

Russian Constructivist Theory and Practice in the Visual and Verbal Forms of *Pro Eto*.

By

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Abstract

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This dissertation aims in part to redress the shortage of close readings of Vladimir Mayakovsky and Aleksandr Rodchenko's joint project, the book *Pro Eto*. It explores the relationship between the book's visual and verbal aspects, treating the book and its images as objects that repay attentive looking and careful analysis. By these means this dissertation finds that the images do not simply illustrate the text, but have an intertextual relationship with it: sometimes the images suggest their own, alternative narrative, offering scenes that do not exist in the poem; sometimes they act as literary criticism, suggesting interpretations, supplying biographical information, and highlighting with their own form aspects of the poem's.

This analysis reveals *Pro Eto*'s strong links with distant forms of art and literature. The poem's intricate ties to the book of Genesis and Victor Shklovsky's novel *Zoo*, written while the former literary critic was in exile in Berlin, evince an ambivalence about the manifestations of socialism in early-1920s Russia that is missing from much of Mayakovsky's work. At the same time Rodchenko's images, with their repeated references to Byzantine icons and Dadaist photomontage, expand the poem's scope and its concerns far beyond NEP-era Moscow. Thus my analysis finds that although *Pro Eto* is considered to be an emblematic Constructivist work, many of the received ideas about Russian Constructivism—the unswerving zeal of its practitioners, the utility of its production, and in particular the ideology-driven, *sui-generis* nature of the movement itself—are not supported by the book. *Pro Eto*'s deep connections with art and literature outside of Bolshevik Russia contradict the idea—first set out by the Constructivists themselves and widely accepted by subsequent scholars—of Constructivism as an autochthonous movement, born of theory, and indebted neither to historical art movements nor to contemporary western ones. My analysis suggests that reading *Pro Eto* through the lens of Constructivist theory denies the work the richness, ambivalence and humor it gains when that theory is understood as being in conversation with artistic practice, rather than defining it.

For Sam and Zephyr

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Introduction

About What? About “*About That*”

Pro Eto (“About That”) is a work with an ambiguous status and an intricate history.

The joint work of the revolutionary Futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and the Constructivist artist Aleksander Rodchenko, *Pro Eto* is, at its simplest, a long poem accompanied by photomontage illustrations. Beyond that, the book, which was first published in 1923, defies easy description. Though it is the result of Mayakovsky and Rodchenko’s combined efforts, it is not quite a collaboration, since the poem was written and published in advance of the creation of the images. Likewise, while it might today be considered an ‘artists’ book’ because of the importance of design to the overall work, *Pro Eto* can also be seen as little more than a modernist update of the age-old tradition of illustrated books. It was not, certainly, the watershed in book-design that Mayakovsky’s and El Lissitzky’s 1923 work *For the Voice* (Для голоса) represented, with its color designs and striking graphical thumb-index.

Indeed, in some ways *Pro Eto* seems insubstantial. While the illustrations and especially the cover are arresting and charged with graphic drama, much of the book’s physical and typographical layout is standard: black and white text (albeit in Mayakovsky’s signature stair-step style and with typographical nuances) with captioned, black-and-white illustrations on opposing pages. The book is thin--a total of 50 pages including eight illustrations--and was published in a relatively small edition of 3,000 copies.

In other ways, however, *Pro Eto* is a major work. The poet himself evaluated it quite highly, writing in the foreword to a 1924 edition that *Pro Eto* “for me—and indeed for everyone else—was a poem of the greatest and finest finish.”¹ The author’s opinion aside, the poem provoked considerable attention --both good and bad-- when it was published, with major figures from literary and political realms publicly weighing in on its merits. Among later scholars of Russian literature the poem has sometimes been called the Mayakovsky’s “masterpiece of the 1920s.” Along with his earlier *Cloud in Trousers*, *Pro Eto* is assessed as one of Mayakovsky’s two “great lyric poems”,² and it is counted along with the journal *LEF* as “one of the [two] most important projects of his life.”³ The poem is variously described as the “literary high point” of works published in *LEF*,⁴ and Mayakovsky’s “most complex” work.⁵ Victor Terras writes that “*About That*....is Mayakovsky’s most interesting and masterful longer work....a medley of the ridiculous and the sublime, of genuine pathos and and uproarious grotesque, of personal statement and literary parody.”⁶

The photomontage illustrations and cover Rodchenko created for *Pro Eto* have met with even greater acclaim. An anonymous article published in *LEF* in 1924 touted photomontage as

¹ Quoted in Herbert Marshall, *Mayakovsky* (London: Dobson, 1965) 157.

² Marshall, 159.

³ Victor Terras, *Vladimir Mayakovsky* (Boston: Twayne publishers, 1983). 18

⁴ Edward Brown, *Mayakovsky: A Poet in the Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 218.

⁵ Marshall, 157.

⁶ Terras., 80.

the most important new medium and pointed to Rodchenko's *Pro Eto* illustrations as models of what it could accomplish.⁷ In the decades since the book's publication, the illustrations and cover Rodchenko created for *Pro Eto* have become icons of Russian avant-garde art, and are perhaps even better known than the poem they were made to illustrate. Taken together, they represented the largest sustained work of photomontage in Russia at the time of their publication, and the first book illustrated with such images.⁸ Dawn Ades praises Rodchenko's illustrations as "among the first imaginative uses of the medium" of photomontage.⁹ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh points to the *Pro Eto* images in particular as exemplary of the "exuberance" and "willfulness" of photomontage in 1923, and as exhibiting their creator's "relief at having finally broken the modernist ban on iconic representation."¹⁰ Another scholar singles the series out as 'the apogee' of Rodchenko's photomontage technique.¹¹ Images from the book are widely anthologized and are often used as an emblem of the dynamism and vitality of Russian Constructivism in the early 1920s.¹² Images appear in numerous specialized works on particular genres including photography, typography, and photomontage, but they also figure very often in general art-historical textbooks, where they stand for the Russian avant-garde, in particular as representatives of Constructivism in the early 1920s. It is no doubt the images' ubiquity in such works that lead one art historian to enthuse that the "photomontages are universally regarded as prime examples of the new modernist medium of photomontage in the 1920s."¹³

Pro Eto is also an exemplar of another medium of increasingly vital importance to the Russian avant-garde in the early 20s: the visual, or designed, book. In the three years before he asked Rodchenko to illustrate *Pro Eto*, Mayakovsky had already published two books (*About 2 Squares* and *For the Voice*) that were illustrated and designed by the itinerant Constructivist El Lissitzky. Lissitzky insisted on the importance of the illustrated book form, claiming that by 1922 the Soviet Union's "best artists" had taken up "the problem of book design." The book was becoming, he claimed, "the most monumental work of art." He spoke of the book in terms of Shklovskian defamiliarization, prophesying that the deautomatization of the book would lead to the deautomatization of life. The great advantage of the book form, according to Lissitzky, was the book's combination of the verbal and visual. "Today," he writes, "we have two dimensions

⁷ "Photomontage and Illustration," *LEF* 1924, 210-11. The article's authorship has been debated, with some claiming that Rodchenko himself wrote it; later scholarship has attributed the article to Gustave Klucis.

⁸ Katerina Romanenko, "Pro Eto: Mayakovsky and Rodchenko's Groundbreaking Collaboration," *Journal of the CUNY PhD program in Art History*, Part 11, 2004, 1-9. Romanenko further claims that "Never before had images of the actual people described in a poem been used to illustrate it." 1.

⁹ Dawn Ades, *Photomontage* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1986). 98.

¹⁰ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," *October*, Vol 30 (Autumn, 1984), 82-119. 98.

¹¹ Susan Compton, *Russian Avant-Garde Books, 1917-34* (Cambridge: MIT Press), 1993. 81.

¹² The book's images have been reproduced in many of the seminal works on Russian avant-garde art: Christina Lodder's *Russian Constructivism*, Victor Margolin's *The Struggle for Utopia*, Stephen Bann's *The Tradition of Constructivism*, Benjamin Buchloh's "From Faktura to Photography," and Christina Kiaer's *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*, to name a very few. They are likewise addressed in John Bowl's *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde, Theory and criticism, 1902-1934*; in *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914-1932*; and *The Great Utopia: the Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932*, among many others.

¹³ Kiaer, 147.

for the word. As a sound it is a function of time, and as a representation it is a function of space.” Reading the new visual-verbal books allowed “today’s children” to acquire “a new plastic language” and thus to develop a “different relationship to the world and to space, to shape and to colour...” The new understanding of the interrelatedness of the visual and verbal, of space and time, was key to the new relationship. Therefore, Lissitzky adjures, “[t]he coming book must be both.”¹⁴ In recent years scholarship has reflected a growing awareness of the importance of the book to Russian avant-garde artists, and there has been a spate of books and exhibitions devoted to the development of the book, beginning with the hand-lettered books of the Futurists. Here too *Pro Eto* and its images are well-represented.

***Vot fon*: background information and historical context**

It is important to discuss, briefly, the circumstances in which *Pro Eto* was written, illustrated, and published. Mayakovsky wrote the poem during the course of roughly two months—late December 1922 through February 1923—during which the poet had sequestered himself in his small apartment following a fight with his longtime lover, Lily Brik. He and Lily Brik had become lovers in 1915, with the express approval of Lily’s husband, Osip. Osip Brik became Mayakovsky’s publisher, as well as his colleague in *LEF*, and his close personal friend. Indeed, though Mayakovsky kept his own tiny flat, he resided with the Briks for much of the period between 1915 and 1923, the three of them living and even traveling together, much like a family. Seen from a remove, the free-love triangle they formed mirrored the famous literary free-love threesome in Chernyshevsky’s novel, *What is to be Done?* (‘Что делать?’)

The poem was first published in March 1923, in the journal *LEF*. Shortly thereafter, Mayakovsky approached Rodchenko, his colleague and friend, and suggested that he make photomontage illustrations for a book version of the poem. The artist worked, as the poet had, at an impressive pace, producing a total of 21 montages within the space of a few months.¹⁵ Three months later, in June of 1923, the State Publishing House in Moscow published the illustrated book in an edition of 3,000 copies. The published book included eight of the photomontage illustrations, printed in black and white, plus the book’s cover, the black, white, and blue design of which combined photomontage with typography.

The publication of the poem in *LEF* was a curious occurrence. *LEF*, short for the “Left Front of Art” was also the name of the literary group the magazine represented. The primary goal of both the group and its journal was to connect certain sects of the avant-garde—mainly former Futurists and Constructivists — with the new socialist state. The journal, which Mayakovsky described in his autobiography as “the envelopment of a great social theme by all the weapons of Futurism,”¹⁶ contained strident articles and manifestos prescribing art’s role in the new society. It promoted ‘non-art’— art that was non-aesthetic, unembellished, and utilitarian—and claimed

¹⁴ El Lissitzky, “Our Book,” from *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch* [1926-1927], quoted in Sophie Lissitzky-Kuppers, *El Lissitzky: life, letters, texts*. trans. Helen Aldwinckle (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968). 360-2.

¹⁵ See Stephen C. Hutchings, “Photographic Eye as Poetic I: dialogues of text and image in Maiakovskii’s and Rodchenko’s *Pro Eto* Project,” *Russian Literary Culture in the Camera Age* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 57-73, 68.

¹⁶ Mayakovsky, “I Myself,” transl. Richard Sherwood, quoted in Stephen Bann, Ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism* (Da Capo Press, 1990), 79.

primacy of the creation of such art for its members. *LEF* was “categorically opposed to heroics, high passion, fantastic plots, etc.”¹⁷ favoring, at least in theory, political agitation over psychology, and social change over interiority or narcissism. *LEF*’s values were in line with those of Constructivism, which strove to develop creative works on “the basis of scientific hypotheses,” and to make art not only a “practical activity,” but one that synthesized the formal properties of materials with the ideology of historical materialism.¹⁸ The magazine’s editorials claimed for it a utilitarian line, calling for the de-aestheticization of art, and pronouncing the death of poetry -- something for which revolution had no use. The poem appeared nonetheless in the midst of these articles, and in the magazine’s first issue, presumably an important vehicle for the establishment of *LEF*’s identity. The poem, which was featured in a section entitled “*Praktika*” (“Practice”) which included short stories, critical evaluations of futurist poetry, and drawings, seems to embody many of the aspects of artistic and literary production that the magazine sets itself against: *Pro Eto* is, after all, not only a poem, but also (among other things) a long, lyric love poem, full of fantastical, science-fiction-inspired plot elements. Its protagonist (Mayakovsky himself, of course) is martyred after much howling about his personal suffering and indignation. The poem announces, in its first lines, that its “personal and petty” theme is love—in particular, as the reader soon learns, the poet’s unrequited love for a married, bourgeois woman. How are we to understand the publication of *Pro Eto* in *LEF*, when it apparently went against nearly every standard that magazine set for itself? How did the poet reconcile his revolutionary stance with his own literary output?

In the context of the magazine’s zealous and dogmatic statements, the poem understandably drew a good deal of criticism, most of which centered around the observation that Mayakovsky’s poem was indeed personal and petty, and that it did not concern the welfare or fate of the collective. Mayakovsky tried to counter this criticism by emphasizing the parts of the poem that were about the common, collective problem of the mode of everyday life in the new state. At a reading in April 1923, for example, he read selections from the text that emphasized social problems, and told the audience: “...in those parts of the poem that I’ve read to you the crucial thing is: our way of life. And by that I mean a way of life which hasn’t changed at all and which is now our vilest enemy, and turns us into philistines.”¹⁹ Nikolai Chuzhak, a Productivist theorist and fellow member of *LEF*, published a critique in the following issue of *LEF* in which he reviled the poem’s preoccupation with everyday domestic life as unproductive, and scorned Mayakovsky’s inordinate absorption in philistine matters, stopping just short of accusing the poet himself of being one of the philistines he so reviles: “And [Mayakovsky] listens at the doors, rushes back and forth, genius that he is, from one set of philistines to another, talks with them about art, passionately mocks himself. . . and comes to the conclusion that ‘there’s no way out.’”²⁰ Leon Trotsky, too, had a skeptical view of the poem, noting that it represented a step backwards from the poet’s best work, ‘A Cloud in Trousers’: “Mayakovsky’s technique in these years has undoubtedly become more skilled,” he writes, “but it has also

¹⁷ Terras, 87.

¹⁸ “Program of the Productivist Group” [1920]. Quoted in Bann, *Tradition*, 18-19.

¹⁹ Edward Brown, *Mayakovsky: A Poet in the Revolution* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1973). 232.

²⁰ Nikolai Chuzhak, *LEF*, no 2., 1923, 150-151. Quoted in Brown, 173.

become more stereotyped.” Trotsky’s harshest criticism of *Pro Eto* comes in his defense of Mayakovsky to detractors who claimed that the poet had “written himself out.” While acknowledging that the poet is repeating himself, he cautions that the poet “can change, and may.”²¹

The Quotidian Remade

The ‘way of life’ that Mayakovsky spoke of in the April reading is indeed a major concern of the poem. The word he uses is *byt*, which translates, roughly, as “everyday life”, “routine”, “the daily grind”, or, most simply, “the everyday.” *Byt*, which implies a sense of inertia or stagnation, but also of the commonplace or the vulgar, points to a concept which is particularly important in Russian cultural life: Roman Jakobson claims the word is untranslatable into Western European languages. Jakobson calls *byt* “the stabilizing force of an immutable present, overlaid, as this present is, by a stagnating slime, which stifles life in its tight, hard mold.”²² Svetlana Boym somewhat less dramatically calls it “the monstrous daily grind.”²³ *Byt*, as Jakobson argues, presupposes its opposition, namely the heroic struggle of the individual against established social norms and forms. In Russian culture the setting of oneself against the great inertia of *byt* takes on a spiritual significance; indeed, the opposition between *byt* and *bytie*, or spiritual life, Boym argues, “is one of the central common places of the Russian intellectual tradition.”²⁴

The struggle against *byt* had been a part of Russian intellectual life for years, dating back even, according to some sources, to the medieval Orthodox Church. After the 1917 revolution, however, it took on an important new set of meanings and associations, and became a topic of debate among the intelligentsia, politicians and literati alike. The summer of 1923 saw not only the publication of *Pro Eto*, but also, for example, Trotsky’s book *Problems of Everyday Life* (*Voprosy byta*), a collection of essays that had been published in the newspaper *Pravda*. The ‘problem’ of everyday life was, in a word, the recalcitrance of habits. In order for society to change, the individual must also change. Thus *byt*, with all the passive force of everyday routines and customs, presented the greatest obstacle to the formation of the utopian socialist state. Making the problem still more intractable, as Trotsky argued, was the very unconsciousness with which domestic daily life was lived.²⁵ Throughout the 1920s Soviet poets and politicians, ethnographers and philosophers, turned their thoughts to the form that everyday life should take in the new socialist society: the new everyday, or *novyi byt*. But of course the meaning of *byt* is not just ‘the everyday’ but carries in addition the sense of stagnation and the slow wearing down

²¹ Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution, 1879-1940* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960). 160-1.

²² Roman Jakobson, “On a Generation that Squandered its Poets,” [1967] in Krystyna Pomorska, ed., *Verbal Art, Verbal Sign, Verbal Time* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 111-133. 114.

²³ Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 29-33, 83. Christina Kiaer and Eric Naiman provide an excellent overview of the discourse of *byt* in early Soviet Russia in the introduction to their *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 3-13.

²⁴ Boym, 1994, 29.

²⁵ Leon Trotsky, “From the Old Family to the New,” in *Problems of Daily Life*. (New York: Monad Press, 1973), 37.

of a repetitive routine. What, then, would be so different and wonderful about a ‘new daily grind’? What might it mean to transform one’s repetitive routine? How could it not become, once again, a merely habitual way of life?

And what, in particular, were the aspects of *byt* that Mayakovsky believed stood in the way of his own and others’ gaining of the utopian socialist future? The examples of *byt* against which Mayakovsky rails in *Pro Eto* might be summarized as ‘the things that happen at the Briks’ flat’: he comes out, for example, against tea-drinking, family happiness, the laying out of china, kissing, small-talk, jealousy, dancing, drinking, eating one’s fill, and gambling. Leaving the gambling aside (though it would be hard to make the case that any revolutionary is not a high-stakes gambler at heart), it is difficult to grasp how the revolution—how the poet’s, or anyone’s, commitment to a socialist state—might change any of these. Would one not dine off plates in the new *byt*? Would the revolutionary society, to Emma Goldman’s horror, proscribe dancing? Would one not, ideally, eat and drink one’s fill, and strive for family happiness in the new society? One might argue, after all, that allowing for such material sufficiency was precisely the goal of the revolution. It is equally difficult to see how renouncing such activities might bring one more expediently to the threshold of a new socialist state.

Trotsky’s goals for the new *byt* provide an informative contrast: the foremost of these is the instituting of political equality for men and women. Under this heading come other domestic changes necessary for the emancipation of women, such as the socialization of housekeeping and the public education of children. When women’s lives are no longer absorbed by their support of the lives of others, he reasons, the bond between a man and woman would no longer be a function of the economic order, but would “depend on mutual attachment.”²⁶ About kissing and dancing he says nothing, but he does propose that the way forward “is twofold: (a) the raising of the standard of culture and education of the working class and the individuals composing the class; (b) an improvement in the material conditions of the class organized by the state.”²⁷ The changing of everyday life must be enacted, in short, step by step, beginning with education and economic advancement; Trotsky is clear that the new *byt* could only grow from these roots upward: “For a thought-out scheme, initiated from above, the time is not yet ripe...”²⁸ He does not suggest that a spiritual victory is to be had by imposing a ban on small-talk.

Trotsky’s pragmatic, reasoned approach to new *byt* helps bring Mayakovsky’s into sharper focus: it reminds us that socialism was, after all, a social program, an economic movement that promised precisely to improve (eventually) the material circumstances of life for the masses. By contrast, Mayakovsky’s program is one of abstention, of the renunciation of the comforts of material life. When he upbraids his family with exchanging “love...for the darning of socks” he implies that the joys of the spirit are incompatible with the physical needs of the body. The poet’s mindset, in this sense, is closer to that of medieval orthodoxy, with its emphasis on the renunciation and transcendence of the physical realm, than of enlightenment rationalism: what he longs for is not the betterment of the material realm, or the equality of those in it, so much as to renounce the physical material realm altogether, and so to transcend it.

²⁶ Ibid, 42.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 43.

About Those

Despite the above-cited encomia lauding writer, poem, artist and images, and despite the acknowledged importance of photomontage and the medium of the book to Russian avant-garde practice, only a scant handful of scholars attempt in any sustained way to provide a close reading of *Pro Eto* as a verbal and visual object. While authorities on Russian literature have thought a good deal about the poem, literary assessments tend to treat the text in isolation, and to note the photomontage images only in passing, if at all. Art historians, on the other hand, have largely addressed the photomontages as illustrations of a stage in the development of Constructivism, or as object lessons of applied bolshevik or modernist theory. The shortage of readings that consider *Pro Eto*'s images along with its text, or that treat them as worth analyzing in their own right, is especially surprising given the importance to Constructivists of the visual and verbal nature of the book.²⁹

Most treatments of *Pro Eto* fall into a few broad categories. A number of them repeat the standard interpretation that the poem is about Mayakovsky's turbid and stormy (not to say failing) relationship with his longtime lover, Lily Brik; some go further and note that the poem is also, as noted above, and as Mayakovsky himself announced, about the problem of everyday life in the new revolutionary society. These are generally content to enumerate the literal ways that Rodchenko's photomontages 'illustrate' the poem: for example that in the poem a telephone call Mayakovsky places to Brik's house is answered by her housekeeper and that this scene is illustrated in the image 'Troglodyte', which shows Mayakovsky on the phone with a dowdily-dressed woman. Likewise, the image-as-mirror-of-text reading of the *Bridge* ('*I paw my ears*') montage rather superfluously points out that the polar bears on ice-floes in the river in the image represent Mayakovsky-turned-bear as he floats down the Neva in the poem. While such literal, referent-finding interpretations are no doubt partly right, they are also, to my mind, unsatisfying.

Another common way of addressing *Pro Eto* is as representative of a stage, whether of Rodchenko's career, Constructivist production, the avant-garde book, or the evolution of ideas about the photograph in modern art. Buchloh, for example, sees *Pro Eto* as a breakthrough moment for artists who have come back to the figure through photography following one of abstract art's periods of hegemony, and as a stage in the development of the Soviet art world's infatuation with the documentary photograph.³⁰ Peter Galassi and Margarita Tupitsyn, among others, are interested in *Pro Eto*'s photomontages because of their citation and reworking of the vocabulary and syntax of advertisements. Tupitsyn, further, cites the *Pro Eto* photomontages as an example of an apolitical, or even anti-political, strain of the medium evident in "the complex and controversial beginnings of Soviet photographic practice."³¹ These assessments of the

²⁹ There is a growing literature on the medium of the book among artistic avant-gardes generally and the Russian avant-garde in particular. See, for example, Susan Compton's *Russian Avant-Garde Books, 1917-1934* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1993); Johanna Drucker's *The Century of Artist's Books* (New York: Granary Books, 1995); Patricia Railing's excellent 3-volume study of "On the Voice," especially Volume 3: *Voices of Revolution: Collected Essays* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2000); and most recently Margit Rowell and Deborah Wye's *The Russian Avant-Garde Book, 1910-1934* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002).

³⁰ Buchloh, 98.

³¹ Margarita Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 34.

images as placeholders in a historicization of bolshevik modernism, or of photographic practice are important—indeed, this dissertation relies on these and other accounts—but fail to address the specificities of either text or image.

About This

This dissertation attempts to redress the shortage of close readings of *Pro Eto*. For the most part, it simply asks of the images the same questions customarily asked about any work of art. How do the images' form inflect their meaning? What are the repercussions for our understanding of the pictures of specific formal decisions made by the artist? Why has the artist chosen this way, and not some other, to represent his ideas? What other works of art does *Pro Eto* seem to refer or relate to? In short, the dissertation represents an attempt to take these images seriously, which is to say as objects that bear attentive looking, and repay detailed analysis.

Chapter 1, “Fracture and Refraction: pictorial space and tense in *Pro Eto*,” provides a close reading of the materials and mechanisms Rodchenko and Mayakovsky use to build the book. In it, I show how the two artists' self-conscious use of fracturing, whether of language or pictorial field, disorients the reader and breaks up any stable sense of narrative or space. I also consider the ways that images and text interact, demonstrating how each complicates the other; and in doing so aim to upend the idea that Rodchenko's images are simple ‘illustrations’ of Mayakovsky's text.

Chapter 2, “A Constructivist Icon?” argues that several of the photomontage images Rodchenko made for *Pro Eto* seem to refer to icons, and to the long tradition of icon-making in Russia. In it, I briefly trace the genealogy of the icon within the Russian avant-garde, complicating the Constructivists' manifesto version of their movement as the voice of a secular, officially atheist regime. The locating of key Constructivists—including Rodchenko—at a slight remove from icon-painting not only complicates the Constructivists' jabs at mysticism and religion, but puts their universal concern about materiality and materialism in a new perspective.

Chapter 3, “Dada, Constructivism, and revolutionary time”, shifts the focus from the past to the present, and from Moscow to Berlin. I make the case that in the *Pro Eto* photomontages Rodchenko self-consciously quotes works from Constructivism's own 1921 *ObMoKhu* exhibition and at the same time borrows from the vocabulary of the Dadaist photomontage that was being produced in Berlin. I suggest that by juxtaposing images from Constructivism's “laboratory phase”—which by 1923 already symbolized an earlier, more idealistic (or perhaps less compromised) version of the movement—with images that drew on the so-called ‘decadent’, anarchistic, chaotic movement of the Berlin Dada, Rodchenko builds a rhetorical, symbolic chronology into the images; one that is not only ambiguous, but that reveals a deep ambivalence about the fate of the revolution.

Chapter 4, “Of Floods, Gardens, and Bourgeois Women: Shklovsky's exilic works in *Pro Eto*”, provides yet another perspective on the book, again addressing its intertextuality, but this time focusing on the text. I discuss the relationship between *Pro Eto* and Victor Shklovsky's *Zoo*, tracing shared themes through the two works, noting their permutations and developments; I show how Shklovskian motifs are refracted in the lens of Mayakovsky's verse. The chapter

turns the tables on Mayakovsky as ‘primary author’ of *Pro Eto*. If Rodchenko’s images have historically been seen primarily as reactive--responding to Mayakovsky’s text rather than inflecting it as well--this fourth and final chapter shows Mayakovsky’s text itself as a response to and reinterpretation of his exiled friend’s work.

In the course of these chapters, several interrelated themes return in various forms: illustration and the ‘secondary’ status of Rodchenko’s images in relation to the text; issues of time and space; the relationship of the photomontages to the ideals of Constructivist theory, and the interrelatedness of *Pro Eto* and various works from near and far.

In writing about *Pro Eto* one of the most difficult issues to settle has been the question of what it means to ‘illustrate.’ To some extent, the secondariness and subservience of the illustration to what is illustrated is inherent in the word, and, of course, in the most pragmatic and literal sense the book’s images *were* secondary: Mayakovsky’s text was first published in the pages of *LEF* without any illustrations; the photomontages followed. Does this mean that the images must simply react to the text? That the images must confirm its messages, accepting unchanged the story that the text has on offer, humbly offering particular examples of the text’s concerns, or at most providing a clever translation of its ideas into visual form? This seems to be the verdict in a surprising amount of the scholarship on *Pro Eto*. The images “bear witness to Rodchenko’s assent to Mayakovsky’s ideas,”³² is perhaps the baldest statement of this notion, but others share the same premise: “[Mayakovsky’s] tormented feelings are captured by Rodchenko....”³³ the images “correspond to Mayakovsky’s style and undergird his images with exceptional force.”³⁴ The very best interpretations of *Pro Eto* are able to read the more abstract details of Rodchenko’s images as visual translations of aspects of the poem. Gail Day, for example, sees the emptiness of the pictorial ground above and below the cityscape in *Troglodyte* (Fig. 3) as the visual equivalent of the ‘removal and absence’ Mayakovsky experiences with regard to Brik;³⁵ Kiaer similarly sees the two images of Mayakovsky in *Centuries* (Fig. 5) as representing Mayakovsky’s ambivalent relationship to *byt*, stating that “the photomontages confirm the doubleness of the poetic text...”³⁶ To some extent, such abstract ‘visual equivalencies’ are the concern of my analyses as well.

But such interpretations are still operating on the ‘translation’ model; they still see the images as ‘merely reacting’ to the text. Throughout my analyses of the images, I propose alternatives to this model. In a number of cases I interpret the images as in conversation with the text, and note where the text is read differently when the images accompany it, so that the images are not merely translating the text but transforming it: adding dimensions to it, complicating its ideas, questioning its claims, subverting or parodying it. For example, many readers’ first experience of *Pro Eto* is of the images, not the poem. For these readers, might the interpretation of the text be colored by their having seen, for example, Lily Brik’s face on the cover? As I argue

³² Ades, 98.

³³ Compton, 82.

³⁴ Romanenko, 9.

³⁵ Gail Day, “Art, Love, and Social Emancipation : on the concept ‘avant-garde’ and the interwar avant-gardes” in Steve Edwards and Paul Wood, eds, *Art of the Avant-Gardes* (New Haven: Yale University Press,2004), 331.

³⁶ Kiaer, 151.

in Chapter One, the placement of the poem's title over the photograph of Brik's face gives the title a double meaning: the "that" in *About That* becomes Brik herself, changed by the pronoun from a woman into a thing. It is only when the reader has read several pages of the poem that she will come to know what Mayakovsky seems to have meant: that "that" is love. Rodchenko's picturing of Brik as "that" does not negate the textual meaning, but it does challenge its centrality. Moreover, by giving a face and thus an identity to Brik, who in the poem is nameless and voiceless, Rodchenko both calls attention to Mayakovsky's treatment of Brik as a mere abstract foil, and provides a corrective, inserting a second specific subjectivity into the otherwise poet-centered drama.

Likewise, by choosing to represent the poet's double—a murderous troglodyte—as a placid-looking Brontosaurus that seems almost to nuzzle the poet's head, Rodchenko gently mocks the note of high drama the poet brings to his self-interrogation. The choice of image provides an a counterpoint to the poet's version of himself, as someone far more ordinary, human, and therefore both more comical and more touching. These images demote Mayakovsky from his position of centrality in the poem, and at the same time soften some of the self-importance and sense of high tragedy that mark the poet's narrative voice. Thus, the images not only 'illustrate' the poem, but, at the same time, destabilize and transform our reading of it.

Ruptures and dislocations of time and space are another recurring theme in my interpretations of *Pro Eto*. Throughout the book the present is squeezed into the margins of past and future; these latter, in turn, are often superimposed on one another and difficult to tell apart. Likewise in my readings, East and West—where Russia is the East and Berlin, most often, stands for the West—are alternatively mapped onto one another and proposed as poles. The first chapter considers time as grammatical tense in the narrative, and space as the pictorial field. The other chapters explore displacements of time and space external to the work: geographically, historically, and biographically. The second chapter looks at the appearance of an ancient art form in a self-consciously modern work; the third sees in Rodchenko's adoption and adaptation of the tropes of a Western art movement an ambiguity not only of geography but of time as well. The fourth, on *Zoo*, looks at the way that work and *Pro Eto* superimpose east on west and vice-versa; in it, Berlin and Petersburg denote themselves but connote the other. The cities also represent times, though which city stands in for past and which for the future is difficult to say; each is the occasion for nostalgia.

To some extent the book's concern with East and West, past and future, is a development of the age-old debate of Slavophiles and Westernizers in Russia, but with an important difference. If in the past the West was the symbol of the modern and Russia understood to be 'backward', those roles are complicated by the revolution. Had the revolution made Russia the vanguard of world political and economic advancement, or had the privations of revolution and years of war made the country even more backwards? In this updated version of the Slavophile/Westernizer debate, moreover, the opposition is not just the other, but frequently also the self: Rodchenko, Mayakovsky, and even Shklovsky are deeply ambivalent, and occupy both positions at once.

Although *Pro Eto* is considered to be an emblematic Constructivist work, many of the received ideas about the movement—the unswerving zeal of Constructivism's practitioners, the utility of its production, and the ideology-driven, *sui-generis* nature of the movement itself—are

not supported by the book. On the contrary, a close reading that shows Constructivism's stated means and ends are to be regarded with ambivalence, and in some cases to be contradicted outright. Both the poem and the photomontage images are shown to be intricately bound up with works outside Constructivism. The interconnectedness of *Pro Eto* with works external to Constructivism contradicts the idea—first set out by the Constructivists themselves and widely (if tacitly and by no means universally) accepted by subsequent scholars—of Constructivism as an autochthonous movement, born of theory, and unindebted either to historical art movements or to contemporary western ones.³⁷ The current study proposes, by way of a single case study, an alternative way of considering Constructivism. I suggest that the role of Constructivist theory in determining and limiting the interpretations of Constructivist artworks be reevaluated, whether the theory be that of Alexei Gan, Osip Brik, Karl Ioganson, or Boris Arvatov. In writing these chapters I have aimed to consider these theories not as defining the works they claim to describe, but as functioning as intertexts themselves: texts which, when read as in conversation with artistic practice, throw aspects of Constructivist work into relief. I propose that when Constructivist theory and practice are approached this way, theory will cease to limit possible readings, and will lend itself less readily to reductive textual interpretations. I hope that it will, on the contrary, allow the reader to see fruitful contradictions in the book, and tensions that are—dare I say it?—productive.

³⁷ A representative example of the view of Constructivism as an autochthonous movement comes in Stephen Bann's introduction to his excellent collection of Constructivism's founding texts: "It hardly requires stating," he writes, "that the course of Russian constructivism was almost completely autonomous." *Tradition*, 31.

Chapter One: Fractures and Refraction: pictorial space and tense in *Pro Eto*

Judging a book...

Pro Eto's bold cover design—its geometrical shapes, high contrast, blocky letters, straight lines, the shock of the woman's wide-eyed stare—has made it an emblem of Bolshevik modernism. (Fig. 1) The book, as we know, was published in 1923. It is an illustrated volume of poetry, and announces itself as Constructivist in particular: bold, geometrical, without ornament. On the cover, a close-up, frontal photograph of a woman's face and neck is set against a geometrical background. It uses few, but stark, colors. The cover is reproduced in countless books as a marker of Russian avant-garde art and its commitment to a new mechanical art of industrial production and precision. It represents a vision of the future.

What seems to me surprising about this image, however, is how *creaky* it looks, how crudely it appears to be put together.³⁸ The edges of the photograph of Lily's face are visibly cut out, as if by a schoolchild with a pair of scissors, and the lettering both of the title and the author's name on the front of the cover have slightly uneven edges. The shapes of the letters are somewhat irregular, perhaps even a bit crude. They seem as though they too might be cut out from construction paper with a pair of scissors, or made with a stencil. The cut-out edges of Lily's head and shoulders are most visible around the ears, along the her left cheek and shoulder. Ink, or perhaps paint, touches up the edges along Lily's right cheek, whereas on her left side, a thin band of white contrasts with both the dark background and the shadow on her jaw. This strip calls attention to the photograph's edge and conveys a sense of imprecision, as though the photograph had been cut somewhat outside the lines of her face, or as though the thickness of the photographic paper beyond the imaged surface had been allowed to show through. Lily's shoulders have been cut out in curved wedges that come to points at either side, the shape echoing that of the eyes and even the mouth, and suggesting less that she is wearing a boat-necked blouse than that the lines were determined by the scissors with which they were cut.

The most emblematically 'Constructivist' aspect of the cover, the reversal of coloring in the central letters of the title words, is also where its hand-craftedness is most plain: in the O in "Pro", for example, the edge where the letter crosses over from background to photograph is shaky; likewise where the bottom of the T crosses her hair, the line neither follows the curve of her head nor a straight line. These lines are hand-painted, made with minimal pains to conceal the fact.

This casualness of production is particularly interesting since at this time Constructivists were proclaiming the virtues of mass-produced, machine-made goods. Painting was outdated, they claimed, and the individuality of the artist—the expression of the artist's 'hand'—was a thing of the past. At the same time the traces of craft in the *Pro Eto* cover confirm the book as

³⁸ Because this dissertation addresses *Pro Eto* as a book, discussions of the images are based largely on their appearance in the original first edition of the work, in the Getty Research Institute Collections for the History of Art and Humanities. (*Polar Bearing*, which was not included in the original publication, was included in the Arc Publications reprint edition.) In some cases, however, the color maquettes of the images allow for a richer reading. Discussions of the cover and *Centuries* are based on the maquettes at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

something made by hand, very much the product of an individual's labor, and therefore anomalous in a milieu that prized machine art, poster art, and mechanical reproduction. How do we explain this discrepancy between theory and production?

Certainly part of the Constructivist agenda was promoting the importance of facture, or 'faktura' (фактура)—the texture of a work, which in turn reveals the materials the product is made of, and the process by which it was made.³⁹ So perhaps Rodchenko did not take pains to erase the traces of where he had been, and the marks of craft were left as signs of the work's 'transparency': as an assurance, that is, that the work was not pretending to be something it was not. At the same time it is important to note that many of Rodchenko's Constructivist advertising posters and photomontages of this period appear seamless, the disjunctions between elements carefully sutured. In fact the cover has key elements in common with the meticulously produced advertising that Mayakovsky and Rodchenko collaborated on in the same year *Pro Eto* was published. For example, the cover's blocky, sans-serif lettering and use of two main opposing colors set off against one another by a division into simple geometrical shapes is a formula exploited by the duo's advertisement for *Rezinotrest* pacifiers. (Fig. 11) But in the pacifier ad the letters are regular, the boundaries between fields are neat and precise. There is plenty of evidence that Rodchenko could hide a seam where and when he wanted. Might, then, Rodchenko's decision to leave and even emphasize marks of craft be an aesthetic consideration, a way of creating a tension in the book between the industrially modern and the handcrafted, single artwork?

The rectangles and letters of the cover lie in layers. The basic layering seems to be white rectangles on a black background; the initial impression is that these white rectangles share the same plane. The interleaving of the photograph into the mix, however, complicates this scheme: at the bottom of the photograph, the white block overlays the photograph, but at the top the white block is overlain by it. Thus the photograph, interleaved between the blocks of white, replaces the initial impression of flatness with one of a more subtle layering of planes. From a simple flat surface the interweaving creates a mathematically impossible space, in which a plane A—on top of plane B, which is itself on top of plane C—is also overlapped by plane C. In one sense—should one order the cover's layers cognitively—all the planes remain parallel to the picture plane, despite their Escherian stacking. At the same time, however, the immediate visual effect of the stacking and layering is to create a sense that the head and face in the photograph are popping forward, toward the viewer, out of a deep space. The insistent 'forwardness' of the head, thrusting into a proximate foreground but couched in a deep abstract space, is like a hologram or an apparition.

³⁹ "Faktura" was the subject of lively debate among Constructivist artists in the early 1920s. The term was coined by Alexei Gan in 1921 in his Program of the Constructivist Working Group of *INKhUK*. (*Programma rabochaia gruppа konstruktivistov INKhuKa*, in Selim Khan-Magomedov, *INKhUK i rannii konstruktivizm* (Moscow; Architectura, 1994), 95-96; translated by James West as "The Program of the Constructivist Working Group of *INKhUK*" in *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914-1932* (Seattle: Henry Art Gallery, 1990.)) The idea encompasses the texture of a surface or material as well as the artists' conscious choices about the manipulation of the material. According to Benjamin Buchloh, the importance of *faktura* for the Constructivists is that it created a 'transparency' of materials and labor: since the marks of the object's making and the signs of its material makeup were plain to the viewer, the thinking went, the object's value would be plain. The evident *faktura* of the Constructivist object was opposed to the commodity object, the seamlessness of which might obfuscate its value.

Where the cover design makes its signature move, though, is in creating a photo-negative continuation of the dark blue letters when they cross over into the black background of the woman's hair. The layering of the image is complicated by yet another plane; the multiplication of planes on a flat ground creates a kind of two-dimensional vertigo. However, the continuation of the letters causes another effect as well: we tend to think of letters as inseparable from surface, as ink is on paper. Since the photograph lies on top of the white block, where the title letters are not covered by the photograph they seem to peel away from background and even, to some extent, away from the parts of the letters and words of which they form a part. The words themselves become just shapes for a few moments, mere abstract patterns against an abstract background.

Where the cover of *Pro Eto* differs most markedly from Constructivist production at the time is in its use of close-up photographic portrait against a flat, abstract, geometrical background.⁴⁰ The shadows in the photograph are at odds with the background whose abstraction allows no space or light. Moreover, the particularities of the face—*this* face with *these* nostrils and eyebrows, and *these* particular hairs along the forehead—also transpose the individual onto a theoretical, abstract background that the figure cannot inhabit. The particularities of the figure and individual stand in contrast to the geometric regularity and non-particularity of the space the photograph ambiguously inhabits.

Title and Image

The title of the work, in the context of the cover, is equally ambiguous. The cover is the only photomontage created for *Pro Eto* in which words form part of the image. The title words, “*pro eto*”—variously translated as “About this,” “About That,” “About It,”—can be used to speak about something the speaker does not wish to name, like someone's alcoholism or a tragic accident. As in, “They know about *it*.” “We don't like to talk about *that*.” “She doesn't ever speak about *it*.” A number of writers who have written about *Pro Eto* have concluded that the ‘that’ of the title is love, the theme of the poem as introduced at the end of its first part.⁴¹ (Mayakovsky, interestingly, never names the theme of the poem, but leaves the reader to infer it from the context of the prelude and the rhyme.) In the context of the cover, however, this interpretation becomes less clear. If “*pro eto*” is a spoken phrase, who is doing the speaking? Is it the narrator of the poem (let us call him Mayakovsky for simplicity's sake) who is speaking (or not) “about that?” If so, given the imposing proximity of the face on the cover, might ‘that’ actually refer to the woman? This reading is supported by Mayakovsky's refusal to name Lily at any point in the poem: she is referred to only as “she,” (она) and “mine” (моя). Although the pronoun ‘eto’ is neuter, and not typically used to refer to women, the reading suggests that Lily becomes a subject, a topic; an issue rather than a person. This use has a firmly established and

⁴⁰ Photomontage was a relatively recent development in Russia. *Pro Eto* represents Rodchenko's first large scale use of photomontage as a medium. Other Constructivists, such as Gustave Klutis, had used photomontage previously, and even, occasionally, pictures of an individual (such as Lenin) against an abstract background (such as a proun). Cf. Klutis' *Dynamic City* of 1920. The scale and impression of these photomontages is quite different from Rodchenko's for *Pro Eto*, however.

⁴¹ See Brown, Terras, Marshall, Kiaer, Wood, others.

famous literary precedent in Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, and a somewhat darker connotation: it makes the woman a *thing* to be grabbed and possessed.⁴²

Lily's portrait on the cover makes her a candidate for speaking the words as well; her wide, staring eyes and tightly closed mouth could easily be read as angry, accusatory, even defiant. It becomes perfectly plausible to think that *she* may be the one demanding to speak (or not to speak) 'about that.'⁴³ In this way Rodchenko has, before the reader has opened the book, changed the poem's essence: the portrait has named she whom Mayakovsky's poem took particular pains not to name. It has given the reader the possibility of Lily—who does not appear in the poem, but remains offstage throughout—as a speaking, thinking subject. Rodchenko has effectively doubled the number of characters in Mayakovsky's story.

Cover as Introduction

Throughout the book the image and text complicate one another, reinforce or undermine each other's meaning, and create new meanings in their counterparts. Image becomes a filter through which language is viewed, and text deeply informs any reading of the image. The literal overlapping of image and text on the cover serves as a prelude to the ways that image will take on characteristics of language, and vice versa. The book also returns repeatedly to a confounding of two- and three-dimensional space, a confusion and conflation of the particular with the abstract and universal, the old ways and artifacts of life and the new. The result is to create an image that is both now, and then; personal, and universal. It creates a time that is now, but also past, and also future. A time that is no time, and a place that is no place—literally: utopia.

In this chapter I argue that both Mayakovsky and Rodchenko, poet and visual artist, explore and expose the structures within which their respective media create meaning. Each artist is concerned with the formal means by which meaning is created, thwarted, opposed, enhanced, or changed within a given system of signs. Each undermines the generic conventions of his own medium and, in the end, endues that medium with traits that typically characterize the other medium. An example is the poet's treatment of time. Time is an crucial theme in *Pro Eto*: the dimension seemed to have taken a turn backward with NEP, creating an uncrossable moat between the banality and crudeness of the present and the (theoretical, hoped for, envisioned, revolutionary) perfection of the future. But the poet's deep underlying concern with time is expressed in large part through disruptions of the very structures that make language, as a medium, particularly well-equipped to describe time. For his part, Rodchenko upends the structures that make visual art a conventional medium for the unquestioned ('invisible' because natural-seeming) depiction of space. As a consequence, pictorial space is given new meanings and made metaphorical.

⁴² Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, Book 5, Stanza 20. Pushkin has done the same with his Eugene Onegin, who, when transformed into a bear, refers to Tatiana similarly: "It's mine!" (in Russian: "мое!")

⁴³ Rodchenko's photomontage is the only thing that proposes this reading: the words outside of the context of the image could not reasonably be read this way (and have not been read this way, I think, because of the customary de-linking of the visual and verbal aspects of the book).

Crawled out of the cable....

The first and only “real” event of the poem is Mayakovsky’s placement of a phone call to Lily during their separation. The phone call is compared to a duel wherein Lily’s housekeeper Annushka, who answers the phone, is a second. Mayakovsky’s frustration with the telephone operator causes him to imagine an explosion at the telephone station. Mayakovsky describes this telephone call in a passage that begins with the ‘real’ and the present but quickly proceeds into the distant future, where the event he has imagined is remembered as an event in the distant past.⁴⁴ Although the passage is a fantastic tangent, inessential to the poem’s plot, it is a compact example of several ‘typical’ means by which *Pro Eto* creates a sense of disorientation in time.

67-10 / Соедините! / В проулок! / Скорей! / Водопьяному в тишь! / Ух! / А то с
электричеством станется -- / под Рождество / на воздух взлетишь -- / со всей / со всей /
телефонной / станицей. / Жил на Мясницкой один старожил. / Сто лет после етого жил
-- / про это лишь -- / сто лет! -- / говаривал детям дед. / Было -- суббота. . . / под
воскресенье. . . / Окоречек. . . / Хочу, чтоб дешево. . . / Как вдарит кто-то! . . . /
Землетресенье . . . / Ноге горячо. . . / Ходун - подошва! / Не верилось детям, / чтоб как-
то / да там-то. / Землетресенье? / Зимой? / У почтамта?!

67-10 / Connect me! / In the lane! / Hurry! / Vodopyany in a flash! / Ugh! / And this will
happen with the electricity-- / on Christmas eve / on the air you'll fly / with all / with all / the
telephone/ station. / There once was an old man who lived in Myasnitsky / A hundred years
after this he lived -- / About that, anyway -- / A hundred years! -- / gramps used to tell the
kids. / It was—Saturday / right before Sunday... / a ham... / I want to get it cheap... / How
someone cracks it! / An earthquake.... / hot on the feet / Boot soles shake! / the children
couldn't believe it, / that it was like that / that it was there. / An earthquake? / In winter? / At
the Central Post Office?⁴⁵

Mayakovsky subverts a typical narrative sense of time through use of sudden shifts of scene and tense, abrupt and dramatic changes of pace, and an overlapping of distinct narrative times. Temporal shifts occur on a number of levels. The most obvious is the cut in the scene from the impatient Mayakovsky’s fantasy projection of an electrical explosion (that perversely destroys the telephone office and kills the operator) to the old man, living a hundred years later, remembering it as an earthquake. The transition takes the reader from the contemporary real of phones and electricity to a storybook reality, the cliché of the grandpa reminiscing. The telephone collapses the typical time-space conventions of the oral tradition. The technological

⁴⁴ 67-10 was Lily Brik’s telephone number. ‘Vodopyany’ and ‘Myasnitsky’ are the names of the streets in Moscow on which the Brik apartment was located and the apartment in which Mayakovsky lived in the winter of 1922-3 during his self-imposed ‘exile’, respectively. It is worth noting that while the telephone number and street names suggest that the scene occurs in Moscow, the scene quickly changes to Petersburg, as indicated by the presence of the Neva river; the poem shifts feverishly between the two cities throughout.

⁴⁵ Mayakovsky, *Pro Eto* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1973) 8-9. All future references to *Pro Eto*, unless otherwise noted, are to this edition, a facsimile reproduction of the original book [Владимир Маяковский, Про Это (Москва, Петроград: Государственное издательство, 1923).] All translations of *Pro Eto* from the Russian are mine, unless otherwise indicated, although I will occasionally modify existing translations. The word for Christmas (Рождество) is based on the root word for ‘birth’ (рожд), and the word for Sunday (воскресенье) is based on the root word for ‘resurrection’ (воскресить). Thus, even in this tangential, fantasy side-narrative, Mayakovsky has inserted some of the poem’s weightier themes.

present—distances erased by wires—is replaced by a future memory, told in a future that, moreover, seems like the past: the world of around-the-hearth storytelling, of children listening to yarns spun by ‘gramps’. In addition, the amount of time that has elapsed --a hundred years-- indicates that the old man who tells the story of the explosion was not yet born when the explosion ‘occurred’; thus the future’s memory of the poem’s imagined present is, in essence, a kind of mythical pre-history.

The trope of imagining a current event as a future memory is further complicated here by Mayakovsky’s interweaving of tenses, and the inflections those tenses have in the narrative. The narrative switches from present “you’ll fly” (взлетишь) to the description of the future in the past tense “Once upon a time lived...an old man” (Жил...один старожил).⁴⁶ The old man of the future starts his yarn in the past tense “It was—a Saturday...” (Было суббота) but his story quickly flips to the present tense: “I want to get it cheap...” (Хочу, чтоб дешево...).⁴⁷ The further shift to the children’s disbelief back to the past tense (“the children couldn’t believe it”) is humorously matched by the old wives’ tales (earthquakes don’t occur in winter) and soviet hubris (“At the Central Post office?”) upon which their disbelief is founded. The irony of the young clinging to old beliefs more tightly than the old-timers do serves as a prelude to the confrontation between Mayakovsky’s past and future selves.

The temporal changes in the passage are also indicated by changes in meter and line-length. In the beginning of the passage Mayakovsky’s impatience shows in the short snaps of the lines, each ending in an exclamation point. With the break in tense, however, there is also a slowing and lengthening of the poetic line; exclamations are followed by sentences with storybook formulations (“Once upon a time...”) and verbs in the imperfect tense (“gramps used to tell them”). Such verbs instate an eternal or ongoing, expansive present, even though they are technically in the past tense. If the narrator’s (Mayakovsky’s) urgency and impatience is marked by exclamation points, the old man’s lines end in ellipses that build pauses into his ventriloquized speech. The pauses suggest the process of remembering the past, as seen in the present. The lines switch from the old man’s halting reminiscences to choppy sentence fragments as the children voice their present-tense disbelief. Throughout the passage, shifts and displacements in narrative time are echoed by changes in rhythm, a kind of staccato stuttering. Sentences themselves are fragmented by zeal and impatience for the future, or else marked with the hesitancy involved in piecing together the past. At the same time, these disconnected and mostly unpoetic utterances are strung together like pieces of popcorn by the poem’s rhymes and assonances. Mayakovsky’s request to the operator “Vyodopyany in a flash!” (Водопьяному в тушь!), for example, is linked through rhyme to his vision of the near future --“on the air you’ll fly” (на воздух взлетишь)--and again to his vision of the distant future: “A hundred years after

⁴⁶ The lines “on Christmas eve/through the air you’ll fly” refer, as does the poem’s title, to Nikolai Gogol’s story “the Night before Christmas.” In the story a villager flies through the air with the devil, on the way to St. Petersburg. [*Evenings on a Farm near Dikana*, 1832]

⁴⁷ The ham (*okorochek*) that ‘it’ refers to here recalls the grunt of Mayakovsky’s neighbor, “Where’s the piglet (*porocenek*)?” thus bringing the piglet into the future as meat, and the reader back to the past to remember the meat’s past as animal. The sequence anticipates a famous sequence in Dziga Vertov’s *Kino-Glaz* (1924) in which a side of beef hanging in a slaughterhouse is sequentially brought back to life: the animal is unclift, re-skinned, re-viscerated, de-slaughtered, and taken back to pasture. Anne Nesbet makes a striking argument about this reanimation in *Savage Junctions: Sergei Eisenstein and the Shape of Thinking* (London & New York: I. B Tauris, 2003). 33-36.

that... / about that at least--” (Сто лет после этого ... / про это *лишь* --). Assonances and alliterations similarly string together the disparate, disconnected phrases. The letters s and v, and the sounds ‘suh’ and ‘vuh’, repeat, recombine, and reverse in the words and phrases for ‘Connect’, ‘To the lane’, ‘Quick’, ‘Vodopyany’, ‘with the electrical station’, ‘Christmas’, ‘you’ll fly’, ‘with all’, and ‘with all its’. (Соедините! / В проулок! / Скорей! / Водопьяному в тишь! ... А то с электричеством станется -- / под Рождество / на воздух взлетишь -- / со всей / со всей /... станицей.) Fragments--of sentences and of time--are linked with sounds; sound itself, apart from its linguistic functions, acts like a kind of wormhole through which the present zips into a future that is sepia-toned and dusty from time spent in the attic.

When Lily refuses to take Mayakovsky’s call, the rest of the poem is set in motion. His transformation and odyssey begin with a mundane, trivial event mediated by an everyday household item. The transformation begins, literally, with a word:

... по кабелю / вижу / **СЛОВО** ползет. / Страшнее слов / из древнейшей древности / где самку клыком добывали люди еще / ползло из шнура-- / скребушейся ревности / времен трогладитских тогдашнее чудище.⁴⁸

... along the cable/ I see / a **WORD** crawls. / More terrible than the words / of the most ancient antiquity / where people still won their women by means of their teeth / crawled / from the cable--/ creeping jealousy / a creature from ancient troglodyte times.

A word, a symbol of reason and the poet’s chief tool, becomes a troglodytic jealousy-monster, crawling out from the phone. The form of the word “WORD” —bolded, all caps, and in a different, sans-serif, font —can hardly escape the reader’s attention. (Fig. 12) The typography calls in all available means to highlight a single word; it not only emphasizes the word by marking it as distinct from those that surround it, but also creates an *image* of the word as well. The thick black lines of the bolded ‘word’ turn the lines of text around it into a visual image of the telephone cable, with the ‘word’ becoming a physical thickening and stretching of the cable, like a clot in an artery. The metaphor, like the visual imagery, changes in flashes as the narrator increasingly doubts his vision of the monster, and substitutes for it a vision of himself:

А может быть... / наверное может! / Никто в телефон не лез и не лезет, -- / нет никакой трогладичей рожи. / Сам в телефоне. / Зеркалюсь в железе.⁴⁹

But maybe / it probably could be! / No one climbed or will climb into the telephone. / There’s no troglodytic mug at all/ I myself am in the telephone. / I am mirrored in the iron.

⁴⁸ *Pro Eto*, 11-12.

⁴⁹ *Pro Eto*, 12.

Mayakovsky creates a metaphor and simultaneously guts it: through a poetic sleight of hand the terrible WORD that was crawling through the line has become a troglodyte, even as the troglodyte's existence is denied. He compares himself to a troglodyte—makes himself one—precisely in denying that the monster is real. Even after Mayakovsky has officially negated the troglodyte, he reinstates the premise of the metaphor as he sees himself in the iron of the phone. The choice of the word 'iron' in particular, not the more generic 'metal,' points back to prehistory once again. The iron is at once that of contemporary technology—the phone into which he speaks, as well as the subject of a great deal of speculation in the 19th century— and also that of the age of the first iron tools. Though the monster is dismissed, Mayakovsky's incrimination of himself stands.

There is a shifting symbolism in the metaphor of Mayakovsky's vision in the phone. The terrible ancient creature creeping through the phone line is a Word: not an obvious metaphor, given the Word's long history in the Western world as a symbol of reason and rationality. The Word, then, represents both rationality and its opposite. As such, it is a compact, economical expression of the 'better', or more evolved, Mayakovsky—the revolutionary, who does not believe in possessions or irrational emotions like jealousy—doing battle with his genetic inheritance, the primitive caveman. Even when the first metaphor of antiquity is displaced by an image of the technological present, another lets itself in: the iron that reflects Mayakovsky places him firmly in the present and in the past.

Mayakovsky's mercurial metaphor works by transitive properties: the Word becomes a troglodyte, which the poet recognizes as himself; so the Word becomes man. Both the word itself and its form serve as prelude to the messianic theme of the book. The episode of the phone call becomes Genesis to the rest of the poem's New Testament: Mayakovsky will become a martyr later, but first the Word must be made flesh. The theme is highly relevant: it is the putting of theory into practice, after all, the mapping of the perfection of idea onto the messiness of the world that has proven so difficult for the poet—and his country—to do. This passage is more complex than has been credited by its few interpreters. It is not simply that Mayakovsky condemns the troglodyte for its primitivity; the linking of the troglodyte with the Word reveals an acknowledgment that the very manifestation of the ideal in the imperfect workaday world entails its becoming imperfect as well.⁵⁰ *Logos* must necessarily subordinate itself to imperfection by merely (or finally) existing in the material world.

Mayakovsky is both serious and joking in this comparison. The joke, of course, is that *logos* incarnated must invariably be subject to the necessities and indignities of *byt*; but who could have guessed how great the indignity would be, to be incarnated as the jealous troglodyte Mayakovsky?

