

## EXPLORATIONS IN THE AVANTGARDE

Review of: Георгий Левинтон. Статьи о поэзии русского авангарда (Slavica Helsingiensia 51). Helsinki: Department of Modern Languages, 2017. 275 pp.

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Reviewing this collection of articles on the poetry of the Russian avant-garde has proved an interesting challenge. Georgii Akhillovich Levinton – outstanding philologist, folklorist, specialist on poetics, student of Vladimir Nikolaevich Toporov and member of the “Taranovsky school” – has been a friend for well over four decades. Since much of his book deals with Velimir Khlebnikov, I have had to refer to my own publications more often than I would wish. Finally, because of the plethora and variety of the textual material quoted by the author, especially in its latter half, and the fact that it often lies far outside my areas of specialization, I have only been able to comment substantively on some of the contributions brought together in the pages of this volume.

At the same time, writing the review has provided me with an unexpected opportunity to repay an old debt. In his collection, Georgii Akhillovich has included several brief reviews originally published in the international journal *Russian Linguistics*. One of these dealt with an early article of mine, “On Khlebnikov’s Love Lyrics. 1. Analysis of ‘O, červi zemjanye’”. At the time, the appearance of this brief note was a very pleasant surprise, and not only because the author, whom I had met during my first stay in the Soviet Union (1972), approved my attempt to trace the connection between Khlebnikov’s poem and the poetics of charms and incantations. However, there was a minor problem: Georgii Akhillovich responded in 1977 to a paper I had presented in 1975 at an international conference on poetics at UCLA. The conference volume, seemingly ready at the time of the scholarly gathering, where preprints had been distributed, still had not appeared. Ultimately, abandoned by the original publisher

(Peter de Ridder), the collection was produced by Slavica Publishers. Thus, because of Georgii Akhillovich's interest in my subject, at the confluence of avantgarde and folklore, his review anticipated my article by six years – perhaps this was a mysterious intervention of that *mirskontsa* principle he explores in some detail in the volume under review.

The book consists of four major parts. Parts One and Two – “Зау. Заметки о зауми” and “Хлебников. Заметки о Хлебникове” – deal with some general issues of Cubo-Futurist poetics, and Khlebnikov's and Aleksei Kruchenykh's legacy in particular. In Part Three, “Мелкие заметки об умеренных авангардистах”, Levinton turns to some texts by Mayakovsky, Esenin, and Benedikt Livshits. In Part Four, “Александр Ривин”, he publishes and discusses some of the poetic works of this long-forgotten Petersburg poet, linked to the creative legacy of the early avantgarde.

All the pieces included in the volume have appeared previously. Levinton has supplemented some of the old titles with additional headings reflecting the structure of the volume. He notes that he has minimized his interventions in the old texts; substantive additions are found either in various P.S.'s or in sections demarcated by double square brackets, [[ ]]. Occasional deletions – of mistakes, of points no longer deemed valid – are demarcated by [...]. Still, the resulting dialogues, with himself and with some of the scholars he cites, at times prove difficult to follow.

In his preface, Levinton notes that the avantgarde is not among his principal interests, however, “время от времени [он] наталкивался на какие-то интересные <...> параллели, находил какие-то объяснения и <...> превращал их в статьи” (6). Unnecessary modesty! The genre of “note”, to which most of the contributions in this collection belong, is not favored by today's scholarly journals, responsive to the demands of major indexing databases. For the most part, Levinton's “заметки” are carefully structured, detailed examinations of certain textual phenomena, in which he takes full account of the accumulated scholarly literature on the topic in question – few specialists in any field are equally exacting! – and combines his impressive erudition with an even more impressive analytical acuity in putting forward a potential solution. The scholar's exposition of his ideas unfolds on two levels: in the main text and in the extensive footnotes. The latter domain is where Levinton delivers occasional lessons

to his opponents. Two such examples are found in the section on *zaum*; readers may enjoy searching for them.

