Device: The Objects of Russian and American Avant-Garde Poetry, 1905-1945

The Harvard community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citable link</td>
<td><a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:41142040">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:41142040</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms of Use</td>
<td>This article was downloaded from Harvard University’s DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

Many histories of the relationship between Russian and American lyric poetry in the twentieth century begin with four, California-based Language poets’ 1989 journey to Leningrad for a conference with their Russian contemporaries. When they arrived, these writers—Lyn Hejinian, Barrett Watten, Michael Davidson, and Ron Silliman—found the innovations of the Russian Formalists and Futurists reflected in their Russian contemporaries’ treatment of the poem itself as an object. This dissertation offers the prehistory of that cross-cultural encounter, from the pre-revolutionary moment of Futurism to the rise of Stalinism and the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. It recounts the history of Russian and American avant-garde poetry in the twentieth century as the story of a shared idea: namely, that the material object offered a conceptual model or ideal for the poem.

The project takes the form of a series of comparative case studies, detailing the often-parallel histories of Russian and American poets’ relationships to this idea. It discusses the work of Gertrude Stein, Velimir Khlebnikov, William Carlos Williams, Vladimir Mayakovsky, George Oppen, and Aleksandr Vvedensky. It argues that the notion of the poem as an object unites these poets, and their respective poetic traditions, and serves to illuminate their shared aesthetic, philosophical, and political concerns over the course of the last century.
**Table of Contents**

Acknowledgments v

Introduction

  Objects and Objections 1

Chapter I

  The Objects of Abstraction:
  Velimir Khlebnikov and Gertrude Stein 25

Chapter II

  Between Montage and Monument:
  William Carlos Williams, Vladimir Mayakovsky,
  and Poetry’s Revolutionary Objects 97

Chapter III

  The Ruins of the Everyday:
  George Oppen and Aleksandr Vvedensky 183

Conclusion

  Beyond the Object 258

Appendix to Chapter II 272

Works Cited 307
Acknowledgments

A dissertation is never quite finished, even when it enters the annals of the registrar’s office or the online database. My work on the topics discussed here is ongoing, and I owe much of the progress I have made on that work thus far to the support, insight, and care of others.

I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee first and foremost. Steph Burt offered to advise my dissertation all the way back in my second year and has been open to all the directions the project has taken, even while holding me to an uncompromising intellectual standard. Peter Sacks generously joined my committee midway through, bringing his incredible critical acumen to bear on these pages while offering generous encouragement, ensuring that this process was not merely awful, but cheerful. Lastly, although I came to her from a different department with little besides my enthusiasm, Stephanie Sandler took me on as her advisee and has been a tireless interlocutor for this project. Her comments have kept me honest and kept me hopeful. As both teacher and scholar, she has modeled for me an approach to cross-cultural, cross-linguistic literary scholarship that I aim to continue beyond these walls.

Many other scholars and colleagues helped to shape this project in its earlier stages, including the members of the Harvard American Literature Colloquium, the Harvard Slavic Colloquium, the Yale Slavic Colloquium, and the attendees of multiple conferences, here and abroad. Particular thanks are due to the Slavicists who have invited me into the fold, including Katerina Clark, Daria Khitrova, Marijeta Bozovic, Molly Brunson, Geoff Cebula, Ania Aizman, Bela Shayevich, and the incomparable Ainsley Morse. In less formal contexts, several friends have offered advice and perspective, including Elizabeth Plantan, Elizabeth Metzger, Calista McRae, David Nee, and Elizabeth Weckhurst. Finally, throughout the past five years, Jorie Graham has exerted a singular influence over my work. She has taught me to write for my own best reader—a role which she herself has often served. Thanks to her, I will never write, or read, the same way again.

Several institutions have also made this project possible, including the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, the Dexter Fund of the Harvard English Department, and several travel grants from Harvard that have allowed me to attend conferences in both Russia and the U.S. As institutions depend upon their administrators, so, too, has my graduate career depended on the support of Gwen Urdang-Brown, Case Kerns, Sol Kim-Bentley, and others in the English Department offices.

This dissertation is dedicated to several people, two of whom will not read it. The first is Matthew, my true north—the pole towards which my compass of what matters is ever re-orienting itself. The second is Selma, who always said of the dissertation, “Write it today, and turn it in tomorrow.” She wanted to be here for this. My life—and most of what I have done with it—I owe to my parents. Thank you for keeping a huge dictionary in our kitchen, and for pointing to it whenever I asked what a word meant. Thank you for your love. And lastly, to my most brilliant, generous, relentless reader, Marta Figlerowicz. Your infernal optimism has kept this thing going. I could not have done it without you.
Introduction: Objects and Objections

What is an object? The ambiguities inherent in this seemingly most concrete and empirical of entities gave rise to many of the twentieth century’s most politically and aesthetically revolutionary works of art. To writers in the first half of the last century, the object seems to have been both increasingly compelling and increasingly suspect, the more closely they scrutinized it as a category. Were objects always concrete, or could they also be abstract? Were objects generic, particular, or some combination of both? Could one categorize objects on the basis of their relative functionality or uselessness? And was there a way to talk about objects’ autonomy that did not subjugate them to the laws and limits of human perception? There were, as I hope to show, serious questions at the heart of the often playful approach that many poets of the avant-garde took to these matters. As a concept, the material object is tantalizingly referential and yet weirdly immaterial; considering that objects’ primary characteristic is (to borrow a phrase of George Oppen’s) “that they are there,” objects, as a general category of phenomena, are paradoxically hard to lay one’s hands on. These paradoxes gave rise to aesthetic developments that are strikingly analogous, and often aesthetically congruent, in two cultures which the past century has tended to brand as opposites and rivals in all things: Russia and the United States.

The modernist fascination with objects is a product of a number of political, economic, social, and technological factors that are not unique to the United States and Russia but that took on a special salience—and some very particular forms—in the art and literature of those countries, as compared with those of Western Europe. This study focuses on Russian and American writers who tend to be seen as members, or descendants, of the avant-garde. Although some overlap
obviously exists between the categories of “modernist” and “avant-garde,” for the purposes of this project, I treat the former as primarily a historical category, whereas the latter refers to writers and artists within the modernist period (broadly construed) who shared certain aesthetic and ideological concerns and commitments, whether they produced art in Russia or in the West. In arguing that the work of the various writers discussed here was shaped by dialectical thinking, this project builds on Peter Bürger’s seminal *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), in which “the turning point from Aestheticism to the avant-garde is determined by the extent to which art comprehended the mode in which it functioned in bourgeois society, [i.e.] its own social status. The historical avant-garde…was the first movement in art history that turned against the institution ‘art’ and the mode in which [art’s] autonomy functions.”¹ It also contributes to a growing body of scholarship on the Western avant-garde across media (as in the work of Andreas Huyssen, Marjorie Perloff, and Daniel Albright),² and on the Russian avant-garde in relation to other cultural formations (as in the work of Jacob Edmond and Steven Lee).³ The historical period in question, for the sake of this study, runs from the early careers of writers in the first avant-garde generation (circa 1905) to the start of the Second World War and including, in the American context, the art works of its immediate aftermath. I hope to show how the avant-garde’s object-focused aesthetic arose out of unusual (and strikingly analogous) conditions in Russia and the U.S., and gave rise to similar stylistic innovations in poetry, even as profound cultural and linguistic differences ensured that

those innovations would have very different effects and serve divergent (or even opposed) socio-political purposes in the two countries across this period and beyond.

Across a broad range of contexts, these debates—about what material objects are, how to represent them, and what their relationship is to both objects of art and human subjects—engaged with long-standing philosophical questions about the nature of language and perception. Could the products of verbal art in general, and poems in particular, be considered objects—and, if so, what kinds of objects could they be? At the heart of these questions lay a concern over whether language was primarily a concrete entity or an abstract phenomenon, a product or a process. The terms of the debates into which these poets sought to intervene were often borrowed or adapted from the visual arts. This is not surprising, given how closely the social circles of the avant-garde’s visual artists and writers were intertwined; it does, however, influence the changing forms that these concepts (visual, verbal, concrete, abstract) take in the early twentieth century.

Because of the unique status of language vis-à-vis these theoretical categories—not to mention language’s role in politics and the social realm—makers of verbal art encountered distinctive possibilities and challenges. As W. H. Auden pointed out in an essay entitled “Writing,”

> It is both the glory and the shame of poetry that its medium is not its private property, that a poet cannot invent his words and that words are products, not of nature, but of a human society which uses them for a thousand different purposes. In modern societies where language is continually being debased and reduced to nonspeech, the poet is in constant danger of having his ear corrupted, a danger to which the painter and the composer, whose media are their private property, are not exposed. On the other hand he is more protected than they from another modern peril; that of solipsist subjectivity; however esoteric a poem may be,…a purely private verbal world is not possible.4

Language in general, and verbal art in particular, thus has a fraught and sometimes counter-intuitive relationship to the idea of the object in this period. I hope to show how this relationship occasioned a new set of questions for poetry in particular, which is at once the most “object-like”

---

form of language and the one most often aligned with the individual “voice” or scale of experience. This makes the poem a complex and generative testing-ground for the possibilities and challenges of an object-focused aesthetic approach to language.

This project takes the form of a series of comparative case studies, whose aim is to delineate the often parallel, at times meaningfully divergent histories of Russian and American modernist poets’ changing relationship to the idea of the object. I see the object as, paradoxically, one of the most spectral and mercurial concepts in the literature of early-twentieth-century capitalism and communism alike. Writers on both sides of the Iron Curtain derived great argumentative efficacy from the malleability of this concept, which allowed them to subsume any number of ideological concerns within an apparently self-contained, given, “objective” device. The very nebulousness of the idea of the object made it adaptable and capacious enough to fulfill the requirements of two very different—and rapidly changing—cultural milieux. In fact, the non-scientific character of this scientific-sounding label is a paradoxical affordance for those artists and thinkers whom it drove to articulate more precisely what they sought from art in aesthetic, social, and political terms. Despite its apparent self-containment, the object is always, I argue, a model of relationality. It offers a means of envisioning the mutual relations of governments and landscapes, individuals and groups, things and words. Furthermore, it alerts these thinkers to the importance of time and space, scale and perspective, in any attempt to picture these relationships or represent them to others. The innovation that all of the avant-garde poets discussed here share consists in moving beyond the Symbolist, Acmeist, or Imagist ideal of the poem as a self-contained object and towards an approach to the poem as a system of object interactions. This is an alternative history of the avant-garde in poetry: a story of these artists’ development of, and experimentation with, poetry’s capacity to objectify or model larger-scale systems of real-world relations.
The concept of the object has a long philosophical prehistory—from Plato and Aristotle to Leibniz, Kant, and Hegel—common to both Russian and American thought. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, each culture had given rise to its own, indigenous strains of Romanticism that combined empiricist-influenced accounts of nature and the material world with more spiritual, Christian accounts of the relationship between man and the universe. In both contexts, the object-aesthetic that found its expression in art of the first decades of the twentieth century was a successor to the materialism and social-reformist goals of such writers as Nikolai Chernyshevsky (in the Russian context) and Ralph Waldo Emerson (in the American context). The subsequent, modernist-era ways of talking about objects, perception, and language in both cultures suggest a set of common concerns that had ripened in separate, but surprisingly parallel, intellectual milieux. The object can offer a focal point for the common sources of stylistic developments in Russian and American poetry of this past century, and can also make the reasons for their divergences clearer. In the most basic terms, I hope to suggest that these poets’ focus on the nature of the object did not merely respond to a shared history of this concept, but altered it and galvanized new perspectives on it that would change the history of poetry in both Russia and the West.

No history of the object-aesthetic in modernist poetry would be complete, of course, without a discussion of poetry’s relationship to Marxism in the first half of the twentieth century. All of the poets discussed here are indebted to the basic tenets of Marxism, whether they treat them as indirect influence, underlying structural principle, or points of resistance. At the same time, I would argue that their focus on the material object is not reducible to either a Marxist world view

or a rejection of that view. These poets’ and movements’ relationships to dialectical materialism at different points in their development can provide clues for how we should understand their interest in the poem-as-object; however, they looked with changing and ambivalent attitudes upon what Marxism had to offer their art. In what ways, it asks, did (or does) Marxist materialism serve as fertile ideological ground for aesthetic production? At what point(s) does it come into conflict with other aesthetic aims, or lose its salience— and why?  

Like the authors it studies, this dissertation takes an ambivalent view of Marxist theory’s applicability to, and affordances for, poetry. It attempts to chart a middle way between the rejection or disregard for its premises among many American scholars of twentieth-century poetry and the uncritical, even forced, embrace of its tenets among their Russian counterparts. For the American poets I discuss, Marxism offers as a thought-experiment, a threat, a promise—at any rate, an an alternative to the Western, capitalist world system. For their Russian contemporaries, in contrast, it is the basis and governing structural principle of the society in which they live. What avant-garde poets in both contexts share is a sense of dialectical materialism as a source of upheaval, which changes the engaged citizen’s relationship to objects and to the social function of art. However, a symptomatic Marxist reading of these different groups and generations of poets would be irresponsible, in part because they are not working with a singular, common understanding of Marxism. The only responsible method, then, seems to be to treat Marxism’s utility for poetry much as the poets do: as an open question. This is especially true given that the material object

---

6 There are numerous studies of the uneasy relationship between Marxism and aesthetics outside of Russia; one example is Eugene Lunn’s Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984). A more recent study that reinterprets Kant’s aesthetic theories through a Marxist lens is Michael Wayne’s Red Kant: Aesthetics, Marxism, and the Third Critique (London, Bloomsbury, 2014).

7 As Daniel Aaron has shown, communism as a mode of resistance to dominant American ideologies was not restricted to the genre of poetry alone, nor to those writers who identified as Party members themselves. See Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left. New York: Avon Books, 1961.
served different purposes as a concept in Russian and American thought over the course of the historical span addressed in this study. The roles played by material objects in their respective societies changed over time, leading to new and increasingly divergent ways of talking about them.

From about 1910 onward, however, even when they engage indirectly or not at all with the terms and concepts of Marxism, all of the writers discussed here think about objects dialectically. They are committed to understanding their own aesthetic production as part of a system of relations in which different forces and objects (what Bruno Latour, much later, would call “actants”) influence each other. Were a utopian reconciliation of subject and objects to take place, this kind of dialectical thinking would no longer be necessary. As Kołakowski points out, this is a dream that both Marx and many of the object-focused poets borrowed from Romanticism, however vocal their resistance to some of its other premises:

Marx’s basic principle is that all mediation between the individual and mankind will cease to exist. This applies to all constructions, rational or irrational, that interpose themselves between the individual and his fellows, such as nationality, the state, and law. The individual will voluntarily identify himself with the community,… the sources of conflict will disappear. The removal of mediating forms does not mean the destruction of individuality— on the contrary. As in the Romantic view, the restoration of organic links will at the same time restore the authenticity of personal life.

In Douglas Mao’s account, modernist writers seem to both believe in and strive for a transcendence of such dialectical oppositions by means of the art-object itself. Their conundrum was that, in their “struggle against the mass-produced commodity on behalf of the handcrafted thing”—which Mao adds, “can certainly be read as an active effort on behalf of [a] kind of utopia”—the very ideal of the object, as a thing “in its unviolated integrity,…beyond ideology and

---

9 Leszek Kolakowski, Main Currents of Marxism, trans. P. S. Falla. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978; 2005, p. 336. Hereafter cited as MCM. Kolakowski is quick to add that Marx does not share the Romantic fantasy of an amnesiac retreat into a pre-industrial Arcadia, but advocates for technical progress, so that society will perfect its reign over nature and create conditions in which modern man can live in harmony with his environment and with others. See MCM 337.
interest,” seemed an impossible one for the work of art. “The problem,” Mao writes, “is that as something inevitably marked by the mind of its maker…, the work of art, even more than the commodity generated by market forces, must appear at last as a spot or stain of consciousness on the world beyond ideology, a subject-object hybrid (as in Hegel) that infiltrates and compromises the last preserve of radical alterity” (Mao, SO 11).

In contrast, rather than lamenting the “fallenness” of the art object from some autonomous chain of being or trying to infuse it with a phantasmic sense of a lost totality, the works of the poets discussed here suggest that this utopian reconciliation of the individual with the world has not yet taken place—and indeed, it might not ever occur. Moreover, as the twentieth century goes on, the poets surveyed here seem less and less to believe in such reconciliation, or to think that the poem could be its vehicle. Thus, far from striving to present their poems as completely autonomous objects, free of subjective interference, these poets often model the interference or hybridity that Mao describes as a “stain” on autonomous art. The poets I study diagram the relationship between production and reception, process and product, parts and whole. They dramatize the gap between subject and object through the interpellation of the art work’s labor and materials into the work itself. I would argue that they resist reductively Marxian analyses by virtue of their ambivalence towards the system’s abstract totality on the one hand and the object’s concrete singularity on the other. Instead, one can see successive generations of avant-garde poets moving beyond the (Hegel-inspired, Marx-approved) goal of a total synthesis between subject and object, and towards a more Adornian (and ultimately deconstructive) view of art as a negative dialectic that places both subject and object within a network of unreconciled difference.10

Thus, while I share Mao’s sense that the commodity serves as the central figure to which artists of the modernist period circle back again and again, I claim that these artists found the boundaries between the sublimely “unviolated” object of art and “the commodity generated by market forces” to be far more permeable and context-dependent than his study suggests. The making of art works (whether “handcrafted” or not) does not preclude their commodification; more to the point, the materials and processes that go into such art works might not distinguish them in any firm way from commodities from the start. The very ideal of the self-contained, autonomous object whose materials and processes of production are subsumed invisibly within it seems to partake—whether consciously or not—of the commodity ethos. Kolakowski summarizes the dangerous implications of a commodity-centered world view as follows:

Commodity fetishism, then, is the inability of human beings to see their own products for what they are, and their unwilling consent to be enslaved by human power instead of wielding it. Fetishism contains in embryo all other forms of alienation—the autonomy of political institutions which turn into instruments of oppression, the autonomy of creations of the human brain in the shape of religious fantasies; in short, the whole sum of man’s enslavement to his own works. (MCM 227)

It would be inaccurate and simplistic to claim that all writers and artists of the avant-garde were subverting the commodity-status of the work of art in order to resist alienation and oppression. However, what the commodity paradigm makes clear is a more general ambiguity surrounding the myth of the “concrete,” “material” object. I argue that one reason why these poets so vehemently demanded a new art was because the category of the object itself had been thrown into question. Different categories of object—the natural and the man-made, the concrete and the abstract, the aesthetic and the functional, the commodity and the work of art—no longer seemed as distinct from one another as earlier thinkers had assumed. In both the Russian and American contexts, these writers’ newly dialectical approaches to their medium stem from a sense that their social, political, and artistic agency require a clearer understanding of what the object is in general—and, more specifically, what kind of object a poem is. These questions led them to reject
many of the nineteenth century’s assumptions about poetry and art, and to think more rigorously about how their work related to the political and socio-economic realities of new era. One thing their poems strive to come to terms with, then, is the uneasy closeness of the art-work and the commodity, and the questions that that closeness raises about artistic work as compared with other kinds of labor.

In the case of the commodity and the work of art alike, the production process involves transforming a set of materials with objective properties (e.g., paint, canvas, wood) into “something material yet transcendent” [ein sinnliches übersinnliches Ding]. The art-works of the avant-garde tend to model the relations between the elements and processes that composed them so as to suggest that something happens to the material and formal qualities of objects when they are put into relation with one another within the shared space of a page, stage, or canvas—something not entirely within the artist’s control. It is not possible to “read” the intentions or ideology that went into the art object’s production merely by considering the relations of its parts, any more than the value of a commodity (say, a coat) can be embodied by a certain quantity or type of cloth, a certain cut, stitching, and number of buttons. Thus, Marx’s claim about the commodity, whose value is not “an innate property” but “is purely social in character,” could also apply to the work of art. Like last season’s designer coat or political campaign posters for a defeated candidate, art objects can gain or lose their salience due to factors beyond their purview. Once imaginatively and effortfully transformed into “art,” circumstances may even demote them to the status of mere raw material (wool, canvas, wood) once again.

These poets’ dialectical approach to the processes and products, construction and reception, of their works ensures that their texts do not merely achieve their form through juxtaposition and

construction; they foreground or expose those processes, to such an extent that the constructed
nature of the poem often becomes its dominant quality. This kind of procedure is obviously at odds
with the aim that Mao ascribes to that bracket of modernist writers who thought that “if to
contemplate the object in its unviolated integrity is to catch a glimpse of a serenity beyond
ideology and interest, then to produce objects that inspire this kind of revelation might be to bring
the world closer to utopia not just as possibility but as reality” (Mao, SO 11). Nor are these authors’
methods those of Dadaism, although, as Benjamin points out, Dada furnishes a helpful parallel:

The Dadaists attached much less importance to the sales value of their work than to its uselessness for
contemplative immersion. The studied degradation of their material was not the least of their means to
achieve this uselessness. Their poems are “word salad” containing obscenities and every imaginable waste
product of language. The same is true of their paintings, on which they mounted buttons and tickets. What
they intended and that she was a relentless destruction of the aura of their creations, which they branded as
reproductions with the very means of production.¹²

In contrast to the Dadaists, the poets discussed in this study take a more constructive, more
earnest approach to the “reproduced” language they employ, even when they “brand” it as
composite or repurposed. For them, the status of language as recycled is not so different from the
status of the newspaper clipping in a cubist collage; if anything, it discloses the material and labor
that went into its production, rather than concealing them as a commodity would.

For all of the poets I discuss, one aim of “baring the device”¹³ in this way is to delineate more
clearly the distinction between the process of artistic creation and that of other, more “alienated”
or exploitative labor processes, such as factory work. These writers intuited that all human labor
is, in some sense, similar in its ability to combine materials and thereby turn things into other
things. This is equally true in the case of a sculptor, who carves a slab of marble into a relief on
the wall of a temple, as in the case of a weaver, who uses a loom to spin raw cotton into cloth. One

could even argue that the specifically human aspect of that labor is not central to how it operates in the production process. From the perspective of a market in which values are determined and traded, the transformative “labor” of the loom is not categorically different from that of the weaver.\textsuperscript{14} Another way, then, of thinking about the art of the avant-garde is that it asks whether there can be any hard and fast difference between the way in which a mass of cotton becomes a rug and the way in which the form of bicycle handlebars and a saddle becomes the image of a bull on a Picasso canvas—or the way in which, in Mayakovskv’s “But could you?” [«А вы могли бы?»], sonic parallelism and metaphor transform a plate of aspic [блюдо студня] into the “slanting cheekbones of the ocean” [косые скулы океана]. The fact that these transformations in the realms of art and industry are not only produced by analogous labor processes but subject to similarly variable determinations of value suggests that the difference between subject and object, person and thing, may be less inherent than relational.

This dissertation suggests, then, that poets of both the Russian and American avant-gardes were motivated by a sense that there was no longer a firm, empirically provable distinction across all contexts between human subjects and material objects. The rise of capitalism, the development of new technologies of mass production and mass war, increasing secularism, industrialization, exploitation, and political repression were some of the factors that made a clearer understanding of objects seem like a necessary step in an understanding of who, or what, got to be a subject. Marx is therefore a canny precursor to many of their inquiries, whether or not they sympathized with his aims. Marx writes in \textit{Wage Labour and Capital}, “A negro is a negro; he only becomes a slave in

\textsuperscript{14} These questions have somewhat different, and arguably even greater, implications in our current historical moment, when digital technologies have led not only to the mechanization of formerly human labor but also to a category of digital “labor” (for lack of a better term) that computers can accomplish and human minds cannot. The new digital networks that such technologies have created are one subject of the recent field of object-oriented ontology. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost’s edited collection, \textit{New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) provides an excellent overview of the field.
certain relationships. A cotton-spinning jenny is a machine for spinning cotton; it becomes capital only in certain relationships. Torn from these relationships it is no more capital than gold in itself is money, or sugar the price of sugar.”¹⁵ The poets discussed here run the gamut from card-carrying Communists (in the cases of Mayakovsky and George Oppen) to wealthy, bourgeois expatriates (in the case of Gertrude Stein), but all of them, I argue, turn to poetry for ways of envisioning the dialectical relations between subjects and objects. T. S. Eliot’s famous claim that the desire for poetry to be “an escape from personality” is premised on “having a] personality” in the first place might suggest to us that, more often than not, the root of the modernists’ insistence on “objectivity” or “impersonality” as aesthetic virtues—and on an object-focused art as those values’ ideal instantiation—was a concern for what the modern subject was or could become.

In the field of literary studies (which is, after all, one of the so-called “humanities”), it has been customary until recently to premise generalizations about the verbal arts on an abstract, universal notion of the “human” or the “person,” which obviates the need to raise such questions as how the labor of the poet is different from that of, say, a cotton-spinning jenny. Even when they discuss poets under the influence of post-structuralism and other theories that would throw the category of the subject into question, most literary critics cannot think of the poem except as an utterance in that singularly human medium, language, that has its source in a particular person. “Personhood” is the central term in Oren Izenberg’s recent book on “poetry and the ground of social life,” in which he writes,

A radical poetics…is not radical for its political commitments but for its pre-political or ontological commitments. The attempt to make the person appear anew as a value-bearing fact—as the necessary ground of social life—is a conceptual precursor to any effective politics, to any subsequent account of justice. In place of the myriad pleasures—aesthetic, intellectual, and moral—of the poem, the poet of “poetry” offers a drama in which the pleasures of object creation or perception…or of the world, all fall away, leaving in their

¹⁵ Karl Marx, *Wage Labour and Capital*, III, quoted in in *MCM* 261. The structural parallel in Marx’s claim between a person (a slave) and a machine (a spinning jenny) is, in itself, a discomfiting argument for the slippage between subjects and objects in an industrialized society.
place something else;…an ontological confidence in the presence of other minds, in the meaning of being numerous.¹⁶

It is obvious why what Izenberg calls “foundational rather than relational concepts of personhood” (Izenberg 22) are desirable for the codification of so-called human rights, the prevention of abuse and exclusion from valued categories of life, and so on. However, I would argue that the dialectical tension in the work of the poets discussed here arises precisely because they do not espouse a stable, consistent, and morally inflexible notion of personhood, either as individuals or as a group. As the century goes on, the poets of the avant-garde increasingly understand any subject-position in terms of its contextual specificity and its relatedness to other actants in its environment. (The relational nature of their thinking aligns it with— and, in some cases, anticipates—the preoccupations and strategies of more contemporary philosophy, from phenomenology to deconstruction to object-oriented ontology.) Moreover, I would suggest that the comparative nature of this study points to one reason for these poets’ difficulty settling on a fixed, trans-historical subject: ironically, the stablest and most universal notions of “personhood” or “the individual” often arise in monolingual and (racially, ethnically, culturally) homogeneous contexts.¹⁷ In contrast, as I hope to show, the notion of the material object invoked by poets in both Russia and the United States in the first half of the twentieth century changes over time but is often remarkably similar across these cultural and linguistic borders.

The changing relationship between Russia and the U.S. from the start of the Soviet period until our own, tumultuous times is one of the most storied geo-political rivalries in history. However, the development of these two countries’ aesthetic categories, concerns, and strategies in

¹⁷ This is one of the issues Jacob Edmond raises about the work of Charles Bernstein and the world-literature-focused Language poets more broadly in his book A Common Strangeness (op. cit.), pp. 164-192.
this period is seldom a part of that story. Many histories of the avant-garde in particular look to Western Europe as the source and center of the cultural formations, such as Cubism, Futurism, Structuralism, that would influence the trajectory of the new century’s art. Indeed, several of the same factors that counterpose both nations against Western Europe—as the standard-bearer of nineteenth-century “progress” and “civilization”—help give rise to the two countries’ parallel aesthetic innovations and occasion their comparable theoretical investments in the material object. The two nations’ large geographical size, apparent geo-political marginality (vis-à-vis European centers of power), rapid industrialization, and the coexistence of their imperial ambitions with a shared hatred of monarchical rule, meant that the search for a national, modern art arose out of analogous needs in both cultures.

The stakes of a distinctive, robust, and contemporary national poetry were particularly high for Russia and the United States because both had long been seen, from a European perspective, as cultural backwaters whose vast natural and industrial wealth had not translated into any “advanced” cultural production. The poets of the pre-World War II period recognized that their aims would require them to prove that Russian and English—not British English, but American English—were historically rich and capacious literary languages.

As outsiders to the European capitals of London, Paris, Vienna, and Berlin, where accounts of the avant-garde so often begin, Russian and American authors entered the twentieth century with strong, entrenched national identities but relatively young literary traditions. In some sense, these

---

18 And yet, visitors to the U.S. in its early phase of industrialization extolled its potential in phrases reminiscent of later (and differently-motivated) calls to Soviet industrial development. See, for instance, Alexis de Tocqueville: “It is impossible to pretend that the English have not won a huge dominance over all the other European races in the New World. They are much superior in civilization, industry, and power. Provided that they see in front of them only empty or sparsely inhabited land,…they will expand endlessly. They will not halt at boundaries drawn up by treaty but will overflow such imaginary dikes in every direction. What helps this rapid progress of the English race even more wonderfully is its geographical position in the New World.” Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* [1840]. Trans. Gerald Bevan. New York: Penguin Classics, 2003, p. 481.
writers had less to build on than their Western European contemporaries, but they also had less to destroy. Insofar as disdain for the “old” art was the engine of the new, much of the art to be “thrown off the steamship of modernity”\textsuperscript{19} were the rotten fruits of Western Europe, with its sentimental Romanticism, Victorian moralizing, fatalistic Bible-thumping or aestheticist decadence. Thus, writers like Velimir Khlebnikov and William Carlos Williams were not in the position of needing to reject everything, as the Dadaists were; they had the option of picking and choosing whichever elements of the Western European past best served their purposes. As Hugh Kenner’s well-known book on American modernist poetry suggests, the poetic culture of the U.S., like that of Russia, was “a homemade world,” which celebrated the homespun quality of its solutions to the new century’s aesthetic conundrums, in opposition to the more widely publicized interventions of their Western European counterparts.\textsuperscript{20} The question of what a poem needed to be (or, indeed, \textit{could} be) was therefore less of a negation for them than it was a constructive principle. At a distance from the burden of Europe’s entrenched aesthetic traditions, they were poised to respond to the new century’s leaps and upheavals with originality and creative risk.

Several underlying premises of this project distinguish it from existing scholarship on poetry of the modernist period in both the American and Russian contexts. One of the propositions that aligns it with many studies of the avant-garde more generally is that any account of the object-aesthetic in modernism should be transnational and cross-linguistic in scope. A comparative approach is necessary to reflect the increasingly globalized nature of the world as these artists knew it, and to show the salience of their preoccupations across national and linguistic borders. Likewise, as demonstrated by other studies of the avant-garde from authors such as Peter Bürger,

Rosalind Krauss, Andreas Huyssen, and Lisa Siraganian, any artificial separation of one artistic discipline or medium from the others would only impoverish one’s understanding of an era whose innovations were motivated and defined by cross-disciplinary engagement. While the current study does not aim to intervene into discussions about non-literary art forms of the avant-garde, it does draw upon the many primary and secondary sources that document the influential ties between poetry and the visual and performance arts in this period. It is largely because of the circulation of non-language-based art forms across national boundaries that the cultural sea change beginning, in Virginia Woolf’s estimation, “in or around December 1910” gave rise to a cross-cultural aesthetics of the object, and to so many profoundly influential literary works indebted to it.21

A second assumption of this project, then, is that even when a concept’s principal means of exchange is through language— as in the case of our discussion of the poetic “object”—that concept may persist in similar instantiations and may play congruent roles in different cultures, despite the fact that the words used for it are (of course) not the same. Because this project is itself written in English, its central term (“object”) is distinct from the two words most often used to denote this concept in Russian, «предмет» (which can also, in some contexts, signify “subject”), and «вещь» (“thing”), a word whose shifting degrees of concreteness and abstraction are fully accounted for in Il’ia Kukui’s magisterial book on this topic.22 This project aims to show that common ground between the Russophone and Anglophone histories of this concept in the early twentieth century does, nevertheless, exist— even if revealing it will require us to tread lightly around cultural and semantic fissures. By constraining its scope to a period of both unprecedented emphasis on “objects” in the two cultures and unprecedented openness between them, the

dissertation aims to highlight the extent of the overlap between Russian and American poets’ fascination with the poem as object, without eliding the differences between them.

This project’s methodology aligns it, in some ways, with the trend towards an increasing acknowledgement in Western literary studies of the non-Western and post-colonial canons of so-called “world literature”; at the same time, it seeks to model an alternative to the rigid application of Western theories and methods of literary analysis to texts which, historically, have been excluded from such scholarly attentions. This supposedly “comparative” work often distorts its object of study in much the way that William Carlos Williams once claimed the sonnet form did to American life as he knew it: “Forcing twentieth-century America into a sonnet—gosh, how I hate sonnets—is like putting a crab into a square box. You've got to cut his legs off to make him fit. When you get through you don't have a crab anymore.” Truly comparative scholarship, in contrast, is as open to applying “foreign” theories or methodologies to “local” texts as it is to reading texts from the rest of the world through an American or Western European critical lens. In the case of Russian and American poetry in the early twentieth century, this comparative approach highlights how many of the breakthroughs of American and Western European literature and theory were anticipated by, or even indebted to, the thinkers of the Russian avant-garde.

Even within a comparative framework, the attempt to rethink the concept of the object by means of poetry, as opposed to other, more clearly “material” kinds of art, may strike one as counter-intuitive. Language often suggests a speaker—as opposed, say, to works of architecture,

---


which testify to collective effort over a long period of time but do not often emphasize an individual architect’s self-expression—and it includes within it the representational distance between signifiers and signifieds, whereas works of minimalist sculpture, for instance, may seem to be simply there. Instances of verbal art tend to present as less materially solid, immediate, and “objective” than works of plastic art, such as sculpture or even painting. Does this mean, as multiple theorists have claimed, that the verbal arts are unfit to achieve the object-ideal that so many artists of this period invoked? On the contrary, several aspects of verbal art make it ideal for socio-political interventions of a kind that the plastic arts find it hard to accomplish.

One such quality is the poem’s relative transferability across contexts. In the early twentieth century, the poem’s lines can be carried in the mind, on a slip of paper in a pocket, between the covers of a pamphlet or book. As long as the reader or listener’s language skills permit, the poem can find effective transmission on the radio or in the newspaper, even across national borders. The written word is a concrete example of a broader culture or national identity, and is therefore, on some level, “about” that cultural perspective, even when its subject is something entirely different. As with all texts, poetry’s potentialities for nation-building are linked to both the specificity of the medium (poems are always written in a particular language) and to the reproducibility of the form. Nelson Goodman’s distinction between the allographic and autographic arts can shed a clear light on this. Unlike the painting, whose authenticity depends upon the fact that a given canvas is the original work, from the hand of the artist herself, the poem finds neither its “originality” or its authenticity compromised by reproduction.

26 See Nelson Goodman, Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1976, pp. 112-123. My thanks are due to Molly Brunson, who pointed out in response to a draft of this work at the Yale University Slavic Colloquium that certain material elements of Russian avant-garde poetry are
Moreover, measures of the poem’s aesthetic and social efficacy are not strictly bound to the size of its audience. The poem’s reception can occur on a mass scale—as in the case of Mayakovsky’s readings, which often filled concert halls and workers’ unions—on the individual scale, and on every scale in between. Walter Benjamin famously argued that film is the twentieth century’s form of mass art par excellence; a museum gallery, in contrast, makes an awkward place for a crowd of revolutionaries to gather in front of a canvas and plot their next move. The “aura” of the poem, to borrow Benjamin’s term, can persist across instances of its mechanical reproduction in a way that the painting cannot; it thereby blurs the distinction between two categories of experience which Benjamin treats as opposed to one another. Films of this time were screened for mass audiences in public spaces; poetry, on the other hand, was unique in its capacity to unite the individual and collective scales of experience, without changing its shape or losing its “authenticity” (Goodman 122).

By emphasizing the similarities between poems and objects, the writers discussed here strive to bridge the gap between the poem as an individual utterance, privately (and often silently) consumed, and the poem as a mass performance that brings audiences together. The small-scale, poems of writers like Gertrude Stein and Vladimir Mayakovsky emphasize the object-like qualities of individual words and phrases, whereas their longer texts intended for public performance suggest parallels between linguistic structures and the real-world systems they represent. Language’s capacity to refer to both concrete instances and abstract phenomena gives these writers the hope that their creations could be at once public and private, particular and universal. Beneath every grand claim, these poets exposed the bedrock of words’ inherent materiality—both as articulated sounds and as characters on a printed page. They demonstrated that the poem’s capacity

less reproducible than Goodman’s claim suggests. Each issue of the Futurist journal Sadok sudei [A Trap for Judges] (1910; 1913), for instance, was printed on old wallpaper—a fact which gets lost in subsequent reproductions.
to unite these different scales of experience made it a powerful, if not always intuitive, object lesson in the social and political potentialities of art.

The first chapter of the dissertation, entitled “The Objects of Abstraction,” chronicles the birth of an object-focused aesthetic in avant-garde writing as seen in the works of two of its most influential practitioners, Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) and Velimir Khlebnikov (1885-1922). I argue that both Stein and Khlebnikov developed object-focused modes of poetic composition based on the idea that words are objects—with both material and abstract qualities—and that poetry, by extension, can be seen as the combinatory process whereby those word-objects become a composite or networked assemblage of objects: a poem. Both writers are torn between a belief in an abstract, universal system of laws dictating the relationship of subject to object and word to thing, and a fascination with the irreducibility of particular objects (individual words, persons, or things) to those general paradigms. Both question whether the semantic and emotional effects of a poem can be traced back to inherent features of language itself, or explained through systems theories—such as Saussurean linguistics, Gestalt psychology, or non-Euclidean geometry—that posit links between singular instances and the phenomena they represent. The influence of the visual arts, specifically Cubism, leads these writers to rethink how the material or object-like qualities of their medium relate to the processes of linguistic construction and reception alike. Invested in the immediacy of the art-object, they treat the poem’s deliberate accretion of verbal matter over time as a foil for the increasing scale and clarity of the world that the poem would have its reader “see.”

The second chapter, “Between Montage and Monument,” describes how two of the foremost heirs to the legacy of the first avant-garde generation strove to adapt their forebears’ innovations to the demands of their increasingly technologized and politicized milieux. Despite
their insistence on the cultural (indeed, the *national*) particularity of their respective approaches to poetry, both Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930) and William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) saw the material object as an ideal for the poem. Moreover, both poets looked to many of the same forms of popular art—from print advertisements and propaganda posters to public monuments on a grand scale—as models of aesthetic “objecthood” to be both emulated and resisted. They turned to these forms for clues as to how to align their own medium with the social and political concerns of their time, while also seeking to differentiate poetry from those other forms of discourse that risked either irrelevance or co-optation by the market or the state. They asked: could art-objects—or, for that matter, human lives—be exemplary without being generic? Did turning one person’s experience into a model or allegory necessarily result in a kind of objectification? Even as they sought to ground their work in the recognizable aspects of everyday life, they found the avant-garde demand for art works to complicate and “estrange” perception to be ever at odds with seductive-yet-suspect calls for political efficacy.27 Williams’s and Mayakovskys experiments test the limits of existing aesthetic categories as they aim to construct a new kind of object: the poem as an instrument of revolution.

In the third chapter, “The Ruins of the Everyday,” the final phase of the historical avant-garde coincides with an ever more intentional interpellation of Marxian principles into the poetry of the American Objectivists and an increasingly total (albeit often subterranean) resistance to those principles on the part of the Russian OBERIU poets, who sought to reconceive subject-object relations outside the reductively Marxist paradigms offered by the Soviet state.28 The chapter places the work of George Oppen (1908-1984) and Aleksandr Vvedensky (1904-1941) within their

---

28 This designation is common among scholars of the period; for one example of it, see Jean-Phillippe Jaccard, *Harms et la fin de l’avant-garde russe*. Bern: Peter Lang, 1991.
respective movements in order to suggest the different cultural attitudes these writers took towards the object-aesthetic in poetry. It then points to their shared concerns with visuality, reification, and the world beyond human perception—what Vvedensky summed up as “Time. Death. God.”—as the source of surprising formal and stylistic similarities in their poetics. Both Oppen and Vvedensky set up a parallel between language’s relationship to its objects on the one hand, and humans’ relationships to the external world on the other. Their poems problematize the relationship between the categories of subject and object; they test how far lyric poetry can go towards an erasure of a particular subject, and whether the fixity of that abandoned subject-position might be filled by other, more “objective” means. They thereby presage (and, in Oppen’s case, also respond to) existentialism and phenomenology as less hierarchical and less totalizing models for subject-object relations.

The brief, concluding section, “Beyond the Object,” traces a road-map of subsequent developments in what I have called the “object-aesthetic” in American and Russian poetry, from the post-WWII period to the fall of Communism and its aftermath. It suggests how poets in the postwar period, from the Lianozovo and Khelenukty groups to the Moscow Conceptualists and the American Language poets, adapted and revised—but seldom fundamentally changed the premises of—their avant-garde forebears’ innovations. I claim that the reconciliation of Russian and American poetry around the end of the Soviet era represented the rejoining of two theoretical-aesthetic paths that had diverged, earlier in the century, from a common set of concerns. By suggesting how many of the twentieth century’s most lasting contributions to philosophy, art theory, and linguistics arose either in conjunction with, or in response to, the object-focused

aesthetics of the avant-garde, I hope to recast more recent movements, such as Language poetry and Moscow Conceptualism, as delivering on the promises latent in an earlier series of objects.
The Objects of Abstraction: Velimir Khlebnikov and Gertrude Stein

Introduction: Thinking in Systems

In his essay “On the Five and More Senses” (1904), Velimir Khlebnikov laments the paltriness of the human senses and dreams of a single sense, “a great one,” that would unite all perceptual experience (Tvoreniia 557). He imagines a totalizing perspective within which the constellation of sense data—“an indefinitely extended manifold, ceaselessly changing”—would “form a pattern” to reveal the underlying structure of the universe. Khlebnikov’s metaphor for the relationship between the fragmented human senses and the flux of perceptual data is geometrical: “as a triangle, a circle, an octagon are parts of a [single] plane,” he writes, “so our auditory, visual, gustatory and olfactory sensations are parts of the casual slip of the tongue of this one great, extended manifold” (T 557). In Khlebnikov’s analogy, geometrical shapes are abstractions of directly perceptible forms in the world, and geometry aims to serve as a network within which those formal categories (“a triangle, a circle,…a plane” and so on) are brought to bear both on each other and on the physical reality they represent. If we follow Khlebnikov’s lead, treating geometry as a kind of grammar for representing spatial forms, a new set of questions soon arises. How would language change if we began to view its own grammatical and lexical systems as abstract representations of sense data? Could a poem serve as the “coextensive, continuous space” within which the shapes of one’s sensory experience engaged with the more abstract and universal categories of a total system?

However limited our perceptual range may be, Khlebnikov suggests, its existence within a unified field allows for the merest coincidence or momentary intuition — a “casual slip of the
tongue”—to incite a mental transformation: “Just as through continuous change a circle can become a triangle, and a triangle can under a continuous conversion into an octagon, just as one can get an egg, an apple, a horn, a barrel, through the continuous transformation of a sphere in three-dimensional space, just so does changing certain values, independent variables, cause different series of sensations — for example, auditory and visual or olfactory — to change into one another” (T 557). This transmutability of one form, one sensation, one word into another is at the core of Khlebnikov’s poetic practice. He takes as the basis of his art a belief in “values whereby the blue of the cornflower…, continuously changing, passing through the unknown to us humans, becomes transformed… into the sound of a cuckoo or a child's cry” (T 558). He then devotes a lifetime to enacting these processes in language, to show how “the sensation of the order of A crosses into the sense of the order of B, and only then…does the feeling become perceptible, as we perceive the spokes of a wheel only when the speed of its revolutions falls below a certain limit” (T 558).

From a theoretical standpoint, Khlebnikov’s description of transformations wrought upon forms in space clearly owes much to contemporaneous discussions of non-Euclidean geometry and the phenomenology of perception. In his work as a mathematician, Khlebnikov developed formulae to hone in on the “pattern” unifying the “indefinitely extended manifold” of “ceaselessly changing” points within whose nexus human beings live out the course of their history. In his poetry, the attempt to expose this underlying pattern in language led to a number of generative questions and stylistic developments, whose implications would not only bear on Khlebnikov’s poetics but would influence the development of twentieth-century poetry in its relationships to science, philosophy, politics, and notions of the self.

Around the same time, as she would later recount to the audiences of her Lectures in
America (1935), Gertrude Stein was also “beg[inning] to vaguely wonder whether I could see and hear at the same time and which helped or interfered with the other and which helped or interfered with the thing…having been over before it really commenced. Could I see and hear and feel at the same time and did I” (W II, 258). Although these words appear in a lecture entitled “Plays,” many of the questions she raises here have profound implications for her poetics: “Is the thing seen or the thing heard the thing that makes most of its impression upon you…How much has the hearing to do with it and how little. Does the thing heard replace the thing seen. Does it help or does it interfere with it” (W II, 249). Khlebnikov and Stein were unknown to one another, working in different political, cultural, and linguistic contexts; and yet, around 1912, both writers took parallel approaches to these strikingly similar projects. Mining their medium’s capacity for transformation, they sought to discover whether poetry could endow language with some of the sensory immediacy and material solidity of the visible world.

Both writers approached this question with a commitment to empirical evidence and systematic methodologies, which they had gained in their training in psychology (in Stein’s case) and biology and mathematics (in Khlebnikov’s). In the major urban centers of Paris and Moscow, surrounded by displays of human innovation on a scale never before known in human history, both writers were keenly aware of the contingent structures within which such acts of seeing, hearing, feeling, and meaning took place. This chapter tells the story of how both Khlebnikov and Stein became interested in the parallel processes of making sense of the visual world and creating meaning in language. They explored whether certain poetic techniques or devices might reveal the (sometimes systematic, sometimes apparently arbitrary) ways in which words come to mean. Could an awareness of the contingencies structuring both sensory experience and linguistic expression be seen not as a liability for poetry, but as the primary
principle of its construction?

Although neither Stein nor Khlebnikov uses the word “object” to theorize their poems, I want to suggest that a nascent notion of the poem as an object informs both the production and the reception of their supposedly “abstract” and “objective” styles. Treating language as an object—and poems as composite objects made up of smaller, discrete word- or sound-objects—allows these writers to experiment with the effects of citation, recontextualization, word creation, and borrowings from other languages or discourses while still insisting on the aesthetic autonomy and artfulness (indeed, the artifice) of their works. The notion of the composite object-poem informs several of the thematic and stylistic aspects of their poetics, and of modernist art in general: a concern with “pure” and “scientific” approaches to their medium; an emphasis on materiality on the one hand and on general, formalized systems of knowledge on the other; an embrace of “primitivist” aesthetics reminiscent of folk art or the art of children; a fascination with the relationship between psychology or perception and language; and an “impersonality” based on the dethronement of a single, central lyric subject. It also serves as a means of problematizing scope and scale as key determinants of their poetry’s affective and epistemological capacities.

The relationship of Stein’s work to phenomenology and its objects has been the subject of many critical studies, as have the verbal devices of repetition, wordplay, and syntactic deformation in both her work and Khlebnikov’s. Up until now, most critics have subscribed to Roman Jakobson’s view of the irreconcilable differences between these verbal forms and the visual techniques they supposedly emulate.30 What has heretofore remained unrecognized is the

30 This has not, however, stopped scholars of both Stein’s and Khlebnikov’s work from borrowing metaphors from the visual arts to describe the influences on, and effects of, their aesthetics—as numerous critics have noted. Two recent examples are Ariane Mildenberg, “Seeing Fine Substances Strangely: Phenomenology in Gertrude Stein’s Tender Buttons.” Studia Phenomenologica VIII (2008), pp. 259-282, and Markus Poetzsch, “Presence, Deixis, and
way in which both Stein and Khlebnikov use sound as a means of mediating between the
temporal and material aspects of poetry. I argue that both poets emphasize the sonic qualities of
their medium in an attempt to collapse or transcend the distance between unmediated sensory
percepts and the universal systems (e.g., grammar, geometry, phonetics) that govern how those
forms appear. Constructing poems out of a series of perpetually repeated and transformed verbal
units, both writers exploit the temporal nature of their medium to reenact the perceptual
processes whereby human consciousness makes sense of visual environments.

Stein’s and Khlebnikov’s use of sound comes to stand in for a world of concrete percepts
which, for reasons of limited scale and perspective, fail to be visualizable from any singular
vantage point. The accretion of sounds as materials in both poets’ works can be understood as a
paradoxical attempt to reconstitute this non-visualizable landscape, in all its sensuous
immediacy, by sonic means. This approach creates a tension in their poetry between the
overwhelming sensory qualities of the sounds, whose affective power precedes and exceeds their
semantic content, and the knowledge that these words are imbricated in a more universal
linguistic and representational system to which they cannot help but refer. The object-like
qualities of Stein’s and Khlebnikov’s verbal constructions are emphasized in two ways. First, the
words themselves are repeated, recontextualized, and transformed in order to emphasize their
own status as verbal objects; secondly, the entirety of each composition made up of these words
is treated as a test site for the kinds of semantic and phonetic deformations that can be wrought
upon these words. Each poem thus becomes its own verbal microcosm—a scale model of a
larger system of linguistic possibilities and limitations.

———. The Making of Meaning in Gertrude Stein’s Tender Buttons.” University of Toronto Quarterly, 75:4 (Fall 2006), pp. 946-956.
Russian scholarship has already produced a robust critical tradition of works focusing on word creation and sound play in Khlebnikov’s oeuvre. Critics writing in English, such as Charlotte Douglas and Charlotte Henderson, have suggested historical parallels between Khlebnikov’s poetry and the works created by his acquaintances (Aleksei Kruchenykh, David Burliuk, Kazimir Malevich and others) in theatre and the visual arts. However, much of Khlebnikov scholarship has yet to reckon with the applicability of discourses of visuality in describing the sources, the manner, and the effects of Khlebnikov’s innovative approach to language.  

Conversely, much of the most influential Stein criticism (by Donald Sutherland, Marjorie Perloff, Wendy Steiner, and others) fruitfully unpacks the parallels between Stein’s writing and the visual arts, but it neglects to account for the ways in which the expressive capacities of language—as a series of sounds unfolding in time—differ from those of paint on a canvas. This chapter seeks to build on those readings of Stein’s work through the lens of the visual arts by putting them into conversation with a highly developed and influential set of critical terms from the Russian context. These terms make it possible to bring together two canonical writers from different traditions, whose oeuvres, despite their considerable similarities, have never been discussed together at length in a scholarly work.

On the most basic level, this approach demonstrates the applicability of the Russian Formalists’ readings of Khlebnikov in terms of sound to a parallel reading of Stein’s work.


32 Marjorie Perloff’s 21st-Century Modernism: The “New” Poetics (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002) comes closest to doing so, since it contains separate chapters on “Gertrude Stein’s Differential Syntax” and “Khlebnikov’s Soundscape”; however, it does not discuss the two authors together. Vladimir Feshchenko has done important work in Russian on Gertrude Stein’s relationship to the concept of Logos. See his book Laboratoriia logosa: iazykovoi éksperiment v avangardnom tvorchestve. Moscow: Iazyki slavianskikh kul’tur, 2009.
While highly productive in other ways, studies of Stein that focus on the visual aspects of her poetics at the expense of their sonic construction gloss over many of the aspects of her process-based, phenomenological approach that prove most influential to inheritors of her work. Conversely, a reintegration of some of the terms most frequently used in critical writings on Stein (including process, visuality, cubism, primitivism, and empiricism) into a discussion of Khlebnikov clarifies the nature and extent of his influence on subsequent Russian poetry, both in theory and in practice. This comparative approach reveals how both authors, who have been taken in their respective traditions to be *sui generis*, actually are tapping into several of the predominant strains of thought in their historical moment. Once revealed, the conceptual connections underlying their aesthetic similarities become clearer— and, in turn, provide a way of linking their idiosyncratic projects up with broader cultural developments of their time. These connections then help us to clarify the origins and implications of some of the most frequently discussed characteristics of avant-garde art in this pre-WWI moment.

The ideological similarities between the works of avant-garde artists and writers of this time have often been discussed, as have the resemblances between their modes of cultural production, despite the national and lingusitic borders that divide them. This boundary-breaking ethos is acknowledged as a constitutive feature of Western European, Russian, and American art works that consider themselves “modern” in this period, but it has not yet given rise to a critical methodology in which insights from both Western and non-Western (in this case, Russian) scholars of Stein and Khlebnikov circulate and reinflect each other with the kind of mutuality that characterized their aesthetic influences in the first place. This study hopes to

---

model a method of cross-cultural, cross-linguistic literary analysis that does not satisfy itself with applying paradigms and terms from the Anglophone critical tradition to works in Russian, but instead creates a double feedback loop in which those English-language texts get re-read, and perhaps even transformed, using the devices of contemporaneous criticism from the Russian context. Insofar as a study of these poets’ works that draws upon such culturally distinct resources might seem counter-intuitive, that quality of surprise in fact recommends it as a fitting entrée into their subversive, unconventional, and perpetually surprising poetics.

Child’s Play: Taking Liberties with Words

In a way that recalls the Italian Futurist notion of “the word in freedom” [“parole in libertà”] but shifts its emphasis, Khlebnikov’s “words with the lifespan of a butterfly” embody “the beauty of language set free from its ends” (CW II, 234). This notion of verbal creation as an activity that prioritizes means over ends—in short, as a kind of child’s play—provides an important justification for his unorthodox method and style. In Khlebnikov’s work, as in Stein’s, an emphasis on sound is key to this process of symbolization, in which the immediacy of sounds stands in for the operative yet invisible presence of a world beyond the playroom, one undergirded by a complex system of principles and rules. Sonic effects such as rhyme, assonance, and alliteration are ways of encoding abstract knowledge in language that become memorable by partaking of the materiality of physical objects in the world. Such language-toys are meant to serve as instantiations of the abstract axioms that govern one’s existence, in much the way that wooden building blocks make the laws of geometrical relations, and their role in the organization of social space, graspable to the child who constructs a model of a house, a school, a hospital, a bank. Khlebnikov, too, describes his poetic practice as a kind of language game.
Significantly, the analogy provides him with a means of literalizing the relationship of words to physical objects in “Our Fundamentals” [«Наша основа»]:

Just as a boy at play is able to imagine the chair he sits on is an actual thoroughbred horse, and as long as he plays, the chair replaces a horse for him, so whenever we speak or write, according to the conventions of human conversation, the little word sun replaces the radiant majestic sun. The radiant orb is replaced by a verbal toy…Similarly, a child playing with dolls may shed heartfelt tears when his bundle of rags and scraps becomes deathly ill and dies; or may arrange a marriage between two rags figures indistinguishable one from the other…While the child is playing, those rag dolls are live people with feelings and emotions. So we may come to an understanding of playing with dolls: in language, scraps of sound are used to make dolls and replace all the things in the word. All the people who speak a given language are the players in this game. For people who speak a different language, these sound dolls are simply a collection of scraps of sound. And so a word is a sound doll, and a dictionary a collection of toys. (CW II, 383)

In addition to reflecting the Russian Futurists’ aforementioned interest in the imaginative activities of children, this passage highlights the importance of context for the kinds of “language games” that the poet can play and the range of resonances that can result. It treats the affective payoff of these investments as no less intense or valuable than real-world, interpersonal forms of engagement, despite their fanciful quality and the transience of their effects. Khlebnikov’s metaphor at once acknowledges the fragility of such games—the fact that these symbolic objects

---

34 The fascination of Khlebnikov and his fellow Futurists with art by children in the early years of their movement has been much discussed, and the connections between this interest and a corresponding penchant for “primitive” art are many. Vladimir Markov writes, “in the Hylaean period [ca. 1910-12], Khlebnikov used infantilism as an artistic method, and later he tried to build some of his poems on a child’s vocabulary. Both Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh were interested in poetry and prose written by children and made efforts to publish it…Finally, both Khlebnikov and Kruchenkykh were preoccupied with certain kinds of Russian folklore. It is, however, not the ‘respectable’ imitation of, or use of motifs from, folk epics, lyrical songs, and fairy tales…but instead, an interest in the naïve and ‘illiterate’ imitation and distortion of literature, especially of romantic poetry, in numerous songs, ballads, and poems which seldom attracted the attention of scholars” (Markov 1968, p. 36).
come to stand in for absent persons or things only for a short time or within a particular context—and celebrates the immersive sense of totality that they occasion. Jakobson has spoken to these seemingly contradictory qualities of Khlebnikov’s poems by likening them to “epic fragments.” The “sound doll[s]” in his “collection[s] of toys” possess all the materiality and hermeticism of autotelic objects, even as they seem less like finished works than like processes, individual instantiations of a general theory of language. In keeping with this provisionality, the poems do not put pressure on any one neologism to become canonical; it is not necessary that any particular coinage prove transferrable beyond the bounds of its poem’s linguistic environment. Each neologistic “sound doll” is a concrete complex of sonic material—“simply a collection of scraps”—at the same time that it gestures towards an entire symbolic system, with a nearly infinite set of expressive possibilities.

The Futurists’ belief in a “universal transrational language” based on the phonemes of Russian is at once a cornerstone of their Pan-Slavic nationalist project and their most influential contribution to poetry of the modernist period. The concept of zaum [заумь, sometimes transliterated as zaum ’] language—which Paul Schmidt ingeniously translates as “beyonsense”

35 In this sense, too, Khlebnikov’s analogy bears a striking resemblance to a simile employed by Wittgenstein to describe how language works: “in a sentence a world is put together tentatively [probeweise zusammengestellt], as an automobile accident is represented with puppets, etc., in a Parisian court of law.” Quoted in Rudolf Arnheim, Visual Thinking. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969, p. 240.
37 One could say that Khlebnikov’s view of language is quite Saussurean in his view of the relationship between individual phonemes or utterances and language’s governing paradigms. As Frederic Jameson puts it, “In linguistics, the preference of classical thought for eternal, changeless, normative laws had resulted in that close identification of language with logic whose codification we know as grammar. Against this, … Saussure’s originality was to have insisted on the fact that language as a total system is complete at every moment, no matter what happen to have been altered in it a moment before[,]…that language is for him a perpetual present, with all the possibilities of meaning implicit in its every moment.” Frederic Jameson, The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972, pp. 4-6.
language—was the subject of several key Futurist writings, including Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh’s “The Word as Such” [Slovo kak takovoe] (1913), Benedikt Livshits’ “Liberation of the Word” [Osvobozhdienie slova] (1913), Shklovskii’s “On Poetry and Zaum Language” [O poezii i zaumnom iazyke] (1919), and Khlebnikov’s “Our Fundamentals” [Nasha osnova] (1919). There have been entire scholarly books devoted to the subject of zaum, whose full scope exceeds the bounds of this study. However, a provisional definition from Gerald Janecek will serve to illuminate the most salient aspects of this innovative practice:

Zaum’ (pronounced ZA-oom, i.e., in two syllables) is a Russian Futurist neologism used to describe words or language whose meaning is ‘indefinite’ [neopredelennoe] or indeterminate. Zaum’ is arguably the most prominent, unique feature of Russian literary futurism…The basic root of the word, um, is a noun that means ‘mind, wit, intellect’…It refers to the locus of normal mental activity of a rational, logical sort…However, the addition…of the prefix za- introduces an element of uncertainty…When attached to a noun, za- is roughly equivalent to the Latin prefix trans-…Thus, in a topographical sense it means ‘beyond, on the other side of,’ and by extension ‘outside of’ or ‘beyond the bounds of.’ It is a matter of escaping from or going beyond the limits of a locale, in this case of something like rational, intelligible discourse. At the same time, the negative connotations of ‘nonsense’ are avoided in the Russian…[Z]aum’ can be said to exist at the limits of language, and therefore an examination of it is one way of getting at the roots (and limits) of human language itself.38

In the late 1910s and early 1920s, after the years of its greatest flowering, many of zaum’s most prominent theoreticians sought to legitimize the practice by showing how it represented not just going beyond the sense-making mechanisms of language, but going back to their roots. Boris Arvatov followed Khlebnikov and Shklovskii in likening zaum to the glossolalia of religious sectarians. Shklovskii claimed that zaum poetry “exists… not only in its pure form, that is as some kind of nonsense speech, but, principally, in a latent state, as rhyme existed in ancient verse—alive, but unconscious.”39 Kornei Chukovskii went so far as to claim, “All poetry (up to a

8 Приведенные факты заставляют думать, что “заумный язык” существует, и существует, конечно, не только в чистом своем виде, то есть как какие-то бессмысленные речения, но, главным образом, в скрытом состоянии так, как существовала рифма в античном стихе— живой, но не осознанной.” (Shklovskii, Viktor.
certain limit) is zaum.\textsuperscript{40} 

The Futurists’ emphasis on the historical and linguistic substratum out of which the spiritual potentialities of zaum arose was largely a polemical gesture. It allowed their poetics to take up the mantle of their Symbolist forebears’ search for transcendence, even as it provided them with grounds on which to renounce the earlier poets’ woolly mysticism. They presented zaum as at once a return to ancient, folk elements of Russian culture and a revivification of the language’s “natural resources” based on a scientific approach to its origins and on its pliability as poetic material. Among poets, Khlebnikov—like Stein in her context, as we will see—exemplifies this scientific approach more clearly than many of his contemporaries, due to his aforementioned background in biology and mathematics. Douglas cites Khlebnikov’s early works as evidence of a “connection between [his] Slavophilism, his study of history, and the pursuit of numerical law.” She writes that Khlebnikov turned to poetry in a “search for elementary, meaningful language sounds [that] was also a quest for primal units, here considered as the original forms that were acted upon by time and the environment and from which all the various species of language descended.”\textsuperscript{41} His paradoxical aim was to develop a scientific approach to the processes of reducing Russian words down to their phonetic and morphological components, and then using those parts as the building blocks of a system of neologisms. This collection of word-toys would possess the sensory immediacy and universal intelligibility of religious glossolalia or children’s speech: it would be an assemblage of “words that do not

\textsuperscript{40}“Вся поэзия (до известного предела)—заумная.” Chukovsky, quoted in Kruchenykh, Sdvigologiiia russkogo stikha: trakhtat obizhal’nyi. (Moscow, 1922), p. 38.

belong to any particular language but that do say something; something elusive but real nonetheless” (CW II 383).

Khlebnikov does not seem to see mysticism and scientific methodology—a nationalistic fascination with Old Slavic culture and the goal of a universal transrational language—as being at odds with one another. The poet describes his “first approach to the word” as follows:

To find, without breaking the circle of roots, the philosopher’s stone [volshebnyi kamen’] for transmuting all Slavic words, the one into the other— to freely melt down Slavic words—that was my first approach towards the word. [This is the self-sufficient [lit., selfliving] word, outside of everyday life and life’s usages.] Seeing that roots are merely phantoms behind which stand the strings of the alphabet, to discover the overall unity of all the world’s languages, a unity formed from the units of the alphabet—such was my second approach to the word. The path leading to a universal transrational language. (CW II, 9)

In a later essay, he goes on to explain his practice of word creation, which combines existing roots and phonemes into new verbal objects, in terms of the relationship between Russian folk wisdom and modern developments in mathematics:

And the resourceful Euclids and Lobachevsky—[do they not call out the eleven imperishable truths of the Russian language’s roots?] In words themselves do they not see traces of our bondage to birth and death? They have called the roots divine, and words merely the work of human hands.

And if the living language that exists in the mouths of a people may be likened to Euclid’s geomasure, can the Russian people not therefore permit themselves a luxury other people cannot attain, that of creating a language in the likeness of Lobachevsky’s geomasure, of that shadow of other worlds? Do the Russian people not have a right to this luxury? Russian wisdomry always thirsts after truth—will it refuse something the very will of the people offers it, the right of word creation?