⁵⁰ Mayakovsky's use of 'the word' also figures as one of a few way-stations in the poet's metaphorical time-travel. His first stop is in the 19th century, where Lily's housekeeper stands like D'Anthes, the man who killed Pushkin in a duel; next, back to the first century, where he is the Word, transformed into flesh; and then, of course, the cave-dwelling troglodyte. The poet's implicit comparison of himself to Pushkin is something of a running joke/raw nerve for him. One example of this is *Pro Eto*'s extended reference, in the flood scene, to Pushkin's poem, *The Bronze Horseman*; this is treated in Chapter 4.

The phone call in image

It is worth noting how the metaphor is changed when Rodchenko deals with it. (Fig. 3) The appearance of the dinosaur in the book's second photomontage 'Troglodyte'⁵¹ pictures the unspecified, metaphorical ancient creature that Mayakovsky refers to, but Rodchenko has both specified and literalized it.⁵² It becomes a specific creature—a brontosaurus—from an altogether different era than Mayakovsky's troglodyte. So while *Troglodyte* literalizes the metaphor by making the reference take a specific zoological shape (the word becoming dinosaur flesh) it also shifts the reference away from its original metaphorical specificities (the troglodyte, literally a cave-dweller—a primitive human, but also a hermit, recluse).⁵³ The literalization of the metaphor defangs Mayakovsky's image, substituting for the poem's bloody-clubbed barbarian a generic schoolbook picture of a dinosaur known (as any second-grader could tell you) to be a gentle, slow-moving vegetarian. In its transition to image the troglodyte has become a cartoon, ironically—or sarcastically?—depicted as having a tender, nuzzling relationship to the elegantly seated and suited Mayakovsky.⁵⁴

In other ways, Rodchenko's photomontage equally illustrates and subverts the poem's imagery. Rodchenko shows the phone call, with Mayakovsky on one end and Lily's housekeeper Annushka on the other. While the number 67-10, as we know, is Lily Brik's actual phone number, the city depicted between the two figures is not the few blocks of Petersburg separating their apartments, but Chicago. Mayakovsky is represented by a photograph—of himself, of course—but Annushka is a combination of a magazine clipping, below, and a hand-drawn head and bust.

The photomontage "illustrates" iconographically the poem's theme (up to this point) of the contrast of ideal with real, reason with irrational emotion. If the irrational is embodied in the dinosaur, reason is most clearly to be found in the structured composition; a simple movement, dynamic because diagonal, left to right (handily, the direction of reading). Rationality is likewise to be found in the repeating geometrical shapes in the image: the matching rectangles of the image as a whole and the photograph of Mayakovsky in its upper right corner; the smaller triangles created by the crossing telephone lines, and the two larger triangles created by the long

⁵¹ The photomontage illustrations in *Pro Eto* are not titled, but accompanied by a few lines from the text, which is sometimes modified in these captions. The images titles I use throughout the dissertation are ones that I have given them, and are drawn from the images' captions and contents.

⁵² The caption of the image reads "It crawled / from the cable / creeping with jealousy / a monster from ancient troglodyte times" (Ползло из шнура скребушейся ревности времен трогладитских тогданшнее чудище). The caption is the second half of a sentence in the poem (11-12).

⁵³ The choice of the word troglodyte is delightfully ambivalent. It can be read both as a metaphor for the poet's base emotions. Given that while he wrote the poem Mayakovsky he lived in a single room, voluntarily cut off from the rest of the world, the reference can also be read as a literal reference to his living situation.

⁵⁴ Something should be said, too, about Mayakovsky's demeanor in the photograph. He is leaning forward as if listening intently or struggling to make himself heard, hands flattened together, in prayer position but pointing away from him, as if beseeching his interlocutor. His comportment seems very serious, but lends itself to comedy as well: the giant of a man pleading with the housekeeper whose body posture is very different, with her right fist on her hip—signifying indifference? Annoyance? 'Them's-my-orders'? Mayakovsky's natty dress, and his physical position above her in the photomontage emphasize the the unlikeliness of the housekeeper's dominance over him. One might wonder, though: is Mayakovsky's apparent chagrin at the reversal of 'normal' power relations ironic, given his identity as revolutionary poet?

landscape photograph slanting diagonally across it. Other elements in the structure, however, play a dual role: the rationality of technology, for example, is transformed into the improbable, absurd, or maybe simply confusing. The conglomeration of ‘technology’ in the lower left corner, for example, on the one hand represents science and progress, and on the other the mystification of those things. Here particularly, we see a fantastical combination of a searchlight immediately behind Annushka’s elbow, seeming to direct light into a reflecting dish, and what appears to be a kind of loudspeaker. These objects refer obliquely to the understanding and harnessing of light and sound waves (not incidentally of special interest to a project—like this book—that combines sound and vision).⁵⁵ The supreme rationality of those enterprises is undermined, however, by the perplexing mish-mash of ill-assorted parts that is the machine itself, and the function those parts imply, or fail to imply. How, exactly, is this loudspeaker attached to the phone at which Annushka stands? What are these wires leaving it from its pump-like handle? Why is the searchlight directed into this circular dish? The scale of the image-parts likewise works against strict rationality: the loudspeaker and searchlight loom over the comparatively Lilliputian figure who appears to overlook the dish. The image of Chicago stretching between the housekeeper and the poet functions, like technology itself, as a double symbol. On the one hand, it is a modern, industrialized city, in which progress has taken root; on the other, it is nonsensical as a representation of two blocks in a Russian city in 1923.⁵⁶ In this, of course, it is a figure of distance, precisely by virtue of its enormous expanse.

The image’s game with ambivalence is all the more evident in its form: the illusion of three-dimensional objects is created and destroyed, the picture divided by geometrical shapes that fall short of the perfection of their Euclidean relatives. Look again at the lower left corner of the image, at the rays of light that shoot from (or into) the dish. The beam that goes up to the left becomes darker above where the beam is crossed by the pump on the loudspeaker device. Where it begins to go dark, this beam takes on also a particular kind of shading, as if it were done with the side of a pencil. Above the device’s crossing of the beam, the ray becomes almost perfectly rectangular and stops, unbeamlike, parallel to the bottom of the page. It looks as if the beam, having traveled through the prism of the device, has become abstract. Where the ray had appeared to be approaching the left edge asymptotically, it becomes parallel to the work’s left edge. The rightmost beam of light does the same thing: until it is interrupted by machinery, it is markedly conical; the ray is darkened below to highlight its three-dimensionality. Where it passes through the machinery—a conic section, by the way—the white of the ray becomes flat and fades into the background. The pattern is repeated a number of times in this photomontage as ‘things’ that represent become abstract shapes, representations of depth deflate into surface.

⁵⁵ When we consider this mythical combination of sound and light amplification, a griffin of technology, it’s interesting to note the mismatches: the beam of light from the searchlight does not line up perfectly with its reflection; the loudspeaker, lodged into the black between the rays of light is pointed at the poet (the creator of sound), rather than directed from him.

⁵⁶ As the United States’ ‘second city,’ Chicago is Petersburg’s photo-negative equivalent.

Troglodyte Composition

Marked by a strong overall diagonal, and by straight lines, rectangles, triangles, cones, the photomontage creates a palpable sense of being built on a geometrical framework. Above Annushka's head, for example, is a triangle that Rodchenko has emphasized by blackening it. Mayakovsky sits in a rectangle. If the three-dimensional shapes go flat in this image, the mathematical form of two-dimensional shapes is unclear. Most of the regular shapes and straight lines are interrupted; they are not-quite shapes, made with fragmented lines. The top of the rightmost ray at bottom left, for example, seems to form a straight line with the bottom of the city photograph. If traced out, however, the line breaks into segments, the ray below never actually recovering from its interruption by the machine. Likewise the diagonal line that mostly cuts the main image into two triangles. Mostly: in actuality nothing in the image stretches from corner to corner. Say, then, that the line formed upper left by connecting the line of Mayakovsky's receiver straight across town on its phone wire to its terminus in the megaphone pump-handle, along with the edges of the paper, would form a triangle. The bottom part of the picture is irregular, and the bulk of the weight of the image—the picture's mass—falls below this line. This division of the rectangle and the proportion of pictorial elements that fall below it mirror the division of the rectangle in which Mayakovsky sits by the phone. All this is seconded—maybe intensified—by the weird relationship between the pate and the 'internal' orange field.

The exercise is not purely academic. The two halves of the picture have quite a different feel, which is emphasized by the orientation of the photograph of the Chicago skyline. The sky of the cityscape blends with the white of the background, creating a sense of expansiveness. The depicted 'real' of the image comes into contact with the flat, abstract space of the background, and overcomes it; the landscape has claimed the space for its own. In contrast, the empty lower right corner of the image fails to merge with the diagonal landscape, and thus remains abstract, a shape sooner than space.

The appeal of the photomontage is precisely its many internal contradictions; it is at once flat and deep, mathematical and illogical, descriptive and abstract, literally illustrative of the poem and cheekily irreverent about its text and author. It might be argued, however, that the photomontage echoes the concerns of the poem even in these inconsistencies. Mayakovsky's much-professed frustration with *byt*, for example, finds expression in Rodchenko's illustration, which maps the abstract concept of *byt* --and its structural mate *bytie*-- onto pictorial space. *Bytie* in Rodchenko's scheme, is akin to Euclidean geometry, the realm of the mind in which forms can exist unmarred by the dreary duty of embodiment. *Byt* is somewhat more complex, represented by displacements, interruptions, lines that do not connect, or that trail off into thin air. By showing disrupted versions of geometrical shapes that nonetheless refer to their ideal forms, the photomontage mirrors the disjunction between the real and ideal. In other words, Rodchenko makes pictorial space and structure metaphorical.

Just as impressive is the way that Rodchenko is able to plait the systems in which meaning is created. The metaphor the artist has created with pictorial space folds neatly into the writer's metaphor as well. The graphic depiction of the dinosaur points back to Mayakovsky's creeping troglodyte, itself a metaphor for his inability to bring his emotions into line with his thoughts and aspirations. This graphic symbol, a metaphor twice removed, also works in

Rodchenko's separate, structural, and visual metaphor. The contrast between the dinosaur's repeating curves and the straight lines and geometrical structure of the photomontage echo the opposition between the embodiment of *byt* and the ideal of *bytie*. The visual metaphorical system extends to other aspects of physical embodiment as well: free from the push and pull of the image's tensile structure, geometrically irreducible, the heaviest thing in the work floats above the Chicago skyline like a balloon.

Space as Metaphor

In *Trogodyte*, as on *Pro Eto*'s cover, the photographic medium, with its irregular but smooth gradations of light and dark, the particularity of its highlights and shadows, brings three dimensions vividly and convincingly into two. At the same time, however, the insertion of photographs into an abstract space produces a keen awareness of the contours & edges of the photograph, and a fluctuating but inevitable sense of their flatness. In part because of this fluctuation of the photograph between two and three dimensions, the image as a whole is also unable to reconcile itself to being one or the other. Elements in the pictures do not hold their form. The image's instability with respect to representations of three-dimensional space is underscored by a near-complete abandonment of scale's ability to orient the viewer. If we are unable to know, from the size and position of objects in the image, the distance of those objects from each other and from us, the standard means by which we understand the relationship and meaning of those things is complicated, if not thwarted. The stretch of skyline between Mayakovsky and Annushka, for example, gives one sense of the distance between them: many city blocks. But the size of Mayakovsky's body tells us something different: if he were to stand up from his chair, he would reach Annushka in three confident strides, or five mincing ones. Of course, as viewers we refuse "rational" vision, as established within a mathematical, ordered perspectival space. But if we do not process the relative size and position of objects as a function of linear perspective, how do we understand that information? As participating in a hierarchical scale? Even then, the values are unstable. Mayakovsky is small compared to the telephone, but large relative to the dinosaur; Annushka dwarfs a tiny scientist at her feet, but is insubstantial in comparison with his inventions. The shifting size of objects in the picture prevents the viewer from locating herself, mentally, in relation to those objects; rather, she must shift her sense of space and distance to make sense of the picture. These small but continual shifts, akin to the changing sense of a sculpture's parts and lines as one walks around it, encourage the mental adjustments that makes us see flat shapes as a representation of deep space, and vice-versa.

Trogodyte's spatial instability on the level of the image as a whole is echoed in its smallest detail. The little scientist in the lower left corner, for example, is the site of yet another shift. He is framed by a thick line in a 90-degree angle that connects to the platform and to the base of the spotlight / loudspeaker. This angle seems to indicate a plane perpendicular to the base of the dish, against its curve. At the same time, the patch of white against which his head is silhouetted seems to begin in the representation of the dish, a curving little slice of a comma. The mark, opaque above the man, is much fainter on the dish itself, a faint and fading brushstroke. So even here are questions: is that "wall" a wall? Is it a transparent surface through which that mark on the dish can be seen? The white mark and black angle each gesture toward depth, and away from it as well. The standard marks used to imply depth are not used here; or

they contradict themselves and each other. The image seems spliced together out of two different systems functioning at the same time. Signification itself, it seems, is thrown into question.

Years on the Bridge

Rodchenko's exercises in the use and abuse of conventional markers of space is analogous to Mayakovsky's further disorienting configurations of time. The double-placement in time that Mayakovsky creates with the comparison of himself to a troglodyte and his placement of himself in the iron age recurs throughout the poem. After the rejection of his phone call, Mayakovsky goes to lie down on his bed, whereupon the poet metamorphoses in such a way that his 'form' comes into line with his 'content': anger and primitive desperation turn him into a polar bear. His pillow becomes an ice floe, and he floats downstream on it, on a river of his own tears; the iron arch of his bedstead becomes a bridge that he approaches from below. On the bridge he encounters a man: himself, Mayakovsky, from seven years before. Although the scene begins in the narrative present, the poet immediately undergoes an emotional-evolutionary regression as he becomes a bear, in which form he encounters his past self. Movement in space—the poet's trip downriver—becomes, metaphorically, movement through time.

The reader is set up for Mayakovsky's encounter with his past self by the poet's growing uneasiness as he approaches the bridge: "Now it's inevitable / He will be! / There he is!!!" (Теперь неизбежно.../ Он будет! / Он вот!)⁵⁷ The conceptual movement from the future to the present in the final two lines mimics the working of memory, as one imagines the passage of time and one's consciousness of its unfolding from the vantage point of already knowing the outcome. The word "inevitable" (неизбежно, from the root бегать, to run; the rough etymological translation might be 'un-run-away-from-able') that precedes these lines carries the same sense; it indicates the knowledge of future events in the present, or else a sense of determinism from a point of view situated in the future. In either case the sense of distinct times converging introduces the section.

This rather urgent introduction to the encounter is interrupted, however, by a description of the bridge:

Волны устои стальные моют. / Недвижный / страшный / упершись в бока /
столицы / в отчаянии созданной мною / стоит / на своих стоэтажных быках.

The waves wash the steel foundations. / Unmoving / terrible / piercing the sides / of
the capital / created by me in desperation / it stands / on its hundred-storied piers.

By describing the city itself as martyred Mayakovsky shuttles the reader to two different pasts. The images of waves in the capital direct some part of the reader's attention to the creation of

⁵⁷ *Pro Eto*, 15.

Saint Petersburg itself, Russia's *ur*-mythology of self-willed metamorphosis,⁵⁸ by way of one of Pushkin's most famous poems, "The Bronze Horseman."⁵⁹ Pushkin's comparison of the terrible creation of Saint Petersburg with the Old Testament story of the flood is further emphasized by Mayakovsky's description of the waves as 'washing,' a reference to a sense of foreboding that nature (or God) itself is angered and out for blood.⁶⁰ The image of the bridge 'piercing the side' of the capital, of course, compares Petersburg with Jesus Christ, yet another historical stutter in the narrative. The description of the bridge in the present tense ("it stands"; *стоит*) immediately gives way to the past tense: "It embroidered the sky with aerial clamps. / Made of fairy steel it revolted from the waters" (*Небо воздушными скрепами бышил. / Из вод феерией стали восстал*).⁶¹ Mayakovsky enlists a Soviet vision, a technological world of clamps and steel creating hundred-story structures born of revolt, but situates this dream in a realm of storybooks and mythology.⁶²

The staccato shifts back and forth in time—a kind of poetic nystagmus or a compulsive tic—evoked by the references to the flood and to the Old Testament are echoed in the poet's description of the river itself: "It doesn't forgive / It hunts. / It contracted! / The violent running had no pity." (*Не прощает / гонит. / Сжался! / Не сжалился бешеный бег*).⁶³ The poem interrupts the present-tense, threatening, forward movement of the river, with pauses both imagistic and linguistic. The river, first "hunts", then stops, pulling back as it "contracted"; but in the next line the chase is on again, and the river has become movement itself: running. The river's inexorable flow is captured in the lack of punctuation between "It does not forgive" and "it hunts"; the running together of these clauses, in Russian as in English, gives the lines a sense of urgency. In contrast, the exclamation point after "It contracts" adds an awkward pause in the middle of that urgency. Even the choice of verbs in these lines both creates and stanches the flow of ideas and images: "It contracted" (*сжался*) and "it had pity" (*сжалился*) are alike enough to be taken, momentarily, as different forms of the same word. The phonic similarities of these words create pauses as the reader or hearer must go back and check or revise her understanding.

The confused and confusing chronology of Mayakovsky's encounter with his past self is mirrored in his description of that self. A single-word line reads "He stands" (*Стоит*). The line's first trick is to send the reader back eighteen lines, where the same single-word line, "it

⁵⁸ For a thorough treatment of the mythology of Petersburg's transformation with respect to Russian literature, see Peter I. Barta, Ed., *Metamorphoses in Russian Literature* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2000).

⁵⁹ In Pushkin's 1833 poem the Neva floods Petersburg during a storm; when the narrator believes his beloved has drowned, he curses a statue of Peter the Great for his poor planning. The statue comes to life and chases the narrator through the city; the narrator is later found drowned as well.

⁶⁰ The symbolism of the flood and other Genesis imagery in this section is discussed at greater length in Chapter 4.

⁶¹ *Pro Eto*, 15.

⁶² The comparison to Tatlin's plan for the Monument to the Third International (the tower) is in line; the poignant discrepancy between the incredible dream of a towering steel structure with rotating floors with the tower's actual incarnations in plywood is matched by the intermingling of Constructivist and storybook fantasies in the poem.

⁶³ *Pro Eto*, 15.

stands” (стоит) described the bridge.⁶⁴ The present tense of the verb is belied by the next line, “His grown-out hair hung loose” (Разметал изросшие волосы). This sentence embodies pastness doubly: the observational present tense turns into the narrative past tense, which expands to include, somehow, the time it took for the poet’s hair to have grown out, a Bolshevik Rip van Winkle.

The description of the narrator, the present-tense Mayakovsky, is no less fraught. He reminds the reader that he is a bear (i.e. a troglodyte, since bears live in caves) when he “paws” his ears in order not to hear the voice of the past calling to him.⁶⁵ The way this experience of hearing is described again recalls both Greek and Christian mythology: “I hear / my / my very own voice /the knife of the voice makes holes in my paws.” (Я слышу / мой / мой собственный голос / Мне лапы дырявит голоса нож.) In the recognition that he is hearing his own voice, and in the very repetition of the words “my” and “voice,” the metamorphic story of Echo is invoked. Her story in turn metamorphoses into one of Christian martyrdom. Again the present time of the narrative— already confounded by the impossible meeting of future and present and hounded by its own relentless forward movement—is displaced and transformed into times and sites of metamorphosis, a nymph into voice, a man into God.⁶⁶

The words “I paw my ears,” chosen for the caption to the image, likewise create disorienting shifts in meaning. The translation and interpretation given them above is certainly fair: Mayakovsky is a bear, and to paw his ears, of course, is to cover them, to keep him from hearing the voice of Revolution past. I would like to suggest, however, that the words have other connotations and meanings that imply another, secondary interpretation. For example, there seems to be a play on the word ‘I paw’ (лаплю). “Paw” is not a verb in Russian, but exclusively a noun; Mayakovsky has ‘verbed’ a noun by tacking a verbal ending onto it. “*Lapa*” also means “tenon”: the technical term for the male end of male-female joints. The word used for “ears” (уши) has similarly technical secondary meanings: “*ushi*” are the ends of a brace or clamp through which a male part—a nail, screw, or tenon—passes to stabilize a joint or attachment. In the context of the description of the bridge with its “aerial clamps” it is possible to read the sentence as referring to the physical connecting of mechanical elements. The image fuses the work of creating poetry—combining segments, creating joints, building a structure—with construction work. The “fairy steel” of the bridge is, after all, the creation of a poet. The reference to construction calls to mind the Constructivist creed that the artist is simply another kind of worker. The comparison is, I think, an ironic and self-aware spoof of the Constructivist and Productivist rhetoric espoused by *Lef*. In allowing for such technical secondary meanings he is likely mocking himself as well.

The Mayakovsky standing on the bridge, labelled as “The Man from Seven Years Ago” in one of the poem’s subtitles, is a reference to his own 1917 poem, *Man. Pro Eto* and *Man* share a

⁶⁴ Although Russian distinguishes between genders in the past tense, it does not do so in the present and future tenses.

⁶⁵ “Я уши лаплю.” 15.

⁶⁶ Ibid. For a fascinating discussion of the Echo verse and its role in Russian literature, see Peter I. Barta’s “Echo and Narcissus in Russian Symbolism” in *Metamorphoses in Russian Literature*, ed. Peter I. Barta (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2000), 15-40.

number of motifs, images and ideas: *Man*, for example, begins on Earth, shifts to Heaven, and ends in the distant, dystopian future, in which philistines continue to rule the world.⁶⁷ Mayakovsky scholar Edward Brown goes so far as to say that *Pro Eto* is a revision, or “even a correction” of the earlier poem.⁶⁸ By referring the reader to the earlier work’s vision of the future Mayakovsky points the reader simultaneously backwards and forwards. Likewise, by alluding to *Man*’s imagining of a future in which philistinism ruled, Mayakovsky compares his contemporary NEP-era self with his past revolutionary self, as well as to the future philistine self that the younger revolutionary has imagined; a future self that the current Mayakovsky is beginning to resemble, and is moving toward, as the river bears him downstream.

The poet’s hallucinatory double-vision of himself is pulled from the realm of dream and metaphor when the younger Mayakovsky, the one on the bridge, yells down to the older. The revolutionary Mayakovsky upbraids the NEP Mayakovsky for his complacency: “You, perhaps, attached yourself to their caste? / You kiss? / You eat? / Set free your paunch? / Into their family happiness / you intend to worm your way like a rooster?” (Ты, может, к ихней примазался касте? / Целуешь? / Ешь? / Отпускаешь брюшко? / Сам / в их семейное счастье / намереваешь пролезть петушком?)⁶⁹ The chronology of the scene is rendered even more complex in that the man on the bridge—the revolutionary Mayakovsky—much better resembles the new socialist man of the future than his actual future self. In his strident, uncompromising self-abnegation and embrace of austerity, the man on the bridge represents *bytie*, here indistinguishable from the ideals and hopes of the revolution. In the eyes of his past self, the ‘future’ Mayakovsky, with his fine clothes and cosmetic dentistry, is hopelessly bourgeois.

Rodchenko’s Bridge

The photomontage that corresponds to this scene, *I paw my ears*, shows us four Mayakovskys: one on the bridge, one sitting on a snow bank, and two in the form of a polar bear. (Fig. 4) One of the Mayakovskys is standing, seemingly poised to jump off the bridge, and one is sitting with his hands over his ears on an iceberg, surrounded by stalactites and other ice formations. The bears at the intersection of horizon and iceberg seem to float, standing on all fours on the surface of the water. A speedboat, its bow considerably out of the water and its stern only just above the water’s surface, might be going very fast or it might be about to sink. Out of one crashing wave rises a trussed arch built of two girders (or chords, to use the technical term). The chords move slowly apart as they rise with diagonal braces shuttling between them like sewing stitches. Another trussed arch, this one part of a (half-through arch) bridge, balances precariously on top of it, and a third deck bridge cantilevers off to the left midway up the vertical

⁶⁷ *Pro Eto* and *Man* both build on and echo the themes and plots of H. G. Wells’s 1895 science-fiction novel, *The Time Machine*. The *LEF* artists were very well acquainted with and highly interested in the novel. The novel’s themes, of time travel (of course), of evolution, of classes that become races and mutate into their basest forms, and the interaction between classes, are evident throughout *Pro Eto*. *Man* goes as far as to envision the future as having devolved in the same way Wells does.

⁶⁸ Brown, 219.

⁶⁹ *Pro Eto*, 16. The single-word line “Yourself” (Сам) in these lines is difficult to translate. It could refer, grammatically, to the speaker (i.e., ‘myself’) or the addressee (i.e., ‘yourself’); its use is a play on the fact that the addressee and the speaker are, in some sense, the same person.

arch. The vertical arch is entirely, and obviously, hand-drawn. This is evident throughout the arch's length and in the diagonal supports, but is particularly noticeable where the left chord crosses over the cantilevering part, where the support has the transparency of ink that crosses tape. Once again, as with the book's cover, the Constructivists' favored industrial motif comes into sharp contrast with the image's schoolchild-art-project aesthetic.

The hand-drawn character of the vertical arch also emphasizes, once again, a tension between two- and three-dimensionality in the image. The elements in the lower part of the image—the water & speedboat—are closer to the picture plane than to the bears. This effect is intensified by the way the boat's bow leaps out in front of the insert of the hard-edged blank page just below. The bears in turn seem closer than Mayakovsky's iceberg perch, making the lower part of the image participate in roughly three-dimensional perspectival illusionism. The rising arch is defiantly flat, however, with both chords seeming to remain parallel to the picture plane throughout their length. The more horizontal trussed arches of the bridge bring home the flatness of the hand-drawn vertical one. The bridge arches are shown in perspective, which causes the parallel arches to seem to cross as they lead away from the picture plane into the distance. The depiction of the arches in perspective, in fact, gives us model for the vertical structure: the way the top and bottom chords of each bridge-arch seem to draw closer as the arches recede into the distance is replicated in the distance between the two chords of the arch coming out of the water. The replication is absurd on its face: it is difficult even to imagine what plane one would need to occupy in order for these pictorial marks of perspectival recession to make sense. Would parallel lines seem to converge like this from the point of view of the standing Mayakovsky? And if so, has Rodchenko made Mayakovsky's perspective the viewer's own?

Rodchenko creates yet another kind of mental engagement with the image by exploiting the viewer's desire for reason and mechanical order. The two beams of the vertical arch conspicuously lack a connection to the bridge's span. That lack is made the more conspicuous in that the picture element of the span already has several possible matches at the ready in the snow-covered piers on the embankment below the bridge. The eye unconsciously recognizes at once two things: that the arch needs to be connected to the span, and that two similar and thus likely attachment points are available, if only the span were to shift slightly to the right. This would of course leave the single pylon unaccounted for, and the viewer will do that math as well. The math does not work, the connection is denied, and the tension between the two- and the three-dimensional in the image remains unresolved.

Multiple pictures of time

The bridge image is particularly worth noting as a two-dimensional image that expresses four dimensions. This in itself is not so new: a decade earlier the Futurists and Malevich had experimented with the depiction of movement—and thus time—in still, flat images. The passage of time is expressed differently in this image, however. The photomontage is not constructed as a single action described in successive moments. Rather, it marks multiple *kinds* of time, and suggests that time might move in a number of ways and directions.

The river in the foreground, conveniently flowing from left to right, the direction in which we read, works as an easy and tried symbol for the (one-way) passage of time, and this

template functions as a foil for the image's play with time. (As such it is a literal translation of Mayakovsky's river, as well as a metaphorical one.) The speedboat and the polar bears facing downstream reinforce the sense of movement left to right. Of course, time has already been complicated by the poem's narrative, and this too is represented pictorially in the photomontage: the primitive of the present (the bear) floats below the past's dream of the future (embodied in the zealous figure of the revolutionary Mayakovsky).

In the poem, there are only two figures in this scene: a human on the bridge, and a bear on a floe. Rodchenko has inserted two extras—a bear and a human each—into the montage. With the introduction of these figures into the system with Rodchenko's precarious bridge structure, two contradictory movements are proposed. One is that Mayakovsky jumps off the bridge and splashes into the water. The other is that he is deposited on the iceberg, melancholy. This is unlike most modernist depictions of time: We are not shown a single, continuous action. Instead we are shown what Jorge Luis Borges might call a "Garden of Forking Paths": mutually incompatible futures, existing in alternate realities or planes of existence.

Consider: What if the arch of the support is actually the trajectory of Mayakovsky's jump, the crashing wave his splash into the ocean? Suddenly the photomontage is not a depiction of a man on a bridge, below and above, but instead emphasizes a central ellipse whose long arcs are the bridge, on the left, and multiple Mayakovskies on the right. The ellipse reveals still another representation of time: instead of (or in addition to) the two mutually exclusive times represented by the splash and the seated Mayakovsky, movement—and thus time—is shown as a cycle: Mayakovsky jumps off the bridge with a splash. From here he is carried downstream (to the right), becomes a polar bear, and eventually crawls up on shore to become the despairing Mayakovsky, who in turn eventually becomes the man on the bridge. The cycle reads like a farce of evolution (interesting that this cycle proceeds counterclockwise): the primitive creature crawls up out of the water, evolves into man, builds bridges of metal, then wants to throw himself off them. The alternative, clockwise reading of this cycle takes an equally dim view of the fate of the revolutionary: he does not jump after all, but is gently deposited on land, where he slides down, reverts into a more primitive version of himself, and must work his way up the unstable, hand-made, pieced-together ladder to become a revolutionary once more.

The page is not, it should be noted, an illustration of Mayakovsky's poem. At this point it has become an interpretation, or even a prequel-sequel. Rodchenko is not describing what happens in the poem, but is giving an incisive reading in which he lays out two possibilities for the revolutionary zealot who cannot bring his world—or even himself—into line with his ideals. He can kill himself and keep his ideals intact, or he can come down from the bridge and become a despondent, isolated, ear-pawing troglodyte.⁷⁰

The inclusion of these alternative cycles of possibility inserts a diachronic aspect into the visual image. The still image moves into what has traditionally been the province of words and

⁷⁰ Compare Nikolai Chuzhak's critique of *Pro Eto*, published in the second issue of *LEF*: "And really 'there's no way out': the whole free world is enclosed by philistines and their way of life. In 1914 that poet was more perspicacious, and his hero did know a way out...." (quoted in Brown, p. 257)

narrative. To build before and after, cause and effect, time and space into a flat visual image is to re-propose what an image can do, and therefore what it is.

Another Cup of Tea

I want to look at a third (and final, for this chapter) pairing of image and prose, before stepping back and considering where these observations and considerations have left us. The book's fourth photomontage, which I will refer to as "Centuries," (Fig. 5) is accompanied by a caption that reads: "For ages they've stood / just as they are. / No whip. / and the filly of living never starts."⁷¹ (Все так и стоит столетья / как было. / Не бьют / и не тронулась быта кобыла.)⁷² Before moving on to consider the relationship between text and image, a few words about the text are in order. The narrative context of these lines is a Christmas Eve party the poet has stumbled upon while trying to secure help for the suicidal man on the bridge (i.e., himself). The poem describes the party-goers as timid and cautiously polite, as encrusted with domesticity, entombed in their apartments; they are a 'whole faceless parade' who 'come and come' in a 'peaceful procession', in whose beards shimmer 'apartmental cobwebs.' One sense of the lines is that everything has remained the same for hundreds of years, and that without goading, or even violent action, nothing will ever change. But when one digs into these lines--both in terms of sense and the specifics of the words, questions come up.

The translation quoted above is Herbert Marshall's—the standard, published in 1965—which admittedly sacrifices much for the sake of maintaining the rhyme scheme of the original. Even if Marshall tried to remain literal, however, the lines tend to resist any single translation—really, any single meaning. (Indeed, sometimes the poem resists strict logical or grammatical sense.) Christina Kiaer's much more recent translation can stand as testimony to the lines' varied possible meanings: "And the century stands/ as it was. / Unwhipped / the mare of *byt* won't budge."⁷³ Where Marshall's translation of these lines relies on their context, taking the subject "all" (все) to refer to partygoers ('they'), Kiaer's translation lifts the lines out of their context: by understanding "all" as 'everything' she has made the lines more impersonal, and increased their metaphorical punch.

Yet another—and still more literal—translation might read, "Everything is standing just so for centuries/ as it was. / They don't beat / and the mare of everyday life didn't get up."⁷⁴ The verb tense alternates from line to line, from present to past to present and back to past. With their skewed tenses these lines prolong and underscore the poem's sense of chronological disorientation which I have been following all through these pages. How can the mare's failure to stir, in the past, be caused by what "they" are doing to it in the present? In other words, how

⁷¹ Marshall, Herbert. *Pro Eto' Mayakovsky* (London: Dobson, 1965) 188.

⁷² *Pro Eto*, 24.

⁷³ Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, 131.

⁷⁴ The Marshall and Kiaer translations do not account for the genitive case of the word 'century' (*stoletie*, here, in genitive, *stolet'ia*). The translation I've provided is the only one I can think of that takes both the verb form (singular) and the noun case (genitive) into account.

The caption is not—and in an interesting way—the same as the lines it refers to in the text. The line of text begins with the words, "vse tak i" rather than "i eto". The most simple interpretation of the text is that it adds the meaning "even so" to the lines of the caption.

can an event in the present determine the outcome of the past? By evacuating any real sense of time from his poem, Mayakovsky seems to be turning away from—deliberately negating—one of the most important aspects of his medium; its ability to convey time, including cause and effect, through tense. In the very grammar of these lines the central image of the poem—Mayakovsky’s double existence as the past revolutionary zealot and the present philistine—is writ small.

The poet creates the same kinds of difficulty—those that make the process of reading itself a staggering sort of affair—throughout. Take, for example, the word that has been translated as “stands” (стоит): it can be read as a form of the verb ‘стоять’ (to stand), or as a form of the verb ‘стоить’ (to cost, to be worth, to be worthwhile). Though their pronunciation is different, the two words are *visual* homonyms for distinct verbs in the 3rd personal singular. The reader, then, must choose between two identical words with different stresses in order to make a meaningful grammatical sentence from the words. Yet another alternative translation might read “It’s worth a century, as it was,” or “And it takes a century, as it was.” Where standard translations convey a static duration (things have been this way for centuries), this one introduces an element of exchange: what is change worth? what efforts, comforts, habits, or things will it cost? At the same time, this second version negates itself, since we are not used to thinking of time, at least on a large scale, as having exchange value: how can something cost a century?

The word translated as “start up”, “budge”, “stir”, or “get up” (тронуться) presents similar difficulties. In its perfective aspect it can mean, as it is generally translated, to start or stir; but it can also be used, colloquially, to indicate a person’s mental unhinging. Thus тронулась could certainly mean ‘she started up’, but might also mean ‘she lost her mind.’ This alternative translation introduces a counter-factual sense: they don’t beat her, and she did not lose her mind. If the gist of the standard reading is ‘if there’s no violent action, nothing will change’, the sense of this alternative translation stands in contraposition: ‘if they don’t beat her, she won’t go crazy’. Since the context is Mayakovsky’s description of polite but cowardly, crusty, cobwebby party-goers, the lines might mean that *these* people did not whip *byt* into motion, and therefore their everyday life did not change, nor did it ‘lose its mind.’ This reading adds a third sense, one of a grudging acknowledgement of the bourgeois codgers’ sensible choice. These people’s lives have not, after all, been turned upside down in the same way as Mayakovsky’s.⁷⁵

I point out these ‘alternative’ readings not as an indication of how translators should have understood the poem—they are not after all the most obvious, or even correct, translations of the lines—but to point out multiple possible meanings that create both visual and aural obstacles for the hearer/ reader of the poem. Pronouncing (or internally hearing) words whose meaning depends on stress creates an auditory hiccup for the reader. Choosing between homonyms and grammatical and logical possibilities inserts pauses into the reader’s understanding and consumption of the text. As the reader encounters these textual difficulties and pushes past them,

⁷⁵ This second meaning of тронуться—to go crazy or crack up—comes from the idiom ‘лед тронулся’, “the ice has broken up” or “the ice has started to move downstream”, a phrase uttered every spring in Saint Petersburg. The breaking up and coming apart of the ice serves as a metaphor for the coming undone of the mind. In the poem this meaning of the word—admittedly a secondary one—is lent additional weight because Mayakovsky as bear has floated down the Neva on a floe of such broken-up ice. Thanks to Eric Naiman for pointing out the idiom.

her own experience of the text is marked by stops, starts, and backward turns that are analogous to the poem's chronological twists.

Of poets and teapots

The montage that corresponds to these words, more than any other in the book, is organized around right angles. *Centuries* depicts a *ronde* of people and household objects. Two photographs of Mayakovsky—a larger one in a suit and cap at left and a smaller, seated one gesturing with his hands at right—take their places among pictures of military men, Africans in native dress, a tweed-suited businessman and others. Outsized silverware and tea-service items bob among them in a kind of circuit. Although the objects and people in the montage project a sense of movement as they circle around the ellipse, the lines of *Centuries* are largely vertical and horizontal. Note, for example, the edges of the pictures and of the colored backgrounds, making the image much less dynamic than the others, an appropriate if too-clear counterpoint to the stillness, stability, and even stagnation indicated in Mayakovsky's poem. This image seems more haphazard and less founded on a unitary structure than the images we have looked at so far. It is also the image in which philistine *byt* is addressed most directly. The accoutrements that surround Mayakovsky are certainly the stuff of *byt*: signifiers of domestic niceties and frivolities. The image is spotted with fancy, patterned, domestic items. Metal teacups, trays, utensils, a samovar and a swiveling vanity mirror are as prominent in the photomontage as the figures themselves. Nearly every figure in the image is literally in contact with these items. In some cases, as with the pictures of Mayakovsky, the businessman, and a faceless soldier just right of top center, the figures are covered by these items, partially eclipsed by domestic bric-a-brac.

The two largest figures in the image are Mayakovsky on the left and a nattily dressed older man on the right. The poet sits, his arms crossed on his knee wrist over wrist. One is just able to see the end of a burning, hand-rolled cigarette between the index and middle finger of his left hand. He wears a worker's cap and his characteristic straight-lipped scowl, and looks straight out of the picture at something beyond or behind the viewer. In front of and overlapping him are a crystal candy dish with a ball balanced on top and an oversized table knife. To his left (our right) is 'the businessman', dressed in a herringbone suit, and holding the lapel such that we can see the its shiny, silky lining. With his bow-tie, monocle, and large ring on his right hand, he is an easy symbol of the philistine capitalist, or *NEP*-man.

With its proliferation of household items, particularly those related to tea-drinking (a recurrent symptom of philistine complacency in Mayakovsky's poem), it is certainly an ironic portrait of the implacable revolutionary in a swarm of mundane *stuff*. The picture of military officers and soldiers surrounded by silver flatware and dishes, soldiers laughing as they drink tea and eat, alongside Africans with their absurd (projected) worship of tea, implies the ubiquity of the philistine drive for creature comforts. All are united—primitive peoples, soldiers, giants, fat capitalists and self-policing revolutionaries alike—in the philistine mundanity of *byt*. The ubiquity may not only be geographical: in the top center-right of the photomontage a soldier is framed in a silver serving tray, the two spoons in the crook of his arm resembling clock-arms. The rightmost spoon/hand approaches the traditional Russian teacup, as if perpetually announcing, "Time for tea!" It is tea-time everywhere, too, as the sign before the prostrate

Africans in the lower right corner attests: the sign reads (in a pre-revolutionary font) “Another cup of tea.” Likewise, the ball in front of Mayakovsky can be read as a darkly humorous crystal ball in which the poet sees nothing in the future but more samovars and tea-drinking. Part of the jibe of the visual joke, of course, is the rendering of the ‘future’ in silhouette, a medium of the 18th century.

Many figures in the picture seem to be in danger of being overwhelmed or overrun by the domestic objects in within it. The soldier in the upper right is effaced by the spoons in front of him; Mayakovsky and the capitalist are equally occluded by objects; and the soldiers in lower left are dwarfed by the butter knife and samovar that loom over them. Even the giant is swallowed up by the patterned wallpaper and carpet of the apartment. Likewise, the African woman’s torso in the upper left corner is nearly covered by the metal cup she seems to hold; indeed, Rodchenko’s comparison of her arm- and leg- bands to the cup suggests a kind of metamorphosis as body is replaced by metal.

One variation of this interpretation is that the objects surround and imprison Mayakovsky. In Christina Kiaer’s reading, for example, the vertical lines of the knife and candy dish are prison bars; Mayakovsky is similarly entrapped inside the capitalist’s “ample belly.”⁷⁶ Kiaer argues that the hyper-male Mayakovsky is trapped within the culturally feminized trappings of *byt*, and proposes that Mayakovsky may have willingly bent himself into that position, noting that “Rodchenko emphasizes the ease of Mayakovsky’s fit within the mirror’s frame by precisely fitting the measure of his photographic figure to the mirror’s ornate pedestals and the cut-glass crystal bottles that form part of the mirror set.”⁷⁷ Likewise, she argues that this sense of ease is heightened by its juxtaposition with the photograph of the giant in a small room immediately to the mirror’s left. This may well be, as the poet’s willingness to make himself a prisoner is made plain enough through Mayakovsky’s self-sentenced and self-enforced imprisonment referred to in the first section in the book, “The Ballad of Reading Gaol.”⁷⁸

However, the relationship of figures to domestic objects in the image is not only that of one group surrounded or imprisoned by another. Rather, both objects and people also engage in a dynamic spatial interplay in which the relative terms of above/below, deep/shallow and dense/dispersed are in tension. Mayakovsky framed by the mirror-set can serve as an example of this: while Mayakovsky fits within the mirror, that fit is uneasy. A key signifier of the giant’s misfit within the room is that his head is intersected by the line of the ceiling-molding behind him; it ‘passes through’ his eyes and ears. The picture of Mayakovksy is similarly intersected by the top edge of his gilt frame; also through the ears and eyes. However much Mayakovsky may want to accommodate himself to this space, he exceeds its boundaries. His head rises out of the frame, as does his left knee with the worker’s cap upon it.

Mayakovsky’s poor fit is just one aspect of the mirror’s spatial instability. In the upper two corners, just inside the frame, the edges of the mirror are beveled; these bevels, meeting at 45° angles in the corners of the frame, indicate a shallow rise to the flat, blackened plane of the

⁷⁶ Kiaer, 152-3.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ The exaggerated and self-imposed nature of Mayakovsky’s exile is discussed at greater length in Chapter 4; I consider the reference to Wilde’s *Ballad* in greater detail in the Epilog.

mirror. The cut-out photograph of Mayakovsky lies directly on top of this plane; the white halo of the photograph's edge is set off against this black background. At the top of the frame, Mayakovsky's photograph rises past the beveled edge and in front of the gilded frame. At the bottom of the frame, however, Rodchenko has played a spatial trick on the viewer. If the top beveling indicates the flat plane of the mirror stands out from the edges (that is, appears to be slightly closer to the picture plane), the bottom of the mirror indicates the opposite. In the bottom of the frame, Mayakovsky's feet, resting entirely above the bottom edge of the beveled part of the mirror, create the illusion that the beveled edge becomes a kind of box, receding into space, in which both Mayakovsky and the legs of his chair sit. The beveled bottom edge of the mirror becomes a kind of receding shelf, parallel to the one just below upon which the cut-crystal perfume bottles stand. (It is also worth noting that Mayakovsky's legs, somewhere below the knee, cease to be photographic; where the photographic likeness becomes hand-drawn corresponds roughly to the place where the mirror switches from convex to concave.) The beveled mirror/Mayakovsky box resembles a modernist version of the reversible cube, known both to students of Renaissance perspective and to nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophers of epistemology.⁷⁹

The reversible perspective of the mirror, which pushes Mayakovsky toward the picture plane at the top and away from it at the bottom, is one example among several in the image of Rodchenko's play with three-dimensionality. Another such reversal is embedded in the mirror-set: the mirror is attached at its vertical midpoint to the obelisks. The single point of attachment on either side indicates a kind of axle around which the mirror might swing backward and forward in space, with its top or bottom moving towards or away from the viewer. This implied swinging of the plane of the mirror through space is prevented in the photomontage, however, by the white surrounding the bottom edges of the frame that extends down to the perfume jars. The white—because it blocks our view of the capitalist behind it—shows that the mirror, supports and all, were cut from a single piece of paper (an advertisement?): the white we see is the abstract background of the re-purposed image. It flattens out the mirror, locking it in a plane parallel to the picture plane. Thus Rodchenko implies both a plane rotating in space, and the 3-dimensional solid that rotation would create; at the same time he negates the imagined movement and its implied cylinder.

Elsewhere the image conjures three-dimensional space less ambiguously. For example, the perfume-bottle tray seems to jut out toward the picture plane until it slices the head of the African man in the photograph below it. In that photograph, too, we see the left wall of the Africans' courtyard recede and intersect with a back wall and steps to create a courtyard spacious enough to accommodate easily the bodies of a number of men. These lie prostrate with their feet

⁷⁹ The reversible perspective of the mirror-box is related to the Necker cube, which can be seen as protruding or receding, depending on the viewer's will; the ability of the Necker cube's lines to indicate conflicting interpretations played a role in epistemological debates since Necker's invention of the form in the early 19th century.

toward the picture plane, as though bodily enacting lines of perspective. Nearby, the angle of ceiling-moulding to the floor gives the giant's room depth as well.⁸⁰

The three-dimensional spaces in this photomontage are peculiarly limited to the bottom of the image containing Mayakovsky's vanity-cabinet, the African courtyard, and the giant's living room. All of the image's inhabitable spaces are in its bottom half. In the top half of the image, modeled, three-dimensional objects seem paradoxically to exist in a flat, purely abstract space. The silver platter and teacup, the knife and candy dish—even the larger Mayakovsky himself—exist in a realm devoid of lines of perspective or other indications of deep space apart from the shadows within their outlines. They are akin to the silhouette.

There is an analogous difference between the top and bottom of the photomontage with regard to the spacing of the montage elements. Below, the elements crowd together and seem to be locked in side to side. In the top half of the image, however, the elements begin to spread out and their edges are less likely to touch those of another form. Rather, as with the silver cup and platter, they appear to be floating weightless in the low-gravity atmosphere of the photomontage's upper half.⁸¹ The slide from deep, inhabitable space to a world in which unmoored objects float hints at—and even seems to poke fun at—the idea of a Platonic realm in which things can exist apart from embodiment in the everyday, material world. It is a humorous trope, implying as it does that even the Platonic realm is full of spoons, cups, platters, and disillusioned revolutionaries.

Rodchenko by turns uses pictorial illusions to conjure space and disabuses the viewer of those very illusions. By doing so he has not only participated in the standard modernist practice of exploring and revealing the quirks and tricks of his own medium, but also has tricks symbolic and metaphorical value. As three-dimensional renderings give way to flattened, abstract, and disembodied forms, Rodchenko's photomontage illustrations function as an analog to Mayakovsky's non-standard use of tense within the poem to expand and contract time. But the photomontages also provide a visual counterpart to *Pro Eto's* concern with, and critique of, *byt*. Setting the everyday, embodied world into precarious, ever-shifting play with an abstract and often geometrical one, Rodchenko's illustrations give visual form to the poem's ambiguous and

⁸⁰ Even in these relatively straightforward examples of pictorial depth, the illusion of three-dimensionality is thwarted: the space that the Africans lie in and indicate is foiled somewhat by the pasted-on 'sign' in the picture and by the overlap of the powder-pot with the standing man's head; the giant's room is frustrated by the preserved rectangularity of the photograph and by the pale line left around the edges of the picture, a sure sign to the reader that he or she is looking at a newspaper clipping. And so on: the samovar, though we see its modeling, floats in the center of a flat black rectangle. The crystal 'ball' that Mayakovsky looks up from, disgruntled, is a simple disc. Even the foreshortening of the guitar played by the soldier at lower left provides only a short-lived illusion of depth: although the soldier seems to 'sit' on the top of the black rectangle, his would-be legs are flattened in their boots by the same black shape.

⁸¹ It is interesting to note that a number of figures in this photomontage are missing legs: the fat capitalist, the capped Mayakovsky, the tea-drinking Soviet soldiers at bottom left, the guitar-playing soldier at left, and the spoon-wielding officer at top center right. Even mirror-Mayakovsky's legs have been removed and re-inked. The only figures retaining their (original, photographic) feet, in fact, are the in the fantasy of bourgeois life (the silhouetted man in the crystal ball) and the sideshows of European culture: the giant and the Africans (both at bottom right and top left). The lack of feet points to immobility, impotence. Mayakovsky's oft-repeated phrase, there is no place to turn (nowhere to go) (Rus: *devatsia nekuda*) is given a new twist: in this photomontage there is nothing to turn, or go, *with*. *Devatsia nichem*.

ambivalent treatment of the imperfection of the real, lived, embodied life of the New Soviet Man.

Mayakovsky takes one of the strengths of his medium—the ability of tense to convey the unfolding of events in time—and uses it to disorient and confuse the reader, upending her sense of cause and effect, and of before and after by creating almost-compulsive literary-chronological shifts in which the past, present and future expand into one another, or simply trade places. Mayakovsky’s metaphors are slippery and shifting. The literal and the metaphorical slide over one another, creating a hallucinatory effect, a metaphorical vertigo with the literal meaning of words approaching and receding, until the absurd—a bear at a Christmas party, for example—begins to seem natural, and everyday objects like plates and socks take on connotations of the monstrous.

Rodchenko for his part takes the traditional strengths of two-dimensional visual art and hollows them out. Where the photograph stood for “the real”, the indexical marker of fact, Rodchenko’s photomontage fragments and dislocates these elements, creating impossible compressions of time and space, of the familiar and religious, of the common and the mythological. While Rodchenko’s images abandon the pictorial illusion of an inhabitable space, they retain local uses of three-dimensionality in tension with the flat abstract fields of the images. In the context of these fields the deflated photographs come to seem at times merely decorative.

If Mayakovsky undermines narrative’s natural ability to convey a clear sense of time, Rodchenko creates a counterpart to this subversion by creating new possibilities for his own medium. Rodchenko uses pictorial space—the pull between the flat picture plane and the three-dimensional it can depict—as a metaphor. Rodchenko brings the abstract visibly into contact with the real and so creates a spatial metaphor for the inability of messy, organic life to map onto the eidetic neatness of theory.

Chapter Two: A Constructivist Icon?

For surely transcendence in modernism can only be achieved—is not this central to our whole sense of the movement’s wager?—by way of absolute immanence and contingency, through a deep and ruthless materialism, by a secularization (a ‘realization’) of transcendence—an absorption in the logic of form.

T. J. Clark, “Origins of the Present Crisis,” *New Left Review*, 95

The Repetition of Things Past

Pro Eto’s sixth photomontage, *Like a Cross*, or “*I wave my arms*”, shows Mayakovsky in a suit and cap, standing atop a tall tower. (Fig. 7) He stands with one foot in front of the tower’s onion dome, one foot behind, his arms raised to his sides. Just below and behind him flies a biplane; further below a crowd of people fills a square edged by towers of high-rise buildings common in large American cities at the time. Growing from the right side of the tower is the semi-circle of half a white-walled tire; in the right hand corner of the photomontage a cannon points upward, considerably aimed to miss both Mayakovsky and the absent pilot of the plane. The largest of three boys who are lined up parallel to the cannon’s barrel, his right arm raised as if to throw a stone, seems the greater threat, even though all three are rendered in an abstract space.

Rodchenko’s image does not align itself intuitively with either the caption provided below it, or, in important details, with the section of the text it “illustrates.” The caption reads, “I try to catch my balance, / I wave my arms about wildly.” (Ловлю равновесие, / страшно машу.)⁸² If the words of the caption convey a frenetic attempt to regain a center of gravity, the image that accompanies them is static and balanced.⁸³ Indeed, one of the image’s most central characteristics is its fundamental stability and stillness. Even the plane, which would normally imply motion, seems frozen in place. In the poem, Mayakovsky’s death comes here, at the top of the onion domed bell tower of Ivan the Great. Persecuted by a great angry mob of people and executed by a volley of gunfire, he is shot “from brow to brow / ever so evenly / from all the rifles / from all the batteries / from each Mauser and Browning.” (“бровь к брови / ровновенько / со всех винтовок / со всех батарей / с каждого маузера и браунинга.”)⁸⁴ When the smoke lifts, a tattered bit of red cloth is all that is left of him. What Mayakovsky describes— loud, instantaneous death by gunfire followed by a physical evanescence, akin to a

⁸² *Pro Eto*, 37.

⁸³ The caption also leaves off the lines immediately preceding them, lines which might have paired more intuitively with the image: the section “Repetition of what is Past” (Повторение пройденного) begins with the lines, “My arms a cross/ a cross/ on the pinnacle/ I try to catch my balance / I wave my arms like crazy” (Руки крестом / крестом / на вершине / ловлю равновесие / страшно машу). 35. The first lines of the section, the lines not used as a caption for the image, match Rodchenko’s image better in their static quality, and in the form they describe. The image accompanies the sections of the poem in which the narrator, who has been on a flying tour of the world, is snagged by the pointed top of an onion dome—in particular, on the top of the tower of Ivan the Great, the tallest tower of the Kremlin.

⁸⁴ *Pro Eto*, 36.

magician's trick or a fireworks display—is not what Rodchenko shows us in the illustration, however. Rodchenko's Mayakovsky stands calmly, his arms stretched to either side and his face calm and contemplative, like a diver on a platform. His arms seem to indicate a display of balance rather than its loss. The sole gun in the photomontage is robbed somewhat of the credibility accorded photographs by the etched-in lines around its base. The insult of this gun's lack of reality-effect is added to the injury of its poor aim and small size; it seems almost incidental in comparison with the photomontage's central images.

What Rodchenko describes instead is crucifixion. Not only does the poet's pose at the top of the tower mimic that of the crucified Christ, but the central lines of the photomontage as a whole form an Orthodox cross as well. Mayakovsky's outstretched arms, the body of the biplane, and the sloping line of the top of the crowd stand in for the cross's three horizontal bars while the bell tower of Ivan the Great supplies the main vertical beam. The substitution is subtle: Mayakovsky's arms occupy not the main horizontal 'arms' of the cross but the topmost beam, on which Christ's mocking title would be inscribed. (The replacement of that writing with a picture of a poet acts as a visual calque or charade, and the humiliating irony of that title is not, perhaps, completely erased by it.) Moreover, by standing at the top of the tower making his own figure of the cross, Mayakovsky obscures the only would-be *actual* Orthodox cross in the scene, i.e. the one on top of the tower. The displacement of the actual cross with Mayakovsky's cruciform figure creates a play among three crosses in the image, none of them complete. The first, Mayakovsky's crucifixion pose, is misleading; another, the 'real' cross on the dome-peak is, ironically, completely invisible; the third, the main cross of the image comprising the tower and the plane, is unoccupied. Like the empty cockpit of the plane, the cross is unmanned; there is an uncanny sense that the important positions have been vacated.⁸⁵

Rather than simply hiding the shape of an orthodox cross within itself, however, *I wave my arms* bears a strong resemblance to Orthodox icons of the Crucifixion, such as Dionysius's icon from the Moscow school, painted c. 1500. (Fig. 13) In each image, the central cross rises from a hill, flanked on either side by multiple figures, with the buildings of the city behind it. The icon depicts the Virgin Mary, together with Mary Magdalene and other female saints to the left of the cross, and Saint John the Theologian and Longinus the centurion to the right. In the icon the curves of these flanking figures mimic each other like double end-parentheses; the curve of the women's backs as they turn away from the cross on the left echoes the curve of John's body as he slumps in grief toward the cross, on the right. At the far right, the centurion breaks the closed circuit of bowed heads and grief with the diagonal line of his upward gaze and the threat of violence implicit in his shield and armor. Rodchenko's photomontage subtly reflects this relationship: Lily, at lower left, stands with her back turned to the scene, while directly below the cross another woman faces in the same direction, echoing John's position relative to the red-robed saint on the left in Dionysius' icon. The three boys at lower right pick up the upward

⁸⁵ In addition, the three crosses make up something like a catalog of fictions: Mayakovsky's bodily cross is present, but not actually to be crucified—the pose misleads. The actual cross that Mayakovsky's body hides is 'real' in that it's not fictive—there it sits for all the citizens of Moscow to see; only in this representation it is only a part of memory or consciousness; the representation itself goes against something the viewer 'knows.' A third fiction is the main, central cross itself; not a cross at all, but a plane and a tower, with no body on them at all, the visual illusion of a crucifixion.

movement of the centurion's gaze and the diagonal line created between his shield and face. With their linear formation and single raised hand they retain the vague threat of violence the centurion represents.

Because of the way icons are made—icon-writers are considered to copy their subject from the successful and sanctioned version that already exists—the photomontage also shares many elements with other icons of the Crucifixion. For example, both an earlier, 14th-century crucifixion icon (Fig. 14) and a later, 16th-century one, (Fig. 15) share with Dionysius's version the central, upright crucifix, with flying angels around the arms of the cross; Mary curved away at left, John curved in at right; the circular shield and white head-wrap of the centurion; the walls of the city behind and below Christ; the rocky surface of Golgotha hiding a hollow space with a skull below. The text at the top of the cross remains, and again the heads and haloes of figures block our vision of others. The reference Rodchenko makes, then, is likely not to a particular icon, but to the whole genre or subcategory of early Russian Crucifixion icons.

While echoing the Crucifixion icon's overall form, Rodchenko's photomontage illustration rearranges and displaces a number of its elements. For example, the bi-plane formally signals the arms of the cross, but also incorporates the flight of the angels just above. The bullseye pattern on the centurion's shield is displaced into the Royal Air Force insignia on the side of the plane, and the semi-circle of tire that emerges from the side of the tower echoes both the form of John as it curves toward the cross, as well as of the repeated partial discs of the golden haloes of the icon.

