

Khlebnikov vs. Mayakovsky: a Budetlianin and a Futurist in the Mirror of Their Verbal Painting

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Abstract

The visual aspect of writing is important for the reader's understanding of the author's message. Poetic works created by fellow-futurists Velimir (Vladimir) Khlebnikov and Vladimir Mayakovsky produce very different visual images, which require an imaginative employment of different artistic materials. In the case of Khlebnikov, it is watercolor, while Mayakovsky's verbal images are visualized as cardboard collages. Understanding the writers' philosophies about the nature of creativity contributes to the readers' perception of their visual imagery. Since Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky belong to the two poles of the Russian avant-garde movement – Budetlianstvo and Futurism - the two artistic mediums that lend themselves for visualizing their poetry can be looked at as encompassing the essential but opposing features of the artistic spectrum: transparency through the medium of watercolor vs. collage and the physical properties of constructivist tectonics.

In numerous scholarly works devoted to Russian Futurism the names of Velimir Khlebnikov and Vladimir Mayakovsky regularly appear next to each

other as the central figures of this movement (Stahlberger, 1964; Brown, 1973; Jangfeldt, 1976; Jakobson, 1979; Janecek, 1984; Grigoriev, 2000). Their poetic manifestoes were frequently co-signed and their poetry was also often published under one cover. In spite of this literary “fellowship,” in their poetics, they represent the extremes of the Futurist poetic spectrum: *Budetlianstvo* and *Cubo-Futurism*. An examination of the basic unity and, above all, of the tension between their poetics demonstrates some aspects of the conceptual and aesthetic conflict between *Budetlianstvo* and Futurism, with Khlebnikov representing the former and Mayakovsky the latter. My approach to demonstrating this conflict and underlying unity is from the perspective of visual art, an approach that is motivated by the fact that both poets were deeply immersed in the painterly avant-garde movement of their times. It is in the intersection of the verbal and the visual that their differences emerge with particular clarity. In terms of the visual arts then, the difference between them can be presented in terms of transparency and fluidity vs. constructivism and solidity, or aquarelle and collage. This distinction helps in tracing the specifics of Khlebnikov’s and Mayakovsky’s vision of their respective artistic ethos. Their own aesthetic declarations, particularly in regard to the inclusion of visual effects into their verbal art, support the distinction made above. The selected poetic texts examined below provide insights into how the ‘verbal painting’ of each poet contributes to an understanding of his artistic ethos. The differences between the choices Mayakovsky and Khlebnikov made in regard

to including visual artistic effects into their poetry has, to my knowledge, not been discussed before in the literature on Futurism; nor has the relevance of this choice to the two poles of the movement been observed.

Budetlianstvo, as the name indicates, is like *Futurism* oriented toward the future, but it is obvious that one name is based on a Russian root and the other on a foreign Latin one;¹ this immediately marks the fact that they proceed from a different premise: *Budetlianstvo* drew inspiration from the Russian folk tradition and Russian nature settings. Khlebnikov's rejection of Latin roots in his linguistic creativity and his preference for Slavic word-formations is emblematic of his protest against an international (non-Russian) urban civilization that distances itself from nature. Mayakovsky, on the other hand, was firmly committed to urban values. The futurist cult of progress and dismissal of past cultural achievement, as well as their disinterest in natural beauty was, most likely, pivotal in Khlebnikov's drifting away from Futurism's mainstream. Mayakovsky proclaimed that "beauty has to be created by the artist, because nature does not contain beauty." He saw the future as a victory of the Machine over Nature and was characteristically adamant about his stance (Markov 142).

One of the main features of both *Budetlianin* and Futurist poetry is its availability for "momentary reading" or immediate comprehension (*smotristsia v mgnovenie oka*) (Markov 20). The poetry of both authors achieves this painterly effect, but by different means. Markov emphasizes that Khlebnikov's poetic

tonality was seldom aggressive and that he dreamed of “a book transparent as a drop of water” (124). Indeed, Khlebnikov’s poetry produces the impression of watercolor. It depicts instantaneous impressions and gives a big picture in one ‘wash’ on the verbal level, just like watercolor does visually. Mayakovsky’s cubistic ‘verbal painting’ can be envisioned as a cardboard collage; his imagery is characterized by fragmentation and segmentation as he manipulates the language and its graphic representation as well, e.g. in his famous *lesenki* (Janecek, *Russian literature* 207). In their ‘verbal painting’ both authors show the interconnection and interpenetration of matter. While in Khlebnikov it is merging watercolor washes, in Mayakovsky’s images, we observe the typically cubo-futuristic “series of certain cuts through various flat surfaces” (Markov 49).

Khlebnikov’s “Oceanic feeling”

Before discussing the specifics of Khlebnikov’s aquarelle technique, the presentation of some relevant contexts is appropriate, including mythological, folkloric and archetypal ones.

As is well known, folklore and pagan mythology were a major source of inspiration for Khlebnikov (Markov 12), as well as the foundation on which he created his own myths. One pagan mythological concept he incorporated into his poetics was water as the source of life and the predominant element of nature in its initial development. It embodies the primeval chaos and the beginning of the world. It stands in opposition to the solid domain – earth. In Russian folk

consciousness, as presented in folklore and folk art, the sea represents a generic personified image of water. In the Russian mytho-poetic tradition the ocean and sea form a joint construct - the *okean – more* [ocean – sea] (Shuklin 84–85). According to Afanas'ev, rain-clouds appeared to the ancient Arians as heavenly wells: the word *utsa* [well] is used in Vedic texts in reference to clouds. The sky itself in ancient folk belief was a big water depository and was referred to as an ocean hanging over people's heads like a canopy; hence, notions about the heavenly bodies floating or “swimming” across the firmament were formed. In Russian folk magic spells, *okean – more* means ‘the sky,’ which is obviated by the context in which it is used (Afanas'ev 120-130). The Russian language, in particular, reflects how the conceptualizations of the ether were carried over from the water domain. The language records it in the following expressions: *oblaka plyvut po nebu* [the clouds are floating across the sky], *vozdushnye techeniia/potoki* [air streams/currents] and many others.