Part One of the book, “Зау. Заметки о зауми”, includes three Notes. The first focuses on the most famous example of Kruchenykh’s “trans-sense” poetry – the five-line text, “Дыр, бул, щыл...”, he created at David Burliuk’s request in December 1912. The initial line of this poem came to symbolize, for Kruchenykh himself and others, *zaum* as a whole, and it has prompted numerous attempts to explicate it – to place it within some kind of rational framework, to “explain away” (17) its origin. Scholars have identified the sources of some other Kruchenykh experiments, such as his experiments with “universal language” (вселенский язык) – “о е а / и е е и / <...>” and the poem “Высоты (вселенский язык)” (е у ю / и а о / о а / <...>): these are, respectively, the vowel structures in the prayers “Отче наш” and “Верую” (16). In other cases, for instance, in Khlebnikov’s “Ночь в Галиции”, where the water-nymphs (русалки) sing “according to Sakharov’s textbook” (“по учебнику Сахарова”), the source proves to be folklore (Levinton discusses this in some detail); while in others, *zaum* results from playing with words from other languages, as shown, for example, by Ilya Vinitsky.

Levinton makes an important methodological point: *zaum*, in certain instances at least, originates in some kind of “everyday subtext” (будничный подтекст) (16). It is neither invented nor a byproduct of the subconscious, but rather is derived from some source and adapted – potentially modified – to serve as ‘transsense’. Such an approach extends further, to the level of an individual lexeme, a proposition first put forward by Viach. Vs. Ivanov in his classic 1967 article (“по дурной традиции упоминаемая малопонятность многих вещей Хлебникова при ближайшем рассмотрении оказывается глубочайшим заблуждением критиков”) and since then confirmed repeatedly by other scholars.

Turning to Kruchenykh’s line *дыр бул щыл*, Levinton first reviews the contributions of other scholars and then considers the final component – “слово или, точнее, буквосочетание, в русской фонетике и графике заведомо невозможное” (26). Yet there was, he asserts, a textual source for *щыл* that would have been fully accessible to Kruchenykh: a 1902 textbook on Slavonic-Russian paleography by Aleksei Ivanovich Sobolevskii

(1856–1929). In it, the famous linguist, literary historian and Slavist discusses an old technique of cryptographic writing (“простая литорея”) involving the replacement of certain consonants by other consonants in accordance with a simple table. On the basis of that table, *цыл* could be read as an encrypted *быс(ть)*. The probability of such an interpretation is strengthened by the fact that the previous word in Kruchenykh’s line, *бул*, resembles the Ukrainian form of the same verb (27).

How could Kruchenykh have come in contact with Sobolevskii’s textbook? Levinton suggests two possible sources: Khlebnikov, with his interests in Slavic culture and pan-Slavic politics, and Andrei Akimovich Shemshurin (1872–1937) – bibliographer, philologist, paleographer, specialist on Old Russian miniatures. Of the two, Shemshurin seems the more credible candidate, given that, according to Roman Jakobson’s oft-repeated story, it was he who, in December 1913, first introduced Khlebnikov to Ivan Petrovich Sakharov’s famous compilation *Skazaniia russkogo naroda o semeinoi zhizni svoikh predkov*, from which the poet borrowed the “song” of his water-nymphs.

In a Postscript to his article on Kruchenykh, Levinton explains that, whatever some may think, he did not deliberately search the internet for *цыл*. Rather, he came across Sobolevskii’s textbook on the web, began to read it, and found the three-letter combination in a section on cryptography. This was, he notes, an instance of *serendipity* – he uses the English word deliberately – as was another successful find involving a couplet by Simeon Polotskii (see below). This point, made in passing, bears emphasizing. In researching the legacy of Khlebnikov and other representatives of the avantgarde, whose biographies and creative practices did not conform to the more traditional patterns of Russian cultural figures, one must employ a maximally open, flexible approach in order to discover the sources of their images, motifs, plots, and myths. As I can attest on the basis of my own experience, operating “outside the box” can be productive – and Levinton’s discoveries offer further confirmation of this fact.