The assembled crowd is not a simple photograph but is itself a montage whose details invite scrutiny.⁸⁶ The varied styles of hats that can be made out (military caps and peasants' kerchiefs mingle with boaters and workers' caps) create something like a catalog of types (the military man, the elegant woman, etc.) whose inclusion in the scene makes them party—knowingly or not—to its violence.⁸⁷ Other aspects of the crowd may also be read in the context of the photomontage's reference to Crucifixion icons: the rabble of hatted heads, each eclipsing the figures behind it, recalls the group below the cross, with specific figures hidden by the opaque, flat, disk-like halos of Byzantine icons. Certain figures stand out in the photomontage's mostly -anonymous crowd: the black dress and head covering of an older woman at the front

⁸⁶ Although the stitching of the photographic elements is mostly invisible, the attitude, scale, and dress of the crowd's individual members are at sixes and sevens. Immediately behind Lily we see the head of a woman elegantly wrapped in a white scarf; if she is more glamorous than those around her, she is also smaller in scale—what would amount to feet shorter—than the men immediately behind *her*. Next along the bottom edge of the crowd montage is the top of what seems to be, from its fat cheeks and button nose, a child's head. Although the child appears to be close to the woman, it is considerably larger than she is, its large forehead wider across than the woman's shoulders. Immediately behind the child and slightly to its right a military cap peeks out, its wearer impossibly much larger than the woman, but equally impossibly much smaller than the child. The mismatched styles call attention to the crowd's particulars: Why these heads, in this configuration?

⁸⁷ It is worth noting that this pieced-together crowd contains a presentiment of Rodchenko's pictures of the White Sea Canal gulag, published in *U.S.S.R in Construction*. Rodchenko has been criticized for creating similar montaged crowds of the labor camps; the artist montaged in extra people to make groups look more populated, thus denying the true state of affairs and numbers who had died in the camp, and manipulated the photographs to make the workers look dedicated, rather than morbid. See for example Victor Margolin's analysis of these images in *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1946* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 88-99.

evoke the robes and headdresses of the women to the left of the cross, and the white head-scarf worn by the elegant woman near Lily's wrist at in the image's lower left recalls that worn by the centurion in many Crucifixion icons.⁸⁸

None of these echoes of Crucifixion icons are meant to exclude other interpretations: the photomontage is not *only* a reference to, or re-staging of, the icon, but remains at the same time an illustration of the poem it accompanies. If the photomontage disregards the poem's rifles and gunsmoke, the story it tells is nonetheless constructed out of elements that exist in the poem. Mayakovsky is, after all, balancing on the onion dome of the bell tower of Ivan the Great, his arms forming "a cross / a cross" as he waves them to balance himself, when he is shot. Although the image emphasizes the cross and crucifixion, relegating the gun to ineffectuality, this interpretation is a re-ordering or re-prioritizing of elements that coexist in Mayakovsky's poem, rather than an invention from whole cloth. Aspects of the poetic narrative remain: for example, the crowd below the tower, although seemingly more distracted than bristling, also stands in for the vindictive throngs in the poem that want the poet dead. Likewise the boys at right, with their stepped arrangement, act as an encapsulation of that same mob.⁸⁹

For all that it illustrates the narrative of the poem, or imagines a parallel version of it, *I Wave My Arms* also, expectably enough, juxtaposes objects and figures of preposterously different sizes, and brings mutually exclusive times and places into impossible proximity. The early twentieth-century Western-style skyscrapers should dwarf the sixteenth-century Moscow bell-tower in whose shadow they sit. The use of the RAF plane as a part of the cross layers World War One and Roman killing technologies, and brings both of them careening into the Moscow of 1923.

A Constructivist Icon?

The recreation of an Orthodox Crucifixion icon in *I Wave My Arms* comes as a surprise: it seems amiss, as if it had been smuggled into the secular world of Bolshevism.⁹⁰ Icons stand in stark contrast to the Constructivists' anti-mystical, pro-factory, pro-technology stance, and the most essential aspects of the icon-- its tradition, use, and making-- are deeply at odds with the

⁸⁸ In most Orthodox icons of the crucifixion the hillside of Golgotha is shown in cross section, revealing the darkness below the geometrically abstracted surface of the earth. The skull inside it, according to Orthodox tradition, is Adam's skull, but also stands in for the other human remains that accumulated at the Roman execution site. By creating a hill of heads Rodchenko's photomontage literalizes Golgotha's name. That is, the hill is composed of heads—future skulls—in the same way that the buried skull in Crucifixion icons shows us the composition of the hill.

⁸⁹ This same arrangement turns the boys into bombs, spaced as if they had been dropped sequentially from the moving airplane, although nothing of the sort is alluded to in Mayakovsky's poem.

⁹⁰ No commentators on Rodchenko or *Pro Eto*, to my knowledge, have recognized these echoes of icons in Rodchenko's work. This is partly due, I think, to Constructivism's image as a bold, ideologically pure, essentially autochthonous movement that boldly rejected all outside influence. This historical autonomy, a kind of birthed-from-the-brow-singularity, seems to have been crafted by the Constructivists themselves, and has been, to a large extent, perpetuated by historians of the movement. In opposition to this notion of Constructivism, the recurring image of the icon in Rodchenko's photomontage illustrations shows the importance of Constructivism's immediate predecessors, the Neo-Primitivists, as well as to icon painters of the distant past, in its creation and vision of its own identity. Moreover, these photomontage icons demonstrate that, far from its image of radical independence, Constructivism participates in Russia's age-old tug-of-war between East and West, with their respective associated, oppositional meanings of spiritual and material, collectivity and individualism, and mysticism and science.

stated goals of the Constructivists. The icon is religious and part of the past: the Constructivists wanted science and the future. The icon is traditionally painted by hand, slowly, by people living in isolation from the world and praying: the Constructivists wanted objects to be fabricated by machines, directed by artists who would work in factories. Every icon was considered a ‘copy’—of both its spiritual prototype and of previous icons; *Lef* had vowed to “throw off...all the copiers”⁹¹ and Rodchenko himself claimed that each of his works was completely new, made without reference to works of the past.⁹² For all these reasons the appearance of an icon, or even the adumbration of one, in a Constructivist work in 1923 is a mysterious thing. Why, in a newly atheist state with avowed socialist, materialist, industrial goals, look backward to a religious object that specifically *was not* made by mass production or industry, in which craftsmanship and religion were central? Why would Rodchenko, a committed Constructivist/Productivist artist, a key member of the LEF group—itsself committed to wrenching society from the past and replanting it in a Utopian future—refer to a part of Russia’s past that was steeped in religious mysticism?

It is tempting, given the poor fit between icons and Constructivists, to write off the hints of iconic imagery in *I Wave My Arms* as coincidental or irrelevant. But there are good reasons not to dismiss the apparitions too quickly. First, they are not isolated phenomena; the ghosts of Russian icons haunt at least three of the book’s eight photomontages. Each of the icons occupies a distinct place in Russian social history and carries a symbolic content that stretches beyond the boards on which it is painted. Two of them mark times of profound social change in Russia, the most recent being the 1917 Revolution itself. Moreover, in the early twentieth-century Russian icons underwent a cultural revival and enjoyed a new social and art historical prestige among the ruling class and the intelligentsia, as well as among avant-garde artists, both in Russia and abroad. However dedicated Rodchenko may have been to Constructivism, he could not have been insensitive to the icon’s new status as a symbol of the motherland’s cultural greatness.

Even so, it is difficult to know what to make of the photomontage’s resemblance to Crucifixion icons. Is the reference in earnest, or is it a joke? And if a joke, what kind? Can it be read as an atheist communist’s poking fun at the benighted believers who venerated icons? Or, given that the Soviet Union had slid backwards in so many ways since the Revolution, might the appearance of the icon work as a symbol of the country’s regression? Or is it better read as a

⁹¹ Editorial from *Lef* no. 1, March 1923. Trans. Richard Sherwood and quoted in Stephenn Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1990). 83.

⁹² Rodchenko, “Ship’s Log,” 1920. In Alexander Lavrentiev, Ed., *Aleksander Rodchenko, Experiments for the Future: Diaries, Essays, and Other Writings*, trans. Jamey Gambrell. 181.

self-conscious, self-ironizing assessment of the Constructivist project in its NEP manifestation, when its practices may have begun to seem indistinguishable from those of capitalism?⁹³

Most puzzling is the sense that icons simply do not belong in the secular world that Constructivism strives to imagine and create. The icon seems incommensurate with Soviet life and imagery, something like the appearance in waking life of a figure from a dream. But could aspects of the Russian icon and Constructivism be seen to square ideologically? If the Constructivists were determined to create, with their “socialist objects”, a viable, consumer-friendly answer to Capitalism’s commodity fetish, how are we to understand the reference in a Constructivist work to those venerated objects—icons—that function and are treated so much like *actual* fetishes?⁹⁴ Is it possible that the icon could be conceived of as a kind of metaphorical prototype of the sorts of objects Constructivists themselves most wanted to furnish their new state with? In other words, is there a way to make sense of these images as part of the Constructivist project, or are they simply anomalous?

This chapter explores Rodchenko’s references to Orthodox icons through multiple avenues; each provides a perspective through which to consider the appearance of icons in Rodchenko’s work. Although the views provide, cumulatively, a sense of the dimension of the relationship between icons and Rodchenko’s photomontage, they never form a consistent, uniform vision. The chapter does not draw any firm conclusions about what those references might mean, or how they were meant, and in this, I believe, it is true to its subject.

Constructivism and Anti-Mysticism

In the 1922 book, *Constructivism*, Alexei Gan supplements notes and statements from meetings of the First Working Group of Constructivists with his own writings. He maintains throughout that Constructivism is not a style of art; it is not, indeed, art at all. On the contrary, Constructivism, which Gan characterizes instead as “intellectual-material production” pits itself *against* art. “DEATH TO ART!” he writes; the mood is hortative, in tune with the statement of

⁹³ For example, in 1923-24 Rodchenko and Mayakovsky worked extensively--together and separately-- in the advertising business, creating newspaper ads, logos, posters, and packaging for goods. The pair charged very high fees for their services, earning more for the design of a chocolate bar wrapper than a factory worker could make in a month. However they may have felt betrayed by NEP, Rodchenko and Mayakovsky’s advertising venture was itself a business, implicating the pair in the NEP economy’s inconsistencies. See Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 170-1. Kiaer argues that Mayakovsky in particular was an “astute businessman”, submitting a detailed list of uniformly high prices for the team’s work to the Tariff-Regulating Department of the Section for Fine Arts of the Moscow Region Union of Art Workers, and positioning the artists as “hired laborers protecting themselves from management...”

⁹⁴ The concept of the ‘socialist object,’ or ‘socialist thing’ grew out of debates about the role of art in post-revolutionary life in the early 1920s. According to its theorists and proponents, the socialist object would serve as a counterpart to the capitalist commodity fetish’s power to organize desire, acting as an equal or comrade to its owner or user; the socialist object would be ‘active’, a co-worker, in opposition to the commodity fetish which was described as ‘passive’ for its role as something consumed. For an in-depth discussion of the socialist object, see Christina Kiaer, “Boris Arvatov’s Socialist Objects” *October*, Vol. 81 (Summer, 1997), 105-118, which accompanies her translation of Boris Arvatov’s 1925 article “Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing.” Kiaer develops her ideas about the socialist object in *Imagine No Possessions*, esp. 1-7 and 28-38.

the Working Group in 1920: “We declare uncompromising war on art!”⁹⁵ The problem with art, per Gan, is that it is an artifact of ‘primeval’ times, when it served religion and “all the so-called spiritual culture of the past.” As such, art is a telltale sign of the primitivity—he does not mean it as a compliment – of the minds that make and consume it.⁹⁶ Gan’s account makes art a relic of the dark ages. Constructivism is its opposite, born of the culture of “labor and intellect.” The line between them is clear: “on one side of October” there is revolution, industry, the intellect. “On our side” of October, art is “indissolubly linked with: theology, metaphysics, and mysticism.”⁹⁷

Gan at once rebukes and dismisses mysticism, religion, spirituality, and the ‘primitive’. His vehemence is notable, but his rhetoric—emphasizing the opposition between then and now, rational and irrational, materialist and spiritual, modern and primitive—is standard in Constructivism’s self-description. In the 1923 *Lef* editorial “Into Production!,” Osip Brik differentiates Rodchenko’s production from that of other artists “who are all doing the same old thing: little pictures....” Brik’s disdain for artists who “talk about material, texture, construction” but who produce “the very same age-old ornamental and applied types of art,” is matched by his scorn for artists like the Symbolists who interest themselves in the ‘eternal questions’ of art. His language derisively links these artists with religion and mysticism: “For them the real world of things does not exist; they wash their hands of it. From the heights of their mystical insights they contemptuously gaze upon anyone who profanes the ‘holy dogmas’ of art through work in production....”⁹⁸ In contrast to such priest-artists with their insignificant little pictures, Constructivists are architects and builders whose projects are vast in scope. “Constructivism must become the supreme formal engineering of the whole of life.”⁹⁹

The language Constructivists use to imagine their project is often an amalgam of the scientific laboratory and the engineering of a production line on a factory floor. In 1922 Karl Ioganson presented a paper in which he embraced a vision of technology that represented “a body of scientific laws” and condemned any constructions that drew on the “methods and means of past art.”¹⁰⁰ The program of the First Working Group of Constructivists used a similar rhetoric that emphasized expedience, “materialistic understanding of the world,” intellectual production,

⁹⁵ Alexei Gan, Конструктивизм [*Constructivism*] (Tver, 1922). Trans. John Bowl, quoted in Stephen Bann, Ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism*. 36-38. Gan continues: “Art speculatively materialized ‘spirituality’ by illustrating sacred history, divine secrets, universal enigmas, abstract joys and sorrows, speculative truths of philosophy, and other childish games of adults whose norms of behavior were determined by the economic conditions of society in this or that historical reality.” 37.

⁹⁶ Gan’s account of art’s history locates it in several of the least glorious episodes of human evolution and history: the primitive, the feudal, and bourgeois capitalism. Art, he writes, “emerged during the epoch of primeval cultures,” “passed through the forge of the guild craftsmen of the Middle Ages,” and then returned, “artificially reheated by the hypocrisy of bourgeois culture....” Quoted in Bann, *The Tradition of Constructivism*, 36.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37

⁹⁸ Brik, “В Производство!” [*Into Production!*] *Lef*, no. 1, March 1923. 105-108. Richard Sherwood’s translation quoted in Bann, *The Tradition of Constructivism*, 84.

⁹⁹ “Кого предупреждает Леф?” [Whom is *Lef* alerting?] *Lef* no. 1, March 1923. 10-11. Translation quoted in *ibid.*, 83.

¹⁰⁰ Karl Ioganson, “От конструкции к технике и изобретению [*From construction to technics and invention*], 9 March 1922, MS private archive, quoted in Lodder 95.

and engineering.¹⁰¹ Constructivist rhetoric was totalizing, rejecting everything from the past in favor of science and technology.¹⁰²

A constant and equally important part of their rhetoric is the yoking of non-Constructivist art with mysticism, religion, and magic. In 1920 Constructivists published the slogans, “Down with art, long live technical science,” and “Religion is a lie. Art is a lie.”¹⁰³ Later Constructivists use the same rhetoric: “A constructively Organized life is above the mystical art of magicians.” “The Future will not build monasteries to Roman Catholic Priests, Prophets, and Holy Fools from art.”¹⁰⁴

The Icon in early twentieth-century Russia

Part of the particular unexpectedness of Rodchenko’s reference to icons can, then, be attributed to the Constructivists’—and Rodchenko’s own—success in defining the movement in terms of its opposition to mystic and religious art. But why is religious art the opposing term here, as opposed to landscape, say, or narrative Realism, or even pure abstraction? While Byzantine religious imagery seems at odds with the geometrical, industrial modernity of Constructivism, icons were very much on the minds of artists and intellectuals in Russia in the early 20th century. The first two decades of the century saw an exponential growth of interest in the icon both in Russia and abroad.¹⁰⁵ During the time that came to be known as the “Russian renaissance,” icons attracted the attention of state officials, art historians, and members of the avant-garde, as well as practitioners of Orthodoxy.¹⁰⁶ In an unusual turn of events it was an art historian who led the way. The Byzantine scholar Nikodim Kondakov’s iconographic studies of Byzantine art prompted him to create a theory of a unified Russian culture, envisioning a time when the vast Russian empire had been both united and great, and providing Russia with a culture that was spiritually and artistically superior to that of its Western brethren. Kondakov’s

¹⁰¹“Программа рабочей группы конструктивистов Инхука [Programme of the Working Group of Constructivists of InKhuK] (MS, private archive). Part of their task, as they stated in their programme, was “to elucidate the position of work in its historical perspective (slaveholding societies, feudalism, capitalism).” Quoted in Lodder, 94.

¹⁰² The Constructivists’ thoroughgoing rejection of the past, including its knowledge and methods, is strangely disregarding of the scientific process itself, which, of course, relies on accumulated data and the examination of prior methodologies, and builds on pre-existing technologies.

¹⁰³ “Program of the Productivist Group.” [1920] Trans. Lund Humphries, quoted in Stephen Bann, Ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism*, 20.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in David Elliott, Ed., *Rodchenko and the Arts of Revolutionary Russia* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), 135-6.

¹⁰⁵ For a discussion of the developments that contributed to 19th C. Russia’s renewal of interest in the icon, see Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Ephemund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), esp. 19-21, and Robert Nichols, “The Icon and the Machine in Russia’s Religious Renaissance, 1900-1909”, in Brumfield, Ed., *Christianity and the Arts in Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 131-144.

¹⁰⁶ Already in the late 19th century the stage was set for what has come to be called the ‘revitalization’ of icons in Russia: With the end of Russia’s war with Turkey, historians of Byzantine art bloomed in number and zeal, and the Russian icon was studied with fresh interest by scholars and amateurs alike. See Belting, op. cit., and Nichols, op. cit.

theories endeared icons to the intelligentsia, as well as to a ruling class that felt its authority suffered from a lack of cultural cohesion as the Empire sprawled further into Asia.¹⁰⁷

Under Kondakov's influence icons, which had until then been an embarrassment to the Russian intelligentsia (or, at best had been "more or less invisible, on a par with church furniture"),¹⁰⁸ made a glamorous comeback, appearing in the exhibition of the Archaeological Congress in 1890, the "Exhibition of Art Works from Antiquity" in 1901, and taking pride of place in the Great Exhibition of 1913.¹⁰⁹ For many non-religious urbanites the icon was re-evaluated as a form of folk art that represented the Russia that had existed before it had fallen under the spell of the West: it became, that is, a symbol of the country's true identity.¹¹⁰

Not surprisingly, this rise in the intelligentsia's awareness and admiration of the icon coincided with the icon's reappearance in contemporary painting. Rodchenko's friends and mentors were among those artists whose practice and experience were closely tied to icons. Natalia Goncharova and her partner Mikhail Larionov, whom Rodchenko considered his teacher, lead the Russian Neo-Primitivist movement, and in their paintings of that period the icon functions as a primary model and symbol. For example, Goncharova's 1910-11 tetraptych "The Four Evangelists" (Fig. 16) recreates iconostasis icons like those of John the Baptist, Peter and Paul, painted in Novgorod in the 16th century (Figs. 17-19). Although Goncharova has modernized the icons—her ham-fisted saints fill even more of her long, narrow canvases, and she paints their robes in purple, cobalt blue, and sea-foam green in addition to the more traditional, somber gray—traditional orthodox icons are clearly both her referent and her model. The counterpoint curves of the saints' unfurling scrolls with the parentheses of their bodies as they stoop toward the unseen image of Christ and the overwrought gestures of the figures make the resemblance plain enough. Goncharova's act of recreation, however, not only brings the icon into the twentieth century, but puts the twentieth century into the icon, so to speak, legitimizing the latter's awkward blend of the representational and the abstract, its flat and distorted figures, and its shallow, upended pictorial space by comparing them to the tropes of modernist painting.

The importance of icons in Russian avant-garde art during the first two decades of the century is revealed both in the frequency with which they appear and in the variety of the forms the references take. Larionov includes an icon, for example, in a 1912 painting, "Still Life with Icon" (Fig. 20) that might otherwise be French (though of course, the centrality of western Russia in the map on the right is another pointer.) His "Autumn" (Fig. 21) of the same year does not depict an icon, but is itself the iconic object drawn in the crude style of a folk wood-print, or *lubok*. The rough, solid, singular figure in the upper right quadrant corresponds to the *Orans* Virgin, with birds on either side of her head replacing the angels of the icon. The pre-modern script below her is frontal and non-representational as it sits squarely on the painting's surface,

¹⁰⁷ Kondakov's studies aimed to show that a distinctively Russian art, a regional offshoot of Byzantine art, had come into being in the 10th and 11th centuries, 500 years earlier than was commonly thought. Kondakov believed that this Russian art had revitalized a deteriorating Byzantine art by virtue of its greater asceticism. Belting, 19-21.

¹⁰⁸ Belting, 19.

¹⁰⁹ See John Bowlt, "Orthodoxy and the Avant-Garde" in Brumfield, ed., *Christianity and the Arts in Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 145.

¹¹⁰ The icon had, of course, similarly served as a symbol of the country's 'true identity' both for proponents and opponents of Westernization since the Patriarch Nikon's reforms to Orthodox practice in the 17th century.

occasionally falling from line to line without regard to the end of individual words, in imitation of Old Church Slavonic texts and their representation in icons. Compare, for example, the depiction of text in a seventeenth-century icon of Mark the Evangelist. (Fig. 22)

The reference to the icon takes yet another form, becoming spatial and positional, in Malevich's *Black Square*. The painting was hung, in the artist's "0.10: *The Last Futurist Exhibition*," in the top corner of the room, angled downwards, a position that was understood as a reference to the *krasnyi ugol* (literally, 'beautiful corner'), the traditional hanging place for an Orthodox icon in a religious home. (Fig. 23) Contemporaries easily recognized the placement. Alexander Benois, upon seeing the hanging, accused Malevich of blasphemy. "Without a number but high up in a corner just below the ceiling in the holy place, is hung a 'production' without doubt by the same Malevich, representing a black square against a white background. There can be no doubt that this is an 'icon.'"¹¹¹

The icon even made inroads among the Constructivists themselves, in no less a figure than the movement's forefather, Vladimir Tatlin, who began his career as an icon-painter. During years in which he studied engineering, and studied painting under West-looking and western-influenced teachers, Tatlin sometimes took work making copies of old Russian church frescoes. He was also friends with Larionov, and the two of them attended the College of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in Moscow together. Like Larionov, Tatlin was pulled between the worlds of Western European art—much of the best of which had recently been on view in Moscow in 1908 during the Golden Fleece show—and the desire to make something uniquely Russian. Increasingly, for all these artists, the icon "provided a living and Russian alternative to Western traditions. [The artists'] search for a Russian identity could find in the icon spatial systems that were not imported."¹¹²

Things came to a head in 1912. When Western art came to Russia again in that year's *Knave of Diamonds* show, the different path taken by Russian art became manifest. Larionov and Goncharova announced their answer to the *Knave* in the *Donkey's Tail* show, which would be exclusively Russian indigenous and folk-inspired. The two shows, which took place within a month of one another, embodied distinct possibilities for Russian modernism: the one, led by David Burliuk, espoused European art and made connections with Berlin and Paris, the other allowed no non-Russians to show, and Goncharova declared her loyalty to 'Byzantine and Futurist' styles.¹¹³

Thus among the avant-garde artists, as among politicians, the icon became something of a nationalist symbol; its very existence proved that Russia need not simply follow and imitate the West, but could lead; it showed that Russia's artistic past was different from that of the West, but not inferior to it; it implied an artistic future in Russia that would be independent of the West. These symbolic meanings of the icon seem to have become something of a touchstone for avant-

¹¹¹ Quoted in Andrew Spira, *The Avant-Garde Icon: Russian Avant-Garde Art and the Icon-Painting Tradition* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Lund Humphries, 2008). 142.

¹¹² John Milner, *Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Avant-Garde* (New Haven: Yale, 1983), 24.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 26-7. At the same time, Slavophilism was at work within the borders of Russia as well, as the urban elite, who had been most exposed to the values and fashions of the West, looked on the peasantry as ideal and naïve. That is, the east-west dynamics between Russia and Europe were at also at work, writ small, in the intelligentsia's interactions with the peasantry.

garde artists of the time; they are occasionally dusted off and put into service. Rodchenko himself knew the icon's metaphorical meanings and its rhetorical uses, as he shows in a public letter to the editors of the newspaper *Ponedelnik* (Monday). In it, he chastises Russian critics who are "always snorting at Russian art, accusing it of imitating the West!" "Look," he writes, "Russia has given birth to a new art and its name is—non-objectivity!" He chides critics with not recognizing the important discoveries and creations of contemporary Russian art (specifically, his own and that of his closest colleagues), and adjures them to look at this new, "entirely original" art that is Russia's own. "Don't sleep through it all," he goads them, "*like you did the Russian icon*. And shame will descend on your heads if you are late studying our distinctive Russian art."¹¹⁴ Rodchenko categorizes the icon as distinctly Eastern—separate from Western art both in origin and essence. His statement also draws a parallel between his production and the icon, turning to the Russian icon's popularity and status in order to make a claim for the originality and superiority (to the West) of *new* Russian art.

The Russian Icon: a Primer

Icons like those of the Crucifixion are central to Russian Orthodoxy. They are household objects, hung in the corners of homes, carried before parades, asked for favors and help. Traditionally painted on shaped wooden cypress panels, they are crafted by hand by monks living in isolation from the world. Early icons reject illusionism, often depicting highly stylized figures against flat, monochrome or nearly-monochrome backgrounds, and sometimes employing a 'reverse perspective' that disallows a sense of shared space between viewer and viewed. The icon is also, however, a transcendental object. Icons are considered gateways into the sacred world, the liminal screen separating the physical, material, everyday world from the supernatural, and a channel through which those worlds can communicate.¹¹⁵ The paradox of the icon is that it accomplishes this despite its complete lack of illusionism. While an icon 'drew the spectator into a transcendental realm,'¹¹⁶ it did so while emphasizing its own materiality; it was a direct link to the spiritual world of God and the Saints and at the same time a utilitarian, household object, a piece of wood.

The double nature of the icon is built into its theology, at the core of which is God's Incarnation as Christ. Icon theology, as it developed over centuries, grew from the apparent

¹¹⁴ Aleksandr Rodchenko, letter to *Ponedelnik* editors, in Alexander Lavrentiev, Ed., *Aleksander Rodchenko: Experiments for the Future: diaries, essays, letters, and other writings*, translated Jeffrey Gambrell (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 83. Italics mine. Although the article is written to the critics at *Ponedelnik* [Monday], it was published in the journal *Anarkhiia* [Anarchy] in 1918.

¹¹⁵ Robin Milner-Gulland's introduction to Oleg Tarasov's comprehensive *Icon and Devotion* provides an excellent overview of many of the most important and puzzling aspects of Russian Orthodox icon painting. (*Icon and Devotion*, Transl. and edited by Milner-Gulland. London: Reaktion books, 2002).

¹¹⁶ Milner-Gulland, 11.

conflict between the making of icons and the Second Commandment, which forbade it.¹¹⁷ Theological justifications of the use of icons developed over time, first allowing only symbolic representations Christ, and later allowing only figural likenesses of him.¹¹⁸ The basis of the latter, lasting legitimation was that the Commandment had only disallowed God to be pictured because He was, as God, unimaginable to humans. As Jesus Christ, however, God had assumed a form that was comprehensible, and therefore His representation was permissible: thus icons came to be because the Word of God had been made Flesh. It is worth noting that the rationale justifying icons does so by making them analogous to Jesus; like God made human, icons are equally rooted in the spiritual realm and the mundane one.

Perhaps as a result, the ‘word’ is central to the idea of icon-painting. The root of the Russian words for icon and icon-painter—*ikonopis’* and *ikonopisets*, respectively—is *pisat’*, (писать) which most commonly means ‘to write.’ In the Russian Orthodox tradition in particular, icons are considered a visual form of the gospel.¹¹⁹ The status of the word as it pertains to image is especially important for a series of images—like Rodchenko’s photomontages for *Pro Eto*—that supplies visual counterparts to a written text.

The icon’s theological justification also dictates how icons ought to be made. As the icon was merely the representation of its prototype (i.e., Christ, Mary, or a Saint), so each subsequent icon was a faithful copy of *its* prototypes (i.e., the ‘successful’ icons on which it, in turn, was modeled). Both commonly and theologically, icons were considered to be copies of the holy figures they depicted; they were not ‘drawn’ but ‘written,’ like a transcription of spoken language into writing, or a translation of a text into a different language. The icon thus permitted, ostensibly, no subjective input or creativity on the part of its painter. Hans Belting argues that the icon—an “old image”—did not originally participate in the aesthetic practices and codes we apply to it: we may take image to be metaphor, but the image used to be considered indexical,

¹¹⁷ The Second Commandment is contained both in *Deuteronomy*, 5:8-10, and in *Exodus* 20:4. In the English translation of the New Revised Standard Version, read as follows. Deuteronomy: “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them....” Exodus: “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.”

¹¹⁸ Before the late 7th century the justification of holy images with regard to their prohibition leaned on the concept of ‘likeness’ or similarity of ‘form.’ Icons were defended as purely symbolic, and therefore not representative in the same way as likenesses. A picture that showed Jesus as a lamb was not in violation of the commandment, since it did not create a likeness of Him. In 692 the Quinisext Council in Trullo decided that such symbolic representations were unacceptable. Jesus was not a lamb, and thus a representation of him as one was a falsehood. The Council’s literalism fed the idea that icons were less a representation of Jesus than a material extension of him into the physical world. Icons were neither mere likenesses nor symbolic representations, but acted as extensions of holy figures and recordings of true events in picture form. See Belting, 149-163, and Spira, 9-15.

¹¹⁹ Although in the Western tradition a favorite justification of religious imagery was that they functioned as texts for the illiterate, this was not necessarily part of the Eastern tradition’s rationale. Andrew Spira argues that the existence of demotic languages in Slavic lands, and the relatively early translation of the Bible into those languages meant that the Slavs did not need to rely on pictures in the same way as the uneducated population did in the West. This in turn gave Eastern Orthodox icons a somewhat different purpose and visual form; they were seen rather as visual proof of an event, rather than as a narrative retelling of it. Spira, 14.

proof. He writes that “the old image rejected reduction into metaphor; rather, it laid claim to being immediate evidence of God’s presence revealed to the eyes and the senses.”¹²⁰

Icons had the paradoxical role of being made “not by hands,” and at the same time works of craft. Although the traditional icon would be made by monks after prayer and fasting, and in consultation with their superiors and theology, the icons themselves were ‘crafted,’ i.e. made very carefully by hand by highly trained, highly skilled painters. What gave an icon its extraordinary power, according to icon-traditionalists, was the “intense religious feeling” and “higher ecclesiastical reason” present in icon-painters who were “rigorously and ascetically prepared.”¹²¹ There was a direct connection between the asceticism of the artist, the ‘exaltation of their religio-artistic attitude,’ and the greatness of effect that the icons they produced would have on those who prayed before them.

Ironically, even as icons were being rediscovered by the educated and monied classes, the hand-painted icon was being threatened by icons mass-produced in factories by women and children, and even by foreign-owned machines. Nicholas II’s committee worried that poorly made, cheap prints and quickly dashed-off paintings taught people a “careless disregard for holy things.” One could not use such machine-made icons in the same way as real ones: machine-made icons could only ever depict their subjects; true icons played a more magical and mysterious role, both representing (in the sense of standing in for) the deity, and also providing such a strong conduit to the deity as to act, in some sense, as a direct link.¹²²

The abstracting *riza*

With this background and understanding of the Russian icon in mind, the cover of *Pro Eto* (Fig. 1) takes on a new life. In this section I will compare the cover’s iconic portrait of Brik with three icons. (I have already described the cover image, so this description will be limited to what is salient to these comparisons.) On the cover, Brik’s face seems to hover above a rectilinear, geometrical background; the ambiguous space in which it floats is bounded on the top and bottom by blocky letters whose exact position is also hard to pin down. The black and white photograph of Brik is cut out so that we can see only her head, collarbones, and the base of her throat: the cut-out is clumsy, as if made with scissors. The clumsiness stands out in a few places: for example, as the cut edges toward her face from her right ear it seems to clip her ear; and on her left cheek, as the cut edge approaches the level of her mouth it veers slightly toward her mouth, giving her oval face a just a hint of jowl. Here the cut-out of the photograph becomes visible where we can see the white thickness of the photo paper, bringing the material to the fore. We are reminded that we are looking at a photograph that is on top of another surface, and the

¹²⁰ Belting, 15.

¹²¹ Nichols, 136.

¹²² Nichols, 135. Moreover, nothing mass-produced or machine-made could really function like an icon, according to Sheremetov—“Icons, properly understood, could never be mass-produced by engraving or lithograph in the same manner that Catholic religious art” could. “Western printed art seeks only to remind the viewer of the original it depicts. One cannot turn to such art as to a “sacred image.” The intense religious feeling derived by worshippers from the inner beauty of an icon painted as an ascetic accomplishment cannot be acquired from printed pages of only superficial beauty.”

sense of her floating is lost for a moment, along with the ambiguous space she once floated in. Most of all, though, the cut-out *abstracts* the bust-portrait. It neatly does away with particularities in her outline: no stray hairs, no wrinkled collar-line rendering more or less skin visible. Rather, Brik's head is smoothed into an unnaturally round shape, the points on her shoulders more geometry than anatomy. It is a perfectly descriptive photograph that nonetheless abstracts and stylizes its subject.

The image, with its combination of geometrical background, layers of letters, rectangles, and portrait image stacked yet floating in place has no clear precedent in Russian avant-garde art, or in any modern art that I know of. Part of the eeriness of the picture is the way the head -- photographic and therefore modeled, shadowed, something that exists in real space -- is set against a background that is flat and abstract, which cannot accommodate it. The various layers of the cover seem to approach and recede. The clumsiness of the lettering, visibly inked and painted, pulls the image back into the flat surface of the book cover, but the figure continues to alternate between modes. Sometimes it seems a trick of graphic design, just a scissor-cut portrait against a flat background; at other it seems to float forward like an other-worldly apparition.

Covered icons such as the late nineteenth century Grottaferrata *Pantocrator* (Fig. 24) helps us see some of the book cover's unusual qualities afresh. This icon's *riza* (Russian for 'robe,' also sometimes called an *oklad*, or 'cover')—the layer of metal that shields and conceals the entire painted surface except for the face and hands of Christ—contrasts sharply with the painting it covers. The painting, carefully modeled, even *sfumato*, is at pains to depict the face and hands illusionistically, as if they were flesh and blood in three-dimensional space; the *riza* interrupts this illusion with its contrasting material and style. If the illusionism of the painting calls attention away from its material reality--the painted, two-dimensional surface--the metal *riza*--etched, enamelled, and in low relief-- obstinately recalls the viewer to its surface and materiality. The illusionistic, modeled, *sfumato* style of the painting is also at odds with the intricate whorls, scrolls and other non-representational patterns that adorn the *riza* around Christ's head and the edges of his robe.

Spatially, the *riza* creates a bizarre and complex effect: if we think of Christ as a body, then the space around him must exist, too. The *riza* acknowledges this fictive space: its existence indicates that it is covering part of a picture, and thus implies the continuation of the fictive, illusionistic world below and beyond the *riza*'s edge. Moreover the curves and swirls of the low relief that indicate the edges and folds of Christ's robe are aligned with what we can see, in the painting, of Christ's body, so that we believe that the metal cover tells us something about the painting underneath it: they both hide and imply what Christ's robes might look like, under the *riza*. At the same time that the metal surface implies the continuation of the world beneath it, however, its pictorial flatness, the plainness of its material, and the impenetrable surfaceness of the *riza* simultaneously revokes the space claimed by Christ's body. The differing degrees of abstraction within the *riza* likewise interrupt and deny the painting's illusion. Christ's robes, for example, are represented in a more abstracted, stylized manner than his face and hands; the nimbus around Christ's head, with its elaborate, repeated decorative motifs presents a further degree of abstraction. Beyond the outlines of Christ's robes and nimbus, the *riza* is still further removed from representation through likeness: the flat expanse of the metal surface leads, in the

upper right corners, to a purely symbolic representation of the subject: language, the name Jesus Christ. Even within these words there is a degree of remove from representation: the letters 'XPC' in the upper right corner, for example, stand for the word *Xpucmoc*, or Christ. Deprived of some of its letters, including all of its vowels, however, the word is no longer a phonetic transcription of spoken language, and is thus also abstracted. The covering of the painting with the *riza* creates a sense of oscillation between realms: between illusionistic and stylized; between likeness and symbol; between material and its elision.

Where the Pantocrator icon's disorienting sense of oscillation is strongest --where the *riza*'s effect is oddest-- is perhaps in the cut-out shapes in the metal panel through which flesh and hair peep out. The windows correspond to the shapes of the flesh and hair in the painting, up to a point. But only up to a point, beyond which they are either mostly abstract (as the almost-perfect circle around Christ's head), or highly stylized (as the curving, pointed shapes to indicate hair falling on the shoulders). Part of the icon's interaction with the *riza* is the strange relationship it creates between 'before' and 'behind.' We know, somehow, that Christ's head is meant to be 'behind' the enameled halo that surrounds it. Christ's hands are a different story: the way the *riza*-robe is contoured around Christ's right hand gives the impression that the hand is actually protruding through it, that it is 'in front of' the metal that covers the figure's chest. The same is true of the hand that 'holds' the book. Enameled and semi-abstract, the book shown on the *riza* is partly cut away so that we can see the painting of Christ's hand behind it. But the mechanics of book-holding dictate, of course, that the fingers curling around the edge of the book be closer to the viewer than the book itself, so that what is seen to be behind must be understood to be before. The same is true of Christ's right hand, raised in blessing: it *must* be in front of the robes that cover his chest, yet the thin line of shadow cast by *riza* onto the painting's surface push the hand backwards and away from the viewer.

Rodchenko's book cover shares a good deal of the *Grottaferrata Pantocrator*'s strangeness, and many of the devices that are responsible for that effect. The cut-out of Lily's face and neck invert the cut-out of the *riza* (in the icon it is the metal cover that is cut out, on the book cover it is Lily's face). But this fact does not prevent it from participating in the same optical tricks (or slips of perception) regarding what is behind, and what in front. Like the covered icons, the photomontage book cover contrasts the subject's modeled, illusionistic head and neck with a flat, abstract background. If Lily's photographic portrait has bested the detailed *sfumato* rendering of Christ for modeling and verisimilitude, her face and neck are nonetheless equally separate from the abstract environment of their surroundings. As the *riza*'s metal window evens out particularities in the painted Christ, rounding his head and molding his hair into the stylized waves that flow onto his shoulders, the cut-out photograph of Lily Brik likewise trades physical particularities for the smooth lines and shapes of geometry. Perhaps owing to these stylizations or abstractions, the cut outline of the photograph of Brik resembles the shape of the *riza*-window through which we see Christ's head. The smooth near-circle of her head echoes Christ's; the broader arc at her collarbones, likewise; the boat-neck cut whose points aim toward her shoulders create a horizontal line that echoes that made by the hair over Christ's shoulders; the downward arc of the top of the boatneck recalls a corresponding curve of the *riza*, where Christ's hair spreads downwards and outwards over his shoulders. There is a trace of the stylized, pointed waves around Christ's hair --emphasized, or even in part created by the *riza*-- in the

curved, somewhat arbitrary, nearly-even points at either side of the boatneck. In these ways Rodchenko's shaping of Lily Brik's photograph reproduces particularities of the icon's interaction with its covering.

Not made with hands.

Whatever its similarities to *Pantocrator* icons, Rodchenko's multi-layered Constructivist book cover without a doubt belongs most closely to the type of icon called "*Acheiropoietos*" (Russian: Нерукотворный, *Nerukotvornyi*): literally, in both Greek and Russian, "made without hands."¹²³ (Fig. 25) This type of icon has its roots in the earliest image of Christ, which, it is believed, was made by Christ himself when he pressed a linen cloth to his face. (The pendant story in the Western church, of course, is Veronica's Veil.) In these icons the head alone is shown, without the torso; *nerukotvornyi* icons typically depict, along with Christ's image, the cloth on which that image was (ostensibly, or originally) impressed. The image of the face is supposed to be on the cloth, but there is no attempt to convince the viewer of that relationship visually. Christ's face and nimbus are not affected by the folds and wrinkles of the cloth, for example, and in this version, from Mt. Athos, the top of the nimbus even extends beyond the surface of the cloth. Other *nerukotvornyi* icons, such as a twelfth-century Novgorod version (Fig. 26), do away with the visual signs of the cloth altogether. In Simon Ushakov's seventeenth-century version of the *nerukotvornyi* icon (Fig. 27) the folds of the linen cloth are faintly visible through the partially transparent nimbus; the cloth seems its own thing, while Christ's head hovers eerily before it.

Lily Brik's face, on the cover of *Pro Eto*, seems similarly to float independently of the image's background, suspended in space. In this, and in its central figure's discomfiting disembodied stare, the book cover recalls the *nerukotvornyi* icons. The cover image also builds in equivalents to a number of the icons' shared details: Lily's head is centrally placed, like Christ's; her hair is dark, parted down the middle, and smoothed around her head; the bottom of her ears, like Christ's, are just visible under her hair; the white rectangle of background intersects with the side of her head just by her ears, echoing the horizontal lines of the cruciferous nimbus, the cross "inscribed in the nimbus that surrounds the head of Christ."¹²⁴ The vertical lines of the nimbus are echoed on the cover by the forms of the title letters that have crossed over onto Lily's head. So, too, the prominence of letters and words in many *nerukotvornyi* icons find their equivalent in the text at the cover's top and bottom.¹²⁵

Simon Ushakov's version of this icon makes for a particularly striking comparison with Rodchenko's cover montage. The black background, just visible around each edge of the cloth, provides a neat frame that contrasts with the white of the linen and provides a counterpart to the darker tones of the central head; a similar black frame--granted a discontinuous one--surrounds

¹²³ These images are sometimes referred to as "Mandylion" (Icon of the Lord on the Cloth).

¹²⁴ Lossky, 72.

¹²⁵ For the traditional iconographic and theological reading of *Acheiropoietos* icons and others, see Ouspensky and Lossky. Lossky describes the icon thus: "The regular features of the visage are rendered schematically: the beautiful line of the mouth has nothing of the carnal; the elongated and very straight nose forms, along with the arched eyebrows, a pattern that recalls a palm tree." 69-72.

the two white blocks on the book cover, likewise supplying contrast and counterpoint in the image. The similar placement of writing in the two images, in the upper left and right corners, and centered below the face, is also worth noting. In each case, too, the relationship between the painted letters and the surface of the image is ambiguous.

It is primarily the lush and illusionistic style of Ushakov's icon, however, that prompts special comparison to the *Pro Eto* cover. It depicts subtle changes in the tone of the flesh, the soft fuzz of the beard, especially around the delicate mouth, and even the soft, individual lashes of the gentle eyes. Ushakov has added a rosininess in the cheek, a tiny but swollen pair of lips that appear freshly colored, and gives us an image of the Savior with soft, tender curls and skin. This lifelikeness is what connects Ushakov's icon, more closely than the other *nerukotvornyi* images, with the *Pro Eto* cover: the contrast between the highly detailed, modeled central face and the more abstract background before which it floats is the dominant trope of each image. The detailed depiction allows for similarities between the faces as well: dark smoky eyes; a soft, rounded, feminine face; plushy curved lips dark in contrast with smooth, rounded cheeks.

Ushakov's *nerukotvornyi* icons (he made many) are modeled, painted in fine detail; they depict Christ with a degree of illusion that was unprecedented in the tradition of icon painting. Indeed, Ushakov's "fleshly saints" were at the heart of Nikon's reforms: while the Patriarch Nikon was much taken with the proto-baroque qualities of Ushakov's icons, the Orthodox Church considered them to be a manifestation of the Western church's decadence and degradation.¹²⁶ Ushakov's style of icon led to ever-more illusionistic performances, the *Grottoferrata Pantocrator* being one. During the time of troubles, icons like Ushakov's were promoted by Nikon as being more like their counterparts in the West; Old Believers refused to venerate such icons and were often persecuted for it.

Thus Rodchenko's decision to raise the ghost of this particular icon—well-known as a symbol of another generation's struggle with the dual pull of East and West—stakes out an ambiguous position in Russia's long Slavophile-Westernizer debates. For his generation the icon itself symbolized an independent way for Russian art, a solution to the problem of its perceived secondariness to the West. Yet his reference to *nerukotvornyi* icons, and in particular Ushakov's, acknowledges that the problem of Russian identity vis-à-vis the West was long in tooth, and that what seemed to his generation a solution had previously symbolized the problem itself.

Perfect copies: Icon & Photograph

In addition, the gravity of the debates over how this particular icon was made—in whose hand, in what style—is paradoxically intertwined with its significance as an image "not made by hands." In the *Acheiropoietos* images, in fact, lies the foundation of all icons and icon-painting. Such an image, 'made without hands,' (i.e. not fashioned by man, a product of his fancy or whim) meant both that Christ *could* be represented, and that his image was to be taken as absolute truth and proof of his Incarnation. Lossky writes,

The expression "acheiropoietos" receives its true meaning in the scriptural context (Mark xiv, 58): the image "made without hands" is above all the incarnate Word,

¹²⁶ The archpriest Avvaakum, for example, called Ushakov's icons "lascivious" and suggested that the artist had modeled his pictures of his "corpulent" saints on his own (Ushakov's) image.

which “shewed” Itself in “the temple of his body” (John ii, 21). From that time the Mosaic law which forbade images (Ex xx, 4) had no more meaning and the icons of Christ became irrefragable witnesses of the Incarnation of God. Instead of creating according to their own inclination, “with their hands”, the image of the God-Man, iconographers must follow a tradition which attaches them to the original “*acheiropoietos*.”¹²⁷

Lossky’s last sentence seems to veer off on a tangent. He has been exulting in the icon-painter’s ability to paint Christ, but suddenly turns to how they must not—and must—paint. This tangent, however, gets to the heart of the matter. The icon’s origin story (and theological justification) puts special emphasis on the image’s having been created without the subjectivity of a human hand (i.e. consciousness) involved: this is what allowed it to act as “proof.”¹²⁸ But what, then, are icon-painters, if not hands, backed by a subjective and creative consciousness? The existence of the artist must be written out, the artist’s hand become merely an instrument: “In consequence, the sacred art of icons cannot be an arbitrary creation of artists: just as the theologian expresses by means of thought, so must the iconographer express by his art the Living Truth...the Revelation that the Church possesses in her Tradition.”¹²⁹

From this spring a number of questions. First, if the ‘old image’ was not meant to be metaphorical but instead was understood as indexical, and the ‘proof’ of what the image showed was that it was made without human intervention and whim, then the icon has a strong correlate in the photograph. Photographs, too, take their power from the indexical, from the sense that they are made by an objective (because mechanical) process. The sense that what an image shows us is real, that ‘this is how it was’ or ‘this is not just someone’s imagination’ is shared between Russia’s most ancient medium and, in 1923, its newest. Thus Rodchenko’s use of photography in this series—and particularly in images that seem to refer to icons iconographically—throws the complicated relationship of the modern and the traditional into high relief. Is his choice to refer to, and even, in some sense, to recreate well-known icons through the medium of photomontage a mockery of the older practice? Or does it show, in an indirect way, an understanding of icon theology, and represent a tongue-in-cheek tribute to it?

¹²⁷ Lossky, 72.

¹²⁸ Belting, 15. Thus, Hans Belting argues, the icon—an “old image”—did not originally participate in the aesthetic practices and codes we apply to it: we may take image to be metaphor, but the image used to be considered indexical: proof. He writes that “the old image rejected reduction into metaphor; rather, it laid claim to being immediate evidence of God’s presence revealed to the eyes and the senses.” The icon permitted, ostensibly, of no more subjective input or creativity on the part of its painter than the photograph ostensibly did. Thus the photographic quality of a “proof” that is proof precisely because it is “not made by human hands” has its origins in religious images like the icon.

¹²⁹ Lossky, 72. “Christian iconography—and above all any possibility of representing Christ—has its foundation in the fact of the Incarnation.”

Words and Images

The icon imagery in Rodchenko's photomontages has a counterpart of sorts in the poem it illustrates.¹³⁰ Although the poem does not speak specifically to icons, it is shot through with references to Christ, martyrdom, Resurrection, the Garden of Eden and the Great Flood. These Biblical images are at the very foundation of Mayakovsky's writing; they form the structure on which all other aspects of the poem hang. That said, the relationship between the poetic imagery and the visual imagery is not a simple one.

The poem's narrative is set against the backdrop of Christmas Eve and Christmas: in the prologue Mayakovsky explains that his room has become a jail because of the typical Christmas fuss; he is Scrooge-like in his loathing of holiday parties and the like: "Why a jail? / Christmas / Commotion." Christmas represents the bustle of the holidays--the rushing, cooking, buying, entertaining. For Mayakovsky it is all so much *byt*: the banality and ordinariness of everyday material life, which so chafes at the poet. The words that surround Mayakovsky's several mentions of Christmas show his contempt. The first mention of Christmas equates the holiday with "jail" (тюрма) and "commotion" (Кутерьма)¹³¹ (one translator tries to convey the sense by turning Christmas into "Christ a mess."¹³²) The second links it with violence, as the poet imagines an explosion that would blow up the telephone operator and the switchboard. The word appears for a third time in a scene in which reporters arrive to witness a duel: "...they have come here / to watch this Christmas of Christmases. / They see life as squabble after squabble." (...сюда они / смотрят на Рождество из Рождеств. / Им видима жизнь от дрызг и до дрызг.)¹³³ The repetition and doubling of words implicitly equates Christmas with squabbling and so reduces the holiday to a petty household scene. Later in the poem Christmas is further associated with claustrophobic domesticity when Mayakovsky arrives at a relative's holiday party where the guests utter nothing but meaningless small-talk and occasional drunken howls. Each time the word Christmas appears in Mayakovsky's text, it is in the context of pettiness, violence, and suffocating domesticity.

Christmas also represents the birth of Jesus Christ and by extension his life, death, and resurrection. Christ appears to be the prototype for the character of Mayakovsky in *Pro Eto*; the primary action of the poem concerns the poet's martyrdom in life, his death at the hands of those who do not understand him, and his resurrection. Like Jesus, *Pro Eto's* Mayakovsky is persecuted, slandered, and eventually killed. He is raised to heaven, and in the end resurrected so that love might rule the world.

¹³⁰ Although it is tempting to associate Mayakovsky's 'accidental station' with a station of the cross, Daniel Rancour-Laferriere notes that Orthodoxy lacks an equivalent: "It is a curious fact that the notion of "Stations of the Cross" does not exist in the Russian Orthodox tradition." (Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, "The Moral Masochism at the Heart of Christianity" (*Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society*, vol. 8, 2003, 8-22). 9, n. 9.)

¹³¹ *Pro Eto*, 7.

¹³² Herbert Marshall, *Mayakovsky*, 164.

¹³³ *Pro Eto*, 10.

Mayakovsky's self-descriptions and behaviors are unambiguously tied to Christ through images of martyrdom, stigmata, crucifixion, death, and resurrection that recur throughout the text.¹³⁴ For example, when the *Pro Eto* Mayakovksy (in his form as a bear) hears the voice of 'Man' (an apparition of his former self) on the bridge, his description calls on Christ's passion, invoking the nails through Christ's hands even as he keeps his animal anatomy: "The knife of that voice drills holes in my paws." (Мне лапы дырявит голоса нож.)¹³⁵ In another section called "The Savior" (Спаситель), Mayakovksy sees a "little man" (человечек) he is convinced is Jesus.¹³⁶ "There / from the gate/ a little man appears. / Step by step comes the short one. / The moon-- / wreaths his head in a halo. / ... / It's the Saviour! / The face of Jesus / Calm and good / haloed in moonlight." (Вон / от заставы / идет человечек. / За шагом шаг бырастает короткий. / Луна / голову вправила в венчик. / ... / Это спаситель! / Вид Ииуса спокойный и добрый венчанный в луне.)¹³⁷ As the little man draws nearer, however, Mayakovksy realizes that he is not Jesus, but someone "younger" and "gentler": a *komsomolets*.¹³⁸ The doubleness of the image--he is both a young communist and Jesus-- is reinforced by the man's actions: he alternately clasps his hands "as if praying" and waves them around "as if he were speaking at a meeting." (То сложит руки / будто молится. / То машет / будто на митинге речь.)¹³⁹ This double figure is of course also Mayakovksy himself. The narrator says, as he approaches the man, "How like me/ he seems to be!" (До чего ж-- / на меня похож!)¹⁴⁰ Were there any doubt about the equation, Mayakovksy's cruciform figure when he dies on the tower of Ivan the Great would remove it. The moon, which seems to form a halo around the *komsomolets*-Jesus' head, reappears in Mayakovksy's death-scene, reinforcing his connection to the image he has created of Jesus.¹⁴¹

Any of the above references might be considered passing or incidental allusions to Christ and the Passion if the poem did not culminate in four events that cement Mayakovksy's

¹³⁴ However much the poem's invocation, with its themes of truth, beauty, and eternity, may recall the beginning of an ancient epic, *Pro Eto*'s themes are fully, even redundantly Christian. The picaresque plot centers on needing to save the Man. (The man is a character --again, Mayakovksy himself--from another of Mayakovksy's epic poems, who himself represents the suffering of Christ for mankind, debating whether or not to kill himself, and deciding in the end to wait instead--so that he could save humanity, or Man.) The poem thus sets up a strange doubleness: Mayakovksy is both the Savior of mankind, and the Savior of Man; he is both the savior in need of salvation and the offering it.

¹³⁵ *Pro Eto*, 15.

¹³⁶ The words used to describe the man are different in the two lines. In the first he is called "little man" (*человечик*), and in the second "shorty" (*короткий*).

¹³⁷ *Pro Eto*, 18-19.

¹³⁸ i.e. a member of the Youth Communist League.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁴¹ The poem further connects Mayakovksy to the Jesus figure in their shared manner of death. Despite the expectations of crucifixion raised by the *komsomolets*' likeness with Jesus, the poem implies that he shoots himself with a gun. The disparity between the two means of dying is doubled by Mayakovksy's own death later in the poem; in that scene Mayakovksy's arms are raised as if he were being crucified, and it is in this position that he is shot. The double death thus works to provide a kind of narrative nesting, mirroring in this short sub-plot Mayakovksy's own comparison to Christ and death by gunfire.

comparison of himself to Jesus: persecution, death, ascension, and resurrection. When Mayakovsky is killed by the hordes that throng to "settle up" with him (Pinkerton bands, duelists, and scores of newspapers all abuse him), he ascends to heaven, his polar-bear altar ego transformed into the Great Bear--Ursa Major or the Big Dipper--among the stars. Finally, he is resurrected "so that love will fill the entire universe." (Чтоб всей вселенной шла любовь.)¹⁴² Mayakovsky's variation on the Gospel is hidden in plain sight, however, both by the details he emphasizes and by the language he uses. With a surly, loud, self-regarding Revolutionary poet playing the lead role and 1922 Moscow as backdrop, the modern details tend to direct attention away from the text's prototype: Mayakovsky's persecutors are newspapers, gossips, and the Pinkertons; although Mayakovsky's arms may be held out like a cross, he is ultimately shot to death; his body goes up in smoke, rather than put in a tomb; the heaven to which he ascends is astrological and astronomical; and he is resurrected not by the divine will of God, but by a chemist in his laboratory, who has received an official petition to do so.

The tenor and lexicon of the poem's language further obscure its narrative's source. The verse's repertoire ranges from epic poetry to Soviet bureaucrat-ese to science fiction, with stops at slapstick and agitprop. For example, Mayakovsky's address in the second person to the Great Bear recalls Homeric invocations: "O Great One, bear towards the ages of Ararat, through the heaven of the flood, the Ark of the Dipper!" (Большая, / неси по векам Араратам / сквозь небо потопа / ковчегом ковшом.)¹⁴³ His appeal to his resurrector, however, is couched in the language of Soviet bureaucracy: "A PETITION ADDRESSED TO.... (I beg you, Comrade chemical-engineer, to fill the name in yourself!)" (ПРОШЕНИЕ НА ИМЯ...(Прошу вас, товарищ химик, заполните сами!))¹⁴⁴ Directly following the petition's bureaucratic idiom, the words he uses to plead for resurrection might be out of *Frankenstein*: "Insert a heart in me-- Transfuse blood into every vein. Drive thoughts into my skull!" (Сердце мне вложи / кровишу / до последних жил. / В череп мысль вдолби!)¹⁴⁵ The petition itself includes another link between Mayakovsky and Jesus, this time in the vein of slapstick comedy. The chemist, mulling over whom to resurrect, sees Mayakovsky's name, but rejects him: "Let's find someone brighter, - this poet's not handsome enough." (поищем ярче лица, >> / недостаточно поет красив.>>) Given that the poet has recently been incarnated as the Big Dipper, the use of the word brighter (ярче) is tongue in cheek.¹⁴⁶ The second line can also be read to mean: "It's not enough to be a handsome poet" (i.e. to warrant his resurrection). Given Mayakovsky's noted good looks, the line

¹⁴² *Pro Eto*, 43.

¹⁴³ *Pro Eto*, 37.

¹⁴⁴ *Pro Eto*, 35.