The ancient Slavs were influenced by the Vedic conceptualization of water as an element with healing and regenerative powers. Its purifying qualities were used as a medicine for illness and as a prophylactic means against evil spells. Various rituals, such as weddings and seasonal celebrations, included references to water as an embodiment of health: *Bud' zdorov(a), kak voda!* [Be as healthy as water!] (Afanas'ev 189). Spring floods were looked at as a vehicle for the deceased to get to the Paradise, as the awakening of nature after the “winter

death” coincided with Easter. At this time, the portals of Paradise, according to folk belief, open up to all who died on those days (150 – 151). Even the myth of the Great Flood, according to Afanas’ev, is a metaphor for the rebirth of nature in the spring (165).

The term *oceanic feeling* is also useful in discussing water as an emblem of cosmic liquescence and its connection with the eternal movement of the human soul and time. This idea reflects the Indo-European and universal notions connecting water, life, and the soul. The idea of the cosmic unity of the soul and sea is reflected, for instance, in the etymology of the German word for soul – *Seele*, which derives from *See* [sea] (Wandruszka 213). Images of various bodies of water and the impact they leave on human consciousness were registered in the heritage of different cultures at different times, and were highly poeticized (Isham xix).

Philologist V.N. Toporov argues that the study of the poetic “sea complex” and the “psycho-physiological” component of poetic texts could help answer some questions in regard to the interdependence of culture and nature, the “pre-culture” substratum of poetic language and the problem of the “reconstruction” of the psycho-physiological structure of the poet’s mind in its reflections in the texts s/he produces. According to Toporov, this “sea complex” consists not just of descriptions of the sea in poetic works, but rather employs the “sea theme” in order to depict something, for which the sea or water imagery is

only a conduit. He calls it the “sea code” of a “non-sea” utterance. In other words, the sea as an element, or even just as a principle of this element, serves as a metaphor for something that exists both in the sea and beyond it, above all in the mental-spiritual make-up of a human being, especially a language-conscious poet. Toporov also points out that this metaphor could be labeled “hackneyed,” since it appears in texts by numerous authors of different epochs, and with very little variation. He arrives at the conclusion that the secret of its “popularity” is in its being “organically” ingrained in the psycho-mental structures of an author and his/her intended audience, because this metaphor is largely reflective of and dependent on certain archetypes (Toporov 577).

The term *oceanic feeling* [Das ozeanische Gefühl] to describe a mystical feeling of eternity in the European consciousness, first appeared in print in the opening chapter of Sigmund Freud’s *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (1930), translated into English as *Civilization and its Discontents*. There, Freud quotes, but does not share, the opinion of the French writer Romain Rolland, who in a letter to Freud insisted that the true source of religious sentiments consists of a peculiar feeling, “which he [Rolland] himself is never without, which he found confirmed by many others, and which he supposes is present in millions of people. It is a feeling that he would like to call a sensation of eternity, a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded – as it were, oceanic” (Isham xx). This *oceanic feeling* is clearly present in Khlebnikov; his poetic universe abounds in water

imagery.

These contexts help us understand the specifics of Khlebnikov's watercolor techniques and the underlying mythic assumptions - transmitted by the language itself - that motivate the poet's choice of these. I now turn to the discussion of the painterly elements in Khlebnikov's poetry.

Khlebnikov's watercolors

Iz kliuva sochitsia pesn' li, polia li.

1908

From the beak there exudes a song or perhaps it's fields.²

1908

Khlebnikov's verse displays the poetic *dominanta* [leitmotif] of world liquescence.³ It encompasses conceptualization of living matter, as well as time, as fluid substances, which percolate through and into each other. For Khlebnikov, liquescence means mutual permeability of all matter: the Earth and the Sky – *Zemlia uronila / Na lazurnye vody nebes / [...] tu penu...* [Earth overturned / On to the azure waters of the Skies / [...] that foam...]; water and human feelings – *struina reka moei toski* [a purling stream of my melancholy]; water and human body – *chelo ozera* [forehead of the lake]; water and human life: *I v zhiznoem sebia my lili...* [And we poured ourselves into the life pool...].

In the following poem about the 'tree sisters', *Neum'* [Little Mind], *Razum'* [Great Mind] и *Bezum'* [No Mind], dance is presented as a medium,

percolating through which human bodies merge with each other and nature.

Gentleness of hands and legs accounts for the absence of outlines, which presents the bodies as blurring into each other and the spatiotemporal background: *Ruki nezhnye svilis', / Nogi nezhnye vzvilis', / vse krugom splelos', svilos', / V viazkoj manni rasplylos'* [Gentle hands twined, / Gentle legs took flight, / Everything merged, twined, blurred in viscid manna] (1907). Visual and aural perceptions in Khlebnikov often extend into each other: color can gradually turn into sound percolating through invisible filters. In an autobiographical note [*Avtobiograficheskaia zapiska*], the poet wrote:

Так, есть величины, с изменением которых синий цвет василька (я беру чистое ощущение), непрерывно изменяясь, проходя через неведомые нам, людям, области разрыва, превратится в звук кукования кукушки или в плач ребенка, станет им. (Proza 15)

There are variables, with the changing of which the blue color of a cornflower (I am speaking about a pure feeling), permanently changing, going through unknown to us, people, breakdown areas, will turn into cuckooing sound or into a child's cry, will become this sound.

