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## **INTRODUCTION to the 2006 edition**

**Ronald Vroon**

It is difficult for us in the first decade of the twenty-first century to appreciate the impact Vladimir Markov's *Russian Futurism: a History* produced when it appeared in 1968. I discovered the book as a twenty-year-old undergraduate who had just taken up Russian studies at the University of Michigan. It would have been a serendipitous find in the present decade, dominated as it is by borders, barns and nobles, but the 1960s were a more auspicious time, when such exotica frequently found their way onto the shelves of unchained bookstores. A score of these encircled the university campus. The volume happened to be stocked by Centicore Books, a magnet for young poets and intellectuals on South University Avenue. Though it was obviously an academic work, what immediately caught my eye were the typographical oddities of the title page and chapter headings, along with the rich illustrations—a thick, thirty-two page signature in dead center with black-and-white pictures of poets, paintings, and pages from Futurist publications—printed on what looked like butcher-block paper. Only after reading through the book did I come to appreciate how its design paid tribute to the avant-garde productions it described. But even without such knowledge, who could help but be intrigued by such curiosities as the Crematorium of Common Sense or Vasiliï Kamenskii's ferroconcrete “Constantinopole”? The book, priced at twelve dollars, was well beyond the means of an impecunious undergraduate, but it nonetheless found its way on to my shelves. It inspired me not only to continue my pursuit of Russian studies, but to focus on Futurism as my first field of research. I suspect that the book had a forceful impact on the intellectual lives of many other young scholars as well.

The significance of Markov's study stands out in high relief against the background of the oversimplified and politically correct treatments of Futurism that had dominated up to that time. As early as 1925 the Marxist critic Vasiliĭ L'vov-Rogachevskii, writing in the first Soviet literary encyclopedia (1925), managed to reduce the complex phenomenon of Russian Futurism to two competing movements, Ego-futurism and Cubo-futurism (represented respectively, by the "chocolaty" Severianin and the "rowdy" Maiakovskii). While admitting that it had "played a positive role in Russia by foregrounding the dynamics and rhythms of the contemporary world in the course of emphasizing its characteristic urbanistic traits," he concluded that "the excesses of the transrationalists, which are evidence of the disintegration of the personality and the disintegration of the word as a means of communication, will be rejected by a literature closely bound up with the collective." L'vov-Rogachevskii's prediction was enforced, not merely reinforced, by the Soviet Academy of Science's ten-volume *History of Russian Literature* (1941-1956), which put Symbolism, Acmeism, and Futurism in one basket labeled "The Poetry of Bourgeois Decadence." It accused Futurism of attempting not only to discredit the finest traditions of Russian culture, but of adopting an anti-populist position and a nihilist attitude toward language. As a consequence, concludes the Academy history with a citation from Communist Party Central Committee Secretary Andrei Zhdanov, "this and other such fashionable movements have sunk into oblivion together with those classes whose ideology they reflected." Twenty years later Futurism and its fellow "bourgeois" movements were fished out of Lethe by the *Short Literary Encyclopedia*, which finally acknowledged that there were many futurisms, some of which (Cubo-futurism in particular) might be redeemable by virtue of their "anti-bourgeois cast." For the first time Markov's *History* was mentioned as a primary reference, and a short parenthetical note ("Includes bibliography") hinted that this was a fundamental study.

Access to it was another matter. Andrei Krusanov, one of the principal inheritors of Markov's mantle, notes in his review of the Russian translation of the *History* (St. Petersburg, 2000) that "for 1968 the work was, without question, an event, especially in the USSR, where Futurism was mentioned at the time only in connection with Maiakovskii's early work. Markov's study exploded the whole scrupulously edited and varnished history of literature. Not surprisingly, the American edition of the book was immediately secreted away in special library repositories, where it remained until the beginning of perestroika, accessible only to the most persistent specialists" (*Novaia russkaia kniga*, № 6, 2000). And even these specialists were long obligated by Soviet censorship to refrain from citing the work in scholarly publications, though it was patently obvious that it was a primary reference.