The second in Part One focuses on the exclamation *манч! манч! манч!* in Khlebnikov’s complex prose tale “Ka”. In this work, with its sudden spatio-temporal displacements (*sdvigi*), Amenophis IV (the Greek version of the name Amenhotep), the pharaoh who carried out a religious

revolution and changed his name to Akhnaton (in Khlebnikov's transcription – *Эхнатэн*), utters it as he's dying; so does, in another time and space, his reincarnated double – “Эхнатэн – черная обезьяна”. Subsequently, in his 1919 essay “Свояси”, written as a preface for a planned volume of his works, Khlebnikov brought up this line in a discussion of *zaum* and acknowledged that the effect it had on him had changed over the years: “Во время написания заумные слова умирающего Эхнатэна “Манчь! Манчь!” из “Ка” вызывали почти боль; я не мог их читать, видя молнию между собой и ими; теперь они для меня ничто. Отчего – я сам не знаю”<sup>1</sup>.

As Levinton notes, the *zaum* word in “Ка” drew the interest of Roman Jakobson. In his initial monograph on Khlebnikov, *Noveishaia russkaia poeziiia* (1921), the young scholar saw it as an instance of the “language of apes” (обезьяний язык); many decades later, he treated it as a manifestation of a sound combination significant for the poet – the nasal consonant *n* with the affricate *č*, typologically similar to instances of glossolalia in other languages (46).

Levinton himself first suggests that the word *манч* caused Khlebnikov pain because of its closeness to the lexical pair *меч / мяч*, linked by what the poet called “internal declension” (внутреннее склонение) in his essay “Учитель и ученик” and used by him in several poetic texts, including the long poem “Война в мышеловке”, with its strong autobiographical component: “Ветер – пение / Кого и о чем? / Нетерпение / Меча стать мячом. / Я умер, я умер и хлынула кровь / По латам широким потоком <...>”.

At the end of the article, Levinton puts forward another potential explanation for the word:

Учитывая, что Эхнатэн в «Ка» то ли тождественен черной обезьяне, то ли частично совпадает с ней, можно предположить и другое, параллельное объяснение, более отдаленное, но не невозможное

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<sup>1</sup> There is an orthographic difference between the *zaum* line in “Ка” according to the first publication (the collection *Moskovskie mastera*, 1916) and how it is written in “Svoiasi” – with a soft *-jer*. The manuscript of “Ка” has not been preserved; in the autograph of “Svoiasi” the orthography is unambiguous. Whether the latter spelling be used in “Ка” itself remains an open question: Khlebnikov could have changed his mind.

для Хлебникова с его лингвистическими интересами – а именно *манч* как усечение (вокатив? подзывную форму?) англ. *monkey* (с русской палатализацией *k*) (50).

In fact, such an explanation deserves a closer look. The Egyptian pharaoh's incarnation as an *обезьяна* – ape, monkey – is but one textual implementation of a subject in which Khlebnikov was deeply interested: Charles Darwin's theory of the origin of species. The poet regularly mocked the “learned Englishman” (“ученый энглиз”) and “происхождение видов” (e.g., the play “Мирсконца”, the “supertale” “Дети Выдры”). More significantly, he polemicized with him in an unfinished essay, “Девы русские!”, which was preserved in Nikolai Khardzhiev's archive and was recently published (Baran, Parnis 2018: 20–85). Given Khlebnikov's propensity for wordplay, for punning, an interlinguistic borrowing of *monkey* to create a *zaum* utterance in “Ка” is not so far-fetched as it might appear at first.

In “Заумный словарь в поэзии и живописи: Хлебников, Ривин, Маргит” (the third Note in Part One), Levinton considers a number of Khlebnikov's texts in which the poet presents a lexicon, with a *zaum* word being followed by a “translation”, an assigned meaning. The best-known example of such a construction is his famous poem “Бобэоби пелись губы”. From Khlebnikov, Levinton moves on to a similarly structured poem by Aleksandr Rivin and some paintings by the surrealist René Magritte that, according to Levinton, are in fact “little dictionaries”. There is no question of any kind of intertextual influence, nor any claim that Rivin is a “Russian surrealist” (56): rather, we see here a case of typological similar phenomena.

