LEFT FLANK OF THE AVANT-GARDE

THE EVOLUTION OF OBERIU POETICS

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Abstract

The artistic association “OBERIU” is considered to be a significant movement in the Russian avant-garde, and several authors associated with this movement (Daniil Kharms, Nikolai Zabolotsky, Alexander Vvedensky) have enjoyed popularity and influence among later generations both in Russian and abroad. Nonetheless, few studies have attempted to describe the group as a whole, and questions persist about their place in the development of the Russian avant-garde and early Soviet culture. This dissertation provides a revised framework for understanding the writers officially and unofficially associated with this movement by focusing on how they responded to a particular set of debates important to the Soviet literary culture of the 1920s and 1930s. Rather than posit a cohesive poetics or worldview unifying these writers, I suggest an ongoing debate between competing visions of progressive (“left”) art as the key to understanding the internal dynamics of the group and the evolution of individual members. Moreover, I interpret these attempts to define a “left” artistic agenda as an effort to carve out an intellectual and creative space within the increasingly restrictive culture of early Stalinism. While the majority of previous studies have isolated these authors from contemporaneous cultural developments, this dissertation largely investigates ways in which their works responded critically to developments in official Soviet culture.

Chapter One provides a general framework by considering these writers’ own discussions of the concept of an artistic “left” in the context of scholarly discussions of their place in the Russian avant-garde. The succeeding chapters extend and refine this framework by examining problems in the construction of a work of verbal art (verse semantics, narrative structure, lyric voice) from these authors’ point of view. These chapters also follow a rough chronology based on the major stages of the group’s evolution: Chapter Two focuses on the public poetry readings of the mid-1920s, Chapter Three contextualizes their theatrical performances of the late-1920s, and Chapter Four considers the unofficial circle that succeeded OBERIU after political reprisals further made public performance impossible. The conclusion reconsiders the legacy of these authors through a discussion of their own views on the notion of literary “greatness.”
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Introduction

One time, Gogol dressed up as Pushkin and went to visit Gavrila Romanovich Derzhavin. The old man, certain that it really was Pushkin in front of him, gave him his blessing while descending into the grave.¹

—“Daniil Kharms”

The Kharmsian anecdote turns the Russian Parnassus on its head. Generally no longer than a few sentences, these humorous tales encourage the reader to laugh at revered authors and to celebrate irreverence and imposture within the literary canon. In several anecdotes, Gogol dresses up as Pushkin to surprise his unsuspecting fellow writers, while Count Lev Tolstoy (“who very much loved children,” as several anecdotes attest) mistakes Pushkin for an adolescent one day on the street and begins chasing him out of an irrepressible desire to show his affection. The image of the fraudulent or misidentified author is built into the very history of the sub-genre. Although the biographical Daniil Kharms (born Daniil Iuvachev in 1905) did write a series of famous “anegdotes” (sic!) about Pushkin as his own private contribution to the poet’s 1937 Jubilee,² and he did place humorous cameos by contemporary wordsmiths in a scattered handful of other writings, the majority of the anecdotes associated with his name were written pseudonymously by later generations.³ Originally, “Daniil Kharms” operated as a means of

¹ Однажды Гоголь переоделся Пушкиным и пришел в гости к Державину Гавриле Романычу. Старик, уверенный, что перед ним и впрямь Пушkin, сходя в гроб, ² On the relationship between Kharms’s “Anegdotes from the Life of Pushkin” (Анегдоты из жизни Пушкина) and the 1937 Jubilee, see Sandler (2006). ³ All of the tales described in this paragraph belong to this pseudonymous corpus. While several sets of anecdotes of “Kharmsian” anecdotes have been written over the years, the most famous collection (from which I have taken the examples described in this paragraph) is “Veselye rebiata” by N. Dobrokhotova-Maikova, with illustrations by V. Piatnitskii (available in multiple
camouflage at a time when denigrating the national tradition was a serious political offense, yet
the name also served a poetic function, as the standard image of Kharms is the embodiment of
playful disrespect toward tradition and established hierarchies. Thus, one can now find
Kharmsian anecdotes playing with “canons” other than the Russian literary tradition—for
example, in one recent spin on this sub-genre readers encounter the fictional exploits of Iggy Pop
and David Bowie.

In light of this playful anti-tradition, it seems only apropos that Daniil Kharms himself
belongs to a coterie of writers whose place in the national literary tradition has never been firmly
established. He is one of the writers associated with the OBERIU group (an intentionally
distorted acronym for the Association for Real Art, Объединение реального искусства), many
of whose works have only become available relatively recently after decades of Soviet
censorship. True, by most standards, since their rediscovery the group has enjoyed astounding
success. Literary and dramatic works by OBERIU members have been staged by theaters in
Russian and abroad on a regular basis for the past three decades. It has become routine to include
at least some discussion of the OBERIU movement in studies of the Russian avant-garde, and
they have even made their way into at least one anthology of international avant-garde theater.
Kharms alone has been translated into around twenty languages and honored with book-length
academic studies in Russian, English, French, and German. His popular success may be judged
by the impressive number of trade editions of his collected writings, as well as his sizable online
following—not to mention the numerous writers, in Russia and abroad, who have drawn on his

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editions online, print edition: Moscow, 1998). Most of these anecdotes are also available as
comics in the volume Kharmsiada anegdoty: komiksy iz zhizni velikikh (Saint-Petersburg, 1999).
work. Nikolai Zabolotsky survived a stint at a labor camp to become a successful Soviet poet and translator, one acknowledged by later generations as an important influence. Konstantin Vaginov has long been regarded as a successful novelist, equally famous for his metaliterary devices (which have repeatedly drawn comparisons to Nabokov) and his associations with major Soviet intellectual circles of the 1920s. Although less known, Vaginov’s poetry has also recently become widely available with the publication of his collected works in verse (Vaginov 2012). Even Alexander Vvedensky, who long lagged behind the rest of his cohort in general recognition, has recently enjoyed a surge of popularity with the publication of the first new Russian edition of his poetry in nearly two decades, as well as an excellent, award-winning collection of English translations printed by the New York Review of Books.

Nonetheless, despite this widespread interest in their work, the status of Kharms and his colleagues in relation to academic scholarship remains insecure. While a healthy body of scholarly literature does exist on these writers, there are surprisingly few substantial studies of the movement as a whole. They generally receive scant representation in U.S. graduate program reading lists and anthologies of Russian modernism. Their growing recognition has also occasionally provoked backlash. One prominent scholar has recently responded to the suggestion that Kharms is a “world classic” with blistering criticism:

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4 Although no systematic study of Kharms’s influence on later Russian writers exists, his importance to later generations is widely acknowledged. (See for instance, Mark Lipovetsky’s major study of Russian modernism and post-modernism, Paralogii, which features Kharms and fellow oberiu Konstantin Vaginov as key figures for establishing the continuity between these two periods [Lipovetskii 2008, 115-179].) To mention a few names of international works inspired by of Kharms’s works and fate: the short story “The Kharms Case” by Croatian writer Dubravka Ugresic (who also wrote an early academic study of OBERIU), the Austrian film Charms Zwischenfälle (dir. Michael Kreihsl, 1996), the German short Die alte Frau (dir. Ariane Mayer, 2011), and the U.S. play The Old Woman (dir. Robert Wilson, 2014).

5 On Vaginov’s metafiction generally, see Shepherd 1992, Roberts 1997, and Bohnet 1998; for an extended comparison to Nabokov, see Bologova 2004.
Now, the acknowledged first rank of world literature consists of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Dostoevskij, Tolstoj, Proust, Joyce, Kafka and some others. Does Charms, with his rather poor command of Russian, dyslexia, flaws in narrative and grammatical errors really belong there? The answer is “yes”, if a scholar is guided by Charms’ self-presentation, and it is “no” if the scholar considers his oeuvre with unbiased general terms. (Panova 362)

A reciprocal distrust for academic culture has been expressed by some of the most dedicated publishers of OBERIU writings—generally in terms that betray a conflicted love for scholarly conventions and habits of thought. Such reservations can be seen as early as Iakov Druskin’s own overtly scholarly treatment of Vvedensky, which couches its detailed quasi-structural analysis with a caution that the very act of understanding dissolves the essence of his friend’s poetry (Sazhin, et al., vol. 1, 549). More recently, in the preface to the recent edition of Vvedensky’s collected works (Vvedenskii 2010)—a volume featuring an extensive scholarly apparatus, rich in intellectual insight and textological detail—the editor Anna Gerasimova writes that she gave up philology in 1995, after fulfilling her “hooligan-like desire to write ‘a dissertation on Vvedensky,’” and returned only because the offer of editing this volume was too good to pass up (24). In a much more blunt expression of distrust, the introduction to a recent (2013) two-volume collection of Igor Bakhterev’s poetry (incidentally, another assiduously annotated edition) opens with a proclamation that the publication “has no ‘academic’ aims” [не имеет “академических” целей]. The editor, Mikhail Evzlin, elaborates that such “‘aims’ appear to us completely senseless in relation to avant-garde authors, who despised the academicization of the literary text” [эти “цели” представляются нам совершенно бессмысленными в отношении авангардных авторов, презиравших академизирование литературного текста] (11).

Of course, this dissertation takes a more sympathetic view of such “academic aims,” and I doubt that any of the authors cited above would disagree that the works of the OBERIU writers
can benefit from thorough and thoughtful contextualization. Yet, it is true that the opportunities for distortion in “academicizing” these writers are many. Much of their corpus exists as a motley set of personal papers, never edited for publication by their authors, in which autobiographical accounts and overtly fictional narratives freely intermingle. Branislav Jakovljevic vividly describes the experience of sifting through Kharms’s archive, attempting to find connections among the contents, and finally determining that these manuscripts exist “in a state of perpetual incubation,” as a “constellation of fragments” that form vague linkages with each other and only rarely give the impression of being “finished” texts (5). On the verbal level, OBERIU writings contain numerous violations of common sense and syntax that caused even readers in the writers’ immediate circle difficulty in distinguishing between stylistic oddities and misprints. These difficulties are compounded by the fact that many of these writers used non-normative punctuation and orthography in their writing. The editorial decision whether to correct these “errors” has been particularly controversial in the case of Kharms, who was, in fact, dyslexic but also sometimes deliberately spelled words in unusual ways and ultimately insisted on the correctness of his orthography: “When someone observes, ‘You made a mistake writing that,’ answer: ‘That’s how it always looks when I write it’” [На замечание: "Вы написали с ошибкой", - ответствуй: "Так всегда выглядит в моём написании"] (Kharms 1997, 5.1, 6

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6 The translators of a recent (2013) collection Kharms’s diaries in English came up with an innovative solution to this problem, compiling a chronological montage of creative and personal documents to form a “creative biography in documents” of the author (Kharms 2013, 43).

7 Here, I mainly have in mind the often chaotic manuscripts of Kharms and Vvedensky, although even the less radical Konstantin Vaginov could toe this line—in a recent edition, Anna Gerasimova characterizes the epithet “линейными руками” in “Поэма квадратов” as a “legitimated quasi-typo” and points out that on one copy a contemporary (mistakenly) corrected it to “лилейными” in two places (Vaginov 2012, 173).
192). Such complications have contributed to the rather slow rate at which their texts have been published. For instance, until the 2013 collection mentioned above, most of Bakhterev’s post-OBERIU poetry existed only as part of a private collection. Similarly, the Blockade poetry of Gennady Gor, who could be considered a “satellite” of the OBERIU movement, has only recently come into general circulation.

Taken together, these complications have made it difficult to form a coherent picture of this movement and its aims. I would argue that the lack of such a picture has contributed more to the uncertainty of their place in scholarship than any iconoclasm on the part of these authors or any assessment of their merits in “unbiased general terms.” There have been very few substantial studies that attempt to address the OBERIU writers as a collective, and those that exist leave a number of important questions unanswered, especially regarding these authors’ relationships to each other and their place within the culture of their time. The result might be characterized as the “isolationist tendency” of OBERIU studies: not only are the authors involved with this movement mostly considered on an individual basis, but they also traditionally play either a minor corroboratory role or none at all in investigations of early Soviet culture. The main purpose of this dissertation is to challenge this tendency by reevaluating the movement’s history. More specifically, I will foreground the ways in which these authors actively responded to the

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8 For a discussion of Kharms’s orthography in terms of avant-garde poetics, see Kobrinskii (2000): 161-188. For opposing views on the implications for editors see Valerii Sazhin’s explanation of his decision not to make orthographic corrections to Kharms’s poetry in the 1997 edition of his complete collected works (Kharms, vol. 1, 335-6), as well as Mikhail Meilakh’s highly critical review of this edition (Meilakh 2004).

9 It is also possible that new texts from the 1920s and 1930s will be discovered. Scholars thought that Vvedensky’s poem “Satira na Zhenatykh” had been lost until Dar’ia Moskovskaia very recently uncovered a copy. (The poem has yet to be published. Moskovskaia read it with her analysis at the international congress marking the one hundred year anniversary of Russian Formalism at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow [August 2013]).
rapid changes in official Soviet culture of the 1920s and 1930s in order to present a new understanding both their collective efforts and their individual texts.

Over the course of this introduction and the first chapter, I will explain more fully what this historical reevaluation entails, as well as the interpretative insight to be gained from it (while also defining more concretely whom exactly I mean by the “OBERIU writers”). First, however, it is important to establish more firmly what aspects of their historical context tend to be omitted in studies of these figures. Thus, for the moment, I will again resort to using Daniil Kharms, the group’s most famous member, as a metonym for the collective.

The Suitcase and the Martyr

An old suitcase is the material and figurative bearer of the Kharmsian literary tradition. This suitcase contained documents rescued from Kharms’s apartment by the aforementioned Iakov Druskin, religious philosopher and friend of the obereuty, in January 1942, after their owner was arrested by the NKVD. (Kharms would die of starvation the following month in a prison psychiatric ward.) Himself suffering from dystrophy induced by malnutrition, Druskin trudged across Leningrad during the first winter of the Blockade to retrieve these documents from his friend’s apartment. Despite the personal risk of possessing these banned items, Druskin held on to them when he was evacuated the following July and kept them secretly for another two decades, carefully beginning to release them only when he felt certain that his friend would not possibly return. Although some drafts did exist elsewhere, and a few had even circulated among a limited number of readers, the contents of Druskin’s suitcase were by far the fullest collection of Kharms’s writings preserved anywhere, as well as the primary corpus of Kharms’s close collaborator, Alexander Vvedensky. The first publications of Kharms’s writings abroad were a direct result of Druskin’s decision to open the suitcase and to circulate its contents.
This literal and figurative sequestering of OBERIU writings from the general history of Soviet culture dovetails nicely with the widely held view that one of the main tasks of the OBERIU movement was to create an ahistorical (anti-)literature. One of the major proponents of this interpretation is Mikhail Iampolski, who writes in the introduction to his brilliant, and in many ways groundbreaking, monograph on Kharms:

The creative works of Kharms, just like the creative works of any other artist, are historically conditioned, but the peculiarity of his position lies in the fact that he consciously attempted to break with the understanding of literature and literary “sense” as historical constructions. “History” in its traditional understanding is described by him as a “stopping point in time,” and so as a phenomenon [that is] antihistorical in its essence.

Творчество Хармса, как и творчество любого другого художника, исторически обусловлено, но своеобразие его позиции заключается в том, что он сознательно пытался порвать с пониманием литературы и литературного “смысла” как исторических образований. “История” в ее традиционном понимании описывается им как “остановка времени”, а потому как феномен антиисторический по существу. (Iampol’skii 7)

In accordance with his central thesis that Kharms attempts to create a radically different type of literature, which “overcomes the linearity of discourse,” Iampolski cautions that “for Kharms temporality removes literature from the sphere of the ideal [i.e. the sphere that Kharms strives to achieve] into the realm of the bad historical” (14). As a result, he explicitly eschews a philological approach in his own analysis, opting instead to perform “a reading” [чтение] in the

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10 Vvedensky uses the phrase “stopping point in time” [остановка времени] to describe the mysterious nature of death in “The Grey Notebook” [Серая тетрадь]: “Чудо возможно в момент Смерти <так!>-GC. Оно возможно потому что Смерть <так!>-GC есть остановка времени” (Vvedenskii 2011, 161). Reading this “stopping point” as a critique of “history” is Iampolski’s own extension of the concept.

11 Одна из наиболее радикальных утопий Хармса—это его попытка создать литератuru, преодолевающую линейность дискурса, казалось бы соприродную любому литературному тексту и со с <так!>-GC времен Лессинга считающуюся основополагающим свойством словесности. Для Хармса же темпоральность выводит литературу из сферы идеального в область дурного исторического (Iampol’skii 14).
Ultimately, this skeptical attitude toward literary-historical analysis has proven fruitful for Iampolski and other scholars of the movement, as it has allowed them to consider the more radical aspects of the OBERIU project at a remove from established paradigms for interpreting the Russian avant-garde. Nonetheless, as I will argue in more depth later, it tends to occlude ways in which the writings of Kharms and his circle carried on a dialogue with the “literary process” of their time. Moreover, if taken axiomatically, this move to rescue their writings from “bad historical” interpretation runs the risk of transforming what was initially itself a historical contingency (i.e., the forcible removal of the oberiuty from the cultural scene through arrests, etc.) into the governing principle of the group’s creative activity.

To a certain extent, the desire of these scholars to return Kharms’s work to the “sphere of the ideal” may be a reaction to one particular reductive trend in efforts to historicize the movement. For the last decade of his life, Kharms experienced intense physical and psychological suffering as a persona non grata in Soviet society, and his grotesque end has solidified in the minds of many readers an image of Kharms as a martyr of the Stalinist regime.

In the introduction to his recent translation of Kharms, Matvei Yankelevich warns against the temptation to view the author as primarily a victim: “because of the power of the trope, Kharms’s writing is often forced into political paradigms, thus making it possible to read his stories and even poems as parables of totalitarianism, comments on the violence of power and absurdity of Soviet life” (28). Nonetheless, the trope continues to have relevance, as became especially evident when Nadezhda Tolokonnikova of Pussy Riot evoked the OBERIU poets.

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12 Мне же хотелось обратиться к чтению как к неспециализированной рефлексии, к чтению как свободному движению мысли внутри текста.

13 For instance, see also Jakovljevic’s (2009) illuminating study of the Kharmsian event, in which the author acknowledges the influence of Iampolski’s study in developing his approach (26).
Vvedensky foremost, in her closing statement when she and two other members were tried for performing their anti-Putin “punk prayer” at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow:

The art of forming the image of a historical period is [one of] not knowing winners and losers. So did the OBERIU poets remain artists until the end, truly inexplicable and incomprehensible. They were purged in 1937. Vvedensky wrote: “The incomprehensible is pleasing to us, and the inexplicable is our friend.” […] Pussy Riot are Vvedensky’s disciples and heirs. His principle of “bad rhyme” is our own. He wrote, “It happens that two rhymes come to mind, a good one and a bad one, and I choose the bad one; this one will turn out to be right.” The inexplicable is our friend. The elite and refined occupations of the oberiuty, their search for thought at the edge of sense, were ultimately fulfilled at the cost of their lives, which were taken away by the senseless and absolutely inexplicable great terror. At the cost of their own lives, the OBERIU poets unintentionally demonstrated that their experience of senselessness and alogism as the nerve of this period was correct. But at the same time it led the artistic into the historical realm. […] The OBERIU dissidents are considered dead, but they are alive. They are punished but do not die. (Tolokonnikova)

Of course, locating OBERIU texts in what Tolokonnikova calls the “realm of history” implies a reading strategy incompatible with Iampolski’s “sphere of the ideal.” Instead of striving to seal themselves off from historical contingency, these texts inevitably stand as witness and judge to systemic violence, encoding a direct critique of its logic in their very form. As a result, this strategy finds a profound homology between biography and poetic text, and the alogism of violence provides the common key for their interpretation: “Their gruesome deaths are like occurrences in their own works” (Gibian 4).

In either form, the Kharms myth leaves only a narrow conceptual space for thinking about how this author actively responded to the political and cultural changes that he experienced during a period of productivity that lasted from Lenin’s death until the Second World War. In particular, these models seem to exclude any possibility that their creative activity could have any productive relationship with more mainstream Soviet culture. Yet, even if Kharms only successfully entered this mainstream as a children’s writer, his relationship to Soviet culture must have been more complex than simple escapism or unconscious reflection. As a professional
writer, he was deeply invested in the trajectory of official culture—most obviously in the 1920s when his notebooks show that he desperately trying to forge contacts with recognized cultural figures and to establish a place in the cultural arena, but also in the 1930s when he needed professional contacts to eke out a living as a children’s author. Of course, such biographical details have increasingly been integrated into scholarship as they have been uncovered, but it remains difficult to articulate how these realities might factor into his creative work in a way that does not reduce them to one of the narratives discussed above. To be sure, the case of Kharms is more polarizing in this respect than other members of the group, such as Zabolotsky, who were more successful in making inroads in official Soviet culture. Nonetheless, especially since Kharms was the principal organizing force behind OBERIU, it is tempting to fall back into these paradigms when discussing these writers as a group. We tend to emphasize the utopian aspirations underlying their shared aesthetic project or the stifling of these aspirations by the regime, and to overlook the specific strategies they used to form a group identity or the immediate context in which their works were first presented. The result is a flattened picture of

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14 In particular, Aleksandr Kobrinskii’s Russian-language biography of Kharms (2009) for the *Lives of Remarkable People* (Жизни замечательных людей) series provides a detailed and carefully documented picture of the writer’s career. See also Valerii Shubinskii’s more recent biography (Shubinskii 2015).

15 Although Zabolotsky did come under harsh criticism in the early 1930s, he survived the 1931 arrest of his former OBERIU associates unscathed and even published a fair number of poems over the next few years. He was arrested in 1938 and sent to a labor camp the following year, but he returned after four years of hard labor to become a successful poet and translator before his untimely death in 1958. Thus, he had the opportunity to reflect on his own career (and incidentally, on his imprisonment) from a position of general recognition, as well as preparing retrospective collections of his early works for publication. Studies of Zabolotsky—such as Adrian Makedonov’s pioneering *Nikolai Zabolotskii. Zhizn’, tvorchestvo, metamorfozy*, Darra Goldstein’s *Nikolai Zabolotsky: play for mortal stakes* (1993), and Sarah Pratt’s *Nikolai Zabolotsky: enigma and cultural paradigm* (2000)—have generally devoted much more attention to his place within Soviet intellectual life of the 1920s and 1930s.
the movement as a single reaction to the realism and neo-traditionalism of official Soviet culture, rather than a complex and evolving system of aesthetic principles and personal affiliations.

**The “Left Flank” and Its Creative Evolution**

The primary purpose of this dissertation is to situate the writers officially and unofficially associated with OBERIU within Soviet culture of the 1920s and 1930s. Their own concern with articulating such a position is evident in the collective name “Left Flank” [Левый фланг], which several of these writers favored before political concerns forced them to accept the more neutral-sounding OBERIU. Whereas the word “Real” in the expanded version of the OBERIU acronym seems to suggest consensus in how the members conceived “reality” and its relationship to language, the positional terms “Left” and “Flank” more immediately implies commonality of affiliation and situation within a larger context. As I will argue in Chapter One, the program for forming a “Left Flank” implies not simply an endorsement the “left arts” advocated by the Left Front of the Arts [Левый фронт искусств] (Lef), but also a critical engagement with the constitution and purpose of this “left.” It reflects the awareness of an embattled position vis-à-vis both mainstream Soviet culture and experimental aesthetics that defined their careers in the 1920s. This process of self-positioning continues in even the private and often esoteric discussions of the informal circle that replaced OBERIU in 1930s: this group (which will be discussed more in the first and fourth chapters) continued to contemplate the legacy of the avant-garde and to imagine a literary and philosophical alternative to official Soviet culture.

The task of this dissertation is to investigate the constitution and evolution of this “left flank” as a part of the overall evolution of Soviet culture in the years between Lenin’s death and the Second World War. Over this period, I will examine both the changing professional and personal affiliations of these writers and the ways in which these historical circumstances might
inform our readings of their texts. By discussing their evolution over this period, I do not intend to provide a comprehensive history of the movement, but rather to demonstrate that the writings of this circle maintain a complex and essential relationship with the aesthetics of official Soviet culture. While my analysis will touch on many of the writers associated with OBERIU and its surrounding unofficial circles, I will concentrate mainly on the careers of Daniil Kharms and Alexander Vvedensky, who played a central role in organizing “left” artists to form the movement that would become OBERIU, and whose later writings were profoundly affected by their social and professional marginalization after their 1931 arrests. Since scholarly discussions of these authors are especially apt to focus on their philosophical views and “poetic critique of reason” (as Vvedensky put its) at a remove from any historical context, they provide an effective central case for my main argument.

Chapter One further develops the concept of a “left flank” and its relevance to studies of the OBERIU movement and the avant-garde more broadly. In this chapter, I will discuss the ambiguous historical position of this second generation of avant-gardists and the ways in which their immediate circle envisioned the “left” during the NEP period. Since the 1920s were a period of rapid cultural change, I also argue the necessity for a more nuanced analysis that divides their work into stages on the basis of context in which their works circulated. The logic behind this division can be explained with reference to the Formalist concept of ustanovka, frequently translated as “orientation,” which refers simultaneously to the compositional logic of a work and its immediate speech context. In this way, the notion of ustanovka provides a basis for in-depth formal description, while also drawing attention to the “situated-ness” of the text within a particular socially and historically determined environment. I also identify three major organizational stages of Kharms and Vvedensky’s collaboration: the Left Flank, OBERIU, and
the Lipavsky Circle. Each stage, I argue, presupposes a different function for poetic texts and so provides a different model for reading artistic productions.

The succeeding chapters extend and refine this framework by examining problems in the construction of a work of verbal art (verse semantics, narrative structure, lyric voice) from these authors’ points of view. These chapters also follow a rough chronology based on the major stages of the group’s evolution as identified in Chapter One.

**Chapter Two** focuses on the very early stages of Kharms’s and Vvedensky’s careers, from their first applications to the Leningrad Union of Poets to their abortive attempt to organize the Left Flank alongside the older zaum’ (transrational) poet Aleksandr Tufanov. At this point, their concept of verbal art was confined almost exclusively to poetry, and their primary artistic concern was to determine the role of semantics in poetry after Futurism. The phonetic experiments of Cubo-Futurism were a major inspiration for the Formalist theorist Iurii Tynianov to radically rethink the practice of verse semantics in his 1924 study *The Problem of Verse Language*. Similarly, the discussions of this Left Flank focus on reconceptualizing the constructive role of meaning in verbal art as a first step in reimagining the form and function of Russian verse. In tracing this early history, I focus on how this shared problem provokes diametrically opposed responses from Tufanov and Vvedensky and this conflict helps shape the second iteration of the “Left Flank,” later officially named OBERIU.

**Chapter Three** argues that the main conceptual shift between these two movements was a change in emphasis from theories of language and versification to the practical question of theatrical performance. As a result, when Kharms and Vvedensky continue to explore many of these same issues in their OBERIU writings, their responses are shaped by contemporary questions about the composition of theatrical texts and the status of semi-professional troupes. In
this chapter, I demonstrate that the theatrical works of OBERIU and the associated theater collective “Radix” engage simultaneously the theoretical questions of narrative “unity” raised by the Russian avant-garde and the practical problems raised by the semi-professional workers’ theaters that proliferated after the Revolution.

Chapter Four focuses on the post-arrest writings of Kharms and Vvedensky, placing them in dialogue with Nikolai Zabolotsky’s contemporaneous poetry. If the two previous chapters primarily attempt to reframe mainstay topics in OBERIU scholarship—i.e., the role of semantic distortions in their poetry and the significance of theatrical performance to their aesthetics—this final chapter argues for the importance of an often-overlooked phenomenon: the pronounced turn toward traditional elegiac tropes in their poetry of this period. Using Zabolotsky’s contemporaneous official poetry as a foil, I explore the significance that a return to the nineteenth-century elegiac tradition held for Vvedensky and Kharms; more specifically, I interpret their engagement with this tradition as an investigation of the relevance of lyric poetry in the 1930s and their own status within the Russian poetic tradition. In the conclusion, I will build a bridge between this investigation and the question of these authors’ legacy and status within the Russian canon at present.
Chapter One: Left Flank of the Avant-garde

In his seminal study on Daniil Kharms, *Daniil Harms et la fin de l’avant-garde russe* (1991), Jean-Philippe Jaccard suggests the phrase “end of the Russian avant-garde” as the appropriate context for understanding the OBERIU movement. The primary meaning of this phrase is clearly this movement’s ill timing. A brief look at the dates of OBERIU’s public performances (1928-1930) suffices to confirm that these enthusiastic proponents of the “left arts” had rushed aboard a sinking steamship. By the time of their first and only major performance in January 1928, Soviet cultural policy had already firmly broken from the overt experimentalism of the avant-garde, and most critics could understand such antics only as a “reactionary” provocation. OBERIU performances ceased entirely in 1930—the same year that Vladimir Mayakovsky’s suicide signaled to many the de facto end of the avant-garde project. The suppression of OBERIU was not merely a byproduct of this cultural shift, but indeed instrumental in establishing the “end of the avant-garde” as a historical fact. As Nikolai Bogomolov (2004) has observed, the investigation of children’s publishing that resulted in the arrests of Kharms and Vvedensky in 1931 was an important moment in the demise of early Soviet culture, as it constituted “the first large-scale [political] case specifically concerning writers” (первым массовым собственно писательским делом) (260). Beyond the descriptive value of the phrase, the “end of the avant-garde” was also a state-sponsored program that affected the OBERIU writers directly through public denunciations, forced confessions, 

\[16\] Here, I am referring both to the official members of OBERIU and other writers unofficially associated with the movement. The scholarly usage of “OBERIU” has varied over time—ranging from signees of the OBERIU declaration to “writers vaguely clustered around Daniil Kharms”—and I will clarify my own usage of this term and other related classifications within this dissertation later in this chapter. For the present, phrases like “OBERIU writers” or “authors associated with OBERIU” are meant to act as placeholders, covering a broad range of writers.
imprisonment, exile, financial ruin, hidden and destroyed manuscripts, and even execution. How did these authors understand their own place within the avant-garde and Soviet culture as a whole? What led them to proclaim an agenda based on radical experimentation at a time when such deviation from orthodoxy was fast becoming unthinkable?

This dissertation interprets the careers of the OBERIU writers as an attempt to contest the official logic of cultural progress from its margin—first by forming a “left flank of the arts” as a more radical counterpart to the Left Front, and then by promoting an alternative literary culture within their own unofficial reading circle. The next three chapters will each examine how these writers reconsidered the notion of “left art” at a pivotal moment in their history, while also contextualizing these serial reformulations within larger debates in Soviet culture. To lay a foundation for these more focused arguments, the present chapter briefly discusses how this dissertation fits within the already-existing scholarship on these writers, identifies the major moments in the evolution of the OBERIU circle, and begins to consider their place within Soviet culture through a discussion of the phrase “left flank.” What does it mean to consider the OBERIU writers as a “left flank” of the avant-garde? How does privileging this term over the widely accepted “OBERIU” open up new ways of looking at their artistic activity?

**Previous Scholarship on OBERIU**

As I have already mentioned in the Introduction, scholarship on the OBERIU writers has frequently tended toward monographic consideration of single authors, the focus most often falling on Kharms or Zabolotsky. While such single-author studies have been important to my officially and unofficially involved with this movement. For the moment, I am making no distinction between, say, Konstantin Vaginov (who participated in the first OBERIU performance but had little interaction with the group after) and Nikolai Oleinikov (who never performed with OBERIU but had personal associations with several members).
research, this dissertation is primarily concerned with understanding these writers as a collective entity. Studies of these writers as a group have generally concerned themselves with establishing the lineage of OBERIU within the Russian avant-garde, while attempting to define qualities distinguishing “OBERIU poetics” from various other avant-garde movements that promote highly unusual verbal associations, often resulting in apparently nonsensical language (e.g., Futurism, Surrealism, Dada). I will continue to address the major traits of “OBERIU poetics” as defined by various scholars in the succeeding chapters of this dissertation. For the moment, I will confine myself to a brief overview of several major works to help clarify the contribution of the present study.

In framing my analysis, I owe a significant debt to the work of Jean-Philippe Jaccard, whose already-mentioned monograph Daniil Harms et la fin de l’avant-garde russe (1991) remains the definitive account of the group’s immediate influences and early evolution. Perhaps Jaccard’s greatest contribution was to detail the influence of the lesser-known zaumniki Igor’ Terent’ev and Aleksandr Tufanov, who served as intermediaries between the oberiuty and the two major zaum’ theoreticians, Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh. In near simultaneous publications of Kharms’s early poetry and Tufanov’s eccentric poema Ushkuiniki [Flat-bottomed Boat Brigands], Jaccard—along with co-authors Tat’iana Nikol’skaia and Andrei Ustinov—firmly established the prevalent narrative of Kharms’s early career and the prehistory of the OBERIU movement. Recent archival publications by Tat’iana Dviniatina and Andrei Krusanov (2008; 2013) have shed additional light on the professional relationships among Kharms, Vvedensky, and Tufanov, as well as how each poet envisioned the project of establishing a unified “Left Flank.” Based on these publications and other documents held in
Tufanov’s archive at IRLI (Pushkinskii dom), we can substantially expand upon, and revise some points of, the generally accepted account of Kharms’s and Vvedensky’s early careers. As I will argue in more depth later in this chapter, such reconsideration ultimately helps us understand not only their poetry from this early period, but also the organizational logic of OBERIU and the unofficial circle that succeeded it.

Another important work for my analysis is Aleksandr Kobrinskii’s ambitious two-volume study, Poetika “OBERIU” v kontekste russkogo literaturnogo avangarda (2000), which focuses on these writers’ response to Silver Age and early Soviet literary movements. Through intertextual analysis, Kobrinskii convincingly establishes that the oberiuty actively engaged with a wide range of authors, responding to “nearly all the major literary movements of their own decade, as well the previous one: the symbolists, the futurists, the acmeists, the imagists [or imaginists: имажинисты]” (6-7). He further contends that the unity [единство] of the OBERIU movement can be found not only in their shared artistic devices [приемы], but also in how they responded to these literary movements (8). The monograph The Last Soviet avant-garde: OBERIU—fact, fiction, metafiction (1999), by Graham Roberts, deserves mention as the only book-length Anglophone study of the oberiuty as a movement. This work makes an

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17 With the support of a fellowship from the Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies, I had the opportunity of examining several documents from this archive in May 2013. All citations from the IRLI archive in Saint Petersburg are given in the following form: Fond (f.), opis’ (op.), nomer (n.). For citations from especially long works, I have also included the relevant page numbers as they have been labeled by the archivists.

18 On the translation of “имажинизм,” see Markov, p. 1-3. In short, Markov argues convincingly that Vadim Shershenevich derived the word from the Italian word for image, used prominently in Marinetti’s Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista (which Shershenevich had translated into Russian). Nonetheless, Markov favors “imagism” as an English name for the Russian movement as it avoids unwanted associations with the English “imagine.” Of course, this translation creates a spurious connection to the Anglophone Imagist movement, but as I will discuss in the next chapter, within the context of this dissertation even this connection may be appropriate, as Alexander Tufanov explicitly draws connections between the two movements in his essays.
ambitious attempt to contextualize OBERIU within Soviet culture of the 1920s, including contemporaneous literary theories (especially the Formalists and the Bakhtin circle). While this dissertation addresses several topics raised in Roberts’s study (including the relevance of Formalism to the OBERIU movement), my approach to these issues does not follow Roberts’s largely Bakhtinian theoretical framework, leading to substantial divergences in our interpretations.

Several studies of the Russian avant-garde have dedicated significant space to the obseiuty, often attempting to define, and occasionally to debunk, their unique place within the greater avant-garde. Such studies have mostly focused on how their poetic sensibilities represent a development of Futurist theories of language. One useful heuristic for understanding this shift was formulated by M. Meilakh: OBERIU poetry “shifted emphasis from zaum phonetics to zaum semantics”—i.e., from overtly meaningless phonemic composites to semantically dissonant combinations of everyday words—to describe this transition (quoted in Janecek, 335). Several later studies have attempted to qualify this shift in more analytic detail. For instance, Aage Hansen-Løve (1993) views OBERIU poetry as a complex negotiation of previous avant-garde models, in which the Futurist paradigm typified by Aleksei Kruchenykh takes precedence:

In their complicated relationship to Futurism, or more specifically to Avant-garde Models I (Kruchenykh) and II (Khlebnikov), the neologisms of V. Khlebnikov’s ‘zaum’-poetics’ (and its utopia of a new cosmic language) were clearly repressed from the beginning in favor of the expressive and gestural sound poetry of Kruchenykh (звучим) and his fondness for self-staging and body language.

In ihrem komplizierten Verhältnis zum Futurismus bzw. zur den Avantgarde-modellen I (Kruchenykh) und II (Chlebnikov) wird freilich von Anfang an die Neologistik der ‘zaum’-Poetik’ V. Chlebnikovs (und ihre Utopie einer neuen kosmischen Sprache) eher zurückgedrängt zugunsten der expressiv-gestischen Laut-Dichtung Kruchenykh (звучим) und seiner Vorliebe für Selbstinszenierung und Körpersprache. (230)
D. L. Shukurov’s recent (2007) study of Russian avant-garde concepts of the “word” (or “discourse”: слово) discusses this distinction at length, concluding that the “collision of verbal meanings” [столкновение словесных смыслов] in OBERIU poetry effectively overcomes the trans-sense word, since semantically dissonant language is ultimately more disruptive to interpretation than unfamiliar phonetic combinations (i.e., a coherent meaning may always be posited for the latter) (254-5). More recently, Lada Panova has taken a different tack in an article on Kharms, moving the focus away from semantic innovations and finding the significant continuity between OBERIU and Futurism instead at the level of pragmatics. Panova argues that an exclusive emphasis on formal qualities and “uniqueness” from a literary standpoint has obscured the program of authorial self-promotion and readerly subjugation that constitutes Kharms’s real avant-garde inheritance (355-6 and passim). In this reading, it is precisely such antagonistic pragmatics that constitute the significant innovation of avant-gardism, and maintaining this uneven relationship between author and reader constitutes the shared “marketing strategy” of the avant-gardists (a category that includes Kharms) and those who keep their reputation alive in scholarship (those who write on Kharms being top marketers) (346).

Thus, instead of seeking to define the formal qualities that make OBERIU poetry innovative, Panova shifts the question to interrogate the authorial practices that lead us to place such a premium on formal innovation in the first place.