Initial reviews of Markov's *History* in the West are also revealing as an index both of the book's significance and the state of field that prevailed at the time, particularly with respect to our understanding of Russian modernism. Most reviewers take their principle cue from Markov's preface, in which he notes straightforwardly that the book is "the first history of Russian futurism in any language." This makes its publication "an event in the world of Slavic scholarship" (Xenia Gasiorowska writing in the *Slavic and East European Journal*, 14, №

1, Spring 1970) and a “most impressive achievement” (Christopher Barnes in *Soviet Studies*, 22, № 1, July 1970). Such praise is commonplace. More striking is the fact that reviews of the book uniformly assess the scope and historical accuracy of the contents based principally on what Markov himself has written. His book thus takes on, for its time, the same self-sufficiency (*samovitost*) that is a hallmark of so many texts it surveys, for there are no serious antecedent texts with which one can compare the work.

The very pioneering status of his history led Markov to adopt a critical approach that actively avoided, in his own words, “analyses, definitions and general judgments.” He chose instead to guide his readers through an extraordinary virtual library of rare books, broadsheets, articles, and newspaper clippings arranged chronologically around the principal characters and coteries of the Futurist movement. In so doing he was clearly following Pimen’s exhortation in Pushkin’s *Boris Godunov* as set forth in one of the book’s epigrams: “Opisyvai, ne mudrstvuia lukavo.”

This approach was itself something of a novelty in a decade when ideology deeply colored scholarship on both sides of the iron curtain, and those who resisted the politicization of discourse did so mostly behind the walls of New Criticism and structuralism. And Markov’s methodology had its admirers. Christopher Barnes, in the aforementioned review, notes that “questions of literary excellence or importance or talent are for once happily ignored and the reader is treated to a thoroughgoing discussion not only of the main Futurist almanacs and works by individual Futurists but also of the movement’s attendant critical literature and various contemporary Futurist hoaxes.” But the approach had its critics as well. In his review (*Modern Philology*, 69, № 4, May 1972) Edward Wasiolek disparages Markov’s offer to serve as a guide but not an interpreter, insisting that “the vantage point of more than half a century should permit us to analyze, define and judge, as well as to record” and concluding that Markov’s study will prove enlightening only to one who is “very well-acquainted with the Futurist movement” and has “worked out for himself the shape and direction of the movement.” Such a point of view was understandable coming from a Dostoevsky scholar who could build his critical edifices on a vast foundation of existing textual and critical data. The problem with Futurism was that the vantage point of even half a century would carry no benefit in the absence of a coherent body of information that could be targeted for analysis. The fact is that most of the empirical data concerning the movement was unknown to both Russian and Western readers prior to the publication of Markov’s book, and for many years thereafter remained accessible only in the form of his detailed summaries and descriptions. Markov’s refusal to be selective and pass over in silence those events, persons, or works he himself might have deemed “unessential” or lacking in merit, is less a tribute to his scholarly modesty than his perspicacity. No approach could have been more felicitous in encouraging further scholarship on Futurism, as the flood of works that followed amply demonstrates.

Yet one must not underestimate the extent to which Markov goes beyond both bibliography and biography. For one thing, Markov is “too discriminating a critic not to pass

specific judgments,” Helen Muchnic notes in her critique (*The Russian Review*, 28, № 3, July 1969) and these are interspersed at regular intervals throughout the book. Their acuity has been born out in subsequent studies. David and Nikolai Burliuk may have played a major organizational role in the movement, but few would question that their works are, as Markov notes, those of amateurs, “not strong enough to appear radical, and lacking completely in poetic maturity or vitality.” By the same token few would question Markov’s assertion that “Guro is probably the most neglected among the early Russian Futurists, a fate that is undeserved because she is one of the very original and talented Russian writers.” Indeed, the only “error” here is the tense of the opening verb “to be”: Guro is among those Futurists who have enjoyed a significant renaissance in the last two decades, due in large measure, one suspects, to the loving attention she receives in Markov’s *History*.

