “god” (*bog*) and “man” (*chelovek*) in the composite *bogochelovek*. Rossomakhin also notes the similarity between the letter O and the number 0 on the cover of *Human Being*. However, he interprets it as a bull’s eye (an image frequently evoked in Mayakovsky’s poems), as well as a reference to Malevich’s “zero of form” (Rossomakhin, *Magicheskie*, 23). No doubt the significance of the letter O and zero is polysemous; however, in my reading, I rely on the direct parallels between the cover and the content of this particular poem.

<sup>139</sup> For example, in the poem a baker is labeled “a flour-bespattered zero” (“Мукой измусоленный ноль”).

Mayakovsky's name "hangs down" on the cross as a stretched-out body.<sup>140</sup> The word "human being" (*chelovek*) runs through the poet's name, as if piercing or crucifying him. Reading the word "human being" semantically, one could say that "Mayakovsky" is crucified by his human side. Unlike the more sexualized interpretation of the "human" in *A Cloud*, in *Human Being* the word becomes associated with romantic love more broadly. In this section, I show that in *Human Being* the inescapability of romantic love leads the poet to sacrifice himself over and over again. Only through death can he free himself from this repetitive theme and address more pressing issues of representation.

Of all of Mayakovsky's narrative poems, *Human Being* is most explicitly patterned on the life of Jesus, at least up to the poet's ascension.<sup>141</sup> Following the parodic prayer of the prologue, the first part describes the "Birth of Mayakovsky." On the day the poet was born, no special stars announced his "descent" to earth. In fact, the day was "absolutely ordinary, / to the point of nausea."<sup>142</sup> The ordinariness notwithstanding, the poet is "an unprecedented miracle": he can move his hands and fingers, even "wrap" them around someone's "neck"; his skull contains a "precious intellect"; his spit is "the sweetest"—just ask his lovers—and his tongue, voice, and heart are capable of wonders that rival Jesus's miracles.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> The visual motif of Mayakovsky as a cross and, at the same time, a crucified body reappears in Aleksandr Rodchenko's photomontages for *About That* (1923). In the sixth photomontage in the book, Mayakovsky is placed at top of the Ivan the Great bell tower in Moscow with his arms outstretched as if in a balancing act. Visually, Mayakovsky replaces the cross of the bell tower and also points toward crucifixion with his outstretched arms (Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Pro eto* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1923), between pages 36–37).

<sup>141</sup> In *Human Being*, ascension is followed by a detailed description of the poet's uneventful life in heaven and his return to earth. The last section of the poem, moreover, suggests that Mayakovsky's death, ascension, and return occur in endless cycles.

<sup>142</sup> "Был абсолютно как все / — до тошноты одинаков — / день" (Mayakovsky, "Chelovek," SS 1: 291)

<sup>143</sup> After the poet's birth, his various qualities are described in the following lines:

After presenting a rather flattering self-portrait, the poet begins to describe ordinary people engaged in their daily professions: the washerwomen, the baker, the cobbler. Although at first these people appear insignificant, they turn out to be artists in their own right:

Булочник.  
Булки выпек.  
Что булочник?  
Мукой измусоленный ноль.  
И вдруг  
у булок  
загибаются грифы скрипок.  
Он играет.  
Всё в него влюблено.

The baker.  
Bakes his rolls.  
What is he?  
A flour-bespattered zero.  
And suddenly  
the rolls  
grow violin-necks.  
He plays them.  
Everything's in love with him.<sup>144</sup>

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Покоится в нем у меня  
прекрасный  
красный язык.  
«О-го-го» могу —  
зальется высоко, высоко.  
«О-ГО-ГО» могу —  
и — охоты поэта сокол —  
голос  
мягко сойдет на низы.  
Всего не сочтешь!  
Наконец,  
чтоб в лето  
зимы,  
воду в вино превращать чтоб мог —  
у меня  
под шерстью жилета  
бьется  
необычайнейший комок.

Spread  
in it's my tongue,  
lovely,  
red.  
“O-ho-ho!” I can call,  
my voice rising higher and higher.  
“O-HO-HO!”  
I can yell,  
and, falcon of the poet's hunt,  
my voice softly falls to the lowest low.  
No counting it all!  
Finally,  
winters  
into summers,  
water into wine enabling me to turn,  
inserted under my waistcoat's wool  
is a most extraordinary lump  
made to beat and burn.

(Mayakovsky, “Chelovek,” SS 1: 293; Rottenberg 59).

<sup>144</sup> Mayakovsky, “Chelovek,” SS 1: 294; Rottenberg 60, trans. modified.

The comparison of the baker to a “zero” in this stanza not only sends the reader back to the cover image, but also to the whole tradition of zero-men in Russian literature.<sup>145</sup> In this line (“Мукой измусоленный ноль” or “A flour-bespattered zero”), the bakery context prompts the reading of the Russian word *muka* as *muká* (“flour”), rather than *múka* (“suffering”), though the prosaic qualities of this stanza permit both stress patterns and readings. Unlike the “losers” of Russian literature, Mayakovsky’s baker does not seem experience “suffering.” He is transformed in his labor, which is likened to the intricate art of an instrument maker and a musician.

The radical reversal implied by the transformation of a zero into an artist is even more explicit in the next stanza:

Сапожная.  
Сапожник.  
Прохвост и нищий.  
Надо  
на сапоги  
какие-то головки.  
Взглянул —  
и в арфы распускаются голенища.  
Он в короне.  
Он принц.  
Веселый и ловкий.

A cobbler’s shop.  
The cobbler.  
A scoundrel and beggar.  
Puts leggings on boots  
or something of the sort.  
Then look –  
into a harp turns every leggin’.  
He’s crowned,  
he’s a prince,  
vivacious and smart.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> The theme of the zero is prominently featured in the mirror gazing of Chichikov in *Dead Souls*, in Dostoevsky’s figures of Devushkin (*Poor Folk*) and Goliadkin (*The Double*), among other examples.

<sup>146</sup> Mayakovsky, “Chelovek,” SS 1: 294; Rottenberg 60.

In this stanza, the cobbler, first described as a “scoundrel and beggar,” transforms into a “crowned [...] prince.” In contrast to the Biblical parallel of the last becoming first, the cobbler becomes a prince in his work, in this life, rather than in “a kingdom not of this world.” As with the baker, the radical change of identity (from a zero into an artist, or from a beggar into a prince) is rooted in a certain carnivalistic overturning of expectations and traditional values.

In the stanza that follows the description of the cobbler, the poet inserts himself into the company of zero men:

Это я  
сердце флагом поднял.  
Небывалое чудо двадцатого века!

It is I  
who has raised my heart as a banner.  
An unheard-of miracle of the Twentieth Century!<sup>147</sup>

Although, grammatically, “It is I” should be read together with the next line (“who has raised his heart as a banner”), the juxtaposition of this and the preceding cobbler stanza, as well as the separation of “It is I” from its predicate by a line break, suggest that the poetic “I” *is* the cobbler, the baker, and the washers.<sup>148</sup> The image of the poet’s heart, which frames the three scenes of work on both sides, reinforces the suggested identity between these figures. Moreover, the first image of the frame highlights the story-telling capacity of the poet’s heart and suggests that the poet’s “most extraordinary lump” could be responsible for the scenes of work that follow:

у меня  
под шерстью жилета  
бьется  
необычайнейший комок.  
Ударит вправо — направо свадьбы.  
Налево грохнет — дрожат миражи.

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<sup>147</sup> Rottenberg 60, translation modified.

<sup>148</sup> The formal similarity of the three working scenes to a riddle (*zagadka*) (“Laundry. / Washerwomen. [...] Look! A one-hundred-legged ham disappears. / Who is it?”) also suggests that “It is I” is the answer to the riddle.

Кого еще мне  
любить устлать бы?

underneath  
the wool of my vest  
beats  
a most extraordinary lump  
To the right it hits out—on the right start weddings.  
It whacks to the left—mirages arise.  
Whom else is there for me  
to love, to cover over with?<sup>149</sup>

Like the storytelling cat from the prologue of Pushkin’s “*Ruslan and Liudmila*,” the poet’s heart promises to conjure magical images. In this sense, the transformations of the workers into artists and princes could be read as the promised magic narrative. The framing of the three scenes of work with the image of the poet’s heart, moreover, links the miracle of the poet’s birth to the miracles of the workers.

Although the first part of Mayakovsky’s poem promises a story of ordinary zeros, the poem’s subsequent parts have less to do with such figures than with Mayakovsky himself. Nevertheless, even Mayakovsky’s ostensibly egotistical narrative, which follows “*The Life of Mayakovsky*,” “*The Passions of Mayakovsky*,” “*The Ascension of Mayakovsky*,” “*Mayakovsky in Heaven*,” “*The Return of Mayakovsky*,” “*Mayakovsky for Posterity*,” touches on broader issues concerning representation. In contrast to other poets, who “believe in peacocks” and “roses,” the poet in the *Human Being* asserts that he is not interested in “lofty fictions.”<sup>150</sup> Instead, he sets out to provide a “flawless description of the earth,” which can be passed on

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<sup>149</sup> Mayakovsky, “*Chelovek*,” *SS* 1: 293; Rottenberg 59–60.

<sup>150</sup> “Долой высоких вымыслов бремя! / Бунт / муз обреченного данника. / Верящие в павлинов / — выдумка Брэма! — / верящие в розы / — измышление досужих ботаников!” (Mayakovsky, “*Chelovek*,” *SS* 1: 296).

“from generation to generation.”<sup>151</sup> More specifically, he suggests that his task is to describe the rule of money over people’s hearts:

звонит золотоворот  
франков,  
долларов,  
рублей,  
крон,  
иен,  
марок.

Тонут гении, курицы, лошади, скрипки.  
Тонут слоны.  
Мелочи тонут.  
В горлах,  
в ноздрях,  
в ушах звон его липкий.

the world gold-go-round, clinking:  
francs,  
dollars,  
rubles,  
crowns,  
yens,  
marks.

Geniuses, chickens, horses, violins—all drown.  
Elephants, drown.  
Trifles too.  
In throats,  
in nostrils,  
in ears its sticky tinkling sounds.<sup>152</sup>

However, as soon as the poet begins to create his “flawless description” of people’s worship of money, his task slips away from him in favor of another theme: the suffering caused by romantic love. As the narrative of the *Human Being* progresses, the description of the god of money increasingly comes to resemble Mayakovsky’s real-life romantic rival, close friend, publisher, and financial supporter: Osip Brik. When the poet believes he sees his own lover among the

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<sup>151</sup> “безупречное описание земли” (Mayakovsky, “Chelovek,” SS 1: 296). The Russian word *bezuprechnyi* (translated here as “flawless”) also suggests that the poet’s description is “unquestionable.”

<sup>152</sup> Mayakovsky, “Chelovek,” SS 1: 296; Rottenberg 62–63.



worshippers of money, the figures of the money god and Brik fuse completely. In this section, appropriately entitled “The Passions of Mayakovsky,” the poet imagines that he sees his lover bowing down before the god of money and making requests on the poet’s behalf:

Вижу — подошла.  
Склонилась руке.  
Губы волосикам,  
шепчут над ними они,  
«Флейточкой» называют один,  
«Облачком» — другой,  
третий — сияньем неведомым  
какого-то,  
только что  
мною творимого имени.

I see—she approaches,  
to his hand she bows,  
pressing her lips to the hairlets,  
whispering, ingratiatingly:  
“Flutelet,” she calls one,  
“Cloudlet” another,  
and the third she bestows  
with the radiance unknown  
of some name  
which I’m just creating.<sup>153</sup>

The lover’s mention of the “Flutelet” and “Cloudlet” refers to Osip Brik’s financial involvement in the publication Mayakovsky’s *Backbone Flute* and *A Cloud in Pants*. The poet’s anti-materialistic narrative is derailed completely when he sees his lover raising from the money-god’s “love bed.” This scene, which suggestively focuses on the emergence of the lover’s face from “beyond His hairs,” pushes the poet to seek out his own death.

The alternative plotline of love, jealousy, and suffering completely coopts or displaces the “flawless description” the poet initially set out to provide. Such thwarting of his plans, moreover, is not a singular event in the narrative of *Human Being*. After poisoning himself and

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<sup>153</sup> Mayakovsky, “Chelovek,” *SS* 1: 299–300; Rottenberg 65. Although the poet’s lover remains unnamed throughout the poem, all details point to Lilia Brik. In *Human Being* the money god wears a diamond on his finger, which alludes to Osip Brik’s wealthy family of jewelers.

ascending to heaven, the poet soon finds his “bodiless” (*bestelyi*) existence rather boring.<sup>154</sup>

Unexpectedly, his heart begins to beat again and, as a result, images of a perfect life on earth, now many years in the future, flash before his eyes. The poet yawns to return, but as soon as he finds himself among people he observes the same scheme:

По скату экватора  
Из Чикаг  
сквозь Тамбовы  
катятся рубли.  
Вытянув выи,  
гонятся все,  
телами утрамбовывая  
горы,  
моря,  
мостовые.

Их тот же лысый  
невидимый водит,  
главный танцмейстер земного канкана.  
То в виде идеи,  
то чёрта вроде,  
то богом сияет, за облако канув.

Down the planet’s equator aslant  
from Chicagos,  
through Tambovs,  
roll rubles  
in perpetual motion.  
All chase them,  
necks stretched,  
with their bodies  
tamping down  
mountains,  
highways,  
oceans.

The same old bald-pate’s  
their invisible guide,  
the chief dancemaster  
of the earthly cancan,  
now as an idea,

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<sup>154</sup> Mayakovsky, “Chelovek,” SS 1: 303.

then as Satan disguised,  
now shining like God, as he sometimes can.<sup>155</sup>

The poet discovers that, as before, money and greed violently trample on everything living, “confining the sky in wires” and “wringing the earth into streets.”<sup>156</sup> This time the poet resolves to take more direct measures to stop the god of money. Instead of exposing “Him” in verse as before, the poet purchases a “dagger.” He sets out to find his opponent, joining a crowd of people in what appears to be an uprising. But as he wanders through the streets of Petersburg, he encounters an apparition of his lover. The sensuous experience of “almost smelling her skin, almost her breath” binds the poet’s heart in chains once more.<sup>157</sup>

Ожившее сердце шарахнулось грузно.  
Я снова земными мученьями узнан.

My heart, brought alive, begins beating, tense,  
again earthly tortures renew their pressure.<sup>158</sup>

The poet pursues the lover’s apparition only to find himself in the intimate setting of someone else’s apartment, with no sign of his lover.

Just as when the poet attempted to produce a “flawless description” of the world and was thwarted from his task by love and suffering, here too his attention is diverted and he abandons

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<sup>155</sup> Mayakovsky, “Chelovek,” *SS* 1: 310–11; Rottenberg 74; trans. slightly modified.

<sup>156</sup> These latter two images occur in the first half of the poem (*SS* 1: 295), but the violence of development implicit in them echoes images from the later part of the poem:

Кто схватит улиц рвущийся вымах!

Кто может распутать тоннелей подкопы!

Кто их остановит,

по воздуху

в дымах

аэропланами буравящих копать! (Mayakovsky, “Chelovek,” *SS* 1: 310).

Who will arrest the streets’ forward sweep?

Unravel the subterfuges of tunnels?

Who’ll stop them in airplanes

soaring steep,

boring through smoke

from chimneys and funnels? (Rottenberg 74).

<sup>157</sup> “почти что чувствую запах кожи, / почти что дыханье” (Mayakovsky, “Chelovek,” *SS* 1: 313).

<sup>158</sup> Mayakovsky, “Chelovek,” *SS* 1: 313; Rottenberg 77.

his vengeful search for the money god. The poet's inability to overcome love and suffering is reinforced by the final image of the poet who stands on the burning pyre of love:

боль моя  
острей —  
стою,  
огнем обвит,  
на несгорающем костре  
немыслимой любви.

only my pain  
will burn, a pyre,  
while I,  
embraced by flame,  
stand in the never-dying fire  
of unfathomable love.<sup>159</sup>

The very last section of *Human Being* consists of the poet's prayer to be taken back to heaven—a request that points to the endless cyclicity of his attempts and failures to overcome his earthly chains.

By contrast to the earthly chains identified at the beginning of *Human Being*—"money," "law" and "religion"—it is romantic love that prevents the poet from accomplishing his tasks:

Я в плену.  
Нет мне выкупа!  
Оковала земля окаянная.  
Я бы всех в любви моей выкупал,  
да в дома обнесен океан ее!

I'm a captive.  
No ransom for me.  
Shackled by earth, god damn it,  
I'd bathe all the world in my love's vast sea.  
But on all sides houses, dammit.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Mayakovsky, "Chelovek," SS 1: 316; Rottenberg 78, trans. modified.

<sup>160</sup> Mayakovsky, "Chelovek," SS 1: 295; Rottenberg 61.

As the poem's narrative repeatedly demonstrates, the poet's main obstacle to spreading the infinite sea of his love is individualistic romantic love, which repeatedly overwhelms his narrative and thwarts him from his task.

***Displacement of Individual Subjectivity in Romantic Love as a Pathological Version of Collective Subjectivity. The Case of Backbone Flute***

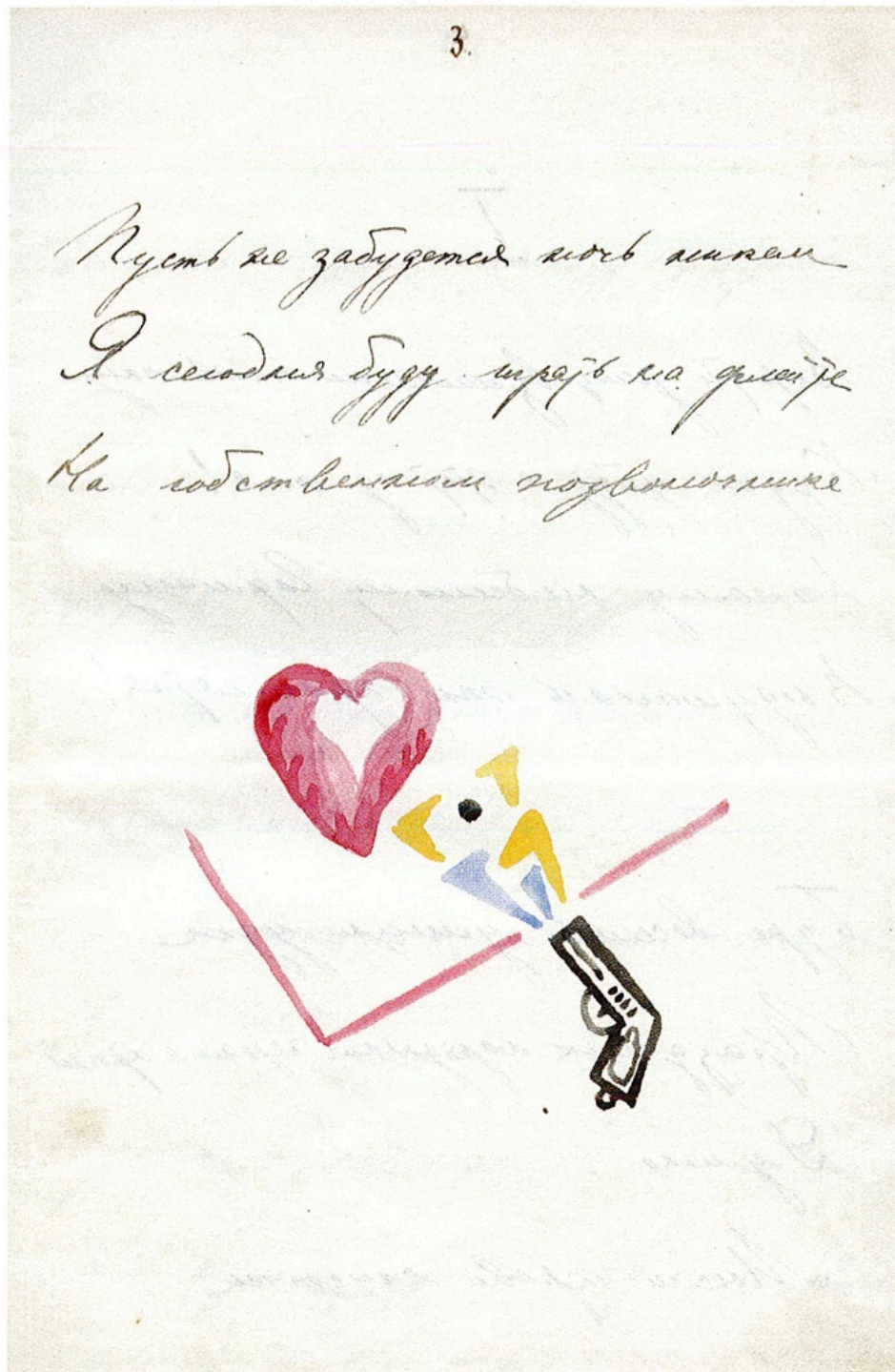
In this section I discuss how Mayakovsky further develops the theme of the destructive potential of romantic love, highlighting how the love object not only diverts narratives, but also takes over the poet's subjectivity. The focus of my analysis is the 1919 illustrated edition of the narrative poem *Backbone Flute*, which was originally published in 1916.<sup>161</sup> I show how in this later edition Mayakovsky not only thematizes the hijacking of the poet's subjectivity by romantic love, but also reflects the lover's claims to the poet's consciousness on the level of form. The struggle of two voices for narrative control in this edition is dramatized in the tension between the illustrations and the text. I argue that although the poet ultimately loses the struggle in verbal form, the illustrated images remain as evidence of the poet's silent protest against the overtaking of his subjectivity. As in Mayakovsky's other narrative poems, in *Backbone Flute* he presents the poet's crucifixion as a necessary solution and a path of escape. Here, though, the poet's self-sacrifice provides a way out of both individual subjectivity and romantic love, the latter of which is framed here as the pathological inversion of collective subjectivity. Romantic love, the poet suggests, is ultimately all consuming; while it can help displace the poet's ego from its selfish

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<sup>161</sup> See my discussion of the cover of the original 1916 edition of *Backbone Flute* in the section on Mayakovsky's lyrical "I." The poem was originally entitled "Verses for Her" (*Stikhi ei*) in reference to Lilia Brik (Sergeeva-Kliatis and Rossomakhin, "Fleita-pozvonochnik": kommentarii," 7). In 1919, the original title of the 1916 book publication, *Backbone Flute* (*Fleita pozvonochnik*), was adjusted to *The Backbone's Flute* (*Fleita pozvonichnika*). The title *The Backbone's Flute* was also used in the first uncensored publication of the poem in *Vse sochinennoe Vladimirov Mayakovskim: 1909–1919* (1919). To avoid confusion, I have chosen to use the same title, *Backbone Flute*, throughout this chapter, even though the focus of my analysis is the 1919 version.

primacy, it leaves no room for anything else. Echoing *Human Being*, *Backbone Flute* shows that romantic love obstructs the poet's love for all of humanity, preventing him from radically opening himself up to underrepresented voices that have no other means to speak than through the body of the poet.

The 1919 edition of *Backbone Flute* contains the complete, handwritten text of the 1916 poem, accompanied by five of Mayakovsky's illustrations in aquarelle and ink. The first image appears on the cover of the book, while the rest are placed one each at the end of each of the poem's four sections. The text is penned by Mayakovsky's lover, Lilia Brik. In the following discussion of the tensions between image and text, I draw on the illustrations as necessary to make my argument, rather than following the progression in which they appear in the book. However, I refer to them as "the cover illustration," "the first illustration," "the second illustration," and so on, in reference to the order that they appear in the book.



**Fig. 1.7 Vladimir Mayakovsky, illustration 1 from Mayakovsky's *Backbone Flute* (1919)**  
© 2018 The State Museum of V.V. Mayakovsky, Moscow

The first illustration, which appears at the end of the prologue, conveys a surplus of meaning vis-à-vis the text that it is called on to illustrate:

Все чаще думаю  
не поставить ли лучше  
точку пули в своем конце

More and more often I think  
wouldn't it be better to place  
the period of a bullet at my end<sup>162</sup>

The emotional content of the above stanza—the poet's confession of his flirtation with suicide—is downplayed through the implicit comparison of the poet to a sentence or a line of verse. Moreover, the stanza appears to reevaluate the compact, disturbing image of a self-inflicted gun wound as something positive, since periods (even in Russian Futurist practice) give content a sense of completion.<sup>163</sup> While the violent content of the poet's suggestion is pushed into the background in verse, the illustration, which itself acts as a kind of period to the entire prologue, makes this content more explicit. In the illustration, the poet's internal world represented by the heart, which notably appears on the same side of the boundary as the handwritten text, is separated from the outside by the boundary of a red line. The poet's "end" is depicted as the violation of that boundary by a gunshot, which propels the bullet towards the poet's heart. Note how the black bullet also acts as a period to both the image of the heart, which appears to be consumed by a fire, as well as to the lines of poetry above.<sup>164</sup> In this edition of the book, the bullet is the prologue's only period.<sup>165</sup> Thus, this illustration creates a kind of continuity between image and text on the one hand, and, on the other, provides a more concrete, literal image of the

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<sup>162</sup> Mayakovsky, *Fleita pozvonochnika* (Moscow, 1919), 1; McGavran 185. The text, including punctuation, capitalization, and line breaks, is reproduced in accordance with the illustrated 1919 edition.

<sup>163</sup> As I have shown above, while Mayakovsky avoided commas and other such superfluous punctuation that constrained the exchange of meanings between words, he continued to use the period throughout even his most experimental years.

<sup>164</sup> The flame-like contour of the heart evokes the verbal image of the poet's burning heart from *A Cloud*, as well as the "never-dying fire of unfathomable love" in *Human Being*. Moreover, this illustration echoes the heart on Mayakovsky's poster for the film, *Zakovannaia fil'moi* (*Enchained by Film*), which starred Lilia Brik.

<sup>165</sup> Although a period is required in several places in the prologue, it is completely avoided. There is only one punctuation mark in the prologue of the 1919—an exclamation point after the vocative "memory!" (Mayakovsky, *Fleita pozvonochnika*, 2).



poet's proposed suicide.<sup>166</sup> Moreover, vis-à-vis the content of the poem, the illustration also proleptically identifies the poet's heart as the problem and the troublemaker, something that does not become clear until the later pages in the book.



**Fig. 1.8 Vladimir Mayakovsky, illustration 3 from Mayakovsky's *Backbone Flute* (1919)**  
© 2018 The State Museum of V.V. Mayakovsky, Moscow

<sup>166</sup> The details of Mayakovsky's actual suicide—by means of a gunshot to the heart—make the image even more disturbingly concrete.

The third illustration in the book also initially appears to complete and concretize the content of the verses:

А там  
где тундрой мир вылинял  
где с северным ветром ведет река торги  
на цепь нацарапаю имя Лилино  
и цепь исцелю во мраке каторги

And there  
where the world fades into tundra  
where the river trades with the north wind  
then I'll scratch the name Lilia onto my chains  
and kiss them blind in the dark of the prison camp<sup>167</sup>

The poet claims that wherever he is sent, he will be faithful only to his lover, carving her name on his shackles and kissing it passionately, as if it were an object of religious devotion.

Apparently mirroring and literalizing the content, the illustration shows a geometric outline of a male figure bound in shackles. The name “Lilia,” spelled out on the shackles, points to the identity of this man with the lyrical “I”. The hat—an iconic image of the later Mayakovsky—further reinforces this identity.<sup>168</sup> Upon consideration, however, the illustration begins to transform, putting forth its own independent content. Note how the poet figure is leaning forward, as if in an attempt to run. The shackles on his hands and feet constrain his movement, pulling him back. The name on the shackles no longer appears as a prayer that helps the poet survive hard labor, as suggested by the verses, but an instrument of the poet’s confinement.

Curiously, one of the hand shackles, instead of showing the first syllable of Lilia’s name (as the other one does), displays its mirror image, *il*, a word which means “silt” in Russian.

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<sup>167</sup> Mayakovsky, *Fleita pozvonochnika*, 23–24; McGavran 191, trans. modified.

<sup>168</sup> While in his early Futurist days Mayakovsky sported a top hat, in the mid 1910s he replaced it with a *partiinaia kepka* (literally “party cap” but more colloquially a “worker’s cap” or “proletarian cap,” made fashionable by Lenin). In the 1919 edition of the *Backbone Flute*, Mayakovsky depicts himself twice as wearing a top hat: once on the cover and the second time in book illustration number two.

Besides being a slippery dark substance that hinders movement, “silt” connects this illustration to the horrific verbal image of the lover’s eyes as two deepening graves:

Ямами двух могил  
вырылись в лице твоём глаза

Могилы глубятся  
Нет дна там  
Кажется  
рухну с помоста дней

Like two graves  
your eyes have sunken into your face

The graves grow deeper  
There is no bottom  
It seems  
I might fall from the scaffold of days<sup>169</sup>

This image stands in stark contrast to the “flowering fields” of the lover’s eyes in *War and the World*, which the poet sees after resurrection.<sup>170</sup> Thus, while the text presents a rather flattering (for the beloved) picture of the poet’s love for his loved one, the illustration suggests a much more ambiguous relationship between the poet and his object of affection. In the illustration, the poet’s devotion is replaced by a feeling of entrapment, servitude, and inescapability.

The conflict of image and text in this edition of *Backbone Flute* can be read as a drama of two voices struggling for control over the narrative.<sup>171</sup> The textual voice represents the voice of the poet’s lover, Lilia, who wishes to present a flattering image of the poet’s hopeless love for

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<sup>169</sup> Mayakovsky, *Fleita pozvonochnika*, 29; McGavran 192–93.

<sup>170</sup> For a different treatment of similar themes, see the following lines from *War and the World*:

О, какие ветры, какого юга, свершили чудо сердцем погребенным? Расцветают глаза твои, два луга! Я кувыркаюсь в них, веселый ребенок.	Oh, by what winds of what southern clime was my buried heart to perform the miracle enabled? Your eyes bloom forth, two meadows sublime, and I romp in them, happy baby.
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(Mayakovsky, “Voina i mir,” *SS* 1: 287; Rottenberg 52).

<sup>171</sup> Cf. with the proliferation of voices in the poet’s mind as a result of romantically motivated rage and desperation in *A Cloud*. In contrast to *Backbone Flute*, the voices in *A Cloud* never threaten to take over the poet’s consciousness.

her, while the voice that contests the textual message in the images belongs to the poet himself. In this power struggle, Mayakovsky presents himself at a clear disadvantage, relegating his own message to the non-verbal images that silently protest his lover's narrative dominance.

One of the peculiarities of the 1919 edition of *Backbone Flute* is that it is handwritten by the woman to whom the poem is dedicated and whose name is repeatedly invoked in the text. From Mayakovsky's perspective, Lilia Brik was notoriously cruel to him, withholding her love in order to make him write.<sup>172</sup> The fact that this special edition is written in her hand, I argue, is neither an incidental gesture nor a practical solution. The presentation of the text in Lilia's handwriting implicitly cedes Mayakovsky's authorial control, reassigning it to her. In this edition, she is no longer the muse of a man's text, nor a passive object of his love; rather, by virtue of penning the text, she is presented as its author. It is also possible to read the presentation of the poem's text in Lilia's handwriting less subversively, since it appears to reinforce a set of traditional gender roles common in the literary process. According to these roles, the woman is a recorder (the scribe, the typist, or the copyist) of a male author's subjectivity. Here, however, the story that is all too familiar in Russian literature seems to be subverted. One only need to look at the cover of Mayakovsky and Rodchenko's *About That* (1923) to see that the woman, again Lilia Brik, is presented as an active subject, as a kind of camera eye, rather than a passive object.<sup>173</sup> In the 1919 edition of *Backbone Flute*, Lilia's implicit authorship, her control over Mayakovsky's creative process and her presence behind his poetry since 1915, is thus materialized in her writing of the poem's text.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Mayakovsky's *About That* (1923) was written during a two-months break that Lilia imposed on the poet, so that he would write (Jangfeldt, *Mayakovsky. A Biography*, 240–41).

<sup>173</sup> See Aleksandar Bošković's reading of this cover in "Photopoetry and the Bioscopic Book: Russian and Czech Avant-Garde Experiments of the 1920s" (PhD diss., the University of Michigan, 2013), 74–75.

<sup>174</sup> The historical context of post-revolutionary Russia is also significant, since it is a time of women's legal and political liberation.

Aside from this edition of *Backbone Flute*, the semantic component of handwriting was emphasized in Russian Futurist practice. As noted in the introductory chapter, handwriting was especially salient in collaborative Futurist books. In this context, the choice to write the poem out by hand and, moreover, to give the pen over to Lilia, who imbued her text with her own particular “mood,” points to the hidden meanings encoded in the act of writing itself.<sup>175</sup> Moreover, Lilia Brik’s implied authorship is reflected on the level of the poem’s plot, specifically in connection with the theme of demonic possession. From the first stanza of the *Backbone Flute*, the poet’s lover appears as a decidedly demonic presence: “In the mind of what divine Hoffmann / were you dreamt up, cursed woman?!”<sup>176</sup> Together with her husband, she is, quite possibly, the devil herself:

Если вдруг подкрасться к двери спальной  
 перекрестить над вами стёганье одеялово  
 знаю  
 запахнет шерстью паленной  
 и серой издымится мясо дьявола

If I could suddenly steal up to your bedroom door  
 and make the sign of the cross on the quilt above you  
 I know  
 the smell of burning fur would fill the air  
 and the flesh of the devil would give out sulfurous smoke<sup>177</sup>

As if trying to dispel the nightmarish vision, the poet interrupts his narrative to reject this demonic apparition of his lover directly:

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<sup>175</sup> In “The Letter as Such” (1913), Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov argued: “1. That mood changes one’s longhand during the process of writing. 2. That the longhand peculiarly modified by one’s mood conveys that mood to the reader, independently of the words. [...] A piece may be rewritten in longhand by someone else or by the creator himself, but if he does not relive the original experience, the piece will lose all the charm acquired by means of free handwriting during ‘the wild snowstorm of inspiration.’” (“Bukva kak takovaia” in Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii* VI: 339–42; tr. in Lawton, *Russian Futurism*, 63–64).

<sup>176</sup> “Какому небесному Гофману / выдумалась ты, проклятая?!” (Mayakovsky, “Fleita pozvonichnika,” 4; McGavran 185). Sergeeva-Kliatis and Rossomakhin explore the intertextual connection between Mayakovsky’s poem and Hoffman’s *Sandman* (“‘Fleita-pozvonochnik’: kommentarii,” 20–21, 26–27, 31, 39–46).

<sup>177</sup> Mayakovsky, “Fleita pozvonichnika,” 7; McGavran 186.

Не надо тебя  
Не хочу

I don't need you  
Don't want you<sup>178</sup>

But the poet's exclamations are in vain, as she takes over not only his heart, but also his narrative in Part II of *Backbone Flute*. This part begins with the poet preaching love of mankind, which, in a way that is reminiscent of *War and the World*, could bring together warring nations:

Люди  
слушайте  
Вылезьте из окопов  
После довоюете

Даже если  
от крови качающийся как Бахус  
пьяный бой идет  
слова любви и тогда не ветхи

People  
listen up  
Climb out of the trenches  
You can finish your fighting later

Even if  
staggering off blood like Bacchus  
a drunken battle is raging  
even then the words of love aren't defunct<sup>179</sup>

But the romantic love plot soon takes over this broader message of love:

Но мне не до розовой мякоти  
которую столетия выжуют  
Сегодня к новым ногам лягте  
Тебя пою  
накрашенную  
рыжую

But I'm in no mood for the rosy pulp  
which will be chewed up by centuries  
Lie down today at new feet

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<sup>178</sup> Mayakovsky, "Fleita pozvonichnika," 8–9; McGavran 187.

<sup>179</sup> Mayakovsky, "Fleita pozvonichnika," 15; McGavran 188–89.

You I sing  
my painted  
redhead<sup>180</sup>

From this point forward, the poet's lover takes over his narrative. As if he has no will of his own, he obsessively follows her everywhere she travels and even expresses his willingness to sacrifice himself at war in her name—a message that stands in stark contrast with his pacifist stance in *War and the World*.<sup>181</sup> She “robs” his “heart” of everything, so that the only thing he wants to do is “drink and drink the poison” of his own “poetry.”<sup>182</sup> Thus, to a certain extent the poem already implies that the poet imagines his own obsession as his lover's demonic possession of him. In the 1919 edition, this idea of possession is also communicated on the level of form, as the writing process becomes attributed to Mayakovsky's real life lover and the illustrations register the poet's silent protest against her narrative dominance.

Indeed, such a reading helps makes sense of Mayakovsky's allusion to Shakespeare in the title of *Backbone Flute*. Just as Guildenstern attempts to play Hamlet like a “pipe,” Lilia attempts and succeeds in playing the poet like a flute, directing him to sing of his love for her, rather than for humanity at large.<sup>183</sup> Similar to the first illustration, Mayakovsky's illustration for the cover literalizes the violence that is only implied in the text:

Я сегодня буду играть на флейте  
На собственном позвоночнике

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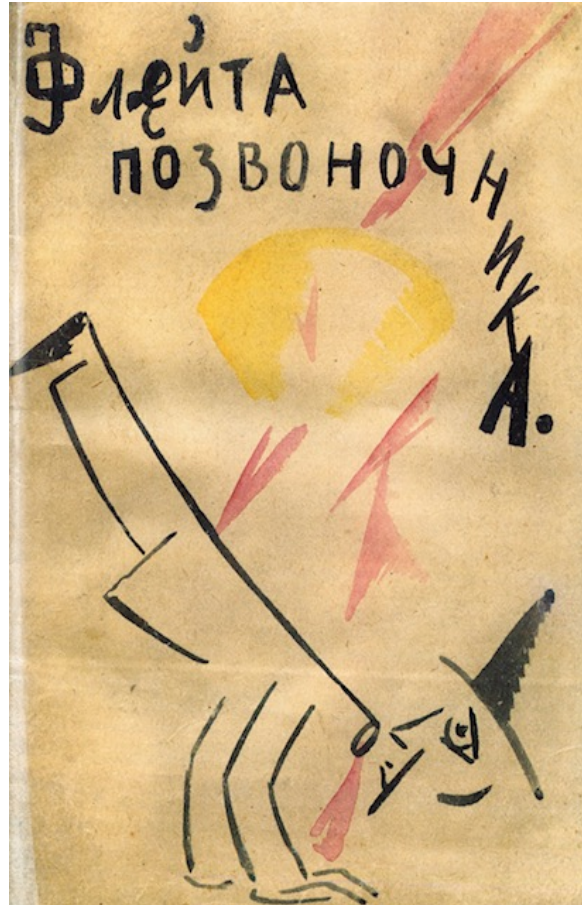
<sup>180</sup> Mayakovsky, “Fleita pozvonichnika,” 17; McGavran 189, trans. modified.

<sup>181</sup> On the one hand, the poet is presented as obsessively pursuing his lover everywhere she goes. On the other, the reader knows that this travelogue takes place only in the poet's mind. In this sense, his lover is pursuing him as an obsessive idea, rather than the other way around.

<sup>182</sup> “Я хочу одной отравы / пить и пить стихи” (Mayakovsky, “Fleita pozvonichnika,” 37).

<sup>183</sup> “Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass: and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ; [...] do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?” (Act III, Scene 2, lines 380–402). As Sergeeva-Kliatis and Rossomakhin note, other possible references in Mayakovsky's title include Benedikt Livshits's “Fleita Marsiia” (“Marsyas's flute,” 1911) and Konstantin Bal'mont's “Fleity iz chelovecheskikh kostei” (“Flutes from human bones,” 1908) (“Fleita-pozvonichnik' komentarii,” 19).

Today I will be playing the flute  
On my own backbone<sup>184</sup>



**Fig. 1.8 Vladimir Mayakovsky, cover illustration from Mayakovsky's *Backbone Flute* (1919) © 2018 The State Museum of V.V. Mayakovsky, Moscow**

Wearing a top hat, the poet's severed head appears to blow into his own upturned body as if into a flute. The blood that pours out from the poet's neck signals the violence involved in such a process, literalizing the metaphor. Note the poet's implicit orientation inward, into himself, which suggests a kind of self-indulgence. At the same time, the choice of instrument and Lilia's handwriting in the text point to her silent manipulation of this act, and in turn to her being the poet's creative in-spiration.<sup>185</sup>

<sup>184</sup> Mayakovsky, "Fleita pozvonichnika," 3; McGavran 185, trans. modified.

<sup>185</sup> The choice of an instrument played with the breath of the musician is not accidental.



