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"NOT BACK TO PUSHKIN, BUT FORWARDS AWAY FROM HIM": ON THE RUSSIANNESS OF RUSSIAN IMAGINISM

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The headline quotation, which is taken from an Imaginist manifesto "Almost a declaration" (*Pochti deklaratsiya*, 1923), is easy to read as a reminder of both the Futurist manifesto "Slap in the face of public taste" (1912) and Aleksei Kruchenykh's earlier definition of his famous and thoroughly studied trans-rational poem "Dyr bul shchyl" (1912). In this poem, according to the poet, there was "more of national Russian than in all of Pushkin's poetry" [Бродский et al. 1929: 80]. On the other hand, his poem was written in its "own language" or, as was suggested by his colleague poet and painter David Burlyuk, with "unknown words" [Харджиев: 390]. The combination of 'Russianness' and 'unknown' thus appears as a proper recipe for an early Russian avant-garde text and as material for new, unpredictable poetic language. Russianness in Kruchenykh's text was emphasized even later by the author himself when he discussed Ilya Ehrenburg's attempts to translate it into French: "Ehrenburg <…> is trying to translate 'dyr bul shchyl' into French but is 40 years too late, and it does not work for him <…> I tried to give a phonetic extract of Russian language with all its dissonances <…> of course, if Dahl had heard my opus, he would probably have sworn, but he could not tell whether we are dealing with Italian or French phonetics" (cit. [Богомолов 2005: 174])[1].

This article does not, however, deal with Kruchenykh or his trans-rational poetry, but with the next phase of historical Russian avant-garde literature, the representatives of the group of Imaginists (1918–1928). Their self-definition of *Russianness* relates to their first declarations and also to the name of their group, though the name "Imazhinisty" would not seem to suggest anything essentially

[1] All the translations are made by the author of the article.

Russian. Like the Futurists with Marinetti, what they did do is represent their "poetic school" as self-emergent, meaning that it had nothing to do with the Anglo-American Imagists. Today we know, however, that Sergei Esenin confessed in a letter that they had read Zinaida Vengerova's interview with Ezra Pound from of 1915 (in the Futurist anthology *Strelets*), and from that interview they took the name for their poetic group [Есенин 1995–2002: VI, 126].

The Imaginists emphasized their Russianness with the publication of their own journal *Gostinitsa dlya puteshestvuyushchikh v prekrasnom* (The Inn for Travellers in the Beautiful), which went through four issues between 1922 and 1924. Vadim Shershenevich wrote in his memoirs about the journal:

> There were four issues published on fine paper, with lots of poems and some articles. Esenin was abroad, and we published his poems sent from Europe or America, his letters as well as letters sent to him. Mariengof was the editor, but I do not recollect that he had any conflicts with any of us about the journal [Шершеневич 1990: 592].

Gostinitsa was severely criticized for its belated aestheticism; the pages being designed and decorated in the spirit of decadent Symbolism of the fin-de-siècle, à la Aubrey Beardsley. Mariengof and his colleagues also tried to anticipate criticism by their enemies, which was typical in avant-garde spheres of the time. However, the texts in the journal contained a surprising nationalistic tendency, which Shershenevich did not like:

> In the journal you can sense, for example, the emphasized ultra-national characteristics of Imaginism. But we were never nationalists. On the contrary, we were always against the way the Futurists tried to promote both their own vulgar internationalism and Khlebnikov, a "Futurist without a doubt," who was obviously not only a nationalist, but a chauvinist [Ibid.: 593].

The first and the second issue (from 1922 and 1923) had a subtitle "Russian Journal" (*Russkii zhurnal*). The first issue had an editorial titled "Non-editorial" (*Ne peredovitsa*) with the following declaration of Imaginist Russianness:

> We Russians are restless people. Is it even possible for Russians to be peaceful? Our fatherland is enormous, we have many relatives. Each of us (even though we hide this in the need to be fashionable) loves the black body of the land and the grey eyes of our neighbours. Thus we cannot constantly worry about the destinies of those who have reached a constant place in our hearts and memories.
>
> This has been the main reason for us to be travellers ever since. Naturally, we do not mean this literally. But even if we did talk literally, it would not be false. Nomads were our ancestors [Мариенгоф 2013: 668].