This dissertation similarly attempts to move beyond the emphasis on the novelty or uniqueness when situating the OBERIU writers within the avant-garde, although I do so for somewhat different reasons. The notion of a unique “OBERIU poetics” downplays the extent to which these poets conceived of themselves as part of an artistic tradition and detracts attention

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19 This phrase comes from the “OBERIU” declaration, attributed to Nikolai Zabolotsky.
from the ways that their writing evokes generic precedents. Authorial claims to radical novelty notwithstanding, the OBERIU poets continually evoke the Russian literary tradition, and this dialogue with their forebears is essential to their writing. As Ilya Kukulin nicely puts it in a review of Kobrinskii’s monograph, the range of inter-textual connections unearthed in this study challenges the default view of OBERIU poetics (and avant-gardism more generally) as a rupture with tradition: “the time has come to conceive of the avant-garde as a particular form of a paradoxical, but inevitable, continuity of culture” [пришло время осмыслить авангард как особую форму парадоксальной, но необходимой преемственности культуры] (Kukulin 2000). Moreover, recognizing such a “paradoxical continuity of culture” at the level of historical succession [преемственность] strikes me as a necessary corollary to this dissertation’s emphasis on an equally paradoxical continuity—this time, in the sense of “целостность” or “нерастворимость”—existing between official Soviet culture and its aggressively marginalized dissenters. As the following chapters will demonstrate, the OBERIU writers joined Soviet culture as a whole in continually questioning the relevance of the pre-revolutionary past for understanding their world.

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20 “The only novel written correctly in its principle is mine,” Vvedensky once claimed, while also acknowledging that his “correct” novel was badly written (Sazhin et al., vol. 1, 243).
21 While Kukulin does not repeat the phrase “paradoxical continuity” in his own article “Vysokii dilentantizm v poiskakh orientira: Kharms i Gete” (2005), this work implicitly develops this idea by showing how Kharms turned to nineteenth-century Romanticism in his later writings. In this article, Kukulin expands on his understanding of Kharms’s relationship to tradition: Хармс считал свою деятельность, а равно деятельность других обэриутов и, возможно, Малевича своего рода игрой, порождающей абсурдистское воспроизведение классической традиции после культурной катастрофы, вызванной революцией и гражданской войной, — игрой, которая проблематизировала и основы этой традиции, и идею культурной преемственности как таковой (75). In this dissertation, I have followed Kukulin’s lead in emphasizing how the OBERIU writers “problematize...the idea of cultural continuity as such,” although my own readings of how they engage with the literary classics suggest that they regarded this engagement as much more than an absurdist “game.” (See Chapter Four and the Conclusion.)
When discussing the historical place of the “OBERIU writers” or “OBERIU poetics,” it is also important to recognize the diversity of artistic outlooks within this group of writers. Not only are there significant stylistic divergences between writers (as one could readily verify by comparing any two works by Vaginov and Bakhterev, for instance), but one also finds significant variations within the work of a single author. We may still regard this movement meaningfully as a whole, but its unity consists in debate and dialogue among its members, rather than a cohesive set of shared aesthetic principles. Moreover, their ability to sustain a dialogue with each other depends on a sense of shared position within society and common purpose of renewing the experimental fervor of the earlier avant-garde. Indeed, I would argue that the single greatest source of unity among these authors is their shared situation. They were contemporaries who began their careers at roughly the same moment in Petrograd/Leningrad and took on the increasingly marginalized role of defenders of the “left arts.” Of course, this notion of “left arts” demands some clarification, but first it is necessary to unpack the term “OBERIU writers” and to expand on the relationships that existed among them.

“Who are we? And why are we?”

So far in my discussion, I have, for the sake of simplicity, used the term “OBERIU” without qualification to designate a nebulous constellation of authors associated with Daniil Kharms. This term, however, requires some parsing, as it has been used to mean different things in various scholarly works, and its immediate historical meaning is considerably narrower than its general application. Strictly speaking, the Association for Real Art, or OBERIU, is the name under which a group of Leningrad poets, theater students, and film directors held a sensational performance called “Three Left Hours” [Три левых часа] at that city’s House of the Press [Дом печати] on January 24, 1928, and a smaller group continued to perform for the next two years.
The participants in these performances were always changing. Scholars most often count the association’s official membership by those who signed the group’s declaration, which was published in the periodical of the House of Print to advertise the Three Left Hours performance. Although the organizers originally intended for the association to forge new paths simultaneously in poetry, theater, film, and music, only poetry and theater became ongoing parts of their evenings. The poets featured in the original declaration are: Vvedensky, Konstantin Vaginov, Igor’ Bakhterev, Zabolotsky, Kharms, and Boris Levin; the theatrical program was based mainly on the work of a student collective called Radix [Радикс], with whom Kharms and Vvedensky had collaborated previously (see Chapter Three).

This historical OBERIU presents a problematic object of research on a number of counts. First, it is not clear at all what the group proposed to accomplish in their manifesto, which responds to its own central questions, “Who are we? And why are we?” [Кто мы? И почему мы?] (Vaginov, et al. 457), with a string of exuberantly vague and clichéd pronouncements. Even if a handful of firm positions can be gleaned from this document, there is no reliable way to gauge how many of the signatories actually supported these statements (or how they understood them). More fundamentally, it is difficult to determine who should be considered a member of the organization, since several signees of the declaration were less involved in later performances than lesser-known members. For instance, judging purely by extent of participation, Konstantin Vaginov should cede his spot to the mostly unknown Russian “Expressionist” Evgenii “Dzhemla” Vigilianskii, yet out of the two only Vaginov is anthologized as an “OBERIU” poet. Moreover, any roster that includes only those directly involved in OBERIU performances will exclude a number of figures who were immensely important—as inspirations, interlocutors, and audience—in forming this artistic community, including: the philosophers Iakov Druskin and
Leonid Lipavsky, the poets Nikolai Oleinikov and Alexander Tufanov, and the theatrical director Igor’ Terent’ev.

For these reasons, scholars and editors of “OBERIU” works have often either made ad hoc decisions about “true” OBERIU membership (e.g. deciding that Zabolotsky was an essential part of the project but Vaginov a marginal figure, or vice versa) or sought a more coherent alternate grouping to take its place. In the latter vein, one widespread alternative to “OBERIU” is the designation “chinari,” a term coined by Alexander Vvedensky. Kharms and Vvedensky used this neologism to designate their shared poetic principles for a short period before forming OBERIU (1925-7). Nonetheless, the term has found wider application since the publication of an influential article by Druskin, in which he extends the “chinari” designation to the unofficial, philosophically like-minded group of friends that predated and outlasted OBERIU proper (Sazhin et al., 46-64). While Druskin is explicit that this use of “chinari” is his own extension of the term, this broad designation has been picked up with various meanings in publications on these writers. The chinari have been alternately described as a literary organization, an esoteric philosophical circle, and merely a group of friends. Whatever the difficulties surrounding this particular name, at the least it is clear that an unofficial, philosophically-minded circle involving Druskin did meet for at least the years 1933-4. The regular participants in this circle included

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22 Druskin explains that the term from “rank” [чин], which he explains as a reference to spiritual rank. Yet an alternative derivation, from “чинять” (to create), has been suggested by Stone Nakhimovsky (1982, 10) and later supported by Ostashevsky (2006, xv). This would give the term an etymological meaning similar to “poet.” Despite Druskin’s firsthand authority on these matters, the latter version makes more sense within the context of the Left Flank, where the names of individual movements generally designated a specific perspective on how to create verbal art. One early declaration of the Left Flank refers to the members as “художныетечери” [roughly: artistic speechers] (Dviniatina and Krusanov, 178). Lastly, given the evident sense of humor expressed by the naming practices of the “Left Flank,” we should also note the name’s nonsensical evocation of a plane tree [чинара]—incidentally, a frequent image Lermontov, one of Vvedensky’s favorite poets.
Lipavsky, Druskin, Kharms, Vvedensky, Oleinikov, and Zabolotsky, and their discussions ranged from metaphysical questions to literary tastes to friendly amusements, such as a competition to determine who could see farther out of either eye. As an alternative to the potentially misleading *chinár*, Eugene Ostashevsky (2013) has introduced the more neutral term the “Lipavsky Circle” to designate this close-knit group (28-9). I will use this term for the remainder of the dissertation to refer to the unofficial circle that replaced OBERIU for the period 1933-4.

In addition to OBERIU and the Lipavsky Circle, one other organizational term will be important for this dissertation: Left Flank [Левый фланг]. Before settling on “OBERIU,” the organizers of the movement proposed several titles involving the word “left,” including “Left Flank” and “Flank of Those on the Left” [Фланг Левых]. Judging by Kharms’s diary, it does not appear that the “OBERIU” compromise was especially popular, but the other names were rejected by the director of the House of the Press for the potentially dangerous political connotations carried by the term “left” (Vaginov et al., 1991, 444). While this naming controversy has provoked little interest among scholars, I believe that it offers some insight into the nature of the OBERIU. In terms of lineage, it establishes a direct link between OBERIU and a lesser-known project: an association called the “Left Flank” that Kharms and Vvedensky attempted to organize alongside the zaum’ poet Aleksandr Tufanov in late 1925. This earlier group was to be a loose confederation of representatives of various poetic movements, and its organizational documents provide a valuable perspective into the early careers of Vvedensky and Kharms. (I will return to this point momentarily.) More fundamentally, these proposed names suggest that the impulse behind the association was less to advance a particular version of “real art” than to rally support for a resurgence of “left art” as a catch-all banner for experimentation.
In short, behind the odd moniker “OBERIU” we find a series of attempts to form a collective identity around the aesthetic heritage of the early Soviet “left arts.” If we take the careers of Kharms and Vvedensky as our baseline, we may break out three major stages of collective activity, each with a high point roughly corresponding to the designations *Left Flank, OBERIU, Lipavsky Circle* (in this order):

- **Stage One** (1924-6): Both poets give public poetry readings with various groups, while also studying under the older transrational (zaum’) poets Tufanov and Terent’ev. The attempt to form the “Left Flank” in 1925 marks a turn in their professional activities toward organization, as well as the formation of a joint poetic identity with the declaration of themselves as *chinari*. Vvedensky and Kharms each manage to publish two poems from this period in almanacs compiled by the Leningrad Union of Poets, which prove to be their only published literary works outside the realm of children’s literature.

- **Stage Two** (1926-1930): The *chinari* break away from Tufanov and become immediately involved with the Radix theatrical collective. As they attempt to form a new Left Flank, theater and theatricalization become central to their conception of the new movement. This movement comes to fruition in OBERIU, which becomes widely visible to cultural elites in Leningrad in January 1928. Plans for group publications are drafted but never realized. Due to harsh public criticism, OBERIU for all intents and purposes ceases to exist sometime in 1930. (A year later Kharms, Vvedensky, Tufanov, and some others are arrested. Kharms and Vvedensky are primarily charged with subversive activities in the realm of children’s literature.)

- **Stage Three** (1933-4): The Lipavsky circle meets. This circle has no illusions of a public impact, but they nonetheless construct a group identity through their written texts of this period, primarily Lipavsky’s “Conversations.” Conflict among the group’s members brings their collective meetings to an end in 1934, and external circumstances—Vvedensky’s relocation to Kharkov (1936), Oleinikov’s execution (1937), Zabolotsky’s arrest (1938)—remove several members from Leningrad. Nonetheless, this circle of friends remains an audience for Kharms’s and Vvedensky’s mature writings until their fatal second arrests (in August and September of 1941, respectively).

It should be emphasized that none of these stages represents a fully coherent organization with well-defined goals.\(^23\) We should consider their names useful high-water marks in the ever-

\(^{23}\) This act of isolating self-contained “stages” runs the risk of eliding the continuities that exist between these circles, suggesting a more rigid periodization than can be justified. (For instance, many of the philosophical questions discussed by the Lipavsky circle had already been posed by Druskin in the 1920s.) Moreover, these stages do not adequately describe the career of every
evolving complex of professional and personal affiliations among their members, rather than easily isolable, self-consistent groups. It is helpful to recognize these stages insofar as one can identify clear differences in the composition, practical aims, and societal status of these groups. From the poetic experiments of the Left Flank to the theatrical spectacles of OBERIU to the intimate circle of Lipavsky’s apartment, we see changes in both the audience and the discursive context of their works. Attention to these changing affiliations can aid us in interpreting the texts produced during these periods, since each context implies a distinct logic for the production and circulation of creative works.

I have already evoked the Russian Formalist term “ustanovka” in the Introduction as a way of conceptualizing the first half of this question. Often translated as “orientation,” the Russian word encompasses a wide range of meanings, from “aim” or “purpose” to the “mounting” or “setting” of an instrument. As used by the Formalists, the term refers simultaneously to the compositional logic of a work and its immediate speech context, since the formal composition of a text will always depend on how it is situated within a particular social context. Most famously, Iurii Tynianov applied this reasoning to demonstrate the eighteenth-century solemn ode must be read in the context of the imperial court, where the texts were “oriented” toward public declamation. In the context of the “stages” outlined above, we might expect changes in how these authors’ texts are disseminated to have an effect on their formal composition. Put simply, member of OBERIU: an analogous attempt to chart the career of Vaginov or Zabolotsky would look quite different.

24 N.B. Strictly speaking, the concept of ustanovka denotes a formal category and bears no necessary relation to the actual performance or circulation of a text—an ode structured according to principles set forth for persuasive speech will qualify as “oratory” regardless of whether it is actually read at a commemorative event. For this reason, identifying the circumstances under which a text was produced is not sufficient in itself to establish its ustanovka. For instance, an argument that a post-arrest text by Kharms displays a different orientation from an OBERIU-era works would need to correlate formal differences with a change in the literary status of this writing.
writing for a public poetry reading is different from writing for a performance by a specific theatrical troupe, and writing for either public forum is different from writing a text for a small circle of friends, or for “the desk.” One recurring task in this dissertation will be to investigate how these changes in venue affect the composition of poetic texts.

At the same time, we can look at this problem from the opposite angle and investigate how these various groups were formed through particular ways of reading and writing texts. Debates over aesthetic principles were not only central to the organizational activities of the Left Flank and OBERIU, but they also continued into the recorded conversations of the Lipavsky Circle. Such discussions of taste also imply a particular understanding of how Soviet culture has developed and necessarily stake out a position within this evolving culture. On a basic level, the Left Flank, OBERIU, and Lipavsky Circle were all attempts to carve out a space at the margin of Soviet culture and to maintain this space through the production of poetic texts—a process aimed at establishing shared aesthetic sensibilities and a common worldview. For both Kharms and Vvedensky, this process of forming an alternative to the cultural mainstream began as a response to the crisis and collapse of the so-called “left arts” in the 1920s.

What was “Left” of the Avant-Garde?

In the beginning of this chapter, I evoked Jaccard’s phrase “end of the avant-garde” to describe the moment when OBERIU formed. As a temporal marker, this phrase is highly ambiguous due to the notorious difficulty of dating the end of the avant-garde project. Did it come to a close with the First All-Soviet Congress of Writers in 1934? Or was Mayakovsky’s suicide in 1930 the final blow? Or was the party really over earlier, in 1928, when a Central Committee led by Stalin announced the end of NEP, the last-ditch attempts to reunite Opoiaz collapsed (as did Lef), and the nineteenth-century realist novel was celebrated in the Tolstoy
Jubilee? Similarly, there are significant disagreements about how to interpret the historical significance of this “end.” Was it simply a matter of persecution by the Soviet state? Or was Stalinism actually the triumph of the avant-garde’s “will to power” (as Boris Groys’s famous paradoxical reading would have it)? Or do we need to understand this cultural transition as a complex interplay of asynchronous processes that redefined fundamental categories of Soviet artistic activity? While these are all important questions, for the purposes of this dissertation I am only concerned with how this process would have been perceived by the various iterations of the Left Flank, and in this respect the phrase “end of the avant-garde” strikes me as especially apt. Long before its recorded “time of death” (whichever date we pick), there was good reason to regard the avant-garde project as either ending or already over, and the Left Flank formed largely in response to uncertainty over the place of “left arts” during this ongoing cultural crisis.

Of course, the notions of avant-garde and terminality have long been inseparable. One of the defining traits of any avant-garde movement is its desire to bring an end to existing culture—its included among this culture’s forms. By the time Kharms and Vvedensky had entered the scene, roughly a decade had elapsed since Russian culture withstood the serial apocalypses of Aleksei Kruchenykh’s Victory over the Sun (1913), Vasilisk Gnedov’s “Poem of the End” (1913), and Kazimir Malevich’s Black Square (1915). More immediately, this sense that Russian culture had entered its end times was validated by the two revolutions of 1917 and the

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25 For instance, Evegny Dobrenko has traced the evolution of Soviet literature during this period through studies of how authors and readers of Socialist Realist texts were formed. See his monographs: The making of the state reader: social and aesthetic contexts of the reception of Soviet literature and The making of the state writer: social and aesthetic origins of Soviet literary culture. More recently, Devin Fore has correlated the return to realism after decades of avant-garde experimentation in Russia and Germany with a resurgent anthropocentrism in art and literature (Realism After Modernism: the Rehumanization of Art and Literature).

26 The avant-garde’s obsession with bringing an end to existing culture has been frequently discussed. For a recent analysis that features all three works prominently, see Strudler 2014.
devastation of the Civil War. To utopian thinkers, this catastrophe presented an opportunity for
the birth of a new culture, indeed one far superior to the one that was lost. This optimistic
viewpoint opens the first article ever to mention Vvedensky, a short piece titled “Futurism”
published in Life of Art in 1923 (No.27): “All ‘old’ art, with some minor exception[s] was in an
embryonic stage until this moment, [therefore] what lies ahead is not the ‘rebirth’ [or: a
‘renaissance’] but the ‘birth’ of art” [Все «старое» искусство, за малым исключением, до
сего момента находилось в зародышевом состоянии, предстоит не «возрождение» но
«рождение» искусства] (Kryzhitskii 14, bold in original). More pessimistically, future oberiut
Konstantin Vaginov evokes a sense of general collapse in his 1922 essay, “The Monastery of
Our Lord Apollo” [Монастырь господа нашего Аполлона], published in the second issue of
the Emotionalist almanac Abraxas.27 Not only has the purportedly eternal God [sic!] of art and
poetry become subject to decay [Жалко смотреть на Бога нетленного, в тлении
поверженного] (Terekhina 286), but Vaginov depicts post-revolutionary Petrograd as a city of
ghosts [призраки] condemned to walk the earth.28

In the minds of many cultural reformers, the birth of a new culture was indefinitely delayed
by the decision to make an uneasy “tactical retreat” into the New Economic Policy (NEP) during
the years1921-1928.29 This temporary policy fostered deep uncertainty about the ultimate
direction of Soviet culture, which was only heightened by Lenin’s death in 1924 (incidentally,
the same year that Kharms and Vvedensky each made an early professional step by applying to
the Leningrad division of the newly formed All-Russian Union of Poets [Всероссийский союз

27 The title of this article may be, in part, a reference to the Acmeist journal Apollo. Vaginov had
been previously a member of Nikolai Gumilev’s Guild of Poets [Цех поэтов].
28 As Polina Barskova has argued in her dissertation chapter on Vaginov, this image of the city
simultaneously corresponds to the author’s own “necrophiliac” literary sensibilities and the
agonized discourse surrounding Petrograd-Leningrad during the 1920s (Barskova 93-153).
29 For an overview of NEP and the “art of capitulation” in Petrograd, see Clark: 143-161.
In this year the journal *Russkii sovremennik* reflected this mood of uncertainty by publishing several critical surveys of contemporary literature by the formalists Boris Eikhenbaum and Iurii Tynianov, all offering the same basic assessment: Soviet literature effectively did not exist. Quoting the titles of two articles, the present could best be described as the “interval” during which Soviet society was “waiting for literature.” In their diagnosis, the problem was not an absence of writers, nor was it a lack of experimentation—rather the pre-revolutionary genre hierarchy and literary culture had collapsed, creating a situation in which writing failed to function as “literature.” Such a diagnosis had ambivalent implications for the various experimentally-inclined movements comprising the avant-garde. On the one hand, since no one could predict what the coming “literature” would look like when it arrived, this notion of an open-ended “interval” provided a license for artistic freedom. (If no one knows what will work, anything is worth a try.) On the other hand, in such an artistic free-for-all most new paths would inevitably prove to be dead ends, and according to Tynianov even the avant-garde’s preeminent living poet, Vladimir Mayakovsky, was struggling to find an adequate response to the uncertain “subterranean shocks of history” that characterize the “interval” (Tynianov 1977, 178). A new artistic culture needed to be constructed, yet there was no guarantee that the experiments of the avant-garde would provide its foundation.

Of course, the success of any movement in the cultural sphere also depends on its ability to find institutional support for its publications and performances. Despite their prominence during the early post-revolutionary period, the so-called “left arts” (as several avant-garde movements had begun to brand themselves) were divided into fiercely competitive factions, and the ethos of experimentation among “left artists” provoked ire among many prominent political

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30 Only Vvedensky was accepted this time. Kharms finally joined two years later.
figures (Lenin famously among them). Analyzing the actual distribution of institutional positions, A. V. Krusanov (2003) has argued that the image of “left artists” dominating early Soviet culture is ultimately an exaggeration founded on these artists’ slogans and the accusations of their detractors:

In reality, we observe in the first years of the revolution only conversations about a “dictatorship of the left,” both from its supporters and from its opponents. No real signs of a dictatorship (the installation of only one’s own art with the simultaneous suppression all who think otherwise) were evident. Right-leaning members of the art world were inclined to call it “the stranglehold of the left” when leftists merely occupied administrative positions that traditionally belonged to the right and enacted a reform in artistic education on the basis of their programs and beliefs. But in the reformed artistic educational institutions the right worked on equal footing with the left. […] Conversations about such a “dictatorship” on both sides (for and against) contributed only to the creation of a corresponding myth, in which the revolutionary period is rich.

В действительности мы наблюдаем в первые годы революции лишь разговоры о “диктатуре левых”, как со стороны приверженцев, так и противников ее. Реальных признаков диктатуры (насаждение исключительно своего искусства при тотальном подавлении всех инакомыслящих) не наблюдалось. Правые деятели искусства были склонны называть “засильем левых” уже одно то, что левые заняли административные посты, традиционно принадлежавшие правым, и осуществляли реформу художественного образования на основе своих программ и убеждений. Но в реформированных художественных вузах правые работали наравне с левыми. <…> Разговоры же о подобной “диктатуре” с обеих сторон (за и против) способствовали лишь созданию соответствующего мифа, которым богата революционная эпоха. (482-3)

If the “left” did not have clear control of the cultural sphere even in the first years after the revolution, their fortunes were steadily falling as Kharms and Vvedensky attempted to gain professional recognition. To take one telling example, the two poets applied to Kazimir Malevich for performance space in the State Institute of Artistic Culture (Государственный институт художественной культуры, or “Ginkhuk”) in the fall of 1926, mere months before the Institute ceased to exist as an independent entity. (They needed the space for their first co-authored play, My Mother is All in Watches [Моя мама вся в часах], which was never staged and is now considered lost.) This same year Kharms and Vvedensky sent several poems to Boris Pasternak
in the hopes of having them printed by the Moscow-based “Uzel” publishing house. In their accompanying letter, they claimed that as “the only left poets in Petrograd [sic!]” they could find nowhere to publish in the local presses (Vvedenskii 1993, vol.2, 138). If this letter involves an element of hyperbole—not only were there other self-avowed “left” poets in Leningrad, but Kharms and Vvedensky were already trying to organize them—it nonetheless conveys their sense of their situation: in the midst of forming the Left Flank they looked around to see the main forces of the left scattered. Their serial attempts to rally a group of experimental artists arose from a sense of needing to take a stand in this ongoing crisis in the “left arts.”

**Situating the “Left Flank”**

Despite the frequency with which they used this epithet early on, neither Kharms nor Vvedensky left any substantial reflection on what they meant by “left.” Although the term carried increasingly problematic political connotations of opposition and Trotskyism, these poets appear to have been mostly indifferent to these meanings. (As mentioned above, the administration of the House of the Press had to explain to them that the phrase “Left Flank” might bring unwelcome attention.) In itself, the term “left” does not imply any definite artistic position (as the “left arts” encompassed several different movements, including futurism, constructivism, and imagism/imaginism), although it does point to an emphasis on experimentation and radical innovation. From Kharms’s notebooks of the OBERIU period, we know that he closely followed a wide range of contemporary poets and actively pursued collaborative relationships with the outstanding representatives of the early avant-garde, including Kazimir Malevich and the members of Opoiaz. Kharms attended classes by Formalist theorists and FEKS director Leonid Trauberg at the State Institute of History of the Arts [Государственный институт истории искусств, hereafter shortened to GIII] (Kharms 1997,
Of course, the Formalists were frequent contributors to the journals of the group from which the Left Flank derived their name, the Left Front of the Arts, or simply Lef.\(^\text{31}\) Certainly, the Left Flank did attempt to forge professional connections with Lef, and Kharms even attempted to publish his play *Elizaveta Bam* in this group’s second journal, *Novyi Lef* (Meilakh 1987, 194). At the same time, many aspects of Lef’s platform would seem an odd fit for the anti-rational Left Flank—especially, their support for documentarism and direct political engagement. If the name of the latter group implies some degree of common cause with Lef, it also suggests the presence of internal divisions among the “left formation.”\(^\text{32}\) In order to understand how the Left Flank positioned itself vis-à-vis its more established counterpart, we may look to the writings of the group’s de facto leader, the trans-sense poet Aleksander Tufanov.

Significantly older than Kharms and Vvedensky, Tufanov was a more established literary figure in Leningrad. He had begun his career before the Revolution, publishing *The Aeolian Harp* [Эолова арфа], a collection of poems heavily influenced by the symbolists, in 1917. In Petrograd, he founded the Order of Trans-sense Poets DSO [Орден заумников DSO], a poetry workshop where Tufanov guided several younger poets, including the young Daniil Kharms. After a successful performance headlined by DSO at an evening hosted by the Leningrad Division of the All-Russian Union of Poets, the members of this group and other local “left poets” began discussions to organize a new group with the plan of registering it as a section within the Union (Dviniatina and Krusanov 2008, 153). True to his role as mentor, Tufanov attempted to shape the direction of this association, and the existing record of their meetings

\(^{31}\) The fate of the *Lef* journal exemplifies the struggles of the “left arts” in the mid-1920s: within a year of its founding, the journal fell behind schedule on its publications, and it folded in 1925.

\(^{32}\) It should be mentioned that Lef itself was pluralistic. Not only were there internal disputes among members, but the journal also published the theoretical pronouncements of various allied movements (see Finer, 1323-1325).
relies largely on his notes. Based on various public and private statements on contemporary culture, it is evident that Tufanov had very little interest in the label of “left art” per se, but he did have reasons for wanting to relocate the gravitational center of experimental literature away from Lef. In one critical essay from 1925, Tufanov states that it is time to cast away “Lef and their political tricks” (Tufanov 1991, 182). Elsewhere, he uses the phrase “seeker of Lef-type adventures” as a pejorative in his response to Vvedensky’s application to the Union of Poets (which he nonetheless approved) (Vvedenskii 2010, 732). An ardent enthusiast of theoretical systems, Tufanov evidently judged Lef to have no aesthetic platform beyond experimentation for its own sake and, therefore, to offer no path forward for art. (As I will discuss in the next chapter, he considered zaum’ to be the true basis of all verbal art and himself to be its only serious theorist.) He also objected to the Left Front’s engagement with social problems and political agitation, since artists who take up the didactic aim of propaganda seek only to correct the world around them (a narrow political task) rather than to create something new (the task of zaum’). If these objections sound relatively straightforward, their foundation is considerably more eccentric, as they ultimately refer to an elaborate poetic myth at the center of Tufanov’s consciousness.

From his 1921 arrival in Petrograd through his 1931 arrest, Tufanov frequently invoked a romanticized image of fifteenth-century Novgorod in his artistic and critical writings. He even devoted three substantial works to retelling this city-state’s resistance to the forces of Ivan III, a historical episode with strong allegorical overtones as a last stand of democratic ideals against

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33 In several documents, Tufanov provides the following taxonomy of artists: those who correct [исправлять] nature (teachers and propagandists), those who reproduce [воспроизводить] nature (mimetic artists), those who decorate [украсить] (proponents of “art for art’s sake”), and those who practice zaum’ and thereby create [сотворить] a new world (IRLI F. 749, op. 1, No. 131; F. 749, op. 1, No. 139; F. 749, op. 1, No. 144).
the forces of tyranny. A nostalgia for this lost age and a faith in its imminent resurrection are defining aspects of Tufanov’s poetic persona during this period. For instance, responding to a GIII questionnaire in 1925, Tufanov writes: “I was born during the epoch of the flourishing of Great Novgorod in the fifteenth century, at the time when the brigands went plundering in flat-bottomed boats…” [Я родился в эпоху расцвета Великого Новгорода в XV столетии, во время разбойных походов повольников на ушкуях] (Tufanov [1991] 169). Tufanov’s private Novgorod draws on the former city-state’s reputation as a bastion of popular rule, as well as an established tradition of depicting the Novgorodian resistance to annexation by Ivan III as a heroic fight for freedom against autocratic power. In several places, he interprets the fall of Novgorod as a disaster for the notion of individual personality [личность], one of several such crises encountered in the course of human history. After the historical traumas of World War I and revolution, Tufanov suggests that Soviet society is on the cusp of a renaissance of the individual personality, which will lead to a new age of freedom.

Tufanov evidently hoped to impose this historical vision on his association with Vvedensky and Kharms as he suggested at one point that the “Left Flank” be renamed “самовщина” (Dviniatina and Krusanov 2008, 178-9), a word he traced back to Novgorod as a

34 These were his poem in fragments Ushkuiniki (published in 1926), a stylized chronicle titled “Умилительная повесть старца Зосимы о Марфе Борецкой,” and the tragedy Marfa-Posadnitsa (IRLI, F. 749 op. 1 No. 58; submitted to Lenizdat in 1930, but never published).
35 This tale has a long tradition in Russian literature, including works by Karamzin, Pogodin, and Esenin, whose 1914 poem “Marfa Posadnitsa” likely influenced Tufanov.
36 Tufanov writes in a 1925 essay: Но мы живем в чудесное и удивительное время. Вся созданная человечеством культура под влиянием новейших открытий в технике и теории познания, испытывает как бы подземные удары при землетрясении, которые говорят ему о грядущей революции во всей духовной жизни человечества ((IRLI F. 749, op. 1, n. 134). He connects this revolution explicitly to “Samovshchina” in the opening line of a speech given at GIII in January 1928: “Мы живем в прекрасное, удивительное время – при переходе к не-бывалому расцвету Самовщины в искусстве.” (IRLI F. 749, op. 1, p. 144)
concept encompassing both “freedom” [вольность] and “individualism” [индивидуальность].

In his brief write-up of the “самовщина” movement, Tufanov includes a section called “Statute of oneself in samovshchina” [Устав самого себя в самовщине], in which he summarizes his vision of extreme individualism: “Every Self is in the center of the universe, but it is also a “distorted” presentation of an other” [Каждый Сам—в центре вселенной, но, будучи «искаженным» представлением другого] (Ibid., 179). More poetically, as expressed in his “Verses about the Left Flank” [Стихи о «Левом Фланге»] (written after the group had effectively disbanded), he imagined his colleagues as a band of rebels from an earlier epoch in Russian history:

Лесовала вольница ископи
В буйные, привольные, золотые дни
В волоках разбойничих на стану
Головы не гнула. […] (Ibid. 183)

Long ago, in bold, free, golden days,
A band of freebooters went to work in the forest
Camped out in outlaws’ portages
[The camp] did not lower its head.

It is especially significant that Tufanov begins this lyric with the verb “лесовать,” literally meaning to hunt or chop lumber in the forest. Not only does the trope of withdrawing to the forest appear frequently in his poetry, but a related return to “unthinking nature” plays a prominent role in his critical writings as a figure for the artist’s escape from human society in times of repression (beginning with the free Novgorodians flight after being defeated by Ivan III). The following word, “вольница,” reinforces this notion of escape from tyranny as it generally refers to outsiders who do not have a sanctioned place in society, including those who have fled oppression. This verse suggests that Tufanov saw the Left Flank as a kind of refuge for outsiders in Soviet society, perhaps even a rallying point for opposition. In a startling passage

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37 Tufanov glosses this term in his five-act tragedy Marfa-Posadnitsa (IRLI, F. 749, op. 1, n. 58), where the word features prominently.
38 For instance, in the essay “Image, заумь, и частушка” Tufanov suggests that the descendants of the Novgorodians have been hiding in the forest for five centuries since their loss to Ivan III, and this seclusion has allowed them to preserve their psychic freedom (F. 749, op. 1, no. 137)
from a speech that he was preparing to present at GIII on January 26, 1928,—incidentally, just two days after OBERIU’s “Three Left Hours” performance—Tufanov paraphrases Matthew 11:28 to figure himself as the savior for artists who reject a subservient role in Soviet society: “come to me all you who labor in the arts and are burdened with social tasks—and I will strip you bare, as without so within” [придите ко мне все трующиеся в искусстве и обремененные социальными заданиями – и аз оголю вас, как снаружи, так и изнутри] (IRLI F. 749, op. 1, n. 144).

The majority of the Left Flank did not strictly adhere to these positions, but rather supported an overall platform of broad inclusivity. As T.M. Dviniatina and A.V. Krusanov (2008) underscore in their essay accompanying the publication of the Left Flank organizational documents, the group’s “federal organization” was particularly important to Kharms and Vvedensky (155). As they put it in a collective statement, their artistic program was not a united one derived from the practice of its members, but rather the aggregate of their views (Программой Объединения служит не синтез, а сумма программ его членов [179]). Individual members of the Left Flank avowed zaum’, constructivism, expressionism, and what Vvedensky called “бессмыслица” (discussed in the next chapter). Similarly, the OBERIU declaration would later proclaim: “Our association is free and voluntary; it unites masters, and not apprentices—artists, and not daubers. Each knows himself, and each knows what binds him to the rest” [Наше объединение свободное и добровольное, оно соединяет мастеров, а не подмастерьев — художников, а не маляров. Каждый знает самого себя и каждый знает — чем он связан с остальными] (Vaginov et al., 1991, 443). We can also see this federative impulse in the names proposed for the group, which included the pluralistic alternatives “Flank of Those on the Left” [Фланг левых] and “Academy of Left Classics” [Академия левых
Thus, the word “left” provided an expansive alternative to the narrower classifications of particular movements.

Of course, the notion of “left arts” also carried strong political connotations. Although Kharms and Vvedenskii mostly avoided any overt comment on social or political questions, they were willing to work with artists who took a stronger political stance. Most centrally, they collaborated with Igor’ Terent’ev, who was the polar opposite of Tufanov in his views on the relationship between art and politics. While Terent’ev never joined either iteration of the Left Flank, Vvedenskii worked alongside him early in his career, and both Vvedenskii and Kharms sought a close association with Terent’ev as their artistic plans turned increasingly toward theater beginning in 1926 (see Chapter 3). Moreover, Terent’ev was director of the House of the Press Theater, where OBERIU held its most prominent public performance. He also believed that Lef was not sufficiently “left,” though, unlike Tufanov, he criticized the group for not being committed enough to Marxist principles in their cultural program. In a letter to Aleksei Kruchenykh, Terent’ev jokes that he has managed to “translate’ Marx into trans-sense language’ [«перевел» Маркса на заумный язык] and suggests that his innovations will not be accepted by

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39 The name Academy of Left Classics may be a play on the well-known Общество ревнителей художественного слова, widely known as the “Academy,” a reading circle formed in 1909 under the chairmanship of Vyacheslav Ivanov and associated with the Apollo journal (see Pyman: 324-6). The choice of an academic name may also be a playful reference to the proliferation of new educational institutions under the Soviet state.

40 Tufanov and Terent’ev were aware of each other—and of their incompatibility—as each had been offered positions in the phonological department of GinKhuk. In a 1923 letter to Aleksei Kruchenykh, Terent’ev writes: “Here we also have Tufanov—a learned zaumnik. A Platonic anarchist—I keep him at a distance—he’s soft! He does good work. His book is useful: only 30% nonsense. [Our] forces are getting organized” [Тут есть еще Туфанов—ученный заумник. Платонический анархист—держу на расстоянии—мягок! Работает хорошо. Его книжка полезна: только 30% чепухи. Силы формируются.] (Terent’ev 404).

41 According to one account, Vvedenskii and Terent’ev read “zaum’ series of words” [заумные «ряды слов»] to artists working in the Ginkhuk institute as a prompt for painting (M. Meilakh, Introduction to Vvedenskii 1993, vol. 1, p. 13)
Lef, whom he deems the “Mensheviks of Futurism” (400). Yet Terent’ev continually published in the journal *Lef* and its successor *Novyi Lef*, alternately defending himself against charges of failing to support the Revolutionary cause and making similar charges against others.\(^{42}\) In the humorously titled “Who is Lef and who is ryte?” [Кто Леф и кто прав?] (1924), Terent’ev calls for a new “self-purification” [внутренняя самоочистка] within Futurism (Terent’ev 286).\(^{43}\) Specifically, he criticizes the *komfut* group founded by Osip Brik for providing not a true synthesis of Communism and futurism but rather “two-sided dilettantism,” as well as the Lef organization more generally for not fully embracing zaum’ as the only true foundation for revolutionary art (288).

While sharply critical of Lef, Terent’ev nevertheless presents himself as the true defender of its principles, indeed as someone who understands these principles better than Lef’s formal membership. Terent’ev maintained this ambivalent position vis-à-vis the better-established proponents of the “left arts” after becoming the theater director for the Leningrad House of the Press. In an article titled simply “The Theater of the House of the Press” [Театр дома печати] (1928), printed in the House’s newsletter (where the article “OBERIU” had appeared months earlier), Terent’ev even explicitly proclaims: “The theater of the House of the Press is a Lef theater” [Театр Дома Печати—Лефовский театр] (Terent’ev 305). In December of the same year, Terent’ev vied unsuccessfully with Meyerhold to direct the controversial play *I Want a Baby* [Хочу ребенка], written several years earlier by frequent Lef contributor Sergei

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\(^{42}\) One of Terent’ev’s first articles in *Lef* was an open letter defending himself and his colleagues in the Georgian Futurist group 41° from accusations of fleeing the Red Army during the Civil War (Terent’ev 285).

\(^{43}\) Terent’ev’s suggestion recalls the infamous “purge of poets” [чистка поэтов], over which Mayakovsky presided in the winter of 1922 (Maiakovskii 459-461).
Tret’iakov. By this point Terent’ev’s relationship with Meyerhold had followed a similar trajectory to his association with Lef. After an initial infatuation with the great director, he had accused Meyerhold of betraying his own principles. By proclaiming the House of the Press to be a “Lef theater” Terent’ev was implying that his theater, rather than the “academic theater” currently run by Meyerhold, was now the only venue for the type of daring theatrical montage that Meyerhold had premiered (see Chapter Three). Despite their ideological and artistic differences, Terent’ev and Tufanov employ a similar logic to position themselves as the true representatives of “left arts” and the status quo embodied by more established figures like the Lef as an aberration.