Part One of the volume also includes two Supplements. The first features articles by M. M. Kenigsberg and A. A. Buslaev that are highly critical of *zaum* in particular as well as Futurist theorizing in general. These originally appeared in the typescript journal *Germes* (1922–1923), which certain members of the Moscow Linguistic Circle (followers of Gustav Shpet) produced in a typescript format in “print runs” of twelve copies per issue. The second Supplement briefly discusses possible painterly subtexts in two poems by Pasternak and Tsvetaeva. A final contribution in Part One, “Из истории полемики ‘левого’ и ‘правого’ формализма: Брик о

зауми Хлебникова” discusses Osip Brik’s 1944 essay “О Хлебникове”, in which he defended Khlebnikov’s verbal creation, as likely involving polemics with Kenigsberg’s article. It is clear from Levinton’s analysis that Brik’s illuminating study, published long after his death, deserves further discussion by scholars.

Part Two of the collection opens with “Заметка I: ‘Мирсконца’: ударение и сюжет”. The well-known neologism *mirskontsa*, commonly translated in English as *worldbackwards*, was used as the title of Kruchenykh’s and Khlebnikov’s poetic collection (dated 1913, actually published 1912) and of Khlebnikov’s play (published 1914, likely written in 1913). Levinton discusses alternative claims to priority in inventing the word, as well as the origin of the generally accepted pronunciation – with a stress on the penultimate syllable, *мирскóнца*. He proposes a likely precedent for this prosodic neologism: a couplet from Simeon Polotskii’s syllabic drama “Комедия притчи о блудном сыне”, found in a monologue of the future Prodigal Son: “Идеже восток и где запад солнца, / славен явлюся во вся мира конца” (86). The stress in *конца*, which would shift to the first syllable, provided a model for the Futurists.

Khlebnikov’s play, originally entitled “Оля и Поля”, presents a couple caught up in the reverse flow of time. A series of short scenes follows the protagonists from the funeral of the man, Polia, through their adulthood, youth, and, finally, infancy, where they ride in baby carriages while holding balloons. Scholars generally have discussed the plot of this play from two perspectives: of its connection with the new art of the cinema, and of the ancient genre of palindrome, which Khlebnikov practiced with great finesse (e.g. his poem “Перевертень”). Levinton reprises these discussions, paying particular attention to an article by Michaela Böhmig, and builds on them by bringing in a variety of new examples, from ancient as well as modern literature. He follows this up with three different Supplements devoted to various types of palindromes: “Упоминавшиеся пародии”, “Инверсированные стихотворные формы” and “Палиндромы и вокруг них”.

The next section of Part Two features “Заметка 2: ‘Черный царь плясал перед народом’”, and deals with certain aspects of a striking Khlebnikov poem:

Черный царь плясал перед народом,	1.
И жрецы ударили в там-там.	
И черные жены смеялись смелей,	
И губы у них отягчал пэлелэ!	
И с нескромным самоварчиком	5.
И с крылышком дитя,	
Оно, о солнце-старче, кум,	
Нас ранило шутя.	
Лишь только свет пронесся семь,	9.
Семь раз от солнца до земли,	
Холодной стала взором темь,	
И взоры Реквием прочли.	
Черный царь плясал перед народом,	13.
И жрецы ударили в там-там.	

The poem was published in the collection *Chetyre ptitsy* (Moscow, 1916) under the title “Лучизм. Число 1-ое”. Along with works by Khlebnikov, the collection featured texts by David Burliuk, Vasilii Kamenskii, and Grigorii Zolotukhin. No autograph of the poem has been preserved; however, there exists a manuscript from late 1921 – early 1922 (archive of Viach. Vs. Ivanov) in which the title and lines 5–8 are omitted.

