

Space, Time and Things Made "Strange": Andrei Belyi, Pavel Filonov, and Theory of Forms

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I. Theoretical Considerations

The critical interest in the intermingling of forms—visual, verbal, and musical—in Russian culture during the first three decades of the twentieth century has been steadily growing through the last two years. Works like Gerald Janecek's groundbreaking examination of visual experimentation in written texts from Belyi through Maiakovskii, *The Language of Russian Literature* (1984), and Juliette Stapanian's wide-ranging book on *Maiakovskii's Cubo-Futurist Vision* (1986) established important precedents for a relatively new mode of critical inquiry. These studies, and others like them, allowed later critics to begin making interconnections in the tangled web of schismatic *-isms* used to demarcate various schools of artistic thought in these turbulent thirty years. Janecek's *Zaum: The Transrational Poetry of Russian Futurism* (1996) is one of the foremost recent examples of such endeavor, combining extensive study of the "zaumniks" with parallel discussion of the concomitant influence on, and by, painters like Kazimir Malevich. When coupled with the continuing development of semiotics and the study of "signs" and "markers" in both literary criticism and linguistics, such an approach, which likely would have been too "interdisciplinary" for many earlier critics, has led to a wealth of works that shed new light on the boldly experimental art of the "Silver Age" and the early Soviet period.

Since the early 1970s, John E. Bowlt has been perhaps the most voluminous author in this field, publishing on almost all aspects of Russian Modernist art. His publications range from collections of Formalist criticism and examinations of stage design in the Russian avant-garde theatre to broad surveys of avant-garde painting and monographs on individual artists. Most importantly, his body of work examines the art and artists of the early twentieth century across boundaries of genre and even form, an approach that is reflective of the thinking of many of the leading Symbolist, Futurist, and Formalist, etc., themselves. Often, the figures spearheading the formation of these nascent theoretical vanguards were also highly skilled practitioners of what they preached. Such was the case with the poet/novelist Andrei Belyi and the painter Pavel Filonov, both influential figures

through their prodigious bodies of creative work and their voluminous and innovative (if not always consistent) writing on the theory of art.

Building on the critical model established by Janecek, Bowlt and others, this article examines similarities in the theoretical and non-theoretical works of Filonov and Belyi. In Belyi's case, it focuses on two novels, *The Dramatic Symphony* (*Драматическая симфония*, 1904) and his masterpiece *Petersburg* (*Петербург*, 1916; revised 1922, 1928), as well as his essays from the 1900s and 1910s on literary and artistic theory, most notably "The Forms of Art" ("Формы искусства," 1902), "The Principle of Form in Aesthetics" ("Принцип формы в эстетике," 1906), and "The Future of Art" ("Будущее искусства," 1907). While analyzing selected paintings from throughout Filonov's career, my use of his theoretical writings limits itself to several of his essays from the 1910s and 20s, chiefly "Made Paintings" ("Сделанные картины," 1914), "The Basic Tenets of Analytical Art" ("Основные положения аналитического искусства" 1923) and the "Declaration of 'Universal Flowering'" ("Декларация мирового расцвета" 1923). The reason for this temporal limitation stems mainly from the relative freedom of expression that Filonov enjoyed during these years. This freedom was essentially curbed by the strong reaction against the avant-garde in the late 1920s, as well as the survivalist necessity for measured speech brought on by Stalin's repressive influence on the arts beginning in the 1930s. Filonov's critical works (and perhaps also his painting) are of questionable integrity during this later period. While this is certainly a pragmatically expedient condition, it also makes his later writing considerably less reliable as a true indicator of his beliefs concerning the nature of art. In order to establish a wider critical context for the works of Belyi and Filonov, my comparative analysis also invokes Viktor Shklovskii's theories about the use of language and the project of rejuvenating Russian literature.