Khlebnikov's neologisms, based on new morphological combinations, include metaphors of the liquescent permeability of matter, such as the saturation of a body with time. In the following example, it is a bird, Khlebnikov names *vremir'*. The word *vremir'* conflates *vremia* [time] and *snegir'* [bullfinch]. The

liquescence of these birds collectively, as a flock, as well as their fusion with time, is expressed through the sound of their song, which, as music in general, has a temporal implication/component: *Staia legkikh vremirei! [...] V serdtse vkhodish', kak volna* [A flock of light timefinches! [...] [You] enter the heart like a wave].

Khlebnikov's *oceanic feeling* is revealed in his abundant use of water imagery as applied to the human soul and time. It contributes to the perception of his poetry as watercolor. The poet's commingling of time and space, visual and auditory perceptions, the action and the doer of this action, observed by R. Jakobson (Ivanov 53), allows us to envisage his watercolors as made in a *wet in wet* technique. *Protekaiushchaia raskraska* (color extending beyond outline), a technique ascribed to Khlebnikov's visual painting (Markov 36), presupposes the methodical repetition of the same color or shade, which demonstrates 'the movement of color', its fluidity. *Protekaiushchaia raskraska* is first found in Russian icons as a distinctive artistic trend, where it is manifested by glaring highlights, which extend beyond the outline of the saints' clothes and merge with the background (Tarasov 1992). In Khlebnikov's 'visual painting,' color extends beyond outline in all four dimensions of his poetic space: length, width, depth and time. The interplay of the positive and negative⁴ spaces in watercolor creates the atmospheric perspective, which stands as a metaphor for time in visual art. A close analysis of Khlebnikov's visual painting in terms of watercolor "disproves"

Jakobson's assertion that, "while time has been made ideographic in painting by presenting it in terms of physical space as an artistic convention, the poetic language is still resistant to appropriation of time and space as its forms" (Ivanov 38).

The poet's vision of time is metaphysical: his universe persists across space and time rather than exists "beyond them" (Ivanov 195). We can observe Khlebnikov's first attempts to amalgamate space and time in his poem "Bobeobi" (1908-1909) (Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii* 198), which paints a portrait with sounds that function as color. The poet uses painting as spatial art and synthesizes it with sound, which, like music, is a temporal art. The liquescence of the human image is underscored by its being sung. The meter imitates the rhythm of waves rolling onto the shore, which underscores the fluidity of the facial features, referred to in the poem:

| | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <i>Бобэоби пелись губы,</i> | <i>Bobeobi the lips were sung,</i> |
| <i>Вээоми пелись взоры,</i> | <i>Veeomi the glances were sung,</i> |
| <i>Пиизэо пелись брови,</i> | <i>Piieo the eyebrows were sung,</i> |
| <i>Лиэээй пелся облик,</i> | <i>Lieeei the image/face was sung,</i> |
| <i>Гзи-гзи-гзэо пелась цепь.</i> | <i>Gzi-gzi-gzeo the chain was sung.</i> |
| <i>Так на холсте каких-то</i> | <i>So, on the canvas of some</i> |
| <i>соответствий</i> | <i>correspondences</i> |
| <i>Вне протяжения жило лицо.</i> | <i>Beyond the time continuum there lived</i> |
| | <i>a face.</i> |

Khlebnikov considered “Bobeobi” to be one of his major “short works,” which employed “painting by sound.” In his poetic pursuits, he was guided by C. Baudelaire’s ideas about correspondences between sounds and colors, also reflected in A. Rimbaud’s sonnet “Vowels.” In 1922 the poet wrote:

Еще Малларме и Бодлер говорили о слуховых соответствиях слова и глаза, слуховых видениях и звуках, у которых есть словарь.
*<...> Б имеет ярко-красный цвет, а потому губы – бобеоби; вээоми – синий, и потому глаза синие; пиизэо – черное (Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii* 476).*

Mallarmé and Baudelaire had already spoken about sound correspondences between word and eye, aural visions and sounds, which have a dictionary of their own. ... B is of a bright red color, hence, lips are bobeobi; veeomi is blue, hence, eyes are blue; piieo is black.

The following poem, “Gody, liudi i narody... [Years, people and peoples...]” (1916) (Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii* 379), was Khlebnikov’s tribute to the 100th anniversary of Gavriil Derzhavin’s death. It clearly shows that the poet unites people and time by the idea of liquescence. The flexibility of nature, presented as “an elastic mirror,” which reflects the movement of human ‘streams of water’ through flowing time, pertains to the world’s primal origin in water.

| | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| <i>Годы, люди и народы</i> | <i>Years, humans and peoples</i> |
| <i>Убегают навсегда,</i> | <i>Run away forever,</i> |
| <i>Как текущая вода.</i> | <i>Like flowing water.</i> |
| <i>В гибком зеркале природы</i> | <i>In the flexible mirror of nature</i> |
| <i>Звезды - невод, рыбы - мы</i> | <i>Stars are seine, we are fish,</i> |
| <i>Боги - призраки у тьмы.</i> | <i>Gods are ghosts of the darkness.</i> |

The poem is in dialogue with the perception of time in Derzhavin’s last poem “Reka vremen v svoem stremlen’i...” [The river of times in its flowing...], which the poet wrote three days before he died. Derzhavin reportedly was looking

at the map entitled “Reka vremen ili emblematiceskoe izobrazhenie sovremennoi istorii” [The river of times, or the Emblematic depiction of modern history], which was hanging on the wall of his study (Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii* 523).

