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| Russian Futurism |
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| An avant-garde movement dedicated to radical poetic experimentation to meet the needs of the dynamic modern era. From obscure beginnings in 1910, Russian Futurism reached its zenith during the years 1912–14, before losing cohesion during the First World War. After 1917, many Futurists produced literature in service of the Bolshevik revolution, but they became marginalized in the late 1920s as experimental writing fell out of favour. Several competing groups adopted the name ‘Futurists’, including, in Russia, the Ego-Futurists, Hylaea (also known as the Cubo-Futurists), and the Mezzanine of Poetry. Of these groups, Hylaea produced the most enduring literature. Hylaea included the Burliuk brothers (David, Nikolai, and Vladimir), Elena Guro, Velimir Khlebnikov, Vasilii Kamenskii, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Benedikt Livshits, and Vladimir Mayakovsky. Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh proved the most experimental writers, developing a transrational language (*zaum’*) made up of newly-coined words which had no denotative meaning, with their power depending on their sonic and graphic import alone. Mayakovsky demonstrated his originality through inventive imagery, a colloquial immediacy, and his creative use of rhyme, rhythm and poetic structures. While poetry and the manifesto proved the literary forms most conducive to Futurist experimentation, Futurists also wrote drama and prose fiction. |
| An avant-garde movement dedicated to radical poetic experimentation to meet the needs of the dynamic modern era. From obscure beginnings in 1910, Russian Futurism reached its zenith during the years 1912–14, before losing cohesion during the First World War. After 1917, many Futurists produced literature in service of the Bolshevik revolution, but they became marginalized in the late 1920s as experimental writing fell out of favour. Several competing groups adopted the name ‘Futurists’, including, in Russia, the Ego-Futurists, Hylaea (also known as the Cubo-Futurists), and the Mezzanine of Poetry. Of these groups, Hylaea produced the most enduring literature. Hylaea included the Burliuk brothers (David, Nikolai, and Vladimir), Elena Guro, Velimir Khlebnikov, Vasilii Kamenskii, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Benedikt Livshits, and Vladimir Mayakovsky. Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh proved the most experimental writers, developing a transrational language (*zaum’*) made up of newly-coined words which had no denotative meaning, with their power depending on their sonic and graphic import alone. Mayakovsky demonstrated his originality through inventive imagery, a colloquial immediacy, and his creative use of rhyme, rhythm and poetic structures. While poetry and the manifesto proved the literary forms most conducive to Futurist experimentation, Futurists also wrote drama and prose fiction.  File: GroupOfHylaeaFuturists.jpg  Figure 1 A group of Hylaea Futurists in 1912. Standing: N. Burliuk; Seated, left to right: Kruchenykh, D. Burliuk, Mayakovsky, Livshits.  Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/a/a2/Poshechina\_obshestvennomu\_vkusu.jpg/200px-Poshechina\_obshestvennomu\_vkusu.jpg  David Burliuk, who served as an organizer of the Hylaea group, dates the origins of Futurism to the publication of the collection *Sadok sudei* (A Trap for Judges) in 1910. However, as early as 1907-08, Khlebnikov's poetry shows the hallmarks of verbal experimentation that would later be labelled Futurist. Despite the Futurists' frequent denunciations of Russian Symbolist poetry, the Symbolists undeniably influenced them, especially in their innovative use of poetic forms, their synaesthesia, and their distaste for Realist aesthetics. However, unlike the Symbolists, who often sought a Neo-Platonic transcendence through poetry, the Futurists rather focused on the intrinsic value of the word. The best Futurist poetry is characterized by verbal innovation, sound-patterning, and linguistic play, as in the following much-anthologized poem by Khlebnikov, written in 1908–09 but not published until 1912:  Бобэóби пелись губы, Bobay*oh*bee sang the lips,  Вээóми пелись взоры, Vayay*oh*mee sang the glances,  Пиээо пелись брови, Peeayayoh sang the eyebrows,  Лиэээй — пелся облик, Leeayayay — sang the visage,  Гзи-гзи-гзэо пелась цепь. Gzee-gzee-gzayoh sang the chain.  Так на холсте каких-то соответствий And so on a canvas of certain correspondences  Вне протяжения жило Лицо. Outside dimension there lived a Face.    Like their Italian counterparts, Russian Futurist writers collaborated closely with visual artists. Indeed, many writers—including Guro, Mayakovsky and Kruchenykh—began their careers as painters and translated painterly techniques to the written word. The Futurists often designed their own books. Unlike the lavish, gilded volumes of their Symbolist predecessors, early Futurist books were diminutive and ephemeral, often printed on wallpaper, and illustrated with Neo-primitivist drawings by artists such as Natal’ia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, Kazimir Malevich and Olga Rozanova.  File: AGameInHellCover.jpg  Figure 2 Cover of Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh's *Igra v adu: Poema* (*A Game in Hell: A Poem*), illustrated by Natalia Goncharova, 1912. Such Neo-primitivist drawings often accompanied Futurist writings.  Source: <http://arttattler.com/commentarytangowithcows.html>  While the Italian Futurists, led by Marinetti, celebrated technology, speed, and the modern metropolis, Russian Futurists had a more ambivalent attitude towards modernity and emphasized formal innovation as the key marker of the new poetry. Moreover, several HylaeaFuturists evinced an interest in primitivism not found among the Italians. Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh in particular drew inspiration from Russia's pre-Petrine past and their linguistic experiments often evoke an ancient Slavic language free of Western influences. Indeed, Khlebnikov's preferred term for ‘Futurist’ was not the Latinate *futurist* imported into Russian, but his own coinage from a Slavic root, *budetlianin*.  Yet while the Hylaea Futurists firmly protested their independence from Marinetti, he influenced at least the tone of their work, particularly their provocative manifestos. The most famous of these manifestoes was ‘Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu’ (‘A Slap in the Face of Public Taste’), which gained the group instant notoriety upon its appearance in December 1912. Signed by David Burliuk, Mayakovsky, Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh, the manifesto urged Russians to ‘[t]hrow Puskhin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc. overboard from the Ship of Modernity’ and called upon poets to pursue ‘Slovo-novshestvo’ (‘Word-novelty’).  The following year, 1913, has been called the *annus mirabilis* of Russian Futurism. The Hylaea group published a number of miscellanies including *Sadok sudei II* (A Trap for Judges II), *Trebnik troikh* (Prayerbook of Three) and *Dokhlaia luna* (The Croaked Moon) among others. Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov’s influential booklet *Slovo kak takovoe* (The Word as Such) also appeared in 1913, which defended their use of ‘chopped-up words, half-words, and [...] *zaum’* to create a ‘swift language of modernity.’ The Futurists’ approach to the word played an instrumental role in inspiring the Russian Formalists, particularly the work of Viktor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson, both of whom were close to the Hylaea circle in the 1910s.  The Futurists courted controversy in their public readings, often appearing in face paint and outrageous attire, and making provocative jibes about the audience. Mayakovsky’s stage presence in particular brought him both acclaim and infamy: he became renowned for his trademark yellow blouse and his booming voice, which admirer Elsa Triolet described as having ‘the strength and volume of a cathedral organ.’ Mayakovsky played the role of himself in his experimental play *Vladimir Maiakovskii: Tragediia* (Vladimir Mayakovsky: A Tragedy), which opened alongside Kruchenykh’s Futurist opera *Pobeda nad solntsem* (Victory Over the Sun)in December 1913 to bemused St. Petersburg audiences.  In 1914, the turmoil unleashed by the outbreak of the First World War seemed to vindicate the poetics of dislocation and fragmentation found in the Futurists' writing. Yet as the Futurists increasingly gained prestige among the literary establishment, their iconoclastic appeal declined. Moreover, the movement started to lose cohesion as the writers began to publish separately rather than collectively. However, individual Futurists produced a number of important works during this period: Mayakovsky completed long poems such as ‘Oblako v shtanakh’(‘Cloud in Trousers’), ‘Fleita-pozvonochnik’ (‘The Backbone Flute’), and ‘Voina i mir’ (‘War and the Universe’). Khlebnikov’s experimental prose piece *Ka* was first published in 1916.  Futurist ranks grew thin during the latter years of the war and the subsequent Civil War. Vladimir Burliuk was killed in combat in 1917; in 1920, David Burliuk emigrated and Nikolai Burliuk was executed. Khlebnikov died in 1922. However, Futurism flowered in this period in the city of Tiflis (now Tbilisi) where Kruchenykh collaborated with Igor’ Terent’ev and Il’ia Zdanevich to form a new Futurist group, 41°. As T. Nikolskaia notes, their work bore resemblances to DADA in its inclination towards alogism and irrationality. Zdanevich became involved in the Paris Dada movement after moving to France in 1921.  Following the October Revolution of 1917, a number of Futurists remaining in Russia produced art in support of the Bolshevik cause: in 1919 Mayakovsky was involved in the short-lived Communist-Futurist group *Komfut* which combined radical Futurist artistic principles with revolutionary politics. Mayakovsky also played an instrumental role in *LEF* (Left Front of Arts) in the 1920s, where he was joined by Kruchenykh, but this group endorsing artistic experimentation faced increasing marginalization in the Soviet Union and disbanded in 1929. Mayakovsky committed suicide in 1930; Livshits was executed in 1938 for alleged anti-Soviet activity. Kruchenykh died in obscurity in 1968.  A number of other literary groups identified as ‘Futurists’ in Russia. Igor’ Severianin was the leading figure of Ego-Futurism, a movement formed in St. Petersburg in 1911. As the name suggests, Ego-Futurists wrote poetry hyperbolically glorifying the self; their work also reflects an urbanism borrowed from Italian Futurism. Temporarily allied with the Ego-Futurists was the Moscow-based Mezzanine of Poetry, organized by Vadim Shershenevich and the artist Léon Zack. Shershenevich translated Marinetti and his poetry too shows an urbanist bent similar to that of the Italian Futurists. Finally, Sergei Bobrov organized the Centrifuge in January 1914. Although this group rejected the name ‘Futurists’ and tended to avoid the more provocative antics associated with the movement, their analytical attitude towards the poetic word and metrical experimentation have led most critics to consider them an offshoot of Russian Futurism. |
| Further reading:  (Folejewski)  (Gurianova)  (Jakobson)  (Janecek)  (Kruchenykh)  (Lawton and Eagle)  (Livshits)  (Markov)  (Nikolskaia)  (Perloff)  (Proffer and Proffer)  (Triolet) |