The first decade of the twentieth century was remarkably productive for the young Andrei Belyi, who in that span published four "symphonies" (short novels that attempted to transfer musical technique to literature), dozens of short stories, several books of poetry, over a hundred critical articles, and a novel, *The Silver Dove* (*Серебряный голубь*). Both Vladimir Alexandrov and Konstantin Mochul'skii have thoroughly detailed his fascination and his (partial or complete) disillusionment with particular writers and schools of thought during this period, from philosophers like Arthur Schopenhauer and Vladimir Solov'ev to such Russian Symbolists as Dmitrii Merezhkovskii and Aleksandr Blok. Furthermore, Andrea Zink's recent *Andrej Belyjs Rezeption der Philosophie Kants, Nietzsches und der Neukantianer* (1998) is perhaps the most thorough examination of the influence of German philosophy on Belyi's writing. Belyi's earliest writings

especially bear the marks of a running dialogue with Schopenhauer's theories on the hierarchy of artistic forms and the possibilities for synthesis between forms. As Roger Keys writes:

It was Schopenhauer's contention that through music we gain access to the deepest forces underlying the universe: we are able to contemplate the noumenal Will itself. This metaphysical assertion lies at the basis of [his] hierarchical classification of the arts, in which music is supreme. For music, unlike poetry, painting, sculpture, and architecture, is "quite independent of the phenomenal world." (111)

For Schopenhauer the hierarchy of art consisted of static and discrete forms that resisted profitable combination. Keys writes of Schopenhauer: "[H]is objections to opera [as a synthetic art-form], for example, were based mainly on the empirical premise that the individual's aesthetic awareness should not be blunted through the mechanical accumulation of different kinds of sense impression" (113).

A glance at Belyi's theoretical writing on the subject quickly reveals significant connections with Schopenhauer's views. For example, in "The Forms of Art" (1902) Belyi writes: "[E]very form of art is determined by the degree to which the spirit of music is revealed in it.... If we place the fine arts in their order of perfection we arrive at the following five principal forms: architecture, sculpture, painting, poetry, music" (165-66). Four years later, in "The Principle of Form in Aesthetics" (1906), Belyi still refers to the same range of artistic forms, but now ranks them according to their relation to temporal or spatial aspects of reality: "Time is the essential formal element of music, elevating the meaning of rhythm to a position of primacy. Poetry unites the formal conditions of both temporal and spatial forms of art by means of the word. The word represents in a mediated fashion. This is the weakness of poetry" (207). Although Belyi denies the notion that the forms are necessarily separate, he preserves the essential hierarchy that Schopenhauer laid out. Belyi's novelistic "symphonies," though, served as a clear practical experiment at using musical forms to elevate and reinvigorate poetry,¹ a technique he would refine and adapt for use in his later works. Furthermore, Viktor Shklovskii and Filonov would follow Belyi (if not explicitly mentioning him by name) down this multi-formal path in their own innovative conceptions of what art can and, perhaps, should be.

Belyi's early work prefigures many of the theories of art subsequently espoused by other Symbolists, as well as members of the Futurist and Formalist movements.² In his introduction to *Russian Formalism: A*

Collection of Articles and Texts in Translation, John E. Bowlt outlines his views on the genealogy of these movements:

It is legitimate that the Symbolists be mentioned in any examination of Russian Formalism since it was they, and not the Futurists, who were the essential innovators in Modernist art and criticism. Although the Futurist poets...expanded the potentials of language and drew attention to specific poetical and linguistic devices...it was such eminent Symbolist literati as Bely and Valerii Bryusov who, in artistic and critical achievement, anticipated the theoretical principles of the Formalists as such.

Bowlt follows this debatable devaluation of the Futurists' work with the less problematic assertion that "the Symbolists were firstly creators and secondly critics, whereas the Formalists were critics above all" (3). Although I disagree with Bowlt's comparatively dim view of the value of "expand[ing] the potentials of language and dr[awing] attention to specific poetical and literary devices"—largely because he limits his discussion of Futurist contribution to *verbal* innovations—I subscribe to his categorization of the Symbolists both as chiefly creative writers and as the *primary* (if not necessarily, essential) innovators in Russian Modernism. Belyi's creative works serve as a *fait accompli* demonstration of the principles that many of the Formalists, especially Shklovskii, would later advance, just as Lev Tolstoi's work was perhaps the prime model for Shklovskii's concept of "making strange" (*остранение*). The works arising from various Symbolist and Futurist groups (such as *Gilea*, *Opoiiaz*, or *Soiuz molodezhi*) similarly contain echoes of a common *Zeitgeist* that may be traced back to writers like Belyi and anticipate the variegated branches of Russian Modernist art.

Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh began writing poetry in their newly minted "trans-sense language" (*zaum* or *zaumnyi iazyk*)³ as early as 1911, and the Cubo-Futurist manifesto "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste" ("Пощечина общественному вкусу") followed soon after, in 1913. Many of the groups that sprang forth from this period included artists like Vladimir Mayakovskii, who worked in several different media simultaneously.⁴ For example, Kruchenykh and Mikhail Larionov produced several volumes of Futurist poetry and prose (such as 1913's *Pomade* [*Помада*]) that were copiously illustrated with drawings and lithographs. The broadly-defined and often quarrelsome amalgamation of the Russian avant-garde also served to critically and physically intermingle artists who are primarily known for their work in visual media—e.g. Aleksandr Rodchenko, Vasiliï Kandinskii, El Lisitskii and Kazimir Malevich—with artists who were pri-

marily writers, such as Elena Guro, Kruchenykh, and Khlebnikov. Furthermore, critics like Shklovskii, Boris Eikhenbaum, Iurii Tynianov and Roman Jakobson were in direct association with many of these groups, as well, adding a very academic and theoretical coloration to the creative work produced. The multi-media nature of much of the work created by the Russian avant-garde from 1910 to 1930 is largely symptomatic of the cross-pollination of ideas among these individuals with different forms of artistic training. However, the ripe atmosphere for such experimentation stems from the ideas of artists like Belyi, who, as early as the turn of the century, sought to integrate and elevate art forms that they perceived to be stagnant. As Janecek notes in his introduction to *Zaum*, Belyi's article "The Magic of Words" ("Магия слов," 1909) was extremely important to the development of sound-sense poetry because it asserts that "the word is a theurgical conjuring mechanism based on sound" (8).

Another of Belyi's important contributions to the development of Russian Modernism is his 1907 article "The Art of the Future," in which he tackles the question of what "path" (путь) art must take in order to develop in a positive manner. He states: "The existing art forms are rushing headlong towards disintegration. The degree of differentiation among them is infinite, something to which the development of technical skill has contributed greatly. The notion of technical progress is increasingly replacing the notion of the living meaning of art" (198). He sees a solution that involves both his previously cited belief in the primacy of music among art forms, as well as the necessity of finding new forms. Firstly, he writes:

[I]f the art of the future were to construct its forms by imitating pure music, then it would bear the character of Buddhism. Contemplation through art is a means: it is a means for catching the summons to vital creation. In art subsumed by music, contemplation would become an end in itself: it would transform the contemplator into an impersonal spectator of his own experiences. The art of the future, having become immersed in music, would permanently arrest the development of all the arts. (198-99)

Later, he posits that "[i]f it is possible to build a new temple on the ruins of the old one that has apparently collapsed, we may not erect the new temple on the atomized forms in which today's forms were molded. The old forms must be discarded. In this way we divert the issue of the purposes of art from an examination of the products of creation to the processes of creation themselves" (200-201). Belyi's art of the future clearly relies on the merger of

musical forms with "lower" forms, but in a manner that does not simply imitate or attempt to revive already existent forms.

Shklovskii's 1914 essay, "The Resurrection of the Word," contains some of his earliest writing on the rejuvenation of literature, much of it conversant with Belyi's ideas. The essay opens with a clear statement of Shklovskii's viewpoint: "The most ancient poetic creation of man was the creation of words. Now words are dead, and language is like a graveyard, but an image was once alive in the newly-born word" (41). He goes on to state that the problem with contemporary usage of words is that "they have become familiar, and their *internal* (image) and *external* (sound) forms have ceased to be sensed. We do not sense the familiar, we do not see it but *recognize* it" (41-42, emphasis added). He makes a definitional distinction between poetry and prose as follows: "'artistic' perception is perception in which form is sensed (perhaps not only form, but form as an essential part)... Therefore, the word, as it loses 'form' completes the irrevocable journey from poetry to prose" (42). For Shklovskii, the artistry and forms of the word are inseparable, and as the forms are lost to apprehension, so too is the poetry possible in them. He makes an explicit qualitative distinction between "poetry" (поэзия) and "prose" (проза) that Belyi does not⁵ in his identification of *poezii* as one of the five major art forms, but both writers envision an explicit association with poetry as the use of language for the purposes of artistic, rather than simply communicative, expression.

Importantly, Shklovskii makes some claims about both the past and future of literature that facilitate application of his theories to those works of Belyi that precede the publication of this particular article. He writes:

The writers of past times wrote too smoothly, too sweetly... The creation of a new, "tight" (*тугой*) language is necessary, directed at seeing, and not at recognition. And this necessity is unconsciously felt by many people.

