

GERALD JANECEK

The Look of Russian Literature

*Avant-Garde Visual
Experiments, 1900-1930*



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The Look of Russian Literature

Avant-Garde

Visual

Experiments,

1900-1930

Gerald Janecek

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For MOM
who gave me eyes
and for SUE AND SARAH
who keep them bright

One must demand of the writer that he actually pay attention to typeface. After all, his thoughts reach us by means of the eye and not the ears. Therefore expressive typographic plasticity ought by its optic action to produce the same effect as both the voice and gestures of an orator.

El Lissitzky, 1925
(Lissitzky-Küppers 1968, p. 357)

SOCRATES: I quite agree with you that words should as far as possible resemble things; but I fear that this dragging in of resemblance . . . is a kind of hunger, which has to be supplemented by the mechanical aid of convention with a view to correctness; for I believe that if we could always, or almost always, use expressions which are similar, and therefore appropriate, this would be the most perfect state of language; as the opposite is the most imperfect.

Plato, *Cratylus*, p. 100

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Transliteration System

The transliteration system is designed to guide the non-Russian-speaking person toward a simple but reasonably close approximation of Russian phonetics rather than toward a precise duplication of the Russian spelling, for which diacritical marks would be required. The resolution for problem letters is as follows:

е = e	й = y (omitted in nominative	ч = ch	э = e
ё = yo (o after sibilants)	adjectival endings)	ш = sh	ъ, ь omitted
ж = zh	х = kh	щ = shch	ю = yu
и = i(-ский = -sky)	ц = ts	ы = y	я = ya

Abbreviations

IMLI—Institut mirovoy literatury imeni Gorkogo, Moscow

PSS—V. Mayakovsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniy*, 1955-61

TsGALI—Tsentralny gosudarstvenny arkhiv literatury
i iskusstva, Moscow

Preface

Faced with what at first seemed a reasonably well-defined and manageable topic, the visual effects in Russian literature of 1900-1930, I soon discovered that it was rather hydra-like in its complexity. It seems that during this period everyone was doing a little of everything. That was, of course, in the spirit of the times. But such a situation aggravates problems every researcher faces in deciding where to stop, what not to include. Every aspect of the visual and verbal arts is relevant to some extent, and one room explored leads inevitably to several others going off in different directions. Thus, in order to keep the project in check, I had to consider many rooms off-limits; subjects such as book design separated from authorship, text as part of a painting, and transrational language (*zaum*) are left unexplored. Sometimes the boundary between a literary work and a graphic work or painting becomes hard to define, but generally it is possible to decide whether a given work is basically a text or a picture. Since this is a literary investigation, I have excluded from detailed consideration works that are pictures—for example, a Cubist painting with fragments of text in the collage. Excluded also are editions or works whose graphic interest is the product of a designer, rather than the author himself, and therefore is not part of the original conception; for example, the book *For The Voice* (1923), a collection of Mayakovsky's poems brilliantly designed by El Lissitzky, and Filonov's lithographed manuscript of part of Khlebnikov's *Selected Poems* (1914) fall into this category.

In recent years the same rooms have been traversed in many sources, since the study of the Russian Avant Garde of the early twentieth century has become a blossoming field. Yet the rooms I have chosen still remain uninspected, even though a few scholars have glimpsed at them in passing, some more intently than others. Of the available sources, Vladimir Markov's definitive *Russian Futurism: A History* (1968) is the cornerstone of the entire field, and without it this book could not have been written. Susan Compton's *The World Backwards* (1978) is the one work that comes closest to the area I have investigated, although her study is oriented toward the art side of the intersection of the two media, while mine is oriented toward the literary side. Another difference is her basically chronological design, while mine is device- and author-oriented.

My main focus here is the interpenetration of the literary medium by features usually associated only with visual, nonverbal media. To have been considered a subject for study, a work must basically be a *text* to which have been added, as a somewhat subsidiary element, innovative visual properties that are bound directly to the text in some way. Five major figures in this trend—Bely, Kruchon-

nykh, Kamensky, Zdanevich, and Mayakovsky—are the focus of the study, but only insofar as their work relates to this topic. It will not be a complete survey of these writers' entire *oeuvre*.

The first chapter attempts to place the subject in its context. Its emphasis is on the historical, tracing those features of book culture that preceded and are perhaps seminal for the rise of interest in visual effects in Russia during the period 1900-1930. Following this introduction are five chapters, each of which is devoted to one of the key figures in the vanguard of Russian visual literature whom I have identified as the creator of a particular style or set of devices that made the look of a literary work dynamic. Thus Bely was chosen as the earliest experimenter with layout in both verse and prose; Kruchonykh as the key figure in the production of manuscript books; Kamensky as the creator of the unique "ferroconcrete" poems; Zdanevich as a master of elaborately typeset books; and Mayakovsky as the proponent of the stepladder line that continues to be used to this day in Russian verse.