To summarize, the Left Flank came into existence during a moment of crisis for Soviet culture as a whole. At this time the notion of “left arts” was threatened by external pressure and internal divisions, and the catch-all epithet “left” functioned within the group as a way to unite a broad range of writers without succumbing to in-fighting among various movements. At a pragmatic level, the phrase served as a calling card for forging personal connections with senior representatives of the “left arts” like Mayakovskiy and Shklovsky. As the cases of Tufanov and Terent’ev show, however, taking over the “left arts” mantle also implied some form of critique directed at the established “left.” Significantly, the statements by these senior authors involve an element of anachronism, as they establish their progressiveness by appealing to earlier conceptions of zaum’ poetry and theatrical staging that the “left” had since rejected. Indeed, the very notion of a “Left Flank” implies a certain notion of lagging behind, even as it pronounces a

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44 Although Meyerhold won the exclusive right to stage the play in Moscow, the committee decided not to forbid Terent’ev from staging it in other cities. Unsurprisingly, above and beyond ideological differences between the two directors, superior experience and resources constituted a major point raised in favor of Meyerhold. (The minutes of this discussion are reproduced in Terent’ev 454-459.)
progressive “left”-ward orientation, and this tension comes out even more strongly in the alternative name, the Academy of Left Classics [Академия левых классиков]. We see a similar contradiction in a well-known story from Kharms’s biography, when the young poet received from Kazimir Malevich a signed copy of his pamphlet *God is Not Cast Down* [Бог не скинут] with the inscription: “Go and stop progress!” [Идите и останавливайте прогресс] (Kobrinskii 2009, 58). While one might be attempted to dismiss these slogans as simply a playful exercise in paradox, they tell us something about the distinctive form that the “left arts” took within this younger generation of poets. In the latter half of the 1920s, such an organization was not merely marginalized within Soviet culture, but necessarily anachronistic.

“*Paradoxical Continuity*”

The longest-lived oberiut, Igor Bakhterev, records the following scene.45

While still appearing under their original name of “Left Flank” (Левый фланг), Bakhterev, Kharms, Zabolotsky, and Vvedensky gave a reading at the State Institute of the History of the Arts (GIII), known at the time as the institutional home of the Russian Formalists. According to Bakhterev, the Opoiaz “troika” (Viktor Shklovsky, Iurii Tynianov, Boris Eikhenbaum), Boris Tomashevsky, and the linguist Lev Sheherba were all in attendance, and this group received the young poets’ verses with great interest. (In particular, they singled out Vvedensky for repeated recitation.) Shklovsky was especially enthusiastic about the group and suggested that the creation of this group was an important phenomenon in Russian literature of the time: “Bringing our short conversation to an end, Shklovsky mentioned Mr. Marinetti. ‘If the leader of the western futurists were to visit us again,’ said Viktor Borisovich, ‘I don’t doubt that the members of the

45 It should be noted that Bakhterev’s version of events was written significantly after the event and cannot be verified by contemporaneous accounts. I offer it here less as objective historical fact than as an apt illustration of the problem of inheritance within the avant-garde.
‘Flank’ would occupy the position of Khlebnikov.’” [Завершая наш недлинный разговор, Шкловский помянул господина Marinetti. “Если бы лидер западных футуристов снова пожаловал к нам в гости,—сказал Виктор Борисович,—я не сомневаюсь, участники “Фланга” заняли бы позицию Хлебникова”] (Vaginov et al., 1991, 443). As it turned out, this would not be their last encounter with Shklovsky. Some time later,46 when the Oberiuty (now calling themselves such) were advertising for their first public performance, he approached the group and began scolding them for their failure to attract attention. He again compared them to the preceding generation, this time with an even more pronounced sense of nostalgia: “‘At your age, we lived more joyfully,’ continued Shklovsky. ‘We never did anything without making some noise.’ […] ‘For performances like this,’ he said, ‘you need a poster. If you don’t believe me, ask Vladimir Vladimirovich [Mayakovsky]” (Ibid 445).

Although Bakhterev relates Shklovsky’s words as a simple endorsement, one might also read it as a cautionary tale. Despite a flattering evaluation of their work, the Left Flank poets are clearly being welcomed into the avant-garde project as junior partners, and an older generation of poets is held up as the standard for the Left Flank’s activities (“Just ask Vladimir Vladimirovich how to advertise”). Moreover, the notion of “occupying the place of Khlebnikov” also risks charges of epigonism, which are particularly damning in the context of the novelty-obsessed avant-garde. One of the main objections raised against the OBERIU Three Left Hours performance was that the “advertising” tactics employed by futurists like Mayakovsky in the past

46 Bakhterev claims that their second meeting with Shklovsky occurred “several years later” [прошло несколько лет] (Vaginov et al 1991, 444). This must be a lapse of memory, since only one year could have elapsed. The earliest possible date for the first meeting would have been late 1926, since Bakhterev only met Kharms and Vvedensky in the fall of this year (Kobrinskii 2009, 48). (Kobrinskii [2009], however, suggests that the meeting at GIII occurred even a little later than this, in the spring of 1927 [174].) During the second encounter, the Oberiuty were clearly advertising for the Three Left Hours evening, which took place on January 24, 1928.
no longer had the same shock value. “The futurists drew sharp signs on their cheeks to shock the bourgeois,” reads an irritated review. “In 1928 you won’t shock anyone with a red wig and there’s no one to frighten.” [Футуристы рисовали на щеках диэзы, чтобы — Эпатировать буржуа. В 1928 году никого не эпатнёшь рыжим париком и путать некого] (Vvedenskii 1993, vol. 2, 150). “Kharms is in fashion now,” writes Lidiia Ginzburg in a diary entry from 1933. “They are afraid to miss him, the way they missed Khlebnikov. But he already resembles Khlebnikov. And they are once again overlooking someone who doesn’t resemble anyone” [На Хармса теперь пошла мода. Боятся проморгать его, как Хлебникова. Но он-то уже похож на Хлебникова. А проморгают опять кого-нибудь, ни на кого не похожего] (Ginzburg 1987, 238). A more cynical reading of Shklovsky’s words of approval would suggest that at best he welcomes the Left Flank as latecomers to the avant-garde project, at worst as its epigones.

Alternatively, one might argue that the absurdity of these scenes gives the lie to either simple interpretation and points us instead to the internal contradiction within the phrase “avant-garde inheritance.” Humorously, the notoriously iconoclastic Shklovsky plays the role of a literary elder (though he would have been roughly thirty-three years old) “passing the lyre” to a younger generation of poets. Yet he implicitly ironizes this gesture by referring to the Russian futurists’ 1914 meeting with Marinetti, at which they rejected the idea of being lumped into a preexisting “futurist” movement. Several representatives of the Russian avant-garde used this event as an opportunity to assert their independence from their Italian pseudo-counterparts, and Khlebnikov was notoriously involved in printing and distributing flyers that denigrated Marinetti during his visit (Poeziia russkogo futurizma, 620, 726-7). This ostensible comparison also elides the fact that such a “Congress of Futurists” would have been unthinkable in late 1926, when “futurism” was already an outmoded label internationally and Marinetti’s name was strongly
associated with fascism. Such an absurd comparison inevitably draws associations to numerous Formalist writings on the role of “struggle” in forming a literary tradition, the propensity of critics to project their own values on contemporary authors, and (to evoke Shklovsky’s own phrase) the “dissimilarity of the similar”—i.e., the notion that apparently similar artistic practices can play vastly different functions based on their historical context. In effect, Shklovsky’s comparison dramatizes the impossibility of passing along the avant-garde tradition, which by its own logic of rupture and revolution should not have a peaceful continuation. In order to claim the mantle of the previous avant-garde generation, the Left Flank would need to redefine what this movement meant and justify its relevance to the later historical moment.

To borrow Kukulin’s phrase once more, this situation points us to a different “paradoxical continuity” within the avant-garde. If a principle tactic of avant-gardism is to employ a discourse of radical rupture to mask its dependence on pre-existing culture, the Left Flank effectively pursued the opposite strategy, positioning itself as heir to a tradition defined by its rejection of cultural inheritance. Their critics were essentially correct to point out that the artistic sensibilities of Kharms and his colleagues were deeply anachronistic, but they failed to acknowledge this anachronism as a deliberate stance, a rejection of the narrative of historical progress underlying Soviet official culture and the notion of “left arts.” The Left Flank began from the proposition that the early experiments of the Russian avant-garde provided a better starting place for artistic practice than any aspect of contemporary Soviet culture. Yet their aim was not to replicate the aesthetics of the early avant-garde, but rather to use this historical precedent as a starting point for imagining an alternate path for Soviet culture. Perhaps this need for a historical precedent is

the most significant aspect of the phrase “the end of the avant-garde”: the avant-garde must be reformulated as a tradition before anything can come after it.
Chapter 2: The Problem of Verse Semantics

Конкретный предмет, очищенный от литературной и обиходной шелухи, делается достоянием искусства. В поэзии — столкновение словесных смыслов выражает этот предмет с точностью механики.

- Nikolai Zabolotsky, “OBERIU”

Разбуди меня сильного к битве со смыслами,
быстрого к управлению слов
и прилежного к восхвалению имени Бога во веки веков.

- Daniil Kharms, “A Prayer Before Sleep”

Горит бессмыслица звезда
она одна без дня

- Alexander Vvedensky, “All Around Possibly God”

The poets who organized OBERIU unanimously suggested that the distinctive aspect of their poetry was its peculiar relationship to meaning or sense [смысл]. Like many other representatives of the avant-garde, these writers agreed that ordinary language was inadequate for describing reality, and they envisioned poetry as some type of battle among or against verbal meanings in response to this deficit. Whether the ultimate goal was to disclose the “concrete object” (as Zabolotsky puts it in the OBERIU declaration) or to open the limitless field of “бессмыслица”48 (or “meaninglessness,” per Vvedensky), verbal art represented for them, first and foremost, an instrument for correcting the conceptual distortions inherent to rational thought and linguistic convention. While they often employed religious and philosophical language to describe these efforts, such notions as “бессмыслица” and the “collision of verbal meanings”

48 As will be discussed later in this chapter, the term “бессмыслица” was significant for Vvedensky and plays a prominent role in later interpretations of his works. The word could be translated variously into English as “absurdity,” “nonsense,” or “meaninglessness.” Since each of these translations may be taken to imply that the term should be interpreted within a particular aesthetic and/or philosophical context, I will use the Russian term throughout.
also played a more practical role of situating these poets within contemporaneous literary debates. Since each of these authors wrote almost exclusively in verse during the early years of their careers, their discourse about “meaning” developed primarily in dialogue with other pronouncements on the role of semantics in verse construction.

This chapter will reconstruct the main lines of this debate within the group that comprised the first “Left Flank,” focusing on a set of poems by Kharms, Vvedensky, and Tufanov from the pre-OBERIU period (1922-1926). In particular, I will concentrate on two contrasting concepts of a “meaningless” poetics that were important to the formation of OBERIU: Tufanov’s peculiar version of zaum’ and Vvedensky’s “авторитет бессмыслицы” [authority of meaninglessness]. These poets represent two contradictory perspectives on the consequences of a rejection of meaning for verse composition, and conflict between Tufanov and Vvedensky was instrumental in dissolving the first iteration of the Left Flank, a process that led to the formation of OBERIU. Moreover, these extremes create a productive framework for situating the varying concepts of a “real art” that make up OBERIU, especially since Kharms and Zabolotsky wrote their earliest known statements on the role of meaning in verse in response to the positions of Tufanov and Vvedensky, respectively. In analyzing these positions, I will pay particular attention to how they construct “meaning” as a problem of verse construction, inseparable from questions of lyric voice, rhythmic repetition, and generic memory.

49 The 1923 article “Futurism,” published in Жизнь искусства, No.27, includes several citations from one or more otherwise unknown works by Vvedensky. These citations are given in prose form, though we cannot exclude the possibility that they may have originally been written in free verse. Incidentally, one of these excerpts includes the phrase “flight without meaning” [полёт без смысла], an anticipation of the poetic program Vvedensky would later declare.
Beyond “Beyonsense”

An investigation into how the oberiuty responded to these questions inevitably raises a problem that has been debated since the group first came into existence: their relationship to zaum’ poetry, or “beyonsense,” as Paul Schmidt has cleverly rendered the term. To varying degrees the younger oberiuty all avowed major proponents of zaum’ as prime influences, and professional and personal associations with the minor zaum’ poets Alexander Tufanov and Igor’ Terent’ev played an important part in the movement’s history. Universally, the oberiuty engaged in intensive dialogue with Velimir Khlebnikov, whose influence on the group has been very well documented. The other major proponent of “beyonsense,” Aleksei Kruchenykh, was also greatly admired by Vvedensky, and Aage Hansen-Löve (2003) has argued that the oberiuty as a group discarded Khlebnikov’s utopian project of creating a “cosmic language” and instead built upon Kruchenykh’s experiments with sound poetry, self-staging [Selbstinszenierung], and gesture (230). As discussed in the previous chapter, contemporaries frequently used the Futurist proponents of zaum’, and Khlebnikov in particular, as a reference point for understanding the oberiuty. Of the latter group, only Kharms ever explicitly declared himself to be a zaum’ poet, a title that he finally dropped in 1926, though Vvedensky did briefly claim the more ambiguous

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51 Druskin records that Vvedensky proclaimed himself to be more akin to Kruchenykh than to Khlebnikov (Vvedenskii 2010, 354). Additionally, Aleksandr Kobrinskii has established that Vvedensky visited Kruchenykh in Moscow at least two times: once in spring 1936 and again in 1939 (“Ob odnoi strannoi polemike”).
Nonetheless, over time this later generation of poets increasingly attempted to distance themselves from the Futurist tradition. Most famously, the 1928 OBERIU declaration explicitly attacks zaum’ for turning the word into an “impotent and senseless mongrel” [бессильного и бессмысленного ублюдка] and proclaims, “there is no school more inimical to us than zaum’” [нет школы более враждебной нам чем заумь] (Vaginov et al. 458). This denouncement likely involved a degree of political calculation, as the word “zaum” had already become an indictment against any insufficiently comprehensible literature in the late 1920s. In this respect, it is interesting that the same declaration takes a controversial stance in defending the right to recognition of Pavel Filonov, Kazimir Malevich, and Igor’ Terent’ev (Vaginov, et al. 457). It appears that the oberiuty were picking their battles, finding it more relevant to defend currently active artists than a nearly fifteen-year-old and almost universally maligned literary movement.⁵³ Yet, it also clearly represents an appeal to be read on their own terms. As Kharms wrote in a 1927 diary entry, which was intended as a preface to an unpublished book of verse: “before counting me among the Futurists of the past decade, reread them, and then me a second time” [прежде чем отнести меня к футуристам прошлого десятилетия, перечти их, а потом меня вторично] (Kharms 1997, 5.1, 123; underline in original).

Such disavowals notwithstanding, scholars have often interpreted OBERIU to be a continuation of the Futurist tradition in some form. Without delving into the numerous scholarly

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⁵² Not only was Kharms a member of Alexander Tufanov’s “order of zaum’ poets,” DSO, he also signed several 1926 poems with the phrase “взирь заумь.” Vvedensky listed himself as a Futurist when applying to join the Union of Poets.

⁵³ Of course, the attempt to deflect criticism failed, and the oberiuty were nonetheless denounced in print as politically regressive zaum’ poets. Under interrogation after their first arrests in 1931, Kharms and Vvedensky confessed (clearly under duress) to the “dissemination of counterrevolutionary zaum’” [распространению контрреволюционной зауми] (Mal’skii, ed., “Razgrom obertiutov,” 185).
attempts to describe the relationship between these movements, I will only briefly sketch the basic contours of this problem. On the whole, the oberiuty disregard what Gerald Janecek (1996) refers to as “phonetic zaum’,” that is, “a situation in which letters are presented in combinations that do not form recognizable morphemes” (e.g. Kruchenykh’s “хо-бο-ро” or “жлыч”) (5). Instead, they more often combined already existing words in overtly “absurd” or “meaningless” ways—according to Mikhail Meilakh’s formulation, the oberiuty “shifted emphasis from zaum phonetics to zaum semantics” (paraphrased by Janecek, op. cit., 335).54 While this explanation provides a useful heuristic, it cannot establish a clear division between these movements, since the Cubo-Futurists applied the notion of zaum’ to illogical word combinations as well. Indeed, the practice of “zaum semantics” greatly resembles the notion of displacement [сдвиг] as theorized and practiced by Kruchenykh and Terent’ev. It is difficult to draw a distinction between these practices since both the Futurist notion of “сдвиг” and the appellation “zaum semantics” could be applied to a wide range of poetic devices.55 As Janecek (1996) points out, semantic distortions that do not include clear violations of morphology and syntax present a challenge for classification as they inevitably “involve complex judgments based on a view of reality rather than on straightforward linguistic standards” (5). As a result, attempts to position OBERIU vis-à-vis the Futurist tradition often focus on the artistic and philosophical declarations of each movement as an indication of how we should interpret ostensible “meaninglessness”

54 Janecek explains these categories of zaum’ at greater length, and with slight differences (e.g. “phonemic” instead of “phonetic” zaum’) in his article “A Zaum’ Classification” (1986). Of course, there are some prominent exceptions to this tendency, in Kharms’s works especially (cf. Meilakh 1991).
55 The Cubo-Futurists applied the term “сдвиг” to a wide range of unexpected linguistic displacements. As Aage Hansen-Löve (2001) points out, one should not expect much precision from a term that originates in a series of boisterous artistic manifestos. The term generally implies some sort of deformation caused by the displacement [смещение] of elements or a contrast between them, resulting in a break from existing aesthetic canons (Hansen-Löve, 2001, 83-85).
differently in each instance (see for instance: Shukurov 2007). Such attempts face the additional difficulty that the “Futurists” and “OBERIU poets” are both highly heterogeneous entities, not disciplined poetic schools.

The projected “Left Flank” organized by Kharms, Vvedensky, and Tufanov provides a useful context for reconsidering this problem, as their discussions allow us to reconstruct how these poets viewed their own relationship to zaum’. This was the period when these authors most strongly associated themselves with the Futurist tradition, and so the Left Flank provides a window into how they understood this tradition and their place in relation to it. Unlike the founding of OBERIU, this earlier group’s discussions about their identity are recorded in their organizational documents (published by Dviniatina and Krusanov in 2008). Moreover, the federative structure of the Left Flank may help us to move beyond the Futurism-OBERIU binary to consider the role that other contemporaneous movements played in shaping these poets’ version of a post-zaum’ poetics. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Left Flank represented several artistic movements, including Constructivists, Imagists (or Imaginists: имажинисты), and Expressionists. By the mid-1920s, each of these other groups claimed to have supplanted the decade-old Futurist movement as the forefront of artistic innovation. While the zaum’ theorist Tufanov is their best-known associate in the Left Flank, the future Oberiuty were also evidently drawn to the so-called Expressionists. According to Kharms’s notebooks, he memorized several poems by each of two poets advocating this movement: Igor’ Markov and Evgenii Vigiliansky. This last poet is particularly important because Vigiliansky repeatedly sided with Kharms and Vvedensky in organizational conflicts, and resigned from the Left Flank with

56 For a discussion of translating “имажинизм,” see Markov, p. 1-3. Since I will be discussing Tufanov’s take on the movement, and he clearly associated this movement with the Anglophone Imagists, I will use the term Imagism throughout this chapter.
them in January 1926.\footnote{At this point, he began studying theater at GIII and remained in touch with the obreiuty. Although Vigiliansky did not sign the OBERIU declaration in fall 1927, he was involved in the group’s most prominent performance, the “Three Left Hours” evening. (He played the role of “Papa” in Kharms’s dramatic montage \textit{Elizaveta Bam}; for a reconstruction of this peformance, see Meilakh 1987.) Over the next two years Vigiliansky frequently performed the group’s theatrical pieces and sometimes read poetry with them—thus, on the whole, he was more active in group performances than the more recognized members Zabolotsky and Vaginov.} Widening our scope a little, the Left Flank were also well acquainted with the Militant Order of Imagists [Воинствующий орден имажинистов], an offshoot of the Moscow-based movement founded in 1922 (Kobrinskii 2000, vol.2, 40-66). As I will discuss momentarily, Tufanov saw in the semantic distortions of Imagism a close ally in his own artistic mission, and his engagement with this movement greatly influenced the development of his zaum’ theory.

As this proliferation of “post-Futurist” movements demonstrates, while many “left” poets perceived a need to rethink the role of semantics in poetry in the aftermath of the early avant-garde, there was little consensus about how to do so. In this sense, zaum’ represented less an established tradition that could be emulated than a problem for verse construction. As an analogy, we might remember that the Formalist Iurii Tynianov devoted his programmatic \textit{The Problem of Verse Language} (Проблема стихотворного языка, 1924) largely to reconsidering the semantics of literary works. (Indeed, the study’s original title was \textit{The Problem of Verse Semantics}.) Although Tynianov only explicitly mentions zaum’ on two occasions, his ambitious redefinition of “semantics” as a category encompassing aural and emotional associations implicitly attempts to answer the peculiar challenges raised by Futurist poets like Khlebnikov. It is indicative that the second section, dedicated to verse semantics, begins not with a discussion of verse form, but with an abstract discussion of language, as if literary scholarship could only
continue once the basic concept “word” had been redefined. One might suspect a similar impulse motivating the poets discussed in this chapter: their thinking about verse centered on the problem of semantics because this was the category in most glaring need of redefinition. Of course, their attempts to forge a new path for poetic meaning necessarily entailed engaging with other aspects of verse construction.

**The Seventh and Only Art**

As I have discussed in Chapter One, Alexander Tufanov was a central figure in the early careers of Kharms and Vvedensky. He played a crucial organizational role as the leader of the trans-rational workshop “Orden zaumnikov DSO” and the first incarnation of the “Left Flank.” His linguistic theories had a direct influence on Kharms, who was one of Tufanov’s students, memorized two of his poems, and even read some “phonetic poems” at the OBERIU Three Left Hours Evening (Kobrinskii 2009, 110). Moreover, as Jean-Philippe Jaccard has convincingly demonstrated, Tufanov anticipated many of the philosophical concerns of the OBERIU circle (especially of Kharms) in his loose Bergsonian understanding of “flow” [текучесть] as a fundamental state of being that cannot be perceived by the human intellect [ум], but may be revealed through poetic language. Although many aspects of the Tufanov-Kharms relationship

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58 Tynianov does this by breaking the word into a hierarchical set of “signs” or “indicators” (priznaki), which may be activated by a given context. A word may have one or several dictionary definitions, but these only account for its “primary indicator” (osnovnoi priznak), and this “primary indicator” does not in itself determine how a word will function in a particular context, as one or several potential meanings may be active, or the traditional semantics of the word may be overshadowed entirely. Words are therefore “chameleons,” constantly changing their coloration to fit their surroundings, or “circles” to be filled with meaning, depending on their lexical system and functional systems (stroi) (48). Put differently, each individual instance of a word represents a node where certain functional and lexical systems (stroi) intersect, and one must determine for each usage which systems predominate.

are well established, foremost by Jaccard, misconceptions persist about the older poet’s understanding of zaum’. Discussions of Tufanov’s theory have centered on his 1923 volume *Towards zaum’* (*К зауми*), a short book of poetry with a theoretical preface in which the author lays out the phonological laws governing his concept of zaum’. Yet Tufanov himself envisioned these laws as merely the first step in building a multi-tiered poetic system based on the simultaneous historical development of language and human cognition. In a series of texts held at the IRLI archive in Saint-Petersburg, Tufanov expands his notion of *zaum’* to include more complex semantics in the form of *images* and *symbols*, even announcing a new stage of artistic development in the form of “*zaum’* symbolism” [*заумный символизм*] (F. 749 Op. 1, No. 144, 24). This expanded notion of *zaum’* both helps to clarify the extent of Tufanov’s influence on Kharms and to distinguish his position more sharply from the views of the other oberiuty.

It will be useful to begin our discussion with *Towards zaum’*. Although this book’s theoretical contentions have previously been analyzed (Janecek 1996, 330-4; Grechko 2001; Dviniatina 2008), the work merits a brief summary as it provides the foundation for his more developed theories. Essentially, Tufanov attempts to build a coherent system upon Velimir Khlebnikov’s conjectures about the intrinsic semantic properties of consonantal phonemes. By drawing on several linguistic theories influential at the time, including Wilhelm von Humboldt, Nikolai Marr, and Jan Baudouin de Courtenay, Tufanov argues that a “resurrection of phoneme functions” [*воскрешение функций фонем*] is needed in order to produce a more perfect language (9). He proceeds to correlate each consonant to a particular “sound gesture,” i.e., a movement intrinsically linked to that phoneme in the human psyche. ⁶⁰ Since these proto-

⁶⁰ Although Tufanov cites Evgenii Polivanov, the linguist who introduced the term “sound gesture” in the Opoiaz-published *Poetika* collection, his notion of sound gesture diverges from this source. (According to Polivanov, sound gestures are ultimately *conventional* signs.)
linguistic impulses are universal, their trace ought to be stored in all modern languages, and Tufanov attempts to reconstruct them through comparative analysis of phonemes from Russian, Chinese, and English. He categorizes these phonemes into seven clusters, each of which both corresponds to a certain stage in the evolution of language and contains a separate implicit motion at its base. Tufanov demonstrates his theory through a series of abstract poems, which distribute phonemes between long and short syllables in a simulation of ancient Greek meter. His central example, “Spring” [Весна], opens with these lines:

Сиинь соон сийн селлэ соонг се
Сиинг сэельф сиййк сигналь сэель сийн

s´iin´ soon s´ii selle soong s´e
siing s´eelf s´iilk signal seel´ s´in´ (Tufanov 1924, 12-13)

[Untranslatable. This is Tufanov’s own transliteration]

As a post-script, the book contains a series of drawings by Boris Ender illustrating the motion associated with each consonant, which are grouped according to Tufanov’s seven clusters and coordinated with colors according to M.B. Matiushin’s system for painting.61

From the beginning of his discussion, Tufanov insists that zaum’ is a lyric genre (7), but it is not immediately clear how to read a poem like “Spring” as lyric since it has no readily evident relation to subjective experience or any external reality. Should it convey a universal idea of renewal or simply the impression left by one particular vernal day? How do the poet’s own experiences come to intersect with the laws of language? Although there are no explanations of Tufanov’s notion of the sound gesture as a pre-cognitive and universal human trait comes closer to the definition offered by Andrei Bely in his “aural poema” Glossolaliia (1922): “Gestures are the youthful sounds of thoughts that have not yet taken shape and are deposited in my body” Жесты—юные звуки еше не сложившихся мыслей, заложенных в теле моем […]” (10).

61 Ender explicitly relates his drawings to Matiushin in an explanatory note. More generally, Matiushin’s theory of 360-degree vision is a frequent touchstone in Tufanov’s theoretical writing. For a discussion of Matiushin’s theory in relation to Tufanov and Kharms, see Jaccard (1995), 77-84.
individual poems in *Toward zaum*, Tufanov does discuss the following stanza from the poem “T’ju” (untranslatable) in a speech written for presentation at the State Institute of the History of the Arts (GIII) in January 1928:62

Роо лютю тлюус теймар таарн
Роо рингри трюупс ритрит ринг
Ляарк аляйф лва ерин линн
Крыим ребид син инсед люус  [Untranslatable] (Tufanov 1924, 35)

These lines, the author explains, convey his impressions when sitting on the bank of the Neva river somewhere just outside Petrograd. The sound structure of the poem is meant to foreground the “one fundamental phoneme ‘r,’ psychically associated with the motion of a watery mass,” and to transition into the phoneme (l), conveying “motion along a line toward a moving point” (IRLI, F. 749, op.1, ed. 144, l. 23).63 Although the concepts of *river* and *bank* may not enter the poem, the motion conveyed by the phonemes distills the dynamic experience of sitting on the riverbank and transmits it directly to the listener/reader. Elsewhere Tufanov writes that the

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62 According to Igor’ Bakhterev, when several of the future obertiuty met with the literary department of GIII (evidently, in late 1926 or early 1927), the renowned linguist L.V. Shcherba expressed regret that Tufanov was not with them as the faculty would be interested in his phonetic notation (Vaginov, et al. 442). Tufanov highly valued the work of the Formalists, who were employed at GIII, even suggesting at one point that only Boris Eikhenbaum was qualified to write about his poetry (Tufanov [1991] 173). This speech was scheduled for January 26, 1928, two days after the OBERIU Three Left Hours performance. Tufanov’s attitude toward his erstwhile collaborators may be judged from an indirect reference in this speech: discussing the tasks of art, Tufanov criticizes several types of artistic slogan, at one point mentioning that “[r]eal art’ is nonsense” («Реальное искусство» - нонсенс) (25).

63 Tufanov additionally identifies a number of English and Chinese phonemes that lie at the base of this poem. We can see this procedure clearly in the second line of the quoted excerpt (Роо рингри трюупс ритрит ринг), built out of the English words “roaring,” “troops,” “retreat,” and “ring.” We can see this same process at work in the lines quoted above from “Spring,” which are constructed from pieces of Russian and English words (синь, сон, сигнал/signal, sing, song, self, see, seek) with perhaps an echo of the German “Seele” (селе, сьел). Incidentally, some of the English words that Tufanov quotes in both the speech and the preface to *Towards zaum* exhibit at best a very oblique relationship to the movement he ascribes to them; it is also unclear how he would account for the Russian corpse that inevitably arises in the transliteration of “troops” [труупс].
members of his Order are distinctive insofar as “[their] experiences are transfigured into artistic images and adopt a constructive form that does not depend on the original experience” [Наши переживания преображаются в художественные образы и получают конструктивное оформление, не зависящее от исходного переживания] (Ф. 749 Оп.1 N 48). The sound gesture is simultaneously particular and universal; it is the point at which an individual subjective impression converts into an objective mode of expression. The result is a type of communication analogous to the Tolstoyan principle of art as infection, an emotional transfer that works most ideally when no interpretation is necessary.64 Despite the absence of a translatable ‘sense’ determined by linguistic convention, both the work’s form and the impressions that it conveys are in principle fully determinate.

As Tufanov’s concept of zaum’ continues to develop in later essays, it becomes increasingly clear that he has in mind much more than a particular type of verbal art based on phoneme patterns. Tufanov begins to use “zaum’” to designate a generalized artistic program encompassing any type of verbal expression that overcomes the insufficiency of the intellect [ум]. Thus, in the preface for his unpublished dramatic poem “Homeward to Zavoloch’e” [Домой в Заволочье] Tufanov defines заумь as “a peculiar type of knowing” [своеобразный род познания] founded upon “a ‘broadened’ perception of the world” [“расширенное” восприятие мира] (Ф. 749 Оп.1 N 48).65 Within this broader definition, the former definition of zaum’—which Tufanov often differentiates as “phonetic” or “abstract” zaum’—continues to exist as a subcategory. Indeed, phonetic zaum’ is pedagogically important, as it reveals the physiological basis of all linguistic activity. At the same time, the overarching theory of zaum’ as

65 “Broadened perception” is another concept that Tufanov derives from Matiushin (see Jaccard 1995, 77-84).
a peculiar type of knowing leads Tufanov to analyze more complex verbal constructions—after all, a cognitive theory must be able to account for a higher order of mental activity than the purely reactive gesture.

The next logical step was the concept of the “image” [образ], which was not only a fundamental category in traditional philology and literary theory (including Formalism), but also represented a basic constituent of thought in psychological literature of the time (see Svetlikova 41-71). As a psychological term, the word’s reference was often considerably broader than simply a “visual image;” it was often used more or less interchangeably with “idea” to designate the memory of an impression (впечатление), including those associated with sounds and actions (Ibid. 43-4). In 1925, Tufanov wrote a series of short essays (or possibly, versions of the same essay) explicating this concept, its place in poetry, and the significance of “Imagism” as a movement.66 Besides the need to extend his own theory beyond the gesture, this change of interest was likely influenced by Tufanov’s membership in the Leningrad Union of Poets and other organizational activities. By this time the Petrograd Imagists (such as G. Shmerel’son and V. Richiotti) were a visible presence in the city’s artistic “left.”67 As an ardent systematizer, Tufanov evidently perceived a need to define this movement within his hierarchy of artistic practices and its main principle within the general evolution of human thought. While Tufanov does indeed discuss Petrograd/Leningrad poet Shmerel’son in these essays, he defines “Imagism” broadly as an international movement, frequently referencing Ezra Pound and

66 These articles are: “Сергей Есенин” (F. 749 Ор. 1 No. 131), “Образ и заумь.” (F. 749 Ор. 1 No. 134), “Стихи Имажинистов” (F. 749 Ор. 1 No. 135), “Заумь и Image” (F. 749 Ор. 1 No. 136), “Image, заумь и частушка” (F. 740 Ор. 1 No. 137). As one can see in the titles, Tufanov sometimes substitutes the English “image” for the Russian “образ,” though in the main text of the essays he normally uses the latter.

67 For a discussion of connections between Tufanov and Imagists, as well as the group’s potential influence on OBERIU, see Kobrinskii 2000, vol. 2: 40-66.
quoting H.D.’s “Oread.” When discussing the Russian imazhinisty, he shows a marked preference for Sergei Esenin, and his thoughts on the movement achieve their most cogent form in his obituary for Esenin (Φ. 749 оп. 1 № 131). Tufanov argues that although one might suspect that Imagism’s emphasis on the image [образ] would be antithetical to imageless [безобразный] zaum’, this opposition is only apparent. Like zaum’, Russian and English “Imagism” represents a return to an early moment in the development of linguistic consciousness. Human activity first gave rise to the “sound-image” [звук-образ], an aural sign that immediately evokes a particular gesture, allowing it to be remembered and communicated. (Functionally, this “sound-image” coincides with what Tufanov previously identified as the “sound gesture.”) As human articulatory organs developed to produce a greater array of distinct sounds, the simultaneous evolution of social relations required more complex ideas [представления] to be expressed through these vocal performances—and the result was the “word-image” [слово-образ]. These “word-images” were originally more or less spontaneous reactions to the surrounding world (therefore maintaining a non-arbitrary relation to it), but over time they became increasingly abstracted from their immediate context, eventually transforming into the tragically impotent resources of the rational mind. In short, true Imagism represents a manifestation of the same attempt to restore the place of instinct over rationality that gave rise to zaum’.

The next and most ambitious stage of Tufanov’s theory of zaum’ is expressed in a speech that he intended to read at the State Institute of Art History (ГИИ). Tufanov titled the speech

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68 It is possible, but unlikely, that Tufanov knew Anglophone Imagism firsthand. He did know at least some English and claimed to have studied the language’s morphology closely. Yet, he does not provide any details about Imagism beyond those provided in Z. Vengerova’s 1915 article introducing the movement and even quotes “Oread” in her translation (cf. Vengerova 102 and passim).
“Zaum’ as the Seventh and Only Art” (Заумь как седьмое и единственное искусство), re-appropriating Ricciotto Canudo’s well-known definition of film as the seventh art, representing a synthesis of all others. The speech enacts in dramatic fashion the paradox of Tufanov’s lyrical understanding of zaum’: it is simultaneously a manifesto for extreme individualism in art and a treatise on zaum’ as the one objective method for realizing this program. In a provocative gesture, Tufanov dresses up the fight for artistic freedom in imagery adopted from the fifteenth-century resistance of Novgorod in their battle against the despotism of Moscow. Tufanov offers his own theory of заумь as an alternative to the “social demands” [социальные задания] burdening Soviet poets. The first part of his explanation lays out the theory of phonetic заумь in the familiar terms of Toward заумь, from which he draws examples. Then his argument takes an interesting turn: “Besides phonemes, each language also gives us primordial forms of morphology and sound complexes, i.e., we, abstract artists [беспредметники], also have as material for art the findings of paleontology, [which are] not semasiologically necessary to [our] contemporaries” [Помимо фонем, каждый язык дает нам еще первичные формы морфологии и звуковые комплексы, т.е. мы, беспредметники, имеем еще в качестве материала искусства данные палеонтологии, семисиологически не нужные современникам.]. He then calls for a “reduction of the present into the past and back again within the limits of a single linguistic system” [редукция современности в прошлое и обратно в пределах одной языковой системы] (23). Although this expression is somewhat unclear, his

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69 As discussed in Chapter One, the tale of Marfa Boretskaia and the defense of Novgorod was a central part of Tufanov’s personal mythology. It provided him the theme for several long works, of which only one, the poem The Volga Brigands [Ушкуйники, 1927], has been published. In one autobiographical sketch, Tufanov even claims to have been born in fifteenth-century Novgorod (Tufanov 1991, 173).

70 The idea of a “paleontology of language” was advocated by Nikolai Marr, whose Japhetic theory was popular at the time and known to Tufanov.
point is evidently something along these lines: after close philological study of a language in its stages of development (i.e. paleontology), a poet can produce verbal constructions that distill essential characteristics of both this language and the national culture that creates it. The verbal products of such a “reduction” are called zaum’ symbols [заумные символы], and by basing his work upon a given linguistic culture (e.g. Sanskrit, Greek, or Japhetic), the artist can create new genres of zaum’ symbols. On this basis, Tufanov identifies his poema in fragments Ushkuiniki [1927] as a “book of zaum’ symbols in the ancient Russian genre” (24).

The phrase “zaum’ symbol” is especially striking considering that Tufanov’s sole prerevolutionary book, The Aeolian Harp [Eolova arfa, 1917], was written under the obvious influence of the Symbolist movement. So one might be tempted to read this new stage of zaum’ theory as essentially a throwback to the period before Tufanov had discovered zaum’ and abandoned the intellect. At a first glance, his exemplary “book of zaum’ symbols,” Ushkuiniki, validates this hypothesis, since its odd admixture of archaic and dialectic language seems to demand precisely the work of the intellect for its decipherment. Although Tufanov’s earlier phonetic theories likely influenced the unorthodox and frequently alliterative language of the poema, the emphasis has shifted from phonetics to philology in this work. This seeming paradox has been noted by several scholars; for instance, in a recent article V. Grechko finds: “With the exception of a few examples in his theoretical work Towards zaum’, we can scarcely find verses that make use of the principles enunciated by him in this work” (57). [За исключением нескольких примеров в его теоретической работе К зауми, мы едва ли можем найти стихи с использованием провозглашенных им в этой работе принципов.] Although much of the work’s language is unusual, and Tufanov seems to have deliberately picked archaisms with
disputed meanings (Tufanov 1991, 105-9), the work is nonetheless composed almost entirely of words that can be found in dictionaries. A characteristic passage reads:

硼酸 к забытощ притуилась,  A birch took shelter among the ruins
В зачинках зихиталась кликовых,  In noisy revelries it started to sway,
К кажной речи глух зеленый клирос,  [Its] green choir is deaf to mad/damaged speech
Не выплавает жито из травы. (Ibid., 53)  Grain does not grow from the grass.