The source of the imagery in lines 1–4 of the poem is well-established: Khlebnikov created a poetic translation of an illustration of an African king’s dance found in Volume 3 of the well-known Russian translation of Hans F. Helmolt’s *Weltgeschichte*.

The literature on the poem includes an attempt by Valentina Morderer to tie the “black monarch” directly to Pushkin (Levinton is skeptical) and my own 2005 article, in which I attempted to interpret the poem as a whole. Levinton himself focuses on two aspects of the text. First, he discusses the lines “И с нескромным самоварчиком / И с крылышком дитя”, showing the connections of the erotic image of the *самовар* not only to folklore tradition but also to “Граф Нулин”; he further traces their echoes in Viktor Shklovskii’s 1969 polemic with Jakobson. His treatment of this topic is enlivened by various examples of “immodest samovars”. The image of the “child with a wing” is unambiguously linked to the *putto* of European painting – the naked infant interpreted either as Eros / Amor



or as an angel. The former “wounds” with his arrows of love – a formula originating in Anacreontic poetry. For Khlebnikov, Levinton suggests, reflections of this tradition in Lomonosov (“Разговор с Анакреоном”) and Blok (“Вспомнил я старую сказку”) were particularly relevant. He then goes on to briefly discuss the polymetric organization of Khlebnikov’s poem, and notes that, assuming the role of Lomonosov and Blok subtexts in lines 5–8, the meter of this quatrain may be viewed as iambic trimeter with dactylic rather than feminine clausulae in lines 5 and 7.

In a Postscript to his article on Khlebnikov’s poem, Levinton brings up my 2008 article, in which I considered “Черный царь...” in light of information from Khardzhiev’s archive – more precisely, in that part of the archive that, following the scholar’s departure from Russia, had ended up in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Levinton first quotes a separate note by Khardzhiev which I reproduced in my publication:

Сомнительные тексты (монтаж Д. Бурлюка)

«Черный царь плясал перед народом», где три четверостишия явно [смонтированы] – монтаж трех отд<ельных> четверостиший (строф), скрепленных заключительным повтором двух начальных строк. Аналогичным образом Д. Б<урлюк> и А. Крученных многократно соединяли отдельные [куски] и заготовки Хлебникова (особенно) в мнимые произведения.

Khardzhiev also commented on the poem in a copy of Volume Two of the 1928–1933 *Sobranie proizvedenii*. Levinton quotes my description of this page:

Он перечеркивает строки 1–4, обводит второе и третье четверостишия (рядом со вторым четверостишием помета: «ср. у меня»), зачеркивает последние две строки, а внизу еще раз указывает «Монтаж Д. Бурлюка 1915 (?)».

Levinton attempts to reconcile Khardzhiev’s claims with the 1921–1922 manuscript and considers whether the contradictory evidence has any bearing of his discussion of lines 5–8. In the worst-case scenario, if, in fact, the printed poem is a mirage, his comments on polymetry become irrelevant. Under these circumstances, he concludes,

“я прокомментировал некое заблудившееся четверостишие Хлебникова, существовавшее отдельно или оторвавшееся от какого-то другого (или этого же) замысла” (159).

Fortunately, the worst-case scenario may be avoided. Khardzhiev’s archive, now entirely in RGALI, contains pages cut from a copy of *Che-tyre ptitsy* with Khebnikov’s corrections (“с авторскими поправками”, as Khardzhiev himself labels them). In “Черный царь...” there are two distinct layers of emendations; their order cannot be determined. The title given to the poem in the first publication, “Лучизм. Число 1-ое”, is crossed out with a pencil; the final two lines of the published text are likewise crossed out. The same pencil was used to draw a line between lines 4 and 5, and another between 8 and 9, thus indicating that the quatrains should be separated physically. A second set of corrections was made with a red pencil. In line 5, “И с нескромным самоварчиком”, the initial conjunction is crossed out, so that the line becomes “С нескромным самоварчиком”. Another correction is made in line 7, “Оно, о солнце-старче, кум”, with the initial word being replaced by *Твое* (РГАЛИ. Ф. 3145. Оп. 1, дело 798. Л. 2). As a result, the corrected text of the poem is as follows:

Черный царь плясал перед народом.  
И жрецы ударили в там-там.  
И черные жены смеялись смелей,  
И губы у них отягчал пэлелэ!