One of the significant contexts of the new Imaginist journal in 1922 was the feeling of timelessness: a sense of frustration that many writers experienced as the end of the Revolution as well as the end of the multiple privileges that this poetic group had received from the Bolsheviks. The Imaginists were a pro-Bolshevik avant-garde poetic group, considering that Ryurik Ivnev served as the personal secretary to Anatoly Lunacharsky, while Sergei Esenin was in constant close contact with Yakov Blumkin, the Bolshevik terrorist and killer of Wilhelm Graf von Mirbach-Harff. Their frustrations can clearly be seen in the poems published in the journal *Gostinitsa*. The Bolsheviks' privileges were transformed in their poetry into "fame" (*slava*) and attention from the general public, and the end of all this is juxtaposed in their poetry with the end of youth, with images of the new times, about "other youngsters singing other songs" [Мариенгоф 2005: 321].

On the other hand, judging from the public activity of the Imaginists during the years 1922–1924 this would appear to be a time of new notions and new key words, such as "the academy" (*akademiya*), "the big theme" (*bol'shaya tema*), "the canon" (*kanon*), "monumental art" (*monumental'noe iskusstvo*), "classicism" (*klassicism*), "Slavonic" (*slavyanskoe*) and "Russian" (*russkoe*). All these notions are, at first glance, somewhat paradoxical for a group of avant-gardist experimental poetry. They are also very different from the former Imaginist declarative "slogans" that were typical during the years 1918–1920, such as "the differentiation of the arts", "the separation of art and the state", "the dictatorship of Imaginism", which all represent typical avant-garde anarchistic departures from the existing cultural tradition and declarations of something new and not yet existing. The new notions would seem to suggest the idea of searching for the historical roots of Imaginism on the one hand, and of defining the existing movement as something historical on the other. In this sense, these notions appear in the context of what has been called the synthetic avant-garde [Hansen-Löve 1987].

"The academy"

One of the most peculiar new concepts in the Imaginists' new vocabulary was "the academy", which suddenly seemed to appear everywhere in editor Mariengof's texts:

> We understand the principle of the academy as complete control not over the separate elements of the material, but the form as a totality.

> Only academic virtuosity opens the way for the moment of discovery in art. Innovative art is always *academic*. Because we understand innovation not as a standard stunt, but the way art is moving ahead [Мариенгоф 1922].

Mariengof further emphasizes how contemporary art is supposed to include the earlier phases, i. e. to annex the cultural tradition. This is obviously something else than "A slap in the face of public taste" or "throw Pushkin overboard from the Ship of Modernity". There the notion of "the academy" was interpreted, along with Pushkin, as something "less intelligible than hieroglyphics". In Imaginism we can see rather symptoms of the synthetic avant-garde with its orientation towards the "conjunctive" principle, meaning the avant-garde's attempts to revive the connection with the past, which was aggressively excluded in the "analytic" period of the avant-garde (the early 1910s). The new art, defined by the Imaginist as "academic", is equipped with more experience and knowledge in comparison with the old and previous. Therefore "the new" means moving forward "from Pushkin" rather than throwing him out. However, it is important to notice that there is a moment of avant-gardist non-belonging in this academic Imaginism as Mariengof pointed out: "Academic art is standing outside the wide success among the audience, since the virtuosity and perfect artistic taste anticipate needlessly décolleté formal wear" [Мариенгоф 2013: 646].

In a document from his personal archive Mariengof develops theses related to the notion of "the academy" by listing them in a catalogue. His basic idea is that both Imaginism and contemporary Russia need a new worldview. Art should be understood through its political function, against aestheticism, which seems paradoxical in the context of *Gostinitsa*. However, the attack against the analytic avant-garde is obvious:

> 12. Cultural tradition.
> 13. The desolate do not know ancestors /Pushkin/, <but we do>.
> 14. We do not destruct, we consummate.
> 15. We create an academy — an executive committee of muses.
> 16. Down with subjectivism — *mahnovshchina* — long live the ACADEMY.
> 17. DOWN WITH ACADEMISM. <…>
> 19. Have to create canons. <…>
> 22. Contemporary, but not the present. It is time to create a revolutionary academy [Мариенгоф 1922: 1].