Moreover, the few instances of “abstract zaum’” are given in the context of otherwise intelligible statements, the most elaborate example being:

Ох, плыви, плыви, стружочек,  Oh, sail, sail, little boat,
К семенухам в степь,  To the golden plovers in the steppe,
Плыйдиплаунбабликоче  Plyiliplaunbavlikochi
Силенльюльмасте. (100)  Siilen’liul’maste.

Such moments of unintelligibility do not obscure the overall narrative of Ushkuiniki. On the most basic level, the poema narrates fifteenth-century Novgorod’s heroic and futile resistance against the invading forces of Ivan III, as well as the journey of a bard named Tufanov who travels into the past in order to preserve their memory (for more detail see: Nikol’skaia 2002, Cebula 2014).

But does this preference for narrative and decipherable language necessarily constitute a betrayal of zaum’? Tufanov did not think so. Ushkuiniki is accompanied by an updated set of zaum’ principles, and Tufanov still identifies himself in his GIII speech the following year as both a zaum’ poet and an abstract (or more literally: “object-less”) artist [беспредметник] (23). Indeed, in the GIII speech he explicitly denies that his symbolism, i.e. the language of Ushkuiniki, communicates by means of comprehensible ideas: “In the zaum’ symbol, as in abstract zaum’, there is no concept [нет понятия]” (26) Instead, the symbol applies what Tufanov calls a “device of analogies” [прием аналогий] to the linguistic system “in order to engender a new zaum’ complex” [для зарождения нового заумного комплекса] and “to

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71 Dal’ lists the expression “жито выпьвает” as a western Russian expression synonymous with “колосится” (forms ears) (Vol. 1, 751).
designate the relationship among things in flowing relief” [для наименования отношений между вещами в текучем рельефе] (Ibid.). If Tufanov’s exact meaning is not clear, the allusion to Bergsonian “flow” and the parallel with abstract zaum’ suggest that the “device of analogies” is yet another type of pre-conceptual association (like the sound gesture or image), which can circumvent the intellect [ум] to reveal a state of the world that would otherwise be inaccessible. It would seem, then, that the apparent cleavage between Tufanov’s theory and practice represents a paradox within his theory: the zaum’ symbol points beyond the limitations of the intellect, but it can only do so by drawing on the historical language system, i.e., the source of the rational concepts that zaum’ should circumvent. Even though the connection between the signifying word and the immediate gesture becomes increasingly attenuated as language evolves, their relationship never becomes fully arbitrary, which makes it at least understandable that a “reduction” of the past centuries’ language system would create a work with discernible semantic meaning and narrative “content.”

Thus, the driving force of Tufanov’s theory was an attempt to comprehend language as a totality constituted by phonetic movement, imagistic associations, and a deep historical memory. Since he understood these aspects of language to be complementary by nature, true poetry could be expected to embody each of these qualities equally. In the context of this theory, the epithet zaum’ must be stripped of any association with a lack of meaning—rather, it comes to simply suggest that the creative process mainly occurs through an intuitive feel for language experienced beyond the rational intellect. However rigorously Tufanov may have defended the necessity for poetry to circumvent the intellect, his ultimate goal was a better form of communication that would overcome the limitations of ordinary language, and he never
proposed any value in incomprehensibility per se.\textsuperscript{72} So it is at least striking to see the word “meaningless” appear as one of the guiding principles of the Left Flank in a declaration written by Tufanov on November 3, 1925. According to this document, the group’s works are based “on the paleontology of speech, genetic semantics, the teleology of functions of consonant phonemes, [and] on speech images, on the one hand; and on the authority of meaninglessness on the other” [на палеонтологию речи, на генетическую семантику, на телеологизм функций согласных фонем, на речевые образы - с одной стороны, и на авторитет бессмыслицы, с другой] (Dviniatina/Krusanov 178).\textsuperscript{73} While the first several terms clearly paraphrase the major tenets of Tufanov’s own theory, the phrase “authority of meaninglessness” stands in stark contrast to this theory. What could he have meant by including the phrase in this Left Flank declaration?

**The Authority of Meaninglessness**

The source of this unusual phrase will be obvious to anyone familiar with Alexander Vvedensky, whose most famous position was the advocacy of “бессмыслица” (meaninglessness) as a poetic ideal. For a roughly two-year period following this declaration,

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\textsuperscript{72} Tufanov’s criticism of Kruchenykh is interesting in this regard: “Kruchenykh had already resorted to simplification in 1925 in his book *-Zaum’ language in Seifullina, Vs. Ivanov, Leonov, Babel’, I. Sel’vinskii, and others*. In Seifullina he points to Kyrgyz words as unintelligible; in Vsevolod Ivanov, regional [words]; in Leonov, Tatar—regarding all of these therefore to be zaum’. With such a simplification, for some people Cicero in the original would be zaum’, and Pushkin [would be zaum’] for his contemporaries.” [Крученых уже в 1925 году в книге «Заумный язык у Сейфуллиной, Вс. Иванова, Леонова, Бабеля, И. Сельвинского, А. он др.» пришел к опрощению. У Сейфуллиной он указывает киргизские слова, как непонятные, у Вс. Иванова — областные, у Леонова — татарские, считаю их поэтому заумью. При таком опрощении для некоторых Цицерон в подлин. будет заумным, а также Пушкин для его современников] (IRLI F. 749, op. 1, p. 144).

\textsuperscript{73} N.B. The phrase “speech images” belongs to the Expressionist and “rechevok” Igor Markov, a member of the group about whom little is known (cf. Dviniatina/Krusanov 154n24). The remaining concepts clearly derive from Tufanov’s own synthesis of contemporary linguistic theories (mainly, Marr).
Vvedensky wrote this phrase—often written as АВТО-ритет бессмыслицы—beneath the authorial signature on his poems. His position statement within the Left Flank reads simply: “I recognize neither emotion nor sense in art. The only thing that is entirely positive is meaninglessness” [Ни эмоций ни смысла в искусстве не признаю. Единственно положительной до конца является бессмыслица] (Dviniatina and Krušanov, 180). While this period would be the only time Vvedensky used this term with clear reference to an artistic principle, the powerful image of a bottomless “star of meaninglessness” [бессмыслицы звезда] would appear prominently in Vvedensky’s 1930 poem “All Around Possibly God” [Кругом возможно Бог]: “горит бессмыслицы звезда/она одна без дна” (Vvedenskii 2010, 161).

Several decades later Vvedensky’s friend and early commentator Iakov Druskin proposed “meaninglessness” [бессмыслица] as the philosophical concept necessary for understanding the writings of both Vvedensky and Kharms. In brief, Druskin argues that this “бессмыслица” is the verbal manifestation of a reality that cannot be comprehended rationally nor communicated in ordinary speech, a reality that he calls the “alogical Logos” and “Divine madness” [Божественное безумие]. Employing hybrid terminology drawn from structural semiotics and fourth-century Trinitarian debates, Druskin further suggests that Vvedensky strove for the ideal of a “homoousian correspondence of text to context” [единосущное соответствие текста

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74. The exact length of time is unclear. The last surviving poem to bear this label, “On the Death of a Theosophist” [На смерть теософки], may have been written in 1927 or 1928 (cf. Meilakh’s note: Vvedenskii 1993, 229).

75. Druskin discusses Vvedensky's poetry in several essays and diary entires, and the concept of “бессмыслица” arises from moral and epistemological convictions discussed throughout Druskin's philosophical works (see Druskin 2004). His fullest statement on Vvedensky's poetics may be found in the long essay “Zvezda bessmyslitsy” (Sazhin et al., 549-642).

76. Cf. 1 Corinthians 1:23-5: “а мы проповедуем Христа распятого, для Иудеев соблазн, а для Эллинов безумие, для самих же призванных, Иудеев и Эллинов, Христа, Божию силу и Божию премудрость; потому что немудрое Божие премудрее человеков, и немощное Божие сильнее человеков.”
контексту], a mysterious identity of signifier and signified, which Druskin illustrates by analogy to music: in which a pair of notes is indistinguishable from the interval they “signify” (Vvedenskii 2010, 363-5). Although later scholars have frequently critiqued, or even disregarded, much of Druskin’s analysis, his writings form the basis of a widely held view that “in its essence [Vvedensky’s poetry] is philosophical poetry” (Sazhin, et al., Vol. 1, 642). The notion of “бессмыслица” in later scholarship has very often carried connotations of a philosophical and/or theological impulse underlying Vvedensky’s poetry.78

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to delve more deeply into Druskin’s readings and their relevance to understanding Vvedensky as a whole.79 For the present, I would simply like to suggest that this elaborate philosophical system might not be the appropriate context for understanding the “АВТО-рите́т бессмыслицы” declared in the Left Flank documents. Once again, Vvedensky only signed poems with this phrase for a relatively short period early in his career (late 1925-1927/8), during a period that critics (including Druskin) widely consider a transitional phase. In his analyses of “бессмыслица,” Druskin focuses mainly on texts from the 1930s, which are written in a markedly different style from Vvedensky’s early works. Moreover, the usage of “бессмыслица” in the Left Flank documents quoted above suggests that this paradoxical “authority” should be understood, at least in part, as an attempt to carve out a place

77 Traditionally, the term homoousian, or consubstantial, refers to the relationship among the hypostases of the Holy Trinity. Druskin appeals to this concept as a way of transcending the limitations of a communicative context (as defined by semiotics and realized in the conventions of everyday speech), which postulates only a relationship of analogy between signs and the world (a homoiousian [“of-like-substance”: подобосущий] correspondence, in Druskin’s extended sense of the term).

78 See especially Iulia Valieva’s monograph Igra v bessmyslitsu: poeticheskii mir Aleksandra Vvedenskogo (Saint-Petersburg, 2007), which focuses on the riddle-like structure of “meaninglessness” to draw an analogy between Vvedensky’s poetry and Gnostic practices.

79 See D.L. Shukurov for a more in-depth explication and critique of Druskin’s main points (244-254).
in the chaos of post-revolutionary literary movements, many of which (zaum’, imagism, constructivism, expressionism) were represented in the Left Flank. Yet, Druskin consistently de-emphasizes the importance of other poetic movements, especially Futurism, to Vvedensky’s writing, suggesting at one point: “I think that even a philologist would be unable to determine a predecessor of Vvedensky” [Мне кажется, и филолог не сможет определить предшественника Введенского] (Vvedenskii 2010, 354). Perhaps it is this conviction of the irrelevance of other poets that leads Druskin to misattribute the punningly titled poem “To floor-polishers or onanists” [ПоЛоТЁра или ОНАН*АМ] to Igor Terent'ev. 80

In short, for all their richness of observation about Vvedensky’s later works, Druskin’s writings on “бессмыслица” a priori exclude from their analysis much of his early career—that is, the period when he actually explicitly used the term “бессмыслица” to describe his writing. During this early period, Vvedensky only sporadically makes philosophical or religious allusions, but his writing does show an intensive, iconoclastic engagement with the Russian verse tradition. Beginning with his pre-Futurist juvenilia (“Diverdissement” [Дивертисмент]), Vvedensky frequently references other authors, literary genres, and specific works in his poetry. 81 Often a particular nonsensical word or the intonational structure of a line will be overtly

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80 Vvedensky’s authorship was later convincingly established by M.B. Meilakh (Vvedenskii 1993, vol. 2, 218-219n132).
81 “Fragment” [Отрывок] (a short poem, possibly an actual fragment) mocks the mid-nineteenth-century romance “There was an affair near Poltava” [Было дело под Полтавой] by featuring a naked Mazepa and replacing the Swedish forces with a fleeing Swedish woman in a torn skirt (Vvedenskii 2010, 36-7). “Galushka” includes the phrase “save yourself Arzamas,” referring primarily to the town (which is threatened by the coming apocalypse), but also irresistibly conjuring the nineteenth-century literary society (Ibid. 40). Of course, by referencing Poltava and Arzamas these poems also nod in the direction of Pushkin, with whom, as Anna Gerasimova has demonstrated, Vvedensky maintains a dialogue throughout his mature works (cf. “Бедный всадник…” in Vvedenskii 2010, 662-691). Anticipating my argument a little, it is worth noting that one Pushkin reference identified by Gerasimova also contains a plausible secondary reference to Kruchenykh: “that Pushkin was without a head/did you know that did you not
influenced by the traditional verse constraints of meter and rhyme. It makes sense, therefore, to reexamine the concept of “meaninglessness” in terms of Vvedensky’s immediate poetic context, especially his formal affiliations with Futurism and the Left Flank.

Such a reexamination may begin with Vvedensky’s application to the Leningrad division of the Union of Poets in May 1924. The ten poems that he submitted in support of this application already demonstrate his rejection of “meaning” as a central compositional category. The poems display machine-like noises, vulgar Freudianism, childish jokes, absurd prosaisms, and various other deformities. Assuming the application was written in the avant-garde spirit of provocation, its success may be judged by the review committee’s responses: one member asked if the poems were a joke, others suggested that they should demand that Vvedensky explain himself in person, and even the positive responses betray a sense of bafflement: “Great. I don’t understand anything, but I’m for acceptance,” writes Aleksei Kraiskii [Славно. Ничего не понимаю, а за прием] (Vvedenskii 2010, 731-2). At the same time, there are at least some provisional signs of order amidst this cycle’s chaos. Take for instance the second poem:

know” [тот Пушкин был без головы / то знали ль вы не знали вы] (Ibid., 55). In Sdvigology, Kruchenykh uses the line, “Все те же ль вы, иные девы,” from the first chapter of Eugene Onegin to illustrate the aural sdvig (i.e. a merging of two phonemes to create a new word, here: the particle “ль” and “вы” [you] merge upon reading to form “лions” [львы]); he includes a list of similar “lions” in 500 New Witticisms and Puns of Pushkin. The quotation from Vvedensky comes from the 1926 play Minin and Pozharsky [Минин и Пожарский], which also includes overt borrowings from Gogol’s The Inspector General and A Terrible Vengeance.

Nikolai Tikhonov’s response demonstrates the committee’s confusion over both Vvedensky’s poetry and how to distinguish among futurist movements in general: “We need to ask Tufanov whether he knows Vvedensky as a Futurist [and/or] zaumnik [как футуриста-заумника]. Many of his lines are, despite their ‘deliberate’ comicality, better than many lines by those who are simply starting out. It seems to me that Vvedensky is deliberately writing this way, working something out. It doesn’t yet reach our consciousness in its entirety, but rather in pieces like Khlebnikov’s aural thread” (732). The matter was indeed referred to Tufanov, who denied that there was any zaum’ or imagism in Vvedensky’s poetry, finding only “buffoonery” and a “neutralization of the verbal stratum,” but nonetheless recommending that the Union could accept Vvedensky as a “seeker of Lef-type adventures,” or failing that, as a “futurist” (732-3).
три угла четыре колокольни
три боба нестругана доска
стало сердце ОТ ВЧЕРАШНЕЙ БРАНИ
отчего нестругана доска
оттого что сгнила (33)

three corners four bell towers
three beans an unplaned board
heart stopped from yesterday’s abuse
why is the board unplaned
because it rotted

The poem’s minimal syntax, disconnected imagery, lack of punctuation, and idiosyncratic capitalization all give an impression of chaos. Yet the rhythmic structure of the poem is strict: the first four lines observe trochaic pentameter with identical accented syllables in the first two lines (/ - / - / - - / <-> ), a rhythmic variation in the third (/ - / - - - / - / - ), and a reprise in the fourth ( - / - / - - / ); the two anapests of the last line are prepared by the three syllable words or phrases that begin all but the third line. This organizational impulse is reflected in the counting imagery in the first two lines (which also underscores its arbitrariness). Moreover, on closer inspection, much of the poem’s imagery can be connected to the concept of construction: the central image of the unplaned board describes raw material, the three corners imply geometrical form, and the bell towers are a type of architecture. The loose assemblage of building imagery does not, however, suggest any definite structure, nor could any such structure be effectively supported by the rotted wood. It also lacks any direct relationship to the poem’s middle line, which interrupts the discussion of the unplaned board and abruptly shifts the indifferent tone of the poem’s beginning with its emphatic capitalization and implication of death. The phrase “FROM YESTERDAY’S ABUSE” [ОТ ВЧЕРАШНЕЙ БРАНИ] appears particularly out of place, as it inserts a concrete deictic marker into a poem that otherwise lacks any clear situational context, and the idea of abuse severe enough to stop the heart implies an intensity of subjective experience absent in the remainder of the poem. If one might be tempted to read the stopping heart as another metapoetic image—the moment when (healthy) order irreparably crosses over
into chaos and dissolution\textsuperscript{83}—one cannot make a similar argument for the allusion to “yesterday’s abuse.” It is notable that Vvedensky capitalizes precisely this phrase, foregrounding the moment where any interpretation of the poem inevitably fails to make sense out of it.\textsuperscript{84}

“Three corners…” relies on rhythmic organization to create an apparent tension between structure and collapse. In other works from this period, Vvedensky develops a similar tension by playing with lyric voice and poetic intonation. As Meilakh has commented, the 1925 poem “Garushka” displays many of the principle characteristics of Vvedensky’s mature poetry in embryonic form, namely, prominent eschatological imagery and an overt thematic engagement with the themes “time, death, and God”—the conceptual triad the author claimed to be at the center of his poetic work (Vvedenskii 1993, vol.2, 8). A detailed analysis of the poem’s opening will help establish how Vvedensky’s use of intonation (and verse convention more generally) mirror and contribute to his destabilization of semantics\textsuperscript{85}:

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
да Бог с ним Бог с ним Кралинька & yes forget him forget him my dear \\
чего поешь ты маленька & what are you singing about little one \\
чего ты плачешь Фетинька & what are you crying for Fet’inka \\
kоль наступило летинька & if the summer has begun \\
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

The lexicon (коль/маленька), syntax (чего поешь/чего плачешь), and insistent dactylic rhymes in diminutive form mark these lines strongly as a folk stylization, verging on parody. The

\textsuperscript{83} Such a reading would bring the poem, and indeed the entire cycle, into line with the obsessive thematization of death that quickly becomes central to Vvedensky’s poetry in succeeding years (and occupies a more prominent place in later chapters of this dissertation).

\textsuperscript{84} N.B. The idea of dying from verbal abuse has precedent in Russian literature (in both Gogol’s “The Overcoat” and Chekhov’s “Death of an Official”), though neither intertextual link can provide much guidance for interpreting the line.

\textsuperscript{85} Druskin emphasizes the importance of literary convention, specifically variation of intonation and rhythm, in Vvedensky’s early poetry and provides a “skeleton” of its thematic sections (Vvedenskii 1993, vol. 2, 219-220). Iulia Valieva (2005) has further suggested a connection between Vvedensky’s experiments with intonation in these poems and the work of the contemporary literary theorists, including the Formalists (63-4). Neither offers close analysis of this poem (or others from the mid-1920s).
parodic tone becomes evident both in the title ("galushka" is a type of noodle or dumpling associated with Ukraine) and in the unexpected change of addressee: the “beauty” [Кралинька] in the opening line is replaced in the third with “Fetin’ka.” While this second appellation may be read as simply a slight distortion of the name “Fedin’ka,” it is also a diminutive for the last name of the poet Afanasy Fet. (Count Lev Tolstoy even jokingly addresses his lyricist friend as “Fetin’ka” in a letter dated October 24, 1859 [Tolstoi 534].) The next several lines maintain the meter and cadence of the beginning (mostly), but quickly abandon the “folk” intonation in favor of a fast succession of irreconcilable phrases:

нукдох нукдох за яшки
стремятся трупы падчериц
дрожит очей молчание
петруша досвидание
артырк уский [sic!] суточный
летит неглупый будочной
я здравствуй плачет весело
на сук жену повесила

nukdokh nukdokh beyond the cases
rush the stepdaughters’ corpses
the eyes’ silence trembles
petrusha goodbye
daily narrow article
a sensible watchman(?) flies
I hello cries happily
[she] hanged [my?] wife on a bough

In these eight lines, Vvedensky runs the gamut of linguistic violations: neologisms (нукдох), non-normative orthography (уский/досвидание), syntactic disruptions (я здравствуй плачет), ambiguous phrasing (substituting “будочный” for “будочник”), and of course, a pervasive alogism in semantics. Yet surprisingly, the last line in this baffling succession of verbal oddities, the syntactically unclear expression “[she] hanged [my?] wife on a bough,” immediately gives rise to an intelligible quatrain in a new intonation:

жена моя звезда
рыда умерла
жена моя погасла

my wife a star
sobbing died
my wife went out

86 The one metrical violation occurs in the line, “артырк уский суточный,” where a syllable is dropped between the first two words. At the same time, it is difficult to pronounce the consonant combination “кль” without adding a (shortened) third syllable—in fact, the Imagist Vadim Shershenevich suggests in his 1920 manifesto 2x2=5 that prosody should take into account the “hidden” vowels in such consonant clusters (28).
There may be an element of semantic displacement in these lines as well (i.e. the metaphor of a light going out is directly compared to oil rather than the more logical star of the first line), but their overall meaning is nonetheless clear and they even maintain an appropriately sorrowful register for the theme of death. Yet these perfectly legible poetic lines are at least as disorienting, if not more so, than the openly nonsensical section that precedes them. It seems absurd to ascribe these lines to a “lyric hero” after the preceding word salad, especially since the first-person pronoun initially appeared in a nonsensical phrase, in which a third-person verb syntactically dislodges the pronoun from its subject position [я здоровой плачет весело]. Indeed, these lines appear to arise from the preceding chaos, since the images of “wife” and “death both appear in the preceding nonsensical line “на сук жену повесила,” blurring the line between arbitrary metric filler and lyric declaration.

To a certain extent, both “three corners...” and “Galushka” present exactly what we would expect from a self-avowed “Futurist.” Scholars have previously pointed to the influence of Alexei Kruchenykh and Igor’ Terent’ev on Vvedensky’s early poetry—an inheritance that is particularly evident in this poem’s odd use of capitalization, as well as its sudden shifts (or “displacements”) of semantic and compositional logic [sdvig]. Nikolai Firtich points to a similarity between the OBERIU avowal “бессмысленца” and the following declaration from Cubo-Futurist A Trap for Judges II [Садок Судей II]: “We are under the power of new themes: the unnecessary, the senseless, the mystery of authoritative insignificance are praised by us” [Мы во власти новых тем: ненужность, бессмысленность, тайна властной ничтожности воспеты нами] (Poeziia russkogo futurizma, 620)—although Firtich goes on to state that

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Kruchenykh never avowed meaninglessness as an end in itself (Firtich 252-3). It is difficult to assess to what extent Vvedensky was emulating any one poet of the movement or consciously applying any particular precept, but even if we cannot establish the specific line of inheritance with certainty, the Cubo-Futurist context can help us describe the semantic structure of poems like “three corners four bell towers.” These poems exhibit a structure of semantic indeterminacy similar to that which Jason Strudler has recently analyzed in many of Kruchenykh’s poems. According to Strudler, many of Kruchenykh’s poems use everyday words in a way that replicates the riddle-like structure of his zaum’, which simultaneously suggests hidden meaning and thwarts semantic resolution: “while Kruchenykh creates the impression of a pull toward traditional signification [in these poems], this pull never fully manifests itself and ultimately leaves the reader at zero” (Strudler 91). By leaving the reader at “zero,” Kruchenykh attempts to maintain the radical open-endedness of the avant-garde’s most extreme gestures, such as Malevich’s Black Square, Gnedov’s “Poem of the End,” and Kruchenykh’s own early zaum’, even as he writes in conventional language. The “authority of meaninglessness” similarly relies on a continual refusal to indicate any interpretable meaning, even as the rhythmic structure of the verse and semantic associations among specific words/phrases suggest such a meaning exists. At this early stage Vvedensky is perhaps more prone even than Kruchenykh to release the tension by collapsing any pretense toward signification: the last poem of the application cycle devolves into a recitation of the alphabet (with the “A” displaced and a few letters omitted) (731), “To floor-polishers or onanists” [ПоЛоТЁра^M и ОНАН^НСТА^M] ends with a series of paradigmatic substitutions into the sentence “[X] preserve in their mouth a piece of [Y]” [<X> хранят во рту кусок <Y>] (Vvedenskii 1993, vol. 2, 115-6), and even “Galushka” contains several segments that dispense with meter and syntax entirely.
Not only do such passages release semantic tension, but they also relinquish the pretense to virtuosity that one might ascribe to carefully crafted nonsensical verse. As the pejorative connotations of the word “бессмыслица” suggest, Vvedensky also followed the Cubo-Futurists in aligning himself with “bad writing.” Returning to the previously cited manifesto, Vvedensky clearly shared this movement’s fascination with “the unnecessary” [ненужность], and the notion of an “authority of meaninglessness” bears a certain resemblance to the phrase “powerful/authoritative insignificance” [властной ничтожности]. (Indeed, both expressions are constructed by paradoxically combining the notion of power/authority with that of insignificance/senselessness.) Vvedensky defends the fundamental right for (verse) language not to function. The main discovery of the previous generation of Futurists (Kruchenykh and Terent’ev foremost) was not a new language nor a particularly poetic style, but the principle of self-sufficient “meaninglessness” as an end in itself. The association between verse and sickness appears in the opening lines of “Rostislav Sheared En masse” (Острижен скопом Ростислав), which is dedicated to Kharms and one of the first poems marked with “authority of meaninglessness”:

Ребёнок что же стих? нет пасекой икает может он помер? нет ногой болтает

Has the child quieted down or what? no he’s hiccups like an apiary maybe he’s died? no, he’s swinging his leg (Vvedenskii 2010, 43)

In isolation, the morpheme “стих” could denote either “verse” or “grew quiet,” and a reader might read the second line as the question, “What is verse?,” if the following lines did not make it clear that the subject was a sick child. We might read this association between sickness and verse alongside the rotting in “three corners…” and the references to death in “Galushka” (and
throughout Vvedensky’s poetry) as an icon of the authority governing Vvedensky’s poetry. This poetry is constituted primarily by moments of semantic rupture and stylistic dissonance, and “healthy” moments of sense and continuity are the exceptions that must be justified against this rule.

Such a spirited defense of failed language is especially significant in the context of the mid-1920s. While Kruhenykh and Terent’ev both still advocated zaum’ as a vital part of culture, they were also exploring the political functions of this principle, drawing connections to oratory and political agitation. Soon after his arrival in Petrograd in August 1923, Terent’ev devoted himself primarily to propagandistic theater, a transition that he calls (in a letter to Kruchenykh of December of that year) “translating” Marx into zaum’ (Terent’ev 400). In 1924, Kruchenykh published his last book devoted to zaum’ Phonetics of Theater [Фонетика театра] with a preface by Boris Kushner that defends the book on its practical political merits: “Zaum’ is calling out to become a new device for political agitation” [Заумный язык напрашивается стать новым приемом агитации] (5). Against this backdrop, Vvedensky’s avowal of “meaninglessness” as the only positive principle may be read as a rejection of this instrumentalization of zaum’.

This stance provoked the ire of Zabolotsky, who complains that Vvedensky’s verse lacks a unifying principle in his 1926 “open letter” criticizing the poet:89

88 I am not arguing that “death” in Vvedensky carries only a metapoetic meaning, nor that these observations on his early poems fully characterize his later works. Both the concept of death and the compositional devices of Vvedensky’s writing become increasingly complex over the succeeding years, especially as narrative begins to appear in the late 1920s, yet this association between death and structural collapse remains a fundamental characteristic throughout.
89 Despite the subtitle of “open letter,” this criticism was not intended for publication—it was only “open” to one other reader. According to Meilakh, Zabolotsky entrusted the letter to Kharms, but the latter decided not to deliver it in order to avoid conflict between his collaborators (Vvedenskii 1993, vol. 2, 234).
Constructing your piece, [you] avoid the most important thing—the foundation of plot or at least a thematic unity. One certainly need not construct this foundation according to the principle of an old brick house; the concrete of new verse demands new paths in the field of developing a binding unity. This is the most gratifying work for a left poet. You have written it off as lost and escaped into the mosaic-like plastering together of materialized metaphoric units.


The letter praises Vvedensky’s ability to create striking imagery but continually expresses frustration with his refusal to develop any of the central categories of verse construction: theme, structure, phonetic complexity, and sense. Paraphrasing a line of argument common to the Formalists and Futurists, Zabolotsky argues that a well-made poem is only temporarily unintelligible, until the generation of readers learns to see the world as the poet does: “what was alogical yesterday has become entirely logical today” (Ibid., 175). From this point of view, neither meaning nor its absence can be absolute, since the poetic work is interpreted within a constantly changing literary system. “Meaninglessness” is thus a false ideal, and Vvedenky’s practice of frustrating sense is nothing more than a trope gone awry: instead of presenting the world in a new light, his metaphors merely form a “mosaic.”

This situation is represented allegorically in Zabolotsky’s “The Battle of the Elephants” [Битва слонов] (1931), in which meaning and syntax are overthrown by the “elephants of the subconscious.” Their battle destroys the towers “where numbers shined” and “where the sword of the syllogism burned and shone,”

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90 It is also telling that Zabolotsky repeatedly refers to the autonomous “metaphors” in Vvedensky’s writing: by accusing his rival of making infelicitous verbal substitutions, he is implying that there should be a singular, ultimately interpretable primary meaning, from which the incomprehensible imagery is derived.
but the loser is identified as Poetry, who, at first, wants to destroy herself in the battle’s wake. Eventually, however, Poetry adjusts to this apparent disorder and finds beauty within it:

Poetry starts to get her bearings,
To study the movement of these new figures,
She starts to understand the beauty of awkwardness,
The beauty of an elephant expelled by the underwold.

The merits of Zabolotsky’s formal critique have been discussed at length elsewhere (Shukurov 220-258), yet the implicit ideological criticism of the “open letter” deserves mention in light of the previously mentioned pressure for “meaningless” poetry to seek a functional justification. Rather than creating art that actively shapes and improves people’s lives (the functional ideal of architecture), Vvedensky indulges in merely decorative aesthetic activity (mosaic). On this basis, in the letter Zabolotsky refers to Vvedensky’s poetry negatively as “invention, legend, revelation” and compares him to a blind old man telling fantastic stories that enthrall his audience but fail to correspond to their daily lives (Vvedenskii 1993, vol. 2, 175-6).

The contrast between Vvedensky and Tufanov is even more pronounced. Despite their shared distrust for the human intellect, the two poets develop completely opposite responses to this problem. In its theory at least, Tufanov’s poetry manifests a far-reaching pull toward semantic consistency, a fully motivated structure in which every aspect of phonetics, imagery, and narrative must be coordinated with the original impression. While the all-encompassing pretensions of this theory may fit squarely into the utopian aspirations of the avant-garde, Tufanov displays little interest in innovation per se, but rather modifies and systematizes the work of his contemporaries to create an academic poetic language. For Tufanov, history and

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91 Perhaps to demonstrate Poetry’s assimilation of these “awkward” movements, Zabolotsky ends the poem with a humorous description of an elephant having tea (appropriately cast in rhymed iambics).
language are essentially cumulative: each epoch carries the memory of the past, and every stage of a language contains as untapped potential the traces of its earlier stages and, above all, a secret connection to the primordial gesture. The abandonment of intellect is compensated with a wealth of intuitive associations and the narrow ego becomes the dynamic self. In contrast, even at this early stage, Vvedensky demonstrates an acute concern for what he would later call the “poverty of language” [бедность языка] (Vvedenskii 2010, 222), its insufficiency as an instrument of cognition in all forms. Instead of wholeness and consistency, we find an enthusiasm for disjunction and fragmentation—as Vvedensky himself put it in 1933 or 1934: “[...]I have a fundamental sensation of the incoherence of the world and the fragmentation of time” [у меня основное ощущение бессвязности мира и раздробленности времени] [Vvedenskii 2010, 593].

Nonetheless, “poor language” is not without memory. As we have seen, from the very beginning of his career Vvedensky frequently references traditions and particular works with his patterns of intonation, intertextual allusions, and even direct citations. Yet, these generic and textual echoes do not promise to recover seemingly lost meanings from the national past, but apparently appear as a mere associative reflex. Similarly, this language undermines the notion of a cohesive lyric self by shifting constantly among an uncertain number of voices and rarely coalesces into intelligible discourse. If its most obvious form is the assault on linguistic norms, its paradoxical “authority” is perhaps better expressed by otherwise intelligible statements rendered “meaningless” by the absence of any identifiable speaker, narrative value, or pragmatic function (e.g. жена моя погасла/печальной каплей масла). Reversing Tufanov’s definition of zaum’, we might call “бессмыслица” a peculiar form of not-knowing, one that disavows any authority to make a statement about the world, even a declaration of the poet’s own existence.
Battle with meanings

During his time in the DSO workshop and the first Left Flank, Kharms was deeply interested in Tufanov’s theories and adopted several of his main principles. On November 11, 1925, Kharms writes that he accepts Tufanov’s “theory of ‘Broadened [sic] perception’” [теорию "Расширенного восприятия"] and claims to arrange consonantal phonemes in his poetry accordance with Tufanov’s laws (Dviniatina and Krusanov 2008, 180). Kharms briefly wrote phonetic poetry inspired by Towards zaum’ and then introduced a strong element of folk stylization into his poetry in a number of works written in 1925 and early 1926 (Михаильы, Половинки, Вьюшка смерть). While scholars have noted the importance of folk stylization to Kharms’s early poetry, they have generally attributed this tendency to the influence of Nikolai Kliuev (with whom Kharms was acquainted since 1925: see Kobrinskii 2009, 104-107). Yet Kharms’s “folk turn” follows Tufanov’s own development—after all, Tufanov had insisted that DSO members study Slavic languages and his critical writings continued to emphasize the need to preserve the Russian national tradition.

At the same time, Kharms never wholly emulated Tufanov’s style, nor did he share his mentor’s interest in a totalizing theory of artistic creation. Along with Vvedensky, Kharms insisted that each Left Flank member should have maximum autonomy within the organization

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92 In their article, Jaccard and Ustinov point to a comment that Kharms made in response to Tufanov to the effect that one should demand “national character” [natsional’nost’] from zaum’, which they interpret as a polemic against Tufanov’s study of multiple languages to derive the laws of zaum’ (163-6). More recently, this argument is repeated in Kobrinskii’s (2009) biography of Kharms (42-3). Yet as we have seen, Tufanov promoted the importance of national tradition to his zaum’ in theory and practice—indeed, a short text titled “Notes of Listeners” [Записки слушателей] (presumably, a record of audience questions from a reading) among the Left Flank documents criticizes Tufanov from the opposite angle: “Why does the chairman of ‘worldwide’ zaum’ serve up a mix of Esenin and Kamenskii” [Почему председатель «мировой» зауми преподносит смесь Есенина+Камен-ский?] (Dviniatina and Krusanov 2008, 186). It would appear that Kharms was either only critiquing one particular poem by Tufanov or perhaps even registering agreement with his approach.
(cf. Dviniatina and Krusanov 2008, 154-5). In the previously mentioned declaration, even after agreeing with Tufanov’s core principles, Kharms states that he “make[s] use only of [the theory’s] consequences,” namely: “a) A new construction of logic in relation to events. b) Limitless thematic dislocation” [пользуюсь исключительно ее следствиями, как то: а) Новая страйка логики по отношению к событиям. б) Неограниченное тематическое смещение. (Dviniatina/Krusanov 2008, 180). By thematic dislocations and a new logic of events, Kharms is likely referring to the narrative structure of Tufanov’s dramatic poem “Homeward— to Zavoloch’e” [Домой—в Заволочье], which makes frequent use of what Kruchenykh refers to as a “temporal shift” [временной сдвиг], or a sudden shift in chronology. Tufanov writes in the work’s preface:

“What is the connection,” the reader who is accustomed to a spatial perception of time will ask, “between all these Naked Brothers [a gang of brigands who play a central role in the poem - G.C.], Birds of the Ice Age, brigands in flat-bottomed boats, Circassians, bards, statues of deaconesses, Chinese people, and so on, and so forth.

Yes, with a spatial perception of time, there is no connection here, everything is broken up, the boxes are broken and the personae and events appear to be pasted together.

Какая связь, - спросит читатель, привыкший к пространственному восприятию времени, - между всеми этими Голыми Братьями, Ледниковыми Птицами, ушкуйниками, черкесами, баянами, статуями диаконисс, китайцами и т.д.: и т.д.

Да, при пространственном восприятии времени, здесь связи нет, все разорено, ящики разбиты и лица и события как будто склеены. (IRLI, f. 749, Op.1, N 48)

By focusing only on “consequences” in this scenario, we would begin with the state where “there is no connection” and “everything is ruined,” without necessarily understanding why the work needed to be written this way. In other words, Kharms is evidently interested in aspects of Tufanov’s theory (mainly, semanticized consonants and narrative dislocations) for the artistic possibilities that they open up, not in their theoretical foundations. Thus, the last thesis of
Kharms’s declaration is the most telling: “During the period of creativity I don’t think about theses” [В период творчества о тезисах не думаю] (Dviniatina and Krusanov 2008, 180).  

We can see both traces of Tufanov and hints of a new aesthetic direction in “Damper Death” [Вьюшка смерть] (1926), dedicated to Sergei Esenin shortly after the poet’s suicide in December 1925. As mentioned above, Tufanov had written a study of Esenin’s poetry as a kind of obituary, as he believed that Esenin’s understanding of Imagism provided a bridge between the this movement and Tufanov’s own folk-nationalist take on zaum’. The poem begins by quoting the opening line of a Russian folk song: “Ah, you inner porch, my inner porch” [Ах, вы сёни мои сёни] (Kharms 38). Besides the obvious play off the name Esenin, this folk song introduces the narrative situation of a young girl sitting at home thinking about her beloved, and Kharms plays on this motif by giving the poem a female speaker and filling it with domestic lexicon (including the stove damper of the title). Over the course of the poem, Kharms intersperses folk imagery and lexicon with references to Esenin, though no clear narrative emerges. There are moments that break with the folk stylization—most prominently the sixth stanza, which includes the opening line of the Lord’s Prayer in German in addition to the loan words “скарлатина” (scarlet fever) and “перламутр” (mother-of-pearl)—yet these borrowings do not in themselves signal a break from Tufanov, since one finds similar moments in the final section of Ushkuiniki. This work also features perhaps the most idiosyncratic aspect of Kharms’s

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93 N.B. The notions of an archaeology of language and consonantal semantics reappear later within the Lipavsky circle in Leonid Lipavsky’s philosophical tract “Theory of Words” [Теория слов] (1935), which argues: “Words preserve their history within themselves; every word preserves, as if [it] has carefully swaddled [it], its original antiquity; at birth words transmit their genetic element to each other as an inherited trait” [Слова хранят в себе свою историю; каждое слово хранит, точно тщательно запеленав, свою изначальную древность; слова передают друг другу при рождении свой родовой элемент как наследственный признак] (Lipavskii 214). The work is mainly a study of Russian word roots. According to Druskin, Lipavsky had no formal knowledge of linguistics when compiling this work; he was, however, definitely familiar with Khlebnikov and would likely have had some exposure to Marrism.
early verse: his use of written accent marks, which sometimes simply mark out particular words for stress and sometimes shift the lexical stress of apparently at a whim (e.g., приходил, девица). The phonetic studies of the DSO workshop may have influenced this practice, as it emphasizes the rhythmic structure of the work over normal speech patterns. At the same time, it is important to point out that these wayward stress marks are not a faithful applications of Tufanov’s theories, since they are not patterned on historical stress patterns but rather represented arbitrary choices, some impossible for Russian phonetics (such as the double stress of девица). Here we see a clear example of Kharms’s simultaneous interest in Tufanov’s linguistic studies and his indifference toward the systematic application of their results. If this poem does not formally signal much of a break from Tufanov, the signature presages Kharms’s coming independence from his mentor, as he places the epithet “чинарь” after his name, thereby marking his recently formed poetic alliance with Vvedensky.