The result is a survey that is, in retrospect, more extensive than intensive, though individual key examples have been analyzed in some depth. Yet further in-depth investigation remains to be done. In particular, the links between graphics and text in the Kruchonykh chapter remain sketchy because preliminary work on the nature of *zaum* is not yet done. But as an extensive survey, this book is relatively complete and ought to demonstrate, I think, the richness and strength of the Russian achievement in the European-American context.

I hope that the reader is already familiar with the books by Markov and Compton mentioned earlier, as well as with Camilla Gray's *The Russian Experiment in Art: 1863-1922*, and perhaps with John Bowl's *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902-1934*. Little space will therefore be given to general information that can be found in these sources unless the information is essential to the discussion. I trust that the readers who are picking up this book without a knowledge of the others will find that enough connective tissue has been provided to make the argument comprehensible.

Translations of Futurist titles generally follow V. Markov's rendering. All other translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

August 26, 1983

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An important part of the research for this project was conducted in Moscow and Leningrad in 1979 under the exchange program administered by the International Research and Exchanges Board between the American Council of Learned Societies and the Soviet Academy of Sciences. Of particular value were the materials provided by the Institute of Russian Literature (Pushkin House) in Leningrad, with significant contributions made by the Lenin Library, the Saltykov-Schedrin Library, the Gorky Institute of World Literature, the Central Government Archive of Literature and Art (TsGALI), and the Mayakovsky Museum. To these institutions and their staffs I hereby express my gratitude.

A number of individuals supplied me with copies of otherwise unavailable books and sections of books. Most important of these is Vladimir Markov, whose generosity toward me has been unstinting. To him I would like to offer a special word of thanks. Others are Edward Mozejko, Mme. Hélène Zdanevitch-ILIAZD, V. A. Katanyan (now deceased), and the directors of the Marvin and Ruth Sackner Archive.

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The onerous burden of preparing clean drafts of the manuscript fell to Sharon Artis, who did the job with consummate skill and a smile. A special thanks goes to her.

The Look of Russian Literature

1. Introduction

A Historical Perspective

THE AGE OF THE AVANT GARDE

Visual experimentation in Russian literature coincides with the age of the Avant Garde, which flourished during the first three decades of the twentieth century. These three decades witnessed an astonishing flowering of Russian arts in all spheres; their richness and level of achievement are unprecedented in Russia's history. The Golden Age of Pushkin relinquished its place to an even greater age—one that cannot be relegated to a Silver Age except in chronological terms.

The period of visual experimentation can be fixed with more preciseness than is usual in such cases. It began with the appearance on the literary scene of Andrey Bely in 1902 and can be said to have ended with the death of Mayakovsky in 1930. Russian Symbolism, the first Modernist movement, arose somewhat earlier, at the end of the 1880s, and a few artists continued to survive and work to the best of their abilities into the 1930s, but all the important events that concern us within the scope of this book fall into the three decades indicated. While some Symbolist writings of significance existed before 1900, they are traditional in appearance, if Modernist in other respects. By 1930 the age of avant-garde experimentation was over in Russia, if only for political reasons. In 1928 Lunacharsky was replaced as minister of culture and the Avant Garde lost perhaps its only defender in the government.

The first successful gambit of the Russian Avant Garde was the manifesto "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste" (December 1912), which declared, among other things, that "the Academy and Pushkin are more incomprehensible than hieroglyphics," and that poets had the right to create new words and "to feel an insurmountable hatred for the language existing before them" (Markov 1968, 46). It was signed by David Burliuk, Kruchonykh, Mayakovsky, and Khlebnikov and attracted significant public attention. Individually or collectively, these poets had already been publishing for several years, but their works went largely unnoticed: they were not sufficiently different from prevailing norms or simply failed to catch the critical and public eye for lack of distribution, publicity, or notoriety.

"A Slap," however, had the necessary shock value to command the desired attention.

The year 1913, perhaps the key year in the history of Russian Futurism, brought with it a bumper crop of publications (books, manifestoes, and miscellanies), many of which will be discussed in the succeeding chapters. The term *zaum* (transrational, beyond-mind language) was introduced—a concept unique to the Russian context that had paler analogues in the Avant Gardes of other literatures. The independence of the word from meaning and its value for its own sake were declared in Kruchonykh and Khlebnikov's manifesto, "The Word as Such." The year ended with the initiation of a tour of the provinces by Burliuk, Kamensky, and Mayakovsky that continued through March 1914. If the tour was not a financial success, it was at least great publicity, and with this, "everyone talked about Futurism in the fall of 1913 and the winter of 1913-14. The Futurists were lionized in literary circles" in the capitals (Markov 1968, 138). The three were also warmly received in Georgia, and this may have been an important factor in the relocation of Kruchonykh and others to Tiflis in 1919-21.

