

Gambling Anarchically: The Early Russian Avant-Garde

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Abstract

This article argues the aesthetics of the early Russian avant-garde of 1910–18 is best understood as autonomous from subsequent developments during the Soviet era. The early Russian avant-garde championed an aesthetic of anarchy which permeates the philosophical outlook of the movement and its artistic productions. I examine an early lithographic Futurist book, *A Game in Hell*, to showcase the anarchic tenor of the movement.

The Russian avant-garde's pre-revolutionary years (1910–18) stand out for the remarkable intensity, concentration, and plurality of artistic practices and theoretical concepts that were compressed into that period. The aesthetics of anarchy was an essential feature of this open and diverse moment, a feature which those involved did not even articulate until the period had come to an end. This retrospective articulation, after the fact, so to speak, is itself indicative of a paradoxical contradiction in the movement, namely the unwillingness to build a dominant school or style controlled by one leading aesthetic system. Different trends that the critical literature often joins together under the vague terminological umbrella of the "Futurist movement" constituted the most noticeable element of the early avant-garde in Russia. "Russian Futurism" included many different

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Figure 1 Hylaeian poets, Moscow, 1913: Aleksei Kruchenykh, David Burliuk, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Vladimir Burliuk, and Benedikt Livshits.

artistic and literary groups, which at times were allied, or in competition and even at odds with one another. In poetry, Futurism applied to the “Hylaeans,” Elena Guro, Velimir Khlebnikov, the brothers David and Nikolai Burliuks, Vasily Kamensky, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Benedikt Livshits. (Fig. 1) They worked along with the painters Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, Olga Rozanova, Kazimir Malevich, to name a few. But the truth is, “Futurism” in Russia is not so much a history of schools and movements as of personalities such as Kruchenykh, who inspired the first Futurist lithographic books which served as a creative laboratory for the avant-garde movement. Indeed, the experience of visual arts was an important ingredient in the activity of the poets identified with this term, many of whom — including Kruchenykh, Mayakovsky, and David Burliuk — were also trained as artists.

Visual and literary production, often described by different scholars as “Futurist,” was actually very diverse stylistically and often eclectic; thus the terminology just doesn’t hold up if we define this term strictly according to stylistic and formal categories. It makes much more sense to treat Futurism as an aesthetic philosophy referring to “radical revolution” in art and life, and to prioritize this ideological outlook. Certainly the latter perspective corresponds to the opinions of many Russian avant-gardists: Natalia Goncharova, for example, wrote in 1914 that Futurism’s main purpose was “to offer renewal and a new point of view on every sphere of human activity” (Goncharova 2002: 214).

Velimir Khlebnikov’s short poem “To Alyosha Kruchenykh” (1920), the first line of which has acquired great symbolic importance in retrospect, is, arguably, key to understanding the major quest behind the poetics of the early Russian avant-garde:

A Game in Hell, hard work in heaven —
our first lessons were pretty good ones
together, remember?

We nibbled like mice at turbid time —
In hoc signo vinces!

(Khlebnikov 1997: 79)

The allusion is to the lithographed Futurist book *Igra v adu* (A Game in Hell), a poem that Khlebnikov co-authored with his fellow Hylaeian Aleksei Kruchenykh, originally published in 1912. (Fig. 2) Here the proverbial “Futurist devil,” seen through the lens of dark



Figure 2 Velimir Khlebnikov with a skull, St. Petersburg, 1909.

irony and *lubok* (the popular print style) grotesquerie, appears for the first time, playing with a sinner who has bet his soul in a card game. Many years later Kruchenykh recalled this work in his memoirs:

In Khlebnikov's room, untidy and bare as that of a student, I pulled out of my calico notebook two sheets, some 40–50 lines of a draft of my first poem, *A Game in Hell*. I humbly showed it to him. Suddenly, to my surprise, Velimir sat down and began adding his own lines above, below, and around my text. That was typical of him — he was ignited by the tiniest spark. He showed me the pages filled with his minute handwriting. Together we read them, argued, revised. That was how we unexpectedly and involuntarily became co-authors (Kruchenykh 1999: 56).¹

¹ On Russian Futurist books, see Evgenii Kovtun, *Russkaia futuristicheskaia kniga* (Moscow: Kniga, 1989); Gerald Janeczek, *The Look of Russian Literature: Avant-Garde Visual Experiments, 1900–1930* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); Susanne Compton, *World Backwards: Russian Futurist Books, 1912–1916* (London: British Library, 1978); Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909–1923* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Vladimir Poliakov, *Knigi russkogo futurizma* (Moscow: Gileia, 1998), and the comprehensive catalogue *The Russian Avant-Garde Book, 1910–1934*, ed. Margit Rowell and Deborah Whye (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002).