The first iteration of the “Left Flank” collapsed soon after “Damper Death” was written due to growing disputes among its members. On January 27, 1926, Kharms, Vvedensky and the Expressionist Evgenii Vigiliansky formally announced their departure from the organization, citing ongoing arguments over how the organization should be run (Dviniatina and Krusanov 2008, 186). Even after parting ways with Tufanov, Kharms appears to have retained a certain respect for him. Dviniatina and Krusanov (2008) publish a poem that Kharms wrote in Tufanov’s notebook almost a year after the first Left Flank dissolved, on December 6, 1926. The first and last stanzas are addressed to Tufanov, whom Kharms represents as a Novgorodian hero adorned with banner, bell, and a somewhat puzzling “stake with three ends” [кол о трех концах] (184).94

94 Kharms is likely playing on the common expression “a stick with two ends” (палка о двух концах), idiomatically meaning “a double-edged sword.” It is not entirely clear to what type of
while the middle stanza is addressed to Marfa Posadnitsa, the central figure of the Old Novgorodian resistance with whom Tufanov was obsessed. Besides this Novgorodian mythology, the poem also includes the clause, “ancient Russian consciousness / slumbers” [древнерусское сознание / дремлет] (Ibid.), evoking Tufanov’s belief in a dormant cultural heritage that could be awaked through “broadened perception.”

Nonetheless, despite these continued associations, there would be no further artistic collaboration between Tufanov and his erstwhile protégé. One sees the stylistic divide clearly in their respective submissions to the almanac for the Leningrad Division of the All-Russian Union of Poets, which for Vvedensky and Kharms were their first publications. For his part, Tufanov published a series of poems from the aforementioned Ushkuiniki under the title “Fragments from Marfa Boretskaia.” Vvedensky published “Beginning of a Narrative Poem” (Начало поэмы), which continues many of the techniques employed in “Galushka” while moving metrically in the direction of Vvedensky’s OBERIU-era verse.95 (Since “Beginning” involves no coherent narrative and does not belong to a known larger work, it is tempting to read the title as an ironic wink at Tufanov’s fragments from Ushkuiniki.) Uncharacteristically for Vvedensky, this poem does not rhyme beyond the opening lines, though it does include frequent moments of object the “stake with three ends” refers, but the Novgorodian context suggests a weapon, possibly something like a trident.

95 The first half of “Beginning” exhibits a strong tendency toward trochaic tetrameter, Vvedensky’s preferred meter for the period from 1926 to 1930. (“Beginning” also includes several lines of pentameter, as well as an iambic closing section.) In several places, including the opening two lines of “snow lies” [снег лежит...] and a large portion of the later “Guest on a Horse” [Гость на коне, 1931-33] Vvedensky masks this rhythm with mid-line breaks—i.e., as printed on the page, these poems feature short mixed meter lines, which can be combined to make regular tetrameter lines: “снег лежит/земля бежит” (Vvedenskii 2010, 107); “Конь степной/бежит устало,” “Гость ночного/тебя не стало” (Ibid. 181). With the exception of the opening two lines, the other short lines in “Beginning” all fit this rhythmic pattern: “дня и ночи/холод пастбищ,” “голос шашек/птичий срам,” “хоры рёзые/посмешници” (Ibid. 49-50).
alliteration. In his submission, “An Incident on the Railroad” [Случай на железной дороге], Kharms has dropped all trappings of a pseudo-folk style, in favor of a quasi-narrative structure, employing relatively simple lexicon to tell a story continually derailed by vague associations. For instance, in the opening lines, the image of a family sitting at the breakfast table (possibly conjured by the grandmother in the opening line) suddenly merges with the expected theme of rail transport:

как-то бабушка махнула
и сейчас же паровоз
детям подал и сказал
пейте кашу и сундук (Kharms, vol.1, 56)  
somehow grandma waved
and right away the locomotive
served the children and said
drink your kasha and a trunk

While there are significant difference between “An Incident” and Vvedensky’s “Beginning of a Poem,” both stand clearly in opposition to Tufanov's poetry at the time, which continued to move increasingly in the direction of archaisms and Novgorodian myth.

By forming the chinari, Kharms and Vvedensky dismissed Tufanov’s “scientific” system of verse language, yet they did not form a new system to take its place. If anything remained constant in their thinking about language, it was suspicion at the semantic validity of everyday language and a programmatic agnosticism about what should replace it. For the rest of his life, Kharms continued to explore a wide variety of theoretical, philosophical, and religious conceptions of language, ranging from the Formalists to Kabbalah and other occult practices. Vvedensky continually professed uncertainty over what consequences to draw from the “authority of meaninglessness,” admitting as late as 1933-4 that he was not sure what a system of ideas that actually corresponded to the world would look like, or even whether there should be a single system or many (Vvedenskii 2010, 593). While both authors continued to write verse for

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96 This does not mean that we can find absolutely no impulse toward organization. In Vvedensky’s poetry identifiable tendencies do coalesce—most importantly, “death” becomes the
the rest of their lives, the next stage of their careers cannot be understood by looking at this form alone. As they organized a second iteration of the Left Flank, eventually to be renamed OBERIU, under their own leadership, theatrical performance became their central reference point for conceptualizing this new movement.

thematic center of Vvedensky’s poetry and consistent semantic clusters form around certain images (often called “hieroglyphs” in OBERIU scholarship). I will discuss several later works by Vvedensky in Chapter Four.
Chapter 3: The Theater of Real Art

I really love the theater, but unfortunately, the theater doesn’t exist right now.

Я очень люблю театр, но, к сожалению, сейчас театра нет.

— Daniil Kharms

OBERIU was conceived as an association of artists pursuing a joint program across various media, including poetry, theater, music, and film. Of these proposed sections, only the group’s theatrical program received a level of attention and development more or less on par with their experiments in verse language. By every indication the concept of theater was central to how Kharms and Vvedensky understood the new movement. Soon after breaking with Alexander Tufanov in 1926, both poets collaborated with the Radix [Радикс] student theater collective before organizing their own “Left Flank.” Kharms personally wrote the description of the OBERIU theatrical program in the advertisement for their major Three Left Hours performance, and his notebooks indicate that future evenings continued routinely to feature both dramatic works and so-called “theatricalized” readings of poetry up until the group’s disbandment in 1930. As for Vvedensky, one of his longest works was the “play” Minin and Pozharsky [Минин и Пожарский], written shortly before their collaboration with Radix. Both

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97 The OBERIU declaration includes descriptions of only the poetry, film, and theater divisions (in this order), since they were still in the process of organizing the musical section. This last promised section never came to fruition, though some incidental music (now lost) was composed for the original performance of Elizaveta Bam by P. Vul’fius, a former schoolmate of Kharms who was teaching courses in the history of Western music at the time (Meilakh 1987, 183). Although the oberyut did not plan a visual arts section, this medium was not far from their thoughts. They shared the House of the Press with Filonov’s studio, and the OBERIU declaration draws explicit parallels between the verbal and visual arts. The film unit is only known to have produced one film, The Meatgrinder [Мясорубка], compiled from existing footage by Aleksandr Razumovskii and Klimentii Mints. It survives only in the sparse recollections of (mostly irritated) audience members.
authors would continue to use the form of the dramatic dialogue throughout this period and long after the disbandment of OBERIU.

Despite its centrality to the OBERIU project, the group’s concept of “theater” remains unclear in many respects, and its genealogy within the Soviet theatrical avant-garde has been relatively little explored. In this chapter, I will trace an unexpected line of inheritance connecting the OBERIU theatrical program to the agitational theater of the workers’ club movement. This connection allows us to read OBERIU theater as a response to contemporaneous tensions between amateur and professional theaters, as well as an attempt to construct a viable “large” theatrical form to counterbalance the classical repertoires that quickly regained prominence in Soviet theater. In this respect, the group’s theatrical program reimagined a common position among “left” artists to respond to contemporary changes in Soviet culture. Before discussing their approach to reinvigorating these “small forms,” however, I will begin by providing some more context about the OBERIU theatrical program.

“OBERIU Theater”

The phrase “OBERIU theater” might mean any number of things. Although this chapter focuses on dramatic texts that these authors intended to be staged publicly by multiple performers, such works in no way exhaust the concept of theater for the oberiuty. Even within the scope of public OBERIU performances, the genre of scripted drama coexists with another type of event, which Kharms called “theatricalized” reading. Such “theatricalization” generally consisted of pairing a recitation of poetry with thematically unrelated stage action, but it sometimes also involved nonsensical speeches [доклады] or audience interaction in the form of orchestrated arguments [диспуты] about aesthetic matters. Moreover, all of these public performances are intimately related to what Branislav Jakovljevic has called the “personal
theater” of Kharms, the group’s main advocate of theater (16). On the one hand, this “personal theater” encompasses Kharms’s often eccentric performative acts in everyday life, such as posing as his own twin brother and constructing an elaborate, non-functioning “machine” in his apartment. On the other hand, it also applies to what Jakovljevic calls “the solitary theater of writing,” the sense in which writing for Kharms becomes its own sort of everyday performance, especially as a potent means of affirming his identity as a “writer” in his latter years of professional obscurity (16-17). A comprehensive concept of OBERIU theater would certainly have to account for each of these types of performance, as well as those works by associated authors that might be classified as “closet dramas” (such as Vvedensky’s late dramatic works). In this chapter, I focus on the considerably narrower problem of dramatic composition during the years when the group still planned to hold public performances (1926-1930) in order to consider the questions: How might contemporaneous theatrical debates have informed the group’s program? How did considerations of dramatic staging change their methods of composing texts?

Before attempting to answer these questions, it will be helpful to review what we know about the group’s theatrical efforts. The OBERIU theatrical program took root in the fall of 1926, when Kharms met the poet and future oberiut Igor Bakhterev, who was at the time a member of the experimental theater collective Radix [Радикс]. Soon after this meeting, Kharms and Vvedensky began work on a long theatrical piece My Mom is All in Watches [Моя мама вся в часах] for performance with Radix. They successfully negotiated with Malevich for stage space at Ginkhuk but the project folded, due in part to creative differences, before the play was

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98 This topic has been frequently discussed in OBERIU scholarship. See: Komaromi 2002; Meilakh 2006; Ioffe 2006; Tat’iana Nikol’skaia, “The Oberiuty and Theatricalisation of Life” (in Cornwell, ed., 195-199).
publicly performed (Kobrinskii 2009, 51-52). Their interest in theater was reignited the following year when they registered with the Leningrad House of the Press [Дом печати]. (Incidentally, it was in the course of securing sponsorship from the House of the Press that they officially changed their group’s name to OBERIU.) At this time, the House’s manager, N.P. Baskakov, suggested to the oberiuty that they should “organize a city-wide evening [i.e., performance – GC] in the theater hall. Of course, we agreed, saying that the evening would be theatricalized and would include the performance of a play […]” (Igor’ Bakhterev’s words, reprinted in Zabolotskii, 1995, 91). This suggestion culminated in the group’s most visible performance—and the only one that is relatively well documented in contemporary accounts—the Three Left Hours [Три левых часа] evening of January 24, 1928. The first of the three billed hours was dedicated to poetry readings, each featuring a distinctive element of performance: Kharms read atop a moving black wardrobe, Vvedensky rode a tricycle up and down the stage, Zabolotsky dragged a large chest around with him, Bakhterev fell over “dead” at the end of his reading and was carried off by candlelight. For a period of time, the stage was empty, as the audience was informed that the poet Kropachev was reading his verse on a street corner. Of the readers that evening, only Vaginov refused to add a theatrical element, but the organizers compensated by calling on a ballet dancer to accompany him onstage. The second hour was dedicated entirely to a performance of Kharms’s theatrical montage Elizaveta Bam, which was

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99 According to one well-known account, Malevich told Kharms at the Radix meeting: “I’m an old troublemaker, [and] you are young ones; we’ll see what happens” [Я—старый безобразник, вы молодые, посмотрим, что получится] (quoted in Kobrinskii 2009, 52). (The founder of Suprematism’s response includes an untranslatable play on the etymologically related term “безобразное искусство,” i.e., art without images.)

100 For a fuller description of the poetry readings that evening, see Kobrinskii (2009) 109-114. (In general, the second chapter of Kobrinskii’s biography is an excellent source on the Three Left Hours evening.) Amusingly, Kobrinskii suggests that the rest of the group found Kropachev’s verses unimpressive, and the street corner stunt may have been a tactful way to get him away from the main stage (112).
billed in the program as an exemplar of OBERIU theater. As I have already mentioned, further OBERIU “evenings” followed this precedent, routinely featuring both dramatic works and “theatricalized” readings of poetry. Unfortunately, the surviving accounts of these OBERIU performances are sparse in many respects, and we can only speculate about the majority of their public appearances.

This dearth of later information makes the Three Left Hours evening all the more central to our understanding of this period. Thanks largely to a painstaking reconstruction by Mikhail Meilakh (1987), we know a good deal about the participants and audience of the event, as well as the staging of Kharms’s Elizaveta Bam during the evening’s second hour. The advertising for this evening also produced the only document that explicitly describes the principles of OBERIU theater: a short section of the article “OBERIU,” in which Kharms sets forth the principles of this theater in relatively clear, if problematic, terms. Kharms begins by outlining a series of “moments” that should be considered theatrical: two players make signs at each other while swelling their cheeks, a shepherd plays a pipe before a painted backdrop, bare arms emerge from a samovar in place of steam (Vaginov et al. 460-1).\(^1\) Notably, Kharms makes no strong distinction between actors’ bodies and other types of stage effects, indeed he classifies an actor’s movements alongside a painted backdrop or changes in lighting as types of theatrical elements. More importantly, the theatrical moments listed are non-diegetic acts, i.e., they do not play any role in advancing a dramatic plot. (The one possible exception would be the sign language example, but even here Kharms draws our attention to the descriptive detail of the swollen cheeks without providing a communicative context.) Kharms rejects the dramatic plot, and the

\(^1\) Additionally, in a move reminiscent of Meyerhold, Kharms further suggests that the fairground booth [базар] should be considered a legitimate model for these theatrical moments. On the folk roots of OBERIU theater, see Clayton (1993): 193-200.
whole concept of the “play,” in favor of a “theatrical show” [театральное представление] created from “a series of [individual] moments, directorially organized” [ряд таких моментов, режиссерски-организованных] (Vaginov et al. 461). As he offers his own Elizaveta Bam as an illustration of his theatrical program, it makes sense to read the rest of the declaration’s remarks on composition with reference to this work.

Although Elizaveta Bam does have a barebones plot, concerning the arrest of the titular character for murder, the majority of the work consists in diversions from the main dramatic line. Explaining this compositional structure, Kharms writes:

The dramatic plot of the play is broken apart by many apparently incidental themes, which single out the object as a whole existing in isolation, outside its connection with the rest; therefore, the dramatic plot does not rise up in front of the spectator’s face like a clearly delineated plot figure—it is as if it glimmers behind the action’s back. To take its place comes the scenic plot, spontaneously arising from all elements of our performance. On it our attention is centered.

The “dramaturgic plot” is the arrest of Elizaveta Bam for an impossible crime, the nature of which we only learn at the very end: she stands accused of murdering one of the two men who have come to arrest her. Kharms does not suggest that this dramaturgic plot should be abandoned entirely, but rather insists that this plot should not play a governing role. Instead, the plot is “broken apart” by a series of displacements [сдвиги]—primarily by being divided into a series of nineteen generically diverse “bits” [куски], each modeled after a different theatrical genre. These generic designations are handwritten on the performance copy of the script (as are,
incidentally, a number of stage directions that are often omitted from published versions). For a while, these shifts in genre allow Elizaveta Bam a stay of execution, as her accusers continually forget to arrest her. In the end, however, the last three theatrical “bits” restage the original arrest scenario in a fatal succession of genres (physiological pathos, realistic dry-official, operatic) and the play’s apotheosis sees Elizaveta Bam finally led offstage to her implied death.

Scholars have occasionally commented on the prescience of the OBERIU theatrical program and its realization in Elizaveta Bam, often foregrounding those features that would seem to prefigure the Theater of the Absurd. At the same time, there is something decidedly retrograde about this program, which essentially continues to defend the early avant-garde slogans of “montage” and “theater as such.” As Michael Klebanov (2011) has pointed out, despite holding a surprisingly negative view of Meyerhold, Kharms laid out a theatrical program strikingly similar to the practice of montage in plays like the Magnanimous Cuckold. Klebanov argues that Meyerhold’s version of montage “simply was not radical enough” for Kharms—partly due to the former’s reliance on literature as source material, and partly due to his institutional standing as director of an academic (and, therefore, non-radical) theater

102 The genres are: 1) realistic melodrama [реалистическая мелодрама], 2) realistic/comedic [реалистический, комедийный], 3) ridiculously comic/naïve [нелепокоомический, наивный], 4) realistic/everyday comedic genre [реалистический. Жанр бытовой комедийный], 5) rhythmic (Radix), the author’s rhythm [ритмический (Радикс). Ритм автора], 6) everyday Radix [бытовой Радикс], 7) ceremonial melodrama emphasized by Radix [торжественная мелодрама, подчеркнутая Радиксом], 8) change of heights [перемещение высот], 9) scenic [пейзажный], 10) monologue aside/two-leveled bit [монолог в сторону, кусок двупланный], 11) toast [спич], 12) chinar’ [чинарский], 13) Radix [Радикс], 14) classical pathos [классический пафос], 15) balladic pathos [балладный <так> пафос], 16) chimes [куранты], 17) physiological pathos [физиологический пафос], 18) realistic/dryly official [реалистический сухо-официальный], 19) operatic ending [концовка оперная].


104 In a letter to Klavdiia Pugacheva, quoted in the epigraph to this chapter, Kharms advises her that theater is dead and warns against pointing to Meyerhold as an exception, since he had, in fact, “accomplished nothing” [не сделал ничего] (Kharms 1997, vol. 3, 76).
(Klebanov 322). By taking such a stance against the current trends in Soviet professional theaters and appealing to an earlier model of avant-garde creativity, Kharms positions the OBERIU theater alongside an unlikely ally: the amateur (or “self-directed”) theaters of the workers’ clubs. Indeed, on closer inspection, there was a substantial relationship between OBERIU and the theatrical activities of these clubs, mediated by the director Igor’ Terent’ev. The homegrown compositional and staging techniques of these workers’ theaters provide a productive context for reconsidering the OBERIU theatrical program, and the “small forms” advocated by these theaters provide a new perspective on the generic peculiarities of the group’s theatrical compositions.105

**Igor Terent’ev and the Club Theaters**

When the *oberiuty* joined the House of the Press, the organization’s theatrical hall was already well known in Leningrad as the home of the daring and technically innovative director Igor Terent’ev. Kharms and Vvedensky both knew Terent’ev personally and supported his theatrical experiments. Like Tufanov, Terent’ev had previously been offered a post in the phonological division of Ginkhuk (actually, as the director and, therefore, Tufanov’s would-be supervisor), and Vvedensky had worked with Terent’ev in some capacity at this time.106 Kharms personally invited Terent’ev to a reading of his own dramatic work *The Comedy of the City of Saint Petersburg* and intended to collaborate with him on staging another worked called *Love* (Любовь) (Kharms 1997, 5:1, 151). Moreover, the OBERIU declaration openly defends Terent’ev’s most notorious production, his 1927 staging of *The Government Inspector*, a

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105 Several scholars have discussed the abrupt generic shifts of Kharms’s “Elizaveta Bam” (see for instance: Stelleman 1985; Grünwald 2001). The work’s connection to the amateur and semiprofessional theaters has not been previously analyzed.

consciously orchestrated scandal, intended as a polemic against Meyerhold’s famous production.\(^7\) The eccentricities of Terent’ev’s staging include elaborate abstract costumes from Pavel Filonov’s workshop, segments of text translated into random European languages, and, most infamously, a number of large movable wardrobes, into which his players disappeared to simulate loud bowel movements and sexual intercourse. One might easily draw parallels between the chaotic, carnival atmosphere of Terent’ev’s production and the OBERIU evenings. The performance also had immediate practical consequences for the oberiuty, who would make their debut on the same stage several months later. Most concretely, they inherited the mobile black “cabinets” designed for *The Government Inspector* and featured them prominently in their own “Three Left Hours” performance. Politically, Terent’ev greatly contributed to the controversy surrounding the House of the Press, whose director was arrested in April of the following (Kobrinskii 2009, 133). In short, although Terent’ev was not directly involved in any of the group’s productions, OBERIU made its premiere as a movement in Terent’ev’s theater, and the oberiuty invited their viewers to judge their accomplishments against this backdrop.

What was Terent’ev’s theatrical program, and what did it represent to the oberiuty? In response to this question, Jean-Philippe Jaccard (1995) has already drawn attention to Terent’ev’s characteristically short, alternately blunt and elliptical, 1925 article “The Amateur Theater” [Самодеятельный театр]. As Jaccard rightly observes, several aspects of this article anticipate both the theater section of the OBERIU declaration and the structure of Kharms’s *Elizaveta Bam*, especially in its rejection of the play as an inherently conservative form and its proposal of an eccentric form of montage as a replacement (see Jaccard 1995, 2001-2). While

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this connection is important, Terent’ev’s program and significance to OBERIU theater can only be understood in light of a concept that Jaccard leaves without comment—the *amateurrism*, or “self-directed activity” [самодеятельность], heralded in the article’s title. The word “самодеятельный” (in contrast to “любительский”) was the main term used to the non-professional artistic forms developed in Soviet workers’ clubs. As Lynn Mally (2000) explains in her excellent study of these amateur theaters, “Liubitel’skii teatr came to stand for all that was bad in amateur activities. Samodeiatel’nyi, by contrast, represented all that was good in the Soviet approach, including collective interaction and productive social results” (2-3). Terent’ev began his theatrical career in Leningrad as a director of agitational theater and vocal proponent of amateur and semi-professional troupes. At the time of writing “The Amateur Theater,” he was working at the newly formed, experimental Red Theater [Красный театр], and the article was originally published in the journal *The Worker and Theater* [Рабочий и театр] as a contribution to a heated debate over the future of workers’ club theaters.

In itself, Terent’ev’s interest in the club theaters is not very surprising. Club theaters were already incredibly widespread in the Soviet Union by the early 1920s, and the Leningrad club culture, in particular, quickly developed into a vanguard of amateur and semi-professional theaters. This thriving amateur theater scene caught the attention of many young playwrights and directors as a promising alternative to the prerevolutionary dramatic repertoire. Several factors likely caught Terent’ev’s interest. First, among the directors to show an interest in the

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108 On the history of the term “самодеятельный,” see Mally (2000): 20-24. As we will see in this chapter, the “amateur” devices of Terent’ev and the obseiuty increasingly departed from what a contemporaneous official would regard “collective interaction and productive social results”—yet, their point of departure was precisely this type of sanctioned amateurism [самодеятельность]. Unless otherwise specified, the English word “amateur” throughout this chapter refers to the Russian term “самодеятельный.”

109 See Lynn Mally’s discussion of the Leningrad-based Theater of Working Class Youth [Театр рабочей молодежи]: 109-156.
club theaters was Meyerhold, who opened a laboratory for training writers and directors for these venues (Mally 9). Before his stint at the Red Theater, Terent’ev had requested to work with Meyerhold (whose production *The Magnanimous Cuckold* he especially admired), and he continued to fervently admire the director until seeing Meyerhold’s production of *The Government Inspector*, which led Terent’ev to denounce his erstwhile idol for counterrevolutionary academicism. Moreover, there was likely a theoretical appeal for Terent’ev, who had published several works suggesting that artistic innovation proceeds only by trial and error—indeed, mainly by error. According to this model, new artistic forms are not generated by the unique faculties of a creative individual, but rather through continuous experimentation with unusual techniques, which produces novel combinations and arrangements that cannot be rationally predicted. For Terent’ev, the causes of innovation were always anonymous and unpredictable, as illustrated by his central example of the typographical misprint as a generator of neologisms. The sheer quantity, improvisational ethos, and amateur standing of the workers’ theaters provided ample opportunity for such productive “errors.” Finally, it bears noting that Terent’ev was intimately familiar with the work of the Formalists, who were writing at this time on the importance of marginal forms (even those deemed to be outside the purview of literature) for generating novelty in the literary system. Although Shklovsky himself apparently had little faith in the potential of amateur theaters, it would not have been much of

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110 Terent’ev repeatedly theorized the productivity of error during his stint with 41⁰; see especially his booklet *17 erundoverykh orudii* (reprinted in Terent’ev 179-211).

111 In a 1928 article, Terent’ev puts it this way: “Our work is in the laboratory: peace to chemists—war on creators!” [Наше дело в лаборатории: мир химикам—война творцам!] (Terent’ev 323).

112 Shklovsky criticizes the work of small regional theaters and dramatic circles during the Civil War in the critical essays “Штандарт скачет” and “Дrama и массовые представления” (Shklovskii 1990, 82-86).
a stretch to apply his notion of “canonization of the minor line” to the performative arts and arrive at the club theaters.

By writing “The Amateur Theater,” Terent’ev was intervening into an ongoing discussion in The Worker and Theater over the role of plays in the club theaters, a microcosm of the widespread debate over the role of classics in Soviet theater that had started immediately after the Revolution. Despite an early enthusiasm for topical content and new forms during the Civil War Years, Proletkult quickly showed a renewed interest in putting pre-Revolutionary classics on the Soviet stage. This change in policy was slower to take hold in the club theaters, which faced their own particular set of political demands and logistical constraints (Mally 48-49). Partly to compensate for their lack of trained professionals, and partly to facilitate the introduction of topical material, the club theaters often eschewed cohesive dramatic narratives, creating instead their own ad hoc forms. Indeed, club theaters became known for their espousal of “small forms” [малые формы], and by 1923 a movement was underway to train club theater troupes in forms specific to the amateur stage (Ibid, 49). Worker and Theater came into being during this apogee of small forms, and it quickly began to devote space to covering the debate over whether the future of club theater lay in “small forms” or traditional plays. As was usual for him, Terent’ev took an especially hard line. There could be no question of staging a proletarian play, he argued, as any “play” manifests the ideological complacency and propensity to metaphysical speculation of bourgeois thought in its very structure: “But in practice no play can free itself from turning a stage ‘mask’ into a symbol, scientific thought into dogma, and a sketch of everyday life into the metaphysical essence of a phenomenon” [А на практике никакая пьеса не может освободиться от того, чтобы инсценировочную «маску» не превращать—в символ, научную мысль—в догмат, бытовой штрих—в метафизическую сущность.
явления] (298). As an alternative to resurrecting the play, Terent’ev suggests combining several parallel techniques to construct a theatrical spectacle: sound-montage (instead of music), “biomontage” (acting), “light-montage” (painting), assembly [монтировка] (set design), and “litmontage” [литомонтаж] (script). The overall performance should take the form of a “living book” [живая книга] (299). When Terent’ev outlines this “living book,” it is clear from his language (инсценировочную «маску,» бытовой штрих, литомонтаж, живая книга) that he bases this form on specific theatrical techniques developed for the “small forms” of the club theater.

By calling his montage a “living book” [живая книга], Terent’ev is obviously suggesting that it is an expansion of a form that was extremely widespread at the time, the “living newspaper” [живая газета]. These “newspapers” presented the pressing issues facing local workers in the form of short skits and other performance numbers. In order to keep the audience’s interest, such “newspapers” began to include song and dance numbers—in some instances, tending toward cabaret. By the mid-1920s “live newspapers” had even spawned semi-professional versions, including one performed at the Red Theater, which was run by Georgii Avlov when Terent’ev worked there. Avlov would go on to write a history of the club theaters, in which he describes the type of acting employed in the dramatic segments [инсценировки] of these “newspapers.” According to Avlov, the club theaters avoided directly playing characters and social types in their dramatizations, but conveyed instead what he calls a “schema.” Instead of attempting to “embody” a particular individual, or even a composite of

113 Notice the similarity between these units of montage and Kharms’s notion of “theatrical elements”: lighting, decoration, music, and the actors’ bodies all have more or less equal status as components of the theatrical performance.

114 The immensely popular Blue Blouse [Синяя блузка] movement—which numbered several thousand workers’ troupes in 1926—was primarily associated with the genre of the living newspaper at the time of its 1923 founding.
individuals, the actor would present an abstract symbol that encompassed both that individual’s social role and the workers’ reaction to it. If a scene demanded a bourgeois or a general, for instance, the worker would not “play the role” of a bourgeois or general but rather “play at the role” (играть в буржуа, в генерала) (Avlov 84). Importantly for Terent’ev, this technique marks the “masks” in these skits [инсценировочную «маску»] as decidedly anti-illusionary—they promote an emotional equivalence between actor and viewer and match these emotions to an evaluative judgment.

According to Avlov, the related genre of “litmontage” [спelled variously, литмонтаж or литомонтаж], evolved from the “living newspaper” and essentially organized the same theatrical devices into a more complex form. Instead of stylized retellings of recent events, the component pieces of litmontage were already-existing written works dedicated to a given theme. Avlov describes this genre as a collage of fragments taken from various sources (literary and otherwise). The completed text “organically ties together the most heterogeneous texts, creating in the final analysis, on the principle of such a ‘chemical compound,’ a new work with an independent life” [Лимонтаж органически увязывает самые разнородные тексты, создавая в конечном итоге, на основе такого “химического соединения” новое, живущее самостоятельной жизнью произведение] (87). The genre’s most prominent proponent was the actor Vladimir Iakhontov, whose one-man performances were well known in Leningrad at the time. His first litmontage, titled Lenin, uses Vladimir Mayakovsky’s poem “Vladimir Ilich Lenin” as a thread for connecting passages from the leader’s speeches, “The Communist Manifesto,” memoirs, Party Resolutions, and various other texts. According to Avlov, by 1925, the year Lenin premiered, amateur theaters had already been staging performances based on the splicing together of heterogeneous segments of text, but it was Iakhontov’s theater that
popularized both the term “litmontage” and a new conception of the genre (Avlov 88). Rather than the simple, unmotivated joining of texts, litmontage joined them together into a cohesive whole—with transitions motivated by definable rules. Avlov explains:

The most varied principles lie at the foundation of the joining of segments in a litmontage. Individual parts are joined together: a) in the interest of amplifying the impression [made by] the journalistic text being delivered by adding to it a literary text with a similar meaning; b) in order to create heterogeneity of impression with the help of various types of sound—through the juxtaposition of literary prose with poetry; c) on the basis of association (by similarity, by contiguity, by contrast); and so on.

Iakhontov labeled his performances “The Theater of One Actor” [Teatr одного актера] and read his litmontages alone with minimal costumes and stagecraft. In the workers’ clubs, however, litmontage often involved a whole troupe playing out skits or reading documents behind various “masks.”

Returning to Terent’ev, “litmontage” was also one of the several genre designations that he applied to his own John Reed [Джон Рид], a retelling of Ten Days that Shook the World that he first staged at the Red Theater in 1924. (He did later relent and label the work a “play” in its 1927 publication and then billed his House of the Press production an “opera.”) John Reed presents a series of vignettes of the Revolution and Civil War, joined together by the travels of the eponymous protagonist and adorned with a pair of symmetrical love plots. In a statement about the work, Terent’ev insists that viewers should perceive no connection between the love plots and the historical material:
The personal intrigue does not stand in any symbolic connection to social events; it fulfills only its technical purpose: to exercise control over the viewer’s attention and to fortify the moments of heightened emotion; this heightening is built not upon the “plot,” but on historical events.

Личная интрига ни в какой символической связи с общественными событиями не стоит, выполняя только свое техническое назначение—регулировать внимание зрителя и закреплять минуты эмоционального подъема, каковой подъем строится не на «сюжете», а на исторических событиях. (Terent’ev 295)

This explanation contains two important moments: First, Terent’ev denies any symbolism to his literary inventions—they are only a technical means of modulating the viewers’ emotions. Then, he seems to imply that the viewers’ emotional reactions follow a certain logic that pertains not to literary convention but to the historical events being depicted. What then structures this emotional experience? For Terent’ev, the problem of depicting the October Revolution becomes identical to the problem of depicting a personality capable of experiencing its grandeur:

In the theater one cannot show an actor made up as Lenin…John Reed in our theatrical composition represents something like a mouthpiece for Lenin’s thoughts, because Lenin read John Reed’s book not only with his mind, but with his heart as well. […] The personality of John Reed, as perceived by the personality of Lenin, provides us the opportunity—in a reflective way and only in part, but nevertheless for certain—to show in the theater that which for us is now possibly the dearest thing in life…the personality of October!

Нельзя в театре показывать актера, загримированного под Ленина…Джон Рид в нашей театральной композиции является как бы выражителем мыслей Ленина, потому что Ленин читал книгу Дж. Рида не только умом, но и сердцем. <…> <Л>ичность Дж. Рида, воспринятая личностью Ленина, дает нам возможность и отраженным способом и лишь отчасти, но зато наверняка—показать в театре то, что для нас теперь, быть может, самое дорогое в жизни…личность Октября! (295-6)

Thus, the personified October Revolution is projected through a series of reflections: when Lenin reads about himself in the words of John Reed and identifies with this depiction, John Reed becomes the only person capable of expressing Lenin’s thoughts and, therefore, the true character of the revolution. As a result, the perspective capable of seeing the “personality of October” is irreducibly split between the political actor and the foreign journalist; together, these
two deceased figures create, paradoxically, a living text that transcends the mere written text of *Ten Days*.115 Through this split perspective, Terent’ev balances the didactic function of his drama with his rejection of symbolism. No actor directly embodies the abstract concept of Revolution (as Iakhontov’s Lenin did), nor is the triumph of the masses allegorically depicted by the stage action. Rather, these more iconic “faces of October” remain offstage, to be gleaned obliquely from a newsreel-like account of John Reed’s travels.

Terent’ev became the founding director of the House of the Press Theater in early 1926. As mentioned in Chapter One, he would identify this theater with the Lef movement in an article titled “The Theater of the House of the Press” [Театр дома печати] (1928), printed in the House’s newsletter (where the article “OBERIU” had appeared months earlier) (Terent’ev 305). In this article, Terent’ev continues his assault on the campaign to professionalize Soviet theaters. Quoting a political slogan, Terent’ev ironically characterizes the call for theatrical professionals part of a “struggle for quality” [борьба за качество] in Soviet goods, suggesting that other revolutionary theaters had pooled their funds with the academic theaters to afford a better product. The result was indeed a satisfying product, but one that had absolutely no relationship to the concrete goals of the Revolution. (Here, Terent’ev still primarily has in mind Meyerhold’s *Government Inspector* as an object of criticism.) According to Terent’ev, the stakes could not be higher, since any of the myriad tasks lying before Soviet theater could provide “a point of departure in the struggle against the restoration of the old world” (Ibid, 306). Therefore, he could not allow even the slightest compromise in the anti-academic, anti-illusionary aesthetics of the

115 The spectator’s experience is similarly split, as she must perceive two levels of reality at each moment of the “living book”: the specific incidents of the October Revolution, as refracted by the personality of John Reed and the events of his Russian journey, and the abstract “personality of October” that shows itself partially through these moments.
House of the Press theater: the qualifier “‘almost’ […] decides the question of what is revolutionary” [«чуть» <…> решает вопрос о революционности] (307).

**Litmontage and OBERIU**

As mentioned above, the OBERIU version of “left” theater began as a collaboration with the Radix theatrical collective. Radix advanced a program that strove to unite media and genres without subordinating them to a governing “plot.” While they were not aligned with the club theaters per se, in an interview with the literary scholar Mikhail Meilakh, former Radix director Georgii Katsman alludes to the small forms of the club theater in explaining the collective’s project:

“Radix” was a conglomerate of diverse arts—theatrical performance, music, dance, literature, and painting. When it appealed to [these] diverse arts the element of parody and estrangement was very important. In a similar way, at that time “living newspapers” were widespread, with which the stage managers wanted to have nothing in common […]

“Радикс” был конгломератом различных искусств - театрального действия, музыки, танца, литературы, и живописи. При обращении к различным искусствам весьма велик был элемент пародирования, остранения. Так, в то время распространены были “живые газеты”, с которыми постановщики не хотели иметь ничего общего <…>(Meilakh 165)

Although the reference is dismissive, the fact that Katsman mentions “living newspapers” at all implies a basis for comparison; and indeed, his characterization of Radix theater as a “conglomeration” (*not* a synthesis) of various media resonates with Terent’ev’s understanding of the club project. Moreover, Radix and OBERIU shared similar circumstances with the club theaters, as they both featured semi-trained actors and faced practical constraints in their funding and rehearsal space, which prevented the types of performances held in the academic theaters. Before the group briefly secured space at Ginkhuk, Radix rehearsals moved among apartments of its members, and the oberiuty paid out of pocket for their simple props. Although Terent’ev’s work in experimental theaters was often more technically impressive than anything OBERIU or
the true club theaters could pull off, he took the club situation into account in his own work. When Terent’ev published a script for *John Reed* in 1927, his notes for future productions provided suggestions for adapting the work to accommodate the technical and personnel limitations of a given club. These notes also specified the appropriate styles to emulate specific scenes, similar to the genre indications that Kharms provides for performing *Elizaveta Bam* (Terent’ev 369).