¹⁴⁵ *Pro Eto*, 41. Marshall 212, Guryeva 153. Although the laboratory setting of the chemist who literally pieces together the body of the dead man is a familiar trope of science fiction, it was also (very) soon to become a part of Soviet reality: the economist and scientist (and deposed member of the Proletkult's Central Committee) Alexander Bogdanov would begin his experiments with blood transfusion in 1924, in which year he was also entrusted with the brain of the newly deceased Lenin. Bogdanov started the first academic institute for the study of blood transfusions in 1925. That same year, Mikhail Bulgakov satirized both the scientific phenomenon and the attempt to create the New Soviet Man in his novel *Heart of a Dog* (*Собачье Сердце*).

¹⁴⁶ The word translated as brighter (ярче) works in Russian as in English, denoting both literal brightness (as in lumens) and intelligence.

is either disingenuously self-deprecating or a real reckoning with the usefulness of his profession. To convince the chemist to resurrect him, Mayakovsky argues that he could work as a zookeeper: "I love animals. / See some doggie-- / right here by some bakery-- / completely bald-- / and I'm ready to give it my own liver. / I don't grudge you it darling / eat!" (Я люблю зберье -- / увидишь собаченку-- / тут у былочной одна-- / цплошная плешь-- / из себя / и то готов достать печенку. / Мне че жалко дорогая / -- ешь!)¹⁴⁷ He depicts himself as willing to sacrifice himself bodily for the good of others, and in doing so parodies Christ's offering at the last supper; instead of the baker's bread the dog is fed Mayakovsky's own body.

Mayakovsky's vernacular translation of the Gospels is in keeping with a long line of comic Russian writers, whose narrators' stilted, not-quite-comprehending parroting of official or literary language reveals their character: Gogol's petty officials in particular come to mind. Mayakovsky's interpretation also takes the most mystical aspects of Christian belief and transcribes them into the language of the literal, the material, the scientific. The many transformations of the immaterial into the material echo a central tenet of Christianity: the Word that becomes Flesh.

Centuries

I have already argued that *Centuries*' (Fig. 5) transition from a crowded, three-dimensional real world in its lower half to a sparser, flatter world less affected by gravity can be read as a visualization of the transition from the 'real' world of becoming into a world of ideas or 'being.' Here I would like to argue for a parallel reading in which the image is employing the visual tropes of a particular eighteenth-century icon that was 'discovered' in March of 1917.¹⁴⁸

In the large wooden *Derzhavnaya* icon (Fig. 28) Mary sits enthroned with the theatrically poised Jesus on her lap. While Mary, like the throne that frames her, squarely faces the picture plane, Jesus twists his body at the waist so that his legs move to the left and his arms, head, and upper body all turn toward the right. Mary is crowned and holds a scepter, not quite upright, in her right hand; her left hand holds an anthracite orb against her leg or hip. Jesus, who is framed

¹⁴⁷ *Pro Eto*, 42.

¹⁴⁸ According to a report on the *Derzhavnaya* icon, made on 13 October 1917 by Tikhon, the Metropolitan of Moscow, the icon was discovered on 2 March 1917 by a peasant woman to whom the Virgin had appeared in visions. Tikhon's report included the findings of an archaeologist who determined that the icon was an artifact of the eighteenth century and had likely once formed part of an iconostasis at the Voznessensky monastery and had been moved to Kolomenskoe for safekeeping at the time of Napoleon's invasion. In addition, the report mentions the wide circulation of the icon after its 1917 discovery throughout its home region and the surrounding settlements, noting that it was housed for a time in the women's monastery in the Kremlin, where it was visited by pilgrims. A redacted statement published by the Afonsky Russian Monastery of Pantaleimon likewise notes the icon's extensive travel throughout the Moscow region "according to the wishes of the faithful." The statement reports that the icon's presence was in such constant demand by the capital's "holy sites and churches, factories and plants" that the icon was only in its home of Kolomenskoe "on Sundays and holidays." See *Православная Москва в 1917-1921, Сборник документов и материалов* (Главархива Москвы, 2001), 10 and *Державная покровительница Земли Русской* (Сост. С.Фомин. М., (Паломник, 1999), 41-44. See also Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, "Традиция почитания икон Богоматери в России глазами американского психоаналитика" (The tradition of the Mother of God icon in the eyes of American psychoanalysis) which he translates as *The Joy of All Who Sorrow: Icons of the Mother of God in Russia* (2005). According to Rancour-Laferriere and others, the re-discovery of the eighteenth-century icon created "quite a stir" in the months following its discovery.

in turn by Mary, makes a gesture of blessing with his right hand and gestures toward the orb with his left.

Above, God echoes the scene below: aligned with Mary and Jesus on the central axis, God's gestures link him with them, even though he is depicted as in a space distinct from theirs, separated from them by a line of puffy, golden-topped clouds. Like Jesus, God raises his right hand in blessing; like Mary, his left rests on a large globe or orb.¹⁴⁹ A mild lack of coordination in the gestures of God and Jesus creates a particularly strong link between them. God's head is turned to the left, while Jesus' is turned to the right. Moreover, while both raise their right hands in blessing, God's right hand is raised to just above the level of his shoulder, while his left arm is held lower, at chest height. Jesus' blessing right hand is held lower, at chest height, while his left arm is raised to shoulder height. As their right hands engage in identical gestures of blessing, their left hands, each resting on large orbs, form counterpoints: below, Jesus' open palm faces heavenward, while above, God's open hand faces earthward. The left hands of father and son form something of a closed circuit, bridging heaven and earth even as those realms are set apart by the opposed convexities of throne and cloud, and the black space between them.

The icon and the photomontage share a vertical, tripartite structure, created in part by blocks of color. The icon's three registers are each dominated by a color—the red of Mary's cloak is strongest in the lower register, gold in God's cloudy world above, and black in largely negative space between them. To a certain extent the original *Centuries* color maquette echoes this structure, as the red and gold rectangles of its background papers define its lower and upper registers. The negative space of the two images almost masks their chromatic resonance: where the figures of the icon stand out starkly and richly against the black background, the white space of the photomontage is almost lost amidst the scattered photographs. Still, the images share a palette: gold, red, black and white; in each the color red predominates below and gold above, and in between them lies a field of no color.

Echoes of the icon's pictorial elements are scattered throughout *Centuries*. The icon's central visual image—Christ, with his gesturing hands, framed and contained by the body of the crowned Virgin who is in turn framed by her metal throne, scepter and orb at her sides—reappears altered and decentralized in the two photographs of Mayakovsky at left and right. At right Mayakovsky sits doubly framed by the metallic edges of a vanity mirror and by the portly body of a monocled, balding man. Gesturing with both hands, he twists slightly at the waist, his legs to the right while his upper body and head to the left. The poet's slightly twisted seated position mirrors that of the infant, and his self-ironizing (“what's a good-looking, suit-and-tie-wearing revolutionary to do?") gesture can be read as satirically conjuring that of Christ. His placement within the man's belly and surrounded by the metal frame both echoes and reverses Christ's double-framing by his mother's body and the metallic throne on which they sit. There

¹⁴⁹ The form of these globes is worth noting: Mary's globe seems to be polished and reflective; we seem to see in the horizontal line of a horizon lit from behind. God's globe, on the other hand, seems to be lit from within, almost as though it contained an electrical storm. We may wonder, then, whether the two globes, one with the earthly attribute of a horizon, the other with the heavenly (or at least atmospheric) attribute of a lightning storm, correspond roughly with the symbolic domains of their respective handlers (i.e. Mary & Jesus are symbols of the fleshly, incarnated, and worldly, God as the absolutely transcendent and heavenly.)

are subtler displacements as well: the curved top of the mirror-frame that hovers over Mayakovsky's head like a flattened, Home-Depot halo recalls the parallel arcs of the Virgin's throne and icon's top edge as well as the Holy Family's own gilded nimbuses; the houndstooth of the capitalist's suit functions as a softer analog of the lozenge-checked pattern of Mary's throne; the capitalist's right hand, confidently hung on his lapel, can be read as a sardonic parallel to Mary's around her scepter.

On the left side of the photomontage Mayakovsky looks straight ahead, a serious but neutral expression on his face and a worker's cap perched on his head. Directly in front of him, just below his collar is a circle (or a disc) containing the silhouette of a man and woman sitting down to tea. This disc with its image can certainly be read as a crystal ball in which Mayakovsky sees the future (which turns out to be a farce of bourgeois past). In the context of the icon, however, the crystal ball changes roles, morphing into the Virgin's (and/or God's) orb. Likewise, the table knife at the poet's right elbow, an easy symbol of the frustrating persistence of *byt*, becomes a scepter, while the worker's cap, already pregnant with satire as it adorns the head of a poet, comes into its own as a proletarian halo.

The parody created by these formal and pictorial parallels is rich but also poignant: symbols of power and dominion have mutated into puffed-up household wares. The scepter's *fleur-de-lys*, exchanged for the rounded, dulled point of the table knife, is wielded not in power or rule, but at the supper table, for use in an elaborate (and no doubt, to Mayakovsky's mind, effete) ritual of manners. The crest on the knife's blade lends the joke a further, subtle twist, placing heraldic symbolism (the traditional context in which the orb and scepter *mean*) at the service of luncheon flatware. The global power represented by the orb is similarly diminished: not only the globe itself, but even the world visible within it is squashed into the silhouette's single plane.

Moreover, to the extent that the inserted shadow-scene's flattening is incomplete, it carries a whiff of the sinister. Visible above and below the silhouette is a photograph; exactly what it depicts is unclear, but what we can discern—the head and shoulders of a person lying on the ground next to a crude scythe, perhaps—hints at violence. The prim domestic scene thus becomes literally (and metaphorically) a cover-up. The photograph becomes scarier in light of its concealment, and the bourgeois niceties of the tea-scene are rendered all the more trite—even a touch obscene—in the face of their role as smokescreen. The matching of the fruitdish on the silhouette tea-table with the one that sits before Mayakovsky in the photomontage (the stems of the dishes seem to be nearly aligned) brings all of this—the impoverishment of the flattening, the dis-ease of the censorship—to the fore (or present) with an eerie, recursive snap.

Against the central, aligned composition of the icon, *Centuries* is centripetal and hollow,

a rotating wheel of people and household objects.¹⁵⁰ In fact, exactly nothing inhabits the center; an X connecting each of the corners of the photomontage would cross at exactly the most conspicuous blank spot of the page, the V of white between the fat man's right arm and Mayakovsky's left. In contrast, the icon carefully positions Mary and Christ in its two geometric centers: lines that crossed from the bottom two corners to the top corners (where the curve of the top has reached 45 degrees from vertical) would cross directly over Jesus' face, while lines that crossed from the 'imaginary' corners of the icon (where the vertical of the side edges would meet the horizontal of the top edge, had the corners not been carved away) would exactly cross in front of Mary's face.

The photomontage's displacements of the icon's elements, I think, are at least as important as more direct quotations. In the icon, metallic shimmer is given to symbols of power and righteousness. For example, there the gold of the icon is applied to haloes and throne, in the photomontage the wealth of these attributes—gold as symbol, for example—has been displaced. The gold is no longer associated with people, telling us something about them or their status, but is arbitrarily distributed among meaningless household goods. The orb in front of Mayakovsky, for example, lacks the rich reflectivity of the orb in the icon: instead, that reflectivity shows up in the samovar and the silver teacup. The rich seat of the throne, echoed in the metallic frame around the smaller Mayakovsky feels—literally?—hollowed out and empty; decorative.

The two appearances of text in the photomontage are worth noting. Both the sign held and venerated by the Africans in the lower right, and the script visible at the far right edge of the photomontage (all but two letters are concealed by the capitalist's left cuff) use pre-revolutionary orthography: the final-position *yer*, or hard sign, (at the end of the word “стаканъ” (cup, mug)) and the letter *yat* (at the end of the partially occluded word) were eliminated by decree in 1917 in a push by the new revolutionary government to simplify and thus democratize the written language. Thus their use seems to point, like the silhouette tea-table image, to the past.

The sign reading “Another cup of tea” is curious for a few reasons. First, unlike almost

¹⁵⁰ The vertical lines of the seams where the icon's boards meet similarly have counterparts in the main vertical lines of the photomontage. Proportionally, with regard to the entire width of the images, the rightmost seam corresponds to the discontinuous vertical line created in the photomontage by the right edge of the “Another cup of Tea” sign, which follows the black man's body up, picks up again in the line from Mayakovsky's foot, through his tie and face, and is thereafter picked up by the string or chain hanging from the monocle of the bow-tied fat man. The icon's next seam, which passes through God's hand and forearm down through Christ's elbow, is echoed most conspicuously by the right edge of the black rectangle behind the left of Mayakovsky's head, and the edge of his cap which is tangent to it, and by the right edge of the black rectangle in the lower left that serves as a background to the samovar. Between these the left edge of the giant and the right edge of Mayakovsky's black cuff maintain the sense of the line's continuity. The strong vertical lines created in the icon by the sides of the throne also have counterpart lines in the photomontage: behind the stairs in the African photo in lower right, a partially occluded black rectangle aligns roughly with the right edge of the vanity-mirror's support. In the photomontage's upper register the line indicating where shadow meets light on the silver teacup may be read as a faint continuation of that line. The vertical of the left edge of the icon's throne aligns with the left edge of the gold background paper in the photomontage, which continues along the right edge of the African girl's metal legwear, and the right edge of the knife in front of Mayakovsky (or, more precisely, with the hollowed-out divet that runs along the knife's top edge).

For all these peculiar corresponding vertical alignments, however, *Centuries* conspicuously fails to provide a similarly strong counterpart to the icon's chief central axis. In the icon the centerline connects the heads and haloes of God, Mary, and Christ; in the photomontage would only the face of the diminutive seated woman in the photograph with the giant, the left edge of the framed picture above her head, and the faint right edge of a support along the wall in the courtyard photograph that dominates the bottom right of the photomontage.

all other texts in the *Pro Eto* photomontages (with the exception of the book's cover) it was not clipped from printed text or from advertisements, but created for the image, probably with a stencil. No scene resembling Rodchenko's photomontage appears in the poem; nor, perhaps more surprisingly, do the words on the sign appear anywhere in the poem's text. The phrase "another cup of tea" is, rather, a distillation of the poem's various references to Africa and to tea-drinking.¹⁵¹ The text of the Africans' sign, then, is Rodchenko's own, and the addition of the *yer* is pure connotation: the letter changes neither the meaning nor the pronunciation of the word it is added to, but is an instantly-felt symbol of pre-revolutionary life.¹⁵²

The *yat* by the capitalist's wrist is an even stronger symbol of the revolution's impositions on language. Revolutionary decrees on orthography eliminated only the final-position *yer*; but left hard-signs in other linguistic positions; the *yat*, on the other hand, was ruled out of the written language altogether. The letter *yat* was a remnant of Old Church Slavonic's Glagolitic alphabet, and though it had for centuries been phonetically indistinguishable from other vowels in the Cyrillic alphabet, it remained in the Russian written language as a visual tie to the liturgical and literary language of Old Church Slavonic. If *yat*'s origin in Old Church Slavonic made it a potent symbol for revolutionaries, the letter's elimination by decree reified that political symbolism.¹⁵³ By 1923 the *yat* was a single letter that carried the weight of competing ideologies, and was surely understood as such by the viewers of Rodchenko's photomontage; only the year before, under intense pressure from the State, had the Orthodox Church begun to use the new orthography.

The lore of the *Derzhavnaya* icon ties it to the Revolution. It came into public consciousness after having lying covered an hidden, for roughly a century, in the basement of a church in Kolomenskoe, near Moscow. According to a contemporaneous report by the Moscow Metropolitan Tikhon the icon was discovered on the same day that the Tsar Nicholas II abdicated the throne by a young girl who had had visions of the icon and the church where it was found. The icon represents God the Father, which because of its prohibition by the Seventh Ecumenical Council was rare, and it depicts the Virgin, who in Orthodoxy is typically venerated as the mother by flesh of Christ, as having the attributes—red robes, crown, scepter and orb—of earthly

¹⁵¹ The sole scene in the poem that includes both Africans and tea occurs in the section "A tour with Мама" (Путешествие с мамой) and reads "Now you fly with your motor droning: / Paris / America / Brooklyn Bridge / Sahara / even here / with a curly-haired negress / a negro family laps its tea." (Сейчас летите мотором урча вы: / Париж / Америка / Бруклинский мост / Сахара / и здесь / с негритоккой курчавой / лакает семейкой чай негритос.) 22. Marshall translates the last lines: "Sahara / where a curly-headed picaninny is guzzling her Negro-mammy's tea."

¹⁵² The sign "Another cup of tea" (Еще стакань чаю) creates a kind of grammatical pendant with the central text of the *Derzhavnaya* icon, written in an abbreviated Greek: "MP. ΘΥ." (the first and last letters of the words *mater theou*, "Mother of God.") The final syllable, '-ou' of the Greek is genitive/possessive, the standard masculine singular ending for that case. The Russian for 'Cup of tea' ('чаю') is also a masculine, singular noun in the genitive, and also ends in '-ou', so that it rhymes with the Greek not only grammatically, but phonologically. The rhyme particularly stands out because there are only a very few Russian nouns that take the '-ou' masculine ending.

¹⁵³ Three separate decrees concerning orthographic reform—all calling for the elimination of the *yat*, among other things—were made in 1917 and 1918. Many Russian émigrés made a point of continuing to use pre-revolutionary script in their letters and publications as a symbol of their allegiance to the old Russia and/or of their disagreement with the new regime's policies. Within the Soviet Union a number of institutions published using the pre-Revolutionary script until forced to switch: the Orthodox Church first used the new orthography in 1922, the Academy of Sciences in 1924.

power.¹⁵⁴ Nonetheless the icon was embraced by leaders of the Orthodox Church which, through Tikhon, interpreted the discovery of icon on that particular day to mean that the Virgin herself would succeed Nicholas II as the leader of Orthodox *Rus*’, and as protector of those faithful to the Russian Church.

The embedded image of Africans prostrate before the “Another cup of tea” sign again points back to religious veneration, and at the same time hollows it out. The Africans’ prostration before the stenciled words signals that part of Russian culture in which the veneration of icons is immensely important, even if it dresses those who worship in a foreign costume. But if the written sign is a reference to the icon, it also depicts a parody of how the icon was supposed to work, theologically at least. The icon, in theory, works not as a window through which one can see another world, but as a kind of mysterious portal connecting two worlds—one visible and one not. The icon connects the material, wood-and-paint copy with its spiritual prototype, linking parallel planes of existence. In the photomontage, however, the icon, with its magical or transcendental properties, has been replaced with a text-only sign that leads precisely nowhere. The way through is blocked, the door boarded over. And indeed, never before has the opacity of a page felt so resistant to me, so lacking the ability to transport one. Rather than facilitate a movement into another world, the written sign seems to block it, to rebound the viewer sharply back into her own lived, physical, material reality. The Africans prostrate before the sign thus become idolaters, humbling themselves before an inanimate object. It shows the viewer the fate of the icon, and perhaps of transcendence, in the new world.

¹⁵⁴ Some of the elements of the *Derzhavnaya* icon, of which many copies now exist, seem to have originated in icons of a much older type. *Orans* icons depict the Virgin of the Annunciation, at the moment when she submits to God’s word. In these icons Christ appears in portrait in a very large, circular medallion around her neck. Her arms are lifted in greeting on either side of the portrait of Christ. In the circular portraits of Christ his hands are often depicted as being raised in a sign of blessing. The *Derzhavnaya* icon seems to have incorporated the Orans icon’s central framing of Christ; likewise, the round, golden halo of Christ in the newer icon corresponds to the shape of the medallion the Virgin wears in the older one.

Chapter Three: Dada, Constructivism, and Revolutionary Time

In the first issue of *LEF*, in which *Pro Eto* appeared, Osip Brik wrote an article entitled “Into Production!” In it, Brik, a theorist of Constructivism and one of *LEF*’s organizers, energetically defends Constructivism, lauding the movement’s unwavering commitment to utility and necessity as the sole factors determining an object’s organization. Brik uses Alexander Rodchenko in particular to illustrate his point:

Rodchenko knows that you won’t do anything by sitting in your own studio, that you must go into real work, carrying your organizing talent where it is needed—into production! Many who have glanced at Rodchenko’s work will say: “Where’s the Constructivism in this? Where’s he any different from applied art?” To them I say: the applied artist embellishes the object; Rodchenko shapes it.for Rodchenko a complete lack of embellishment is a necessary condition for the proper construction of the object. It is not aesthetic considerations but the purpose of the object that defines the organization of its color and form. Rodchenko will not go astray. He can spit on the artists and philistines.... Rodchenko is patient. He will wait; meanwhile, he is doing what he can – he is revolutionizing taste, clearing the ground for the future nonaesthetic, but useful, material culture.¹⁵⁵

In spite of Brik’s warning, however, it may be that “Where’s the Constructivism in this?” is a fair question to ask about *Pro Eto*. After all, what is so useful about an illustrated book of poetry? How can one gauge its purpose or utility? The questions Brik asks with the philistine’s voice are particularly pertinent for Rodchenko’s illustrations: “Where’s he any different from applied art?” cuts to the heart of the matter, since book illustration would seem to fall squarely into the category of applied art. Brik’s answer, that applied art merely embellishes an object, does not satisfy. What is an illustration, if not an embellishment of the text it illustrates? To return, then, to the philistine’s question: where is the Constructivism in these images?

One answer to this question—admittedly quite literal—is that the photomontages harbor the traces of structures which, by 1923, were already emblematic of the ‘laboratory period’ of Constructivist production. Three very different works exhibited in the 1921 *Obmohku* show are echoed in the *Pro Eto* images, each created by an artist who represents a different aspect of Constructivism as it was understood at the time. On one level the three images in which these structures appear all represent moments in the poem’s narrative; on another they reveal and record the movement’s well-documented concern with technology, its prioritization of material in design, and its interest in space itself as something to be shaped. Two of the images, *Bridge* and *Troglodyte*, have been discussed in other chapters in greater detail; here I will lay out just those features that link these images to the *Obmohku* structures. The first image to be addressed, however, *Jazz Band*, has not been discussed elsewhere in this dissertation, and will now be introduced at somewhat greater length.

¹⁵⁵ Osip Brik, “Into Production!” [В Производство!] *LEF* no. 1, March 1923. Trans. Richard Sherwood, in Stephen Bann, Ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism* (Da Capo Press, 1990) 83-85.

Die Jazz-Band

Pro Eto's fifth illustration, which depicts a man and woman dancing, surrounded by a whirl of objects and people and subtended by the words 'Die Jazz-Band', is one of the least-reproduced and least commented-on of the series.¹⁵⁶ (Fig. 6) It is easy enough to see why this is so: it does not look like a typically Constructivist image. On the contrary, the photomontage does away with a good deal of Constructivism's customary geometricity, exchanging clean, legible shapes and lines for a chaotic swirl of *bons vivants* and consumer goods. Nor does *Jazz Band* seem to offer much that is new and creative in photomontage; its fashionable people surrounded by bottles of alcohol read as already-familiar tropes of advertising. A closer look at the image's underlying structure, however, shows it has more in common with Constructivism than appears at first glance.

Jazz Band depicts a dance-hall or cabaret with all the attendant signs of revelry: alcohol, fashionable men and women eyeing one another, cavorting couples, and dancing. Signs advertising jazz music and modern western dances further place the scene. The photomontage fittingly suggests a whirl of movement as hovering bottles of German liqueur, a stack of oversized cookies, and a cut-crystal punch bowl encircle the central dancing couple from above, while a troupe of socialites, --including a flapper, a cigar-faced man in a double-breasted suit, a small band of carousers, and a second, smaller, dancing pair-- spiral in around them from below and right. There is even an exotic stage show: a cabaret performer in a shiny sleeveless top stands with arms stretched and slightly twisted to either side, just beyond and above the revelers.

The image is peppered with small oddities. One of the central male dancer's eyes has been replaced with a larger, whiter, bulging eye that looks straight out at the viewer, and gives him the exaggeratedly crazed look of a silent-film madman. Among the group on the right are other peculiar characters; a woman with the enormous shoulders of a man, wearing a pill-box hat, twists to look at a woman whose head, adorned with a flowered cap, floats disembodied amidst the group. Another figure, at the group's left and smaller than the others, is rendered odd by her position: she sits at a table with her back towards her compatriots, and at the same time kneels, or rides, on the dandy's cigar, her arms outstretched as if she were holding the reins of a horse. Behind all these figures is the cabaret performer whose head--a man's head on a woman's body-- tilts at a disconcerting angle. A thick black shape between the dancer's head and shoulders seems to hide a grotesquely elongated neck; taken together with the dancer's straight black bangs it suggests a tonsured monk wearing a cowl.

Despite carefully crafted strangenesses such as these, there are moments when *Jazz Band's* construction is awkward and clumsy, its symbols common and overdetermined. The patrons of the dance-club, with their darkened eyes, bare shoulders, and boozy bonhomie, read as easy clichés of decadent consumption; the phallic cigar that rises from the dandy's mouth is an equally facile symbol. Below, the banner that reads "Original-Jazz/ Die Jazz Band" fits almost too neatly as a caption; the pictures of liqueur bottles snipped from newspapers or magazines reinforce the sense that the image is modeled on an advertising template. These episodes of ham-

¹⁵⁶ One exception is Alexander Lav'rentiev, who discusses the image briefly in the section "Rodchenko: Konstruktor," in *Rodchenko: Klassika Konstruktivisma* (Moscow: Fortuna, 2004), 108-9.

fisted iconography are matched by moments when *Jazz-Band* allows its physical seams to show. A photograph of Lily Brik superimposed on the central female dancer's head, for example, is too rectangular and long to mesh with the photograph below it, and the black garment around her shoulders contrasts with and does not quite cover the blonde hair of the dancer whose head Brik's is meant to replace. The effect of this willful mismatch of head and body, both in terms of anatomical possibility and in scale, is not grotesque, however, as with the montaged cabaret-performer, but merely unconvincing. The placement is puzzling, at once proposing an object and limiting the viewer's ability to see it. There are other visible seams: the cigar that rises from the dandy's mouth looks hastily cut, its edges just a bit too angular. Similarly, the bottles of liqueur that bob about the image are simple cut-outs from advertisements, shown square on, like a schoolboy's rainy-day project.

At these moments --when *Jazz Band's* seams are most visible, where the most obvious mismatches appear-- the deep space of the cabaret comes into tension with the surface of the montage in which it is pictured. The room, its depth suggested by overlapping and the relative size of the figures in it, flattens out as the roughly assembled image-elements snap back into their positions on the surface of the page; the montage oscillates between the depiction of deep, narrative space and percussive, almost perforating, assertions of surface. At times the picture subtly ushers us into the dark of the club; at others it denies entry, appearing to be all surface, a jumble of figures and objects that we cannot place in space because of their irreconcilable sizes, visible edges, or unconvincing placement.¹⁵⁷ Given all this, it is a little surprising that the picture's quick breaks between depth and surface do not disorient us more than they do.

One way that the picture maintains a sense of order is through the set of nesting rectangles that structure it. The outermost rectangle shares its edges with those of the image itself; thick gray lines border it on three sides. Inside this outer vertical rectangle is a squat black horizontal one, which serves as a contrasting backdrop for the pale skin of the dancers and revelers.¹⁵⁸ Within the horizontal black rectangle is yet another one, vertical and bordered in white. The gray background of this third rectangle is a kind of shadowy projection, and darker areas of shadow within it mark the outlines of yet another rectangle, which frames the stage dancer.

These nesting rectangles can be read as flat, a decorative geometrical pattern serving as a backdrop against which to see the montage's pictorial elements. Insofar as each rectangle fits neatly in and around its counterparts, all the rectangles fit flatly within the single plane of the

¹⁵⁷ There is a rough system of signs indicating depth in the image: the central dancing couple and the figures at the bottom of are larger than those behind them, the head of the man in the double-breasted suit occludes the hem of the dress of the smaller dancing woman, and the bodies of this couple occlude parts of the party behind them. The stage-performer, though larger than the revelers, is by this gauge nevertheless beyond them, representing one of the furthest recesses of space in the image. These signs of depth are imperfect, of course; the stage performer, to note just one example, is much larger than the figures who sit in front of her.

¹⁵⁸ The relationship between this horizontally-oriented black rectangle and the outer rectangle is emphasized by suggestions of a white border analogous to the image's dark one: on the right side of the black rectangle this border is the line of blank space between the rectangle's outer edge and the inner edge of the gray outline. The space between the rectangle's left edge and the right edge of the *Rempe Exquisit* bottle that runs parallel to it suggests this boundary on the left side; at the top, the white border of the black rectangle is most noticeable below the pale gray of the trimmed-off dance-steps sign, but is reinforced with a faintly drawn line on either side of the sign.

page. However, within the image the rectangles correspond to recession into depth, as well. The white, outermost rectangle, for example, is closest to the picture plane, denoting the space in which the flapper and her admirer stand, and in which the central couple dances; the black horizontal rectangle corresponds to a middle distance occupied by the toasting man and his company; and the gray upright rectangle within it represents a distance beyond the tables and chairs, perhaps the stage on which the monk-dancer performs. As the planes telescope away they come to encompass the intervening space, so that when we look at the rectangle that frames the monk-dancer, we are looking deep into the cabaret, across a dance floor, past tables, chairs, and their occupants, to the dancer onstage and even to the projected screen behind her.

The geometrical tidiness of this set of nesting rectangles, each with its contrasting border both delimiting and actuating the space it marks out, is somewhat marred by diagonal lines that stray from the horizontal and vertical pattern of the rectangles, and extend beyond the rectangles' proscribed limits. The cigar is one such untidy diagonal; likewise the left side of the dancing woman's skirt, the long stretch of her partner's leg, the three distinct trajectories of the stacked cookies, Lily Brik's white shoulder, and the stage performer's arms as they reach down and away from her. Further lines that criss-cross the visual field are implied by the exchange of gazes around the picture. Lily looks out at the viewer, as does the central male dancer, with his one large eye. The flapper at left looks over her left shoulder to exchange glances with the man who lifts a glass at right. The man with a cigar at lower right in turn eyes the flapper (perhaps explaining the erect position of his cigar). Among the seated group at the right one woman, who is only a head, looks down at another young woman and is in turn gazed at by the large-shouldered woman wearing a pill-box hat at the far right edge of the picture. A pale young man with dark eye make-up—also only a head—gazes over this woman's head at something out of view.

The diagonal lines that criss-cross the photomontage, both actual and implied by gaze, link the rectangles; as these diagonal lines cross the borders of the rectangles, they also cut across the layers of depth that the telescoping rectangles signal, bringing the diagonal lines out into three dimensions, connecting the telescoped planes front to back. In this linking of concentric geometrical shapes expanded in space, the photomontage recalls Rodchenko's hanging spatial constructions, made from 1920-1921, and exhibited in the 1921 *Obmohku* exhibition.¹⁵⁹ Although the best-known of these spatial constructions are based on the circle (Fig. 29) and the ellipse, (Fig. 30) Rodchenko made hanging constructions based on other geometrical shapes as well, including hexagons, triangles, and rectangles. In a documentary photograph of the exhibition (Fig. 31) three of these hanging constructions are visible: labeled

¹⁵⁹ Christina Lodder describes the *Obmohku* exhibition as a "case study" of Constructivism's development "from agitational tasks through to laboratory work for real constructions with a utilitarian aim." This "laboratory work" was intended to stimulate new ideas about space and material, as well as about the roles of artists themselves. The group did not, she argues, share Tatlin's method of working based on the texture of materials. Rather, to *Obmohku* artists "the organic form and texture of the material has become less important and the stress on material, as worked and processed by machine technology, has become greater." Their experiments formed what was thereafter the "dominant trend" of Constructivism: the "geometric form in technologically processed material highly influenced by mechanical forms." For more on the *Obmohku* exhibition and the laboratory period, see Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1983), 67-72, and Maria Gough, "In the Laboratory of Constructivism: Karl Ioganson's Cold Structures" *October* 84 (Spring 1998), 91-117.

XXIV, in the center of the image, is the ellipse; to its right, labeled XXIII, is the hexagonal structure, and in the upper right corner of the photograph, looking like an astrolabe and labeled XXII, is the structure made of circles.

The rectangular spatial construction, like all of Rodchenko's hanging constructions of 1921, was made from a single, flat piece of wood, which was cut into matching, concentric, geometrical shapes. From the two-dimensions of their original plywood material the concentric geometric 'rings' were then rotated in space to create a three-dimensional structure, held in place by wire.¹⁶⁰ Although the cuts made in the plywood were concentric, it is clear both from Rodchenko's sketches and from installation photographs that they were not (necessarily) positioned concentrically when rotated in space. For example, while the component rings of the oval hanging structure share a single center (or, to be more precise, a common pivot point, perhaps one of the ellipse's foci), the installation photographs of the circular and rectangular constructions show the smaller shapes clustered at the top and bottom of the structures respectively, even as each of the 'rings' remains within its next-largest counterpart. Thus, some hanging constructions have a 'center', or nucleus, that are not the same as their geometrical center. This is perhaps most obvious in the installation photograph of the circular hanging construction, in which light and shadow emphasize the planar nature of the rings; each ring, though a subset of a series and a subordinate shape, also represents the plane within its bounds, and which extends beyond them. Rodchenko's sketches of these hanging spatial constructions (Fig. 32) make it plain that the hanging constructions were designed to be hung this way when expanded. The effect of this shift of center, I think, is to divert some of the viewer's attention away from the original geometrical shape, to the number and intersection of the planes that the rings represent.

The subject of the hanging spatial constructions is space itself. According to Maria Gough, the difference between sculpture and spatial construction is that "while all sculpture occupies space, the spatial construction advances space itself, so-called empty space, as 'concrete' material. It orchestrates this material but does not fill it; it declares volume with recourse to neither mass nor weight; and it dissolves the customary distinction between the exterior and interior of form."¹⁶¹ While Rodchenko's hanging constructions certainly meet these criteria, I would argue that their specific means of getting at space—the structures' medium, so to speak—is the plane, and in particular the expansion and contraction of nesting, concentric shapes into multiple planes in three dimensions. The ability of the planes, once expanded in space, to contract back into two dimensions was as integral a part of the structure's design as its expansion. An important feature of the hanging constructions was that after exhibition they could be then be flattened back into two dimensions for storage or 'archiving.'¹⁶² The geometrical elements of Rodchenko's 1921 spatial constructions can be seen in their flattened form standing and hanging behind the artist in Mikhail Kaufman's well-known 1922 photograph (Fig. 33).

Jazz-Band contains echoes of both states of the rectangular hanging construction. In their decorative, flat aspect, the nesting shapes recall the hanging construction in its first and final

¹⁶⁰ Lodder, *RC*, 24.

¹⁶¹ Gough, *Laboratory*, 95.

¹⁶² Christina Lodder, *RC*, 24-6.

forms: its state as cuts in plywood as well as its re-flattened, archivable state. The telescoping aspect of the rectangles within the photomontage, their marking of and expansion into the deep visual space in the image, corresponds to the creation and delimitation of space created by hanging construction's rotation into three dimensions. The borders around the edges of the rectangles in the photomontage correspond visually to the individual rings of the geometrical shapes in the construction. In the photomontage and hanging structure alike, the borders function to call attention to the space within them, and to make an otherwise abstract space more concrete.

The diagonal lines marked by the objects and gazes in the photomontage also correspond to the much messier picture of the rectangular hanging construction as it appears in its expanded state. Rodchenko's 1920 photograph of the rectangular structure, taken as it hung in the exhibition, demonstrates the apparent disorderliness of the structure when seen from a given vantage point. (Fig. 34) Although the shapes that comprise the structure are parallel when flat, their lines appear to converge at multiple angles and distances, and even to cross one another, when they are expanded into three dimensions (this is particularly true when the shapes are not arranged concentrically). Even lines that we know to be parallel (as for example the two right-leaning sides of the second-largest rectangle) appear to approach one another, however faintly. In the exhibition view of the expanded hanging spatial construction, the outermost rectangle of the structure appears riddled with diagonal lines, which increase in density and complexity toward the top (and slightly to the right); the diagonal lines criss-crossing *Jazz Band* likewise grow denser toward the actual shared center of the images' component rectangles.

This is already, I recognize, at risk of sounding strained: I am proposing that Rodchenko's own rectangular hanging construction from the 1920 *Obmokhu* exhibit subtly reappears in *Die Jazz Band* photomontage, that the photomontage simultaneously embodies that work both in its flat, orderly state and in its messy, entropic one. The claim is a difficult, even a weird one. If I am not simply making too much of an accidental likeness, how are we to understand the allusion? Are the correspondences between the photomontage and the hanging structure a deliberate re-use of his earlier work? Or do they represent an unconscious echoing of those forms?

Acknowledging the weirdness of the comparison and my claims, however, I would like to push the comparison still further, to perhaps even stranger ground, and suggest that Rodchenko may have worked his hanging spatial construction into the *Die Jazz Band* photomontage by way of the three-dimensional construction's appearance in two-dimensional photographs. If we compare *Die Jazz Band* to Rodchenko's photograph of his rectangular spatial construction *in situ*, we can note similarities between them even in small details. For example, the zig-zag of the left side of the central dancing woman, as it moves toward the center of the image, turning left at her shoulder, and right again at her elbow, strongly echoes a similar set of angles, like a sigma, visible on the left side of the construction. Likewise, the extension of a small triangle of the photograph of Lily Brik beyond the left edge of the black rectangle likewise mimics the protrusion of a similar triangle beyond the edge of the outermost rectangle on the the

construction's left side.¹⁶³ These correspondences suggest that Rodchenko's may have recreated the structure in the *Jazz-Band* photomontage as it appeared in this particular photograph. It was, after all, his own photograph of his own work, and the photograph that represented the structure—and thus the artist's own earlier, more formalist production—in the second issue of the magazine *Kino-Fot* (for which Rodchenko had also designed the cover), in 1922.¹⁶⁴ It was, therefore, an image deeply familiar to him. Likewise, Kaufman's photograph of Rodchenko before the flattened constructions quickly became iconic of the Constructivist project (in part because of the self-designed "production clothing" Rodchenko wears); taken just a year before the publication of *Pro Eto*, the photograph's documenting of the constructions in their archivable state may have kept the hanging constructions fresh in the artist's mind.

Jazz Band's allusion to Rodchenko's earlier hanging construction—is it an allusion, or echo, or even a bizarre figurative parody?—provides an explanation for a curious (and anomalous) feature of this photomontage, namely the appearance in it of a self-portrait: the male head of the stage dancer is a photograph of Rodchenko himself.¹⁶⁵ Again, it may well be that the similarities between *Die Jazz Band*'s organization of space and the hanging spatial construction's are unconscious, unplanned. However, Rodchenko's inclusion of his portrait image in a photomontage in which he cites his own work may also be read as a sly incorporation of a medium-appropriate signature: while he has signed his name with the drawn line of script at the bottom of the photomontage, he has signed the two-dimensional representation of his three-dimensional structure with a two-dimensional representation of his three-dimensional face.¹⁶⁶ Sly is indeed the word for all of *Jazz Band*'s echoes, inclusions, and half-acknowledgements; by weaving of his earlier work and his portrait into an illustration of *Pro Eto*, Rodchenko quietly expands the poem's context beyond the immediate confines of its author's fantasy, and undermines the trope of the invisible, or objective, illustrator.

¹⁶³ While *Jazz Band* recreates Rodchenko's hanging constructions, they are certainly not the image's only art-world referents. For example, I believe the picture refers, somewhat obtusely, to Malevich's *Black Square*. Although the black square in the picture is actually a rectangle—slightly wider than it is high—the reference, or at least a comparison, is hard to avoid. There is just enough of the painting's solid black shadow of rectilinear geometry and—the key, to it seems to me—of the white background surrounding it, to plant the idea in the minds of viewers who would have had trouble avoiding the symbol. If it is an allusion, it is a funny one: where Malevich's *Black Square* so self-seriously denies everything, Rodchenko's square is the site of an outright overflow—not a single side of it is not exceeded or crossed. If *Black Square* was a picture of a return to starting premises, the black rectangle fills it full of stuff, packs it with people, and generally seems to refuse to take the idea seriously. The hint is that the unassailable, sacrosanct silence of the black square has been marauded & filled with the noise and commotion of delirious, western high life.

¹⁶⁴ Margarita Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 24-6.

¹⁶⁵ Alexander Lavren'tiev has interpreted its appearance as an acknowledgement on the artist's part that he was a witness of the love affair between Mayakovsky and Lily Brik. (Alexander Lavren'tiev, "Rodchenko: Konstruktor" in *Klassika Konstruktivisma* (Moscow: Fortuna, 1994), 108.) And indeed, the eyes of the small portrait head seemed to be rolled to the far left, toward the picture of Brik, which sits above the body of her dancer at an angle and distance like Rodchenko's above his.

¹⁶⁶ It is also worth noting that a concern with the translation of three dimensions into two, and the expansion of multiple planes that rotate into space out of a flat object, are in a way neat summaries of Rodchenko's project with *Pro Eto*: the former describes the role of photography; the latter, the shape and behavior of the codex-style book. The rectangular hanging construction mimics the shape of the book, and geometrical planes of the ovals, meeting in a single line at their center, recall a the pages of a book, shooting out from their spine in all directions.

Fairy girders of steel rose up from the waters.¹⁶⁷

The third image of the *Pro Eto* series (Fig. 4), we have seen, shows Mayakovsky standing on top of a bridge-like structure. Though Mayakovsky is pictured twice, it is the structure itself, shaped like a backwards letter F, that plays the central role, claiming most of the picture field and the more active of the parts. The photomontage structure is instantly recognizable as a ‘bridge’ even as it fails to perform a bridge’s primary function of connecting two geographically separated pieces of land. Instead it teeters in space, touching down for the moment at neither of its ends. On the far end the bridge-structure’s connection to solid ground, implied by the embankment that runs perpendicular to the span below it, is undermined by the triangle of white that bites into the left side of the image. The near end of the bridge structure is even more disconnected and dangling than the far one. The roadway’s length is cut abruptly off at the image-segment’s far right edge by a slim black triangle. The truncation is emphasized by another slim triangle that juts beyond the black one, giving the image-element the look of an unevenly folded holiday card. The whole span is pushed into the air by the thrusting black segment of arch that careens up through the surface of the water below. The black arching supports pivot where they intersect with the water, creating a sense that the whole structure is in the midst of toppling to the right. The white triangle of blank space at the left of the image adds to this sense, like a wedge hacked from a tree by an invisible ax, the tool’s swinging movement dissolved into a vector.

The black vertical arch’s two long beams are laced up by zig-zagging struts that mimic the triangular shapes of the bridge’s trusses. Replacing one of these trusses and extending its length (the lower horizontal arm of the backwards letter F) is another image of a bridge. This span, with its flat roadway supported by trussing and an arch below, echoes and reverses the form of the larger span above it. The leftward thrust of this lower span functions as a visual counterweight to the structure’s rightward list, shifting the structure’s center of gravity and visually reversing its rightward topple. The two spans of the structure, the upper tipping toward the right and the lower pulling up and to the left, create a static simulation of mechanical movement, like a drinking bird.

In its static representation of mechanical pushes and pulls, and in its appearance itself, the photomontage bridge-structure recalls another work shown in the *Obmokhu* exhibition: Vladimir Stenberg’s *Construction for a Spatial Structure No. 6* of 1920. (Fig. 35) The similarity is in part visual; the bridge in the photomontage simply looks like the construction, with the open-ended reach of its upper section, its nearly-horizontal central platform, and its thicker, darker-colored supporting segments below. The photomontage structure and the Stenberg construction share thicker, black, trussed struts below supporting lighter-colored, cantilevering arches above. In addition, the thick, black, almost-horizontal line segment in the photomontage’s lower right corner corresponds to the part of the base of the Stenberg construction that extends out underneath the arch, beyond the structure’s main vertical thrust.

The affinity between the photomontage bridge and the Stenberg construction is also, in part, due to their shared ‘function’. Works by the Stenbergs, as Christina Lodder explains,

¹⁶⁷ The section title is a line from *Pro Eto* that describes the bridge that Mayakovsky encounters as he floats down the Neva on his ice-floe. It reads in Russian: “Из бод феерией стали восстал.” (15)

generally “contain strong references to existing technological structures, such as bridges. Frequently using metal and glass, these works appear as completely abstract investigations of the potential of such structures in artistic terms.¹⁶⁸ Stenberg was sternly criticized by his colleague and fellow *Obmokhu* exhibitor Karl Ioganson for this kind of work, the complaint being that Stenberg’s spatial constructions were “merely the representation of a technical construction.”¹⁶⁹ Maria Gough seconds his criticism, asserting that for all the Stenberg brothers’ “championing of functionalism, and for all their familiarity with engineering specifications, the ultimate results of their labors are aestheticizations, that is, imitations of that which has already been invented.”¹⁷⁰ Ioganson argued that it was not enough to appear useful, industrial, or engineering-driven; in order to be truly utilitarian, an object needed to grapple with physical principles and offer new solutions to the problems faced by builders and engineers. By being neither a crane nor a bridge the Stenberg construction emphasizes the aesthetics of technology without actually being technology; by looking generically machinic but without a clear purpose, the construction mystifies existing technology. Other Constructivists--Tatlin, Popova, and Stepanova, to name just a few--had broader ideas of what might constitute a Constructivist object and resisted such a strictly utilitarian view of Constructivism. They were intent on creating objects whose dynamism and geometricity derived from industrial production, but which need not have a direct industrial or engineering application.¹⁷¹

Whatever the merits of Ioganson’s (and Gough’s) criticism of Stenberg’s constructions, Rodchenko’s photomontage ‘bridge’ bears witness to this aspect of the contemporary discourse of utility and technology among Constructivists. Gaps between the ‘supports’ and the main body of the structure make the bridge a technological oddity. (The supporting structure does not connect to the upper part of the bridge, but rather there is a gap between them; it does not actually support. In fact, the supporting struts end randomly--the strut on the right ends at the edge of the upper photo; the left strut extends into this photo, but ends just short of reaching the river in the photo, not allowing even this amount of closure or connection.) The technology is loosened from its utilitarian mooring; the structural elements of the bridge are transformed from everyday applications of technology into unspecific likenesses of mysterious machines. While the movement inherent in the structure’s precarious balance recalls a drinking bird, as suggested above, it might also be a trebuchet (for example) poised to fling the gloomy Mayakovsky into the enemy’s camp. Or it may be an elevator, as the flat part of the structure, weighted slightly more heavily by Mayakovsky on the right than by the small trussed counterweight to the left, tilts down and deposits the morose Mayakovsky in a sitting position on the iceberg below. There is little question of the centrality of technology to this image. What is, perhaps, of greater interest is the way that technology, in stark contrast to Constructivism’s stated goals of transparency and expediency, is used in the image to promote fantasy, irrationality, and play.

¹⁶⁸ Lodder, *RC*, 70.

¹⁶⁹ Maria Gough, *Laboratory*, 116.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 117.

¹⁷¹ Arvatov would argue in *Everyday Life*, for example, that “the dynamism of the socialist thing results from its condition of industrial production....and its purpose is to import this dynamism into the passive consumerist lethargy of everyday life (*byt*) under capitalism.” Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, 101. (Arvatov, *EL*, 121).

The Constructivist discourse of technology – in particular as it was witnessed by works on view in the 1921 *Obmokhu* exhibition– figures as well in the *Troglodyte* photomontage that depicts Mayakovsky’s phone call to Lily Brik (Fig. 3). In it, telephone wires extend across an entire city, linking Mayakovsky in the upper right to Lily’s housekeeper, Annushka, in her kitchen at lower left. The narrow length of the cityscape photo creates a sense of distance between the two corners of the photomontage, pushing Annushka’s corner away from Mayakovsky’s. The distancing effect is not only a function of the broad expanse of the cityscape pictured in the photograph. The straight lines of the photograph’s parallel top and bottom edges emphasize the diagonal city’s horizontal stretch; the image’s breadth makes the expanse between the corner images unambiguous and solid.

Also connecting Mayakovsky’s end of the image to Annushka’s is a set of thin long, straight lines that subtly cross near the horizon of the cityscape about 2/3 of the way between the two corners. One of these long lines continues from the oversized telephone receiver at Mayakovsky’s end, through the numbers 67-10, and ends at the top of a shaft on an apparatus that looks like a bullhorn. The other extends from Annushka’s telephone as it hangs on the wall, refracting at a slight angle from the phone itself. This line forms the rightmost edge of a black triangle, and its extension remains just visible as it crosses the cityscape. As it passes out of the cityscape, this line pales and almost disappears, but is conspicuously marked above the cityscape by a fatter, fuzzier white line up to the dinosaur’s front leg. Above the dinosaur’s neck a short extension completes the connection of this line to the telephone bell at Mayakovsky’s corner.¹⁷²

These longer lines form a tall, narrow X, while other shorter lines in each corner, both drawn and implied, create triangles at either end of the X. Together the set of lines form kind of an angular figure eight. At top, one of these lines connects from the dinosaur’s neck to the mouthpiece of the phone receiver, another from there to Mayakovsky’s head, and a third, undrawn horizontal line connects Mayakovsky’s head to the wall-mounted bell near him. The dinosaur’s neck simultaneously implies this line and obfuscates it. Bottom left, there is a similar triangle. Two of its lines are formed by the bottom edges of the light beams emitted from the disk (or dish) in the corner. A third, implied, line connects them: it stretches along the length of the megaphone handle, is picked up by the rings around the megaphone, and extends to the crease at the waist of her apron. The result of this proliferation of lines is a complex matrix whose central cross is flanked on either end with a sort of triangular base. The figure is not symmetrical and its intersections are imprecise. The line extending from Mayakovsky’s mouthpiece is longer than its counterpart. Likewise, the shorter lines of the triangles are not uniform in length, mismatched with both the other lines in the same corner, and those in the opposite corner. As a result, the triangle at the bottom is larger than that at the top. It is also worth noting the instances in which the intersection of the lines is off by a bit, or is implied but not depicted. The megaphone handle, for example, serves as a rough meeting point for three lines: the one from Mayakovsky’s mouthpiece, the leftmost edge of the left-hand beam, and the implied line continuing from the

¹⁷² The small segment of this line that is white, as if there has been an attempt to erase it, or white it out, represents a peculiar moment in the photomontage: although it seems as if the line had been meant for deletion, the white segment on the contrary highlights the line. In addition, the black line is still visible within the broader, less sharply edged white line that ‘hides’ it.

handle to Annushka's forearm. The lines themselves never *quite* meet, however, and there is a subtle fungibility between the lengths of lines and their exact points of intersection.

With its matrix of lines stretching between various points, the *Troglodyte* photomontage contains a strong echo of still another structure from the 1921 *Obmokhu* exhibition; Karl Ioganson's *Spatial Construction No. IX* (hereafter, *IX*) comprises a similar, and similarly complex, set of intersections. Although the structure is difficult to make out in Rodchenko's photograph of the exhibition, a later reconstruction of *IX* allows us to see its form (Fig. 36). *IX* consists of three central rigid straight metal poles connected by flexible metal wire. The metal poles, or struts, do not touch one another at any point, but are connected only by taut wires (or tendons), which hold the elements in tension. Triangles are formed by the wires connecting the poles at each end of the structure. Cables also extend from one end of each of pole to the opposite end of another pole. The pushing and pulling forces of the poles and wires respectively create a system that in spite of its lack of rigid joints is able to maintain its form when suspended, and can support weight.

The resemblance between the lines of *IX* and those of *Troglodyte* is striking, particularly as the structure's three dimensions are flattened into photographs. The lines which criss-cross through the center of the structure find their counterpoints in those in the photomontage that cross in the middle of the city, while the more or less parallel cables which run lengthwise find theirs in the edges of the picture of the city. The triangular top and bottom of the structure find their parallels in the triangles, at either end of the cityscape, of which Mayakovsky and Annushka form a part.

Nor is the relationship between the *IX* and the photomontage mere visual homology. The cables of the structure play a role that is functionally analogous to the lines of the photomontage. The triumph of *IX*, to repeat, is that it does not depend whatsoever on rigid joints, nor on the contiguity of an internal cross. Instead, *IX* owes its stability to "a precisely configured interplay between, or mutual annihilation of, the forces of discontinuous compression and those of continuous tension."¹⁷³ That is, the tension of the wires creates a pull that opposes the push of the struts, and the balancing of the pushing and pulling elements creates stability and order. The same effect is achieved, pictorially, in the photomontage. While the sense of distance created by the long, narrow photograph of the cityscape pushes the corners of the image away from one another, the crossing diagonal lines pull back in opposition towards the image's center, connecting the top edge of the photograph on each corner to the bottom edge of the photograph in the opposite corner. These elements of the photomontage form a visual tension equivalent to the physical tension in the structure: where the push of distance keeps apart, the pull of opposite and opposing tension holds taut and compacts. This explains a curious feature of the photomontage. Despite its strong use of the diagonal, which typically creates a sense of dynamism in the composition, the photomontage is strangely static. The movement latent in the structure's distinct cant is mitigated by the opposing forces of the image's lines and the stability of the triangles those lines create.

The photomontage's lack of symmetry—the uneven length of its connecting lines and their variable angles of intersection—likewise picks up on the way that *IX* inevitably deforms

¹⁷³ Gough, *Laboratory*, 110-111.

when seen from any single vantage point, as in photographs. Scholars of Ioganson's work argue that this visual ambiguity is fundamental to *IX*, a function of the structure's lack of "centralized contiguity." No solid point of contact is available to anchor the perception of before and behind, and lines of the cables fade or disappear. Moreover, the structure's invisible planes, indicated by the intersection of any two lines, shift with knowledge of the structure. What seems to be a triangle in a single plane transforms, with thought, to something more like a geometrical solid. Gough notes that the lack of an internal cross in *IX* produces "a fundamental asymmetry, a kind of unpredictability of structure that presents radically divergent versions of itself according to the vantage point of the viewer."¹⁷⁴

What does it mean, then, that in creating the *Pro Eto* photomontages Rodchenko borrowed from the vocabulary of the movement to which he belonged, at a particular, defining moment two years prior? How are we to understand the appearance of the structures in the photomontages?

The three examples described above—the recreation of Stenberg's construction in *Bridge*, Ioganson's in *Troglodyte*, and the admittedly queerer appearance of Rodchenko's own hanging construction in *Jazz Band*—demonstrate how Rodchenko's photomontages refer to the products of Constructivism's laboratory period. The spatial structures from the *Obmokhu* exhibition lend the photomontages their hyper-rational, scientific grammar, and account for a number of the artist's compositional choices. The structures also lend the photomontages a set of concerns, posed in the form of a number of oppositions. The concern of Rodchenko's hanging spatial constructions, for example, is space; the oppositions expressed by them are expansion and contraction, the three-dimensional and the two-. Ioganson's structure shows a concern with force: in particular the opposing forces of rigidity and tension, of pull and push, but also of concept and manifestation, as Ioganson's *IX* takes the idea of opposing forces and locates it in an application. Stenberg's construction, as Gough and Ioganson would have it, is an extant thing brought into abstraction, so the opposing poles of his structure are the real and the abstract. One might argue along these lines that Stenberg's practice is the opposite of Ioganson's, for Stenberg turns praxis into theory. One might also argue that Stenberg's structure liberates technology, turning the familiar devices of engineering to fantastic, as yet unimagined, purposes. The structures also relate to one another with regard to the past and the future. Stenberg's structure calls on the past and aestheticizes it, engaging in a sort of nostalgia; while Ioganson creates a structure that might, one day, find a real application in life. Its engagement with time is one of optimism. For now, perhaps, it can be left at this: the re-appearance of these structures, just a few years later, refers to a number of terms: to Constructivism, especially in its laboratory stage, when its production was largely three-dimensional and concerned with space and materials; to time, where structures can refer to things already built or not yet built, and where they can produce nostalgia or hope; and to the very idea of opposition at the core of each of them.

¹⁷⁴ Gough, 110.

And now, mama, we're headed for Berlin.¹⁷⁵

We have answered, in a way, Brik's (and the philistine's) question: "Where's the Constructivism in this?" Brik may have wished for, and indeed provided, a different sort of answer; nonetheless, we have found "the Constructivism" in Rodchenko's *Pro Eto* photomontages. But if we are to be fair to Brik, and the philistine, we must recognize there are other, less logical forces at work in the *Pro Eto* photomontages. Eventually we must account for the characteristics that set the book's illustrations apart from Constructivism as it had been until 1923. To return, for example, to the floating bottles and punch bowl, and symbolic cigar in *Jazz Band*—simple symbols of decadence that seem to hover about the dance hall, as if in outer space, where gravity had no claim on them: It is as if the man raising his glass were toasting these objects that hover blearily around the room. More precisely, it looks as if the contents of his glass had picked up the momentum of his arm and splashed out in an arc, turning into punch and liqueur along the way and forgetting, finally, to land. The punch bowl similarly hovers in an abstract space, but because its outer edge coincides with the outline of the stage-dancer's head, it also gives the impression of having just sliced this head off, like a disc-shaped guillotine. An everyday household object thus becomes a political weapon of the state, but one animated, like the brooms of the Sorcerer's Apprentice, by some manic, whirling magic. Objects and people alike spin like inebriated dervishes. A number of the *Pro Eto* photomontages contain such moments, which could go by many names: excess, delirium, tumult, overflow, chaos. If the *Pro Eto* series photomontages deal in experimental structures, struts and tenons, rigidity and geometrical planes, they truck equally in baffling contraptions, mismatched body parts, absurdist and playful juxtapositions of people, animals, and objects.