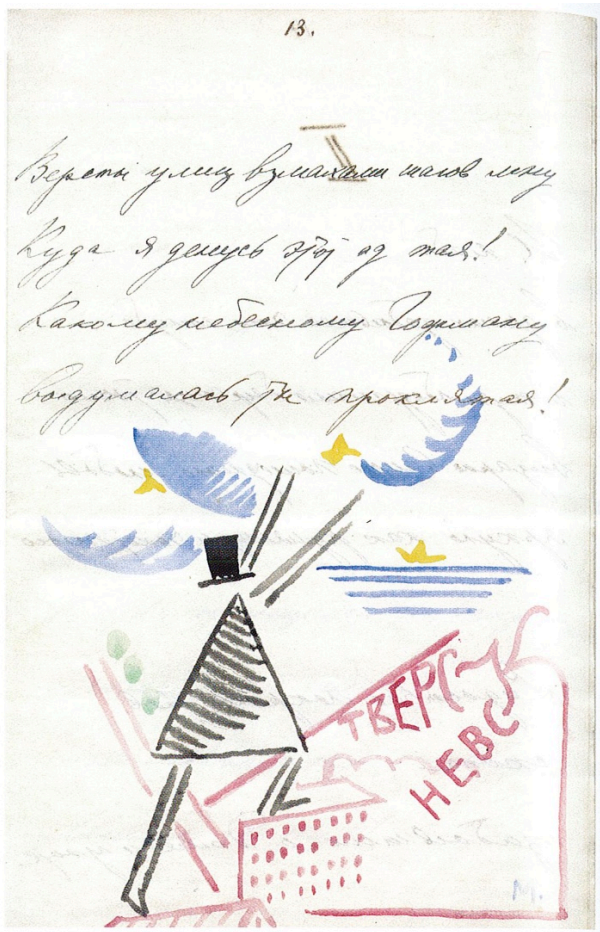
The ambiguous relationship of image and text continues to hold for the remaining two illustrations in the 1919 *Backbone Flute*. The second illustration ostensibly complements the following lines:

Если правда, что есть ты  
Боже  
[...]  
судейскую цепь надень  
Жди моего визита  
[...]  
Привяжи меня к кометам, как к хвостам лошадиным  
[...]  
Или вот что  
когда душа моя выселится  
выйдет на суд твой  
выхмурясь тупенько  
Ты  
млечный путь перекинув виселицей  
возьми и вздерни меня преступника  
Делай что хочешь  
Хочешь четвертуй  
Я сам тебе праведный руки вымою  
Только  
слышишь!  
убери проклятую ту  
которую сделал моей любимой!

If it's true that you exist  
God  
[...]  
then put on your judge's chain  
Await my visit  
[...]  
Or here's what  
when my soul moves out  
frowning like a little idiot  
and exits to meet your judgment  
You  
can put a gallows up over the milky way:  
take me and string me up like a criminal  
Do what you want  
You could even quarter me  
I myself as a righteous man will wash your hands of it  
Only

hear this!  
 take away that cursed one  
 the one you made my beloved!<sup>186</sup>

In these lines, the poet begs God to expedite his judgment, even at the cost of the gruesome physical torture that may await the poet. He would rather let his body be mutilated and dragged by comets (in a cosmic revision of Hector's punishment in the *Iliad*), than endure the overwhelming feeling of love. The accompanying illustration depicts the poet reaching for the clouds, as if in prayer for his salvation.



**Fig. 1.10 Vladimir Mayakovsky, illustration 3 from Mayakovsky's *Backbone Flute* (1919)**

© 2018 The State Museum of V.V. Mayakovsky, Moscow



**Fig. 1.11 Ivory plaque, Ascension (circa 400)**

<sup>186</sup> Mayakovsky, "Fleita pozvonichnika," 9–12; McGavran 187–88.

The image Mayakovsky selects, however, does not depict God's judgment, but rather iconographically alludes to scenes of Jesus' ascension, often depicted as a climb upward to his father.<sup>187</sup>

In reaching for his father, the poet hoists himself not on a mountainside, but on a cityscape. Notice that the streets of this cityscape are depicted in red, a color reserved for blood in the other illustrations. This image evokes the lines from the beginning of the poem "I crumple miles of street with the sweep of my paces," as well as the image of a writhing street from *A Cloud*.<sup>188</sup> In addition, the meeting of "Tversk(aia)" and "Nevsk(ii)," two main streets of Moscow and St. Petersburg respectively, at the intersection of the letter "K" phonetically and iconically reminds the reader of the word *korchit'sia* ("writhes"), used in reference to the "tongueless" street, as well as the poet himself.<sup>189</sup> Thus, the poet once again morphs into Jesus, as the depicted scene changes from a scene of judgment to one of ascension. In this sense, a more fitting place for this image would be at the end of the book, since ascension customarily comes after crucifixion. However, in Mayakovsky's "tetraptych," the images follow their own narrative logic. The poet reverses the order of the scenes and, by extension, the biblical story behind them, to place emphasis on the last scene—the scene of crucifixion.<sup>190</sup>

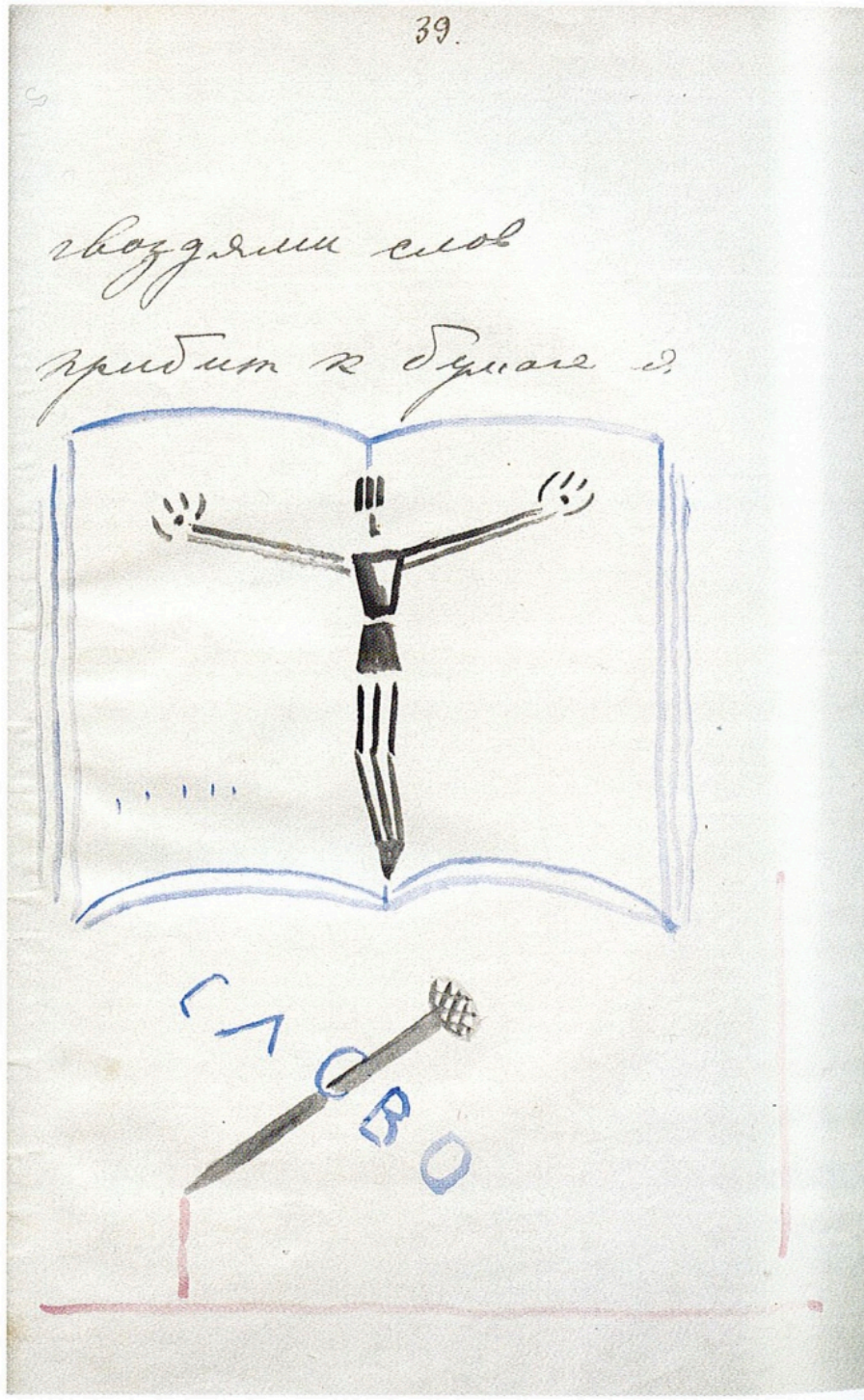
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<sup>187</sup> Herbert Kessler discusses this iconographic tradition of depicting ascension in "The Christian Realm: Narrative Representations," in Kurt Weitzmann, ed. *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum, 1977), 454.

<sup>188</sup> "Версты улиц взмахами шагов мну" (Mayakovsky, "Fleita pozvonichnika," 4; McGavran 188).

<sup>189</sup> The following images from *A Cloud* referred to the street and the poet respectively: "улица корчится безъязыкая" and "жилистая громадина / стонет / корчится." Mayakovsky repeatedly depicts the violence of modernization in images that confine natural landscape. Cf. with the directive of the "den of bankers" in *Human Being*: "Заприте небо в провода! / Скрутите землю в улицы!" ("Lock up the sky into cables tight, / twist up the earth into streets, stultifying!" Rottenberg 61).

<sup>190</sup> Not counting the cover, the number of images in the book is four.



**Fig. 1.12 Vladimir Mayakovsky, illustration 4 from Mayakovsky's *Backbone Flute* (1919)**  
© 2018 The State Museum of V.V. Mayakovsky, Moscow

The above illustration concludes the 1919 edition of *Backbone Flute*, apparently commenting on the following stanza:

В праздник красьте сегодняшнее число  
Творишь  
распятью равная магия  
Видите  
гвоздями слов  
прибит к бумаге я

Paint today's date like a holiday  
Come into creation  
magic equal to the crucifixion  
You see  
I am nailed with words  
to the paper<sup>191</sup>

Prompted by these lines, the reader identifies the trapezoidal Christ figure in the illustration with the lyrical “I” or the poet himself, who is crucified on the pages of an open book. The last two lines (“I am nailed with words / to the paper”) encourage the reader to imagine the nails of the poet’s crucifixion as words. Visually, the equivalency between words and nails is established in the bottom pane of the image, which features the word “word” (“*slovo*”) with a nail driven through it, making explicit the visual interpenetration of the stanza’s lines.

At the same time, the illustration makes its own statement, independent of the text. Rather than lending itself to the reading offered by the text, the word-nail image also suggests an alternative parallelism—between the word and the poet, who are both victims of a crucifixion. Note that the nail is not driven through the empty center of the letter O, but rather through the side of the letter or its “body.” Such a reading is further suggested by the blood that drips down from the nail and fills the bottom of the page. Moreover, on the right, a thin red line extends upward toward the book, suggesting that the blood paradoxically defies the rules of gravity and appears to flow upward as well.<sup>192</sup> The fate of the word could thus be seen as mirroring the fate of the poet.

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<sup>191</sup> Mayakovsky, *Fleita pozvonichnika*, 38–39; McGavran 195.

<sup>192</sup> In religious iconography seeping or gushing blood points to the continued life of Christ despite his death.



Mayakovsky's color symbolism likewise connects the word, colored blue, to the book in the upper plane of the illustration as well as to the dots on the page, which evoke lines of poetry and possibly allude to censorship (since censored lines were often represented by dots).<sup>193</sup> Just like the number of letters in the word *slovo*, the dots number five, possibly suggesting that the word at the bottom of the page has been violently ripped out of the book. Finally, Mayakovsky's illustration also evokes the cover of *Human Being*, analyzed in the previous section. Here, the geometric figure that represents the poet replaces the letter crucifix made of "Mayakovsky" and the word "human being." In both cases, the letter O, with its connotations of the zero men of Russian literature, is brought into the center of attention. Thus, the poet, the word, the human being all become interconnected in a complex interrelation of visual metaphors and are implicitly equated with each other.

The final placement of this illustration, as well as the violation of the icon narrative implied by the placement of ascension before crucifixion, points to the importance of this image for the poet's narrative in *Backbone Flute*. In my reading, Mayakovsky chooses to end on this image in order to emphasize the necessity of crucifixion, understood as self-sacrifice, involved in ridding himself of both his own individual consciousness, as well as of the pathological identification with his lover that takes over his "I". Only the poet's crucifixion can free him from the earthly chains in which romantic love has confined him. The poet's self-sacrifice allows him to readjust his narrative to focus on more urgent themes, allowing him to make room for other voices within the body of his narratives. That words in *Backbone Flute* are both the tools of crucifixion as well as the crucified body themselves points to the centrality of language in both performing the sacrifice and finding a more democratic form of representation.

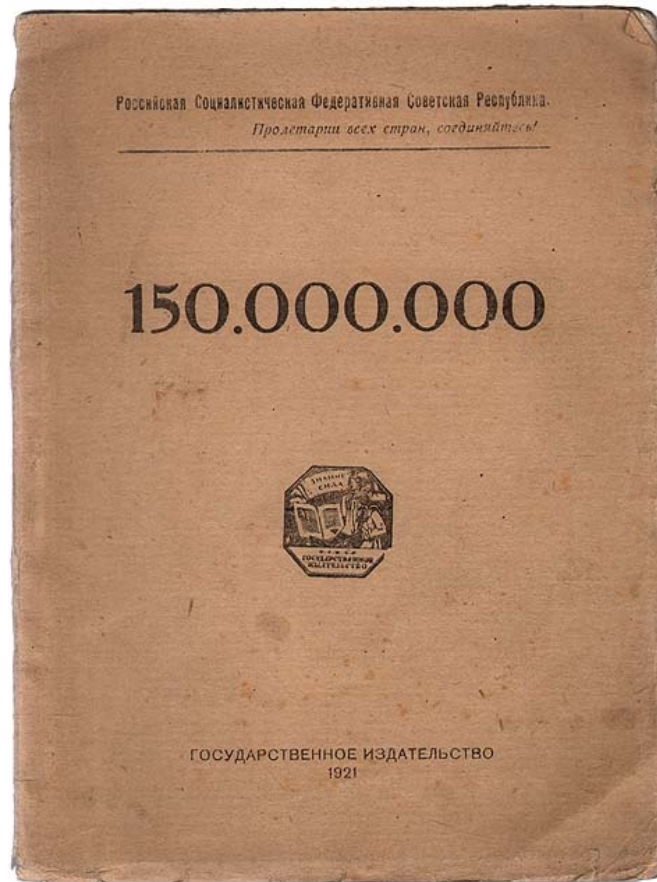
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<sup>193</sup> In the illustrated *Backbone Flute* the color blue is also used to represent the divine essence of clouds. Thus, the word in the illustrations is not the stuff of black magic, as suggested by the text, but the stuff of the heavens.



narrative, these figures become the poet’s “I”. This glimpse of democratic representation from *Human Being* becomes the central, sustained artistic task of *150,000,000*, Mayakovsky’s longest poem to date, written in 1919–1920.

On the cover of the first complete book edition of *150,000,000*, one finds that the zeros from the cover of *Human Being* have multiplied and expanded—notably—in a horizontal direction.<sup>196</sup>



**Fig. 1.13 Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo [State Publishing House], cover of the first edition of Mayakovsky's *150,000,000* (1921)**

<sup>196</sup> Prior to the book publication, the poem was excerpted in *Khudozhestvennoe slovo* (Moscow, 1920), a journal run by the *Narodnyi komissariat prosveshcheniia* (the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment). Although there is no definitive information about who designed this particular cover, it seems clear that Mayakovsky was involved in the process. In addition to designing at least 12 of his own book covers (and, possibly, as many as 17), Mayakovsky was actively involved in directing the visions and designs of others. According to Rossomakhin, the poet often provided his own sketches of covers to be reinterpreted by others. Moreover, he often insisted that he approve the external form of his books before they were printed (Rossomakhin, *Magicheskie*, 48).



Here, however, the God-Mayakovsky-author triad, which had occupied the vertical position on the cover of *Human Being*, has been erased. Only the horizontal, earthly plane—the position of the “human being”—remains. Later editions that replace the zeros with the word “million” neglect the original cover’s appeal to the zero-men of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Critical Realism and ignore the significance of the horizontal space these zeros take up.

Throughout the 1910s, as I have shown, Mayakovsky’s name was accorded a prominent place not only within the body of his texts, but also on the covers of his books, which often made his name as important as—if not more important than—the title. On the cover of the first edition of *150,000,000*, the author’s name has not only ceded its position of prominence, it has disappeared entirely: no mention of the author’s name can be found on the cover at all, or anywhere in the book.<sup>197</sup> In addition to supporting the idea of nameless collective creativity that is explored in the poem’s text, the omission of authorship gestures toward the poem’s alliance with one of the founding documents of the new Soviet society, *The Communist Manifesto*. Originally circulated as an anonymous political pamphlet (although written by Marx and Engels), *The Communist Manifesto* presented itself as the voice of the people, “enacting, theatrically, the unity of the proletariat.”<sup>198</sup> By fortuitous coincidence, the last line of the *Manifesto* crowns the cover of *150,000,000*, visually suggesting that the poem is a continuation of the *Manifesto*, a new catechism for Soviet Russia that belongs in the pantheon of founding documents, or, at least, to their exegetical apparatus.<sup>199</sup> Shedding the performance of religious

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<sup>197</sup> The only trace of the author’s name in the entire book is its partial appearance in the word “*mayak*” (“lighthouse”) twice in the text. As I have noted above, Mayakovsky used this word as a playful nickname for himself that alluded to the poet’s physical height, as well as his isolation.

<sup>198</sup> Martin Puchner explains that the names of Engels and Marx, who took it upon themselves to speak on behalf of the proletariat, were added only when the *Manifesto* became a founding document (Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution. Marx, Manifestoes, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006), 33–35).

<sup>199</sup> The inclusion of the slogan “proletariat of the world, unite!” was a standard feature of all GIZ publications from that time. It is safe to assume that the decision to include this line at the top of Mayakovsky’s poem belongs to the

sacrality characteristic of Mayakovsky's earlier texts, *150,000,000* appeals to the new political sacred. In this appeal, *150,000,000* not only seeks to secure its own legitimacy in the new regime, but also gestures towards its own political significance.

The intentional omission of the author's name on the cover is explained and affirmed by the very first line of the poem: "*150.000.000 mastera etoi poemy imia.*"<sup>200</sup> One could untangle the syntax of this line as, "150,000,000 is the name of the master of this poem" ("*150.000.000—imia mastera etoi poemy*"). At first sight, however, this line presents itself to the reader as a grammatical violation of the Russian language, since the use of the number "one hundred and fifty million" normally requires a genitive plural (*masterov*), rather than the genitive singular or the nominative plural (*mastera*) that immediately follows it. The grammatical tension that results from the synchystic entanglement requires a non-linear reading, slowing readers down, alerting them, through form, to the conceptual difficulty of the expressed content; it is the Futurist "splintery texture" (*zanzistaia poverkhnost'*) in the service of politicized content.

Mayakovsky's vision of collective authorship in this poem includes not only the material labor of publishing a book, as suggested by the metaphor "This edition is printed [...] on the cobblestones of paper squares," but, more importantly, the composition itself:<sup>201</sup>

Кто назовет земли гениального *автора*?  
Так  
и этой  
моей  
поэмы  
никто не *сочинитель*.

Who can name the ingenious *author* of the earth?

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publisher, rather than to Mayakovsky. Nevertheless, this design feature certainly affects the reader's experience and creates additional meaning, even if not intended by the author himself.

<sup>200</sup> Vladimir Mayakovsky, *150.000.000* (Moscow: GIZ, 1921), 3. When citing the original 1921 edition, I reproduce the punctuation, line breaks, and capitalization of this edition.

<sup>201</sup> Ротационной шагов / в булыжном верже площадей / напечатано это издание. (Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 3). Here Mayakovsky's metaphor presents the people's revolutionary march as the printing process of this book.

So  
of this  
my  
poem  
no one is the *creator*.<sup>202</sup>

The negative assertion that “no one is the *creator*” paradoxically functions as an affirmation of collective authorship. The word “сочинитель” (“composer” or “creator”) points to the presence of collectivity in the very process of creation, not just in the material afterlife of a written poem.<sup>203</sup> As the stanza suggests, just as the earth’s authorship (previously falsely attributed to God) has been corrected in the modern times, so has the authorship of this poem been dispersed into the body of the 150,000,000.<sup>204</sup>

After the poem’s collective authorship has been established, *150,000,000* transforms into a collective song of people, animals, and even inanimate objects like trains, roads, villages, and broken objects, as they march together to a party meeting. In the original 1921 edition, the song is divided into two parts by the way Mayakovsky arranges text on the pages: he singles out certain stanzas, which are printed on a separate page from the rest of the text and in slightly larger font. The song is followed by a four-part epic narrative, likewise divided into sections by textual arrangement. The last part of the poem returns to the collective song. Unlike his previous narrative poems, Mayakovsky does not explicitly divide *150,000,000* into parts, that is, none of the typographically separated parts are labeled or titled individually; nevertheless, in my discussion I will refer to them as parts for practical purposes.

The concept of collective creativity is also reflected in the genre of *150,000,000*. Before settling on the title *150,000,000*, Mayakovsky considered the possible alternates “Bylina about

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<sup>202</sup> Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 4; my emphases; McGavran 196.

<sup>203</sup> Note also the evocation of collective creativity in the etymology of the word *sochinitel’*, which can be etymologically translated as “co-maker.”

<sup>204</sup> Mayakovsky’s use of the negation “no one is the composer” (“*nikto ne sochinitel’*”) also parodically refers to and grammatically literalizes apophatic descriptions of God, to whom he implicitly compares himself.

Ivan” and “Ivan Bylina. The epic of the revolution,” both of which draw attention to the centrality of the epic genre to this poem.<sup>205</sup> The poem’s middle sections (III, IV, V, VI), as I noted, are stylized as epic poetry. They mix features of Greek epics with the East Slavic *bylina*, as well as with elements of folk tales (*skazka*).<sup>206</sup> In other words, Mayakovsky deliberately selects genres connected to the collective creativity of oral cultures.<sup>207</sup> But while perfectly appropriate for the idea of supra-individual authorship, the epic, at first sight, appears inadequate to Mayakovsky’s chosen chronotope—the Soviet Russia of his own historical time. Firmly located in the distant past, the epic cannot sing of the present in which the singer and his listeners are located.<sup>208</sup> In this sense, the epic genre seems incongruous with Mayakovsky’s goal to write about his own historical moment. In order to heroize the present in the same way the epic approaches the past, Mayakovsky makes an adjustment: he displaces the narrative position into the future, thereby relocating the present into the past. This displacement allows the collective poet to speak about the present—the events of the 1917 Revolution and the Russian Civil War—as if about the distant heroic past.

Indications that the narrative position of *150,000,000* is located in the future are scattered throughout the text. For example, in the first part, which documents the march and the songs of

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<sup>205</sup> Mayakovsky, “Kommentarii,” *SS* 1: 429.

<sup>206</sup> Mayakovsky evokes Homer throughout the poem:

В песне	Resurrect them
миф о героях Гомера	in song—
история Трои	the myth of Homer’s heroes,
до неузнаваемости раздутая	the story of Troy,
воскресни!	inflated beyond recognition!

(39; these lines appear on a separate page that functions as a chapter heading; Mc Gavran224)

The very last lines of the poem read:

Это тебе	It’s for you,
революций кровавая Илиада.	the bloody Iliad of revolutions!
Голодных годов Одиссея тебе!	The Odyssey of hungry years is for you!

(70; Mc Gavran 247)

<sup>207</sup> Petr Bogatyrev and Roman Jakobson, “Folklore as a Special Form of Creativity” in *The Prague School. Selected Writings, 1929–1946*, ed. Peter Steiner (Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 1982), 32-46.

<sup>208</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel” in *Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 1981), 15–17.

people, animals, and things, the collective poet notes that “everything buzzed in the place where Russia *once* stood,” implying that Russia stands no more.<sup>209</sup> This observation gains an increasingly apocalyptic significance as the narrative unfolds:

Как нами написано  
мир будет таков  
и в среду,  
и в прошлом,  
и ныне  
и присно  
и завтра  
и дальше  
во веки веков!

As we have written,  
so shall the world be:  
on Wednesday,  
in the past,  
today,  
and forever,  
and tomorrow,  
and further,  
world without end.<sup>210</sup>

The collective voice appropriates religious discourse to attribute apocalyptic significance to the described event. The implicit suggestion is that the song of the marching collective is eternal because “time” is “no more.”<sup>211</sup> However, here and in *War and the World*, the apocalypse evokes an earthly utopia, suggesting that the future is here and now.

The concluding part of *150,000,000*, which returns to the song of the collective, makes the narrative position of the future even more explicit:

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<sup>209</sup> “И гудело над местом / где стояла когда-то Россия” (Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 10).

<sup>210</sup> Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 18; McGavran 208.

<sup>211</sup> Revelation 10:6. Cf. the apocalyptic image of trumpets that announce the arrival of the future:

будущее загорланило триллионом труб	the future bawled out through a trillion horns:
«Авелем называйте нас	“Whether you call us Abel
или Каином	or Cain,
разница какая нам.	we couldn’t care less!
Будущее наступило.	The future is here!
Будущее победитель.	The future is victorious!

(Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 63; McGavran 244, translation modified)

История  
в этой главе  
как на ладони бег твой.  
Голодая и ноя  
города расступаются  
и над пылью проспектовой  
солнцем встает бытие иное.

Год с нескончаемыми нулями.  
Праздник в святцах не имеющий чина.  
Выфлажено все.  
И люди  
и строения.  
Может быть  
октябрьской революции сотая годовщина  
может быть  
просто  
изумительнейшее настроение.

History,  
your fast current shows clearly  
in this chapter.  
Starving and aching,  
the cities make way,  
and above the dust of their avenues,  
like a sun it rises: another existence.

A year with interminable zeroes.  
A holiday not indicated  
on any church calendar.  
Everything's decked out in flags,  
both people  
and buildings.  
Maybe it's the hundredth anniversary  
of the October Revolution,  
or maybe everyone  
is just  
in one hell of a good mood.<sup>212</sup>

The quick pace of “history” in this “chapter” bears witness to the arrival of a different kind of existence. The mention of the centenary of the Revolution places the narrative position of the

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<sup>212</sup> Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 64; McGavran 244. While the first quoted stanza signals a break from the previous epic sections, the second signals the resumption of the collective song.

epic singer more specifically, in the 2000s, “with [their] endless zeros.”<sup>213</sup> Such manipulation of the narrative position serves two goals. First, as I noted, it enables representation of contemporary reality in epic terms. Second, the displacement of the narrative position into the future implies that what does not yet exist in contemporary reality already exists in the future. That is, it allows the narrative voice to speak from a position where democratic representation, embodied in the idea of collective creativity, has already been realized, has become fact.

On the level of plot, Mayakovsky’s present, framed as an epic past, describes the conflict of two civilizations: America, represented by Woodrow Wilson, president of the United States at the time Mayakovsky wrote this poem, and Soviet Russia, represented by Ivan.<sup>214</sup> Instead of being divided by ethnic or national borders, however, the two civilizations are divided by conflicting ideologies of capitalism and communism. They are respectively coded with the colors white and red. The four middle sections of *150,000,000* are devoted to depicting the conflict between the red and white sides. As bogatyr-like giant Ivan makes his way toward America, his mere presence in other parts of the world causes unrest and revolution. Ivan soon arrives on the shores of Lake Michigan to face the fat capitalist Wilson in hand-to-hand combat. In a

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<sup>213</sup> Though the centennial of the Revolution falls on 2017, which has only one zero, it should be noted that Mayakovsky always favored the expressive quality of his images, rather than their consistency. Moreover, the precise date of the future does not seem important to Mayakovsky, as indicated by his conditionals: “*Maybe* it’s the hundredth anniversary / of the October Revolution, / or *maybe* everyone / is just / in one hell of a good mood” (my emphasis). Just like the events take place in the epic some time in the past, the narrative position of the poet in this text is some time in the future. The zeros of the future years also echo the zeros of the cover.

<sup>214</sup> Mayakovsky frames the clash of civilizations in manichean terms:

Одни к Ивану бегут	Some ran to Ivan
с простертыми	with outstretched
руками—	arms,
другие к Вильсону стремглав.	others to Wilson in a headlong dash.
[...]	[...]
уничтожились все середины—	all middles had been destroyed—
нет на земле никаких средин.	there was no middle ground left on earth.

And later:

Запела земли половина красную песню.	Half the earth belted out a red song.
Земли половина белую песню запела.	The other half, a white.

(Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 55; McGavran 227)

characteristically sly manner, Wilson uses technology to gain advantage over his barehanded opponent and succeeds in cutting Ivan open. But this seemingly fatal wound is only an apparent victory for Wilson: Ivan unleashes a greater horror on the city of Chicago, as things, machines, and people, climb out of his body and storm Wilson's version of the "Winter Palace," the "Chipel Strong Hotel." Faced with a massive rebellion, where even his own mistreated furniture turns on him, Wilson enlists the help of three horsemen of the apocalypse: hunger, biological weapons, and—most dangerous of all—ideas.<sup>215</sup> Each is successfully countered by the power of Ivan's collective body and brain.

In these four middle sections of *150,000,000*, Mayakovsky employs a number of epic narrative devices, such as extended similes, suspenseful retardation of plot, simultaneous narration that switches between parallel scenes in different locations, culmination of the narrative in an epic battle, among others. The epic device that is of particular interest to my argument is ekphrasis, which Mayakovsky employs, on the one hand, to create verbal images that do not and cannot exist in reality, and, on the other, to invoke existing visual representations in order to help the reader imagine the impossible. I argue that Mayakovsky's description of Ivan is just such an instance of ekphrasis in *150,000,000*. On the one hand, Ivan's description presents the reader with a cognitive challenge: to imagine a collective body that speaks and acts as one person. On the other, it appeals to a number of existing visual representations: depictions of *bogatyr*s in paintings and book illustrations, the verbal image of the Trojan horse from Greek and Latin epics, and, finally, the highly politicized image of the Leviathan. All these images, as I will show, are adjusted to the particular narrative needs of the poem.

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<sup>215</sup> The three horsemen invoked here apparently correspond to famine, pestilence, and death (Revelations 6:1–8). Wilson does not enlist the help of the second horseman who represents war, perhaps because the idea of war is already implicit in the conflict of civilizations. Moreover, the choice of the number three also points to the significance of fairy tales for *150,000,000*.



The readers' first encounter with Ivan prompts them to visualize the rich visual representations of *bogatyrs*, who are usually depicted as enormous in size and whose bodies are integrally tied to the land.<sup>216</sup> Consider the following image, which introduces the character of Ivan:

Россия  
вся  
единый Иван  
и рука  
у него—  
Нева  
а пятки — каспийские степи.

all  
of Russia  
is a single Ivan,  
and his  
arm  
is the Neva,  
his heels, the Caspian steppe.<sup>217</sup>

The enormous body of the *bogatyrs* stretches from the north to the south, establishing an equivalence between the land of Russia and his body. Before Ivan springs into action, however, he first has to be vivified by Lenin, in an image reminiscent of both Ilya Muromets, who could not walk until he became an epic hero, and Frankenstein:

Сердце ж было так его громоздко  
что Ленин еле мог его раскачивать.

His heart was so big and cumbersome  
that even Lenin could hardly shake it up.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> In studies of the East Slavic epic, the *bogatyrs* are often divided into generations. The images of the “older” *bogatyrs*, who are particularly enormous in size, like Sviatogor or Volkh, are said to be rooted in myths. The “heroic” cycle of the epic is said to properly begin with the “younger” *bogatyrs*, like Ilya Muromets, Dobrynia Nikitich, and Aliosha Popovich, who likewise have larger than human proportions, but who are smaller than their mythical forebears (V.E. Kalugin, *Predislovie* [foreword] to *Byliny*, ed. V.E. Kalugin [Moscow: Sovremennik, 1980], 20). Mayakovsky’s portrayal of Ivan seems to evoke both generations, though genre links him to the younger *bogatyrs* more closely. The intimate connection between *bogatyrs*’ bodies and land is often depicted as spilled blood of the *bogatyrs*, which forms the rivers of the land they protect (and continues to protect it from invasion even after their death). See, for example, *byliny* concerning Sukhman (or Sukhmatii) and the Dunai.

<sup>217</sup> Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 19; McGavran 209.

But as soon as Mayakovsky introduces this image of the *bogatyr*, he begins to combine it with others in search of more fitting representations of the collective body. As Ivan begins to make his trip across the world to America, he accumulates people's bodies inside him, becoming a human

Trojan Horse:

а эти  
вошли  
ввалились в Ивана  
и в нем разлеглись  
как матросы в каюте.

but some  
made it in  
tumbled into Ivan  
and settled inside him  
like sailors in a stateroom.<sup>219</sup>

The image of the Trojan horse is evoked once more when Wilson unwittingly unleashes the horse's contents. After cutting Ivan open,

Встал Вильсон и ждет—  
кровь должна б  
а из  
раны  
вдруг  
человек полез.

Wilson stood and waited—  
there should have been blood  
but from  
the wound,  
suddenly man  
popped out.<sup>220</sup>

Although grammatically correct, the phrase “человек полез” (literally, “man started climbing out”) employs the less common use of the singular “man” to mean plural “people.” The

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<sup>218</sup> Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 20; McGavran 210.

<sup>219</sup> Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 42; McGavran 226.

<sup>220</sup> Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 50; McGavran 234; trans. slightly modified.

grammatical number highlights Mayakovsky’s game of unity in plurality in Ivan, whose image is gradually transformed into the frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (itself a product of collaborative creativity between Hobbes who commissioned the image and Abraham Bosse who executed it):



**Fig. 1.14 Abraham Bosse, top half of the frontispiece to the first edition of Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651).**

Mayakovsky’s repeated insistence on the unity of the people in the body of Ivan, as well as his choice of the name “Ivan,” which rhymes with Leviathan, especially when pronounced with the Russian stress on the last syllable (*Leviafán*), evoke Hobbes’ utopian imagination of an ideal(ly ruled) collectivity, symbolically represented in the above image. However, unlike

Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Mayakovsky's vision lacks a sovereign as the ruling head. Ivan is a collective body through and through:

Совнарком -  
его частица мозга

The council of commissars  
is just a tiny piece of Ivan's brain<sup>221</sup>

Even Ivan's brain is composed of a collectivity. The people in Mayakovsky's *Leviathan* look outward, confronting the onlooker face to face, rather than looking inward to some higher authority, as in the illustration to Hobbes's work. They are not subjects of a sovereign, but, collectively, they are the sovereign himself. Moreover, within the radically accepting collective, one can find not only people, but previously voiceless beings and things: "houses, battleships, horses."<sup>222</sup> The inscription, "There is no power on earth to be compared to him. Job 41:24," found at the top of the *Leviathan* frontispiece, becomes an apt descriptor of the *bogatyr*-like, undefeatable power of the collective.

Moreover, Mayakovsky's *Leviathan* is divested of the symbols of the church and state, the crozier and the sword, which the *Leviathan* from Hobbes's frontispiece bears in his hands. Mayakovsky repeatedly emphasizes that Ivan fights with his bare hands, in contrast to his technologically enhanced opponent Wilson:

У того -  
револьверы  
в четыре курка,  
сабля  
в семьдесят лезвий гнута,  
а у этого -  
рука  
и еще рука  
да и та  
за пояс ткнута.

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<sup>221</sup> Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 20; McGavran 210.

<sup>222</sup> Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 50.

One contestant  
had revolvers  
with four triggers,  
a saber  
bent into seventy blades,  
while the other  
had only  
his two bare hands  
one of which  
was even tucked under his belt.<sup>223</sup>

While Ivan comes bare-handed, Wilson, in a parodic parallel to the illustrated image of Hobbes' Leviathan, bears a saber-sword. In sum, the image of Ivan, which acts as a kind of ekphrasis of the collective body, gradually morphs from a more traditional image of the *bogatyr* into the image of a Trojan horse into the ideal of a communist Leviathan.

Like the ekphrastic images of epics, the composite image of the collective Ivan conjures visions impossible to realize outside of verbal form.<sup>224</sup> As a kind of impossible object, Ivan represents both the desired communist political organization, as well as Mayakovsky's vision of collective authorship.<sup>225</sup> While Mayakovsky eschews his own authorship on the cover of *150,000,000* and in the rest of the book, he repeatedly draws parallels between his fictionalized self and Ivan. The enormous size of Ivan evokes not only the *bogatyrs*, but also Mayakovsky's self-descriptions:

Красноармейца можно отступить заставить  
коммуниста сдавить в тюремный гнет  
но такого  
в какой удержишь заставе  
если  
такой  
шагнет?!

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<sup>223</sup> Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 49; McGavran 233.

<sup>224</sup> For a Classical example of such ekphrasis, see the description of Aeneas's shield in Book VIII of Vergil's *Aeneid*. What is depicted on the shield is the future history of Rome, which Aeneas will not witness and cannot understand.

<sup>225</sup> "Communist" here should be understood as the next stage of socialism.

Гром разодрал побережий уши  
и брызги взметнулись земель за тридевять  
когда Иван  
шаги обрушив,  
пошел  
грозою вселенную выдвинуть.

You can force a Red Army soldier to retreat  
or squeeze a communist into a prison yoke,  
but how do you fence in  
someone like this  
once someone like this  
takes a step?!  
Thunder tore up the seashores' ears,  
and splashes shot up all over the land,  
when Ivan,  
his heavy steps raining down,  
set off  
like a storm to stun the universe.<sup>226</sup>

Many of these descriptors of Ivan—the gargantuan size of the hero, the desire and the inability of others to contain him, as well as the comparison of his footsteps to “thunder”—also index Mayakovsky. As I have noted, in *A Cloud in Pants* Mayakovsky repeatedly describes himself as an oversized, barely-human body (“*glyba*” and “*gromadina*”). In many of the poems discussed earlier in this chapter, Mayakovsky speaks of his attempts to break out of the earthly chains that confine him in similar figurative language. Finally, the poet frequently compares the sound of his own voice to thunder.<sup>227</sup>

In addition to these parallels, Mayakovsky repeatedly refers to Ivan as *chelovek* (“human being”)—a word that was code for “the poet” in *A Cloud*, *War and the World*, and *Human*

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<sup>226</sup> Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 20; McGavran 210.

<sup>227</sup> Cf. “МИР ОГРОМИВ МОЩЬЮ ГОЛОСА / ИДУ КРАСИВЫЙ ДВАДЦАТИДВУХЛЕТНИЙ.” (Mayakovsky, *Oblako*, 7; “I WALK ALONG HANDSOME TWENTY-TWO YEARS OLD / I THREATEN THE WORLD WITH MY POWERFUL VOICE” Womack 17). While such comparison of the poet’s voice to thunder is not unique to Mayakovsky, it is nevertheless an integral part of Mayakovsky’s self-image within his body of poetry.

*Being*.<sup>228</sup> Moreover, before Ivan makes his first appearance in the poem, the chorus of human and non-human voices calls on a “god made of flesh”:

Выйдь  
не из звездного  
нежного ложа  
Боже железный  
огненный боже,  
Боже не Марсов  
Нептунов и Вег  
*Боже из мяса –*  
*Бог-человек!*  
Звездам на мель  
не загнанный ввысь  
земной  
между нами  
выйди,  
явись!

Не тот, который  
«иже еси на небесех»

Come out,  
but not from some tender  
bed of stars,  
God of iron,  
fiery God,  
God not of Neptunes,  
Vegas, and Mars,  
but God made of flesh—  
God-man!  
Not driven up high  
onto the stars seashores,  
but earthly,  
among us,  
come out—  
appear!

Not the one  
“who art in heaven.”<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> “человек—/ голова в Казбек!” (Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 41). (“a man, / his head as high as Kazbek!” McGavran 225)

<sup>229</sup> Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 14–15; McGavran 204–205; trans. slightly modified.

Note how Mayakovsky repurposes the language that was such an integral part of his own poetic self-image in earlier poems to describe Ivan. The words “god made of flesh” allude to the poet-Jesus analogy from *A Cloud* and the birth of Mayakovsky in *Human Being*, while the compound *bog-chelovek* evokes the idea of *bogochelovek*, which was playfully reinterpreted on the cover of the *Human Being*. Moreover, in the above stanza Mayakovsky sets these words into a folk form, which evokes fairy tale spells (*zaklinanie*) more than religious prayers. In this way, Mayakovsky transforms himself into Ivan, who is simultaneously the epic hero of the middle parts of the poem, as well as Ivan the Fool of folk tales.

Moreover, in an alternate version, Mayakovsky considered replacing the above-quoted lines “Not the one / ‘who art in heaven’” with the following stanza:

Новое имя  
Вырвись  
лети  
в пространство мирового жилья  
Тысячелетнее  
низкое небо  
сгинь синезадо  
Это Я  
я, я  
я  
я  
я  
земли вдохновенный ассенизатор.

New name  
escape  
fly  
into the space of the world’s abode  
millennial  
low sky  
die you blue-ass  
It is I  
I, I  
I  
I  
I



the earth's inspired sewage man.<sup>230</sup>

In this variant, the connection between the figure of Ivan and the poet himself becomes even more explicit. Besides the loaded repetition of “I”, which implicitly becomes the response to people’s prayers, the image of “the earth’s inspired sewage man” also points to Mayakovsky. Mayakovsky would use the image of the “sewage man” to refer to himself in his later poetry.<sup>231</sup> But even within *150,000,000*, this image is integrally tied to the poet.

The idea of an “inspired sewage man” evokes the destructive agenda of the Futurists, understood as the necessary “cleanup” before construction of the new world could begin.

Mayakovsky explicitly invokes Futurist destruction several times in the poem:

футуристы  
прошлое разгромили,  
пустив по ветру культуришки конфетти.

the Futurists  
routed the past  
releasing culture’s confetti to the winds.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> This version comes from Mayakovsky’s pencil correction to the typed manuscript from 1920. The stanza Mayakovsky proposed to replace reads in its entirety as:

Не тот, который	Not the one
«иже еси на небесех».	“who art in heaven.”
Сами	We ourselves,
на глазах у всех	in full view of everyone
сегодня	today
мы	will
займемся	work
чудесами.	miracles.

(Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 15; McGavran 205)

<sup>231</sup> Cf. a parallel self-depiction in “Vo ves’ golos” (“At the Top of My Voice,” 1930): “Я, ассенизатор / и водовоз, / революцией / мобилизованный и призванный” (Mayakovsky, “Vo ves’ golos,” SS 6: 175). (“I, a latrine-cleaner / and water boy, / by the revolution / called up and deployed” (McGavan 147, trans. modified)).

<sup>232</sup> Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 62; McGavran 243. Cf. Mayakovsky’s qualification of Futurism’s destructive agenda in “A Drop of Tar.” Other explicit references to the Futurists in *150,000,000* include:

К бобрам -	To the fur-coats
декадентов всемирных строчки.	went the lines of the whole world’s decadents.
К блузам -	To the grease-shirts,
футуристов железные строки.	the Futurists’ iron lines.

And, in an alternate draft:

За футуристами гонятся	Chasing the Futurists
памятников бронзовая конница!	a bronze cavalry of monuments!

(Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 48; McGavran 232)

Moreover, he connects this destructive agenda to the tasks that stand before the collective Ivan:

А нам  
не только новое строя  
фантазировать  
а еще и издинамитить старое.

We  
as we build up something new can't just sit  
and fantasize  
we've also got to dynamite the old.<sup>233</sup>

In this way, Mayakovsky links himself and the Futurist project not only to Ivan, but also to the voices within his collective body.

Some may see in Mayakovsky's bold parallels between the poet, Ivan, and the collective, an intensification of the poet's megalomania, well known from his early works.<sup>234</sup> In a scathing critique, Lev Trotsky accused the poet of self-indulgent "universalization of his own I": "Just as the ancient Greek was an anthropomorphist and naively thought of the forces of nature as resembling himself, so our poet is a Mayakomorphist and fills the squares, the streets and fields of the Revolution with his own personality."<sup>235</sup> However, I argue that Mayakovsky creates a parallel between himself and the collective Ivan in order to highlight the fact that Ivan is not simply an embodiment of an ideal political collectivity, but also, more importantly, an ekphrastic representation of collective authorship.

Mayakovsky frames Ivan, the epic hero of the middle parts of the poem, simultaneously as 1) the answer to the people's prayers for a human god, 2) the product of their own activity,

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<sup>233</sup> Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 15; McGavran 205. Cf. Aleksei Kruchenykh's artist book, *Vzorval (Explodity)* (St. Petersburg: EUY, 1913).

<sup>234</sup> As noted earlier, Mayakovsky's very first book publication was entitled *I (Ia)*, 1913).

<sup>235</sup> "Как грек был антропоморфистом, наивно уподобляя себе силы природы, так наш поэт Маякоморфист, заселяет самим собою площади, улицы и поля революции. Правда, крайности сходятся. Универсализация своего я стирает до известной степени грань индивидуальности и приближает к коллективу — с другого конца. Но только до известной степени." (Lev Trotskii, *Literatura i revoliutsiia*. 2<sup>nd</sup> expanded ed. (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1924), 111).

and 3) as the collectivity itself. The epic narrative of the poem's middle sections is in fact nothing other than the song of the collective Ivan himself. As I have noted, the first two sections of the poem feature songs of people, animals, and inanimate objects marching to attend a party meeting. The songs are carried out in different voices. For example, the song sung by the poor people goes:

Я приду к *нему*,  
я скажу *ему*:  
«Вильсон мол,  
*Вудро*,  
хочешь крови моей *ведро*?  
[....]»

I'll come to *him*,  
I'll tell *him*:  
“Wilson,” I'll say,  
“*Woodrow*,  
you want a bucket of my *blood*?”<sup>236</sup>

The simple rhymes of this stanza (*nemu-emu*, *Vudro-vedro*) evoke folk songs and other folk genres such as *chastushka*, *pribautka*, and others. The “I” in this stanza is not that of the poet, but of some other voice, such as the character named Van'ka (notably, the diminutive form of Ivan), mentioned in passing in the previous lines. In fact, the use of the folk forms sharply differentiates the poet's speech from that of the people he depicts. While he is still speaking for them, he is relying on their forms, channeling their voices into content. It is as if the poet provides his lips (and the body of the poem) for them to speak their forms and their content.

Without preparation or explanation, the “I” of the previously quoted stanza suddenly becomes a “we”:

До самого дойдем  
до Ллойд-Джорджа -  
скажем ему:

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<sup>236</sup> Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 6; McGavran 198; my emphasis on rhymes.

*We'll make it  
to Lloyd George himself  
and we'll tell him.*<sup>237</sup>

Thus, what we are witnessing are the different voices that at times join into a unified “we” and sometimes break into “I”s, which are not identical with the poet’s own “I”. The chorus of the people is followed by the songs of the animals, whose voices appear to be more unified:

«Слушай,  
Вильсон,  
заплывший в сале!  
Вина людей -  
наказание дай им.  
Но мы  
не подписывали договора в Версале.  
Мы,  
зверье,  
за что голодаем?  
Свое животное горе киньте им!  
До-сыта наестся хоть раз бы еще!  
К чреватым сажеными травами Индиям,  
к Американским идемте пастбищам!»

“Listen up,  
Wilson,  
swimming in fatback!  
If men are to blame,  
then give them the punishment.  
But we  
didn't sign any treaty in Versailles.  
Why should we,  
the beasts,  
have to go hungry?  
Fellow beasts, fling your animal grief at Wilson!  
Oh, to eat our fill just one more time!  
Let's be off to Indias stuffed with tall grasses,  
let's head for American pastures!”<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 6; my emphasis; McGavran 198.

<sup>238</sup> Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 7; McGavran 199.

The song of the animals is followed by those of roads, seas, and other inanimate things.

Although at first the songs are individuated according to groups (human, animal, infrastructure),

they soon blend into a common song:

«Мы пришли сквозь столицы  
сквозь тундры прорвались  
прошагали сквозь грязи и лужищи.  
*Мы* пришли *миллионы*  
*миллионы* трудящихся  
*миллионы* работающих и служащих.  
*Мы* пришли из квартир  
*мы* сбежали со складов  
из пассажей, пожаром озаренных.  
*Мы* пришли *миллионы*  
*миллионы* вещей  
изуродованных  
сломанных  
разоренных.

*Мы* спустились с гор  
*мы* из леса сползлись  
от полей годами глоданных.  
*Мы* пришли  
*миллионы*  
*миллионы* скотов  
одичавших  
тупых  
голодных.

“*We* ’ve come through capitals,  
*we* ’ve broken through tundras,  
*we* ’ve marched across mud and enormous puddles.  
*We* ’ve come in our *millions*,  
*millions* of laborers,  
*millions* of workers and servants.  
*We* ’ve come from apartments,  
*we* ’ve escaped from warehouses,  
from arcades lit up by flames.  
*We* ’ve come in our *millions*,  
*millions* of things—  
disfigured,  
broken,  
in ruins.

*We've* come down from the mountains,  
we've crawled out of the forest,  
out of fields gnawed on by years.  
*We've* come  
in our *millions*,  
*millions* of livestock—  
wild,  
dim-witted,  
and starving.<sup>239</sup>

The similarity and unity between the members of this collective of voices is suggested by the accumulation of rhymes based on identical words or permutations of them, as well as the same grammatical forms, such as the repeated use of the genitive plural adjective endings (-*ykh*). It is this “we” that collectively produces the image of Ivan, who is at the same time the collective itself:

И вот  
Россия  
не нищий оборвыш  
не куча обломков  
не зданий пепел —  
Россия  
вся  
единый Иван

And Russia  
is no longer  
a beggar in rags  
or some heap of debris  
or the ashes of buildings—  
all  
of Russia  
is a single Ivan<sup>240</sup>

The open quotation mark of the collective “we” song that produces this image is never closed, and the song implicitly transforms into the epic narrative that follows over the next four parts of the poem. The very last lines of the collective song, in which the collective “we” transforms into

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<sup>239</sup> Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 13–14; my emphases; McGavran 203–204.

<sup>240</sup> Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 19; McGavran 208–209.

the “we” of the author-reader, likewise imply a continuation between the song and the epic narrative that follows:

В стремя фантазии ногу вденем  
дней оседлаем порох  
и сами  
за этим блестящим виденьем  
пойдем излучаться в несметных просторах.

We'll strap our feet into the stirrups of fantasy,  
throw a saddle over the gunpowder of days,  
and blast off  
after this blinding vision,  
to radiate through the world's limitless spaces.<sup>241</sup>

The collectivity established at the beginning of the poem is reaffirmed in the very last part (VII), which reminds readers that the epic narrative they have been witnessing is produced by the collective. The collective once again resumes its song:

«Голоса людские  
зверьи голоса  
рев рек  
ввысь славословием вьем.»

“Voices of people  
beasts’ voices  
the rivers’ mighty roar  
we weave you all together ever higher in our song of praise.”<sup>242</sup>

The use of the word *slavoslovie*, which literally means “glorification,” refers back to the epic narration of the immediately preceding parts. But the word also evokes the poet’s task in *A Cloud in Pants*: to glorify the men and women who are not normally subjects of epic poetry. Note, however, the grammatical transformation. Whereas the poet’s task in *A Cloud* was qualified as “*mnoi [...] slavosloviatsia muzhchiny [...] i zhenshchiny*” (“glorified by me [...] are men [...] and women”), in *150,000,000* it is described as “*slavosloviem v'em*” (literally, “through

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<sup>241</sup> Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 20; McGavran 210.

<sup>242</sup> Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 68; McGavran 245.

glorification we weave”). The grammatical agency of the first construction has assumed full grammatical subjectivity in “we.” Moreover, the placement of the instrumental *slavosloviem* next to the verb *v’em* produces a paronomasia, which retroactively transforms the instrumental *slavosloviem* (“through glorification”) into something akin to a verb *slavoslovi-em* (“[we] glorify”). That is, the men and women (and other creatures living and not) have become subjects through and in language, even if only in language. Finally, note the implicit parallel between the two instrumentals: *mnoi* (“by me”) and *slavosloviem* (“by means of, through glorification”), which make the task of glorification (representation) possible in the respective narratives.

The final song of the collective is worth pausing on for another reason. In it, the collective addresses itself, perhaps unexpectedly, as “you”:

Вам,  
 легионы жидкокостных детей  
 толпы искривленной голодом молодежи  
 [...]
 Вам  
 звери  
 [...]
 Вам неумолкающих слав слова  
 ежегодно расцветающие вовеки не вянув  
 за нас замученные — слава вам  
 миллионы живых  
     кирпичных  
 и прочих Иванов.”

To you  
 legions of frail-boned children,  
 crowds of youth bent over in hunger  
 [...]
 To you,  
 beasts  
 [...]
 To you we raise unceasing words of glory,  
 every year blooming, never fading,  
 you who were tortured for our sake; glory to you,  
 you millions of living,  
     brick,



and other assorted Ivans.”<sup>243</sup>

This somewhat puzzling grammatical permutation of “we” into “you,” even as the identity between them is clear, can be explained by the temporal disjunction in the narrative position, that is, by the adjustment Mayakovsky makes to accommodate the themes of the present within the epic genre. In this passage, it is the “we” of the future that addresses itself as the “you” of the present. This temporal disjunction makes explicit that the vision of the collective Ivan—both political and authorial—is a future aspiration, a not-yet-present reality. In this sense, Mayakovsky’s collective poet fulfills the role assigned to the poet in *War and the World*. This vision ushers in what is to come by imagining an alternative future defined by a strong communist collective. The poet’s self-sacrifice allows him to give over his body to the voices and subjectivities of the previously voiceless, and allows the future utopian collective to be incorporated into his self.

In this chapter, I have argued that Mayakovsky responded to the crisis of language and representation by introducing the political function of art. In particular, his narrative poetry from 1914 to 1921 shows a consistent concern with forms of representation that could adequately present others’ voices, especially the voices of those who do not yet have a language. As part of this search, he tried to transform the lyric into a more democratic form of representation, capable of accommodating other voices. In *A Cloud*, the poet voiced the question of democratic representation in art for the first time by problematizing the street’s lack of language and offering himself to be its lips as surrogate for the street’s missing tongue. In this central poem, Mayakovsky also introduced the motif of crucifixion, which subsequently became part of his more concrete proposal on how to become the lips of the underrepresented. In *War and the World*, Mayakovsky tasked the poet with becoming a visionary of future utopias and showed,

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<sup>243</sup> Mayakovsky, *150.000.000*, 68–69; McGavran 247.

moreover, that such visions required the poet's self-sacrifice. The poet's crucifixion was necessary to purge him of his narrow individuality, as well as of the pathological version of supra-individuality in romantic love. In *Human Being*, Mayakovsky problematized the new human being who was still bound by earthly chains. Moreover, he identified romantic love as the source of his inability to extend his loving representation to others. In the illustrated edition of *Backbone Flute*, the poet staged a cooptation of his own subjectivity by his lover, translating what was implicit on the level of content in the earlier version into book form. In *150,000,000*, Mayakovsky finally performed the radical self-sacrifice he had practiced in previous poems, transforming himself into the body that accommodated a collectivity. Through manipulation of genres, narrative positions, and grammar, Mayakovsky created a utopian vision of an ideal political and authorial collectivity.

## CHAPTER 2

### Czech Poetism and Teige's Search for a Formal Solution to the Crisis of Representation

#### *Introduction*

The crisis of language and representation that began with the rebellion against naturalism in the arts and reached its peak in abstraction survived into the 1920s. Like Mayakovsky and the Russian Futurists, Karel Teige and the Czech Poetists responded to the crisis in their theoretical writings and artistic practice. In addition to offering remedies in the form of new artistic agendas, Poetist manifestos historicized the crisis, integrating it into narratives of artistic evolution. Teige's training as a visual artist, who experimented with multimedia forms that included images and words, allowed him to conceptualize the crisis of artistic language as a broader phenomenon afflicting the visual and verbal arts and to shape these narratives with his own particular vision. This broader understanding of parallel crises in painting and literature left a mark on his artistic practice as well.

Together with the Poetists, Teige attempted to overcome the crisis of representation not by fragmenting the word and image or by introducing the political into his artworks; rather, he sought a solution in the integration of autonomous spheres of art. The lesson Teige took from avant-garde experimentation of the 1910s was that neither word nor image was capable of surmounting the crisis alone. Accordingly, in his artistic practice, he sought to fuse the word and image. The first attempt at fusion materialized in the Poetist conception of "image poetry," a new art form that incorporated words, painted images, photographs, and other materials into a single whole and placed different media in conversation with one another. Soon after, Teige sought an even more intimate integration of the word and image in the new medium of typophoto, which, as the title suggests, fused typography and photography into a single form. The multimedia form

of the book was the perfect space for the realization of the new fusion that incorporated both the old media and the new.

As compared to Mayakovsky's politicization of art discussed in the previous chapter, Teige's response to the crisis of representation focused on finding new forms that could become vehicles for overcoming the crisis. Despite their radically different solutions, both Teige and Mayakovsky were equally driven by the desire to attain more direct contact with reality, a contact that stood in opposition to traditional modes of representation.

In the first part of this chapter, I establish the existence of the crisis discourse among the Czech avant-garde, tracing a conceptual shift from the crisis of the word to the crisis of artistic language, and a figurative shift not so much in the language of crisis, as in the values attached to it. In the second part, I show how the multimedia art form of "image poetry" is offered as a solution to this crisis. First, I trace how image poetry uses photography to accomplish the desired fusion of different media. Then, I analyze concrete examples of image poetry, showing how different media interact with one another and fuse in the viewer's act of interpretation. In the third and final part, I consider yet another solution to the crisis of artistic language embodied in a 1926 multimedia book, *ABCs*. First, I elaborate on the book's use of a new medium of "typophoto." I then trace the pre-history of the book as a poem and a dance performance. Finally, I analyze the interplay of media in the book to show how they work together to overcome the crisis of representation.

*The Crisis of Representation in the Czech Avant-Garde*

**DO NOT PRESERVE THE DEAD!**

**GET RID OF THE CORPSES  
BECAUSE THEY STINK!**<sup>1</sup>

Jindřich Štyrský, “image”

Let us not be arrogant [in thinking] that we protect art with our convulsive screaming. It must die in this world, so that it can rise from the dead in the new world.<sup>2</sup>

Stanislav K. Neumann, “Art in the Social Revolution”

Czech Poetism was launched in 1923 with the publication of the journal *Disk*, which served as a kind of founding manifesto for the movement.<sup>3</sup> On the very first pages of the journal, the artist Jindřich Štyrský (1899–1942), who would later become a prominent Surrealist painter, called for the abandonment of the “dead” art of the past. In bold capital letters, he wrote of art’s decomposing “corpses” that had to be discarded for sanitary reasons. The death of old art was both necessary and welcome. Though never clearly explained in this manifesto-like proclamation, the death of art that Štyrský so enthusiastically encouraged was the death of the

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<sup>1</sup> “**NEKONSERVUJME MRTVÉ! ODSTRÁŇTE MRTVOLY, NEBOT’ ZAPÁCHAJÍ!**” (Jindřich Štyrský, “obraz” [image], *Disk* 1 [1923]: 2; bolding and capitalization is reproduced as in original). This manifesto is translated in *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910–1930*, eds. Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 365–67. I will refer to this translation with some modifications, including consistently translating “obraz” as “image” rather than “picture.” Henceforth this translation source will be cited as *Between Worlds*, followed by the relevant page number. Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this chapter are my own.

<sup>2</sup> “Nebudme domyšliví, že zachran’ujeme umění svym krečovitým tápáním. Musí zahynout v tomto světě, aby z mrtvych vstalo ve světě novém” (Stanislav K. Neumann, “Umění v sociální revoluci” [Art in the social revolution], *Proletkult* II, 23.5, 1923, 266–68).

<sup>3</sup> Instead of publishing a manifesto of “Poetism,” as other avant-garde movements had done when launching their artistic platform, the entire journal issue served as an announcement of the emerging new movement. The journal thus serves as a theoretical platform for the new movement as well as an art object of sorts. The first explicit “manifesto of Poetism” appeared only in 1924 (Karel Teige, “Poetismus” [Poetism], *Host* 3, no. 9–10 [Jul 1924], 197–204).

mimetic or “naturalistic” image. Painted images, he suggested, simply could not compete with photography, so long as they defined their task as mimesis:

A colored Gauguin = 0 against the perfect color of the photograph from the tropics.

Photography has realized the dreams of the old masters from time immemorial—why do fools still admire them today?—because their painterly ideal was nothing but to imitate reproductions. Illusionism.<sup>4</sup>

Photography, Štyrský argues in this passage, rendered mimetic painting useless and, as his metaphors throughout the essay suggest, *killed* it. After all, “a photo” would always be a “more perfect narrator” of the factual world, he writes further. Therefore, he concludes, it is pointless for painters to set before themselves the goal of imitating reality.

In contrast to the slavish ideals of old art, the goal of the new painted image would be “the creation of new beauties, of new values”—an agenda left deliberately vague until further notice.<sup>5</sup> Štyrský’s elliptical history of the image and its crisis at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as his prescription to invent a new mode of representation, succinctly defines the Poetist agenda, at least as far as the visual arts are concerned. They wished to resurrect the image, and, along with it, art more broadly, by inventing an art form that would have a fundamentally different, non-mimetic way of relating to reality.

Calls for inventing new forms and dispensing with the past characterize every new avant-garde movement. Nevertheless, one may wonder why Štyrský chose to launch a crusade against mimetic representation as late as 1923, with nearly a decade of experimentation in abstraction that successfully broke with mimesis behind him.<sup>6</sup> In other words, in the 1920s, concerns with

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<sup>4</sup> Štyrský, “obraz,” 2. Štyrský and other Poetists saw Impressionist painting as the last stage in the evolution mimetic painting. For example, Teige writes: “Impressionism is the culmination of spiritual and mental world of the naturalistic century” (Karel Teige, “Novým směrem,” *Kmen* 4, no. 48 [Feb 1921], 569). In unison with other avant-garde artists, the Poetists locate the break from mimesis in Cubism.

<sup>5</sup> Štyrský, “obraz,” 2; *Between Worlds* 366.

<sup>6</sup> At this time, Štyrský was well aware of international artistic trends, not to mention the strong local tradition that took Cubism much further than any of the Paris-based artists had done by bringing it into the applied arts.

the death of the mimetic image and art appeared somewhat out of date. Did the language of crisis become an empty formula to be utilized by every emerging artistic movement that wished to carve out a place for itself in the history of art? Was it simply the avant-garde's anarchic impulse, devoid of any content? As I will show below, for the new generation of Czech artists who (creatively) came of age in the 1920s, abstraction was no longer a viable solution to the crisis of naturalistic representation. Part of their dissatisfaction was, no doubt, driven by the demand for constant renewal that characterized many avant-garde movements and factions. But, more importantly, abstraction was no longer perceived as satisfactory because it failed to acknowledge the connection between art and life, to bring art and life closer together. Abstraction's formalism, in these artists' view, had rendered it infertile.

In the 1920s, the discourse of artistic crisis was also fueled by the historical situation in which the new generation of artists found themselves: the First World War, interpreted as the bloody cleansing of the world from everything that belonged to the old world, had just ended; the independent nation state of Czechoslovakia was born out of the dissolution of Austro-Hungary; and hopes for a socialist revolution were running high in Central and Eastern Europe, which had witnessed a number of brief successes in 1918 and 1919. In this context, the discourse of crisis, of death and resurrection, had a broader appeal that extended beyond the new generation of artists. The old-guard poet, Stanislav Kostka Neumann (1875–1947), who championed the cause of Proletarian poetry against which Poetism came to position itself, likewise resorted to this discourse.<sup>7</sup> However, the younger generation of artists, in their view, occupied a special place in these broader debates: unmarred by the values of the greedy and decadent old world, they alone

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<sup>7</sup> Stanislav Kostka Neumann, who began his artistic career as a Symbolist author, bore witness to the proliferation of the crisis discourse at the turn of the century. Around 1920, he became close with the young generation of artists like Teige and Štyrský over their common leftist cause. By 1923, however, Neumann parted ways with Teige and company, preferring to continue supporting the cause of Proletarian poetry.

were in the position to create truly new art. The new generation dismissed abstraction as an inadequate solution to the crisis of representation and, along with it, the older generation of artists who represented this tendency. The younger artists saw a direct correlation between the peak of abstraction and the climax of the First World War.

In order to create a unique position for themselves within the artistic field, the new generation of artists mobilized conservative and progressive discourses alike. In his pre-Poetist writings, Karel Teige repeatedly evokes Oswald Spengler's *Untergang des Abendlandes* (*The Decline of the West*, 1918), which proclaimed the end of western civilization and its art.<sup>8</sup>

Borrowing the idea that the First World War was a kind of watershed in the cultural history of the world, Teige dispenses with Spengler's pathos in describing the decline of western civilization: "It is not in vain that it is believed that *culture is ending, culture of the west and civilization of Euroamerica* [...] The end of culture means the end of the world. For us, however, it is the world's beginning."<sup>9</sup>

Teige appropriates Spengler's discourse to proclaim humanity's liberation from the old world. New art, he adds, will be "first of all the *modus vivendi* of a liberated humanity."<sup>10</sup> In another early article, Teige connects the death of the old world and the emergence of the new to a coming geopolitical shift. In an imagined address of future art to the past, he writes:

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<sup>8</sup> The 1918 edition of Spengler's book was revised in 1922 and complemented by a second volume in 1923, precisely in the years that the Poetist movement was emerging. Teige cites Spengler's work in "Novým směrem" (570) and in a 1922 lecture (Teige, "Umění přítomnosti," *Život* II [1922], 133). Teige also evokes Spengler's work in "Images and Prefigurations" (Teige, "Obrazy a předobrazy" in *Avangarda známá a neznámá*, ed. Štěpán Vlačín et al. [Prague: Svoboda, 1971], 97–103). The reception of Spengler's work in the Czech context can also be traced to the work of the literary critic, František Götze, who frequently polemicized with Spengler's conception of history in the very same venues of publication as Teige.

<sup>9</sup> "Ne marně soudí se *proto o zakončení kultury, kultury západu a civilizace Euroameriky* [...] Zakončení kultury znamená konec světa. Pro nás však teprve jeho počátek" (Teige, "Novým směrem," 570; emphasis in original). Cf. "nad hrobem včerejší společnosti, kultury a civilizace novou dobrou zvěst, hlásá slavné evangelium veliké lásky života, horoucí, blažený sen království srdce" (Teige, "Obrazy a předobrazy," 98). "over the coffin of yesterday's society, culture, and civilization, the gospel of the great love of life sounds the good news, the fervent, blissful dream of the kingdom of the heart."

<sup>10</sup> Teige, "Novým směrem," 571.



We do not like your images, so forced and violent, like the stony sea of cities, nor your poems, which rumble like express trains, sputter like automobile exhaust pipes, [sound] like boat sirens, street shouting, the howling of airplane propellers; we do not like them, for they resemble your cities too much, which we also dislike. [...] In short, we do not like your world. [...] The kingdom of our heart is not from this, but from the next world.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, by the time Teige wrote these lines, a major geopolitical shift had occurred: an independent Czechoslovakia rose from the ashes of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. But Teige's passage alludes to an impending geo-*artistic* shift as well. Without explicitly citing artists' names or artworks, Teige's description of "violent" images and poetry evokes the aesthetic practices of the Italian Futurists. Along with their art, Teige dismisses the places out of which such art emerges—the metropolises of the old world. The implicit suggestion is that new art will reside in new artistic centers like Prague—an idea that becomes an important motif in Teige's essays and artworks, as I will show later in the chapter. Teige resorts to Biblical rhetoric, which alludes to the coming kingdom where the wrongs will be set right, to reinforce the legitimacy of his plea.

Thus, contrary to the typical designation of the *first* decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a turning point and the source of a cultural revolution, Teige displaced the radical break between the old world and the new to the end of the First World War.<sup>12</sup> Such a historical shift implicitly placed Teige's generation of artists into the unique position of being able to create a new world and a new art. As I will show below, Teige later adjusted his historical narrative, in order to integrate his movement into the international history of the avant-garde.

In Teige's early critical work, the rhetoric of the end of the old civilization merges with a leftist agenda. His early essays are permeated with hopes and expectations of a socialist

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<sup>11</sup> "Vaše obrazy, tak nerostné a násilné jako kamenné moře veleměst, ani vaše básně, lomozíci expresními vlaky, frkáním automobilových trubek, lodními sirénami, pokřikem bulvárů a hukotem vrtulí letadel, se nám již nelíbí, neboť se příliš podobají vašim městům, kterých již také nemilujeme. [...] Váš svět se nám zkrátka nelíbí [...] Naše pak království srdce není z tohoto, nýbtžž příštího světa" (Teige, "Obrazy a předobrazy," 101).

<sup>12</sup> "pro nás končí minulý věk teprve Válkou" (Teige, "Novým směrem," 570). Cf. "Že výbuch války pohrbí v sutinách svět, který ji vyvolal [...]" (Teige, "Obrazy a předobrazy," 97).

revolution in Czechoslovakia: “The painter and the poet, the creator of the new world, an apostle of a new heaven [...] is, at the same time, an agitator for socialism.”<sup>13</sup> In addition to cooperating with local socialists, Teige also sought out collaboration with leftist artists from Soviet Russia. Teige’s thinking about the crisis of art in the early 1920s is also indebted to Ilya Ehrenburg. Borrowing Ehrenburg’s slogan “art will no longer be art,” Teige inflected it with apocalyptic meaning, according to which art died in order to be integrated into life.<sup>14</sup> Echoes of Ehrenburg can also be found in the work of other Poetists. For example, Jiří Jelínek writes:

ART IS DYING!—Dying with a great gesture.—One cannot fail to remember the moment when the curtain of the temple was torn: IT IS DONE! He had to die, so that his teaching would  
b e c o m e l i f e.<sup>15</sup>

Invoking Matthew 27:50–53, Jelínek suggests that old art has to die in order to be resurrected as life. By virtue of the leftist orientation of Poetism and the importance of Ehrenburg’s ideas, the Nietzschean undertones of this passage are transformed into an avant-garde message to make art functional as a part of life. In this way, the discourse of artistic crisis among the members of a group that would soon become known as the Poetists is refracted through the specific historical situation of the 1920s. Having established the centrality of the crisis of representation for the

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<sup>13</sup> “Malíř a básník, stavitel nového světa, věrozvěst nového ráje a příchodu království srdce je zároveň i agitátorem socialismu” (Teige, “Obrazy a předobrazy,” 102).

<sup>14</sup> In his 1922 article “The Art of Today and Tomorrow,” Teige cites the book *Ona vse-taki vertitsia (A přece se točí [And Yet It Spins])*, where Ehrenburg discusses the idea of art that will no longer be art (“Новое искусство перестает быть искусством”/ “new art ceases being art”). Quoting Ehrenburg’s platform in all caps, Teige proposes to hang up posters with these words “on all the doors of existing temples and art stands” (“Umění dnes a zítra” in *Avangarda* 377). In the same essay, Teige discusses the necessity of art’s functionality, which echoes Ehrenburg’s proposal: “Umění, umění, bylo před lety heslem a cílem [...], je dnes skutečností, a tato skutečnost je kletbou. A přece nemá umění smyslu samo o sobě, má svůj smysl, účel a poslání toliko v životě a jako stroj je strojem, jen pokud funguje, tak i umění je uměním jen, pokud plní své funkce.” (“Umění dnes a zítra,” 366).

<sup>15</sup> “UMĚNÍ UMÍRÁ! — Umírá s velkým gestem. — Nemožno nevzpomenout chvíle, kdy roztrhla se opona chrámová: DOKONÁNO! — Musel zemřít, aby jeho učení stalo se životem.”

(Jiří Jelínek, “Situace na počátku roku 1924” [The Situation at the beginning of 1924], *Veraikon* [Mar–May, 1924]: 30–34; formatting reproduced as in original, including capitalization and spacing).

emerging Poetist movement, I will now delve into the details of the crisis, mainly its historicization by Teige and the Czech avant-garde.

### ***Crisis in the Visual Arts***

#### *Artistic Evolution and Teige's Reevaluation of Cubism*

Although the 19-year-old Teige was initially interested in literature as much as in the visual arts, his entrance into the faculty of Art History at Charles University in 1919 marked the beginning of a strong influence of art historical narratives on his thinking. Shaped by these narratives, Teige's stance on mimetic representation remained unchanged throughout his writing: naturalistic painting was simply untenable in the modern age of mechanical reproduction.<sup>16</sup> His attitude toward Cubism, however, gradually shifted from polemical dismissal to appreciation of the movement's role in inaugurating the search for non-mimetic forms of representation. As I will show in this section, Teige's reevaluation of Cubism is tied to his understanding of the possibility of a non-mimetic type of realism. I argue that this reevaluation restructures Teige's understanding of the artistic canon, creating a new history of the avant-garde.

Teige's initial rejection of Cubism was motivated not only by formal and aesthetic disagreements, but also by his desire to find a place for himself as an artist and critic on the Czech artistic scene. The generation of the fathers, against whom Teige had to prove his own legitimacy, included Czech Cubists like Josef Čapek (1887–1945) and Václav Špála (1885–1945), who belonged to the group “Tvrdošijní” (The Obstinates) and practiced a kind of Cubist-inflected neo-Primitivism at the time Teige began his career as an artistic and critic. In 1920, Teige joined a newly formed group, U.S. Devětsil (Artistic Union Devětsil), which initially positioned itself against the Obstinates and eventually splintered off into Poetism in 1923. In

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<sup>16</sup> The artists in question, including Teige and Štyrský, used “naturalism” and “mimesis” synonymously.

short, Teige's early evaluations of artistic movements are bound up in his desire to find a place for himself as an artist and theoretician of art.

In his early writing, Teige attacked the "formalism" of the previous generation of artists, seeing "abstraction" as excess that mistakenly places form before content:

The art of yesterday—it does not matter if you call it Cubism, Futurism, Orphism, or Expressionism—found all things "in themselves" beautiful [...]. Without the feeling of life it [the art of yesterday] was bound to get stuck in its formalism and aestheticism.<sup>17</sup>

For Teige, at this stage in his intellectual evolution, Cubism was no different from Futurism or any other movement that broke away from naturalist representation and followed the path of abstraction. While Teige understood that abstraction was meant to be a solution to the crisis of mimetic representation, as a leftist artist-critic he deemed it too reactionary in its disregard of life and longed for the return of the human being into art.<sup>18</sup>

By contrast with his earliest evaluations of Cubism, which did not distinguish it from other post-impressionist forms of abstraction, in the 1922 lecture "The Art of Today" Teige presents the movement in a more positive light:

Cubism, enriched by both Purism and New Classicism, grew on the actual soil of form [...] Cubism was the classicism of form, *but the spirit of Cubism was realism*. Cubism was always protected by its evident realism, so that it would not turn into abstract decorativism [...] so that it would not become plagiarizing academism.

We speak of the realism of Cubism and, in the same sense of the word, we will speak about the realism of new art, which, though far removed from Cubist ideals, is nevertheless tied to Cubism by this very realism.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> "Umění včerejška—lhostejno, nazvete-li je kubismem, futurismem, orfismem či snad expresionismem— nalézalo všechny věci 'samy o sobě' krásné, a to mu stačilo. [...] Bez tohoto hodnocení duchové celistvosti života musilo zůstat pouze ve svém formalismu a esteticismu" (Teige, "Obrazy a předobrazy," 98–99). This idea is associated with "art for art's sake" for Teige (Teige, "Umění dnes a zítra," 366). Throughout this article, Teige moves freely between different figures and artistic movements including Impressionism, Cubism, Expressionism, Futurism, Dadaism, and others, all of which belong to the art of the past (umění včerejška) that must be surpassed.

<sup>18</sup> "jediným obsahem uměleckého díla (nikoliv předmětem!) může být člověk," writes Teige in the same article (Teige, "Obrazy a předobrazy," 99). ("the only content of artistic activity (never an object!) can be the human being").

<sup>19</sup> "Kubismus, obohacený i purismem i novoklasicismem, vyrostlý na reálné půdě formy, bude, jak jsme už minule pravili, počátkem každé nové formy. Kubismus byl klasicismem formy, *ale duch kubismu byl realismus*. Kubismus byl vždy právě svým evidentním realismem zachraňován, aby se nestal abstraktním dekorativismem, podobně jako realismus byl jedinou záchranou postkubistického klasicismu, aby se nestal plagiátním akademismem. Mluvíme o

Echoing his previous evaluations, Teige insists that form was very important, perhaps too important, for Cubism. To compensate for this formalism, however, he introduces the idea of Cubism's realist "spirit," which prevented it from becoming too separated from life.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, as I noted, in his earliest writing, art of the old world (which, for him, meant all art before the end of the First World War) had nothing to do with the emerging new art. Here, however, the old and the new become linked through the hidden "higher realism" of Cubism.<sup>21</sup>

Teige goes on to argue that "we are indebted to" Cubism for "its regeneration of artistic language": "Today, thanks to Cubism, we can paint [...] without the danger of naturalism."<sup>22</sup> Instead of denying it its revolutionary force, Teige accepts the dominant art historical narrative that places Cubism in a special position within modern art. Reiterating some of his earlier criticism of Cubism's excessive abstraction, Teige recasts it in new light:

By contrast with Cubism, new art professes to people more reality and concreteness than abstract compositional schemes. It endures, however, as the beautiful legacy of Cubism, as a valuable lesson, as the relentless anchoring in the land of reality, not in optical and sensual empirical discovery: this is where we have landed, and at the price of life and death we must not abandon this shore: it is inhabited by people and furnished with the things of reality; [...] it is not the realm of phantoms, shadows, and phenomena. *Réalité de connaissance* [reality of knowledge], not *réalité de vision* [reality of vision] is the starting point of both Cubism and realism.<sup>23</sup>

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realističnosti kubismu a budeme v temže smyslu hovořiti o realističnosti nového umění, které, velmi již vzdáleno kubistickým ideálům, přece je právě tímto realismem ke kubismu poutáno" (Teige, "Umění přítomnosti," 133; emphasis in original).

<sup>20</sup> For Teige, "decorativism" referred to art that was "unnecessary" and "unconnected to real-life needs." Teige was not alone in his evaluation of the realist spirit of Cubism. See, for example, Kazimir Malevich's *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism. A New Painterly Realism (Ot kubizma i futurizma k suprematizmu. Novyi zhivopisnyi realizm* [Moscow, 1916]). In this booklet, Malevich compares Cubism to Futurism and the Russian 19<sup>th</sup>-century realist group, the Itinerants, suggesting that there is almost no difference between them: "Кубизм, как и футуризм и передвижничество, разны по своим заданиям, но равны почти в живописном смысле" ("Cubism, just like Futurism and Itinerantism, though differing in their tasks, are almost equal in the painterly sense.") Similarly to Teige, Malevich uses the connection between Cubism and realism to advance his own artistic platform.

<sup>21</sup> Teige, "Umění přítomnosti," 134.

<sup>22</sup> "Dnes, díky kubismu, můžeme malovati [...] bez nebezpečí naturalismu" (Teige, "Umění přítomnosti," 135).

<sup>23</sup> "Na rozdíl od kubismu vyznává před lidmi nové umění více konkrétní a skutečnost, než abstraktní kompoziční schémata. Trvá však rozhodně jako krásné dědictví kubismu, jako cenné naučení, neústupné zakotvení v pevně skutečnosti, ne v optickém a sensuelním poznání empirickém: zde jsme přistáli a nelze za cenu života a smrti tohoto břehu opustiti: je obydlen lidmi a vybaven skutečnostmi, není říší fantomů, stínů a jevů. *Réalité de connaissance*,

Thus, by emphasizing Cubism's connection to realism, which elsewhere in the essay is opposed to illusory naturalism, Teige begins to adjust the evolutionary trajectory of new art. He now locates the radical break between new and old art not with the postwar generation of artists, but with Cubism.

What caused Teige to change his view of Cubism in a matter of months? In the introduction to his 1922 lecture, Teige suggests that it is the death of Cubism that made possible a more positive reevaluation of the movement.<sup>24</sup> Although the passage of time certainly enhances historical perspective, I contend that Teige's reexamination of Cubism has a more specific source. This change in Teige's view coincides with his acquaintance with the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson, who began to take part in Czech intellectual life shortly after his relocation to Prague in 1920.<sup>25</sup> In 1921, Jakobson published his article, "O realismu v umění" ("On realism in art") in the journal *Červen*, where Teige also printed several of his articles.<sup>26</sup>

Buried in the middle of the lecture and printed in a smaller font with a set of parentheses around it is a direct reference to Jakobson:

Defined in this way the concept of realism narrows in relation to naturalism, and, at the same time, expands in relation to non-abstract art. R. Jakobson correctly noted that modern criticism looks for realism in Delacroix, but not in Delaroche, in El Greco, in Zurbarán, in the icons of Rublev, but not in Guido Reni, in Scythian idols, but not in

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nikoliv realitě de vision je východiskem kubismu i realismu" (Teige, "Umění přítomnosti," 135). Note that Teige uses French expressions partially transliterated into Czech orthography.

<sup>24</sup> "Účtovat s kubismem hlediska umění nového neznamená pro nás ani konstatovati jeho úpadek, jako prostě jeho vývojové konec; *bylo by* dokonce naopak *třeba konstatovati, co pozitivního kubismus [...] přinesl*, co z něho trvá jako dědictví pro příští období" (Teige, "Umění přítomnosti," 120; my emphasis). ("To come to terms with Cubism in relation to new art does not mean for us to declare its decline simply as the end of its development; on the contrary, it is necessary to state the positive things that Cubism brought, what persists of it as a legacy for the next period").

<sup>25</sup> Jindřich Toman, "The Linguist Remains a Futurist: Roman Jakobson and the Czech Avant-Garde between the Two Wars," in *The Magic of a Common Language: Jakobson, Mathesius, Trubetzkoy, and the Prague Linguistic Circle* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 217–41.

<sup>26</sup> Roman Jakobson, "O realismu v umění" [On Realism in Art], *Červen* 4 (1921): 300–304.

Laocoon; that what is at issue is simply the search for new plastic forms for a new reality.<sup>27</sup>

Not only does Teige cite Jakobson explicitly, but toward the end of his lecture he also proposes a new reading of primitivism in art that relies on Jakobson's insights about realism. Towards the end of "The Art of Today," Teige divides "primitivism" into two basic approaches: "1. primary, elemental, primordial [...] 2. artistic primitivism, spiritual, decadent."<sup>28</sup> The first type need not be practiced by primitive peoples only and can include amateur painters like Henri Rousseau, who had no formal training in the arts. Only the first type of primitivism, Teige goes on to argue, "speaks against dead art, crushes snobbism and fetishism more effectively than Futurism or Dada do, and points to a way out of the academy and library toward reality, toward people and life."<sup>29</sup> Though less schematic and more simplified than Jakobson's multilayered definition of realism, Teige's attempt to define "primitivism" nevertheless appears to be informed by the Russian linguist's propositions. Teige rests his case not by insisting that his definition is the correct one, but by recognizing different primitivisms and showing that one form is superior to another.<sup>30</sup>

Such a definition of primitivism and, more importantly, Teige's more complex evaluation of Cubism mark the beginnings of a new artistic genealogy, from which Poetism would soon

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<sup>27</sup> "Takto definován zužuje se pojem realismu oproti naturalismu a rozširuje se zároveň vůči všemu neabstraktnímu umění. R. Jacobson správně napsal, že moderní kritika shledá realismus u Delacroixe a ne u Delaroche, u El Greca, Zurbarána, v ikonách Rubljevových, ale ne u Quida Reni-ho, ve skytských modlách, ale ne v Laokoonu; že jde prostě o získání nové formy plastické pro novou realitu." (Teige, "Umění přítomnosti," 136). Cf. Roman Jakobson, "On Realism in Art" in *Language and Literature*, eds. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1987), 23. As I show further on, at times Teige lifts entire passages out of Jakobson without setting them off with quotation marks. Since Teige is part of a different citation practice that prioritizes adaptation of ideas in summaries over direct quotations, one must stay attuned to Teige's possible interlocutors even when he appears to be expressing his own views.