Anyone familiar with life in the Russian village is familiar with words made up for a mere occasion, words with the lifespan of a butterfly. (“The Burial Mound of Sviatogor,” CW I, 234)

И хитроумные Евклиды и Лобачевский не назовут ли одиннадцатью нетленных истин корни русского языка? В словах же увидят следы рабства рождению и смерти, назвав корни — божьим, слова же — делом рук человеческих.

И если живой и сущий в устах народных язык может быть уподоблен доломерно Евклида, то не может ли народ русский позволить себе роскошь, недоступную другим народам, создать язык — подобие доломерия Лобачевского, этой тени чужих миров? На эту роскошь русский народ не имеет ли права? Русское умнечество, всегда алчущее прав, откажется ли от того, которое ему вручает сама воля народная: права словотворчества?
Khlebnikov’s relationship to the Russian language is characterized by a faith in the inherent “divin[ity]” of its roots, which is, for him, inseparable from both their ancientness and their exactitude. The process of word creation grounds the poet in the history of his language while allowing him to participate actively in the revival of its roots by transforming them. He celebrates this deep history of language, and the transience of its new coinages, in two of his best-known poems, written when he was only twenty-four. These early works epitomize the stylistic breakthrough that led Mayakovsky to claim him as the figurehead for the Russian futurist movement and convinced Roman Jakobson that he was “the greatest world poet of our century” (Jakobson 1997, 20). Written between 1908 and 1909, they are the poet’s best known works, and they embody many of his ongoing poetic preoccupations laid bare (to borrow a Russian formalist term); they speak to his fascination with the synaesthetic qualities of language, the affective resonance of neologisms, the effects of repetition, and the potency of iconography from Old Slavic religious and folkloric traditions.

The first of these poems, “Bobeobi pelis’ guby,” combines onomatopoetic zaum language with both sonic and syntactic parallelism to create what Vladimir Markov calls “Khlebnikov’s own famous attempt at poetic cubism” (Markov 1968, 81). Each of the first five lines of this seven-line poem has a parallel structure: a zaum word, sometimes with an onomatopoeic quality and sometimes apparently divorced from any mimetic basis, precedes a passive, past-tense form of the reflexive verb pet’sia [from pet’, “to sing”], followed by the name of the body part with

---

42 The bold type in these block quotations indicates text in the Russian original that are missing from Schmidt’s translation but have been added here.
which both the sound and the verb are associated. The final two lines, which are devoid of neologisms, have the straightforward tone of the solution to a mathematical proof, gesturing back to the steps that have led to the completion or “solution” of the poem’s composite image.

Бобэоби пелись губы,  
Вээоми пелись взоры,  
Пиээо пелись брови,  
Лиэээй — пелся облик,  
Гзи-гзи-гээо пелась цепь.  
Так на холсте каких-то соответствий  
Вне протяжения жило Лицо.

(T 54)

Bo-beh-oh-be sang the lips,  
Veh-eh-oh-me sang the gaze,  
Pee-eh-eh-oh sang the brows,  
Lee-eh-ay—the visage sang,  
Gzee-gzee-gzeh-oh sang the chain.  
Thus on the canvas of such concordances,  
Beyond any dimensions lived the Face.

(Translation mine.)

Markov has hailed Khlebnikov as “a master of the inexact word” (Markov 1962, 94), and “Bobeobi” provides early evidence of the poet’s proclivity for inciting what Shklovskii calls the “de-automatization of perception” by fending off obvious associations and replacing expected words with counterintuitive coinages.44 As with any work of art that resists the norms of representation within its medium, “Bobeobi” is perhaps best approached through an interrogation of those qualities that strike a reader as somehow “off.” Investigating these instances of what Jakobson characterizes as “semantic deformation” [semanticheskaia deformatsiia] and noting the more standard forms that they seem at once to echo and to eschew makes it possible to understand the effects of these transformations on semantic, aesthetic, and affective planes. One such aspect of this particular poem is the use of the verb pet’sia, which tends to be found in impersonal constructions (such as «На какой мотив это поётся?», or, “To what tune is this sung?”) rather than ascribed to a particular body part. One might expect a poetic

---

line featuring the word «губы» (“lips”) and a verb with the root for “to sing” to endow the lips with the agency to do the singing. Khlebnikov’s construction, on the contrary, makes the lips the passive recipient of the singing; it is as if song sang the lips, or as if the lips were called into being by the singing of the zaum word “Bobeobi.”

Just as the poem’s concrete facial features arise out of the “singing” of the poem’s non-visualizable zaum coinages, the words for those features oscillate between varying degrees of concreteness or abstraction. While «губы» is the standard word for “lips,” the word «взоры» in the following line will strike readers as more formal, less concrete, perhaps even somewhat old-fashioned; «взор» suggests “eyes” but in fact is more readily translated as the nominal form of “gaze,” “look,” or “regard.” The fact that «взор» is pluralized here heightens the strange conflation of the physical eyes with the more abstract gaze. Similarly, while «брови» in the third line is a standard, concrete word for “eyebrows,” line four’s «облик» carries the root for “face” («лицо») but is a more abstract word meaning “countenance” or “image.” The word has notable religious connotations, as it is often used in the Russian Orthodox tradition to designate the image of a saint on an icon. (The use of the verb «петься» heightens this impression, as it may be used to designate the antiphonal verse or sentence (i.e., from a psalm) sung by a priest or other religious leader and followed by a response from the congregation.) The noun that concludes the final line of this portrait, «цепь» (“chain”), could refer either to secular adornment or to a chain around the neck of a religious figure, as in an icon.

It is not difficult to see that “Bobeobi” owes its structure to the conceit of constructing its central image, the face, piece by piece; what is more surprising is that this construction takes

---

45 The reflexive verb pet’sia [to sing] would be familiar to native speakers of Russian from its popular use in children’s songs, especially those used to teach young children the alphabet. I thank Daria Khitrova, who pointed this out at the Harvard University Slavic Colloquium, November 10, 2015.
place on a sonic level as much as on a visual level, by means of the zaum utterances that begin each line of the poem’s description. Viktor Shklovskii’s seminal 1916 essay “On Poetry and Zaum Language” [«О поэзии и заумном языке»] is a helpful way into the poem, in that explains the affective resonance of zaum words and phrases using psycho-physiological notions of performative speech. Shklovskii quotes the psychologist B. P. Kiterman’s claim that “the imitativeness, the depictiveness of a word is contained in the movements of speech organs and in other mimetic and pantomimic gestures accompanying them”; thus, associations evoked by certain sound-combinations “are to a significant degree dependent for their development on the sound forms themselves.”46 He goes on to explain the relationship of Kiterman’s argument to the German psychophysicologist Wilhelm Wundt’s notion of Lautbilder [sound-pictures]:

Under this term Wundt groups words which express not an acoustic, but rather an optical or other notion, but in such a way that between this notion and the choice of sounds of onomatopoeic words a certain correspondence is felt…Previously, such words would have been explained thus: after the pictorial elements of words disappeared, the meaning of words became linked solely to their sounds; finally this gave the words their sensual tonality. But Wundt principally explains the phenomenon thus: that in the pronunciation of these words the organs of speech make equivalent movements. (Shklovskii 1919, pp. 8-9, trans. Janecek, p. 15)47

To view “the sonic physiognomy of the word [as] merely a consequence of its articulation,” as “belong[ing] without a doubt to the mimetic movements” and constituting “a special sound gesture,” is to facilitate a connection between the articulatory actions involved in pronouncing zaum words and their emotional (“trans-sense”) effects (Zelinskii 1901, 187; trans. Janecek 19).

As Zelinskii writes, “Now it is easy for us to apply [this idea to] both sound imitations and sound

47 Wundt’s theory of Lautbilder appears in his Völkerpsychologie, Die Sprache (1900, Russ. translation 1912), which Shklovskii quotes from F. F. Zelinskii’s article, “Wilhelm Wundt and the Psychology of Language” (1901). Some of the relevant passages in English appear in Janecek’s introduction to ZAUM.
pictures [Lautbilder]: they are all imitations, but the organ of imitation will not be sound directly, but a ‘simulatory’ sound gesture.”

Although its potential implications for the fields of psychology, psycholinguistics and literary studies only become activated around the turn of the last century, the idea of certain sounds in language as being expressive in themselves goes back to Plato’s Cratylus. Somewhat more recently, as Janecek points out, the attribution of “emotional qualities to vowels and consonants” was an influential feature of the poet M. V. Lomonosov’s Short Guide to Eloquence [Kratkoe rukovodstvo k krasnorechii] (1748). Shklovskii’s fascination with Kiterman’s and Wundt’s theories of language seems to contain the unspoken hope that recent developments in psychology and physiology might make good on Socrates’ promise that the most effective forms of expression, and the most fitting names, will succeed in “express[ing] the true forms of things” through sounds that are intrinsically charged with emotional resonance. Zelinskii, by seeing written language as a sort of script for the articulation of such sounds—each requiring its corresponding articulatory gesture—concludes on this basis that the resonance of these “sound-pictures” is “not a ‘chance or arbitrary association,’” but a completely natural and inevitable one (Zelinskii 187; in Janecek 19). Indeed, “Bobeobi” appears to be constructed on a faith in the “natural and inevitable” parallel between transcribed sounds and corresponding (produced or only imagined) articulatory movements that the futurist treatises on zaum language will codify, only a few years later, into a program for the revitalization of “the word as such.” Khlebnikov’s search for a universal language beyond or outside (za) the boundaries of the rational mind (um)

48 Ibid.
couches its claims of empiricism and universality, as does Zelinskii’s discussion of “sound-pictures,” in a paradoxical emphasis on the material qualities of words themselves.

As becomes clear upon reading Khlebnikov’s theory of the relationship between consonants and colors—written later but clearly in a nascent stage of development in this poem—the performative nature of the utterances in “Bobeobi” also parallels the process whereby the parts of a painterly composition take shape on a canvas. The relation of the poem’s “cubist” representational techniques to its use of trans-sense language is perhaps best understood with recourse to the notion of zvukopis’, or “sound-painting,” a form of zaum which was bound up, for Khlebnikov, in the quest to derive a universal language from the material and sonic qualities of particular letters of the alphabet. This approach, as Markov notes, makes onomatopoeia not only an embellishment of the verse line, but a driving force behind the meaning or “content,” in a way that dovetails with Shklovskii’s emphasis on the emotional tenor of “sound-gestures”:

Sound identity always had a special attraction for Khlebnikov. He attached unusual importance to the first consonant of a word and, in fact, built all his theoretical essays on the transrational language on this idea. In addition, he preferred heavy orchestration of a line, even to repeating the same sound five times. His tendency in rhyme to favor the consonant, or the consonants, preceding the stressed vowel led to even greater alliterative richness, and sometimes to ponderousness. This tendency was further bolstered by the futurist tendency to extend the idea of rhyme so that it included orchestration of the whole line…In this way alliteration with a purely ornamental effect, which occasionally is onomatopoetic, becomes a device involving semantic values. (Markov 1962, p. 141)

In a rather ambiguous passage from “Khudozhniki mira” [Artists of the World], Khlebnikov suggests how the notion of zvukopis’ might point the way towards a universal language based on a synaesthetic theory of word-initial consonants: “The task involved in artists’ labors would be to assign a particular sign to each type of space. The sign should be simple and should not resemble others. One could resort to using colors and designate M dark blue, V green, B red, S gray, L white, and so on.” (SS V 219). Although this treatise was formulated years after the composition of “Bobeobi,” it is worth noting that each of these color-consonant pairings, if matched to the zaum word in “Bobeobi” that begins with the relevant consonant, corresponds to
an appropriate color for the body part designated by that line. “Painting by sound” in this way yields, according to Khlebnikov’s synaesthetic pairings, red lips, green eyes, black brows, and a white face.\(^{50}\)

The final lines of the poem both complete and complicate this painterly metaphor: «Так на холсте каких-то соответствий, / Вне протяжение жило Лицо». In the first line of the couplet, the analogy between poetry and painting becomes literalized because of the word «холст» [canvas] even as the word «соответствий» [concordances or correspondences] points to a more abstract reading of the “canvas.” The poem’s final line is at once syntactically straightforward and mystical: “beyond any [or all] dimensions lived the Face.” The first two words of this line in Russian, «Вне протяжение», combine compression with abstraction in a way that makes them difficult to translate. The noun «протяжение» could refer to a temporal span or a spatial expanse, field of action or a scope of vision. It also has the meaning of “continuance” or “continuity.” The word “вне” means “outside” or “beyond,” and contains echoes of both «в» [in, inside] and «не» [not], leading to a sense of the face in the final line as existing in two contradictory ways: both on the canvas (fixed in a static space of non-continuity) and beyond the perceptible spans of either time or space. Participating in the performative speech act the poem invites results in having “sung” the face into existence. This is not merely a transformation from written word to articulatory gesture, from sound to color, or from signifier to referent, but one from temporality to spatiality: from the time-bound articulation of the

\(^{50}\) Khlebnikov’s interest in the relationships between sound and color during this period have much in common with the similar set of interests manifested in the works of Symbolist painters (e.g., Vasily Kandinsky), musicians (e.g., Aleksandr Skriabin), and art theorists like Nikolai Kulbin, whose writings show the influence of theosophy. (See Bowlt’s *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, pp. 3-38.) Kulbin organized the influential Triangle exhibition of art in St. Petersburg in March 1910, in which Khlebnikov participated alongside his fellow Futurists, including Kamenskiy, Matiushin, Guro, David and Vladimir Burliuk. Khlebnikov’s works were exhibited in a section showing drawings and autographs by writers including Tolstoy, Gorky, Pushkin, Chekhov, and symbolist poets; almost simultaneously, Kulbin published “Zakliatie smekhom” in his collection *The Impressionists’ Studio*. 
composition’s elements to the simultaneity and multi-dimensionality of the completed portrait. Through its marriage of sonic and visual materiality, the face becomes the poem’s composite object, triumphantly exceeding the bounds of either the spatial or the temporal plane upon which language has brought it into being.

While the onomatopoeic zaum coinages of “Bobeobi” reveal much about the relationship between visual and verbal, textual and sonic elements in Khlebnikov’s verse, they represent only a limited set of the potentialities of Khlebnikov’s vast neologistic inventory. Linguist and Khlebnikov scholar Ronald Vroon divides the poet’s coinages into three categories:

1. *grammatical* nonce words, those which conform to the laws of Russian word formation
2. *nongrammatical* nonce words, those which violate the laws of canonical [Russian] word formation…[some of which] can only be analyzed by referring back to the etymology of their models in the real language[, since] the morphological components of these models have become fused and are semantically indivisible
3. an *agrammatical* class of nonce words [that] cannot be analyzed against the background of its present or past state.

In discussing the agrammatical nonce words, Vroon adds,

> Etymological analysis is of no help [with regards to these coinages]. In their least radical form these coinages are more akin to folk etymologies: they may incorporate real formants, but the analogy to real words is always false…The most radical coinages in this third category of nonce words are indivisible, even within the context of Xlebnikov’s own idiolectical systems of word formation. Many of them are onomatopoeic in nature…Others are based on the artificial association of sound and color.\(^{51}\)

If “Bobeobi”’s inventiveness arises mostly out of its relationship to nonce words of this final category, a poem of the same period—and the only Khlebnikov poem more often anthologized than “Bobeobi”—illustrates the range of aesthetic effects the poet is able to achieve by constructing a poem almost entirely out of the first two kinds of coinages. Ever since its 1910 publication, “Zakliatie smekhom” has been widely discussed in terms of its neologistic transformations of a single root word; in these analyses, it tends to serve as a point of contrast

---

with the *zaum* aesthetic of “Bobeobi.”\textsuperscript{52} Both poems demonstrate the potentialities of different aspects of Khlebnikov’s word-creation, and each can be understood as adopting certain modes of anti-mimetic representation to achieve complementary acoustic and phenomenological effects.

As its title suggests, “Zakliatie smekhom” [Incantation by Laughter] declares its status as a performative utterance much more explicitly than does “Bobeobi.” The poem consists almost entirely of a series of morphological transformations successively enacted (and sometimes repeated) on the root word «смех» [laughter]:

\begin{quote}
О, рассмейтесь, смехачи!
О, засмейтесь, смехачи!
Что смеются смехами, что смействуют смейльно,
О, засмейтесь усмейльно!
О, рассмешниц надсмейльных — смех усмейных смехачей!
О, испсмейся рассмейльно, смех надсмейных смейчей!
Смейево, смейево,
Усмей, осмей, смешники,
смеяники,
Смеюнчики, смеюнчики.
О, рассмейтесь, смехачи!
О, засмейтесь, смехачи!
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
О, rassmeites’, smekhachi!
O, zasmeites’, smekhachi!
Chto smeiusia smekhari,
chet smeianstvuiut smeial’no,
O, zasmeites’ usmeial’no!
O, rassmeshishch
ndasmeial’nykh — smekh
usmeinya smekhachei!
O, issmeisia rassmeial’no,
smekh ndasmeinya smekhachei!
Sméievó, sméievó,
Usmei, osmei, smeshiki,
smeshiki,
Smeiuńchiki, smeiuńchiki.
O, rassmeites’, smekhachi!
O, zasmeites’, smekhachi!
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Oh, you laughniks, laugh it out!
Oh, you laughniks, laugh it up!
Who laugh it with laughables, who laugherize laughfully,
Oh, laugh it out uplaughfully!
Oh, laughed-out of the overlaughers—laughter of belaughèd laughniks!
Oh, relaugh forthlaughèdly,
laughter of the laughed-at laughsters!
Laughily, laughily,
Uplough, roundlaugh, laughlets,
loughlets,
Laughikins, laughikins.
O, you laughniks, laugh it out!
O, you laughniks, laugh it up!
\end{quote}

*(Translation mine.)*

In the poem’s first two lines, Khlebnikov introduces the primary devices of repetition and reorganization of prefixes and suffixes in relation to the root word that will dictate the rest of the

poem. The next line then describes the behavior of those apostrophized in the first two: “Who
laugh it with laughables, who laugherize laughfully,” while the fourth line combines the prefixed
imperative from line two with a differently-prefixed version of the adverb from line three: “Oh,
laugh it out uplaughfully!” In two long lines that follow, the laughter itself becomes the subject
of the sentence, and the persons exhorted to laugh appear in a possessive (genitive) form. The
final four lines include two prefixed, imperative versions of the verb “to laugh” without their
typically reflexive ending, followed by a diminutive direct object form of “laugh,” sandwiched
between a line of repeated adverbs and a line of repeated diminutive nouns. Then the poem’s
final two lines repeat the command of the first two: “Laughily, laughily, / Uplaugh, roundlaugh,
laughlets, laughlets, / Laughikins, laughikins. / Oh, [you] laughniks, laugh it out! / “Oh, [you]
laughniks, laugh it up!” The recognizability of the root smekh in the original poem allows the root word to serve as a kind of litmus test for the degree to which such transformations can
“semantic[ally] defor[m]” (Jakobson, qtd. in Kruchenykh 1922, 12) old meanings and give rise to new ones.53

Unlike “Bobeobi”’s instances of zaum [e.g., Veeomi] and onomatopoeia [e.g., “Gzee-
gzee-gzeo”], all of the nonce words in “Zakliatie smekhom” fall into one of Vroon’s first two
categories for Khlebnikov’s neologisms: the majority of them are grammatical, and all of them contain morphological units whose role in the poem can be borne out by etymological analysis. Khlebnikov does not create new grammatical rules, or even abolish old ones, here; instead, he applies existing grammatical rules to the verb in question for the purpose of “exploring the

53 See Jakobson’s claim that poetic language, in contrast to practical language, is purposefully “deformed”: «По существу всякое слово поэтического языка в сопоставлении с языком практическим—как фонетически, так и семантически—деформирован.» Kruchenykh, Faktura slova: deklaratsiya. Moscow, 1923.
versatility—the ‘movability,’ if you will—of the root,” such that “the individual meaning of the verbs…is overwhelmed by the ceaseless repetition of sounds” (Vroon 90). The attempt to translate meaningfully what numerous critics and translators have treated as nonsense verse also illuminates the degree to which the practice of zaum word formation was, for Khlebnikov, less an attempt to escape the bounds of rational signification than an attempt to discover the different ways in which words could mean.\(^5\)

The reduction of language down to its rudiments, its purposeful fragmentation into the smallest possible units of phonetic and semantic meaning, sets the stage for the constructive and transformative word-creation of “Zakliatiae smekhom.”

As mentioned above, this poem literalizes and makes explicit the underlying construct of the performative speech act that governs “Bobeobi.” In keeping with the “incantation” of its title, the poem seems to be modeled on utterances from the realm of the supernatural or the occult—spells and hexes, for instance—and also to emphasize the incantatory nature of liturgical chanting to such a degree that they take on the glossolalic qualities of pagan ritual. “The magic in the word,” as Khlebnikov writes in his essay “On Poetry” [«О поэзии»], “remains magic even if it is not understood, and loses none of its power” (Т 371, trans. Janecek 141). Unlike “Bobeobi,”

---

\(^5\) This is an important point of distinction between Khlebnikov’s understanding of zaum and Kruchenykh’s, which many of the two poets’ contemporaries failed to draw, but which has been much remarked upon in the critical literature on Khlebnikov since the 1960s. Markov cites the two poets as having “two completely different concepts” of zaum: “for Kruchenykh,” he writes, “zaum’ was the creation, from existing phonemes, of absolutely meaningless combinations in order to obtain freedom from meaning. Khlebnikov, paying little respect to this anarchistic concept, regarded zaum’ as an attempt to create a ‘universal language’ by first singling out the pure, abstract ideas expressed by the separate sounds of language” Markov 1962, p. 7). Janecek sees this difference as indicative of a larger temperamental difference that informs the work of the two zaumniki: “While using the same term (zaumnii jazyk) as Kruchenykh, Khlebnikov meant something different by it, or at any rate had different goals for it. The general goals of his work in other areas as well, e.g., his lifelong attempts to discover the mathematical laws of world history, demonstrate his need to find logic, order, and determinacy in the world, rather than a need to escape from such bounds. True, he too was dissatisfied with the limits of standard language and mundane thinking and wanted to expand their territory, but to do so he simply created a more capacious system…” (Janecek, p. 142).
this poem consists of an extended invocation to a group of listeners; its hortatory quality is embodied in the anaphoric repetition of «O» and its predominant use of imperative verbs.

Khlebnikov achieves some of the poem’s most inventive verbal wizardry by deriving new adverbs from adjectives which are themselves neologisms. Words like «рассмеяльно» [forthlaughingly] combine the root of the verb [смеяться, “to laugh”] with the past-tense ending [-ял], replace the typical reflexive verb ending with an adverbial ending [-но] and add a prefix [пас-] generally used to suggest a sudden, violent movement or gesture (as in «расплакаться»), to burst into tears). This coinage therefore exists at a radical degree of removal from the root word «смех», which begins as a noun [“laughter”], is transformed into a verb [“laugh”], becomes an adjective describing the agent [“laughing”], and finally ends up as an adverb describing the agent’s manner of laughing [“forthlaughingly”]. The “ceaseless repetition of sounds” (Vroon 90) creates, through an accretion of sonic materials, a layering of mutually interdependent yet flexible forms whose points of overlap contribute to the thick verbal texture of the composition.

The notion of verbal texture held particular salience for the Russian Futurists, and for the critics who theorized and promoted their poetry. Aleksei Kruchenykh’s 1923 treatise on “The Texture of the Word” [«Фактура слова»] provides several (not completely consistent) definitions of the concept of faktura:

The structure of a word or line of verse [refers to] its constituent parts (sound, letter, syllable, etc.)—let us call them a - b - c - d. Verbal texture [is] the arrangement of these parts (a - b - c - d or b - c - d - a or anything else); texture is the work of the word, its construction, layering, inclination, the positioning one way or another of syllables, letters and words. […] Verbal texture is known under the name of “the music of the word” or its instrumentation.

Структура слова или стиха—это составные части (звук, буква, слог и т. д.) обозначим их a - b - c - d. Фактура слова—это расположение этих частей (a - b - c - d или b - c - d - a или еще иначе), фактура—это делание слова, конструкция, наслонение, наклонение, расположение тем или иным образом

49
It is important to note that Kruchenykh mentions the relevance of this concept both on the level of the line and on the level of the individual word. Emphasizing the interrelatedness of all the constituent parts of a poem, from the individual phoneme to the syntax of a phrase to the stanzaic framework, Kruchenykh echoes an awareness of the materiality of his medium that was also a driving force in Khlebnikov’s compositional process. In his earliest published collection, *Tvoreniia* (1914), Khlebnikov summed up the relationship between the small- and larger-scale parts of the verbal composition in a succinct metaphor, defining the word *[slovo]* three ways:


Vroon interprets this aphoristic statement as follows:

…the word is a construct whose components include: 1) meaning (the ready cloth or fabric), 2) sound (the material from which the fabric is woven), and 3) the rules governing the combination of threads of sound into fabrics of meaning (the tambour or frame). Consequently the fashioning of new words may involve 1) the alteration or rearrangement of the semantic units of language; 2) the free selection and combination of the sound materials that make up the word; 3) modification of the rules that govern their combination. (Vroon 15)

Khlebnikov takes up one of the most programmatic aspects of the Russian futurist approach to literature—a focus on “the word as such” *[slovo kak takovoe]* and the corresponding belief that “language should be language above all else.”\(^{55}\) He develops it into aesthetic praxis by demonstrating how the single word, or even the single phoneme, interacts with larger meaningful units to create the affective and semantic resonance of the poem as a whole. The word, in its synecdochic relationship to language as a whole, delimits the outer edge (or “frame”) within which signification of any kind becomes possible; on the other hand, its “ready cloth,” an aggregate of sonic and graphic elements, marks the inner limit of meaning—the most intractably

---

physical threads from which the poem is to be woven. Khlebnikov’s analogy, which implicitly likens the poem to a tapestry framed and constructed by means of the word, complements an understanding of “Zakliatie smekhom” as a performative speech act. A textile may be comprised of individual threads that remain visible in the finished tapestry, without leading viewers to claim that the tapestry “represents” the threads. Likewise, Khlebnikov’s poem foregrounds the connective and transformative process its words undergo, drawing attention to the sonic and visual textures of its medium—even as the whole poem, on a larger scale, constitutes the incantation those words transcribe.

Both the image of the completed portrait that closes “Bobeobi” and the image of the poetic textile as a symbol for “Zakliatie smekhom” support Charlotte Douglas’s assertion that, in the poetry and painting of the Russian Futurists, “Art became a kind of model-building, a means to knowledge of a reality which is not accessible by purely deductive means. The work of art was proposed as a metaphor linking man to all of nature in a coherent vision.”56 The many critics who, like Douglas, analyze Khlebnikov’s and Stein’s texts in relation to non-representational art works, productively emphasize these writers’ concern with spatial relations. At the same time, their focus on spatiality tends to occlude the degree to which these poems strive to be “coherent” “model[s]” of temporal processes as well. Like Stein, Khlebnikov emphasizes the sonic qualities of the verbal landscapes he constructs over time, with a view towards representing the parallel process of perceiving visual data in space and then integrating it into a unified mental picture.57

Eschewing the more conventional mimetic modes that would depict an object in “realistic”

57 As Mojmír Grygar emphasizes, “The main semantic (constructive) principle of Khlebnikov’s poetry…is that in it the very process of the birth of meaning comes to the foreground.” [“Основной семантический (конструктивный) принцип Хлебниковой поэзии состоит…в том, что сам процесс рождения смысла выступает в ней на первый план.” (Grygar, Mojmír, “Paradoks ‘samovitogo slova’ Khlebnikova.” In Willem G. Weststeijn, ed. Velimir Chlebnikov (1885-1922): Myth and Reality. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1986), p. 335).]
spatial terms, both poets seek to represent the coming-into-being of a coherent image or sense of a given object (or constellation of objects), which occurs in time as well as in space. It is in these terms that both Stein and Khlebnikov find a point of connection between their drive to represent the naïveté of the innocent eye perceiving the world anew, and their desire to justify their poetic “objectivity” with recourse to the methods and concerns of contemporary science.

Like many of their influences in the visual arts, Stein and Khlebnikov reflect upon the aesthetic implications of those breakthroughs in psychology and quantum physics that were gaining popular recognition in the early years of the century. A casual awareness of relativity lead many at this time—most of whom had less exposure to scientific thought than Khlebnikov or Stein—to appreciate Helmholtz’s view that “[e]ach property or quality of a thing is in reality nothing but its capacity to produce certain effects on other things…[and if] what we call a property always involves relation between two things, then such an action naturally never depends on the nature of one of the agents alone, but always exists only in relation to and in dependence upon the nature of a second being.”58 Their approaches to language thus take the mutual imbrication of time and space as a generative principle for poetic creation, in order to explore how these various dimensions of experience give rise to the knowledge of any perceptual object.59

59 Jameson cogently connects these more general changes in scientific thought with Saussure’s revolutionary linguistics: “The dilemma of linguistics is only part of a vaster crisis in the sciences in general: in physics for instance, where the alternation between the wave and particle theories of light begins to cast some doubt on the conception of the atom as a substance, and where indeed the idea of ‘field’ is not without analogies to Saussure’s notion of a system. In all these areas, scientific investigation has reached the limits of perception; its objects are no longer things or organisms which are isolated by their own physical structures from each other, and which can be dissected and classified in various ways. Saussure’s concept of the ‘system’ implies that in this new trackless unphysical reality content is form; that you can see only as much as your model permits you to see; that the methodological starting point does more than simply reveal, it actually creates, the object of study.” (Jameson, The Prison-House of Language, 14).
In his theoretical writings, Khlebnikov builds on such claims; he declares, inspired by Lobachevskii, that “space by itself does not exist.” Far from inciting bewilderment or existential angst, this theory proves a source of inspiration for the poet, who writes in 1919: “It is somehow pleasing to think that in essence there is neither time nor space, but only two different accounts, two slopes of one roof, two paths to one edifice of numbers” (SP III 478).

His project then becomes to unite temporal process and spatial object in his art. Especially in his shorter poems (stikhotvorenia as opposed to poetry), Khlebnikov’s intricate sonic play calls attention to how this verbal landscape unfolds across the temporal span of its articulation—whether aloud or in its reader’s mind. The poem exists in the successive moments of its verbalization and then persists on a much longer timescale; its linguistic components remain emphatically artefactual after the first reading, offering themselves up as material to the reader’s archaeological eye.

Khlebnikov’s 1912 poem “Pereverten’” [Palindrome] illustrates the relationship between the spatial and temporal aspects of his poems’ construction particularly well. As its title suggests, every line of the 18-line poem (including its subtitle, «Куски, кум мук и скук» [Fragments, a Lad’s Agony and Boredom]) is a palindrome—an astonishing structural feat that both emphasizes the predetermined sonic and semantic content of each line and endows the entire composition with a sense of circularity within closed bounds. Within this framework, the line becomes the primary unit of meaning in the poem; its individual words and images take on a broken quality, even as they combine to constitute an imagistic collage:

—


This poem, originally published in *A Trap for Judges* [Садок судей] II, was Khlebnikov’s much-lauded first attempt at a form that became for him more of a transcendent project than a mere act of wordplay. He would later call writing in palindromes “an incantation by the double current of speech, a convexo-convex speech,” “a reflection of the beams of the future” (SP II 8-9, quoted in Markov 1962, 157). For Kruchenykh, the palindrome, along with *zaum* language, could be counted among “The New Pathways of the Word” [«Новые пути слова»], since it highlighted language’s capacity to point towards the rational and irrational poles of experience at once. “One can read a word backward, and then one gets a deeper meaning,” he declares, citing this as one example of the “subjective objectivity” that allows the Futurists to cut through the dead husk of the word and reveal its inner essence.62 “Pereverten,”

---

62 Aleksei Kruchenkh, “Novie puti slova,” *Gramoty i declaratsii russkih futuristov*, 1914; quoted in Markov 1968, p. 128. Kruchenkh’s way of describing the death of the word’s affective and imagistic resonance has much in common with Shklovskii’s account of the “word-image and its petrification” [слово-образ и его окаменение] in his 1914 essay “The Resurrection of the Word” [Воскрешение слова]: “Эта потеря формы слова является большим облегчением для мышления и может быть необходимым условием существования науки, но искусство не
Khlebnikov’s initial assay into this terrain, can be considered a precursor to his 1920 poem “Razin,” of which—astonishingly—all 408 lines are palindromes. Kruchenykh praised the palindrome approach as “one uninterrupted rhyme” (sploshnaia rifma) and saw it as incarnating “a maximum of sonic saturation.” Upon reading Khlebnikov’s “Pereverten,” Kruchenykh could declare proudly, “We [have] learned how to look at the world backwards, we enjoy this reverse motion… We can change objects’ weight (the eternal force of gravity), we see buildings hanging in the air and the weight of sounds. In this way, we present a world with new content.”

While no other futurist poet attempted to write palindromic poems either on the scale of “Razin” or with the exactitude of “Pereverten,” these palindromic poems display several of the aesthetic qualities in which the Futurists were most invested. One is the priority, articulated by Kruchenykh in his treatises on poetics, of consonants over vowels in the construction of poems that do justice to “the word as such.” He lampoons the impulse towards soft, “feminine” vowel sounds and mellifluous rhymes in much symbolist poetry, announcing,

Like pictures painted in jelly and milk, poems built on ‘pa-pa-pa,’ ‘pi-pi-pi,’ ‘ti-ti-ti,’ etc. do not satisfy us. Such food only upsets a healthy person’s stomach.

Как картины, писанные киселем и молоком, нас не удовлетворяют и стихи, построенные на па-па-па

---

64 Kruchenykh, “The New Ways of the Word” (1913), in Lawton and Eagle, p. 76.
The initial consonant of a simple word governs all the rest — it commands the remaining letters. Words that begin with an identical consonant share some identical meaning: it is as if they were drawn from various directions to a single point in the mind. (T 384, trans. Janecek 140)

In a different essay from the same year, Khlebnikov elaborates on these ideas, discussing “the sounds of the alphabet” as “bodies” that incarnate “a certain conceptualization of space.” The poet constructs a metaphor in which the field of language becomes literalized as a geographical plane even as it is abstracted into a geometrical one. Words that begin with the same consonant are said to share a common point of origin, a universal and essential crux of meaning that is embodied by the letters on the page:

…The simple bodies of language—the sounds of the alphabet—are the names of various aspects of space, an enumeration of the events of its life. The alphabet common to a multitude of peoples is in fact a short dictionary of the spatial world that is of such concern to your art, painters, and to your brushes. Each individual word resembles a small workers’ collective, where the first sound of the word is like the chairman of the collective who directs the whole set of sounds in the word. If we assemble all the words that begin with the same consonantal sound, we observe that, just as meteors often fall from one single point in the sky, all these words fly from the single point of a certain conceptualization of space. And that point becomes the meaning of the sound of the alphabet, and its simplest name. (SP V 216, trans. Schmidt 149)

Each consonant appears on the page as a visual sign with a corresponding sonic articulation and is literally a material “body”; at the same time, it occupies a certain conceptual location (“one single point in the sky”) and encapsulates, according Khlebnikov, a particular orientation towards the world, a “basic uni[t] of thought from which words may be constructed.”
This metaphor helps to account for the appeal of the palindrome’s sonic and visual circularity: the meaning of the line, which stems from the meaning of the leading consonant, both begins and ends at “a single point in the mind” (Janecek 140).

In addition to its affinities with these formal aspects of the futurist agenda, “Pereverten’” displays Khlebnikov’s influential penchant for “primitivism,” exemplified by his frequent use of children’s vocabulary and of motifs from Slavic folklore and prehistory. As befits the palindromic form, many of the images called up by these lines suggest a setting from Old Slavic mythology, and the poem’s limited syntactic palette speaks to Khlebnikov’s primitivism of both motif and method. Markov discusses how, since the “language yields easily to palindromes,” “in Russia palindrome developed from a sophisticated game into a minor folklore genre” in its own right (Markov 1962:157). Not unlike the Anglo-American modernists, who incorporated diverse allusions and registers of diction into their poems—in order, in Ezra Pound’s words, to “make it new”—Khlebnikov and his circle sought to recuperate the pagan, naïve, and pre-literate forms of language, and to re-incorporate them into a literary canon whose critics had deemed them unworthy of scholarly consideration (Markov 1968, 36). The form imposes certain generative

---

65 In both this essay and “Our Fundamentals” [Наша основа], Khlebnikov gives extensive examples to illustrate the applicability of this theory of consonants to the development and decoding of a universal zaum language: «Если взять слова чаша и чеботы, то обоми словами правит, призывает звук Ч. Если собрать слова на Ч: чулок, чеботы, черевички, чувяк, чунь, чуп<а>ки, чехол и чаша, чара, чан, чеботы, череп, чапуточка, чучело, — то видим, что все эти слова встречаются в точке следующего образа. Будет ли это чулок или чаша, в обоих случаях объем одного тела (ноги или воды) пополняет пустоту другого тела, служащего ему поверхностью. Отсюда чара как волшебная оболочка, сковывающая воплощенную — воду по отношению чары, отсюда чать, то есть быть чашей для вод будущего. Таким образом Ч есть не только звук, Ч — есть имя, неделимое тело языка. Если окажется, что Ч во всех языках имеет одно и то же значение, то решен вопрос о мировом языке: все виды обуви будут называться Че ноги, все виды чашек — Че воды, ясно и просто. Во всяком случае хата значит хата не только по-русски, но и по-египетски; В в индоевропейских языках означает вращение. Опирайся на слова хата, хижина, халупа, хутор, храм, хранилище, — мы видим, что значение <X> — “чerta преграды между точкой и движущейся к ней другой точкой”. Значение В в вращении одной точки около другой неподвижной. Отсюда — вир, вол, ворот, вьюга, вихрь и много других слов. М — “деление одной величины на бесконечно малые части”. Значение L — “переход тела, вытянутого вдоль оси движения, в тело, вытянутое в двух измерениях, поперечных пути движения”. Например, площадь лужи и капля ливня, лодка, лямка. Значение Ш — “слияние поверхностей, уничтожение границ между ними”. Значение K — “неподвижная точка, прикрепляющая сеть подвижных”. Таким образом заумный язык есть грядущий мировой язык в зародыше. Только он может соединить людей.» (T 394-5)
restrictions, leading to a consonantism that Markov calls “naturally, and properly, rough, barbaric, and picturesque,” even though the “palindromic structure predetermines the syntactical poverty of the poem. Most sentences are therefore exclamatory, impersonal, or one-word nominal sentences... On the other hand,” he notes, “the same factor conditions the richness of the vocabulary” (Markov 1962, 158-159).

In keeping with the formal conceit of the poem, whose every line marks a new variation on the palindrome as a structural theme, this rich vocabulary of neologisms, archaisms, abbreviations and colloquialisms gives a sense of wildly inventive improvisation within a consistent framework. Many otherwise familiar words appear in unexpected forms, as when Khlebnikov uses the short form of adjectives to avoid the long-form word endings that would interfere with his palindromes, e.g. «МОЛОД» [mólod] instead of «МОЛОДОЙ» [molodóy] and «ЗЛО» [zol] instead of «ЗЛОЙ» [zloy]. The palindrome effect creates echoes between one word and the counterpart that mirrors it, endowing each word of the pair with a new resonance. Often, the sonic connection between these mirror-words leads the reader to play each word, so to speak, in the key of its other — as in the pairings of «ХУД» [thin] and «ДУХ» [spirit, soul], or «НЕ РЕЧЬ» [not speech] and «ЧЕРЕН» [knife handle], or «ПЛОТ» [flesh] and «ТОЛП» [crowd]. In the midst of this lexical richness, such echoes combine with a syntactic parallelism to give a sense of each word — or even each phoneme — as a discrete and equivalent piece of verbal material. For instance, in the line «САНИ, ПЛОТ И ВОЗ, ЗОВ И ТОЛП И НАС» [Sani, plot i voz, zov i tolp i nas], or «ГОРД ДОХ, ХОД ДРОГ» [Gord dokh, khod drog], the parallel syntactic positions of words with different parts of speech posits a degree of equivalence between such semantically disparate words as sani (sledges) and i nas (and us) or gord (proud) and drog (dray-cart). Regardless of its semantic role in the sentence, each word is treated as a material complex of equal physicality and richness.
In keeping with the claim that even Khlebnikov’s “briefer verses create the impression of epic fragments” (Jakobson 1990, 274), one has the dual sense, in this poem, of its solidity and of its potential endlessness. The subtitle of “Pereverten,” which refers to the poem as «куски» [“pieces” or “fragments”], shows Khlebnikov’s awareness of its piecemeal qualities. Each line is perfectly, symmetrically hermetic and yet fragmentary, graspable only in the context of the other pieces of language that gesture towards a larger mythology of which they together comprise one artifact. The sonic unity of each line persists within shorter phrases and even within individual words—for example, in the third line, the [o] sounds in dolom and molod resonate both within the words and across the whole line, creating echoes with one another and with the [ë] (pronounced “yo”) of idēm and mēdi. Each feature of this verbal landscape reasserts itself, but backwards; each element is insisted upon even as it is recontextualized and thereby transformed. Khlebnikov illustrates the relationality of these fragments to show how relative their sonic and semantic properties are. Thus, the written word comes to seem at once more solid and more contingent than one might have imagined.

The last broad aesthetic shift in Khlebnikov’s poetic career can be illustrated most clearly through an analogy to contemporaneous developments in the visual arts. In the progression we have traced over the course of Khlebnikov’s work from “Bobeobi” to “Zakliatie smekhom” to “Pereverten,” what begins as an exploration of the ways in which the language of poetry can assert its materiality, endowing works of verbal art with the perceptual solidity of objects, increasingly distances itself from the material object as the standard to which both the poem and its units of construction are to be held. For Stein’s Tender Buttons, as for “Bobeobi,” such a

---

66 In his essay “On a Generation that Squandered its Poets,” Jakobson remarks, “Velimir Xlebnikov gave us a new epos, the first genuinely epic creations after many decades of drought...Xlebnikov is epic in spite of our antiepic times, and therein lies one of the reasons he is somewhat alien to the average reader” (Jakobson 1990, p. 274).
project necessarily involves representing perceptual processes: “In order to comprehend the [object] as a series and thus to penetrate into its systematic nature,” Ernst Cassirer reminds us, “there is needed not merely a single apperceptive act,…but always a manifold of such acts, which reciprocally condition each other. Thus a movement of thought is always demanded, yet a movement which is no mere change of presentation, but in which what is first gained is retained and made the starting-point of new developments” (Cassirer 317). To consider a work of verbal art as a compendium of such dynamic, reciprocal acts places an emphasis upon the parallel phenomenologies of perception and of reading, whose similarities both Khlebnikov and Stein explore. In Khlebnikov’s later work, this poetics of process carries with it yet another set of implications, one that has less to do with the phenomenology of the perceiving subject than with the structure of its object, language.

In traditionally descriptive, realist literature, as in traditionally representational painting, the unitary, “complete” work of art constitutes the kind of object it also mimetically represents: an incarnation of a set of essential and unchanging laws. A loss of faith in the capacity of any single object to encapsulate such universal properties, or of any singular human subject to instantiate total and lasting forms of perception, leads to a disavowal of the self-enclosed object, the stable or canonical word, in favor of what one might call the word-in-progress, the word as it gathers meaning unto itself. As Khlebnikov strives to build ever larger and more inclusive poetic forms, from the verse epic to the supersaga (sverkh-povest’), the individual words within his larger structures become less like solid splotches or strokes of paint and more like gradients in an ever more fine-grained spectrum of color. In Khlebnikov’s introduction to his most expansive supersaga, “Zangezi” (1920-22), the poet defines his new genre and accounts for its new conception of the word:

A story is made of words, the way a building is made of construction units. Equivalent words, like minute
building blocks, serve as the construction units of a story. A superstory, or supersaga, is made up out of independent sections, each with its own special god, its special faith, and its special rule. To the old Muscovite question about one’s orthodoxy, “How dost thou believe?” each section must answer independently of its neighbor. Each is free to confess its own particular faith... The supersaga resembles a statue made from blocks of different kinds of stone of varying colors—white for the body, blue for the cloak and garments, black for the eyes. It is carved from varicolored blocks of the Word, each with its own different sturcture. Thus do we discover a new kind of operation in the realm of verbal art. Narrative is architecture composed of words; an architecture composed of narratives is a “supersaga.” The artist’s building block is no longer the word, but the first-order narrative. (Schmidt 1989, 331)

Through the figure of Zangezi—wizard, poet, prophet, “master carpenter of time”—Khlebnikov puts forth his theory of historical time and illustrates how the “Alphabet is the echo of space” (CW I: 338; 364) by demonstrating the potentials of three transrational languages: the language of the birds [птичий язык; ptichiy iazyk], the language of the gods [язык богов; iazyk bogov], and the language of the stars [звездной язык; zvezdnoy iazyk]. He weaves numerous historical uprisings, from the Greek battle of Marathon to the battle of Kulikovo to the Polish insurrection of 1863 and the 1917 abdication of the last Russian tsar, into a cycle of conquest and retribution summarized in the Tables of Destiny [doski sud’by]. In a series of twenty-one sections, his fantastical and visionary saga chronicles the departure of the deities of the old order and the instantiation of a new world order whose goal is nothing short of the unification of humankind with the patterns of nature and the flow of time.

In “Zangezi,” neologisms proliferate on a larger scale than ever before in Khlebnikov’s work and grow out of a wider array of root words, prefixes, and endings. This difference of scale inculcates a different kind of readerly experience, as ceaseless repetition joins with seemingly infinite variation to give a sense, of every conceivable outgrowth of a given root—of “signs as
they have operated in the past, as they might in the future, or “both simultaneously” (Vroon 7).

These neologisms, rather than aspiring to the status of canonical coinages, serve as templates upon which a series of continuous changes is being wrought; they are “intermediate forms” whose indeterminacy of reference highlights their articulatory, phonetic characteristics on the one hand and their relation to existing semantic schemata (grammar, syntax, etymology) on the other. They illustrate how firmly Khlebnikov’s verbal constructions, notwithstanding the heights of invention to which they may soar, always begin and end grounded in the axioms of the Russian language. As Jakobson points out, “rhyme technique is ‘either grammatical or antigrammatical’ but never agrammatical, and the same may be applied as well to poets’ grammar in general. There is in this respect a remarkable analogy between the role of grammar in poetry and the painter’s composition, based on a latent or patent geometrical order or on a revulsion against geometrical arrangements” (Jakobson 1990, 132-33). The grammatical structure of Khlebnikov’s verse is the frame [pial’tsy] upon which the word-threads [len] are woven into a variegated and resonant fabric [tkan’].
Потопом летят в инеса,  
Летуры летят в собеса!  
Летавель могучей виданой,  
Этотой безвестной и  
странной,  
Крылом белоснежные  
махари,  
Полета усталого знахари,  
Сияны веянами дахари.  
Река голубого летога,  
Усталые  
крылья мечтога,  
Широкие песни ничтога.  
В созвездиях босы,  
Там умерло “ты”.  
У них небесурные косы,  
У них небесурные рты!  
В потоке востока всегда,  
Они улетят в никогдавель.  
Очами земного нетеж  
Закона земного нетуры,  
Они в голубое летеж,  
Они в голубое летуры.  
Окуются вещую грустью,  
Летят к доразумному устью,  
Нетурные крылья,  
грезурные рты!  
Незурные крылья, нетурные рты!  
У них небесурные лица,  
Они голубого столица.  
По синему небу бегуричи!  
Огнестром лелестра небес.  
Их дико грезурные они,  
Их дико незурные рты.

(T 486)

Neturichei staia, nezurichei,  
Potopom letiat v inesa,  
Letury letiat v sobesa!  
Letavel’ mogucheii vidanoi,  
Etotoi bezvestnoi i strannoi,  
Krylom belosnezhnye  
makhari,  
Poleta ustalovo znakhari,  
Siiany veianami dakhari.  
Reka golubovo letoga,  
Ustalye krylia mechtoga,  
Shirokie pesni nichtoga.  
V sozvezdiakh bosy,  
Tam umerlo “ty.”  
U nikh nebesurnye kosy,  
U nikh nebesurnye rty!  
V potoke vostoka vsegdava,  
Oni uletiat v nikogdavel’.  
Ohami zemnovo netezh,  
Zakona zemnovo netury,  
Oni v goluboe letezh,  
Oni v goluboe letury,  
Okutany veshchei grust’iu,  
Letiat k dorazumnomu  
ust’iu,  
Neturnye krylia, grezurnye  
rt’y!  
Nezurnye krylia, neturnye  
rt’y!  
U nikh nebesurnye litsa,  
Oni golubovo stolitsa.  
Po sinemu nebu begurichi!  
Ognestrom lelestra nebes.  
Ikh diko grezurnye ochi,  
Ikh diko nezurnye rty.

Into the goneness of here and  
the notness of now,  
hovering haveless through  
star-frost and sea-spray  
toward elsewhere. Wayfarers  
on the evening air,  
Thistening like thought-secrets, heaven’s harriers,  
these nestlings of nowhere, a  
latterng flutter  
of wings in flight to some  
elsewhere,  
of ledglings in flight, seeking  
their selfland!  
Hover-home, breeder of  
streaming light,  
Of strange unattainable flutter  
and fluxion!  
Wing-wavers white as  
drifting down,  
weary wizards of downward drift,  
Waving dowers of dawn.  
River of blue skystead,  
Weary wings of the  
dreamstead  
broad harmonies of the  
downstead.  
Barefooted in star clusters,  
there you died.  
Heaven hovers in their hair,  
heaven hovers in their voices!  
streaking the eastern stream  
of everland,  
they fly away into their  
everland.  
With the nevering eyes of the  
earthlings  
lke notnesses of earth-law,  
Fleet flight to the blue of  
heaven,  
flight fleet into blue,  
hovering.  
Shrouded in all-knowing  
sorrow,  
they fly to the source of pre-knowledge,  
winglings of no-where,  
mouths of now-here!  
Winglings of not-here,  
mouths of no-there!  
Heaven hovers in their faces:  
They are the dwellers in the  
blue places.  
Heaven’s high harriers, a  
flood of flame,  
the heavenly-river over us all.  
Their untamed eyes all  
vanishing vision,  
their untamed mouths saying:  
not-here.

(CW II, 351-2)

The thirteenth section, or “stage” [ploskost’] of “Zangezi” consists of a monologue by its
eponymous sorcerer-prophet, in which he describes the departure of the gods with a series of neologisms based on the root word лет [as in летать; letat’, to fly]. A number of related coinages are used to refer to the “they” [«они»] with whom the passage begins: “The personae [in the poem], the ullavli (“the fly-awayers,” from uletat’, to depart by flying), are the same ischezai (“disappearers”) and nekhotiai (“unwanting or reluctant ones”) mentioned earlier, the gods of the past receding into the distance” (Vroon 107). Rather than being described in concrete or visualizable terms, the gods are invoked metonymically in terms of their actions, e.g. their disavowal of the old order of laws, their disappearance, and their having forgotten their names.

The letury [летуръ; “flying-ones”] are made present, ironically, through the accretion of a series of terms to describe absence and emptiness. Also called netury and described as neturnye—an adjective based on the root word нет- [net-], meaning “no”—they disappear across the horizon into the netota [нетота; “minus-day”], thereby becoming netava—a noun coinage possibly modeled on the word держава [derzhava; “power, might”] that suggests their disenfranchisement. The sonic materiality of these repeated roots and suffixes stands in stark contrast to the completely abstract landscape Khlebnikov evokes. Often the neologisms resurrect the ghost of an existing Russian word that lends them its structure, as well as the shadow of its denotative meaning. For instance, the gods, described as étoty [это́ты; “luminous reflections”] and netoty [непо́ты; “no-longers”] call to mind two possible model words, vyso ty [высóты; “heights”] and pekhoty [пе́хоты; “foot soldiers, infantrymen”] that superimpose physical and visualizable meanings over these inscriptions of negation.

The affective resonance of the neologisms in Khlebnikov’s supersaga outstrips any attempts to pin them to a particular definition or even a particular part of speech. The purposeful semantic deformations the poet enacts upon his material result in an “accumulation of
unobtrusively incorrect forms [that] creates the impression of something primordial” (Markov 1962, p. 48). Further, this primitivist embrace of the “wrong word, which, in a strange way, does not seem out of place” (Markov 1962, 40) illuminates new possible meanings in addition to obstructing everyday ones. “Zangezi” treats each word as a particular embodiment of a set of linguistic laws, subordinating denotation to the process of building up a scene’s emotional tonality over time. This allows for the use of neologisms that seem unstable, dynamic, even semantically “incomplete,” when compared with their canonical counterparts. As Aleksandr Shevchenko states in his 1913 essay “Neoprimitivism: Its Theory, Its Potentials, Its Achievements”: “Objects are created not by simple copying but by the sensation of their forms and colors…In order to display the essence of objects, we resort to the depiction of their intermediate forms. This enables us not to enslave them on the picture’s surface in their isolated form, in a motionless state, but to depict them, as it were, in the moment of creation—in motion, i.e., in a more real, more complete form.” In the name of this particular brand of realism, many of Khlebnikov’s neologisms, such as летеж [letezh; “ones who fly”] in the passage above, could be seen as a word in motion between two points, or an intermediate gradient on a spectrum from мятежь [miatezh; “mutiny, rebellion, revolt”] to летать [letat’; “to fly”]. These words are often indeterminate in their parts of speech; Vroon points out that, in keeping with its meaning, летеж “hover[s] between noun and verb” (Vroon 62).

There exists a significant resemblance between what Jakobson might call Khlebnikov’s neologicist “deformations” of common Russian words and Stein’s dislocation and rearrangement of the elements of ordinary English sentences. The process of making meaning out of both

---

Stein’s and Khlebnikov’s language depends upon the reader’s recognition of the “normal” words or phrases upon which these works’ “deformed” words or phrases have been modeled, and “[e]ach violation is a commentary on the law it eludes” (Vroon 7). An understanding of the neologisms in “Zangezi” requires that the reader be familiar not only with the meanings and connotations of particular prefixes or suffixes, but with the semantics of the coinage’s model word as well. The word «окопад» [okopad] combines an archaic root oko- meaning “eye” with the root word пад, commonly seen in words like падать [padat’; to fall] or падение [padenie; collapse, decline]. An intuitive sense of the word’s meaning arises out of the complex of associations surrounding both of these roots, as well as the model word, «листопад» [listopad], meaning “falling of leaves.” In some cases, neologisms with the same suffix can derive different meanings from the different usages or contexts of that suffix. For instance, one relevant meaning of the noun suffix -avl’ / -av’el’ derives from its model word, журавль (zhuravl’), “crane.” In this case, Vroon writes,

[t]he semantics of the model is extremely relevant to the coinages that it generates. The gray-blue crane is regarded as a harbinger of warmth…It is known for the height and distance of its flight. At the same time the high flight of cranes is regarded as a sign that stormy weather will follow, and thus the bird may be ominous as well. The mournful cry of the crane is frequently heard in Ukrainian folklore. Xlebnikov’s analytical approach to existing words may have led him to associate the root with zhur- as in zhuritsia, which in Ukrainian means ‘to mourn’…The ambiguous symbolism of the model is crucial to an understanding of the coinages…The personae [in the poem], the uletavli (“the fly-awayers,” from uletat’, to depart by flying), are the same ischezai (“disappearers”) and nekhotai (“unwanting or reluctant ones”) mentioned earlier [in this section], the gods of the past receding into the distance. (Vroon 105-7)

In other neologisms using the suffix -avl’, Khlebnikov exploits yet another of its meaningful associations: the fact that “the names of ancient Russian cities (cf. Yaroslavl’, Likhoslavl’)” also feature this ending. Vroon points out that the occurrence of neologisms such as тихославль [tikhoslavl’] “in the immediate environment of the other [-avl’] coinages makes them a paronomastic extension of this cluster. The gods who fly away [uletavel’] have forgotten their names [svoë pozavybshie imia]; they are now a tikhoslavl’, a collective of silence [from
“tikho-,” silence; quiet]. Their destination is nikogdavel’ [from nikogda, “never”], the nev-
never land from whence they arose” (Vroon 107). The more familiar one is with the sources of,
and variations on, the building blocks of Khlebnikov’s neologisms, the more numerous will be
the directions in which they point, and the richer will be the associations they occasion.

It is in Khlebnikov’s “supersaga” that the duality between the concreteness of the Futurists’
“self-sufficient word” and the oft-cited abstractness of the poet’s oeuvre shows itself most
clearly. The more his neologistic practice expands its locus of signification, from the individual
phoneme (as in “Bobeobi”) to the individual word (“in Zakliatie smekhom”) to the verse line (in
“Pereverten’”) and beyond, the less clearly persists the distinction between the individual threads
and the overall texture [faktura] of the verbal tapestry. And the more Khlebnikov’s verse
eschews mimetic representation in order to “discover…a unity formed from the units of the
alphabet” (SP II 9), the more its reassertion of the material bedrock of the language supersedes
that language’s ability to refer to distinct and visualizable phenomena beyond itself. In this way,
“Zangezi”’s linguistic field of possibilities resembles the canvas of a non-objective painting:
more than even in his “cubist” phase, the medium has become the message.

The Trouble with Universality

Many of the positive qualities of zaum highlighted by Benedikt Livshits in his “Liberation
of the Word” essay (the centerpiece of the March 1913 Futurist collection The Croaked Moon
[Dokhlaia Luna]) could also be applied to Gertrude Stein’s poetry of the same period. Livshits
praises zaum poetry for being “free…for the first time…from the sad necessity of expressing the
logical connection of ideas”; he writes that the poet can now eschew logic and be influenced
instead “by plastic affinity of verbal expressions, by their plastic valence, by verbal texture
[faktura], by rhythmic problems and musical orchestration, and by the general requirements of
pictorial and musical structure.”68 This description fits Stein’s verse strikingly well—a surprising fact given her insistence that “Language as a real thing is not imitation either of sounds or colors or emotions it is an intellectual recreation and there is no possible doubt about it and it is going to go on being that as long as humanity is anything” (“Poetry and Grammar,” W II, 331). Further, whereas Khlebnikov and his circle made the creation of neologisms a touchstone of their poetics, Stein famously disdained this practice. “The english language,” says the speaker of The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, “was her medium and with the english language the task was to be achieved, the problem solved. The use of fabricated words offended her, it was an escape into imitative emotionalism” (SW 112).

Stein's account suggests that the primary difference between her approach to language and that of zaumniki like Khlebnikov is the difference between a scientific, “intellectual recreation” using existing language and a symbolist-inspired “imitation either of sounds or colors or emotions.” What Stein overlooks in her dismissal of such “imitative emotionalism” is that the difference between her work and that of her Russian counterparts is fundamentally a difference of scale. Stein manipulates language’s processes of making meaning on the scale of the sentence or paragraph, whereas Khlebnikov’s intervention into them begins on the smallest scale possible: that of the individual phoneme. Treating individual sounds as discrete, meaningful objects makes it possible for Khlebnikov to gloss over a possible contradiction between two of the aesthetic values that characterize his poetry and much other art of this period. One side of this dichotomy is modernist art’s preoccupation with medium, which bespeaks an obsession with the forms of mediation—material as well as methodological—that influence the construction of the work of

art. The other is an emphasis on endowing aesthetic experience with a maximum of sensory and emotional immediacy. Both Stein’s and Khlebnikov’s work tries to reconcile this opposition by foregrounding the forms of mediation employed by the work of art; paradoxically, they seem to do so in the name of making the work of art replicate “pure,” naïve, unmediated perceptual experiences.

This is the paradox enshrined in Shklovskii’s famous argument in “Art as Device” [Iskusstvo kak priëm], wherein literary language achieves the deautomatization of perception—and hence restores its vitality and freshness—precisely by obstructing the very processes whereby it makes meaning. In keeping with the Russian formalists’ tendency to cite folk songs and Old Slavic tales to explain literary devices, both Khlebnikov and Stein discover this combination of “purity” and vital immediacy in the undisguised media and alleged simplicity of folk art, “primitive” or indigenous art, and art made by children—to which both of their styles

---

70 For instance, in his essay on “Subliminal Verbal Patterning in Poetry”—in which Khlebnikov features prominently—Jakobson gives voice to the Futurist interest in Old Slavic folklore and oral poetry: “Folklore provides us with particularly eloquent examples of a verbal structure heavily loaded and highly efficient despite its habitual freedom from any control of abstract reasoning. […] The dense phonological and grammatical texture of folk riddles is, in general, quite impressive […] Phonology and grammar of oral poetry offer a system of complex and elaborate correspondences which come into being, take effect, and are handed down through generations without anyone’s cognizance of the rules governing this intricate network…Intuition may act as the main or, not seldom, even sole designer of the complex phonological and grammatical structures in the writings of individual poets. Such structures, particularly powerful on the subliminal level, can function without any assistance of logical judgment and patent knowledge both in the poet’s creative work and in its perception by the sensitive reader…” (Jakobson 1990, pp. 254-55; 261).
have been compared. Stein even went so far as to say that “the only thing that is spontaneously poetic is children,” since “[c]hildren themselves are poetry.”

As in Khlebnikov’s case, recasting her linguistic experiments in ludic terms was a way for Stein to confront charges that her work is not just childlike, but childish. Stein went so far as to claim, not without pleasure, “Children always seem to understand my books better than grownups.” She acknowledged in “A Transatlantic Interview,” “My poetry was children’s poetry.” When Stein decided, late in her life, to undertake the writing of a children’s book, she found the endeavor a way of literalizing the relationship between concreteness and abstraction that she had earlier problematized through her “childlike literalness” of style. In her first book for children, *The World Is Round* (1939), the contrast between axiomatic, received knowledge and the embodied experience of reality troubles the protagonist, a young girl named Rose: “The teachers taught her / that the world was round…It was so sad it almost made her cry / But then she did not believe it / Because mountains were so high” (*W II*, 543). The nursery rhyme qualities of Stein’s language highlight the role of play — or, as Marjorie Perloff notes, of

---

71 For an explanation of Khlebnikov’s purposeful aesthetic infantilism, see Markov 1968. As for Stein, she endorsed a view of her work as childlike, even in the face of critics who disparaged it as childish. She aligns her work with a childlike aesthetic in light of the fact that the same “loving repeating [that] is always in children” (*SW* 270) is a constitutive part of her work as well. More recently, Sianne Ngai has discussed Stein’s childlike aesthetic of “cuteness” as a form of critique. Ngai claims that, “if *Tender Buttons* still contributes in one way or another to the modernist avant-garde’s assault on the sentimentality of commodity culture, it does not do so merely or only by troping on cuteness [but] by managing to play on cuteness while also being cute.” (Sianne Ngai, “The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde.” *Critical Inquiry* 31:4 (Summer 2005), pp. 811-847; 829.)