For these un-Constructivist elements there is another, extra-Soviet model of image- and art-making to which Rodchenko is looking. The bottles, with their labels in Roman and Gothic script, and the cabaret signs, with their tell-tale conjunction (above) and definite article (below), function as linguistic pointers for the viewer: Germany. The language of the signs, along with the montage's absurdist assertion of the impossible, and the very medium of the images, point the way. The visual evidence, never irrefutable, nonetheless adds up; in specific images, repeated tropes, and in overall tone, the photomontages in Rodchenko's *Pro Eto* series strongly suggest their maker's familiarity with the creations of the first avant-garde photomonteurs, his counterparts in Berlin.

Bodily Disfigurement

A recurring trope of the *Pro Eto* photomontages is the distortion of the body through the montage-grafting of alien body parts. *Jazz Band* achieves this several times, as eyes and heads are replaced, and heads lose their bodies altogether: a large white eye replaces the central male dancer's; the stage performer's head is replaced with that of a monk (or artist), giving him/her a grotesquely long neck; the central female figure's head is not entirely replaced with Lily Brik's. Such use of montage to create a sense of bodily distortion and disfigurement is common to Dada photomontage; among the Berlin Dadaists, Hannah Höch is perhaps the most skilled and canny practitioner of it. Höch's photomontages *Dada-Tanz* of 1922 (Fig. 37), and *Das schöne Mädchen* from 1920 (Fig. 38), along with other works dating as early as 1919, show that bodily distortion

¹⁷⁵ The title of this section is borrowed from *Pro Eto*. (Rus: *Seichas, mama, nesemsia v Berlin.*)

was a well-established part of her photomontage repertoire.¹⁷⁶ The operation in which a figure's eye is replaced with an imposter's is one that Höch uses frequently and to great effect. In *Das schöne Mädchen*, the right eye of a face in the upper right corner of the photomontage has been replaced, or covered, by an eye too large, glassy, and closely cropped for it. Crude and lidless, it looks like the eye of a doll, and at the same time bears an uncanny resemblance to the many BMW insignia below it, including the one that mostly occludes the woman's real, left eye. Another Höch photomontage from 1919 plays this trick several times: one eye in each of the three pairs of eyes in *Da-Dandy* is mismatched, grafted onto its new owner's face (Fig. 39 and detail).

Maud Lavin's interpretation of such outsized eyes in Höch's photomontages is potentially helpful here. Lavin, who identifies the too-large eye in *Das schöne Mädchen* as a cat's eye, argues that such oversized eyes give their faces "the appearance of wearing a monocle." The monocle was Höch's symbol for Dadaists and thus, Lavin suggests, for the artist herself.¹⁷⁷ A complex volley of gazes ensues, a layer of meaning revealed with each: "The absurdity of the scene provides an ironic distance that is doubled by the presence of a spectator within the montage. But the viewer outside the montage is in part implicated by the gaze of the female spectator within the frame of representation."¹⁷⁸ The viewer looks at the female object (in Höch's montage, a bathing-suited body with big hair, a parasol, and a light bulb in place of a head), but the artist—Lavin's internal spectator—acts as witness of that gaze, her vision a check or rebuke of the viewer's own. *Jazz-Band*, with the returned gaze of the artist made literal through Rodchenko's embedded portrait, offers a kind of send-up of the mutual observing gazes (of viewer (or spectator), female object, and artist) that Lavin sees in Höch's work. While the elements are all present, their relationships are inverted. If Höch's artist/witness observes the viewer, Rodchenko's observes the image's central object; where Höch's central figure is without eyes, visionless, Rodchenko's photomontage doubles this figure (with the photograph of Brik), and turns all their four eyes on the viewer. These primary gazes are then, in turn, nestled into the web of looks that hangs between all the various eyes in the picture. The result reads as both a reversal and parody of the more straightforward geometry of vision in *Das schöne Mädchen*.

Although, in *Jazz Band*, the disembodied head of woman in the right-side group who looks down over the assembled company perhaps represents an extreme of bodily disfigurement, the central figures are equally eerie and impossible. Rodchenko's severed head floats impossibly far above the body of female performer, while Brik's head and shoulders are turned in the opposite direction from the rest of her body. Compare these figures to the grotesque dancers in Höch's 1922 *Dada-Dance*. The lower legs and feet of Höch's rightmost dancer are huge in

¹⁷⁶ The similarity between Rodchenko's *Pro Eto* illustrations and Dada photomontage with regard to bodily disfigurement has not, to my knowledge, been pointed out by other authors.

¹⁷⁷ Maud Lavin, *Cut with the kitchen knife: the Weimar photomontages of Hannah Höch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 43. Lavin notes Höch's particular association in her memoirs of the monocle with Raoul Hausmann, Höch's lover of many years: "Hausmann... probably came into the world wearing a monocle." (*Cut*, 37 and 226 n. 56).

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 43. For Lavin, the mutual observership of viewer and maker is strongly related to gender. Nonetheless, I think it is fair to consider the trope apart from gender. She continues: "It is as if we, the viewers, are aligned with the montage spectator in looking at this surreal advertising scene; she views from the back, we from the front, and our gazes meet."

comparison to her head and arms, and at least as ill-matched are the relative positions of all these parts. While the legs suggest that the dancer is in the process of turning away from the viewer to the left, the head and arms are in the position of one facing toward and to the right of the viewer. Höch's dancer and Rodchenko's share this impossible pose, with the heads of each turned 180 degrees away from their feet. While the legs of Rodchenko's central female dancer are the right size --her body is of a piece-- her head (i.e., Brik's) is analogous to the ill-matched and outsized feet of Höch's dancer, which find, moreover, an echo in the single, shiny, high-heeled shoe in the lower right corner of *Jazz Band*. Rodchenko's stage performer, a grotesquely elongated figure with a man's head atop a woman's body, likewise has a counterpart in the left-hand figure in *Dada-Dance*, whose long, pale, feminine legs are grafted onto a much smaller African male. Even their outfits are analogous. Rodchenko's stage-performer wears a slinky sleeveless dress that contrasts starkly with the monk's cowl around his/her neck. The smaller scale of the African man's torso makes the dress' deep neckline absurd; it falls open to his navel, well below his bony chest. As Rodchenko's performer's cowl extends its neck, in Höch's photomontage the extent of the legs below the hem of the floor-length gown creates the sense of a body that is disconcertingly disproportionate, whose legs are far too long for it.

Another example of this kind of body-part grafting in the *Pro Eto* series can be seen in the image captioned "Four times having grown younger, four times I grow old," (hereafter, *Four Times*).¹⁷⁹ (Fig 8) One of the children in the photomontage, a chubby-faced urchin with a single lock of hair on his forehead, seems to sprout like a young shoot out from the left shoulder of a man wearing a long coat and holding a cigarette. The faces of the boy and the man, representing younger and older versions of the poet, are turned parallel to one another, facing in the same direction. They share a torso, indicated by the neat match where their backs, necks, and shoulders meet. The similarities in tone and shape of the faces and the analogous arcs of their cap-brims further emphasize the grafted connection between the boy and the man. Similar photomontage conjoining of heads and bodies appears in early works by Höch and Hausmann. In Hausmann's *Double Portrait* of 1920, for example, the heads of a younger and an older man who face in the same direction are slightly overlapped and aligned so that the head of each man is nestled into the shoulder of the other. (Fig. 40) Although the men are oriented upside-down to one another, peculiarities of their physiognomies strengthen their doubleness: the older man's balding pate echoes the smoothness of the younger man's chin, while the older man's beard mirrors the younger man's full hair.

Hannah Höch's *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* contains a similar double-headed figure: in the lower right hand corner of the montage, in the quadrant devoted to portraits of Dadaists, directly beside a picture of Raoul Hausmann, the heads of two grown men share a single body (Fig. 41).

If the conjoined-twins type of doubling we see in *Double Portrait* represents a type of physical disfigurement born of excess, *Four Times* also depicts disfigurement in the form of sloppy bodily reassembly. The left arm of the boy who sits in the box at the top of the image, for example, is an imposter. At the shoulder a Frankenstein-ish seam is visible where body and alien

¹⁷⁹ The caption of the image corresponds to a line of the poem in which the poet considers the possibility of time travel as a way of circumventing the personal, social, and political obstacles that stand between the imperfect present and his dreamed, post-Revolutionary Utopia. The image could be read as a relatively literal interpretation of the poet's images where the four children represent the poet's reincarnations.

body-part meet, but other traits give the game away completely: reaching out toward the picture plane, the arm is too large, but also too tense and rigid to belong to the laughing, playing boy.

The mix-and-match style of bodily fragmentation and reassembly recalls the the “Dada Manifesto,” in which Richard Huelsenbeck writes that the highest art of his day was that, which, “thrown by last week’s explosion” is “forever gathering up its limbs after yesterday’s crash.”¹⁸⁰ The manifesto was distributed at the First International Dada Fair, where a number of sculptures and paintings, to use Brigid Doherty’s neat summary, “presented evidence of the destruction of human bodies by the technologies of modern warfare without showing the successful repair of that destruction by medical science and engineering, specifically the development of highly sophisticated prosthetic limbs...”¹⁸¹ The Dadaists, with their emphasis on the damage done to bodies by mechanistic warfare and the subsequent, insufficient restoration of those bodies by mechanical prostheses, present a very different view of technology and the machine than the one we are accustomed to associate with Constructivism.

Baffling machines

Another kind of Dadaist machinery is at work in the *Pro Eto* photomontages. In *Troglodyte*, for example, an assemblage of machine-parts at the lower left corner embodies a kind of ‘technology’ altogether more puzzling than the tensegrity structure that dominates the center of the image. (Fig. 3) Packed into the corner, behind the (pre-modern, but quite utilitarian) housekeeper, a megaphone is mechanically attached to what seems to be a very large spotlight that beams rays of light into the concave top of a shallow cylinder. The individual parts of the structure recall existing technology, but do not seem to function like their real-life technological counterparts. A pump or handle rising from rear segment of the megaphone, for example, serves as the connecting point to two of the lines that stretch across the city. We might guess from the context that these lines represent the wires that enable Mayakovky’s fateful telephone conversation, but how are we to understand their connection to a handle? Or any part of a megaphone, for that matter? And what are we to make of the spotlight? Are we seeing light, then, or sound? In the end it is not clear what the apparatus in the corner is meant to represent. However commonplace the machine-parts might seem, it would be difficult even to name them all, and hopeless to try to reconstruct how they might work together. The overall effect is one in which familiar elements of early industrial technology have been resized and recombined to form something unfamiliar and inscrutable: a baffling machine.

A similarly baffling bit of machinery made from vaguely familiar elements of existing technology appears in *Four Times*. (Figs. 19) In the upper-right quadrant of the image a pyramidal amalgamation of metal machine parts rises above a thick, black, hand-marked horizontal line. The bottom right corner of the machine looks like a generator or engine of some sort; the stout metal in which it is fabricated, along with its flat base, look as if they are meant to resist something spinning within its squat cylindrical body. A mechanical press or a microscope, with knobs, wheels and a stack of shiny metallic concentric cylinders, extends horizontally from

¹⁸⁰ Richard Huelsenbeck, “Dada Manifesto”, 1918. Quoted in Brigid Doherty, “Berlin” in Leah Dickerman, ed. *Dada: Zurich, Berlin, Hannover, Cologne, New York, Paris* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2005), 88.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 98-99.

the circular hollow at the generator's left side; below this is yet another set of cylindrical rods that looks like an empty printing press. The top part of the machine is composed of a flat disc on which rests another megaphone, its rounded mouth pointed down and to the right, superimposed over the circular arc of a film reel. Beyond the reel, a long, tall, cylindrical tower composed by a transparent, metal mesh supports another horizontal disc.

From the caption of the photomontage we can infer that this is meant to read as a kind of time machine: the apparatus that will allow Mayakovsky to grow young four times. The details of the machine, however--what its parts are, or even how they fit together, let alone how the loose conglomerations pistons, cylinders, a film reel, bull-horn, and generator might combine forces to allow time travel--are of course inscrutable. Even the layering of the photographic elements that make up the machine defy any attempt to make sense of them. While the photomontage suggests that the different machine-fragments are related, the mismatching and overlapping of their photographic elements does not allow such an illusion. Moreover, though it promises a technology of the distant future (the 30th century is named as the time of Mayakovsky's resurrection in the poem) the machine is made up of fragments of technology—generators, microscopes, film reels, even radio towers—that are decidedly of the past. These machinic conglomerations, like the bodily disfigurements discussed above, seem at odds with the Constructivist commitment to rationality and utility.

While Rodchenko's time machine, in all its mysterious complexity, represents a departure from the visions of technology on view at the Obmokhu exhibition, it resonates with a similar amalgamation of technological scraps in Raoul Hausmann's 1920 photomontage *Tatlin at Home*. (Fig. 42) *Tatlin at Home* depicts the head and shoulders of a square-jawed, clean-cut man whose head—the top of it, anyway—does not quite contain the superabundance of machine parts that replace it.¹⁸² 'Tatlin' shares a steeply tilted interior space with a man in a hat and waistcoat who turns out his pockets; behind him is a cut-away, torso-only anatomical dummy, perched on a wooden stand. Against the rear wall a black-and-white projection of a propeller on a large, undulating, riveted metal surface provides a slightly sinister-seeming analog to the complex mechanism that tumbles from the Constructivist artist's head.

On a general level, Rodchenko's time machine and Hausmann's machine-head are both inexplicable dreams of technology, at once mysterious and absurd. More specifically, the montage-machines share the vocabulary of knobs, wheels, shafts, cylinders, and columns. Large spoked wheels dominate each of the mechanisms, and both images center visually on discs and cylinders facing and rotating in various directions. The large drill enclosed by a glass tube in Hausmann's mechanism finds a counterpart in the tower part of Rodchenko's machine, in the transparent mesh cylinder that surrounds a vertical metal rod. Even the fragment of Rodchenko's machine that resembles a printing press may have an analog in Hausmann's photomontage. Above Tatlin's right eye, among other cylinders, wheels, pistons and axles, is a part of a white

¹⁸² The conceit of the *Tatlin at Home*, as Hausmann explained it later in an interview, was simple enough. He said that he was "interested in showing the image of a man who only had machines in his head." From there he expanded and balanced out the picture by adding the cartoon picture of a man turning out his pockets (reasoning that "Tatlin can't have been rich,"), the interior model of soft, puzzling guts, mounted on a wooden stand, at right, and the undulating curve of the boat or submarine with its giant propeller in the far background. Quoted in Dawn Ades, *Photomontage*, 29.

rectangle resembling a piece of paper emerging from a typewriter. On it is written a single Cyrillic letter (in pink script); the letter “ya” which in Russian means “I”.

The mystery machines depicted in the montages have a silent counterpart in the camera used to capture the photographic elements of the images. The practical, familiar camera—a machine with a relatively straightforward mechanism and known utility—contrasts ironically with the fanciful machines of the images. And yet the camera is not incidental to any of these works. Dadaists, like Constructivists, valued the elements that made up photomontage for their mechanical reproducibility. As Brigid Doherty argues, “When [Grosz] equated the dadaists’ first ‘photo-gluing-montage-experiments’ with ‘the mounting of machine parts’ the point was to associate dada montage with modernized industry.”¹⁸³ Hannah Höch, for her part, wrote that the Berlin Dadaists’ “whole purpose was to integrate objects from the world of machines and industry into the world of art.”¹⁸⁴ (Indeed, the contradiction between the camera-machine’s purported objectivity and the impossible world made out of its products was part of the Dada point.) Constructivists similarly valued the photograph’s mechanical reproducibility, as it fit squarely with their commitment to technology and industry. At the same time, as Christina Lodder argues, the “ability of photomontage to present a concrete image that linked the everyday life of the viewer with the political and social precepts of the Communist Party made it a valuable propaganda weapon.”¹⁸⁵

Spin

Perhaps the most distinctive and telling trait that distinguishes the *Pro Eto* photomontages from most Constructivist production is their reliance on a looping, circular, ‘all-over’ style. The last photomontage of the *Pro Eto* series, *She Loved Animals*, (Fig. 9) exhibits a centerless, spinning form that it shares with *Four Times*, *Centuries*, and *Jazz Band*. The movement of these images is restless; each element leads to another and no element can hold the viewer’s undivided attention for long, let alone claim centrality. No object, action, or figure takes the lead in organizing these images. Even in *She Loved Animals*, in which Lily Brik’s face is the largest element and dominates the upper left quadrant of the montage, the photographic elements are arranged to divert attention from her face. The thick, horizontal line at her temple quickly leads to the isolated baboon in the upper right corner, which in turn leads to the caged bear, the lion, then the parrot, and so on. The lion cubs that hang like a pendant necklace at Brik’s neck serve the same purpose, pulling the viewer from a potentially stable point of focus into a visual circuit in which the elephants and the other zoo animals form something like a carousel. In all four of these images the subjects are multiple and scattered; their primary organization is the restless, spinning circuit, punctuated with diagonal lines like those formed with the elephants’ trunks in *She Loved Animals*. The “familiar centrifugal movement and jazzy diagonals”¹⁸⁶ that Lavin sees as characteristic of Höch’s Dada photomontages are equally characteristic of these images from *Pro Eto*.

¹⁸³ Doherty, Berlin, 93.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Christina Lodder, “Constructivism and Productivism,” in *Art into Life* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), 114.

¹⁸⁶ Lavin, 43.

In Höch's work, the larger centrifugal dynamism in the photomontages as a whole is reflected in microcosm in the many wheels, tires, ball-bearing races, gears and drive shafts that populate them. *Das Schöne Mädchen*, for example, features numerous such objects: a car tire, the handle of a crank shaft, and the hands of a clock face. Even the lightbulb that has replaced the beautiful girl's head contains latent spin in the visible threads at the bulb's base, which imply the rotating movement needed to screw it in. The alternating blue and white interiors of the many BMW insignia, montaged in at various angles, produce the same sense of spinning as the hands of the clock face and the crank of the gears, creating local movement within the image that mirrors the image's overall centrifugal pattern.

The grand example of both the 'all-over' in photomontage and the spinning microcosm/centrifugal macrocosm is Hannah Höch's *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* of 1919-20, in which the local spinning movement of gearshafts, spoked wheels, ball-bearing races, and car tires--even the spinning of Kathe Kollwitz' head tossed into the air--matches the restless spin of the photomontage as a whole (Fig. 43). The appearance of spinning wheels, gearshafts, clockfaces and engines in early Berlin Dada photomontage has been the subject of much comment. Such spinning machines are, of course, an ever-increasingly visible and common part of life in the industrialized West. They carry numerous connotations; the turbulence and changingness of modern life--a modern update of the wheel of Fortune; the increasing mechanization of the world, particularly in the light of World War One; and even, as Brigid Doherty argues, the shattered, neurasthenic modern psyche.¹⁸⁷ In these works, which are characterized by the "centrifugal dissolution" of their elements, "Dada is a destabilizing force."¹⁸⁸ The centrifugal dissolution is also what creates the montage's 'all-over' effect, since the entropic spread of elements to fill each sliver and corner of the montage subverts more traditional compositional arrangements.

A few of Rodchenko's *Pro Eto* images share Höch's trope and match that image's overall stomach-turning circularity. *Four Times*, for example, with its carousel-style turning, also exhibits more contained instances of rotation, as for example in the mysterious machine in its upper right. The film reel, the generator or turbine, and the knobs and wheels of the mysterious machine all provide localized instances of spin that match the image's overall centrifugal pattern, and thus are functionally equivalent to Höch's tires and ball bearings, etc. Still another photomontage made for the *Pro Eto* series, but which was not included in the original publication of the book, displays an all-over style of composition. To some degree, the local spin of *Cut: Polar Bearing* (Fig.10) has the same roughly all-over pattern as Rodchenko's other circuit images, but the elements of 'all-over' and whirling have been turned up a notch: it has more of Höch's 'familiar centrifugal movement and jazzy diagonals' than do the others. In the upper left corner of *Polar Bearing* a tank descends a set of stairs, its five visible wheels revolving, and leads the viewer into the turbine of the montage. Among the elements through which we are cycled are a turreted gun that rotates in its battery, a domestic interior with a round table surrounded by chairs, and an armored train whose rotating wheels recall and point to those

¹⁸⁷ Brigid Doherty, "See: We are all neurasthenics!" or, the Trauma of Dada Montage." *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Autumn, 1997) 82-132.

¹⁸⁸ Lavin, *Cut*, 23, 39.

of the tank in the upper left. The wheels and turret in these images provide a counterpart to the moments of micro-level turning in Höch's *Cut*, especially since they tend to set in motion, imaginatively, elements in the image that would otherwise be seen as stable. The table in the domestic interior, for example, along with the round dishes and lamp on the table, take on, in their proximity to the gun turret, a latent sense of spin.

The case should not be overstated: while *Polar-Bearing*, *Jazz Band*, *Four Times*, and *Centuries* all share the specific, rotational 'all-overness' of Höch's montages, they by no means match Höch's commitment to this kind of (dis-)organization. Even at his most centrifugal and cluttered, Rodchenko's images are sparser and more rectilinear. *Centuries*, for all its busy, centerless spin, displays a love of the right angle, an evenness of distribution, and a kind of stability that one cannot find in Höch's work. *Centuries*' geometrical stability is writ small in in *Four Times*. The time-machine, though comprising a number of quintessentially spinning objects --disks, knobs, wheels, a turbine, and even a film reel-- nonetheless combines these elements into a paradoxically stable form; a triangle (or a pyramid). Rodchenko's photomontages never fully give way to the Dadaist tendency to fragmentation and 'centrifugal dissolution'; instead they maintain a kind of balance, their linear geometries just barely reining in the chaos of the circle's centrifuge. Where *Cut* and other dadaist montage tends to emphasize the arbitrariness of the cuts and arrangements on the page (though Hausmann's *Tatlin at Home* is a notable exception to this), Rodchenko's photomontages have a tendency (equally incomplete) to create a kind of narrative and spatial unity: a city square, for example, or a phone call, or a nightclub. Even at their most fractured and arbitrary—considering here *Polar Bearing* as an example—Rodchenko builds an essential geometry into the image, creating with the lines of image-edges, bodies, buildings and the vectors of tanks and guns a crystalline, ordered fracturing. That structured quality in Rodchenko's montages means that even in their fragmentation, the elements hold together. They may swirl and fracture, but they never devolve into chaos, or suggest, like *Cut*, an abyss filled with discrete representations thrown together arbitrarily. Nonetheless, it would seem that Rodchenko has incorporated Höch's centerless, spinning, all-over characteristic into his own work, and in doing so has brought the viewer a considerable distance from the measured, orderly geometries more typical of Constructivist production—toward the chaotic, dizzying, disoriented mood that the Dadaists captured (and helped create) in the West.

In addition to these categorical similarities between the *Pro Eto* series photomontages and those of Berlin Dadaists, there are also a number of very specific likenesses between them that are worth noting. *Like a Cross*, for example, shows Mayakovsky with his arms outstretched as he stands atop a Kremlin tower, struggling to 'catch his balance' as he sways above the crowd (Fig. 7). A similar drama is takes place the lower left corner of Höch's *Cut*, where another figure is poised to fall from a tower, arms outstretched, into or onto the crowd below. (Fig. 44) In Rodchenko's image, as in Höch's, the crowd's mass pours out from the urban canyons of wide avenues lined with modern, new-world skyscrapers shown not straight on, but at a broad, enveloping angle. The tire that intersects with the bell tower of Ivan the Great in Rodchenko's photomontage, as if stopped by the tower mid-spin, combines disparate elements of *Cut*, mirroring the placement of the giant letter e that intersects the tower in Höch's work with the

manufactured tire whose counterpart can be seen in the wheel directly behind Höch's falling figure.

Similar particularities connect Rodchenko's *Centuries* with other moments of Dadaist montage. On the left side of *Centuries* Mayakovsky sits, scowling, while a number of domestic items crowd around him, hemming him in (Fig. 5). His chest is covered by the blade of a supper knife and a large, circular object in which a silhouette describes a scene of domestic comfort, a man and woman having tea together. The circular object, which could be a crystal ball, might also be read, by virtue of its placement at the base of his neck, as a parody of a military medal. A kind of 'Lavender Heart' or 'Order of the Samovar' for those who have traded their political struggles for creature comforts. The military man to the right of Mayakovsky, framed by a silver serving tray, and carrying spoons in place of weapons (top center), provides the context for such a reading: though the uniformed man stands at attention, any threat he may have posed has been neutralized. His framing within the tray has neatly amputated his legs (which are eerily replaced by the tray's handle), a set of teaspoons has replaced his weapon, and one of these spoons has even eclipsed his face. Mayakovsky and the military man represent domesticated, and thus emasculated, versions of the revolutionary zealot and the military man. These tropes echo similar ones in George Grosz' and John Heartfield's wondrously titled *The Middle Class Philistine Heartfield Gone Wild (Electro-Mechanical Tatlin-Sculpture)* (Fig. 45). The *Tatlin-Plastik* is a montage in the round, a dresser's dummy to which various ornaments and prostheses have been attached, including a revolver, a medal of the Black Eagle Order, a prosthetic leg, a doorbell, a fork and knife. Because of the medals on the *Tatlin-Plastik's* chest, his prosthetic leg, revolver, and the Black Eagle Order medallion, the sculpture has been read as a military figure; Brigid Doherty calls it a an "assemblage of military and mechanical fragments."¹⁸⁹ The argument could be made that a further part of the *Tatlin Plastik's* debasement stems from the very domesticity of its decorations: fork and knife, doorbell, dentures. For while the doorbell and light-bulb can be read as mechanical objects, they are also decidedly domestic articles, and while the dentures may well be read as a reference to the Freudian *vagina dentata*, they can also be read as a sign of the chronic, low-level humiliations of domesticity and age.

The *Electro-Mechanical-Tatlin-Plastik's* attributes have been distributed in Rodchenko's photomontage. While the silverware-medals on the *Tatlin-Plastik's* chest adorn both Mayakovsky and the spoon-soldier, Mayakovsky has received the equivalent of the Black Eagle Order medal, and spoon-soldier has gotten the *Plastik's* amputations. The *Plastik's* doorbell and light bulb can be thought of as having sublimed into the door and ceiling of the apartment interior shown in *Centuries*.

Cf. 'Soviet' Photomontage

Although the characteristics that have been identified as Dadaist tropes ('all-over'-ness, bodily distortion and disfigurement, centrifugal organization, mysterious machines made out of familiar parts) may now seem to be essential features of photomontage, they were were decidedly not part of the vocabulary of Constructivist photomonteurs in the Soviet Union before Rodchenko's *Pro Eto* series. In comparison with what Margarita Tupitsyn calls "the more overtly

¹⁸⁹ Doherty, "See: We are all neurasthenics!" 97.

political photomontage” of Gustave Klutis, Rodchenko’s *Pro Eto* photomontages are more fragmentary, both formally and with regard to their subject matter. For example, prior Soviet photomontage—including Rodchenko’s own—tended not to cut and reassemble individual bodies in the ways described above, but rather show a strong tendency towards bodily integrity. Even where the disintegration and fragmentation of the body is the subject of the photomontage, as with Gustave Klutis’ 1921 *Cannon Fodder* and Rodchenko’s 1923 *Crisis* (Fig. 46), the body is not dismembered, and body parts are not fungible.

El Lissitzky’s photomontage of this period is worth comparing to the *Pro Eto* series. His 1920 *Lenin Tribune* (Fig. 47) might well be compared with Rodchenko’s *I paw my ears* (or *Bridge*) photomontage. Both photomontages represent machines, or fantasies of technology, and have in common a dynamic diagonal list with a dark, suited figure at the far, high end of the structure, emphasizing the potential movement latent in each image; for it is these figures who will tumble to the ground if the structure fails. Lissitzky offsets the cantilever of the long diagonal structure with counterweights: the heavy-looking cubic base; a gray solid rectangular mass on the opposite side from Lenin, about halfway between Lenin’s stand and the base; and the square sign that reads “Proletarians!” Because this sign is opposite Lenin, it also functions to balance the structure, if only visually. In contrast, Rodchenko’s image both alludes to and removes these stabilizing supports. Gone is the solid base, its hefty cube replaced by shifting water; likewise the stable, hefty, mid-structure counterweight, replaced by a teetering bridge segment, dubiously connected to the main structure. Perhaps most disconcertingly, the large sign of Lissitzky’s tribune has a counterpart not in any sign in *I paw my ears*, but in the top photographic element itself. Because we can see the edges of the photograph of the bridge on which Mayakovsky stands (the narrow black wedge and photo-gray wedges at the element’s far right are at pains to show us the limits of the photographic element), we see it as flat, like Lissitzky’s “Proletarians!” sign. Not only, then, does Rodchenko both refer to and reject the stabilizing elements of Lissitzky’s tribune, but in doing so destabilizes the more conventional poster’s means of signifying. While Rodchenko’s bridge recalls the existing technology of the bridge, it simultaneously de-rationalizes it, imbuing his ‘machine’ with a logic quite apart from that of standard engineering. If we compare Lissitzky’s *Lenin Tribune* to *Troglodyte*, which is likewise marked by a strong, linear diagonal structure, we see that Rodchenko has deliberately confused the *Tribune*’s clean lines and diagrammatic straightforwardness with precisely the elements discussed above: the comic and absurdist apparitions of the brontosaurus and the stripe-stockinged housemaid, the puzzling metaphor of the foreign city stretched between them, and the conglomeration of technology--somewhere between mysterious and absurd-- that serves as the base for the entire structure.

The centrifugal, ‘all-over’ style of many of the *Pro Eto* images is also largely anomalous with regard to previous and contemporary Constructivist production. The contrast can be seen most clearly, perhaps, in the photomontages, like *Dynamic City*, (Fig. 48) that Yve-Alain Bois has termed “radically reversible”¹⁹⁰: even where Klutis’s montages have a circular center that builds rotation into the images’ structure, the primary action is to turn space inside out rather than start it spinning. The radically reversible images are, once flipped, again stable; by contrast the

¹⁹⁰ See Yve-Alain Bois, “El Lissitzky: Radical Reversibility,” *Art in America*. April 1988, 181-188.

centrifugal pattern of *Jazz Band* does not create an image that flips, but rather one in which the elements of the montage move through a constant circuit, against a rectilinear, stable background. These images also demonstrate the significant difference between pre-*Pro Eto* soviet photomontage and the *Pro Eto* montages with regard to their ‘all-over’ style. The primary aim of Klutis’s photomontages, as Margarita Tupitsyn argues, was to “discard ‘overall confusion in the visual field’ in order to produce a more readable ‘ideological content.’”¹⁹¹ In some of his montages, such as *Dynamic City* and *Electrification of the Entire Country*, (Fig. 48, 49) legibility is gained through the *literal* clearing out of the visual field; the space that surrounds the radically reversible centers of these images is white and empty, offering nothing that might interfere with the neat geometrical solids that the images posit as the future. In other photomontages, for example *We are Building a New World*, Klutis creates ideological legibility by making a graphic comparison of the old and the new--a sort of ideological Venn diagram (Fig. 50). On the left, a dark circle labeled “The Old World” is filled with primitive symbols of that world, drawn free hand: a chain, a whip, a bottle (the bottle itself is not labeled, but we can imagine it represents the evils of drink). On the right another, light-colored circle labeled “The New World” serves as a geometrical frame for a rectilinear construction, drawn as if at an architect’s drafting table. Rectilinear shapes, right angles, geometrical solids, and graphed lines do not have the individual meaning of the symbols on the left side, but form a collective symbol for a future planned and built according to reason. If the symbols in the Venn diagram were not plain enough, Lenin’s body language, with his back turned to symbols of the past and optimistically facing those of the future, makes the message unambiguous.

By way of contrast, look again at *Centuries*. Having seen Klutis’s photomontages certainly helps in recognizing Mayakovsky as a parodic or pathetic stand-in for Lenin. But in *Centuries*, the old and new world are not separated and labeled, resulting in no clear distinction between good people or things and bad ones. Even Mayakovsky, the poem’s protagonist, and compared indirectly with the great Ivan Ilych, is not unambiguously a symbol of progress. Rather than stride forward, he sits with his wrists crossed over his knee, surrounded by metonyms of domestic life. If the fat man in the herringbone suit is an easy mark for a capitalist fat-cat, our protagonist is lodged squarely inside him. Conversely, the photomontage places an old-fashioned scene of bourgeois tea-drinking over the revolutionary poet-protagonist’s heart, as if we were seeing his softer yearnings through a clear window. If Klutis’s photomontages strove for an erasure of ‘overall confusion in the visual field,’ the *Pro Eto* images are positively based on that confusion; easy legibility and unambiguously ideological content are not on offer.

Dada-Constructivism

It is fair to compare Rodchenko’s photomontages with those of Klutis and Lissitzky; Klutis and Rodchenko were fellow-Constructivists in Moscow in the early years of the Soviet Union.¹⁹² While Lissitzky lived in Berlin for much of the period in question, he had worked

¹⁹¹ Margarita Tupitsyn, “From the Politics of Montage to the Montage of Politics,” in Matthew Teitelbaum, ed., *Montage and Modern Life*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992) 84.

¹⁹² Klutis and Rodchenko attended meetings together where they debated about Constructivism’s path forward; they knew one another’s work.

closely with a number of Rodchenko's colleagues, including Mayakovsky, and was the avant-garde's face abroad--Rodchenko would certainly have been familiar with his work. But how much did Rodchenko know about Dadaist photomontage? He himself never travelled to Berlin, and no shows of Dadaist art came to Moscow. To what extent, then, was Rodchenko familiar with Dadaist production? As far as I know, there are no writings or records testifying to Rodchenko's direct knowledge of the Berlin Dadaists generally, or to any of their works in particular; nor does he mention Dadaism or Dadaists in his diary; nor is there any scrapbook he kept of images that interested him. The case that he was familiar with their work, then, will necessarily be argued from circumstantial and fragmentary evidence. The picture formed from such evidence, like photomontage itself, will doubtless contain distortions and uncertainties. As has been seen above, however, fragments can sometimes get one a long way.

A good place to start is at the First International Dada-Fair, held in 1920 in Berlin. Several of the montages and photomontages considered as potential sources or influences on the *Pro Eto* series photomontages were shown at the Fair. One installation photograph shows Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Höch posing for the camera, each standing in front of the other's work. (Fig. 51) Hausmann, in a neat suit and worker's cap, is showing Höch something on a scrap of paper; she, hands folded precisely over a walking stick, considers it obligingly. The photograph records two of the works that have made their way (as has been argued) into Rodchenko's *Pro Eto* photomontages: to the left of Hausmann is seen Höch's *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*; to the right of Höch and behind her is Hausmann's *Tatlin at Home*. Still further right, low on the wall, is a sign that reads "Art is Dead: Long Live the New Machine Art of Tatlin." The photograph seems to attest to a strong interest in the Soviet artist on the part of the 1920 exhibitors. Less clear is how much the Dadaists understood about 'machine-art', and what Tatlin signified to them as a representative of it. According to Stephen Bann, the Dadaists' knowledge of Constructivist art as practiced inside the Soviet Union was likely limited to what they learned from Konstantin Umanskii's 1920 *New Art in Russia*. Bann writes that "it seems certain" that parts of the book were published in advance in the serial *Der Ararat. New Art in Russia* established Tatlin as Constructivism's founder and the leader of the Russian avant-garde, and proffered his "machine art" as typical of the kind of the best work being produced in the new Soviet state.¹⁹³ Umanskii called Tatlin's work "machine-art" and the Dadaists simply followed suit.

The sign that reads "Long Live the Machine-Art of Tatlin" appears again in another celebrated photograph from the exhibition (Fig. 52). Here George Grosz and John Heartfield hold it in front of yet another work that refers to Tatlin: their sculpture *The Middle-Class Philistine Heartfield Gone Wild (Electro-Mechanical Tatlin Sculpture)*. Again, the documentary installation photograph doubles up on its references to Tatlin, as the sign bearing the linguistic reference to Tatlin is held before a work titled after him. This time, however, the reference is slightly modified. The double-title of the work, named for both Heartfield and Tatlin, aligns its two namesakes, forging a kind of appositive relationship between the Constructivist and the Dadaist. But how is the alliance to be interpreted? The Dadaists' multiple references to Tatlin might be read as a parody of Constructivist rationalism and slogan-mongering -- which would be

¹⁹³ Stephen Bann, "Constructivism and its European Resonance" in *Art into Life*, 215.

in keeping with the Dadaist's professed disdain for reason and order. Brigid Doherty suggests that Heartfield's reference to himself as a "middle-class philistine" is to be read as a "self-mocking identification" with radical anarchists and "petit-bourgeois revolutionaries," of the sort that were being condemned by Lenin at the time.¹⁹⁴ If the identification is self-mocking, however, it is an identification nonetheless; his ironic use of the term also functions as a reminder of the political affinities he and his fellow Dadaists shared with Tatlin, since he and his brother Wieland Herzfelde, along with Grosz, were founding members of the German Communist Party. Indeed, while the Berlin Dadaists' adoption of Umanskii's language could be (and has been) read as a mocking of the Constructivists, other evidence suggests that their views were sympathetic.¹⁹⁵ The Dadaists' descriptions of themselves as "monteurs", or engineers, and of their works as "constructed," "built" or "engineered", create a sustained analogy between their work and that of their Soviet counterparts. Furthermore, the political commitments of the Berlin Dadaists, and Grosz's subsequent move to the Soviet Union and his actual friendship with Tatlin, all point to an underlying sympathy on the Dadaists' part for the Constructivist project.

Based on the evidence of what was published in the 'little magazines' that made the rounds during the early twenties, including *G*, *Mecano*, and *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet*, the Dadaists' knowledge of Constructivist practice grew enormously in the years between 1920 and 1923. Several of these 'small magazines' showed work of the group that came to be known as the International Constructivists side by side with Dadaist works. For example, a 1922 issue of the magazine *Mécano* compared Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's *Nickel-Plastik* with a drawing by Charcoune called *Cigarette Dada* (Fig. 53). The comparison of Hausmann's *Mechanical Head* with an assemblage of machine parts by Moholy-Nagy, also in published in *Mécano*, likewise acknowledged the overlap of Dada and Constructivist interests and production.¹⁹⁶

All this, of course, does not tell us whether Rodchenko and other Constructivists inside Russia knew about Dada, only that Dadaists knew of and were interested in Constructivism. However, these references and comparisons to Constructivism would have attracted the attention of Constructivists. Those working inside Russia would have been curious to see how their project was understood in and received by the European art world. In the Dadaists' references to

¹⁹⁴ See Brigid Doherty, 'Berlin' in *Dada: Berlin, Zurich*. 100-103. Doherty likewise argues that the term "going wild," was a reference to the psychic regression and sexual impotence that Lenin claimed characterized such people.

¹⁹⁵ In short, it is difficult to know how seriously members of the Berlin Dada took Constructivism and Constructivists. It has been argued that their apparent enthusiasm was actually a kind of sneering or poking fun at Russian Constructivism's self-righteous ideological fervor. For example, Martin Kane interprets Grosz' seeming enthusiasm for the Constructivist project as facetious. (Martin Kane, "George Grosz: Constructivism parodied" in *New Studies in Dada: Essays and Documents*, ed. Richard Sheppard (Driffield: Hutton Press, 1981), 35-45. Dawn Ades, who argues for the Berlin Dadaists' sympathy with Russian Constructivism, argues that Kane's interpretation suffers from a too-generalized use of the term 'Constructivist.' See Dawn Ades, "Dada-Constructivism" in *Dada-Constructivism: the Janus-Face of the Twenties* (London: Annely Juda Fine Art, 1984), 33-35. Given the leftist political values held by the Berlin artists, however, and the continued ties between Berlin and Moscow in the years following the Fair, I am inclined to believe that the Dadaists' attitude toward their Soviet colleagues was fundamentally supportive.

¹⁹⁶ The comparisons of Moholy-Nagy to Charcoune and Hausmann are among many examples of the ties between Dada and Constructivism compiled in Ades' helpful article, "Dada-Constructivism," cited above, n. 195. This chapter relies heavily on her research.

them, and the various published comparisons between the two movements, Constructivists would have been able to see their work reflected back to them.

To return, then, to the question of whether Constructivists working in the Soviet Union might have been familiar the photomontage of the Berlin Dadaists. It is generally known that El Lissitzky, in his capacity as official cultural envoy, travelled between Moscow and Berlin regularly in the years preceding 1923, and was regularly in contact with artists and theorists in both cities. More pertinent still are Mayakovskiy's own frequent travels to Europe, including several trips to Berlin, in the years immediately preceding *Pro Eto's* publication. On his return from each of these trips, Mayakovskiy brought back suitcases full of books and magazines from the West to share with his colleagues. Mayakovskiy brought these publications to the apartment of Osip and Lily Brik, which served as *Lef's* library as well as its official headquarters. Through these magazines, Rodchenko recalled, he was exposed to the art of the west. In his memoir, "Work with Mayakovskiy" Rodchenko wrote that Mayakovskiy

was often abroad. The map of his travels Varvara is now making reveals that in a year he made four trips on average. ...He brought entire suitcases of magazines, catalogs, and books. He gave all of it to Osya [i.e, Osip Brik], and there was a complete warehouse in his room. We would crowd into the room, look at things, argue and make plans. . . . After Osya had examined everything and all the newsworthy material had been used in the press, the magazines and books were distributed by specialty. I got art and photography. Volodya [Mayakovskiy] . . . wasn't a collector, he gave to us everything he brought back. He brought us not just the art of the West, but its life, its breath, its essence, with all its virtues and shortcomings. He brought posters, catalogues, advertising prospectuses and handbills, and the latest novelties and photographs of views, productions, and structures.¹⁹⁷

The publications that Mayakovskiy generously brought back from the west did not just expose Rodchenko to western art, however, but also found their way into Rodchenko's studio, and even his photomontages. One of Rodchenko's *Vkhutemas* students, on visiting Rodchenko's studio, found images from German and French magazines strewn all over the floor. Rodchenko, the student reported, was clipping images from these magazines and filing them according to subject.¹⁹⁸ The photographic images pictures that comprise his *Jazz Band* largely came from German magazines including *Junge Welt*, *Moderne Illustrierte Zeitschrift*, and *Die Woche*, periodicals that also served, notably, as sources for Hannah Höch's photomontages.

Indeed, the very idea of illustrating *Pro Eto* with photomontages was a result of Mayakovskiy's contact with new photomontage in Berlin. In October of 1922, Mayakovskiy was in Berlin at the opening of the exhibition, *Figurative Art in the USSR*. While in Europe he

¹⁹⁷ Rodchenko, "Work with Mayakovskiy" [1939], in Alexander Lavrentiev, ed., *Rodchenko: Experiments for the Future*, 236-7.

¹⁹⁸ Alexander Lavren'tiev, *Rodchenko: Photography 1924-1954*, trans. John Gabriel (New York: Rizzoli, 1982), 14.

noticed that publications were more and more often accompanied by photographs and photomontage. It was only a few months after his return that he proposed that Rodchenko create photomontage illustrations for the book.¹⁹⁹ Some of Rodchenko's countrymen made the connection as well, noting that Rodchenko's photomontages had a good deal in common with Dada photomontage.²⁰⁰ An anonymous *LEF* article on photomontage notes a parallelism between Rodchenko's photomontage and that of George Grosz. Klutskis, writing in 1930, declared that Rodchenko's photomontage "often slipped into the methods of Western advertising" that, not coincidentally, were thought to characterize Dada photomontage.

How, then, are we to think about the similarities between Rodchenko's *Pro Eto* montages and those of Berlin Dada? Do we understand the *Pro Eto* photomontages, like Peter Galassi does, as simply transitional images that mark the start of Rodchenko's awareness of the West's cultural production? Is it possible to think, along with Christina Kiaer, that *Pro Eto* photomontages are unrelated to Dada, and their similarities are coincidental? Are they best seen, as Klutskis saw them, as having descended to the formalism of Western advertisements? Are the *Pro Eto* images to be read, as Margarita Tupitsyn argues, as apolitical works, reluctant to incorporate political iconography, interested only in narrative and aesthetics, and more fit for NEPmen than for workers?²⁰¹

What these readings have in common is their view of Dada and Constructivism as negative and positive antipodes, representative of conflicting actions and having mutually exclusive goals: Dada destabilizes, Constructivism steadies; Dada destroys, Constructivism builds; Dada dismantles and fragments, Constructivism unifies and organizes. Dada's "permanent state of ironic revolt" has been equated with the same decadence of the West that Dada purportedly aimed to highlight and discredit. Constructivists identified Dadaism with "negative tactics," and insisted that the new art did not aim to destroy the past or overthrow it,

¹⁹⁹ Alexander Lavren'tiev has also implied the relationship between Mayakovsky's trip to Berlin and the idea of illustrating *Pro Eto* with photomontage. He writes that "it was not by accident the idea to illustrate the book with the help of photomontages came to Mayakovsky," adding that "before this his book *For the Voice* was published in Berlin, assembled by Lissitzky; it appears that he wanted to see his latest poem in a new style." (Alexander Lavren'tiev, "Rodchenko, Konstruktor" in *Klassika Konstruktivizma*, 108. My translation.)

²⁰⁰ Nor is it solely Rodchenko's contemporaries who saw the similarities: a number of current scholars of photography and Constructivism, among them Benjamin Buchloh, Leah Dickerman, and Alexander Lavren'tiev, have likewise associated Rodchenko's *Pro Eto* photomontages with Dadaist ones. Though the comparisons are almost always made in passing and without citing particulars, they recur often enough to warrant notice. Peter Galassi writes that "the freedom of composition and effect" of the *Pro Eto* images "brings to mind the anarchic energy of collages made a few years earlier by the Berlin Dadaists Raoul Hausmann, John Heartfield, Hannah Höch, and George Grosz. (Galassi, "Rodchenko and Photography's Revolution" in Magdalena Dobrowski, Ed., *Alexander Rodchenko* (New York: Harry Abrams, Inc., 1988) 106.) Margarita Tupitsyn argues that Rodchenko's *Pro Eto* montages come "much closer to the application of photomontage by such Berlin Dada artists as Hannah Höch and George Grosz than to the 'agitational-political' orientations of Klutskis and the *LEF* theorists." (Tupitsyn, "From the Politics of Montage to the Montage of Politics," 88.) Even scholars like Christina Kiaer, who, without refuting any particular scholar's claims, deny an affinity between Dada photomontage and Rodchenko's *Pro Eto* series, are bound by their very protestations: the denial reveals the comparison as implicit. (Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, 154.)

²⁰¹ Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937*, esp. 23-36.

but to learn from it.²⁰² For such thinkers, as, perhaps, for many of the scholars who study them, Dada represents a deep disaffection and disenchantment. Their vision for Constructivism, on the other hand, is the very essence of optimism, with its ambition to reorder the new world, and perhaps even its inhabitants' minds, through its rational, organized structures. Seen through the lens of this understanding, Rodchenko's *Pro Eto* images can only be read as a failure, the Dadaist elements and organization in the images diluting and weakening works' Constructivist principles. If we consider Constructivism and Dada as complementary rather than opposed, however, the appearance of Dada referents in *Pro Eto* takes on a different meaning, and both movements emerge seeming somewhat less one-dimensional.

Constructivism and Dada as Revolutionary Time

While the characterization of Dada's relationship to Constructivism as that of a nihilistic movement to a utopian one is well-founded, it is only part of the story. The two movements can also be conceived of as temporal: two consecutive phases of the same utopian project. Dada, according to one way of thinking, does not destabilize and dissolve capriciously, but as a kind of razing, with the specific intent to clear the ground for the building of a new world. At this point, the idea goes, Constructivists would take up the baton and begin building the world anew. Thus Dada and Constructivism, despite their near-simultaneity in real time, can also be seen as having a chronological relationship in which Dada becomes the "before" to Constructivism's "after". And indeed, there were a number of Constructivists who saw Dada, as Dawn Ades puts it, "as performing something of an enema—a destructive but cleansing convulsion preceding the great task of reconstruction."²⁰³ From this perspective, Dada and Constructivism are not so much oppositional movements as sequential events that together constitute a revolution.

This view was represented in some of the little magazines that drew visual parallels between Constructivist and Dadaist production. El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg represented the temporal relationship of Dadaism to Constructivism in 1922, in *Veshch'/Objet/Gegenstand*:

Seven years of separate existence have shown that the common ground of artistic aims and understanding that exists in various countries is not simply an effect of chance, a dogma, or a passing fashion, but an inevitable accompaniment of the maturing of humanity. The days of destroying, laying siege, and undermining lie behind us....the negative tactics of the dadaists, who are as like the first futurists of the prewar period as two peas in a pod, appear anachronistic to us...Now is the time to build on ground that has been cleared....We hold that the fundamental feature of the present age is the triumph of the constructive method.²⁰⁴

²⁰² El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg, "The Blockade of Russia is Coming to an End!", in *Vesch, Gegenstand, Objet*, Berlin, 1922. Trans. Stephen Bann in *The Tradition of Constructivism*.

²⁰³ Ades, "Dada-Constructivism", 33. While the Constructivists Ades is referring to are primarily "international" Constructivists like Moholy-Nagy, El Lissitzky, and Theo van Doesburg, there is no reason to assume that such an understanding could not have been known to--or shared by--Constructivists inside the Soviet Union.

²⁰⁴ El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg, "The Blockade of Russia is Coming to an End!", in *Vesch, Gegenstand, Objet*, Berlin, 1922. Trans. Stephen Bann in *The Tradition of Constructivism*, 53-57.

Even as they chastise the Dadaists for their ‘negative tactics’, Lissitzky and Ehrenburg acknowledge the two movements’ interdependence. If Dadaist practice seems ‘anachronistic’ to them, it is because their own movement, in essence, grew out of it; Futurism, like Dada, relied heavily on nihilism and the absurd. Moreover, if the time is ripe for building, it is precisely because, as they say, the ground has been cleared, the razing has been accomplished.²⁰⁵

When Dada and Constructivism are considered from this perspective, as representing distinct moments in time, their appearance side by side in Rodchenko’s photomontages takes on new significance. The simultaneous appearance of two temporally consecutive styles brings to the images a sense of the collapse of time into a single moment; in the *Pro Eto* images, before and after exist simultaneously. Because, moreover, the two movements represent not just any two periods in time, but sequential steps in revolutionary time, the uneasy juxtaposition of Dadaist and Constructivist tropes takes on the weight of metaphor. Time’s typically unidirectional nature was particularly important where revolutions are concerned; theoretically, revolution took place one step at a time, and its steps were irreversible. Time, particularly revolutionary time, ought not to turn back on itself; here, however, we see it otherwise.

The simultaneity of ‘before’ and ‘after’ in the *Pro Eto* images can be read as a graphic parallel of the phenomenon that the German philosopher and cultural critic Ernst Bloch calls “non-synchrony,” in which elements of the past, present, and future are visible all at once. Bloch’s non-synchronous (Ger. *ungleichzeitig*) referred to an unsettling perception of time in which the past coexists with the present. According to Bloch, when the “unsurmounted remnants of older economic being and consciousness” remain among or alongside the manifestations of modern ones, the perception of the modern is infused with the nostalgia inherent in the signs of a time gone by. “Homesickness” and longing for “prewar conditions”, along with the search for “transcendence in the past” create groups of people haunted by “the ghost of history.” Separation from production can form an “alogical space” in which “primal drives and romanticisms, wishes and mythicisms come to the fore”, and youth “who are out of step with the barren Now retreat, more easily than moving beyond the Today in order to get to Tomorrow.” The result of all this, in Bloch’s most concise formulation, is that “Not all people exist in the same Now.”²⁰⁶ Although Bloch was writing about Germany, where, in his view, the ‘lateness’ of the revolution fed into the country’s non-synchrony, the concept of the non-synchronous provides a helpful shorthand with which to describe the temporal foreshortening Rodchenko creates with his stacked references to multiple, ostensibly mutually exclusive, periods of time.

²⁰⁵ In a similar vein, Ades argues that the ubiquitous presence of Malevich’s *Black Square* in these magazines itself serves to connect Dada with Constructivism, and that it is not by chance that that *Black Square* most commonly turns up in the reviews that relate to Dadaism. *Black Square*, she argues, can be read as “an icon both of destruction and construction, representing a primary urge to re-create from scratch, an Ur-form.” As a precursor of Constructivism, and a theoretical limit-case of Dadaism, *Black Square* is the liminal figure that connects the two movements, a visual representation of the turning point between the Dadaists’ razing and the Constructivists’ foundation-laying. (Ades, “Dada-Constructivism”, 35.)

²⁰⁶ Ernst Bloch, “Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to its Dialectics,” trans. Mark Ritter. *New German Critique*, No. 11 (Spring, 1977), 22-38.

The non-synchronous is a recurring theme in *Pro Eto*. When Mayakovsky sees the troglodyte crawling through the telephone wire, for example, the super-modern (the telephone) and the pre-historic share the same infrastructure, and the renowned ‘Futurist’ becomes a primitive creature. Mayakovsky’s bridge-side encounter with his younger self makes a similar point: the old and new models paradoxically exist at once. Ironically, the prior Mayakovsky is closer, in his fervor and commitments, to the ‘new man’ of the socialist ideal era than the new one. At the end of the poem, after the poet is killed, the hero’s mythical placement among the stars is reached via a Biblical vessel. However, because the poet is also talking about literal stars, the ark is a spaceship as well: thus literature’s oldest and its most futuristic means of transport are one and the same. Similarly, when the poet is resurrected by a chemist of the thirtieth century, he asks to work in a zoological garden of the future alongside his beloved, an Adam and Eve in a thirtieth-century Eden. Throughout the poem, the bookends of history meet in the middle and meld with the book.

The sense of the non-synchronous that Mayakovsky and Rodchenko create in *Pro Eto* had an immediate precipitating cause, perhaps, in the policy of the New Economic Policy (NEP), when time, in a sense, had turned backward. In 1921, after years of War Communism, the Soviet Union adopted a limited return to capitalist market practices. NEP revived the private entrepreneur, and with him the culture Mayakovsky refers to as ‘bourgeois philistinism’. By 1923, NEP-men in fur coats were to be seen on the streets, and luxuries were increasingly available to them. Such manifestations of the past came back to haunt the revolutionaries and commingled with their utopian projects; traditional ways of life co-existed in tension with those that Soviet propagandists and avant-garde theorists alike were trying to put behind them. In short, NEP created a non-synchrony in the Soviet Union that was both discomfiting and difficult to ignore.

NEP appears in the poem as a symbol of the turn backwards in time to a period of decadent consumption and domestic comforts. In it a NEP-man “Drinks and dines / Dines and drinks.” When Mayakovsky stumbles into a party he hears a voice that summarizes the nagging fear at the heart of the poem:

To hell with theory
NEP is practice, see.
Pour for him
Carve for him
Futurist, eat heartily.²⁰⁷

The voice may be Mayakovsky’s own; it does not matter much. Poem and poet are haunted by the suggestion that the ideals of the revolution are nothing but words, that the reality people live is NEP, and that far from being ‘new,’ the New Economic Policy is another name for the same old thing: the bourgeois philistinism the revolution and its servants had hoped to leave behind. Still worse is the epithet with which the poet is addressed. As a Futurist Mayakovsky had

²⁰⁷ Mayakovsky, *Pro Eto*, trans. Herbert Marshall, *Mayakovsky*.

engaged in now-anachronistic practices with the intent of overturning old hierarchies and ways of life. The name of ‘Futurist’ is an ironic evocation of the past, and points up a double disappointment. Not only is the old way of life still at large, but now former Futurists can be counted among those living it. *Jazz Band* strikes just this note, with the head of Lily Brik—wife to Constructivism’s most zealous theorist and lover of its most famous poet—uncomfortably transplanted onto the body of a bleach-blond dancer in a nightclub, surrounded by hallmarks of decadence. Brik’s neck and head are turned 180 degrees from her body, twisted until she is heading in on direction and facing another. Her body, twisting back on itself, is both an awkward metaphor for the unfurling—or re-furling—of revolutionary time, and a depiction of the uncomfortableness of the strange predicament Constructivists faced in 1923.

In the context of NEP and the non-synchrony that it both created and made more apparent, Rodchenko’s side-by-side placement in *Pro Eto* of Constructivist and Dadaist tropes and styles is a chronotope with a metaphorical weight.²⁰⁸ If, as Wieland Herzfeld wrote, Dada’s spirit was in “the...disfiguration of the contemporary world,” the structures of the *Obmokhu* exhibition in 1921 represent the highest ambition of reason and organization, an attempt to order the amorphousness of space itself. Rodchenko’s quotations of Dada’s pessimistic absurdism, mixed with recreations of the optimistic *Obmokhu* structures, just two years after their exhibition, represents a far more ambiguous sense of the revolution’s possibilities, and an ambivalent picture of the revolution’s before and after.

Rodchenko, Mayakovsky and Bloch, in their various depictions of a more fluid and reversible version of time, were part of a greater intellectual zeitgeist. While Russian interest in aspects of the fourth dimension, including time-travel, in part pre-dated the revolution, the publication in 1915 of Einstein’s *Special Theory of Relativity* kept that interest alive well past it. Relativity, which popular contemporary mathematics associated with ‘the issue of time’, gave the old concerns about time new energy and excitement. Erwin Schrödinger wrote that the theory of Relativity “meant the dethronement of time as a rigid tyrant imposed on us from the outside, a liberation of the unbreakable rule of before and after.”²⁰⁹ The theory’s mass appeal, as one contemporary writer wrote, may be in the potential it seemed to create of a “new vision, of enlargement, of our freeing and liberation from the prisonhouse of the humdrum actual, and the exhilaration of that liberation.”²¹⁰ On the one hand, it is surprising that hard-line revolutionaries,

²⁰⁸ The chronotope is a literary term devised by Mikhail M. Bakhtin and used to address the deep interconnectedness of space and time expressed in literature. ‘Time-space’, which Bakhtin borrowed from Einstein’s Theory of Special Relativity “almost, but not entirely, as a metaphor,” defines and constitutes genre: it will determine what kinds of actions, ideologies, and characters figure in a work, as well as its intended audience. In the literary-artistic chronotope, Bakhtin explains, “[t]ime, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.” (Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of Chronotope in the Novel,” transl. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, in Holquist, Ed., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84-258) 84-5. In this instance I use the term to emphasize the relationships between Berlin and Moscow and a time that could be called the revolutionary before and after; I want to show the non-synchronous itself as a chronotope.