But there are other ways in which the book reaches higher than the goals of compilation and criticism. The book abounds in scholarly discoveries: the complex stages of impressionism, primitivism, and “logism” that characterize the evolution of Cubo-futurism, the importance of Shershenevich in his pre-imagist guise, the complex aesthetics of Centrifuge, and many, many more. Equally important, Markov’s work shaped our perceptions of the movement at a time when it was approachable only in terms of the fragmentary and highly subjective accounts of a few representatives (chiefly Alexei Kruchenykh, Vasilii Kamenskii, and Benedikt Livshits). To write a history compelled him to identify origins, pinpoint literary antecedents, single out the principle players, trace the evolution and devolution of groups and their interaction, define apogees and perigees for both individual groups and the movement as a whole, and at least tentatively define its chronological and geographic boundaries. Markov’s most significant achievement is, ultimately, the compelling emplotment of an extraordinary mass of historical data, the transformation of disparate chronicles into a coherent history, and in so doing he has left his stamp on all subsequent scholarship.

Since the book’s appearance in 1968 a very substantial body of literature has arisen either building on or buttressing the foundations laid by Markov work. Perhaps the single most important development has been the intensive study of Futurism as a movement that encompassed various art forms, including painting, music, cinema, and architecture, as well as poetry and prose. It is now clear that these various artistic manifestations of the avant-garde are so intimately interconnected that the study of one necessarily implicates the other—a phenomenon acknowledged but mostly ignored in Markov’s study, which focuses almost exclusively on Futurism as a literary movement. One of the ironies of literary history is that substantial intermedial studies were among the first to be undertaken—by Nikolai Khardzhiev, Teodor Grits and Vladimir Trenin—years before Markov’s, but could not be published for political reasons until the 1970s and later. Their work was taken up by numerous scholars, both Western (among them John Bowlt, Jean-Claude Marcadé and Charlotte Douglas) and Russian (Nina Gur’ianova, Irina Sakhno, Evgenii Koftun, Andrei Krusanov and many others). The contributions of Krusanov and Sakhno stand in

particularly interesting contrast to Markov book. The former's three-volume *Russkii avangard: 1907-1932 (Istoricheskii obzor)*, a work still in progress (the first volume appeared in 1996 and the second, consisting of two book-length parts, in 2003), comes much closer to being the sort of journalistic history that Wasiolek denigrates, presenting a season by season chronology of the social life rather than the productions of the artistic and literary avant-garde, replete with accounts of exhibitions, public disputes, reviews and press notices. Sakhno's *Russkii avangard: Zhivopisnaia teoriia i poeticheskaia praktika*, in contrast, explores the multifarious ways in which painting and poetry interface in the avant-garde, moving thereby into that area of "analyses, definitions and general judgments" eschewed by Markov.

Special mention should be made of those studies that focus on the Futurist book itself. Markov frequently mentions the illustrations that adorn these collections as well as their graphic peculiarities, but the true significance of the artistic partnership between artists and writers is now evident thanks to the work of Susan Compton (*The World Backwards: Russian Futurist Books, 1912-1916*), Gerald Janecek (*The Look of Russian Literature: Avant-Garde Visual Experiments, 1900-1930*), Evgenii Kovtunov (*Russkaia futuristicheskaia kniga*), and Vladimir Poliakov (*Knigi russkogo kubo-futurizma*), among others.