74 Stein, “A Transatlantic Interview,” p. 29.

Wittgensteinian “language games”—in her attempts to mediate between the concrete qualities of her materials and their abstract or symbolic significance.\textsuperscript{76}

The project of resolving this tension between received wisdom and perceptual experience led Stein to make the linguistic field not only her play space, but her laboratory. As in Khlebnikov’s case, this can easily be seen as a symptom of the modernist drive to recuperate the cultural salience of poetry by aligning it both rhetorically and methodologically with the sciences.\textsuperscript{77} From the start of Stein’s writing career, the case study provides an important model for her attempts to abstract general principles from particular instances. Donald Sutherland traces this tendency back to Stein’s training in William James’s psychology lab, and contextualizes it within the broader literary trend of scientific and philosophical empiricism:

> In the scientific climate of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century the single life took on the meaning of a case history, or the natural and inevitable performance of any instance of a species…The literary record or an ordinary life is not a documentation of the single case for its own sake…but a demonstration of how the single case expresses the essentials of the whole species or subspecies.\textsuperscript{78}

“[H]aunted,” in Sutherland’s words, “by the pretention to universal inclusion,” Stein’s early work “is a universal history of human types,” in which “all these separate individuals are related mainly to a few essential classifications developed by Gertrude Stein— the attacking type and the resisting type, the dependent independent type and the independent dependent type…giv[ing] external coherence and…scope to a book which was projected as the history of ‘everyone who ever was or is or will be living.’”\textsuperscript{79} “One consequence of such mixed claims,” which seek to provide universal laws of character on the basis of immediate perceptions, is—as Robert Chodat


\textsuperscript{77} The most recent reading of Stein as a proponent of “poetic” science or experimentalism and a successor to the pragmatism of such thinkers as Alfred North Whitehead and William James is Stephen Meyer’s Irresistible Dictation: Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001). Robert Chodat critiques the myth of Stein as “scientific” in the first chapter of his Worldly Acts and Sentient Things: The Persistence of Agency from Stein to DeLillo. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008, pp. 25-55.

\textsuperscript{78} Donald Sutherland, Gertrude Stein: A Biography of Her Work. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), p. 27.

\textsuperscript{79} Sutherland 42; 53.
reminds us—“that the first-person perspective can come to occupy the same distinguished place in explanation that science usually accords the third-person perspective” (Chodat 36). As we will see in subsequent chapters, Stein is neither the first nor the last poet to occlude the particularity of the organizing consciousness behind her poems in the name of a dubious exemplarity. Her own idiosyncracies, however, have tended to leave critics faced with two opposite options: either to focus on the biographical elements of her work, or else to insist, as Chodat remarks, upon her writing’s “scientific” qualities (Chodat 33; 54).

Stein openly acknowledges the unresolved tension in The Making of Americans between the individual person as the object of her study, and her goal of dividing human nature into general, taxonomic categories. Note the pervasive alternation, in the following passage, between these two scales of inquiry:

Sometime there will be here every way there can be of seeing kinds of men and women. Sometime there will be then a complete history of each one. Every one always is repeating the whole of them and so sometime some one who sees them will have a complete history of every one. Sometime some one will know all the ways there are for people to be resembling, some one sometime then will have a completed history of every one…Then there will be realised the complete history of every one, the bottom nature in them, the mixtures in them, the strength and weakness of everything they have inside them,…the meaning in them, the being in them, and then you have a whole history then of each one. (Selected Writings 263; my emphasis)

This oscillation between the desire to “see” “the whole” of “each one” “some time” and to develop “a completed history” of “every one” “always” typifies Stein’s mode of character construction in The Making of Americans. She first lays out a general description of a type of character, expands upon it at length and with much repetition, and eventually alights on the particular name of the person in question:

Each one as I am saying has it in them to feel more or less, sometime, something, almost certainly each one sometime has some capacity for more or less feeling something. Some have in them always and very little feeling, some have some feeling and much nervous being always in them, some have as a bottom to them very much weakness and eagerness together then and they have then such of them some sensitiveness in them to things coming to them but often after they are then full up with nervous vibrations and then nothing
can really touch them…and sometimes stubborn feeling then in them and then nothing can touch them and they are all this being then was nervous vibratory quivering and perhaps Mrs. Redfern was such a one…

(SW 282-83; my emphasis)

It seems very much in keeping with the ethos of this project, which seeks to taxonomize and categorize people into broad types, to have the verbal objectification of these characters take place on the level of the phrase, rather than on the level of the individual word or sound. In *The Making of Americans*, phrases that otherwise might seem mere discursive accessories acquire, through repetition, a materiality that they then lend to paragraphs whose content is quite abstract:

It is hard to know it of any one whether they are enjoying anything, whether they are feeling something, whether they are knowing they are giving pain to some one, whether they were planning that thing. It is a very difficult thing to know such things in any one any one is knowing, very difficult even when they are telling that one all the feeling they have in them, a very difficult thing when they are not telling anything. It is a very difficult thing to tell it of any one whether they are enjoying a thing, whether they know that they are hurting some one, whether they have been planning the acting they have been doing. It is a very difficult thing to know anything of the being in any one, it is a very difficult thing to know the being in any one if they tell you all that they themselves know of it as they live it…It is a very difficult thing to know the being in any one. It is a very difficult thing to know whether any one is feeling a thing, enjoying a thing, knowing that they are hurting some one, planning that thing, planning anything they are doing in their living. (SW 287; my emphasis)

Although the primary feature of this passage (which continues for twice the length of the excerpt quoted here) is its repetition of phrases built around the word “thing,” the experience of the passage is not that of encountering an object, but that of participating in a cycle, of watching a discursive serpent eat its own tail *ad infinitum*. One reason for this is the size of the linguistic freight that these paragraphs, as vehicles moving the text from one part to the next, have been asked to carry. As we will see, Stein’s shift of focal scale—from the paragraph to the individual word or even the single phoneme—allows her to put the verbal materials of *Tender Buttons*

---

80 By “objectification,” I mean to refer to several things: the instrumentality of individual characters for the purpose of shoring up Stein’s categories; the interchangeability of these individuals, such that they become deindividuated; their lack of subjectivity or agency as characters—and also, in a way that becomes important for my subsequent discussion of *Tender Buttons*—their function as objects of language, whose repetitive characterization emphasizes the constancy of their personalities as well as the materiality and solidity of the words used to describe them. For more potential usages of this term, see Martha C. Nussbaum (1985), “Objectification.” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 24 (4), pp. 279–83.
through much more rapid transformations. This change of scale radically alters the object-like quality of her texts.

Around 1911, Stein first abandons the paragraph as a unit of meaning and explores the possibilities of reshaping language on the level of the phrase or sentence. Her later lecture on “Poetry and Grammar” raises the question of scale explicitly: on what level(s) of language—in this case, the English language—do meanings form? On what scale does language produce “emotional” effects? This query speaks to the distinction Stein draws between prose and poetry:

Sentences are not emotional but paragraphs are. [...] When I wrote The Making of Americans I tried to break down this essential combination by making enormously long sentences that would be as long as the longest paragraph and so to see if there was really and truly this essential difference between paragraphs and sentences, if one went far enough with this thing with making the sentences long enough to be as long as any paragraph and so producing in them the balance of a paragraph not the balance of a sentence [...] But after I had gone as far as I could in these long sentences and paragraphs that had come to do something else I then began very short things and in doing very short things I resolutely realized nouns and decided not to get around them but to meet them, to handle in short to refuse them by using them and in that way my real acquaintance with poetry was begun. (“Poetry and Grammar,” W II 322; 325)

In her experiments “to see if there was really and truly this essential difference between paragraphs and sentences,” Stein discovers the noun as the minimal threshold, the least contingent fact, of linguistic meaning. “Nouns are the names of things and so nouns are the basis of poetry,” she writes (W II 329); the problem is that “a name of anything is not interesting because once you know its name the enjoyment of naming it is over and therefore in writing prose names that is nouns are completely uninteresting” (W II 327). The rationale of her method in Tender Buttons is a drive to transform the noun:

Was there not a way of naming things that would not invent names, but mean names without naming them...I commenced trying to do something in Tender Buttons about this thing. I went on and on trying to do this thing. I remember in writing...looking at anything until something that was not the name of that thing but was in a way that actual thing would come to be written...This that I have just described, the creating it without naming it, was what broke the rigid form of the noun the simple noun poetry which now was broken. (“Poetry and Grammar,” W II 330-31)
It is important to note that *Tender Buttons’ “concern” with using with abusing, with losing with wanting, with denying with avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun* (WII, 327) constitutes a movement away from the impulse to typologize that marked Stein's earlier works. In *The Making of Americans*, most of which was written between 1903 and 1911, Stein would later claim, “I had of course written about every kind of men and women” (“Portraits and Repetition,” WII, 292). She narrates the turn to *Tender Buttons*, to poetry—to the thing as opposed to its name—as follows: “I was completely obsessed by the inner life of everything…and I was writing prose…And then, something happened and I began to discover the names of things, that is not discover the names but discover the things the things to see the things to look at” (“Poetry and Grammar,” WII, 329). Stein’s earlier work, from *Three Lives* to *The Making of Americans*, had raised the problem of all-encompassing or total vision; her portraits of human subjects had sought to be similarly encyclopedic by rendering “the rhythm of anybody’s personality” (“Portraits and Repetition,” WII, 292; italics mine). She presents *Tender Buttons* as a focal shift from “everything” and “anybody” to particular “things” and the process of “look[ing] at” them.

This movement towards a fragmented, circuitous, and phenomenologically-based approach to rendering objects in time also marks a turn away from the human as a portrait subject—a departure with several consequences for both the style of Stein’s writing and its reception. Even as *Tender Buttons* is often read as representing a Jamesian “stream of consciousness” or the phenomenology of perception described by Merleau-Ponty, Stein’s portraits of objects, food, and rooms tend to occlude the perceiving subject as a physical presence. For an example of the former reading, see Steven Meyer’s *Irresistible Dictation: Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001). For the latter, see Ariane
intentionality, or (to use Mel Chen’s recent term) “animacy.” Tender Buttons transforms the diagnostic distance or “impersonality” of Stein’s earlier projects — whose interest in psychology and character is more explicit — in two directions. Its occlusion of the human subject in the name of “act[ing] so that if there is no use in a center” (CW I 344) would seem to constitute an Eliotic “escape from personality” — and yet the smaller scale of the work, the dailiness and intimacy of the domestic interior, and the close range at which the free play of consciousness over its objects is depicted, root Tender Buttons in the scale of individual experience in ways that the earlier projects arguably do not.

A comparison of the different sections of Tender Buttons shows that even much smaller differences of scale than the one between that work as a whole and, say, The Making of Americans, have important effects on both the language Stein uses and the kinds of observations or insights that language is able to convey. Let us take as a starting point one of Tender Buttons’ short object-portraits, from its first section, “Objects”:

GLAZED GLITTER.

Nickel, what is nickel, it is originally rid of a cover.

The change in that is that red weakens an hour. The change has come. There is no search. But there is, there is that hope and that interpretation and sometime, surely any is unwelcome, sometime there is breath and there will be a sinecure and charming very charming is that clean and cleansing. Certainly glittering is handsome and convincing.


82 See Mel Y. Chen, Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012). In The Poetics of Indeterminacy, Marjorie Perloff elaborates on this point, claiming that the texts of Tender Buttons mark “a move towards Surrealism,” since they take “words designating the most ordinary objects—pincushions, fabric, closets, beds, a sash, a tassel—and [put] them in extraordinary situations, treating these things as if they had a life and volition of their own” (Perloff 1981, p. 106).


84 Indeed, as Chodat notes, a large portion of Stein criticism has mitigated the opacities of Stein’s writing with reference to the details of her private life. Two examples of this trend are William Gass, The World within the Word (New York: Knopf, 1978), and Ulla E. Dydo, Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises, 1923-1934 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003). I hope to suggest here that the existence of a private or domestic life is foundational to the kinds of abstraction Stein achieves, but that the details of that life are largely beside the point for the purposes of gauging Stein’s relationship to perception and to the material and auditory qualities of her medium.
There is no gratitude in mercy and in medicine. There can be breakages in Japanese. That is no programme. That is no color chosen. It was chosen yesterday, that showed spitting and perhaps washing and polishing. It certainly showed no obligation and perhaps if borrowing is not natural there is some use in giving. (WI 313)

From the title onwards, “Glazed Glitter” progresses by the repetition of similar sounds, often in a way that bears out the relationship between etymological pairings. If a glazed object is filled in or enclosed in a surface of glass (and indeed “glazed” and “glass” have the same root), the gl-shared by “glitter” suggests a similar set of meanings, originating in the Old High German word for “brightness” and the Old Norse word for “to shine.” Previous critics have taken an etymological approach to “unpacking” Stein’s texts, but few of them have accounted for the ways in which a sonic logic—an accretion of repeated (and repeatedly altered) phonemic material—propels these descriptions forward. There is no way of knowing for certain whether these sections were composed in a linear fashion; it is certain, however, that at least the first reading of them must unfold linearly. I suggest that Stein exploits this temporal nature of the verbal medium in order to make the experience of reading these descriptions mirror the phenomenology of taking in this visual sense-data over time, in a way that is reminiscent of the construction of the face in Khlebnikov’s “Boboobi.”

In “Glazed Glitter,” the meaning of “glaze” gives rise to the repeated word “nickel” (from the German Kupfernickel, or copper-colored ore, an alloy used for plating coins). In calling “nickel” “originally rid of a cover,” Stein recalls the original “glazing” function of copper. “The change in that,” she goes on to say, “is that red weakens in an hour. The change has come.” This transient “red” seems to be a reference to the color of the copper—or, if one takes more narrative liberties, to the blush associated with a brief flirtation or embarrassment, perhaps related to the “handsome and convincing” “glittering” of the offered “sinecure.” (On the following page, the fragment entitled “A box,” which begins, “Out of kindness comes redness,”
supports this reading.) In addition to suggesting a possible “change” in the relationship between giver and receiver, the word carries the double meaning of “a small denomination of coinage” and “transformation.”85 The oft-cited circularity of Stein’s writing is in fact counterbalanced by a series of such “changes” wrought upon words with similar etymologies or phonetic components. For instance, the “i” in “glitter” finds its echo in “nickel,” while the hard “c” [k] sounds of “nickel” resounds off the similar sounds in “weakens,” “unwelcome,” “sincere,” “clean,” “cleansing,” and “convincing.” A similar process leads the poem’s reasoning as it moves from “change” to “charming” to “chosen.” One could even go so far as to claim that these repeated sounds suggest the absent nouns on which their descriptions are based—“copper” in the first verse-paragraph and “china” in the second.

Stein’s repetition of individual sounds and individual words invites one to reconsider those words’ meanings and roles in a given sentence. The repetition of conjunctions, articles and prepositions works similarly, asserting the materiality and salience of these “minor” words as connective tissue holding the sentence, the image, the thought together. It also makes it possible to track the slight changes made to these phrases and the resultant difference in usage or meaning, e.g. from “in that” to “is that” to “and that.” Moving from “clean” to “cleansing,” for instance, suggests various ways in which the two words might be related. (A “clean” thing might “cleanse” you or prove “cleansing”; conversely, a thing becomes “clean” through “cleansing,” by being “cleansed.”) These object portraits’ progression by means of etymological relations makes each description into a small-scale model—or a case study, perhaps—of the historical process whereby roots and meanings, repeated over a long time, gather new meanings unto themselves.

and form new networks of meaning. Further, by enacting ceaseless transformations on these material elements of language, each passage stages the time-bound perception of “change” in the relations between its words—and, correspondingly, between the objects they represent.

Sound acts as Stein’s means of moving between concrete objects, the processes that govern how those objects appear to us, and the cognitive processes involved in moving from the object described towards some more general or abstract idea of it. For instance, he soft “c” [s] sound in “sinecure” and “convincing” serves as an audible connection to “mercy” and “medicine” in the second verse-paragraph. By means of this sound, Stein connects the “Japanese” (i.e., porcelain) with the care shown in preparation of the gift alluded to in both the first and final verse-paragraphs: “It was chosen yesterday, that showed spitting and perhaps washing and polishing.” Finally, the assonance between the more concrete actions of “washing,” “polishing” and the more abstract social gestures of “obligation” and “borrowing,” along with those between “convincing” and “spitting,” form an auditory bridge from “glittering” in the first part to “giving” in the last. Stein weaves together gestures and perceptions, customs and material objects, by showing how they are all cut from the same verbal fabric.

“Glazed Glitter” exemplifies Stein’s cubist still life technique at its most concerted, with its tight focal range, high degree of sonic density, and large quantity of visually suggestive (if not technically visualizable) detail. Whether it serves a descriptive, generalizing, or seemingly offhand function, each sentence stands as a fairly independent unit; as mentioned above, the connections between sentences are primarily sonic rather than rational or discursive. A comparison of this representative passage from the “Objects” section of Tender Buttons with one of the later sections’ descriptive passages makes clear how differently Stein’s style operates, and to what different effect, when the text’s scale of focus is altered. What follows is a selection from
the passage entitled “Roastbeef,” the first part of *Tender Buttons*’ “Food” section. The selection represents a bit less than a third of the passage’s total length:

ROASTBEEF.

In the inside there is sleeping, in the outside there is reddening, in the morning there is meaning, in the evening there is feeling. In feeling anything is resting, in feeling anything is mounting, in feeling there is resignation, in feeling there is recurrence and entirely mistaken there is pinching. All the standards have steamers and all the curtains have bed linen and all the yellow has discrimination and all the circle has circling. This makes sand. [...]

The change the dirt, not to change dirt means that there is no beefsteak and not to have that is no obstruction, it is so easy to exchange meaning, it is so easy to see the difference. The difference is that a plain resource is not entangled with thickness and it does not mean that thickness shows such cutting, it does mean that a meadow is useful and a cow absurd. It does not mean that there are tears, it does not mean that exudation is cumbersome, it means no more than a memory, a choice and a reëstablishment, it means more than any escape from a surrounding extra. All the time that there is use there is use and any time there is a surface there is a surface, and every time there is an exception there is an exception and every time there is a division there is a dividing. Any time there is a surface there is a surface and every time there is a suggestion there is a suggestion and every time there is silence there is silence and every time that is languid there is that then and not oftener, not always, not particular, tender and changing and external and central and surrounded and singular and simple and the same and the circle and the shine and the succor and the white and the same and the better and the red and the same and the centre and the yellow and the tender and the better, and altogether. [...]

A sound, a whole sound is not separation, a whole sound is in an order.

Suppose there is a pigeon, suppose there is.

Looseness, why is it, why is it, is bigger.

The time when there are four choices and there are four choices in a difference, the time when there are four choices there is a kind and there is a kind. There is a kind. There is a kind. Supposing there is a bone, there is a bone. Supposing there are bones. There are bones. When there are bones there is no supposing there are bones. There are bones and there is that consuming. The kindly way to feel separating is to have a space between. This shows a likeness [...]

(WI\textsuperscript{327-31})

Many differences between this section and “Glazed Glitter” are clear at once. In the later sections of *Tender Buttons*, as evidenced here, the average length of the individual descriptions increases, and long, run-on sentences with minimal punctuation replace the shorter declaratives of earlier sections. The repetition and transformation of individual phonemes or syllables— as in the change from “clean” to “cleansing” to “convincing” in “Glazed Glitter”— gives way to the repetition of whole phrases or sentences (e.g., “It does not mean,” “There is a kind”) reminiscent
of *The Making of Americans*. “Glazed Glitter” is made up of 124 words, with an average of ten words per sentence; “Roastbeef,” in contrast, is 1756 words in length, with an average sentence length of 21 words. As in Khlebnikov’s movement from “Заклятие смехом” to “Занеци,” this difference in length amounts to a difference in the phenomenology of reading, and in the text’s aesthetic effects. This difference increases as the relative density of particularized or descriptive language lessens in these later sections; the high concentration of adjectives and concrete nouns is supplanted by conjunctions, static verbs (“to be,” “to mean”), and abstractions (“anything,” “likeness”).

The increasingly abstract content of the sections, when juxtaposed with the concrete nouns in their titles, means that attempts to link the two (that is, to find out how title and section refer to one another) become increasingly far-fetched as the text moves from “Objects” to “Food” to “Rooms.” In contrast to “Glazed Glitter,” “Roastbeef” contains fewer words that describe the object mentioned in its title. The poem does have representational moments, such as the phrase “There is reddening,” which evokes the fact that roast beef—in contrast to other meat dishes—tends to redden in the center as the cooking process goes on. The “thickness” of the meat; the “cutting” process; its source—“a cow”); and its remains (“a bone” or “bones”) all ostensibly refer to an actual roast beef and its preparation process. However, whereas the adjectives, verbs, and nouns of “Glazed Glitter” tended to be treated as objects in their own right, those of “Roastbeef” more often serve to stage a repeated scene, such as a typical dawn (“In the inside there is sleeping”) or to posit a hypothetical proposition (“Suppose there is a pigeon, suppose there is”). Further, Stein replaces the mutually-reinforcing descriptors of the “Objects” section with a set of stock oppositions: inside vs. outside, morning vs. evening, and meaning vs. feeling. The passage reads less like an abstract description of a concrete object than like a set of
generalizations or tautologies, repeated and reinforced as if part of a lesson. The taxonomic tone
of *The Making of Americans* has returned, and the specimen is hard to locate despite appearing,
in brief flashes, before the mind’s eye.

The majority of these paragraphs appear to operate according to their own internal logic,
and each paragraph is structured by means of its own refrain or alternating refrains. (In the first
paragraph, the repeated structure is: “In the x there is y; in the second it is “It is so easy,”
followed by “it does not mean”; in the third it is “all the time,” “any time,” and “every time.”)
One paragraph proceeds almost entirely by negations (“it does not mean…it does not mean…”),
while a succeeding one lists a multiplicity of features, sometimes contradictory but always
connected by “and” (“tender and changing and external and central and surrounded and singular
and simple and the same and the surface and the circle and the shine” and so on). The overall
effect is one of a much looser verbal structure, characterized by less sonic density and fewer
auditory or logical connections on every level of signification.

We can take the comparison between “Roastbeef” and “Glazed Glitter” as indicative of
general differences between the earlier and later sections of *Tender Buttons*, and, in more general
terms, between *Tender Buttons* and the longer works that Stein conceived as prose rather than
poetry. The substance of any Stein text is a function of the number of repetitions out of which it
is constructed; the more sonic material builds up, the more the words that might formerly have
seemed merely ornamental or excessive come to be seen as contributing to a composite verbal
object: “Does this change,” Stein asks. “It shows that dirt is clean when there is a volume” (*WI*
313). As critics such as Meyer and Perloff have noted, this is an inherently non-hierarchical
mode of writing—one in which, following William James, any difference in a passage’s
“content” is revealed to be contextual rather than inherent, and in which “each part is as important as the whole.”

It is a function of their constrained scale that the eponymous “objects” of the first section of *Tender Buttons* provide Stein with the ideal stage on which to enact the accretion of visual sense-data by sonic means. Nowhere else in her work does her language at once acquire such a degree of autonomy from hierarchical models of gathering, generalizing, and communicating information and remain so firmly rooted in the physicality and particularity of the material world. In this sense, Stein’s verbal objects could be said to exemplify the same self-containment their author ascribed to successful paintings: “Whether it is intended to look like something and looks like it or whether it is intended to look like something and does not look like it it really makes no difference, the fact remains that for me it has achieved an existence in and for itself, it exists on as being an oil painting as a flat surface and it has its own life and like it or not there it is” (*W II*, 237-42). Due to their length, many of Stein’s later works bring her “objective” ambition to the limits of possible representation, or even—depending upon one’s point of view—beyond those limits.

The problem with these longer works arises as a result of Stein’s exaggerated faith in the “immediacy” of auditory, as opposed to visual, sense-data. Another of her *Lectures in America* bears out Pieter Vermeulen’s observation that “Looking (or seeing) and listening (or talking) have, for Stein, very different temporalities. For Stein, ‘seeing’ is complicit with repetition,

---

Stein, quoted in Peter Childs, *Modernism (The New Critical Idiom)*. (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 113. Elsewhere, William James writes: “In a pot in a paintshop, along with other paints, [the paint] serves in its entirety as so much saleable matter. Spread on a canvas, with other paints around it, it represents, on the contrary, a feature in a picture and performs a spiritual function. Just so, I maintain, does a given undivided portion of experience, taken in one context of associates, play the part of knower, of a state of mind, of ‘consciousness’; while in a different context the same undivided bit of experience plays the part of a thing known, of an objective ‘content.’” (William James, “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” [1904], in *The Principles of Psychology* (New York, Henry Holt & Co., 1890), p. 1141).
resemblance, and memory, and as such threatens the immediacy and intensity of emotion that her poetics requires.” In “Portraits and Repetition,” Stein claims that the act of looking “inevitably carried in its train realizing movements and expression and as such forced me into recognizing resemblances, and so forced remembering and in forcing remembering caused confusion with past and future time.” In contrast, “Listening and talking did not presuppose resemblance and [therefore] they do not necessitate remembering” (“Portraits and Repetition,” W II, 293). I read *Tender Buttons* as an attempt at verbal art that does “not presuppose resemblance,” one which dispenses with visual representation of objects in order to reconstitute those objects’ immediacy and presence through sonic means. The need for a lecture series to explain the stakes and effects of these experiments speaks not only to the “abstract” nature of Stein’s project, but also to the tensions between her poetic practice and the broader theories of language and perception that it can never quite embody.

In view of these difficulties, the model of cubist still life served Stein’s writing perhaps better in *Tender Buttons* than in her later work, for the reason Norman Bryson highlights: “Even in analytical Cubism, the interest is less in ‘abstraction’ than in the *pull* between the forces of abstraction and the gravity and inertia of still life’s familiar forms” (Bryson 85). Precisely because it begins by focusing on the everyday, the creaturely, the domestic, the still life serves as a template on which the artist can enact a step-by-step transformation on the objects of her attention, at once embodying and dramatizing a movement from reality through mimesis and towards ever-greater “abstraction.” In *Tender Buttons*, one begins not with the theories governing the appearance of these bourgeois domestic objects, but with the objects themselves. All of them—from the clothes one wears to the food one eats—retain their thinglike physicality,

---

even as they gesture towards the superstructures of gender, class, economy and sexuality in
which they are always already imbricated. Khlebnikov’s transformation of existing words and
phonemes, in order to redefine the relationship of etymology and semantics to their cultural
matrix, is a parallel gesture to Stein’s encoding of sociality and history within the objects of still
life. Both poets’ efforts to objectify the parallel processes of perception and poetic composition
are attempts to encapsulate the largest ambitions of avant-garde literary modernism in some of its
smallest objects.

A Shift of Focus

The role of grammar proves central to any understanding of Stein’s and Khlebnikov’s
linguistic effects, since grammatical rules serve as the blueprint for the normative phrases and
sentences they eschew. As, in Shakespearean drama, a break in the norm of the iambic
pentameter line signals a moment of emotional or discursive import, these writers’ work
undermines received linguistic structures by means of grammatical or semantic dislocation,
known among the Futurists as sdvig [“shift”]. Khlebnikov’s collaborator, Kruchenykh, went so
far as to entitle one of his treatises on Russian Futurism Сдвигология [Sdvigologia, or
Shiftology], and to claim, “Sdvig permeates verse (especially modern verse)—it is one of the
most important aspects of the poem. It changes words, lines, sounds…There, where a slippage in
consciousness seemed to appear [in the poem], sdvig reveals itself to be, a secret creative work,
at times yielding up many authors’ secrets!”88 The concept of sdvig likewise informs Jakobson’s

88 «Сдвиг насквозь пронизывает стих (особенно современный) он — одна из важнейших частей стиха. Он
 меняет слова, строки, звучание […] Где, казалось, был проскок сознания— там вскрывается сдвиг, тайная
 творческая работа, выдающая подчас многие секреты авторов!» Kruchenykh, Sdvigologia, pp. 34-36.
treatise on the relationship between the “Poetry of Grammar and [the] Grammar of Poetry”:

…rhyme technique is ‘either grammatical or antigrammatical’ but never agrammatical, and the same may be applied as well to poets’ grammar in general. There is in this respect a remarkable analogy between the role of grammar in poetry and the painter’s composition, based on a latent or patent geometrical order or on a revulsion against geometrical arrangements […It] is precisely against the background of [a] common feature that the differences in fundamentals of poetic grammar become evident, in particular, [the] sliding between juxtaposed grammatical categories, for example, different cases or different combinatory meanings of one and the same case—in a word, [the] continual change of focus.” (Jakobson 1990, pp. 132-33; 144)

The notion of a continual change of focus, according to Jakobson, helps to account for the “complex” sensory experience of Khlebnikov’s poetry, within whose “network of analogies” “space and time, visual and auditory perception, character and action are all juxtaposed” (Jakobson 1921, pp. 39-40). I would suggest that Khlebnikov’s and Kruchenykh’s writings on sdvig are the first formulation of a broader shift of focus in poetry, from an emphasis on the self-containment of individual objects to an interest in the dynamic relationships between different kinds and categories of objects.

We can see sdvig-like dislocations and transformations, along with rapid changes in scale and perspective, in Stein’s Tender Buttons. Ample documentation testifies to Stein’s interest in grammar, of which she said, “I really do not know that anything has ever been more exciting…[T]o me undoubtedly when I was at school the really completely exciting thing was diagramming sentences and that has been to me ever since the one thing that has been completely exciting and completely completing” (Stein, “Poetry and Grammar,” W II 314). In keeping with Jakobson’s analogy between grammar and geometry, I would suggest that the diagrammed sentence serves much the same role in Stein’s writing as the linguistic root plays in a Khlebnikov poem—or as a geometrical shape occupies in a cubist painting. All of these art forms begin with a standard form, whether implicit or explicit, upon which they enact successive “shifts” in a way that calls up the ghost of the standard only to supplant it with a composite form that more overtly
acknowledges its own contingency.\textsuperscript{89}

Further, Stein’s and Khlebnikov’s poetics of the abstract object calls forth this phantom norm as a way of staging not only perceptual processes but the dialectic between concreteness and abstraction that inheres in them. At the root of every attempt to “see a fine substance strangely” (\textit{WI} 312) lies a countervailing desire for recognition, for the ability to name and classify what one sees in a way that would make “the power of sight absolute,” in Czesław Miłosz’s phrase.\textsuperscript{90} Correspondingly, any abstraction poses a threat to the “innocent” eye whose continued appeal to the modernists was, in some sense, a holdover from a Romantic notion of sight.\textsuperscript{91} Jakobson recounts how Stalin dismissed linguist Nikolai Marr’s Japhetic theory of language origins as anti-Marxist by citing the insidious power of abstraction to lose sight of the material substrata of words:

\begin{quote}
\ldots abstracting itself from anything that is particular and concrete in words and sentences, grammar treats only the general patterns, underlying the word changes and the combinations of words into sentences, and builds in such a way grammatical rules and laws. In this respect grammar bears a resemblance to geometry, which, when giving its laws, abstracts itself from concrete objects, treats objects as bodies deprived of concreteness and defines their mutual relations not as concrete relations or certain concrete objects but as
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{89} This is similar to an argument made by Frederic Jameson in his essay “Beyond the Cave: Demystifying the Ideology of Modernism,” \textit{The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association}, vol. 8, no. 1 (Spring, 1975), pp. 16-17: “[I]t follows, from what we have said, and from the very notion of a recoding of secular reality or of the decoded flux, that all modernistic works are essentially simply cancelled realistic ones; that they are in other words not apprehended directly, in terms of their own symbolic meanings, in terms of their own mythic or sacred immediacy, the way an older primitive or overdetermined work would be, but rather indirectly only, by way of the relay of an imaginary realistic narrative of which the symbolic and modernistic one is then seen as a kind of stylization; and this is a type of reading, and a literary structure, utterly unlike anything hitherto known in the history of literature…[The] reading of such a work is always a two-stage affair, first, substitution of a realistic hypothesis…then an interpretation of that secondary and invented or projected core narrative according to the procedures we reserved for the older realistic [text] in general…I suggest that this elaborate process is at work everywhere in our reception of contemporary works of art.”


\textsuperscript{91} Martin Jay relates this issue to the early twentieth century’s penchant for “primitivism” as follows: “The extension of the range of Western aesthetic experience could be interpreted as an example of the dominating anthropological gaze at the ‘other’…The very aestheticization of ‘primitive’ artifacts meant removing them from their original context—functional, ritual, or whatever—and appreciating only their abstract form. No account of the prehistory of Modernism can ignore the impact of this revaluation of primitivism, which often drew on an older, Romantic belief in the power of ‘innocent’ vision. But its political ambiguities have also become harder to gainsay in recent years.” (Martin Jay, \textit{Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought}. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 140-41.)
relations of bodies in general, namely, relations deprived of any concreteness.  

Stein and Khlebnikov’s work displays a degree of anxiety towards concreteness, as both artists demonstrate their awareness of the distortions inherent in individual perception and the limited possibility of adducing general principles from particular instances of a given phenomenon. At the same time, their writings abound in evidence of a corresponding mistrust of abstraction. The sense that any broader or more general claims about the relations between real-world phenomena—let alone any attempts to schematize or represent those relations—will necessarily involve a degree of falsification, pulls their work back in the direction of the singular and the concrete. This anxiety is reflected in the high premium placed in Stein and Khlebnikov’s work (as in much of the scientific writing of their time) on intuition as the basis of abstract insights that arise out of immediate perceptions. How deeply, their work asks, can any concrete quality of a word or image—perceived “in the blink of an eye”—speak to the abstract laws undergirding its construction? How far can the momentary intuitions that arise out of such perceptions lead the perceiver towards a broader theoretical schema into which those perceptions could be integrated, and by which they might be explained? If the material object, like the “self-sufficient word,” is the least-reducible site wherein such perceptible qualities combine, it is also an untrustworthy one. Thus, poised anxiously between the objectionable abstraction and the untrustworthy instantiation, the abstract object seeks to encode the limits to

---

93 Ulla E. Dydo frames this oscillation between concreteness and abstraction in Stein’s work in terms of the author’s writing process: “With the words, there enters into her work referential detail that speaks of the world and of herself. Such details challenge us, as does all referential matter, to read representationally. Pointing out from the composed text to the world, they become centrifugal elements. But joined as words in a text, they become centripetal, creating patterns that point inward, to the composition. […] The references ask us to attend to the world while the composition asks us to attend to the design. Her texts simultaneously pull us toward the compositional center and push us out into the world.” Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises*, p. 19.
its representativeness within the very materials of its representation.

The rejection of mimetic, realist representation therefore involves a disavowal of the material object in favor of what I am calling the abstract object. The autonomous and hermetic art object, in its concreteness, increasingly comes to seem emblematic of human attempts to perceive it as a totality, and therefore evinces the mistrust of Stein and Khlebnikov, among others. But just as the neologism derives its meaning from the root whose canonical forms lurk behind it, the abstract object still requires the concrete object as its founding principle. In Stein’s work, as in Khlebnikov’s, the quest to rediscover the lost totality of the material object takes place on the level of materials. In _zaum_ poetry, it requires the poet to dig deep into the phonetic and morphological substratum of the linguistic medium and unearth the roots of a trans-historical, non-contingent system of signs; in Stein, it requires a return to the most basic structural principles of English grammar. Either aesthetic amounts to a reassertion of the object-like qualities of language itself, even as language’s objectification often comes at the expense of its ability to refer to other objects in the world.

The more concertedly one’s style emphasizes an equivalency between the word and its object by foregrounding the interplay of its self-contained materiality and the contextual relations that contribute to its meaning, the more clearly the work implies the parallel relationship of words and objects to the broader realms of which they are, respectively, parts. Just as the object points to the society that produced it, the economy in which it circulates, and the historical circumstances that have influenced its development and given rise to its form, the word encodes

---

95 William Gass makes a similar point about the significance of repetition in Stein’s writing: “Almost at once [Stein] realized that language itself is a complete analogue of experience because it, too, is made of a large but finite number of relatively fixed terms which are then allowed to occur in a limited number of clearly specific relations, so that it is not the appearance of a word that matters but _the manner of its reappearance […]_ This desire to gain by artifice a safety from the world—to find a way of thinking without the risks of feeling—is the source of the impulse to abstractness and simplicity in Gertrude Stein as it is in much of modern painting, where she immediately felt the similarity of aim” (Gass, quoted in Perloff 1981, pp. 86-89).
an etymology, a capacity to form certain semantic relationships, and a set of nationally, 
historically, and culturally-conditioned concerns to which it speaks. Thus, Stein's and 
Khlebnikov's experiments with the most basic and “universal” elements of verbal signification 
out of the rudiments of sound and structure of their respective native languages reveals not a 
shared economy of signs or sounds basic to all linguistic expression, but instead the specificity of 
the gestures a particular language can make, its minimal units of construction, and the limitations 
or constraints within which manipulation of those resources is possible if any intelligibility is to 
be maintained.

In this sense, both writers’ attempts to construct universal or encyclopedic typologies— 
whether of human personality types, transrational coinages, or perceptual processes—point to the 
irreducibility and particularity of any given linguistic system and the ways in which it structures 
what we are able to think or articulate.96 Perhaps the qualities of these works that tend to be 
described in terms of “abstraction” can be seen as consequences of this paradox. The more 
ambitiously these works gesture towards a totality of possible persons, processes, or utterances, 
the clearer becomes the shaping influence of the particular language and consciousness of their 
respective authors. Conversely, the accretion of self-contained, sonically dense, and perceptually 
particular verbal fragments, as they gather to form a composite verbal object, points to nothing 
so much as the abstract laws that govern the forms they take.

96 This is in keeping with the well known Whorfian view (also known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis), which states 
that “We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language. The categories and types that we isolate from 
the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the 
world is presented in a kaleidoscope flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means 
largely by the linguistic systems of our minds. 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 [...] all observers are not led by the 
same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in 
some way be calibrated.” See Benjamin Lee Whorf, Language. Thought and Reality. (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 
Both Khlebnikov’s and Stein’s efforts to craft a “universal transrational language” or a verbal “dictionary of anybody’s personality” paradoxically yield proof of the irreducibility and particularity of any given language system and the ways in which it structures what its users are able to think or articulate. They thus also begin to move toward suggestions that these sounds, and the objects they resemble, could be used to describe particular economies and sociopolitical networks, and perhaps even to critique them. Their attempts to move beyond these boundaries bear a striking similarity to avant-garde painters’ attempts to follow Pëtr Ouspenskii’s call for a “higher consciousness” that will allow the artist to “see that which others do not see.” This clairvoyance involves, in turn, a move beyond visuality itself. Mikhail Matiushin writes:

What we call perspective is in reality a distortion of visible objects which is produced by a badly constructed optical instrument—the eye. We see all objects distorted. And we visualize them in the same way….owing to the habit created by our defective vision, which was weakened the capacity of visualization. But…we can free ourselves from visualizing objects as we see them, and we can learn to visualize them as we know they really are…[W]e must learn to visualize objects as they would be seen from the fourth dimension, i.e., first of all, not in perspective, but from all sides at once, as they are known to our consciousness….The development of this power to visualize objects from all sides at once will be the casting out of the self-elements in mental images.

The cubists and their successors in the Russian tradition attempted to draw an analogy between the two-dimensional canvas and our three-dimensional world, and to render how three-dimensional objects would appear (flattened, distorted) to an inhabitant of the fourth dimension. Likewise, the characteristic “texture” and “abstraction” of Stein’s and Khlebnikov’s styles can be seen as an effect of a poetics that would conceive of the word from all angles at once. Their use of repetition, syntactic distortion, fragmentation, and neologistic play exposes the limitations of their signifiers even as it gestures towards the possibility of extrapolating from them new meanings beyond the bounds of rational or even worldly language. Disavowing a mimesis that


would depict their objects of focus in recognizable or even visualizable ways, these poets seek at once to reinvest their language with the aural physicality of an utterance rooted in the body and to move beyond the confines of a single-point perspective— to construct, in Merleau-Ponty’s terms, a “house seen from nowhere.”  

Those who, like Marinetti, denounce futurist poetry as “abstract” often do so by highlighting a couple of distinctive qualities that apply to both Khlebnikov’s and Stein’s compositions. The first is its failure to respect the limits, as Wendy Steiner has discussed, of the analogy between the verbal and visual arts. The gap between signifier and signified in verbal art, along with the difference between mutually unintelligible, individual languages and the more “universal language” of visual representation, seems to check the expressive and mimetic payoffs of “verbal cubism,” even as this style proves fruitful for illustrating perceptual processes and the nature of linguistic systems. The blind spot of their art, and of abstract art more generally, seems to be the middle distance. Their work raises the question of how to ground the visionary without watching it turn to “the personal” before one’s eyes. It makes it seem that there is nowhere, in this toggling between the immediate, concrete percept and the trans-historical, non-contingent sign, for the daily and the common to go.

One aim of this chapter has been to show how this particular blind spot — one which led critics of both poets, for decades, to dismiss their work as solipsistic but not satisfyingly “emotional,” insistent about the primacy of its components yet unwilling to touch down in the world of everyday concerns—points tellingly to the set of conventions out of which, and against

---

which, the notions of “abstraction” and “objectivity” in poetry arise. It shows that what critics both then and now have deemed a kind of pathological abstraction, insofar that it can be seen as the result of a representational failure, is a purposeful pathology, not dissimilar to Jakobson’s “poetic deformation” mentioned above. It is the kind of “pathology of representation” which, in Ernst Gombrich’s words, “will give us some insight into the mechanism which enabled the masters to handle the instrument with such assurance” in the first place.  

By staging the deliberate failure of their language to crystallize into a mimetic, self-enclosed object, Khlebnikov and Stein model a new kind of poetic construction, one which is composite and non-representational, privileging processes and material qualities over description and expression. The contingency of these models upon their contexts is at once their object and their obstacle: the texts foreground the specificity of both their materials and their occasions in a way that endows them with a sense of self-contained completeness, even as it undermines any claims they might make of purity, timelessness, or universality. There is an alternative mode of impersonality available to artisans, as Gombrich reminds us: “The forger of banknotes succeeds only too well in effacing his personality and the limitations of a period style”—but his creation circulates in the world only if it is able to shed any traces of its context, its createdness.  

In contrast, the construction of Stein’s and Khlebnikov’s works through an accretion of related phonetic material emphasizes the non-transferability of the perceptions they enclose or the insights to which they give rise. Through such accretion, their language gradually gathers solidity; it comes into being, to borrow Judith Butler’s terms, “not as site or surface but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and

101 I owe the phrase “pathological abstraction” to Peter Galison, whose lecture, “Rorschach Test: X-Rays of the Soul”—presented at Harvard University on April 17, 2014—influenced my thinking on these questions.

surface we call matter.” Such composite verbal objects also use repetition to foreground their materiality as a problem. They do so by demonstrating the dependency of these verbal constructions upon the laws of grammar and semantics that make them sayable in the first place. “It is…by virtue of this reiteration,” Butler goes on, “that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm.”

What Butler says here in a very different context, about the production of the human as a category, strikingly recalls the kind of deconstruction-through-accretion with which Russian Formalist critics such as Shklovsky credit Khlebnikov’s works. The “repetitive labor of [the] norm” serves paradoxically, in questions of both poetry and personhood, as a way of “baring the device.” It reveals that the poem, despite being composed of irreducibly material parts, is a kind of abstract, immaterial object, at once formed by and dependent on an enabling and constraining grammar of relations.

I would like to suggest in closing that we might view these two writers’ ideal of the all-encompassing, self-enclosed, “completed portrait” as their attempt to make a virtue of the necessary separateness and hermeticism of individual experience. One way to think of the stakes and effects of these writers so-called abstractions is to see them as engaging —alongside their contemporaries such as Joyce, Proust, and Eliot— with the limitations of a singular subject position, but moving outward from any fixed notion of the self, instead of inward. The works of those modernist writers who display a marked interest in the personal, and in the subjective experiences of consciousness and emotion, ask how much the individual can perceive, contain, or express. Stein’s radical intervention in this regard was to assume, but not foreground, an organizing consciousness behind her works. Her works do not lament the slippage between

---

104 Butler 2011, p. 10.
external objects of perception and their compromised “objectivity” as mental representations; instead, she presents individual perceptions in language as abstract objects, endowed with a material reality of their own.  

Khlebnikov, for his part, had a mind at least as idiosyncratic as Stein’s, but his texts provide no evidence that he was invested in the singularity of that mind. He located language’s revolutionary and nationalist potential within its status as a trans-personal medium; it offered a means of transcending a singular perspective and of locating perception and “experience” beyond the bounds of the individual. Where he and Stein come together is in their treatment of the physical qualities of language—specifically, the acoustic properties of spoken language—as a potential bridge between the embodied perceptions of a single consciousness and the large-scale networks within which persons, words, and things interact.

Thinking beyond the singular subject (or even beyond the category of the “subject”) requires these poets to replace an older, identity-based way of categorizing entities with a dialectical system that focuses on the relations between them. By returning to the bedrock upon which their respective linguistic environments are built, both Klebnikov and Stein seek out a new, suprapersonal sense of how languages construct the very realities they describe. Their treatment of words as objects, and of texts as composite objects, offers a corrective to those who would view life and art, signifiers and signifieds, or even persons and things as wholly discrete entities. It leads later poets in both the Russian and the American cultural contexts to see the limits of their medium as a paradoxical affordance—a grammar that gives shape to objects that are abstract, “elusive, but real nonetheless” (CW II 383).

---

105 For a relevant discussion of this distinction, see Chodat 37.
Between Montage and Monument: Williams, Mayakovsky, and Poetry’s Revolutionary Objects

Introduction: Art’s Affiliations

The 1920s is generally regarded as the height of modernism in both American and Russian literature, and it is the decade in which artists’ preoccupation with the object as a paradigm for the work of art becomes most explicit. As poets follow the lead of visual artists in espousing this paradigm, they begin to consider ever more rigorously the ideological stakes of the forms that this insistence on the art-object occasions. The two foremost representatives of this trend in modernist poetry are Vladimir Mayakovsky and William Carlos Williams, both of whom worked tirelessly to make space for poetry in their modern societies—and, conversely, to make space in poetry for the representation of everyday life, from its economic interests to its politics to its most common objects.

A great deal has been written in both cultures about the influence of the visual arts on poetry of this period, and much of it provides compelling evidence for the formal strategies and effects that poets borrowed from visual artists and adapted to a verbal medium. However, many Western accounts of poetry and the so-called “sister arts” of the 1920s present Russian artists’ and writers’ accomplishments as extensions or continuations of experiments begun by their Western European contemporaries, such as Marinetti and Picasso. One of my aims here, as in the previous chapter, is to insert the Russian Futurist poets into their rightful place in Western literary criticism’s accounts of modernist innovation and influence. In the case of Mayakovsky, this is also an attempt to recuperate the legacy of the poet as a figure rife with contradictions, many of them arising out of a conflict between his aesthetic cosmopolitanism and his commitment to so-called proletarian art. This is especially important given the poet’s monolithic
reputation, courtesy of Stalin, as “the greatest poet of our Soviet era,” and the post-Soviet burial of that reputation under “all one hundred volumes / of [his] / Party books” (Vo ves’ golos, S II, 431).¹ (This was a fate Mayakovsky himself foresaw; indeed, these are the final lines of the last stand-alone poem he ever wrote.) The range of Mayakovsky’s talents, and his extensive work in the visual arts, are central to any investigation of his interest in objects. Thus, another aim of the current study is to build on several Russian critics’ accounts of the visual arts in Mayakovsky’s poetry by showing how his engagement with popular art forms—including advertisements, agitprop poster art, and Constructivist photomontage—furnishes a series of parallels between his poems and those of his American contemporary, William Carlos Williams. These very different poets are united by an anxious fascination with the large-scale mechanisms of modern, urban culture; a commitment to directness and immediacy; a corresponding interest in the forms of mass culture, especially photography and advertising; and an attraction to concrete objects as models for poetic speech.

Much like his Russian contemporary, Williams looked to several types of objects, aesthetic and otherwise, as models for his poems. He often found himself torn between the affordances of each particular object-model and the threats it posed to his artistic ideals. For this poet, commodification and co-optation through abstraction were two sides of the same coin; his remarkable formal inventiveness can be seen as a mode of resistance to the object’s (or the poem’s) potential loss of concrete particularity. Williams’s oft-cited credo (“Say it: no ideas but in things!”) has led numerous critics over the years to examine how “things” in his oeuvre relate to linguistic structures on the one hand and real-world, material objects on the other.² Several of

the earliest and most influential of his critics, J. Hillis Miller and Bram Dijkstra among them, have demonstrated how his poems return language to the ground of natural and everyday objects (Miller), and, in so doing, drastically reconfigure the relationship between poetic speech and visual culture (Dijkstra). Subsequent critics have, in turn, traced multiple strands of this relation in Williams’s work, which has led them to describe his poems’ correspondences to European avant-garde art (Altieri, Halter) and American movies (Bryant). Like Khlebnikov and Stein in the previous generation, Williams turned to other artistic media as models of how to represent the limits of an individual perspective. How did the changing pace and scale of everyday life affect those limits, and what formal interventions could the poet make to bring the poem up to speed with contemporary concerns? What kind of object, in other words, did the poem need to be if it was to bridge the gap between one maker and the masses?

I argue here that it was partly their indebtedness to the painters of the avant-garde that led Williams and Mayakovsky to emphasize the material qualities of language in their work while continuing to take the composite and self-contained object as a model for their poems. At the same time, their resistance to certain aspects of these painters’ works—its abstract “difficulty” for the common viewer, its foreignness to either Russian or American culture, its rootedness in a bourgeois European social system—motivated both poets to imagine alternative uses for the representational strategies they found there. Both Mayakovsky and Williams follow the lead of the Russian and Western European avant-garde artists in positioning their art as an antidote to the realism and symbolism of earlier centuries. Both poets express their continued conviction that indigenous American or Soviet forms of modern art and literature must depart from classical, Romantic, and European models in order to be new and representative of their respective national psyches. Within that oppositional vantage, I argue, the two poets stand poised
between different genres of popular art that offer them seductive yet suspect versions of an object-focused aesthetic: the propaganda or advertising poster, the photograph, and the monumental sculpture.

For both poets, these kinds of objects serve as aesthetic ideals, characterized as they are by the self-containment and concrete solidity that bespeak a labor completed, a function fulfilled. Contextualizing their poems amid the forms of mass visual art they wrote about (and, in Mayakovsky’s case, created) allows us to see more clearly the structural and stylistic parallels between these poets’ work and the sculptures and paintings that inspired them. However, over the course of the 1920s, both Mayakovsky and Williams increasingly came to doubt the capacity of any given art object to be exemplary and particular, formally complex and politically efficacious, at the same time. Both experimented with hybrid verse forms influenced by collage and photomontage as a way of repurposing and critiquing the conventions of mass art. By tracking their alternately idealistic and conflicted relationships to these popular forms, I hope to show how the forms reflect their changing ideological commitments, at a time when the politics of art were indivisible from those of statehood.

**Advertising, Photography, Poetry: Williams’s Red Wheelbarrow**

Insofar as Williams draws upon the strategies of advertising and the rhetoric of consumer capitalism in his writing, he does so for the twin purposes of realistic description and social critique. Interestingly, Williams does not seem to feel compelled to justify his repeated representation of advertising, or to explain his relationship as a poet to the rhetorical and aesthetic strategies that advertising affords him. He does not seem threatened by the possibility that his poems will be co-opted or somehow tainted by these popular forms, and therefore
presents them matter-of-factly as the most precise—indeed, the only—way to show what is new and modern in his surroundings.

There is no way, Williams’s poetry suggests, to speak to the concerns of modern American life without representing the preponderance of advertising and bureaucratic language across the landscape. At times, the poems do seem to move away from the direct representation of these features, but the free-standing quality with which Williams imbues many of his objects of representation is misleading. As Mike Chasar argues, one cannot read Williams’s mature poetry of the pre-WWII period without remarking on the continuity between the poet’s “objective” presentation of popular linguistic forms (subway ads, public service posters, billboards, and casual speech) and the apparent independence, even impenetrability, of the concrete objects he represents, which circulate within a shared economy with these forms of language. Chasar presents Williams’s efforts in a way that aligns them with Douglas Mao’s account of the modernist resistance to mass culture; he suggests that Williams condescends to incorporate “the products of the culture industries” into his work as a way of offering “an alternative or corrective” to their lack of “intellectual rigor and aesthetic complexity.” I would build on Chasar’s argument by shifting its emphasis slightly. Williams, I argue, does not look down on these forms at all. He does not treat the content and style of mass discourse as material for his poems to master, but treats mass cultural forms as models of the kind of relevance, efficiency, accessibility, and concrete particularity that he thinks poems ought to have. Over the

---


4 See Chasar 161. His discussion of the modernist resistance to mass cultural forms recalls Douglas Mao’s account in *Solid Objects*: “Although few if any modernists were immune to the pleasures of consumption, most also showed a profound mistrust of the capitalist formations that made what Adorno called a “culture industry” possible, and virtually all promoted the carefully crafted work of art as an alternative to the fruits of mass production and mass marketing.” cf. Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 18.
course of his career, he grapples ever more overtly with the social and political implications of
drawing on the affordances of mass culture for the sake of art.

*Spring and All* (1923) derives much of its energy from its author’s contradictory impulses
towards his medium. The billboard-riddled landscape of modern America was a testament to
language’s power to obfuscate as well as indicate; it suggested that to re-place certain elements
of a verbal construction in new positions vis-à-vis others was often akin to *replacing* them with
entirely different ones, since “so much depends,” as in Williams’s famous “Red Wheelbarrow,”
upon the relationship of the parts. Let us consider the wheelbarrow for a moment, as a parallel
and a counterpoint to those sections of *Spring and All* that more clearly capitalize (so to speak)
upon the strategies of advertising:

```
so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens
(CP I, 224)
```

Like the face of Khlebnikov’s *Bobeobi pelis’ guby* (“Bobeobi sang the lips”), the wheelbarrow
points in two directions at once. This object lesson in syntactical dependency achieves the
ultimate concrete and direct representation of its object, while serving as a diagram of the set of
linguistic relations required to represent it. It is a representation of one object that models how
language could also be used to represent other objects. In this sense, Williams’s wheelbarrow is
not just *a* red wheelbarrow, but the *ur*-wheelbarrow— the iconic stand-in for all wheelbarrows,
for a class of related farm objects, for a system of labor that employs such objects, and for the
local and even national economies that depend upon that labor.
To borrow the language of semiotics, the wheelbarrow is not merely a composite object, made of two wheels and a barrow, but a composite sign that results from putting “wheel” and “barrow” together. By breaking this composite sign across the line boundary, Williams calls attention to the separability of its parts, and to the way in which each part (wheel and barrow) depends on its contiguity with the other in order to signify the object in question. The stillness of the wheelbarrow is that of a sign whose components hang in suspension, each awaiting the potential for action that its unification with the other will bestow upon it. (After all, “wheel” cannot do that which “wheel” and “barrow” together can accomplish.) What kind of object, then, does Williams’s poem most resemble? It is not a wheelbarrow, but an ordered collection of signs that collectively represent a wheelbarrow. It is referential. It describes a particular object at a particular moment in time—and yet, in capturing that object, in emphasizing the formal relationships between its parts, it makes that one object exemplary, iconic. It collapses all subsequent readings of the poem into the singular moment described, thereby extending that moment infinitely, until “all things enter into the singleness of the moment, and the moment partakes of the diversity of all things” (SE, 307). As Charles Altieri describes it,

The [reader’s] mind acts, not by insisting on its own separateness, but by fully being “there”: by dwelling on, depending on, the objects that depend on it. And words themselves take on that same quality, because each part of speech reveals its capacity to transfer force. Each first line ends in what could be a noun—a substance allowing rest in the flow of meaning—but that turns out to function adjectivally. As adjectives, the words define aspects of an intending mind…seeking a substance in which to inhere. But the words’ nominal qualities do not disappear. […N]o poem in English is more spatial and timeless. On the mimetic level, these objects seem to have no history, to have always been there, and to represent a form of rural life whose essential habits, and dependence on natural processes, have never really changed.5

The wheelbarrow appears exactly as it would “in real life,” and yet it has been transported out of earthly time and into the perfect stasis of the photograph. One experiences the relationship of its parts temporally—since poetry is, after all, a medium that unfolds in time—and yet, as Altieri

notes, the expansion of the image does not alter the sense of the object’s timelessness. We can look and look, without ever feeling that any part of the picture will break its frame.

The photographic aesthetic of many of Williams’s poems participates in a fantasy of objective sight that was widely shared by the visual artists who were the poet’s friends and contemporaries, as Bram Dijkstra writes in his account of Williams, Alfred Steiglitz, and their circle: “For Stieglitz and his followers the immediate task was to restore the integrity of the American object, to perceive it free from metaphor, to see it as it actually existed, within its own experimental framework. […] There can be no doubt that Williams was profoundly influenced by what Stieglitz and the painters set out to do. What is even Williams’ extensive campaign in favor of the word as a ‘thing itself’ if not an extension of these concepts?”

The camera promised perfect objectivity, by capturing reality more swiftly and precisely than the human mind could process it, and by fixing it in an instantaneous gaze that would make it persist infinitely—and make it infinitely reproducible. The woolly mysticism of the symbolist generation had met its death with the click of a shutter, as the camera exorcised all imagined or “imported” aspects of the image, leaving only the object in focus. Thus, Steiglitz proudly declared, “There is nothing in my pictures that isn’t there— that doesn’t come straight from the object photographed.”

The photograph partakes of what, many years later, Roland Barthes will call “the utopian character of denotation,” due to the “paradox…that the photograph…, by virtue of its absolutely analogical nature, seems to constitute a message without a code.”

Needless to say, the poem, as a verbal construction, can never be “a message without a

---

7 Alfred Stieglitz, Memorial Portfolio [1947], p. 25. Quoted in Dijkstra, 97.
code.” Williams knew this, and yet Barthes’s much later account of photography still poses a useful challenge to Williams’s apparent faith—at least at this point in his career—in the capacities of the photographic aesthetic to render visual experience directly and objectively. By examining how the advertisement transforms represented objects into symbols of certain lifestyles, class distinctions, brands, and values, Barthes helps us see how Williams’s red wheelbarrow becomes saturated with the symbolism of advertising, even as it attempt to claim a space for itself in the non-instrumental world of art:

…the denoted image naturalizes the symbolic message, it innocents the semantic artifice of connotation, which is extremely dense, especially in advertising. Although the [advertising] poster is full of ‘symbols’, there nonetheless remains in the photograph, insofar as the literal message is sufficient, a kind of natural being-there of objects: nature seems spontaneously to produce the scene represented. A pseudo-truth is surreptitiously substituted for the simple validity of openly semantic systems; the absence of code disintellectualizes the message because it seems to found in nature the signs of culture.9

The apparent simplicity and spontaneity of the wheelbarrow—the way in which the poem’s tight focus on that one object then zooms out, so to speak, to invoke “the white / chickens” and to suggest the farm of which the wheelbarrow is a part—endows it with the kind of latent symbolism with which advertisers imbue a Ford car or a carton of Sunkist orange juice. The poem’s representational strategies thus turn the red wheelbarrow into the mysterious (or “auratic”) stuff of art and also, simultaneously, present in terms of its objective, documentary reality, so that, in Barthes’ terms, “nature seems spontaneously to produce the scene represented.”10 This dual approach to objects, which proves so profitable for the medium of print advertising, is an affordance of photography more broadly, as Rosalind Krauss explains:

Spacing is the indication of a break in the simultaneous experience of the real, a rupture that issues into a sequence. Photographic cropping is always experienced as a rupture in the continuous fabric of reality. […] The frame announces that between the part of reality that was cut away and this part there is a difference; and that this segment which the frame frames is an example of nature-as-representation, nature-as-sign. As

---

it signals that experience of reality the camera frame also controls it, configures it.\textsuperscript{11}

Williams’s photographic approach to the wheelbarrow presents it as static, and indeed monumental in its importance; it then invests the wheelbarrow with metonymic significance by suggesting that it is crucial to the agricultural way of life in America. In terms of scale, the wheelbarrow therefore appears larger-than-life and also small; it stands in for the labor of the individual farmer who operates it, and who is, in turn, the smallest cog in the great machine of American production. Of all the qualities of Stieglitz’s work that Williams admired, the one he praised most was not its capacity for singling-out, but its deft depiction of the relationships between persons and things:

The photographic camera and what it could do were particularly well suited to a place where the immediate and actual were under official neglect. Stieglitz inaugurated an era based solidly on a correct understanding of the cultural relationships… The effect of his life and work has been to bend together and fuse, against whatever resistance, the split forces of the two necessary cultural groups: (1) the local effort, well understood in defined detail and (2) the forces from the outside.\textsuperscript{12}

Williams praised photography as a medium able to “fuse, against whatever resistance,” the local and the unassimilable, concrete material reality and abstract social forces. Such a fusion depends, however, on a knowledge of context. A poem of only sixteen words will be hard-pressed to suggest as many such connections as a photograph; it will depend, much more than its visual counterpart, on the reader to make these connections. If the reader does not do so, the distinctions between Williams’s presentation of his object and that of or a newspaper advertisement for farm equipment—or, for that matter, Mayakovsky’s propaganda posters for Soviet agriculture—start to blur. [Figure 1] Perhaps it is Williams’s sense that the poem is at risk of commodifying its object of attention (and, by extension, itself), that gives rise to the poem’s


quasi-Imagist elaborating phrases (“glazed with rain / water // beside the white / chickens”),
which would resist this fate by deepening the description beyond the shallow realm of ad copy. It
is worth noting, however, that such descriptive language also fulfills many of the guidelines for
successful ad writing that had begun cropping up in the first decade of the twentieth century.
Given the proliferation of products on the American market in the 1910s and early 1920s,
Jackson Lears writes,

the strictly utilitarian approach was inadequate. The most intractable problem was not only the
predominance of artistic preciosity but also the tendency for the reader’s eyes to glaze over when
confronting a mass of competing appeals for increasingly standardized products. As technological
developments were incorporated into the manufacturer’s merchandising plan, it became more and more
difficult for him to differentiate his product from those of his competitors. […] The trick to setting one’s
product apart was to learn how to participate in what the advertising executive James Collins called “the
economy of symbolism” — to surround the product with condensed clusters of words and images that gave
it symbolic as well as utilitarian value.13

The same precision, clarity, and vividness that transform the red wheelbarrow from a banal
implement into an “auratic” object, or what Mayakovsky might call a “literary fact,”14 also make
it an ideal advertisement. On a formal score as well, Williams avoids the trouble that George
Powell ascribed to many would-be copywriters in Advertising Writing Taught (1903): “The chief
reason why literary writers are poor at writers is because they have not learned to condense a
long story and boil it down into crisp sentences.” Lears expands upon Powell’s words, adding:
“As early as 1901, trade press contributors were applauding ‘the sincere trend’ in advertising—
the attempt ‘to be earnest without being heavy.’ This turned the copywriter once more toward the

14 Mayakovsky most famously conferred the status of «литературный факт» (“literary fact”) on an event that was
actualized in verse shortly before it took place in reality: the suicide of the poet Sergei Esenin. There was, he writes,
a kind of factuality and even causality to Esenin’s death once the latter’s suicide note in verse had been composed:
“After these lines, the death of Esenin became a literary fact.” [«Я узнал об этом ночью, огорчение, должно
быть, так было и осталось огорчением, должно быть, и подрассеялось бы к утру, но утром газеты принесли
предсмертные строки: «В этой жизни умирать не ново, / Но и жить, конечно, не новей.» После этих строк
смерть Есенина стала литературным фактом.»] See V. V. Maiakovskii, Kak delat’ stikhi? (1926), in С II.
staccato rhythms (short declarative sentences, one-sentence paragraphs) and (allegedly) conversational tone of popular journalism and away from the ‘vacuous verbosity’ of the self-consciously literary style” (Lears 286). “The Red Wheelbarrow” is crisp! It’s fresh! It’s memorable! Considered in light of copywriting criteria, the poem soon leads the critic to advertise its own exemplary qualities.

What if there was no clear, definable distinction between the poem and the advertisement? If anything, the photograph was even less immune than the poem to the threat of co-optation by commercial or political forces. One need not look far to find Williams building a sense of these risks into the form of the poems themselves. “The Red Wheelbarrow” is section twenty-two of Spring and All, and its self-contained stasis could scarcely be undermined more thoroughly than it is by section twenty-five, often anthologized under the title “Rapid Transit.” Several critics interested in Williams’s relationship to visual culture and technology have taken an interest in the poem, and with good reason; here, I present it as a transitional piece between the earlier, more photographic “Red Wheelbarrow” and “It Is a Living Coral,” which I will soon discuss as a more developed instance of photomontage techniques in Williams’s poetry.15 Here is the poem in its entirety:

Somebody dies every four minutes
in New York State—

To hell with you and your poetry—
You will rot and be blown

through the next solar system
with the rest of the gases—

What the hell do you know about it?