In their work for this poem ridiculing the “archaic devil,” the first designer of the book, Natalia Goncharova, and later Malevich and Rozanova, who designed the second edition, adhered to the centuries-old folk *lubok* tradition. However, the language, metaphors, and general intonation of the poem could not be more contemporary: in the Futurists’ own critical interpretation, it mocked “the modern” vision of hell, which “is ruled by greediness and chance, and is ruined, in the end, by boredom” (Kruchenykh 1912).² (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4)



Figure 3 Kazimir Malevich, Front and back covers for the second edition of Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh’s *Igra v adu* (A Game in Hell), (St. Petersburg: Svet, 1914). Edition: 800. Lithograph, 18.1×13.3 cm. Gift of The Judith Rothschild Foundation (46.2001), The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

² My translation. The first edition of *Game in Hell* was designed solely by Goncharova, who created sixteen compositions (including front and back cover), except for the textual parts handwritten by Kruchenykh in lithographic pencil. The second edition was designed by Olga Rozanova and Kazimir Malevich.

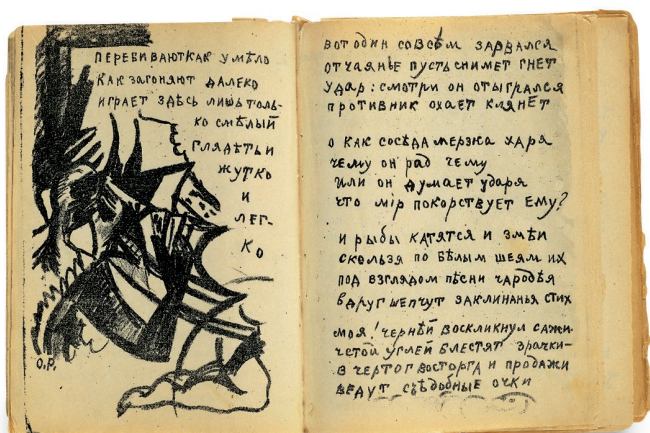


Figure 4 Olga Rozanova, composition for the second edition of Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh's *Igra v adu* (A Game in Hell), (St. Petersburg: Svet, 1914). Edition: 800. Lithograph, 18.1×13.3 cm. Gift of The Judith Rothschild Foundation (46.2001), The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

This Futurist — but not the least *futuristic* — hell resembles Dostoevsky's sarcastic and anti-utopian vision of the “perfect” future society in *Notes from the Underground*. Dostoevsky envisions a future sterilized of the slightest trace of individual creative will or unpredictable chance intervening in the absolute perfection of the closed system, where man turns into an automaton, “nothing more than something in the nature of a piano key.”

All human action will automatically be computed . . . mathematically, like a table of logarithms, reaching to 108,000 and compiled in a directory; or still better there will appear various loyal publications, like our contemporary encyclopedias, in which everything will be so accurately calculated and designated that there will no longer be any actions or adventures in the world . . . Of course, you will think up all sorts of things out of boredom! Indeed, gold pins get stuck into people out of boredom, but all this would not matter. (Dostoevsky 1999: 26)

Lurking in the background behind the tortured protagonist of *A Game in Hell*, who signs a diabolic deal with his own bloodied finger and bets his soul in hell ("the one who lost greedily sucking his broken finger; this loser and creator of accurate systems is begging for a coin"), (Kruchenykh 1912) one recognizes Dostoevsky's critique of a positivist and utilitarian theorist who prides himself on acting "for the happiness of the human race."