The paths of the new art have only been indicated. It is not theoreticians, but artists who will travel those paths ahead of all others... at any rate the Futurist poets are on the right path: they have correctly evaluated the old forms.

... The realization of new creative devices, which were also met with in poets of the past—for example in the Symbolists—but just by accident—is by itself a great undertaking. And it has been accomplished by the Futurists. (47)

Shklovskii surely overreaches in claiming that the Symbolists used the innovations he discusses "just by accident." Blok, Belyi and others among the

Symbolists were rigorous theoreticians as well as practitioners of the written arts, as the above-cited excerpts from Belyi's work clearly demonstrate. Shklovskii's revolutionary zeal notwithstanding, the points he makes about the necessity of "seeing" through language are, again, remarkably similar to Belyi's transcendental musings on the power of art to induce contemplation. For both writers, the renewal of language is the process by which art can fulfill its purpose of causing active perception and cognition in those who partake of it. Both Shklovskii and Belyi deny the value of art that simply allows the viewer to passively recognize something from past experience and apply reason to derive meaning. The *zaumnyi* aspect of their theories is what makes them demonstrably similar.

Finally, Filonov's theoretical writing also shows evidence of wanting to create art that is perhaps difficult to comprehend, but is ultimately restorative by dint of that very characteristic. He sets himself apart from the mainstream in Russian art early in his career, writing in the manifesto "Made Paintings" that "[w]e...stand in the center of the global life of art, in the center of a tiny but avant-garde handful of persistent workers, the conquerors of drawing and painting" (135). He was close to Maiakovskii, collaborating with him on several projects, and also illustrated several Futurist works during the early 1910s. He formulated theories about analytical art, which he called "Universal Flowering" (Мировой расцвет). His theory described some of the principal tenets of this art as follows:

1) Painting is the artist's universal language accessible to all. This language is incorporated into the viewer's consciousness in an integral deduction that sometimes cannot be translated into words.

[...]

7) Creativity, i.e. madeness (сделанность), whatever is depicted in the painting, is, above all, the reflection and record (via material) of a struggle—a struggle for the development of a higher intellectual plane in man, for the existence and [effect] of this higher psychological art on the viewer. ("The Basic Tenets..." 145)

Filonov's conception of artistic language as potentially non-verbal links it with the transcendent knowledge postulated by Belyi and Shklovskii. Both the "higher intellectual" plane and the supra-linguistic "integral deduction" that Filonov invokes resemble the more expansive, trans-rational form of mental stimulation that Belyi and Shklovskii argue should be a necessary component of new art.

Filonov also discusses the inseparability of form and content, a subject that both Belyi and Shklovskii wrote about at length. He writes:

- 1) In my art the concept of form is conditioned by the concept of content.
- 2) The development of the form being made and its highest artistic significance are conditioned by the analytical development of this concept of content.
- 3) Form is the realization of content through material.
- 4) The content of whatever the artists is operating with in art is, first and foremost, the active force of the artist's intellect....
- 5) Content is form, i.e. the significance of form, whereas form, i.e. its significance, is content, i.e. the force in the painting that affects the viewer.
- 6) In my perception the form of art is inseparable from content in a painting.... In this sense there is no such thing as pure form. But content might be expressed in one or another version. (146)

This passage echoes much of the copious body of writing on the topic produced by Belyi and Shklovskii. Tzvetan Todorov in "Some Approaches to Russian Formalism" usefully summarizes the contrast between Symbolist and Formalist approaches to the concepts of "form" and "content" as follows:

In short, one can say that the Symbolists tended to divide the literary product into form (i.e. sound), which was vital, and content (i.e. ideas), which was external to art.

The Formalist approach was completely opposed to this aesthetic appreciation of "pure form". They no longer saw form as opposed to some other internal element of a work of art (normally its content) and began to conceive it as the totality of the work's various components. (10)

If one accepts Todorov's working definitions (which I do, with only minor reservations), Filonov's theories have more in common with the Formalists' than with the Symbolists', but other aspects of his theory and his work link him more clearly with Belyi.