Mariengof also declares that "academy is not aestheticism of the 'top 10,000', but a national ideology" [Ibid.: 2]. One relevant context for the notion of "the academy" in the Imaginist jargon in 1922 is, apart from the earlier Cosmist

Alexander Chizhevsky's *Academy of Poetry* (1918), the organization of the Russian Academy of Art Sciences (since 1925 known as the State Academy of Art Sciences). It was organized by Anatoly Lunacharsky in October 1921. The Academy was indeed close to the Imaginists, since their friend and participant in their performance events, philosopher Gustav Shpet, was the vice-president of the Academy. As Galin Tihanov has noticed, Shpet was apparently sympathetic towards Sergei Esenin's and Mariengof's oeuvre. By this time Lunacharsky, who had earlier been in favour of the Imaginists, started to become more hostile towards their activity. The Imaginists organised in June 1921 in Moscow a happening with a title "General Mobilisation" (*Vseobshchaya mobilizatsiya*), and in August Esenin with Mariengof and others were arrested by the State Security (Emergency Commission "Cheka"), after which this dispute took place.

In September 1921 Lunacharsky [Луначарский 1921: 6] called the Imaginists "charlatans who want to offend the public" and defined them as a dishonest group that should not be supported by the government. The Imaginists were offended by Lunacharsky's critical article about their activities and publications, and they wrote a reply, a letter to the journal *Pechat' i revolyutsiya*. In this letter they invited Lunacharsky to a public dispute about Imaginism with invited competent judges: "Taken that the above-mentioned critic and People's Commissar has already found it necessary to throw these unfounded words against us on several occasions, the Central Committee of the Imaginists is obliged to declare: 1) the People's Commissar Lunacharsky should either stop this light-minded haunting of a whole group of poet innovators, or, if his wordings are not just phrases, but a conviction, he should banish us from Soviet Russia, since our existence here as charlatans is offensive and unnecessary and may be even harmful to the state; 2) to the critic Lunacharsky we suggest a public dispute on Imaginism (with the participation of G. Shpet, P. Sakulin and others). The Masters of the Central Committee of the Imaginists Esenin. Mariengof. Shershenevich" [Есенин, Мариенгоф, Шершеневич 1921: 249].

In the same issue of *Pechat' i revolyutsiya* Lunacharsky replied by saying that he has all the right to make statements about poets or poetic groups and that he is not willing to participate in any of the Imaginists' public discussions, since "he knows that the poets would turn such discussion into advertisements for themselves. The People's Commissar Lunacharsky, on the one hand, does not have the right to banish poets from Russia, and, moreover, he would not use such a right even if he had it" [Луначарский 1921: 249]. Lunacharsky was sure that the audience would soon understand the nature of "the Imaginist noise of clowns and charlatans" and that the real talents among them would soon leave the poetic group. By this he seems to have meant Esenin. It is obvious that the

Imaginists wanted to remain Bolshevik poets with a new agenda, trying to follow and accompany Lunacharsky's attempts to organize a new Bolshevik culture in the framework of the Academy. But the criticism towards them became more severe.

The first President of the Russian Academy of Art Sciences was the critic and literary historian Petr Kogan, one of the main enemies of the Imaginists: "Their tragedy is that there is no talent among them to convince us that their theories definitely mean the beginning of a new era, that they have really brought an end to the previous art tendencies. The Imaginists are replacing this deficiency with noisy advertisements, happenings, and for some time they did reach their goal. They managed to gain the attention of the stale bourgeois. The Imaginist fame is the sister of scandal" [Коган 1921]. Kogan quotes Mariengof's poem *Magdalina*, which was a scandalous, blasphemous depiction of violent love during the October Revolution, and he concludes that even this text has ceased to shock the bourgeoisie, since the audience has lost its interest in them. Their desperate scandals and happenings have led to a situation where their café is visited only by women searching for adventure. It is worth remembering that Kogan was one of the victims of such scandalous happenings, being convicted in an acted trial in which the poetic group attacked the literary critics.

In the above-mentioned trial Mariengof gave a speech against Kogan, and it is obvious that the notion of "the academy" is originally Mariengof's invention, an unsuccessful attempt to once again coincide with the Bolshevik Lunacharsky's cultural politics, and, at the same time, an attempt to build some kind of a poetic academy, a new poetic school of its own. Esenin was travelling abroad, Shershenevich was busy in organizing his "Experimental Heroic Theatre" together with Boris Ferdinandov. *Gostinitsa* and "the academy" were Mariengof's attempts towards what he suggested as the new direction after Imaginism.