AXIOMS

15 For some other discussions of “Rapid Transit,” see Chasar 181, and also Cecelia Tichi, Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987, pp. 277-78.)
Do not get killed

Careful Crossing Campaign
Cross Crossings Cautiously

THE HORSES black
&
PRANCED white

Outings in New York City

Ho for the open country

Don’t stay shut up in hot rooms
Go to one of the Great Parks
Pelham Bay for example

It’s on Long Island Sound
with bathing, boating
tennis, baseball, golf, etc.

Acres and acres of green grass
wonderful shade trees, rippling brooks

Take the Pelham Bay Park Branch
of the Lexington Ave. (East Side)
Line and you are there in a few minutes

Interborough Rapid Transit Co.

(1915, p. 231-32)

The ludic skepticism of Dada towards the productions of mass culture is on full display here, undermining the grandiosity of the public service announcement (“AXIOMS”) and the over-obviousness of municipal safety campaigns (“Do not get killed”). The poetic techniques of alliteration and litany join with the natural rhythms of American speech to create memorable slogans (“Careful Crossing Campaign / Cross Crossings Cautiously”) that expose the uneasy closeness between high and low forms of discourse. Statistics, signage, critiques, retorts, advertisement and overheard speech appear distinctly but non-hierarchically arranged. This was Williams’s stated goal: the reader’s “whole preconceived scheme of values has been ruined. And this,” according to the poet, “is exactly what he should see, a break through all preconception of
poetic form and mood and pace...It is this that one means when he says destruction and creation are simultaneous.”

Such slippage between prefabricated, found language and artistically “created” utterances also have implications for poetry as a genre. By incorporating into the poem the kinds of conjunctions and clarifications more typically reserved for prose (e.g., “for example,” “etc.,” “Lexington Ave. (East Side),” and so on), Williams raises the question of whether prose remains prose in any context, or whether a “change of speed amounts to a difference in quality.” The alliterations and repetitions of the clichés implies a parallel between the phenomenology of reading the poem and that of reading a series of billboards and ads as they whizz by. One could even go so far as to say that, in lines such as “Acres and acres of green grass / wonderful shade trees, rippling brooks,” the poem mimics the dynamic rhythms of the elevated train on which its organizing consciousness implicitly reads the logo in the final line.

It is understandable why Cecelia Tichi sees “Rapid Transit” as an exemplar of how, “[o]f all arts of the written word, poetry claims the concision, the compression, the terseness congruent with the values of efficient machine and structural design.” (Tichi 258). However, upon closer inspection, the poem inhibits— or, in Shklovsky’s term, estranges— the reading practices forcibly introduced to the American public by means of mass transit, billboards, and urban surfaces plastered with handbills. It reveals instead a paradox of modern, urban experience: having access to so much simultaneous information, and being able to move through space so efficiently, actually

---

17 Alfred North Whitehead remarked in 1925 that “In the past human life was lived in the bullock cart; in the future it will be lived in an aeroplane; and the change of speed amounts to a difference in quality.” cf. Science in the Modern World (1925). Quoted in Tichi, 230.  
impedes comprehension. We see this in the poem’s most Cubist moment, where the communicative force fields of two phrases cross:

THE HORSES black
 PRANCED & white

There is no linear, “efficient” way to read this aloud; even the ampersand, paralleled by negative space in the opposite column, draws the eyes in two directions at once. The result is a linguistic assemblage that one must look twice at if one is to translate it into meaning at all. Williams ingeniously dramatizes how the speed with which one can now move through space actually highlights the relative inefficiency of one’s perceptions. It also calls attention to the unassimilable materiality of the discursive elements in one’s environment. These materials (in this case, letters and words) persist in the mind beyond their moment of visibility because their effects are unsolvable in such a brief window of time. Once this language has been borrowed and repurposed in a poem, its significance becomes even harder to determine because its source has been obscured. When the poem’s final line (“Interborough Rapid Transit Co.”) suggests that much of the poem’s second half has been quoted from subway ad, the reader can no longer tell where the source material ends and the poem begins. There is no longer any illusion of the poem as a thing in itself.

The parts of “Rapid Transit” therefore resist the kind of synthesis that Bergson earlier attributed to the mind faced with juxtaposed images, in a theory which was to prove influential for Cubism. “No image can replace the intuition of duration,” wrote Bergson, “but many diverse images, borrowed from very diverse orders of things, may, by the convergence of their action, direct consciousness to the point where there is a certain intuition to be seized.”¹⁹ By problematizing such a “convergence,” Williams casts into question whether the static forms of the

Cubist collage or the photograph can still serve as model objects for the poem in an age of “Rapid Transit.” Both of these earlier forms attempted to “direct consciousness to a point” by synthesizing and framing disparate elements in a single moment of vision. Both presupposed a still work of art and an unmoving spectator. In Martin Jay’s words, post-Imagist works like this one “[go] beyond the embrace of spatialized form…and introduc[e] a certain open-endedness, which implies mobility.”

As the American populace grew increasingly mobile, the organs of capitalist ideology had to become more dynamic—and so did the objects of poetry that would critique them.

Mayakovsky and the Masses: “150,000,000” as Advertisement for Communist Victory

Although mass industrialization began later (and, at first, more slowly) in Russia than in the U.S., it is as integral to Mayakovsky’s story as it is to Williams’s, if not more so. Like many of his generation, Mayakovsky was a child of the provinces whose revolutionary activities began after he moved to Moscow in 1906 with his sisters and newly-widowed mother (Jangfeldt 6-9). His first job involved painting lacquer boxes and Easter eggs, but by the time he published “150,000,000” in 1921, the poet’s immense reputation had made him something of a brand in his own right. He was, according to Futurist impresario David Burliuk, “a poet of genius.” He was legendary for his voice, which Aleksei Kruchenykh likened to “a physical explosion,” a clarion call which “he carried…out of the familiar drawing-room and onto the podium, into the public square.”

According to many witnesses, the crowds at his lectures literally made police barriers quake and windows quiver; and he, in turn, pushed his way through the masses, in Shklovsky’s

---

words, “like a hot iron through snow.”24 The question of how this larger-than-life poet, famous for his egoism and experimentalism alike, could nonetheless claim to speak for the proletariat as one among others haunted Mayakovsky in the wake of the Revolution. He tried to answer it by beginning his revolutionary epic, “150,000,000,” in an unorthodox manner: by abdicating responsibility for its authorship.

“150,000,000 is the name of this poem’s master. / Bullets—its rhythm. / Rhyme—its fire spreading from building to building. / 150,000,000 speak through my lips” (lines 1-4).25 This is a gesture intended to shore up the poem’s credibility as a dispatch from the front lines of the Communist struggle, and to insist upon the poet’s imbrication in the social and political life of the masses. It is also an attempt to counter those critics who accused Mayakovsky of transforming his own personal tribulations into myth, rather than putting his talents in the service of revolution. While claiming that “150,000,000 speak through my lips” is hardly a modesty topos, the poem's opening lines show the poet’s commitment to arguing for the politically engaged nature of his art. They describe a fantasy of total correspondence between the revolutionary effort in the streets and the literary effort unfolding across the page. Mayakovsky's fantasy even goes so far as to equate the “movement” embodied in his lines with the unchallenged movement of celestial bodies, whose own revolutions cause the progression of time. As Mayakovsky describes it, the revolutionary Soviet citizen now inhabits a world in which

25 The reader will find that, due to the length of the Mayakovsky poems under discussion in this chapter, I have chosen in each instance between several possibilities for presenting Russian and English versions together. In most cases, I have excerpted longer passages from the poem with the English translation facing the Russian original. In instances where suitable English translations of whole poems exist—as in the case of Herbert Spencer’s version of Pro eto—I have preserved the original Russian lineation and have placed the corresponding English lines beneath it. Lastly, in cases where no full translation exists, and where individual phrases or lines are quoted for the sake of plot summary, I have included in-line quotations in English. The original text appears in an appendix that follows the chapter. All Russian quotations from “150,000,000” are taken from S II, 89-131. The translation is my own.
ideology has been transformed into text; each worker finds himself a minor character in a grand
narrative whose chronicle cites itself high and low, “underground, / on the earth, / in the sky / and
higher” (22-25). The poet launches his tirade against the complacent and corpulent Woodrow
Wilson—the living embodiment of American capitalism—not by invoking the voice of his
fellow Soviet citizens, but by endowing the animals and natural features of the post-
revolutionary landscape with speech. The poem's lyric speaker, insistently anonymous and yet
inseparable from Mayakovsky, presents himself as a translator of the landscape's demands.

The landscape itself begins to move inexorably towards revolution, until everyone of the
150 million Soviet citizens, billions of fish, trillions of insects, cats, and wild animals, “all that
moves, / and all that does not move,” gets swept up in the fervor and makes its way westward,
towards Wilson and his capitalist regime (174-91). What follows is a catalogue—not just of
active bodies in the service of the attack on America, but of those bodies' parts—as they unite,
human and animal, living and dead, in order to take on the capitalist threat (221-31). Strikingly,
the chant transcribed from the lips of this multitude refers to them not as people, but as things:
“We came by the millions, / millions of things, / mangled, / broken, / destroyed” (246-50). The
crowd then speaks of itself as a herd of livestock, millions, / millions of beasts, / gone feral, / wild, / hungry” (255-59). A battalion of “godless ones, / pagans / and atheists” (262-65), they
celebrate, in true futurist fashion, an exploit “three times harder than the gods’ / creation, /
bestowing things unto the void,” which will include not only the construction of a new world, but
the explosion of the old one (300-08). And just as, at the start of the poem, the lines of
Mayakovsky’s revolutionary epic became the ranks of proletarians marching westward, now
those marchers’ body parts become the vehicles and artillery of the Soviet state. “Our legs— / the
lightning aisles of trains. / Our arms— / dust blown from the field by a sheaf of fire. / Our fins —
steamships. / Our wings— aeroplanes” (327-32). Finally, the army marches on the old world order: “We’ve / finished you off, / Romantic-world! / In place of faith— / our souls are full / of electricity, / steam” (344-50).

Surprisingly, no one appears to have written at length about the relationship between these verse descriptions and the agitprop poster art Mayakovsky created for the Soviet State Telegraph Agency (ROSTA), or the advertising posters he designed for other state industries, such as the State Agricultural Production Agency (Mossel’prom) and the State Rubber Production Agency (Rezinotrest). Although one must, of course, be wary of overlooking the particularities of different media when comparing verbal and visual arts, it is possible to note several general similarities between Mayakovsky’s poster work from 1919 to 1921, and the representational strategies of “150,000,000,” written in 1920. One quality they often share is the flatness of the poet’s representations, which recall the images produced through woodcut or printing techniques in traditional lubki. (The lubok was a type of folk illustration that had found its twentieth-century renewal not long before, in the works of Russian avant-garde painters such as Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova.)26 Mayakovsky’s descriptions often feature bright colors and broad, even caricatured portrayals of landscapes and human figures alike. The people featured in “150,000,000” are either mite-sized Soviet citizens, all of whom together make up the vast body of the proletariat, or enormous, allegorical figures, such as Woodrow Wilson. In his ROSTA posters, too, Mayakovsky seldom represented people with faces, preferring instead to draw attention to the dynamic actions of their bodies by showing them in silhouette. [Figure 2]

26 Gerald Janecek describes how avant-garde artists’ interest in the lubok “even grew briefly into a commercial-patriotic enterprise to aid the war effort” in 1914-15, thanks to a Moscow corporation called the Modern Broadside, which printed lubok-style posters on patriotic themes. Mayakovsky, whose activity in artistic circles and burgeoning poetic career was already underway at this time, participated in this effort. See Gerald Janecek, The Look of Russian Literature: Avant-Garde Visual Experiments, 1900-1930. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014, pp. 9-11.
As is the case in “150,000,000,” the poet’s illustrations suggest a greater interest in typologies than in the details of specific people’s appearances. In the words of one critic, “The ROSTA posters…formed and typified a particular sense of [their] characters, who were transferred from poster to poster: the worker, the Red Army man, the farmer, the capitalist, the priest, the kulak [wealthier peasant].” Each image was unique, but it also drew on and reinforced a culturally engrained notion of character types. These figures were designed with mass dissemination—rather than depth or complexity—in mind, and they achieved these aims with greater ease than did Mayakovsky’s poems. The poet also reinforced the ideological import of such images by captioning them with catchy, rhymed slogans, many of which shared the regular, accented meter of his propaganda poems. “Mayakovsky’s speech,” writes Grigorii Vinokur, “is rhetorical; it is constructed as a call, an exhortation, like a slogan or a poster. This is public speech.”

The strategies of poster art endow “150,000,000” with a combination of vibrancy, urgency, and whimsicality. At times, they also lead Mayakovsky, master caricaturist that he is, into becoming a caricature of his own hyperbolic tendencies—as we see when, almost a third of the way into the poem, these diverse forces of the revolution get subsumed into the vast body of one,

28 When Soviet critics attempted to recuperate the poet’s legacy from its taint of individualism, they often evoked the exemplarity of his personae and the his focus on the common struggles of his time. V. R. Shcherbina’s essay, entitled “Maiakovskii and Modernity” («Маяковский и современность»), is typical in this regard. Shcherbina writes, «Отличительные черты, «индивидуальность» творчества Маяковского подчеркиваются сейчас в критике довольно интенсивно. А вот его «всебобрюйность», «конденсирующая» роль в художественной культуре эпохи в иных критических работах учитываются далеко не в полной мере… в творчестве Маяковского, в его отчетливо выраженной индивидуальности находят также выражение общие черты искусства его времени.» [“The distinguishing characteristics, the ‘individuality’ of Maiakovskii’s work is underlined now in criticism quite intensely. And yet his ‘universalism,’ [his] ‘condensing’ role in the artistic culture of his age is far from fully accounted for in the work of some critics… In Maiakovskii’s work, in his distinctly drawn individuality, the common traits of the art of his time can also be found.”] See V. R. Shcherbina, “Maiakovskii i sovremennost’,” in Maiakovskii i sovremennost’, ed. A. M. Ushakov. Moscow: Nauka, 1985, p. 9.
all-powerful allegorical figure: “and so / Russia / is no poor ragamuffin, / no heap of detritus, / no edifice-ash — / Russia / is all / a single Ivan, / and his / hands— / the Neva, / and his heels— / the Caspian steppes” (417-28). Likewise, as Mayakovsky enumerates the awe-inspiring features of Moscow’s capitalist rival, his poem begins, in spite of itself, to seem more and more like an advertisement for Chicago. “The world, / from a blaze of parts / gathering a quintet, / endowed it with magical power. / The city stands / on one screw, the whole / electro-mechanical-dynamo,” the poet writes. “In Chicago, / there are 14,000 streets— / rays of the plazas’ suns, / From each— / 700 lanes / longer than a year by train. / It’s wondrous for a person in Chicago! / In Chicago, / the light from / the sun’s / no brighter than a penny candle. / In Chicago, / just to raise an eyebrow— / even for that / you need electric current. / In Chicago / for miles / into the sky / a circus of steel girders / gambols. / It’s wondrous for a person in Chicago!” (490-517).

As a propaganda poem for the Bolshevik cause, Mayakovsky’s aim is to cast aspersions on the soulless bloat of Western capitalism; however, ambiguities in his relationship to American technology and wealth come out more and more as his descriptions go on. One reason for this conundrum is the difference between the scale of poster art, which is predetermined by material considerations such as the size of the paper or the quantity of available ink, and the less materially constrained scale of verbal art. The poet’s problems with scale are, in fact, a prime source of Trotsky’s frustration with his work:

He has frequently a very high degree of pathos in his works, but there is not always strength behind it. The poet is too much in evidence. He allows too little independence to events and facts, so that it is not the Revolution that is struggling with obstacles, but it is Mayakovsky who does athletic stunts in the arena of words. Sometimes he performs miracles indeed, but every now and then he makes an heroic effort and lifts a hollow weight. [...In his verse,] the proportions of our worldly affairs vanish, and it is impossible to establish the difference between a little thing and a big. That is why Mayakovsky speaks of the most intimate thing, such as love, as if he were speaking about the migration of nations.30

The poem creates its own, outlandish economies of scale that are impossible to superimpose onto

any real-world networks of relations between humans, landscapes, and objects. The closest relative to this form of description may be that of *Gulliver’s Travels*, in which each new setting introduces a new system of size-relations. We see this throughout the middle of the poem, which expounds upon the incredible girth and larger-than-life authority of Woodrow Wilson, the capitalist pig *par excellence*, who consumes all the laboring energies of his underlings.\(^{31}\) Even the greatest poets and philosophers in American history have been multiplied into diminutive versions of themselves and race around at his monumental feet like hordes of toy soldiers. Everyone, no matter how venerated, has been put to some kind of menial work—everyone, that is, except Wilson. Whitman has been accorded the highest rank, that of “Honored Lifter of Ladies’ Wrinkles.” Distinguished professors, “crumbly with age,” stand littering the parquet with sand, and “the Ultimate Most Famous Menshikov” stands around removing soot deposits from the candlesticks of Wilson’s “Triple-Strong Hotel.” Wilson dwarfs even the Soviet Union’s grandiose busts of Lenin; he is a living, breathing, commanding, *eating* monument—a city, as Williams would later write, in himself:

In the poem’s flat and colorful world, all of the leaders of the U.S. and Britain look the same, and all of the denizens of Chicago, obese and lazy, huff and puff on the beach; each pet pug is “overfed…like [a] calf.” American society is not even able to produce enough to sate its needs, poised as its factories are to process the raw materials hoarded in the body of its leader.32

Meanwhile, upon this unsuspecting shore, the Soviet forces descend as a “terrible storm on the Pacific Ocean” (857)—not in the form of a submarine, nor that of a naval fleet, but simply as “Ivan” (904). The strength and enormity of this great human wave again unites the forces of revolution with those of the weather. The battle that begins as a human battle comes to encompass the natural world, and then even the supernatural realm—until it drains all the world’s colors (1045-58). All intermediary shades disappear; in the end, only red and white remain. In this binary battle of ideologies, “Some run to Ivan / with outstretched / arms, / others— rush to Wilson. / From the petty facts of workaday slime / a lone fact is revealed: / the middle’s / sudden annihilation— / there is no middle on earth any longer. / No flowers, / no shades, / nothing— / except / colors, all things dyed white, / and red, / bloodied color of blood.”

---

32 As Charles Rougle has noted, Mayakovský’s depiction of Wilson is greatly indebted to Gor’kii’s portrayal of the capitalist in “Odin iz koroley respubliki” (“One of the Republic’s Kings”). See Charles Rougle, Three Russians Consider America: America in the Works of Maksim Gor’kij, Aleksandr Blok, and Vladimir Majakovskij. Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1977, pp. 106-08.
Here, again, it is hard not to think of Mayakovsky’s agitprop and advertising posters, many of which featured only three colors: black, white, and red. [Figure 3] Those images tended (probably for practical reasons) to use two main colors— for instance, red and green or red and blue—and often emphasized the importance of their message through distortions of scale. One poster, an advertisement for waterproof soles from the State Rubber Production Agency (Rezinotrest), depicts an enormous, upside-down shoe poised above a globe, sole-up, shielding the entire world from a downpour that sluices through the blue sky of the background. Another shows an enormous, red-clad male figure— the spitting image of Mayakovsky, or “Ivan,” for that matter— towering over an urban street and several pedestrians, rebuking them for crossing in front of the bus: “Why do you stick your nose into the bus’s business? Why hold up traffic?” he asks. [Figure 4] These posters hone in on particular objects and details in a way that blots out their original contexts; it makes them exemplary, for the purpose of instructing the public to produce or encouraging them to consume.

This monumental communist crossing guard of Mayakovsky’s poster is not a far cry, then, from Ivan in “150,000,000,” whose size allows him to stride across the globe, defusing revolutionary fires like a Komsomol-sponsored superhero. This violent savior of the people “flatten[s] / the world / like an ocean” (1067-68); “He walks, / stuffed by people with dynamite. / He walks, exploding with the whole world’s wrath […] Ivan / with no map, with no compass arrow, / strode / and kept eyes on the goal, / as if / he looked up not from the sea, but from / a plate” (1078-91). The storm he creates is so strong that “Wilson’s flabbiness” gets “blown away” (1131-32), and Ivan emerges from the sea and steps upon American soil, “dry as can be,” without having gotten his feet wet (1141-44). As the poem goes on, its events become increasingly cartoonish: Wilson retaliates, striking the Soviet Union with famine (1403-17); the Soviets fight
back in the face of chemical warfare, as a mysterious epidemic infects the populace (1452-91); the country’s former religious leaders—“popes, / mullahs, / rabbis” (1530-32), pour down from the skies in an avalanche, leaving Peter with “the smashed head of his own cathedral” (1539). With holy men raining down all around, Mayakovsky foretells the demise of capitalism and the ideology that supports it: “Democratism, / humanism— / you can trade any / isms for isms. / You won’t be able to sort out, / exactly what’s needed, / and already / there is a bond / on your philosophy’s head” (1496-1504).

The poet’s ability to shift rapidly between concrete (if sometimes absurd) imagery and abstraction is reminiscent of the Russian formalist principle of *sdvig* [сдвиг; “shift”] propounded by Kruchenykh and exemplified in Khlebnikov’s *Zangezi*—which was written, in fact, within a year of “150,000,000.” It is also a testament, as Ivan Aksionov writes, of the generative influence of Mayakovsky’s agitprop poster work on his poetic production:

> It is likely that his vast work on small epigrams of political propaganda was a considerable help for the poem’s author… The monotony that one could have found in the fable’s exposition, if it had been represented in an identical manner from start to finish, could be avoided thanks to the difference in register between the story of Ivan, narrated with a tone of pathetic elevation, and the story of Wilson, conducted by means of satire akin to those of the popular poetic tale.33

Folklore joins with absurdism in the poem’s “final skirmish,” when “Wilson himself” is “burned to ashes / bending backwards to pin up the sun,” as his diminutive minions (*vilsontsi*, or “Wilsonites”) look on in terror (1573-77). The commanders and fleets of the past sink to the depths, forgotten, as “factories trample the corpse of the past, / and the future shouts out from a trillion pipes.” “Call us Abel,” they bellow, “or Cain, / it makes no difference! / The future has arrived! The future’s the winner!” (1581-87). Now, the new Soviet life is poised to begin: “Hungering, whining, / the cities split open, / and over the avenues’ dust, / the sun of a different

existence [bytie] rises” (1598-1601). A paradisiacal, if eccentric, vision of the new Soviet reality ensues, and the poem concludes with a requiem for the defeated past and a resounding hymn to the victory of Communism: “To You, long-standing, / years-hungering, / …who have given a million years / to sing, / drink, / eat”; “To You, women”; “To You, / legions of liquid-boned children”; “To You, / beasts, / […] who worked, bearing someone or something, / as the whip never dropped”:

Вам,

расстрелянные на баррикадах духа,
чтоб дни сегодняшние были пропеты,
будущее ловившие в ненасытное ухо,
маляры,
певцы,
поэты.
Вам, которые
сквозь дым и чад,
жизнью, едва державшейся на иотке,
ржавым железом, шестерней скрежеща,
работали всё-таки,
делали всё-таки.
Вам неумолкающих слав слова,
ежегодно расцветающие, вовеки не вянув,
за нас замученные - слава вам,
миллионы живых,
кирпичных
и прочих Иванов.

To You,

shot on the barricades of the soul
so that these days would be foresung,
snaring the future in your insatiable ear,
painters,
singers,
poets.
To You, who
through smoke and fumes,
all your life barely held on by your labor laws,
like rusty iron, a single gear grinding,
worked yet,
made it still.
To You the words of unceasing glory,
blooming again each year, never to wither,
Tortured on our behalf — praise you
millions of living
brick
and simple Ivans.

(1672-90)

Once again, the natural world, the man-made world, and all its inhabitants come together in a unified vision of renewal. Notably, the poem directs this renewal at the reader, implicating us in the foregoing narrative by making us its end-point— just as the agitprop poster wants “You” to enlist, to clean up your trash, or to buy Mossel’prom products. The final paradise of “150,000,000” comes about “through harmonious song, / flowers, earth, in threshing and sowing”: “It was for you, / the bloody Iliad’s revolutions! The Odyssey’s hungry years, for you!”
(1704-08). This arrival at a utopian state of affairs, announced with all the pageantry of a Soviet victory parade, wishfully suggests that a plurality of addressees [Вам] has united around its narrative, just as, in its earlier lines, the masses came together to overpower their common capitalist enemy.

Cutting up the Tourist Brochure: Williams Goes to Washington

In contrast to Mayakovsky’s epic aspirations, Williams patently avoided large-scale verse forms in most of his 1920s poems. Williams’s poems, with often de-emphasize their organizing consciousness and strive for quasi-photographic immediacy, seem far removed from the vehement exemplarity of Mayakovsky’s lyric subject. Nonetheless, both poets claim that the language in their poems comes from outside of the individual self; they are the mouthpiece of the masses (in Mayakovsky’s case), the camera that captures the local yet representative American image (in Williams’s). Both aspire to a relationship to the external world that is most clearly modeled by the visual arts of the period, as Dijkstra suggests in his discussion of a 1922 review of Marsden Hartley’s paintings:

To capture reality, to understand the meaning of his spiritual constitution, the artist must feel deeply and see clearly and without prejudice, until the object opens itself to him in its full visual and tactile purity, revealing in its constitution the objective equivalence of the emotion which moves the artist. The artist then becomes the recording agent. His subjective response is made universal when it becomes absorbed by the object whose texture, line, color, and volume represent the elements which evoked the artist’s original emotion. The artist must now arrange his canvas in terms of those qualities...objectively seen. Thus we witness in the artist’s work “the circling of interest between his own breast and the thing before him, with the result that the thing before him begets for him an importance quite as great as his own person, and is perceived, a life with rights identical to his own...till the man almost becomes a transparency through which the light of life streams, till the man almost becomes the thing before him and the thing the man.”

This passage highlights the interplay between the artist’s (in this case, the poet’s) goal of “becom[ing] the recording agent” and his attempt to “rearrange” elements of external reality in

order to “constitut[e] the objective equivalence of the emotion which move[d] him,” and thereby to make “his subjective response…universal when it becomes absorbed by the object.” The artist, in this case, is both the poem’s engine and its engineer, both the eye and the camera lens that fixes its vision “objectively,” once and for all.

Djikstra makes the case that Williams, unlike his friend Hartley, “was much too grounded in the formal conventions of writing to be able to delete the voice of the poet, his subjective interpretation of things seen. He found it difficult to let the image speak for him without interference. He did not have at this time, and was never entirely to have, the absolute confidence of the visual artist, who knows that the image itself will be more expressive than he ever could be. Consequently,…the concrete materials of the visual world are overtaken by Williams’ conscious voice…” (Djikstra 170). This was problem faced by Mayakovsky as well, and Victor Erlich describes “150,000,000” as the poet’s “strenuous attempt to submerge the collective will in his elephantine ego.”35 “Ironically enough,” writes Erlich, Mayakovsky’s “individualistic and bohemian arrogance” “was most apparent in th[is] poem intended as an epic of mass heroism” (Erlich 436). As the 1920s wore on, both poets saw the need to question the representational paradigms that mass art offered their poetry: the poster, the photograph, and the monument. Both Mayakovsky and Williams sought to apply the formal innovations of avant-garde art, specifically cubism, to verbal materials that would maintain their concreteness and their denotative functions. The response of both poets, independent of one another, was a new poetics indebted to the art form known as photomontage.

Photomontage became an established art form in the Soviet context of the 1920s, under the auspices of the LEF group (*Levyi front iskusstv*; Left Front of the Arts), of which

---

Mayakovsky was a founding member. This context is of the utmost importance for an understanding of Mayakovsky’s attempts to mediate between photographic and monumental discourses in his mature poetry, as I will soon discuss. It was less of a topic of discussion among the American avant-garde artists of Williams’s milieu, although the poet’s writings suggest that he was well aware of the experimental methods of Dadaism, whose photomontages were the primary exemplar of the genre in the World War I era.36 Those critics who discuss Williams’s work in the context of the visual arts tend to relate his formal effects to those of cubist painting—a comparison that proves highly productive with regards to Kora in Hell, The Descent of Winter, and Spring and All but seems less and less useful as the poet’s style changes over time. The photographic aesthetic of Williams’s object-focused poems of the 1920s, such as “The Red Wheelbarrow,” becomes troubled and complicated by the increasing incursions of ideology into the representational frame. Photomontage is an ideal analogy for this process of cutting-up, juxtaposition, and collocation because it is already a late style of photography, in which the artist, having mastered the revelatory capacities of the photographic medium, draws attention to the structural principles of that medium through manipulation and distortion. This suggests a burgeoning awareness of the photograph as an inherently rhetorical object, in contrast to an earlier understanding of photography as an objective means of capturing things as they are “in real life.” In the words of Mayakovsky’s friend and LEF colleague, Sergei Tret’iakov, “If the photograph, under the influence of the text (or caption), expresses not simply the fact which it shows, but also the social tendency expressed by the fact, then this is already a photomontage.”37

The intentionality of the juxtapositions between elements is a feature that photomontage

and architecture have in common, in contrast to the randomness of advertisements plastered throughout the modern city. The willful constructedness of these contrasts offers new compositional opportunities for propagandists, architects, and poets alike. Williams explores these possibilities in his 1929 poem “It Is a Living Coral,” which chronicles his visit to the Capitol in Washington, D.C., the country’s largest monument to American democracy. What he discovers there is a kind of propagandistic *bricolage*, an advertisement for America on a grand scale that unintentionally bares many of the devices by which the country has gained, and keeps, its power. The conglomeration of statuary, paintings, and placards—all within the frame of a monumental, domed edifice—is itself montage-like, and the poet fittingly adopts the strategies of montage in order to compass its chaos. The relationship of the poem’s title to its opening lines is reminiscent of Marianne Moore’s “An Octopus,” in which the titular figure becomes, in the poems’ first line, an octopus “of ice.”38 Williams’s poem similarly begins *in medias res*, characterizing the “Living Coral” of the title as “a trouble // archaically fettered / to produce // *E Pluribus Unum.*” These lines dramatize the formation of the early American republic and its capitalist ideology, one fragmentary phrase at a time. The unexpected sonic parallel between “coral” and “trouble” underlines the sudden critique that takes over the poem in its very first line, after a title that seemed to promise an ode to the “living” qualities of its subject. Like a “living coral,” the early republic sought to feed its constituents so that they could reproduce and grow into a colony, eventually entering into a symbiotic relationship with the land and its other inhabitants. Instead, its diverse outgrowths have been “archaically fettered / to produce” not only commodities and wealth, but a myth of unity that tends insidiously towards insistence on sameness: *E Pluribus Unum*, “Out of Many, One.” This hermeticism, this “fettering,” has turned

---

the unified nation into “an / island // in the sea.” In fewer than twenty words, Williams exemplifies the tonal contrasts, syntactic shifts, and discontinuities that will inform his critique of American monuments and the culture they mythologize. [Figure 5]

Amid the mausoleum-wedding-cake aesthetic of Washington, D.C., the Capitol itself rises like “an / island // in the sea… / surmounted // by Armed Liberty.” The allegorical figure of Liberty wears a crested helmet, like the Roman goddesses Minerva or Bellona, and bears a sword that suggests the vulnerability of the freedom she represents. The interior of the monument, its discontinuous “painting // sculpture,” appears likewise embattled, awkwardly “straddled by / a dome // eight million pounds / in weight.” Williams’s couplets of uneven length and variable stress distribute the monument’s ungainliness across the full breadth of the description, recalling the “iron plates constructed / to expand // and contract with / variations // of temperature” like “the folding // and unfolding of a lily.” The easy contraction and expansion of the poetic line ironically underscores the difficulty with which the monument’s materials—marble, iron, and bronze—must “expand // and contract with / variations.” Ideally, the “living coral” of American society would mirror the “variations” in its climate as smoothly as “the folding / and unfolding of a lily”; however, the island-like dome “eight million pounds / in weight” adjusts itself to new conditions only with difficulty.

The grandest and most durable materials for signifying the victory of American democracy are those that resist change with the greatest obduracy, preventing the “living coral” from evolving as it grows. The couplet structure of Williams’s poem effectively dramatizes the disjuncture between the graceful “unfolding” of policy that would lead the union to thrive and the intractable, clunky slowness of American bureaucracy: “and unfolding of a lily. / And Congress” make uneasy fellows, and not just because the first full sentence of the poem ends
between them. What follows is the stutter of the democratic process attempting to shore up its validity in the face of a gap between theory and practice: “And Congress // authorized and the // Commission // was entrusted was / entrusted!” The enthusiasm of the declaration is undermined by the incompleteness of the first phrase (what exactly did Congress authorize?), the vagueness of “the // Commission,” and the stammered repetition of “was entrusted.” Politicians have a habit of cutting to the chase—of leaving out the details of new legislation and reinforcing the party line on it through brute repetition. One feels here as if a participant in a speed-reading course had just provided an exuberant summary of the text contained on a placard beneath the monument’s “painting // sculpture.”

Monumental sculpture and architecture seeks to reconstitute past events in the form of a consolidated object— one whose literal, spatial presence stands in for the temporal presence of the people or events it depicts. The Founding Fathers and their struggles belong not to the present, but to the past. Williams’ emulation of the repetitive, gung-ho rhetoric of political speechifying exposes the awkwardness of efforts to kindle reverence or remembrance in the hearts of current-day Americans. Furthermore, the poem’s tendency to scramble the various elements of the monument, until readers can no longer tell how its parts relate to the whole, points to the bizarrely Europeanized nationalism inherent in the decision to place elements of a Greco-Roman architectural tradition in the service of making the (far more recent) American past seem present again:

a sculptured group
Mars
in Roman mail placing
a wreath
of laurel on the brow
of Washington
Commerce Minerva
Thomas
Jefferson John Hancock
at
the table Mrs. Motte
presenting
Indian burning arrows
to Generals
Marion and Lee to fire
her mansion
and dislodge the British—

The poem’s disjunctive, free-verse couplets, whose lines range from one to six syllables in length, break apart and recombine the elements featured in the monument, until it becomes increasingly hard to tell how the names and parts relate to each other. [Figure 6] Who is “Commerce Minerva / Thomas”? What about “Jefferson John Hancock”? This perpetual rearrangement of parts achieves several of the poem’s goals at once. It gives the poem an experiential dimension by dramatizing the experience of walking around and surveying the monumental Capitol as a tourist, struggling to unify its elements of myth (“Minerva”), allegory (“Commerce”), and history (“Thomas // Jefferson”) into a coherent object. By breaking its sentences down into dense and discontinuous chunks of verbal matter, it replicates the combination of concreteness and abstraction that are so puzzlingly intertwined in the monument. Few poets, especially in the early twentieth century, would put the word “at” alone on its own line, followed by a stanza break. And only Williams would isolate a Founding Father’s first name (“Thomas”) across the gulf of a stanza break from his last name, and then group his last name together with the full name of one of his colleagues (“Jefferson John Hancock”). The result is difficult to absorb despite its overwhelming familiarity, like the spiel of a mediocre tour guide. Its inchoate syntax is the site of Williams’s critique: this rush of more-and-less-familiar names, this stream of events that carries the ghosts of forgotten housewives and anonymous Indians in
its wake, has been subsumed not merely into the “trouble[d]” monument, but into History. It seems that this great historical flux of nouns and verbs refuses to stay still—to appear properly monumental—without being “straddled by / a dome // eight million pounds / in weight.”

Following Mrs. Motte’s injunction to the generals to burn down “her mansion / and dislodge the British” during their occupation of South Carolina, the poem opens out into a present-tense moment of editorializing:

this scaleless
jumble is superb
and accurate in its expression
of the thing they would destroy—
Baptism of Pocahontas
with a little card hanging
under it to tell the persons
in the picture.

As we saw in Khlebnikov’s and Stein’s attempts at “verbal cubism,” the linearity of text (as opposed to, say, monumental sculpture) allows Williams to create half-meanings and partial images that persist for just a moment before they are subverted or contradicted by a subsequent line or phrase. It seems as if Williams is praising the monument for its disorderliness (“this scaleless // jumble is superb // and accurate”)—leading one perhaps to wonder how a “scaleless // jumble” can be “accurate”—until the subsequent clauses modify this tribute: “this scaleless // jumble is superb // and accurate in its / expression // of the thing they / would destroy—” (italics mine). Williams does not specify exactly who “they” are, nor the particular nature of “the thing
they / would destroy.” The subsequent stanzas give some idea, as the title “Baptism of Pocahontas” calls to mind the ceremony in which the daughter of a famous Algonquian chief, once captured by the British, took the name “Rebecca” and converted to Christianity prior to marrying the Englishman John Rolfe. If Williams expects his readers to know the history of how Pocahontas was herself “destroy[ed]” by British imperialism—brought to London, exhibited around English high society, forced to bear a son, and dead at Gravesend at age twenty-onecc—his poem makes none of this explicit.39 The only captioning provided for the 12-by-18-foot painting Williams describes, which occupies the rotunda of the Capitol, is “a little card / hanging // under it to tell / the persons / in the picture.” The word “little” calls attention once again to the problem of scale in the monument’s “superb” and “scaleless // jumble.” The rotunda painting, with its “little” placard, errs on the side of excessive “accura[cy]” about some of “the persons // in the picture,” while appearing to overlook the other (nameless) persons involved in the early republic’s history— not to mention the exploitative and inhumane acts of “archai[c] fetter[ing]” required “to produce” the America it celebrates.

To be made into a monument means to be included in history; it offers the promise of immortality alongside the threat of reification. It includes the individual “persons // in the picture” at the cost of their individuality— for whether or not it includes their names on “a little card,” it turns them into representatives of a broader historical moment and a more general set of trends or characteristics. Although there is a place, in the middle horizon of the large-scale painting, where individual colonists, congressmen, and Indians gather around to watch the main event and are preserved for posterity without being singled out for particular notice, inclusion in a monument generally consigns one to exemplarity or oblivion. This is the fate of one former

senator, whose bronze likeness stands in front of a picture of his home state; he becomes a proxy for the many acts of exploration and aggression enacted upon early America by white men:

\[
\text{It climbs}
\]
\[
\text{it runs, it is Geo. Shoup}
\]
\[
of Idaho it wears a beard
\]
\[
it fetches naked Indian women from a river Trumbull
\]
\[
\text{Varnum Henderson Frances}
\]
\[
\text{Willard’s corset is absurd—}
\]
\[
\text{Banks White Columbus stretched}
\]
\[
in bed men felling trees
\]

On the one hand, Senator Shoup sounds like a comic book superhero (“It climbs // it runs, it is Geo. / Shoup // of Idaho!”); on the other hand, he (“it”) is flattened, depersonalized, and allegorized as a force that “fetches naked / Indian // women from a river.” Shoup is a presence both active and static in the poem. He represents the agency of Anglo-American men to conquer both the landscape and its indigenous peoples, but Williams’s abbreviation of Shoup’s first name (“Geo.”) and repeated use of “it” instead of “he” turns Shoup into an object with a placard under him—an allegory of the Colonizer. Similarly, Frances Willard, for all she may have done in life as the founder of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, has been immortalized in a form that draws attention only to her undergarments (“Frances // Willard’s corset is / absurd”). And Christopher “Columbus,” coming at the tail end of a litany of names, appears “stretched // in bed,” while (on the very same line) there are other “men felling trees.” Nowhere else in
American literature has the chaos and destruction underlying our national foundations been drawn with such economy. The poem adopts the rhetoric and content of the Capitol’s architecture in order to expose both its polysemy and its inadequacy. The monument, as Williams would have us see, preserves exploitatively, and sometimes inadvertently. By making a montage or collage of past events physically present before the viewer on canvas or in bronze, the monument distorts our sense of historical time; Ancient Greece, the fall of Rome, the baptism of Pocahontas (1613), and the destruction of Mrs. Motte’s plantation home (1781) come together in a “scaleless // jumble” of representations. We know more than we need to about some figures (“it wears a beard”), and woefully little about others (who were all those “Indian women” “fetch[ed]” “from a river”?). It condenses a teleology of American progress so violently that it destroys any sense of the causal relationship between the events depicted.

It seems fitting, then, that the poem’s ending leaves the viewer of its “living coral” somewhat at sea:

The Hon. Michael C. Kerr
onetime Speaker of the House
of Representatives Perry
in a rowboat on Lake Erie
changing ships the dead
among the wreckage sickly green

By the poem’s end, the narrative of American greatness and growth has been undermined so thoroughly that even the individual parts of the “Living Coral” lie dissected into lexical fragments. Williams’s unexpected line breaks fracture the structures of words that stand for
persons, places, and institutions whose wholeness the monument was built to honor. Bureaucratic
titles resound with their own hollow pomposity (“The Hon. Michael / C. Kerr // onetime Speaker
of // the House // of Representatives / Perry”), and the names of important figures appear
crammed into the same line, like the meats of different animals stuffed into one sausage (“Indian
// women from a river / Trumbull // Varnum Henderson / Frances // Willard’s corset is / absurd”).
The poem ends with an image from William H. Powell’s painting, “The Battle of Lake Erie,” in
which U.S. Captain Perry changes ships while leading American troops to victory over the
British in the War of 1812. Perry is shown “changing ships,” and thereby surviving to be
memorialized in the Senate wing of the Capitol— in pointed contrast to his troops, “dead //
among the wreckage.” The fact that the poem, which has taken the reader on a frenetic, slapdash
tour of the Capitol, slows to a halt and finally stops on the image of “the / dead // among the
wreckage / sickly green” can be considered Williams’s parting shot at the “Living Coral” he
seemingly set out to praise. That “Living Coral” is— and always was— built on “a trouble,” a
“jumble” of “wreckage” and death; the “sickly green” of the soldiers’ corpses is the color of
sacrifice and renewal at once.⁴⁰ Likewise, the statue of “Armed Liberty” crowning the
centerpiece of the capital was built through the labor of men who were not themselves free.

In the most generous estimation, the United States of America has much in common with
the “Living Coral” of the poem’s title—but one would not know it from a visit to the Capitol.
The coral reef is an enormous colony of polyps who are individually vulnerable and
indistinguishable, and whose secretions form a large, shared skeleton over the course of
generations. A coral reef, unlike man-made forms of monumental architecture, is “living” even

⁴⁰ Williams details the violence and exploitation of the early explorers of the Americas in his essayistic nonfiction
book, In the American Grain (New York: New Directions, 1925). Several of the events and characters mentioned in
passing in “It Is a Living Coral” are discussed at greater length in that work.
when it might seem to be merely sculptural; moreover, the living polyps build their collective body upon the excretions of their predecessors. The form of the reef is organic and is influenced by environmental factors, rather than being “archaically fettered / to produce” anything beyond itself. For Williams, the coral embodies a kind of production that is both natural and non-ideological. The form of the Capitol building, with its enormous, ornate dome, might look like a coral colony, but the history within its walls is as discontinuous as the billboard-plastered landscape of “Rapid Transit.” The states it claims to stand for are anything but united.

Interlude: On Photomontage

The opposing forces of nationalism and disunity create tension in Soviet art of the NEP period (1921-1928) as well. In the wake of the Revolution, the strategies of photomontage came to be seen as particularly germane to two of large-scale advertising’s goals: first, to reflect the context of the newly-transformed Soviet society through the use of “documentary” (i.e., photographic) materials; and second, to imply a narrative and provoke viewers’ emotions through the immediacy and juxtaposition of the medium. It did not take long for Aleksandr Rodchenko, Aleksei Gan, and their fellow Constructivists to begin exploiting the polysemous potential of photomontage. They treated montage as a means of embedding multiple “plotlines” or ideological meanings in an otherwise flat and unified surface.\(^{41}\) These posters perform the reconciliation of potentially contradictory injunctions; for instance, purchasing commodities might seem to be at odds with the tenets of the new Communist state, but a poster encouraging peasants newly arrived from the countryside to buy goods at the State Department Store (GUM)

\(^{41}\) It is important to remember, however, that the original versions of these photomontages were cut and assembled by hand, and often included hand-lettering designed to look like typography. The machine-made aesthetic had to be emulated, at times, because of limited materials. It was only through mass reproduction that the works attained their apparent flatness and the unification of their fragments on a single plane.
presents consumption as a way of strengthening the national economy and supporting Soviet progress. [Figure 7] Through photomontage, which contained no handwriting or drawing but only typography and photographs, the hand of the artist had found a way to stand in for the phantom hand of the regime—all while leaving the result perfectly free of fingerprints.

Because these artists’ medium was the photograph documenting recognizable kinds of people, places, and objects, the Constructivists’ work was aligned with the tenets of so-called “factography,” whose polemics were later collected in an anthology entitled Literature of Fact [literatura fakta]. Nikolai Chuzhak’s injunction to the artists of LEF (Left Front of the Arts) and beyond was to reject any non-figurative art of the kind promoted by earlier avant-gardists, in favor of documenting the material facts of the New Everyday Life:

Нельзя перепевать мотивы беспредметного утверждения революции, когда вся жизнь кричит о конкретной производственной работе, … когда требуется живая работа над фактом. Нельзя, наконец, опыт современного строительства осуществлять вчерашней техникой,— нельзя приемы литературного оборудования современного человека добывать из арсенала феодального мастерства. […] Старая эстетика преображала-просветляла жизнь…расцвечивая ее блестками “свободного” воображения, — …новая наука об искусстве предполагает изменение реальности путем ее перестройки… Отсюда — и упор на документ. Отсюда — и литература факта.42

We must not sing the tunes of the revolution’s baseless statements again and again, when all of life is crying out about the concrete work of production,…when what is required is living labor on the facts. We must not, finally, accomplish the experiment of modern construction through the use of yesterday’s technology,— must not procure the devices of modern man’s literary equipment from the arsenal of feudal craftsmanship. […] The old aesthetics transfigured [and] illuminated life…tinting it with flashes of “free” imagination, — … the new science on art proposes a change in reality by way of its reconstruction… Hence— the emphasis on the document. Hence— the literature of fact. (Translation mine.)

Collage techniques had been a foundation of cubism as early as 1910, but the LEF artists downplayed the influence of the first avant-garde generation on their work. In a move of political sleight-of-hand, they presented photomontage as if its documentary materials had created the demand for the new, disjunctive art form, rather than harnessing that form—a product of pre-revolutionary bourgeois culture—for Soviet ends. By taking “objective,” documentary

representations of everyday life and recombining them in unexpected ways, these artists appropriated the representational strategies of the cubists and suprematists and injected them with a new ideological agenda. In the words of Steven Lee, the LEF group “had grown troubled by a perceived gulf between them and the masses. Their formal innovations seemed increasingly at odds with Soviet audiences and realities. […] Tret’iakov and his circle sought a middle ground of sorts, art that was legible to workers, but that also destabilized perception and undercut received notions of the real. Factography was intended to serve these ends.”

By the time the theory of photomontage was being written about by such LEF luminaries as Chuzhak, Tret’iakov, and Eisenstein, the jaws of state censorship were already poised to clamp down on all works that did not subscribe to the tenets of strict socialist realism. However, in the heyday of the technique’s development—of which Rodchenko’s illustrations for Pro eto (1924) are perhaps the crowning achievement—it seemed like the best answer to the problem of a new Soviet art that did not succumb to the lures of bourgeois aesthetics on the one hand or artless propaganda on the other. More recent critics do not necessarily agree. Boris Groys, for one, has cited the Constructivists’ belief in the “objectivity” of their materials as one of the final nails in the coffin of avant-garde aesthetics:

Newspaper reports on the “victories of labor” or photographs of smiling collective farmers and proletarians with their faces turned to the future may have been interpreted as “facts” and contrasted with the “fictive,” “illusory” art of the past; but to the modern observer, at least, a glance at LEF’s educational art reveals that the material with which the group was working was not any immediate manifestation of “life” but the product of manipulation and simulation by mass media under the complete control of the party propaganda apparatus. All of these newspaper materials and photographs…were interpreted by LEF as materials of life itself—materials which, although they must be shaped creatively, were raw and primary outside this process. The Achilles’ heel of avant-garde aesthetics as a whole lies in this failure to understand the mechanisms through which reality is technically processed by the modern means of communication that register it. In part because the artists of LEF enthusiastically shared the underlying ideology and were actively involved in this processing,… they regarded the photographs and the news article as a means for discovering reality and remained blind to the fact that such forms of information are an ideological operation.  

It is true that none of LEF’s art calls into question whether the people or things represented in its photographic fragments are anything other than the real-life incarnation of a familiar cultural concept; every boy in a hat is the ideal Komsomol youth; every gleaming tractor is a synecdoche for the great Soviet collectivization of agriculture. However, by stripping newspaper clippings and photographs of their original contexts and re-orienting them in overlapping spatial configurations, the LEF artists foreground the material qualities of their objects—and, by extension, of the productive processes, both ideological and logistical, behind them. They may not go so far as to critique this landscape of allegorical facts, in which every thing comes out of and gets fed back into the Soviet machine, but, to invoke the Formalist credo, they do at least “bare the device.”

Constructivist photomontage and Mayakovsky’s poetry of the 1920s negotiate between the same aesthetic and ideological binaries. They try to engage with the scale of the Soviet project by creating art works with suitably monumental implications, while also staying true to the factual and material particularities of their medium. They invoke recognizable imagery and familiar slogans in order to gain traction with the masses, but they also follow from Shklovsky’s principle of ostranenie, through what Nina Gourianova calls a “recoding of the object or thing placed in an unusual context that generates the element of alogism, absurdity, or if you will, estrangement.” Gourianova goes on to say that “the complication or impeding of artistic language, what Shklovsky calls a device, inhibits active politicization and the blunt intrusion of a dominant political ideology of power striving for hegemony”— and thereby comes into conflict

---

with Trotsky’s concept of “the objective social dependence and utility of art” (Gourianova, 260).

Because the cubist and suprematist aesthetics of the earlier avant-garde arose out of different ideological foundations than those of Constructivist photomontage—and because, in some sense, the foundations of the former directly oppose the basis on which the Soviet state was built—a tension persists in the work of LEF between the idiosyncrasy of the collagist’s individual vision and the supposed purpose of his art: namely, to reflect the State back to itself. Unable to unlearn the lessons of Shklovsky and their avant-garde forebears, Mayakovsky and the Constructivists are left with the task of repurposing suspect artistic techniques in the name of their social and didactic mission. And while their goal may occupy the opposite end of the ideological spectrum from that of the American ad-men, the two groups shared many of the same influences and types of materials; perhaps it is not surprising that they thus confronted many of the same questions.

The Breakdown of the Monumental Everyday: Pro Eto

The Leningrad of Russia’s second modernist generation is a world in which all actions, desires, and bodies—human or otherwise—find themselves subsumed within the oppressive banality of byt [быт]. This untranslatable word, from the verb “быть,” meaning “to be”) is the target of much avant-garde art and writing in the context of Russian modernism. A neutral definition might be the following: “the mode of everyday life; the non-production (non-manufacturing) sphere; including the satisfaction of the people’s material needs, as well as the development of their spiritual values, culture, communication, recreation, and entertainment.”47 However, byt took on a much more sinister tone in many writings of the early Soviet period, including

Mayakovsky’s most prominently of all. Byt came to be seen, by Mayakovsky and his circle, as fundamentally opposed to “бытье” (byt’ie)—which, in philosophical terms, is the subject of ontology: being, or existence, in its essential form, as in Heidegger’s understanding of Dasein.

The alienation of byt from byt’ie—of the material means of everyday life from its existential ends—gives rise to the contradictions of avant-garde poetry and becomes the object of its social critique. The most famous description of byt is perhaps that of Roman Jakobson, who wrote that, in Mayakovsky’s poems, “Opposed to th[e] creative urge toward a transformed future is the stabilising force of an immutable present,”

overlaid, as this present is, by a stagnating slime, which stifles life in its tight, hard mold. The Russian name for this element is byt… The real antithesis of byt is a slippage of social norms… [But i]nertia continues to reign. It is the poet’s primordial enemy, and he never tires of returning to this theme. “Motionless byt.” […] The poet is oppressed by the specter of an unchangeable world order, a universal apartment-house byt… Against this unbearable might of byt an uprising as yet unheard of and nameless must be contrived.48

Byt refers to the reification of persons by the institutions and practices that together make up the so-called “daily grind.” It is also exemplified for the theorists of LEF, as Christina Kiaer shows, by a range of objects that embody capitalistic values and promote the circulation of petit-bourgeois taste at the expense of the revolutionary project:

…by byt in the objective sense we mean that stable order and character of objects with which the person surrounds himself and to which, regardless of their usefulness, he transfers the fetishism of his sympathies and memories and in the end literally becomes the slave of these objects. In this sense byt is a deeply reactionary force, that which in pivotal moments of social change prevents the organization of the will of a class for plotting decisive assaults. Comfort for comfort’s sake; coziness as an end in itself; all the chains of tradition and of respect for objects that have lost their practical meaning, beginning with the neck tie and ending with religious fetishes—this is the quagmire of byt…49

The materialist basis of the new communist state led theorists in every field to treat the


transformation of people’s everyday objects as an occasion for, and a means of, transforming their consciousness. Artists and engineers leapt at the opportunity to be on the front lines of this “inescapable battle against byt” (Tret’iakov, in Kiaer, 26). Trotsky’s 1923 book Voprosy byta [Questions of Everyday Life] took on such topics as “Vodka, the Church and Cinema,” while renowned Constructivist architect Vladimir Tatlin publicized his new designs for mass-produced domestic objects in a 1924 article in Krasnaia panorama [Red Panorama] boldly entitled “Novyi byt [The New Everyday Life].” When, years later and in a much more oppressive version of the Soviet project, Stalin called upon artists to be “the engineers of the human soul” (Groys 37), he was drawing upon a notion of the dialectical relationship between objects and social values that placed the artist, as designer and creator of those objects, in a position of power.50

In the midst of this revolution in sensibility, Mayakovsky set to work on a long poem that chronicled his private struggle to revolutionize his relationship to other persons and objects, in the hopes of transforming that struggle into an allegory of the “battle against byt.” At its heart is the question of whether, by changing his relation to the contexts of everyday life, the poet can expand his concern with private, individual love—the subject of outmoded and bourgeois poetry—into a universal love befitting the goals of his new, revolutionary society. When the poem appeared in print in May of 1923, amid a storm of popular publications on the problems of byt, and featured eight full-page illustrations created by Mayakovsky’s friend and fellow Constructivist, Aleksandr Rodchenko. It was the first book ever to be illustrated by means of photomontage, and one aspect of its revolutionary aesthetic was its inclusion of photographic portraits of Mayakovsky and Lilia Brik, alongside photographs and popular press images of

50 The pervasiveness of this will to power, and its origins in the polemics of the avant-garde, is something many historians and critics overlook—at the risk of believing that the avant-garde project and the Stalinist one are more divergent than they actually were, according to Boris Groys. See Groys, 7-8.
everyday objects. Because it centered around the theme of love—a fixation of Mayakovsky’s which his critics in the workers’ unions had been quick to point out—the long poem entered the world with the tongue-in-cheek title of Pro eto [About That], and with Brik’s face on the cover.

The poem opens with Mayakovsky’s persona stuck in a “Reading Goal” of romantic torment, whose characteristics match those of his real-life dwelling on Vodop’ianii Lane down to the letter. It is well known that the poem was, in fact, written during a two-month “voluntary separation” between Mayakovksy and the eternal “she” of his poems, Lili Brik, at the end of 1922 and the start of 1923. It is an existential portrait of its author, as Andrei Rassomakhin attests—but a portrait that configures its hero’s subjectivity by means of objects.

The first section discovers Mayakovsky seated by the telephone, an object whose technology locates the promise of connection with the outside world within one’s own home. It offers users the ability to make contact with absent people with unprecedented rapidity, and yet it does not quell the speaker’s isolation, or solve his relationship problems. Indeed, the telephone becomes a way of dramatizing a rejection of the same intimacy it offers. Only a tiny cord («кабель тоносенький», «просто нитка», «ниточка») spans the abyss that separates Lili and Mayakovksy, and its vast connective power highlights the vulnerability and fragility of the connection between them. Soon enough the poet is describing his experience of the switchboard in terms that evoke natural disasters—“An earthquake? / In winter? / At the post-office?!” The telephone transfers the turmoil inside his body into the institutions, and even the weather, of the external world. Here, as throughout Mayakovksy’s work, the lyric subject, the body, the landscape, and technology appear superimposed upon one another.

51 For an account of the poem’s composition process, see Jangfeldt, 231-263.
In the subsequent section, entitled “What Can Become of a Man!” («Что может сделать с человеком»), Mayakovsky satirizes, but cannot overcome, the predicament of his lyric speaker, whose jealousy turns him—otherwise a loyal contributor to the official Communist news organ, Izvestia—into a bear. The whimsicality of this cartoonish portrait is nonetheless undercut with terror, as the speaker’s body grows and coarsens under the pressure of his unruly emotions:

Товарищи! Взвесьте! В Париж гастролировать едущий летом, поэт, почтенный сотрудник «Известий», царя стул когтём из штиблета. Вчера человек — единым махом клыками свой размединил вид я! Косматый. Шерстью свисает рубаха. Тоже туда ж?! В телефоны бабахать?! К своим пошёл! В моря ледовитые! 53

Comrades! Weigh the pros and cons then! This coming summer a poet, who will tour Paris, a respectable Izvestia correspondent, now scratches the chair with claws through his shoe. Yesterday a man - With one stroke alone of my fangs my looks I polar-beared! Shaggy. My shirt hangs like furry hair. You’re also going there?! To moan into the phone?! Go back to the Arctic! To your own! 54

In the subsequent section, the speaker’s emotions hypostasize once again, until they create a landscape for his cartoonishly overgrown bear body to inhabit:

Медведем, когда он смертельно сердится, на телефон грудь, на врага тяну. А сердце глубже уходит в рогатину! Течёт. Ручьища красной меди. Рычание и кровь. 54

Like a bear, when to deadly anger prone, my breast I turn to my foe — the phone. Into the two pronged receiver rest, deep into the boar-spear, my heart is pressed. It gushes a stream of coppery red. Howls and blood lapping, darkness sped. 53

(Spencer 172)

Mayakovsky’s descriptions combine his skill as a satirist and his experience as a cartoonist with his rhetorical gifts; by making the language of Russian folklore and that of communist agitprop rhyme perfectly, he reveals how close to one another they may have been all along. The poet

53 All Russian-language quotations from “Pro eto” are taken from S II, 174-219.
revels in language’s transformative powers, taking his subject matter to the brink of absurdity and even into the realm of the surreal. Thus, just as the linguistic sleights of the poem’s opening section transformed the telephone into a turbulent landscape paralleling the speaker’s emotions, here the apartment of the first scene becomes an arctic wasteland, a Lake Ladoga flooded with his own, enormous tears:

Here, as in Mayakovsky’s earliest poems, the speaker’s turmoil is represented as a disjunction in scale between a gigantic interiority that overspills its bounds, and a vulnerable exterior. His vast emotions are externalized as a rushing river, upon which his comparatively smaller body floats helplessly along. The fact that his own tears create the landscape does not preclude his alienation from it, which has has hypostasized into an estrangement from everything else on earth. He even goes so far as to dramatize his failed attempts to reach out to the State for
help with this isolation. Standing alone on the same bridge where his poetic alter ego contemplated suicide in the poem Man, seven years before, Mayakovsky implores the Party to relieve his agony— but Christ turns out to be “younger,” “gentler,” “not Jesus at all,” but a komsomolets (Young Communist League member). The gulf between his one room on Liubianksii Lane and Lili’s place in Vodop’ianii Alley, with the thin telephone wire stretched across it, becomes the insuperable abyss between the poet-speaker’s personal torment and the resources the current world might muster to relieve it. All potential saviors— the Party, the State, Jesus Christ, the speaker’s family, and even the private ideal of romantic love— are either inaccessible or inadequate, as Mayakovsky acknowledges with the section title “Nothing Can Be Done” («Ничего не поделаешь»).

At any rate, it becomes clear when the poet rejoins the human world and returns home for Christmas— that pre-revolutionary, now-retrograde holiday— that the social order of the older generation will not accomplish the necessary transformation of eros into agape. His family, shocked by his outbursts, offers petty domestic comforts that disgust him: “For love you substitute afternoon tea? / Love you exchange for the darning of socks?!” he cries (Spencer 184). The familial domestic space embodies the very worst of byt. It is rife with the stifling, petit-bourgeois ordinariness, or meshchanstvo, that suppresses revolutionary sentiments and suffocates the poet’s voice. He takes its objects, from mattresses to samovars to geraniums and the portrait of Marx in a cheap red frame, as proof of the triumph of byt over the forces of revolution:

С матрацев,
вздымая постельные тряпки,
клюпы, приветствую, подняли лапки.
Весь самовар расселялся в лучики -
хочет обнять в самоварные ручки.
В точках от мух
веночки
с обоев
венчают голову сами собою.
Взяли тут ангельские-торнинсты,
пророзовев из иконного глянца.
Исус,
приподняв

From mattresses,
through the bed rags beating,
bed-bugs lift their paws in greeting.
The whole samovar's with light-beams laced-stretching our its handles to embrace.
Wallpaper
wreaths
with fly-spots blown
crown my head all on their own.
Angel trumpeters played a flourish pulsating,
out of the ikon's lustre roseating.
Jesus,
raising
Svetlana Boym has detailed the extent and influence of this resistance to *byt*, which led to a series of articles in *Komsomol Truth* [*Komsomol’skaia pravda*] called “Down with Domestic Trash!” The campaign urged young Soviet citizens, “Let us stop the production of tasteless bric-a-bracs! With all these dogs, mermaids, little devils and elephants, invisibly approaches *meshchanstvo*. Clean your room! Summon bric-a-brac to a public trial!”55 Boym writes,

> If for the prerevolutionary intelligentsia *meshchanstvo* often appears as a perversion of the folk spirit, for the postrevolutionary left-wing intelligentsia it betrays the ideals of the revolutionary proletariat. Mayakovsky spends more time in poetic fights with “bad workers” (that is, those who show…interest in private acquisitions and are hence considered “bourgeoisified”) than against the bourgeoisie itself. Bad workers are worse than class enemies; they profane the ideal of the revolutionary class. (Boym 69)

Rodchenko’s photomontage illustration for the section contain a portrait of the poet encroached upon by overlapping cutouts of these bourgeois objects: the face of a framed Communist Youth portrait is blotted out by a giant teaspoon; a goblet holds up to the poet’s stony expression a silhouette of a man and woman at a dining table; perfume bottles and a butter knife cross paths with a portly, bald, monocle-wearing capitalist—perhaps the Wilson of “150,000,000”?; and a snapshot of the world’s tallest man shows his head scraping the ceiling of an apartment in which his diminutive mother sits gazing upwards, bewildered. These overlapping surfaces create a

---

sense of shallowness and claustrophobia, while their disjunctures bespeak the poet’s alienation from a world that is supposed to constitute a unified and self-contained domestic ideal. His existential dread of the private life becomes an allegory for a fear which, the poem suggests, any socially-conscious Soviet citizen should share. [Figure 8]

In the same way that Mayakovsky’s poetic accounts of his personal romantic torment—from *A Cloud in Trousers* to *Man to About That*—expand into allegories of Romantic Love writ large, the section title for his holiday homecoming laments bankrupt *meshchanin* values in general. These are not just issues faced by his family, he insists; they belong to “Everyone’s Parents [Всехные родители].” The poem achieves this allegorical expansion by first dramatizing the superhuman size of its speaker and then surrounding him with a world that either dwarfs him with emptiness or encroaches upon him with an excess of objects. The poem escapes this only by means of a fantasy of personal mobility, which allows Mayakovsky and his mother to travel all over the world and resist the clutches of the dreaded samovar [“Весь самовар рассиялся в лучики— / хочет обнять в самоварные ручки”]. They jump from one line to the next, from Moscow to Petrograd, Szczecin to Berlin to the Brooklyn Bridge, but cannot escape either the petit-bourgeois ideology they live within nor the torment that threatens to make it unlivable. The speaker finds himself trapped once again, in a domestic space recalling the “Reading Gaol” of Liubianskii Lane in section one:

В матрац,
поздоровавшись,
взели клопы.
На вещи насела столетня пыль.
А тот стоит —
в перила вбит.
Он ждёт,
он верит:
скоро!
Я снова лбом,
я снова в быт
вбиваюсь слов напором.
Опять
атакую и вкривь и вкось.
Но странно:
слова проходят насквозь.