²⁰⁹ Erwin Schrödinger, Tarnier Lectures, 1956. Quoted in Annette Michelson, “The Wings of Hypothesis: On Montage and the Theory of the Interval” in Matthew Teitelbaum, ed. *Montage and Modern Life* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 65.

²¹⁰ Morris Raphael Cohen, “Einstein in the Movies: A Note on the Exposition in the Films of the Theory of Relativity,” *Vanity Fair*, August 1923. 48, 96. Quoted in *ibid.*, 66.

eight years into the building of a new society, should demonstrate and depict “liberation from the unbreakable rule of before and after” and “liberation from the prisonhouse of the humdrum actual”. Constructivism is portrayed, generally, as committed to a uniform push toward a socialist utopian future; debates about the path that it should follow nonetheless assumed that the movement should be forward.

Rodchenko’s *Pro Eto* photomontages, however, present visions of the revolution and of time’s flexibility that are deeply ambivalent. Rather than a unidirectional push toward the future, they present a vision of time in which the work of the past is undone, in which the plagues of yesterday reappear. The photomontages show the past creeping into the present and (dreams of) the future clumsily transplanted into clichés of the past. In doing so they reveal an underlying anxiety about the feasibility of reaching, or creating, a utopian future. Rodchenko’s use of Dadaist destructive, chaotic, centrifugal tropes alongside Constructivism’s optimistic, orderly ones presents a vision of time in which progress can be undone, and opens the possibility that the utopian future may never be reached. Curiously enough, Osip Brik unwittingly reflects this treadmill view of time in his praise of Rodchenko, with which this chapter began: “Rodchenko,” he writes, “is patient. He will wait; meanwhile, he is doing what he can---he is revolutionizing taste, clearing the ground for the future...” If the Constructivist artist, two years before, had been experimenting for the future, tinkering with the design aspects of utopia, by 1923 he is no longer constructing at all, but is back to clearing the ground, razing.

Chapter Four: Of Floods, Gardens, and Bourgeois Women: Shklovsky's Exilic Works in *Pro Eto*.

Pro Eto was written during two months in the winter of 1922-1923, when Mayakovsky and Lily Brik, his lover of many years, underwent a two-month trial separation. The separation, documented in their letters to one another and in Lily Brik's memoirs, is widely written about as an explanatory circumstance for the poem's creation, and is often called upon to support interpretations of the poem as being about the couple's torrid, troubled romance.²¹¹ And indeed, Mayakovsky alludes to their separation (which included an agreement on his part not to visit her place or to try to see her) in the first section of the poem (following the *Prologue*) of *Pro Eto*. The title of the section, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" refers in part to the poet's 'imprisonment' in his apartment during this time; as do the lines: "So why is it a jail? / The little house's little windows have no bars! / But that's none of your business. / It's a jail."²¹²

But Mayakovsky's punishment was largely rhetorical and self-imposed. The terms he gave himself, as the letters and memoirs report, were stricter than those Lily would have demanded: she merely insisted on the two-month separation; it was he who claimed that he would make his rooms a jail, leaving them "only when absolutely necessary for business." He would use the solitude, he averred, to reflect on his character and his life, and would emerge from the two-month period a changed man. Mayakovsky's professed solitary confinement was no doubt crucial in carving out the time and space in which to produce a long creative work, but since he left his apartment almost daily to meet with colleagues, his isolation and imprisonment were largely exaggerated. But Mayakovsky's announcement of those circumstances, both in the poem itself and around its publication, created a biographical context in which others would read the poem. By imposing a period of separation and loneliness on himself, Mayakovsky created for himself a kind of fictional exile. Since the poem's story turns on two moments in which Mayakovsky breaks the 'terms' of his self-imposed outsidership, 'exile' plays a triple role in the poem: it is the state in which *Pro Eto* was written, the vehicle through which the conditions of this exile are announced, and a narrative element in the poem itself.

Mayakovsky's exile took place against the backdrop of the 'real' (i.e. involuntary and external) exile of a number of writers from the Soviet Union. Indeed, the writing of *Pro Eto* followed a lengthy visit by the poet to Berlin, then the largest center of Russian emigrés, where he met with a number of Russian writers who had been forced to leave the country following the revolution. One such writer-in-exile was Victor Shklovsky, the first literary critic of the Russian Futurists, the father of Russian Formalism, and founder of the literary group *Opoyaz*. Shklovsky,

²¹¹ See, as just a few examples of this reading, Herbert Marshall's introduction to and interpretation of the poem in his book *Mayakovsky* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1965) 157-160, 216-239; Victor Terras, *Vladimir Mayakovsky* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), 19, 81; George Hyde also introduces his translation of the poem with a recounting of Brik & Mayakovsky's affair. (Larisa Guryeva and George Hyde, *That's What* (Tormoden: Arc Publications, 1990). Terras argues that parts of *Pro Eto* would be "incomprehensible to a reader who does not know that *About That* was occasioned by a lover's tiff which caused Lilya to banish Mayakovsky from her presence for two months...." 81.

²¹² *Pro Eto*, 32.

formerly a resident of Petersburg, had been forced to flee the country to avoid arrest by the *Cheka*, who in the spring of 1922 had reopened their investigation and pursuit of Socialist Revolutionaries, preceding the SR trials of June that year.²¹³ In May of 1922, Shklovsky had fled across the ice to Finland, and from there made his way to Berlin where he lived until the fall of 1923. As would later be the case with Mayakovsky, Shklovsky's exile was productive: between his escape in May and the end of the year he wrote the third section of his memoirs (which, compiled, were published as *Sentimental Journey*) and a quasi-autobiographical epistolary novel, *Zoo: or, Letters Not About Love*.²¹⁴ *Sentimental Journey* and *Zoo* were not only written in exile but are, in an important way, *about* exile: each work provides its own account of the mourning and exquisite sadness of that experience; the longing of the writer for the homeland to which he is devoted, and from which he has been banished, is one of the books' major recurring themes.²¹⁵ *Zoo* conflates the anger, sadness and loss of exile with those of what he calls a powerful love: his unrequited love for a Russian emigré of another class. In this way Shklovsky's exile can be looked on as a kind of real-life model for Mayakovsky's fictional one, and as an important referent for and predecessor to his account of that exile, in *Pro Eto*.

The exile of the writer is just one of many themes *Pro Eto* shares with Viktor Shklovsky's 'exilic works.'²¹⁶ A number of images and themes from *Sentimental Journey* and *Zoo* reappear in *Pro Eto*; some are modified, while others seem merely to have moved, as if they had simply changed addresses. In both *Zoo* and *Pro Eto* important roles are played by animated and hostile telephones, iron bridges that rear up on their hind legs, the fourth dimension, relativity, and decadent jazz-hall dancing. Each work features scenes in which the author's tears flood his city; in each the rising flood waters lift a sleeping animal --which is in each work a zoomorphic representation of lover or beloved--and carry it away downstream. Both works use tea-drinking as a symbol of everyday domestic life (or bourgeois *byt*), deride and defend the importance of its creator's literary practice, and use the unrequited love of a woman--in each case a member and

²¹³ Shklovsky, having been part of Kerensky's provisional government, and a Socialist Revolutionary during the time of the (suppressed) 1918 uprising, was forced to flee the Soviet Union in 1922 to escape arrest. The Bolsheviks were rounding up Socialist Revolutionaries, who were tried later that year. (Many of those tried were executed.) For the second half of 1922 (beginning in June), he was living in Berlin, where he wrote *Zoo*.

²¹⁴ Shklovsky also published a collection of previously published essays under the title *Knight's Move (Khod Konia)* in 1923.

²¹⁵ *Sentimental Journey* and *Zoo* were both published in Berlin in 1923, though they were written sequentially. *Sentimental Journey* comprises three parts, written over the period of several years; the first two parts were published separately before their joint publication as *Sentimental Journey*. The first was written during the civil war in Petrograd in 1919, where illness forced Shklovsky to remain while his wife left for the relative safety of the Ukraine; the second part was written in Finland, when Shklovsky had just escaped across the ice from Petersburg, fleeing arrest by the *Cheka*; the third part was written in Finland and in Berlin, beginning immediately after his escape in May of 1922. *Zoo, or Letters Not About Love* was written in Berlin in 1922 and finished in December that year. Maksim Gorky received the manuscript in January 1923.

For detailed information about the writing and publication history of these books, see Sidney Monas' "Historical Introduction" in Richard Sheldon, ed. and trans., *Sentimental Journey* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press) 1969, ix-xlvii; Richard Sheldon's "Introduction" to *Zoo, or Letters Not about Love* (London: Dalkey Archive Press) 1971, viii-xxxiii, and Svetlana Boym, "Estrangement as a Lifestyle: Shklovsky and Brodsky", *Poetics Today*, Vol. 17, no. 4, Creativity and Exile: European/American Perspectives II (Winter 1996), 511-530.

²¹⁶ I borrow the term 'exilic works' from Svetlana Boym, who uses it in her comparison of these works with the intellectual legacies of Joseph Brodsky and Hannah Arendt. I use it, as she does, as a shorthand for Shklovsky's *Sentimental Journey* and *Zoo*.

symbol of the bourgeoisie--as the story's prime mover. Each relies on the Biblical images of the great flood and Noah's ark; in each a zoo takes on symbolic significance. Each work begins with the image of its writer, upon hearing that his beloved is ill, rushing to her side, despite her instructions to stay away; each ends in a bureaucratic petition, in which the writer asks to be restored.²¹⁷

In addition to sharing these (and other) literary themes and motifs, *Zoo* and *Pro Eto* have in common strangely similar genealogies. Victor Shklovsky and Mayakovsky had been friends for many years in Petersburg, where they moved in the same literary & literary-critical circle. In October of 1922, Mayakovsky, along with Osip and Lily Brik, visited Berlin.²¹⁸ Mayakovsky's visit lasted most of the fall, through December, with brief trips to Moscow and Paris. By all accounts, he took an active part in the intellectual life of the 'Russian colony' in Berlin; he gave a number of readings, and participated in public discussions about the First Russian Art Exhibition, then on display at the Gallery Van Diemen. He and Shklovsky met regularly during this time, attending parties and cafés together, and Shklovsky arranged for Mayakovsky to give a reading at the House of Arts, in connection with the Van Diemen Gallery exhibition.²¹⁹ Mayakovsky was in Berlin and in regular contact with Shklovsky, that is, at a time when *Sentimental Journey* had been completed but not yet published, and throughout much of the period during which *Zoo* was written. It was immediately on his return from Berlin, moreover, that Mayakovsky sequestered himself and wrote *Pro Eto*.

The two writers' lives had overlapped considerably even before Mayakovsky's stay in Berlin. Mayakovsky had been introduced to Lily Brik by her sister Elsa Kagan (later Elsa Triolet), whom Mayakovsky—still a young, unrecognized, unpublished futurist in a yellow blouse—had been courting until then. Elsa brought Mayakovsky to the Briks' apartment for a

²¹⁷ I am not the first to note the similarities between *Pro Eto* and *Zoo*. Richard Sheldon, in the introduction to his translation of *Zoo*, writes that "...the two works have remarkable stylistic and thematic affinities." Some of the images and themes I write about in this chapter are elaborations and close readings of motifs, like the 'personification of the telephone', the flood and the Berlin zoo, that Sheldon briefly mentions here. However most of them, I believe, are original; I have not seen them discussed elsewhere.

²¹⁸ Shklovsky writes about their visit from his point of view in his book, *On Mayakovsky and his Circle*: "I found myself in Berlin. The year was 1922....I was writing *Zoo*....Mayakovsky and the Briks came to Berlin. Later they left, and Mayakovsky stayed on." (Shklovsky, *On Mayakovsky and his Circle*. Edited and Translated by Lily Feiler (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1972. [1940] 155.) This information is confirmed by Lily Brik in her memoirs and referred to in Charter's *I Love: The Story of Vladimir Mayakovsky and Lily Brik* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979) 193. Mayakovsky was in Berlin, in part, to witness the First Russian Art Exhibition at the Van Diemen Gallery there, the first large exhibition of Russian art since the revolution.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 155-62. *On Mayakovsky and his Circle* (O Maiakovskom) was published in 1940, on the 10th anniversary of the poet's death. Because Stalin had already declared indifference to Mayakovsky's memory to be criminal, the candor of Shklovsky's assessment of Mayakovsky's life and work may be called into question. *On Mayakovsky* seems to have been written at a period of relative laxity after the terrors of the 30s however, and where Shklovsky is not able to express himself directly he manages to convey his meaning through parallelism, allegory, and the insertion of superficially unrelated anecdotes.

Mayakovsky's trips to Moscow and Paris were to speak publicly about his travels abroad, as he also did in Berlin. It was at the second of these, just before Christmas of 1922, that the quarrel that led to Mayakovsky and Lily Brik's separation took place. Ironically, Lily Brik insisted on the breakup in part because at one of these talks, Mayakovsky had relayed as his own experiences she knew he had not had himself, but which had been related to him by her husband. Her anger and indignation at this might be considered ironic in view of the thoroughgoing similarities between *Pro Eto* and *Zoo*, and in view of Mayakovsky's rhetorical claim to circumstances (exile, imprisonment, unrequited love) more rightly ascribed to others than to him. See Charters, 193-196.

fateful reading of his poem “A Cloud in Trousers”; it was at this meeting that the poet gained a publisher in the Osip Brik and a lover in Lily Brik. Mayakovksy, in turn, introduced Shklovsky (whom he knew through the latter’s laudatory critical work on Futurism) to the group.²²⁰ A meeting at the Briks’ apartment cemented the small nucleus of figures when Shklovsky met Elsa there and fell in love with her. Shortly after the revolution Elsa emigrated, landing eventually in Berlin, where Shklovsky would find her on his arrival in 1922.²²¹

When the interconnected histories of *Sentimental Journey*, *Zoo*, and *Pro Eto* are taken into account, along with Mayakovsky and Shklovsky’s intertwined biographies, the similarities between the works begin to seem like something more than coincidence; they come to insist on the connections that run through them, and on ties that extend even beyond the boundaries of the discrete literary works. *Zoo* and *Pro Eto* each, for example, announced exile and unrequited love as the circumstances under which the work was created (and thus, the context in which it was to be read); each writer was in love with one of the Kagan sisters; each complained that she did not love him enough. These similarities in themes between the books and the authors’ claims about their creation are all the more noteworthy since, for Mayakovsky, the claims did not match up with biographical details. Mayakovsky’s love, for one, was not entirely unrequited: Lily, after all, had been his lover for over six years by the time *Pro Eto* was written. Nor, as we have seen, was he really in exile. By insisting that his love was unrequited, however, and by including his isolation in the terms of his separation from Lily, he reproduced for himself the circumstances in which Shklovsky had written his book.

Mayakovsky’s duplication of Shklovsky’s exile, both in his personal life and as the premise of *Pro Eto*, presents an interesting problem for the literary criticism of the period. *Pro Eto* is widely interpreted as a poetic representation of “real” events in Mayakovsky’s life. But how can the poem’s themes and motifs be based on Mayakovsky’s life if they began as motifs in Shklovsky’s works? Although shared experiences and sensibilities may account for some of the similarities, *Pro Eto*’s liberal use of themes from Shklovsky’s exilic works casts into doubt the idea that “real life” inspired the poem. At the same time, both *Zoo* and *Pro Eto* strongly suggest, even urge, biographically-influenced interpretations. Indeed, the collapse of the real and the fictive is among *Pro Eto*’s most important duplications of *Zoo*. The slippage between literature

²²⁰ Although Shklovsky claims he accepted the Mayakovsky’s invitation to the Briks’ apartment only because he had Osip confused with another Brik--an engineer rather than a publisher with literary and political aspirations-- Shklovsky found in Brik a fellow scholar of Futurism and Formalist critic; the two would publish together for many years. For detailed accounts of the circumstances in which Mayakovsky met Elsa and the Briks, see *On Mayakovsky and his Circle*, esp. pp.74-89, and *Charters, I Love*, esp. 7-77.

Brik and Shklovsky’s work appeared together in the short-lived magazine of literary formalism ‘Took’ (Взял) and in a volume of Formalist theory published by Brik himself. Brik became a member of the OPOYAZ group that Shklovsky founded, and the two later published together in Mayakovsky’s magazine *LEF*, in which *Pro Eto* was first published.

²²¹ The first letter of *Zoo* is dated February 4--an impossible date, since he had not arrived in Berlin in February of 1922, and the date of the letter, which marks the beginning of the series, seems improbably close to the March 5, 1923 date of the author’s preface, and the book’s publication date. No doubt these dates function as another of Shklovsky’s ‘retardation devices’ that appear in this book, some ‘laid bare’ and others not.

and life becomes especially charged, moreover, in the context of the fundamentally Formalist critical position that the author's biography is irrelevant to an interpretation of a literary work.²²²

The books' thematic similarities, their shared imagery, and the interconnectedness of both the circumstances of their making and the lives of their makers, suggest that there is much to be gained in our understanding of each of these books by a close reading of them in relation to one another.²²³ Indeed, occasionally the differences between the two writers' styles and approach to similar materials are particularly helpful in developing a nuanced understanding of *Pro Eto*, as the earlier texts provide foils against which to read the poem, allowing its emphases and ambivalences to be felt more fully. In this chapter I explore the ways that images and themes from Shklovsky's *Zoo* and *Sentimental Journey* are taken up in *Pro Eto*, and consider how those ideas and images morph and change in their new context. Shklovsky's exilic works function both as a source and a foil for *Pro Eto*'s themes, motifs, and images; these latter gain depth and complexity when their former incarnations in Shklovsky's prose are recognized. Against the backdrop of Shklovsky's exilic writings *Pro Eto* reads as far more ambivalent than it might otherwise appear; it also appears more guarded and coded.

In addition to pointing to *Zoo* and *Sentimental Journey*'s role as originary texts and referents for a number of *Pro Eto*'s dominant ideas, I will argue that these works constitute a kind of contextual pre-history for *Pro Eto*. The historical, political and social worlds described in the exilic works overlap with Mayakovsky's own; their specification of people, events—even ostensibly interior states like concern or regret—allows the reader to see what Mayakovsky refers to in the poem but leaves abstract, what it alludes to but leaves unsaid. A comparison between these works in context allows for insights into the intellectual and artistic atmosphere of the Soviet Union in the early 20s, and provides a glimpse of the political and literary fate of Formalism in the Soviet Union, as the school's terms, tools, and (alleged) ideologies came under attack. Shklovsky's understanding of the events, people, and politics of the time provides a helpful foil against which the idiosyncrasies and ambivalences of Mayakovsky's poem come into sharper relief. If *Pro Eto* is coded, *Sentimental Journey* and *Zoo* allow readers to crack some of its more obscure messages; the poem can be guarded, in an important sense, because some of its

²²² As mentioned in previous chapters, a number of details of Mayakovsky's personal life find their way into *Pro Eto*. He names Lyubyansky and Vodopyani--the streets on which he and Lily lived in Moscow--as the streets on which the narrator of *Pro Eto* and his beloved live in the poem; the beloved's housekeeper shares the name Annushka with Lily's housekeeper, and the mother of the narrator shares her name with Mayakovsky's own mother.

²²³ Of course, there is also a good deal that distinguishes Mayakovsky's poem from Shklovsky's exilic works. Shklovsky's books are prose, for one, although their use of extended metaphors, allusions, returns to and metamorphosis of thematic images, and even his regular use of the 'one-sentence paragraph' at times works to complicate the categories of prose and poetry. Mayakovsky's book on the other hand, with its short lines, neologisms, and emphasis on sound through rhythm, alliteration and assonance, might be called on as proof that the categories of prose and verse still hold. Shklovsky's books tend toward the memoir and to speak of real people and events; his works are replete personal accounts of historical events, and littered with references to real people: figures political, military, and literary. Even if, as he sometimes claims, a story is told as a parable, it is not made fictional; the symbolic meanings attached to some figures do not render those figures merely symbols. In contrast *Pro Eto*, despite certain identifiable 'events' in its narrative, is largely fantasy and meditation; the only three historical persons in it are Mayakovsky himself, Lily, and Lily's housekeeper Annushka; of these, only the poet gets a speaking role.

background events, personages, and even its moods or misgivings, have been supplied in the ‘formalist baroque’ of the earlier texts.²²⁴

Nor, I hope to convince the reader, are the comparisons between *Sentimental Journey*, *Zoo*, and *Pro Eto* merely a convenient literary-critical technique imposed on the works from without for didactic purposes, external to the works themselves, the connections unknown to and unthought by texts’ authors. On the contrary I suggest that *Pro Eto* represents Mayakovsky’s immediate response to Shklovsky’s exilic prose, both a reference to and a development of the ideas and images in those works: something like a variation on a set of themes. Indeed, *Pro Eto* counts on images and ideas that were developed in the earlier works to inflect those ideas and images in its own text.²²⁵

The “Letters Not About Love” Svetlana Boym writes, “are, of course, letters about love.”²²⁶ One could argue, similarly, that while *Pro Eto* professes to be a lyrical poem about the author’s personal life and love, it is really about the its author’s dismay at the failure of the revolution to produce real change, whether internal or external. Like *Zoo* and *Pro Eto*, which seem to be about one thing but are really about another, this chapter may seem at times to be about *Zoo*, but will really, or also, be about *Pro Eto*.

A Formalist *roman à clef*: two couples in the revolution

The very opening of *Zoo* presents the reader with minor mysteries. Shklovsky introduces the main characters of his novel—his beloved and himself—through a letter “written by a woman in Berlin to her sister in Moscow.” By suggesting real-world equivalents to his epistolary characters, he encourages the reader to approach the work as a *roman à clef*. Some of *Zoo*’s early readers, particularly in the close-knit world of Russian emigrés living in Berlin in 1923, would no doubt have known the identities of the two sisters, or could have found them out with minimal research. (Later readers would be advised in advance by prefaces, blurbs, publicity, and, of course, translators’ introductions.) The first letter doubles the reader’s guesswork when Elsa—given in *Zoo* the name of Alya—lists the men who are attached to her, along with the character of their courtship of her.²²⁷ Since she describes them solely by number and attributes

²²⁴ Again, the term is Svetlana Boym’s. She uses the term as a description of Shklovsky’s “Third Factory,” written upon his return to Russia, but her description could just as easily apply to either (or any) of the exilic writings: he is a “great theorist-storyteller” who “speaks in elaborate parables, full of self-contradiction,” a style she terms a unique “Russian formalist baroque.” Svetlana Boym, “Estrangement as a Lifestyle,” 521.

²²⁵ It should be noted that Mayakovsky borrows freely from his own earlier work as well, and that some themes, such as the flood, that I have identified *Pro Eto* as sharing with *Zoo* and *Sentimental Journey* had appeared in poems that Mayakovsky wrote before either of Shklovsky’s exilic works had been written. Indeed, it could well be argued with regard that Shklovsky had found his themes in Mayakovsky’s work. The preponderance of shared themes and images, however, does suggest that Mayakovsky knew and was responding to Shklovsky’s exilic writing, and my point is not to prove that the themes had their absolute origins in Shklovsky’s work; rather it is to consider how those themes and images changed in their reiteration in *Pro Eto*, after having been refracted through the lens of Shklovskian prose.

²²⁶ Boym, 1996, 516.

²²⁷ Even the name “Alya” that Shklovsky chooses for Elsa, emphasizes the relationship between the two sisters. Lily Brik’s name, in Russian, is Lilya; the transformation gives the Berlin sister’s name the same middle consonant, a soft L, followed by the vowel ‘YA’, giving the names assonance and rhyme. For a formalist like Shklovsky, a great admirer of the pure-sound poetry of Khlebnikov and others, such a change would be significant.

(for example, that the first admirer “still sends flowers” and that she considers the third “who has practically pinned himself” to her, to be her “most outstanding decoration”)²²⁸ the reader is prompted to hunt in the text for details that might reveal which of the unnamed suitors is our protagonist; the reader must then sort through these incomplete textual descriptions to gain a sense of VS’ character and his standing with his beloved.²²⁹

It may be, however, that one of the most important ‘keys’ to this *roman à clef* is a figure who is never mentioned in the text, but who is implied in that first introductory letter. If the reader knew who the sisters were—Elsa Kagan and Lily Brik—they would also know about the relationship between Lily Brik and Mayakovsky. In the late 1910s, even a taxi-driver could know Mayakovsky by sight; Shklovsky wrote that a driver once turned around and said, “Everyone knows Vladimir Vladimirovich,” even if, as the cabbie speculated, most people knew him better as an ‘event’ than as a poet.²³⁰ No doubt a good deal of the poet’s fame was more like notoriety: Lenin himself had criticized Mayakovsky, as had Lunacharsky and other important Party figures; his consistently strained, oppositional relationship with RAPP, the official writer’s group, is well-known. But Mayakovsky was also a central figure in the Russian avant-garde, acting as a lynchpin for the Formalist and Futurist groups, leading their later incarnation as *LEF*, writing jingles for state advertising agencies, in addition to declaiming proletarian poetry. He travelled extensively as a representative of the USSR, giving talks in Berlin and Paris on new artistic practices in Russia, and was even regarded, in his lyric mode, as “a poet’s poet.” Part of his fame or notoriety, however, stemmed from broad public knowledge of his love affair with Lily Brik. Mayakovsky’s relationship with the Briks—in which cuckolded husband supported, published, publicly lauded, and openly shared his home with his wife’s lover—was (despite its literary precedent in Chernyshevsky’s *What is to Be Done?*) unusual enough to attract public notice even beyond the considerable group of people who visited their home on a regular basis.

Thus, when Shklovsky introduces himself by way of a letter from Elsa to Lily, he indirectly makes reference to Lily’s own “most outstanding decoration.” Mayakovsky is the unnamed fourth part of the analogy: the X to Lily Brik that Shklovsky is to Elsa Kagan. In invoking Mayakovsky this way, Shklovsky has made a both a literary reference (since Mayakovsky’s books had been inspired by and dedicated to Lily for some time), and a factual one, indicating a real set of relationships. While a cynical reader might see the reference as an attempt to ride on the coattails of Mayakovsky’s fame, or to remind the reader (through his connection to the poet) of his own status as the first theoretician of the Futurists, the analogy also serves a structural purpose: the pair in Moscow provides *Zoo* with a second geographical center in the author’s homeland. The Russian couple, who are mentioned nowhere else in the book, function as a kind of spectral counterpart for the emigre/exile couple, a double that lives in the land that Shklovsky pines for. The analogy can be read as urging a comparison between the personal lives of the two couples, drawing on publicly known clichés of the Mayakovsky-Brik

²²⁸ *Zoo*, 11.

²²⁹ In fact, each of the three suitors is described in terms that could lead the protagonist to believe he was VS. The reader learns, over the course of the book, that VS has sent Alya rooms full of flowers, that he has attached himself to her, etc.

²³⁰ Shklovsky, *Mayakovsky and his Circle*, 155-6.

affair (she was variously cold, annoyed by, or indifferent to him; he was jealous, brooding or insufferably bombastic) to frame the jealousy, bombast, annoyance and indifference of Shklovsky and Alya in *Zoo*.²³¹ But the analogy between the couples can also be read as political and social; by way of association, Shklovsky's allusion to Mayakovsky and his circle points to the general political and literary milieu in which Mayakovksy functioned, and in which Shklovsky himself had previously moved. The analogy ties *Zoo* to an entire social milieu connected to Futurist poetry, Formalist criticism, to Russian literary and visual avant-gardes, and to OPOYAZ. The reference does not just tie Shklovsky, now down and out in Berlin, to his former 'glory', but also points to the injustices of the regime and the denunciations of individuals that have necessitated his exile; it refers obliquely to the to the regime's execution, in 1922, of the writer Gumilyev. It is possible, too, that such a list of injustices would include, for Shklovsky, the denunciations of his former fellow SR that forced him into exile.

Another example of the faraway world conjured by Shklovsky's references in *Zoo* is Osip Brik, the third point of the Brik-Mayakovsky triangle; like Mayakovsky, Brik is a part of the web of associations the letter from Alya to Lily evokes. In the case of Osip Brik the associations take on a somewhat sinister cast: Shklovsky suggests, in *Sentimental Journey*, that Brik was a hypocrite who cared "about nothing at all," and whose involvement in the revolution was bogus. Brik's involvement with and employment by the *Cheka*, and his capitulation to Bolshevik ideas about art, were well known among many writers and artists, as well as in the larger circle of the Briks' friends. Among the factors affecting the two critics' relationship was Brik's attempt, in Shklovsky's absence, to consolidate power for the former members of the OPOYAZ group under the new guise of *LEF*, suggesting that that group be deemed the official literary school of the revolution. *Zoo*'s quiet, indirect reference to Brik through Mayakovsky, then, wordlessly evokes the debate among members of the avant-garde as to art's role in the new communist society, and Shklovsky's own much-quoted assertion (in yet another essay published in 1923), that "Art was always free of life, and its color never reflected the color of the flag which waved over the fortress."²³²

The analogy between Shklovsky in Berlin and Mayakovsky in Moscow is one that puts a strange pressure on the difference between "real" life and "literary" life. The letters of *Zoo*'s protagonist show a history and an experience that match Shklovsky's own. The writer of the letters knows the same people Shklovsky knows, did the same things he did, and even started the same Formalist literary group, Opoyaz. At the same time, in the preface and in the epigraphs to each letter, "Shklovsky", speaking with the voice of the author, regularly reminds the reader that the book is a literary work--a fiction. Indeed, the *Author's Preface* consists largely of a description of the book's development through various stages. The book, he writes, began as "a

²³¹ The comparison to the Mayakovsky-Brik triangle may also allude to a missing third point in *Zoo*'s love affair: the spectral, unmentioned presence of Shklovsky's own wife, who remained in the USSR when he escaped to Berlin, and who may have accounted in part for the urgency of the poet's desire to return to the Soviet Union, despite the obvious dangers he knew return would hold for him. Nina Berberova suggests that Shklovsky's wife was taken hostage and imprisoned when he left the country, to encourage his return. (Nina Berberova, *The Italics are Mine*, trans. Phillippe Radley (London: Chatto and Windus, 1991). 197-8.) See also Sheldon, 1971, xxiv-xxv.

²³² Shklovsky, *Knight's Move* [*Khod Konia* 1923], trans. Richard Sherwood (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005) 39.

series of essays on Russian Berlin” which he decided it might be nice to connect “with some sort of general theme.” The idea of an epistolary novel having “come” to him, he reasoned that the letters needed a motivation: his letters are “not about love”, he writes, simply as a variant on the genre’s usual romantic motivation. Likewise, Alya’s character is as it is—of an “alien culture”—simply as a logical consequence of book’s literary premises since, as he argues, “there’s no point in writing descriptive letters to someone of your own culture.”²³³ The reader is cautioned that not only the novel’s characters, but also the events recounted are there merely for their metaphorical value. Shklovsky’s denial of the letters’ “truth” is, to some extent, merely the reversal of one of the oldest novelistic traditions, in which the author poses as commentator to a found manuscript: a diary, for example, or set of letters. Indeed, Letter 9 urges Alya to remember how *Don Quixote* was made. The final letter of the novel, however--written to the All-Russian Central Executive Committee, in which Shklovsky begs to be allowed to return to Russia--changes the terms of the ‘real’ once more. This same letter was sent, in historical fact, to the All-Russian Central Executive Committee; it was understood as an earnest petition, which the Committee then earnestly granted, allowing the historical figure of Shklovsky to return to Russia in September 1923, where he lived out his days. And yet the letter, formally and thematically, is of a piece with the novel: it includes an epigraph to match the others, uses metaphors developed in the novel’s previous letters, and even claims that the central figure, Alya, is only “the realization of a metaphor.” The final letter, like the novel as a whole, is an uneasy blend of fiction and fact that calls both of those terms into question. The novel’s status in turn inflects the things depicted in it, making the lives it chronicles subject to the same sort of queasy existential doubt. As an artistic device, the move is familiar. In merging his fate with his novelistic tropes, however, Shklovsky is defamiliarizing life itself.

Formalist literary theory urged readers to consider the author’s biography irrelevant to the interpretation of a literary work, and while *Zoo* relies on that position, it also undermines it, making the ‘real’ Shklovsky difficult to tell apart from his literary character. That is, the writer of the letters in *Zoo* and the commentator in the letters’ epigraphs, both is and is not Victor Shklovsky. While it is not always possible to say which of the two is speaking, this chapter attempts to distinguish between Shklovsky the historical person and his character in *Zoo*, the writer of the letters not about love: the former is referred to by name, while the latter is called VS.

“About love, jealousy, the telephone, and the phases of love”: shared themes and images in *Zoo* and *Pro Eto*

The Unmentioned/ The Unnamed

Not-naming is a shared theme of *Zoo* and *Pro Eto*. In *Zoo*, the theme is prompted by Alya’s second letter to VS, in which she forbids him to write about love: “Don’t write to me about love. Don’t.” Here is his response, dated the next day:

I’m not going to write about love. I’m only going to write about the weather.

²³³ Shklovsky, “Author’s Preface,” *Zoo*, 3.

The weather in Berlin is nice today.
The sky is blue, the sun higher than the houses [.....]
Outdoors is nice and cool. [.....]
Today is February 5 . . . I'm still writing not about love.²³⁴

He obliges her request, but only in the most technical way. By mentioning twice the thing he is not writing about, of course, VS calls attention to precisely that topic. The obvious, 'don't-think-about-an-elephant' reverse-psychology is emphasized in his choice of topic—weather, the most hackneyed cliché of pleasant conversation—and the wooden, Berlitz-guide phrases in which he writes about it.

This same kind of naming-not-naming reversal is at work when Shklovsky decides to call Elsa by the name of Alya in the letters. The letters are consistent in this regard, speaking to and of Alya at all points. Alya's identity, however, is a poorly-kept secret, since the book is dedicated to Elsa Triolet, whose name is also embroidered into *Zoo's* subtitle, *The Third Heloise*.²³⁵ Not talking about a specified subject becomes, in Shklovsky's hands, a form of emphasis.

Perhaps the most important denial in *Zoo* is the assertion, in the Preface and in the final letter to the All-Russian Central Executive Committee, that the beloved herself was a fiction. "The woman I was writing never existed," he writes. He maintains that "Alya is the realization of a metaphor," whom he invented "in order to make a book about misunderstanding, about alien people, about an alien land."²³⁶ The letter to the ACEC functions in the same way, however, as his letter "not about love" to Alya: his very denial of the thing, his refusal to name and acknowledge it, calls attention to it, emphasizing its shape by means of a precise denial of its contours.

Pro Eto reformulates *Zoo's* not-naming in several ways. The most obvious of these is the book's title. "Pro eto," as we know, means "about that," a simple colloquial combination of preposition and pronoun. The pronoun, however, lacks a referent, and the reader cannot know to what it refers. *Zoo's* elaborate not-naming of love is likewise duplicated in *Pro Eto's* prologue, in which three pages of verse are dedicated to describing, but never naming, its 'theme'. The theme, described as "both personal and petty," is an agent throughout the prologue, variously commanding, scrutinizing, threatening and even telephoning the poem's narrator (whom I try in this chapter to distinguish from the historical figure of Mayakovsky, calling the former VM). The poem is not shy of well-trodden Romantic clichés of love: personified, the 'theme' demands such things as "Beauty!" and "Truth!" from the poet. Its actions also tie the theme to love grammatically: 'love' and 'theme' are grammatically feminine, and the verbs are written in the past tense, which specifies gender. The 'theme' is hinted at, at last, through rhyme: The unknown

²³⁴ Shklovsky, *Zoo*, 14.

²³⁵ While referring the reader to *Zoo's* literary precedents--the letters of Eloise and Abelard, and Rousseau's Julie, or the New Heloise-- the name Heloise points to its shorter cognate, Elsa. The name's significance in this regard has not been missed by scholars, including Sheldon, who notes it in his introduction to the book (xxvi), and Svetlana Boym, who mentions it in each of her articles on Shklovsky's exilic work.

²³⁶ *Zoo*, 103.

variable, which almost named in the final line of the poem (“The name/ of this/ theme/ is..... _____!”) is paired with the word *любовь*, ‘brow’, that rhymes with *любовь* --‘love’. The love-rhyme, in a sense, supplies a fine metaphor for the process of naming-not-naming: the ‘theme’ is only hinted at, never spelled out, and yet the rhyme makes the ‘hint’ definitive.

If *Zoo* both names and erases Alya-Elsa, *Pro Eto* fails to identify its muse at all. Although the poet names himself, Lily Brik is never named. The dedication substitutes a pronoun for her name, and in the poem too the beloved is referred to only as “she” and “mine.” In this regard, the self-consciously modern books *Zoo* and *Pro Eto* lean on the favored trope of courtly love poems, brought perhaps uncomfortably close through the Symbolists’ eternal feminine. The woman is generic, the prime mover, the pretext for the writer to investigate the contents of his own soul and, depending on his findings, to rejoice or to reform appropriately. Mayakovsky’s poem does not even describe his muse, leaving the reader to judge her only by her passive, milquetoast activities: resting, smiling, and liking animals. Like Dante’s Beatrice, Mayakovsky’s “she” is really just the excuse for the poet’s journey; a human love that symbolizes a greater one. She is, like Alya, merely “the realization of a metaphor.”²³⁷

The telephone

When Alya asks VS not to write to her about love, it is not her only request of him: “Don’t,” she adds, “make wild scenes on the telephone.”²³⁸ That the motif is introduced in a negative request is significant: the importance of the telephone is revealed, like much else in the novel, by a kind of negation. If he were allowed to return to Russia, he writes, he would do so “without looking back, without taking my manuscripts. Without making a telephone call.”²³⁹ The writer says what is important to him precisely by acknowledging his willingness to give it up. The motif of the telephone recurs throughout the letters, becoming a potent literary device and the site of hallucinatory visual imagery, as well as a symbol of VS’ dedication to Alya and of her failure to care for him. Everywhere in *Zoo* the phone -- an everyday, inanimate object -- is animated, dislocated in time and given totemic powers. “I call,” he writes, “the telephone squeaks (пищит; which Sheldon translates as ‘squeals’). I can tell that I’ve stepped on someone.”²⁴⁰ While he outwardly fears having hurt another, one senses that the zoomorphic protest of the phone reads as a projection of his own pain. This is affirmed elsewhere, where he himself is the squealer, and sits at the phone “touching it with my hand, the way a cat does with

²³⁷ Interestingly, it is Rodchenko who ultimately supplies *Pro Eto*’s heroine with an identity. By illustrating the book with photographs of Brik and Mayakovsky, he acts like an old-fashioned (or merely pre-Formalist) literary critic, supplying biographical information and historical equivalents for literary characters. In the place of the abstract ‘she’ Rodchenko supplies the reader of *Pro Eto* with a particular, recognizable, historically specific face. In addition to supplying ‘her’ with an identity, moreover, Rodchenko’s photographs supply the unnamed beloved with a subjectivity that the poem never approaches, or even considers: in the photomontage illustrations Brik is not, or not only, smiling or lying in bed. The face on the book’s cover in particular is not that of a generic, benevolent inspiration, but someone having her own thoughts, and even quite specific ones. See Chapter 1, “Fracture and Refraction: pictorial space and tense in *Pro Eto*.”

²³⁸ *Zoo*, 15. “Не устраивай мне диких сцен по телефону.”

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 53-4.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

its paw when the milk's too hot...."²⁴¹ VS's telephone is also strangely complicit in his isolation and humiliation: at one point he likens himself to a "combat engineer" whose post is "at the telephone." VS refuses to abandon his "post by the telephone," repeating "I cannot desert; I cannot abandon my post," despite the futility of his presence and his conviction that Alya, "the corporal-of-the-guard" deserts "without any qualms." Elsewhere VS conjures the image of Swift's Gulliver telephoning a giantess who carelessly holds him to beg her not to drop him. In these scenarios the telephone serves to remind Alya of her neglect, and to remind everyone (by referring to his military service and his literary criticism) of his own worth. Thus, when VS begins to drown in his own tears, he asserts that "even there, underwater--where the phone doesn't ring," he will go on loving her.

At the same time the telephone shows us another side of VS. Alya's request that VS not make scenes on the phone is followed by a pronouncement that she will not account for her comings and going to anyone. The reader learns, through this indirect route, that the phone has been medium for jealous rantings...we get to see, between the lines, a jealous, irrational side of VS that his own letters do not reveal. Likewise, in Letter 19, Alya writes: "When I telephoned you, you came running to my place at a fast trot. What's that supposed to be? Conceit or vileness--or both at the same time!"²⁴² While her reprimand seems to be capricious (it was she, after all, who phoned him), it betrays an astute sense of the way VS makes a martyr of himself, rushing doggishly to the side of the woman he so loudly complains is rejecting him. Alya's comment conveys an understanding that it is a perverse egotism, rather than love, that drives his 'love' for her.

The telephone is also the site of fantastic visual imagery in *Zoo*. VS writes to Alya: "You have driven my love into the telephone receiver."²⁴³ While the metaphorical implication is that the poet's love can now only express itself through the phone, Shklovsky's also has a literal connotation: his use of the accusative case also reads as movement into a space, and his specification of the part of the phone that it is driven into--the receiver--gives the metaphor a physical aspect: the image of the poet himself stuffed bodily into the telephone apparatus.

The telephone in *Pro Eto* shares a number of its strangest characteristics and narrative actions with the phone in *Zoo*; it functions, similarly, as a symbol of the narrator's unrequited love, and his beloved's neglect. As in *Zoo*, the phone in *Pro Eto* is animated: it "hurls itself at everyone." The beginning of *Pro Eto*, where the telephone plays an important role in the narrative, condense a number of descriptions of the phone in *Zoo*. For example, where VS's timid cat touches the phone as though it were too-hot milk, VM is burned by a hot phone as well; the phone, described as white hot, squeals and the receiver leaps from his hand. Although the phone in *Pro Eto* the phone doesn't squeak (пищит), but squeals (визжит), the zoomorphic representation of the narrator's emotions is unmistakable: a neighbor mistakes the phone's cries for those of a piglet. What the phone has called to announce (as in *Zoo*): "she" is ill. Like VS, VM's response is to rush to her side: "Run! / Faster!" Here, too, there is humiliation implicit in the urge, since the reader has been thoroughly briefed on VM's rejection by his beloved. As in

²⁴¹ Ibid., 33.

²⁴² Ibid., 72.

²⁴³ Ibid., 84. In Russian the passage reads "ты загнала мою любовь в телефонную трубку."

Zoo, Mayakovsky also makes the phone a site of armed conflict: he imagines the electricity blowing up the local switchboard; an unknown, he suggests, is aiming the receiver at him, counting off paces like a duelist. He likens the telephone's transmission to a bullet.²⁴⁴

He smells cooking meat (his own flesh burning as he holds the hot receiver), and then pushes his lips "into the telephone's hell." Here, too, *Pro Eto* uses imagery familiar from *Zoo*: Mayakovsky's use of the accusative case conjures a picture of his lips physically moving into the space of the telephone apparatus. The hallucinatory visual imagery of the metaphor-turned-literal is expanded as thunder and "tinkling lava" squeeze through the thin cord and stretch out the receiver (трубка); the poet reinforces the physical aspect of the metaphor when he states, "I myself am in the telephone."

A few lines later a disembodied voice reprimands VM: "Are you trying to get in there too!? / Booming into the telephone?!" (Тоже туда-ж? / В телефоны бабахать!?)²⁴⁵ The voice points the reader in two directions. First, its use of the word "too" (тоже) alerts the reader to a precedent for the unusual action of heading into the phone, and may therefore be read as an allusion to that action in *Zoo*. Second, the voice plays the role of Alya's earlier letter, allowing the reader to see the narrator's behavior from a point of view not his own. We see, in other words, that Mayakovsky has indeed (like his predecessor in VS) been making "wild scenes on the telephone." The telephone in these scenes is the site of the poet's irrational concern and his dogged, slavish devotion to his beloved, but also of his impatience, his rejection, his rage, and his jealousy.²⁴⁶

The Flood

In both *Zoo* and *Pro Eto* a sudden flood functions as a major plot point and an allusive metaphor. The epigraph to Letter 10 of *Zoo* begins: "About a certain flood in Berlin; in point of fact, the whole letter constitutes the realization of a metaphor...."²⁴⁷ VS starts the letter proper with the words, "What a wind, Alya! What a wind!" He locates the wind in Berlin (it makes the spires on the *Gedachtniskirche* sway), but then quickly transports the imagery of the flood to Petersburg:

When the wind blows like that in Petersburg, Alya, the water rises.

On those days the chimes in the Petropavlovskaya Fortress are rung every quarter hour, but no one listens to them.

Everyone is too busy counting cannon shots. The cannons shoot...eleven times.

²⁴⁴ "More terrible/ than the bullet/ between here and there/ / I see/ like a swallowed rabbit in a python's belly/ along the cable/ I see/ a word crawls. A word more terrible than the words/ of ancient antiquity/ when men/ fought for women/ with their bare fangs,/ from the cable/ crawled/ scratching jealousy/ a monster from troglodytic times." Guryeva, 45

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 49.

²⁴⁶ The mirroring of Mayakovsky's troglodyte self in the iron of the telephone has an inverse, or negative counterpart in *Zoo*. In Letter 8, Alya writes of a very different inner world reflected in the world around her: "The warmth, the smell, the peace and quiet belong to me. / I take them with me like a reflection in the mirror: When I leave, they leave. When I return, I look--and there they are. / I can hardly believe that they live in the mirror only through me." Shklovsky, *Zoo*, 31.

²⁴⁷ Shklovsky, *Zoo*, 37.

A flood.

A warm wind, making its way toward St. Pete, pushes water up the Neva.²⁴⁸

The flood keeps rising, and reaches the zoo (which was the center of the Russian neighborhood in Berlin at the time); soon it has “washed all the fish and crocodiles out of the aquarium. The crocodiles float without awakening, though they whimper because of the cold, but the water keeps mounting the steps.”²⁴⁹ The crocodiles that are washed away in the flood are a reference to Alya herself, who in Letter 8 characterizes herself as a cross between a child and a crocodile.

The image of the crocodile, cold but unawakened, being lifted and carried away by the water stands in stark contrast to an earlier image and the flood’s probable cause: in VS’ first letter to Alya he writes her that he is “floating, salty and heavy with tears,” and that he “seems to be sinking” but that even underwater, “where the phone doesn’t ring,” he will still love her. His tears seem to be both the water that he is floating on, and the weight that causes him to sink.²⁵⁰ While his earlier letter suggests that, though he is drowning, his only concern is for her, the later one suggests that she, merely slightly uncomfortable, is not even aware of his despair.

The floodwaters continue to rise, and reach Alya’s apartment, where they encounter and speak with a courtier’s voice to Alya’s slippers: “O, dear mesdames, Alya’s slippers. Eleven feet. The water is rising. The cannons are shooting. A warm wind is making its way here and keeping us from returning to the sea. The warm wind of true love. Eleven feet!”²⁵¹ Although this passage describes the flood in Berlin--it is in Alya’s apartment, after all-- the cannon shots, the warm wind, and the repetition of the number 11--all indicate that the flood is in Saint Petersburg. In its Petersburg location the flood takes on literary heft as an allusion to Pushkin’s poem *The Bronze Horseman*, which is set during the city’s worst flood, in 1824.²⁵² The poem, which sets the individual subject against the power of the state, embodied in the person of Peter the Great, who built the inhospitable city as a ‘window onto which Russia looks on Europe.’ *The Bronze Horseman* is famously ambivalent, with fine critics interpreting the poem on either side, as a condemnation of Peter’s autocratic policies or a vindication of them; as a questioning of the cost to the individual of historical progress, or an acknowledgement that the ends of that progress justify the means. Shklovsky’s flipping of the flood scene between Petersburg and Berlin connects his hometown with his place of exile, and the site of the city’s ‘window’ with its view. The allusion, like its referent, is ambiguous: on the one hand *Zoo* is about VS’s desire to return to

²⁴⁸ Ibid. The cannon shots refer to the practice in Petersburg of shooting cannon-shots from the Petropavlovskaya fortress in order to warn citizens about the flood danger. The number of shots fired coincides with the depth of the flooding, in feet.

²⁴⁹ Ibid, 38.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 13.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 38.

²⁵² The poem’s protagonist, who loses his beloved in the flood, goes mad and curses Peter I for having built the city in such a place. He hallucinates that he is being pursued through the streets of Petersburg by the statue of Peter the Great, come to life; the poem ends when some fishermen find his dead body in a hut on the shore.

The figure of ‘eleven feet’ corresponds roughly to the 300 cm-mark, at which a flood in St. Petersburg is considered catastrophic. At the time of *Zoo*’s writing, there had been only one flood that had reached that depth--the 1824 flood that Pushkin describes.

Petersburg; on the other, he is the powerless subject driven by despair, like Evgeny in *The Bronze Horseman*, by the impersonal whims and vagaries of an all-powerful state.

The theme of the flood, and its dislocation into contemporary Russia, also appears in Shklovsky's *Sentimental Journey*, where Shklovsky writes that "Gorky was the Noah of the Russian intelligentsia."²⁵³ He credits Gorky, along with the vessels in which he rounded up Russia's writers, with saving some relatively small number of Russia's educated people: "During the flood, people were saved in the arks of World Literature, the Grzhhebin Publishing house and the House of Arts."²⁵⁴ These two lines in *Sentimental Journey*, set amidst a long and brutal recounting of the sufferings of the Russian people during this time (including at one another's hands and the hands of the state) indirectly compare the Soviet state's attempt to centrally organize life with God's vindictive, nearly-indiscriminate killing of all life in *Genesis*. The lines follow a passage which criticizes Bolshevik policy in the language of mythology: "The Bolsheviks wanted to organize everything so that the sun would rise on schedule and the weather would be made in their chancellery. They couldn't understand the anarchy of life, its subconscious, the fact that a tree knows best how it should grow." This parable occurs in the midst of Shklovsky's all-too-real descriptions of life in Russia from 1918 to 1921, when so many people were dying that "corpses were being hauled on sleds" and "left behind in apartment buildings," when whole apartment houses froze to death because no one knew where the provisions of firewood had been sent.²⁵⁵

These signs and symbols—floods, miracles, Arks—never quite crystallize into allegory or metaphor; they work on the reader through a web of connections, and the meanings of each term shifts as the motif develops. The Bolsheviks are not blamed directly—at least not in this passage—for killing Russian citizens, but rather for the hubris of their attempt to organize on that scale; their fault lies in their faith that they can perform miracles of organization and rationality.²⁵⁶ Throughout Shklovsky's memoirs, however, the Bolsheviks' unthinking brutality recurs as a motif. This brutality in turn serves to link Bolshevik policies with the flood of the Old Testament, since man's 'wickedness' and 'violence' are given in *Genesis* as the reasons for God's displeasure and man's destruction. Unclear is whether we are meant to connect the Bolsheviks with the wicked people who cause God's wrath, or with the angry, vengeful God who wipes out the race to punish them. At the same time, the Bolsheviks' attempt to make and control the weather (in the passage cited above) stands in ironic contrast with the uncontrollable, destroying flood. By analogy they are compared to Peter the Great, for whose hubris in building

²⁵³ Shklovsky, *Sentimental Journey*, 189.

²⁵⁴ Ibid. An historical account of Gorky's role in helping writers, artists, and scientists through the House of Arts and his World Literature publishing house is given in Orlando Figes, *A Peoples' Tragedy: a History of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1996), 606-607. Figes writes that Gorky saw his publishing house "less as a business than as a charity," and that "many of the greatest names of twentieth-century literature...owed their survival...largely to the patronage of Gorky" and "would not have survived the civil war" without Gorky's contacts. Figes counts both Shklovsky and Blok in this number. 606.

²⁵⁵ *Sentimental Journey*, 176.

²⁵⁶ A related, recurring theme in *Sentimental Journey* is the folk tale of the Devil's apprentice: "You remember the folk tale about the devil who could make an old man young again? First he consumes the man in fire; then he restores him to life rejuvenated. / Then the devil's apprentice tries to perform the miracle. He's able to consume the man in fire, but he can't rejuvenate him." 141.

Petersburg the citizens of the city are punished. The irony of comparing the Bolsheviks to Russia's most Westernizing Tsar could not have been lost on Shklovsky.

By weaving together the Biblical and the Pushkinian floods, Shklovsky complicates *Zoo* with the set of meanings and associations previously built in *Sentimental Journey*. More important, perhaps, is that in doing so Shklovsky endues the relatively abstract, literary image of the flood with historical specificity, including the new Soviet Union's hostility to its educated classes. Shklovsky's recognition of that hostility, moreover, includes an acknowledgement of its antagonism to him, in particular: the above passages are all written on the occasion of the trial of Socialist Revolutionaries in Moscow, in which he, if not for the miracle of Gorky's Ark (and the attentive friends who informed him of the *Cheka*'s intent to arrest him) would likely have been included.

Pro Eto's flood also begins with the speaker's tears. Having gotten 'mortally angry' from his run-in with the phone, he lies on floppily his bed, and his tears fill his cave.²⁵⁷ Mayakovsky's bear, like Alya-as-crocodile, whimpers and floats away. It is worth noting that in *Zoo*, the crocodiles (of which Alya is one) 'whimper' (скулят) in the 3rd person plural. Mayakovsky sets the whining of his bear up thus: "I don't know if bears weep, but if they do, it's like this: . ." This allows him to use the word 'whimper' in the same person and number as the crocodiles in *Zoo*: "they whimper (скулят), flooding the length and breadth of their cave." Other details of the animals floating on the flood seem equally deliberate: Mayakovsky's bear, for example, is conscious of falling leaves and pinecones 'only through tears and shaggy-lidded eyes,' giving the sense that he, like Alya's crocodile, registers his perceptions unconsciously. Further details link other parts of the works. The poem, like the novel, notes the wind from the west (from Lake Ladoga) and the cold of the river. It similarly describes the encounters of the flood with the domestic interior of an apartment and its contents: the flood in VM's apartment carries away a suitcase; in *Zoo* it retreats from Alya's apartment with a briefcase.²⁵⁸ In a moment reminiscent of VS' 'even-underwater' love, Mayakovsky writes "Only one sensation hasn't been washed away by the water: —"²⁵⁹

Mayakovsky's poem also makes references to Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman*. As the flood carries the narrator downstream (again, in the form of a bear), he hyperbolically imitates the shooting cannons of the Peter-Paul fortress: "I roar like a battery of cannons." Elsewhere, he tosses feverishly on his ice-floe pillow as it floats down the flooded Neva, an inverted reference to Pushkin's description of the Neva as tossing and turning like a sick man in his bed. *Pro Eto*'s references to Pushkin are partly couched in language, also: Mayakovsky plays with the common

²⁵⁷ Mayakovsky, *Pro Eto*, 51.

²⁵⁸ The suitcase, while not mentioned in the flood scene in *Zoo*, nonetheless plays a role in the novel: through it, VS chides Alya with acting the foreigner, and reminds her of her humble Russian background: "Since you, Alya, are an acting foreigner and since your suitcases do not realize that their mistress was suckled by a Siberian woman, Stesha the Ruddy, then I must also inform you that our monkey folk....has a real tsar." (22) The 'monkey folk', which will be discussed later in this chapter, refers to an imaginary society created by a Futurist friend of Shklovsky; for now it is sufficient to note Alya's suitcases stand in for her pretensions, in comparison with his own 'undomesticated' and proudly Russian nature.

²⁵⁹ Mayakovsky, *Pro Eto*, 54.

sound ‘med’ in the words for bear (медведь) and bronze (медный); VM’s transformation into a bear—a symbol, among other things, of the Russian state—reinforces the flood’s status as a metaphor of the relationship between the individual and the nation. At the same time, VM’s transformation complicates the bear’s symbolism of Russia, since the bear is also VM—the individual, and in particular a symbol of that individual’s personal backwardness.

The flood imagery establishes an important difference in the symbolic schemes of *Zoo* and *Pro Eto*. In *Zoo*, the flood’s waters announce that the ‘warm wind of true love’ blowing from the west is preventing them from returning to the sea. The East-West distinction, emphasized in the flood’s double-setting in Berlin and Petersburg, is crucial; the metaphor is one of displacement, built around geographical space. In *Pro Eto*, in contrast, the flood waters represent the (perhaps backwards) flow of time: Mayakovsky-as-bear floats downriver, where he encounters a past version of himself (his self of the poem ‘Man’, written seven years prior); VM’s regression into a bear through the ‘troglodyte’ emotions of jealousy and anger reinforce the sense of time’s reversal in the scene.²⁶⁰ In each book, the winds blow the Neva’s waters in an opposite direction from their normal flow, and act as a kind of treadmill, keeping the writer in place: in *Zoo* that unnatural flow is what keeps VS from his homeland; in *Pro Eto*, the backward flow of time reflects his own and Russia’s seeming inability to move forward, to reach his dreamed-of utopia.