A second significant development in the study of Futurism is an examination of its fate during and after the Revolution and Civil War. Although Markov touches on these years in his capsule epilogues to the lives of the major Futurists, the movement's evolution after 1917, he asserts, is "sufficiently peculiar to deserve another book, or perhaps a series of essays." Just how deserving is best exemplified by Krusanov's aforementioned study, which devotes an eight-hundred page volume to the brief period between 1917 and 1921 in the leading literary centers of Moscow and Petersburg. Here he follows thematically, though not methodologically, in the footsteps of such Western scholars as Bengt Jangfeldt (*Majakovskij and Futurism 1917-1921*), Gert Wilbert (*Entstehung und Entwicklung des Programms der "linken" Kunst und der "Linken Front der Künste" (LEF) 1917-1925*), and Halina Stephan (*"Lef" and the Left Front of the Arts*).

Numerous studies have also extended our knowledge of the geographical boundaries of Futurism. Markov touches only superficially on the movement's appearance and development in the provinces. Krusanov devotes six hundred pages to this topic, covering Ukraine, Belarus, the Russian Far East, the Caucasus, the Crimea, and the Urals as well as central, northern and southern Russia, covering only the period of the Revolution and Civil War. Oleh Ilytzyk's *Ukrainian Futurism: 1914-1930: A Historical and Critical Study* is a major contribution to our understanding of the avant-garde outside Petersburg and Moscow, as are the monographs on Russian Futurism in Georgia by Tat'iana Nikol'skaia, Rosemary Ziegler and Marzio Marzaduri.

Studies of individual Futurists have also proliferated. At the time Markov wrote his book only the chief figures—Maiakovskii, Pasternak, Khlebnikov—had been singled out for study in major monographs, and the author of one of them was Markov himself (*The Longer Poems of Velimir Xlebnikov*). Since then the number of works devoted to these giants of the

movement has grown precipitously (Khlebnikov and Pasternak have been targeted with particular frequency), but other figures have also earned book-length studies, among them Igor' Severianin (Mikhail Shapovalov, Lenie Lauwers), Alexei Kruchenykh (Sergei Sukhoparov) Vasilisk Gnedov (Crispin Brooks), Vadim Shershenevich (Anna Lawton), Elena Guro (Kjeld Jensen, Anna Ljunggren, Alla Povelikhina), and others. More and more primary texts by these and other writers have also appeared—by Nikolai Kul'bin, Lev Zak, Benedikt Livshits, Vasili Kamenskii, Il'ia Zdanevich, Igor' Terent'ev, David and Nikolai Burluk, Sergei Bobrov and Nikolai Aseev, to name only the most prominent, as well as many collections of documents associated with the various Futurist and neo-Futurist subgroups. Among the most important are collections of manifestoes, treatises and tracts that supplement Markov's path-breaking anthology, *Manifesty i programmy russkikh futuristov* (Munich, 1967), published only a year before his *History*. They include, first and foremost, Konstantin Kuz'minskii's two-volume *Zabytyi avangard—Rossiia, pervaiia tret' XX stoletiiia*, and also the first English anthology of the manifestos and other theoretical writings of the Futurists, Herbert Eagle and Anna Lawton's *Russian Futurism through its Manifestos* (1988), now reprinted as *Words in Revolution* (2005).

The explosion of new materials—and we have barely skimmed the surface here—raises the inevitable questions: has Markov's *History* been superseded, and if so, what motivates its republication? Readers who are familiar with the literature on Futurism that has emerged over the past four decades have rightly pointed out various lacunae and errors in Markov's *History* (many of these are corrected in the Russian translation of the book, but regrettably many new errors are introduced, some of which are catalogued in Krusanov's review of the translation). Rather than rendering Markov's study obsolete, however, they have, in a sense, relegated it to the status of a textbook, a work students might begin with in order to get a broad picture of the movement in its formative years. Correctives and corrections can come later, in more specialized studies. Indeed, one hopes that a new annotated Russian translation might one day appear that will undertake the requisite emendations, adjusting or filling in missing dates and footnoting what has become genuinely obsolescent. But beyond its obvious utility as an introduction to the subject for both English- and Russian-speaking audiences, the book is a landmark in the intellectual history of critical discourse on the Russian avant-garde, and that alone justifies making it available to a new generation of scholars.

*Ronald Vroon, 2006*

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