Chance, a notion that encompasses the unpredictable nature of individual will and creative desire explored in Dostoevsky's poetics, is also rooted in the philosophy of freedom so fundamental to anarchism. Suitably then, it appears as the poem's refrain: chance is "sought after as a treasure." And it is no coincidence that chance is the metaphor and formal device most widely acknowledged in Russian avant-garde poetics: "by correcting, thinking over, polishing, we banish chance from art. . . by banishing chance we deprive our works of that which is most valuable" (Krusanov 2009:118).

An irrepressible game ensues, based on the refutation of the primacy of pragmatic logic and determinism in art. The game is designed to break the mechanical perception of so-called common sense and tap into the readers' intuition and the unconscious instead. Chance's set of rules — or, rather, the lack thereof — are the artistic principles of the game's players. There is a momentous game of self-portrayal in the *Game in Hell*, an image of gamblers who choose the different "path of strife and struggle, path of the broken Book," and "kingdom of uncanny dreams." These are the contemporary "underground men" — the Russian avant-garde — who persistently choose a marginal position in relation to ruling social or aesthetic ideology, voluntary outsiders, with "enough space in their pockets for both worlds — for love and misery" (Kruchenykh 1912).

The metaphor of hell has yet another function: it marks the beginning of an early avant-garde wariness of the contemporary city, which "connects through fights, no friendship," and where "everybody just wants to win" and "songs are squeals" (ibid.). This paradoxically "Futurist" anti-urbanism is very characteristic of the early Russian avant-garde and distinguishes the Russians from the urbanist and technological utopian of their Italian Futurist counterparts. In Vladimir Mayakovsky's play *Vladimir Mayakovsky: A Tragedy* (1913), the anti-urban mythologem is sharply at variance with the cult of the city and machine civilization in the works of the Italians. Even in Mayakovsky's early poetry, which can be characterized as obsessed with the city, there is no hint of utopian "positivism." A

similar thread can be found in work by other members of Hyleae, such as Elena Guro's early urbanist prose book *Sharmanka* (The Hurdy-Gurdy, 1909) and Vasily Kamensky's "anti-urbanistic" novel *Zemlyanka* (The Mud Hut, 1910). "It is distressing in the city, amidst hourly killing," Guro wrote in her diary. "Perhaps in the teeming city we fluids of the intelligentsia will be given credit for front-line duty. New people. They wear out quickly here" (Guro 1988: 30).



Figure 5 Olga Rozanova, *Fire in the City*, 1914. Oil on tin metal, 71×71. Samara Regional Art Museum, Samara.

Not very surprisingly, this anxious mood is repeated in Rozanova's catastrophic *Fire in the City* (1914), and greatly influenced Mayakovsky's poetic vision. (Fig. 5) But, unlike Rozanova's, Mayakovsky's city is personified and turns out to be a gambler. Thus, his first published poem "Night" (*Noch'*, 1912) opens with an imaginary scene of

gambling projected onto the cityscape, in which darkened windows are depicted as palms holding playing cards of yellowish electric light. In Mayakovsky's later poetry, this transformation becomes a characteristic trope, and the metamorphosis that turns the poet's world into a gamble is visualized in some of his painterly works, such as *Roulette* (1915, The State Mayakovsky Museum, Moscow). (Fig. 6)



Figure 6 Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Roulette*, 1915. Oil on canvas, paper, and collage, 79×54 cm. The State Mayakovsky Museum, Moscow. Photo credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

Personification is one essence of poetic play and myth-making. This animated, though hostile, city is inseparably tied to the poet as his evil double, his prison, his curse. In his painting *Yellow Blouse* (1918, private collection, Moscow), which also figures as Mayakovsky's self-portrait, his lyrical persona (an abstracted human silhouette recognizable by his infamous striped yellow blouse) is faceless and melts into the streets of the city to become one with it. The poet does not emerge from the city; quite the contrary, he is devoured by it, is disappearing in it, becoming it. The intense rhythm and tempo of Mayakovsky's poetic speech is impetuous, dictated by the visionary image interjected into poetic narration. In comparing the Symbolist vision of the city with Mayakovsky's futuristic image, Kruchenykh emphasizes, "There is not even any superficially descriptive side, but only the inner life of the city, which is not contemplated, but experienced (Futurism in full swing!). And so the city disappears, and what reigns instead is a kind of hell" (Kruchenykh 1914: 23).