In the postrevolutionary period the Avant Garde, never too tightly knit to begin with, underwent a continuous process of disintegration, occasional regrouping, and scattering. David Burliuk, the most cohesive figure, was in Japan by 1920; in 1922 he moved to the United States, leaving Mayakovsky, the most visible and active member of the original group, at the helm in Moscow. The early 1920s also saw a move by some artists and writers, who called themselves Constructivists, away from art for its own sake toward an art that would be utilitarian: in times of material austerity, they felt, art must serve to improve the daily life of the masses and not be merely a decorative item for the aesthetic pleasure of the upper classes. The designs that resulted were clearly an outgrowth of the foregoing emphasis on purification of media and the trend toward abstract simplification, yet with a practical purpose. Constructivism in book production found its best theoretician and practitioner in El Lissitzky, and its most interesting creative writer in A. N. Chicherin.

But by the mid-1920s a crackdown on liberal trends in the arts was already underway; a policy of artistic political subservience was being formulated. The Avant Garde was soon wiped out.

The period had begun with escalated attempts to produce a synthesis of the arts, comparable to Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but on a level more profound than cooperation or coexistence in the framework of a single artistic enterprise. Rather, a genuine synesthesia was sought on the basis of associations of the senses on the deepest psychological or spiritual level. This attempt at synthesis was combined with an investigation of the essence of the various art media, a "back-to-basics" approach. A characteristic declaration of the time is this passage from N. Kulbin's "Cubism":

In our great time when in official physics the absoluteness of time and space has been
 abolished,
 When a new life is being built in new higher dimensions,
 Cheerfulness has overfilled and spun the heads of harlequins
 Experiments, one more multicolored than another, stage designs, one more ragged than
 another
 What remains of the holiday hullabaloo?
 Every "ism" brings use to the techniques of art
 Let everything be—genuine
 For music—sound
 For sculpture—form in the narrow sense
 For the word—values of expression [*narechiya*]
 In the new synthesis of art we know where the kernel is and where the shell
 Painterly painting—that is the slogan of the painter
 And everything else—freedom (Belenson 1915, 216)

Thus painting as a matter of plane, color, and form was reanalyzed and purified, verbal structure was freed from conservative grammatical restraints, new harmonies, rhythms, and melodic shapes were explored in music. Malevich wrote "Architecture begins where there are no practical aims. Architecture for its own sake" (Kovtun 1974, 46). Nineteenth-century canons were questioned and rejected as academic, artificial, and unidiomatic. In this context, an "unidiomatic" canon can be understood as one which places restrictions (such as the requirement to be representational in painting) that are not of the essence of the art or medium itself. Once the basics of an art were defined, new relationships between arts could be intuitively felt and possibilities for new combinations could be perceived and developed.

A hallmark of the period was Scriabin's *Prometheus Symphony* (No. 5) with its "color organ" that attempted to produce color effects corresponding to the musical effects by a very carefully worked-out system of relationships. Scriabin's unfinished *Mysterium* was to have been even more elaborate and monumental. Other efforts at synesthesia were Kandinsky's "musical" style of painting (Stuckenschmidt) and his painterly literary efforts, the drama *Der gelbe Klang*, and the book of prose poems, *Klänge*. Meyerhold's theatrical productions, which, while laying bare theater conventions, introduced balletic, musical, and painterly techniques in innovative ways (Marshall 1977, 125-44), and perhaps most extensively, Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, which brought together some of the most advanced minds of the time in all the arts—painters (Bakst, Benois, Larionov, Goncharova, Matisse, Picasso) for set designs and costumes, composers (Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Ravel, Debussy) for ballet scores, and dancers and choreographers (Fokin, Nijinsky, Pavlova, Karsavina) to produce brilliant, often shocking and controversial, but nearly always innovative, productions.

Russian Symbolism had regarded music as the highest art, and one which

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literature should emulate. With the Futurists, however, music receded into the background. The majority of Futurists had begun as painters, and some of them continued to paint and draw even after establishing their writing careers. It is therefore not surprising that they considered the possibilities offered by literature as a visual medium. This study focuses on their efforts by glancing both backward and forward at their important predecessors and successors.

Since Russian Futurism was an avant-garde movement par excellence in almost prototypical form, I will focus briefly on one point in Renato Poggioli's *The Theory of the Avant Garde* that to me expresses the tenor of the avant-garde spirit in general. He draws a clear distinction between the classical and avant-garde attitudes toward art:

The tacitly enunciated task of classic art was the splendid repetition of the eternal maxims of ancient wisdom; impossible, then, for it to conceive of the commonplace pejoratively. But since the triumph of the romantic cult of originality and novelty, the aesthetic equivalent of the commonplace has come to be more and more pejoratively considered. (Poggioli 1968, 80)

In classical thinking about art, there was either beauty or ugliness, but there was no concept of cliché or "a not-new beauty, a familiar or well-known beauty, a beauty grown old, an overrepeated or common beauty" (p. 81). In contrast, Poggioli notes, "For modern art in general, and for avant-garde in particular, the only irremediable and absolute aesthetic error is a traditional artistic creation, an art that imitates and repeats itself" (p. 82).