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Река времен в своем стремленьи</i> | <i>Relentless River, coursing ages,</i> |
| <i>Уносит все дела людей</i> | <i>Usurps all works of mortal hands;</i> |
| <i>И топит в пропасти забвенья</i> | <i>It sinks all worlds, in darkness</i> |
| <i>Народы, царства и царей.</i> | <i>rages:</i> |
| <i>А если что и остается</i> | <i>Naught shall be saved – not Kings,</i> |
| <i>Через звуки лиры и трубы,</i> | <i>nor lands.</i> |
| <i>То вечности жерлом пожрется</i> | <i>Should any trace endure an hour</i> |
| <i>И обцей не уйдет судьбы.</i> | <i>Through Lyre’s chord or</i> |
| | <i>Trumpet’s call,</i> |
| | <i>Obscured it drowns, by Time</i> |
| | <i>devoured,</i> |
| | <i>Purged of its form – the fate of all.</i> |

Translation by A. Levitsky and M.
Kitchen

Derzhavin foregrounds the destructive aspect of water presenting time as a cataclysmic force. Khlebnikov implicitly polemicizes with his predecessor by laying emphasis on the *undulatory* nature of time [volnovaia priroda vremeni] (Davydov), the concept of which he favored. According to this concept, time develops in cycles and there is a certain, naturally determined number of days or years between two similar events. Since poetic language is a deviation from the linguistic norm and conventional visual perception, it is able to convey this unique vision; Khlebnikov lets his reader seize the present moment as a simultaneous locus of both past and future.

There are two more possible subtexts for the Khlebnikov poem mentioned in the notes to his *Selected Works*. These are D. Merezhkovskii's novel *Iulian Ostupnik* [Julian the Apostate] (1895) and an ancient Alexandrine text *Fiziolog* [Physiologos] (2nd-3rd century AD), a collection of articles about animals and stones. One of Merezhkovskii's characters, the Neoplatonist Iamvlikh [Iamblichus], likens the world to the sun and the stars to a seine. He observes that the world strives toward, but cannot grasp God, just like a moving seine cannot hold water: *Chemu upodobliu etot mir, vse eti solntsa i zvezdy? Seti upodobliu ikh, Zakinutoi v more. Set' dvizhetsia, no ne mozhет ostanovit' vodu; Mir khochet, no ne mozhет ulovit' Boga.*

In *Fiziolog*, the world is presented as sea and people as fish, who become

entrapped by demons into a net of baneful and evil desires: *More zhe – ves' mir, a ryby - liudi. [...] rybaki zhe – eto besy. Set' zhe – eto paguba i l'stivyve vozhdeleniia...* (Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii* 524).

As we can see, Khlebnikov uses pre-existing ancient conceptualizations in order to convey the idea of commingling and interpenetration of natural elements: water, people and time. Water is a prototypical mirror. Mapping the image of a mirror onto nature, the author suggests that water is the substance of life. Permeability is the most important quality that allows water to persist through time and space and to circumvent obstacles. Most prominent consonant sounds in the Russian word for 'mirror' [*zerkalo*] are 'liquids' - /r/ and /l/. The whole poem is also full of this liquid consonantal imagery. The sound pattern of the poem suggests that Khlebnikov's water is not stagnant or polluted, but primordially pure and transparent; the clusters of voiced consonants create the image of a cheerful and boisterous water flow. The poet draws on our traditional conceptualization of time as water and hence a moving entity: time is flowing through space as a water stream flows through a landscape. The poem shows that in our consciousness, people individually and collectively (as ethnos), time and water belong to the same conceptual area. This metaphorical conceptualization of people as water, which persists through space and time, emerges in such conventional expressions as *liudskoi potok* [stream of people], *utechka mozgov* [brain drain] and others. The human world and nature appear to be mirrors put one in front of the other: as a

result we can observe an almost infinite number of reciprocal reflections, or cross-mappings, between the two domains. For example, a verb of motion from the human domain *ubegaiut* [run away] in the poem is applied to water and then water imagery is immediately mapped onto the human domain. Since people and time are like water, it is justified to equate them. Time, as a category of human reality, becomes tangible at the points of contact with the human domain.

The second part of the poem, in just three lines on the verbal level and a single watercolor wash on the visual plane, grasps the unity of human life and the Cosmos. The image of a “seine made of stars” suggests that people are subject to the cosmic tides caused by the combined effects of the rotation of the Earth and the gravitational forces exerted by the Moon and the Sun. So, the seine in the poem corresponds to the tide as a pulling force. The image of the seine made of stars makes the abstract idea of gravitation very visual. A seine is a net, the ends of which are drawn together to encircle the fish: the metaphor entails that human beings are entrapped in the mystery of life cycles and have to yield to cosmic rhythms.

The next excerpt is taken from the poem “Lasok... [Weasels...⁵]” (1916), which was initially entitled “Oshibka smerti” [Death’s mistake]. Water imagery in this poem also brings in eroticism, a force permeating all living matter:

Ласок

Груди среди травы,

Вы вся - дыханье знойных засух.

Под деревом стояли вы,

А косы

Жмут жгут жестоких жалоб в

желоб, И вы голубыми часами

Закутаны медной косой.

Жмут, жгут их медные струи.

А взор твой - это хата,

Где жмут веретено

Две мачехи и пряжи.

Я выпил вас полным стаканом,

Когда голубыми часами

Смотрели в железную даль.

А сосны ударили в щит

Своей зажурчавшей хвои,

Зажмуривши взоры старух.

*I indulged in you as in a glass-full of
water,*

*When [you] were looking into the
metal distance*

With [your] blue clocks.

And the pines struck the shield

Of their purling needles,

Closing the old women's eyes tight.

И теперь

Жмут, жгут меня медные косы.