The bugs having greeted crawled back to the mattresses’ mustiness. Everything settled under the centuries’ dustiness. But he stands there — nailed to the railings. “Soon!” He believes, he awaits. Once more humdrum life bailing, once more, word-slamming, my brow hammers away. Again, I attack, right, left and centre. But strange, words pass through as they enter.

{Spencer 192}
The poetic ideal of the self-living word, the word concrete and powerful enough to break through the flimsy walls of the petit-bourgeois apartment, fails the poet, whose words pass straight through him and his surroundings without making contact. Further, the poet’s shock of self-recognition is compounded by the overpowering objects of byt:

Стой у стенки.
Я не я.
Пусть бредом жизнь смололась.
Но только б, только б не ей
невыносимый голос!
Я день,
я год обыденнице предал,
я сам задыхался от этого бреда.
Он
жизнь дымком квартирощным вышел.

By the wall, I'm not I,
unseen, unheard.
Let life be ground by delirium’s noise.
Only it shouldn’t be, it shouldn’t be her
unendurable voice!
The day,
the year to the commonplace I betrayed.
Myself from that delirium I suffocated.
It
has eaten out my life by the fug of apartments.

(197)

The only thing all-consuming enough to swallow up the poet’s monumental subjectivity is the stuffy oppression of apartments, its uneventfulness and commonness [обыденщине]. His escape mission, in which he became an exiled polar bear on Lake Ladoga in section two, has failed; the only solution left, it seems, is for the poet to grow in size until he can rival the vast edifice of the status quo. He becomes an updated version of “Ivan” from “150,000,000,” a Jesus figure in his own right, nailed to the cross of the bridge over the Neva:

Жду,
чтоб землён обезлюбленной
вместе,
чтоб всей
мировой
человечей гущей.
Семь лет стою,
буду и двести
стоять привязённый,
этого ждущий.
У лет на мосту
на презренье,
на смех,
земной любви искупителем значась,
должен стоять,
стою за всех,
за всех расплачуся,
за всех расплачуся.

I’ll wait,
with the earth
love-bereaved
with the whole human mass
we’ll achieve it.
Seven years I’ve stood,
two hundred I’ll defy,
just for that waiting,
crucified.
On the bridge of the years,
derided,
scorned
a redeemer of earthly love I’ll be, alone,
I must stand,
stand up for everyone born,
for everyone I’ll moan,
for everyone atone.

(200-01)
Unlike Christ, however, Mayakovsky is not immune to the slanders of the communist press. In the section called “Recapitulating the Past [Повторение пройденного],” Mayakovsky foresees, chillingly, the impact that negative public opinion will have on his survival. These societal forces torment him until, in “The Final Death [Последняя смерть],” the poet is overpowered by them:

It is easy to criticize Mayakovsky’s narcissistic paranoia, to deride his grandiose self-mythologization as a tormented Romantic, a latter-day Pushkin or Lermontov whose effusions have fallen out of favor— and yet, some resonance of this *cri de coeur* rings true to the poet’s
situation. The poem reflects his outsize reputation in the tabloids, his constant hounding by the press and the court of public opinion, and his sense of a barely-masked violence in the masses’ protests to replace him with proletarian writers. His fear that “merriment [would] chatter [веселье клохочет]” from street corners soon after his death proved well-founded, and he predicts here, movingly, the paltriness of his once-huge personality after his silencing by the state: “Лишь на Кремле / поэтовы ключья / сияли по ветру красным флагом.” Mayakovsky has been reduced to a small, tattered red flag, waving over the Kremlin—and yet, in a final hypostasization, his tattered voice pours into the heavens as starlight [“лирикой звездится”], and the ursine form of the poet from the earlier sections gets transposed onto the eternal canvas of the constellations, uniting the throat of his song [“горланю стихи”] with the blaze of the Big Bear [“Большая Медведица”].

At the start of the poem’s third and final chapter, the poet-speaker awakens back in his bedroom on Liubianskii Lane, and—although he is now human-sized—he towers over a miniature globe, “hunch[ed]” over it in “grief,” to deliver one last condemnation of the only world he has known:

```
Но дыханием моим, сердцебиеньем, голосом, каждым острём издыхенного в ужас<br>волоса, дырами ноздрей, гвоздями глаз, в зубом, иссекрененным в звериний язык<br>ёжью кожу, гнева брови сборами, трillionом пор, дословно - всеми порами<br>в осень, в зиму, в весну, в лето,<br>```

But with all my breathing, heart-beating, voice- rending, with every hair-bristle in spiked terror up-ending, with the holes of my nostrils, the nails of my eyes, with my teeth, set on edge in bestial cries, with my brow’s angry muster, my porcupining skin, with a trillion pores literally - each pore irate in summer, in autumn, in winter, in spring.

---

56 Trotsky’s critique is perhaps the most famous of all: “Mayakovsky is closer to the dynamic quality of the Revolution and to its stern courage than to the mass character of its heroism, deeds and experiences. Just as the ancient Greek was an anthropomorphist and naively thought of the forces of nature as resembling himself, so our poet is a Mayako-morphist and fills the squares, the streets and fields of the Revolution with his own personality... When he wants to elevate man, he makes him be Mayakovsky.” Trotsky, Literature and Revolution, p. 150.
These kind of hyperbolic language and overwrought sentiments, which were condemned by so many of Mayakovsky’s critics, can be seen not merely as an indicator of the poet’s temperament, but as a response to the atmosphere of ever-louder propaganda and increasing political repression in which he lived and wrote. This is not to deny the poet’s all-consuming ego, his penchant for what Trotsky called “Mayakomorphism” — for who could deny it? However, it is not sufficient to see the style and content of his work as crudely predetermined by his own, overweening temperament on the one hand and the overwhelming context of composition on the other.

Propaganda begets propaganda. The poet’s preoccupations (both stylistic and symbolic) point to the dialectical relationship between what Roman Jakobson called the “I” and the “not-I” of Mayakovsky’s oeuvre; his poetry’s “excess” of “personality,” its dizzying distortions of scale and shifts of power, are both a consequence of, and a response to, the agitprop-saturated environment of post-revolutionary Russia (Jakobson, “O pokolenii…,” 32). Soviet critics were keen to underplay the significance of this social context in their condemnations, however clearly the title of Mayakovsky’s final, unfinished poem, “At the Top of My Voice,” speaks to his sense of needing to shout in order to be heard over the roar of the state’s propaganda machine. From a contemporary vantage, it seems there is almost too perfect a parallel between the exhaustion of...
Mayakovsky’s lyric powers and the destruction, from over-exertion, of his physical voice.\textsuperscript{57} 

Devoted “Communist-bear” that he is, Mayakovsky yearns to believe in an afterlife, but cannot reconcile it with state-mandated atheism. In the final chapter of \textit{Pro eto}, seven years before his earthly death, the poet chillingly prefigures his own suicide. And yet, as he will later write in an elegy for fellow poet (and suicide) Sergei Esenin, “In this life, it isn’t hard to die; to build a life is far more difficult.”\textsuperscript{58} He thus includes his own escape route—the quick, easy bullet—alongside a desperate profession of faith in the only world there is:

Верить бы в загробь!
Легко прогулку пробную.
Стоит
только руку протянуть -
пуля
мигом
в жизнь загробную
начертит гремящий путь.
Что мне делать,
если я
повсю,
всей сердечной мерою,
в жизнь сию,
сей
мир
верил,
верую.

If one believed the hereafter!
So easy a trial trip.
One's only
to lift one's hand –
and in a flash
the bullet
will rip
a thundering path to the hereafter-land.
What can I do,
if through and through
with all,
all my heart's measure,
in life on this ball,
this world,
I believed,
believe
and treasure?!


The poet drives home his secular conviction through the repeated, strongly stressed end rhymes of \textit{vovsiu} (“to the utmost”; “with all [my] might”) and \textit{meroiu} (“[with all] measure”) with \textit{vzhizn' siu} (“in this life”) and the stanza’s final word, \textit{veruiu} (“I believe”). “This life” is inseparable from “this world [\textit{sei mir}]”—a realm in which living persons and material things overpower the faint promise of an afterlife.

The final three sections of this last, third chapter are entitled “Faith,” “Hope,” and “Love,” respectively, recalling the three divine virtues of faith, hope, and charity. Having given


\textsuperscript{58}Mayakovsky’s lines in response to Esenin’s are “В этой жизни помереть нетрудно, / сделать жизнь значительно трудней.” The poet uses these lines as the basis of his “poetry lesson” for readers in \textit{How Are Verses Made? [Kak delat' stikhii?].} See \textit{S II}, pp. 679-92.
up on the promise of a Christian heaven, the poet-speaker puts his faith in a “big-foreheaded, / quiet chemist” of the “workshop of human resurrection,” who leans—as Mayakovsky leaned over the globe on Liubianskii Lane—over a book entitled *The Whole World*. This caricature of the Soviet scientist, whose universal tome seems like something out of a children’s story, becomes the addressee of the poem’s final cries:

Then I cry out from these very pages of writing:
“Don’t turn over the page!
Resurrect!

Put a heart in me!
- Transfuse blood to the uttermost vein.
Inject thought into my skull with your skill.
My earthly life I never lived out to the end.
On earth, my love I could never fulfill.

(Quoted in Spencer 211-12)

Ironically, the same speaker who likened his one-room apartment to Reading Gaol and who describes his earthly life as being “stuffed spectacle-like into / a glasses-case of room” now begs to be resurrected within a new site of captivity, demanding of the resurrection specialist, “I still love beasts—/ do you / have / zoos?” He offers to be a janitor, a lowly caretaker in the zoo of the future, in the hopes that his beloved (“she, too, loved animals”) will rejoin him, resurrected into the zoological gardens of the “thirtieth century,” a latter-day Eden:

“Resurrect,” the poet cries out, “if only because / I / the poet / awaited you, / threw out the junk of the daily grind! / Resurrect me / if only for that! / Resurrect—/ I want to live out what’s mine!” The poem ends with a litany of subjunctives, in which Mayakovsky enumerates the
qualities of the afterlife in which he and Lili could be the first children of Creation, and a new socialist paradise-on-earth would begin:

Чтоб не было любви - служанки замужеств,
погохи,
хлебов.
Постели прокляя,
встав с лежанки,
чтоб всей вселенной шла любовь.
Чтоб день,
который горем старящ,
не христарадничать, моля.
Чтоб вся
на первый крик: - Товарищ! -
оборачивалась земля,
Чтоб жить
не в жертву дома дырам.
Чтоб мог
в родне
отныне
отец
по крайней мере,
в родне
отныне
отец,
по крайней мере,
мать.

So love would not be the wench of marriages,
lusts,
loaves.
To hell with the bedsheets,
up from the armchairs,
to flood the world with universal love.
So that the day,
which grief turned gray,
would not need to beg Christ's benediction.
So that at
the very first cry:
- Comrade! -
The earth would shift direction.
To live
not as victims in a house of dearth,
So that,
native
to each other,
father
would become, at least, the world,
earth, at least, our mother.

(Translation mine.)

The utopianism of these final lines gives rise to a shared, enclosed space like that of the home, but one which would also be public—like the zoological gardens that Lili and Mayakovsky had visited together—and therefore interwoven with the other landscapes and institutions of the new Soviet society. “Resurrect[ed]” into a realm of “universal love,” the poet imagines himself and Lili as offspring of Mother Earth and Father Time, whose union collapses both time and space into a singular, eternal present. This sense of a total synthesis is heightened by the form of Mayakovsky’s *lesenka* (staircase) line, which emphasizes correspondences in word stress and grants the status of line-end rhymes to sonic parallels which, in a line of standard length, would be merely internal. 59 *Molia* (praying) rhymes with *zemlia* (earth), the holes (*dyram*) of the meager house with the whole world (*mirom*), and, in the final rhyme, *stat’* (become) joins, fittingly, with *mat’* (mother). The poem’s formal mastery serves as a foil for the *agape* its

59 Much can be said—and, indeed, has been said—about the effects of Mayakovsky’s *lesenka* line. For a recent account, see Janecek 2014, 207-48.
speaker hopes to accomplish. Its incorporation of the rhetorical strategies of photomontage (juxtaposition, overlap, foregrounding and distortion of documentary materials) does not preclude the unification of these fragments within one, multifarious construction.

“Only one man— like a city”: Williams’s Monumental Montage

In many ways, *Pro eto* was the last poem of its kind that Mayakovsky would ever write. One of the principal reasons for this was that the Soviet regime censored with increasing vehemence any writing that was deemed to be written in an “avant-garde” style or on “personal” themes. Likewise, the late 1920s and early 1930s bore witness to a shift in Constructivist art from the techniques of photomontage to a more unified, monumental aesthetic. At a meeting on April 23, 1932, the Central Committee of the Soviet Union effectively signed the death warrant of the avant-garde that had been both comrade and counterweight to its aims; it disbanded all artistic groups and mandated the unionization of all “creative workers” under the auspices of the Party. The monumental aesthetic regime of Stalinist socialist realism became law. In the words of one scholar:

Жанр «длительного фото-наблюдения», предложенный Третьяковым, является буквальной антитезой «моментальному фото», которое в 1928 году тот же Третьяков называл одним из двух основных завоеваний «ЛЕФа» (наряду с «литературой факта»). Но «длительное наблюдение» не просто противопоставляется им моментальному фотоснимку — скорее оно интегрирует в себя более раннюю модель. Одновременно кристаллизуется и другой жанр, соответствующий тенденции к монументализации фотографии — жанр фотофрески. Ранее всего эта тенденция находит отражение в дизайне советских павильонов на всемирных выставках…

The genre of the “long photo-observation” proposed by Tret’iakov is the absolute antithesis of the “instant photo,” which in 1928 the same artist had called one of the two principal achievements of LEF (along with the “literature of fact”). But to him the “long photo-observation” did not simply oppose the instant snapshot— rather, it integrated the earlier model. At the same time another genre, too, was being crystallized, one which corresponds to the tendency toward monumental photography — the genre of the photo-fresco. This tendency finds its earliest reflection in the design of the Soviet pavilions at World Expositions…

---

In the American context, this tendency towards centralization and monumentality was perhaps less noticeable but no less influential, as Susan Stewart explains:

The twentieth century has signaled the appropriation of the sphere of the gigantic by a centralized mode of commercial advertising. Whereas the early figures like Crockett are dollarized as individual heroes and as symbols of community values, Pecos Bill, Joe Magarac, and Febold Feboldson were invented by “local color writers” to sell more newspapers and magazines. Bunyan was made famous by an advertising executive for the Red River Lumber Company… This appropriation of the gigantic away from the vernacular by the domain of commodity advertising marks the gigantic’s transition into an abstract space of production. Contemporary giants such as “the Jolly Green Giant” or “Mr. Clean” are nothing more than their products. Behind them we see not labor but frozen peas and the smell of disinfectant; commodities are naturalized and made magically to appear by the narrative of advertising itself. Such giants are symbolic of a transition from production to anonymity, of the transformation of leisure and production into consumption.61

These commercial giants hearken back to the much earlier practice of including “town giants” in public festivals during the late Middle Ages, and to the incorporation of gigantism into parades and spectacles of Europe’s burgeoning capitalist societies. “With the development of the bourgeoisie, the marketplace, and the life of towns,” writes Stewart, the gigantic is appropriated by the state and its institutions and put on parade with great seriousness, not as a representative of the material life of the body, but as a symbol of the abstract social formations making up the city” (Stewart 81). As we saw in section XXV of “Spring and All,” the tendency towards large-scale advertising and municipal signage was a source of enduring interest for William Carlos Williams, who approached the over-inscribed American landscape around him with a combination of humor, skepticism, and awe. Likewise, in The Descent of Winter (1928), he describes an uncanny encounter with “two / gigantic highschool boys / ten feet tall” on a billboard that declares, “1/4 of their energy comes from bread” (CP I, 303). Williams was fascinated and troubled by the mode of perception occasioned by the modern city, which Stewart describes in terms of the collapse of distance, the fragmentation of perception, and a renewed awareness of the pressure of temporality (Stewart 79). In his four-part epic poem Paterson,

---

begun in the mid-1920s, the poet sought to combine a representation of the modern, industrialized consciousness of the American city with a perspective that would place the city in its natural and historical context—a perspective “gigantic” enough to encompass all of its objects and contradictions.

Williams had been working on versions of his long poem on the city of Paterson, New Jersey for almost 20 years by the time Book I was published in 1946. The poem aggregates diverse forms of discourse that take place in and around the city, including news stories, archival reports, personal anecdotes, description, commentary, and overheard speech. He adopts many of the strategies of the high modernist epic poem in the Anglophone context and embraces the allusiveness and discontinuity of Pound’s *Cantos*, Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, and Crane’s *The Bridge*. Indeed, Crane’s poem serves as a fruitful companion piece for *Paterson*, since both Williams and Crane were galvanized into poetic action by their strongly negative response to the Eurocentrism, academicism, and pessimism of *The Waste Land*; both sought to harness Eliot’s arsenal of representational techniques in the service of a more future-oriented poetics of the local, made of American speech materials and—to borrow a title of Williams’s—“in the American grain.” The central conceit of Williams’s long poem bears a striking resemblance to that of Mayakovsky’s “150,000,000.” In the Author’s Introduction to Book I, Williams explains it as follows:

*Paterson* is a long poem in four parts—that a man in himself is a city, beginning, seeking, achieving and concluding his life in ways which the various aspects of a city may embody—if imaginatively conceived—any city, all the details of which may be made to voice his most intimate convictions. Part One introduces the elemental character of the place. The Second Part comprises the modern replicas. Three will seek a language to make them vocal, and Four, the river below the falls, will be reminiscent of episodes—all that any one man may achieve in a lifetime.” *(P, xiv)*

Williams is far from the first poet to seek to represent an entire city through the prism of one individual subjectivity; one thinks of the seventh chapter of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, in which the poet goes to London, or more contemporaneously, Lorca’s *Poet in New York* [*Poeta en Nueva...*
York]. But what did it mean for this American poet, and this moment in history, to base the main work of his later career on the notion “that man in himself is a city”? [Figure 9]

Poets of Williams’s generation understood the importance of expanding the domain of lyric poetry beyond the bounds of the single, transcendental subject. Given the genre’s formal correspondence, whether implicit or explicit, between the body of the individual poem and that of the subject whose perspective it encapsulates, such a project of expansion threw into question many of the most fundamental conventions of lyric. Excising the poetic consciousness from the implied body of a lyric speaker and implanting it into inhuman objects, or into a landscape around them, had long been Williams’s strategy to circumvent this problem. Increasingly, as we saw in the progression from “The Red Wheelbarrow” to “Rapid Transit” to “It Is a Living Coral,” these poetic “objects” began to call attention to their own status as representations, constructed out of systems of signs that never quite escaped the taint of ideology. However, the lengthy gestation period of Paterson suggests the poet’s enduring goal of bringing the strategies of lyric to bear on a poetics capable, “like a city,” of encompassing a vast scale and diversity of objects and perspectives. The poem would accomplish what the disjunctive bricolage of the Capitol Building had not: it would transform the local and the particular into the universal and exemplary, by means of “the ultimate form” that would “give language its highest dignity, its illumination in the environment to which it is native” (CP II, 55).

The encyclopedic impulse on display here is one which Eliot and Pound, too, owe to Whitman’s legacy, whether or not they would acknowledge the debt. One of its problems is the status is accords to other consciousnesses, as in this passage from Paterson, Book I:

Say it! No ideas but in things. Mr. Paterson has gone away to rest and write. Inside the bus one sees his thoughts sitting and standing. His thoughts alight and scatter —
Who are these people (how complex
the mathematic) among whom I see myself
in the regularly ordered plateglass of
his thoughts, glimmering before shoes and bicycles?
They walk incommunicado, the
equation is beyond solution, yet
its sense is clear — that they may live
his thought is listed in the Telephone
Directory — (P; 9-10)

The section begins by reiterating Williams’s battle cry— “Say it! No ideas but in
things”— and then abruptly pivots back to “Mr. / Paterson,” who, by having “gone away / to rest
and write,” has done something that the city itself cannot do. The Falls do move, but the occupy
a fixed location; likewise, the city’s architecture cannot change position in order to gain a new
perspective on its denizens. As if sensing the dead-end nature of this possibility, the stanza shifts
from a credo about “ideas…in things” to an image of Paterson’s thoughts (ideas) as people inside
a thing— in this case, a bus. If the unified, incorporated landscape of the city were indeed
coterminous with the consciousness of “one man,” surely “his thoughts” would take the form of
its inhabitants, “sitting and standing,” “alight[ing] and scatter[ing].” The stanza even goes so far
as to raise the status of print culture in relation to the life of these citizens, by reversing the
causal relationship one might expect between life and writing: “that they may live / his thought is
listed in the Telephone / Directory.” This somewhat whimsical reversal makes the mind of
Paterson, “his thought,” into a stand-in for the mind of God, and supplants the Book of Life
featured in Exodus and the Psalms into the city’s “Telephone / Directory.” And yet, the poem’s
conflict of perspectives expresses itself in its smallest words, as in the pronouns, here rendered in
bold type so as to show the true measure of their significance:

Inside the bus one sees
his thoughts sitting and standing. His
thoughts alight and scatter —

Who are these people (how complex
the mathematic) among whom I see myself
in the regularly ordered plateglass of
his thoughts, glimmering before shoes and bicycles?
They walk incommunicado…

The speaker, recalling the capaciousness of Whitman’s personae, also brings to mind the totalizing subjectivity of the Mayakovskian “I,” from his earliest poems (one of which takes the first person singular pronoun as its title) to the last one he completed. Here, Williams describes a world in which his mind is as orderly and transparent as “regularly ordered plateglass,” and its contents possess both the vitality of “people” and the materiality of “shoes and bicycles.” Any speaker with the authority to declare, “Say it! No ideas but in things,” or “only one man—like a city,” would seem to be coterminous with Mr. Paterson himself. However, at times that all-enveloping perspective, which had clung to the “regularly ordered plateglass of / his thoughts,” comes unstuck, and the speaker sees himself alongside the city’s other, depersonalized inhabitants. The conflict between a sense of alienation (“who are these people”), the need for a depersonalized perspective (“one sees”), the aim of speaking to the masses as their equal (“among whom I see myself”), and a desire to speak for the landscape as the landscape animates these lines without resolving their conflicts; and Williams admits: “the / equation is beyond solution.” This may be one reason why the poem insistently returns to the figure of a composite “man like a city and a woman like a flower / —who are in love.” For a poet so invested in the directness of speech and the immediacy of experience, the only relation that can serve as an imaginable ideal is the individual relation; the only equation whose solution can be verified firsthand is $1 = 1$.

Williams’s insistence on a poetics based in concrete objects and firsthand perceptions aligns him with the final passages of Mayakovsky’s Pro eto. Allen Ginsberg, himself an important inheritor of Williams’s legacy, describes the older poet as
Zeroing in on actuality with the ordinary mind and abandoning any thought of heaven, illumination; giving up any attempt to manipulate the universe to make it better than it is; but, instead, coming down to earth and being willing to relate to what is actually here without trying to change the universe or alter it from the one which we can see, smell, taste, touch, hear and think about. […] That’s the whole point; dealing with this universe. And that was a fantastic discovery: that you can actually make poetry by dealing with this universe instead of creating another one.62

Ginsberg takes this worldly focus as an indication that Williams was exemplary for his very ordinariness: “He was somebody no different from ourselves” (Ginsberg 39). However, it is important to note that, for all the fellow-feeling in Williams’s poems—which Randall Jarrell praised as “their generosity and sympathy, their moral and human attractiveness”—the large-scale form of Paterson seems to preclude this most humane of poets from endowing the poetic speaker and the citizens of Paterson with the same degree of complexity.63 The best of his earlier portrait-poems (“To a Poor Old Woman,” “Death (He’s dead),” “The Centenarian,” “Proletarian Portrait, “Young Woman by a Window,” and others) combined the intimacy and vulnerability of the encounter with the timeless, infinitely repeatable “objectivity” of the photograph; they suggested that any person (or object) thus attentively captured could reveal a complex history and incite compassion, or perhaps even galvanize social change. Now that he has taken on the challenge of writing from the perspective of a personage whose immensity is “eternal,” “immortal,” and geological, the poet seems unable to see these individual citizens as clearly. The “body electric” that Whitman once sang has become a literally electrified landscape of power plants (“machinations // drawing their substance from the noise of the pouring river”), factories, and reified persons:

…a thousand automatons. Who because they neither know their sources nor the sills of their disappointments walk outside their bodies aimlessly

for the most part,

locked and forgot in their desires — unroused. (P, 6)

So monumental a problem requires a monumental solution, which the poem locates in its material: “language.” *Paterson* seeks what Adrienne Rich would later call “the dream of a common language”—a linguistic code that would revivify and unite its citizens by bridging the abyss between “the torrent in / their minds” and their ability to express it:64

The language is missing them
they die also
Incommunicado.

The language, the language
fails them
They do not know the words
or have not
the courage to use them.

They may look at the torrent in
their minds
and it is foreign to them.

They turn their backs
and grow faint—but recover!
Life is sweet
they say: the language!
—the language
is divorced from their minds,
the language—the language! (P, 11-12)

The strained relationship between language and the mind becomes a metaphor for the current “divorce” between immediate knowledge of the world and the institutions that package and propagate it, as well as the “divorce” that alienates man (Paterson, “one man—like a city) from generative nature (“one woman—like a flower”):

a bud forever green
tight-curled, upon the pavement, perfect
in justice and substance but divorced, divorced
from its fellows, fallen low—
Divorce is
the sign of knowledge in our time,
divorce! divorce! (P, 17)

One way for the poet to reconcile the parties in this “divorce,” *Paterson* suggests, is for him to draw his verbal material from an untapped source—“certainly NOT the university” [emphasis in original]—and focus on local history and nature, “begin to know the mottled branch / that sings” (*P*, 21). Wallace Stevens famously accused Williams of a penchant for the “anti-poetic” (*CP* I 535), a charge which the poet resented enough to recant it in both verse and prose. In Book I of *Paterson*, we can see that one reason for his indignation is Stevens’s failure to understand that, for Williams, there is no such thing as the “anti-poetic,” unless it be the university whose imported, second-hand knowledge he shuns. His resistance to the idea of anti-poetic materials recalls that of Nikolai Chuzhak, who even invokes Mayakovsky in support of his claims:

> Не нужно бояться “неинтересных” моментов как предмета изложения. Ненужно в природе не бывает. В нашем существуют еще мнение, что целый ряд предметов для писательства “не подходят”. Не подходят все простое, обыденное. […] Новая литература впервые ставит образ на ноги. (Здесь, в частности, отметим колоссальную роль Маяковского, освободившего поэзию от мистицизма.) … Путь воздействия ее — через сознание. Не образность, а точность. Не дешевая символика, а правда живого факта.65

There is no need to fear “uninteresting” moments as objects of representation. The uninteresting does not exist in nature. One needs only to offer it up. Among us there persists an opinion that a whole series of objects “do not belong” in writing. All that is simple, ordinary does not belong. […] The new literature for the first time stands the image on its feet. (And here, in particular, we note the colossal role of Mayakovsky, who has freed poetry from mysticism…) The path of its impact is through consciousness. Not imagery, but precision. Not cheap symbolism, but the truth of living fact.

Williams’s insistence on the use of local materials, from overheard speech to newspaper clippings and excerpts from historical accounts, aligns his methodology in a surprising way with that of the Constructivist “factographers.” It is an important conundrum of reading comparatively that those same formal strategies painstakingly devised by one poet in one context can simultaneously (to paraphrase the daredevil Sam Patch of *Paterson*) serve some ideological ends as well as others. In this case, both Williams and Mayakovsky seem to begin their poems from a feeling of being at once monumental and stuck; recall how Mayakovsky dramatized his own

---

suffocation by the arms of the samovar and the other objects of petit-bourgeois *meshchanstvo* in the apartment of *About That*. In Williams’s poem, the foil for the poet—“Mr. Paterson”—is, fittingly, *both* the city (which cannot leave its spot) *and* “the body…lodged between two logs” at the foot of the Falls, which “attract[s] a large number of visitors,” a grotesque record of human foolishness:

```
Moveless
he envies the men that ran
and could run off
toward the peripheries—
to other centers, direct —
for clarity (if
they found it)
loveliness and
authority in the world—

a sort of springtime
toward which their minds aspired
but which he saw,
within himself—ice bound