Classical art seeks an eternal beauty that is stable and permanent, while avant-garde art is in constant ferment: art must change, progress, look to the future, avoid the past. Newness becomes a value in itself and ceaseless experimentation is the way to achieve it. A restless, frenetic, youthful, revolutionary mood predominates and finds artists changing their views, styles, and techniques seemingly from day to day. This attitude toward art is still prevalent today in many circles in the West, whereby an artist who produces a work similar to the preceding one is immediately accused of stagnation. Yet we must remember that such an attitude is an entirely modern one, less than one hundred years old.¹ In the Russia of the early twentieth century, this avant-garde mood was the main propellant for the development of the visual effects discussed here.

MANUSCRIPT CULTURE

In two areas of historical interest that are relevant to this study—manuscript culture and Baroque figure poetry—Russia shared the history of Europe, though

¹ The term "Avant Garde" in its metaphoric use is older, however—even older than Poggioli thought it was. See Calinescu 1977, 97.

on a somewhat delayed basis. The Gutenberg revolution was slower to reach Russia and slower to take a firm hold. The first dated printed Russian book, an *Acts of the Apostles*, appeared in 1564 (fig. 1) and bore the name of the typographer Ivan Fyodorov (d. 1583), who was eventually given the title of Father of Russian Printing. It is notable how much the first printed book resembled a manuscript, as was true of early European printing in general (Zemtsov 1964, 16). It was not, however, until Peter the Great's printing enterprise that books were printed in large enough quantities to challenge the hegemony of the manuscript (Kalder 1969-70), though manuscript culture itself managed to continue well into the nineteenth century, at least in ecclesiastical and Old Believer spheres. The nineteenth-century Romantic movement stimulated an interest in native antiquities in Russia as in the rest of Europe; by the end of the century the process of collecting and studying old manuscript books resulted in the flowering of paleographic science and the appearance of manuals by renowned Russian scholars such as Sreznevsky (1882), Sobolevsky (1906), Shchepkin (1920), and Karsky (1928). The first decades of this century were particularly rich in scientific literature and scholarly editions of old books, largely directed at the academic community but certainly available to others interested in antiquities.

Fig. 1 A page from the first dated printed Russian book, *The Acts of the Apostles*, by Ivan Fyodorov, 1564

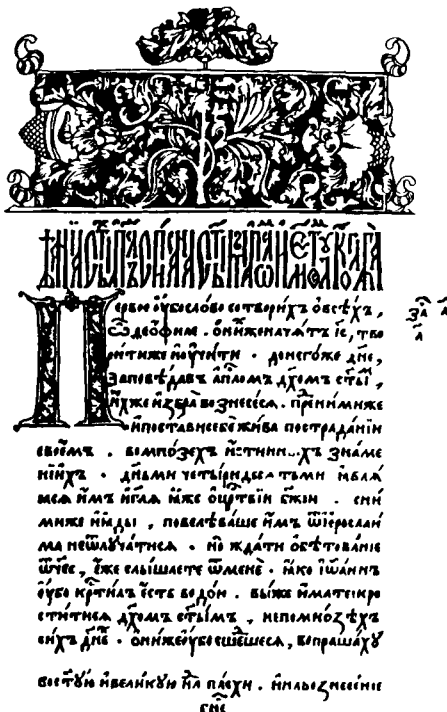
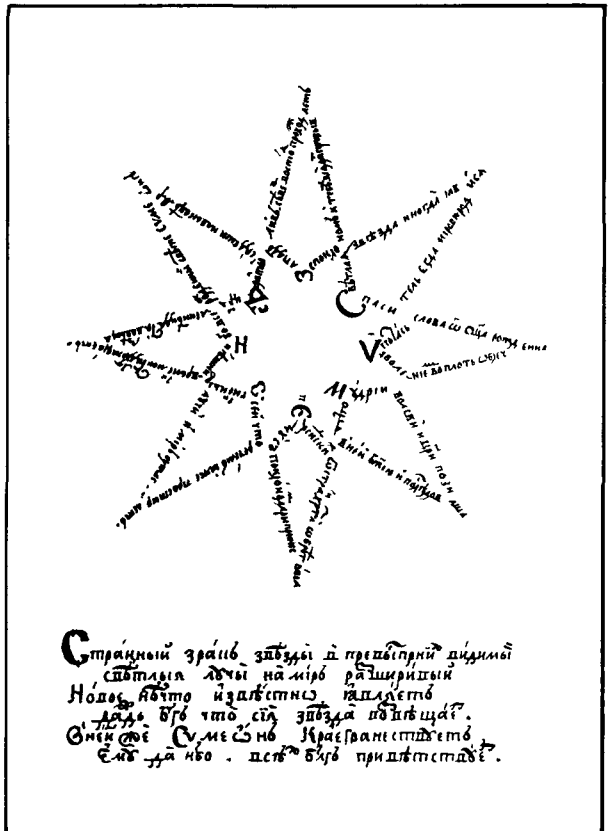


Fig. 2. Poem by Simeon Polotsky in the form of a star from the "Greeting" to Tsar Aleksey Mikhaylovich on the birth of his son Simeon, manuscript, second half of seventeenth century.