Of course, there were significant ideological differences between Terent’ev and the Radix/oberiu project. In his articles and letters, Terent’ev adhered to a strict advocacy of montage as the truly Leninist form of theater, and even the scandalously distorted *Inspector General* was meant to indict the academic theaters for stagings that Terent’ev found insufficiently politically engaged, at best, and counterrevolutionary, at worst. In contrast, Radix was conceived as an experiment in “pure theater” [чистый театр], and Katsman claims that they were less concerned with having a particular effect on the audience than on the actors’ experience of theatrical forms (Ibid., 164). Similarly, we have seen that Kharms emphasizes above all the OBERIU theater’s ability to demonstrate properly theatrical laws. Nonetheless, this gap was evidently not as wide as it might appear, as Kharms actively sought collaboration with Terent’ev and even worked together with him on an unfinished dramatic work called *Love*. A brief outline for this work in Kharms’s notebook demonstrate a willingness to take up social themes and even draws its lexicon from Terent’ev (резонатор, Левтолстовских):

Premise: Love is a social phenomenon, i.e., where [its] social resonators are extinguished love fades; where these resonators are constructed (by the culture of a class), there love rises to Levtolstoyan \(^\text{116}\) proportions and “global” scales. Our time is one of transition. There is no love

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\(^{116}\) The epithet “LevTolstoyan” sounds at least strange in this context to anyone familiar with Count Tolstoy’s scathing criticism of romantic relations late in life, culminating in his controversial advocacy of abstinence within marriage. This epithet makes sense, however, in light of Terent’ev’s ongoing work on a stage adaptation of *War and Peace*. In an article
and it is vanishing. Asexuality is the sign of this day! Erotica is old-fashioned. The future is love for [one’s] comrade, kin—love like a moth has!

Исх. полож. Любовь—социальное явление, т.е. там, где угасают социальные резонаторы,—любовь меркнет; там, где эти резонаторы созданы (культурой класса), там любовь доходит до—Левтолстовских размеров и «мировых» масштабов. Наше время—переходное.—любви нет и она пропадает. Асексуальность—признак сего дня! Эротика—старомодность. Будущее—любовь к товарищу—родне, любовь—как у моли!

(Kharms 1997, 5.1, 151)

Ultimately, whatever political differences between Terent’ev and Kharms, there was a significant overlap in their polemical stance, as the “Left Flank” shared Terent’ev’s ambition for rejuvenating the “left arts” by restoring an ethos of open-ended experimentation that was quickly diminishing as the Party took greater control of artistic life.

Above all, it is likely the compositional open-endedness of the litmontage form that would have appealed to the oberiuty. My Mother Is All in Watches [Моя мама вся в часах], the never completed and ultimately lost collaboration by Kharms and Vvedensky, was to be stitched together from several shorter poems written by each author. Some of these shorter works were previously written by each author, and others were written “along the way” [на ходу] as they wrote the play (Meilakh 1984, 164). By this point the “Left Flank” were already interested in Terent’ev’s activities, and Kharms’s notebook indicates that he actually attended a performance of John Reed at the House of the Press the day before starting work on My Mother (Kharms 2002, vol. 5.1 77). Although there exists no such record of its composition, one might speculate a similar process behind Vvedensky’s Minin and Pozharsky, an especially chaotic dramatic work also written in 1926. The work has been classified as a “play” in scholarship, but the

purchased in Novyi Lef, Terent’ev criticizes the novel as “antihistorical” and a work of “agitational propaganda against politics” [агитка против политики], partly on the basis of Tolstoy’s propensity to magnify personal dramas—“the themes of individual love, jealousy, career, and death” [темы личной любви, ревности, карьеры, смерти]—to the scope of “world catastrophes” [мировые катастрофы] (Terent’ev 315-16).
relationships among sections are often so tenuous that it could equally be regarded as a montage of heterogeneous texts. Moreover, the “play” was written during a period of intensive collaboration with Terent’ev and features an inserted vignette featuring the dramatis personae of *The Government Inspector*—as if to highlight both its connection to Terent’ev and its divisibility into many arbitrarily connected segments of text. Although Kharms’s long theatrical works *Elizaveta Bam* and *Comedy of the City Petersburg* more cohesive overall, both contain songs and verse interludes that give the impression of being inserted texts, and the former even includes a moment when the actors read out the title page of the next segment, “The Battle of Two Bogatyrs,” complete with a fictitious author and composer. In these works by Kharms, we do not find obvious signs of the litmontage compositional method, but they do operate on a similar aesthetic principle: the text is composed in such a way as to give an impression of being cobbled together from various sources, thereby calling into question the integrity of the artistic work. By foregrounding the heterogeneity of “theatrical elements” in a performance, litmontage creates a space for rethinking the notions of narrative and thematic *unity* in a work of art.

One useful way of understanding these problems is through the concept of “dynamic” artistic form advanced by Iurii Tynianov in his 1924 study *The Problem of Verse Language* [Проблема стихотворного языка]. Like Terent’ev, Kharms enthusiastically followed Formalist theory. He even attended some classes at the Institute of the History of the Arts, where Tynianov taught, and lists several books by Formalists in his diaries, including *Problem of Verse Language* (Kharms 1997, 5:1, 36). Moreover, the opposition between “dramaturgic” and “scenic” plot (i.e., a series of narrative events and their displacement in the finished art form) resembles the Formalist distinction between *fabula* and *siuzhet*, while the phrase “возникающий из всех элементов” comes lexically close to Tynianov’s notoriously abstract terminology (cf. “О
In Problem, Tynianov suggests that self-consistency is not a fundamental quality of a successful work of art, advancing instead a concept of “dynamic unity” to suggest that the fundamental categories of a work are subject to change. Following Goethe, Tynianov illustrates this concept with this theatrical example: Only a naïve reader would object to the fact that Lady Macbeth proclaims, “I have given suck, and know/How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me,” in the First Act, though MacDuff suggests that she has no children in Act Four. Shakespeare, who wrote for a live audience and never imagined a reader combing through his text, calculated each declaration for maximum dramatic effect at the moment of utterance (8-9). For Tynianov, all elements of an artistic work are “unified” precisely to the same extent as Lady Macbeth. The basic principle of their existence is change; the impression of “static unity” [стatische единство, i.e., self-consistency] is an effect of certain types of composition, rather than a universal principle. Moreover, compositional categories (such as “character” in a narrative work) can be replaced by their “equivalent” [эквивалент], a marker of a category that has no coherent content. The “nose” of Gogol’s story functions as a character despite never having a stable identity because the narrative category of character is established by the repetition of the signifier “нос” (Ibid., 123n3). For Tynianov, it is such an equivalent that best exemplifies the dynamism of the work of art. The entire effect of Gogol’s work depends on the fact that the physical attribute and the Civil Councilor identified as “нос” cannot be reconciled with each other. Significantly, in this example, the principle of repetition is conceptually prior to, and constitutive of, the concept of “static unity.”

Although Problem of Verse Semantics makes only passing mention of questions specific to narrative, Tynianov’s later writings on film expand the logic of “dynamic unity” in their discussion of the key concepts of Formalist studies of plot: fabula (story) and siuzhet (discourse).
He points to two ways of understanding this relationship. According to Viktor Shklovsky’s most famous description, the *fabula* provides a basic schema of narrative events, and the *siuzhet* is the “unfolding” or “unwinding” [развертывание] of these events in the story’s telling. When the terms are conceived in this way, one might easily make the mistake of regarding *siuzhet* as simply an arrangement of the events contained in the *fabula*, thus making the first term entirely dependent on the latter. Yet Tynianov points out that Shklovsky also provides another, lesser known definition of *siuzhet* as “the connection between the devices of plot composition and the style” [связь приемов сюжетосложения со стилем] (Tynianov 1977, 340). While this definition may at first appear tautological (since “*siuzhet*” is a means of “*siuzhetoslozheniia*”), it effectively complicates the dyad by making *siuzhet* dependent on the non-diegetic category of style. “The concept of *siuzhet* cannot be equated with the concept of *fabula*,” Tynianov goes on. “*Siuzhet* may be eccentric in relation to the *fabula*” [Понятие сюжета не покрывается понятием фабулы. Сюжет может быть эксцентричен по отношению к фабуле] (Ibid, 341).

Tynianov finds this type of “eccentric” narrative not only in film, but also in the works of modernist writers like Boris Pilniak, where narrative lines might be related to each other only by the bare fact of occurring in the same location, or by stylistic similarities in their telling, without having any logical connection in the fabula. At the same time, Tynianov also widens the concept of *fabula* to encompass the “entire semantic blueprint of the action” [всю семантическую (смысловую) наметку действия], and *siuzhet* to denote “its dynamics, arising from the interplay of all connections in the material (including the fabula as connections in the action)—stylistic, fabular, etc.” [динамика ее, складывающаяся из взаимодействия всех связей материала (в том числе и фабулы как связи действия) — стилистической, фабульной и
Here he makes an analogy to the phonetic structure of verse, where *meter* provides a schema of potential positions of stress, and *rhythm* denotes the dynamic interplay of this metric schema with other structural factors (e.g., rhyme, alliteration, syntax) (Ibid.). Similarly, the narrative structure of a work involves a complex schema of possible events and interpretations, and the realization of any given possibility depends on its relation to every other element in the dynamic work of art.

From this perspective, *Elizaveta Bam* might be considered as an illustration of dynamic unity. While stage action continually transforms to fit each change in genre, we can still speak of “characters” in the play insofar as there remains a consistent set of bodies on stage and names in the script. Yet these “characters” are only provisional entities that can be reconfigured or drowned out by other aspects of the theatrical work. During the first performance, the work’s dynamism in terms of character and narrative was matched with the literal movements of the stage design, which was rigged to change shape at certain moments and even to “swallow” objects and actors (Meilakh 1987, 181). Similarly, the musical accompaniment would sometimes complement and sometimes intrude upon the dialogue, redirecting the flow of the stage action (indeed, individual instruments are even listed as characters at one point) (Ibid. 185-7). The

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117 The utility of this distinction may not be immediately obvious. As an example, Tynianov points to the “veiled” ending of Pushkin’s “Fountain of Bakhchisaray,” in which it is only hinted that Zarema was responsible for Maria’s death. A student recalling the plot would undoubtedly gloss the ending by saying something like, “Zarema killed Maria out of jealousy,” but this retelling distorts the plot by removing all ambiguity. By defining *fabula* as this type of “static” retelling of events, we are forced to make the absurd claim that Pushkin deviates from the *fabula* by masking this ending (Tynianov 1997, 325, 340-1).

118 At the same time, these bodies on stage might ultimately prevent us from characterizing these fluid roles as *equivalents* of character when the piece is performed. One suspects that Tynianov might argue that the stage performance ultimately succumbs to the fundamental flaw of all concrete visual illustrations, as the category of character would remain confined to the relatively static image of the actors’ bodies, which are limited to a determinate scale and delimited physical space on the stage (cf. “Кино—слово—музыка” and “Иллюстрации”).
resulting “scenic plot” is dynamic in Tynianov’s sense of the term: constituted by all elements of the stage production and therefore irreducible to a simple “unfolding” of the dramaturgic plot.

Theater as Real Art

To summarize, then, while OBERIU theater relies on many of the compositional techniques employed by Terent’ev and the club theaters, the group eschewed propagandistic aims in favor of a program of “pure theater.” This “pure theater” might also be characterized as a “dynamic” theater, an experiment in sustained theatrical composition on the basis of fluid categories. Rather than representing a story through various techniques of dramatic staging, a nonlinear “scenic plot” would arise as an effect of the component parts and their interrelations. Strictly speaking, Kharms only discusses these techniques as formal innovations, a study of theater as such, but this narrow program does not match Zabolotsky’s assertions elsewhere in the declaration that the dynamism and discontinuity of OBERIU poetry provides a way of understanding the world. Nor can it account for the fact that Kharms and Vведенksy continue to use many of the same dramatic devices in their writings long after losing any opportunity to stage their works. So we should also ask how these particular compositional techniques derived from the club scene via Terent’ev contribute to constructing a particular worldview. With this question in mind, I will now consider two of the longer dramatic works written by the OBERIU circle: Vvedensky’s Minin and Pozharsky [Минин и Пожарский] and Kharms’s Comedy of the City Petersburg [Комедия города Петербурга]. Judging by the timing of their composition, both works were likely intended for stage performance, although there is no evidence to suggest either was actually performed during the author’s lifetime. While their structures may be compared to Elizaveta Bam in many respects, these works engage more overtly with the question
of continuity as a philosophical problem, both at the level of individual identity and on a broader historical scale.

Minin and Pozharsky

Written over a three-month period in 1926, on the eve of the poet’s collaboration with Radix, Minin and Pozharsky is Vvedensky’s earliest known theatrical work. The moniker “чинарь АВТО-ритет бессмыслицы” accompanying the authorial signature suggest that this piece expands on the core principles of Vvedensky’s work with the Left Flank. Except for phonetic zaum’ (see previous chapter), it demonstrates every other type of linguistic violation that Vvedensky practiced in his early poetry, and one might speculate that this work, like My Mother is All in Watches, was composed by joining together a series of independent shorter texts.119

With no plot and an expansive list of speaking roles, Minin and Pozharsky does not easily lend itself to paraphrase. The names “Minin” and “Pozharsky” do indeed appear in the work, as does an abundance of battle imagery that could be taken as an echo of their namesake’s defense of Moscow, yet the historical affinities more or less stop here. Lines are additionally spoken by Rabindranath Tagore, two Princes Menshikov, a “masculine person” named Veechka, some penguins, Nero, someone simply called “me (with a cigar),” and many others. To exacerbate this confusion, the script gives very little indication of the stage action and does not even indicate which characters are meant to be onstage at any given time. (There are no existing production notes.) The “stage directions” are occasionally difficult to distinguish from the dialogue, and as

119 Indeed, a monologue from Minin and Pozharsky, in the voice of a certain “Grekov,” was published separately by the Leningrad Union of Poets in the 1927 almanac Kocēp, thus becoming one of the two mature works that Vvedensky successfully published during his lifetime.
often happens in Vvedensky’s later works, they offer more commentary on the text than direction for performance.¹²⁰ Unlike these later works, however, *Minin and Pozharsky* was almost certainly intended for performance, as it was written during the year of Vvedensky’s collaboration with Radix. In this case, the stage directions might be interpreted in the context of the collective’s emphasis on directorial organization over textual material: if Vvedensky intended to entrust the work to Katsman for staging, the open-ended stage directions may have been intended to allow for directorial freedom. It is also possible that Vvedensky actually intended for the stage directions to be read aloud during performance, as Terent’ev (in)famously had his actors do during the tableau at the end of *The Government Inspector*. This conjecture is supported by the fact that some of the lines describing stage action are written in meter and rhyme, though it cannot be verified without production notes.

What can we make of this chaos? One immediate reaction might be to disengage, which likely explains why, despite being one of Vvedensky’s longest surviving works, *Minin and Pozharsky* tends to surface in scholarship only in the form of isolated quotes. As far as I am aware, the only published sustained reading is in a chapter of Graham Roberts’s *Last Soviet Avant-garde*. Roberts makes a number of important observations about *Minin and Pozharsky*, pointing out the work’s prominent intertextual dialogue with major works by Pushkin and Gogol, its overall lack of onstage action, and its debt to Aleksei Kruchenykh’s *Victory Over the Sun* (Roberts, 46-57). Ultimately, Roberts bases his reading of the play on Vvedensky’s life-long preoccupation with the theme of death, as well as his insistent construction of time as a fundamental obstacle to human cognition. Specifically, he argues that *Minin and Pozharsky*

¹²⁰ For instance the description of one “Petrov” (the word used to mark units of scenic action in the work) reads: В этом Петрове все люди в лежачем и Минин и Ненцов и другие все. Это ведь не почтовый ящик. Ура (Vvedenskii 2010, 65).
represents an avant-garde spin on the ancient “dialogue of the dead,” with a paradoxical message that “only the dead can hope to produce authentic narratives, since only their words, expressed in a timeless realm, and expressing an event taking place outside time (their own death) can escape time and its vice-like grip on human cognition” (56). Even this abstract characterization is difficult to sustain, however, since it does not explain the coexistence of historical figures with overtly fictional characters (e.g. dramatis personae from *The Government Inspector*), nor does it take into account the fact that, at the time of composition, Rabindranath Tagore was not dead. Moreover, we must somehow account for the “characters” whose identity cannot be deciphered: Who is “me (with a cigar)”? How do we distinguish between the two Princes Menshikov, and how sure are we that one of them was a renowned, if controversial, favorite of Peter I?

Here we encounter a central dynamic of Vvedensky’s poetics: his pervasive critique of the name as a marker of identity. The “explanatory note” to a much later work (1936-7) puts this problem explicitly, pausing amidst a series of dialogues to address the reader: “But don’t forget it isn’t three persons acting here. It is not they who travel in a carriage, not they who argue, not they who sit on the roof. It could be three lions, three tapirs, three storks, three letters, three numbers” (232). In *Minin and Pozharsky*, the titular heroes never enter Moscow, units of stage action are announced by the proper name Petrov and a corresponding outfit, and even the most trusted names have a way of slipping from our grasp: “This Pushkin was without a head/did you know this you didn’t know this” [Этот Пушкин был без головы/то знали ли вы не знали вы] (Vvedenskii 2010, 55). Instead of “Pushkin,” we encounter “this Pushkin,” the headless one. Here, Vvedensky is certainly playing on the iconoclasm of previous avant-garde poets, as well as
their broader program to diminish the categories of “literature” and “authorship.”

As one might expect from a poet who later claimed that he was only interested in “time, death, and God,” the main thematic line running through the piece is mortality. This undercurrent is developed over the first page of text: from the imminence of death in the opening line (“We will smother them”) to its universality in Veechka’s short speech (which appears to be an estranged description of aging) to its realization in Grekov’s first line: “So I was killed” (51-2). From that point onward, characters continually recall lying on the ground, implicitly or explicitly dead or dying, and for the last “Petrov” all of the characters are to be “in a recumbent [position]” [в лежачем] (65). (Overall, forms of the verb “to lie” [лежать] appear seventeen times in the script.) One can hardly think of a better answer to Terent’ev’s call to create “anti-artistic theater” [антихудожественный театр] than the rejection of not only stage action, but also the actor’s body as a focal point on the stage (cf. Terent’ev 308-314). As indicated in the previous chapter, Vvedensky already often employed physical collapse to mirror the failure of meaning his poetry. The dramatic form allows him to provide adequate voice to this “poor language” by constructing an impossible speaker, whose instability conforms to the language’s internal resistance. Consider the beginning of Pozharsky’s final monologue: “I lie as double on the table/and my veins as if streetlamp jelly/and there’s no wind/my soul bristles along its brow” [Лежу двояким на столе/и жилы как бы фонарное желе/и не дует/душа топорщится челом] (67). The first line refers to the tradition of laying out a corpse on the table as part of the mourning ritual, an image that will recur prominently in Vvedensky’s later poem “All Around Possibly God” [Кругом возможно Бог]: “There lies on the dining room table/the world’s corpse in the form of a crème-brulee”

121 The apparent non sequitur “то знали ли вы не знали вы” references the tongue-in-cheek “findings” of Aleksei Kruchenykh, who used Pushkin to validate his concept of displacement [сдвиг]. (See footnote 81 in previous chapter.)
The opposition between Pozharsky’s body (veins) and his soul explains the “double” [двойным] in the first line, but it immediately starts to break down as the veins are compared to a source of light (фонарное зефир) and the soul “bristles” as if it were a physical body. Pozharsky lies completely suspended between two mutually exclusive states (life/death, being entirely spirit/being entirely body). This suspension is reflected in the stage directions as well, which announce before this speech: “We see a corpse lies there with such a beard that the whole time the beard visibly grows and delight all around” [Видим покойник лежит такой бородатый, что видно всё время борода растёт и нега вокруг] (67). Similarly, early in the play the “governor” describes death as a state of profound instability: “Well here I lay murdered/[...] And I myself flicker from anguish” (nu vot lezhu ubityi/[...] a sam mertsaiu ot toski) (53; my emphasis).

This liminal position—no longer living in the world but somehow still speaking in it—provides an implicit motivation for the flattening and distortion of semantics that occurs throughout the work. It also accounts for the lack of definition of characters or clear differentiation between them, as they are essentially disposable masks for voicing this impossible perspective. It is precisely the inability to assign this voice to any stable “character” that a paradoxical concept of death as an event occurring simultaneously in and out of time, one necessarily experienced on an individual level but also eliminating individuation.

122 Vvedensky later employs this same verb, мерцать (“to flicker” or “to shimmer”), in a well-known passage from his Grey Notebook [Серая тетрадь]: Пускай бегает мышь по камню. Считай только каждый ее шаг. Забудь только слово каждый, забудь только слово шаг. Тогда каждый ее шаг покажется новым движением. Потом, так как у тебя справедливо исчезло восприятие ряда движений как чего-то целого, что ты называл ошибочно шагом (ты путал движение и время с пространством, ты неверно накладывал их друг на друга), то движение у тебя начнет дробиться, оно придет почти к нулю. Начнется мерцание. Мышь начнет мерцать. Оглянись: мир мерцает (как мышь) (Vvedenskii 2010, 177).
Similar to Kharms and Terent’ev, Vvedensky rejects the conventions of illusory theater and explores the joining of disparate texts as a compositional method. Yet he also goes much further in eliminating cohering features in his work. In this respect, it suffices to compare the circular ending of *Elizaveta Bam*—in which the arrest scenario of the opening scene is replayed, but this time ends with the heroine being led to her death—to the closing lines of *Minin and Pozharsky* (pronounced by Pozharsky):

отец! мундштук! кричат Тарасу
dворяне в мраке столбовом
в молчаньи гонит пашни сразу
и тихий купол оболгал
Смятенно всё Козлы мужицки
и слёзы знатного и свицкого

father! cigarette holder! they yell at Taras
the nobles in the pillar darkness
in silence it drives the plowed fields at once
even the quiet cupola slandered
every thing is in disarray the peasant’s goats
and the tears of the noble and the Swedish one

Overall, the words of this speech are only vaguely connected and devoid of any narrative thread, and even the rhyme scheme breaks down with the word “оболгал” (followed by a final inexact rhyme). Yet the passage is connected to the rest of the work through a vague set of associations, as the last couplet vaguely suggests Time of Troubles in the phrase “Смятенно всё” and the archaism “свицкого.” This last word—a Petrine-era term for “Swedish,” and thus associated with the concept of resisting a foreign invasion—caps the poem with a hidden associative link to the historic Minin and Pozharsky.

*Comedy of the City Petersburg*

Kharms wrote *Comedy* over an eight-month period in 1928. It was most likely not performed during the author’s lifetime.123 The surviving script begins with a section marked “part two,” which has led most scholars to regard the play as partially lost, although it has also

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123 He did plan to hold a public read-through (читка) once it was finished. The list of invitees included Terent’ev, Vvedensky, Zabolotsky, Vaginov, Bakhterev, and Lipavsky (Kharms 1997, Vol. 5.1, 153).
been speculated that no first part ever existed.\textsuperscript{124} While this play has been discussed in scholarship much more often than *Minin and Pozharsky*, the degree of critical response pales in comparison to *Elizaveta Bam*, even though *Comedy* is Kharms’s first known large-scale work and debuts many of the theatrical principles that would shape *Elizaveta Bam*. While Kharms repeats some compositional patterns between the two works, *Comedy* displays a more varied plot, a wealth of literary references (cf. Rymar’ 2006, 457), and an ambitious attempt to use the titular city to interrogate the continuities and disjunctions between the tsarist past and the Soviet present.

Christine Müller-Scholle has aptly described the genre of *Comedy* as “postapocalyptic clownery” (144). The manuscript begins with a humorous juxtaposition between Peter the Great and Nicholas II. The former appears as a parody of the demiurge in Pushkin’s *Bronze Horseman*, describing how his “tender thought” [мысль нежная] rose above the Neva on the day he founded the city (cf. “дум великих полн” in Pushkin) (Kharms 1997, Vol. 2, 191), while the latter must be looked after like a “spoiled” [избалованный] child (193). These characters metonymically establish the entirety of the city’s tsarist history, which is confronted by the post-revolutionary present in the person of Communist Youth League member named Vertunov, who gives an (unanswered) order to arrest the tsar as soon as he arrives on stage.\textsuperscript{125} To a certain extent, this confrontation resembles the arrest of Elizaveta Bam, as Vertunov’s entrance is initially accompanied by ominous overtones, only to give way to evidently good-natured clowning. As happens in *Elizaveta Bam*, the would-be arresting agent quickly reverts to trivial dialogue, accusing the tsar of spitting into velvet pillows, before assuming a subservient role vis-a-vis his

\textsuperscript{124} Andrei Rymar’ (2006) points out that the surviving “fragment” has a circular compositional logic that gives the impression of being a complete work (464).
\textsuperscript{125} Readers of Kharms’s works for children will note that he repurposed this name for a central character in his puppet show “Shardam Circus” [Цирк Шардам] (1935).
erstwhile victim (Что прикажете Ваше Величество? [195]). The plot of Comedy is, however, much more complex, and Kharms displaces the arrest narrative with a series of subplots, including a nonsensical contest for the tsar’s favor and an ominous chorus of monstrosities. Implied threats on Nicholas’s life recur throughout the play, as a maniac named Obernibesov murders a guard somewhere offstage, and the tsar’s hapless defender, Shchepkin, panics over the effects that a sinister “draught” [сквозняк] might have on the monarch’s health. Although Nicholas meets no actual harm within the play, and even pronounces its final line, the implications are just as sinister here as in Elizaveta Bam, as the audience knows very well how an encounter with the Soviet present will end for the tsar.

To a certain extent, the dramatis personae resemble those of Minin and Pozharsky, as Kharms puts figures from various historical moments in dialogue with overtly fictional creations. But while Minin and Pozharsky attempted to dismantle the categories of theatrical time and space entirely, Kharms’s work has enough continuity for these categories to maintain a functional role. The action is indeed confined to the titular city, even if its topography largely remains abstract and characters continually forget its name (a point to which I will return). Moreover, character names are more than empty placeholders, and the helpless Nicholas II caught between the authority of Peter I and the intrusion of Vertunov clearly represents the city’s inability to choose between its present and its mythic past. Yet just as soon as this situation is established, the narrative is displaced by a multitude of unexpected subplots and bizarre situations. Mikhail Iampolski provides a compelling explanation of the play’s chronotope in his analysis of the death of the sentry [часовой], Kruger, which represents the disruption of history (i.e. a consistent, evenly divided continuum in which events occur as a successive series) by the alternate conception of time as a “stream” (поток) (Iampol’skii 145-8, 154). Andrei Rymar’
(2006) has demonstrated that a stream of another sort, the Lethe \( \text{Лета} \), is crucial to understanding the play, as it highlights its pervasive theme of forgetting and even figures in Kharms’s invented name for Leningrad/Petersburg, “Leterburg” (Rymar’ 456 and passim). This pervasive forgetting has an important counterpart in the comedy’s theme of (mis)naming, as the misuse of proper names infects both the titular urban setting and the characters: while “Leterburg” remains suspended between two historical realities, belonging to neither, the demonic character Obernibesov (containing the word for “demon” \( \text{бес} \)) is transformed into a boring banker when another character misremembers his last name as the odd, but more stable Trekhetazhnyi (“Three-tiered”).

In the context of post-revolutionary Russia, and especially the twice-renamed city now called Leningrad, this notion of renaming would have been a part of everyday experience for Kharms’s audience. Thus, it is worth reconsidering Rymar’s contention that the confrontation between “old” and “new” worlds in the persons of Nicholas II and Vertunov is merely a “screen” \([\text{ширма}]\), behind which the real drama of abstract philosophical ideas can play itself out (456).\(^{126}\)

Indeed, the very conflict over the city’s name that gives rise to the hybrid “Leterburg” may be read as a commentary on the problem of cultural continuity between the tsarist past and the Soviet present. In this sense, the last lines of the play contain a powerful, and deeply ambivalent, comment on the city where the work was written:

\(^{126}\) Одну из интерпретаций противопоставления силы и бессилия, памяти и беспамятства предлагает сам текст, reminisцирующий традиционное для советской литературы тех лет противопоставление нового и старого мира. В полном соответствии с ним представители старого во главе с Николаем II в новом мире оказываются потерянным чудаками, а комсомолец Вертунов, «новый человек», ориентируется в нем как рыба в воде. С другой стороны, если посмотреть, из чего состоит этот «новый мир», то противопоставление миров оказывается ширмой. Оба мира—и «старый», и «новый»—совокупность обэриутских предметов, демонстраций мнений, повешенных в пустоте. (Rymar’ 2006, 456)
In the last line, Nicholas I apparently asserts the priority of past over present, cultural memory over political change. Although the authority of Nicholas is in question throughout the play, the utterance of the city’s historical name recalls the more powerful tsar, who presides over the play as a literal monument (the Bronze Horseman) and cannot be diminished by his weakened line. (In keeping with this reading, we might also note that Kharms himself continued to refer to the city as Petersburg well into the 1930s.) At the same time, this reading is undercut by the fact that Peter I takes no action within the play, and his depiction may be read as just as parodic as any of the other heroes. The absence of Lenin or any real representative of Soviet power from the stage makes them immune to such parody, while their unseen authority operates through the name Leningrad and motivates the overzealous komsomolets. Thus, we could equally read the final line as an edict deprived of force and, therefore, a final sign of rupture. This ambivalence is expressed in the tsar’s articulation of the name: the act of breaking it into individual syllables could be seen as a means of emphasis or the word’s dismemberment into a series of phonemes. The tension between unity and fragmentation in this word encapsulates the dynamic unity of the work as a whole.

In both Comedy and Minin and Pozharsky, the disjointed strands of narrative model a certain experience of time: the first suggests a paradoxical sense of continuity in the aftermath of historical trauma, while the second presents an array of fragmented experiences only unified by the certainty of death. To a significant extent, the compositional principles of these works follow logically from the shifts in intonation, recurring motives, and interspersed narrative elements of
their early verse (see Chapter Two), yet Kharms and Vvedensky develop these principles in a way specific to the theater. Recent experiments in theatrical montage provided a model for joining together short “bits” in various genres through on the basis of vague associations and shifts in mood, rather than on the basis of plot, and the crude devices of the semi-professional workers’ clubs provided a concrete example for how these principles could be applied outside the newly formed theater establishment. If the oberiuty remained ideologically distant from the Leningrad club theaters, they rallied around their anti-professional ethos, dismissal of traditional dramaturgy, and especially their rejection of any attempt to “academicize” the left arts. In this sense, the amateurism of OBERIU theater was not only a product of their youth and meager funds, but also a pointed call to return to the experimentalism of the early avant-garde.
Chapter Four: Elegiac Intonations in post-oberiu writings

Искусство, что ты чувствуешь находясь без нас?
-Alexander Vvedensky, “Приглашение меня подумать”

One prominent theme in oberiu poetry is the problem of imagining a world existing “without us”—that is, at a definite remove from the human experience. One may readily cite Zabolotsky’s enduring interest in the experience of plants and nonhuman animals, Kharms’s obsession with human figures disappearing and transforming into inanimate objects and geometrical shapes, and Vvedensky’s insistence on the insubstantiality of human life and the inadequacy of all human speech and thought. No poetic form would seem more inimical to such an anti-human orientation than the elegy, a genre often identified with the expression of intimate emotion, especially personal sorrow. Yet, over the course of the 1930s, Zabolotsky and Vvedensky—in many ways the most diametrically opposed of the former oberiuty—both simultaneously gravitate toward the elegiac genre and language of classic Russian verse. This parallel evolution is especially striking given the immensely different circumstances in which each poet wrote: Zabolotsky was still publishing in major literary journals, and he was trying to quell the critical outrage provoked by the grotesqueries of his first collection, *Columns* [Столбцы], as well as the ambivalent depiction of collectivization in his poema *Triumph of Agriculture* [Торжество земледелия]. Although Vvedensky still managed to publish some works for children after his first arrest (1931), his mature poetry was intended primarily for his friends and acquaintances, and only a few works were passed along (of course, unofficially) to a wider audience that included Anna Akhmatova and the writer and art collector Nikolai
Khardzhiev. Unsurprisingly, the elegy took on different forms in these disparate contexts, but I will argue that it posed fundamentally the same problem to each author. Namely, for both Zabolotsky and Vvedensky the elegy became the privileged genre for working out a reflective lyric voice after an early poetic career dedicated to dismantling the idea of personal and emotive verse. When put into these terms, the strategies pursued in these post-OBERIU texts may be placed within a wider context of the revaluation of lyric and canonization of the pre-revolutionary tradition within Stalinist culture as a response to avant-gardism and ‘formalism’ in the arts. Borrowing language from Devin Fore’s recent study, Realism after Modernism: the Rehumanization of Art and Literature, we might pose the broader question in this form: “what happens to [the elegy] once the human is no longer a perfect integer” (4)?

This chapter will investigate the relationship among members of the Lipavsky Circle by this odd phenomenon of “the post-OBERIU elegy.” Although this “circle” never existed as an official entity, these meetings at Leonid Lipavsky’s apartment in the years 1933-4 provided a forum for continuing the aesthetic and philosophical debates that these authors had begun in the 1920s. While scholars have previously discussed shared imagery among these poets’ works of this period in terms of their philosophical implications (i.e., the notion of “hieroglyphs”), this

In his poetic analyses, Druskin applies the term hieroglyph in an idiosyncratic meaning established by Lipavsky: “A hieroglyph is a particular material phenomenon, which I directly [непосредственно] sense, feel, [and] perceive, and which tells me more than is directly [непосредственно] expressed by it as a material phenomenon. […] A hieroglyph can be understood as the indirect or oblique speech of the immaterial—that is, the spiritual or extra-sensory—directed to me through the material or the sensuous” (Sazhin et al., 550-551). Druskin distinguishes between the material and immaterial meaning of a hieroglyph as its intrinsic [собственное] and non-intrinsic [несобственное] meanings. For instance, the intrinsic meaning of leaf-fall [листопад] in autumn is simply the biological process that results in leaves falling from the trees, but this event also carries the non-intrinsic meanings of “life, death, the birth of a new life […], the change of human generations, historical periods, and cycles” (Ibid.). Although the concept of hieroglyph extends beyond human language, Druskin primarily applies the notion
chapter will focus on the generic memory of these lexical choices to investigate how these authors’ lyric poetry of the 1930s reconfigures the elegiac tradition. The first part will provide a working definition of the “elegy” as well as delineating in more detail the problems that the genre posed to the obiutiy. In the second and third parts, I will provide an interpretation of how Zabolotsky and Vvedensky each responded to these problems during the 1930s through a series of close readings. These readings are not meant to be exhaustive but rather attempt to describe how each poet restructures the “elegiac situation” of a meditative lyric subject’s confrontation with death and loss. My readings of Zabolotsky will suggest that elegiac language functions to voice a set of concerns about identity, self-perception, and mortality, which unite his civic poetry of the period with his better known works dedicated to Naturphilosophie. Similar philosophical concerns are central for Vvedensky, many of whose later poems remain oriented on a traditionally elegiac structure even while distorting the conventions of the genre. Whereas the lyric subject of Zabolotsky’s verse consistently overcomes his sorrow to take solace in a sense of social or natural harmony, Vvedensky’s elegist dissolves in a flood of irresolvable contradictions. The last section will consider Vvedensky’s most famous work, “Elegy” (1940), which stands apart from his other poetry stylistically, alongside a pair of similarly uncharacteristic texts by Kharms. In these poems, we find a somewhat different relationship to the poetic tradition as the elegiac perspective shifts to the first person plural—from the “I” of an individual facing death to the “we” of a generation forgotten by history.

to recurring imagery in the writings of his circle (Vvedensky especially), and in its literary application the term has found some currency in later scholarly works.
Elegy and Lyric Voice

While the English word “elegy” generally denotes a poem lamenting one or more deceased persons, such a definition does not hold across history and cultures.\(^\text{128}\) The Russian genre of “элегия” has historically been defined primarily by its emotional content, most often identified as sorrow.\(^\text{129}\) To take two authoritative examples, Trediakovsky introduced the elegy as “plaintive and sorrowful verse” in his *New and Brief Method for the Composition of Russian Verse* [Новый и краткий способ к сложению стихов Российских], and Belinsky defined it simply as “a song with sad content” (Trediakovskii 395; Belinskii 335).\(^\text{130}\) The elegy is often distinguished from other lyric genres by its “personal” and “intimate” character, that is, its ability to express, with an ideal degree of directness and openness, the emotions of the lyric subject. This subject may be conceived as quite specific, either as a version of the biographical poet (e.g., Lermontov) or an overtly fictional surrogate (e.g., Trediakovsky, who in *Novyi i kratkii sposob* invents the persona of a grieving husband for his elegies). Or this hero may be abstracted from any markers of personal identity, as, for instance, Grigori Gukovskii has observed to be the case in Sumarokov’s elegies (80-81). While the elegy may forego a concrete image of its speaker, and this speaker may be understood as a separate entity from the author, the promise of the elegiac

\(^\text{128}\) The ancient elegy was not defined by its content but rather by the metrical structure of its couplets. Even among English poets the nature of the elegy has sometimes been defined in more broad terms, by the position of the lyric subject rather than by any specific content. For instance, Coleridge writes: “[The elegy] may treat of any subject, but it must treat of no subject for itself; but always and exclusively with reference to the poet himself. As he will feel regret for the past or desire for the future, so sorrow and love become the principal themes of elegy” (Coleridge 444-445).

\(^\text{129}\) This does not mean that the elegy expresses only sorrow. Indeed, as Lazar Fleishman (2006) discusses, the most widespread definition of the elegy during the age of Pushkin was a poem of *mixed* feeling [смешанное чувство], expressing psychological complexity rather than a singular emotion (9-10).

\(^\text{130}\) For a fuller discussion of Russian definitions of elegy, see Frizman: 5-9 and passim.
genre lies in the nuanced expression of the lyric subjects emotions. Whether or not the lyric hero has a face, it must have a convincing voice.

At the same time, the supposed immediacy of elegiac discourse often finds itself at odds with the conventions of poetic language. In his study of the English elegy, Peter Sacks eloquently frames this problem, with reference to psychoanalytic theory, by describing “the elegist’s reluctant submission to language itself” as an “enforced accommodation” between the mourning poet and the language of mourning (2). If such an “accommodation” creates difficulties for the poet, the conventionality of poetic language also risks alienating the reader, especially at times when the elegy is seen as a fashionable genre among a certain subset of writers. During the high point of the Russian elegy, Wilhelm Kiukhel’beker mocked other young poets of his generation for relying on standard imagery such as a pale moon, a setting sun, or a secluded grove to express their grief. He writes: “If this sadness were not simply a rhetorical figure one […] might think that our poets in Russia are born as old men” [Если бы сия грусть не была просто риторическою фигурою, иной […] мог бы подумать, что у нас на Руси поэты уже рождаются старицами] (Kiukhel’beker 456). Of course, the situation described by Kiukhel’beker would be theorized roughly a century later by the Russian formalists as the general tendency of poetic conventions to self-automatize and to devolve into parody. Although the formalists’ emphasis on complicated form is still sometimes viewed narrowly as a celebration of ‘literariness’ as a self-sufficient goal, their basic point is somewhat different. One cannot simply rely on accepted literary language as a means of direct expression because it will always be marked as literary, citational, and insincere. In his second novel, Shklovsky formulates such a situation aphoristically: “I would like to write as if literature had never existed. […] I can’t, irony devours [my] words” (Shklovskii 1923, 87).
In the 1920s, these potentially negative connotations of the elegy—its narrowly personal focus and conventional form—provided a target for critics sympathetic to the Futurist movement, including the formalists. Iurii Tynianov and Boris Eikhenbaum both drew explicitly on the experience of early 19th-century Russian verse as an analogy for the literary battles of the 1920s. While the massive scale of the ode is consistently identified with Mayakovsky, the main defender of the lyric shifts from Akhmatova to Esenin. In the notes for a 1927 lecture on Esenin, Tynianov writes: “The elegy is battling our ode, lashing at it. But it won’t last long” (Элегия борется с нашей одой, захлестывает ее. Но она недолговечна) (Tynianov 1977, 501n63).