<sup>28</sup> "1. Primární, elementární, primordiální, jenž stojí na počátku všech kultur a 2. primitivism umělý, duchový, dekadentní, jenž po velkých obdobích kulturních v dějinách následuje a jejich ukončením." (Teige, "Umění přítomnosti," 141).

<sup>29</sup> "Vystupuje proti mrtvému umění, a spíše než futurismus, spíše než dada potře umělecký snobismus a fetišismus, a naznačuje východisko z akademií a biblioték ke skutečnosti, k lidu a do života" (Teige, "Umění přítomnosti," 142).

<sup>30</sup> Although Jakobson's goal in his article is to show the relativity of the definition of realism, which changes depending on the point of view, he nevertheless seems to express preference for less obvious forms of realism. See Jakobson, "On Realism in Art" in *Language in Literature*, 19–27.

emerge. No longer seeking to differentiate his group from the prior generation of artists in order to be heard, Teige admitted Cubism into the canon of revolutionary artistic movements. This change of attitude toward Cubism went on to structure Teige's narrative about the crisis of verbal arts. Teige's reevaluation of Cubism and reflections on realism also changed his views on photography.

### *Changing View of Photography as a Result of Cubism's Revaluation*

Teige's very first discussions of photography are permeated with a certain anxiety and caution toward this medium. In the same lecture that contained his reevaluation of Cubism, Teige evaluated the development and impact of photography rather negatively. Noting that naturalistic painting is impossible to pursue in his day, Teige stated, "*the development of the photographic apparatus has crushed naturalistic painting.*"<sup>31</sup> The choice of the word "crushed" suggests that he perceived photography as a negative development for painting. Elsewhere in the article, rather than speaking about photography directly, Teige used photography as a metaphor for naturalistic painting:

[H]igher realism [... is] the exact opposite of mimetic, visual, optically illusionary naturalism, of the descriptive and the so-called '*photographic*' naturalism. This [higher] realism [...] does not try to hoodwink you by means of optical illusion or to put on before you the illusion of reality in situations where what's at stake is *the image, which is a more human thing than a photographic snapshot; the photographer works with the lens and the sensitive plate, whereas the artist works with all of his humanity.* He apprehends the world not only with his eye, but with all his senses.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> "*Neboť naturalistovu malbu rozdrtil vynález fotografického aparátu*" (Teige, "Umění přítomnosti," 134; emphasis in original).

<sup>32</sup> "Je to [realističnost kubismu] vyšší realismus přísné výtvarné čistoty, svéprávný a samostatný formově, pravý opak napodobivého, visuelního, opticky iluzionistického naturalismu popisného a tak zv. "fotografického." Tento realismus [...] ne snaží se optickým klamnem vás ošaliti a předstíratí vám ilusi skutečnosti tam, kde jde o obraz, jenž je věcí lidštější než fotografický snímek; kde fotograf pracuje čočkou a citlivou deskou, tam pracuje umělec celým svým lidstvím. Poznává svět nejen zrakem, ale všemi smysly" (Teige, "Umění přítomnosti," 134; my emphasis).



The comparison of naturalistic painting to a photographic mode of representation casts photography as an inferior medium to painting, where the artist does not simply *reproduce* or *copy* (as he does in photography and naturalistic painting), but *creates* “with all of his humanity.” The mechanical eye of the camera, to which the eye of the naturalist painter is implicitly compared, is contrasted with the more sensitive, more “human” perceptual apparatus of the artist. At this stage in Teige’s intellectual development, the photograph is “precise,” while the “image is human,” with negative and positive values attached to these labels, respectively.<sup>33</sup> Teige reiterates his discontent with photography toward the end of the lecture by referring to the “pros and cons of mechanical reproduction.” He observes that people will never be satisfied with “mere photography,” just as they are not satisfied with “the daily criticism of newspapers.” They will seek out, he suggests, “richer” stories “in the books of poets.”<sup>34</sup> In “The Art of Today,” Teige thus primarily reproduces the anxieties of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century discourses on photography.<sup>35</sup>

In his very next article, however, Teige begins to rethink this position. In “Art Today and Tomorrow,” written just months after “The Art of Today,”<sup>36</sup> photography no longer appears as a metaphor for naturalistic representation, but as a legitimate, independent art form.

“PHOTOGRAPHY” joins the labels “ARCHITECTURE,” “THEATER,” “FILM,” “LITERATURE AND POETRY,” “MUSIC,” “DANCE,” and “PAINTING,” which divide the article into sections that address each art form. It is notable that “photography” appears last,

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<sup>33</sup> Teige, “Umění přítomnosti,” 135.

<sup>34</sup> Teige, “Umění přítomnosti,” 135.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Baudelaire, who famously excludes photography as an art form, castigating it as the handmaiden of the sciences (Charles Baudelaire, “The Modern Public and Photography—The Salon of 1859,” in *Art in Paris 1845–1862*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne [London: Phaidon, 1992], 144–216). Teige is clearly familiar with this discourse, even if he did not necessarily know this particular essay; however, that is hard to imagine given Teige’s interest in French culture, including Baudelaire’s poetry.

<sup>36</sup> The publication history of these essays does not reflect their dates of composition. Though published in the fall of 1922, “The Art of Today and Tomorrow” was actually written *after* the lecture “The Art of Today.” Teige wrote the “The Art of Today” as a lecture in May 1922 and seems to have made little to no changes to the lecture when it was published in December of 1922.

perhaps suggesting that it was added last.<sup>37</sup> The order in which these labels appear is, in any case, significant. “FILM” appears after “THEATER,” since it is the form that Teige stipulates will eventually supersede theater. Similarly, “PHOTOGRAPHY” will implicitly replace “PAINTING,” or perhaps has done so already. Teige elliptically constructs a series of analogies to make his point clear: “pianola : piano of Paderewski = photography : painting = film : theater = future photoplastics : sculpture.”<sup>38</sup>

In addition to addressing photography as a medium, Teige also expands on the earlier idea that photography is at the root of the crisis of naturalism:

Photography [...] *made naturalism impossible* simply by proving itself in competition with naturalistic painting [...] when we speak about documentary illustration, photography, not drawing, is preferred: geographical and scientific publications do not trust graphic artists, but trust photographers. [...] *With the development of photography imitative, representational painting lost its purpose.* The truth of photography in this field will always be more truthful.<sup>39</sup>

By contrast with his earlier fears that photography would “crush” painting, in this passage Teige evaluates photography in more neutral tones, even praising it for its documentary truthfulness. He also begins to elaborate photography’s special relation to reality. However, photography’s connection to reality, truth, and fact is, for the time being, assessed as more relevant for scientific purposes than for artistic ones, as Teige’s references to “scientific” and “geographical” publications suggest. In other words, in this essay Teige does not yet see the possible uses of this documentary function of photography in art. But while Teige does not yet recognize photography as an art form with a documentary potential, he has no doubts about the artistic merits of film,

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<sup>37</sup> The very last paragraph before a section break is actually entitled “sculpture.” However, the fact that it only consists of two sentences, one of which lists artists’ names, and that it is set apart from the rest of the text by italics rather than capitalization, suggests that Teige added sculpture as an afterthought.

<sup>38</sup> Teige, “Umění dnes a zítra,” 376.

<sup>39</sup> [...] fotografi[e] [...] *znemožnila naturalismus* prostě tím, že při soutěži s naturalistickou malbou prokázala se fotografie [...] kde jde o vyobrazení dokumentární, je na místě fotografie a ne kresba: zeměpisné a vědecké publikace se nespěšují grafikem, ale fotografům. [...] *Vynálezem fotografie pozbylo zpodobovací reprenující malířství svého účelu*” (Teige, “Umění dnes a zítra,” 374; emphasis in original).

which he praises for its “direct realism” and for depicting reality “without descriptive, explanatory, parasitic naturalism.”<sup>40</sup>

In his next article, “PHOTO CINEMA FILM,” Teige triangulates 1) his understanding of Cubism through the lens of realism, 2) his more neutral evaluation of photography that emphasizes its productive challenge to painting, and 3) his exploration of the realist medium of film to explore the possibility of photography as a realistic art form. Here Teige praises photography without reservation, integrating it into liberation discourses typical of the early 1920s:

For painting, photography represents liberation from naturalism, that malodorous mold that was eating away at painting’s solid and constructive artistic laws. With the intervention of photography, painting was able to develop its aesthetics, which will be henceforth anti-naturalistic, and it is now aware of its new mission, its new, concrete role and new function in modern life. The credit due to photography for curing painting of impressionism is immense.<sup>41</sup>

Instead of “destroying” painting, photography now “frees” painting and the artist from their slavery to naturalism or mimetic representation, which is implicitly linked to the old world via metaphors of decay. Instead of being stuck in infertile aestheticism and academism, painting can now become part of “life.” As if in recognition of the dissonance in his ideas about photography as compared to his earlier views, Teige confronts these views using the same figurative language, but revising his judgment:

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<sup>40</sup> “bez opisného a popisného cizopasného naturalismu; přímý realismus kina je bližší umění budoucnosti [...]” (Teige, “Umění dnes a zítra,” 370).

<sup>41</sup> Teige, “Photo Cinema Film,” in *Cinema All the Time: An Anthology of Czech Film Theory and Criticism, 1908–1939*, eds. Jaroslav Anděl and Petr Szczepanik (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2008), 130; emphasis in original. “Fotografie je vysvobozením malířství z naturalismu této páchnoucí plísně, jež rozežírala jeho pevné a konstruktivní výtvarné zákony: intervencí fotografie precizovalo si malířství svou estetiku napříště protinaturalistickou a uvědomí si nad své nové poslání, nové konkrétní ukoly a novou funkci v modernism životě. Tato zásluha fotografie o uzdravení malířství z impressionismu je nesmírná, ale malířství se fotografii zle odvděčilo” (Teige, “FOTO KINO FILM,” *Život II* [1922]: 158). Although “FOTO KINO FILM” is published in the same journal as “The Art of Today,” they were written several months apart. The relevant articles under discussion in this section were composed in the following chronological order: “Art of Today,” “Art of Today and Tomorrow,” “Photo Cinema Film.” Thus, Teige’s changing views on photography can be dated to this relatively short time frame in 1922.

The beauty of photography [...] is the product of a machine as well as the work of human hands, the human brain, and, if you will, the human heart. The physiochemical productive process, the photographic developer, the chemical baths, the exposure, etc., are all controlled by people, by their capability and their aptitude. Photography is therefore no less of a human art, because the photographer's abilities are further multiplied and regulated by the impeccably operating mechanical brain of the camera.<sup>42</sup>

Note how the human is no longer opposed to photographic modes of production. Instead, the human being is now appended and enhanced with a more precise mechanical eye and brain. Moreover, s/he directs the creative process of the mechanical reproduction of the world, as photography, implicitly, becomes an art form.

In this article, Teige also emphasizes that photography is a special art form, one that must always remain true to its documentary function. In other words, he begins to develop his ideas about the importance of the documentary function of photography not just in relation to science, but also to *art*, linking it to the possibility of giving an artwork more concreteness, bringing it closer to reality. Teige repeatedly emphasizes photography's "moral" force in its ability to convey the depicted objects with "veracity": "*[I]n reality and verisimilitude lies the morality of photography*. After all, veracity is always held as a virtue and it is in accordance with the function for which photography was invented."<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, Teige makes clear that photography shares a more intimate, direct, unmediated connection with reality than other forms of representation. He repeatedly emphasizes the documentary function of photography:

[P]hoto and film are not hunters of artificial lighting effects. They are first and foremost documentary. They are evidence and proof that the world is beautiful and the mere reality of film and photography thereby wholly refutes the gibberish of pessimistic philosophy.

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<sup>42</sup> Teige, "Photo Cinema Film," 129. "krása fotografie je [...] je dílem stroje a zároveň prací lidských rukou, lidského mozku a, chcete-li, i lidského srdce; fysickochemický proces výroby, vývojky, lázně, expozice etc, to vše je dirigováno člověkem, jeho schopnostmi a dovednostmi: fotografie není proto méně lidským uměním, že schopnosti fotografovy jsou ještě násobeny a kontrolovány mechanickým bezvadně fungujícím mozkiem fotoaparátu [...]" (Teige, "FOTO KINO FILM," 156–57).

<sup>43</sup> Teige, "Photo Cinema Film," 130; Teige, "FOTO KINO FILM," 158; emphasis in original.

Until the invention of cinema and the refinement of the photographic camera, philosophy was able to proclaim that reality does not exist, that everything is illusion. But just one issue of an illustrated weekly, just one film episode—for example, a plane taking off or a Gaumont newsreel—is irrefutable evidence of the existence of reality, a direct expression of the ambiguous drama of modern life. Philosophy lied. Photography cannot and may not lie.<sup>44</sup>

In this passage, Teige not only emphasizes that photography records the world, but also makes a radical, anti-idealist claim that photography can serve as proof of the existence of the world outside of human perception.

Ignoring photography's documentary function would amount to an "unhealthy" misuse of the medium: "Photography lies when it becomes 'artistic'."<sup>45</sup> Teige's claim here is not directed against photography as an art form, but rather against what he sees as perversion of photography in pure aestheticism: "The refinement of photography [...] enhances its clarity, its realism, and its documentary aspect. These qualities, which constitute the intrinsic sense of the photograph, are betrayed by the typical "artistic" photography of Europe."<sup>46</sup> After denigrating "typical" European artists, Teige extols the work of the "Jewish-American" Dadaist Man Ray, who, at the time, lived in Paris.<sup>47</sup> In the "Art of Today and Tomorrow," Teige had briefly noted the special status of Man Ray's "abstract photographic pages," which, he claimed, can be "compared to the

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<sup>44</sup> Teige, "Photo Cinema Film," 131. "foto a film není lovcem umělých světelných efektů: je především dokumentární. Je dokladem a důkazem, že svět je krásný, a tak pouhá skutečnost filmu a fotografie vyvrací všechny žvasty pesimistické filosofie. Až do vynálezu kina a zdokonalení fotoaparátu mohla filosofie hlásat, že skutečnost neexistuje, že všechno je klam. Jediné číslo obrázkového týdeníku, jediný filmovaný příběh, třeba vzlet aeroplánů, či 'Gaumontův týden' je nevývratným důkazem existence reality, přímým projevem mnohaznačného dramatu moderního života. Filosofie lhala. Fotografie nelže a nesmí lháti." (Teige, "FOTO KINO FILM," 159). Cf. Štyrský's evaluation of photography: "PHOTOGRAPH: Objective truth and documentary clarity beyond doubt" (Jindřich Štyrský, "obraz," 2; trans. in *Between Worlds* 366).

<sup>45</sup> Teige, "Photo Cinema Film," 131. "Umělecká fotografie, totéž co umělecký průmysl, je věc nedůstojná, odpadková, kalná a nezdravá [...]" (Teige, "FOTO KINO FILM," 159).

<sup>46</sup> Teige, "Photo Cinema Film," 129. "Zdokonalení fotografie násobí její [...] jasnost, realističnost, dokumentárnost, vlastnosti, které jsou vlastním smyslem fotografie a které zrazuje běžná „umělecká" fotografie evropská" (Teige, "FOTO KINO FILM" 157). Cf. "Photography can be an art [...] [b]ut it can never be artistic industry" (Teige, "Umění dnes a zítra," 376).

<sup>47</sup> The artist's multiple identities and allegiances are significant for Teige. America is important as a "contemporary homeland of photography" (Teige, "Photo Cinema Film," 128; "FOTO KINO FILM," 159), and Man Ray's (Russian-)Jewish identity is important because Teige believed that "Slavs and Jews" were playing leading roles in the development of international art (Teige, "Slova, slova, slova" [Words, Words, Words], *Horizont*, no.1–4 [1927], 2).

graphic art of Georges Braque and Juan Gris.”<sup>48</sup> But in “PHOTO CINEMA FILM,” Teige expands on the significance of Man Ray’s experiments. He first takes up Man Ray’s Dadaist constructions, comparing them to the “suprematist constructions of the Russians, Rodchenko and Lissitzky.”<sup>49</sup> In the photographic reproductions of these constructions, photography, Teige suggests, “almost ceases to be photography and becomes something akin to painting and graphic art.” But even as photography in these examples approaches graphic art, it cannot “abandon reality.”<sup>50</sup> Teige goes on to evaluate Man Ray’s most recent experiments, published in *Les champs Delicieux* (1922). He explains that this volume includes 12 photograms or “‘direct’ photographs,” created “without photographic plates or lenses.”<sup>51</sup>

For Teige, photograms share an even more intimate, direct contact with reality than photographs: in photograms, objects imprint themselves directly on photosensitized paper, without the mediation of a camera lens. In his summary of the photogram-making process, Teige emphasizes the unmediated connection these compositions have with reality. The observation he makes following the discussion of Man Ray also suggests that it is the photogram’s special relation to reality that interests him in particular: “Picasso not only pasted newspaper clippings into some of his paintings, he even pasted photographs of pears onto some of his ‘still lives’.”<sup>52</sup> These clippings, he suggests, are remnants of reality or objects brought into the world of representation directly from the real world:

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<sup>48</sup> “Fotografie může být uměním, ba může za jistých okolností téměř přestat být fotografií a stát se malířstvím a grafikou (nebot’ na technice nezáleží) [... to] dokázal americký fotograf na Montparnassu žijící Man Ray svými abstraktními fotografickými listy, jež lze přirovnat ke grafice Georsege Braqua či Juana Grise [...]” (Teige, “Umění dnes a zítra,” 376).

<sup>49</sup> Teige’s comparison is worth noting. On the one hand, Teige dismisses the “suprematist” constructions called “prouns,” which Lissitzky offered as realist solutions for bringing art into life (El Lissitzky, “Proun,” *De Stijl* 5, no. 6, [1922]: 224–25). On the other, he makes clear that he is following the latest trends of Russian Constructivism, which is obviously an important movement for him.

<sup>50</sup> “Photo Cinema Film,” 132.

<sup>51</sup> Teige, “FOTO KINO FILM,” 160. The article includes two of Man Ray’s photographs, and one photogram, though apparently not taken from *Les champs Delicieux*, as he suggests (“FOTO KINO FILM,” 159–160). The images are omitted from the English translation of the article in *Cinema*.

<sup>52</sup> Teige, “Photo Cinema Film,” 133.

Let the music roar with the din of dynamos, Morse telegraphs, and automobile horns, with the squeal of express trains and aeroplanes, let the throbbing of the typewriter replace the traditional throbbing of the nightingale in the poetic summer night! Such ‘*touches of reality*,’ which were sought after by the futurists with their ‘noise machines’ and by Erik Satie in his *Parade*, can have the same meaning for music as *newspaper clippings, playing cards, pieces of material, etc., have for Cubist still lifes. Picasso, Braque, and Juan Gris use these things to freshen up the abstract geometric structure of their work, bringing to it some aesthetically unfiltered vitality, the reality of raw material.*<sup>53</sup>

In Cubist paintings, the objects from the outside world, “raw materials” like “newspaper clippings” and “playing cards,” constitute “pieces” of reality smuggled directly into painting, without the mediation of representation. The juxtaposition of this Cubist strategy with Man Ray’s photograms shows that Teige valued the photogram precisely for its direct contact with reality, for its ability to make a copy without representation.<sup>54</sup> In semiotic terms, what Teige was trying to describe is the indexical function of photography, which relies on the idea of contiguity between the real world and the world of representation. Such an understanding of photography led Teige to incorporate the medium into the majority of his subsequent artistic projects, including Poetism’s first creation—the image poem.

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<sup>53</sup> Teige, “Photo Cinema Film,” 142; my emphases. “Necht’ řve hluky dynam, Morseových přístrojů, automobilových trubek, rykotem expressu a avionu, tlukotem psacího stroje na místo tlukotu tradičního slavíka v poetické letní noci! Tyto ‘doteky reality,’ o něž se pokoušeli futuristé svými ‘hřmotící’ a Eric Satie v ‘la Parade,’ mohou mít v hudbě asi podobný význam, jako výstřižky novin, hracích karet, látek etc. v kubistických zátiších, jimiž Picasso, Braque i Juan Gris osvěžují abstraktní geometrickou skladbu díla, vnášejíce v ně něco esteticky neprodestilované životní, skutečností suroviny” (Teige, “FOTO KINO FILM,” 167).

<sup>54</sup> Note that in the first part of the passage Teige also invokes Italian Futurist poetry, which integrates real-world noise into poetry.

## *Crisis in the Verbal Arts*

Oh mouths men are looking for a new language  
One the grammarians can't label  
For the old languages are so close to death  
It's really from habit and cowardice  
That we still use them for poetry  
But they're like sick people they lack volition  
My God we'd soon get used to muteness  
Pantomime works well enough in the movies  
    But let's insist on speaking  
    Let's waggle our tongues  
    Send out postillions  
We want new sounds new sounds new sounds<sup>55</sup>

Guillaume Apollinaire, "Victory" (1917)

Before Teige enrolled in Art History courses at Charles University in 1919, he actively cultivated his literary interests alongside artistic ones, publishing translations, poems, and short stories under the pseudonym Karel Vlk in the journal *Knihy všeho* (*Books about Everything*), which he cofounded with his classmates, as well as in other journals.<sup>56</sup> In 1919, before his literary interests were temporarily displaced by the narrative of modern visual art, Teige published a review of Apollinaire's work. This review, which focused specifically on Karel Čapek's Czech translation of *The Zone* (accompanied by Josef Čapek's illustrations), shows how closely Teige followed the contemporary situation in literature.<sup>57</sup> Among the strengths of Apollinaire's poetry Teige cites the implicit rejection of "naturalism" in his poems and the anticipation of "a huge synthesis" in art. At the same time, Teige critiques Apollinaire's calligrammes for their "hazardous attempt to establish identity between the lyric and painting."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Guillaume Apollinaire, "Victory," in *Calligrammes*, trans. Anne Hyde Greet (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1980), 337.

<sup>56</sup> Eric Dluhosch and Rostislav Švácha eds., *Karel Teige 1900–1951: L'Enfant Terrible of the Czech Modernist Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 348.

<sup>57</sup> In French, "The Zone" was published as the opening poem of Apollinaire's *Alcools* (1913).

<sup>58</sup> Karel Teige, "Guillaume Apollinaire. (Několik poznámek k českému překladu "Pásma")" (Guillaume Apollinaire. A Few Observations on the Czech Translation of the "Zone"), *Kmen* 3, no. 7 (1919): 53. Cf. Teige's later take on



Classifying such attempts together with “pure painting,” isolated from and disinterested in life, Teige evaluated them “an error, a deception” with no lasting value.<sup>59</sup> Despite his rejection of the calligrammes on the level of form, the idea of synthesizing poetry and painting continued to inform his artistic and critical practice throughout the 1920s. What he rejected was the possibility of a synthesis through translation of one medium into another—writing verses on the canvas or “painting” in poetry à la Apollinaire.<sup>60</sup>

Teige’s publications from the early 1920s do not devote much space to discussing literature, besides occasional remarks on the parallels between the verbal and visual arts. Teige renews his interest in literature in the mid 1920s, following the birth of Poetism, and writes two articles devoted to the verbal arts. The first, “On Humor, Clowns, and Dadaists,” published in 1924 under the pseudonym T. Garell, reevaluates Teige’s previously negative assessment of Dadaism.<sup>61</sup> The second, “Poetry for the Five Senses,” published in 1925, reassesses Apollinaire’s calligrammes in the context of the Poetist vision of the future of literature. I will take up each of these in chronological order.

Just as the young Teige did not care to draw precise distinctions between different movements in the visual arts, dismissing everything that came before him as decadent art of a dying civilization, he initially placed developments in the verbal arts into a similar binary of the past and the future. His early articles are full of dismissals that do not differentiate among the

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Apollinaire in *Svět, který voní* (The World that Smells, or, A Perfumed World) (Prague: Odeon, 1930), 51–61. The chapter where Teige discusses Apollinaire was partially written in 1926, but revised and expanded later.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> This article is important for another reason: it shows that already in 1919 Teige had read Apollinaire’s poem “Victory,” which I quoted in the epigraph. It links his attempts for a search of a new language to Apollinaire’s agenda, showing that it is an important source for Teige. Teige quotes this specific poem in his review, though an earlier section that reads: “I remember you city of meteors / They flowered in the air among those sleepless nights / Gardens of light where I gather nosegays.” Though not immediately obvious, Apollinaire’s replacement of real flowers with the flowers of light that he gathers in the city symbolizes the idea of a new language of poetry (which is traditionally represented as a flower or a rose).

<sup>61</sup> Teige, “O humoru, clownech a dadaistech,” *Sršatec* 4, no. 38 (1924): 3–4, no. 39 (1924): 2–3, no. 40 (1924): 2–4; reprinted in *Avangarda* 571–86. I will refer to the reprint edition of this article.

agendas of different movements. For example, he writes, “common expressionism and headless Dadaism are the last consequences of art of the past and of its demise,” without acknowledging the individual contributions of Dadaism to expressionist art more broadly.<sup>62</sup> However, by 1924, Dadaism emerges as a distinct movement for Teige, which offers particular lessons for Poetism, even if it cannot be fully embraced. Although there are some irresolvable tensions in Teige’s article, “On Humor, Clowns, and Dadaists,” he generally casts the movement in a positive light.

Teige focuses on the contribution of Dadaism as a literary and theatrical-performative movement to the culture of laughter.<sup>63</sup> Linking the development of “modern laughter” in Dada to the “ironic” laughter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he argues that both Dada and ironic laughter stem from the same tradition of philosophical skepticism. Moreover, he suggests that both can be curative.<sup>64</sup> However, while Dada laughter is genuine, ironic laughter is not: “this laughter is not laughter from the heart.”<sup>65</sup> Moreover, Teige praises Dada laughter for exploding the boundaries between art and life: “Dada is everywhere a little, Dadaism is a very living movement.”<sup>66</sup> Teige sees Dada “not only as literary creation,” but as a “spiritual state”— a qualification he will later apply to Poetism.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Teige, “Obrazy a předobrazy,” 99.

<sup>63</sup> According to Teige in this article, “laughter” is a fundamental aspect of human existence. Rewriting Aristotle’s definition of the human being (as a rational animal), Teige suggests that “the human being is the animal that laughs” (Teige, “O humoru, klaunech a dadaistech,” 571).

<sup>64</sup> Ironic laughter cures by making fun of the “decay of bourgeois culture and morality” (Teige, “O humoru,” 572), while Dada laughter “cures” man of the traumatic experience of war (571), of philosophy, and high art (577).

<sup>65</sup> “Ale tento výsměch není srdečným smíchem. Satira a karikatura jsou bojovný, tendenční projev, intelektuální knuta, bičující malost a pokrytectví společnosti, blesk mravního roztrpčení; není čistým modernism humorem, nemajícím jiného cíle než intenzitu veselí a pohodu dobré nálady, jenž není než básní zábavné lhostejnosti, čirou legrací” (Teige, “O humoru,” 572).

<sup>66</sup> Teige, “O humoru,” 578.

<sup>67</sup> Teige, “O humoru,” 580. In later evaluations of Dada, Teige will deny the movement precisely this transcendence beyond literature that he attributes to the movement here. This change can perhaps be connected with his dada sources. In this article, with the exception of Ivan Goll and Marinetti, Teige cites primarily French sources (Tzara, Aragon, as well as writers who do not claim a Dadaist affiliation, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Remy de Gourmont, Theophile Gautier, Max Jacob, Rabelais, among others. By contrast, in this later work, Teige focuses on the work of the German Dadaists like Kurt Schwitters.

Teige's appropriation of certain aspects of Dada, however, is far from a wholehearted embrace of the movement: "dadaists-skepticists always laughed by their method, which was rather hysterical [...] they were the style of *decaying* culture."<sup>68</sup> As with Cubism, Teige ultimately sees Dada not as an end in itself, but as a step in the right direction. His repeated claim that Dada "ventilat[ed] the overloaded mind" of the modern man anticipates a future construction that will be built on this cleared ground: "Dada comes in order to cure by turning over political, astronomical, artistic, parliamentary, agrarian, and literary syphilis of its time."<sup>69</sup> At this stage, Teige connects Dada to the necessity of clearing ground for new creation and to the crisis of the old civilization.<sup>70</sup> In his subsequent writing, he will link Dada to the crisis in literature more specifically.

In "Poetry for the Five Senses," Teige once again takes up Apollinaire's calligrammes. While in the earlier article from 1919 he presented calligrammes as problematic due to their aspiration toward painting, by 1925 he sees them as a constructive form that emerges out of the chaos of Marinetti's "words in freedom":

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<sup>68</sup> "Přiznáváme, že dadaisté-skeptikové se smáli vždy po svém způsobu, jenž někdy byl poněkud hysterický, zpívali písně, jež byly bláznivé, ale i tak byly slohem *rozkládající* se kultury, slohem bezeslohové doby" (Teige, "O humoru," 577; my emphasis).

<sup>69</sup> "Toto absurdní idiotství není naprosto zjevem povážlivým či dokonce úpadkovým; právě naopak je to zdravá ventilace přetopeného mozku, výborná kanalizace našich starostí a chmur" (Teige, "O humoru," 575); "Dada přichází vyléčit obratem politickou, astronomickou, uměleckou, parlamentární, agrární a literární syfilidu doby" (Teige, "O humoru," 580).

<sup>70</sup> Teige's views seem to be influenced by Nezval, whose Dada-inflected manifesto "Parrot on a Motorcycle" Teige cites in this article (Teige, "O humoru," 583). Nezval would later describe the significance of Dada as follows: "Dadas are furniture movers. They have thoroughly dismantled the modern bourgeois' living room. Window sills are collapsing and breaking into pieces. On the sofa there lies a clock, side by side with comforters and Monet's paintings. Fragments of cups and vases cover the bottom of the moving van. Laces stick out from the dust, accompanied by a couple of shoes. Having created this charming mess, the Dadas ran away. . . . We can love them. Out of hatred for well-groomed tradition they began to smash everything. They kicked out the landlord. And then and there, their rage produced marvelous coincidences. A broken vase, a soccer ball and a sun-shade make a beautiful still-life. We have taken a lesson from it. We are now standing in this demolished room. It is necessary to make a new order" (Vítězslav Nezval, "Dada a surrealismus" (Dada and surrealism), *Fronta* (1927): 22; trans. in Jindřich Toman, "Now You See It, Now You Don't: Dada in Czechoslovakia, with Notes on High and Low," in *The Eastern Dada Orbit: Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, Central Europe and Japan*, eds. Gerald Janecek and Toshiharu Omuka [New York: G.K. Hall, 1998], 28). For more on the Poetists' reception of Dada, see Toman, "Now You See It."

Freed words are gathered in the chaos of Marinetti's poems. It was necessary that a new star crystalized out of this chaos. Apollinaire subordinates freed words to optical configurations in his calligrammes, which are the discovery of America, the revelation of the new world of modern poetry.<sup>71</sup>

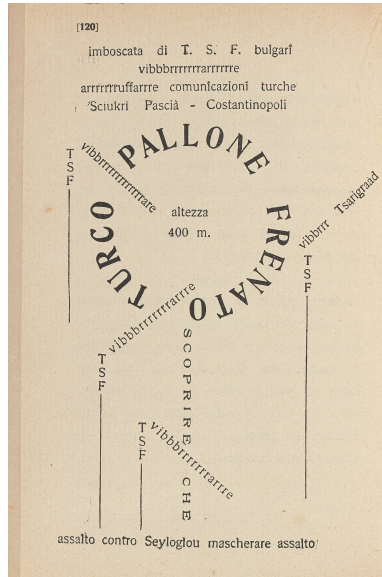
Teige's positive evaluation of the optical qualities of Apollinaire over and against Marinetti is perhaps less driven by differences in the visual arrangement of letters on the page than by Teige's rejection of the onomatopoeic qualities of Marinetti's poetry. While Marinetti's later publications like *Les mots en liberté* (1919) did indeed include chaotic letter arrangements, such as "Après la Marne, Joffre visita le front en auto" (1915; "After the Marne, Joffre Visited the Front by Car") and "Une assemblée tumultueuse. Sensibilité numérique" (1918; "A Tumultuous Assembly. Numerical Sensibility"),<sup>72</sup> his early work, including *Zang Tumb Tumb* (1914), is characterized by rather orderly typographical arrangements. Some examples, such as "Pallone" ("Balloon") even approach the diagrammatic and in this sense, do not differ significantly from Apollinaire's.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> "Volná slova se shlukla v hřmotný chaos Marinettiho básni. Bylo třeba, aby z chaosu vykristalisovala nová hvězda, Apollinaire po dřizuje osvobozená slova optický m konfiguracím ve svých „Calligrammech", které jsou objevením Ameriky, odhalením nového světa poesie" (Teige, "Poesie pro pět smyslů" [Poetry for the Five Senses], *Pásmo* 2, no. 2 [1925]: 23).

<sup>72</sup> F.T. Marinetti, *Les mots en liberté futuristes* (Milan, 1919), 99, 107.

<sup>73</sup> Although Teige does not discuss Marinetti's early poetic works with much specificity, his detailed chronology of Marinetti's scandalous interventions on the French literary scene suggests that he knew these works well. See Teige, "Futurismus a italská moderna," *Pásmo* 1, no. 10 (1925): 4–6. In this article, Teige focuses primarily on the contributions of Italian Futurism to painting, but he does briefly address Marinetti's poetic oeuvre (5).



**Fig. 2.1 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, a page from Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Zang Tumb Tumb* (1914)**

What Teige took issue with is Marinetti's use of the visual to emphasize the auditory: "Marinetti, by contrast [with Apollinaire], emphasizes simply the anarchy of the word and verbal art, which cannot be colonized by optical laws: the Futurists continue in phonetic speech; Marinetti works onomatopoeically."<sup>74</sup> The emphasis of Marinetti's typography on the performance of speech is one of the reasons why, in this article, Teige presents Marinetti as almost a Dadaist destroyer, who razes the ground for new creation, rather than a creator of new forms himself. By contrast, Apollinaire's poetry is qualified as "the abandonment of acoustic, phonetic, and now also onomatopoeic poetry"; it is "an optical sign: the word is no longer the word of a speaker or an actor, but the typographical word, with a series of visual associations."<sup>75</sup>

<sup>74</sup> "Marinetti naproti tomu zdůrazn'uje naprostou anarchii slova a slovesnosti, kterou nesluší se kolonizovati zákony optiky: futuristé pokračují ve fonetické řeči, Marinetti pracuje onomatopoeicky" (Teige, "Poesie pro pět smyslů," 23).

<sup>75</sup> "Jeho ideogramy [...] jsou opuštěním akustické, fonetické a tedy i onomatopoeické poezie; [...] jsou optickým znakem: slovo není už slovem řečníka a herce, je to slovo typografické se sériemi zrakových asociací" (Teige, "Poesie pro pět smyslů," 23).

As such, Apollinaire's poetry is better fitted to the "contemporary civilization" that prioritizes the development of the "eye."<sup>76</sup>

Teige writes of the typographical revolution that has overtaken poetry: "In modern poems, typographical vegetation is blooming [...] The new poet [...] is like the tamer of wild typographical animals [...] zebras and tigers, hummingbirds and bulldogs, antelopes and crescents [...] A feast for the eye, not a musical séance."<sup>77</sup> Thus, Apollinaire is presented as the tamer of Marinetti's typographical chaos, who visually makes words perform certain tricks. While Teige approves of the visual direction that contemporary poetry has taken, he is careful to clarify that the Poetist vision consists of writing poetry for *all* the senses: "Poetism wants to speak to all the senses [...] it wants to speak with all of the human being."<sup>78</sup> In this vision of Poetism's ideal, Teige's earlier insistence on the necessity of the human presence in art is transformed into the reader-viewer's active participation in the artwork with all of his or her senses. In other words, instead of depicting the human being, an artwork places the human readers-viewers at the center of the artwork by stimulating their senses. The desire for the return of the human being is addressed in a non-representational way.

Aside from two collections of previously published articles, Teige's most complete evaluation of the situation in verbal arts is contained in an article entitled "Words, Words, Words," published in several installments from January to April 1927.<sup>79</sup> In this essay, Teige

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<sup>76</sup> "V moderních básních rozkveté tipografická vegetace [...] nový básník [...] je jako krotitel divé zvěře typografické [...] zebry a tygřice, kolibříci a buldoci, antilopy a pŕlměsice [...] Hostina pro oko, nikoliv hudební seance" (Teige, "Poesie pro pět smyslŕ," 23).

<sup>77</sup> Teige, "Poesie pro pět smyslŕ," 23.

<sup>78</sup> "Poetism chce mluviti ke všem smyslŕm [...] chce mluviti k celému člověku" (Teige, "Poesie pro pět smyslŕ," 24).

<sup>79</sup> The two collections, entitled *The World that Laughs* and *The World that Smells* (or *A Perfumed World*; *Svět, který voní*), appeared in 1928 and 1930 respectively. The majority of articles in these volumes were published in various literary and artistic journals at different times throughout the 1920s. For this reason, these volumes do not present a single, consistent take on the various artistic and literary movements discussed in them. Teige's article "Word, Words, Words," originally published in the architecture journal *Horizont*, was republished in the 1930 volume.

concerns himself not only with the contributions of individual movements to literature today, but also with their evolution, with their relationship to one another. In a narrative familiar from the visual arts, Teige traces the development of the verbal arts from their crisis at the turn of the century to their temporary renewal in abstraction and, finally, to the birth of new forms, free of the aestheticism and formalism of abstraction.

### ***Symbolism, Crisis of the Word, and Verbal Arts***

According to Teige, just as the image rebelled against the injunction to mirror reality, so did the word, no longer satisfied with its “servitude,” abandon reality. Symbolism, in Teige’s evaluation, played a special role in liberating the word from its enslavement to its referential function and from its transparency vis-à-vis the physical world:

Symbolism is the period of the magic of the word. Sacred reverence for the word. For in the Bible it is written that in the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and God was the word. [...] today we don’t understand this sentence, it makes no sense to us. For the Symbolists, the word was an incantation. Rimbaud invented the color of vowels and organized the form and motion of every consonant, he introduced new delicate elements into the poetic language and destroyed the grammatical logic of sentences; he tested out the alchemy of the word.

A further development is the progressive differentiation of matter from its verbal copy, of the thing from the idea. The word is freed from its immediate bond with natural objects. The word is simply being emancipated from the thing and action, whereby it attains the possibility of widening the range of concepts and ideas, much like the circulation of money and banknote symbols intensify free trade. The word is not, then, a fixed and unchanging abstraction that determines the idea of this or that object, but becomes for the poet an element of sensitivity, which can be used to build a new object, which is the poem. Poets [...] rid the word of its fixed meaning [...].<sup>80</sup> The word loses its referential and metaphorical values, taking on new forms and colors.

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<sup>80</sup> “Symbolismus je obdobím magie slova. Posvátná úcta před slovem. Neboť v bibli je psáno, že na počátku bylo slovo a slovo bylo u boha a bůh byl slovo. Co na tom, že této větě dnes nerozumíme, že nám nedává žádného smyslu. Symbolistům bylo slovo zaklínáním. Rimbaud, jenž vynalezl barvu samohlásek a utřídil tvar a pohyb každé souhlásky, uvedl do básnického jazyka nové delikátní elementy a rozrušil gramaticální logičnost vět; prozkoušel alchymii slova. [...] Přirozeně, že z Rimbaudových příměrů vytrácí se slůvko “jako”; slova se stávají ohebná a svěží. Dalším vývojem nastává progresivní diferenciacie hmoty od její slovní kopie, věci od představy. Slovo se osvobozuje od bezprostřední vázanosti s naturálními objekty. Slovo se prostě emancipuje od věci a od děje, čímž dospívá se možnosti rozšíření pojmů a idejí, asi podobně jako peněžní obrat a směnečné symboly zintensivňují

In this passage, Teige reconstructs Symbolist experimentation with words, specifically their synesthetic dilution of the word's referential meaning, noting how this experimentation led to the separation of language from its descriptive function.<sup>81</sup> While the Symbolists had great respect for the word, their experiments in decoupling the word from reference and expanding its meanings actually led to the devaluation of the word. Insofar as the word, thanks to Symbolist experimentation, could now potentially mean anything, "the word's value and its consequences" were diminished.<sup>82</sup>

Invoking the French Symbolist Remy de Gourmont, Teige suggests that Symbolism made apparent the following situation:

The word deceives. It is the robe of our illusion and it appears to designate reality. It is a symbol that authenticates hundred-year-old beliefs. It is a counterfeit banknote of the golden treasure of reality. We don't know how and to what extent words answer truths and facts. The relations between objects and their names are not exact. We don't know what exists underneath words, except for their canonized meanings. Adam's nomenclature in Paradise urgently requires scientific revision. For a poet, the word cannot be the image and a substitute for reality, which loses color, form, essence in it [the word]; for a poet, the word is material and it is necessary that the word itself be real, that it itself be definite reality, that it be as real as brick or marble.<sup>83</sup>

In other words, the Symbolist experiment enabled the dissolution of what was perceived as an essential relationship between language and reality. The logical conclusion of the Symbolist

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svobodu obchodu. Slovo není tu tedy nehybnou a neměnitelnou abstrakcí, určující ideu toho kterého předmětu, ale stává se pro básníka elementem sensibility, schopným, aby z něho byl sestrojen nový předmět, jímž je báseň. Básníci dovolují si impertinentní slovní akrobacie, hrají si se slovy jako dítě, dělají kouzelné hors d'oeuvres ve své kuchyni slov, zbavují slova ustáleného smyslu, aby tím lépe se zastkvěla jejich podstata. Slovo ztrácí tu své předmětné a metaforické hodnoty, nabývá nových tvarů a barev" (Teige, "Slova, slova, slova," 30).