THE FIGURE POEM

Figure poems, in which the text has the outlines of an object central to the poem, were apparently the invention of Greek poets. Simias of Rhodes (fl. ca. 300 B.C.) evidently was the earliest practitioner (Higgins 1977), but only three of his poems, in the shape of an axe, an egg, and wings, survive. The best-known practitioner, however, was Publilius Optatianus Porfirius (fourth century A.D.), who produced a range of cryptograms and figure poems (Mueller 1877, 69; also Doria 1979, 82-85). In the period of European Baroque this exotic genre was revived and used by a number of prominent poets.

Whether or not Russia can be said to have had a "genuine" Baroque period in literature, one can safely point to Simeon Polotsky (1628-80) as having practiced *figura poesis* on Russian soil during this period. Belorussian by birth, Kievan by scholastic training, he became the official poet to the Muscovite royal court, bringing to that post a knowledge of the Baroque practices of Europe, chiefly from Polish and Latin. His output includes a variety of figure poems (star [fig. 2], heart, cross) and cryptograms (Eryomin 1966; Hippiisley 1971, 1977). These are, it seems, a purely imported product without a native Russian source, and, as was also the case in Europe, the figure poem did not develop an extensive tradition in Russia. Polotsky has never been held in high regard for his literary achievements. If his name was known at all by Russian writers of 1900-1930, it is unlikely that this knowledge went much beyond the cursory, and there is no evidence that he served as a model for anyone. In that period, only one noteworthy publication appeared about him—an edition of *Oryol rossysky* (*The Russian Eagle*, 1915), which contained, among others, the illustrated poem.

Fig. 3. I. Rukavishnikov, poem in the form of a star [n.a. "Figurnye stikhi," source and date not given].

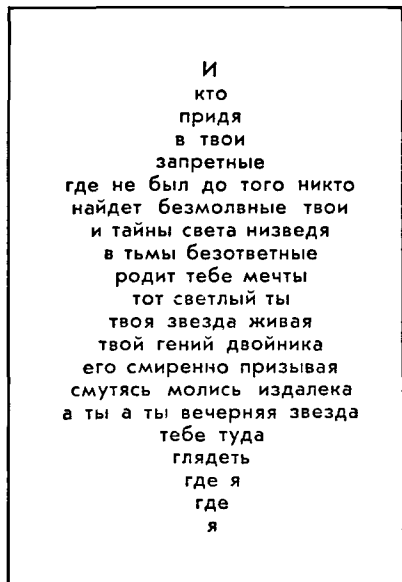


Fig. 4. Erl. Martov, "Rhombus," *Russkie simvolisty*, II, 1894.

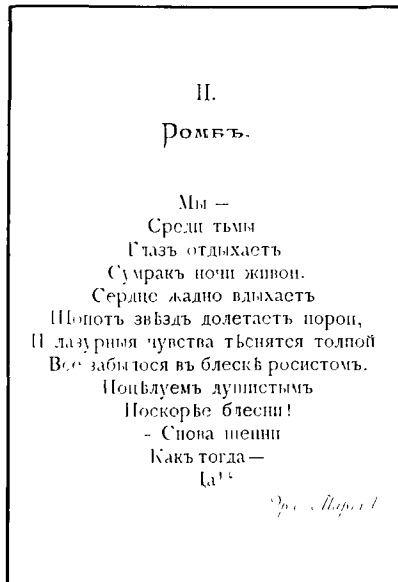
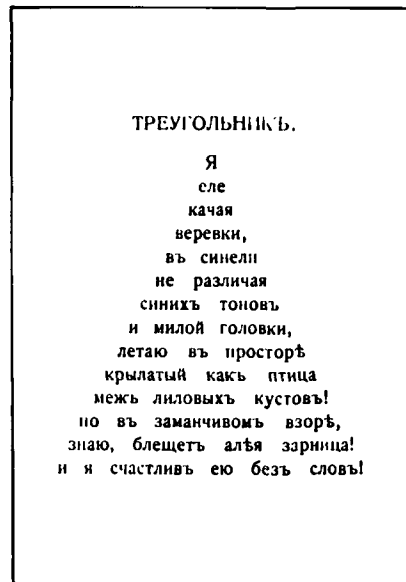


Fig. 5. V. Bryusov, "Triangle," 1918.