Filonov examines the ways in which color is the primary determinant of form in painting, a theory that contains strong correspondences with Belyi's early theoretical work. In "The Forms of Art" Belyi maintains that the dominance of color is a means for expression in painting: "[O]f the spatial forms of art, painting is the most perfect form. ... [W]ith the aid of a small quantity of colors we attain the fullest depiction on canvas not only of a single image or group of images, but of whole events. Architecture and sculpture

are unable to depict large spaces" (170). In "The Principle of Form in Aesthetics," he explicitly expands on this theme: "Painting involves the abstraction of three-dimensional representation: it is the fate of painting to be restricted to the plane surface. But painting gains a certain richness of interpretation from this abstraction. Because of this abstraction, it elevates color to a position of primacy" (207). Filonov's view of the role of color in painting resonates with Belyi's. To wit:

7) You should operate with color while operating with form simultaneously, so that the effect of color never ceases to be the effect of form, i.e. so that, professionally, the entire work process can be reduced to the action of form, i.e. the effect of content.

[...]

11) A concept of form dictates a concept of color in a work, its degree of force and intensity of color. ("Basic Tenets..." 146)

Belyi and Filonov also agree on the desirable effect of "rhythm" on painting. Filonov states: "Rhythm is the illusory measuredness of dynamics in the consistency, form and color of the object realized in the painting" (148). Likewise, Belyi sees rhythm as the primary expression of temporality in music, and claims that this "is why music, which is a temporal form, is able to exert such an influence on the spatial forms. Music is...the latent energy of creation" (208). Although their conceptions of the nature of form and content do not overlap, Belyi and Filonov share several basic beliefs about the role of compositional elements in art.

A number of striking parallels exist between modern semiotics and the ideas that Belyi and Filonov posited about form and content more than seventy years ago. These similarities testify not only to the originality of the two avant-gardists, but also to their lasting influence on the understanding of how meaning is created and transmitted in various forms of art. For example, Jiří Veltruský's article "Comparative Semiotics" (1981) treats many of the issues addressed by Belyi and Filonov. In his discussion of why the nineteenth-century French humorist Alphonse Allais was successful in making a joke out of an entirely black canvas entitled *Negroes Fighting in a Cellar at Night*, Veltruský writes: "Allais' joke was of course based on the fact that in the pictorial sign the thematic meanings tend to predominate heavily over the rather indeterminate and diffuse meanings conveyed by the various material components...Injected into the pictorial sign from the outside, by the name it is given, they can make up for its internal diversification" (117). Veltruský also compares the semiotics of verbal art and music as follows:

Verbal art does not differ as radically from music as language per se. A literary work cannot undo the combination of phonemes into morphemes, words, etc., but its segmentation can also take place in other tiers and follow a different pattern in each. The autonomy of words can be contradicted by sound patterns, the cohesion of sentences by versification, the boundaries of sentences by the continuous undulation of intonation, the syntactic links by correspondences and confrontations between grammatical forms, the lexical meanings by grammatical meanings, and so on. (120)

Almost all of the linguistic "segmentation[s]" in the second passage cited from Veltruský are present to some degree in Belyi's work, and Filonov's painting often relies heavily on the interplay between thematic meanings provided by "outside" signs (such as associations with colors or shapes) and the "indeterminate and diffuse meanings conveyed by the various material components" of his abstract depictions. The blending of various semiotic strata described by Veltruský is essentially the same phenomenon that Schopenhauer, Belyi, and Filonov describe in their theories about the amalgamation of "forms."

II. Inscriptions

All of the theories outlined above provide useful points of entry into Belyi's novels *The Dramatic Symphony* and *Petersburg*, especially with an eye toward a comparison with paintings by Filonov. Such an analysis shows that both Belyi and Filonov use technical elements (or at least the best simulation of those technical elements possible) that are not intrinsic to the forms in which they are working as part of an attempt to create examples of the new art expressed in their theoretical works.

Roger Keys rightly identifies the *Dramatic* (or *Second*) *Symphony* as the "most fictional" (143) of the four literary symphonies by Belyi. The *Northern Symphony* (completed in 1900, first published in 1903) and *The Return* (1905)⁶ are regularly assessed in terms of their "superficial" novelty (Elsworth, "Introduction," 6) and "relatively firm framework of meaning" (Keys 145). Furthermore, critics usually fault the bewilderingly innovative *Goblet of Blizzards* (1908) as an overreaching⁷ and "monstrous aberration, a true *ne plus ultra* based on a fundamental misapprehension of the semantic possibilities of verbal art" (Elsworth, "Introduction," 6) or deem it "the work in which Belyi took the structural analogy between music and literature to its furthest limit" (Keys 136). Keys characterizes the form of *The Dramatic Symphony* as a "mezhdoumok composed of poetic and prosaic ele-