Pro Eto’s flood—like *Zoo*’s, pointedly associated with Pushkin’s *Bronze Horseman* and the conflict between the state and the individual—also refers to the flood of Genesis. Part of the reference is linguistic: when describing his hatred for *byt*, he says that he feels it “with his breath” (дыханием) and “in the holes of [his] nostrils” (дырами ноздрей).²⁶¹ The use of the words breath and nostril together recall the language of the Old Testament, when it describes the flood’s destruction: “all, that had the breath of the spirit of life in their nostrils...died.”²⁶² When VM asks to be resurrected, he suggests he might be put to work in a zoo. While the zoo itself can be understood as a reference to the ark, where Noah looked after the animals, Mayakovsky makes the reference more pointed through the use of the word “beasts” (звери)—the word used in Genesis to describe the creatures Noah saves—rather than the linguistically neutral “animals” (животное).²⁶³ The Petersburg flood in *Pro Eto* also metamorphoses into the Biblical flood of Genesis when an Ark appears, intervening between the poet’s death and his resurrection. When the poet is killed, the poet-bear becomes the Great Bear, the constellation *Ursa Major*, or the Big Dipper. The Great Bear’s appearance means that Mayakovsky-bear has taken his

²⁶⁰ The figure of the bear, as previously mentioned, is part of a long poetic tradition of the bear as a symbol of the Russian state; as such its slow, lumbering, and perhaps barbaric qualities are relevant. It was also used as a symbol in Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*, as a sexualized dream-figure of threat and transformation.

²⁶¹ *Pro Eto*, 142.

²⁶² Genesis, 7:22. (Бытие 7:22: все, что имело дыхание духа жизни в ноздрях своих на суше, умерло.)

²⁶³ Genesis, 7:21. (Бытие 7:21: И лишилась жизни всякая плоть, движущаяся по земле, и птицы, и скоты, и звери, и все гады, ползающие по земле, и все люди.)

minstrel show on the road; he has been placed in the sky like a dead hero of Greek mythology.²⁶⁴ The next lines, however, make it clear that the chronological endpoint of his journey is not ancient Greece, but the time of the Flood in *Genesis*: “Oh Great One [Oh Great Bear]/ take the Dipper of the Ark/ to Ararat’s centuries/ through the heaven of the flood.”²⁶⁵ The lines lean on similarities between the words ark (ковчег) and dipper (ковшем), combining the images of the poet-turned-bear, the constellation, and the ark (which the destination of Ararat identifies as Noah’s). Although the lines are somewhat ambiguous grammatically, one possible interpretation is that the Ark—at the same time *Ursa Major* or the Great Bear, which links *Pro Eto*’s Mayakovsky-bear with the stars and thus the present with the eternal—becomes a kind of time machine, traveling backward in time to the era of the flood.²⁶⁶

Shklovsky’s flood and ark imagery is strongly associated with a critique of the Bolshevik regime; if Gorky was the ark that saved writers from near-certain death, the revolution itself—in particular, perhaps, the Bolshevik regime’s brutality and reprisals—was the flood. In Mayakovsky’s work the imagery of the flood and the ark do not carry such open reference to the ills and evils of the Bolshevik regime. On the one hand, Mayakovsky seems to temper Shklovsky’s relatively overt critique of the regime by couching those referents in different contexts: mythology, the Bible, and science-fiction. In this sense, Mayakovsky seems to shy away from Shklovsky’s clear-eyed criticisms of the Bolsheviks. On the other hand, Mayakovsky relies on the referents and references in Shklovsky’s work; the symbolic imagery of the flood and the ark come to *Pro Eto* already loaded with the meanings they were given in *Sentimental Journey* and *Zoo*. It is because Shklovsky’s critique is so clear and open that Mayakovsky does not have to be equally plain with his own. To those in the know—to Mayakovsky’s avant-garde/literary audience—the meaning would be plain enough; to censors or to those seeking revenge, however, the critiques implicit in Mayakovsky’s adoption of central Shklovskian imagery would be a fairly incoherent jumble of mythological, biblical, and science-fiction fantasy.

²⁶⁴ “The Great Bear has gone troubadour-ing?— / For what? To sneak up on the queen of the poets?” Mayakovsky, *Pro Eto*, 138 (my translation). It is worth noting that in the change from Bear to Great Bear, the bear’s gender has changed. The Mayakovsky-bear (медведь) was gendered male; the Great Bear—*Ursa Major* (Большая Медведица) *Bolshaya*—is feminine.

²⁶⁵ ‘Great One’ (*Bolshaya*) is gendered feminine, and so is likely meant to refer to the Great Bear (*Bolshaya Medveditsa*). Grammatically, these lines are quite convoluted and difficult to parse. While Herbert Marshall has translated them into sense (“Great Bear, through Ararat-eras, bear / the Ark of the Dipper / through the flood of the heavens!” 207), the poem does not quite support this reading. The case of “the Ark of the Dipper” does not allow for the poet to carry it. In addition, Marshall’s ‘flood of the heavens’, while sensible-seeming, neglects that it is the word ‘flood’ that appears in the genitive, meaning that the reader must then reason through what the poet might mean by “the heaven of the flood.” The implication may be that the poet does not carry the ark through the heavens, but that he uses it as a means of transport to another time; that it is not the Great-Bear-poet’s location that changes--it stays in heaven--but the era in which that heaven (or sky) exists.

²⁶⁶ The language in which these lines are written, in the second person vocative, like an epic poet’s address to the Goddess, embodies the travel backward in time, reflecting in their form a bygone era. The next lines address the Great Bear again, this time in the language of the future: “the spacecraft/ --the bearish brother-- / noisily shouts some verses about creation.” Noah’s ark, having been sent back to the time of the flood, is now described in the language of H. G. Wells and science fiction. Has the spacecraft-ark-Dipper-poet gone backward in time, or forward?

Zoo's flood ends in a single, ironic sentence: "So God registered a rainbow in honor of the 'Universal Deluge.'"²⁶⁷ With this the flood takes an additional referent: the Flood in Genesis. The statement rewrites the Biblical end of the flood in Genesis in the language of Soviet bureaucracy and propaganda. The rainbow God set in the clouds is "registered"; instead of a sign of God's covenant with all living creatures, it is deemed "in honor of" the flood itself, which takes on a further propagandistic air with the epithet "Universal." Through the use of this bureaucratic language the image of the flood, already linked with the relationship between state and subject by virtue of its references to *The Bronze Horseman*, is connected specifically with the Soviet state. The Old Testament and the policies of the Soviet Union meet, through language, in the registered rainbow. Thus, however optimistic the image of the rainbow and its symbolism of the new covenant, the comparison carries the weight of the judgement that provoked the flood as well. That is, it can be read as an ironic commentary on the vindictiveness of the Bolsheviks, and the arbitrariness with which, in Shklovsky's view, they have wielded their power in their new state.

This same clash of genres is echoed in the final part of *Pro Eto*, entitled, "Application on behalf of . . . (Please comrade chemist, fill it out yourself!)." The title marks what follows as a bureaucratic document, a petition written in the language of the new Soviet state; the subsections of this petition, however, are the Augustinian trio of "Faith," "Hope," and "Love." Like its predecessor, *Pro Eto* mixes the specific language of the officially atheist Soviet state and its ruling bureaucracy with the lofty language of the Bible. Mayakovsky's replacement of the God of the Old Testament with the tenets of the New Testament is significant: the new world emerges for Mayakovsky as a place less saddled with random jealousy, anger, and reprisals than the one to which Shklovsky refers. But what precisely hope, faith, and love might look like remains vague: the world envisioned under these abstract headings is pure fantasy. While there is no rainbow in *Pro Eto*, the poem's ark scene does lead to a utopian vision: having been killed by his fellow citizens, the poet is borne through and to heaven, to a time-place where "the sun illumines the mountains," and "the days smile from the dock."²⁶⁸ He asks that he be resurrected so "that love may cross the universe," and so "that the whole world might turn on the cry of 'Comrade!'"²⁶⁹ While Shklovsky's ark, in *Zoo*, functions as a metaphor, it also locates that metaphor in specific, historical people and events. Mayakovsky's ark, in *Pro Eto*, is couched in mythology and science fiction; while it may be a metaphor, it pointedly avoids points of earthly, historical contact. The distant past & unforeseeable future are, in *Pro Eto*, interchangeable: each is equally vague; both are generically utopian. In the context of the critique of Bolshevik brutality that seeps into *Pro Eto* through imagery it shares with *Zoo*, *Pro Eto*'s vagueness and lack of specificity begins to take on a slightly more sinister feel; the reader gets the sense--always a back-burner sense, but a sense nonetheless--that Mayakovsky's abstractions are a political necessity. The abstractions, then, are partly the familiar modernist language of disorientation, isolation, and uncertainty; but behind this is detectable the *need not to name*. Adam's privilege—critical to the writer's vocation—had become too hazardous.

²⁶⁷ *Zoo*, 39.

²⁶⁸ *Pro Eto*, 138.

²⁶⁹ *Pro Eto*, 160.

byt and love

Alya's first letter to Shklovsky--the one in which she tells him not to write to her about love--gives him a reason for her injunction: "The daily grind (*byt*) pulls us apart. I do not love you and I will not love you."²⁷⁰ These lines introduce one of *Zoo*'s most prominent motifs: the relationship of *byt* and love. *Byt*, as we know, describes the material, domestic realm, as opposed to *bytie*--the sphere of the intellect, spirituality, and transcendence.²⁷¹ Why, then, is *byt*--the material realm as opposed to the spiritual, emotional realm of *bytie*-- given as the reason why VS should not write to Alya about love? Should not love belong to the latter category, and thus transcend *byt*? The paradoxical linking of the two theoretically opposed terms of love and *byt* provides a structuring motif for *Zoo*. Shklovsky formulates, throughout the letters in *Zoo*, a very particular relationship between love, *byt*, class and the author's identity as a revolutionary and artist. It is worth looking at that formulation, and the anecdotes that comprise it, in detail, in part because it is closely mirrored in *Pro Eto*.

After Alya asserts that *byt* has pulled them apart and that she does not love VS, VS takes up the theme of *byt* himself. At first the response is not direct, but resides in his pointed efforts in the following letter to write about the weather instead of love. The cliché of weather-as-subject carries the weight of a counter-accusation; it is the most banal topic, and in this it is unspoken opposition to his preferred more cultured and enlightened, topic: love.²⁷² VS' talk about weather--and its implied criticism that she is shallow and superficial, that she would prefer the banal-- is the first, and least direct, criticisms of her along these lines. The next installment of this critique comes in Letter 5, in which VS compares himself to a monkey. The comparison allows him to enact one of his favorite devices: the alien-visiting-your-culture trope. "You humans," he writes, "wear clothes, and one day follows the next; in killing, and even more in love, you are traditional." As a monkey he can be interested in activities that are at once more creative and less pedestrian, he implies, than she and her kind. Further on in the letter he opposes her human traditions with his own freedom: "Walking on sidewalks is hard for free monkeys--a way of life foreign to them. Human women are incomprehensible. The human routine (человеческий быт) is awful, meaningless, sluggish, inflexible."²⁷³ Women, he hints, are incomprehensible to him for the same reasons that sidewalks and routine are intolerable: with their meaningless, rigid routines they represent a mental slavishness that is the opposite of his freedom; these traits make the women, like the sidewalks, foreign as well. For the creative, free monkeys, *byt* is not a restriction but provides material for metaphor: "We turn *byt* into anecdotes."²⁷⁴ At the end of the letter the analogy is taken still another step further, when VS opposes his freedom to the superficial trappings of European life: "I will not give up my writer's

²⁷⁰ *Zoo*, 15. (Russian: "Нас разединяется с тобой быт.")

²⁷¹ See my *Introduction*, 5-6 above.

²⁷² If Alya's insistence that *byt* is the reason she cannot love VS, and the opposition of love and *byt* that it implies, can be read as anti-Romantic, VS' response may be seen as an attempt to promote love back into the sphere of *bytie*.

²⁷³ *Zoo*, 24.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid*.

trade or my free thoroughfare across the rooftops for a European suit, shined shoes, or a high rate of exchange--not even for Alya."²⁷⁵ Disregarding the fact that Alya has not asked him to give anything up for her sake, VS' proud refusal, as though she had, rounds out a set of opposing terms: she is dull routine and slavish devotion to tradition, favoring banalities over substance—incomprehensible because meaningless, superficial, and foreign. He, on the other hand, is creative, free, flexible, innovative, devoted to the higher, spiritual goals of artistic creativity, liberty, and love; he is Russian. In other words, she represents *byt*; he *bytie*.

Byt, in Shklovsky's formulation, has a class; the "European suit and shined shoes" he rejects are signs not only of Europe but of bourgeois life, with its requirements of nice clothes and *comme il faut*. If Alya, as VS writes, is the 'realization of a metaphor,' the metaphor is the 'foreign' way of living: bourgeois *byt*. The metaphor, which conflates gender, 'Europeanness,' and consumerism, comes out of his regular association of Alya with routine, a love of fine things, and pleasure-seeking. She dances the shimmy with foreign men, enjoys domestic tranquillity, and loves clothes. "Your routine is always the same: a jolly meeting, flowers, and then the love of the man," he says to her.²⁷⁶ Elsewhere, he connects her gender to her love of things: "You are an utter woman," he writes; likewise, speaking of her in the third person, he ascribes to her a European mindset: "Without fail... the woman in question flirts with thing things in the store: she likes everything. That's the European mentality."²⁷⁷ He describes both the culture and Alya herself as "alien."

He offers, by way of contrast, the experience of himself and his fellow Russian soldiers and writers who had "known no other way of life than that of war and revolution": "The store mentality is foreign to us. We're used to few things; anything extra was given away or sold. Our wives wore sacks and their feet grew a size larger."²⁷⁸ Shklovsky's class is, we come to see, a matter both of and shame and pride. After telling the story of how a friend--a fellow writer and as badly dressed as Shklovsky--was taken for a beggar, Shklovsky answers his own story defensively: "No one can make us ridiculous, because we know our value," and "No one can insult us, because we work." This last, the assertion that he works, is a particular point of his

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ *Zoo*, 48.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 40.

²⁷⁸ My argument admittedly oversimplifies VS' characterization of his and Alya's economic positions. While I believe that the book opposes Alya's class to his own, his class is bound up in the history of wartime and revolutionary Russia. He tells the story, for example, of his friend who had, like him, lived through the famine and deprivations of wartime and revolutionary Russia. "In hungry Moscow, Bogatyrev had no idea that he was living badly," but, upon being taken to a Prague restaurant with "clean walls, assorted foods, wines and women" began to weep: "not out of sentimentality, but the way windows weep in a room heated for the first time in many weeks." While the context proposes that Shklovsky's anecdote be read as a particular kind of wide-eyed, self-defense of his unworldliness, the image of Bogatyrev weeping complicates the rhetoric, and turns the argument in a different direction; Shklovsky opposes the European 'store mentality' not with standard poverty, but with the starvation of winter war-time Moscow. 41-3.

class pride, repeated several times in the book; when he is angry that Alya will not see him, he insults her on these same grounds: “Woman with no vocation, how do you spend your time?”²⁷⁹

In Letter 12 bourgeois *byt*, again characterized as European, is further associated with its values--which he says are alien to him-- of pressed clothes and table manners:

So help me, Alya, pants don't have to be creased!....As for hunching over one's food, maybe that ought to be avoided.

You complain about our table manners.

We hunch down over our plates to minimize the transportation problem.....

This whole European way of life [*zdeshnii* (lit., 'here-ish') *byt*] provokes me!²⁸⁰

This representation of Shklovsky's relationship to bourgeois *byt*—his bafflement in the face of its irrational values and customs, in contrast to the honor and horse-sense of his own class—presents a picture of Shklovsky as lost in a world that is incomprehensible and alien to him. The indicators of class, worth and belonging are like the words, or syntax, of a language he does not speak. His bewilderment in the face of these signs is illustrated, again in combination with the theme of table manners, when VS recounts a visit to a Berlin *Nachtlokal* with his fellow former-futurist-in-exile, Bogatyrev. The two of them witnessed a stage-show in which a naked woman danced awkwardly around the room before a drunken clientele; later they see her, “wearing a ready-made, fairly stylish dress,” sit down at a table, and are surprised that her table-manners are better than theirs. ““See, she even knows how to hold a knife,” said Bogatyrev to me.”²⁸¹ When they see, later, that she also works at the coat check, VS realizes that the nightclub is a family operation, and that there was no debauchery. The anecdote rides on what is for Shklovsky, apparently, a contradiction of the woman's class: how can a woman play at debauchery and dance naked, and nonetheless be a respectable, well-mannered, middle-class citizen? That such a woman knows how to hold a knife properly confirms for him that this skill,

²⁷⁹ VS's critique of Alya is intertwined with his disdain for consumerism, and he builds the case that Alya confuses people with things, and values them inappropriately: “In your wastebasket is the man who gave your flowers.... In the same wastebasket is the man who gave you the amber amulet...” Her trash can contains not things, but people—specifically, him. He accuses her, moreover, of not knowing the real value of things or people, preferring deceptively flashy things to those of substance. He compares, for example, the man she has taken as a lover with a glitzy but poorly designed car: “This car is extremely dubious and forced, so to speak--a cocaine-sniffer if ever there was one,” he writes; if it were a man, it would be wearing earrings. Shklovsky's dislike for the car—like the man for whom it is is a simile—has to do both with its deceptions and its class pretensions: it looks fake, he says, “like false shirtfronts and cuffs; it is a “is a lie made expressly for snobs.” Thus VS implies that Alya's choice of lover --and her choice not to have him, VS, as a lover-- is bound up with her class. Ibid., 96-7.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 44. A more literal, if informal, translation of this last line (“Сердит меня здешний быт!”) might read “The here-ish *byt* angers me!” Shklovsky follows this outburst with the narration of a scene in Judges, in which Judge Gideon, gathered a band of guerillas to attack the Philistines. In choosing fighters, “first of all he sent home all the family men.” Then, he continues, “the Angel of the Lord commanded him to lead all the remaining warriors to the river and to take into battle only those who drank water from the palms of their hands, and not those who hunched over the water and lapped it like dogs.” The warriors who were not chosen on account of their table manners represent him, rejected, the comparison implies, for something both superficial and irrelevant. The analogy reminds Alya and the reader of Shklovsky's military service, and at the same time allows him baffled by his own comparison: “Are we, by any chance, bad warriors?” (44-45)

²⁸¹ Ibid., 50.

the lack of which Alya has reprimanded him with, is meaningless. He lumps it in with the clothes he doesn't know how to wear, and in any case doesn't own: "It's nice to know how to hold a fork, although that ability is shared by every hat-check girl in Europe. It's even better to know which shoes to wear with a smoking jacket and which cufflinks to stick into a silk shirt, though these accomplishments are of little use to me at the moment."²⁸² Bourgeois *byt* is schizophrenic, valuing what it should not, and disregarding altogether what is valuable; it is a code, he suggests, that he cannot, or does not care to, crack.

The codes of bourgeois *byt* extend even into language. "In Berlin, it is impossible and improper to speak Russian loudly in the streets." His accustomed way of speaking makes him stand out as a boor among the Germans, who seem, with their own quiet speech, to demand of him a kind of self-elision: "Live, they say, but keep quiet." The ability of one's language to reveal one's outsider status is illustrated in several brief stories he tells about sibilants; in both the Bible and in the Ukraine, whether one could pronounce "zh" or "sh" sounds served to distinguish Jews from Philistines and Jews from ethnic Russians. In each case, mispronunciation--the telltale sign that one is an outsider--meant death. Shklovsky's inability to fit in with or understand bourgeois-coded Europe is metaphorized in these stories about language. But his failure is not merely a metaphor; when he is told by Alya what to write—or specifically what not to write—it is a signal that bourgeois *byt* is a language whose syntax he cannot grasp. In *Sentimental Journey* Shklovsky is saved several times by words; his 'writing desk' keeps him sane, and his literary work for Gorky keeps him alive; in addition, he recounts two interrogations by the *Cheka*, in which his ability to tell a story convincingly kept him alive.²⁸³ But in *Zoo*, his words, at least as far as Alya is concerned, fail him. Shklovsky writes, tears up, and rewrites his letters to Alya, and even so sends her so many that they fill the drawers of her desk, her pockets, and her purse.²⁸⁴ He comments on her writing style, which is far less self-conscious and belabored than his own: "Your voice is true....I'm even a trifle envious. . . I'm sick of wit and irony...How I want to simply describe objects as if literature had never existed; that way one could write literarily."²⁸⁵ And indeed, throughout the novel, VS's letters to Alya, while rich with allusions and complex motifs, seem to stumble, their wit and life overshadowed by a push toward novelty and device that feels forced and at times compulsive. For her part, Alya is frustrated and nonplussed by VS's letters. Her final letter to him reproaches him with his failure to understand the generic constraints of the love letter:

You claim to know how Don Quixote is made, but you certainly don't know how to write a love letter. ... When you write about love, you choke on your own lyricism and froth at the mouth.... I may not understand much

²⁸² *Zoo*, 88.

²⁸³ *Sentimental Journey*, 47-8; 141. In one he was able to use words so convincingly that he, a philologist and literary critic, was able to convince the *Cheka* that he was a mechanic, and knew his way around a lathe. "I am a professional raconteur," he boasts.

²⁸⁴ *Zoo*, 101.

²⁸⁵ *Zoo*, 84.

about literature, though, being a flatterer, you insist that I understand just as much as you. I do, however, know a lot about love letters....

You write about yourself, but when you write about me, you make reproaches. One doesn't write love letters for his own satisfaction, since no real lover thinks of himself when he's in love.

On various pretexts, you keep writing about the same thing. Quit writing about how, how, how much you love me, because at the third 'how much' I start thinking about something else.²⁸⁶

Her appraisal of his letters is fair, even if her statement of it stings; by the time the reader has seen this letter, the book's penultimate, she has herself noticed Shklovsky's lyrical frothing and choking, and wondered at his indirect, demeaning, and oversimple characterizations of the woman he supposedly loves. VS reads her censure as a final proof his inability to adapt to the habits and routines—the everyday life, or *byt*—of bourgeois Berlin; this understanding reveals itself in his next letter, to the All-Russian-Central Executive Committee (*VTsIK*), where *byt* is given as the reason he must return. "I cannot live in Berlin," he writes. "My entire way of life [всем бытом], all my habits bind me to today's Russia."²⁸⁷

Shklovsky's complaint that bourgeois *byt* is a language that he doesn't speak is matched by Alya's efforts to teach it to him. When she tells him not to make wild scenes on the phone, not to write her more than two letters a day, not to rant and rave, when she asks him not to hunch over his soup and slurp it, to hold a fork properly, she is, in a sense, trying to teach him the language, the culture, the *comme il faut* of bourgeois *byt*. She is trying to remake him so that he can fit in: no scenes and shine your shoes. When he protests that he knows only war, cold, poverty, and that for that reason he cannot accept or understand her way of life, she responds indirectly, providing a cool, detached summary of its joys: "My dear, I'm sitting on the divan you don't like and thinking how very nice to be warm, comfortable, and in no pain." When he rants, she calmly, with the love of a parent, tries to redirect his rage, to reason with him and comfort him at the same time. In Letter 19, for example, she writes "You shout, get irritated at the sound of your own voice, then you shout still more frantically. How, pray tell, will this momentum help you to declare your love to someone utterly unsuitable? Now don't lose your temper. ...Get yourself a new suit and six shirts, so that three can be at the laundry and three at home; I'll give you a necktie; shine your boots."²⁸⁸ Both her instructions to him and the calm, detached demeanor she adopts with him are meant, it seems, to be didactic techniques.

In this context, in which Alya tutors Shklovsky in the foreign customs of culture alien to him, and tries to make him fit in in bourgeois society, *Zoo*'s second subtitle, *The Third Heloise*, begins to take on a different meaning. The dedication seems to indicate, because of the closeness of the names Elsa and Eloise, that Alya-Elsa is the third incarnation, after Rousseau's,

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 103.

²⁸⁷ Ibid. I have reformulated Sheldon's translation here to reflect the word order of the Russian, which puts *byt*, I think significantly, before the 'I'. Sheldon's translation reads: "I am bound by my entire way of life, by all my habits, to the Russia of today."

²⁸⁸ *Zoo*, 72.

of Abelard's student and beloved, Heloise. But another possibility now presents itself, through Shklovsky's continuing, difficult training in the fundamentals of bourgeois society: that Shklovsky himself is the third Heloise, not an Eloise or or an Elsa, but an Eliza: in particular a gender-inverted double of Eliza Doolittle, from George Bernard Shaw's 1912 play, *Pygmalion*.²⁸⁹ This reading switches the roles of Shklovsky and Alya; she is the tutor, not he. He, though the literary critic, is getting lessons in genre form and language use from Alya in Berlin; he is the one who is learning how to negotiate a culture—and a class—not his own. Like Eliza Doolittle, Shklovsky learns that irrelevant-seeming matters count, that manners and fine clothes are needed to signal belonging; like her he is—or pretends to be—shocked to learn that those things do not line up perfectly with moral rectitude. Alya's grooming of VS includes buying him suitable clothes, teaching him table manners, and entreating him to modulate his voice. Like Eliza, VS learns the language: toward the end of the book, Shklovsky's comparison of Alya's lover to a poorly-designed, expensive car, which "if a man" would wear earrings and false shirtfronts, belies his claim that Alya's bourgeois *byt* is an alien culture he cannot understand. On the contrary, he proves with his simile that he does understand the language of fashion and things. His accusation that the glitzy car she likes must appeal to gigolos is touched by the irony that he, too, has been socially and to some extent financially supported by Alya. Likewise, when he complains that Alya has thrown away the man who has given her the amber amulet and the small steel mesh purse, he reveals not only her participation in bourgeois consumption, but his own: he is the one who has filled her room with flowers, who has purchased gifts for her and who expects those gifts to buy her love. His claims to be naively outside, or above, the world of bourgeois *byt* are also shown to be false: in response to his accusation that she flirts with things in the store, that she has a 'store mentality,' Alya calls his bluff: "If you were a woman, my so-called Wertheim would be a tiny boutique next to your establishment." She exposes his claim to be a *naif* as a self-serving pose, its own kind of preening and one-ups-man-ship; his *Sturm und Drang* she unmasks as a generically familiar, and perhaps even bourgeois, egotism.²⁹⁰

Alya's exposure of VS as more worldly, more versed in the language of bourgeois *byt* than he lets on, is important. VS may claim to be a hardened soldier, a revolutionary, an outsider, and he may liken himself to those soldiers, in the Book of Judges, who are turned away from battle for their manners. And while he was, indeed, a soldier and a revolutionary, he was also,

²⁸⁹ Elza, as Richard Sheldon points out in a note to his introduction to *Zoo*, is the Russian equivalent of the French name Heloise, and the German name Elsa and English name Eliza. Sheldon, however, does not connect the name Eliza with Shaw's *Pygmalion*, but with Laurence Sterne: "It is an interesting coincidence that Laurence Sterne, whose novels *Sentimental Journey* and *Tristram Shandy* so deeply influenced Shklovsky, also wrote a book called *Journal to Eliza*, which is a highly autobiographical epistolary novel about unrequited love. The name Eliza even serves the pun made on the names Elsa (Elza in Russian) and Heloise." xxvi, note 17.

²⁹⁰ Whereas Eliza Doolittle learns proper English and attains a veneer of gentility that fools her class betters, VS only partially masters the language of bourgeois *byt*. His description of Alya's lover shows that he understands the codes of bourgeois *byt*, but his jealous outburst shows that he has not mastered her detachment, and her subsequent rejection of him signals his failure to master that aspect of the code. His failures extend to the final letter, written to the ACEC, or *VTsIK*, in which he begs to be accepted along with all his "guileless baggage: six shirts (three at home, three at the laundry), a pair of tan boots accidentally polished with wax, some old blue trousers in which I vainly attempted to make a crease. And a necktie which was given to me." (104) The inventory of his luggage, in addition to contradicting his claim that Alya is a fiction and emphasizing his humiliating dependence on her, serves as a metaphor for his only-partial mastery of bourgeois *byt*: he has the requisite number of shirts, but his boots are badly blacked, and his pants uncreased.

first and foremost, a writer; and not a proletarian writer, but a literary critic, an intellectual. His investment in his image as raw, unrefined, salt of the earth, or ‘real’ seems a touch strained, and perhaps even self-indulgent, given his profession. While Alya, and the reader, can see the gap between VS’ proposed persona and his ‘real person,’ the gap is nonetheless important: it illustrates, I think, the pressure put on revolutionaries who were also members of the intelligentsia, and the strange bind of revolutionary writers at a time when utility was valued above aesthetics. VS requires Alya; he must have a foil to show what a real foreigner looks like; a real *bourgeoise*. His own identity as a Russian intellectual figure, and perhaps his life itself, depends on it.

Zoo is ultimately an ambiguous, and ambivalent, document. VS writes autobiographically, but at the same time insists that he is writing fiction. He protests that he does not understand bourgeois *byt*, that he does not fit in, but takes special care to give his reader enough information to see through that claim. Indeed, Shklovsky calls attention to Alya’s unmasking of his pretensions in a characteristically contradictory way; he prefaces her letter, saying that it is the best in the book, but that the reader should not read it, and to this end he has crossed it out with a red pencil--a ruse which is reproduced typographically with a large red X through the pages of the letter. (Fig. 54) The disdain for the bourgeoisie he displays throughout *Zoo*, which Alya suggests is itself a kind of false shirtfront, harks back to a similar revelation in Shklovsky’s *Sentimental Journey*: “I hate the bourgeoisie,” he writes. “Perhaps its because I’m petty-bourgeois myself.” His disdain, we come to see (and as he himself suggests) is rooted in part in a class insecurity. He is embarrassed that he does not know how to dress or eat. Like his friend who “in hungry Moscow...had no idea that he was living badly,” Shklovsky is ill at ease at discovering this about himself. But this, too, is not the end of it. His hatred springs not only from envy, but also, and more importantly, from his deep disappointment and despair that despite everything he and the country had gone through, nothing had actually changed. “If I live to see another revolution, I’ll break [the bourgeoisie] into little pieces. It’s not right that we should have suffered in vain and that nothing has changed. The rich and the poor remain, as before.”²⁹¹

Pro Eto, like *Zoo*, is configured around *byt* and love, along with issues of class and materialism. Moreover, its formulations of these elements mirror those in *Zoo* to a surprising extent: *byt* is associated with the bourgeoisie; a woman—specifically his beloved—is the symbol of the bourgeois domestic world that both tempts and stymies him; bourgeois *byt* is to blame for preventing real change. As in *Zoo*, the narrator is torn between his disdain for the bourgeoisie and a desperate desire to fit into it. Like *Zoo*, *Pro Eto* documents its author’s profound ambivalence about the revolution, expressing hope, doubts, and regrets. That the ambiguities and ambivalences in *Pro Eto* are brought into sharper focus when the poem is read in the context of *Zoo* makes the deep connections between the works all the more apparent.

Although *Pro Eto*’s prologue hints that the theme of the poem is personal and petty romantic love, that theme is partially subsumed under the larger category of ‘everyday life.’ The extent to which love belongs to the category of everyday life, and to what extent it belongs in a

²⁹¹ *Sentimental Journey*, 195.

more idealist, abstract realm, is perhaps a more precise statement of the poem's relationship to its purported 'theme.' Idealized love, in *Pro Eto*, is depicted at times in romantic personifications of a demanding, higher, universal truth, and, at the end, in a generalized desire for the welfare of mankind, expressed in encompassing terms: universe, world, mother, father.²⁹² However, love in *Pro Eto* is not only an idealized construct, abstracted and separate from life, but lives as well in the everyday interactions between man and woman. Some part of love takes place in the sphere of *byt*: in the sharing of beds, apartments, and other aspects of day-to-day life.

Pro Eto represents *byt* as in competition with love, as the factor that determines whether love will be "personal and petty" or universal and transformative. The struggle between love and *byt* is thus both personal and epic. Love is not only love for a woman, but Love itself, with a capital L. Love is a kind of prime mover; like the God of the Genesis (though working in reverse), it "turns daylight into darkness"; its power is such that it can scatter "people and things like a thundercloud."²⁹³ *Byt*, like love, is magically powerful, but its model of power is closer to pagan mythology than the Bible; it does not make demands and scatter people so much as transform. The metamorphoses animate inanimate objects, and turn people into things: a samovar "wants" to embrace Mayakovsky in its "samovary arms"; the attraction of domestic comforts is such that "a down comforter turns your will to stone."²⁹⁴ The soft, warm incidentals of bourgeois *byt* have a sinister power; they are Medusas in disguise.²⁹⁵ *Byt* transforms people, as well: "Jesus/ tipping/ his crown of thorns/ politely bows"; "Marx/ harnessed in his scarlet frame/.... hauls a load of domestic routine." The Savior is an obsequious servant; the prophet of the revolution is a pack animal. *Byt*'s most powerful ability, perhaps, is its ability to stop, and perhaps even reverse, time. In the dusty, cobwebby Davidovna apartment, time has ground to a halt: Marx is stuck in the picture frame, just as Mayakovsky will soon be ensnared by the samovar.

In the poem's prologue, love and *byt* are at odds; the demanding, Romantic figure of love "Glanced sideways at my everyday..." and scattered it to the winds. But in the first section of the poem, love and *byt* must be roommates: the romantic ballad of 'he and she' is set against the background of domestic spaces and telephones. Mayakovsky explicitly opposes love and *byt* a bit later, when Mayakovsky-as-bear, traveling backwards in time on his river of tears, encounters his zealous, idealistic 1916 self. The 1916 Mayakovsky is indignant at the behavior of his future self, and speaks to him as a traitor. "You, perhaps, crawled your way into their caste?/ Kiss? / Eat? / Let out your trousers? / Yourself into their kind of routine (*byt*), into their kind of family happiness/ aim to climb like a rooster?"²⁹⁶ He insinuates that the older Mayakovsky's social and class aspirations, and his comfortable domestic life, including his love affair with Lily Brik,

²⁹² *Pro Eto*, 161.

²⁹³ *Pro Eto*, 26.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁹⁵ Anne Nesbet has written about metamorphosis (including the transformational image of Medusa) in the Russian Avant-Garde in her "Savage Thinking: Metamorphosis in the Cinema of S. M. Eisenstein" in Peter I. Barta, ed., *Metamorphoses in Russian Literature* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2000).

²⁹⁶ *Pro Eto*, 62.

have turned him from what had been his higher, defining purpose: the revolution. The lines align erotic, romantic love with *byt*, and oppose that domestic love with the idealist revolutionary's 'spiritual' love of humanity, or *agape*. Most damning in the young Mayakovsky's words is his accusation that the poet-bear has become a traitor to his class, and therefore to the revolution: the word 'caste' indicates that class is the locus of the attack; that class is identified as the bourgeoisie by the future Mayakovsky's waistline, by his need to have 'climbed' his way into it. However, neither class itself nor the bourgeoisie is specifically named; instead, the young Mayakovsky connects caste, *byt*, and family happiness by modifying each, repeatedly, with a non-standard word: "their kind of" (ихный, lit: their-ish). "Their kind of" emphasizes that the comfortable bourgeois *byt* Mayakovsky enjoys is not his own, but 'theirs': the Briks; moreover, by naming neither the class nor 'them', the young Mayakovsky manages to make both sides of the equation seem more damnable.

The "their-ish" *byt* of the bourgeois Briks in *Pro Eto*, with its associations of foreignness and shallow consumerism, maps onto the "there-ish" *byt* of bourgeois Europe in *Zoo*. As with Alya in *Zoo*, Lily Brik represents bourgeois *byt*, with all its frivolities and tempting comforts. Like Alya, Lily is represented as a layabout, salon hostess and socialite, a "woman with no vocation." "She" is invoked three times in the poem, always unseen: lying in bed, perhaps sick, but refusing to take his call; an unseen presence at a Christmas party, where the guests ridicule VM in his absence; at the zoo, resurrected like VM, smiling "as in the picture." Like Alya, Lily is represented as relishing life's pleasures while her lover suffers, unnoticed by her: at a fateful party she is busy with pies and furs, and dancing with men, while he, outside, seethes and falls apart. Clothing and language--and the classes they represent--likewise separate Mayakovsky from Lily: he contrasts the fur coats of Lily and her guests with his own "bast shoes"; the partygoers' polite, if hackneyed, banter is juxtaposed to his own "coughing and spitting," and his barbaric, bearish howls.²⁹⁷

Just as striking as the fictional similarities between *Zoo*'s Alya and *Pro Eto*'s 'She' are the similarities between Alya and Lily as she is in "real life"—as she is portrayed in the memoirs and letters that provide the biographical background for *Pro Eto*. Letters written between Lily Brik and Mayakovsky, as well as Brik's own memoirs, reveal that the bourgeois salon-hostess was often embarrassed by Mayakovsky. His crude manners and booming voice were often a source of friction between them. Mayakovsky's bad teeth seem to have been an especially sore point for both of them; Lily complains about them several times (and quite cruelly) in her letters and memoirs, and Mayakovsky is said never to have smiled in a photograph expressly to hide them. Like her sister, Lily tires of the 'difficult' and heavy love of the her suitor, and on occasion chastises him for writing so much about his love for her.²⁹⁸ Like Alya, Lily tries to transform her lover, *Pygmalion*-style, into a man of her own class, buying him new clothes, giving him money

²⁹⁷ *Pro Eto*, 107.

²⁹⁸ Brik recalled in an interview an exchange between Mayakovsky and herself that serves as an uncanny summary of VS and Alya's relationship in *Zoo*. Mayakovsky had written her a poem; on reading it, she exclaimed, "Again about love!" On hearing her complaint, he grabbed the poem from her hands and tore it up, saying he would never write about love again. Charters, 78.

to have his teeth fixed, and scolding him for his fits of temper and shouting.²⁹⁹ Each sister, in the end, becomes frustrated with the recalcitrance of the signs of petit-bourgeois *byt* in her lover, and betrays him, turning him aside in favor of the pleasures of more genteel men.³⁰⁰

Bourgeois *byt* returns, again in opposition to love, in the scenes in which VM tries to convince his family to return with him to the river in order to save his more idealistic self. “Do you really love me?” he asks. “You love me? / Yes? / Well listen up, then!” and proceeds to tell them to give up their comfortable Christmas eve and head out, into the cold, to save him.³⁰¹ When they balk, he shames them, saying that they are trading love for petty domestic pleasures. “What? / Love you exchange for tea? / Love you exchange for the darning of socks?” These lines, opposing the highest, most noble emotions with the mundane baseness of clothing and tea, recall Shklovsky’s insistence that he would not trade his writer’s freedom for a European suit. Love and freedom are *bytie*, and each writer presents the material aspects of daily life—suits, socks, and tea—as something one trades for those feelings, as if the two were mutually exclusive. *Byt*, in this scene, is a symbol of stagnation, of the distracting temptations of material comfort, of the petty details of day-to-day life that impede real understanding, real change, and real love. Like the Ghosts of Christmas in Dickens’ *Christmas Carol*, Mayakovsky tries to persuade his mother of her misguidedness by taking her on a ideologically pointed tour of the sites of bourgeois *byt*. They stop in Berlin, Paris, and the America of the Brooklyn Bridge, but VM notes that the petty comforts of *byt* reign supreme everywhere, as illustrated by a stop in the Sahara: “[Even] here /” the poet complains, “with a curly-headed negress, / a [little] negro family laps up its tea.”³⁰²

When his own family proves a disappointment, VM lopes on, hoping to find help elsewhere. He arrives at a party, where the basest and most trivial aspects of bourgeois *byt* are personified in the hosts and the guests he encounters at the home of Fekla Davidovna. These come in for a full measure of the poet’s disdain: they speak in mincing, polite, hackneyed, and meaningless phrases, exchanging only the most insipid banalities; they are described as mice and bedbugs, crawling out fearfully from the dusty hiding places of their domestic holes, waving their arms, making toasts, and smiling for the camera. Bedbugs though they might be, however, Mayakovsky is obliged to beg them for help. “I chose my words / the most insinuating, / then roaring most horribly / then plangent as a lyre. / Instead of just putting my case— / I tried the eternal verities / I prayed, / threatened, / begged, / agitated.”³⁰³ VM is dismissive of the banalities

²⁹⁹ Lily’s attempts to transform Mayakovsky, and Mayakovsky’s willingness to be transformed, are documented in Lily’s memoirs and letters. See Bangfeldt, Ed., *Liubov’eto serdtse vsego*, especially letters 21 and 24; and Charters, 86-8, in which Lily recalls that Mayakovsky’s teeth were so bad that she had nightmares about them. The attempts are confirmed, from a different point of view, in Shklovsky’s remembrances of Mayakovsky. “O Mayakovskom,” 142-4.

³⁰⁰ Elsa Triolet, as is hinted at in *Zoo*, took a European lover. See Sheldon, xxix-xxx. Lily Brik took an Englishman as a lover before their Berlin stay of 1922. Later, she would have a long-term relationship with a well-heeled lawyer. Brik’s frustration with Mayakovsky, of course, was the one of the given causes of their separation in the winter of 1922, and thus of the poem *Pro Eto*.

³⁰¹ The ‘him’ that needs saving is his younger, more zealous self, the one who chastises VM for growing fat and social climbing, who has been waiting on the bridge.

³⁰² *Pro Eto*, 81. Guryeva translation.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 95-97.

of the mincing class, disdaining their shallow chatter; he, it is implied, values more important topics. Nonetheless, his words indirectly acknowledge his own faults as well: the first line acknowledges the “roaring” that his poetry has so heavily relied on;³⁰⁴ the second that his trademark proletarian agitation is no different from more traditional methods of coercion. In pleading his case he himself starts to succumb to the gravity of the banal, becoming first a parody of himself and then a series of clichés.

The crowd at Davidovna’s however, will not help, and accuse him of being drunk. Like his younger self, the crowd confronts Mayakovsky with the choices that have come to define him; to the injury of the reminder they add insult by adding the epithet ‘Futurist,’ thus implying the poet’s hypocrisy as well: “Oh, he’ll whine! / Eat and drink / drink and eat / and then gamble at 66! /.../ Eat up, Futurist!”³⁰⁵ When he leaves Fekla Davidovna’s place in disgust, VM—still as bear—heads to yet another party. At this one, however, he creeps up the stairs; just so, he writes, “Raskolnikov, having killed, came ringing the doorbell.” The party, this time, is at Lily Brik’s, and it is unmistakably coded as bourgeois: he hears guests helped off with their fur coats, pies handed to the housekeeper, fashionable modern dance music, and indirect but insinuating conversations. He hears, moreover, himself spoken about in mocking and derisive tones. His response registers his humiliation, but focuses on his contempt for bourgeois *byt*: “If I sacrificed a day / I sacrificed a year / to this dreary nonsense. / I too almost succumbed / to this delirium.”³⁰⁶ In this scene VM’s disdain for bourgeois *byt* seems to take on a personal motivation, rather than stemming from an un-self-interested revolutionary fervor. From the guests’ knowing, coded talk about him and from his creeping around the edges of the party like a criminal, the reader comes to see that at least part of VM’s problem with bourgeois-coded *byt* is that he is an outsider—literally and metaphorically—in that world. He sees himself as superior to the guests, yet he is humiliated when he hears their opinion of him. Like VS, who is at once embarrassed and proud not to know his way around Berlin’s bourgeois, domestic, consumerist culture, VM conveys his disdain for the culture’s pettiness and his shame at his own shortcomings in its eyes in equal measure. Moreover, his shame itself is two-headed; if he is embarrassed at his failure to finesse his way into the culture, he is no less ashamed of his very desire to do so. Though the 1916 revolutionary VM accuses his future self of climbing into a *byt* not his own, it seems that the poet’s transformation into a *bourgeois* was incomplete: external signifiers—his voice, manners, and indeed his very body prevented it. However transformational *byt* may be, its powers do not extend, it seems, to the reworking of class identity.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁴ The contrast between “roaring most terribly” and “plangent as a lyre” recall the most famous contrast of the poem “A Cloud in Trousers”: “If you wish/ I’ll rage on raw meat like a vandal/ or change into hues that the sunset arouses/ If you wish/ I’ll be irreproachably gentle/ not a man but a cloud in trousers.” (Andrei Kneller trans.)

³⁰⁵ *Pro Eto*, 98.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

³⁰⁷ In another sense, too, Mayakovsky’s identity is linked to language: Mayakovsky’s inability to speak any foreign language was well known, and was the occasion of a number of jokes among his circle. See Charles A. Moser, “Mayakovsky’s Unsentimental Journeys” in *American Slavic and East European Review*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Feb. 1960), 85-100. The title of Moser’s article, interestingly enough, is a reference to Sterne.

If the relationship between love and *byt* is complex in the two works--and is further complicated by questions of social class and its codes--that relationship is all the more strained by the texts' pervasive devaluation of women. Although VM and VS are ostensibly in love with their women, the treatment of those women, by their lovers as by the texts, is often stiflingly misogynistic. I will not enumerate specific examples of this misogyny here, as the reader will no doubt have noticed many examples among the passages I have discussed above. A good deal of the misogyny in *Zoo* and *Pro Eto* goes hand in hand with the texts' male lovers' association of women with the disparaged terms of *bourgeoisie* and *byt*. Alya and Lily are each derided for lacking professions—for example salon hostess, as we have seen, seems to be a coded term for layabout—even as they are awkwardly courted by their accusers. Likewise, the women are depicted as selfish materialists, indifferent to everything but luxury goods and creature comforts. At other times women are characterized not as consumers of goods, but as goods to be consumed. Mayakovsky describes a group of women “bundles of meat and finery” [мяса и тряпок вязанки]; that they are objects to be consumed is confirmed later when he identifies them as prostitutes.³⁰⁸

The association of women with domestic life and materiality is not confined to Russia, of course, and the linking of women with *byt* was nothing new in Mayakovsky and Shklovsky's time. Indeed, the association is inherent in the very etymology of the word *byt*, which in old Russian meant “goods and chattel”: women would, at some point, have fallen into the category.³⁰⁹ While discussions in the early Soviet period about *novyi byt* centered around the refashioning of women's relationship to the material aspects of life, the very terms of the debate indicate that the identification of women with material, to some extent, continued unabated.³¹⁰ What is more relevant to *Zoo* and *Pro Eto* is the way that the texts' misogyny would seem to be at odds not only with the revolution's progressive commitment to the equality of the sexes, but with the narrators' characterizations of themselves as high-minded. While the male lovers associate women with all that they repudiate in *byt* and the bourgeoisie, neither manages in the end to rise above the entangled horrors they decry in that relationship. The narrators are smug about their superiority to the materialistic and acquisitive bourgeoisie, and fail to see the irony of their own possessiveness of women. Indeed, as their whining and petulance approaches the parodic, the tenor and excess of the self-righteous men's complaints redound on them. One might argue that misogyny represents the presence of *byt* within these texts--*byt* in its deepest, ineradicable, internal form. Certainly the misogynistic beat *Zoo* and *Pro Eto* drum is so repetitive as to seem almost mechanical, and becomes its own wearisome, unchanging routine.

³⁰⁸ Mayakovsky's description of the women stands perhaps in ironic contrast to Mayakovsky's repeated claim, several lines prior, that he will redeem (lit: pay for) everyone. [“за всех расплачусь”].

³⁰⁹ Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, 60.

³¹⁰ Kiaer carries this argument further, maintaining for example that the equation of women with matter is inherent even in Trotsky's appeals that women be liberated of their household duties. *Ibid.*, 60-64.

Zoo, Pro Eto, and Early Soviet Cultural Politics

Faith and Disappointment in the Revolution

“It’s not right that we should have suffered in vain and that nothing has changed. The rich and the poor remain, as before.”³¹¹ The relationship between *byt* and revolution is complex and tense. According to Svetlana Boym, *byt* is by nature a stagnating, inertial force. Indeed, both *Pro Eto* and *Zoo* depict *byt* not only as stagnant, but as a hallucinatory travel backward in time, past the 1824 flood, and on to the flood in Genesis, returning poet and literary critic alike to brutish states. Moreover, as Christina Kiaer and Eric Naiman argue, *byt*, while traditionally devalued by the intelligentsia, became in the early Soviet Union the site of a campaign of self-surveillance and interrogation, as citizens, newly made aware of ‘ideology’ by the Bolsheviks, strove to mold their interior lives to meet the standards of the new society they wanted to become a part of. Both Shklovsky, in *Zoo*, and Mayakovsky, in *Pro Eto*, do just this: each makes *byt*—tied to the class of the poet’s beloved and his own aspirational class—the site of self-interrogation in aftermath of the revolution.

At the same time, bourgeois *byt* is not only that which prevents revolutionary change, but also the embarrassing and horrifying symptom that change has not occurred. Shklovsky’s acknowledgement of the revolution’s failure to produce real change occurs in the context of his outrage that, well after the revolution, a talented young girl he knows is forced by circumstance to marry a boorish, drunken *kulak* for the same reason as ever: he has money and she does not. The basic premise of human inequality, along with its humiliations, is unchanged: women, as an example, are still sold and beaten. For Shklovsky the failure of the revolution to change the lives of Russia’s citizens, substantially and for the better, is a matter of deep regret in large part because of the devastation the revolution wreaked on people’s lives. *Zoo*’s continued allusions to *Sentimental Journey* do not allow the reader to forget the atrocities recalled in the memoir: atrocities Shklovsky had witnessed first hand, committed in the name of the revolution. Shklovsky’s indignation at the revolution’s failures acknowledges the terms on which he and others had accepted the suffering: the reasoning that the ends would justify the means. Shklovsky’s concise formulation suggests that when the ‘ends’ turned out to be a mere exchange of brutally indifferent tsarist leaders for cruel, equally brutal Soviet ones, the suffering and death wrought by it turned out to be meaningless. In retrospect, the acceptance of the suffering, and perhaps even the intellectual ends-means reasoning itself, was intolerable to Shklovsky; his promise to tear the bourgeoisie to pieces, should another revolution occur, is a typical and wonderful Shklovskian reversal.

Pro Eto also expresses a deep disappointment at the failure of the revolution to produce real change, but Mayakovsky’s regret takes on a different cast than Shklovsky’s. Mayakovsky understands the ability of *byt* to absorb and dispel the force of change: “October came thundering / punishing / judging. / You / under its fire-feathered wing / stood up / and laid out the dishes.”³¹² In these lines the poet’s trademark hyperbole is undercut by a quieter irony, and it expresses his disillusionment, not only, perhaps, with the layer-out of dishes. Elsewhere he

³¹¹ *Sentimental Journey*, 195.

³¹² *Pro Eto*, 88.

suggests that the only difference in daily life before and after the revolution is the occupants of its unbudgeable hierarchy: “Only in the place of guardian souls and fairies/ is a guardian angel: / a lodger in breeches.”³¹³ Superstitions and supplications remain as much a part of life as before, changed in name only. “Centuries / they lived their little houses / and then they began to live in little house-committees!”³¹⁴

Pro Eto's regret is expressed negatively, in terms of what will not be accomplished in in the poet's lifetime: the sweeping changes in human nature and society that he had believed the revolution would bring. The post-revolutionary socialist utopia is only described in the most fantastic and vague terms; in it “love crosses the whole universe” and “the world turns on the cry of ‘Comrade!’”³¹⁵ The vagueness of the utopian dream is matched by the fantasy of the science—time machines and human resurrection—by which it is reached. Part of the dream's vagueness is its articulation as a set of things it is not: love is not a servant, marriages are not dominated by lust and bread, and lives are not spent in domestic holes. The future, unimaginable, remains unrealized in word as well as in deed; what *Pro Eto* regrets, rather, is what life and human character remains: “In autumn, in winter, in spring, in summer, / in day/ in sleep / I don't accept it / I hate it / all. / All / that has beaten our slavish past / into us. / All / that the trifling swarm / of petty routine [*byt*] alighted and sat on, even in our red-flag society.”³¹⁶ Indeed, the terms are so vague that loss does not seem quite personal; the regret and the envisioned utopia seem equally distant, and the hyperbole feels put on.

Where Mayakovsky's anguish reads as most convincing, on the other hand, is in the scene in which he, while skulking like a criminal around the Briks' flat, overhears Lily and her guests disparaging him: “Yes, / their voices / [...] Yes - / it's them - / them about me.” The staccato repetition of simple words creates a sort of stammer that conveys the creeping horror of the realization. Likewise, in the brief section that transcribes the slander, five lines begin with the words “and again”; the repetition serves to convey a mental state of shock or disbelief. The scene depicts Mayakovsky's alienation not only from his acquaintances and from Lily at the party, but from himself as well: “I stand at the window. / I am not me.” Mayakovsky who has devolved into a primitive state, and who cowers in the cold and dark outside the window of a well-lit, warm house, at which well-fed guests --people he knows!--make merry, oblivious to his nearby suffering. The image is one of *Pro Eto*'s most pathetic. While Mayakovsky compares himself to Raskolnikov creeping guiltily to the scene of his murder, the scene can also be read as the acknowledgment of a different sort of guilt. In this scene the poet, stepping outside of his own ego for a moment, recognizes the bargain he has made with the devil. The lines that follow perform a kind of reckoning, of what has been traded for what: “If I sacrificed a day, I sacrificed a year to this dreary nonsense,” he writes. He has bartered his Love, he implies, along with his creativity, his verse... if not for the darning of socks, then for banalities exchanged in bourgeois apartments. The sting and absurdity of the ridiculous trade is brought home only when when learns he has been betrayed, and the *byt* to which he sacrificed himself tells him to go kill

³¹³ Ibid., 88. Russ: ‘жилец в галифе’.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 82.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 161.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 144

himself. The dreary nonsense “ate up my life with its apartmental muck / and then said: / “Resolve yourself / from the upper floors / to the pavement!”³¹⁷

Estrangement

The scene of Mayakovsky’s alienation and betrayal bears an uncanny resemblance to one described by Shklovsky in *Sentimental Journey*, which took place in the winter immediately before the revolution. War had made Peter’s ‘window onto Europe’ revert to primitivity; people were starving in the street, furniture was used as firewood; civilization was yielding to chaos. Shklovsky, who was then serving as a military mechanic, describes having to chop frozen ice out of the gas tanks of cars:

During a break, I ran over to see a writer I knew. It was crowded and hot in his rooms; the table was piled high with food; the tobacco smoke was like a wall. Some people were playing cards and they played for two more days without setting foot outside the door.

Later this same man very quickly and sincerely became a staunch Bolshevik. Almost everyone who had been sitting around that table became a Communist.

And even now I remember so clearly their supercilious irony toward the “disturbance in the streets!”³¹⁸

Richard Sheldon identifies the writer as Osip Brik. The apartment Shklovsky visited, then, is the same one that Mayakovsky refers to in *Pro Eto*: the Briks’. Moreover, Mayakovsky had met and moved in with the Briks before the revolution (after all, Brik and Shklovsky were only acquainted, as we know, through Mayakovsky). That is, at the time Shklovsky describes, Mayakovsky could well have been among the crowd playing cards at the Briks’ well-stocked flat.

In the party scene in *Pro Eto* VM is on the outside in the cold, watching his acquaintances make merry in a warm, comfortable bourgeois apartment. Reading the scene in the light of Shklovsky’s depiction of the scene at the Briks’ house, however, we see that Mayakovsky has changed roles. Mayakovsky’s role in life—*inside* the Briks’ heated, smoky rooms, was not the one he gave himself in the poem. By switching the roles he played, Mayakovsky gave himself a new history: now he was the one on the outside, wondering at how alien, self-serving, and petty that life of pleasures seemed. The reversal emphasizes the role of VM—and to some extent Mayakovsky himself—as a zealous, striving revolutionary. At the same time, by putting himself on the outside, looking in at the warm lights of the party from the cold dark, Mayakovsky contrives to see his own history and actions in a new light, from the point of view of someone else: an outsider, or alien.

While the narrator of *Pro Eto* proclaims his fierce hatred of the bourgeoisie and *byt* throughout the poem, Mayakovsky’s alienation from himself at Lily’s party allows a deep sense of ambiguity and ambivalence to undercut his louder, more agitational messages. The words,

³¹⁷ Ibid., 114.

³¹⁸ *Sentimental Journey*, 12. Richard Sheldon identifies the supercilious, proto-Bolshevik writer (“almost certainly”) as Osip Brik.

“Eat up, Futurist!” take on a new meaning in the context of Shklovsky’s memoirs. The line is spoken by a bourgeois party-host, and in that context amounts to taunting the poet with *NEP*, showing what has become of the revolutionary poet’s dreams of a socialist utopia. But in the context of Shklovsky’s memoirs the line takes on an additional meaning: it seems to be spoken not so much by an external critic of *NEP* as by Mayakovsky himself-- and in that case *NEP* is not so much a failure of current policy as a metaphor for the way that the poet himself lived during the revolution. “Drinks and eats / eats and drinks/ and then gambles at 66!” is not only a portrait of the *NEPman*, but of Mayakovsky himself, in the same year he wrote the strident ‘Man’: 1917.

Reading *Sentimental Journey*, Mayakovsky would have recognized himself, as seen from an alien viewpoint. Switching places from his own to what was essentially Shklovsky’s place (i.e., with regard to who was inside and who outside) puts Mayakovsky in a position to reevaluate his own life and behavior from the point of view of someone else: in particular someone who was suffering more than he was at the time. The experience is one of estrangement; it makes him see what was assumed for him, what was automatic, in a new light. Even the mechanism by which Mayakovsky is estranged from his own life is one of Shklovsky’s own personal favorites: the commonplace as seen through the eyes of an alien.

Coda: *byt* and the dead horse

Just before the scene in *Sentimental Journey* where Shklovsky visits the supercilious card-players, he remembers a dead horse lying in the street, on Liteiny Prospekt. The dead horse is important for setting the scene. What appears at first to be an illustration of the breakdown of normal functioning of a modern city, however, turns into an ominous symbol of the personal tragedies--including starvation-- entailed in that breakdown: Shklovsky writes that he remembered the dead horse so clearly because “[i]t was unusual then.”