In the eighteenth century, figure poems were written by A. Rzhevsky (Gukovsky 1927, 181); eventually, around the turn of the twentieth century, the genre was adopted by I. Rukavishnikov (fig. 3), Erl. Martov (fig. 4), and Valery Bryusov. Bryusov's single figure poem, "Triangle" (fig. 5), from his book, *Experiments* (1918, 160), was part of a survey of verse form with illustrations by the author.² Bryusov also wrote a cryptogram (fig. 6) in answer to one written to him by Vadim Shershenevich (fig. 7) (Bryusov 1973-75, 3:627; Shershenevich 1916, 33).

The genre of the figure poem never caught on and is therefore of minor concern here, to be mentioned only briefly hereafter (see also Kuzminsky 1980).

THE LUBOK

Much more relevant and influential is the Russian broadside, or *lubok*. The oldest surviving example dates from between 1619 and 1624, and *luboks* were produced continuously into the early twentieth century. These "comic books" from the realm of pop literature typically combined a text with illustrative pictures in a variety of ways. Some had a block of text placed either above or below the illustration (fig. 8), while others had only a text that served, iconlike, to identify the characters and scene without narration. Still others had a narrative text distributed within the frame of the illustration (fig. 9), or combined a variety of layouts. Subjects ranged over the religious, historical, adventurous, and amorous, the text typically being a popularization of some already-existing literary

² See also Bryusov (1973-75), 3:544 and 524, respectively, and pp. 626-27 for further background.

Fig. 6. V. Bryusov, "Belated Answer. To Vadim Shershenevich," 1913.

В л е к и с у р о в у ю м е ч т у,
д а й у т о м л е н н о й р е ч и,
в а д и м ъ, и с т у д а л ь ш т у,
д а р и н а с т а р о м ъ в е ч е
с е б е м г л о в е н н е о г н я,
д а й с м у т е с т е н ы в о л и.
т ы и с к у ш е н н е к р е м н я:
з а т м е н н е о ш и б к у д н я —
т р о п ь и с к р о ю д о б о л и!

Fig. 7. V. Shershenevich, "To Valery Bryusov from the Author," published 1916, written prior to fig. 6.

15.

в с ѣ м ы к а к б у д т о н а р о д и к а х
с в а л и т ь с я л е г к о н о с е й ч а с
м ч а т ь с я и в е с е л о и с к о л ь к о
д а м л о р в и р у ю т о т м ѣ н н о н а с
н а ш е р б у к р а ш е н л и к е р а м и
и м ы д е р ж и м д у ш а с ь ш и п р о м
и ш е м ю г ю л и в о в с е м ф о р м у
м ч а с и л о ю о т к р ы т о к л и п п е р
з н о й н о з н а е м ч т о в с ѣ ю н о ш и
и в с ѣ п о ч т и г о в о р ю б е з у с ы е
у т в е р ж д а я э т о ч а ш к у п у н ш а
п ь е м с р а д о с т ь ю з а б р ю с о в а

work. The illustrations were what we might call “primitive” in style but lustily drawn and brightly colored, with a freedom from academic canons of perspective, anatomy, and composition. These characteristics held great appeal for twentieth-century artists such as Nataliya Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, David Burliuk, Kazimir Malevich, and Olga Rozanova (Bowlit 1974, 1980, 10, 13, Chamot 1973, 495), who were looking for ways to escape the restrictions of realism and were finding new vitality in folk creativity. Larionov and Goncharova, in particular, extensively collected and exhibited examples of the art of the *lubok*, and used them as “domestic stimuli” in their search for “the virtues of traditional Russian art forms” (Bowlit 1974, 137). This interest even grew briefly into a commercial-patriotic enterprise to aid the war effort.

In August-September, 1914, a special corporation called the Modern Broadside was established in Moscow for the production and publication of "lubok" posters and postcards. Some of the avant-garde artists, including Vasilii Chekrygin, Larionov, Lentulov, Maia-kovsky and Malevich were active in this enterprise, although the employment of professional studio artists in "lubok" production, however sincere their admiration of primitive art forms, was, of course, contrary to the very basis of the "lubok" industry. The new "lubok" was at its most powerful before the reversal of Russia's military fortunes. But when the consistent defeats of the Russian army began in 1915, the "lubok" "petrified and grew silent" (Bowlit 1980, 15).