С нескромным самоварчиком  
И с крылышком дитя –  
Твое, о солнце-старче, кум,  
Нас ранило шутя.

Лишь только свет пронесся семь,  
Семь раз от солнца до земли,  
Холодной стала взором темь,  
И взоры Реквием прочли.

Given the evidence of such authorial corrections, Khardzhiev’s assertions about the “artificial” montage-construction of the poem must be

reexamined. The corrections made to lines 5–8 strengthen the syntax and imagery of the quatrain. The interpretation of the poem I put forward in my 2005 article is preserved with a minimum of changes.

Discussion of “Черный царь плясал перед народом...” is followed by a section with the playful heading “Свосяси по сусекам”. Here we find “Маргиналии к хлебниковедению” and “Маргиналии к Хлебникову”. The first group features brief discussions of commentaries by other scholars on the prose poem “Зверинец”, of a folkloric image in a quatrain from the drafts of the long poem “Игра в аду”, of a folktale motif in the long poem “Лесная дева”, and of the poem “Москвы колымага”, with its ironic treatment of Esenin and Mariengof. In the second set of *marginalia*, Levinton discusses the poem “Крученных”, a deeply ironic portrait of Khlebnikov’s former co-author. Levinton successfully traces the connections between the “English” theme in this text and Mandel’shtam’s 1913 poem “Домби и сын”; there is no contradiction between this and the previously discussed presence of the Darwin theme. The author also discusses the patronymic doublet *ней / ной*, found in several of Khlebnikov’s works, as well as some lines from the poem “Написанное до войны” («Кубок печенежский», which reference the fate of Great Prince Sviatoslav, killed in battle against the Pechenegs in 972 AD. The victorious enemies made a winescup out of his skull: “Знаменитый сок Дуная / Наливая в глубь главы”.

Levinton concludes Part Two of his book with his lengthy review of Barbara Lönnqvist’s Russian-language book, which brought together the major part of her original monographic analysis of the long poem “Поэт” with a number of shorter articles. The review is a tribute to the Swedish Slavist’s achievement, as well as a detailed critique of the translation itself. A Supplement contains four of Levinton’s brief reviews in *Russian Linguistics*. I have previously mentioned one of these; another to be noted deals with an important article by Boris Andreevich Uspenskii.

Part Three of the volume, with its “minor notes” on “moderate avant-gardists”, includes various commentaries on Pasternak, on Mayakovsky, on Benedikt Livshits (definitely a moderate among the Cubo-Futurists!) and on Joseph Brodsky. Levinton’s erudition, critical acumen, and wit, all previously acknowledged in this review, are on full display here.

Finally, Part Four, and Levinton's several publications of works by Aleksandr Rivin, an acquaintance of the scholar's father, the Germanist Akhill Grigor'evich Levinton (1913-1971), who recited them for his son ("Я знал стихи Ривина наслух от отца <...>, который многое помнил наизусть", 265). Long fascinated by this forgotten, tragic figure, ready to share his texts with friends (I received some myself in 1972), Levinton has played a key role in seeking to secure this "student of Khlebnikov" (244) an appropriate place in the history of Russian literature. Collected here, his pieces allow us to appreciate how this process unfolded, how his own understanding of Rivin's poetry evolved over time, and how much yet remains to be done – and, hopefully, discovered – with and about Rivin.

The last publication on Rivin – and the last in the volume – presents a manuscript by Akhill Grigor'evich, preserved in the family archive. It was first published in a collection in memory of the archivist Larisa Nikolaevna Ivanova, for many years a mainstay of the Manuscript Division of IRLI (Pushkinskii dom). Seeing the name of this wonderful human being brought back memories, and provided a most fitting coda for Part Four of Gabriel Akhillovich's book.

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