"A Game in Hell" and "hard work in heaven" are phrases that describe the first creative lessons for all Russian "Futurians," poets and painters alike, who learned to prefer riddles and paradoxes and ignore utilitarian pragmatism in life and art. They refrained from sinking into predictability to avoid becoming part of it, and although they existed in the "hell" of the quotidian, they refused to belong to it. Early Russian Futurism was one of the most "resistant" movements of the avant-garde: resistant to tradition and to any ideological or aesthetic compromise. The Russians believed that one could break through to this experience only by means of "work" and "a game" — in other words, by making art as if it were a game. The open space for this "game" was a new kind of art. And the fundamental condition for its existence was the coming together of creative activity and unbounded joy in the element of play ("play" and "game" are the same word — *igra* — in Russian), with its vital energy and spontaneity. In Malevich's *Aviator* (1914), there is a speculative riddle resembling a traditional rebus made up of different random objects and fragments, including the "torn off" sign and fragments of words. (Fig. 7) In this game, however, there is no "prize," no single winning answer, since the alogical riddle is not amenable to any pragmatic rationalizing. The Futurist rupture breaks any automatic perception and produces the dissonance, which Shklovsky, inspired by Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh's practice of "transrational" language, would soon define as the artistic device of "estrangement" or "defamiliarization" (*ostranenie*). The poetics of play and chance, as well as the early

concept of “deconstruction,” or the Futurist shift, manifest as the anarchic method of making art regardless of any aesthetic system.

“Oh, for a pack of cards!” plead Vladimir Mayakovsky in his brilliant early poem “The Backbone Flute” (1915). The motif of playing cards — whether explicit or just subtly implied — eventually turned out to be one of the most significant elements in the avant-garde’s symbology. The symbolism of the “playing cards” — and of the game itself — was rooted in the Russian culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. According to the Russian semiotician and cultural historian Yuri Lotman, in the nineteenth century, the structure of the card game developed the trait of being a “universal model” projected onto life (Lotman 1975: 132). Certainly, the Russian avant-garde drew heavily upon a Romantic fascination with this theme (and everything associated with it in the Russian social and cultural context). If one agrees with the notion that in Russia there was no continuity of tradition but, rather, a tradition of “the break,” then we can understand the early avant-garde’s attitude to tradition and history. They sought neither a blatant destruction nor a total negation of the past for the sake of a utopian notion of the future. Instead, demonstrating they were aware of their historical role, the Futurists performed a complex act of cultural “archeology” that questioned and deconstructed tradition, and this is another aesthetic aspect of the Futurist “shift.” The dynamics of this shift — temporal, spatial, and semantic displacement, the dislocation of form, rhythm, and time — shaped the early avant-garde’s “estranged” sense of aesthetics.

Before he left the country in 1915, Mikhail Larionov was perhaps Russian art’s most restless, radical genius. “We all went through Larionov’s school,” Mayakovsky recalled. Initially, Mikhail Larionov was attracted by the phenomenon of playing cards as a requisite component of contemporary folklore. The subject was not only reflected in many popular prints, such as the widespread *Soldier and the Devil* series, but was a fascinating aspect of *lubok* culture’s urbanism. (Fig. 8) The fact that cards were a familiar element of everyday life is important: twelve million packs of cards a year were manufactured in Russia in the 1910s. Playing-card symbols graced dream books and picture postcards, and the traces of the cliché playing-card can be found in journals, newspapers, and political cartoons, where they served as common metaphors. Phrases from the card-playing lexicon were firmly entrenched in the conversational idiom of the society and Larionov was the first among the avant-gardists to



Figure 7 Kazimir Malevich, *The Aviator*, 1914. Oil on canvas, 125×65 cm. The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg. Photo credit: SCALA/Art Resource, NY.



Figure 8 Unknown artist. *The Card Players*, circa 1760. Lubok woodcut, watercolored by hand. Private collection, Moscow.

draw upon the theme when, in 1910, he scandalized the conservative public by dubbing his group's first exhibition "Jack of Diamonds."