Some of these artists contributed visual material to the early publications of Kruchonykh and others and will be discussed in chapter 3

Fig 8 Old time Hospitality, woodcut, first half of eighteenth century



Fig 9 Picture Bible, woodcut by Vasilii Koren, 1696



SYMBOLISM

The followers of Russian Symbolism, the literary movement immediately preceding and overlapping with the period of greatest visual experimentation, were not particularly interested in tampering with the look of their texts. Andrey Bely was the obvious exception and will be studied in detail in chapter 2. The others were more conservative, which is not to say that they were entirely indifferent to the printed appearance of their works. In fact, they were important precursors to the experimentation that was to follow, because they wanted the look of their books to contribute to a general mood. But they preferred an elegance and luxuriousness of book design that was rather traditional, though in consonance with their neo-romantic orientation. The Petersburg journal *Mir iskusstva* (*The World of Art*, 1898-1904), with its large format, many illustrations, rich decorations, fine paper, and exquisite typographical design, introduced an aesthetic refinement that was absent in the journals of the late nineteenth century and spawned a series of descendants of similar elegance, such as the major journals *The Balance*, *The Golden Fleece*, *Apollo*, *Works and Days*, and *Dreamers' Notes*, plus a variety of shorter-lived journals and almanacs (Lapshina 1977, 72-76, 82; Chamot 1973, 494).

The Symbolists' striving for unity of mood, involving even the visual level, is expressed in this previously unpublished fragment of an unfinished novel on the life of the decadents by Valery Bryusov:

"Now let's talk about the title," said L-in.

D-ov, standing opposite him, slowly opened his eyes. His pale face lit up. He began to speak quietly and not right away . . .

"The title . . . They didn't understand that earlier . . . There is a mysterious bond among all the parts of a book . . .

There are mysterious, caressing bonds

Between the aroma and the contour of a flower.

And the paper, and the typeface . . . O, Baudelaire understood that. . . ."³

Another statement by a major Symbolist is contained in a letter, recently come to light, from Aleksandr Blok to Bryusov, dated April 18, 1906, having to do with the publication of Blok's second volume of poems *Unexpected Joy*:

May I ask you that it be printed in the normal "Skorpion" typeface, as in the first issues of *Northern Flowers* (1901-1903); I think that the typeface of *Urbī et orbī* and *Stephanos* [two books by Bryusov] is too classical for my poetry; in addition, I would like each verse to begin with a capital letter. I have long pictured the format, cover and even the paper as being like that in *Letters by Pushkin and to Pushkin*; this is because there is a conservative bookishness in me: I have always felt a particular affection for covers with simple

³ Lenin Library, ms. div., fond 386, Bryusov, k 3, e. kh 17, January 1898

lettering or in an old book border, but have felt that complex lines and everything which exceeds vignetteness [*vinetochnost*] soon becomes tiresome. To this day I love the edition of *Pan* in its entirety: the format, and the paper and the four simple green letters on gray, nevertheless I do have in mind red letters on gray or grayish blue. But everything concerning the cover, format and paper is secondary, the main thing I ask for is the typeface and capitals.⁴

This relatively conservative position is reasonably representative of the general Symbolist attitude in matters of printing. Symbolist books as a result often have a somewhat neutral, if not old-fashioned look. Innovation in sound was of more concern to them than newness of visual appearance. Music was the perfect art form.

Yet even a great verbal artist such as Blok cast an occasional envious glance in the direction of the visual arts, as in his short article "Colors and Words" (1905):

The art of colors and lines permits one always to remember the closeness of real nature and never allows a submersion into a schematism from which a writer has no strength to remove himself. Painting teaches one to look and to see (these are different things and rarely coincide). Thanks to that, painting preserves alive and untouched the kind of feeling which is notable in children.

Verbal impressions are more foreign to children than visual ones. Children enjoy drawing everything possible, and what is impossible to draw—that isn't needed. In children words are subordinate to drawing, they play a secondary role. (Blok 1960-63, 5:20-21, see also West 1975)

This childlike orientation toward the visual is what would be brought to the fore by the Futurists, but would be condemned by many as childish and primitive.

THE ORTHOGRAPHIC REFORMS

Unique to Russia (and other parts of the eventual Soviet Union) during the period of the Avant Garde was the enactment of reforms in the orthography by the Bolshevik government immediately following the October Revolution. These reforms in some sense did more than anything else to change the appearance of the Russian text, affecting all written materials—literary and nonliterary, avant-garde and conservative. Only the émigré publishing houses held off for a time in capitulating to this symbol of the new Soviet power.

Slavists are quite familiar with the essential features of the reform since most of them deal regularly with materials printed in periods both before and after the reform, yet few of them, probably, have ever looked into the matter more than

⁴ The title *Pan* in the Russian old orthography would have a "hard sign" added to it, making it four letters, in Suvorova (1978), 89.

cursorily. Although extensive discussion is not needed for our purposes, the story itself is interesting and it casts a valuable light on certain features of some of the texts we will be dealing with.