The sound pattern of the poem reflects Khlebnikov's views on sound symbolism, which he uncovers in his article "Perechen'. Azbuka uma" [Catalogue. The alphabet of the mind, 1916]. According to Khlebnikov, the recurrent /zh/ sound communicates the idea of independent movement and accounts for the concept of inherent liquescence, as in Russian words *zhidkii* [liquid], *zhivoi* [lively], *zhabry* [gills], *zhaba* [toad], *zhazhda* [thirst]. The poet underscores the equation between water and time by the example of intrinsic connection between *zhdai'* [wait] and *zhazhdai'* [have thirst for/desire]:

Ж – свобода двигаться независимо от соседей. Отсюда жидкий и живой, и все около воды: жабы, жаба, жажда. В древнем рассудке между водой и временем (прошедшим) протянута черта равенства. Отсюда родство ждать и жаждать (Sobranie sochinenii 524).

Zh – freedom to move independently of neighbors. Hence, liquid and live, and everything [that is] by the water: gills, toad, thirst. In the ancient mind, between water and time (the past) there stretched a line of

equation. Hence, kinship between wait and have thirst for/desire
(*Sobranie sochinenii* 524).

The poet's reference to the woman he loves as water, drained in one gulp to quench his thirst, illustrates, on the one hand, the traditional conceptualization of humans and human feelings as water and liquid, and, on the other hand, emphasizes the female nature of fluidity and ever-shifting water. The combination of water imagery with the image of a clock again points to the metaphysical connection between time and water. This interplay is made even more complex as clocks here obviously stand for human eyes, which, are conceptualized as the mirror of the soul in the Russian tradition: *glaza – zerkalo dushi*. A 'mirror image' is also present in a "shield of purling pine needles", because a shield, with its polished metallic surface, can also serve as a mirror. Russian *khvoia* (needles) is a mass noun [*sobiratel'noe sushchestvitel'noe*], which allows to present needles as a liquid substance or a mirror. Hence, this poem also conceptualizes nature as a "flexible mirror". According to Toporov, an evergreen pine tree is a symbol of immortality and eternal rebirth. Behind this symbol, there is always the antinomy of the sea, which connects the two poles: life and death. Such conifers as a fir tree (a Christmas tree), a cedar, a larch, are incarnations of the "world tree" or "tree of life", but at the same time, they are attributes of a funeral, symbolizing "life falling off (Toporov 587 - 591)." This makes the final image of the excerpt clear: "striking the shield of purling needles" serves to mark a point where the life cycle

has made a full circle. It presents a transition from the world of the living to the world of the dead as a natural event. The image of a young woman's open eyes, "blue clocks" filled with water of life, is intercut with "old women's eyes closed tight," i.e. life and youth symbolism here is juxtaposed to the imagery of ageing and death. The abundant presence of water in the poem helps to draw the following inference: as in a hydrological cycle, when water at some point turns into vapor, death does not presuppose complete disappearance, but only a change of state. Thus, a human life, to use a watercolor metaphor, "extends beyond its outline" and *protekaet* into a new dimension.

Mayakovsky's Cubo-Futurist heritage

From the time of its inception in 1909, as marked by the appearance of Filippo Marinetti's manifesto, Futurism employed shock tactics and the vocabulary of rebellion and violence. The Italian manifesto calls for physical destruction of humanity's past achievements, encapsulated in museums and academies. It also presupposed the "destruction of syntax" in the natural language, which consisted in reducing language to basic forms – nouns and infinitives. In poetry and music, Futurism strove to override harmony with cacophony, declaring it a new esthetic value (Lawton 2 - 9). The Futurist ethos, built on the principles of dynamism, speed and simultaneity, poeticized the materiality of the chaotic universe and emphasized the primacy of the Machine over Nature (Markov 142). Russian Futurist manifestoes did not lag far behind. It

is enough to remind of the well-known *Poshchechina obschestvennomu vkusu* [A slap in the face of public taste] (1912) to realize that Russian Futurism was “unceremonious” in its attitude to the past.

Russian Futurism was from the outset “conspicuously marked by the imprint of Cubism” (Ottinger 37), forming an integral part of Futurism in Russia. Russian Cubo-Futurism viewed artistic creation as a deliberate distortion and not as a reflection of reality. Words, which possess a self-contained reality [*samovitoe slovo*], according to Russian Futurists, serve as construction material for poetry. The poet’s goal is to evoke a certain ‘idea’ by means of composition and arrangement of words on paper and in relation to each other. The poet was thus viewed as a verbal engineer (Barooshian 17).⁶ Cubism put forth the dynamics of fragmentation and displacement [*sdvig*] of normative centers (Stapanian 2); this approach found its reflection in both the visual arts and poetry of the time.

According to Stapanian, the Russian Cubo-Futurists cultivated a poetic form of “visual text,” which violated conventional ideas about semantics. The word was considered to be greater than its conventional meaning [*slovo shire smysla*].⁷ The scholar points out that Mayakovsky’s early poetry develops interplay of verbal signs and visual devices from contemporary avant-garde painting. She suggests a framework for analyzing this kind of synthetic art, which she calls “graphic scansion.” This strategy considers “verbal codes in their conjunction with pictorial codes” (Stapanian 1 - 4), and is effectively applied to

Mayakovsky's verse as a product of his Cubo-Futurist vision.

Cubo-Futurism constitutes the artistic genealogical roots for Mayakovsky's verbal creativity and provides explanation for why his poetry can be visualized as cardboard collages. Below, I provide an analysis of how cardboard collage technique maps onto the poet's linguistic experimentations.

Mayakovsky's collages

Видите -

звездами слов

прибит к бумаге я.

В. Маяковский,

Флейта-позвоночник. 1915

Look –

with the nails of words

I am hammered down to paper.