Although Larionov had begun his artistic career with dizzying success as a Postimpressionist, he rejected professional recognition and stability in favor of aesthetic exploration and further reinvention, serving as a kind of "evolving" model for most avant-garde artists. He wrote, "my task is not to assert the new art, since after that it would cease to be new, but to attempt as much as possible to move it forward. In a word, to do what life itself does as it every second gives birth to new people and creates new ways of life, out of which new possibilities are continually born" (Parkin 1913: 53). In 1912, Larionov developed his own theory of abstract art, Rayism (*luchizm*, sometimes also translated into English as Rayonism), and codified it in a book *Luchizm* (Rayism, 1913) and few essays. His theory was based on the interaction of radiating and emanating rays from any object; thus Rayism is "concerned with spatial forms that can arise from intersection of the reflected rays of different objects, forms

chosen by the artist's will" (Larionov 1988: 93). Larionov emphasized independence and the "anarchic" quality of his invention, choosing lines from Walt Whitman's poetry as an epigraph for his book on Rayism:

How they are provided for upon the earth (appearing at intervals),
 How dear and dreadful they are to the earth,
 How they inure to themselves as much as to any — what a paradox appears their age,
 How people respond to them, yet know them not,
 How there is something relentless in their fate all times . . . ³

Between 1913 and 1915, elements of performance and events, fully open to stylistic pluralism, appear in Larionov's work. In 1915, he created one of the first Russian avant-garde kinetic installations: utilizing his partner's Goncharova long hair, cut and partially glued to a wall, he constructed a collage with an electric fan playing on the hair, creating constant movement. His provocative ideas tested the limits and anticipated a postmodernist mentality of deliberative aesthetic eclecticism. (Fig. 9) He even rejected the major modernist stipulations of authenticity and originality, arguing that there is no difference between a copy and an original (Goncharova, Larionov 1988: 90).

Larionov could not tolerate any suggestion of an established aesthetic, social hierarchy or structure. When Ilya Mashkov and Petr Konchalovsky, two leading participants of the 1910 exhibition, decided to establish a Jack of Diamonds artists' association, officially registered with the Moscow governor's office and subject to rules and regulations, Larionov immediately broke off all ties with them. Together with his unregulated "gypsy" camp of followers and friends, including Goncharova, Aleksei Morgunov, Mikhail Le Dantu, Aleksandr Shevchenko, and Ilya Zdanevich, he moved on to further experimental exhibitions. "The Jack of Diamonds" (1910) was followed

³ John E. Bowlt has pointed out that the Whitman extracts are from *Leaves of Grass*: the first from "Beginners," in *Inscriptions*; the second from "I Hear It Was Charged against Me," in *Calamus*: "Whitman was known and respected in Russia particularly among the symbolists and futurists, and his *Leaves of Grass* had become popular through Konstantin Balmont's masterful translation (Moscow, 1911)." *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902–1934*, ed. and trans. John Bowlt (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1988), 302.



Figure 9 Mikhail Larionov and Ilia Zdanevich, “Why We Paint Ourselves: Futurist Manifesto,” *Argus* 12 (St. Petersburg), December 1913, 116–18. Zdanevich and Larionov, p. 116, and Natalia Goncharova, p. 117, with faces painted with Rayist designs by Larionov.

by “Donkey’s Tail” (1912), “Target” (1913), and, finally, “Number 4: Rayists, Futurians, Primitive” (1914). Each exhibition marked a period of development in the avant-garde aesthetic and presented a different approach, challenging not only the spectators, but also the exhibitors, most of whom differed from show to show.

From the very beginning, the early Russian avant-gardists associated card play with tricks, imps, and an adventurousness that challenged accepted norms with a “slap in the face of public taste.” Betting on this provocative aspect, Larionov deliberately injected the established art world with the “low” tradition of the urban primitive, aiming not so much to shock as to create a new aesthetic system with different points of reference, a system in which the contrived borders between the “high” and “low” in art were eroded.