When a given language evolves, spelling that once closely approximated pronunciation becomes outmoded as the sound structure changes. With time the discrepancy between spelling and pronunciation increases and spelling becomes a burdensome matter of learning rules that seem arbitrary because they no longer have observable foundations in speech. But changing the orthography often becomes an inefficient solution: either all materials written in the old orthography must be replaced, which is too monumental a task to be considered seriously, or two or more orthographies must exist side by side, which has its problems as well. Some authority must decide when a given sound change is clear enough, permanent enough, and universal enough to be enshrined in official spelling—not an easy decision, given regional and personal variations. It is interesting to note, moreover, that spoken language evolves slowly yet inevitably (Sapir's "linguistic drift" [Sapir 1949, 147-70]), but is beyond the control of anyone, while written language usually does not evolve gradually and produces permanent, timeless documents, yet is amenable to legislation.

Russian orthography had been a topic of discussion in learned circles for more than two centuries, ever since the Petrine reforms opened up the subject of orthographic questions by introducing changes in the orthography beginning in 1710. Concepts of the sacredness of traditional spelling were swept out in the face of the practical considerations of printing government documents and technical treatises in large numbers for the first time. Precision and efficiency were more valued than tradition. This reform eliminated some unnecessary letters and many variant letter shapes, added *ŋ*, and brought the remaining letters closer to Latin forms (Eskova 1966, 58-59). Nonetheless, several redundant letters were allowed to remain, as was the silent *ѣ*. The result was called the "civil script" (*grazhdansky shrift*). As a half-measure it remained a subject of controversy in which leading literary figures such as Trediakovsky, Lomonosov, and Karamzin added their views and proposed solutions.

As was true elsewhere in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, spelling rules were not as rigid in Russia as they have become in more recent times. Finally, in 1885, Ya. K. Grot, in his practical manual *Russian Orthography* (*Russkoe pravopisanie*) set up standards that received wide acceptance. Ironically, Grot, as a prominent linguist who knew all the inadequacies of the civil script and had written about them critically, was instrumental in canonizing the civil script as the norm. His manual, which went through at least twenty editions (the twentieth appeared in 1912), became the standard reference source for typesetters, proofreaders, writers, and teachers for more than thirty years. Grot's contribution was positive in that with his scientific erudition and authoritativeness he eliminated some of the many orthographic problems plaguing the language and brought

a uniformity to spelling that cleared the way for the more complete and decisive reforms that were to follow.

The first move was made by those who were most able to appreciate the hardships visited upon the innocent by orthographic problems—the teachers of Russian.⁵ They knew at firsthand how much classroom time was spent teaching students to know when to write ѣ, љ, and Ѡ and when to write е, и, and ф. In 1901 the Moscow Pedagogical Society began a study of the question. They were followed by similar groups in Kazan and Odessa. Finally, in 1904 the Academy of Sciences formed a commission to study the matter. The chairman of this commission was the president of the Academy of Sciences, Grand Duke Konstantin Romanov. The commission, at its one and only meeting, voted that it was appropriate to reform the orthography and that all unnecessary letters should be dropped. The remaining issues were to be dealt with by a subcommission of experts which included F. F. Fortunatov (chairman), I. A. Baudouin de Courtenay, F. E. Korsh, and A. A. Shakhmatov—some of the most illustrious linguists of the day. Soon their recommendations were formulated and published, but the war and the 1905 Revolution intervened to cause the matter to be tabled indefinitely.

In 1912 the discussion was reopened by the publication of the *Resolutions of the Orthographic Subcommission*, which was a somewhat less radical version of the 1904 plan.

The last stage took another five years. The debate was quite heated. On one side stood most of the teachers and linguists, and on the other stood the traditionalists, some of whom claimed that the orthographic reforms would drive a wedge between the people and their heritage. Among the opponents of the reform stood some major literary figures, such as the Symbolists Vyacheslav Ivanov, Bryusov, and Blok. Their objections are particularly relevant to our study as they focus on the look of words. The opinion of Vyacheslav Ivanov (1905): "The danger that threatens on this path is graphic amorphousness or formlessness which not only, as a consequence of the weakening of the *hieroglyphic* [emphasis added] element, is aesthetically unpleasant and psychologically unnatural, but also can facilitate general apathy toward language" (Eskova 1966, 87). Bryusov: "However, both ѣ and љ play one important role that is ordinarily forgotten about: an aesthetic role. By means of some sort of 'natural selection' Russian words have acquired in their shapes the most beautiful of attainable forms. The word вестъ printed with a simple 'е' (instead of вѣстъ) loses its beauty of shape, as will be the case with words printed without љ" (Eskova 1966, 87). This despite the fact that the letters ѣ and е were no longer distinguished phonetically, and љ, indicating the hardness of the preceding consonant, was in most cases entirely superfluous.⁶

⁵ The account of the orthographic reforms from this point on is based chiefly on Chernyshov (1947).

⁶ On a similar graphic distinction in Lermontov see Lotman (1972), 73, trans., p. 72.