But the dead horse lying on the pavement is also a literary reference with multiple valences. The dead horse can be read as a reference to the episode of ‘The Dead Ass’ in Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey*, and thus as a tongue-in-cheek reference to Shklovsky’s literary critiques of Sterne as well. The dead horse can also be read as an allusion to Tolstoy’s story *Kholstomer*, which ends with the slaughter of a horse and the consumption of its body afterwards, by young wolf-cubs. The story, comparing the relatively unproductive life of one of *Kholstomer*’s owners with the lifelong usefulness of the horse, extending even to the food its body provides, addresses the issue of utility that would later become of such concern to Constructivists. *Kholstomer* takes on an additional meaning, however, as one of Shklovsky’s primary examples in his seminal 1917 essay, *Art as Device*; as such it is a revisiting of the terms with which Shklovsky first described the idea of defamiliarization. *Kholstomer* is told from the horse’s point of view; the human world, seen through the horse’s eyes, comes to seem strange, illogical, and even barbarous.³¹⁹

³¹⁹ *Kholstomer* questions, for example, the ability to own another living creature. How can one animal 'own' another? What does it mean to own a thing, anyway? By listening to the horse's thoughts, the reader, now inhabiting the consciousness of the horse rather than her fellow humans, comes to see not the animal's point of view, but the humans', as peculiar.

Shklovsky's vision of the horse, followed by the memory of the party at the Briks', makes not only the poverty and primitive circumstances of life on the streets of Petersburg seem strange, but makes the softer, warmer lives of those in the room seem even stranger. The juxtaposition of the scenes of privation and plenty occurs at the beginning of *Sentimental Journey* and sets the stage for what is to come: throughout the memoirs, Shklovsky describes his experiences of the revolution and the war in terms of just such strangeness. Following the revolution, he writes, "there was no regular life of any kind."³²⁰ "During the first years of the revolution, there was no normal life in any sense, unless you consider a storm normal." Some of the strangeness of post-revolutionary life had to do with the violence it brought: the defamiliarized state of the injured body, for example, after an explosion. Some of the strangeness, though, was due to simple privation.³²¹ The regular inability to feed oneself, for example, made eating a defamiliarizing experience: "Once," he writes, "beef was issued. What a fantastic taste it had! It was like the first time you slept with a woman. Something entirely new."³²² The needs of the body—the brain's "requirement" for butter and sugar is a motif in *Sentimental Journey*—not only rearranged the priorities of life, but even made one read literature differently:

. . . I wanted butter and sugar all the time.
If I were a poet, I would write a poem about butter and set it to music.
How much greed for fat runs through the Bible and Homer!
And now the writers and scholars of Petrograd understand that greed.³²³

In other words, life had become so strange that it no longer needed art to defamiliarize it; on the contrary, the new post-revolutionary life had come to refresh Shklovsky's and his colleagues' perception of art. The motif of the dead horse which Shklovsky notes before he visits the Briks returns in this regard as well: Later, in *Sentimental Journey*, horsemeat—even rotting, mixed with inedible sawdust—is counted as a great gift, appreciated no less than the commissary beef.

"And this will be for centuries, / as it has been. / Don't beat her, / and the mare of *byt* won't start up." These lines from the party scene at *Pro Eto* metaphorize *byt* as a symbol of daily life, and harken back to the story of Kholstomer.³²⁴ The dead horse is a reminder of the felt realities of the revolution, representing both the breakdown of civil society and the extreme

³²⁰ *SJ*, 134.

³²¹ As an example, Shklovsky describes how, at first, "the old-fashioned furnaces" in Petersburg apartments were kept going with furniture"; at one point, he writes, everything was "divided into two categories: combustible and non-combustible." Later, people stopped using them and all slept in the same room to keep warm; these sometimes froze by the apartment block.

³²² *SJ*, 180.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 234.

³²⁴ Another aspect of the allusion to *Crime and Punishment* is worth noting here. In the novel, the protagonist Raskolnikov kills an old woman in part to prove his theory that to certain people all things are permitted; these people are the ones who make history, who move and change the world. Raskolnikov, who had believed, or perhaps just hoped, that he was morally greater than his fellow people, realizes that he is exactly like them.

privations that followed it. The image may also be read as an allusion to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, where Raskolnikov dreams that he sees a mare beaten to death by a drunken mob; although he is overwhelmed by compassion for the creature, he proceeds upon awakening to kill an old woman with an axe. *Pro Eto's* dead horse becomes, then, a symbol of Mayakovsky's own sometime-indifference to the suffering of others.

Epilog

The Poet's Trousers: Reading Gaol and the Museum of Experimental Technology

The first part of *Pro Eto*, after the prologue, takes its title from Oscar Wilde's *Ballad of Reading Gaol*. The reference is, as Edward Brown has noted, "richly suggestive of the poem's outward and inward meanings." It refers in part to the poet's self-imposed 'imprisonment' in his apartment. In addition, the prisoner in Wilde's poem is condemned to death because of a 'fatal overflow of love.' Jealousy was a problem with which Mayakovsky was deeply familiar: it is represented in *Pro Eto* by the 'creeping jealousy' which manifests in the troglodyte the poet sees in his own reflection in that first section of the poem. Likewise, as Brown notes, the death of the jealous lover in Wilde's *Ballad* is mirrored in *Pro Eto* by references to the poet's suicide: references which are even more explicit in early versions of the poem.³²⁵

The well-known refrain of *Ballad*, in one sense, refers to such murderous (or suicidal) love:

For each man kills the thing he loves
By each let this be heard
Some do it with a bitter look
Some with a flattering word
The coward does it with a kiss
The brave man with a sword!

How are we to read the refrain of Wilde's *Ballad* with regard to *Pro Eto*? Brown and others who have interpreted *Pro Eto*'s reference to Wilde as referring to Mayakovsky's jealousy of Lily have left the details of interpretation to the reader. If 'the thing' Mayakovsky loves is Lily, is the poem to be read as threatening to her? Or, if we take Mayakovsky's violence to be self-directed, are we to understand that by killing himself (bravely or otherwise), he is naming himself as the thing he loves? A third and less literal reading presents itself. If, as I have argued above, *Pro Eto* is not only, and perhaps not even chiefly, about Mayakovsky's jealous love for Brik, she becomes a symbol, sometimes representing the bourgeois comforts the poet hates himself for enjoying, sometimes the *byt* he longs to transcend, and sometimes the Beatrice who inspires him onward in his struggles. She represents, in other words, aspects of his own version of revolution: aspiration and renunciation. If we read the poem this way, it may be that what the poet kills—metaphorically speaking—is not Lily or his love for her, but his idealized vision of the revolution and his own place within it.

Ballad's speaker repeatedly returns to the physical details of death and decay: the hanged man's bulging eyes and swollen purple throat are recalled several times, as are images of his naked body, burned by lime. This preoccupation with the lot of the physical

³²⁵ Brown, 236.

body reveals a horror not only of bodily disintegration, but of a worldview in which a body is only a body--a mass of material. That view is embodied by one of three ‘extras’ in Wilde’s *Ballad*.

The Governor was strong upon
The Regulations Act
The Doctor said that Death was
But a scientific fact:
And twice a day the Chaplain called
And left a little tract.

The Doctor’s statement reflects a deeply materialist belief, in which the body is simply a collection of materials divided into systems; it implies that nothing is lost in death, that there is no animating spirit or soul to depart from the body. Death, in this view, is merely a dissolution of those materials, the malfunctioning of a system: a fact. The doctor’s reductionist materialism has relegated the chaplain and his religion to pamphleteering.

In *Pro Eto*, as in *Ballad*, we are shown a modern, materialist and positivist world in which life’s social and material aspects are given prominence, and the spheres of emotion and the spiritual—*bytie*—are constricted. Mayakovsky captures this point when, persecuted by a mob of newspapermen and gossips, he both provokes their torment and accepts it:

I won’t interfere.
 Insults are pointless.
I’m only poetry
 I’m only the soul.

Я вам не мешаю.
 К чему оскорбления.
Я только стих
 я только душа.³²⁶

In view of the martyrdom that Mayakovsky suffers in the poem shortly after these lines, the euphemistic apology presents another interpretation of the “victim” and “crime” alluded to by the reference to the *Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Perhaps “the thing he loves” is not Lily but “poetry” and “the soul,” made superfluous by the revolution’s—his own—uncompromising commitment to materialism and utility?

The same elements appear in an unusual piece of writing by Rodchenko, in which he gives an account of a museum of creativity and inventiveness. In it, Rodchenko muses on themes that are at the heart of this dissertation: the relationship of materialism and materiality to transcendence; the role of aesthetics and technology in art; the place of everyday life and its physical comforts in the future socialist state; and the confusing contradictions of Constructivist rhetoric. It is certainly an unusual introduction to a report on a museum; it is arguably as strange

³²⁶ *Pro Eto*, 36.

a document as any within the canon of Constructivist literature. For these reasons I quote from it at length.

The cold of the autopsy laboratory will blow from such a museum, the dryness of mathematical formulas, the sharp, pitiless realism of the analytic.

Here, everything is invented, shredded, measured, dismembered, calculated, made deliberately, reduced to bare formulas.

Nonetheless, you, inspired creators of life and feeling, you will begin to use these invented creations for your own works if you are moving toward the future, because that's the way it has been and will be.

It is only from here that new paths of creation will proceed, and in its cold wisdom that special, creative future life will be eternally hidden.

Except for non-objective and decorative painting, art in general has not gone further than decorating parlors and studies for coziness over the couch.

But the art of the future will not be a cozy decoration of family apartments. It will be as necessary as forty-eight-story skyscrapers, grandiose bridges, wireless telegraphs, aeronautics, underwater vessels, etc.

And the art of contemporary painting goes further than technology. Dead electricity will destroy the comfort of the fireplace in the end! The non-objective airplane will destroy the railroad! The abstract wireless telegraph will destroy letters!³²⁷

Though the introduction to the museum touches on familiar themes, it is by no means a straightforward statement of its author's beliefs. Its paragraphs shift from register to register and even genre to genre, and seem to be spoken by different people, ventriloquizing one ideology and then another. They abound in abstractions and pronouncements, vagueness and obtuse repetitions.

On the one hand, Rodchenko adopts the language, and in part the sense and syntax, of revolutionary manifestos. Combinations of words recall the catchphrases with which Constructivists extolled their project: "inspired creators of life", "moving toward the future", "creative future life", "art of the future," and "as necessary as forty-eight story skyscrapers..."

On the other hand, the introduction to the museum reads like a parody of Constructivism, mocking its pronouncements about the role of art, technology and aesthetics in its imagined, utopian future. The text's consistent pairing of death and violence with markers of positivist thought (measurement, mathematics, formulas), and of destruction with new, scientific inventions (electricity, the airplane, the telegraph) suggest a tongue-in-cheek condemnation of Constructivist theory's privileging of materiality and utility above all other concerns. Even the all-too-familiar tenet about the future art's utility comes apart in Rodchenko's examples. The wonder of steel bridges may be a standard Constructivist (and modernist) trope, but Rodchenko's use of the word "grandiose" [грандиозный] implies a showiness and self-regarding hauteur that is at odds with the strict form-follows-function utility of the Constructivist credo. That art is not "coziness over the couch" was something Rodchenko and his colleagues fervently believed. Does it necessarily mean, though, that something "dead" should replace the coziness of the

³²⁷ Aleksandr Rodchenko, "On the Museum of Experimental Technology," [О Музее Экспериментальной Техники, 1920], *Опыты для будущего: дневники, статьи, письма, записки* (Москва: "Grant", 1996) 84-86. Transl. Jamey Gambrell, in Alexander Lavrentiev, ed., *Experiments for the Future: diaries, essays, letters, and other writings* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005). 101-102.

family hearth? Can Rodchenko, having lived through several Moscow winters in an unheated apartment, really wish for an end to the comforts of the fireplace?

The museum introduction is a highly ambiguous document, inhabiting neither an earnest nor a satirical position entirely. Its language of violence, cold, death, dismemberment and destruction is so negative and unappealing that it begs to be read as satire. Yet it echoes the language of various Constructivist statements and programs--including those that Rodchenko himself wrote or signed--closely enough to make one second guess that interpretation.

A further paragraph helps settle the question. Though not necessarily a crystalline statement of Rodchenko's views, it stands out from the others as a long paragraph that reads with a sustained, authentic-sounding voice, and an apparent absence of satire:

Materialism eats into our heads day by day, people are afraid to say a word in which there is not something material, as though everything had become just dandy, sober, and clear. It's gotten to the point where art is skill, skill and nothing more. But it is aesthetics, feeling, mysticism. Genius—is also aesthetics. Talent—is window dressing, and so on. And what did they give to us, all those “clear heads” and sober minds? Yes, they needed to cleanse themselves of aesthetics and inspiration, but the genius of creative work—is indeed great. Materialization is a good thing, but if it rejects everything except trousers, it simply means that dilettantes have taken to preaching, people who can't create, and therefore it's to their advantage to try to vulgarize everything they are unable to attain.³²⁸

In this paragraph Rodchenko seems to expound in plain language that which is only suggested by preceding parodic paragraphs: the impossibility of the artist's—that is, his own—position. He is an artist in a movement that is against art and artistry. He recognizes the importance of genius and inspiration, but is part of—indeed is a leading figure in—a movement that cannot accept it, holding instead that art is nothing more than artistry or even trickery (“window dressing” [очковтирательство]), that creating must be like any other kind of labor, and thus cannot rely on genius and inspiration. Rodchenko's position is best summed up by his lament that materialism, while a good thing, has denied “everything except trousers” [все, кроме штанов]: what remains is dry goods, product, bereft of life and spirit. ‘Nothing but trousers’ points, perhaps, to what is lost in the most doctrinaire of the Constructivists' visions of a materialistic, utilitarian practice, though it does not name that loss. It suggests that for Rodchenko, himself a sometime-idealist and the author of uncompromising programs, there were moments when the Constructivists' version of the new Soviet art—stripped of inspiration, feeling, aesthetics, and, yes, mysticism—was too rigid, too confining, perhaps even deadening. A materialism that rejects everything except trousers does not leave the artist much to work with.

In 1924 Trotsky himself saw the problem. “The error of ‘*Lef*,’ at least some of its theorists,” he writes, “appears to us in its most generalized form, when they make an

³²⁸ Ibid.

ultimatum for the fusion of art with life.”³²⁹ Trotsky acknowledges that *Lef* theorists are correct in their assertions that art had existed so far in the domain of the “privileged classes” and that art would, on its current path, grow ever more closely linked with life and production.

It is good that the ‘*Lef*’ understands this and explains it. But it is not good when they present a short time ultimatum on the bases of the present-day art, when they say: leave your ‘lathe’ and fuse with life. In other words, the poets, the painters, the sculptors, the actors must cease to reflect, to depict, to write poems, to paint pictures, to carve sculptures, to speak before the footlights, but they must carry their art directly into life. But how, and where, and through what gates?³³⁰

Elsewhere he makes a similar point in tones that are more admiring, but also more caustic and flippant: “Mayakovsky proves, by complicated and rhymed verses, the superfluousness of verse and rhyme, and he promises to write mathematical formulas, though we have mathematicians for that purpose.”³³¹

Looking back over a decade later at 1923’s incongruous publications of *Pro Eto* and *LEF*, Mayakovsky’s friend and colleague Victor Shklovsky saw the same problem:

Now, imagine for a moment the position of the poet. He is at the head of a journal, and this journal opposes poetry. There was no place for Mayakovsky. With his love, as well as his verses on love.³³²

• • •

Common to the above chapters on *Pro Eto* has been the theme of the writer’s and artist’s ambivalence with regard to the stated goals of Constructivism, especially as formulated in *LEF*. This double-mindedness, sometimes seemingly conscious and at other times not, comes through in tensions between what is theorized and what is made, frictions that are manifest in the particulars of *Pro Eto*’s verse and images. These last three voices—Shklovsky’s, Trotsky’s, and Rodchenko’s own in his introduction to the Museum of Experimental Technology—all acknowledge the strain between the tasks Constructivists set themselves and the means they had to accomplish them. Indeed, these voices, implying that Constructivist theory had made for its artists something of a Procrustean bed, state plainly one of *Pro Eto*’s deepest-running currents. That these voices are external to *Pro Eto* suggest, however, that the strain I have remarked on in the work is not limited to it; that the confinements imposed by the Constructivists’ ardent desires that their art be of the revolution did not hold captive Rodchenko and Mayakovsky alone. On the contrary, I suggest that my reading of *Pro Eto* is best understood as a case study, demonstrating how an interpretation of Constructivist work as in tension with its theory, rather than an illustration of it, can throw Constructivist production into greater relief.

³²⁹ Trotsky, *Art and Revolution*, 119.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

³³² Shklovsky, *Mayakovsky and his Circle*, 170.

Illustrations

Fig. 1-10: Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Pro Eto*, book cover and illustrations



Fig. 1: Cover



Fig. 2: 'She's in bed'



Fig. 3: *Troglodyte*

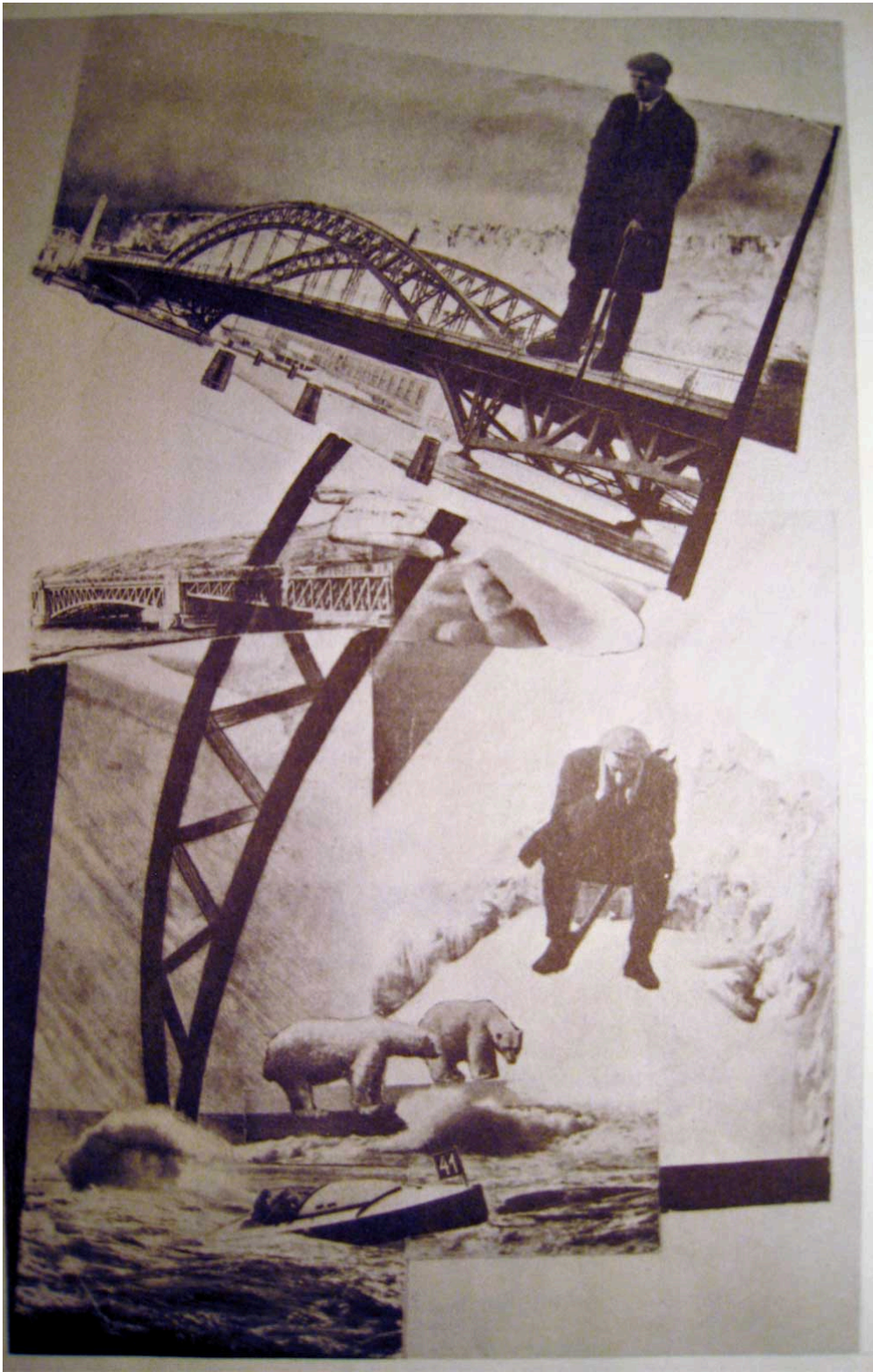


Fig. 4: *Bridge, or 'I paw my ears'*



Fig. 5: Centuries



Fig. 6: Jazz-Band



Fig. 7: *Like a Cross, or 'I wave my arms'*



Fig. 8: *Four Times* and detail (right)

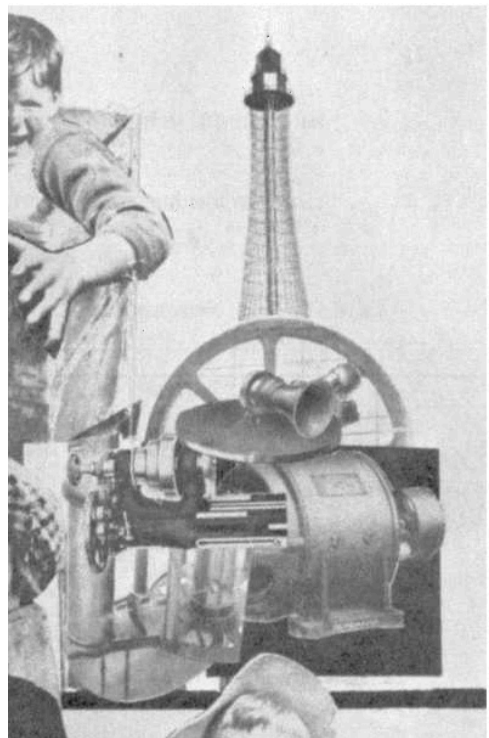




Fig. 9: 'She loved animals'



Fig. 11: A. Rodchenko and V. Mayakovsky, poster advertisement for *Rezinotrest* pacifiers.

нуль
любого яда и веса
Страшнее нуль
оттуда
сюда вот
кухаркой оброненное и
проглоченным кроликом
по кабелю
вижу
СЛОВО ползет.
Страшнее слов
из древнейшей др
где самку клыком добы
ползло
из шнура —

Fig. 12: *Pro Eto* typography: the word “WORD” is bolded and in a different font.

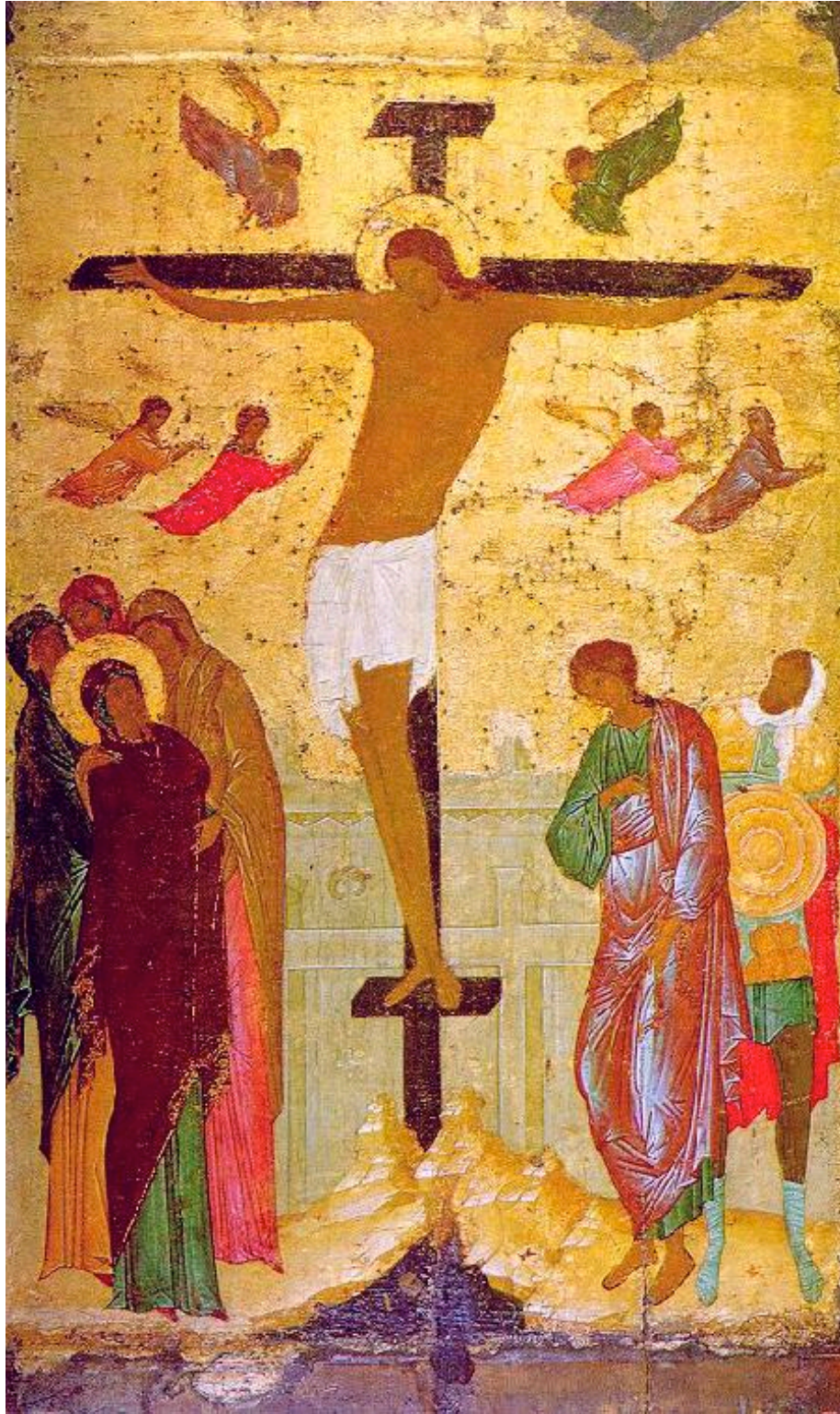


Fig. 13: Dionysius: *Crucifixion (Tretyakov)*

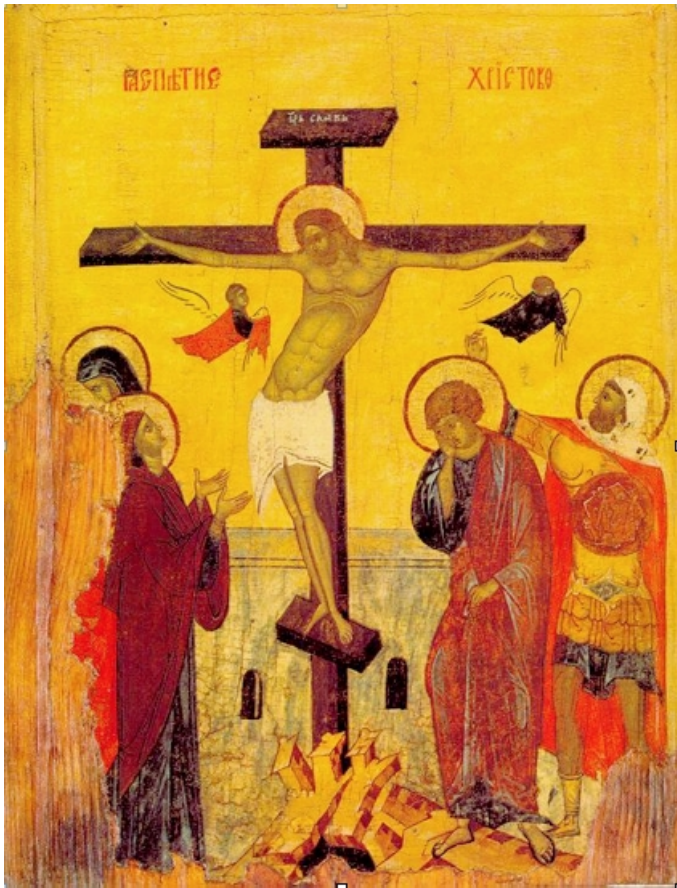


Fig. 14: 14th c. Moscow School
Crucifixion, (Andrei Rublev Museum)



Fig. 15: 16th c. Moscow
school, Crucifixion.
(Grottaferrata Monastery)



Fig. 16: Natalia Goncharova: *Four Evangelists*, 1910-11.



Fig. 17-19: *John the Baptist, Saint Peter, and Saint Paul*. Novgorod school, 16th c.



Fig. 20: Mikhail Larionov, *Still Life with Icon*, 1912.



Fig. 21: Mikhail Larionov, *Autumn*, 1912.

Fig. 22: Unknown icon painter, *Mark the Evangelist*, 17th c., detail



Fig. 23: exhibition photograph of ‘0.10: The Last Futurist Exhibition,’ 1915.



Fig. 24: Unknown icon painter, *Grottaferrata Pantocrator*, late 19th c.



Fig. 25: Unknown icon painter, *Acheiropoietos* or *Mandylion*, 17th c.

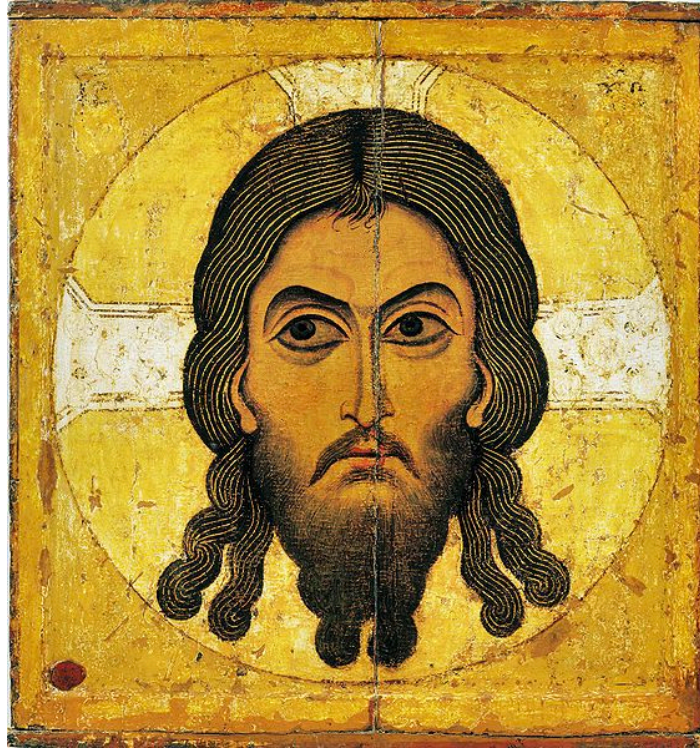


Fig. 26: Unknown icon painter, *Nerukotvornyi*, Novgorod school, early 12th c.

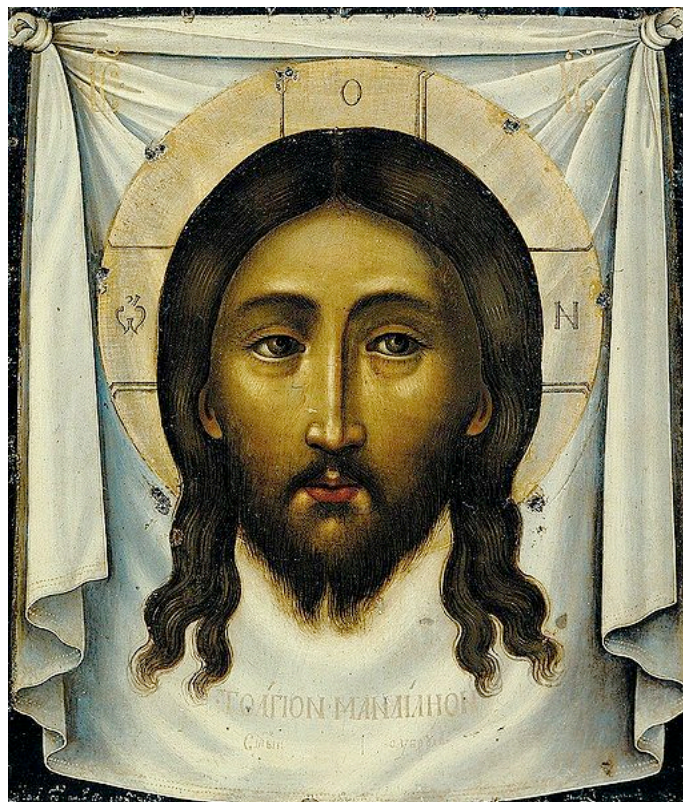


Fig. 27 Simon Ushakov, *Image of the Saviour Not Made with Human Hands*, mid-17th c.



Fig. 28: Unknown icon painter: *Derzhavnaya* icon

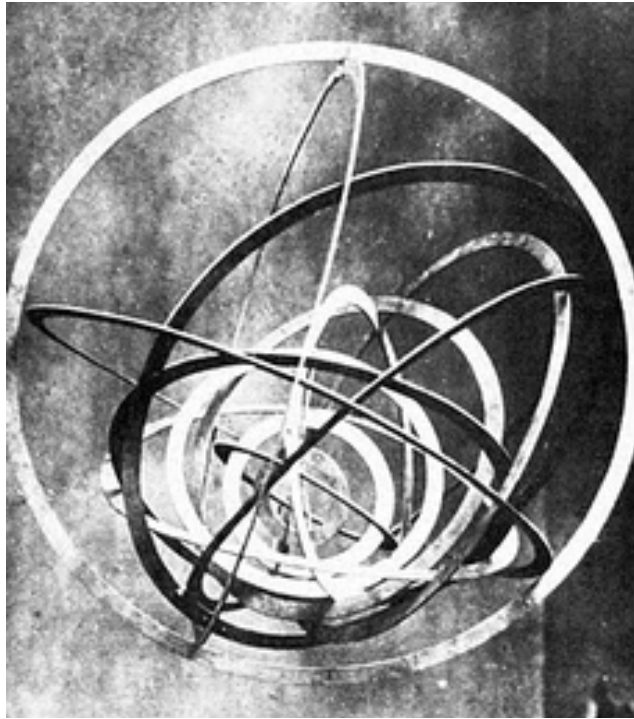


Fig. 29: Rodchenko, Circular Hanging Construction.



Fig. 30: Rodchenko, Oval Hanging Construction.

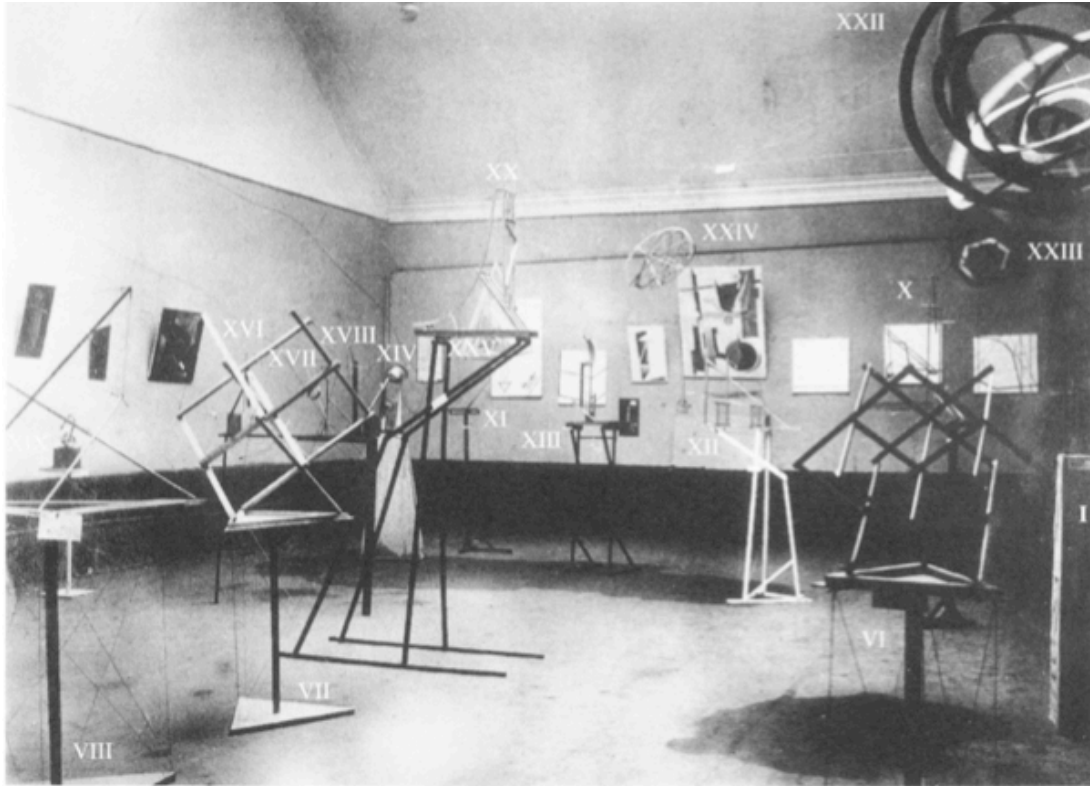


Fig. 31: Rodchenko. View of Obmokhu exhibition, 1921. Image from Maria Gough’s “In the Laboratory of Construction.” Roman numerical labels are Gough’s.

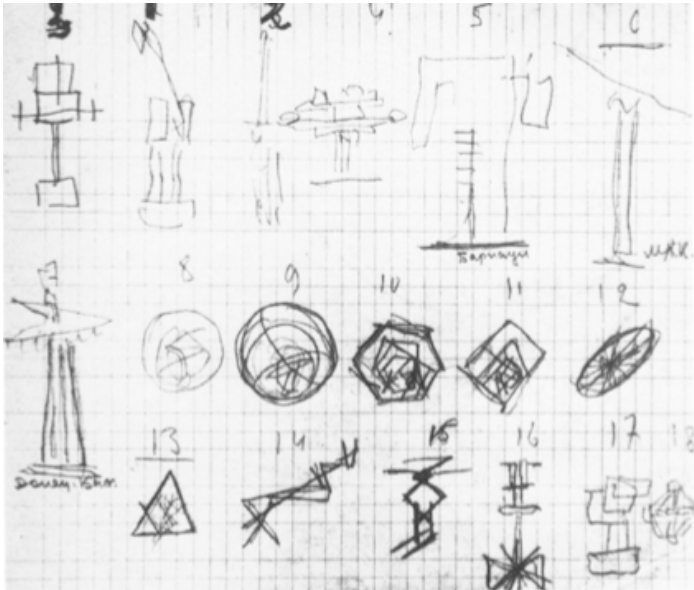


Fig. 32: Rodchenko, sketches for Spatial Hanging Constructions (nos. 9-13)

Fig. 33: Photograph of Rodchenko in Constructivist outfit, standing before his Hanging Spatial Constructions in their archivable (flattened) state.

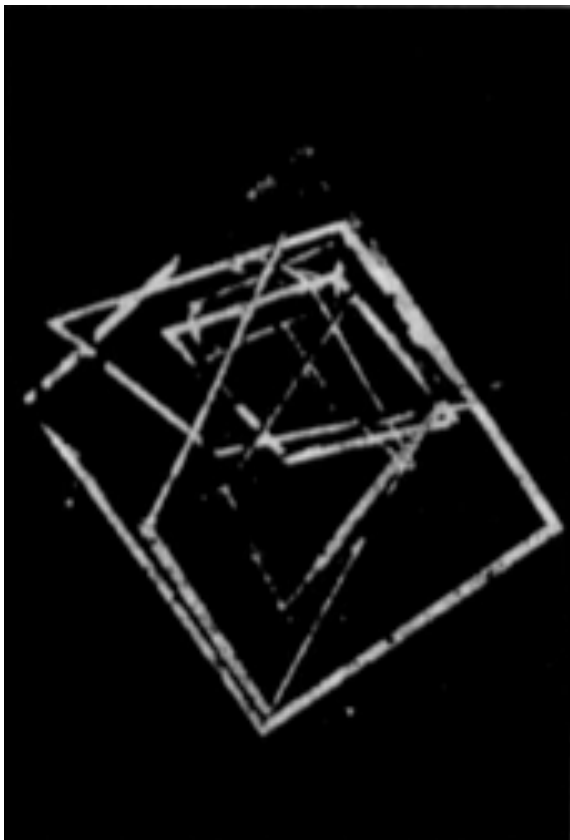


Fig. 34: Exhibition view of Rodchenko's Hanging Spatial Construction, 1920, reproduced in *Kino-Fot*, 1922.

Fig. 35: Vladimir Stenberg, Construction for a Spatial Structure, No. 6, 1920.

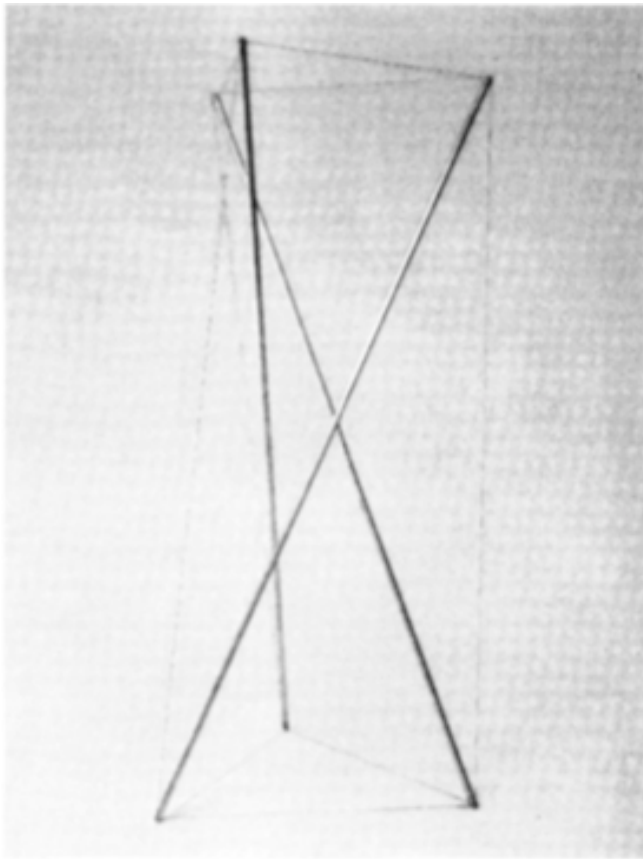


Fig. 36: Karl Ioganson, Cold Structure IX, 1920-1.



Fig. 37: Hannah Höch, *Das Schöne Mädchen* (and detail, right)



Fig. 38: Höch, *Dada Dance* (*Dada-Tanz*), 1922.



Fig. 39: Höch, Da-Dandy, 1919.

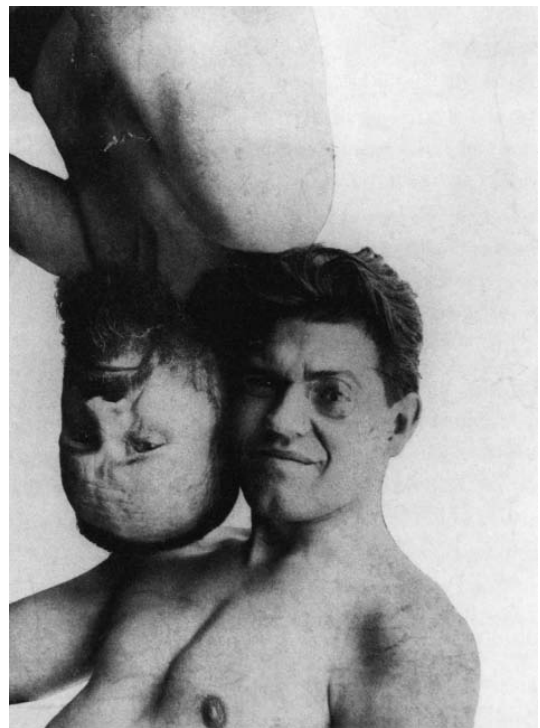


Fig. 40: Raoul Hausmann,
Double Portrait, 1920.



Fig. 41: Höch, detail of *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* (see also Fig. 43)



Fig. 42: Hausmann, *Tatlin at Home*, 1920.



Fig. 43: Höch, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*, 1920.

Fig. 44: Höch, detail of *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*

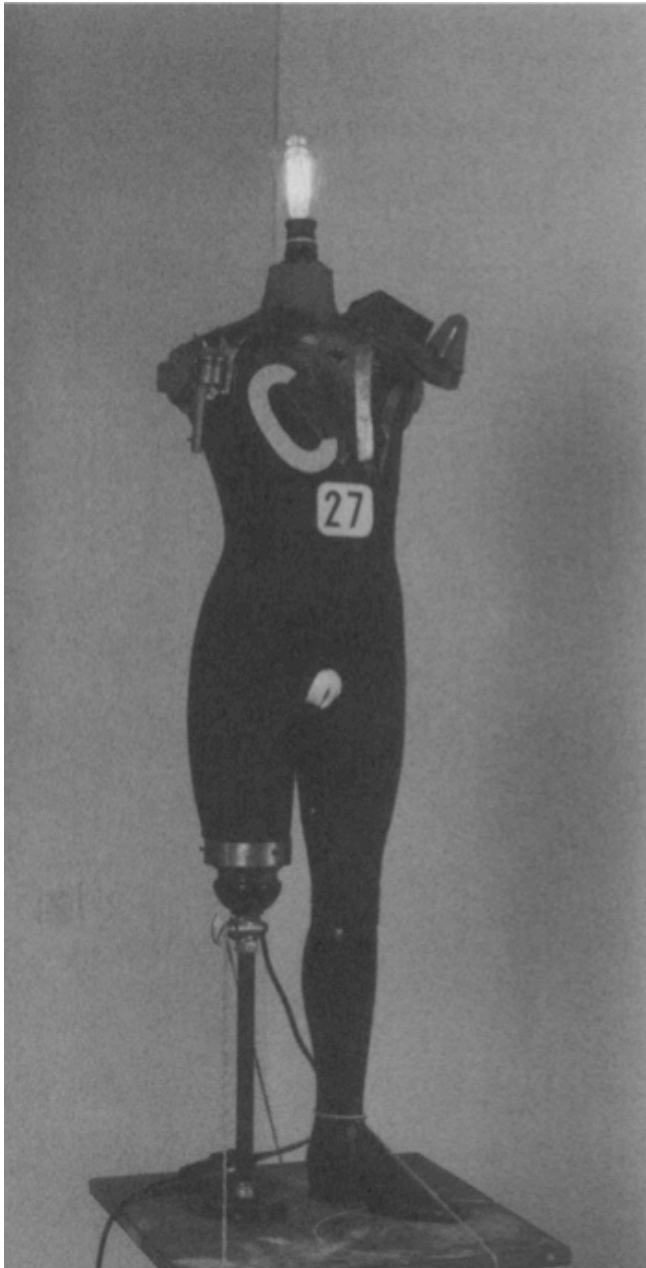


Fig. 45: George Grosz and John Heartfield, *The Middle Class Philistine Heartfield Gone Wild (Electro-Mechanical Tatlin-Sculpture)*, 1920.

Fig. 46: Rodchenko, *Crisis*, 1922.

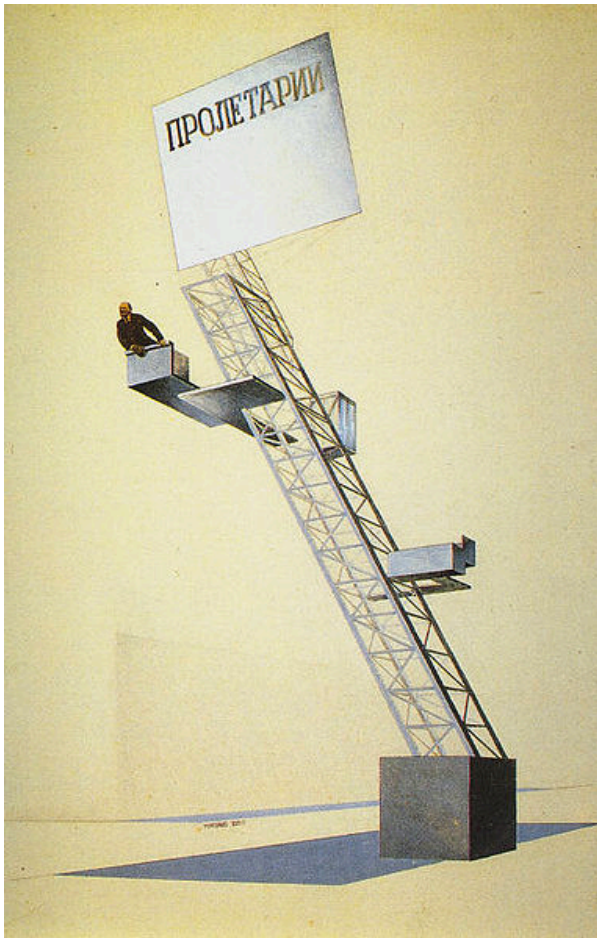


Fig. 47: El Lissitzky, *Lenin Tribune*, 1920.

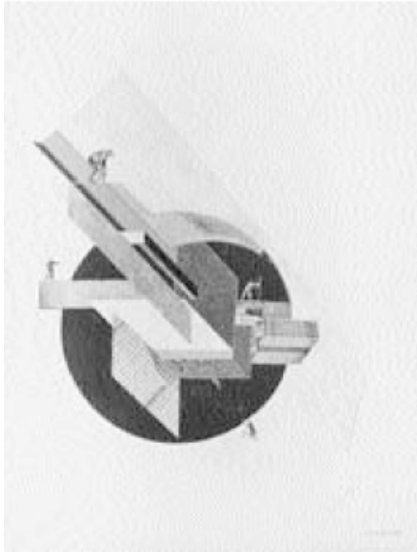


Fig. 48: Gustave Klutssis, *Dynamic City*.



Fig. 49: Klutssis, *Electrification of the Entire Country*.



Fig. 50: Klutsis, *We are Building a New World*, 1920.

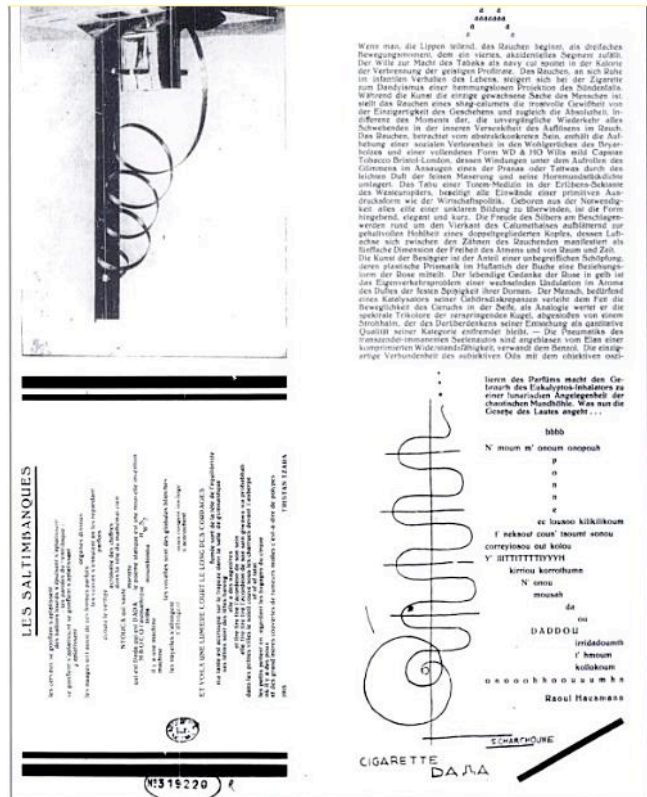


Fig. 51: Hausmann and Höch at the International Dada Fair.



Fig. 52: Grosz and Heartfield at the International Dada Fair.

Fig. 53: Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *Nickel-Plastik*, and Serge Charcoune, *Cigarette Dada*, in an unfolded 4-page section of *Mecano*, no. Blau, 1922.



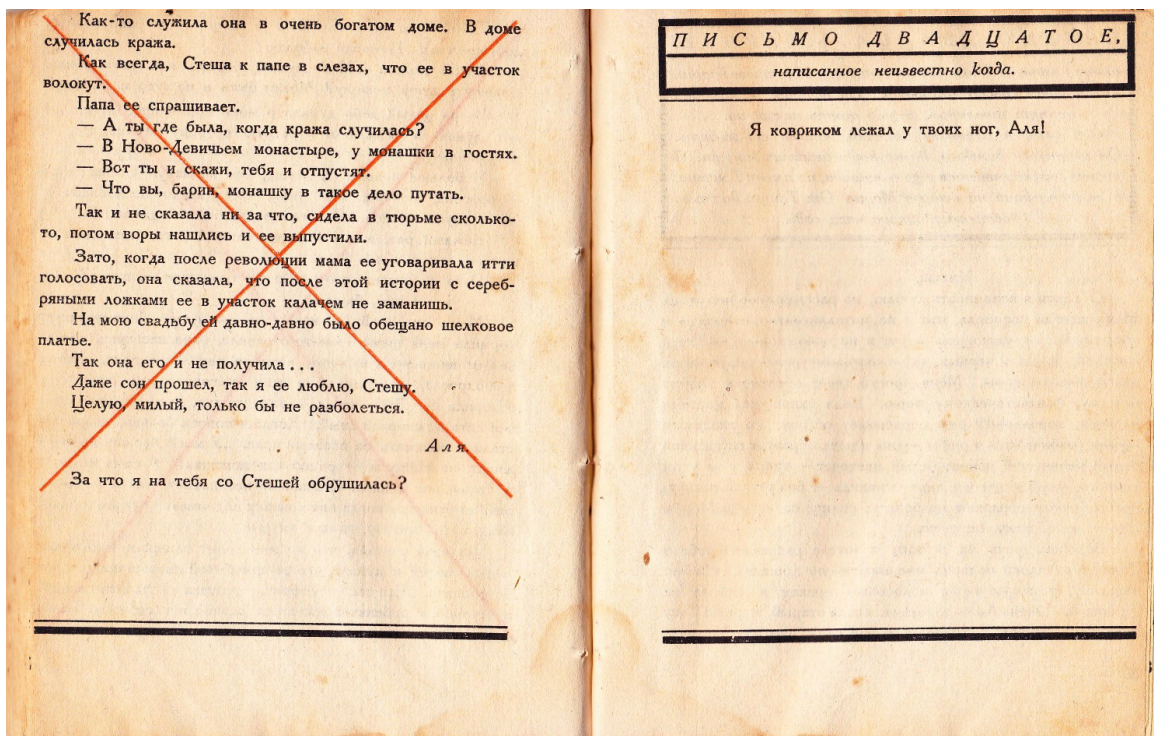
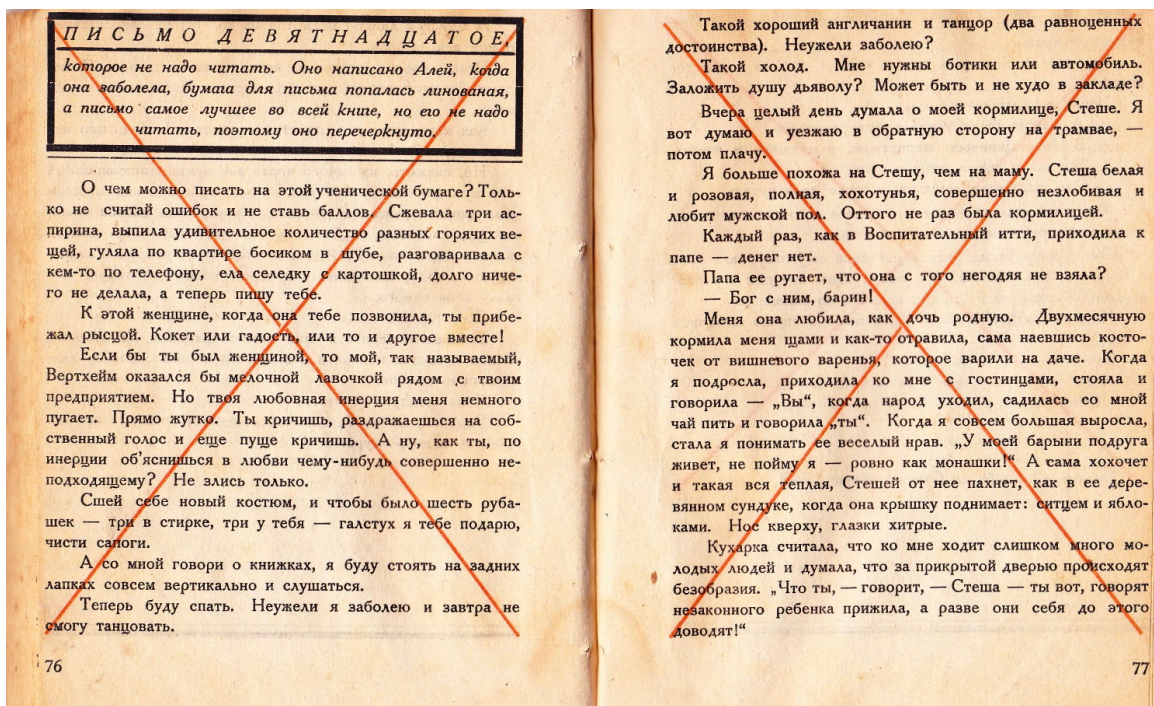


Fig. 54: Zoo, original typography of Letter 19 in 1923 edition.

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