Larionov’s soldiers playing cards — *Dancing Soldiers* (1909–10, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles) — was a good fit for his gallery of rosy-cheeked prostitutes, menacing provincial hairdressers, and toy-like young soldiers. Larionov’s simple-minded gamblers play cards furiously, and the tense physical awkwardness of their contrived poses makes them look frozen in the middle of a rowdy dance. Two soldiers cling to their cards while uttering obscenities which literally fill the space and stick to the walls of their barracks. Meanwhile, another soldier is singing and playing his accordion. The “hellish” game and crude phrases of Larionov’s soldiers spread all over the painterly surface in a comic-book like

manner are not random details, they are a challenge to the viewer. Such subjects were considered risky or vulgar: suffice it to recall, for instance, that *tri listika*, translated below as “three leaves,” refers to “three cards,” a game likely related to three-card monte. It was banned at the time, but very popular among card sharps, and appears in Mayakovsky’s fragment “As a Boy” from his long poem “I Love” (*Liubliu*, 1922):

I was gifted in measure with love.
 Since childhood,
 people
 have been drilled to labor.
 But I
 fled to the banks of the Rion
 and knocked about there,
 doing absolutely nothing.
 Mamma chided me angrily:
 “Good for nothing!”
 Papa threatened to belt me.
 But I,
 laying my hands on a false three-ruble note
 Played at “three leaves” with soldiers under the fence.
 (Mayakovsky 1960: 151–152)

Taken as a thematic subject, cards were synonymous with the notion of play, and functioned as an epitome of the Futurist “principle of chance.” Mayakovsky’s game “with the soldiers under the fence,” so reminiscent of Larionov’s images, is a metaphor for his freedom and his provocative nonconformity with the “folks” “drilled to labor.” This self-identification of the poet as a gambler who challenges the laws of society and “runs risks” playing “for high stakes” is manifested in Mayakovsky’s early poem “Welcoming Words to Some Vices” (*Teploe slovo koe-kakim porokam: pochti gimn*, 1915):

You who are working so hard (just to shine your boots)
 Accountant if a man, or accountant’s assistant if a woman
 Your face is all worried and to tears bored
 And crumpled, and green as a three-ruble note.

Let's take a tailor: For whose sake,
why did you make all these pants?
You don't have an American uncle, and if you do
He is poor, still kicking and doesn't live in the U.S.

I am telling you, me, well-read and clever,
Pushkin, or Shchepkin, or Vrubel'
Neither line, nor pose, nor color whatsoever
They believed — but believed in the ruble.

You live to iron, you are wounded by scissors
Look, there is gray woven in your beard
But did you ever see an orange
Growing and growing for its own sake on the tree?

Sweating and laboring, laboring and sweating
You will calve babies and they will sprout, these kiddies
The boys — accountants, the girls — accountant's assistants,
These and those will be sweating like their mummies and
daddies

And me, never fucked over or being pushed around
Just like this, ay
Cashed in gambling on my sixth hand
Thirty-two hundred yesterday.

It's okay if they mock me in whispers, gossiping
That I helped myself in a game
That I have in my pack this and that ace
Softly marked by my fingernail

Gambler's eyes in the night
Shine like two pieces of gold
I was unloading somebody as a meticulous worker
Would unload a ship hold.

Long live the first who got it right
Who without laboring and scheming
cleans out and empties thy neighbor's pockets
In a manner good and hygienic

And when they preach hard work to me, and more, and more
 As if grating horseradish on a rusty grater
 I gently ask, tapping someone's shoulder —
 Do you like to take risks when you gamble?⁴

In terms of style and form, this satirical poem is far from Mayakovsky's best, but its content and context opens up interpretations of poetics and the politics of the game on different semantic levels. The central refrain is explicit: game (or play) versus work, freedom of choice and liberated will versus determinism, chance versus routine and habit, and "gambler" versus "accountant."

In short, this poem becomes a metaphorical "boxing match" where game theory wins over labor theory. It has an ironic subtitle, "Almost a Hymn," and belongs to the series of "hymns" that Mayakovsky composed for the popular satirical journal *Novyi Satirikon* (*New Satirikon*) in 1915. They share the same polemical force of satirical discourse and playful authorial intonation, and serve as a provocative and aggressive rhetorical gesture directly addressed to the audience. The poet does not simply challenge the "routine world" of "labor and sweat," he exposes it in accordance with the radically anarchic dictum of French socialist Paul Lafargue, who declared, "Work ought to be forbidden and not imposed."