<sup>81</sup> Synesthesia explores associative rather than referential connections of language material, widening the word's field of possible meanings to potentially include any and all experiences.

<sup>82</sup> Teige, "Slova," 1.

<sup>83</sup> "Slovo klame. Je hávem naší iluze a zdá se označovati skutečnost. Je symbolem, ověřujícím staleté pověry. Falešnou bankovkou zlatého pokladu skutečnosti. Nevíme, jak a pokud odpovídají slova pravdám a skutečnostem. Vztahy mezi předměty a jejich jmény jsou nepřesné. Nevíme, co existuje pod slovy, kromě jejich kanonisovatího smyslu. Nomenklatorský výkon Adama v Ráji vyžaduje naléhavě vědecké revise. Pro básníka nemůže býti slovo obrazem a nahrázkou skutečnosti, která v něm ztrácí barvu, tvar, podstatu; pro básníka je slovo materiálem, i je třeba, aby samo bylo reálné, aby samo bylo určitou skutečností, aby bylo tak reálné jako cihla nebo jako mramor" (Teige, "Slova," 1).



experiment, according to Teige, was the radical instability of the word's meaning. The quoted passage reflects not only the views of Remy de Gourmont and Teige, but also of Roman Jakobson, who critiqued the realist treatment of the word as a the "violent *inflation* of linguistic signs."<sup>84</sup> Teige's metaphor of the "banknote," which, in contrast to gold, has no value in itself, links up with Jakobson's idea of "inflation," at least metaphorically. In the 1920s, paper currency became a common symbol of devaluation due to inflation and economic instability in many European countries at the time.<sup>85</sup> According to Jakobson, "Positivism and naïve realism," which placed value on the word's ability to convey some truth about the world, "fetishized" the word by trying to conceal the fact that it does not reflect reality directly. They shamelessly "bolster the credit of the word and strengthen confidence in its value," despite the fact that there is no link to the gold standard (to combine Jakobson's and Teige's metaphors).<sup>86</sup> While for Teige it is Symbolism that draws attention to the arbitrary connection between words and reality, Jakobson credits "modern phenomenology" with "exposing one linguistic fiction after another": "It has skillfully demonstrated the prime importance of the distinction between sign and designated object."<sup>87</sup> Although Jakobson's lecture on this subject was given after the publication of Teige's essay, the shared metaphors and views of language suggest close intellectual exchange between

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<sup>84</sup> Roman Jakobson, "What is Poetry?" in *Language in Literature*, 376; my emphasis. The original "Co je poezie?" was delivered as a lecture in Czech to the Manes Society in Prague, prior to being published in *Volné směry*, no. 30 (1933–34): 229–39.

<sup>85</sup> Most European countries suspended the gold standard during the First World War. Depiction of money, including the incorporation of actual bills into collages and photomontages, was common practice among the German wing of Dada, since Germany was one of the countries that saw major inflation and resulting devaluation of paper money in the 1920s. See, for example, Raoul Hausmann's "ABCD" (1923–24) or Hannah Höch's work. The application of this metaphor to language has a long tradition that goes back as far as the Greeks (Heraclitus, Plato). See Marc Shell, *Money, Language, and Thought: Literary and Philosophic Economies from the Medieval to the Modern Era* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993) and *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993).

<sup>86</sup> Jakobson, "What is Poetry?", 377.

<sup>87</sup> Jakobson, "What is Poetry?", 377.

Teige and Jakobson. Indeed, as I show below, Teige explicitly relies on Jakobson's insights about language and the special place of the poetic function in "Words, words, words."<sup>88</sup>

Regardless of whether the agent behind the decoupling of words and reality is Symbolism or phenomenology, for both Teige and Jakobson this situation is, on the one hand, a liberation and, on the other, a crisis. Teige elaborates on this situation, noting that the post-Symbolist generation of artists experiences the separation of the word from its referential meaning as a crisis: "Already Marinetti and Apollinaire intuited the material crisis of modern verbal arts, the verbal crisis."<sup>89</sup> This crisis is explicitly linked to Symbolism, specifically to Rimbaud's discovery of "the poetic word accessible to all meanings today or tomorrow" and to Mallarmé's "words without relationships" in his "Penultimate" poem.<sup>90</sup> For Teige, the contemporary verbal crisis is caused less by the prioritization of reality over the non-transparent medium of the word, than by the realization that the word is not a transparent medium. In other words, the understanding that the word does not have a stable set of references and meanings brings about a crisis of certainty: "The contemporary crisis of literature," Teige writes, "is the crisis of material. *The uncertainty of the word.*"<sup>91</sup>

The crisis of verbal matter, which began with the Symbolist rebellion against referential degradation of words, developed further in the literary movements that followed. In "Words,

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<sup>88</sup> I do not mean to suggest that the influence moved in one direction only. Teige and, more broadly, literature and art certainly influenced Jakobson's theoretical thinking as much as his theories influenced artistic production.

<sup>89</sup> "Materiálovou krisi moderní slovesnosti, krisi slovní, vytušil již Marinetti i Apollinaire." (Teige, "Slova," 31). Note that "slovní" ("verbal") is more explicitly connected to "slovo" ("word") in Czech than in English.

<sup>90</sup> Teige appears to be referring to Mallarmé's early prose poem, "Le démon de l'analogie." Citing the line "La Pénultième est morte" in Czech, Teige suggests that this line does not give itself to being clarified or made sense of.

<sup>91</sup> "Soudobá krise literatury je, ukázali jsme, krisi materiálu. Nejistotou slova. A tam kde není slova, není přirozeně literatury" (Teige, "Slova," 47; my emphasis). Cf. Teige's evaluation of Jules Laforgue's character Hamlet, who "understands the emptiness of great words, does not respect them, and exclaims, 'Words, words, words! This will be my motto, until someone proves that words rhyme with transcendental realities'" (Teige, "Slova," 1). The title of Teige's article, "Slova, slova, slova," clearly borrowed from these lines, suggests the importance of the ideas expressed in them for Teige's own thought. As I argue, Teige's solution to the crisis of the verbal arts involves linking the post-Symbolist word that has been dissociated from its referential function to objects in the world. However, Teige does not advocate for a return to a pre-Symbolist state. Rather, he suggests that the word can be linked to reality in a non-representational manner.

Words, Words,” Teige does not discuss Italian Futurism’s contribution to overcoming the crisis besides occasional references to Marinetti’s “words in freedom,” which “freed words from their syntactic straight jacket.”<sup>92</sup> In fact, in this essay Teige is rather dismissive of Marinetti’s emphasis on “abstract onomatopoeia,” which he views as a naive “return to unorganized life” and to “the ranks of parrots.” In Teige’s view, art must move forward, rather than attempt to recover language in its initial state.<sup>93</sup> Apollinaire appears several times throughout Teige’s article as a pioneer of optical effects in poetry, but he too is not discussed in any significant detail. By contrast, the movement that is presented as the most consequential in terms of its response to the crisis of language and meaning is Dadaism. According to Teige, Dadaism “provided valuable services and impulses to verbal art with its skepticism towards verbal material, with its criticism and examination of words.”<sup>94</sup>

The Dadaists took to an extreme the liberation of the word initiated by the Symbolists:

In order to free the word from reality and from thought, the Dadaists took it upon themselves to place words next to each other without any sort of connection, and the discontinuity of such word salads precluded the possibility of words associating with each other and translating thought.<sup>95</sup>

The final result of this liberation, however, was somewhat unexpected:

Suddenly it became apparent that words are superannuated and awfully debilitated, that they have obtained their freedom at a moment when they no longer have the strength to use it. [...] In Dadaism one witnesses disintegration and *devaluation of the word*.

The result was disrespect of the word [...] underneath the word a terrifying emptiness opened up.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Teige, “Slova,” 30.

<sup>93</sup> Teige, “Slova,” 32 and 70. In this article, Teige follows the Rousseauian model of the origins of language, which links the first word to cries of pain.

<sup>94</sup> Teige, “Slova,” 1. Further down in the same paragraph, Teige emphasizes Dadaism’s contribution even more emphatically: “We could say that there would be no modern literature, if there were no Dadaism” (Teige, “Slova,” 1).

<sup>95</sup> Teige, “Slova,” 30.

<sup>96</sup> Teige, “Slova,” 30–31; emphasis in original.

The liberated word, according to Teige, disintegrated into letters, sounds, and ever finer compositional elements, and retreated into abstraction, as exemplified by the poetry of Kurt Schwitters and I. K. Bonset (Theo van Doesburg):

If abstract poetry freed [...] the word from naturalism, if it allowed one word to be evaluated against another word compositionally, rather than against matter and reality, one cannot avoid asserting that the word itself is not the primary, elementary material. The word is an assembly of letters, it is sound, it is the designation of a certain reality and an inducer of associations.<sup>97</sup>

Consequently, some Dadaist poets took up “the letter” as the material of poetry, in “recitation” and “typography.”

Going beyond the French and German literary contexts, Teige also discusses a parallel tendency toward abstraction in Russian literature, which likewise experimented with “abstract and non-objective poetry.”<sup>98</sup> He devotes an entire section of the article to a discussion of the contributions of Russian Futurism, which he divides into the “Futurism” of the pre-war generation of poets and the “zaumniki” of the post-war.<sup>99</sup> Teige notes the parallels between the “non-objective poetry” of the “zaum movement” (which he equates with the Georgia-based group 41°) and Suprematist painting, from which he borrows the term “non-objective.”<sup>100</sup> Teige suggests that the Russian zaumniki were more productive than the French and German Dada in searching for ways out of the verbal crisis for two reasons: 1) due to Russian Futurism’s connection to the Revolution, and 2) due to the movement’s transcendence beyond literature. In

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<sup>97</sup> “Jestliže abstraktní poesie osvobodila [...] slovo od naturalismu, dovolila komposičně hodnotiti slovo proti slovu a nikoliv proti hmotě a skutečnosti, nelze přece nekonstatovati, že slovo samo není prvotním, elementárním materiálem. Slovo je sestavou písmen, zvukem, označením nějaké skutečnosti a navozovačem asociací.” (Teige, “Slova,” 47).

<sup>98</sup> Teige, “Slova,” 46.

<sup>99</sup> Teige’s discussion of Roman Jakobson’s differentiation of practical speech and poetic language introduces this section, again pointing to the direct intellectual exchange between the two thinkers specifically in the context of this article.

<sup>100</sup> As we will see further on, Nezval applies this term to his poem “Abeceda,” claiming a connection to the Russian avant-garde and to a strand of experimentation with words that he saw as more productive than that of Dada.

his view, the context of the Revolution, zaumniki's destructive project became more urgent and meaningful, since destruction was channeled toward building a new world:

Zaumniki [...] approach [...] the highly defiant attitude of the French and German Dadaists. But the negation that Russian modern art calls for naturally has more fire and revolutionary power: its offensive cooperates with the October offensive of the proletariat: here the real revolution operates, here the old world is defeated and the new world is being built. The words of Russian manifestoes, just like the proclamation of the communist international, are fiery, incendiary, explosive.<sup>101</sup>

Contrasting the Russian avant-garde with western Dada, Teige implies that the destruction performed by the Russian Futurists was not carried out for its own sake, but in order to enable the construction of a new world.<sup>102</sup> The Russians' creation of "neologisms" takes them a step further in the project of liberating the word: "Dadaists did not go as far in their liberation of the word as did their Russian peers, the zaumniki."<sup>103</sup>

Russian Futurism's connection to other disciplines is another reason why the movement receives a more positive evaluation from Teige than Western Dada:

The poets of this group [zaumniki] created a new, completely autonomous poetic language, "suprarational," "transrational language," as Kruchenykh designated it. Their effort is assisted by modern Russian linguistics and philological criticism; Jakobson, Shklovsky, Brik, Kushner, Arvatov are undertaking a laboratory experiment of immense importance. They determine experimentally the semantic meaning of words and speech. They study properties of word-masses, the nature of their relations, the way they differ from a natural object. The poets of transrational language—Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, Aliagrov, Zdanevich (Iliazd), Tretiakov, Tereshkovich, Terentev—realize poetry of pure form, a poetry that has no naturalistic meaning, a poetry which sings in order to sing, a poetry of ringing words. The linguistic-poetic theories of these philologists and the practice of these poets—a kind of marvelous chemical laboratory that explores basic elements of poetry, revives the word, disciplines rhythm—make truly abstract, non-objective and non-naturalistic poetry possible. A new verbal aesthetic is born, supported

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<sup>101</sup> "Zaumnikovci [...] bliží se velice popěračským atitudám francouzských i německých dadaistů. Ale negace, kterou hlásá ruská moderna, má přirozeně více ohně a revoluční síly: její útoky druží se s říjnovým útokem proletariátu: zde dějstvuje se skutečná revoluce, zde se poráží starý a buduje nový svět. A slova ruských manifestů právě tak jako provolání komunistické internacionály jsou zápalná, žhářská, výbušná" (Teige, "Slova," 46).

<sup>102</sup> Cf. Mayakovsky's announcement of the constructive agenda of Futurism in "A Drop of Tar."

<sup>103</sup> "Dadaisté nedošli tak daleko ve svém osvobozování slova jako jejich rusští vrstevníci, zaumnikovci." (Teige, "Slova," 46).

by the research of exact science. It is only here that verbal art gains pure and genuine elements.<sup>104</sup>

In this passage, Teige emphasizes the transcendence of the Russian Futurist experiment beyond poetry into the science of language. Meanwhile, “Dadaism, in most cases, remained a verbal art, remained, willy-nilly, literature, literature par excellence.”<sup>105</sup> Teige subjects Dadaism to the harshest of criticisms precisely for its failure to transcend literature: “Their [Dadaists’] poems almost always suffer from a certain verbal cocaineism; they remain individualistic child’s play. The Dadaists remained the vendors of words, who convert the elements of life into images and crystal sentences. They remained litterateurs.”<sup>106</sup>

While offering a more positive evaluation of Russian Futurist experimentation than of Dada, Teige suggests that neither movement can solve the crisis of language in the verbal arts, insofar as they both rely on abstraction. Abstraction—whether destructive, as in the case of Dada, or constructive, as in the case of the Russian Futurists—leads only to further disintegration of language and threatens to become impotent aestheticism in its separation from life. What is needed in order to overcome the crisis is a different mode of relating to reality, a different kind of realism that would fall neither into the sin of naturalism and slavish imitation, nor into the

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<sup>104</sup> A partial translation of this passage is provided in Toman, *The Magic of a Common Language*, 226; trans. expanded and modified. The original reads: “Básníci této skupiny pokoušejí se vytvořit nový, zcela svéprávný básnický jazyk, „nadrozumný”, „zaumný jazyk”, jak jej označil Kručených. Jejich úsilí je sekundováno moderní ruskou linguistikou a filologickou kritikou; Jakobson, Sklovskij, Brik, Kušner, Arbatov podnikají laboratorní pokus velkého významu: experimentálně vymezit smyslový význam slova a řeči. Studují vlastnosti slovních mass, povahu jejich vazby, diferenciaci od naturálního objektu. Básníci zaumného jazyka, Chlebnikov, Kručených, Aljagrov, Zdaněvič (Iliazd), Tretjakov, Těreškovič, Trentěv, realizují poesii čistého tvaru, poesii, která nemá naturalistického smyslu, která zpívá, aby zpívala, poesii zvučících slov. Linguopoetické teorie oněch filologů a praxe těchto básníků — jakási úžasná chemická laboratoř, která prozkoumává základní elementy poesie, obrozuje slovo, disciplinuje rytmus — umožňuje vskutku abstraktní, bezpředmětnou a nenaturalistickou poesii. Opírajíc se o výzkumy exaktní vědy, rodí se tu nová slovesná estetika. Teprve zde nabývá slovesné umění čistých a ryzích elementů” (Teige, “Slova,” 46).

<sup>105</sup> “dadaismus ve většině případů zůstal slovesným uměním, chtě nechtě, zůstal literaturou, literaturou par excellence” (Teige, “Slova,” 1).

<sup>106</sup> Teige, “Slova,” 46–47.

dead end of abstraction. Teige's alternative, as I will show, is modeled on the idea of a photogram, understood as a non-representational mode of approaching reality.

In "Words, Words, Words," Poetism, not surprisingly, stands at the top of the artistic evolutionary ladder.<sup>107</sup> Written in 1926-1927, the essay betrays historical insight that Teige would not have had in 1923, when Poetism was born. Nevertheless, it attests to Teige's unchanging desire for a different kind of connection to the real. Introducing the work of Poetism at the end of his article, Teige writes:

The dictionary is nothing other than a repertoire of the most commonly used expressions, a map of the stars visible to the naked eye. But what of the secret and unexamined life of words under the microscope and X-rays! [...] Words imparted to us by the dictionary are words that are illuminated by the daylight of practical reason. Verbal art, literature, which uses these words as its material, comprehends only that which is comprehensible in the light of day; the infrared and ultraviolet realities fatefully escape it. It remains and will remain a photograph of the darkroom of the intellect, which is improved and further improvable. But poetry invents X-ray-grams from other worlds. [...] poetry, poiesis, pure creation will again turn to the deep life of the subconscious, to the underground currents of dreams and ideas, to the fantastic vegetation of treacherous and black oceans. It captures their gleams without the system of lenses of the intellect and logic, without the darkroom of intelligence, directly and without mediation onto the photographic plate of sensibility. But this is something other than that other literature, other than all literature. [...] Poetry without literature and beyond literature. The surrealists have chopped up speech into words without etymology, without their ordinary meaning, in order to show the hidden power of words [...] Poetism follows these ultraviolet realities unrealizable by the word, ungraspable by literature; using elementary materials, it realizes a poetry that does not address logical intelligence, but rather the modern man's entire complex being by means of all the senses.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Teige makes the supremacy of Poetism on the evolutionary ladder of art clear from the beginning. The very first sentence of the article reads: "Drawing the developmental line, which leads from Romanticism through Symbolism, Fanaticism, and Cubofuturism, to Dadaism and, later, [...] through Surrealism to Poetism and its poetry for the five senses, we tried to show [...] the progressive emancipation of poetry from ideology and morality, from every thesis and effort, so that there could be only poetry" (Teige, "Slova," 1). In this article, Teige does not discuss the legacy of Romanticism, which is noted as the first step on his ladder of artistic revolution, nor does he mention "Fanatism" again. Note that Teige uses the term "Cubofuturism" broadly, to refer to the connection between futurist movements and the aesthetic revolution initiated by Cubism, rather than to the Russian Cubo-futurist group also known as "Hylaea." The evolution of Poetism from Surrealism is a bit of a retrospective distortion, since in the Czech context Poetism actually preceded Surrealism or, at the very least emerged at the same time.

<sup>108</sup> "Slovník není než repertoárem výrazů nej běžnějšího užívání, mapou hvězd, viditelných prostým okem. Ale tajemný a neprobádaný život slov pod drobnohledem a pod roentgenem! [...] Slova, která nám sdělí slovník, jsou slova osvětlená denním světlem praktického rozumu. A slovesné umění, literatura, která má za materiál tato slova, postihuje jen to, co lze postihnouti v denním světle: infrarudé a ultrafialové skutečnosti jí osudově unikají. Zůstává a

As Teige suggests in this passage, new literature will not be literature as a distinct domain of verbal art. He rejects ways of pursuing literature as a mode of recording only the visible phenomena, not the secret, hidden life beneath the visible. Teige's choice of metaphor in this passage is noteworthy: he compares old ways of writing literature to a photograph taken by the intellect, suggesting that such a photograph would be able to capture only a part of reality, even if the medium of recording is perfected to the point of mechanization. (Earlier I noted how the metaphor the mechanical eye of the camera was contrasted with the less perfect recording mechanism of the human eye. Here, the suggestion is that even if the human eye is enhanced with the objectivity of a camera, the artist will still not be able to record all of reality). By contrast, new literature, which will not be literature at all but rather a *poiesis*, will record reality and life more directly, without the mediation of the "camera" of the intellect. In this sense, it will rather resemble a *photogram*, or, as Teige suggests, an X-ray-gram, which suggestively combines X-rays that allow access into something deeper within, and photogram, which emphasizes creation by means of direct imprint.

In this passage, Teige connects the new type of literature to the project of Poetism, which appeals to reader-viewers through all of their senses, rather than merely cognitively, through their intellect. It is important to note that this is how Teige chooses to introduce the human back into the art—not by means of representation, but rather by manipulating the audience's senses, who are already located in the real world.

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zůstane fotografií temné komory intelektu, zdokonalenou a nadále zdokonalitelnou. Ale poesie vynalezne roentgenogramy z jiných světů. [...] poesie, *poiesis*, čistá tvorba obrací se znovu k hlubinnému životu podvědomí, k punkevním podzemním tokům snů a představ, k fantastické vegetaci dna zrádných a černých oceánů. Zachycuje jejich záblesky bez soustavy čoček rozumu a logiky, bez temné komory inteligence, přímo a bezprostředně na citlivou plochu sensibility. Ale to je něco jiného než ona literatura, než všechna literatura. [...] Poesie bez literatury a mimo literaturu. Surrealisté rozsekali řeč ve slova bez etymologie, bez obecného smyslu, aby objevili jejich vlastní skryté síly [...] poetismus sleduje ty ultrafialové skutečnosti slovem nerealizovatelné, literaturou nepostižitelné; elementárními materiály realizuje poesii, neobracející se k logické inteligenci, ale prostřednictvím všech smyslů k celé komplexní bytosti moderního člověka" (Teige, "Slova," 72–73).



### ***Elaboration of a Poetist Solution to the Crisis of Representation***

Teige's theorization of the crisis of artistic representation evolved and became more complex over time, as the retrospective account of the significance of the Poetist movement in "Words, Words, Words" suggests. However, the idea of crisis and the desire to address it permeates Poetist artworks from the very beginning. In this section, I trace how specific Poetist artworks evolved as a response of the crisis of representation. My primary case studies will be Poetist image poetry produced between 1923–1925 and the multimedia book *ABCs (Abeceda, 1926)*. I show how these artistic projects attempt to overcome the crisis of representation by finding non-representational ways of relating to reality. In the end, they offer different solutions on the level of form and content; nevertheless, both are driven by the same desire to find an adequate solution to the crisis.

The first artistic creation officially anointed as Poetist was the "image poem" (*obrazová báseň*).<sup>109</sup> Along with the Poetist movement itself, the new artistic form was announced in the inaugural issue of the Czech avant-garde journal *Disk* in 1923. Instead of shrieking proclamations of new revolutionary art, this journal contained multiple scattered references to Poetism throughout its pages.<sup>110</sup> For example, the following announcement appeared below an illustration by Jindřich Štyrský, with no apparent attachment to any other text on the page:

**Poetism =  
the art of today**<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Although *obrazová báseň* has often been translated as a "picture poem," following Jaroslav Anděl I prefer the more literal term "image poem," which makes the etymological connection to different types of images more apparent (Jaroslav Anděl et al., *Czech Modernism, 1900–1945* [Houston and Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1989]).

<sup>110</sup> Manifestoes that detailed the Poetist agenda more specifically came later. For example, Teige's "Manifesto of Poetism" was published in 1924. While Štyrský's article "obraz," which, as we saw, had more typical features of the manifesto genre, opened the first issue of *Disk*, it made no mention of "Poetism" as a movement. It seems likely that Štyrský's essay was written some months earlier, before Poetism was founded, since it is dated to May 1923, while the issue of *Disk* did not come out until November.

<sup>111</sup> *Disk*, no. 1 (1923): 18. Formatting reproduced as in original.

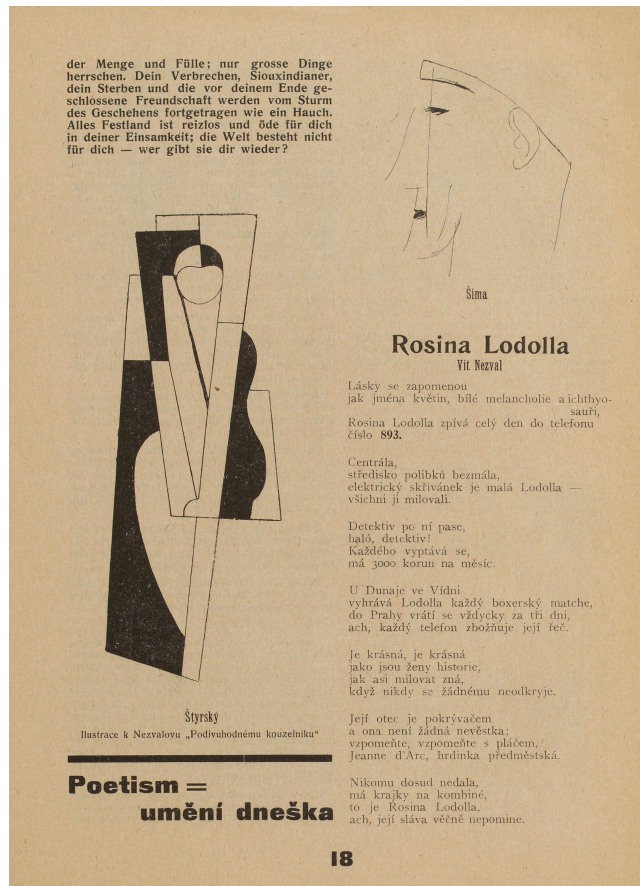


Fig. 2.2 Announcement of Poetism (bottom left) in the journal *Disk* (1923)

The word “Poetism” reappears in the closing article of the issue:

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### Poetism

Thanks to Cubism, painting and poetry, once dominated by ideology, have arrived at **pure poetry**. The **IMAGE POEM** is emerging.<sup>112</sup>

This brief statement, which appears toward the end of Teige’s article “Painting and Poetry,” establishes a connection between “Poetism” and the art form of “image poem,” which will be explored in subsequent Poetist publications. Echoing Teige’s earlier publications, this passage

<sup>112</sup> Teige, “Painting and Poetry” in *Between Worlds* 368; translation modified and original typographical emphasis restored.

suggests that Cubism stands at the foundation of new art. While paying tribute to it, he also suggests that something new is emerging, namely, “the IMAGE POEM.”

The juxtaposition of the heading “Poetism” with “Constructivism,” which, similarly formatted as a heading, comes before it, implicitly suggests that the emerging new movement also claims the legacy of Constructivism. Moreover, the placement of one after the other—a strategy Teige used in “Art Today and Tomorrow,” when he juxtaposed “theater” and film”—possibly suggests that he sees Poetism as the next stage of Constructivism.<sup>113</sup>

The importance of artistic evolution and of Poetism’s particular place in it is signaled at the very beginning of Teige’s article. The following lines, which recite the familiar narrative of artistic evolution in the visual arts, open the essay “Painting and Poetry”:

In so far as modern visual, literary, and musical production is really modern, that is, insofar as they have real value, they are based entirely on *Cubism*. [...] The camera annulled the social contract between painting and reality. An enormous amount of work was accomplished from Cezanne to Picasso: artistic production was cleansed of everything imitative, decorative and anecdotal. The advance of *abstraction and geometrization* reached its high point: reality, which used to be the point of departure, was deformed and then transubstantiated into a complex of autonomous, primary geometric forms and expressive colors governed by specific laws of image composition and construction, and a powerful poetry grew out of their harmony. Now an opposing trend has come into being: the road of *concretization*. Cézanne turned bottle into cylinder to make it comply with the image composition. Juan Gris makes the cylinder, called for by his image composition, into a bottle, so that it would attain contact with reality. Here and there the geometrical composition of the image is vivified [*oživována*] by points of contact with raw, living reality.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> In a later Poetist manifesto, Teige would suggest that Constructivism is the base, while Poetism is the superstructure, indicating a more complicated relationship than one of succession and perfection.

<sup>114</sup> Karel Teige, “Painting and Poetry,” 367; translation modified and original emphases restored. The original reads: “Moderní produkce výtvarná, slovesná, hudební, pokud je skutečně moderní, tedy pokud je skutečně hodnotná, bázuje cele na k u b i s m u. [...] Fotoaparát zrušil společenskou smlouvu mezi malířstvím a skutečností. Od Cézannea k Picassovi dovršena ohromná práce: výtvarná produkce desinfikována od všeho zpodobivého, dekorujícího, anekdotického. Postup a b s t r a k c e, g e o m e t r i s a c e dostoupil vrcholu: skutečnost, jež byla východiskem, zdeformovaná a posléze předpodstatněna v souhrn autonomních, primárních, geometrických tvarů, výmluvných barev, ovládaných specifickými zákony obrazové kompozice a konstrukce, z jejichž harmonie line se silná poesie. Nyní nastoupena cesta opačná: cesta k o n k r e t i s a c e. Cézanne dělal z láhve válec, aby láhev vyhověla obrazové kompozici. Juan Gris dělá z válce, daného obrazovou strojbou, láhev, aby obdržel kontakt s realitou. Geometrická skladba obrazu oživována tu a tam doteky syrové životní reality [...]” (Karel Teige, “Malířství a poesie,” *Disk*, no. 1 (1923): 19–20; emphases in original).

In this passage, Cubism is, once again, extolled as the foundation of modern art. In contrast to metaphors of irreparable destruction that characterized photography before the spring of 1922, here photography appears as the liberator of painting.<sup>115</sup> The annulment of the social contract, which draws on the language of moral and political philosophy, symbolizes the newly gained freedom of the artist, liberated from the constraining, illegitimate rule of mimetic representation.

As a force that brought freedom to the artist, photography has led to developments in visual art such as “*abstraction*” and “*geometrization*,” represented in Cubist works and the non-objective (*bezpředmětný*) compositions of the Suprematists, Piet Mondrian, and Theo van Doesburg, whose abstractions Teige dismisses later on as “decorativism.”<sup>116</sup> That is, although these experiments in abstraction had their value, they are no longer viable today. As the passage makes clear, this trend in turn gave way to “concretization,” to the desire once again for close “contact with reality.” Although abstraction and concretization in art are not causally linked in this article, elsewhere Teige makes clear that concretization stems from the exhaustion of the possibilities of abstraction.<sup>117</sup> The concretization trend, here represented by Juan Gris’s paintings, is also linked to photography and the photogram, as we saw earlier in Teige’s comparison of Juan Gris’s compositions to Man Ray’s.

While Teige does not provide as much detail about the current state of poetry as he does about the image, he does allude to a certain shift that is taking place in the verbal arts. Teige notes a movement away from auditory poetry, represented by Marinetti, toward the visual poetry

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<sup>115</sup> Karel Teige, “Umění přítomnosti,” 134.

<sup>116</sup> “Non-objective compositions that study pure forms and their mutual relationships are a deviant consequence of Cubism: Mondrian, van Doesburg, Suprematism, and the like risk turning into decoration” (Teige, “Painting and Poetry,” 368). “Bezpředmětné kompozice, studující čisté tvary a jejich vzájemné vztahy jsou zcestným důsledkem kubismu: Mondrian, Doesburg, suprematismus a pod. jsou v nebezpečí dekorativismu” (Teige, “Malířství a poesie,” 20).

<sup>117</sup> In “The Art of Today and Tomorrow” (1922), Teige notes the “unhealthy” nature of abstract painting: “[...] jako extreme malby naturalistické, tak i opačný extrém malby abstraktní a absolutníje nezdravý” (“Umění dnes a zítra,” 374).

of Apollinaire. As a result of this shift, Teige suggests, poetry is moving closer to the image, while the image moves closer to poetry:

**A poem reads like a modern image.  
A modern image reads like a poem.**<sup>118</sup>

The recitation of the crisis story in this article serves a particular goal: to make room for the Poetist movement by promoting its specific solution to the crisis of language, exemplified by the new form called “image poetry.”

After his summary of the crisis, Teige writes:

Plastic art in its existing forms is dying out, [...] just as the traditional concept of the image is withering.

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We stand before the logical conclusion: *the fusion of modern painting with modern poetry. Art is one and it is poetry.* You will see (in the second issue of *Disk*) **IMAGE POEMS** that represent a solution to the problems that are common to painting and poetry. Sooner or later this fusion will probably bring about the *liquidation*, perhaps gradual, of traditional methods of painting and of writing poetry.<sup>119</sup>

Although no examples of “image poems” or any descriptions of the formal characteristics of this new art form were provided in Teige’s article or in the journal issue as a whole, it is clear from this passage that the image poem was meant to be a revolutionary new form. Teige’s prescriptive characterization of image poems places emphasis on the potential of this form to transform painting and poetry into a single fused genre. Moreover, as the rhetorical framing of this passage makes clear, the creation of this form was not an end in itself. The image poem was meant to be a “solution to the problems” of painting and poetry. Such a “Jakobsonian-constructivist”

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<sup>118</sup> *Between Worlds* 368; translation modified, original emphasis restored. “Básen’ se čte jako moderní obraz. Moderní obraz se čte jako básen” (Teige, “Malířství a poesie,” 20). In Teige’s appraisal contemporary art in general seems to tend toward fusion. For example, sculpture likewise moves toward painting (Teige, “Malířství a poesie,” 20).

<sup>119</sup> Teige, “Malířství a poesie,” 20; emphases in original.

formulation suggests that Poetist image poetry emerged as a result of a goal-directed search to find a solution to the crisis of representation.<sup>120</sup>

### ***First Examples of Image Poetry***

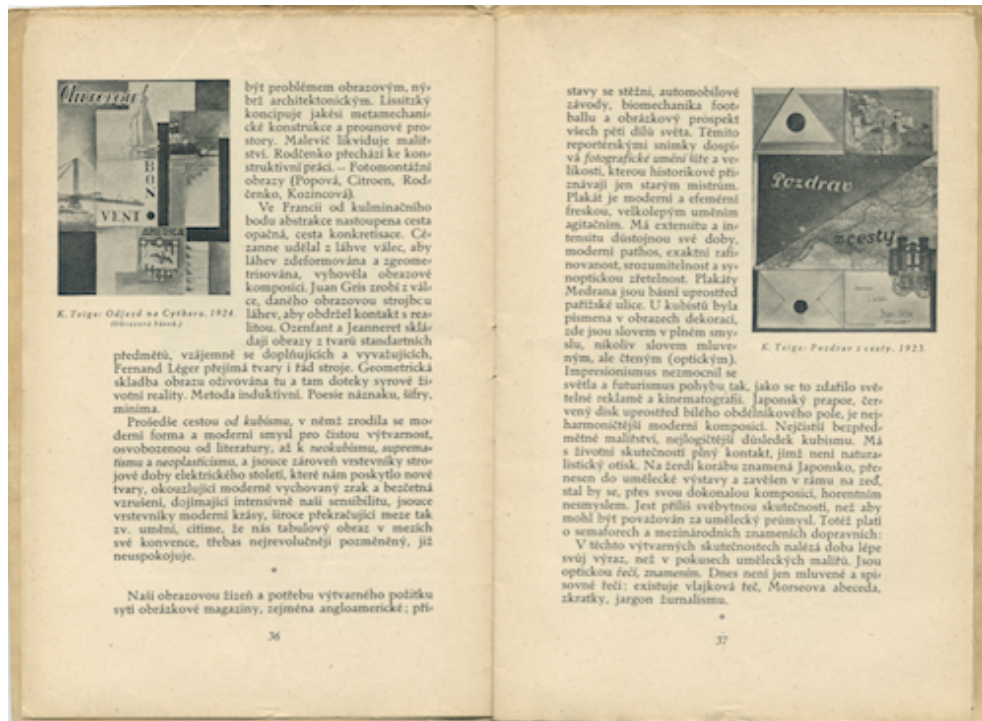
The first examples of Czech image poetry were displayed at the Bazaar of Modern Art, held in Prague in December 1923.<sup>121</sup> In print, the first image poems appeared in the journal *Veraikon* in 1924, followed by reprints and expansion in *Disk 2* in 1925, almost two years after Teige's announcement of them in the first issue of *Disk*. Before turning to concrete examples of image poetry, I will first discuss how this new Poetist art form was framed rhetorically in labels and articles that accompanied reproductions of the poems. In this section, I argue that photography stands at the center of the Poetist conception of image poetry and that it is through this indispensable feature that Poetism aims to overcome the crisis of representation without falling into the dead end of abstraction.

In *Veraikon*, two image poems were printed alongside Teige's article that recited the familiar story of artistic evolution from Cubism's break with mimetic representation to geometric abstraction. Both image poems featured painted and drawn images, words, photographic cut-outs, images from newspapers, maps, and other materials (fig. 2.3).

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<sup>120</sup> Jindřich Toman, *Foto/montáž tiskem = Photo/Montage in Print* (Prague: Kant, 2009), 88.

<sup>121</sup> Toman notes that the exhibition catalogue for the Bazar lists several image poems, including Jindřich Štyrský's "Marion" and what is probably Teige's "Departure for Cythera," among the objects that were displayed (Toman, *Foto/montáž*, 88, 94 fn43). He observes that, although the original image poems were probably displayed at the Bazar, they were nevertheless created with the specific goal of being printed in journals (88). Indeed, in "Painting and Poetry," Teige discusses image poetry, the bazaar as the ideal of a modern art exhibition, and books of reproduced images all in the same paragraph. This paragraph ends with the idea that, in the age of mechanical reproduction, originals will become superfluous (Teige, "Malířství a poesie," 20). Despite the importance of mechanical reproduction for the conception of image poetry, the Bazaar was nevertheless an important means of propagating new Poetist art. The programmatic issue of *Disk* contains multiple covert references to the Bazaar, including a reproduction of a photograph of ball bearings that would be used as the invitation to the Bazaar (*Disk*, no. 1, 11). For more on the Bazar, see: Timothy O. Benson, ed., *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910–1930* (Los Angeles: 2002), 114–116; Toman, "Now You See It," 19–20.



**Fig. 2.3** A two-page spread from the journal *Veraikon* (1924) featuring Karel Teige's image poems, "Departure for Cythera" (1923–1924; left) and "Greetings from a Journey" (1923; right), alongside his article "Images" (1924).

The first, "Departure for Cythera," is explicitly labeled as an "image poem" (*obrazová báseň*) in the caption and referred to as a short "lyrical film" in the text of the article.<sup>122</sup> The second, "Greetings from a Journey," is left without a parenthetical subtitle, but the article makes it clear that both are offered as illustrations of image poetry.<sup>123</sup> In the body of the article, the latter is also characterized as a "touristic poem" and detailed in terms of the process of its creation "from several distinctive *photogenic* elements: flag on a boat, a postcard, a photograph of the starry

<sup>122</sup> Teige, "Obrazy" [Images], *Veraikon*, no. 10 (1924): 39. The brief reference to this image poem as a "lyrical film" is extended to characterize it as a fuller verbal 'cinematographic' experience in *Film* (Karel Teige, *Film* [Prague: 1925], 125). The making of short films by means of other media, often called "film librettos," was a common practice among the Poetists. The aesthetics of film was, like the aesthetics of photography, integrally related to a new kind of realism. The Poetists were also attracted to film as a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which is implicitly contained in the term "film *libretto*," since it references opera or the "original" *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

<sup>123</sup> Teige, "Obrazy," 38.

sky, travel map, binoculars, a letter, and the inscription: Greetings from a journey!”<sup>124</sup> Teige’s use of the word “photogenic” to describe the features of this image poem, a word he frequently used in his earlier writing on photography and film, gestures towards the importance of the photographic aesthetic for the Poetist conception of image poetry.<sup>125</sup> Here, Teige seems to use the term in the broader sense, to describe the aesthetic quality of image poetry as intrinsically photographic. The importance of photography is hinted at again towards the end of the essay, when Teige calls for the creation of “books of image poems.” In this section he suggests that image poems exemplify painting’s “acceptance” of “the method of photography and photomontage.”<sup>126</sup>

When the promised second issue of *Disk* finally appeared in 1925, it presented the reader with more examples of image poetry. In addition to reprinting “Greetings from a Journey,” which was now given the title “Touristic Image Poem,” two more examples by the artists Jiří Voskovec and Jindřich Štyrský appear on the same page (fig. 2.4).<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Teige, “Obrazy,” 38–39; my emphasis.

<sup>125</sup> For a gloss on *photogenic* and the use of this term among the Poetists, see *Cinema All the Time* 129, fn 9.

<sup>126</sup> Teige, “Obrazy,” 40.

<sup>127</sup> The change in titles signifies that the Poetists were gradually defining the parameters of this new form.





**Fig. 2.4** A page from the journal *Disk 2* (1925), featuring Karel Teige’s “Greetings from a Journey” (here retitled “Touristic image poem”; top left), Jiří Voskovec’s “Siphons of colonial siestas” (top right), and Jindřich Štyrský’s “Remembrance” (bottom). All three are subsumed under the umbrella label “image poems” (obrazové básně) that appears in the top left corner.



**Fig. 2.5** A page from *Disk 2* (1925), featuring Karel Teige and Vítězslav Nezval’s “What is most beautiful in a coffee house?” with the subtitle, “a poem” (top right).