V. Mayakovsky,

Backbone Flute

As already stated, Mayakovsky gravitated more towards the 'constructivist' flank of the Futurist movement, than the Budetlianin Khlebnikov.⁸ His artistic ethos prescribes that the materials his verse is made of should be

“ponderous, crude and tangible.” A very important aspect of Mayakovsky’s cult of earthly life and yearning for physical immortality is his belief that only the solidly material and static has the ability to outlive the poet’s physical presence on Earth. These themes and esthetics are relayed in the poem “Vo ves’ golos [At the Top of my Voice]” (1929 - 1930).

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| <i>Мой стих</i> | <i>My verse</i> |
| <i>трудом</i> | <i>by labor</i> |
| <i>громаду лет прорвет</i> | <i>will break the mountain chain of</i> |
| <i>и явится</i> | <i>ears</i> |
| <i>весомо,</i> | <i>and will come out</i> |
| <i>грубо,</i> | <i>ponderous,</i> |
| <i>зримо,</i> | <i>crude,</i> |
| <i>как в наши дни</i> | <i>tangible,</i> |
| <i>вошел водопровод,</i> | <i>as an aqueduct</i> |
| <i>сработанный</i> | <i>made</i> |
| <i>еще рабами Рима.</i> | <i>by the slaves of Rome.</i> |

In his analysis of Mayakovsky’s poems “Noch’ [Night]” (1912) and “Utro [Morning]” (1912), one of the poet’s main scholars, Brown compares his play with color, form and line, which is important for Cubo-Futurism, with “an urban

kaleidoscope”. He envisages the transition from one stanza to the next as “a sudden shift in the position of the framing box, which drops the pieces of the picture into new patterns” (Brown 73). Malevich called another Mayakovsky poem, “Iz ulitsy v ulitsu [From Street to Street]” (1913) “the most successful experimentation in versified cubism” (quoted in Brown 79) Brown suggests that “the [visual] effect is achieved by the *segmentation* (italics are mine) of words on the page, and by a succession of phrases that read roughly the same way backward and forward” (79). Stapanian, in a similar vein, compares shifts, fragmentations and distortions of multiple image- and verbal-frameworks in Mayakovsky’s verse with Cubist paintings, where “images are fractioned and displaced along a grid-like structure” (3).

Mayakovsky’s ‘verbal painting’ could be presented as the following sequence of activities: cutting objects out of construction paper, coloring them with gouache or oils and gluing them onto some background as pieces of a collage. Fragmentation and segmentation of imagery by means of manipulations with the language and its graphic form support the idea that Mayakovsky’s poetry can be visualized as a cardboard collage. It contains several recurrent tropes, which further substantiate this hypothesis.

Mayakovsky’s poetry foregrounds frequent use of cutting, piercing and breaking imagery (Stahlberger, 1964; Brown, 1973). In *Vladimir Maiakovskii* [Vladimir Mayakovsky] (1913), *Oblako v shtanakh* [Cloud in Pants] (1914 -

1915) and *Fleita-pozvonochnik* [Backbone Flute] (1915), for example, we encounter the following verbs, which carry the semantics of violation: *rasparyvat'* [unrip], *rvat'* [tear], *vyryvat'* [tear out], *kroit'sia kastetom* [cut with brass knuckles], *raskraivat'sia/rezat'* [cut], *vgryzat'sia* [to sink one's teeth into], *perekusyvat'* [bite through/off], *obrubat'* [chop off], *razbivat'* [break].

The metaphor of cutting and breaking also describes the way Mayakovsky recited his poetry. Markov mentions his “unbearable manner of pronouncing the sentences separately, as if hurling them out one after another, and ending them in a sing-song manner.” Metaphorically speaking, the poet reifies words as weapons in order to cut reality according to his own design with the help of his voice.

Several characters in the drama *Vladimir Maiakovskii*, such as the *Cripples*, are pronouncedly theatrical in that they wear cardboard masks (Stahlberger 24 - 25). Here, the cardboard quality of the images was dictated by theatrical convention. The labels, Mayakovsky sticks to these characters, like a second set of theatrical masks, exaggerate one feature of the image, and foreground it. For instance, in the cast of characters, we find some, whose role is outlined in one prominent detail: *zhenshchina so slezinkoi* [a woman with a tiny tear], *zhenshchina so slezoi* [a woman with a tear], *zhenshchina so slezishchei* [a woman with a huge tear]. A tear cannot be a permanent and inalienable characteristic feature of the human image: Mayakovsky makes the temporary appear permanent and considers the alienable to be inalienable. The resulting

visual image is a woman's face with a tear stuck to it just like a mole. For the stage, these tears were substantialized in a form that resembled "some sort of giant fish bubbles" (Stahlberger 42). Sometimes this foregrounded feature can synecdochically stand for the entire human being, as the poet's lips in *Oblako v shtanakh*. The image of lips here symbolizes his complete submergence in the feeling of love. The static image of the poet's "solid" lips - the result of turning one's flesh inside out - contrasts with Khlebnikov's liquescent "sung" lips living through space and time in the poem "Bobeobi".

Нежные!

Вы любовь на скрипки

ложите.

Любовь на литавры ложит

грубый.

А себя, как я, вывернуть не

можете,

чтобы были одни сплошные

губы!

Tender lovers

with violins vie.

The ruder compete with

cymbals.

But can anyone turn inside out

like I

to be nothing but lips, bodiless

and limbless?

Translation by D. Rottenberg

The idea of shrinking down our vision to one feature is also present in

Mayakovsky's attempts to present objects, much bigger than the human form, as small, which creates the effect of making them easily able to be manipulated. In his imagination, he utilizes the sun and the stars as brooches and pins them on his beloved's dress: *My solntsa / prikolem liubimym na plat'e, iz zvezd nakuem / serebriashchikhsia broshek* [We will pin suns to our beloveds' dress, from stars we will forge silver brooches] (*Oblako v shtanakh*).