Lafargue's celebrated polemic, *Le droit à la paresse: Réfutation du droit au travail, de 1848* (1883) was translated into Russian soon after its original publication and was much read in cultural circles inclined toward anarchist-individualism. Apart from Mayakovsky and Lironov, and possibly Kamensky, the work greatly influenced Suprematist artist Kazimir Malevich's post-revolutionary essay "Sloth — The Real Truth of Humanity" (1921), where he presents his own concept of "socialist" creativity, quite at odds with the industry-emulating "socialist objects" called for by Marxist Constructivists and their Productivist allies at the time (Malevich 1978: 73–85). Lafargue's praise of laziness could not help but appeal to the Russian early avant-garde, which sought to defy Eurocentric and Westernized views by valorizing "the primitive" and the innate goodness of the communal ways of cultural and social existence associated with it: "The happy Polynesians may then love as they like without fearing the civilized Venus and the sermons of European moralists" (1883: 49). Although

⁴ My translation.

Lafargue concluded his political career as a Marxist, his earlier inclination toward the anarchist economics of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon shaped the main argument of his book, where he regards the “right to work” promoted by many socialists as a disastrous dogma:

If, uprooting from its heart the vice which dominates it and degrades its nature, the working class were to arise in its terrible strength, not to demand the Rights of Man, which are but the rights of capitalist exploitation, not to demand the Right to Work which is but the right to misery, but to forge a brazen law forbidding any man to work more than three hours a day, the earth, the old earth, trembling with joy would feel a new universe leaping within her. But how should we ask a proletariat corrupted by capitalist ethics, to take a manly resolution . . .

Lafargue passionately concludes his appeal:

Like Christ, the doleful personification of ancient slavery, the men, the women and the children of the proletariat have been climbing painfully for a century up the hard Calvary of pain; for a century compulsory toil has broken their bones, bruised their flesh, tortured their nerves; for a century hunger has torn their entrails and their brains. O Laziness, have pity on our long misery! O Laziness, mother of the arts and noble virtues, be thou the balm of human anguish! (1883: 56, 57)

Emulating this stance, Mayakovsky’s “Welcoming Words” is written in the first person and, by assuming the mask of a gambler, and a tricky one at that — possibly a swindler and cheat — the poet emphasizes his own alienation from the laws and customs of common life. His tactical choice to teach us his social lesson is witty and quite unusual. Pushing Lafargue’s idea to its logical extreme, he throws in the “vice” of risky “gambling” to prove the lie of the “virtue” of “laboring.” The poetic metaphor of card playing becomes a mythologem. The main quality of any play is the quality of freedom, Mayakovsky is telling his readers. Play cannot be forced, because then it ceases to be play or turns into something different. Play is never a duty or obligation. By advocating play over labor, Mayakovsky advocates freedom, unpredictability, and the ultimate fulfillment of life without “special purpose,” “without why” (*but did you ever see an orange . . .*) In this he follows Dostoevsky’s underground man:

"Man need one thing only: *independent* desire, whatever that independence costs and wherever it may lead him. But the devil only knows what desire . . ." (Dostoevsky 1999: 27). Mayakovsky directs his own social critique at the discrepancy between natural fruition and the beauty of growth, and the lifeless mechanical repetition of imposed labor which has wasted whole generations. This refutation of utilitarian means and ends is also framed as an aesthetic manifesto targeting his literary "forefathers," Symbolists and Realists, who are "guilty" of labor and "sweat." According to the Futurists, "Through instantaneous writing a given feeling is expressed in fullness. Otherwise labour, rather than creation, many stones and no whole, and it smells of sweat and [the contemporary Symbolist writer Valery] Briusov. Writing and reading must be instantaneous!" "The ungifted and the apprentices like to labour . . . the same can be said of the reader" (Kruchenykh, Khlebnikov 1988a: 61).