and leaped, “the body, not until
the following spring, frozen in
an ice cake”
```

Shortly before two o’clock August 16, 1875, Mr. Leonard Sandford, of the firm of Post and Sandford, while at work on the improvements for the water company, at the Falls, was looking into the chasm near the wheel house of the water works. He saw what looked like a mass of clothing, and on peering intently at times as the torrent sank and rose, he could distinctly see the legs of a man, the body being lodged between two logs, in a very extraordinary manner. It was in the "crotch" of these logs that the body was caught.

The sight of a human body hanging over the precipice was indeed one which was as novel as it was awful in appearance. The news of its finding attracted a very large number of visitors all that day. (P, 35)

Stuck in the “crotch” of two logs, the corpse becomes a gruesome still birth, into which not even the spring thaw can breathe new life. It serves as a reminder of how death can turn any individual into an anonymous “mass of clothing” and can fragment the unitary body into parts. One reason why Williams’s epic of the local—not unlike Constructivist photomontages—emphasizes the referentiality of each of its fragments may be to prevent the whole, huge body of the poem from being petrified and illegible to future readers (“ice bound // … ‘the body, not until / the following spring, / frozen in / an ice cake’”). The risk of constructing a monument out of local accounts,
personages, and details is that any attempt to leap beyond the bounds of that context may result in objectification of a kind the poet never intended. At worst, the poem whose context is can be as dead as the Pushkin monument of Mayakovsky’s “Lubileinoie,” and as irretrievable as the body caught in the Falls.

However, one saving grace of the poetic monument, unlike other monumental forms, is that it furnishes many opportunities for its creator to draw attention to the constructs that have shaped it. Like Mayakovsky, Williams leaves evidence of questioning his grandest conceits even in the materials used to build them. He allows these undermining chinks to persist in the marble of his own monument like pauses in an otherwise impassioned oration. The failures of language, which Williams had proposed as a panacea for Paterson’s social and existential ills, find their concrete instantiation in the bodies fished out of the Passaic Falls and immortalized in the annals of local history— that of Mrs. Sarah Cumming, whose last utterance while falling was a wordless shriek, or that of the daredevil Sam Patch:

> On the day the crowds were gathered on all sides. He appeared and made a short speech as he was wont to do. A speech! What could he say that he must leap so desperately to complete it? And plunged toward the stream below. But instead of descending with a plummet-like fall his body wavered in the air — Speech had failed him. He was confused. The word had been drained of its meaning. There's no mistake in Sam Patch. He struck the water on his side and disappeared.

> A great silence followed as the crowd stood spellbound.
> Not until the following spring was the body found frozen in an ice-cake. (P. 16)

Here, Sam Patch’s inarticulacy (he was known to say of his exploits only, “Some things can be done as well as others”), his hesitation midair once “speech had failed him” and “the word had been drained of its meaning,” leads directly to his petrification as that most feared other of the monument—the corpse. The threat of death is that of being taken out of context once and for all.

The poem-as-monument can give shape to the dream of permanence and immovability—or, better yet, to the dream of being all-encompassing enough to create one’s own context, as the
Soviet-era monument of Mayakovsky built in 1958 gave its name to the public square that still houses it, as well as to the metro station beneath it. It can also give voice to the poet’s experience of waking up from that dream and trying to exorcise that most ubiquitous of modernist poetic affects, self-doubt. The monument embodies these poets’ attempts to construct a local mythology that would partake of universal themes, to demonstrate poetry’s capacity to serve as an equally all-encompassing but secular and statist alternative to religious discourse.

Upon reading the other three books of *Paterson*, or the body of criticism generated therefrom, one might be tempted to agree with Jarrell’s assessment that the poem “get[s] rather steadily worse” as it goes (Jarrell 73). One might even go as far as Jerome Mazzaro does when he writes that, for the typical Williams critic, “*Paterson* is a national monument, and his offering reads like a tourist guidebook. The work never fails to locate the reader in the exact spot he occupies in the poem, to point out interesting landmarks, or to give brief histories of various passages…Throughout most of the survey, one senses that the author may be mapping the poem simply ‘because it’s there.’”  

It turns out that the monumental sensibility can have an unsatisfying aftermath, whether or not the poet’s canonization takes place at the hands of the State. There is evidence that Williams regretted the final outcome of his decades-long effort and claimed that the poem would have turned out differently if he had begun it sooner and finished it as a younger man. Mayakovsky anticipated the petrification of his own, larger than life persona in his verse multiple times, in “Iubileinoie” and elsewhere; and it seems he was right to fear it. His reification by the Soviet state, which erected monuments and named streets and metro

---

67 In a letter to his publisher, the 75-year-old poet wrote, “Were I younger, needless to say, it would have been a different poem. But then it would not have been written at all. […] In th[is] period I have come to understand not only that many changes have occurred in me and the world, but I have been forced to recognize that there can be no end to such a story I have envisioned with the terms which I had laid down for myself. […] Yet I wanted to keep it whole, as it is to me.” Quoted in *P*, xv.
stations after him, has altered his critical reception forever. Pasternak described the poet’s fate most memorably when he wrote that Mayakovsky “began to be introduced like potatoes under Catherine the Great. This was his second death. He was not to blame for it.”

Useful, Eternal, and Faceless: Mayakovsky’s “Brooklyn Bridge”

For Mayakovsky, the monument served as a figure for his legendary ego on the one hand and his obsession with the death of that ego on the other. The monument makes a copy of the notable individual for eternity; it puts him on par, in terms of duration, with the architecture of the city. It literally solidifies his contribution to the local ideology, turning the sum of his personal commitments into a part the public space. It makes his individuality exemplary—and, in so doing, paradoxically effaces it.

The promises and contradictions of the monument were much in Mayakovsky’s mind following the publication of Pro eto and the critiques it received (Jangfeldt 264). In the subsequent year, Mayakovsky contributed to the 125th anniversary of Pushkin’s birth with an occasional poem entitled “Jubileinoie [Anniversary Poem],” in which he demonstratively casts off the personal and bourgeois themes of the prior poem and declares himself at last “free / from love / and posters.” Alluding to his ursine persona from the earlier poem, he proudly announces, “The sharp- / clawed pelt of the jealous bear / lies dried.” “Jubileinoie” expresses a dream of domesticating one’s own passions through a kind of taxidermy; it is the poet’s fantasy of taking his place on a pedestal alongside his poetic forefathers and thereby being “freed,” once and for all, from the transient pressures and concerns of everyday life. He fantasizes whimsically about chumming it up with Pushkin, exiling those poets whose surnames come between M and P to the

---

end of the alphabet, and even throws in a jibe at Esenin and the otherwise “monotonous landscape” of Russian poetry. However, Mayakovsky recognized that liberation through petrification was something of a paradox. The promise of having his likeness cast in bronze or immortalized in marble after his death was also a threat: it would mark the end of his agency to construct his own personal myth, leaving his legacy in the hands of the State—where it had, in fact, been captive all along. But this is the one path available to poets in the Soviet canon, and Mayakovsky claims, somewhat outlandishly, that Russia could use all the great poets she could get: “For my country is far / too poor / in poets.” He goes on to imagine his own posthumous existence in Soviet encyclopedias down to the letter:

Скоро вот
и я
умру
и буду нем.
После смерти
нам
стоять почти что рядом:
вы на Пе,
а я
на зМ.

Soon, I
too
will die
and fall mute.
After death
we’ll stand
almost side by side
you at P,
and I
at M.

Like Williams’s “It Is a Living Coral,” Mayakovsky’s poem pays homage to the trappings of patriotism in order to jolt them out of their static existence and reveal their often-unsettling foundations. By projecting his ambivalence about monuments onto Pushkin, Mayakovsky seeks at once to honor and to revivify him:

Я люблю вас,
но живого,
а не мумию.
Навели
хрестоматийный глянец.
Вы
по-моему
при жизни
— думаю —
тоже бушевали.
[…]
На Тверском бульваре
очень к вам привыкли.
Ну, давайте,
подсажу
на пьедестал.

I love you,
but alive,
not as a mummy.
They’ve coated you
with textbook gloss.
You
I think
in your life
— is it true? —
caused uproars, too.
[…]
We’ve grown so used to you
on Tverskoy Boulevard.
So come on,
I’ll lift you back
onto your pedestal.

69 All quotations from “Iubileinoie” are taken from S I, 215-223. The translation is my own.
Pushkin endowed the Russian canon with heft and grandeur through monument-focused poems like *The Bronze Horseman* and «Я памятник себе воздвиг нерукотворный…» and now, a century and a revolution later, Mayakovskv positions himself as the heir apparent to that legacy, even as he invokes the Futurist threat of canon-destruction. “Throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc., etc. off the steamship of Modernity!,” he and his fellow Futurists had written back in December of 1912. As the sun rises on the anniversary of Pushkin’s birth and the city prepares for its festivities, Mayakovskv places his forebear back on the latter’s pedestal, so he can resume his spot of honor overlooking Moscow’s most majestic boulevard. But his poem serves as an alternative monument to the Pushkin “mummified” in bronze and gazed upon to the point of indifference. Unlike the statue, Mayakovskv’s ode shakes off the antiquarian “gloss” of so many sterile, textbook tributes and fills his material with the breath of his own, living voice. He seeks to remind listeners of the controversy and conflict that characterized Pushkin’s actual career, rather than allowing them to take the poet’s monumental image on faith. This can be seen as an implicit act of self-defense: Mayakovskv’s public life, like Pushkin’s, may be hounded by the press and riddled with scandal, but all of that will fall by the wayside once he is placed under “М” in the chronicle of Soviet literature. It is also, however, a recognition that the Communist state’s habit of commemoration is a double-edged sword. The state does the utmost honor to the

memory of its great minds; at the same time, its penchant for monuments co-opts those figures’ legacies by casting them in the forms and materials that best serve the narrative of the regime. This paradox would have been much on Mayakovsky’s mind in 1924, when Pushkin’s “jubilee” was all the more politicized because of Lenin’s recent death and the Soviet state’s concerted attempt to control the arts. The ending of “Jubileinoie” leaves readers with a similar question to the one posed by Williams’s “It is a Living Coral”: can any physical structure fulfill these monumental aims without succumbing to aestheticism on one hand or reification on the other? Is any real-world monument an ideal foil for the poem?

It is a great and fruitful irony that when Mayakovsky, who so vehemently cried out against the Soviet monument obsession, finally found the embodiment of this ideal, he found it at the heart of the capitalist landscape he had been sent on a diplomatic assignment to critique— in New York City, of all places. Mayakovsky’s 1925 poem “Brooklyn Bridge” joins the ranks of Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” (1856) and Hart Crane’s roughly contemporaneous epic The Bridge (1930) in a tradition of celebrating this architectural monument to American industry, innovation, and democracy. [Figure 10] (There is ample proof that Mayakovsky was familiar with, and influenced by, Whitman’s poetry— although it is not clear that he ever encountered “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” That topic, indeed, deserves an essay of its own.)

“Brooklyn Bridge” is notable not only because it is the best poem Mayakovsky wrote during his four-month sojourn in the U.S., but because it displays a humility uncharacteristic of the poet.

71 Mayakovksy and his colleagues in LEF had protested the literal and metaphorical “mummification” of Lenin in their (later censored) 1924 manifesto entitled “Don’t Trade In Lenin!” For more on this fascinating parallel to Mayakovksy’s anti-monumental polemic, see Jangfeldt, 291.

72 By all accounts, Mayakovsky was introduced to Whitman’s poetry by Kornei Chukovskii’s 1907 translation. Chukovskii also wrote at length about Leaves of Grass, in works that generated popular interest after the Revolution. See Kornei Chukovskii, Volt Uitmen i ego “list’ia travy’, sixth edition (Moscow/Petrograd: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo, 1923). For a historical and conceptual account of this influence, see Clare Cavanagh, “Whitman, Mayakovsky, and the Body Politic,” in Rereading Russian Poetry, ed. Stephanie Sandler. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999, pp. 202-22.
The poet-speaker presents himself as a pilgrim to this shrine to American progress, a humble votary of its aesthetic:

Издай, Кулидж,
радостный клич!
На хорошее
и мне не жалко слов.
От похвал
красней,
хочь вы
и разъюнайтед стетс
оф
Америка.
Как в церковь
идет
помешавшийся верующий,
как в скит
удается,
стог и прост,
точ я
в вечерней
сероющей мере
вхожу,
смиренный, на Бруклинский мост.73

Give, Coolidge,
a cry of jubilation!
these accolades
I don’t begrudge.
Blush
from my praise,
Like our motherland’s flag,
never mind
that you’re Rusunited States
of
America.
Into the church
strides
the deranged evangelical,
so, into his cell
retreats a monk,
harsh and bare,
so I
in the evening’s
graying mirage
step,
humbly, onto Brooklyn Bridge.

At just under 170 lines, the poem is considerably shorter than “Vladimir Ilyich Lenin” and “150,000,000,” and each of its sentences appears splayed across nine to twelve lines. Each line, in turn, contains one to eight syllables, or between one and three stresses. Mayakovsky’s distinctive, step-down lines are pervasive throughout his poetry, but here they offer the reader an experiential parallel to the crossing the poem describes: the reader’s eye “walks” across the visual and sonic landscape of the poem, one segment at a time, while the voice moves metrically from one rhyme to the next. Urban space, when well-designed, has the power to standardize and streamline the movement of human traffic through a landscape. Mayakovsky’s ode to this marvel of modern architecture applies these utilitarian formal strategies to the task of poetic construction, and the poem thereby achieves a sense of vigor within regularity; it becomes a small-scale foil for its monumental subject.

Mayakovsky’s walk across the Brooklyn Bridge takes the form of a series of similes,

73 All quotations from “Bruklinskii most” are taken from S I, 335-39. The translation is my own.
following the one cited above. The poet speaks (as he so often does) in his own voice, even mentioning himself by name towards the end of the poem. He compares himself to a humble, religious pilgrim; a victorious conqueror making his way through a defeated city; a dumbstruck artist entranced by a portrait of the Madonna in a museum. Each comparison features a contrast between the power or agency of the person described and the overwhelming scale of the bridge itself. The conquerer, perched atop his artillery, is the height of a giraffe’s muzzle [“на пушках — жерлом / жирафу под рост”], and the artist, although “stupid [глупый]” nonetheless manages to “plunge” his gaze, “lovestruck and sharp,” into the painted Virgin: “…глупый жудожник / в мадонну музея / вонзает глаз свой, / влюблён и остр.” But even as he compares his poetic persona to these other figures, Mayakovskyy represents himself as dwarfed by the bridge. He, too, is “drunk with glory [пьяный славой],” “alive with appetite [жить в аппетите],” and “proud [гордый]” as he clambers up onto the bridge— and he becomes subsumed in its greatness, hemmed in by its star-spangled skies [“с поднебесья, / в звёзды усеян, / смотрю / на Нью-Йорк / сквозь Бруклинский мост”].

The size of the Brooklyn Bridge makes it an ideal monument because of how it re-orients its denizens’ perception of the landscape. From its height, the speaker feels he can behold the processes of capitalism directly, and on a scale that suggests the vast reach of American industry:

Когда ж, казалось, с-под речки начатой развозит с фабрики сахар лавочник, — под мостом проходящие мачты размером не больше размеров улавочних.

When, down below, the ships begin to deliver to shopkeepers sugar from the factory— then the masts passing under the bridge appear no larger than the size of pins.

Manhattan, whose streets felt “stuffy and stifling [тяжек / и душен]” by day, “forg[et]” their stuffy oppressiveness (“Нью-Йорк / …забыл, / что тяжко ему / и высоко”). It is notable that
Mayakovsky phrases this change in terms of the city’s own sentience, as if, through his visionary presence on the bridge, he were somehow integrated into the large-scale architectural fabric of the city—as if, having arisen out of its material structures, he could speak on their behalf. A great and ghostly plain of illuminated windows spreads beneath his feet: “и только одни / домовьи души / встают / в прозрачном свечении окон.” The individual inhabitants are suggested by the lights in the apartments, but they are unseen, unknowable, not unlike the 150,000,000 million Soviet citizens for whom Mayakovsky claimed to speak a few years earlier. The poet’s superhuman vantage both alienates him from the city and, paradoxically, domesticates it: the largest U.S. city shrinks beneath him like a town in a child’s model train set. The hum of the elevators large enough to carry many people up and down many skyscraper-stories is only a dim hum from here. Even the roar of the elevated trains—those unrivaled epitomes of American modernity and progress—gets drowned out in a rush of stars. Their clangor becomes the far tamer clatter of dishes cleared from a lunch counter: “И только / по этому / тихому зуду / поймёшь— / поезда / с дребезжаньем ползут, / как будто / в буфет убирают посуду” (“And only / that soft drone makes / you grasp— / the trains / crawl rattling across, / like a café’s / clearing of plates”). The Russian poet stands at a distance from the American system that protects him from total immersion and yet allows him to see all its parts clearly. His view over this huge, unfamiliar city becomes a fantasy of order and control, in which the machinations of capitalism systematically deliver the goods, and then clean up after themselves.

The Brooklyn Bridge is the object which most fully incarnates the constructivist ethos espoused by Mayakovsky and his circle; it is the literal embodiment of the conceptual bridge between Soviet and American modernist aesthetics, and it achieves an architectural feat of the kind that Russian industry and technology of the time could only imagine. Thus, Mayakovsky’s
A description of the poem gives way to a statement of his Constructivist principles. Unlike the moribund statue of “Iubileinoie,” the Bridge is less commemorative than functional: it is built not to arrest time by making the past present again in viewers’ minds, but to facilitate modern transportation. It privileges purpose and durability over decoration, and emphasizes the intrinsic properties of its materials. Most importantly, it will last—as any monument is built to do—surviving beyond the current age and serving as a testament to human ingenuity, a large-scale model of the capacities and values of twentieth-century civilization:

Я горд
вот этой
стальною милей,
живьем в ней
мои видения встали -
борьба
за конструкции
вместо стилей,
расчет суровый
гайки
и стали.
Если
придет
окончание света -
планету
хaos
разделяет влоск,
и только
один останется
этот
над пылью гибели вздыбленный мост,
то,
как из косточек,
тоньше иголок,
tучиет
в музеях стоящие
ящеры,
так
с этим мостом
столетий геолог
сумел
воссоздать бы
dni настоящие.

I’m proud
of this
steel mile—
in it,
my visions come alive, turn real—
the battle
for construction
over style,
the harsh calculation
of bolts
and steel.
If
the end
of the world should befall us—
and chaos
shatter
the planet to bits,
the sole
remaining matter
will be this
above-the-destruction-rearing-up bridge,
and just
as from a tiny,
needle-thin bone,
a museum
fills out a massive raptor’s
frame,
thus
from this bridge
a geologist centuries hence
could re-
construct our
present days.

In these lines, Mayakovsky reveals an archaeological mentality more frequently

74 The useful idea that the monument should accomplish anamnesis—the making-present of the past, in order to provoke in the viewer a version of the feelings aroused by the living person or the original event—is discussed in Jake Adam York, The Architecture of Address: The Monument and Public Speech in American Poetry. New York: Routledge, 2005, pp. 39-42. Mayakovsky praises the bridge in part because he, like the Constructivists, believed in an art of the future that was modern and utilitarian above all.
overshadowed by his bombastic insistence on the future. By invoking the figures of geologist and fossil, the poet aligns himself with an image-repertoire more characteristic of Mandelstam or Pound. He also reveals a foundational layer of concern with the fate of history and *techne*—expressed in terms alternately utopian and nihilistic—which, one can surmise, subtended the Futurist fascination with objects all along.

Much of the final third of the poem is spoken in the voice of the imagined “geologist centuries hence [столетий геолог],” who demonstrates the bridge’s potential as a monument by excavating as many inferences as possible about “our present days [дни настоящие]”:

He’ll say:

— This here steel grip
united
prairies and seas,
across it
Europe
stormed the West,
dispersing
Indian feathers
into the breeze.
Its ribs
recall
a machine—

[...]

A current flows
through electric lines—
I know—
this age
came after steam—
here
people
already
orated over the radio,
here
people
already
soared around in aeroplanes.
Here
life was—
for some—
carefree,
for others,
a prolonged
hungry fight.
From these heights
the down-and-out
threw themselves
headfirst
into the Hudson.
And further,
my picture
without a hitch
spans the cable-strings,

Он скажет:

— Вот эта
стальная лапа
соединяла
моря и прерии,
отсюда
Европа
рвалась на Запад,
пустив
по ветру
индийские перья.
Напомнит
машину
ребро вот это —

[...]  По проводах
электрической пряди—
я знаю—
эпоха
после пара—
здесь
люди
уже
орали по радио,
здесь
люди
уже
излетели по аэро.
Здесь
жизнь
была
одним—беззаботная,
другим—
голодный
протяжный вой.
Отсюда
безработные
в Гудзон
кидались
вниз головой.
И дальше
картина моя
без загадок
по струнам-канатам,
The Brooklyn Bridge is not just a local landmark, but a symbol of an increasingly connected world. It encapsulates the reach of European imperialism, unifying landscapes while displacing native populations. It offers the poet perspective on the large-scale, structural relations of its American metropolis, along with an occasion—less habitual for this particular poet—to imagine the lives of others. The bridge’s capacities as a utopian symbol do not preclude its denizens from using it for darker purposes. Mayakovsky’s imagined archaeologist of the future, who speculates on twentieth-century society based on the bridge, reads it as proof of human technological advancement and recognizes also that technology does not solve all of humankind’s problems: “Here, / life was—/ for some—/ carefree, / for others, / a prolonged / hungry fight. / From these heights / the down-and-out / threw themselves / headfirst / into the Hudson.” These lines recall the repeated motif of the man on the bridge from “Man” and the more recent “About That.” In those earlier appearances, the man was a figure for Mayakovsky himself; now, this new bridge allows for a contrast between the suicidal jumper and the poet, who proudly stands and constructs his own edifice of syllables. Mayakovsky fantasizes (perhaps whimsically) that his own presence on the bridge might be legible to the scientist who beholds the bridge centuries from now: “I see,” he writes in the voice of that “recorder ages hence,”75 “here / stood Mayakovsky, / stood / laying down poems beat by beat.” Here Mayakovsky draws a clear parallel, as he and Williams so often do, between poetic labor and manual labor, between

---

the construction of a national literature and the building of a brick-and-mortar society. He dreams that this monument, which will outlast our current age, will also preserve the trace of the poet’s own transient, if visionary, presence.

And yet, in the final lines, even this most larger-than-life of poets returns to his “supplicant [смиренный]” posture, dwarfed by the immensity of the bridge. The bridge, after all, it is not just a monument, a “dead” representation like the Pushkin statue in “Jubileinoie” or the Capitol Building in “It Is a Living Coral”; it is still at the beating heart of a vital society:

As in the works of other, object-focused poets, the climax of the poem’s reverence comes at the very moment in which Mayakovsky emphasizes the visual nature of his connection to the bridge, thereby acknowledging also the distance between himself and it. He looks at it the way a person distant from technologized society would behold a high-speed train— and then, in a moment of imagined unification of the very small and the enormous, he drinks his fill of it [впивается], like a tick gorging itself on the blood of another. In this case, however, the relation is not that of parasite and man, but of man and monument. The poem’s final line of praise, “Это вещь!,” is, of course, idiomatic (“That’s something!”), but it is also particularly appropriate to Mayakovsky’s intentions. By ending the poem on the word “thing [вещь],” the poet praises the bridge precisely as an object. Its combination of monumental scale, durability, detail, and unity make it a model towards which the poet’s own, verbal object can aspire.
Conclusion

I began this chapter with the assertion that I hoped to restore the place of Russian Futurist poets in general, and Mayakovsky in particular, in Western literary criticism’s accounts of modernist innovation. The implications of such a task reach beyond the bounds of both the Russian and American canons to illuminate the kinds of critical approaches that scholars of these poets have brought to the fore in their attempts to read them side by side. A fuller understanding of the significance of these poets’ shared preoccupations—and their indebtedness to the visual arts—requires a critical historiography not just of their own work, but of the theories that have since come out of it.

In this regard, it is striking but ultimately unsurprising how much of the comparative and inter-arts scholarship on these poets, such as the writings of Bram Dijkstra and Wendy Steiner, builds upon principles of semiotics that were first developed in response to avant-garde innovations. Given that Stein, Khlebnikov, Mayakovsky, and Williams all had long-standing relationships to the visual arts and theorized their own poems in visual terms, the openness of their work to inter-arts comparisons should come as no surprise. Indeed, their poems, with their emphasis on objectivity, perspective, scale, and distortion, expose and explore the irreconcilable gaps between signifier and signified, sight and speech, subject and object. One could even go so far as to claim that their poetic method operates on the basis of a nascent structuralism—which is precisely what theorists such as Jakobson and Lotman subsequently discover in their work.

Put another way, we can understand Williams’s and Mayakovsky’s invocation of the artist’s contractual obligations to “the object” or to “things” as a way of bringing into the poem a conflict that the poem might otherwise be called upon (and often reified) to support: namely, the ongoing battle between the verbal and visual realms of signification. Their proto-structuralist
relationship to the object as an ideal for the poem arises out of a recognition that it is an impossible model—in part because not all elements of either visual or verbal art are identical. An unfinished stone wall calls viewers’ attention to the process of building, and yet the viewer is able to imagine what the rest of the wall might look like. (The same could be said, in reverse, of a ruined wall, which calls to mind, however faintly, the ghost of its erstwhile integrity.) In contrast, how can a reader tell what word that comes next in the unfinished fifth section of *Paterson*? One cannot tell, any more than one could look at the group portrait for the Soviet Writers’ Union and see which “repressed” poet’s face had been censored out of it. These poets question the object as a model for the poem by challenging the idea that a made thing can be seamlessly self-contained and also true to the messiness of its context. As an aspirational form for the work of art, the object achieves exemplarity much as the Capitol Building or the Pushkin monument does: by reconciling disparate parts into an often misleading unity. Williams and Mayakovsky turned to the collage techniques first embraced by the Cubists once such a seamless integration of elements had come to seem irreconcilable with the diversity, dynamism, and fragmentation of everyday life as they knew it.

Both writers thus respond to the desire for the “object-ideal” on the one hand and its incompatibility with “the facts” on the other by building the imperfect process of signification into the object itself. Nowhere is this clearer than in their use of photomontage as a model for the poem. It is a technique that Rosalind Krauss has described as “a revision of photography away from the surfaces of the real” through “the experience of blanks or spacing,” which results in an

---

76 Rudolf Arnheim draws a useful distinction between “seeing a thing as complete, but incompletely” and seeing an incomplete thing in all of its incompleteness. One could say that Williams and Mayakovsky (like Khlebnikov and Stein before them) focus on the relationship between these two phenomena. Their objects of attention are treated as complete (rather than fragmentary), but this completeness is suspect, since it is always composed out of discrete, unassimilable parts. See Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969, p. 107.
“insistence on signification as a political act”:

The photographic image, thus “spaced,” is deprived of one of the most powerful of photography’s many illusions. It is robbed of a sense of presence. Photography’s vaunted capture of a moment in time is the seizure and freezing of presence. It is the image of simultaneity, of the way that everything within a given space at a given moment is present to everything else; it is a declaration of the seamless integrity of the real. The photograph carries on one continuous surface the trace or imprint of all that vision captures in one glance. The photographic image is not only a trophy of this reality, but a document of its unity as that-which-was-present-at-one-time. But spacing destroys simultaneous presence: for it shows things sequentially, either one right after another or external to one another—occupying separate cells. It is spacing that makes clear…that we are not looking are reality, but at the world infested by interpretation or signification, which is to say, reality distended by the gaps or blanks which are the formal preconditions of the sign. (Krauss 107)

Photomontage’s excess of signifying parts that refuse to coalesce into a unified whole is reminiscent of the myriad advertisements, signboards, conversation snippets, and details that overfill the landscape of the modern metropolis. This medium is skeptical of the photograph as “a trophy of…reality,” just as it has trouble with presence; it strives, as the photo-collages of the Surrealists strove, to strike by chance upon a combination of signs that will embody an inarticulable dream of presence, a word that speaks itself. Photomontage trafficks in unsentimentality and alienation, because it at once desires and doubts that some hidden, existential order might be found within its juxtaposed images.

We can see photomontage, then, as an embodiment of what Barthes calls “myth”: it draws from the same sources of collective representation that it tries, through disjuncture and recontextualization, to resist. “Myth,” writes Barthes, “consists in overturning culture into nature or, at least, the social, the cultural, the ideological, the historical into the ‘natural.’ What is nothing but a product of class division and its moral, cultural and aesthetic consequences is presented (stated) as being a ‘matter of course’; under the effect of mythical inversion, the quite contingent foundations of the utterance become Common Sense, Right Reason, the Norm, General Opinion, in short the doxa (which is the secular figure of the Origin)” (Barthes 165). If Mayakovsky and Williams ultimately discard photomontage as a (conscious or unconscious)
model for their poems, they do so, perhaps, because it offers just one more myth— albeit a self-critical one.

In the final phase of these poets’ careers that I examine here (since Williams’s career, after all, extends far beyond the bounds of this study), we see these poets espousing the form of the monument in their poems as a way of grappling with two difficult realities. One is that there can no longer be any such thing as “non-committed” art, and that the contemporary political climate— whether it be in post-revolutionary Russia or in the post-WWII United States— compels poets to base their new aesthetic labors on the realms of consumer production on the one hand and political-ideological production on the other. Their art forms must rival the monumentality and ideological engagement of other discursive forms in their society, or else risk exile to the eternal drawing-room of bourgeois irrelevance.

Another fact that both poets face is that even the ideal of the object is a constructed one. The impulses it objectifies, and the values it promotes, are always already products of a context with its own agenda. Williams and Mayakovsky responded to this conundrum by reasserting not only the materiality of the linguistic medium, but the pre-fabricated or recycled status of the words they used. Theirs was a common language that could only attain the solidity and transferability of material objects by marking its sources as “unoriginal”—or, in more positive terms, shared. By offering readers “a presentation of the language as it actually is used” (Williams CP I, n. 505), both poets strove to highlight the exemplarity of the individual perspective that was, on some level, inescapably the poems’ source. As they navigated the precarious strait between bourgeois self-indulgence and vacuous kitsch, both Williams and Mayakovsky came up against the limits of poetry’s capacity to assert a common materiality as
the foundation of a shared social and political life. Yet neither of them was quite willing to sacrifice the fantasy of the self-contained, poetic object, which would obviate all advertisements by speaking, at last, for itself.

Notes
Throughout this chapter, the following abbreviations are used to refer to the most frequently cited texts:


77 As John McKay writes in the context of Wordsworth’s “Michael,” “the poem…suggests that the sturdiest basis for community and posterity emerging out of poetic inscription might rest on this radical appeal to a common materiality, what Paul Fry calls our ‘mineral community.’” John McKay, *Inscription and Modernity from Wordsworth to Mandelstam.* Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006, pp. 23-24.
The Ruins of the Everyday: George Oppen and Aleksandr Vvedensky

Introduction

Among those poets who can be said to belong to the second generation of “modernists” in both the Russian and the American contexts, a tendency to theorize poems in terms of objects becomes ever more explicit, even as it also seems ever more crucial to defend. This tendency is especially ripe for analysis in the works of two groups, the Objectivists and the Oberiuty (whose acronym stands for the polemical name, Ob’edinenie Real’nogo Iskusstva— The Association for Real Art). Members of both groups were born at the dawn of the twentieth century and came of age amid the turmoil of the Russian Revolution and the First World War, and they share a penchant for describing their poems as “objects” or “things.” At the same time, these poets bring the mutually intertwined questions of what an object is, and of what it means for a poem to be “objective,” under a scrutiny more rigorous than that of their predecessors.

If, as I argued in the first chapter, Stein and Khlebnikov’s poems are informed by a nascent sense of the potentialities of treating words as objects, the Russian and American avant-garde poets of the next generation take this potential in two quite different directions. Broadly speaking, the OBERIU poets draw upon the same lessons that the Russian Formalist critics, such as Shklovsky and Jakobson, learned from Khlebnikov’s work. Their poems emphasize the subversive and estranging effects of repetition, recontextualization, and textual materiality—and this materiality of the signifier proves to be more central to their method than any drive to represent particular objects in the world. In the American context, the Objectivist poets, who are of the same generation as the OBERIU poets but whose very different milieu allows them to live and write for decades longer, emphasize concrete objects external to the poem rather than focusing on the materiality of language itself.
Interestingly, on both sides of this story, the mid-century poets who most cogently theorize the relationship of poems to material objects do not tend to be those whose work most clearly reflects the relationship they describe, nor do their writings serve as a dominant model for that relationship for poets of succeeding generations. In the Russian context, the primary impresario of the OBERIU group (also known as chinary), Daniil Kharms (1905-1942), is the one who famously insisted upon the importance of poems’ status as objects. But Kharms primarily wrote short dramatic works and narrative prose (in addition to a vast and much-beloved oeuvre of children’s literature), and his fellow Oberiut and close friend, Aleksandr Vvedensky (1904-1941), was both more wedded to verse genres and more visibly influenced by Khlebnikov’s style. In the American context, poet Louis Zukofsky’s (1904-1978) preface to the February 1931 “Objectivists” issue of Poetry magazine, “Sincerity and Objectification,” came to be seen as an articulation of the primary principles of object-focused poetry; but Zukofsky’s work is more

---


«Люди реальные и конкретные до мозга костей, мы — первые враги тех, кто холостит слово и превращает его в безсильного и бессмысленного ублюдка. В своем творчестве мы расширяем и углубляем смысл предмета и слова, но никак не разрушаем его. Конкретный предмет, очищенный от литературной и обиходной шелухи, делается достоянием искусства. В поэзии — столкновение словесных смыслов выражает этот предмет с точностью механики. Вы как будто начинаете возражать, что это не тот предмет, который вы видите в жизни? Подойдите поближе и потрогайте его пальцами. Посмотрите на предмет голыми глазами и вы увидите его впервые очищенным от ветхой литературной позолоты. Может быть вы будете утверждать, что наши сюжеты «не-реальны» и «не-логичны»? А кто сказал, что житейская логика обязательна для искусства? Мы поражаемся красотой нарисованной женщины, несмотря на то, что вопреки анатомической логике, художник вывернул лопату своей героини и отвел ее в сторону. У искусства своя логика и она не разрушает предмет, но помогает его познать».

“We, people who are real and concrete to the marrow of our bones, are the first enemies of those who castrate the word and make it into a powerless and senseless mongrel. In our work we broaden the meaning of the object and of the word, but we do not destroy it in any way. The concrete object, once its literary and everyday skin is peeled away, becomes a property of art. In poetry the collisions of verbal meanings express that object with the exactness of mechanical technology. Are you beginning to complain that it is not the same object you see in life? Come closer and touch it with your fingers. Look at the object with naked eyes, and you will see it cleansed for the first time of decrepit literary gilding. Maybe you will insist that our subjects are ‘unreal’ and ‘illogical’? But who said that the logic of life is compulsory in art?... Art has a logic of its own, and it does not destroy the object but helps us to know it.” (The Man with the Black Coat: Russia’s Lost Literature of the Absurd, Trans. George Gibian. [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1987], p. 248.)

183
indebted to Ezra Pound’s than it is to Stein’s— and the “Objectivist” poems that most directly engage with objects as such are those of George Oppen (1908-1984), under the influence of William Carlos Williams. Insofar as Gertrude Stein’s work comes to exert considerable influence over later American poets, it does so only many decades later, refracted through the prism of the Objectivists’ leftist political commitments and the blend of pragmatism and idealism that characterizes their poetry’s approach to material objects.

The Objectivist/OBERIU parallel seems, in some ways, irresistible— given that these two “movements” began around the same time, featured poets of the same generation, and shared, despite their diverse linguistic and cultural perspectives, many of the same theoretical terms— but there are important differences between the two groups. The OBERIU/chinary group was actually a self-identified, if short-lived, movement, with a manifesto and a series of organized events. It included two philosophers, Iakov Druskin and Leonid Lipavsky, along with Kharms, Vvedensky, Nikolai Zabolotsky, Konstantin Vaginov, Igor Bakhterev, and Boris Levin, many of whom made a living writing literature for children, while composing their subversive works for adult readers far from the eye of the Soviet censor. The Objectivists, on the other hand, would not exist as a named collective in the history of American poetry if not for Poetry editor Harriet Monroe’s insistence that Zukofsky give a name to the group of poets (eventually including Charles Reznikoff, Carl Rakosi, Lorine Niedecker, and the English poet Basil Bunting) whose work he assembled as guest editor of the magazine’s February 1931 special issue. These poets would later become acquainted or correspond with one another, and, as L. S. Dembo points out, they “all had personal interpretations of ‘objectivism’ that gave shape to their poetry” despite “denying the existence of a unified ideology.”2 In their case, the influence of these poets’

similar principles on one another, and on the next generation of American poets, has done more
to solidify the notion of an Objectivist poetics than any deliberate “movement.” The shared
features of these writers’ work tend to coalesce into a unified ideology mostly after the fact, and
mostly through what it is not. According to Rachel Blau DuPlessis, the term “objectivism”
designates a general aesthetic position in modern and contemporary poetry encompassing work based,
generally, on “the real,” on history, not myth, on empiricism not projection, on the discrete not the unified,
on vernacular prosodies not traditional poetic rhetoric, on “imagism” not “symbolism” or “surrealism,” and
on particulars with a dynamic relation to universals.3

The Objectivists—like the Oberiuts, whose work was more actively suppressed—exerted their
fullest influence not in the Depression era, but on the young poets of the 1960s and 1970s, when
Oppen’s return to publishing coincided with what Michael Davidson calls “the miraculous
emergence of an entire generation…who for varying reasons had been invisible since the 1930s,
and who suddenly appeared among us, now transformed into venerable sages” (NCP xiv-xv).4

Given the complexities inherent in describing these poets as a unified group—let alone of
posing equivalences between one group and another that existed across the world, with no
direct contact between them—this chapter will focus less on OBERIU or Objectivism as
“movements” than upon these two poets who exemplified and grappled with many of their
respective groups’ preoccupations. Just as Louis Zukofsky’s introduction to the “Objectivists”
issue of Poetry sets out the operative terms for many of Oppen’s early poems, Daniil Kharms’s

3 Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Introduction to The Selected Letters of George Oppen. (Durham, NC: Duke University
Press, 1990), ix.

4 The height of critical interest in Oppen began around 1980 (the time of Oppen’s last published writings) and
continued through the mid-80s, following the poet’s death in 1984. Prior to this, he received a following of younger
and like-minded poets after the publication of Of Being Numerous (1968) won him the 1969 Pulitzer Prize for
Poetry. The first version of his Collected Poems (1975) also garnered widespread attention.
Vvedensky’s work, in contrast, has taken much longer to come to light. Although the writings of other Oberiuts
emerged in the 1960s—around the same time that Existentialist literature from Western Europe made it to the
USSR—the first full collection of Vvedensky’s work, Polnoe sobranie proizvedenii (2 vols.; ed. Mikhail Meilakh
and Vladimir Eri`) was only published in 1993. The publication of VSE by Anna Gerasimova in 2010 was a
landmark event in Vvedensky’s reception, as was the first full-length collection of his works in English, Matvei
Yankelevich’s The Grey Notebook (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2002). For more on the posthumous reception of the
Russian avant-garde, see Leiderman and Lipovetskii, eds., Sovremennaia russkaia literatura (3 vols.), 1953-1990s
(Moscow: Editorial URSS, 2001).
writings (in both prose and verse) offer an illuminating parallel and counterpoint to his friend Vvedensky’s. For the purposes of this study, I treat Zukofsky and especially Kharms as touchstones for the shared concerns of poets in Oppen’s and Vvedensky’s circles, but my main focus is on the latter two poets, whose works were profoundly individual, their qualms about “the singular” notwithstanding (Oppen, NCP 166).

Before we proceed, another false cognate in the OBERIU and Objectivist discourse of relationality that must be addressed is the notion of “materialism” itself. The role of Marxist ideology, while central in the work of the Objectivists and pervasive in the everyday context of the OBERIU, takes such different forms in the Russian and American contexts that it may be more of a hindrance than a help to understanding what these poets talk about when they talk about objects. One could even say that nothing more clearly illuminates the differences between these two poetic cultures’ relationships to material objects than the materialist ideology they appear, on the surface, to share. One key point of difference is the centrality of Marxist discourse to the language of the Objectivists’ poems— even as they describe scenes of American capitalist life—in contrast to the works which the OBERIU writers composed in a Soviet context, but which make almost no reference to the ideology undergirding their Communist state. In the former context, the language of Marxist theory is itself treated as the language of resistance; in the latter context, the Soviet state’s insistence on conformity to a simplified and distorted version of Marxism is precisely what these poets use their language to resist.

These context-specific and self-consciously political relationships to the “objects” of poetry and of the material world distinguish the poets discussed here from their predecessors. There is, however, an important continuity between them. Like Khlebnikov and Stein, and Mayakovsky and Williams, Vvedensky and Oppen employ poetic materials to represent real-
world material conditions and their effects. They treat sensory experience as the basis from whence any philosophical insights into the nature of the relationship between humans, language, and physical objects must stem. As is true of the Objectivists and the Oberiuts alike, both poets cast doubt on their predecessors’ faith in the representativeness of a given subject position. They follow the lead of writers like Williams and Mayakovsky in supplanting the first-generation modernist poets’ emphasis on sound with a focus on visual perception. As we began to see in the previous chapter, there is a vast difference between a sight-focused poetry and a poetics of “pure sound.” The Symbolist-inspired dream of the poem as a totality in which the subject’s consciousness is integrated seamlessly into the material aspects (phonemes, rhythms, written characters) of its verbal expression comes to seem increasingly untenable. Such an approach admits no gap between the body of the subject, the body of the poem, and the material bodies (objects) that the poem strives to take into itself. A poetics of sound is absorptive; it treats consciousness—and the language used to represent its processes—as a closed system, a kind of snow globe world whose self-enclosure allows for the tracking of patterns and networks of relation within all the shimmering flux of its inner weather.

Poetry that approaches representation in primarily visual terms is a different story because, of all the senses, only sight admits a gap between the perceiving subject and the objects of the gaze. Positing a relation between what the eye sees and what the I says tends to involve acknowledging the ever-present gap between the perceiver and the objects of perception. One might expect a poetics that denies the possibility of integrating the world into oneself, a poetics that insistently reaffirms the externality of the world to the work’s organizing consciousness, to be more successfully “objective” than Stein or Khlebnikov’s all-assimilating composite poems.5

5 It is important to note that just because a poem asserts visual (and, by extension, physical) distance from the objects with which it engages does not mean that it, or its author, expresses a certain politics thereby. As Vincent
Interestingly, however, the poem of visual perception creates certain perspectival requirements that throw into question precisely this neutrality or innocuousness of the subject’s positioning. The poem that refuses to integrate the diversity and flux of sensory data into a single, composite object displays a dependency on the constancy and contextual specificity of the very subject whom its emphasis on objects might seem to occlude.

The relationship of these poems’ unacknowledged perceiving subject to their context serves, as I will show, as an index of the difference between the role of the object in Vvedensky’s and Oppen’s poetics, respectively. For while the Russian and American avant-garde poets of this generation share a preoccupation with the distance between consciousness and its objects—and with the project of shifting between perspectives on this gap—their divergent ways of treating the perceiving subject both comes out of and contributes to very different models of object-focused poetry. Oppen, for his part, interrogates the smallest elements of the English language even more relentlessly than Williams did, and dramatizes the contingencies of first-person perception even more overtly. However, even his twenty-five-year hiatus from writing poetry does not erase the invisible “I” from his poems; if anything, as multiple critics have shown, his return to poetry heralds a new openness to direct representation and to the first-person voice. Upon writing his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Of Being Numerous* (1968), Oppen readily acknowledges “learning that one is, after all, just oneself and in the end is rooted in the singular, whatever one’s absolutely necessary connections with human history are.” When told that the poems seem also to be “very personal,” he responds, “That’s right, but I’m

---

Sherry has argued, the emphasis on visual distance has also been a hallmark of Fascist-oriented poetics. See Vincent Sherry, *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

6 For Oppen’s own account of his long silence and the poetry that followed, see L. S. Dembo’s 1969 interview with the poet in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Spring, 1969), pp. 159-177.
also writing about the human condition. All I actually know is what happened to me and I’m
telling it.”7

It is striking that Oppen, a longtime Communist Party community organizer—one whose
political affiliations forced him and his family to emigrate to Mexico in the McCarthy era to
avoid persecution—slides so smoothly here between empiricism (“all I actually know is what
happened to me”) and universal humanism. This attempt to zoom out from the particular to the
general, from concrete materials to abstract guiding principles, has its antecedents in the works
of the earlier poets we have discussed. However, I would argue that this “last avant-garde” is
also the moment at which one sees the seemingly parallel developments of these Russian and
American poets’ relationship to the first-person subject most irrevocably diverge.8 From the first
page to the last, Vvedensky’s oeuvre is shot through with doubts about the unitary and persistent
presence of an individual subject. His earliest surviving poem, «И я в моём тёплом теле…»
[“And I in my warm body…”] suggests not only that the “I” and the body are distinct, but also
that the “I” is additional to the world into which the poem enters, rather than integral to it (1920;
in VSE 27). Vvedensky might well have agreed with the contemporary poet Grigori
Dashevsky’s ironic introduction to the first person in his book, Duma Ivan-chaiia (2001):

Все «я», взятые изнутри и поодиночке, невинны и особенные, а взятые извне и скопом – виноваты и
однаково. Естественно, само это сознание своей невинности и особенности – необходимый
результат действия тупого и жестокого механизма, в который как детали эти «я» включены и
который из них только и состоит. Твердые винтики и должны считать себя незаслуженно
страдающими цветочками (механизм же имеется уже там, где есть хотя бы двое – а двое есть
всегда). Лучше, что можно сделать, – от этого идола просто отойти.9

Any “I,” taken from within and on its own, is innocent and particular, and [any] taken from without and en
masse are guilty and the same. Naturally, this very consciousness of one’s innocence and particularity is the

7 Both quotations are from the 1969 Dembo interview, p. 172.
8 Particularly in the Russian context, the avant-garde was quite firmly put to rest after—or with—the poets of the
1930s. See Jean-Philippe Jaccard, Harms et la fin de l’avant-garde russe. Bern: Peter Lang, 1991, and Boris Groys,
inevitable result of action of a dumb and cruel mechanism, in which details like this “I” are included, and of which it [the mechanism] consists. Even solid cogs must consider themselves undeservedly suffering flowers (the mechanism is already there, where there are at least two [people] — and there are always two.) The best thing one can do is to simply distance oneself from this idol. (Translation mine.)

We might, for our purposes, call this “mechanism” intersubjectivity, or the social—in Oppen’s terms, “being numerous.” But the question remains: why bring together two poets whose points of view on this foundational question of poetics differentiate their work so starkly?

I would suggest that this divergence comes across all the more strongly because of a crucial underlying similarity. Both Oppen and Vvedensky go a step beyond their predecessors’ search for the ideal object-correlative for the poem. Rather than seeking to make the poem a certain kind of aesthetic object, both poets treat the poem as a stage upon which the parallel between the relationship of language to its (grammatical) objects and that of the embodied “I” to a world of (material) objects can unfold. Their stated interest in “the object” or “the thing” thus comes to seem like an interest in how different kinds of objects—expressive and inexpressive, useful and useless, living and dead—relate to each other. This is a new iteration of the problem posed by the earlier works of Stein and Khlebnikov, Williams and Mayakovsky, and other prior modernist artists, and it raises new questions. If one takes the individual (perceiver, artist, speaker) as the starting point of any act of artistic production, is there an empirical, an ethical, way to generalize from out of that first-person experience? How might one person in one particular context transform their experience into a model of more general truths, and thereby transcend the differences between persons, classes, or historical eras? How might one figure this distance (as Williams and Mayakovsky also sought to do) in visual terms?

The more of Oppen’s and Vvedensky’s work one reads, the more acutely one becomes

---

aware of a slippage between different kinds of materiality: the stuff of the living body, the non-living material substratum of a society, and the malleable matter of language. These poets operate under an implicit faith in the poem’s capacity to be a form of exceptional language. They espouse a formal approach to the poem’s construction that tries to make the poem communicate (or meaningfully refuse to do so) across contexts, including into an imagined future. However, their attempt to discover how such poems get made—and what stuff to make them of—requires the demolition of hierarchical relations long taken on faith. At their most radical, I argue, these poets’ efforts to create self-contained, lasting, “objective” verse involves treating poems as bodies and bodies as objects. It involves an attempt to encapsulate the presence, the precariousness, the possible disappearance, of each of these materials, in order to map their relations more clearly—to show how essentially they produce each other.

**Changing Lenses**

A focus on the visual orientation of Oppen’s and Vvedensky’s poems reveals significant discrepancies between their respective notions of the object, as well as profound cultural and personal differences between their sense of the human (perceiving, thinking, speaking) subject. Both poets attempt to theorize the nature of the poetic object—and the relationship between language and its objects in the world—with an urgency undergirded by an apparent fear that the distinctions between subjects and objects are fading and may disappear for good. The term “reification,” although neither poet employs it himself, seems germane for describing both what their poems strive to assert themselves against, and the kind of action they seek to enact upon language to make it more resistant to institutions and ideologies that threaten dehumanization on a larger scale. In “Reification and the Class Consciousness of the Proletariat” (1923), Georg
Lukács calls “the commodity the universal structuring principle of society,” its production broken down into a series of separate, highly specialized processes, and its final materialization endowed with a “phantom objectivity.” “The fragmentation of the object of production,” Lukács writes, necessarily engenders the fragmentation of its subject:

In consequence of the rationalisation of the work process the human qualities and idiosyncracies of the worker appear increasingly as mere sources of error when contrasted with these abstract special laws functioning according to rational predictions. Neither objectively nor in his relation to his work does man appear as the authentic master of the process; on the contrary, he is a mechanical part incorporated into a mechanical system.¹¹

Both the OBERIU poets and their Objectivist contemporaries share a sense that the world around them, whether capitalist or communist, has reached a level of mechanization, of falsity and flatness, in which human beings are no longer the masters over the technologies they have produced—in which, to quote Lewis Mumford, “machines [have] become autonomous and men [have] become servile and mechanical…disconnected from their historical values and purposes…Man has become an exile in this mechanical world.”¹² Oceans and ideologies apart, the early 1930s found both Oppen and Vvedensky making the reified state of the everyday—and the capacity of artistic production to resist or provide alternatives to it—into an unspoken principle of their aesthetic construction.¹³

In keeping with this, the Objectivist poets make a point of rejecting the closed verse forms upon which their modernist predecessors had likewise cast aspersions. They often rehearse their own brokenness to the point of theatricality, in ways that infuriated the poetic establishment. (William Rose Benet, for instance, said that reading Discrete Series was “like

listening to a man with an impediment in his speech.”\textsuperscript{14} At the same time, this brokenness is only surface “rubble” (to use one of Oppen’s signature words, borrowed from Charles Reznikoff); the Objectivists’ commitment to the poem as “rested totality”—to a unified, self-sufficient, and lasting verse structure that “satisfie[s] completely…as an object”—bespeaks a formalism that dares not speak its name.\textsuperscript{15}

…distinct from print which records action and existence and incites the mind to further suggestion, there exists, tho it may not be harbored as solidity in the crook of an elbow, writing (audibility in two-dimensional print) which is an object or affects the mind as such…[I]ts character may be simply described as the arrangement, into one apprehended unit, of minor units of sincerity—in other words, the resolving of words and their ideation into structure.\textsuperscript{16}

Zukofsky almost seems here to be advocating for a collectivization of individual words that resembles the attempt of a Communist Party organizer to corral individual people (each a “minor unit of sincerity,” “each…in itself…an arrangement,”) into the “ideation[al]” “totality” of a collective bargaining unit. He goes on to acknowledge the word as at once powerful and under threat, and to point out the difficulty of squaring the value of “sincerity” with the project of “objectification”:

Granted that the word combination ‘minor unit of sincerity’ is an ironic index of the degradation of power in a culture which seems hardly to know that each word is itself an arrangement, it may be said that each word possesses objectification to a powerful degree; but that the facts carried by one word are…not sufficiently explicit to warrant a realization of rested totality such as might be designated an art form. (\textit{Ibid.})

The “rested totality” of the verbal “object,” then, is meant to be— not unlike Stein or Khlebnikov’s composite sound-objects—an assemblage of “sincere” perceptions, transmuted into “minor units of sincerity,” that is, into units of \textit{words}, “each…possess[ing] objectification to a powerful degree.” But whereas Stein and Khlebnikov emphasized sound as the meaningful sensory principle at the root of their verbal objects, Zukofsky, like Oppen, emphasizes sight. He

\textsuperscript{14} William Rose Benet, quoted in Eric Homberger, “Communists and Objectivists.” \textit{TON}, 116.
\textsuperscript{15} Louis Zukofsky, “Sincerity and Objectification: with Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff,” \textit{Poetry} (February 1931), pp. 272-284; 274.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid.}
even begins his “Objectivists” manifesto of 1931 with a definition from optics:

An Objective: (Optics)—The lens bringing the rays from an object to a focus. (Military use)—That which is aimed at. (Use extended to poetry)—Desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars. (Italics in original.)

Zukofsky’s essay sets up a parallel between the unified, total form of the poem-object (“the resolving of words and their ideation into structure”) and the teleology of historical progress, whereby “historic and contemporary particulars” get assimilated “inextricably” into a single “direction,” and thereby become “objectively perfect.”

This parallel does not, however, solve the problem of “sincerity.” The notion of “sincerity” here seems to be standing in for the role of individual perception as an index of a person’s presence in the context s/he is describing. Thus, the qualities of the Objectivists’ ideal poetic subject—at least according to Zukofsky’s manifesto—are best embodied, paradoxically, by an object: “The lens bringing the rays from an object to a focus.” The “sincerity” an Objectivist poetics calls for is not so much a form of honest expressiveness as it is the solidarity, transparency, and continuous presence of a pane of glass. As Charles Altieri explains,

Sincerity [for the Objectivists] is not usually self-expression. Rather, it involves insistence on the surface of the poem as concerned primarily with direct acts of naming as signs of the poet’s immediate engagement in the areas of experience made present by conceiving the act of writing as a mode of attention. Sincerity involves refusing the temptations of closure—both closure as fixed form and closure as writing in the service of idea, doctrine, or abstract aesthetic ideal. Sincerity can take the form of presenting any form of direct experience…that is intensified in the act of writing.

To the extent that Oppen’s poems bear out the Objectivist credo, they prove their “sincerity” by applying the proper formal strategies to the “objectification” of first-person experience into

---

18 The overwhelming frequency with which Oppen’s poems invoke lenses, mirrors, and (especially) windows suggests that the window often stands in for the “eye” of the poem’s perceptual act. The image of the window also makes an important cameo in Kharms’s letter to K. V. Pugachëva, dated 10/16/1933, in which he writes: «Кажется, эти стихи, ставшие вещью, можно снять с бумаги и бросить в окно, и окно разобьётся. Вот что могут сделать слова!» [“It would seem that these poems, having become a thing, could be lifted from the paper and thrown at the window, and the window would shatter. Now that’s what words can do!”] Reprinted in VDK, 28-30.
language— with the goal of transforming it into a “rested totality.” Put another way, the objectivity of these poems’ “mode of attention” is in the “objectively perfect” form their sincerity takes. To quote Robyn Schiff, an heir to the Objectivist legacy: “When we use the / tool intended for the job / we are neutral. The right tool for the right / task is objective truth.”

Zukofsky’s manifesto never quite resolves this tension between direct experience and rested totality, between sincerity and objectification. Indeed, the fault lines in this essay, which the editors of the “Objectivists” special issue of Poetry hoped would serve as the unified field theory for the Objectivist “movement,” expose a great deal about the relationship between bodies, objects, and poems in these poets’ thought. They suggest that, in order to understand the social and political stakes of the relationships these poems model between verbal objects and real-world, material objects, we may need to see both kinds of objects as foils for a third object of study: the person.

This is also the vantage point from which the Objectivists’ and Oberiuts’ differing notions of the object appear most clearly. The Objectivists, including Oppen, participate in a common, Western understanding of the human (or of “man,” to use a term that had great currency in their historical moment), one which is conditioned by the American, urban, capitalist milieu, however much their Marxist-inflected poetics may try to resist it. Their poems imply a distance between perceiver and perceived— between the speaking subject of these poems, however deemphasized, and his objects of reference— that parallels the distance between the poet’s consciousness and the reified landscape of everyday life. Thus, the poet’s capacity to

---


21 Mark Greif’s The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015) is the most recent attempt at an exhaustive history of this concept’s salience in American thought. Of course, the notion of “man” as the site of both conscious agent and ethical obligation— whether by that or some other name—is common to a number of mid-twentieth-century philosophers of Oppen’s generation, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, and Hannah Arendt.
name the objects of the world serves an indexical function not only for the objects, but for the poet as subject; and any breakdown in the referentiality of language signals the existential blurring of the boundary between consciousness (person) and context (things).\textsuperscript{22}

In the broadest sense, the difference between the Objectivist and OBERIU poets’ respective understandings of subject-object relations can be seen as a function of their divergent materialisms. Their poems demonstrate the difference between treating Marxism as an ideology—that is, as a set of political views one adopts in order to understand or promote certain institutions and behaviors while critiquing or rejecting others—and existing in a society whose every object and institution ostensibly is built on that ideology from the start.\textsuperscript{23} It is the difference between viewing the materials of American capitalist society through the “lens” (to use Zukofsky’s word) of Marxist ideology and knowing that all the materials available for poetic construction have been produced, or at least co-opted, by a Marxist context. The Objectivist poets retain a faith in their ability not to be subject to the machinations of American capitalism; they invoke the material substratum of everyday life as a form of resistance to it. Further, their “sincer[e]” “objectification” of “historic and contemporary particulars” serves as a kind of recuperative reification: the construction of a verbal object that can encapsulate the materials of their age in portable and non-commodified ways. In contrast, as Mikhail Iampol’skii points out,

\textsuperscript{22} Recall Altieri’s claim, quoted above, that the Objectivists’ “[s]incerity…involves insistence on the surface of the poem as concerned primarily with \textit{direct acts of naming} as signs of the poet’s immediate engagement in the areas of experience made present…” (Altieri, “The Objectivist Tradition,” p. 33; italics mine).

\textsuperscript{23} I say “ostensibly,” because in reality the relationship between daily life and the tenets of Marxism was both complex and changing, especially in the period when the OBERIU poets were most active (late 1920s-mid 1930s). The New Economic Policy (NEP) of the post-revolutionary period had revoked the total nationalization of industry established during the Russian Civil War (1918-1921), but Russian society was still saddled with the after-effects of two wars, a drought-induced famine, and the forced collectivization of agricultural production. The fact that the Soviet regime needed to inculcate a new relationship to production, consumption, and domestic life was obvious, but its solution—at least, in the sphere of aesthetic production—of socialist realism was still in its early phases. See Lewis H. Siegelbaum, \textit{Soviet State and Society: Between Revolutions, 1918–1929} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) for a historical overview of these issues.
the impulse of OBERIU writing is to deconstruct the poetic object and thereby give the lie to its (inherently ideological) claims of universality.24

**Concrete People**

In an untitled 1937 poem by Daniil Kharms, which was ostensibly written for children, a nondescript man with no name goes out early one morning and never comes back. The perfectly regular meter and rhyme scheme creates an unsettling, nursery-rhyme quality to this parable; by mirroring the nonchalance with which the event is presented, this regularity in fact exposes the unthinkable absurdity of the situation:

Из дома вышел человек

Из дома вышел человек
С дубинкой и мешком
И в дальний путь,
И в дальний путь
Отправился пешком.

Он шел все прямо и вперед
И все вперед глядел.
Не спал, не пил,
Не пил, не спал,
Не спал, не пил, не ел.

**A man had left his home one day**

A man had left his home one day
With bag in hand and metal bar
And off he went
And off he went
A stroll that took him very far.

He walked on straight and forward
And always looked ahead
He never slept
He never drank
He never stopped to eat or drink nor even rest his head.

---

24 Iampol’skii credits the Oberiuts with being the first Russian poets to make irony a foundational strategy of their practice. Their “deconstructive” strategy [«деконструкция[я] самого понятия действительность или критика[а] миметических свойств литературы»] enables them, in his account, to move beyond the “provincial” “universalism” of the earlier avant-garde: «Универсализм, космизм, -- конечно, одно из наиболее характерных проявлений провинциального сознания, традиционно преодолевающего свою изоляцию и вторичность с помощью универсалистской риторики. В этом смысле Хлебников и Малевич -- российские провинциалы именно в той части своего творчества, которая наиболее утопична и метафизична. Освобождение от утопизма позволяет Хармсу и обэр-гиутам преодолеть российский провинциализм». (Mikahil Iampol’skii, Bespamiatstvo kak istok. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1998, p. 370.)
И вот однажды на заре
Вошел он в темный лес
И с той поры,
И с той поры,
И с той поры исчез.

Но если как-нибудь его
Случится встретить вам,
Тогда скорей,
Тогда скорей,
Скорей скажите нам.

(Хармс Даниил Иванович. “Из дома вышел человек (Песенка).” VDK, 800.)

And once upon a morning dawn
In darker woods he fared
And from that time
And from that time
He vanished in thin air.

But if perhaps your path with his
Just happens to be crossed
Then quick as you can
Then quick as you can
Run quickly telling us.


The Oberiuts’ characteristic style, in which an arbitrariness reminiscent of Western European absurdist drama combines with the formal qualities of a rule-bound, deterministic universe, reflects a paradox of Soviet life: the horror of disappearances like this one is compounded by their sheer predictability. Aleksandr Nikitaev contrasts this generation with that of the earlier Futurists, for whom “the world represents process, movement, and, in the last analysis, speed,” claiming that “for the Oberiuty it is the totality of objects, arrested phantasmagoria, a world deprived of causality and, consequently, of movement.”25 Contemporary poet Maria Stepanova echoes Nikitaev’s sense of their work’s “motionlessness” when she writes:

…the experience of the intelligentsia of the twenties and thirties is not at all like ours. How was it for them? They were born in a motionless world; they felt like rocking it. They caught the final minutes when everything stood in its place: the lunch counters, the fences, the policemen. In the new world, there was none of that— and with them themselves, as it turned out, anything could be done. The laws of physics, of grammar, of logic, ceased to work along with everything else (and this became the object of, and reason for, speech)— but it still shocked and fascinated them.26

Approaching Vvedensky’s poetry requires readers not only to acknowledge that the Oberiuts’ experience is far removed from our own, but to try to think one’s way into the phenomenology his poems bear out. Imagine: the stage set of the world is there, all buildings, all the organs of bureaucracy, planned and executed with exquisite uniformity—but it is, to use an anachronistic simile, like a video game world in which the computer makes the rules. You don't know what the dangers of each level are; you don’t know how many lives you get. The routine itself is deadening, yet precarious. One gets numb from so much subsumed dread that the routine—itself deadening—may change irrevocably, at a moment’s notice. Inside the Soviet machine, all objects (“the lunch counters, the fences, the policemen”) are created equal.

The Leningrad of Russia’s second modernist generation is a world in which all actions, desires, and bodies—human or otherwise—find themselves subsumed within the oppressive banality of «быть». We recall from the previous chapter that this untranslatable word, pronounced byt (from the verb «быть» meaning “to be”) was the target of much avant-garde art and writing in the context of Russian modernism.27 Jakobson’s comments about Mayakovsky’s work, cited previously, likewise emphasizes the post-revolutionary stasis of the OBERIU moment. We recall that he writes:

Opposed to th[e] creative urge toward a transformed future is the stabilising force of an immutable present,“overlaid, as this present is, by a stagnating slime, which stifles life in its tight, hard mold. The Russian name for this element is byt… The real antithesis of byt is a slippage of social norms… [But i]nertia continues to reign. It is the poet’s primordial enemy... The poet is oppressed by the specter of an unchangeable world order, a universal apartment-house byt... Against this unbearable might of byt an

27 The topic of what falls within the capacious concept of byt, and the tension in Russian cultural production between byt and byt’e, is large enough to be the topic of a dissertation in its own right. Indeed, it is an ongoing question. In the past year, byt has been the subject of an edited history of cultural history and criticism, Istoriia kul’tury povsednevnosti: Uchebnoe posobie, V. P. Bol’shakov and S. N. Ikonnikova, eds. (Moscow: Prospekt, 2015). As of 1998, there is even a Museum of Lost Everyday Life, in Russia’s Novgorod Oblast (region). See http://sobesednik.ru/publications/sobesednik/2008/04/16/byt-utrata (Russian-only) for more information.
uprising as yet unheard of and nameless must be contrived.28

There is, however, an important difference between Mayakovsky’s work and that of his OBERIU successors. Whereas Mayakovsky’s suicide in 1930 predated the height of Stalinist repression, Kharms, Vvedensky, and others in their circle continued writing until a decade later—by which point the 1910s and early 1920s dreams of a glorious and byt-resistant future had been forcibly put to rest. This “sense of an ending,” to borrow Frank Kermode’s phrase, finds its literal embodiment in the Oberiuts’ penchant for deadly plot twists. It permeates the tone of their writings, which oscillate uneasily between nihilism and a manically playful inventiveness, between cynicism and desperate faith. Metaphors proliferate until eventually each word (each object) becomes indistinguishable from the others:

from Кругом возможно Бог

РЕЧЬ ФОМИНА:

Господа, господа,
Все предметы. Всякий камень
Рыбы, птицы, стул и пламень
Горы, яблоки, вода,
Врат, жена, отец и лев,
Руки, тысячи и лица,
Войну, и хижину, и гнев,
Дыхание горизонтальных рек,
Занес в свои таблицы
Неумный человек.

[…]

А мы были грешны.
Мы стали скучны и смешны.
И в нашем посмертном вращении
Спасенье одно в превращеньи.
Господа, Господа.


from God May Be Around

FOMINE’S ADDRESS:

Gentlemen, gentlemen,
all objects, each stone,
fish, birds, chair, flame,
mountains, apples, water,
brother, wife, father, lion,
hands, thousands, faces,
war, hut, wrath, breath
of horizontal rivers,
all of them nearsighted man
set down in his tables.

[…]

[But we were] sinners.
Yes we are boring and absurd.
In our posthumous rotation
the one salvation is transformation.
Gentlemen, gentlemen…


In this excerpt from a much longer poem, Vvedensky’s litany of objects calls to mind both the rhetoric of the Book of Genesis and, strangely enough, the object-catalogues of American modernist poets such as William Carlos Williams and Hart Crane. In the American context, these lists invite readers to marvel at the overwhelming productive power of capitalist society. At times, they give way to an uneasy sense that these excesses are all merely functions of the same fetishism: the repetition melts every product down into the gelatinous abstraction of capital. A similar unease comes across clearly in the translation of Vvedensky above; stones (kamen’) and flames (plamen’), water (voda) and faces (litsa) seamlessly supplant the rhyming “objects” that precede them. What gets lost in translation is a sense, unmistakable in the original, of the materiality of the words that stand in for these objects. As we saw in Khlebnikov’s work, the rapid shift from one word to the next makes the poem into a kind of transubstantiation machine—after all, “the one salvation is transformation.” At the same time, it allows the words to remain behind on the page once the “rotation” between them has been completed. By the poem’s end, the words, as products of a closed system with its own rules (however arbitrary), have assumed a materiality and constancy towards which their referents can only aspire.

Vvedensky here reveals the dark side a practice often associated with light verse by yoking together nouns whose sonic similarities belie their differences in meaning. Concrete objects, animate beings, physical substances, events, and emotions appear as parts of the same litany, each one superseded by the next so quickly that the reader scarceley has time to “see” it. It is almost as if what is being catalogued here is not objects at all, but possible nouns. This brings us to one of the most radical aspects of the OBERIU ethos: its rejection of the teleologies

29 Stephanie Sandler, private correspondence, 02/18/16.
and hierarchies that govern real-world relations between persons, words, and things. Often, their writings borrow typical narrative or dramatic structures—the anecdote, the parable, the dialogue—only to subvert these skeletal frameworks by altering the subject-object relations within them. These manipulations invite the reader to see objects in their most abstract form: not as visible entities, but as rules that afford actions, require complements, and create causality.

Kharms contemplates this problem in his 1939 «Трактат более или менее по конспекту Емерсена» [Treatise More or Less Following Emersen {sic}], which includes sections on gifts [«О подарках»] and “The Correct Way of Surrounding Oneself With Objects” [«Правильное окружение себе предметами»]:

Let us suppose that one completely naked authorized apartment resident decides to settle in and surround himself with objects. If he starts with a chair then he’ll need a desk to go with the chair, and a lamp for the desk, then a bed, a blanket, bed sheets, a dresser, underclothes, outer dress, an armoire, then a room to put it all in, etc. Here, at every point in this system an unusual little system-branch might manifest itself: The desire might arise to place a doily on the small round table, then to place a vase on the doily, then to shove a flower into the vase. Such a system of surrounding oneself with objects, in which one object snags another—this is an incorrect system, because, if the flower vase has no flowers in it, then this vase is made meaningless, and if the vase is taken away, then the small round table is made meaningless…The annihilation of one object disrupts the whole system.30

No object that appears in Kharms’s work is innocent; like Vvedensky, he continually reminds us that whatever distortions a desire for acquisition may give rise to in our minds, the objects of everyday life make their own demands. At the same time, these materials of byt have a stubborn tendency to persist beyond the logical systems that called for them in the first place. The Oberiuty use objects to expose this logical breakdown—to embody a trace of causal relations

that no longer hold.

This approach to language and its objects is different in an important way from Dada’s complete evacuation of linguistic meaning, as Vladimir Feshchenko points out. Vvedensky’s poems perform a kind of archaeology of meaning, in which the author expresses his alienation from byt by exposing the rift between its material objects and the (social, economic, political) systems that both produce them and contextualize them within a set of meaningful relations. The objects become like abandoned buildings, or bunkers from a former war. Merely by persisting in space, these objects reveal the insidious fiction of a cultural memory that a society expects all of its members to share. If there is something undeniably anti-social about this refusal of a common historical teleology, a shared system of values, it nonetheless performs an important social critique. It forces readers to recognize their society’s tacit inducement to renew their sense of progress or order, not by looking to other people, but—ironically—by looking to objects.

Both the Oberiuity and the Objectivists participate in twentieth-century philosophy’s attempt to renegotiate the boundaries of subjective experience, but in contrast to the emphasis placed by philosophers from Husserl and Brentano to Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger on being in the world (In-der-Welt-sein), the Russian writers refuse to stage everyday experiences in the world as sites of revelation for a self, however departicularized. In their theatrical productions, they eschewed an emphasis on character construction or moralizing in favor of representing “the

world of concrete objects onstage in their interaction and collision.”32 And many of their prose and verse writings participate in this ethos. In one of Kharms’s very short tales, for instance, one man returns from the store to find his friend angrily waiting for him, accusing him of lateness. In the heat of an argument about who was actually late, the recently returned shopper hits his friend over the head with a giant cucumber from his grocery bag:

Then Tikakeyev snatched the biggest cucumber from his satchel and hit Koratygin over the head. Koratygin clasped his hands to his head, fell over and died. What big cucumbers they sell in stores nowadays!33

Far be it from Kharms to turn this anecdote of sudden and senseless violence into an opportunity for moralizing. The conclusion drawn in the story’s final line dispenses with the human characters entirely, subsuming any ethical concerns within a sardonic praise of Soviet agricultural production: “What big cucumbers they sell in stores nowadays!” The people in these stories are not so much characters as vehicles for these kinds of “object collisions.” As Aleksandr Kobrinskii explains,

A character type is constructed, which comes into its full incarnation in the works of the OBERIUts: he is anonymous, his sensory capacities are severely limited (a characteristic motif of the OBERIU is the character’s insensitivity to pain), which reflects the signifying status, the contingency, of his existence. He appears, unmotivated, in the text, the motives for his actions are always purely formal, and finally, he is erased from the text with the help of the characteristic device of sudden disappearance, which leads to the self-exhaustion of the text.34

32 In the OBERIU manifesto, Kharms is described as a “poet and dramaturg, whose attention is fixated not on the static figure, but on the world of concrete objects in their interaction and collision. In the moment of action, the object takes on a newly concrete form, full of actual (real-world) meaning” [“поэт и драматург, внимание которого сосредоточено не на статической фигуре, но на столкновении ряда предметов, на их взаимоотношениях. В момент действия предмет принимает новые конкретные очертания, полные действительного смысла”]. For more information on the status of objects in OBERIU theater, see Michael Klebanov, “The Culture of Experiment in Russian Theatrical Modernism: The OBERIU Theatre and the Biomechanics of Vsevolod Mejerchol’d.” Russian Literature vol. 2-4 (Spring 2011), pp. 309-328.
33 «Тогда Тиказеев выхватил из кошелька самый большой огурец и ударили им Каратьгина по голове. Каратьгин схватился руками за голову, упал и умер. Вот какие большие огурцы продаются теперь в магазинах!». In VDK, 210. Trans. Matvei Yankelevich. Today I Wrote Nothing: The Selected Writings of Daniil Kharms, p. 73.
34 See Aleksandr Kobrinskii, Poetika OBERIU v kontekste russkogo literaturnogo avangarda, Vol. I. Moscow: MKL, 2000, p. 22: «Конструируется тип персонажа, который именно в обретенном творчестве получит полное воплощение: он анонимен, его сенсорные способности резко ограничены (характерный для ОБЕРИУ мотив — нечувствительность персонажа к боли), что отражает знаковость, условность его существования. Он немотивированно появляется в тексте, мотивировка его действий всегда чисто формальна, и, наконец, он
Vvedensky’s poetry likewise reflects the OBERIU declaration’s insistence upon the material concreteness of the poet himself: “We,” the manifesto states, “[are] people real and concrete from our brains to our bones” [«Люди реальные и конкретные до мозга костей»]. Vvedensky’s poems bear out this promise, even to the point of describing the process of death taking over the body, fragmenting the person into a collection of material parts:

from Всё
…ёё животик был как холм высок и очень туп ко её ёё прилип хохол она сказала: скоро труп меня заменит здесь и труп холодный и большой уж не попросит есть затем что он сплошной инкула тихо. Вышла пена и стала твёрдой как полено […] покуда все не вышли петухи поесть немного может быть ухи в ней много косточек янтарных жирных сочных мы не забудем благодарны пуховиков песочных где посреди больших земель лежит красивая мамзель…