Unsurprisingly, the elegiac genre found little support among the poets of the Left Flank and OBERIU. During the period of OBERIU performances, the word “elegy” appears only once in the writings of this group, as the title of a humorous 1927 poem by Igor’ Bakhterev. Its beginning conveys the overall tone:

Я снова выйду в жёлтый сад
и долго плакать буду там,
а ветер волосы сорвет,
а ветер волосы швырнёт
в глухой посад
пустой посад
к зубчатым воротам. (Bakhterev 34)

I once again walk out into the yellow garden
and I will cry there for a long time,
but the wind tears out my hair
but the wind flings my hair
into an out of the way village
an empty village
to the jagged gate.

The first lines present a common elegiac image—the sorrowful poet seeking seclusion—but instead of quiet contemplation he finds in the garden an aggressive wind that tears out his hair and tosses it into a far-off settlement (perhaps a reconfiguration of the ancient ritual of tearing out one’s own hair in mourning). By the poem’s end, its titular genre becomes the object of humorous wordplay:

Шуми-шуми, богов стихия,
под зелень ночи стих и я.
Шуми-шуми, ночь стихия,
заканчивая элегию.

Make noise, make noise, element of the gods,
Beneath the green of night I too fell quiet.
Make noise, make noise, element of the nights,
I bring my elegy to an end.
Там—на своей телеге я. (36)    There—I am on my cart.

Here, the solemnity of the elegiac genre is ironized by comically elaborate rhymes involving the word “elegy” (элегия) and a homonym of the word for verse (стих). It is also significant that these rhymes relegate the first person singular pronoun to a subordinate role: in the first instance, it appears to be left over from the decomposition of “стихия”; in the second, the force of the rhyme encourages one to elide it into the preceding word “телеге.” (This latter effect is especially worth noting since Vvedensky borrows this rhyme pair for the epigraph to his own poem “Elegy” [1940, see below]). These rhymes effectively ‘bare the device,’ exposing the lyric subject as a product of poetic convention, while the obvious references to Pushkin’s famous elegy “Погасло дневное светило” add to the hackneyed effect.

Elegiac sentimentality is also thoroughly eviscerated in Vvedensky’s and Zabolotsky’s poetry of the period. As discussed in Chapter One, Vvedensky denied emotion any role in poetry, and overtly emotional statements in his early poetry are heavily satirized. Take for example the beginning of “Everything” [Or “That’s it”: Всё], which parodies graveside sorrow before descending into chaos. The speaker exits a tavern to join the funeral procession for his wife and immediately breaks into histrionics that culminate in a grotesque and absurd gesture:

я горько плачу страшно злюсь    I bitterly cry become terribly angry
о гроб главою колочусь            Against the coffin I pound my head
и вынимаю потроха                I dig out the bowels
чтоб показать что в них уха (80)   to show that there is fish soup in them

While this poem, like many of Vvedensky’s works, continues to revolve around the theme of death, every indication of personal sorrow is somehow trivialized and/or rendered absurd. If Zabolotsky disagreed with Vvedensky on most poetic matters, his early writing shows a disdain for overt emotionality. In the OBERIU declaration he writes: “And the world—which has been littered with the tongues of a multitude of fools and mired in the muck of ‘feelings’ and
“emotions”—is now being reborn in all the purity of its concrete, masculine forms.” (И мир, замусоренный языками множества глупцов, запутанный в тину «переживаний» и «эмоций», — ныне возрождается во всей чистоте своих конкретных мужественных форм) (Vaginov, et al, 457, italics mine). Zabolotsky’s “Temptation” (Искушение) tells the tale of a maiden handed over to death by her father; it includes a graphic description of her decomposing body, which ends in the immortal line: “Была дева—стали щи” (109).

Of course, there was one prominent exception to this anti-emotional stance within OBERIU. Vaginov, who differed from the other obrieru in many respects, was a member of Kuzmin’s Emotionalist movement and reportedly read “Poem of the squares” (Поэма квадратов) at the Three Left Hours evening (Kobrinskii 2009, 113). Despite its constructivist-sounding name, the poem opens with the Esenin-inflected lines: “Yes, I’m a poet of tragic enjoyment / but life is still deathly attractive” (Да, я поэт трагической забавы/ А все же жизнь смертельно хороша). The dynamic relationship between personal emotion and impersonal form is a constant theme in Vaginov’s poetry, frequently represented in both the classical trope of the statue and the constructivist language of geometric forms. Several years older than the other obrieru, Vaginov belonged to a wide range of intellectual circles in the 1920s and had even participated in the Acmeist Nikolai Gumilev’s Guild of Poets [Цех поэтов]. As a result, his lyric poetry developed separately from his younger colleagues and lies beyond this dissertation’s focus. The remainder of this chapter will consider the works of Zabolotsky, Vvedensky, and Kharms, who were more closely associated with each other. Each of these poets would reconsider the problem of lyric voice in their post-OBERIU poetry.
Over the 1930s Zabolotsky developed a lyric voice that would define his poetry for the rest of his career. This evolution has been described as his either triumphant or browbeaten return to the individual human after either overcoming or shrinking away from a Futurist fascination with things and collective masses. It was accompanied by a general ‘normalization’ of Zabolotsky’s poetics in the form of a gravitation toward standard syllabotonic meters and rhyme schemes as well as toward lexicon and imagery from the Romantic tradition. During this period, Zabolotsky continued to write philosophical works exploring the structure of the natural world and humanity’s place in it, while also beginning to pen poems on civic themes, such as “The Gori Symphony” [Горийская симфония] (1936), dedicated to Stalin’s birthplace. In both sets of poems, Zabolotsky repeatedly returns to elegiac situations as an expression of existential loneliness, only to reject this sorrowful picture and integrate his lyric subject into a greater whole. This double perspective on the elegy structures a series of poems written between 1936 and Zabolotsky’s arrest in 1938, but its roots extend back to a work that Zabolotsky began when he first started to break formal ties with Kharms and Vvedensky, his mock epic paean to collectivization, *Triumph of Agriculture*.

Lydia Ginzburg, one of the great theorists of the lyric subject, knew both Zabolotsky and Oleinikov personally and wrote a series of essays discussing their lyric from a

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131 This evolution is most explicitly traced in Efim Etkind’s tellingly titled article on Zabolotsky, “V poiskakh cheloveka (Put’ Nikolaia Zabolotskogo: ot neofuturizma k ‘poezii dushi’).”
132 For a discussion of the unconventional meters and rhymes of Zabolotsky’s first collection, see Etkind (op cit.), 602-606. On Zabolotsky’s turn toward Romanticism in his 1930s verse, especially Tyutchev, Baratynsky, and Pushkin, see Sarah Pratt’s articles “Strange Bedfellows in an Odd Moment of Romantic Orthodox Meditation: Vjazemskij, Tjutcev, and Zabolockij” (*Russian Literature* 53.1) and “Tjutcev’s Poetic Admonitions—with Some Help from Puskin and Zabolockij” (*Russian Literature* 54.4).
simultaneously memoiristic and philological perspective. In the case of both authors, she observes a device of communicating human emotions through the intermediary of nonhuman animals, which provide a figurative distance necessary to accommodate the genuinely pathetic intonations of their verse. One of the texts that Ginzburg analyzes is the elegy to Khlebnikov in the second part of *Triumph of Agriculture*, and her reading provides a useful perspective for the present discussion. This passage abounds in lofty language and imagery straight from the storehouse of the elegy, yet this reversion to high poetic style is offset in a playful way:

Вижу я погост унылый, — “I see a dismal graveyard,”
Молвил бык, сияя взором. — Uttered the bull with shining gaze.
Там на дне сырой могилы “There, at the bottom of a damp grave,
Кто-то спит за косогором. (142) Someone sleeps beyond the hillside.

Writing in 1929, Zabolotsky could not possibly claim phrases like “погост унылый” or “руки бледные” (a phrase Ginzburg highlights from later in the poem) as a form for expressing his own sincere emotion. Yet the task of describing the grave of Khlebnikov, a poet whom Zabolotsky greatly admired, demanded precisely this emotional language and high register. Ginzburg sees the bull as a necessary intermediary, creating distance between the poet’s self-representation and the elegiac language (while the humor also presumably neutralizes the reader’s opprobrium for these stock forms) (Ginzburg 1987, 139-140). In other words, a parody of an elegy becomes an elegy.

Ginzburg’s analysis establishes two points about Zabolotsky’s poetics that will be crucial for my own readings: an anxiety about poetic voice and a strong sense of the historicity of elegiac language. Nonetheless, if one pushes analysis of elegiac language in *Triumph* further, one

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133 “Zabolotskii dvadtsatykh godov” can be found in Ginzburg’s book *Literatura v poiskakh real’nosti* (Leningrad, 1987). Her writing on Oleinikov has been published as a preface to his posthumous collection *Puchina strastei* (Leningrad 1990), as well as in the collection *Mir Velimira Khlebnikova: stat’i, issledovaniia (1911-1998)* (Moscow, 2000).
sees that its primary narrative motivation lies elsewhere. After all, the same lexicon that Ginzburg identifies as elegiac extends throughout the second section of the poem, which mostly has nothing to do with Khlebnikov’s death. Instead, it is comprised of a conversation between the bull and a horse about the general plight of animals exploited by humanity as beasts of burden. Moreover, this same mournful language occurs toward the end of the poem, when Zabolotsky depicts another grave (even repeating the first rhyme of the Khlebnikov elegy):

И растет лопух унылый,   And despondent burdock grows
И листом о камень бьет,   And beats its leaf against the stone
И над ветхою могилой   And over the ancient grave
Память вечную поет. (158)   It sings “Memory Eternal.”

This time the grave belongs to a wooden plow [coxa], a symbol of the inefficient and repressive order that was laid to rest by mechanization and rational organization. Within the utopian narrative of the poem, replacing such exploitive methods with new technology should lead to a future in which humans and animals could coexist with mutual respect. In this context, it becomes clear that the elegiac lexicon is associated with the oppressive order that has been condemned to oblivion, the world that needs to be cleared away to lay the foundation for a better future.

By associating elegiac intonations with prerevolutionary culture, Zabolotsky not only continues the polemics of revolutionary groups like the Formalists and Futurists against sentimental lyric, but he also plays on a similar set of associations that was a commonplace Soviet critical discourse of the 1930s. Although the word “elegy” could operate as a simple descriptive terms denoting a musical or poetic genre, in many critical articles of this decade this term, and especially the adjective “elegiac,” carried associations with emotional overindulgence and political resignation. This association is expressed with particular clarity in an obituary for the peasant poet Spiridon Drozhzhin published in Izvestiia in December 1930:
One should not, however, exaggerate Drozhzhin’s literary significance. His poems and songs are not a call to battle: they are full of sorrow and complaints, often quite tearful ones. The poet even seems to revel in the sorrow with which he strives to evoke social sympathy to all oppressed [people]. [...] The liberal populist intelligentsia eagerly took an interest in S. D. Drozhzhin’s fate and tried to use his talent to its own ends. [...] Drozhzhin’s resigned elegiac sadness, the poet’s quiet sighs, his indefinite hopes and reproaches without address—it was advantageous [to the intelligentsia - GC] to set all this in opposition to the vague, uniformed rumbling and class-based discontent that was growing in the masses. (Emphasis added)\footnote{Не следует, однако, преувеличивать литературного значения Дрожжина. Стихи его и песни не звуют к борьбе: они полны скорби и жалоб, часто довольно слезливых. Поэт даже как будто упивается скорбью, которую он стремится пробудить социальное сострадание ко всем угнетенным. <...> Либерально-народническая интеллигенция охотно приняла участие в судьбе С. Д. Дрожжина и старалась использовать его талант для своих целей. <...> Безропотная элегическая дрожжинская печаль, тихие вздохи поэта, его неопределенные надежды и упреки без адреса,—все это было выгодно противопоставить нарастающему в массах глухому, неоформленному ропоту и классовому недовольству. (“S. D. Drozhzhin,” Izvestiiia [Dec. 26, 1930], 4)\footnote{Note the similarity between this criticism and the passage from the OBERIU declaration cited above, which also draws a distinction between emotion and masculine courage: “И мир, замусоренный языками множества глупцов, запутанный в тину «переживаний» и «эмоций», — ныне возрождается во всей чистоте своих конкретных мужественных форм.” (Vaginov, et al. 457, emphasis added).}}

Despite its attention to the hardships faced by Russian peasants before the Revolution, Drozhzhin’s poetry fails because it adopts the passive emotional register of the elegiac sorrow, rather than sowing revolutionary indignation, and therefore effectively supports the status quo. Such a tone might be appropriate in certain historical circumstances—for instance, in the works of Chekhov or Turgenev, which describe the doomed landed gentry—but this refined melancholy stands in opposition to revolutionary virility [мужественность].\footnote{A. Nazarov, “Luchshii teatr nashei strany,” Pravda (Oct. 27, 1936), 4.} In this spirit, a 1938 Pravda article celebrating MKhAT praises the theater’s progression “from the tender sorrow and elegiac lyric of Chekhov to the courageous [мужественным] revolutionary intonations of Gorky.”\footnote{136} This does not mean that every poetic expression of emotion was viewed negatively. Recent scholarship has foregrounded “lyricism” and emotionality as key aesthetic categories in
forming a vision of Socialist Realist art (Kiaer 2014). Such a view is clearly articulated in the sphere of poetry by a review article written by D. Mirsky at the end of 1935: “It’s clear even now that the past year will be much more interesting for poetry than 1934. And one may point out some fundamental characteristics of this improvement. It is a turn toward more lyricism and more self-confidence on the part of the poet” [Уже сейчас ясно, что для нашей поэзии истекающий год будет много интереснее 1934 г. И можно наметить некоторые основные черты этого подъема. Это поворот к большему лиризму и большое доверие поэта к самому себе] (Mirskii 231). This return to lyricism matched well with Gorky’s assertion that Soviet poets should “learn from the classics” in order to improve their mastery of poetic form (Gor’kii 416-417). To facilitate this process, Gorky initiated the Biblioteka poeta series in 1931 to publish definitive editions of classic poetic works. While the series published a wide range of poetic texts, from folklore to Mayakovsky, poets of the early nineteenth-century Golden Age were prominent in the new publications. If any doubt remained about which historical period represented Russian poetry par excellence, the massive Pushkin Jubilee of 1937 resolved this question decisively.

Zabolotsky embraces a highly traditional elegiac form in “Farewell” (Прощание), written in 1934 to commemorate the death of Sergei Kirov. The poem begins with traditional woeful language (Прощание! Скорбное слово!) and mostly continues in this vein. It ends with a traditional comforting gesture as the poet takes solace in the thought that the deceased continues to live through his deeds. After hearing, or perhaps imagining, young children repeat Kirov’s name, the lyric subject reflects:

И мир исполински прекрасный
Сиял над могилой безгласной,
И был он надежен и крепок,
Как сердца погибшего слепок. (193)

And the gigantically beautiful world
Shone above his voiceless grave
And it was sure and strong,
Like a copy of the dead man’s heart.
This hyperbolic final metaphor—with the exuberant expression “gigantically beautiful” (исполниски прекрасный) and reversal of expectations (instead of Kirov living on in our hearts, we live in a copy of his)—gives a hint of the rejection of private sorrow that would define Zabolotsky’s poetry over the next several years. Yet, “Farewell” remains a traditional elegy on a civic theme. A more critical engagement with the elegy would become evident in Zabolotsky’s works a little over a year later.

This transition can be seen in one of Zabolotsky’s better known works, “Yesterday, Meditating on Death…” (Вчера, о смерти размышляя…) (1936), which Sarah Pratt has previously compared to both earlier Russian elegies and the English Graveyard poets (Pratt 2000, 155). It begins with the traditional elegiac situation of a lone poet pondering the inevitability of death—

Вчера, о смерти размышляя,  
Ожесточилась вдруг душа моя.
Печальный день! Природа вековая  
Из тьмы лесов смотрела на меня.
И нестерпимая тоска разъединенья  
Пронзила сердце мне,

Yesterday, meditating on death,  
My soul suddenly became hardened.
Sorrowful day! Age-old nature  
Looked at me from the dark of the forests.
And the unbearable sorrow of coming apart  
Penetrated my heart,

—but this sorrowful reflection is interrupted by nature itself, which, unlike the mournful and solipsistic lyric subject, speaks in a multitude of voices. These voices impart to the poet a sense of hope:

и в этот миг  
Все, все услышал я - и трав вечерних пенье,  
И речь воды, и камня мертвый крик.  
И я, живой, скитался над полями,  
Входил без страха в лес,

and at that moment  
I heard it all, it all—the singing of evening grasses,  
The water’s speech, and the stone’s dead cry.
And I, alive, roamed over the fields,  
I entered the forest without fear

137 Pratt (2000) also provides an extended reading of the poem, also focusing on the moment of revelation, but contextualizing it in terms of Zabolotsky’s philosophical sources and the poem’s metrical structure, instead of the problems of the elegiac situation and lyric voice (155-158).
They also reveal the secret afterlife of generations past in the surrounding world:

И голос Пушкина был над листвою слышен,  And Pushkin’s voice was heard above the
И птицы Хлебникова пели у воды.  And Khlebnikov’s birds sang by the water.
И встретил камень я. Был камень  I encountered a stone. The stone was
неподвижен,  Motionless
И простоял в нем лик Сковороды.  And in it Skovoroda’s face showed through.
И все существовавши, все народы  And all living things, all nations
Нетленное хранили бытие,  Preserved an immortal being,
И сам я был не детище природы,  And I myself was not a child of nature,
Но мысль ее! Но зыбкий ум ее!  But its thought! Its shaky intellect!
(Zabolotskii 198)

As several studies have demonstrated, Zabolotsky’s conception of immortality as integration into an intelligent cosmos draws heavily on Konstantin Tsiolkovsky’s monistic philosophy.\(^{138}\) The realization that the lyric hero is part of this greater whole interrupts the narrative suddenly, in mid-line (и в этот миг), and reveals a world of hitherto unheard voices, from the “evening song” of the grass to the stone’s “dead cry.” In such a world the sorrowful language of the self-absorbed elegist can have no place, indeed, the concepts of death and loss are fully neutralized. The deceased all remain present in the surrounding world; living beings can never decay; nature does not have children subject to death, but rather pure thoughts and eternal reason. The false

\(^{138}\) For a detailed discussion of Tsiolkovsky’s ideas and their resonance with Zabolotsky’s worldview, see Goldstein, 134-143. See also: Pratt, 183-6. Although Zabolotsky did not find Tsiolkovsky’s theorization of existence after death entirely adequate, he was generally enthusiastic about the philosopher’s worldview. The perspective of “Yesterday, Meditating on Death” is consistent with Tsiolkovsky’s belief that all human (and animal) suffering is merely an aberration in a cosmos that strives for perfection and harmony, and that this suffering is compensated by reintegration into the cosmos after death. Incidentally, the roots of many of Tsiolkovsky’s ideas have been traced back to the philosopher N.F. Fyodorov, who has also been suggested as a possible direct influence on Zabolotsky (on which see: Masing-Delic 1983, 1992).
understanding of elegiac thought (i.e. the meditation at the beginning of the poem) is rushed away by the ecstatic sounds of the living world.

A similar structure underlies Zabolotsky’s civic poem “Sedov” (1937), dedicated to the Arctic explorer Georgii Sedov who died on an expedition to the North Pole. The poem’s first lines depict the already-ill Sedov facing death on the Arctic ice:

Он умирал, сжимая компас верный.  He was dying, clutching his faithful compass.
Природа мертвая, закованная льдом,  Dead nature, held fast by ice,
Лежала вокруг него, и солница лик пещерный Lay all around him, and the sun’s cavelike visage
Через туман просвечивал с трудом. (202)  Shone through the fog with difficulty.

Sedov has attained a distant, frozen realm that even the sun struggles to reach, and the forward drive implicitly suggested by his compass needle finds itself countered by the stifling ice and fog. After he dies, the poem depicts his grave as an Arctic twin of Khlebnikov’s final resting place:

И есть на дальнем Севере могила...  And in the distant North there is a grave...
Вдали от мира высится она.  Far from the world it stands raised.
Один лишь ветер веет там уныло,  Only the wind howls there dolefully,
И снега ровная блистає пелена. (203)  And an even cover of snow shines.

Yet, the poem is, overall, a celebration of Sedov’s determination in pursuit of the North Pole. The lyric subject embraces the example of Sedov as a paradigm of heroic death (Лишь одного просил бы у судьбы я:/Так умереть, как умирал Седов). Such a heroic death proves to be not only admirable but also insurance of immortality, as his accomplishments will live on as long as humanity does:

Вставай, Седов, отважный сын земли!  Rise, Sedov, courageous son of the land!
Твой старый компас мы сменили новым.  We have replaced your old compass with a new one.
Но твой поход на Севере суровом  But in our own campaigns we could not forget
Забыть в своих походах не могли. (203)  Your campaign in the severe North.

In his civic poetry, Zabolotsky maintains his position that the world strives for perfection, but the governing force is shifted from “nature” to the sphere of human endeavors.
This same reversal occurs at the end of the 1937 poem “Book of the Dove [or Depths]”\textsuperscript{139} (Голубиная книга), which combines personal recollections with celebration of the Soviet Constitution. The poet recalls how an old peasant told him the story of a magical book hidden far away that contains the truth of the world, and it is implied that this truth could alleviate the lives of the peasantry, who have long been victims of injustice and lies (кривда). At the end of the poem, the lyric hero reflects:

Где ты, старик, рассказчик мой ночной? Where are you, old man, my nighttime storyteller?
Мечтал ли ты о правде трудовой Did you dream of the truth of labor
И верил ли в годину искупленья? And did you believe in the time of atonement?
Не знаю я... Ты умер, наг и сир, I don’t know... You died, naked and alone,
И над тобою, полные кипенья, And above you, full of fervor,
Давно шумят иные поколенья, Since long ago other generations have made noise,
Угрюмый перестраивая мир. (205) Rebuilding the sullen world.

In these lines, the sorrowful lexicon of loss (Где ты, старик, рассказчик мой ночной/Мечтал ли ты...?/Ты умер, наг и сир/угрюмый...мир) collides with the positive and energetic language of a bright future (правд<а> трудов<я>/?полные кипенья/инье поколенья/ перестраивая мир). The backward and tearful glance of the elegy can see only the old man, a sad relic of a receding past, but happily another gaze interrupts, one with eyes open to the “truth of labor” and therefore able to celebrate the construction of a new world.

The broad continuity running from “Yesterday Meditating on Death” through “Sedov" and “Book of the Dove” is clear. All three poems encourage the reader to abandon an egotistic concern for his or her own life in order to join the unity of a greater truth—whether that truth be found in communal activity or in Naturphilosophie. This truth, in its turn, ensures a kind of

\textsuperscript{139} The reference is to the collection of spiritual verse called “Голубиная книга.” Scholars have debated whether the title should be understood as Book of the Dove (a reference to the Holy Spirit) or Book of the Depths (a distortion of Глубинная книга). Both translations of the title exist in English-language scholarship on Zabolotsky. For a recent discussion of the “dove” v. “depths” debate, see Seriakov 15-40 (who falls on the side of “depths”).
immortality, even individual immortality in the case of those who most perfectly embody it (Sedov, Pushkin, Khlebnikov, Skovoroda). Moreover, concern for oneself speaks in a depressed, elegiac language that the poem invariably corrects (usually at the end) by suggesting a model of continuity that cancels any personal loss. Using terms from Mirsky’s 1935 review, this type of reversal can be seen as Zabolotsky’s method for combining the “intimacy” and “freedom” of lyric poetry with the “political content” and “political passion” of the revolutionary epoch (Mirskii 232). As such it displays what Christina Kiaer (2014) has identified as an attempt to articulate “socialism as an alternative affective economy” (77), in which artists redirect private feeling “into a more diffuse emotionality with a potentially collectivizing social force” (69). The lyric subject of these poems strives to recognize that the division and redistribution of oneself provides the only insurance of immortality—and through this recognition overcome elegiac isolation.

Zabolotsky celebrates this joyously fragmented subject in “Immortality” (Бессмертие, 1937), later renamed “Metamorphoses” (Метаморфозы), another of his best-known poems of the 1930s. The opening lines concern ceaseless change and foreground the conventionality of the word “I” in both lyric and everyday life:

Как мир меняется! И как я сам меняюсь! 
Лишь именем одним я называюсь,— 
На самом деле то, что именуют мной,— 
Не я один. Нас много. Я - живой. 

How the world changes! How I myself change! 
Only by one name am I called— 
In fact, that, which is called “me” 
Is not only me. There are many of us. I’m alive.

[Or: The “I” is alive.]

Here the subject behind the poem is presented as an ontologically uncertain philosophical category, identified meta-linguistically as “that which is named ‘I’” (то, что именуют мной). Next, the concept of death is similarly demoted, as dying is revealed to be not a single definitive event, but rather an ongoing process of life:
As Aleksandr Kobrinskii has observed, the shedding of bodies in these lines is a reversal of the shedding of souls in Gumilev’s “Memory” (Память) (Kobrinskii 2000, 103). Gumilev also proclaims that the poet goes through many different selves over the course of a lifetime—in his case, a depressive but enchanted child, a hopeless romantic, a freedom-loving world traveler, a warrior, an architect, and an as-yet-unknown traveler of the future—but he only identifies the voice and time of the poem with his present incarnation. In other words, only the architect (i.e. Gumilev’s persona at the time of writing the poem) is referred to as “I,” while the poet’s other incarnations are referred to as a more distant “he.” Zabolotsky refuses this more grammatically and logically elegant solution in favor of a coexistence of his many dead selves:

И если б только разум мой прозрел
И в землю устремил пронзительное око,
Он увидел бы там, среди могил, глубоко
Лежащего меня. Он показал бы мне
Меня, колеблемого на морской волне,
Меня, летящего по ветру в край незримый,
Мой бедный прах, когда-то так любимый. My poor remains, that once were so loved.

And if my reason had gained its sight
And directed its penetrating eye into the earth,
It would have seen there, deep among the graves,
Me lying. It would have shown me
Myself, rocked atop a sea wave,
Me flying on the wind to an unseen land,
My poor remains, that once were so loved.

Altogether this opening stanza uses the first person singular pronoun eleven times and the corresponding possessive three times in fourteen lines. This repetition becomes especially pronounced in lines 11-12, which juxtapose two oblique forms across an enjambment (“показал бы мне/Меня”). Complicating the picture still further, the poet’s reason [разум] is separated out as another entity, one with potential to reveal the continued existence of past selves in the world. At the same time, these lines carry an echo of the elegiac situation of the other poems. As graveyard imagery enters the poem (среди могил; мой бедный прах), we also see the emergence of a future modality, the hypothetical future in which the speaker’s reason has come
to see things clearly [прозрел] and allows him to coexist with all his many dead selves. In this way, the opening of “Metamorphoses” reverses the structure of Zabolotsky’s previous pseudo-elegies: rather than pivot from the contemplation of death to ecstatic revelation, this poem immediately adopts the perspective of a joyous, infinitely divisible self and views the prospect of death without sorrow.

Thus, the “re-humanization” of Zabolotsky’s poetry during this period involves an interrogation of the lyric subject through an engagement with the language and imagery of the elegiac tradition. The poems discussed here take up the traditional elegiac theme of a poet’s confrontation with death, but they also disavow elegiac sorrow as the result of a false consciousness. By embracing its own inherent multiplicity, the lyric subject overcomes the temporal and perspectival limits of individual subjectivity to become a voice of the social collective and ultimately the cosmos. Shortly after writing “Immortality” (“Metamorphoses”), however, Zabolotsky would find himself temporarily excluded from Soviet society as a result of his 1938 arrest for supposed involvement in a counterrevolutionary plot. Of course, Zabolotsky would once again attain acceptance as a translator and lyricist after his release, though he would have no further interaction with his former OBERIU colleagues.

Vvedensky’s Hyper-Elegiac Late Writings

When Vvedensky read “Rug/Hydrangea” [Ковёр гортензия]140 to the Lipavsky circle, his host and friend immediately praised this elegy (explicitly identifying the poem as such) for

140 The original manuscript is untitled. “Rug/Hydrangea” is a conventional name ascribed to the poem by members of the Lipavsky Circle on the basis of its most distinctive rhyme: “Ещё есть у меня претензия, что я не ковёр, не гортензия” (Vvedenskii 2010, 208). (N.B. A version of this rhyme pair (with both members in the genitive plural [претензий/гортензий]) was used previously by V.G. Benediktov (“Плач оставшегося в городе при виде переезжайщих на дачу,” 1857) and Sasha Chernyi (“Служба сборов,” 1909).)
overcoming the indifference that had pervaded Vvedensky’s earlier works (Vvedenskii 2010, 608). Besides the poem’s emotional content, Lipavsky also praises the analytic rigor of Vvedensky’s work, marveling at its “precisely and correctly posed questions”—an appropriate response, since according to Druskin, the author himself mainly regarded the work as a philosophical tract (Lipavskii 348-9; Sazhin, et al. 570). Of course, these two assessments are compatible: the work presents a lyric meditation on the nature of human existence squarely in the tradition of the philosophical elegy. The central problem of the human condition is expressed—with an apparent lack of irony that is stunning compared to Vvedensky’s earlier works—in the lines: “I don’t like that I’m mortal/I’m sorry that I’m inexact (Мне не нравится что я смертен,/мне жалко что я неточен) (Lipavskii, 349). Of course, this naive phrasing belies the difficulties of describing the nature of this “inexactness” and the meaning of inevitable death, and the poem develops these questions in an oblique manner, teasing out their various aspects through a series of images ranging from the Romantic (eagles soaring over mountaintops, lonely stars, silenced lyres) to a more recent poetic lexicon (i.e. various types of insect life, central to Khlebnikov and the Lipavsky circle) to idiosyncratic and personally significant imagery (the hydrangea of its adopted title, the combination “candle grass” [свеча трава]). As has previously been pointed out, Vvedensky defines the human apophatically, as that which is not any of these images, or more precisely, that which suffers from not being any of these images.

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141 See for instance: Omry Ronen (2000).
142 Vvedensky declared the following lines to be “personally important”: Мне страшно что я не трава трава,/мне страшно что я не свеча./Мне страшно что я не свеча трава (Vvedenskii 2010, 209/608).
143 Cf. Tatiana Iovovich’s close reading of the poem, “‘Mne zhalko chto ia ne zver’…” A. Vvedenskogo” (in Ichin/Kudriavtsev, 172-181). While many of Iovovich’s observations are consonant with my own reading, our views differ fundamentally on the issue of the lyric subject: specifically, whereas Iovovich analyzes the poem as an instance of autocommunication (by
The construction “мне жалко что я не” repeats itself thirteen times over the course the poem, and the nearly identical construction “мне страшно что я не” occurs ten times (plus two iterations of “мне трудно,” and one of “мне неворятно обидно”).

The consequences of this incessant repetition can be compared to the last lines of “Metamorphoses” (written three years later), as it also underscores that the unity of the (lyric) “I” is merely a conventional assumption. As in Zabolotsky’s poem, the division of the lyric persona is directly thematized and becomes evident in the very first lines:

Мне жалко что я не зверь,
бегающий по синей дорожке,
говорящий себе поверь,
а другому себе подожди немножко (208)  
I’m sorry that I’m not a beast
running along a dark blue path,
telling myself to believe
and my other self to wait a little

The splitting begins innocuously in the repeated first-person pronoun of the opening line and the reflexive grammar of “telling myself” (говорящий себе), and only the unexpected addition of an “other self” in line four signals something unusual. As an alter ego the running beast appears to pull in two opposite directions. While the word “beast” implies a primitivist nostalgia for a prehuman animal existence, the adjective “dark blue” appears to suggest a celestial path and therefore some type of spiritual or fantastic being. This suggestion of dualism may be analogy to a religious confession), my reading questions the presupposition of a self-consistent speaker underlying such an interpretation.

144 This peculiarity of the poem has been widely remarked (though without analysis of its implications for the lyric voice). For a different (and compatible) take on the structural role of these repetitions in the poem see Sergei Biriukov’s grammatical diagram of “Rug/Hydrangea,” published online at http://vvedensky.lenin.ru/critics/avang.htm (Accessed 4/29/2014).

145 All Russian quotes from Vvedensky are cited from the recent volume, Бе, edited by Anna Gerasimova (Moscow, 2010). In providing English translations, I have consulted the volume OBERIU: An Anthology of Russian Absurdism, edited by Eugene Oatashevsky (Evanston, 2006), though I have deviated from these translations in the interest of rendering the Russian more literally (at the obvious expense of literary merit).

146 This image of traveling across the sky has precedent in Vvedensky. Cf. the earlier poem, “Sud ushel,” begins with the line: “а person walked along the sky” (шёл по небу человек) (Vvedenskii 2010, 127).
extended to other images throughout the poem: on the one hand, the “I” is frequently juxtaposed with travelers across great heights (a star, an eagle); on the other, it is compared to grass, worms, the earth. Like the fantastic beast the “I” can be identified with neither the ethereal freedom of the spirit nor the ecological harmony of the material world, nor does it occupy any definite middle position. It resolutely abides by the directive, “wait a little,” continually deferring judgment by relentlessly, almost compulsively, communicating what it is not.

Repetition constitutes one of the main structural principles of the poem, as certain lines and couplets also frequently recur without an obvious logic for their placement—as if the poem is continually recycling itself, stopping and restarting from various midpoints. Indeed, this impression reflects the purported genesis of the poem: in conversation with Lipavsky, Vvedensky claims that he could not decide between two drafts of the poem and simply joined them together. Coming closer to the question of how to read these repetitions, Vvedensky further states: “There are many repetitions here, but I think that there is nothing extraneous—they are all necessary, if you look closely they repeat in a different form, clarifying.” (Повторений здесь много, но, по-моему, лишнего нет, все они нужны, если внимательно присмотреться, они повторяются в другом виде, объясняя) (Vvedenskii 2010, 608). This extra-textual emphasis on formal repetition can be related to an otherwise unmotivated reflection in the poem on the fact that the appearance of similarity can mask profound difference:

Мне страшно что я при взгляде на две одинаковые вещи не замечу что они различны, что каждая живёт однажды
It frightens me that upon glancing at two identical things I don’t notice that they are different, that each lives one time.

Fittingly, these lines themselves immediately repeat with a significant variation at the end:

Мне страшно что я при взгляде на две одинаковые вещи не вижу что они усердно
It frightens me that upon glancing at two of identical things I don’t see how hard they
The first iteration concludes with the thought that “each [thing] lives only once”—a claim that fits squarely into the elegiac mode of lament for the loss of a singular object in its individuality. The second conclusion, however, points in a somewhat different direction, suggesting that every apparent identity is ultimately a deception by the diverse parts that make up the world. (It is noteworthy in this connection that many members of Vvedensky’s immediate circle, including Zabolotsky, had become extremely interested in monadic theories by the time “Rug/Hydrangea” was written.) If we apply these thoughts back to the lyric “I,” we come to a conclusion close to Zabolotsky’s insight, “то, что именуют мной, —/Не я один”: the words of the poem can belong to no singular entity. The sense of fragmentation is much more jarring throughout Vvedensky’s poem with its insistent, almost mechanical repetition—not to mention its length. If Zabolotsky floods fourteen lines with first person pronouns, Vvedensky performs his dislocations over 104 lines. Rather than a single, continuous stream of personal reflections about the world, Vvedensky provides us with a montage of lyrical statements framed as philosophical reflections. As a result, the pathos of the poem is divested from any concrete individual—both thematically (since demise is the common denominator of human fate) and structurally (since there is no implied lyric speaker to whom we may attribute these statements). To borrow a Formalist term, we might say that he has replaced the lyric subject with its equivalent, or zero

147 Druskin and Lipavsky both studied with Nikolai Lossky, whose central premise of the world’s organic unity is based on a reinterpretation of Leibniz in light of Vladimir Solov’ev. While neither student wholly adopted Lossky’s positions, his influence is nonetheless evident in their work. As mentioned above (see footnote 148), Zabolotsky felt a great infinity with Konstantin Tsiołkosky, whose monistic theory was also informed by Leibniz.

148 Thomas Epstein has previously applied the discussion of the identity and difference in “Rug/Hydrangea” to Vvedensky’s views on the philosophical problem of subjectivity (without reference to lyric voice or the construction of the poem). See the section “Logic of Identity” in his dissertation “Fragmented unity: Thought, language and reality in the poetry of Vvedensky, Harms, and Oleinikov” (Brown University, 1994), 173-182.
degree. We need to refer each line to the category of a lyric subject for the poem to have an emotional impact, and arguably for it to register as a “poem” at all, yet the structure of “Rug/Hydrangea” continually foregrounds the absence of this implied subject.

The disappearance of the poet implicit in “Rug/Hydrangea” is dramatized in two later works, “A Certain Quantity of Conversations” (Некоторое количество разговоров, 1936-7) and “Where.When” (Где.Когда, 1941). In the second conversation of the former work, a bard sings an elegy commemorating the death of the world’s poets, musicians, and bards. More so than “Rug/Hydrangea,” this poem relies on traditional graveyard imagery and an elegiac lexicon (cf. Pushkin’s На холмах Грузии лежит ночной мгла…”):

Merknet kladbichep evcov. The cemetery of the bards grows dark.
Tiishina. Novaya mgla. Quiet. The night haze has already
Na holmy уже легла. (224) Settled on the hills.

The poem repeatedly underscores the silence of the trees and the forest in the absence of these poets—creating a stark contrast to Zabolotsky’s image of Pushkin’s voice rustling in the trees in “Yesterday Meditating on Death.” The only sound that still exists is bird song (another key image from Zabolotsky’s poem), but Vvedensky’s poem again diverges from Zabolotsky’s ideal of harmony as this sound “has become hateful to the people” (Опостылели народу/Ныне птичьи голоса). Similarly, the ending of the poem has the poets resurrect briefly, but only to tell the world once again that they are dead, and the very last lines present a more ambivalent picture of the reintegration into nature that Zabolotsky represents as compensation for death:

Musyka v zemle igraet, Music plays in the ground,
Chervyaki stihyi poют. Worms sing verses.
Reki rifyмы повторяют, The rivers repeat the rhymes,
Zvery zvuki pesen пьют. (224) Beasts drink the sounds of songs.
By overtly referring to worms as the agent that converts the bards into a kind of natural song, Vvedensky undercuts the solace of Zabolotsky’s conclusion. Vvedensky refuses to draw any explicit conclusion from the poets’ death and pseudo-resurrection, nor does he provide the reader with a stable reference point from which to interpret the poem. Whereas Zabolotsky models this consolation in the response of his lyric subject, Vvedensky embeds this elegy in a narrative that prevents any identification with its speaker. The bard is giving a concert before an absurdly fluctuating number of people, and every time he pauses between stanzas the couch behind him either disappears or reappears. These sudden and arbitrary changes remove from the elegy any semblance of intimate communication. The ending of the section dramatizes this indeterminacy: the bard dies at the end of his performance, and the final narrative remark reads: “What he thereby demonstrated” (Что он этим доказал) (Vvedenskii 2010, 224).