Mayakovsky envisions un-utilizable objects as utilizable and makes them more crudely material than the 'real' objects; in his poetic space, the unattachable becomes attachable; the liquid solidifies and turns from transparent into opaque. In the following example, a tear becomes estranged and reified: *Vot eshche sleza. Mozhno na tufliu. Budet krasivaia priazhka* [Here is one more tear. [It] could be [attached to] a shoe. [It] will make a good buckle] (*Vladimir Maiakovskii*). Jakobson and Vinokur, as quoted in Stahlberger, also point out Mayakovsky's similar manipulations with animacy/inanimacy, i.e. he makes animate inanimate and the other way round (1964:48). It is clear the poet cannot accept 'God-given' nature, but feels compelled to rearrange, reconstruct and 'refunctionalize' it.

Another trope that contributes to the visualization of Mayakovsky's imagery as collages is the reification of abstract ideas. The poet consistently attempts to present the abstract as concrete and to manipulate the resulting object. One of the characters in the tragedy *Vladimir Maiakovskii* is *chelovek s dvumia*

potseluiami [a man with two kisses]. The author converts “a touch with the lips,” as the Oxford Dictionary definition of ‘kiss’ has it, into an object, the materiality of which is contextually underscored by its countability.

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| <i>Большому и грязному</i> | <i>A man who was big and all dirty</i> |
| <i>человеку</i> | <i>received two kisses as a gift.</i> |
| <i>подарили два поцелуя.</i> | <i>He was an awkward fellow and</i> |
| <i>Человек был неловкий, не</i> | <i>didn't know what</i> |
| <i>знал, что с ними</i> | <i>to do with them – where they</i> |
| <i>делать, куда их</i> | <i>should go. The whole town,</i> |
| <i>деть. Город, весь в</i> | <i>bedecked for the holiday, was</i> |
| <i>празднике, возносил в</i> | <i>singing hallelujahs in the</i> |
| <i>соборах аллилуя, люди</i> | <i>cathedrals,</i> |
| <i>выходили красивое</i> | <i>and people were out in their</i> |
| <i>надеть.</i> | <i>Sunday best.</i> |
| <i>А у человека было</i> | <i>But the man was cold;</i> |
| <i>холодно,</i> | <i>There were oval shaped holes in</i> |
| <i>и в подошвах дырочек</i> | <i>the soles of his shoes.</i> |
| <i>овальцы.</i> | <i>He chose one of the kisses –</i> |
| <i>Он выбрал</i> | <i>bigger than the other – and put it</i> |

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| <i>поцелуй, который</i> | <i>on</i> |
| <i>побольше, и надел, как</i> | <i>like his galoshes.</i> |
| <i>калошу. Но мороз ходил</i> | <i>But the weather was bitter cold</i> |
| <i>злой, укусил его за</i> | <i>and nipped at his</i> |
| <i>пальцы. «Что же, —</i> | <i>toes. “Oh, bother!” said the</i> |
| <i>рассердился человек, —</i> | <i>angry man.</i> |
| <i>я эти</i> | <i>“I’ll throw these useless kisses</i> |
| <i>ненужные поцелуи</i> | <i>away!”</i> |
| <i>брошу!» Бросил.</i> | <i>And he did.</i> |

Translation by G. Daniels.

The term *raskraska*, discussed in the Khlebnikov section above, may also be applied to Mayakovsky, but in a different meaning of the term. In Russian, *raskraska* can also describe the filling in of two-dimensional shapes with color, just as in a coloring book for children. It implies a mechanistic process devoid of creative impulse. Mayakovsky’s interplay of verbal expression and visual artistic metaphor presents the process of filling in ready-made shapes with color as a mystery of Creation. In this creation, God is dismissed in his capacity of Artist who breathed life and coloration into the universe in the beginning of times. Instead, in the poet’s vision of the Universe, he just left a dull and primitive outline, which art has to improve on. The verb for this activity that Mayakovsky

uses in his poem “Poet Rabochii [Poet Worker]” (1918) is *razukrasit’*, which means “to decorate, adorn, embellish as for a holiday.” He thus implies that he adds qualities to the previous Creation that it was lacking. In this act, he is also supported by the collective.

Лишь вместе

Only together

вселенную мы разукрасим

We'll paint/decorate the Universe

и маршами пустим ухатъ.

And let it down

Bang

Crash, March.

This fragment from the poem “Poet Worker” reveals Mayakovsky’s disdain for nature and the idea of a given Creation. While the first two lines speak about seemingly constructive creativity, its last line contains the manifesto of destruction that the new world order prepares for the Universe. The act of painting and adorning it presents it as an inorganic being, devoid of inner structure and makes it appear flat. The verb *ukhat’* describes erratic and inexorable downward movement of a tremendously weighty object. Instead of the colorful image of new creation the poem develops an almost apocalyptic but, at the same time, ludicrous effect: it presents the Universe as a painted carnivalesque carriage, which is burnt and let go banging down the hill with an eventual crash.