(Введенский Александр Иванович. “Всё.” VSE, 83.)

from That’s All
…her tummy was a knoll tall and very dull, stuck to her brow, a lock of hair she said: soon a corpse will replace me here and the corpse, cold and big won’t even ask to eat since it is solid, hiccuped softly. Out came foam and hardened like a log […] as long as they didn’t come out, the cocks, to eat perhaps a little stew in her are many tiny bones, amber fatty juicy we won’t forget, thanks to their sandy feathers where amidst these great lands lies a beautiful damsel…

(Translation mine.)

Whereas the recent critical turn to new materialism in the West can be seen as asking its readers to endow physical objects with a quasi-anthropomorphic agency, the OBERIU aesthetic of the 1920s and ‘30s seems to demand precisely the opposite recognition: not “Things are people, too,” but rather, “People are things, too!” Vvedensky shows that the discovery of one’s capacity to become inanimate (“the corpse, cold and big / won’t even ask to eat”), to ossify until one has “hardened like a log,” provokes a kind of wonderment. Not only does death unseat one from
one’s imagined, hierarchical position above the material substratum of everyday life; death literally returns one to the ground of one’s being, until at last one’s raw materials get absorbed back into the earth and feed the continuing growth of the system.

**Wish You Were “Here”**

While the writings of the first-generation modernists departed in polemically charged ways from their symbolist forebears’ depiction of lyric subjectivity, their unacknowledged practice of treating the individual consciousness as a model for a universal system of relations itself bespoke a deeply engrained and historically unquestioned relationship to one’s own position as subject. An emphasis on the sonic materiality of their medium allowed both Stein and Khlebnikov, a generation before, to tacitly enshrine the individual subject’s consciousness as a model for a broader perceptual world. Moreover, emphasizing sound over sight provided a way of staging the construction of a composite, non-visualizable image of that world within the implied subject’s consciousness *without ever insisting on the individuality or subjectivity of the subject*. This practice of treating subjective rationality as the bedrock upon which an “objective” world constructs itself leaves itself open to excavation by theorists of the OBERIU/Objectivist generation, including Theodor Adorno, who recognized that “the object is no more a subjectless residue than what the subject posits. The two contradictory definitions fit into each other: the residue, with which science can be put off as its truth, is the product of their subjectively organized manipulative procedures.”

---

forcefully than does a poetics of sound, which silently takes both the consciousness and the
embodiment of its agent as givens. Thus, whereas Stein and Khlebnikov’s poetics of sound
speaks to a surprisingly shared notion of the lyric subject that unites the two poets, Oppen and
Vvedensky’s more vision-centered verse exposes the fault lines between their culturally (and
personally) divergent senses of subjectivity.

But if Stein’s generation erred on the side of totalizing idealism or absolute despair, the
succeeding generation of American poets, with its emphasis on visual sense data gathered by an
unacknowledged subject, could be said to lean dangerously towards an existentialist treatment of
perception. L. S. Dembo, in his essay on Oppen, notes the applicability of Sartre’s description of
Baudelaire to the “mood [of ‘boredom’]” in the opening poem of Discrete Series. Sartre writes:

He was attracted by the idea that things are thoughts which have been objectified and, as it were, solidified. In
this way he could see his own reflection in them; but natural realities have no significance for him. They meant
nothing, and the disgust and boredom which overcame him in face of the vague, mute, disorderly monotony of a
landscape were no doubt among the most immediate reactions of his mind.36

Michael Davidson likewise remarks on the “odd merging of American pragmatism and European
existentialism in Oppen’s poetry”:

In both systems, knowledge is a relationship between rather than of things, a negotiation rather than an
appropriation. […] One finds oneself already in a world of intersecting particulars, no one of which may be
isolated for purposes of scrutiny. Oppen is less interested in what is discovered than he is in the condition or
mood in which things can be apprehended, in which things constellate a world. (NCP xxxvii)

Oppen rejects the earlier generation’s faith in composite verbal objects made “by containing
quotidian reality in repetition, amassing cultural fragments toward an eternal dynastic edifice”
(NCP xxxvi). And if, as Davidson suggests, the poet’s focus on perception and relations rather
than object was “a refusal of the metaphysical [and Marxist] lure of totality” (Ibid.), this
approach also tacitly places the perceiving subject at the center of a constellation, and sets all the

36 Jean-Paul Sartre, Baudelaire, tr. Martin Turnell (New Directions, 1967), 104. Quoted in L. S. Dembo, “The
“materials” of the quotidian into orbit around him. It begs the question of whether there is any difference between the oft-quoted exclamation about the deer in “Psalm”— “That they are there!”— and the unspoken but equally valid fact of the subject’s own presence (“That I was there!”).

Put another way, whereas Eliot saw the individual personality as the source of emotion and treated poetry as the search for an “objective correlative” to such emotion in the external world, the objectivist notion of ‘sincerity’ treats the poem’s speaker as a subjective correlative for the object relations that surround him. Davidson would have it that “Sincerity does not mean presenting a verbal mimesis of [an object], but finding some linguistic approximation of cognitive acts engaged in apprehending such objects” (NCP xxxviii). In Oppen’s poems, outside and inside still handily mirror each other, even as the disjunction of visual and verbal syntax makes the alienation of subject from object into a kind of theater. I would suggest that it is worth reconsidering both terms of the Objectivist equation—“sincerity” and “objectification”—in this light. What is the relationship of subject to object implied in the lines with which Oppen begins *Of Being Numerous*: “There are things / We live among ‘and to see them / Is to know ourselves’”? It is as if, by looking to these “things,” one might come to see oneself as their (albeit inexact) reflection. One’s subjectivity comes to be seen as the product of a network of perceptual relations which, in their turn, correspond to the object relations of one’s everyday context. Oppen’s formulation would seem to reverse the notion of Eliot’s “objective correlative” by acknowledging the productive forces that shape the subject through the administration of the

37 In his essay “Hamlet and His Problems” (1920), T. S. Eliot states that “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.” See T(homas) S(tearns) Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* and *Major Early Essays* (London: Courier Corporation, 1998), p. 58.
context in which s/he lives. He seeks, ostensibly, to dismiss a subject-centered poetics by claiming that the “self is no mystery, the mystery is / That there is something to stand on.” 38
Indeed, the poet’s move to treat consciousness as the subjective correlative of a world of “things / [one] live[s] among” relies on the referential stability of both that self and the ground on which it stands. It seems intended to ensure that the “self [will be] no mystery.” 39

Both the OBERIU poets and the Objectivists emphasize the material facts of their contexts over the human qualities of their subjects— and yet, both do so in theatrical ways. This quality of Oppen’s poetry is a result of its tendency to combine a rhetoric of immediacy with an insistence on the opacity of both language and its objects— since “the world, if it is matter / Is impenetrable” (NCP, 144). Jeffrey Twitchell-Wass notes that

Oppen’s spare language must avoid the more obvious poetic or rhetorical effects in order to maximize the sense of ethical seriousness and urgency… Humor and verbal play are almost entirely forbidden… Yet while he is deeply suspicious of theatrical effects, the poetry is fundamentally dramatic: the stage is the framing crisis to which the poem must repeatedly enact a meaningful response. The sense of crisis and of the urgency to respond explicitly or implicitly stages all of Oppen’s work, giving it dramatic tension, as well as grounding its ethical sincerity…with the result that it is never easy to determine whether the work is an adequate response to that crisis or merely symptomatic of it. 40

The Objectivist poets perform the distinction between the world of percepts and the perceiver who speaks them into virtual being on the page; however, they do so while maintaining a faith in the universality of their own perceptual processes that eclipses the source of those perceptions. In Oppen especially, this poetics of visuality underlines the process of perception at the same time that it universalizes that process; by glossing over the particularity of the subject, and the limits of his individual perspective, Oppen endows the “small nouns” of his poems with

38 George Oppen, “World, World,” This In Which, quoted in Dembo, “The Existential World of George Oppen,” p. 73.
39 This attempt to abnegate a stable and particular subject position is related to what Izenberg sees as the “minimal” quality of Oppen’s poems. “If Oppen’s poems seem ‘broken’ or ‘parsimonious,’” Izenberg writes, “it is because he does not really want to be making ‘poems’ at all.” (Izenberg 101).
a phantom objectivity. A comparison of the opening two sections of *Discrete Series* illustrates two possible, and in some ways opposite, effects of this tendency:

White. From the Under arm of T
The red globe.
Up Down. Round Shiny fixed Alternatives
From the quiet Stone floor…

(*NCP 6*)

---

Thus Hides the Parts—the prudery Of Frigidaire, of Soda-jerking—
Thus Above the Plane of lunch, of wives Removes itself (As soda-jerking from the private act) Of Cracking eggs);
big-Business

(*NCP 7*)

The opening section is deliberately alienating, both in its laconic diction and in its refusal to connect the fragmentary particulars it mentions. Indeed, most twenty-first-century readers probably would not discern the poem’s real-world object of focus—that happens to be the
directional lights over an elevator car—without the help of a number of explicators who were
Oppen’s contemporaries and who “live[d] among” such objects. In terms of the perceptible
sense-data the poem offers us, we are made to see a color first (or, rather, the lack of a color),
and then find the poem’s vision focalized from “[u]nder” a “T” shape. How does the “[w]hite” of
the first line relate to the “[u]nder arm of T,” and how does either of them relate to “[t]he red
globe” that follows? The series of directional adverbs (“Up / Down. Round”) and adjectives
(“Round” could just as easily be an adjective, followed by “Shiny” and “fixed”) seems to
promise clarity, but the abstract noun they modify, “Alternatives,” casts further doubt. Tom
Sharp, who interviewed the poet with his wife, Mary Oppen, in 1978, confessed his confusion:

**TS:** I can sort of figure it out, but then I’m not sure. […]
**MO:** That was a symbol that’s no longer around.
**GO:** Yes, it disappeared. I think I wrote about that. I think it would have made sense. The elevators had a— in
large Qantas buildings, you won’t notice […] —always had the red globe for going down—
**MO:** Yes, the two balls.
**GO:** —two balls, one up, one down. […] And every office building had that, and I think it was—
**MO:** You punched a button and it came up or down, showed up or down the great globe, and it was like a T—
there were two bulbs underneath the overhang, or whatever it was— was the way I remember it— but it was the
underarm, you see.
**GO:** And I was working in an office building and—
**TS:** Up and down.
**GO:** Those were the alternatives. It could go up in that building and it could go down in that building.
**TS:** Well, I was associating it with the soda-jerking in the next section.
**GO:** Well, it’s similar. […] I realize now they were never big then. There were other things too.
**MO:** It used to be like that at the top of the elevator, see, so that it looks like they were under the T.
**GO:** There’re a few other things in Discrete Series I don’t remember, but I’ve realized since that they’re not
recognizable now.41

Once the real-world referents of the riddle have been solved for us, we become able to see the
poverty of Oppen’s diction and the schematic, repetitive shifts of syntactic direction as working
in the service of the poem’s central metaphor: the “limited alternatives” offered by the glossy,

---

41 George Oppen and Mary Oppen. Interview with Tom Sharp. 10 November 1978. Speaking with George Oppen:
p. 215.
modern elevator, with its illusion of upward mobility, in fact mirror “the limited alternatives of a culture” under capitalism, as Oppen wrote in a 1963 letter to Charles Tomlinson.42 The social commentary of the passage becomes, then, almost too clear: “the routine path of the elevator has radically delimited even a glass-bound horizon of possibility. The poem activates a tension between the allusive freedom of deictic-driven syntax and the restriction of action by the spatial regimes of urban capitalism.”43 But this kind of purposeful linguistic opacity works on the assumption of a shared (cultural, spatial, historical) context, in the absence of which “respect[ing] the poverty of language”— as Vvedensky would say— results in an impoverished experience for the reader.44

At first glance, the form of Discrete Series’ second section appears similar to that of its predecessor. However, the object of Oppen’s critique is clearer in this case. Moreover, the poet’s deliberate obfuscation here suits his purpose. “Thus,” the poem begins, implying the continuation of an ongoing debate, in which— the reader must assume—a prior example has just been adduced. “Thus” prolongs an argument, without cluing the reader in to what exactly is being demonstrated; it announces its significance as a relational unit without saying what is being related to what. The lack of subject-verb agreement between the third-person singular “hides” and the plural noun “parts” deepens the confusion. Who or what “Hides the / Parts” in question, and what are they “parts” of? What is it that “Removes itself” “Above the // Plane of lunch, of wives,” and how is that removal like the separation of “soda-jerking from / the private act // Of / Cracking eggs”? This section’s riddle solves itself, introducing the culprit in the final

43 Ibid.
44 The original quotation from Vvedensky is as follows: “Уважай бедность языка. Уважай нишие мысли”. It appears in “Некоторое количество разговоров”, in VSE, p. 222.
line, yet subversively refuses it the honor of capitalizing both parts of its name: “big-Business.”

One of the reasons this verbal object “works” is that it effectively mirrors the ways in which each of the “parts” of “big-Business” it mentions “removes” its internal labors from view. “[T]he prudery / Of Frigidaire” is that it “hides [its] parts” inside: “All the mechanism is in here,” a 1927 ad from the Saturday Evening Post proclaims.54 “[T]he prudery… of / Soda-jerking” is that the soda-jerk is expected to crack his eggs ahead of time, so that the performance of this messy, “private act” will not intrude upon the streamlined performance of his duties. He is supposed to optimize his body to work as a part of the capitalist machine, on the “plane of lunch” where “wives” eat on the other side of the counter while their husbands (or men in general) orchestrate these machinations on the mysterious plane of “big-Business” “[a]bove” them. The “prudery” of capitalism’s alienation of means from ends here consists in its unspoken mandate that feminine and domestic realms of production (the “Frigidaire,” “the // Plane…of wives,” “the private act // Of / Cracking eggs”) remove themselves from the view of consumers (the wealthier “wives” who “lunch”) and producers (“big-Business”) alike.

In both of these poems, we can see Oppen’s recuperative reification at work: by foregrounding theatrically the poem’s processes of construction, the poet creates a verbal object that simultaneously mimics and undermines capitalism’s purposeful attempts to subsume the processes of labor within its products. But this second section performs an obfuscation of its own: it borrows the terse, deictic style of the first section as if the scene described were being experienced directly. The poem appropriates the first section’s emphasis on visuality by staging the relationship between its “small words” (“Thus,” “Above”) as a spatial relation on the page, so that the machinations of its language will seem to be those of a lived experience rather than

those of an abstract argument. This kind of “objectification” seems intended to restore an aura of concreteness and particularity to the very processes of capitalist production that it critiques as ominously disembodied. Oppen’s language, in other words, wants to have its ice cream soda and drink it, too: it seeks to be at once as obfuscatory and as vulgarly material as the processes it describes. This effort exposes an opposite risk of Discrete Series’ style. Whereas the first poem’s concreteness was too reliant upon the recognizability of the experience it described, this second poem’s verbal framework objectifies an argument rather than a specific experience—with the result that each “small nou[r]” wears the aura of an ersatz concreteness and particularity.

Many critics have pointed to the terse, almost talismanic opacity of Oppen’s everyday words. Few, however, have reckoned with the extent to which that opacity relies on an assumption that the context of the poems— their location, their historical moment— will be familiar to both poet and readers. Oppen’s poems repeatedly invoke the “windows,” “roads,” and “buildings” of the then-modern American city, but what is even more notable is their insistent use of “little words” (pronouns, prepositions) to locate the poems continuously within that context. Over the course of Discrete Series, such “tracking words” proliferate:

“in the distance”; “past the window-glass” (5)
“From the / Under arm of T”; “Up / Down. Round”; “From the quiet // Stone floor…” (6)
“Thus”; “Thus // Above the // Plane of lunch” (7)
“Thru which our car runs”; “Over what…?” (8)
“beneath the wind”; “The limp water”; “Beneath us” (12)

46 This is quite similar to the effect Marjorie Perloff ascribes to Williams’s typography in “To Give a Design”: Williams and the Visualization of Poetry.” In Carroll F. Terrell, ed., William Carlos Williams: Man and Poet. Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 1986, pp. 159-86.
47 See, for example, Randolph Chilton: “Oppen’s stylistic peculiarities, especially his concentration on the noun, signal his effort to maintain contact with our selves and our world. He has said that ‘All the little nouns are the ones that I like most’ (Collected Letters, p. 163)...because ‘they remain attached to the object.’ In using such words he intends partly to return us to his own perception of the elemental. At the same time, though, he reveals a provocative insight into the way language can claim to do that...” (Randolph Chilton, “The Place of Being in the Poetry of George Oppen,” in GOMP, p. 101.) Like many of Oppen’s appreciative critics, Chilton acknowledges the poet’s sense of self-conscious doubt about precisely where or how these words “remain attached to [their] object[s],” but does not seem to seek a more rigorous explanation for why these words are any closer to their referents than other words would be.
“At the curb”; “A thing among others / Over which clouds pass”; “Between glasses” (13)
“The shallow surface of the sea, this”; “The sea is a constant weight” (15)
“This land: / The hills”; “A house” (16)
“The edge of the ocean, / The shore: here”; “By the water” (18)
“near the lens”; “in the field / In silk hat. Daylight”; “that day”; “In our parks” (21)

The purpose of these locating phrases seems to be to make the poem itself stand in for the
deephasized perceiver of these scenes. The urgency of these gestures comes out of their
“Imagistic…effort,” as Twitchell-Waas puts it, to present a moment of ‘presence’ or ‘actuality’” with an “immediacy that communicates and renews a sense of lived experience.”\(^{48}\) But because the Objectivist aesthethic forbids editorializing, the poet must at once imbue the “matter” at hand with a sense of existential significance and call attention to the fact that it, as “matter[,] is impenetrable” (NCP 144).

In Norman Finkelstein’s account, no emphasis on a shared context will re-route Oppen’s poems around this dead end: “In terms of the poem’s relationship to reality, we have reached on a formal level what is equivalent to Oppen’s admission of the limitations of art. The objectivist can only state the case; if that does not fulfill his purpose, he must find another means of treating the matter at hand.”\(^{49}\) Finkelstein sees this representational problem as part and parcel of a larger, political problem that would cause Oppen to abandon poetry for twenty-five years after Discrete Series went to press. For Oppen, he writes, “the harsh political realities of the thirties make the question of objectivity a moot point: the poet’s immediate perceptions were of ‘fifteen million families that were faced with the threat of immediate starvation.’”\(^{50}\) But perhaps it is not objectivity, but subjectivity—especially the poet’s subjectivity—that feels itself under threat in

---

\(^{48}\) Twitchell-Waas, “What Were the ‘Objectivist’ Poets?,” 327.
the face of such large-scale social and economic hardship. The pressure Oppen’s poetry places
on direct, immediate experience can be seen as a response to the fact that the poet—who is, after
all, just one person, cannot perceive “fifteen million families,” nor can he feel directly “the threat
of [their] immediate starvation.” How was the poet to go on writing, when he acknowledged that
“The poem replaces the thing, the poem destroys its meaning—I would like the poem to be
nothing, to be transparent, to be inaudible, not to be”\textsuperscript{51}

For more than two decades, Oppen’s solution was simply not to write. Once he returned to
the U.S. and to poetry, the idea that poems should speak with “sincerity” about contemporary
events—despite the impossibility of doing so—drove Oppen to seek the symbolic in “the little
words” of his language. The fantasy here is that of a kind of ultra-pressurized, metaphysical
vision that allows the poet to break through the everyday object husks of the external world,
without altogether dispensing with his consciousness of things as things. The “lens” of the poem,
Discrete Series suggests, is not just a documentary lens but a magical one: it allows the poet to
stare at a 400-gram bread ration hard enough to make it turn into the hunger of fifteen million
families. This makes for a poetry of rare boldness and immediacy. However, the erasure of the
speaker’s particularity creates issues not dissimilar to those we saw in the would-be exemplarity
of advertising and propaganda. An ironic problem for a poet whose political commitments focus
so much on the collective is that, in order to live out this fantasy of objectivity on the page,
Oppen’s poems need to assume that “the world, weather-swept, with which one shares the
century” (NCP 5) is the same world, the same century, for every “one.”

\textsuperscript{51} George Oppen, quoted in Peter Nicholls, George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism (Oxford: Oxford University
The View From the Hieroglyph Dump

In contrast to Oppen’s poems, Vvedensky’s are at once more narrative and less readily visualized. They are dramatic scenes in which the most concrete aspect of the characters’ words and gestures is the metrically consistent, sonically dense, rhymed stanzas in which they appear. In Vvedensky’s poems the lineation and stanza form more often set the rules, delimiting the boundaries of the world of signs through which his deliberately flat characters make their inexorable way towards death. The seriality of Vvedensky’s forms makes these transformations unpredictable, even as the end-rhyme endows each development with a retroactive sense of fatalism. Words are repeated as if to insist upon their materiality, their hermeticism, as they become engulfed in the poem’s ceaseless flow. As early as the OBERIU manifesto, the collective wrote of Vvedensky, “A. Vvedensky (at the far left of our association) breaks the object into parts, but the object does not lose its concreteness thereby. Vvedensky breaks down plot into fragments, but the plot does not lose its creative order.”52 And while Vvedensky’s comrades took up his self-styled title, “The Authority on Nonsense” [авторитет бессмыслицы], they were careful to clarify the extent and implications of that “nonsense.” In direct response to Vvedensky, his friend and fellow Oberiut Nikolai Zabolotsky wrote:

Obviously, in such circumstances the very nature of the term “nonsense” takes on its own, somewhat unique meaning. [It is] nonsense not because the words themselves do not possess meaning; it is nonsense because purely meaningful words [have been] placed in an unusual relation, alogical in character. The unusual ordering of objects, the attribution of unusual qualities and capacities to them, and likewise—of unusual actions. Formally speaking, this is a line of metaphor. Any metaphor, while it is still alive and new, is alogical. […] The renewal of metaphor can go so far as to widen the circle of associations—this work You carry out, poet, with the only distinction being that You materialize your metaphors…”53

52 «А. Введенский (крайняя левая нашего объединения), разбрасывает предмет на части, но от этого предмет не теряет своей конкретности. Введенский разбрасывает действие на куски, но действие не теряет своей творческой закономерности». (Translation mine.)
53 N. A. Zabolotskii, “Moi vozrazheniia A. I. Vvedenskomu, avtoreitetu bessmyslitsy.” Ed. A. Gerasimova; rpt. in VSE, p. 394. The Russian text is as follows:
«Бессмыслица не от того, что слова сами по себе не имеют смысла, а бессмыслица от того, что чисто смысловое слово поставлены в необычайную связь—алогического характера. Необычное чередование предметов, приписывание им необычных качеств и свойств, кроме того—необычных действий. Говоря формально—это есть линия метафоры. Всякая метафора, пока она еще жива и нова, алогична. […]

217
This materialization of metaphors is an ideal in Vvedensky’s poetry. Despite their alogical qualities, many of Vvedensky’s mature poems share a common teleology, building a non-visualizable world out of a series of repetitions, misrecognitions, and fragmentations that culminate in an apocalypse. Examples include “The Saint and His Followers” [Святой и его подчиненные] and “Two Birdies, a Mountain, a Lion, and Night” [Две птички, горе, лев, и ночь]. The former poem ends when all of its objects disappear at God’s command. The latter poem constructs a hermetic, test-tube world in which referentiality takes the form of transubstantiation— “the word tribe solidifies / and transforms into an object [и слова племя тяжелеет / и превращается в предмет]” (VSE 97). Clearly, this solidity, this alchemy followed by stasis, is related to the “motionless” quality that Stepanova and Nikitaev find in Vvedensky’s poems—but how so?

Like the other thinkers in his circle, particularly Kharms and Lipavsky, Vvedensky’s mystical relationship with the object-like qualities of words owed much to his idiosyncratic reading of Kant. Specifically, Jakovlevic draws readers’ attention to Kant’s discussion of the mathematical sublime, wherein the philosopher’s account of “the comprehension of multiplicity in the unity…of intuition” bears on the still materiality of Vvedensky’s words:

The measurement of a space (as apprehension) is at the same time the description of it, thus an objective movement in the imagination and a progression; by contrast, the comprehension of multiplicity in the unity not of thought but of intuition, hence the comprehension in one moment of that which is successively apprehended, is a regression, which in turn cancels the time condition in the progression of the imagination and makes simultaneity intuitable.  

In a moment of intuition, Kant suggests, something happens that is, in some sense, the opposite

---

of the “progression” or “movement” of “measurement”; the mind stops taking stock of what is around it (or in front of it, or co-present with it) and intuitively, “in one moment,” comprehends the “multiplicity” of instances or “description[s]” as a “unity.” At such moments of insight, the difference between the discrete components of the “multiplicity” is “cancel[ed]” out, and the components are subsumed in a general category. The feeling Kant associates with this unification is “simultaneity”—a stopping of the “progression” of time.

In The Grey Notebook [Серая тетрадь] (1932-33), Vvedensky, following Kant, reminds us that the conventional way of understanding actions in terms of time-bound progression is merely that, a convention. In contrast, actions witnessed in a moment of insight—a moment like the last one before death—would be indistinguishable from objects, and objects from actions.\(^{55}\)

Let the mouse run over the stone. Count only its every step. Only forget the word every, forget the word step. Then each step would seem a new movement. Then, since your ability to perceive a series of movements as something whole has rightfully disappeared, that which you wrongly called a step (you had confused movement [and] time [with] space, you falsely transposed one over the other), that movement will begin to break apart, it will approach zero. The shimmering will begin. The mouse will start to shimmer. Look around you: the world is shimmering (like a mouse). (Trans. Jakovlevic 112)

Пускай бегает мышь по камню. Считай только каждый ее шаг. Забудь только слово каждый, забудь только слово шаг. Тогда каждый ее шаг покажется новым движением. Потом так как у тебя справедливо исчезло восприятие ряда движений как чего-то целого что ты называл ошибочно шагом (Ты путал движение и время с пространством. Ты неверно накладывал их друг на друга), то движение у тебя начнет дробиться, оно придет почти к нулю. Начнется мерцание. Мышь начнет мерцать. Оглянься: мир мерцает (как мышь). (VSE 177)

Two decades earlier, Khlebnikov and the artists in his circle strove to envision reality from the fourth dimension. In Vvedensky’s 1930s poems, the visionary clarity of death offers a very different mode of ostranenie, in which “every step” (every word) is “a new movement,” inseparable from the ever-less-solid, ever-less-self-contained mouse. It is a visionary mode

---

beyond the means of earthly visualization; Vvedensky has no words to capture it except as a blur («мир мерцает»), a liminal state between solidity and disappearance.

This difficulty in distinguishing between actions and objects is constant in Vvedensky’s 1930s poems, such as “Battle” [Битва]; in many of them, so-called nonsense thinly veils the poet’s attempts to account for every possible means of death. The exhaustiveness of the litany highlights nothing so much as the interchangeability of all these various deaths— the abject materiality of the bodies and the disembodied agency of the voice that speaks beyond and through them. The slapstick execution staged in “All Around Possibly God” [«Кругом возможно Бог»] literalizes the promise of transforming word into thing by introducing the trope of paralysis, which turns human bodies into sentient objects. The convict, the paralyzed executee, is the reified counterpart of the anthropomorphized natural beings (birds, trees, fish) who populate Vvedensky’s poems. These poems achieve their complex tone—one of light-hearted violence, of slapstick devastation—by revealing the world of non-human objects to be more powerful, or even more conscious, than one might expect, even as they show the people in this world to be ever more breakable, less alive, than they might think they are.

But if Vvedensky’s repeated objects mime the immediacy and solidity of things in themselves, they are really less like things than like “thing-concepts,” to use Heidegger’s term. The more these objects are repeated, recontextualized, and transformed across Vvedensky’s oeuvre, the more they seem to be staging a mere fantasy of solidity, belied by radical linguistic flux. Vvedensky’s is a world in which everyday objects aspire, and fail, to be self-contained—and therefore portable beyond the bounds of their context. Vvedensky treats the objects in his poems as if their goal is, ironically, to attain the materiality of the words that signify them. This approach to the object comes to seem like an extension of the Futurist ideal of “the self-living
word” [«самовитое слово»], One could even risk anachronism by calling this a kind of reverse deconstruction: rather than staging the signifier’s infinite deferral to the signified, Vvedensky’s poems construct a world out of what Kobrinskii calls “subject fragments” [«сюжетные куски»] — pieces of byt striving for the substance and portability that is exemplified by their own names.56 These names, in turn, are what the OBERIUts called “hieroglyphs”:

Vvedensky, right up to the end, never gave up on “the star of nonsense.” His things, with time, become ever deeper and more complex — “the star of nonsense” deepens, but simultaneously becomes clearer: the style and character of things become so clear and transparent that I come to feel the absurdity, the illogic, and the nonsense as my own — precisely my illogical, absurd existence; I no longer see their absurdity. In contrast, logic, as Vvedensky shows me, is something absolutely foreign to me, outside; logic itself, the very logic of Aristotle, comes to seem absurd to me. But nonsense is not relative. It — the absolute reality — is Logos, the word become flesh. This direct Logos is illogical, as is its incarnation. […] Lipavsky coined a term: “hieroglyph.” A hieroglyph is some kind of material phenomenon that I sense, feel, perceive unnaturally [theatrically], and which tells me more than it expresses directly. The hieroglyph is two-faced; it has an inherent and an extrinsic meaning. The inherent meaning is its attribution as a material phenomenon — physical, biological, psychophysical. Its extrinsic meaning cannot be defined precisely and unequivocally; one can convey it metaphorically, poetically, sometimes through the unification of logically incompatible concepts — that is, [through] antinomy, contradiction, nonsense.57

Words, for Vvedensky—as for Lipavsky and Kharms—have an elementary or elemental state that exceeds any instrumental usage of them. (One might recall Khlebnikov’s theory of a universal alphabet, to which the Oberiuts’ conversations often turned.) Kharms called this the

56 See Kobrinskii, Poëtika OBERIU v kontekste russkogo literaturnogo avangarda, Vol. I, p. 23. In the OBERIU manifesto, Vvedensky is described in terms of an aesthetic approach that centers on fragmentation: «Введенский разбрасывает предмет не на части, но от этого предмет не теряет своей конкретности. Введенский разбрасывает действие на куски, но действие не теряет своей творческой закономерности». (“Vvedensky breaks the object into pieces, but the object doesn’t lose its concreteness as a result. Vvedensky breaks down action into fragments, but that action doesn’t lose its constructive consistency.”)

word’s “fifth meaning,” or “the free will of the word.” He goes on to say that “the fifth, essential, meaning of the object in a concrete system and in a discursive system is not the same” (Jakovlevic 56). Jakovlevic’s analysis leads one to surmise that the “fifth meaning” relates to the denotative meaning in much the way that, in Heidegger’s late writings, the thing relates to the object. The object is a product of the human failure to see things in themselves; Heidegger claims that “they [things] have never been able to appear to thinking as things.”

The object-like qualities of words, then, are what remains behind on the page after the “transubstantiations are complete. They are the material elements that signify as parts of a rule-bound language. The thing-like qualities of words are at once separate from the objects they denote and irreducible to the discursive system in which they appear. The words “thingliness” is what Druskin calls its “extrinsic meaning.” This is the obverse face of the hieroglyph—the thing you cannot see unless you approach it through so-called “nonsense.”

Because they are both thing-like and object-like, abstract and concrete, words can create unstageable dramas, non-visualizable landscapes, built on antinomies and contradictions that accrue a materiality as language that they could never achieve in a physical form. They can give rise to a portrait of the subject through a negative theology, a litany of anti-similes that catalogue the poet’s failure to become a thing among others. This is precisely the structure of one of Vvedensky’s great late poems, which the poet himself cited as his favorite and, invoking Kant, referred to as his “Critique of Poetical Reason” [Критика поэтического разума]:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Мне жалко что я не зверь…”</th>
<th>“I’m sad I’m not a beast…”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Мне жалко что я не зверь, бегающий по синей дорожке, говорящий себе повер, а другому себе подожди немного,</td>
<td>I’m sad I’m not a beast asprint down some blue lane whispering confidences to my self, and to my other self—let’s wait a little</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

мы выйдем с собой погулять в лес
для рассмотрения ничтожных листьев.
Мне жалко что я не звезда,
бегающая по небосводу,
в поисках точного гнезда
она находит себя и пустую земную воду,
никто не слышал чтобы звезда издавала скрип,
ее назначение обрать собственным молчанием рыб.
Еще есть у меня претензия,
что я не ковер, не гортензия.
Мне жалко что я не крыша,
распдающаяся постепенно,
которую дождь размачивает,
у которой смерть не мгновенна.
Мне не нравится что я смертен,
мне жалко что я неточен.
Многим многим лучше, поверьте,
частица дня единица ночи.
Мне жалко что я не орел,
перелетающий вершины и вершины,
которому на ум взбред
человек, наблюдающий аршин.
Мы сядем с тобою ветер
на этот камушек смерти…

we’ll go walk in the woods with us
to gawk at the paltry leaves.
I’m sad I’m not a star
running seeking that one nest
to drown in – none
could hear that star making creakings
to embolden the silence of fish.
I also have a complaint:
I’m not a rug, nor a hydrangea.
I’m sad I’m not a roof
falling – little by little – in
for whom death is only a moment
wet with rain.
I dislike that I’m mortal
I’m sad I’m inexact.
Much, much better, believe me,
is a fraction of day than a unit of night.
I’m sad I’m not an eagle
soaring encircling the heights, the heights,
falling into the mind of
the man surveying the arshins.*
We will sit with you, wind,
atop this deathly pebble…

* arshin: an old Russian unit of measure,
equal to about 28 inches.

The poem is 112 lines long, and Vvedensky insisted that, in spite of its repetitions, every line was there for a reason:

This poem, in contrast to others, I spent a long time writing, three days, thinking over every word. Everything here is meaningful to me, so much so that a treatise could have been written about it. It started this way: that the eagle came into my head…Then a different version presented itself. I thought, why pick between them, and then included both… I wanted to end with a question: why am I not a seed. The repetitions here are many, but in my opinion, all of them are necessary; If you look it over carefully, they repeat themselves in different ways, explaining themselves.59

The poem begins with, and repeats, an expression of dissatisfaction in the form of an impersonal construction. I have translated it as “I’m sad,” in part to keep the strong rhythms of the original,


223
but a literal translation would be more like “To me it is a pity.” Throughout the poem, any subjective agency is projected insistently onto the non-human or inanimate “hieroglyphs,” which are animated by active participles: the beast runs [бегающий], as does the star; the roof falls [распадающаяся] and the rain wets it [размачивает]; the eagle circles the mountains [перелетающий] again and again. The speaker’s internally divided self can only whisper to his “other self” [говорящий], make commands to the reader (“believe me” [поверьте]), contemplate the landscape, like “the man surveying” the distance, and utter repetitive, impersonal constructions about his failure to be any of the other things he mentions. Throughout, Vvedensky’s use of active participles creates a sense of continuous flow—a movement of objects through an undifferentiated, Bergsonian duration (durée) that does not distinguish between active and passive, human and inhuman.60 The only separable “moment,” as Vvedensky has written about elsewhere, is the moment of death itself.61

The poem’s speaker reiterates the desire for a more totalizing, distanced perspective from his objects of attention; he sets up a contrast between the eagle who circles back several times

---

60 Vvedensky’s interest in Bergson is well documented, and thought-experiments about the nature of time and its relation to objects in space appear throughout his mature work, especially in the section of «Серая тетрадь» [The Gray Notebook] entitled «Простые вещи» [Simple Things], in VSE, pp.176-77. The influence of Bergson on Vvedensky’s thought is too large a topic to be within the scope of this study; however, a representative quotation from the philosopher’s Matter and Memory may illuminate the role of time in the form of Vvedensky’s poems: “The qualitative heterogeneity of our successive perceptions of the universe results from the fact that each, in itself, extends over a certain depth of duration, and that memory condenses in each an enormous multiplicity of vibrations which appear to us all at once, although they are successive. If we were only to divide, ideally, this undivided depth of time, to distinguish in it the necessary multiplicity of moments, in a word to eliminate all memory, we should pass thereby from perception to matter, from the subject to the object. [...] Subject and object would unite in an extended perception[,] the subjective side of perception being the contraction effected by memory, and the objective reality of matter fusing with the multidinous and successive vibrations into which this perception can be internally broken up. [...] Questions relating to subject and object, to their distinction and their union, should be put in terms of time rather than of space.” See Henri Bergson, Matter and Memory, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer. (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1911), p.77. (Italics in original.)

61 See, for instance, the section entitled «Глаголы» [Verbs] in «Серая тетрадь» [The Gray Notebook]: «Отметчу что последние час или два перед смертью могут быть действительно названы часом. Это есть что-то целое, что-то остановившееся, это как бы пространство, мир, комната или сад освободившиеся от времени. Из можно пошупать. Самоубийцы и убитые у вас была такая секунда, а не час? Да секунда, ну две, ну три, а не час говорят они. Но они были плотны и неизменны? да, да». (VSE, c. 177-78).
throughout the poem, surveying the landscape from a great height, and the unfortunate person who seeks to apply rational units of measure to the distances before him. There is both humor and pathos in his “complaint” [претензия] about the implied arbitrariness of his status as a human being, as opposed to a plant [hydrangea; гортензия], a wild animal [beast; зверь], or an object [rug; ковер]— all of which would have a different relationship to time. The irreverence with which Vvedensky groups together disparate alternative modes of embodiment is undercut, at moments, with a blunt assertion of vulnerability: “I dislike that I’m mortal / I’m sad I’m inexact.” What differentiates the poem’s human speaker from these enviable others is that he is aware of his own mortality (unlike the plants or animals) and of his failure to fulfill a natural or constructed prototype perfectly. A rug can be made to measure; a hydrangea’s petals can grow unthinkingly in perfect, fractal patterns; and no one would accuse a mountain, however rough or jagged, of being “inexact.” These things are more successfully self-contained, more lasting, or (at least) easier to commemorate than their “mortal,” “inexact” speaker. The poem goes on:

Мне жалко что я не чаша,
мне не нравится что я не жалость.
Мне жалко что я не роща,
которая листьями вооружалась.
Мне трудно что я с минутами,
меня они страшно запутали.
Мне невероятно обидно
что меня по-настоящему видно.
Еще есть у меня претензия,
что я не ковер, не гортензия.
Мне страшно что я двигаюсь
не так как жуки жуки,
как бабочки и коляски
и как жуки пауки.
Мне страшно что я двигаюсь
непохоже на червяка,
червяк прорывает в земле норы,
заводя с землей разговоры.
Земля где твои дела,
говорит ей холодный червяк,
а земля распоряжаясь покойниками,
может быть в ответ молчит,
она знает что все не так

I’m sad I’m not a chalice
I hate that I’m not pity
I’m not even a copse
that sheathes itself with leaves.
It’s hard to be with the minutes,
They have tangled me up so badly
It’s terribly offensive to me
That I’m visible currently.
I still have a complaint:
I’m not a rug, nor a hydrangea.
It’s awful to me that I move
so unlike the beetles, beetles,
like butterflies and whirligotes,
and like beetle spiders.
It’s awful to me that I move
not at all like the worm —
The worm rips burrows into
the earth and plants conversations.
Earth, where are your works
the cold worm says to her
and Earth, disposing of the dead,
keeps quiet
(she knows it’s not like that)
Мне трудно что я с минутами, они меня страшно запутали.
Мне страшно что я не трава трава, мне страшно что я не свеча.
Мне страшно что я не свеча трава, на это я отвечал, и мигом качаются дерева.
Мне страшно что я при взгляде на две одинаковые вещи не замечаю что они различны, что каждая живет однажды.
Мне страшно что я при взгляде на две одинаковые вещи не вижу что они усердно стараются быть похожими...

It’s hard to be with the minutes, they have tangled me up so badly.
It’s terrible that I’m not grass, grass,
It’s terrible I’m not a candle.
It’s terrible I’m not candle grass, to which I replied, and the trees momentarily sway.
I’m scared I have before me two identical things —
I don’t see how they’re different, how each one lives, independent.
I’m scared I have before me two identical things —
I don’t see how eager they are to look like one another...

As in the earlier part of the poem, there are no discrete stanzas, although groups of lines form within the general pattern on the basis of rhyme. Quatrains rhymed ABAB, rhymed couplets, and some three-line stanzas distinguish themselves, although there are no typographical breaks between them. The closure provided by these rhymes contrasts with the looseness of the poem’s accentual rhythm, as well as the way in which Vvedensky’s metaphors tend to bleed into each other across stanza boundaries. As Keti Chukhrov has pointed out, “Vvedensky’s utterances are built in such a way that each successive meaning begins a different direction […The] seemingly disjointed leap from one meaning to another creates a nonsense effect precisely because of its orientation on a constantly new source.”

As in Khlebnikov’s work, this nonsense quality is heightened by a rhyme pattern that highlights the acoustic and orthographical similarity between two words with wildly divergent meanings, as in the case of “pity [zhalost’]” and “armed (or, in

---


«Высказывание у Введенского строится так, чтобы каждый следующий смысл начинал иное направление. То же самое происходит, например, в двенадцатитоновой композиции. Следующий звук не налаживает связь с предыдущим в рамках предзаданной гармонической системы. Каждый из 12 звуков не продолжает начатое раньше, но как бы возникает заново. И только логика серийных обращений внутри произведения выявляет связь, равную, а может, и более интенсивную, чем тональность. Подобным же образом на первый взгляд бессвязный бросок с одного мысли на другой у Введенского создает эффект бессмыслицы именно благодаря установке на постоянно новое начало.»
Towards the end of the poem, the repeated “hieroglyphs” take on a new resonance as their
repetitions orbit new clusters of lines that introduce a sense of mortality and doubt into the poem more explicitly. Phrases like «я вижу» [I see] and «я слышу» [I hear] emphasize the speaker’s perceptual capacities: he sees a ruined landscape [«искаженный мир»] and the sounds of lyres, that most classical of all tropes for the poetic voice, forcibly stifled [«шепот заглушенных лир»]— in contrast to the verdant, agential, and uncorrupted solidity of a world whose objects the speaker cannot become. Then, the finitude of his “mortal” point of view, its “inexactitude,” circle into view again. The speaker sees the precarity of his own existence mirrored ever more clearly in the surrounding landscape (“all falls to decay / “and…compared, I’m not rare”; “the trees begin to sway”; “the worm crawls over all”), but unlike the landscape, which retains the promise of reabsorbing its materials into the earth, the speaker laments that he “[is] not a seed”— his own generative powers will come to an end with the silencing of his voice.

Even the capacity of that voice to leave less “mortal” and more “exact” verbal objects behind it comes into question here. Vvedensky mimes placing the word, as a physical entity, on the page, only to discover that it is less solid than he hoped: “and here, at the conquered tip of the letter / I put down the word box / I set box in its place: / its substance is thick dough.” The word “box” (in the original Russian, the word is «шкаф», more literally translated as “cupboard”) is meant to be as concrete and capacious a container as the material object to which it refers.63 However, the word itself becomes unpleasantly malleable: the “thick dough” of its verbal matter is both impossible to get rid of and difficult to form into a solid, lasting object. The relentless onward flow of time subsumes every object in the poem’s landscape, melting it down into one thing and the same, as Vvedensky describes elsewhere, in “The Grey Notebook”:

---

63 The word shchka[plet] [cupboard] denotes an object that would have had particular salience for the Oberiuts. In their largest public performance, “Three Left Hours” [«Три левых часов»] January 24, 1928, as Jakovlevic recounts, “Some of the witnesses of that night’s performance remembered a big, decrepit cupboard positioned center-stage, in front of which Kharms paced with a shiny top hat, smoking a pipe and reciting poetry” (Jakovlevic 15).
Я камень трогаю. Но твердость камня меня уже ни в чем не убеждает.
Пусть солнце на небе сияет будто пальма, но больше свет меня не освещает.
Все все имеет цвет,
все все длину имеет,
имеет ширину, и глубину комет
все все теперь темнеет.
И все остается то же самое.

(VSE 172)

I touch a stone. But the stone’s hardness cannot convince me of anything.
Let the sun in the sky shine like a palm tree, the sun no longer illuminates me.
All things, all things have color,
All things, all things, have length, have width, and their depth, too, a comet will darken, all things, all things, soon.
And everything stays the same.

There is no actual, real-world relation between these objects and the “hieroglyphs” that represent them— let alone between these objects and the metaphorical or connotative potential of their names. Only in the poet’s fantasy landscape can the leaves in fact be inscribed with “imperceptible words” [«незаметны[е] слов[а]»] that speak to such metaphysical concerns as “immortality” or “a view of foundations” [«вид основ»]. The speaker expresses not a fear that these “imperceptible words” don’t exist, but a fear of the limits of his ability to notice them. We are left with an ideal world of objects that have been evacuated by the poem’s negative theology, leaving behind something like a Portrait of the Artist as No-Man. “It comes to seem,” Anna Gerasimova writes, “that all [of these] ‘hieroglyphs’ are, in one way or another, linked to death; they are masks, or pseudonyms, of death.” In Vvedensky’s world, every “concrete” object, like every living being, holds death at its heart; it is the meaning, and the end of meaning, to which all signifiers refer. The poem exercises its limited power by putting those objects, those “hieroglyphs,” on the page in the first place. It invites the reader to indulge in a fantasy of solidity and dynamic, agential, consistent object relations, even as Vvedensky’s figurative leaps remind us that the words are only words, signifiers whose referents haunt them like ghosts. The

64 А. Герасимова, “Предисловие.” VSE, р. 21: «…оказывается, что все ’иероглифы’ так или иначе связаны со смертью, они — маски или псевдонимы смерти…»
words on the page continue to invoke real-world objects (fish, trees, rugs, etc.), but their
phantom referents never achieve the fixity or the duration of the words that call them before the
mind’s eye. Moreover, the fact that these words refer to physical objects and living beings does
not distinguish them in any way from the words used in «Кругом возможно Бог» [“All Around
Possibly God”] to denote far more abstract phenomena.

The poem is thus an elegy for multiple things at once: it bids farewell to a life spent in the
real world, surrounded by the trappings of everyday life, at the same time as it performs the
renunciation of an imagined, alternative world of things uncorrupted by byt. It is an elegy for a
life whose agent can be summarized most fully by what he has not been and will not become.
Lastly, it elegizes a faith in a system of meaning that would link the individual subject, the
objects of his world, and the names of those objects in less “mortal,” more “exact” ways.

Vvedensky’s poems only get bleaker from here. His last poems have the eviscerating
clarity of late Beckett: nothing but a voice with no known speaker remains. When asked to
comment on a recent attempt to stage Vvedensky’s unstageable play, «Елка у Ивановых»
[“Christmas at the Ivanovs”’], poet Maria Stepanova responds that “Texts written today can’t be
a derivation from Vvedensky, a natural continuation of his poems: they become ours, so to
speak, not by birthright.” Vvedensky’s context transformed the status of “the word as such”;
“Russian speech [became] like a stranger’s apartment, where new people [were] rounded up (as
in the thirties and forties, in a house of arrest).” She goes on:

What, in fact, happened there? The word changed. From it, the semantic halo sloughs itself off, like a husk;
something like a multiplication by zero takes place: any word can be joined to any other, because in
combination, they all give the same thing («BCÉ»). The objects of speech loosely adjoin one another, and
each fold or slit is pierced by an intolerable, unthinkable light. Indeed, what these poems do is testify to
the new state of things in this new light, canceling out the old links [between them]. They are found at a point
from which it is an equal distance to any object. All things mean one thing: valediction, disappearance,
otherness.65

65 Mariia Stepanova, «Teksty Vvedenskogo—chudo na kraiuiu voronki.»: «Там ведь что делается? Там
отменяется слово. С него снимается, как кожура, смысловой ореол; происходит что-то вроде умножения на

230
Perhaps this is a version of what Clare Cavanagh means when she claims that contemporary readers can only encounter early Soviet-era authors out of context, “in an environment…in which the literal implications of ‘the death of the author’ remain unactivated.”66 On the other hand, read with their context in mind, the machinations of history threaten to overwhelm the work much as they overwhelmed its author. There comes to be something terrible even about the moments of revelation one wrests from Vvedensky’s poems, so firmly do they bear the stamp of the context that killed him. Any sense of purchase they offer us on the subject who speaks these lines comes at the cost of knowing that he would not survive beyond them. By reading the poet this way, one objectifies his œuvre as the residue of a brutal historical process, the crystallization of— to borrow Zukofsky’s words— the “inextricab[e]…direction of historic and contemporary particulars.” Stepanova, indeed, presents Vvedensky as an object lesson for the fate of the poet (and the poem) under Stalinism:

Vvedensky’s texts, those of them that survived, are not merely the death-conquering word, as Akhmatova, herself far from the Chinari, would say— but, in some sense, the process and the result of that death. They (and I have in mind the main [texts], the last [ones]) are written in a neutral territory— beyond life, as if on a windowsill overhanging nonexistence. We must understand what we are dealing with here: that they were written by a person hovering in a state of prolonged death— like a soul looking down from a height. In this sense, Vvedensky, like Mandelstam in the 30s, became both object and victim of the Soviet experiment: his poems are the very result of what they did to him.67

An uncanny aspect of Vvedensky’s object-focused aesthetic is the way in which he seems not

67 Stepanova, «Тексты Введенского— chudo na krai u voronki.»: «Тексты Введенского, те из них, что выжили, это ведь не только побежденное слово, как сказала бы далекая от чиновной Ахматова,— но и в некотором роде процесс и результат этой смерти. Они (я имею в виду главные, последние) написаны на нейтральной территории — за жизнью, как бы на подоконнике, вынесенном в несуществование. Тут надо понимать, с чем мы имеем дело: что они написаны человеком, зависящим в состоянии продленной смерти — как душа смотрит с высот. В этом смысле Введенский, как Мандельштам в 30-е годы, стал объектом и жертвой советского эксперимента: его стихи — это еще и результат, они то, что с ним сделали.»
only to have anticipated this kind of reification, but to have been writing towards it all along. “Time ate events,” he writes in “The Grey Notebook.” “Not even the bones of them remain” (VSE 178).

The Theatrical Machine

The poems of Oppen’s *Discrete Series* charted the ambiguities and disjunctions in the relationship of signifier to signified, allowing this binary relationship to serve as a parallel to the relationship between the perceiver and the perceived. Oppen’s emphasis on visuality means that his poems perpetually confront the contingency of this latter relationship. However, the corresponding contingency of meaning in language falls out of focus as the poet’s later work increasingly embraces referentiality:

> I realize the possibility of attacking many of the things I’m saying and I say them as a sort of act of faith. The little words I like so much, like ‘tree,’ ‘hill,’ and so on, are I suppose just as much a taxonomy as the more elaborate words; they’re categories, classes, concepts, things we invent for ourselves. Nevertheless, there are certain ones without which we really are unable to exist, including the concept of ‘humanity.’ [This is a faith] that the nouns do refer to something; that it’s there, that it’s true, the whole implication of these counts; that appearances represent reality, whether or not they misrepresent it; that this in which the thing takes place, this thing is here, and that these things do take place.68

Oppen’s “faith” that there are certain “things we invent for ourselves…without which we really are unable to exist”— “the concept of ‘humanity’” among them— chimes discordantly with the unshared, non-particularized quality of the “little words” his credo repeats: “that it’s there, that it’s true;…that this in which the thing takes place, this thing is here, and that these things do take place.” (What world does Oppen have in mind when he invokes “this in which the thing takes place”? What is the “it” that is “true,” and where is the “here” where “these things do take place”?) The tension between the brevity and apparent simplicity of Oppen’s “little words” and the broad, even philosophical, claims he makes with them— e.g., “that appearances

---

represent reality”—recall similar tensions in Khlebnikov’s individualist theory of “universal” meaning. Just as Shklovsky saw Khlebnikov’s poetry as evidence that any particular phoneme of the Russian language incites an articulatory gesture which, in turn, gives rise to a common set of affective and semantic responses, Oppen’s poems are built on a belief that both sight and speech refer to real-world objects in shareable ways.69 The faith that seeing a tree and putting that “tree” in a poem will give rise a comparable tree in the reader’s mind replaces earlier attempts at objectivity with a totalizing subjectivism.70

The problem of such limits of vision will come into more acute focus, so to speak, when Oppen returns to poetry thirty years after Discrete Series. His subsequent volumes, The Materials (1962) and This In Which (1965), strive to reconcile the poet’s faith in the physical solidity of objects and the referential solidity of the “small nouns” that describe them with a corresponding faith in “an ethic” of “humanity.” Dembo describes Oppen’s Pulitzer prize-winning opus, Of Being Numerous (1968), as the work of a poet “subject to intimations of a common humanity beyond the fragmentary encounters by which men are confirmed in their isolation.”71 The book’s title seeks to acknowledge a recognition that, in Adorno’s words, “[t]he particular individual has the universal to thank for the possibility of his existence.”72 But a

70 Oppen professes this faith, albeit with reservations, in his one published piece of critical prose, “The Mind’s Own Place” (1962): “It is the arbitrary fact, and not any quality of wisdom literature, which creates the impact of the poets. The ‘shock of recognition,’ when it is anything, is that. If we can hold the word to its meaning, or if we can import a word from elsewhere—a collective, not an abstract noun, to mean ‘the things that exist’—then we will not have on the one hand the demand that the poet circumstantially describe everything that we already know, and declare every belief that we already hold, nor on the other hand the ideal of the poet without any senses at all.” George Oppen, ”The Mind’s Own Place” from Selected Poems (1963). Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation. http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/237882. October 8, 2009. Accessed November 23, 2015.
72 “Witness thought, Adorno goes on to say, “which is a general relation, and thus a social one.” Adorno, “Subject-Object,” 501.
chronicle of myriad “fragmentary encounters” does not add up to “a common humanity,” just as the accretion of sonic materials in Khlebnikov or Stein’s long poems did not add up to a visualizable landscape. Here, once again, Oppen turns to objects to mitigate this issue of scope.

Oppen’s poetry seeks to acknowledge the material substratum of a shared context in which each person is one among others— and it does so, most often, by insisting on the seeing, speaking body as “a thing among things.” In other words, Oppen attempts to transcend the shift in scale between individual and collective experience by collapsing the distinction between persons and things. The rationale here seems to be partly metaphysical and partly political: the poems try to “objectify” the experience whereby, in Maritain’s words, “Things are grasped in the Self and the Self is grasped in things, and subjectivity becomes a means of catching obscurely the inner side of Things”; at the same time, Oppen’s treatment of “seeing [as] the very condition of subjective life” makes a shared context— a world of things seen— into fallow ground for a collective meta-subjectivity, a notion of “humanity,” to arise.

In practice, this approach is another version of the recuperative reification discussed earlier: Oppen here objectifies his own position within everyday life by presenting himself as the individual and his perceptual process as a model for all individual experience. He then seeks to deflect this reifying agency away from the poems’ speaker and onto the world of things. This method endows the objects of everyday life with a quasi-mystical, even quasi-human, dignity. The result is not unlike the “incurably theatrical,” “latent or hidden naturalism, indeed anthropomorphism,” which Michael Fried famously critiqued as “the core of literalist [art]

---

75 Nicholls, George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism, p. 49.
theory and practice.” Fried’s account of the art viewer’s engagement with a piece of literalist sculpture serves well, in fact, as a description of the kind of encounter that Oppen’s poems stage:

the experience of being distanced by the work in question seems crucial: the beholder knows himself to stand in an indeterminate, open-ended—and unexacting—relation as subject to the impassive object on the wall or floor. In fact, being distanced by such objects is not...entirely unlike being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another person. (Ibid., italics in original)

This is the very situation in which the deemphasized subject finds himself at the start of “Image of the Engine”:

1

Likely as not a ruined head gasket
Spitting at every power stroke, if not a crank shaft
Bearing knocking at the roots of the thing like a pile-driver:
A machine involved with itself, a concentrated
Hot lump of a machine
Geared in the loose mechanics of the world with the valves jumping
And the heavy frenzy of the pistons. (NCP 40)

The poem begins with a surmise, an attempt to say what the object before one is, “[l]ikely as not.” Before we know what we are looking at, we know that it is “ruined”— and Oppen proceeds to set the quasi-human and wholly inhuman aspects of the object against each other, just as “head” and “gasket” sit uneasily in the same compound phrase. Parts are accorded separate, continuous actions: the “head” is “spitting,” the “shaft” (in a Steinian phrase) is “[b]earing knocking,” and “the thing”—although acknowledged as a thing—also has life in its “roots.” Oppen’s emphasis seems to be on movement, visually perceived, rather than on sound, although the viewer seeks to intuit the source of the engine’s issue by its sounds as well as its motions: the “spitting,” the “knocking,” the valves jumping / And the heavy frenzy of the pistons.” Most significantly for our purposes, the crank shaft is said to be “[b]earing knocking at the roots of the thing like a pile-driver” (italics mine). The machine part is not merely likened to a human agent;

---

it acts as its own organizing consciousness, “involved with itself;” “concentrated” on its task and “[b]earing knocking at [its] roots,” clenching a vital force at its center like a heart pumping blood to the body. Oppen imagines a perfect symbiosis between the engine parts and the pile-driver, except that—as Oppen himself noted in an interview—“the motor…becomes rather an exact metaphor of a man dying and of the thing blundering, the cough in the manifold. Almost too good, maybe.”

The body-engine parallel, Oppen admits, is “[a]lmost too good”—so good, in fact, that the two entities become indistinguishable:

When the thing stops,
Is stopped, with the last slow cough
In the manifold, the flywheel blundering
Against compression, stopping, finally
Stopped, compression leaking
From the idle cylinders will one imagine
Then because he can imagine
That squeezed from the cooling steel
There hovers in that moment, wraith-like and like a plume of steam, an aftermath,
A still and quiet angel of knowledge and of comprehension. (NCP 40)

Oppen’s syntax masterfully stages the engine’s grind to a halt—the process by which “the thing,” very like a heart, resists the end and then gives in. “[T]he thing stops,”—or not, on the next line, it “[i]s stopped” in defiance of its agency, one part clumsily “blundering” against the inexorable pull of inertia, “stopping, finally / Stopped.” The drawn-out line ending with “finally,” like “the last slow cough” of the engine “blundering / Against compression,” meets its definitive end with the sharp line break and is “stopped.” The contrast between the apparent vitality of the machine in action and the passive, “idle cylinders” from which its “compression” ultimately “leak[s]” blurs any distinction between the life and death of persons and that of “thing[s].” Once it has stopped, the engine is merely what Kharms might call “a machine for

doing nothing, a machine for being a machine.”^78 It becomes no more than its material components. But, Oppen suggests, “When the motor finally starts, it’s different, it’s itself, and it’s very different from a lump of steel.”^79 Conversely, of the once-living body that has ceased to “blunde[r]” and lies reft of its “last slow cough,” the poet quips, “[I]t’s just a machine” (*Ibid*).

Because of how seamlessly the human body and the mechanical engine blend into each other, it is difficult to tell whether Oppen espouses a nominalist view of the former or a mystical, quasi-animist view of the latter. The poem seems determined not to settle for either perspective, but in order to transition into analyzing the man-machine relationship at all, it needs to gain distance from the material by introducing a spectator figure explicitly into the scene:

> will one imagine  
> Then because he can imagine  
> That squeezed from the cooling steel  
> There hovers in that moment, wraith-like and like a plume of steam, an aftermath,  
> A still and quiet angel of knowledge and of comprehension. (*NCP* 40)

Structurally speaking, the poem necessitates this shift away from the close focus on the poem’s objects, because the description meets, with the death of the engine, a dead end. It is notable that Oppen makes as little of a show as possible of this sudden shift towards abstraction; the idea of “imagin[ing]” follows directly on “the idle cylinders” and also precedes the poem’s first mention of a particular subject (“he”). The poem displays a resistance that readers will recognize from *Discrete Series* to all that is unverifiable. Even within the final lines, the poet

---

^78 See George Gibian, *The Man with the Black Coat: Russia’s Lost Literature of the Absurd*. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1987), p. 8: “One of Kharms’s friends, Vladimir Lifshits, wrote in his recollections of the poet that his room was sparsely, ascetically furnished. In one corner a strange object stood out in the almost empty room. It was made of pieces of iron, wooden boards, empty cigarette boxes, springs, bicycle wheels, twine, and cans. When Lifshits asked what it was, Kharms replied, ‘A machine.’ ‘What kind of machine?’ ‘No kind. Just a machine in general.’ ‘And where does it come from?’ ‘I put it together myself,’ Kharms said proudly. ‘What does it do?’ ‘It does nothing.’ ‘What do you mean nothing?’ ‘Simply nothing.’ ‘What is it for?’ ‘I just wanted to have a machine at home.’ He did not call it a collage, a sculpture, or an objet trouvé—it was simply a machine to do nothing.” (Vladimir Lifshits, “Mozhet byt, prigoditsia,” *Voprosy literatury*, No. 1 [1969], pp. 242-43).

seems to correct his own image to make it pass the poem’s “test of truth.” Thus, in describing the mist “squeezed from the cooling steel” that “hovers in th[e] moment” after the engine is is “finally / Stopped,” he cannot rest with calling it “wraith-like,” however much it may resemble Ryle’s “ghost in the machine.” Oppen strives to give as nominalist an account of the soul as possible: it is “like a plume of steam, an aftermath.” And yet, whether the poem endorses a spiritual view of this “aftermath” or not, the final line’s mysticism seems to be irresistible, lest the poem entirely “compress” the ontological distance between man and machine.

Oppen appears to have been somewhat defensive of his decision to let the verse’s ending “hover” on abstractions such as “knowledge” and “comprehension.” This is, after all, the same poet who responded to the work of H. D. by asking, “How can you write a word like ‘angel’?” Nevertheless, at the end of this first section, the poet looks to the object at hand to reveal an animating impulse that humans tend to feel towards the dead body and the dead engine alike:

Then it finally stops. The man finally dies, the motor finally stops. Shall one imagine then, shall one? In the case of the motor, obviously, one shall not. I mean one knows it isn't true. In the case of the man, just the question, shall one imagine just because one can imagine? There's no reason to believe it, except that one can, or except that there's this impulse to believe. That's really what I meant to say. Even in the case of a motor there's this impulse to feel that. It's difficult to believe in death. (GOMP 206)

Intent on recuperating the “objectivity,” the factuality, of this small leap into metaphysical territory, Oppen specifies that his “angel of knowledge and of comprehension” has been “squeezed from the cooling steel” by none other than “this [i.e., our] impulse to believe.”

The second of the poem’s five sections follows the “death” of the represented machine, but the poem’s own engine winds up again: “Endlessly, endlessly, / The definition of mortality //

80 See Oppen’s 1962 essay: “It is possible to find a metaphor for anything, an analogue: but the image is encountered, not found; it is an account of the poet’s perception, the act of perception; it is a test of sincerity, a test of conviction, the rare poetic quality of truthfulness.” George Oppen, "The Mind’s Own Place" from Selected Poems (1963). Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation. http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/237882. October 8, 2009. Accessed November 23, 2015.
81 Burton Hatlen, “‘Not Altogether Lone in a Lone Universe’: George Oppen’s The Materials,” in GOMP, p. 346.
82 George Oppen, cited in Davidson, “Introduction” to NCP, p. 5.
The image of the engine // That stops.” These lines clearly have the mechanical quality of “[t]he definition” that is perpetually redefining itself, staving off the deliverance of its promise. And it is on “[t]he definition” and “[t]he image,” rather than on “mortality” or the “engine” itself, that the poem now turns its attention. By echoing the poem’s title by placing “The image of the engine” alone as its own, separate stanza, Oppen highlights the self-contained quality of the image as such. He also suggests that the image, the definition is itself a kind of window, a “dusty” form of mediation akin to “the glass” through which “[t]he machine stares out / With all its eyes.” The poem insists on the materiality of the window, refusing to let it become a mere “image”; it is “glass / With a ripple in it,” and its “sill / …is dusty” with the tiny, particulate rubble of domestic life:

The machine stares out,
Stares out
With all its eyes

Thru the glass
With the ripple in it, past the sill
Which is dusty—If there is someone
In the garden!
Outside, and so beautiful. (NCP 41)

This is the most explicit anthropomorphization of the machine in the poem, and it seems fitting that Oppen chooses to endow the machine with “eyes” (indeed, with multiple eyes, from the sound of it), given that, as Dembo and many others have pointed out, Oppen is “a poet who is committed to his eyes,” and to his “faith” (Oppen’s own word) “in the reality of the perceived world” (Dembo, “The Existential World of George Oppen,” 65-6). Notably, this moment of personification enters on the heels of the most general, least verifiable claims the poem has made thus far:

2

Endlessly, endlessly,
The definition of mortality
The image of the engine
That stops.
We cannot live on that.
I know that no one would live out
Thirty years, fifty years if the world were ending
With his life.

The machine stares out,
Stares out
With all its eyes…

Not just the existential situation of being, in Yeats’s phrase, “fastened to a dying animal” (cited by Oppen in his interview with Dembo, cf. GOMP 206), but the “knowledge,” the “comprehension”—whether in the form of “[t]he image” or of “[t]he definition”—that everything ends is unbearable: “We cannot live on that.” A first-person speaker, ostensibly the same “he” who first beheld the “angel of knowledge and of comprehension” at the end of the previous section, now enters to deliver his own “knowledge”: “I know that no one would live out / Thirty years, fifty years if the world were ending / With his life.” Abruptly, as if to backpedal from the subjective flimsiness, the unprovability, of this claim, the poem reintroduces “[t]he machine” on the subsequent line. The pronouns in the section tell the story of its teleology: the empirical “image of the engine” is followed by the drive to generalize (“We cannot live on that”), then by a claim of first-person authority (“I know”), then by the third person in general (“no one would”), the singular third person (“his life”), and, finally, by the anthropomorphic object (“The machine… / With all its eyes”).

Oppen’s poems after Discrete Series tend to oscillate in this way between more vague, conventional moments of lyric revelation and an anxious reiteration of the materials in which the speaker’s attention is grounded. Syntactically speaking, Oppen makes these shifts of scale and focus as un-theatrical as possible, as in the jump from “a machine / Geared in the loose mechanics of the world” to—on the same line—“with the valves jumping / And the heavy
frenzy of the pistons.” As soon as a non-visualizable concept (“the loose mechanics of the world”) enters the poem, “the heavy frenzy of the pistons” and the jumping valves must reassert the “objectivity” of both the poem and its objects of attention. However, by the end of the second section, it has come to seem as if the distinction between the machine—with its imputed excitement to see “[i]f there is someone in the garden!”—and the human speaker is a mere formality. What kind of machine, if not a lyric machine, (what kind of engine, if not a human engine) would “stare out” to find “someone / In the garden,” and then make the subjective judgment that closes the section: “Outside, and so beautiful”? “The machine,” ostensibly the subject of this final action, becomes—not unlike the window—a form of mediation, an object whose “star[ing]” is meant to encapsulate the “I”’s own attentiveness. Preserving the illusion of the machine’s autonomy is Oppen’s strategy for transfiguring the suburban backyard into an Edenic “garden,” and placing within it “someone” “so beautiful” that s/he gives the “I” something s/he “ca[n] live on.”

The third and fourth sections of Oppen’s poem continue the move “[p]ast the sill” of the previous section and “[o]utside the sphere of the individual encounter, from the particular “someone” “in the garden” to “companionship” in general:

3

What ends
Is that.
   Even companionship
Ending.

‘I want to ask if you remember
When we were happy! As tho all travels

   Ended untold, all embarkations
   Foundered.

4

On that water
Grey with morning
The gull will fold its wings
And sit. And with its two eyes
There as much as anything
Can watch a ship and all its hallways
And all companions sink.

Both sections combine more constrained verbal forms with these more expansive, general claims about human relationships. The mechanical, declarative syntax in section three highlights the emotional undercurrent of these lines, even as it threatens to subsume that emotion within a tersely deterministic schema. Similarly, Oppen’s syntactic emphasis on the “little words”—the pronouns, conjunctions and prepositions that link the nouns together—seems engineered to point in two directions at once: it foregrounds the arbitrary rules of grammar that allow these parts to connect in just this way, and it also makes the relations between the poem’s real-world referents seem as inexorable as those connections. Take, for instance, the “that” in the lines “What ends / Is that.” The pronoun “that” seems to refer back to the whole scene that closes the previous section— the window and the “someone / In the garden! / Outside, and so beautiful”—and to equate it with “companionship” more broadly. There is a violence to the kind of determinism that allows “that” to stand in for all of “companionship,” and to subsume the entire situation of the previous section within one vague yet compact phrase: “what ends.” The parallel between the relentless paring-down of language and of experience suggests that this violence is somehow built into the mechanisms of both. And insofar as this syntactic violence results in a kind of theatricality, the poem’s spareness would have us believe that there is something inherently, “objectively” theatrical about language’s attempts to represent real-world relations. This section, for instance, enfolds a fragment of quoted speech (“‘I want to ask if you remember / When we were happy!’”), in between the mechanical, paired sets of phrases that stage the ending of that “happ[iness]” and abstract from it. The quote— without a closed-quote—blends into the language of the rest of the passage; indeed, it is maudlin in its ordinariness, failing to
distinguish its own diction as any more particular, any more human, than that of the blunt phrases that frame it. These phrases echo one another metrically as well:

What ends / Is that. / Even companionship / Ending.

Ended untold, all embarkation’s / Foundered.

In this, the first of the poem’s two bleak, middle sections, any sense of subjective agency has been excised from the “Image of the Engine.” And while the “machine” itself is apparently missing from these stanzas, its authoritarian rhythms govern the start and end of each line’s “embarkations.”

Section four literalizes the “travels” of the previous section, removing itself from the everyday context of the suburban “window” and “garden” and taking to the water. The ship of this section recalls Discrete Series’ “Party on Shipboard” and several other fragments, and presages a number of other marine vessels in Oppen’s poetry, including “The Tugs of Hull” (also in The Materials) and the “Carpenter’s Boat” of This in Which. But the most resonant echo by far comes from the oft-quoted seventh section of Of Being Numerous:

Obsessed, bewildered

By the shipwreck
Of the singular

We have chosen the meaning
Of being numerous. (NCP 166)

Here, Oppen counterposes the sea— an abstract, distant, and pointedly inhuman realm— against his human (or, at least, man-made) objects of focus. The “water / Grey with morning” marks the limits of the speaker’s perception or knowledge. Indeed, Oppen’s insistence on the sea as a kind of anti-object, a figure for all that is not-here, not-concrete, and not-human, strongly recalls Vvedensky’s use of this trope. For both poets, the sea is the counterweight to all local and
particular contexts—the vast inertia on whose waves “all embarkations / Founde[r],” the depths whose surface yields up no sign of the passage of earthly time. Oppen’s and Vvedensky’s use of this trope could even be seen as a reappropriation of the Romantics’ oceanic sublime—but for the latter poet, the sea remains mysteriously meaningful in its impenetrability, whereas Oppen emphasizes its meaninglessness. The sea in section four of “The Image of the Engine” is not affectively charged but dead—or rather, never alive in the first place. Hence the need for an animate spectator to provide “its two eyes” to the scene, echoing the gesture of the inhuman “machine [that] stares out / …With all its eyes” in section two and standing in, more generally, for the poem’s implied, human speaker.

The ship here becomes a foil for the domestic architecture of the second section, and the parallel constructions using “and” set up an equivalence between “all its hallways / And all [the] companions” who “sink” within it. Unlike the “image of the engine” in section one, the ship is not particularized in any way. Oppen acknowledges that the gull’s spectatorship is arbitrary (he “can watch” the shipwreck “[T]here as much as anything”), and yet, the singularity of the gull seems intended to stand in for a degree of specificity that is lacking in the description itself. The gull’s perspective is also objective—indifferent to the fate of the ship “and all companions”—in a way that a human onlooker could not be.

The seagull thus serves as one more figure for the difficulty of perceiving, let alone representing, the particularity of processes that happen beyond the singular subject’s purview. This difficulty is perpetually waiting in the wings of the scenes Oppen’s poetry stages. And yet, these poems insist on their formal “objectivity” and the particularity (“sincerity”) with which they represent collectives and environments, regardless of the difference in scale between individual and collective, between “someone / In the garden” and “all companions” (italics
mine). What I am calling Oppen’s theatricality—the rhetoric of seriousness and ethical self-importance built into his compact stanzas—is, in part, a function of such attempts to occlude the limits of a singular perspective. Ironically, as we shall see, the very partiality of this perspective comes into sharper focus in the poem’s next section.

The fifth and final section of “Image of the Engine” is also the longest. Fittingly so, since at this point in the poem, Oppen has left himself with the overwhelming task of extracting from the original parallel between human and engine “a still and quiet angel of knowledge and of comprehension”—or, in Peter Nicholls’s words, finding a way to “bring political and metaphysical views into some sort of conjunction” (TFOM 45). Moreover, the poem seeks this total synthesis under the guise of *not* seeking it, of emphasizing the very incompleteness and fragmentation that preclude it. The section begins with lines from Ecclesiastes 3:11, “*Also he has set the world / In their hearts*” (NCP 42). The inclusion of “also” suggests continuity with both the prior sections of the poem and the other acts and works of the divine, thereby foregrounding the status of world-creation as a process. The Biblical verse continues, “so that no man can find out the work that God taketh from the beginning to the end.” The partial quotation of these lines about the partialness of any human knowledge of the world is Oppen’s bow to the limits of lyric “sincerity,” since “the world, if it is matter / Is impenetrable” (NCP 144). Moreover, these lines speak to the worldview Oppen seems to have gained from the philosophy of mid-century thinkers such as Maritain, Sartre, and Heidegger—in particular, to the reciprocal “mediation” of humans and objects by one another, which Sartre called the “crucial discovery” of dialectics.83 Oppen’s poem seeks to combine a faith in the mutually self-creating relationship between person and world, and an approach to the world as the perpetual “unconcealment” or “revelation

[Entbergung] of what-is,”84 with a lingering sense of having come late to creation. Because
“[w]e are locked out” from a preexisting and self-sufficient, natural world, we are driven to
“see[k] love / At last among each other.” And we do so, Oppen’s poem suggests, like “the
beautiful bony children” who cross an almost post-apocalyptic, postwar landscape of American
capitalism and are, in turn, “[c]rossed by” it:

Also he has set the world
In their hearts. From lumps, chunks,

We are locked out: like children, seeking love
At last among each other. With their first full strength
The young go search for it,

Native in the native air.
But even the beautiful bony children
Who arise in the morning have left behind
Them worn and squalid toys in the trash

Which is a grimy death of love. The lost
Glitter of the stores!
The streets of stores!
Crossed by the streets of stores
And every crevice of the city leaking
Rubble: concrete, conduit, pipe, a crumbling
Rubble of our roots…

Here, Oppen’s fundamental belief in futurity (evident also in poems like “Sunnyside Child” and
“Sara in Her Father’s Arms”) is “crossed” with a kind of existential homelessness. “[E]ven the
beautiful bony children” of Oppen’s poem “arise in the morning” to find they have “left behind,”
or been forcibly “locked out” of, a “lost” world. The material substratum of the everyday is the
past’s destructions— “the worn and squalid toys in the trash // Which is a grimy death of love.”
In this sense, as Marjorie Perloff points out, this poetry is “about exile—specifically, the acute
sense of pain and disorientation attendant upon the exiled American poet’s attempt to relearn ‘a
language of New York,’ to make his way through the new ‘city of the corporations.’” The

84 Martin Heidegger, Existence and Being, ed. and introd. Werner Brock (Chicago: Henry Regency Company, 1949),
p. 334.
‘journey,’ which is not temporal but spatial, erasing all or almost all autobiographical traces, is through a landscape of dislocation, of absence, a visual ‘landscape’ of short, abrupt lines…surrounded by white space.”

Her remarks about Oppen’s subsequent *magnum opus* illuminate the sense of alienation in this earlier poem as well: “‘Of Being Numerous,’ it turns out, is primarily a case ‘of being separate.’”

Towards the end of this final section, two of Oppen’s favorite motifs— rubble and roots—return, recalling both the “roots” of the machine in section one, and “the girder / Still itself among the rubble” of Oppen’s later work. If the first generation of modernist poets sought to shore the fragments of civilization against its ruin, Oppen exposes the waste, “the grimy death” to which the “[g]litter of the stores” has been reduced. At last, the machine’s “roots” have become inseparable from our own, with “every crevice of the city leaking / Rubble,” like the machine whose “compression leak[s] / From [its] idle cylinders,” or like the dying human body giving up its ghost. Where can the poem possibly go from here?

Returning to “the beautiful bony children” who are “native” to this landscape, Oppen concludes:

```
But they will find
In flood, storm, ultimate mishap:
Earth, water, the tremendous
Surface, the heart thundering
Absolute desire.
```

This passage employs a kind of shorthand to reintroduce a number of images from earlier in the poem, including the “flood” and storm” of shipwreck, “the tremendous / Surface” of the “water”

---

86 Ibid.
featured in the middle sections, and, of course, “the heart” of both human and inhuman engines “thundering.” This method banks on the capacity of such common words (what Oppen elsewhere calls “small nouns”)\(^8\) to accrue a talismanic significance, such that they call up the entirety of the contexts and connotations to which each word previously attached itself. The kinds of responses Oppen’s work received in the first posthumous wave of his reception suggests a critical context ready to be transported by such elemental figures. Burton Hatlen’s reading of this final passage is both generous and typical of such responses:

The loss of our toys, the rubble in our streets, merely augur the ultimate shipwreck, death itself. But in the very moment of shipwreck, the hunger of the heart, a hunger for “the world,” surges up. In these concluding lines of the poem, the engine returns, but now the alien machine into which we have projected our humanity is absorbed back into the human. No longer an image of the merely mechanical that stands over against the human community, the engine now becomes the symbol of the human heart itself, both “mechanical” and “natural,” both “individual” and “collective,” as it thunders out the beat that makes us all members one of another, and joins us to the sometimes inhuman world we have created, in the beat of “absolute desire.”\(^9\)

This final stanza, then, aims for a kind of total synthesis, whereby “the heart” and the earlier “engine” for which the title claimed it was an “image” become indistinguishable. One could claim that these lines argue discursively for the transformation which the poem’s first section accomplished by sensory (auditory, visual, tactile) means. The poem has traveled far afield of its incipient moment, in which an implied beholder stood before “[a] machine concerned with itself, a concentrated / Hot lump of a machine” and tried to discern what it might be, “[l]ikely as not.”

The poem’s title, “Image of the Engine” (italics mine), pointed to an awareness of the image as a form of mediation between subject and object; it seemed to bespeak a recognition that the human-engine parallel was, to borrow Stevens’s phrase, “A little different from reality, / The difference that we make in what we see.”\(^9\) However, by the poem’s end, one finds any sense of

---

\(^8\) George Oppen, *This in Which*, 20, quoted in Dembo, “The Existential World of George Oppen,” p. 81.

\(^9\) Hatlen, in *GOMP*, p. 349.

the engine as image subsumed within a totalizing conflation of the beholder and the beheld. And this synthesis stands in for an even more significant conflation, whereby the materials of one machine—a singular, inhuman “thing”—melts into the hot abstraction of “[a]bsolute desire,” and whereby the “thundering” “heart” of “one” beholder who “can imagine” becomes hypostasized into “the heart” (italics mine). The engine of the poem’s title has become a machine for transforming inhuman objects into symbols for human emotions. Under the sign of “objective” vision, it allows Oppen to melt down particular sensory experiences into the vague fantasy of collective humanity.

**Conclusion**

The relationship in Oppen’s poems between space and time (“this,” “here,” “now”) and the arguments (“thus”) which they give rise to suggests a radical difference between his and Vvedensky’s conceptions of being-in-the-world. No discussion of this issue would be complete without invoking Oppen critics’ more rigorous analysis, in recent years, of the poet’s relationship to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, as a way of clarifying both his notion of the object and his ethical concerns. Heidegger’s 1929 acceptance speech for the Chair of Philosophy at the University of Freiburg, for instance, was one to which Oppen returned in his journals and letters: “Releasement toward things and openness to the mystery belong together. They grant us the possibility of dwelling in the world in a totally different way. They promise us a new ground and foundation upon which we can stand and endure in the world of technology without being imperiled by it.”

91 The implicit focus on the perceiving subject is significant here; Heidegger articulates the stakes of an “openness to the mystery” of things in terms of the new

---

“possibilit[ies] of dwelling in the world” that this “[r]eleasement toward things” will offer “us.”

In his later writings, Heidegger goes on to shift his focus towards imagining the appearance of things as a function of their independent agency. The fact that the work of art, itself a “thing,” is formed matter, whose “thingness” nonetheless evades thought (“the world, if it is matter / Is impenetrable” [NCP, 144]), generalizes the work of the artist while emphasizing the “material” that the formed art-work causes to come forth.92 What persists in Oppen’s work, however, is an implied structural relation between subject and objects that retains the ocularcentrism— and, indeed, the single-point perspective—of Discrete Series. The fallacy of asserting, “I think myself / Is what I’ve seen and not myself” (NCP 99) is that it conflates vision with a direct knowledge of the world, while refusing to “see” the forms of those perceptions as always already ideological. Martin Jay discusses the foundations of this idea in painting: “the perspectivalists’ assumption of what was visible in the perceptual field: a homogeneous, regularly ordered space, there to be duplicated by the extension of a grid like network of coordinates…The result,” Jay writes, “was a theatricalized ‘scenographic’ space…It was this uniform, infinite, isotropic space that differentiated the dominant modern world view from its various predecessors, a notion of space congenial not only to modern science, but also, it has been widely argued, to the emerging economic system we call capitalism.”93

To say that “There are things / We live among ‘and to see them / Is to know ourselves’” already suggests a mentality in which any citizen, as an agent in the development of his or her country, his or her “American Dream,” could look to the surrounding objects as indices of his or her values. When the perceiver is struck with a sense of dissonance between an idea of his or her

---


250
values and their realization (or failure to be realized) in the external world, this becomes the occasion for a poem. For instance, “The Image of the Engine” presents the engine’s resemblance to its beholder as a discovery. The poem strives to recreate the encounter in which the overwhelming alterity and similarity of this mechanical body to the human body evinces an existential recognition: that “[t]he image of the engine / That stops” is synonymous with “[t]he definition of mortality.” But the capacity of Oppen’s objects to serve as vehicles of lyric revelation depends upon the poet forgetting that the objects of his urban, capitalist landscape are man-made—the engine was never independent of human needs and aims, but was built to serve them in the first place. Thus, the poetry’s performance of alienation from its materials involves a degree of bad faith: it insists on the similarity between man and machine while actually participating in the subjective sense of exceptionalism that Adorno critiques in his essay, “Subject-Object”: “Once radically parted from the object, the subject reduces it to its own measure; the subject swallows the object, forgetting how much it is an object itself.”

Many of Oppen’s successors have admired his ethical integrity, and his insistence on asking more difficult questions than his poems can answer. He was no stranger to the scale and diversity of modern violence. But even in the face of war—as a wounded soldier in Europe in World War II, and as an outspoken critic of U.S. engagement in the Vietnam War—Oppen retained his faith in a firm distinction between subjects and objects that could be expressed in visual terms. The object-like qualities of his poems occlude or underplay the organizing consciousness behind them, and emphasize collectives over individuals, but they do not unseat “man” or “the person” from his hierarchical vantage point over a world of objects.

I hope to suggest that this is the point at which the parallel trajectories of Russian and

---

American avant-garde poetry, with their shared interest in objects, diverge. It is impossible to know how much of the disparity between these two poets’ conceptions of the object is due to their different political and cultural milieux, and how much of it is particular to them as individuals. At a minimum, one can posit that life under Soviet regime, with its insistence on conformity and its constant threat of reification and suppression, did not accord a privileged role to individual subjectivity. The position of the private citizen was one that could be confiscated at any time, like the keys to one’s state-owned apartment. This precariousness is something that Vvedensky and his comrades, for all their irreverence, could not forget. The writings of the Oberiuty thus set a stage of everyday objects, which imply a corresponding set of relations, only to overturn them and the regimes of order they represent. At the same time, their works present these objects as a paradoxical ideal. Even Kharms’s fear that a sheet of paper could be the perfect synecdoche for the human body— that the person’s life could be cleanly supplanted by the document bearing his name, his passport number, the charge against him—betrays a wish to be more like an object. If only the living body were thus legible, archivable, immune to pain and adaptable to the system, the marriage of subject to empire would be complete. Then, there would be no need for the poem at all.

In the midst of their quite opposite depictions of subject-object relations, the OBERIU poets and their Objectivist contemporaries do share a certain object-oriented mysticism, a certain theatrical approach questions of linguistic “objectivity.” Their enshrinement of the “hieroglyph” as a privileged unit of discourse is not at all dissimilar to Oppen’s “faith” in the “little words” to be “still them[sel]ves among the rubble” of an otherwise compromised language. Critics on both sides of this cultural and linguistic divide have emphasized these poets’ doubts over their faith, even to the point of hailing it as a precursor to deconstruction:

Throughout his canon, then, both stylistically and thematically, Oppen foregrounds the problem of connection:
of word to word, of word to phrase and sentence, of image to image, of singular to numerous, person to group—and of part to part and part to whole in his poetic sequences. Oppen’s calculated discontinuity in his sequences, the writing of more or less discrete series whose individual pieces sometimes are themselves only parts of a sentence, mirrors his breaking up of the sentence to attend to individual words. At both levels the technique creates enforced pauses, draws attention to parts, and throws into question the connection of those parts to each other and to the whole. (Alan Golding)\textsuperscript{95}

The consciousness of the Oberiuts reoriented itself from social actuality towards the semiotic, towards the actuality of signs. In Kharms, the path from a utopian consciousness to a semiotic one is visible in his progressive retreat from zaum’ and his growing interest in problems of discourse and the phenomenological aspects of the text. In the end, the circle of interests of Kharms and his comrades came to bear even less resemblance to the circle of interests of their Russian predecessors. Kharms immersed himself even more in the solving of those problems that had interested such Western thinkers as Wittgenstein or Husserl. […] All that had been used by the early avant-garde for the magical transfiguration of reality is put to use in Kharms for the “deconstruction” of the concept of “reality” itself, or as a critique of the mimetic capacities of literature. (Mikhail Iampol’skii)\textsuperscript{96}

In the case of both Oppen and Vvedensky, this doubt can come to seem like an allegory for the poets’ existential doubts about the relationship between human subjects and the “things / [they] live among”; the recuperation of “small words”’ signifying capacity and lasting power goes hand in hand with an effort to reverse reification, to restore “the immediate—qualitative and material—character of things as things” to the objects of everyday life, so that “[their] own authentic immediacy becomes manifest.”\textsuperscript{97} This approach leads both poets to treat these newly “immediate” and “authentic” objects as aspirational forms, whether or not they acknowledge it. Their poems try to situate the visual perspective of the poet in the landscape of everyday life as if he were one object among others; in turn, they present certain kinds of words (“small words,” “hieroglyphs”) as objects to whose deep history, self-containment, and transferability across contexts the reified objects of everyday life might themselves aspire.

---

\textsuperscript{95} Alan Golding, “George Oppen’s Serial Poems.” \textit{Contemporary Literature} vol. 29, no. 2 (Summer 1988), 234.

\textsuperscript{96} Mikhail Iampol’skii, \textit{Bespaniatstvo kak istok}. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1998, pp. 370-72: «Сознание оборачивается от социальной действительности к семиотической. У Хармса путь от утопического сознания к семиотическому хорошо виден в постепенном отходе от заумиства и в нарастающем интересе к проблемам дискурса и феноменологическим аспектам текста. В конце концов круг интересов Хармса и его товарищей становится все меньше похожим на круг интересов его российских предшественников. Хармс все больше погружается в решение проблем, которые интересовали таких западных мыслителей, как Витгенштейн или Гуссерль. […] Все то, что в раннем авангарде использовалось для магического преображения действительности, у Хармса используется для ‘деконструкции’ самого понятия ‘действительность’ или для критики миметических свойств литературы».

\textsuperscript{97} Lukács, “Reification and the Class Consciousness of the Proletariat,” p. 177.
One reason for the natural kinship of these concepts—the hieroglyph, the discrete series, the thingly thing, the “small noun”—to questions of visuality is that they are all, in some sense, either figures for the distance between consciousness and its objects or attempts to overcome that distance. They are means of trying to imagine the specificity and concreteness of processes that take place outside of the self and beyond the scale of individual perception. Vvedensky, who has what one might (anachronistically) call a Heideggerian relationship to language, envisions the “essential meaning” of the word as something prior to the split between subjects and objects, and “extrinsic” to the limits of any signifying system. Oppen, as we have noted, was also influenced by Heidegger, but his approach to language is in fact more existentialist, insofar as his poetry reminds one that even the most seemingly basic words are man-made—they are not stones, but bricks. The challenge to linguistic certainty, then, is less a metaphysical one than a social one. As Sartre would have it, “whenever I form a sentence its meaning escapes from me, is stolen from me; meanings are changed for everyone by each speaker and each day; the meanings of the very words in my mouth are changed by others.”98 This is one aspect “of being numerous,” and it calls upon each poet to consider his or her individual discourse in relation to the surrounding language. This is one sense in which, for all their differences, Oppen and Vvedensky share a dialectical approach to thinking about the relationships between persons, objects, and words. They do not seek, as some of their modernist predecessors did, to locate an “objective correlative” for the self in the world; instead, they explore the limits of a single person’s capacities to correlate his or her self, as expressed in language, with the large-scale historical and economic processes in which that subject is always already imbricated.99

98 Jean-Paul Sartre, Critique of Dialectical Reason, vol. 1, p. 76.
99 In this formulation, I have doubtless been influenced by Marta Figlerowicz’s account of the modernist prehistory of affect theory, Spaces of Feeling (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).
Whatever the limits of its so-called objectivity, such poetry calls attention to the stakes of writing lyric poetry in an age of reifying and totalizing ideological regimes; it seeks to claim poetry—and its material, language—as a ground upon which less hierarchical and subjectivizing models of relationality could be constructed. Perhaps it was only in the wake of such attempts to articulate the edges of the lyric self that Adorno could expose the fallacy of “experienc[ing] lyric poetry as something opposed to society, something wholly individual.” “Th[e] demand,” Adorno writes in 1957, “that lyric expression, having escaped from the weight of material existence, evoke the image of a life free from the coercion of reigning practices,…is itself social in nature. It implies a protest against a social situation that every individual experiences as hostile, alien, cold, oppressive.”100 In the Russian and American contexts alike, poets in the first half of the twentieth century turned to the object as a model for both the impermeable containment of the living body and the completeness of the work of art, the thing made to transcend the contingencies of a given place or time. As Adorno writes, “The less the [poetic] work thematizes the relationship of ‘I’ and society, [the more fully it expresses] the historical relationship of the subject to objectivity, of the individual to society.”101 At their most sagacious, both Oppen and Vvedensky seem to trust that their poems’ occlusion of the perceiver may serve as a model of subject-object relationality that will illuminate both their everyday contexts and their visions to future readers. Insofar as Oppen’s work retains a utopian impulse at its heart, it partakes of the unspoken hope of Stein and Khlebnikov’s poetics— the dream of being able to generalize about “society” or “man” based on the experiences of the individual consciousness. Vvedensky, who did not count on a posthumous readership, couched his own fantasy of a unified world vision in

---

101 Ibid.
the “synthesis” of the moment of death, when the boundary between persons and things disappears. In the works of both poets, the object-ideal crystallizes a similar dream: that of transcending one’s single-point perspective so that one’s sight becomes coterminous with Vision, or of participating in a shared history of language by speaking “le-Mot-de-la-fin-de-tout”—the last word for which every other has been preparation.102

Notes

In every citation after their first, the most frequently cited texts in this chapter are indicated by abbreviations, as follows:


All translations from the Russian are my own, unless otherwise noted. In cases where quoted passages appear in translation in the body of the text, I have included the original, Russian-language versions of those passages in the preceding footnotes. Attentive readers will note a discrepancy between the spellings of several authors’ names in the body of the text (Vvedensky, Lipavsky, etc.) and the transliterations of their names (as “Vvedenskii,” “Lipavskii,” etc.) in the footnotes. I have retained the standard anglicized spelling of these authors’ names in the body of the text and have used a modified Library of Congress transliteration system in the notes.

Conclusion: Beyond the Object

George Oppen’s nearly twenty-five-year silence, from the appearance of his debut collection *Discrete Series* in 1934 until he resumed writing in 1958, parallels the far less volitional silencing of independent voices in Russian poetry throughout the Stalinist period. Both Russia and the United States were, of course, devastated by the Second World War; the Soviet Union lost an astonishing twenty-seven million citizens to the war, and nineteen million of those were civilian casualties.¹ The wartime silence of poets on both sides of the Iron Curtain seems to bespeak a recognition, as Oppen subsequently put it, that “there are situations which cannot honorably be met by art, and surely no one need fiddle precisely at the moment that the house next door is burning.”² Following the end of World War II and the ascendancy of the New Criticism within American academe, it would take until the publication of Donald M. Allen’s anthology *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960* for postwar experimental poets—such as the Black Mountain poets, the New York School, and the poets of the San Francisco Renaissance—to gain the kind of recognition that has ensured their continuing importance.

Similarly, the poems of the Russian avant-garde lay buried under an avalanche of mediocre socialist realist verse until their often-covert unearthing by the underground poets of the *samizdat* era. The underground cultural scenes in Moscow and Leningrad from the late 1950s until the early 1970s are only now beginning to receive scholarly attention, thanks to the work of such

---
scholars as Ainsley Morse and Josephine Von Zitzewitz.\textsuperscript{3} As Morse and others have shown, poets of the so-called Lianozovo Group, such as Igor Kholin, Ian Satunovskii, and Vsevolod Nekrasov, and poets of the Khelenukty group (active 1966-1972), including Aleksandr Mironov and Aleksei Khvostenko, demonstrate the abiding influence of the earlier avant-garde—especially the OBERIU—on their work. Despite the long Stalinist silence, the trajectory of influence of the avant-garde upon late Soviet and even post-Soviet poetry in Russia is somewhat more linear than that of the transatlantic avant-garde on the American Language poets and their successors. As I hope to suggest in closing, however, these poets’ attempts to rethink subject-object relations and the nature of language by means of post-structuralist and “postmodern” theory resonated with the poetry of the avant-garde precisely because many of those theories arose out of, and sometimes directly in response to, avant-garde poetic praxis.

In the first avant-garde generation, discussed in Chapter One, Stein and Khlebnikov approach the poem as a composite verbal structure whose accretion of visual (textual) and auditory (phonemic) material over the course of the poem serves as a parallel to the accumulation of visual sense data over time. I have claimed that both poets are interested in using the resources of poetry to capture perceptual processes phenomenologically, in much the way that Merleau-Ponty finds Paul Cézanne to have done in painting. He writes, “it is Cézanne’s genius that when the overall composition of the picture is seen globally, perspectival distortions are no longer visible in their own right but rather contribute, as they do in natural vision, to impression of an emerging order, an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes.” Here, as in Stein’s and Khlebnikov’s work, this methodology opens up a gap between

concrete instances and the abstract laws that govern their instantiation. Merleau-Ponty writes that Cézanne “wanted to depict matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization. He makes a basic distinction not between ‘the senses’ and ‘the understanding’ but rather between the spontaneous organization of the things we perceive and the human organization of ideas and sciences.” In the Futurist generation, an emphasis on process (“the impression of an emerging order”; “matter as it takes on form”) is a way for these poets to think about the mutual imbrication of themselves and their objects of attention within a larger system, even as they take their own, individual perspectives (as Cézanne did) as models of perception more generally.

What Stein’s and Khlebnikov’s sound-constructions notably do not do is distinguish between the kind of materiality that words themselves have (regardless of their referents) and the more concrete materiality possessed by the real-world objects that many of their words denote. The visual emphasis of Cézanne and Merleau-Ponty highlights a different phenomenological relationship to material reality than does, say, Kruchenykh’s account of zaum’ language or William James’s claim that the differences between content and consciousness are contextual rather than intrinsic. One reason why the subsequent generation of poets (much like Merleau-Ponty, their contemporary) construct their poems on the basis of visual relationships rather than auditory ones is, as I argued in Chapter Two, because visuality implies physical distance between

---


5 See, for instance, James’s 1904 essay entitled “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?,” in which he offers the following example: “In a pot in a paintshop, along with other paints, it [the paint] serves in its entirety as so much saleable matter. Spread on a canvas, with other paints around it, it represents, on the contrary, a feature in a picture and performs a spiritual function. Just so, I maintain, does a given undivided portion of experience, taken in one context of associates, play the part of knower, of a state of mind, of ‘consciousness’; while in a different context the same undivided bit of experience plays the part of a thing known, of an objective ‘content.’” (“Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” [1904]. Reprinted in James’s Principles of Psychology, p. 1141. Quoted in Steven Meyer, Irresistible Dictation: Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 216.
the perceiver and the perceived. Moreover, this distance is never “empty” or neutral, but is always already inscribed with, or circumscribed by, a set of ideological codes that govern subject-object relations. For instance, the size and height of the Pushkin statue on Tverskoi Boulevard in Moscow (mentioned earlier in relation to Mayakovsky’s poem “Iublileinoe”) ensures that it will tower over passerby; to stand under it is the only available way to understand it. Strategic manipulations of scale and perspective were integral to the success of urban mass art in the 1910s and 1920s, and both Mayakovsky and Williams tested the possibilities and risks of such distortions in their attempts to create a new popular poetry.

In the final avant-garde generation, multiple poets in both Russia and the United States emphasized the object-like qualities of their poems as a way of suggesting that the poems were at once aware of themselves as “historical and contemporary” (Zukofsky’s term) and also “discrete” (Oppen’s word) from the broader socio-political regimes in which they sought to intervene. In American capitalist society, as discussed in Chapter Three, the Objectivists seek, as per Zukofsky’s 1931 manifesto, to forge the poem as a “rested totality,” an object composed of non-objectified “particulars” “direct[ed]…along a line of melody.”6 The ideological nature of capitalist society, as one finds it critiqued in their poems, is not so much related to the promotion of a dominant class’s interests at the expense of subordinate groups’ as it is inherent in the structure of their society. Depression-era America is a mechanism that “hide[s its] parts,” as Oppen writes;7 it is a nation in which, Terry Eagleton claims, the “curious inversion between human subjects and their conditions of existence is now inherent in social reality itself”:

…society is fragmented by this commodity logic: it is no longer easy to grasp it as a totality, given the atomizing operations of the commodity, which transmutes the collective activity of social labour into relations between dead, discrete things. And by ceasing to appear as a totality, the capitalist order renders

---

itself less vulnerable to political critique. Finally, the fact that social life is dominated by inanimate entities lends it a spurious air of naturalness and inevitability: society is no longer perceptible as a human construct, and therefore as humanly alterable.8

We find a similar critique, albeit from a Soviet perspective, in a prescient 1926 essay by LEF member Boris Arvatov, “Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing” [Byt i kul’iura veshchi]. According to Arvatov, American capitalism has created the “city that is completely, to the last inch, lettered by matter that has been transformed by humanity until the last faint resemblance to its spontaneous source has disappeared.”9 Moreover, this state of affairs creates a relation to the Thing as if to a self-sufficient form that is retired within itself. Its dynamic-laboring structure and its living force are never simultaneously present; thus both become ‘soulless.’ This leads to capitalism’s characteristic thirst for nature as if for something that, in contrast to the thing, seems to be alive, or, conversely, to its aversion to nature and to the fetishizing of things that are putatively, outside of any relation to nature, valuable in themselves. (Arvatov 119)

Even as Arvatov gives credit to the modern American metropolis for the mastery of productive forces it represents, he pinpoints American urban culture’s relationship to the Thing as at once the source and the product of its citizens’ alienation. Implicit in his argument is the suggestion that, having transformed the landscape beyond recognition, the capitalist relation to objects now provokes alienation on two fronts. First, consumers are no longer able to recognize either the natural sources or the historical specificity of their material possessions, which endows those possessions with a false sense of hermeticism: they come to seem “outside of any relation to nature, valuable in themselves.” Secondly, having come to see their commodities as “outside of any relation to nature,” the same consumers display a “thirst for nature,” wishfully treating these objects as synecdoches for a less “soulless,” more “alive” world beyond the bounds of their experience.

Oppen strives to resist this fetishism by foregrounding his poems’ production process

---

within the poems themselves, thereby emphasizing both the historicity and the limitations of the linguistic material out of which they are made. Eric Homburger’s description suggests that, even on the level of syntax, the work is rife with ostranenie: “the early Oppen was a poet of estrangement,” he writes, “because he was writing in a society in which the connections, explanations and stories had been corrupted, distorted, mystified, turned into ideology.”10 The Second World War (and, later, the Vietnam War) endowed the poet’s exposure of language’s distortions and mystifications with new political stakes, but it did not lead him to experiment with less referential forms of language; if anything, his work becomes increasingly denotative and concrete in the second half of his career. Nor does the disjunctive aesthetic of Oppen’s verse ever give way to a similarly fragmented lyric subject. Because he never abandons the (occluded but implicit) singular subject position at the heart of his poems that Oppen finds that his only means of according the same complex significance to objects that he does to subjects is by endowing the former with a latent anthropomorphism.

I find this relationship to referentiality to be the main point of contrast between Oppen and Vvedensky’s poetics. For each poet, his own language (English or Russian) as a system of laws is at once the bedrock upon which the authority of the poem rests and the limiting horizon of that authority. “Respect[ing] the poverty of language,” in Vvedensky’s words, means acknowledging the ways in which its rules and resources structure what one can express, and how.11 Thus, both poets begin from a sense of language’s incommensurability to experience, but Oppen maintains a hierarchical perspective over language, whereas Vvedensky treats the word

itself as an aspirational form, at once durable (“hieroglyph”-like) and transcendent. I claimed above that Stein and Khlebnikov notably did not distinguish between the kind of materiality that language possesses and the kind of materiality that characterizes concrete, real-world objects. The disjunctive quality of Oppen’s verse, as compared with Vvedensky’s, can be seen as a syntactical (and also, as I have called it, “theatrical”) means of staging the unresolved antinomies between the physical bodies of persons and objects in the world and the textual “body” of the poem. Vvedensky’s poems operate on the assumption that whatever lyric subject exists in them is constituted of the same verbal material, and enmeshed in the same verbal landscape, as every other object in the poem. Thus, the laws of language and their inconsistencies and contingencies serve as a foil for the expressive potentials and constraints of subjective perception itself.

To trace a causal link between these poets’ divergent approaches to the poem as object and the differences in their socio-political contexts or biographies would be to limit the potential applicability of this distinction to only these two poets and their respective contexts. However, one difference that must be mentioned as informing or underlying the disparities in their work is—of course—the language in which each of them writes. Due to its extensive morphological, grammatical, and lexical inheritance from Old Church Slavonic, and also its status as an inflected language that creates meaningful differences by adding prefixes or suffixes to familiar root words, the Russian language offers its users a vast range of possible linguistic effects on the level of the individual word. Khlebnikov’s zaum coinages, Mayakovsky’s neologisms, and Vvedensky’s notion of the hieroglyph are all products of a language whose foundation is “the word as such,” amenable to a seemingly infinite range of transformations [sDVIGI; PREVRASHCHENIia]. In contrast, the English language— with its much larger inventory of loanwords and calques, highly analytic structure (i.e., its small number of inflectional
morphemes), and relatively inflexible syntax—offers few possible interventions on the level of the word and many more on the level of the phrase, sentence, or paragraph.\(^{12}\) (Gertrude Stein’s claim, in “Poetry and Grammar,” that “sentences are not emotional but paragraphs are” makes sense in English, but not in more highly inflected languages like Russian.)\(^{13}\) I would suggest that one reason why the Anglophone writers discussed here had such difficulty “letting the words speak for themselves” is that individual words in English do not tend to have the self-enclosed, “object-like” qualities of their Russian counterparts.

Within his particular linguistic context, Vvedensky’s dissolution of any boundary between the speaking subject and the objects of the world is at once utopian and nihilistic, in that it offers readers the experience of a correspondence between the structures of language but cannot prove that such a correspondence exists beyond language. In other words, the world of the poem is necessarily separate from everyday life, because of the impossibility of linking its linguistic structures with the objects and processes they signify. Its models a kind of correspondence whose real-world possibility it does not endorse. This is the site of these poems’ Shklovskian “estrangement”: the point at which the analogy of the word to the body and the language to the world breaks down. Vvedensky’s work suggests that, if such a perfect relation existed between the text and the world (as parallel collectivities made up of individual bodies), it would be possible to dissect the finished “proof” of the poem into its constituent parts, and thereby to reveal the structure of the concept or event in question. But such a correspondence may only be possible, as Vvedensky suggests, in the moment of death—an instant of absolute


presence in which mind and world inherit one another.

This incomplete transformation of self into world gives rise to a poetics that emphasizes the interdependence of a context and its contents above all else. Any time it seeks to model a system of subject-object relations by means of a parallel system of linguistic and grammatical relations, it exposes the gaps within these relationships. The difficulty of tracing the so-called lyric “voice” of the poem back to its source in a singular and discrete subject thus comes to serve as a metaphor for the impossibility of deriving an originary code from any particular word or word-relation. (“A rhyme,” as Vvedensky’s Brazilian contemporary wrote in a different context, “is not a solution.”)\(^\text{14}\) What the poem can do is dramatize the phenomenology of existing in this kind of unstably-networked world by creating an equivalent experience of it in language. It can project the inner landscape of the lyric subject outwards, onto an imagined set of object relations that take the form of relations between signifiers.

Vvedensky’s poetry offers a metapoetic critique of referentiality in more ways than one. First, it disconnects the signifying power of its “hieroglyphs” from any necessary, denotative relation to objects in the real world. Next, it sets up sonic parallels between words that have a kind of material similarity for the reader, even if they do not reflect a likeness between the objects those words represent.\(^\text{15}\) Lastly, it redefines the kind of simultaneous presence which Jakobson once called the basis for all description.\(^\text{16}\) Poetry need no longer describe objects that are physically co-present before the subject; instead, Vvedensky celebrates poetry’s capacity to externalize imagined objects, to clothe a “merely” phenomenological set of relationships in the


\(^{15}\) For instance, the Russian words «камень» [stone] and «пламень» [flame], a favorite rhyme pairing of Vvedensky’s, share phonemic similarities that belie the (literally elemental) difference in their meanings.

material of language as a way of making their relations present to a reader.

Writing like Vvedensky’s thus casts into doubt so many of the organizing principles of the poetry that preceded it that one is left asking whether it follows any kind of system at all. In some sense, this poetry’s openness to ambiguity and unpredictability within the often parallel structures of its lines and rhymes suggests a move beyond a dialectical notion of form and content. These poems’ parallel linguistic forms do not bespeak a similarity between the things they signify. Instead, they suggest that language can be material and also meaningful—as in Kharms’s account of the word’s “fifth, essential meaning”—beyond any particular relations to which its user may subject it.17 This kind of deconstructive approach to language might remind us less of the Formalists than of Continental thinkers who exercised a more immediate influence on American poets of the 1970s and 1980s. Pheng Cheah’s account of Deleuzian materialism offers a cogent, if unexpected, account of Vvedensky’s treatment of the material word:

The radical nature of Deleuze’s materialism lies in its overturning of the central principle of dialectical materialism: organization. In dialectical materialism, the dynamism of matter comes from the activity or process of organization, the ordering of things through dialectical relations of mutual interdependence such that they become parts or members of a whole, where each part is an organ with its designated function within an integrated or systemic totality. The template of this kind of causality is the organism…For Deleuze, however, matter as the plane of immanence is a dynamism of the differentiations, seeds, and flows of particles that are prior to any organized form…The truly material body is the body that subsists in the plane of immanence. It is not an organized system but “an aggregate whose elements vary according to its connections, its relations of movement and rest, the different individuated assemblages it enters”…not an organism but a body without organs.18

A poetics that begins from a dialectical world-view and then expands beyond it to enter into “different individuated assemblages” has radical implications for language, as well as for the kinds of phenomenological experiences the poem can both capture and evoke in its readers. In its tendency to subvert readers’ expectations and expand the time-scale of the reading experience, it

---

also hearkens back to that cornerstone of Russian Formalism, Shklovsky’s concept of “estrangement” [ostranenie]. In his book *A Common Strangeness*, Jacob Edmond discusses the profound influence of Russian Formalist criticism in general, and ostranenie in particular, on the American Language poets. It was, he claims, a significant impetus for four of them—Lyn Hejinian, Michael Davidson, Ron Silliman, and Barrett Watten—to travel to Soviet Russia in the summer of 1989. Hejinian would later write that “Sensation of the world and a counter to pessimism are what Language writers, when first encountering Shklovsky in the 1970s, found in his work.” According to Edmond, “Like Shklovsky, Hejinian extends her poetics of estrangement beyond the textual, connecting the radical artifice of poetic language with the act of seeing the world anew and with the estranging effect of Russia itself: the autonomous poetics of the word as such…with the renewal of perception in everyday life.” He goes on to suggest how Hejinian’s encounter with Russian poets of the Moscow Conceptualist school delivered, in some sense, upon the possibilities that she and her friends had sensed in the writings of Shklovsky and the Russian Formalists— the promise, that is, of a poetics that united a technical, non-subjective approach to the poem with a “utopian” model of community. The writers’ associations of the Russian Formalist context—from the Futurists with whom Shklovsky wrote and read in his student years to the subsequent groups of LEF and the OBERIU to the expatriate Jakobson’s Prague Linguistic Circle—were formed, as we have seen, under a set of changing historical conditions very different from those of the Language poets. However, Edmond notes that the Language poets’ desire to “translate” this early-twentieth-century Russian notion of

---

19 Their collective account of that trip, *Leningrad: American Writers in the Soviet Union* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1991), has often been treated—at least in Anglophone critical contexts—as the starting point of “correspondence” (Hejinian’s word) between the Russian and American poetic traditions of the twentieth century.  
artistic community across the Iron Curtain speaks to the way in which concepts and collectives rooted in particular historical conditions can gain new significance from subsequent, “border-transcending visions and encounters” and the “collective cross-cultural readings…that shape them” (Edmond 73).

Hejinian’s statements on her own poetry—which, as Edmond suggest, deliberately echo Shklovsky’s “Art as Device” [Izusstvo kak priëm]—highlight the two kinds of materiality that this Russian Formalist lens makes available to the Language poets’ thinking. The paradox of “estrangement” is that it aims to restore to perception the material qualities of familiar forms in the world and, simultaneously, to draw attention to the material qualities of language. It thereby strives by means of a text to inculcate a less mediated recognition of “the world which habit and familiarity otherwise obscure” even as it insists upon the mediation, the constructed nature, of the text itself.22

As I suggested in the foregoing pages, I see this as the central paradox informing the Russian and American avant-gardes’ interest in the object as a model for the poem. From the early years of the twentieth century, the self-contained poem-as-object embodied an alternative to the more sprawling subjectivist lyrics of the Symbolists. Poets aimed to endow its words with a kind of “objective” clarity, unclouded by their own psychologies or biographies, in the belief that this would enable the poem to both gesture to its roots in a national, historical tradition and to outlast the contingencies of the context of its production. In some sense, this kind of writing is always less about its supposed object of focus than it is “about” the simultaneous materiality and abstractness of language itself. And in much the way that its words hover between their own status as signifiers and the signifieds they denote, this kind of object-focused poem tends to

capture the *distance* between two types of solid bodies: that of the inescapably-implied human subject behind the poem, and that of the objects of his or her attention. A failure to preserve such distance within their structures would bespeak, in Adorno’s phrase, “a forgetting” of the fact that subject-object relations, like the world of objects itself, are always constructed, even when they may appear before us as a “second nature.”

The idea that the poem *could* achieve a utopian totalization of its fragmentary impulses and influences into a single, apparently “natural” object was one that the poets of the avant-garde felt ever less able to endorse, but that does not mean that they forgot about it. What I hope that this historical survey of the object-ideal in their poetry has shown is that they approached the material object as a model for reconciling the kinds of binary oppositions (such as animate and inanimate, natural and artificial, verbal and visual, and subject and object) that would prevent such totalization. The highest praise one could offer a poem, in this sense, was Osip Mandelstam’s 1933 response to Dante’s *Divina Commedia*: “the entire poem is but one single unified and indivisible stanza. Rather, it is not a stanza, but a crystallographic figure, that is, a body.”

For Mandelstam, the ideal object-model for the poem was the “stone” [камень] that

---


provided the title for his first collection of poems. He goes on to say that

mineral rock is something like a diary of the weather, like a meteorological blood clot. Rock is nothing more than weather itself, excluded from atmospheric space and banished to functional space. […] Mineral rock is an impressionistic diary of weather accumulated by millions of natural disasters; however, it is not only of the past, it is of the future: it contains periodicity. It is an Aladdin’s lamp penetrating the geological twilight of future ages. (Mandelstam 281-82)

For Mandelstam, a contemporary of the early avant-garde, mineral rock—that most durable and impenetrable of all natural objects—is the one thing that can collapse geographical space and geological time into one another. It sediments the past into the solid and self-contained foundation of future developments, while retaining at its core the striations of its turbulent history. The “weather” of the twentieth century drove the Russian and American poets I have discussed far afield of this dream of a concrete totality to be realized in language. But even as their projects diverged both politically and aesthetically, they were bound to reconnect on the other side of communism, world war, and global capitalism, because—as I hope I have shown here—they began from the object-ideal as their common ground.
Appendix I: Russian Text of “150,000,000”

150 000 000 мастер этой поэмы имя.
Пуля — ритм.
Рифма — огонь из здания в здание.
150 000 000 говорит губами моими.
Ротационной шагов
в булыжном верже площадей
напечатано это издание.

Кто спросит луну?
Кто солнце к ответу притянет -
10 чего
ночи и дни чините!?
Кто назовет земли гениального автора?
Так
и этой
моей
поэмы
никто не сочинитель.
И идея одна у нее -
снять в настающее завтра.
20 В этом самом году,
в этот день и час,
под землей,
на земле,
по небу
и выше -
такие появились
плакаты,
летучки,
афиши -

30 «ВСЕМ!
ВСЕМ!
ВСЕМ!
Всем,
кто больше не может!
Вместе
выйдите
и идите!»

(подписи):
МЕСТЬ — ЦЕРЕМОНИЙМЕЙСТЕР.
ГОЛОД — РАСПОРЯДИТЕЛЬ.
ШТЫК.
БРАУНИНГ.
БОМБА.
(три
подписи:
секретари).

Идем!
Идемдем!
Го, го,
50 го, го, го, го,
го, го!
Спадают!
Ванька!
Керенок подсунь-ка в запоть!
Босому что ли на митинг ляпать?
Пропала Роксенка!
Загубили бедную!
Новую найдем Россию.
Всехсветную!
60 Иде-е-е-е-м!
Он сидит раззолоченный
за чаем
с птифур.
Я приду к нему
в холере.
Я приду к нему
в тифу.
Я приду к нему,
я скажу ему:
70 «Вильсон, мол,
Вудро,
хочешь крови моей ведро?
И ты увидишь…»
До самого дойдем
do Ллойд-Джорджа -
скажем ему:
«Послушай,
Жоржа...»
— До него дойдешь!
80 До него океаны.
Страшен,
как же,
российский одёр им.
— Ничего!
Дойдем пешкодером!
Идемидем!
Будилась призывом,
из лесов
спросонок.
90 дезла сила зверей и зверят.
Вн渴л предавленный слоном поросенок.
Щенки выстраивались в щенячий ряд.
Невыносим человечий крик.
Но зверей
душу веревкой сворачивал.
(Я вам переведу звериный рык,
если вы не знаете языка зверячьего):
«Слушай,
Вильсон,
100 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!
Досыта наесться хоть раз бы еще!
К чреватым саженными травами Индией,
к американским идемте пастбищам!»
О-о-гу!
Нам тесно в блокаде-клетке.
Вперед, автомобили!
На митинг, мотоциклетки!
Мелочь, направо!
Дорогу дорогам!
Дорога за дорогой выстроились в ряд
Слушайте, что говорят дороги.
120 Что говорят?

«Мы задохлись ветрами и пылями,
всякими степями по рельсам голоденькими.
Немощенными хлипкими милями
надолго пластись за колодниками.
Мы хотим разливаться асфальтом,
под экспрессов тарой осев.
Подымайтесь!
Довольно поспали там,
колыбельми пылью шоссе!
130 Иде-е-е-е-м!»
И-и-и-и-и-и-и-и-и-и-и-и.
К каменноугольным идемте бассейнам!
За хлебом!
За черным!
Для нас засеянным.
Без дров ходить -
дураков наймите!
На митинг, паровозы!
Паровозы,
140 на митинг!
Скоре-е-е-е-е-е-е-е-е!
Скорейскорей!
Эй,
губернии,
снимайтесь с якорей!
За Тульской Астраханской,
за машины машина,
стоящие недвижимо
даже при Адаме,
150 двинулись
и на
другие
прут, погромыхивая городами,
Вперед запоздавшую темь гоня,
сшибаясь лампами,
на митинг шли легионы огня,
шагая фонарными столбами.
А по верху,
воду с огнём мира,
160 затапливающие тупоиными, катились моря.
«Дорогу каспийской волне баловнице!
Обратно в России русло не поляжем!
Не в чалом Баку,
а в ликующей Ницце
с волной средиземной пропляшем по пляжам».

И, наконец,
из-под грома
бega и сэды,
в ширь непомерных легких завываешь,
170 всколоченными тучами разнулись из дыр
и пошли грозой российские воздуха.
Иде-е-е-е-м!
Идемидем!

И все эти
сто пятьдесят миллионов людей,
билионы рыбин,
триллионы насекомых,
зерей,
домашних животных,

180 сотни губерний,
со всем, что построилось,
стоит,
живет в них,
все, что может двигаться,
и все, что не движется,
все, что еле двигалось,
пресмыкаясь,
ползая,
ползая -
190 лавою все это,
лавою!
И гудело над местом,
где стояла когда-то Россия:
- Это же ж не важно,
чтоб торговать сахарином!
В колокола клокотать чтоб — сердцу важно!
Сегодня
в рай
Россию ринем
200 за радужные закатов скважины.
Го, го,
го, го, го, го,
го, го!
Идемдем!
Сквозь белую гвардию снегов!

Чего полезли губерний туши
из веками намеченных губернаторами зон?
Что, слушая, небес зияют уши?
Кого озирает горизонт?

210 Оттого
сегодня
на нас устремлены
глаза всего света
и уши всех напряжены,
наше малейшее ловя,
чтобы видеть это,
чтобы слушать эти слова:
это -
революции воля,
220 брошенная за последний предел,
это -
митинг,
в машины машинных тел
вмешавший людей и зверь гуши,
это -
руки,
лапы,
клешни,
рычаги,
230 куда,
где воздух поредел,
вонзенные в клятвенном единодуше.
Поэтов,
старавшихся выть поднебесней,
забудьте,
эти слушайте песни:
"Мы пришли сквозь столицы,
сквозь тундры прорвались,
прощагали сквозь грязи и дужиц.
240 Мы пришли миллионы,
миллионы трудящихся,
миллионы работающих и служащих.
Мы пришли из квартир,
мы сбежали со складов,
из пассажей, пожаром озаренных.
Мы пришли милионы,
миллионы вещей,
изуродованных,
сломанных,
разоренных.
Мы спустились с гор,
мы из леса сползлись,
от полей, годами глоданных.
Мы пришли,
миллионы,
миллионы скотов,
одичавших,
тующих,
голодных.
Мы пришли,
миллионы
безбожников,
язычников
и атеистов -
бикся
лбом,
ржавым железом,
полем -
все
господу богу помолимся.
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».
Сами
на глазах у всех
сегодня
мы
займемся
чудесами.
Твое во имя
биться дабы,
в громе,
в дыме
встаем на дабы.
Идем на подвиг
труднее божеского втрое,
творившего,
пустоту вещами даруя.
А нам
не только, новое строит,
фантазировать,
а еще и издинамитить старое.
Жажда, пой!
Голод, насыть!
Время взойти
тело носить.
Пули, погуше!
По оробёлым!
В гущу бегущим
грязь, парабеллум!
Самое это!
С доньшка душ!
Жаром,
жженьем,
железом,
светом,
жарь,
жги,
режь,
руши!
Наши ноги -
поездов молниеносные проходы.
Наши руки -
пыль сдувающие веера полян.
Наши плавники — пароходы.
Наши крылья — аэроплан.
Идти!
Лететь!
Проплывать!
Катиться!
- всего мирозданья проверяя реестр.
Нужная вещь -
хорошо,
годится.
Ненужная -
к черту!
Черный крест.
Мы
тебя доконаем,
мир-романтик!
Вместо вер -
электричество,
пар.
Вместо нищих -
всех миров богатство прикарманьте!
Стар — убивать.
На пепельницы черепа!
В диком разгроме
старое смыть,
новый разгромом
по миру миф.
Время-ограду
в небе нагами.
Тысячу радуг
в небе нагыми.
В новом свете раскроются
поэтом опоганенные розы и грезы.
Всё
на радость
нашим
глазам больших детей!
Мы возьмем
новые розы -
розы столиц в лепестках площадей.
Все,
у кого
мучений клейма нажжены,
тогда приходите к сегодняшнему палачу.
И вы
узнаете,
что люди
бывают нежны,
к звезде вздымающейся по лучу.
Будет
наша душа
любовных Волг слиянным устьем.
Будет,
любой приплыви -
глаз сияньем облит.
По каждой
тончайшей артерии
пустим
поэтических вымыслов феерические корабля.
Как нами написано, -
мир будет таков
и в прошлом,
и в среду,
и присно,
и завтра,
и дальше
во веки веков!.
За лето
столетнее
бой,
пой:
— «И это будет
последний
и решительный бой!»
Залпом глоток гремим гимн!
410 Миллион плюс!
Умножим на сто!
По улицам!
На крыши!
За солнца!
В миры -
слон звонконогие гимнасты!
И вот
Россия
не нищий оборвыш,
420 не куча обломков,
не зданий пепел -
Россия
вся
единий Иван,
и рука
у него -
Нева,
а пятки — каспийские степи.
Идем!
430 Идемидем!
Не идем, а летим!
Не летим, а молньимся,
души зефирами вымыв!
Мимо
баров и бань.
Бей, барабан!
Барабан, барабань!
Были рабы!
Нет раба!
Эй, стальногрудые!
Крепкие, эй!
Бей, барабан!
Барабан, бей!
Или — или.
Пропал или пан!
Будем бить!
Бьем!
Были!
В барабан!
В барабан!
В барабан!
В барабан!
Революция
царя лишит царева званья.
Революция
на булучную бросит голод толп,
но тебе
какое дам названье,
вся Россия, смерчем скрученная в столб?!!
Совнарком -
его частица мозга, -
не опередить декретам ская его.
Сердце ж было так его громоздко,
что Ленин еле мог его раскочивать.
Красноармейцы можно отступить заставить,
коммуниста сдавать в тюремный гнет,
но такого
в какой удержишь заставе,
если
такой
шагнет?!!
Гром разодрал побережий уши,
и брызги взметнулись земель за тридевять,
когда Иван,
шаги обрушив,
пошел
грозою вселенную выдивить.
В стремя фантазии ногу вденем,
дней оседлаем порох,
и сами
за этим блестящим виденьем
пойдем излучаться в несметных просторах.
Теперь
повернем вдохновенья колесо.
Наново ритма мерка.
Этой части главное действующее лицо — Вильсон.
Место действия — Америка.
Мир,
из света частей
собирая квинтет,
одарил ее мощью магической.
Город в ней стоит
на одном винте,
весь электро-динамо-механический.
В Чикаго
14 000 улиц -
солнц площадей лучи,
500 От каждой -
700 переулков
длиною поезду на год.
Чудно человеку в Чикаго!

В Чикаго
от света
солнце
не ярче грошовой свечи.

В Чикаго,
чтоб брови поднять -
510 и то
электрическая тяга.

В Чикаго
на версты
в небо
скачут
дорог стальные циркачи.

Чудно человеку в Чикаго!

В Чикаго
у каждого жителя
520 не менее генеральского чин.
А служба -
в барах быть,
кутить без забот и тягот.
Съестного
в чикагских барах
чего-чего не начудено!
Чудно человеку в Чикаго!
Чудно человеку!
И чудно!

530 В Чикаго
такой свирепеет грохот,
что грузовоз
с тысчесильной машиню
казался,
что ветрится тихая кроха,
что он
прошелёстывал тишью мышиного.

Русских
в город тот
540 не везет пароход,
не для нас дворцов этажи.
Я один там был,
в барах ел и пил,
попивал в барах с янками джин.
Может, пустят и вас,
не пустили пока -
начинайтесь же и вы чудесами -
в скороходах-стихах,
в стихах-саногах
550 исходите Америку сами!

Аэростанция
на небоскребе.
Вперед,
пруженя бока в дирижабле!
Сожмутся мосты до воробьих ребер.
Чикаго вниз
землею прижаблен.
А после,
с неба,
560 видные еле,
сорвавшись,
камнем в бездну спланируем.
Тоннелем в метро
подземные версты выроем
и выйдем на площадь.
Народом запружена.
Версты широко с три.
Отсюда начинается то, что нам нужно
570 — «Королевская улица» — по-ихнему — «Рокль стрит».
Что за улица?
Что на ней стоит?
А стоит на ней —
Чипль-Стронг-Отель.
Да отель ли то или сон?!
А в отеле том
580 в чистоте,
в теплоте
сам живет
Вудро Вильсон.
Дом какой — не скажу.
А скажу когда,
то покорнейше прону не верить.
Места нет такого, отойти куда,
чтоб всего его глазом обмерить.
590 То,
что можно увидеть,
один уголок,
но и то
такая диковина!
Посмотреть, например,
на решетки клок - из гущёного солнца кованы.
А с боков обойдешь — гора не гора!
600 Верст на сотни,
а может, на тыщи.
За седьмое небо зашли флюгера.
Да и флюгер не богом ли чищен?
Тоже лестница там!
Не пойдешь по ней!
Меж колоночек,
балкончиков,
портников
610 сколько в ней ступеней
и не счесть ступне - ступеней этих самых
dо чертиков!
Коль пешком пойдешь — иди молодой!
Да и то
дойдешь ли старым!
А для лифтов —
трактиры по лестнице той,
620 чтоб не изголодались задаром.
А доехали —
если рады нам — по пяти впускают парадным.
Триста комнат сначала гости идут.
Наконец дошли.
Какое!
Тут опять начались покой.
Вас встречает лакей,
Булава в кулаке.
Так пройдешь лакеев пять.
И опять булава.
И опять лакей.
Залу кончишь -
лакей опять.
За лакеями
гуще еще
курьер.
Курьера курьер обгоняет в карьере.
От числа такого
дух займет у цепка-Хлестакова.
И только
уставши
от страшных снований,
когда
не кажется больше,
что выйдешь,
а кажется,
нет никаких оснований,
чтоб кончилось это -
приемную видишь,
Вход отсюда прост -
в триаршинный рост
секретарь стоит в дверях нем.
Приоткроем дверь.
По ступенькам — (две) -
приподымемся,
взглянем,
ахнем! -
То не солнце днем -
цилиндрище на нем
возышается башней Сухаревой.
Динамитом плюет
и рыгает о нем,
рыжий весь,
и ухает ухарево.
Посмотришь в ширь -
горишем горшком горшком!
А длина -
и не скажешь какая длина,
так далеко от ног голова удалена!
То ль заряжен чем,
то ли с присвистом зуб,
что ни звук -
бух пушки.
Люди — мелочь одна,
люди ходят внизу,
под ним стоят,
как избушки.
Щеки ж
такой сверхъестественной мякоти,
что сами просятся -
придите,
лягте.
А одежда тонка,
будто вовсе и нет -
из тончайшей поэтовой неги она.
Кальсоны Вильсона
не кальсоны — сонет,
сажени из ихнего Онегина.
А работает как!
Не покладает рук.
Может заработать до смерти.
Вертит пальцем большим
большого вокруг.
То быстрей
то медленней вертит.
Повертнёт -
700 расчет где-нибудь
в на заводе.
Мне
платить не хотят построчной платы.
Повертнёт -
Штраусы вальсы заводят,
золотым дождем заливает палаты.
Чтоб его прокормить,
поиштрети рупь.
Обокрашенный весь,
710 опознанный.
И на случай смерти,
не пропал чтоб труп,
салотопки стоят,
маслобойни.
Все ему
американцы отданы,
и они
гордяг говорят:
я -
720 американский подданный.
Я -
свободный
американский гражданин.
Под ним склоненные
стоят
его служящих сонмы.
Вся зала полна
Линкольнами всякими.
Уитменами,
730 Эдисонами.
Святого его
из красавиц,
из самой отборнейшей знати.
Его шевеленья малейшего ждут.
Аделу
Патти
знаете?
Тоже тут!
В тесном смокинге стоит Уитмен,
740 качалкой раскачивая в невиданным ритме.
Имея наивысший американский чин -
«заслуженный разглаживатель дамских морщин»,
стоят уже загримированный и в шляпе
всегда готовый запеть Шаляпин.
Паркеты песком соря,
рассыпчатые от старости стоят профессора.
Сам знаменитейший Мечников
стоят и снимает нагар с подсвечников.
Конечно,
750 ученых
своя
привел
теорий потоп.
Художников
какое-нибудь
великолепнейшее
экольдебозар.
Ничего подобного!
Все
700 сошлись,
чтоб
ходить на базар.
Ежутро
все эти
любимцы муз и слав
нагружаются корзинами,
и несут,
несут
770 мяса,
масла.
Какой-нибудь король поэтов
Лонгфелло
стол волочит со сливками крынок.
Жрет Вильсон,
наращивает жир,
растут животы,
за этажом этажи.

Небольшое примечание:

художники
780 Вильсонов,
Ллойд-Джорджев,
Клемансо
рисуют -
усатые,
безусые рожи -
и напрасно:
все это
одно и то же.

Теперь
dовольно смеющихся глав нам.
В уме
Америку
ясно рисуете.
Мы переходим
к событиям главным.
К невероятной,
к гигантской сути.

День
800 этот
был
огнеупорный.
В разливе зноя земли тихи.
Ветров изтрубренные бороны
вотще старались воздух взрыхлить.
В Чикаго
жара непомерная:
градусов 100,
а 80 - наверное.
810 Все на пляже.
Кто могли — гуляли себе.
А в большей части лежали даже
Пот
благоухал
на их холеном теле.
Ходили и пыхтели.
Лежали и пыхтели.
Барышни мопсиков на цепочках водили,
и
820 мопсик,
раскормленный был,
как теленок.
Даме одной,
дремавшей в идиллии,
в ноздрю
сжаревший влетел мотыленок.
Некоторые вели оживленные беседы,
говорили «ах»,
говорили «ух».

С деревьев слетал пух.
Слетал с деревьев мимозовых.
Розовел
на белых шелках и кисеях.
Белел на розовых.

Так
dовольно долго
все занимались
приятным времяпрепровождением.

Но уже
840 час тому назад
стало
кое-что
меняться.
Еле слышное,
разве только что кончиком души,
дуновенье какое-то.
В безветренном море
ширятся всплески.

850 Что такое?
Чего это ради ее?

А утром
в молнийном блеске

АТА
(Американское Телеграфное Агентство)
город таким шарахнуло радио:
«Страшная буря на Тихом океане.
Сошли с ума муссоны и пассаты.
На Чикагском побережье выпловлены рыбы.
Очень странные,

860 В шерстях.
Носатые».

Вылазили сонные,
не успели еще обсудить явление,
а радио
спешные
вывешивало объявления:
>Насчет рыб ложь.
Рыбак спьяну местный.
Муссоны и пассаты на месте.

870 Но буря есть.
Даже еще страшней.
Причины неизвестны».
Выход судам запретили большие,
к ним
присоединились
маленькие пароходные компания.

Доллар пал.
Чемоданы нарасхват.

880 Незнакомого
на улице
останавливали незнакомые
не знает ли чего человек со стороны.

Экстренный выпуск!
Радио!
Выпуск экстренный!
«Радиограмма переврана.
Нет буры раскат.

Другое.
890 Грохот неприятельских эскадр».
Радио расклеили.
И, опровергая оное,
сейчас же
новое,
последнее, 
захватывающее, 
сенсационное.
«Не пушечный дым - 
океанская синева. 
нет ни броненосцев, 
ни флотов, 
ни эскадр. 
Ничего нет. 
Иван».
Что Иван? 
Какой Иван? 
Откуда Иван? 
Почему Иван? 
Чем Иван? 
910 Положения не было более запутанного. 
Ни одного объяснения 
достоверного, 
путного. 
Сейчас же собрался коронный совет. 
Всю ночь во дворце беспокоился свет. 
Министр Вильсона 
Артур Крупп 
заговорился так, 
что упал, как труп. 
920 Капитализма верный трезор, 
совсем умалялся сам Крезо. 
Вильсон 
необычайное 
показал упорство 
и к утру 
решил - 
иду в единоборство. 
Беда надвигается. 
Две тысячи верст. 
930 Верст за тысячу; 
За сто. 
И...
очертанья идущего 
нащупали, 
заметили, 
увидели маяки глазастые.
Строки 
этой главы, 
громите, 
время ритмом роя!
В песне - 
миф о героях Гомера, 
история Трои, 
до неузнаваемости раздутая, 
воскресни!
Голодный, 
с теплом в единственный градус 
жизни, 
как милости даренной, 
950 радуюсь, 
ход твой следя легендарный. 
Куда теперь? 
Где пеш? 
Какими идешь морями? 
Молнию рвущихся депеш 
холодным стихом орамим. 
Ворвался в Дарданеллы Иванов разбег. 
Турки
с разинутыми ртами

960 смотрят:
человек -
голова в Казбек! -
идет над Дарданелльскими фортами.
Старик улыбнулся.
Молодые на мол.
Вышли.
Песни бунта и молодости.
И лишь
до берега вал домёл,
970 и лишь волной до мола достиг -
бросились,
будто в долгожданном сигнале,
человек на человека,
класс на класс.
Один короновали.
Других согнали.
Пешком по морю -
и скрылись из глаз.
Других глотает морская ванна,
980 другими
акула кровавая кутит,
а эти
вошли,
ввалились в Ивана
и в нем разлеглись,
как матросы в каюте.
(А в Чикаго
ничто не сулило пока
для чикагцев страшный час.
990 Изогнувшись дугой,
оттопырив бока,
веселились,
танцами мчала.)
Замерли римляне.
Бури на Тибре.
А Тибр,
взвивясь,
pape римскому голову выбрил
и пошел к Ивану сквозь утреннюю яс.
1000 (А в Чикаго,
усы в ликеры ввали,
выступ мяса облапив бабистый, -
Илл-я-я-я! -
Ода-я-я! -
процелованный,
взголёвовный,
разухабистый.)
Черная ночь.
Без звездных фонарей,
1010 K Вильсону,
скользя по водным массам,
коронованный поэтами
крядется Рейн,
слегка посвечивая голубым лампасом.
(А Чикаго
спит,
обтанцован,
опит,
рыхтебля подушками выхоля.
1020 Синь уснула.
Сопит.
Море храпом храпит.
День встает.
Не расплатой на них ли?)
Идет Иван,
сиянием брезжит.
Шагает Иван,
прибоями брызжет.
Бежит живое.

Вулканом мир хорошорится рыже.
Этого вулкана нет на
составленной старыми географами карте.
Вселенная вся,
а не жалкая Этна,
народов лавой брызжущий кратер -
Ревя несется
странами стертymi
живое и мертвое
от ливня лав.
Один к Ивану бегут
с простертymi
руками,
другие - к Вильсону стремглав.
Из мелких фактов будничной тины
выявился факт один:
вдруг
унитожились все середины -
нет на земле никаких середин.

Ни цветов,
ни оттенков,
ничего нет -
кроме
цвета, красящего в белый цвет, и красного,
кровавящего цветом крови.
Багровое все становилось багровей.
Белое все белей и белее.
Иван
через царства
шагает по крови,
над миром справляя огней юбилеи.
Выходит, что крепости строили даром.
Заткнитесь, болтливые пушки!
Баста!
Над неприступным прошел Гибралтаром.
И мир
океаном Ивану распластан.
(А в Чикаго
на пляже
выводок шлюх
беснованием моря встревожен.
Pогоняет время за слухом слух,
отпустив небылицам вожжи.)

Какой адмирал
в просторе намытом
так пути океанские выучит?!
Идет,
начиненный людей динамитом.
Идет,
всемирной злобою взрывчат.
В четыре стороны расплюсь
тихоокеанское лоно.

Иван
без карт,
без компасной стрелки
шел
и видел цель неуклонно,
как будто
не с моря смотрел,
а с тарелки.

(А в Чикаго
до Вильсона
dокатился ваз,
брошенный Ивановой ходьбою.
Он боксеров,
стрелков,
фехтовальщиков сывал,
чтобы силу накрывать к бою.)
1100 Вот так открыватели,
tак Колумбы
сияли,
когда
Ивану
dо носа -
как будто
с тысячезапахой клумбы -
земли приближившейся запах донесся.

(А в Чикаго
1110 боксеров
распирает труд.
Положили Вильсона наземь
и…
ну тереть!
Натирают,
трут,
растирают силовыми мазями.)
Сверьнуло глаза маяка одноглазье -
и вот
1120 в мозги,
в глаза,
из всех океанских щелей вылазя,
Америка так и прет и прет.
Взбиралась с разбега верфь на верфь.
На виадук взлетал виадук.
Дымящий такой,
что, в черт
идешь, уверовав,
1130 что ты в аду.
(Где Вильсона дряблость?
Сдули!
Смолодел на сорок годов.
Животами мышцы вздулись.
Ощупали.
Есть.
Готов.)
Доходит,
пеной волной опеня,
1140 гигантам домам за крыши замча,
на берег выходит Иван
в Америке,
сухенький,
даже ног не замоча.

(Положили Вильсона последний заклеп
на его механический доспех,
шлем ему бронированный возвели на лоб,
и к Ивану он гонит спех.)
Чикагцы
1150 себя
не любят
в тесных улицах плошить.
И без того
в Чикаго
площади самые лучшие.
Но даже
для чикагцев непомерная площадь
была приготовлена для этого случая.

1160 Люди,
место схватки ораниз, пуская непомерное! -
сушили в узел.
С одной стороны -
с горностаем,
с бобрами,
с другой -
синевели в замасленной блузе.

Лошади
1170 в кашу впутались
в ту же.
К бобрам -
арабский скакун,
к блузам -
тяжелые туши битюжки.
С уздечкой рванье,
грозят рысаку.
Машины стекались, скользя на мази.
На классы разбился
1180 и вывод
и ввоз.
К бобрам
изящный ушел лимузин,
к блузам
стал
стосильный грузовоз.

1190 Ни песне,
ни краске не будет отсрочки,
бой вас решит — судия строгий.
К бобрам -
декадентов всемирных строчки.
К блузам -
футуристов железные строки.

Никто,
никто не избегнет возмездья -
звездле,
и той
не уйти.
К бобрам становитесь,
1200 генералы созвездья,
к блузам -
миллионы Млечного пути.
Наружу выпущена скованьные лавины,
земной шар самый
2200 на две раскололся половины
и, застыв,
на солнце
повис весами.
Всеми сущими пушками
1210 над
площадью объявлен был
«чемпионат всемирной классовой борьбы!»
В шири
ворота Вильсону -
верста,
и то он
боком стал
и еле лез ими.

1220 Сапожицами
подгибает бетон.
Чугунами гремит,
железами.

Во Ивана входящего вперил он -
осмотреть врага,
da нечего
смотреть -
ничего,
хорошо сложён,

1230 цветом тела в рубаху просвечивал.
У того -
револьверы
в четыре курка,
сабля
в семьдесят лезвий гнута,
a у этого -
рука
и еще рука,
da и та

1240 за пояс ткнута.
Смерил глазом.

Смешок по усам его.
Взял плечом шитье эполетово:
«Чтобы я -
o господи!
этого самого?

Чтобы я
не смог
вот этого?!!»

1250 И казалось -
растет могильный холм
посреди ветров обвываний.
Ляжет в гроб,
и отныне
никто,
никогда,
ничего
не услышит
о нашем Иване.

1260 Сабля взвизгнула.
От плеча
и вниз
на четыре версты прорез.
Встал Вильсон и ждет -
кровь должна б,
a из
раны
вдруг
человек полез.

1270 И пошло ж идти!
Люди,
dома,
броненосцы,
лошади
в прорез пролезают узкий.
С пением лезут.
В музыке.
О горе!
Пришли из северной Трои
начиненного бунтом человека-коня!
Метались чикагцы,
о советском строе
вести по оторопевшим рядам гоня.

Товарищи газетчики,
не допытывайтесь точно,
где была эта битва
и была ли когда.
В этой главе
в пятиминутье всредоточены
бывших и не бывших битв года.
Не Ленину стих умиленный.
В бою
славлю миллионы,
вижу миллионы,
миллионы пою.
Внимайте же, историки и витии,
битва не бывших видевшему перипетии!
«Вставай, проклятьем заклейменный» -
радостная выстрелила весть.
В ответ
миллионный
голос:
«Готово!»
«Есть!»
«Боже, Вильсона храни. Сильный, державный», -
они
голос подняли ржавый.
Запела земли половина красную песню.
И вот
за песней красной,
и вот
за песней за белой -
тараны затарахтели в запертые будущее,
лучей щетины заскребли,
замели.
Руки разрослись,
легко распутывающие
недоведомые измерения души и земли.
Шарахнувшиеся буны веником лавочники,
не доведя обычный торг,
разбежались ошпаренным муравейником
из банков, магазинов,
конторок.
На толщу душивших набережных и дамб к городам
из океанов двинулась вода.
Столбы телеграфные то здесь,
то там
соборы вздергивали на провода.
Бросив насиженный фундамент,
как тигр в зверинце -
масса фунтами,
пастью ворот особнячки сгреб.
Сами себя из мостовых вынув,
где, хозяин, лбиш твой?
в зеркальные стекла бриллиантовых магазинов бросились булыжники мостовой.
Не боясь сесть на мель,
не боясь на колокольни напороть туши,
просто -
как мы с вами -
шагали киты сушей.

Танцевал Вильсон
во дворце кэк-ук,
заворачивал задом и передом,
да не доезжала нога экипаж,
в двери смотрит Вильсон,
а в двери там -

И вот,
притворявшиеся добрыми,
колье
на Вильсонах
бросились кобрами.
Выбирая,
которая помягче и почище,
по гостям по миляндаршам
гоялись грузовичниками.

И вот,
притворявшиеся добрыми,
колье
на Вильсонах
бросились кобрами.
Выбирая,
которая помягче и почище,
по гостям по миляндаршам
гоялись грузовичниками.

Не убежать!
Сороконожная
мебель раскинула лов.

Через Рокфеллеров,
влающихся ничком,
с горлами,
сжимаемыми собственным воротником,
растоптав,
как тараканов,
вывалилась,
в Чикаго канула.

По улицам
в сажени
дома не видно от дыма сражений.
Как в кинематографе
заглядывают:
сквозь хаос
ползущую спекуляцию добивает,
встав на задние лапы,
Совнархоз.

Но Вильсон не сдается,
засел во дворце,
нажимает золотые пружины,
и выстраивается цепь -
не человековеческие дружини.
Страшней, чем танки,
чем войск роты,
безбрюхий встал,
поройьитет,
миллионузубьитет
ринулся голод.
Город грызнет — орехом расколот.
Стреб деревню — кустула косточкой.
А людей,
а людей и зверей —
просто в рот заправляет горесточной.
Впереди его,
вывострил ухо,
путь расчищая, лезет разруха.
Дышит завод.
Разруха слышит.
Слышиш разруха — фабрика дышит.
Грохнет по фабрике —
фабрика свалена.
Сдавит завод —
завод развалина.
Рельс обломком крушит как палишей.
Все разрушается,
голодом сперт,
тогда, —
раскавчивая поездов таран,
двинулся вперед транспорт.
Ветрилась паровозов борода седая,
быться,
голод сдал,
и по нем,
остатки съедая,
гроженные хлебом прошли поезда.
Искорежился, —
и во гневе
Вудро,
приказав:
«срежите сразу»,
новых воинов высылает рой —
смертоноснейшую зарazu.
Идут законвенные в грозевые брони
спирохет на спирохете,
смешчен на смежон.
Ядом бактерий,
лапами вшей
кровь поганят,
ползут за шей.
Болезни явились
небывалого фасона:
вдруг
человек
становится сонный,
высыпает ряб
распухает
и лопается грибом.
Двинулись,
предводимые некою
радугоглазой аптекою,
бутыли карболовые выдвинув в бойницы,
лазареты,
лечебницы,
1480 больницы.
Вши отступили,
струдились скопом.
Вщей
в упор
расстреливали микроскопом.
Молотят и молотят дезинфекции цеп.
Враги легли,
ношки задрав.
А поверху,
размахивая флаг-рецепт,
прошел победителем мировой Наркомздрав.
Вырывается у Вильсона стон, -
и в болезнях побит и в еде,
и последнее войско высылает он -
ядовитое войско идей.
Демократизмы,
гуманизмы -
идут и идут
за измами измы.
1500 Не успеешь разобраться,
чего тебе нужно,
а уже
философией
голова заталмужена.
Засасывали романов тиной.
Пением завораживали.
Завлекали картиной.
Пустые головы
книжками
для веса
нагрузив,
пошел за профессором профессор.
Их
молодая встретила орава,
и дулам браунингов в провал
рухнуло римское право
и какие-то еще права.
Простонародью очки втирая,
адом пугая,
прельщая раем,
и лысые, как колено,
и мохнатые, как звери,
с евангелиями вер,
с заговорами суеверий,
рясами вздыбив пыль,
армией двинулись чернобелье попы.
Под градом декретов
от красной лавины
рассыпались
попы,
муллы,
раввины.
А ну, чудотворцы,
со смертных одр
встаньте-ка!
На месте кровавого спора
опора веры вается -
Петр
с проломанной головой собственного собора.
1540 Тогда
поэты взлетели на небо,
чтоб сверху стрелять, как с аэроплана бы.
Их
на приманку академического пайка
заманивали,
ждали, не спустятся пока. Поэты бросались, камнем пав, - в работу их, перья рифм ощипав!

1550 В «Полное собрание сочинений», как в норки, классики забились. Но жалости нет!

Напрасно их наседкой Горький прикрыл, распустив изношенный авторитет.
1560 Фермами ног отмахивая мили, кранами рук расчищая пути, футуристы прошлое разгромили, пустив по ветру культуришки конфетти.

Стенкой в стенку, валия в пыли, билась с адмиралтейством Лувра труха, пока
1570 у адмиралтейства на штыке-шпиле не повисли Лувра картинные потроха.

Последняя схватка. 
Сам Вильсон.

И в ужасе видят вильсонцы - испепелен он, задом придававший солнце. Кто вспомнит безвестных главковерхов имя, победы громоздивших одна на одну?!
1580 Загрохотав в международной Цусиме, эскадра старья пошла ко дну. Фабриками попирая прошедшего труп, будущее загоранило триллионом труб: «Авелем называйте нас или Канином, разница какая нам! Будущее наступило! Будущее победитель!

Эй, века, на поклон идите!»
1590 Горизонт перед солнцем расступился злюч. И только что мира пол заклавший, Каин гением взялся за луч, как музыкант берется за клавиши.

История, в этой главе как на ладони бег твой. Голодная 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,
1610 может быть, просто
изумительнейшее настроение.
Разгоняя дирижабли небесам под уклон,
послами,
на палубах бесчисленных эскадр,
извилинами пеших колонн
за кадром выстраивают человечий кадр.

Большеголовые,
в красном сиянье,
1620 с марса слетевшие, встали марсияне.
Вытягает аэро,
и снова нет.
И снова птицей солнце заслонится.
И снова
с отдаленнейших слетаются планет,
винтами развернувся из-за солнца.
Пустыни смыты у мира с заревом,
деревья за стволом расфераили ствол.
На площади зелени -
1630 на бывшей Сахаре -
сегодня ежегоднее торжество.

День за днем спускались дни,
и снова густела тьма ночная.
Прежде чем выстроиться сумев,
они грянули:
- Начинаем!

„Голоса людские,
1640 зверьи голоса,
рев рек
ввысь славословием вьем.
Пойте все и все слушайте
мира торжественный реквием.

Вам, давнишние,
годы проголодавшие,
о рае сегодняшнем растреблявя весть,
вам,
миллионлетию давшие
1650 петь,
пить,
есть.
Вам, женщины,
рожденные под горностаевые
мантии,
тело в лохмотья ряд,
падавшие замертво,
за хлебом проставная
в неисчислимых очередях.
1660 Вам,
легионы жидкокостных детей,
толпы искривленной молодежи,
те, кто дожили до чего-то,
и те,
кто ни до чего не дожил.
Вам,
звери,
ребрами сквозя,
забывшие о съеденном людьми овсе,
1670 работавшие, кого-то и что-то возя,
пока исхлестанные не падали совсем.
Вам,
расстрелянные на баррикадах духа,
чтоб дни сегодняшние были пропеты,
будущее ловившие в ненасытное ухо, малиры, певцы, поэты.

1680 Вам, которые сквозь дым и чад, жизнь, едва державшейся на нотке, ржавым железом, шестерней скрежеща, работали всё-таки, делали всё-таки. Вам неумолкающих слав слова, ежегодно расцветающие, вовеки не вянув, за нас замученные — слава вам, миллионы живых, кирпичных 1690 и прочих Иванов”.

Парад мировой расходился ровно, — ведь горе давнишнее душу не бесит. Годами печаль в покой воркестрована и песней брошена ввысь поднебесь. Еще гудят голосов отголоски про смерти чьи-то, про память вечную.

1700 А люди уже в многоуличном лоске катили минуту, весельем расцвеченную. Ну и катись средь песенного лада, цвети, земля, в молотьбе и в сеятьбе. Это тебе — революций кровавая Илиада! Голодных годов Одиссея тебе!

1919-1920
GET THESE IMPORTANT POINTS
(The Original, 9th Year)

FITCH FOUR-DRIVE TRACTOR

Figure 2

Vladimir Mayakovsky, Okni satyri ROSTA [Satirical Windows of the Russian State Telegraph Agency], 1919-1921. Drawing. Muzej Majakovskogo (Mayakovsky Museum), Moscow.
http://mayakovsky.museum/events/lectures/lektsiya-mayakovskiy-khudozhnik/
Figure 3

Vladimir Mayakovsky, Rezinotrest (State Rubber Production Agency) poster, 1923. Public domain.
Figure 4

Figure 5

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:US_Capitol_west_side.JPG

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 9

Map of Paterson, New Jersey, 1880. Public domain.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paterson_NJ_1880.jpg
Figure 10

Works Cited or Consulted


---- *Iskusstvo i proizvodstvo. Sbornik stat'ei*. Moscow, 1926.


Faktura slova: deklaratsiiia. Moscow, 1923.

15 let russkogo futurizma, 1912-1927 gg. Moscow, 1928.

“Novie puti slova,” Gramoty i declaratsii russkikh futuristov. Moscow, 1914.


Matiushin, Mikhail V. “O knige Metzanzhe-Gleza ‘Du Cubisme.’” *Soyuz molodëzhi* (Sankt-Peterburg), no. 3 (Mar. 1913), pp. 25-34.


---- *In the American Grain*. New York: New Directions, 1925; 2009.