The label “image poems” crowns the page in the top left corner and unifies the three works into a distinct “genre” or art form. This label, moreover, serves to distinguish them from other, non-synthetic art forms, such as “architecture” and “painting,” on the preceding and following pages. Only the last page of the illustrated section is left without a general label (fig. 2.5). On this page, the following miscellaneous individually titled artworks appear: “illustration,” “photograph,” and “poem.” The “poem,” co-authored by Teige and Vítězslav Nezval, is of particular interest to my

argument, since it features a combination of words and images and has been referred to as an “image poem” in secondary scholarship.<sup>128</sup>



**Fig. 2.6 Karel Teige and Vítězslav Nezval, “What is Most Beautiful in a Coffee House?” in *Pantomima* (1924)**

This poem consists of the words “Co je nejkrásnějšího v kavárně? Červeno bílé květiny z protější verandy” (“What is most beautiful in a coffee house? Red white flowers from the opposite veranda”) painted onto a fragmented background with red and white detail that is suggestive of striped café awnings (fig. 2.6). It features both images and words and relies on optical poetics.<sup>129</sup> But, contrary to expectations, it is not labeled an “image poem”; it remains

<sup>128</sup> The double authorship refers the reader to Nezval’s book of poetry *Pantomima* (1924), which was typeset by Teige and which suggestively includes this “poem” as if it were a replacement for the tenth stanza of “The Heart of a Chiming Clock” (Vítězslav Nezval, *Pantomima* [Prague: 1924], 125–130). For secondary scholarship that applies the label “image poem,” see Timothy O. Benson, introduction to *Central European Avant-Gardes*, 61. Although Esther Levinger classifies image poems into “types”—“collage and typographic poems”—she still maintains that they are all image poems (Esther Levinger, “Czech Avant-Garde Art: Poetry for the Five Senses,” *The Art Bulletin* 81, no. 3 (1999): 517). My contention is that only what Levinger calls “collage” image poems are proper image poems, according to the Poetist conception of them. Note that both Benson and Levinger use the term “picture poem” to refer to *obrazová báseň*, which I prefer to translate as “image poem.”

<sup>129</sup> The fragmentation of the background and the different letter sizes turn the process of reading into a process of perceiving snatches of visual information. In this sense, this experiment resembles Cubo-Futurist paintings, such as

simply “a poem” (fig. 2.5). According to the implicit classification system of *Disk 2*, “What is most beautiful” does not meet the standards of an “image poem.” I argue that it is the absence of the photographic image in “What is the most beautiful” that disqualifies it from being a Poetist image poem. Though neither Teige nor the other editors of the journal spell out their classification principles explicitly, they reserve the label “image poem” only for those works that include photographic images. Without this feature, the poem remains mere words transferred onto a canvas, not the fusion of word and image promised by image poetry. Indeed, one may recall Teige’s early criticism of Apollinaire, who, Teige claimed, merely translated words into the medium of visual representation.

As I suggested, for Teige and other Poetists, photography gradually becomes a special kind of art form that bears a particular relationship to reality that no painted image or word can have. It is not representation, but an imprint, directly linked to reality. The sought-after fusion of word and image discussed in the programmatic issue of *Disk* cannot be accomplished without photography. By themselves, words and images are incapable of overcoming their crises, doomed forever to vacillate between naturalistic representation and abstraction. A combination of the two media in crisis is hardly helpful, since they simply carry their baggage into a different form. This is why “What is most beautiful” is denied the label of an “image poem.” The fusion can only take place through the introduction of the photographic image, which smuggles in reality directly.

Instead of creating an illusion of reality, the photograph draws reality into the world of representation. Like a piece of newspaper in a Cubist painting, the photograph in image poetry becomes an extension of the real world within the world of representation and metonymically

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Natalia Goncharova’s “Cyclist” (1913). However, in the Czech artwork words rather than images play the primary function; that is, “What is the most beautiful” is first and foremost a poem, rather than a painting.

establishes new relationships between words and images. As an imprint of the real world, photography is more than an extraneous object lifted out of reality and placed into the world of representation without any kind of connection to it. The photographic medium, in accordance with Teige's views, is an alternative to mimetic representation—a mode that neither falls into abstraction, nor insists on the separation of the two worlds, the real world and the world of art.<sup>130</sup> By virtue of being adjacent to the word and painted image, the photographic image transfigures these other elements of the image poem that do not enjoy a direct connection to the real world. Consequently, the photographic image takes these media out of their respective crises. The word and image no longer have to cast illusions of the real world, but can participate in the world that has imprinted itself on the photograph.

***Word, Painted Image and Photograph in Two Image Poems, “Departure for Cythera” and “Greetings from a Journey”***

Consider the interaction of word, painting and photographic image in one of the first image poems to appear in print, “Departure for Cythera” (1923–24).

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<sup>130</sup> Here I am taking Teige's theoretical position to its logical conclusion. Teige does not explicitly justify the use of photography in image poetry; however, his views on photography, together with concrete examples of image poems, clarify the function of the photograph in this new form.



**Fig. 2.7** Karel Teige's image poem, "Departure for Cythera" (1923–1924)  
*Courtesy of Prague City Gallery*

On a formal level, in this image poem the photographic images are integrated into the composition by pencil lines that extend from the photographic cutout and complete it. Take, for instance, the image of a sail boat at the center top of the composition: instead of pasting in the whole photograph, Teige allows the cropped sail of the boat to jut out beyond the photographic space into the drawn background and partially cover the exclamation point of the painted words "au revoir!" Although the compositional space is clearly divided into rectangles, with one superimposed on another, Teige conveys a sense of seamlessness by completing the sky over the sailboat with a cloud drawn in pencil. The bottom of the photograph-sailboat is also extended with light pencil shading that suggests a calm sea, just as it appears in the photograph. In this way, one medium passes into another, creating a productive tension between the separation of different media, on the one hand, and their fusion, on the other. Even as Teige organizes the

image poem into specific areas designed for each medium, he constantly challenges their separation by extending media across the boundaries of his grid.

The sepia constellation on the right likewise dramatizes the encounter of different media. Whereas in the sailboat section the photographic image was pasted over words and drawn images (even as they completed each other), here the photographic image recedes behind the painted, thanks to a clever manipulation of perspective. Closer examination reveals that the painted stairs, which frame the photographic image, are, in fact, only an extension of the background; they are not, as it appears, pasted on top of the photograph. Teige brings forward the painted image that is technically part of the background by extending the line of the stairs' railing from the black background onto the photographic image. This extension creates a visual illusion of an impossible interpenetration of background and foreground, of the painted image and the photograph.<sup>131</sup> In the top right corner of the photograph, a thin black line similarly extends the contour of the background over the photograph. It is as if the railing, which originates in the painted background, and the background have conspired to constrain the photographic image, to prevent it from dominating the composition. In this way, Teige creates a sense of somewhat disorienting interpenetration of the photographic and the painted images.

The interpenetration of the word, the painted images and the photographic images in "Departure for Cythera" is conveyed on a formal level, in terms of the interplay between different media, as well as an intertextual one. The title refers the viewer to Jean-Antoine Watteau's "L'Embarquement pour Cythère" (1717), which, in its own time, set a precedent for a new type of painting in the French Academy by inventing the genre of *fête galante*.<sup>132</sup> As if

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<sup>131</sup> Teige's illusion is akin to those of impossible objects, like the penrose triangle, which plays with the viewer's projection of a two-dimensional object into three-dimensional space.

<sup>132</sup> In the reproduction of "Departure for Cythera" in *Film*, Teige supplies its French title, explicitly drawing the viewer's attention to the intertextual importance of Watteau's painting (Teige, *Film*, 125). Despite obvious aesthetic

mocking the pastel colors and sensuous, fleshy shapes of Watteau's rococo, Teige carries out his composition in dark, photographic tones and a grid-like, angular aesthetic. Rather than Watteau's happy island of cupids, Teige's Cythera resembles the "gloomy island" of Charles Baudelaire, whose "Voyage to Cythera" constitutes the second intertext of Teige's image poem.<sup>133</sup>

Instead of portraying happy (Watteau) or suffering (Baudelaire) human bodies, however, Teige avoids human figures altogether. As an alternative, he represents the island of Cythera—Venus's mythical birthplace and, implicitly, the land of love—as a technological utopia, specifically that of America.<sup>134</sup> His central image is not a human figure, but technology—modern sailboats, steamboats, and cranes.<sup>135</sup> The human element is displaced from the level of representation to the level of the artwork's interaction with the viewer. Consider, for example, the cinematic elements encoded into this image poem that rely on the viewer's animation. The detail of the stairs appears in "Departure for Cythera" twice: once as a staircase we observe from the side (as an extension of the background analyzed above) and a second time, next to the "America. American Line" newspaper cutout, as the steps we are about to descend. When animated by the viewer, such a montage suggests that we have first descended the stairs in order to watch the departure of the boat from below.<sup>136</sup> We might imagine ourselves as having said

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differences between Watteau and the Poetists, the idea of *fête galante*, an outdoor festival depicted in Watteau's painting, has surprising parallels with the Poetist movement, which likewise supported the idea of outdoor entertainment, albeit one that was suited for the modern city rather than the pastoral paradise of Watteau's work. For the Poetists, one such form of outdoor entertainment was sport.

<sup>133</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "A Voyage to Cythera," in *Flowers of Evil* (1857), trans. James McGowan (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 255–58.

<sup>134</sup> Relying on the later, cinematographic rendition of this image poem in *Film*, where Teige offers a film-libretto in place of the visual, Levinger identifies the significance of America in "Departure" as the land of filmmaking (Levinger, "Czech Avant-Garde," 521).

<sup>135</sup> Though none of the boats represented in this picture poem are patrol yachts, it is curious that at the time Teige made the poem there existed one under the name of U.S.S. Cythera. Since the yacht served in the First World War, Teige could have very well picked up this piece of information in the very same magazines from which he drew his images of boats.

<sup>136</sup> Although the shadows on the stairs suggest that the viewer is looking downward, it does not matter much whether the suggested movement is down and up. The goal of ascending the stairs to get a better view of the



goodbye (“au revoir”) to a loved one, turning around to look back at the departing ship once more, after we have descended the stairs.<sup>137</sup> The viewer’s visual senses are thus manipulated to create a sense of passing time and narrative in a static image. Although the human being in Teige’s “Departure” is not an object of representation, s/he is not entirely absent, but is incorporated into the image poem as the one who animates it. In this way, Teige’s image poem updates prior “Departures for Cythera” to an art form appropriate for the 20<sup>th</sup> century both on the level of form and subject matter. Teige’s intertextual allusions thus repeat the gesture already implicit in the formal characteristics of the poem: “Departure for Cythera” represents, reworks, and recombines the verbal and the visual in a contemporary remaking of Watteau’s painting and Baudelaire’s poem.

Finally, consider how this image poem functions on a semiotic level. The photograph, which brings with it its indexical connection to reality, transfers this connection to the other elements in the poem. But, as I already suggested in my formal analysis, Teige does not allow the photograph to dominate the image poem. By completing the photographic image with other media, he recontextualizes it and redefines it. When subjected to interpretation, the indexicality of the photographic image in an image poem cedes primacy to its symbolic function. That is, once introduced into an image poem, through its interaction with the viewer, the photographic

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departure relies on the viewer’s animation of these montage images as much as the reading of the opposite movement.

<sup>137</sup> Teige’s 1925 film libretto for “Departure for Cythera” reads:

“A course of action:

I: An abstract geometric composition in movement.

II: This composition becomes increasingly sharper: the harbor, the steamliners, the crane, the poster become visible.

III: At the same time, the crane turns to positions required by the composition (horizontal) and, to the right, at the top, a speedboat crosses the harbor, leaving behind it a (compositionally relevant) white wake of waves.

IV: The sailboat starts moving, turns, leaning to one side, and disappears in the distance, becomes smaller and smaller. *On the stairs to the right a hand, waving a white handkerchief, is visible.*

V: The sailboat disappears in the distance; a luminous sign jumps forward: ‘Au revoir! Bon vent!’ — — — —” (Teige, *Film*, 125; my emphasis).



image is no longer defined exclusively by its connection to reality, but also by its interaction with the other elements.

The words “bon vent,” for example, recontextualize the photographic image of the sailboat as a symbol of “good wind”—the water in the photograph is calm and the (drawn) sky above is clear.<sup>138</sup> Or, in the sepia photograph, the frame created by the painted staircase and railing locates the observer just below the platform where ships disembark and assigns the scene a symbolic meaning it did not have before. Without this frame, the photographic image of the steamboat would simply be an iconic representation of a boat on water and an indexical representation of a specific boat at a particular moment. However, with the contextualization provided by the frame, we can interpret the image as a departure or arrival. Perhaps, as I suggested, the observer has just said goodbye to a loved one, or, alternatively, perhaps s/he is anticipating the arrival of a visitor.<sup>139</sup> In this way, the photographic image in “Departure for Cythera” becomes a sign that can be interpreted with the help of the other signs in the image poem, while at the same time maintaining an indexical relationship to the real world. Thus, each element of the image poem becomes interdependent. Words, painted, drawn, and photographic images overlap and complete one another in a complex, dynamic process of signification.

An examination of Poetist image poetry from 1923–1925 reveals that all image poems explicitly labeled as such by the Poetists contain photographic images, alongside words and painted or drawn images. It will suffice to analyze one more example to show that “Departure of Cythera” is representative of the new art form Teige proposes to take on the challenge of the crisis of representation.

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<sup>138</sup> Levinger interprets this feature of the image poem in a similar way. See Levinger, “Czech Avant-Garde Art,” 520–21.

<sup>139</sup> A certain tension between departure and arrival also characterizes Watteau’s painting, where, despite the painting’s title, it seems as if the guests have already arrived at Cythera and are perhaps preparing to leave.



**Fig. 2.8 Karel Teige's image poem, "Greetings from a Journey" (1923–24)**

"Greetings from a Journey" (1923–24) was one of the first examples touted by the Poetists as an "image poem." Although it appears to be less complex than "Cythera" on an intertextual level, on the semiotic level, in terms of the variety of signs it contains, it easily rivals this and other image poems. For example, the painted image in "Greetings" is not simply a representation of a white triangle with a red dot in the center, which forms a visual rhyme with the envelop below; it is also a flag, an international nautical symbol that has conventional, arbitrary meaning distinct from its visual appearance.<sup>140</sup>

A similar use of the photographic image to bring in reality in a non-representational way that was noted in "Departure" can be observed in "Greetings from a Journey" as well. Here, even

<sup>140</sup> Levinger points out that the flag is a "nautical" symbol, though she does not site its meaning (Levinger, "Czech Avant-Garde," 522). Imagining the blue background of the flag as water, this reading seems possible.

more than in “Departure,” the photographic image appears as a kind of window onto reality,<sup>141</sup> since the integrity of the photograph is maintained (rather than being cut). At the same time, the photographic image does not encroach on the other signs, but rather extends and completes them. For example, the blue color provides the background for the entire image poem. Though it is not apparent in the reproduction, the same color blue, just more saturated, is used at the bottom around the envelope, as well as around the sides of the middle section.<sup>142</sup> In the barely visible bottom right corner of the photograph, the blue background color extends slightly out of the photograph.<sup>143</sup> The same blue is used to write the words “*z cesty*” (“from a journey”) on top of the map, creating a kind of interplay between background and foreground, similar to what we saw with the railing in “Departure.” In a parallel gesture, the painted red line (which symbolizes either the traveler’s journey or the journey of the envelope) traverses across the found object of the map (which participates in a different kind of semiotic system by virtue of it being an actual map), reining it in from becoming too dominant. Finally, the photographic cut-out of the binoculars, which is pasted on top of the map, is extended onto the envelope with black paint on the left lens.<sup>144</sup> Though arguably less clear than in “Departure,” here too Teige invokes the idea of interpenetration.

As in “Departure,” when subjected to interpretation, the indexicality of the photographic image in “Greetings” cedes primacy to its symbolic function. For example, the words “*pozdrav z cesty*” (or “greetings from a journey”), as well as the hand-drawn envelope at the bottom of the

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<sup>141</sup> In addition to the photograph that is left intact, the frame of the balcony (visible on the bottom left) within the image contributes to the experience of the photographs as a window that looks out onto the real world.

<sup>142</sup> The latter is invisible in the reproduction above, which cuts off the very edges of the image poem.

<sup>143</sup> A number of places where the blue background meets other images make it clear that the blue background was filled in by Teige later. That is, he did not start out with the blue background on top of which he arranged his composition. The barely visible blue corner that brings together the photograph, the map, and the glossy reproduction of a starry sky seems rather intentional on Teige’s part, regardless of its meaning.

<sup>144</sup> Additional continuity is suggested by the angle of the binoculars, which appear to have been lifted after ‘stamping’ the envelope.

composition recontextualize the photographic image at the top *as a postcard*, which was perhaps sent from Nice where the implied traveler's journey began, according to the supplied map.<sup>145</sup> Thus, the landscape in the photograph comes to be understood not only as an indexical representation of a particular place in the world, but also as a sign that takes part in a different kind of semiotic system. By virtue of its new context, that is, the context of the image poem, the photograph becomes a *symbolic* record or witness to the journey made. In this way, the photographic image in "Greetings from a journey" becomes a sign that can be interpreted with the help of the other signs in the image poem, while at the same time remaining an index to the real world landscape it depicts.

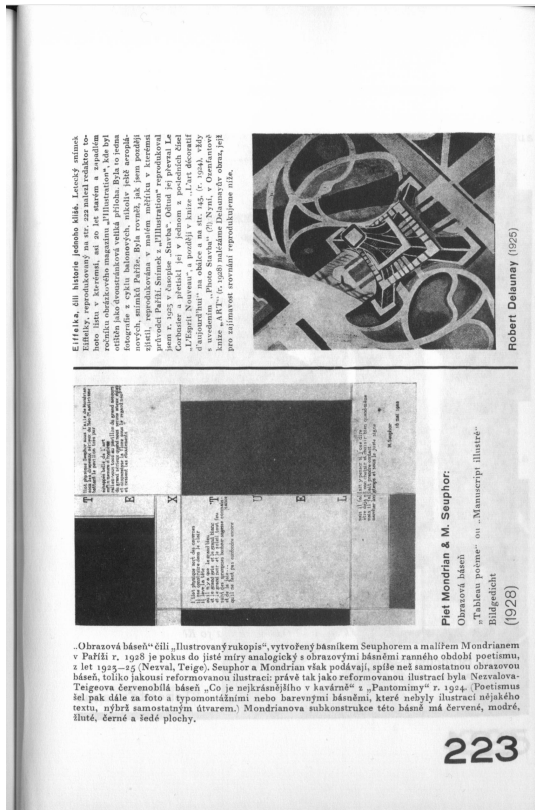
Teige's retrospective evaluation of Poetist image poetry confirms the centrality of the photographic image to this art form and therefore the centrality of photography to overcoming the crisis of language. Only with the help of photography, according to Teige, can painting and poetry, painted image and word be fused. In 1929, Teige would make clear the rationale behind the Poetist refusal to classify "What is most beautiful in a coffee house?", which appeared in its own category on the pages of *Disk 2*, as an "image poem." In a caption to the reproduction of a parallel experiment by Michel Seuphor and Piet Mondrian, Teige writes:

The "image poem" or "illustrated manuscript" created by the poet Seuphor and the painter Mondrian in Paris in 1928 is an experiment to a certain extent analogous to the image poems of the earlier period of Poetism, from the years 1923–1925 (Nezval, Teige). Seuphor and Mondrian, however, present not so much an independent image poem, as much as a kind of reformed illustration: just as Nezval and Teige's red-and-white poem, "What is most beautiful in a coffee house?", which appeared in *Pantomime* in 1924, was a reformed illustration. (Poetism went further, to photo- and typomontage poems and

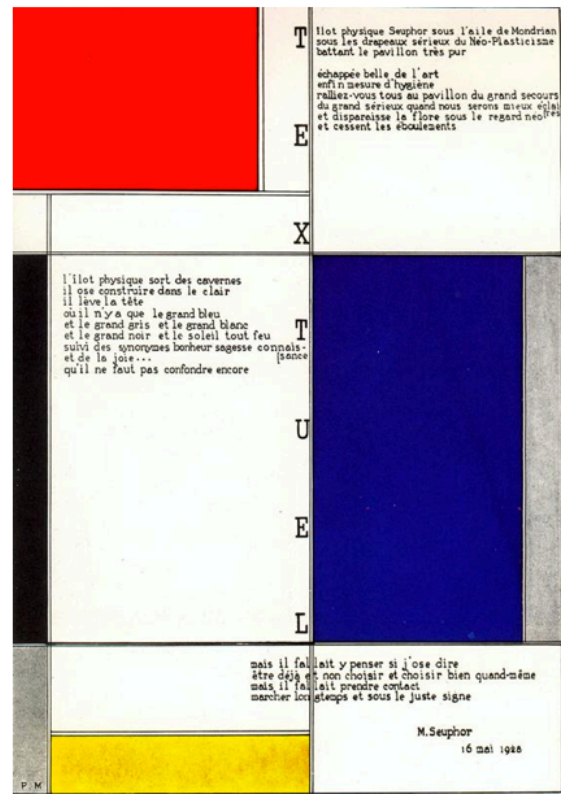
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<sup>145</sup> The envelope in this image poem is repeatedly cited as "actual" and real (Benson, *Central European Avant-Gardes*, 60), though in the original it is clear that the envelope is drawn in pencil. The illusion of the reality of the envelope is created with the help of real stamps, which are pasted on top. The seals on top of the stamps appear to be painted on to further create the illusion of a real envelope. The use of ink (rather than pencil or paint) for the address again pushes the illusion further. Teige's optical illusion of apparently pasting in both sides of an envelope in his image poem recalls Picasso's "Violin" (1912), where the artist uses the front and back sides of a newspaper to allude to the third-dimension of real objects that is absent in painting (Rosalind Krauss, "The Motivation of the Sign," in *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium*, ed. Lynn Zelevansky [New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992], 261–62).

color poems, which were not an illustration of some text, but an independent form.) Mondrian's subconstruction for this poem has red, blue, yellow, black, and grey areas.<sup>146</sup>



**Fig. 2.9 Caption and reproduction of Michel Seuphor and Piet Mondrian's "Tableau poème" (1928) in the journal ReD (1929)**



**Fig. 2.10 Michel Seuphor and Piet Mondrian's "Tableau poème" (1928)**

Facing the reader directly, unlike the reproduced image which is turned on its side, the caption conveys Teige's message loud and clear: the artistic experiments of the Czech Poetists not only predated Seuphor and Mondrian's work, but that they also "went further." At first sight, such dismissal seems nothing more than competitive polemics between warring avant-garde factions,

<sup>146</sup> "„Obrazová básně" čili 'ilustrovaný rukopis,' vytvořený básníkem Seuphorem a malířem Mondrianem v Paříži r. 1928 je pokus do jisté míry analogický s obrazovými básněmi raného období poetismu, z let 1923–1925 (Nezval, Teige). Seuphor a Mondrian však podávají, spíše než samostatnou obrazovou básně, toliko jakousi reformovanou ilustraci: právě tak jako reformovanou ilustrací byla Nezvalova-Teigeova červenobílá básně 'Co je nejkrásnějšího v kavárně' z 'Pantomimy' r. 1924. (Poetismus šel pak dále za foto a typomontážními nebo barevnými básněmi, které nebyly ilustrací nějakého textu, nýbrž samostatným útvarem.) Mondrianova subkonstrukce této básně má červené, modré, žluté, černé a šedé plochy." (*ReD* 2, no. 7 [1929]: 223).

fueled by the perceived “peripheral” status of the Czech avant-garde.<sup>147</sup> Not infrequently, such battles for primacy unfolded within captions in avant-garde journals, since these compact spaces afforded the ideal opportunity to reframe the reproduced artwork with the persuasion tactics of museum labels. However, when read with the importance of photography for Poetism in mind, the caption does indeed articulate an important difference between the Czech experiments and others that claimed the label of image poetry. Poetism, Teige notes, went beyond the idea of transforming words into painting or vice versa, unlike the provided reproduction or the early Czech experiment, “What is the most beautiful,” Poetism reached for “photo- and typomontage poems,” which became an “independent form.”<sup>148</sup> An independent form is precisely what Teige was searching for from the first proclamation of Poetism—a new art form that would transfigure the word and image, taking them out of their respective crises. Such a transfiguration would be accomplished only with the help of photography, which would transfer its non-representational way of relating to reality to the troubled media and thereby fuse them.

Teige’s retrospective appraisal of image poetry as a unique, superior Poetist art form is important for another reason. The caption connects the aspirations of early Poetist image poetry to a later project, the multimedia book, *ABCs* (1926). In Teige’s narrative of artistic revolution, the book, carried out in the medium that would become known as “typophoto” or “typophotomontage,” is seen as the next stage of image poetry. It is to this work that I shall now turn.

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<sup>147</sup> I use quotes to indicate the anxiety of influence on the part of Central and Eastern European artists vis-à-vis the West, as well as the ways such polemics are often interpreted in avant-garde studies, that is, as tension between periphery and centre. The recent scholarly emphasis on “networks” has tried to correct some of the misconceptions originating from the centre-periphery binary. See: Per Bäckström and Benedikt Hjartarson, “Rethinking the Topography of the International Avant-Garde,” in *Decentring the Avant-Garde*, eds. Per Bäckström and Benedikt Hjartarson (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2014), 7–32.

<sup>148</sup> We may recall that Teige dismissed Apollinaire’s calligrammes is a similar vein, citing that they only translate the problems of one medium into another.

***Typophotomontage and the New Fusion of Word and Image. The Case of the Multimedia Book, ABCs***

Scissors and a little tube of glue  
Today the poet assembles his book  
Can he really have become a child?

Roman, thanks for everything!<sup>149</sup>

Vítězslav Nezval, “A Letter to Roman Jakobson”

Teige’s primary experiment in “typophoto” is a book he designed in 1926, at the request of the modern dancer, Milča Mayerová.<sup>150</sup> This multimedia book, entitled *ABCs* (*Abeceda*), featured Vítězslav Nezval’s verses alongside photographs of Mayerová’s dance composition, which were set into a typophoto sequence by Teige.<sup>151</sup> As Teige’s primary experiment in typophoto, this book and its particular solution to the crisis of representation is the focus of my analysis in this section.

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<sup>149</sup> Nůžky a malou tubu kliču  
dnes básnik montuje svou knihu  
Změnil se v skutku v děčko?

Romane, díky za všecko!  
(Vítězslav Nezval, “dopis romanu jakobsonovi,” in *Zpáteční lístek* [A Return Ticket] [Prague: Fr. Borový, 1933], 158–59).

<sup>150</sup> Matthew Witkovsky has convincingly restored the credit due to Mayerová for helping to practically realize this book, including the impulse for making the book in the first place. See his dissertation, “Avant-Garde and Center: Devětsil in Czech Culture, 1918–1938” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2002), 78–162, and his article, “Staging Language. Milča Mayerová and the Czech Book *Alphabet*,” *The Art Bulletin* 86, No. 1 (2004): 114–35. The original publication of *Abeceda* [ABCs] (1926) credits both Vítězslav Nezval and Milča Mayerová on the cover of the book (Vítězslav Nezval, dance composition by Milča Mayerová, *Abeceda* [Prague: J. Otto, 1926]). The poet’s name appears in larger font without qualification, implicitly suggesting that he is the author, while Mayerová’s name appears in small letters after the words “dance compositions,” suggesting limited authorship of this particular part of the book.

<sup>151</sup> In English, the title of the book is often rendered as *The Alphabet*. I prefer *ABCs*, since like the Czech title, this translation foregrounds the letters and playfully points to a children’s primer.

## *Typophoto*

Teige used the term “typophoto” to describe a combination of typography and photography, explicitly in reference to the *ABCs*:

In Nezval’s *Abeceda*, a cycle of poems based on the shapes of letters, I tried to create a “typophoto” of a purely abstract and poetic nature, setting into graphic poetry what Nezval set into verbal poetry in his verse, both being poems evoking the magic signs of the alphabet.<sup>152</sup>

In this brief statement, Teige evaluates his experiment as an attempt to translate verbal poetry into graphic form, which combines verbal and visual aspects of typography and images. Teige borrowed the term “typophoto” from the Hungarian Bauhaus artist László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946), who defined the medium in 1925 as follows:

What is typophoto?  
Typography is communication composed in type.  
Photography is the visual presentation of what can be optically apprehended.  
**Typophoto is the most visually exact rendering of communication.**<sup>153</sup>

In other words, for Moholy-Nagy, typophoto was a revolutionary new medium that combined the instantaneous communication of images with typography, which had both optical and semantic modes of affecting the viewer.

As an artist-theoretician, Moholy-Nagy influenced Teige’s thinking about art, as well as that of many of his contemporaries.<sup>154</sup> Although Teige does not cite Moholy-Nagy explicitly in his early publications, his interest in “mechanically reproduced” “books of image poems” can be linked to Moholy-Nagy and Lajos Kassák’s revolutionary book publication, *The Book of the New*

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<sup>152</sup> Teige, “Modern Typography” in *Karel Teige 1900–1951*, 105. “V Nezvalové Abecedě, jež je cyklem básní na tvary písmen, pokusil jsem se o typofoto povahy ryze abstraktní a básnické, která byla by grafickým z básněním toho, čeho jsou Nezvalovy verše z básněním slovesným: obě bylo básní, evokující magii znamének abecedy” (Teige, “Moderní typ,” *Typografia* 34, no. 7–9 [1927]: 198).

<sup>153</sup> László Moholy-Nagy, “Typophoto” in *Painting, Photography, Film*, trans. Janet Seligman (London: Lund Humphries, 1969), 39; emphasis in original. The English translation is based on the slightly revised 1927 edition of *Malerei, Photographie Film*, which originally came out in 1925 (Munich: Albert Langen Verlag, 1925).

<sup>154</sup> Krisztina Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, trans. Éva Grusz et al. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 37–44.



*Artist (Buch Neuer Künstler, Új művészek könyve)*, from 1922.<sup>155</sup> The book is a collection of mechanically reproduced images including artworks, cityscapes, machinery, architectural structures, music scores, among other things, many of which had been individually printed in different avant-garde journals. The images are not narrated and their captions are simplified to the bare minimum—artists’ last names or somewhat redundant labels, such as “propeller” and “dynamo.”<sup>156</sup> Instead, the reader is to establish visually associative connections between them, as Moholy-Nagy reiterates in his typophoto article.<sup>157</sup> More broadly, Moholy-Nagy’s and Teige’s views on photography, and the photogram in particular, of which the former artist was a superb practitioner, have many parallels.<sup>158</sup> These examples suggest that Teige was following the work of the Bauhaus artist rather closely.

Moholy-Nagy’s theorization of typophoto in *Painting, Photography, Film* (1925) was republished as an article in the Poetist-affiliated journal *Pásmo (The Zone)*.<sup>159</sup> The original German book publication was illustrated by a poetic experiment carried out in the medium of typophoto. Moholy-Nagy’s “Dynamic of the Metropolis,” which combined photographs and an

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<sup>155</sup> Teige, “Malířství a poesie,” 20. Note that no concrete examples of Poetist image poetry existed at the time Teige published this article in *Disk*; the announcement inaugurated the experimentation that was to lead to the discovery of this new form. László Moholy-Nagy and Lajos Kassák, *Buch Neuer Künstler, Új művészek könyve* (Vienna: Verlag Julius Fischer, 1922).

<sup>156</sup> The image of the boat propeller can also be found on the pages of El Lissitzky and Ilya Erenburg’s revolutionary journal, *Veshch’ (Thing)*, though under a different caption, “Parthenon and Apollo XX” (*Veshch’*, no. 1–2 [1922]: 4). The image will also reappear in Kassák’s later publications (*Dokumentum* [January 1927]: 9), as well as in Poetist journals.

<sup>157</sup> “The form, the rendering is constructed out of the optical and associative relationships [...]” (Moholy-Nagy, “Typophoto,” 40).

<sup>158</sup> See, for example, Moholy-Nagy essays “Photography,” “Production Reproduction,” “Photography without Camera,” and “The Future of the Photographic Process,” in *Painting, Photography, Film*, 27–37. Moholy-Nagy and Teige, like other avant-garde theoreticians of their time, divide art along the lines of the “visible” and the “intellectual,” where the former is the preferred mode of future art.

<sup>159</sup> Moholy-Nagy, “Typophoto,” *Pásmo* 2, no. 1 [1925]: 16–17.

experimental film sequence in narrative form, can be viewed as a predecessor to Teige's typophoto arrangement in *ABCs*.<sup>160</sup>

For Teige, typophoto was not only a new medium, but also the future of communication. In his essays written around the time of the *ABCs* publication, Teige frequently takes up the significance of new media alongside the question of a universal language. In "Words, Words, Words," written just months after the appearance of the *ABCs* book, he states:

a new universal world language [...] is [...] a necessity in the time of great print, communication and speed. [...] the development of international capitalism has shown that since Latin as an international language is no longer used, a new universal language is needed.<sup>161</sup>

He goes on to suggest that such a language should begin with a new alphabet. In "Modern Typography" (Moderní typy) written shortly after "Words," Teige praises typophoto as the "most exact and complete communication,"<sup>162</sup> elaborating that the "modern times need an international language of communication":

and, along with it, an international, generally accepted letter format. The Germanic Gothic script has disappeared and so will, sooner or later, the Russian, Greek, Chinese, and Turkish scripts, causing, of course, certain structural changes in the relevant languages. At the same time our own alphabet will have to be revised: there is a remote but certain movement toward the construction of a communication alphabet based on a different principle.<sup>163</sup>

He concludes this essay with a suggestive meditation on the use of typophoto in the *Abeceda* book cited above.

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<sup>160</sup> Moholy-Nagy evaluated "Dynamic of the Metropolis" as follows: "The intention of the film 'Dynamic of the Metropolis' is [...] meant to be visual, **purely** visual. The elements of the visual have not in this film an absolute logical connection with one another; their photographic, visual relationships, nevertheless, make them knit together into a vital association of events in space and time and bring the viewer actively into the dynamic of the city" (Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film*, 122).

<sup>161</sup> Teige, "Slova," 2.

<sup>162</sup> Teige, "Modern Typography," 99.

<sup>163</sup> Teige, "Modern Typography," 103.

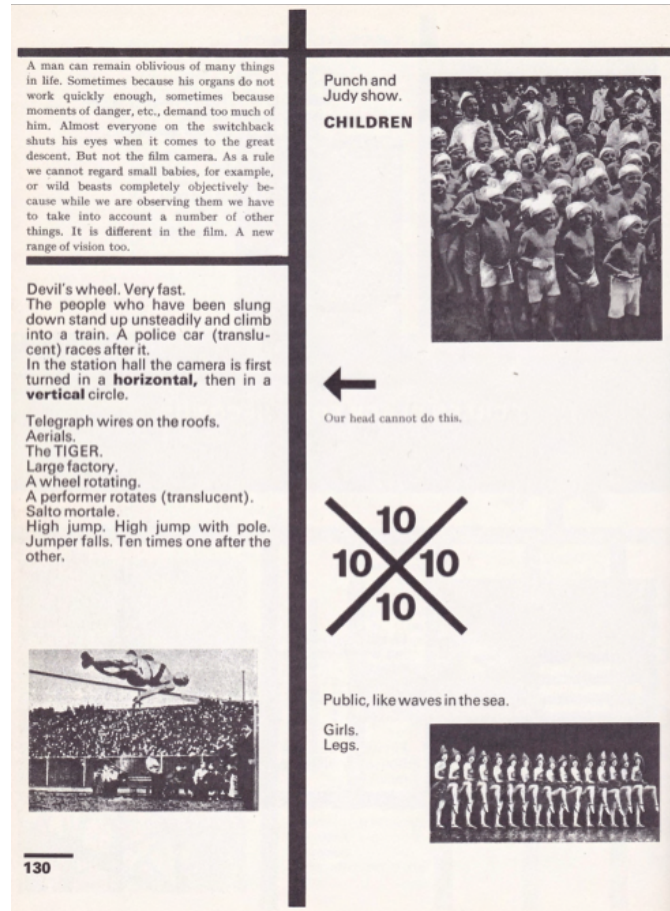
But despite these parallels between Moholy-Nagy and Teige, there are also important differences. On the one hand, photography for Moholy-Nagy, like for Teige, adds an element of the real (or, at least, of the objective) to verbal communication:

Photography is highly effective when used as typographical material. It may appear as *illustration* beside the words, *or* in the form of **'phototext'** *in place of words, as a precise form of representation so objective as to permit of no individual interpretation.*<sup>164</sup>

On the other hand, unlike Teige, Moholy-Nagy subordinates this potential for objectivity and a different relation to reality to the role of illustration. In other words, in the photograph Moholy-Nagy sees the potential to enhance the verbal by means of illustration. An analysis of “Dynamic of the Metropolis” reveals that Moholy-Nagy does indeed employ photography primarily for its illustrative function.

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<sup>164</sup> Moholy-Nagy, “Typophoto,” 40; my emphasis in italics, original emphasis in bold. Curiously, Moholy-Nagy retrospectively labels the cover(s) he designed for the Dada journal *Broom* (March 1922), a “typophoto” (*Painting, Photography, Film* 112, 140). The proposed covers for *Broom*, which were not accepted by the magazine, are actually *photograms*. They use stencils to create letters of light, not typophotos, which had not yet been invented. It should be noted that Moholy-Nagy is responsible for popularizing the term “photogram,” which combines the etymologies of “photo” (light) and “gramma” (letter, character), in the 1920s, when he discovers the medium and begins to experiment with it (Matthew Witkovsky, “Elemental Marks,” in *Moholy-Nagy: Future Present*, eds. Matthew Witkovsky et al., [Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2016], 28–30). In Teige’s time, “photograms” were often called “rayographs,” as a result of close association of this form with the artist Man Ray. Calling the proposed *Broom* cover a “typophoto” in *Painting, Photography, Film* is either a gesture of retrospectively assigning more revolutionary value to his earlier discoveries (a common practice among the avant-garde), or an indication that Moholy-Nagy did not have a precise formal definition or vision of typophoto in 1925.



**Fig. 2.11** A page from the English facsimile edition of László Moholy-Nagy's "Dynamic of the Metropolis" (1925)

As I suggested in connection with Teige's caption to Seuphor and Mondrian's "Tableaux poème," the Poetists aspired to create a relationship between the word and image that was more than illustration.

***The "ABCs" According to Nezval***

The 1926 book *ABCs* began its life as an eponymous poem, written by Vítězslav Nezval in 1922. The poem was first published in the programmatic issue of *Disk*, which, as I noted, contained the announcement of Poetism, as well as Štyrský's and Teige's articles. Upon opening the pages of *Disk*, the reader would first encounter Štyrský's manifesto "images," which encouraged the

reader to rejoice in the death of the traditional image. Nezval's playful verses entitled "ABCs" ("Abeceda") came second. Not only did the poem respond to the crisis of verbal material, but, as an alphabet, it also alluded to the necessity of creating a new artistic language. Together Štyrský's and Nezval's texts mapped out the Poetist agenda to come.

Each rhymed quatrain of Nezval's verses poetized one letter of the Latin alphabet, for a total of 25 poems, since J and Q were joined together in one stanza.<sup>165</sup>

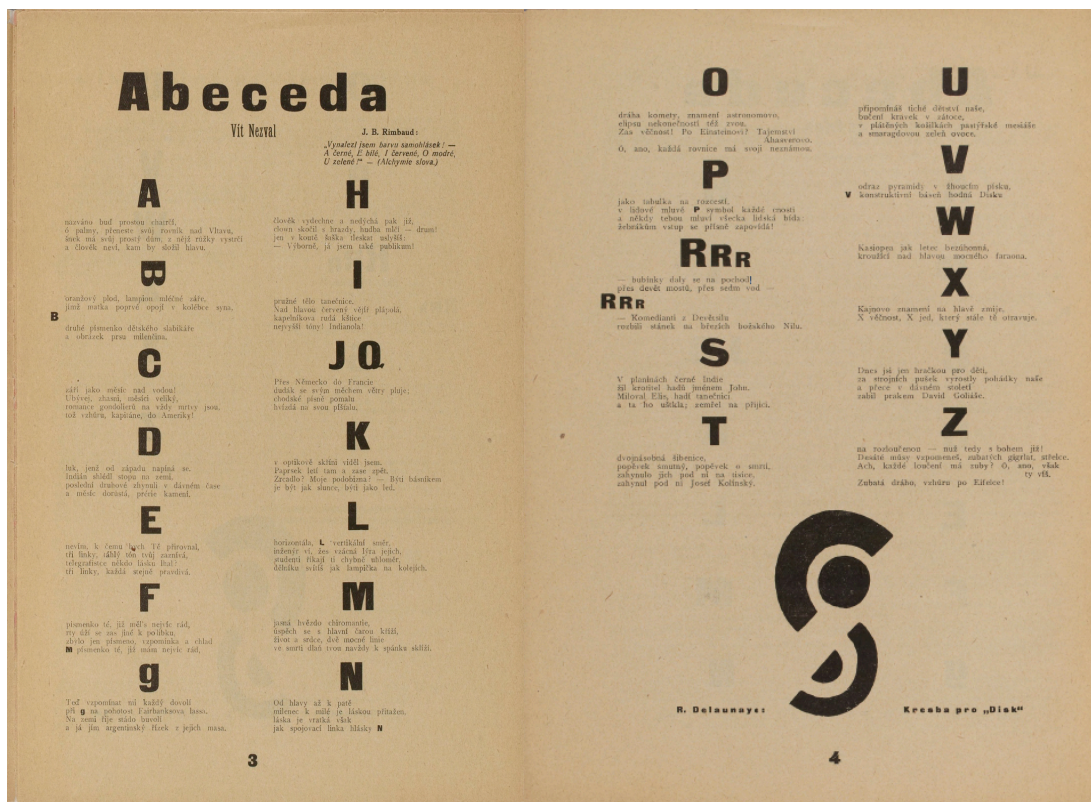


Fig. 2.12 Vítězslav Nezval's poem "ABCs" in *Disk* (1923)

<sup>165</sup> It is possible that Nezval's decision to pair JQ alludes to a new international language called QJ, which was invented in 1921 by Kukel-Krajeviski. In Nezval's manuscript of the poem, the letter J is omitted, while Q, which appears in its standard place in the alphabet (after P), is crossed out. Both J and Q reappear together only after S in the combination QJ. Thus, the original order of the letters as QJ appears to support the possible allusion to the new international language. The order QJ is restored in the photograph of Mayerová's body in *ABCs*, as we shall see shortly. Christopher Harwood has suggested that JQ iconically evoke the image of bagpipes, in accordance with the content of the stanza (personal communication).