Another poem, “A vy mogli by? [But could you?]” (1913), describes detrimental changes, which the poet inflicts on the conventional world order by way of his manipulations with the help of painterly Cubist methods. Mayakovsky’s metaphor of “splashing paint on the map of everyday routine” creates a visual image of muddle and contamination, which the poet himself presents as adornment and *re-creation*, in the same way as he does in the “Poet Worker.” The “slanting cheekbones of the ocean” can only appear “on the plate of brawny glutin” as a result of slashing and turning it upside down with a knife. Instead of creating an epic canvas of primeval chaos, as a pre-requisite for the birth of new life, the poet documents an act of ruthless youthful vandalism. The “liquid” images of splashed paint and liquid-based glutin do not produce an impression of freshness and fluidity but rather of pollution and damage. The appearance of the “new” lips on “the scales of a tin fish,” reminiscent of Malevich’s painting *Anglichanin v Moskve* [An Englishman in Moscow] (1914), suggests their lifelessness and staticity, although they seem to be calling the poet to either amorous or revolutionary exploits.

| | |
|--|---|
| <p><i>Я сразу смазал карту будня, плеснувши краску из стакана; я показал на блюде студня косые скулы океана. На чешуе жестяной рыбы прочел я зовы новых губ. А вы ноктюрн сыграть могли бы на флейте водосточных труб?</i></p> | <p><i>I splashed some colors from a glass and smeared the world of drabness. I showed on a dish of trembling jelly the jutting cheekbones of the ocean. Upon the scales of a tin fish sign I read the calls of lips yet mute. And you, could you have played a nocturne on a flute of drainpipes?</i></p> |
|--|---|

Even water imagery preserves a static cardboard quality in Mayakovsky's poetry, as the waves of the tempestuous Neva do, in the excerpt from *Pro eto* [About That] (1923). The visual images appear static and rigid; hence they do not presuppose a temporal dimension. The hero of this poem is going to commit suicide because of unrequited love. The stasis of the waves is dictated by the central image of the modern bridge, from which he is going to throw himself down into the water. Its formidable stock-still ferro-concrete piers firmly anchor the whole universe in one decisive moment: between life and death. The *faktura*, more than the dimensionality of the visual image is achieved by presenting the

spans and arches of the bridge as embroidery on the fabric of the sky.

Mayakovsky does not go into details as to the specific type of embroidery he has in mind, but the emergent image of stitches, also contributes to the idea of firm attachment in space. A human figure appears “fastened” or “screwed to” [*prikruchennyi*] to “the inflamed background of the sky” as well. This form of “attachment” divests the image of water of its “innate” dimensions, and deprives it of depth.

| | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| <i>Волны устои стальные моют.</i> | <i>The waves are washing the steel</i> |
| <i>Недвижный,</i> | <i>bases.</i> |
| <i>страшный,</i> | <i>Immobile,</i> |
| <i>упершись в бока</i> | <i>Formidable,</i> |
| <i>столицы,</i> | <i>Resting against the sides</i> |
| <i>в отчаянье созданной</i> | <i>of the capital,</i> |
| <i>мною, стоит</i> | <i>Which I made up in</i> |
| <i>на своих стоэтажных</i> | <i>despair,</i> |
| <i>быках.</i> | <i>There it stands</i> |
| <i>Небо воздушными скрепами</i> | <i>on its hundred storied</i> |
| <i>вышил.</i> | <i>bases.</i> |
| <i>Из вод феерией стали</i> | <i>It embroidered the sky with its</i> |

восстал.

Глаза подымаю выше,

выше...

Вон!

Вон -

у небес в воспаленном фоне,

прикрученный мною

стоит человек.

airy staples.

Raised out of the waters as a

steel extravaganza.

I am lifting my eyes higher,

higher...

There!

There –

Against the inflamed

background of the sky,

There stands a man,

who I screwed down to it.

Conclusions

Khlebnikov's *protekaiushchaia raskraska*, where color extends beyond the outline and creates transparency, shape and depth, makes a strong contrast to Mayakovsky's poetic space, which does not give an ideographic representation of time. The two artistic approaches to portraying reality, watercolor and constructivist collage, reflect the essential difference between *Budetlianin* and *Futurist* artistic ethos. The former draws on the metaphysics of life cycles, and envisions a human being as their subject and integral part. The latter, on the contrary, is anthropocentric; it takes an aggressive stance towards reality and attempts to cut and reshape it according to its own design.

¹ Borrowed from the Italian avant-garde, the term *Futurism* links Russian poets and artists more closely to Italian futurism and their leader F. Marinetti than the term *Budetlianstvo*. The Italian Futurist Manifesto proclaimed total rejection of the past, as a corner stone of their esthetics, also declaring that art “can be nothing but violence, cruelty, and injustice (Apollonio, 1973:23; Original publication in French: Le Figaro, Paris, February 20, 1909).”

² Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Russian are my own.

³ The Khlebnikov poems selected for analysis are from the period 1904 – 1916; they are quoted from Volume I of Khlebnikov’s *Collected Works* (Khlebnikov, V. *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*. Moskva: IMLI RAN, “Nasledie,” 2000)

⁴ “Positive space” is an art term denoting the space filled with color; “negative space” is created by painting the area around a form instead of the form itself, which is left blank.

⁵ This translation of the first word in the poem is the one given in the Commentary to Volume I of Khlebnikov’s *Collected Works*. In folk belief, a weasel can act as a witch, a shape shifter, who is able to turn into a maiden (2000:524). The word *lasok* is ambiguous, however: although it could be understood as the genitive plural form of *laska* [weasel] followed by a reference to these animals’ chests seen amidst grass, it can also be interpreted as an elliptical construction with the meaning of ‘caressing [someone’s] breasts amidst grass,’ as it is followed by a clear reference to a woman the poet loves. Homonymy, which merges two senses in one word, plays for the watercolor effect, so all-pervasive in Khlebnikov. This type of homonymic pun is also found in the title of the famous manifesto *Sadok Sudei*, which may mean either [trap for judges] or [hatchery of judges].

⁶ This attitude toward the creation of poetry is reflected in Mayakovsky’s treatise on aesthetics provocatively entitled *Kak delat’ stikhi* [How verse is made] (1926).

⁷ A.A. Kruchenykh, as quoted in Stapanian.

⁸ The Mayakovsky poems selected for analysis are from the period 1912 – 1930; they are quoted from various editions of Mayakovsky’s poems.

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