Mayakovsky's poem is full of semi-disguised inter-textual references that map for us the literary world of his playing poet. Some of the most obvious references include a fun allusion to Aleksandr Pushkin's "Evgenii Onegin" (*you don't have an uncle*. . .), and the figure of the "accountant," "face all worried and bored to tears," who has attributes akin to the Dostoevsky-inspired "creator of perfect systems" from Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov's *Game in Hell*. The tailor is another type Mayakovsky treats harshly. Regarded among the avant-garde as social agents who implement the ideals of "public taste" and the whims of short-lived "fashions," "tailors" also appear in the first Futurist manifesto, "Slap in the Face of Public Taste," "all those Gorkys, Kuprins, Bloks, Sologubs, Remizovs, Averchenkos, Bunins, etc. need only a dacha on the river. Such is the reward fate gives tailors" (Burliuk 1988: 51).

The "principle of play" combines fantastic and real elements by incorporating strange details into an everyday context. The texture of this poem is a mixture of hyperbole, grotesque and self-irony. Here, perhaps, we find the source of the "apache" (a popular term for Parisian street thugs) identity adopted by the young Mayakovsky. This lyrical persona becomes the embodiment of the free and spontaneous game for Mayakovsky. Commenting on Mayakovsky's dramatic performance of his play, "Vladimir Mayakovsky: A Tragedy" (1913), Viktor Shklovsky writes, "The poet deals himself upon the stage, holds himself in his hands like a player holds cards. It was Mayakovsky, the two, the three, the Jack, the King" (Shklovsky 1940: 97).

Indeed, in the Russian literary tradition, card playing was often viewed as a kind of active meditation, a unique possibility provided by chance to come face to face with the anarchic essence of the universe beyond the human power of control or manipulation. It is the process of the game, with its temporality, its unpredictable yet repetitive rhythm, that rules the player. Accordingly, the Futurists were fascinated with temporality as expressed in physically in what they called “live” rhythm: “We shattered rhythms. Khlebnikov gave status to the poetic meter of the living conversational word. We stopped looking for meters in textbooks; every motion generates for the poet a new, free rhythm” (Kruchenykh, Khlebnikov 1988b: 54). In the aesthetics of anarchy of the early Russian avant-garde, the rhythm of the game, of art and of life itself, overlapped and intertwined, fast and intense as heartbeats, as irregular and repetitive as Mayakovsky’s “ladder” verse (*lesenka*).

Pondering such “incarnations” of physical rhythm, vigorous movement, and the vivacity of the game, the reader is drawn into “life as such” and the unpredictable and irrational essence apart from all canons: this is the core hidden behind the “poker face” of the poet-trickster, the bluffer, the creator of the unspoken enigma. Such poetics became not only a representational motif, but also a means of self-cognizance, of *self-presentation*.

In this way the early Russian avant-garde created an aesthetics attuned to Mikhail Bakunin’s anarchist theory of “creative destruction” and the anti-utopian philosophy of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground*. The underground man’s rebellion against utilitarianism and determinism had a crucial impact on intellectual and aesthetic ideas in Russia. For the early Russian avant-garde, the “poetics of the underground” opposed the creation of any fixed or immutable ideas or absolutes in both social and aesthetic philosophies.

Although aspiring towards shock value certainly played a role in the productions of the early Russian avant-garde, this was not the primary aim of its anarchic anti-canoncity: the purpose was, rather, to consciously expand artistic space by deconstructing the aesthetic clichés of “the ideal” and “beauty.” The ideological aspirations and aesthetic tendencies of the early avant-garde are reflected in the non-uniformity of its artistic and literary movements and the diversity of groups and tendencies that coexisted within its circles and spurred one another on (Neoprimitivism, Cubo-Futurism, Ego-Futurism, Rayism, Organicism, and Suprematism among them).

This multiplicity of artistic practices and theoretical concepts presents a challenge to scholars of the Russian avant-garde. There is only one feature that can be applied equally to all of them: an anti-teleological, anarchic desire for freedom unlimited by any pragmatic political, social, or aesthetic goals.

Once methodological or epistemological closure occurred, this essence became evasive. Paradoxically, then, important features of early avant-garde poetics have gone unrecognized in the historical literature because they do not fit into periodization schemes that prioritize totalizing definitions of style over the philosophy of artistic practice. The aesthetics of anarchy, as I see it, asserted a new interpretation of art and human creativity: art without rules. These aesthetics are revealed in the creative energy of the artists as they transformed literary, theatrical, and performance practices, eroding the traditional boundaries of the visual arts and challenging the conventions of their day.

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