Vvedensky’s last surviving work, “Where. When” (the conventional title used in anthologies—like “Rug/Hydrangea” the original was untitled) follows this practice of setting verse segments within a prose narrative. This work also features a poet’s farewell to the world, but this time the text encourages a much stronger, although still structurally ambivalent, relationship between lyric voice and author. An especially strong authorial identification becomes nearly inevitable for readers familiar with Vvedensky’s biography, as the poet died en route to a prison camp soon after this work was written. The fabula of “Where. When” is fairly simple: a poet says farewell to the world, shoots himself, and then reawakens after his death, if only for a moment. The narration becomes increasingly ambiguous after the act of suicide, 

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149 Vvedensky generally uses idiosyncratic punctuation and follows several questions with periods throughout “A Certain Quantity” (placing them somewhere between a question and a subordinate clause). This punctuation, which turns questions into declarative statements, may be considered the obverse side of Eugene Ostashevsky’s (2006) shrewd observation, “The huge lyrical force of [Vvedensky’s] final writings comes from his turning words into pointers, as it were: into questions rather than answers” (xxviii).
leaving the poet’s “reawakening” open to multiple interpretations, though other texts by Vvedensky suggest we should read this moment as a second death.\(^{150}\) Despite this ambiguity, “Where. When” remains overall one of Vvedensky’s most readily intelligible works. One of the poet’s most conscientious commentators, Mikhail Meilakh, characterizes the work as a “pure and clear note” on which Vvedensky’s poetry culminates (Vvedenskii 1993, vol. 2, 43). Scholars have also noted a dense network of intertextual links to Vvedensky’s earlier writings, which have led the work to be read as a summation of Vvedensky’s own career.\(^{151}\) It has not, however, been analyzed as a meditation on lyric per se—and this perspective is particular important for an author who left only a handful of isolated comments on writing.

In the first section, “Where” Vvedensky writes of a man who stands amidst a minimally defined space—the only details given by the narrator are grass and a statue—and bids farewell to the surrounding world. For the most part, these farewells are addressed to hallmarks of poetic language—the forests, the river, a flower, the desert—at one point, two poetic topoi are even conflated into the “cliffs of the fields” (скалы полевые). These farewells are mostly cast in rhymed iambic tetrameter, which only breaks down in the last few lines of his speech (presumably motivated by the imminence of death).\(^{152}\) As the commentators to the Biblioteka poeta edition note, certain lines even explicitly recall Pushkin’s 1817 elegy “Farewell, faithful

\(^{150}\) Druskin records the following as the subject for a lost work by Vvedensky: “Two deaths: a person dies, this is the first death. Then the second death occurs.” (Vvedenskii 1993, vol. 2, 103) A similar doubling occurs in the dramatic poem “All Around Maybe God,” in which the protagonist Ef’Fomin is first decapitated and then, after a series of travels, consumed by fire.

\(^{151}\) Meilakh comments: “To an even greater degree than ‘Elegy,’ this work is like a retrospective vade mecum to Vvedensky’s poetic universe, the motifs and images of which are reproduced here in the parting glance of the poet himself, who (according to those close to him) had a presentiment of his impending demise” (Vvedenskii 1993, vol. 2, 201).

\(^{152}\) In comparison to Vvedensky’s earlier works, it is striking that the vast majority—possibly all—of the prima facie “nonsense” of “Where. When” has a discernible motivation within the text.
groves!…” (“Простите верные дубравы!…”) (Meilakh, et al. 600n30). Just before the moment of death finally arrives, the bodily integrity of the poet breaks apart: he removes his temple (висок) from his pocket and shoots himself in the head. At this point, parts of the surrounding world take their turn saying goodbye to him, also in rhymed verse but with more rhythmic variation. The world was previously silent when the poet spoke; now the poet himself falls silent. The world’s farewells are each registered by a verb suggesting rigor mortis (цепенеет, леденеет, каменеет), or, more poetically, transforming into a statue, as suggested by the work’s second line (Он сам обращался в статую). An interesting reversal occurs as the river’s farewell appears to slip momentarily into the dead man’s voice:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Russian</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Прощай тетрадь</td>
<td>Farewell notebook.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Неприятно и нелегко умирать</td>
<td>It is difficult and unpleasant to die.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Прощай мир. Прощай рай ты очень далек человеческий край. (266)</td>
<td>Farewell world. Farewell paradise you are very far away human land.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The departure of the human land is mirrored by the mysterious arrival of a group of beings that are not really savages—“не то дикари не то нет.” The humanity of these figures will come into question in the following section, but “Where” ends with an assertion of their humanity (Он взглянул на людей).

“When” resumes the narrative at precisely this moment of looking, but the language of this second section is more strained than the first. It is not incidental that the language is more difficult to follow in the section titled “When.” If Vvedensky continually problematizes space in his narratives, it is time that constitutes the real problem for human knowledge, as it exists always outside the limit of human understanding and language.153 The section begins with the paradoxical image of the suicide reawakened and trying to remember his own death:

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153 On spatial relations in Vvedensky’s poetry, see Iuliia Valieva’s article “бедный детский человек: к аксиологии пространства а. введенского” (in Ichin and Kudriavtsev, ed., 40-55).
When he slightly opened his eyes, he opened his eyes slightly. He recalled everything exactly as it is by heart. I forgot to take leave of the rest, that is, he forgot to take leave of the rest. Here he remembered, he recalled the entire moment of his death. All those sixes, fives. All that—vanity. The entire rhyme. Which had been a faithful friend to him, as Pushkin said before him. Ah Pushkin, Pushkin, that very Pushkin who had lived before him.

The first sentence rests on a tautology between two Russian words for “open slightly” (приотворить/приоткрыть). This construction suggests a sense of linguistic difficulty, perhaps mimicking the semantic difficulty of describing what is transpiring, especially as the first verb is not generally used to describe eyes. (Given the archetype of death as a threshold, it may be relevant that “приотворить” most commonly describes the partial opening of a door or gate.) At the same time, the mirroring of the subject “he” in two equivalent sentences anticipates its decisive split in the third sentence, when the narrative briefly slips into the first person singular.

There are several ways of reading this latter moment. Given the whole passage’s halting language, it might be read as a slip of the pen, an accidental substitution corrected by the second half of the sentence. It also mirrors the slippage between the poet and the river in the previous section, suggesting that the implications extend beyond linguistic distortion to an undecidability on the level of ontology.\textsuperscript{154} In terms of lyric voice, this ambivalence encourages us to read the poem simultaneously in two voices, as if the poet were saying, “this is \textit{my} anticipation of \textit{my}”

\textsuperscript{154} The self-contradictory construction “I […]”, that is, he” resembles the identification of characters in several previous works, for instance: “коровы они же быки” (“Кругом возможно Бог”), not to mention the “не то дикари не то нет” that appear later in the same passage.
death,” and “this death is someone else’s; I am only an observer.” Such a perspective is itself paradigmatically elegiac; as Brodsky observes of poems written in memoriam: “In mourning his loss [...] an author by the same token frequently mourns—directly, obliquely, often unwittingly—himself, for the tragic timbre is always autobiographical” (195). Not only are these perspectives interchangeable in “Where.When,” but it is impossible to determine from which position the voice emanates.

It is no coincidence that the explicit introduction of the first-person perspective is followed by a reference to lyric poetry and the Russian tradition. When the suicide—who may or may not be the lyric voice behind the entire work—calls to mind the moment of his own death, he remembers it “by heart” (наизусть), the way one would remember a poem. First, he remembers “all those sixes and fives” (Все эти шестерки, пятерки), an unclear reference. The context of remembering “by heart” (наизусть) may suggest a reference to poetic meter, itself a mnemonic device, especially in light of the ensuing reference to Pushkin. (Although in this case one would have rather expected the number four, i.e., the iambic tetrameter of Eugene Onegin and most of the verse in “Where.”) More broadly, these quantities may denote numbers in general, perhaps an oblique reference to the practical mind’s inability to understand the world.155

The next thing remembered is vanity (суета), which might be read as a reference to earthly

155 Out of the many examples of Vvedensky’s play with countable quantities, the most relevant here may be the narrative poem “Five or Six” [Пять или шесть]. While commentators have previously drawn attention to the recurrence of these numbers in the two works, it remains unclear what, if any, special significance they held for the poet. One passage in “Five or Six” may provide relevant context for understanding how these numbers function here: Кшега безусловно прав. Что собственно мы имеем пять или шесть лошадей говорю намеренно приблизительно потому что ничего точного всё равно никогда не скажешь. Четыре одежды (Vvedenskii 2010, 92; idiosyncratic punctuation in original). In this passage the speaker’s inability to decide between the numbers five and six signals the imprecision of all language, once again leading to a breakdown of grammar in the expression: “four clothes” [четыре одежды]. Note the similar unusual combination involving an uncountable noun in the phrase “немногочисленную землю” at the end of “Where.When.”
existence. But then, this memory blends with that of rhyme, the poet’s “true” or “faithful” friend (верная подруга). Of course, the attribution of this epithet to Pushkin is itself a testament to the vagaries of poetic memory. The line misquoted here is the opening line of “Рифма, звучная подруга…”—a poem in which “rhyme” is decidedly unfaithful, deserting the poet in the very first stanza.¹⁵⁶ This misremembered epithet becomes all the more striking when we ourselves remember that, in the myth of Pushkin’s poem, Mnemosyne is declared to be the mother of rhyme. In Vvedensky’s text as well, rhyme figures as an instrument of memory, yet his inexact citation doubly underscores its unfaithfulness. This inconstancy of memory might be interpreted through the problematic of repetition and discontinuous identity raised in “Rug/Hydrangea,” and more generally through the writings of the Lipavsky circle. For the present discussion, however, the reference to Pushkin and poetic form is mainly significant for its refusal to recognize poetic discourse as a source of harmony; rather, this discourse is distorted by contact with an incomprehensible and uncomprehending world and it becomes impossible to anchor it to any one unified perspective.

As poetic language fails to fulfill its mnemonic function, the prose of the narrative begins to collapse on itself. Immediately following the excerpt quoted above we find this self-devouring sentence:

Тут тень всеобщего отращения лежала на всем. Тут тень всеобщего лежала на всем. Тут тень лежала на всем. (267)

Here the shadow of universal repugnance lay upon everything. Here the shadow of universal lay upon everything. Here the shadow lay upon everything.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ This poem is also subtly referenced earlier in Vvedensky’s work, with a nod to another famous Pushkin poem. In “Where,” the suicide declares, “Прощайте камни, прощайте тучи/я вас любил и я вас мучил,” inverting of Pushkin’s line, “Был я мучим и любим” (“Рифма, звучная подруга…”) and, of course, recalling the opening of “Я вас любил…”

¹⁵⁷ For this and the next block quote, I reproduce Ostashevsky’s (op. cit.) translation (59).
This “repugnance” (or “repulsion”) can be read etymologically as “от-вращения,” literally a universal “turning away,” echoing the world’s leave-taking in “Where.” The systematic deletion of words in this line suggests aphasia and prefigures the silence at the end of the text, while the shadow left covering everything suggests a final lapse of memory. At this point the not-exactly-savages make their return:

И дикари, а может и не дикари, с плачем похожим на шелест дубов, на жужжание пчел, на плеск волн, на молчание камней и на вид пустыни, держа тарелки над головами, вышли и неторопливо спустились с вершин на немногочисленную землю. (267)

And the savages or maybe not savages, with a weeping that resembled the rustle of oaks, the buzz of bees, the plash of waves, the silence of rocks, the view of the desert, came out holding plates over their heads and descended, without hurry, from the mountaintops onto the nonnumerous earth.

While the plates over their heads suggest a humanoid form of these “savages,” their humanity is difficult to reconcile with the description of their weeping (плач), which suggests an inaccessible, nonhuman language that can only be indicated by a series of analogies, both aural and visual. Within the text they appear to enter from a neighboring reality, but intertextually these entities have evidently migrated from a primitivist discourse that imagines the “savage” as a threshold between humanity and the non-human world. (Taking an example close to the obreity, Tufanov discusses savages in this sense—i.e., as a kind of primal humanity connected to the natural world—in the preface to Towards zaum’.) Unable to describe such entities, language falls back on an equivocation (“savages, or maybe not”) followed by a series of comparisons, the proliferation of which underscores their insufficiency.

At this point, the struggling language of this paragraph gives up with a sigh—and one final evocation of the Russian poetic tradition:

Ах Пушкин. Пушкин. ВСЕ (267)
Ah Pushkin, Pushkin. THAT’S ALL

This ending is an ambiguous affirmation of Pushkin’s legacy. On the one hand, Alexander Sergeevich is given pride of place at the end of the text, and presumably as a final impression in the (lyric) hero’s human consciousness. His name appears to underwrite the entire work and to stand in as a shorthand for human language and living memory. On the other hand, the breathless repetition of this name sounds obsequious and comic, especially when we remember that Vvedensky used nearly the same words (О пушкин, пушкин.) as a throwaway line in his quasi-Futurist farce Minin and Pozharsky (53). Moreover, we have just witnessed the collapse of human language and memory, as well as its incomprehensible alternative in the weeping of the pseudo-savages. If language is primarily characterized by its “poverty,” its governing authority is “бессмыслица,” rather than Pushkin. Finally, it bears noting that the metonym of Russian poetry is followed by “BCE”—a final word rich in connotations for Vvedensky and his immediate circle, perhaps implying a simultaneous parting with his own circle and the national tradition as a whole.158 (One may also hear in this juxtaposition an echo of Apollon Grigor’ev’s famous declaration: “Пушкин—наше всё.”)159

In the end, Pushkin proves absolutely indispensible and entirely incommensurate to Vvedensky’s poetic project. Vvedensky knew Pushkin’s works thoroughly and constantly drew on them for imagery, but he also perceived a decisive break between his sense of the world and

158 Various works by Kharms and Vvedensky use the word, often in all capital letters, to mark their ending. The abrupt ending, “вот, собственно, и все,” is a kind of trademark of the Kharmsian non-narrative. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, “Всё” is also the title of an Oberiu-era poem by Vvedensky, and it was subsequently used for a recent edition of his collected works.
159 My thanks to Professor Ellen Chances for bringing this reading to my attention.
any literary precedent. In a conversation recorded by Lipavsky, shortly after discussing Veresaev’s *Pushkin v zhizni*, Vvedensky proclaims: “I’ve understood how I am different from past writers, and indeed from people in general. They said: life is a moment in comparison to eternity. I say: it’s just a moment, even in comparison with a moment.” (Я понял, чем я отличаюсь от прошлых писателей, да и вообще людей. Те говорили: жизнь - мгновение в сравнении с вечностью. Я говорю: она вообще мгновенье, даже в сравнении с мгновением.) This self-assessment resonates with the philosophical texts gathered in the “Gray Notebook,” especially the mini-essay “Points and the Seventh Hour” (Tochki i sed’moi chas).

Here, Vvedensky argues that a person can truly possess only the second immediately preceding death, since this is the only moment in the series constituting a particular human life that is not immediately negated by its successor. Yet even this possession is itself unreal as death immediately negates it (179-180). Vvedensky’s later comment on the absolute ephemerality of human life may be read as an insistence on viewing all human experience through this unattainable moment of death. One poetic interpretation of what such an existence might look like can be found in the poem “Over the blessed sea…”, which was written on the same page as “Points and the Seventh Hour” (cf. A. Gerasimova’s note: Vvedenskii 303-4). The poem presents a moribund cosmology in which the world is created by self-poisoning air [Воздух] (an obvious play on the expected “Spirit” [Дух]) whose first thoughts on creation are, “Everything passes/the rotted fruit barely hangs” (Всё проходит/едва висит прогнивший плод). Death proves constitutive not only to being but also to cognition, as thought [мысль] first descends to the world when a flower (emblematic of procreation) first experiences grief (in a phrase that also

160 Cf. Anna Gerasimova’s article “Бедный всадник, или Пушкин без гововы. Реконструкция одного сна” (in Vvedenskii 2010, 662-691, also available online: http://www.umka.ru/liter/950221.html)
suggests wilting [тоскует лепестками]). This moribund cosmology—where creation happens through and for its own negation—may be read as a poetic resolution to the philosophical impasse of the notebook: a space in which death is always immanent and underlies all contemplation. A weathered roof in “Rug/Hydrangea” provides a similar image of expanding the moment of death:

Мне жалко что я не крыша,  
расслаивающаяся постепенно,  
которую дождь размачивает,  
у которой смерть не мгновенна. (208)  
I’m sorry that I’m not a roof  
Crumbling bit by bit,  
Which the rain softens,  
For which death is not instantaneous.

This philosophical context explains both Vvedensky’s acute interest in the elegy and his need to subvert of the genre. If the elegy often treats death as its subject, its attitude toward death implies a certain temporal distance - as in the already-complete death of a friend or an anticipated horizon for the poet himself. Vvedensky attempts to stage an encounter with death not as a future contingency but as a fundamental incoherence in our thinking about life, one that becomes evident primarily in the dissolution of the lyric subject.

**Conversations with the Literary Tradition**

To summarize, both Zabolotsky and Vvedensky look back to the philosophical elegy and adapt it to fit a world where the isolated elegist no longer provides a convincing model for meaningful understanding. In Zabolotsky’s poetry, we see the fate of the elegy in a world without loss, one where death is never really death because I am no singular entity and part of me will always live on in others. For Vvedensky, the terms are reversed: death and loss fundamentally constitute the world, and the task of lyric poetry is to disclose the hidden disjunctions underlying every sense of continuity—a task that leaves no space for a self-consistent lyrical subject. If we speculate that the return to this canonical genre was, at least in
part, a tactical move for Zabolotsky, it was evidently not solely due to political considerations, and we can impute no political motive to Vvedensky, whose poems had no chance at publication at this point.

Notably, we do not find such an aggressive undermining of the lyric “I” in Vvedensky’s 1940 poem “Elegy,” in many ways the most overtly traditionalist poem of his career. This poem would seem entirely divorced from the ontological concerns of his more philosophical works. It does, however, engage the problem of conventionality and tradition in an interesting way. A degree of irony toward the elegiac genre is evidenced in the epigraph, which borrows its rhyme from Bakhterev’s “Elegy” (cited above):

Так сочинилась мной элегия о том, как ехал на телеге я. (261)  
So was an elegy composed by me about how I rode in a cart.

These lines suggest that, like Bakhterev, Vvedensky approaches the elegiac genre from an ironizing distance. Indeed, the opening lines of the poem read as a catalogue of poetic tropes, positioning the lyric hero more firmly within the literary tradition within a contemporary context. Yet, there is nothing overtly humorous about the imagery—if anything, the overall tone is solemn, and the rhymes, although elaborately structured, do not maintain the comic tone of the epigraph:

Осматривая гор вершины, их бесконечные аршины, вином налитые кувшины, весь мир, как снег, прекрасный, я видел горные потоки, я видел бурю взор жестокий, и ветер мирный и высокий,  
Surveying the mountains’ heights, their endless arshines, the pitchers filled with wine, the whole world, beautiful like snow, I saw the mountain streams, I saw the cruel gaze of the storm, and the wind peaceful and sublime,

The poem’s rhyme pattern aaabcccb is rare, although it does appear in previous works by several other poets (including Pushkin, Fet, Tsvetaeva, and Kuzmin). Vvedensky’s specific combination of iambic tetrameter and trimeter with this rhyme pattern appears to have no precedent. It has, however, been used in later poems, most prominently in Joseph Brodsky’s “1 января 1965 года” and “Как славно вечером в избе...” (1965).
и смерти час напрасный. (261-2) and the vain hour of death.

The imagery is not strictly elegiac but rather broadly based on the Russian poetic tradition since the eighteenth-century ode. Indeed, much of the imagery in these lines directly recalls the opening stanza of Lomonosov’s famous Khotin ode: the emphasis on height, the mountain streams, the calm wind on high.\textsuperscript{162} The soaring gaze established in these lines places the lyric subject in the tradition of the eighteenth-century Pindaric bard, as well as the Pushkinian poet, likened to an eagle awakened by divine speech.\textsuperscript{163} This perspective is particularly striking when compared to the earlier elegy “Rug/Hydrangea,” in which the fragmented “lyric subject” (to the extent that this category even applies) mostly imagines the world and sees only its insignificance: he sees “insignificant leaves,” a “disfigured world,” etc. In “Elegy” we find the resurgence of the unified subject, now empowered with sublime inspiration and speaking in regularly patterned syntax and structured verse (without the narrative devices that estrange the regular verse of the “Second Conversation” or the beginning of “Where”). If the epigraph underscores the conventionality of this category, it does not compromise its consistency in any way. In short, “Elegy” appears to operate on a completely different notion of lyric from Vvedensky’s other poetry. Why might this be the case?

The answer lies in the perspective of the poem. Put simply, “Elegy” stands apart from Vvedensky’s other poetry of the 1930s because it is not primarily a philosophical work, but rather a commemoration, in alternately sorrowful and invective turns, of a generation that had witnessed cataclysmic social changes and now stood at the brink of a devastating war. By the

\textsuperscript{162} Cf. Lomonosov: Восторг внезапный ум пленил,/Ведет на верх горы высокой,/Где ветр в лесах шуметь забыл;/В долине тишина глубокой,/Внимая нечто, ключ молчит,/Которой завсегда журчит/И с шумом вниз с холмов стремится. (Lomonosov 61; emphasis added).

\textsuperscript{163} Height and the “uplift” of the poet’s gaze are defining traits of the sublime as expressed in the Russian odic tradition (see Ram: 11-12, 17-19).
third verse, the voice shifts into the first person plural (мы), and the tone shifts from exaltation to pity and blame: “...we look through a window without a curtain/at the light of a soulless star”; “we mean almost nothing”; “we betray our friend,” etc. Over the course of the elegy traditional poetic imagery is interspersed with glimpses of a condemned world, but a rhetorical gap remains between the elegiac “I” and the judged “we.” The soaring lyric perspective of the opening lines becomes the perspective from which the poet views the lowly and ignoble present. It provides the contrasting gaze through which the present age may be seen and evaluated—and perhaps there is even an element of redemption. One of the charges levied against the age is that they “equated remembrance with pretense” and “that’s why [they]’re burning” (as Ostashevsky translates it, 125) [воспоминание мним как дерзость/за то мы и палимы (Vvedenskii 2010, 263)]. The act of writing an elegy for this generation and elevating it through poetic discourse is itself an act of recollection counteracting this self-immolation.

Such an understanding of the Russian classical tradition as a perspective for evaluating the present may also help explain a surprising trend in Kharms’s poetry of the 1930s. In the years following his arrest and exile, Kharms wrote a number of overtly stylized poems, marking many with the oddly pedantic designation “exercises in classical meter” (упражнения в классическом размере; often abbreviated УКР). Scholars have previously remarked on Kharms’s pronounced interest in order and classicism post-arrest, evident in these exercises, his love for canonical authors, and 1934 avowal of “purity of order” (чистота порядка) as an aesthetic principle (see especially: Kukulin 2005; Kobrinskii 2009, 301-6). It has been suggested that these poems represent a simultaneous personal and aesthetic crisis, as Kharms’s professional literary activity was over (excepting children’s literature, although even in this sphere he was struggling to find work) and he was beginning to face extreme financial hardships (Kobrinskii 2009, 343). More
generally, Kharms’s avowal of “classicism” parallels the official drive for canonization already mentioned, and this context likely influenced his interest in defining a lineage for his own writing. While many of the “exercises in classical meters” are precisely this, formal exercises, Kharms reverts to classical meters and conventional lexicon to write on a variety of topics, including his relationship with his second wife, Marina Durnovo, and the poet’s calling. This category also includes a pair of draft poems about the Lipavsky circle that mark Kharms’s most serious engagement with the nineteenth-century elegy.

On January 23, 1935, Kharms wrote, and then crossed out, the following poem in his notebook:

Here is a gathering of friends by fate abandoned:
Each is repulsed on hearing the other’s speech;
One can no longer leap upwards, nor become oneself,
Nor cast boredom from his shoulders with a mordant joke.

The dispute is long left behind, the useless conversation
Subsided suddenly on its own, and silently every gaze
Is filled with disdain, flies at its neighbor like a lance,
Knocking down the word from his lips. And the conversation goes silent.

Вот сборище друзей, оставленных судьбою:
Противно каждому другого слушать речь;
Не прыгнуть больше вверх, не стать самим собою,
Насмешкой колючей не скинуть скуки с плеч.

Давно оставлен спор, ненужная беседа
Сама заглохла вдруг, и молча каждый взор
Презреньем полн, копьём летит в соседа,
Сбивая слово с уст. И молчит разговор. (Kharms 1997, 410 n.237)

This first draft has made its way into scholarly conversations primarily on the basis of its vivid depiction of the collapse of friendly relations among the Lipavsky circle. (Valerii Sazhin titles his major two-volume collection of Lipavsky circle writings “Сборище друзей, оставленных судьбою…”). In the context of Kharms’s oeuvre, this short nineteenth-century stylization is
striking precisely because it observes formal conventions so faithfully (including archaisms and a midpoint caesura in the seven hexameter lines). Kharms was evidently displeased with this version and penned a new one the same day, this time addressing himself expressly to Nikolai Oleinikov. This second version retains the same verse structure as the first (quatrains with alternating feminine and masculine rhymes; mostly iambic hexameter with one pentameter line) and represents a stylization in the same spirit (despite the contemporary reference to Bunin). The opening lines of this openly hostile poem revisit the theme of lost friendship from the previous draft, but then focus on Oleinikov’s lack of respect for tradition:

Conductor of numbers, friendship’s cruel derider,
What is on your mind? Or do you once more compromise the peace?
For you Homer’s a vulgarian, and Goethe’s a stupid sinner,
Dante is ridiculed by you, - only Bunin is your idol.

Кондуктор чисел, дружбы злой насмешник,
О чем задумался? Иль вновь порочишь мир?
Гомер тебе пошляк, и гёте - глупый грешник,
Тобой осмеян дант, - лишь бунин твой кумир. (Kharms 1997, vol. 1, 269-270)

If the previous draft focused on the silencing of friendly conversation, this version suggests instead poetic impotence as Oleinikov’s verse (Он <т.е. твой стих - GC> даже злит порой, и мало в нем искусства, И в бездну мелких дум он сверзиться спешит.). These themes of silence and reprobation appear again in a similarly stylized 1935 verse epistle addressed to Kharms’s wife Marina Malich. After chastising her silence, Kharms begs for just one vocal sound to reignite his love:

Произнеси хотя бы слово,       Pronounce but a word,
Хотя бы самый краткий звук,    But the very shortest sound,
И вмиг любовь зажжётся снова   And suddenly love will be sparked anew
Ещё сильней к тебе мой друг. (Ibid., 274)    Even stronger for you my friend.

Once again, traditional, overtly stylized verse language of the epistle replaces direct verbal conversation with the recipient.
This theme takes on a more dramatic form in a slightly later poem (1936-7), in which Kharms writes of his divine selection and lost inheritance as a Poet:

Да, я поэт забытый небом
<Забытый небом> с давних пор.
А были дни, когда мы с Фебом
Гремели вместе сладкий хор. [...] (Ibid., 283)

Yes, I am a poet forgotten by the heavens
<Forgotten by the heavens> since long ago
But there were days when Phoebus and I
Resounded together a sweet choir.

The opening line—which echoes Vaginov’s earlier pronouncement: «Да, я поэт трагической забавы”—sounds strange coming from Kharms, who up until this point had never used the word “poet” in his short verse and had given the word much more destructive connotations in Comedy of the City Petersburg. (The maniac Obernibesov proclaims: “Я поэт / схвачу тебя за ножки / и как птицу / ударю с возгласом о тумбу головой” [Kharms 1997, vol. 2, 214].) Here Kharms explicitly aligns the poet with Apollo, representative of a clarity and order, a deity proclaimed dead by even Vaginov, who began his career in dialogue with the Acmeists, in 1923. The phrase “forgotten by the heavens” [забытый небом] in the opening line recalls the epithet “abandoned by fate” [оставленных судьбою], which we have already scene in the poem about the Lipavsky Circle cited above. Yet the most relevant context is actually another Kharms poem, the unfinished “On my visit to the Writers’ House on January 24, 1935” (На посещение писательского дома 24 января 1935 года), which uses this exact same phrase in its opening line:

Когда оставленный судьбою
Я в двери к вам стучу друзья
Мой взор темнеет сам собою
И в сердце стук унять нельзя

When, abandoned by fate,
I knock at your door, friends,
My gaze grows dark on its own,
And the hammering in my heart cannot be soothed.

(Ibid., 327)

As the poem continues, Kharms contemplates the humiliation he may face when confronted by these writers, especially if he should be subject to the “ready-made condemnation” [приговор готовый] that struck his friends in the past. This scene is made especially poignant by the titular
date, which marks the seventh anniversary of the OBERIU Three Left Hours performance at the Leningrad House of the Press. While the lyric subject of these poems claims to acquiesce to his fate of being tossed aside by friends, colleagues, and even his wife, the stylized language of the verse inevitably evokes the Romantic tradition, with its central trope of the poet as outcast, implying that the neglected genius of their author will one day be revealed to the world. In other words, the poet relinquishes his present status in order to be integrated into the tradition of great literature and passed along to posterity.\footnote{Cf. Baratynsky: “I will find a reader in posterity” [Читателя найду в потомстве я] (“Мой дар убог и голос мой не громок…” 1828).}

In the prior examples from Zabolotsky and Vvedensky, we saw that these poets found novel solutions to the traditional elegiac problem of expressing intimate emotion within the established language of poetic convention. For all their differences, both poets foregrounded this conventionality to figure elegiac sorrow as the expression of a confined lyric subject, incapable of expressing the world outside its own experience. In Vvedensky’s “Elegy” and Kharms’s “exercises in classical meters,” however, the poets evoke the canonical Russian tradition to a different end, as an alternative to the ignominy of the present. Here, the Pushkinian tradition functions as a stand-in for lyric poetry per se, as a privileged language for expressing truth and reaching posterity, regardless of the poet’s present travails. In each of these cases, the post-OBERIU turn to elegiac language enables these authors to interrogate their existential and professional status as poets after the collapse of the “left flank” as a viable alternative for Soviet art and society. In a way, the elegy provides an ideal genre for expressing this experience of living out of step with the social whole. As Harsha Ram observes, as a genre suspended between “former plenitude” and “imminent death,” “[t]he elegy is bezvremenna—not so much time less as untimely: it dramatizes a fate essentially out of synchrony with the course of events” (178). The
members of the unofficial Lipavsky circle were essentially out of synchrony with the course of
Soviet history, and the mournful intonations of the elegiac tradition provided a means of living
and memorializing this asynchronous existence.
Conclusion

Pushkin sits at home and thinks: “Sure, I’m a genius. Gogol’s also a genius. But Tolstoy is also a genius, and Dostoevsky, God rest his soul, is a genius! When will it all end?

Right then, it all ended.  

- Pseudo-Kharms

There comes a point in Leonid Lipavsky’s “Conversations,” the ostensibly faithful transcript of several discussions among the members of the Lipavsky circle in the years 1933-4, when the author unexpectedly makes a meta-textual comparison between the exchanges of his own immediate circle and a prominent literary precedent:

Goethe’s conversations with Eckermann are incomparably more agreeable and interesting than those that I am recording. There is no pretentiousness or abstraction in them. Because they were both working and the conversations didn’t replace work for them, [but] aided it.

Разговоры Гете с Эккерманом неравнозначно приятнее и интереснее тех, что я записываю. В них нет претенциозности и отвлеченности. Потому что оба они работали и разговоры не подменяли им работы, помогали ей. (Lipavskii, 369)

Johann Peter Eckermann served as Goethe’s secretary during the last years of the latter’s life, and his record of their conversations contributed substantially to Goethe’s legacy worldwide. By appealing to this text, Lipavsky makes an important claim about the conditions for a successful conversation, correlating interest and enjoyment with the capacity to engage in meaningful work. Since most participants in the “Conversations” faced a doubtful professional future by this time, it is significant that Lipavsky immediately pivots to reflect on the virtue of being in step with one’s time:

Of course, Goethe’s greatness [lay] not in the knowledge of some particular secrets, but just the opposite, in his ordinariness. He was clear in spirit like any person working conscientiously

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165 Пушкин сидит у себя и думает: "Я - гений, ладно. Гоголь тоже гений. Но ведь и Толстой - гений, и Достоевский, царство ему небесное, гений! Когда же это кончится?" Тут все и кончилось. (Dobrokhotova-Maikova, 44)
and selflessly. How noble [it is] when people work freely and modestly. It’s pleasant to look at
them then. […] Pushkin was, most likely, more gifted than Goethe. Even Goethe had his
limitations. But he was able to set himself in the proper position, so that time itself, like the
rising tide, brought him its riches. His conversations give the impression of conversations in
heaven. We, however, are unhappy and poor.

Величие Гете конечно не в знании каких-то особых тайн, а наоборот в его обыкновенности. Он ясен душой как всякий добросовестно и бескорыстно работающий человек. Как благородно, когда люди работают свободно и скромно. На них приятно тогда смотреть. […] Пушкин был, вероятно, одаренее Гете. И у Гете была своя ограниченность. Но он сумел стать в правильное положение, так что само время, как прилив, приносило ему свои ценности. Его разговоры производят впечатление разговоров в раю. Мы же неблагополучны и скучны. (Ibid., 369)

Here, Lipavsky defines “greatness” largely by the talent of living in sync with history. If one can
position oneself in alignment with contemporary values, this coincidence will endow one’s
language with meaning, interest, value—even immortality. By this same standard, Lipavsky’s
own circle (a “gathering of friends by fate abandoned” as Kharms would call
them) is
insignificant and impoverished.

In general, the topics of genius and literary greatness frequently arise in Leonid
Lipavsky’s “Conversations.” If the passage cited above betrays anxiety over how the authors
involved would measure against a historical pantheon of great writers and thinkers, these
discussions also include moments of humorous iconoclasm. For instance, at one point the author
cites the following lines from an otherwise unknown “autobiography” by Vvedensky as a dig at
the pretentious name-dropping of Kharms and the Germanist Dmitrii Mikhailov (a frequent
participant in the circle’s meetings):

Гениальному мужчине
Гете, Пушкин и Шекспир,
Костомаров и Пуччини
Собрались устроить пир (345)

For a man of genius
Goethe, Pushkin, Shakespeare,
Kostomarov and Puccini
Got together to have a feast.

More than anything, these conversations display an interest in how such categories as “genius”
and “greatness” are constructed. Shortly after his discussion of Goethe and Eckermann, Lipavsky
remarks on the arbitrariness of all judgments of human “greatness” in light of “very mixed practical demands” [очень смешанные практические требования] that confront each person, which leads him to conclude: “But it is simply futile to speak about great people with some special reverence” [А говорить о великих людях с каким-то особым благоговением, это просто бесплодно] (Lipavskii 370). One should not focus on compiling a list of “great” people, but rather on understanding the qualities and historical circumstances that lead to such an evaluation.

These reflections on literary success strike me as particularly apt for understanding the legacy of the writers clustered around OBERIU, even the most prominent of whom are generally denied admission to the “first rank of world literature.” If these authors have by and large become legitimate objects of academic study, a degree of mutual suspicion remains between their most vocal advocates and the discipline of philology. This tension arises directly from the history of the Left Flank traced in this dissertation, in which the creative evolution of these authors is closely linked with an organizational history comprised of unrealized projects, critical disdain, and social exclusion. More importantly, we have seen that these authors were deeply aware of their marginal, quasi-literary status—a position jestingly encapsulated in names like the “Left Flank” and the “Academy of Left Classics.” Even as they increasingly turned to the literary canon in their post-arrest writings as a source of continuity with past authors and (they hoped) future readers, the former oberiyuty continued to question aesthetic hierarchies and literary conventions. Consider once again Kharms’s advice on spelling: “When someone observes, ‘You made a mistake writing that,’ answer: ‘That’s how it always looks when I write it’” [На замечание: "Вы написали с ошибкой", - ответствуй: "Так всегда выглядит в моём написании"] (Kharms 1997, 5.1, 192). Or Vvedensky’s principle of “bad rhyme”: “It happens
that two rhymes will come to mind, a good one and a bad one, and I choose the bad one; this one will turn out to be right” [бывает, что приходит на ум две рифмы, хорошая и плохая, и я выбираю плохую, именно она и будет правильной] (Sazhin et al., vol. 1, 52). By making such pronouncements, they implicitly acknowledge the established rules of orthography or prosody as the standard against which their idiosyncratic works will be read, but they simultaneously relativize these rules by suggesting that alternative criteria for “correct” writing might be established. This hypothetical alternative may merely offer a degree of private satisfaction (“Other people write correctly, but I write this way”), or it may be put to wider political use (as when Nadezhda Tolokonnikova of Pussy Riot evoked the principle of “bad rhyme” while on trial), but in either case it fundamentally depends on creating dissonance with a normative literary style. As a result, it always runs the risk of being read unsympathetically as mere artistic failure.

In short, the history of the Left Flank cannot be disentangled from aesthetic hierarchies, and an adequate understanding of this movement must include a critical examination of the politics of determining literary “success.” Although a more thorough investigation of this problem lies beyond the scope of this dissertation, I would like to suggest a few considerations that such an investigation might take into account. First, one might expand upon the line of inquiry opened in Chapter Four and delve further into the personal “canons” of the participants in the Lipavsky circle and their relationship to the official literary canon established by Socialist Realism. Second, one might delve more deeply into Lipavsky’s “Conversations” as a starting point for examining how these authors engaged conceptually with the notions of genius and literary greatness (as both historically contingent categories and abstract philosophical concepts).

166 For a related discussion of the politics of “bad poetry” in relation to Zabolotsky’s later works, see Sandomirskaja (2001).
Lastly, taking a broader historical view, one might also trace the genealogy of a canonical view of the OBERIU movement in the creative endeavors of successors like Dmitrii Prigov and Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, as well as in the memoirs of the group’s contemporaries and the early studies of Iakov Druskin. While beyond the scope of the present study, these questions are crucial to understanding the conflicted relationship between the Left Flank and “literary history.”
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