Nezval's stanzas string together various associations about each letter, at times based on the visual quality of the letter, at times based on its sound, and, less frequently, on a word or a cluster of words that begins with that letter.

For instance, the stanza of the letter K traces the visual qualities of the letter:

**K**  
v optikově skříní viděl jsem.  
Paprsek letí tam a zase zpět.  
Zrcadlo? Moje podobizna? — Býti básníkem  
je být jak slunce, býti jako led.

in an optician's case I saw.  
A beam shoot forth and then back.  
Mirror? My likeness? — To be a poet  
is to be like the sun, to be like ice.<sup>166</sup>

Here the letter K is described as a light ray reflected in a mirror. Together with the reflective surface, the ray of light and its reflection form the shape of the letter K. Moreover, the visual shape of the letter is mirrored on a syntactic level in a double-simile construction, "to be a poet is to be like the sun, to be like ice," where the poet is implicitly both the source of light (sun) and the material of its refraction (ice). In this way, this particular stanza creates the image of the letter K and also, perhaps, the process of writing it.

Although Poetists would retrospectively emphasize the visual and optical qualities of Nezval's proposed new alphabet, the poem "ABCs" abounds with non-visual associations that come to represent the letters. Take, for instance, the letter U:

**U**  
připomínáš tiché dětství naše,  
bučení kravek v zátoce,  
v plátěných košilkách pastýřské mesiáše

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<sup>166</sup> Nezval, "Abeceda," *Disk 1* (1923): 3; trans. Christopher Harwood (unpublished). The punctuation and typography are reproduced as in the *Disk* edition. The 1924 republication in "ABCs" in *Pantomima* (Pantomime) eliminates the punctuation. The book edition from 1926, which has additional alterations, is also available in a reprint edition in English. Vítězslav Nezval, *Alphabet*, trans. Jindřich Toman and Matthew Witkovsky (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 2001).

a smaragdovou zeleň ovoce.

you recall our quiet childhood,  
the mooing of cows in the creek,  
the pastoral messiahs in linen shirts  
and the emerald green of fruit.<sup>167</sup>

In this stanza, it is the mooing of cows (bučení), which reproduces the sound “u,” that suggests the images of pastoral bliss. Here, rather than using the visual shape of the letter as a stepping stone for the content of the verse, Nezval relies on the sound “u.” A careful reading reveals that many stanzas rely on both visual and auditory qualities of the poetized letter. Consider H:

### H

člověk vydechne a nedýcha pak již,  
clown skočil s hrazdy, hudba mlčí — drum!  
jen v koutě šaška tleskat uslyšíš:  
— Výborně já jsem také publikum!

a man exhales and breathes no more now,  
a clown leapt from a trapeze, music is silent — drum!  
Only in the corner you hear the jester applaud:  
— Excellent I am also the audience!<sup>168</sup>

On the one hand, the letter H visually resembles a kind of trapeze or a tightrope, across which an acrobat-clown makes his way as the audience holds its breath in suspense. On the other, the aspirated sound of the letter “H” is reflected in the man’s exhalation (*člověk vydechne*). Free-association that at times appeals to shapes of letters, at times to their sounds, guides the construction of this poem, as indicated by a lack of any kind of consistency or pattern in Nezval’s choices of visual and verbal images.<sup>169</sup> Free association as the constructive principle of this poem is also alluded to in the epigraph, which invokes the French Symbolist Rimbaud’s synesthetic invention of colors for vowels. Nezval cites Rimbaud’s “Sonnet of Vowels”:

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<sup>167</sup> Nezval, “Abeceda,” 4; trans. Harwood.

<sup>168</sup> Nezval, “Abeceda,” 3; trans. Harwood.

<sup>169</sup> It should be noted, however, that the process of free association is guided by the order of the letters in the Latin alphabet (perhaps with the exception of JQ). Teige’s later attempts to distance “ABCs” from Symbolist modes of writing, which are perceived as arbitrary associations, do not apply to Nezval’s original conception of the poem.

I invented the color of vowels!—  
A is black, E is white, I is red, O is blue,  
U is green!—(*Alchemy of the word*).<sup>170</sup>

As we saw above, for Nezval “u” is indeed green as is “i” red.<sup>171</sup> Thus, Nezval not only weaves his own, personal web of associations, but also makes use of the international canon of poetry in constructing his new alphabet.

On a formal level too, Nezval’s Latin letters, freed from Czech diacritics, appear to be a kind of international alphabet, more suited for telegraphs and other forms of modern communication. The letters also gesture towards Latin as the former agent of international text circulation and knowledge exchange in Europe, a connection that will be exploited by Teige in the later stages of the project. Although the verses themselves are in Czech, in many cases they are oriented toward translation into other languages, especially English, which Teige would later call “the most universal” of natural “languages.” Consider stanza B:

**B**

oranžový plod, lampion mléčné záře,  
jímž matka poprvé opojí v kolébce syna,

**B**

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<sup>170</sup> I provide the translation of Rimbaud’s “Sonnet of Vowels” (1871; published 1884) from Nezval’s Czech rather than the original French. Teige’s retrospective evaluation of Nezval’s poem, informed by his own multimedia experiment of 1926, does not seem to do justice to the variety of associations Nezval incorporates into his poem, including the auditory: “Now that Nezval is versifying his “Alphabet” we stand on the threshold of new image poetry. Whereas Rimbaud discovered the color values of vowels in their sound value, Nezval transposes the shapes of typographic signs into his poem; he makes poetry from the magic of their form” (Teige, “Poetism Manifesto,” in *Between Worlds* 594; trans. modified according to the original in “Manifest poetismu,” *ReD* 1, no. 9 [1928], 325).

<sup>171</sup> Nezval’s verses for the letter “I” read:

**I**

pružné tělo tanečnice.  
Nad hlavou *červený* vějíř plápolá,  
kapelníkova *rudá* kštica  
nejvyšší tóny! Indianola! (Nezval, “Abeceda,” 3; my italics).

the supple body of a dancer.  
Above her head a *red* fan blazes,  
the bandleader’s shock of *crimson* hair,  
the highest tones! Indianola! (trans. Harwood; my emphasis).



druhé písmenko dětského slabikáře  
a obrázek milenčina prsu.

orange fruit, lantern of milky glow,  
with which a mother first nurses her son in a cradle,

**B**

is the second letter of a children's primer  
and the picture of a lover's breast.<sup>172</sup>

The primary association with the letter B in this poem is, of course, a woman's breast, teasingly emphasized by the B turned on its side by the typesetter, Karel Teige. While the breast association works well in English, notice that in Czech there is not a single word that begins with the letter B in this stanza, and the Czech word for breast is "prs."

A similar dynamic plays out in stanza S:

**S**

V planinách černé Indie  
žil krotitel hadů jménem John.  
Miloval Elis, hadí tanečníci  
a ta ho uštkla; zemřel na příjici.

On the plateaus of black India  
there lived a snake tamer John.  
He loved Elis, the snake dancer  
And she bit him; he died of syphilis.<sup>173</sup>

While the English translation abounds with S sounds, in Czech the single occurrence of the letter S appears at the end of the girl's name "Elis." The Czech word for "snake" is "had," and while Nezval could have used the international word "syphilis," which also exists in Czech, he opted instead for the synonym "příjice."

The poem is intended to tease its Czech readers, denying them the pleasure of pronouncing the poetized letter and appealing to their knowledge of other languages or, at the very least, of international words, such as "syphilis." But the poem's orientation towards other

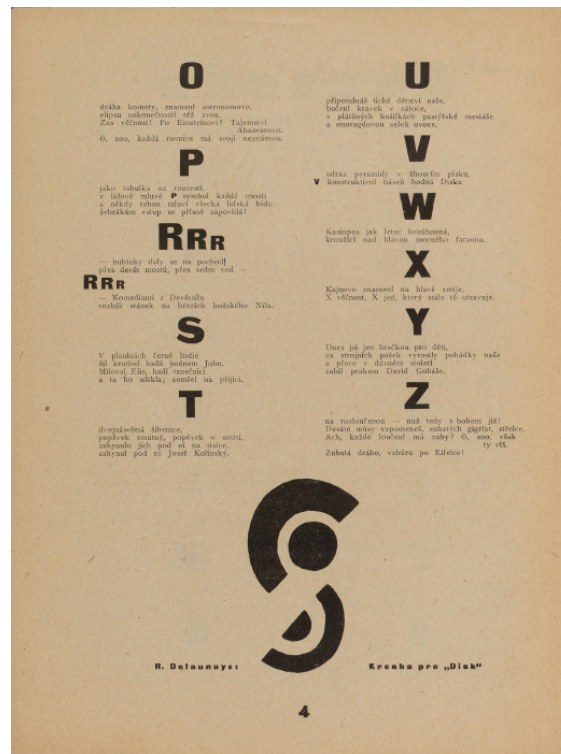
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<sup>172</sup> Nezval, "Abeceda," 3; trans. Harwood.

<sup>173</sup> Nezval, "Abeceda," 4; trans. Harwood.

languages also reveals a desire, even an expectation that it will be translated into other languages and circulated internationally.

The international orientation of the poem's content is punctuated by the visual rhyme stanza S forms with Robert Delaunay's drawing at the bottom of the page.



**Fig. 2.13 A page from the journal Disk (1923) featuring Vítězslav Nezval's poem "ABCs" and Robert Delaunay's drawing**

This correspondence between the letter S and the drawing, without a doubt placed there by the typesetter Teige, is hardly accidental: already in his earliest publications, Teige expressed the desire for illustrated books that would be appropriate for the modern age. Discarding the illustrations of his older contemporary, Josef Čapek, who turned to expressionism to illustrate Apollinaire's *The Zone*, Teige wrote:

[T]he dark and harsh linoleum prints [of Čapek] do not fully correspond to the text [... it is] Robert Delaunay, whose images I cannot stop thinking about when reading

Apollinaire. [...] Apollinaire's flood of sentences is like the sunny flame of Delaunay's *couleurs simultanées*.<sup>174</sup>

Teige begins to realize his dream of “modern book design” (“*moderní knižní výprava*”) four years later in the journal *Disk* 1, for which he served as editor, along with the architect Jaromír Kreicar and the poet Jaroslav Seifert.<sup>175</sup> The juxtaposition of Delaunay's drawing with the letter S of the poem also echoes emerging Constructivist reforms in typography. For example, in 1923 Lissitzky was propagating the geometric construction of letters, including circles and semi-circles as the primary forms of letter design, in his innovating publications, such as Mayakovsky's *For the Voice (Dlia golosa)*.<sup>176</sup> In a similar fashion, Delaunay's abstract drawing, by being placed near the letter “S,” deconstructs the letter into circular geometric shapes.

*Disk* contains many more such suggestive correspondences and constellations, weaving the content of the journal together. To cite a few more examples, the “modern day Hercules” and American silent film actor, Douglass Fairbanks, appears not only in Nezval's poem wielding a lasso in stanza G, but also several pages later, in an illustration by Otakar Mrkvička.<sup>177</sup> Stanza

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<sup>174</sup> Teige, “Guillaume Apollinaire,” 61. Teige is likely evoking the revolutionary publication by Blaise Cendrars and Sonia Delaunay-Terk (who was married to Robert Delaunay), *La prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jeanne de France* (1913).

<sup>175</sup> Teige, “Guillaume Apollinaire,” 61.

<sup>176</sup> See El Lissitzky's 1925 text “Typographical Facts,” where he discusses the typographical arrangement of Mayakovsky's *For the Voice (Dlia golosa)*, 1923), emphasizing the importance of curves, as well as horizontal, perpendicular, and diagonal elements that appear in Delaunay's drawing as a result of Teige's typographic juxtaposition (El Lissitzky, “Typographical facts” in *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, ed. Lissitzky-Küppers [London: Thames and Hudson, 1980], 359–60. Lissitzky's experimental book was published in Berlin (*Dlia golosa* [Berlin: Gosudarstvennoe izdanie, 1923]).

<sup>177</sup> Stanza G reads:

Ted' vzpomínat mi každý dovolí  
při g na pohotost Fairbanksova lassa.  
Na zemi řijí stádo buvolí  
a já jím argentínský řízek z jejich masa.

Now everyone will allow me to recall  
apropos of g the readiness of Fairbanks' lasso  
On the ground a buffalo herd is in rut  
and I eat an Argentinian stake of their meat.  
(Nezval, “Abeceda,” 3; trans. Harwood).

“V” of Nezval’s poem declares its belongingness to the journal-manifesto that advances a united aesthetic front:

V  
odraz pyramid v žhoucím písku,  
V konstruktivní báseň hodná Disku

the reflection of a pyramid in burning sand,  
V the constructive poem fitting for Disk<sup>178</sup>

The stanza not only locates itself directly in the venue of publication, but also evokes the content of Štyrský’s essay, where he discussed constructive poems.<sup>179</sup> Thus, both the poem and the journal are simultaneously oriented outward and inward: toward an international audience, as the cover of the journal boastfully claims to be pentalingual, as well as toward the other artists involved in the publication.<sup>180</sup>

Nezval’s poem was soon republished in a collection entitled *Pantomime* (*Pantomima*; 1924), which featured his other poems in Teige’s typographic arrangements, manifestoes, and a play. As compared to *Disk*, where “ABCs” appeared after Štyrský’s essay on images, in this collection the poem moved to the first place and greeted readers as they opened the book.<sup>181</sup>

Besides the content changes noted above, other alterations of the poem in this edition included: 1) the removal of all punctuation, with the exception of exclamation points and question marks, and 2) the rearrangement of the poem to fit five pages, rather than two as in *Disk*—a design decision which gave the poems room to breathe and created an almost symmetrical arrangement

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Mrkvička’s image can be found in *Disk* 1 (1923), 7. See also, Teige, “Umění dnes a zítra,” 370. In the later versions of the poem (1924 and 1926), “Fairbanks’ lasso” is replaced with the more general “cowboy’s lasso,” probably in an attempt to make the poem more legible to a wider audience.

<sup>178</sup> Nezval, “Abeceda,” 4; my trans.

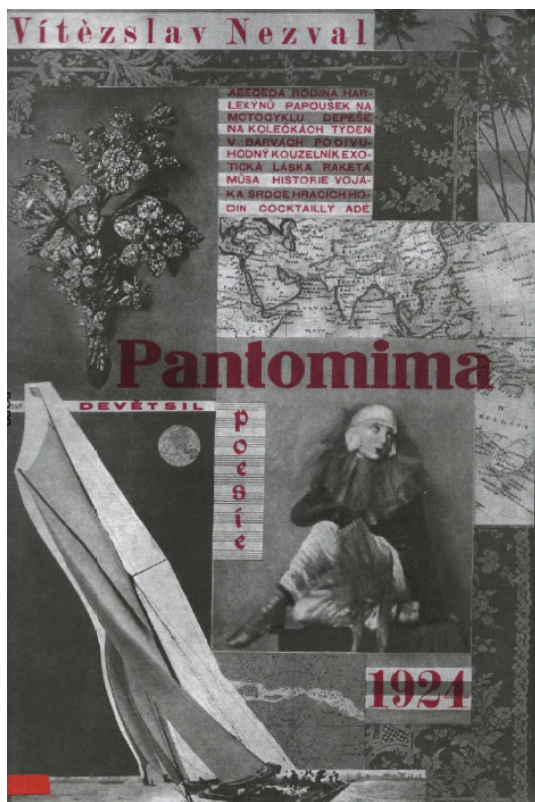
<sup>179</sup> “image = constructive poem of the world’s beauties” (Štyrský, “obraz,” 2).

<sup>180</sup> In reality, in *Disk* 1 only two languages other than Czech were utilized. The journal printed two poems and one short fragment in French, as well as a German translation of an excerpt from Vladislav Vančura’s *Amazon Stream*. As with many “international” publications at the time (such as Erenburg and Lissitzky’s *Veshch*), the majority of content appeared in the language of the country of publication (or of the editors), despite more ambitious claims.

<sup>181</sup> The poem is technically prefaced by a dedication page, which states the book is dedicated to “my muse,” as well as to “Teige,” playfully suggesting that Teige is Nezval’s muse.

with five letters per page.<sup>182</sup> The decision to remove most punctuation was connected to the perception that commas and periods impeded the process of association conjured in the reader, and thus echoed the concerns of many other avant-garde groups, including the Russian and Italian Futurists.

The cover of *Pantomima* is also worth noting. Designed by Štyrský, the cover incorporates elements of image poetry and can be read as an image poem in and of itself.<sup>183</sup> On this cover, Štyrský even recycles the same photographic cutouts of palm trees and a sail boat that he used in “Marion,” one of the first image poems made available to the public at the Bazaar of Modern Art.



**Fig. 2.14** Jindřich Štyrský, cover for Nezval’s *Pantomima* (1924)



**Fig. 2.15** Jindřich Štyrský’s image poem, “Marion” (1923)

<sup>182</sup> Rimbaud’s epigraph displaces one letter from the first page, where only four letters appear. Consequently, the last page contains six letters.

<sup>183</sup> The cover also realizes Teige’s design principle that a book cover should serve as an advertisement for the book: “I see the book cover [...] as the poster for a book, and, as any publisher will confirm, that is its true commercial purpose. It is therefore desirable for the cover to make a strong impact” (Teige, “Modern Typography,” 105).

As the example of the cover illustrates, the Poetists were constantly working toward a synthesis of the image and word, and one of the most productive avenues for doing this became the book form. The poem “ABCs” stood if not at the center of this transformation, then certainly alongside it.

### ***The “ABCs” According to Mayerová: The Multimedia Performance***

Before Nezval’s poem became an independent book, the “ABCs” witnessed one more crucial transformation. This time, the poem was lifted from the printed page and placed into life, thus fulfilling the Poetist dream of taking poetry out of “musty” books. In 1926, Milča Mayerová (1901–1977), who was beginning her career as a modern dancer in Czechoslovakia, choreographed a dance composition to be performed alongside Nezval’s poem.<sup>184</sup> She premiered her dance during a “Nezval Evening” at the Liberated Theater (Osvobozené divadlo) in Prague on April 14, 1926 and continued her performances of the poem (as an illustration of her and her teacher Rudolf von Laban’s dance method) even after the *ABCs* book was published.<sup>185</sup> Matthew Witkovsky writes, citing an interview with one of Mayerová’s former students:

[T]he recitation of each quatrain was accompanied by three to four poses, each derived from corresponding verses in Nezval’s poem. The choreography remained fairly static, confined to an area of two square meters, and it paused after each letter [...] The photographs printed in *Alphabet* most often record the first pose.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> This section on Mayerová is based entirely on Matthew Witkovsky’s painstaking research in reconstructing Mayerová’s contribution to the book *ABCs*. See his “Staging Language,” especially pages 121–32. Witkovsky suggests that although Mayerová tended to downplay her own role in the project, the idea to perform the poem as a dance in the first place may have originated with her, rather than Nezval, whom she credits in her retrospective accounts (“Staging Language,” 124).

<sup>185</sup> Nezval, *Abeceda*, 57. Witkovsky cites April 17<sup>th</sup> in his “Staging Language,” 121. Mayerová had studied under Rudolf von Laban, whose methods of dance notation are reflected in her performance, and spent 1922–1925 in Paris and Germany. In the 1930s, Mayerová went out to found a school based on Laban’s methods in Prague “to finance her stage career” (“Staging Language,” 114–15).

<sup>186</sup> Witkovsky, “Staging Language,” 125.

According to Witkovsky, it is largely thanks to the efforts of Mayerová that the multimedia *ABCs* exists today. She not only choreographed and performed the composition, thus popularizing the book, but also had a hand in certain aesthetic features of the book and in the more practical matters of publication. First, Mayerová commissioned “a small-time studio photographer,” Karel Pasma, to document her dance.<sup>187</sup> These photographs were then incorporated into the 1926 publication of *ABCs* by Teige, who presumably worked with a limited set of photographic options. A careful examination of the book shows that the photos were taken in a studio, rather than during a live performance. Moreover, they were probably taken in more than one session, since Mayerová is wearing white shoes in some photographs, while in most of them her shoes are black.<sup>188</sup> These seemingly insignificant details show that Mayerová likely had to make special arrangements in order to ensure that the documentation of her performance or its poses survives. Additionally, since the publishing company, “J. Otto,” was a family business that did not typically publish avant-garde books, it was probably Mayerová who oversaw the efforts to see the book to publication.<sup>189</sup>

Aside from these concrete interventions, Mayerová’s performance of “ABCs” is most important as an attempt to translate the poem into a different, non-verbal medium. With Mayerová’s multi-faceted role in mind, I will now turn to the 1926 book, which, I argue, is a transformation of Nezval’s poem into yet another medium—typophoto. On the artistic level, together with old forms, typophoto is tasked with overcoming the crisis of representation. Like image poetry, it is yet another attempt to find a non-abstract, non-representational artistic mode that fuses word and image. Only together, in a non-hierarchical relationship to one another, can word and image overcome the crisis of artistic language. Moreover, far from remaining art for

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<sup>187</sup> Witkovsky, “Staging Language,” 125.

<sup>188</sup> Witkovsky, “Staging Language,” 134 fn. 61, 125.

<sup>189</sup> Witkovsky, “Staging Language,” 125.

art's sake, the book is also an intervention in practical communication, specifically in the search for new forms and alternative modes of communication adequate to the multilingual community of the (technologically interconnected) world. Although a number of scholars have argued that Teige provides a multimedia 'facelift' to old modes of writing poetry and specifically engage the concept of typophoto in relation to this book, none, to my knowledge, have framed typophoto and its integration with verbal content as a solution to the crisis of artistic language, the crisis of representation.<sup>190</sup>

***The ABCs According to Teige: The Multimedia Book as the Next "Solution" to the Crisis of Artistic Language***

In the 1926 multimedia book, *ABCs*, Nezval's verses appear next to photographs of Mayerová's dance poses, and the innovative typography of Karel Teige, who arranged this multimedia experiment into an aesthetically unified whole. Nezval's verses and the Latin letters poetized in them are placed on the left-hand side of the book, while Teige's innovative typophoto compositions face them on the right.<sup>191</sup> A close examination of Teige's compositions on the odd pages of the book reveals how typography and photography are integrated on a formal level. Many of the photographic images Teige uses are cropped in various ways to accommodate his new typography and to fit the composition of the page. Consider, for example C (fig. 2.16).

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<sup>190</sup> Witkovsky, "Avant-Garde and the Center"; Aleksandar Bošković, "Photopoetry and the Bioscopic Book: Russian and Czech Avant-Garde Experiments of the 1920s," (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2013).

<sup>191</sup> The epigraph that cited Rimbaud in the first publication of the poem is removed.



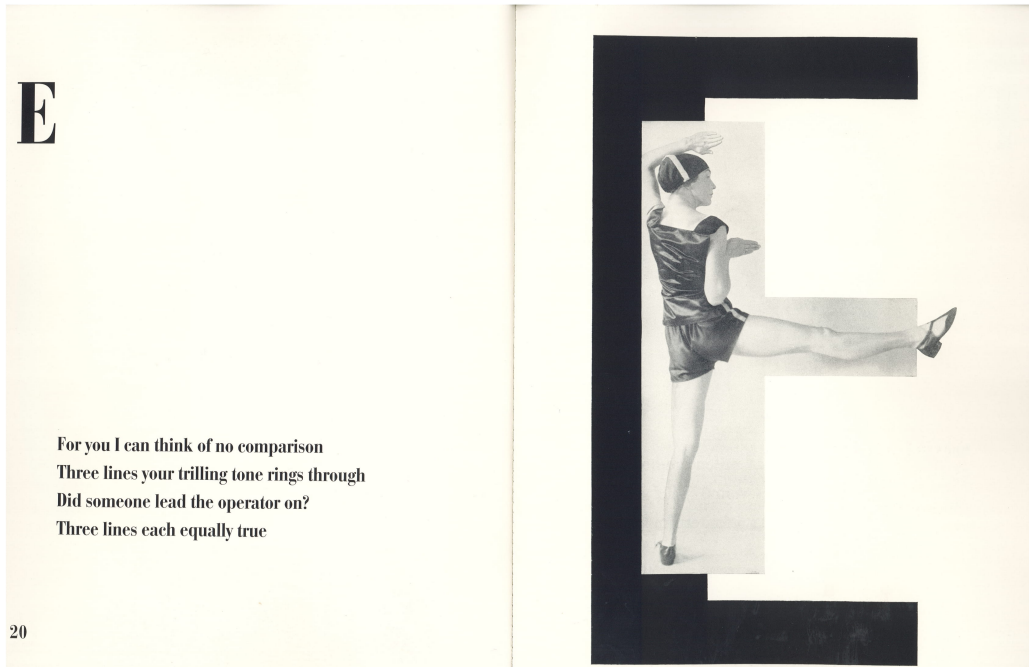


**Fig. 2.16 Karel Teige, typophoto of C in *Abeceda* (ABCs; 1926)**

The white negative space that makes the shape of the letter in this composition encroaches on the photograph, cutting off its top right corner. In H, W, and E (fig. 2.17) Mayerová's foot reaches out of the confinement of the photograph, stepping onto the page of the book.<sup>192</sup>

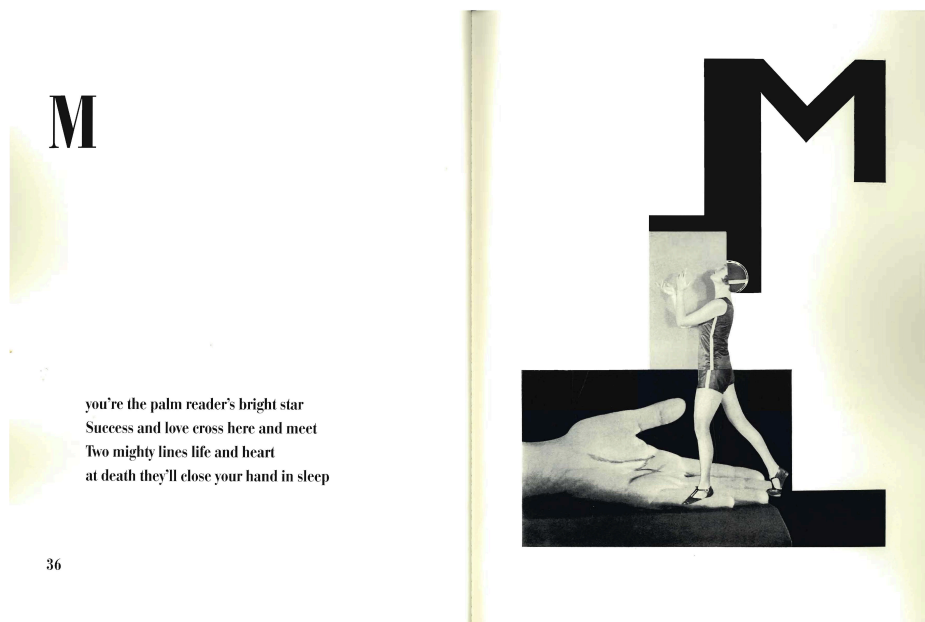
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<sup>192</sup> I provide one example from the book to illustrate each observation I make. The rest of the images can be found in Nezval, *Abeceda* or *Alphabet*, passim.



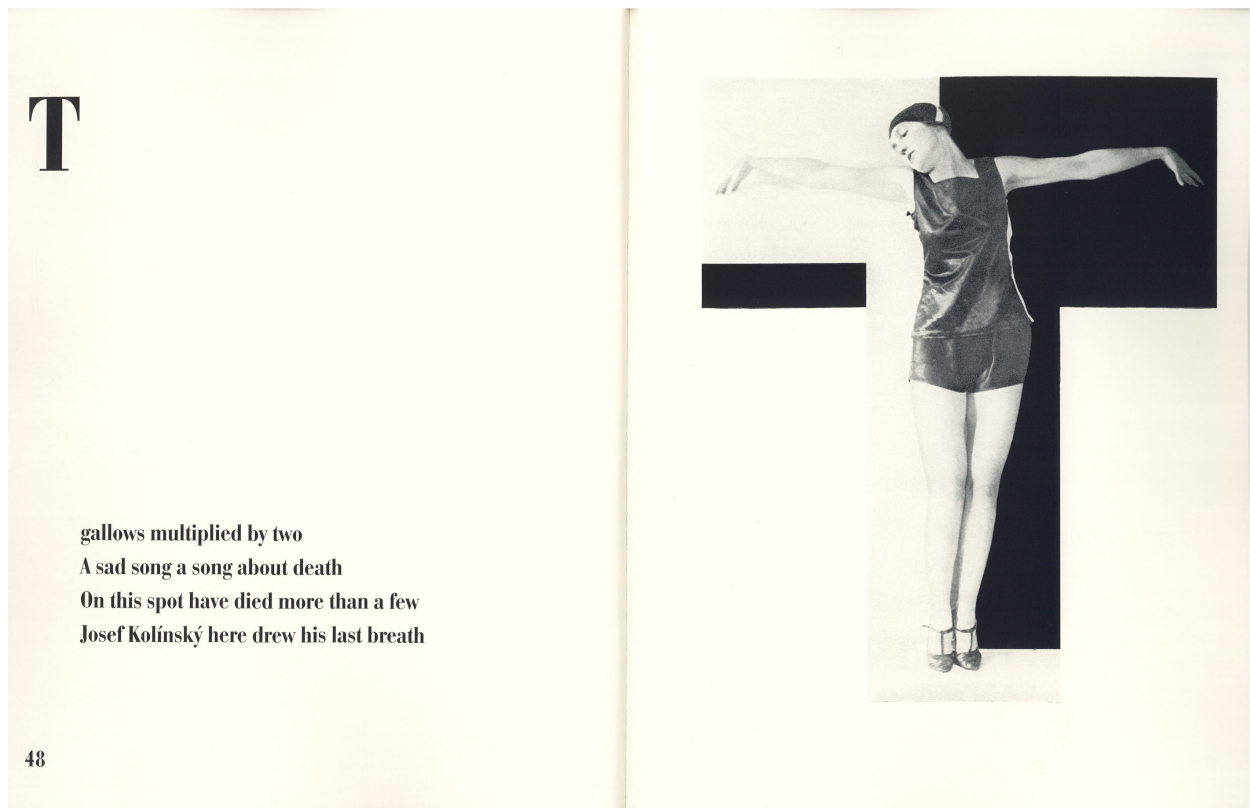
**Fig. 2.17 Karel Teige, typophoto of E in *Abeceda* (ABCs; 1926)**

In M, Mayerová's body is almost completely cut out from the photograph and pasted on top of another photograph, which depicts someone's hand (fig. 2.18).



**Fig. 2.18 Karel Teige, typophoto of M in *Abeceda* (ABCs; 1926)**

Teige makes sure that her photograph also comes into contact with his typography (near her head) and the white background (her back). In this typophoto composition, only a small part of the photograph's original background remains and seems to constrain Mayerová's hands, as if reminding the viewer of the impotence of photography in isolation.<sup>193</sup> In N, the photograph displaces the middle section of the letter, replacing it, in a way, with the 'body' of the photograph. In T, Mayerová's body is evenly divided down the middle between typography and photography (fig. 2.19).



**Fig. 2.19 Karel Teige, typophoto of T in *Abeceda* (ABCs; 1926)**

<sup>193</sup> It is as if this piece of the photograph traps her, preventing her from coming off the 'screen' onto the page.

Notice how Teige visually constructs a sense of integration and interpenetration of typography and photography in this example by extending the photograph into the letter in the bottom right corner (by Mayerová's feet) and, in parallel, extending the black letter on the left, below her arm. Although this black strip is technically separate from the letter itself, the symmetry between this piece and the extension of the photograph at the bottom right, when coupled with color symbolism (black as the color of letters) creates a sense of interpenetration of media, not just their parallel existence. In one way or another, typography and photography in all of Teige's compositions are spliced with one another, creating a sense of seamless continuity implied by the composite word "typophoto." One could say that the typographical, and by extension the verbal (word), and the photographic, and by extension the visual (image), are fused or built into one another, to use Constructivist vocabulary. Just as the concept of "typophoto" suggests, in Teige's arrangement "typo" and "photo" become the new fused medium.

At first sight, Mayerová's poses appear to be primarily iconic of the letters, entering into a long tradition of human alphabets and human- or animal-shaped letters.

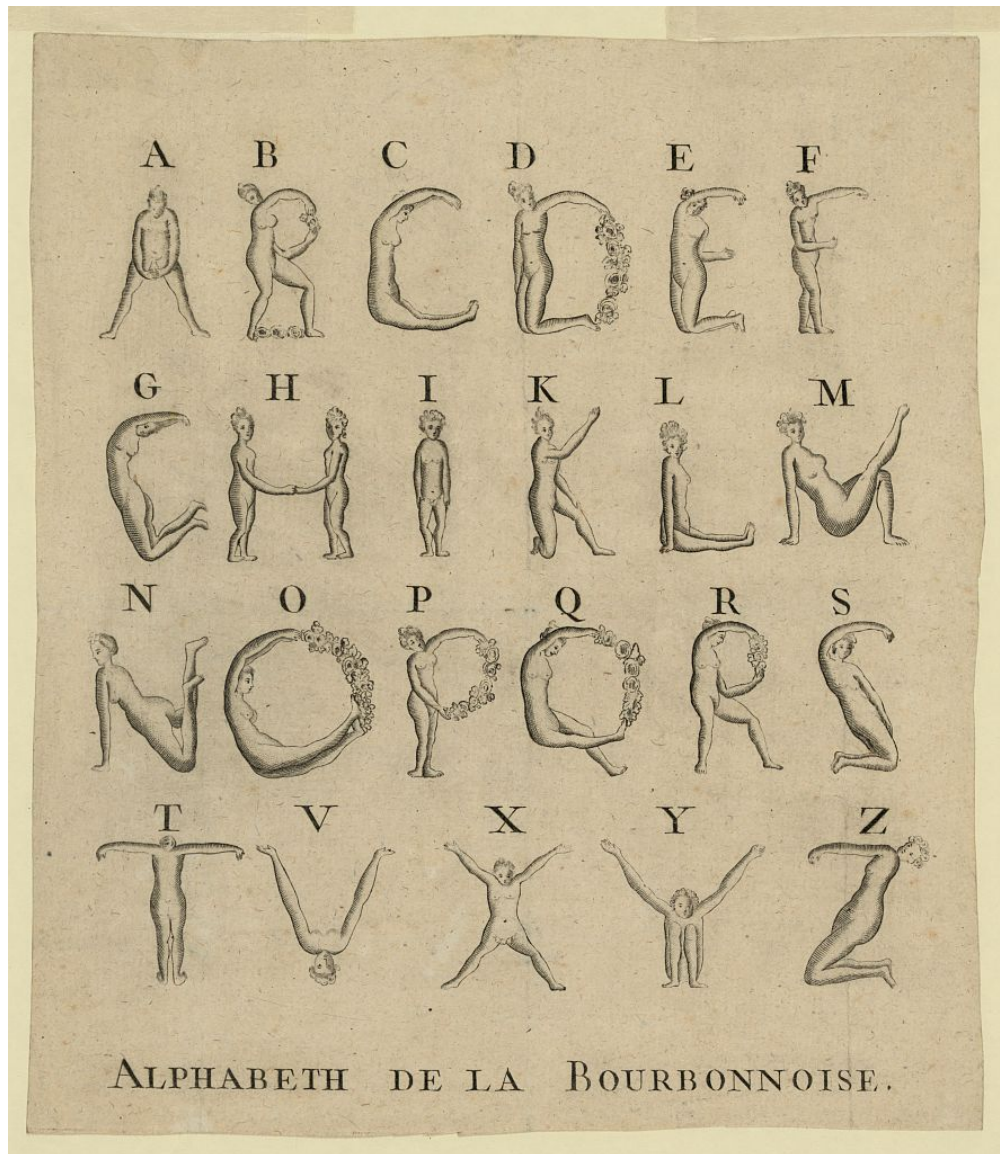


Fig. 2.20 Unknown artist, Alphabet de la Bourbonnoise (1798)





**Fig. 2.21 Vladimir Mayakovsky, *The Soviet Alphabet* (*Sovetskaia azbuka*, 1919) by Vladimir Mayakovsky, in collaboration with Roman Jakobson<sup>194</sup>**

However, the iconicity between Mayerová's body and the shape of the letter quickly comes into question. Already in C (fig. 2.16), one observes a disorienting doubling, in which Mayerová's pose would not necessarily be easily discerned as C without the typographical aid.<sup>195</sup> That is, the hidden or refracted iconicity of the photographic images is helped along by Teige's innovative, geometrically abstract typography, which recalls the circular shapes of Delaunay's illustration in

<sup>194</sup> Although neither of the authors' names are listed in *The Soviet Alphabet*, Jakobson suggests that he worked together with Mayakovsky on some of the chastushki-like alphabet rhymes (Roman Jakobson, *My Futurist Years*, ed. Bengt Jangfeldt and Stephen Rudy, trans. Stephen Rudy [New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1992], 51–52).

<sup>195</sup> In the photograph alone, there are at least three C shapes: two made with each of Mayerová's arms, and another made with her entire body. In this photograph, Mayerová appears as if she's cradling someone, perhaps the child, whom a mother feeds with her breast in stanza B.

*Disk* as well as the circular symbol of the journal itself.<sup>196</sup> Typography is especially central to U and W, which are indistinguishable from one another without it (fig. 2.22).



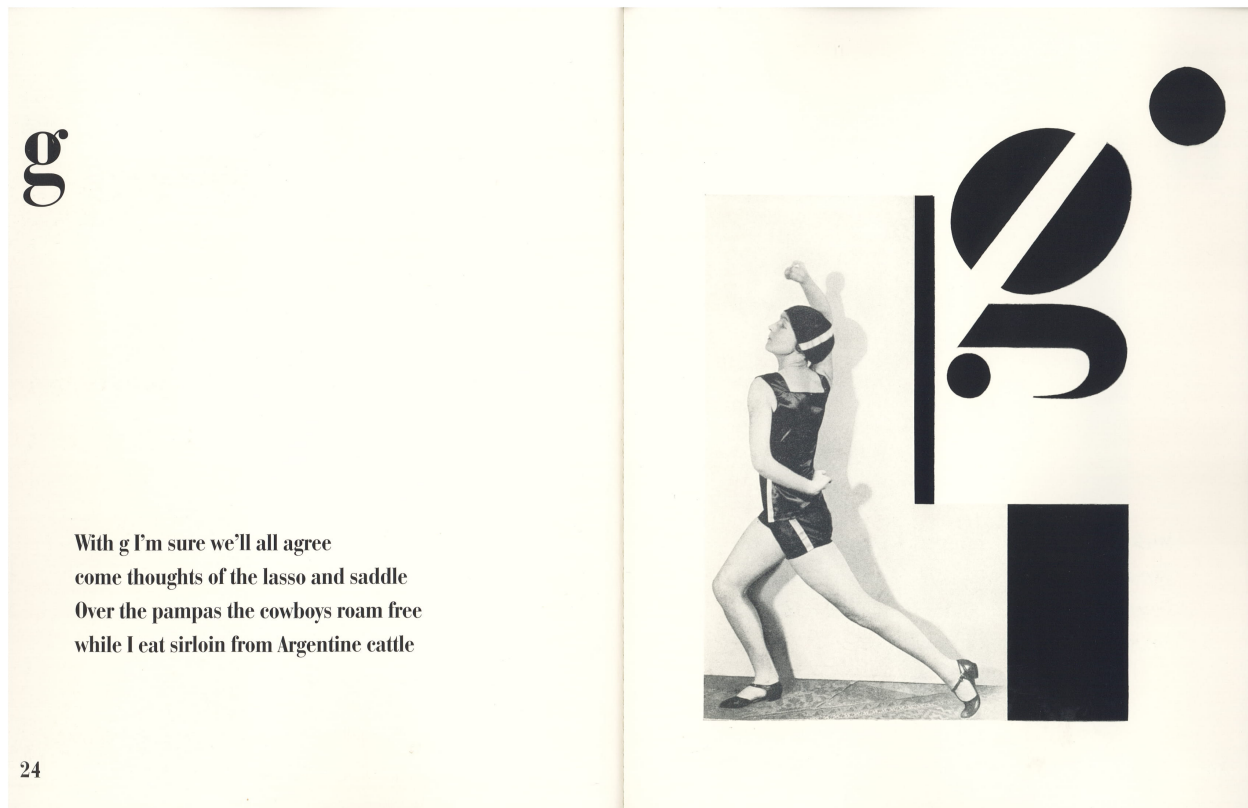
**Fig. 2.22 Karel Teige, typophotos of U and W in *Abeceda (ABCs)*; 1926)**

As the book unfolds, it becomes more and more apparent how dependent the photographic images are on Teige's typography, and, in some cases, vice versa.