"Big Theme"

History shows us that the Marxist utilitarian tendency of the Left Front of the Arts that was so much criticised on the pages of *Gostinitsa*, became increasingly necessary for the Bolsheviks — these ex-Futurists were treated as the proper representatives of Soviet Russian literature of the 1920s. It even seems that from Lunacharsky's point of view the Imaginists had been a convenient counterbalance to the Futurists during the transition period of 1918–1920. In his defence of the Imaginists on the pages of *Gostinitsa* Mariengof accused the Futurists and the Constructivists, especially Meyerhold, Tatlin and Mayakovsky, for "technicism in art". His answer to the utilitarian tendencies was radical

aestheticism, reflected in the journal's title and several articles. Another answer, somewhat inconsistent with aestheticism, was what he surprisingly called the "Big Theme". Mariengof's archive documents of the time tell us that this notion is closely related to the idea of "the academy", and also to such anti-analytic and conservative-minded concepts, as "the canon" and "monumental art". Mariengof explicitly denies the analytic avant-garde art:

> 8. No to analyticism or facture research, but theme as the ground for monumental art.
> 9. Aestheticism, as a product of cabinet philosophy / subjectivism / against.
> 10. Monumental art as *sobornost'* [Мариенгоф 1922: 1].

In 1922 Imaginism was no longer a formal school of poetry, but a "nationalistic worldview, which emerges from the deep Slavonic understanding of the dead and live nature of the motherland" [Мариенгоф 2013: 645]. This nationalistic worldview appears to be the "Big Theme", which was now so necessary to the Imaginist poets rather than the previous radical Formalist role that they had emphasized in their 1919 declaration. But now the "Big Theme" has become inevitable. It was essentially Russian in character.

In 1921 Esenin and Mariengof lived together in Moscow and wrote a joint declaration that was left unpublished and thus relatively unknown for the history of literature: "Once again we suggest the meaning of the form, which in itself is the beautiful content and organic expression of the artist <…> After emerging from the motherland of its language without artificial irrigation of the Westernizing attempts <…> We reject categorically the formal achievements of the West, and not only do we resist its hegemony, we also prepare a massive attack on the old culture of Europe. Therefore, our first enemies in the motherland are homemade Verlaines (Bryusov, Bely, Blok and others), Marinettis (Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, Mayakovsky), Verhaerens (proletarian poets — their name is legion). We are the violent beginners of the Russian poetic independence. Only through us is Russian art reaching its age of awareness" [Есенин, Мариенгоф 2013: 667–668]. Vadim Shershenevich, who was an Anglophile and polyglot, apparently could not sign this declaration and thus it remained outside of the Imaginists' collective manifestos. It was supposed to be published in a book entitled "The Era of Esenin and Mariengof", but it never appeared.

In the first *Gostinitsa* the pathos surrounding the unpublished manifesto was continued, as Mariengof wrote that "what is beautiful in the culture is always national in its essence" and defined Russianness in art through Russian architecture: "Saint Basil's Cathedral was built by the Russian masters Barma

and Postnik, a magnificent pinnacle of Russian architecture. St Petersburg's 'Isaac' and 'Kazan Cathedral' were merely good copies" [Мариенгоф 2013: 648].

In 1922 Mariengof was the editor-in-chief of the journal *Gostinitsa*, so it was definitely his enterprise. The manifestos and editorials of the journal were written by him, although this was not explicitly stated in the issues themselves. The ideology behind these texts and behind the new plans for the Imaginist group also belongs to him. He was looking for a new approach to the literary movement, which had significantly originated in Mariengof's and Shershenevich's interest in Anglo-American literature (Ezra Pound, T. E. Hulme, Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley) and the Russian Symbolists. The new approach had to be against the Futurists, which was always the case with the Imaginists — they were principally against Futurism. The Futurists, after all, were now declaring Internationalism, after having their nationalist experiments already during the First World War. The new approach of the Imaginists was coloured with anti-Western ultra-nationalistic pathos in the search for a common language with Lunacharsky and the Bolsheviks. This also explains their increasing talk of political essence in literature. "The academy" was supposed to be some kind of structure for the new "monumental art" dedicated to the October Revolution. The "Big Theme" was the basis of this new art, showing that the Formalist tendency of Imaginism had almost ceased to exist. They were moving towards conservative contents, essentially nationalistic in character.

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