Thus, typography and photography are integrated, not only on a purely formal level (physical overlapping of media), but also on a semantic-semiotic one (contamination of visual meaning). A telling case for the semantic meaning of typography is the composition for G (fig. 2.23). Looking at the photographic image alone, one is unlikely to suspect that a letter is being shown here.

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<sup>196</sup> The Delaunay reference is especially visible in the new typographical rendition of S, which is made of two half circles. The black circular shape or disc that appeared on the cover of *Disk 1* migrated into other Poetist publications.



**Fig. 2.23 Karel Teige, typophoto of G in *Abeceda (ABCs)*; 1926)**

Yet with the help of Teige's typography the similarity of Mayerová's pose to the letter become apparent. The parallels Teige creates between the dancer's cap and the "head" of the letter g, which is similarly "sliced through" with a slit of white space (in parallel to the white stripe of the cap), transform the ambiguous gesture of Mayerová's performing body into a letter. Switching between typographic and photographic sections, the viewer begins to see the tail of Teige's "g" in the dancer's left leg and curled toe, the top dot as her fist, while the typographic "g" acquires the bold and proud features of the dancer's face, body, and their orientation. Thus, Teige's compositions work on multiple levels, purely formal-material, as well as semantic, to create a sense of fusion, interpenetration, inextricability of photo from typo and vice versa.



As one flips the pages, it is as if the new “language” of typophoto covers up the old Latin alphabet along with Nezval’s verses on the left. The question naturally arises: what is the place of Teige’s typophotomontage in the book as a whole? Is it, as Levinger and other scholars have suggested, an example of a future, superior mode of visual communication that dispenses with verbal matter?<sup>197</sup> Does the new medium on the right-hand side pages replace the old of the left? My analysis suggests that the book is intentionally designed in such a way that the “old” and the “new” work together; though one may indeed be newer, there is no hierarchical relationship between them, and the verbal is not rejected in favor of the visual.

The most obvious cases that assert the importance of the “old” verbal medium of Nezval’s poem are cases where photography and typography do little to help us understand Teige’s composition as a letter or make any meaning of it at all without the stanzas. Take, for instance, D (fig. 2.24).

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<sup>197</sup> Scholars who work with the concept of “photomontage” rather than “typophotomontage” tend to frame *ABCs* as the overcoming of verbal communication by the visual. The recognition that there are elements of the verbal present in these compositions allows for a different reading and alerts us to the importance of Nezval’s text in the aesthetic whole of the book.



**Fig. 2.24 Karel Teige, typophoto of D in *Abeceda* (ABCs; 1926)**

In this typophoto composition, one would have a hard time discerning any kind of letter here even by a stretch of the imagination. The typography of N and O are likewise so distorted (and the photographic images do little to remedy this situation) that one would have a hard time deciphering any letters there at all.<sup>198</sup> Once compared with the stanzas, however, the seemingly disjointed and abstract pieces of the composition fall into place. Stanza D reads:

luk jenž od západu napíná se  
 Indián shlédl stopu na zemi  
 Poslední druhové zhyňuli v dávném čase  
 a měsíc dorůstá prerie kamení

a bow stretched from the west  
 an Indian spotted a footprint on the earth

<sup>198</sup> Per suggestion of iconicity between Mayerová's body and the letters provided by many other examples, one would sooner see an R in Mayerová's pose for O. Once we know the letter O is being instantiated, however, we can clearly see an orbit and an oval in both the typography and in Mayerová's pose.

The last companions perished in a time long ago  
and the moon waxes prairie of stones<sup>199</sup>

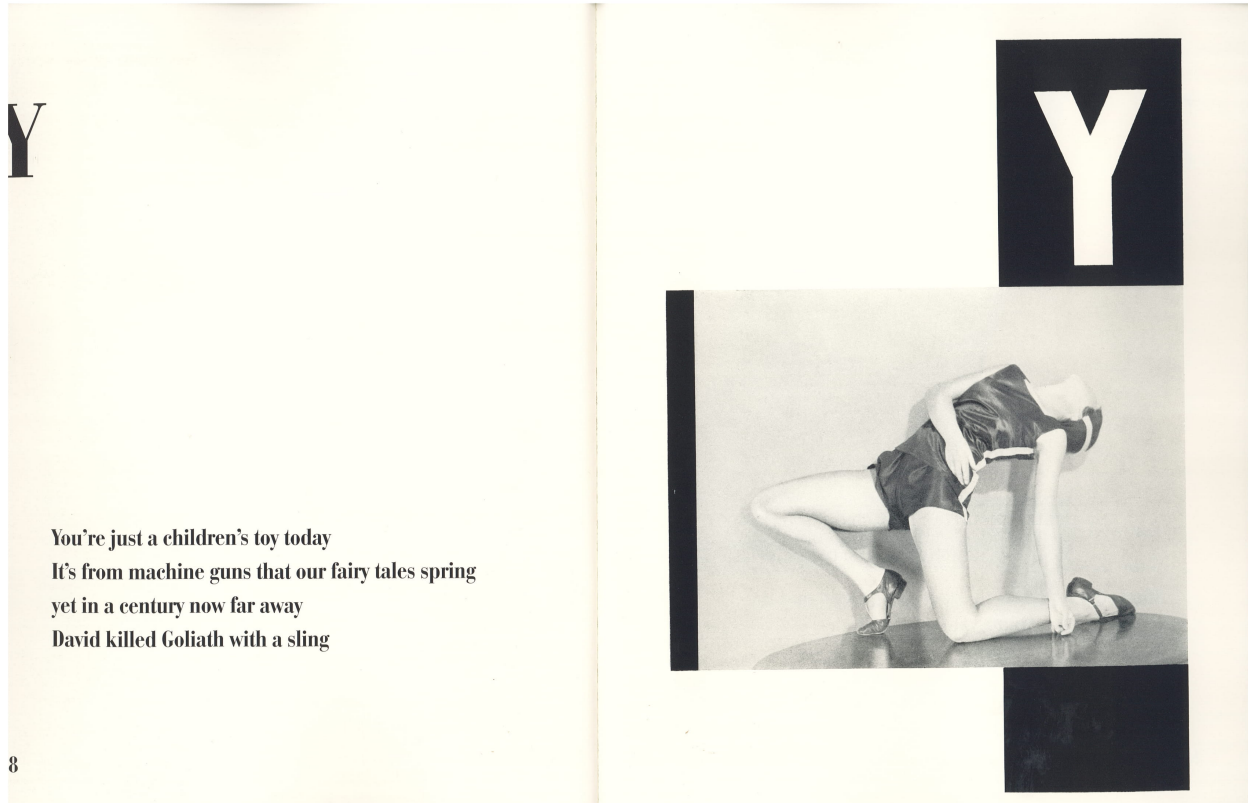
As the verses make clear, the dancer in the photograph is performing the action of shooting a bow and arrow.<sup>200</sup> In Teige's typophoto arrangement, Mayerová is stretched out into a typographic arrow strung on the bow of the letter D, creating the kind of continuity between typography and photography we saw in the earlier examples. In each of the cases where the visual resemblance between the body in the photograph, the typography, and the letter is more difficult to discern, Nezval's verses guide us through interpretation, completing the missing elements. In this example, the viewer first pauses on the typophoto, moves to the stanza, and then returns to the typophoto.

One could dismiss this circle of references as a limitation of the materials Teige was working with. As I noted, it was Mayerová who provided him with the photographs for the book, and it was Mayerová who composed the dance that eluded the literal embodiment of the letters, in the first place. Dismissing the circular references between the media in the book in this way, however, downplays Teige's skillfulness as a designer-typographer.

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<sup>199</sup> Nezval, et al. *Abeceda*, 12; trans. Harwood.

<sup>200</sup> Note Teige's and Mayerová's playful reversal of the direction described in the verses: in the photograph, the arrow is shot from east to west rather than vice versa as in the poem. Such a gesture corresponds to Poetism's playful aspirations to conquer the west with their new, truly international art.



**Fig. 2.25 Karel Teige, typophoto of Y in *Abeceda* (ABCs; 1926)**

For example, in the letter Y (fig. 2.25), the photograph of Mayerová’s body is clearly a performance of the death of Goliath described in the stanza:

Dnes jsi jen hračkou pro děti  
 Za strojních pušek vyrostly pohádky naše  
 a přece v dávném století  
 zabil prakem David Goliáše

Today you are only a toy for children  
 In the time of machine guns our fairy tales grew up  
 and yet in a century ago  
 David with a slingshot killed Goliath<sup>201</sup>

And yet, almost in disobedience of Mayerova’s performance of the content in this poem, Teige creates parallels between her “slain” body and the letter Y. By making the typography of the letter Y into a negative, he creates visual parallels between the white letter and the dancer’s

<sup>201</sup> Nezval, et al. *Abeceda*, 52; trans. Harwood.

“white” legs, which echo the “fork” of the Y.<sup>202</sup> Moreover, it seems that in designing the book, Teige would have had the freedom to use any of the photographs that Mayerová provided, including those that did not actually correspond to the letters in her performance.<sup>203</sup> But even if Teige did remain true to Mayerová’s performance in his choice of photographic material for each letter, he still used the content of Nezval’s verses as a complement to his typographic arrangements, over which he had complete control. For example, in C (fig. 2.16), Teige chose to subtly reflect the content of the poem by making the letter out of the negative space of the background, which visually mirrors the “young moon” that Nezval associates with the letter C in his stanza.<sup>204</sup>

In conjunction with the supplied Latin alphabet, Nezval’s verses, and the predictable sequence of an alphabetic primer, which make this experiment into a book, we can access the meaning of letters that might otherwise elude us. Such a relationship between the book’s different elements points to their inextricable interpenetration, rather than separation and succession. In the 1926 *ABCs*, the suggested relationship between the old and the new, between verbal and visual poetry, between word and image is not evolution, but dialectics, where different media are brought together in a higher synthesis.

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<sup>202</sup> Though Teige productively employs negative space in his typophoto compositions quite frequently, besides C, Y is the only letter where Teige uses the negative space as the ‘body’ of the letter itself.

<sup>203</sup> This last point is a purely speculative proposition, but a close examination of the pages of the book suggests an intriguing possibility. Teige may have simply mixed up the photographs, taking those he saw more fit for each composition, whether or not they represented Mayerová’s pose for a particular letter. Since Mayerová provided him with more than one photograph for each letter, this is entirely possible.

<sup>204</sup> září jako měsíc nad vodou  
 Ubývej shasni měsíci veliký  
 romance gondolierůnavždy mrtvý jsou  
 tož vzhůru kapitáne do Ameriky

it glows like the moon over the water  
 Wane and be extinguished great moon  
 the romances of gondoliers are forever dead  
 so onward captain to America  
 (Nezval, et al. *Abeceda*, 10; trans. Harwood).

In the preface to the 1926 edition, Nezval writes: “Alphabet is the image, in book form, of a meeting of autonomous arts *solving a common task* in parallel and within the bounds of their functions.”<sup>205</sup> As is inevitable for collective projects, different artists aspire to realize divergent agendas. Mayerová’s goals, informed by her experience with Rudolf van Laban’s school of movement, differed from those of Nezval; Teige’s insistence on the purely visual quality of Nezval’s stanzas differed from the poet’s own continued assertion that in “ABCs” he worked with the “shape, sound, and function” of letters.<sup>206</sup> Even Nezval of 1922 did not agree with Nezval of 1926 about the aims and motivations of his poem, distancing himself from Rimbaud’s Symbolist influence. Despite these differences, I argue that in the 1926 edition of *ABCs*, the Poetists were working toward a “common task”: to renew artistic language and overcome the crisis of representation by means of fusing word and image. The project that began with image poetry found its culmination not in typophoto, but in the multimedia book form that allowed “autonomous arts” to overcome their individual limitations.

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<sup>205</sup> Nezval, *Alphabet*, 10; my emphasis.

<sup>206</sup> In the preface to the 1926 edition, he writes: “From the letter’s shape, sound, and function I associatively created a subconstruct to serve as the base on which my fantasy embroidered” (Nezval, *Alphabet*, 9; *Abeceda*, 3).

## CONCLUSION

### *Crisis and its Figures*

Now words are dead and language resembles a cemetery; but at birth the word was alive, image-like. [...] Today old art has already died, new art has not yet been born; and things have died too—we lost the feeling of the world [...] Only the creation of new art forms can return to man the experience of the world, resurrect things, and kill pessimism.<sup>1</sup>

Viktor Shklovsky, “The Resurrection of the Word”

The word [...] is a counterfeit banknote of the golden treasure of reality.<sup>2</sup>

Karel Teige, “Words, Words, Words”

Death shall be nothing else but abandonment of the world of banknote currency.<sup>3</sup>

Jindřich Štyrský and Toyen, “The Poet”

The concept of crisis in the modern sense, as the historian Reinhart Koselleck has noted, necessarily entails a philosophy of history that enables one to apprehend the present as a break with the past as well as a prognosis for the future.<sup>4</sup> Although crisis does not prescribe specific solutions, it assumes that history is moving in a particular direction, that is, it posits a telos. In this dissertation, I have tried to show how the rhetoric of crisis is mobilized by the Russian and

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<sup>1</sup> “Сейчас слова мертвы, и язык подобен кладбищу, но только что рожденное слово было живо, образно. [...] Сейчас старое искусство уже умерло, новое еще не родилось; и вещи умерли,—мы потеряли ощущение мира [...] Только создание новых форм искусства может возратить человеку переживание мира, воскресить вещи и убить пессимизм” (Viktor Shklovsky, “Voskreshenie slova,” in *Gamburgskii schet* [Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1990], 36, 40).

<sup>2</sup> “Slovo [...] je falešnou bankovkou zlatého pokladu skutečnosti” (Karel Teige, “Slova, slova, slova,” *Horizont*, no. 1–4 [1927]: 1). Cf. Jakobson’s description of the “violent inflation of linguistic signs” by 19th-century Realism (Roman Jakobson, “What Is Poetry?” in *Language in Literature* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1987], 376; my emphasis).

<sup>3</sup> “Smrt nebude ničím, než opuštěním světa papírové měny” (Jindřich Štyrský, Toyen, “Básník (Přednáška proslovená při vernisáži výstavy),” *Rozpravy Aventina* 3, no. 20 (1927–28), 242; trans. as “The Poet (A Lecture Given on the Occasion of an Exhibition Opening)” in *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910–1930*, eds. Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 591).

<sup>4</sup> Reinhart Koselleck and Michaela Richter, “Crisis,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67.2 (2006): 372. Koselleck dates the transformation of the concept of crisis from an “eschatological concept” to “a philosophy of history” to the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Koselleck 373).

the Czech avant-garde to create a space for their artistic intervention, which placed the previously invisible artistic “periphery” on the map of (western) art history. In particular, I have traced the signs of crisis in the work of two artists, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Karel Teige, each of whom attempted to overcome the crisis of language and representation in his own way.

In the 1910s and 1920s crisis permeated poetic discourse, fueled in part by the Symbolist movement, anxieties about emerging technologies, which challenged old modes of representation, as well as apocalyptic expectations, heightened by the first global conflict in World War I. Mayakovsky’s and Teige’s artworks not only register a broader sense of crisis, which implicitly placed these two artists at a turning point in history, but also respond to the language in which the crisis is figured. Following Derrida on the centrality of metaphor to all discourse, one could say that there is no crisis outside of the figures in which it is expressed.<sup>5</sup> In what follows, I focus on figurations of the crisis of language, since language—both verbal and visual—is the medium that makes representation possible.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the crisis of language finds expression in two predominant metaphors. The first is connected to economic discourse and posits language as devalued paper currency. This idea of language as money, which can be found in the writing of Vladimir Mayakovsky, Velimir Khlebnikov, Roman Jakobson, Karel Teige, Jindřich Štyrský and Toyen (Marie Čermínová), can be traced back to Heraclitus; however, the preference for diction connected to paper currency and inflation imbue this ancient metaphor with the atmosphere of 20<sup>th</sup>-century economic instability.<sup>6</sup> The second, more pervasive figurative discourse formulates the crisis of language in terms of the death of the word. Unlike the metaphor of language as

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<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” *New Literary History* 6, no. 1 (1974): 7.

<sup>6</sup> According to Shell, Heraclitus compares words to coins. Marc Shell, *Money, Language and Thought: Literary and Philosophical Economies From The Medieval To The Modern Era* (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1982), 2.



money, which suggests an analogical relationship between the two compared items, the metaphor of death is asymmetrical. Rather than renaming an object based on a similarity of some of its features or functions (a “word is a counterfeit banknote” or “Juliet is the sun”), this metaphor reaches into another discourse—that of mortality and biological death—to borrow the means for capturing a linguistic process that cannot be described in a literal way.

One may be tempted to examine such metaphors for signs of not fully conscious assumptions and beliefs about language and ask: if the word can die, does it mean that it is a living organism, a body, or a kind of self, as Thomas Seifrid has suggested?<sup>7</sup> However, such an analogical approach to the death of word metaphor seems only to mislead. The notion that the word can die cannot not yield information about what the word is, if for no other reason than that in these same discourses, the metaphor of death is used to describe the state of language more broadly, as well as art forms, art itself, and even objects that have been transformed into dead fossils under the glass of representation. Rather than reading the metaphor as an analogy with a missing (but unconsciously assumed) term, it is more productive to analyze how “death” spreads from one area to another in a kind of metonymic contamination. Perhaps it is precisely the lack of analogical parallelism that allows the death metaphor to envelop everything from the word to the things in themselves, which had the misfortune to become objects of representation.

Moreover, the metaphor of death in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century discourses on art not only extends to language, art, and reality, but also transforms into other figures. For example, consider the rich metaphors of the Russian Symbolist Andrei Bely, whose rhetorical formulations influenced the Russian avant-garde:

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<sup>7</sup> The presence of an unconsciously articulated model of selfhood in Russian discourse on language in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is the premise of Seifrid’s *The Word Made Self. Russian Writings on Language, 1860–1930* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2005), 2. Unlike my emphasis on the “death” metaphor, Seifrid’s readings do not focus on any specific metaphor.

[T]he only thing to which our livelihood binds us is word creativity [...] in this way we forge weapons for the struggle against *living corpses* [words], which rub their way into the circle of our activities; we have to be barbarians, *executioners of the walking word*, if we can no longer breathe life into it. The word that has become a term is a different story; it does not present itself as alive [...] you cannot resurrect it to life, but it is harmless: in the ideal term the *very corpse poison* has decomposed, in such way that it no longer *infects* anyone.<sup>8</sup>

Notice how Bely extends the metaphor of the (almost) dead word to present a picture of language overrun by zombies. Moreover, the metaphor of death blends with poison and infection in the biological substance of “corpse poison.” The discourse of the Russian Futurists exhibits similar signs of contamination of metaphors, suggesting that this death of language can be contracted and spread. For example, in the essay “The New Paths of the Word” (1913), Kruchenykh compares critics who write about “the great deceased” to “undead vampires” (*vurdulaki*) and “grave diggers” (*grobokopateli*).<sup>9</sup>

In the Czech avant-garde context, metaphors connected to death usually find more concise expression, but they are nevertheless scattered throughout the writing of Karel Teige and Jindřich Štyrský, whose rhetoric is discussed in chapter two. Characterizations of the death of the word as well as of the image, also spread to art more broadly. The leap from the dead image to dead art is perhaps nowhere as clear as it is in Štyrský’s manifesto “image” [sic], where he proclaims: “**DO NOT PRESERVE THE DEAD! GET RID OF THE CORPSES BECAUSE THEY STINK!**”, referring simultaneously to images and old art.<sup>10</sup> Fellow Poetists like

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<sup>8</sup> “единственное, на что обязывает нас наша жизненность, — это творчество слов [...] так выковываем мы оружие для борьбы с живыми трупами, втирающимися в круг нашей деятельности; мы должны быть варварами, палачами ходячего слова, если уже не можем мы вдохнуть в него жизнь; другое дело — слово-термин; оно не представляется живым [...] его не воскресишь к жизни, но оно безвредно: самый трупный яд разложился в идеальном термине, так что он уже никого не заражает” (Andrei Bely, “Magiia slov” [The Magic of Words; 1909] in Andrei Bely, *Simvolizm kak miroponimanie* [Moscow: Respublika, 1994], 135; my emphasis). The Russian text makes it clear that “living corpses” refer to the “walking word.”

<sup>9</sup> Aleksei Kruchenykh, “Novye puti slova” in *Troe* (St. Petersburg: Zhuravl’, 1913), 22. Although Kruchenykh does not explicitly cite Bely, his metaphors betray his sources. Viktor Shklovsky, whose views are discussed below, likewise responds to Bely’s rhetoric in his “Resurrection of the Word.”

<sup>10</sup> Jindřich Štyrský, “obraz,” *Disk 1* (1923): 2; bolding and capitalization is reproduced as in original.

Bendřich Václavek, as well as members of competing groups like Proletarian poetry, including the poets Stanislav Kostka Neumann and Josef Hora, likewise waged war against the dead art of the past and old artistic forms.<sup>11</sup> The Devětsil art historian Jaroslav Jíra speaks of the necessary death of artistic movements like Expressionism, Cubism, and New Classicism, since they no longer show “life functions” or have “the ability to live.”<sup>12</sup>

### ***Death and Renewal as a Conceptual Pair and the Permanence of Crisis***

As Koselleck has pointed out, the modern discourse of crisis entails a prognosis for the future. In the rhetorical figuration of the crisis of language as “death,” future prognosis finds concrete embodiment in the idea of renewal or “resurrection,” as the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky suggested in his essay “The Resurrection of the Word” (1914). I will briefly discuss Shklovsky’s pairing of “death” and “resurrection” to illustrate how, on a functional-theoretical level, the articulation of the death of language necessitates its renewal, creating an endless cycle of death and renewal of forms.<sup>13</sup> First read as a lecture at the Stray Dog Cabaret in 1913, Shklovsky’s essay explores the natural tendency of language to “petrify” and “die.”<sup>14</sup> Shklovsky suggests that the word’s death is a natural consequence of the “algebraization of language,” which turns words into concepts.<sup>15</sup> Much as one may try to counteract this death, soon after the word is renewed, the

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<sup>11</sup> Bendřich Václavek, “Likvidace konkursní podstaty expresionismu,” *Pásmo* 1, no. 1 (1924): 3–4. Stanislav K. Neumann, “Umění v sociální revoluci,” *Proletkult* II, no. 23.5 (1923): 268. Josef Hora, “Konec sociální poezie?,” *Rudé právo*, Nov. 19, 20, and 27, 1924.

<sup>12</sup> Jaroslav Jíra, “U.S. Devětsil,” *Veraikon* (March–May 1924): 25.

<sup>13</sup> While “The Resurrection of the Word” was undoubtedly important for the Russian avant-garde (Mayakovsky referred to it in “A Drop of Tar”), it seems doubtful that the Czech avant-garde was familiar with Shklovsky’s work in any great detail before the 1930s, when members of the Prague Linguistic Circle took on the translation of Shklovsky’s *Theory of Prose*. My discussion of this essay is not informed by a desire to reconstruct a historical link, but rather by making a more theoretical point about how the discourse of death and renewal functions.

<sup>14</sup> Shklovsky does not employ the death metaphor exclusively, interchanging it with ideas of “petrification” and wearing out; nevertheless, death is the most prevalent metaphor in this text and moreover, seems to suggest the final state of petrification.

<sup>15</sup> Shklovsky, “Voskreshenie slova,” 38. According to the program of the Stray Dog Cabaret, the essay’s original title was “The Place of Futurism in the History of Language” (“Kommentarii” in Shklovsky, *Gamburgskii schet*,

process of petrification sets in once again and the word recedes behind invisible layers of use. In this petrified state, we no longer “see” the word; we only “recognize” it. To illustrate the petrification of language at various stages, Shklovsky provides a series of examples. He suggests that the word’s original “image-like” (*obraznyi*) quality is the first to disappear under the wear and tear of language use. Thus, as a result of constant use, we no longer see the “lost, erased image” at the base of words like *otrok* and *enfant*, which are the etymological image of “one who does not speak” (*ne govoriashchii*).<sup>16</sup> Taking up a different example, Shklovsky shows how we no longer perceive collocations like *solntse iasnoe* (“bright sun”) as redundant. He suggests that the epithet, which was originally added to renew our perception of a dying word, has died too.

Although in 1913 Shklovsky has yet to articulate his famous “device” of defamiliarization (*ostranenie*), which would become the master trope of Russian Formalism and the foundation of a new way of relating art to reality, its basic conceptual framework is already present in this essay. It is the goal of new art, Shklovsky argues, to “return to the human being the experience of the world,” which has been lost in language.<sup>17</sup> This nascent articulation of the concept of defamiliarization explains how the announced agenda of “the resurrection of the word” is connected to the “resurrection of things,” which Shklovsky discusses towards the end of the essay.<sup>18</sup> That is, by “resurrecting” words, the artist does not “resurrect things” directly, but does so through the medium of our perception. “Things” come to life because we begin to see them again.

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486). This title, along with the choice of venue, points to the centrality of Futurism for the conceptions expressed in Shklovsky’s essay. Moreover, Shklovsky borrows the idea of “algebraization” of language, which can also be found in Kruchenykh’s “Novye puti slova.”

<sup>16</sup> Shklovsky, “Voskreshenie slova,” 36. It should be noted that following the linguist Aleksandr Potebnia, Shklovsky connects this original image-like quality of the word to its etymology. “Etymological image” is my term for Shklovsky’s conflation.

<sup>17</sup> Shklovsky, “Voskreshenie slova,” 36. While Shklovsky identifies this new art with Futurism, towards the end of his article he suggests it can be any movement that follows the path of renewing our perception of the world (42).

<sup>18</sup> Shklovsky would later remember the original title of the essay as “Resurrection of things,” a slip of memory, which shows how easily he traversed the space between words, art, and things.

Shklovsky's formulation of the crisis of language is by no means singular. He consolidates various ideas about art and language in circulation at the time, drawing on a variety of sources from the linguist Aleksandr Potebnia, on whose connection between image and etymology he relies, to the cognitive aesthetics of Heinrich Wölfflin and Alois Riegl, who examined psychological and physiological effects of art on its viewers, to Andrei Bely and the Russian Futurists. Besides building on contemporary theories of art and language, this essay is interesting for another reason: it illustrates how, on a theoretical level, the metaphor of death anticipates, even necessitates the metaphor of renewal. Shklovsky's essay suggests that "death" and "resurrection" (or the more neutral "renewal") are a conceptual pair. Moreover, this essay assigns the project of resurrection to art, which acts as a force that counters the natural petrification of language. The implicit perpetual tension between language that dies and art that resurrects points to an endless cycle of death and renewal, which is characteristic of the avant-garde's conception of creativity.<sup>19</sup> Finally, in this essay Shklovsky connects art to the aim of restoring the lost image-like quality of the ordinary word—a project that informs not only the artistic experimentation of Mayakovsky and Teige, but also the international avant-garde more broadly.

The discourse of death and renewal, as exemplified in Shklovsky's essay, frames the artistic experiments of Mayakovsky and Teige in a two-fold manner. Broadly, both artists perceived their experimentation as a renewal of artistic language in an effort to overcome the crisis of representation. For both Mayakovsky and Teige, the renewal of artistic language

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<sup>19</sup> In the early 1920s, the concept of perpetual death and renewal blends with the Marxist idea of "permanent revolution" in art. See, for example, Lajos Kassák, "Letter to Bela Kun in the Name of Art," where the leftist proletarian artist argues for freedom from any political demands on art, including those of socialist governments, out of the internal necessity of art to evolve (Lajos Kassák, "Levél Kun Bélához a művészet nevében" [A Letter To Bela Kun in the Name of Art], *MA* 4, no. 7 [1919]: 146–48).

reached beyond the world of art and entered life. Mayakovsky's experiment, which began with *A Cloud in Pants* and culminated in *150,000,000*, transformed the means of representation for the underrepresented who finally find their voice in his art (at least as far as it appeared to Mayakovsky and fellow *LEF* members like Boris Arvatov and Sergei Tret'iakov). On the level of poetic images, Mayakovsky offered his vision of the poet as a collective Leviathan and the lips of the people. On the level of form, he experimented with introducing street jargon into poetry, implicitly legitimizing it as an artistic mode of expression, and appealed to forms of collective creativity. Perhaps more importantly, Mayakovsky's search for democratic representation in art offered a model for realizing democratic representation in life, which became an increasingly urgent question in post-revolutionary Russia. Teige's projects also extended art into life. The broader aspiration of the Poetist movement was to supplement the Constructivist agenda of changing people's lives through concrete interventions, such as architecture and city planning, by teaching the working class "the enjoyment of life."<sup>20</sup> The Poetists fulfilled this goal by creating artworks that were based on the ideas of mass entertainment like sport, circus, music hall, film, and leisure as exemplified by the theme of travel and exotic landscapes. By publishing image poetry in periodicals, the Poetists attempted to rescue art from the academy, the "musty" galleries, and museums and bring it closer to the people.<sup>21</sup> Finally, in his experimentation in the medium of typophoto, Teige aimed to provide

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<sup>20</sup> "Poetism, is an art of life, *an art of living and enjoying*, it must become, eventually, a natural part of everyday life, as delightful and accessible as sport, love, wine, and all manner of other delectations [...] Poetism is the crown of life; Constructivism is its basis. [...] 'After six days of work and building of the world, beauty is the seventh day of the soul.' This line by the poet Otokar Březina captures the relationship between Poetism and Constructivism. A man who has lived as a working citizen wants to live as a human being, as a poet. Poetism is not only the opposite but also the necessary complement of Constructivism" (Karel Teige, "Poetismus," *Host*, no. 9–10 [1924], 199; trans. in *Between Worlds* 579–80).

<sup>21</sup> Štyrský, "image" in *Between Worlds*, 366. Teige, "Poetism" in *Between Worlds* 580.

models for transforming communication outside of the artistic world.<sup>22</sup> In other words, his work on the multimedia book *ABCs* was not merely an artistic experiment, but a lesson in giving visual form to verbal communication.

Beyond these general tendencies, Shklovsky's formulation of resurrection as the return of the image-like quality of the word also had particular relevance for both Mayakovsky and Teige. Both aligned the word and image rather closely in their works and continued to work with both forms throughout the different projects discussed in this dissertation. In regards to verbal artistic language, both Mayakovsky and Teige undoubtedly made the word visible in their artworks. As I have shown, already in his early poetry, Mayakovsky began experimenting with visualizing the word and making it perceptible. Among Mayakovsky's early experiments I analyzed "An exhaustive portrait of spring," where Mayakovsky created a visual Cubist composition out of a fragmented word. Even when Mayakovsky began to move away from purely formal experimentation, he nevertheless maintained his efforts to make the word more visible. Mayakovsky's poetry features countless examples where the poet made words visible and perceptible covertly, not by translating them into images, but by presenting words in unusual grammatical forms and syntactic juxtapositions. Such tactics made the word jump out at the reader. For example, Mayakovsky's placement of *slavoslovitsia* (to glorify) and *poslovitsia* (saying or proverb) near one another prompt the reader to disassemble the words according to their etymological meaning or, in Shklovsky's formulation, to see the image contained in them. The use of rare or incorrect grammatical forms in conjunction with paronomasia, such as in

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<sup>22</sup> Teige, "Modern Typography" in *Karel Teige 1900–1951: L'Enfant Terrible of the Czech Modernist Avant-Garde*, ed. Eric Dluhosch and Rostislav Švácha (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 103; Teige, "Slova, slova, slova," 2–3.

“*Nash bog beg*” (literally, “our god has run away”), prompts the reader to return to the words, examine them as form rather than content.<sup>23</sup>

Mayakovsky’s poetic strategy that emphasized the preservation of stress patterns of natural speech in poetry can also be seen as an attempt to make the word more visible.<sup>24</sup> While emphasis on natural stress patterns may seem to dissolve the word in everyday speech, with respect to conventions of poetic language, which in syllabo-tonic verse often violate stress, natural stress patterns make the word more perceptible.<sup>25</sup> And the visual side of the word is perhaps nowhere as clear as in Mayakovsky’s book cover designs, which assign words visual and spatial meaning (as in *Human Being*, for example), presenting them as a visual composition rather than a page to be read.

For Teige, who was primarily a visual artist, the word and image remained equally important throughout the 1920s. In regards to his innovations with the word specifically, his experiments in image poetry and typophoto can be interpreted as attempts to bring out the visual

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<sup>23</sup> In Russian there is only one letter difference between the word “god” (*bog*) and the non-existent form of the past tense “has run away” (*beg*). The correct form of the past perfective that is required by the sentence would be *sbezhal* or *ubezhal*. The difficulty of parsing this sentence is compounded by the fact that *beg* is a form that exists in Russian, but as a noun. In this way, Mayakovsky’s juxtaposition creates tension between what the word ought to do grammatically in a sentence (that is, act as a verb) and the form that is used (a noun). It is also possible to read this sentence as “run is our god” (*nash bog—beg*); however, prior grammatical constructions prompt us to read *beg* as a participial characterization of “god.” That is, the preceding line, *nash byk peg* (“our bull is piebald”), creates an expectation of grammatical parallelism. Mayakovsky, “Nash marsh” (Our march), in *Rzhanoe slovo. Revolutsionnaia khrestomatiia futuristov* (Petrograd: IMO, 1918), 37.

<sup>24</sup> In Jakobson’s formulation: “Маяковский, подписавший в 1912 г. прошумевшую декларацию освобождения поэтического слова, не освобождает слова от традиционной семантики и традиционной формы словообразования подобно Хлебникову, но он освобождает его от Прокрустова ложа ритмической инерции силлабо-тонического стиха, по своему переритмовывавшей слово. Самостоятельное ударение слова становится единственным неперменным мерилем стиха (поскольку счет слогов и заданный ударный ряд аннулируется) [...] Поэзия Маяковского есть поэзия выделенных слов по преимуществу” (“Mayakovsky, who in 1912 signed the famous declaration of the liberation of the word, did not liberate the word from traditional semantics or traditional forms of word-creation as Khlebnikov did, but he liberated it from the Procrustean bed of syllabo-tonic verse’s rhythmic inertia, which had re-rhythmatized the word in its own way. The independent stress pattern of a word becomes the only indispensable measure of verse (insofar as the syllable count and the given stress sequence are annulled) [...] Mayakovsky’s poetry is predominantly poetry of emphasized words”) (Roman Jakobson, *O cheshskom stikhe preimushchestvenno v sopostavlenii s russkim* [On Czech Verse Primarily in Comparison with Russian; 1923] [Providence: Brown UP, 1969; reprint], 102–3, 107).

<sup>25</sup> Defamiliarization, in this case, is directed at a reader who is familiar with poetic conventions.



side of the word, to make it appeal not simply to the cognitive apparatus, but also more directly, to the visual senses of the perceiver. In his image poetry, Teige posterizes and cinematizes the word by bringing it into a multimedia space. For example, the “film libretto” provided to “Departure for Cythera” helps the viewer see the words “BON VENT” not simply as a static painted image of language, but as an animated neon sign that gradually becomes illuminated and perceived before being apprehended by the viewer. As discussed in chapter 2, Teige differentiated the Poetist concept of image poetry from translations of poetry into the medium of painting. His rejection of the seemingly parallel experiments of Michel Seuphor and Piet Mondrian as inferior to Poetist creations makes it clear that in the Czech image poem the word is present as word, but one that has been liberated from invisibility and renewed through the multimedia body of the image poem.

Teige’s persistent engagement with the visual side of language is perhaps most clearly manifest in the multimedia book, *ABCs*, which did not simply replace the letter and the word with the image, but tried to transform them both. In the hybrid medium of typophoto, Teige saw the future life of the word and image that made use of their individual forms. As Teige repeatedly noted, he hoped that one day Poetist experimentation would change the face of practical communication in the world or at least point in the direction of productive change. In addition to Teige’s contribution to *ABCs*, Mayerová’s dance performance, which embodies the letters and the content Nezval attached to them in his poem, visualizes language in a physical way. The poses documented in the photographs of Mayerová not only bring the alphabet—and by extension, language—closer to gesture, which many believed was the original form of

language, but also to sport.<sup>26</sup> In *ABCs*, the photographs of Mayerová's performance prompt the reader to experiment with similar positions. In this sense, Mayerová's performance extends the visualization and materialization of language to the imagination and even body of the reader, who becomes a participant in the exercise.

The visualization of language that accompanies both Mayakovsky's and Teige's artistic experiments can likewise be seen as a response to a very specific vision of language renewal. Mayakovsky and Teige join countless other avant-garde artists who visualized and materialized the word. To Futurist handwriting, discussed in the introduction as an integral feature of meaning, one may add the materiality of Futurist books, which were often printed on cheap, rough, and recycled paper that made language present in a tactile way, along with the whole body of the book.<sup>27</sup> Apollinaire's calligrammes (both handwritten and typographically arranged) and Marinetti's typographical experiments can likewise be seen as responses to the crisis of language that tried to bring out the visual qualities of words.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, both the rhetoric of the crisis of language, as well as its specific formulation connected to the erasure of the original image of the word, guided avant-garde experimentation. In this sense, the discourse of the death and renewal of language can be said to be exceptionally productive for the avant-garde. At the same time, however, this discourse set up certain limitations on the artist and his works. As Shklovsky implicitly suggested in his essay, language was in a perpetual state of crisis. Crisis rhetoric binds the artist to the constant need for renewal, which necessitates a constant revolution of art and language. After Mayakovsky found

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<sup>26</sup> Teige cites the importance of gesture in his essay "Slova, slova, slova," which engages with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages* (1781), especially in connection to gesture as a visual form of communication (Teige, "Slova, slova, slova," 70–71).

<sup>27</sup> This experience of the physical-material side of language in Futurist books relied on the reader's defamiliarization from the expected format of a poetry book as an aesthetically pleasing or at least neutral object.

<sup>28</sup> For further examples and a more detailed exploration of the visual side of language, see Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word. Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909–1923* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994).

embodiment of the collective voice in *150,000,000*, toward the mid to late 1920s, he channeled his interests into editorial work for the journals *LEF* and *Novyi LEF*, which began to emphasize documentary art. Teige's search for an art form that would have a non-representational relation to reality was channeled into his interest in architecture as an art form that quite literally directed people's lives by guiding their movements in space (toward a more productive workflow and a more enjoyable personal life, in his interpretation). At the same time, Teige grew closer to Surrealism, which tried to communicate the less visible and therefore higher "truths" of the unconscious.

Soon, however, this constant need for renewal, set up by a particular understanding of language as something that petrifies, atrophies, and dies, the need for the permanent revolution in art came to a screeching crash against the historical circumstances in which Mayakovsky and Teige found themselves. In the late 1920s, Mayakovsky grew increasingly dissatisfied with the role allotted to him in the new Soviet state that shifted attention from the radical experimentation of the early 1920s to stabilizing and legitimizing the status quo. In this context, Mayakovsky's art became "incomprehensible" to the masses, and he experienced severe critical attacks on his works not only from readers, but also from the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, which he joined shortly before his death in 1930. Teige's search for new artistic language and continuous artistic revolution throughout the 1920s and 1930s was labeled decadent, and by the 1950s the artist was publically denounced in a press smear campaign in the Communist Czechoslovakian press. The permanent linguistic revolution, required by the rhetoric of the continuous cycle of death and renewal, became unsustainable and incompatible with the new political reality in which these artists found themselves.

But beyond historical circumstances outside of any concrete individual's control, the perception of language as an entity subject to perpetual death and renewal endowed language with an inherent inadequacy. Language was forever bound to be out of step with the desire for expression, binding us to misunderstanding. Thus, there was a kind of tension between the intended effect of renewal, which advocated greater respect for the verbal medium, and the result, which implied the permanent inadequacy of language. The average language user was implicitly placed in a weak subject position, where his or her individual consciousness was powerless to resist the petrification and death of language.

In the 1910s and 1920s, the model of language as something that dies and has to be renewed permeated the work of the theoretical and artistic avant-garde in Russia and Czechoslovakia and informed their understanding of the broader crisis of representation. As suggested in the introductory chapter, this formulation of the language crisis continued to shape the philosophical position of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism. By way of concluding, I would like to point to a counter narrative to this dominant understanding of the perpetual death and resurrection of language. In the 1920s and 1930s, an alternative view of language was developed in the work of the Bakhtin Circle, which presented a vision of language as a kind of limitless collective repository of past meanings that extended beyond any individual consciousness. Language evolved and accumulated meanings; it did not exclude or forget. Moreover, by redefining the process of signification, splitting it into denotative meaning (*znachenie*) and embodied meaning of a particular speech act (*smysl*), the Bakhtin Circle restored to the individual the lost power to create meaning even within inherited language that one was powerless to choose. The solution to the crisis of language was deceptively simple: language, the members of the Bakhtin Circle suggested, was not dead; consequently, there is no need to renew

it. This vision, like the death and resurrection of language, is mere metaphor for something that cannot be described outside of figurative language. Nevertheless, figurations, as I have suggested, can become powerful tools for modeling alternative realities and producing real cognitive change, even if they are not (yet) aligned with the present, existing reality. Although less conducive to the type of avant-garde artistic experimentation that has produced some of the most compelling artworks of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this vision of language is perhaps more egalitarian, insofar as it privileges the language user over the (avant-garde) artist.

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